

# Jan Tschichold and the Language of Modernism

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Jan Tschichold,  
poster for  
*Casanova*, 1927.  
in Tschichold, Jan.  
*The New Typogra-  
phy*, 189.

## Why Tschichold interests designers

It is often intuitively obvious that the visual aspects of communication have meaning. We know when these “designs” work and we can often come to consensus on what they do. But we have poor accounts of how they do what they do. We may know, for example, that decoration “does not fit here,” but why is less clear. There are refuges: the difference between visual and verbal thought, the idea that the work is ineffable, or the view that the technique is practice like the way the pitcher knows when he is pitching well, or even self-evidence — knowing pornography when we see it. In sum, we lack good analytical tools to take us from visual communication to the meanings conveyed.

It can be difficult to come to useful theoretical understandings of practical endeavors. For example, it was only very recently that there were the understandings and technologies that made it possible to analyze body movements so that we could unravel and articulate the techniques of pitchers. Often, the work of research is not the collection of data, but its organization: the “discovery” or invention of systems of classification or ways of looking that disclose meaningful relationships.

Similarly, it is not a simple path from perceived form to meaning; that path involves the interaction of some piece of work under consideration with the communicative situation in which authors and readers interact, and with other cognitive, social and cultural mediators, many of which are themselves not well explored or understood. So when we discuss “things that communicate,” we are entangled in genre, subject matter, the knowledge of the viewer or receiver, the intentions

of the author or sender, “style,” the message and the social conventions of medium, — and we are entangled in them all at the same time. We increasingly find ourselves in need of tools that are adequate to analyze the complexity of communication as we experience it.

For whatever reason, in *Die Neue Typographie*, Tschichold made bold assertions, and in so doing, he gathered arguments that can help us construct analytical tools for communicative media. *Die Neue Typographie* concerns form on the printed page, but first and foremost as that form is related to social and cultural goals. In short, Tschichold argues that formal decisions within communication design have definable meanings in the human world. From the vantage point of 1996, that may be one of *Die Neue Typographie*'s greatest contributions.



Jan Tschichold, *Laster der Menschheit*, 1927.

### Introduction

In 1928, in Berlin, one of this century's major typographers and book designers, Jan Tschichold wrote *Die Neue Typographie*. It was a manifesto and a handbook defining an ideology and a practice of typography. In 1995, *The New Typography* is appearing in English translation. The twenties and the nineties are both periods of transformation: in the social and economic structures of industrial societies, and in the forms and content of their communications. We now find ourselves looking back at modernism. The appearance of *The New Typography* is timely. It provides us with opportunities to both reassess modernist design in its social context and approach the still perplexing question of how we can actually relate form to meaning.

Writings are narratives; they are occasioned: written by individuals in particular places, at particular times and they are most wisely interpreted with reference to those occasions. Like other objects, writings can be misunderstood or obscured by time. Jan Tschichold wrote only seventy years ago, but industrial culture has changed dramatically in that time. In 1928, the horse was becoming obsolete only in the “advanced” countries. Radio was just beginning to develop as a social medium. Seeing Tschichold's work in 1996, we search through the industrial culture of his time for documents to

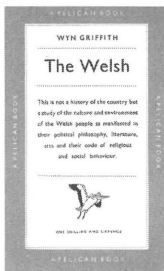
aid us in understanding the context of his writings and his typographic design.

Fortunately, Tschichold was both clear and unusually comprehensive, so *Die Neue Typographie* is not just a fragment, but a microcosm; it provides us with a clear statement of modernist philosophy and modernist practice when both were being formulated and promoted. This paper locates Tschichold with respect to traditional design, dada and de stijl, the bauhaus, the later Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm, “Swiss typography” and other modernist movements. By relating visible form to social agenda, it provides for the opportunity to track social goals and style across time to see how they change.

### Biography

The facts of Tschichold’s life history are given briefly by Robin Kinross in his introduction (they are more fully documented in Ruari McLean’s biography *Jan Tschichold: Typographer*). This history is reflected in Tschichold’s large typographic output, and in Tschichold’s writings and the debates they sparked with Max Bill at Ulm and others who were struggling to understand and realize the modernist problematic. Tschichold set out his philosophy first in *Die Neue Typographie*. It was followed in 1935 by *Typographische Gestaltung*, also translated into English by Ruari McLean and titled *Asymmetric Typography*. That work presents his philosophy in a more subtle formulation.

By 1935, Tschichold had already been forced to leave Germany for Switzerland. By the 1940s, he largely abandoned the typography he had advocated in *Die Neue Typographie*, adopting what Kinross calls a “neoclassical” style, which included ornamentation and centered type settings. Tschichold’s later design was the reverse of the trend he had helped establish, and he became a critic of his earlier work and of that trend. After World War II, he was for a time the typographer of record at Penguin Books, where he designed books and authored house composition rules. He spent his last years in Basel, retiring to the Ticine Alps above Lake Maggiore, where he was in sporadic communication with modernist practitioners.



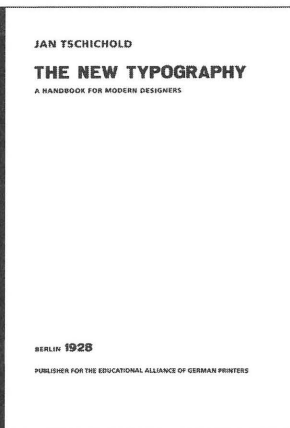
Penguin book cover design, circa 1947. in McLean, Ruari. *Jan Tschichold, Typographer*, p. 101. Reprinted by permission of David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc.

The later “neoclassic” Tschichold is outside of this review, but this much can be offered. What seems to have changed his position after *Asymmetric Typography* was not only his attitude toward the rules of typography but his attitude toward the social and political environment as well. As we will see, Tschichold’s typography changed because the social environments in which he lived and worked changed. In 1935, his model of communication was based on information: non-linear or non-narrative, public, objective utterance or reportage. At Penguin, after World War II, he was publishing literature, for the private and personal enjoyment of individual readers. He recognized that the political shift entailed abandonment of his modernist aesthetic.<sup>1</sup>

### Scholarship

*Die Neue Typographie* is a work that practices what it preaches, so preserving its original form and language of presentation is important. The new translation reproduces the original format of the book, its glossy paper

and its typographic styles with special attention to typeface and set width. According to the publisher, many images were re-scanned and the images are generally of very high quality. In some cases, the original spot colors are reproduced as spot colors while in others, black and white line art or half tones are used with indications of the original colors.



*The New  
Typography:*  
title page,  
reproducing  
the design of  
the original

The translation adds not only the historical and analytical introduction by Robin Kinross which provides a sense of context, it also includes translator’s notes by Ruari McLean. There are also revisions which Tschichold provided in 1967 when this translation project was beginning. They are included but in the introductory pages, outside of the book proper which renders the original text.

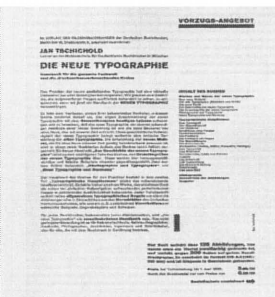
Tschichold's *Die Neue Typographie* has two major sections: "Growth and Nature of the New Typography," outlining Tschichold's social philosophy with its graphic implications, and "Principal Typographic Categories," which enumerates categories of typographic practice or subject matter and concrete applications of his approaches to them. The book includes many examples ranging from posters to letterhead and book formats, though the emphasis is on public, quasi-public and commercial communication settings like posters, advertisements, newspapers and magazine covers.

### Sources of Tschichold's philosophy

By the beginning of the twentieth century, we can see that technology and industry (engineering) had built a new substrate on which the objects of everyday life were placed as varied expressions of a common culture of materials and processes. These objects were not created by persons alone, but through industrial processes. Like the many others who comprised the avant-garde, Tschichold organized his work around the notion of a clear cultural break with the past: a break which could be seen in all aspects of society, and one to which the material culture and communication must adjust.

