Abstract: In this paper we discuss how the teaching of visual identity in graphic design education may be redeveloped within a speculative design framework. We inquire into how the teaching of visual identity design was framed speculatively with reference to a student project focusing on future scenarios for water sustainability. We propose the concept speculative graphic design, and discuss the implications such a concept might have for the teaching of visual identity in graphic design, and how this may position graphic design more as an agenda-setting discipline. Via analysis of selected student work, we inquire into how such a framing may both destabilise and consolidate conservative approaches to identity design with reference to water sustainability.

Key words: Speculative design, graphic design speculation, visual identity, problem finding, water sustainability.

1. Introduction

Imagine a future where all the world’s fresh water resources are no longer sufficient for sustaining human life. In such a dystopia, everyone is allotted a given amount of water during a lifetime. When an individual’s quota is consumed, an omnipresent organization oversees the termination of that individuals’ life. This trans-national organisation has left its graphic imprint on all official documents, from flags, passports, to lists and letters. The visual identity of the organisation has colonised existing national signage, and its omnipresence is a constant reminder of a brutal faceless regime. In his project Genesis, Mads Øvergaard, asks how this bleak future scenario can be brought to life via the seemingly neutral but uncanny graphic design of visual identity.
This provocative scenario provides discursive entries into topics relevant for understanding graphic design as reaching far beyond visual identity design. However, as practitioners and educators in graphic design, we aim at making graphic design matter beyond the briefs of industrial clients and increased sales (Mau 2004, Chick & Miclethwaite 2011). In the context of the graphic design department in a Norwegian University College, this paper discusses how we might frame the teaching of graphic design of visual identity within a speculative design framework. Central to our discussion is what we refer to as speculative graphic design, drawing in particular on Dunne & Raby’s (2013) and Auger’s (2013) notions of speculative design. Most prominently advocated by Dunne & Raby (2013), but also by Dunne (2005), a speculative design framework explicitly shifts the focus in design from problem solving to problem finding, and is concerned with enabling us to reflect on the future and to critique current practice by asking “What if?”
In developing the concept of speculative graphic design, we scrutinise graphic visual identity design through the lenses of a speculative design framework. We are particularly interested in how this may contribute to graphic design education, and how it may aid us as educators in empowering the students as future designers - and as citizens. The student project discussed in this paper combines visual identity design with issues of water sustainability framed as future speculations. At stake were different concerns: The students were to learn how to design visual identity for an organisation or company. Also, we wanted to empower the students, as well as bringing issues of water sustainability to the educational table as part of rooting the graphic design education in real life issues.

The paper is structured as follows: First we provide a brief overview of speculative design. In section 2 we discuss the transformative role of graphic design. In section 3 we discuss visual Identity design within a speculative design approach. In section 4 we present and discuss selected student works with a specific focus on techniques applied for making the speculations credible, followed by a section where we discuss some implications of speculative graphic design.

2. A speculative design framing

The pressure on the world’s fresh water resources is not widely recognised as relating to local Norwegian affairs - even as the pressure on our fresh water resources is increasing. In providing the students with a speculatively framed assignment as opposed to an assignment related to a realistic client (such as for example a mineral water company), the students were to investigate matters relating to water sustainability. We aimed at pushing the students to actively consider future scenarios, affording student reflections into matters beyond client’s needs (Sueda 2014, Wood 2007). Interestingly, in hindsight we realised that the student project closely aligned with a speculative design framework, even as it was not framed as such initially. Retrospectively drawing on Dunne & Raby (2013) as well as Auger (2013), we realised that we had replaced the teaching of concept design with conceptual design, and problem solving with problem finding. These pedagogical shifts were taken to scaffold the student’s redefinitions of problems enabling them to come up with unexpected designs. The students were to express their speculations through a visual identity toolbox.

Drawing on the related fields of critical design (Bardzell et al 2012), discursive design (Morrison et al. 2011), as well as speculative design (Dunne & Raby 2013, Auger 2013), Edeholt (2012) sees design as a valuable source for facilitating radical change. But to achieve this, design education needs to develop beyond the at times limiting mindsets
inherent in the design professions. Teaching how to graphically design visual identity was transformed into a series of visual explorations of possible futures and provocative discourse (Tharp & Tharp 2013, Bardzell et al. 2012). Potentially, such discourse might trigger debate and serve as catalysts for enabling difficult discussions, and may enrich the field of graphic design, where such practices flourish even as they tend to go unnoticed (Sueda 2014). A speculative design framework may guide students towards asking important questions about graphic designs’ social and political roles and scaffold imaginative thinking and towards what Dunne & Raby (2013) refer to as gentle nudges, which may potentially lead to behavioural change. We argue that a speculative design framework aids the students in reflecting on possible, probable or preferable futures of water sustainability (Dunne & Raby 2013). We are in particular interested in how such a perspective may afford students in gaining deeper understandings of “substantive and often debatable issues of psychological, sociological, and ideological consequence” (Tharp & Tharp 2013:406), and how they can explore and manifest these visually via graphic design. Before discussing the student’s work, we focus on the potential for societal change inherent in the graphic design discipline.

