

Kapa magazine, 1990 – 1993: A survey on postmodern graphic design and appropriation

abstract

The essay aims to explore the graphic references of postmodern Portuguese magazine *Kapa*, published from 1990 to 1993. Designed by João Botelho and Luís Miguel Castro, the magazine was strongly influenced by the art direction of Alexey Brodovitch in *Harper's Bazaar* (1934-1958), who played an important role in introducing the European Modernist aesthetics in American editorial background. The historical context of *Kapa* is exposed as well its editorial and graphic features. The “retro” expression of the magazine draws the importance of relating graphic references from Russian Constructivism and European Modernism to the American mainstream magazines of the 30s to 50s. The affinity between visual language and ideology is an important clue to understand the use of past references in postmodern design. This appropriation and the reasons beyond it are the main questions of this essay.

keywords

graphic design, postmodernism, appropriation, Ideology

Introduction

This paper is part of a doctoral research about the Portuguese magazine *Kapa*, published from 1990 to 1993 as its contribution to postmodern graphic design. Going beyond the Portuguese context, this survey intends to place *Kapa* in the wider background of graphic design history.

Kapa’s graphic style is mostly linked to the “retro” expression of postmodern graphic design, being strongly influenced by Alexey Brodovitch's art direction of *Harper's Bazaar* (1934-1958). Brodovitch was educated as a designer within the Modernist and Constructivist movements in Europe, moving later to USA, as many other artists, designers and architects between World Wars.

The question this paper intends to explore is the use of such strong past references in a 90s magazine. It is proposed to take a chronological leap backwards in design history, from Postmodern design appropriation of historical legacies to the expression of Modernist graphic design in Europe and Russia.

During the second half of the 80s Portugal was living an economical growth, due to its integration in European Community in 1986, and there was an increasing private investment in new mass media communications. Thus, a lot of magazines and newspapers were published, convoking plenty of editorial agents to a free public discourse. After 48 years of a conservative dictatorship lead by António Salazar, which ended with the 1974 Revolution, left wing parties and compounds controlled most of the editorial press, using

it as a doctrinal medium to spread Socialist ideas. However, their graphic production was inconsistent, fragile and undefined in terms of graphic references.

Kapa magazine was a direct descendant of the weekly newspaper *O Independente*, published in 1988. In his first editorial the newspaper director Miguel Esteves Cardoso quoted Arthur Miller: "A good newspaper is a nation talking to itself" and *O Independente* wants to take part of this conversation" (Cardoso 1988: 2). The newspaper was mainly attached to a conservative ideology, proclaiming itself as liberal. Its main concern was a patriotic argument: the integrity of Portuguese values and culture against any kind of power abuse, in opposition to the ruling government, a center left wing party headed by Cavaco Silva. The newspaper was responsible for reporting political scandals, which led to Miguel Esteves Cardoso resignation in 1990.

The newspaper was designed by Jorge Colombo. Inspired by the French newspaper *La Libération*, the result was an elegant black and white layout, only coloured with blue on the first page, displaying well-designed typography, well-proportioned grid and a sober composition. The art direction was mostly supported by photography, with the collaboration of a new generation of photographers.

Figure 1.
Luís Miguel Castro.
Cover of *Kapa*
nº 1 (1990)



In October 1990 Miguel Esteves Cardoso founded *Kapa* magazine with some collaborators from *O Independente*. The magazine was an editorial extension of the newspaper cultural supplement: *VIDAS*, with small articles on mundane issues, interviews, chronicles, critical reviews on books, music, fine arts, fashion, cultural agenda and photography essays. *Kapa* was still under a conservative ideology, determined to propose a new national identity of Portugal in a European context. However, it was detached from the "old" conservative agents and took part of a new liberal expression: urban, provocative, libertarian, with strong sense of style.

Kapa graphic project belongs to João Botelho (filmmaker) and Luís Miguel Castro. It was printed in 4 colours offset in glossy paper, glue binding. It was a sophisticated visual object among his pairs; it used classical typography such as Bodoni and modern typography like Futura (types that were not so usual to find in printing industry by that time). It was produced through photomechanical process, composed with scissors, tape and glue, being the art direction supported by elegant photographic productions and illustrations from emerging young artists.

According to Luís Miguel Castro, the strongest graphic reference in *Kapa* layout was Alexey Brodovitch's *Harper's Bazaar* (1934-1958). Brodovitch legacy to *Kapa* spreads is clear: the use of white space as an important composition element, the bleeding photos, the cinematic display of the images, the use of classical and modern typography, the elegance of a graphic composition where text and image interact.



Figure 2.

On the left column: spreads of *Harper's Bazaar*; on the right column: spreads of *Kapa* magazine.

The period between wars was crucial for the dissemination of Modern graphic design by industry, press and advertising. Such association of modern vocabulary to consumption society promoted its consolidation in public imagination, allowing the acknowledgement of Modernism as an institutionalized movement, thus a graphic authority in design history.

1. Post Modernism and historical references

By the end of the 50s and the early 60s, a different approach towards the modern society arose: objects emerged in an increasing consumer society; means of production and distribution of goods were gradually more efficient; and worldwide; politics was being replaced by economics; communication and technology were developing as fast as ever.

