

“An Unused Esperanto”: Internationalism and Pictographic Design, 1930–70

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ABSTRACT The decades surrounding the Second World War saw an intense wave of interest in pictographic communication, with social scientists and graphic designers promoting the potential of universal pictographic “language” to bring about international understanding and co-operation. This article explores the historical relationship between pictographic design and internationalist politics in this era through the work of Rudolf Modley, a pioneering designer of information graphics whose career spanned from the socialist experiments of 1920s Vienna to humanist advocacy projects in late-1960s America. Tracing the complex relationship between visual communication, commerce and

politics in mid-twentieth-century design, this article further reflects on the decline of the pictographic project after the 1970s, when pictographs at once gained a broad global currency and lost their political thrust just as the dream of an international visual language was ironically realized in the triumph of a global traffic in mass-consumable images.

KEYWORDS: pictographic design, internationalism, information design, Rudolf Modley, Otto Neurath, Margaret Mead

The quest for “universals of communication” ought to make us shudder.

Gilles Deleuze

In the closing paragraphs of his 1953 pamphlet *Culture Without Literacy*, Marshall McLuhan suggested that the postwar emergence of new communications media of “instantaneous character,” the growing awareness of global cultures these facilitated and the general dispersal of knowledge across a wide range of scientific and social-scientific disciplines required “new languages of perception and judgment, new ways of reading the languages of our environment with its multiplicity of cultures and disciplines” (McLuhan 1995: 311). The solution, he wrote, lay in the use of “visual metaphor in contriving a new unified language for the multiverse of cultures of the entire globe”:

Whereas the written vernaculars have always locked men up within their own cultural monad, the language of technological man, while drawing on all the cultures of the world, will necessarily prefer those media which are least national. The language of visual form is, therefore, one which lies to hand as an unused Esperanto at everybody’s command. The language of vision has already been adopted in the pictograms of scientific formula and logistics. These ideograms transcend national barriers as easily as Chaplin or Disney, and would seem to have no rivals as the cultural base for cosmic man. (McLuhan 1995: 313)

McLuhan’s faith in “the pictograms of scientific formula and logistics” as the unrivalled cultural basis for the modern subject – cosmic, technological man – may seem surprising today, particularly when we consider the kinds of images the pioneering media theorist may have had in mind (Figure 1).

Standing neatly in their rows, resolutely face forward or in strict profile, immutable in their serial repetition, these little figures appear

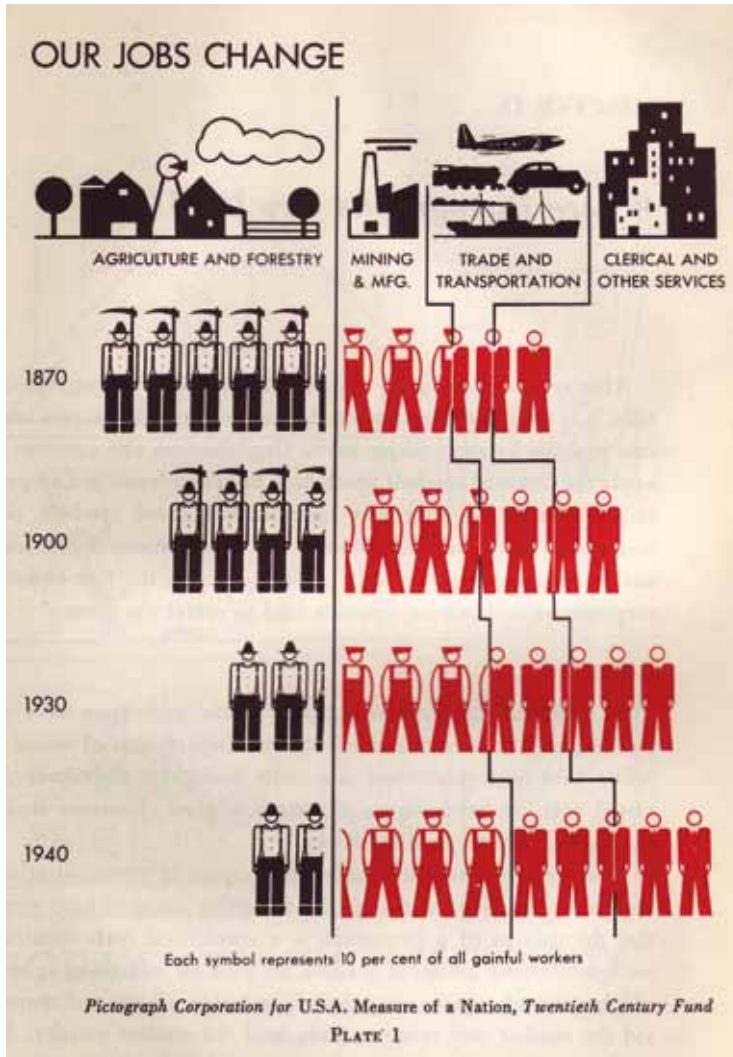


Figure 1

Pictograph Corporation chart: "Our Jobs Change." From Rudolf Modley and Dyno Lowenstein, *Pictographs and Graphs: How to Make and Use Them*, 1952. New York: Harper. Courtesy of HarperCollins.

