Descendant mutations: the consumption and transformation of the everyday in graphic design

1. I N T R O D U C T I O N / U P D A T E _____

[image: Title, Monster Luke]

Hi my name is Luke Wood . . . welcome to my talk.

I'd like to start off today by backtracking a bit . . .

Following my last review – which was my first – in May this year, I've aimed at repositioning the focus of this research on the practitioner – in this case *me*. Through pushing myself to *make work*, I wish to develop a research topic that is lead by practice rather than theory. While this was my intention at the beginning of this year, by May I found myself frantically attempting to build some sort of theoretical framework from within which I could *then* start to *make work*! I had actually made some work just prior the May GRC, but I didn't show it because I didn't feel it was well resolved, and I wasn't sure it fitted within the framework I was attempting to construct.

In hindsight I feel like I had this completely the wrong way around. The theoretical framework I constructed was shaky, and – through chasing my tail, trying to tie up loose ends and answer all the questions I was posing – my topic was about to disappear altogether. The actual piece of work I had made, on the other hand – primarily because it *was* unresolved, provided a much more open-ended point from which to continue to develop the topic of my research.

[image: Hot Rod Biology cover]

The work I had made was a book, which I called 'Hot Rod Biology'. Without getting too involved, this book was basically a 'filter' through which a series of images I had collected as part of an exercise at the beginning of the year, were to be contextualised in relation to my developing topic. My intention was to create a hybrid artefact from the crossing of two disparate conventions – a biology textbook, and a hot rod magazine. The link to the images I had collected being what I initially thought was their schizophrenic appearance – finely crafted artefacts of European modernism on one hand . . .

[image: Hot Rod Biology – modernist stuff]

[image: Hot Rod Biology – modernist stuff]

and vernacular images from my upbringing in small town New Zealand on the other.

[image: Hot Rod Biology – vernacular stuff]

[image: Hot Rod Biology – vernacular stuff]

Through my attempts to connect the images throughout the book I came up with the triggers that would shape the early stages of my topic – Taxonomy, Hybridity, and Appropriation.

In my previous seminar I mentioned, but did not really discuss, someone *or something* called 'The Hybrid Practitioner'. This mythical being came from the book.

[image: Hot Rod Biology – manifesto title]

Developed as a course requirement for 'Research Methods', this *manifesto* was the one part of the book I was happy with at the time. The manifesto for the Hybrid Practitioner was a cut & paste assemblage of various other people's manifestoes . . . although I used the term manifesto fairly loosely.

[image: Hot Rod Biology – manifesto title]

I was interested in how this came together in a relatively cohesive way, insofar as I felt it became a kind of *hybrid statement*. None of the original authors had set out to say what I now used them to say, yet it all somehow made sense.

Following my review, and feeling like I had been going about things in the wrong way, I began to see Hot Rod Biology, as a whole, to be essentially doing the same thing as the manifesto, if perhaps in a less well resolved way. . .

[image: Hot Rod Biology – Duchamp fountain]

[image: Hot Rod Biology – Elvis mask]

[image: Hot Rod Biology – Elvis as Michael Jackson]

[image: Hot Rod Biology – Anna as Elvis, Influence]

Hoping that I still had a topic here somewhere I decided to try and let my frustration with the book pose a question. The main reason I wasn't happy with the thing, as an artefact, was that it didn't seem to *be* what I was trying to *make* in terms of a hybrid statement. I didn't feel that I had actually *hybridised* anything. The biology text book and the hot rod mag were not 'getting along' here, there was no spark, no offspring . . . or any offspring there might have been was, like a mule – half horse, half donkey – infertile.

So what do I mean by a hybrid statement? What is that? What does it look like? How does it work? Who the hell is The Hybrid Practitioner? Why do I care? These were pretty much the questions in my head as I backed up from my topic, moved to one side slightly, and planned to come at it again.

