

bubble of meaning. Something could mean anything, and so quickly it could only mean nothing. And all of this echoed the politics of the time: when a sense of things in common was displaced by free-for-all individualism; and when individual liberty became reduced to freedom to consume – if you had the cash – watched over by forces of the state.

The world became a text.

'Language' became a fashion item: a designer-label, to be flaunted and checked. The balloon of speech was inflated, inflated beyond its possible reach. Mundane reality was blocked from view. Each person could inhabit their own

Fellow readers

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Robin Kinross    **Fellow readers: notes on multiplied language**

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*The feeling of self is only the feeling of the particular being affected. Under the exclusive domination of this feeling, every being is its own universe. The winds blow and the sun shines for it and it alone. It is not the feeling of self, but the idea of self that carries man out beyond his own individuality, and places him on a level with all other human beings. He is now invested with a new set of emotions and passions. From being selfish, he has become social.*

James Frederick Ferrier, 1849/50

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RK / London, July 1994

The quotation on the preceding page comes from Ferrier's 'Criticism of Adam Smith's ethical system', the text of lectures given at St Andrews University in 1849/50, and first published in *Edinburgh Review*, no. 74, 1986, pp. 102-7 (quotation at p. 107). See also note 39 of this essay.

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## Fellow readers: notes on multiplied language

### Free-for-all meaning

1. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Tavistock, 1977 [original French edition, 1966], p. 65. The remark is quoted by Raymond Tallis in his *Not Saussure: a critique of post-Saussurean literary theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, p. 58). The clarity, humour and vigorous argument of Tallis's book will provide welcome relief to those lost in the world of muddy theorizing. A good resumé and extension of the case against poststructuralism is made by Brian Vickers in *Appropriating Shakespeare* (Yale University Press, 1993). I read Vickers after completing this essay, with the feeling that the points I make in this first section are accepted wisdom in some quarters. Strong criticism of value-free deconstruction is made by Christopher Norris in *Uncritical theory: postmodernism, intellectuals and the Gulf War* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1992). This book is of special interest in showing a former protagonist changing his mind. Norris's partial recantation and the inbuilt imperviousness to challenge of deconstruction are discussed by Raymond Tallis in articles on 'The survival of theory' in *P. N. Review* (the first in no. 98, 1994, pp. 61–4).

'It is the world of words that creates the world of things'.<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan's motto – extreme, absolute, unreal – sums up as clearly as can any single formulation the tendency of poststructuralist theorizing. Over the last twenty years the quite rarified ideas of a few thinkers in Paris have become common currency in intellectual discussion. And now, late in the day, and after they have been seriously questioned at their source, these ideas have turned up in the rude world of design. A web of associated assertions starting from poststructuralism has spread into architecture, then into other fields of design, including typography. Some typical instances of this theory applied to typography and graphic design are quoted and discussed in an appendix to this essay (page 29). But this tight, self-enclosed circuit of ideas can be adequately described in a brief summary such as the following. We know the world only through the medium of language. Meaning is arbitrary. Meaning is unstable and has to be made by the reader. Each reader will read differently. To impose a single text on readers is authoritarian and oppressive. Designers should make texts visually ambiguous and difficult to fathom, as a way to respect the rights of readers.

This mish-mash of the obvious and the absurd goes under different names: poststructuralism, deconstruction, deconstructivism, and – more generally and much more vaguely – postmodernism. One could have a theological discussion of these terms; but not here. This essay is a loose and informal tour round some of the issues raised by deconstruction in typography and graphic design. I have wandered off the path at times, believing that the academic discussion of typography, and of design in general, is too often hermetic and unreal: in unholy partnership with the proud anti-intellectualism of many practising designers.

Let us go back to the main theoretical source at the root of these ideas about reading. This is the book known as *Cours de linguistique générale* by Ferdinand de Saussure: Course in general linguistics. Saussure was a professor of linguistics at the University of Geneva. He died in 1913, and this book was first published in 1916. Its text is a reconstruction of lectures, based on notes taken by students, and edited by some of his

colleagues. This helps to explain why professional linguists – not to mention amateurs without any special competence in linguistics – have found it an enigmatic and difficult text, although commentaries and improved editions have cleared up some mysteries.<sup>2</sup>

2. The English translation quoted from here is that of Roy Harris (Duckworth, 1983). This may supersede the translation by Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), which has provided the basis for most English-language commentary on Saussure. See also: Roy Harris, *Reading Saussure: a critical commentary on the 'Cours de linguistique générale'*, Duckworth, 1987.

3. Saussure, *Cours*, Part 1, chapter 1: Harris translation, p. 66 and following.

Saussure dismisses the simple-minded notion that words correspond to real objects: that, for example the word 'tree' corresponds to the real thing that we know as a tree. Instead he introduces a more complex notion of what he calls the sign ('la signe'). 'A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern'.<sup>3</sup> And Saussure goes on: 'The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses.' Coming to the end of this discussion he proposes to substitute 'concept' ('concept' in this translation) and 'image acoustique' ('sound pattern') by the terms 'signifié' and 'signifiant', which, in the English translation followed here, are 'signification' and 'signal'.

This pair in combination constitutes the sign.

Saussure then describes the two fundamental characteristics of a sign: that the link between signal and signification is arbitrary; and that the signal is linear in character (it occurs over time). The first of these characteristics is at the root of the debate over typography and the reader.

As one reads Saussure's remarks on arbitrariness, it is hard, I think, to disagree. He says that different languages have different words for the same concept: the animal which the French know as 'un boeuf', the Germans know as 'ein Ochs'. And this is enough to prove the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

Two paragraphs after this Saussure drops in a speculation about semiology, the science which, he predicts, will extend the principles of linguistics to the understanding of every aspect of human life. This is why Saussure has assumed so much importance outside his part in linguistics. A few cryptic remarks in this text became foundation stones for the semiology that was developed half a century later. Semiology became part of the larger project of structuralism, worked out most notably in the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Then later – gradually – semiology and structuralism turned into poststructuralism. The development of Roland Barthes' writing – from the scientific pretensions of the early work, to his frankly poetic later prose – exhibits this transition most clearly. Poststructuralism renounces the notion of the heart, centre or essence; but if it had such a thing (and perhaps its centre lies in its



wearily championing of the periphery?) then this concept of the arbitrariness of the sign lies there. Another two paragraphs further on, Saussure says the following:

The word arbitrary also calls for comment. It must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker. (We shall see later that the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community.)

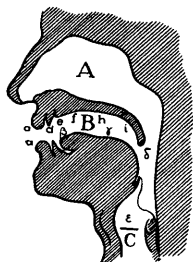
The term implies simply that the signal is unmotivated: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality.<sup>4</sup>

4. Saussure, *Cours*, Part 1, chapter 1: Harris translation, pp. 68–9.

5. 'There is no such thing as "society", there is only individuals and their families'. This is the quotation as made by Stuart Hall, principal analyst of 'Thatcherism', in *Marxism Today*, December 1991, p. 10. Though endlessly quoted, the exact source for the statement is elusive.

Russell A. Berman traces connections between deconstruction and Reaganism in his 'Troping to Pretoria: the rise and fall of deconstruction', *Telos*, no. 85, pp. 4–16. But in his nice remark that 'deconstruction is the restaurant where one can only order the menu ... Let them eat tropes!' (at p. 10), Berman seems to exaggerate deconstruction's purchase on the material world (of paper, in this case).

