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National College of Art & Design

Visual Communications

Josef Müller-Brockmann and the
Development of Swiss Graphic Design

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Design in Visual Communications

1998

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Introduction

Joseph Müller-Brockmann, born in Rapperdswill, Switzerland in 1914, trained as a graphic designer at the Zürich School of Arts and Crafts. He adopted a modernist approach to design and was one of the main people to develop this design philosophy into what became known as the Swiss style of graphic design.

In this thesis I aim to discuss the design philosophy and approach to design of MB, and analyse the influences on his ideas and work, which will involve discussing earlier modernist artists and designers. I will also look at the way in which MB influenced other graphic designers and how he contributed to the development of Swiss graphic design. I will examine examples of the graphic design work and published writings of MB and other designers who influenced him. I will then examine MB's influence on other designers and his role in developing Swiss graphic design. I will then examine why Swiss graphic design became less popular and what criticisms were made of MB's style of design. I will then give my own opinion on the value of the contribution of MB to graphic design, and how successful the Swiss style has been.

CHAPTER ONE

Müller-Brockmann's philosophy and style of work

MB's priority in design was to achieve efficient and clear communication. Therefore, his work is characterised by simplicity and order. In a 1995 interview in *Eye* magazine, he summed up his approach to design:

> I have always aspired to a distinct arrangement of typographic and pictorial elements, the clear identification of priorities, the formal organisation of the surface by means of the grid, a knowledge of the rules that govern legibility (line length, word and letter spacing and so on) and the meaningful use of colour.
> (Quoted by Schwemer-Scheddin, 1995, p. 10)

MB wanted order in his work because he wanted legible, clear and effective communication. This was because he believed that the communicative function of graphic design was more important than expressive input from the designer. His method of design was methodical, objective and organised, rather than spontaneous or subjective. Ease of communication was a priority for his work, so most decisions regarding line length, point size and difference in scale of text depended on rules of legibility he had established, which gave rise to his simple, functional style.

MB's objective style was a question of morality also. He said that objective communication reflected "an honest attempt to present unmanipulated information to the general public. Subjective interpretation leads to a falsification of the message." (MB, 1961, p. 84) He wrote:

> With the aid of a striking graphic idea and good design the artist has imparted interest to the contents of the advertisement, enhanced its value by formal means and falsified it, thus boosting its effect beyond the merits of the article concerned. The recipient of this advertising message is

induced to buy, simply and solely on the strength of an optical illusion. This gives rise to the question whether such advertising methods are morally justified or to be condemned. (MB, 1961, p. 28)

MB had a strong sense of responsibility as a designer and did not merely want to make money but wanted to help society through his profession. He said:

I have always felt obliged to make a constructive contribution to the future of society. I have never lost the feeling that I have a task to perform.
(Quoted by Schwemer-Scheddin, 1995, p. 16)

This belief that the graphic designer had a moral duty to inform the public in an honest way and not to use design for propaganda or to give false impressions, had profound implications for MB's style of work. For this reason he believed that graphic design should be objective. He said: "What I try to achieve in my work is to communicate information about an idea, event or product as clearly as possible." (Quoted by Schwemer-Scheddin, 1995, p. 16) He went on to say that it was a question of "being able to communicate information to the recipient in a way that leaves him or her free to form a positive or negative opinion." This shows his belief that the purpose of advertising was to inform the public and not to persuade them.

The grid system

The use of grids in MB's design was of fundamental importance. Their use was a distinctive feature of Swiss graphic design. A grid is an underlying structure of page design, the purpose of which is to assist the designer and establish order and therefore increase legibility. MB wrote:

The grid divides up an available surface into a number of proportioned subdivisions serving the needs of the work in

Figure 1: Advertisement by Müller-Brockmann.

hand and provides a visual structure on which the design can be based. The grid makes it possible to bring all the elements of design; type characters, photography, drawing and colour; into a formal relationship to each other; that is to say, the grid system is a means of introducing order into a design.
(MB, p. 85, 1961)

In his book *Grid systems for the Graphic Designer*, MB explained their use. Fig. 1 shows an example of an advertisement in which there is a clear grid structure that was typical of magazine layouts. The space is divided into six columns. The large text at the top left of the space goes across the first two columns. The first picture is three columns wide and the next two pictures, are one column and two columns wide respectively. The pictures are the same height and are lined up.

The principle of a grid is that different pieces of text and elements of the page are lined up along invisible lines and within columns. This creates a link between the different elements which form an overall structure which unifies the design. MB pointed out that ordered design achieved by the use of a grid "lends added credibility to the information and induces confidence." He said that the grid "...brings the arbitrary organisation of text into a logical system in keeping with the content." (MB, 1971, p. 104) The use of grids by MB shows his desire for order, clarity and a formula of design.

Typography

MB favoured san-serif typefaces as he believed that they were more legible than serif typefaces. The typeface he normally used was Akzidenz-Grotesk. The simplicity of san-serif typefaces was suited to the overall simplicity of his work. He believed that san-serif typefaces were objective, unlike Roman letters which he said expressed an "individual concern with form; the decorative feet, the growing and diminishing thickness of the up and down strokes

Figure 2: Concert poster, 1961, by Müller-Brockmann.

which belong to the spirit of a past age." (MB, p. 124, 1961) He believed that san-serif typefaces were functional and expressed the spirit of the 20th century.

MB concentrated on the study of typography after giving up the use of illustration. Typography replaced illustration and began to serve the same purpose as it, which was to attract attention to the design and supply a visually interesting element. MB developed strict principles for the use of type, such as a belief that different typefaces should never be mixed. Fig. 2 shows an example of a concert poster which is purely typographic. MB wrote:

> In the last posters of 1960 formally symbolic forms were deliberately relinquished in favour of typographically constructed posters. the task of expressing dynamism, rhythm and tonal colour hitherto given to the formal elements is now left to typography. (MB, p. 114, 1961)

The type-face used is Akzidenz-Grotesk which MB liked for its simple quality. All the text runs at a 45 degree angle sloping upwards and all the words are ranged against grid lines which are perpendicular to the lines of text. The angle of the text makes the poster dynamic and interesting as the viewer's eye is led in an unusual direction, moving upwards, rather than in a normal horizontal and vertical pattern. The angle of the text also meant that more use could be made of the space of the poster. The first names of three of the musicians are placed to the bottom right of the rest of the large text, lined up with a different grid-line. This means that there is more blank space around the large type which makes it less cluttered and easier to read. In this poster the most important information, the name of the concert and the musicians, is printed a second time in a much larger point-size and in different colours. This makes them the first thing the viewer would notice, and can be read from a distance. These names are placed in equal distance apart on the vertical axis with the rest of the text in between them so

Figure 3: Exhibition poster, 1960, by Müller-Brockmann.

there is a balance between large and small text. The bright colours used for the large text are an important part of the design as they make the poster more interesting. Bright colours are only suitable for large text as it would be difficult to read a lot of small text if it were coloured. The paper used for the poster is a light grey/brown colour. This colour mixes with the colours of the inks used for the names of the musicians, thereby making them less pure and therefore more natural colours. This effect also unifies the colours used in the poster.

Another purely typographic poster is illustrated in fig. 3. The background is black with the words 'der Film' running across the page, in as large a size as possible, about three quarters the way down the page. The word 'Film' is white which is the strongest contrast to the background. The word 'der' is grey so it contrasts with the background and the word 'Film'. Half of it goes behind the 'F' and so saves space. The rest of the text is in a much smaller point-size and is red which is a vibrant colour so it stands out. It is ranged against a vertical grid line with the word 'Film' at the top and bottom of the poster. The poster is striking because of the large area of empty black space which causes the word 'der Film' to stand out. MB wrote of posters: "The typography must always be an integral part of the conception and its effects placed on a par with all others." (MB, 1971, p. 54)

Illustration

MB's use of and beliefs about illustration changed throughout his career. His earlier work was often illustrative, but he abandoned the use of illustrations when he adopted his more objective approach to design. In an interview he said:

> Until I was 30 I had been trying out various styles and techniques to find out where my talent might lie. I had quite a lot of apparent success with my illustrative work, but as a

