The Importance of Cultural Exposure for Designers

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Fig 1   Fig 2

Introduction

As South Africans, we have often taken a somewhat perverse pride in how complex our society is. It is with a macabre delight that we talk about our population of approximately 43 million people being made up of about 8 different cultural groups speaking 11 official languages and practicing many different religions. We have 1st and 3rd world infrastructures, incredibly diverse literacy levels and ethnic affiliations and we are in the process of re-inventing ourselves as a nation and a new democracy. How complex, how colourful, how diverse we pride ourselves in being. What this paper is choosing to address is how inadequately this South African reality is engaged with within our design education curricula, to raise debate around why our courses are so 'international' and to offer suggestions as to why and how we need to address notions of multiculturalism in our course content.

The importance of the recipient in the Design process.

The verb 'to design' is a contentious one, debated endlessly as to what it entails. Is designing primarily about aesthetics, function, sustainability, innovation or creativity? Every design discipline has a different take on design's significance and what is deemed necessary to equip student designers with to enable them to function effectively within their chosen field. One of the Oxford dictionary definitions of design is 'to plan, to intend for a specific purpose.' It could be contended that design is about using a creative process to solve a problem so that it effectively caters for an audience's needs or desires. It is the 'specific purpose' in the dictionary definition and the 'audiences needs and desires' in the second interpretation that will be the focus here. It seems that our courses tend to be very driven towards equipping students to deal with creativity and the process of designing; we expend much time and energy on familiarizing them with problem solving techniques, production methods and honing technological and digital skills, yet little is done in terms of dealing with the audience or consumer of the design within the South African context. As it is here where the design has to function, these people whom the designs need to serve, this imbalance of emphasis is something that surely needs to be addressed.

Existing theory models.

As important as certain skills are to designers, so is an ability to be aware of how design sits within a critical framework. To this end courses include subjects such as Design History; here we tend to place the emphasis on dominantly Eurocentric content, often with a bias towards the arts. Whilst this fact can be put down to the lack of texts available that cover design from an African context and that Europe and America have had a huge impact on the development of design, the signals that we are inadvertently sending are that anything of importance from a theoretical context is from another continent. This could be seen to smack somewhat of colonialism where only foreign cultures were perceived to be of any

worth. Other theoretical content that may be covered in selected courses involve theories of communication, marketing and semiotics- also valid foundations for design (particularly communication design.) Whilst the examples that may be cited during these lectures may be local, the texts from which we predominantly teach are once again from Europe and America. Undeniably, these theoretical subjects can contribute towards more holistic thinkers and help to create designers who are more critically aware and the relevance of these courses is not under dispute, the point that I am trying to make is that nowhere in this scenario is the particularly South African context being addressed.

Communication theory often forms part of design courses as an essential attribute of any designer is that they are also good communicators. Basic communication theory contends that effective communication takes place if you not only understand what you want to say and how you want to say it, but who you want to address. Present theoretical input into our design courses seems to address the former two criteria, but I would like to contend that little is being done to address the latter.

The form of cultural exposure needed.

As the intention of this paper is to point out the importance of cultural exposure, some clarity may be necessary as to what the interpretation of the word 'culture' is here. Often 'culture' is addressed in course content where emphasis is placed on debates around cultural studies, discussions on a modernist or post-modernist rejection of or embracing of indigenous cultures, anthropology and social theory. Culture is often discussed as a static entity, something attached to history or alternatively a representational veneer attached to communications which are criticized for being inappropriate and token. The multiculturalism that appears relevant for us to address are the everyday habits and practices that people in South Africa live daily, we need to address the incredibly diverse needs of the South African community many of whom live a 'foreign' or alien culture to our own.

Where these conclusions come from.

For the purposes of research, questionnaires were sent out to a number of design educational institutions and design educators were interviewed. The focus tended to be predominantly within the visual design genre and also mainly offering degree courses as that is of particular personal interest. The reality of the situation within our design education institutions seems to be that the student body is still very predominantly white. Research conducted amongst a number of design schools in South Africa reflect a ratio of 83% white to 17% non white within the student cohort (this figure includes black, Asian and Coloured students.) Whilst disciplines such as Fashion Design show a stronger non white component, those such as graphic design show very low non white numbers. For years the cry has been that we need to attract more students from our diverse cultures into the design professions and most colleges have implemented concerted drives to show the attraction and importance of design as a career in an attempt to attract students of a high caliber into the field. These requests have come directly from industries whose need for black designers to fill BEE requirements are critical and because black designers in the workplace could facilitate a better level of communication and understanding between the industry and consumers due to them being of similar backgrounds. Surely all of us in this room believe in the importance of design in the potential development of the South African economy and society so our recruitment motives are not simply self serving but earnest. Unfortunately few schools show a growth over the last few years in terms of non-white enrollments and we continue to battle to attract the type of students we would like into the field.

