

Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller

## Deconstruction and Graphic Design: History Meets Theory

“Deconstruction” is a mode of criticism described by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Of Grammatology*, translated into English in 1976. The term had a broad cultural impact in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s, spreading from departments of literature to the fields of architecture, graphic design and fashion. Our essay considers the relevance of deconstruction to the theory and practice of typography. The first section discusses deconstruction in relation to the recent history of design, showing how the term gained currency among graphic designers and eventually became the label for a new style. We then look at the place of typographic form within Derrida’s own theory, finding that the link between graphic design and deconstruction is far from arbitrary, but constitutes a central issue in his work. We end the essay by proposing the compilation of a history of typography and writing informed by deconstruction; such a history, running counter to the narrative of modern rationalization, would reveal a range of structures that dramatize the intrusion of visual form into verbal content, the invasion of “ideas” by graphic marks, gaps and differences.

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Since the surfacing of the term “deconstruction” in design journalism in the mid-1980s, the word has served to label architecture, graphic design, products and fashion featuring chopped up, layered and fragmented forms imbued with ambiguous futuristic overtones. This essay looks at the reception and use of deconstruction in the recent history of graphic design, where it has become the tag for yet another period style. We then consider the place of graphics *within* the theory of deconstruction, initiated in the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida. We argue that deconstruction is not a style or “attitude” but rather a mode of questioning through and about the technologies, formal devices, social institutions and founding metaphors of representation. Deconstruction belongs to both history and theory. It is embedded in recent visual and academic culture, but it describes a strategy of critical form-making which is performed across a range of artifacts and practices, both historical and contemporary.

Jacques Derrida introduced the concept of “deconstruction” in his book *Of Grammatology*, published in France in 1967 and translated into English in 1976.<sup>1</sup> “Deconstruction” became a banner for the advance guard in American literary studies in the 1970s and 1980s, scandalizing departments of English, French and comparative literature. Deconstruction rejected the project of modern criticism: to uncover the meaning of a literary work by studying the way its form and content communicate essential humanistic messages. Deconstruction, like critical strategies based on Marxism, feminism, semiotics and anthropology, focuses not on the themes and imagery of its objects but rather on the linguistic and institutional systems that frame the production of texts.<sup>2</sup>

In Derrida’s theory, deconstruction asks how representation inhabits reality. How does the *external image* of things get *inside* their internal essence? How does the *surface* get under the skin? Western culture since Plato, Derrida argues, has been governed by such oppositions as reality/representation, inside/outside, original/copy and mind/body. The intellectual achievements of the West — its science, art, philosophy, literature — have

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Jacques Derrida introduced the theory of deconstruction in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1976. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. See especially Chapter 2, “Linguistics and Grammatology,” 27-73.

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Jonathan Culler explores the impact of deconstruction on literary criticism in his book *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. 1982. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

valued one side of these pairs over the other, allying one side with truth and the other with falsehood. For example, the Judeo-Christian tradition has conceived the body as an external shell for the inner soul, elevating the mind as the sacred source of thought and spirit, while denigrating the body as mere mechanics. In the realm of aesthetics, the original work of art traditionally has carried an aura of authenticity that its copy lacks, and the telling of a story or the taking of a photograph is viewed as a passive record of events.

“Deconstruction” takes apart such oppositions by showing how the devalued, empty concept lives inside the valued, positive one. The outside inhabits the inside. Consider, for example, the opposition between nature and culture. The idea of “nature” depends on the idea of “culture,” and yet culture is part of nature. It’s a fantasy to conceive of the non-human environment as a pristine, innocent setting fenced off and protected from the products of human endeavor — cities, roads, farms, landfills. The fact that we have produced a concept of “nature” in opposition to “culture” is a symptom of our alienation from the ecological systems that civilization depletes and transforms.

A crucial opposition for deconstruction is speech/writing. The Western philosophical tradition has denigrated writing as an inferior copy of the spoken word. *Speech* draws on interior consciousness, but writing is dead and abstract. The written word loses its connection to the inner self. Language is set adrift, untethered from the speaking subject. In the process of embodying language, writing steals its soul. Deconstruction views writing as an active rather than passive form of representation. Writing is not merely a bad copy, a faulty transcription, of the spoken word; writing, in fact, invades thought and speech, transforming the sacred realms of memory, knowledge and spirit. Any memory system is a form of writing, since it records thought for the purpose of future transmissions.

