

Alix Lambert's "The Mark of Cain"

Michael Golec and Alix Lambert

Abstract

The following contribution is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a brief essay that describes the contents of Alix Lambert's film, *The Mark of Cain*. The second part is an interview with the filmmaker and artist. In the interview, Ms. Lambert discusses the differences between documentary filmmaking and conceptual art practices; she reflects on the nature of representation and examines the relationship between the symbolic content of Russian prison tattoos and the new Russian economy; and she compares the persistence of visual forms to the impermanence of meaning. That the two are interrelated is of special interest to Ms. Lambert, whose film records the vicissitudes of a faded visual idiom and reveals the non-identical sameness of form, homologically aligning tattoos and economic order. In both her video still-images and in her interview, Ms. Lambert attempts to make explicit what is inexplicit, all the while admitting to the disruptions, hesitations and gaps in doing so. In her film, a prisoner states that "You can learn a lot about a prisoner from his tattoos." In the hands of Ms. Lambert, we can learn a lot about tattoos from prisoners. And from tattoos, we can learn a lot about the decline of a culture.

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Visible Language 36.1
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The Mark of Cain, a feature-length documentary by Alix Lambert, explores the dying art of Russian prison tattoos to offer audiences an understanding of conflict and transition in contemporary Russia. Through intimate interviews that enable the prisoners to talk about their life experiences, body art and living conditions, a powerful story emerges of tension between prisoners of different generations and different social-economic systems. *The Mark of Cain* documents for the first time the disappearing artistic practice of Russian prison tattoos; further, the project investigates the nature of change in Russia by examining what is happening in the country's prisons.

As early as the 1920s, Russian prisons and Gulag began to attract the attention of researchers. The prisoners of the Stalinist Gulag, or "Zone," as it is called, developed a complex social structure that incorporated highly symbolic tattooing as a mark of rank. The very existence of these inmates at prisons and forced labor camps was treated by the state as a deep secret, and their tattoo art was considered a forbidden topic.

Since the introduction of Glasnost and the new freedoms of the press, striking figures have been published: from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, thirty-five million people were incarcerated. In the last decade, Russia's prison population has exploded; overcrowding has reached unimaginable proportions. Few other nations have had such a massive prison population. The most conservative estimates suggest that in the last decades, over thirty million of Russia's inmates have had tattoos even though the process is against the law inside prison.

According to *The Book of Genesis*, God placed a mark on the world's first murderer before sending him into exile. The mark of Cain proclaimed its bearer as a criminal and social outcast; for centuries, prisoners and those who broke social codes were forcibly tattooed. In Russian prisons, tattooing emerged as a visual mode of communication linked with social division. The startling and beautiful images of churches, cats, Christs, Madonnas, dolphins, bears and hawks, to name a few, became part of a secret, political language that allowed for clandestine communication both in and out of prison.

The Mark of Cain tells the story of a fading art form and how that practice's death reflects transition in broader Russian society. In Russian prisons there has been a "Code-of-Thieves." This criminal code is directly related to how prisoners earn their status in the prison community, and in turn earn the right to carry particular tattooed images that communicate who they are and their position within the social hierarchy. The godfather of the Code-of-Thieves is the "Thief-in-Law." In Russian prisons today there is major conflict concerning how prisoners achieve their status. Older prisoners are committed to the practice of tattooing and a Code-of-Thieves in which status has to do with one's behavior as a criminal on the outside, in the legal system and in the community of prisoners. Younger prisoners seek to purchase high status in the prison community. The younger generation is less interested in tattooing.

The prisoners raise crucial questions about expression, resistance, redemption and social division. *The Mark of Cain* intervenes into discussions that concern: Russian society, prison reform, resistance and artistic expression and transition in world systems.

Michael Golec: I'm very interested in the disparities between your documentary activity and your art-making activity. Do you see any difference?

Alix Lambert: I think that the difference is less acute for me than the difference may be for other people. That is, other people perceive a line that isn't as clear to me.

MG: Do you mean a lack of definition between the two activities in your own work, or are you referring to a lack of difference between the traditions of art making and documentary making from your perspective.

AL: I'm referring to how I view my own work, be it art or documentary. To me, the content of my art is very similar to the content of my documentaries. The difference lies in execution. I didn't want to make a conceptual art piece; I decided to make a documentary film because *The Mark of Cain's* subject matter suggested an alternate means of representation.



MG: What were the issues that caused you to make this decision? Was it the political content? The geographical location? Or, was it the entire scope of the problem—geopolitics, economics, post-soviet identity construction—as you saw it, that necessarily required an alternative format? And, why was it that conceptual art was too restrictive, if indeed that was the case?

AL: It wasn't that conceptual art was too restrictive. I have to admit, I based my decision on intuition. I felt more comfortable approaching the subject as a documentary rather than as a conceptual art piece. In general, I don't feel the need to make a choice. It's really a matter of appropriateness.

MG: Do you consider the documentary form to be an altogether different means of expression? That is, did the content influence the form in a manner that was unavailable to, as you say, conceptual art?



AL: I think it's different. And, I think for me, at least with *The Mark of Cain*, I was more interested in the audience that a documentary draws. With a documentary, you're reaching a different audience in a different way. The art world is so specific; it draws a specific audience, an audience I didn't want for that project.

MG: I assume that when you began work on *The Mark of Cain* you didn't anticipate that ABC's *Nightline* would eventually air excerpts from the film.

AL: No, I didn't know. In fact, when I first initiated the project, I didn't know if I would even get into a Russian prison.

MG: I'd like to return to the problem of gaining access to the Russian prison system. For now, however, I'd prefer to address the expansion of your audience. Because, indeed, the documentary has availed you to an audience that you may have never had up to the point of making *The Mark of Cain*. Traditionally, documentaries are targeted to specific audiences, much like the art world. But, as it happens, you've actually transcended the documentary audience as well as the art world audience.

AL: I was lucky to have had the *Nightline* segment. On the other hand, I've had a really hard time getting any kind of theatrical lease here in the United States, or even a complete airing of the documentary on television for that matter. It seems much easier in Europe for some reason.

MG: To what do you attribute this problem? Why is it so difficult in the United States to show *The Mark of Cain*, either in theaters or on television?

AL: It's the subtitles. A lot of people don't want subtitles here.

MG: When you bring up the problem of subtitles for an American audience, the problem actually lies with the location of the documentary; that is, post-Soviet Russia. What led you to Russia, and more specifically, the subject of tattoos in a post-Soviet Russian penal system? I should add that you have also produced your own tattoos as art pieces. How did that come about?

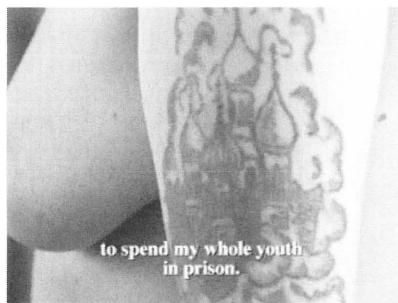


AL: My original interest in this subject began eight years ago. I spent a lot of time researching the topic of Russian prison tattoos and trying to raise money for the documentary's production. Actually, the man who became my fiscal sponsor, who runs a place in New York called the "Body Archive," is the person I found who had all the books on Russian tattoos, books that I couldn't find anywhere. He is also a tattoo artist and runs a place. So, we were working together on the documentary and the tattoos I made as art pieces came out of spending time with him.

MG: Was it the illicit nature of the Russian tattoos that attracted you to the project? And did the private nature of tattoos in general lead you to making your own tattoos? I ask this because it seems to me that your work both literally and metaphorically enters some very intimate spaces, with the ultimate goal of making those spaces public. But there is always a limit to how public those spaces become in your work. I'm thinking specifically about *Wedding Project* (1994). The question of consummation is implicit, but never answered either in the negative or the affirmative.

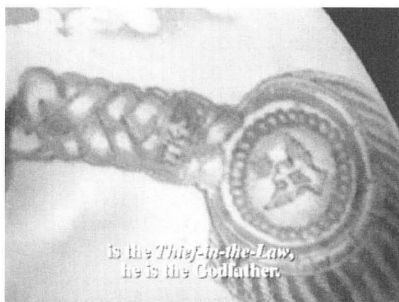
AL: Well, the *Wedding Project* wasn't about consummation, or privacy *per se*. Under everyday circumstances, I wouldn't ask a married couple if they had consummated their marriage.

MG: That's true. But, in deference to propriety as such, you've put your finger right on the problem. Indeed, the question of consummation would rarely come up in everyday conversation. One doesn't ask these things. However, you beg the question once you took marriage up as the focus of an art piece. Now, in the case of *The Mark of Cain*, the issue arises because you expose a practice that was hidden from public view, even hidden from legitimate researchers. Is this a common theme in your work?



