Explorative Research and Praxis

Modernism in art and design

This is the modern world

Modernity in western and Chinese culture

‘Modernity in the “Western” context is a product of the historical and cultural forces that produced the Enlightenment, forces of European histories and cultures that were different from those of China.’

The modernisation of China and the Chinese critique of modernity

(Revista HMiC, número IV, 2006 pp.8)

It is worth noting that the growth of Modernism that is traced here is that of the western experience. A study of Chinese Modernism would make an interesting research topic in itself.

The context of all art and design.

No design or artwork can be considered to be created in isolation.

All work has a cultural and historical significance.

Objects and ideas have a relationship with things that surround them.

Every history has a theory that shapes the way it is communicated.

Every theory has a history of how it has come into existence.

All art and design practice is situated amongst other practices.

This practice is embedded into cultural, political, economic and philosophical frameworks.

Studying this context helps us to become active, independent researchers.

Some words you may wish to research

Culture

Context

History

Deconstruction

Theory

Commentary

Framework

Culture

The start of the twentieth century.

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century the development of modern, western, industrial societies, through the rapid growth of cities, influenced a dramatic cultural and philosophical transformation. Driven by the economic prosperity and an improved quality of life populations increased exponentially in cities.

The new 20th century century hailed in a new era.

We have come to understand and identify the artistic, cultural and social characteristics of this period as Modernism.

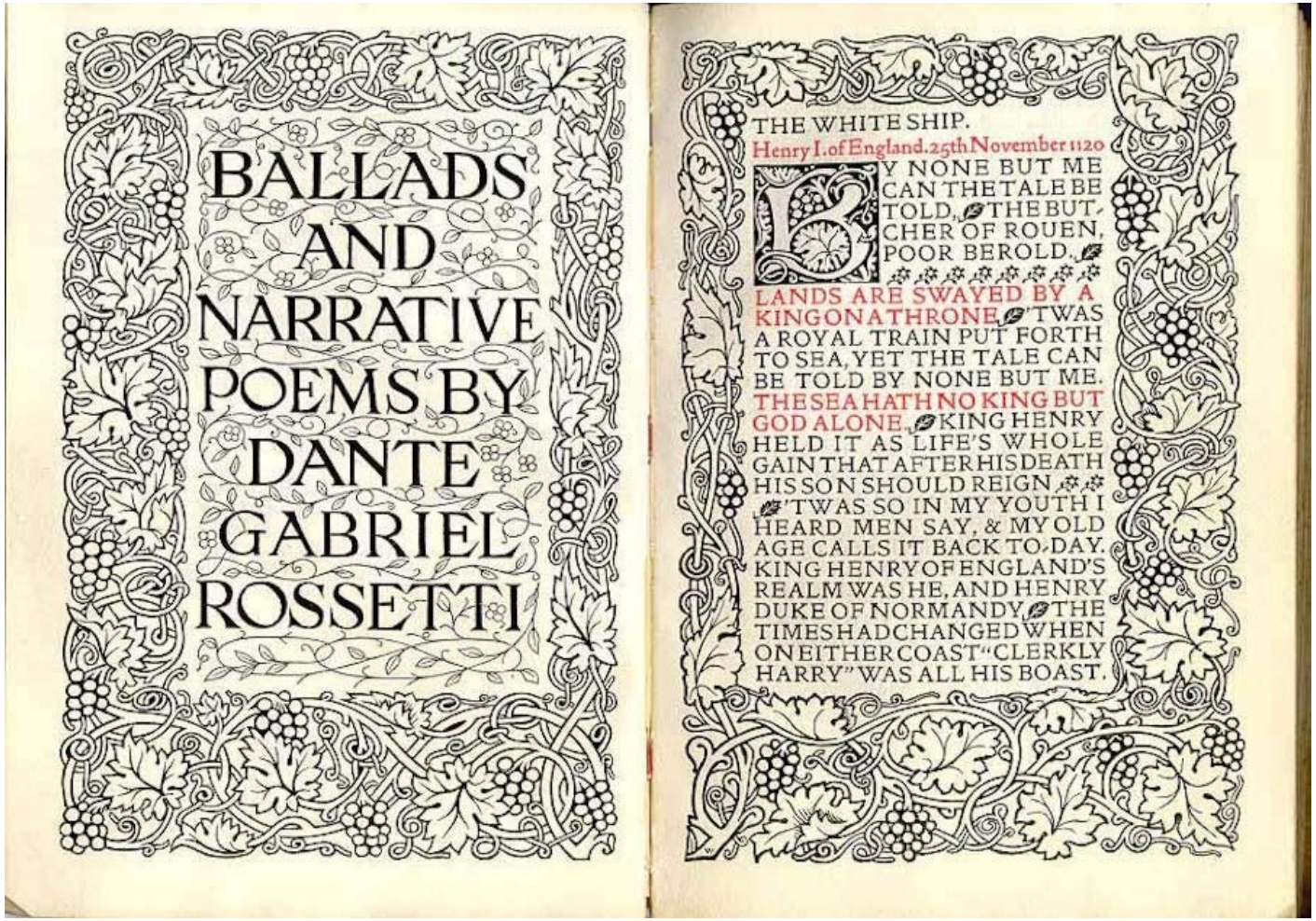
The Modernist principle.

