What are the ethical, social and political implications of design, and can they be utilised for positive change?
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Introduction

‘After fifteen or twenty years in the profession I discovered that design is just a language and the real issue is what you see that language to do.’
(Kalman, cited in Cullen, 2001)

As a student of graphic design, I have become increasingly aware of design’s relationship to society and culture, and how this alters the way we as a species interact with and perceive our world. Whether this be something as small as advertising an event, or something as significant as signage systems to save lives in emergency situations, it is evident how the design of artifacts has changed the way we live our lives and how we interact with our surroundings. It has also become increasingly clear in our information age, that the decisions we make as designers have direct implications on not just our perception, but also our understanding, our experiences and our environment. To dismiss the effects of our creations, either negative or positive, is to deny responsibility for something that is directly caused by us, and is completely within our power to change.

Design has been directly and indirectly tied to many negative self-inflicted issues within the Western world in the previous century due to its direct relationships with capitalist, corporatist and neo-classical ideals. The proliferation of free markets, belief in never-ending growth, and globalisation have created a world where necessity and desire are constantly mistaken and the complexity of our own identities disorientates us. The effects this has had on culture, society and nature are becoming more apparent every day, ‘in fact, people consumed more goods and services in the second half of the 20th century than in all previous generations put together.’ (Berman, 2009: 21). To lay the blame entirely on designers is excessive, but it is clear how graphic design has aided in the rapid growth of these problems, sweeping the path that has allowed these values to become such a large part of our society. The fact that we are destroying our planet is confusing enough. However, to feel that the subject area of my own studies is so closely tied to the issue has often made me cynical towards design for fear of adding to these problems.
In the near future I hope to be entering a career within the design profession. As it stands I am torn: on the one hand I want to attempt to improve certain situations within our society using the knowledge I have gained from my degree, and I can see the huge potential the design process has for change. On the other hand I feel that to enter a career in design there is a large amount of pressure to separate myself and my beliefs from what I create, and to merely follow a client’s wishes. I hope to further my understanding of the relationship graphic design has with the political, social and economic structures that exist and whether these relationships allow me, as well as any other designer, the opportunity to use design as a process for social change. I hope to infuse my study with more optimism, enthusiasm and awareness of how I approach design projects.

The ‘First Things First Manifesto’ was first written by Ken Garland in 1964. It called for designers to change their priorities away from advertising trivial, unnecessary products, ‘in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication’ (Garland, 1964). Although quite authoritarian in tone, it made a bold statement about how the skills of designers could be harnessed to create more important creations than advertising. This was the starting point firstly for my interest in socially responsible design and secondly for this paper. I feel that the manifesto raises an important point, but stops there. In this paper I explore the points raised in ‘First Things First’, and delve deeper into the possibilities of using design to have a positive effect on society.

In my first chapter, I will establish a definition of ethics and examine certain aspects of design that are affected. My primary sources here were the writing of philosopher Anthony C. Grayling, and an interview with Grayling conducted by Lucienne Roberts, in her book ‘Good: An Introduction to Ethics in Graphic Design’ (Roberts, 2006). In this, Grayling gives a very modern take on what it means to be ethical within the field of design. I look at how beauty and aesthetics can be thought of as ethical, using Tucker Viemeister’s article ‘Beautility’ to give a different perspective on why beauty is important. The writing of Judith Schwartz (‘Socially Responsible Advertising’) and Lynne Ciochetto (‘Green USP?’) helped me analyse the ways in which businesses use cause-related marketing and other techniques to appear worthy and responsible when that may not be the case. A short analysis of
the BP logo shows how design facilitates the possibility for organisations to appear environmentally friendly in the face of opposing facts.

In my second chapter I aim to show how design affects our society. Guy Debord’s book ‘Society of Spectacle’ highlights the Situationist’s theory about how media and advertising have affected our perception of reality and desire. The writing of Kalle Lasn, the owner of Adbusters Media Foundation, reinforces the ideals of the Situationists, and provides good insight into how the media has changed the way we interact. David Berman’s book ‘Do Good Design’ was an inspiration throughout, and provided me with a case study of the ‘Palm Beach Ballot’, showing how small design errors can have huge adverse reactions. From here I use the ideas of Katherine McCoy, a frequent writer on social and political aspects of design. Her conference ‘Good Citizenship: Design as a Social and Political Force’ argues for design educators to understand and embrace the political aspects of design.