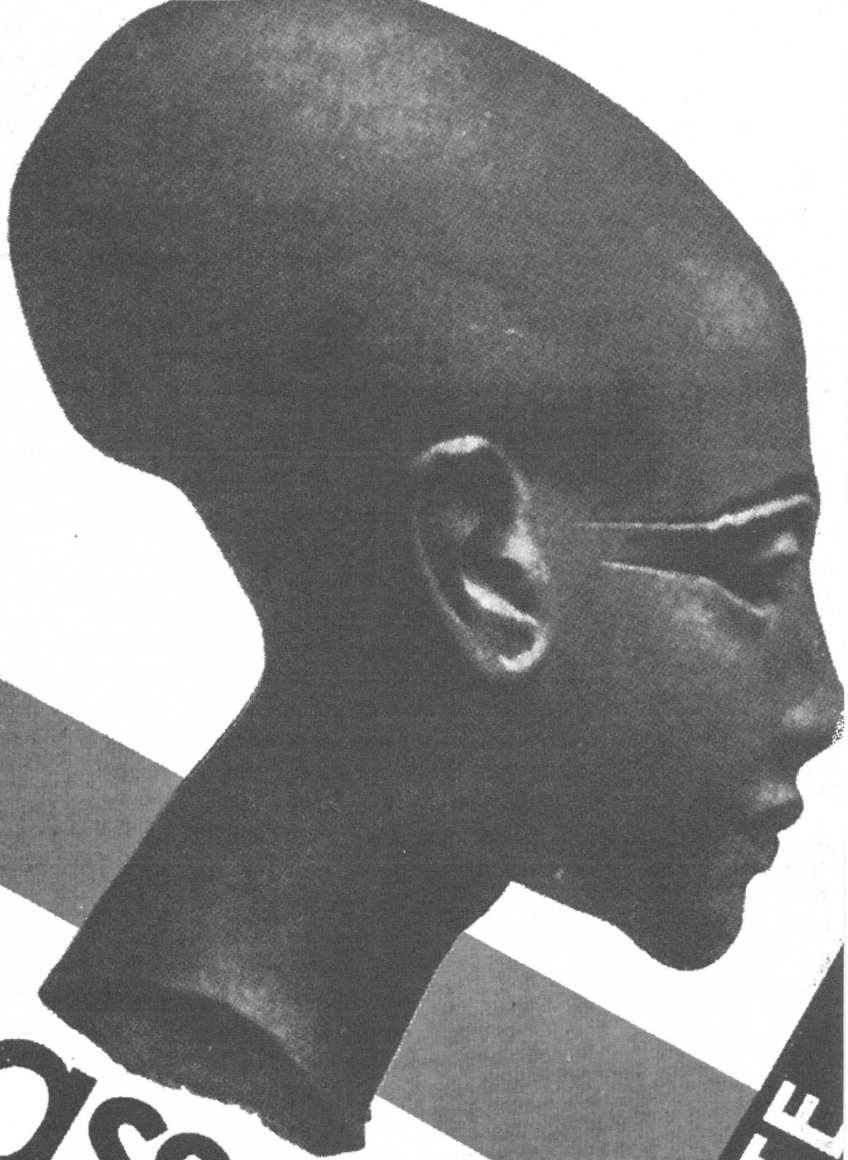
The objects in use by the new generation suffer from the fatal compromise between a supposedly "artistic" intention and the dictates of technical manufacture: from a feeble turning back to historical parallels: from the conflict between essence and appearance. Instead of recognizing and designing for the laws of machine production, the previous generation contented itself with trying to follow a tradition that was in any case only imaginary. Before them stand the works of today, untainted by the past, primary shapes which identify the aspect of our time: Car, Aeroplane, Telephone, Wireless, Factory, Neon-advertising New York! These objects, designed without reference to the aesthetics of the past, have been created by a new kind of man: the **engineer!**<sup>2</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the cultural reaction to industrialization had been escape into the arts and crafts. (In Germany, *fraktur* or black letter text was still in common use after World War I.) Tschichold participated in the related movements — futurism, dada, *de stijl*, constructivism, suprematism, etc. — which embraced modern industrial life and tried in various ways to chart a course to follow. This avant-garde, modern industrial culture with its creativity rooted in industry and technology confronted the degeneration of outmoded forms of production. "Type production has



*Die Neue  
Typographie*  
advertisement  
(original in black on  
yellow)

3 ANE



**ASSUH**

NUR FÜR

**ZIGARETTE**

KENNER

**ADLER-COMPAGNIE, A.G.**

Left:  
Herbert Bayer,  
Cigarette poster.  
*The New Typogra-  
phy*, 184.

gone mad with its senseless outpouring of new types: worse and worse variations of historical or idiosyncratic themes are constantly being drawn, cut, and cast.”<sup>3</sup>

For Tschichold, this was not at root typographic degeneration per se, but a social degeneration: a stress in the coming of age of industrial culture, the first fully inclusive mass culture.

We can only acquire a true general culture (for a culture of the few, as has existed up to now, is no culture but a kind of barbarism) if we remember the natural law of general relationship, the indissoluble oneness of all men and peoples, and of all fields of creativity. Only in degenerate times can “Personality” (opposed to the nameless masses) become the aim of human development.<sup>4</sup>

Within this framework, art did not stand apart from society as it does today, or escape from it as in the nineteenth century, but could work with other institutional forces of industry, polity and communication. Graphic communication had its roots in art, and art remained important to Tschichold, but he envisioned art integrated with industry and science. In this milieu, it was possible for an advertising poster like Bayer’s cigarette advertisement to take its cues from painting, present a product and project a sense of its own integrity.

### **The constructivist answer to art, design and culture**

To us, anonymous art is largely a contradiction in terms, at least after the middle ages. We expect works to be novel and unique, and in practical terms we price them according to their artist. In Tschichold’s collectivist ideology, the purpose was to overcome all particularities: of maker, viewer and occasion or subject matter. Art increasingly overcame subject matter by turning from the representational (images of something) to the presentational (forms which are in and of themselves what they are), and by changing artistic products from decorations to integral parts of architecture: “We don’t hang it on any available wall, but deliberately integrate it with the architecture of our living-rooms.” Representational art creates between itself and the experiences it communicates. Presentational art collapsed that semantic axis and centered on cognitive interests in shapes and colors with arrangement or syntax playing a heightened role. The impersonality of art was in its abstract, objective and non-particular communication, its

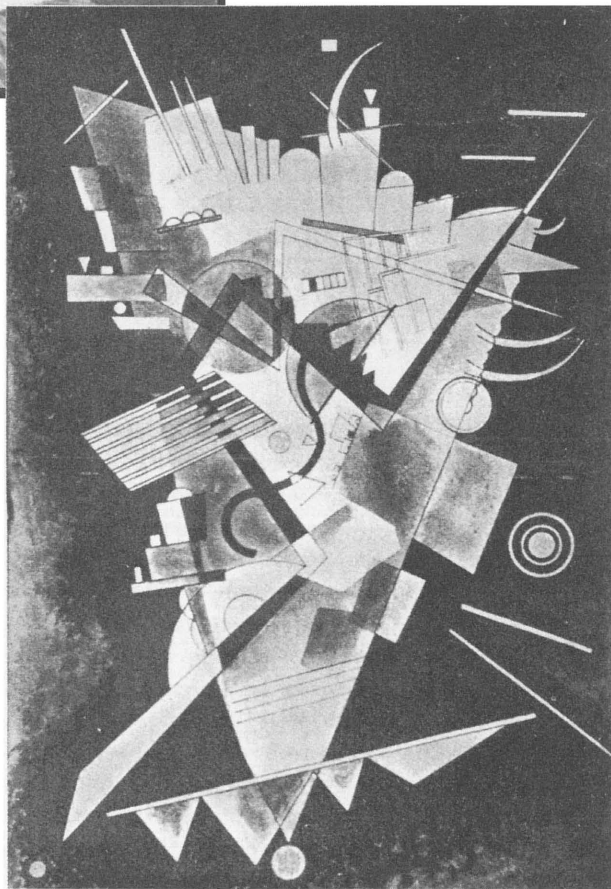


Typography of the turn of the century. From the folder of the “International Graphic Design Exchange of the German Printing Association,” 1889.



**Above:**  
Image as representation: Manet, *In the Greenhouse*. *The New Typography*, 30.

**Right:**  
Presentational form: Kandinsky, *In the Balance*, 1924.



indifference to subject matter and the relationship of that subject matter to the viewer.

Within this conceptual frame, art, commercial communication, architecture and commercial products tended to fuse into a unified form language for print, graphics, architecture and objects, with a communicative stance in all of these media which tended toward presentational as distinct from repre-



**Above:**  
Architecture as  
representation:  
Natick Massachusetts.



**Right:**  
Architecture as  
presentation:  
Detroit Michigan.

sentational form, and toward an expression which was public and impersonal as distinct from private and personal. The ideology links these attitudes together.

