CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DESIGN OF DEATH

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We are Senior Lecturers in Graphic Design at Falmouth University and our research project, *Moth*, is about design and death. Graphic design is about communication, making sense of complex information, using systems and hierarchy to create meaningful solutions to problems and questions. Established design process underpins and documents that journey, questioning how visual communication designers can contribute to end-of-life matters. We see ourselves as emerging researchers in this field with an expertise in graphic design and an interest in graphic anthropology. Our interest in the ways in which design shapes, and is shaped by cultural values and social practices, has a particular relevance to our understanding of the "design of death". We want to produce work, which can facilitate problem solving in the context of death and death studies and create "tools" in order to help articulate process. The *Moth* Project focuses upon the importance of ideas as triggers of creativity, as devices for narrative and as loci for opportunities of chance and transition in the context of loss and bereavement. In addition, the *Moth* Project explores metaphors embedded within layers of meaning specific to individual "readers" (those who have experienced bereavement or are interested in contemplating mortality) and societal conventions and traditions. To date this dialogue has taken the form of a series of practical workshops and an exhibition, which explore contemporary attitudes towards death and mortality through visual language and typographic experimentation. Until recently, our "readers" were from a fairly narrow demographic (undergraduate design and fine art students), but our recent work has included international partners who are keen to explore these ideas and create new creative partnerships. The *Moth Project* was initiated in 2011 after a conversation with a Norwegian student following the massacre on the island of Utoeya, during which Anders Breivik slaughtered sixty-nine people (the majority of whom were teenagers) after detonating two bombs in central Oslo which killed a further eight victims. This student reflected upon the lack of suitable visual symbols available that could be used to articulate universal sympathy in the context of death

and bereavement. This conversation prompted inspiring questions about visual signifiers of mortality and, in effect, constituted a potential design brief. At the time, most of the social media messages posted in response to the massacre employed the heart symbol. This appropriation of a signifier of love seemed inadequate and highlighted our culture's inability to discuss death as freely as we discuss love. The *Moth Project* suggests that we become visually mute when confronted with grief and mourning and that our understanding of and relationship with death is both intimate and complex. Does an adequate visual symbol for death exist beyond the traditional conventions of the Christian cross and the morbidity of the skull?

Perhaps the uniqueness of a death together with a bereaved individual's specific circumstances prompts the need for a particular or unique symbol. The significance of the poppy for example, serves as a lasting visual memorial to those who died in World War One and later conflicts. Symbols can change over time according to social, cultural and political beliefs, values and trends. Signs employed in the past can become regarded by modern audiences as inappropriate or "primitive" and their context and meaning lost. The *Moth Project* explores the relevance, significance and potential re-launch of traditional symbols as well as the creation of new ones, some of which explore broad communication opportunities, whilst others may be bespoke to a specific "community" or event. In other words, the *Moth Project* initiates a set of tools in order to provide a visual language and typographic legacy, one that acknowledges a fascinating, and diverse heritage of death symbolism, but one that also seeks to prompt dialogue and bring discussions of death and mortality to the surface.

As designers, we endeavour to decode meaning and understand the context in which ideas are received in order to communicate appropriate messages adequately. Audiences are diverse and complex however, and we are aware that symbols can have significantly different meanings to different groups dependent upon ethnicity, religion, gender and/or age— but also as a result of individual personal experiences and relationships.

In his book, *Visible Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts* (2010), David Crow writes:

> All that is necessary for any language to exist is an agreement amongst a group of people that one thing will stand for another. Furthermore, these agreements can be made quite independently of agreements in other communities. (Crow 2010, 18)

Designers understand the notion that materials, artefacts, the means of production and design aesthetic carry meaning and value within the context of communication. However, beyond the function of an object or the legibility of a typeface, emotional content needs to be considered. A typeface, for example, has particular characteristics exclusive to its identity, and certain characteristics can have associations on conscious and unconscious levels which can communicate specific messages.