AL: Not on a conscious level. I see it now that you point the theme out, and I'm not adverse to the idea that I'm attracted to the private made public as a conceptual thread that runs through my work. That being said, I realize that my most recent work, a film about flying commissioned for a new PBS series, departs from that subject.

MG: As I understand your work, you're interested in the construction of personae, of identity. And your project, in the most general sense, seems to me to be a kind of anthropology, at least on the conceptual art end. In most cases you're literally in the artwork. I'm thinking again of *Wedding Project* where you are investigating the legal and emotional boundaries of the institution of marriage and divorce in the United States by marrying and divorcing several individuals in quick succession. On the other hand, you don't physically appear in *The Mark of Cain*, although the film expands your anthropology even if it appears more conventional than your conceptual artworks. What I'm trying to get at here is whether or not there is a marked difference for you between the two, between the documentary and the conceptual artwork in light of anthropology?



AL: There is a tradition of documentary filmmakers who put themselves into the film. But, I feel like it would've been bad; it would've *looked* bad. An American woman walking around takes away from the viewer's sense of being there. I wanted to allow viewers to feel like they were in these prisons.

MG: Do you consider the look, or aesthetic, of your work to be instrumental in achieving a particular goal? In other words, does the look of your work contribute to your audience's aesthetic experience? Are the two causally connected by your intentions to achieve a particular goal?

AL: Yes, yes, and yes. The tattoos are beautiful, and the prisons are like churches or monasteries. Aesthetic experience is central to my work. My current project, the flying piece, incorporates my presence. I'm in it. The subject matter is a world away from *The Mark of Cain*, but it's no less aesthetic in its intent. It's my journey to flight. The audience will accompany me in my journey, and they'll learn about becoming airborne. *The Mark of Cain*, on the other hand, wasn't about *my* journey through the Russian prison system. The film was about the prisoner's journey, which has its own aesthetic qualities.

MG: I assume that you were actually present while the film was being made. You were just off camera.

AL: I was there. I was sitting there interviewing the subjects. I had a translator and a production manager who assisted in the on-site production. But, I was there, just not on film.

MG: No doubt. As I watched your film, I, as a viewer, had the distinct feeling that you were present. But because you were off camera, I also felt like I was there as well. Or, more precisely, I was allowed greater access to your interviewees because they were addressing me as viewer (rather than as interviewer). I somehow became your surrogate. Or, maybe it's the other way around? In any case, the level of intimacy is increased somehow by your physical absence. I wonder if there isn't a more banal or mundane explanation for my sense of being there, something that contributes to the phenomenology of viewing *The Mark of Cain*?

AL: Before I traveled to Russia, the woman who was my production manager made a trip to work out where there were people who had the tattoos that I was looking for and who had interesting stories. And then, once I arrived, we kind of tried to go via an official route, but, that wasn't successful. Although, we did obtain some official authorization that allowed us to do some things. But, in order to get everything that we wanted, we just spent a lot of time socializing with prison wardens. There was a certain amount of preplanning, and then there was a lot of chance, a lot of luck and a lot of vodka. A considerable amount of vodka! But not as bribes. I have to say, we didn't end up bribing any official. The wardens were our hosts, which, in the end, allowed us to do what we wanted to do.



MG: What do you think the wardens' interests were? Why were they so hospitable?

AL: It was a combination of things. When we first arrived on site, the officials had set up stuff that they wanted us to see. It took awhile to get them to feel comfortable showing us what we wanted to see.

And then there was our decision to travel really far outside of Moscow. We got the runaround in Moscow. So, we traveled to areas in the country where there wasn't a lot of foreign press—Perm and Samara, for example. And, to some extent, there was an element of boredom—like, Who are these visitors?

Also, there was a lot of vagueness on our part about what it was that we were doing. I definitely stressed that I was interested in the tattoos, which I was. But, I didn't say that I wanted them to be a kind of window to, you know, horrible prison conditions and what's going on in Russia. And, my crew was all Russian, which was really to my benefit. I think that it was also to my benefit that I was female. They viewed me as non-threatening and there was a certain cultural.... It wasn't like a group of American men wanting to make a movie. It was kind of like, here's this American woman, with a Russian film crew, who's interested in tattoos, so let's let her do whatever she wants.

MG: How were you able to get the prisoners to talk about their tattoos? Was that a difficult part of the production?

AL: I was told consistently that they wouldn't talk. I didn't want to speak to anyone who didn't want to speak to me. Every prisoner and prison authority that you see on film were all people who volunteered to talk to me. It's pretty obvious, you can see a breakdown of who would talk and who wouldn't talk. We have a lot more authority figures than prisoners speaking to us. I'm sure there were fewer consequences for those individuals.

MG: I'd like to turn our conversation to the content of *The Mark of Cain*. I'm speaking specifically about the transition from Soviet Russia to post-Soviet Russia and how that transition effected the production and meaning of tattoos in the prison system. The implications of the shift in symbology is really quite fascinating, especially when that shift is enacted under pressures from a new Democratic Russia that has embraced Western style economics. Is there really a shift, a formation of a new tattoo language?

AL: I felt like that was ultimately what the gist of what all the prisoners had said about the difference between the older prisoners and the younger prisoners, how they conduct themselves and how tattoos reflect that conduct.

MG: Yes. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, a prisoner towards the end of the film said something to the effect that his tattoos were meaningless under the new economic order. As *Nightline* host, John Donovan stated, "...this story is a fascinating and powerful tale not just about tattoos and not just about prison life, but about Russia itself and the enormous changes it has been through and is still going through." Certainly, the trope of the prison as a micro-version of the larger social body isn't unusual.

AL: Right. One of the prisoners actually says that the prison is a model of the state.

MG: Was there anything beyond the lens, as it were, that confirmed this view more powerfully? Let me put the question another way. Was the situation such that you were allowed access to the prison and the prisoners precisely because of the new economic order and its having successfully rendered the old style Soviet tattoos meaningless?

AL: Yes. The two criminologists that we spoke to had forty years of documentation of the old style Soviet tattoos, but they were never allowed to show this material, or they never felt comfortable showing this material. Now, all of a sudden, they can show us this, and they want to show us this.... Because the style is dying, if not already dead.

MG: Does this current situation, the revelation of what has long been repressed, trivialize the old style tattoos? Are they now just remnants of the past—impotent—and, is our view of them utterly nostalgic? Let me put it this way: Do the tattoos have any currency today?

AL: The old style tattoos will be lost completely. That is one of the interesting things about this historical moment, this moment of change. If we look back after thirty years time, anyone who possessed the old style tattoos will be dead. That's the end of that! The new generation of prisoners may have tattoos, but they're the kind of tattoos that Western teenagers get.

MG: The work that you've accomplished, the documentary, will allow those tattoos to live on beyond those physical bodies.

AL: I hope so.

MG: Speaking of bodies. Were you satisfied with the film's translation of your experiences in the prisons? I ask this because it strikes me as relevant to the distinction between conceptual art making and documentary film making. Is one medium more successful in its representation of everyday experience?

AL: To the extent that one's experience is never fully transferred to film or writing or whatever else one happens to create, no. In the sense of looking at the footage for the first time, I was struck by the fact that the temperature wasn't there, that the smell wasn't there, that the whole visceral experience wasn't there in the film. Its one thing to see something on film. It's another thing to be on site all day, to talk to these people, to have them give you gifts, to have this overwhelming experience. One tries the best she can to translate all of that to film.

MG: Is this a problem with representation in general? By producing documentaries, are you attempting to break down a barrier, or are you resolved to having it be in place? And does the nature of representationality, for you, place the documentary film closer to art than it is to mere reportage?

AL: Is representation a problem? No, I don't think it's a problem to the extent that I would give up making documentaries. With the exception of some advanced kind of virtual reality, I'm not going to satisfactorily recreate an experience for an audience. As a filmmaker or an artist, I try to find some truth in the fiction that I'm creating. I feel fine about that—let the barrier stand.



MG: Is there something about the content of *The Mark of Cain*—that it's, in part, about bodies—that increases the stakes of representationality?

AL: A number of actual prisoners addressed this question. They said that one doesn't always express oneself with words. And as an inmate, a body is all that one has. That's a mode of expression. I'm not sure if that was adequately conveyed in the film, however. In any case, that's my sense of tattoos in general. A tattoo is a reflection, or an expression, of a personality, even if it's a tattoo that everyone else has.

Really, I'm not a tattoo artist, at least not in the conventional sense. I kind of learned how to do it, and then did fifteen tattoos and documented them as a learning curve. But that was more in the realm of a conceptual project. Let's just say that I never intended to set-up shop. The people who I tattooed were very aware of the project's status. They had their own reasons for having me tattoo their bodies. That was important to me. I didn't want to work with anyone who wanted the best tattoo.

