My Recent Research (on Isotype)

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Talk given at the *International Isotype Symposium*, University of Reading, 24-25 September 2009

I came to the work of Otto and Marie Neurath and Isotype from a circuitous route. My intellectual background is not in logical positivism or the history of typography or graphic design. I have a background in art history and art practice, but my theoretical interests have always been oriented to more to Neurath's contemporaries, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno and their work in critical theory, aesthetics and cultural history. I have researched and written about museums and exhibitions, and it was through this work that I first became interested in the Neuraths and Isotype. I learnt of their innovations in exhibitions from an essay by Roger Miles, in which he discussed the influence of Isotype on 1970s exhibitions at the Natural History Museum, London. I recalled visiting some of these exhibitions as a child.

I first visited the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection here at Reading, very briefly, about 4 or 5 years ago. I wrote about their work in my book *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* and in another book called *Exhibition Experiments*. My interest at this point was in the innovations in exhibition practice, though I had also been (and still am) fascinated by the photographs of Viennese everyday life in the 1920s, which are held in these collections in the N files, and which were used in slide shows and exhibits at Otto Neurath's Social and Economic Museum in Vienna. Another developing interest was in the status of Isotype as a picture language and its relation to contemporary icon systems, and to ancient hieroglyphics.

Once I was aware of this work, I began to notice mentions of Neurath and Isotype in histories of modernism and modernity that were very familiar to me: essays by Peter Wollen, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, and Peter Galison. These all treated Isotype as a direct pictorial expression of logical positivism. They also treated logical positivism as an essentially modernist philosophy that is self-evidently problematic. These were all writers I liked and whose diagnoses of modernity and modernism I broadly shared. They are also influential accounts in cultural theory and cultural studies (of the kind I am involved in – a kind that

comes out of art history and critical theory).

I had a hunch that what they said about Neurath and Isotype, and how they used them, was missing something. I decided that by looking at what was missing from these accounts, I might develop a different account of modernism from the ones in these texts and from those I had learnt as an art historian and then as a cultural studies scholar. When I started to look more closely at Neurath's work in general and Isotype in particular (reading, studying in the archive, talking to people) I began to notice those things that probably become clear pretty quickly to anyone working with this. For example, I became aware, as you all are, that Isotype was a collective production, even if strongly steered by Neurath, so the idea of it as a direct expression of his philosophy seemed tenuous. I also learnt that the reputation and inherited understanding of logical positivism and Neurath's version in particular had been shaped by a number of historical accidents, if you like, such as his sudden death, the subsequent success of the Frankfurt school, contingencies of translation, and so on. The reputation of Isotype, not in typography circles, but in these accounts of cultural history, was also shaped by certain dominant interpretations, which can be traced back to the work done here at Reading to bring Isotype to public attention in the 1970s, but particularly to the ways these were taken up in art and design in the US – notably by the artist Victor Burgin and the design curator Ellen Lupton.

Part of what I've been setting out to do is to critique these accounts, specially in the three essays I mentioned at the start. There are some evident problems, such as a tendency to read Isotype via Carnap's philosophical writings (not even Neurath's), and a tendency to read Isotype charts in a way that is heavily dependent on metaphor. For example, Latour and Wiebel describe Isotype symbols as floating on a "pure", clean, empty background. This lays the ground for their argument about modernism, which they seem as purifying, cleansing, opposed to hybridity. Wollen describes the symbols in one Isotype chart (on car production) as serried, linear and so on. The implication of his argument is that the chart is not just about Fordism, but is quintessentially Fordist, which is ironic given both Arntz and Neurath's critiques of Fordism and Taylorism. (eg. Neurath's early "converse Taylor system"). Another part of what I've been doing is to look to Neurath's work in general as a means to provide a counter-account, to complicate both the assumptions about

his philosophy and about Isotype. Many people (many of you) have already done the work on this, working in fields such as economics, philosophy and typography, you have challenged assumptions about Isotype and about logical positivism, and this is a perfect resource for me to begin to question these larger histories.

I also quickly realized that to study Neurath as an individual and Isotype as a collective practice could be a lifetime's work, and that aspects were already being well-studied by people with more access and a more-suited background than mine. However, I applied for funded research leave to investigate the question more, and as a result of that application process I was invited to write something on Neurath for the journal *Radical Philosophy*. This was a challenge, since I had not yet done any really substantial research on the topic. I decided to focus on the visit to Bilston and in particular the account that Neurath reportedly gave there of a pig in the bath of one of the Viennese council tenants. I wanted to try to show the difference between Neurath's vision of modernity (as something belonging to the people) and that attributed to him by recent writers such as Latour.

In 2007-8, I spent one day a week for about 10 weeks researching in the archives at Reading and then another 5 weeks or so travelling, giving conference papers, meeting people and seeing exhibitions, and making brief visits to the archives Vienna and The Hague. During this time I also read essays on critical theory and German speaking philosophical and aesthetic traditions. I set out to familiarize myself with Neurath's work in general, but I also took heed from advice Michael Twyman gave me in a passing encounter (which he may not even remember) which was to focus on the time Neurath was in Britain . This gave me much more of a manageable focus (5 years) and partly compensated for my poor grasp of German, since many of Neurath's letters and writings from that period are in English.

