Early twentieth-century avant-garde book design: an agentive vehicle for social change

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Early twentieth-century avant-garde book design:
an agentive vehicle for social change

by

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Abstract

The increasing dominance of visual communication puts pressure on professional communicators and students of rhetoric to understand the nature of the scopic regime and how competing ways of seeing affect communication networks and the societies they serve. This document focuses on the attempts of the early twentieth-century avant gardists to profoundly shift social realities by challenging the scopic regime of their time through book design. Their attempts to seize agency through aesthetics failed to directly enact a new social order, but the avant gardists succeeded in establishing the necessary visual grammars for new ways of visually presenting information, including the International Style. This current (and global) scopic regime embraces a particular relationship among text, image, and reader that allows us to cope with the cacophony of information and objects. To understand the International Style and other competing ways of visual communication, one must understand the major movement that came before: the Avant-Garde, which itself included movements we now call New Typography, Suprematist, and Constructivist. Principally building upon Richard Lanham’s assertion that we live in a “economy of attention,” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s notion of agency as promiscuous, Anthony Giddens’s work on the duality of social structures, and Martin Jay’s conception of the scopic regime, this document traces the work of key avant-gardists and in so doing adumbrates how book design has combined and continues to combine aesthetics with social action.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Mass-produced books are both a commercial and a cultural unit of trade. Straddling the philosophical divide between the intellectual discourse field and the marketplace, books are a powerful cultural artifact. The book combines text and image in a tight-knit format and is so efficient it is rarely given much thought; yet, this humble object has occupied a central position in Western culture.

Book design as a genre is slow to change and could be taken as an embodiment of Western intellectual tradition from the fifteenth century onward. The stability and timelessness of the book made it an irresistible target for avant-garde intellectuals and artists. During the early twentieth century in particular, the book was adopted as a vehicle for agency in social action. Writers and scholars who sought a life submerged in Dadaism, political and social revolutionaries who came together under Soviet Constructivism, radicals who believed that war was the cleansing agent necessary for a better tomorrow and called it Futurism—they all investigated and exploited the book as a way to attack an enemy, persuade an audience, seek like-minded allies, and display their best ideas in hopes of changing the world.

They believed design—art combined with technology—could shape social realities and used book design as an agenteive vehicle to shatter the scopic regime (the visual conventions that constitute the dominant way of seeing in a culture) by challenging the reader to see in a new way and so shift the dominant field of discourse toward a new social paradigm.

The choice of the book as an agentive form by the avant-garde seems inevitable from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. The book as a form at the very least represents a habit of intellectual thought and carries with it hundreds of years of intellectual tradition. It represents a long, one-way conversation with an authoritative voice not present, but accessible through text and images on pages symmetrically positioned on a central axis. Book design is a highly static genre. Most of the mass market books one finds today in the local megastore are not so very different from Gutenberg’s 42-line Bible. A typical book is constructed more
or less symmetrically, using the spine as the pivot point. The typeface the book designer used is likely a slightly modernized version of one first designed in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Folio placement, margins, paragraph, and header placement are easily predictable and often blindly follow tradition. Text is placed in blocks with the occasional image carefully placed in a not too dominant place. There are, however, exceptions. Some books show evidence of being a product of a different paradigm. The layout is asymmetrical. Type might be set at an angle or in blocks arranged seemingly at random rather than in orderly columns. Images are integrated as focal points rather than appended extras. Color appears unexpectedly or is used for rhetorical effect. The shape of the book itself might be unusual, giving it a balance and proportion very unlike the traditional form. These book designs were not produced by random chance or in a creative vacuum. They were built upon the efforts of the early twentieth century avant-gardists.

An outgrowth of European philosophies and culture, early twentieth-century modernism sought to confront and disassemble the traditions and forms of Western art in order to change the social forms of their time. If one's goal was to smash the accretion of traditionalist ideas and practices of a culture, the book is the obvious target. Any change to this honored form would at least inspire a reaction and potentially fundamentally shift the way in which the reader sees the world. The avant-gardists failed in their goal to hurry along a better world order, but their attempt to seize agency changed the form of the book and established visual grammars that constitute one of the most dominant modes of visual communication in modern day usage: the International Style.

**BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MASS PRODUCED BOOK: GUTENBERG'S BIBLE TO TRISTAM SHANDY (1450–1800)**

It is only with the advent of the electronic age that we have the distance to start to understand how the printed book has functioned as a cultural artifact. For centuries, ink on paper was the way we told each other news, conducted business, enshrined memories, preserved values, and declared our most important beliefs and truths. Newspapers, journals, and other periodi-
cally published works helped keep people abreast of changing times and new ideas. Books, on the other hand, were reserved for words that hold the most cultural capital. The trouble and expense of printing, binding, and distributing books required that the content be worth the bother.

Until mechanized production took hold in the early sixteenth century, books were almost entirely handcrafted by monks for universities and a few wealthy collectors. Moreover, the circle of exchange tended to be highly localized, the scribe monks of an area producing most of their books for this small circle of the intellectual elite (Finkelstein and McCleery 46). Once the production of the book shifted from handcrafted to mechanized production, the wide distribution of books emerged, which created the possibility of an international intellectual community and a network through which radical ideas and coordinated actions could take hold. This idea of the book, or at least the printed page, as the vehicle by which ideas of social change and shifting ideologies percolated through Western culture is receiving renewed attention because of the widespread shift from analog (e.g., paper and ink) to digital (e.g., computer-based) technologies.

Many are interested in what the shift in physicality means in terms of our relationship to knowledge. While the argument that the technology of bookmaking drives the intellectual path of the West is specious, the concept of the book as a unit of intellectual and commercial exchange intrinsically tied to the humanistic threads of political and social foment is worth considering. Whether analog or digital, looking at the form through which social action is engaged might be revealing.

Whenever in our history a shift in political power or social mores erupted, there was a profusion of printed matter. For example, the international character of the Enlightenment is at least in part due to a mechanized book production process. The loads of books wrapped in canvas and lugged from print shops to destinations across Europe and her colonies by ship and cart carried a potent element that promoted the possibility of agency. The ideas of authors
such as Diderot, Rousseau, Bentham, and Kant entered into Habermas’s “public sphere,” giving people at a great distance both physical and intellectual access to powerful possibilities in the shape of bound text (Finkelstein and McCleery 58).

The history of the mass-produced book could—indeed, has—filled volumes. This section is limited to a few key concepts and threads to create the necessary background to more fully explore how artists and intellectuals in the early twentieth century used the book as a vehicle for agency in social action.

The “avant-garde” were the intellectual elite—designers, artists, and scholars—that participated in modernist culture. In brief, modernism was an outgrowth of European philosophies and culture that sought to confront and disassemble the traditions and forms of Western art in order to change the social forms of their time. From the late nineteenth through the mid twentieth century, Europe’s countries were raked by war and witnessed the dissolution of much of their colonial power. Europe was no longer the dominant political force in the world. Movements aimed at creating a more perfect society, including communism, fascism, and the totalitarian state of the Nazis, emerged. After the WWII, the United States and the USSR gained ascendancy, ushering in the years of McCarthyism, the Cold War, and a renewed colonial age separated into two camps of communism and capitalism (Crouch 6–9). The time between the beginning of the twentieth century and the end of the second world war frames the work of the modernists to be examined here.

Books as we know them in the early twenty-first century originated in the middle of the fifteenth century. The first hundred years of printing have been characterized as the highly creative era of the printer-scholar. Books were often produced entirely by one individual who performed the tasks of a typefounder, printer, publisher, editor, and bookseller (Steinberg 3). Claude Garamond and Jacob Sabon are prime examples of this conception.

The mechanization process that made it possible to create books on a large scale is usually dated from when a goldsmith named Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg
turned his hand to printmaking and printed the 42-line Bible in 1455. The printed book, however, is usually dated from the 1440s. This is at least in part because Warren Chappell, one of the most cited book production historians, is fond of symmetry. In his book *A Short History of the Printed Word*, he defined the age of “classic printing” as beginning with the experimentations of cutting and casting movable metal type in the 1440s to the growth of phototechnology in the 1940s. The neatly placed five hundred years between comprise the golden age of the printed page, and especially the book, as the method by which people in the West preserved and shared their best ideas with each other. Gutenberg's 42-line Bible was the best example of early technology for what would become an increasingly mechanized process.

Gutenberg was not the inventor of printing but the successful manager of a conflation of techniques. In particular a Hollander name Laurens Janszoon (alias Coster, died c. 1440) has been credited with being the “father of wooden and molten-metal movable type in Europe” after mastering the Asian art of character printing (Jubert 37).

The murky knowledge of the beginnings of movable type in the West is understandable. In China, xylography (printing with woodblocks) had been practiced for centuries before Gutenberg's bible (the earliest known Chinese incunabulum is from the ninth century) and stamping for centuries before that. Xylography was first used for bookmaking in Holland in the early fifteenth century. Pages were rubbed on engraved and inked boards, but the wood was not durable enough to produce more than 50 copies (Jubert 36). These woodblock incunabula support the notion that movable wooden type was probably in use and the principles worked out upon which Gutenberg built his letterpress. Gutenberg's choice of printing the bible was likely commercially rather than spiritually motivated. During the fifteenth century, religious texts dominated the publishing field at a rate of three to one (Jubert 40).

Book production historian Warren Chappell persuasively argues that because the 42-line Bible (B42) possessed a far higher quality of craftsmanship than anything surviving from the Dutch in the same period, Gutenberg is the *de facto* inventor of modern printing. By rely-
ing on quality of craftsmanship for inclusion into the “history of the printed book,” Chappell draws a sharp line between “amateur” and “artisan,” a distinction that reappears in almost all examinations of book design. It is interesting to note, however, that Gutenberg was by training a goldsmith and, therefore, an amateur bookmaker. His craftsmanship with metal type is owed to his metallurgic skills, not his ability with hand script or binding. His work with metal type may have been lost had he not also been able to secure a loan and partner with a group of skilled (and not so skilled) craftsmen to do such tasks as run the press and bind the books.

The work and investment Gutenberg and his team of craftsmen put into the 42-line Bible (B42) elevates their effort to a manifesto for mechanized printing (Jubert 39). Picking up a copy of B42 after a lifetime of hand-lettered manuscripts would have been a shock. The B42 was not received with wholehearted acclaim. Like any shift toward mechanization, many craftsmen sensed they may be made obsolete: in this case the illustrators and binders were safe, but not the scribes. When he moved from producing ephemera such as playing cards and letters of indulgence, Gutenberg surely expected to meet with significant opposition to his new way of producing books, the repository of cultural ideals and religious material.

Perhaps in anticipation of this pushback, Gutenberg’s design choices were amplifications of what was conceived to have been the finest and most balanced elements of medieval il-

Figure 1. Genesis, The Gutenberg Bible [The King’s Library, British Library], digitized by the HUMI Project, Keio University, March 2000.
luminated manuscript construction and calligraphy. For example, wide margins with balanced columns were based on the central axis of the binding; the typeface was clearly inspired by religious text scripts; and the second-run red ink typically seen in ornamentation were used for headings.

Yet, B42 was more than an homage to the best of medieval techniques. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the evidence of the machine in the justification of the line, consistent production quality, and—most importantly—increased numbers of copies for distribution in a short time period to an increasingly diverse audience were evident in B42 and remain relevant to the form of the book to the present day.

Type design during this period reflected the spread of humanism. “Roman” and “italic” typefaces swept western Europe, while Germany, Russia, and Turkey resisted the pull of humanism and kept to gothic types, such as Fraktur (Steinberg 9). Steinberg attributes this preference for gothic type directly to the dominance of religious writings in book publishing (17). Religious documents and books were objects of authority and the basis for truth. They were repositories for wisdom and verities passed down through the ages. The form was part of their power. Change had no place of preference in this context.

There are two type-designers in the fifteenth century that are still referred to as the greatest of all time: Nicolas Jenson (b. 1420) and Claude Garamond (b. 1480). Jenson worked in Venice and cut his roman font in about 1470 for Cicero’s Epistolae ad Brutum. His was the first roman standard, though he later reverted to gothic types (Steinberg 13–14). Garamond worked in France and created the stock typographic elements for printers for years to come (Chappell 102). Though Jenson inspired the Golden type of William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, the most famous of the Arts and Crafts printing workshops, Garamond’s roman typeface is considered the standard by which all other serifs are measured.
During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, printing was most affected by the steadily expanding reach of printing technologies, refinement rather than invention of typography, shifts in image production, and an increase in punctuation practices.

Print technologies as originally conceived in Germany spread to ten countries by 1600: Turkey, Romania, Greece, Mexico, Ireland, Russia, India, Palestine, Peru, and Japan (Chappell 84). In the seventeenth century, eight more countries made widespread use of Western printing technology: the Philippines, Lebanon, Bolivia, America, Iran, Finland, Norway, and China (Chappell 113). This steady international spread began the necessarily large network of readers and book culture to support mass produced books. It is only with a large, dispersed audience that the book as a commercial unit could survive without the patronage of a wealthy individual or organization (i.e., university, church, or government). Publishers no longer answered necessarily to a single authority for their work, yet the switch to a larger audience did not result in a complete freedom in what and how they published. They only exchanged the dominance of a few to the shifting pressures of the marketplace whose readers were increasingly diverse. Women and children presented a particularly new, and potentially profitable, reader base (Steinberg 74).

Geofroy Tory, a scholar, type designer, and bookseller in sixteenth-century France, is remembered as a fearless innovator and intellectual who pushed book design toward humanistic principles (Jubert 54). For religious publications, Tory used his own geometrically defined Roman type instead of the traditional script-inspired Gothic. Some would argue that his (and not Garamond’s or Jenson’s) roman type created the baseline that future type designers used for centuries (Jubert 56).

Claude Garamond, described above as the standardmaker for roman type, is the most famous of the Renaissance typographers. As a publisher, type designer, type founder, and bookseller, Garamond embodied much of the spirit of bookmaking in the Renaissance. Garamond carried on Tory’s work in type design. The elegance and balance of his typeface
can be seen in Fig. 2. While his work as a publisher is mostly forgotten, many typophiles will argue to the death the varying merits of contemporary versions of Garamond.

Italian printers contributed much to the development of type during these years (Jubert 47). Interior punctuation became more popular, including increased use of exclamation mark, colon, parenthesis, and apostrophe. Visual textual divisions, such as sentences, phrase divisions, paragraphs, subparagraphs, etc., also date from these years (Jubert 47). The appearance of the title page from printers in Italy reflects a definitive shift from the handcrafted manuscripts of the past and the contemporary book. The title page signals that the book is a product, possibly created from a text written by an identifiable person (the author), made by an organization of people for commercial trade.

From the middle of the sixteenth century, books in Europe were heavily censored by both religious and lay authorities. Publishers used many methods to subvert censorship, such as a faked imprint usually attributed to a foreign company. Manuscripts that had any controversial material were often produced in Holland (or imprinted as if they were) where there was far greater tolerance for print.

In 1643 John Milton advocated to Parliament for freedom of the press, which was later published as Areopagitica. In it he stated, “As good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature; but he who destroys a book kills reason itself, the image of God.” Censorship in England ended in 1694 with the expiration of the Licensing Act.
Censorship was challenged throughout Europe with some success through the late eighteenth century.

The eighteenth century was a time of turmoil. During this century revolutions—political, social, and economic—swept America and Europe. By the year 1800, censorship was beaten back (at least in some Western countries), neoclassical artists found inspiration in the close relationship between form and text, and production technology took a significant step toward truly mass production capability.

The political and social upheavals in France and the American colonies in particular inspired an attempt at renewed censorship by national governments. By the end of the eighteenth century, post-revolutionary France and the U.S. had both proclaimed as sacrosanct the freedoms of the press (Jubert 74). Without this development the aggressive challenges of the avant-garde movement to the book would have been, at best, severely hobbled if they emerged at all.

Besides the artistic achievements of the eighteenth century, the all-iron press, first built by Wilhelm Haas of Basel in 1772, was used at the Boydell and Nicol Shakespeare Printing Office in London in 1800 (Chappell 163). Until this time the capacity for mechanical presses were quite limited due to the lack of durability of the parts. The all-iron press introduced the commercially viable possibility for truly mass-produced books, a necessary development for the dramatic upsurge in the publishing industry in the nineteenth century and the experiments in book design by the avant-garde of the early twentieth.

In addition to the political and social events, a neoclassical revival stimulated all arts, promoting the kind of artistic audacity that erases boundaries. This particular revival amplified the importance of knowledge and the individual's capacity for genius and rational discourse, making use of the book as a preferred medium inevitable. Literary and graphic artists used printed works (primarily periodicals, pamphlets, and newspapers but, in a few notable occasions, books) as a chosen medium for innovative work (Chappell 168). All of William
Blake’s published books and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristam Shandy* are excellent examples of how the book was investigated as a form that could be radically shifted to profound effect.

Blake published books that combined poetry (text) and engravings (images) in hauntingly beautiful and radical ways. Even in the twenty-first century his work continues to evoke unusual reactions from readers. Sterne’s *Tristam Shandy* is a contains many experiments in typography. His use of punctuation as communicative form as well as blacked out pages and swirling patterns give his book a highly graphic context relevant even today.

