Written response

For this exercise, I selected Michael Rock's seminal essay Designer as Author (1996), which critiques the romanticisation of authorship in graphic design and challenges the myth of the solitary creative genius. Drawing inspiration from Raymond Queneau's Exercises in Style (Queneau, 1998), I re-present Rock's arguments through three stylistic lenses: Retrograde, Litotes, and Metaphoric. Each variation reframes Rock's core proposition that design is a collaborative, interpretative practice rather than a purely authorial one by mirroring Queneau's experimental narrative shifts.

Retrograde

Authorship is not a particularly convincing metaphor for what we understand as design. While it has encouraged designers to rethink process and expand their methods, it also carries problems: it promotes an ahistorical view of design and overstates the power of the lone artist-genius. Rather than imagining the designer as an author, it is more fitting to see design as translation, performance, or direction which are practices rooted in interpretation and orchestration rather than solitary invention.
Meaning does not arise from a single mind but through the meeting of designer, client, audience, and context. Yet design desired for authorship once, believing it would secure artistic legitimacy. Borrowing the language of literature and film, designers aspired to be "auteurs" meaning a singular visionary voices in a culture captivated by individuality and postmodern ideas of authorial power.
As Foucault noted, authorship has shifted historically. Ancient sacred texts circulated without named authors; Renaissance science later required attribution for credibility; eventually literary culture elevated originality and ownership making author a genius. Before this seduction, designers worked as mediators by shaping form, translating ideas, and sharing agency across networks of meaning.
At the core lies the question: what does it truly mean to call the graphic designer an author? By retracing this history, the illusion becomes clear: the "designer-as-author" fantasy compresses a fundamentally collective act into the myth of individual brilliance.

Litotes

What does it really mean to call the graphic designer an author?
The idea is not without charm, yet it is hardly a neutral claim. Designers are not untouched by collaboration, nor do they create in a vacuum fueled by solitary genius. Their work is not free from the influence of clients, audiences, tools, culture, and history.

The authorship metaphor is not without prestige, and design has not been indifferent to such allure. It would not be wrong to say that, at one point, the field hoped authorship might grant legitimacy and intellectual weight.

Designers did not shy away from borrowing the language of literature and film; the dream of being the "auteur" was not insignificant.

Yet authorship has not always equated to originality or brilliance. Ancient sacred texts were not diminished by lacking named authors, and scientific writing did not always rely on personal credit. Authorship itself is not untouched by cultural and legal invention.

Design, by contrast, has never rested solely on origination. It is not free from iteration, interpretation, and shared meaning. The "designer-author" ideal does not capture the collective and interpretive nature of design; nor is it immune to distorting practice into a myth of individual genius.

Design does not lack power, it exercises it differently. Not through solitary authorship, but through shared meaning-making, contextual shaping, and thoughtful mediation.

Metaphoric

The designer is a gardener working in a shared soil, not a solitary genius cultivating rare blooms behind a fence. Their garden is fed by collective compost containing cultural references, client intentions, historical seeds, and the weather of public taste. They do not invent the earth; they tend what grows from it. Their labour is not in claiming authorship, but in observing, pruning, layering soil, and welcoming cross-pollination. Ideas migrate like bees, carrying fragments from other fields. Some plants are native, and others are transplanted through hybrid techniques but none thrive without context. The designer's authorship is quiet yet persistent. It is seen in careful pruning, subtle grafts, new arrangements that alter how a familiar landscape is walked. Their success is not in shouting "I grew this," but in creating a garden others can inhabit, wander, and interpret. In this ecology, design is a cultivation, not domination; growth, not ownership; a shared bloom, never a single name on the stem.

References

Queneau, R. (1998) Exercises in Style. John Calder.
Rock, M. (1996) Designer as Author. [online] Available at:
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