The speech/writing opposition can be mapped onto a series of ideologically loaded pairs that are constitutive of modern Western culture:

Speech	Writing
natural	artificial
spontaneous	constructed
original	copy
interior to the mind	exterior to the mind
requires no equipment	requires equipment
intuitive	learned
present subject	absent subject

Derrida's critique of the speech/writing opposition locates the concerns of deconstruction in the field of graphic design. We will return to the speech/writing problem in more detail later. First, we will look at the life of deconstruction in recent design culture.

## The design history of deconstruction

Deconstruction belongs to the broader critical field known as "post-structuralism," whose key figures include Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and others. Each of these writers has looked at modes of representation — from literature and photography to the design of schools and prisons — as powerful technologies which build and remake the social world. Deconstruction's attack on the neutrality of signs is also at work in the consumer mythologies of Barthes, the institutional archaeologies of Foucault and the simulationist aesthetics of Baudrillard.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that cultural forms help to fabricate such seemingly "natural" categories as race, sexuality, poetic genius and aesthetic value had profound relevance to visual artists in the 1980s. Post-structuralism provided a critical avenue into "post-modernism," posing a left-leaning alternative to the period's nostalgic returns to figurative painting and neo-classical architecture. While Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Victor

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Post-structuralist texts widely read by students of art and design include: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. 1979. New York: Random House; and Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin. 1981. St. Louis: Telos Press.

Burgin attacked media myths through their visual work, books such as Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic* and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* delivered post-structuralist theory to students in an accessible form.<sup>4</sup>

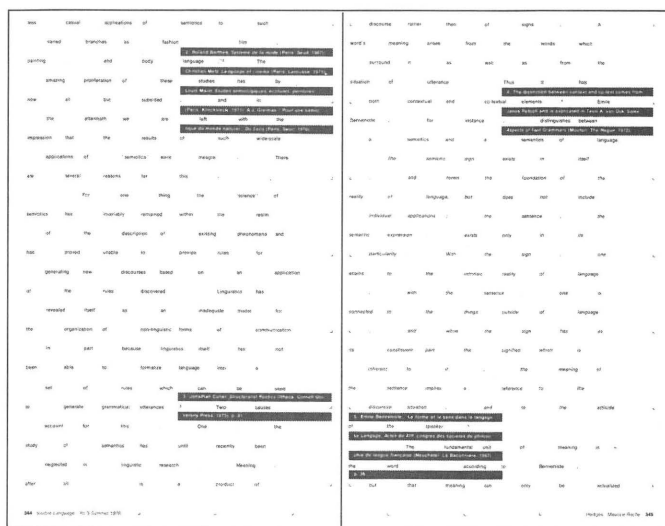


Figure 1

Graphic designers in many American art programs were exposed to critical theory through the fields of photography, performance and installation art during the early 1980s. The most widely publicized intersection of post-structuralism and graphic design occurred at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, under the leadership of co-chair Katherine McCoy.<sup>5</sup> Designers at Cranbrook had first confronted literary criticism when they designed a special issue of *Visible Language* on contemporary French literary aesthetics, published in the summer of 1978<sup>6</sup> (figure 1). Daniel Libeskind, head of Cranbrook's architecture program at that time, provided the graphic designers with a seminar in literary theory, which prepared them to develop their strategy: to systematically disintegrate the series of essays by expanding the spaces between lines and words and pushing the footnotes into the space normally reserved for the main text. *French Currents of the Letter*, which outraged designers committed to the established ideologies of problem-solving and direct communication, remains a controversial landmark

4 Books which helped popularize post-structuralism in schools of art and design include Hal Foster, editor. 1983. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press and Terry Eagleton. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

5 Graphic design produced at Cranbrook between 1980 and 1989 is documented in *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*. 1990. New York: Rizzoli, with essays by Katherine and Michael McCoy, Lorraine Wild and others. Wild discusses the



in experimental graphic design. According to Katherine McCoy, post-structuralist texts entered more general discussions at Cranbrook around 1983. She has credited Jeffery Keedy, a student at the school from 1983–85, with introducing fellow course members to books by Barthes and others.<sup>7</sup> The classes of 1985/87 and 1986/88 also took an active interest in critical theory; students at this time included Andrew Blauvelt, Brad Collins, Edward Fella, David Frej and Allen Hori. Close interaction with the photography department, under the leadership of Carl Toth, further promoted dialogue about post-structuralism and visual practice.<sup>8</sup>

Post-structuralism did not serve as a unified methodology at the school, however, even in the period of its strongest currency, but was part of an eclectic gathering of ideas. According to Keedy, students at Cranbrook when he was there were looking at everything from alchemical mysticism to the “proportion voodoo” of the golden section.<sup>9</sup> McCoy recalled in a 1991 interview:

*“Theory had become part of the intellectual culture in art and photography. We were never trying to apply specific texts — it was more of a general filtration process. The term ‘deconstructivist’ drives me crazy. Post-structuralism is an attitude, not a style.”<sup>10</sup>*

But what is the difference between “style” and “attitude”? If “style” is a grammar of form-making associated with a particular historical and cultural situation, then perhaps “attitude” is the inarticulate, just out-of-focus background for the specificities of style.

