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“Von Weltformat“. Das Schweizer Plakat aus historischer und bildwissenschaftlicher Perspektive”

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The Work of Swiss poster designer Paul Brühwiler and the Swiss National Design stereotype.

Abstract

The understanding of “Swiss design” as perhaps the purest form of modernism places Switzerland at the epicentre of twentieth century graphic design history. Post modern vehicles of thought as well as challenges to Western-centred design history, have left the success story of Swiss graphic design in tact. The poster has its own particular status in Switzerland, offering a continuity with the perception of the “Swiss style” [Hollis] in design. This paper examines the work and career of Swiss poster designer Paul Brühwiler, and through this critiques this concept of “Swissness”.

Brühwiler’s prodigious output has not received the attention of design historians to the same extent as others who sit comfortably within canonical models of Swiss design. This paper will rely on visual analysis, design historical and social studies research to examine the impact of the national myth on Brühwiler’s work both in Switzerland and in California and ask to what extent a national stereotype is useful or detrimental to design historical knowledge

Text:

The Swiss designer Paul Brühwiler created more than two hundred posters and other kinds of graphic design for clients in Switzerland, Paris and California between the years 1960 and 2010.

His posters are held in the national library of Switzerland, in the collection of the Zurich Museum of Gestaltung, in the Stiftung Schweizer Grafik as well as in the MoMA in New York.

Showing here a roughly chronological selection of examples: [...]

The recently published “100 years of Swiss Graphic Design” includes one work of Paul Brühwiler from the Los Angeles period. In the English language design history classic, Meggs’ History of Design, his work is featured in a supplementary chapter since the 5th edition. Brühwiler has enjoyed two retrospectives of his work, both in Germany.

I set out to examine this notion of a national stereotype and how this is used in design history and criticism. In the Swiss case a national style or method has even taken a descriptor which identifies it as at one with the nation: “Swiss style”. Rational, systematised, neutral, clean, precise design, the abiding characteristics of post war Modernism are found to have their epicentre in the country whose stereotype as a nation shares these same characteristics – rational, systematised, neutral, clean, precise. Whether the term “Swiss style” emerged at home or abroad, the style (that equally sought to be international) was a metonym for “Swiss”.

Even when the era of the Swiss style forged by protagonists such as Emil Ruder, Armin Hoffman and Josef Müller Brockmann in Zurich and Basel began to be eclipsed by the counter tendencies towards deconstruction centred around Wolfgang Weingart and others, the myth of Swiss design retained its currency, and does even today. Post modern vehicles of thought as well as challenges to the Western-centred design history, have left the success story of Swiss graphic design intact.

As each new generation of cultural critics seeks to identify “Swiss” design anew, the myth of “Swiss style” remains as the standard to which design invariably relates and perhaps tries to distance itself. The Swiss stereotype, compelling as it is, seems hard to shake off.

In the 1990s Swiss design becomes represented by young people in touch with computers in studios, creating visually strikingly similar work, the aesthetics of vector graphics, manga, and techno.

This monograph also tackles the question of Swissness head on, but again the work portrayed seems to unite around a limited set of visual characteristics.

Anglo American design historians

Anglo American design historians (eg Hollis, Cramsie, Meggs) have embraced the essentialist idea of Swissness and functionalist modernism, particularly in typography. Whilst they refer in particular to the influence of the post war era, this as the imaginary of Swissness seems to hold its currency even today.

“Swissness” as a set of design characteristics in is explained in relation to “Swissness” as a geopolitical cultural condition. For example, Patrick Cramsie in *The Story of Graphic Design* describes Swiss style with terms such as “impersonal”, “rational” “clarity” “minimal” “abstract”. He makes a link between Switzerland’s system of direct democracy, the four languages and the “onus on designers to present information clearly and impartially.” (p 244) He refers to Switzerland’s geographical position on the borders of Fascism in the war, traditions of craftsmanship, and an institutional support for graphic design.

Whilst these conditions may have been present, there is no causal link between frequent referendums and a predilection for the sans serif, nor between technical and craft skills and a preference for photography over illustration.

It is true, the development of the grid allowed for the systematic presentation of information, but the growing need for this in the post war era was symptomatic of the rise in mass communications and public information with increasing mobility, global trade, consumerism, and media output, none of which were unique to Switzerland.

