

**An exploration of how professional graphic design discourse impacts on innovation:
a focus on the articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi***

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Abstract

This study examines the graphic design industry's call for 'a South African design language' in post-apartheid South Africa and how the non-commercial publication *i-jusi* is envisaged as a space for graphic designers to innovate a South African design language. The central premise of this research is that graphic design, as a form of cultural production, is discursive. In this respect, graphic design practice is constructed and constrained by professional discourse, which is in turn informed by social structures. However, discourse is also a site of contestation and graphic designers may challenge or negotiate professional discourse in their practice. Thus, as Wolff (1981) argues, the possibility for innovation within graphic design practice may exist at a particular historical moment, although this possibility is itself situated within social structures. In this study, the impact of professional graphic design discourse on the attempt to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi* is explored. Utilising qualitative interviews and other texts selected from graphic design commentary (conference presentations and published articles), the motivations of the producers of *i-jusi* are examined with a view to assessing how their articulation of a South African design language is informed by professional graphic design discourse.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Graphic design produced in South Africa prior to the first democratic elections in 1994 has been described as characterised by a “western aesthetic” (Lange 2001a). In apartheid South Africa, graphic designers, who were almost exclusively ‘white’, were “...trained according to the [Modernist] form follows function design philosophy” and “...drew upon Europe and North America for creative inspiration with little regard for uniquely local references”, with the exception of depictions of indigenous flora and fauna (Lange 2001a).

With the socio-political transformation of the 1990s, the South African graphic design industry has needed to address a multicultural audience, rather than a privileged ‘white’ minority, in their work and transform the demographics of the industry and its training institutions (Lasky 1998, Lange 2001a). In addition, the industry has expressed at conferences, in journals and in other design fora the importance of challenging the dominance of western stylistic conventions in South African graphic design. Instead, the industry advocates that graphic designers develop a style based on local influences but not on the stereotypes commonly used to denote ‘South Africa’ in graphic design; such as: indigenous wildlife and flora, graphics in the style of ‘Bushman’¹ art and ‘ethnic’ motifs such as beadwork and triangular patterns derived from Ndebele design (Buntman 1994, Sauthoff 1998, Ginwala 2001).

Thus, in post-apartheid South Africa, the graphic design industry has articulated a desire for the development of what I choose, for the purposes of this research, to refer to as *a South African design language* but which has been described in various ways. For example, some articulations describe it as a style or ‘visual identity’ (to use professional jargon) particular to South Africa, for instance: “a common South African visual identity” (Ginwala 2001), “a definable South African visual identity and style” (Sauthoff

¹ Barbara Buntman (1994: 12) notes that the term ‘Bushman’ is “culturally and politically loaded with sexist and racist connotations”. She also critiques the term ‘San’.

1998: 9), “a new South African identity” (Shantall 1999), “a unique South African design language” (Design South Africa 2001), “a uniquely South African design style or culture” (Oosthuizen 1993) and “a South African graphic idiom” (Sauthoff 2000: 27). Other articulations see it as particular to the continent, for example: “...a design language rooted in the African experience” (Orange Juice Design 2001) or “a unique African perspective and aesthetic” (Winkler 2001: 18); and others refer to it more generally as “an indigenous character” (Basson 1992: 15) or “an indigenous graphic style” (De Jong 1992:10).

Jacques Lange (2001a) claims that, in post-apartheid South Africa, graphic designers have “...embarked on a quest to reflect the country’s diversity, challenged the Modernist conventions and produced graphic design that became uniquely local whilst also being internationally competitive”. However, the imitation of western design conventions is still being critiqued at design conferences (Ginwala 2001). Thus, my research developed from a perception at the end of the 1990s that, although the South African graphic design industry had been articulating the *need* for a South African design language since the early 1990s, there was still little *evidence* of a significant stylistic change within mainstream practice. The industry continued to articulate a ‘call’ for a South African design language but its discourse never seemed to move beyond the superficial, its inherent contradictions and the economic role of graphic design to a real engagement with the possibilities and implications of a South African design language and the social role(s) and politics of graphic design.

For example, the call for “a definable South African visual identity and style” (Sauthoff 1998: 9) that is not based on stereotypes, does not interrogate how, in order to be recognisable as ‘South African’, graphic design is likely to be based on stereotypes; albeit new ones (Walker 1989). Similarly, the industry does not explore the potential contradiction between its expressed goals of challenging western stylistic conventions and maintaining a standard that matches “international practice” (Kurlansky 1992: 11). The industry also seems to assume that it can merge the cultural diversity of South Africa into one style that will be universally understood and accepted as representing ‘(South)

Africanness' regardless of the cultural context of its reception. The debate shows little engagement with audiences and social contexts in South Africa.

Individual graphic designers and agencies have responded to the call for a South African design language. For example, graphic designers have, on occasion, had to experiment with creating products that have a South African 'look and feel', particularly in corporate identity projects with an international or tourist audience (see Bekker 1994, Sauthoff 1998, Stallenberg 2002). Yet, the most prominent example in South Africa graphic design that shows a *sustained experimentation* with the development of a South African design language is the non-commercial, experimental publication *i-jusi*.

i-jusi, its name derived from the Zulu word for juice, has been produced in print format by the graphic design agency Orange Juice Design since 1995. In response to local and international demand, *i-jusi* also exists in digital form online at www.i-jusi.co.za. Contributors to the publication include professional graphic designers and students who produce work for the publication free of charge.

What is significant about *i-jusi* is that it is purportedly produced as a non-commercial publication. It is distributed for free and, while its production is sponsored by various design and related production companies, it does not contain advertising per se². It is ostensibly set up as an open space for graphic designers to experiment with developing a South African design language:

The *i-jusi* initiative is part of Orange Juice Design's commitment to developing a design language rooted in the African experience. Designers, design students, illustrators, photographers and writers are encouraged to create in total freedom and to explore their personal views on life in a free and democratic South Africa (Orange Juice Design 2001).

i-jusi has received significant acclaim from the local and international graphic design community for its contribution to the development of a South African design language.

² The *i-jusi* website (Orange Juice Design 2001) lists the following sponsors: Sparhams, Fishwicks Digital Imagers, Sappi Fine Paper, John Pauling Digital Photography, Orange Juice Design and blue.Kryptonite.

For example, Marian Sauthoff (1995a) reviewed the first edition of *i-jusi* for the South African design journal *Image & Text*. Sauthoff (1995a: 39) praised *i-jusi* for "...reflecting important visual aspects of the society we live in" and how it "blends" "Indian", "Western" and "African" styles and imagery "...to create utilitarian communication with a distinctly local flavour". She argued that *i-jusi* "...provides valuable insight into how one may appeal to a vast section of the local population, a target audience which is perhaps not as well understood as it should be by the creative industries" and develops visual "solutions" that "...cannot fail to communicate with the target audience" (Sauthoff 1995a: 39).

What is interesting and problematic about this praise is the assumption that *i-jusi*'s visual style "...cannot fail to communicate with the target audience". The review appeared in 1995, one year after the first democratic elections were held. Until this time, 'black' audiences were not a primary "target audience" for South African advertisers because they were politically and economically disempowered. It is significant that *i-jusi* was hailed by the graphic design industry as 'innovative' at this time because it was believed to provide "insight" into how this 'new' audience could be addressed by graphic design. However, the statement assumes that communication is a unidirectional process.

Nevertheless, the publication "...has won cult-like status all over the world" and "...has been featured in practically every design magazine in the world" (Sudheim 1999: 10)³. *i-jusi* has also been exhibited locally and internationally. Plans are underway for a book of the first twenty issues to be published. *i-jusi* has been described as "...the Trojan Horse of the advertising industry, a potent war-machine of aesthetic liberation that has brought the soul of art into the heart of the capitalist citadel" (Sudheim 1999: 10). Similarly, the programme for the Sixth International Design Indaba describes *i-jusi* as "an intelligent, dissident voice" (Naidoo 2003).

³The list of design publications in which *i-jusi* has been featured includes: *baseline* (UK), *U&Ic* (USA) *Print* (USA), *Creative Review* (UK), *Émigré* (USA), *Étapes Graphique* (France), *PAGE* (Germany), *ID* (USA), *Lab Arrivals* (UK), *SOON* (UK), *Lab Metamorphis* (UK), *Creativity* (USA), *Design Week* (UK), *Eye* (UK), *Novum* (Germany), *ITEMS* (Holland), *curva* (Argentina), *colour* (UK), *Image & Text* (South Africa), *Design Indaba* (South Africa), *Communication Arts* (USA), *ARNET* (Italy), *Graphic Design* (Korea) and *DesignNET* (Korea). It has also been featured in international graphic design books.

In this respect, it would appear that the graphic design industry has positioned *i-jusi* publisher and graphic designer Garth Walker as an ‘unofficial spokesperson’ for a South African design language. In particular, Walker has presented his work and his thoughts on South African graphic design at numerous international conferences held both locally (Cape Town, Johannesburg) and internationally (Germany, France, London, Korea, Croatia, The Netherlands)⁴.

Although the status accorded to Walker and *i-jusi* by the industry makes *i-jusi* a valid subject for the study of the articulation of a South African design language, the publication should not be uncritically accepted as an example of ‘innovation’ nor should Walker be uncritically accepted as South African graphic design’s ‘wonder-boy’. One of the most criticised characteristics of graphic design history and discourse is the celebration of individual graphic designers and the stylistic characteristics of graphic design products, without significant understanding of how graphic design is context-specific and part of a broader system of cultural production (Aynsley 1987, Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Crafton Smith 1994, Teymur 1996). Furthermore, aesthetic evaluation of (graphic) design texts, particularly in regard to ‘innovation’, has been problematised within design and visual culture studies (Hannah and Putnam 1980, Palmer and Dodson 1996).

Thus, the industry’s call for a South African design language and graphic designers’ attempts to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi* must be studied within a theoretical framework that positions graphic design as a cultural activity. A descriptive study of *i-jusi* and Walker’s approach would be insufficient and serve to perpetuate the limitations of graphic design history that have been the subject of significant criticism in

⁴ Garth Walker’s work has been exhibited in Germany, South Africa, the USA, Switzerland, France, Spain and Korea. He has addressed graphic designers at the following conferences and workshops: International Design Indabas 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 (Cape Town, South Africa 1997, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003), Impact (Cape Town, South Africa 2003), Forum Typografie (Potsdam, Germany 1998), ATypI (Lyon, France 1998), Icograda Congresses (Oullim, South Korea 2000 and Johannesburg, South Africa 2001), Icograda Symposium (Zagreb, Croatia 2001) and Colour the Globe (The Hague, Netherlands 2001).

recent design studies (Aynsley 1987, Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Blauvelt 1994a, Blauvelt 1994b).

Furthermore, a descriptive study would presume the coherent and fixed nature of a South African design language. The articulation of “national identity through design” is not new to graphic design practice or history (Walker 1989: 121, see also Ray 2003). In particular, the “ideological construction” of ‘nationalism’ in discourses of design history has received critique because “...the concept of nation is a historical, ideological and political construct... which is subject to constant revision and which is the site of continual struggle” (Walker 1989: 119-121). ‘National identity’ may be a construct, but it is also a “product of discourse” (Wodak *et al* 1999: 22, see also De Cillia *et al* 1999). Similarly, a South African design language can be seen to exist discursively. While my concern does not lie with the discourse of ‘national identity’, the conceptualisation of a South African design language as a discourse similarly enables one to account for both the interpretive and ideological nature of this fluid concept.

A definable South African design language arguably does not exist beyond the discourse which articulates it. The industry may articulate a need for a South African design language, graphic designers may try to represent or construct a South African design language and individuals may ‘read’ a ‘South African’ aesthetic in graphic design texts but a South African design language does not exist independently. There is no fixed vocabulary of visual elements that can be used to signify ‘South African’ design and “no textbook” (Gondwe quoted in Hardy 2002: 20) that graphic designers can follow, although there are a few stereotypical elements that have been used by graphic designers. This means that there is also no fixed repertoire of visual elements that signify a South African design language that can be identified in graphic design texts for the purpose of visual analysis.

Thus, researching the ‘innovation’ of a South African design language is complex. In particular, textual analysis of how a South African design language is represented in graphic design texts would be problematic in two respects. Firstly, it would involve the

researcher imposing his/her own reading of a South African design language and ‘innovation’ on particular texts. Secondly, methods of visual analysis, for example the visual semiotics approach of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1999, see also Jewitt and Oyama 2001), are based on a western visual literacy. To rely on a western-specific “grammar” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999) is inappropriate when one’s subject is supposedly a visual language that is not exclusively based on western graphic design conventions and influences.

In addition, I sought to examine whether the *i-jusi* approach to the development of a South African design language contained the same contradictions and limitations I perceived in the industry’s articulation of a South African design language or whether it made particular innovations that contribute towards the development of a South African design language.

Thus, my research requires an approach that allows me to study the attempt to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi* in relation to specific individual contexts: how individual graphic designers understand a South African design language and attempt to innovate or articulate this in their practice; and how graphic design practice and, particularly, the industry’s articulation of a South African design language is informed by broader social contexts.

However, design studies does not offer any coherent theoretical or methodological precedents on which I could draw. Rather, the field is characterised by debate. Areas of controversy, articulated by a range of theorists and commentators, include: the scope of the field; definitions of ‘design’ and the professional practice that is known as ‘graphic design’; appropriate theoretical and methodological approaches to design research; and the relationship between design studies and professional practice (Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Crafton Smith 1994, Margolin 1994a, Teymur 1996, Cross 1999, Roth 1999, Seago and Dunne 1999). The nature of graphic design history, in particular, has been the subject of significant criticism (Aynsley 1987, Walker 1989, Blauvelt 1994a, Blauvelt 1994b).

As design studies does not offer a clear, unified theoretical or methodological approach that can be used to interrogate graphic design practice, it is necessary for me to outline the debates within design studies and the position I adopt in relation to these debates. This is the focus of *Chapter 2*.

In particular, I argue that it is necessary to both adopt a view of graphic design as part of a broader system of cultural production embedded in particular contexts (in this respect I draw on theorists within design studies and the emerging field of visual culture studies) and understand graphic design as a particular professional activity. Furthermore, I argue that as a professional activity engaged in the production of culture, graphic design is a discursive practice, which is regulated by particular hegemonic professional discourses (Teymur 1996). A discursive understanding of graphic design enables me to account for both the specificity of graphic design practice and its relationship to broader contexts. It also enables me to study individual practice as discursively situated. In addition, the work of Janet Wolff (1981) offers valuable insights, which enable me to account for the possibility of innovation within graphic design practice and study individual practice without compromising an acknowledgement of how this is discursively situated.

Using this framework, my aim is to explore how professional graphic design discourse impacts on innovation in graphic design, particularly the industry's call for the innovation of a South African design language and the attempt to articulate a South African design language in *i-jusi*. Thus, I need to consider the nature of professional graphic design discourse and take into account the particular discursive context of the call for a South African design language before analysing individual graphic designers' attempts to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi*.

In *Chapter 3* I discuss the three stages of my research which are:

1. Identifying the characteristics of professional graphic design discourse;
2. Examining how the discourse of a South African design language is articulated by the South African graphic design industry;

3. Assessing the impact of professional graphic design discourse, including the specific South African discourse of a South African design language, on the attempt to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi*.

In addition, in *Chapter 3*, I focus on the particular research methods I use to research the impact of professional graphic design discourse on the attempt to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi*. I argue that qualitative research is appropriate for graphic design research because it enables one to study specific examples/phenomena in relation to broader contexts. I also discuss my use of semi-structured qualitative interviews to uncover the ways in which individual graphic designers are attempting to articulate a South African design language in *i-jusi*. The data collected from the interviews is supplemented by information from conference papers, websites and published articles about *i-jusi* and its producers.

Chapters 4 to 6 present and analyse the findings of each stage of this research project. As a single body of texts that maps out professional graphic design discourse does not exist, I draw on a variety of design studies and design history texts in *Chapter 4* in order to provide an overview of key aspects of professional graphic design discourse that informs my research. I examine the professional discourses of graphic design within a historical, and therefore ideological, context.

In *Chapter 5*, I study the call for a South African design language in South Africa as a particular discursive context. I explore how the discourse of a South African design language has been articulated in post-apartheid South Africa at conferences, in journals and by particular organisations. In particular, I critique the articulation of a South African design language in relation to the characteristics of professional graphic design discourse, as identified in *Chapter 4*.

In *Chapter 6*, I discuss the findings of the interviews with the producers of *i-jusi* and the other texts about *i-jusi* which are examined. In particular, I consider whether the articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi* shows evidence of the impact of

professional graphic design discourse, as identified in *Chapter 4*, and the South African discourse of a South African design language, *Chapter 5*, on the attempted innovation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*. I comment on my findings in the concluding chapter.

Thus, I examine a specific example of graphic design practice, the attempted articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*, within a framework that is informed by an understanding of graphic design as a cultural and discursive practice, related to broader contexts.

Chapter 2

Approaching the study of graphic design

2.1. Introduction

My study is concerned with South African graphic designers' attempts to innovate a South African design language in the publication *i-jusi*. However, at the outset, this topic presents two problems. The first is the criticism within design studies of the focus on individual graphic designers and products at the expense of understanding of the design process (including the moments of both production and reception) and how it is rooted in particular contexts. The second is the difficulty of identifying evidence of a South African design language.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the debates within design studies in order to argue for an approach which enables me to examine graphic design and, specifically, the articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi* as a situated cultural and therefore discursive practice. This premise provides the point of departure for my methodological approach; as explored in the subsequent chapters.

2.2. Defining the object of study

One of the primary sites of debate in design studies is how 'design' and/or 'graphic design' (among other design genres) is defined. This issue is critical because it determines the scope of the field of study and what are considered appropriate methodological approaches (Blauvelt 1994a, Cross 1999). Thus, I discuss definitions of 'design' and 'graphic design' before I consider approaches to the study of design.

2.2.1. Defining 'design'

Before I examine the significance of a distinction between 'design' and 'graphic design', it is important to highlight four complexities of the term 'design' (Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Teymur 1996).

Firstly, the word ‘design’ can be used to refer to the activity whereby all human beings organise ideas or objects in their lives or to the underlying plan or pattern of everything in the universe. Richard Buchanan (quoted in Margolin 1989: 3) argues that ‘design’ “...provides the intelligence, the thought or idea... that organizes all levels of production” (and existence). However, ‘design’ also refers to a range of professional production practices. In this respect, ‘design’ encompasses architecture, engineering, fashion, textiles, products, information and a host of other cultural activities and artefacts, made from an array of media and used for varied purposes (Walker 1989). It is the study of these design activities and texts that is the objective of design studies.

Secondly, ‘design’ is a relative term in that the implications of the word ‘design’ have changed over time in response to historical developments and its “meaning and value” alters in relation to “...neighbouring terms such as ‘art’, ‘craft’, ‘engineering’ and ‘mass media’” (Walker 1989: 23). Thus, it is important for the design researcher to consider how the meaning and role of ‘design’ changes in relation to particular contexts and why particular practices or objects are considered to be ‘design’ and/or are defined in a particular way, rather than assume an essentialist view of ‘design’.

Thirdly, ‘design’ is not a discrete field of inquiry or activity (Frascara 1988, Walker 1989, Julier 2000). Walker (1989) suggests that ‘design’ is cross-disciplinary in two ways. Firstly, “...it occurs in various arts and industries” (Walker 1989: 35). Secondly, “...it synthesizes information derived from a range of disciplines” (Walker 1989: 35). Thus, it is necessary to examine how ‘design’ intersects with a range of cultural genres and processes.

Fourthly, the word ‘design’ is a “generic term” (Teymur 1996: 149) which has different grammatical uses:

1. As a verb ‘design’ refers to the enactment of various production activities;
2. As a noun ‘design’ can refer to a process, practice, product, plan or pattern. For example, in print media, ‘design’ can refer to the layout process, the style and

- visual identity of the publication, the actual layout and plan, and the resulting product;
3. As a term denoting value, for example, the phrase ‘designer clothes’ (Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Teymur 1996, Barnard 1998). In print media, terms such as ‘layout’ and ‘design’ may imply different degrees of quality, skill and ‘creativity’.

Thus, the study of ‘design’ is not simply the study of designed objects. Cross (1999: 5) argues that design knowledge has three sources: people, processes and products. Accordingly, he divides design research into three categories:

1. Design epistemology: the “study of designerly ways of knowing”;
2. Design praxiology: the “study of the practices and processes of design” and;
3. Design phenomenology or morphology: the “study of the form and configuration of artifacts [*sic*]” (Cross 1999: 6).

However, design studies often disregard how design practices are embedded in broader contexts and that design processes extend beyond the conceptualisation and production of texts to their circulation and reception (Crafton Smith 1994). I return to this point in the next section.

Although all design genres share commonalities and are all part of “visual culture” (Barnard 1998), they each have particular idiosyncrasies. Andrew Blauvelt (1994a: 206) argues: “While all forms of design activity must, by definition, conform to some shared traits, their historical specificity would reveal differences and demand certain approaches.” In this respect, both Blauvelt (1994a) and Necdet Teymur (1996) argue against approaches which disregard how each design genre is a distinct practice which has developed in relation to particular historical circumstances. Blauvelt (1994a: 206-207) states: “An umbrella approach of design history... strives for a problematical unifying philosophy of design which undermines the significance of graphic design as a distinct field of inquiry, with specific historical contexts which demand particular attention”.

While many discussions of graphic design tend to use the term ‘design’ when only referring to graphic design, I distinguish between ‘design’ and ‘graphic design’ to indicate when I am referring to ‘design’ in a holistic sense that refers to various professional production activities and ‘graphic design’ as a specific professional activity. However, the complexities of the term ‘design’ apply equally to ‘graphic design’ and should inform the study of graphic design as a discrete design practice. Studies of graphic design need to consider that graphic design refers to products and processes which have developed and occur within particular contexts in relation to ideological values.

2.2.2. Defining graphic design

The phrase ‘graphic designer’ was reputedly coined in the early twentieth century by William Addison Dwiggins and only gained widespread use after the Second World War. However, graphic communication “...has been practised over the centuries by artisans, scribes, printers, commercial artists, and even fine artists” (Craig and Barton 1987: 9). Historians may choose different starting points for their histories of what today is labelled ‘graphic design’ but essentially graphic design includes a range of pre- and post-industrial graphic communication practices and artefacts (Margolin 1994a).

Although graphic design has traditionally been associated with printed communication, it has evolved over centuries and spans media and genres that include poster design, publication design (books, magazines, newspapers, comics, etc.), advertising, corporate design, branding and packaging, signage, graphics for film and television, among other genres. Graphic design is also moving increasingly beyond the boundaries of printed communication to various forms of multimedia. Each of these graphic design genres has its own idiosyncrasies, yet incorporates the common elements of graphic design and is informed by what is broadly seen as graphic design history. Thus Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “notion of family resemblance” is useful to convey the idea that “...a common essence underlies” all the different applications of graphic design (Walker 1989: 22-23).

Historically, graphic design practice only became distinct from fine and commercial art and the printing trade after the Industrial Revolution⁵. Thus, the artefacts of graphic design history may also fall under histories of fine art, printmaking, illustration, written and printed communication and other genres of visual communication. The boundaries between ‘fine art’ and ‘graphic design’ (sometimes referred to as ‘commercial art’) are once again being challenged in the electronic age. Definitions of graphic design are further complicated by differing notions of who can be considered a ‘designer’. Some discourses draw a distinction between high design and “vernacular” (Lupton 1996a: 157) design by non-professionals. This distinction is related to differing ideas of ‘design’, ‘art’ and ‘craft’ (see Walker 1989, Margolin 1992)⁶.

Thus, definitions of ‘graphic design’ are controversial. On the one hand, a definition needs to be sufficiently flexible in order to account for how the practice, which today is labelled ‘graphic design’, has evolved over time and changed in its media and applications, production and reception contexts and in relation to other social phenomena. On the other hand, the definition also needs to consider that in industrialised society graphic design is a particular professional practice that has an ideological role. Thus, the researcher needs to be conscious of who and what practices and artefacts definitions of graphic design include or exclude and with what ideological effect.

Nevertheless the term ‘graphic design’ is often used ambiguously and has diverse and often problematic definitions (Blauvelt 1994a). To illustrate this point, I have selected four examples which reveal particular problematic assumptions about graphic design⁷.

⁵ I discuss the implications of this in *Chapter 4*.

⁶ The distinction between design and craft is ideological and deserves scrutiny. However, while I acknowledge that such a distinction has significant implications, particularly in the South African context, it is beyond the scope of my research to interrogate these in depth.

⁷ In response to the increased importance of the communication of information in the information age, there has been a call to redefine graphic design as “information management” (Bonsiepe 1994: 48). Similarly, Margolin (1994b: 68) calls for graphic designers to reconceptualise their role in the communication process and describe themselves as “interface designers”. However, in order to delimit my study, I do not explore this argument or the information design school of thought.

Example 1

Aynsley (1987: 135) describes graphic design as “...items with words and images printed by ink, registering on a surface”. Firstly, this definition overlooks the professional and ideological constitution of graphic design. Secondly, it relies on the materials used and is no longer applicable in the age of multimedia. In contemporary society, graphic designers utilise a range of tools and media that are not necessarily ink-based (Bonsiepe 1994). These tools are also used for a range of activities beyond the boundaries of graphic design practice and by ‘non-designers’.

