Starting From Zero

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The will to eradicate the past with a new set of values and establish a new age is the Modernist mythology we inherit in the art books. The Modernists were political ideologues who rewrote history with a new brush. It was the Bauhaus groupies and constructivists who designed a radical new workers' paradise and these movements helped create a new age; a future where the past would no longer be recycled because the new theory exposed the past as corrupt and outmoded. Theory was above all a belief that justified action. Theory WAS ideology. Starting from zero was not the obsession of the Dada anarchist nor the naive optimism of the Futurists. "Starting from zero" was the catch-phrase of one of the most influential, opinionated and ultimately conservative groups of architects and designers who were ideologically working out theories of functionalism in design. Here was design governed by an idea.

Much of the nineteenth century had to do with coming to terms with the Machine Age. John Ruskin and William Morris criticized nineteenth century British design and manufacture for their obsession with the materials of manufacture and utilitarianism. Reeling after the death and destruction of the First World War, it is not surprising that the next generation should take a harder line, apply the Modernist theory to their art, and be supermen creating a bold new future. They, after all, created the new Modernism and called it the "International Style" - it was international because it transcended the parochial national styles and traditions. It was the new art that expressed that which was universal in the world - the new technology of mass production and standardization. In the past, it had been claimed that the machine was used to express the foibles of fashion victims who chose historical motif for ornament. A truly utilitarian art, they argued, would be based on an accurate appraisal of mechanical production in order to develop the truest, purest mechanical aesthetic. Standardization and streamlining were the key to this approach.

Towards a new order

Walter Gropius is the best known ideologue of the International Style, but he was only one of a phalanx of artists espousing the new art. He promoted a new unity where architecture became the center. Here, the fine arts served the crafts, which furnished the building with all its fittings and ornament. Theo van Doesburg was an important theorist. Neo-plasticism was concerned with the hard-line geometric truth behind all human production - both artistic and industrial. El Lissitsky and Lazslo Moholy-Nagy were two of the major practitioners of the new Neo-plasticism or Constructivism. What they shared was the desire to transcend national styles, a response to a new technology through their art. Early in the modern movement, these artists were still developing what can be identified as parochial styles. But their theory was well ahead of their practice. They were working towards a new order even through the anarchy of Dada and the concrete poets.

in 1928, which was early in the development of Modernism, the first major manifesto on modern design was published by Jan Tschichold called *Die Neue Typographie*. As with most radical movements, the more extreme ideas emerged first only to be watered down in practice. In Tschichold's case, he was to become one of the finest classical designers, overturning nearly all of his early theories. His propaganda for the International Style, however, was to remain influential in Europe and even the USA long after the war. *Die Neue Typographie* advocated a new approach to typographic design, because modern designers were working in a new age. Tschichold rejected the printed tradition from the position of style, however, not of function, which was the flaw in his early argument which he was himself later to identify. So what was the new typography according to Tschichold?

Jan Tschichold. Prospectus for *Die Neue Typographie*, 1928.

1. It was essentially simple and pure design in harmony with the modern world.
2. Asymmetry replaced symmetry because it was more functional, reflecting the more complex rhythms of the modern age.
3. Only sans serif typefaces were efficient communicators of modern information. Serifs were relegated to the historians' scrap heap.
4. Where greater emphasis was needed, he insisted on using different weights of type (e.g. bold, demi-bold, light) rather than different faces and even point sizes.

There was also emerging a new emphasis on "objective" and "scientific" approaches to the page grid - one planned less by tradition (the golden section) and more by mathematics. The mathematical grid can be most clearly identified in the early designs of Theo Ballmer. The radical beginnings of the Modern movement started with the mad fruit salads of point sizes and faces of Dada and the bold asymmetry of Tschichold, Bayer and Moholy-Nagy. Slowly, however, there was a formalization and ossification of the Modern movement culminating in Switzerland after the war.