The current scholarship projects in Switzerland are already opening up these delivered histories. *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design* already makes a huge contribution to expanding the idea of Swiss graphic design.

But it still wants to retain “something autonomous that can be described as Swiss graphic design”. Asking the perennial question, what makes it Swiss? it nonetheless falters, wanting to go beyond the cliches but inevitably then generalising, referring for example to the commercial recognition of the benefit of quality design in Switzerland – this latter telling us more about the value of design rather than its formal or methodological characteristics.

If Swiss design, as I contend is caught in its own stereotype, then what do I mean by stereotype?

A stereotype is typically it is considered to be a negative assignment, but it doesn't have to be. Indeed, there is much that would be considered positive about the Swiss stereotype. Michael Pickering argues that the concept of the stereotype has its partner concept in “The Other” that is to say, the idea of the active subject which defends its normality through the exclusion and denigration of those who don't conform.

It is important to note, that the stereotype refers to not a classification or category, but a set of characteristics associated with a group, which is then assumed to apply to all members of that group. Ewen and Ewen, authors of *Typecasting*, demonstrate how stereotyping has gone hand in hand with the building of nations and national identity, but always on the basis of exclusion and the assertion of the Subject as against the Other. All of these writers focus on the use of stereotypes to connote inferiority.

Was Swiss style a construction of design history which promoted and served a partial vision of Swiss nationhood? How useful is it still to try to construct national cultures of design? I hope to shed some light on these questions through the example of the work and career of poster designer Paul Brühwiler. This is the focus of the next section of this presentation.

* * * *

Paul Brühwiler was born in 1939 in Luzern and took a graphic design *Vorkurs* at the Kunstgewerbeschule, followed by a four-year graphic design apprenticeship in Luzern.

In the late fifties, Zürich seemed far from Luzern. The Luzern school was not oriented to the concrete art inspired by pre-war Modernism that was developing in the mid to late 1950s in Basel and Zurich. Innovations such as *Typografische Monatsblätter* (image) and *Neue Grafik* (image), were not representative of most graphic design at the time.

For example, The posters from Switzerland selected in “Modern Publicity” from 1950 to 1951 show a number of works moving in the direction of geometric and abstract solutions, but just as many are illustrative.

Examples from *Graphis 1959/60* again show the two directions side by side. The emergent “Swiss style” is notably fresh and different. But nonetheless this represents a small proportion of the designs at the time.

The terms typography or graphic design are not even used, only advertising, illustration and art.

Even half a decade later, in 1972, it was by no means inevitable that Swiss design was to be uniquely identified with the forward march towards an imaginary rationality offered by the truth of mathematics and geometry.

Henri Hillebrand in *Graphic Designers in Europe* talks of two Basel schools:

“Die Basler Schule: das ist in der modernen Grafik doch ein Begriff- gerade weil er unbedachterweise fuer zwei vollkommende gegensaeetliche Richtungen verwendet wird, fuer die illusionisten wie Stocklin, Brun, Leupin und Birkhauser, und fuer die Konkreten wie Hofmann und Ruder.”

So, what was happening at these unknown Swiss schools of design? At the time when Brühwiler studied in Luzern, the orientation was to drawing and expressionist forms of design. Students were encouraged to draw, paint, to do woodcuts, and were expected to find their own personal language of visual design. A subjectivity was encouraged.

Wolfgang Weingart in interview claimed: “Not every school in Switzerland was as good as Basel. Zurich perhaps, but nobody spoke about Bern and Lucerne, they were totally unknown [...] Lausanne was a totally unknown school, everybody laughed about this school.

[Louise Paradis; conversation took place in Basel in January 2011. It was copy-edited by Ariella Yedgar.]

Was Lucerne simply conservative, or was it developing its own method and style, which does not fit tidily into design history canon?

When Hans Rudolf Lutz, ardent defender of a subjective design position became head of the school from 1966, the emphasis on personal expression remained. However, I have not come across the presence of a “Lucerne School”, nor even of the “illusionist” school in Basel referred to by Henri Hillebrand. or even a Romande school in the standard canon of “Swiss design”.

