

Blah Blah Blahnik

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BLAH BLAH BLAHNIK

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Abstract

Many commentators on contemporary graphic design agree that the discipline needs to converge meaningfully with writing (Richardson 2010). An interesting outcome of this convergence is the designer as 'auteur'. Some see this as incompatible with the traditional role of the graphic designer as a communicator and not an originator (Rock 2001), although others see creativity as changing domains and domain-based thinking (Zimmerman, 2009). Creative tension keeps the discipline agile and makes it more responsive.

This paper briefly outlines and explains the viewpoints above. It then describes and analyses a one-day writing project for final year undergraduate Graphic Design students at Coventry University, and shows 5 examples of the resulting work.

In this project, students were given an image of an intricate Monolo Blahnik high-heeled gladiator shoe, and asked to design an advert persuading female students to wear a pair of these shoes at their Graduation Ceremony. They had to write a story by hand to fit within the shoe. The results threw up discussions about use of space, tone of voice, relative size, ignoring grammatical rules, uncertain reading direction, narrative and breaks in text (Roberts's 'conflict of print and sound', 2000).

Given that the project was so short, its yield was rich. It was enjoyable and different: they had never done anything like it before, nor had they had to consider literary theory as part of their interaction with words before. The project made the students look at their discipline and its intellectual credentials in a new way. It also prepared them well for their next, bigger project: magazine design.

Keywords: converging, diverging, tight, suggestion.

1 CONTEXT

Many - if not most - graphic designers expect text to come to them ready to use: they orchestrate rather than author. However, designers should be prepared to edit - if not write - their own text if they are to exploit changes to the design process in which Anna Richardson sees writers as now "increasingly involved at the idea-generation stage" [1], with writing "no longer marginalised" [2]. In the competitive advertising and promotion environment, "words have to work harder to keep people interested" [3], suggesting that the relationship between writing and designing needs to be reinvigorated.

However, there is professionally institutionalized resistance to "attempts at self-expression" [4] within graphic design's emphasis on communication over origination [5], especially as a paying client is almost always part of the equation [6]. This traditional process is at odds with some interpretations of creativity. Zimmerman identifies an ongoing search for new "paradigms and practices in art education" [7], and asserts that creativity lacks commonly agreed definition [8]. She finds some consensus amongst those who see creativity as "changing a domain" and its ways of thinking [9], and amongst those who see creativity as "adaptability in new situations" [10].

Graphic designers clearly need to embrace writing if they are to keep a major aspect of their practice current and relevant, but the only writing that Graphic Design undergraduates get as part of their course at Coventry University - and this is fairly standard across the UK sector - is a contextual studies essay in each of their first and second years, and a 4,500-word dissertation in their third and final year. They may do odd pieces of writing such as any graphic designer might - suggesting names for companies, or slogans, for example - but nothing that would help lever them into the kind of design / writing crossover or models of creativity endorsed by Richardson and Zimmerman, above.

2 METHOD

A good opportunity to introduce some more experimental and applied writing came about midway through a large, two-term, quadruple (80 credits out of the annual 120), third and final year undergraduate Graphic Design module at Coventry University. Because of the module's extended schedule and eclectic content, an experiment could be run without noticeable disruption to the schedule; any benefits could be more easily applied, any drawbacks more easily remedied than in a shorter module with more particular aims and content. I also considered final year students ideal for this experiment because they have greater confidence and discipline authority than the students in the years below them, and so the experiment's findings should be more robust and valid. Any course content changes would therefore be implemented top-down.

The one-day project asked approximately 20 students to create an advert to persuade female undergraduates to buy a pair of Blahnik shoes for their Graduation Ceremony. The project lasted for nearly three hours, including briefing and critiques. All the students had finished at least one version of the project when the critiques started, meaning that writing had taken a maximum of 90 minutes. I was the sole tutor with the students. The briefing used a visualiser to project the image and lasted about 15 minutes; I discussed the point of the advert, the point of the project, and answered any questions. The students were expected to work in the studio because it contained everything they needed, although some chose to work elsewhere and came back at various points for feedback and then for the critiques at the end. The project was not conducted like an exam: students could chat, exchange ideas, do internet research, use a thesaurus and dictionary, and come and go as they pleased - a relaxed atmosphere.