Figure 4: Posters for Zürich police, 1951/52, by Müller-Brockmann.
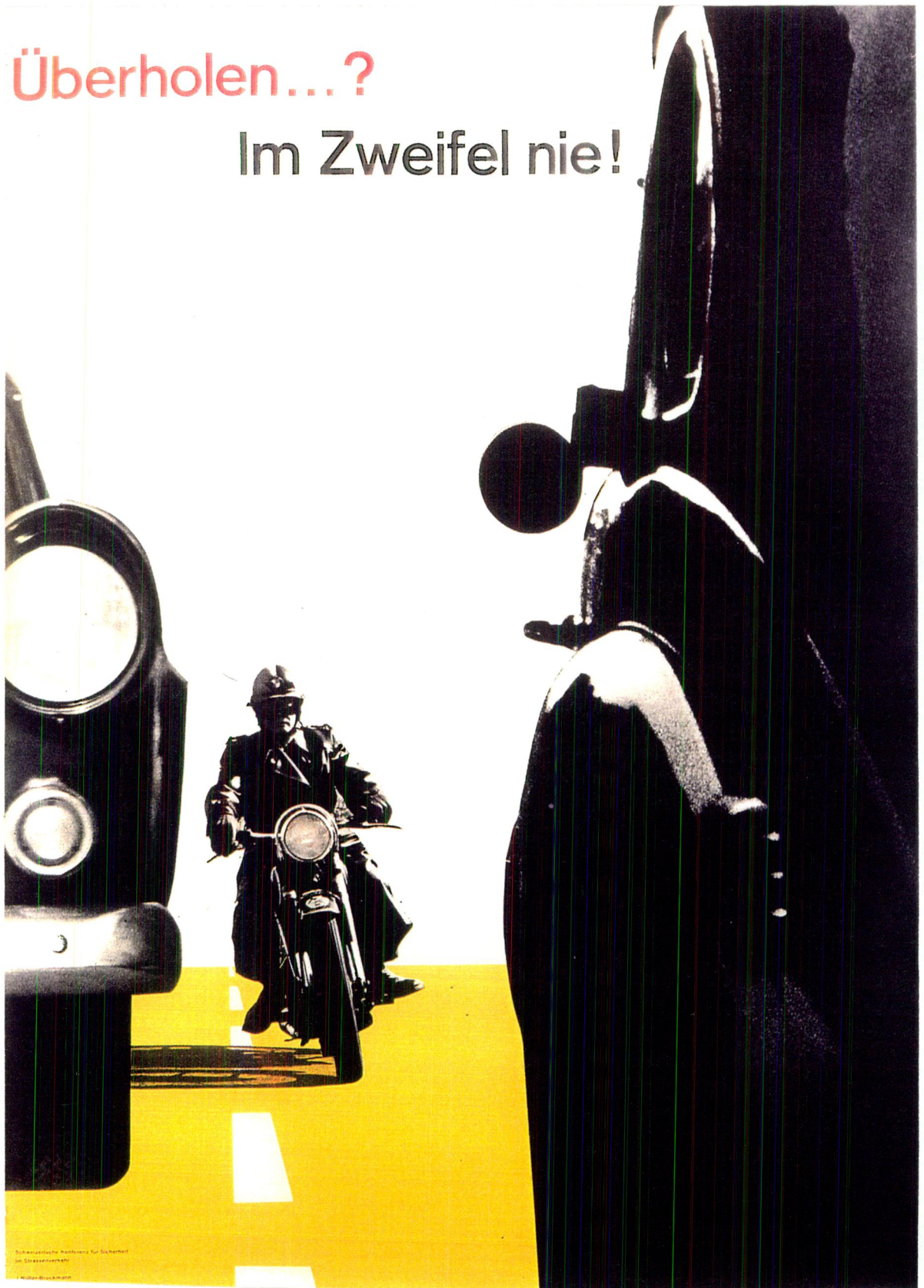
Figure 5: Traffic safety poster, 1957, by Müller-Brockmann.

result of my ruthless self-critical analysis I saw that I possessed no essential artistic talent beyond the ordinary, and the creativity of a mediocre person is of no general interest. You can't learn to become an artist, but you can learn to become a useful graphic artist. Intensive study of typography will reveal its laws, and the same holds for photography and compositions using typographical, photographic and graphic elements. (Quoted by Schwemer-Scheddin, 1995, p. 11)

This statement shows how self-critical he was, and how he wanted his work to be as good as possible. He felt he could not develop his artistic skills any further, but that he could develop his graphic design skills through hard work and study. MB felt that illustration gave an individualistic note to a design solution which "was at variance with the modern advertising style." He also said: "Illustrations are always understood as an artistic product - a subjective statement. Photography is a credible reflection of reality that enables me to make an objective statement." (Quoted by Schwemer- Scheddin, 1995, p. 12)

Fig. 4 shows a set of four posters for the Zürich police from 1952/53 before he stopped using illustrations. The drawings are made up of simple angular lines which create a clear but abstracted effect. The drawings are also humorous, unlike his later work. Posters with a similar purpose which he did later, the road safety and anti-noise pollution posters, consisted of photographs instead of drawings, which show his change of style. The poster illustrated in fig. 5 is one of these. It shows a motor-cyclist overtaking a car while there is an on-coming car. The poster is dramatic because it shows a tense moment before a possible accident. This effect is dramatised by the difference in scale between the motor-cycle and the cars. Only a small part of each car is showing, which allows the cars to be very large thus increasing the dramatic effect. This also makes good use of the available space. The use of photography makes the image realistic so the viewer might feel that this type of situation is

Figure 6: Advertisement, c. 1954, by Müller-Brockmann.

Figure 6: Advertisement, c.1934, by Müller-Brockmann.

more likely to happen than if illustration was used as people are more likely to believe what they see in a photograph. The posters in fig. 4 draw people's attention to the threat of crime in a humorous way, while the traffic safety poster is more serious and therefore more effective. A humorous approach, especially cartoons, may not convey the serious nature of crime or accidents. The purpose of the cartoons is to entertain the viewer and communicate a message.

MB said that he abandoned illustration because he realised that "the illustrative solution never quite served the purpose of the work in hand."(MB, 1961, p. 26) He believed that photography was better than drawing as a means of illustration, as it was objective; he wrote: "When the camera records a situation, it furnishes objective information..." and that "it requires no effort to understand its message..."(MB, 1961, p. 27) This meant that photography fitted in with the criteria of clarity and objectivity which were central to his design philosophy. MB believed that photography should be used instead of drawings whenever possible, because photographs were better able to impart an impression of reality and were objective unlike illustrations.

Fig. 6 is an advertisement for an antidepressant. It consists of a photograph of a wall with a woman standing at the end of it. The picture is taken at a high angle, from a point which is on the same plane as the wall, so the two sides of the wall are seen as straight lines and only the top and side of the wall can be seen. Sunlight is shining at a low angle directly at one side of the wall, casting a long shadow of the wall and the woman which forms a right angle with the wall and lines up with the nearest corner of the wall to the photographer. Though this is a photograph it is very symbolic and is carefully set up. The wall represents depression and its shadow represents the effect it has on a person, which is the woman. The wall is photographed at an angle which gives as little information about the three-dimensional aspect of the image as possible which makes it difficult to recognise. People might not recognise the wall

Gruppe 21
Europäische Form

Schenken Sie formvollendet

Zum Beispiel diese Vase

Sie wurde ausgezeichnet.
Mit dem Zeichen der Gruppe 21.
Und gehört somit zu den formvollendeten
Gegenständen rund um den Tisch.
Zum Besten, was 23 Hersteller aus ganz
Europa und ihre namhaften Designer

geschaffen haben. Eine internationale
Jury bedeutender Fachleute
(unter ihnen: Sigvard Graf Bernadotte,
Prof. Lord Queensberry, Dr. Arthur Hald,
Prof. Arnold Bode) entscheidet, welche
Artikel das Zeichen der Gruppe 21 tragen
dürfen. Und dadurch erkennbarer Maß-
stab werden. Für vollendete zeitlose Form.
Für guten Stil also – und Geschmack.

Figure 7: Advertisement, 1965, by Müller-Brockmann.

Figure 2. Advertisement, 1965, by Müller-Brockmann.

if the shadow were not there. This makes the picture intriguing for the viewer. There is also nothing to give an impression of perspective on the ground, so the surface could be read as being a two-dimensional background for the text. The text is integrated with the photograph, as it follows a grid structure already present in the picture. The name of the product is set in a large point-size following the shadow of the far edge of the wall. The rest of the text is much smaller and forms a column ranged to the left against an invisible line which is a continuation of the side of the wall and is perpendicular to the line formed by the shadow. The poster is very simple and has a minimum of elements. The angle from which the wall was photographed was carefully chosen to line up different elements in order to make the image interesting and dynamic. This image would not have been successful if it had been a drawing rather than a photograph because it would just seem like something imagined by the designer, rather than a real situation.

Another example of an advertisement involving a photograph is illustrated in fig. 7. This consists of a photograph of a glass vase which fills the width of the space, and some simple text above it. This is an example of an objective and simple advertisement that MB felt should be produced as there is nothing in the picture other than the vase to help promote it, such as an interior of a room. The photograph is taken at the same level as the vase so its outline shape can be seen and therefore shows its design most accurately. The advertisement shows the viewer an accurate representation of an example of the product. The text is as simple as possible, the small text being in two columns on the right of the page. The first of these columns and the black square above it are lined up with the left hand side of the neck of the vase in the picture. Even though the vase is symmetrical, he does not centre any other element of the poster. Large text is to the left of the smaller text, so all the type fills the width of the page, reflecting the widest part of the vase. MB wrote:

musica viva

tonhalle, grosser saal
donnerstag, 10. märz
20.15 uhr, 1960
16. volkskonzert der
tonhalle-gesellschaft
zürich

leitung
erich schmid
solisten
annie laffra
violoncello
eva maria rogner
sopran

hans werner henze
sonata per archi
luigi dallapiccola
‹concerto per la notte
di natale dall'anno
1956› für sopran und
kammerorchester
arthur honegger
konzert für violoncello
und orchester
henri dutilleux
erste sinfonie

karten zu fr. 1.-, 2.-, 3.-
tonhalle, hug, jecklin
kuoni, dep.kasse oer-
likon, kreditanstalt

Figure 8: Concert poster, 1960, by Müller-Brockmann.