The intention was to promote progress and change in order to improve living conditions and society. At the time it was largely perceived that society had become lethargic, artificial, preoccupied with image and resistant to change.

In the creative arts it was the Arts and Crafts movement and Victorian decoration that as perceived to be culturally fashionable.

Modernism in contrast offered new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing, and new ways working.

Arts and Crafts book design.



Printed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press and published by *Ellis & Elvey*, 1893

Arts and Crafts manufacture.



John Henry Dearle Wallpaper



The William Morris Chair

The Modern period.

The period of Modernity (Modernism) is commonly understood to have begun in the 1900's and concluding some time between 1940s and the 1960s. However it's ethos, practices and approaches are still very much influential today through art, design, architecture, literature, philosophy, social organisation and science.

An interconnected concept.

Modernism was and is an ‘idea’ as opposed to a ‘style’.

It promoted the idealism of a utopian society. Its’ founding principles believed that improvement could be achieved by progressive approaches to art, design and architecture.

It occurred at a very specific time in history, and sits within a cornucopia of many fragmented art and design movements.

Modernism was the collective, identifying title for the singular united vision of a brave new world. (This is worth remembering when we look at postmodernism in a future lecture.)

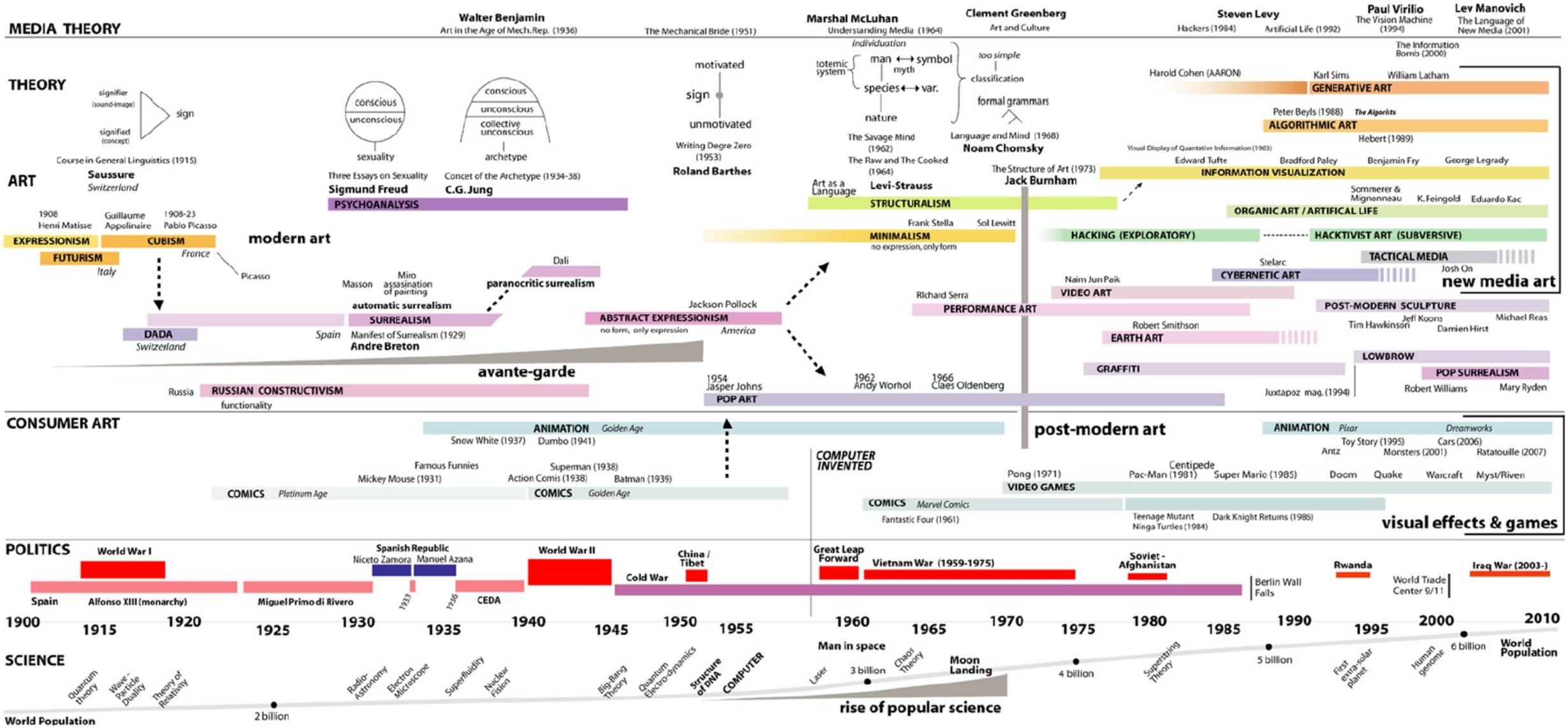
Modernist movements

There are a number of art and design movements that took place throughout this period that explicitly supported many Modernist ideals:

- **Fauvism** - a style of painting with vivid expressionistic and non-naturalistic use of colour
