

Letter letter 3

F E B R U A R Y 1986

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Writing is a system of shapes. The shapes are closely related to each other, they are clearly distinguished from shapes which do not belong to the system. The shapes are as different as possible, they should not be mistaken for each other. This balance depends on perception. Perception might be taken for granted to a degree in education, but if it is neglected or even disturbed, education will result in illiteracy. It is even an effect of illiteracy to consider it as a semantic problem (the meaning of the shapes). Illiteracy is first of all a problem of perception. This is why Fernand Baudin wants 'to make everybody aware of the fact that any piece of writing is a good or a bad picture'. Letterletter 3 concentrates on the educational conditions of this project, the A B C programme.

PALAEOGRAPHERS are a strange tribe. The subject of their life's work is script - no: for most of them it is the texts found in manuscripts, for others the manuscripts themselves, and for a minority the script; but all of them must know, and believe they know, much about script; yet most of them know very little about writing. They would seem to stand particularly in need of Education in this matter. Yet missionary work in this field is no easier than among other outlandish tribes. The cultural distance is great; when a palaeographer and a 'writer' [I mean 'a maker of letters' - should I call him a 'letterer'?] look at the same page, they see incredibly different things. The missionary should walk carefully, admit that the values of the other culture are not to be despised, and avoid colliding with taboos. One of these is Terminology. The terminology of palaeography is a joke: most terms have several meanings, none of them precise. Yet, if a 'writer' uses an existent palaeographical term for his own purposes (however noble), the consequences are bad: 1. the palaeographer will get irritated and not listen; and/or 2. he will think that he knows what the writer means, which is not the case; 3. the writer will think that he knows what the palaeographer means, and that is not the case either. The word 'cursive' has already too many meanings: it means script that is 'fast', or 'careless', or 'sloping', or 'with loops', or 'with linked letters'; it can't cope with its work load as it is; really, if new things are to be explained in a clear way, it is best not to chuck them into the same basket with the fuzzy old lot. - But, if not contaminated from the outset with names worn beyond usability, this matter of Fronts etc. is an excellent beginning of something which may teach palaeographers to look at medieval pages in a new and useful way.

I nearly wrote just now 'in a sensible way', but that would have been unfair; our old way was sensible enough, witness the fact that it enables us to 'date' and 'localize' (more or less). We certainly must keep that way, which really is: to see the page as a part of history. We must learn to see it at the same time as a set of shapes & as the trace of a pen. Both views will benefit.

(By the way: we are not completely heathen; one needs only to quote Jean Mallon, Paléographie romaine, 1952, or his collected writings, De l'écriture, 1982; and he is not the only one; but there should be more.)

J.P.Gumbert, Leiden.

This correspondence reveals that we are not alone with our problems of perception and terminology. But we cannot substitute arguments by the phrase: Palaeographers say...

Communication

At the Hamburg seminar three schools demonstrated their teaching of writing. The children of a common German school had to copy movements from a model which showed shapes. We wanted to know how the resulting shapes are evaluated, but the principal of the school did not allow such theoretical questions: 'we are practical teachers, we just teach movements'.

The children of an anthroposophical school studied the letter p. They made stereotype drawings of a toad-stool because p is the letter of toad-stool and because it is a picture of a toad-stool. I did not understand this.

The children of the Japanese school wrote big black characters in gyousho. The teacher underlined his comments with red brush-strokes pointing at the tension of the strokes, at their proportions and at the balance of the characters. The teacher might have intended to make an impressive show with his young writers, but he seemed to be quite happy with our interpretation of his corrections. The difficulty of explaining the difference between kai-sho and gyousho could be solved with the description of the strokes as moving fronts. In kai-sho the front is moving in one direction, in gyousho the front is returning. The conclusion

appeared on the blackboard: western shapes with Japanese names:



kai-sho



gyousho

I would like to know whether the Japanese readers of Letterletter can accept this cultural link. Much more than western writers they might be familiar with the idea that the stroke is the basic element in writing instead of letters or characters.