MG: Do you see any correspondence between tattoos and artworks, especially where the hand of the artist, the inscription, becomes the primary site of appreciation? In one sense, as you've stated, tattoos are expressions of the person adorned with the image, but do you feel that tattoos are also expressions of the artist's personality?

AL: Actually, I believe that it's more of a collaborative effort. But there's a lot of gray area in regards to the percentage of effort in the collaboration. I didn't choose the images that I applied to my subjects. There are tattoo artists who decide the form and content of the image. There are also tattoo artists who only do freehand applications. I, on the other hand, used stencils of images given to me. More than anything, I think that trust is involved in all cases.

MG: Was trust the central issue in the Russian prisons? I'm thinking specifically of one prison tattoo artist who had a reputation within his cell-block.

AL: Most of the prisons only had one or two tattoo artists. It's not the case that everyone does it. One has to find that guy.

MG: Is it the case that that one prisoner possesses the lexicon of symbolic language of the tattoos? Or, is it the case that most of the inmates possess some knowledge of the symbolic language of the tattoos?



AL: All of the prison inmates know what the tattoos mean. Each has to get the tattoo that applies to him.

MG: Does appropriateness override style? Will an arbitrary application of certain tattoos lead to trouble for an inmate inevitably?



AL: Yes. There was a prisoner who had the “killer” tattoo removed because he didn’t want to be identified as a killer. Misrepresentation was a major concern for the older prisoners. The tattoo had to fit the station. This isn’t a concern for the “new Russians.” That’s where the division started. A lot of the older prisoners referred to a time when one would be killed for such an indiscretion. But that situation is waning. It’s really only the older generation of inmates that adhere to such a code.

MG: What kind of tattoos do the “new Russians,” as you say, prefer? Is it an amalgamation of Western style and old-style?

AL: We saw people with both. The Japanese style tattoos and American style tattoos are very popular. Although, we did see these styles combined with the old-style prison tattoos. I should add that there are prisoners who forego tattoos altogether. But, for those who have tattoos, the trend is moving toward decoration.

MG: Would you go so far as to say that the adoption of American and Japanese style tattoos signifies an appropriation, or an acceptance, of American and Japanese economic power? Would the prisoners rather be identified with money rather than with honor?

AL: I don’t know. It makes sense to me, but nobody expressed it that way. It’s understood as strictly a style preference.

MG: Isn’t that the underlying problem? The “new Russians” view their choice as merely decorative, as having little if any symbolic merit. But it’s really that their choices signify a desire for economic affluence, something quite vulgar and out of step with the Soviet past in the eyes of the older generation. The older generation’s tattoos were intertwined with a perceived order and regiment of the Soviet past, especially in light of the growing chaos in a Democratic Russia.

AL: Yes. Listening to the older prisoners is like listening to someone’s parents. You know, “Ahh these kids!” Which is kind of odd to me, because, according to the older prisoners, there are no *good* murderers anymore.

MG: There was a term that the prisoner used to refer to their brotherhood.

AL: A “Thief in Law.” The term doesn’t mean that one is a thief necessarily. Rather, the term means that one adheres to a code of conduct. A Thief in Law has to earn his position, which is ignored by the “new Russian” criminal. Now, if a criminal has some money he can buy his status as a Thief in Law, regardless of the rules of conduct. More than anything, that’s what disgusts the older prisoners.

MG: They’re the *nouveau riche* of the Russian prison system.

AL: Exactly.

MG: Again, it’s nostalgia, a sense of loss, that permeates the documentary. I find this especially ironic since it seems likely that the prison population felt the brute force of the old Soviet system. Am I being too reductive? Were you able to interview any political prisoners, holdovers from the old days?

AL: No. We didn’t interview political prisoners. They don’t get tattoos. Except Valeri Abramkin, he runs the center for prison reform. He was a political prisoner, but, now he’s out of prison. Anyway, I didn’t anticipate that prisoners would view the old system as being better.

MG: I assume that if political prisoners did have tattoos they wouldn’t have the same meaning as those worn by the Thieves in Law. The reasons for incarceration are quite different, whether the government admits to it or not. The political prisoner may be considered an outlaw by the state, but he or she isn’t a thief by any conventional definition.

AL: Exactly. The two don’t live by the same code.

MG: Speaking of distinctions within the prison system, I noticed that *The Mark of Cain* focuses on men almost exclusively.

AL: Yes. That was another decision I had to make during the course of production. Actually, there will be a second *Nightline* that will focus on women prisoners. The film didn’t focus on women inmates because of tattoos, which are less prevalent in the women’s prisons. Also, the tattoos don’t indicate status like they do in the men’s prisons. As a consequence, the women’s tattoos are less interesting. And, they’re less artistic because they don’t have the shavers [wind-up razors used by male prisoners to create tattoo guns]. So, we saw a lot less tattoo activity. There was a lot of other interesting stuff, but I didn’t use it for the film because I was trying to maintain a thread. I did shoot a good amount of footage that focuses on the women’s prisons, which will be shown on *Nightline*.



MG: In short, the tattoo theme of the film limited gender exposure.

AL: It did. But, there were a number of tangential themes that we simply couldn't follow in the one documentary. For example, there was a really interesting criminologist that didn't make his way in because the additional story would have taken the film too far off course. It's not uncommon to find a lot of interesting material on the editing room floor.

MG: Regardless, the clarity of your film adds to its critical force. *The Mark of Cain's* power lies in its exposure of radical cultural upheaval at the subcultural level of prison tattoos and their meaning. To see the shift marked, as it were, so clearly is rare in accounts of post Cold War histories. Furthermore, the film literally embodies, or bodies forth, the manner in which economics structures communication. Or, how it is that economics becomes a dominant language itself, draining all competing languages of meaning. There's a non-redemptive, sobering quality to your film, a quality that puts a great deal of pressure on the subject, not only of communication, but of identity and selfhood. The making, or construction, of an identity is not a pleasant thing to watch. What you've shown is that one can lose the means to construct his or her identity. It's remarkable how palpable that sense of loss is in your film.

Michael Golec is an adjunct lecturer and Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art History, Northwestern University. His research is focused on the philosophical and art historical problems of visual representation in the twentieth-century. He is a member of the advisory board of *Visible Language* and is currently co-editing a critical reevaluation of Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* for a forthcoming special issue of the journal.

Alix Lambert lives and works in Los Angeles, California. She has participated in numerous solo exhibitions, most recently her *Flight Series* at Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York, and she has participated in many group exhibitions, including those curated by The Chicago Project Room, The Museum of Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In addition to *The Mark of Cain* (2000), she made the film, *Platipussy* (1997) and "Flying Lessons" aired on PBS's *Life360*. *The Mark of Cain* was nominated for "Best Documentary" by the Independent Spirit Awards.

**Ancestor of the West. Writing, Reasoning,
and Religion in Mesopotamia, Elam, and Greece**
Jean Bottéro, Clarisse Herrenschildt and Jean-Pierre Vernant

Carol F. Justus

With a Foreword by François Zabbal, Teresa Lavender Fagan, translator.

**Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 194 pages, Illustrated,
Hardbound, \$25.00, ISBN 0-226-06715-7**

Abstract

This small, elegantly written book, offers three distinct perspectives on civilization as it emerged in the more familiar ancient Greek tradition from antecedents in the Ancient Near East. Bottéro's "Religion and Reasoning in Mesopotamia" (Part I:3-66) outlines themes that arose as the cuneiform tradition evolved in the hands of Sumerian and Akkadian scribes, while Herrenschildt's "Writing between Visible and Invisible Worlds in Iran, Israel, and Greece: (II:69-146) characterizes conceptual changes in the transition from the cuneiform script based on a mixture of phonetic (syllabic) and non-phonetic (determinatives, logograms) signs to the phonetic alphabet on which Greek was based. In "Writing and Civil Religion in Greece" (III:149-175), Jean-Pierre Vernant compares the Indo-European-speaking heritage of the Greeks and with traits that emerged as Greek culture made uniquely Greek contributions in contact with the non-Indo-European cultures of the Ancient Near East.

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These essays are intended to dispel the notion that a “western” tradition sprang fully clothed from the head of Zeus not long before fifth century BC Athens. Fagan’s translation makes this book easily accessible to the nonspecialist, and Zabbal’s forward (vii–xii) situates it in time (beginning in the fourth millennium BC) and space (Mesopotamia peopled by Sumerians, Akkadians, a culturally changing Iran and Greece) raising questions about whether thinking can really be characterized as “(middle) eastern” or “western,” as is often done. Bibliographical references are confined to brief footnotes (177–178) and a very selective “Bibliography” (179–181) with an index of names and concepts (183–192).

■ I.

