



PLATFORM

* Flat ** Form *** Plane **** Figure

- * Sacrificing the Third Dimension.
- ** Uber Ubiquitous.
- *** “Plane” like “Plain?” The Extra-Ordinary.
- **** What’s a Figure Without a Ground?

On November 29th 2014, I received an email from Yam Lau with an image of Alexandre David's project for G Gallery. Lau describes David's original sketch as an image/proxy of a Greek agora, which hovers above the floor, yet to take root in the world: "its presence floats as a promise, prevailing as a pledge to an indefinite teleos that is yet-to-arrive."¹

David's structure, whether proposed as a Greek agora ("a structure designed to facilitate open discourse and face-to-face encounter"²) or as something that can be "used" (e.g. as an aromatherapy sauna using slow cookers³) is in any, many, or all of the senses of the word, a platform. The great thing about the word platform (or really, platforms in general) is the ease in which it may be applied to different contexts. Think *not only* of a horizontal surface, a stage, a layer or a vestibule. Think *also* of a means, a vehicle, an opportunity, an appeal or a declaration. Think *too* about software platforms, political platforms, or a set of principles.

Because of this variation of platforms, a couple of months ago, I Googled "platform definition." Depending on how far you dig (or what sources you allow yourself to consider/use) we come across:

1540 - 50; earlier platte forme < Middle French: literally, flat form, plane figure.⁴

And this, as you might have guessed, is one of the many potential promises of David's proxy-agora as indicated by Lau. David's proxy-agora hovers above the imaged ground, but perhaps it can also hover above the page it is drawn on. I would like to construct a narrative between the proxy-agora on the page and the structure that inhabits G gallery. David's structure is the platform for this that you hold in your hand or have on your screen.⁵ In what follows, I will use the words flat, form, plane and figure in an attempt to draw a link between the proxy-agora and the structure at G, between the space of the page and the space of the gallery, between being on the page and being in the world.

***Sacrificing the third dimension.** In 2010 I encountered the construction site for the new Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal concert hall at the Place des Arts in Montréal. Around the site was a timber hoarding that adapted to the physical attributes of its environment: angling up stairs, skirting across courtyards, and—if you were to follow it the whole way round—provided a vantage point into the construction site itself. What struck me most about this hoarding was that there was no doubt that it was an object in space—its very physical presence blocked my view and changed the way that I negotiated the space—yet, compared to the buildings around it, the hoarding seemed almost two-dimensional—that is—flat. I started thinking that the plywood panels of the hoarding were akin to a single sheet of paper. Both on their own barely have a semblance of three dimensions.

It was around this time that I came across Leo Steinberg's *Other Criteria*, and his notion of the flatbed picture plane; what he believed described the picture plane of the 1960s. Steinberg saw an axiom in painting that began with the Renaissance and carried on through Cubism and Jackson Pollock. Despite their stylistic differences, the picture plane in some way corresponded with erect human posture:

The top of the picture corresponds to where we hold our heads aloft; while its lower edge gravitates to where we place our feet. ⁶

¹ Lau, Yam. "Invitation to 'use' Alexandre David's work at G Gallery" Message to the author. 29 Nov. 2014. Email.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dictionary.com. n.p. Web. 7 Jan. 2015.

⁵ And of course, when this is read at G on February 14th 2015.

⁶ Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1972. Print.

Steinberg identified a shift in orientation in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet. Their paintings no longer “simulated vertical fields” or “an analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes” and “opaque flatbed horizontals.” It was not the physical placement of the work that marked this difference, but its “mode of imaginative confrontation” that for Steinberg, ultimately came down to a shift from nature to culture.⁷ The work of Rauschenberg in particular referred to a flat receptor surface—table tops, workbenches, beds, floors—a surface that was “whatever a billboard or a dashboard is, and everything a projection screen is;” a surface “on which data is entered” (pampliset, cancelled plate, printer’s proof, trail blank, chart, map, aerial view); “on which information may be received, printed, impressed.”⁸

7 Ibid.

What [Rauschenberg] invented above all was, I think, a pictorial surface that let the world in again. Not the world of the Renaissance man who looked for his weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message, “precipitation probability ten percent tonight,” electronically transmitted from some windowless booth.⁹

8.Ibid.

9 Ibid.

What I would like to take from Steinberg more than anything are the words flatness, orientation, horizontal and vertical. Flatness is not defined by its orientation: walls are flat; floors are flat. Steinberg’s flat “receptor surfaces” are a mix between what we can consider vertical (billboards, dashboards) and horizontal (studio floors, table tops). There does seem to be a difference between the space of making (usually horizontal, think: Rauschenberg’s *Erased DeKooning*, an “evocation of a world space into a thing produced by pressing down on a desk.”¹⁰) and presenting (vertical, hanging on the wall, billboards). But I’ll get back to this point in a moment.

