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lind designers:

A Proposal for Schools of Design

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Today it appears beyond doubt that the field of graphic design is essentially visual. This is reiterated by innumerable texts,² as well as by the contents of most courses in schools of design and the education backgrounds of most professors in such schools. However, I wish to begin by stating that all which follows can be condensed in a single and, in such circumstances, seemingly paradoxical proposal: **Design schools today would benefit incalculably from close collaboration with the blind. Yes I mean the blind, that is, the visually impaired,³ people who cannot see with their eyes.⁴**

In view of the unjustified prejudices regarding the blind, so common in a culture in which vision and knowledge are synonyms,⁵ it comes as no surprise that designers should often take offence at my proposal. Of course I do not blame them, for, in the context of the consideration of design as an essentially visual field, how to conceive the possibility of a bond between designers and the blind?, and moreover, how to conceive not only the possibility of this bond but even the affirmation that the blind might today actually be *necessary*⁶ to designers, particularly during their college-level training?

I am aware that this proposal can seem rather odd, and all the more so in view of the fact that it should not be a designer who puts it forth but rather a mere glass-wearing guest of this noble field, for although I work in a school of design I am not myself a designer. In fact perhaps my own situation with regard to design is not too different from that of the blind man, and if I deem myself sufficiently qualified to address questions of design in a journal such as this one, this is due to my consideration of the rationale which leads me to conclude that collaboration with the blind would be highly beneficial for our schools today. What, then, is this rationale?

Essentially, it involves a reconsideration of the relation between the *interior* and *exterior* of design *qua* visual field. Although we commonly consider interiors and their exteriors to be absolutely opposed -

¹ This paper is partially based on my current doctoral research in Philosophy at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México under the supervision of Dr Carlos Pereda; it incorporates two previously unpublished materials: the paper *Hacer visible lo (in)visible*, delivered at the IV Congreso Nacional de Escuelas de Diseño Gráfico (16 November 1994, Antigua Hacienda Galindo, San Juan del Río, Mexico), as well as parts of my essay *Ciegos Diseñadores*. An earlier version was delivered as a second-term inaugural lecture following a generous invitation from the Universidad del Diseño (4 August 1995, Sede del Colegio Federado de Ingenieros y Arquitectos, San José, Costa Rica). I dedicate this piece to my colleagues at Anáhuac in acknowledgment of their ideas and efforts which have served as a foundation for this paper's proposal - one to which, however, they might not in turn subscribe...

² Even in Gui Bonsiepe's *Las 7 columnas del diseño* (1993) in which we find that most fecund definition of the domain design as the domain of the *interface* (p1-19), we still find statements such as 'Design - is connected with the body and space, especially with retinal space' (p1-16, emphasis mine), in which the undue privilege of the retinal would remain to be accounted for in the face of the decentering of the visual effected in papers such as this.

³ The entire debate about the ethics of naming intervenes at this point. If throughout this paper I keep to *blind* rather than *visually impaired* this is in order to bring out more fully the connotations of blindness in our languages.

⁴ This proposal originally derived from a deconstructive account of how it was possible for Martin, the central character of that extraordinary film *Proof* (Moorhouse 1991) to make sense of the innumerable photos taken by himself with his automatic camera in spite of being blind from birth. (A viewing of this film serves as an excellent supplement to the reading of this paper). The story of Martin is usually considered convincing by viewers, but nevertheless I shall cite too the example of blind photographer Evgen Bavcar (b. Slovenia, 1946) in anticipation of the argument that Martin is a mere fictive character. Bavcar, who lost his sight at age eleven, calls his stunning photographs of nudes, landscapes and children 'tactile views', and claims to have 'learned a lot about the visual world thanks to photography'; he was named official photographer of *Photography Month* in Paris in 1983 under director Jean-Luc Monterosso. Why does he take photographs?:

Even those who cannot see have within them what we could call a visual need. A person in a dark room needs to

see light and looks for it against all odds. This is the same need I express when I take a photograph. The blind sigh for light just as a child does while on a train travelling through a tunnel. (S., J. 1985: 25, 54, 68, 82, translation mine).

The reader shall note that while careful consideration is due to the difference between Martin's and Bavcar's blindness - blindness from birth and acquired blindness - this difference does not essentially alter the rationale behind collaboration between designers and the blind as proposed here.