The theory of the front of the stroke has been invented to use the computer as a shapemaking tool in the hand of the designer. So far it could only be used as a machine for the reproduction of design by tracing the outlines of shapes. The theory does not require affirmation by computer specialists, we can simply demonstrate how it works. The proof of the theory is its cultural validity. The reactions of the Japanese school and of the professor of palaeography are promising indications. In all our attempts we should be aware of the terminological barrier. There will be no progress as long as we think that typography is not a way of writing. Our efforts in design, technology, science, learning, industry and education depend on the answer to the simple question:

what is writing?

The increase of illiteracy

Fernand Baudin illustrated the presentation of his project with alarming reports on increasing illiteracy. This attention for the problem of illiteracy creates a favourable climate for Fernand's campaign, but the meaning of the alarming news is not clear. The publications suggest that illiteracy is increasing in the world: The army of the U S A is introducing pictographic instructions because many soldiers cannot read. Another example, a little more precise, is the conclusion that 7% of Dutch children is illiterate because they cannot look up a name in the telephone directory. But what is the world? We know nothing about illiteracy in Japan, China, India and in Arabic countries. And what is increasing? There is more publicity about illiteracy, but is there more illiteracy as well? And what is illiteracy? Who are the illiterates in the U S army, are they the soldiers who cannot read the instructions or are they the soldiers who formulate them?

The Dutch telephone directory is controversial in several respects: Editing; the alphabetical order switching from names to streets. Orthography; the sequences ei, ij, eij, ey are not arranged alphabetically.

one should know that they have to be looked up under y, but there are exceptions. The typography of the directory is 'functional', which might be another barrier for children. The 7% of the children who cannot find their way in this surprising publication could easily be mobilized against the policy of its publisher. Similar complications will have influenced the results of other investigations. Therefore: what is illiteracy?

I can produce different percentages of illiteracy depending on my definition of the problem. In the industrial countries of the world probably 10% cannot decipher words. This kind of illiteracy is deficient spelling. I estimate 30% of illiterates if the recognition of words is considered. This is deficient reading. When considering the ability of making words I could obtain 100% of illiterates: deficient writing. These are symptoms; any of this deficiencies might be reduced to a degree to deficient perception.

The alarming publications refer to mixtures of spelling and reading deficiencies. Deficiency of writing is never considered because it includes the investigators themselves. It is this 100% of illiteracy which worries me: it encompasses our scholars, artists, scientists and other intellectuals who understand the trick of rationalizing their

absurdities. They make the world believe that bad design belongs to or even contributes to the progress of civilization. They make us believe that bad handwriting is a mark of good education. They point at pedagogy which confirms all this nonsense. But pedagogy is nothing else ^{than} but the systematic production of such sophisms. In the first week of 1986 I listened a radio emission on teaching reading and writing. A professor of pedagogy at the university of Utrecht broadcasted the message that a script should not be legible but writable. I appreciate the smart presentation of this humbug, but it is humbug. Pedagogy is the art of presenting the shortcomings of education as its virtues, the most effective propaganda for illiteracy. This looks like a silly joke, but silly as it may be, the difference is that it is not a joke. The quoted maxim of the Dutch professor is representative for the greater part of pedagogic literature. As a whole pedagogy teaches education to be proud of its failures. I have a remedy for the failures but not for the pride. There is no remedy for a patient who feels perfectly well. Let us try to make him feel sick.

The improvement of the system of education is frustrated by the self-sufficiency of pedagogy. When the newspapers wrote about increasing illiteracy and speculated about its causes

the pedagogic journals did not even mention this publicity. We should not believe that we could refer to it in our attempts to improve education. We should not believe that the system could be improved by small steps. The school cannot be improved but by the destruction of the system. The reason is the fatal character of education.