2.1 A potential for change
Access to the tools and techniques of graphic design has become more available to the general public than before (Canaan 2003). However, the access to its conceptual scope has not been as wide spread as the technical ones (Gale 2013). Graphic design still tends to be understood as predominantly serving client’s needs, and as expressing what the client pays for (Hollis 1997). However, graphic design may also be understood not just as a craft but also in terms of intellectual problem solving (Canaan 2003). Graphic designers may thus also be understood in terms of agents of change (Dougherty 2008, van der Velden et.al 2010, Sueda, 2014). Inquiring into the roles design might have in foresighted action relating to the bleak prospects we may anticipate due to climate change, Edeholt (2012:158) highlights design’s ability to present thought-provoking micro-scenarios (Wood 2007), which may trigger and stimulate public debate. These perspectives may motivate students to see graphic design also as a tool for designing for societal change. It is, however, important that such acknowledgment of the transformational role of graphic design is followed by an increased ethical sensitivity.

2.2 Teaching visual identity design
Design of visual Identity is an essential part of Graphic Design. It is the means by which a product, organization or a corporation is represented visually, by the design of a toolbox consisting of such elements as name, logo, colours, typography as well as imagery, in
order to attain an identifiable expression (Wheeler 2012). Visual identity is important in building a reputation or a brand. Van den Bosch and Menno (2005) discuss how corporate visual identity is key in branding. Central to their discussion of visual identity in building a reputation is visibility, distinctiveness, transparency, authenticity and consistency (Formbrun & VanRiels 2004).

The teaching of visual identity is often based on marketing theory as it relates to corporate identity, and this knowledge is applied in visual identity design. Usually, the students receive a brief similar to one a marketing department would give a design agency. The students then design appropriate visual material for the company, grounded in their knowledge about the market, the target groups and the values of the company. This knowledge is expressed visually so as to position and differentiate the company from possible competitors (Trout 2008). The main applications of the identity, that is how and where, as well as on what platforms and through what media the identity is expressed, usually involve a website, business cards and template for literature and signage (Budelmann 2010). Teaching visual identity with real clients is useful and relevant, but it does not fully release the critical potential inherent in an educational context. However, student’s knowledge building within a speculatively framed project can be transferred to designing corporate identity for realistic clients.

3. Student speculations: Designing credibility
Our students were asked to find a local or global water-related problem and express it via the design and applications of visual identity as part of a future speculation. The students worked individually, and grappled with issues relating to water sustainability, doing research on relevant topics - from eco-activism to maritime engineering projects. Intuitively the students adjusted both design and choice of applications in order to achieve credibility and to make the spectator relate to their speculations. Auger (2013:2) argues for the importance of what he refers to as a perceptual bridge in speculative design for avoiding complete audience rejection if the speculations are too incredible. He describes four different techniques for designing credibility in speculative design. We now discuss these techniques as they relate to selected student designs.

3.1 What is most likely?
Auger (2013:3) refers to what he calls an ecological approach to speculative design. Such an approach grounds the speculation in contexts in which the speculation could exist. One way to establish connections to present reality is to let the design reflect what would
most likely happen. For example, Edel Horne’s project *Final Water Frontier* is fuelled by discoveries of what appears to be water on Mars, and treats this water as our only clean water resource in the future. She has designed the visual profile of a global corporation, which takes advantage of a situation where the Earths’ water resources are drained. Water from Mars is bottled and sold at outrageous prices. Her project is built upon presumptions of how water scarcity drives prices up, resulting in water being available only for the privileged. This is expressed by visualising the retail price for a bottle of
water, and through a visualisation of how water is fought over at the stock market. Her speculation taps into familiar ways in which we could imagine the visual profile of such a corporation - based on what we already know about how water is privatized, sold and advertised and on existing visual conventions of corporate design.

3.2 Uncanny Speculations
Auger (2013) incorporates Freud’s notion of the uncanny in techniques for making the audience relate to a design speculation. The uncanny is what is simultaneously familiar and alien (Royle 2003). The ambivalence and cognitive dissonance conflicting imagery may generate is central in balancing audience interest and rejection of the speculation due to “...revulsion or outright shock” (2013:4). The uncanny represents a form of desirable discomfort evident in Mads Øvregaard’s Genesis (Fig. 1). Even as this project includes systematic mass executions, it just provides hints of the presence of the organization. Visualized by subtle means, it draws on the dry visual formality of faceless bureaucracy. This formality, coupled with the organization’s creepy presence on international documents, makes it bearable through it’s use of formalities and reason, that is, given that the audience understands and accepts the reasoning. A subtle visual identity may thus provide a counterweight to the incredibility of a speculation by tapping into the uncanny.