The project was evaluated with verbal feedback in the critiques and written feedback a few days later, but was not assessed as part of the module's grades. The students were expecting a project but had no idea of what it would be like in advance. The project was an individual one, although students tended to work in small, self-selected groups of about six to a table. I worked my way around the room, discussing the work, sometimes with individuals and sometimes with groups, depending on what seemed most appropriate at the time.



Fig. 1

The students (both male and female) were each given the plain image of the shoe on a sheet of white A4 (see Fig. 1. Figs. 2-6, the images of the submissions discussed, are shown on the striped background used when they were later displayed). The brief reminded the students that Blahnik wanted to generate new and future loyal customers, and were therefore advertising in laid-back student magazines and websites rather than their more familiar territories of high-end fashion like *Vogue* and *Elle*. The students had to produce a story to fit within - but not necessarily using all - the spaces in the shoe. It had to be handwritten to make the project quick, manageable – and different. The advert would be in black-and-white, so the students were expected to write directly onto their sheets, and they were allowed fresh copies if they made mistakes, wanted to change their work, or wanted to do a fresh version.

The students were asked to think about the project in more conceptual terms as well. These included the graduands' likely frame of mind and familiarity with these kinds of shoes; the atmosphere of the Graduation Ceremony; the appeal of fiction in adverts; the interaction of negative and positive space; the style of picture and its relationship to the page; the sequence of words and whether this should be obvious; where the story should begin and end; tone of voice; the identity of the narrator.

In the critiques, each student's work was projected on the visualiser, and each student was asked to explain his or her work to the group and to me, with comments and suggestions offered by any of us. The students would have expected this because it is fairly standard critique procedure at Coventry University. It was important that this work, which was unlike anything they had done before, was understood to be part of graphic design practice. To have had outlandish critiques might have undermined this, and I was mindful that Gibbs records some students in his experience thinking "open" teaching - in the sense of unexpected and unfamiliar - was "bad" teaching [11].

At about the same time in the module I ran a seminar in which I introduced students to three major literary theories: reader-response, new criticism and new historicism. David Macey outlines how reader-response assumes meaning of a text is "far from pre-given [and is] produced by readers" [12]: text is seen as an "unstable or changeable entity" [13]. Macey also highlights how new criticism focuses on the formal and gives poetry "self-sufficiency" if it is stripped of any historical, biographical and social factors [14], and how new historicism reintroduces an "historical dimension" to literary studies [15], reacting against new criticism's anti-historicist precepts [16].

These three theories, then, create an interesting dynamic: the first suggests that meaning is best left to the reader, the second that meaning is embedded in the work itself, and the third that meaning is contingent upon a raft of ancillary factors. The seminar was integrated into discussion of students' ongoing practical work. I also asked them to write three short, 200-word critiques of a piece of work of their choice filtered through each of these three theories in turn: a defence using reader-response, a criticism using new criticism, and an explanation using new historicism.

3 FINDINGS

The results of the Blahnik project varied no more than in any other, more design-specific short project: some submissions were outstanding, some were acceptable, some were uninspired and some did not adhere to the restrictions of the brief (for example, they wrote outside the shoe, or added imagery). Surprisingly, however, many students finished the work more quickly than I expected. This may be because either they did not enjoy it and wanted to get it over with; or because they found it too easy; or because they were very good at writing; or because they failed to see any potential in the exercise and did something superficial; or because they did not see it as part of their discipline and did not take it seriously – or because of any combination of the above. Data recording any of these possible reasons was not collected, but students did on the whole say that they found the project interesting and unusual.

There are five examples selected for analysis in this paper.