The research conducted also revealed that the majority of non-white students within our schools speak English or Afrikaans as a first language which would suggest that they are not strictly culturally diverse or particularly reflective of South Africa's multicultural profile. It is therefore questionable whether they would in fact be any better equipped to communicate effectively or have a better understanding of the needs of the South African community than their white counterparts. I would also like to contend that this 'solution' of enlisting black designers to speak to black people serves the purpose of keeping culture exclusive as opposed to making it inclusive, the implication being that only people from common backgrounds can effectively address each other. Unfortunately the drive to attract more ethnic designers has been ineffective and it is even questionable whether those who qualify and enter the industry are even being utilized for their supposed cultural understanding. Surely we now need to propose a modification to the

education system to allow all design students to have a rudimentary literacy in what constitutes South Africa's multiculturalism, as opposed to shrugging the issue off by saying that the problem rests in the student colour profile being non-reflective.

Global or local designers?
The question is, is it our duty to create designers that can have transferable skills that could allow them to work anywhere in the world or should we be structuring our courses to best equip our students to deal with the challenges of the South African context? We have to confront the issue of South Africa becoming globalized, de-Africanised and to question whether we are happy with this trend and are in effect contributing to it by basing our curricula on models established in Europe and America. If we don't concentrate on South Africa as a unique place, how can we expect our students to do so? The other take is to go with the global flow of neutrality and sameness.

What if we don't address our diversity?
It feels necessary to point out some problems that will continue to manifest if we carry on teaching course content that has changed little since pre 1994:

- A continued lack of emphasis on the needs of our particular market results in designed products and communications being generated that risk being irrelevant or inappropriate.

" Stereotypes, however inaccurate are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutes standing in for what is real…Stereotypes abound where there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make them real cannot be taken or are not allowed." (Hooks 1992: 170)

- We land up perpetuating stereotypes due to ignorance of who it is particularly that we are addressing, this is not necessarily intentional but comes from ignorance orr a lack of awareness.
- By not taking cogniscence of our cultural diversity we land up making generalized solutions which results in acculturation. If we deny that there are any differences within our society, we deny the very flavouring that gives South Africa its distinction. It is only through being aware of and ideally intimate with a culture that you can speak in an appropriate language, filled with appropriate nuances, idioms, vernacular that not only resonate with that culture but that will help to create a distinctly South African tone.
- By omitting to address our multicultural profile, are we suggesting that resolving a design problem for the South African market constitutes exactly the same challenge as anywhere else in the world? This could be seen as antiracism, following the path of 'we are all the same beneath the skin.' This polar opposite viewpoint to that held by the apartheid system is also flawed. Different cultural exposure through upbringing has inevitably made us all different, our values, habits, responses and everyday practices vary hugely. This means that often the needs we have as to how a design solution suits us as individuals are equally different.

" For many groups or individuals…post-colonialism is much more to do with the painful experience of confronting the desire to recover 'lost' pre-colonial identities, the impossibility of actually doing so, and the task of constructing some new identity on the basis of that impossibility." (Childs and Williams 1997;14)
- We could be seen as unwittingly perpetuating neo-colonial tendencies where a single (in this case western) culture dominates and other (indigenous) cultures are ignored.
- South Africa is a dynamic, new nation that is formulating and inventing itself all the time. Due to our very troubled and fraught past there is little that we can refer to visually or conceptually that does not come with some form of negative association. This almost gives us a clean slate to work with when setting up who and what we are. Culture is not monolithic, static and in the past. It is malleable and in the process of being formed. As designers and design educators I believe that we have a large responsibility in helping to construct what the new South Africa is and should be seen as, I feel we have been lax in taking up this responsibility and are too happy with the status quo of teaching course content the way it has always been because it is familiar and easier.

Why the need for action now?

The reasons it appears that a new emphasis on South Africa's multiculturalism within design education is being necessary is twofold; firstly, to make the two -way communication between designer and his/her market more effective. An understanding of the habits, needs, social mores, rituals, everyday lives of other cultures will enable designers to cater for those in the products that are produced more empathetically. Secondly; if South African design is ever to establish a feel that distinguishes it from that produced by the rest of the world, its practitioners need to absorb what it is about us that makes us different and I would argue that that is our very vibrant and original cultural make-up.

Much energy has been expended in recent years on preoccupations with what links us as opposed to what separates us, an understandable position to take due to our history. Undeniably we are all driven by very similar needs and desires, the need for love, security, community, to belong, to be happy. Culturally however, in terms of our everyday habits and practices, how these desires can be fulfilled or even manifested can be radically different. Advertising, during the recent World Cup contended that "everyone speaks football" and this really does appear to be a universal truth. We don't all speak the same way about death, sharing, commitment, old age or respect however- every culture addresses these life challenges in totally different and sometimes opposing ways.