> I can hear Switzerland when I look at Helvetica. And when the Basque nationalist movement began to establish itself, at the end of the nineteenth century, one of its founders made obsessive transcriptions of the ancient carvings on stones throughout the country to come up with a specifically Basque typography. Partly through association and memory, partly through the emotional triggers and resonances it brings, a typeface expresses an endless range of characteristics, even wider in its scope than handwriting. But while it takes a graphologist to decode individual signatures, typographic design can communicate on a conscious or unconscious level with everybody, whether aware of the vocabulary of type or not. Send an email in capital letters, and you know that you have raised your voice to shout. (Sudjic 2008, 37-8)

Sudjic later mentions the graphic designer, Otl Aicher, who believed that if Germany had not been so keen on the use of capital letters, it might have been less vulnerable to fascism; design can inform as well as influence thinking.

Death is central to our religious and philosophical thinking, the essence of much of our human anxiety and insecurity. Our species has the ability to grasp concepts of the future, and to plan and look forward to events, but at those moments in our life when we must face death, we are generally unprepared and feel uncomfortable about the conversations that we need to have, ill-equipped without religious frameworks to comfort and provide answers. Design cannot provide *solutions* to this, but it can serve to communicate and yield substance and connectedness. The limitary nature of the design brief, inspires us to look at problems and distinguish new opportunities and relationships, beyond the form and function and aesthetic of objects, brands and experiences. It can give us courage to see death as being something we can learn from rather than fear, and recognition of this can simultaneously both liberate and ground us.

In his essay, *That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die*, the French Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne examined our relationship with dying and suggested that if we do not fear death we are able to take risks, and without such constraints to limit us, society and individuals can advance socially, medically and technologically.

> Where death waits for us is uncertain; let us look for him everywhere. The premeditation of death is the premeditation of liberty; he who has learned to die has unlearned to serve. There is nothing evil in life for him who rightly comprehends that the privation of life is no evil: to know, how to die delivers us from all subjection and constraint. (Montaigne 1580)

In the context of death, rites and rituals are essential for society; certain things need to happen following a death, a hierarchy of events, practical, ritualistic and symbolic considerations. This common purpose unites the society and provides solidarity to a group in times of grief and mourning. This process cannot really "help" the dead but can be beneficial to the living. For our ancestors in the Middle Ages there was a sense of resignation to death; it was visible and ritualized by society and church, with an unquestioning acceptance that death would lead to an eternal life. Part of the Christian narrative focuses upon death and suffering, with a huge array of spectacularly gruesome deaths of martyrs, burning, wheels, crucifixion, beheading, and mutilation. Our daily death, however, is "other" and distant; murder, war, collateral damage, genocide and natural disasters are consigned to newsfeeds through screens or in print. Death fills our TV entertainment schedules in works of fiction. Death is still the greatest mystery and a source of great narrative content.

Nowadays, we can go through life without ever seeing a dead body. Death has become medicalised and professionalized, the domestic rituals have been lost and the dead and dying are taken to hospitals, where doctors, whose job it is to preserve life, care for the dying. We view death as unnatural, a pollutant and without a religious context, we have no guidance as to how to deal with it or contemplate the possibility of an afterlife. We are obsessed with delaying ageing and avoiding discussions about our mortality. We are often too late to prepare for a good death.

Moth is interested in the formal visual graphic conventions of death (such as the Victorian legacy) as well as the ways in which we might challenge such conventions in order to understand more contemporary attitudes to death and mourning. We are interested in the aesthetics of death, the educational implications and the potential to collaborate with new partners in the visual arts, science and humanities.

In a remarkable project at Raymond Poincaré Hospital in Garches, France, doctors commissioned designers and musicians to create an extraordinary morgue, a space in which the bereaved could see their loved ones for the last time in a considered environment of calm reflection. Musicians David Lang and the British artist Scanner, created two musical soundscapes whilst the physical space was designed by the Italian artist, Ettore Spalletti. Lang's composition, *DEPART* comprised of a meditation

on death. This was deliberately written so that it could not be performed live, with a series of unending vocal parts performed without spaces for breath.

