

Designing Atonal Rhythms

Abstract: Design is the paradigmatic space of encounter between form and function, rationality and sensuality, objectivity and subjectivity. To design a book or a journal which includes text and image, without privileging one over the other, or without relinquishing any of those concerns requires an especially subtle choreography between all these attributes, in addition to re-staging research as an expression of risk. One could say every design is ‘an event’, one which allows each aspect to play its part and for each to be acknowledged and seen as important. As the chains of equivalence and points of divergence between and amongst these aspects is not always exposed or evident, these remarks are intended as an exposé of the process and decisions undertaken in the course of the design at hand. This is especially important when working on a brief as complex as that of Zētēsis, which, by its very conceptualisation and content, intends to expose the cruelty of the classical canon.¹

“Language is the material of sense.” ~ Hannah Lammin.²

With and Against the Canon

The designer and typographer are always mediating the ~ sometimes conflictual ~ attributes noted above, while at the same time attempting to negotiate between the needs and desires of readers; researchers and a highly regarded academic publishing house, whose concerns are for clarity of communication, rigour and solid evidence of research, all of which can and should be expressed in and by the design.

Canons are comforting. They refer to well trodden paths and known entities. In any field of inquiry, canons of knowledge become the dominant force in any encounter we may have with the work before us: they are the memories we don’t even realise we have, drawing us inexorably towards the known ground of our intellectual and aesthetic endeavours. They enframe us, even as we attempt to depart from them. They are inevitable. Even welcome, since without something to break away from, we have no ground from which to depart; no limit to transgress.

1. The classical canons of design are many; they include the Golden Section (Phi, 1.86), which forms the basis of the ‘canons of page construction’ for books, from the Medieval period. ‘There was a time when deviations from the truly beautiful page proportions 2:3, 1:√3, and the Golden Section were rare. Many books produced between 1550 and 1770 show these proportions exactly, to within half a millimeter’. Jan Tschichold, *The Form of the Book*, (Hartley & Marks, 1991). The Western canon is the dominant literary force, shaping cultural and intellectual priorities, and design is an ally to the dissemination of such a canon through its role in typography and book design.

2. Hannah Lammin in conversation with Sheena Calvert, 12th September 2013.

“By all means break the rules, and break them beautifully, deliberately and well.”³ ~ Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*.

As Robert Bringhurst suggests, these concerns are especially true of typography ~ an art which is both scientific and poetic. It embraces and exemplifies the dualities of exactitude and expression, subjectivity and objectivity, respect for rules, and risk. Whilst reaching for the elusive goal of transparency ~ for the ‘window’ which Beatrice Warde and other typographic purists have coveted ~ typography is always already a form of mediation: it exists as a physical interface between ourselves and meaning, and in doing so it plays a part in constructing that meaning.⁴ However, even a crystal clear window has a presence, albeit a subtle one. Without material text[s] on paper, or screen, the event of written language; its performativity, its presence, would not exist and the force of these thoughts would remain mute. In its role as the concrete form of language, typography is the constant reminder that meaning is made, not pre-given: it ‘matters’, in every sense and nuance of that statement; its materiality is a fact, and a partner in the experience of reading. Typography is also a micro and macro art. To see the whole performance across a series of pages, as an event of reading, is as important as being aware of the details of an em-dash, chosen for its slightly queer curvature, or the slight deviations from the canon which Goudy ~ the typeface used here ~ implies; with its enchanted oddities, graceful and misbehaving.

There are parallels with philosophy, wherein the overall argument needs to be seen in relation to the details of linguistic expression and rhetorical phraseology. The very form[s] of language become the texture of the argument, just as the typeface forms the texture of the page. Philosophy and its manifestation through typography and design are intimately entwined, and need to be brought into constant relation as a seamless presentation of form and content ~ even where even visual dissonance is the counterpart to philosophical argument. These are subtle questions, and ones that are not so evident to the untrained eye. However, the typeface chosen for Zētēsis, and the subtleties of typographic detail are not accidental, nor are they arbitrary. They attempt to pay homage to the richness and detail of philosophical exposition in all its forms, and to actively work with, and not against, those

3. Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, (Hartley & Marks, Canada, 4th edition, 2012), 10.