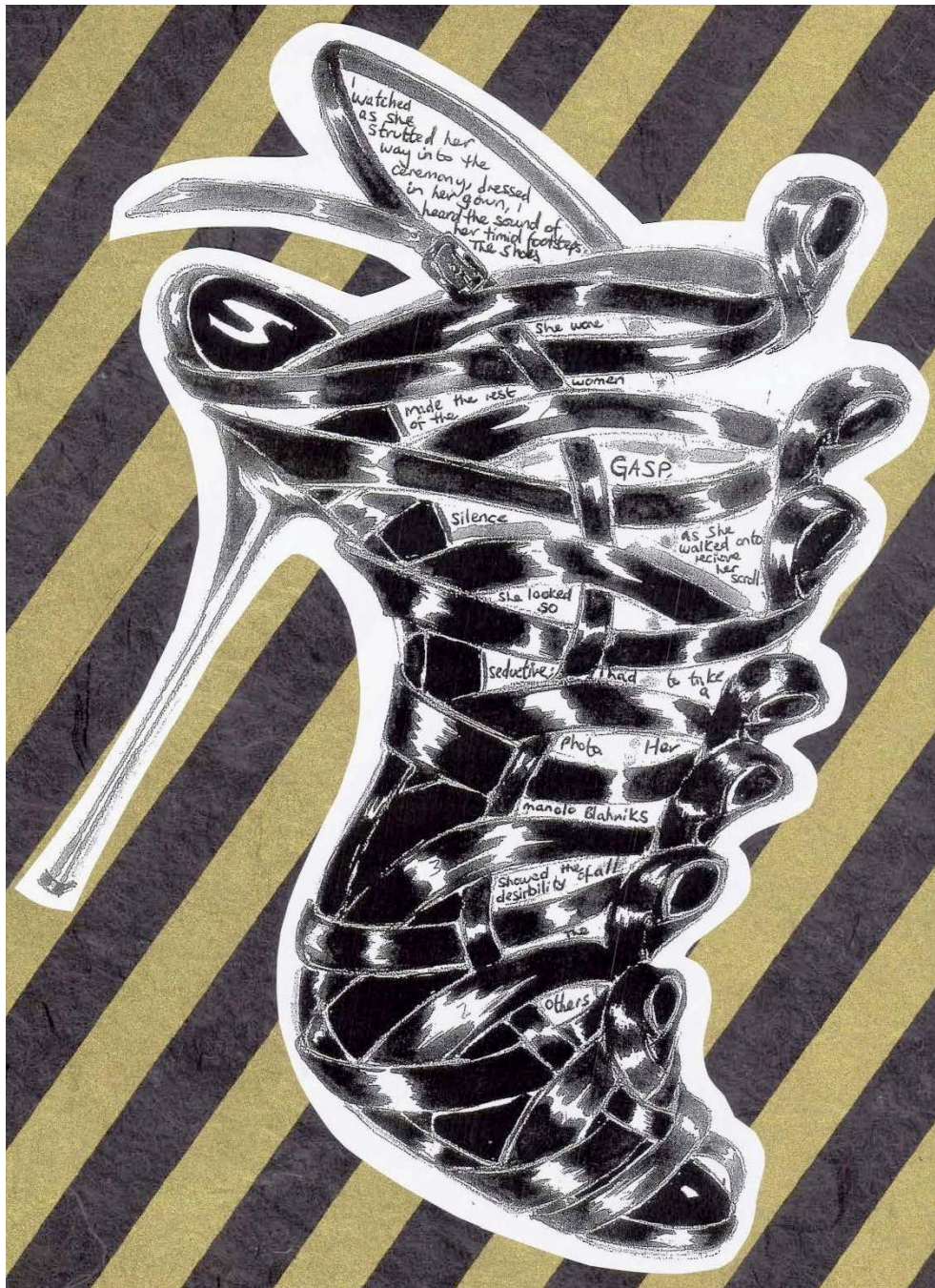


Fig. 2

Fig. 2 mixes a dramatic word in capitals with normal text, reminiscent of comic-books distinguishing between narrative and utterances. It uses a mixture of slanted and horizontal text, creating different reading speeds which are further broken up by the bunching of some copy into some spaces and the relatively expansive treatment of other chunks of text. This design also uses the spaces selectively, and so disrupts and questions reading patterns, legitimising alternatives. For example, after "GASP" which is placed above a cascade of story, one could read "silence" followed by "as she..." or one could read "as she..." followed by "silence" followed by "she looked". One might equally read in one direction one day and the other direction the next, perhaps giving this advert a longer life. It is hard to tell if this story is written by a male or female friend, or admirer or lover, although placing "women" into a space on its own could suggest a writer who enjoys watching other women being outshone. The final sentence is a little obscure.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3 is not as much of a story as the brief required, but the tension between the angle of the opener (which echoes how the foot slips into the shoe) and the rest of the text is strong; the zigzag cascade of text, which also includes capitalised phrases, ends with the nicely placed “end”. The capitals in the middle of the shoe highlight that phrase, which may then be read first, with the other two phrases being read in no particular order thereafter. The reader is given options. The breaking of phrases into spaces makes reading them engagingly staccato, in contrast to the main, capitalised phrase – another way of breaking up reading and making sure that readers are forced to spend longer making sense of the advert. The phrase “you have already graduated” at the top is spread out and just possibly could be read downwards first before going across, thus: “you already / have graduated”, again providing options and not boxing the design – or the reader – into a corner.