The response to post-structuralism at Cranbrook was largely optimistic, side-stepping the profound pessimism and political critique that permeates post-structuralism’s major works. McCoy used the architectural theory of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown as a “stepping stone” to post-structuralism, enabling her to merge the Pop aestheticization of the American commercial vernacular with post-structuralism’s critique of “fixed meaning.”<sup>11</sup> McCoy’s preference for celebration over criticism is echoed in Keedy’s comment: “It was the

*French Currents of the Letter* project in her essay. See also Katherine McCoy, “American Graphic Design Expression,” in *The Evolution of American Typography*, Mildred Friedman, ed., *Design Quarterly* 148, 4–22.

6

*French Currents of the Letter* includes essays on the use of typography in the theory of deconstruction and in other post-structuralist writings. See Andrew J. McKenna, “Biblioclasm: Derrida and his Precursors,” *Visible Language* 12:3, 289–304.

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Kathy McCoy, interview with Ellen Lupton, February 1991.

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Communication with Andrew Blauvelt, June 1994.

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Jeffery Keedy, interview with Ellen Lupton, February 1991.

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Interview with Ellen Lupton, February 1991.

11

*Learning from Las Vegas*, by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. 1972. Cambridge: MIT Press, had been an important text at Cranbrook since the mid-1970s.

poetic aspect of Barthes which attracted me, not the Marxist analysis. After all, we're designers working in a consumer society, and while Marxism is interesting as an idea, I wouldn't want to put it into practice."<sup>12</sup>

Post-structuralism's emphasis on the openness of meaning has been incorporated by many designers into a romantic theory of self-expression: as the argument goes, because signification is not fixed in material forms, designers and readers share in the spontaneous creation of meaning. This approach represents a rather cheerful response to the post-structuralist theme of the "death of the author" and the assertion that the interior self is constructed by external technologies of representation.

According to the writings of Barthes and Foucault, for example, the citizen/artist/producer is not the imperious master of systems of language, media, education, custom and so forth; instead, the individual operates within the limited grid of possibilities these codes make available. Rather than view meaning as a matter of private interpretation, post-structuralist theory tends to see the realm of the "personal" as structured by external signs. Invention and revolution come from tactical aggressions against this grid of possibilities.

"Deconstructivism" catapulted into the mainstream design press with MoMA's 1988 exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*, curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley.<sup>13</sup> The curators used the term "deconstructivism" to link certain contemporary architectural practices to Russian constructivism, whose early years were marked by an imperfect vision of form and technology. The MoMA exhibition located a similarly skewed interpretation of modernism in the work of Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman and others. Wigley wrote in his catalogue essay:

*A deconstructive architect is...not one who dismantles buildings, but one who locates the inherent dilemmas within buildings. The deconstructive architect puts the pure forms of the architectural tradition on the couch and identifies the symptoms of a repressed impurity. The impurity is drawn to the surface by a combination of gentle coaxing and violent torture: the form is interrogated.*<sup>(11)</sup>

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Interview with Ellen Lupton, February 1991; quoted in Ellen Lupton, "The Academy of Deconstructed Design," *Eye* 3, 44-52.

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Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley brought deconstruction into the mainstream of design journalism with their exhibition and catalogue *Deconstructivist Architecture*. 1988. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

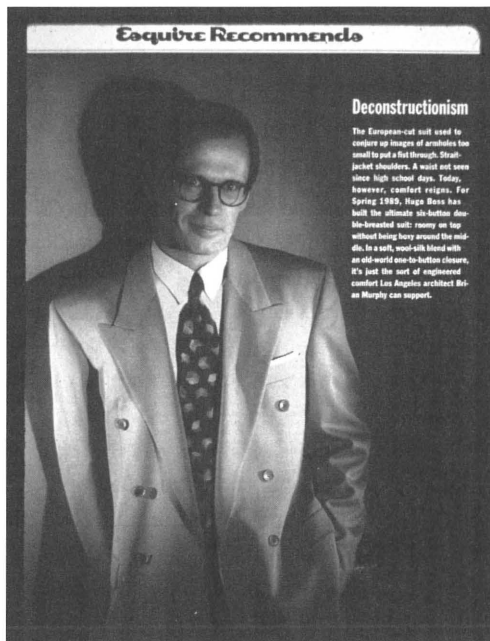


Figure 2

In Wigley's view, deconstruction in architecture asks questions about modernism by re-examining its own language, materials and processes.