Brühwiler himself was inspired by the Basel poster artist Herbert Leupin. Leupin’s work, lyrical, colourful, illustrated represents a different modernism. Although his work received international acclaim in the 1950s and 1960s all over the world it is not what springs to mind today when we talk of the Basel school.

During his apprenticeship, Brühwiler’s talent for both drawing and poster design were put to good use, and brought commercial success for Kung. The kind of work they undertook was promotional material, shop windows and posters for Swiss businesses such as Hotel Raben in Luzern, Hotel Elite in Zürich. These images show a brochure for the Modegeschäft Grieder in Luzern.

But by 1960, Brühwiler was already finding Lucerne too provincial, and left for Paris where he hoped to work in film design. It was only in Paris, that he learnt that his Swiss nationality placed him an advantageous position as a designer, although he knew nothing himself of “Swiss design”, nor even of its precursor The Bauhaus. Brühwiler’s window to the world of graphic design had been Graphis magazine in which he admired many different forms of graphic design. It was working with Albert Hollenstein in Pigalle, however, that he encountered designers from Basel and Zurich.

In Paris, Brühwiler moved on corporate work with Dorland, (Dorland and Grey), and then Conde Naste where he art directed the male fashion magazine Adam as well as designing packaging for Beaufour.

By 1965, Brühwiler wanted to expand his horizons further and emigrated with his young family and a fellow graphic designer to Los Angeles. It was the start of a roller coaster of professional, personal and graphic design experience which saw him contribute to some of the foremost studios of American Modernism, Saul Bass and Charles and Ray Eames.

In Los Angeles, Brühwiler again he found that his Swiss nationality brought with it a certain cache, whilst at the same time there was little evidence of of the “Swiss Style” in his portfolio. In Switzerland itself the counter movement of deconstruction was emerging, particularly in typography with the well known exchanged between American students and Basel teachers.

Hoping again to work in film titles, Brühwiler got his first job with Saul Bass in 1965, but as it turned out his talents were put to doing the print work which he could do faster and better than the other designers.

In 1967, Brühwiler went on to work with Charles and Ray Eames, an immersive experience he describes as like going to university, with scientists and mathematicians as much a part of the operation as designers. The Eames admired Swiss design. But their modernism embraced tradition. Rather than

banishing the hand-made, they drew inspiration from crafts from Africa, India, Poland and Russia. For the Eames design was a means of pedagogy, and scientific advance and certainly not a neutral carrier of information.

Brühwiler contributed to several of Eames' major multi disciplinary works. (he is the male figure in the film Powers of Ten). Often working seven days a week, the Eames period coincided with crisis in Brühwiler's private life, and a breakdown which nonetheless spurred him to new experiences as a designer, finally striking out as a designer in his own right, setting up a firstly with Rod Dyer in 1969, and then with Teruko Ohkagawa in 1970.

His business partner, Rod Dyer, a South American, was a fan of Konkret inspired grafik design, Odermatt in particular – but as a style, not a method. And so it was from the South African that Brühwiler learnt more about Swiss design. What they practiced was later to become known as sampling, and at the same time it was important to bring something personal to the work.

What Brühwiler encountered in America, was not only the impressive scale of the advertising – giant facades, the richness and variety of expressions, but also the corporatisation of design and advertising which was fast developing to keep pace with the acceleration of post war consumerism.

At the same time, the emerging “counter culture”, closely associated with the emergence of new forms of music – in Brühwiler's words, “music became religion”– and the attendant festivals opened up new genres of graphic design.

Together, Bruhwiler and Dyer they entered the fast-moving world edged with the glamour of show biz, designing LP covers and posters for big names such as Capitol, Warner, Universal, A+M Records. He described the extraordinary tempo of their work lives:

Manchmal hatten wir drei vier Arbeiten im Tag, am morgen früh haben wir die fertigen Arbeiten zurückgebracht, wieder zwei drei neue gefasst... Auf der Rückfahrt im Auto überlegten wir wie was zu machen war, dann ans Telefon, Typo bestellt, ein Stilleben... Film ins Labor per Courier gesandt, express... wenn image gut war, aufgezeichnet im richtigen Ausschnitt, Typo dazu auf Overlay, alles auf Carton aufgezogen, fertig, nächsten Tag geliefert. Für eine Zeit ist das alles sehr aufregend... aber nach einigen Monaten war ich ausgepumpt. Und das Geld das reinkam ist an den Wochenenden wieder raus...