For example, happiness and humour are not only subjective but can lead to cross cultural misunderstandings and antagonism. As experienced recently, the notion of ignorance leading to misunderstanding which led to disdain. When watching the Oscar award winning Tsotsi in a Sandton cinema as one of very few white faces in a mainly black audience, it was very disconcerted to see the audience reaction to the film. There was laughter through the most poignant, moving and violent scenes. This lead to a feeling of disquiet and dislocation as ones own responses were so different from the rest of the audience. Weeks later I was relieved to read an article in the Sunday Times newspaper written by Justice Malala that clarified this seeming paradox. It wasn't that the audience had misread the film or misunderstood the content, it was simply a coping mechanism that Black communities have adopted as a way of dealing with the trauma, violence and difficulties that characterise their everyday lives. It started historically during the days of apartheid, having to deal with brutality, disappearances and loss of dignity; kind of a "if you can't beat it, laugh at it" philosophy.
As Malala stated, " It made me realize that all those people were not laughing. They had forgotten how to cry." (Malala 2006: Sunday Times Lifestyle supplement)

This sudden understanding of the different response to a stimulus was enlightening yet it really highlighted the point of how our differences serve not only to separate us but to contribute to prejudice and antagonism. Reading Fred Khumalo's autobiography "Touch my Blood" was another unlikely eye opener. It wasn't the intention of the book to bridge cultural gaps but the simple description of one typical township child's upbringing was really enlightening in terms of who one is speaking to in South Africa. This proved more valuable in terms of having something within a designer's repertoire to help understand South African challenges and just generally to have a feel for why people are so different. Few lectures on the structure of Greek columns in Art History class have proved as beneficial.

It also brought home how as a teachers we seem to do very little to address this issue of misunderstanding. It seems that we all try to cover the multicultural angle by occasionally giving students practical challenges that are aimed at cultures other than their own and hope that they take the initiative to undertake the relevant research that will allow for their design decisions to be relevant. Formally, within our course content this issue receives very little attention. Design by its very nature addresses the masses so essentially designers need to cater for their needs and to be able to communicate effectively with them. Good communication is effective when there is clarity on the part of the speaker and an understanding of the terms of reference of the message receiver, I think that design education places a large emphasis on the first part off this equation and very little on the second.

The way forward, perhaps.

It is always easier to point out the problems in a situation as opposed to offering solutions. Times when like minded people with similar intentions are together in forums such as these are incredibly limited however and it feels like an opportune moment to suggest some routes forward as opposed to simply leaving you with thoughts to ponder.

- South Africa's multicultural profile is incredibly diverse, any attempt to try to educate designers about all the rituals, practices and behavioral characteristics attached to these groupings is well nigh impossible. Culture is also mobile and changeable so the risk would be that something that is taught today would be outdated tomorrow. The approach to multiculturalism that I suggest is one that promotes an embracing of understanding as opposed to criticizing and fascination with diversity as opposed to being frustrated and irritated by it.

- At Vega we are introducing Ulimi Lwami Centres (Language Labs) on all of our campuses. The main intention of these centres is to encourage the use of copywriting in indigenous languages and to offer opportunities for students to learn the rudiments of a language other than their own. Part of the Ulimi Lwami initiative is also to hold cultural sensitivity workshops that will hopefully address many of the issues that I have mentioned in this paper. We hope to be able to address simple fundamentals such as the significance behind complicated handshakes, how to behave appropriately at a Zulu funeral, what aspects of a culture is it permissible to have fun with and what is sacred? At the moment these courses are voluntary but it would seem to be relevant if they became compulsory for all our design and communication students.

- To promote transformation by making designers 'acultural' when they solve creative problems. The notion that only those from similar cultures can design appropriate solutions for them needs to be nullified. A neutral voice needs to be adopted whose tone can be adjusted to suit the culture that is being addressed. This involves more un-teaching than instruction. Students need to be made aware of how much of their own make up is culturally biased so that they are aware of what they see as being 'normal' is actually a construct. To create a clean canvas onto which designs can be painted means a recognition of how culturally constructed we as individuals are.

- We need to reflect on difference as a good thing as opposed to bad. Instead of wishing that everyone was the same to make things simpler, we as educators need to embrace our diversity and richness as it is that which distinguishes us as South Africans. If we set this tone, students should hopefully follow. Without overstating the case, if all students follow this principle of respecting that which distinguishes us and they take this mind set with them into what they produce and mass-produce, the ripple effect could be quite profound. One of the ills confronting our society at this stage in our history is the lack of mutual respect and an antagonistic approach to difference, along the lines of "if you are not like me, you are against me," this is a mindset that needs to be confronted and attempts made to change it.

- We are in a unique position, ours is a new country still finding its feet on the world stage and within its own borders. There is no other society that we can refer to to compare ourselves with in terms of dealing with being a new democracy, cultural diversity, 1st and 3rd world infrastructure and how teaching design fits into this big picture (except perhaps India which is on a similar page to us in terms of the multicultural profile and the development phase.) Everyone in this room is presumably in agreement that the role that design can make in consolidating and improving the country's future is huge and yet it seems to me that we have not adjusted our curricula much at all to address these issues. A more pro-active approach needs to be adopted in going forward; as designers our brief should be to formulate courses that fit the needs of our consumer (students) that take into account the needs of the changing marketplace (the industry that our students will be entering) and equips them with the wherewithal that will enable them to ultimately function better as designers (a better understanding of who it is that they are designing for.)