The main style of typography during this age is called modern, not to be confused with the twentieth-century Modern movement. The typography of this time is perhaps best represented by the work of the Didot family. While the humanist roman typefaces were based on geometry and less on hand script, the type designers of the eighteenth century distanced the style even further from handwriting toward the symmetry and rule-defined shapes of what became known as modern roman. Bodoni (Italy), Bell (England), and Walbaum (Germany) are three other type designers who contributed font work that has survived in some form to the present day. The changes in roman from Gutenberg to Didot are minimal and are a good representation of how resistant to change typographic and book design principles are.

The static nature of book design as described in this chapter makes its location in the communication network unique. By tracing its history and the experimentations of the avant-gardists in book design, the small shifts of agentive action available to individuals can be thrown into stark relief, allowing a grounded discussion of past and current attempts at engagement through the organizational structures as they exist in modernity.

The current (and global) scopic regime called the International Style embraces a particular relationship among text, image, and reader that allows us to cope with the cacophony of information and objects. To understand the International Style, one must understand the major movement that preceded it: the Avant-Garde, which itself included movements we now call New Typography, Suprematist, and Constructivist. By focusing on book design, this docu-
ment will trace those movements and in so doing adumbrate how book design has combined and continues to combine aesthetics with social action.

Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical framework that grounds the discussion about book design and social action in the following chapters. After looking at Richard Lanham’s assertion that we live in a “economy of attention,” the power of the designer and editor is apparent. How ideas and things are packaged play a critical role in our culture, including our relationships to each other and our physical world. By situating the argument within modernity as conceived by Anthony Giddens and locating potential for agency through Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s notion of agency as protean, designers, editors, and writers have the potential to engage in agentive action. The field in which this action takes place is in the “scopic regime” as described by Martin Jay.

Chapters 3 and 4 take a closer look at two pivotal moments of engagement with the form of the book as an agentive vehicle for social action. In chapter 3 the beginning of the use of book design as a way to change social realities in modernity is located at the close of the nineteenth century with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. The failure of Morris’s vision for book design and production to create an artisan economy does not obviate the success of Morris and others in the movement in establishing a different way of seeing that carries forward long after the Arts and Crafts movement faded away. Chapter 4 follows the thread of protest against the scopic regime by avant gardists, particularly El Lissitzky and Jan Tschichold, demonstrating that their work established the basic visual grammar for the global scopic regime we now call the International Style.

The concluding chapter connects past avant-garde work with current book design practices and takes a brief look at the potential for agentive action by communication professionals today.
Chapter 2: The Connection Between Book Design and Social Action

The presentation of information in the twenty-first century is comprised by structures that are specific to culture and intellectual habits. These structures constitute a communication network that both constrains and enables us in what we say, how we say it, and how it is perceived. Whether the images and words we use to communicate appear on paper or a digital screen, the nature of our modern communication structures play an elephantine role in how we choose to live and what we allow as worthy or dismiss as trivial.

In his essay “Socialism: A Life Cycle,” Regis Debray argues that the way we communicate with one another is elemental in human social organization and understanding the “communication networks that enable thought to have a social existence” is absolutely necessary to any study of culture (5). He goes on to lay out a characterization of the time period between 1448 and 1968 as the “graphosphere,” an age of rationality and the book during which printer scholars provided a link between “proletariat theory and the working-class condition,” making possible the socialist movement (6). Notions of power and class, value and production, and proposed responses to them traveled throughout European cafés and meeting halls through the printed page. Debray makes the point that even the great oral speeches given by socialists were based on a written version and were received by an audience accustomed to reading (8). The age of the graphosphere is over, according to Debray. We are now in the videosphere, an age dominated by the screen and the visible (27). We no longer seek our truths primarily through print, but through the Internet and television. The primacy of the book has been broken, which makes the exploration of its form all the more interesting.

The avant-gardists’ work in altering the essential elements of visual design has been variously dismissed as fascist, futile, or self-referential formalism. From the cave of Plato to the iconoclastic persecutions of the eighth and ninth centuries to today, Western culture has treated the visual as suspect. Whether because of quasi-religious taboos of avoiding the
worship of an iconographic idol or an aversion to the notion of a communicative act that bypasses the intellect and feeds straight from the eye to the emotions, the intellectual elite have shunned the visual and cleaved to linguistically based knowledge. Yet, our world increasingly relies on visual communication.

In 2008 we live in a globalized civilization that increasingly relies on visual modes of communication in a world that breeds information and produces goods at an alarming rate. The horrific wars, poverty, and hunger in many parts of the world throw the abundance of wealthy nations into an eerie and uncomfortable light. How we in wealthy nations manage the abundance, continue to successfully communicate, and address the problems facing not only the West but the globe is an ongoing concern, yet the West has consistently rejected the visual as a more base mode as opposed to text. To effectively tackle problems that involve cultural values, such as acceptance of difference or how to share resources or define responsibilities, understanding the dynamics of the communication networks we use to discuss, argue, and persuade is essential.

This chapter explores the importance of visual design today, touches on the conflicted Western relationship with the image, situates the importance of visual communication within a conception of the scopic regime, and locates the potential for shaping a scopic regime toward a better social reality.

**DESIGN PLAYS AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT ROLE IN WESTERN CULTURE**

In his book *The Economies of Attention*, Lanham explains that we have entered a new economical age: the age of fluff. By “fluff” Lanham means that the new economic unit is not based on agriculture or production, but on the packaging of information, which is essentially the aesthetic or designed presentation of data. Food and stuff have not, of course, lost their essential value, but the way we think about them and handle them requires the ability to “oscillate between the two economies” (Lanham 10). The flexible act of shifting between the two is a product of the ability to see the same thing in multiple ways. This is an enormous task. People
of Western cultures have both common and new stuff and information in an overabundance. The West has created a culture that inundates people with a sea of resources—objects, information, art—that can only be managed by ignoring most of it. It is up to those who package stuff and information (e.g., engineers, teachers, artists,) to create the differentiations and categories that make the information and stuff palatable to the general public—to get and keep their attention. In Lanham's attention economy, the dominant position, therefore, is that of the visual designer. Designers facilitate the development of this ability by directing our attention, the way we “see” both common and new objects or information.

If Lanham is correct in his argument that attention is the scarcest resource in our economy and that designers, especially visual designers, are the directors of this resource, the way we see becomes even more important to examine and understand. The avant-gardists blazed the paths that most designers continue to follow. Designers do more than make objects or pages look pretty. How people see things has a profound influence on how people know things. Visual cognition has both cultural and physical components.

*Is the Way People See Determined by Nature or Nurture?*

The way human beings see depends a great deal on their culture. Scientists have offered papers that support the idea that although there is an inherited bias for spatial cognition in great apes, spatial cognition in humans is heavily and systematically biased by culture and language. Researchers in the Netherlands documented studies that tested both great apes and diverse human cultural communities. They found that human babies, like great apes, have a bias toward a particular way of spatial cognition. In humans, however, this bias shifts depending on the culture in which the infant is raised (Haun et al. 1737).

In another report, Hannah-Faye Chua and Richard Nisbett conducted a study that asked students to look at a photograph and create a narrative about what was happening when it was taken. Students from a European ethnic background focused on what figured in the foreground of the photo while students of Asian background looked at the environment—the
background—more than the object of focus. Their explanation was that one cultural group valued individualism and the other interconnectedness. The viewers of the photograph had a strong bias on where to even look for information before they even began interpreting it. Cultural and linguistic biases establish not only a ready-made way to interpret what an individual sees, but also how he or she seeks it.

Debray’s conception of the present day as a videosphere fits nicely with Richard Lanham’s argument that we now live in an “economy of attention.” The typical Western reader from the late nineteenth century onward already had a sea of information available from printed matter. The increasing domination of the screen has exponentially increased the quantity of information flooding into our lives. If Debray and Lanham are correct in that we live in an increasingly visual age, investigating the dominant visual habits of our culture is crucial to understanding the strengths and powers as well as the biases and blind spots that are created between seeing and knowing.

**WESTERN DISTRUST OF THE IMAGE IS PROBLEMATIC IN AN INCREASINGLY VISUAL AGE**

The study of visual rhetoric has until recently been a poor relation in academic departments. Attempts at visual persuasion, at least those without the stamp of “high art,” have largely been left to profiteers who wished to sell goods or entertain the masses. Once, however, visual aesthetics were recognized as powerful and systematically used in an attempt to shape social realities, though not always in ways that support humanist values.

The use of visual aesthetics for political change in the twentieth century has been tightly bound to the rise of fascism, even so far as the assertion by film historian Maurice Bardèche that the connection of aesthetics to politics inevitably leads to totalitarianism by offering a way to cloak the violence of a new hegemony (qtd. in What Does It Mean 72). This seems a drastic claim, yet the use to which totalitarian states have put aesthetics is appalling and well documented.
Fascist Italy, Soviet Russia, and Nazi Germany are the most infamous examples of twentieth-century governments that attempted to institute by force a new scopic regime in an attempt to accelerate social change. Fascist Italy first used typography and other visual aesthetics as a strategic part in creating a new national identity. The Futurists spearheaded the use of typography for the new regime. They knew that the way a people sees itself has a powerful influence on how a people behaves, on what actions or perspectives hold more social capital. Magazine covers, book jackets, posters, and most any other publication produced carried images meant to inculcate a new mythology to inspire young men to embrace Fascist doctrine and breed a new world order (Heller 124). Soviet Russia picked up Italian Futurism and reinvented it to serve the needs of the germinating communist regime. Nazi Germany’s perverted use of aesthetics is so pervasive it goes without discussion—few remember the fasces but everyone recognizes the swastika.

Why would the combination of artistic sensibilities and political vision necessarily lead to the abominations of a regime like Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy as Bardèche claimed? Martin Jay pulls apart this question in his essay “What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?” He points out that the typical answer is that in art there is no consideration for any scruples beyond the demands of the work for its own perfection. Carrying that blind compulsion into politics erases any validity of human rights from the equation of achieving political ends. People become nothing more than material to be formed to the new social order, airbrushed and streamlined into suitable shape and silence.

In defense of the possibility of a benign connection between aesthetics and politics, Jay turns to scholars Terry Eagleton, Josef Chytry, Jean–François Lyotard, and Hannah Arendt. In this constellation Jay finds a web of theory that allows for the benign reconnection of aesthetics to politics through praxis. The conduct made possible through the practice of aesthetic ideology may lead to a more diverse and perceptive, if more thoroughly contentious, discursive field.
The traditional prevailing view of aesthetics by scholars within the academy is well represented by Terry Eagleton. Jay synopsizes Eagleton’s view on aesthetics as a hollow game that lends itself to the propagation of a political hegemony and acts as a sop to the culturally adrift bourgeoisie. Yet, even Eagleton’s view allows for a less malicious role between aesthetics and social action because it is also “the discourse of utopian critique of the bourgeois social order” (78). Jay notes that Eagleton did find a kind of value in the aesthetic:

For what the aesthetic imitates in its very glorious futility, in its pointless self-referentiality, in all its full-blooded formalism, is nothing less than human existence itself, which needs no rationale beyond its own self-delight, which is an end in itself and which will stoop to no external determination. (78).

Eagleton’s judgment of the aesthetic seems predicated on a disapproval of the sensual. The “glorious futility,” “full-blooded formalism,” and “self-delight” of the aesthetic are smugly tolerated like the naiveté of youth. The value of aesthetics is lost on those who dismiss it as without content, as “fluff.” Lanham’s attempt to reframe fluff as one of the driving forces in the current economy may not convince many because Eagleton’s view is still the dominant one: the outer form may be pleasing, but it cannot be central. Yet Eagleton’s connection of the aesthetic to the basic experience of being human, to sensuality, is integral to Jay’s recuperation of the aesthetic as praxis.

The accusation of the sin of “formalism” is another popular way to ignore any notion of aesthetics as social action. Many scholars have accused the avant-gardists of being obsessed with form over content, fluff over stuff, and dismissed their work as self-indulgent and irrelevant. The sensuality of the visual has a long history of distrust from intellectuals. In her essay “Between Iconophilia and Iconophobia: Milton’s Aeropagitica and Seventeenth-Century Visual Culture,” Kristie Fleckenstein traces an interesting dialectic between the image and text in post-Reformation Britain and Europe. She notes that the veracity of an individual’s vision usually depended on social status (e.g., white, male, and upper-class) and not on the ability
to see or remember. The vision of women, being weak and prone to “carnal confusion,” could not be trusted. Apparently, the default content of any visual perception was one of disguised evil and temptation. Visual perception had to be controlled and dominated with strength that could only come from a virile white male born into a pure family state. It is not surprising, then, that scientists who sought to base a new way of constructing the realities of the world through study verified by the sense had a conflicted relationship with the visual.

Science is based on data collected by men and women through the use of their senses. If they cannot trust their senses, their data is worthless. Scientists, therefore, had from the beginning a keen interest in optics as the basis for scientific proof, but it had been used in religion for idolatry and by artists for fantasy (Fleckenstein 71). Scientists sought to control the scopic regime, the dominant way to see, to repudiate the mystical past. They sought to gain power over the chaos of sensuality and the distraction of metaphor. This conflict has never truly been resolved. Indeed, some would argue that the conflict between image and text is integral to any study of culture:

The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a “nature” to which only it has access. . . . We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature. (Mitchell 43)

By this conception, the struggle against the image, against any kind of visual communication, is the struggle against the carnal, the uncivilized, and the basest impulses of human nature. Yet image or form and the appreciation of it are not only about carnality.

In reference to Chytry’s reading of Schiller, Jay adopts the idea that the aesthetic state of being is anti-Platonic in origin and is an outcome of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Perceiving the beauty of a form is a mediation between what one sees and how it appears to others and seeks to preserve the heterogeneous. Because “learning to appreciate natural beauty is trans-
erable to intersubjective relations,” these states may result in “individuals learning to respect the otherness of different objects and subject rather than dominating them” (What Does It Mean 79). By cultivating the conciliatory act of recognizing beauty outside of oneself, the power of the aesthetic combined with civic process would be a highly democratic ideal. The ability to see the beauty in another’s view would make a contentious discourse field workable. Schiller could not see an aesthetic state working outside the scope of an elite, but the notion of a cultivated field of discourse based on the mediating influence of aesthetic knowledge led Jay to his most promising piece of theory.

Jay uses Hannah Arendt’s treatment of judgment as a political ability to form a basis for aesthetics as a paradigmatic concern, one with multiple instantiations rather than a single dominant view that opens the door to a mediation of tension between the general and the particular, the ideal and the experience. Rather than a mythic paradigm created whole and forced upon an unwitting public as Mussolini pursued, aesthetics can also promote the ability to see from another’s point of view. Arendt’s notion of aesthetic judgment was “the building of a sensus communitis through using persuasive skills comparable to those employed in validating judgments of taste” (82). The ideal of this kind of sought consensus, which is essentially a way to recognize and reconnect to one’s larger community, frames the previous use of aesthetics in politics to promote totalitarianism as a further perversion by a powerful group rather than an inevitability carved in the bones of aestheticism.

Jay’s construction of aesthetics in politics as praxis promotes the diverse views of the many as more powerful than that of any hegemonic vision and reestablishes the element of the sensual to ground it to the real world. Under his conception, the inclusion of aesthetics could in fact protect a society from the pull of totalitarianism. The danger would lie in ignoring the uses to which powerful elite are using visual aesthetics in politics, not in the presence of it alone.
THE FUNCTION OF VISUAL DESIGNERS WITHIN (AND OUTSIDE) A SCOPIC REGIME

If we accept Jay’s proposition that aesthetics in social action could promote a diverse rhetorical discourse field, there is still the question of what qualifies as aesthetics. There has been and continues to be a tendency to divide artists and designers into a hierarchy of engagement: artists engage while designers package. In an economy of attention, this distinction becomes more and more blurred, and it began with the avant-gardists.

As previously mentioned, the experimentations in book design for social action by the avant-garde were diverse, as evidenced by the proliferation of –isms that suffused the early twentieth century: Fauvism, Constructivism, Futurism, Dadaism, etc. Each of these ideological movements represented a resistance to the dominant scopic regime and constituted a way of moving toward a better future. Where some designers experimented with fragmentation, such as Dadaists and the Constructivists who used symbols unburdened with a tainted history, others sought a universal system that would put design more fully in service to technology. Many claimed associations with both, but Peter Bürger and others consistently separate them into two groups, such as avant-gardists versus the modernists or artists versus designers. The attempt to divide those working during this time period into two camps is an attempt to distinguish what is art and what is merely commodity—what qualifies as “aesthetics.” This is an odd preoccupation when one of the modernists’ primary goal was to blur the lines between all traditional boundaries of art, sex, and politics.