unlikely candidates for the prodigious labors of cultural transformation with which McLuhan charged them. If his evocation appears opaque or strange to us today, however, I suggest that it is because we have largely lost the thread of a persistent narrative of "universal" or "international" pictographic language that extended from the interwar decades through the late 1960s, in which such images were posited as a means to achieve international communication and global peace. Like McLuhan, the visual communicators who developed graphic strategies for the representation of social facts

saw simplified visuals not as “desperate remedies but roads to unimagined cultural enrichment” (McLuhan 1995: 311).

In this article, I explore a brief history of pictographic communication between the 1930s and the end of the 1960s, focusing on the discourse of internationalism that gave the problem of visual language its particular exigency during this period. My argument unfolds through an examination of the career of Rudolf Modley (1906–76), a graphic designer and communications theorist whose central role in the development of twentieth-century information design has been largely overshadowed by that of his Viennese mentor, Otto Neurath (1882–1945).¹ Modley’s career, which incorporates the shifting contexts of interwar European socialism, New Deal and postwar corporate America, and design advocacy in the 1960s and 1970s, provides an ideal register of the shifting fortunes of twentieth-century pictographic design. It also offers significant historical insights for our contemporary interest in problems of global design strategies and cross-cultural communication. Despite significant differences between Modley’s context and our own, his writings and designs reveal a persistent tension present in all universalizing design strategies, between the desire for objective and transcultural signs or objects and the inevitable cultural specificity of the values that inform these, at the levels both of production and reception.

The Birth of Modern Pictorial Statistics: ISOTYPE

In the late 1920s, Modley served as an assistant to Neurath in the latter’s role as director of the Museum of Society and Economy (*Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum*) in Vienna. This was an institution that aimed to educate a politically organized but informationally inchoate working-class public in the social facts concerning the substantial renewal and reform projects of so-called “Red Vienna,” from housing and unemployment to mortality, emigration, public hygiene, nutrition and sport. In order to address its proletarian audience, of whom advanced literacy or sophisticated conceptual knowledge could not be assumed, the Museum turned from traditional modes of representing this information – in explanatory texts, line and bar graphs, or architectural elevations, sections, and plans – to new means of communication.

In Neurath’s own words, he sought “a system of optical representation . . . that would be universal, immediate, and memorable . . . [ensuring] that even passers-by . . . can acquaint themselves with the latest sociological and economical facts at a glance” (Neurath, quoted in Cartwright et al. 1996: 65). This statement expresses two persistent ideas that inform twentieth-century developments in pictographic communication: an understanding of visual “language” as being more immediate and universal than existing verbal languages and a corresponding instantaneity of reception that directed itself to the limited attention spans of modern audiences, substituting direct and instantaneous information for complex and labored analysis.

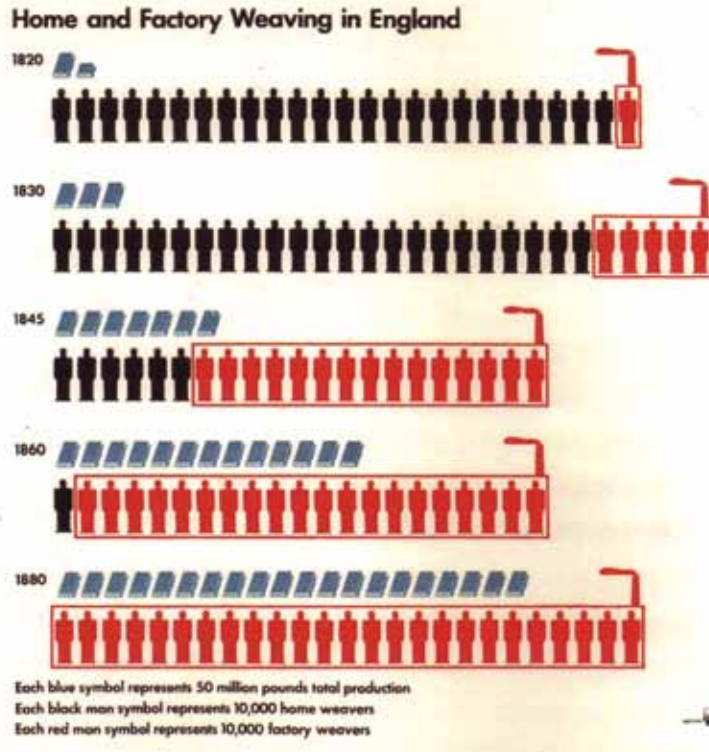


Figure 2

Isotype chart: "Home and Factory Weaving in England." From Otto Neurath, *Modern Man in the Making*. 1930. New York: Knopf. Courtesy of Random House.