10 Ibid.

Although Steinberg’s flatbed picture plane was indeed talking about pictures, I’d like to draw a parallel to Walter Benjamin’s idea of reading and writing in the “dictatorial perpendicular.” For me, Steinberg’s “flatbed picture plane” (“I borrow the term from the flatbed printing press—“a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests.”¹¹) implicates the page, which in turn implicates a whole lot of other things, but for now, I’d like to concentrate on reading and writing. In a recent article, Tim Carmody highlights a passage from Benjamin’s 1928 book, *One Way Street* as a “reading revolution” that encompasses the history reading forms and their movement in time and space:¹²

11 Ibid.

If centuries ago [writing] began to gradually lie down, passing from the upright inscription to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking itself to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisements force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular.¹³

12 Carmody, Tim. “10 Reading Revolutions Before the E-Book.” *The Atlantic* 25 Aug. 2010. n.pag. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

What Benjamin traces is a shift in writing from the vertical (epigrams, hieroglyphs) to the horizontal (manuscripts, industrially printed books) to the vertical again (newspapers, silent movies & billboards). Carmody places Benjamin’s “reading revolution” as part of a series of reading revolutions: changes in technology that have in turn have altered reader’s expectations.¹⁴

13 The “dictatorial perpendicular” because of the political circumstances—the rise of the Nazi party—at the time Benjamin wrote *One Way Street*: “under these circumstances true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework. [We] must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its influence in active communities better than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, placards...Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.” Ibid.

14 Ibid.

The term “reading revolution” says Carmody, probably hails from the German historian Rolf Engelsing who used it to describe a phenomenon in the 18th century: “a shift from ‘intensive’ reading and rereading of very few texts to ‘extensive’ reading of many, often only once.”¹⁵ Perhaps the most well known of these revolutions is Elizabeth Eisenstein’s notion that the standardization of stable and identical texts (the theoretical

15 Ibid.

guarantee that each copy is "the same" as the next) afforded by the printing press "gave rise to a new social order."¹⁶ This "new social order" can perhaps be embodied by the industrial revolution: steam & electronic presses + paper made of pulped wood + state driven education = more people reading and what David Hall has coined the "literacy revolution."¹⁷ Another reading revolution that I would like to touch upon comes a little closer to home (depending on who you are and where you're reading this). Canadian "communications legend" Harold Innis proposed that the history of culture can be seen as a move from media that are characterized by time (think: monumental & enduring like epigraphs and parchment books) to media that are characterized by space (think: portability & reach like paper and radio).¹⁸

But what distinguishes Benjamin's reading revolution, as Carmody tells us, is that it incorporates all the others (and even a few I haven't even mentioned here).¹⁹ It all basically comes down to orientation, just as Steinberg has shown us earlier. The return to the vertical is a "genuine revolution return of writing to the vertical plane, not just that things change, but happen in space...objects are actually rotated in the way they are oriented to each other."²⁰ It is a revolution that takes into account a vertical/horizontal relationship between what we are reading and our bodies as we are reading.

But before we go any further, as Carmody tells us (and rightly so): we can't talk about a revolution of the book without talking about a revolution of the desk.²¹ If manuscripts were read on "sloping desks" they were also written on the same surface (traditionally horizontal) with the focus of the hand and the eye in the same space. With typewriters, a gradual alienation between hand and eye takes place. Upstroke typewriters printed on the underside of the platen making typists blind as to what they were typing. It was only with the invention of front strike typewriters in the early 1900s that the typist could see what they were typing (kind of like an agora, the typebars of typewriters gently slope towards the page). With contemporary laptops, Carmody tells us, the separation between the horizontal and the vertical, between the hand and the eye is complete.²² We type on a horizontal bed of letters and watch letters pop up on a vertical screen. So like the distinction between Rauschenberg's paintings as referencing a flat horizontal work-space and yet are presented on a flat vertical wall, there seems to be a disconnect between writing (horizontal) and reading (vertical), but also between paper and the screen.²³

What Carmody finds in Benjamin's reading revolution is that it "abstracts from everything we know about concrete history, only to return it to lived experience and the relationship between written language and the human body."²⁴

Once you begin to think about it this way, Benjamin's "reading revolution" turns out to be the only one that's listed that's a genuine revolution, a 360 degree return, occurring in space as well as time.²⁵

And, unlike, say, Eisenstein's distinction between the manuscript and the printing press, Benjamin's reading revolution relates to a broad range of media throughout history, and has implications for the present (even if the papyrus scroll is no longer a dominant reading form, we still scroll through webpages). Perhaps the new two-dimensional surfaces on which we read and write are something akin to Steinberg's dashboard mentioned earlier. With tablets and smart phones, we may actually touch text that historically has been separated. We can take these devices to bed like a paperback book, or hold them upright like a newspaper or magazine.²⁶

¹⁶ Mak, Bonnie. *How the Page Matters*. Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 2011. Print.