The avant-garde refers to the intellectual wedge of modernism that sought to push social change on Western societies. The difference between avant-gardists and modernists is in many ways slight, and not surprisingly, lost on most readers. The division, when drawn, is usually made to highlight the value of the former and the frivolity of the latter. In essence, many avant-gardists sought to shift the paradigm of the viewer by altering the visual conventions of their time.
One of the most successful ways the avant-gardists sought to make their audience shift paradigms was their investigations of the fragmentation of form or *informé* (formlessness). In fact, it is this inquiry that underlies the most famous distinction between the avant-garde and the modernist as defined by Bürger: “Whereas modernism remained within the institution of art, seeking to explore the limits of aesthetic self-referentiality, the avant-garde sought to reunite art with life, thus allowing the emancipatory energies of the former to revitalize the latter” (Modernism and the Retreat 156). Bürger emphasizes, however, that the art must be “wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society [so that it] can be the starting point for the organization of a new life praxis” (Bürger 50). The avant-garde, as defined by Bürger, could only be those whose work was fragmentary in that it required the participation of both artist and recipient. There was no avant-garde art—or design—that existed wholly apart.

To Bürger, the hallmark of the avant-gardists, if there is one, would be the montage. He attributes the avant-garde with creating the modern montage because “the individual elements [of their work] have a much higher degree of autonomy and can therefore also be read and interpreted individually or in groups without its being necessary to grasp the work as a whole” (72). Bürger in particular refers to the Dadaists and Constructivists as effective users of the montage. He credits the success of this method in their work to not only the fragmentation of their work, but to that fragmentation being an accurate reflection of reality (73).

Bürger asserts that the avant-gardists’ attempt to reintegrate art into the praxis of life failed in bourgeois society except as a “false sublation of autonomous art” as evidenced by “pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics,” which are essentially commercial manipulations of the public through art and design that would have disgusted the avant-garde in general as a corruption of their work. Bürger is highly concerned that art be apart from commerce, that it serve no purpose other than that of the artist and his or her intended effect on the viewer. Once tainted by the marketplace, art became an object of modernism that could be manipu-
lated and twisted in a way unintended by the maker. If art, however, is to function as praxis, it must become part of the daily social sphere. In Western culture from the time of the Greeks on, like it or not, that center has been the marketplace.

Whatever the attitude of the avant-gardists might have been, the commodification of art and design has become part of the cultural landscape. The takeover of popular cultural artifacts by corporate interests have at least made the creation of new avant-garde art problematic. What was once used as a tool to shock the masses is now a beacon of consumerism. The black flag or a scrawled ‘A’ with a circle around it, once radical icons used to signify the rejection of the modern nation-state, have been popularized by punk bands and are now mass-produced on T-shirts to be sold at malls to preteens shopping with their own credit cards. The preteen does not care what purpose the icon originally had. The black flag has become almost entirely disembedded from its original political origin.

The impulse to raze the idols and icons of the past and impose the images and symbols of the present is nothing new. The attempt to do so through mechanization and commodification is, some would argue, an aspect of modernity. W. J. T. Mitchell in examining Marx’s treatment of aesthetics writes that the commodification of art is essentially the transformation of the “primitive” fetish into a modern commodity through a rationalization process that separates the fetish from the object it represents, raising it from a mere fetish to an icon of rational space-time, a universal symbol. The symbol, in turn, must destroy the traditional fetishes of the past, which leads to the phenomenon of iconoclasm (196). Iconoclasm, in this sense, is not limited to the religious, but extends to the destruction of all traditional images, beliefs and institutions. According to Mitchell, the iconoclast often claims that he seeks to replace images and icons with ideas and empirical truths, “but when pressed, he is generally content with the rather different claim that his images are purer or truer than those of mere idolaters” (198).

There is a tradition of ideas ultimately being grounded in imagery that Mitchell traced from Plato’s shadows made by the true Forms in the cave to Locke’s false images of scholastic
philosophy versus the true images originating from the senses to Kant's false images of the empirical sensory impressions versus the true abstract schemata of a priori categories to Marx's use of the camera obscura as a model for ideology (165). However much we try to separate idea from image, text from visual, the relationship between the two is deeply embedded. The manipulation of the visual, whether art or design, is a powerful act in our culture. The distinction between artist and designer becomes less important.

Christopher Crouch points out, however, that there is a key difference between the two when considering the artist or designer in conjunction with the shape of culture. While artists and designer both partake of an ideological superstructure and economic base—there is no art without the economic base to support it and no design is relevant without reference to ideology—the designer is primarily anchored to the economic base while the artist mainly functions in the other realm of ideology (5). Avant-gardists blurred this line, creating art from commercial objects (Duchamp) and elevating workaday objects to art (almanacs).

Bürger's delineation between the avant-gardists and the modernists may be more interesting to an art historian than one interested in social action. His accusation that modernists sought only the limits to “self-referentiality” in their art is certainly less compelling when looking at their work in design. Artists, painters, filmmakers, architects, and book designers were among the many involved with creative work who openly worked together toward a new social order. The manifestos they created were an outgrowth of their physical senses, work within their art and their experience as a member of their contemporary reality. The modernists’ push toward the blending of art with technology for a new world was more than self-referential, even if it was not the revolution sought by the Dadaists or the Constructivists. Certainly, the legacy their work in design left for future generations is just as fertile.

Even if his distinction between avant-garde and modernist work is less than compelling, Bürger is right in pinpointing fragmentation as one of the more powerful successes of the avant-garde experimentations in visual art and design. The use of fragmentation required
the participation of the audience to make sense of the avant-gardist’s work. In his foreword to Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse articulates a compelling vision of the early twentieth-century avant-gardists’ approach to art (and design) as social action through the use of fragmentation:

> Avant-garde aesthetic praxis, though, aimed to intervene in social reality. The avant-garde saw that the organic unity of the bourgeois institution of art left art impotent to intervene in social life, and thus developed a different concept of the work of art. Its concept of art sees a chance to reintegrate art into social praxis if artists would create unclosed, individual segments of art that open themselves to supplementary responses. The aesthetic fragment functions very differently than the organic whole of romantic artwork, for it challenges its recipient to make it an integrated part of his or her reality and to relate it to sensuous-material experience. (foreword to Bürger, xxxix)

The fragmentations Schulte-Sasse refers to have become a staple in modern visual grammar. Seemingly random shifts in perspective or placement are not necessarily dismissed as bad design, but it might require a longer look to “read” the designer’s visual message that either supports or undermines the stated content of the book. Of course, this required effort on the part of the viewer had better pay off or the designer risks alienating the intended audience. In a world stuffed with things and information, designers are required to take greater risks without being able to control all possible outcomes. It is impossible to entirely control how a fragmented design might be completed by all viewers everywhere. This release of control of aesthetics is in fact necessary to create the diverse visual field necessary to promote social agency through design.

**THE AVANT-GARDISTS’ LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR OCULAR-ECCENTRICITY**

While the avant-gardists did not achieve their goal of utterly destroying existing book design praxis and the visual structures and grammars formed by almost 400 years of tradition, they
did “destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity” (Bürger 87). In their drive toward a new beginning, the avant-gardists established the basic elements that created the wellspring for potential multiple scopic regimes in Western culture. Though their experiments with book design seem remote to us now, their very remoteness is evidence of the highly kairotic and agentive nature of their work.

The way to weaken a dominant scopic regime is not to deny the power of vision in shaping our perception of the world, but to promote multiple valid scopic regimes, which Jay calls “ocular-eccentricity.”

Ocular-eccentricity rather than blindness, it might be argued, is the antidote to privileging any one visual order or scopic regime. What might be called “the dialectics of seeing” precludes the reification of scopic regimes. Rather than calling for the exorbitation or enucleation of “the eye,” it is better to encourage the multiplication of a thousand eyes, which, like Nietzsche’s thousand suns, suggests the openness of human possibilities. (Downcast 591)

The abundance of visual feeds we currently receive, from television to print to the Internet, is representative of more than one scopic regime. A coffee table book about gardening may be created with an elegant and balanced design that places hand-drawn illustrations of plants in flower, stem, and bud in one column with descriptions opposite on successive pages, or it might be an asymmetric assembly of full-color photos of plants, flowers, and gardenscapes sporadically interspersed with poetry and recipes that use the plant. The former relies on rigid lines of harmony while the latter employs ragged and disjointed images and editing to appeal to their respective audiences. The basic grammars for both were created by the avant-garde artists and scholars of the early twentieth century.

All of the modernists were focused on shifting the visual grammar away from one mired in tradition, whether based on a return to the primitive (and therefore more natural) state or a move toward the machine through rationality and science. Though at odds in how
to do it, they sought to raze tradition to the ground and build a new visual grammar to make possible a faster transition from the old corrupt world to a new society based on modernist ideals. They acted as if they way people saw a thing could change they way they thought about a thing. Lanham writes that the avant-gardists were early teachers in shifting perspective from the object to the cultural imperatives that shaped the way it was seen.

In the twentieth century, the most obvious economists of attention have been the visual artists. The locus of art, for them, became not the physical object that occasioned the aesthetic response but the response itself. The center of art migrated from the object to the attention it required. . . . The Italian futurists created alphabetic collages that asked us to consider letters as physical objects, stuff, rather than as agents of information, to reverse our customary stuff/nonstuff assumptions. . . . It was didactic, not revolutionary, and its aim was to teach us how to toggle back and forth between seeing the art object, and hence the world, as stuff and seeing it as attention. It taught an economics lesson.

(Lanham 15)

Lanham's reduction of avant-garde experimentation as “didactic, not revolutionary” may be overstating the case. The books produced by the avant-gardists are not the same as the dull Dick and Jane variety. The innovations they introduced might seem so quaint in part because they were so thoroughly adopted that their revolutionary aspect is lost. Changing how people see a thing is the first step in revolution.

The legacy of the avant-gardists' work may not have been the dramatic social shift they intended, but their attempts at finding agency through design by merging art and technology for social action created the building blocks for multiple scopic regimes that would allow a diverse rhetorical discourse field based on praxis and mediation rather than the a morally blind tool suited only to a brutal regime seeking to institute a hegemony.
AGENCY IS PROTEAN AND CANNOT BE QUANTIFIED BY SUCCESS ALONE

The history of the mass-produced book and its relationship to modernity could—indeed, has—filled volumes. Walter Ong and Marshal McLuhan, for example, have thoroughly addressed the social and cultural shifts from oral to written to print cultures and beyond to the digital age.

Agency is a highly contested concept in rhetorical and social theory. In the broadest possible terms, agency is the ability to act otherwise. Before embarking on an analysis of avant-garde book design as a vehicle of social agency, it would be useful to more thoroughly discuss what exactly is meant by “agency” as it is used here.

Scholars from several disciplines, such as history, sociology, cultural studies, feminist theory, communication studies, and rhetoric, have wrestled with the notion of agency. Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens, for example, are quite far apart in that Giddens attempts to resituate the individual/subject into a more powerful relation to social processes through the recursive nature of his structuration theory. The role of agency in Foucault’s work shifts from one of almost impossibility to one of rare occurrence. Even when allowed for, it is shaped by dispersion within a discourse field and denies the usefulness of consciousness as a defining element by pointing out consciousness is entirely subjective (183).

To Giddens, agency is tied to consciousness and is based on people having some rational awareness of how they choose to act, though they may not be able to articulate it. Giddens asserts that there are three kinds of consciousness: discursive, practical, and the unconscious (Constitution 7). In structuration theory, the first two types are the most important. Discursive consciousness involves a reflexive awareness of intention and rational explanation for action. Practical consciousness is the day-to-day wisdom of social processes without which functioning in a modern society would be impossible. According to Giddens, people spend most of their lives in practical consciousness, but the line between the two is permeable and can be shifted through experience and education (Constitution 6–8). He also stresses power, es-
sentially a “transformative capacity” to achieve outcomes, as integral to agency. Therefore, all human action has some amount of power (though usually very small) and has some capacity for change due to the recursive nature between society and the individual (Constitution 16). Though far from the romantic ideals of the individual being master of his or her own destiny, Giddens has salvaged some hope of agency, though without the ability to predict where it might lead (as discussed later).

Foucault’s concept of agency, however, was formed far from the Enlightenment ideal of the brilliant individual mind let loose upon the world, nor does it have any relation to the Romantic ideal of the creative soul producing dazzling work solely from a mysterious pool of genius that lies within the soul of the artist. Instead Foucault asserts there is no individual author, but rather subjects who occupy points of articulation within a field of discourse and are themselves bound by it (55). While this articulation of people as bound subjects is somewhat depressing, it levels us all to the same discourse field. No one has the right to call their own words (articulation) the only truth possible.

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Bordieu, and others, Herndl and Licona refine the notion of agency as an ephemeral conjunction of social and discursive relations that allows for an opportunity of social action through a point of articulation (138–139). Rejecting Giddens’s tying together of agency with power, their work finds yet another way to open up the anti-humanist stance of Foucault’s early work to the potential for individual action as a position in the discourse field. For Herndl and Licona agency cannot be possessed or wielded. It is a kairotic opportunity, a space (rather than a resource or structure) that requires thought and rhetorical skill to recognize.

Agency has also been characterized as complex and mercurial. In her essay “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean,” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell asserts that some concept of agency has been part of the Western rhetorical tradition since its ancient beginnings, but our current notion is a modernist concern emerging from the Enlightenment and the concept of the
individual of the early seventeenth century. Campbell fleshes out her argument by saying that agency is inherently communal, created by those who are points of articulation, is performative, has form, and is by nature “perverse” (2). Campbell uses this intricate notion of agency to redeem the only known written record of Sojourner Truth’s famous speech at the 1851 women’s rights convention in Ohio that was created twelve years after the fact from memory by a white woman using racist language.

Campbell’s conception of agency includes not only the ability to act but also the form in which the action materializes in a social context. She also ties agency to techne and kairos: the ability to “respond to contingencies” through artistry and skill born of practice. Campbell embraces her own protean strategy in defining agency: “I reject the view that there is a vast chasm separating classical, modern, and postmodern theories. I am committed to reading and rereading earlier works in light of the insights of more recent theorists, reinventing, if you will, the legacy of the past in ways that fuse these traditions” (8). By doing so, Campbell opens up many possibilities for looking at past attempts to create social change through performative acts. Agentive possibilities based on the rearticulation of a form within well-established genres is one. Campbell points out that a new articulation of an established genre is never a carbon-copy of something gone before and carries with it alterations in meaning (7).

Campbell’s exploration of agency agrees with Herndl and Licona’s in that agency is kairotic and shifting. She has, however, taken the potential for agency further and opens up its possibilities to a much wider field because she does not require agency to be successful but instead focuses on its perverseness, its ability to turn back on itself, as a key part of its nature.

In Archaeology, Foucault shifts the capacity for agency from the individual to a position within a discourse field. This decentering of power is interesting in that it opens up the possibility for resistance, for the validity of other voices. The problem, however, is that Foucault leaves one in a carceral state, incapable of effecting change, in other words, bereft of agency. Herndl and Licona solve this freeze in part by refining agency as a place within the
discourse field that occurs when other elements align, making agency an opportunity in time/space rather than a power to be wielded. Giddens takes a different tack by defining agency through consciousness and a recursive duality between the individual and social structures. Campbell brings together these differing angles by constructing a complex notion of agency that encompasses Giddens's recursive duality (performance and the form that results = action and structure), Foucault's points of articulation, and the kairotic nature of Herndl and Licona's definition of agency. Campbell's inclusive concept of agency as communal, promiscuous, and protean provides the link that makes possible the study of genre manipulation as agentive. The long-reaching consequences of attempts to seize agency are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to quantify and so success cannot be the defining feature of agentive action. The attempt at engagement is fascinating in its own right, as are tracing the consequences of that act.

**Is Social Change Possible by Challenging Visual Paradigms?**

The conception of modernity from Giddens is one of social organization that emerged in seventeenth century Europe and spread across the globe (*Consequences* 12). It is an industrial and Western juggernaut, whose very nature makes it volatile and only with the use of reason can we hope to direct it (*Consequences* 151). Giddens firmly believes that social action (attempts to steer the juggernaut) is absolutely necessary and that we should steer toward a “utopian realism” (*Consequences* 154). Indeed, Giddens introduced the concept of the “duality of structure” as a third way between the dominant agentive or structurally centered social theories (*Constitution* 25). These theories either celebrated the lucky, damned the victim, or blamed society for producing ineffective people, depending on one's point of view. Rather than simplifying matters as agents interacting with structures and structures constraining agents, Giddens casts agency and structure as different faces of social action. Structure can, therefore, be both constricting and enabling.
The act of creating an innovative or challenging design, however, is not enough. The innovation must have a real connection to both the content and the social framework in which it exists. Established genres exist because they serve a very real function.

Carolyn Miller’s work in genre takes Giddens’s structuration theory in an interesting direction. In Miller’s seminal work on genre, she points out that genre is the practical structure that frames or binds together other rhetorical strategies. Because genres are closely tied to the living social frameworks in which they function, they are kairotic, morphing into different forms depending on the needs of the time. New genres, however, succeed only if they can “achieve a rational fusion of elements.” If the form has “conflicting interpretive contexts,” it will likely fail as a genre (38). By defining genre as both rational and kairotic, Miller shows how flexible and powerful genres are. They are not empty vessels into which any content can be poured. They depend on a thoughtful and balanced interchange between communicator, content, and audience.

