The Endless End

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Abstract

From the boom of corporate identity in the 50s, 60 years have passed, and we now see picture marks become more complex and question axioms of identity design, like simplicity or bidimensionality. In these changing times, where access to technology and to information makes it possible for one to see the world as a ‘flat’ place [1], where virtually anyone with a computer can create, it is worth considering how much has changed and how much remains the same in picture marks design. Are the silent designers [2] — the technology and software — growing louder? Are picture marks mimicking each other? Are graphic marks following trendy solutions?

It is clear the change of paradigms the new technologies have over the graphic zeitgeist. However, what are the consequences of the transformation in the modus operandi and its result in picture marks evolving solutions? And what does this evolution say about us? Being both a condensation of meaning about a corporation or institution and a rhetorical instrument by which to persuade an audience that a product or entity has distinctive and desirable qualities, picture marks are, therefore, a condensed representation of social identity. They are signs full of signification beyond themselves, representing ourselves and our world and by means of its analysis we can learn a bit more about our role as designers, our relation towards new technologies and foresee our role as designers in the future.

Keywords
Identity design, picture marks, visual analysis, meme, myth, hero.

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1. Introduction

This analysis, part of an ongoing PhD research, will be made firstly, from a visual selection of recently updated picture marks from Mollerup’s work *Marks of Excellence* [3]. I will compare these recent changes to their previous versions and assess the various new versions amongst each other in order to find out if there is a pattern or tendency that is emerging.

Afterwards, I will approach these transformations in the light of the concepts of hot and cool from McLuhan, and the concept of ‘Meme’ from Richard Dawkins [4]; and ‘Teme’ from Susan Blackmore (2008) as virals, in order to bring a social explanation to picture mark creation in the present and envision our role as designers in the future.

Before presenting the selected picture marks recently changed from their rational look, influenced by the International Style, it is worth considering why the study of picture marks is important today. When identity design blossomed in the 1950’s, Swiss design had made a benchmark that would become a model for corporate and institutional identity designers, which consisted of rationality, proportion, geometry, with the aim of transcending passing tendencies or fashion, in order to continue over time [5][6][7].

In contrast, it might seem odd at a first glance, to speak about picture marks when we are in the middle of the worst global economic crisis the world has faced for 80 years. However, a more attentive look will note that in these challenging times, it is even more necessary to produce excellence in one’s area of expertise and produce efficient picture marks as they are key elements in the recognition, differentiation and profitability of an entity, in order to augment competitiveness, productivity and efficiency. Through the analysis of the picture marks evolution, we can obtain guidelines by which to contribute to a more efficient model of designing picture marks, one that is aware of a social theory and its practical consequences.

2. Materials and Methods

The corpus of analysis is composed by the picture marks that have changed since the publication of Mollerup’s *Marks of Excellence* [3]. From those, we will analyze, in the course of this paper, and in more detail, a selection made to illustrate a variety of entities of different sectors of industry. Those selected marks are: UPS (changed in 2003), Apple (changed in 1999), At&T (changed in 2005) and Peugeot (changed in 2010). I’m going to analyze these picture marks through categories that I adapted from the categories of Jacques Bertin [8], Donis A. Dondis [9] and Kimberly Elam [10] and synthesized into three categories – value, direction and shape; and through the trinomial hero, conflict and purpose. Qualitative methods were the basis for this study, particularly, visual analysis according to the grid based on those 3x2 categories from the

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2 *Marks of Excellence* by Mollerup was chosen as the corpus of our ongoing analysis because it represents the development of trademarks through more than 5,000 years and has become an international reference book, being, still today, a best seller in the field.

3 On the 05.11.2010 conference in New York, *Brand New Conference* [11], which I assisted via webcast, Connie Birdsall from Lippincott (USA), and Tom Dorresteijn from Studio Dumbar (The Netherlands) stated evidence in the correlation between a company’s identity design and its profits.

4 Characteristics of any narrative
synthesis of Bertin’s, Dondis’ and Elam’s categories, and using semiotics as a technique.