¹⁷ Carmody, Tim. "The Dictatorial Perpendicular: Walter Benjamin's Reading Revolution." Online Video Clip. *Vimeo*. Vimeo, 8 June, 2011. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Carmody's "10 Reading Revolutions before the E-Book"

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ See "What's a figure without a ground?"

²⁴ Carmody, Tim. "The Dictatorial Perpendicular: Walter Benjamin's Reading Revolution." Online Video Clip. *Vimeo*. Vimeo, 8 June, 2011. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

²⁵ Carmody, Tim. "10 Reading Revolutions Before the E-Book." *The Atlantic*. 25 Aug. 2010. n.pag. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

²⁶ Ibid.

To conclude, via Carmody once again, I would like to turn to Theodore Adorno's "The Form of the Phonograph Record" from 1934:

It is no coincidence that the term "plate" [platte] is used without any modification and with the same meaning in both photography and phonography. It designates the two-dimensional model of a reality that can be multiplied without limit, displaced both spatially and temporally, and traded on the open market. This, at the price of sacrificing its third dimension: its height and its abyss.²⁷

What Adorno seems to imply is that flatness = an ease of displacement or movement through space and time (recall Innis momentarily). Perhaps flatness is the form of reproduction then.

****Uber Ubiquitous.** The reason why I'm emailing you (v. enthusiastically) is because for "form" (which is an uber ubiquitous word that I have no real intention to fully explain) I'm going to look at the phrase "lorem ipsum" as it is used as placeholder text in word processing, web pages, Letraset, and apparently, typographers since the 1500s.²⁸

If you've used a computer within (at least) the last 25 years or so, chances are you've come a Latin-looking phrase beginning with the two words lorem ipsum in word processing programs, presentation software, or somewhere nestled the nebula of the Internet. There are countless lorem ipsum generators²⁹ to be found on the Internet, all of them providing more or less the same thing. And each of these websites will tell you more or less the same thing: lorem ipsum is used in printing, publishing and graphic design as placeholder (or dummy) text in order to visualize the layout of a document before copy is available.³⁰

These websites will go on to say that in these industries, it is understood that readers will be distracted by readable content when looking at the layout and design of a particular publication. Lorem ipsum, then, is used as placeholder text that resembles the normal distribution, spacing, and weight of letters. According to Cecil Adams; "in the graphic design business, nonsense filler like this is known, somewhat incongruously, as 'greekling' presumably because of 'it's Greek to me.'"³¹

Apparently, even Microsoft Word Help has a little to say about lorem ipsum: "[a]lthough the phrase is nonsense, it does have a long history."³² A 1994 issue of *Before and After*, a desktop publishing magazine, traces lorem ipsum to a passage from Cicero's *de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, a treatise on ethics from 45 BC. During the sixteenth century, a printer adapted Cicero's original Latin text to develop a page of type samples. The words and letters were altered to make its content "nonsensical; its not genuine, correct or comprehensible Latin anymore...[it] has no meaning whatsoever."³³ Fair enough. Fast-forward three centuries and lorem ipsum is used in the 1960s as placeholder text, available in adhesive sheets pre-printed by Letraset, in order to give "a more realistic way to indicate where text would go on a page."³⁴ In 1985, Laura Perry, then art director for Aldus Corporation, modified the original text, and the lorem ipsum as we know it today was launched in Aldus's PageMaker, a desktop publishing program for Apple Macintosh computers (released in 1987 for Windows 1.0).³⁵

This all seems straightforward enough. According to *Before and After* magazine, it was Richard McClintock, a former Latin professor turned publications director at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, who is said to have recalled seeing lorem ipsum in a book of early metal type samples.³⁶ Says McClintock in 1994:

27 Carmody, Tim. "The Dictatorial Perpendicular: Walter Benjamin's Reading Revolution." Online Video Clip. *Vimeo*. Vimeo, 8 June, 2011. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

28 Email from Michelle McGeean to Kevin Rodgers, December 2014.

29 And derivatives: Bacon Ipsum, Online Dating Ipsum, Cupcake Ipsum, Hipster Ipsum, Riker Ipsum (generates text using dialogue from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and Cat Ipsum ("Litter your copy with more kitty") being only the tip of the ipsum iceberg.