Just as the graphic form should be subordinated to the theme, so the text should perform a supportive and purely informative function. It should state the point of the advertisement objectively and clearly without any misrepresentation misleading arguments. (MB, 1961, p. 87)

MB often did not use any illustration unless it was necessary, and just used text. This style of work meant that MB had to develop and perfect the use of type. In illustrative graphic design the text is normally of secondary importance to the image, but with a lot of MB's latter work the text becomes the most important element and replaces the image, becoming a more important design feature as well as communicating a message.

His purely typographic posters like fig. 8 are even more objective and simple than the ones involving photographs or abstract patterns. In these posters the only design element is the text, so the only decisions to be made by MB are which typefaces, point-sizes, colours of paper and colours of ink are to be used, and where the text is to be placed aswell as line spacing and weight of text. These posters normally have a lot of text, and a grid is an important part of the design. With these posters MB has created elegant, interesting and effective designs in as simple a way as possible.

The poster in fig. 8 is one of MB's most simple and is very effective. There is no variation in type-face or point-size, a large Akzidenz-Grotesk being used in lower-case letters only. All the text runs horizontally which creates a sense of stability and normality. The names of the musicians and the title of the concert are printed in red, so they stand out against the rest of the text which is printed in black. What makes the poster striking is that the right hand side of the page is filled with text which is ranged against a line that goes down the centre of the page; while in contrast the left hand side of the page is empty except for the title of the concert which is halfway down the page against the left hand side. This makes the title of the concert the most prominent piece of text in the poster, and makes it

Figure 9: Concert poster, 1951, by Müller-Brockmann.

Figure 4. Concert poster, 1951, by Müller-Brockmann.

Figure 10: Concert poster, 1951, by Müller-Brockmann.

important for the overall design of the poster because it becomes a line in relation to which the rest of the text can be seen. If the title was not there, it would be harder to see how far down certain information was in the main part of the text. The presence of the small piece of text in the left hand side of the page helps show how empty it is and contrasts with the right hand side of the page. The three colours of the poster, black, white and red are colours which contrast as much as possible from each other. This adds to the clarity of the poster.

Some of the most important work MB did were the posters for the Zürich Tonhalle. Some of these posters were purely typographic, and others involved abstract designs. Their design was normally meant to represent the music of the concert. MB wrote:

> The design of my posters so far has been based on simple formal elements strictly linked together and a lucid, constructive arrangement of areas including most geometrical forms. This composition, for which I often used precisely proportioned subdivisions, was intended to be a symbolic expression of the conformity of music to its inner laws.
> (MB, 1961, p. 114)

Two early examples of these posters from the same set are illustrated in figs. 9 and 10. An abstract image takes up the top two thirds of the poster while the text is at the bottom. The abstract designs probably represent pieces of music as MB wrote:

> The thematic, dynamic, rhythmic and metrical values of music are represented by suitable visual forms and series of forms. The tonal colour of the various works due for performance is illustrated with colour arranged as dictated by emotion or a particular visual effect and in a fixed sequence.
> (MB. 1961, p. 114)

Both posters are printed in black and another colour which is used for the names of the musicians and part of the image. The names of
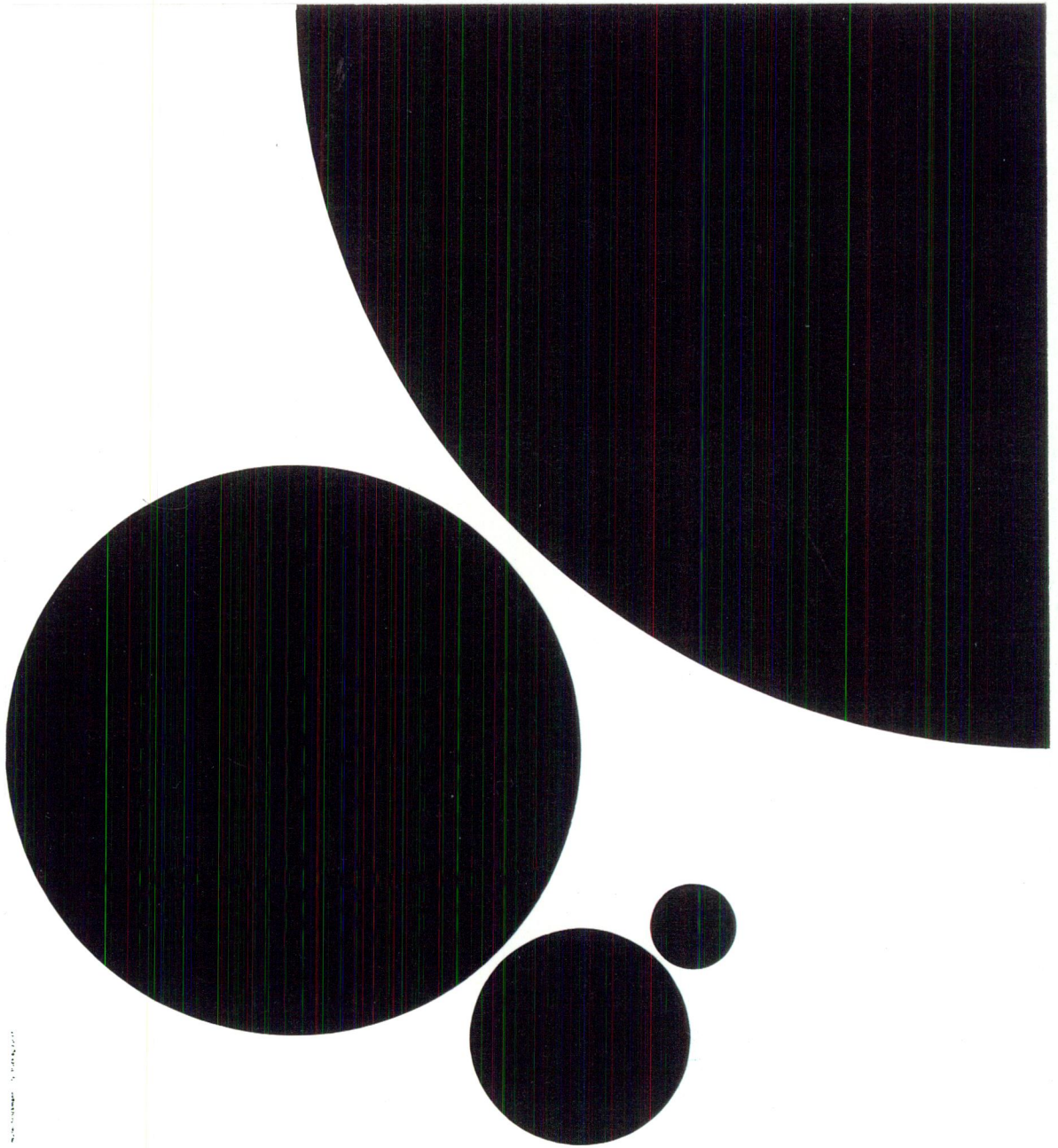
dienstag, den 7. januar 1958
20.15 uhr großer tonhallesaal
12. volkskonzert
der tonhalle-gesellschaft
zürich
als drittes konzert
im zyklus «musica viva»
leitung hans rosbaud
solisten alfred baum klavier
andré jaunet flöte

schweizerische erstaufführungen
andré jolivet
cinque danses rituelles
ernst krenek
zweites klavierkonzert
luigi nono
«y su sangre va vienne cantando»
musik für flöte und kleines orchester
bernd aloys zimmermann
sinfonie in einem satz

musica viva

karten fr. 1.-, 2.- und 3.-
vorverkauf tonhallekasse hug
jecklin kuoni
genossenschaftsbuchhandlung

