



Writing Visual Culture

Writing About New Typography from The Margins: Problems and Approaches

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Abstract

My PhD research into New Typography in Scandinavia is taken as a starting point for a methodological discussion on how to approach histories of Modernism in neglected geographies. Discussions in design history around centre-periphery relations are revisited, and the idea of networks and the rhizome are introduced. I argue that networks provide a model for thinking both about the exchanges made possible through formalised organisational structures, and for thinking about those taking place through the non-hierarchical and fluid relationships formed between protagonists. Domestication is preferred to 'influence' as a way of thinking about how ideas as styles travel. Accordingly, I maintain that Scandinavian printers did not accept the teachings of the avant-garde unthinkingly, but instead consciously modified New Typography to suit their own aims and cultural preferences. The importance of understanding the professional context in which ideas were spread and work designed is also stressed. In conclusion, I argue that the different contexts and aims of the avant-garde and the printing trade need to be considered when assessing particular examples. Alternatives to criteria like 'originality' and visual interest need to be found in order for them to be judged on their own merit.



From the Margins

The following deals with some of the problems encountered and approaches adopted in writing my PhD thesis on New Typography in Scandinavia at the Royal College of Art in London. The three countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden are not usually associated with this movement. Instead, New Typography is commonly described as the work of a small group of Central and Eastern-European avant-garde artists which in 1925 was introduced to the German printing trade in 1925 by the special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen* [Typographic Messages] titled 'elementare typographie' [elemental typography] and edited by Jan Tschichold (1902–74). Whilst New Typography was a minor concern amongst Scandinavian avant-garde artists, it is possible to find stray examples in the literature on little magazines (Holmberg, 1987; Brooker et al, 2013) or on literary or political groups (Bredsdorff 1982; Thing, 1993; Harsløf 1997; Jelsbak 2006; Svedjedal 2011). However, it should be noted that because the texts in which these examples feature are written primarily from literary or political perspectives, the typography itself is typically only dealt with in passing. Conversely, although New Typography arguably had a much greater impact on commercial printing in the three countries, it is poorly described in the literature focusing on this area of graphic production. Indeed, an initial literature survey revealed only two articles dealing specifically with this topic, by Magdalena Gram (2006) and Torbjørn Eng (1998) respectively. In other words, my research has dealt with marginality both in terms of Scandinavia's position to Central-European Modernism, and in terms of my topic's place in the literature. The problems discussed below all relate to this marginal status. The first concerns the lack of secondary sources. The second deals with how one might think about the relationship between centre and periphery, particularly in terms of understanding how ideas and styles spread across international borders. The third relates to the second, but concerns itself with how one might evaluate what could be classified as derivative work. Lastly, some of the ways in which the 'wild' New Typography of the avant-garde was domesticated by the printing trade in Scandinavia will be discussed.

Problem 1: A Lack of Secondary Sources

The first problem encountered was a lack of secondary sources. The approach taken in order to overcome this was informed by Gram's and Eng's articles, both of which had turned to trade journals as primary source material. Of course, this approach is not new. For instance, it was suggested already in Clive Dilnot's seminal article 'The State of Design



History' that trade journals could be used to 'to map the changing values, ideas, and beliefs expressed or communicated in text and graphic layout', and thereby to 'map the history of the professions' (1984, 19). However, in my case I found the approach particularly apt. Although Tschichold's work in promoting New Typography to a printing trade audience through the special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen* and subsequent publications is well documented, little critical attention has been devoted to how this was interpreted by the graphic trades. I therefore decided to build upon Gram's and Eng's work by performing an exhaustive survey of New Typography's coverage in Scandinavian printing journals, and to focus more closely on the New Typography of printers than on that of the avant-garde. In turn, the journals surveyed informed the decision to frame the research using the transnational parameter 'Scandinavia'. It soon became clear that journals were published and read across the Scandinavian borders. For instance, *Grafisk Revy* [Graphic Revue, 1930-36], was published jointly by the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish compositors' unions, articles appeared in any of the three languages, and the publication explicitly proclaimed itself part of a Scandinavianist tradition (Wessel, 1931).