30 I could really cite from any website, but here: *Lipsum.com* *Lipsum.com*, n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

31 Adams, Cecil. "What does the filler text "lorem ipsum" mean?" *The Straight Dope*. *The Straight Dope*, 16 Feb. 2001. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

32 *Lipsum.com*. *Lipsum.com*, n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

33 Adams, Cecil. "What does the filler text "lorem ipsum" mean?" *The Straight Dope*. *The Straight Dope*, 16 Feb. 2001. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

34 *Lipsum.com*. *Lipsum.com*, n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

35 *Generator.lorem ipsum.info*. *Generator.lorem ipsum.info*, n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

36 Adams, Cecil. "What does the filler text "lorem ipsum" mean?" *The Straight Dope*. *The Straight Dope*, 16 Feb. 2001. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

What I find remarkable is that this text has been the industry's standard dummy text ever since some printer in the 1500s took a galley of type and scrambled it to make a type specimen book, it has survived not only for centuries of letter-by-letter resetting but even the leap into electronic typesetting, essentially unchanged except for an occasional 'ing' or 'y' thrown in. It's ironic that when the then-understood Latin was scrambled, it became as incomprehensible as Greek; the phrase 'it's Greek to me' and 'greeking' have common semantic roots!³⁷

37 Ibid.

However, in 2001, Cecil Adams reports:

When I spoke to McClintock recently, he said he had been unable to locate the old type sample in which he thought he'd seen lorem ipsum...the earliest he could definitively trace back the passage was Letraset press-type sheets, which dated back only a few decades.³⁸

38 Ibid.

Disaster! This leaves us asking, and Cecil Adams too:

Were graphic arts companies even hiring classics scholars in the 1960s?...It's easier to believe that someone at Letraset simply copied the text from an old hot-type source. We're now faced with the mere technical detail of figuring out which one.³⁹

39 Ibid.

But the more you look for lorem ipsum, the more it disappears into well, lorem ipsum. The aforementioned history of lorem ipsum can be found on numerous lorem ipsum generators and webpages generally in their "infancy."⁴⁰ So it's not just the Cicero text that is being used as placeholder text, the history of lorem ipsum *itself* is being used as placeholder text. Try Googling "lorem ipsum." You'll find the same passage again and again. My particular favorite is the Province of Manitoba's Conservation and Water Stewardship website's page for "Fish Species."⁴¹

40 Ibid.

But what about Cicero's original text? What does it mean? Lorem ipsum can be found in sections 1.10.32-33 in Cicero's original text. It reads:

Neque porro quisquam est dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit...⁴²

42 Generator.lorem ipsum.info. *Generator.lorem ipsum.info*, n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.

Which may be translated to:

There is no one who loves pain itself, who seeks after it and wants to have it, simply because it is pain.⁴³

43 Ibid.

So essentially, lorem ipsum translated into English means "pain itself" (dolorem = pain, misery, suffering; ipsum = itself).⁴⁴ While it would be interesting to associate "pain itself" with "form," there is yet another translation of lorem ipsum that I would now like to turn to.

44 Ibid.

In August 2014, Brian Krebs described an Internet phenomena that has lorem ipsum at the centre of mystery, intrigue, and (potentially) *danger*. Krebs worked alongside security researchers from Deloitte and FireEye in an attempt to understand how the seemingly innocuous words, lorem ipsum—words that have been lifted of their burden of meaning—could be

transformed into so many apparently geopolitical and startling modern phrases when translated from Latin to English using Google Translate.⁴⁵

45 Krebs, Brian. "Lorem Ipsum: Of Good & Evil, Google & China." *Krebs On Security*, 14 Aug. 2014. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

What Krebs and the researchers found was:

when one typed "lorem ipsum" into Google Translate, the default results (with the system auto-detecting Latin as the language) returned a single word: China.⁴⁶

46 Ibid.

Capitalizing, repeating and rearranging the words led to more intrigue. For example, “Lorem Ipsum” became “NATO”, “Lorem lorem” became “Business on the Internet,” “lorem lorem” became “China’s Internet,” “Lorem Ipsum ipsum Ipsum ipsum” became “About the game itself,” and “lorem ipsum ipsum ipsum Lorem” became “China is very very sexy.” When the researchers added more of Cicero’s text as mentioned above, even stranger results abounded. “Consecectetur sit sit Dolor” became “Russia May Be Suffering.” “Lorem Consectetur” became “Technology Enhanced,” “Ipsum Sit Sit Sit” became “Let’s let him be,” and finally, “Ipsum Sit Sit Sit lorem” became “This May Be The Internet.”⁴⁷

47 Ibid.

Researchers wondered if someone outside of Google figured out how to map certain words to different meanings in Google Translate? Was it a secret communications channel? Perhaps a form of communication meant to bypass the censorship by the Chinese government with the Great Firewall of China?⁴⁸

48 Ibid.

Michael Shoukry, a researcher at FireEye tells us:

The cleverness of hiding something in plain sight has been around for many years. However, this is exceptionally brilliant because these templates are so widely used that people are desensitized to them, and because this text is so widely distributed that no one bothers to question why, how and where it might have come from.⁴⁹

49 Ibid.

Because Latin is considered to be a “dead” language, there is no reason why there should be Latin words for the “Internet” and “technology” and so on. But this, according to Krebs, leads us to a possible solution. Google Translate uses crowdsourcing for its translations by searching for previous translations of the same thing on the Internet.⁵⁰ It could be that Google Translate doesn’t have enough Latin texts to have learned the language. But this does not answer the question as to why there were so many references to China and the Internet. Perhaps there are Chinese websites with only “lorem ipsum” as their English counterpart.⁵¹