With *Moth*, we hoped to discover, explore, question and reveal responses to death through the design process and by creating a series of briefs and workshops, which explored aspects of visual language and typographic opportunities associated with death; mortality, legacy, bereavement and vanitas. This body of work has begun to distil and direct the aspirations of *Moth*, as well as generate more questions and opportunities for the role that graphic design can play in the "Design of Death".

Moth Workshop 1: The Cabinet of Curiosity

In this first project we built upon the legacy of "The Cabinet" as a portal, where objects were placed out of context and served as devices for creating narrative. The popularity of the "Cabinet of Curiosity" (the Wunderkammer—or Cabinet of Wonders) reached its height in the seventeenth century. They were usually personal collections, of natural and man-made objects, which inspired wonder and a sense of curiosity, their system of organisation and classification being idiosyncratic and specific to the individual. These collectors were often gentlemen of means, who wanted to discover, possess and define these objects in order to validate their own intellectual authority and worldliness as well as register their personal interests in the scientific, magical, philosophical and religious potential that the objects possessed.

> The collector was never far from the realm of necromancy, engaged as he was in bringing the dead back to life or consigning living things to death. The funeral connotations of so many of the items central to the cult of curiosities—from mummified limbs to coral branches, from the mythical congealed blood of the Medusa to stuffed animals, from skulls to a charnel house of other bones—were ultimately not only the most superficial expression of this theme, but also the most morbidly fascinating. This dialectic between life and death, this infatuation with the aesthetic transfiguration wrought by death, recurs at an even deeper level, informing the very organisation of the collection. It is central indeed to the thesis underlying the Cabinet of Curiosities: for the aim of any collection is to halt the passage of time, to freeze the ineluctable progress of life or history, and to replace it with the fragmented, controllable, circular time frame established by a finite series of objects that can be collected in full. (Mauries 2002, 119)

Graphic designers are notorious collectors, archiving material ready to use when appropriate; to some folk, it can look like clutter. We think of it as collections of visual flotsam that will come in handy one day, equivalent to tins of screws, buttons and off cuts in the shed. Graphic designers are liberated by the non-permanence of their work, the transient nature of a magazine, poster, and package—yet they have, on the whole, an inability to actually throw anything away. Squirreled ephemera, meticulously alphabetized.

The initial brief of the *Moth* project prompted our graphic students to respond not in visual terms, but with a written piece of work. Designers are visual thinkers but their work requires them to handle large quantities of text as well as edit, write briefs and presentations. They need to be as competent, creative and confident with the written word as they are with the visual word.

> Graphic Designers are the ultimate self-improvers. Each new job and client demands empathy and introduces one to new territories with potential for learning. Words are no more frightening than pictures if one understands the language, and it is the language of words that graphic designers are now called upon to learn. (Roberts 2000, 81)

The cabinet of curiosity also provides and reflects other essential educational skills to design students; curiosity, humour, breadth of interests, ambition, the love of language and craft, reading and writing, systems, arrangement and hierarchy, communication, narrative, responsibility and relevance. Our physical cabinet hosted a series of nine objects over nine weeks and written responses were submitted digitally, many anonymously. The theme of death was not revealed until the project's conclusion at the final workshop. Some students decoded the signs and this in turn began to influence their writing. Unsurprisingly, some students were initially uncomfortable with talking about death, most having had no direct personal experience with dealing with loss or bereavement.

Fig. 14-1 Cabinet of Curiosity: Metaphors of Death

1. Memory & Recollection—Extinguished Birthday Candles
2. A Good Death—A Poison Bottle and a Cigarette
3. The Soul, Shells
4. Regret, a Fetus
5. The Afterlife, Chinese Paper Shoes & Watch
6. Collective Grief, the Poppy
7. Amulet, a Motorist's Prayer
8. Resurrection & Rebirth, a Pomegranate
9. Ghosts, child "Glow-in-the-Dark" Ghost

At this workshop participants were invited to bring objects, which held a personal legacy, having been passed onto them from a loved one. None of the objects chosen had monetary value, but each had a new meaning and subsequent narrative as a result of the relationship. The objects were no longer simply bottle openers, quilts or shoes, they represented people and lives loved and lost. This was not simply about collecting but recognising objects, as portals for the past, legacies for the future and triggers for creative thinking and problem solving.