In 1994 Miller refined her earlier work on genre. In her essay “Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre,” she connects her previously stated rhetorical conception of genre with Giddens’s structuration theory. Miller points out that the duality of Giddens’s structuration theory captures the inherent reflexive nature of genres. Using structuration theory, Miller casts genre as both a means by which one can establish rhetorical kairotic potentials and a connecting point between the individual and society (71). By this Miller confirms her earlier position that though genre may be successfully described as structural, it is but the instantiation of social action. Her refined conception of genre and its successful manipulation fulfills Giddens’s demand that rationality be the basis for social action, for steering the juggernaut.

By connecting genre and structuration theory, Miller underlines the potential for social action by challenging societal paradigms. Though she does not address visual genres, her point is easily transferable from textual genres to the visual. The scopic regime, the dominant
habits of seeing, is the underlying organization that supports and is constituted by visual genres. This recursive nature of the structure in which the structure frames the action and the action has influence on the form of the structure describes the interaction of the scopic regime and the effect of the avant-gardists experimentations with book design.

**Is the Book a Symbolic Token or Cultural Object?**

Disembedding mechanisms are key elements in the formation and ongoing character of modernity. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens discusses two types of disembedding mechanisms: symbolic tokens and expert systems. These elements are critical to his theory of modernity because they both “remove social relations from the immediacies of context” (28). The example he uses for the symbolic token is money. Giddens disagrees with other theorists who claim that money is like language or power by defining money as a social form rather than action. To Giddens money as a symbolic token is important because it is a “mode of deferral” that makes possible transactions without reference to immediate circumstances. In other words, because money has an abstract and flexible relationship to value, it relieves one of sitting on one’s hoard or needing to fully understand another person when attempting to trade a bit of one’s hoard for theirs. Money is a symbolic token that not only allows anonymous strangers to interact at great distances and with a minimum of common ground, but makes possible capitalistic ownership and disembeds value from its object and exchanges from a particular time or place. Money, to Giddens, is a means of time-space distanciation (*Consequences* 24).

With a slight adjustment of focus from content to form, the book is not so very different from money. It too is a unit of transaction. The book houses the most durable of cultural ideas and values and travels great distances to interact with strangers. Its value is based on a concept of authorial ownership, yet it is entirely disembedded from its origins and makes possible exchange at great removes. What would be a long conversation between people in close proximity is transferred to an object that can be shipped around the world by cart, boat, or aircraft.
Though not so perfect an example as money, the book functions as a symbolic token and is a means of time-space distanciation.

Expert systems, according to Giddens, are “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live” (27). He gives as examples lawyers, doctors, and flight attendants. One of the defining characteristics of Giddens’s expert systems is that they are opaque to the layman. One must trust that the professionals know what they are doing and that the systems are sound and acting in the best interests of society.

The book publishing industry possesses many similarities to these expert systems offered by Giddens. The publication of books, at least through the late twentieth century, took place in a black box as least as far as most people were concerned. Laymen had no idea how manuscripts were selected, how editors came to occupy their positions, or how the books were moved about. Editors and authors were assumed to have authority and many publishing houses, at least the ones in New York or London, had reputations that virtually guaranteed the value of the book’s content. A book may be written in England, accepted for publication in New York, printed in the Netherlands, sold in Austria, and read in Iowa.

Unlike the bound vellum pages covered in a scribe’s hand lettering, mass-produced books are disembedded products of labor. Handmade books carry with them the imprint of the maker, the mark of the craftsman. The link between the labor of the one who made it and the object is visible. With the modern bookmaking process, the machine erased the mark of labor from the product so that it became a thing without reference to the time and labor that produced it: a disembedded symbolic token. In place of the maker’s mark is the logo of the publishing house that produced it. It has shifted from a product of a craftsman’s labor to the product of an industrial organization. Yet the definition does not entirely fit because the book can be unpacked. Its value is not entirely in its form but in its contents: words and images.
In Jay’s conception of aesthetics in social action, the main benefit is the possibility of promoting a diverse rhetorical field of discourse. Achieving such an aim in modernity would require a cultural object with enough potency that it could carry with it this mediating influence. The avant-gardists choice of the book was not random.

According to Giddens a cultural object has three basic characteristics: 1) distanciation between ‘producer’ from ‘consumer’, 2) a need for independent interpretation on the part of the receiver, 3) durable medium of transmission that can be stored and retrieved (Structuralism 100-101). The book neatly fits within this definition, and though other objects could be arguably more dominant today, it was the dominant cultural object in the early twentieth century. Cultural objects in Giddens estimation are important because they “introduce new mediations between culture, language and communication” (Structuralism 101). The book as cultural object fits more securely to Miller’s conception of genre as cultural artifact, as well. Yet, the connection to the marketplace and to the notion of the book as a unit of transactional value reveals the deeply connected nature of the book and its form to our conceptions of intellectual and cultural value.

Our communication systems are revealing of cultural knowledge and identity. Mediations are of necessity based on conflicting viewpoints. Cultural objects that successfully clamor in support of competing scopic regimes are essential in creating the ocular-eccentricity that supports a diverse rhetorical discourse field.

Sitting on the shop's shelf, the contents “unpacked,” the book holds value before it is even read because it embodies a form that is recognizable and has assumed worth. People trust that the book is the product of an expert system and has intrinsic value. As Debray said, during the graphosphere (Gutenberg to the advent of TV), the maxim of authority was no longer “God told me” but “I read it” (27). The cultural centrality of the book had not yet been challenged by new media and presented a highly attractive location for the kind of cultural battle the avant-gardists sought to wage.
Why Understand the Source of Scopic Regime Grammars?

Though the book designs of the 1920s and 1930s seems quaint to us today because they so perfectly addressed the kairotic needs of their time, the attempts of the avant-gardists to engage in a battle for a better future through design is relevant to communicators today. The easiest way to disempower people of a different opinion is to refuse to acknowledge that their minority way of seeing has no value. As we will see in the next chapter, William Morris was one of the first to create a competing way of seeing through the form of the book. By acknowledging the increasing power of the visual in our current communication networks and understanding the paths from which they came to be part of competing scopic regimes, those who wish to offer a point of view that departs from the dominant way of seeing or ascribing value would benefit.
Chapter 3: Challenging the Industrial Machine

The avant-gardists sought above all a better social order. Their manifestos were both demands for the world to share their visions and road maps to a brighter future. Futurists saw their utopia in an idealized city of the machine, but those in the Arts and Crafts movement who came before them knew that the best of all worlds could only exist in a bucolic and ordered non-industrialized township in which the objects were made through skill and joyful labor (Crouch 54).

The modernist aesthetics of the early twentieth century, including those that glorified the industrial age and the machines within it, were influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, especially his work in book design and production. Morris’s Kelmscott Press was a successful, though short-lived, integration of socialist ideals that used aesthetics to inform praxis. The books produced at Kelmscott Press were portable manifestations of the social action Morris believed necessary in the advance toward a better world. Morris’s work in book design and production was part of a larger print culture that was experiencing enormous economic pressures and cultural shifts that took place in the nineteenth century.

THE BOOK BECAME A FORCE OF MASS MEDIA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Though Edmund Burke elevated the press to England’s “Fourth Estate” in 1787, it did not become a true mass media until literacy had “percolated down to practically every layer of the population” at the end of the nineteenth century (Jubert 105–107). The adoption of the printed word within the heart of culture was not, of course, strictly English in nature. From the daily newspaper’s first appearance in 1777 with Le Journal de Paris that grew its print run to 12,000 copies by 1790 to the burgeoning penny press in the United States, people from all social classes in the West engaged with their world through reading. This rapid spread of literacy created the immense market necessary to sustain and drive forward the publishing
industry’s new capacity to produce large-scale print runs quickly and cheaply and was a neces-
sary precondition for the rise of the book as a cultural object.

In the nineteenth century, book design and production kicked into overdrive. The relative abeyance of strict censorship created an environment more friendly to the emergence of the novel and other popular works. The convergence of production capabilities and distribution networks made the book industry profitable.

One of the biggest shifts in book production technology in the nineteenth century was the invention of lithography by Aloys Senefelder in 1796. Lithography grew in use along with mechanical presses, machine-made paper, and stereotypes. The most noticeable impact lithography had on book design is that it made possible the creation of typefaces that flowed as smoothly as script with a similar capacity for fine detail, which contributed to the explosion of font creations in foundries in Europe and the United States (Jubert 102).

Late in the nineteenth century Linotype (1886) and Monotype (1893) were invented in the United States. Linotype machines could be run by a single operator, cast type on the fly, set each line entire, and made type infinitely accessible and disposable. Monotype machines were run by a keyboarder and a caster, each letter created singly, cooled, then assembled in a channel for a line, making for easier corrections. These processes opened up the field of printing dramatically. The book industry was now able to generate books on a scale to supply a steadily increasing literate base. These two competing technologies represent the moment in which printing became truly mechanized.

And while the book as a form remained for the most part static in design, the proliferation of printed materials aimed at an increasingly literate public bred a bizarre outgrowth of the use of increasingly outlandish typefaces in bids for attention in a crowded field, the heavy ornamentation derided in future as “fluff.”

The crustily ornamented and rowdy typefaces of Victorian graphic design spread throughout the West. Big, outlandish characters were commonplace by 1840. Graphic design
in the Victorian age was awash in revivalist ornamentation taken from the architectural trends of the time. Type designers and printers strove for the most elaborate and creative typographic achievements possible, the more fantastic the better (Heller 322). At the same time, foundries consolidated and discovered a brisk and lucrative business in producing the ornate and imaginative fonts being designed at a rapid pace (Jubert 102). The internal form of book remained essentially the same, but for jacket covers, title pages, interior illustrations, ephemera, and periodicals, it was a typographic free-for-all.

The wide exploration by so many individual artists and artisans into the new possibilities in design and typography made possible by new technologies paved the way for the avant-garde movements to come (Jubert 103). The typographic smorgasbord of the nineteenth century overflowed and encouraged random acts of design. Printers, for example, who ran out of a font would continue compositing with another—without even breaking the line (Heller 322).

Typography and bookmaking were populist concerns, and some were horrified at the results. From 1870 through the 1890s, the downward spiral of bookmaking resulted from a combination of social and technical factors. The leap forward in mechanical efficiency combined with a new papermaking process that allowed for the use of wood pulp rather than rag sped the decline (McLean, Victorian Book Design 228-229). The lack of an international copyright agreement, which allowed printers and booksellers to produce copies of works by foreign authors without the obligation of paying royalties, contributed too, as entrepreneurial printers and booksellers took advantage of this legal lapse to create cheap editions for a working class public voracious for reading material at an affordable price.

The public, however, soon grew tired of the poorly made books. Flooded with books of broken type, pages with voids, and crumbling bindings, the time was ripe for a change. Another nail in the coffin of these marketplace fodder editions came in 1891 when the Interna-
tional Copyright Act was passed, and the number of these casual profiteer publishers dropped dramatically (Thompson 2).

The end of the nineteenth century was a time of invention and novelty that saturated the reading public with visual stimulation that must have been hard to keep up with. This century is often described as vulgar or sloppy in terms of design, but it also achieved much in formal excellence. Before abandoning the nineteenth century altogether, it is important to note that despite the problems of shoddy book production, there were important appearances of innovative design and typographic experiments that are inextricably linked to modernist movements.

These wild gyrations in typeface design and advancing production technologies were important precursors to the avant-garde experimentations in the early twentieth century. There were also a few writers in the nineteenth century who seriously challenged the static form of the book.

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and the poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A throw of the dice never will abolish chance) are prime examples of the highly innovative attempts at wrestling the static form of the book into something new (Jubert 134–136).

Lewis Carroll based *Alice in Wonderland* on a previous manuscript he wrote called *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*. Published as a hand-lettered and illustrated book, this forerunner to his more famous work is a beautiful and evocative blend of text and image. A poem titled “The Mouse's Tale” appears in both. In the earlier version (c. 1864), the script begins in the top left corner and curls down the page in a long sinuous shape, the letters shifting position to better create the smooth curves of a mouse’s tail, ending in a fine point with the text fully upside down in the bottom left-hand corner. When a different poem of the same title and general shape appears in the first edition of *Alice* in 1866, the typesetter tried to capture the play between text and shape with line break, line placement, and decreasing font
size, but it does not have nearly the same grace or whimsy. In the final form, Carroll used collage, which added texture and is much more interesting than the typeset version, yet still lacks the sinuous grace of the original hand drawing. The relative success of each different version, however, is less important than that Carroll engaged intimately with such a radically different visual formation of text.

Mallarmé is a widely recognized forerunner of the avant-garde movement. His work in relation to the book was with expanding, some would say exploding, the limits of typographical form and space. After over twenty years of research, his *Un Coup* manuscript was finally published in *Cosmopolis* in 1897 (Jubert 135). Sometimes the text of the poem gathers space around itself like a dying star. At other times, the words flow down the page in an uneven stream. The dynamics of visual form strip away the need for traditional punctuation. The visual contrasts Mallarmé used—text placement on the page, varying type size, roman vs. italic vs. bold—create rhythms and tones with the eye that are hard to imagine on the ear. His poetic art was as much visual as verbal, a blurring of boundaries between poetry and painting.

These two nineteenth century artists, who bracket the worst era of book production of 1870 to 1895, embodied key hallmarks of the early twentieth-century avant-garde movement: the integration of new forms within the static form of the book and the intentional shifting of boundaries. The combination of book production being subject to commercial pressure, great success in using technological improvement to printing for books, and a widespread willingness to manipulate forms of type and book production (with an audience willing to read them) created the groundwork for twentieth-century avant-garde attempts to influence social change through the medium of the book.

The closing decades of the Victorian era were, for the upper classes, marked by a surfeit of objects. The stereotypical image of the Victorian parlor as a mishmash of styles, overcrowded furnishings, tabletops and shelves chockfull of Oriental, Egyptian, British, and papier-mâché monstrosities is rooted in truth. The well-to-do Victorian was awash in stuff.
The industrial age had run faster than the ability of the average person to sort through it all. In 1877 Clarence Cook, a nineteenth century American art critic, writes

> There needs to-day to be a protest made by some one against the mechanical character of our decoration, for, with an unexampled demand . . . there has come an unexampled supply, and the manufacturers, of course, bring all the labor-saving appliances they can contrive to supply this demand. And all these things . . . are so cheap, that everybody gets them, and . . . gets so many that our homes are overrun with things, encumbered with useless ugliness, and made to look more like museums or warerooms than like homes of thinking people and people of taste. (Cook 281–283)

Cook goes on to conclude that the “superabundance” of goods will actually benefit both taste and the craft of goods because people’s natural desire for exclusivity will create a demand for finely crafted pieces incapable of machine duplication because they “carry the stamp of our own time and country” (283–284). Cook may have correctly anticipated the hope of the Arts and Crafts movement that public taste would be elevated to demand handcrafted objects, but his attribution of its rise more to a desire for self-aggrandizement through the possession of stylish objects than the reintegration of craftsmanship and beauty into daily life has nothing to do with Morris’s ideals. While Morris believed that people should have in their homes “only those things which you know to be useful or believe to be beautiful,” he also despised fashion and the excesses it inspired (Boris 40). Cook’s vision is more descriptive of another trend that represents the other manifestation of the nineteenth century’s relationship to material abundance—Aestheticism.

Concurrent with the growth of the Arts and Crafts movement, there was a surge in deluxe editions of cultural treasures such as an 1886 edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese. These editions were hand drawn by artists and produced on thick paper in generous-sized formats for a wealthy few (Thompson 7). The boundaries of the
book's beauty were intended to be wholly fulfilled within the harmony of its pages and craftsmanship of its bindings.

These books, created as art for their own sake, have deep links to the Aesthetic movement and ultimately to the fin-de-siècle decadence that came to a close with the trial of Oscar Wilde. In the 1882 introduction of Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf, one of the most stickily precious books produced in the Aesthetic style, Wilde wrote “... this love of art for art's sake, is the point in which we of the younger school have made a departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin. . . . to us the rule of art is not the rule of morals. . . .” (qtd. by Thompson 11). The tension between the aesthetic as a tool for increased power in communication, art for art's sake, and an agent for social change re-emerges throughout the work of the early twentieth century modernists.

The Italian Futurists took the notion of aestheticism as a way to increased power to radical heights by blending it with technology and speed, and injecting it into a created mythos to fuel the youth of their nation for a Fascist revolution. Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, however, were more closely liked to the Pre-Raphaelites who were inspired by Ruskin's writings and believed that the “ability to improve one's environment was the path to reconnection with Nature, with beauty, and with control over one's life” (Bright 3). Though inspiring the Private Press movement that encompassed a return to the book as art through craftsmanship without the socialist ideals, the Arts and Crafts proponents, Morris foremost, committed themselves to Ruskin's philosophy of design with an essential grounding in social utopian action: they viewed ornamentation as an outgrowth of craft and had an ideological value based in truth in materials, the collective effort of trained craftsmen, and placing the needs of humanity before industrialization (Crouch 30–32).