By framing their exhibition around a new "ism," Wigley and Johnson helped to canonize the elements of a period style, marked by twisted geometries, centerless plans and shards of glass and metal. This cluster of stylistic features quickly emigrated from architecture to graphic design, just as the icons and colors of neo-classical post-modernism had traveled there shortly before. While a more critical approach to deconstruction had been routed to graphic designers through the fields of photography and the fine arts, architecture provided a ready-to-use formal vocabulary that could be broadly adopted. "Deconstruction," "deconstructivism" and just plain "decon" became design-world clichés, where they named existing tendencies and catalyzed new ones in the fields of furniture and fashion design (figure 2) as well as graphic design.<sup>14</sup>

14 Michael Collins and Andreas Papadakis include a chapter on "Deconstruction, Deconstructivism, and Late-Modernism" in their book *Past-Modern Design*. 1989 New York: Rizzoli, 179-95, a survey of furniture, jewelry, and other decorative arts.

In 1990 Philip Meggs published a how-to guide for would-be deconstructivists in the magazine *Step-by-Step Graphics*. His essay, which includes a journalistic account of how the term “deconstruction” entered the field of graphic design, focuses on style and works back to theory. Following the logic of the MoMA project, his story begins with constructivism and ends with its “deconstruction” in contemporary design; unlike Wigley, however, Meggs’s story depicts early modernism as a purely rational enterprise.<sup>15</sup>

Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte’s more analytical piece for *Print* (1990) describes deconstruction as a “zeitgeist,” a philosophical germ circulating in contemporary culture that influences graphic designers even though they might not know it. Their view corresponds roughly to McCoy’s sense of post-structuralism as a general “attitude” or “filtration process” responding to the “intellectual culture” of the time. Byrne and Witte’s article identifies examples of deconstruction across the ideological map of contemporary design, ranging from the work of Paula Scher and Stephen Doyle to Lucille Tenazas and Lorraine Wild.

Today, in the mid-’90s, the term “deconstruction” is used casually to label any work that favors complexity over simplicity and dramatizes the formal possibilities of digital production — the term is commonly used to invoke a generic allegiance with “Cranbrook” or “CalArts,” a gesture which reduces both schools to flat symbols by blanketing a variety of distinct practices. Our view of deconstruction in graphic design is at once narrower and broader in its scope than the view evolving from the current discourse. Rather than look at deconstruction as a historical style or period, we see deconstruction as a critical activity — an act of questioning. The visual resources of typography help demarcate Derrida’s ideological map of the biases governing Western art and philosophy. Having looked at deconstruction’s life in recent design culture, we will now locate design within the theory of deconstruction.

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Essays on deconstruction and graphic design include Philip Meggs, “De-constructing Typography,” *Step-by-Step Graphics* 6, 178-181; and Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte, “A Brave New World: Understanding Deconstruction,” *Print* XLIV, 80-87.

## Design in Deconstruction

Derrida's critique of the speech/writing opposition developed out of his reading of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, a foundational text for modern linguistics, semiotics and anthropology.<sup>16</sup> Saussure asserted that the meaning of signs does not reside in the signs themselves: there is no natural bond between the signifier, the sign's material aspect, and the signified, its referent, (figure 3). Instead, the meaning of a sign comes only from its relationship to other signs in a system. This principle is the basis of structuralism, an approach to language which focuses on the patterns or structures that generate meaning rather than on the "content" of a given code or custom.

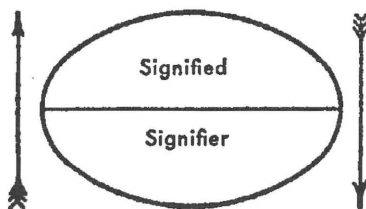
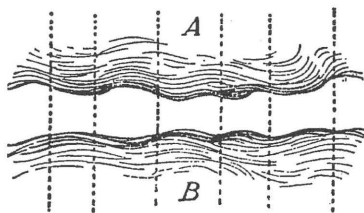


Figure 3

Figure 4



Saussure revealed that because the sign has no inherent meaning, it is, taken by itself, empty, void, absent. The sign has no life apart from the system or "structure" of language. Saussure revealed that language is not a transparent window onto pre-existing concepts, but that language actively forms the realm of ideas. The base, material body of the signifier is not a secondary copy of the elevated, lofty realm of concepts: *both* are formless masses before the articulating work of language

16

Ferdinand de Saussure founded structural linguistics with the lectures compiled in *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin. 1959. New York: McGraw-Hill. See especially "Graphic Representation of Language," 23-32; and "General Principles," 65-100. For a discussion of Saussure's relevance to structuralism and critical theory, see Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*. 1976. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

has sliced it into distinct pieces (*figure 4*). Instead of thinking of language as a code for passively representing “thoughts,” Saussure showed that “thoughts” take shape out of the material body of language.

Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* points out that although Saussure was willing to reveal the emptiness at the heart of language, he became infuriated when he saw the same principle at work in *writing*, the system of signs created to represent speech. Saussure’s text views writing as a copy of speech, an artificial technology for reproducing language. While the alphabet claims to be a phonetic transcription of spoken sounds, codes such as written English are full of irrational spellings: for example, words that sound the same but are spelled differently (*meet/meat*), and letter combinations with unexpected pronunciations (*th-*, *sh-*, *-ght*). The tone of Saussure’s critique escalates from mild irritation at the beginning of his presentation to impassioned condemnation of the alphabet’s violation of an innocent, natural speech: “writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise.” The “tyranny of writing” distorts its pristine referent through “orthographic monstrosities” and “phonic deformations” (30–2).

Saussure specifically concerned himself with phonetic writing, the paradigmatic medium of Western culture, which translates the diverse sounds of a language into a set of repeatable graphic marks. He explicitly excluded pictographic and ideographic scripts from his attack on writing; Chinese ideograms have fewer “annoying consequences” than the alphabet, because their users clearly understand their role as secondary signs for spoken words (26). The power (and seductiveness) of phonetic writing lies in its economy: a small number of characters can represent an ever-expanding quantity of words. Unlike pictographic or ideographic scripts, phonetic writing represents the *signifier* of language (its material sound) rather than the *signified* (its conceptual meaning or “idea”). Whereas an ideogram represents the concept of a word, phonetic characters merely represent its sounds. The alphabet thus embraces the arbitrariness of the sign by considering the signifier independently of its meaning.

As an intellectual technology, alphabetic writing can be compared to photography: it is an automatic record of the *surface* of language. The alphabet cleaved language into an inside and an outside: the destiny of phonetic writing is to occupy the outside, to be a mechanical copy of the signifier, leaving intact a sacred interior. The belief in the interiority, the fullness, of speech depends on the existence of an exterior, empty representation — the alphabet. Similarly, the notion of “nature,” as an ideal realm separate from human production, emerged as “civilization” was despoiling the broader ecological systems in which culture participates. To “deconstruct” the relationship between speech and writing is to reverse the status of the two terms, but not just to replace one with the other, but rather to show that speech was always already characterized by the same failure to transparently reflect reality. There is no innocent speech.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida asserted that an intellectual culture (or *episteme*) built on the opposition between reality and representation has, in fact, depended on representations to construct itself:

*External/internal, image/reality, representation/presence, such is the old grid to which is given the task of outlining the domain of a science. And of what science? Of a science that can no longer answer to the classical concept of the episteme because the originality of its field — an originality that it inaugurates — is that the opening of the ‘image’ within it appears as the condition of ‘reality,’ a relationship that can no longer be thought within the simple difference and the uncompromising exteriority of ‘image’ and ‘reality,’ of ‘outside’ and ‘inside,’ of ‘appearance’ and ‘essence’ (33).*

The fact that our culture developed a phonetic writing system, which represents the material *signifier* in isolation from the sacred *signified*, is indicative of our primary alienation from the spoken language. Phonetic writing, because it makes use of the gap between signifier and signified, is not simply a secondary reflection of language, but is a symptom of language’s lack of presence, its lack of interior self-completeness.

Derrida's final attack on the notion of writing as a secondary copy of speech is to make the claim that "phonetic writing does not exist."<sup>39</sup> Not only does writing inhabit speech, transforming its grammar and sound, and not only does phonetic writing exist as language's "own other," an "outside" manufactured to affirm its own complete "insidedness," but this model of the "outside" continually fails to behave in the manner expected of it. Thus where Saussure had claimed that there are only two kinds of writing — phonetic and ideographic — Derrida found the frontiers between them to fluctuate.

Phonetic writing is full of non-phonetic elements and functions. Some signs used in conjunction with the alphabet are ideographic, including numbers and mathematical symbols. Other graphic marks cannot be called signs at all, because they do not represent distinct "signifieds" or concepts: for example, punctuation, flourishes, deletions and patterns of difference such as roman/italic and uppercase/lowercase. What "idea" does the space between two words or a dingbat at the end of a line represent? Key among these marks, which Derrida has called "graphemes," are various forms of spacing — negative gaps between the positive symbols of the alphabet. Spacing cannot be dismissed as a "simple accessory" of writing: "That a speech supposedly alive can lend itself to spacing in its own writing is what relates to its own death."<sup>39</sup> The alphabet has come to rely on silent graphic servants such as spacing and punctuation, which, like the frame of a picture, seem safely "outside" the proper content and internal structure of a work and yet are necessary conditions for making and reading.

