

Per Mollerup, *Marks of Excellence: the History and Taxonomy of Trademarks*. Phaidon, London, 1997. 240 pages.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

Designing a logo is a kind of rite of passage for a graphic designer. Almost every designer has done at least one and some have made this a specialty. In the 1950s a few designers like Paul Rand invented a new practice of 'corporate identity' which not only entailed designing a corporate logo but also developing the rules for its many applications from stationery to neon signs. Design firms like Lippincott & Margulies specialized in corporate identity and have been responsible for more corporate makeovers than most of us can imagine.

Although the design of logos, trademarks, and corporate identity programs is now an integral part of design practice, the literature on this practice is rather sparse and theories about it almost non-existent. There is no shortage of visual compendia of marks, logos, and corporate identity programs which are no doubt used by many designers simply as visual resources. And there have been occasional published statements by designers, about what a logo is and what constitutes a good one. In the literature of personal statements about logo design, Paul Rand's comments, found in various essays and in the briefing books he presented to clients, are particularly insightful. But his remarks and historically those of his colleagues have been more intuitive than analytic and have not been motivated by the ambition to create a theory of logo, trademark, or corporate identity design.

Per Mollerup in his new book *Marks of Excellence* has a different project in mind. Intending to raise the awareness of both clients and designers as to what constitutes a distinctive logo or identity program, he first locates the design of logos within a process of communication and then provides examples of the different functions that a logo performs. He also presents a classification of different logo motifs ranging from body parts such as eyes and hearts to birds, animals, waves, and lightning. Mollerup is an exhaustive researcher who not only produces many visual examples of logos and trademarks from all over the world but also offers brief historical accounts of how they were designed and in almost all cases the names of their designers or the design firms that created them.

The author, who is from Denmark, has had a varied career as a graphic designer, publisher, editor, author, and television producer. He has written extensively on the themes of corporate design, design quality, and design and everyday life. As a designer, he founded Designlab, a consultancy that has produced, among other things, logos and identity programs for a number of established companies. The book, based on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Lund in Sweden, is a rare example of research by a practicing designer and as such it truly attempts to close the gap between theory and practice. It is, in fact, theory that grew

out of the author's own practice. As Mollerup states at the beginning of the book, he wants to understand how trademarks produce meaning. To pursue this question, he characterizes the trademark, delineates its functions, and then explains the role of trademarks within the process of social communication conducted by companies. His explanations are reinforced by a rich array of visual material and the brilliant layout of Alan Fletcher.

Mollerup organizes his information and arguments schematically. First he divides the material into six sections: history, function, communication, taxonomy, motifs, and development. Then he further divides each section into subsections with brief texts and heavily annotated visual examples. The amount of text is modest compared to the large number of images, annotations, and diagrams that the author uses to organize his concepts. As a result, I experienced the book more as an encyclopedia—though one that has a thematic structure—rather than a narrative text.

The basis of Mollerup's theory is that trademarks are identified with messages that are sent and received. Mollerup adapts his model of social communication (sender—message—receiver) from Shannon and Weaver's seminal book of 1945, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. He embellishes this translation of Shannon and Weaver to the social sphere with the six linguistic functions of Roman Jakobson. To characterize the marks themselves he draws on the semiotic theory of Charles Morris and Charles Sanders Peirce. It is to Mollerup's credit that he has been able to fit so much source material into his schematic construct. He thus incorporates a vast amount of visual material, primarily examples of logos and marks from around the world, into a schema where they function as examples of his theory.

I find little to quarrel with in the way Mollerup envisions corporate communications. He accounts both for the function of the mark as information about a company and as a rhetorical instrument to persuade an audience that the company or its products possesses particular desirable qualities. What I find problematic about his schematic presentation is that it appears to neat. He attempts to translate a great deal of difficult information into diagrams and short descriptive statements that are linked to visual examples. His taxonomies of semiotic categories and classes of trademarks, presented in elaborate diagrams, have far too much information to relate to his visual examples. In the course of presenting images of different types of marks, he adds schematic diagrams of how each category of mark functions semiotically. The reader has to relate images to these diagrams and then tie both back to the larger taxonomic charts. It is a visual way of organizing information, one that applies the basic tenets of information graphics, but in fact there is too much information in too diagrammatic a form.

Mollerup's preoccupation with taxonomy is evident as well in his first section on history and in a section on motifs. In the history section he focuses on categories of marks from earlier

times - heraldry, monograms, livestock branding, ceramic marks and the like. For each category he provides numerous fascinating examples. But he doesn't locate these categories on a precise historical continuum and he also leaves out various categories from later periods such as the narrative pictorial marks of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which are much more difficult to fit into a neat schema.

I have problems as well with his section of motifs in which he presents separate pages of marks that embody comparable images. I found little to be learned by viewing a group of marks for various purposes that all consist of buildings, crosses, birds, or even "Kandinsky-inspired motifs." Such categorization, based on distinctly untheoretical principles, is at odds with the overall project of the book.

Mollerup intends his theoretical explanations to result in better designed marks and identity programs. In essence, he is showing us the best examples he can find and then explaining why they are of high quality. To achieve this end, he avoids the sometimes messy social situations in which marks function. It would appear from Mollerup's text and visual presentation that trademarks and logos are anchored in relatively distinct and stable communication situations, which I do not believe to be the case. The author does not go far enough, for example, in accounting for a series of almost identical hexagonal marks, all representing different banks. Nor does he explore issues of parody or satirical inversion that many marks are subjected to.

Marks of Excellence is full of useful information and there is much to appreciate in its beautiful design. Mollerup's theory is more than adequate to expand a designer's awareness of what a mark is and how it functions as an instrument of corporate communication. But it doesn't invite an exploration of the many and complex ways that marks function as signs of institutional and social identity. Such issues are not only of interest to designers and corporate executives but also to researchers in the humanities and social sciences. To address them will require a broader social and theoretical approach than Mollerup has given us in this book.

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