Cook's description of the superabundance of household objects in the typical Victorian gentleman's home in the 1870s is eerily similar to Lanham's suggestion of being awash is stuff in our current times. The countermovement of the Arts and Crafts was the first attempt to
shift the juggernaut of modernity in favor of the dignity of the individual. Morris and those he inspired sought to clear the suffocating profusion of printed materials by creating a form that demanded attention through the quality of craft and the aura of specificity they believed would cling to an object created through a craftsman’s labor rather than the impersonal power of the machine.

THE BOOK PLAYED AN CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT

The Arts and Crafts movement was an English reaction to the industrialization that permeated the country by the 1850s. The aesthetic statements made in the Arts and Crafts movement as well the method of manufacture sought to advance social and political ideals. Morris was a socialist whose career comprised architecture, decorative arts, design, drawing, painting, and writing. Morris, thought not the originator, is commonly credited with encompassing the prevailing spirit behind the Arts and Crafts movement.

Dating from the 1880s, the Arts and Crafts movement rejected the mechanization of cultural objects that barreled through the industrialized nineteenth century and sought a synthesis of traditional crafts and fine arts into a socially vital state. Morris and his partners at Kelmscott Press created their books by hand and used only the finest papers and bindings to create the ideal book forms.

The print culture environment into which the Kelmscott Press took form had a pervasive deterministic bent. The book reading audience had shifted from a small educated elite to a diverse, newly urban, and increasingly literate population with a little money to spend. Publishing as an industry started to see relatively large profit lines from their newly expanded literate market. The print professionals of the late nineteenth century were so enamored with the technological advances of the century in both type creation and book production that they believed any product of these amazing new machines must be equally exciting. In his introduction to Morris’s writings, Peterson quoted an article in a trade publication that exemplified the professional attitude of a printer in the 1880s:
An art which is so eminently dependent upon mechanical perfection must inevitably progress toward excellence by the successive labours of succeeding generations; and the best letterpress of the nineteenth century is not only vastly superior to the greatest efforts of Aldus and Plantin, but far superior even to the most loudly-vaunted triumphs of Baskerville and Bodoni at a much later period; and a typefounder’s specimen book of the present day can safely challenge comparison with any work performed by any of the great masters of early printing. (xx)

While true that the new technologies allowed the creation of very fine lines and sharp edges that appealed to some as an aesthetic refinement, to others it was a gray mark of decay that had more in common with fin-de-siècle decadence than fine typography.

At Kelmscott Press, Morris sought to handcraft books imbued with everything best from the traditions and materials afforded by English culture. Morris was not alone in his fervor to rescue printing from degradation. In her essay “Typography and Gender,” Megan Benton investigates Theodore Low De Vinne’s 1892 manifesto for a return to “masculine printing,” finding that he believed the industrialization of printing contributed to the weakening of the form by allowing the mechanized technology and mass market (women with modest purchasing power) to dictate the paper (thin, smooth, and cheap), typeface (spindly, awkward, and illegible), and style (pallid pages marred with superfluous ornamentation). Morris is the most famous of those who attempted to rededicate typography and printing to a “masculine” style and used canonical work such as the Canterbury Tales to make his point.

In Modern Typography, Kinross derides this common characterization of typography in the nineteenth century—essentially that it suffered a steep decline because of the pressures of industrialization and was revivified by the work of those identified as the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement such as William Morris—as oversimplified (25). Kinross goes on
to point out that even the most mechanized printing press operations hired workers (mostly women) at sweatshop wages to hand-finish the books in as elegant a style as ever achieved.

Ruari McLean, a well-known British type designer and expert on Victorian book design, allowed that “ordinary commercial book printing deteriorated during the 1870s and 1880s because of new possibilities in cheapness of methods and materials” (162). McLean, however, spent much of his life collecting and writing about all that was fine in Victorian book design. In particular, McLean lauds the imagination and vitality evident in the typography, illustrations, and manuscript selection of book production in the nineteenth century. It was, however, his belief that amateurs, not professionals, contributed the most original and far-reaching ideas and practices to book design, and he includes William Morris in this category.

Kinross maintains that the horror stories of hideous printing told by De Vinne and Morris were unfounded and that the mechanization of print actually improved typical quality. He does, however, point out that printers paid very low wages and that these exploited workers were known to cut corners to save labor and in other ways vigorously resist their exploitation by the shop owners (28). Thus, the degradation of the form of the book was intimately tied to capitalists’ profit margin and the resulting social problems of the time.

Though he professed socialist ideals, Morris’s books were very costly, affordable only to the rich. He hoped that by elevating bookmaking to its highest form, it would shift the general standard and so improve the common production and, therefore, the experience of the book. His main success is more traceable, however, in the artist book tradition of the Private Press movement that was carried on through the twentieth century by houses such as Gehenna Press that have high status and production costs with small readerships.

The Arts and Crafts movement spread to many countries, including America. Bruce Rogers, considered the best American book designer of the early twentieth century, fully participated in this movement. The use of hand press machines, however, was limited to the most committed Private Press shops that produced very modest print runs. The economic
advantages of Linotype and Monotype were too strong and the foremost American typographers designed for them.

**Morris’s Book Design Aesthetics Were Based in Socialist Ideals**

In an essay on printing he wrote in 1893 with Emery Walker for a compilation of essays by members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, Morris wrote that the Gutenberg Bible had never been surpassed as an example of fine typography (112). The state of modern printing had been debased by the necessity of designing type for the machine process, which had led to “positively ugly. . . . wiry forms suitable for the machine process” but hardly able to compete with medieval forms (121–123). Morris’s aesthetic was established after careful examination of medieval books and included the absolute avoidance of more white space in letter, word, line, and margin than the minimum (Morris, T on T, 5).

Morris’s convictions about the purity of the medieval book form eclipsed his equal belief in the importance of being true to Ruskin’s ideal of the power of the craftsman to imbue his own experience into the object he created. This would of necessity include the age in which the craftsman lived. The particulars of Morris’s book aesthetic were clearly set forth in William Peterson’s compilation of his writings titled *The Ideal Book*.

If Morris was the “architect of the book,” type was the brick that he used to build. Though Morris’s first move in recreating the spirit of medieval book craftsmanship was to draw a new roman typeface that captured the beauty of medieval script suitable for the modern age and able to complement the woodcut illustrations Morris favored, he preferred Gothic styles. Despising the glittering, modern faces of Bodoni and Didot, Morris’s aesthetic demanded heavy strokes that would give a paragraph and strong dark color, quite unlike the widely leaded gray text blocks of the nineteenth century.

As mentioned above, Morris believed the page should be dense with ink. Leading between lines should be only as much as required to keep the descenders and ascenders from competing. Paragraph marks may be used instead of line breaks and indentations. One of the
most deeply influential of his innovations was the concept of the double spread as a unit. By treating the spread as primary unit of composition Morris invented the art of layout (Wilson 21; Bartram 109). In America Bruce Rogers was one of the first to approach book design using the spread (Wilson 22).

Truth in materials was essential to Morris. Ink and paper should be of the first-quality, preferably handmade from rag not wood pulp, well proportioned, and laid rather than wove. Above all the materials should be in agreement with the content and not pretend to be better than they are.

In spite of his generously decorated pages, Morris believed that a “book quite un-ornamented can look actually and positively beautiful, and not merely un-ugly, if it be, so to say, architecturally good” (qtd. in Peterson xxxi). When present decoration should be in balance and harmony with the text and executed with precision and skill. “Medieval art is admirable; Renaissance art deplorable” (Thompson 23).

The Arts and Crafts participants resisted the disembedding effects of modernity. They sought to reestablish the link between craftsman and product. To escape the indignity of workers becoming servants to the machine, they sought to revivify the traditions of craft. There were many styles associated with Arts and Crafts; the common link was the use of high-quality materials and highly skilled craftsmen. Though his furniture highlighted the simplified line, the strongest features to the casual eye in Morris’s book design were the decorations and dense quality of text.

Morris’s Kelmscott Press was the manifestation of his socialist vision. The books produced by the press were cultural objects that carried with them—on every ornamented page of handmade and printed paper and hand-tooled cover—the principles of Arts and Crafts socialism. Morris’s brand of socialist praxis through craft took root in the U.S. quickly and spread thoroughly as a “handicraft revival” that became popular enough to warrant a U.S.
Bureau of Labor special report on its growth, artistic aims, and “sociological” critique (Boris 32).

The ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement as put forth by Morris sound like a pastoral and idyllic reflection of Marxist socialism mixed with an English, medieval craftsman tradition, but in practice these ideals tended to devolve into another form of elitism. The medieval guild framework Morris and his imitators sought to revive was intended as a network for men, presumably white. Even the manuscripts Morris chose as content for his book production projects are a glorification of the white English male (e.g., Chaucer, Ruskin, Keats) with a tendency toward the pastoral.

Morris, though a dedicated socialist, espoused a form of socialism that elevated domestic work but did not free women from it (Marsh 113). In the latter nineteenth century there was still a strong boundary between work appropriate for men and women. Men were printers, metalworkers, and carpenters, but women painted china, worked with textiles, or created jewelry. Neither Morris nor the Arts and Crafts movement in general attempted to change the segregation of women into lower-paying positions, but it did try to elevate “women’s work” to craft along with the rest of industrial arts (Boris 99). Crafts like bookbinding turned into promising fields for women because they required patience and raised the supposedly “feminine virtues” of nimble fingers and tidiness to the level of a fine art. It is telling, however, that Morris never gave much attention to bookbinding at Kelmscott and even occasionally directed his books to be cut but not bound because any of the cheapest methods would do (Peterson xxx). Morris did hire women as workers at his press, but they are usually lumped into the same category of wonder as his hiring boys from the nearby orphanage as proof that “anyone could learn craft techniques” (Boris 9).

Morris, however, was far from a misogynist. Women as equal partners appeared in his book *News from Nowhere*, a utopian vision of an Arts and Crafts socialist community that is
presumably reflective of his socialist views. The quirk is that Morris believed that women, free
to do anything they liked, would surely choose to be housekeepers:

. . . Perhaps you think housekeeping an unimportant occupation, not deserving of respect. I believe that was the opinion of the “advanced” women of the
nineteenth century, and their male backers. . . . Don’t you know that it is a great
pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skillfully, and to do it so that all
the house-mates about her look pleased, and are grateful to her? (NFN 83–84)

Certainly, women would not want to stoop to working in a print shop. Some of the best ex-
amples of book design and production in the nineteenth century, however, were accomplished
through the combined efforts of women and men.

Women working in nineteenth-century printing were most likely either bookbinders
or woodcut illustrators. Bookbinding, though not a high paying job, was seen as a realistic
path for a woman to take who wanted to be self-sufficient but did not have the inclination
toward teaching or housekeeping. Some of the best examples of woodcuts were designed and
executed by women.

Mary Byfield produced some of the finest wood engravings of the period for Chiswick
Press in the mid nineteenth century, several of which were designed by the print shop owner's
daughters who worked at the press, Charlotte Whittingham and Eleanor Elizabeth (Victorian
Book Design 18, 20, 166). The Chiswick Press was the printer for Pickering, Henry Shaw, and
other high-quality contemporary publishers. Ruari McLean, one of the most cited authors in
Victorian book culture, called the press the “foremost name in Victorian book design” and
“synonymous with good typography and printing” until its close in 1962 (McLean 5). Morris
had his first two books of poems, the Defence of Guinevere and The Life and Death of Jason
printed by Chiswick Press during the time the sisters worked there. In fact, in 1866 and again
in 1871, Morris planned a fine edition of one of his own works to be printed there and even
went so far as to have the blocks engraved and specimen pages set up, but the projects were
abandoned. Even the best printing press of his time did not come near his standards of book production. His fine editions had to wait till he started his own press in 1890, and he could enact all the social and craft practices that would make his vision of the Book Beautiful possible.

**Book Designers as Socialist Craftsmen**

After our recent desktop publishing revolution, it might be difficult to understand the complexity involved in getting a manuscript to print during the period from 1440 to 1985. Now it takes only a decent computer, a copy of page design software, built-in fonts, and rudimentary training to crank out a file that can be produced as a book by a printer. The end result would likely be a clunky mess, but it would still be recognizable as a book. Books were once handset, in fact they were commonly handset in the United Kingdom well in the twentieth century, meaning someone had to drop each piece of type in a “stick” (a metal tray which would comprise a line of text), and each tray would then be stacked with appropriate leading in between to make the lines readable (Wilson 33). There was an art to composing a page that could not be learned from a week-long seminar. Even with the advent of the Linotype and Monotype machines, the art of page composition was still needed.

The book designer’s role was to create a layout that the compositor could follow to create a book that would match the vision and purpose. The tools required at a book designer’s desk, even so late as the mid-twentieth century, were many and included both common drafting and (now) arcane tools such as the printer’s line gauge, Haberule visual copy-caster with type gauge, colored pencils, special marking pencils for photo scaling and cropping, pastel chalks, paints, fixative, proportion wheel, paper cutter, and at least a dozen type specimen books (Wilson 68). The skill required to use all these tools to effect was obviously considerable.

The books from Kelmscott Press were a product of a team of skilled craftsmen. Kelmscott Press offered its first book, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, on April 4, 1891, three hundred copies on paper and six on vellum. The edition was an example of how the press
intended to go on. Borders, handmade paper, and a stiff vellum binding covered with a linen case, even the paper edition was a finely made object that reflected centuries of tradition and craftsmanship. Set in Golden type, a dark roman typeface Morris designed in an effort to evoke the saturated page style of Nicolas Jenson, the book was meant to be beautiful, balanced, and true to its nature. Morris's aim was to produce “books which are beautiful as books” through the cooperative efforts of craftsmen. His goal, however, was not only to create “the book beautiful” but also to promote the value of craft in the industry.

After Kelmscott Press closed in 1900, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker, who had helped set up Kelmscott, founded the Doves Press. It was an unhappy partnership that did not end easily and was the reason Cobden-Sanderson eventually pitched the unique Doves Press type into the Thames River upon dissolution of the Press. A self-proclaimed zealot, he shared the passion for the ideal book with Morris. Cobden-Sanderson, however, sought a book form that would suit the modern age: elegant, unadorned, and wholly of the present. Rather than the medieval practices Morris embraced, Cobden-Sanderson held the Renaissance ideals of beauty and order in the physical universe as his guiding principles, but he did not seek to mimic any historical style, which he considered to be a dead end. He wanted to inspire a way forward both aesthetically and socially.

Cobden-Sanderson's first stated reason for founding the press was to “attack the problem of Typography . . . and attempt its solution by the simple arrangement of the whole Book” (qtd. by Tidcombe 1). The Doves Press aesthetic shared the Kelmscott Press's basis in quality materials and typography inspired by Janson, but Cobden-Sanderson sought a lighter page and struck a font much closer to the original lines of Jenson's Venetian roman typeface. Though ornamentation in the margins did not appear in Doves Press books, Cobden-Sanderson worked with a calligrapher named Edward Johnston who added script flourishes to the pages that were often printed in an arresting red ink. The Doves’ Bible is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful ever printed. The curving initials in many of the Doves books
are beautiful, but the flaming flourishes that race down the left margin of the bible’s page are startling because of the boldness of the stroke and the fineness of execution (Fig. 3). The proportion of the stroke to the body of text is perfectly balanced and evokes a surprising strength.

The second purpose of the Doves Press was “embodied in the work of the Press itself, the spirit in which it was done, and the encouragement it gave to others to do good work” (qtd. in Tidcombe 72). Like Morris, Cobden-Sanderson revered the writings of Ruskin, but he also grouped Carlyle and Emerson as guiding influences. Together their essays and books lent him a vision of the importance of ideals and how the worker’s status might be improved (Tidcombe 52).

Cobden-Sanderson’s work toward the production of the book beautiful—without the rich ornamentation that required the rare skill of an artist like Morris—served as the model for many fine printers of the Private Press movement. The spare elegance of the pages and attention to bold, clean lines also show the clear link to the modernist experimentations to come.

There were many intellectuals and artists who took up Morris’s vision of the Arts and Crafts as a way toward a better social future. Morris’s characterization of his method of book
production as building an “architecture of the book” highlights not only the level of craft re-
quired but also the cooperative nature of his ideal process (Bright 1). The act of creating goods
should elevate all the workers who participate rather than use them up as capitalistic fodder.
Some of the most passionate and hard-working were women in the U.S. who whole-heartedly
supported the Arts and Crafts movement but who believed that without the focus on active
socialism and a grounding in Christian community values, the work of Arts and Crafts pro-
donents would degenerate to one of many passing aesthetic fashions. The most lasting work
influenced by William Morris was accomplished by the women of Hull House.

Eileen Boris contends “it was the residents of Hull House and not the trustees of the Art
Institute who brought the Arts and Crafts idea to Chicago” (45). Jane Addams and Ellen Gates
Starr co-founded Hull House in 1889 in Chicago. Modeled on London's Toynbee Hall, Hull
House's mission was to provide social and economic opportunity for the urban working poor,
especially recent immigrants. Addams and Starr lived and worked there among other “resi-
dents” and their clients, offering classes in literature, art, and many other topics. Though Starr
studeied with Cobden-Sanderson and was a noted bookbinder, she failed to use this industrial
art as a way to provide more opportunity to the impoverished workers Hull House served. The
materials were expensive and the method difficult to learn, especially for struggling working
class people who had already spent a full day at hard labor.