Conclusion

Developed countries have cultures that are fairly entrenched with deep historical roots. Countries such as China, England, Japan live their culture simply because it surrounds them and is part of their everyday life. We seem to spend more time trying to ignore our culture because of South Africa's troubled past. There is very little culturally that we can depend on, refer to or even enact or depict without being offensive to someone. Due to this factor, our indigenous cultures are at risk of being lost due to neglect, (include Afrikaans culture here.) Culture in South Africa can be criticized as being

token, a surface treatment or veneer attached for the benefit of tourists and investors. The country is dynamic, fundamentally ungrounded, disparate and open to change and transformation. Changes are happening, in terms of how we see ourselves and the space we have ambitions to fill on the global stage. What we need to do is plant the seeds for a new culture but to still have some degree of respect for what has been, we need to start somewhere- 12 years into democracy and we are still somewhat rootless. As educators we need to take an active part in this process- not to necessarily dictate how it happens but to nurture and promote this development and possibly to direct it in some way. Few texts seem to exist that we could use as appropriate blueprints for teaching this challenging subject area. South African cultures tend to feature in coffee table books with appealing photographs of ethnic rituals. Little has been written to serve as sources for understanding the 'everyday' of these cultures as opposed to the more extreme or exotic manifestations. Without over stating the point, I feel that our responsibility as design educators is huge in terms of what we can bring to the construction of the new South Africa. The notions that we make our students address at tertiary level will inform decisions that they make in their working capacity. These choices will dictate their designs which in turn get mass produced and mainstreamed. If, for example, visual communicators become more sensitive to our multiculturalism, they will set the tone within the work they produce for what becomes the norm. Whilst there is often cynicism about the representations of the 'new South Africa' in mainstream advertising, in terms of how divorced from reality it is, there is no denying the impact that mass media messages have on people's perceptions. If we start treating other cultures with more respect, we can serve as examples as to how South Africans should be treating each other. We have always tended to see others cultural practices not just as different but often in opposition, if we achieve nothing more than a subtle shift in that mindset, we will have achieved much.

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Sources Consulted
'Race' and difference- developing practice in lifelong learning [O]
Available: www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-race.htm

Images
Fig 1 Saint Stithians school magazine 2001
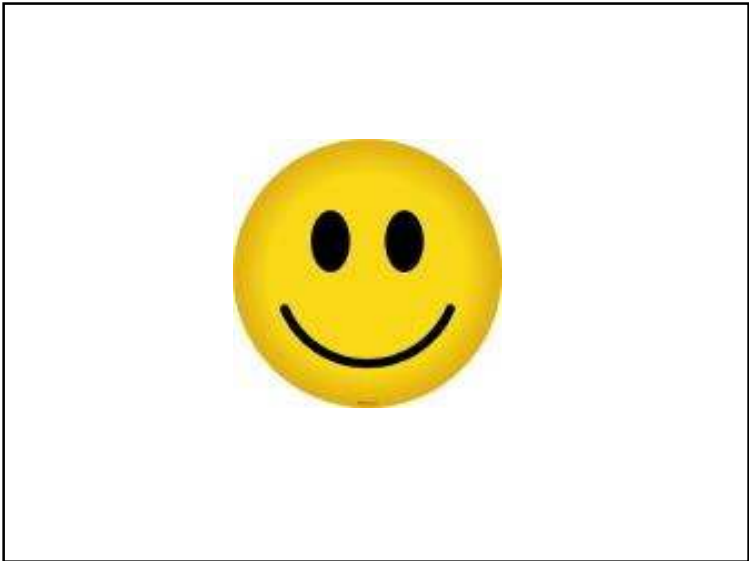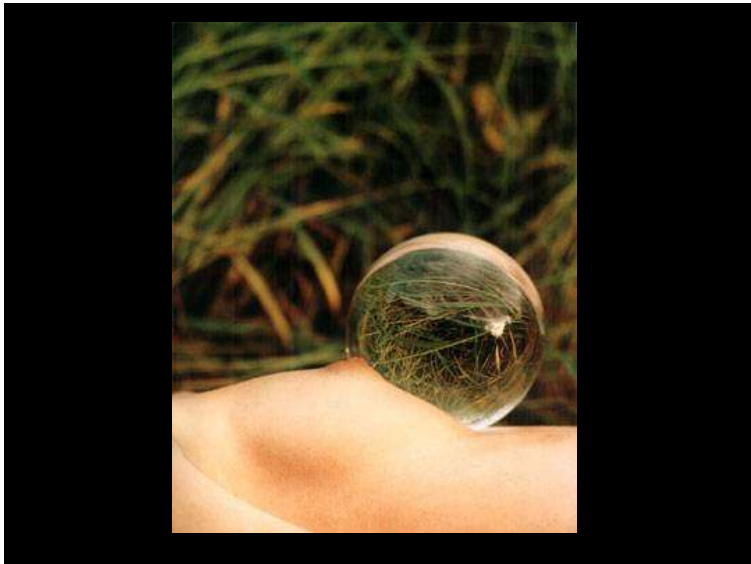Fig 2 National Geographic Sept 2006