50 Biggs, John. “The Mystery of Lorem Ipsum.” *TechCrunch*, 18 Aug. 2014. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

51 Ibid.

Alas, it seems as though we may never know the real explanation. As Krebs notes:

Just before midnight, August 16, Google Translate abruptly stopped translating the word “lorem” to anything but “lorem” from Latin to English...[a] spokesperson for Google said the change was made to fix a bug with the Translate algorithm (aligning “lorem ipsum” Latin boilerplate with unrelated text) rather than security vulnerability.⁵²

52 Krebs, Brian. “Lorem Ipsum: Of Good & Evil, Google & China.” *Krebs On Security*, 14 Aug. 2014. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

***Plane as in “plain?” The extra-ordinary. “We say our buildings are ‘ordinary,’ other people have said they are ugly and ordinary. But, of course, our buildings in another sense are extraordinary, extra-ordinary...Literary critics have known all about this all along, that is, about the use of clichés, the use of common everyday language which makes the literature of Eliot and Joyce, for instance, extra-ordinary.”⁵³

53 Robert Venturi, as quoted in Vinegar, Aron. *I am a Monument: On Learning From Las Vegas*. Boston. MIT Press, 2008. Print.

There are two versions of the book *Learning From Las Vegas*. The first was published by MIT Press in 1972 and was designed by Muriel Cooper.⁵⁴ The second revised edition was published by MIT Press in 1977, was designed by co-author Denise Scott Brown and is presented as “stripped and newly clothed,” an “augmentation,” and “although abridged, stands on its own and goes beyond it progenitor.”⁵⁵

54 Cooper is also responsible for the MIT Press logo design.

In her “Preface to the Revised Edition,” Scott Brown tells us that the revised edition came out of a desire to not only produce a more affordable book, but also to “focus our argument a more clearly,” “to shift the book’s emphasis from illustrations to text,” to “‘de-sex’ the text,”⁵⁶ and most importantly (to my interests here);

55 Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Boston. MIT Press, 1977. Print.

56 Ibid.

to remove the conflict between our critique of Bauhaus design and the latter-day Bauhaus design of the book; the “interesting” Modern styling of the first edition, we felt, belied our subject matter, and the triple spacing of the lines made the text hard to read.⁵⁷

Some background. *Learning From Las Vegas*, written by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour,⁵⁸ sets up a dichotomy between two types of symbolic architecture: 1) the “heroic and ordinary”⁵⁹ “melodramatic”⁶⁰ “expressionism”⁶¹ inherent in the modernist tradition and 2) an “ugly and ordinary”⁶² architecture, an “architecture of the ‘second glance,’”⁶³ one that was okay with the “existing landscape”⁶⁴ and one that said, “billboards are almost all right.”⁶⁵ The duck, (“[w]here the architectural systems of space, structure and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture⁶⁶ we call the duck in honor [sic] of the duck-shaped drive-in, ‘The Long Island Duckling,’ illustrated in *God’s Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake.”⁶⁷) and the decorated shed (“[w]here systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them”⁶⁸).

The duck is the special building that is a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that applies symbols.⁶⁹

For Venturi and Scott Brown, the design ethos of modernism—“an aesthetic of the beautiful” with “its emphasis on the clear limits of form...propagated by gestalt-in-flected theories of art and perception”—could not “account for the kinds of sprawl, apparent disorder, agitated movement, ubiquitous signage, and general ‘noisiness’ of a strip city like Las Vegas.”⁷⁰ Venturi and Scott Brown’s critique of these two types of architecture would seem to be enacted in the two versions of *Learning From Las Vegas*.

As Aron Vinegar and Michael Golec tell us in their introduction to *Relearning From Las Vegas*, “a reader is feels quite conspicuous carrying the 1972 edition of *Learning From Las Vegas* from the library stacks to the closest available table.”⁷¹ And it’s true, you do (although I must say that my journey from the stacks retrieval to nearest table was conspicuousness mixed with giddy nerdy excitement).⁷² Measuring 10 ½ x 14 inches, the first edition is not the kind of book that you can informally pick up and take with you to read on the subway. It is a monument. The book is best read on a flat surface (akin to Benjamin’s sloping desks mentioned earlier). It is chocker-block full of information: words, photographs, film stills, illustrations, maps, advertisements and diagrams taken from Venturi and Scott Brown’s Yale Seminar class of 1968. The book is encased in a glassine wrapper with the book’s chapter titles “chattering” “architectural one-liners.”⁷³ Cooper’s design ethos has links to the “pared-down” and “dynamic typography” of the “Swiss style”—the use of sans serif fonts and grids to organize text and image—popular in the sixties and seventies.⁷⁴ Her design of the 1972 edition of *Learning From Las Vegas* “took up this modernist tradition by integrating text and image in such a way that as a reader pages through the book, he or she traverses the city of Las Vegas.”⁷⁵

So given Venturi and Scott Brown’s critique of the “thin, stale”⁷⁶ modernist design of the 1960s, Muriel Cooper’s affiliation with the Swiss typographic tradition would

57 Ibid.

58 While Izenour is a co-author of the book, for my interests here I will be concentrating on Venturi and Scott Brown.

59 Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Boston. MIT Press, 1977. Print.