The difficulty Starr faced putting Morris's ideals into practice is a common theme.
Though the direct influence of Morris's experimentation with print methods did not raise
most bookbinders or printers into a social and economic level of relative comfort and stability,
Morris's socialist ideals did successfully take root in social agencies (Hull House in 2008 still
holds to its original ideals and practices) and the aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement
found enough traction to survive to the present day (small private presses that follow the basic
Arts and Crafts ideals come and go every year).
Of his contemporaries inspired by Morris's work, the lasting effect was a shift in taste and perhaps some elevation of craft. George Bernard Shaw once wrote that his “acquaintance with Morris led me to look at the page of a book as a picture, and a book as an ornament.” Shaw's interest was limited only to a “certain connoisseurship in types and typesetting,” which led him to first challenge then educate his printers and publishers into producing the kind of books Morris inspired him to envision. It might be that Morris's influence led to the advancement of craftsmanship through the elevation of Shaw's taste, but it was a small shift. Morris’s influence on other American designers was profound aesthetically, but though his followers were often attracted to his ideology, social action was a less likely result than an elite appreciation of refined book design that struggled against the pressures of the marketplace.

**Book Design in the Private Press Movement**

Though Arts and Crafts heavily influenced many craft industries (e.g., architecture, textiles, furniture making), in the publishing industry the movement inspired young designers and entrepreneurs who created a proliferation of small presses committed to producing literary works with a high production value (the Private Press movement). Morris and his Kelmscott Press, and to a lesser extent Cobden-Sanderson and the Doves Press, cast their guiding light.

The resistance of the reader to any alteration in the form or the book, whether the justified line or typeface, reflects the depth to which readers invest authority into this object. Stability is preferred in any source of truth or cultural capital. In his 1930 book titled *First Principles of Typography*, Stanley Morison explains his belief that book typography, as opposed to other forms of print design such as for periodicals, is inherently conservative because it must be “good for a common purpose” and that the mass produced book is only a “means of multiplying” (6). To Morison's mind, the only job of the designer and printer of books is to be invisible by adhering to the national traditions of book design and typeface and maintaining a firmly regular appearance in layout. He advocated monotony rather than any appearance of “difference” or of being “jolly” (8).
Morison seems to be responding to the Private Press movement. This movement was characterized by a proliferation of small presses generally committed to producing literary works with a high production value and inspired in large part by Morris and Cobden-Sanderson. Like them, these presses emphasized the craft of bookmaking and often reached back to medieval forms, such as gothic typeface styles and handmade papers, or Renaissance ideals of harmony. These concerns were sometimes taken to extremes and dominated the book's content. Writers and critics like Morison sought to emphasize the book as an intellectual unit of exchange rather than a museum-quality instant antique. The design and production of the book was only the process by which the ideas reached the reader. The social concerns that so occupied Morris and other who identified with the Arts and Crafts movement did not hold currency with Morison and Warde. Typography was first and last a tool for communicating content.

The small publishing houses that mushroomed during Private Press movement had, for the most part, a short lifespan. Modern book historians sometimes characterize Morris, and by association all private presses influenced by his ideals, as a sentimental Marxist who misguidedly tried to turn back the clock on book production:

William Morris would have been deeply mortified, had he but known it, that a contemporary of Gutenberg or Caxton would hardly have recognized a product of the Kelmscott Press as a “book” but more likely have marveled at it as a kind of purposeless curio. A book which, in some way or other, is “different,” ceases to be a book and becomes a collector’s piece or museum exhibit, to be looked at, perhaps admired, but certainly left unread; the fate of most productions of private presses. (Steinberg 10)

Morris was in fact heavily influenced by the writing of John Ruskin, who promoted the ideals of medieval craftsmanship imbued with the contemporary sensibilities of the artisans to create something new and appropriate to their present age. Morris was not a fool and
knew the mechanized book production process was too powerful to compete against with a small private press of handruns. He envisioned a time in which book production artisans would need to design for the machine. Morris’s key principle in this mechanized context is that books produced by an industrial process should reflect in their design and form their mechanical origins (Crouch 32). What was essential is that the machine would serve the thoughtful designs of the artisans and that the accomplishment of a team of skilled craftsmen was more important than individual aggrandizement through art. Many, though by no means all, avant-garde artists from the early twentieth century agreed wholeheartedly.

Yet because the Arts and Crafts movement in the U.S. was focused on the production of high-quality goods for the marketplace, the pressures of the marketplace ultimately decided its fate. Despite the organizations and their attempts to place the goods made by their craftsmen in their own shops, the movement failed to bring anything approaching a wide shift in production practices. Boris argues that the ideology of Morris failed as praxis in the U.S. because of a combination of two factors—the low numbers of working independent craftsmen and the high numbers of art workers employed by factories or schools—that meant the Arts and Crafts groups tended to be composed of amateurs with no real connection to the marketplace (42). Even the master craftsmen who were committed to the ideals of Morris and Ruskin found it difficult to reconcile them with the need to participate successfully with more traditional businesses.

*Morris’s Ideals Failed to Influence Commercial Book Design*

William Addison Dwiggins, a highly influential American book designer of the early twentieth century who produced over 300 designs for Knopf, was initially inspired by Morris’s work at Kelmscott Press. As a young designer, he adapted Morris’s style to his own work, including the gothic lettering and intricate borders with a similar distaste for white space, using intertextual illustrations and a penchant for printers’ leaves as line fillers. He even had a
bent toward creating idyllic social organizations that promoted his view of craftsman-driven aesthetics.

In 1919 Dwiggins published extracts from the “Transactions of the Society of Calligraphers,” an honorary club made up of a group of his friends, including D. B. Updike, Stanley Morison, and Beatrice Warde, with a common interest in book design. Even though he produced very fine stationery for the society, it seems to have only existed in his imagination, or perhaps as an elaborate inside joke. In the published “extracts” is an essay called “An Investigation into the Physical Properties of the Book” that records imaginary interviews with publishers about book design and production. The entire piece is a long piece of irony that highlights the lack of interest from most production managers in creating anything approaching a finely crafted object. The following excerpt is a fictitious interview about whether there is any room for art—or even craft—in early twentieth century bookmaking (1919).

Q You were speaking of the pressure of industrial conditions since the war. Under these conditions what percentage of the traditions of the craft can you preserve, would you say?

A The traditions of what craft?

Q The craft of printing, obviously. What I am trying to get at is this:– There are certain precise and matured standards of workmanship in the printing craft; these standards are the result of experiment through nearly five hundred years. How far are these standards effective under your present-day conditions?

A Those standards, so far as I know anything about them, are what you would call academic. In the first place, book-manufacturing is not a craft, it is a business. As for standards of workmanship – I can understand the term in connection with cabinet-making, for example, or tailoring, but
I should not apply the expression to books. You do not talk about the “standards of workmanship” in making soap, do you?

... 

Q Would you then consider yourself as happily employed in making soap as in making books?

A Quite as well employed, if making soap paid the dividend.

Clearly Dwiggins and his “society” were frustrated by the continued lack of interest from publishers for the arts and crafts aesthetic promoted by Morris that would support a class of highly trained workmen. Any remnant of his concern with the social impact of book designs was soon abandoned. In the early 1920s Dwiggins wrote to a friend that social action and aesthetics are irreconcilable:

Art has nothing to do with democracy. . . . People do not want it, and it is entirely all right that they shouldn’t. Old man Morris led us all astray by his dream of a popular or democratic art activity. It isn’t there, old cock, and for one I am content that it isn’t there. Sweat the popular art poison out of your blood, and start in pleasing yourself . . . (Postscript on Dwiggins 91)

Dwiggins's focus on aesthetics to satisfy the taste and vision of the designer or artists and perhaps an elite few who can appreciate their efforts is typical of the end result of most of the publishing experiments with Morris's theories as practice in the U.S. The production of exquisitely designed and handmade books in the U.S. remained to be an elitist concern on both sides, production and consumption. The longest lasting effect was not on social order but on the book as a cultural object.

Many designers, printers, and social activists in Europe and the U.S. were inspired by Morris's and Cobden-Sanderson's work at their private presses and championed their socialist ideals through their own efforts: creating societies, investing their work in the studio with a clear commitment to excellence in both materials and design, and instituting socialist prac-
tices in the workshop. In the end, however, the Arts and Crafts movement succumbed to the dark predictions of both critics and proponents: the focus on social action was lost and all that remained were the finely made objects that only the rich could afford. Boris contends, however, that though they lost to industrial systems of production,

. . . the existence of the craftsman ideal still questions the necessity of the current organization of production. The hegemonic culture tends to contain and trivialize efforts to oppose it, but moments still occur when the utopian element breaks through, offers inspiration. Put into practice, the vision of Ruskin and Morris lost its utopian power; as a vision, however, the craftsman ideal has retained an emancipatory potential for the individual, if not the society. (193)

Boris's comment that it is Morris's “vision” that provided the lasting legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement while the praxis failed does not take into account that it was the praxis, the practice of his ideology, that inspired the thousands of people to accept the ideals of a different ideological paradigm because of his success in producing cultural artifacts that traveled great distances and carried in their pages, covers, and typography a visual argument for a new scopic regime. Even though the receiver of the book was at a wide remove from the maker—all the handwork and collaborative workmanship that produced them could not erase the fact that the reader had to unpack the work alone—the message the book sent by the nature of its form was clear: the way books are designed and made at this present moment in time is a product of modernity and not the only, or even the best, way to do it.

While failing to kindle a radical return in the production of goods from the factory to workshop, it was form of the arts and crafts book (and the textiles, tiles, etc.) that created the images and iconic details necessary for the accretion of a competing scopic regime that can challenge the dominant way of seeing not only once, but as a source that future generations can return to as an alternate way of seeing long after its ascendancy has passed. Without the
physical reminder of the forms that the practical application of the ideology took, the perva-
siveness of the vision would diminish exponentially.
Chapter 4: A New Scopic Regime for a Better World

The way information is packaged and presented in the early twenty-first century is connected to the avant garde movements of the early twentieth century. There were multiple protests that coalesced into movements, many brief in duration, that challenged the scopic regime across the West. This chapter will focus on the thread of dissent to the scopic regime raised by the Suprematists, explored by the Constructivists, codified into the New Typography, and carried forward by Swiss designers into the International Style we recognize today.

Of the avant-garde interested in the form of the book as an agentive vehicle for social change, the Futurists and the Dadaists made enormous contributions in exploding the aesthetic form. The avant-gardists who created the groundwork for multiple ways of seeing that last to today, however, were those who were more concerned with the form of the book as a functional object that existed not only as art but also as a useful object that permeated the lives of the masses, such as de Stijl in the Netherlands, Vorticism in England, and, especially, Constructivism in Germany and Russia.

Constructivists were above all Utopians. They believed that by deriving the underlying, universal, and mediated elements expressed through geometric forms without reference to the concrete world, they would unlock the “plastic language” that could transform the world through the social agency of art and the design of everyday objects.

The Soviet Constructivists extensively experimented with book design to promote a new social order. This movement followed close on the heels of Russian Futurism, a nonconformist movement characterized by hand-drawn typographic experiments, collage, and creative book binding. According to Margit Rowell, from 1910 to 1919 individuality and handcrafting were highly valued in Russian book design. The books were then produced on whatever scraps of paper could be found in impoverished Russia, including wallpaper (50). The Russian futurists experimented with typography by contrasting printed letters with those written by hand as a way to show how form can shape meaning (Reading Lessons 114). These experimental books
were largely abandoned after the October 1917 Revolution. By 1920 all inventive efforts with the book in Russia were driven by ideological goals.

Constructivism was a relatively short-lived movement that disintegrated by 1930 and was succeeded by Soviet Realism. During the 1920s, however, many avant-gardists in Europe and Soviet Russia systematically investigated “the fundamental constituents of visual expression, from line, color, and form to space, light, texture, and volume” (Rowell 51). There was a wide range of opinions and practices that emerged from these experiments. The fusion of theories and practice offered by the Soviet Constructivist avant-garde was founded on the idea that the effective organization of materials was the key to a better social order, whether in architecture, industry, or book design.

The book, no less than a chair or table, fit into the category of useful everyday object that required a complete redesign informed by rational organization and intended to be mass produced for the proletariat populace. Soviet Constructivist book designers attempted to dismantle individual expression, symbolism, and academic formal traditions in typography in favor of an ideologically driven and plastic visual vocabulary with an emphasis on technological production advances so that they might create books that would help the masses enter into a more perfect communist state (Rowell 180).

Many of these designers were more rightly called artists, especially perhaps Varvara Stepanova, Natalia Goncharova, and Liubov’ Popova, who participated in the Russian futurist movement with a focus on the book as art more than tool for social change. Within the new genre of Soviet Constructivism, these artists turned into “book constructors” and used their skills in book design to help shape their society (Compton 130). While hand lettering still appeared in Russian book designs well into the mid 1920s, the Soviet Constructivist book cover was mainly characterized by flat color, strong horizontal and vertical lines marking textual or image compartments, and a strong machine aesthetic (Compton 77). By constructing objects like books without reference to tradition or symbolism, the Soviet Constructivists believed
they could change the intellectual orientation and beliefs. The books were supposed to be in tune with the new age and serve the people. The early 1920s were years in which a better world seemed just around the corner of revolution:

Constructivism dreamed of a world where industrial production would help to respond to the question of social inequality, where mass poverty would be eradicated by recourse to machines, and where the artist would jettison “art for art’s sake,” and place all artistic practices in the service of the revolution.

(Jubert 334)

The dream of the Constructivists was an early attempt to bring into being a union of aesthetics with politics and industrial production that would result in a mediated, multivoiced embodiment of modernity.

Constructivism flourished for a time in Germany. Though many artists and designers in Europe during the 1920s were at some time affiliated with Constructivism, the most prominent in relation to typography were El Lissitzky, László Moholy-Nagy, and Jan Tschichold. All were interested in typography as a way to shape future social realities, though in different capacities. Lissitzky sought to use typography as a transformational tool that would jolt people out of one scopic regime to another leading to a new world order without boundaries, for instance between artists and designers or politicians and philosophers. Moholy-Nagy also committed to a utopic vision believed that typography could transform, but he sought a new set of rules that would make it an efficient and powerful servant of technology and science. Tschichold sought to standardize the experimentations into a system that could be adopted by graphic designers everywhere.

In his book *Swiss Graphic Design*, Richard Hollis offers an elegant summary of the origins of new visual grammars for typography laid down in the early twentieth century, specifically between 1923 and 1928. He marked these years as the cradle for modernist typographic treatment because of three important publications: Lissitzky’s essay “Topography of Typogra-
phy” in *Merz* magazine in 1923, Moholy-Nagy’s essay “The New Typography” in a Bauhaus exhibition in 1923, and Tschichold’s book *The New Typography* in 1928. All three were based in Germany during these years and had some affiliation with the Constructivists.

**EL LISSITZKY’S WORK IN DESIGN WAS CENTRAL TO THE NEW SCOPIC GRAMMAR**

The circumstances of Lissitzky’s life and education laid the foundation for the international vision of design and typography that emerged in his mature work. Lissitzky was a Russian Jew born in 1890 in a small Jewish community nearby Smolensk, Russia. Though he passed the qualifying exams, Lissitzky was denied entrance to the Petrograd Academy of Arts, probably because he was a Jew. Giving up all hope of becoming a painter, Lissitzky decided to study architecture. In 1909 Lissitzky went to Germany to study in Darmstadt where he honed his skills with ruler, set-square, and compass and became an accomplished draftsman (Lissitzky-Küpper 28). During this time, Lissitzky traveled around Europe searching out forms and structures that inspired him and was exposed to the work of Marc Chagall, Walter Gropius, and other avant-gardists. Immediately after taking his final examinations in Germany and the outbreak of World War I, Lissitzky returned to Russia where he received a degree in architecture and began practicing in 1916.

After the end of the anti-Semitic czarist regime in 1917, Lissitzky’s work in book design began with *Sikhes Kholin* (Small Talk) also called *A Legend of Prague*. This was his first attempt to impact social realities through design. Lissitzky was one of many Russian intellectuals and artists who sought to create a cultural identity for Russian Jews who had long been an oppressed minority in their country. His work in children’s picture books was an attempt not only to make available the stories of their own traditions but to open up the wider world of creativity to his young readers. It was a secular effort to shift the Russian Jewish identity to a cosmopolitan and modern perspective. This attempt to mediate between his identities as a Jew, a Russian, and an artist is typical of his interest in the erasure of boundaries.
In 1919 Chagall as principal of an art school in Vitebsk ask Lissitzky to join as a professor of architecture and head of the applied arts department. During his brief tenure there, Lissitzky met Kasimir Malevich.

Malevich was the foremost proponent of Suprematism, the rejection of natural shapes in art for a new geometric form that will allow the visual perspective to advance to infinity (Lissitzky-Küppers 20). Through these geometric forms Malevich sought to embody a universal and communal truth that comprised the natural and figurative without making actual reference to them. The Constructivists attempted to create a praxis from this theory.