2. T O P I C   T I T L E _____

[image: Title, Monster Luke]

While the terms and conditions of my research have been refocused, I am still interested in basically the same ideas and issues I began with. My title from May . . .

[image: Old Title 'The Hybrid Practitioner', Monster Luke]

"The Hybrid Practitioner: appropriation as an evolutionary catalyst in graphic design", has been altered or updated . . . with this.

[image: Title, Monster Luke]

There's two things I'd like say about this. Firstly, that I'm not using the term *appropriation* any more. While I do still see the *act* as being a part of my topic, I have discovered that the terminology implies *more* than the act. The use of the term appropriation implies an interest in the political/ethical motivations behind the act. While I see this as important, I feel it is something covered well elsewhere, and it is not currently a motivating factor within my own practice. At this stage I believe terms such as sampling, referencing, and *consuming* may be more appropriate to this research.

Secondly – The Hybrid Practitioner. While I'm most certainly interested in this being a practitioner-focused project, I'm just not sure this is right name at the moment? I guess I'm not sure if I actually

want to **become** a monster. At this stage I see myself more like Dr Frankenstein, thinking about how I might create new beings, new lives, out of used, dead, and forgotten parts.

[image: Descendant mutations]

My current title, 'Descendant Mutations', is itself a used **part**, from the introduction to Anne Burdick's text 'Neomania: Feeding the Monster'.

She uses the term in reference to a situation whereby the same form, or style, might have very different, even contradictory, readings when used or viewed inside of different contexts.

[image: Consumption]

In my use of the term **consumption**, I am interested in graphic design as **participant and product** in a culture that continuously consumes its own symbols and conventions.

[image: Transformation]

Transformation then, refers to how these forms and ideas might be digested, regurgitated, or recreated new once consumed.

[image: The Everyday]

The everyday refers to that which is consumed. This term I'm not sure about – it could have been, and almost was, replaced with either **the vernacular**, or **the familiar**. I've also been using the term 'nostalgia' in similar sense, but felt that this term narrowed the focus of my research too greatly at this stage.

3. R E S E A R C H   Q U E S T I O N _____

My Research question then, currently goes something like this . . .

[image: Research question (a)]

How might the sampling and borrowing of the familiar be developed into an **exploratory** practice?

[image: Research question (a) + (b)]

Within this – can the intentional hybridisation of familiar sources perform a **transformative** act generating unexpected outcomes?

[image: Research question (a) + (b) + (c)]

And – might the intentional development of what is ugly, or **grotesque**, lead to a more **exploratory** investigation of form?

In respect to this last question in particular, **monsters** have become of interest as a poetic device within this research topic.

[image: blank]

[image: Monster posters for films]

Monsters rely, to some extent, on familiarity. They are scary often **because** they are familiar . . . but somehow different. Monsters challenge our taxonomic urge – our systems, our conventions – and,

because they don't 'fit in' – because they disrupt what is familiar, what is usual – they are considered grotesque. Barbara Stafford, writing about hybridisation during the Enlightenment states that

[image: Stafford quote]

"Elaborate theories abounded concerning the virtue of pure strains . . . all were predicated on the judgement that mixtures abstracted from normal procreation easily lead to the ***monstrous***".

As a ***threat*** to taxonomy, monsters often exist as an exploratory device with which we can investigate boundaries and conventions, and also push ourselves outside of our comfort zones.

R E C E N T   W O R K _____

[images: Elvis '&' monster cap]

In the mid 1950s Elvis Presley posed a serious threat to certain conventions such as sexuality, race, maturity, and creativity. This threat came by way of a hybridisation that resulted in the mutated offspring of previously familiar sources. Greil Marcus refers to this as a ***hybrid moment***, or more specifically ***The Rockabilly Moment***.

For mainstream America – conventional America – the Rockabilly Moment was grotesque. Elvis was a monster.

Elvis had shown up frequently in Hot Rod Biology. Each time he appeared my interest increased. Returning home from my seminar in May I had decided I needed to read something quite different to Russian literary theory – maybe nothing to do with my topic, something I could get my head around, but most importantly something that interested me.

