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Postmodernism
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Buck Tradition
How Punk, Memphis, and New Wave Rebels
Created the 1980's Postmodern Design Aesthetic

No specific style stands out in the 1980's. The aesthetic that we have come to know is a combination of styles and movements that were happening simultaneously at that time.

PUNK
Punk music and punk aesthetic were made to reject norms and traditions, question the status quo and as a means of anti-mainstream expression. With this growing musical move-

Fig. 1

ment, a need graphical expression in the form of gig posters, album covers, and handbills arose with it. The chaotic and rebellious sound of Punk music called for an equally rebellious and chaotic visual representation of that sound. One of the first visual artists to propel the design aesthetic of this rebellious sound visual artist Jamie Reid. Designing graphics for the Sex Pistols, he translated the angsty chaotic sound into a style of cut-and-paste collage artwork and helped define the punk style as we know it today (*Fig. 1*). "Reid effectively captured the chaos of the anarchist spirit by visually attacking existing compositions and elements that he remixed into violent contrasts in shape, color, and form," according to Mark Healy in a 2017 article "The Art of Chaos: Punk Rock's Timeless Influence on Graphic Design."

Fig. 2

Images were taken from popular culture and appropriated for the pieces. This style was a hallmark of other DIY designers of the day (*Fig. 2*). "Choices weren't made from lack of

planning or knowledge of design. These designs were created with the intention of questioning the norms of contemporary culture." (Callie Budrick, "Punk for a Day: Graphic Design History and the Punk Aesthetic.") This Dada styled collage art was made out of necessity due to lack of money and materials, but this necessity created emotionally charged images that reflect the underground culture of that time.

NEW WAVE

Modernism with its sense of order and purpose had been the main design sense for many decades leading into the 1960's and 70's. Swiss Design or the International Typographic style was guided by the idea that design should be as invisible as possible. The "content" of the design should stand out. The form should follow the function. However, designers within the Swiss Design movement were starting to question these strict ideas and principles. The International Style was about order and clarity; designers weren't encouraged to play around with elements and explore. But it was time for a change.

Swiss designer, Wolfgang Weingart, was a teacher and lecturer at the Basel School starting in 1968 broke away from the Swiss International Style. He instilled creativity and a desire for experimentation into the industry at that time. His creativity and curiosity changed the way typography looked. He once said "what's the use of being legible, if nothing inspires you to take notice of it."

Fig. 3

Weingart is credited as "the father" of New Wave or Swiss Punk typography. In an article for Eye magazine in 1994 by Rick Poyner, Weingart stated "I took 'Swiss Typography' as my starting point, but then I blew it apart, never forcing any style upon my students. I never intended to create a 'style'. It just happened that the students picked up—and misinterpreted—a so-called 'Weingart style' and spread it around." We start to see some of this punk style in this poster designed by Weingart in 1979 (*Fig. 3*).

And this Swiss Punk graphical style did spread. One of Weingart's most famous students was April Grieman. She, along with designer Dan Friedman (*Fig. 4*), brought back the knowledge she learned at the Basel school and co-opted it into the mainstream of graphic design making this new style a huge commercial success.

This New Wave style defied strict grid-based layouts. Some characteristics included inconsistent letterspacing, varying typeweights and type set at non-right angles. This led to a slightly chaotic

feeling. New Wave was labeled as a "softer, commercialized punk culture" (Stephen Eskilson, Graphic Design a New History)

Grieman's work was bold and playful (*Fig. 5*) She is considered one of the first designers to see the potential of the computer as a design tool. Grieman used this new technology and explored its novelty. Being well educated on the rules of design and typography, she knew how to break these rules.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

New Wave was not just a graphic design phenomenon. New Wave music was similar in being a "softer, commercialized punk." New Wave artists created music that was easier for the mainstream to digest. Bands like Devo, Depeche Mode, New Order, and the Cure popularized this sound and helped this soft punk aesthetic grow.

Much like punk music, New Wave music styling called for a new aesthetic to represent the music. Designers like "Barney Bubbles, Peter Saville, Neville Brody and Malcom Garrett – all produced designs for new wave musicians." (Rick Poyner, No More Rules) Album covers like this Psychadellic Furs cover by designer Barney Bubbles (*Fig. 6*) suggest a knowledge of international styles like the Memphis movement and Swiss Punk, shown with squiggles, bright colors, geometric shapes, and non-gridded typography.

Fig. 6

MEMPHIS

Memphis is a design movement that began in 1981.The Memphis Group got its start in Milan, Italy when designer Ettore Sottsass and other Italian designers and architects formed with a unique goal – to develop a new, mostly radical, approach to design.

"Like many creative movements, Memphis was a reaction against the status quo," states Sara Barnes in her article "How the Memphis Movement Went Against 'Good Taste' to Inspire Designers Today." It was a reaction against the mid-century modern minimalism that was prevalent in the decades leading up to the early 80's.

1926 Vogue Cover & 1930's Deco Chair

1956 Pop Art Sofa by George Nelson & Detail of Pop Art by Robert Rauschenberg

Fig. 7

In true postmodern fashion, some of the design inspiration was borrowed form past historical trends like Pop Art and Art Deco (*Fig 7.*)The prevalent features of Memphis design are abstract graphic patterns like squiggles, and bright, multi-colored atypical geometric shapes. The group was also fond of using cheap materials laminate to create their pieces, laminate specifically chosen because of its "lack of culture". The final look was playful and energetic and meant to make a statement that was rebellious and bold.

Memphis design made a splash, the look caught on and the colors and patterns worked their way into mass marketed materials (*Fig. 8)* that resonated with youth culture like MTV, which launched the same year as the Memphis Group.

 "Conceived to be a deliberate 'fad', Sottsass dismantled the group in 1988. The group had made a sort of political statement intended to break the barriers between high and low class design." (Patrick Sisson, Curbed Magazine)

We further observe the ripped apart notion of punk, with it's DIY aesthetic, the bold colors, geometric patterns, and freeform designs of Memphis, as well as the broken grid, and mixed typography of New Wave design. Though seemingly a fad, this combination of styles swept mainstream and in a sense became the 80's aesthetic as we know it today.

Fig. 8