Derrida's book *The Truth in Painting* unfolds the logic of framing as a crucial component of works of art.<sup>17</sup> In the Enlightenment aesthetics of Kant, which form the basis for modern art theory and criticism, the frame of a picture belongs to a class of elements called *parerga*, meaning "about the work," or outside/around the work. Kant's *parerga* include the columns on buildings, the draperies on statues and the frames on pictures. A frame is an ornamental appendix to a work of art, whose "quasi-detachment" serves not only to hide but also to reveal the emptiness at the core of the

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Derrida presents a theory of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. 1987. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

seemingly self-complete object of aesthetic pleasure. In Derrida's words:

*...the parergon is a form that has, as its traditional determination, not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. The frame is in no way a background...but neither is its thickness as margin a figure. Or at least it is a figure which comes away of its own accord.* <sup>(61)</sup>

Like the non-phonetic supplements to the alphabet, the borders around pictures or texts occupy an ambiguous place between figure and ground, positive element and negative gap.

Spacing and punctuation, borders and frames: these are the territory of graphic design and typography, those marginal arts which articulate the conditions that make texts and images readable. The substance of typography lies not in the alphabet *per se* — the generic forms of characters and their conventionalized uses — but rather in the visual framework and specific graphic forms which materialize the system of writing. Design and typography work at the *edges* of writing, determining the shape and style of letters, the spaces between them and their positions on the page. Typography, from its position in the margins of communication, has moved writing away from speech.

## **Design as deconstruction**

The history of typography and writing could be written as the development of formal structures which have articulated and explored the border between the inside and the outside of the text. To compile a catalogue of the micro-mechanics of publishing — indexes and title pages, captions and colophons, folios and footnotes, leading and line lengths, margins and marginalia, spacing and punctuation — would contribute to the field which Derrida has called *grammatology*, or the study of writing as a distinctive mode of representation. This word, *grammatology*, serves to title the book whose more infamous legacy is deconstruction.

Such a history could position various typographic techniques in relation to the split between form and content, inside and outside. Some typographic conventions have served to rationalize the delivery of information by erecting transparent “crystal goblets” around a seemingly independent, neutral body of “content.” Some structures or approaches invade the sacred interior so deeply as to turn the text inside out, while others deliberately ignore or contradict the internal organization of a text in response to external pressures imposed by technology, aesthetics, corporate interests, social propriety, production conveniences, etc.

Robin Kinross’s *Modern Typography* (1992) charts the progressive rationalization of the forms and uses of letters across several centuries of European history. Kinross’s book characterizes printing as a prototypically “modern” process, that from its inception mobilized techniques of mass production and precipitated the mature arts and sciences. The seeds of modernization were present in Gutenberg’s first proofs; their fruits are born in the self-conscious methodologies, professionalized practices and standardized visual forms of printers and typographers, which, beginning in the late seventeenth century, replaced an older notion of printing as a hermetic art of “black magic,” its methods jealously guarded by a caste of craftsmen.<sup>18</sup>

If Kinross’s history of modern typography spans five centuries, so too might another history of deconstruction, running alongside and beneath the erection of transparent formal structures and coherent bodies of professional knowledge. Derrida’s own writing has drawn on forms of page layout from outside the accepted conventions of university publishing. His book *Glas*, designed with Richard Eckersley at the University of Nebraska Press, consists of parallel texts set in different typefaces and written in heterogeneous voices. *Glas* makes the scholarly annotations of medieval manuscripts and the accidental juxtapositions of modern newspapers part of a deliberate authorial strategy.<sup>19</sup>

A study of typography and writing informed by deconstruction would reveal a range of structures which dramatize the intrusion

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Robin Kinross presents a theory of modernism in his book *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*. 1992. London: Hyphen Press.

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Derrida has experimented with typography in his own writing. See *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand. 1986. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. See also “Tympan,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. 1982. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, x-xxix.



of visual form into verbal content, the invasion of “ideas” by graphic marks, gaps and differences. Figures 5 and 6, pages of late fifteenth-century book typography, represent two different attitudes towards framing the text. In the first, the margins are a transparent border for the solid block dominating the page. The lines of classical roman characters are minimally interrupted — paragraph breaks are indicated only by a wider gap within the line, preserving the text as a continuously flowing field of letters (*figure 5*). The second example draws on the tradition of scribal marginalia and biblical commentary (*figure 6*). Here, typography is an interpretive medium; the text is open rather than closed. The first example suggests that the frontiers between interior and exterior, figure and ground, reader and writer, are securely defined, while the second example dramatizes such divides by engulfing the center with the edge.