60 Vinegar, Aron and Michael Golec, Eds. *Relearning From Las Vegas*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

61 Ibid.

62 Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Boston. MIT Press, 1977. Print.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Perhaps David’s structure at G is a “sculpture-becoming-building.”

67 Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Boston. MIT Press, 1977. Print.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Vinegar, Aron and Michael Golec, Eds. *Relearning From Las Vegas*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

71 Ibid.

72 Some context: Cooper’s 1972 design of *Learning From Las Vegas* is available on eBay from \$600-\$2000. The revised paperback costs \$17.24 on amazon.ca.

73 Vinegar, Aron. *I am a Monument: On Learning From Las Vegas*. Boston. MIT Press, 2008. Print.

74 Vinegar, Aron and Michael Golec, Eds. *Relearning From Las Vegas*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

75 Vinegar, Aron. *I am a Monument: On Learning From Las Vegas*. Boston. MIT Press, 2008. Print.

76 Salomon, Stephanie and Steve Kroeter. “Still Learning From Denise Scott Brown.” *Designers and Books*, 7 Jan. 2014. Web. 20 Jan. 2015.

seem to be a mismatch for the intentions behind the book. Vinegar tells us that much of Scott Brown's chagrin at the design of the first edition was its "'white-page aesthetic' that is, the preference in Swiss design to 'implicate the unprinted white space as a design factor.'"⁷⁷

Here, the "tyranny of white paper"⁷⁸ is equated with the "the condition in which the modernist quest for purity, totality, and its version of 'absolute expression,'"⁷⁹ an ideal that "has been twisted in such a way that what was to be expressed is no longer clear."⁸⁰

Writ large, the duck enacts a "melodrama of modernism" "an architectural soap opera" in which the entire building becomes an (sculptural) "ornament" to its own communicative impasse.⁸¹

As Vinegar tells us, Venturi and Scott Brown's critique of the duck is not because of its "dishonesty" but "rather on its irrelevance—the duck is not meaningless but pointless."⁸² Instead, they proposed an architecture that was "explicit" in its symbolism. Venturi and Scott Brown's Guild House, a decorated shed with "GUILD HOUSE" spelled out its façade, is an "instantiation of a deadpan approach—a flat denotation—that would allow the architecture to "speak" in order to avoid upstaging itself."⁸³

This kind of deadpan attitude is manifest in Venturi and Scott Brown's architectural practice as well as the 1968 Las Vegas studio and the subsequent design of the book. As Vinegar tells us, the word "'deadpan' is literally defined as a flat or emotionless face, the word 'pan' being slang for 'face' in 19th century America."⁸⁴ Buster Keaton perhaps best illustrates the deadpan in films such as *Steamboat Bill Jr.* from 1928. The photographic approach of Ed Ruscha ("[W]hat I was after was no-style or a non-statement with a no-style."⁸⁵)—specifically his *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1968), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), and *Thirty-four Parking Lots* (1967)—were seen by Venturi and Scott Brown as a deadpan, "non-judgmental" means for architects to take up and work by:

What new techniques are required to document new forms? We should aim to dead-pan the material so it speaks for itself. Ruscha has pioneered this treatment in his monographs... It is a way to avoid being upstaged by our own subject matter. It can lead too, toward the methodological rigour which will be required of architectural formal analysis once it is recognized as a legitimate activity."⁸⁶

The subsequent 1977 "un-design"⁸⁷ of *Learning From Las Vegas* is a paperback of reduced size (6 x 9 inches) with entirely re-typesetted text from Univers to Baskerville (the switch from Helvetica to Baskerville in this document mirrors this change), "skimpy"⁸⁸ "tight margins"⁸⁹ and larger illustrations (despite the smaller pages). It is unremarkable, "boring," "less conspicuous, more comfortable to read, and less precious."⁹⁰ it's *extra-ordinary*. The addition of the subtitle, "The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form," says Vinegar and Golec, reminds us that "the book is 'a treatise on symbolism in architecture.'"⁹¹ However:

the title's inclusion of the words "symbol" and "form" would suggest an attempt to find a more continuous

⁷⁷ Vinegar, Aron. *I am a Monument: On Learning From Las Vegas*. Boston. MIT Press, 2008. Print.