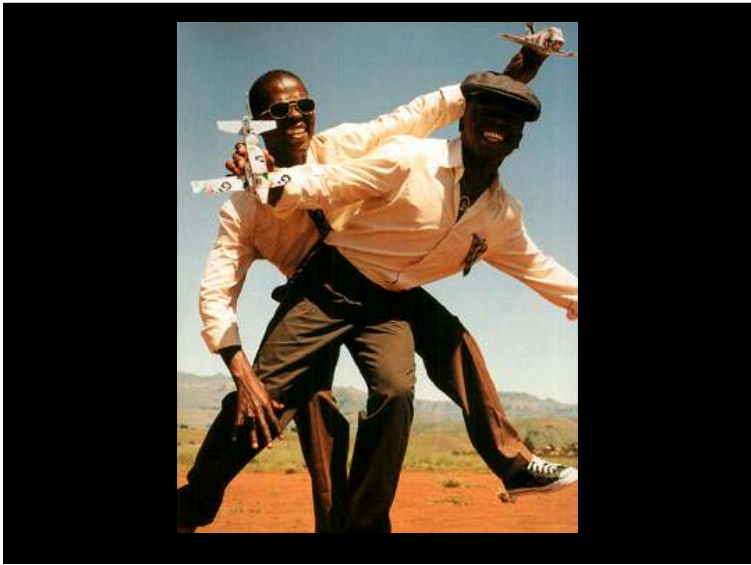The Importance of Cultural Exposure for Designers.

Janet Berger

Understand?

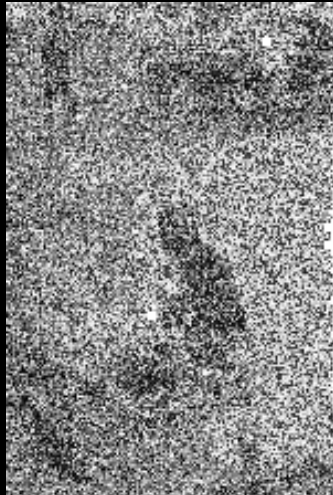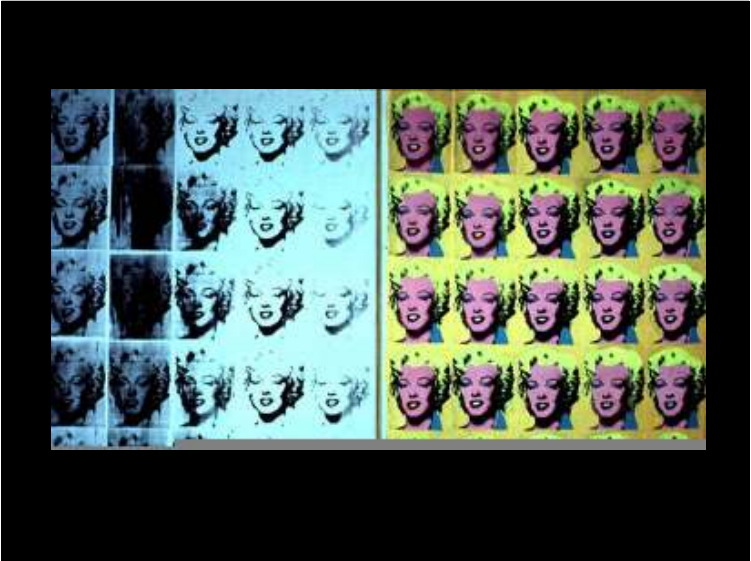Wa kwishisha?