4. Beatrice Warde, *The Crystal Goblet*, (London: Sylvan Press, 1955). We refer here to Beatrice Warde’s essay on typography “The Crystal Goblet”, which was first delivered as a talk entitled “Printing Should be Invisible”, first given to the British Typographer’s Guild at the St. Bride Institute in London, October 7th, 1930. The essay’s title refers to the clearest vessel of wine as a metaphor for the role of the printed word as providing no obstruction to the presentation of content.

myriad expressions of conceptual content, while being a ‘window’ which is acknowledged as both crystal clear and fully present.

We opened these remarks by claiming that there is no full objectivity in any design, but only a series of subjective choices that make the human presence felt. Design is a *human* activity, full of ambiguities, inflections, and contradictions, wherein technology is only ever a means, and the allure of its deterministic rationality is but a chimera. Subjectivity makes design an especially demanding encounter and negotiation between the reader and the author; one in which the designers’ hand is always present as a third party, or a silent interlocutor. With this in mind, within this design we have tried to navigate these poles and the differing requirements of the present context, with a steady hand, a human eye for detail, and the potential for gently critiquing the canon while acknowledging its persistent force and presence, and its defining role.

This is how we resolved the brief given to us by a journal whose unusual remit for presenting the intersecting landscapes of art, philosophy and science privileges research generated by curiosity. First, we removed the images from the main part of the journal and set them into a separate insert as a remark on the ways in which artwork and text, the discursive and the figural, both diverge and differ between themselves while at the same exact time create dialogue and ‘make’ sense (differently).⁵ These artworks, seen as a group, with their associated texts, are tangentially linked, through something akin to the philosophical aesthetic of Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*, one where the narrative is about difference, not identity, and about the non-equivalent in place of a sequential narrative.⁶ The images play differently in this space, and take up Paul Klee’s call not to reproduce what we can already see, but to make visible what we cannot. Deleuze states this as ‘rendering visible forces that are not themselves visible,’⁷ which shares the aim of philosophy to ask ‘How can we see what we did not see before?’⁸

In the drawing together of images and artworks which support the philosophical departure points presumed by those questions, we posed another series of interrelated questions, which made sense in terms of the subversive and sensual forces of art, and the different logic they offer. Stated differently, this paper-bound ‘gallery’ of images operates as a space of visual reading which

5. On this point, see the important work by Jean-Françoise Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

6. Giles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, introduction by Constantin Boundas, trans Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

7. Deleuze Gilles, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans Daniel W. Smith, (London: Continuum, 2003).

8. Ibid.

invites a mediation on the ways in which images might randomly interact with one another, in contrast to their role as support or illustrations for texts. In being given an autonomous space, their treatment subverts the usual hierarchy of text versus image, in which text frequently wins out as the dominant discursive vehicles by which knowledge is disseminated. This creates a space for images to have an equivalent role in the communication of knowledge, and in posing a critique of how knowledge is formed per the canon, especially within the canonical object called the ‘book.’

We therefore invite you to “see” or “read” (or “listen to”) these images as forming a body of questions, not as supporting the texts within the journal, or operating as visual equivalents for philosophical ideas. The artworks possess their own dynamic force-field; one related, but not secondary, to the textual content which either accompanies them in short form, or to that of the journal. Image and text are not to be seen as being in opposition, but as possessing / performing their own discreet model[s] of communication, and it was this premise that underpinned our desire both to amplify and question the ways in which these modes take place. Finally, and to borrow a term from Thomas Hirshorn made in reference to the *Gramsci Memorial*, we wanted them to form ‘precarious moments of grace,’⁹ moments in which they possess a presence of their own.