### **Information, industry and modernity**

Tschichold was working to develop a new culture of communication — a culture of information. Tschichold saw that in industrial society, the modal subject matter of communication is information and information has its own special characteristics. Information is written by people, but it is not self-expression. It is directed to audiences, but it is not about them. The subject matters may be particular objects or experimental phenomena taking place at particular times, but the relevance of the information is what is discovered that transcends those particular circumstances. Within the world of

5 ANE



The object as data:  
 Otto Baumberger's  
 poster for PKZ. *The  
 New Typography*, 185.

information, authors and readers are catalytic: information comes through them and is received and held by them, but they do not concoct or control it; rather they discover it.

In Tschichold's posters, for example, information is not linear: it does not reflect the narrative line of speech or argument. It involves the reader as observer, making syntheses from disparate data and data types: day, place, name, shape, color, image. Information also involves a disjuncture between content and subject matter, a story which is not the data itself, but a story the data can be used to "tell" and which makes it information. Readers may be drawn to that story by visual arrangement or syntax, how the information is selected and arrayed. This arrangement can organize data into packets which can be visually related to each other. The interpretation of information often involves placing it in the frame of the reader or viewer. In narration, the author has to link the various informational units to create an intelligible stream or argument, but the informational style requires the opposite, to break the narrative stream apart, and present only components juxtaposed to each other so that a narrative or, as we will see, the possibility of a narrative can be constructed by viewers.

The verbal-visual hybrid of content and the visual style that was being perfected in the twenties and thirties is particularly suited to this conception of "information," by presenting packets of data which we can inspect and organize as our eyes rove the page. For example, Baumberger's PKZ poster does not "say" anything: there is no text addressing us to inform us of the wonders of PKZ clothing. Rather, we see part of the coat. We note its pattern, cut, color and we discover who is the maker. Since we are free to make our own observations, those observations appear at least on first viewing, not as received narrative, but as our conclusions. This poster is like the computer game in which we are apparently free (but within a highly structured environment), or like the well designed tool that fits into our hands in specific ways. Our observations most surely have been selectively made available, and the simplicity and high contrast and similarity make the process of interpretation highly directed, but there is no narrative caption speaking to us.<sup>5</sup> We might say that the sender and the receiver are both hidden. The result is cool and compelling.

In this environment we inspect, gather information and sell ourselves.

### Art and information

It is not by accident that informational presentation and constructivist art are parallel in how they relate author, viewer



Jan Tschichold,  
Personal postcard.  
*The New Typography*, 140.

or reader and subject matter.<sup>6</sup> As constructivist art overcomes the particularity of maker and viewer, information overcomes the particularities of author and reader. In this world the individual person is a ghost or a catalyst, bringing forth what is already there but not yet discovered or realized, and consuming what exists to be consumed.

The result of a bias toward the use of this approach is communications that tend toward impersonality in general. For example, we see one of Tschichold's post cards. We might call it formal, corporate or objective in its visual language.

The eighteenth-century funeral announcement that follows is certainly also formal. It has objectivities as well, communicated by the use of magiscules. But the funeral announcement also has its script and decoration, both references that point outside of the content to human agent and social forms. The decoration is perhaps irrelevant to the content and it is added perhaps for pleasure or appeal. We can read simulated handwriting as a personal gesture between the author and reader. There is a distinction between sign and text, and in the text, there is the linearity of narrative, which only humans create. Tschichold's postcard is more like a presentation. The forms are simple, and graphic. There is no narrative, only items that we inspect and make intelligible. The typewriting (which is the hand striving for type rather than type striving for a representation of the hand) of name and address provide the

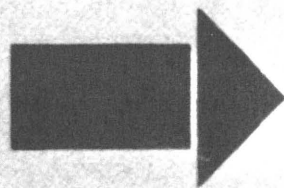


SANIE

TSCHICHOL



# NAPOLLEON



**PHOEBU  
PALAST**

ANFANGSZEITEN

4<sup>00</sup> 6<sup>15</sup> 8

SONNTAGS:

Jan Tschichold,  
poster for  
*Napoleon*, 1927.  
*The New Typogra-  
phy*, 189.

search for essential form. In terms of type, he wrote “Do type-faces express anything? Is it really a typeface’s job to express spiritual matters?”<sup>7</sup> He favored sans serif faces because they lack personal characteristics. Asymmetric setting had an “affinity” with the culture, but more important, it allowed for the organization of complex information. Page sizes were to be fixed not by a spiritual system, but by a practical system of standardization that provided logical sizes for different purposes and which simplified paper manufacture and distribution.

### **Syntax and visual elements**

In Tschichold’s system, the job of design is to use visual arrangement or syntax to provide schemas by which the disparate data elements can be contrasted, juxtaposed and perceived without having to be translated into narrative.

Every part of a text relates to every other part by a definite, logical relationship of emphasis and value, predetermined by content. It is up to the typographer to express this relationship clearly and visibly, through type sizes and weight, arrangement of lines, use of colour, photography, etc.<sup>8</sup>

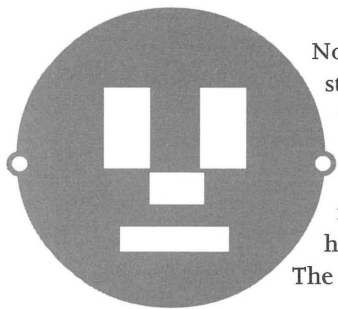
Tschichold’s way of building meaning was not from the element up, from sacred, elemental forms with inherent meaning, but from outside in, using the larger, socially constructed, formal systems which function as conventions within which variation and contrast make it possible to create meaning. Using this system, one could: 1) create contrasts of size, light and dark, type, line, half tone, simple shapes against each other, and 2) diverge from the “background” of routine, general accepted practice. Thus, the various sizes of type, rules, colors and elementary shapes Tschichold used were tools for creating figures against ground.

### **Condensation and nominalization**

Another tendency of modernist design that one sees in Tschichold’s posters is the radical reduction in the number of words used to convey a message. Not only are there fewer words, but the choices of words and arrangements can be seen as a strategy consistent with Tschichold’s view of the world. For example, let us say that I own the Phoebus Palast movie theater. We will be showing the film “Napoleon” for a few

weeks and we are showing it on a schedule. I want all of you to buy tickets and come and see it, so I want you all to know about it. So, I commission a poster. Tschichold created such a poster (and many others like it). Instead of a narrative, it contains three explicit pieces of data that you can make into information: the title of the movie, the name of the theater and some lines and boxes with days and times. Let us presume that we know that Napoleon is a film, Phoebus Palast is a theater, and we recognize a time schedule. The common presence of Napoleon, Phoebus Palast and days and times is the only information that is here divulged. From that information, you might intelligibly conclude “I can go see Napoleon at the Phoebus this week.” Thus, from that information — name, name, time — you will be able to project a complex set of events and your role in them.

Note what has been removed — only nouns populate this poster. References to action are made by a visual syntax or arrangement, either by the way the text is set, or by graphical elements — arrows, lines, circles, etc. — functioning as operators. The narrative of my intentions has not merely been concentrated. It has been abbreviated, elided and eliminated — the author and the designer have both been concealed. We may try to reconstruct the author and the intentions or occasion, but we do not have enough information to reconstruct unequivocally.



Not only can those intentions not be adequately reconstructed, but the poster seems quite intelligible without them. “They’re putting on Napoleon at the Phoebus all week.” — “Who are they?” — “Does it matter?” — “Are we supposed to go?” — “Somebody will.” What is left determinate is this object world apart from the human agents, and it seems to operate quite by itself. The more we think about this, the more weird it gets.

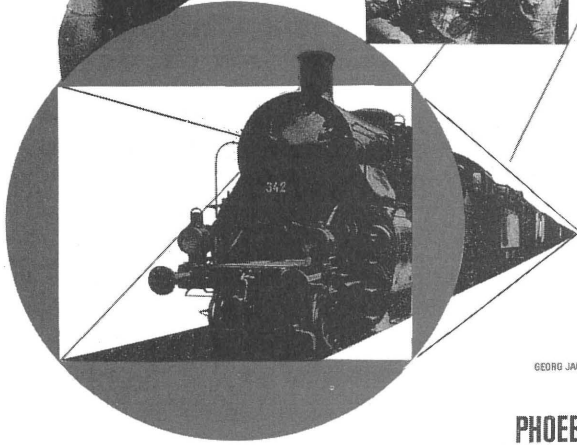
Do we know the face from the forms of the eyes, ears, etc., or do we know the parts from the face as a syntax of arrangement?