Another comparison comes from the history of the newspaper, which emerged as an elite literary medium in the seventeenth century. Early English newspapers based their structure on the classical book, whose consistently formatted text block was designed to be read from beginning to end. As the newspaper became a popular medium in nineteenth-century Europe and America, it expanded from a book-scaled signature to a broadsheet incorporating diverse elements, from reports of war and crime to announcements of ship departures and ads for goods and services. The modern illustrated newspaper of the twentieth century is a patchwork of competing elements, whose juxtaposition responds not to rational hierarchies of content but to the struggle between editorial, advertising and production interests.<sup>20</sup> While the structure of the classical news journal aspired to the status of a coherent, complete object, the appearance of the popular paper results from frantic compromises and arbitrary conditions; typographic design serves to distract and seduce as well as to clarify and explain.

Dictionaries of page design featuring schematic diagrams of typical layouts have been a common theme in twentieth-century design. Such visual enactments of theory include Jan Tschichold’s 1934 manifesto “The Placing of Type in a

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On the history of the newspaper, see Allen Hutt, *The Changing Newspaper: Typographic Trends in Britain and America, 1622-1972*. 1973. London: Gordon Fraser.

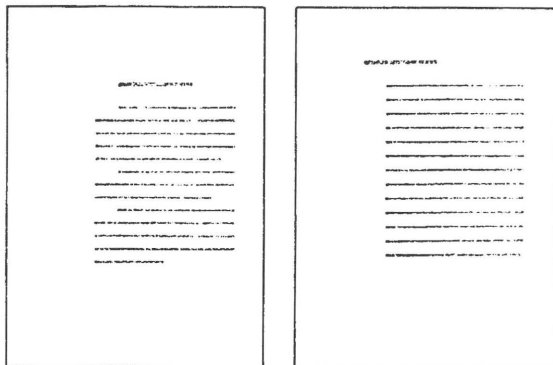
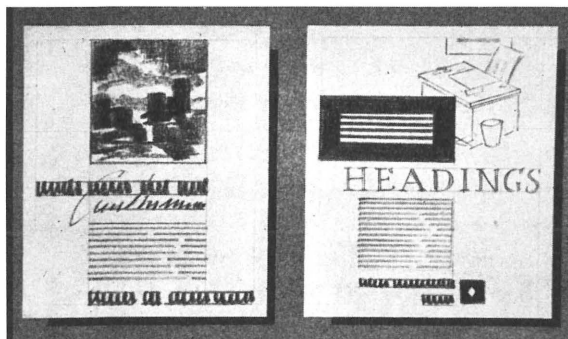


Figure 7

Figure 8



Given Space," (figure 7) which charts a range of subtle variations in the placement of headings and body copy, and Don May's 1942 manual *101 Roughs*, which catalogues various types of commercial page design.<sup>21</sup> While Tschichold charted minor differences between clearly ordered elements, May accommodated the diverse media and competing messages found in advertising. Both theorists presented a series of formal containers for abstract, unspecified bodies of "content," but with a difference: Tschichold's structures are neutral frames for dominant textual figures, while May's patterns are active grounds which ignore conventional hierarchies in favor of such arbitrary rules as "Four point: The layout touches all four sides of the space once and only once" (figure 8), or "Center axis: The heading copy, illustration, and logotype flush on alternate sides of axis."

If one pursued the study of grammatology proposed by Derrida, the resulting catalogue of forms might include the

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Taxonomies of the page include Jan Tschichold, "The Placing of Type in a Given Space," in *Jan Tschichold, typographer*, Ruari McClean, editor. 1975. Boston: D. R. Godine; and Don May, 1942. *101 Roughs*. Chicago: Frederick J. Drake & Co.

graphic conditions outlined above. In each case, we have juxtaposed a coherent, seemingly self-complete literary artifact with a situation where external forces aggressively interfere with the sacred interior of content. A history of typography informed by deconstruction would show how graphic design has revealed, challenged or transformed the accepted rules of communication. Such interventions can represent either deliberate confrontations or haphazard encounters with the social, technological and aesthetic pressures that shape the making of texts.