6. Saussure, *Cours*, Introduction, appendix, chapter 1, Harris translation, p. 42. The version shown below is taken from the original French edition:



It seems that the deconstructionists never read this. Or if they did read it, they never made their disagreement clear. Language, Saussure reminds us, is created by a community, and we use it within the constraints of this larger, communal understanding. In this fundamental sense, signs are not arbitrary, and we would do better to use the term 'unmotivated' to describe the quality of fortuitousness in our pairing of signal to signification. So deconstructionism contradicts Saussure, without acknowledging it. Certainly in its degraded forms, as in the recent typography debate, this theory very simplymindedly asserts that there is no such thing as community, or society – as Margaret Thatcher notoriously formulated it, at around the same time.<sup>5</sup>

Saussure regards language as a collective, social endeavour. But typographers and other designers who share that view should nevertheless have a deep disagreement with Saussure. The language that he considered was almost exclusively spoken language. Saussure's idea of language is a very theoretical and intellectual one. It is less material even than human breath. He remarks that 'a sound is something physical'. Can one sense a tone of disdain here? Then he turns away from such crude materialism to concentrate on concepts and sound patterns. The diagram in the *Cours de linguistique générale* of how sounds are produced by the organs of speech is about as material as Saussure gets.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Cours de linguistique générale* there is not even much sense of human beings talking with or to one another. It is true that Saussure's famous distinction between 'la langue' (the system of language) and 'la parole' (individual acts of speech) makes provision for this, in this second term. But then his emphasis falls so largely on the speaker. And if you look for the form of language that most interests typographers – the language that uses letters, characters, images, of ink on paper, of scans across TV screens, of grids and bit-maps, of incisions in stone – there is a

7. Saussure, *Cours*, Introduction, chapter 6: Harris translation, pp. 24–5.

8. Josef Vachek, *Written language*, The Hague: Mouton, 1973. A helpful survey here is an unpublished PhD thesis by Robert Waller: 'The typographic contribution to language', University of Reading, 1987.

9. See: Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The consequences of literacy', in Jack Goody (ed.), *Literacy in traditional societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 27–68), and these books by Goody (also published by Cambridge University Press): *The domestication of the savage mind* (1977), *The logic of writing and the organization of society* (1986), *The interface between the written and the oral* (1987). Goody's work is illuminatingly scanned in the course of Perry Anderson's high-altitude essay 'A culture in contraflow' in his *English questions* (Verso, 1992, at pp. 231–8). I am grateful to Giovanni Lussu for reminding me about Jack Goody's work, in an article that bears on the themes of this essay: 'La grafica è scittura', *Lineagrafica*, no. 256, 1991, pp. 14–19.

large gap. Early in the lectures, Saussure has some pages on writing, but only to put it in its place: 'A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. The object of study in linguistics is not a combination of the written word and the spoken word. The spoken word alone constitutes that object.'<sup>7</sup> This may have been a revolutionary attitude to adopt then: linguistics had been shaped as a study of language in its written forms. But its legacy has not been helpful to any discussion of the material world of the making and exchange of artefacts: the world to which typography belongs. The wish of semiologists, to study and explain the social world, suffers from this crippling weakness: it has no material foundations. So, after his brief discussion of writing, Saussure confines himself to spoken language. Indeed he uses the word 'language' ('la langue') to mean just 'spoken language'.

Some attempts have been made to correct the blindness of linguistics to writing. From within linguistics itself, one could cite the work of Josef Vachek, and maybe others.<sup>8</sup> From a vantage point outside linguistics, the English anthropologist Jack Goody has produced a stream of books and essays on writing, understood in its full historical and material sense.<sup>9</sup> *The domestication of the savage mind* may be his most accessible and directly relevant book for typography. Goody here points forcefully to the distinctive properties of written language, as a system apart from and in mutual reciprocity with spoken language. His work also has the distinction of examining ways in which writing may be configured other than as continuous text: in tables, lists, formulae, and other related forms for which we hardly have an agreed descriptive terminology. These systems of configuration may be used almost unthinkingly, every working day, by typographers, editors, typesetters and typists. And yet discussions about reading, legibility, print and the future of the book seem to know only continuous text (a page of a novel, most typically) as their object of reference. The real world of typography is far more diverse and awkward. If reflection on what is there before us is not enough to persuade semiologists about the reality and difference of written language, then a reading of Jack Goody should be persuasive. Afterwards it will be impossible to parrot Saussure on 'language'.

#### Shared copy

The recognition and analysis of written language is an essential correction to the Saussurian theory, but it needs to be developed further. There is

writing and there is printing: two different phenomena. Writing exists in one copy; printing makes multiple copies of the same thing. Yes, you can duplicate writing: you can photocopy it, or photograph and make a printing plate from it. The more exact difference is between writing and typographic composition of text. But some such differentiation must be made: between the written and the typographic/printed; or, more widely (to include film, TV, video, tape- and disc-stored information) between the single and the multiple.

Semiology, based on an abstract notion of language that does not recognize the independent life of writing, is no help here. Theorists who do discuss 'writing', but just as some unified, undifferentiated sphere of visible language may have a tool of analysis. However, it is a blunt one, which cannot deal with multiplied language. Although here one should remember that this discussion is being conducted in English, and in this language a rather clear distinction is made between 'writing' and 'printing'. But, for example, German has 'Schrift' as a common term between writing (by hand) and printing (with a machine). Where in English one speaks of 'writing' and of 'type' (ie, words with quite different roots), in German, one speaks just of 'Schrift', or perhaps of 'Handschrift' and 'Druckschrift'. As if to confirm the distinction that English makes, one can judge typographic innocence in an English-speaker by the extent to which they muddle 'writing' and 'printing'. Thus: 'I like the writing [ie, type] on that record cover'. Or: 'please print your name and address' (ie, write in capital letters).

Theorists of spoken and written language cannot divorce their subject from its place and time. Thus Jack Goody's main field of interest has been in Africa and the Near East, and in ancient societies. When Goody touches on European or modern societies, he is alert to the differences introduced by printing; but for the most part he can properly concentrate on written – handwritten – language.

From within the world of typography, Gerrit Noordzij has been a productive and powerful theorist of writing: which he usually takes to include typographic composition of text: 'typography is writing with pre-fabricated letters'.<sup>10</sup> This definition is offered as an alternative way of thinking, within the context of a discussion of graphic design and typography as processes of specification and worldly intervention between texts, commissioners, printers and producers. Noordzij's wish to subsume typography within writing is the purest piece of dogma: an essential item of mental equipment for a master scribe, lettercutter and engraver,

10. Gerrit Noordzij, *De staart van de kat: de vorm van het boek in opstellen*, Leersum: Uitgeverij ICS Nederland, 1991, p. 12. Noordzij can be read in his own idiosyncratic English in the occasional publication *Letterletter*, published by ATypI (Münchenstein), from 1984, and from 1993 by the Enschedé Font Foundry (Zaltbommel). For a critique of Noordzij, see: Paul Stiff, 'Writing and typography: what's the difference?', *Letterletter*, no. 14 (in press).

whose main focus is on the minutest details of letters and their production. But here, in this essay, our focus is on the world that Gerrit Noordzij sees when he puts down his magnifying glass and picks up his telephone: the social world of producers and readers. In this domain, typography and writing are essentially different activities.

Typography deals with language duplicated, in multiple copies, on a material substrate. Here we can add in screen displays, and any other means of multiplying text. And to 'text', we can add 'images' too: the same point applies. The exact repetition of information is the defining feature of multiplied text, and it is what is missing from writing. The historical elaboration of this perception has been made most thoroughly by William M. Ivins in his *Prints and visual communication* and by Elizabeth Eisenstein in her *The printing press as an agent of change*.<sup>11</sup> If printing was not, as Eisenstein sometimes seems to suggest, the lever of change in the history of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, it was certainly a fundamental factor in the changes that took place then. Printing could for the first time provide the steady and reliable means for the spreading and sharing of knowledge. Science and technology could be developed, ideas could be disseminated and then questioned. With a stable and common text for discussion, a critical culture could grow. Argument had a firm basis on which to proceed.

The emphasis of historians of print culture, such as Eisenstein, has tended to be on books, partly perhaps for the mundane reason that these are the printed documents that survive most abundantly. It is certainly harder for a historian to investigate newspapers or street posters: harder to locate surviving copies, and to consider their effects. Indeed this branch of history has become known as 'the history of the book'. A book is, most characteristically, read by one person at a time, and often that person will be alone. One can counter this perception by recalling the practice – now declining – of reading aloud, in churches, in schools and other institutions, and in the home. Texts are also read alone-in-public: on buses, in parks, in libraries. So reading often has a visible and apparent social dimension. But its truer and perhaps more real social dimension lies in the reading that happens when one person picks up a printed sheet and turns its marks into meaning. The page – it could be a screen too – is then the common ground on which people can meet. They may be widely dispersed in space and time, unknown and unavailable to each other. Or they may know each other, and come together later to discuss their reading of the text. Then the social dimension of the text may

11. William M. Ivins, *Prints and visual communication*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953; Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The printing press as an agent of change: communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. The social dimension of printing is more evident in the book that opened up this field of history: Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The coming of the book: the impact of printing 1450–1800*, New Left Books, 1976 [original French edition, 1958].

become a group of people around a table, pointing to the text, quoting from it, arguing, considering.