Bottéro, the Assyriologist, emphasizes the cultural continuum that comes with the spread of written traditions, the first of which was the cuneiform conflation of Sumerian and (Semitic) Akkadian culture. Four succinct chapters (1: “The Birth of Civilization” 3–18; 2: “The First Writing” 19–33; 3: “The Intelligence of the World”, 34–50; and 4: “The Gods: A Reasonable Religion,” 51–66) develop themes related to writing and reasoning as they arose from the everyday lives and institutions of Mesopotamian, Sumerian and Akkadian speakers.

Fundamental is the coalescence of two distinct groups, Sumerians and the Semitic-speaking Akkadians. By the time Sumerians and Akkadians had independently arrived in the lower valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the places from which they came were buried in prehistory. From their interaction between the two rivers (in “Meso-potamia” based on Greek *meso-* ‘middle’ and *potamos* ‘river’), loan words from one language to the other reflect cultural borrowings. The writing and gardening Sumerians gave Akkadians their word for ‘tablet’ (Sumerian *dub*, Akkadian *tuppu*) and ‘garden’ (Sumerian *n u . k i r i*, Akkadian *mukaribbu*) while the herding, warlike and highly religious Semites gave Sumerians their words for ‘herdsman, shepherd’ (Akkadian *nāquidu*, Sumerian *n a . g a d a*), combat (Akkadian *tamharu*, Sumerian *d a m . h a r a*), and a pantheon with transcendent deities such as Akkadian Shamash

(sun-god), Adad (storm-god) and Ishtar (goddess of war). Building on the initial creativity of the Sumerians and their role as teachers for the Semitic-speaking Amorites from the north and west, Bottéro emphasizes the Akkadian genius that maintained the culture and allowed it to spread over three millennia. The clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform signs preserved texts as diverse as prayers, omens, letters, economic transactions, royal deeds, poetry and school boy's lessons, and their Akkadian and Sumerian originals were translated into languages as diverse as non-Indo-European Hurrian and Indo-European Hittite. Often copying and translating Sumerian epics such as the Gilgamesh epic, scribes across the Ancient Near East made it their own. In regions of the Ancient Near East as close as Elamite Susa (Iran) or as far removed from the southern valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as the Hittites of Central Anatolia (east of modern Ankara) and the West Semitic dialects of Syria, the cuneiform writing system carried the culture of Sumer and Akkad. Bottéro presents evolution in writing technology and reasoning methods as a foundation of civilization on which the West later built.

Writing, which is very recent (c. 5000 years old) by comparison with prehistoric traces of human habitation in the Ancient Near East that go back to c. 70,000 BC (Bottéro 7–17), evolved from an early proliferation of pictographic signs into an abstract subset (20–26). This subset combined phonetic and semantic values to record three-millennia-old civilization (c. 3200 BC to the last cuneiform tablet of 74/75 AD). Using the cuneiform writing system, scribes catalogued, classified and reasoned about their world. By the time of Egyptian Akhenaton, the Akkadian language, written with the cuneiform script, had become the international diplomatic language of Great Kings from Egypt and Babylon to Assyria, Palestine and Hittite Anatolia.

Bottéro's discussion of the evolution of writing from pictograms to phonetic symbols using terms "pictogram" or "ideogram" emphasizes the artistic origins of writing. He elucidates the generally accepted view that signs for such words as Sumerian *ti*, which are homophonous for meanings 'life' or 'arrow,' paved the way for the phonetic interpretation of erstwhile pictograms (Bottéro 22–24). The situation, however, is more complicated.

On the one hand, use of the term "ideogram" simplifies the transition from a system of pictograms independent of the units of a spoken language (if such ever existed) to signs intended to write a language phonetically. The meaning of "pictograms" allowed them to be "read" as words with different phonetic values in different languages. So the TI sign would be pronounced in Sumerian as *t i* and, depending on the context, interpreted as the word for 'life' or 'arrow.' An Akkadian scribe, however, "reading" its meaning as 'life' would pronounce the Akkadian word *balātu*, while a Hittite scribe would pronounce *huišwatar* for 'life.' Because of this word-sign equivalence, many scholars prefer Gelb's (1963) term "logogram" to "ideogram" because such signs are interpreted as words, not abstract ideas.

Moderns numerals such as '2' for English 'two' and '2nd' for 'second' make use of processes familiar to cuneiform scribes. Speakers of different languages today using Arabic numerals may pronounce the symbol '2' as Spanish *duo*, French *deux* or German *zwei*, as well as English 'two,' and French speakers will complement it '*2ième*' for *deuxième* as opposed to English '2nd' or German '*2te(n)*' for *zweite(n)*.

On the other hand, early art was not alone in prehistory. As early as the Neolithic (c. 8000 BC) clay tokens, as forerunners of writing, were used as devices for keeping records of agricultural and other surpluses. Impressions of their shapes onto "protoliterate" cuneiform tablets refined the economic accounting role of tokens and led to the invention of cuneiform writing. Schmandt-Besserat (1992:6-11; 161-164) pointed out that tokens were not models of the commodities that they represented but already arbitrary abstractions, that their impressions were yet another step in abstraction from the concrete commodity. With the evolution of Sumerian logograms we thus have quite abstract symbols, no longer "pictograms" or "ideograms."

When tokens began to be impressed on clay tablets and used with mathematical values, the visible symbol on clay also did not unambiguously refer to one linguistic (or mathematical) unit. They did not unambiguously "write" the words of a language. As studies of the preliterate mathematical systems have shown, values of impressed shapes depended on their rank-ordered use in a system for quantifying a particular kind of commodity (Damerow & Englund 1987; 1989; Nissen, Damerow, & Englund 1990:61-75). For quantifying grain the large circle was the fourth unit in a rank ordering of units similar to our 'bushel' or 'quart,' the small circle the third unit with numeral equivalents of 300 and 30. In the system for measuring fields, by contrast, the large circle was the largest unit, the small one the fourth unit, each with numeral values of 10800 and 180, which were probably about as frequently referred to as our 5280 feet for a mile or 36 inches of a yard (see also Justus 1999:58-60). Such logograms for quantity undoubtedly referred to a multiplicity of Sumerian quantity words so that their visible "written" forms may have been early cuneiform "homograms" much as English 'there' and 'their' are modern homophones.

In his broad survey, Bottéro glosses over details of the origin and evolution of writing that are now well-known in English-language publications (Schmandt-Besserat 1992; 1996; Damerow & Englund 1987 *passim*) and under continued investigation now by an international team of scholars united by mirror websites at UCLA (<http://early-cuneiform.humnet.ucla.edu/archaic/index.html>) and Berlin (<http://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/>), leaving them for Herrenschildt to touch on below. Details of the transition from a semantically based set of symbols to symbols with phonetic values that recorded a particular spoken language, however, are still problematic.

Like writing, according to Bottéro, methods of reasoning also have their roots in cuneiform scribal traditions. When scribes used their new script to preserve records of economic transactions, they also found that other things could be so preserved for future use. Among them were precedents of unusual natural phenomena that might be taken as 'signs,' a kind of 'writing' from the gods. When such 'signs' occurred, they were correlated with the fortunes of humanity. These included celestial 'signs' and anomalies in the birth or behavior of animals and human beings. Immense numbers of these signs correlated with observed events were recorded in formulas of the sort "When a two-headed calf is born, famine occurs" or "When a sacrificial lamb has an odd spot on its right liver lobe, the army wins its campaign." Such collections of precedents are preserved, not only on standard clay tablets, but also on clay models of livers used in divination.

Such formulae, preserved on as many as thirty thousand tablets, suggest an early attempt to find necessary connections between the known and unknown events. Notions of cause and effect and syllogistic reasoning would remain for later centuries to develop, but when Bottéro suggests that this recording of events that seemed to be linked in a temporal order was the first step toward legitimate generalizing from past instances to general principles (43–50), it is intriguing. If at first conclusions were naive and primitive, this kind of activity and resultant reasoning, as he argues, must have preceded notions of cause and result that underlie the scientific method based on observation. From observed precedents, Mesopotamian specialists drew conclusions about things they wanted to know, things such as future events.

Legal decisions too were first recorded as precedents that could be used to resolve subsequent problems (“If a man puts out another man’s eye, they put out his eye”). On the basis of such bodies of knowledge written in cuneiform on clay tablets, Ancient Near Eastern rulers (and their scribes) ran an organized society that spread literacy throughout the known world for millennia. Our modern institutions too are based on organized bodies of literature and our methods of scientific inquiry attempt to begin with the known and proceed to the unknown in a process that has built on principles of empiricism. Painted with Bottéro’s broad strokes, the essence of his generalizations rings true.

■ II.

In the second section Herrenschildt turns to an equally ignored chapter in western culture, that of Iran, a modern Islamic state, with roots in ancient (Indo-European) Persia and its non-Indo-European precursor, Elam.