Helvetica Hel-

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Postwar Swiss design developed a new classicism, a new conservative benchmark to which most later designers seemed to retreat at times of crisis. Swiss movement artists based their designs on the Constructivist traditions of pre-war Europe, but strove to perfect the theoretical position of Tschichold and others in their practice. They emphasized the bland, de-personalized, mechanical and objective principals of design that were close to being theoretically correct. It is interesting that the most successful examples of International Style design were posters for particular cultural events - art exhibitions, film festivals, industrial exhibitions and the like. It is rare for these recessive, stylized designs to be sufficiently engaging to serve a more commercial function.

Theo Ballmer was the first great International Stylist. In 1928, using strictly mathematical grids he created posters with a hard-line purity unsurpassed stylistically till the fifties. He is distinguishable from his Constructivist contemporaries by his insistence on square grids and relatively small, single point sized, sans serif, asymmetrical type. Such discipline deserves a place in the pantheon.

Max Bill was a student at the Bauhaus in 1928 but he had to wait untill the war was over to sufficiently reduce his style to the barest of elements. He used strict mathematical proportions, asymmetry and generally small sizes of sans serif type, but always with a superb sense of balance between black and white space.

Armin Hoffmann was the classic fifties designer. He mastered the combination of disciplined asymmetric typography and often striking details from photographic sources. This element of his work was, however, eclipsed by the leading International Stylist Josef Müller-Brockmann, who established himself as its leading writer and propagandist.

Josef Müller-Brockmann, Poster, 1960.

It was Müller-Brockmann who spread the word that International Style was about to adopt the mannerisms of machine art. Here, pure spacial harmony would reign, governed by mathematical logic and a few self imposed restrictions. These were designed to downplay individual talent and create an objective and reproducible style. In 1960 he produced his black, white, grey and red *der film* poster. Surely this was the masterpiece of the fifties (for that is the decade to which it stylistically belongs). Designed with mathematical logic and using typographical elements alone to create a low-key but impressive poster, Müller-Brockmann sought to strip his work of all but the essential meanings. *der Film* was certainly close to zero.

Poor Zero

Since the fifties, zero seems to have slipped as a role model. Far from announcing the end of graphic design, because the machine age had at last found its true expression, International Style has simply become one of many design options. Each decade since the fifties seems to have spawned a range of graphic styles, but only aspects of psychedelic and Post-Modern design can be described as being primarily historical in orientation. POP and New Wave (or Post-Punk) do at least relate to their contemporary industrial cultures just as legitimately as International Style did to the consolidation of the postwar corporate giants.

There have, however, been some interesting reverberations of International Style through most of this period. More often than not, it is a safe haven to which many top designers can retreat after their innovation have been ripped off by the style vultures who make up the rest of the industry.

Milton Glaser, for instance, must rank as perhaps the greatest graphic innovator of the sixties. Glaser is best known for his eclectic themes, flat color and outlined illustration style; but each one of his designs is based on what was essentially a mathematical grid. Typographically, Glaser


Milton Glaser, Baby Teeth typeface, 1977.

would either use austerely small and simple sans serif or he would invent some of the most vulgar decorative faces that even the drug obsessed sixties couldn't manage. Who could explain the lapse? Nevertheless, Glaser was a major inheritor of the International tradition.

Instead of reaching back into history, POP simply reaches across to its contemporary commercial culture for inspiration and symbology. It is more imitative/appreciative simply of what exists - a value-free acceptance of the status quo, whether that status quo be commercial, capitalist or popular.

To understand Post-Modern sensibilities in design is to bring to contemporary design both the critical and uncritical aesthetics. Part of the appeal of Post-Punk design is the juxtaposition of the refined and vulgar, the classic and the gaudy, the kitch and the technocratic.