Figure 11: Concert poster, 1958, by Müller-Brockmann.
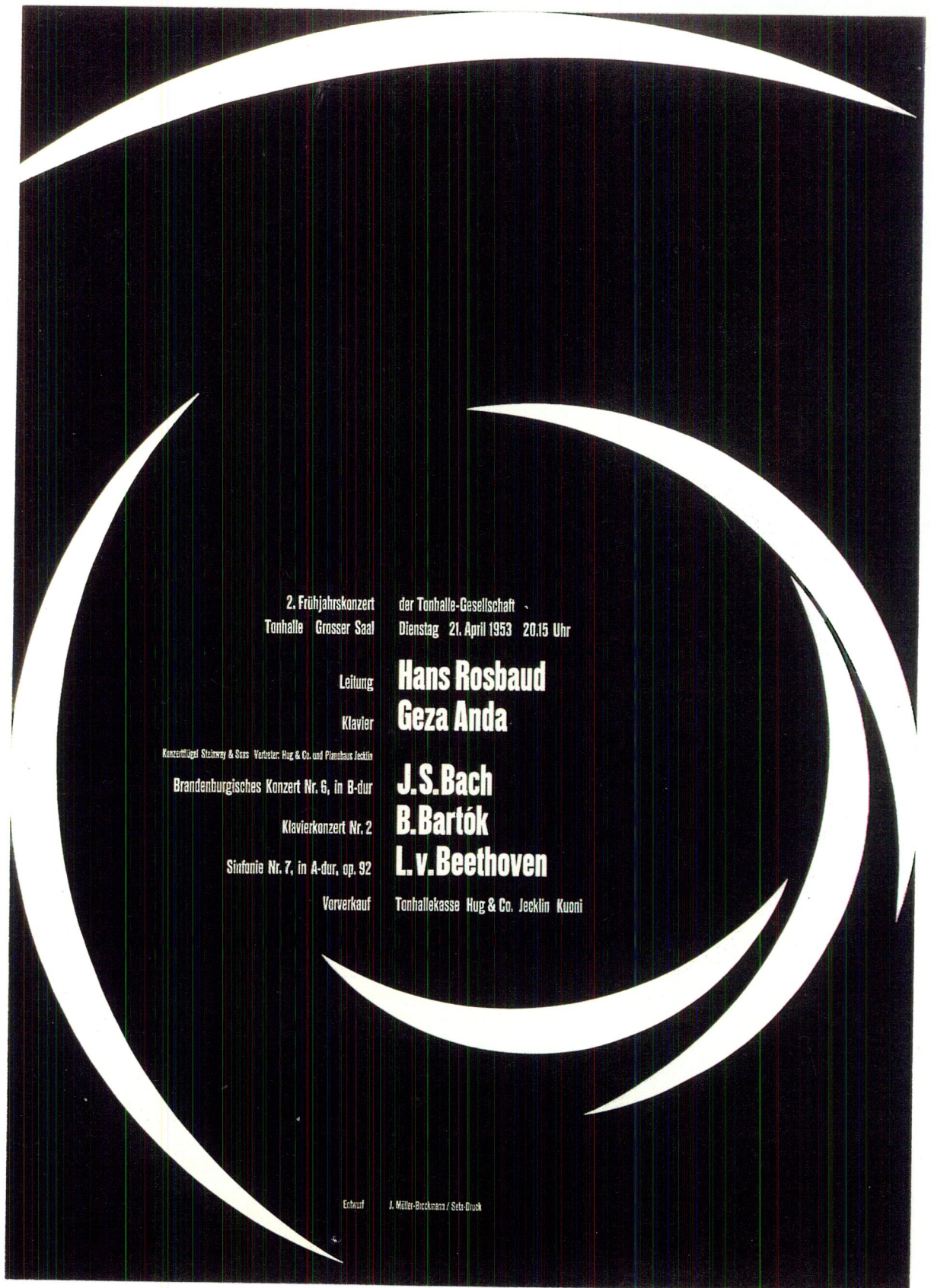
Figure 12: Concert poster, 1958, by Müller-Brockmann.

the musicians are printed in a larger point-size which makes them stand out.

MB wrote: "Very often publicity for cultural events is emphatically traditional in its form."(MB, 1961, p. 107) He pointed out that for cultural publicity designers should also "think in contemporary terms and use appropriate means of design."
He also wrote:

> The task of the poster should not be limited to communication between producer and consumer but should also improve the aesthetic sense of the viewer, thereby making a contribution to artistic-cultural consciousness and awareness of our fellow men. The poster, which is present everywhere, has already become an element forming our environment.
> (MB, 1971, p. 12)

The concert poster in fig. 11 is composed of an abstract design covering the top four fifths of the space with the text in three columns at the bottom. Black and white are the only colours used. The text is characteristically simple and clear. The design above it consists of four black circles which are related to each other because the difference in scale between the smallest and the second smallest ones is the same as the difference in scale between the second smallest and third smallest ones, and so the circles are part of a sequence which could represent a piece of music. The simplicity of the poster and the stark contrast between light and dark, and contrast in scale of the shapes makes the poster dramatic and powerful.

The concert poster in fig. 12 is also black and white, though in this case the background is black, with the text and other elements being left white. The information for the concert occupies a central area of the poster, with white crescent shapes around it, thus helping the text to be a focal point of the poster. The text is a condensed san-serif type-face and the names of the musicians are larger and bolder than the rest of the text. The text is ranged to the

Figure 13: Poster, c. 1960, by Müller-Brockmann.

Figure 14: Drafts for logo, c. 1960, by Müller-Brockmann.

left and right of a central margin. This causes the centre of the poster to become the focus, because the viewer's eye follows the lined up side of the text.

MB promoted the use of corporate identity by the use of a consistent design approach in all the printed material of the company or organisation and the use of a logo. He wrote:

> The device must be concise and simple, a compelling symbol of the theme or object; its form must be easy to understand and imprint itself on the mind. It must be unique and have no resemblance to any existing device. (MB, 1961, p. 35)

Fig. 13 shows a poster for a Dutch department store chain, which consists of the logo for the store filling the width of the poster in white on a brown background, with black text below it. The logo is simple and clear, being composed of a thick white line and a minimum of elements. For this reason it can be recognised easily even from far away or when it is reduced in size. Fig. 14 shows some drafts for the de Bijenkorf logo. They all involve a simplified representation of a bee-hive enclosed in a geometric shape. MB chose the simplest of them which shows an outline of half of the bee-hive in a hexagon which is placed with two opposite sides being vertical lines. The bee-hive fits most comfortably into this shape as there is a more even amount of negative space around it. The hexagon is also the shape of a cell in a honey-comb. The bee-hive shape is ambiguous and not immediately recognisable as a bee-hive so it no longer is an important part of the identity of the store. Instead the logo itself becomes the symbol of the store. MB wrote:

> The device must appear on everything serving to advertise the firm; business notepaper, shop fronts, delivery vans, newspaper advertisements, prospectuses and illuminated signs, and it must be capable of fitting easily into the design of any publicity campaign. (MB, 1961, p. 105)

CHAPTER TWO
Influences on Müller-Brockmann

The biggest influence on MB was the modernist movement from the 1920s onwards. This was a philosophy of design which developed out of various artistic movements with similar principles. These were the De Stjil movement in Holland, the Constructivist movement in Russia, the Futurist movement in Italy, the Dadaist movement in Germany and later the Bauhaus design school. The main characteristics of these movements were simplicity, economy of design and a desire to establish the basic principles of good design, and to break radically with the past, creating a design philosophy which was suited to the modern industrial age. The modernists wanted there to be a unity between art and design; both areas were marked by radical reformation and were governed by the same philosophy and principles. In the area of graphic design these different design movements developed into a broad design style which became known as the 'New Typography'. One important promoter of New Typography was Jan Tschichold who wrote in his book 'The New Typography':

> It would be naïve and short-sighted to think that the New Typography, the result of the collective efforts of a whole generation of artists, is a temporary fashion. The break with the old typography, made complete by the new movement; means nothing less than the total discarding of decorative concepts and the turn to functional design.
> (Tschichold, 1987, p.64)

He described the history of the movement and the principles of it. He claimed that old typography was more concerned with beauty than function because its readers had more time to read the text. He believed that the form of a design should be derived from its function and should not be "a product of the artistic imagination".

Figure 15: Exhibition poster, 1926, by Herbert Bayer.

He pointed out that beautiful forms in nature and technology are derived from their function. Therefore he believed that form should follow function in all areas of design and that decorative elements were superficial. He wrote: "The New Typography is distinguished from the old by the fact that its first objective is to develop its visible form out of the function of the text." He said that because of the much larger quantity of material people have to read, they have to absorb information faster. He said that "as a rule we no longer read quietly line by line, but glance quickly over the whole, and only if interest is awakened do we study it in detail." (Tschichold, 1987, p. 70) He believed that for these reasons old typography concerned itself more with beauty than function and that new typography was more functional.

This requirement for speed of reading and selective reading of material, was very important in contributing to the style of modern typography. This resulted in a desire for clarity and the use of contrast in scale, colour and weight of type to highlight certain phrases. Modernists established the practice having a hierarchy of information with the most important text being the most prominent on the page. The poster by Herbert Bayer in fig. 15 is a typical example of this practice. It is a poster advertising an exhibition of Kandinsky's work from 1926. It is printed in red and black on yellow paper. The poster is mostly typographic and a san-serif typeface is used, which are characteristics of a lot of MB's posters. It is functional and legibility is a priority of the design. The most important information is the most prominent because of the use of contrast of scale, colour and weight of the text. The word 'Kandinsky' is the most prominent because it is black and is printed in a large, bold type-face being almost as long as the width of the poster. The rest of the text is in various smaller type-faces corresponding to the importance of the information. The text in red is less prominent than the black text because there is less contrast with the yellow background. Because of these contrasts there is no

competition between different phrases of the poster. The different pieces of text are placed in relation to each other, similar to the grids used by MB. All the text and the photograph are at an angle which makes the poster more interesting and is characteristic of modernist typography. Unlike Bayer's work MB tended not to use bars and lines around the text, probably because he felt that they were unnecessary and distracted from the text.