A text is produced by writers, editors and printers. With luck, if they keep their heads down, designers might find a role somewhere here too. The text is composed, proofed, corrected, perhaps read and corrected further. Then it is multiplied and distributed. Finally it is read alone but in common, for shared meanings. When one starts to think along these lines, the semiology of texts and images doesn't seem to help much. Yes, 'signification' can be identified as part of a larger process. And within this small part, what of the 'arbitrary link' between signification and signal? Saussure's too-little noticed suggestion that 'unmotivated' is a better term than 'arbitrary' helps: because 'arbitrary' is not what typography is about at all.

The juxtaposition that one finds happening in typography is easy to grasp. It is the link between a keyboard and a monitor; between manuscript copy and a laser-printed proof; between information on a disc and on sheets of text on film; and finally, and differently, between the page and the reader. The links between these pairs are, we try to ensure, anything but arbitrary. Correcting proofs, with its attempt to turn 'arbitrary' into 'intended', can stand as the clearest instance of this defining characteristic of typography.

The argument made here is that deconstruction and poststructuralist theory can't account for the material world. The only material it knows is air: and its foundations are built not even on air, but on the entirely abstract and intellectual.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, when it takes on typography, the huge mistake that poststructuralist theory makes is not to see the material nature of typographic language.<sup>13</sup> Here screen display, because it is indeed so fluid – materially so – probably should be considered separately. But certainly in printing, language becomes real and materially present: ink on paper. Here lies the responsibility of the designer of printed matter: to bring into existence texts that will never be changed, only – if one is lucky – revised and reprinted. The idea that design should act out the indeterminacy of reading is a folly. A printed sheet is not at all indeterminate, and all that the real reader is left with is a designer's muddle or vanity, frozen at the point at which the digital description was turned into material. Far from giving freedom of interpretation to the reader, deconstructionist design imposes the designer's reading of the text onto the rest of us.<sup>14</sup>

This argument against poststructuralism in typography is not directly

12. This point was first made for me by Sebastiano Timpanaro in his essay 'Structuralism and its successors', *On materialism*, (New Left Books, 1976 [original Italian edition, 1970], pp. 135–219). I tried to amplify it in two articles: 'Semiotics and designing', *Information Design Journal*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1986, pp. 190–8; 'Notes after the text', *Information Design Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1986, pp. 75–8.

13. Among more recent essays in this field, see: Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, 'Type writing: structuralism and writing', *Emigre*, no. 15, 1990. In their theoretical preamble, Lupton and Miller misread Saussure's 'arbitrary' (see above, p. 7), and then apply poststructuralist theory to typeface design – as if this is what constitutes typography. In a later essay on 'structure' in typography, Miller does discuss whole passages of text and their configuration, but to less clear effect: in *Eye*, no. 10, 1993, pp. 58–65.

14. Paul Stiff succinctly takes apart the 'designer-centred ideology' of deconstructionism in *Eye*, no. 11, 1993, pp. 4–5.

about style, nor is it about tradition and breaks with tradition. It is a social argument. Saussure's formulation, already quoted, that 'the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community' makes the point firmly. Too firmly, because it seems to leave out the creative aspect of language, of syntax especially, and of the ways in which every one of us mints these signs freshly, with new meanings, every day.

The theme of language as the possession of a community was developed by Benedict Anderson in the course of his book *Imagined communities*.<sup>15</sup> This book is one of the handful of general works on history and politics that should be dear to typographers, because it takes notice of printing; in fact printing is at the heart of Anderson's thesis. In one chapter Anderson weaves together the rise of capitalism, the spread of printing, the history of languages, and the 'origins of national consciousness'. Arbitrariness is acknowledged. He writes about alphabetic languages, as against ideographic: 'The very arbitrariness of any system of signs for sounds facilitated the assembling process.' But, unlike the post-structuralists, he does not stop there. 'Nothing served to "assemble" related vernaculars more than capitalism, which, within the limits imposed by grammars and syntaxes, created mechanically-reproduced print-languages, capable of dissemination through the market.' But this is not a reductive account of mere capitalist exploitation. Anderson continues:

These print-languages laid the base for national consciousness ... they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. Speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally-imagined community.

This 'imagined community' may be difficult for some people to grasp: particularly if they live within the community of one of the dominant languages of the world. But even in the English-speaking metropolis where these words are being written, it can be understood and felt. Greek, Italian and Irish newspapers are sold at corner shops in this

15. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*, Verso, 1983. The quotations that follow are from p.47.

neighbourhood: serving their readers here as conductors or life-lines out into the larger sphere of their linguistic-cultural community. This may describe the case for some, probably older readers. For others from those communities, and for us too – the mother-tongue English-speakers – the local weekly newspaper is the place where we come together, where we read the neighbourhood. The activity of reading, as Benedict Anderson puts it, may take place ‘in the lair of the skull’, but it has this social extension.<sup>16</sup> We always read in common, with fellow readers.

16. Anderson, *Imagined communities*, p. 39.

#### Places and nets

Some qualifications need to be made to this argument. I have been stressing the ‘in-common’ element of reading, against the idea that this is a wilful, arbitrary process, without an intersubjective dimension. But as an extreme of ‘in-common’ reading, one thinks of conditions in totalitarian societies. In China at the time of the the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong’s ‘little red book’ became – despite its praise of contradiction and dialectics – the emblem of a society in which an attempt was made at coercion even into feeling in unison. The book was a badge, as well as a manual of ‘correct thinking’. Like the trim, beautifully made jackets into whose breast pockets it slotted, the ‘little red book’ was a model of fitting, unobtrusive design and production: but this uniform became oppressive. The project of complete, totalitarian standardization is inhuman, impossible, and will always eventually collapse. After a while, people rebel.

To the list of the non-determinable tendencies in reading, we can add that texts age and travel: or their contexts change both in time and place. Each generation, as well as each person, will find different meanings in a text. Much that is fresh in writing and thinking comes through recovery of old texts, and through reading them against the grain of current orthodoxy in an attempt to discover the original habits of thought and language in which the work was written.<sup>17</sup>

Thus among the freshest of recent tendencies in music has been the uncovering of ‘early music’, by the attempt to understand and re-attain its original conditions of production. But, against any idea of static and finally knowable pieces, it is clear that there can only be performances of their time and place. Take the example of J. S. Bach’s Matthew Passion: ‘authentic performances’ in the 1990s differ markedly from those in 1970s. The most moving and convincing readings are those that – perhaps just through their concentration on ‘the work itself’ – speak

17. Here I am thinking especially of the art historian Michael Baxandall in his books *Painting and experience in fifteenth-century Italy* (Oxford University Press, 1972) and *The limewood sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (Yale University Press, 1980). His book on method, *Patterns of intention* (Yale University Press, 1985), discusses these and related themes in ways that design theorists could learn much from.

18. First performances took place in London in February 1993. The production was the initiative of the promoter, Ron Gonsalves, with the support of the conductor Paul Goodwin and the director Jonathan Miller.

more directly to us. This was certainly the case in the recent 'performed' version of the work.<sup>18</sup> This production discarded the conventions of the concert performance (white ties, tails, diva dresses, upright posture) – often then uneasily situated in a church – and joined the work instead to the sphere of the everyday reality of the audience (jeans and sweaters, gestures and perambulation). Somehow this helped set free the emotional power in the Passion story, especially for the non-believer, for whom the work may otherwise remain a long-distance and largely 'aesthetic' experience. The audience, grouped around the action in stacked scaffolded seating, entered the event more intimately than is usual. The acting-out was quite limited: a touch on the shoulder, a gesture of the head, and not much more. But just in this very constraint it gained in effect. One could point to some historical legitimation for this performance (the work was felt to be surprisingly theatrical and operatic by its first audiences in Leipzig in the 1730s), but this was at most a starting point rather than a complete programme to emulate or recreate.