3.3 Fiction & faction
A perceptual bridge is important as “...the term speculation can take the viewer too far away from here and now” (Auger, 2013:9). However, using faction, "... a form of verisimilitude where truths are blurred and disbelief is suspended" (Auger, 2013:9), provides credibility to Morten Håvik’s Georain. Georain is a company offering rainmaking services through the process of cloud seeding, a much-debated weather modification technique for generating rain. Research on cloud seeding has been going on for decades, however, conclusions to whether cloud seeding actually works or not is yet to be drawn1. In tapping into the visual vocabulary of engineering, the visual identity is designed to make Georain appear as a serious commercial actor. This graphically roots the speculation in existing design conventions. The visual profile is informative, and via representations of rainfall, the profile and name of the company immediately provides information about it, with a stronger reference to the activity of this fictional company than for example seen in Genesis. However, as the project draws on the factual this supports the speculation in projecting a believable image into a domain already saturated by speculation.
Figure 3. Visualisations of the fictive company *Georain*, by Morten Håvik.
3.4 Familiarities
Familiar elements may create the bridge we need for relating to the speculations at first glance. Such a rooting in familiar elements is evident in Renate Hagen’s project *Abolition*.
Army. The project relates water terrorism to eco-terrorist groups (Joosse, 2012). This ads to the credibility as it taps into imagery present in international news feeds. Abolition Army develops the visual identity of an organization aiming to draw attention to the irresponsible practices of large corporations central to the privatisation and pollution of water. The visual elements in this project draw upon, and re-contextualise the visual language of terrorist organisations (Beifuss & Bellini 2013), positioning water as at the core of future conflict. Auger (2013:14) explains how design speculations may be rooted in the familiar: “By utilising the mundane, the familiar and small, un-noticeable details, the designer can provide spectacular, even preposterous, proposals with a tangible link to our contemporary sensibilities and understanding”. This can for example be seen in a carefully designed detail in the visualization of a roadside ad-shell Final Water Frontier, where a cartoon-like smiling astronaut offers a thirty five thousand dollars bottle of water. Dunne & Raby (2013:92) as well as Dunne (2005) refer to using props in speculative design, pointing to how these “…function as physical anecdotes, parts representing wholes designed to prompt speculation in the viewer about the world these objects belong to.” In including props based in the everyday world, these projects provide perceptual bridges to present reality.

4. Towards speculative graphic design?

Graphic design is encompassed, but not the main focus in Dunne & Raby’s (2013:15) framework, even as they refer to the critical practices of the design collective Metahaven (see van der Velden 2010), who via corporate identity design critiqued how political fictions are expressed and created visually. Through teaching visual identity speculatively, we find that a notion of speculative graphic design serves as a catalyst for discussions of how visual identity is taught and understood in our educational context.

One main observation is that many of the student projects presented rather conservative visual identities. Their speculations were primarily supported by the applications of the identity onto artefacts, such as space ships and flags. The applications of the identity more than perhaps the identity design itself served as the means through which the speculations were expressed. In this student project, speculative graphic design may thus refer more to the conceptual bridges than the identity design itself.

Speculative design projects have importantly been criticized for primarily generating debate within the white cube, or among members of specific design tribes (Prado & Oliveira, 2015, Laranjo, 2015). Laranjo (2015) points to the need for raising the bar for critical and speculative designers, reaching beyond what Prado & Oliveira (2015) see as biased, privileged and self-centred positions. These authors argue that designers also are
responsible citizens even if their design is not cast specifically as speculative. These considerations will be taken up more closely as we will continue our development of speculative graphic design with our students, as will further inquiry into the relations between conservative visual identities, clichés and props.

5. Closing remarks

In discussing a speculative approach to the teaching of visual identity in graphic design, we have proposed the term speculative graphic design. In inquiring into how conventional corporate design clichés available to the students were applied in familiar and outrageous settings, we find that the speculative framing at times led to conservative visual identities. These serve as perceptual bridges. However, we find that a speculative approach stimulates our debate as educators about the continuum between radical or conservative visual identity, as well as the possible contexts and applications of these identities. We thus see such a framing a fruitful for our pedagogical discussions on how visual identity design is taught in the context of graphic design education. Hopefully, a speculative design framing may guide the students to envisage themselves as taking part in nudging us to consider new and bold ideas about our futures.

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