Example 2

Blauvelt (1994b: 200-201) argues that “the conjecture of word and image” is a pivotal characteristic of graphic design. However, this definition is too simplistic to take account of the complex nature of graphic design; particularly the role it is intended to play in a world revolutionised by the rising power of information. New technologies have challenged the distinction between word and image (Drucker 2001) and the juxtaposition of image and text is not exclusive to graphic design.

Example 3

Similarly, definitions such as “Graphic design *is the activity that organizes visual communication in society*” (Frascara 1988: 20) attribute too much autonomy to graphic design, which is part of broader media and socio-economic systems and disregard that ‘visual communication’ includes a range of visual representation practices (such as film and television). In this regard, Margolin (1994a: 238) distinguishes between graphic design as “a specific professional practice” and visual communication as “a fundamental activity of visual representation” in which “everyone engages” and which includes “...coded body language and gestures as well as artifacts [*sic*]”.

Example 4

Many theorists have attempted to focus their definitions on the role graphic design has in the communication process. For example, Aynsley (1987: 136) claims that: “If we take communication as the characteristic of graphic design, then we should be aware that it is

a social rather than a technical category. ... Graphic design is a *medium* for transferring an object or an idea”⁸. While Aynsley’s reference to graphic design as a social activity is useful, the emphasis on graphic design as a medium that transfers an idea has three weaknesses. Firstly, graphic design is not simply a medium, but also a process and an activity that is organised within particular historical and institutional contexts. Secondly, the conceptualisation of graphic design as ‘communication’ is linked to a particular understanding of ‘communication’ and has a particular ideological role in capitalist society (Crafton Smith 1994)⁹. Thirdly, cultural studies has debunked communication models that assume a unidirectional communication of an idea in which “...the authority of the message and ‘source’ of meaning are located primarily in the designer/client relationship” (Crafton Smith 1994: 301). Cultural studies argues that meaning is not fixed or intrinsic to a particular text and that “...audiences [do not] make interpretations based solely on their interaction with the text” (Crafton Smith 1994: 308). Instead, cultural studies proposes that readers interpret texts based on their lived experience. In their active and subjective interpretation of cultural texts readers become producers of meaning.

A conceptualisation of graphic design as a form of cultural production enables one to account for both the evolving nature of graphic design and its specificity in relation to particular contexts. Using a definition of graphic design as culture, Marilyn Crafton Smith (1994: 309) states: “Culture comprises the conceptual forms and accumulated stocks of knowledge by which social groups and heterogeneous subcultures structure their everyday experience within a social and material context.”¹⁰ Crafton Smith (1994: 307) adapts Richard Johnson’s model which:

⁸ Similarly, the information design school of thought sees the graphic designer as an information architect. For example, Abraham Moles “...defines the graphic designer as a sign engineer who precisely designates the symbolic aspects of the environment to prepare us for real actions” and who thus “provides a system of mediation to orient the individual” (Margolin 1989: 19-20).

Moles’ (1989) argument does not sufficiently consider how the graphic designer is him/herself constrained by broader structures and the active role audiences play in creating meaning (Crafton Smith 1994). He also claims that “graphic design has no ideology of its own” (Moles 1989: 122).

⁹ I explore this in *Chapter 4*.

¹⁰ Similarly, Maurizio Vitta (1989: 31) recommends that the concept “the culture of design” replaces “design”. Vitta’s (1989) conceptualisation of “the culture of design” implies that “design is an activity which is defined to some degree by the social milieu in which it operates” (Margolin 1989: 7). Guy Julier (2000) similarly argues for a concept of “design culture”.

...represents 'a circuit of the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products,' with each 'moment' in the circuit contingent upon the others. Not only are the moments of production, circulation and consumption conceived in complex interactive relations with each other, they also engage with 'lived cultures and social relations'¹¹.

Thus, "...cultural products [such as graphic design texts] exist in a culture which pre-exists their production, their materially realized form" (Crafton Smith 1994: 309). As cultural products, graphic design texts can be seen as a form of representation (Crafton Smith 1994: 310). A definition of graphic design as part of cultural production "...requires that the moments of production, circulation and consumption be assessed for their interrelationships, but always in relation to the larger discursive field where meanings are negotiated through cultural forms" (Crafton Smith 1994: 316).

The idea that graphic design is produced in relation to a "larger discursive field" (Crafton Smith 1994) is central to my study, particularly because the concept of discourse enables one to study graphic design as a particular, situated practice. Before I examine cultural production and discourse in more depth, I discuss some of the debates within design studies in order to argue for a theory of the relationship between design and social structures and show how a discursive approach to (graphic) design responds to key issues in design studies.

2.3. *Debates in design studies and research*

2.3.1. *Approaches to design history*

Clive Dilnot (1989: 215) argues that "...the first context for design understanding is the historical". Yet, he also points out that "...design history, in the sense of a single, organized discipline with defined aims and objects, *does not exist*" (Dilnot 1989: 220, see also Frye 1981, Walker 1989, Margolin 1992 and Blauvelt 1994a).

Prior to the 1960s the study of design history occurred only within areas of fine art and architecture history (Dilnot 1989). With the development and recognition of professional

¹¹ A similar model termed "the circuit of culture" has been developed by Du Gay *et al* (1997, see also Julier 2000 and Lister and Wells 2001).

design training (particularly for graphic and industrial design) in the 1960s and 70s there arose strong pressure from the design professions and new design colleges to develop the study of design history beyond what was covered within fine art studies (Hannah and Putnam 1980, Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989). At first, approaches to design history tended to be based on fine art and architecture studies (Walker 1989). Thus, "...since art and architecture historians tended to construct their narratives around famous artists and masterpieces, many design historians followed suit" (Walker 1989: 45)¹². Hence, design history has focused largely on designers and stylistic aspects of design texts.

Furthermore, "...despite the fact that one cannot begin a history of design without immediately encountering theoretical issues", design history has tended to be characterised by a "resistance to theory" (Walker 1989: 10). This lack of a clear, unified methodology developed intentionally:

The first generation of design historians working in Britain in the 1970s deliberately eschewed definitions, methodological inquiry, and theoretical self-reflection on the laudable, if somewhat misplaced, grounds of keeping the fledgling subject as open and pluralistic as possible. However, what replaced these absences could only be a self-evident empiricism that took its guiding concepts from the given assumptions about design history and design practice (Dilnot 1989: 239).

Blauvelt (1994b: 198) also attributes the "resistance" to theory within design history to the "...constant oppositional thinking of theory and practice, with the privileging of the latter", arguing that "...graphic design history has been constructed in service to the legitimisation of professional practice". Similarly, Crafton Smith (1994) argues that design discourse is driven by its conceptualisation as a profession and the regard for individualism. She says that traditionally graphic design discourse (both professional and academic) has over-emphasised the "...visual 'object' and its attendant production practices" with the result that little recognition is given to design as a cultural practice, its role in society and its relationship to audiences (Crafton Smith 1994: 300).

¹² Traditional art history and its emphasis on individual artists, artworks and style has been challenged in the last 30 years of the twentieth century and new, critical approaches to the study of art now exist. A discussion of these changes is provided in *The new art history: a critical introduction* by Jonathan Harris (2001).

Thus, design history is often criticised for a number of reasons, including:

1. Its frequent lack of distinction between history and criticism of design (Walker 1989);
2. Its lack of theoretical and methodological reflection (Frye 1981, Frascara 1988, Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Kinross 1993);
3. Its emphasis on particular attributes of designed objects, mainly those of material, type and style (Frascara 1988, Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989);
4. Its reliance on chronological approaches which produce "...a [linear] sequence of stylistic and technical change, linking designed objects with other designed objects" and assume that "...design has an autonomy" and that "...designers only refer to previous design" (Aynsley 1987: 137, see also Wilkins 1992). The use of chronology can be attributed to the influence of chronology in art history;
5. Its emphasis on individual designers; what Bridget Wilkins (1992) refers to as the "hero" approach to design history (Walker 1989, Wilkins 1992)¹³;
6. Its disregard for how design and 'innovation' are socially-situated (Hannah and Putnam 1980, Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989);
7. Its lack of self-reflexivity (particularly in terms of aesthetic evaluation) and inherent assumptions (Hannah and Putnam 1980, Dilnot 1989) and;
8. Its disregard for the cultural reception of texts (Crafton Smith 1994).

Therefore: "Consciousness of design, not in the sense of self-consciousness, but of developed conscious historical and theoretical understanding, has played a negligible role in academic research or study and within design practice" (Dilnot 1989: 216). The result has been "simplistic, crude histories which fail to do justice to the complexities of reality" (Walker 1989: 10)¹⁴. Furthermore, attempts to develop theoretical and methodological frameworks for design studies have been controversial.

¹³ The "ideology of individualism" that has dominated western thought since the Renaissance and particularly in the modern age has contributed to the "exaggerated" emphasis on individual designers (Walker 1989: 48, 50). I discuss this ideology in *Chapter 4*.

¹⁴ Thus, the challenge, as Baker (quoted in Blauvelt 1994b: 201) argues is to develop an approach to graphic design history which is "consonant with the practice of graphic design, and which would challenge this sign's gendered way of writing from (or around) one of the particular characteristics of its subject: the endlessly changing and infinitely complex relation of word and image".

2.3.3. *Research methods for design studies*

The breadth of design and its interdisciplinary nature presents the researcher with an array of methodological choices. Some studies of design draw on the research paradigms of the natural sciences. An example is engineering. Other studies, such as graphic design as explored in this thesis, draw on the paradigms of the arts and humanities (Cross 1999: 5). Within the study of the humanities, in particular, there are many approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, to the study of design and culture.

Susan Roth (1999: 22) argues that: “Design seems particularly well-suited to the employment of qualitative research methods applied within a constructivist paradigm.” I explore the relevance of qualitative research and selected qualitative research methods to (graphic) design studies in *Chapter 3*.

Yet, there is “ongoing debate on the true nature of design research” (Roth 1999: 19). This controversy can be attributed to various factors, including:

1. The tension between essentialist views of design which attempt to merge all design genres under one “umbrella” and approaches which study specific design genres and contexts (Blauvelt 1994a);
2. The cross-disciplinary nature of design activities which has led to debates about which research paradigms and methodological approaches are appropriate to design and whether design should/can be an ‘interdisciplinary discipline’ (Cross 1999);
3. The absence of established and accepted theoretical and methodological precedents in most areas of design studies and history (Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989) and;
4. The differences in research conceptualisation, goal, method, implementation and application that exist between design research projects conducted in professional practice and academia (Cross 1999, Roth 1999).

Given this complexity, some theorists distinguish between practice-based or professional research and academic design studies (Cross 1999, Roth 1999). Roth (1999: 19) argues: “The distinction between project-oriented design research and the scholarly area of design studies reflects the extension of design from a form-giving activity to an interdisciplinary process dealing with complex systems and solutions.” Professional or “project-oriented design research” is usually determined and “driven” by the expectations and requirements of the industry, the specific design firms and their clients, and does not extend beyond the immediate information needs or time frame of a particular project (Roth 1999: 20). It is also usually intended to ‘ensure’ the acceptability and use of a product by a target market. Its context is one of competitive commercialism. Thus, its research techniques are usually “...strategic analyses adapted from business and marketing” (Roth 1999: 19).

In contrast: “Design studies considers objects and processes from the perspective of critical theory and humanistic inquiry” (Roth 1999: 19). In this respect, design studies is “...an interpretive practice, rooted firmly in the techniques of the humanities and the social sciences” (Margolin quoted in Roth 1999: 19). However, many academics are increasingly crossing traditional boundaries by conducting research that meets academic research criteria and is also practice or project-based (see Seago and Dunne 1999).

Roth (1999: 21-22) identifies three categories of design research, which allow a perspective of design practice within a theoretically-informed paradigm:

1. The concrete and specific: “defined by a specific situation”;
2. The conceptual: “extending beyond a specific instance to an entire class of situations” and;
3. The theoretical and philosophical: “examining design practice and its artefacts in a broader context”.

My study can be placed in the third category because it examines graphic design as a cultural practice and therefore researches the practice and products of graphic design within a broader framework.

2.4. *Graphic design as a cultural practice*

Conceived as a part of culture, (graphic) design has increasingly become, in the view of some theorists, part of cultural studies. In Britain, the development of design history has been paralleled by that of cultural studies, and thus, cultural studies has had a significant impact on design studies (Walker 1989: 18) ¹⁵. In particular, visual culture studies (see Jenks 1995, Walker and Chaplin 1997, Barnard 1998, Mirzoeff 1998 and Lister and Wells 2001) is developing as a field to study various forms of visual culture (film, television, art, architecture, advertising, industrial design, etc.), including graphic design. Visual culture studies is seen as a “reworking” of cultural studies (Lister and Wells 2001: 62). It is an interdisciplinary field that draws on cultural studies, other social theory and approaches to media (such as film theory) and art/design/architectural theory in order to make sense of visual culture within its various contexts (the macro/broad and micro/immediate contexts of production and reception).

In visual culture studies and cultural studies the text is not studied “...for its own sake or for the sake of its social effects” (Crafton Smith 1994: 308), but rather for the “...subjective and cultural forms it realizes and makes available” (Johnson quoted in Crafton Smith 1994: 308-309). Crafton Smith (1994: 310) argues that to “...rethink the place of ‘text’ in cultural analysis” a holistic approach needs to be adopted that, for example, poses questions about “...how graphic design draws on codes and conventions” to create texts which acquire meaning in their social reception. From a cultural studies perspective, society is not seen as “...simply the context... against which to view a cultural practice or text; rather the production of texts is seen as in itself a social practice” (Lister and Wells 2001: 61-62). Thus, “...cultural studies attempts to show the relationship between cultural texts and social systems through a focus on social meanings” (Crafton Smith 1994: 307). In its emphasis on this relationship, cultural studies exhibits a concern with power and aims to “transform structures of power” rather than merely explain and interrogate cultural practices.

¹⁵ Robin Kinross (1993: 7) adopts a somewhat sceptical view of the influence of British cultural studies on design studies saying that cultural studies “has promised – threatened – to take care of graphic design, seeing it as just one more item in the total menu of ‘culture’”.

Similarly, within design studies there has been a strong call to examine how “...the design process is embedded within particular social relations which it helps to reproduce or to alter” (Walker 1989: 136-137). Both Dilnot (1989) and Walker (1989) argue that design is not separate from social contexts. Dilnot (1989: 244) asserts the following:

The most significant aspect about design is that it is produced, received, and used within an emphatically social *context*. The social is *not* external to the activity, but internal to it and determining of its essential features, even of its sense of relative autonomy.

Similarly, Walker (1989: 136-137) takes issue with the phrase “design *and* society” because, he argues, it “...implies design is separate from society”.

In this respect, design studies need to examine:

1. How design texts are socially situated and reveal particular ideologies (Margolin 1989, Blauvelt 1994a);
2. Both “the immediate context of design production or reception” and “the wider context of meaning and production” (Dilnot 1989: 228);
3. How the practice of design has been “defined” (Dilnot 1989) by western capitalism and thus has a particular ideological role in capitalist society (Dilnot 1989, Walker 1989, Blauvelt 1994a) and;
4. How the graphic designer is “...a member of a social group and thus comes under specific social and economic conditions, shares certain values and beliefs, and... represents in his or her work an ideological position” (Jon Bird quoted in Dilnot 1989: 227).

Thus, Dilnot (1989: 244, see also Hannah and Putnam 1980) argues:

The essential field of design’s meaning and import, therefore, is not the internal world of the design professional, but the wider social world that produces the determining circumstances within which designers work, as well as the conditions that lead to the emergence of designers.

Yet, visual culture does not “simply reflect” the context in which it is produced but has “...a more complex, sometimes contradictory, relationship to it” (Doy 2000: 236). Thus: “Design historians need to take account of the general conditions within which design takes place, but in particular how those conditions, forces and determinants are exploited and overcome in the design, production and marketing processes” (Walker 1989: 88).

Furthermore, design is “...part of the economy, part of industrial production and technology” and, simultaneously, “...an ideological phenomenon involving ideas, feelings, creativity, tastes, styles and so forth” (Walker 1989: 69). This duality means that design “cuts across the divide” between the two “realms” of base and superstructure (Walker 1989: 69; see also Crouch 1999). In this respect, design:

...occurs at a point of intersection or mediation between different spheres, that is between art and industry, creativity and commerce, manufacturers and consumers. It is concerned with style and utility, material artefacts and human desires, the realms of the ideological, the political and the economic. It is involved in the public sector as well as the private sector. It serves the most idealistic and utopian goals and the most negative, destructive impulses of humankind (Walker 1989: ix).

Thus, a theory to account for the complex relationship between graphic design and social structures is necessary. As Margolin (1989: 7) argues, “...we cannot conceive of any theory of design that is independent of a theory of society”.

Janet Wolff’s *The social production of art* (1981) provides a useful theoretical framework for the study of graphic design. Wolff’s work has particular relevance to graphic design studies because she focused specifically on artistic production. As I have noted, fine art studies have had a particular effect on how graphic design has been studied, documented and practiced. Many of the problems in traditional art studies that Wolff responds to are similar issues to those that have been critiqued in recent design studies.

2.5. *Cultural production and innovation*

Wolff’s (1981) definition of artistic production incorporates graphic design and other forms of ‘commercial art’ in capitalist society. Although she focuses primarily on fine art

and literature as examples of artistic production, Wolff (1981: 12-16) draws on Marxist approaches to argue that artistic production is akin to other forms of cultural production or work and is not a specialised activity. She also critiques common understandings of artistic production and notions such as ‘creativity’. In this respect, her work is of particular relevance to graphic design studies because design occurs at “...a point of intersection or mediation between... creativity and commerce” (Walker 1989: ix).

In addition, Wolff’s approach does not discuss the social production of cultural texts at the expense of an understanding of the reception of cultural texts and how audiences are actively involved in the construction of meaning. She argues that “...production and consumption must be seen as complementary” (Wolff 1981: 1). Readers, she argues, play a role that is both “creative” and “situated” (Wolff 1981: 115):

The reader is guided by the structure of the text, which means the range of possible readings is not infinite. More importantly, the way in which the reader engages with the text and constructs meaning is a function of his or her place in ideology and in society (Wolff 1981: 115)¹⁶.

Hence, Wolff’s approach complements the arguments presented in this chapter that graphic design studies should:

1. View graphic design as socially-situated;
2. Acknowledge that the creation of meaning is not solely the domain of cultural producers;
3. Examine the ideological nature of cultural production and;
4. Explore the role of particular conventions in particular forms of cultural production.

Most importantly, Wolff also specifically examines the possibility for innovation in artistic production. As my study is concerned with the innovation of a South African design language her work is particularly relevant.

¹⁶ Similarly, James Curran (2000: 9) notes that within media studies there has been “a reaction against textual populism”. He argues that while ‘meaning’ is not fixed, “audience understandings are cued, though not necessarily determined, by the ways in which communications are encoded” (Curran 2000: 9).

Wolff (1981: 10, see also Lupton 1996a) critiques the traditional view of artists and designers "...as outside society, marginal, eccentric, and removed from the usual conditions of ordinary people by virtue of the gift of artistic genius". In particular, such an approach disregards how graphic designers and other types of artists are "...integrated, *as* artists, into various branches of capitalist production and social organisation" (Wolff 1981: 11-12). Wolff (1981: 17) argues that "...artistic activity as a uniquely different kind of work, with a unique, indeed transcendent, product is a mistaken notion based on certain historical developments" and particular social relations. Art and design are ideological and should be seen as "historical, situated and produced" and not merely the products of "...divine inspiration to people of innate genius" (Wolff 1981: 1). Wolff (1981: 94) states that the cultural producer should not be viewed as "...someone with political understanding, free to experiment in whatever way is most appropriate to reach cultural consumers". Instead, cultural production should be seen as situated within "social, ideological and broad cultural structures" (Wolff 1981: 94). In particular:

The artist/cultural producer is confronted with certain materials with which to work – existing aesthetic codes and conventions, techniques and tools of production – and is, moreover, himself or herself formed in ideology and social context (Wolff 1981: 94).

Thus, for Wolff (1981: 52), ideology functions at both "...the micro-level of producers engaged in practical activity" and "...the macro-level of the actual material interests of a large, economically defined group". Thus, the "...power relations within organisations involved in the general process of the production of culture" and how these are informed by broader social structures are significant (Wolff 1981: 30-31).

The impact of social structures on cultural production does not negate the relevance of aesthetic or stylistic traits of cultural products. In particular, Wolff (1981: 7) argues: "Understanding art [and graphic design] as socially produced necessarily involves illuminating some of the ways in which various forms, genres, styles, etc. come to have value ascribed to them by certain groups in particular contexts." She suggests that "...the experience and evaluation of art are socially and ideologically situated and constrained, and at the same time irreducible to the social or the ideological" (Wolff 1993: 84). The

aesthetic is “a social-historical construction”, but “...the discourse [of the aesthetic] and its practices confront us as a ‘social fact’” (Wolff 1993: 22-23). Wolff (1993: 46) argues against both collapsing “aesthetics into the social” and approaches that “...deny the relevance of sociology to the aesthetic”. She proposes that “...exposing the genesis and ideological operation of traditional aesthetics does not in itself invalidate it” (Wolff 1993: 37).

According to Wolff (1981: 71), culture is “mediated” by various factors; including: “...the complexity and contradictory nature of the social groups in which it originates”, “...the particular situations of its actual producers” and “...the nature of operation of aesthetic codes and conventions, through which ideology is transformed and in which it is expressed”. However, while a sociological perspective would seem to reduce “creative autonomy” to “...a series of social, economic and ideological co-ordinates”, Wolff (1981: 2) proposes that concepts such as creativity and social structures are not necessarily in opposition. Rather, “...practical activity and creativity are in a mutual relation of interdependence with social structures” (Wolff 1981: 9). She states:

Everything we do is located in, and therefore affected by, social structures. It does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social structures and act outside them. On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables any activity on our part, and this applies equally to acts of conformity and acts of rebellion (Wolff 1981: 9).

Thus, Wolff (1981: 94) proposes: “The political consciousness of, and the *possibilities of aesthetic innovation* for, the artist *are constructed in the social historical process* [*emphasis added*]”. In this respect:

...all action, *including creative or innovative action* [*emphasis added*], arises in the complex conjunction of numerous structural determinants and conditions. Any concept of ‘creativity’ which denies this is metaphysical, and cannot be sustained. But the corollary of this line of argument is not that human agents are simply programmed robots, or that we need not take account of their biographical, existential or motivational aspects (Wolff 1981: 9).

Thus, Wolff (1981: 71) is critical of the idea that a “hierarchy of mediations” implies a “uni-directional relationship”¹⁷. Rather she suggests that: “...there is no contradiction between the view that art is socially and ideologically constructed, and the view that *artistic and cultural intervention in politics is a possibility*” (Wolff 1981: 75, *emphasis added*). Wolff (1981: 84) argues that cultural production “is relatively autonomous”: “At certain historical moments, and in certain conditions, it is more or less independent of economic determination, and in some cases can also be historically effective and a force for change.”

However, she notes that “particular aesthetic ideologies” and the specific mode of a production for a cultural form may limit the “transformative power” of culture (Wolff 1981: 84-85). Thus: “Unless it is firmly linked with an understanding of contemporary cultural production, cultural intervention may be impossible, inappropriate, or completely ineffective” (Wolff 1981: 85). In addition: “Transformations in cultural practice cannot take place in abstraction from consideration of who these are for” (Wolff 1981: 91).

Similarly, media studies scholars, such as Liesbet van Zoonen (1994: 43), argue that particular “contradictions and tensions” exist in media production processes that “give rise to particular discourses and how amenable the production process is to innovation and change”. Van Zoonen (1994) argues that “discursive negotiation” occurs throughout cultural production and, particularly, the ‘moments’ of encoding and decoding¹⁸. In particular, “the production of media texts is replete with tensions and contradictions resulting from conflicting organizational and professional discourses” (Van Zoonen 1994: 41). She also notes that “aesthetic aims and personal preferences” may guide “creative personnel” and mediate how discourses are encoded in media texts (Van Zoonen 1994: 41).

¹⁷ Similarly, Doy (2000: 236) argues that “the relationship of culture to its economic and social context is not a static, but a changing and unstable one; one that needs to be understood dialectically”.

¹⁸ Van Zoonen (1994) draws on Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model.

The concepts of discourse and discursive negotiation provide a useful way to conceptualise how graphic design, and the possibility for innovation in cultural production, is “ideologically constructed” (Wolff 1981: 75).

2.6. *Graphic design as a discursive practice*

The concept of discourse comes from the French post-structuralist Michel Foucault and is a central idea in cultural studies¹⁹:

By ‘discourse’, Foucault meant ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. ...Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. ...since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do... all practices have a discursive aspect (Hall 1997: 44).

For Foucault, discourse:

...defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic... it ‘rules out’ ... other ways of talking... (Hall 1997: 44).

Similarly, Ian Parker (1992: 5) defines discourse as “...a system of statements which constructs an object”. According to Foucault, discourses are “productive” in nature (Levett *et al* 1997: 2 and Kendall and Wickham 1999: 34). Thus, all practices are “both discursive and material” (Henriques *et al* quoted in Kendall and Wickham 1999: 41). There is a dialectical relationship between discourse and social practice: “...discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it” (Wodak *et al* 1999: 8).