The tempo of life and work described by Brühwiler is a world away from the painstaking rhetorical approaches to design back in Switzerland and the comfort of institutional communities such as the university.

The tempo was accompanied by an assault on the norms of the older generation. In Brühwiler's words:

Die Amerikaner im allgemeinen waren sehr prude Menschen, durch die Hippies wurde die prude Moral aufgelöst, auf einmal war Sex kein Tabu mehr, Orgien wurden alltäglich.

Brühwiler's emerging auteurship as a poster designer embraced both this radicalisation, but compositionally remained disciplined and consciously aesthetic. The fashion for sexually unambiguous imagery graphic design of the 1970s is also present in some of his first poster designs.

This promotional brochure for a porcelain company runs the gamut of myths of womanhood, from this 1970s renaissance of a turn of the century romanticism_ the lace and puckered fabrics, puffed sleeves ...

to the naturalness connoted by the long, loose hair... combined with the implied eroticism of these twosomes and threesomes, pieces of fruit giving connotations of both fertility and original sin.

All of which looks quite clumsy today, but the point is that Brühwiler here is already embracing promotional design rich in cultural signification, but at the same time with no relationship to the objects promoted.

There is no trace of the myth of Swissness here, no Sachlichkeit. In this poster promoting just about every major name in rock and pop music for Capitol Records, the girl is again sexualised but speaks also the spunkiness of youth, the rising feeling of empowerment through the rejection of prudish conventions and the new music culture.

Brühwiler soon became adept at manipulating graphic techniques and visual characteristics in order to suggest meanings. He also began to use typography and lettering as a direct form of image making, something which typifies his later work.

This promotional poster for the LP and photo exhibition "Marylin" crops on to the face of the singer, using the raster effect to connote the multiple mechanical reproductions of her image – the singer is not the subject, the image, its reproduction and fetishisation of the singer is the subject. Whilst putting Monroe's face as the subject, it simultaneously interrupts that fetishisation through the imposition of the black half tone.

This poster Summer Time, for Herb Albert, uses a pop aesthetic both in the silkscreen look of the flat colours indicating the beach scene, and through the bubble cloud writing, commissioned by Brühwiler.

The album itself cuts strikingly into this landscape in a way which has the singer, whilst diminutively placed, becoming part of the overall scene, and thus the culture of that time and place.

Just recently another book of regional design was published. In her book of Californian design, Louise Sandhaus argues that California is a "state of mind", an incubator and hothouse in which stylistic and commercial influences combined to create a distinct culture of design.

Does a state of mind become a culture, which then ushers an aesthetic, or a style? Does the heightened experience of taboo breaking, and the accelerating tempo of consumerism have a real time aesthetic corollary?

If this is true of California, is it then the case that the clean, repressed orderliness of Swiss design reflects Switzerland, or the other way round? Are these classifications of design loci, or stereotypes?

And what happens when these cultures meet, when one infiltrates the other, as so clearly happened in some of the more well-known exchanges between Swiss German and American designers? Why do we look for national and regional identifiers such as Swiss design, or Californian design? As our image worlds become more and more fluid, are we again entering a period such as the post war era in which nations and regions re-assert their need to create myths and identities, to shore up their borders and insist on their particular characteristics?

In 1972 Brühwiler returned to Switzerland on a visit, and found that for the first time he really appreciated it.

Die neue schöne Hallenbäder, alles schien irgendwie besser als in LA, die Cafes an der Reuss, alles war so sauber, die Berge, der See, vor allem die Luft.

Brühwiler wanted to introduce Switzerland to what he called the “anti-design design” he had experienced in California. Hans Rudolph Lutz, who was then director of the school at Lucerne invited Brühwiler to share his images of Californian music industry design with the students there. Walter Herdeg, editor of Graphis then published an article using Bruhwiler’s image material on the emergent scene of LP cover design on the West Coast.

This anti design perhaps postmodern, an explosion of imagery, juxtapositions, irreverent pastiche. It must have been a delight to students to see this anything goes aesthetic, an anti-intellectualism, sticking up two fingers at what is allowed. the designer themselves is taking charge, rather than learning from the masters.