However, the quantification of the different changes observed proved necessary to the ongoing results of our research: from the 257 picture marks presented and analyzed by Mollerup, 147 (57%) of them today remain the same. Amongst them are Deutsche Bank, created by Anton Stankowsky in 1974, Lufthansa designed by Otto Firle in collaboration with Walther Mackenthun in 1918, KLM created by F.H.K. Henrion in 1961, Electrolux done by Carlo Vivarelli in 1963 or Mitsubishi done by Yataro Iwasaki in 1870. However, 52 (20%) changed significantly and more than half of those changes (29 of them, 11,3%) have incorporated what seems to be the same solution: a third dimension and a gradient. In this next part we will advance an analysis and interpretation of this phenomenon, considering 3x2 categories: value, direction and shape; the hero, conflict and purpose of each picture mark.

Figure 1 – (From the author.) The components of this analysis. In the first column are the categories inspired by the synthesis of Donis, Bertin and Elam’s categories; in the second column are the categories of a narrative.

**Donis A. Dondis (1974) suggests 10 categories to analyse visual materials:**
- dot
- line
- shape
- direction
- tone
- color
- texture
- scale
- dimension
- movement

**Jacques Bertin (1983) suggests 8 categories to analyse the semiology of graphics:**
- 2 dimensions of the plane: x and y
- size
- value
- texture
- color
- direction
- shape

**Kimberly Elam (2001) suggests 2 to analyse design:**
- proportion
- regulating lines

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5 Even though these marks have been steadily updated since, the changes in the picture mark have been subtle enough not to be perceived by the average user.
Here I synthesize those categories into 3 to analyse picture marks:

1 - value: means the hierarchy or the relative importance of elements in comparison to each other – therefore, it includes size, color and texture that influence the value (or the hero, the most important element or message);

2 - direction: this category can be influenced by the most important elements and it can imply movement. It is suggested by the regulating lines of the composition and it may be horizontal, vertical, diagonal or irregular (or conflict, the stress, the dynamic movement);

3 - shape: it is the totality of the form (or purpose, the entirety of the picture).

Figure 2 – (From the author.) The components of this analysis: value, direction and shape; hero, conflict and purpose.

3.1. Visual analysis of Ups, Apple, AT&T and Peugeot

Figure3 – UPS (1961). The rectangle format is divided into 4 equal horizontal parts: the top one being divided by its vertical and horizontal medians, showing in its center the ribbon, an important focal point conveying the message.
Figure 4 – UPS (2003). In comparison to the previous version, the format is slightly wider. Again, the large rectangle of the format is divided into 4 equal horizontal parts. The circle that forms the lower curves of the shield is centered with the height of the letter p.

Figure 5 – UPS (Paul Rand, 1961).

VALUE/HERO
Apart from typography (which is, as known, not the research focus of this work) the main element is the ribbon on top: it is a focal point not only because it is centered on the top rectangle, but also because that centre is represented by its perpendicular medians. The bottom angle of the shield reflects that top focal point, giving it importance by allowing it with white space. The idea of a gift, of a present, is the hero of this story.

DIRECTION/CONFLICT
The implied lines of this picture mark are actually shown in it: the rectangle, the vertical and horizontal medians make a perpendicular tension, only softened by the two diagonals on the bottom of the shield.

SHAPE/PURPOSE
The shape is clean, rational and straight.

Figure 6 – UPS (Futurebrand, 2003).

VALUE/HERO
Besides typography, the form of the shield is the most important element. The treatment in the contrast between light and dark gives a sense of a third dimension. It is noticeable the brighter curve on top.
DIRECTION//CONFLICT
The conflict is now lessened because the angles and also the curves have been softened. Due to the bright yellow curve on top, the most important lines in the composition are oblique, rather than the perpendicularity of the previous version.

SHAPE//PURPOSE
The shape is still clean, but less straight and curvier.

Figure 7 – Apple (1977). The square format is divided into 6 equal parts. Two of them are added on top to make the height of the leaf. The stripes were a playful contrast to the competitor IBM

Figure 8 – Apple (1999). The format remains the same: the square is divided into 3 equal parts, one of them being added on top to make the height of the leaf and the total height of the format. The stripes disappear from inside the shape in favor of a grey gradient.

Figure 9 – Apple (Rob Janoff, 1977. New version from 1999).

VALUE//HERO
Thanks to the silvery grey and the 3D slick feel in this latest version, the hero or what stands out more are the form’s connotations linked with elegance and enlightenment, like knowledge, curiosity, challenge (associated with the notion of sin, but now with a glamorous twist), freshness, originality.

