

Book review

Intrigue: the graphic designer's code

Written and designed by Jan Erasmus and edited by Carl Lamprecht. Published by Cybergraphics cc, 2007

Reviewed by Jacques Lange



Books published on South African communication design are rare to find. Sporadically, awards annuals or company showcases see the light, but few books exist that delve into the thinking and creative processes – with substantial depth of discourse – on local communication design and designers. *Intrigue: the graphic designer's code* is one of those rarities that present the career accomplishments, philosophies and work of a highly regarded South African designer, Jan Erasmus.

A big question looms: why would an individual deem it appropriate to publish a book on personal work and thoughts while he is still in the blooming years of his career? Carl Lamprecht, editor of *Intrigue: the graphic designer's code* appropriately asks the same question in his preface to the book: 'Is it a result of egotism?' His answer states: 'I think it is more selfish to hang on to knowledge than to share it. ...if this book achieves something of that [guidance], it has achieved its goal.'

Intrigue is a book designed with the craftsmanship and finesse of a master designer. It utilises 130 illustrations spanning more than three decades of the subject's career to

support the text which provides a visual feast, especially for typography aficionados.

Intrigue consists of twelve chapters. In chapter one, Lamprecht describes the principles that guide his mentor's design philosophy and methodology under the headings: 'A powerful mind', 'Intuition', 'Play', 'Contradiction' and 'Interruption'. In chapter two, Erasmus provides a brief narrative account of his career and intellectual and creative development. In chapters three to twelve, Erasmus expands the narrative with more detailed accounts of his professional development under the titles: 'Photography', 'Illustration', 'Typography' (with subtitles 'Direct mail', 'Type design' and 'Catalogues') and 'Information design' (with subtitles 'Branding', 'Packaging', 'Brochures and magazines', 'Announcements' and 'Interactive multi-media') where he extrapolates his fascination with emerging digital technology, science and philosophy. In each instance, Erasmus provides detailed descriptions of his theoretical influences and conceptual solutions supported by accompanying illustrations. These span his student years in the early 1970s and culminate in *Intrigue: the graphic designer's code* published in 2007.



The book includes iconic South African designs created by Erasmus, such as the calendars for Artone Press (1985) and Photoscan (1988), contributions to *i-jusi* (1996), several contributions to *Émigré Magazine* and promotional Émigré Font Foundry announcements of new fonts to the South African market (1990s). A highlight of Erasmus' illustrious career included in *Intrigue* is his design of the iconic font *Thornface* (1989), inspired by indigenous flora and broadly embraced as one of the beacons of vernacular design in a transforming South Africa in the late 1980s. Erasmus followed *Thornface's* success with the development of the internationally acclaimed fonts *Export Unicase* (2000) and *Transition* (2003).

Intrigue is a book filled with layers of subtexts (or as the subtitle alludes '...: *the graphic designer's code*'), hyperlinked codes that connect diverse narratives in an eloquent, non-linear manner. For instance, one subtext that features in the

preface, introduction and chapter one tells of an esteemed relationship between a passionate mentor (Erasmus, the subject and author) and a talented apprentice (Lamprecht, the editor) and the evolution of their roles into a co-equal collaboration. Other more obtrusive subtexts deal with Erasmus' multidisciplinary approach of practice where his multiple roles as photographer, illustrator, typographer, information designer and multimedia designer engage in multilayered conversations. These highlight his diverse professional interests and talents and cross-reference over multiple chapters and design disciplines. As the book unfolds, the reader discovers that Erasmus is a complex thinker who seeks creative and intellectual inspiration in the domains of popular culture (a lesser interest) and technology (a primary curiosity) supported by an interest in science – he grapples with philosophy, psychology, sociology, mathematics and physics, among others.

Intrigue is a work of personal passion but also a work of commitment to share valuable knowledge. Erasmus states in the 'Conclusion' that : 'There is still so much to investigate, learn and create', a statement that indicates that an *Intrigue 2* might follow in future.

Intrigue: the graphic designer's code documents the yearning of an individual to share his intellectual engagement with the design profession and its multiple dimensions with others, specifically young designers. This initiative needs to be embraced by the South African design community, who should identify and encourage its design heroes to record their histories and theory. *Intrigue* presents a powerful way for us to celebrate local design history, facilitate research and foster discourse in an integrated manner.