While writing was evolving in ancient Sumer, related developments were also taking place in Susa (modern Iran), on soil where the earliest attested language was Elamite. Elamite was a language perhaps related to the non-Indo-European Dravidian languages of India such as Tamil, perhaps not. Over the same three millennia that Semitic speakers spread Sumerian and Akkadian traditions west, the Elamite rulers of Iran were replaced by Indo-European Persian speakers, mixing their Mesopotamian cuneiform heritage with Old Persian Zoroastrian traditions before becoming part of the Hellenistic Greek empire of Alexander the Great (4th c. BC) and, in more recent times (7th c. AD), coming under the religious influence of Islam.

Herrenschildt’s “Elamite Civilization and Writing” (Chapter 5: 69–89) recalls the early proto-Elamite script which paralleled developments in late fourth, early third millennium BC Sumerian Uruk. For her, Schmandt-Besserat’s preliterate tokens, as “calculi” led via impressed tablets to cuneiform writing, at Susa “the path toward writing” perhaps even “more clearly” attested (p. 71) in impressed bullae, hollow clay balls with token/calculi and seal impressions on the outside and related tokens on the inside (pp. 72–73). Her account of the evolution of the data at Susa follows that of Schmandt-Besserat (1992; 1996), reproducing (Figure 5 p. 74) material said to be taken by “permission of the author” from Schmandt-Besserat (1992), a reference which, however, did not make it to the Bibliography (179–181).

Herrenschmidt's account of the Elamite calculi from Susa, where writing is generally agreed to be an offshoot of developments at Sumerian Uruk, sketches for Elamite writing essential developments that Schmandt-Besserat (1992; 1996) worked out for the steps in the origins of writing based on sequences at Uruk. Schmandt-Besserat (1992:181–182) had argued that the evolution of bureaucracy, quantification and writing developed together, first at Uruk, and then spread as a system to Susa. When complex tokens were found outside Uruk, they were intrusive from Uruk IV, not a natural outgrowth of local (non-Sumerian) evolution (e.g., Schmandt-Besserat, 1992:182–183). At Uruk, token use, then tablets impressed with token shapes beside drawn pictographs evolved (see also Powell, 1981 who attributed the invention of writing to a scribe at Uruk c. 3200 BC). As Herrenschmidt (77–78) notes, however, the “proto-Elamite” pictographs at Susa (before c. 2900–2800 BC) differ in form from those at Uruk and thus pose Elamite decipherment difficulties, particularly as they are without the successors at Susa that Sumerian forms had at Uruk.

Early complex tokens, which came to serve speakers of Elamite as well were so arbitrary yet similar that they were identified as having a common origin in Sumerian Uruk (Schmandt-Besserat, 1992:182–183). Only when signs could be shown to have phonetic as well as symbolic values can we assume that scribes were pronouncing words and phrases corresponding to the signs that they were writing. By that time Sumerian and Elamite signs had evolved quite separately.

Despite problems that remain in deciphering the Elamite material, Schmandt-Besserat's emphasis on the dated archaeological sequences at Uruk with their parallels throughout the Ancient Near East and Herrenschmidt's sketch of the data of Elamite “calculi” both point to an essential origin of writing in an accounting procedure. Writing (for Herrenschmidt 81) began when “calculi” shapes were “made visible” on the outside of the bulla which contained the concrete shapes. From this perspective, writing began when bureaucrats worked out a way to record quantities. To fill gaps of detail that Herrenschmidt's sketch leaves, one should turn to Schmandt-Besserat's (1992:129–154; 1996:55–83) discussion of the rise of impressed tablets and the relation between token shapes, tablet impressions and pictographs.

While many problems remain, it seems clear that for a period between 2800 BC and the conquests of Sargon I of Akkad (2334–2279 BC) before relations between Semitic Akkad and Susa were (re-)established, writing at Susa disappeared. With renewed contact after Sargon, Elamite scribes simplified the Akkadian cuneiform script for recording Elamite documents and used both Akkadian and Elamite to record important treaties. If this is so, then writing in Iran was, with the exception of the Old Persian script, borrowed from elsewhere, from earliest versions of cuneiform, to consonantal Semitic scripts used to write Aramaic, Hebrew and the modern Arabic of Islam, as well as the Greek alphabet of earlier periods.

Chapters “Consonant Alphabets, the Greek Alphabet, and Old Persian Cuneiform” (6:90–107) and “Old Persian Cuneiform: Writing as Cosmological Ritual and Text” (7:108–125) attempt to explain the Old Persian cuneiform as a semi-consonantal alphabetic script designed, not only for political purposes, but also shaped to emphasize the role of Ahura Mazda in Old Persian politics, while Chapter 8, “Writing—and Some Thoughts on Hebrew and Greek” (126–147), continues this theme, arguing that the Hebrew consonantal alphabet was well designed to hide the full name of God, for example.

Herrenschmidt’s approach to the history of a region via its evolving scripts (and multilingual speakers) emphasizes the continuity of intellectual tradition by contrast with the usual historical focus on events from the perspective of new empires which successively replace each other in the region, the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, the Seleucid Greeks, Alexander the Great, the Parthians and the Islamic Arabs.

For the Achaemenid (Persian) period of Iranian history, she points out that one must deal with a large range of scripts and languages in addition to the Old Persian script used for inscriptions (111). Besides the Old Persian, scribes used contemporary Elamite (written in cuneiform) and Aramaic (written in a Semitic consonant alphabet), for example. Raising the question as to the permanence of a civilization “that recognizes itself in such varied writing systems and languages” (111), she emphasizes that the rise of Iranian linguistic consciousness is linked to religious documents, first with the Avesta of Zarathustra’s teachings (111–118). Old Persian cuneiform is the first Indo-European writing system known in Iran (between c. 550 and 520 BC), and the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius clearly reflect the same religious tradition as that of the later written down Avesta (118–122). But Darius’ inscriptions were trilingual, in Old Persian, Elamite and Akkadian as opposed to economic documents written in Elamite and diplomatic documents in Aramaic, even Greek (122).

The Old Persian script, writing an old Indo-Iranian language, had similarities to Semitic consonant alphabets, which did not regularly write vowels and to Greek which always wrote vowels (79–106). Unlike the Semitic scripts, which had symbols for consonants and used diacritics on occasion to indicate vowels, the Old Persian cuneiform script of the inscriptions had a full set of consonant (22) signs that implied the vowel [a], signs for vowels and a limited set (11) of syllable signs for consonant plus [i] or [u] and five logograms. Her explanation is that the Old Persian script was linked in both form and purpose with Old Persian religious life (123–125). While the purpose of the Old Persian script was ostensibly political, to record Darius' deeds, it did so with a focus on Ahura Mazda. Syllable signs seem to almost arbitrarily choose some consonant and vowel combinations and not others, while logograms stood for 'Ahura Mazda,' the title of god, the title of king, the earth and the country.

Herrenschmidt interprets the design behind this system as supportive of Darius' belief in Ahura Mazda, although he stated that the script was for political purposes, to record his deeds. The very few logograms, she argues, served as symbols emphasizing "the great concepts of the Achaemenid world" and in order of importance: first the divine beings, Ahura Mazda and the title of god; then the earth and the land, important things created by Ahura Mazda and ruled over by the king; and finally, the king himself, represented by his title (p. 119). For Herrenschmidt, the fact that such concepts were written as indivisible logograms made them recognizable symbols. She goes so far as to say that reading the phonetic script, while rendering the details of language more explicitly than a strictly consonantal alphabet, was not as explicit as the Greek alphabet with separate vowel signs except as it was theologically important. Signs 'da' plus 'i,' for example, might be interpreted [dai] or [di] ([i] instead of the assumed [a] or [i] plus [da] forming a diphthong). But in Zoroastrian theology *daiva* (*daeva*) would be 'demon' whereas *diva* referred to the divine. The reason for an explicit 'di' was thus crucial as it prevented the utterance of words belonging to "lying Disorder" which exalted *daiva* (120–121). Between the religion of the Sanskrit Vedas and Zoroastrianism in fact lies the crucial semantic shift in the use of the root in Sanskrit *deva* 'god' and its Avestan or Old Persian counterpart *daeua* 'demon.' For Zoroastrians, the 'god' of the Vedas was anathema. When Darius' inscriptions tell how he brutally conquered his enemies in order to stamp out the "Lie," was he also stamping out the false "demons" who opposed Ahura Mazda? The Old Persian script, in allowing some things to be explicit but leaving others ambiguous, Herrenschmidt argues, reinforced "right thought" as opposed to the "Lie" (Old Persian *drauga*).