In my final chapter I look at a few varying approaches towards ethics from the design community. Here, I look again at ‘Do Good Design’ from David Berman, specifically his 3 part ‘Do Good Pledge’. The goal of this pledge is to get the whole design community to uphold their social responsibility and work on more socially just projects. I then look at AIGA’s ‘Standards of Professional Practice’ that offers a loose guideline for acting professionally within a design career, using an article from Paul Nini entitled ‘In Search of Ethics in Graphic Design’ to establish priorities in who we serve in our creations. This leads to a project from 3 recent design graduates, Ricky Knowles, Diego Ulrich and May Safwat. Their project shows the way that a socially collaborative design process can be very beneficial to communities. From here I look at a different approach at using design to change society: dissent. Milton Glaser’s book ‘Design of Dissent’ showcases worldwide political designs, and ends with an intriguing interview between Steven Heller and Glaser discussing the importance of political design. Kalle Lasn’s book ‘Culture Jam’ takes the Situationist ideals and looks at ways that design can spread important messages throughout society. The section ends with a short analysis of the anti-tobacco movement and the subversive techniques it harnessed.
1. What is Good?
There is a problem that arises when attempting to define ethics. It is often assumed that being ethical means following the law, or that ethics are obvious guidelines that are in everyone’s best interest to follow. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy splits the definition into three areas: ‘(1) a general pattern or way of life, (2) a set of rules or a moral code, and (3) inquiry about ways of life and moral conduct’ (Edwards, 1967). The ambiguity that surrounds ethics is clearly down to its huge range of definition and application. A ‘way of life’ implies that all of our actions have ethical implications, ethics is ‘about the whole quality of life’ (Grayling, cited in Roberts, 2001). This means that ethics advance beyond morals and include the spirit and overall attitude of an individual or group.

In A.C. Grayling’s ‘What Is Good?’, the definition he chooses to use is: ‘ethics means thinking and theorising about what is good and bad, and how people should live’ (Grayling, 2004: ix). He draws a differentiation between this and ‘moral presuppositions’ which he defines as ‘what, either consciously or unconsciously, govern what people do, or aspire to do, in the practice of life’ (ibid). The distinction he makes between the two may seem negligible, but he states that our moral presuppositions are what truly regulate our choices and are in many cases unconscious and without thought. The act of ‘thinking and theorising’, is however, one of reflection, empathy and understanding. This declares that to be ethical we have to make a personal choice about which actions are ‘good’ and which are ‘bad’, thus having more control over our ‘moral presuppositions’ that govern our choices. Our personal and internal ‘ethos’ then goes on to have very real moral implications when we express it.

Because of the ambiguity surrounding ethics, it is a complex issue to debate. Everyone has personal beliefs and priorities that somewhat define who they are. ‘A code that says ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt not’ is inflexible and fits awkwardly with real life, which is complex and protean.’ (Grayling, cited in Roberts, 2006: 36). This paper is not aiming to provide a list of good and bad companies to work for, nor does it attempt to push my own personal ethics upon the reader. The intention is to provide an understanding of the ethical implications of design and show why graphic design is a befitting process for making positive changes within society.
Design outcomes largely live within the realm of the visual. By using Grayling’s and Edward’s theories of ethics stated previously, it is clear that the aesthetic is related to ‘overall quality’ of a design artifact. Roberts (2001) asserts that when dissecting ethics, it is evident that the aesthetics of something are directly associated ‘if it adds to someone’s quality of life by making the world a more delightful or pleasurable place’. Roberts states that this is at odds with the common misjudgement that for design to be ethical, it must partially abandon beauty and artistry. Tucker Viemeister (2003) makes a good argument for why this is not the case in his article ‘Designing for Beautility’. He describes ‘beautility’ as a new label that redefines beauty as something that is useful as well as sensual. As he states: ‘Beauty is more than skin deep. Beauty is powerful. Utility is beautiful and beauty has utility’ (ibid). He describes the way in which a work of art can have intellectual value, as can a mathematical equation contain beauty.

Beauty has utility. It makes us feel good. It serves a practical purpose in our lives. Being around something that is beautiful stimulates us intellectually, emotionally, and sensually - a multimedia experience! It is the fuel that keeps humanity moving ahead. (Viemeister, 2003)

Viemeister goes on to explain how beauty is something that every human being has the capacity of experiencing, and although different individuals and cultures define it differently, ultimately beauty can be thought of as ‘a very pleasing physical sensual element combined with mental enlightenment’ (ibid). This definition interests me, as he states that not only is beauty something with aesthetic wonder, but it also contains elements of insight and understanding. He also tells of the effect this has on society, saying: ‘The objects we make and how we enjoy them define culture’. It has a resonance that spills over from the aesthetic into the emotional and intellectual, a mid-ground that all good design strives for: ‘The design profession’s job is to create Beautility!’ Discussions of beauty have continued for hundreds of years, and questions are still yet to be answered about what we truely mean by beauty. Grayling attempts to remedy this confusion, stating that we can find what we mean by beauty in the synonyms that we usually associate with the word: ‘what pleases, what’s enchanting, what’s attractive, what’s striking, what’s moving, what makes a difference, what makes an impact.’ (Grayling, cited in Roberts, 2006: 38). He goes on to state that, whenever possible, ‘designers have a responsibility to try and make
figure 1 - Glaser, M. - *Graphic Designer’s Road to Hell.*
the world a more beautiful place’. Our work adds to the visual and sensual landscape within which we live, and in this sense is considered ethical.