The outcome of Neurath's project, which has been well documented in graphic design historiography, was ISOTYPE, or the International System of Typographic Education. ISOTYPE consisted of a grammar of standardized, abstracted pictorial symbols and rules for combining them that aimed to represent social-scientific data (particularly quantitative differences) through the serial repetition of identical figures (Figure 2).

Ellen Lupton has described these figures as concentrating "experienced detail into a schematic, repeatable sign" (Lupton 1999: 137); in this respect, ISOTYPE reflected its origins in "machine-age" modernism, replicating an industrial logic in its simplified forms designed for serial (or mass) reproduction. Neurath himself saw ISOTYPE figures as depending on a fundamental equivalence of value between terms that made them akin to industrial objects, writing that "all [ISOTYPE] statements lie on one single plane and can be combined, like all parts from a workshop that supplies machine parts" (Neurath 1973: 326).

ISOTYPE's condensation of social data and the complex subjectivities of individuals (profession, class, race, gender, and so

on) into schematic, repeatable figures may be seen as evincing its further compatibility with the logic of industry and with those modes of rationality that Theodor Adorno identified as characteristic of both modern capitalist economies and twentieth-century totalitarian states.

For Adorno, the reduction of particulars to universals toward a goal of wholly instrumentalized communication was essentially totalitarian in character, insofar as it reduced the plenitude of subjective life and the complexities of culture to an overarching framework of objective value.² More recently, Gilles Deleuze identified “the quest for ‘universals of communication’” with the decentralized and pervasive modes of social control he saw as dominating late twentieth-century networked societies (Deleuze 1995: 175).

While acknowledging the power of such critiques, this article focuses on the shifting nature of this “quest” between the late 1920s and the late 1960s in order to adumbrate a partial history of design’s engagements with internationalist and humanist ideology and thus to articulate the concerns of design at a historical moment in which pictographic communication could be charged with the potential for overcoming trenchant problems of international conflict and ushering in a new age of cross-cultural understanding and global peace.

Pictographs and the American Context

Perhaps none would remain so consistently committed to this goal, through its various permutations, as Modley. Having introduced ISOTYPE methods to the United States in 1930 in his new position as chief curator at the newly established Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, where he planned pictographic exhibits along those lines established by Neurath’s team in Vienna, by 1934 Modley had relocated to New York and established Pictorial Statistics Incorporated, a company promoting the commercial production and distribution of ISOTYPE-like pictographs for education, news information and corporate communications (Figure 3).³

Between the mid-1930s and the late 1950s, Modley’s company (renamed the Pictograph Corporation in 1940) played an important role in moving pictographic diagrams into the forefront of the burgeoning field of information design, where they were routinely employed in mass-market books and periodicals, government publications and corporate reports. As a privileged means of translating the new technical discourses of economics, human geography, architecture and planning to a mass public, pictographs provided economists, sociologists, educators, architects and planners with what Andrew Shanken has called “an abstract, popular, resolutely modern, and purportedly universal language in which to engage the public” (Shanken 2006: 310).

The visual language of pictorial statistics proved particularly well suited to the emerging role of the social sciences in American domestic and foreign policy in this period, both in the bureaucratic

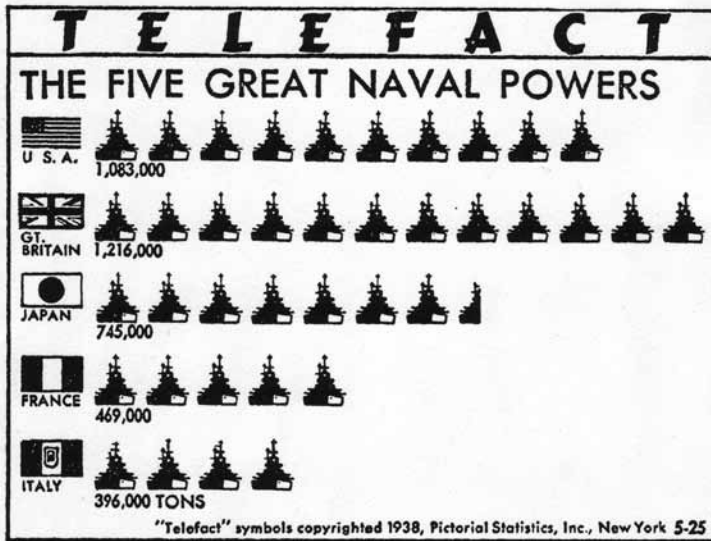


Figure 3

Pictorial Statistics, Inc. chart: "Telefact: The Five Great Naval Powers." Reprinted in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, October 1938. Courtesy of Oxford University Press.

context of New Deal projects and the "organizational complex" of wartime and postwar corporate and military administration (Martin 2003). As Modley recounted in 1952, "in the course of expanding government activities under the first Roosevelt administration, federal agencies told their story in graphic form in order to gain popular support. Government agencies have been steady users of pictographs ever since" (Modley 1952: 8).⁴

The rapidity with which pictographic images attained a foothold in American visual communication is registered in popular writings from this period, with ISOTYPE and Modley's graphics receiving coverage in the pages of the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* in addition to more specialized publications such as *Survey Graphic* and the *Science News-Letter*, while Modley's own writings from this period served both to provide a theoretical grounding for the use of pictographs in communication and market their further uses (Modley 1935, 1937a, 1937b, 1938, 1942, 1952). Much of the early promotion of pictographs in America was carried out by the *New York Times* science editor (and inaugural director of the Museum of Science and Industry) Waldemar Kaempffert, who had known Neurath in Vienna and described him in a 1936 *Survey Graphic* article as having "formulated the most extraordinary designs ever used to give life to statistics, geography, natural resources and social forces" (Kaempffert 1936: 618).