Between his use of *drauga* ‘the Lie’ in more clearly political contexts such as the Behistun Inscription, there seems to be room for interpreting it to refer to ‘lies’ as to who the rightful ruler should be as well as a more abstract evil force that contrasted with the religious good that Ahura Mazda stood for as exemplified in the inscription at the gate of Persepolis (Kent 1953:135–136 = DPd with translation). This inscription is a formal prayer to Ahura Mazda for help against the enemy armies, famine and “the Lie.” Its description of Darius’ land as ‘good’ uses a word (*naiba*) that means ‘good’ in a religious sense, a word cognate with Old Irish *nōib* ‘holy.’ It would thus not seem far fetched to believe that for Darius his well being and that of his land was part of a religious well being based on belief in Ahura Mazda.

The Persepolis inscription is more clearly religious, although also displayed where both gods and men would see it, while other inscriptions were not. As Herrenschildt points out, many cuneiform tablets are found buried in temple foundations, while Darius’ large Behistun inscription, high above on a cliff, for example, could only be read by the gods because of its inaccessibility (other inscriptions such as that addressing Ahura Mazda as Darius’ personal god are more accessible). She thus concludes that when Darius used a special Persian variant of cuneiform to inscribe his deeds, this must have been in the tradition of writing for the gods, not as a means of human communication.

In Chapter 8 she then contrasts the Old Persian experiment in writing with developments in the scripts for writing Hebrew and Greek, which, she argues, left ambiguous or clarified aspects of language intimately related to state values. To the Semitic Phoenician consonantal alphabet, there needed to be added, either diacritics for vowels (the general Semitic solution) or linear letters for vowels (the Greek solution). The Hebrew consonantal alphabet, she suggests, was compatible with the fact that the name of the Hebrew Yahweh was not to be pronounced (132), while the Greek alphabet, in adding vowels, introduced an explicitness in the pronunciation of written language that was not part of either the Persian or Hebrew tradition of writing about religious matters. This is compatible with Herrenschildt’s view that writing systems endure because they encode a theory of language that links visible speech (writing) to the invisible (ritual, cosmology: 126).

■ III.

Jean-Pierre Vernant concludes by pointing to features in the more familiar Greek culture of ancient Athens that may build on the shoulders of earlier cultures but do so in their own unique way. In Chapters 9 “Myths and Reasoning” (149–163) and 10 “The Polis: Shared Power” (164–175), he recalls the old question of the association between Indo-Europeans and the ideology of European supremacy on which early twentieth century expansion was based in order to reject it. Ideas that go back to the nineteenth century view that European culture was the product of an Indo-European-speaking people with origins on the shores of the Baltic is outmoded in the twentieth century with its new discoveries about the Ancient Near East. Such Indo-European ideology must now confront the fact that, as Samuel Noah Kramer said, history began in Sumer, not in Europe. Vernant then raises questions about the roots of some of our most treasured institutions, long traced to Greece and Rome. He concludes that, although there are obvious parallels in myth, for example, between Greek themes and those of the Ancient Near East (e.g., the wars in heaven among the gods), Vernant also points to differences. He recalls the historical break in cultural thinking between the twelfth and eighth centuries BC that was accompanied by a break between the older scribal tradition based on syllabic writing and the new system based on alphabetic writing. He recalls here the use of syllabic Linear B, written on clay tablets at centers from Knossos on Crete to Pylos, Thebes and Mycenae on mainland Greece in the last part of the second millennium BC that disappeared with the re-emergence of Greek literacy in the eighth century BC and the Greek alphabet. Issues of continuity and discontinuity that accompanied changes in script traditions as well as interactions between the Indo-European speaking world and the non-Indo-European speaking origins of writing, beside reasoning based on precedent and hierarchical-based civilization remain to be explored.

Despite the break in script traditions between the birth of writing in Mesopotamia and the Greek alphabet, the roots of western culture must go back to the early Mesopotamian urbanization of c. 3500 BC, millennia before fifth century BC Athens and even the Homeric or Mycenaean Greek Bronze Age of the late second millennium BC.

This is a book by scholars for the general public. As such *Ancestor of the West* deals with essential questions that the nonspecialist will easily follow, but its broad, often daring interpretations, will give specialists something to ponder about things near and dear to them. An Indo-Europeanist may ask, if the western tradition was not born in an Indo-European homeland but is a conflation of Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures, what is still properly Indo-European?

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The Form of The News:

A History

Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone

Reviewed by Marsha Peters

New York: Guilford Press, 2000

Hardcover, 326 pages, Illustrated, one color, \$35.

ISBN 1-52730-637-8

Abstract

The evolution of the modern American newspaper is a complex development that took place over a period of two-hundred years through revolution, civil war, prosperity, depression and the age of television.

Its modern form is the result of changes engendered by social, political, economic and cultural forces. Its readership changed from the literate gentleman of the late eighteenth century to the multi-cultural audience today, some of which get their newspapers delivered online.

In their book, *The Form of the News*, authors Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, both at the time professors at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, explore the emergence of the newspaper we read today. They adopt a non-traditional approach interrelating newspaper design with cultural shifts. It is not only design, but the implications of the design, that they examine in academic detail. (The book as it appears is intended to be a textbook.)

Visible Language 36.1
Peters, 76-83
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They build their case about newspaper form from the earliest newspapers published in America (c. 1750) to the electronic newspaper by studying specific newspapers over a period of time and investigating changes in these news sheets in tangent with the changes in culture. In addition they examine in one chapter the influence of American newspaper design on European newspapers, which was considerable, and in another the internet.

They have divided the development of the American newspaper into several categories—each marked by social, cultural, economic and or political subtexts depending on the historical period. They then proceed to examine these forms for their content, design and voice and how those values intersect with ownership, the means of production, division of labor and targeted readership.

Their primary thesis is that newspapers in the United States are an “instrument of democracy” and examine how they have lived up to that “mission.” Populist in their views, they see the newspaper as a place for public discourse.

Form is defined as what makes each newspaper distinct and recognizable. “Form is everything a newspaper does to present the look of the news,” they contend. And that includes typography, content, layout, illustration. They proceed to examine factors that affect form—mainly the distribution of power. For example, lack of news about women’s accomplishments (except in society) and those of African-Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is notable. People who have access to power and authority have access to the people in the news business and can influence public discourse. In some eras, this discourse was more open and democratic though even then disenfranchised groups were excluded. Eventually the newspaper itself assumes its own cultural authority to guide readers to what the editors and publishers proclaim as the most important news of the day. Design evolved to reflect this.

The authors begin with the “printerly newspaper” dating from the late colonial era (c. 1750) designed to look like a book (using book-like typography and even columns of type) and meant to be read like a book by the privileged gentlemen readers ensconced in their libraries or pubs—men who were expected to participate in the political process. The printerly paper was craft based—made by hand. There was no reporting of the news as we know it. Content relied on an assemblage of bits of news collected from other print or oral sources in addition to letters, essays, government reports, local news of note and shipping news. And the news was often weeks late. There was no reporting as we know it and no illustrations except perhaps a woodcut in the masthead. The function of this form of the newspaper was to acquaint gentlemen and merchant readers with the latest, though somewhat stale, political and shipping news.

As America moved toward revolution, the form of the newspaper (printerly) remained the same as the content changed to reflect new political ideas and debates. Letters and essays dominated this forum for democracy. However, small but significant changes took place and continued in the post-revolutionary or Federal period. Printers, no longer anonymous, announced their proprietorship on the masthead. The scale of the paper grew larger. Bolder typefaces appeared as well as more decorative flourishes and advertisements. The newspaper grew more authoritative and bold and began to enjoy a prominent role in public life.

Another significant change took place in the 1820s as America moved into an era of fractious politics and multiple political parties. Printers who exerted no editorial control over the paper in terms of defining specific content gave way to editors who brought with them a particular point of view and allegiance to a specific political party. In this sense these early papers resemble many European papers today which have a specific political or ideological agenda. And more important, the papers began to acquire a mass audience riveted by the raucous political issues of the day that concerned the burgeoning democracy. The authors label papers published in this period “Partisan.”

As newspapers courted the common man—women were not allowed to vote but had another role as consumers—the papers began experimenting with their look. The bookish printer’s paper gave way to a paper with more advertisements and illustrations, notably political cartoons. Changes in printing technology made this possible. Though the editor was the voice of the paper, printers still had a pivotal role, responsible for many of the design innovations, which included the increased prominence of advertisements, ornamentation, charts and tables (protographics) for economic news. Newspapers responding to the needs of the day were flexible enough to experiment and absorb innovations. As newspapers grew in authority both visually and textually—they created a map of what is important for people to know—a chart of the known world.

Advertising and commercial culture influenced newspaper form in distinctive ways. Newspapers began to physically separate ads from editorial material and display ads from classified ones. The eclectic typefaces used in the advertisements, which did not have to follow the form of the news sheets, drew attention to the ads. The use of white space differentiated them from the editorial material. The ads employed headlines, labels and illustrations that all eventually became part of the design of the newspaper itself. With all the competing typography, the newspaper resembled more a circus poster than a book.