Fig. 4

Fig. 4 takes a longer view of life, ranging from “1st Job” through to “Anniversary”, but interestingly places this in reverse order, if we read from the top down. This mixes time, and suggests that the wearer might be looking back, and might have kept the shoes as a memento of the day from which so much else started. This approach has the potential to be adapted and developed in related advertising campaigns – especially in animated multimedia – although the spacing is a little awkward and the events predictable, perhaps too much like a bridal magazine and not Blahnik’s normal territory: but then this advert was conceived to be seen out of Blahnik’s normal context, so this criticism could be rebutted. However, the wearing of the shoe at Graduation would be unusual, and extravagant, so this copy might be incongruous; then again, the tension between the comfortable domesticity of the text and the spiky grace of the shoe is powerful. There is therefore more than one interpretative and evaluative viewpoint.

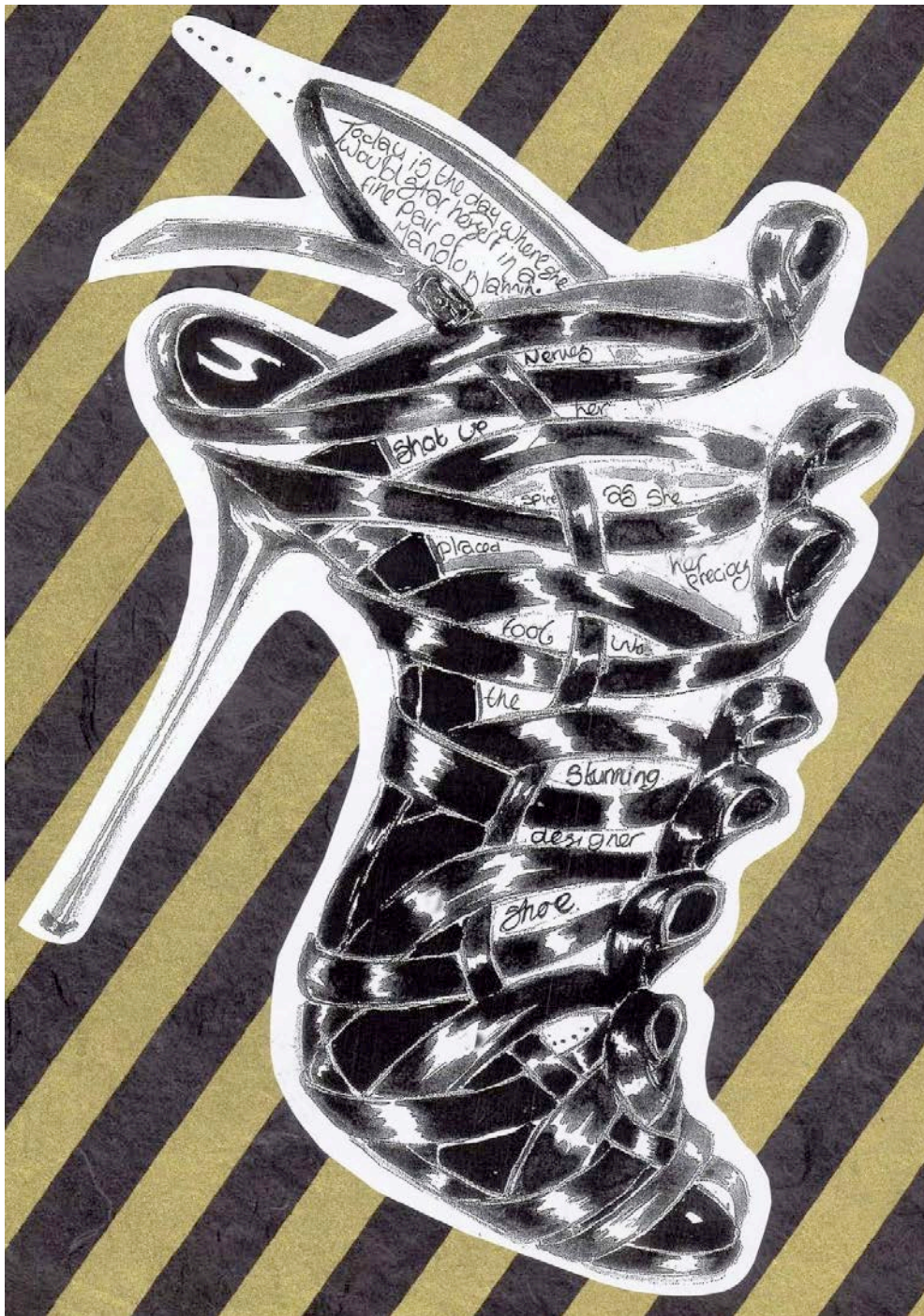


Fig. 5

Fig. 5 crams background text into the opening space (this was neither stipulated nor recommended as an opening space, but many students chose to use it as such), and then, like a film in slow motion, describes the experience, hinting at the significance of the occasion ("nerves shot up her back") and how the wearer is almost pedestalled by the shoe ("her precious / foot"). This example places introductory dots outside the image, but intriguingly follows up with dots placed at the front of the shoe, the forward facing part – the story will continue... The text is reasonably well placed within its chosen spaces, but the overall layout is a little bland. Nevertheless, the change of pace and the simple duality of the text's pacing are memorable.