- **Cubism** - art movement in which perspective with a single viewpoint was abandoned in place of simple geometric shapes,
- **Futurism** - rejected traditional forms and embraced the energy and dynamism of modern technology.
- **Vorticism** - influenced by cubism and futurism and favouring machine-like forms.

- **Constructivism** - where assorted mechanical objects are combined into abstract mobile structural forms.
- **Suprematism** - characterized by simple geometrical shapes and associated with ideas of spiritual purity.
- **De Stijl** – Dutch art movement that favoured an abstract, economical style and was influential on the Bauhaus and constructivist movements.
- **Dada** - movement in art, literature, music, and film, repudiating and mocking artistic and social conventions and emphasizing the illogical and absurd.
- **Surrealism** - avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images.

These sat amongst an even much broader cultural context.



Rama Hoetzlein, *Timeline of Twentieth Century Art and New Media*, 2009-2010

Architectural influence

The inequalities in Western society and the occurrence of war were fundamental in creating the Modernist agenda, and this was driven in many ways by the architectural needs to respond to the housing crisis across Europe.

Louis Sullivan – ‘Form follows function’

Prior to the twentieth century the Modernist mantra **form follows function** was actually first used by architect Louis Sullivan in his 1896 essay *The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.*

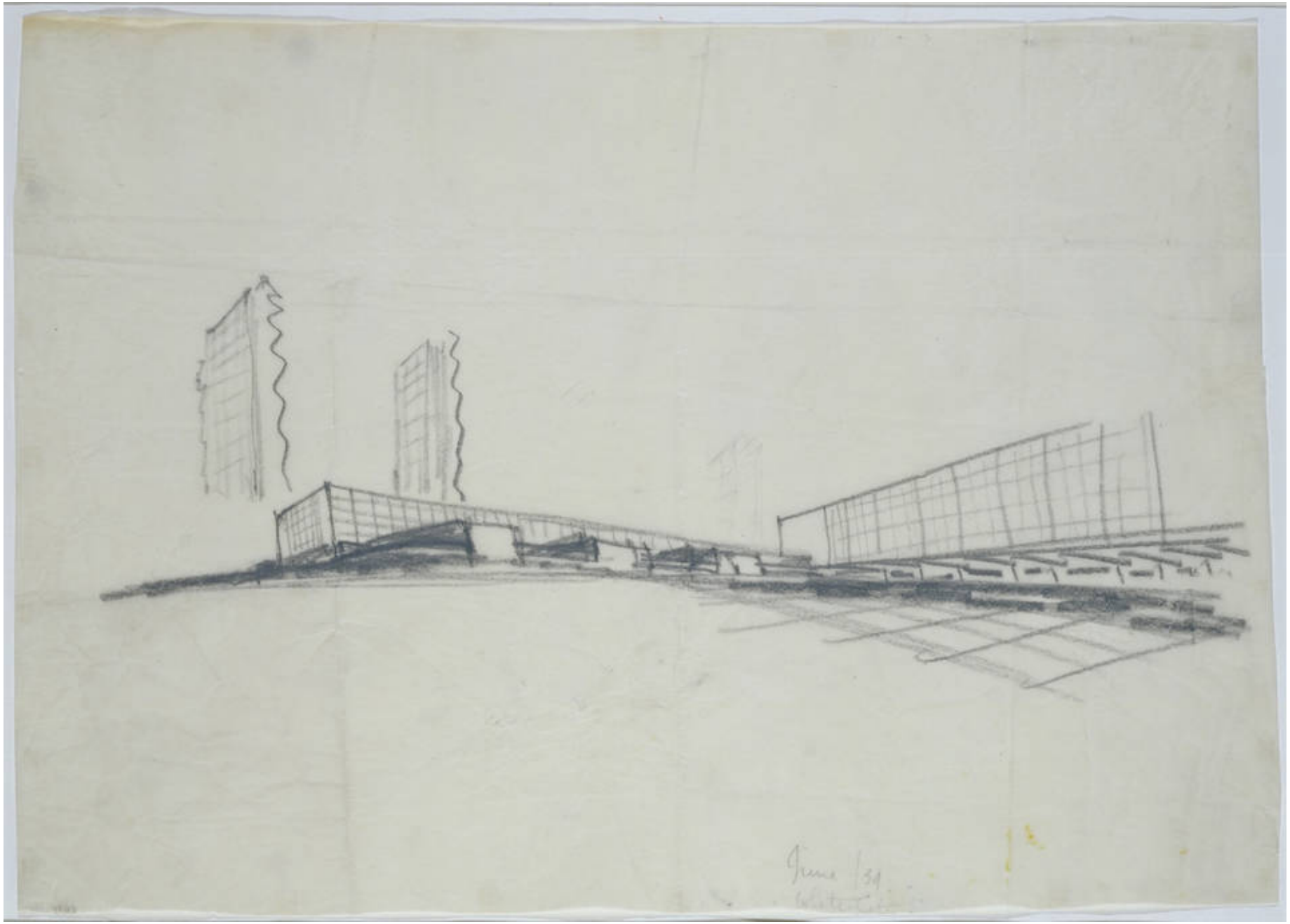
The point he was making was that a skyscraper's exterior design should reflect its’ interior functions. The skyscraper was introduced during this period and was a radical change in the building of cities that is still with us today.