Another major factor of ethical design that cannot be avoided is money. The Western world is absorbed within capitalist ideals. I shall not attempt to argue for or against Capitalism as a political structure, as that is cause for a major thesis or lifelong study. It is safe to say, however, that capitalism is based on monetary profit and the potential for ‘unlimited’ economic growth. In ‘Design For Society’, Nigel Whiteley describes it as ‘a socio-economic system that assumes limitless growth and a continual state of desire’ (Whiteley, 1993). In all areas of capitalist society, our ethics often come into conflict with financial concerns, and designers are no different. It would be unrealistic to say that you should work solely for charities, just as it would be wrong to say that any profit is unethical. That being said, it is important to understand the purpose of money and the role it plays in our lives:

Technically money should be a neutral instrument that enables things to happen. It’s useful to have a coin in your pocket to buy bread rather than a sack of coal to be exchanged for it. But money too often becomes an end in itself and this can distort some people’s sense of responsibility.

(Grayling, cited in Roberts, 2006: 36)

As stated previously, ethics are a personal analysis and choice about our actions, and so too are the jobs we choose to work on. Graphic designer Milton Glaser produced a slightly satirical and forthright chart called ‘12 Steps on the Graphic Designer’s Road to Hell’ (figure 1). This shows some of the different stages that graphic designers can and have stooped to for the sake of business. It hints at the problem that designers often face: many companies are willing to lie in their advertising in order to profit, playing on people’s emotions, fears and insecurities to make money, and sometimes even covering up dangerous truths.

In business, no matter how emotionally involved in a particular cause a company might appear to be or how loudly it preaches about values, in the end the bottom line is profit and self-interest. (Schwartz, 2003)

‘Cause related marketing’ is a strategy used by many companies, with the aims of ‘improving a weak public image and boosting sales’. In the year 2000, $700 million
was spent on this strategy by American companies alone (ibid). Studies have shown that by endorsing and expressing their social responsibility, companies can ‘influence consumers, their perception of brands, and their purchasing decisions’. Schwartz then goes on to state how this strategy is perceived in two different ways, some people feeling that cause-related marketing is purely ‘in a company’s self interest’, while others believe it is a win-win situation and a ‘sincere effort to do good’ (ibid). However, she goes on to list some ‘pros and cons’ of this strategy, all of which being cons. She points out that companies direct their attention to ‘visible causes’ when ‘less marketable but equally worthy causes may not benefit’ (ibid: 16). She also tells of how corporations only donate a minuscule fraction of the profits they make from such marketing, making the act ‘insincere’.

I do agree that this type of marketing is playing on consumers’ sincerity, and it is clearly not an altruistic act. As Ann E. Kaplan of Giving U.S.A states: ‘Companies by their nature are not philanthropic’. Companies do not have feelings nor morals, but can try to appear that way to play into the morals of consumers. As Milton Friedman, the king of Capitalism, openly stated: ‘there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profit’. (Friedman, 1970)

In recent years we have seen the rise of huge social, political and cultural movements regarding the impact of our species on the planet: global warming, shrinking biodiversity, third-world exploitation, the list goes on. The more we learn of our impact, the more our decisions are considered ethical, and the more we consider our decisions. Because of this, a huge market has developed for ethical products and organisations that embrace environmental concerns. As stated in Fred Pearce’s column in the Guardian: ‘Companies have suddenly realised that people are scared stiff of climate change and so are rushing to put out adverts promoting their environmental authenticity’. Organisations spanning the globe employ designers to advertise their environmental ethics, no matter how minuscule, to play into the hearts and minds of this new green consumer market. In her article entitled ‘Green USP? Greenwashing and design in the age of ethical consumption’, Lynne Ciochetto states that ‘design has played a key role in reinventing company profiles with new environmental messages, designers should question these claims’. 
figure 2 - Landor - British Petroleum Logo.

figure 3 - McNamee, W. - Gulf Oil Spill Pictures.
‘Greenwashing’ is a term used to describe purposefully misleading claims made in advertising and branding in order to make environmentally unsound companies and products appear environmentally friendly. Designers are the catalysts that speed up this change in perception, using their skills to subtly lie and convince consumers of something that is not true. For instance, of the total UK carbon dioxide emissions, road transport accounts for 22%, making it ‘the major contributor to climate change’ (EPUK). These carbon emissions are extremely damaging to human, animal and plant life. However, it comes as no surprise that a leading fuel provider, BP (British Petroleum), changed their logo in 2000 ‘to show the company’s commitment to the environment and solar power’ (BBC, 2000). The new logo below (figure 2), features an amiable green and yellow flower. It could be said that the irony here is humorous, but the scary reality is that BP’s rebrand went uncontested. The truth in their ‘commitment to the environment’ became evident in April, 2010, when a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 crew members and spreading an oil slick over 130 miles long and 70 miles wide (Gerstein, 2010). Not only has this wreaked havoc on the wildlife (figure 3) and environment surrounding it, but BP are still in business, using a logo that visually claims to be green and environmentally friendly.