The 'reading' that is given before an audience gathered under one roof – or even that is broadcast on television – is of course a different matter to the reading that is the concern of this essay. Though, by comparison and contrast, it may illuminate. The director of the performance, in collaboration with others, presents an interpretation, a reading. We the audience receive it and interpret that interpretation; and our attention interacts with and may affect this interpretation. Afterwards, with others who have been there, we consider, discuss, develop, modify, revise our interpretations. These have been different experiences; maybe quite wildly different, if members of an audience bring very different assumptions and beliefs to the event (say, people of different religious beliefs at the Matthew Passion). This may be why theatre can be so vivid an experience in small communities, where audience members have shared pasts and a sense of who each other is. And it may be why theatre in a large city – however technically assured – can be such a desolate experience. Whatever the composition of the audience, there is a common event by which to measure. And the sense of community that may be engendered at such a performance is, of course, what makes the difference between public performance and private reading. But joint reflection over something that has been shared can happen with both these experiences, of watching and of reading. Both have 'public' and 'private' dimensions, if in different measures.

'The truth lies somewhere in between' may be a truism, but one that



is also true in this case, or in these infinite particular cases of people reading texts. One only has to think of any reader turning the pages, misunderstanding, turning back to see what was said before, sneaking a look at the last chapter, being distracted by a phone call or the demands of a child, perhaps falling asleep and dreaming around the text, and then returning to this business of turning marks into meaning. The process is individual and unpredictable. As if we needed a designer to make this so! And yet the text is there as an irresistible and multiple fact: a common ground. For any writer, the intersubjective dimension of reading comes vividly to life when one hears from a friend that they have been reading something you wrote. Then you may reach for your copy of the text and read it again, but this time in the voice of that other reader, turning the words over, wondering what she or he made of them.

Computer-based means of transmitting texts are no doubt introducing fundamental changes to the model that is here taken as characteristic of reading. Text and images organized as nodes on a network, as in hypertext, or intercut and layered with other information and other kinds of media (animated images, sound) – this provides a different experience from that of reading a printed page. And here the deconstructionist rhetoric about the active reader may have more truth in its descriptions. At least here there really is fluidity and the possibility of change, as there hardly is in printed deconstruction.

Debates over the coming of the 'electronic book', at the expense of the printed one, have always seemed a little futile.<sup>19</sup> Futurist visionaries tend to underestimate the dimensions of bodily comfort and cost. Reading cheap small books in bed can still be a great pleasure. The dead duck of 'legibility' is hardly the issue here. Much more critical – apart, of course, from content – is page size, weight, openability and flappiness, lighting, temperature of the room, and how many pillows you have. Sitting in an upright chair at a screen brings a more serious air to the processes of reading, and there would be some sense of contradiction in reading a thriller that way. To read an intimate letter sent over the wires to your terminal may also feel a little odd. The present upsurge in this mode of communication must bring large changes. One already noticeable effect is that an informal, unedited style which goes with private communication is spreading into multiplied communication. Electronic mail is fine; but not if this becomes the model for all communication. The formality that multiplication and publication demands of text carries a social function. And the social necessity of 'in-common' reading, which

19. Among recent works in this genre, Jay David Bolter's *Writing space* (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991) is of interest here in its deployment of poststructuralist theory to rationalize hypertext.

was won for us by printing, remains – even if it is now carried by other ways of transmitting text. If this is lost, then we really will all be reduced to ‘individuals and their families’.

#### Time and place of modernity

My book *Modern typography*, first published in 1992, is shaped by an idea about history. Its premiss is that modern typography is a long and still unfinished story, with its roots in developments in England and France around 1700. It was then that consciousness about the activity of printing began to be evident. ‘Typography’ really dates only from then: before that time, there was just ‘printing’. If early printing was consciously done, that consciousness was not articulated and disseminated. So typography is printing made conscious: printing explaining its own secrets with its own means of multiplying texts and images. And so typography is part of the long haul of ‘enlightenment’: of making knowledge accessible and spreading it, of secularization, of social emancipation. No doubt this thesis is oversimplified and could be infinitely modified with further research. But sometimes it is necessary to ‘think crudely’: as a start, and to get a discussion going.<sup>20</sup>

20. Support comes from Bertolt Brecht: ‘The most important thing is to learn to think crudely’. And see the commentary on this by Walter Benjamin, in English translation: *Understanding Brecht*, New Left Books, 1973, at pp.81–2.

The bulk of *Modern typography* was written rather quickly in 1985–6. Then there started what proved to be a long process of trying to get it published. Established publishers did not know quite what to make of it. The book seemed to fall between the category of academic history and that of popular exposition. It was a work that contained a good deal of factual information and yet was one that engaged in current debates. This spanning of categories was part of its point. I wanted to draw the attention of practising designers to the perspective of history, but to a history that was different from the received, often tired accounts. Equally, for academic historians, I hoped to shift their perceptions of history by opening the subject up to present issues of practice.

In the years between completing the bulk of the text and its eventual publication, I tried to keep up with current developments. For example, the spread of desktop publishing – although initially conceived of as a marketing device – seemed to confirm the thesis of ‘modern typography’. (It was also the means by which I could eventually produce my book.) This was another step in the movement of typography out of specialism and into the ordinary world. The extent of the desktop-publishing revolution is such that it is becoming hard now to conceive of ‘non-practitioners’. Certainly anyone with access to a computer and a laser printer is

a practitioner: this means most people in the 'professions' of western society, including the academic historians mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

Around the time that *Modern typography* finally came out, an important piece of historical research was published, but too late for me to take account of it. In an article James Mosley discussed and reproduced – some for the first time – illustrations made as part of the investigations of the Académie des Sciences in Paris, around 1700.<sup>21</sup> These images confirm the importance of the work of the Académie, not just in the design of letterforms (the 'romain du roi'), but also in the attempt at a larger systematization of typography. In particular, one of these illustrations outlines – if cryptically – a system of type body sizes that relates directly to the system of measurement of inches and feet in general use then in France. The Académie's system, which was implemented at the Imprimerie Royale, predates the system formulated nearly a hundred years later by François-Ambroise Didot, which gave continental Europe the Didot point (still in use, though being driven out by the DTP point as well as by metric measurements). In the 1730s and 1740s, Pierre Simon Fournier had formulated his system, and this has always been given credit as the first real system of measurement for typographic materials. It seems now that the Académie gave us more than Fournier ever acknowledged: indeed, he made fun of these unworldly theoreticians and their impractical ideas about letter design. And the Académie's engraved plates, in their juxtaposition of a general view of the work process and annotated technical drawings of tools, seem to have been the models for the celebrated plates of the *Encyclopédie* (to which Fournier contributed). Maybe one can risk a moral to this story. It would be that unworldly investigators can provide us with schemes that may, surprisingly, be of great practical value.

The writing of *Modern typography* was spurred on by my context of place and time: Britain in the mid-1980s. The book's thesis of the 'unfinished story' of the modern was given shape and confirmation by a lecture that Jürgen Habermas had given in 1980, about 'modernity' as an 'incomplete project'.<sup>22</sup> Habermas's text was also a document of its time: that moment when the simultaneous and not unconnected phenomena of radical-conservatism in politics and of postmodernism in art, architecture and design, were beginning to take effect in the western world.

The thesis that modernity is not yet finished still has close resonance with the special situation of Britain. Here, in the 1980s, the political-

21. James Mosley, 'Illustrations of typefounding engraved for the *Description des arts et métiers* of the Académie Royale des Sciences, Paris, 1694 to c. 1700', *Matrix*, no. 11, 1991, pp. 60–80.

22. An English translation was first published in *New German Critique*, no. 22, 1981, and reprinted as 'Modernity: an incomplete project', in: Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern culture*, Pluto Press, 1985, pp. 3–15.