In a 1994 interview in *The New York Times Magazine*, Derrida was asked about the purported “death” of deconstruction on North American campuses; he answered, “I think there is some element in deconstruction that belongs to the structure of history or events. It started before the academic phenomenon of deconstruction, and it will continue with other names.”<sup>22</sup> In the spirit of this statement, we are interested in de-periodizing the relevance of deconstruction: instead of viewing it as an “ism” of the late-’80s and early-’90s, we see it as part of the ongoing development of design and typography as distinctive modes of representation. But deconstruction also belongs to culture: it is an operation that has taken a name and has spun a web of influence in particular social contexts. Deconstruction has lived in a variety of institutional worlds, from university literature departments to schools of art and design to the discourse of popular journalism, where it has functioned both as a critical activity and as a banner for a range of styles and attitudes. We will close our essay with two examples of graphic design that actively engage the language of contemporary media: the first confronts the politics of representation, while the second remakes design’s internal language.

Vincent Gagliostro’s cover for *NYQ* (figure 9), a gay and lesbian news magazine, was designed in November of 1991, in response to Magic Johnson’s announcement that he is HIV+. Gagliostro imposed *NYQ*’s own logo and headline over a *Newsweek* cover featuring Magic Johnson proclaiming “Even me,” his upheld arms invoking saintly sacrifice and athletic vigor. “He is not *our* hero,” wrote *NYQ* over the

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Mitchell Stevens, “Jacques Derrida,” *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, January 23, 1994, 22-5.

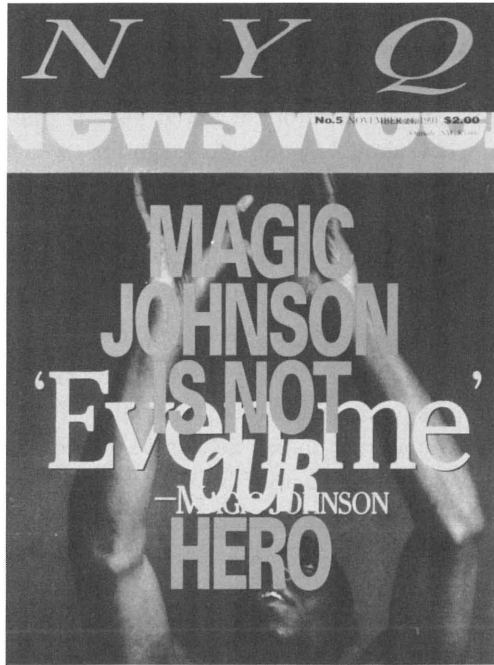


Figure 9

existing cover. While Gagliostro's layering and splicing of type and image are shared with more aestheticized, individualized gestures found elsewhere in contemporary design, this cover does not aim to trigger an infinite variety of "personal" interpretations but instead explicitly manipulates an ideologically loaded artifact. Gagliostro's act of cultural rewriting is a powerful response to the ubiquity of normative sign systems, showing that the structures of mass media can be reshuffled and reinhabited. The *NYQ* cover reveals and exploits the function of framing as a transformative process that refuses to remain outside the editorial content it encloses.

The manipulation of existing media imagery is one activity in contemporary design that can be described as deconstruction; another is the exploration of the visual grammar of communication, from print to the electronic interface. Designers working in hypermedia are developing new ways to generate, distribute and use information — they are reinventing the language of graphic design today, just as typographers reacted

to the changing technologies and social functions of printed media in the past. A leading pioneer of this research was Muriel Cooper, who founded the Visible Language Workshop at MIT in 1976. In the wake of her death in the spring of 1994, her students are continuing to build a concrete grammar of three-dimensional, dynamic typography. Cooper called the basic elements of this language “geometric primitives,” defined by relationships of size, brightness, color, transparency and location in three-dimensional space, variables which can shift in response to the user’s position in a document. Cooper and her students have worked to restructure the internal language of typography in four dimensions.

Spacing, framing, punctuation, type style, layout and other nonphonetic marks of difference constitute the material interface of writing. Traditional literary and linguistic research overlook such graphic structures, focusing instead on the Word as the center of communication. According to Derrida, the functions of repetition, quotation and fragmentation that characterize writing are conditions endemic to all human expression — even the seemingly spontaneous, self-present utterances of speech or the smooth, naturalistic surfaces of painting and photography.<sup>23</sup> Design can critically engage the mechanics of representation, exposing and revising its ideological biases; design also can remake the grammar of communication by discovering structures and patterns within the material media of visual and verbal writing.

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Several recent writers have extended Derrida’s theory of writing by addressing the technological conditions of texts. Friedrich Kittler has studied modern and romantic literature in terms of “discourse networks,” defined by the systemic conditions of writing, from methods of pedagogy to the technologies of printing and the typewriter. See *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Meteer with Chris Cullens. 1990. Stanford: Stanford University Press. George Landow’s book *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. 1992. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, describes electronic media as an embodiment of post-structuralist literary theory.