There are numerous cases like this throughout branding and advertising, and it is inevitable that without the visual persuasion used by designers it would be much harder for companies to appear as something they are not. Designers should be aware that morals are not inherent in business. There are many cases where companies use the subtlety of design to lie about what their company stands for in order to increase their profit and reputation. But how much affect does this really have on consumers? How important is design to our society, and can it really alter a person’s perception and understanding of something?
II. Design & Society
Within the mental psyche of our society, the media has come to mediate our relationships with the outside world. Graphic design (and the image-world as a whole) has had a huge impact on people’s perception of, and approach towards themselves, others, objects, ideas, places, beliefs and organisations. In many ways it has changed and even become how groups express themselves and how they are perceived. One understanding of the power design and media hold in our societies is the following:

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change. (McLuhan and Fiore, 2008: 41).

Berman (2009: 64) states that ‘symbols are the building blocks of reason and of memory, so it is unethical to intentionally insert misleading symbols’. From this it is easily argued that the goals and creations of a designer affect change within an individual, but to what extent is hard to analyse, although many theories have been expressed. ‘The Society of the Spectacle’, a philosophical and theoretical guide to the image world and its effects, was written by the Situationist Guy Debord and first published in 1967. It speaks of the commodification of reality into a visual language that mediates our society and our actions. This image world is delivered to us from the top down, producer to consumer in ‘societies in which modern conditions of production prevail’ (Debord, 2000: 1). Debord states that the spectacle is neither negotiable nor negotiated, and is in fact absorbed and used by us in the hope of expressing our ‘unique’ identities better (ibid: 12). His message, some 43 years old, still rings alarm bells of what our culture looks like today. The traffic of ideas and messages within our society is extremely one way and monologic. ‘The generations alive today – who cannot recognize an edible mushroom in the forest or build a fire without matches – are the first to have had their lives shaped almost entirely by the electronic mass media environment.’ (Lasn, 1999: 4). Corporations with power and money have the ability to spread their ideas further and with more impact than the majority of members of the public.
The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.” The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances. (Debord, 2000: 12)

This ‘monopolization of the realm of appearances’ is something tied strongly to graphic design and its history in advertising, corporate identity and the media. Debord talks of how our fluid and protean reality has been reduced to fixed images, where ‘truth is a moment of falsehood’ (ibid: 9). Our real social lives are glamorized and reduced into defined images, these images become our dreams, our hopes and our friends, and our social lives become governed by what is presented to us as good. When looking at the world of advertising with an analytical eye, it is clear that this theory is extremely accurate. Everywhere we look we see our real world reduced into images. Our social relationships are somewhat indefinable and ever-changing in reality, but within the image world we are presented our own desires and fantasies, and we are told that these fantasies are within easy reach if we can just expend some finances. ‘Our stories, once passed from one generation to the next by parents, neighbours and teachers, are now told by distant corporations with something to sell as well as to tell.’ (Lasn, 1999: xiii)

To fully understand the strength design holds within our modern society, it is first important to understand what design has come to mean in recent years. Upon hearing the term ‘graphic design’, it comes across as quite clear in definition, but when analysing and unpacking the term ‘things soon spiral into complexity’ (Twemlow, 2006). Design has become ubiquitous within our culture, not just in appearance but equally in definition. Design is no longer solely the shell added to products to give the mechanical function of technology a fashionable veneer. Defining processes throughout many areas of our society, from popular culture to the sciences, from media to our natural environment, the word ‘design’ has come to mean far more than a stylish afterthought.

Today everyone with an i-phone knows that it would be absurd to try to distinguish what has been simply designed and what has been planned, calculated, arrayed, arranged, packed, packaged, defined, projected, tinkered,
figure 4 - LePore, T. - *Butterfly Ballot Design*. 
written down in code, arrayed, arranged, disposed etc. “to design”, from now on, could equally mean all those verbs. (Latour, 2008)

As consumers living in the information age, we are becoming ever more technologically acute, and with that has come vast opportunities to control the form and even function (e.g. iphone) of the products we use and the environment we live in. Social media has infused our lives with the means of designing our own public identities. We see more and more products and services that rely on user generated content. The internet has given anyone with access the possibility to learn, share, express and design information like never before. For better or for worse, ‘the future of our world is now our common design project’ (Berman, 2009: 01). In light of the confusion arising, I would like to establish that throughout the rest of this paper, when using the terms ‘design’ and ‘designer’ I will be referring to someone who specifically and knowingly creates graphic designs aimed at conveying information or messages to an audience, unless otherwise stated.