Foucault’s concern was with “...how human beings understand themselves in our culture” and particularly, the relationship between knowledge about “...the social, the

¹⁹ My research is not intended to explore Foucault’s work directly. However, his conceptualisation of discourse informs the theorists on whose work I draw.

embodied individual and shared meanings” (quoted in Hall 1997: 43) and power relations in a particular historical period:

Discourse, Foucault argued, never consists of one statement, one text, one action or one source. The same discourse, characteristic of the way of thinking or the state of knowledge at the time (what Foucault called the *episteme*), will appear across a range of texts and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society (Hall 1997: 44).

Collectively, various articulations of a discourse which support a particular ideological point of view “...are said by Foucault to belong to the same discursive formation” (Hall 1997: 44). Some discourses are official and “...work as instruments of ‘normalisation’” and other discourses (“naïve knowledges”) are marginalised or disqualified (McHoul and Grace 1993: 16-17). Thus, “...it is only when the wider context is understood that one gets a sense of how particular discourses reproduce a dominant culture” (Parker 1992: 34). As Parker (1999: 6) notes, discourse analysis reveals “...the intimate connections between meaning, power and knowledge”²⁰.

The conceptualisation of graphic design as a particular discursive practice (or discipline) has been raised by Ellen Lupton (1996b). Similarly, Anne Bush (1994) and Guy Julier (2000) have argued that graphic design, and therefore graphic design history, needs to be viewed as discursive. Lupton (1996b: 66-70) discusses Foucault’s concern with “...the range of objects, practices, and information that define a field of knowledge” and how power is exercised through these discourses and the “institutions they authorize” in relation to design. In particular, Lupton (1996b: 66) highlights Foucault’s view that “...design becomes powerful only when it enters the domain of other discourses”.

If graphic design is viewed as a discursive practice, it must be acknowledged that:

1. Graphic design is a system of representation;
2. Graphic design discourse is context-specific and evolves;

²⁰ Similarly, critical discourse analysis “assumes a dialectical relationship between particular discursive events and the situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded” (De Cillia *et al* 1999: 157) and is interventionist in its aim to “unmask” (Wodak *et al* 1999: 8) the role of ideology and power through discourse.

3. Graphic design discourse has a dialectical relationship with graphic design practice: it is socially constructed and situated but simultaneously shapes and informs practice;
4. Graphic design discourse does not consist of a single statement but appears across a range of texts (across a range of institutions) that belong to a common discursive formation;
5. Graphic design discourse is related to other discourses and, thus, power and ideological positions within a particular context and;
6. Graphic design has particular professional hegemonic discourses which regulate how graphic design is understood and practised. These discourses are not necessarily uncontested, but create an ideological framework in which graphic design is constructed.

As Van Zoonen (1994: 34) notes: "...discourse as a site of contestation implies that the disciplinary power of discourse, prescribing and restricting identities and experiences, can always be resisted and subverted". Thus, while graphic design practice is discursively constructed, the possibility for innovation in graphic design exists and is itself constructed through discourse. Given this, attempts at innovation need to be studied in relation to the macro and micro ideological or discursive frameworks that inform and constrain graphic design.

Teymur (1996: 162) argues:

The primary object of design research is not to produce designs, or to lend uncritical support to the dominant design ideologies, but to understand the complex and contradictory reality of design activity largely by a critical study of how that activity is socially constructed and how it is made intelligible through its discourse. Discourse analysis can therefore be the natural companion of design research if the latter is to avoid uncritically reproducing the discourse which provides it with its 'problems' in the first place.

It is important to study how graphic design is constructed by its own discourses and how these discourses are related to other discourses and institutions in society (Wolff 1993)²¹. Graphic design is not a neutral process of putting together images and words. Design is ideological and can be seen as a product of and for a particular social group in a particular socio-historical and geographic location (Blauvelt 1994a, Barnard 1998). Thus, the professional discourses that inform graphic design practice (and how the history of graphic design has been written about) are related to broader social structures.

2.7. Concluding remarks

Graphic design needs to be studied in terms of the discourses which shape it and are reproduced in its products. In particular, because aspects of professional graphic design discourse, such as the emphasis on individual designers, products and style, have had such a homogenising impact on how graphic design has been written about, graphic design has not developed a critical reflexivity that, in turn, informs and challenges graphic design practice (Julier 2000). I intend to interrogate how graphic design is produced in relation “...to the larger discursive field where meanings are negotiated through cultural forms” (Crafton Smith 1994: 316) by producers who are discursively situated and consciously or unconsciously represent particular ideological positions. Innovation in graphic design is relative to the discourses which construct graphic design practice.

Thus researching the views of individual graphic designers can provide insight into the possibility for innovation in graphic design if these are situated within broader discursive frameworks. Such studies should not reproduce the existing biases of graphic design research. Rather, graphic design research should:

1. Study graphic design from a perspective that acknowledges that communication is not unidirectional and accounts adequately for how graphic design is given

²¹ Wolff (1993) refers to the arts as institutions which have particular discourses in *Aesthetics and the sociology of art*. Similarly, “the methods and language of art history as discursive institutions” have been examined in art studies (Mansfield 2002). In this respect, art historian, Elizabeth Mansfield (2002: 11-12) argues that “...institutional discourse helps to shape our perceptions of reality”.

- meaning by both graphic designers (media producers) and audiences (producers of meaning);
2. Study graphic design activities (production and/or reception) and texts in relation to social contexts;
 3. Acknowledge that graphic design is a cultural activity and therefore ideological and;
 4. Examine how graphic design is “socially constructed and how it is made intelligible through its discourse” (Teymur 1996: 162).

A discursive approach to the study of graphic design enables me to simultaneously study graphic design as a specific practice and view graphic design in relation to broader ideological contexts. Thus, it enables me to examine the impact of professional graphic design discourse on attempts at innovation within graphic design practice.

Chapter 3

Methodological approach

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argue that graphic design research should be informed by an understanding of graphic design as a particular discursive practice because this enables one to situate specific examples of graphic design practice within a broader context. In this chapter, I describe the application of this premise to my research: an exploration of the impact of professional discourses of graphic design (the broader context) on graphic designers' attempts to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi* (the specific example).

However, as noted in the introduction, the call for a South African design language developed in a particular context and is not a concrete phenomenon that exists independently of the discourse which constructs it. Similarly, 'South African' is also a shifting concept or discourse depending on who articulates it. Thus, it is important to situate the South African graphic design industry's articulation of a South African design language as a discourse and in relation to professional graphic design discourse before looking at how it is articulated by the producers of *i-jusi*.

3.2. Stages of the research process

As noted in the introduction, there are three stages to my research. The first two stages, identifying the characteristics of professional graphic design discourse and examining how the discourse of a South African design language is articulated by the South African graphic design industry, are intended to develop a theoretical framework and context within which to explore, in the third stage, the impact of professional graphic design discourse on the attempt to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi*.

As Teymur (1996: 161) argues: "Design is inseparable from the discourse which helps form it, to which it gives form, and which justifies, presents and discusses its processes, products and problems." Thus, it is valuable to examine how professional graphic design

discourses, including the South African graphic design discourse of a South African design language, have developed in relation to particular socio-historical contexts.

3.2.1. Stage 1: Identifying the characteristics of professional graphic design discourse

In *Chapter 4*, I explore graphic design history and design studies in order to identify the characteristics of professional graphic design discourse and how these are embedded in discursive power relations. I draw on a variety of design studies and design history texts in order to develop an overview of key aspects of professional graphic design discourse. In particular, the following texts are important resources which I use to examine graphic design discourse: Victor Margolin's *Design discourse* (1989) which consists primarily of articles that were first published in the journal *Design Issues*, Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller's *Design/writing/research: writing on graphic design* (1996a), the journal *Visible Language* (edited by Andrew Blauvelt 1994c), Christopher Crouch's *Modernism in art, design and architecture* (1999), Jorge Frascara's *Graphic design, worldviews* (1990a) and John Walker's (1989) *Design history and the history of design*. I examine how professional graphic design discourse has developed since the Industrial Revolution as a product of particular ideological positions.

Graphic design histories are not 'neutral' texts. In particular, "...graphic design history has been constructed in service to the profession of graphic design" and thus "in service" to particular ideologies (Blauvelt 1994d: 292). I choose, therefore, to draw on a range of design studies texts (rather than one individual's version of graphic design history) in order to examine graphic design discourse. I also acknowledge that my identification and discussion of graphic design discourse is interpretive and mediated by my own ideological and discursive positioning.

3.2.2. Stage 2: Examining how the discourse of a South African design language is articulated by the South African graphic design industry

The call for a South African design language is a discourse specific to the South African graphic design industry. In *Chapter 5*, I explore how this discourse has been articulated in

post-apartheid South Africa at conferences, in journals and by particular design organisations.

I discuss the context of the call for a South African design language, who the discourse addresses and how this informs what it privileges and/or advocates. In particular, I critique how the industry's articulation of a South African design language is influenced by professional graphic design discourse, as identified in *Chapter 4*. As Parker (1992: 16) argues, it is important to examine “how and where discourses emerged”, how they address particular kinds of people and how they change or maintain the things they refer to in relation to positions of power.

3.2.3. Stage 3: Exploring the impact of professional graphic design discourse on the attempt to innovate a South African design language in i-jusi

The first two stages establish an overview of the characteristics of professional graphic design discourse and the South African design industry's discourse of a South African design language. The aim in the third is to apply this theoretical framework to the focus of my study, how professional graphic design discourse impacts on how the producers of *i-jusi* attempt to articulate a South African design language.

In this respect, as I argue in the previous chapter, it is necessary to examine how particular graphic designers consciously and unconsciously negotiate professional discourses and the codes and conventions of their practice in relation to particular contexts (Wolff 1981, Teymur 1996). This necessitates exploring graphic designers' understandings of their practice and their “motivational aspects” (Wolff 1981: 9).

This data must be tempered with a critical understanding of graphic design as a discursive, ideological practice. As Teymur (1996: 162) argues, the aim of design research should be “...to understand the complex and contradictory reality of design activity largely by a critical study of how that activity is socially constructed and how it is made intelligible through *its discourse [emphasis added]*”. By considering how professional graphic design discourse impacts on the attempt to articulate a South African

design language in *i-jusi*, I am able to critically appraise graphic design practice in relation to broader social contexts.

As Crouch (1999: 4) argues:

Art and design are based on many untestable suppositions... All we can hope to do is to identify the sets of ideas that stimulate artists and designers to make things the way they do and, in design particularly, to distinguish function (the practical aspect of an object...) from ideology (its principles of styling).

Thus, in order to situate the attempted articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*, within a framework that is informed by an understanding of graphic design as a discursive practice, I need a research approach that allows me to explore the specific motivations of graphic designers in relation to discursive contexts.

To explore graphic designers' attempts to articulate a South African design language, I have used qualitative research methods. As Roth (1999: 22) argues: "...design seems particularly well-suited to the employment of qualitative research methods". I now substantiate why qualitative research is appropriate for graphic design studies and my study in particular.

3.3. *Qualitative research and design studies*

3.3.1. *The characteristics of qualitative research*

Qualitative research covers a broad range of approaches but is well-defined by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994: 2) who write:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Similarly, Alan Bryman (1998: 61-69) identifies study from the perspective of the subjects, contextualism and detailed description as characteristics of qualitative research.

Qualitative research is concerned with acquiring understanding, rather than proving causal relationships, because qualitative researchers do not perceive ‘reality’ as immutable or objective. Roth (1999: 24) highlights that paradigms associated with qualitative research show a shift from “a highly structured objective approach” to approaches which acknowledge that “perceptions of reality” are constructed by individuals and groups and “realities” can therefore change. Such approaches propose “...an historical and dialectical interpretation of the [research] subject in context” (Roth 1999: 24).

Similarly, Clifford Christians and James Carey (1989: 359) argue: “Humans live by interpretations. They do not merely react or respond but rather live by interpreting experience through the agency of culture.” They suggest that these interpretations (the creation and negotiation of meaning) are the subject of qualitative study.

Thus, it can be argued that qualitative research is an appropriate choice for graphic design studies for three reasons. Firstly, graphic design is an “interpretive practice” (Margolin quoted in Roth 1999: 19). How producers and audiences make sense of cultural texts (graphic design) and create meaning from these is also interpretive. The interpretive nature of qualitative research is therefore complementary to the study of (graphic) design. In particular, I am concerned with how the producers’ of *i-jusi interpret* how a South African design language can be articulated in graphic design. Secondly, qualitative research exhibits a particular concern with the study of phenomena in context. I have argued that social context is an important facet of (graphic) design research and is particularly pertinent to a study of graphic design as a discursive practice. Thirdly, a “multimethod” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 2) approach allows the researcher to account for the complexity of (graphic) design, highlighted in *Chapter 2*, by using various techniques to piece together knowledge. Qualitative researchers often draw on a variety of methods, selected according to their appropriateness to the particular study, in “...an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding” of the subject (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 2).

In particular, interviewing is an accepted qualitative research method that is suitable for the interpretive, in-depth and contextualised objectives of qualitative study. Interviewing is an appropriate method for my study because I am concerned with exploring the “motivational aspects” (Wolff 1981: 9) of graphic designers and how their understandings of their practice are informed by graphic design discourse.

3.3.2. *Interviewing and qualitative research*

There are many techniques of interviewing; ranging from structured surveys and questionnaires to “...open-ended, apparently unstructured, anthropological interviews that might be seen almost... as friendly conversations” (Seidman 1991: 9). The semi-structured and unstructured forms of interviewing are often used in qualitative research because qualitative interviews intend to gain understanding of “...the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman 1991: 3). Seidman (1991: 1) explains:

I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing. ...Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process. ...It is this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience.

The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews is appropriate for qualitative research because it yields understanding of how and why people act and how they interpret their experiences in relation to particular contexts:

Interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience (Seidman 1991: 4).

In particular, in in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviewing, open-ended questions are used so that the interviewer can “...build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions” and the interviewee can “...reconstruct his or her experience” (Seidman 1991: 9). In such interviews, the researcher may simply have a list

of topics for discussion and rephrase and reorder questions in response to the “conversation” between him/her and the participant (Fielding 1993: 136). Seidman (1991:16) acknowledges that: “The interaction between the data gatherers and the participants is inherent in the nature of interviewing.” In this respect:

...interviewers are a part of the interviewing picture. They ask questions, respond to the participant, and at times even share their experiences. Moreover, interviewers work with the material, select from it, interpret, describe, and analyze it (Seidman 1991: 16, see also Bevan and Bevan 1999).

Thus, qualitative interviews can be a useful method for graphic design research because they enable the researcher to study how producers and/or audiences of graphic design create meaning in relation to specific and broader contexts.

I have argued that graphic design is a discursive practice and that graphic design practice is mediated by the discourses of graphic design. Cultural production is a process of negotiation. Thus, Wolff (1981: 9) argues that the “biographical, existential or motivational aspects” of media producers are significant. Although Dilnot (1989: 244) argues that social context is more important than the “...internal world of the design professional”, individual interpretations are relevant if they are studied in relation to discursive contexts.

To explore how the professional discourses of graphic design impact on graphic designers’ attempts to articulate a South African design language in *i-jusi* I need to interrogate the motivations and interpretations of its producers. The semi-structured qualitative interview is therefore my chosen research method. I have interviewed two graphic designers who work on *i-jusi*: Garth Walker, as *i-jusi* is primarily seen as his brainchild, and Brode Vosloo, who is Walker’s colleague and has been significantly involved in the production of *i-jusi*.

There has been significant criticism within recent design studies of the focus on individual ‘white’, male graphic designers in design history (Buckley 1989, Scotford 1994). Gender bias in graphic design practice and history has, in particular, been the

subject of critique (see Buckley 1989, Scotford 1994). Although the *i-jusi* producers whose views are explored here are ‘white’, middle-class and male, my study is not intended to entrench the ‘race’, class and gender bias that exists in design studies, practice and history. The original research proposal aimed to explore how graphic designers from at least three publications are trying to innovate a South African design language. To this end, in-depth semi-structured interviews with media producers who are diverse in their gender, ‘race’ and class were conducted. However, this study was too broad. Subsequently, I have chosen to focus only on *i-jusi* as this publication has received acclaim (and criticism) within the graphic design industry for its experimentation with the development of a South African design language. Unfortunately, this means my study does contain particular biases in terms of who the graphic designers are that were interviewed. I am critical of the bias inherent in this study, but believe that this bias is also revealing because it is typical of the demographics of the South African graphic design industry.

Walker’s ideas have been articulated to graphic designers in various arenas (conferences, workshops, features in design publications, etc.). His ideas are therefore not only a key influence on how a South African design language is articulated in *i-jusi* but are also a potential influence on local graphic designers’ interpretations of a South African design language and international readings of a ‘South African’ graphic design style. He is a prominent figure in the debate around the development of a South African design language. It is precisely because the local and design community has mostly uncritically applauded his work at conferences and in journals (although in less public fora his views may be controversial) that his approach merits critical study. Therefore, my discussion does focus largely on Walker’s articulation of what he is trying to achieve through *i-jusi*.

As noted by Bryman (1998: 61-69), flexibility is an important characteristic of qualitative research. The flexibility of the interviews (here I refer to all the interviews conducted during the research process, not just the Walker and Vosloo interviews) was necessary in order to ensure that respondents could share their personal views and experiences in a way that suited them and so that I could probe and follow-up on particular issues they

raised. A structured approach, such as a fixed questionnaire, would not have yielded in-depth, descriptive information that was specific to each respondent. However, it was necessary to work with a framework of questions as a starting point. This framework includes questions pertaining to:

1. Their graphic design training and work experience;
2. Their motivations as media producers/graphic designers;
3. Their understanding of what the terms ‘South African’ and ‘African’ mean;
4. Their awareness of the call or the need for a South African design language;
5. Their approach to or ideas about how a South African design language may be developed;
6. Problems they perceive as restricting the development of a South African design language and;
7. Projects they have been involved in or seen that they ‘feel’ articulate a South African design language.

I tried to pose questions in a general manner, often mentioning themes and topics rather than phrasing specific questions, to enable the respondents to bring their own experience and interpretation to the interview rather than predefining the discourses. Each respondent was encouraged to take time in answering the questions and to give frank, personal responses. In response to their replies, further questions were posed to clarify and discuss points that they had raised.

While I was able to interview Walker face-to-face, Vosloo was working in the United Kingdom at the time the interviews were conducted. For this reason, I was unable to conduct an in-depth spoken interview with Vosloo, but could correspond electronically with him. Vosloo provided detailed written responses to my questions and I was able to ask further questions based on his responses. While, I may not have been able to conduct a spoken interview with him, I consider the electronic communication we had to collectively form a ‘conversation’ about how he thinks graphic designers can develop a South African design language and his approach to his work. Vosloo also referred me to

online portfolios of his graphic design work and particular examples in which he has attempted to articulate what he considers to be a South African design language.

In addition to interviewing Walker face-to-face, I corresponded electronically with him to follow-up on issues which I wanted to probe or clarify. Furthermore, I have attended presentations that Walker has made at the International Design Indaba (2001, 2002 and 2003) and given to graphic design students (2001). Walker also emailed me transcripts of conference presentations that he has given in the past. These presentations and the various articles about *i-jusi* and a South African design language published in graphic design journals, magazines and online also inform my analysis. In addition, the first eighteen issues of *i-jusi* are a source of information.

I present my findings from the interviews and the other texts examined in *Chapter 6* and analyse these in relation to the professional discourses of graphic design. In particular, I explore whether the articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi* shows evidence of the impact of professional graphic design discourse, as identified in *Chapter 4*, and the South African discourse of a South African design language (*Chapter 5*) on the attempted innovation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*. My aim is to identify in what ways *i-jusi* deserves its ‘innovative’ status and in what ways it is merely a product of graphic design discourse.

However, while it is impossible to avoid comment on the publication itself, I do not attempt any formal textual analysis of *i-jusi* in this study. My focus is on the activity of graphic design and the impact of graphic design discourse on how the producers of *i-jusi* make sense of their practice. Yet, because graphic design is a discursive activity, particular discourses are embodied in graphic design texts. Textual analysis of *i-jusi* could therefore be complementary to my approach. It is therefore important to articulate why textual analysis of *i-jusi* is not a primary method of inquiry in this research.

3.3.3. *Visual analysis and qualitative research*

There are many forms and uses of visual analysis. While qualitative researchers sometimes use quantitative content analysis in conjunction with qualitative textual analysis, primary forms of textual analysis include: narratology, rhetoric, discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. While rhetoric and discourse analysis have been used in the study of advertisements (see Gripsund 2002 and Pearce 1999), these studies focus primarily on the content of advertisements. Graphic design in itself has not been the primary subject of textual analysis, although the layout of advertisements and newspapers has been commented on in some studies in order to show how an information hierarchy is created on the page.

The work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) offers an approach to textual analysis of graphic design. Kress and Van Leeuwen's study *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design* (1996) presents a new dimension to social semiotics, which has tended to focus on analysis of verbal texts, and provides a framework for textual analysis of visual texts. They argue that their approach is complementary to critical discourse analysis which attempts to "read between the lines" and reveal how "apparently neutral" discourses "convey ideological attitudes" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 12-13). While Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 12) "...focus on the system of visual communication rather than its uses, [they] see images of whatever kind as entirely within the realm of ideology, as means – always – for the emergence of ideological positions".

The relevance of *Reading Images* to graphic design research lies in the development of "...a descriptive framework that can be used as a tool for visual analysis" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 12). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) draw on the "visual grammar" that artists, graphic designers, and other visual communicators, who they describe as "sign-makers", use to create images. This "formalist and aesthetic" knowledge is not new to graphic design (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 141). Graphic design and fine art education has incorporated formalist theories, such as Gestalt psychology, into visual training since the early twentieth century. What is significant is the link of this normalised, professional knowledge and the resultant conventions (visual grammar) to critical analysis of the

social and ideological construction of meaning. In other words, these conventions (or semiotic resources) are simultaneously “...the products of cultural histories and the cognitive resources we use to create meaning in the production and interpretation of visual and other messages” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 136).

However, “...visual social semiotics by itself is not enough” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 138). While it is a useful tool for analysing visual texts, “...visual social semiotics can only ever be one element of an interdisciplinary equation which must also involve relevant theories and histories” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 138). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) argue that (visual) language is culturally-specific. For example, a visual semiotic approach should not reduce graphic design to merely a system of visual codes that can be read and critiqued in graphic design texts; just as graphic design should not assume that a system of visual codes can be encoded in texts and singularly and universally interpreted. Crafton Smith (1994) is particularly critical of structuralist approaches that assume that particular codes and conventions will be read in a particular way. Instead, it is important to consider how audiences construct meaning from texts in relation to particular contexts.

A semiotic study of how visual elements attempt to signify a South African design language, derived from the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), could critique how a South African design language is represented in particular texts. It could reveal how graphic design, like most commercial media practice is discursively constrained and tends to homogenise the representation of culture, particularly in the context of global capitalism. However, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 3) acknowledge that their visual grammar is applicable to “...a culture-specific form of visual communication”, namely that of western cultures. If the quest for a South African design language entails challenging the dominance of western graphic design language then the application of a western-derived visual grammar to the articulation of a South African design language is limited.

Furthermore, textual analysis of how a South African design language is represented in graphic design texts and an appraisal of its innovativeness: the extent to which its

articulation in particular examples deviates from the reliance on a repertoire of visual stereotypes commonly used in South African graphic design to denote or signify a '(South) African' visual identity would assume the nature of a South African design language.

Thus, while textual analysis would likely reveal how graphic design texts embody particular discourses it would not enable me to adequately interrogate the impact of professional graphic design discourses on how producers' are attempting to innovate a South African design language.

Accordingly, while it is necessary to refer to examples within *i-jusi* to illustrate and support my discussion, I do not attempt any formal textual analysis of *i-jusi*. My concern in this research is to assess the impact of professional graphic design discourse on how the producers of *i-jusi* attempt to articulate a South African design language and make sense of their practice, rather than to critique the representations in *i-jusi*.

Thus, the next chapter provides an overview of professional graphic design discourse in order to develop a framework in which I can contextualise the South African graphic design industry's call for a South African design language and the individual motivations of the *i-jusi* graphic designers, as explored in the qualitative interviews conducted.

Chapter 4

Professional graphic design discourse

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore professional graphic design discourse in order to provide a theoretical framework from which one can approach the study of how professional graphic design discourse impacts on the articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*. By drawing on design studies and graphic design history, I identify how professional graphic design discourse has developed in relation to particular contexts and how it privileges particular ideological points of view (Teymur 1996).

Historians choose varying starting points for their histories of graphic design (Margolin 1994a: 236-237). Some historians claim the origins of graphic design lie in prehistoric visual communication (Meggs 1983, Craig and Barton 1987). Typographic histories, for example, often begin with ancient forms of writing (Friedl *et al* 1998). Other historians begin their histories of graphic design with medieval manuscripts and the origins of book design or with early Renaissance printing and the development of printed communication (Margolin 1994a). And some historians view graphic design as a “twentieth-century innovation” (Craig and Barton 1987: 9); although with origins in the ‘commercial art’ and advertising that developed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s (Margolin 1994a).