The Wainwright Building in St. Louis, Missouri, is an excellent example of the time. Essentially, this was the principle followed thereafter whether it was in architecture, furniture design, graphic design, typography, product design, and even literature and music.



The Wainwright Building in St. Louis, Missouri. 1891

- Designers and architects such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Erich Mendelsohn and Walter Gropius were fundamental to this process of creating functional living for large populations.



White City housing scheme, drawing,
Eric Mendelsohn, 1934.

Progress

By using new materials such as concrete, glass and steel, machines and mass production could help build a utopian society. Function was central to Modernist principles an example being Henry Ford’s assembly lines for motor vehicles. Clean lines replaced decoration, practicality and usefulness would dictate the forms of production.

The effect on visual communication

Modernism introduced a new way of communication. Prior to the twentieth century communications, graphic design and typography were overtly ornamental and cluttered as the example we have seen from the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Modernism introduced structure, grids, negative space and sans serif typography to create a universal style that challenged commercialism.



London Underground Railway branding and signage.
Edward Johnston 1919

Constructivism

Of the many art design movements Constructivism was stylistically and theoretically significant to Modernist graphic design.

Constructivism began as a movement in support of the Russian Revolution. Alexander Rodchenko created propaganda in support of the Russian Revolution by combining political messaging with advertising.

El Lissitzky was also part of the movement and also embarked on the production of propaganda. In doing so he developed many of the rules of typography and design that led to the development of grid systems. He also pre-empted the significance of photography by implementing imagery into his designs realising the essential and important role it would have for mass communication and graphic design.



Alexander Rodchenko



El Lissitzky

The Bauhaus 1913 - 1933

In 1913, German architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969) founded the *Bauhaus* with the aim to reimagine the material world to reflect the unity of all the arts. Gropius explained this vision for a union of art and design in the *Proclamation of the Bauhaus* (1919).

The aim was to bring together the practices of architecture, sculpture, and painting into a single creative expression. Gropius wanted to bring artisans and designers together to create useful and beautiful objects appropriate to a new system of living.

The curriculum was taught by individuals such as Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Anni Albers, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, László Moholy-Nagy and Gunta Stölzl.

In line with the *Bauhaus* theory, students entered specialised workshops, which included metalworking, cabinetmaking, weaving, pottery, typography and wall painting. The schools work was driven by its' principle "Art into Industry."

At the school, typography was conceived an essential means of communication, with clarity and legibility being the major aim. This meant typography became increasingly connected to corporate identity and advertising. The promotional materials prepared at the Bauhaus, with sans serif typefaces and the inclusion of photography, have become visual symbols of the Bauhaus style.

(metmuseum.org)



Poster for the Bauhaus exhibition held in Weimar in 1923, by Joost Schmidt

‘Research in Development of Universal Type’ by Herbert Bayer, 1927.



Modernist development: The Swiss School

(Helvetica)

Swiss Design was a movement that started 1950s in two Swiss art schools, the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich, led by Josef Müller-Brockmann, and the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule in Basel, led by Armin Hofmann.