3

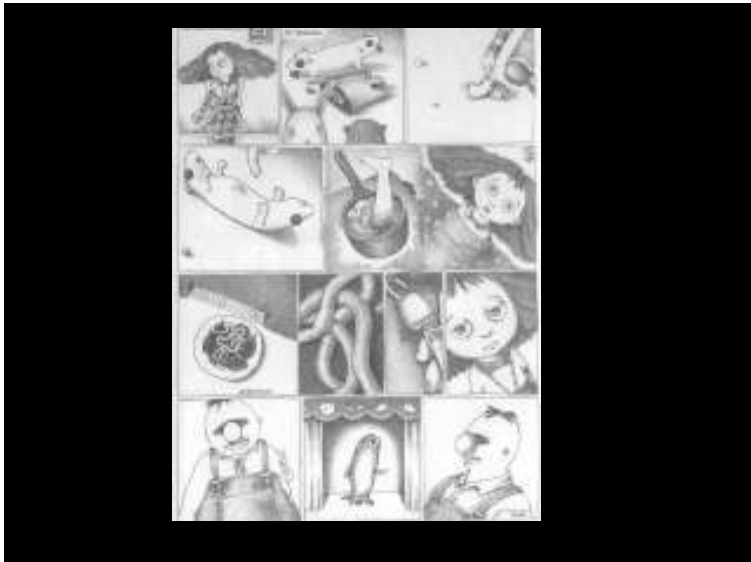毛主席的无产阶级革命路线胜利万岁！

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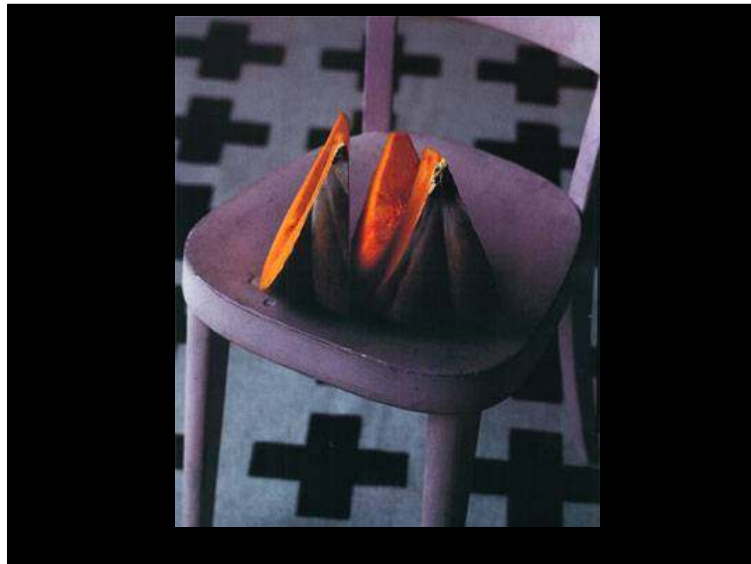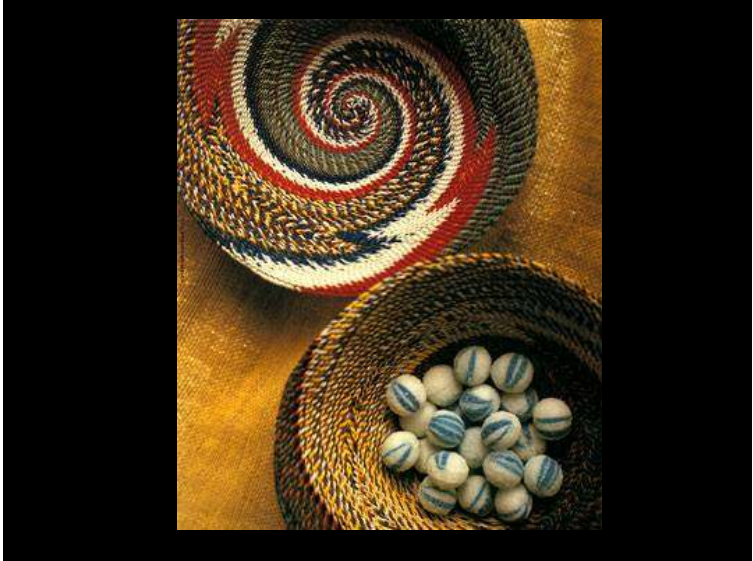
Uyangithola?

Uyazwisisa?

8

Wantwisisa?

Uyangiva?

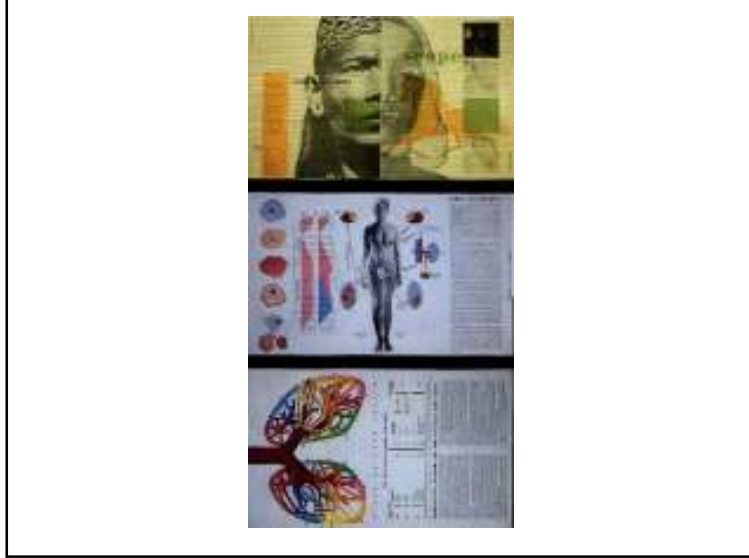Verstaan?

Uyaqonda?