- 5 A quick look at the dictionary confirms the common association of blindness with insensibility, indiscriminate-ness, ignorance, obstinacy and so on. As Derrida notes, *Idein, eidos, idea*: the whole history, the whole semantics of the European *idea*, in its Greek genealogy, as we know - as we see - relates seeing to knowing. Look at the allegory of *Error*, Coypel's blindfolded man. *Naturally* his eyes *would be able* to see. But they are *blindfolded* (1990: 12-3).
- 6 This necessity is in direct relation to the extent to which the strictly visual presents itself today not only as the dominant language in practically all domains of design, but also as the common denominator to which it is believed design can be reduced in its totality. The arguments in this paper are not directed at the visual as such, but rather at the mirage of its empire; thus, any other aspect of design which might at some point similarly appear in the guise of an empire would, therefore, open itself to the same kind of refutation.
- 7 This is a slightly simplified version of arguments in Derrida such as

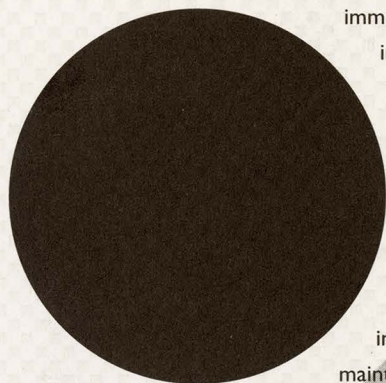
the division between exterior and interior passes through the interior of the interior or the exterior of the exterior (1967a: 43);

... the insistent atopics of the *parergon*: neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work ..., neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work. It is no longer merely around the work (1978b: 9);

What constitutes them as *parerga* is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*. And this lack would be constitutive of the

we say, for instance, that if we have sight it is because we are not blind, and vice versa - we shall come to restate this relation of *opposition* (for all practical purposes, a non-relation) along the lines of the more rigorous notion that between interior and exterior, designer and blind man, there exists a mutual and necessary bond on the basis of which each derives its very identity. Nothing less.⁷

That we generally consider interior and exterior to be simply opposed is clearly exemplified by the response which design students consistently provide when asked where they would judge the essence of a circle to be located: 'here, in the centre' they



immediately respond, as if pointing to the evident itself: if it is a matter of indicating where the essence - something like the interior of the interior - of a circle might be, then undoubtedly it must rest at its centre; and there is no need here for me to remind the reader that such an answer shows total disregard for the exterior of this figure. For what - students will ask - could the *exterior* of a circle possibly have to do with its essence?

Well everything, actually, as designers rediscover day after day when, in an effort to economise in the representation of a circle, they do not maintain its centre in the form of a point, patch of colour or some other graphic figuration, but rather its periphery, the circumference which gives rise simultaneously to the circle's 'interior' and 'exterior'. **Shouldn't the circumference, then, be considered as the essence of the circle insofar as it presents us with its most economical expression?** The answer to this question can only be affirmative, for otherwise we would have to account for the possibility of economising in the representation of this - or any other - geometrical figure while at the same time leaving aside its very essence. **Thus it seems rather more appropriate to conclude that the essence of a circle is the relation between its interior and exterior, and more precisely the circumference as the locus in which such a relation articulates itself.**

Of course this answer in fact comes as no surprise, for we all know well enough that it is impossible to have an interior without an exterior (how for instance might one draw a circle without generating an exterior surface at the same time as an interior one?), and therefore that interior and exterior cannot properly be opposed since one and the other can only be themselves through their relation with the other.⁸

Thus it begins to become apparent that designer and blind man cannot simply be opposed or unrelated, for if it is the case that the task of the designer is essentially a visual one, then it must necessarily define itself in relation to the domain of the non-visual, to which the blind would belong.

very unity of the *ergon*. Without this lack, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon* (1978b: 59-60).

- 8 At this point, the attentive reader shall find himself faced by a profound contradiction, for it would appear equally evident that the essence of things is to be found in their most internal interiors (as in the example of my students' response concerning the location of the essence of a circle) and that this same essence is given by the relation between their interior and exterior. However, both the radicality of this contradiction as well as the astounding regularity with which it manifests itself suggests that we are dealing with more than a simple case of error or ignorance. In fact, allow me to anticipate that such a contradiction cannot be dispelled and is structurally necessary if meaning is at all to take place [I have focused on this question in two previous papers also characterised by a deconstructive orientation (Mayer 1995 and 1994), in the former case in rather more philosophical terms, in the latter with regard to the question of colour as treated in Eisenstein's writings]. In order to understand this, here it shall suffice to note the argument presented further below that 'since a composition can also be conceived as a certain interior containing a number of relations between different elements, then its own essence must be given by its own relation with its corresponding exterior, that is, other compositions visual and non-visual (as well as with the ultimate exteriority of the domain of the non-compositional)' [emphasis added here]: since the non-compositional is another name for all that is commonly implicated in the thought of 'essentialities which do not require of their exterior in order to be themselves' (to which I refer later), we see that the compositional, in order to operate, must relate to that which is most radically incompatible with its own ethos - whence the profound contradiction already signalled - and therefore all instances of meaning, although by nature compositional, necessarily appear *also* in the guise of absolute 'in themselves', i.e. as non-compositional. This explains, perhaps: the enduring illusion of graphic design as an essentially visual field (in the classical sense), our permanent tendency to think of exteriors and interiors as homogeneous and absolute opposites, the predictable offence experienced by designers at their being related with the blind, and so

