

THOUGHTS ON THE POSTER

by Armin Hofmann

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A primary objective of my work with black-and-white posters is to counteract the trivialization of color as it exists today on billboards and in advertising. Paradoxically, I believe that one is more likely to develop a better perception of color by looking at the subtle harmonies of black-and-white images than by looking at the multi- and overcolored illusions color photography often creates. The super-realistic likenesses that appear in television and in advertising fail to create the contrary or counterimages necessary to engage the viewer's participation. Such literal translations hinder constructive thinking, absorption in the subject matter, and poignancy of recollection; they are ultimately counterproductive, producing no afterimages that continue to exist in memory.

I also intend my posters to serve as reminders that, in affluent societies in particular, the danger of a tendency towards excess always exists, especially within the mass media. The idea of limitation or restriction, therefore, takes on new meaning. In the realm of visual communication, excesses of expense and pomp do not necessarily lead to gains in clarity, a realization that is of particular importance in advertising.

In any discussion about the future of the poster or in any speculation about the opportunities that can be expected from modern communication techniques, one must not overlook the astonishing work that has resulted from the birth of lithography. Lithographed posters fulfilled, and in principle continue to fulfill, the most important demands imposed by the large format: visibility, simplicity of message, originality of form, singularity of color scheme, and intellectual clarity. The ferment that emerged in the posters as well as in the painting, the music, the architecture, and the design of the turn of the century may well have contributed to the noticeably confident mood that distinguished the beginning of the machine age.

Because the designer no longer executes his visual ideas manually but rather realizes them mechanically by means of electronically controlled cameras, his relationship to content and expression, to form and color, has changed. The photographic image has, therefore, altered the whole of sensory perception. Today we stand before a situation not unlike that which medieval man faced at the start of letterpress printing. The photographic way of seeing that has developed in contemporary industrial society seems to call our entire communication structure into question. An object represented photographically in black and white demands symbolic interpretation; any abstract traits, however, disappear completely when color is introduced. To go from the black-and-white to the color photograph quite certainly does more than merely add a broader dimension.

Color has driven photography entirely from the domain of reading and banished it to the realm of viewing. The image in color photography acquires an authenticity that seems comparable to life itself. The advertising artist and the advertising expert in particular have succumbed to the temptation of simulating reality in this photographically exact and reliable way. The medium is too brilliant, too simple, not to be used falsely. Only a few designers began to investigate thoroughly the phenomenon of photography at the dawn of its age; those experiments were abandoned too quickly and the circle of people ready to pursue photographic research was too small to enable the poster to renew itself against the background of photography. The rapid advance of color

photography made it seem untenable to question what the medium might really be about. People were already busy with the next phenomenon: the movable color image on the television screen. Another reason for my interest in the use of black-and-white in design lies in my intense preoccupation with the forms and analysis of signs and symbols. The countless objects and elements of daily life have become more and more materialistic and naturalistic—but are represented and perceived less and less sensually. In order to experience objects not just superficially but also symbolically, the objects must somehow become dematerialized. Through the removal of color, objects become neutralized and as interchangeable as letters of the alphabet. Above all, I am interested in the way an object changes in meaning when its context changes. Saussure referred to this transformation when he said, “What a sign includes in its concept is less important than that which, in the form of other symbols, exists around it.” My preoccupation with visual signs and symbols has led me to make a series of posters in which different kinds of signs meet and reciprocally influence one another. In my work as a teacher, I have attempted to investigate the phenomena of semiotics and to introduce my students to the meaning of simple confrontations. When reduced to black and white, the processes of contrast and confrontation become clearer, more understandable, and easier to learn—as much for the designer as for the audience.

In elaborating upon my thoughts about the symbolism of objects and things, I would like to add a few reflections about photographic images. The color photograph, in particular, plays an important role in advertising. Today, food products, clothing, tools, instruments, and the like are captured predominantly by the camera. The desire to have the most lifelike representations of advertised objects is fostered and encouraged by the photo industry, simply and primarily because its ultra-advanced technology permits such things to be done. Highly refined equipment allows the professional designer and the amateur photographer alike to create—without laborious preparation, training, or consideration—so-called perfect pictures. The ease with which super-realistic likenesses can be produced makes them difficult to resist; but the current trend toward their use discourages the forging of creative and unconventional paths. To an increasing degree, the technique decides how everyday objects should look in advertising. In a sense, then, the dominating effect of such images can permit them to have a voice in the appearance of reality. Mankind thus begins to perceive the environment only through a representation of it. The letterform receives its formal impact and optimal readability from the contrasting effects of light and dark. The transparency of the letter shape is particularly important to me because basic forces of creative work underlie the letterform, especially in the relationships between the shapes of the letters and the images. Thus, lettering is by no means a neutral medium for the transmission of information. It leads to the reorganization of the object it describes at that moment when the two aspects—the object and its description—meet. Semiotics deals in scientific detail with the background of these phenomena of meaning. Current research is, however, limited almost exclusively to linguistics; little is being done to explore its practical applications in design. Another essential concern of mine, which leaves its imprint on my work in design and otherwise, is to keep all aspects of the project in my own hands as long as I can: in other words, to plan the entire process to continue as much as possible without interruption from start to finish. Furthermore, I like to determine from the outset that the project will culminate in reproduction methods that are as technically simple as possible, that the influence of the machines involved will serve both the project and the process to the utmost.

Perhaps one could challenge me by arguing that my working methods do not correspond to the spirit of the times or that to ignore the newest techniques and possibilities of the trade is a regressive attitude. In some ways, such a reproach is indeed legitimate; but it nevertheless underscores the fact that I have confidence in humanistic development and a belief that every human work should exist in the highest possible fulfillment of its meaning.

The influence of money, which one must earn through one's work, endangers this critical relationship between the work and its ideal manifestation. If financial gain ultimately becomes more important than the product to be created, one will no longer be able to speak of work that fulfills a higher meaning. When industrial working methods divide aspects of design that belong

together, fundamental principles of design may be compromised. In any case, to call attention to the tragic breach that has occurred in mankind's relationship to modern working methods is a matter of extreme importance for , me. In my own work, I feel compelled to set an example: to cultivate a corner of unity and to struggle against dismemberment and fragmentation in the field of design. (Translation: Lisa Pomeroy)