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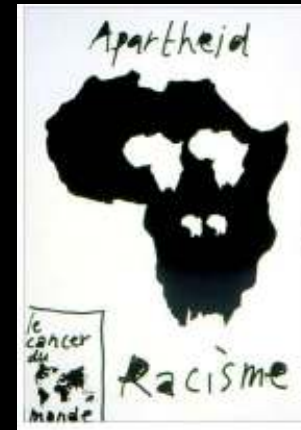GOTHIC
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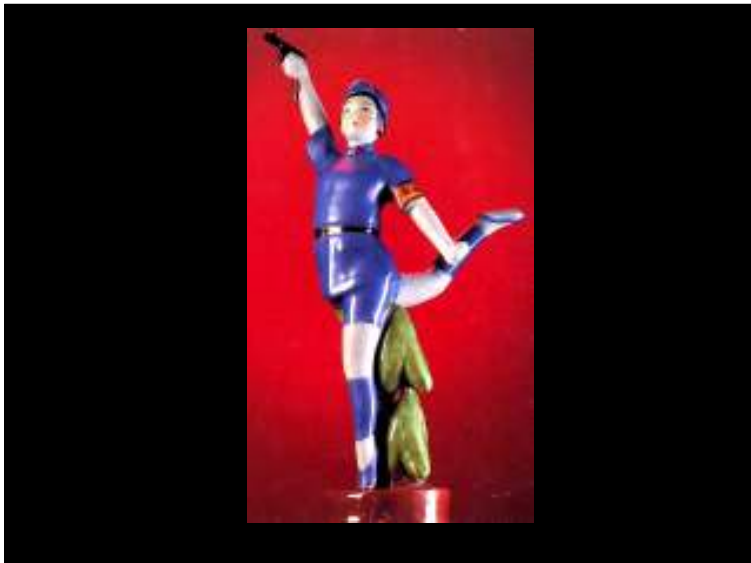
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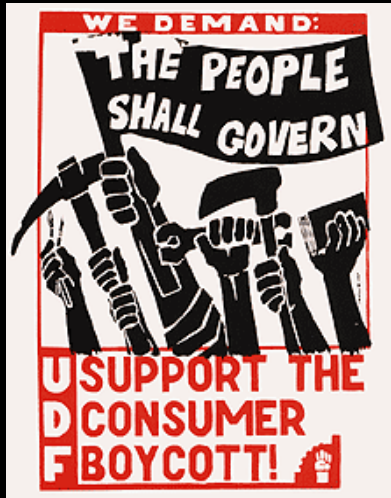
Wamfesesa?

Get it?

18

Uyangithola?

Samaj padi?
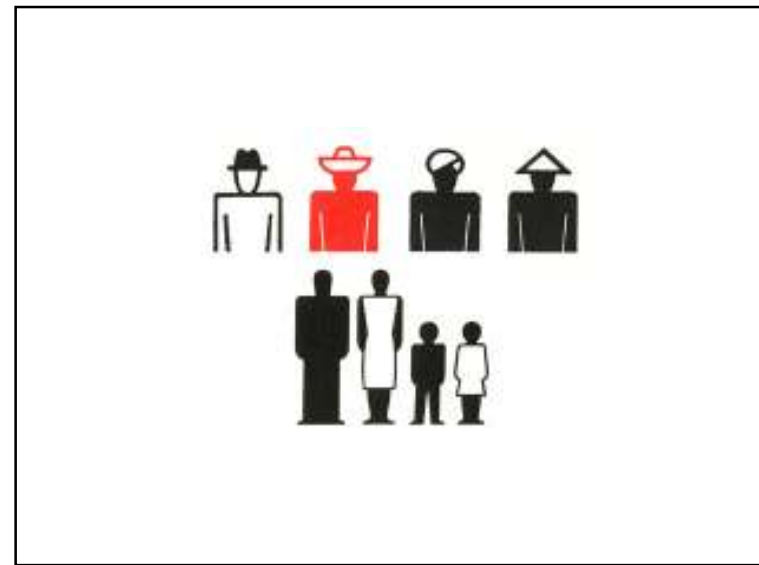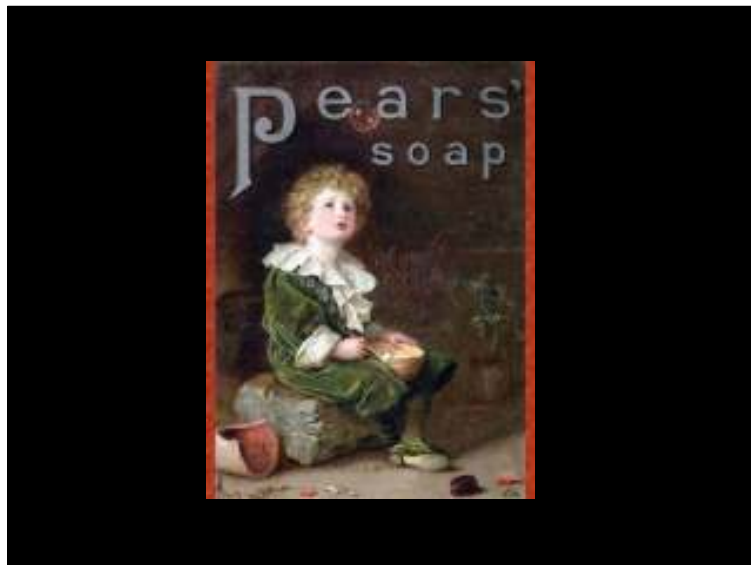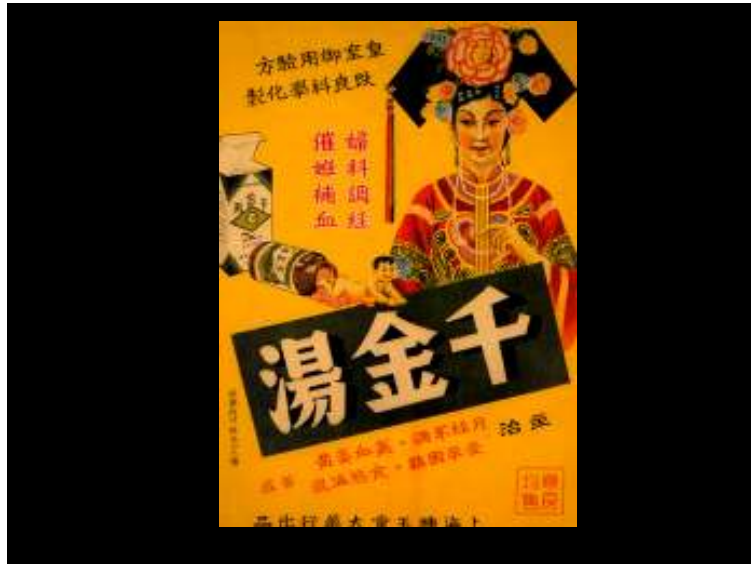
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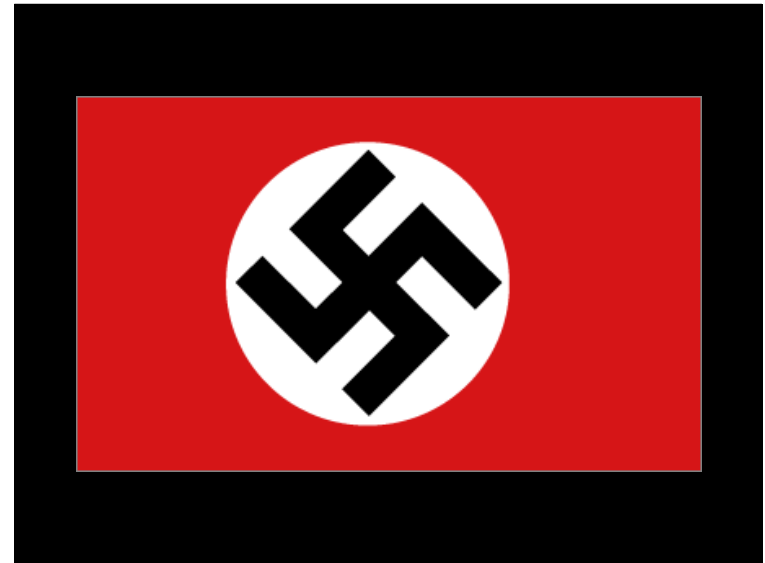
What if we don't address our diversity?