Moth Workshop 2: Sacred Type

Starting with a typographical field trip to Falmouth cemetery along with examples from our own archive of collected photographic reference, we asked students to embrace the eclectic nature of lettering found on monumental headstones and capture the sentiment of their irregular and vernacular charm. In response, they highlighted the use of; large and small caps with lower-case styles, the random use of italics, arrangement and hierarchy of information, ligatures, incorrect or archaic spelling of words, fleurons used within individual letterforms, the unusual mix of fonts, irregular word and letter spacing and type subjected to wear and damage. Then, using examples of common memorial tributes, we constructed typographic pieces:

Her end was peace…in loving memory of...beloved wife of...also of his wife…beloved and only son…who fell asleep…gone but not forgotten…who departed this life…in affectionate remembrance of…peace perfect peace…the spot where she lay.

Fig. 14-2 Monumental Stone   Fig. 14-3 Undead Type
          Cornwall   Workshop

Fig. 14-4 Undead Type Workshop

As Figure 14-2 suggests, few gravestones exemplify refined letterforms or a sense of an overall design proposal, yet the personal judgment and technical/practical skill of the mason show intuitive genius at work. This awkward hierarchy and idiosyncratic visual aesthetic offers charm and quirks and considerable potential to positively impact on our modern graphic sensibilities and typographical richness. We also looked at the work of Robert Brownjohn and Ed Fella, designers of the 1960s who utilized the visual language of the street as new typographic opportunities and embraced experimental design thinking. In his photo-essay, "Street Level", (published in *Typographica* magazine, 1961), Brownjohn photographically documented the type in the city. This reference celebrated the misspelt, the worn and eroded, poorly spaced and misaligned type, letterforms distorted by weather, reflection and neglect. Earlier, in 1950s France, the artist and documentarist Jacques Villeglé, used the phrase "affiches lacérées" (torn posters) to describe his work, essentially posters torn down from the walls of Paris. He was fascinated by the process of plenty being reduced to the fragmentary transience of decay, by random forces using disparate materials and techniques to "create" works. The same vernacular and visual sentiment can also be said of some of the monumental stones in Falmouth cemetery. Here too, are stylistic variations of ligatures, letterforms, abbreviations, errors and alignment. There are many beautifully carved letterforms, which demonstrate skillful flourishes of the carver's joy of the nature of the material. Some stones have cut or punched metal characters and this lettering is of equal interest and diversity. The gravestones, "read" beyond typographic and aesthetic frameworks, providing us with amorphous narratives which help us to appreciate our present, the cemetery and its stones being artistic and symbolic reminders of the inevitability of death.

Moth Workshop 3: Undead Type

As a follow-up to "Sacred Type", the "Undead Type" workshop considered lettering in terms of typographic anthropology; the creation of a typeface based on individual monumental characters to reflect and respond to contemporary attitudes towards death. It introduced historical context and concepts of death in order to generate discussions and share experiences focusing on ideas and beliefs surrounding what happens at the end of life; the moment at which we die. In terms of the hierarchical design process, this brief prioritized the importance of the emotional response as a source for the rationale of design, over that of concerns about aesthetics, form, functional or legibility.

We initiated conversations about attitudes towards ageing and significant moments within life when we effectively terminate/cease to practise or perform specific functions or behaviours. These moments of loss or change or simply transition, are an inevitable part of life and death.