DIRECTION//CONFLICT
The curvilinear form is counterbalanced by the apple’s bite and the tilted leaf which is common in both versions. The conflict or dynamism that the colored stripes represented is now gone thanks to a softer treatment of light and dark.
SHAPE//PURPOSE
The curvy lines of the form are emphasized by the glare the mark now features in 3D. Shape, direction and value are in unison to underline its primary value or hero: its glamorous, enlightened connotations.

Figure 10 – AT&T (1983). The circle is divided into 12 equal parts by equidistant horizontal lines.

Figure 11 – AT&T (2005). The sphere is divided into 5 equal parts, which become proportionally smaller parts divided not by lines anymore, but curves. The transparency of the blue allows us to see the back of the globe and accentuates its three dimensionality.

Figure 12 – AT&T (Saul Bass, 1983. Interbrand, 2005).

VALUE//HERO
In contrast to the previous version, in which the most important elements were the white stripes given by the texture of lines, particularly on the top left part of the circle, representing light, this newer version has fewer wavy blue lines. The elements that stand out are the fewer blue curving lines on the left lower part of the circle that become narrower as they ascend to the right. The hero is thus accentuated by the wide, curvier lines: it is the 3D of the globe. The color blue remains, only brighter.

DIRECTION//CONFLICT
The curving lines embrace the sphere and are more dynamic now. The stress given by the texture of lines is lessened even though the curves bring dynamism.

SHAPE//PURPOSE
The spherical illusion given in the previous version is now accentuated through the curving lines and the light treatment. The purpose is in sync with the hero: the three dimensional globe.
Figure 13 – Peugeot (1980). In this version we can see that the format is approximately the golden rectangle and that many of the angles disappear or were smoothed into curves in today’s update.

Figure 14 – Peugeot (2010). The softening of the angles and the embodiment of a third dimension is part of the mark’s evolution.

As the brand evolves, it loses its ‘masculine’ features, if we see it from a Baudrillard’s point of view [12]: it loses height and its face leans more forward, losing some haughtiness; the shape becomes more curved and less angular, more blunt and, finally, the angles and variations in its silhouette (that previously represented claws, tongue, and a more ferocious look) are now lessened, contributing to a form that is more synthetic and fluid. It evolves from the smoothening of fright into a Teddy. Peugeot leaves the golden rectangle to lose height and approximate the square format.

Figure 15 – Peugeot (From Signe & Fonction, 1980 to Betc Design, 2010)

VALUE // HERO
The brand’s value as hero becomes more accentuated by its 3D look, and its shine. Its slick appearance connotes quality, richness, elegance and boldness.

DIRECTION // CONFLICT
The conflict is now lessened because of the absence of pointy angles, through their smoothening into curves. There is not so much conflict anymore, even though the diagonal formed by the two left claws has been accentuated through light and shade contrast.
SHAPE/PURPOSE
The form has now smoothened curves. This less threatening form, with less angles, becomes an easier and more accessible connecting point between the picture mark and its user, serving the purpose of showcasing both of them as heroes.

3.2. Visual Analysis Summary

As if they were trying to compensate for global warming, picture marks are in fact becoming ‘cooler’ [13]. This McLuhan-esque progression of picture marks from hot to cool can be explained because they now are quicker to assimilate and comprehend, they require less participation and time to absorb. Furthermore, cool seems to be this tendency towards three-dimensionality and light as we see it in 29 out of the 52 (11,3%) changed picture marks since the publishing of Mollerup’s work, analyzed in the course of this ongoing research.

It is no surprise technology influences the style and visual rhetoric of corporate identity: from protecting properties by nomads and signaling tombstones in Egypt, to registering authorship in the middle ages with stone, fire, wax or wood, to gaining a greater formal rigidity with the advent of press, to its consolidation amongst a visual identity system with the Industrial Revolution and now, with the computer and the World Wide Web, picture marks have been side by side in a close relationship with the advents of technology. After all, Media is the Massage [14], as McLuhan puts it. — Backlit screens with high definition and moving images? There you go, flexible, transitory picture marks, with flares, 3D, light and all the colors of the rainbow that will keep you surprised.

Nonetheless, picture marks condensate in themselves something greater than them6, a piece of reality where we can read ourselves, our relationship towards new technologies and our values in society. What do these changes mean in light of a social theory? What do they say about us?

