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Title: Senses & Sensibility'17: Design Beyond Borders and Rhizomes

Collection: Proceedings book of UNIDCOM/IADE Conferences

First Published: October 2017

ISBN: 978-989-8473-23-3

Proceedings of the
9th International Conference, Senses & Sensibility
Design Beyond Borders and Rhizomes
24-27 October 2017, Funchal, Madeira Island, Portugal

<http://senses2017.unidcom-iade.pt/>



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Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia
MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO E CIÊNCIA





The “Neurath Problem” as an Example of the Glitches Raised in Design Education by the Dominant Historical Narratives. The Mystics of the Myth, Part II.

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ABSTRACT

2008 was celebrated in Spain as the centennial year of the invention of the brand. Argentina also boarded in the movement and celebrated it. The word was that the brands started in 1908, in Germany with AEG brand discourse created by Peter Behrens and Otto Neurath. The original message was created in Spain, most likely by Juan Costa; the claim was that the brand conscience - a company's global language and discourse from the logo to the buildings – was invented in 1908 by AEG with the work of Peter Behrens and Otto Neurath. This is an excellent example of the type of mystification that is imposed to communication's design history through a narrative that is still highly influenced by the (bad) history of art methods. From newspapers to books (in Spanish and in Portuguese) the claim spread through the academic context and it's not difficult to find online master thesis that say that AEG design programme was done by Behrens and Neurath (which is obviously false). This paper studies the “Neurath problem” and connects it with a broader idea of design mystifications in an effort not to bring some factual data to the academic world about this issue (trying to balance with the viral spread of the Neurath tale) but mainly to address the problem of the persistence of this “gourmet” narrative (great works/great names) in the education of a designer.

Keywords: History of Communication Design, Peter Behrens, Otto Neurath, AEG

INTRODUCTION

Problems in the dominant narratives of communication design were first raised by Clive Dilnot in 1987 and since then have been a fairly debated by several authors. This debate has not always been productive because most of the historians recognize the problems but they keep building their narratives over the same historiographical model. Sectorial studies are contributing to the deepening of the initial information, but there has been little consensus on the need to review the present information. This raises problems in design education; for example: we talk about social design in project and in history we use the “gourmet” objects discourse: great works/great names. Many of the statements on which the dominant historiographic discourses in the design of communication are structured need to be checked and evaluated. This paper addresses one of these cases and tries to bring a new look at its mythology (proven through the importance it assumes in the current narratives of communication design). Doing so it concludes for a need to have a different approach to design history education since it will affect the perception of the design profession.

METHODOLOGY

Through the case study and the review of literature it is possible to prove that the academic “truth” being thrust in Portugal, Spain and Argentina about the role of Otto Neurath (1882-1945) in AEG’s brand discourse is incorrect. Doing so we will show how so many assumptions build by the first historians are now revised in fact but not in practice and the history of communication design is still being passed to our students through these first narratives.

CONTEXT: GERMANY IN THE TURN OF THE CENTURY IN GRAPHIC ARTS

In 1871, with the end of the Franco-Prussian War, a group of nation-states was grouped as the second German Empire with borders that lasted till 1945. The printing tradition was highly valuable in this region since Germany claimed to be the birth place of the movable type, developed around 1450 by Gutenberg. As Jeremy Aynsley (2000) very well recalls, he developed his experiments while in exile in Salzburg, today Austria).

In late XIX century, France and England were countries much more developed – graphically speaking – than Germany, still very attached to the Gothic Language. “Germany could not make great claims for artistic invention and originality (...) Germany styles were considered to follow rather than lead” (Aynsley, 2000, p. 17). The need for affirmation of a national identity was probably one of the factors that made the use of retroactive imagery and typefaces so popular. As Aynsley points out, in the turn of the century Germany was still using gothic typefaces for communication. German foundries had three types of designs in production: “revisions of the 15th and 16th century Roman designs were generically called Antiqua. New Blackletter designs under two main kinds, Schwabacher and Fraktur (...) Thirdly, newly conceived “germanicized” Roman scripts”. (Aynsley, 2000, p.18). A clear example of this last group was Peter Behrens Schrift. A hybrid alphabet engraved by the Klingspor foundry in 1901 that attempted to merge the Fraktur and Latin letter styles.

