

by Nancy Bernard

Critique presents a simple review of aesthetic principles—and a crash course in making sense while talking about design—by way of fulfilling a promise made to the late Mr. Rand.

This is personal. While we were putting *Critique's* second issue together, I had to call Paul Rand's office for permission to republish some of his designs. He didn't know us. He wasn't in. I left the usual message.


He called that night. He wanted to know why we were publishing a critical magazine in graphic design, why our first cover was so scary, and what we thought we could contribute to the profession. Mr. Rand was fairly emphatic in his opinions on design journalism, and offered some pointed advice. I'm no clearer about my reply now than I was then, but I do remember what he said to me.

"We have to create a common language for the discussion of design. Concentrate on aesthetics. You have to write in the language of aesthetics." He made me swear to it. He put me under a geiss—an Irish oath. That means I have to write this. And you have to read it. I'll try to make it entertaining.

In *From Lascaux to Brooklyn* (published in 1996 by Yale University Press and read by me a week after the conversation noted above), Rand wrote, "The practice of design—the art of communication—is sorely lacking a means of communication, a language to make the practice of and discussion about design clear and interesting." You know exactly what he meant. The language of design usually runs along the lines of "It's not working," or "But I like it." Clients and colleagues stand beside you, look at the rough design, and say, "Just make it sexy." Right. What the hell does that mean?

Without Contrast,





Try this: "Create a stronger sense of drama by manipulating the visual relationships. Increase the contrast. Create movement by attracting the eye first here, then there, in a patterned progression. Create tension by using too much or too little space between elements. Relate the elements to each other with color. Throw it off balance by putting one thing off the grid." And so on. Granted, you have to choose the right elements in the first place—the concept has to be powerful and the imagery pregnant with meaning—but

what design inevitably comes down to is compositional craft. Aesthetics. The language of visual art.

"Without the aesthetic, design is either the humdrum repetition of familiar clichés or a wild scramble for novelty." (Guess who? Rand, *Lascaux* again.) "Like mathematics," Rand continued, "the principles of aesthetics involve the abstract formal properties of things and apply to everything—to apples and oranges, to ideas and things—regardless of one's feelings, opinions, or emotions." The good news, contrary to the romantic notion that the artist is a soul possessed and great art the result of communion with the divine, is that aesthetics is not a dark art. Especially if you have a concrete language to discuss it in.

Clear language is the vessel of conscious thought. If you can pin an idea down with words, you can keep it in one place long enough to test it critically. You can refine it and make it stronger. And you can help other people understand it too, which is a very nice thing.

So. Under oath from Mr. Rand, we now present to you the language of aesthetics: a review of the classic principles of movement, tension, balance, unity, rhythm, flow, emphasis, scale, depth—and contrast, "without which" (as Mr. Rand said to a friend of ours during a summer session in Switzerland), "you're dead." 🖱️

You're Dead



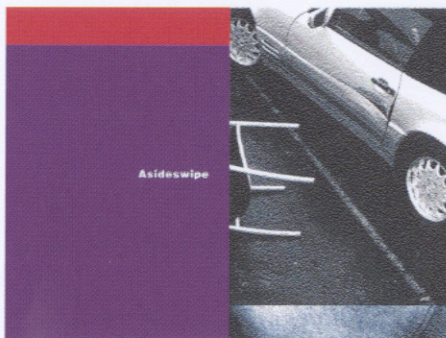
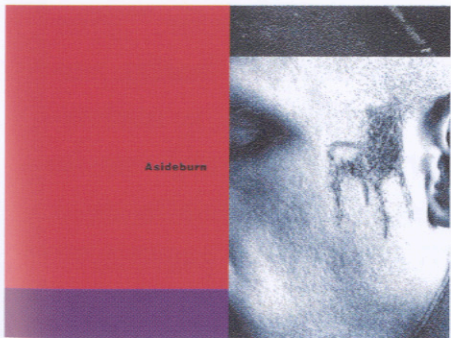
RHYTHM

Rhythm used to be the visual alternation or syn-
 copation of similar elements across a page, or the
 contrasts of near and far, big and small, text and
 image, from page to page, that gave a book its pacing.
 Now it's also about time.

Most of us aren't quite sure how to handle time—
 especially in time-based media. With downloads.
 Images that reveal and dissolve. Sound. Pages that
 can be relinked on a whim. One of the best
 examples of a successful use of rhythmic time is
 represented here as screen captures: it's the SQA
 website promo for Herman Miller, designed by Big
 Theory, a Texas-based studio specializing in time-
 based design. To see what I mean, you will have to go
 to <http://www.sqa.net/aside>.

The site is hypnotic, as all good rhythm-based designs
 turn out to be. It's a little movie. Once you click in, the
 code takes over (mercifully, these folks get it that
 sometimes we just want to be told a story, and not
 have to figure out what bits are interactive, and how
 to make them work). The half-and-half screens scroll
 in at waltz time to reveal strong black-and-white pho-
 tos that stand in nice visual contrast to the solid color
 fields on the left, while their subject matter makes wry
 comments on the text that follows at just the right
 interval. We have visual rhythm here, temporal
 rhythm, even meanings that rhyme.