23. These ideas were then being powerfully formulated in Neal Ascherson's journalism, reprinted in his *Games with shadows* (Radius, 1988). Earlier, in the 1960s and 1970s, essays in the *New Left Review* by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn had (certainly for this reader) established the groundplan of this view of British history. Anderson's *English questions* (Verso, 1992) comments on and reprints some of his contributions. Tom Nairn's *The enchanted glass* (Radius, 1988) took his arguments further, in a sustained and acid critique of 'Britain and its monarchy'. And also in the tercentenary of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, the pressure group Charter 88 was formed, to articulate demands for constitutional modernization. Its leading light, Anthony Barnett, had been a member of the *New Left Review* editorial board.

cultural revolution of the new conservatism was being vigorously enacted. The broad national consensus that had been established after 1945 began, with its institutions, to be dismantled. This made itself evident in the discarding and disparagement of the modern architecture and design that had accompanied reforms in the public sphere (housing, education, transport, the cultural sector). If it had not been clear before, it became evident then that the structures of government, and of public life more widely, were, in Britain, still thoroughly determined by legacies from pre-democratic, pre-modern times.<sup>23</sup> We had avoided the sharper experience of our continental neighbours, and evolved an organic pattern, which, if it has some virtues of informality and flexibility, still has grave weaknesses. No proper, written constitution; an unreformed monarchy, and no popular sovereignty; none of the written codes that provide safeguards to citizens, especially against the state – the charges run on, to make a long list. And 'Britain' is itself a confused concept: is it the United Kingdom? Or just 'England', as it is often called by reflex. But where then are Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (and what is 'Ireland')? So here in 'Ukania', more than anywhere else, it seems daft to celebrate the junking of the modern: something we have never properly had, and whose lack we still suffer from.

By concentrating on the large and long historical condition of 'modernity', and distinguishing that from 'modernism', one jumps over the immediate, ephemeral debates over style of appearance. The long view is salutary, calming, and durable, in keeping the short-lived in perspective. A danger in this approach – not wholly or consistently avoided in my book – is that too great an emphasis is placed on the rather abstract, almost structural and invisible themes of modernity. Standardization and the creation, agreement and implementation of norms; explanation of the processes of typography; work on the classification of typographic elements, and on the vocabulary of their description: such matters – though they can raise passions in the participants who debate and try to implement them – are indeed often dry and secondary.

The particular artefact, with all its material and formal qualities, provides the focus of a designer's attention, often to the point of distraction from other considerations. But it offers a point of resistance to the dangers of abstraction. Here, always and inevitably to one side of all theorizing, and not finally to be captured by those means, is this thing. Deal with it!

### Critical practices

The graphic designer Otl Aicher attempted to make some critical response to the world of the postmodern. His perspective – his history – was that of someone who had become a modern designer in the 1940s in Germany, with all the political resonance that this suggests. As well as a designer, Aicher was a kitchen-philosopher (and a philosopher of cooking and kitchens too). His writings through the 1980s, until his accidental death in 1991, usually appeared in typographic formats of his own or his studio's design.<sup>24</sup> Their strong polemics and dogmatics go together with a very clear approach to design. Aicher stood out for and tried to embody much that is argued for here. Typography results in material products. These things should be communications, not works of art or personal designer-expressions. They circulate in our common world, and must be so judged. Design is thus a completely social act: part of the social texture.

Over the last years of his life, Aicher was thinking and working around a particular set of themes. Modernist design had developed on from how it had been earlier in the century, even into the 1950s and 1960s. It needed to become more organic. Simple geometry and simple grid-design weren't adequate. Yet there needn't and mustn't be any relapse into irrationalism or neo-classicism. The latter, especially, should still be read as a sign of totalitarianism. Centrally arranged texts set in capital letters fail to show meaning clearly enough. But worse: they are authoritarian. Text set in lowercase letters and with fixed word-spaces (ie, unjustified) embodies principles of equality and informality. Aicher wanted a republican typography. And, trying to live out these ideas fully, he began to think of the cluster of designers and other workers among whom he lived as belonging to an 'autonomous republic', with aspirations towards self-sufficiency, at Rotis, between the 'Länder' of Bayern and Baden-Württemberg in the south of Germany.<sup>25</sup> An 'Institute for Analogical Studies' was established there. Against the abstraction of digital, analogue was real, material, concrete. To take a familiar instance: the hands on a clock face give a physical analogy for time. We have a model to hang on to and work with. The merely numerical information of a digital device may be much more precise, but it is abstract, elusive, and so less easy to do anything with. It is significant that analogical language is so often bodily ('hand', 'face').

The products of Aicher's philosophy, both typographic and in other areas of design, had an often steely and sleek certainty. If his philosophy

24. The work of most relevance here is his *Typographie* (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1988), but readers who know Aicher only through this book will miss the larger frame of his ideas. To grasp that, one needs to see and read his quite large corpus of recent writings. Among them: *Die Welt als Entwurf*, Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1991 [in English as *The world as design*, 1994]; *Schreiben und Wiedersprechen*, Berlin: Gerhard Wolf Janus-Press, 1993.

25. A book, privately published in 1987, gave a picture of the community and its ideas: Hans Hermann Wetcke (ed.), *In Rotis*.

had a 'green' dimension, its characteristic colours were black, grey, silver and dazzling white. Despite his embrace of the organic, he still wanted pages of text to present an even colour: neither between words nor between lines should there be excessive space. The typeface that he designed in the 1980s, called Rotis, was an attempt to exemplify these theories, and it has a rather theoretical and dogmatic air. Pages of text set in Rotis (in any of its variants) according to the doctrine of even colour do not, I think, invite the reader.

Otl Aicher's typography could be compared to the architecture of his friend Norman Foster.<sup>26</sup> Its final products sometimes seem to belie the good thoughts that apparently generated them. Immaculate surfaces – as in the forbiddingly white and smooth paper of Aicher's book *Typographie* – have an anti-democratic feeling: they repel dialogue. So too Foster's buildings have tried to embody principles of openness and dialogue (for example, a workplace designed without hierarchy in its plan), while including elements of the monumental (the huge staircase in Foster Associates' London office) or the impenetrable (reflective materials). Yet in a context of unprincipled shoddiness and inane pretentiousness, such quality of finish and clarity of thought have been refreshing. Aicher's work is an example, but one with dogmatic tendencies that need to be contested.

Here one could turn to the work of another typographer and writer, Jost Hochuli. Working in St Gallen, Switzerland, away from the pressures of the metropolitan centres of Basel or Zurich, Hochuli may be cited as someone who has worked through and out of dogma, while maintaining a strongly principled approach. Though formed in Swiss modernist typography, he has been able, as he developed, to let coexist in his work both this approach and the new traditional approaches of (say) the later Jan Tschichold. A mentor of his, Rudolf Hostettler, also of St Gallen, showed the way along this path. More recently some of Hochuli's book-design work has shown a fusion of both tendencies within one piece. This resistance to dogma was articulated by Hochuli in a lecture of 1991 on 'book design as philosophy'.<sup>27</sup> The argument takes as its motto, the first paragraph of Immanuel Kant's essay of 1784, 'An answer to the question: "What is enlightenment"':

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use

26. Aicher was the designer, with a strong editorial contribution, to a planned series of books (reaching three volumes): *Norman Foster: buildings & projects*, Chiddingfold: Watermark, 1989, 1991. I reported on the venture in 'The book of Norman', *Blueprint*, no. 51, 1988, pp. 27–8.

27. Jost Hochuli, *Buchgestaltung als Denkschule*, Stuttgart: Edition Typografie, 1991.

28. Hochuli, *Buchgestaltung als Denkschule*, p. 5.

The quotation here is given in H. B. Nisbet's translation from: Hans Reiss, *Kant: political writings*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 54.

29. I attempted to make a small gathering of such work in 'More light!', *Quarter Point*, no. 3, 1993, pp. 4–6. This appeared in a short-lived publicity magazine of Monotype Typography, hampered by the usual constraints of such a context.

Among the designers whose work was shown were George Mackie, Jost Hochuli, Karel Martens, Jack Stauffacher and Jerry Cinamon. The exercise suggested that one could make a substantial anthology along these lines: though the argument against reproduction might forbid it.