Although graphic design has roots in prehistoric visual communication and its discourses have developed over centuries, my primary concern lies with the development of *professional* graphic design discourse. The origins of graphic design predate the Industrial Revolution by centuries, but it is essentially from this time that graphic design evolved into the professional practice that it is today. Hence I focus on the development of graphic design as a discrete ‘profession’ from the time of the Industrial Revolution. I do not intend to suggest that graphic design history or discourse originated during this period, but rather to focus on how, from the 1800s, graphic design developed into the professional practice that it is today and was shaped by western capitalist discourse.

While I explore the impact of commercial discourse on *professional* graphic design discourse, it is also important to acknowledge that graphic design history, as a discourse, is framed by western capitalist discourse and has tended to support professional design discourse (Crafton Smith 1994, Julier 2000). Graphic design is oft perceived as a practice which developed in and for a context of western capitalism and expansionism (thereby reaching colonies). Today it is practised in urban centres across the globe but the history of graphic design is still constructed as a history of a practice which developed in Western Europe and spread to the United States. Although graphic design occurs all over the world, graphic design “...outside the European and American mainstream” is largely excluded in design histories (Margolin 1994a: 241). Thus, graphic design history is characterised by the centrality of graphic design from Western Europe and the United States and western aesthetic discourse is privileged in graphic design discourses (both historical and professional) (Margolin 1994a: 242).

Tony Bennett (1996: 45) notes that aesthetic discourse is political. He argues that the “rules for valuing” aesthetic standards are “...derived from particular valuing communities” (Bennett 1996: 36). Thus, the “discourses of value” that privilege western design “...provide a means of discounting as impertinent any and all aberrant systems of aesthetic evaluation which would otherwise call into question the universalising constructions of aesthetic discourse” (Bennett 1996: 35). The western graphic design community is thereby positioned as the primary valuing community for graphic design.

However, “...the impetus provided by the heightened awareness of cultural relativity (i.e. multiculturalism) has served to challenge the centrality of the canon with focus on graphic design from the United States and Western Europe” (Blauvelt 1994a: 212). In particular, in post-apartheid South Africa, the local graphic design community has critiqued the dominance of western influences.

In developing countries like South Africa, the privileging of western “aesthetic discourse” (Bennett 1996) is further implicated in the broader discourses and contexts of

colonisation, cultural imperialism and globalisation, which are perceived to westernise culture, rather than allow for heterogeneity. Furthermore, the current ‘global information society’ raises questions as to who is included in this society²².

Thus, my discussion of professional graphic design discourse is necessarily based on western constructions of graphic design history and practice. This bias is nonetheless significant because:

1. “Graphic design history has been constructed in service to the profession of graphic design” (Blauvelt 1994d: 292). Thus, graphic design history reveals how professional graphic design discourse privileges particular points of view;
2. The valuing community for graphic design is normally a western graphic design community and western positions are privileged in graphic design discourse and;
3. South African graphic design practice has been critiqued for its reliance on western traditions and influences.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore characteristics of western professional graphic design discourse before I examine how South African graphic designers have articulated a desire to challenge the centrality of western traditions in local graphic design. In *Chapters 5* and *6*, the call for a South African design language is discussed. In this chapter, I focus on the development of professional graphic design discourse in a western context since the Industrial Revolution.

In particular, I have identified five themes in professional graphic design discourse which merit exploration:

1. How graphic design discourse defines graphic design as a profession;
2. How graphic design discourse defines graphic design in relation to commercial activity;
3. How graphic design discourse defines graphic design as ‘communication’;

²² For example, Crouch (1999: 184) draws a comparison between internet users and medieval monks as both operate within “an ideologically restrictive information network”. Crouch (1999) argues that in today’s society “...a minority high technology culture [is] still being used to perpetuate the ideas and social attitudes of a dominant capitalist class” and that “transculturalism... is a fantasy”.

4. How graphic design discourse defines graphic design as a ‘creative’ activity of personal expression;
5. How graphic design discourse defines graphic as a primarily visual activity.

These are not necessarily the only characteristics of professional graphic design discourse, but are the ones I have identified for the purposes of this research.

4.2. *Graphic design as a profession*

Prior to the 1800s, the design and production of printed communication were not separate activities. However, after the Industrial Revolution:

The unity of design and production, in which... a printer was involved in all aspects of his [*sic*] craft from the design of typefaces and layout of the printed page to the actual printing of books and broadsheets, ended. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the specialization of the factory system fractured graphic communications into separate design and production components (Meggs 1983: 156).

New means of production simultaneously decreased production costs and increased the production and availability of printed communications media (Meggs 1983: 153-156). Increased availability and the growth of urban populations, education and literacy led to an augmented demand for printed materials (Meggs 1983: 153-156). What had been “a trade activity” grew into “a segmented profession” (Buchanan 1992: 5).

The growth of publications in the 1800s, particularly magazines, was paralleled by the development of advertising as an industry (Meggs 1983). Advertising agencies were initially only responsible for placement of advertisements, but in the 1880s began to offer clients “...a complete spectrum of services: copywriting, art direction, production, and media selection” (Meggs 1983: 196). Graphic design was beginning to promote itself as a specialised service and strengthen its ties to commercial imperatives.

However, during the 1800s there was little distinction between fine art and what was then known as ‘applied’ or ‘commercial art’ (Buchanan 1992, Craig and Barton 1987). At the turn of the century, most graphic designers (and illustrators) were trained in fine art

schools and “...embraced applied art techniques which had evolved with the development of commercial printing processes” (Meggs 1983: 221).

In the early twentieth century, philosophical views that advocated the unity of art and design were topical (Meggs 1983). In particular, the Bauhaus School sought to abandon distinctions between art, craft and production in favour of totality: the integration of form and function, “the aesthetic and the utilitarian” (Foster 2002: 18). In addition, theories of visual perception, colour and design were developed in Europe and the Soviet Union during this time (Drucker 2001). The theoretical principles and philosophies of the Bauhaus and early twentieth century modern art were adopted by graphic design and gave credibility to its practice (Hitchins 1990, Meggs 1983, Wild 1997, Drucker 2001). Drucker (2001) argues that the development of “...a concept of design grounded in principles of visual order and systematic precepts” and the “...taming of avant-garde innovation... created the first rationalized foundation for design as a discourse with its own rules”.

Thus, with the spread of Modernist and Bauhaus philosophies to the US after the Second World War, “...graphic design was seen as the means to more effective visual communications” (Byrne 1997: 85). As the significance of commercial ‘visual communication’, particularly in the forms of advertising, packaging and corporate communications, grew, graphic design was increasingly positioned as “a socially useful and important activity” (Meggs 1983: 379).

As a result, in the 1960s, there was significant emphasis on positioning graphic design as a profession. As Peter Kneebone (1990: 13) comments with reference to the early 1960s:

Not so very long ago, ‘commercial artists’ discovered that they were really ‘graphic designers’. It was not simply a matter of redesigning the label. This was a time when the graphic design profession was suddenly growing in importance and its responsibility and, while its own character was changing, attempting to clarify its identity. It was a time when design education was developing, and professional associations too, when the social and technological problems that are our concern were becoming more complex, when a lack of international dialogue could not be afforded.

In particular, the 1960s involved the establishment of numerous professional organisations, design schools, design journals and professional annuals, competitions, codes of conduct and ethics, conditions of engagement and the call for the development of design history as a discrete discipline. Furthermore, graphic design began to be touted as an international profession, which led to the perceived need for ‘professional’ standards. For example, the Designers and Art Directors Association was established in 1962 (Hitchins 1990). In particular, Icoграда was set up in 1963 to raise ‘international standards’ of graphic design and the status of the designer (Sakana 1990: 12). Icoграда was concerned that graphic design be seen both “as a discipline and as a profession” (Kneebone 1990: 20). However, the “profile” of Icoграда was not necessarily ‘international’ (Kneebone 1990: 23). It was only in the early 1980s that the “...first meetings of graphic designers to be held in developing regions were organized” (Kneebone 1990: 23).

The development of desktop publishing technologies (DTP) in the 1980s and 90s renewed the emphasis on positioning the graphic designer as a professional and specialist in order to differentiate the trained graphic designer from the ‘ordinary person’ with access to a computer and DTP software (Twyman 1990, Julier 2000). Thus: “Much of the discourse about graphic design has derived from continued attempts to define and reposition graphic design practice as a profession” (Crafton Smith 1994: 300).

The emphasis on professionalism in graphic design discourse seeks to legitimise and reinforce the value of the profession. To this effect, as Butler (1989: 157) argues, graphic designers “...present themselves as having achieved the unique ability to analyze and project images that constitute the symbolic meaning in the public message of their clients”²³. Among other factors:

²³ Butler (1989: 157) argues that:

Designers have had to be self-referential inasmuch as the other group concerned with visual images – the coalition of museums, art marketers, painters, and sculptors – contend that they alone generate images worthy of symbolic belief and use their publicity systems to exclude the replicated image of mass culture from public and scholarly attention or assessment.

Designers have accomplished this through long and specialized training in a highly theoretical body of knowledge and sophisticated technique, bolstered by a service orientation and a self-regulated social code, that is to say, by the definitions of their profession (Butler 1989: 157).

Thus, graphic designers claim to have particular training and specialised knowledge that sets them apart from untrained designers, their clients and their audiences. In addition, the celebratory focus on individual graphic designers and their ‘creations’ in professional annuals and graphic design history serves to reinforce the idea that the graphic designer is a ‘creative genius’, with a unique and innate ability honed by specialised training (Crouch 1999).

Consequently, the process of defining graphic design as a specialised, professional “value-adding” (Julier 2000) activity and the discourses of professionalism and specialisation function to exclude particular people, practices and texts from what is considered to be ‘graphic design’ (Blauvelt 1994d, Margolin 1994a). In particular:

By allowing only one definition of practice to be operative, graphic design history has effectively foreclosed the possibility of locating and understanding alternative practices that fall beyond the range of its interests such as graphic design produced by untrained professionals, work that is produced in ways which seem oppositional to current definitions of professional practice or even work produced by those individuals who do not qualify under the racial, sexual and class aspirations of mainstream society, which practice reproduces (understood as the white supremacist, [heterosexist], patriarchal bourgeoisie) (Blauvelt 1994d: 292)²⁴.

Similarly, Margolin (1994a: 239) argues that the definition and institutionalisation of graphic design as a professional practice excludes “...vernacular material done by non-professionals whose talents are considered inferior to those of professionals”.

²⁴ The distinction between graphic design and craft has been critiqued by feminists. For example, Margolin (1992: 109, see also Attfield 1989) quotes Cheryl Buckley who argues:

To exclude craft from design history is, in effect, to exclude from design history much of what women designed. For many women, craft modes of production were the only means of production available, because they had access neither to the factories of the new industrial system nor to the training offered by the new design schools. Indeed, craft allowed women an opportunity to express their creative and artistic skills outside of the male-dominated design profession.

The elitist positioning of graphic designers as “specialists” (Lupton 1996a: 158) is not challenged because the profession is largely “self-regulated” (Butler 1989: 157). Graphic design discourse privileges the relationship between the client and the graphic designer and devalues audience assessment and participation (Butler 1989, Margolin 1994a). While the disregard for audience evaluation severs graphic designers “...from understanding the extent to which their work is accepted and used or seen and ignored” (Butler 1989: 158), it ensures that graphic designers, rather than the ‘public’, are the primary “valuing community” (Bennett 1996) (and audience) for graphic design. Therefore: “Current fashions among designers, not the study of human communications, have continued to determine graphic design practice” (Butler 1989: 158). Thus, graphic designers remain a self-referential group of cultural specialists.

Lupton (1996a: 157-158) asserts that, as “specialists” graphic designers usually “...position themselves outside and above” culture. Everyday social life and culture, she argues, is outside of “the aesthetic world of the designer” (Lupton 1996a: 157-158). Hence, the graphic designer occupies an elite, privileged, “knowing” position that is distanced from that of the ‘ordinary’ person and the untrained designer or artisan (Lupton 1996a: 158)²⁵.

Thus, for graphic designers, popular culture is “...an ethnographic specimen, an innocent sample of popular life to be studied by the knowing specialists of high culture” (Lupton 1996a: 158). Popular culture becomes a resource, what Lupton (1996a: 165) describes as “raw material to be transformed”, from which graphic designers can appropriate imagery. I discuss the implications of appropriation later in this discussion.

²⁵The influence of fine art discourse on graphic design discourse is evident in that artists are traditionally perceived to occupy an elite position (Wolff 1981). To elaborate this point, Wolff (1981: 10) quotes an extract from Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger*:

The artist must be unhuman, extra-human; he [*sic*] must stand in a queer aloof relationship to our humanity; only so is he [*sic*] in a position, I ought to say only so would he be tempted, to represent it, to present it, to portray it to good effect, The very gift of style of form and expression, is nothing else than this cool and fastidious attitude towards humanity; you might say there has to be this impoverishment and devastation as a preliminary condition... It is all up with the artist as soon as he becomes a man and begins to feel.

4.3. *Graphic design in relation to commercial activity*

While graphic design has had a link to business since the development of trade, its practice has been particularly defined by industrial capitalism. In particular: “What industrialisation had achieved in all the design disciplines was to remove repetitive manual tasks from a social context and place them entirely into the context of successful economic performance” (Crouch 1999: 31). In this respect, professional graphic design discourse is inextricably linked to capitalist discourses of commercialism.

Initially, (graphic) design “...took shape as a critique of industry” (Lupton 1996b: 67). In the early twentieth century, Modernist designers aimed to transform industry; believing that “...the economic base could be fundamentally altered by the cultural superstructure” (Crouch 1999: 7)²⁶. However, graphic design, as part of the culture industries, crosses the divide between economic base and cultural superstructure (Walker 1989, Crouch 1999). Thus, paradoxically, design “...gained its mature and legitimate status by becoming an agent of machine production and mass consumption” (Lupton 1996b: 67). In particular, the ideals of Modernist designers “...who saw good design as emulating the functionality of the machine, have been superseded by contemporary ideas that encourage *a constant change in the appearance of designed goods to stimulate consumer demand*” (Crouch 1999: 7, *emphasis added*).

In this respect, graphic design’s relationship with the corporate world increased significantly after the Second World War. The “explosion of products and merchandising techniques” after the war led to the increased importance of advertising, packaging design and corporate communications (Craig and Barton 1987: 190). Product differentiation (branding) and marketing gained importance in light of improved transportation and “suburbanization” (Rothenberg 1997: 49). In fact, Bass (quoted in

²⁶ Mansfield (2002: 13) argues: “Modernism could never participate in a radical social realignment because modernism depends upon irresolution.” Furthermore:

Modernism’s unsettled relationship to scholarly discourse is... fundamental to its nature. Rooted in the Industrial Revolution, modernism was forged in the repeated collisions between antithetical philosophical and political traditions. Philosophically, modernism grows out of the positivist as well as the idealist traditions articulated in the eighteenth century and codified in the nineteenth. Politically, modernism’s unstable alloy includes bases of mercantile capitalism as well as utopian socialism (Mansfield 2002: 13).

Meggs 1997: 73) argues: “Corporate identity as a clear discipline is a post-World War II phenomenon.”

Thus, “...contemporary transnational industry has simply used the designer to perpetuate its own values” (Crouch 1999: 7-8). In particular, professional graphic design discourse adopts capitalist discourse’s privileging of novelty and ‘innovation’ (change) and devaluing of audiences.

4.3.1. Novelty and ‘innovation’

Novelty is a characteristic of “the cultural commodity” (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 20). Butler (1989: 167) describes novelty as “the continued quest for originality”. With the development of mass production and a competitive commercial system, novelty, became integral to consumer culture. Butler (1989: 167, see also Julier 2000) argues that consumer culture “...turns toward constant discovery as its model of intelligence” and thus, with the development of capitalism, “...the bourgeoisie... were sucked into a continual striving for the authentic, or the rare, or that which had a high labor value, the unique, handmade object”. Thus, consumer culture creates “...an audience that demands and supports novelty” (Butler 1989: 158).

In order to differentiate products and their associated identities in a capitalist society, graphic design is concerned with creating or recreating a perception of newness, originality or uniqueness. In particular, in the competitive consumer society of 1960s’ America, “...novelty of technique and originality of concept were much prized, and designers sought simultaneously to solve communications problems and satisfy a need for personal expression” (Meggs 1983: 398-399).

However, graphic design’s preoccupation with (what it perceives as) newness, originality, authenticity and novelty is ironic when one considers that the graphic design product is necessarily a “replicated product” (Butler 1989: 167). Furthermore, the “...focus on novelty [occurs] within a changing but restricted range of established conventions” (Butler 1989: 157). In particular, graphic design relies extensively on

appropriation of objects or styles to new contexts to create new meanings and/or novel representations.

4.3.2. The devaluing of the audience

Crouch (1999: 106) asserts: “The mass media perpetuate a notion of the individual and individuality whilst in reality treating its audience as a mass without individual distinctions other than the most insignificant.” Thus, a capitalist ethos constructs the audience in “commodity form” as buyers; negating the role that individuals play in creating meaning (Crafton Smith 1994: 304). Rather than exploring lived experiences, “...graphic design’s close alignment with business suggests marketing strategies as a model for understanding audiences” (Crafton Smith 1994: 304). The passivity of the audience in graphic design discourse serves to simultaneously affirm the elite positioning of the graphic designer as a specialist and the legitimacy of the profession.

In addition, the imagined consumers of graphic design are usually narrowly-defined ‘target markets’ of particular goods or services. Graphic design, like most media, addresses particular types of people, usually those with spending power in capitalist societies. Thus, there is often an inherent class, gender and race bias in graphic design representations.

4.4. *Graphic design as ‘communication’*

Buchanan (1989: 91) argues: “If one idea could be found central in design studies, it most likely would be communication. Directly or indirectly, this idea and its related themes have animated more discussion of design theory and practice than any other.” The view of graphic design as ‘communication’ developed with the Bauhaus emphasis on functionalism and the modernist belief in the possibility of a universal language. In the early twentieth century, ‘communication’ became paramount in graphic design and the primary responsibility of the graphic designer was seen as “...ensuring that the message is accurately and adequately communicated” (Meggs 1983: 425).

With the growth of corporate communications in the 1960s and the revival of graphic design's 'social' role in the late 1960s (in response to a climate of social activism), the idea of communicating a message remained central in professional practice. Even, post-modern challenges to the centrality of legibility and readability in the 1980s ensured that 'communication' continued to be debated in design discourse. However, the view of graphic design as 'communication' has particular ideological underpinnings.

Within a capitalist system, graphic design "...seeks to provide the audience with the reasons for adopting a new attitude or taking a new course of action" (Buchanan 1989: 93). This role assumes that graphic design can influence or create agency. Thus, the task of the graphic designer is assumed to be one of persuasion. Graphic design is based on the assumption that graphic designers encode particular meanings and identities into the products they create and that these are decoded by the intended audience who respond in particular ways (Crafton Smith 1994). Although, cultural studies research has shown that audiences play a significant role in the creation of meaning, the graphic design sensibility largely overlooks this aspect and assumes that the graphic designer plays a primary role in creating meaning. With the exception of the deconstruction school of thought in the 1980s and 90s, 'communication' in professional graphic design discourse is assumed to be a linear process in which the ability to create meaning lies solely with the graphic designer (McCoy 1990). In particular, the use of particular aesthetics and styles in graphic design is not merely formalist, but intended to create particular emotive responses and identification within the intended audience. Form is attributed with "expressive meaning" (Butler 1989: 160).

Graphic design discourse often uses the metaphor of language to describe its practice. And graphic design training frequently involves teaching this 'visual language'. This visual, or graphic, language is based on the theoretical principles and philosophies (including Gestalt psychology, colour theory and other cognitive theories) of early twentieth century modern art and has been developed as the core "theoretical base" of graphic design (Lupton 1996c: 62, see also Meggs 1983, Hitchins 1990, Wild 1997, Drucker 2001). Thus, in professional (and often educational) graphic design discourse,

graphic design involves the application of a system of visual conventions or “formalist principles” (Crafton Smith 1994: 300); a constructed language, which consists of “...a ‘vocabulary’ of design elements (dots, lines, shapes, textures, colors)... organized by a ‘grammar’ of contrasts (instability/balance, asymmetry/symmetry, soft/hard, heavy/light)” (Lupton 1996c: 64). For graphic designers, the application of these principles assures “...a clean transmittal of visually organized content to a genetically predisposed (and welcoming) viewer” (Crafton Smith 1994: 302).

However, the theoretical underpinnings of this ‘visual language’ are based on particular assumptions about how texts are read. In particular, this discourse assumes a transmission model of ‘communication’ (Crafton Smith 1994: 302). ‘Communication’ is perceived as a process of perception rather than interpretation:

‘Perception’ refers to the subjective experience of the individual as framed by the body and brain. Aesthetic theories based on perception favour sensation over intellect, seeing over reading, universality over cultural difference, physical immediacy over social mediation. Modern design pedagogy, an approach to form-making validated by theories of perception, suggests a universal faculty of vision common to all humans of all times, capable of overriding cultural and historical barriers (Lupton 1996c: 62).

In contrast, if the reception of graphic design were viewed as interpretive, graphic designers would need to acknowledge that the meaning “...of a particular image shifts from one time or place to the next, drawing meaning from conventions of format, style, and symbolism, and from its association with other images and with words” (Lupton 1996c: 62).

Nevertheless, “Graphic designers have continued to trust these Gestalt theses, and the late twentieth century finds them believing that... they have found models for composition that will infallibly align with man’s [*sic*] genetic cognitive map” (Butler 1989: 161). In particular, these Gestalt theories are used to justify the importance of graphic design to “Western corporate business” (Butler 1989: 161). Thus, Butler (1989: 161) argues that “...graphic designers have spent much time elaborating a series of abstract linear structures with which they seek to assure the transmission of their intended message to

the perception of the audience”. Ironically, Gestalt theory was originally intended to assist in social reform (Butler 1989). Thus, modernism sought to develop “a universal pictorial language” (Crouch 1999: 80) which could transform the world.

The development of a codified graphic or visual language based on theories that presuppose the universality of the meaning of forms and composition functions to:

1. View graphic design an “abstract, formal activity” in which “...text is secondary, added only after the mastery of form” (Lupton 1996c: 62);
2. Emphasise the visual, rather than the social, aspect of graphic design (Crafton Smith 1994) and thereby mask the ideological nature of graphic design;
3. Emphasise the graphic designer’s ‘unique’ ability to create meaning for an intended audience and thereby legitimise the value of the profession and position the graphic designer as having particular expertise;
4. Justify the view that graphic design, particularly in the form of advertising and corporate branding, is capable of being a form of persuasion or “rhetoric” (Buchanan 1989)²⁷ and therefore fundamental to successful economic relations in capitalist society;
5. Disregard the importance of audience evaluation and how individuals create meaning in relation to their own situated identities and experience. This serves to simultaneously reinforce the perceived autonomy and “self-referential” (Butler 1989) nature of professional discourse and dismiss “cultural meaning” (Lupton 1996c: 62);
6. Limit the diversity of representations in graphic design and assume that graphic designers can create singular brand identities or “image-products” (Foster 2002) for cultural consumption. This leads to an emphasis on singularity in how graphic design talks about its practice and ensures homogeneity in the way graphic

²⁷ Buchanan (1989) elaborates the persuasive role of design with reference to the concept of rhetoric. Drawing on his argument, “design as rhetoric” points to particular concerns within graphic design: logos, ethos and pathos (Buchanan 1989). Logos leads to a preoccupation with functionality and technological reasoning, ethos with the character of a product or text and pathos with the emotion of a text.

designers represent the world, facilitating the circulation of cultural texts that maintain the status quo²⁸.

Thus, "...designers' claims to communicative skill necessitate greater understanding of the nature of the real and the posited audiences and of the elements of image with which designers work, than has so far been demonstrated in designer critiques" (Butler 1989: 157).

4.5. *Graphic design as a 'creative' activity of personal expression*

In addition to being part of the marketing of goods and services, graphic design is seen as "a form of aesthetic expression" (Crafton Smith 1994: 300). In particular: "Under the rubric of aesthetics, graphic design foregrounds personal expression and the development of a personal style" (Crafton Smith 1994: 300). Crafton Smith (1994: 300) argues that the "...high regard for individual artistic achievement" and personal expression is a "...discursive strategy for framing popular understandings of design" that provides the profession with "...aesthetic recognition while also accommodating commercial, scientific or public interests".

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, graphic design was largely seen as "an extension" of the fine arts, albeit "...pressed into commercial or scientific service" (Buchanan 1992: 11). Thus, graphic design discourse has adopted or inherited many of the discourses of fine art, including the emphasis on 'creativity' and personal expression. From industrialisation, graphic design "...was oriented toward personal expression through image making" (Buchanan 1992: 11). This emphasis on individualism is rooted in modernist ideology.

²⁸ Buchanan (1989: 94) argues: "Design is an act of thought directed to practical action through the persuasiveness of objects and, therefore, design involves the vivid expression of competing ideas about social life." Graphic design is therefore "a central representation of cultural values" (Margolin 1989: 7). Yet those values are those of a capitalist system, privileged by graphic design with little concern for the values of and audience but great concern for proving the worth of the profession by emphasising the functionality and symbolic and emotive power of graphic design products.