Tschichold said that the essence of the New Typography was clarity, which he felt was the opposite of old typography which was more concerned with beauty. He wrote:

> At first, today's printing differed from that of previous times less in form than in quality. But as the quantity increased, the 'form' also began to change: the speed with which the modern consumer of printing has to absorb it means that the form of printing also must adapt itself to the conditions of modern life. (Tschichold, 1987, p. 64)

Tschichold believed that the use of a central axis was wrong as the individual content was subordinated to a preconceived form. He wrote: "We believe it is wrong to arrange a text as if there were some focal point in the centre of a line which would justify such an arrangement." (Tschichold, 1987, p. 66) Instead he recommended an ordered asymmetrical composition.

MB follows all these principles. In all the examples of his work illustrated he uses a san-serif typeface and does not centre text. Instead the text is ranged against a line which is part of a grid structure in most cases. Like MB, Tschichold believed that modernist typography should express the spirit of the modern age, and that people should not use historical styles. He wrote:

> It can not and must not be our wish today to ape the typography of previous centuries, itself conditioned by its own time. Our age, with its very different aims, its often different ways and means and highly developed techniques, must dictate new and different visual form.
> (Tschichold, 1987, p. 65)

A rejection of the use of ornament and any unnecessary elements was one of the main principles of the modernist movement, and was related to the desire for functional design. Tschichold wrote:

> The use of ornament, in whatever style or quality, comes from an attitude of childish naïvety. It shows a reluctance to use 'pure design', a giving in to a primitive instinct to decorate; which reveals, in the last resort, a fear of pure appearance. It is so easy to employ ornament to cover up bad design! (Tschichold, 1987, p. 69)

This view was shared broadly by modernist architects and product designers, who concentrated on perfecting the pure form of an object because of their interest in producing functional designs. In graphic design this functionalism translated into a desire for legibility and visual clarity and can be seen in the work of MB. The architect Adolf Loos was one of the first designers to reject the use of ornament, a belief which he promoted on his book *Ornament and Crime*. Tschichold quoted him as writing:

> The more primitive a people, the more extravagantly they use ornament and decoration. To seek beauty in form itself rather than make it dependent on ornament should be the aim of mankind. (Quoted by Tschichold, 1987, p. 69)

This argument in favour of modernist design was slightly different from the argument which indicated a desire for functionalism and economy of design, because it related to the aspiration of cultural sophistication, which was taken to be a positive quality. Throughout history the use of ornament was a part of what was seen as 'high culture' because it added value to an object and was seen to raise its quality of design. Partly because of the excessive use of and poor quality of ornament, Loos and others came to believe that it should not be used. A central argument Loos used to support his belief was the claim that the use of ornament was primitive. He pointed out that
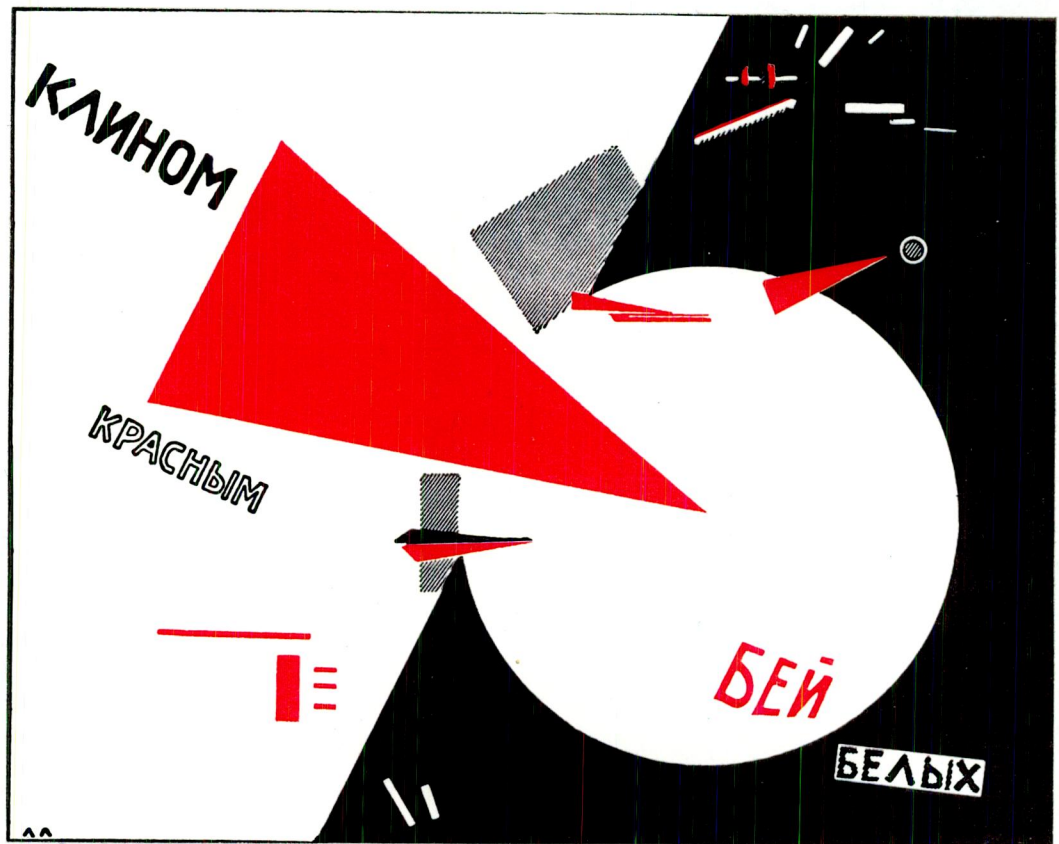
Figure 16: Political poster, 1919, by El Lissitzky.

primitive societies and primitive people in advanced societies liked the use of ornament. This implied that people who have achieved least and whose opinions therefore are least valid endorsed what Loos opposed. This argument would have fitted in with the widespread view that human civilisation has been going through a process of development from earliest times and that some societies have developed further than others, the most advanced being the industrial European countries. Therefore people who wanted to improve society further might adopt Loos's views on ornament and support his style of design. After the modernist style was adopted by those who were believed to be the best artists and designers, simplicity was seen by many to represent 'high culture'.

Tschichold set out the principles of the new typography in the magazine *Typographische Mitteilungen*. The points he made were similar to those in his book 'New Typography'. He pointed out the value of negative space in a design, which he believed had previously been regarded as a passive background, but should be used as an important part of the design to help important text stand out against other text. He also wrote about the advantages of standardisation.

While MB adopted the main principles of the earlier modernist style, he developed these principles to form his own style. Generally his work was more refined and simpler than earlier typographers. The difference between MB's work and the earlier modernist typographers can be seen by comparing examples of their work.

