

Course: **HNC In Design – Graphics And Illustration**

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This essay requires me to consider the influence of a historical image on a contemporary one, and critically analyse how it has reflected, enforced, and informed current elements of Design. For this piece of work, I have chosen the historical image from the Bauhaus School - taken by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy for the cover of the 1927 "Fourteen Bauhaus Books" Catalogue (this will be referenced as Fig. 1). I will outline Moholy-Nagy's position in the Bauhaus School and the changes taking place there, his opinions on technology and his exploration of ways that photography and typography could intersect – known as Typophoto. The concept will be illustrated using Fig. 1, and then analysed against the contemporary image used in an advertisement for the National Exhibition Centre taken in 2000 (this will be referenced as Fig. 2). Consideration will be given to the changes in technology that have occurred between 1927 and 2000, and how these changes are reflected in Fig. 2. I will show how Fig. 2 has its roots in the opinions of Moholy-Nagy and his concept of Typophoto, and can be viewed as a revision of Fig. 1. I will also briefly discuss a modern advertising theme that can be perceived in Fig. 2.

Lazlo Moholy-Nagy was born in Hungary and arrived in Berlin in 1921. He was introduced to Walter Gropius the founder and director of the Bauhaus at the same time as Gropius was looking to change the direction of the School. "In painting, the theatre, cinema, poetry prose, and music, expressionism was declared dead and swiftly buried" (Whitford 1984, page 121). Expressionism was being replaced by a style that was "disciplined, sober and even conventional and for which the phrase *Neue Sachlichkeit* was coined" (Whitford 1984, page 121). To enforce the concept of "New Objectivity" at the Bauhaus, Gropius needed to employ new visionaries. Moholy-Nagy took over the development of the preliminary Bauhaus course, once Gropius had persuaded Johannes Itten to resign in 1922. Moholy-Nagy was "a committed constructivist" (Rowland 1997, page 138), who "scornfully rejected the idea of divine inspiration of art, of individual genius and of

art as private property" (Rowland 1997, page 138). His appointment was the first stage in a redirection that Gropius outlined in a public lecture given "during the Bauhaus Exhibition of 1923. It was on the theme 'Art and technology, A New Unity'" (Whitford 1984, page 132). One of the keys of this redirection was to embrace machines as "a means capable of producing for the public, beautiful commodities to provide an experience of quality in everyday life" (Lovejoy 1997, page 45).

Moholy-Nagy's opinions on machines and technology were documented in an essay written during 1922 entitled *Constructivism And The Proletariat*. He felt that "The reality of our century is technology: the invention, construction and maintenance of machines is to be of the spirit of the century. It has replaced the transcendental spiritualism of past eras" (Whitford 1984, page 128). His view of the machine combined with his interest in photography yielded the "integration of photography with text heralding the halftone process as the catalyst of a communications revolution" (Merrill C. Berman Collection 2001). This process became known as Typophoto. Writing in "Painting Photography Film", Moholy-Nagy expounded on the idea of Typophoto: "What Is Typophoto? Typography is communication composed in type. Photography is the visual presentation of what can be optically apprehended. Typophoto is the visually most exact rendering of communication. The Typophoto governs the new tempo of the new visual literature" (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 39).

I feel examining Fig. 1 provides a classic illustration of the concept of Typophoto. The image portrays a block of metal type bearing the catalogue title that will be used in a letterpress. This renders "the content of the communication in a directly visible fashion" (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40), whilst the letters on the block form the text in place of words, as a "precise form of representation so objective as to permit of no individual interpretation" (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40). The title of

the catalogue has been creatively incorporated into Fig. 1 without the need for additional typography. The block of text (the typography) is already subconsciously connected to the letterpress (the means of communication) without the viewer requiring additional stimuli. When placed together in Fig. 1 they form a “visual, associative, conceptual, synthetic continuity” (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40). Moholy-Nagy’s use of typography in the Typophoto is a good example of “clear communication in its most vivid form” (Bayer, Gropius, Gropius 1975, page 78). The striking use of a bold orange colour on the number fourteen, the geometric shape of the block of metal type, and the linear reflection of the block are “typical of constructivism” (Phaidon 1996, page 314).” I think this is an incredibly economical image that is able to suggest the idea of communication without having to show anything more of the process.

As the twentieth century progressed new technologies for printing and communication were being developed, leading to an information revolution providing “new ways to converse and new spaces to converse in” (Economist, Morton 1997, page 40). The changes caused a far-reaching change in the way information was transmitted as “Until technology set it free, information relied on people to carry it, to disperse it, to create it. Now information can be gathered by inanimate systems and filtered to human minds” (Economist, Morton 1997, page 43). Moholy-Nagy imagined a future where “tomorrow we shall be able to look into the heart of our fellow man, be everywhere and yet be alone” (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 38), and suggested that the idea of Typophoto could be “broadly pursued on another plane” (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40). At the turn of the century, this plane was the Internet and the cables that connected it to form “channels through which information and interpersonal contact can flow and mix binding together an otherwise dispersed and disparate population.” (Leiss, Kline, Jhally 1997, page 93).