on - so many instances which appear to be able to be themselves beyond the compositional context in which they occur. That it should be precisely such instances which serve as points of departure for this paper clearly illustrates the paradox that deconstruction is permanently demanded and yet cannot ever fully live up to the exigencies proper to this demand (for example, by bringing about a post-deconstructive state of affairs): if on the one hand and in the name of the more rigorous logic of the compositional it is necessary to question all sorts of illusory essentialities which pretend *not* to require their exteriors in order to be themselves, on the other hand, however, the very movement of this logic *itself* generates the illusion of such essentialities as its very precondition. From this point of view, deconstruction is indeed a 'properly *infinite* movement' (Ronsse in Derrida 1967b: 14) which, nevertheless, at a certain point has 'tangible' effects:

it is because deconstruction interferes with solid structures, 'material' institutions, and not only with discourses or signifying representations, that it is always distinct from an analysis or a 'critique' [in the Kantian sense]. And in order to be pertinent, deconstruction works as strictly as possible in that place where the supposedly 'internal' order of the philosophical is articulated by (internal *and* external) necessity with the institutional conditions and forms of teaching. To the point where the concept of institution itself would be subject to the same deconstructive treatment (Derrida 1978b: 19-20).

The proposal put forth in this paper perhaps exemplifies just such a way in which deconstruction can have tangible effects, in this case on the entire institutional configuration of design *qua* 'visual' field: its ostensible disciplinary borders, didactics, mechanisms of legitimization, and so on.

This, in its most general expression and strange as it may still seem, is the reason⁹ why the blind have an essential contribution to make to our schools.

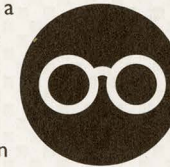
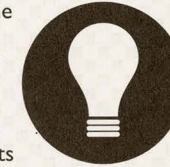
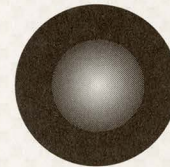
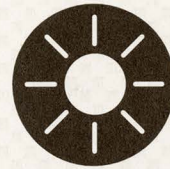
Yet, urgent questions immediately present themselves: what does it mean exactly that 'the blind have an essential contribution to make to our schools?', why do I reduce the overwhelming diversity of the non-visual specifically to the 'instance' of the blind?, and what could be the actual terms of this collaboration between designers and the blind? In order to address these important questions I first need to introduce the additional concept of *translation*.

I have already stated that no interior is conceivable without its corresponding exterior and that this implies that, in fact, the essence of any interior is not in turn *inside itself*, but rather in the limit which constitutes and articulates this same interior in its relation with the exterior. From this we derive the idea that **the essence, or value, or meaning, of an interior never rests simply in this same interior in a permanent and stable manner, but rather results always from the concurrence of such an interior with its exterior - which is why a 'same' interior comes to differ in meaning if its 'exterior' context is altered in any way.** For

instance, take again the eminently visual example of the circle, this time placed in the midst of a certain graphic composition: the 'same' circle can in a poster; denote an eye, a point above the letter *i* in the word *blind*, a sun, a braille mark, a light bulb or even a portion of a stylised pair of dark glasses, and so on, only by virtue of the alteration of the elements immediately surrounding it in the context of the compositions in which we might place it; the essence of the circle, then, is unstable and determined by the composition in which it is to be found.

But for its part, and in turn, what happens with the composition itself?, from where does it derive its own value or meaning?, where is the essence of a composition *itself* to be found? Here we return to the argument already presented concerning the circle: since a composition can also be conceived as a certain interior containing a number of relations between different elements, then its own essence must be given by its own relation with its own corresponding exterior; that is, *other* compositions visual and non-visual, as well as with the ultimate exteriority of the domain of the non-compositional. This is to be expected, for we have already observed this same principle operating in the case of the circle. However, the implications of this extension of this logic has the noteworthy consequence of allowing us to distinguish more clearly how it is that the visual quite literally constitutes itself through its relation with the non-visual. How so?