> Death is not just happening later and taking longer, it is also fragmenting. There are different types of death occurring in the same person at different rates and to different extents in different people. There is death at different levels: molecular death, cell death and organ death, death of the individual, death of the culture and death of the species. There are multiple deaths in different parts of our body and mind: death of our physical abilities and appearance, death of our various mental capacities. There is reproductive death, social death and psychological death. There is death of desire, there is death of memory, and there is death of the will to live. All these things fade away at different ages, at different rates and to different extents. Death is no longer a unified event. It is shattered into multiple uncoordinated processes. (Brown 2002, 8)

The typographic responses included the typeface *Blossom*, which focused on the beautiful fragmentary moments when life becomes crystal clear and beauty is magnified in the face of death. The designers were inspired by the Channel 4 broadcast of the last interview with Dennis Potter by Melvyn Bragg, on March 15, 1994. Potter died on the 7th of June 1994 (just eleven weeks later).

> Below my window…the blossom is out in full now. It's a plum tree, it looks like apple blossom, but it's white, and looking at it, instead of saying, "oh, that's nice blossom", looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there could ever be…the fact is that you see the present tense, boy do you see it! And boy, can you celebrate it. (Potter 1994, 4-5)

Here, Potter describes the exquisite newness of everything as though seeing it for the first or last time. *Blossom* focuses on fragmented typographic detailing in which the aesthetic essence of the character can be identified and read with minimal elements, and with particular attention to the terminals of characters.

During the workshop, one group discussed the journey of life and the inevitability and abruptness of death. With florid strokes each character had movement and elegance starting at the point of construction and then ending with a solid black slab to define the finiteness of existence, the solid and immovable end, abrupt and unforgiving. The typeface *Limbo* asked the awkward questions that surround death and life, *what do you*

believe in, ascension into heaven, or plunging into damnation? The descenders, ascenders and shifting x-height carry the message of an awkward conversation, illustrating the direction of our journey into the next life, when death comes to call. The counters and titles give the sense of the earth and a life cycle, intentionally colourless and left blank referencing how we choose to fill our lives before we die. This was a fluid type, changing according to individual choices and beliefs.
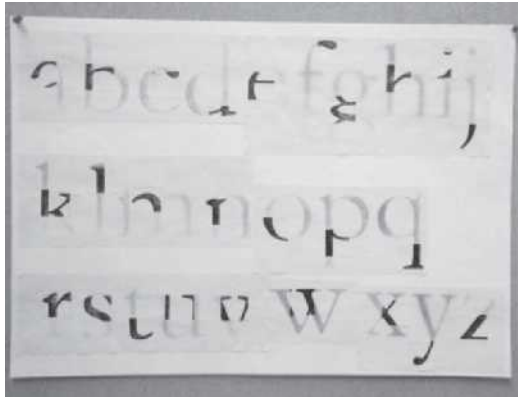

Fig. 14-5 Undead Type Workshop. Work in Progress, *Blossom Type*

Fig. 14-6 Undead Type Workshop

Moth Workshop 4: Memento Mori

"Memento Mori", a collaborative project with Lucy Willow, artist and fine art lecturer (Falmouth University) and twenty fine art and graphic design students, questioned the ideology of "Deathists" vs. "Immortalists". How might we contemplate our own future as being either finite or immortal: an endless hope or a hopeless end? For some, we either simply cease to be, for others we can live forever, through a spiritual, genetic or cultural legacy. We looked initially at the conventions of the *Vanitas* painting and its symbolic reminders that we will die: Man's mortality (depicted by the human skull and bones), symbols of knowledge, arts and sciences (books, maps, and musical instruments), wealth and power (purses, jewellery, gold objects, swords, shells (rare collectors' items)), earthly pleasures of the senses (goblets, pipes, playing cards), symbols of transience (chronometers, burning candles, smoke, soap bubbles, fruit, flowers and butterflies), peeled lemon and seafood, which is attractive to look at but like life can be bitter to taste; and symbols of resurrection and eternal life (ears of corn or sprigs of ivy).