The work of El Lissitzky, a Russian Constructivist graphic designer, had characteristics in common with the work of MB. Lissitzky tended to use elementary geometric shapes in his design. Fig. 16 is one of his most well known posters 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge', the basic concept is the symbolic representation of the Red army attacking the White army. This is done very effectively using purely abstract elementary shapes. As the opposing
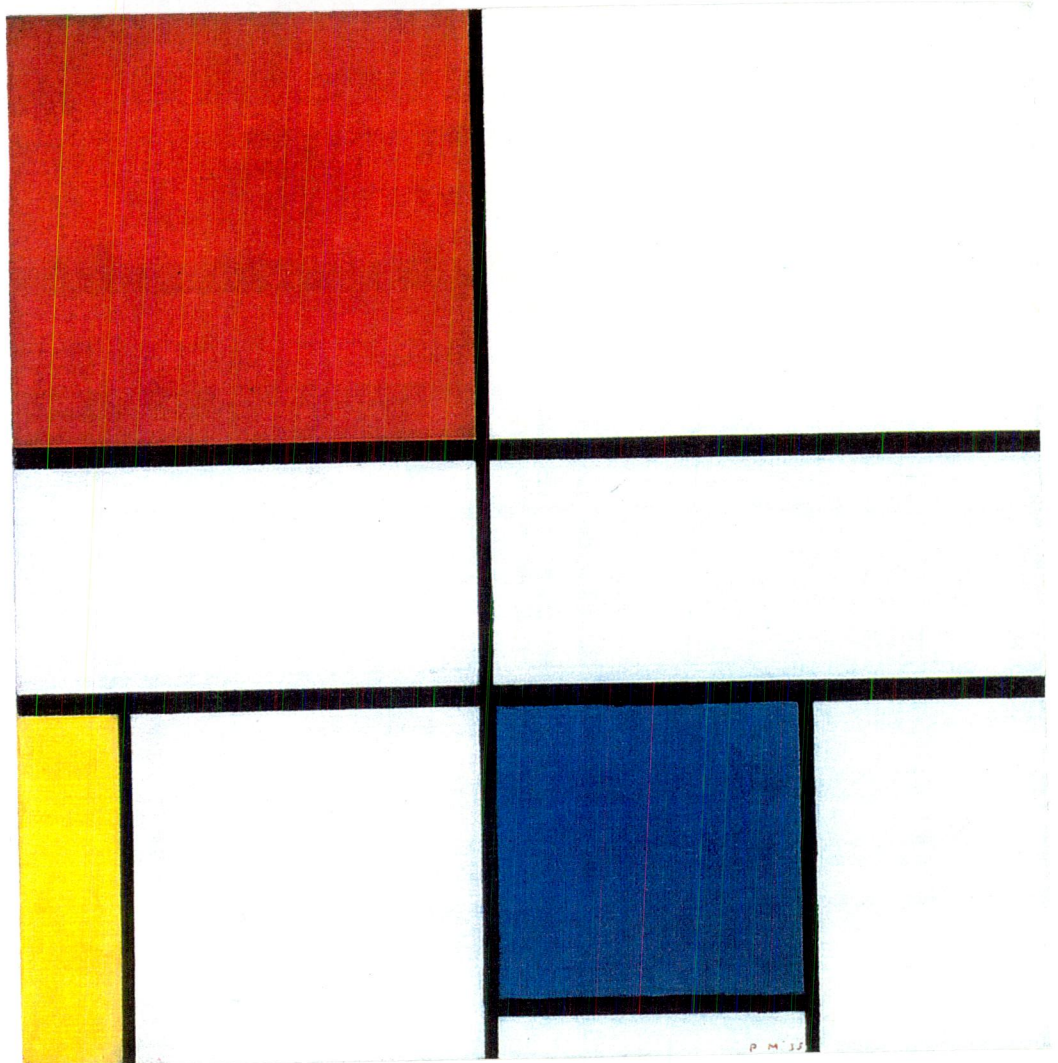
Figure 17: Composition C; No. III, 1935, by Piet Mondrian.
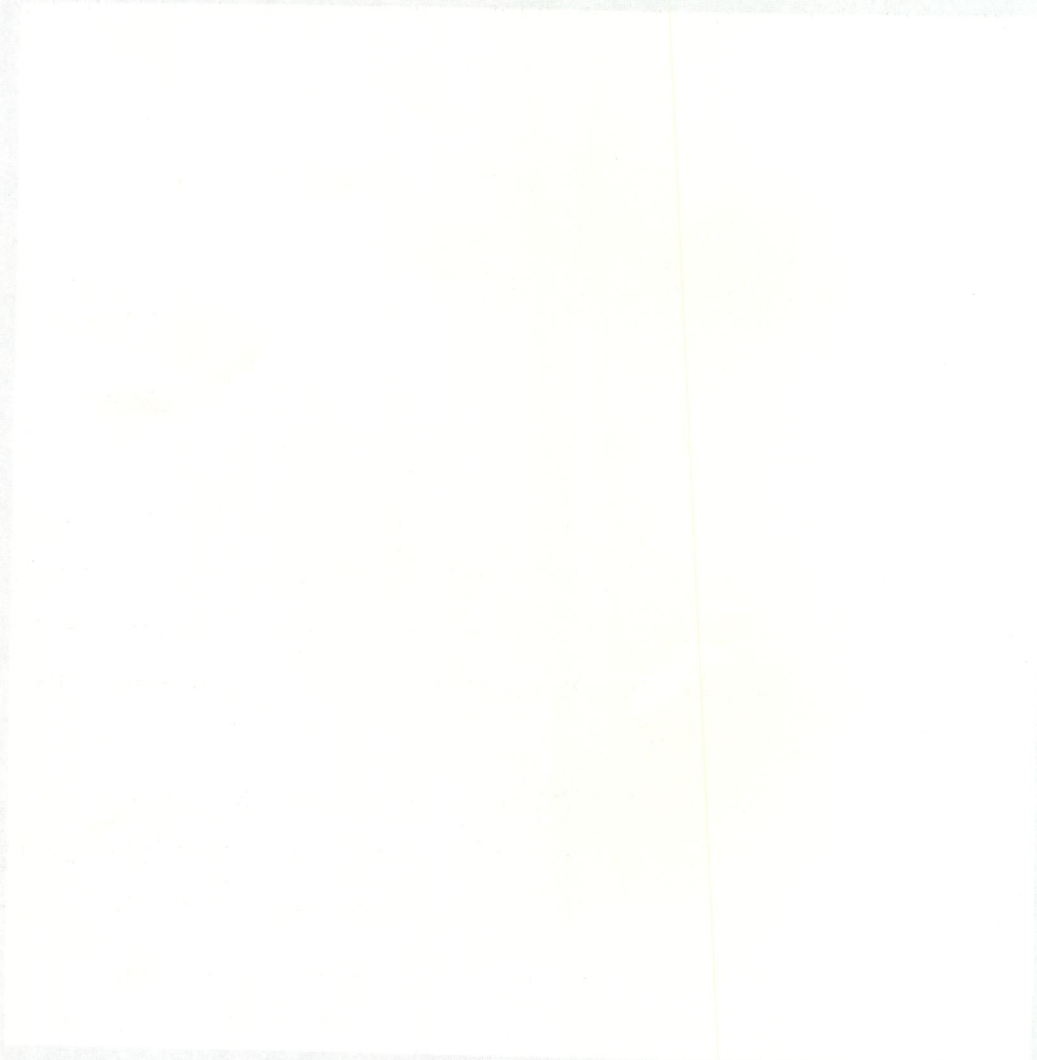
Figure 17: Composition C No. III, 1935, by Piet Mondrian.

armies were called the Red and White armies, Lissitzky used these colours in his design to represent each army. A red triangle represents the Red army, which is dynamic and aggressive. The White army is represented by a white circle, which is as different as possible a shape to a triangle. The circle is passive, enclosed and does not imply movement or action. It controls a black area which represents evil, while the red triangle is attacking from a white space and piercing the circle to the centre, which would be a fatal injury for a living thing. A similarity between this poster and MB's work, is the use of abstract shapes which represent something else. For example the abstract illustrations for a concert poster which represent music.

The De Stijl movement which was founded by Theo Van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian had similar principles to the work of MB. These were the use of elementary shapes and colours, which reflected a desire to discover the basic principles of art and design, which were to be found in geometry. The De Stijl movement used vertical and horizontal lines in particular which were similar to the grid system used by MB.

The example of Mondrian's work in fig. 17 is typical of his later style. The painting consists of rectangular shapes of elementary colours separated by black lines. The painting is very simple, which is a characteristic of MB's work, which used a minimum of elements. The simplicity of the painting makes it very clear. The painting is completely two-dimensional and abstract which is also a characteristic of MB's work. There is also no sense of depth, movement or texture in the painting. The black lines contribute to the impression of flatness and stability as two colours are not side by side. Mondrian always used horizontal and vertical lines in his paintings. This evoked an impression of stability and lack of movement. This was similar to the grid system used by MB, though he did not always use the vertical, horizontal structure but used

dynamic shapes and text positioned at different angles, giving an impression of depth and movement.

