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Caps Lock: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design and How to Escape from It

By Ruben Pater. Valiz: Amsterdam, 2021, 552pp. ISBN 978-94-92095-81-7.
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Book Review

Caps Lock: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design and How to Escape from It, by Ruben Pater

Valiz: Amsterdam, 2021, 552 pp., ISBN 9789492095817, €22,50

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In *Caps Lock*, Ruben Pater provides a comprehensive and chronological history of the long and complicated entanglement between graphic design and capitalism, which he defines as “an economic system that is founded on three basic principles: everything should be privately owned, all production is for the market, and people work for a wage” (6). He accomplishes this by meticulously examining twelve evolving roles that designers have played throughout history, beginning with ancient Mesopotamian scribes who kept financial records and concluding with interviews with contemporary design activists and activist collectives worldwide attempting to work ethically within the capitalist system. He covers the designer as engineer, brander, salesperson, worker, entrepreneur, amateur, educator, hacker, futurist, and philanthropist. While the list of roles may seem overwhelming, it accurately encompasses the many hats designers wear throughout their career, if not in one day. This expectation of being “everything and all at once” is symbolic of the increasingly unrealistic demands for growth that capitalism has placed on the creative class. The pandemic

revealed that the superfluous perks like quirky workspaces equipped with free snacks and drinks only served to mask exploitative working conditions. As one interviewee explains, “I am more than old enough to understand that no job is a dream, but design takes this notion to a level unparalleled with low pay, ridiculously unfair scrutiny, and competition that never reaches a point of stability” (294).

Pater, a tutor at the Royal Academy of Art in the Hague, runs Untold Stories, a design studio that makes work creating visual narratives about complex social and political issues. The format of *Caps Lock* closely mirrors that of Pater’s first book, *The Politics of Design*. Pater uses accessible language and concise descriptions to make complicated topics accessible in both. Despite its high page count (552 pages), the book includes plenty of historically significant photos, advertisements, diagrams, documents, and maps to help the reader quickly progress through the book. Each chapter comprises bite-sized sections that examine specific topics, mimicking the experience of navigating a social media feed. This generous gesture accommodates our diminished attention spans.

While designers are victims of capitalism, *Caps Lock* explains the myriad ways that they are also complicit in its creation and propagation. In “The Designer as Salesperson,” Pater provides multiple anecdotes of the designer’s role in manipulating consumers through creative and seductive photography, colors, and typography to manufacture the need for products and services that drive profit for corporations. For instance, one visual example shows how extravagant packaging design and copywriting help to sell bottles of water for €30, €75, and €219 each, punctuated with a quotation by Wally Olins: “When you package it effectively, you can even sell water expensively” (195). Even the language used in the industry reveals the dubious role designers play in this system. In “Making Marks,” Pater opens with Hanks Willis Thomas’ work *Scarred Chest* (2003), which shows a bare male torso with nine scars that resemble Nike checks to introduce us to the problematic origins of the term *branding*. On the following page is a woodcut illustration from 1858 depicting the branding of enslaved people with an iron. Next to it is a photograph of a branding iron used on humans from 1877 featuring two serif letters: E and W. As Pater writes, “Branding reveals the violent logic of capitalism’s exploitation of people and planet, by turning everything into a commodity, even people” (136). The designer, he shows, contributes to this brutality.

Let’s face it: there will never be a simple solution to neoliberal capitalism. Pater’s most explicit directive is to embrace the commons by creating shared spaces and resources that will help designers gain more autonomy, dignity, and independence. The text includes examples of collaborative studios in Canada, Argentina, Italy, Brussels, and the UK, in which participants practice design in new and more sustainable ways. In “The Designer as Activist,” he profiles Toronto’s The Public, which consists of designers who

identify as people of color and members of the queer and trans community, and which serves the same communities with the work they do. Additionally, they operate as a social enterprise, an organization whose purpose is to have a social impact. By contrast, Brave New Alps, an eco-friendly and radical design collective based in the Vallagarina valley in the Italian Alps, comprises a community of designers, web programmers, agro-ecologists, farmers, and art therapists who practice what they preach. They describe how living modestly in a rural area where they can grow their food and share resources with the local community allows them to sustain six salaries. While these accounts are heartening, they remain unrealistic for most people who need to function within the existing system to survive.

While *Caps Lock* aims to be comprehensive, with its chronological scope and the broad range of international references, Pater acknowledges the difficulty of accurately representing all the nuances that inextricably link design to capitalism. *Caps Lock* seamlessly combines historical facts with modern-day examples and points the reader to additional texts within the footnotes and in the book's back matter which provide a deeper analysis. Individual chapters stand on their own and can serve as excellent supplements to courses that explore the history of graphic design, packaging, environmental sustainability, decolonization, graduate seminars, and classes that explore anti-capitalist topics. This is a graphic design history that does not hero-worship by idolizing the specific contributions of individuals but instead highlights the effects of design on society and the environment. Pater positions the book as an educational resource and has created an Educational Resource Kit with further readings and suggested assignments for each section. He often references the work of those that came before him, most notably Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish's 2009 book, *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide*. References to *Design for The Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* by Victor Papanek and *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* by James Bridle also appear frequently. Scholars of design criticism will appreciate how Pater connects references from these essential texts to current-day examples. Additionally, he stays true to his ideals, licensing the entire book to Creative Commons. It is free to copy, replicate, or redistribute the content in any medium or format.

Pater's thorough analysis and critique of the relationship between capitalism and design provides clarity to designers who have already experienced the damaging effects of this ecosystem but have a hard time articulating the causes. While this may not be enough to help us "Escape From It," as the book's title suggests, it can help make this profession more equitable, inclusive, and humane by admitting its harms. If nothing else, *Caps Lock* provides ideas for how to temper the increasingly unrealistic expectations that capitalism places on designers, society, and the planet.