Modernism's roots lie in the Enlightenment (seventeenth century) but essentially "...came to an identifiable focus" with industrialisation (Crouch 1999: 5). Some modernist ideas, such as the "ideology of individualism", date back to Renaissance humanism (Walker 1989: 48, 50, Crouch 1999: 10). Modernist ideology has informed professional graphic design discourse in particular ways:

1. "The modern(ist) understanding of the individual is a precondition for the role of the modern artist as a creator" (Gripsund 2002: 8);
2. The modernists "...privileged the idea of progress before any other" (Crouch 1999: 5). This idea serves to reiterate the importance of individual 'creativity' and 'innovation' (as opposed to 'tradition') in graphic design discourse;
3. Modernism's agenda was one of "cultural and social transformation" (Crouch 1999: 8). Thus: "The arts were seen by Modernists as not only reflecting the world around them (this was a radical departure in itself...), but also helping to alter the structure of society" (Crouch 1999: 7). Thus, artistic "genius" in modernist art and design entails the individual's ability to "transcend" his/her environment rather than be shaped by it (Crouch 1999: 18).

The importance of personal expression in graphic design discourse has been reiterated by the ideologies of a number of art and design movements including the Arts and Crafts Movement²⁹ and Abstract Expressionism; to highlight two examples (Crouch 1999). However, during the 1970s and 80s, personal expression gained distinct significance in graphic design discourse (Meggs 1983, Byrne 1997):

For a variety of reasons ranging from changing personalities and the desire for personal distinction to anti-intellectualism, during this period there was a philosophical and aesthetic shift away from that rather rigid, collective, professional mission of effective communications toward a softer, less analytical, more decorative and personal kind of design (Byrne 1997: 86).

²⁹ The Arts and Crafts Movement was "...a reaction against the social, moral, and artistic confusion of the Industrial Revolution" (Meggs 1983: 201-202), which sought a social role for art, design and craft and advocated a return to handicraft. Paradoxically, it was influential on the development of 'modern' graphic design discourse in various ways. The emphasis on truth to materials, the relationship of the utilitarian and the aesthetic, unity of design and individual expression are, ironically, "...attitudes adopted by succeeding generations who sought to unify – not art and craft – but art and industry" (Meggs 1983: 210).

Byrne (1997: 86) argues that this led to an “elitism” in graphic design, a sense of “high design”, as graphic designers focused on winning awards, became selective about what projects they would take on (in order to win awards) and focused less on convincing business of “professional values” and more on publications and exhibitions.

The move towards “intuitive”, “subjective” and “more self-absorbed personal involvements” in the latter half of the twentieth century is also related to the influence of post-modernism on graphic design (Meggs 1983: 490, see also McCoy 1990). Meggs (1983: 490) highlights how “...the intuitive and playful aspects of Post-Modernism reflects this personal involvement; the designer places a form in space because it ‘feels’ right rather than to fulfil a rational communicative need”.

The influence of post-structuralism and post-modernism is evident in the deconstruction work of the 1980s and 1990s (Lupton and Miller 1996b and 1996c). Ironically, although post-structuralism advocates the multiplicity of potential readings of a text, graphic designers saw this as further confirmation of individualism in their practice (Lupton and Miller 1996b: 8-9):

Post-structuralism’s emphasis on the openness of meaning has been incorporated by many designers into a romantic theory of self-expression: as the argument goes, because signification is not fixed in material forms, designers and readers share in the spontaneous creation of meaning. Interpretations are private and personal, generated by the unique sensibilities of makers and readers. This approach represents a rather cheerful response to the post-structuralist theme of the ‘death of the author,’ which asserts that the interior self is constructed by external systems and technologies (Lupton and Miller 1996b: 9).

Of course, the critical edge of post-structuralism and post-modernism was arguably largely disregarded by graphic design because of its incompatibility with a practice implicated and legitimated by capitalist modes of production (Lupton and Miller 1996b: 8-9). As Cranbrook School graphic designer Jeffrey Keedy (quoted in Lupton and Miller 1996b: 8) commented: “It was the poetic aspect of Barthes that attracted me, not the Marxist analysis. After all, we’re designers working in a consumer society...”

In the “highly technological” society of the 1990s and post-millennium years, personal expression and intuition are receiving “renewed” emphasis in graphic design discourse as “subjective interpretation” is seen as “...what humans can give that computers cannot” (McCoy 1990: 197). Katherine McCoy (1990: 197) suggests that given the contemporary “...environment of abstracted technologically generated data, the designer’s personal viewpoint and interpretive forms may be the humanizing element required to make vast quantities of abstract data meaningful”.

Teymur (1996: 161) notes: “Discourse enables designers to present not only their products, but also themselves, to the world. It also functions in presenting themselves to themselves, by reproducing their self-images and self-definitions...”³⁰ This reinforces the “self-referential” nature of the profession.

The value in graphic design discourse accorded to originality, authenticity and novelty in graphic design is also related to the belief that individual graphic designers are capable of, and predisposed to, ‘creativity’. I propose that a graphic design sensibility emphasises individual creativity so as to de-emphasise the relationship of design to capitalist production. As Wolff (1981) argues, the view of the individual artist-as-creator masks the many people and structures who are involved in creating any cultural product or artwork. This creates a false sense of autonomy, but serves to mask and thereby perpetuate existing power relations in society. After all, the ideology of individualism is integral to modernism and capitalism.

4.6. *Graphic design as a primarily visual activity*

Within the competitive economic context of capitalism, the visual and a discourse of ‘creativity’ gained particular significance. Competition for “imaginative” or “ingenious” “pictorial impact” developed in the 1840s in relation to the rise of advertising and changes in reproduction methods which facilitated greater use of images, and more simplified images, in graphic design (Meggs 1983: 190). In particular, “The ascendancy

³⁰ Similarly, Buchanan (1989: 101), in his discussion of design as rhetoric, notes that ethos is not simply about the character of a product but about “...the way designers choose to represent themselves in their products, not as they are, but how they wish to appear”.

of the letterpress poster and broadsheet was challenged in the middle of the nineteenth century by a more visual and pictorial poster. Lithography was the graphic medium allowing a more illustrative approach to public communication” (Meggs 1983: 190). The movement away from naturalism “pioneered the graphic impact that could be achieved by simplification”; particularly in poster design (Meggs 1983: 190).

Furthermore, the invention of photography in the late nineteenth century furthered the emphasis on the visual and the movement away from naturalism in art and design. Photography “...alter[ed] both ways of seeing the world and the way that it was represented in the arts and sciences” (Crouch 1999: 26, see also Meggs 1983). Throughout the twentieth century, the visual continued to grow in importance in western capitalist society as film, television, multimedia and “visualizing technologies” (Lister and Wells 2001) spurred on the movement away from a word-based culture to a visual culture that manifests itself in a plethora of ways. The visual thus occupies a central place in western capitalist society (Barnard 1998, Lister and Wells 2001).

Definitions of graphic design (see *Chapter 2*) often reveal a preoccupation with the visual. Graphic design is primarily defined as a visual practice; whether it be referred to as *graphic* design or *visual* communication. The centrality of the visual in definitions of graphic design practice indicates the primacy of the visual in graphic design discourse. As Butler (1989: 169) argues, “Graphic design is about sight.”

The emphasis on the visual in graphic design discourse is particularly evident in professional graphic design jargon such as ‘*visual* identity’, ‘*visual* language’ and ‘brand *image*’³¹ and in the names of many graphic design journals, for example, *Image & Text*, *Eye*, *Word and Image*, and *Visible Language*. It is also apparent in the way graphic designers treat typography as a visual element.

³¹ In the late 1950s, “David Ogilvy connected the concept of ‘brand image’ to words and pictures that, while divorced from the product, told a story that conveyed an impression about that product and the people who used it” (Rothenberg 1997: 49).

The commonality of history, theory and training means that graphic design discourse has been significantly influenced by fine art discourse. The centrality of the visual in graphic design discourse can be related to the emphasis in art institutions (particularly traditional art and design history) on the visual attributes of art objects. Traditional aesthetics, formulated as a discipline in the eighteenth century and highly influential on art history and criticism, focused “solely” on the visual rather than social or political aspects of art (Wolff 1993: 13). Because graphic design history adopted this emphasis, the profession’s treatment of aesthetics and visual style as non-ideological has not been significantly challenged. Graphic design is concerned primarily with style and appearance, rather than content, and thus seldom assumes responsibility for content, which is seen to be the domain of the client (Butler 1989, Moles 1989). Thus, “The preoccupation with formal and material elements of the image continues to typify graphic design” and “...graphic designers tend to elevate visual stimulation to primacy” over other sensory perception (Butler 1989: 164, 165).

Lupton (1996a: 166) notes that because “...designers are taught to focus on visual style over social function” they “...often overlook the relation of design to institutions of power”. This relationship would include the significance of images in communicating what Baudrillard (quoted in Foster 2002: 18-19) called “the political economy of the sign”. Thus, the profession does not acknowledge “...that [its] visual ideologies are determined by a very limited range of experience, training, and values” (Butler 1989: 170). In particular, the emphasis on the visual has tended to reinforce professional graphic design discourse’s “...focus on perception at the expense of interpretation” (Lupton 1989: 149). Similarly, Crafton Smith (1994: 300) notes that graphic designers’ “...preoccupation with aesthetic and perceptual responses to their products has also meant an over reliance on formalist principles, including those derived from gestalt [*sic*] psychology”.

Butler (1989) argues that the image in graphic design is usually removed from ‘real life’ contexts. Rather than “visual realism”, says Butler (1989: 169), the “...language of most graphic design is either abstraction or pun, wherein what is visible is not what is real”.

This language of abstraction has particular implications for how graphic design represents the world, particularly because it is reductionist and may ignore aspects of culture or create particular false or misleading associations between visual elements.

Furthermore, Butler (1989: 169) asserts that the devaluing of “...the real body, real social space, real touch, gesture and to group specific symbolic acts” serves to reinforce the ideology of individualism in capitalist society by presenting a world in which the individual is “...physically and intellectually isolated by the abstractions and conceits of the graphic designers’ imaginations”. Thus, “...the removal of the specifics of symbolism undercuts the remnants of shared symbolic action, typical of oral culture, which can sometimes still exist and which provides a social memory” (Butler 1989: 169).

The privileging of the graphic designer as a cultural specialist, the devaluing of the audience and ‘popular culture’, the concern with novelty, innovation and creativity and the emphasis on a ‘communication’ process in which the graphic designer is all-powerful all contribute to the legitimisation of an aspect of professional graphic design discourse and practice that merits further discussion: appropriation.

In this respect, Rosemary Coombes (1997: 17) notes that: “Creativity... must always involve the reworking of those cultural forms available to us”. Graphic designers have always been and will always be influenced by the visual culture they experience (Heller and Lasky 1993).

4.7. Graphic design and appropriation

Graphic design’s tendency to appropriate styles and visual elements, but to ignore the ideological and social ‘meanings’ of style, is rooted in the 1930s when members of the European avant-garde immigrated to the United States (Meggs 1983: 362). The visual arts in the US had been relatively conservative and European modernism was embraced at a formal and stylistic level, while its socialist and revolutionary roots (being contradictory to US politics and capitalism) were disregarded.

Appropriation is both a common design practice and the subject of significant criticism in design studies (Heller and Lasky 1993, Coombes 1997, Ilyin 1997, Meggs 1997, Ruffins 1997). Images are not 'neutral' but have histories that contain the biases of the past (Meggs 1997, Ruffins 1997). Thus, graphic designers' tendency to "recycle" and reappropriate imagery and symbols leads to the depoliticisation of images and a loss of meaning, detail and 'truth' (Ilyin 1997: 12).

In addition, the "...ethics and politics of appropriating imagery from other cultures" is a subject of contention (Coombes 1997, Ruffins 1997). Fath Davis Ruffins (1997: 7) questions "Who is a 'legitimate' spokesperson?" for cultural groups and distinguishes between "cultural definition" (which implies identification) and "cultural control" (which refers to the power to represent and influence). Similarly, Rosemary Coombes (1997: 17) argues: "The law enables the expressions of some people to become available as ideas for the appropriation of others and may protect the appropriator when the expressions are incorporated into an expressive work that is legally recognized." In particular, she points out that:

Laws of intellectual property are based upon liberal, individualist principles born of Enlightenment certainties and legitimated by Romantic ideologies. The Eurocentrism of these (purportedly universal or neutral) premises often serves to devalue creative expressive forms produced collectively, intergenerationally, or in unfamiliar media... (Coombes 1997: 16).

Hence, the centrality of graphic design in visual culture is avowed and, as Coombes (1997: 16) argues, "Possessive individualism and liberal democracy are thereby mutually affirmed".

Thus, graphic design's "tendency to see styles as working in a free space" (Lupton 1996a: 166) has particular ideological consequences. In particular, as Crouch (1999: 174) argues:

The commodification of past historical styles, through their indiscriminate use in cultural production, has taken significant codes out of their chronological context and rendered them impotent and meaningless in a perpetual 'present'. This

fragmented ‘present’ blinds us to the political reality of the collapse of the nation state, with its defined and autonomous cultural values, and the evolution of a new power base constructed around transnational corporations and their culture of commodification.

The depoliticisation of images and style through appropriation increasingly serves to reinforce the values of global capitalism. Thus, graphic design’s relationship with capitalism is not merely to perform an economic function, but an ideological one too.

4.8. Concluding remarks

Professional graphic design discourse serves to both legitimise and mask graphic design’s relationship to capitalism. In particular, professional graphic design discourse functions to:

1. Exclude particular people, texts, practices and knowledges through how it defines itself as a profession;
2. Perpetuate the focus on novelty and the objectification of the ‘audience’ in consumer society;
3. Disregard how meaning is interpretive and culturally situated;
4. Focus on individual expression, thereby perpetuating an ideology of individualism and masking how cultural production is ideologically situated;
5. Emphasise style and form and thus disregard the ideological nature of graphic design and perpetuate the emphasis on visual novelty in consumer society.

Thus, the tensions within professional graphic design discourse, particularly graphic design’s “netherworld status between art and commerce” (Heller 1997: xiii), function to maintain the status quo in terms of social and economic relations of power. However, discourse is also a site of contestation (Van Zoonen 1994) and therefore graphic designers can resist or challenge professional discourse in their practice (see *Chapter 2*). In the next chapter, I discuss how the South African graphic design industry has articulated a desire to challenge the privileging of western aesthetics in local design and, instead, expressed a ‘need’ for a South African design language.

Chapter 5

Graphic design discourse in South Africa and the call for a South African design language

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how the South African graphic design industry has articulated its call for a South African design language in various fora. In particular, I discuss articulations of a South African design language in the local journal *Image & Text*, at graphic design conferences held in South Africa and by particular organisations such as Design South Africa, a local association that serves various design disciplines (including graphic, interior, product, architecture, ceramic, fashion, textile, jewellery and digital design) and Interactive Africa, a South African marketing consultancy and publishing company. Interactive Africa hosts the annual International Design Indaba, publishes the *Design Indaba Magazine* and organises workshops and training for professional and student graphic designers in South Africa.

Parker (1992: 16) argues that it is important to study “how and where discourses emerged”, how they address particular kinds of people and how they change and/or maintain the things they refer to in relation to positions of power. Thus, I briefly contextualise how the discourse of a South African design language has emerged and examine who this discourse addresses and what it privileges, with the purpose of assessing its relationship to professional graphic design discourse.

5.2. The context in which the discourse emerged

The call for a South African design language emerged in the early 1990s and has remained topical and controversial into the early years of the twenty-first century. It originated close to the time when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the first steps towards transforming South Africa into a democracy were taken. In this respect it is paralleled, and arguably informed by, socio-political discourses of transformation, nation

building and national identity in post-apartheid South Africa and cultural and individual questions of identity in a country in transition³².

In particular, the South African government's call for a new flag (officially hoisted on 27 April 1994, see Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology 2001a) and a new coat of arms (inducted on 27 April 2000, see Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology 2001b) presented opportunities for graphic designers to create potential national symbols for the country and, thereby, engage with discourses of nationalism in post-apartheid South Africa (Pretorius 1993, Bakker 2001, Vosloo 2002).

The articulations of the discourse of a South African design language tend not to describe graphic design's relationship to the nation building and democratic processes as a political one, but rather as a cultural, economic or social one, if they acknowledge it at all. It is not often explicitly acknowledged that graphic design "...is a powerful tool to enfranchise people" because it "...enables them to subscribe to the values of a particular political and economic system by sharing in its visual culture" (Kurlansky 1992). Rather, the emphasis lies on the cultural role graphic design can play in expressing multiculturalism, the unity and diversity of the New South Africa, the 'rainbow nation' (Kurlansky 1992, Wolfaard 1997, Ginwala 2001, Lange 2001a and 2001b). This role is distinctly political but graphic design discourse typically downplays its relationship to politics.

However, politicians have articulated graphic design's role in nation building to the graphic design industry at conferences. For example, at the opening to the Fourth International Design Indaba held in Cape Town in March 2001, Dr Frene Ginwala, Speaker of Parliament, declared: "We are at a critical point in our history. Amongst our many priorities is the need to consolidate democracy and to forge a common South

³² The influence of broader discourses of national identity, nation building and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly those of government and media (see Baines 1998), on the graphic design discourse of a South African design language is significant. However, I cannot adequately interrogate this influence within the scope of my present study. While I acknowledge this influence, my focus must necessarily be limited to the impact of *graphic design discourse* on the articulation of a South African design language.

African identity.” She spoke particularly of the role design can play in “...establishing a common South African identity” (Ginwala 2001) and the social responsibility of design. Similarly, at the opening ceremony of Continental Shift, the 2001 Icofrada Congress hosted by South Africa in September 2001, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Dr Ben Ngubane’s speech “...included poignant references to the role that design played in the liberation struggle of South Africa, as well as its critical contribution in the nation building process and economical development since 1994” (Lange 2001b).

The call for a South African design language is also related to other political discourses. In particular, it is related to the repositioning of South Africa as part of Africa and a rejection of colonial values and the associated privileging of European culture over African culture. Situating South Africa as part of Africa is important in government discourse. The *White Paper on art, culture and heritage* (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology 1996) specifically articulates the need for South Africa to “reclaim” its heritage and realign South African culture with that of the African continent. The African National Congress (ANC) advocates that the diverse heritage(s) of South Africans be embraced and that “...African cultural expression becomes part of mainstream cultural expression” too because “...South Africa is not a European country, it’s an African country” (Serote quoted in African National Congress 1996). The graphic design industry generally adopts this position in its discourse (Basson 1992, Kurlansky 1992, Lange 2001b). However, I believe its articulation of this position is, in some respects, contradictory. I elucidate my argument on this point later.

What is also significant about the emergence of the call for a South African design language is its relationship to economic contexts. In particular, it is related to the post-apartheid shift from a relatively isolated economy to the opening up of trade between South Africa and other countries, the growth of the tourism industry (among others) in South Africa, a desire to position South Africa as “the leader of the African Renaissance” (Winkler 2001: 18) and the context of global capitalism. This relationship is frequently emphasised in South African graphic design discourses (Kurlansky 1992, Van Wyk 1996,

Sauthoff 1998, Ginwala 2001, Gondwe 2001, Lange 2001b, Winkler 2001, Naidoo 2001a, Design South Africa 2001), as will be demonstrated later.

Similarly, the importance of developing a South African brand identity has been articulated by the International Marketing Council of South Africa (IMC): “The development of our visual identity – the logo, the banners and any other paraphernalia – is only one component of a broader campaign that is backed by the SA government and managed by the IMC” (Black 2001). The IMC’s Brand South Africa campaign aims to “...transform the international image of the country, and ultimately the economy” (Koenderman 2001: 113). Thus, the development of a South African design language is often framed primarily as an economic imperative.

Image & Text editor, Marian Sauthoff (1998: 9, see also Sauthoff 2000) writes:

The issue of a definable South African visual identity and style... has essentially been informed by two challenges. The first is the drive to satisfy personal curiosity about the nature of a design expression shaped by a creative exploration of that which is uniquely South African. The second relates to the strategic positioning of South African design in the global arena.

The quotation above evidences the privileging of personal expression, ‘creativity’ and ‘uniqueness’ in professional graphic design. The quotation does not suggest that the impetus for a South African design language is also possibly related to political and nationalistic discourses in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead, graphic design is presented as a purportedly ‘neutral’ space for either individual or commercial activity.

5.3. *Who the discourse addresses*

The texts I have examined primarily address the local and/or international graphic design industry. Mostly, the discourse of a South African design language is articulated by and to graphic designers. There is little evidence of engagement with South African audiences to inform the discourse or the development and implementation of a South African design language. In this way, the “self-referential” (Butler 1989) and elite positioning of the profession is perpetuated.

The 'graphic designers' who the discourse includes are primarily professional graphic designers working in the mainstream. While indigenous traditions within South African 'craft' have been hailed as an important source of "inspiration" and "a means of establishing a national identity" (Connellan 1994: 17, see also Ginwala 2001, Lange 2001a) in South African design, 'craft' still remains a peripheral activity to 'graphic design'; an 'Other'. The discourse that articulates a need for the development of a South African design language is addressed exclusively to professional graphic designers with formal training and arguably excludes unschooled designers and crafters. Thus the exclusivity of the profession and the existing demographic bias (in terms of 'race', class and gender) in the South African design industry is maintained. Most importantly, this also serves to maintain a definition of graphic design which situates graphic design within a system of capitalist production and ignores alternative roles for graphic design.

In addition, the articulations of the discourse never succeed in breaking away from the privileging of an international "valuing community" (Bennett 1996). The 'international' community in graphic design discourse can arguably be said to refer to the USA and countries from Western Europe, although it is used in an all-encompassing manner. While I am critical of the term, I shall use it for the purposes of this discussion. The dominant influence of western aesthetics, styles and conventions in South African graphic design is protested against (Kurlansky 1992, Schwekendick quoted in De Jong 1992, Gondwe in Hardy 2002). But, the priority given to transforming the "international image" (Koenderman 2001: 113) of South Africa and ensuring that South African graphic design is "globally acknowledged" (Stallenberg 2002) serves to reinforce the positioning of the western graphic design community as the legitimate evaluator of graphic design. This is likely related to the ideological context of global capitalism.

Furthermore, I propose that the discourse largely excludes an African "valuing community" (Bennett 1996), with the exception of South African graphic designers working in the mainstream. Although the South African graphic design industry is concerned with positioning itself as part of Africa, the discourse does not, in my opinion,

speak to Africa. This is evident in the anonymity of the African nations and cultures beyond South Africa's borders in the discourses, the essentialist use of the term 'Africa' (discussed in the next section) and the absence of comparisons between South African graphic design and graphic design from other African countries.

It can also, at times, be seen to attempt to speak on behalf of Africa. For example, in the way that it often uses 'South African' and 'African' as interchangeable terms; positioning South Africa as "...the resurgent standard bearer of All Africa" (Naidoo 2001a). Thus, while there is evidence of the attempt to position South Africa as an African country, and thus emphasise that a South African design language is an African aesthetic, South Africa is placed in a position of power to the rest of Africa. For example, other African nations and specific cultural traditions beyond South Africa's borders are not identified. This anonymity places South Africa in a dominant position. It is not clearly acknowledged that Africa has diverse cultural traditions and heritages. Thus a South African design language is assumed to be "a unique African... aesthetic" (Winkler 2001: 18) that is typical of African design. This serves to perpetuate a stereotypical Euro-American view that sees African culture as homogeneous rather than diverse. However, the discourse does articulate a need to challenge stereotypical Euro-American perspectives of Africa. I explore this in the section that follows.

5.4. What the discourse privileges

Within the South African graphic design industry's articulation of the need for a South African design language five recurring themes are identifiable. In this section, I discuss each of these themes and interrogate how they privilege particular discursive, and therefore ideological, positions.

5.4.1. Essentialism

Kathleen Connellan (1994: 20) describes essentialism as "...the notion that it is the essence of certain things that identifies and sets them apart from other things". The discourse of a South African design language is essentialist in that it tends to assume that 'Africa' has an "essence" that is represented in graphic design products (Connellan 1994:

20)³³. For example, graphic designers often refer the need to represent “the spiritual essence of Africa” (De Jong 1992: 10) in their work. I have already critiqued the tendency with South African professional graphic design discourse to generalise the ‘South African’ to the ‘African’.

Essentialism is also evident in the graphic design industry’s actual articulation of a South African design language. For example, the following phrases all reveal a belief that a singular South African design language can exist and that graphic design can possess a set of shared characteristics that convey it:

- “a common South African visual identity” (Ginwala 2001);
- “a definable South African visual identity and style” (Sauthoff 1998: 9);
- “a unique South African design language” (Design South Africa 2001);
- “an indigenous character” (Basson 1992: 15);
- “a new South African graphic idiom” (Sauthoff 2000: 27);
- “an indigenous graphic style” (De Jong 1992:10) and;
- “a unique African perspective and aesthetic” (Winkler 2001: 18).