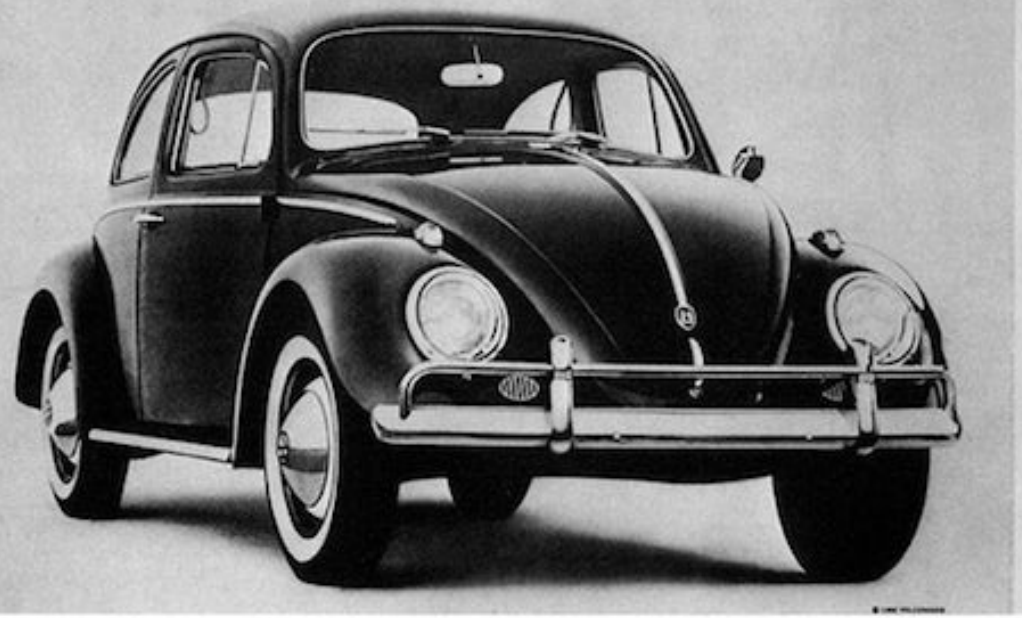
Their style developed to become the International Typographic Style and was guided by the principle that ‘design should be as invisible as possible. All traces of the designer’s subjectivity should be suppressed in order to let the “content” of a work shine through. It is similar to the axiom of architectural modernism that form should follow function.’


34 Street
Penn Station
1 2 3
Elevator at 34 St & 7 Av
Enter with MetroCard
all times or see ager

The birth of modern advertising

This Modernist style was quickly revered and reached the founders of modern advertising on Madison Avenue, New York. At the time Bill Bernbach and designer Helmut Krone were creatives at agency *Doyle Dane Bernbach* who created what is now considered to be one of the earliest examples of the modern advertising vernacular with their *VW Beetle* advertisements.

(99designs.co.u)





Lemon.

This Volkswagen missed the boat.

The chrome strip on the glove compartment is blemished and must be replaced. Chances are you wouldn't have noticed it; Inspector Kurt Kroner did.

There are 3,389 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job: to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. (3000 Volkswagens are produced daily; there are more inspectors than cars.)

Every shock absorber is tested (spot checking won't do), every windshield is scanned. VWs have been rejected for surface scratches barely visible to the eye.

Final inspection is really something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the Funktionsprüfstand (car test stand), take up 189 check points, gun ahead to the automatic brake stand, and say "no" to one VW out of fifty.

This preoccupation with detail means the VW lasts longer and requires less maintenance, by and large, than other cars. It also means a used VW depreciates less than any other car.)

We pluck the lemons; you get the plums.

Think small.

Our little car isn't so much of a novelty any more.

A couple of dozen college kids don't try to squeeze inside it.

The guy at the gas station doesn't ask where the gas goes.

Nobody even stares at our shape.

In fact, some people who drive our little flivver don't even think 32 miles to the gallon is going any great guns.

Or using five pints of oil instead of five quarts.

Or never needing anti-freeze.

Or racking up 40,000 miles on a set of tires.

That's because once you get used to some of our economies, you don't even think about them any more.

Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or renew your small insurance. Or pay a small repair bill.

Or trade in your old VW for a new one.

Think it over.

Contemporary Modernist Design: Peter Saville

Saville studied graphic design at Manchester Polytechnic. He is an art director and designer working in music, fashion, art and identity. His minimalist approach looks to identify simple images to ‘epitomize the moment’. He was inspired by the ‘early modern movement typographers such as Herbert Bayer and Jan Tschichold. He found their elegantly ordered aesthetic more appealing than the anarchic style of punk graphics.’