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(Hooks 1992:170)

"For many groups or individuals… post -colonialism is much more to do with the painful experience of confronting the desire to recover 'lost' pre-colonial identities, the impossibility of actually doing so, and the task of constructing some new identity on the basis of that impossibility."
(Childs and Williams 1997:14)

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Why the need for action now?

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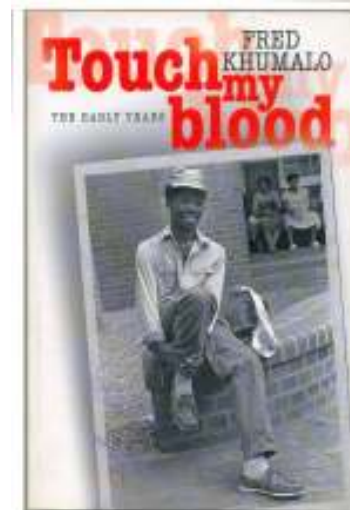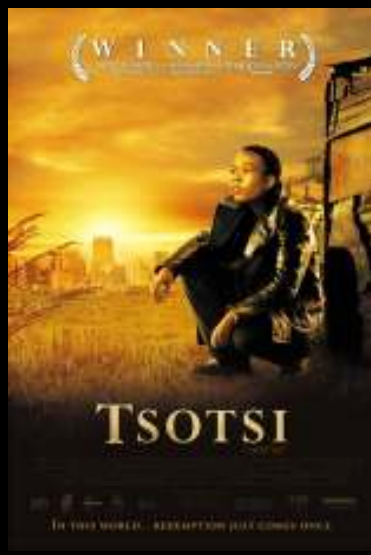
The way forward perhaps..

- Let's not teach an A-Z on culture in SA

- Keep it simple, useful, interesting and direct.

- Cultural sensitivity workshops

- Adopt an 'acultural ' position before any design challenge

- Encourage a celebration of difference

- Start planting some fresh seeds

The way forward perhaps..

- Design our courses to:

- Suit the needs of our consumers (students)

- Suit the marketplace (industry)

- Improve functionality

- Be sustainable

- Be relevant

Uyangithola
Wantwisisa
Verstaan
Wa utiusisa
Uyangithola
Samai badi
Uyangiva
Understand