Problem 2: Scandinavia and the Centre

Through the focus on trade journals, I was also presented with a way of approaching the second problem: how to think about the relationship between centre and periphery – and then particularly how to understand the spread of ideas and styles. Maurizio Scudiero has observed that the journals of the international avant-garde were drawn to each other 'spontaneously, following the activities of the groups and their artists', and by the common need to exchange resources like texts and stereotypes (2012, 165–66). Trade journals also needed to exchange resources. However, their ties were not so much spontaneous creations, as they were extensions of the pre-established networks underpinning organisations like the International Congress of Master Printers and International Secretariat of Printers. Trade journals formed what Ellen Mazur Thomson has called 'professional communication networks', which she has argued served to define the professions 'to themselves and to others' (1997, 37). Reflecting each profession's culture and relationship to particular reproduction technologies, they formed nodes in a series of discreet, international, professional networks. They were more likely to report on developments within their respective fields abroad than those taking place in related fields at home. For instance, printing journals maintained a knowing silence on the typography of local avant-garde publications like Georg Pauli's (1855–1935) *flamman* [the flame, 1917–21] and D.N.S.S.'s



Pressen [The Press, 1922–24]. Only after German type specimens started making use of New Typography did they start showing interest. Similarly, the advertising trade press, which predominantly addressed lay-out men and looked to American ideas of scientific advertising, took little interest in Modernist commercial art prior to the publication of The Studio's *Modern Publicity 1930* and *Mise en Page* (1931). The advertising journals' lack of coverage was remarkable given the high level of interest shown in New Typography by the printing trade press in the intervening years.

The choice to downplay the national category in favour of a focus on language, journal networks and professional culture was further underpinned by ideas formulated around networks in a broader sense by other design and art historians. Anna Calvera's thoughts on the local, regional, national and global provided a point of departure. Seeking to break down the binary relationship of centre and periphery she proposed a structure where 'the geography of design becomes a crossroads, a puzzle of relationships and exchanges' (Calvera 2005, 375). I also turned to some of Hubert van den Berg's texts on the avant-garde in the Nordic countries. He argues that the practice of writing art history within national frameworks has hindered our understanding the avant-garde's 'supernational' nature, which enabled the rapid exchange of styles, texts and ideas across borders (van den Berg 2000). Drawing upon the rhizome, the image of thought informing the complex structure of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *Mille plateaux* [*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, tr. 1987], van den Berg considers the avant-garde to be a fluctuating, omni-directional, self-organising, non-hierarchical malleable structure without an organised point of entry or exit which met its limits 'not only in Turkey or in Georgia on the Caucasus, in Norwegian Lapland, in Finland, in Santiago de Chile or Fukuoka, but also in Berlin, Paris, New York and Moscow; not only in the difference between the work of different artists, but also - virtually without exception - within the work of each avant-garde artist' (2007, 347). As opposed to the centre-periphery model, this network was characterised by flow rather than hierarchy, no "'mere" historiographical projection', but an entity which can be mapped through 'demonstrable data': like the collaborations manifest in publications and exhibitions, the memberships of organisations, through correspondence and so on (van den Berg 2007, 343). That ideas and styles travelled both to and from Scandinavia is clear, for instance in Tschichold's own work. Whilst his manifesto undoubtedly was the key point of reference informing Scandinavian printers' discussions about New Typography, his ideas were in turn informed by the work of a wide-ranging avant-garde network which included the Danish group D.N.S.S. As Torben Jelsbak has identified, *Die neue Typographie* (1928) contains references both to their pamphlet *Aktiv Reklame* [Active Advertisement, 1924] and broadsheet *Pressen* (2006, 122).



Problem 3: Judging the Work in Question

The third problem concerned how to evaluate work created in the 'periphery'. One reason the centre-periphery model has been seen as unsatisfactory, particularly amongst those working on histories of Modernism, is that its hierarchical structure combined with the avant-garde's emphasis on new form can lead to a line of argument which stipulates that the innovation taking place at the centre is original and significant whereas the periphery's interpretations of the same are derivative and consequentially of little interest. For this reason, Jeff Werner has questioned the usefulness of transposing international narratives to Swedish art history, claiming it always leaves Swedish Modernist work looking 'like a pale cousin from the countryside' when compared to international counterparts (2002, 99).