Starting in 1936, US Surgeon General Thomas Parran's newly declared "War on Syphilis" employed Modley's pictographs in a nation-wide public health education campaign (Figure 4).

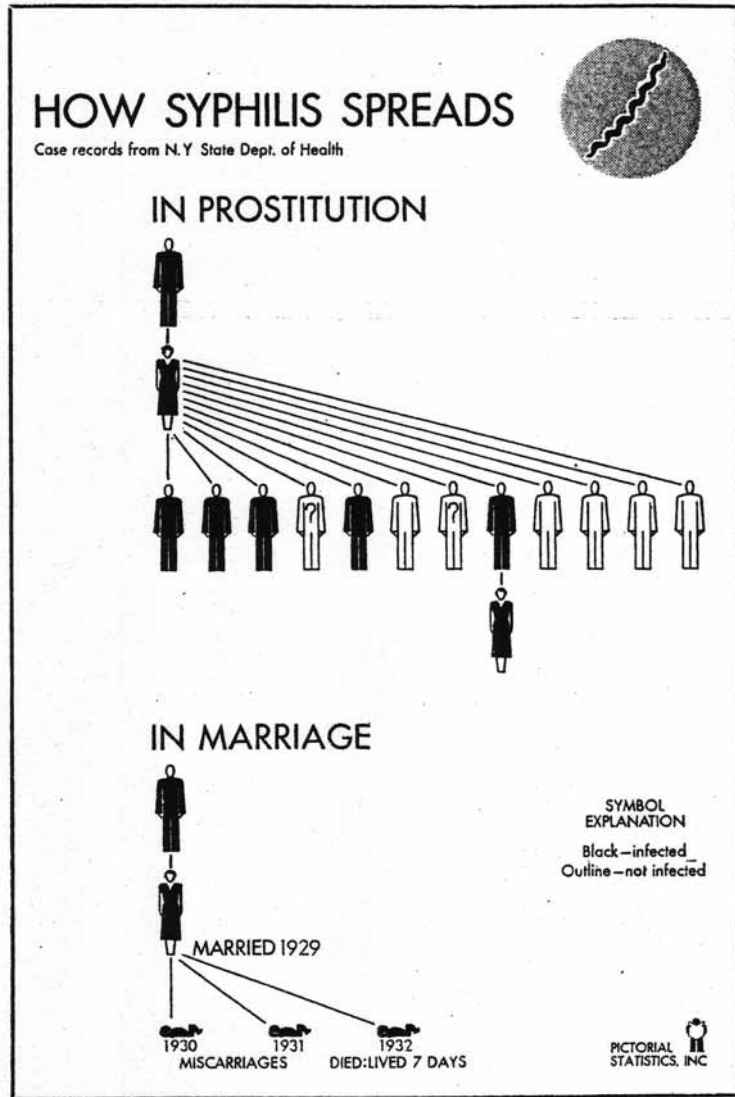


Figure 4

Pictorial Statistics, Inc. chart: "How Syphilis Spreads."
Reprinted in *Survey Graphic*, July 1936.

Conevery A. Bolton has suggested that such images, which were "seen by other public health educators as important tools in promoting Parran's message," likely spurred other commissions of pictorial statistics in public health education programs – including Pictograph Corp. charts for fighting tuberculosis for the City of New York Department of Health in 1937–9, and ISOTYPE charts for the National Tuberculosis Association in 1938–42 (Bolton 1998: 303).⁵

By 1942, a review of Modley's work noted that the pictograph "has come to occupy a leading position among graphs designed

for popular consumption . . . [and] has swept into indisputable dominance of the graphic field wherever relatively popular reports of a few quantities are involved" (Scates 1942: 566), a claim echoed in *Survey Graphic's* earlier description of Modley as "taking the whole United States in his stride statistically speaking" (*Survey Graphic* 1937: 488). And by the mid-1950s, the author of a book on methods of graphic presentation could admiringly state that Modley's Pictograph Corporation, "through the preparation of hundreds of pictorial unit charts on a commercial basis for governmental agencies, newspapers, magazines, and books, has literally brought this type of chart into virtually every American home" (Schmid 1954: 231).