But what effect does design have on our society? Does design make any real differences to society, or is this some form of grandiose delusion? In the year 2000 in Palm Beach County, Florida, the effects of thoughtless design became fully exposed. Due to a badly designed voting card (figure 4), a large amount of votes were mistakenly given to independent Pat Buchanan instead of Al Gore. The number of votes Al Gore lost was ‘well in excess of George W. Bush’s certified margin of victory in Florida’ (Berman, 2009: 9). This allowed George Bush the victory in Florida, meaning he was elected president of the United States. A seemingly small design flaw completely betrayed democracy and ‘is therefore likely responsible for the failure of the United States’ (ibid). Although this is an extreme case, and clearly shows the stark reality of thoughtless design, it also shows the possibility, power and necessity of good design. With a little design knowledge and logical thinking, this mistake would never have happened:

Design for the greater good is that which is usually overlooked: airport signage, stamps, passports, the driver’s license. It’s time for our government to act publicly, fervently, and adamantly in advocating the essential and necessary nature of design. Design should be valued and recognised for the power it holds. (Williams, 2001: 99)
To stop similar cases recurring, our governments and societies need to understand the importance of good design. Excluding or confusing people due to their age, physical ability, or any other characteristic, may cause it to be inaccessible at best, and life threatening at worst. It is therefore an ethical consideration to decide who our audience is, what their needs are, and how rationally we should approach each project. For instance, road signage is clearly more suited to a rational approach than, say, an anti-war poster.

The concept of rational and value-free design has caused much confusion and debate in the design community. Is design a value-free process of rationality, or does a designer’s social context play a part in the design process? In 1993 at the Design Renaissance International Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, Katherine McCoy presented a speech entitled ‘Good Citizenship: Design as a Social and Political force’. Her argument was mainly aimed at design educators as a plea to revise the apolitical stance that many of their students were taught. She speaks of the problems that arise when a generation of designers believe in approaching projects from an ethically neutral stance, and why this is fundamentally a waste of potential:

This ideal of the dispassionate professional distances us from ethical and political values. Think of the words used to describe the disciplined objective professional, whether it be scientist, doctor or lawyer: impartial, dispassionate, disinterested. These become pejorative terms in a difficult world crying for compassion, interest, concern, commitment and involvement.’ (McCoy, 2003)

McCoy argues that no matter how impartial we are to the views and ethics of the messages and organisations we design for, the truth is that through our designs we are in fact strongly advocating the ideals within them. By using our creativity and time within the commercial sector, for instance, we are ultimately making ‘a decisive vote for economics over other potential concerns, including social, educational, cultural, spiritual, and political needs’ (ibid). Not only this, but it becomes a strategised and publicised vote aimed at encouraging the audience to vote in favour of economics also. You only have to think of a specific political movement or figure (Communism, Nazism, Obama, Che Guevara, etc.) to realise that the images of those movements come to embody the ideals and beliefs that they represent. For instance,
figure 5 - Anon - Swastika.
Berman (2009: 66) highlights the ability of the Swastika (figure 5) ‘to make many in Western culture wince’. The designs of a political and social movement can be as iconic and memorable as the ideals themselves, and become the visual voice of those ideals.

The myth of objectivity, as McCoy puts it, is indeed a belief held by a large percentage of the design community that feel they are there to serve the client’s wish only. This is often that of making more profits whilst turning a blind eye to the other physical and mental impacts of their messages and products. McCoy argues that when this myth does not impose on a designer’s creations, skills are used to openly advocate messages that strongly relate to the designer’s personal ethical beliefs. When this happens we see meaningful, thoughtful and sometimes provocative designs that take into consideration the social and political implications of what is said and why. What is important about McCoy’s argument is the notion that design inherits political and social ideals that are rooted within the content. It can be deduced then, that a designer acts politically and ethically from the moment they choose a client or message. Essentially, our skills can be used to vote for certain changes within our society, but also to inspire and persuade others to participate and take an active stance on important issues too, and in this sense design should not be ‘value-free’. In the words of McCoy: ‘even chemists and physicists must have a contextual view of their work in the socio-political world around them.’ As designers we need to understand our own context, and examine how our time and creativity can be best applied to improve society.
III. What Can We Do?
In his 2009 book, ‘Do Good Design’, David Berman concludes with his ‘Do Good Pledge’: a 3-part-promise that he claims is possible (and compulsory) for all designers to join. As he states: ‘We must act, be heard... and sometimes simply say no by designing a better yes’ (Berman, 2009: 149).

The first part of this ‘Do Good Pledge’ is: ‘I will be true to my profession’. In this, Berman urges the reader to become a member of a ‘national or regional association of design professionals that has a code of ethics’, such as AIGA or Icograda. In doing this, designers will not only agree to respect the relationships they have, both socially and professionally, but design will start to gain more respect in return. He stresses the point of ‘a commitment to social responsibility’, stating that with this pledge comes ‘a recognition that your profession is a part of who you are’ (ibid: 151). He likens this part of the pledge to the Hippocratic Oath, taken by doctors in order to uphold their social responsibility and to bring about equality and ethics within their profession.