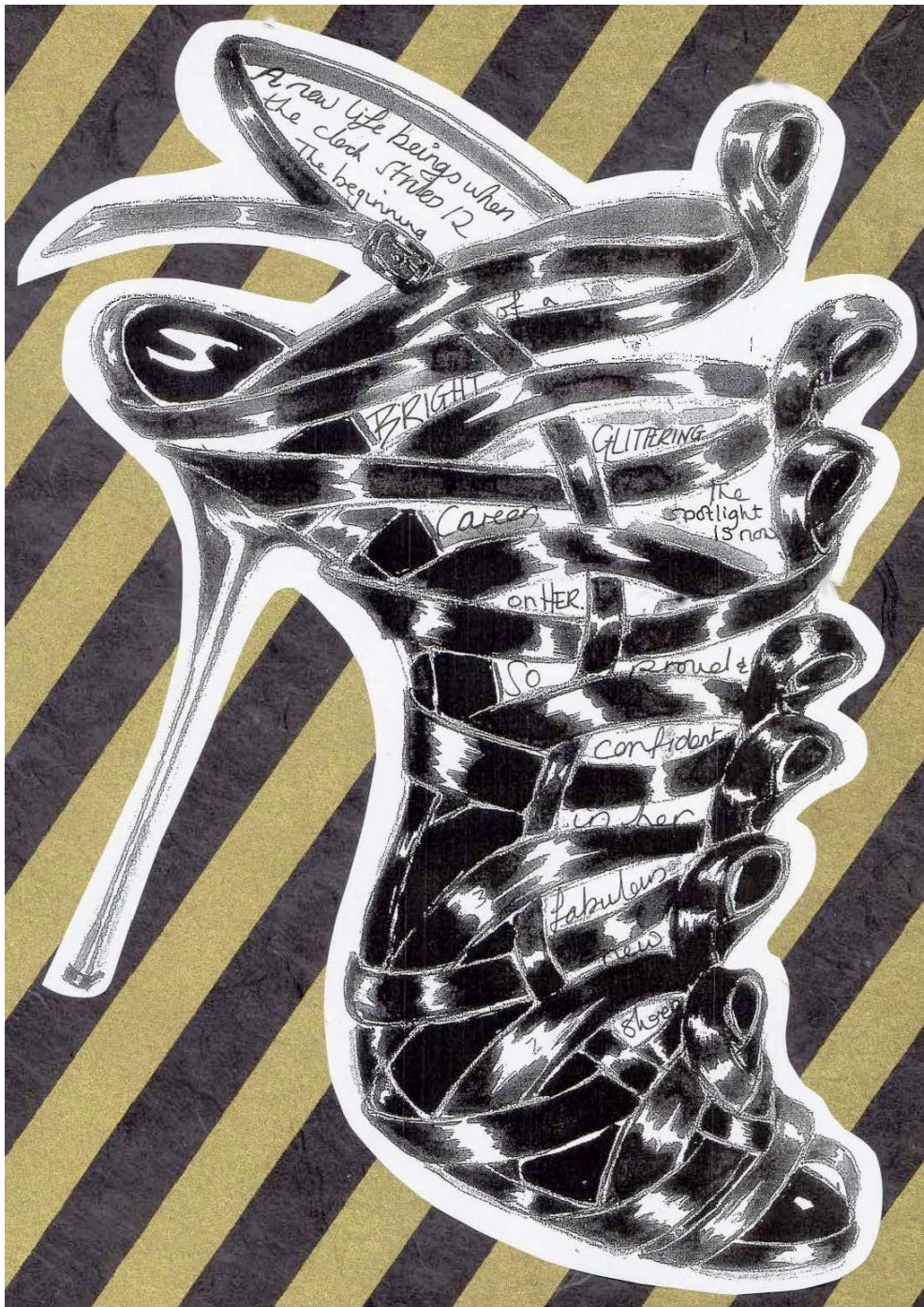


Fig. 6

Fig. 6 also picks up on the *Cinderella* theme, but is a little awkwardly spaced and perhaps does not exploit the spaces enough as a narrative, although some of the words are evidently intended to be drawn to fit their spaces. This design, perhaps more than any of the others, uses the full extent of the shoe's spaces – apart from two gaps, one after “BRIGHT”, the other after “on HER”. Given how scrupulously the remaining spaces have been filled, and how many words are squeezed into the box beginning “the spotlight”, this might either be seen as dynamic or an oversight (I suspect the latter). Although there are variations in the size of some of the words, these do not look intentional nor as if engagingly extruded from the shape of their spaces: they simply look casual and ill-considered.

Aspects emerging from studying these examples cover spacing and uses of spaces, tone of voice and variations of speaker / narrator, relative size creating emphasis, mixing time, slow motion, ignoring grammatical rules, uncertain reading direction, reading patterns, reading speeds, narrative viewpoints, reader options and breaks in text. These latter bring to mind Roberts's "conflict of print and sound",

contributing to the "particular richness of poetry" [17]; in the case of the Blahnik, this would be, for example, expansive words - both literally and figuratively - crammed into tight and unforgiving spaces, but spaces which have to be used because they fit the unfolding narrative. The shoe and its spaces gave students a framework to kick against which most conventional poets do not have, not even concrete or visual poets who mostly compose shapes by mixing words, meaning, intention, and a blank sheet of paper.

4 CONCLUSION

Although these findings represent reasonably creditable responses to an unusual and unexpected brief, the majority of the points were not articulated by the student writers themselves. Indeed, the usual reaction when I pointed out these kinds of qualities was surprise mixed with a slight lack of interest. It was as if the students saw the work as stimulating, but outside their domain. Judged harshly, the work was not particularly outstanding. The stories were rather mundane and there were no conversations, not even between wearer and shoe, and no real double meanings. No student mixed horizontal and vertical type especially meaningfully, and no student experimented with carefully rendered letterforms to create more nuanced tonal differences. Too few of the submissions engaged with the spaces accurately and actively - it may be that they were sketching out by hand what they might later render digitally if the project were to be taken further, suggesting that they were producing sketchbook-style roughs and thus placing traditional design above writing.