My intention was to use this exploration of Neurath's work to unravel certain accounts of modernism. In the process of doing the research I learnt things that do challenge the place in modernism given him by people like Lupton, Burgin, Galison, Latour and Wollen. I also came to appreciate once more the subtlety and insightfulness of their accounts. But the greatest benefit of having the time to research this was in the pleasures and insights that came from following my nose, and my curiosity, without concern for immediate use-value. I

still have a strong interest in the photographs in the N files, frustratingly this is often a dead-end at the moment – though I did spend a very nice day going around Vienna trying to reconstruct them with my own camera. I've focused a lot, perhaps too much, on the correspondence, because I found it fascinating, and through this found myself drawn to Neurath's biography (eating my hat over something I said to Chris Burke when I first met him, which was that I wasn't particularly interested in doing biography).

I want to finish this talk by just telling you some of the things I've found out: that may or may not be significant on a large scale, but which are interesting, and resonant, I think.

Through the correspondence I've begun to think about network theory and how to articulate relationships of friendship, professional connections and the intersection of fields in wartime Britain. First, I've been very interested in the women correspondents who wrote to Neurath in Britain. Most of these don't appear in the named correspondence but in the alphabetical files, and I spotted some names that I know but not in this connection – others I tried to find out about. I knew little about many of the male correspondents too: but it's not difficult to find out much about figures like Lancelot Hogben, Julian Huxley and Karl Mannheim – all who were respected figures at the time. There are of course male correspondents who cannot be so easily traced: the school teachers who take an interest in Visual Education, the soldiers looking for employment at the end of the war, the council officials, printers and suppliers that the Neuraths corresponded with. Nevertheless, the female correspondents struck me for several reasons. One is the informality and friendliness of their letters: many of them write often and affectionately to both Otto and Marie. Another is the fact that some of these women turn out to be very accomplished in their fields: they include architects, photographers, scientists, philosophers, business women, and educationalists. Some were at early stages of their careers, some students, others were well-established.

Just a few examples: the correspondents writing from within Britain include Lucia Moholy, the photographer, previously married to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who knew the Neuraths from Vienna and who becomes a microfilm specialist in wartime Britain; Helen Coppen, South African educator studying at the London Institute of Education, who contacted Otto for his expertise in visual education and later became a specialist in visual aids/media in education

and who developed a close, affectionate relationship with the Neuraths; Ella Briggs, architect, who designed the Pestalozzihof in Vienna in the 1920s, and knew Otto Neurath from that time; Charlotte Luetkens, the German sociologist and author who came to Britain in 1937 and became a lecturer in sociology at Queen Mary's College and then worked with Karl Mannheim at the London School of Economics; Phoebe Child (1910-1990) one of the pioneers of Montessori education and later founder of various Montessori Educational Institutes and training centres around the world, and Molly Harrison of the Geffrye Museum, who wrote that meeting Otto had given her the courage to make innovative changes at the Geffrye.

I've also paid some attention to Neurath's friendship with Josef "Pepi" Frank, particularly as the latter goes on to become a very significant figure in Scandinavian modernism – and because of their shared discussions about Bauhaus flat roofs, ornament and so on. This is significant for my larger project. Researching Isotype in Britain leads also to popular and adult education, precisely the place my own field (media and cultural studies) is said to have begun in the 1940s. It also led me to Isotype-illustrated or connected books like the 1941 book *The Loom of Language* edited by Lancelot Hogben, written by the Swiss linguist Frederick Bodmer, who corresponded with Neurath, and which has a fascinating account of Chinese pictograms. Another interesting connection (which I have yet to follow up in any depth) is with the photographer John Hinde, who subsequently started his own circus and then became famous for his postcards (most recently celebrated in two publications: Martin Parr's *Our True Intent is All for Your Delight* and Michelle Abadie and Susan Beale's *Nothing to Write Home About*).

So far I have not got anywhere near finishing my larger project, I am really just at the beginning, but I have published and talked on various aspects of it. For example, I've written an an essay on Neurath's elephant signature, where I compare this way of communicating in pictures to Isotype. I've also given a number of papers where I try and describe aspects of the work of the Isotype institute as material social practice, as against the idea of Isotype as a "system", and which challenge a current tendency to view individual Isotype symbols (teleologically) simply as steps toward the development of modern icon systems (on computers for example). This might seem to go against my initial interest in finding the

relevance of Isotype for our current use of icons. I want to be persuaded that a connection can be made that isn't teleological, that doesn't just see this as one inevitable, progressive step toward the current situation. However, I am yet to be persuaded by some of the ways Gerd Arntz's Isotype designs have been presented in books and exhibitions on graphics and typography, perhaps especially in the Netherlands.

I've done some work which seems a little off-beat in relation to the larger project, such as an essay on whale exhibits, prompted by Neurath's discussion of a whale exhibit (in his essay "Museums of the Future") and a paper called "Imagining Post-War Happiness: Otto Neurath and Britain in 1945", which is something I'd like to develop more. I'm now starting to look at Neurath's work on happiness in the context of other contemporaneous writings on happiness (notably Bertrand Russell), and to reread Adorno's writing – particularly one short piece in *Minima Moralia*, which is a critique of Isotype inspired statistical pictograms being used in sociology in the US (written when Adorno was in America and Neurath in Britain). I've also written a brief account of Neurath as a sociologist for the Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology and contributed to Wikipedia entries on many of the figures I've met in my research. My next aim is to put this all together in a way that returns me to my larger project of rethinking modernism through Isotype.

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September 2009