'Dead Elvis: a chronicle of a cultural obsession' by Greil Marcus, is basically a catalogue of what Elvis has been up to since his death in 1977. Not the man, so much as the myth, or the metaphor, Marcus explains.

Although the man does turn up in the form of Presley Burgers – dug up, flame grilled, and sold to the highest bidder . . . ***consumed*** by the rock aristocracy, as the story goes.

[images: Elvis 'B' cap – eating]

I have also been feeding on Elvis.

The image on screen now is one of the most recent iterations of a project I've been working on to develop a series of illustrated capitals that use Elvis as content. Following on from my disappointment in Hot Rod Biology, I am again setting out to hybridise two different conventions . . .

[image: illustrated capitals]

Decorative or, Illustrated, capitals . . . and . . .

[image: Elvis cushion 'A']

Cushions!

[image: Elvis cushion 'B']

[image: Elvis cushion 'A' & 'B']

These cushions were made as full-scale functional *models*, kind of because I was having trouble picturing what these might end up like, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because I had been focusing almost solely on the production of the images, and forgetting about the artefact.

As it is this project is the result – *itself a mutation* – of something I'm not sure I set out to do.

I'd like to use the rest of this talk to discuss the shifts, or mutations, that have occurred in this project – to introduce thematic threads that have run through, and hopefully shed some light on where I might be going from here.

[image: Elvis drawn into original illustrated capitals]

Initially I had set out to develop an illustrated font based on Elvis . . . what exactly about Elvis I wasn't actually sure. Following my review in May, I had decided to literally *force* myself to make work, so I set myself the task of making an image a day over a four week period on my return to New Zealand.

This image – one of my first – was obviously a result of Elvis's presence in my previous project. The original image – the Illustrated capital – was from a book I'd recently picked up from a second hand store. The association to myth and legend, the epic, the hyperbole, the superlative . . . looking at this image, I guess it just seemed to make sense that The King of Rock and Roll should have a set of illustrated capitals made around, or about, him.

As I mentioned, what exactly about Elvis – I wasn't sure. What would Elvis be doing? And how would this relate to the letterform it illustrated? One of the biggest problems I've encountered within this project is that of developing content around which I can build form. Maybe it's my Modernist heritage, and I should have just jumped right in and begun to play with form . . . but also, perhaps, it's just as important that I've been attempting to *drive* my hybridisation with mutant content?

[images: Elvis 'X' cap – with Johnny Rotten]

Feeling like I wasn't getting that much out of my initial attempts – which more or less just involved illustrating moments in his life – I decided that Elvis could perhaps *be* The Hybrid Practitioner. I'd become quite interested in the hybrid lives Elvis had been *appropriated* into following his death – Elvis Hitler, Elvis Christ, Elvis Nixon, Elvis as Sid Vicious. Maybe I could *learn* more about what The Hybrid Practitioner might be by manipulating Elvis into this role. In this image he's come slightly further – here the ghost of the young Elvis Presley visits Johnny Rotten, inducting him into the cult of The Hybrid Practitioner.

While I began to feel like the content was becoming interesting – *or generative* – it occurred to me that formally all I was doing was appropriating an existing convention – I hit a wall for a while . . .

and this was approximately when monsters and cushions showed up.

[images: Elvis monster]

I had kind of been creating monsters *unconsciously* in Hot Rod Biology – my bikini clad girlfriend as Elvis for example – but monsters came, consciously, into this project via a conversation I had with Denise Gonzales Crisp. She didn't really like The Hybrid Practitioner – she felt that the type of practice I'd attempted to describe was merely suffering an identity crisis – was schizophrenic. She also felt I needed to push form more – "push forms harder, and don't be afraid of being ugly", I think she said.

