

# A COMIC BOOK'S CALLING CARD

GRAPHIC DESIGNER MIKE ESSL ON HOW LOGOS ARE A REFLECTION OF A BOOK'S VISUAL STORYTELLING.

BY MIKE ESSL

My attraction to graphic design started with comic book covers. Like a lot of artistic comic nerds, my preteen friends and I would painstakingly redraw our favorite panels from *Iron Man*. While they drew characters and scenes, I was the guy drawing Iron Man's shiny, machined logo—rivets and all. I was enamored with the lettering's three-dimensional form, as if it were forged by Iron Man himself. By the end of high school, I was drawing my own logos and looking forward to studying graphic design in art school.

In class, the professors taught us that logos should be simple and rely on intimation, not imitation. As young designers, we inherited a set of aesthetic rules that implied good taste: black outlines around a logo were taboo, and evil lurked inside every drop shadow. Instead, Paul Rand's logos for IBM and ABC were cited as models of elegant and effective design. Rand espoused the theory, saying: "A logo cannot survive unless it is designed with the utmost simplicity and restraint." But how can a simple logo survive being crushed by Dark Phoenix?

Comic book logos don't play by the same rules as corporate America. In the Marvel logo universe, typographic marks, sometimes called word marks or logotypes, are designed to inhabit the same worlds as a comic's characters. Before the desktop publishing revolution in the 1990s, logos were drawn by letterers in Marvel's famous bullpen. This lent logos a charming, hand-drawn quality. Although modern logos are often based on existing typefaces, classic Marvel logos were custom drawn to relate stylistically to the title. There are cues to the genre of the comic in almost every Marvel logo. Angular, structured typography can indicate a military or espionage storyline. Pointed, flowing shapes indicate a character who is magical. Amorphous letterforms that appear burned or distressed indicate a monster or supernatural comic.

Understanding Marvel logos means understanding the Marvel Universe, where every character is unique and larger-than-life. Logos are stand-ins for the title characters in the world of the cover, where custom lettering can embody the stylistic traits of the characters it represents. One of the best examples is the 1973 *Ghost Rider* logo, which featured the word Ghost rendered with lettering burning at the edges to convey that the character is supernatural and on fire. The word Rider is more structured and visually echoes Ghost Rider's motorcycle. As if all this weren't enough, the logo also features speed lines to let us know his motorcycle is, indeed, very fast. This approach is the opposite of intimation—it is full-blown imitation that embraces a literal reading of the character. Although designers are trained to avoid this, it works in the Marvel Universe because everything is over-the-top: the writing, the art, the characters, and even the logos.

This lack of subtlety works as an effective marketing tool. When comics were sold on a spinner rack, you could only see the full cover of the first comic on the rack, while the others were obscured by the comic in front, leaving only the logo visible. This meant the logo became a finding aid for readers in a comic book store. To grab the reader's attention, the logo needed to break all the rules I learned in design school. Artists liberally used skewed letterforms, thick outlines, and illustrative ideas like cracks and speed lines in their designs. Loud custom lettering allows a logo to thrive above a high-energy multicharacter fight scene. On a comic book rack, elegance and simplicity was a handicap.

Creating a consistent, recognizable visual identity is a tenet of good logo design, but that wouldn't work in comics. Cover artwork changes wildly from issue to issue. The art can be multicolored or monochromatic, complex or simple. The cover might feature an