### **The universe of potent identities**

And, there is another dimension to add. There are different sentences that might be made from these data, e.g., “The Phoebus moviehouse is putting on Napoleon this week,” “Napoleon can be seen at the Phoebus,” “Napoleon is coming to

# DIE FRAU OHNE NAMEN

## ZWEITER TEIL



GEORG JACOBYS WELTREISEFILM

### PHOEBUS-PALAST

ANFANGSZEITEN: 4, 6<sup>15</sup>, 8<sup>15</sup> SONNTAGS: 1<sup>15</sup>, 4, 6<sup>15</sup>, 8<sup>15</sup>

### IN JEDER VORSTELLUNG AUFFÜHRUNG VON HONEGGER: PACIFIC 231

DESE ZEITGEMASSE MUSIKSCHRIFTUNG WIRD VON EINER  
ERENS HAZD KOMPLEXER LICHT-BOICHTUNG (FILM) BELEITET

ENTWURF: JAN TSCHOLD, PLANEGG & HOCH. DRUCK: GERALD SPACHEN AB. HÖRNER

Tschichold, poster for  
*Die Frau Ohne Namen.*  
*The New Typography,*  
188.

the Phoebus this week.”<sup>9</sup> These sentences are all warranted, but semantically distinct. If we were to ask “Who is doing what to whom?” — we would have three different answers. Whether by necessity or by intention, this poster is indeterminate with respect to the language structures that can be constructed from it. This kind of first order indeterminacy<sup>10</sup> is important. As, for example, Chomsky comments, the phrase “a device for constructing sentences can derive from either a) a device by means of which speakers produce sentences or b) a device which produces sentences.”<sup>11</sup> The difference is fundamental. After all, who is doing the acting: speakers or devices, Phoebus or Napoleon or the poster. We are in a non-determinable world in which for all we know the objects themselves are potent identities, and on posters they are able to act by just being there: without even moving.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, while the visual syntax does not provide the specific ground or explication which the narrative would provide, it does give a semblance of one. We have no verbs; in their place we have these graphical operators. We might call them semblances of verbs because they stand in the places of verbs the way lines can be eyes, ears and mouth when they are properly arranged. (The most verb like object in the Napoleon poster is the arrow.)

It is possible for visual elements to function in explicit and language-like ways, most notably in formal graphs, and in the graphical transformations used for manipulating mathematical formulae. Many of Tschichold’s business forms and letterheads come very close to this sort of language-like explicitness. Layout is making the posters intelligible, but that intelligibility remains implicit so we cannot put our fingers on quite what it is.

### **Syntax, mystification and trust**

So, the extreme elision in these posters removes the information that gives statements their determinate ground. It leaves them enigmatic. We do not know who is putting on this show, or why, or whether we are to go. In this impersonal world, these questions really do not matter. What matters is that the film is here.

Marxists call this invocation of an unspecified base mystification. When we determine that base, we often find that it has been fabricated or inflated to legitimate authority. Anthony Giddens<sup>13</sup> uses the term “trust.” When we push the elevator button we probably do not know how the elevator actually works, but we trust the notion of an elevator: that somebody figured out how to make it, and that if this one is in proper working order we will get “there.” We cannot see the logical ground, in this case the mechanism,<sup>14</sup> but we believe it is there. In a complex environment we have no choice but to function in this overdetermined way, and we do so routinely. Grounds not only support statements but limit them. But if we do not know the grounds, we do not know the limitations. If the elevator is not working, you could fall. The Napoleon poster gives us a reality without enough information to reconstruct the narrative grounds that support and limit it.

### **Indeterminacy and size**

Now that we have mystification and trust, there is one final salient aspect that I wish to mention here. To put it most simply, the indeterminate is bigger than the determinate. If “something awful might happen,” it might be anything we could imagine, and we can imagine all sorts of awful possibilities. If I am taking a trip: the plane could crash; the taxi could have a flat tire; the train could derail. This becomes an amazing scenario because in real life, only one of these things could happen. If the taxi has a flat, I miss the plane or the train, since I won’t be taking both. But in my imagination, I experience all the possibilities, even the mutually exclusive ones. By leaving the communication indeterminate, Tschichold allows us the greatest freedom to amplify the possible messages, and where the communication is most indeterminate, e.g., on the postcard, we work the hardest to find some sense to make. Yes, less is more. To summarize, we see six aspects working together in this communication system:

1. Impersonality as the dominant mode of address
2. Elision, or the reduction of information to a level below that which is necessary for grammatical completeness
3. Potent (nouns) identities that can effect action (verbs) merely by their presence

4. Potential meanings made available by visual syntax
5. Semantic ambiguity arising from indeterminacy in the syntactic system
6. Mystification/trust

### Natural history of modernism

One of the most interesting aspects of *Die Neue Typographie* is what perspective it can give us on the developments within modernist design and communication as they would develop in the decades after it was written. George Kubler, who has studied the issues of period and change, has offered the following general observations:

*Early solutions (promorphic) are technically simple, energetically inexpensive, expressively clear. Late solutions (neomorphic) are costly, difficult, intricate, recondite, and animated. Early solutions are integral in relation to the problem they resolve. Late ones are partial in being addressed more to the details of function or expression than to the totality of the problem.*<sup>15</sup>

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Herbert Bayer's  
*Universal* typeface

By these standards, Tschichold fits near the beginning. His work is clear, simple and striking. One theory of modernism might apply this model to see later work in terms of a natural life cycle of elaboration and degeneration. There are also other issues having to do with the ideas that informed modernism and how they interacted with the larger social and economic structures that transformed modernism into something of its opposite. This transformation can be seen in modernism's progress through Ulm and into American and world economies and the information of the digital age.

### Tschichold, Bauhaus and Ulm

As noted earlier, Tschichold's functionalist modernism contrasted with the idealist Bauhaus emphasis on the search for inherently meaningful form. Kandinsky, by contrast, had developed theories of the spirituality of elementary forms and processes.<sup>16</sup> Tschichold was a highly skilled draftsman, but he had little inclination, at least after the twenties to create new

# futura stencil

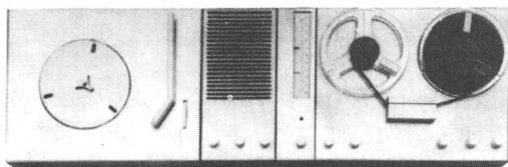
A 1928 version of  
Renner's *Futura*,  
Albers' *Stencil*

typefaces. Within the Bauhaus, there were many experiments with typeface design created from the compass and T-square, and the results were geometrically ideal, but often non-functional. Joseph Albers, for example, built the typeface "Stencil" out of three forms: square, triangle and one quarter circle. Herbert Bayer developed a Freudian analysis of his Universal typeface.<sup>17</sup> For the most part, these are hard typefaces to read.

## Ulm, America and the market

After World War II, both idealist and materialist tendencies found their way to the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm. There, they were joined by the post-war German politics of anti-communism. Here, Tschichold's views can be seen in terms of one side of Ulm's struggles.

*And so the battle lines were drawn. Is design an applied art, in which case it is to be found in the elements of the square, the triangle, and the circle: or is it a discipline that draws its criteria from the tasks it has to perform, from use, from making, and from technology? Is the world the particular and the concrete, or is it the universal and the abstract? The Bauhaus never resolved this conflict, nor could it, so long as the word art had not been rid of its sacred aura.... We all had our reasons to have reservations about the Bauhaus.<sup>18</sup>*



Braun A.G.  
audio equipment

At Ulm, the result was a technocratic approach based on technology and industrial production and a more empirical sense of usefulness and practicality.

## Adventures of the functional

Neither the idealist, nor the materialist, nor the technocratic approaches integrated theories of the marketplace and that failure proved important. Among the best known end products from Ulm were Braun electronics and appliances. These products were among the first to fully communicate a schematic of their meaningful function rather than a reflection of their internal mechanical structure. Their surfaces and con-

trols organized their operation and reflected ideas of their function as much as their mechanism. They were intended to be seen as neutral, objective and functional, at least when introduced into the land of streamlining and fins they stood out.

At first, they were alien and unaccountable, but customer experience and their individuality provided them with a distinctive semantic identity. Not only did they acquire this socially constructed identity; it became essential to product differentiation that these products be recognized and sold at premium prices. These designs were transformed by the marketplace. Not only did (and does) it behoove manufacturers to create products with unique and identifiable characteristics; it behooves designers, whether freelance or employees to encode themselves into the products of their work in such a way that their clients (or the other departments in the company) are aware of their presence. So, we can count among the forces at work a tendency toward individuation which pushes the functional toward the artistic, and at a premium, “designer” price. In communication we can see the detachment of the formal interest from the content, which came often to be characteristic of high modern style and, for example, obsessive interest in logotypes and visual identity symbols in situations where they had little practical value.