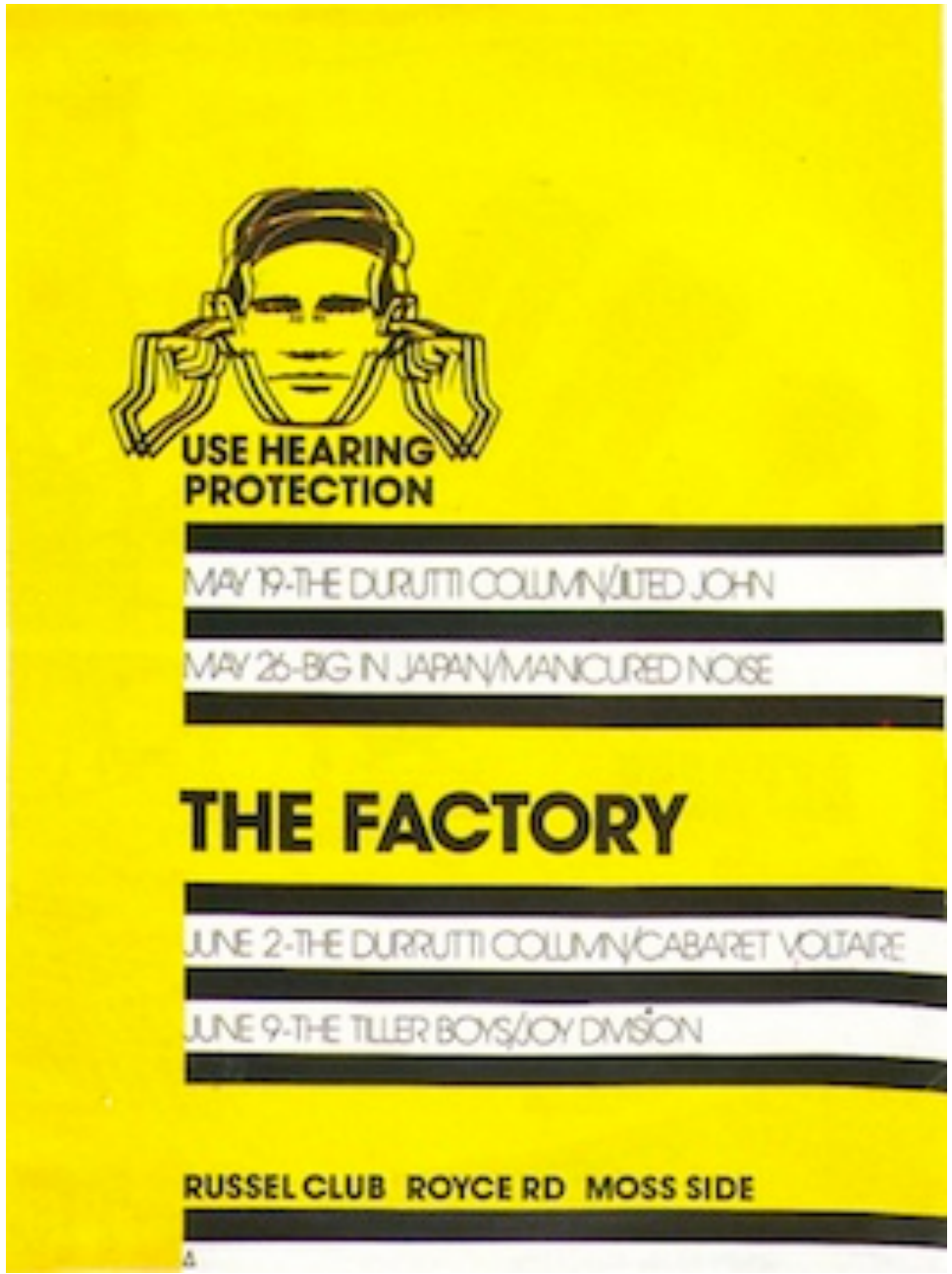
(designmuseum.org)

Unknown Pleasures
by Joy Division, 1979.

The vinyl album cover used an image from the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* of a pulse of electromagnetic radiation from a distant star.
A minimal expression of humanities isolation that was expressed in the music.

‘Having the title on the front just didn’t seem necessary.’
Peter Saville





The Factory launch poster, 1978.