The second part of this pledge is titled: ‘I will be true to myself’. In this section he asks designers to act as a human being first, and a designer second. He states that ‘if all designers simply looked in their hearts, chose to be their best selves, and did only work that was in alignment with their principles, then we’d be 90 percent there’ (ibid: 151). Although it is a bold proposal that would take effort and will-power, if all designers chose not to apply their skills to messages they believe to be harmful or disingenuous, it would dramatically reduce the possibility of them appearing within society.

The third and final commitment of the pledge is: ‘I will spend at least 10 percent of my professional time helping repair the world’. This gives the idea of altruistic design a realistic goal. Berman makes the point that this would amount to 4 hours of a 40 hour work week: not a considerable amount of time to an individual, but substantial if all designers throughout the world were to join in.

There are close to 2 million designers in the world. If each of us were to take just 10 percent of our professional time, imagine what would be possible. Close to 8 million hours a week of designing a more just, more sustainable, more caring civilization. (Berman, 2009: 153)
Although the prospect of 8 million hours per week being used to improve society seems utopian, this part of the pledge only succeeds if parts one and two are taken seriously. Four hours per week is a nice gesture, but only if the other 36 hours are spent working responsibly. What’s 10 percent of time working on socially just projects, if the other 90 percent is spent working on socially unjust projects? That being said, this pledge is an important step in the right direction. It works at creating a goal that is both manageable and realistic, making the issue of ethical design, with its’ infinite considerations and personal choices, far less daunting.

Another attempt at defining a professional responsibility for designers is AIGA’s ‘Standards of Professional Practice’ released in 1994. It aimed to ‘define the expectations of a professional designer’. It looks into many ethical issues and relationships that designers run into within the professional practice of design, including:

- The designer’s responsibility to clients
- The designer’s responsibility to other designers
- Fees
- Publicity
- Authorship
- The designer’s responsibility to the public
- The designer’s responsibility to society and the environment

It is clear that these areas are very valid points of discussion if we want design to move toward a more ethical habitat. One point (1.4) states that ‘A professional designer who accepts instructions from a client or employer that involve violation of the designer’s ethical standards should be corrected by the designer, or the designer should refuse the assignment.’ Berman (2009: 152) states: ‘Saying no at times is a big part of it. But it is often more powerful to propose an alternative solution that aligns with the principles of all parties’. Part of being a designer is understanding how our messages will be received and reacted to, and therefore it is our responsibility to correct a client if they are asking for something that could harm or manipulate the viewer. Paul Nini analyses the priorities put forth in the AIGA Standards in his article ‘In Search of Ethics in Graphic Design’ and states: ‘The client’s desire for profits, and our desire for visual sophistication (and peer recognition) should come after the needs of our audiences and users have been met’.
figures 6 & 7 - Ricky Knowles - Children’s Playground.
Nini argues that a designer’s most important role within society is that of creating helpful outcomes for the audience. Design is of most benefit to society when acting altruistically, focussing its skills on real problems that exist within society before that of monetary gain for a client, or reputation for the designer. Benefitting the users of a project and the public in general is to consider them the client, working with and for communities to solve problems they are experiencing.

In a broadcast from Graphic Design on the Radio (15.07.10) titled ‘Social Design’, a project was presented that consisted of 3 students of graphic design working with a community to improve the area in which they lived. Ricky Knowles, Diego Ulrich and May Safwat were asked by Southwark council to study disused areas surrounding a council estate in London. They attended community meetings and collaborated with the local people to find possible improvements to the estate.

‘I think the key was really listening to them and listening to what they wanted. From that we built up this relationship and this trust that we could co-design the project together’. (Knowles, Graphic Design on the Radio, 2010). The process of collaboration and community involvement allowed the residents to become a part of the process, and thus a part of their surroundings. Likewise, it allowed the designers to get personally attached to the space, understanding and appreciating how the users would relate to the area:

After talking with the local children we realised that they did not want another traditional swingset and slide. Instead we discussed different options and made 4 playful hills, allowing the children to use their imagination and make up their own games. (Knowles, 2010)

The outcome (figures 6 & 7) is not a piece of graphic design, granted, but it shows how design skills can be applied to very different situations, some being very valuable to society. Social design is a process with the aim of benefitting and involving the end users, the people who are really affected. It becomes unique to it’s environment, adding to the culture and overall value of the area. This process of user involvement and input is surely one of a true democracy, allowing communities to have more say and control over their environment.

