ISOTYPE REVISITED

Isotype and the University of Reading

Michael Twyman (1981)

The connection between Isotype and the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication of the University of Reading goes back more than ten years [i.e. from 1981] and it may perhaps be of some historical value to record how it came to be established, the reasons for it and some of the forms it has taken.
The beginnings of the connection date from 1970, shortly after the establishment of the new degree course in Typography & Graphic Communication at Reading. At this stage we were also running a three-year research project, funded by a group of publishing houses, on the use of illustration in primary school books. As part of this project we had chosen a few examples of the use of pictures in such books in order to run some experiments in schools. Some of those we selected were from the series 'Visual science' which Marie Neurath had conceived and designed in the 1950s. Another example chosen was a double-page visual presentation of the characteristics of a medieval town from the book *Living in villages and towns* (1948); this formed part of the series 'Visual history of mankind' which had been planned during Otto Neurath's lifetime but was not worked out in detail and published until after his death. At that time, much to our shame, we had not heard of Isotype or the work of Otto and Marie Neurath.
The approach these publications embodied was not new to me, however. As a secondary school child in London just after the Second World War I had picked up intuitively some of the Isotype methods of presenting ideas graphically through publications of the time (such as the Penguin Books publication *The County of London Plan, explained by E.J. Carter and Ernő Goldfinger*, 1945). I can still remember the way I used such ideas - with considerable short-term success - in relation to the geography homework I did in the early years of my secondary school education. I reminisce at this point only to emphasise that, despite my ignorance of the acronym itself in 1970, Isotype methods rang distant bells for me personally.

More important, however, was the fact that the Isotype examples we had chosen to use as experimental material fascinated us because they embodied many of the principles of graphic communication we believed to be important. Above all, they associated the notion of clear-thinking with visual presentation. It seemed to us, therefore, that we ought to try and establish what kind of thinking lay behind these particular images. Accordingly, the two research students involved with the project, Jessica Smith and Helen Watkins, resolved to track down Marie Neurath. This they did, and very soon afterwards they visited her in the Isotype offices at 116 Haverstock Hill, London. And this was the beginnings of what has been, at least from the point of view of the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at Reading, a most rewarding association. I can recall vividly the enthusiasm with which these two students reported back to me. Not only were they pleased because they had all their questions thoughtfully and patiently answered; but they were reassured - and I think I have to say somewhat amazed - to find that the ideas about graphic design this dignified, elderly lady expounded accorded so closely with their own. It was clear to me that such an experience should not be limited to these research students and, shortly afterwards, I arranged to visit Marie Neurath myself.

Everything the two research students had told me was confirmed by this experience. I was struck by Marie Neurath's incisive thinking, by her integrity and enthusiasm, and by her concern for so many things I held to be important. At that time work was still going on with a few Isotype projects and, in particular, with the production of sets of a monochrome picture dictionary. What I saw provided clarification of the approach I had naively adopted as a schoolboy. But in addition to current examples of work, the office housed Otto and Marie Neurath's working collection of pictorial reference material. Since much of my own research work had been in the field of the history of printed images I was excited to find that the Neuraths - notwithstanding their innovations in graphic design - saw themselves as

belonging to a long tradition of pictorial communication. Everything seemed to fall into place for me personally as a result of this visit; moreover, it provided reassurance in terms of what we were trying to do at Reading in relation to graphic design education generally.
As part of my own education and that of our students, Marie Neurath paid the first of a number of visits to Reading. At first it was a matter of asking questions about the historical aspects of Isotype; later on, after the broad perspective of its history had become clearer to us, and had become part of regular course work, it was more a matter of discussing with Marie Neurath how the team actually worked and questions relating to the design of specific charts. On one particularly productive visit, Marie Neurath even assisted students in the designing of charts according to Isotype principles. A direct outcome of these visits has been the involvement of students in the design of charts following Isotype principles for the journal Austria Today in 1978 and 1979. [1] For understandable reasons, Marie Neurath's visits to the Department are less frequent now than they were, but I am happy to say that they have been maintained over a long period and have been occasions of the greatest pleasure for us.