It must be pointed out that more than half of the changed picture marks from Mollerup’s Marks of Excellence gained light, 3D and that 8 out of the 52 altered marks changed from a synthetic, almost abstract appearance into a solution that mimics reality more closely7. Could this latter solution predict a direction towards a cycle from realism to abstraction, and then back to realism? With the invention of photography it became possible for us to distance from a realistic representation of reality and move closer to abstraction – does this indicate that for some reason (lack of time or will power) we are growing tired of abstract thinking? Lipovetsky and Serroy [15] state that hyper-modernity – the times we live in today – does not punctuate with vast amounts of time

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6. ‘A sign is something by knowing which we know something more.’ Charles Sanders Peirce (in Mollerup, 1997: 1)
7. Like United Airlines, designed by Saul Bass back in 1976 and changed last year in 2010, or the american company Prudential designed by Lee & Young in 1984 and recently updated into a more realistic image. Adams Trucking, designed by Almanac Advertising in 1981 has recently been changed into a blatant picture of a truck. Tomato Bank, designed by Shigeo Katsuoka in 1989 and newly changed is another example of a more easy to understand paradigm, as well as the previously designed by Alan Fletcher in 1995, The International Society for Heart Research, that has been updated into a more in-your-face clip-art look.

Figure 16 – United Airlines, Prudential, Adams Trucking, Tomato Bank and The International Society for Heart Research.
for abstract analysis. Picture marks hold the axiom of synthesis in their form: great impact with few elements. But those fewer, later examples show a direction from metaphorical, allegorical or connotative signs that share conceptual qualities with the object or idea – icons, indexes and abstract symbols – to more highly representational images. This tendency is also in tune with our contemporary times in which anyone with a computer can create [16] and virtually everyone has access to information. Therefore, those 8 picture marks reformulate their solution within a context that seeks to be closer to the great masses.

From this ongoing reading and analysis of the 52 recently updated picture marks based on this 3x2 categories, we can say that, in the previous version, the one mentioned in Mollerup’s book, the hero seemed to be the concept connoted by the form and the mark itself would pass more unnoticeably. The picture marks were the concept’s sublimation and synthesis into visual rhetoric. Now it is the picture mark itself that has not only a body, but also light and shine: it is, in itself the hero; its purpose is the picture mark showing itself as the hero of the story. Subsequently, this tendency can be seen as an attempt to go global, in a present era when all time is scarce and the mark needs to show itself more evidently, with an ease that imprints our ‘hyper-modern’ world [15].

This direction towards a greater shine, light and 3D is moving together with globalization that is done with a bit of differentiation, but also with similitude [15], and the preconization of material comfort. In the dark downfall of the hyper-capitalism, we still believe in the self validation that the bling-bling can bring. Hence the 3D and the shiny light.

Figure 17 – A selection of the changed picture marks from 2D to 3D with light. The version on the left is the one represented at Mollerup’s publication in 1997, and the one on the right is its update.
G. Citroën: 1903 – 1999

8 ‘This American dream fascinated and continues to fascinate millions of people. It brings strong values and, firstly, a freedom of initiative in which anyone can achieve success; this dream represented, especially for the poor and underprivileged from across the globe, an idea of comfort and wealth symbolised in the dollar, at the same time as it brought along an ideal, especially a cinematographic ideal, of sublime stars and triumphant heroes.’ [13] [Free translation from author.]
Light connotes spiritual elevation and dignity (the Enlightenment, the Divine light), as well as prestige and well being [15]. 3D on the other hand, represents a broader and clearer manifestation of a material object, something to possess. This is in line with our theory of the picture mark as being now the hero in itself.

4. Picture marks: From Myth to Hero

Roland Barthes, when discussing ‘Myth Today’ in his Mythologies [17] mentions that myth carries with itself an ideology, visually forming an idea before our eyes9 and underlines that, consequently, myth is an ideographic structure where the form is derived from its signification but doesn’t cover all its possibilities of representation. Myth is an idea carrier that forms the way we see a picture.

‘Myth is a pure ideographic system, where the forms are still motivated by the concept which they represent while not yet, by a long way, covering the sum of its possibilities for representation.’ [17]

This philosopher and semiotician also states that myth works better with what he calls ‘poor images’, incomplete images that are more open to being filled with ideas: images relieved from anything that is not essential:

‘(…) myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc.’ [17]

We can therefore conclude, that the more condensed these pictures are, the more succinct they are, the more lessened in form and simplified they are, the more compressed with ideas they will be and the better myth will work through them. Consequently, we can integrate picture marks in this concept of ‘incomplete images’, relieved from excess, left with the essential, without superfluous elements, being, therefore, permeated with metaphorical, allegorical connotations [5][6].