Education as fate

The playing child explores space and time. Education is the part of others in this play. It is fashion to interrupt me here by pointing at the view of Soviet pedagogists who restrict education to the influence of authorities. This is, indeed, a good reason for me to reject Soviet pedagogy: in education the others are parents and teachers, but playmates and lovers as well. Education is everything that takes the child seriously in its play. The rest, pedagogic in its pretentions or not, is not education but terror.

Time and space can be distinguished but they cannot be separated without splitting the human personality. In some activities the exploration of time and space are neatly integrated, e.g. in walking, other plays accentuate one of both categories. Calculating, founded on a theory of numbers, is a play in the realm of time. Reading and writing, founded on a system of shapes (not necessarily the alphabet and the alphabet is not neces-

sarily the western system) is playing within the realm of space.

For the systematic introduction to reading, writing and calculating the school has been invented. The school is the systematic complement of education.

The priority of the school reflects the priority of society. We cannot demand from the school to reform society. The school systemizes cultural structures; it cannot systemize structures that do not exist. It is the fate of education to follow the trends of society from a distance.

The priority of modern society is time. Any other value is reduced to those aspects that can be calculated and expressed in chronological sequences. The rest has no value. (In this sense marxism and capitalism confirm each other; both are alienating man from his place in space.) The school follows this trend by restricting the game to chronological components. This is taught and this has to be learnt. The spatial aspects of playing are expelled after playing. The first effect is boredom; the natural interest of children in their play is superseded by dull duty. The consequence is a disaster. The school cannot teach reading and writing according to their nature as the passive and active aspects of the same perceptual play with shapes. The spatial essence is substituted by time-by sequences.

A word is a structure of white and black shapes that has to be perceived. This is easy for children because it appeals to their

experiences in playing. The school will, however, maintain that this perceptual approach is too difficult for children because it is too difficult for the teachers to perceive. This is why the structure of reading and writing is disintegrated. A word is considered as a sequence of alphabetical positions. The sequence 2, 1, 7 is supposed to be understood as the word 'bag'. It is in fact the sequence b, a, g, which is not a word. Logically the sequence is identical with 7, 1, 2 : g, a, b. This explains why many children cannot distinguish the word 'bag' from the word 'gab'. This logical inversion of sequences is considered a symptom of dyslexia. In obsolete neurology dyslexia is ascribed to brain disfunctions. This is convenient because it discharges the school from its responsibility. Dyslexia is an interesting plague afflicting more or less 30% of western children. There is a vast literature on the subject from physiological as well as from psychological points of view. The neurological basis of this literature is out of date. Dyslexia requires a new explanation. Here it is: Dyslexia is the result of western education.

Some teachers might object that they do not teach reading as memorizing sequences. They try to teach 'global' reading. If you meet such a teacher, ask him what he will do when his children read 'gab' for 'bag' and he will neatly return to the sequence.



Reading attributes meaning to words. The word is the foundation of reading and a word is not a sequence of black elements but a structure of black and white shapes. The structural word bag cannot be reversed into gab because the shape between ab does not occur in ba. Shading of the 'white' shapes is an effective method to ensure the perception of the word. It is a good protection against dyslexia and it is even a successful treatment of dyslectic damages. It relieves the child from the paralyzing sequences and uses its perceptual resources.

A traditional objection against my example says that children cannot learn different scripts simultaneously. This is not true. Children can even distinguish lunch from dinner. The distinction between scripts is much easier because the criteria can be formulated more clearly. This need not be discussed; just try and show children a gothic bastarda or an uncial. Their natural reaction is to try these shapes as well.

A pedagogic prejudice regarding typography is the remarkable custom to give the youngest children big books, composed in

big body sizes of sans serif typefaces. Why? The physiology of children would require the contrary approach in the typography of initial readers and so does the principle of perception. Experiments result again and again in the solid fact that children need small books composed in a small body size of a typeface that is dominated by translation. (To put it less precisely, but in more familiar terms, the typeface should be classic, such as Times, and not classicist, such as Baskerville.) By meeting this demand typographers could reduce the category of so called poor readers considerably if only pedagogy would accept sound typography.