England was, at this point, reforming typography with a re-reading of the Renaissance sources and “the next generation of English Designers [note: after Morris], including Walter Crane, Anna Simons and Edward Johnston, visited Germany in the 1900’s, often meeting their counterparts, exhibiting work and extending the message of reform.”(Aynsley, 2000, p.31). The British influence was felt and led to small German movement promoting artistic manufacture. Kathryn Heisinger cited by Aynsley and Susan Engelhard agree that German Arts & Crafts appropriation did not include the socialist attitude, and was more a combination of artistic ideals with marketable effectiveness. Mechanization was “taking command” and Germany was in an accelerated growth and prosperity.

The “Berliner Tageblatt” newspaper of 28 July 1907 publicized the contract between the Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG) and Peter Behrens (1868-1940). He’s first task was to redesign the company’s newspaper, according to Tillmann Buddensieg and Hans Georg Pfeiffer (“Peter Behrens: Wer aber will sagen, was Schönheit sei?”) cited by Aynsley (200, p. 65-66).

OTTO NEURATH AND AEG...?

Reading Teresa Carvalho master thesis while preparing myself for the argument in her final examination (2016) I have encountered this sentence (free translation): “In 1907, the visionary businessman Emil Rathenau, director of the German company AEG, hired Peter Behrens and Otto Neurath and build the first team of image consultants.” (p.12). Astonished by this super-team formation in AEG (1909-1911), and the reference to it in a master thesis, I went to search for Carvalho references that backed up this sentence. I’ve find out that that she was well academically safeguarded in a reference book about brands, paraphrasing Daniel Raposo’s book “Design for Identity and Corporate Image” (“Design de Identidade e Imagem Corporativa”, 2008) where one can read (free translation): “In 1908, Henry Ford implemented the division of work in the assembly line. In an awkward way and almost like moving backwards, Peter Behrens and Otto Neurath make the first team of image consulting with a sociological perspective when they work together, in the same year, for AEG, the German company.” (Raposo, 2008, p. 80).

I wrote to Raposo to try to find out how did he came to that conclusion and he said he was just paraphrasing from another book, this time from one of the main Spanish references in branding and corporate identity: Joan Costa. Costa has his own institute (joancostainstitute.com) with free downloadable papers about corporate image, infographics and other themes. Publishing sometimes three books per year, Joan Costa has been writing about visual identity since 1977 and has been spreading this idea about Otto Neurath and AEG in his writings since 1992 (*Identidad Corporativa y Estrategia de Empresa*, 1ª edition 1992, La Crujía editions, Buenos Aires). So it is now well spread in the Spanish speaking world and also in Portugal thru Raposo's excellent book.

It's impossible, reading the Neurath biographies available (Cartwright, Cat, Fleck, & Uebel, 2008; Symons, Pombo, & Torres, 2011; Hartmann & Bauer, 2006; Symons et al., 2011), to believe in this idea from Costa, and even more in the suggested dates (1909-11). Otto Neurath never worked to AEG. Certainly not in the period suggested by Costa (he was finishing his Phd and his first wife died in 1911 while giving birth to their son) or any other time in Neurath's live.

So, we asked Mr. Costa how could he make such an improbable statement. The answer arrived by e-mail (Costa, 2016), and re-stated that Otto Neurath was hired as a sociologist for the "human relations" of AEG with the exterior and society in general. We insisted and asked him about the references he was using to make such a claim, because we couldn't find any. There is no register whatsoever about Mr. Neurath employment in AEG or having any sort of involvement or contract with the German industry colossus. The answer received from mr. Costa to my question even added more data to this story, referring to a conversation between Emil Ratheneau and AEG's board of directors (even if the conversation had occurred would it be probably Walter, Emil's son, that was leading the company in this period) that were questioning him about these agreements with Behrens and Neurath, because they thought that they were unproductive. According to Costa, Emil stood for his choice and confirmed the contracts because he thought they were fundamental to the company... (according to Aynsley the agreement started with small tasks and the board of the company went on expanding Behrens functions and powers as they were pleased with the results (Aynsley, 2000, p. 66).

This dialogue conveyed by Costa in his e-mail answer deepen the mystery, not only it sounded highly doubtful as it could be known only by a direct chronicling of someone present at the meeting (written documents from the war periods from AEG are scarce).