Nevertheless, these ‘poor images’, as we’ve seen, are getting fatter and richer. Full of needless gradients, shades, light and a third dimension, one can wonder now if there is enough space for myth to work in. An attentive observation of the obsolete versions in the corpus of Mollerup’s work – 52 out of 257 according to our research – will point out that that openness to signification and association is no longer as wide as it was before: in comparison to its previous versions, to its more abstract versions, do current versions, with all the glare and 3D, have the same stamina for myth has they previously had? On the other hand, I would suggest that these recently updated picture marks compensate this change by the incorporation of light, gradient and three-dimensionality so as to embody an idea-carrier that is more accessible and approachable than myth. Again, we can call it here the hero – a concept and connotation carrier that pushes our reading of the form into something greater than itself, but is not as far out or universal as myth, still having a great power, even though it is more accessible.

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9 Barthes emphasizes that the reading of the concept and myth is essentially a relation of deformation. I would put it in other words, not a deformation in a negative sense but literally a formation: the signification is something ethereal that conditions our perception of the form. So in that sense, there is in myth some physicality in the signified that conditions the signifier.
5. ‘Memes’ and ‘Temes’ as Silent Designers

If it is true that picture marks have the goal to contribute to a corporation’s reputation, to attribute it with originality, memorization, and differentiation from its competitors or market rivals, how can we understand this herd thinking in heroic picture marks creation?

‘Meme’ is a concept originally published by biologist Richard Dawkins [4] which means a replicator, being an alternative explanation for the world’s evolution (that doesn’t rely on genes, but rather on imitation: ideas that replicate themselves from brain to brain like a virus). The concept comes from the Greek word Mimeme and signifies ‘that which is imitated’. This concept has been further developed by Susan Blackmore on the book *The Meme Machine* [18] and more recently, this author introduces the idea of ‘Teme’ – the technological meme [19].

This explains this tendency that we have noticed in the picture marks evolution in 29 out of the 52 changed picture marks with light and 3D. Now new technologies have made 3D simulation easier, more accessible and more powerful than ever and common applications – the ‘silent designers’[2], the ones that design quietly – like Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator incorporate the possibility to render 3D simulation resulting in similar solutions by the use of the same *modus operandi*.

6. Discussion

If the biologist Richard Dawkins or Susan Blackmore had a particular interest in graphic design and were shown this evolution in picture marks, they could say memes and temes love picture marks and that they are taking us over through them in order to replicate. Is it either that or are we just getting lazy?

There is, however, a third way to look at it. This can also be proof, as we’ve seen, of a clearer aspect of the picture mark as a being a hero: that is to say, the mark as dignity, as a quality seal, as a stamp in an era when it’s not so much the quantity of products or services you use but their quality. Psychologically, light, gradient and the fact that it is three-dimensional give the picture mark that sense of empowerment – and, consequently, it’s user – of being even more than a hero than before. Now with all its brightness and 3D, a super-hero is embodied in the picture mark. This movement shows the birth of a glowing mark that doesn’t resign to work undercover anymore: it does not settle in the corner of a printed ad as a little icon as it happened before, but is now trying to show itself on the spotlight, moving on the screen and in 3D. What does this say about us, the creators, replicators and users of these heroes? What do they say about our society and the times we live in? Will they say we need them? And if so, how long will we need super-hero picture marks? — How long do super-heroes live?

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10 There are various examples of Mollerup’s work that have the same tendency, recurrently exploring similar solutions, like At&T, by Saul Bass (1984) that created a benchmark for other designers; Statkraft, by Anisdahl/Christensen (1985); Den Norske Bank, by Skæra & Partners (1990); USA Today, by Mutsumi Yasumura (1982); Coloplast, by Hans Due (1988); Scanticon, by Peter Jensen / Pind Marketing (1989) or Cable & Wireless by Lock / Pettersen (1992).

11 We can also see this theory in action when we look at websites that offer or sell in very low prices (or for free) ready-made picture marks that permeate with a very low interest in adjusting themselves to a client’s unique briefing but are quick and easy to use. Ready-made picture marks and visual identities can be seen at: www.logomaid.com or www.heroturko.org.
References