Schizophrenia and ugliness . . . I'd already began to think about monsters, mad scientists, and B-grade horror, before I hung up the phone. The idea that the monstrous, or the grotesque, might drive my exploration of form was kind of exciting.

Around the same time my girlfriend brought me this *monstrosity* . . .

[images: NZ souvenir cushion]

She's always scouring backwater junk stores, and I mentioned how cool it would be if she could find me an Elvis cushion. Of course it occurred to me pretty quickly that the images I had been making might become cushions.

I was interested in the *distance* between the conventions . . .

The Illustrated Capitals – the *reverent* decoration of the almighty printed Word, *serious*, flat, two dimensional, and in *context* – a tool for contemplation . . .

The Souvenir Cushion – the *irreverent* decoration of padding for your arse, no context . . . a tool for comfort!

But equally I was interested in the *similarities* . . . from a different angle might the distance disappear?

I felt like there was a hybrid artefact, *a hybrid statement*, worth pursuing here.

SKIP THIS > [images: distance and perspective]

[images: Elvis '&' monster cap]

Ugliness, is certainly subjective and relative. This image, for me, and in relation to my previous practice *is* ugly.

[images: Elvis '?' monster cap 2]

This has become a developing part of my topic – the search for the grotesque as a strategy with which to critique and challenge the boundaries, *or conventions*, of one's own practice.

[images: Elvis '&' monster cap 3, with Johnny Rotten]

These images were created in Photoshop – a tool with which I'd previously thought you could make only ugly work. I tried my best to 'go wild' with Photoshop's filters and effects . . . things I'd always steered well clear of in fear of making ugly work!

[image: Elvis vs Art Chantry cap 'C']

At the same time, however, I was exploring working by hand with a photocopier. What I found interesting about working in two different ways was how a theme could develop through both processes.

[images: Elvis vs Eliot Earls cap 'E' – good shadow image?]

From this switching between methods I developed an interest in *shadows* as both a formal and conceptual device in my image making process. Monsters hide in shadows. A shadow as the residue of a form, of an image, of an idea. Musically I've been exploring *reverb* and *echo* for the same reasons. Might Bakhtin's dialogic conversation between an original and it's reproduction exist in shadow, or reverb?

Being that I thought there were successful aspects in each, I've also been attempting to combine both methods of working.

[images: Elvis vs Eliot Earls cap 'E' colour]

This is Elvis visiting Eliot Earls. I wasn't sure I was getting much out of this 'visitation' business anymore, and I looked for new strategies to develop the content of the images. For this reason, I pretty much discarded this image, although now I find it really interesting, and I'll come back to it again soon.

Andrew Blauvelt, in his text 'Unfolding Imformation' (Emigré no.40), discusses the notion that mutation is caused by the interjection of a random element into a known and accepted pattern. He states that "recognising patterns makes things intelligible", and that mutation implies both the *replication* of pattern *and* the *interjection* of randomness.

[images: A is for Aristides no.1 - pink]

This was one of the first results from the idea to bring a random element into the content of the image . . . *random* information with which to *hybridise* the narrative of Elvis. Feeling like I had more generative, or exploratory content to work with, I started making images again using both the photocopier and photoshop.

Introducing my project to a visiting designer friend, and discussing this work specifically, the following issues came up . . .

1. He felt that I wasn't creating anything *hybrid* because it looked so 'cut and paste'. I had used the term *cohesive*, and he felt that my images were too obviously separated out, and layered, to be cohesive. It was suggested that the images as *parts* needed to be more carefully constructed into one *whole* piece.

2. He thought that, particularly in my recent pieces, the reference to the convention – the illustrated capital – was getting lost, and that the letterform should be more dominant. It was also suggested that I might look at creating a hybrid letterform that related in some way to the content of the image.

3. We also observed that I had been focusing purely on the image in it's two dimensional form, and that not only would the image be *altered* by it's application to the artefact – the cushion – but that *attempting* to create a hybrid artefact in this way was probably doomed to failure!