Both Darwin and Freud believed that there were three certainties for man; that he was an animal, that he either learnt to adapt to his environment or else perished, and that death was a conclusive end. For these thinkers, nature, whilst bountiful and fertile was nevertheless transient. Darwinism suggested that it was impossible to reconcile the notion that humans had any special exception from mortality as species are not fixed or everlasting. Darwin was concerned that the growing interest in spiritualism in the mid-1800s would delay thinking concerned with scientific materialism. Henry Sedgwick, a founder of psychical research, spent much of his life looking for evidence, conclusive scientific proof of human immortality: without it, he believed, there was no need to live a moral life and mortal man and his society would therefore be reduced to chaos. During the same period, the so-called "God Builders" of the Bolshevik Russian intelligentsia, believed that science would be able to give them the answers to resurrect and cheat death. With this goal in mind, under the leadership of Leonid Krasin, *The Immortalization Commission* set about to preserve the remains of Lenin. This orthodox belief focused upon the preserved bodies of saints as incorruptible. From this view, Lenin was no less than a saint waiting for such time when he could be resurrected. The constructivist architect, Alexey Viktorovich Shchusev, was commissioned to design a magnificent mausoleum—he used cubed forms in the design, in order to construct a fourth dimension—where death could not exist.

Death and suffering are some of the central themes of Christianity, suggesting that we can gain immortality through embracing death. Christian discourse suggests that although man became sinful and mortal upon his fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, Jesus provides the possibility of regaining immortality in a spiritual form. Immortality also exists via our genetic survival and our investment in cultural symbols or practices, "memes", to be passed on. These ideas mutate and self-replicate much like our genes to ensure a lasting if not diluted legacy.

The work from the *Memento Mori* project was exhibited at The Falmouth Art Gallery in 2013 and it embraced themes such as; life expectancy and decline; death within life, legacy, death and social media platforms, the abject, of liminality, disintegration, renewal and censorship. In the exhibit, *Tools to Face Grief* (Fig. 14-7), a cabinet contained artefacts and objects which were essentially rejects and fragments. The strangeness and ephemerality of many of these objects, however, paradoxically ensured their reality and value offering living proof that they were once part of something whole, meaningful and real. The work suggested our desire (albeit irrational) to look for personal messages from and to our bereaved loved ones (for example, by cloud watching, star gazing, amulets and prayers) or signs of their comfort in the afterlife.

As demonstrated by these examples, these workshops opened up a range of potential directions for *Moth* and confirmed our belief in the role that graphic design can play in our understanding and relationship with death. The *Moth Projects* create designs that are both mindful and respectful of conventions but which aspire to create contemporary relevant and meaningful understandings of death. As graphic design is a discipline that constantly evolves in order to accommodate changes in culture, society and technology, it is well placed to embrace difficult questions about mortality, aid understanding and provide relevant visual signifiers in the context of death.
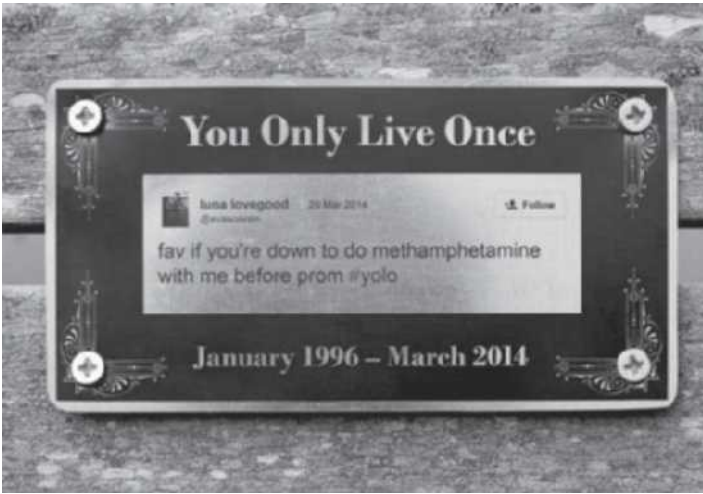
Fig. 14-7 *Tools to Face Grief*

Fig. 14-8 The Light of One Lifetime Extinguished in a Single Breath

Fig. 14-9 #Yolo' (You Only Live Once)

Fig. 14-10 Encompassed Death Complimenting Life

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