Thus, the discourse itself naturalises and takes for granted that an essentialist view of ‘South Africa’ and ‘Africa’ is possible and desirable. This essentialism is related to graphic design professional discourse’s emphasis on its ability to create singular and universally-agreed visual meanings and identities for products. However, this essentialism is described as being based on varied influences. For example, the rationale of Design South Africa states:

Design South Africa aims to uplift standards of professionalism and the development of a unique South African design language.

³³Similarly:

The capacity of African art to spark ubiquitous feelings of appreciation and universal transcultural aesthetic response has been noted again and again since the earliest moments of African art collecting and exhibition. One point that has often been stressed is the fact that African art can withstand public observation in the bright light of the gallery display case without the support of interpretive text or contextual information – i.e. any knowledge that might be derived from an art-historical perspective on Africa (Steiner 2002: 136).

In addition, Lize van Robbroek (quoted in Connellan 1994: 19) argues that essentialism is also evident in: “The idea that an innate ‘Africanness’ infuses ‘black art’ with a particular, recognisable aesthetic apparently exercised power over the imagination of white critics and black artists alike.”

A language whose image and core ethos positively reflects its authentic South African positioning and which draws its inspiration from the plethora of local cultural diversity, lifestyles, value systems and collective aspirations, and in turn, deciphers and articulates an emerging, yet highly eclectic cultural wave unique to South Africa (Design South Africa 2001).

Similarly, Ernst de Jong (1992: 10) advocates "...the creation of a unique design style based on South Africa's diverse cultural heritage and natural influences" and Mervyn Kurlansky (1992: 12, 13) speaks of "...a new visual language which draws on both the Black and White experience of the country".

This emphasis is possibly related to the theme of multiculturalism in official discourses of post-apartheid South African nationalism. However, what needs to be interrogated by the industry is whether and how the diversity of South African cultures can be amalgamated into a single visual language, whether such a visual language would be read and accepted as symbolic or representative of 'South Africa' by diverse local and international audiences and how graphic designers can draw on (appropriate) South African culture without decontextualising it.

5.4.2. Africa in a South African design language

The South African graphic design industry does not merely situate a South African design language as 'African' rather than 'European'. Articulations of a South African design language are specifically intended to challenge existing stereotypical representations of 'Africa' and 'South Africa'.

In this respect, a distinction is often drawn between what is seen as graphic design for tourism and a South African design language. For example, tourism-related projects such as corporate branding projects for clients like South African Airways (SAA), the Proudly South African campaign, and the Johannesburg Olympic Bid Portfolio have drawn on national symbols, colours and imagery such as the South African flag, flora and fauna in order to convey a recognisable 'South African' visual identity to international audiences (Stallenberg 2002). Similarly, at the Fourth International Design Indaba, opening speaker

Dr Frene Ginwala Speaker of Parliament distinguished tourist images of Africa from design that truly reflects South African culture:

At the outset, I want to say, that jewellery and artefacts that simply depict elephants, lions and snakes is not what I mean by good African or South African design. Depicting wildlife or the scenic beauty of our country, belongs to, and should remain on travel agents' posters: a perspective of and for tourists (Ginwala 2001).

Ginwala's speech highlighted a primary characteristic of European stereotypes of Africa: the depiction of "...the people of Africa frozen in time". The timeless and static quality of clichéd representations of Africa has received significant critique within local graphic design discourse (Basson 1992, Buntman 1994, Lange 2001b). In particular, such representations privilege a Eurocentric discourse of 'authenticity' (Lange 2001b, Steiner 2002).

Steiner (2002: 134) argues: "According to those who share [a] particular longing for an imagined past, 'authentic' African art is thought to have existed only before the first European presence on the African continent." Thus, "African art since its earliest excursions through the studios of European modernist artists has always been perceived as a blank slate upon which to project one's own meanings and illusions" (Steiner 2002: 137). Similarly, Marilyn Martin (quoted in Lange 2001b) argued at the 2001 Icoграда Congress held in South Africa that:

...[Africa] was void and nothing until an Outsider arrived; today it often remains the blank slate on which the West projects its fears, imaginings and desire for the exotic. It is the negative opposite of European 'civilisation', forever primitive, primeval, tribal, ethnic, communal; it is perpetually static. And the West remains ambivalent towards the continent the 'heart of darkness', yet filled with art [and design] of the most extraordinary power and beauty persists, and the truth about Africa continues to be distorted, while her wares are sought after, displayed and bartered. Keeping African 'dark' valorises the western sense of modernity and cultural identity; at the same time the West looks towards Africa for its own redemption and revitalisation.

Furthermore, images of an 'authentic' pre-colonial Africa and/or representations of 'Bushman' or 'San' people often "show an utopian concept of an age-old nomadic people

living completely in tune with, and secure in their environment” (Buntman 1994: 12). Such representations potentially neutralise dissent because they perpetuate a myth that shows life in Africa as harmonious and removed from the present, rather than represent current social issues. In this respect, the use of such images in South African advertising in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as discussed by Buntman (1994), can be seen as distinctly ideological.

However, the industry does not intend a South African design language to be based on existing stereotypes. For example, through the *Design Indaba Magazine* and other projects, Interactive Africa aims to challenge international perceptions of South Africa and South African graphic design. Graphic designer, Michael Stallenberg (2002) says the *Design Indaba Magazine* is trying to challenge stereotypes so that local and international communities “...see South Africa in a new light”. He says: “We prefer to give it a look that’s global and also shift people’s perceptions of what South Africa is all about. Because basically they all think that it’s... ‘Bushman’ drawing and triangles and hand-drawn type” (Stallenberg 2002). In particular, he says, the magazine has an ethic to “...think global, act local”:

What we’re trying to do in the context of a magazine is... we use local content... but the execution [and]... the look of it is global. So we mix the two... It could be a story on Khayalitsha, but the way we are going to put it across is not with squares and circles and handwritten type – it’s a way... we feel comfortable presenting it to the world... (Stallenberg 2002).

Stallenberg (2002) claims that through its “global” presentation the magazine “...has shifted away from the perceived packaged tourist brochure perception of what South Africa is all about”.

However, I question whether Interactive Africa’s goal to “inspire” (Winkler 2001: 19) the international graphic design community by positioning South Africa as an ‘exotic’ and ‘unique’ source of inspiration compromises its intention to challenge stereotypes. The magazine’s mission statement claims that it aims to “inspire” local and international graphic designers “...by taking the opportunity to innovate and introduce different

inspirations to the international industry” and “uncover... fresh directions” in South African graphic design (quoted in Gondwe 2001). Similarly, Mark Winkler (2001: 19) argues that Interactive Africa aims:

...to inspire the international creative arts fraternity as well as the associated marketing industry with African-generated creative perspectives. The picture post-card view of South Africa is well known internationally, but little exists to contribute fresh views to the world’s collective imagination. (Winkler 2001: 19).

By positioning South Africa as a source of “fresh views” (Winkler 2001: 19) Interactive Africa may compromise Africa’s transformation “...from being the source of inspiration, towards becoming a leading force in the design and production world” (Design South Africa 2001). Furthermore, “showcasing” (mission statement for the *Design Indaba Magazine* quoted in Gondwe 2001) South Africa design may decontextualise it and reduce it to mere visual stimulation.³⁴ The industry does not interrogate how its proposed appropriation of ‘South African’ imagery is related to neutralising the socio-political contexts of South Africa culture and representing a particular and neutral ‘South Africa’ to the world.

The tension between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ evident in the views of Interactive Africa points to another potential contradiction within the discourse of a South African design language. On the one hand, there is significant criticism within the local graphic design industry of South African graphic design that emulates international trends. For example, Taweni Gondwe (quoted in Hardy 2002: 20) who has edited the *Design Indaba Magazine* and the South African version of *O Magazine* says:

What is missing in too much local design is that spontaneity. You can’t design by design. Design is a reflective art. It reflects what’s happening out there and what’s happening out there is spontaneity, what’s happening out there is chaos, what’s happening out there is exuberance. But as long as South African designers continue to work as if they’re working out of a London studio they will continue to produce work that is brilliant... in London.

³⁴ Africa art has often been viewed by the west as purely aesthetic with its significance considered to lie in its visual impact rather than its context (Steiner 2002).

The claim that South African design relies too heavily on international trends for inspiration is not new. As noted by Sauthoff (1995a: 38): “The South African design and advertising industries are often criticised for their tendency to turn to glossy international journals for inspiration, ignoring what is happening on their own doorsteps.”

Similarly, Gerhard Schwekendick (quoted in De Jong 1992: 10) criticises South African graphic designers for “slavishly following European standards” and Ginwala (2001) posed significant questions at the 2001 Design Indaba:

Do we... forge new identities or do we perpetuate existing visual hegemony, such as the Eurocentric perceptions which depict the people of Africa frozen in time? Do we continue to project South African as an adjunct of Europe or the US, or [as] a rainbow nation, which is an integral part of Africa?

On the other hand, local and global cultural aspects coexist in South Africa and South African graphic designers should not ‘Other’ themselves by ignoring elements of South African culture that do not necessarily fit the ‘local’ label. For example, Martin (quoted in Lange 2001b) argues that:

...African artists [and designers] are not experiencing any crises of identity or problems of ‘transition to modernity’ as many Western critics like to believe; they have no difficulty making art that is ‘authentic’, it just does not always fit in with Western notions of what ‘authentic’ African art and design is. There are artists and designers who are engaged in trying to discover what role, if any, Western art and design can play in their creativity, and they make works that are international in theme and execution. In fact, the tension between indigenous traditions and influence from the West or the East, gives much of African art its dynamism and interest.

Similarly, Kurlansky (1992: 12) proposes: “What is needed is the emergence of a design culture that is unique to South Africa – a design approach that fuses the cultural experiences of all races living in South Africa with creative influences from the rest of the world.”

In fact, to account for the diversity of influences and multiculturalism of South Africa, South African graphic design is often described as a “stew” or melting pot of ingredients (Lange 2001a)³⁵.

Nevertheless, within the discourse there is an ongoing struggle with what ‘African’ is and tension between the expressed rejection of Eurocentrism and Eurocentric ideas of ‘Africa’ and the ‘need’ for graphic design to address and be valued by an international community.

5.4.3. *Professionalism*

The tension between ‘local’ and ‘global’ or ‘African’ and ‘international’ in South African graphic design discourses is also related to the positioning of the international design industry as the “valuing community” (Bennett 1996) for graphic design. In particular, in graphic design discourse, ‘international’ is often seen as more ‘professional’.

For example:

- Kurlansky (1992: 11) argues that it is important for the South Africa design industry to both “explore what it means visually to be African rather than European” and maintain a standard that “matches international practice”;
- Interactive Africa states that the *Design Indaba Magazine*’s editorial/design policy has the following values: originality, high production values, professionalism and innovation (quoted in Gondwe 2001). These are all key values of western graphic design discourse;
- Interactive Africa expresses a concern to “speak” to an international audience “in a language they understand” and simultaneously “be sensitive” to a local audience (Stallenberg 2002);
- Design South Africa (2001) “...aims to uplift standards of professionalism”;
- Design South Africa (2001) argues: “Whilst exploring our uniqueness, it is important to synergise leading edge technology and functional qualities, in keeping with the modern and progressing nature of an emerging design industry”;

³⁵ Lange (2001b) attributes the idea of the African stew to the Kenyan academic Odoch Pido.

- Iaan Bekker (1994: 8) discusses the corporate identity for the Johannesburg Olympic Bid, saying that "...the identity should... transcend the Africanness of its graphic appeal" and "...be an international identity primarily, with secondary regional connotations".

Yet, the industry does not interrogate how "standards of professionalism", "functional qualities" and technological advance are primarily rooted in western graphic design standards and the capitalist ideology of production (Design South Africa 2001).

Thus, by repeatedly juxtaposing the articulation of a South Africa design language against western standards of professionalism and progressiveness, the industry reinforces the position of a western "valuing community" (Bennett 1996) for South African graphic design. In this respect, the development of a South African design language is restricted to assimilating elements associated with denoting 'African' identity/identities into an inherited western paradigm such as graphic design (Shohat and Stam 1998), rather than challenging the definitions of the practice itself.

5.4.4. Branding and the economic benefits of 'uniqueness'

The articulations of the discourse of a South African design language primarily reveal a central desire to discover and articulate the 'uniqueness' of South African design and culture. In some respects this emphasis is related to essentialism. In addition, I believe it is informed by commercial discourses of global capitalism, particularly the emphasis on novelty and newness that characterises commercial discourse and professional graphic design discourse. The desire for the 'unique' is often articulated. For example:

- Sauthoff (1998: 9) speaks of "...the nature of a design expression shaped by a creative exploration of that which is uniquely South African";
- Design South Africa (2001) promotes "...the development of a unique South African design language";
- Interactive Africa aims to promote "...a unique African perspective and aesthetic grown from a unique socio-political position" (Winkler 2001: 18) and present "fresh views" (Winkler 2001: 19) of South Africa to a global market;

- Manager of Interactive Africa, Ravi Naidoo (2001a) says: “We have to advance new descriptors for South Africa: innovative, dynamic, creative, resourceful, techno-literate, secure, dependable, trustworthy, confident and fun”;
- Oosthuizen (1993) argues for “...the realisation of our uniqueness” and the development of “a uniquely South African design style”;
- Ginwala (2001) noted at the 2001 International Design Indaba that, in terms of design, South Africa has “...the potential to be a vibrant new voice on the global arena”.

However, while the discourse articulates a desire to discover the ‘unique’, it does not focus on what is ‘unique’. This desire is motivated by the economic context of global capitalism. The economic context that informs the call for the development of a South African design language is openly acknowledged in South African graphic design discourse (Sauthoff 1998, Ginwala 2001, Winkler 2001, Design South Africa 2001). For example, the reference to “an emerging design industry” in the Design South Africa (2001) rationale points to the perceived economic role of graphic design. The organisation argues that:

...Africa as a developing continent, is still in the phase of transforming herself from being the source of inspiration, towards becoming a leading force in the design and production world... Design South Africa has taken on a new global importance... South Africa with its new international passport has the greatest opportunity of them all to become the new industrial powerhouse (Design South Africa 2001).

Similarly, Interactive Africa has a “...mission of promoting design as a communication fundamental, a business imperative and a powerful tool to advance the cause of industry and commerce” (quoted in Gondwe 2001). Naidoo (2001a) states that Interactive Africa aims to “...place design on the national agenda” and to “...be a major advocacy group that promotes the creative industry, and heralds its contribution to the economy”. Interactive Africa wants “...business, government and society to acknowledge that design will enhance South Africa’s competitive advantage” (Naidoo 2001a). Naidoo (2001a) argues:

...as our economy lessens its dependencies on commodities and begins to leverage its products and services globally, we need to ensure that we have a vibrant design industry. Image and branding is simply crucial in the differentiation of our products, and in positioning South Africa Inc – the resurgent standard bearer of All Africa.

Thus, Interactive Africa advocates that local designers “...should be exporting their skills and products to the rest of the world” in order to add “...to the international design mix a totally new discourse, a unique African perspective and aesthetic grown from a unique socio-political position” (Winkler 2001: 18).

Interactive Africa frames the development of a South African design language, or rather a “brand image” for South Africa, as a business opportunity. For example, Winkler (2001: 17) notes that Interactive Africa perceived an opportunity “...in working out a way to add value to and build the brand of the biggest new enterprise of all, South Africa Inc.” and thus, “...uplift and promote the brand image of the revitalised country”. Similarly, Naidoo (2001b: 31) says:

Central to the rationale for the Design Indaba conference and its brand extension the *Design Indaba Magazine*, is a contribution to a new brand image of South Africa Inc. – the resurgent standard bearer for All Africa. While politicians are responsible for policy, we have always believed that the creative industry ought to play a massive role in defining the image of a new South Africa.

Thus, the industry’s articulation of a South African design language focuses primarily on the economic benefits of a South African ‘brand’.

5.4.5. *The visual*

The emphasis on developing a South African design language as a brand image is also related to the privileging of the visual in graphic design discourse. The centrality of the visual is evident in language such as:

- “a definable South African visual identity and style” (Sauthoff 1998: 9);
- “our visual identity” (Black 2001);
- “the international image of the country” (Koenderman 2001: 113);

- “a unique African... aesthetic” (Winkler 2001: 18);
- “a common South African visual identity” (Ginwala 2001);
- “a new visual language” (Kurlansky 1992: 12, 13);
- “fresh views” (Winkler 2001: 19);
- “a new South African graphic style” and “an indigenous graphic style” (De Jong 1992:10).

The unquestioned emphasis on the visual in professional graphic design discourse is also evident in the primacy of the visual elements of culture, rather than the underlying politics of visual culture, as potential influences for a South African design language. Lange (2001a) describes a variety of influences which comprise “the South African design stew”, including:

- rock art;
- “traditional African tribal craftwork”, particularly the “...brightly coloured geometric patterns of the Ndebele tribe’s beadwork, embroidery and homestead painting”, the Zulu tribe’s basket weaving and pottery” and “the decorative textiles of the Swazi people”;
- “the colourful eclecticism of the Indian community”;
- “...the heritage of several European expatriate communities... [such as] Portuguese ceramics and Italian art”;
- hawkers’ signage and wares;
- the “kitsch sentimentalism” of Afrikaner culture and;
- the “...spectacular landscape, animals, plants, natural textures, vibrant colours and the ever-present sunlight”.

The only influence he articulates that is not primarily a visual influence is local music and even this influence is derived from the fashions and “iconography” associated with particular music styles.

Thus, a South African design language is about developing a ‘unique’ visual style rather than an alternative practice or politics of graphic design. The discourse of a South African design language is not about responding to different visual literacies or exploring

how graphic design can make information more accessible to South Africans. It is not about challenging who is designing what and for whom. It is not about shifting the role or practice of graphic design. The discourse is about style and branding and is shaped primarily by the economic imperative of positioning South Africa and South African products in the global economy.

5.5. *Concluding remarks*

While the South African graphic design industry's 'call' for a South African design language is intended to challenge the centrality of Euro-American graphic design, this challenge is arguably merely a stylistic challenge. Thus, the ideologies that underpin western professional graphic design discourses including: professionalism, individualism, creativity, novelty, and the privileging of the individual graphic designer are not challenged. Furthermore, the primacy given to a global valuing community and the economic role of graphic design in South Africa, serves to reinforce: the way in which a capitalist system is maintained through graphic design practice, particular views of 'Africa' and relations of power that privilege particular groups of people and representations.

Chapter 6

The articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the motivations of the producers of *i-jusi*, particularly publisher Garth Walker, and how he envisages *i-jusi* as a space in which graphic designers can experiment with the development of a South African design language. My aim is to assess the impact of professional graphic design discourse, as discussed in the preceding chapters, on the articulation of a South African design language in *i-jusi*.

6.2. Orange Juice Design and *i-jusi*

Graphic designer Garth Walker established Orange Juice Design in 1995³⁶. Based in Durban, South Africa, Orange Juice does commercial graphic design work; focusing on what Walker (2001a) describes as “brand languaging” – developing and defining visual languages for corporate brands³⁷. Orange Juice has experimented with representing elements of a South African design language in corporate design work for clients such as the Durban Art Gallery and SATOUR, the state-owned tourism board (Walker 2002a).

In addition to commercial work, Orange Juice publishes its own studio magazine: an experimental, non-commercial publication called *i-jusi*³⁸ which attempts to develop “...a design language rooted in the African experience” (Orange Juice Design 2001). *i-jusi* was first published in 1995 and, to date, nineteen issues have been produced. Published two to four times a year “...depending on the time available to get a theme together” (Walker 2002b), the usually 16-page, A3 magazine³⁹ has a limited print run of 500 copies per issue. The production of *i-jusi* is made possible by sponsorship from paper, reproduction,

³⁶ In 1997 Ogilvy and Mather “bought” Orange Juice as their “design brand” (Walker 2002b). Although they are the majority shareholders in Orange Juice, they do not, according to Walker, have any say in the publication of *i-jusi*.

³⁷ Orange Juice Design also has a branch in Johannesburg and had a third branch in Cape Town until 2001.

³⁸ *i-juse* is a Zulu word which means juice.

³⁹ The pagination and size of *i-jusi* has varied. For example, the first issue is eight A3 pages and No. 18 is a 32-page A4 publication.

printing and other graphic design-related companies⁴⁰. *i-jusi* is distributed⁴¹, primarily by mailing list, for free and does not include advertising. In these respects, it is seen to be free of commercial considerations and thus, considered a “platform” for unhindered experimentation.

Contributors to the publication include professional designers and students, who produce work for *i-jusi* free of charge (Walker 2002b). Several issues have been collaborative projects with local or international graphic design students; often developing from training workshops that Walker has facilitated. Each issue of *i-jusi* focuses on a particular theme. Themes vary from social issues (including: power, human rights, death, pornography and identity) to more graphic design-specific themes (such as: “African style”, typography, comics, black and white illustration, icons and “street style”). Past issues of *i-jusi* can be viewed online at the *i-jusi* website: <http://www.i-jusi.co.za/pastissues/index.php>.

Although Walker (2004) says *i-jusi* is aimed at “anyone who is interested”, the publication is mostly distributed to graphic designers and the design media. Approximately eighty percent of its audience is international (Walker 2004).

6.3. *i-jusi*'s aims

The aims of *i-jusi*, as articulated on the *i-jusi* website, state:

i-jusi aims to encourage and promote South African graphic design to interested creatives and writers worldwide. The *i-jusi* initiative is part of Orange Juice Design's commitment to developing a design language rooted in the African experience. Designers, design students, illustrators, photographers and writers are encouraged to create in total freedom and to explore their personal views on life in a free and democratic South Africa. Increasingly, *i-jusi* provides a platform for creatives (both local and international) from diverse backgrounds to collaborate in exchanging cultures, ideas and imagery (Orange Juice Design 2001).

⁴⁰ Sponsors include: Sparhams, Fishwicks Digital Imagers, Sappi Fine Paper, John Pauling Digital Photography, Orange Juice Design and blue.Kryptonite (Orange Juice 2001).

⁴¹ The monopoly on distribution channels for magazines in South Africa is a key factor that affects the economic viability of alternative magazines.

i-jusi can be seen as a response to:

1. The lack of scope within commercial projects to develop a South African design language;
2. The privileging of an ‘international’ valuing community and ‘international’ trends in South African graphic design;
3. The social and political changes that have occurred in South Africa;
4. The reliance on ‘African’ stereotypes in local graphic design and;
5. Graphic designers’ desires to innovate a ‘new visual language’ that is rooted in South African culture(s).

Drawing on the interviews conducted, conference presentations and other published articles about *i-jusi*, I discuss how the *i-jusi* producers attempt to articulate a South African design language in response to the factors listed above.

6.3.1. Responding to the lack of scope within commercial projects to develop a South African design language

At the Fifth International Design Indaba, Walker (2002c) implied that the chance for local designers to develop a South African design language is severely restricted by client expectations. He argued that most clients feel that anything “‘African’ is bad” and, by large, “...corporate South Africa is avoiding the question” of ‘reflecting’ the South African context in graphic design (Walker 2002c).

Walker (2002d) notes that business in South Africa, including the new “black elite”, want to be “New York”; implying that they want their corporate design to look as if it were produced in western business, and graphic design, capitals and not in South Africa. “Business must change and embrace ‘positive’ Africa,” he argues (Walker 2002d). This, he says, includes moving beyond the “fear of political correctness” (Walker 2002d). Walker (2002b) describes clients as the “biggest problem” in terms of developing what he calls “a new visual order”.

i-jusi is intended to provide Orange Juice, and other graphic designers and students who contribute to it, with a space within which to experiment with developing a graphic design style and/or approach that is influenced by local experience and culture rather than pandering to corporate (client) taste and mimicking international trends. Walker (2002b and 2002d) describes *i-jusi* as “strictly non-commercial” and a “forum” for “change”.

6.3.2. *Responding to the privileging of an ‘international’ valuing community and ‘international’ trends in South African graphic design*

According to Walker, clients are not the only interest group which privileges ‘international’ design aesthetics. In particular, Walker (2001b, see also Sauthoff 1995b) protests against the tendency for South African designers to emulate ‘international’ trends. He voices this criticism openly at graphic design conferences and in media, often deliberately using provocative language to counter what he sees as South African graphic designers’ complacency. He feels that South African graphic designers lack “the will to change” and are generally content to imitate trends rather than set trends (Walker 2002d).

“Our [South African graphic designers’] design language is rooted in the ownership of cultural lineage – and the dogma of international design annuals,” laments Walker (2001b: 54). He criticises the South African graphic design industry for being “obsessed” with international awards and recognition: “We have to lose this obsession with being ‘big in NY [New York] or London’. ... Instead, we should be trying to be big in NY [New York] or London with what they don’t have. The very special creative spirit of Africa” (Walker 2001b: 54). Similarly, Orange Juice graphic designer and *i-jusi* contributor, Brode Vosloo (2002) notes that South African designers should be setting trends rather than following trends.

In addition, the *i-jusi* graphic designers are dismissive of the proposal from some sectors of the design industry that South African graphic design needs to be “more global” (Walker 2001b: 54). Walker, in particular, is critical of the value judgment that ‘African’ is inferior to ‘international’ and the belief that South African graphic design needs to appear to be more ‘global’:

There are amongst us creatives, academics and ‘big business’ folk who see Africa, its visual language and its culture, as being ‘Third World’ – and all that that label stands for. ‘We are an ‘emerging economy’, so we must strive to look international.’ Less African – more global. Every day I am asked to design a brand identity to ‘look like it’s not African or at least make the African part look nice’ (Walker 2001b: 54).