30. Jost Hochuli, *Detail in typography*, Wilmington: Compugraphic, 1987. See also his *Designing books*, Wilmington: Agfa Compugraphic, 1990.

31. Jost Hochuli suggests this in some severe remarks on Aicher's *Typographie*, in *Buchgestaltung als Denkschule*, p. 21.

32. Erik Spiekermann, *Rhyme & reason: a typographic novel*, Berlin: Berthold, 1987, at pp. 13–15. The argument appeared first in the original German edition: *Ursache & Wirkung: ein typografischer Roman*, Erlangen: Context, 1982, at pp. 13–15.

it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!<sup>28</sup>

This critical spirit distinguishes the work of numbers of typographers who have worked free of the ideological polarities that were present before the 1970s and the onset of postmodernism in design.<sup>29</sup> In their work, 'principle' tends to mean attention to meaning and to the details of configuration, to production technique and materials. Thus, as well as producing a stream of exemplary work, Hochuli has written illuminatingly on 'detail in typography'.<sup>30</sup> Here is a place of more intelligent, less assuming resistance to the 'current nonsense' against which Otl Aicher inveighed – but against which he could only finally erect a style.<sup>31</sup> The style-free or style-indifferent work of these anti-dogmatic but principled typographers seems to represent, in a microcosm, the spirit of enlightenment: appropriate means, chosen consciously, without regard to the prevailing spirit.

#### Talking in public

There is a paradox of typography. While printing is a prime means of enlightenment and demystification, discussion of it has tended to be the preserve of specialists. Books about typography are often made to be ostentatious specimens of the art of printing: few copies sold at high prices. The contradiction here becomes more acute the more that use of the means of typography is dispersed into the hands of lay users. Office secretaries can now take decisions about letterspacing, hyphenation procedures, and much else, in the word-processing and desktop-publishing programs that they use. Meanwhile the typography club members talk amongst themselves. The 'art of fine printing' aura of typography seems only to become reinforced in public perception.

Could typography be a topic of regular and intelligent discussion in newspapers? The typographer Erik Spiekermann set off this hare in his book *Rhyme & reason*, in which he complained that one could never read discussion of typography there.<sup>32</sup> If music, architecture, cookery and gardening have critics and columnists, then why not typography? It is a more fundamental topic than much that is discussed in public places. But it is only when newspapers change their design that one sees any discussion of typography in their pages. Certainly in Britain these redesigns are usually followed by surprisingly passionate letters to the editor, with comments from lay-people about typefaces, column widths, treatment of

pictures, and so on. This phenomenon suggests that ordinary people do have a latent consciousness of how they process the pages they read. This is especially true of newspapers, with which one may form a close, sometimes demanding attachment. When a paper gets redesigned, it is as if someone has replaced your familiar soft old shirt by a scratchy new one.

In 1992 the *Guardian* newspaper published a surprising review of a book on René Magritte.<sup>33</sup> The writer, David Hillman, was the designer who in 1988 had given that newspaper its new Continental-European face. Hillman's review was almost exclusively devoted to the design of the book. There was some sort of news story here, because the book's designer, David King, had been notorious in the 1970s for his vigorous, sometimes strident graphic design, often done for sections of the Trotskyite Left in Britain. Now he was entering the quiet fields of book design. Hillman's discussion was disappointingly thin, and it was not followed up.

In 1993 the typographer John Ryder's book *Intimate leaves from a designer's notebook* was published. It has a chapter on 'The typography critic', in which he starts off with a reference to Spiekermann's idea and to the review by Hillman.<sup>34</sup> Ryder seems to want public typography criticism. He writes about the visual editor – that rare person who can spot a missing ligature, but who also reads for content – and suggests that a typography critic should have such abilities. But after the first page of this essay, we leave behind newspapers and are in the world of limited editions, of the scholar-typographers Stanley Morison and Giovanni Mardersteig, and one knows for sure that one has entered the cosy gentleman's club of rarified typography because Ryder refers to these two men just by their initials, set in judiciously spaced small capitals. John Ryder makes this argument for typography criticism in a book that was printed by letterpress in 400 numbered copies, of which 80 are singled out for special quarter-goatskin binding. The 'ordinary' copies are priced at £85, the special ones at £160.

Ryder's book illustrates the blind alley that typography very often finds itself in. Despite his stated dislike of the book as art-object and his commitment to trade editions, in this instance at least John Ryder condemns himself to the immobility of the deep padded club armchair. But Spiekermann's book suffers another kind of self-limitation. It was first published by a consortium of typesetting houses, then further editions were published by the manufacturing company Berthold. It was not for sale through the book trade. Although *Rhyme & reason* has the aim of

33. David Hillman, review of David Sylvester, *Magritte* (Thames & Hudson, 1992), *Guardian*, 18 June 1992.

34. John Ryder, *Intimate leaves from a designer's notebook*, Newtown, Powys: Gwasg Gregynog, 1993.



explaining principles and subtleties of typography in ordinary language, and with plentiful visual analogies, it may be doomed to stay in the design studio. The form of the book – it is very consciously a nice little object – does not help its argument.

These are stray episodes in a frustrated discussion. Perhaps, on one view, typography needs or deserves to remain a minority pursuit, with correspondingly restricted discussion. It may indeed be like 'chess and other specialist subjects'.<sup>35</sup> Yet it has not attained even the recognized minority status of chess. It is at once entirely widespread in its effects and hidden in its public acknowledgement.

#### Common sense

The argument made here is that we read in common. Texts become meeting places, grounds for open discussion between people. This line of thought springs from the European Enlightenment, and from the practices and institutions that began to realize these ideals. In his first book Jürgen Habermas described the 'public sphere' – an arena in which the life of a society was openly and freely discussed – as it took shape in Europe through the eighteenth century and in its development into the age of mass communication.<sup>36</sup> There is some risk of building myths about the 'age of Enlightenment', and about the fluid communication that went on in the salons of Paris and coffee houses of London, in the scientific societies, and in the pages of encyclopaedias and of journals of general interest. But one can hold on to certain core Enlightenment ideals without needing to believe in any golden age of the eighteenth century. Or perhaps now, at the end of the twentieth century, one has to put this more minimally: it is still possible to hold beliefs; not everything can be entirely explained as a function of power and self-interest, although there is certainly a lot of that about; absolute relativism is not just terminal – it leads on to absolute cynicism – but is also logically incoherent. The theorists who accept or even advocate a state of complete relativism cannot account for their own position. The out-and-out relativists say 'anything can be said and we can have no grounds for criticism: everything is of equal validity, equal undecidability'. But in saying that they use the use the voice and the tone of reason (it may well be a salaried teacher speaking). They use an instrument they profess to deny.<sup>37</sup> And, if the idea of the impossibility of common agreement is true, why should we bother to listen to the person who proclaims it? Why should they expect us to respond? Why speak or publish?

35. This was suggested to me by Michael McNay, arts editor of the *Guardian*, in a letter (4 February 1993), after I had raised the idea of that paper publishing typography criticism.

36. Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, London: Polity Press, 1989 [original German-language edition, 1962].

37. Brian Vickers (*Appropriating Shakespeare*, p. 48) traces this contradiction to the poststructuralist muddling of Saussure's 'langue' and 'parole'. The second category (individual acts of speech) is blocked from view by the assumption that 'la langue' (the system of a language) is all that language is.

Two broad and related ideas live on in the continuing stream of thought and action that flows from the Enlightenment. The first is the critical approach. Kant's simple formulation 'have the courage to use your own understanding' remains. It remains true both in respect of current fashions (that 'meaning is undecidable'), and of now less fashionable beliefs (that meanings can be known and shared). The critical approach questions: and it questions its own assumptions as part of a refusal to take anything unquestioned. There are no beliefs – not of a golden age, nor of transparent communication – that can stand free of these questions and doubts. In this way the critical approach will always live on, never quite satisfied. It is coloured by dissatisfaction, even melancholy: it lives in the contexts in which it finds itself, but questions the terms of those contexts, and is often unhappy with them.