And to some more remote corners of the nation as well. In the late 1930s, Modley collaborated with ethnologists on a new public education program of the Office of Indian Affairs toward the development of a written Navajo language. In a profile of this project, a journalist from the *Science News-Letter* outlined Modley's views in terms that strongly resonated with Neurath's earlier mandate for the Museum of Society and Economy: "heretofore, field service doctors, teachers, and conservationists have been hard put to explain to attentive, but bewildered, Navajos simple facts about modern farming, germs, nutrition, and perils of soil erosion" (Davis 1940: 154). The Navajo, Modley asserted,

gets little of the white man's culture mentally. He accepts much that he can see or touch or taste. He drinks coffee, uses sugar. Gave up his deerskin coat for modern materials . . . But [he] still doesn't think the white man's thoughts, and that is because language is such a barrier . . . After all, don't forget our modern talk of health, nutrition, and conservation is full of terms we ourselves coined within recent decades . . . (Modley, quoted in Davis 1940: 157).

Modley's responses in this interview reiterate classic anthropological readings of native peoples that placed them in an "experiential" mode of being, operating on the basis of matters of fact rather than abstract ideas. This was an idea that took on added significance in the context of Modley's participation in the project, in supporting the necessity of employing the more "factual" language of graphics alongside written text in both English and Navajo (Figure 5).

If, as Modley suggested, such images were more immediate and universal in their impact than alphabetic writing, having a closer or more direct relationship to their objective referents (the "things" they depicted and denoted), they were also thus a form of communication whose relation to verbal language paralleled the putative relation of the "experiential" Navajo to the "conceptual" discourses of white culture.

The Navajo project also highlights some broader issues operative in the universalizing discourses of pictorial language. Informed on the

Nahodji god'go nada ya'a'd'e



Only the one who hoes has good corn

Figure 5

Artist unknown. Poster for Office of Indian Affairs, 1940. Reprinted in *The Science News-Letter*, March 1940.

one hand by a spirit of internationalism and cross-cultural communication – design working in service of a (global) public good – these discourses frequently imply on the other hand a paternalistic, one-way communication, moving from a plane of statistics and abstract ideas understood and translated by social scientists and designers to an immediate one of “things” for the edification of non-literate or marginally literate audiences. Something of this paternalism remains implicit, I suggest, in the pictographic project as a whole, despite its advocates’ universal ambitions for this language of signs.

Communication Among All People, Everywhere

Over the postwar decades, pictographic systems were increasingly aimed not only at improving communication between different local or international cultures, but also between the emergent “languages” of the natural and social sciences, whose growing separation and specialization – and growing incommunicability, both between experts in different fields and to the broader public – belied their growing influence on political and economic decision making. These were problems to which Modley dedicated increasing attention in the last decade of his life (Modley 1966, 1974). Joining forces in the mid-1960s with the noted anthropologist Margaret Mead, together they established an organization named GYLPHS, Inc., whose goal was to promote the development and global adoption of a universal graphic symbol language.

In a 1968 article in the journal *Natural History*, titled “Communication Among All People, Everywhere,” Mead and Modley outlined their goal: “a set of clear, unambiguous signs that can be understood by the speakers of any language, and by the members of any culture, however primitive,” as a “first requirement . . . for our technologically developed world . . .” (Mead and Modley 1968: 57). While the authors’ central example in this article focused on the disjunction between the ease of international travel in the jet-age and the unease faced by travelers in their inability to communicate or read signs at their destination, their argument clearly had broader implications.

Modley and Mead posed graphics as one means of ameliorating obstacles to engaged citizenship and global peace, perceiving the disjunction between increased international and cross-cultural contact (in the jet and telecommunications age) on the one hand and continued national-ideological conflicts in Vietnam and the Cold War on the other, as fundamentally a problem of communication.⁶ Of additional and growing importance in Mead’s writings of the late 1960s was the incommensurability of various scientific, technological, and social-scientific discourses, addressed here as a serious problem endangering the goal of an informed citizenry. Such ideas appeared in greater relief in a 1969 report entitled “Secrecy and Dissemination in Science and Technology,” authored by Mead in her role as head of the Committee on Science in the Promotion of Human Welfare at the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Emphasizing “the different mechanisms of communication and regulation” in the dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge, the report identifies “the fragmentation of science into such narrow specialties that the essential interaction among adjacent disciplines is made exceedingly difficult” as a key obstacle to the adequate dissemination of scientific knowledge. “There is,” it continues, “an urgent need for the further exploration and development of methods of cross-disciplinary, cross-national, and cross-ideological communication.” At this point, a note directs the reader to Modley and Mead’s *Natural History* article (Mead 1969: 787–9).

Taken together, these texts set out the key problems of the age as difficulties of communication and posit the adoption of pictographic signs as a significant step toward their amelioration. Recognizing the need for such initiatives to be supported by broad infrastructural and governmental frameworks, Modley and Mead called for “co-ordinated research, development, and testing; broad private and public support for glyph development; a nationwide educational campaign as glyphs are introduced into any one country; and a permanent body of international and national experts to keep the international symbol system up to date, effective, and simple” (Mead and Modley 1968: 57–8). It is unclear what impact, if any, this call had on the actual development of design strategies in this period – a period that nonetheless saw the emergence of

various national and international bodies concerned with graphic standards and visual communication in the public interest. In any case, my interest here lies less in demonstrating the *efficacy* of pictographic language in *practice*, than in exploring the fortunes of universal graphic communication as a *dream* of mid-twentieth-century design.