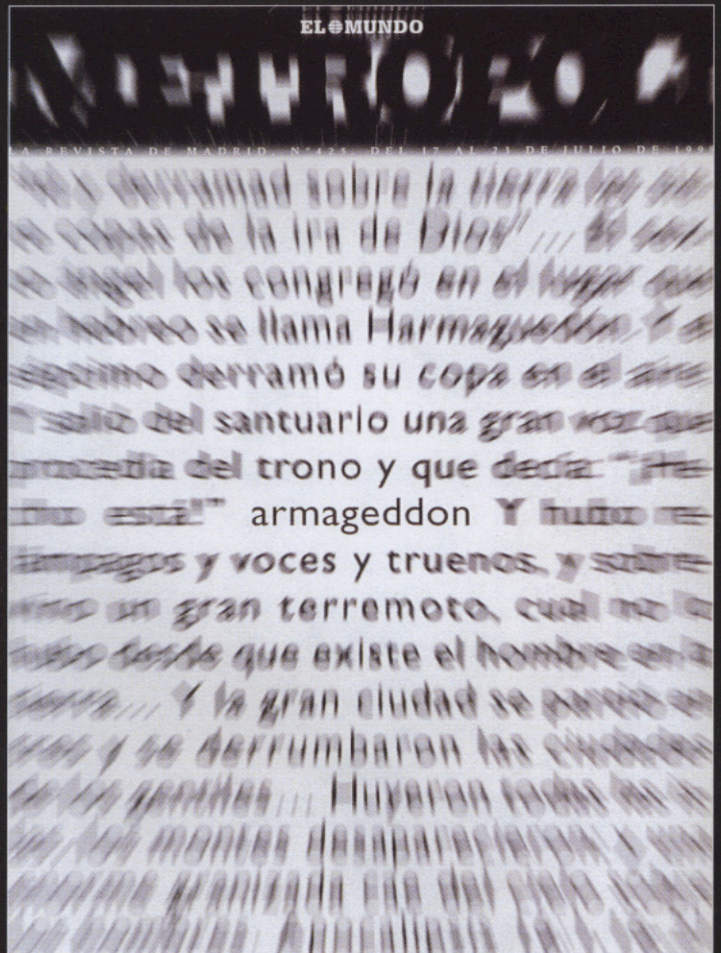
The music's pretty cool, too. If you like Texas Swing.





FLOW Brodovitch, Alexey, in a 1940s spread from Harper's Bazaar. Classic. Now that's flow. I'd say more, but you don't need me to. If you don't know Brodovitch yet, go look for the one decent book on his work, *Alexey Brodovitch*, published by Assouline a few years ago and distributed in the U.S. by Thames and Hudson (ISBN: 2 84323 116 7). You'll learn a lot from it about making designs that cross the spread.

EMPHASIS Basically we're talking visual hierarchy here, which, naturally, we create primarily through the judicious use of contrast and flow. Usually we use variations in size, weight, and form to make things stand out. Sometimes we put lots of space around things to call attention to them. We can also exploit the reading sequence of the culture (top to bottom, left to right, etc.), or let directional axes in surrounding imagery and text point out the lead dog. But the true key to emphasis is focus: you have to focus on what's important in the first place. Rodrigo Sanchez of *El Mundo's* *Metropoli* magazine understands this, as the cover design for the issue at right (headlining a cinematic thriller) proves. If you can't decide which idea matters most, you can't emphasize it. If you can't then steel yourself to kill off anything that isn't essential to it and discipline everything else to serve it, your design will go the way of all "kinder, gentler" entities. It may be a very nice design, and your friends might trust it with their children, but it will have no power. Hey, power in and of itself isn't bad. People who misuse power are—so make sure your focus is clear.





DEPTH Our publisher, Mr. Neumeier, is always nagging us to give our designs depth. It's one of his big bugaboos (another is "make sure there's contrast in value—color doesn't count," but we won't go into that here). He says people notice depth. He says they're drawn into it like cats into open cupboards. So, we put drop-shadows on everything, and animate the imagery so it jumps out at you, and build things we can take photographs of instead of drawing pictures of things. (Write us if you disapprove.) We're not the only ones who do this. Remember Neville Brody? Talk about a master of depth (and contrast, and scale, and rhythm, and tension...). Here's the March page from a calendar he did years ago with a terrifically warped vertiginous starburst that gives emphasis to the name of the month. He created sufficient depth to pull you in without using any fuzziness or layering whatever.

The initial shape is basically normal, if tippy, but somewhere in there he sees a spiral staircase, except not literally a spiral staircase, but it's there, you know? Then he sets us down firmly several floors below, on the same, same, solid starburst, and anchors it with the squarely perpendicular Helvetica Black (in white) of the name of the month between the frozen wastes of winter and the first sweet floral blessings of spring. March sucks. We all know this. Brody just makes it perfectly clear by pulling us all the way into it.