The most concrete outcome of the relationship between Reading and Isotype was the deposit of the archives of the Isotype Institute in Reading University Library in 1971. Marie Neurath was to retire in 1972 and she felt it would be appropriate to deposit the archives in a place where she and other directors of the Institute felt they would be preserved and valued. The collection is called the 'Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype collection' and it contains items brought to England from the continent, in addition to those acquired or produced since Otto and Marie Neurath began working in England. It includes both published and unpublished material. Among the published items are copies of books, posters and filmstrips designed by the Isotype team, besides books and prints collected by Otto and Marie Neurath as reference material, and the writings of others on Isotype and the Vienna Circle. The unpublished material includes correspondence, administrative papers, preparatory work, artwork, a few original charts, job files (principally after 1945), files of symbols, files of photoprints of charts (c. 1927-40), files of photographs relating to the Vienna period of their work, slides produced in Vienna and the Netherlands, the Futura type bought in England and line blocks of the symbols made in England after 1945. The collection is at present housed jointly by the University Library and the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication.
The next stage in the connection between Isotype and Reading was an exhibition organized jointly by the University Library and our Department in 1975 called 'Graphic Communication through Isotype'. By good fortune, it coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Gesellschafts-und Wirschaftsmuseum in Wien. The purpose of the exhibition was two-fold: to draw public attention to the work of the Neuraths and to help us at Reading to familiarise ourselves with the enormous collection of material so that loose historical ends could be cleared up with Marie Neurath. The exhibition was the joint work of staff and students and was held in the University Library from May to October 1975. A catalogue was produced in connection with it, which has since been reprinted. [2] It was in connection with this exhibition that Reading's interest in Isotype was made known in Vienna. Professor Franz Rauscher (formerly Director of the Österreichisches Gesellschafts-und Wirtschaftsmuseum) opened the exhibition and the Director of the Austrian Institute (which had supported the exhibition financially) also attended. The occasion provided an opportunity for many old friends connected with the Isotype Institute to meet one another again. On the day of the opening a special showing was held of the film 'Total war in Britain' together with excerpts from four other films produced by Paul Rotha in the 1940s and for which the Isotype Institute had contributed charts. This was a memorable occasion for all who saw them, and cannot easily be repeated.
The interest shown in the exhibition at Reading led to it being taken to Austria in 1977. In April of that year it was re-erected at the Zentralsparkasse in Vienna, and it travelled to Linz and Graz later. A German translation was made of the introductory notes and of the essay 'The significance of Isotype' which I had contributed to the English catalogue. [3] In the evening of the opening of the exhibition in Vienna one of my colleagues, Ernest Hoch, who as

a student in Vienna in the 1930s had visited Neurath's exhibitions, read a translation Marie Neurath had made of a lecture I had prepared on the 'Wiener Methode'. The experience of going to Vienna led me to realise how little was really understood about Isotype in the place of its birth, and revealed that what was needed was a German translation of Otto Neurath's most direct exposition of Isotype principles, *International picture language* (1936). Marie Neurath kindly agreed to take on the translation of this work and in 1980 our Department published a facsimile of this long out of print work, together with Marie Neurath's German translation of it. Appropriately, the work was dedicated to Marie Neurath. [4]

As a result of the interest shown in this exhibition, I delivered a number of illustrated lectures on Isotype to different kinds of audiences both in England and abroad and it was easy to detect a revival of interest in the subject among graphic designers and museum staff. In particular, the British Museum of Natural History and the Open University were influenced by Isotype thinking.
The other immediate outcome of the Isotype exhibition of 1975 was that one of the students concerned with its organization, Robin Kinross, felt he would like to write a postgraduate dissertation on some aspect of Otto Neurath's graphic work. Our experience of putting together the exhibition catalogue had revealed that there were a number of issues that still needed resolving from an historical point of view. The work of Robin Kinross led to a successful conclusion with the presentation of a dissertation in 1979. [5] This research work brought Marie Neurath into very close contact with the Department. At this stage Robin Kinross was given the responsibility of cataloguing the collection of Isotype material in the University and was appointed to the staff of the Department. Needless to say, all points of fact in the catalogue and dissertation were rigorously checked by Marie Neurath and they must be seen as providing a definitive framework for the study of Otto Neurath's work in the field of graphic communication.