The identification of news sources also became important. Most news arrived by mail or hand. When the first long-distance telegraph line was established in 1844, telegraphic news transmitted instantly was prominently displayed on the pages and labeled as such. The front-page news was organized in terms of importance—the beginning of hierarchy—with lesser items occupying space at the bottom of the page and printed in smaller type. Inside, news of interest was segmented into categories along with the ads, a device employed to appeal to different demographics, not unlike today. The modern newspaper was slowly taking shape as the nineteenth century progressed.

The fullest development of this latest stage of newspaper form the authors call the “Victorian paper” (c. 1840s and forward). It was also the age of the publisher whose influence grew as the century progressed. The publisher’s main mission was to keep his eye on the markets as well as market his own newspaper. The authors declare that the editor’s paper of the Partisan period was “made for the voter, the publisher’s made for the consumer.”

One of the most modern aspects of the paper—illustration—further enhanced the newspaper form. Advertisements added a pictorial element offering tantalizing images of goods. Newspapers grew larger in scale during the Victorian era, devoting more real estate to ads, not unlike today’s papers.

The first illustrations, outside of political cartoons, to appear in newspapers were wood engravings, woodcut reproductions of artist’s sketches. The early illustrations added nothing new to the news report. Rather they enhanced the narrative in a descriptive, decorative way. The artist gave a visual interpretation of events based on the text. This was not reportage. Though photography arrived on the scene in 1839, there was no efficient means of reproducing photographs in the paper. The best substitute was sketches made after photographs, notably during America’s Civil War. Most illustrations dealt with nature, not surprising since the nineteenth century had a passionate regard for nature as a medium of social change. The built environment was depicted, as new cities sprung up along railroad lines and clustered around lakes as America pushed westward.

Though based on a reality, the sketches were not real in the photographic sense. Artists interpreted the world for readers. Armchair travel was a popular nineteenth century diversion. From the comfort of a cluttered, overwrought Victorian parlor, one could view stereoscopic photographs of far away places. Newspaper illustrations in their own way continued this comfortable view of the world.

Photography later ripped away this gauzy, romantic view. A sense of objectivity intruded. But that was a later development. The role of photographs as prominent elements in newspaper form did not take shape until the rise of modernism. Newspapers, since the end of the nineteenth century, had the capacity to print photographs, but they were not regarded as news. Illustrations still dominated particularly in papers with a conservative design philosophy. When photos were displayed they were often portraits decorated with hand-drawn borders and flourishes, a leftover of Victorian sentimentality. Even through the 1920s newspapers still carried sketches on the front pages, political cartoons, illustrated logos. By the 1930s all that changed, particularly with the appearance of the hand-held 35mm camera and wire services such as the Associated Press which had the capacity to transmit photos over phone lines. The immediacy of photojournalism was impactful. There is no single decisive moment when photographs began to dominate design. It was gradual and now is a way of seeing the world.

By the beginning of the late nineteenth century newspapers entered what the authors called the “Classical” period of modern design during which newspaper design looked back to a period of clean, simplified design. The printery newspaper was the paradigm. These were not newspapers of brash photo display, but dignified gray ladies dominated by type which made them appear authoritative with a capital A. Classicism coincided with a quest to make sense of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized world at century’s end. A quiet, classical look for newspapers gave people confidence. Order and clarity ruled. The social map was maintained.

These classically inspired newspapers also included in their design the virtues of early modernist design such as more geometrical, horizontal layout and hierarchy. And technological developments allowed more freedom to modify form. Headlines stretched across more than one column, stories got larger and were displayed in a hierarchical manner. White space alleviated the gray mass of body type. Photographs though often played small were an organizing element on the page around which a story was displayed. This was not the case in all newspapers, but it was the most adhered to form.

The authors note that the classical phase lasted until the 1970s when newspaper design exploded and modernist design took on a new look. Graphic designers, not journalists, influenced the papers of the '70s. Though keeping to the basic modernist tenets they expanded on them. Newspapers declared themselves through design. And the impulse to promote their contents was very visible as summary boxes of inside content were blasted across the tops of front pages, "Read me, Read me" like some new potion for Alice in Wonderland. Emphasis was put on a dominant visual element, usually a photograph standing alone or packaged with a story.

Part of the impetus to change was the increasing competition from television and its relevance to news. Live reports from Vietnam and Cambodia gave television news a lot more legitimacy and power. The flickering images on the screen could never be stilled, but the newspapers tried. They could not have the immediacy of television and they feared loss of readers to the other media; they began experimenting with making the front page more lively.

In 1982, the appearance of USA Today caused another jolt in the design continuum. The authors contend that the newspaper with its energetic design—emphasis on informational graphics, higher story count, less space for photographs as dominant elements and varying typography—owes much to the Victorian newspaper. No design is ever outmoded, no idea is ever new. As with fashion, freshness was based on innovation but with a backward look to past successes.

Form is both visible and invisible. You hold it in your hand but what it contains is also a result of intangible currents. The trajectory of newspaper design was not linear the authors conclude after their exhaustive study. The form of newspapers came about through experiment and in response to outside forces. Newspapers constantly reinvented themselves to stay relevant and in touch with the dominant cultural/social/political trends of the time. Technology, they add, was not an impetus to the changes in newspaper form, but a facilitator. By the time computers became complex enough to output design ideas, a curious relationship developed. They enabled newspapers to experiment and possessing the technology and knowledge to use it gave designers a role in the look of the newspaper. They are keepers of the magic.

A case close to home illustrates some of the author's points. In March 2001, the *Chicago Tribune*, for whom I work as a photo editor, introduced a comprehensive redesign in response to the skyrocketing cost of newsprint. Many other major dailies such as the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Hartford Courant* had done the same, namely to reduce the size of the news sheet. This shrinkage necessitated rethinking the traditional design. The paper had undergone changes before but this one was from the front page to the back page. The evolution of this redesign involved a fleet of editors and designers, who were ultimately the individuals making many of the visual choices that altered the newspaper's form.

The paper modified but kept its blue masthead and waving flag, but refined the typeface. The masthead is a newspaper's distinctive display of its brand name. The body typeface was kept though it was made a little blacker with more leading so it was readable in the smaller column width. New fonts were selected for headlines—bolder in the news sections and lighter in features. The look of informational graphics changed. Photos would be run larger. The thrust of the redesign undertook to make the paper more readable and distinctive. "Typography," the editor, Ann Marie Lipinski, wrote in a note introducing the design, "is the voice the *Chicago Tribune* uses to speak to its readers. . . Headlines can be bold, while the text speaks with midwestern clarity and directness." This encapsulates a philosophy of newspapers born in the nineteenth century (the Tribune was founded in 1847) down to the present.

So newspapers continuously reinvent themselves propelled by forces both internal and external. Content changes with the news and it changes fast. New stories, new headlines, new photographs alter the newspapers' form on a daily basis.

At the end of their chronicle, the authors lament the loss of a print forum for public discourse, maintaining that newspapers filled with features and intent on self-involved purposes were no longer open to ordinary civic discussion. There was a disconnection between the community and the newspaper.

The cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001 brought about powerful changes in newspapers—their form expanded to encompass the unforgivable and horrific and the public's response. One wonders what the authors of this book published in 2000, would make of that.

Marsha Peters is a photo editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. With degrees in political science and American history and work at two major American dailies (the *Providence Journal*), she brings a strong perspective to this review.

Zero: Hans Schleger—a Life of Design

Pat Schleger

Reviewed by Colin Banks

New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000

248 x 210mm, illustrated, hardbound, 272 pages, \$45.

ISBN 1-56898-273-9

Abstract

When one has mastered the craft of typography the next trick is to move on up to the art of typography. Not many people can do that: Tschichold was one, Dick Elffers another; they could make marks on paper that rang clear and true, like the bells of a cathedral. Of recent times Tom Eckersley and Saul Bass produced print that achieved art with only a passing nod to typography; Hans Schleger's designs come somewhere in between.

Schleger's approach to design was forged in Germany where, initially, he seemed to have been attracted to the complexity of the subconscious, manifest in a Max Ernst-like surrealism. This was rapidly overcome by a reductionists' search for underlying form, a style that remained with him for the rest of his career; maybe this had something to do with his adopted name 'Zero.'