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombing in 1945 the rationality of the Modern project was under critical scrutiny. Set up as a moment of crisis, some thinkers assume postmodernism as a self-conscious moment of Modernism itself. Closely engaged with late capitalism and neo-liberal policies, postmodernism was strongly attached to political affiliations. Hal Foster distinguishes two kinds of postmodernism: one of reaction and another of resistance. Both strands shared the critique to the Modernism project as a reduction to style (e.g. the "formalism" of International Style). The postmodernism of reaction was under the influence of a neo-conservative ideology and proposed a return to traditional values (in art, family, religion) in order to keep the political and economical *status quo*. In opposition, the postmodernism of resistance was against the cosmetic appeal of reactionary postmodernism and was "concerned with a critical deconstruction

“The Constructivists rejected the idea of a unique work of art as belonging the old bourgeois society. Armed with the forms of the new abstract painting, they set out to demolish the division between art and labour” (Hollis 2001: 46).

As the perfect combination between art and technology, graphic design became a medium of the revolutionary program. By borrowing plastic language from avant-garde movements like Futurism, Dada, Suprematism, graphic design incorporated and spread the principles of a new industrial society, concerned with the labour and social conditions of the working class and against the bourgeois establishment:

“Painters, Architects, Sculptors, you whom the bourgeoisie pays with high rewards for your work – out of vanity, snobbery, and boredom – Hear! To this money there clings the sweat and blood and nervous energy of thousands of poor hounded human beings – Hear! It is an unclean profit... we must be true socialists — we must kindle the highest socialist virtue: the brotherhood of man” (Wolfe 1981: 12).

This “Novembergruppe” manifest (an expressionist German group which included Moholy-Magy who later taught in Bauhaus) defends the social mission that graphic design should express through geometric abstraction, formal reduction, dynamic asymmetry, high contrast black and white, boldly structured typographic arrangements, collage and photomontage as image composition.

The rise of fascist regimes in Europe (Germany, Italy, Spain) forced most of these artists and architects to migrate to USA, which had become a great world nation, wealthy and economically stronger than Europe. There was no royalty, or noblesse or even bourgeoisie. “Starting from zero”, Bauhaus most famous principle on changing society seemed to have found place to blossom. The economic growth and technologic development lead this new nation into a consumption society and modernist designers and architects had to deal with a new paradigm: to produce according capitalism and market logics. Designers were asked to work in publicity, advertising, fashion, mainstream magazines and newspapers in order to make consumption glamorous and “to shape the notion of contemporary life of abundance in the popular imagination” (Drucker and McVarish 2009: 215). The Modernist graphic legacy was absorbed by consumption industry, letting its political and ideological features blur into stylish and aesthetic goals.

3. “Astonish me!”

Alexey Brodovitch played an important role in introducing many ideas and aesthetics of European Modernism in USA, as both art director and teacher. Born in Russia in 1898 in the middle of an aristocratic and wealthy family, politically sympathetic with czarist Russia, Brodovitch fought against the Bolsheviks and served with the White Army. Moving later to Paris, he started working in an advertising agency. In the beginning of the 30s he moved to America to teach in Philadelphia College. The *Harpers Bazaar* editor Carmel Snow asked him to modernize the publication in 1934. This collaboration lasted 24 years. Brodovitch had the ability to apply the principles of modern graphic design to the magazine's layout. He borrowed El Lissitzky notion of “flow”, where graphic layout was faced as a cinematic display, an analogy between the magazine spreads and film sequence in order to create a new visual experience. The white space was an important layout element, the photomontage and juxtaposition of photos were used to make images and text communicate to each other, adding visual meaning to editorial contents. The photos

were cropped until the page bleed, giving the idea that the “story” continued beyond the layout, in contrast with the shy effect of the frame.

Conclusion

Brodovitch's work in *Harper's Bazaar* is an example of how avant-garde visual legacy was appropriated by a consumerism industry in order to promote consumption as an ideal, letting the original socialist values vanish into style and goods.

The “retro” expression in postmodern design was a systematic evidence of appropriation of design history. As John Savage outlined in “The Age of Plunder” (*The Face* magazine in 1983), the excessive use of past references in Pop culture was an “explicit device for the reinforcement and success of the New Right” (Savage 1983: 45). Savage alerts the appropriation of past is attached to an ideological strategy to support neoliberal politics:

“Savage took the view that this visual plunder was a symptom – one of many – of a Thatcherite political culture in which everything is turned into a disposable consumer commodity” (Poynor 2003: 77).

Fully aware of the importance of style and looks and embedded in a nostalgic tendency towards the past (the Portuguese values and identity), *Kapa* magazine needed to convoke elegant and glamorous graphics to spread the fantasy. Reluctant about the Portuguese integration in UE, the magazine was determined to construct an alternate cultural identity towards the economic European domain. The use of modernism graphic language (borrowed by Brodovitch), made this construction more seductive to the public, allowing the magazine to be distinguished among its pairs. *Kapa* magazine was the editorial arm of an ideological opposition, led by a new right that was clever, humorous, fashionable and critical on how capital flow tended to shape global politics. Supported by “classical modernism” *Kapa* was nearly committed to the postmodernism of reaction, according to Hal Foster. Nevertheless it is a tacit example of how graphic design quotes its own history as a commodity, completely detached from its original background.

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