See: if a visual composition, which endows with meaning the set of elements which it 'contains', acquires its own meaning by way of its relation with visual compositions external



⁹ That my argumentation is metaphoric ('... the relation between designer and blind man can be seen as the relation between the interior and exterior of a circle') is no mere accident for reasons deriving from the passages soon to follow concerning translation: no argument is intelligible beyond the possibility of its translation into other, per force non-identical, terms. Says Derrida:

every reading is [metaphoric or metonymic], one way or another, and the partition does not pass between a figurative reading and an appropriate or literal, correct or true reading, but between capacities of tropes (1978a: 16).

to it, and, in turn, visual compositions as a whole establish their common interiority only through their relation with compositions again external, and this time necessarily non-visual - for instance sonorous, tactile, gustatory, olfactive -, then we must conclude that, in fact, it is only possible to capture the essence of a visual element, such as a particular circle, through a trajectory which passes in equal measure through the domain of the visual as it does through the domain of the non-visual.¹⁰

And it is precisely this trajectory which can be understood as a movement of *translation* in view of the fact that it consists, essentially, in the search for individual elements in other compositions comparable to the 'original' ones in the 'original' composition (the term 'comparable' being understood, of course, in the same sense in which in a translation we describe as 'comparable' an original term and its translated version in another register). In other words, there is no way of knowing what a graphic 'circle' is if it is not possible to know too what a 'circular' sonorous structure might be (such as a melody which repeats itself when it reaches its end), what might be a form which when touched suggests 'circularity' (such as a sphere), or what might be any other non-visual phenomenon which suggests a recurrent cycle. So that this movement of 'translation', then, rather than being as is usually considered an operation to be performed upon elements already constituted, is in fact what opens the very possibility of any essence, value or meaning in general, insofar as these are, and forever remain, but the possibility of their own translation.¹¹

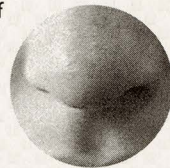
¹⁰ Another way to understand that any visual composition necessarily implies an exchange with the non-visual is the following: compositions are what give rise to the meaning of the elements which conform them; however, has anyone ever seen a composition, that is a composition in itself?; no, never, for compositions are not properly visible beyond the elements whose relations they facilitate, and they can only be grasped by way of a comparison with other compositions, that is, other sets of relations between other elements visual or perceptible in general, for these could also be audible, touchable, tastable, smellable, etc. Take for instance a reiteration: while it is possible to observe the reiteration of different elements in a certain visual composition, nevertheless in such a case it is only possible to see the reiterated visual elements and not the reiteration *itself*, for which reason the only way of rendering visible the latter is by locating other classes of elements which relate to each other in a reiterative manner in the context of their own compositions: the only way to recognise reiterative visual compositions is through the recognition of sonorous, tactile, gustatory, olfactive or other comparably reiterative types of compositions. *The visual constitutes itself only by way of the non-visual.*

Now, finally, it is possible to suggest answers to the urgent questions previously formulated. For, in the course of my explanation of the importance of translation, I have provided an answer to the first question regarding what it means that **'the essence of design is precisely its relation with the non-visual': if the essence**

of design is visual, and if the visual can only be apprehended through a translation which passes just as much through the domain of the visual as it does through that of the non-visual, then the essence of design must definitely involve the non-visual.



However, why do I reduce the amplitude of the non-visual specifically to the example of the blind? Clearly, the blind are by no means the only 'instance' of the non-visual, as is exemplified by the non-visual domains already mentioned (sound, touch, taste, smell) and which might point, rather, towards musicians, massagists, cooks or perfumers



as possible important partners for designers. However, from my point of view the invaluable particularity of the blind, that which has made me opt for them over and above any other possible ambassadors of the non-visual, is precisely that it is through contact with them that the false idea that design is essentially visual, in the sense of an essentiality which does not require of its non-visual exterior in order to be itself, could be most radically disarticulated in both 'theory' and 'practice'. In accordance with the arguments presented here, **contact**

¹¹ Again, translation is a central concept in Derrida, insofar as it

decides, suspends, and sets in motion ... even in 'my' language, within the presumed unity of what is called the corpus of a language,

for which reason

a text lives only ... if it is *at once* translatable and *untranslatable* ... Totally translatable, it disappears as text, as writing, as body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately (1979: 100-102).

There is a close relation between translation and the question of synergy, never far off from the argument developed here. For a more detailed account of such a relation see Mayer 1990: 91-96.

with the blind would reveal to designers that it is actually possible to **visualise compositions** - which, as already stated, constitute the essence of individual graphic elements in general - **without necessarily having to see with one's eyes; contact with the blind would reveal to designers that, in fact, graphic compositions are not primarily nor exclusively visual in any sense whatsoever.**

Thus, **ironically**, it would appear that today it is designers who are in fact blind, since for them the **visuality of their work appears so evident that this prevents them from seeing the essential relation which the visual has with the non-visual.**

Collaboration with the blind would render visible what today remains a blind spot for designers:

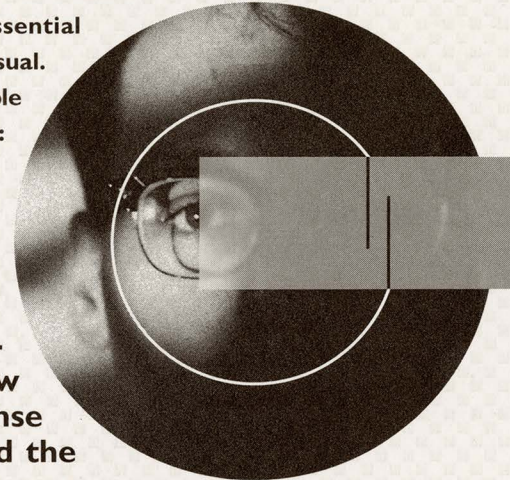
the blind man, that most improbable sender and receiver of designs *qua* visual productions, would in their mutual contact force the designer rigorously to disenchant himself from the idea that the field of design in all its complexity can be reduced merely to the visual (or any other such single register). **Exchange with the blind would allow designers to realise the precise sense in which their activity is visual and the massive degree to which it is not.**¹² The blind man

would demonstrate to the designer that what is primary in design is not *visuality* as such but rather *translation*: all contact between them would necessarily have to be articulated in terms such as - in the voice of the designer addressing the blind - 'this which you don't perceive with your eyes is *equivalent* to that which you can understand through your sense of hearing or touch', the centrality of translation thus being brought to the fore.

In this way, as is endeavoured through many of the theoretical courses (including some introductions to semiotics) taught to students of design, designers would indeed become accustomed to working on a much more abstract level and with greater versatility than that which they generally achieve on the basis of their studies today, studies which in my view have a tendency erroneously to assign inherent values or meanings to certain graphic elements as a result of a deficient understanding of the dynamics of translation *qua* possibility of meaning.

Thus, insofar as one of the most important mandates of programmes in design is to demonstrate the extent to which the impression of the visual is structurally secondary with respect to the compositional articulation which in the first place gives rise to it - however much it might appear primary, particularly to the untrained eye -, the suggested collaboration with the blind would significantly strengthen the theoretical vein of our schools,

and so on) since all such schemes can be exemplified in non-visual registers. A whole set of questions opens up here, but I cannot go into them now for reasons of space. (I refer the reader again to Mayer 1994). The point here is to note that the blind necessarily have very considerable access even to colour in spite of being one of the most specifically visual factors of design.



¹²It is worth considering here the question of colour as one of the most evidently *visual* aspects of design, for which reason the blind would seem not to have any access whatsoever to this kind of signification. However, the domain of colour operating in accordance to the logic of the compositional, it necessarily appears also in the guise of a non-compositional 'in itself'. We might ask ourselves whether this last 'in itself' is precisely that portion of colour which must remain untranslatable if colour generally is to signify insofar as it undergoes translation. As the reader might by now anticipate, this means that the blind would have access only to those aspects of colour which remain translatable into non-visual registers - which, as we have seen, is to speak not of few or negligible aspects: for instance, since colour, among other functions, serves as a general differentiating factor between the parts composing total images or objects, the blind could clearly determine general colour schemes characterising such relations between parts (in terms of 'high contrast', 'softness',

13 In the course of his spontaneous remarks to an earlier draft of my paper, Steven Skaggs, editor the of issue of *Zed* in which it was first published, suggested that I provide some additional examples of 'how crossing the "boundary" of visual design ... might shed light on both design-as-communication and the specifically visual aspects of graphic design'. For, as he said,

what is particularly exciting is that ... [by working with the blind] you have the opportunity of separating two distinct parts of graphic design - the visual component and the 'aesthetic' communicative component. There may be, for example, universals to be found in the aesthetic component - rhythm, texture, unity, figure/ground, emphasis, 'framing of the message' etc. that will show up in non-visual design. Those principles will be contrasted with the stuff that is specifically linked to a particular sense modality, in this case sight.

Here, then, are three such examples and also some comments slightly expanding upon that towards which Steven Skaggs points.

Although I have as yet carried out no work with blind persons directly (I have wished first for the 'theoretical' moment of my proposal initially to exhaust itself) I can cite three different college courses developed by me as examples of early attempts to articulate in practice the rationale presented in this paper. In one course, third-year undergraduates familiar with examples of graphic signage were asked to develop signage for blind persons visiting some kind of temporary fair; while the students were quite disconcerted at first, the project was quite successful in its results - on the last day of the project, unsuspecting passers-by were blindfolded and invited to grope their way around a natural-size model of a fair utilising such signage - and provided many insights into the nature of any instance of signage in general, whether visual or not: the systematic character of signage could be addressed quite immediately with hardly any of the interference regarding questions of 'taste' and 'good looks' which so often plague the early projects of graphic design students (not that 'taste' and 'good looks' are unimportant, but they often block students' access to questions of a more theoretical/semiotic nature).