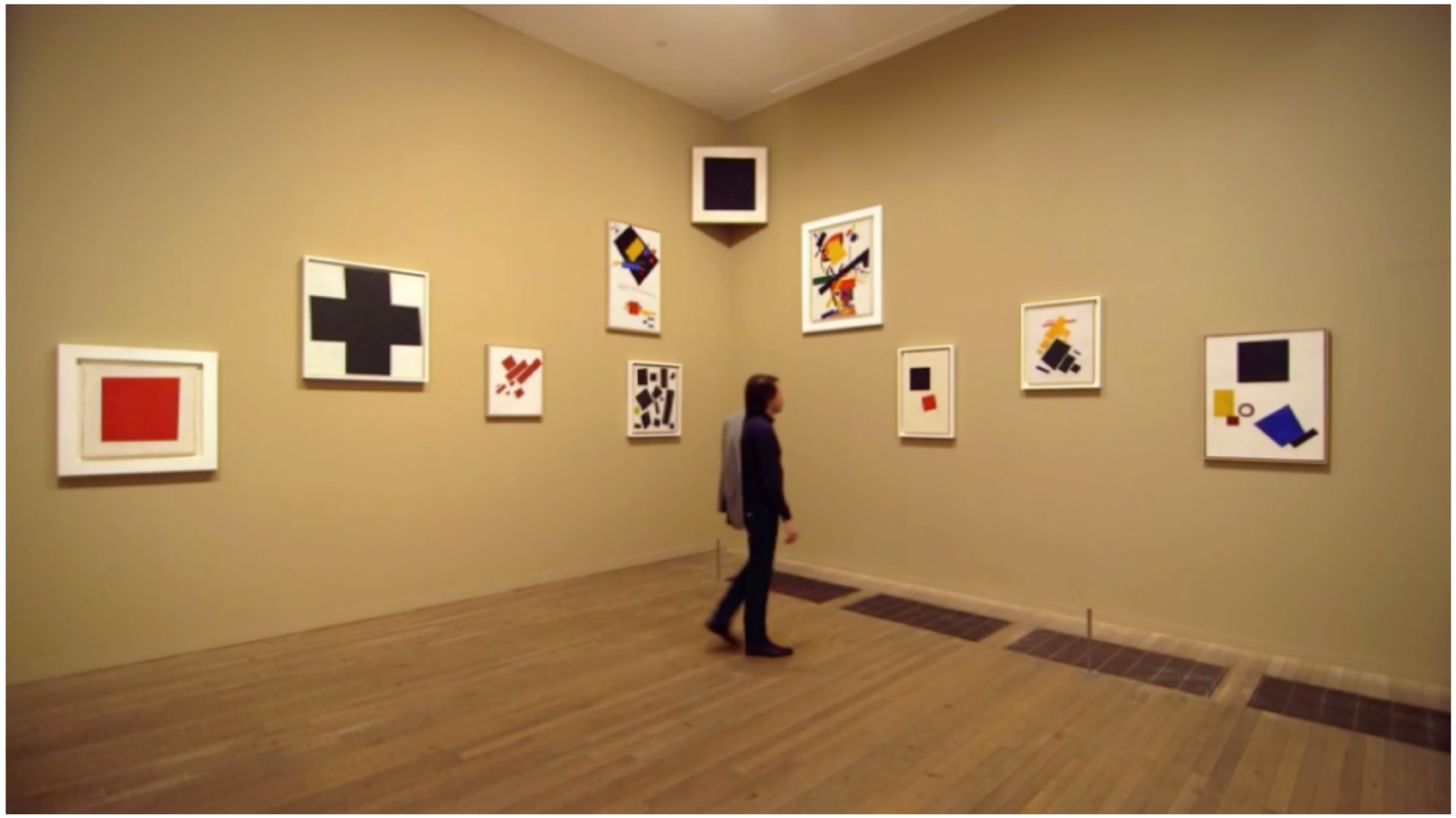
Having ‘borrowed’ a warning sign from his college, Saville re-appropriated the graphic style, typographical cues and colourways for the launch poster of a new Manchester nightclub he was involved with. In line with the functionality and order of modernism, he gave every project a code, this was FAC1



Saville is a great admirer of the modernist principles of the late 50s and 60s, especially the work of artist Yves Klein, and his 1958 exhibition *The Void*. Working alongside Trevor Key 'they applied their own take on Klein's concept of 'nothingness' using advanced photographic and printing techniques. This produced a beautiful series of sleek, silkscreen-style images for New Order's 1989 album Technique.' (designmuseum.org)

Peter Saville: Abstraction and Design

Peter Saville discusses the journey from abstraction to modernism and how it has been embedded through reduction into many mass produced products over the last 100 years.