We wished to enact a sub-textual intervention into questions of the canon, via the subtleties of punctuation rendered slightly strange, in the form of stray commas or wave-line em-dashes. Punctuation is a clear instance where material language affects the establishment of meaning in language. There are two kinds of punctuation, one that is rhetorical and based on pauses and breath (voiced); the other that is grammatical and related to the interactions of parts of speech (silent). Such conventions as capitalization, paragraph spacing and indents of course also count as punctuation, since they order the flow of ideas in a text. Initially, the function for which punctuation was created was purely rhetorical: it aided the classical reader in knowing when to pause and where to place accents and inflections of voice when reading aloud from a text. It has become a mark of the performative in language, the vocal / acoustic, and the choreographic. This repertoire of marks, developed and added to over time, has become codified and regularised part of written language similarly moving, as did language, from the oral world into the silent, written world, later reinforcing grammatical roles, not just temporal ones. In contemporary times, the syntactical role of punctuation has entered yet another phase, the result

9. See Thomas Hirschhorn’s, *Gramsci Monument*, in the Forest Houses; the Bronx. Through the artist being present, and producing something (in this case, public art), Hirschhorn seeks to create such ‘precarious moments of grace’ from the temporary alignment of the produced and the observer, who needs to be both present and ‘awake’ to the potential of the work.

of the standardization and control of language made possible (and politically deemed necessary) by the new technology of printing. This shift has profoundly affected thought and reorganized our relationship to language (and language to itself) in ways which have deep implications for knowledge gained through the written form, and for the canonical object we call ‘the book’: that sequence of pages which are punctuated by the rhythms of material language in familiar and standardized ways; in turn regulating meaning and its association with the establishment of truth.

In *Zētēsis*, by disrupting the strictly linear ‘movement’ of language, through turned letters and strange punctuation, we sought to disrupt its ordinary rhythms, and to perform a different ‘movement’: one which is closer to the non-structures of improvisation than conventional musical form. We have therefore, by analogy, ‘punctuated’ the typographic and compositional rhythms of this book, differently, with a view to exposing and complementing the atonal and non-conventional forms of thought presented here, in a move which constitutes both an acceptance of the necessity of the canon, and at the same time, its refusal. *Zētēsis* celebrates the paradoxical, a-logical, sensual characteristics of language, freed from the necessities of instrumentality, by ‘playing’ it slightly differently. We have therefore included within these pages some subtle and hidden calls to think again about how design can create an immanent space of encounter with content, not just play the role of neutral container.

Atonality

Speaking of the relationship between music and language, Adorno states that music, along with syntax, and formal structures, employs “a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds.”¹⁰ Unlike language, music does not possess an external ‘signified’ and in this sense, music remains non-conceptual. Adorno points out the non-identical nature of music and language: Music and language, while possessing similar attributes, divide along the faultline of “intentionality”, or instrumentality. However, he goes on to say that albeit specific concepts may not emerge from tonality, still a kind of spaciality can be articulated. This spaciality is shown by repetitive sequences, and harmonic figures which reappear, and become, as he puts it, ‘universal ciphers’. Adorno suggests further that when contextualized, these figures and sequences in turn provide a certain kind of space. Thus he writes:

10. T. W. Adorno, *Music and Language: A Fragment, Quasi una Fantasia, Essays on Modern Music*, Theodor W. Adorno. Trans Rodney Livingstone, (Verso, London, New York: 2012), 1.

“Space for musical specificity, just as concepts do for a particular reality, and at the same time, as with language, their abstractness [is] redeemed by the context in which they [are] located. The only difference is that the identity of these musical concepts [lies] in their own nature and not in a signified outside them.”¹¹

In a somewhat similar vein, one could characterise Nietzsche’s re-staging of philology as emulating or, indeed being considered, a kind of ‘musical event,’ where the lyrical timbre of his paces, punctuations and arguments allowed one to understand the nuance of an argument by treating philology ‘musically.’¹² Another way of saying this might be that language is to be viewed as an instrument, rather than as instrumental, one that we must to learn to play well.