Instead, Walker (2002e) argues that “...we are a fruit salad nation – so we should ‘look’ like one”. He protests vehemently against how the industry frames the positioning of South African graphic design in the global arena, saying: “All this ‘African’ powerhouse, first world stuff is bullshit” (Walker 2002e).

According to Walker (2002d) graphic design needs to “...reflect the world in which it appears” and “...say what it is”. He adds that it is critical for the “voice” articulated in graphic design images to be intelligible to audiences; asking “Can you the viewer see/feel/understand this voice?” (Walker 2002d). In this respect, he argues that South African graphic designers need to “adapt” the (western) language of graphic design “to fit local language...” and “...throw out all that ‘does not speak of Africa’”, particularly “...sophisticated abstract design languages that only fellow designers can interpret” (Walker 2002d).

However, Walker (2002d) acknowledges that adapting a western design language for the South African context is “difficult”. He says: “...the bridge between what is western and African” or “...the point at which each can understand the other” is complex (Walker 2002d). In particular, this complexity is affected by how both first and third world elements co-exist within urban South Africa. Walker views this as a positive challenge to South African graphic design:

We are fortunate because we straddle two worlds – that makes South Africa unique – because we straddle this first and third world, that makes us closer to our roots... makes us very interesting animals... I don’t think we exploit it enough (Walker 2001a).

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, his work has been praised for merging the influences of both contexts (Sauthoff 1995b: 10). Commenting on the influence of western design traditions, Walker (2001b: 54) says:

I enjoy them and I am influenced by them but I am not enslaved by them. They are a part of my past and perhaps my future. But the greater part of both [*sic*] my past, present and future, is the cultural *gemors*⁴² that surrounds us all. The culture of the *worsrol*⁴³, Bafana Bafana⁴⁴, taxis that aren't yellow or black, Castle Lager⁴⁵, *bakkies*⁴⁶ and *Egoli*⁴⁷. This is the stuff that makes me feel I have a future here. They say to me I'm not in London, Tokyo or New York. I don't want to be Sven in Sweden. I want to be right here, right now, speaking with my own voice, in my own language to my fellow citizens. The important thing (for me, anyway) is to create stuff we all recognise as ours. I happen to like black Father Christmases, BMW convertibles with leopard skin upholstery, pavement hair salons named 'all is for God' and *Zambuk*⁴⁸.

Walker argues that professional graphic designers need to move beyond their suburban comfort zones and experience the diversity of South African culture in order to produce graphic design that is situated and "real" (Walker 2001b: 54). He says that graphic designers "...have to escape the safety of Sandton for the streets of Hillbrow⁴⁹. To become real people doing real design. Connect. Explore. Experience. Create" (Walker 2001b: 54).

To this end, Walker established Orange Juice design:

Orange Juice was formed to challenge corporate South Africa's mimetic Euro-American paradigm and propagate the use of Afrocentric design in local advertising. Frustrated by the predominance of values which did not reflect the reality of our [South African] subtropical society, Walker undertook to bring the semiotics of the street into the ivory tower of big-budget advertising and design (Sudheim 1999: 10).

⁴² *Gemors* is an Afrikaans word that means 'mess'.

⁴³ *Worsrol* is an Afrikaans word that refers to a 'boerewors roll'; a type of South African sausage eaten on a bread roll.

⁴⁴ The South African soccer team is called Bafana Bafana.

⁴⁵ Castle Lager is a South African beer.

⁴⁶ A *bakkie* is a type of two-door utility vehicle.

⁴⁷ *Egoli* is a popular South African name for the city Johannesburg, meaning place of gold.

⁴⁸ *Zambuk* is a strong-smelling ointment used in South Africa.

⁴⁹ Sandton is a very wealthy area and Hillbrow is a haven for refugees and new immigrants. Both are in Gauteng, South Africa.

In particular, *i-jusi* is intended to be a challenge to the dominance and privileging of western aesthetics in South African graphic design. Furthermore, the desire to promote and privilege South African culture is evident in the way Walker (2001c, 2002c) deliberately uses South African slang and words from Zulu and Afrikaans in *i-jusi* and conference presentations to both local and international graphic designers.

6.3.3. *Responding to the social and political changes that have occurred in South Africa*
i-jusi is not merely conceived as a space for stylistic experimentation but is rooted in its producers' responses to a new social context. Walker (2001b: 54) argues that the development of a South African design language has a particular social role in that South African graphic designers "...have a chance to rewrite our visual history".

In a conference presentation, *Snake fat, sheep heads, droëwors⁵⁰ and haircuts: a white boy's journey across cultures across South Africa*, Walker (2002b) argued that the first South African democratic elections in April 1994 "...heralded a new way of seeing" and gave South Africans the "power" and the "...freedom to redefine ourselves, to rewrite history from the past, to feel renewed in the present, revitalized in the future". This power, and with it "...a new sense of responsibility... [for] those of us who have become increasingly aware of the intimate connection between the individual and society", he argues, gave rise to "personal actions" and "communal reactions" (Walker 2002b):

These actions are described in a new language, a more powerful language, a visual language that everybody can understand. One that mixes icons from the past and borrows from different cultures and blends it all into a new brother and sisterhood. A visual language that starts on the streets and ends up in glossy magazines on coffee tables (Walker 2002b).

Most importantly, this "visual language" then becomes, for Walker (2002b), "our most powerful traditional weapon" – "our tool of change".

⁵⁰ *Droëwors* is a thin salty or spicy dried sausage eaten in South Africa.

In particular, *i-jusi* is rooted in graphic designers' *personal* responses to a changed social context and, particularly, questions of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Walker extends his personal sense of identity to his work. As a graphic designer, his motivation is "...to speak with my own voice" (Walker 2002d). In respect to this "voice", he argues: "I live in Africa – so I should speak African (and not 'international')" (Walker 2002d). He says:

There are fellow creatives, here and abroad, who accuse us of exploiting 'African culture' by using traditional indigenous craft patterns and symbols – as ingredients in a new and common visual conversation. Well, tough shit. I happen to see indigenous African culture as an equal part of my own culture. I have huge respect and love of our collective and shared heritage. I am surrounded by it. I have absorbed it. I have embraced it (Walker 2001b: 54).

Although Walker (2001b: 53) describes himself as "a white boy from the suburbs", he is vehement that he is African: "The fact that I am here is what makes me African. I see myself as African. Africa is in my blood, in my head and in my seed" (Walker 2001b: 54). In a similar vein, he describes (South) Africa(n) as "...part of your 'blood circulation' (as in spirit) must be 'of Africa' (as in direct personal experience)" (Walker 2002d).

Walker (2002d) describes himself as follows: "I am a mongrel. Part English, part African. I live in Durban, my heart is in Cape Town and my business is in *Egoli*. A typical African..." Although he describes himself as "a typical African", acknowledging the influence of different cultural centres in South Africa, his notion of what is "typical" is based on urban experiences of South Africa. He refers to three major cities in South Africa to 'prove' himself a cosmopolitan South Africa, yet this negates numerous (South) Africans living in rural areas as "typical African(s)". Furthermore, his educational background and class positioning do not make him "a typical African"⁵¹. While my

⁵¹ Garth Walker was born in Pretoria and raised in Johannesburg. He trained as a graphic designer at Natal Technikon and has worked as a designer in Durban. He now works primarily from Orange Juice Design's Johannesburg and Durban branches. His graphic design training and experience is conventional and typical of most mainstream graphic designers in South Africa. However, Walker travels extensively around South Africa to see and photograph examples of South African design which are not products of mainstream graphic design and broaden his experience of South African cultures and 'graphic design'. His collection of images of non-mainstream graphic design forms a key resource in his work.

concern is not to explore the complexities of Walker's personal construction of identity and how it pertains to broader questions of identity in post-apartheid South Africa, it is important to acknowledge that this does inform his articulation of a South African design language.

6.3.4. *Responding to the reliance on 'African' stereotypes in local graphic design*

i-jusi is also intended to challenge how South African graphic designers represent a South African design language. Although he expresses a desire to "...create stuff we [South Africans] all recognise as ours", Walker (2001a) argues that the representation of a South African design language is "a personal thing" and it "...doesn't have to be recognisable as 'African'", although it does look "different" to western graphic design (Walker 2001a). In this respect, he advocates a move away from the use of "recognisable" 'African' stereotypes and clichés in South African graphic design.

For example, *i-jusi* is critical towards the stereotypes used in local tourism design. As the editorial to the A to Z Issue (No. 14) states:

Forget the elegant giraffe loping across the seemingly endless African plains. You won't find the obligatory loving shot of a pride of lions relaxing in the shade of a Baobab tree, after another breath-taking hunt. No pristine, white sand beaches. No Big Five. And absolutely no smiling indigenous people in traditional dress, thrilling a group of enthusiastic tourists with a heart stopping, blood-pounding African dance around the campfire.

Forget everything that you think you know about Africa. This is not your average tour guide to the sights and sounds that the tourism board thinks you'd like to experience. This is Africa through the sense of those who live it, breath[e] it, feel it, think it (Gabriel 2001: 1).

Thus, *i-jusi* seeks to move beyond existing stereotypes of 'South Africa' and 'Africa' in graphic design. Vosloo (2002) notes that graphic designers tend to add "a border of triangles", imitate Ndebele patterns or create logos out of beads in order to "make their piece of design look African". However, he says: "In essence all of these are actually good starting points for a good design solution, but should really only be that, a starting point" (Vosloo 2002).

Instead of these generic answers to the question “what is African” in graphic design terms, Vosloo (2002), like Walker, advocates a more personal approach:

The answer to what I feel is African is quite simple – a perfectly stacked pyramid of oranges. I’ll try and explain why. For me the vibrant colour of the orange represents the bright, bold colours of... Africa, its people and its art. The circular shape is timeless and is symbolic of the warm, African sun. When stacked with other oranges it becomes a component of a symmetrically proportionate piece of numerous components, similar to a pixel on your screen or a bead on a traditional love letter. This symmetry can also be seen in most things that are African: wire baskets, earplugs, fabrics, murals, even the traditional layout of the kraal dwellings.

It’s this time and effort that is taken to produce these proportionate sculptures, of oranges usually in an environment of chaos, that appeals to me.

It’s these elements of symmetry and geometry that I have spoken about that are equally African as they are South African (Vosloo 2002)⁵².

Thus, *i-jusi* focuses on personal interpretations of ‘(South) Africa’ rather than dictating a fixed or stereotypical South African design language.

While *i-jusi* attempts to articulate a South African design language in a non-stereotypical way, this does not preclude the use of imagery derived from ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ culture(s), as seen in the Rave Issue, No. 4, and the African Gold special issue. Both Walker and Vosloo have also experimented with developing new motifs based on mostly Zulu-inspired shields, insignia and heraldry.

⁵² However, Vosloo (2002) also notes that these principles are common to graphic design throughout the world:

The basic principle of design is a global one. That is what I was trying to say with my ‘precisely packed orange’ analogy. That same symmetry, geometry and attention to detail can be seen in American Indian motifs, Mexican patterns and Scandinavian design. The fundamental principle for most culture’s decorative arts is geometry. This can be translated into a grid – a principle that we as modern day creatives still aspire to. Whether it’s the meticulous pixel by pixel design of today’s multimedia designers or the attention to detail that goes into the making of a beaded love letter, it’s what you do with the grid that is imperative.

The references to a grid, symmetry, geometry and a belief in a “fundamental principle” for graphic design shows the influences of modernist discourse on graphic design approaches in South Africa.

6.3.5. *Graphic designers' desire to innovate a 'new visual language' that is rooted in South African culture(s)*

i-jusi aims to portray South Africa in a new light and to "...educate an audience [of both local and international graphic designers] who is unfamiliar with the wonders of Africa" (Walker 2001a) by developing and exposing a "...design language rooted in the African experience" (Orange Juice Design 2001).

Walker (2001b: 54) argues:

We have all around us the very stuff of our creative fantasies. Creative freedom. An opportunity to create something new and wonderful. Something not seen before. Something that can be exported to every corner of the globe. There is no roadmap, no 'what's right' or 'what's wrong'. Nothing exists. We have a chance to create it all. To have the famous London and New York copying us – using our language to unite their own cosmopolitan cultures.

Walker (2001a) uses the metaphor of the South African "fruit salad culture" to argue for the eclecticism of a South African design language. In particular, the fact that South Africa has elements of first and third world makes this "fruit salad" or "stew" (Sauthoff 1995b: 8) unusual. In this respect:

Africa is a land of contrasts. We Africans embrace excess. Life, death, wealth, poverty, fame and obscurity are all taken to extremes. The world envies our ability to stand on the edge, stare into the abyss then pull back. Why then, given the raw forces that have created us, is design not better able to develop a new language reflective of our history, our past and our future? To be the global creative leaders we should be, would like to be, MUST be. The Nelson Mandela of global design. Are we really the 'Rainbow Nation', a 'fruit salad', the 'unity through diversity' that everyone wants us to be? (Walker 2001b: 54).

"We live in the fruit salad culture," says Walker (2001a). "Therefore, we need to know what else is in the fruit salad and get out of suburbia culture and discover" (Walker 2001a). By taking "bits" from both worlds (the first and third world aspects that, Walker claims, coexist in South Africa) and experimenting he argues it is possible to "...develop something new, to explore parts of you [and Africa] that you didn't know exist" (Walker 2001a). To this end, Walker (2001a) sees himself as a collector and "a cultural traveller".

For Walker (2002d), the solution to finding a way to communicate a South African design language is for designers to “learn to see” what is out there: to “look, connect, experience”. What is crucial, according to Walker, is that graphic designers look to local inspiration: “It’s a new visual language. Wood-cuts, wire, Hindu bridal painting and urban murals provide food for the new visual (dis)order” (Walker quoted in Bang 1997).

And thus, since 1995, Walker (2001a) has been documenting things that take his “fancy”: the “...amazing graphic design that is in front of our eyes” in local craft traditions and cultures. He praises the work of what he refers to as “...graphic designers that don’t know they’re graphic designers”, observing that “most of them are doing a better job than we [professional designers] are” (Walker 2001a). This ‘collection’ acts as a scrapbook of ideas, which Walker draws on in his work.

Similarly, Vosloo (2002) believes that it is important for designers “...to use their own African experiences to proudly create something different”. He also draws inspiration from “...the harsh contrasts of our country and the times we live in” (Vosloo 2002). Vosloo (2002) states that he feels “...equally as passionate as Garth [Walker] does about this ‘new graphic language rooted in the African experience’ that we [*i-jusi*] are trying to develop”. However, Vosloo (2002) questions whether merely reflecting and using images of ‘South Africa’ is sufficient:

It’s great to document and showcase the various graphic elements of our African environment, but how does this further our current visual language and create a new one that is not only inspirational to us locally but also to designers throughout the world? This is similar to what the Swiss and the Japanese have done for design internationally and what we should aspire to do.

We as creatives should learn from what the west and east have achieved and combine that with our own African experiences to create a visual language that is uniquely ours but still able to communicate on an international level. After all, that’s what design is all about – communication (Vosloo 2002).

For Walker, examples of local design that contribute to the development of a South African design language are rarely seen in mainstream graphic design and the advertising

industry (Sauthoff 1995b). Instead, he sees evidence or examples of a South African design language in aspects of daily South African life and culture. Walker (2002b) argues that a 'new' South African design language and emerging "regional design styles" are evident in the plethora of 'informal' or 'vernacular' graphic design that has developed to serve the burgeoning street trade and bus and taxi industry in post-apartheid South Africa. He says: "Out on the streets they're doing everything we in the graphics world are not" (Walker quoted in Bang 1997). He cites "soccer, the taxi and (black) transport industry, black radio and TV soaps" and "street and township hawkers" as examples (Walker 2002d). He advocates that graphic designers find inspiration in "...alternative media (industrial theatre), new media (web), street trading environments and leisure environments (pubs, dance clubs and so on)" (Walker 2002d).

Walker (2001b) observes that 'street' graphic design is motivated by capitalist ideals; although in a less institutionalised or formal way than mainstream advertising and corporate design. He says: "South Africans are fanatically capitalist. Many traders begin the long climb to success on the streets or flea-markets of our cities. Graphic design is already an integral part of that process. Their success is design's success" (Walker 2002b).

Similarly, Vosloo also shows an interest in local design that is produced by untrained people rather than by the professional graphic design industry. He says: "A street sign that has been created out of complete necessity with total naivety and honesty excites me" (Vosloo 2002).

Thus, what *i-jusi* attempts to do is incorporate contemporary South African experience and culture in graphic design. Through *i-jusi*, Walker and his team "...try to experiment with things that are pertinent to South Africa" from a range of everyday local culture in an attempt to create a new design language that has a particular role in South African society and that is unique in the global arena because it is "rooted" (Orange Juice Design 2001) in the South African experience. In this respect, typography is a key area of experimentation in *i-jusi*.

6.4. *i-jusi* and ‘African’ typography

The influence of a diverse range of aspects of South African ‘vernacular’ culture on a South African design language is particularly evident in *i-jusi*’s typography. In particular, Walker (2002e) argues that “...we need to have type that conveys the ‘spirit’ of SA. A bit glitzy, nouveau, cocky, retro and decorative, we are NOT a Helvetica nation”. Helvetica is a sans serif typeface that was developed in the 1950s in Switzerland as part of the Swiss or ‘International’ Style that was concerned with creating typography that communicated with maximum efficiency and minimum individual characteristics. It is regarded as one of the most over-used typefaces in western design and epitomises the modernist quest for typographic clarity (Sellers and Kowskie 2003). Walker’s reference to Helvetica can be seen as both a protest against the mimicking of western graphic design trends in South Africa and a questioning of the suitability of modernist design values for ‘a South African design style’.

Typography is one of Walker’s key interests: “I just like letterforms – what they look like and how they convey content” (Walker 2002e). Walker (2002e) has sought and photographed examples of “African” typography throughout South Africa and notes that South Africa is “...not a zen, sans serif kind of type nation”. Rather, “Africa likes the obvious. Type is usually flashy, loud and looks like it is expensive – fonts are used in the same way consumers buy furniture. Lots of special effects, shiny upholstery, tassels and carving” (Walker 2002e). He advocates that South African designers need to draw inspiration from “what’s out there”, such as signage and other examples of ‘vernacular’ typography found on the streets, in order to develop a more rooted typographic design language for South Africa (Walker 2002e).

Walker’s collection of typography has been “very influential” on *i-jusi* (Walker 2002e). He also says he finds it a useful “...starting point for designing a new letterform” (Walker 2002e). Walker has presented his collection of photographed typography at design conferences and created and published new typefaces based on South African culture in *i-jusi*. Similarly, Vosloo (2002) notes that his own “passion” is “...the

development of typefaces that are uniquely African” and says that *i-jusi* provides him with a vehicle for his typographic experiments⁵³.

In addition to using new, ‘African-inspired’ typefaces in various editions of *i-jusi*, two issues of *i-jusi*: “National typografika” (No. 11) and “National i-jusi typografika 2” or “ithayiphi” (No. 17), devotedly solely to new South African typography (i.e. typefaces that have been created in post-apartheid South Africa by South African graphic designers and are intended to respond to aspects of South African cultures) have been published. Each typeface featured is accompanied by a rationale written by the respective type designer. Although the preface to both editions focuses on street signage as key sources of inspiration for South African type design, a variety of South African cultural reference points are evident. In addition, many of the rationales reveal evidence of socio-political commentary or critique embedded in the conceptualisation of the type.

6.5. *The impact of professional graphic design discourse on i-jusi*

The *i-jusi* ‘call’ for a South African design language shares various traits with the South African design industry’s ‘call’ for a South African design language:

1. Both advocate a movement away from the imitation of western trends;
2. Both call for a South African design language that is not based on stereotypes of ‘African’ design;
3. Both emphasise a ‘new’ visual language for a ‘new’ South Africa;
4. Both emphasise the need for a South African design language to ‘reflect’ the diversity of the ‘new South Africa’ and;
5. Both privilege the visual.

However, the motivation for each ‘call’ differs. Whereas the industry is primarily concerned with the economic value of a South African design language and the development of a ‘South African’ brand identity, the *i-jusi* producers and contributors are

⁵³ In addition, Vosloo has developed a “South African based digital type foundry” with Lyall Coburn called The SacredNipple which is produced “in conjunction” with *i-jusi* (Coburn and Vosloo 1998). The SacredNipple promotes itself as “the only South African type foundry to make a conscious effort to promote the splendours of African design and typography” (Coburn and Vosloo 1998).

concerned with their personal quest(s) to explore South African culture and develop a South African design language that ‘reflects’ the South African cultural context. The importance of developing a South African design language that is ‘new’ and ‘unique’ and can be “exported” (Walker 2001b: 54) is acknowledged, but this is not the primary rationale for *i-jusi*. Instead, the development of a South African design language is framed as personalised responses to the context of the ‘new South Africa’, which is seen to present an opportunity of “creative freedom” (Walker 2001b: 54).

This emphasis is arguably informed by the privileging of personal expression and individual ‘creativity’ in professional graphic design discourse, which, in its turn, is influenced by the ideology of individualism. The emphasis on the individual graphic designer’s personal “creative freedom” to explore, in this case, a South African design language is not innovative in terms of professional graphic design discourse.

Walker’s desire to speak (design) with his own “voice” and his emphasis on personal exploration and expression does not challenge the values of hegemonic professional graphic design discourse. Rather, it can be seen to reinforce the “self-referential” (Butler 1989) nature of graphic design because it privileges the individual graphic designer’s point of view, which is arguably influenced by the individual graphic designer’s training and the internalised codes of the ‘profession’ (Wolff 1981).

However, Wolff (1981: 91) notes: “Transformations in cultural practice cannot take place in abstraction from consideration of who these are for.” With respect to *i-jusi*, the “self-referential” (Butler 1989) nature of graphic design is reinforced by the fact that both the contributors to the publication and its audience are “creatives” (Orange Juice Design 2001) in graphic design and related media professions. In the South African context, where most professional graphic designers have a particular cultural background and have been trained to develop a particular visual literacy (based primarily on western norms), this raises questions about whose ideologies are being consciously or unconsciously represented in *i-jusi* and how a ‘western’ design language mediates the attempt to innovate a South African design language. In particular, “...a design language

rooted in the African experience” (Orange Juice Design 2001) can be seen as an attempt to broaden the *imagery* used in graphic design and create a ‘new’ *style* rather than an attempt to change the *language* or “grammar” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996) of graphic design and how imagery is used. Typographic experimentation in *i-jusi* similarly focuses primarily on the visual and stylistic aspects of ‘new’ typefaces rather than on the application and uses of type.

Walker (2002b and 2001b, *emphasis added*) argues that a South African design language is a “more powerful” visual language that “*everyone* can understand”, “a new and *common* visual conversation”. But *i-jusi* speaks to an audience of graphic designers who share a particular (western) visual literacy. It does not speak to other (South) Africans who may have different visual literacies. Walker (2002d) aims to challenge the use of “...sophisticated abstract design languages that only fellow designers can interpret”. But I question whether this is achievable without grounding experimentation in knowledge of the reception of graphic design texts and how audiences construct readings of a South African design language.

Thus, I do not believe that *i-jusi* engages with the true challenge of a South African design language which, in my view, is creating or learning a visual language or languages that can play a particular cultural, social, educational and informative role in (South) African visual communication. The privileging of graphic designers as the audience of graphic design arguably serves to limit who a South African design language is intended to speak to and therefore who can “understand” it. This, in turn, privileges a particular understanding of ‘communication’ as a linear process in which meaning is determined by the graphic designer.

However, it can also be argued that *i-jusi* does challenge the “self-referential” (Butler 1989) nature of graphic design and the privileging of the individual graphic designer’s point of view in other respects. For example, *i-jusi* is conceived as “...a platform for creatives (both local and international) from diverse backgrounds to *collaborate* [*emphasis added*] in exchanging cultures, ideas and imagery” (Orange Juice Design

2001). Thus, *i-jusi* is not merely conceived as a space for individual expression but also for collaborative exploration. Particular collaborations could certainly extend and/or develop new ways of articulating a South African design language or any alternative design language. However, one can question to what extent a group comprising individuals who are graphic designers and other related media producers can be considered to come from “diverse backgrounds” (Orange Juice Design 2001), particularly given the demographics of the South African graphic design industry and the fact that most South African graphic designers have been trained in the same western traditions, conventions and tools as their ‘first world’ counterparts.

i-jusi is thus primarily a space for trained or in-training graphic designers to represent their interpretations of a South African design language or their response to the chosen theme of a particular issue. However, *i-jusi* does attempt to ‘include other voices’ in its pages. For example, the *amaout*, street style, African blood edition (No. 10), features an interview with Bruno, a Congolese refugee living in Durban who creates signage for street hair ‘salons’. While *i-jusi* features Bruno’s work as an example of ‘African graphic design’, the use of an interview format, the fact that Bruno is not identified fully (whereas the interviewer and photographers are fully identified) and the (re-)presentation of his work by other ‘professional’ graphic designers (it is not merely photographed but re-designed on the page) serves to set up an ‘us and him’ dichotomy. Bruno and his work are set up as an ‘Other’; ‘found’ by the ‘professional’ graphic designers; a resource on which graphic designers can draw.