Brühwiler was in fact bringing back to the Lucerne students some ideas that were analogue to those being exported to the USA from Basel at the same time in the sense of the breaking away from strictures of European post war Modernism. The music design nonetheless had a rhythm, a sense of dynamism, of change, of the creation of new meanings through the sourcing of references.

I believe these were driven by the tempo of idea generation, and thus the need to bring together existing images in order to create the new. This is an externally reflective rather than internally reflective form of design practice. The construction does not lie within internally reflective rhetoric but with the juxtaposition of existing projections of meaning.

Brühwiler’s is not an intellectual design, but one which is highly engaged with existing visual cultures. A key feature of his design approach is the aspiration that each design has its own answer, the avoidance of a system or singular visual language which can be applied to each job.

This was not a kind of loose, hippyish psychedelia nor a punk trash aesthetic. His works are highly constructed, aesthetic and harmonious. Yet Brühwiler’s work is not a kind of postmodern pastiche, nor is it pop graphics. What is

evident throughout his posters and which develops, is an anti-perfectionism, and a sense of narrative, and often a personal statement.

An early commission for the Theatre 11 in Lucerne visually translates this conscious framing of narratives. The construction of the poster reflects the internal and external framing of the event.

The jazz poster on the right demonstrates a design competence equally at ease with the fluid letterforms as with the grid overlay, but even this is drawn out and made explicit. The grid is visibly part of the design. Further information is provocatively pushed to the edges of the pages.

Brühwiler was able to attract new clients in Switzerland fairly quickly, first working for Swiss tv, and winning contracts from major Swiss companies such as SBB, Swiss Air, and Sandoz.

Most importantly for Brühwiler he began to establish his name and to take off in auteurship as a poster designer. He proved himself to be an extraordinary versatile designer, equally at home art directing, or using his own photography, typography, lettering and illustration and particularly developing montage techniques which served his interest in multiple and contrasting narratives.

He is equally at ease creating an image of harmonious perfection, as with an aggressive destruction of the clean graphic surface.

Commissioned to create the cover for Graphis magazine number 231 (1985), Brühwiler chose to make a provocative image of the graphic designer as the puppet of the paying client, and at the same time disturb the image of cleanness and perfection which has remained a sustained hallmark of Swiss design.

I spoke earlier about how some of B's early posters exploited myths of womanhood.

Later, the human face, either of a well-known figure, or cropped to the eyes and mouth is at the centre of many of the posters produced for the Swiss cultural institutes who became his main clients.

Here social readings and cliches around gender are less dominant and the body parts – eyes, ears, mouths, hands feet are used as metonyms for aspects of the social condition, such as the ability and at the same time inability to communicate.

His subjectivity is clear. For example, a comment on Goddard's attitude to the conventions of film.

There is often a playfulness and humour present in Bs work, for example in these delightful literal interpretations of Hitchcocks "The Birds" and "The Congress of the Penguins"...

In his later works from the 1990s onwards Brühwiler's questioning of the human condition becomes more evident. He seems to not simply question the role of the designer, but more generally to reflect on the individual as a member of the human race, perhaps also on himself. It is clear that he brings a social sensitivity to his work, whether this has its roots in his religious upbringing or a political stance.

Whilst Bruhwiler's work was highly present in the Zurich and Basel cultural institutions in the 1980s and 1990s up to the end of the 20th century – indeed Hans Rudolph Lutz claimed that he more than any other designer influenced (geprägt) or the Zurich poster scene in this period, he does fit tidily into the canon of Swiss design. Not only does he not represent a stereotype of Swiss design, but he does not reproduce his own ideas in stereotypical fashion.

His work is polychromatic, monochrome, emotional, personal, sexual, multi-layered and visibly hand made. They reveal not an attempt at neutrality, but a desire to engage and critique.

Perhaps his work is “Other” to the Subject, that which lies outside the norm in order for the norm to shore up its sense of identity. This understanding is reflected by the fact that Brühwiler has been included in exhibitions in Switzerland such as *Breaking the Rules, Plakate der bewegten 80er Jahre in der Schweiz*, 2007, and as a post-script in *Meggs' Graphic design* in 2012.