In a related but different sense, Andrei Igamberdiev, speaking of Beethoven’s *Grosse Fugue* begins to develop the relation of text to dissonance and dissonance to the double fugue. Described in its own time as ‘incomprehensible’, the *Grosse Fugue* challenged the prevailing musical canons. The Fugue’s dark, complex tones and lack of harmonic resolution, are singularly uncompromised and complex. As a piece of music, which actively embraces counterpoint, and which consists of multiple movements within a single large movement, Stravinsky called it “an absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever.”¹³

The linguistic analogy could be made through conversation, where elements enter and depart with extreme suddenness, the composer / performer adding and subtracting fragments from the main theme at breakneck speed and in multiple layers and in plural times. The word Fugue comes from the Latin ‘to flee’ and the ‘event’, where sudden, unexpected, changes and shifts in the movement of the music are the motor-force. The *Grosse Fugue* is incomplete, self-referential, and recursive; its form and structure is neither finite nor expressly infinite, but the tension between the two keeps the movement and dynamic of the music alive, just as the tension between the dynamics of white space, typography and their counterpoint rhythms keeps the page alive.¹⁴

11. Ibid., 2.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Diaries B. 3*, 257; Dec. 21, 1871. See in particular where he writes: “Everything that [...] cannot be understood in relation to music engenders [...] downright aversion and disgust in me.” Cited in Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, 2002 (W. W. Norton, USA), 19.

13. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 24.

14. Jan Tschichold, having set in motion the precepts for an entirely new form of modernist typography in his book *Asymmetric Typography*, (Faber, 1967), which was considered highly radical at that time, stated: ‘White space is to be regarded as an active element, not a passive background.’ However, he returned in the late 1930s to the classical, symmetrical canon of typographic design, subsequently

This is precisely what we have tried to generate within the two different bounded bodies of *Zētēsis*, Vol. 1 ~ a way of writing, and indeed reading, that is closer to music ~ a kind of dark fugue ~ rather than to writing per se. For the classical canon has the capacity to be cruel, to be the enemy of the arts, to be an omnipotent ‘mop’ of creative juices; upholding tidiness as though the same as rigorous experimentation; or complete transparency as equivalent to communication. This is particularly the case with certain kinds of design ~ where the canon can belie or smother certain forms of thought, imagination, originality and understanding through a kind of generic massification of well-trodden typographic paths that feign openness, but instead can amass a whole series of judgments that quietly weigh on any interpretative reading.

However, as design is also always a collaborator in thought, and practice, ~ a partner in meaning, a vital organ in the body of this book ~ there has been an opportunity to seek out the (sometimes) illusive openings where we can begin a rewriting of the canon in the most sensitive of ways. To design within the odd, new parameters that *Zētēsis* has demanded, has required a particular turn to the carnal connections of the body, a connection formed through a fundamental *knowing* of rhythm: to move through choreographed pages, each one an attempt at conveying not only information and concept of the research to hand, but the rhythmic experience of postulating time, timing, and temporally induced spaces. For on the stage created by ‘the book’, there is no page considered in isolation. The publication in its entirety is a continuous stream of coming and goings, of concepts, remarks, events, just past, just present, just about-to-happen.

This design-concept of rhythm is one that negates repetitive sameness as its principle concern. We would like to suggest that an ‘atonal’ rhythm is required, one that is similarly comprised of repeating elements (as is the necessity of ‘the book’ as collective material), but one that is given freedom in the spaces around these elements. Here, edges are no longer considered as rigid structure and the distance in between is no longer confined to the regular beat of the interval. We might image this as a camouflage pattern, which by its very nature is ideal for the inconspicuous inserting of subverted elements.

To understand design in this way is, in the same breath, to understand design in harmonious coexistence with canonical thought. Just as a grouping of sounds is not dictated by the relation between sounds, so too the formation of design elements is not dictated with purely self-referential consideration. An atonal rhythm is made manifest by one that must dance always at its side.

expounding the virtues of classicism in both typography and page layout. He later worked for Penguin Publishing. See also *The Form of the Book, Essays on the Morality of Good Design* (Hartley & Marks, 1996). Tschichold was described as an ‘apostate’ for having initially championed and then rejected the ‘New Typography’ as it had become known.

The canonical rhythms that refer to the accumulated knowledge of thousands of years of historical and cultural progress in design are not only present, but essential to the cohesion of otherwise decontextualized elements. Intelligent listening and active participation is required in the formation of a structure that is to call itself ‘rhythmic’,¹⁵ without the canon there is no communal dialogue, there can be no space to experience the ‘beat’.