The Identity Issue (No. 18), juxtaposes the views and work of Dutch design students about their identity with a photographic documentary about people living in Khayalitsha. While the Khayalitsha feature includes voices of a poor ‘black’ community usually excluded from graphic design, the mediation of the reporter’s voice (rather than a direct transcription of what the subjects said) contrasts with the first-person reflections by the Dutch students. Thus, the student graphic designers are empowered to reflect on their identity and create their own images (‘designs’) whereas how the people who live in

Khayalitsha consciously or unconsciously 'reflect' their identity in their environments is assumed and articulated on their behalf.

Thus, *i-jusi's* attempts at 'inclusion' of 'Other' non-mainstream voices in its graphic design arguably do not challenge the exclusivity of the 'profession' or the positioning of the 'graphic designer' as a specialist who can speak on behalf of others.

Another way in which *i-jusi* can be seen to perhaps challenge the "self-referential" nature of graphic design is how the producers consciously try to extend their own cultural experience and incorporate a diversity of cultural influences, particularly examples of 'vernacular' design that is created beyond the boundaries of the profession by 'graphic designers' who have clients with budgets on a significantly different scale and do not share the training or resources of 'professional graphic designers'. The attempt to be "...real people doing real design" (Walker 2001b: 54) can be seen as an attempt to reposition the graphic designer's relationship to culture.

However, Lupton (1996c: 57) claims: "The term 'vernacular'... is relative: it positions a standard language against a lesser dialect, a dominant culture against a secondary subculture. The vernacular is the Other, and any discourse has its Other." Furthermore, the appropriation of 'vernacular' culture is not new to graphic design practice or unique to South Africa. Lupton (1996c: 157-158) argues:

The recent attraction to vernacular styles represents a search for spontaneous, unpretentious voices – voices that belong to the idealized aura of a romanticized past (the roaring 20s, the flamboyant 50s) or to the noble savagery of a visual underclass (folksy signage, campy clip art). Nostalgia, a key ingredient in raising the market value of a vernacular style, is not a return to history but a repackaging of history. It treats the past not as the roots of the present, but as a distanced Other. Appropriations of contemporary vernaculars often project a barrier between a sophisticated 'us' and a naïve, spontaneous 'them' – the ordinary commercial artifact [*sic*] is an innocent object that fails to comprehend its own genius. Such nostalgic borrowings relegate the vernacular to a space removed from the aesthetic world of the designer.

Thus, the appropriation of contemporary South African vernacular culture in *i-jusi* can also be said to reinforce the elitist positioning of the graphic designer and the importance of the ‘profession’. Appropriation also usually serves to depoliticise imagery and reduce aesthetics to a question of style, as discussed in *Chapter 4*.

However, the extent to which the question of appropriation applies to *i-jusi* is questionable. In some respects, the way Walker has presented his collection of photographs of ‘vernacular’ design at graphic design conferences (for example: *One man’s search for a boerewors roll* and *The graphic design of death* presentations at the Fourth and Fifth International Design Indabas, 2001 and 2002) and in other publication features (see Matthews 2003 and Bang 1997) reveals the ‘Othering’ of appropriation and places popular culture as “...the objects of an appropriating gaze” (Atkinson 1999). Examples include comments like “Out on the streets *they*’re doing everything *we in the graphics world* are not” (Walker quoted in Bang 1997, *my emphases*) and descriptions of popular culture as “food” (Walker quoted in Bang 1997) for a new graphic design language, an ‘Other’ that captures graphic designers’ “fancy” (Walker 2001a).

In particular, although Walker (2002b) argues that “...the African context forms the basis of our new and collective culture – and is no way connected to the ‘white colonial’ cultures, way-of-life and mindset of the past”, the colonial gaze of appropriation, which views ‘Africa’ as a ‘blank canvas’ is sometimes evident in his discourse (Lange 2001b, Steiner 2002). For example, he says:

We have all around us the very stuff of our creative fantasies. Creative freedom. An opportunity to create something new and wonderful. Something not seen before. Something that can be exported to every corner of the globe. There is no roadmap, no ‘what’s right’ or ‘what’s wrong’. *Nothing exists. We have a chance to create it all* (Walker 2001b: 54, *emphasis added*).

In other respects, Walker views ‘vernacular’ culture as part of his own (visual) culture and not as ‘an Other’. His argument is not that graphic designers should abstract and appropriate imagery from popular culture but that professional designers need to move beyond their suburban comfort zones and “...become real people doing real design”

(Walker 2001b: 54). He says graphic designers need to be “...real people saying real things” and should not “dress it up” by forcing ‘African’ design to conform to western standards (Walker 2001a). Thus, there is also a sense that *i-jusi* tries to shift the elite positioning of the graphic designer from above/outside of popular culture as ‘white’ graphic designers try to shift their privileged positioning in South Africa and extend their cultural experience.

Proposing that *i-jusi* merely perpetuates the “appropriating gaze” (Atkinson 1999) of graphic design discourse becomes particularly complex when one examines the publication. While there is ample evidence of the influence of local ‘vernacular’ culture in *i-jusi*, there is also evidence of personal engagement and reflection. Imagery is often contextualised and related to a particular story or used with text to convey a particular socio-political or cultural comment. Various examples from *i-jusi* illustrate this point:

- The “ready for take off” feature on bus signage in the Rave Issue (No. 4), while primarily descriptive, explains how different bus companies use different imagery;
- “Phendula ukufa” (The opposite of dying) in the Death Issue (No. 12) discusses Zulu death customs and beliefs but contextualises these in terms of personal reflection of the author’s experience of growing up in a rural environment;
- The typography issues (No. 11 and No. 17) feature a range of typefaces which may be simply inspired by ‘vernacular’ culture, for example Walker’s “Vassie” and Vosloo’s “Shoe Repairs” are inspired by Durban street trader signage; or respond to cultural and political issues, for example: “JB wallpaper” is inspired by urban wall art but also questions the connection between American influences on graffiti and urban culture and the Ndebele heritage of wall art, “Red mercury” responds to the South African Apartheid Government’s involvement in nuclear warfare programmes, “Kaffirkorn kolonial” and “Kaffirkorn bigotry” are reactions to colonialism, “Muzzle” responds to “ideological monuments”, and “Familie” and “Duidelik” explore aspects of Afrikaans culture.

Furthermore, while each spread or page is designed and imagery necessarily re-presented, it is not treated as merely stylistic. There is usually no attempt to abstract –or “dress it up” (Walker 2001a) – and merge the diversity of images into a singular publication design style. *i-jusi* is not simply about the visual or creating a ‘new’ style.

Of course, one can argue that cultural imagery is often, but not always, given a new context and filtered through the graphic designer’s individual cultural and discursive position. But, I think, it is significant that the intention is often to reflect on aspects of South African life and culture and/or to politicise the imagery rather than render it neutral and merely stylistic.

For example, evidence of political and/or social critique can be seen in graphic design ‘comments’ on pollution, road deaths and law (Death Issue, No. 12), poverty (Identity Issue, No. 18), ‘race’ (Black and White Illustration Issue, No. 8), objectification of women (Komix Issue, No. 13, Porn Issue, No. 15), violence (A to Z Issue, No. 14), colonialism and apartheid (A to Z Issue, No. 14, National Typografrika 1 and 2, Nos. 11 and 17).

In addition, *i-jusi* does not attempt to hide the ‘voices’ of its contributors. It is acknowledged that these are personal responses to particular themes. For example, the editorial to the black and white illustration edition states that “...a diverse group of White designers have shared their private angst and visions” in this issue and allows for the possibility that the images created may be “the White designers’ catharsis”.

Furthermore, the absence of a client and therefore ‘pre-existing’ content ensures that, in *i-jusi*, graphic designers are not merely appropriating or abstracting visual elements to illustrate content and/or give the content or product a visual identity. Instead, in *i-jusi*, graphic designers arguably have to assume greater responsibility for the content than in conventional graphic design practice and the traditional separation between ‘design’ and ‘content’ is challenged. In *i-jusi*, ‘design’ has or is ‘content’; it does not merely give form to it. Walker (2002d and 2001a) acknowledges the importance of the text and the

integration of ‘design’ and ‘content’ saying, “...the one can’t exist without the other” and graphic designers should not “...bury words in the corner”. In addition, the thematic approach to each issue allows for the possibility that graphic designers can engage with particular issues and subject matter. In this respect, *i-jusi* is an important “forum” (Walker 2002d) for graphic designers because it provides a space for graphic designers working in the commercial mainstream to create graphic design about South African issues, as identified by *i-jusi*, rather than about commercial products or services.

But this does not mean that the ‘Africa’ in *i-jusi* is necessarily more “real” (Walker 2001b: 54) and less stereotypical than representations of a South African design language for commercial clients. It may show individual South African graphic designers’ personal responses to life in South Africa as they experience it, but these too are discursive and may contain particular biases.

On the one hand, inspection of how the *i-jusi* producers articulate a South African design language in the interviews and other texts examined in this chapter reveals a tendency towards essentialist views of Africa. For example, Walker (2001a) argues that there is “...something in the air of Africa” that makes it “unique”. He also talks about “the African way of life” (Walker 2002b). Similarly, in the aims of *i-jusi*, Orange Juice Design (2001) talks about “the African experience” and does not acknowledge the differences between “the African experience” and “...life in a free and democratic South Africa”. The *i-jusi* discourse often shifts easily between what it labels ‘African’ and ‘South African’.

Furthermore, tension exists between Walker’s desire to challenge perceptions of ‘Africa’, as is evident in the word “educate” and the emphasis on “real” cultural experience, and ‘exotic’ ideas of Africa, as is evident in the phrase “the wonders of Africa” (Orange Juice Design 2001). Similarly, Walker’s own position shifts. While he defines himself as ‘African’ and sees “...indigenous African culture as an equal part of my own culture”, he still sometimes positions ‘vernacular’ culture as the ‘Other’. By identifying himself with the graphic design community (evident in his use of pronouns: we, our, us, etc.) he

automatically sets up an ‘us and them’ relationship when he talks about contemporary ‘African’ culture to the graphic design industry.

On the other hand, examining how graphic designers talk about *i-jusi* and a South African design language without reference to the publication itself belies some of the characteristics of a South African design language as articulated within its pages. For example, the apparent essentialism that underpins the conceptualisation of ‘African’ in the spoken discourse of a South African design language is less overt in *i-jusi*. The publication is often more specific in its cultural references. The South African design language of *i-jusi* does not attempt to reduce the cultures of either the African continent or South Africa to a set of presumed national or continental characteristics. Instead, it constantly extends the boundaries of “...a design language rooted in the African experience” by drawing on different cultures. Again, the interrelationship between graphic design and content becomes important because the text often serves to contextualise the influences.

For example, the two editions on typography both include rationales which acknowledge and explain the influences (whether that influence be signage, graffiti, Pedi mural art, Zairian music, red mercury, landmarks, hairstyles, Cape post office stones of the 1600s, etc.) on the typefaces featured. While, these examples may vary in the extent to which the appropriation argument can be applied to them, none encapsulate an essentialist view of African culture. Rather, they reveal the diversity of cultures on the continent and in South Africa in particular. Typography is not just about the visual, but about how letterforms “convey content” (Walker 2002e).

The data I have presented in this chapter suggests that in some respects *i-jusi* is an attempt to challenge mainstream graphic design practice in South Africa. The producers definitely intend to challenge the mimicking of western trends and also reveal little concern for western standards of ‘professionalism’ (in their discourse but not necessarily in their practice). By setting *i-jusi* up as an independent publication the producers create opportunities for experimentation, collaboration and, most importantly, personal

engagement with particular issues. This enables *i-jusi* to be about more than simply a space to try and develop a visual style, but also to be concerned with how graphic design creates meaning through type, images and other elements. Furthermore the text that accompanies the visual in *i-jusi* serves to contextualise the images and produce a more rooted product.

The thematic approach to each issue ensures that graphic designers explore a variety of themes related to South African life and design. Thus, *i-jusi* presents a diversity of perspectives rather than simply reducing diverse cultures to a repertoire of visual elements that become stereotypical and decontextualised.

One characteristic of *i-jusi* that has recently become popular in mainstream graphic design practice (particularly for urban youth audiences) is the incorporation of imagery derived from South African products as seen in: the Ra/Gold Issue (unnumbered), Rave Issue (No. 4), Identity Issue (No. 18), Amaout Street Style Issue (No. 10), Black and White Illustration Issue (No. 8) and the A to Z Issue (No. 14). The use of such imagery can also be seen as part of a larger ‘international’ trend to incorporate the ordinary and everyday in contemporary graphic design (Blauvelt 2000).

However, *i-jusi* is also clearly framed by professional graphic design discourse. The publication is created by graphic designers (and other “creatives”) for graphic designers. This reinforces the “self-referential” nature of graphic design and ensures a sense of exclusivity and novelty (reinforced by the limited print run; *i-jusi* becomes somewhat of a collector’s item). It also enables the producers or contributors to assume that the audience has a particular visual literacy and a particular interest in the visual. Thus, *i-jusi* does not experiment significantly with different ways of storytelling. It is designed to have a particular visual impact and novelty value. While it showcases graphic experimentation it does not explore the implementation and application of its stylistic and typographic experimentation. There is little engagement with how graphic design can contribute to meaningful visual communication in South Africa and/or create a South African design

language that is better suited to the information needs and visual literacies of the South African public.

6.6. Concluding remarks

While *i-jusi* does contain some social and political comment within its covers and thus does move away from the neutrality of graphic design, it does not realise the social agenda that it sends for itself; it does not become the “most powerful traditional weapon” or “tool of change” and certainly does not develop a “...visual language that everybody can understand” (Walker 2002b). Walker (2001b: 54) argues that graphic designers need to “...become real people doing real design” but *i-jusi* does not transcend the boundaries of the individual worlds of the graphic designers who contribute to it.

Thus, the ideology of individualism and the emphasis on personal expression in graphic design discourse serves to limit the extent to which *i-jusi* can be a space for innovation in South African graphic design. In particular, the privileging of the individual designer in graphic design discourse, in hand with the demographics of the local graphic design industry, limits the development of a South African design language. It is always primarily mediated by the graphic designer’s perspective, which is mostly a ‘white’ perspective. The “African fruit salad” is prepared by a graphic designer chef whose choice and method is conditioned by his/her training and individual discursive position. The graphic designer remains a cultural specialist who has the right to appropriate imagery from those not trained as ‘graphic designers’ and who sees ‘novelty’ in the cultures that surround him/her.

Thus, the *i-jusi* designers’ attempts to develop “a design language rooted in the African experience” often remain trapped within a western design language of visual style and appropriation. Even though there is an attempt to engage with the diversity of cultures in South Africa, *i-jusi* does not become “a potent war-machine of aesthetic liberation” (Sudheim 1999: 10) that challenges who has the power to define the practice of ‘graphic design’ and to be a ‘graphic designer’. It remains an exclusive space.

The “dissident voice” (Naidoo 2003) of *i-jusi* is never entirely realised. While, Walker certainly challenges some of the perspectives of the South African design industry and the corporate world (the rejection of the need for a South African design language to have ‘global’ resonance is particularly significant), he still operates within professional graphic design discourse. *i-jusi* may bring to light “...the understanding that graphic design is ultimately a social practice not solely the property of professionals, but an activity of individuals, where *the personal is political*” (Blauvelt 1994d: 297, *emphasis added*), but it does not adequately interrogate how these individuals are confined by their own discursive positioning.

In addition, the desire to create ‘new’ ways of representing ‘South Africanness’ rather than relying on stereotypes is hardly ‘innovative’ given that one of graphic design’s primary concerns is novelty and originality. The significance of the ‘new’ was reiterated throughout the interviews and other texts examined. The creation of ‘new’ or novel styles is typical of graphic design practice. This is not to say that *i-jusi* does not show any *stylistic* innovation (relative to mainstream graphic design practice).

In many ways, the quest for the development of a South African design language can be seen as a quest for novelty. While the articulation of a South African design language remains solely in the arena of visual style, it is unlikely to be an *innovation* but merely repackaged appropriations that fit the criterion of *novelty*. To innovate a new visual or design *language* would necessitate exploring how meaning is created in particular cultural contexts and developing an alternative practice of graphic design.

Thus, “particular aesthetic ideologies” or discourses do limit the “transformative power” of *i-jusi* (Wolff 1981: 84-85). While the *i-jusi* graphic designers express a desire to displace the primacy of a western valuing community for South African graphic design, their practice is still shaped by western discourses and urban capitalist contexts.

Wolff (1981: 91) argues that: “Transformations in cultural practice cannot take place in abstraction from consideration of who these are for.” As long as *i-jusi* is created for

graphic designers by a privileged group of 'graphic designers' its attempts at innovation will remain within the professional discourse of graphic design and privilege particular cultural points of view. Perhaps, if it moved outside of its discourse of individualism, novelty, creativity and the preoccupation with the visual, it would be better able to deal with the challenges of graphic design in post-apartheid South Africa and the goals of "aesthetic liberation" that it sets for itself.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

At the outset of this study, I argued that graphic design is best understood as a cultural and discursive practice as this enables one to situate graphic design practice and products as part of a broader cycle or “circuit” (Du Gay *et al* 1997) of cultural production that is socially situated. In particular, a discursive approach to the study of graphic design enables one to examine the specificity of graphic design as a particular professional practice in relation to broader ideological contexts. In addition, a view of graphic design as part of cultural production also enables one to examine the possibility for ‘innovation’ (often a problematic notion in design studies and history) as discursively situated.

The aim of this research has not been to applaud *i-jusi* as a space for innovating a South African design language in a manner similar to “hero” (Wilkins 1992) approaches in design history and professional discourse, which tend to focus on the presumed ‘aesthetic quality’ of graphic design texts (Wolff 1993). Rather, my intention has been to show how the possibility for ‘innovation’ in graphic design practice, and particularly the attempt to innovate “...a design language rooted in the African experience” (Orange Juice Design 2001) in *i-jusi*, is situated within broader discursive frameworks.

While some evidence of ‘innovation’ in *i-jusi* is apparent, particularly in regard to the development of new typefaces and the creation of a non-commercial space for experimentation and collaboration, what is significant is how the producers’ attempts to innovate a South African design language are discursively constrained. The producers articulate a desire to transform South African graphic design and develop a South African design language but their attempts at innovation are framed by professional graphic design discourse. For example, while the producers may reject the industry’s emphasis on developing a South African design language that can play a particular commercial role in the global economy, their concern with personal and individual expression is arguably framed by the ideology of individualism and the primacy of individual ‘creativity’ within professional graphic design discourse.

Similarly, the *i-jusi* contributors do not fully succeed in moving beyond the parameters of professional graphic design discourse which positions them as cultural specialists and ‘vernacular’ culture as a resource produced by a naïve ‘Other’; although there is a sincere attempt to embrace and celebrate all aspects of South African culture as ‘ours’. The distinction between “I am inspired by my cultural surroundings” and “I, the designer, elevate this ‘unique’ style of ‘sign-writing’ to the ranks of ‘graphic design’” is, at times, somewhat blurred. At other times, the work involves cultural engagement, reflection and comment and a future study could conduct reception analyses of *i-jusi* in order to see how different readers read these images.

The attempt to diversify the cultural imagery on which South African graphic designers draw by rejecting a reliance on western design influences in favour of being more inclusive of South African culture is significant. Nevertheless, it is still necessary for graphic designers to develop reflexivity in their practice. Graphic design discourse may give primacy to the visual, but in order to democratise graphic design it is necessary to examine how visual representation practices are necessarily political. Changing the imagery graphic designers draw on will not create a South African design language. Rather, graphic designers need to examine how particular discourses are embedded in the way they represent and who their work is intended to address. The challenge is not to alter what South African graphic design looks like, but how it is practised and to what end. In this respect, the use of ‘vernacular’ culture to create a South African design language can simply perpetuate the discourse of ‘Othering’, depending on who the text is intended to address.

Most importantly, the framing of the discourse of a South African design language by the design industry as a question of style and branding ensures that the attempt to innovate a South African design language remains trapped within its own discourse. ‘Innovation’ is restricted to the stylistic and, given the capitalistic focus on novelty of style and the (re)packaging of ‘new’ forms for a consumer culture, this can hardly be said to be ‘innovative’. As seen in *i-jusi*, the attempt to challenge capitalist discourse is ultimately

compromised by elements of graphic design discourse. Should this tendency be typical of other experimentation in graphic design, graphic design practice in South Africa is likely to remain trapped within its professional discourse and the ideologies of global capitalism until it realigns its emphasis on visual novelty.

While the number of examples of design inspired by South African ‘home-grown’ influences are increasing in all design genres (fashion, product/industrial, media, etc.) and there are many marketable variations of a South African design language, I remain concerned by the seeming limitation of the debate to either capitalist concerns (whether these be concerned with marketing goods to either an international audience or local *urban* audiences) or individual concerns of “how do I ‘reflect’ my identity as a South Africa in what I create?”. In the last ten years, a range of ‘South African’ design styles have been paraded before consumers. The emphasis on ‘ethnic’-inspired styles predominant in the early nineties has given way to styles inspired by contemporary urban culture and South African product packaging (Johnson 2003). In addition, imagery from urban ‘black’ working class culture in the 1950s, as exemplified by past issues of *Drum Magazine*, has become a popular reference (Nagel 2002). Nevertheless, the debate primarily centres on the question of style, and, as such, remains a question of capitalism.

What is missing in the discourses of the South African design industry is a questioning of the role graphic design can play in addressing (South) Africa’s problems, particularly those pertaining to education and health, by developing new ways of presenting information. Amrik Kalsi (1990: 118) has highlighted the need for African graphic designers to develop new approaches (new languages) in graphic design practice that can assist in addressing some of these issues:

Graphic designers in Africa will have to detach themselves from the Euro-American models of education and learn to relate to the development needs of their countries [and specific communities within countries] and to work more closely with the policy-makers... The profession of graphic design will have to understand and develop methodologies suitable to bringing about the necessary changes and developments more efficiently. Graphic designers in the future will be more concerned with areas such as health education, agriculture, education,

community development, publication information, religion, family planning and family life.

Similarly, I propose that graphic design needs to be concerned with developing a (South) African design language that is not only based on stylistic concerns but also on understanding how graphic designers can develop a new graphic language or languages that are not reliant on western codes and conventions but respond to different visual literacies and cultural meaning-making processes and aim to make information more accessible (Frascara 1990b). The challenge is not to develop a ‘new’ style but an alternative practice of graphic design.

However, this would entail challenging how graphic design’s role is defined, its relationship to capitalist production, graphic design education and, thus, particular aspects of professional graphic design discourse. For example:

1. Graphic design’s definition of itself as a profession would be challenged because the specialist knowledge and education of graphic designers would be re-evaluated, the audience would need to be seen as important and ‘new’, non-western knowledges and methods of evaluation would gain importance;
2. Graphic design would need to redefine its relationship to commercial activity (Bonsiepe 1994) and centre its concern on information and accessibility rather than novelty value. As Gui Bonsiepe (1994) argues, the “reorientation of graphic design also results in *liberation of graphic design from its ancillary status in the domain of advertising and promotion*”;
3. Graphic design would have to re-examine how it defines its role in the communication process and, particularly, challenge its reliance on theories of perception and build in means of audience evaluation;
4. Graphic design would have to focus on ‘creative’ solutions to making information accessible to people rather than on personal expression and;
5. Graphic design would have to reappraise the primacy of the visual, and particularly the significance of style rather than content, in its discourse. Bonsiepe (1994: 48) argues: “An info-designer approaches the tasks of efficient

communication less from the perspective of visualization, or ‘creation’ of images, but more from the perspective of organizing information.’⁵⁴

Thus, the impact of professional graphic design discourse, and its relationship to broader systems of power in society, on graphic design practice remains central to any discussion of ‘innovation’ in graphic design.

Given the significance of graphic design’s role in communicating information, I believe that my research has not adequately addressed or interrogated contemporary debates around redefining graphic design’s role in the information society (Bonsiepe 1994, Margolin 1994b), nor has it examined the critical relationship between graphic design and technology and how this too is situated within particular power relations. This relationship has often been a focus of design studies, although usually somewhat simplistically discussed in design studies and history (Julier 2000).

Nevertheless, the ‘information revolution’ offers new challenges and opportunities to design studies and practice, which need to be interrogated. While this lies beyond the intended scope of my study, I do believe that my study, through a focus on five aspects of professional graphic design discourse, reveals how professional graphic design discourse constrains graphic design practice and how professional graphic design discourse is related to other discourses, particularly those of capitalism. For this reason, future studies of graphic design and, specifically, the role graphic design plays in the ‘information society’ need to be informed by an awareness of how the debates and practices of graphic design are informed by professional graphic design discourse and underlying social, political and economic agendas. As this study demonstrates, attempts to innovate a South African design language in *i-jusi*, which is envisaged as a *non-commercial* space for graphic designers to experiment, are nevertheless framed by professional graphic design discourse and capitalist ideology.

⁵⁴ However, approaches to graphic design as ‘information’ need to be wary of over-determining the efficiency of graphic design by relying on theories of perception and unidirectional models of ‘communication’.

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