### **The transformation of information**

Tschichold’s approach to communication was built out of a model of information as narrative: events, facts, data that appear as objects in the world. In Tschichold’s world it was possible for these data to make sense by themselves. We can now see how qualitatively different information is from what it was in the twenties.

By the 1960s, design methodologists like Christopher Alexander were developing systems planning to tackle the problems of knowledge synthesis in a culture in which information was being both extended and balkanized into specialties and subspecialties with incompatible languages. Increasingly, we have found that just as the forms of information are growing horizontally, they are growing vertically —

layers of information, information about information and information embedded in other information. In the electronic age, information in the form of symbolic communication comes across our desks so rapidly and in such a form that it becomes independent of the outside world. By virtue of its sheer volume, information has become an autonomous self-referential stream or field of operations within which we function.

In Tschichold's day, we could see the operation of mechanical objects; we could vicariously feel the crumbling of brick buildings under the stress of earthquakes and by contrast the bending of steel frames, and the cracking and tension within reinforced concrete. The engineering knowledge had physical analogies that made objects understandable extensions of our bodies as McLuhan said. But within electronic media, for example, those analogies break down. The images produced by cat scans, are synthetic representations of data, programmed to have familiar, photograph-like appearance. The computer is programmed in multiple layers of chip architecture, ROM BIOS, operating system, interpreter/assembler and user programs. These layers are available only as mediated by more programs — information is embedded — in short, the information of today is often not the sort of information that Tschichold and his contemporaries envisioned.

### **Information and culture**

Tschichold's *Die Neue Typographie* reflects the period of utopian modernism in which it was written. Starting with the Enlightenment, the future was a place of fulfillment, and while many tried to escape from industrialism, many others saw in the acceleration of progress the possibility of "retrieving an indefinitely open future and putting it into lifetime proportions."<sup>19</sup> (Tschichold saw the realization of a "true general culture" in the offing.) The growth of communication and information have made that acceleration possible, but within the world of continuous information flow, the horizon moves away from us at the pace with which we run toward it. "Thus it is not just that 'the future is no longer what it used to be,' as a piece of graffiti announces from the wall of a house in Ber-

lin. It is increasingly overshadowed by the problems which are opening up in the present.”<sup>20</sup>

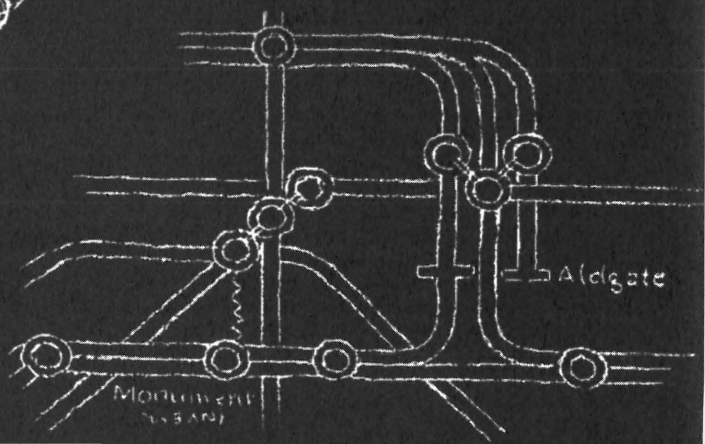
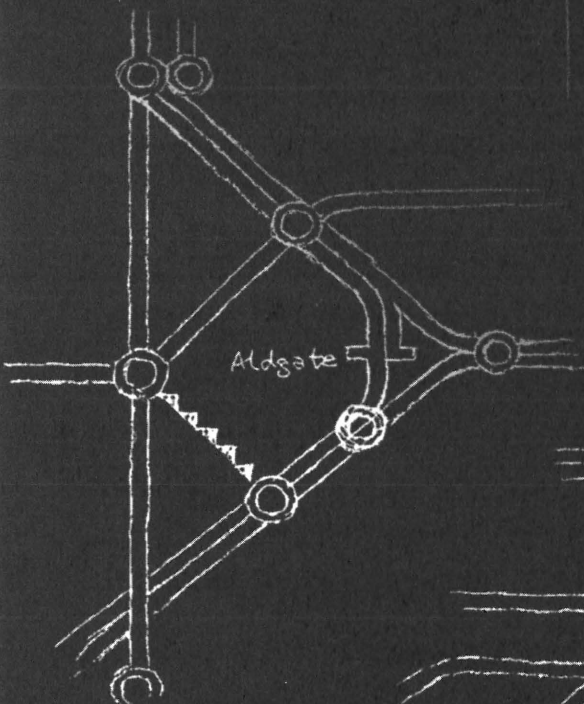
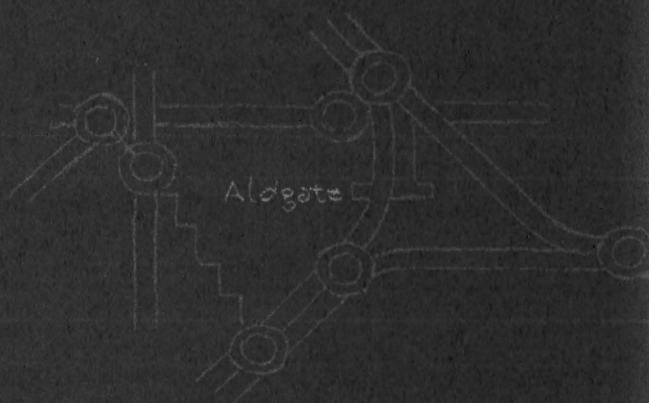
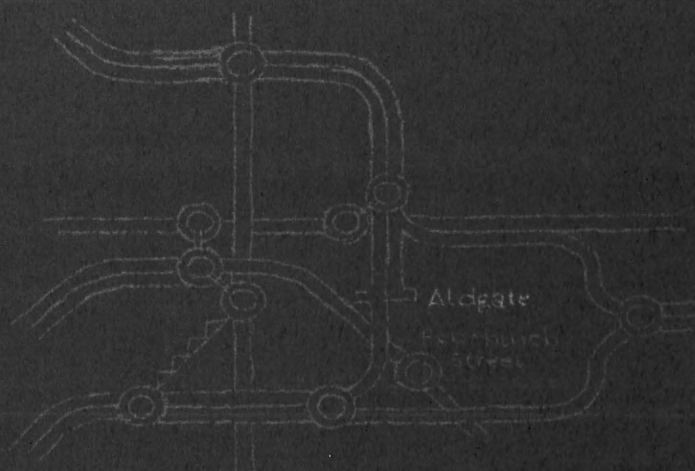
The future realized is less than we have imagined it to be. Thus, it seems appropriate that the disenchantment with the future at least as it was idealized would have as a corollary, the sort of shift we see in current multi-media and computer games with their return to representation, layering of multiple, often conflicting, levels of information. From this standpoint, these changes should perhaps be taken seriously not within the craft of communication design, but as indicative and constitutive of a major cultural shift in our social understanding of information and communication.

### Conclusion

Writing about communication within the graphic arts has generally centered on the craft aspects of the work, presenting rules for “good” design or presenting a series of images with more or less related text. *The New Typography* includes a comprehensive set of useful explicated examples of design strategies, and clear discussions of paper and typographic standards that can clarify these for students and give them a sense of how systematic and powerful visual literacy can be. More important, Tschichold saw the purpose of design to be communication. He built a theory and practice that corresponded to that theory. In so doing he provided us with valuable tools for understanding design history and important theoretical issues in the actual relationship between form, meaning and communication. Any reprint of *The New Typography* would be important, if only because of its historic importance as a document. It is especially valuable to have it in English, presented in an appropriate format, with graphics and a timely introduction. It is extraordinary as a clear, succinct and integral statement of an important modernist position that helps to relate form to essential social and cultural beliefs.