In dealing with this problem I turned to domestication, which has been positioned by Roger Silverstone (1992, 2006) and others writing in the field of media and technology studies as an alternative to diffusion, the dominant theory of how technologies are taken up and spread. Diffusion, first theorised by Everett M. Rogers in 1962, focuses on innovation. It argues that technologies are either 'adopted' or 'rejected' on the basis of the innovativeness of a range of adopter types spanning from the venturesome, through the early and late adopters, down to the laggards—and whether or not the innovation in question succeeds in reaching critical mass (Rogers 2003, 282–285, 343–344). In contrast, domestication focuses on use, and how technologies are taken up and modified by users to suit their needs, preferences, abilities and circumstances. Whilst originally limited to studies of the household environment, the applications of domestication soon expanded to the wider field of Everyday Life (Lie and Sørensen 1996, 13). Kjetil Fallan then argued for its use as a design historical method, and then not only to study products, objects and technologies, but also theories, systems, beliefs and ideas (2010, 99). Recently, Julia Meer has used domestication specifically to argue that the German printing trade did not simply 'accept New Typography's validity' as claimed in *Die neue Typographie* (Tschichold 2006, 61), but that it actively took it up as part of their educational programme, modifying and adapting it in the process (Meer 2015). Such modifications were deemed necessary because the 'wild' New Typography of the avant-garde was considered ill-suited to the demands and restrictions of professional printing practice. Nevertheless, printers in Scandinavia, as in Germany, identified New Typography as a means by which the printing trade could increase its competitiveness against rival trades, and by which individual compositors could gain new skills and thereby remain employable in an increasingly mechanized workplace.



Domestication of New Typography in Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, New Typography was domesticated in a variety of ways. In order to structure what might otherwise appear a disparate set of tactics I have therefore made use of three 'modes', or strategies, proposed by Jeffrey Meikle as a 'tentative typology' of how modernity was domesticated in the United States (1995, 165). The first of these sees modernity placed 'in a historical continuum linking past, present, and future' (Meikle 1995, 143–44). This allowed it to be seen as part of a gradual evolution rather than a violent rupture. So, whilst Tschichold in his well-known manifesto of elemental typography (1925, tr. 2007) positioned the use of photography and photomontage over hand illustration, sans-serif over serif and blackletter type, *kleinschreibung* over standard German orthography, and asymmetrical over symmetrical composition as part of a decisive break between New and Old, Scandinavian printers were instead eager to point to historical, and if possible, domestic points of reference. For instance, Anders Billow (1890–1964) emphasized the 19th century origins of the sans serif (1930, 34–35). In Denmark, Hans Christian Andersen's (1805–1875) bed screen and scrap books were held up as domestic precursors of photomontage (Slomann 1930, 7), and earlier consistent use of lower case was identified in the work of Martin Petersen (1863–1935) (S-z 1934, 16-17). Several voices, amongst them Emil Selmar's, drew attention to the asymmetric compositions of the Artistic Printing period (1927). The historical continuum was further emphasized through the use of the term 'Functionalism'. In the run-up to the Stockholm Exhibition 1930 'Functionalist Typography' had been taken up as a synonym for New Typography. This new name enabled a shift in debate, from evaluations of Tschichold's teachings to personal and often 'commonsensical' expressions of what Functionalism 'really' meant in typography. As a result, those with traditionalist sympathies were able to promote traditional practices and aesthetics as part of a Functional, and therefore purportedly progressive, typography. This was particularly the case for the design of books.

Meikle's second mode limits modernity to discrete zones, outside of which the world remains 'timelessly whole and reassuringly traditional' (1995, 143–44). In my case, this applies particularly to photomontage. In mainstream advertising, book cover and poster design usage was limited prior to 1935. In Sweden and Norway in particular, this allowed the medium to retain its revolutionary connotations, connotations which were knowingly exploited by the Social Democratic parties' women's and youth groups in an effort to connect with groups of voters more inclined to hold a positive view of the Soviet Union than the



population at large would. In Denmark, the publications of radical group *Monde* also made extensive use of photomontage in their publications. More generally, Viggo Hansen (later known as Viggo Hasnæs, dates unknown) and others argued that New Typography should be limited to jobbing print and not for the setting of books (1928).