Some years earlier, in the pages of *Print* magazine, Modley had suggested that “the task of selecting a small set of symbols which would be most useful might well call for the creation of a body comparable to the French Academy” (Modley 2006: 75).⁷ In their *Natural History* article, Modley and Mead aimed to go beyond the selection of these symbols to propose nothing less than a global renovation of verbal and visual communication. Distinguishing between the capabilities and limits of both pictographs and verbal language, they wrote that while “glyphs” could solve problems related to “the business of money, schedules, directions, and rules of the road,” verbal language was still required for communication “about events, about politics and religion, about memories of the past and hopes for the future” (Mead and Modley 1968: 58).

If pictographs did not replace verbal languages, but rather supplemented them, Modley and Mead (among other advocates of pictographic systems) suggested that these languages must themselves be reformed toward the goal of simplified international communication. The movement toward international pictographic systems connects at this point with the constructed language movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose products include Esperanto, Interlingua, and BASIC English.⁸ This last, a simplified lexicon of 850 words and five combinatory rules designed by Charles K. Ogden to do the work of some 20,000 English words, recommended itself both to Neurath (whose 1936 work *International Picture Language* was written entirely in BASIC English) and to Willard C. Brinton, a leading American theorist of statistical graphics who wrote in 1939 that “graphics – the international language of the eye – may be made completely international if BASIC English is used where any words are necessary” (Brinton 1939: 27). Modley and Mead affirmed the need for simplified verbal communication alongside pictographic signs, although they rejected these artificial languages in favor of adopting a single existing national language (for somewhat obscure reasons, they suggested Armenian).

Neurath and his associates had sought largely to bypass written language, in producing visual “statements” of fact through the combination of graphic elements that were, at least theoretically, immediately recognizable and which could be supplemented by the barest minimum of accompanying text to provide context for the assembled image. In *International Picture Language*, he clarified ISOTYPE’s relation to verbal language, calling the former a “helping language . . . into which statements may be put from all the normal languages of the earth” (Neurath 1936: 17). Being more universal

than any specific verbal language could be, pictographic "language" nonetheless remained supplementary or auxiliary to these "normal languages", remaining inherently dependent on verbal language to supply context and concept. While Modley had once suggested that "the ideal chart would have no lettering. It would be self-explanatory" (Modley 1937a: 73), he would later echo Neurath, writing that pictographs "do not replace the written language, but supplement it, and may be successfully used to present a series of ideas" (Modley 1952: 17).

The nature of the ideas to be presented in pictographs remained an open question. Where Neurath's pictographic experiments had been driven by a sense of exigency, by the need to communicate certain vital developments in social and economic reform to an underinformed working class public, Modley's appropriation of these means in producing diagrams for mass-media publications – illustrating any content whatsoever – effectively severed them from their initial use and freed them up to become relatively neutral agents of a liberal-humanist brand of internationalist politics.

Anti-universalism: Challenge and Critique

Whatever the ideological differences between the internationalism of Neurath and that of Modley, by the late 1960s and 1970s the universalizing humanism that underlay both designers' pictographic projects was beginning to come under critique from a number of corners. Feminist, civil rights, and gay liberation movements had put the lie to the alleged inclusivity of American liberal democracy and its postulate of a universal subject, while contemporary intellectual developments coming from Europe were adumbrating theories of language that either emphasized difference and the slippage of meaning or asserted the imbrication of all modes of communication in ideology and deeply rooted structures of power.

In some respects, the project of pictographic design as an "unused Esperanto" would find remarkable success after the 1970s as the model of much global wayfinding and transportation signage, including Otl Aicher's pictographs for the 1972 Olympics in Munich and the US Department of Transportation's "Symbol Sign System" (designed by Cook and Shanosky Associates between 1974 and 1979). At the same time, the model of pictographic communication promoted by Modley and others in the postwar decades would come under critique in this period, as an expression of a modernist universalism marked and marred by all the assumptions and blind-spots of its age. Increasingly, the purported universality of these symbols and visual signs was challenged by critiques that pointed out their implicit and unacknowledged cultural specificity, and their reflection moreover of specifically Western concerns and assumptions.

In this vein, a 1979 reviewer of Modley's last work – the *Handbook of Pictorial Symbols* (Modley 1976) – suggested that its value lay not

in its worth as a tool for designers seeking to employ pictographs for communication but rather as a historical record of modern semiotic usage and as fodder for deconstruction (Figure 6). “Page after page provides fascinating material for semiotic analysis,” the reviewer noted, highlighting the problematic and often paradoxical relationship between denotation and connotation, between arbitrary and motivated signs and between similar semiotic concepts. “Particularly striking is the emergence in the older pictographs of latent national, ethnic and social assumptions in what were once regarded as completely value-free symbols. . . . Used in this way, the publication constitutes a useful and accessible source book on an increasingly important aspect of cultural history” (Ashwin 1979: 343–4).