## Notes

1. In his later philosophy, Tschichold argues for the need to decorate and humanize. It would remain for Robert Venturi to define the impulse to break from simple form in structural ways. Venturi is not invoked here, but his notions, particularly concerning inflection, superadjacency, and complexity within rigid containers could be applied to Tschichold's work. Is it 'Miesian' and regular, or is it a language of considerable complexity and inflection?
2. Tschichold, Jan. *The New Typography*, Ruari McLean, tr. Berkley, Ca; University of California Press, 1995, p. 9.
3. *The New Typography*, 26.
4. *The New Typography*, 25.
5. At least not in 1930. We may have become more jaded or aware of the manipulation involved.
6. Though, as I will discuss, it would be several decades before information would overcome and detach itself from its subject matter — the outside world — to become what it now is: information about information.
7. *The New Typography*, 74.
8. *The New Typography*, 67.
9. The Sentence "I can go see Napoleon at the Phoebus this week," is one of the sentences you can create by interpreting the data as information. You can guess that it is the likely intended reading because it is reasonable motivation for making the poster. But you could just as easily make many other sentences, like "They really do put on lousy films at the Phoebus." and still be responding to the information. If, however, you said "What is that weird circle about?" you would be operating from a point of view outside of the language culture of the poster or at least the one that I have been pointing out.
10. Sentences themselves are often indeterminate in their interpretation, e.g., "The aging control system is causing delays." Is this a system for controlling aging of a control system that is itself aging? In the modernist design under discussion, we are with this sort of interpretive problem before we can even construct the sentence.
11. Hodge, Robert and Gunther Kress. 1933. *Language as ideology*. London; Routledge and Keegan Paul, 33.
12. We might consider the fact that motion can only be indicated. This may heighten the ability to imply it.
13. See Anthony Giddens. *Consequences of Modernity*.
14. Consider the matter of electronic devices, where there is no mechanism to see, and we have only accounts like descriptions of the programs!
15. Kubler, George. 1962. *The Shape of Time*. New Haven; Yale University, 55-56.
16. Kandinsky, Wassily. *Point, Line, and Plane*.
17. For a brief description see Mills, Mike. Appendix: The Gender of the Universal. in Lupton, Ellen, and J. Abbott Miller, editors. *The ABC's of Bauhaus Design*. Princeton; Princeton Architectural Press, Inc. undated, 46-47.
18. Aicher, Otl. in Lindinger, Herbert editor. *Ulm Design: the Morality of Objects*. Cambridge; MIT Press, 126-127.
19. Nowotny, Helga. 1995. *Time*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 46.
20. Nowotny, 50.



## **Book Review**

Ken Garland

### **Mr. Beck's Underground Map: A History**

Middlesex: Capital Transport Publishing: 1995

illustrated, limited edition, £10.95

*Reviewed by Colin Banks*

**Colin Banks** is a principal in the London design studio Banks & Miles. His folio book *London's Handwriting* surveys the history of twentieth century sans serif typefaces and places Edward Johnston's 1916 design for London Transport within the development. It was published in fall of 1995 in a limited edition of 200 copies by the London Transport Museum.

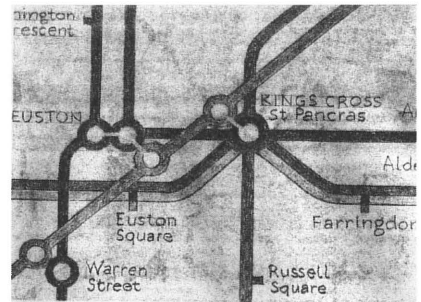
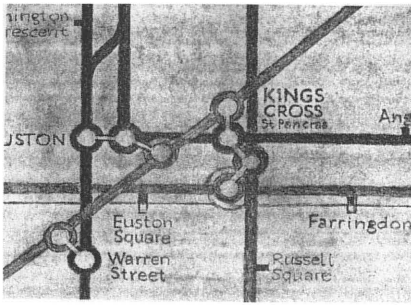
This story could be an important rallying point for designers. It chronicles the struggles that Harry Beck had, to hold on to the integrity of the design of his famous diagram of the London underground and the way in which he ultimately lost it.

Beck was a rare man of original talent who had to grovel for an idea. In many ways it is an inspiring story sympathetically told, for the idea remained central to Beck and to this book; in other ways it is a depressing one. Something has to be done, for the arm twisting still goes on in the United Kingdom. The boot is quiet on the wrong foot, a designer's copyright for adaptation or further use, should never be assignable. The designer should never be left in a position where he or she has to take up the defensive and beg to retain it, that should be the purpose of law and the client should come to the designer for any extension of the original contract; but it happens all the time.

A national patron of design recently forced me to sign away rights in design by withholding the payment for other, completely different work. I hope I have a biographer as well qualified as Garland to write it up with the same light touch.

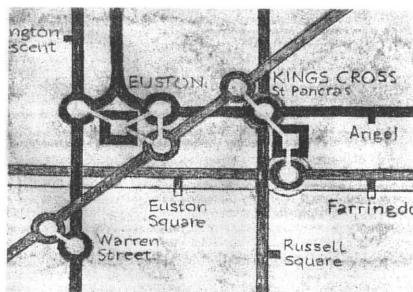
Beck had been made redundant by London Underground and was on the dole when he did all the original core work on his map in 1931. Subsequently he was reinstated to his draftsmans' job, but had his map proposal turned down by the London Transit publicity chiefs. It was not to be ultimately taken up until 1933 in which year the LT printed 850,000 copies of the pocket version for which he was paid £5.25 for the visuals, £5.25 for the artwork.

After that one thinks of the map as a history of continuous refinement; it was not so. I was not aware of the horrors that Beck was then directed to accommodate: station names inside boxes, tube line names within thickened routes. But then Beck also set himself parameters which did little to improve the appearance of the diagram, such as a minimal use of diagonals, from 1940 until his last adaptation in 1959. Beck was, as we would hope, a man driven by intellectual challenge, but this led him to set up as nearly as many hurdles in his path as his employers.



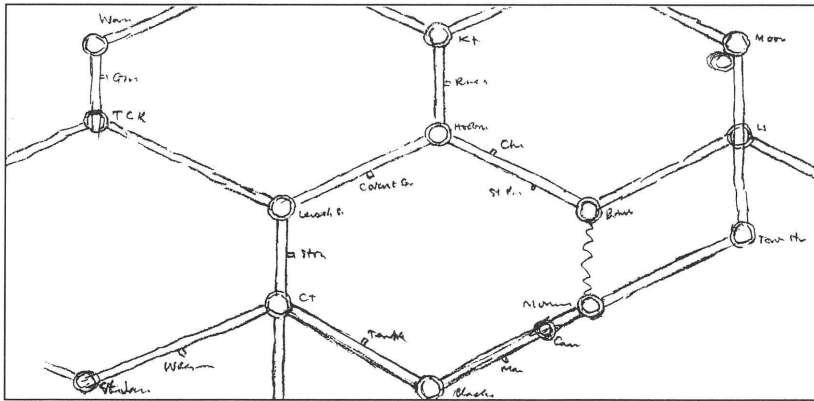
**Above and right:**  
Pencil sketches by Beck of Euston and King's Cross interchanges.

Made in 1961, after the publication of the Hutchinson version of the Diagram, they all employ Beck's favorite device of 'white-line connectors' but there is one drawing (right) which incorporates a device he had not used hitherto: an open square at Euston and at King's Cross St. Pancras to represent a connection with the main line termini.



**Opposite page:**  
Pencil Sketch by Beck of an experiment with hexagonal modules.

Apart from these arbitrary demands, the map needed modification as the London underground network grew; there are nearly thirty examples in this book. How does one choose a



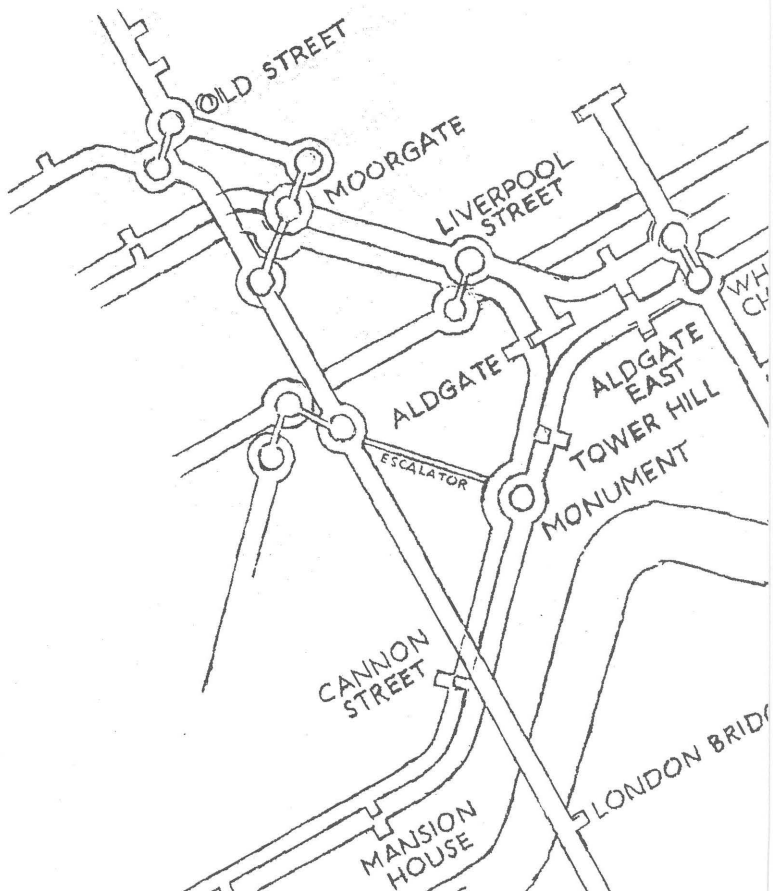
favorite? Well subtract the redundant information, tot up economies of production, acknowledge the new problems and the elegance of the answers and surprisingly, what is left is an aesthetic choice.