BALANCE We've discussed tension. Now let's talk balance. This spread from "Myth, Object, and the Animal," designed by The Traver Company (see "Seattle Studio Tour," page 70), is definitely working both—which is not necessarily a contradiction in design terms.

Balance and tension need each other: too much of one or the other, and your spread either gets the sleeping sickness or has a nervous breakdown. White space balances dense detail; a small spot of color balances a big mass of gray; and a square, steady text block with a muscular initial cap stands up well to a wicked peering raven on a golden skull. Especially if both are sized to the same column width and regard each other from opposite ends of a wide white mat.

But there's more here than the competition of opposites. The eccentric black border contributes to the sense of balance by striking a regular 1, 2, 1, 2 rhythm in its thicks and thins. On the right-hand page, the thicker border stands at the bottom, giving the text block the heft it needs to compete with the animals. On the left page, the stronger border is at the top, pulling the heavy heads up and making them lighter. There are other equalities: the raven's beak and the strong W make similar gestures towards the center; the detailed forms of the sculpture are balanced by the letters of the running head and byline; the byline aligns with the point of the beak; and the title, byline, and W have a tense triangular relationship that echoes the energy of the heads. This is a tense, athletic balance. It's needed. There's so much contrast between the art and the text, the spread would fall apart without it.



in bargain shoppers



SCALE One creates a sense of scale through contrasts in size. You got big, you got little, you got scale. Along the way you also happen to get depth, movement, drama, and, often, humor. (For some reason all I can see in my mind right now are Herbert Matter's Swiss Tourism posters...) So, don't forget to try scale—it works good.

Don't forget to consider the scale of your format, incidentally. 8.5 x 11 is fine, but tiny can be a more effective performer. So can big. Think about it—but never, never make things huge or tiny just for effect. Only use small to convey intimacy, preciousness, non-threateningness; use big to express "in real life I am a billboard you can read while driving by with your radar detector on at full power," and so forth. In the case of Easler/Mustain/de Miranda's spreads on Alessi's houseware designs for *Hemisphere* magazine, scale adds to the sense of movement that animates the corkscrews, etc., adding verisimilitude to the humanoid character their creator programmed them with. Not to be a broken record, but note also the fine uses here of contrast (see the fine line vs. the plump kitchen tools), movement, balance, space, and rhythm. Any design that's worth its salt has them all.





MOVEMENT

To create a sense of urgency and energy, we generally try to make the page move. To make the page move, we generally try to use some kind of figurative analogy. We set things on a diagonal that mimics the running or falling body, or place elements in positions that mimic human gestures. We blur and streak the visuals, or zoom in the way Sanchez does on the Armageddon piece. More abstractly, we force eye movement by manipulating the visual hierarchy, leading it here with color, there with contrast, somewhere else with directional rules.

With a starting point in the text like "Equifax drives traffic to retailers," you might expect the designers of Equifax's 1998 annual report to take just such a figurative point of view. To give us people or minivans or to push abstract elements down a visual chute with directional cattle prods (otherwise known as "arrows"). They might have given a single shopping cart a shove and shown us the blur, or used colored lights to liven things up. Instead, Atlanta's EAI photographed the prosiest of associated objects in their most static position from a point of view that catches their natural visual vibration. The procession of little wheels underlines the idea of movement with their implied potential for mechanical energy, though they're momentarily restrained by the inertia of rest. That's it. Everything else is static—the landscape format, the relentlessly repeated horizontals, the grayish densities of the photograph—except for the small italic head line, which leans into the wind to make sure you don't miss the point of the story.

UNITY

Contrast may be king, but without unity, all you get is tossed salad. To get great design, you have to bring all your elements together in a single gestaltic moment of shared cognition.

At first glance, this poster by the fabulous Russian Stenberg brothers of 1920s movie-poster fame looks like random scraps in mid-scatter. It's all contrast. Opposition. The hard, jangly letterforms of the title have nothing to do with the soft rendering of the pretty girl, for one thing—unless you consider the look in her eyes. So, okay, maybe they're speaking the same language. The Cyrillic title may have the happy shapes of the old Deco typeface, Broadway—but it's Broadway on steroids with little balls popping out of the strokes. Safe in long white buses, the Russian words are driving through the path of the French, and into each other. Below them, the tiny, detailed, distant shot of the café is completely out of proportion. The perspective is off, too: in the natural world of the photograph, a face that large would be standing beside us, not floating above. But since nothing matches, everything fits, allied in misanthropic alienation.

Spiritual conviviality aside, all of the above is arranged in a neat compositional V, which points emphatically down, down, down, which is precisely where girls who hang out at places like the Moulin Rouge are headed and you know it. You also know, of course, that fitting all your elements into a single strong shape is a reliable device for the creation of unity. Putting the assembly on a flat, contrasting ground further endears the elements to each other by giving them something to disagree with. A contrary kind of unity, but unity nonetheless.

And that concludes this broadcast. Stay tuned for more reviews of aesthetics in future issues of *Critique*. ☼