It is these issues that I have been dealing with over the couple of weeks prior to this review. Interestingly, and I hadn't thought about this until now, we never really discussed the content of the images?

[images: A: Aristides no.3 – blue on white]

This is work produced as a response to the critique.

[images: B: bitter aloes – green on white]

They are the images that appear, in different colours, on the cushions I've had made.

[images: A: Aristides no.3 – blue on white , and B: bitter aloes – green on white]

The scene is more carefully, or consciously, *constructed*. The images, the *parts*, are more carefully composed in an effort to develop a cohesive whole – I've intentionally tried to graft the images together through composition.

The letterforms here, are hybrid mutations relating to the random connections I made in the scenes. In the image on the left, the letterform is constructed by crossing the Greek letter 'alpha', carved in stone in about 400BC, with an an uppercase 'A' from the blackletter revival typeface 'Gotisch'. I enjoyed this aspect of the making of this image I think, because I felt that I could potentially explore form through content, and content through form.

The application of the image though seems to have lost something? It feels flat. It doesn't look like an exploration of form, it looks more like an attempt to tame form maybe? Making these has made me realise the importance of certain things though . . .

Initially *the shadows* – which I tried to replace conceptually with the overlayed arrows – a device that I originally used in Hot Rod Biology. As I've already mentioned I'm really interested in the potential for shadows to conceptually link images. While they might separate them in space, they also act as a point of connection, a conversation between forms.

Also, and perhaps more importantly, I was not consciously developing a *monster*. In fact I think I was trying to make these look good . . . well, make the connections *good* maybe? Having made the 'A' first, I did start to consider this when making the 'B' . . . I thought that perhaps the monster would come from what Elvis was doing in the scene – consuming his influences . . . or from the construction of the artefact – the cushion.

The issue that struck me most when critiquing the earlier piece though, was the fact I hadn't really given any thought to the outcome, the cushion. Yet, here I was *again*, hung up on the content, and formal construction of the image!

[images: A cushion, and B cushion]

These represent my first attempt to look at the form and construction of the artefact. To be honest they were kind of rushed – I really just wanted to get something made though, test the printing process, and get a feel for the outcome. I also thought it would be important to have them here as a part of this review, so we wouldn't end up looking at, and discussing the images on their own.

Making the cushions has made me aware that if I am to make a hybrid artefact that will be generative and exploratory, the conventions that are sampled and referenced need to inform one another. What disappoints me most about these is that they look like cushions with pictures on them.

I think what I've realised from this is that the *way* things are connected should be an important part of this topic.
How are the forms or conventions grafted into one another? Not just making connections, but trying to make sense of those connections.

SKIP THIS > [images: A: Aristides no.3 – blue on white, and B: bitter aloes – green on white]

[images: most recent 'B' photographed image]

This is a recent iteration of the letter 'B' image. Basically an attempt to bring back the interesting things I felt I'd lost – the shadows, the cut and paste, the scars and the stitches – formal references to conceptual connections. This is not a completed image though. . .

[images: Elvis vs Eliot Earls cap 'E' colour]

my intention is to go back and look at working between photoshop and the photocopier again. Looking back over my work this term it is this process that I've found most interesting . . . dare I say *generative*?

[images: most recent 'B' photographed image]

Much of what I've talked about today has come from the process of making this work, however much of what I've said has really only been consciously considered through the process of writing this. While I don't feel I've come far in terms answering the research questions I've posed, I'm comfortable in knowing that, to some extent, the work has posed those questions.

To summarise, I'm interested in the nature of graphic design's relationship with popular culture – that it at once *feeds* off it and is *consumed* by it. Can the search for the grotesque critique or cause mutation in

the patterns, ***or conventions***, of this system. I'm motivated by the idea that by positioning themselves more consciously within this system the practitioner can transform familiar everyday references into new unexpected outcomes.

I am motivated by the elation that Dr Frankenstein obviously feels when he brings his monster to life . . . "It's alive! It's alive!".