I think for me it must be the earliest poster of 1933, in spite of diamond shaped interchange points and some awkward corners. Mostly where it fails is not in giving the metropolis a concentrated and identifiable center, but then the main idea had been to even out the geographical bunching. So why do I like it: the answer is only partly objective and rests with the very revolutionary nature of the concept; the rest is subjective. I like the fine route lines that lend emphasis to the station names, and the balance of tension between the horizontals and equal number of verticals; not the sort of criteria to settle the question but as Beck was very aware, good style cannot be kept out of the equation. As Beck refined the style though, he set out to reduce the number of diagonals and the design got duller. The introduction of a station finding grid came to stay for a few years in 1951; it surprises me that it was not also used logarithmically to show how the suburbs had been condensed, but I cannot be sure it would work unless it were tried. The last Beck map was in 1959 and included a misplaced apostrophe in 'St. JAME's.' I was told very firmly when

once I proposed 'St. James' Park' that it was "not LT's mission to encourage illiteracies."

Beck's involvement ended very sadly. In 1960 he was confident, on the basis of verbal agreements, that LT would turn to him again with the introduction of the then forthcoming Victoria Line. I remember the furor with which the signature of H.L. Hutchison, the LT publicity manager of that time, was received when it appeared on the very bad 1962 map together with sweeping press statements about its improvement.

A Pencil sketch by Beck of the eastern end of the Circle Line. The earliest extant working drawing for a quad royal edition of the Diagram, this dates from 1949-50. With the promotion of the Inner Circle to the status of a separate line with its own color – yellow – Beck was presented with the challenging task of inserting this extra line into the more congested parts of the Circle.



I met Hutchinson first socially then in his office when I was a young lad taking my first steps in London. He asked me what I wanted to do and I said I was interested in typography, that was dismissed with “We leave that sort of thing to our printers.”

He did not give me any work nor would I have wanted it from him. Christian Barman had been Frank Pick’s assistant and Hutchinson’s predecessor at LT and had moved on to work for The British Railways Board; where I never received anything but generosity; and as this book illustrates, that story just about mirrors Beck’s treatment at that time.

Garland has used his considerable talents to a worthy end in this book about an enduring artifact, that is socially beneficial, rather than the street graffiti of which he sometimes speaks fondly. The book is as we would expect well designed and produced, but also very good value. It uses original London Transit Block Letter for the headings and it is interesting to see how this type makes poor letter combinations and has quickly come to look anachronistic. It would have been a bonus to see more of the other city maps which have sought their inspiration in Beck’s work, but at the very least it should answer the question “What is Information Design”; examples will never come better than this.

STEP

WA  
PRO  
NSU

Handwritten text in a cursive script, possibly a form of shorthand or a specific dialect, covering the background of the page. The text is arranged in several lines, with some characters appearing to be stylized or abbreviated. The script is dense and fills most of the page area.



SENATVS POPVLYS QVE ROMANVS  
 IMP CAESARIS DIVI NERVAE F NERVAE  
 TRAIANI AVG GERM DACI OPTIMI  
 MAXIMO TRIB POT XVII IMP VIGOS VIII  
 AD DECLARANDVM QVANTALITIVDINIS  
 MONSETILOCVSTANDI TRVSSIT EGESTVS

## Book Review

Johanna Drucker

### **The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination.**

New York: Thames & Hudson: 1995.

322 pages, illustrated, \$45.00

*Reviewed by: Adam Blatner, M.D.*

**Adam Blatner** is a psychiatrist working with both children and adults, a psychodramatist, a cartoonist and among other things has an interest in the lore of writing systems. He lives, teaches, writes and plays in Austin, Texas.

This book goes beyond a mere history of the alphabet to address a deeper level of abstraction: How have people interpreted the phenomenon of the alphabet itself? What is to be made of a system of writing that can capture language in a limited number of symbols? There are a number of books that have addressed the impact of literacy on law, politics, military strategy, literature, etc., but *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* is unique in its consideration of the symbolic impact—that is, the power of these symbols to evoke rich complexes of intuitions and associations regarding the possible way writing was invented, the spiritual essence of each letter and many other aspects of writing itself.

Any subject has a range of levels of abstraction and subtlety associated with it, from electronics or chemistry to philosophy or the study of writing systems. The most superficial or outwardly obvious level is called the “exoteric,” while the “deepest” level, requiring the most extensive study and contemplation, is called the “esoteric.” Whether it’s in mathematics or subatomic physics, the greatest thinkers add a degree of intuition and inspiration to their ordinary modes of information processing—and the cultivation of such modes represents the esoteric approach to that subject.

For many years and many cultures, writing itself was the advanced technology, and the letters of the alphabet functioned not only as pragmatic tools for communication – their exoteric aspect – but also became the objects of contemplation. (A relatively contemporary analogy is the “esoteric” study of communications itself as a subject, an example being the work of Marshall McLuhan, with his effort to penetrate the obvious,



**Quadrate Greek Letters**  
from a stele at Athens  
Lewis F Davis,  
*Alphabets Old and New*

**opposite page:**  
Line of text from  
the Gutenberg Bible

the “message,” and appreciate the semantic and semiotic impact of the “medium.”)

During the pre-modern era, when philosophy, spirituality, and science had not become compartmentalized, the phenomena of nature were fit objects of contemplation as to their cosmic significance. Mineral and organic substances were studied by alchemists, and numbers and letters were studied by pythagoreans, hermeticists and kabbalists. The rich variety of meanings found in the alphabet reflects the power of the imagination, perhaps the power to find pattern and significance in what to the exoteric mind would seem to be a relatively neutral or random set of signs. The author reviews this hermeneutic approach to the alphabet, the stories of the people and the way they’ve interpreted the alphabet; and thus this book may be appreciated as an historiography as well as a kind of history.

Technically, a letter is an arbitrary shape, a sign. It becomes a symbol when it takes on a host of associations. A symbol, then, is more than simply a definition; rather, it carries connotations, it evokes feelings and thoughts, and in short it serves as a stimulus to a complex of meanings. One of the lessons of this book is that it reveals the power of mind to make meaning out of patterns which may or may not have been formed with that or any meaning in mind! Given enough psychological sensitization, motivation or orientation, the imagination can, and often with surprising rapidity will, “discover” significance. The growth of a paranoid delusional system, the complex set of prophecies and doctrines in a cult, the baroque convolutions of interpretations in certain theories of psychology, the way dreams work, these phenomena as well as many psychology experiments separately and in their aggregate support this thesis.

In India and other cultures, drawings, sometimes of abstract or geometrical forms, function as symbols whose forms evoke subtle associations and projections of inner fantasies. These “yantras” (as they are called in Yoga) thus serve as objects of contemplation. They are more abstract than the pictures or statues of gods and saints, but because of that, they can receive

a wider range of intuitions. In a similar fashion, yet on a smaller, more “portable” scale, the alphabet served as a set of symbols which could be shuffled, arranged and contemplated – at times, with mystical intensity and magical systematization. Drucker documents some of these practices, situating them within the historical and philosophical context.

Without explicitly noting the analytical psychology of Carl G. Jung and his theory of “archetypes,” this book illustrates some of his theories in a new way. Jung notes the way people from many different cultures relate to art, symbols, ritual and other social constructions, and that people naturally project the themes of life onto ambiguous phenomena; they then experience patterns thus perceived as meaningful symbols which then are re-incorporated in the psyche. This psycho-cultural perspective adds another dimension to an appreciation of this book.