At the same time as new theoretical paradigms were breaking down the modernist narrative of universal humanism, they were also focusing on popular forms of communication, mass media and consumer society as significant sites of cultural meaning. Such approaches, whether valorizing or critical, seemed to suggest that in the same decades that Neurath, Modley, Mead and others were arguing for a new model of communication to unite “technological man” across barriers of culture, language and ideology, an international vernacular *had* in fact taken root, in those same commodity forms and modes of mass entertainment McLuhan had identified as supporting the power of a “language of visual form” (McLuhan 1995: 313).

A connection between pictographic communication and popular forms of film, television, comic books, photojournalism, posters and illustrated magazines had been acknowledged from an early point by the innovators of pictographic design, who frequently cited the power and appeal of these forms as supporting the adoption of pictographic languages for the communication problems of the global age; Kaempffert’s 1933 introduction of ISOTYPE to the readers of the *New York Times Magazine* described the pictograph as being as “international in its appeal and as unmistakable in its point as a Mickey Mouse animated cartoon” (Kaempffert 1933: 9).

In 1926, the year following the opening of the Museum of Society and Economy, Neurath asserted:

Races, Nationalities,
Religions



Figure 6

“Pictograph Corporation Symbols” from Rudolf Modley, *Handbook of Pictorial Symbols*. 1976. New York: Dover Publications. Courtesy of Dover Publications.

modern man receives a large part of his knowledge and general education by way of pictorial impressions, illustrations, photographs, films. Daily newspapers bring more pictures from year to year. In addition, the advertising business operates with optical signals as well as representations. Exhibitions and museums are indeed offspring of this visual hustle. (Neurath, quoted in Hartmann 2008: 283-84).

In other texts from the same period, he was even more exuberant about the possibilities of mass communication, exclaiming that, faced with problems of public communication, “the modern advertisement will show us the way!” (Neurath, quoted in Vossoughian 2008b: 242).

For his part, Modley emphasized the demands placed on the attention of men and women by the attractions of mass media and argued thusly for the visual directness of pictographs: “Well executed charts win the attention of modern men and women who in their hurry limit their attention to those things which are simple, informative and arresting” (Modley 1937a: 5). Some decades later, he connected this more explicitly to the rise of mass media forms, writing that “picture magazines, tabloids, comics, movies and television bear witness to the popular desire to absorb information through visual impressions” (Modley 1952: 4).

While Modley and other proponents of pictographs had seen the images and techniques of advertising and mass media as a powerful source of communicative action that nonetheless stood in need of *transformation* toward socially productive ends, whether public education toward engaged citizenship or international campaigns for cross-cultural understanding, a new generation of semioticians and media theorists (not to mention designers about to give birth to postmodernism) saw, in these images and their objects, a visual *lingua franca* for the globalized age. In this view, the logos and brands of postwar American corporatism, disseminated throughout McLuhan’s “global village,” formed a new international lexicon: a capitalist and branded parallel to Modley and Mead’s “glyphs.”

“Western” consumer goods (which were, however, increasingly global, at first in their markets and later in their sites of production) had, like pictographs, a simple and arresting power of immediate recognition; unlike pictographs, they conveyed an informational fact – product identification – while doing away with the need for verbal language to provide context. Or rather, the product image was already imbued with this context, its meaning overdetermined in advance of its reception by a host of mediated messages. By the early 1970s, the increasingly international products and brand identities of corporate America had not only supplanted pictographic language in its aim of communication among the world’s peoples, but were exploiting the latter’s discourse of international co-operation in its advertising, as in Coca-Cola’s 1971 “I’d like to buy the world a

Coke” campaign.⁹ Where Modley and his colleagues had, however naïvely, sought to bring together peoples and nations for peace and understanding through pictographs, the language of products and advertising achieved a yet more dubious goal – that of bringing together the world’s peoples for greater market share through brand recognition: mass-consumption among all shoppers, everywhere.

Conclusion

The pictographic projects outlined in this article sought a new foundation for global communication in the alleged objectivity and universality of images, presumed to stand above local cultures by virtue of their basis in fact and straightforward visual reception. This goal was ultimately undermined by critiques that revealed the unacknowledged cultural biases both of these images and the universalist-humanist notions on which they relied. We have lost our taste for the particular conceptions of universal man that informed these projects, many aspects of which now appear as outmoded relics of their age. We might ask what significance such work holds for us today, as designers turn once more to problems of data visualization to communicate complex social and economic relationships to a globalized audience.