Margolin argues that Lissitzky operated from the linguistic model of utopian thought that sought to “transcend the object, to identify it as a marker of human thought,” a model that was inspired in large part by Malevich’s Suprematism (10). There is agreement that though Lissitzky was passionate about social revolution, he was at best conflicted about the Stalinist regime and his role in it as an artist-constructor (Margolin 23–25, Bois RR 165). The new way of seeing that Lissitzky attempted to institute was not for the Soviets alone. It was meant to be used globally by everyone whose lives were being affected by the emergence of technology. It was to be a new, plastic visual paradigm that would integrate with the world of technology, exploding old forms into new ones capable of serving a new world order.

Up until the 1930s his work, particularly his “Prouns” (paintings and installations that subjected architectural elements to Suprematist ideals) and exhibition designs, had a distinct international look. Lissitzky did not seek to create the formulaic rules that would define a new visual grammar. He was more concerned with jolting the reader into a transformative state through strong visual designs that would deliver an electric jolt straight to the brain. Lissitzky did not join other modernists in seeking to develop a new functionalist aesthetic. He sought transformation.

Lissitzky was not interested in the rebus. His typographic experiments were far more sophisticated. One shape did not equal one concrete meaning. The point was to call attention
to the signifier as being at a remove from the object and to challenge the reader to deeply engage with the book. He accomplished this by constructing books, not as complete messages, but as riddles (RR 167). The riddles he posed were based on both visual and typographic cues.

**Lissitzky’s First Book Designs Were for Yiddish Picture Books**

Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, Lisstizky’s widow, describes the typography of his Yiddish picture books as “architectonic” (20). They are laid out on the page to create frames for the illustrations and decorations. Over the next two years, he went on to illustrate and design seven more Yiddish picture books. After the second book, his designs focused on presenting his illustrations, abandoning the text entirely.

The illustration style of Lissitzky in these books is an interesting blend of folk art and Cubism (Fig. 4). The flat colors and strong curves look like a modernist translation of the woodcut. The mystical influence of Chagall is highly evident in the illustrative style, but whereas Chagall’s illustrations are static Lissitzky’s illustrations already possess a strong capacity to denote motion. Chagall’s pages are highly traditional: Text neatly ordered in one column with an illustration bounded by a broken ruled box on the opposite page. In Lissitzky’s books,
the layout organizes space into a distinct feature of the page, sometimes interweaving the text and image as in *The Mischievous Boy* or creating strong shapes out of lines of text as he did in *The Hen that Wanted a Comb*.

The mysticism that is the essence of transformation and the elemental lines of motion in his Yiddish picture books are precursors to the vectors and dissolution of traditional perspective that he develops as a mature designer in his later book designs and *Prouns*.

Lissitzky’s aesthetic shift from the Chagall-like figures and nostalgic book designs to the modernist visions of Suprematism and Constructivism was sudden. As Bois wryly writes, “The “Jewish revival’ was replaced by ‘revolution in art’; little people flying over rooftops were replaced by geometric cubes and volumes floating in infinite space” (RR 164). Rather than interpreting this as a young artist’s fickleness or susceptibility to outside influence, it is further evidence of Lissitzky’s depth of belief in transformation. His ability to stride toward a new interest without being tied to what he did before is an unusual trait that somewhat explains why he held to his belief that social action through design was achievable.

In his 1923 “Topography of typography,“ Lissitzky declared that typographic mechanics should change to suit content, the “inkstand and goose quill are dead,” and called for a tran-
scendence of the book to “THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY” (355). He was frustrated by the ability of the production technology of the early twentieth century to capture his book design ideas and longed for a more direct path from the eye to the brain:

Gutenberg’s Bible was printed with letters only; but the Bible of our time cannot be just presented in letters alone. The book finds its channel to the brain through the eye, not through the ear; in this channel the waves rush through with much greater speed and pressure than in the acoustic channel. One can speak out only through the mouth, but the book’s facilities for expression take many more forms. (358)

Lissitzky expected the book to one day transcend the form laid out by Gutenberg, which he described as “a cover with a jacket, and a spine, and pages 1, 2, 3 . . .” in the same way that theater leapt onto the screen. He believed his experimentations, however, would only be a step on the way to this transformation. His books were intended to give the youth of the world a new “plastic language” that would turn into a new basis, untainted with the failures of the past, to create the better world of tomorrow. He was not interested in a set of rules that would produce expected results as many formalists of his time. Instead, Lissitzky sought to erase the lines between genres. Lissitzky believed the illustrated weekly magazines were a step toward the new form of the book, one more plastic and able to keep pace with the speed at which the world was moving in modern times. In fact, he saw modernist posters as potential pages in a book that with some new binding could capture the modern spirit (Life and Letters 357).

Lissitzky’s experiments with Suprematism brought the mind of an architect alive on the page. One of the most powerful innovations in book design, Lissitzky invested axonometric perspective into illustrations. To accomplish his axonometric book designs, Lissitzky used grids, various geometric volumes, lines of all weights and textures, and a new treatment of horizon. The horizon line no longer existed on his page. It was transported off the page into
some unknown infinity that visually demanded the reader to bring their own interpretations and perceptions to the unpacking of the book.

In a 1927 essay written for the International Gutenberg Society’s yearbook (Gutenberg-Jahrbuch), Lissitzky wrote about his vision for the future of the book:

We know that being in close contact with worldwide events and keeping pace with the progress of social development, that with the perpetual sharpening of our optic nerve, with the mastery of plastic material, with construction of the plane and its space, with the force which keeps inventiveness as boiling-point, with all these new assets, we know that finally we shall give a new effectiveness to the book as a work of art. (359)

Lissitzky sought to explode the form of the book so that the text and images would combine into a force that would issue forth from the page and inspire action in the reader. The book no longer held an entirely “one-way conversation” from the author to the reader. Lissitzky brought to the surface that the book was a disembedded symbolic agent produced via an expert system that carried a message of social change.

**Of Two Squares Was a Children’s Proun for Revolution**

The work of Lissitzky is some of the most cited in literature about avant-garde design. Anders writes that Lissitzky carried Constructivism abroad and turned it into an international movement (45). His work on Suprematisticheskii skaz pro 2 kvadrata v 6ti postroikakh (Suprematist Story about 2 Squares in Six Constructions) is considered a masterpiece of avant-garde book design. In the opening pages of his book *Of Two Squares*, Lissitzky immediately contradicts the reader with the first words of the book after the title page: “Don’t read, get paper, rods, blocks, set them out, paint them, build.”

*Of Two Squares* was intended to be read aloud. Lissitzky was interested in experimenting not only in blurring the lines between painting and typography but also in the conjoining of expression through senses: sight with sound:
... [In 1922] Lissitzky differentiated Prouns from the negative consequences of imitative expressionist art, claiming that the Proun was an articulation of space, energy, and forces rather than aesthetics. This definition made it easy for him to link the Prouns to the new values of science and technology... It also separated Lissitzky’s work from any taint of Communism and made it acceptable to show in galleries and art societies... in Berlin... and Hanover.

(Margolin 68)

Lissitzky’s Proun 1 E, The Town, 1921, has a resemblance to the reorganized structure in his book Of Two Squares, conceived in 1920 and published in 1922. Lissitzky sought to blur distinctions between art forms, including his own. A children’s picture book, Of Two Squares has red and black geometric shapes on a white background. By eschewing traditionalist forms and using these modern shapes, Lissitzky sought to give children a “new plastic language... with a different relationship to the world and space... and to color” (137). He sought to free the youth of Russia and all children everywhere to fulfill a destiny different from the one he inherited through the power of book design.

The belief Lissitzky had in his ability to change the intellectual orientation of children and thus the future of society through book design might seem strange to some of us in the early twenty-first century. Now, information flows from many digital sources, but in the early twentieth century, the book was still the primary source of authority. Lissitzky’s choice of the book may also be a reflection of his ethnicity: the book, in particular the Torah, is a fundamental feature in

Jewish culture. Margolin argues that *Of Two Squares* is most compelling as a vehicle for social change and linked it to the tradition of the Torah by pointing out that they are both intended as a guide for action (38). *Of Two Squares*, however, is also the embodiment of Lissitzky’s goal to create a new mode of reading that does not rely on Gutenberg’s model.

*Of Two Squares* was a step toward the new bible of his time as he referenced to it in “Topography of Typology.” Without numbered pages, regular columns of text, or a firm spatial perspective, the book demanded a great deal from its reader. By confronting readers with radically changed text and shapes in one of the most potent symbolic tokens of his time, Lissitzky sought to jar people from a passive role into that of an active participant. The shapes and text required that the reader to wake up and engage with her world.

*Of Two Squares* has inspired strong analysis from design and art historians over the years. In his 1979 essay entitled “El Lissitzky: Reading Lessons,” Yve-Alaine Bois contends that *Of Two Squares* carried a “Trojan horse” within its pages that subjected the reader to a “rape” of the intellect (120, 128). The great deception Bois refers to began with El Lissitzky’s integration of the poster into the form of the book. Using strong visual forms in place of text allowed Lissitzky to perpetrate a trick on his reader by creating an elision that would go unnoticed through the use of color and a kind of perverted rebus. Interpreting *Of Two Squares* as a simple rebus ignores the experimental work Lissitzky was attempting. At the time he constructed (1920) and published (1922) the book, Lissitzky’s work did not use the colors red or black to represent any single meaning. They were instead used as points of contrast and to excite the optic nerve as pure elements, which is in keeping with Constructivist principles. Bois’s attempt to read the Suprematist design as a work of propaganda from the Stalinist regime of the 1930s is the result of immature scholarship.

Bois’s position on Lissitzky’s work developed into a more balanced perspective when he wrote a review of a Lissitzky exhibit in 1988. In his review Bois argues that *Of Two Squares* was never intended as a picture book. It was a textbook, a primer for a “new plastic language”
that could keep pace with the new technological driven world (359). Bois’s new perspective may have been informed by the concurrent rise of the International Style, which was founded on Constructivist innovations.

For the Voice Merged Function and Form in a New Way

Lissitzky designed a new kind of book for Mayakovsky’s book of poetry Dlia golosa (For the Voice or To Be Read Aloud). The design used color and typographically constructed illustrations to amplify the text, but it also infused the book with motion and emphasized the sensual connection to the reader.

The form of the book was designed so that the reader could quickly flip to the page of the poem to be read. The fore-edge of the pages were cut on steps that guide the reader’s fingertip to specific poems in the book. Each step was printed with the title of the poem and a symbol. The trim size (7-3/8” x 4-5/16”) fits nicely in the hand and is small enough to be tucked into a jacket pocket or personal bag. Tschichold, though a fan of Lissitzky’s Of Two Squares, wrote that For the Voice’s book design “reveal Lissitzky’s tendency to turn a book into a piece of technical apparatus” and was disappointed that he allowed the German compositor to use whatever type was at hand. Tschichold’s criticism highlights Lissitzky’s drive to turn his aesthetic work into a cultural object that would drive the action of the reader toward revolution. By amplifying not only the text

but also the functionality of the book, the reader’s experience would more closely approximate the speed of modernity.

**MOHOLY-NAGY COINED “THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY”**

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was a Jewish-Hungarian who served in the Austro-Hungarian army as an artillery officer. After the horrors of a trench war, Moholy-Nagy, like so many other intellectuals of the time, developed a strong sense of social idealism and pursued a career as an artist, primarily in painting. After spending time in various European cities, he settled in Berlin in 1920 where he met other artists who inspired him and with whom he worked toward a new social order. Principle among these associates were Lissitzky and, later, Tschichold.

In the early 1920s, besides painting Moholy-Nagy experimented heavily with photographic methods, developing the photogram. The photogram are photographic images made without a camera by placing objects directing on the photosensitive paper and using light to cast shadows. His exhibition of this work brought him to the attention of Gropius and began his association with the Bauhaus.

As the center of modernist design in Western Europe, the involvement of the Bauhaus in a new typographic visual paradigm was instrumental in its success. Led by Moholy-Nagy the Bauhaus offered a preliminary typography course that united type and typography (Heller 79). The catalog for the Bauhaus exhibition of 1923 was the prototype that set the tone for the New Typography (it also inspired Tschichold as noted below). In this catalog the typographic hallmarks of Bauhaus appeared: titles in large sans serif capitals, author names appearing on a vertical in the left-hand margin, bold sans serif types and thick structural rules for organization. It also contained Moholy-Nagy’s seminal essay on the new movement (Burke 34).

Moholy-Nagy’s “The New Typography” was his manifesto for a new way of designing written documents to be efficient, clear, and free of decoration. It was only by allowing the content of the text to dictate the form of the design that the most powerful acts of communication could be achieved. Holding to genres dictated by tradition trapped the text into a
prison of useless fluff, coming between the reader and the message: “We want to create a new
language of typography, whose elasticity, variability, and freshness of typographical composi-
tion is exclusively dictated by the inner law of expression and the optical effect” (21).

Like Lissitzky and other Constructivists, Moholy-Nagy emphasized the modern suit-
ability of the photograph over illustration for efficient communication. The photograph could
even replace words “as an unambiguous form of representation which in its objectivity leaves
no room for personal-accidental interpretation” (qtd. in Hollis 40). The pursuit of clarity and
form-following-function tied typography and graphic design to the level of competing scopic
regimes based on sensuality and reason rather than ethereal perfect forms that followed
unseen harmonies. One form could not be said to be superior than another if they both were
based on the kairotic requirements of their instantiations. These concepts were picked up and
an attempt was made to codify them by a man called both the leading modernist graphic
designer and the first typographic postmodernist: Jan Tschichold.

**JAN TSCHICHOLD CODIFIED THE NEW VISUAL GRAMMAR**

The work of Tschichold sought to establish new typographic standards—a new scopic regime
for printed documents—that followed from the experimentations of the early twentieth
century avant-gardists and suited the unique features of modernity. Though he credited
Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement with reawakening the “taste for pure typography
in books,” Tschichold rejected utterly Morris’s and many of those involved in the Private Press
movement attempts to reestablish medieval craft standards and aesthetics as a way to instill a
better social order (TNT 25). Turning away from the resurrection of dead forms, Tschichold
believed the Russian avant-garde had found a way forward through their experimentations
with Suprematism and Constructivism. This new way of seeing printed matter was founded
on the principles of clarity, rationalism, and functionality.

His passion for finding a new way of visual thinking led him to write widely and lecture
often on the topic from 1924 through 1933. One of those writings was entitled “Elementare
Typographie” (Elemental Typography) and published in the German trade magazine *Typographische Mitteilungen* (Typographic News) in 1925.

Tschichold published *Die Neue Typographie* (The New Typography) in 1928. This book was a manifesto for the typographical treatments put forward by avant-gardists like Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, and himself. The perspective Tschichold put on the matter, however, was decidedly from a German Constructivist point of view. Rather than a way to liberate the proletariat as Soviet Constructivists pursued, German Constructivism expressed itself as “a sensibility of rationality, economy, and precision” (Margolin 77). His aim was a social action of a different sort. Instead of seeking to liberate the minds of the masses, Tschichold’s *The New Typography* had much more to do with convincing practicing designers and printers of the necessity for adopting new typographic standards as the best way to harness the most power for communicating in a modern world. His book sought to set the basis for standards that, once

![Figure 8. Jan Tschichold’s calligraphy for Hölderlin’s *Hymne an die Freiheit*, 1919. *Active Literature: Jan Tschichold and New Typography*. London: Hyphen, 2007: 20–21.](image)
fully explored and accepted, would bring the kind of social order necessary to free designers and printers to move to new heights of creativity and production.

Tschichold was aware of the inherent paradox in this goal. Though he was more assertive about standards for books of technical content, those he offered for creative works were often hedged. For instance, on his recommendations for appropriate trim-sizes for novels he offered only a potential beginning point: “It seems necessary to find a stand format also for novels, corresponding to the way they are used. . . . Perhaps we should standardize only their page depths, e.g. 176 mm depth for novels” (TNT 228). Tschichold's underlying motive for *The New Typography* was a search for clarity in a modern world increasingly buried in a surfeit of printed matter. For Tschichold no less than Lanham believed that attention was the scarce commodity in a modern world.

The essence of the New Typography is clarity. This puts it into deliberate opposition to the old typography whose aim was “beauty” and whose clarity did not attain the high level we require today. This utmost clarity is necessary today because of the manifold claims for our attention made by the extraordinary amount of print, which demands the greatest economy of expression. (TNT 66)

Tschichold’s argument that a new relationship between document and reader is based on a feature of modernity we still live with today: we have too much stuff to sift through easily. Lanham's wry use of the term “fluff,” however, is in direct conflict with the aims of New Typography. Tschichold's search for clarity was an effort to eliminate the fluff of design and cleave to a rational way of ordering typography and the physical form of the book in a way that quickened the conduit (the eye) between content and the mind of the reader. The designer’s mandate in New Typography was to create “develop its visible form out of the functions of the text” (66–67).
Unlike Morris and Lissitzky, who were both architects, Tschichold was trained in the
craft of design and printing. The son of a sign painter, he was born as Johannes Tschichold
on April 2, 1902, in Leipzig, a center of the German publishing industry. After studies geared
toward teaching art, Tschichold switched to calligraphy and entered the Staatliche Akad-
emie für graphische Künste und Buchgewerbe (State academy for the graphic arts and book
production). He was already an accomplished calligrapher upon entering the academy at
seventeen. In fact, he designed two poetry books in the series titled “Palatino” during his first
year. Printed by lithograph from texts written out by calligraphers, this was quite an honor
for a beginning student. His style at this point is extremely classical and followed the work of
his country’s master calligraphers at the time that sought to revitalize the German tradition
letterforms, essentially gothic in nature.