My view on education is pessimistic. There is no practical method for any improvement. The school would say that this is not the way of teaching children. When I show the mature hands of the children in my village the school would say that they do not write childish enough. When I repair dyslectic damage, the school would say that my treatment is restricted to the effect of dyslexia (though there is nothing else to worry about). Any of us would be considered by the school as not qualified. My long experience in education on all levels makes no difference: I am a designer and designers cannot understand the metaphysics of pedagogy.

Some of my friends try to infiltrate the educational system gently. I believe that they are wasting their time if not even sacrificing their integrity. Others who are expecting improvement of teaching from the introduction of good handwriting-models do not understand that the school cannot appreciate the quality of a model because a teacher did never learn how to look. Otherwise the occurrence of good typefaces in schoolbooks should have had some influence. The problem of education cannot be solved as long as it is denied.

Social studies lack the clear rules of the game which are the advantage of natural science. There is no procedure for reform. In this primitive jungle 'authorities' concentrate on suppressing new points of view. But outside the campus students of pedagogy have started to think again. And there are students of psychology who are discovering again the spatial character of perception. There are neurologists who understand the absolute localization of brain-functions as obsolete. There are students of design who refuse to subordinate the trends of advertising and 'styling'. There are publishers of school-books trying to escape from pedagogic commonplaces. These are the creative forces of a new society. For me there is no choice: I want to be on their side.

APOLOGY

As chairman of the Committee on Education and Research of the Association Typographique Internationale I might have written:

The problems of education are extremely delicate. As we do not have a common point of view, we can offer little more than a collection of mere opinions. The educational^{al} aspects of the ABC programme require careful study in close cooperation with qualified authorities. We might consider the appointment of a panel which should try to make sense of our contradictory opinions and to collect the reactions of other parties in A Typ 1. The results should be available for discussion in our general meeting as soon as possible, say within three years.

This suggestion would be very wise and very realistic. It would consider the fact that only a few of us is sufficiently interested in education to take part in investigations. We would discover that the prejudices in education are as hard to change as any other prejudice and in the course of time everybody would forget our good intentions.

I would not like to write as a chairman of a committee. My personal experiences make a better story. I tried to understand my experiences by explaining them from a specific point of view. In this respect the story has characteristics of a theory. It is of the same nature as a scientific report:

Better experiences might demonstrate that the scientific pretensions in my story cannot be justified. Please, tell this good story. If not, Fernand can add my sadness to his wisdom.

I G S

The International Graphonomics Society (IGS) has been founded in 1985 at a congress in Hongkong. The objective of IGS is the study of graphic skills as, for instance, the motor aspects of handwriting. chairman of IGS is:

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Mr Thomassen would appreciate contacts between IGS and A Typ1. I do not have more information but our colleague Rosemary Sassoon (England) attended the meeting in Hongkong.

LETTER LETTER received the unanimous support of the general meeting of A Typ1 in Kiel, september 1985. This decision proves that the A Typ1 is open for initiatives. (The working seminars are another example.) The opportunities are there, we just have to use them.

Education and research

The Committee on Education and Research started its activities in 1971 as Committee on Education. Our first surprise was the refusal of outstanding researchers to cooperate because they were not involved in education. Instead of arguing that research implies education and that education is research, we simply changed the name of the committee. This might have been a mistake. Probably we should have been more patient and change the minds of our friends rather than the name of the committee. For we gained nothing. Some designers still believe that their business could be essentially different from childrens handwriting or even that type should not be writing.

The programme ABC is a new chance. It will be absolutely useless to exhibit lettering in the British Museum (there has always been a lot of it on show) if people do not feel that lettering is their concern. They will not go to look. They will go when we can convince them that typography and calligraphy are writing and that writing is the first condition of any civilization and that civilization is the play-ground for human life. Even those who believe that business is more serious than this play have to be convinced of the contrary. For this change another change of the name of the committee is not a substitute.