Considering the goodly number of histories of writing presently available, it must be noted that *The Alphabetic Labrynth* is for the most part not redundant, but rather presents a great deal of new material, organized in a new way! The author has done an excellent, scholarly review of the work of scores of scholars, from classical times through the middle ages and the last few centuries, who have speculated on the origins of the alphabet, the esoteric significance of the different letters, their correspondences to numbers, constellations and other symbols or elements in nature, and their magical powers. The author’s approach is unique in its breadth and depth, and thus her book can expand our appreciation of this dimension of writing.

The extensive history of writing is nicely condensed in the first few chapters, and then the impact of this system is noted, in philosophy, calligraphy, alchemy, medieval occultism, eighteenth- and nineteenth century speculation, etc. We must note that the way writing was able to “capture” in two dimensions much of the fullness of language seemed almost (or actually) magical to those who were unfamiliar with the technology of writing and this applies to the great majority of humanity through most of history. (And writing, after all, is chiefly what

Quod rú audiffet David: descendit in

DIME

allows history to be distinguished from prehistory.) However, those who have been raised in a culture saturated with literacy come to take it for granted.

In turn, our modern culture has lost the feel of magic, or perhaps it has become so commonplace and demythologized that we don't recognize how much we treat modern technology as if it were both magic and yet at the same time, ordinary. Nevertheless, I find a small but distinct percentage of people tend to be fascinated by writing, curious about the making of symbols. I suspect these individuals have a particular intellectual bent which allows them to intuitively penetrate the demythologization of writing – I suspect I'm referring to the types of people who would read this journal – and to sense the implications of letters and writing systems. And perhaps also they represent the kinds of scholars described throughout the book, those who study, question and create new solutions to the mysteries of the process of writing.

One way to look at history is as the story of the evolution of consciousness. And within the big picture, there are numerous sub-histories, which in turn serve as more comprehensible mirrors of the faltering steps and fascinating byways of exploration in the emergence and continuing exploration of, say, medicine, or a given religion, or, as in this case, one of the simplest (yet unendingly complex) technologies – the continuing story of writing.

For those who enjoy contemplating the evolution of the technology of writing on both its exoteric and esoteric levels, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* is a connoisseur's delight! It overflows with jewels of information, yet it is written with surprising clarity and succinctness – remarkable, considering the breadth and complexity of the subject matter being covered. The book is well illustrated, with lots of fascinating examples – pictures, diagrams, photographs, a good variety of stimuli to satisfy the reader's attention. Indeed, the overall design is strikingly effective enough to remind the reader that book design itself is part of the overall enterprise!

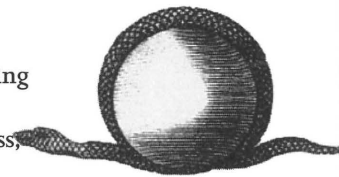
**Background::**

Shin-A letterform from the Kabbalah.

The field of study of writing systems is surprising in its interdisciplinary character, yet it has no identity which can be characterized with a name. I have proposed the term “scriptology” in this regard, the word functioning to gather together the lore of writing systems which includes so many different facets, including such diverse elements as typography, linguistics, history, various language studies, anthropology, art, etc. This book addresses more facets of “scriptology” than any other single text I’ve encountered; the author’s discussions range from the proper postures for handwriting or early forms of shorthand to the emergence of an international phonetic alphabet and efforts at creating new, universal writing systems. She further touches on or addresses such topics as typography, paleography, cryptography (codes and ciphers), numerology, pedagogy, art and even the way the history of the alphabet might support or challenge certain established socio-religious beliefs in a cogent and interesting style.

I don’t expect a book to be perfect, and this volume has a few minor problems. There are a number of aspects of writing which have been neglected, such as the recent attempt at a hieroglyphic writing called “semantography” by Charles Bliss, or the way certain Yogic schools in India treat the Sanskrit alphabet similar to the esoteric view of the Hebrew alphabet – that every letter has cosmological significance; and every phoneme vibrates with a different kind of spiritual resonance.

Since one of my minor avocational interests is the Jewish mystical tradition called Kabbalah, and because that was one topic which the author addressed as an example of how the alphabet has been interpreted, I paid close attention to her treatment of that field. Her review was for the most part clear, somewhat scholarly and, considering the breadth of the subject matter, surprisingly complete and succinct. There were a few minor errors – technical terms in Hebrew misspelled, some confusion as to which elements should be viewed as being on the “right” or “left” on the “Tree of Life” diagram, etc. And although it was noted later as an element in nineteenth century occultism, I would have been more explicit about the way the letters, the Tree and related Kabbalistic



**Derivation of the letter pi.**  
*Literary Antiquities of Greece*, London, 1799.

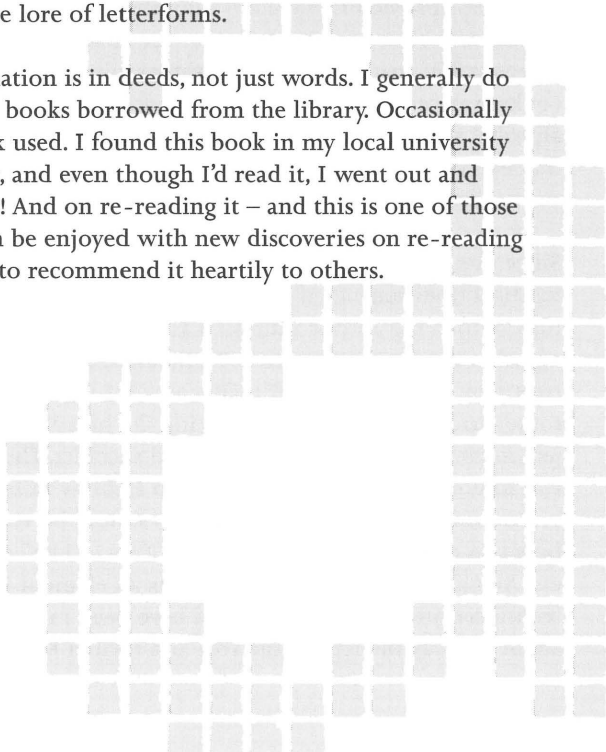
symbolism has continued to be popular as elements in the occult renewal in Western culture – as a minor fashion in the earlier twentieth century, and as a much more prominent fashion in contemporary “new age” circles! This fact makes this book even more relevant to a wider range of cultural studies.

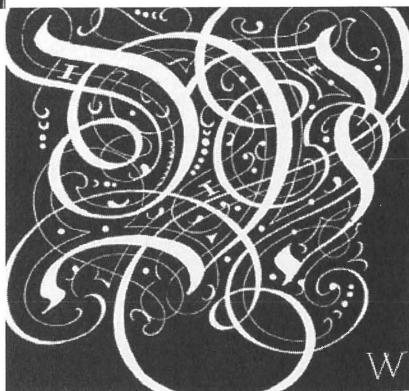
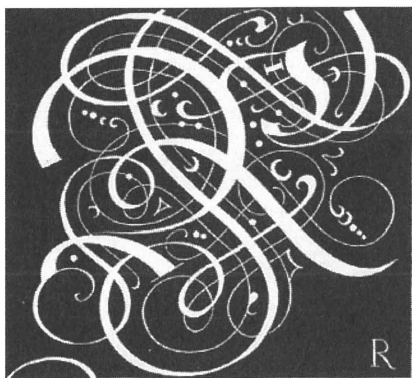
Yet considering the overall enterprise, I have been delighted and impressed with the scope of her survey. *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* has been the only careful review I’ve seen of the secondary commentators, the people who have contemplated the phonological or symbological significance of the letters. There have been many scholars, some more loosely speculative than others, who have sought some rational explanation for the shape and order of these signs. The main focus of *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* deals with how the the letters, their forms, order and speculative origins, have themselves become symbols of contemplation. This approach is relatively unique in the general literature of scriptology, but it brings out an important dimension of the lore of letterforms.

**Background:**

Enlarged bit-mapped letterform for use in computer-typesetting.

My final evaluation is in deeds, not just words. I generally do my reading in books borrowed from the library. Occasionally I’ll buy a book used. I found this book in my local university library, read it, and even though I’d read it, I went out and bought it new! And on re-reading it – and this is one of those books that can be enjoyed with new discoveries on re-reading – I’m pleased to recommend it heartily to others.





Virtuoso penmanship:  
examples from  
the early 1700s.