The brief stipulated something handwritten, not something sketched for future digital rendering. This almost wilful ignoring of one of the brief's fundamental demands is symptomatic of how deeply rooted and confident Rock's "institutionalized features of design" [18] really are, and is indicative also that many design students see writing as a separate domain with its own conventions and precepts. However, this was presented to them as a writing and design project, an integrated challenge, and part of the problem with any kind of experiment like this is that it tends to remain just that in participants' minds: an experiment, whose impact and benefits might only be unleashed when another, perhaps obliquely relevant, creative challenge emerges. The students might well have enjoyed it and found it different, and may well have thought about their discipline differently, but I question how hardy this reflection will prove to be without support.

The literary theories could prove to be a vital missing link, however, and their inclusion was commended by the external examiner. Some students used reader-response to concede vagueness in their work, and then to defend it. New criticism helped others to be confidently objective and new historicism helped others to be candidly reflective. There were practical benefits as well: some subsequent work in this same module, notably a fashion magazine design project, showed thoughtful and innovative handling of text and typography where form and content converged into tight and well-justified arrangements which had divergent appeal. Although the literary theory input and the one-day project cannot claim exclusive credit for this, they surely contributed.

The one-day project was an interesting experiment, whose impact might be more visible and meaningful to tutors and graphic design industry professionals than to students. It was well-intentioned and well received, but had it taken up more of the module than it did, without proper justification, students might have questioned its usefulness. The traditions of design practice and process are strong, and design students respect for the traditions of writing equally so. However, if innovative writing and creative domain crossovers are to become part of the design process and displace long-held traditions - as I believe they should - then short projects such as the Blahnik need to be part of a more comprehensive discipline paradigm shift, which will also have to integrate associated theories and involve course planners and industry practitioners.

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