All that remains to be recorded from a factual point of view in this brief account of the Department's association with Isotype is the winding up of the Isotype Institute in 1981 and the transferring of its responsibilities to the University.
This does not mean the end of the association between Isotype and Reading, however. Isotype is treated as an important phenomenon in our study of twentieth century design and is one of the special options listed for study on the course. In addition, students are introduced to the principles of Isotype work through practical design assignments. But the lessons to be learned from Isotype go far beyond the specific issues discussed above and I can do no better than paraphrase and quote from the conclusion to my essay on 'The significance of Isotype' written in 1975; [6] I suggested there that: 'The development of an international means of communication based on the use of standard symbols, and the presentation of statistics by the repetition of units which stand for particular quantities, form only a relatively small part of the Isotype contribution to graphic communication.' And I argued that the real lessons of the work of the Isotype team could only be learned after a careful study of such major undertakings as *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* (1930), the exhibition 'Rondom Rembrandt' (1938), Neurath's own book *Modern man in the making* (1939) and the series of schoolbooks 'Visual history of mankind' (1947-8). These works which we are able to study in one form or another at Reading, demonstrate the importance of the Isotype team's general approach to design and highlight two points that are of special interest to practising designers: 'that successful designing depends to a large degree on clarity of thinking', and 'that the graphic designer's primary role is to serve the needs of society'. [7] It is because we too believed such things that the Department first took an interest in Isotype work. A decade's experience of looking at Isotype work and a much richer understanding of what lay behind it has merely confirmed the value of studying Isotype principles and methods in an educational context.

Notes

1. Charts on '60th Anniversary of Austrian Republic', vol. 4, Autumn 1968, pp. 31-41 and on 'Vienna: the last 70 years', 1978, vol. 5, Spring 1979.

2. University of Reading, *Graphic communication through Isotype*, (1st ed., Reading, 1975; 2nd (revised) ed., Reading, 1981).
3. M. Twyman, 'Die Bedeutung der Wiener Bildstatistik' in Zentralsparkasse, exhibition catalogue, *Graphische Kommunication: Entwicklung der Wiener Methode der Bildstatistik*(Vienna, 1977).
4. Otto Neurath, *International picture language/International Bildersprache* translated from the English edition of 1936 by Marie Neurath (University of Reading, 1980).
5. R. Kinross, 'Otto Neurath's contribution to visual communication 1925-45: the history, graphic language and theory of Isotype', M.Phil thesis, University of Reading, 1979.
6. M. Twyman, 'The significance of Isotype' in *Graphic communication through Isotype*(Reading, 1975), p. 17.
7. Ibid.

Editorial appendix:
Letter from Marie Neurath to Michael Twyman

Editorial note. Although originally written in English, the above essay has previously been published only in German, in Friedrich Stadler (ed.), *Arbeiterbildung in der Zwischenkriegszeit: Otto Neurath - Gerd Arntz* (Vienna/Munich: Österreichisches Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum/Löcker Verlag, 1982), pp. 185-8. Marie Neurath translated Michael Twyman's text into German for that publication, and sent the translation to him along with the following letter typed on notepaper headed 'Isotype Institute Ltd'.

23-11-81

Dear Michael

This may be the last time that I use this notepaper ...

Hereby my rather untidy translation; we are in a hurry. I feel it could be improved here and there. I hope it will be acceptable.

You tell a nice story, I read it with great pleasure and gratitude, as you can imagine. I had not known before that even for you personally 'things fell into place' as a result. I was of course also very excited by Jessica's and Helen's visit; never had anybody put such intelligent questions to me; or: what is important to me, seemed important to them. And they came just at the moment, when Helen Coppen and I had racked our brain: where is the best place to deposit our collections? I have probably telephoned with her straight away: here is a hope; I certainly did so after your visit. Do you remember: after half an hour I told you of our problem, and that now I saw a solution, if you would be willing and had the necessary space. You beamed with delight; you told me of the Library etc.; but that your department would make good use, etc.

Imagine what my feelings now would be, if there was no Reading ...

If you want to add a footnote from me, here it is in German:
[an English translation of Marie Neurath's 'footnote' follows]

Marie Neurath writes: For me the visit by the two students was equally as exciting. Never before had I been so sensibly questioned; or: never before had I found so much understanding for that which seemed to me to be most important. I asked them both what they wanted to become, in which faculty they studied, who their teacher was; and so I learned about this unique department and of Michael Twyman. I was determined to ask him to visit soon. He came, and after half an hour I said to him: we need some heirs; how about it, would you be prepared?
[translation ends]

Looking forward to seeing you here some time. Keep well, and my best wishes to all,

Yours,
Marie

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