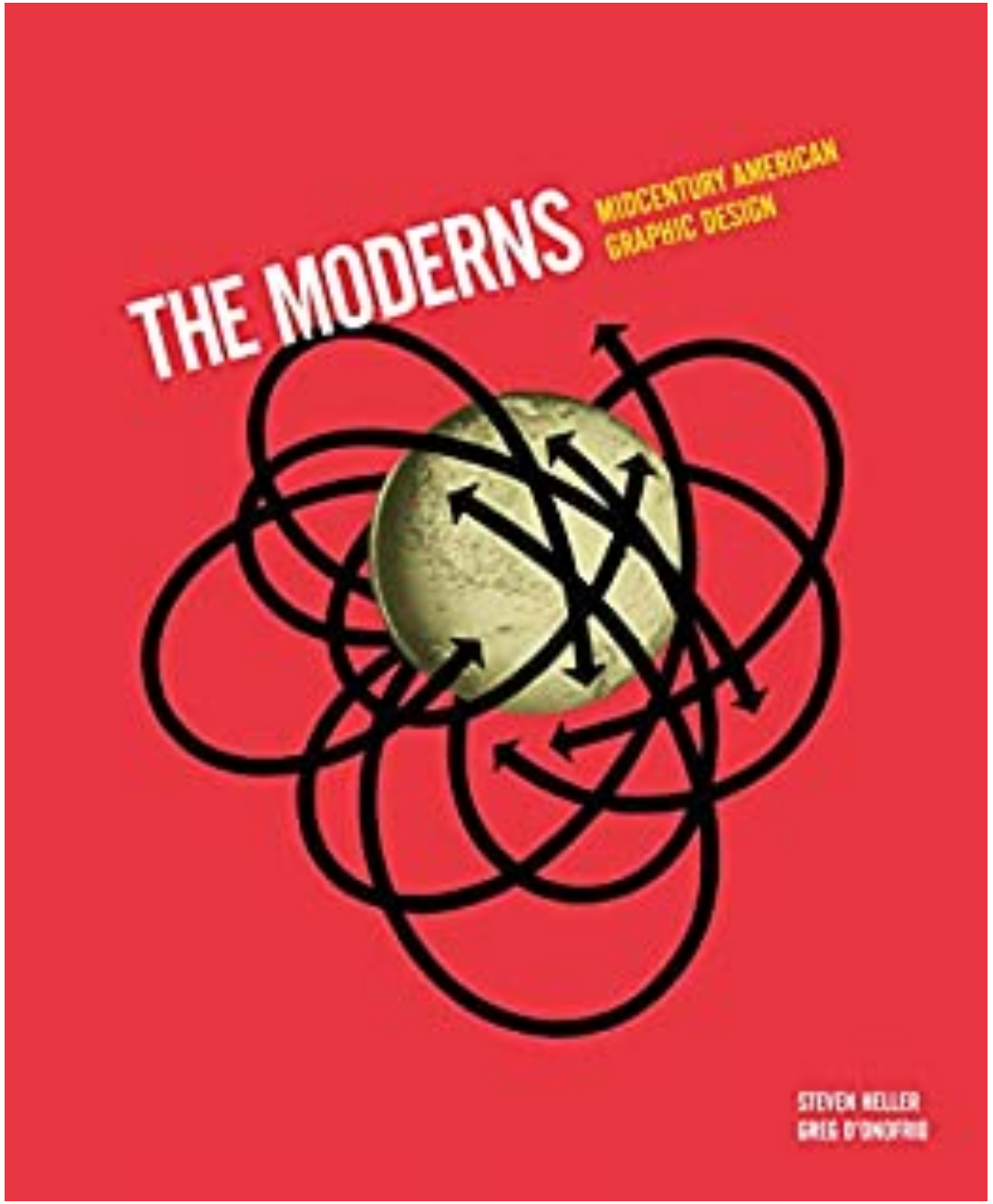


Steven Heller and Greg D'Onofrio.

In their 2017 book, *The Moderns: Midcentury American Graphic Design the authors* trace the cultural and design significance of Modernism:

'Virtually all good design in our world today is either an adaptation of the visual language of Modernism or a reaction against it, …'

'These varying viewpoints and methods bound by function, clarity and simplicity produced a distinctive graphic language which moved away from their political beginnings and emerged as an integral part of mass culture, for the purpose of selling products and ideas in the commercial and cultural arenas, …'



Steven Heller and Greg D’Onofrio, 2017.



Robert Brownjohn:
Si-Si, No-No
Machito & His Orchestra, 1957.

Arnold Saks:
Inflatable Sculpture,
Jewish Museum, New York,
1969



Music: Kraftwerk

‘We are the children of Fritz Lang and Werner von Braun. We are the link between the ‘20s and the ‘80s. All change in society passes through a sympathetic collaboration with tape recorders, synthesisers and telephones. Our reality is an electronic reality.’

Florian Schneider and Ralf Hütter, founders of Kraftwerk in Düsseldorf 1970. (radicalphilosophy.com)

KRAFTWERK – THE CATALOGUE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Jo Widoff, curator of the *Tate Modern* 2013 Exhibition, *KRAFTWERK – THE CATALOGUE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8*

‘For more than four decades now, Kraftwerk have explored the relationship between man and machine. In the museum galleries, Kraftwerk’s 3-D installation will initiate an electronic and conceptual dialogue with early modernism, something I am certainly looking forward to.’


TATE

Next lecture:

That was the modern world.

postmodernism