At the other end of the spectrum to social design is politically driven design, whereby
designers aim to create a dialogue of ideas in society. This form of design can be classed as dissenting design; design that opposes and questions the natural order of things. In this process, the designer can act as author, activist, educator, philosopher, or subverter. However, it’s aims are often to benefit society, although usually dwelling from a more personal and emotional place than social design. In his book ‘Design of Dissent’, Milton Glaser describes why dissent in any form is often a positive thing:

Part of the characteristic of dissent when it’s at it’s best is fuelled by empathy, and it’s fuelled by the idea that other people matter, and that if somebody is hurt or victimised, we are all hurt or victimised. (Glaser, 2006)

This approach to design is political and sometimes destructive in an ideological sense. It gives minority ideas a voice, and ‘is an essential part of keeping democratic societies healthy.’ (Glaser, 2006). Another book with a similar approach to design is ‘Culture Jam’, written by Kalle Lasn, promoting and encouraging designers to dissent, act politically and bring about change. Kalle Lasn is the leading force behind the Adbusters Media Foundation, an anti-corporate community that describes itself as ‘a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society’ (www.adbusters.org). Culture Jamming is a term used to describe acts of civil disobedience, aiming to ‘topple existing power structures and forge major adjustments to the way we will live in the twenty-first century’ (Lasn, 1999: xi). The book and ideals held within it have evolved from the Situationist movement and the aforementioned theories of the “society of spectacle” from Guy Debord. It focusses on how mass media has affected the way we live our lives, claiming that ‘Corporate advertising […] is the largest single psychological project ever undertaken by the human race.’ (ibid: 19).

Lasn claims that only within the last two centuries has the human race made the transition to a manufactured lifestyle, (ibid: 4) and it has had many adverse effects on our personalities and culture. ‘When you cut the flow of nature into people’s lives, their spirit dies. It’s as simple as that.’ (ibid: 6) The power of the media within our society is vast and has come to define our culture and the way we relate to the world around us. Culture jamming is a method of utilising the power of big media,
figure 8 - Anon. - Marlboro TV Advert

figures 9 & 10 - PSA - Johnny Smoke Advert
advertising and branding, and using it against itself to tell the truth; advertising aiming not to sell, but to inform, invigorate and promote health, with no ulterior motives. Lasn introduces the term ‘meme’ to describe a piece of information that acts contagiously, spreading throughout culture and grabbing people’s attention. ‘Potent memes can change minds, alter behaviour, catalyze collective mindshifts and transform cultures.’ (ibid: 123). But how effective is culture jamming? Can it really right any wrongs that big corporations and mass media have introduced into our lives?

A clear example of this technique being used successfully is anti-tobacco advertising. Lasn states that the ‘tobacco war’ began in the 1960’s, and by 1969 the ‘anti-tobacco crusaders’ had the chance to publicise their messages on TV, to actively compete with the tobacco ads that were still prevalent at the time (ibid: 125). Figure 8 shows a still from an original Marlboro TV advert from the 1960’s showing masculine cowboys sitting in a vast, natural and open environment. The ‘Marlboro Man’, conceived by Leo Burnett in 1954, became synonymous with Marlboro cigarettes, and ‘by 1957, Marlboro’s sales were skyrocketing.’ (NPR, 2002).

Marlboro's television advertisements in the ‘60s reflected the idea of freedom in wide-open spaces, especially once the theme from the movie “The Magnificent Seven” was added to the scenes of cowboys leading their herds through dusty canyons of “Marlboro Country” or charging off to rein in a stray colt. (NPR, 2002)

Cigarette advertising worked. It forged a connection with an audience of men that wanted the freedom these adverts expressed. Jack Landry, the then brand manager of Malboro, describes the theory behind the adverts: ‘In a world that was becoming increasingly complex and frustrating for the ordinary man [...] the cowboy represented an antithesis -- a man whose environment was simplistic and relatively pressure free. He was his own man in a world he owned.’ (Landry, cited in NPR, 2002). The power and influence of the ‘Marlboro Man’ was immense, but it was first attacked by an ad campaign called ‘Johnny Smoke’ created by the ‘Heart Association’ (figures 9 & 10). It featured on TV in the late 1960s in America, showing a cartoon cigarette cowboy riding through the desert. A man’s deep voice booms over the top, ‘how many tears will be shed? How many more will die?’ (Spiritgumm, 2007). Many
I miss my lung, Bob.
other forms of subverts have appeared since. Figure 11 shows a grave mockery of the original ‘Marlboro Country’ adverts. The combination of wit, subversion and bleak truth does well to highlight the lies inherent in the original tobacco adverts: the masculinity and freedom shown does not come from the tobacco, and the harsh reality is that cigarettes destroy lives. Lasn (1999: 125) states that thinking strategically, understanding and subverting the methods of tobacco advertising allowed a relatively small, seemingly powerless group of people to dramatically affect culture, consumer choices and ultimately the world’s health. However, I think he talks very little about the social landscape that contributed in overturning the tobacco industry. Throughout the 1960’s, many scientific studies were being publicised about tobacco’s relationship to cancer. Increased awareness and evidence about the issues of smoking gave strength to the subvertising, and vice versa: the anti-tobacco advertising gave the studies a visual voice, emotion and impact that scientific data does not have.