The third mode relies on the incorporation of Modernist icons into the user's own environment, an act which neutralises its threatening, unfamiliar, aspects. This was the trickiest one of the three for me, perhaps because of its focus on icons, by which Meikle referred to things like a toy Zeppelin, a souvenir ashtray from the 1928 Empire Exhibition in Glasgow, or items of commercial art featuring illustrations of streamlined planes and trains. Whilst Tschichold's special issue certainly can be regarded as a Modernist icon inserted in into the printing trade environment, further examples can be found if we shift the focus from icons specifically to other tactics which allowed Modernism to co-exist, or even merge, with existing practice: Following German architect Richard Herre (1885–1956), Hasnæs stressed that New Typography should not be seen as a replacement of the 'old', but a 'new variation' to be used alongside it (1930). Viktor Peterson (unknown–1945) amalgamated Tschichold's principles with Rudolf Engel-Hardt's (1886–1968) older guidelines for using the golden section in composition to create a variation called 'constructive design'. Hugo Lagerström (1873–1956) identified that Tschichold had deemed *Mediæval Antikva* permissible for setting continuous text, as no fully satisfactory sans serif had yet been developed for this purpose, and proposed a 'modified form' in which faces like Baskerville, Walbaum and Bodoni were acceptable, as they were also 'impersonal' and 'more constructed than "written by hand"' (1928, 435).

Domestication offers a way of assessing the New Typography of printers in a way which avoids their portrayal as 'pale cousin[s] from the countryside', when compared to that of the *avant-garde*. If made on aesthetic grounds, or on the basis of innovativeness, comparisons between the two seem to me not only unfair, but more importantly of limited value. If one does not take into account that the printing trade's version of New Typography was created with a different purpose, under different circumstances and under different constraints, such comparisons can only offer a limited understanding of the respective works' merits. The adaptations made to New Typography by the trade were not accidental, but underpinned by rational and coherent arguments. Clearly, its practitioners were active participants and not limited to the binary, diffusionist choice of 'adopting' or 'rejecting'. Whilst their aim was often to reconcile New Typography with existing practice, it does not necessarily follow that this was borne out of Conservatism. Indeed, it can be seen as an active effort to adapt and include aspects of New Typography optimally. It is, in my view,



important to remember that the printers themselves believed they were *improving* New Typography, not watering it down. To extend Jeff Werner's metaphor, one might ask if the work of the Scandinavian printing trade appears pale because it is from the countryside (i.e. the periphery), or because it is a cousin (i.e. a relation, but not a direct descendent)? I would argue for the latter.

Conclusion

Although it may not transpire from this paper, I too am fascinated by the typographic work of the avant-garde. However, I do not believe we should be bound by its own conception of what New Typography was. Through the choice of trade journals as primary sources, and by claiming the New Typography of printers a legitimate area of study, I have attempted to open up the term and arrive at a more diverse, possibly even inclusive, definition of what New Typography was to a greater community of people. By focusing on networks, be they the fluid structures of the avant-garde or the more formally organised journal networks of the graphic trades, I have sought to uncover a history of New Typography which is not delineated by borders, but by language and culture.

Consequentially, I have come to think of centre and periphery relations as independent of geography and the categories local, regional and national. As Hubert van den Berg argued, the avant-garde's limits were found not only at Europe's outskirts and beyond, but in urban centres like Berlin and Paris – and even in the careers of individual artists. That the commercial application of avant-garde ideas and styles were not spread uniformly either, nation by nation, but through a set of discreet professional networks can be seen from how Scandinavian practitioners were more likely to consult books and journals published by respective trades abroad than those published by competing trades at home.

Although further research needs to be undertaken in order to assess journals published elsewhere, I do not believe the Scandinavian practitioners to be exceptional in terms of viewing themselves as part of larger, international, professional cultures. Therefore, I also believe that this paper's model of discrete sets of networks is transferrable to other geographic and national contexts, and that it there may help foster a more nuanced understanding of how ideas and styles travel across borders, between languages and between professional cultures. Moreover, it is hoped that the approaches described above can assist the pursuit of such a project. For scholars working in geographies neglected by mainstream design history, or where specialised domestic secondary literature is sparse,



trade journals can provide possible fertile material for research. In dealing with engrained art historical notions of the original and the derivative, domestication offers a conceptual framework which can help shift the historian's attention from innovation and aesthetic judgement to use. Freed from the avant-garde's emphasis on the new, the work of interpreting international currents in peripheral locales or contexts can be recast as creative acts.

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