The other two courses concerned themselves specifically with images and words. In one of them, challenged

a vein which it is unnecessary to recall does not operate exclusively in so-called 'theoretical' courses but strictly speaking and more or less consciously in all courses. Collaboration with the blind would offer designers very many of the perspectives and benefits associated with 'theory', articulated through a theoretically focused, rigorous and attractive 'practice' which has, in addition, practically unlimited potential for future development. Such a practice might offer a large number of designers the knowledge and experience which today courses in 'theory' attempt to provide with only relative success.

There are many ways in which this proposal could be put into practice.¹³ From my point of view, it would be a matter of **professors and students from different areas collaborating directly with the blind in both workshops and theoretical courses**, that professors confront the experience of teaching the blind contents which they normally transmit to their students in order for them to see that what they teach day after day greatly transcends the simply visual and might rather be described as the analysis and handling of diverse *modalities of relations between elements*.

One of the basic underlying ideas here is that **there is no reason whatsoever for the blind not to be able to work as designers professionally** at least in the domain of the three-dimensional, designing not only for the blind in particular but for any other persons in general. The idea is for designers to learn about the nature of their trade, and for the blind to learn the trade itself. (That the blind might eventually work in three-dimensional design although throughout this paper I have referred nearly exclusively to graphic design does not present a problem. For, on the contrary, the wealth of the acts of translation required from the blind as much as from designers necessarily implies precisely such a differentiation in domains of activity: in any case two- and three-dimensional design have a common basis, which we might now characterise as *relational* rather than merely as *visual*. Thus, while the blind might, in the context of my proposal, train to work professionally in three-dimensional design, those with eyesight might indistinctly train to work in either two- or three-dimensional design. That is, supposing that such distinctions still make sense).

This proposal also implies the widening of perspectives and opportunities in the field of design for members of a marginalised group who undoubtedly have great potential. The evident ethical questions which my proposal supposes must receive adequate attention on another occasion, although I would like to emphasise that the terms of the collaboration proposed here are those of a contract of mutual benefit - designers learning from the blind, the blind from designers - and not those of an ethics of charity; my proposal supposes the recognition of an irreducible difference between those with eyesight and those without, and of the benefit which collaboration with the other might suppose for both.

Clearly this proposal presents no vision to produce 'ideal' designers. Like other fields, design is characterised by an internal variety of elements, languages and sub-fields which are not all visual, not even in the traditional sense of the term. Therefore, even if through collaboration with the blind design students were to arrive at an 'optimal' handling - whatever 'optimal' might mean here - of visual languages, that in itself would guarantee no proper mastery of the global field of design, a field which, in a different sense now, is not essentially visual because

by the commonplace that designers dislike reading and writing. I offered a workshop to first semester post-graduate students whose premise was that *To design is to write, to write is to design*: week after week students wrote/designed a different version of a brief literary passage provided at the outset, each time in accordance with the law of a different genre provided by myself (for example, *Pedantically Correct*, *Nothingness*, *Green*, *Acapulco*, *Nocturne* - a bit in the manner of Raymond Queneau's superb *Exercices de style* [1947]); questions of spelling, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and so on were consistently introduced as matters of internal/external coherence as governed by the particular genre dictated, and never as straight and empty 'rules'; while students' 'skills' in reading and writing in themselves improved relative to their initial levels, in addition questions of composition, structure, tradition, innovation, reception, interpretation, text, context, and authorship - all of which design students usually find rather arid and irrelevant - became notions commonly cited in their verbal commentaries on each others' work, and towards the end of the workshop such notions were already being deftly applied to various issues related strictly to graphic design; this seemed to confirm the adequacy of having - in a 'translational' or metaphoric manner - approached from the start 'linguistic' texts as 'designs' in order to encourage students freely to import their previous knowledge of (graphic) design into the domain of 'literary' production.

Lastly, throughout an undergraduate first semester course, at a stage in which design teachers usually complain of their pupils that 'they are blind', students were asked to produce gradually more complex exercises consistently comprised by an abstract image and a written passage with the only condition that such pairs of elements always operated as translations of each other; students were asked to justify and account for their productions in written form as a matter of course; while at first quite puzzled and irritated at having to reach their own conclusions regarding the general nature of translation and the criteria by which it is possible to judge whether particular translations are acceptable or even good or interesting - they initially tended to produce illustrations or explanations rather than translations proper - students eventually began to adopt notions of a theoretical nature as useful concep-

it is by definition heterogeneous. Even in the mentioned case of composition, while collaboration with **the blind might significantly contribute towards rendering visible what today remains invisible to many students of design**, the fact is that not for being blind one is necessarily more able to compose, so that the only means to enhance such an ability amongst designers and the blind alike is by way of exercises based on the dynamics of translation and set with this objective in mind.