That being said, throughout America in 1971, tobacco advertising was banned on TV and radio, (Lasn, 1999: 125) and has slowly lost its accepted reputation since. In the last 8 years, around 35 European countries have imposed some form of smoking ban, usually within all workplaces (EPHA, 2007). A study done in 2001 in the U.S.A. (Hyland, et al, 2006) analysed the smoking habits of 2061 smokers in relation to state anti-tobacco advertising. It found that there is still an obvious correlation between the amount of anti-tobacco advertising an individual is subjected to, and the chances of them quitting smoking. ‘The quit rate for those in communities above the median for state anti-tobacco GRPs was 12.9% compared with 11.0% for those below the median.’ (Hyland, et al, 2006). It is clear proof that informational messages that harness the strength of the media and express scientific understanding in an emotional and visual way, do still have power to educate and change behaviour.
Conclusion

I set out in this paper to establish what ethics meant in a profession like design, and to understand the possibilities for using design as a political and social force. Although quite a strict definition of ethics was hard to pin down, a graphic designer holds many responsibilities within society and also holds skills that can benefit people’s lives. One idea that is new to me is the idea of beauty as an ethical implication in itself. It is clear that beauty has an important role to play in our lives, with Viemeister showing the ways in which it can have a function and improve our lives. This framed beauty as one responsibility and goal of good design, showing that it can have sensual as well as intellectual significance. Another key point was assessing the consequence money has on ethics, especially the ways in which businesses use design to appear ethical in order to make a profit. Judith Schwartz’s writing showed me that, in many cases, companies exploited good causes for profit, and there are a number of problems that result from this. I have learnt that companies sometimes use design to appear as something they are not, and to be wary and speculative when working with companies that want to appear ethical.

The role of design within our society is multifaceted, and has had a large impact on our society. Advertising and the media have become disconcerting prevalent forces, and in many ways are used to create desire and mediate the way we interact as a society. The effect of ignoring our responsibility as designers can at times be grave. However, there are many ways in which a designer can use their skills to benefit society. The Palm Beach Country ballot design failure shows the possible ramifications of ignoring our design responsibility, but also show how designers can benefit society. Democratic objects such as voting cards and road signage play a positive role in society and should not be overlooked. On the flip-side, our governments and public need to understand the importance of good, accessible design in these cases. The political aspects of design should also be harnessed, rather than seeing ourselves as a value-neutral tool or service. Designers should understand the political essence of choosing clients and make conscious use of it. When we work specifically within the economic sector, we are ultimately voting in favour of economics and consumption. When we choose to work for clients within social,
political and educational areas of society, although maybe not paying as well, they hold completely different values that our design comes to reflect and enhance. We can vote for positive change in society with our time and creativity.

This paper has guided me to two distinct strategies that approach design as a vehicle for social change. The first is that of social design, allowing the designer to act altruistically as a citizen, whilst benefitting the public. When we approach a project with the mindset that society in general is the client, there are infinite possibilities for affecting change. By focussing our attention on the end users of our creations, the negative ramifications of design become minimised. Outcomes are truely beneficial to the audience it is intended. My case study of the children’s playground by Ricky Knowles, May Safwat and Diego Ulrich introduced me to a new way of perceiving the design process. It shows that by ignoring typical outcomes of graphic design and focussing on the process, obscure and varying problems within society can be remedied in refreshing and useful ways. The importance of community collaboration and input within this process will hopefully now become a large part of my approach towards design. The other approach is that of politically driven design, and designer authorship. Here, the designer can create messages of a dissenting nature that can come to affect our common social values. By taking a clear political stance, using wit and subversion can create resonant messages that would otherwise gain no momentum. The anti-tobacco movement shows a case where these techniques were successful. Timely messages can give scientific evidence an aspect of emotional resonance, creating a connection between the viewer and the information that would otherwise not be possible. In this way, the designer sees the public as client, with the intention of the outcome being the promotion of equality, health and education.

During my university studies I have come to understand that graphic design is more than merely applying a personal style to content. It is a process of strategy, creativity and understanding with the aim of altering behaviour or knowledge in some way, but with this understanding came a sense of unease and confusion about what my role as a graphic designer may be in society. I first read Ken Garland’s 1967 manifesto ‘First Things First’ in my first year of study. It resonated with me, introducing me to the idea that design can do more for society than create a desire for products. However, it left me quite cynical towards design, and apprehensive as to how I could
create work that didn’t fall under the suspicious title of ‘manipulative’. I felt that by devoting my dissertation to the issue of ethical graphic design, I could improve my understanding of the ways graphic design informs our society, and look at possible ways of using that strength for good. I am now more aware of the possible ways that design can affect society, and the strengths within the design process that lend it so well to solving social problems. The process of community collaboration and social design will definitely become a big consideration within the rest of my degree, and hopefully my career upon leaving university. I have gained a lot more direction as a result of this paper, and it has relieved me of the majority of my distrust in design that I had when starting. Overall, it has given me the chance to appreciate the power of design within our society, rather than being intimidated by it.
Images


Bibliography