The Bauhaus design school was an important promoter of modernist art and design, which was influenced by the Constructivist and De Stijl movements. Its philosophy was to design functional objects for mass-production. Bauhaus typography was also functional. The teacher at the Bauhaus mainly concerned with typography was Herbert Bayer. His work is similar to that of MB's. He designed a typeface called Universal which is as geometric and simple as possible, because Bayer believed that this would make it easier to read. He said of alphabets "…the simpler the optical appearance the easier its comprehension." (Bayer, 1967, p. 84) He also said in the same passage that he wanted the letters to be designed with basic geometric elements to produce a harmonious character of the alphabet. This typeface represented the principles behind the design of modern typefaces, though it was not successful as a typeface because the very geometric nature of the alphabet made it less rather than more legible. This typeface only has lower-case letters because Bayer believed that upper-case letters were unnecessary and incompatible with lower-case letters. He pointed out that upper-case and lower-case letters were two different alphabets; upper-case letters being based on stone-carving and lower-case letters being based on hand writing; and that type would be more harmonious if one alphabet was used. He wrote: "We do not speak in a capital 'A' and a small 'a'. To convey one sound we do not need large and small letters symbols." The practice of not using upper-case letters was widely adopted among modernist typographers including MB. In many of his posters illustrated here he only used lower-case letters. In these cases the text is the main element of the design and some of it is set in large point sizes, becoming a decorative feature as well as a practical one, so the elegance of the text is more important than usual, and the use of lower-case letters only helps continuity in the design as the
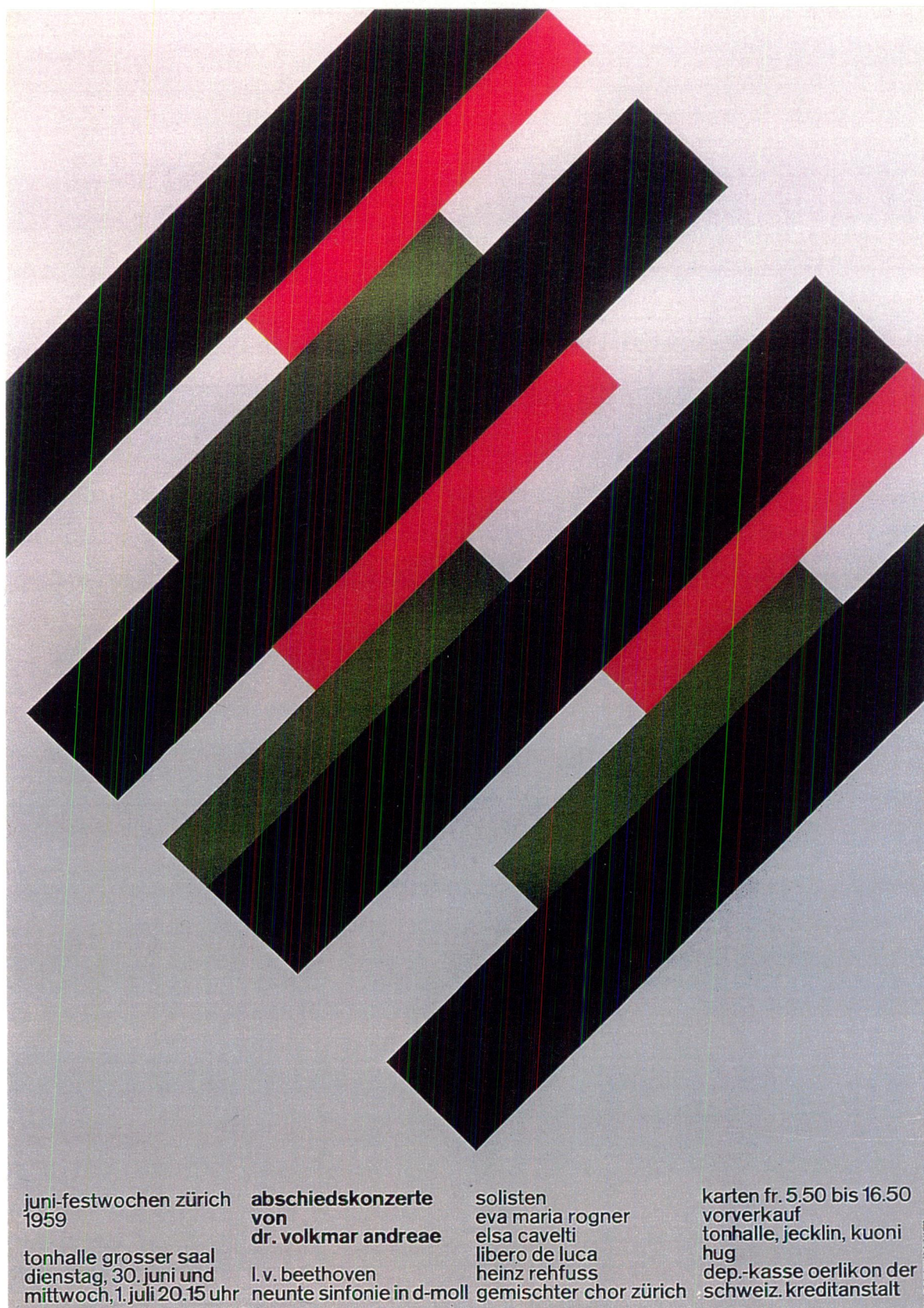
Figure 18: Concert poster, 1959, by Müller-Brockmann.
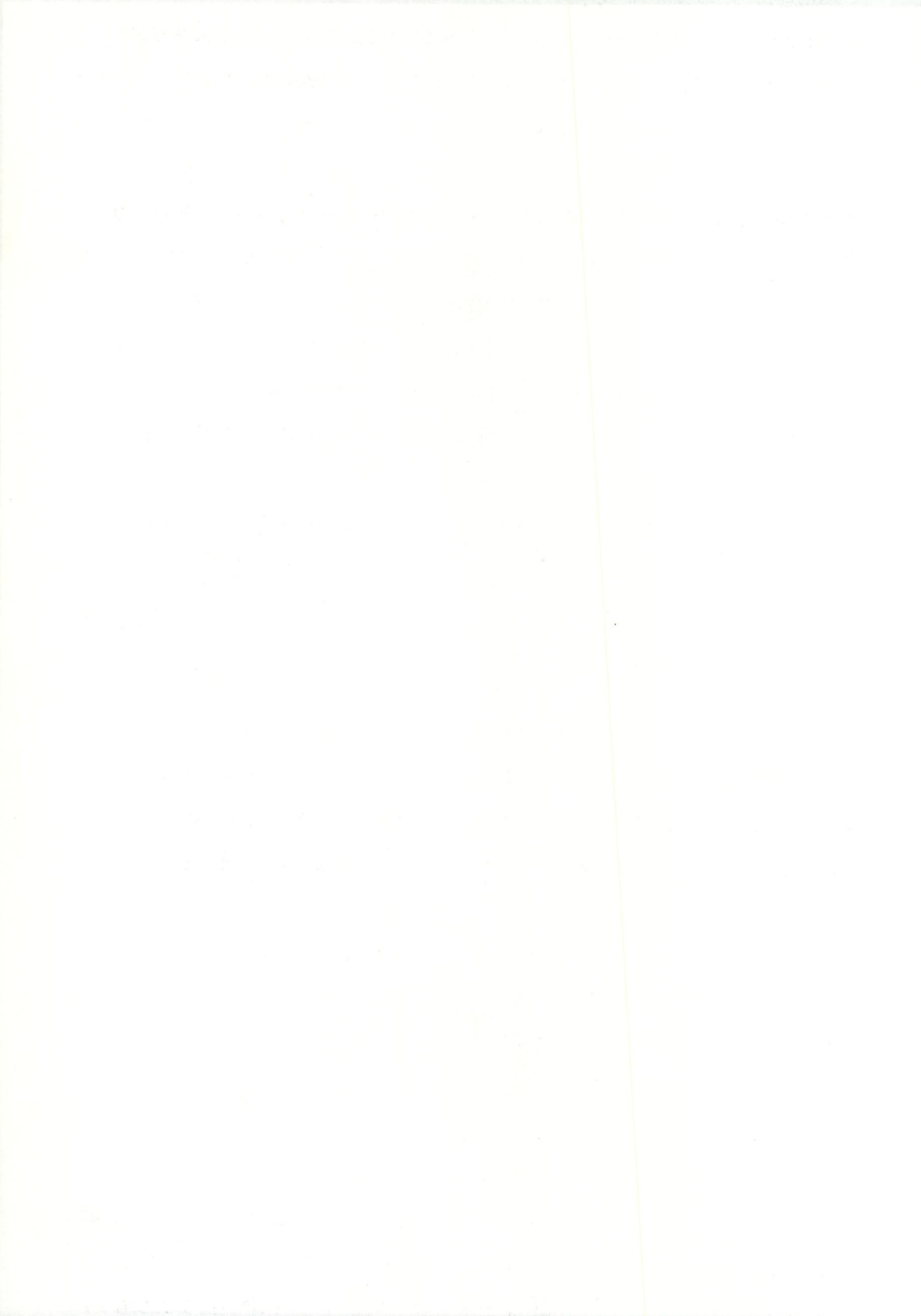
Figure 18: Concert poster, 1950, by Müller-Brockmann.

differences between upper-case and lower-case letters can be noticed more easily when the text is printed in a large point-size. Also, capitals are less necessary than normal because there are no long sentences in the posters and the names of people and places are highlighted by other means. In fig. 8 the names of the musicians are printed in red, while in the other posters they are printed in a much larger point-size and different colours. MB did, however, use upper-case letters in long passages of text in books and magazines, presumably because he believed that they were a help to legibility.

MB saw the Swiss style as being a development of earlier modernist designers whose work was objective and functional. He wrote:

> 'Bauhaus' typography and graphic design was based on economy of expression and objective, clear optics. Strong beams supported the arrangement of space available and a vigorous contrast between the types of print increased clarity and legibility. (MB, 1971, p. 120)

The difference between modernist graphic design and previous graphic design was a loss of artistic and illustrative qualities in modern graphic design. Because of its objective and methodical approach, the modernist style could be seen as more design than art. However, modern art was a major influence on modernist design and had the same principles as it, being objective, geometric and minimalist. These qualities of modern art were suited to graphic design in particular, as simple shapes are easily reproduced with simple printing techniques, and clear compositions are taken in and understood by the viewer quickly and easily.