If Modley’s career charts the rise and fall of a certain dream of pictographic language, it also embodies the ambiguities and tensions inherent in any project aiming at universal graphic communication – tensions that are perhaps even greater today than during Modley’s life. The four decades since his death have seen both the remarkable expansion on a global scale of those networks of instantaneous communication foreseen by McLuhan and the global spread of Western branded goods and entertainments, facilitated by these same communications networks. If a shared global cultural base exists today, it is surely one defined more by McLuhan’s “Chaplin or Disney” than by the “ideograms” in which he placed so much faith.

The little men and women, suitcases and cigarettes of information signage in public toilets and global transportation hubs, or the desktop icons of our computers’ Graphic User Interfaces, are a testament to the practical efficacy of pictographic systems in contemporary life. The success of such icons, however, belies the extent to which the utopian ambitions of earlier pictographic designers have been set aside here in favor of a more generic “recognition.” If these pictographs – which arguably have more in common with the logos of multinational corporations than with Modley’s charts and glyphs – communicate any social content today, it is only negatively. That is, their global ubiquity indicates not an inherent universal appeal, but rather the hegemonic reach of Western “culture” across national and cultural boundaries. If pictographs may yet regain something of the urgency and agency given to them in mid-twentieth century projects, they will have to contend not only with the conditions of their earlier failure, but also those of their current success.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. While Neurath was in many respects a more significant innovator in the development of graphic communication, Modley's long career on the margins of twentieth-century information design serves better to register the shifts in visual communication during this period. Whereas Neurath's work has been the subject of numerous recent studies, virtually no attention has been paid to date to Modley's role in the development of twentieth-century information graphics. The sole historical article to date on Modley's work is Charles R. Crawley's valuable but brief "From charts to glyphs: Rudolf Modley's contribution to visual communication" (Crawley 1994). The relevant English-language literature on Neurath and ISOTYPE, by contrast, is voluminous: a short list of sources, few of which give even passing reference to Modley, would include Twyman 1975; Kinross 1979, 1981, 2009; Lupton 1986, 1999; Galison 1990; Bolton 1998; Vossoughian 2008a, 2008b; Hartmann 2008; Jansen 2009.
2. In this respect, Frank Hartmann suggests, the "pictographic man" of ISOTYPE has an ancestor in Adolphe Quetelet's great nineteenth-century statistical fiction, "l'homme moyen," or "average man." This "man," Hartmann writes, "is not a character. He has no personality, no individual features. He is simply a statistical phenomenon" (Hartmann 2008: 284).
3. A "Talk of the Town" segment in a 1938 issue of *The New Yorker* referred to the "flourishing" firm of Pictorial Statistics, Inc. as a "\$30,000-a-year business," giving a partial list of its corporate and institutional clients (Maloney 1938: 15), belying Modley's 1935 description of the firm as "a non-profit membership organization" (Modley 1935: XX6).
4. The turn to graphic education in New Deal programs extended far beyond incidental uses of statistical graphics and includes the poster programs and photographic surveys of the Works Progress Administration and its Farm Securities Administration. Modley himself worked on WPA posters in the mid-1930s, and his sister-in-law, Marion Post Walcott, was a well-known WPA photographer.
5. Parran outlined the campaign against syphilis, accompanied by a number of Modley's pictorial charts, in a 1936 issue of *Survey Graphic* (Parran 1936), while a 1938 issue presented a selection of Neurath's charts for the National Tuberculosis Association (*Survey Graphic* 1938: vol. 27: 139–41).
6. In the opening pages of his *Graphic Presentation*, Willard C. Brinton echoed this concern: "with international conditions throughout the world unsettled and getting worse, there seems

- more than ever before a need for such a common graphic language” (Brinton 1939: 15).
7. While no such body directly resulted from this call, during the 1960s and 1970s design associations including AIGA and ICOGRADA advanced projects toward the development of visual communication standards in co-operation with both governmental and intergovernmental institutions. One outcome of such initiatives was the U.S. Department of Transportation’s “Symbol Sign System,” designed by Cook & Shanosky Associates in association with the AIGA Signs and Symbols Committee and the Federal Design Improvement Program. This project was prefigured in an ill-fated proposal made in 1967 by Modley (with the architect Bill Lacy and the Canadian graphic designer Paul Arthur) to the U.S. Department of Transportation for the establishment of a set of universal graphics to be used in national transportation signage, following an initial test case on the campus of the University of Tennessee. I thank Brian Donnelly for this reference.
 8. Esperanto, the most successful of the constructed international languages, was created by L.L. Zamenhof in 1887. Interlingua, based on Romance-language characteristics, was developed between 1937 and 1951 by the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA). Basic English (British American Scientific International Commercial), a simplified form of English for international use, was introduced by the British author Charles K. Ogden in his *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar* (1930) and *Debabelization* (1931). George Orwell, an erstwhile supporter of Basic English, used it as the basis for the totalitarian “Newspeak” of his dystopian novel *1984*.
 9. Bill Backer, the McCann-Erickson creative director on the Coca-Cola account in 1971, recalled the origins of this campaign in a “basic idea: to see Coke not as it was originally designed to be – a liquid refresher – but as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples” (Backer 1993: 7).

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