Mirzoeff felt that the “dramatic expansion of the Internet since 1995 is motivated by a sense that the key contest in modern capitalism is the competition for media, pathways, forms of circulation” (Mirzoeff 1999, page 106). This attitude extends to the area of exhibition hosting where competition for business is intense. As one of the designers of Fig. 2 Jamie Harrison explained, “The NEC required a campaign that outlined the fact that they are the exhibition industry leaders (this was due to the arrival of Excel, the new exhibition centre in London). The NEC's campaign consists of three adverts; our concepts for these are heavily brand driven featuring the NEC at the centre of industry. For the Smart Choice ad which is in fact the second to appear in the press, the NEC was featured at the tip of the optical fibre” (Jamie Harrison - RMA Creative Communications 2001, Email). Fig. 2 informs us that the use of fibre optic technology will enable exhibitors and visitors to experience and use modern day technology such as high speed Internet access, video conferencing and data networking direct from their stand. Discussing whether the image within Fig. 2 illustrated the concepts of Moholy–Nagy and placed them in a contemporary setting, Jamie Harrison felt that “As a designer it is important to absorb all visual developments, and though our decision to execute this ad in one particular style was not directly inspired by the Bauhaus, we believe subconsciously it may well be so.” (Jamie Harrison - RMA Creative Communications 2001, Email).

Stripping away the additional advertising text from Fig. 2 allows a direct comparison to Fig. 1, and in my opinion shows a contemporary reinvention of Typophoto. The image within Fig. 2 portrays the raw fibre optic cable, which when utilised by computers passing information through it, allows the communication process to take place. This renders “the content of the communication in a directly visible fashion” (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40). For the typography, Moholy-Nagy required a “precise form of representation so objective as to permit of no individual interpretation” (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page

40). So instead of a visual display of binary ones and zeroes, actual text is displayed within the centre of one fibre strand. In Fig. 2, I feel that the use of a lowercase font that closely mirrors the style of the Bauhaus, the glowing bright orange used behind the text to add clarity, and the use of lines to split parts of the advert into rectangles again show basic Constructivist techniques, and closely integrate with the ideas expressed in Fig. 1. As in Fig. 1, the text has been creatively incorporated without requiring additional typography. The glowing data (the typography) located at the centre of the fibre is subconsciously connected to the communication medium (the means of communication) without the viewer requiring additional stimuli. When placed together in Fig. 2 they form a “visual, associative, conceptual, synthetic continuity” (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40). This continuity is enhanced by identifying with a commonly held perception of the networks of communication. Lovejoy suggests, “A network is a phenomenon which links together a wide range of disparate entities. It has no sides, no top, and no bottom. Rather it is many connections that increase interaction between all its components. It is open ended and non-confining with no beginning and no end” (Lovejoy 1997, page 214). Each strand of fibre represents a separate entity, bound together in a circular cable. We are viewing a cutaway of the cable, which shows multiple strands, and enhances the idea that a large number of individual communications are happening simultaneously to form a virtual network of communication.

In terms of modern advertising methods, Fig. 2 utilises the theme of magic as described by Judith Williamson. “Consumer products and modern technology provide us with everything ready made; we are always users, not creators; manufactured goods make up our world removing the need for any action from us. Such minimal action creates a magical spell element: from a little action we get great results (or are promised them)” (Williamson 1982, page 140). In Fig. 2 the exhibitors are being promised the ability to use efficient cutting edge tools

direct from their stand without having to worry about how the fibre optic technology will work. This also alludes to another of the ideas that Moholy-Nagy discussed in his 1922 essay on Constructivism And The Proletariat "Everyone is equal before the machine. I can use it so can you. It can crush me; the same can happen to you. There is no tradition in technology, no class-consciousness. Everyone can be the machines master or its slave." (Whitford 1984, page 128). I think the implication in Fig. 2 is that the technology at the NEC will work for you and that you will be in charge of it, whether viewing it or utilising it. A basic Constructivist tenet is also implied through Fig. 2, as it shows "The use of technological achievements for expanding the area of potentiality" (Bann 1974, page 106). By using the advanced communication technology available to them, exhibitors will be able to realise their visions, making it a "smart choice" of venue.

In conclusion, I see Fig. 2 as a direct descendent of Fig. 1, and of the redirected philosophy of the Bauhaus, both images representing "an abstract aesthetic of pure form connected to the function of the object" (Lovejoy 1997, page 45) and a celebration of the machine. Each image encapsulates the idea of communication via technology - Fig. 1 referring to the physical printing press, Fig. 2 referring to the virtual channels of modern communication. Each image illustrates Moholy-Nagy's idea of Typophoto where text is integrated into photo to economically display without the need for further explanation, and providing "an unambiguous rendering in an optically valid form" (Moholy-Nagy 1986, page 40). Each image also displays a typically Constructivist approach to the use of colour, design and layout. Further, Fig. 2 enforces current ideas regarding the potential of future communication technology, the information revolution and a modern advertising theme.

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