This ensemble of writing / reading / listening existing as it does, linked together by a variety of voices, is presented with an atonal beat layered as a participant in the subversion of existing patterns ~ a kind of atonality that flows throughout as a slightly roguish disturber of the peace. There are places within the design where elements have been toppled, snapped and flourished in new ways to cloud Warde’s infamous crystal goblet; to give the musculature of design its visibility without disrupting the necessary comfort zones too much.¹⁶ It may simply be a ‘backwards’ page number or an irregular alignment of titles; one might follow the line of a lowercase g, its tail flowing ana-fractuously from its body, and be made aware of a unique eccentricity in the form of its upward-curved ear, a single horn protruding from its head. It is in this world that we operate.

Atonal design: it requires more than an audacious dive into uncharted and possibly murky ‘uncommunicative’ waters; it has required us to dance within and from the singular-plurality, to recall Jean-Luc Nancy, of rhythm.¹⁷

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15. Dr. Mark Walker in conversation with Joseph Bisat Marshall, 16th September 2013.

16. Op. cit. B. Warde, *The Crystal Goblet*.

17. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, (Stanford University Press, 2004). Jean-luc Nancy poses a new relation of the ‘I’ to the ‘we’, once drawn out through the nuances of the hyphen: “Being singular plural: in a single stroke, without punctuation, without a mark of equivalence, implication, or sequence. A single, continuous-discontinuous mark tracing out the entirety of the ontological domain, being-with-itself designated as the “with” of being, of the singular and plural, and dealing a blow to ontology—not only another signification but also another syntax. The “meaning of Being”: not only as the “meaning of with,” but also, and above all, as the “with” of meaning. Because none of these three terms precedes or grounds the other, each designates the co-essence of the others. This co-essence puts essence itself in the hyphenation ~ “being-singular-plural” ~ which is a mark of union and also a mark of division, a mark of sharing that effaces itself, leaving each term to its isolation and its being-with-the-others”, 37. We might therefore ask, what is the plural of rhythm, and what is its singular?

Biographies

Virgil W. Brower taught Ethics at the Chicago Police Academy and is currently Full-Time Lecturer of Philosophy at Chicago State University, where he teaches Logic, Ethics, Critical Theory, and Comparative Religion. He is a double doctoral candidate in the Theology, Ethics, and Human Sciences division of The Chicago Theological Seminary and the Program in Comparative Literary Studies at Northwestern University, where he co-directs The Paul of Tarsus Interdisciplinary Working Group. www.northwestern.academia.edu/virgilbrower

Sheena Calvert is a typographer, designer and philosopher She holds an MA in Fine Art and Design from Yale University, and an AHRC funded PhD in Philosophy and Aesthetics from The University of Greenwich. Her research is concerned with rethinking the relationship between language and meaning, viewed through the lens[es] of identity / difference, and paradox. She is particularly interested in how a form of immanent textual ‘performativity’, undertaken through typography, might amplify philosophical content. She teaches practice and theory of design at Central St. Martins, and The University of Westminster. ‘materialanguage’ is her most current research project, which explores language and its relationship to materiality as it pertains to the production of thought / power / subjectivity / time / sensuality.

Meryl Donoghue is an internationally renowned artist. She holds an MA in Fine Art from the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, and a first first-class honours degree in Fine Art from Bath Spa University (2007). She was awarded the University Prize for her final show. Having no fixed medium, Meryl moves from delicate pencil drawings to highly augmented photographic prints, and from experimenting with sound and animation to installations comprising animatronics and taxidermy. Her work borders on the sinister and the bizarre, exploring concerns relating to self-constructed reality, childhood, adolescence, sexuality, exile, isolation, loss and death. www.meryldonoghue.com

Norbert Finzsch is Professor of North American History at the University of Cologne. He specializes in the history of racisms, sexualities and corporealities. www.aaa.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/8825.html?&L=1

Johnny Golding is a philosopher. Her books, videos, philosophic-sound installations and stage productions cover the complex intersections of fine art, ethics, sexualities and physics. Foregrounding synesthetic materiality, fractal patterning, camouflage, curved-time dimension, much of her recent work continues to be filtered through the parrhēsiastic ethics of the flesh, borrowing from feminism, queer studies and the wild sciences. Director of The Centre