The second still vital part of this stream is the principle of dialogue. Self-interest, coercion and domination exist, often very powerfully and suffocatingly. But dialogue and free exchange can happen. And there is the possibility of a mutual sharing of views and information, between people. Freely-arrived-at agreement is possible. As illustration, one thinks most readily of small groups of people in discussion. Musical performances in small ensembles can provide vivid metaphors of the dialogue principle. But agreement-through-dialogue can happen in the larger world: democratic constitutions, political treaties and accords are evidence of this – often fragile, of course.

These two connected principles of criticism and dialogue underpin what is argued here for typography. The reproduction and distribution of text is part of the life-blood of social-critical dialogue. The argument for openness and clarity in typography is made, most importantly, for this reason. It is not a question of 'legibility' or of mere appearance, whether 'traditional', 'classical', 'modern', 'classic modern', or anything else. It is now clear that 'modern' in style came to provide – despite the best professions of the democratic impulse of modernism – an immaculate surface that leaves no room for dialogue.<sup>38</sup> There has to be something – in the text or the image, in the way these are configured and made material – that allows a place for dialogue: a foothold, or perhaps an 'eye-and-hand-hold', in which the reader can grip, and then have a place from which to respond. This refers to the way in which the words are written, to the nature of the images, but also to the qualities of their material embodiment: disposition of information, the visual forms in which it is configured, texture and colour of substrate, the bulk and weight of the

38. This thought lies behind an essay I wrote in criticism of notions of value-free design: 'The rhetoric of neutrality', *Design Issues*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1988, pp. 18–30 (reprinted in: Victor Margolin (ed.), *Design discourse*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 131–43). More recently, I have tried to discuss typography that embodies the critical and dialogic values. See, for example, an article on the work of Karel Martens in: *Eye*, no. 11, 1993, pp. 26–33.

object, the way it flexes in your hands, and so on – into innumerable small considerations.

This material dimension of typography, received by the reader through the senses of the body, reminds us of a special meaning of the term common sense.<sup>39</sup> This is the ‘common sense’ of the human body, which joins together the five distinct faculties by which we gain knowledge of the world. The bodily dimension provides a set of limits and of physical possibilities, which are too little observed in the discussion of reading or viewing. Pages can become simply too big for comfort – or too shiny, too noisy, or even too disconcerting in their smell. Taste, in the mouth, is perhaps the one sense that is not deployed in our processing of text and images.

The senses of the body have been spoken of as forming a ‘republic’: a set of equal and distinct members, joined in some federation. It is a little world or microcosm, which only finds its identity in dialogue with others. And here is the other important meaning of ‘common sense’, already delineated in this essay. Both these understandings – fresh and active – are quite different from the dull ‘common sense’ that is now deployed as an inhibition, often from the old against the young. So this second idea of ‘common sense’ can be expanded as follows. We find ourselves through others. Reading in common can be one important path to knowing ourselves, as a human community. The term republic can be applied here too as describing a society in which the principle of critical-dialogue is fully realized.

This way of thinking about the topic of typography lets in some air to often stale debates. Recently, in typography as in the larger culture, there have been discussions over ‘high’ and ‘low’.<sup>40</sup> Are some things higher in cultural value than others? Is John Keats better than Bob Dylan? The same concern has fuelled discussion about the question of a ‘canon’ of products.<sup>41</sup> Is there a restricted set of material, to which discussion, reproduction and teaching is confined? What then are the biases of this canon? Too many male designers? Too many good self-promoters? Or just too many lazy editors who take over what has already been reproduced? But there is a way through these dilemmas.

In typography, even more clearly than in the ‘fine arts’, such as music or literature, it becomes clear that there is just one culture and that it is common and ordinary. There are terms of judgement, as suggested throughout this essay, but they are not the received ones of good or bad design, of beauty or ugliness, of modern or traditional, of innovative or

39. The argument here is directly inspired by material published in *Edinburgh Review*, since its new direction under the editorships of Peter Kravitz and Murdo Macdonald, from no. 67/8 in 1985. See especially the Scottish philosophy section in no. 74 (1986), and an essay by Richard Gunn, ‘Scottish common sense philosophy’, in no. 87, 1991–2, pp. 117–40. Behind these ideas stand the work of George Davie, especially in his book on ‘Scotland and her universities in the nineteenth century’ with the marvellous title *The democratic intellect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961).

40. See: Ellen Lupton, ‘High and low’, *Eye*, no. 7, 1992, pp. 72–7.

41. See: Martha Scotford Lange, ‘Is there a canon of graphic design history?’, *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1991, pp. 3–5, 13. Scotford Lange reports on her analysis of five books of graphic design history, suggesting that there is some latent ‘canon’ in what is reproduced. She argues that, if this a canon, then it needs to be broadened; and that there are more realistic ways of understanding design than to under the methods of art history.

repetitive. Each thing has to be thought out freshly, for itself, in its context. The criteria may be human, physical, social, as well as formal. We will surprise ourselves.

#### Ordinary people

If typographic design is (should be) a process in which the designer brings critical thought into play, where does the material that is the object of criticism come from? Where is the raw stuff? It is there as content, information, ideas, desires, necessities – which are given form. Typically and traditionally, this raw stuff comes from a client. The designer works in dialogue with that client. And if in this essay the ‘critical’ component of the process has received emphasis, it is by way of compensation. The figure of the designer has been bathed in an aura carried from the domain of art. The designer is the person who visibly impresses their stamp on the content, conjuring something unique out of what may otherwise be unremarkable. The rhetoric surrounding design is still of ‘individuality’, ‘personality’, ‘expression’, ‘creativity’.

In a small, telling instance of this attitude, the designer Jeffery Keedy recently asked in a published letter ‘is Piet Zwart considered a good designer because his work was about floor tiles?’<sup>42</sup> (He was referring to the advertisements that Zwart designed in the early 1920s for Vickers House.) Keedy’s suggestion is that we can enjoy and admire Zwart’s work as ‘design’ (form) without needing to be interested in its often basely material content. He implies that Zwart was working *despite* his banal content of floor tiles. But Zwart, strongly egalitarian and materialist, worked happily with manufacturers of industrial goods. The spirit of Dutch modernist graphic design of that time – as in their term ‘*nieuwe zakelijkheid*’ (new sobriety) – was a celebration of the factual, the everyday, the normative, with a shrug of indifference (or something stronger) at the art-values of unqualified personal expression. In the same letter, Keedy wrote that ‘if designers ... pursued only “messages that matter to the reader”, we would all need a second job’. In response one can remark that ‘messages that matter’ – such as floor tiles, indeed – are plentiful. It might take a long time before these are exhausted, and when we arrive at a state in which designers are left only with messages that don’t matter, but which allow them an open field in which to exercise their talents.

It is worth trying a brutally simple attitude to design: judge it by its content. This certainly helps to clear the mind – and maybe the shops

42. Jeffery Keedy, letter in *Eye*, no. 10, 1993, p. 10.

and museums too. But, having announced the simple criterion of 'content', one then has to explore the ways in which content is mediated by, inseparable from, the forms in which we find it. So – here I might agree with Jeffery Keedy – we can't merely praise something for good content without considering how that is embodied. We can't know content free of form. But now at least we are not trying to value the embodiment without reference to content. And I would argue that the nature of these embodiments depends on what they are embodying. If, perversely, form runs free of content, that is an escape, but an escape from a relation that sets the terms of the job. All of this can be understood by looking at particular instances and by stepping back to examine the processes by which these things come into the world. The manifestations of design arise out of sets of relationships: of client with designer, of designer with producer, of user with client, and so on. Whatever results can be understood when all these processes, interactions, contexts and histories are understood.

If we no longer want designers to be surrogate artists spreading their touch all over, how can they fit into these processes? In reaction to the supremacy of the designer and, in particular, in reaction to modernist good taste, the attempt has been made at a 'vernacular' in graphic design: a grasping for the 'low' as a rebuff to the 'high'.<sup>43</sup> At its most self-conscious this has involved theoretically sophisticated people speaking graphically – say in an art-exhibition catalogue – to other theoretically sophisticated people, but in the 'graphic language' of the downtown supermarket or the diner (it is primarily a North American phenomenon). In other, more straightforward versions of graphic vernacular, one finds high-powered metropolitan design groups devising things – typically in packaging – that pass easily but with just enough differentiation in their desired habitat: say a shop in free-market Poland. All this follows on from a failure of modernism, which had dreams of becoming the new vernacular, but which seems now to have given us merely a designer-culture. The public libraries and health centres of the 1930s and 1940s fall into disrepair, are perhaps renovated and regarded as monuments, while smart white restaurants and unlimited matt-black consumer items displace them in our perception of what modernism was or is.