During his years at the academy, Tschichold mastered the classical traditions of both
forming letters (typography) and book design. In 1923 he took a train ride that changed his
work dramatically. He traveled to an exhibition in Weimar and discovered Bauhaus.

Inspired by the revolutionary ideas he saw displayed in various forms, Tschichold sought
to build relationships with the avant-gardists spearheading the modernist movements. The
first successful contact was with the Hungarian Constructivist László Moholy-Nagy, who was
in charge of the preliminary course at the Bauhaus at the time. Tschichold’s change of name
from Johannes to Ivan (or Iwan, depending on his spelling mood) dates from 1924, publicly
signaling his newfound devotion to contemporary Russian design (Burke 25).

Tschichold quickly took hold of the new visual vocabulary laid out by the Suprematists
and Constructivists and started working toward his own vision of the new typography. A
poster he designed for Warsaw publisher Philobiblon has a strong resemblance to Lissitzky’s
title page for Of Two Squares that was published in 1922.

The influences between them are clear. The curve as it joins the vertical in the ‘P’ was
sketched with a subtle break, though the printed version is a solid gray. The short lines of text
set at a diagonal create similar lines of motion. The adoption of Lissitzky’s form of the ‘P’ is an interesting example of a graphic element emerging from a title page in a book to a large poster. The element had been successfully translated into a new use. The experimentations with the new forms in new uses were an important step toward a shared praxis. Where Lissitzky used typography as a way to seek revolutionary transformation through experimentation with form and type, Tschichold sought to standardize the avant-gardist discoveries.

Moholy-Nagy may have coined the term “New Typography” in the Bauhaus exhibition catalog of 1923, but it was Tschichold who formulated it into a workable praxis and promoted it in professional circles. Prior to the release of The New Typography, Tschichold edited a special edition of the magazine Typographische Mitteilunger. In the twenty-four page issue printed in red and black ink, Tschichold introduced the professional world of typographers to his vision of a typography first formulated by the Bauhaus, grounded in rationality and meant to function in the modern world.

In “Elemental Typography” Tschichold wrote that “the New Typography is based on what is shown in the logically consistent work of Russian Suprematism, Dutch New-Plasticism and especially Constructivism” (qtd. in Hollis 36). Tschichold introduced the readers to his vision for the typographic future with eight pages of Lissitzky’s Of Two Squares reduced
and placed in the outer margins of the opening spread. The rest of issue held illustrations from Herbert Bayer, Schwitters, and other contemporary designers.

Tschichold’s ten principles of the New Typography centered around functionalism; urgency; rational organization in page design, line, and type; value of space; vertical and diagonal lines as well as horizontal; exclusion of ornament; standard paper formats; and an openness to new typographic discoveries.

Tschichold’s brilliance is not in the same vein as Lissitzky’s. He did not lead the exploration of square and circle as the elemental forms of typography. There were many others who engaged with at the exploratory level of discovery of forms and their relationship to the optic experience. Tschichold, on the other hand, was able to gather together the modernist visions and theories for typography and create a rational and workable praxis.

The New Typography gathered support relatively quickly, but Tschichold’s views on typography were not universally embraced. He was at times publicly mocked, though he lectured constantly to student and professional groups in an attempt to persuade them to his

views. As one journalist who reported on his lectures wrote, “If the seeds did not always fall on fruitful ground, the new ideas will nevertheless break through, as is already shown by the numerous pieces of work in the new manner” (qtd. in Burke 61). The response from reviewers to the publication of *The New Typography* in 1928 was minimal, though it did sell out by 1931, which carries a measure of success. The measure of Tschichold’s success is better measured by the influence he had on typography and graphic designers in the latter half of the twentieth century.

**EXPULSION FROM GERMANY**

The shift of power in Germany and Russia ended the freedom of expression the avant-gardists required for their experimentation with ways of seeing through the book. The seizure of power by Hitler and the National Socialist party in 1933 scattered the Constructivists. El Lissitzky returned to Russia, Moholy-Nagy went to Chicago, and Tschichold resettled in Switzerland.

In Stalinist Russia El Lissitzky put his talent to work designing exhibitions and posters in support of the new totalitarianism. He abandoned the experimental work that informed *Of Two Squares* or *For the Voice* as agentive social vehicles that supported progress toward a utopia and turned his visual designs into sheer propaganda, each a “non-critical artifact” that “served the established power” (Radical Reversibility 175).

Moholy-Nagy arrived in Chicago in 1937 to begin his tenure as director the New Bauhaus: American School of Design. When the school closed after one year, he founded a new school, the School of Design, that survived until 1944 when it was reorganized and named the Institute of Design. Moholy-Nagy directed the Institute of Design until his death in 1946.

The three instances of Moholy-Nagy’s school of design undergoing a re-invention of identity while attempting to hold to both its aesthetic and social ideologies is a reflection of the difficulties he had integrating the Constructivist ideals with the expectations of American supporters, mainly businessmen, who wanted application to capitalistic industry. The Bauhaus ideology emphasized the transformational education of students, which demanded a liberal
education toward the formation of designers capable of drawing universal and socially relevant insights to inform their professional work. Designers so educated would be the driving force behind product development, but American businessmen did not share this perspective. They expected industry to lead and designers to follow, to make the products they made palatable to the American taste.

Moholy-Nagy ultimately lost this battle. His socialist ideals inspired individual students but his socialist ideals were eventually erased from the Institute of Design by succeeding directors (Bauhaus Archive).

Jan and Edith Tschichold were arrested in Germany in March 1933. Though she was released after a few days, he was held for several weeks by the Nazi government as a suspected communist. One Nazi report referred to him as a “bolshevistically disposed graphic designer” (qtd. in Burke 138).

Because he was not a Jew, Tschichold and his family was allowed to emigrate to Switzerland after his release, where he achieved the unusual feat of adapting to Swiss culture and language and was awarded citizen rights in 1947. From the beginning of his residence there, the Swiss had no taste for his asymmetrical typography. Working entirely in book design, Tschichold began to swing back toward classical designs, though he never entirely reverted to the traditionalism of his youth. His typography became more nuanced, and he wrote far less about the “spirit of the time” or any social awareness at all (Kinross in TNT xxxvii). His professional associations were no longer with the Russian revolutionaries but with the “new traditionalists” of England, such as Stanley Morison. In 1937 he began to sell his collection of modernist typography and by 1938 was a harsh critic of modernism in typography. He often said that there was a kindred spirit behind the New Typography and Nazism and sought to distance himself from it till his death.

The New Typography never reached the ruthless level of exclusion and rigidity Tschichold claimed. The relationship he saw between the two is stretched at best. The grounding in
form emerging from the specifics of content and functionality have little in common with the Nazi imposition of traditionalist values drenched in racism and sped along with technology. Perhaps Tschichold remembers his vocal and tireless support of the New Typography as being absolute and blind, as he was to the ugly realities of Nazism before his arrest and expulsion.

Tschichold’s repudiation of his modernist work after his emigration to Switzerland is especially puzzling because it is there that his codification of the New Typography had the greatest impact. Designers in Switzerland carried on the work started by the Constructivists. In the 1950s they became known as the “Constructive” movement in direct acknowledgement of their debt to the Constructivist movement in the 1920s. The Swiss Design movement carried the visual grammar of geometric forms, sans serif typefaces, and grid layouts into the latter half of the century and has become the common visual language in both hemispheres, inspiring its other name “International Style” (Hollis 260).

The International Style is the result of decades of experimenting, demolishing, rebuilding, and promoting the visual experiments of the modernists. Though the Swiss got the movement rolling, designers and artists from many parts of first Europe then Asia took part in its formation. The pervasiveness of this visual grammar cannot be overestimated.
Chapter 5: Toward an Ocular-Eccentricity in Later Modernity

The avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century gave us a powerful visual grammar and a legacy of combining aesthetics with social action. Through the codification of the New Typography, Suprematists and Constructivists forged a new and lasting relationship between text, image, and reader with more capacity to channel the power of modernity and cut through the cacophony of information and objects. This way of coping with visual information has been adopted in countries around the world. The International Style is the closest thing we have to a global scopic regime, and because it is constantly being challenged, changed, and reinvented, it is has remained a vital part of communication practices.

The Constructivist conviction that designers should determine the best form of a product is no longer the alien view in the U.S. that it was in the 1940s. Organizations like Apple have found a market for their design-driven products. In the book publishing world the evidence of the modernists is obvious. In *Making Books* Alan Bartram considers the design of modern titles in light of the need for a renewed emphasis on classical design skills and sensibilities. While his reverence for traditional book design “rules” is the cry of the professional

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designer for respect to craft in the upcoming generation, he presents interesting examples of modern book design.

The book design for *The Sculpture of David Nash*, as shown in Fig. 10, has evident influences from Swiss design: subtle controlling grid, sensitive use of white space, and an overall sense of restrained order (Bartram 148). The design is entirely centered on the needs of the content. The subtle elegance of the underlying grid and functionality allow the pictures of Nash’s sculptures to have the dominant space without creating an unbalanced page.

A casual glance at a random selection of titles on Amazon.com will find many examples of visual elements that come from the avant-gardists. The book covers in Figures 13 and 14 are fairly typical of current titles, and their links to past experimentations in design is clear. *Living Systems* uses a dark and cool color palette lit with electric greens and blues, a sans serif typeface, an underlying grid, a strong horizontal line, and razor thin ruled box very much from the Swiss style. *Gardening When It Counts* uses a warm and earthy color palate with mixed typefaces (serif, sans serif, and italic) layered around and over a natural looking graphic that evokes the work of an artisan. The designs work because they amplify the content and posi-
tion the information to capture the attention of their intended audience. These designs are not trying to confront the reader or to shift their perspective in any way. They are communicative and in agreement with the scopic regimes the work within. In fact, they are good examples of regional publishing paradigms: *Living Systems* came out of Basel, the center of Swiss style; *Gardening When It Counts* was produced from British Columbia, a Canadian province with strong ties to countercultural movements that resist commercial domination.

Though an extension built on the radical investigations of the Constructivists, the practicality of Swiss design has more influence on modern book design than its avant garde originators. What was once experimental became part of the production and consumption of mass-produced goods (Kinross 135). The Arts and Crafts influence on book design is still alive in a small number of private presses that continue to publish. The book designs that both challenge the reader toward social change and are widely available are likely to be found today in odd niches.

**THE SPIRIT OF THE AVANT-GARDE IN THE NEW CENTURY**

The book *Rules of the Red Rubber Ball* by Kevin Carroll is about social change through empowering the individual to pursue his or her dreams. He wanted the design of the book to embody his vision: handmade and full of life and energy. Though produced by a commercial publishing house with no handwork rather than crafted by a small private press, the design of the book imitates the rough, artisan quality of a handcrafted book while using the elemental shapes of Constructivism to underscore the universality of its message of social change and is available at a cost within reach of a very modest budget.

The Arts and Crafts movement may not have effected a sweeping return to handmade objects and the elevation of skilled craftsmen to the highest level of society, but their work gave form and enough sustenance to their vision to keep their alternate version of the highest value alive to this day. The spirit of the movement that traveled so well as beautiful books had a lasting effect in the U.S. in both book design and social activism. The most concrete
evidence of the lasting social effect of the Arts and Crafts influence is still Hull House. One of Chicago’s largest social service agencies, it carries on its Arts and Crafts’ inspired mission of social service through the vision of a world that centered on social justice, respect, and the belief that everyone is capable of contributing to the community given the opportunity.

The utopian vision of the Constructivists has been oddly realized. The “plastic language”—the abstraction of the specific into universal form capable of erasing local and national differences—has become absorbed into a global communication vocabulary used by advertisers, architects, and designers the world over, though more often in pursuit of profit than social justice.

**SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND DESIGN**

Promoting the idea that the use of aesthetics to shift social realities is either ineffectual or, when blended with hegemonic power, brutal is an excellent way of silencing people whose only tools of protest are words and images. The attempt to promote a way of seeing counter to the dominant culture through the design of objects that people can use and share has consequences. These consequences may be unexpected or even counter to the original intent of the designer, but that is hardly a reason not to make the attempt. The idea that an act should be taken only if the intended consequence is immediate and powerful is unworkable. Most changes in any social organization come in very small shifts and only after repeated attempts from a number of individuals. The more serious threat is that commercialization co-opts the countering vision, waters it down, and sells it as part of the dominant regime. While there
may be no way of avoiding this sublation entirely, there are possibilities for agency.

Some designers still work with book design to challenge the dominant scopic regime. The book design in Fig. 16 was created as an educational piece to show graphic design students the rich possibilities in environmentally friendly printing. The book was printed on one thousand posters that were gathering dust because they were printed too late to do their work. The images were created by scanning garbage or hand-sketches. This book has a truth in materials that fulfills the Arts and Crafts ideal while capturing the needs and realities of the present day. The use of recycled materials is reminiscent of Russian Futurists’ use of wallpaper to print their work due to a lack of paper.

Because the book has lost the dominant position of communication in Western culture, however, most future challenges to dominant scopic regimes will increasingly take place elsewhere. Independent filmmakers have been working within this paradigm for decades. The Internet has also, of course, broadened the availability of tools and distribution channels for practically anyone to post their vision. The skill to create a visual message powerful enough to cut through the abundance of stuff published and the rare ability to synthesize the available visual grammar into a vision understood by the intended audience does not come with the computer software or the monthly Internet access fee. The skills are usually hard earned. On top of that, a certain amount of luck is needed to find the intersection of agentive possibili-
ties that allow for a new or minority scopic regime to push forward. The visual and content designers able to effect the greatest change are also the most employable and most likely to work for industry.

In the U.S., a country dominated by corporate industry, the forefront of this struggle is met by designers who package and sell products. A nonprofit organization based in British Columbia, Adbusters, though not universally acclaimed as the spokes-site for all forward-thinking designers, keeps the focus on the debate about what social responsibilities designers have. Their manifesto entitled *First Things First 2000* is an updated call to social action first conceived by Ken Garland, a British designer, in 1964. The updated version from Kalle Lasn and Chris Dixon of Adbusters advocates for a “reversal of priorities” from branding and commercial product promotion to “more useful, lasting, and democratic forms of communication” (qtd. in McCarron 113). Adbusters condemns the consumer culture that relies on greed and the creation of spurious desire, which is fanned by the many talented designers and writers. The manifesto asks designers to stop creating false images that make stuff into something other (usually better) than it is and feeding the consumerism that is destroying the planet. The manifesto was criticized as flawed and naïve, even by some of its supporters. Thirty-three, however, of the world’s most accomplished and influential designers—including Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, and Ellen Lupton—signed. They all agreed that whatever the manifesto’s flaws, the debate over what role visual designers can and should play in social change should be an ongoing, active, and organized part of being a professional visual communicator.

Not everyone who builds a web site, produces a poster, or designs a book is capable of cutting through the cacophony of messages and stuff to get our attention and make us see something in a way other than the usual. But when confronted with an object or message made in a way that requires a shift perspective to understand it, the viewer who successfully engages in the mediation between complex and ideologically driven manifestations of com-
peting ways of seeing is supporting a discourse field that may be contentious but is open to new perspectives, challenges, and a better world.

The avant-garde struggle to dismantle the dominant scopic regime is unfinished. Their work struck the first shattering blow against the tradition of holding to only one correct way to see, but the proliferation of data and commodities has muddled the issue. People may believe that the sheer volume of stuff has created an “anything goes” cultural climate that makes an avant-garde statement impossible. This is true if the definition of the avant-garde is based on being able to shock a complacent middle class out of outmoded traditional values. However, if the role of the twenty-first century avant-garde is to build competing scopic regimes that can survive the pressures of hegemonic flattening, those who package the stuff and information of our culture have a heavy responsibility.

The social agenda of the Arts and Crafts movement failed, according to Boris, because the craftsmen were largely employees of industry. They, in other words, were not independent contractors who could form organizations powerful enough to negotiate with businesses for their rights and to promote a vision for fulfilling their professional roles ethically. They served the industrial machine. In the U.S. designers, editors, and writers still largely play a subservient role to marketing and production. However, working for the industrial machine is changing in important ways. The current trend is moving toward a less traditional relationship: more self-employment, a diverse set of employees either telecommuting or coordinating from distant locations, and employees working for several employers over their career. This new configuration will take part in the recursive nature of structuration, supporting the existing organization but also creating an opportunity for a new dynamic or at least a small potential for agency.

If Lanham is correct that we are in an age that has shifted its power base from the production of resources to the aesthetic filtering of information and things, there are now agentive possibilities for those who choose the materials and create the aesthetic presentation
of the information and products of our time—writers, editors, and designers—if they choose to engage.
Works Cited


“Fine Book-Work.” *Printers’ Register*. 6 November 1882, 82.