This AEG problem has developed from a motivation to connect the Behrens work to a starting point in a brand culture in a company that goes from the typeface to the building. Further on this paper we will try to explain why is Behrens so important to the dominant historical narratives on graphic design, but while doing so it is not our intention to diminish the role of Peter Behrens in graphic design. We recognize his effort and ground-breaking role, not only to move away from the traditional German blackletter (design of the "Behrens" typeface cut by the Klingspor foundry of Offenbach am Main in 1901) but also on a effort to clean the Art Nouveau language not only in advertising (ex: Tachometer advertising, about 1908) or the exterior of the AEG showroom in Berlin, around 1910.

GERMAN BRANDING PIONEER: WILHELM DEFFKE

While trying to find a reference in creating branding programmes in this period and geography, another name immediately comes to the forefront: Wilhelm Deffke (1887-1950); He joined forces with his colleague Carl Ernst Hinfefuus (that he met while working on Otto Elsner's printing shop) and opened one of the first advertising agency's in Germany in 1915. So any historian would have to consider Deffke conscious and systematic approach in branding and balance it with Behrens output in this specific area.

Deffke had realise the power and future of his enterprise while working with Peter Behrens as an artistic associate in 1909/1910 in Potsdam-Neubabelsberg studio. It was there, at Behrens workshop, that he "cut his teeth". Later, in 1915 after being discharged from military service (after being wounded) Deffke will launch his company – Wilhelmwerk – to became one of the first and most important brand designers of Germany and Europe, maker of iconic german brands (ex: Zwillingssmarke), still in use today and for their global communication, from packaging to storefront.

Deffke was born in 1887 and start working in 1901 in his hometown, a heavily industrialized Wuppertal, drawing patterns in Ernst Meckenstock's studio (Breuer, Bröhan, Brüning, Dorén, & Eisold, 2014). Was hired to work at Behrens office in Neubabelsberg on the 1st of February 1909 and remained for 13 months (Breuer et al., 2014, p. 16). He wrote about it in 1945 in a seven page typed curriculum vitae: "independent artistic member of staff for graphic art, figural composition, and architecture... including designing all the AEG advertising materials and the joint development of larger exhibition projects in cooperation with two assistants working there at the same time, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, the later directors of Bauhaus" (Engelhard, 2014, p. 32). Although it is not exactly clear which work was done inside Behrens's AEG studio by Deffke (some prospectus and stage design are known by sure to have been designed by him) the expression "including designing all the AEG advertising materials" is a strong evidence of the influence of Deffke in the definition of AEG's Image at this year. It is also most likely that Deffke must have had some supervision – and probably direct style influence from Behrens - since there is a shift in his style that becomes more geometric and less "batik" and decorative since he enters the AEG studio.

Deffke work for a great number of German industries of his time. Uncredited but also important is his (unintended?) work for the Nazi totalitarian state. Although Hitler claimed the authorship of the Nazi brand - as part of the myth of the artist that goes into politics to relieve German from suffering – we should now considere that he used the stylized version of the swastika from Wilhelmwerk. "In the 1960s, Deffke's former assistant wrote in a letter to the designer Paul Rand: '[Deffke] came across a representation of the ancient Germanic sun wheel on which he worked to redefine and stylize its shape. Later on this symbol appeared in a brochure which he had published; [the Nazis] chose it as their symbol but reversed it....Needless to say, this was done without any thought of copyright or compensation'" (Heller, 2008, p. 23)

CONCLUSIONS

A story of AEG that could integrate all the company's communication and graphic design is still to be done. The company started in 1882, when Emil Rathenau obtained licences to use some of Thomas Edison's lamp, and it was a huge company in 1907, with factories in different cities, when before Peter Behrens designed the Turbinenfabrik in 1909, and other 5 industrial buildings (Maschinenfabrik Brunnenstrasse, Apparatewerk Ackerstrass, Kabelwerk Oberspree, Transformatoren-werk Oberspree, Glühlampenfabrik Moabit), several business (ex: Electricity production and distribution, trams, radio [a merge between AEG and Siemens named Telefunken], power engineering, steam turbines, automobiles, cables, electric appliances), and products (ex: hairdryer in 1900, public lightning lamps in 1907-8, and kettle in 1910). So first of all let us make clear we are not suggesting that Behrens influence was just a detail (even because Behrens studio made some communication to promote the electric appliances (more catalogues than advertising) which might have had important public impact; but the claim for transforming the company image should be balanced with a clearer view of the company's global output. It's not easy to find a formal or stylistic connection between the turbine factory and the prospectus for the AEG turbine ("Turbo Angetriehe Hilfsmaschinen") most likely designed by William Deffke inside Behrens studio and with his supervision in 1910, still in an Art Deco language.