These, then, are some initial thoughts on this matter which I hope might provide a first basis for the empirical validation which this proposal still requires. Perhaps after an early period of experimentation it might be concluded that a school of design is not worth that name if it lacks a permanent division devoted to collaboration with the blind, a division which could figure in teaching activities, teacher-training and, of course, research.¹⁴

This proposal might provide a clear point of contact for the 'theoretical' and the 'practical', domains whose relation is so traditionally problematic that much energy is dissipated in our schools around the question of their relation. The outlined proposal might serve as a third element auxiliary in the disarticulation of the entirely illusory opposition between 'theory' and 'practice', domains which in any case are, in their mutual exteriority, essentially constitutive of each other.

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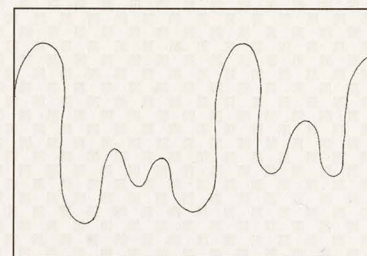
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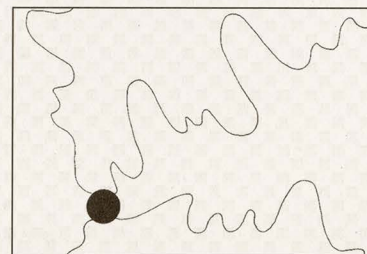
tual 'tools' for the analysis and improvement of work produced; in general, students' 'blindness' to nuance and detail in both visual and verbal domains lifted quite dramatically.

The following illustration reproduces one of the projects completed towards the end of this latter course, when students were asked to produce in a couple of days free narratives in six steps in which linguistic and visual registers fully satisfied the condition of reciprocal translatability. This narrative was completed by Brenda Franco Ortega (English rendering mine):

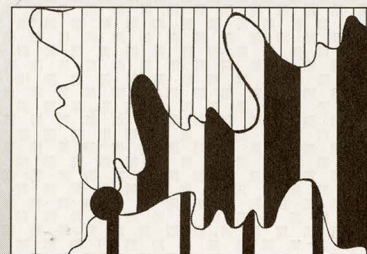
1 Emotions



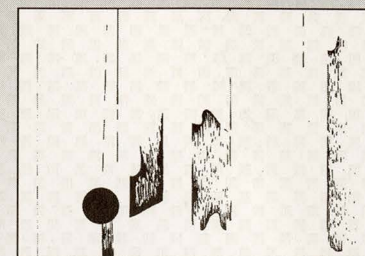
2 As they depart from you, emotions follow a direction forming moments



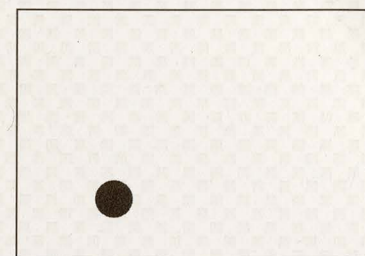
3 Such moments have different intensities



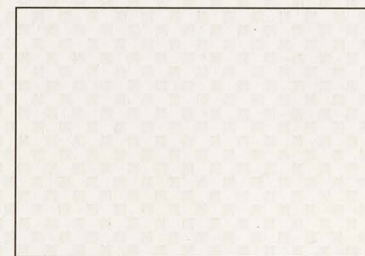
4 Without emotions, the moments will gradually disappear



5 You will remain, you and alone



6 You are nothing



A long commentary is tempting but will have to be elided for lack of space. In general, the success of this narrative - which speaks for itself - is that the words make the images speak consistently in a certain way and vice versa: each of its constituent visual and verbal aspects is only fully comprehensible insofar as it is translatable into the terms of the other register; thus, although the verbal rendering of the visual is by no means the only possible or valid translation of the former (and vice versa) - and although translation must be at work in our understanding of the verbal

and visual elements 'in themselves' previous to their explicit translation in the context of this exercise - such a rendering does however determine our 'reading' of the former by investing, by way of an *a posteriori* repetition, certain meanings into the elements involved - which accurately exemplifies the argument deployed earlier that 'any essence, value or meaning in general ... forever remain ... the possibility of their own translation'.