A central philosophy of the modernist movement was the unity between art and design and the application of art in design. Many painters were also graphic designers, so their experiences of one discipline would influence another. MB was very interested in fine art and especially the geometric abstract art developed by modernists. He said:

> Concrete Art is the kind of art that appeals to me most
> directly as a graphic artist. Its principles, which are open to
> analysis, can be transmuted into graphic terms. Of all the art
> movements of the twentieth century it is the one that is
> universal and still open to development. You might say it is
> the art in which I can discover the fewest flaws.
> (Quoted by Schwemer-Scheddin, 1995, p. 13)

This shows that MB liked concrete art because of its similarity to graphic design. Concrete art had its origins in the early modernist movement when painters like Kasimir Malevich from Russia began to do very simple paintings composed of abstract geometric shapes. Mondrian's paintings had similar principles in so far as they were abstract, geometric and two-dimensional. These characteristics can also be found in the work of later artists who concentrated on exploring basic abstract forms. Max Bill was a painter, sculptor and graphic designer who had studied at the Bauhaus. His paintings are mostly made up of geometric coloured shapes.

In many of MB's posters he uses abstract compositions which were similar to the work of concrete artists, for example the poster in fig. 18. The main image is an abstract composition of rectangles which is based on a clear grid of perpendicular lines running at a 45 degree angle to the vertical. This design is confined to a square which is divided up into basic proportions. The black rectangles are as wide as the square and a seventh as high, and are evenly spaced side by side. The space contains red and green rectangles which are half the width and height of the black ones and are lined up with the centre or the end of the black shapes. This design is very simply created with geometric elements. The overall effect of this design is a striking pattern of interlocking shapes. The function of this design is to attract attention to the poster and also has the same purpose as a painting which is to show visually pleasing and interesting forms. This poster is one of a set of posters which are of the same format. An abstract design of thick and thin rectangular bars is confined

within a square which is at a 45 degree angle. The bars run from the bottom left to the top right of the page. They are all printed on grey paper and all the text of the posters is at the bottom of the page in four equal columns. Because these factors are common to all of the posters people will know instantly that they are in the same set and that the concerts advertised are from the same festival.

While MB adopted the main principles and philosophy of earlier modernist designers such as El Lissitzky, Bayer and Tschichold, his work differed from theirs in a number of ways. He developed a more organised, simple and refined style of work, by discovering typographic rules to improve legibility and through the development of the use of grids in design. His work is simpler because he endeavoured not to use unnecessary elements in a design.

CHAPTER THREE

Müller-Brockmann's influence on others

MB was very influential on other graphic designers through the Swiss movement; people who adopted his principles of design, adopted the principles of the Swiss style as a whole, of which MB was one of the main exponents.

Seeing examples of MB's work would have been the most influential promotion of his ideas. When people saw the success of his work they might then read about the principles behind them. MB's work established his reputation and therefore he would come to the attention of other designers.

MB was evangelical and believed that other designers should adopt the same principles as he did. This made him influential. The books he wrote about graphic design were very popular and therefore influential. In his book *The Graphic Artist and his Design Problems* (1961), he explained his beliefs about and principles of graphic design. His book *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* (1981), explained how grids should be used. His magazine *New Graphic* had a big circulation and was influential. This was founded for the purpose of promoting the ideas of the Swiss style. MB said in an interview:

> I had the idea in 1955 of founding a periodical for rational and constructive graphic design to counter the excessively irrational, pseudo-artistic advertising I saw around me.
> (Quoted by Schwemer-Scheddin, 1995, p. 12)

Magazines are seen as being more avant garde than books, because the material in magazines is more up-to-date.

Another reason why MB's ideas were widely accepted is that he was not the only one promoting them, as he was part of a wider movement he was also influential on his students during the time he was a teacher.

Figure 19: Exhibition poster, 1980, by Siegfried Odermatt.

Figure 20: Resource management poster, 1980, by Paul Rand.

MB's philosophy and style of design were steadfast and consistent, and he had clear rules and principles. His views about design were based on the solid foundations of modernist design theory, and evolved through years of experience. For these reasons people were inclined to accept his opinions on design matters.

MB's influence was lasting because he established universal laws of graphic design which were helpful for designers in the modern world. By proposing principles of good design, he created the opportunity for debate. A lot of people took on board the ideas of Swiss graphic design and combined them with other ideas, rather than staying dogmatically with the principles of the Swiss style.

The work of Siegfried Odermatt has a lot in common with that of MB. An example of Odermatt's work is illustrated in fig. 19. The text runs at a 45 degree angle and is ranged against an invisible vertical line. Like MB's concert posters it is purely typographic and a san-serif type face, helvetica, is used. The background colour of the poster is green while the text is black and white. The words in white stand out more than the words in black of the same point-size. The rest of the text is in a much smaller point-size with some of it being in bold. This poster is like MB's concert posters as it is purely typographic and the typography becomes a more decorative element of the poster.

The poster by Paul Rand in fig. 20 was produced to promote resource management. The letters 'R' and 'M' at the top of the poster are as large as possible and fill the width of the page, making the poster dramatic. Four symbols of the four different aspects of resource management named at the bottom of the poster are combined with the two letters to form an interesting image and an impression of depth. The symbols are designed in a simple and geometrical way and each one is a different elementary colour which corresponds to the activity mentioned in the text below. It is purely typographic, apart from the symbols and its simplicity makes it similar in style to MB's work.

CHAPTER FIVE
Criticism of the Swiss style

Jan Tschichold's opinions on typography changed throughout his career, and he became less militantly modernist and began to disagree with many principles which were held by MB and other Swiss graphic designers. He began to see the positive qualities of traditional typography and felt that the principles of modern typography were too strict. Max Bill, a graphic designer who was a promoter of the Swiss style, wrote an article in which he criticised Tschichold's move away from the modern style. In response to this Tschichold wrote an article defending his position. In it he said of the New Typography:

> Its intolerant attitude certainly corresponds in particular to the claim to sole power correspond to those fearful components of German inclination to the absolute; its military will to order and its German-ness which unleashed Hitler's rule and the Second World War. (Quoted by Kinross, 1992, p. 128)

He also criticised the obsession with modern technology and the dismissal of traditional wisdom. He wrote: "Bill's current typography is, just like my own work of between 1924 and around 1935, characterised by a naive over-valuation of so-called technical progress."(Quoted by Kinross, 1992, p. 129) Tschichold was disillusioned with modernism because of the strict rules it required designers to adhere, and he saw value in traditional theories of design while Max Bill and MB believed in the principles of modern typography.

After the Swiss style had become a widely accepted style in most countries, people began to question its values, such as the view that only san-serif typefaces should be used and that text should be asymmetrical and not centred. The most common complaints about the style were that it was austere and boring, because of its

obsession with legibility and order, which resulted in a minimalist approach. MB himself acknowledged this in as interview. he said:

> I have taken my love of order to the point of manifest boredom, producing design solutions which are valid but deadly boring. Thanks to the passage of time, I am now just about able to examine my posters for the Zurich Tonhalle to discover why some are better than others. I am amazed how many are bad. (Quoted by Schwemer-scheddin, 1995, p. 14)

Too many rules made designs predictable and similar to each other. The emphasis on legibility was seen as unnecessary as people felt that design did not have to be legible. Creativity became more important than good well-conceived design. To achieve these qualities people used typography in unusual and interesting ways, using a variety of typefaces and breaking the rules of Swiss typography. New ideas and approaches to design had the advantage of being fresh and therefore more attractive than the Swiss style, which had stagnated and had nothing new to offer in an age where people expected things to change and progress, and were more used to a constant change of fashion in areas such as music and dress design. New designs for packaging, magazines, advertisements and book covers made things look new and up-to-date, as well as being more interesting. Accepted qualities of design became the involvement of interesting concepts, and more creative designs.

The Swiss style went out of fashion as new generations of designers brought new ideas about design to public attention. The Swiss style had become representative of the establishment and the status quo, so it was not suitable for designers whose clients were in opposition to the establishment. Main-stream designers tended to look to unorthodox designers for inspiration rather than to established principles.

Graphic design is by nature populist, and populism normally causes low standards in any discipline because the average person, who is incompetent, sets the standard of quality by consuming bad designs due to indifference to quality or due to bad taste. These people are susceptible to fashions and are impressed by stylistic affectations. They would generally not appreciate the simplicity and clarity of MB's work.

Summary and Conclusion

MB was successful because his style of work was suited to the time and society in which he lived. MB lived in a society that valued modernity and the principles of modern art and design, because these principles were seen as progressive and the way to a better society after the War. People were interested in avant gard ideas about design and modern design fitted in with the philosophy of post-war Europe. Fascism had also discredited traditional and classical theories of design, especially in the German speaking world. Modernist design represented new technology and economic use of materials that could improve people's standard of living and quality of life. MB's work is very carefully and elegantly designed and this made his work popular.

MB's contribution to graphic design was the consolidation and development of the modernist style and the creation of an ordered system of design, having deduced the principles of good design. The basic principles of his style were objectivity, simplicity and order, so that his work was legible and elegant. While these principles and rules of design can be seen causing a lack of scope for creativity and being an unnecessary constraint for the designer, their application produced clear and effective communication.

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