Of the British Post-Punk designers, only Jamie Reid can be considered the consistent anarchist. Reid's designs are mostly concerned with making usually critical/outrageous sociopolitical statements that purposely reject the Modern design aesthetic. Reid's aesthetic has more to do with graffiti and the randomness of found objects - the same anti-aesthetic used in the hand-made punkfanzines.
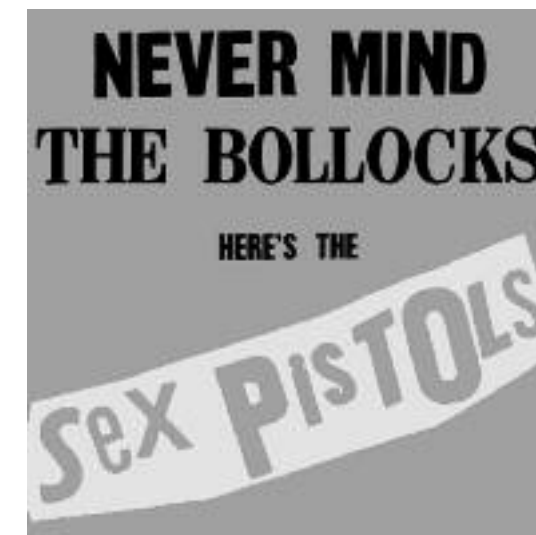
Jamie Reed, Record sleeve, 1977.
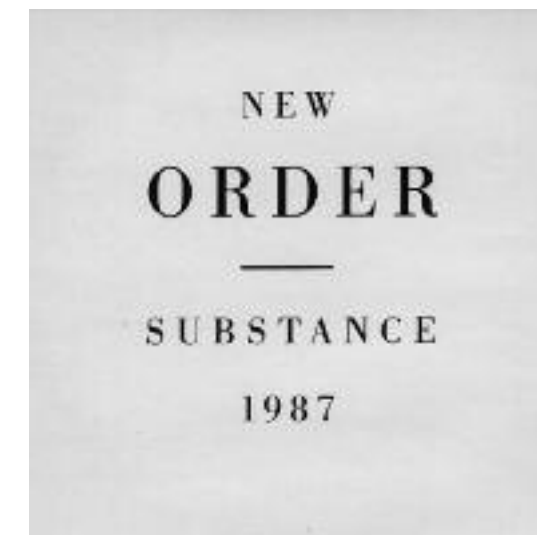
Peter Saville, Record sleeve, 1987.

Starting with Barney Bubbles, there was an insistence on marrying Modern movement good taste with pop culture products, whether they be for mass production or the entertainment industry. Most interesting from this point of view is the work of Malcolm Garrett, Peter Saville and Neville Brody.

From the modern movement has come the reawakening of the potential of typography as the primary communicator in design. Typography is the hook on which Post-Modern design hangs. At first this "new" typography followed the same progression as the Modern movement had taken itself: first, the anarchist Dada fruit-salads of ransom note type to classic, controlled, centered and serifed elegance.

Along with a new type consciousness there is also a new grid awareness which tends to wear its design process on its sleeve. The process of design, of preparing finished artwork, of being printed in the four color printing process, and laid out using mathematical precision and geometry is something often exposed through the artwork. Post-Punk design, when it is plundering the rules of the Modern movement for ideas, tends to use Modernism simply as the formal layer of its artwork. Most likely, the contemporary layer, be it an illustration, a photograph or even a digitally distorted device, will be there by nature of its juxtaposition and incongruity.

Poor Neville Brody! What a dilemma to be the world's most ripped-off designer. Brody was not exceptional in the British context, but out of context (a position he was projected into with the international distribution of *The Face* magazine) he is seen as a lone innovator. He is fast becoming yet another of those art geniuses London and New York are so keen to generate. For most of his time at *The Face*, Brody was reworking Modern movement design history. His most original contribution, however (and he claims only to have resorted to this out of sheer ripped-off desperation), was to design his own type faces. These give an element of post-modernity to an otherwise shared art school awareness of recent design history. It seems that the role of taste trendsetter is one that *The Face* sets for itself, but it is not apparently the role Brody wishes to contribute to. So where do you go to as a Post-Modern designer when you are ripped-off by the system? Where else but to the safe refuge of International Style. At least the bland and mechanical is a safe harbor where the logic of construction belongs to history rather than a new boy genius.

Neville Brody, Spread from Arena, 1990.