Interestingly, whilst both the graphic and verbal elements employed are quite straightforward and only just begin to integrate some of the material explored in first semester subjects, the double translatability taking place is fluent enough for viewers generally to be struck by the effect it produces. In fact, the wealth of events taking place all at once in Brenda's work might suggest that it is perhaps reductive to talk only of 'translation'. I would be partially in agreement with such an opinion, except that if here I keep to 'translation' in order to name the general field of possibilities which accommodates the particularity of this project as well as the issue of meaning in general it is in that extended sense in which in Derrida secondary elements in conceptual oppositions (*writing* with respect to *speech*, the *outside* with respect to the *inside*, and so on) can in fact be seen to be more primary than those elements initially considered primary and can be generalised to articulate the entire field concerned in the opposition examined. In other words, to focus the question of meaning from the vantage point of 'translation' is helpful in its disarticulation of the illusion of immediate or inherent meaning only secondarily to be translated, breaking the way open for an exploration into structural repetition and semantic resonance.

Hopefully these examples further clarify

my paper's proposal. My intention is not at all to suggest that there is a single and definite set of theoretical notions on the basis of which it is possible to explain anything and everything (in fact, not even 'translation' as such); I am not saying that 'linguistics' can or should be simply reduced to 'visual semiotics' or vice versa. Yet, if semiotic specificities demand respect, this surely follows from the fact that meanings are but the possibility of their own translation, and therefore that 'linguistics' and 'visual semiotics' necessarily have enough in common for their differences clearly to show up. Translation is not in itself a reductive concept or procedure; quite the contrary, it tends painfully to be aware of singularity and its inevitable loss or alteration in the conveyance of 'original' meaning through 'other' codes or media (for absolute translation is nothing but lack of translation ...).

All three courses described set out from the understanding that signage, general composition and the specificity of images and written passages are only 'perceived' and 'understood' to the extent that they can be translated into different registers; in all three cases procedures of translation were utilised in class in order to render 'original' notions clearer, better defined, more differentiated, more useful, and so on. Collaboration with the blind is by no means the only way for design students to increase their general capacity for abstraction and versatility; however much it remains veiled - for reasons which demand very careful consideration - translation is everywhere and always; yet such collaboration offers an invaluable opportunity to unsettle the visualist prejudice ruling (graphic) design today; as with any other prejudice, there is no telling how far its consequences in fact reach, so that most of the effects of working with the

blind probably remain unimaginable at this point.

Now, in the passage I have allowed myself to quote at the beginning of this note, Steven Skaggs points to the distinction between the 'visual component' and the "'aesthetic" communicative component' of graphic design. Then, in a later note to me he takes this distinction to its most radical expression by suggesting that collaborating with the blind might shed light on the 'true root of design as practice as well as point to what is specific about the visual mode'. This, indeed, is what I am suggesting. And yet to say this is already to be caught in an enigma, for it would appear that both design and its truth and the visual in its utter specificity become entirely invisible at the very moment when they seem to be about to appear in their full particularity. For what is design *as such* (perhaps something like pure form, pure composition, maybe even something like a pure semiotics)? What is the visual (pure matter, pure sensibility, pure 'stuff' of a certain kind)? Judging from the reasoning presented at the beginning of this paper which led to the conclusion that 'the essence, or value, or meaning, of an interior never rests simply in this same interior ... but rather results always from the concurrence of such an interior with its exterior', one might recall Heidegger and Derrida to anticipate that the form of these questions - the *what is* of design and *visuality* - is inadequate insofar as beings - things which *are* - are so entirely *in themselves*, that is, beyond the compositions in which they might or might not 'circumstantially' find themselves at different moments, and therefore note that strictly speaking nothing ever *is*. For, as already explained, if something ever *happens* it does so in accordance with the law of the liminal: just as 'compositions

are nothing beyond the elements whose relations they facilitate and can only be grasped by way of a comparison with other compositions', so design cannot be anything beyond the 'images' or 'objects' it facilitates, and so too with the visual 'as such'. 'Pure composition' cannot ever fully divorce itself from 'pure stuff' - which in fact implies that the purity of pure composition and pure stuff is never properly pure. The only way even to hint at design and *visuality in themselves* is by way of a movement of comparison with other equally irremediably impure instances of 'design' or 'visuality'. Design and *visuality* are but passage to and from their irreducible exteriors. However much it might for a moment appear to do so - again, for reasons which must carefully be looked into along the lines mentioned in note 8 - a proposal such as this does not depend upon a previous determination of the truth of design and the specificity of the visual; on the contrary, it sets out precisely from a critique of the essentialism which such a determination always implies and moves towards 'that' which must remain forever unseen if vision is at all to be able to scan its vistas.

14 Of course such a conclusion might be extended through translation to other domains. Other types of schools concerned with the visual as such or in explicit combination with other media - photography schools, film schools, theatre schools - as well as other centres concerned with music, literature, multimedia etc. might all equally benefit from collaboration with ambassadors from their 'exterior'. It is worth noting that many of the basic operational structures of Anthropology and Psychoanalysis are closely related to the perspective presented here.

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