In typography, at least, the game is all but up. The means of design and production are becoming very widely accessible. Designers are losing the place that they have staked out for themselves in the twentieth century, as intermediaries between clients and printers. The obscurantism of

43. Ellen Lupton's article 'High and low' (*Eye*, no. 7, 1992, pp. 72–7) is a critical discussion of some of these issues. See also the publication which accompanied an exhibition that Lupton initiated: Barbara Glauber (ed.), *Lift and separate: graphic design and the quote unquote vernacular*, New York: Cooper Union / Princeton Architectural Press, 1993.

deconstructionist design can be understood in this light, as an attempt to hang on to disappearing ground. 'Here are things so difficult and elaborate that only we designers can provide them. Reading is such a complex and indeterminate process that you need us (to make it complex and indeterminate).' And then, in another perhaps opposite move against the threat of redundancy, the fad for vernacular bad taste may be an attempt by designers to survive by blending into the landscape, chameleon-like. These strategies must be doomed – by their own bad faith, if not by public indifference to them.

Typographic and graphic designers do have skills and knowledge that could be useful. These things can find a place in the processes of creation and publication, not as an unveiling of mysteries, but as an open sharing. The calling of our designer bluffs by cheap computing technology may be embarrassing and uncomfortable, but to get rid of illusions is liberating. Then we can see where we are, attend to real issues.

## Appendix: voices advocating enforced undecidability

As some evidence for the nutshell summary offered in the first paragraph of this essay, I should cite these ideas in the words of protagonists and apologists of deconstruction within graphic design and typography.

For example:

This work has an intellectual rigour that demands effort of the audience, but also rewards the audience with content and participation. The audience must make individual interpretations in graphic design that 'decenter' the message. Designs provoke a range of interpretations, based on Deconstruction's contention that meaning is inherently unstable and that objectivity is an impossibility, a myth promulgated to control the audience. Graphic designers have become dissatisfied with the obedient delivery of the client's message. Many are taking the role of interpreter, a giant step beyond the problem-solving tradition. By authoring additional content and a self-conscious critique of the message, they are adopting roles associated with both art and literature.<sup>1</sup>

The argument here can be interpreted as follows. Readers are to be put to work in some postgraduate deconstructionist camp, with the promise of a reward at the end of their labour. They 'must' make individual interpretations: as if this did not happen every time a human being perceives the world. Then comes the polarization into either/or extremes. 'Objectivity' is set up as one hard extreme of 'control'; unstable meaning is its opposite. Nothing in between is allowed. So 'objectivity' is then knocked down ('an impossibility, a myth') and replaced. By what? By the designer! Far from being dead, as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault supposed, the author/designer now becomes a dominating presence.

A second apologist adds flesh to this schema:

Type design in the digital era is quirky, personal and unreservedly subjective. The authoritarian voices of modernist typography, which seem to permit only a single authorised reading, are rejected as too corporate, inflexible and limiting, as though typographic diversity itself might somehow re-enfranchise its readers. 'I think there are a lot of voices that have not been heard typographically', says

1. Katherine McCoy  
'American graphic design  
expression', *Design  
Quarterly*, no. 148, 1990, at  
p. 16.

2. Rick Poynor, 'Introduction', in: Rick Poynor & Edward Booth-Clibborn (ed.), *Typography now: the next wave*, Internos Books, 1991, at pp.8-9.

3. Bridget Wilkins, 'Type and image', *Octavo*, no.7, [1990, pages unnumbered].

The 'Bartram' quoted here is in fact Anthony Bertram, minor 'man of letters' in between-the-wars Britain and occasional propagandist for its design movement. The paragraph from which the quotation is taken suggests that the observations I make here about the public obscurity of typography are nothing new. 'The lack of public interest in typography is really astonishing. It is an art with which everyone of us is in daily contact, even if it is only in reading the newspapers or an income-tax form, and yet very few of us are even conscious that it is an art. There is, of course, a fairly large public that expects print to be legible, but they do not go beyond that.' (Anthony Bertram, *Design*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1938, p.105.)

As published in *Octavo*, the stew of ideas in Wilkins's text was given appropriate form through a maze-like configuration that certainly gave off an air of 'visual communication'. The next issue of the magazine took further the logic of the maze, or the haystack: a CD, scripted by Wilkins, about multi-media and the future of communication.

Californian type designer Jeffery Keedy. 'Whenever I start a new job and try to pick a typeface, none of the typefaces give me the voice that I need. They just don't relate to my experiences in my life. They're about somebody else's experiences, which don't belong to me.' Another American type designer, Barry Deck, speaks of trading in the 'myth of the transparency of typographical form for a more realistic attitude toward form, acknowledging that form carries meaning'. The aim is to promote multiple rather than fixed readings, to provoke the reader into becoming an active participant in the construction of the message.<sup>2</sup>

Our reporter here rehearses the idea that 'only a single authorised reading' is permitted by an authoritarian modernism. He entertains (sceptically) the possibility that formal diversity 'might somehow' give power to readers. Then the voice of the designer comes in: 'I ... me ... I ... my ... my ... me.' Another designer sets up another absolute ('transparency'), calls it a 'myth', and thus knocks his straw opponent down in two swift moves. This 'unreserved subjectivity' is all for the good: it is for the multiple against the fixed, it is for 'active participation'. But consider the most banal of reading experiences, say that of reading an airline timetable or a listings magazine. What could be more active and multiple than this process? And what fixes unreserved subjectivity more objectively and unchangeably than ink on paper? Now, some new twists to the thesis:

Legible is easy to read. If it is easy to read it bypasses the visual potential of the message. People prefer the comfort of legibility. The passive, comfortable approach and negative visual interrelationships of type and image were firmly rooted by Stanley Morison in the perpetuation of legibility and the cultural backwater of left to right reading in the 1930s. Reinforced at that time by many, like Bartram 'Legibility is, of course, the *sine qua non* of a good type. It should go without saying. It is as elementary and vital a consideration as that the wheels of a car should be round or that a house should have a door.' Well, sadly this still applies today, so that speedreading is seen as a desirable skill; ignoring the visual communication of type and image.<sup>3</sup>

The straw man of 'legibility' is set up, put into stiff 1930s clothing, and pilloried with deadly insults: 'passive', 'comfortable', 'negative'. Even 'left to right reading' comes in for blame: is this another attack on Western metaphysics? In conventional or traditional typography, reading is reduced - accelerated - into 'speedreading'. What is so bad in all this,



our radical critic proclaims, is that 'the visual communication of type and image' is ignored. All this fire-breathing polemic seems to lead merely to a plea for graphic designers to be allowed to make their presence known.

You may object that, with these three quotations, I too am merely attacking straw statements, selected only to be knocked down. But I hardly had to select them. They are from the rash of articles published in magazines and anthologies, supporting and explaining the 'new', the 'now', the 'next', and the 'post', in typography and graphic design. And I have not found any more convincing statements than these. So far counter-arguments have tended to occur only in private and public conversation, and to be at the level of 'this new wave stuff is so ugly and polluting'. The deeper arguments about social effects, about the place of the designer, have rarely been made. Paul Stiff has put forward serious objections to this theorizing: that it is another strategy to promote the romance of the designer.<sup>4</sup> But replies have not been forthcoming. An advantage of extreme relativism is its avoidance of the need to argue.

4. In *Eye*, no. 11, 1993, pp. 4-5.

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The bubble may have burst now, under the pressure of its own overextension and incoherence. There are more comfortable and kinder-to-the-body fashions now. But we are still living with the effects of airy meaninglessness and power-dressing. This essay is an attempt to diagnose the confusions, as they appeared in the world of typographic and