⁷⁸ Salomon, Stephanie and Steve Kroeter. "Still Learning From Denise Scott Brown." *Designers and Books*, 7 Jan. 2014. Web. 20 Jan. 2015.

⁷⁹ Vinegar, Aron. *I am a Monument: On Learning From Las Vegas*. Boston. MIT Press, 2008. Print.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ruscha as quoted in Katherine Smith, "Mobilizing Visions: Representing the American Landscape." in Vinegar, Aron and Michael Golec, Eds. *Relearning From Las Vegas*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

⁸⁶ Scott Brown from Levittown studio notes, Ibid.

⁸⁷ Salomon, Stephanie and Steve Kroeter. "Still Learning From Denise Scott Brown." *Designers and Books*, 7 Jan. 2014. Web. 20 Jan. 2015.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Vinegar, Aron and Michael Golec, eds. *Relearning From Las Vegas*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

⁹¹ Ibid.

relationship between form and content rather than a sole emphasis on content...Whether or not Scott Brown's redesign constitutes a significant shift away from the modernist abstraction exemplified in Cooper's 'latter-day Bauhaus design of the book' is open to debate.⁹²

92 Ibid.

So is the book a duck or a decorated shed? What's better: over-design or un-design? Should we prefer Cooper's version over Scott-Brown's? Maybe it's okay to like both. Maybe (and here I may be stretching Vinegar and Golec's words here a little too much), like Wittgenstein's rabbit/duck:

one [can] see the "duck-rabbit" simultaneously: "I may say 'It's a duck-rabbit.'"⁹³

93 Ibid.

****What's a Figure Without a Ground? There is something that has been obliquely referred to here, throughout Carmody's reading revolutions, the uber ubiquitousness of lorem ipsum (in fact you could say that it is perhaps more ubiquitous than lorem ipsum—uber uber ubiquitous as it were), and even in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's over-design and subsequent un-design of *Learning From Las Vegas*. It's been staring (blankly) back at us between the staccato of letters and words you hold in your hand or see on your screen. What's black and white and whatever all over? The page. The platform of platforms.

The page—whether in the form of Sumerian clay tablets, the paginae of papyrus scrolls, parchment papers, pages made of rags or pulped wood, or pages on the screens of our computer, tablets and mobile phones—has become a form so familiar that it "disappears in its very function."⁹⁴ Bonnie Mak in her book, *How The Page Matters*, tells us that we are so accustomed to the form of the page—a vertical rectangle—that we no longer notice how it is "fundamental to the transmission of ideas and that it shapes our interpretation of those ideas."⁹⁵ Mak tells us that the idea of the page remains the same—a vessel for information, an interface between author, designer and reader—but the characteristics of say, a handwritten folio made of animal skin and a leaf of a mass-produced paperback "communicate vastly different messages about their respective manufacture, circulation, and cultural value."⁹⁶

94 Alberto Manguel, as quoted in Stoicheff, Peter and Andrew Taylor, Eds. *The Future of the Page*. Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 2004. Print.

95 Mak, Bonnie. *How the Page Matters*. Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 2011. Print.

96 Ibid.

Case in point: Mak's *How the Page Matters* traces the various manifestations of Buonoccorso's da Montemagno's 15th century treatise *Controversia de nobilitate* as it has been translated and transformed from parchment to digital facsimile. It follows how the material manifestations of *Controversia de nobilitate* have shaped the way that the treatise has been identified as either a work of rhetoric, literature or theology, and in turn changed its audience from humanists and scholars to collectors and connoisseurs.⁹⁷

97 Ibid.

Mak's emphasis on the page—rather than the book—is integral to understanding how the various incarnations of the page have informed and developed the "graphic communication of thought."⁹⁸ The page need not be the page of a book; Mak points us towards the scrolls of antiquity as "challenging the notion that the page is unique to one particular form."⁹⁹ Scrolls are of particular interest here. As we know, classical scrolls were made from papyrus. Scribes would paint text and image columns that were laid out from left to right across the length of the roll:

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

The columns were usually oriented in a series, sometimes running over the joins of the individual sheets, so that the length of the scroll would be held horizontally, and unfurled section by section.¹⁰⁰

100 Ibid.

These columns were called paginae—pages—and were understood by designers as a conceptual and organizational device that divided the long scroll into shorter, more readable sections. The paginae did not rely on a physical distinction to communicate its boundaries to the reader; “instead, the careful arrangement of text and space graphically shows readers where they should read and indicates where they stop.”¹⁰¹

101 Ibid.

Nevertheless, each paginae in the roll possesses its own physicality—one that places it in close proximity to other paginae, requires a slow unfurling of the scroll and encourages a practice of continuous reading.¹⁰²

102 Ibid.

The idea of a page being a bounded, physical structure—as typified by the codex—likely begins with Roman wax tablets. Made from a rectangular wooden frame with a hollow meant for a thin layer of tinted wax, the wax tablet “marks the edges of the cognitive space of the page, providing clear direction about where the information should be written and read.”¹⁰³