In a gesture which is typical for Bruhwiler's inventive search for difference and renewal, the last series he created for The Zurich Filmposium in 1994 were large woodcuts, at a time where most designers were embarking on digital methods. Woodcuts could not have been less fashionable, but as black and white hand made images they stood out amongst other designs, and whether intentionally or not, paid homage to his Luzern education forty years earlier.

Whilst I would love to show more of the incredibly rich and diverse output of this designer, I will now move on to my concluding remarks in relation to some of the questions which I have raised, and for which Bruhwiler's output has served as an example for the validity of those questions.

It is evident through the recent projects such as the Zurich Museum für Gestaltung's 100 years of Swiss graphic design, and *Mapping Graphic Design in Switzerland* from the HdK in Berne, that there is a current impetus to encompass a wider range of creative output from Switzerland than has previously been the case.

The Mapping project is also interesting for its problematising of design historical approaches, and has sought to draw on some of the Anglo-American critiques of canonical models of design historiography with their tendency to reproduce the same narratives. But still the Anglo American feminist critiques which want to re-think the canon have made only marginal headway in Britain or the USA. Those feminist demands of the 1990s (Martha Scotford, Teal Triggs, Bridget Wilkins) were about moving away from objects towards processes and looking at dissemination, mediation, and consumption as much as production.

Today the proposals for feminist historiographical methodologies have given way to the notion of participatory history writing (Johanna Drucker), with the easy availability of mass amounts of data once under the guard of the archivist and inevitable questioning of the role of the expert.

But accessibility to data alone in itself will not re-construct our assumptions and expectations, will not make visible that which has not been seen as worthy of recording.

Finally, to return to the question of national stereotypes. I am interested to ask why at this particular time as national design cultures seem to be more fluid and open, there is a move once again assert national myths in design.

In social studies the stereotype is invariably built on characteristics which are viewed negatively. In the case of Swiss design, the common characteristics are celebrated for their international influence. But even if a stereotype forms a generally considered positive representation of a nation, it stands for simplistic categories and ultimately an unrepresentative picture which is difficult to shake off.

Another very contemporary model of the positive stereotype of a national culture is the nation brand. It is the business of the brand to draw out a simple set of characteristics which can be easily identified and recognised, a form of communication which seeks to reduce complexity and this method is now increasingly applied to nations. In multibillion dollar operations paid for from public funds, often of countries which can ill afford it, with the promise return on investment. The argument for these branding processes are never about complexity, but about the benefits of simplification and promotion of national myths, and by implication, exclusion of unwanted factors.

Kjetil Fallan tackles this question of the national design myth in his attempt to expand and diversify Scandinavian design history. He also sees a recent revival of modernist ideals, in the Scandinavian case the stereotype is “humanistic, organic, democratic and timeless”, which Fallan describes as a ‘straightjacket of mythologies’ (p. 1), stereotypes that are superficial at best and caricature at worst.

Was the “Swiss style” in design perhaps one of the earliest, non-explicit examples of nation branding? Design historian Paul Betts has shown how West Germany, with the help of the USA, took this route to re-branding Germany through design in the post war era.

Whilst the term Swiss style was, according to Lars Müller and others, not coined by the Swiss but by the Americans, perhaps the Swiss, at least those in the vanguard were happy to embrace it as reflecting a coherent idea of Swissness which could be identified with the myths of technological and economic success, precision and craftsmanship, and a faux neutrality which affirmed Switzerland’s place in the post-world order.

Twenty first century reassertion of modernist aesthetics if not principles evident in design and architecture in Switzerland seems to act as a bulwark against new

influences, an assertion of not of a universality but of a Western-oriented myth which seeks perfection, excludes disruption, and ultimately can only reproduce and caricature itself.

In one of two excellent essays on the visual reproduction of the Swiss myth in the poster collection *Paradise Switzerland*, David Signer suggests that a critique of the Swiss myth prolongs its existence. In which case, perhaps the concept of national stereotype is more useful, for its negative connotations are more likely to encounter resistance and push for openness and diversification to that which does not fit in to the stereotype. I hope this expose of the work of Paul Brühwiler today, as well as the other contributions to this seminar makes a contribution to that process.

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