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ZERO

Zero

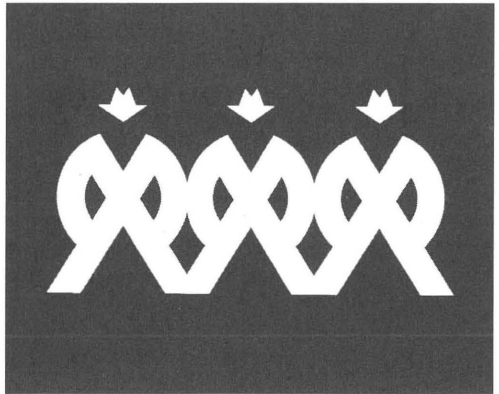


Figure 1: Weber and Heilbronner Trademarks, c.1925

An economic migrant, he arrived in New York in 1924 and shortly after opened his own studio at 270 Madison Avenue; he offered a design service, advertising home-luxuries for the most part. He introduced the three-men symbol that came to represent Weber and Heilbronner, the mens' clothes stores (see figure 1). W&H advertising we are told, was driven by the then new idea that it is not necessary to put the product before the imaginative representation of the brand and its qualities, and it was imagination that Schlegel had in abundance. The W&H advertising manager had gone to 270 Madison saying can you draw me an elephant for five dollars? To be told "I cannot draw anything for five dollars."

At this time Schlegel wrote a lyrical description of approaching downtown Manhattan on the ferry and of the people going there to work, he stresses the upbeat nature of the beast where talent is encouraged and it is a reminder that 'the business of America is Business' a lesson he learned.

The Wall Street Crash brought him back to Berlin in 1929 and by that time his talent was acknowledged on both sides of the Atlantic, but he had one more citadel to conquer. A spell in the Berlin Office of the London Agency Crawfords, brought him into friendship with Ashley Havinden and later with Edward McKnight Kauffer, commercial artists as they were then called, both of whom were well established in London when Schlegel moved there in 1932; on a path well beaten by Eric Mendelssohn and Walter Gropius, the Hungarians Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer, and the Pole George Him. Zero's friends McKnight Kauffer and Marion Dorn, the textile designer, crossed the pond the other way, to London from the States.

Schleger owed a lot to Edward McKnight Kauffer, Kauffer worked at Crawford's in London from 1927 to 1929. When Schleger came on to London Kauffer generously introduced him to several of his clients. The familiar names of 'encouragers with patronage' appear: Jack Beddington at Shell, Frank Pick and Christian Barman at London Transport, Sir Stephen Talents at the Post Office and Lund Humphries the progressive printers who exhibited his work and later employed Jan Tschihold. But with the 1939 war, posters by Zero became the wallpaper of Metropolitan life here in London (*see figure 2*). Kauffer in my view also strongly influenced his style at that time, the famous flying birds poster seems to lend some of its dynamism to Schleger's Stop for Shell poster and there are other very different comparisons to be drawn. I think I can see something of Hans Erni also, a Prince of Draftsmen, and then the surrealism of Max Ernst.

One of my first jobs was working for multi-task design group led by Gabi Schreiber, who was like Schleger a Berliner; it was not an enriching experience. I had to revise their letterhead and was told "keep it as close as possible to Zero's original specification." I could not see what the fuss was about, it was clumsily set in Bodoni 135 and compromised between asymmetric and down the center arrangements. I dug back in the files and it was like unwrapping a pearl. What Schleger had originally given them was delicately balanced, like an Alexander Calder mobile; it was set in Walbaum Light and every word sang like music.

I never met him but stories about his pernicky engrossment in detail were rife, On rejection of his morning coffee: "Now this is how I like it; mix the milk and the coffee grains first and pour the water, whilst still boiling, from eighteen inches above the cup." Eminent designers both from Europe and the States were said to invariably to call by on 'Poppa Schleger' when in London. including Paul Rand who wrote the introduction to this book, Saul Bass and Lucian Bernhard.

Many of the designer's thoughts here are skillfully wrought into his words:

Design can be disarming through simplicity. It does more than catch the eye. It can give shape to thought and feeling as the glass does to wine; Limitation produces form; Such people ask the designer to make chickens look like peacocks; Few advertisers are taking expert advice This is interesting considering how differently they behave when their health, property or liberty are at stake; Advertising should not be designed by us for them; and Advertising as a long term investment.

With advertising Schleger both made his reputation and promoted his own name (see figure 3), first in New York in the 1920s. He retained an involvement with it throughout his career, it was a major part of his trade, he was a design consultant to the important London agency from 1952 to 1964 and is shown in this book to be strong when writing on justification and its benefits He was visually telling in the campaigns he directed for Mac Fisheries, Fisons and ICI, national and international corporations. He understood that words and images should come together hand in hand and often that meant playing in a team.

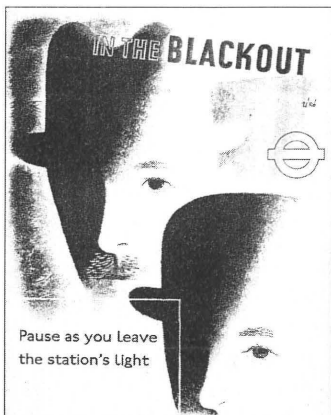


Figure 2: London Transport Wartime poster 1943. Edward Johnston's 'Underground block-letter' was used for most of LT's display lettering from the first world war until the 1970s.

Advertising still had to justify itself to many powerful critics throughout his times. When I started out in design in the 1950's self advertising by designers was expressly forbidden by our representative association in Britain. The memory was still fresh of how the martyrs of earlier years had struggled to be recognized as professionals, who did not undercut fees or steal clients and no British profession allowed self-advertising in those times.

There are perceptive introductory essays by both Fiona McCarthy and David Bernstein. Bernstein emphasizes a precept Schleger returned to again and again: "Even in his earlier days, when a struggle to establish himself might have tempted him to create one-off ads, he was determined to lay foundations rather than to erect facades." And there is a message here for the computer technilogs: "He hated glibness, technique masquerading as creativity and smart execution blinding the onlooker to the absence of an idea. He also believed in 'negating self-expression'." Bernstein goes on to say "Schleger was not the usual stereotype of the instinctive, untidy, irrational quasi-genius. He was an artist-designer, his own term for someone responsible for design policy, whose toughest task was to 'sublimate himself' and 'channel all his powers into solving a problem.' He was the thinking man's creative—because for him deep thought preceded action."

His widow, Pat Schleger, puts it this way “the visual image played a secondary role to the planning, content and psychology of the approach.”

One of the essayists is at least fifty years adrift when she writes, “he and F.H.K. Henrion one might almost say are pioneers, of the coordinated visual image running through the whole range of a company’s activities.” There had been many earlier pioneers, for instance the design 1907/1914 coordinated policy of Peter Behrens in Germany at AEG and including in Schleger’s day the really concrete achievements of Bradbury Thompson in 1938 at Virginia Pulp and Paper and earlier in 1934 at the Container Corporation of America (CCA). This last is interesting in this context because Schleger spent 1950 as guest professor at the Chicago Institute of Design, while there he designed some match folders for CCA. Not much but it seems possible that could have exposed him to the merits of a rigorous corporate identity scheme; Container Corporation had one of the best, introduced by Egbert Jacobson in 1936. This last was completely redone in 1956 by Ralph Eckerstrom.

Interesting also because he was invited to the Chicago Institute of Design by Serge Chermeyeff, another émigré who had spent a long time in transit in London. With the shadow of its founder Moholy-Nagy behind them and with Mies van der Rohe, Konrad Wachsmann and Hugo Weber also on the payroll, it must have felt like the reincarnation of European modernism had taken root there.

The words of the late Lord Reilly (Director of the UK Design Council) sum him up: Reilly called him “The master of the simple statement.” Another commentator said, “he seems to have a quite extraordinary capacity for letting problems evolve their own solutions.” Half true, but Reilly would have none of it, “Solutions do not evolve on their own. They are arrived at only after a proper process of analysis and synthesis. The fact that these labors are not visible in the final result is the measure of Schleger’s mastery of his job and of himself.”

Hans Schleger born in Prussia 1898, died England 1978.

The book is skillfully designed and detailed, well produced, and good value.

Colin Banks is a life-time typophile and long-time member of *Visible Language’s* advisory board. As book review editor for the journal he critiques new titles.

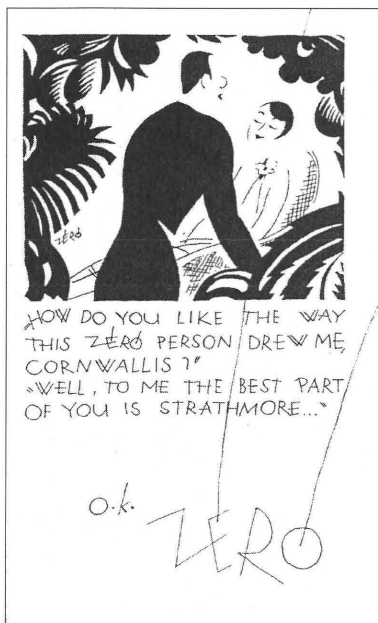


Figure 3; Schleger originally drew this for Park & Tilford in 1925; he then used it again to advertise himself and Strathmore Papers.