Behrens designed a typeface ("Behrens Schrift und Zierat" for Klingspor foundry, [Aynsley, 2000, p. 63]) and used it in AEG's brochures; and that the typeface had a transitional feeling to it, trying to move away from blackletter to a more commercial and geometric art nouveau style.

Historians have found appealing to acknowledge a coherence in a visual language that goes from brochures to products and buildings: "The combination of visual form, working method, and functional concern in his work for AEG products enabled him to produce a body of work that has led some to proclaim Behrens the first industrial designer" says Meggs in 2012 (Meggs & Purvis, 2012), while his words in the first edition of the same book, from 1983, were "He is considered to be the first known industrial designer" (Meggs, 1983). Strange in both versions the fact that Meggs does not assume the sentence as his one and says that "some proclaim" or "he is considered". Who are these proclaimers we do not know? So Meggs is probably the starting point of this myth of Behrens as a man with a clear and transversal view of the company's image and communication. Pevsner (Pevsner, [1960] 1975) talks about this transversal work from the building to the objects but does not attribute to Behrens the founding responsibility for the image and communication, although he makes some references about a printed page in 1901 (Pevsner, [1960] 1975, p. 202).

German started late in designing with a mass production spirit and Britain was ahead from early on. Let us not forget that in 1896 the Prussian government sent Hermann Muthesius as a “taste spy” to England to try to understand and copy the British example. Industrial design teaching was a result of Muthesius recommendations. Starting late does not mean Germany could not lead or revolutionize graphic or product design. But we have to have this in mind before getting too enthusiastic with AEG’s forerunner role in design history, so this AEG claim is part of the goodwill - from certain professionals and theorists - to create a starting point, a birthplace for the contemporary idea of branding. The Coca-Cola brand comes from 1886, Nestlé 1868 (still in use, the nest with two birds, almost with the same drawing), and several other brands from the beginning of 1900 that build upon the idea of a brand with a logo (ex: Kellogg’s) or images (ex. Shell). Nestlé is making advertising in Portugal in Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro’s magazine in 1887 and saying to the consumer to prefer the wheat from “Henrique Nestlé” that can be identified by the nest brand. The idea of putting AEG as the birthplace of branding seems to be convenient since Peter Behrens was Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe patron and they will later lead the Bauhaus school; also, because he later used a graphic language that conveys with the idea of modern design that the dominant historical narratives now celebrate. Unlike Coca-Cola image, drawn in a disturbed script, Nestlé with a realistic drawing of a nest with two small birds and General Electric in a decorative script (all of them designed before AEG and still in use today), AEG’s 1908 and 1912 brands (5th and 6th AEG’s logos) are geometric, undecorated, reductionist. They move away from the fluid letter designs that Peter Behrens assumed for his first logo attempt in 1900. And this is the kind of thing that history is looking for to value a certain group of ideas that became celebrated as good design between 1950 and 1970.

The AEG/Neurath case shows how much there is to do in the survey of dominant historical narratives in communication design and how easy it is to maintain a false claim for so long within academy and how easy it is for it to spread in the academic milieu from the moment it enters the first master or PhD thesis. Part of this problem would be solved if we moved away from the historiographic model (derived from history of art) on which we are still building design history. Great works and great names, with all the mythification that this model implies, is not the best way to tell history of design, and we need to make a better effort to use other historiographical models.

It’s urgent to re-historicize design, rehearsing a different historiographical. By valuing history, the whole history and not just that of “gourmet objects” (Fallan, 2010) - exclusive, luxurious or futile - we contribute better to a history that is useful to today’s practitioners and aspirants. We expect to rapidly be able to contribute with a new model.

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