103 Ibid.

The slow unfurling of the papyrus scroll and the bounded, one-sided material support of the wax tablet has certain affinities to the ways that we navigate the page on our computer, tablet and mobile phone screens:

Like their analogue counterparts...digital pages are complex interfaces that provide a point of contact between designer and reader...[and are] constructed in a material way that influences how they are read and understood.¹⁰⁴

104 Ibid.

And like their analogue counterparts, Mak continues;

The boundaries of the digital page like those of the paginae in the papyrus roll, need not be coextensive with the boundaries of the material platform; the digital paginae is not always coterminous with a computer monitor or screen of a hand-held device.¹⁰⁵

105 Ibid.

Yet there is a difference. While we could read a scroll

LEFT to RIGHT

And we could flip through a codex

FRONT to BACK

We scroll

D
O
W
N

t
h
r
o
u
g
h

d
i
g
i
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a
l

t
e
x
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s
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I would now like to turn to the PDF as an instantiation of a digital page. PDFs are documents that, as Lisa Gitelman tells us in her book, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, are often disparaged as “clunky and backward looking.”¹⁰⁶ Like Gitelman, I am less interested in the “ontological complexity of digital texts”—just what it is a digital text—than I am in the “look of printedness” that the PDF affords, and how these digital documents “appear as pictures of themselves.”¹⁰⁷

The acronym PDF stands for portable document format because—true to its name—it makes the layout, letterforms and figures or documents portable and accessible across programs and devices.¹⁰⁸ According to webopedia.com, “Essentially, anything that can be done with a sheet of paper can be done with a PDF.”¹⁰⁹ For Gitelman, PDFs represent a “specific ‘remedial’ point of contact between old media and new [media].”¹¹⁰ PDFs “partake of the form and fixity of print that other digital texts formats frequently do not:” “they look like print when they are opened in a PDF reader application. They look as if they work like print.”¹¹¹

“Looking the same” in this context appeals to the fixity of print...the documents rendered by PDFs achieve a measure of fixity because of the ways they simultaneously compare printed documents and contrast with other kinds of digital documents that seem less fixed—less print-like—as they are used.¹¹²

As Gitelman notes, the PDF also seems to have “reimagined the monopoly lost by printers in the 19th century” and has “reinstalled it in miniature within the everyday channels of business communication.”¹¹³

It looks back toward the fixity of analog print artifacts and the division of labour between print publishers and their reading customers at the same time that it participates in the mystification of digital tools for an average user trapped in a “friendly” environment where users are parameterized, constrained to menu-identified tasks, and divided among discrete “tools” and “views.”¹¹⁴

106 Gitelman, Lisa. *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham. Duke University Press, 2014.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 As quoted in Gitelman. Gitelman is quick to point out that there are many things that we can do with a physical page that a PDF cannot. Things like “folding, smelling, tearing, crumpling, shuffling, and wiping.”

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

Because its design was tailored to accommodate corporate authorship, the PDF works “partly by imagining hierarchical labour relations,” between author and reader.¹¹⁵ This notion is enforced the separation of software used to create PDFs and the software used to read them. Whatever the document (published or internal memos), PDFs are “circulated simply for reading, not for more writing.”¹¹⁶

Authoring is cut off. The pages have “congealed” into page images.¹¹⁷

Gitelman’s idea of “page image”—“a document that is experienced as a picture of itself online”—marks the difference between electronic texts and electronic images.¹¹⁸ PDFs are meant to be “user friendly” in that they are searchable documents. “Image only” PDFs, however, cannot be searched until the text has been machine-encoded by optical character recognition (OCR) software. These images are not recognizable by the “algorithmic eye” of the computer.¹¹⁹

Like any word processing file, PDFs conjure up the image of a “page;” one that formally is similar to the medieval page design.¹²⁰ Most importantly (for my interests here) the PDF is a file that will look the same in print as it does on the screen. So Gitelman’s “page image” can be interpreted in another way:

When computer users click to open a PDF they experience a brief, theatrical moment as their PDF reader opens—and then they likely have a keen sense that they are looking at an image and / of a text, a text that is somehow also an image itself.¹²¹

The page of the PDF is an image—a representation (and here think of representation in the canonical Western condition of representation)—of a (printed) page. Gitelman draws a connection to Bamber Gascoigne, who in his book *How to Identify Prints*, tells us not to study the illustrations in a text too closely, as the only thing it would reveal “is the very recognizable characteristic of halftone offset lithography, the process by which the book is printed.”¹²² Although we may recognize a picture of a pipe as a pipe, we also know that “it can’t be picked up and smoked.”¹²³ But, as Gitelman says,

There are some pictures that are self-identical with the subjects they picture: an illustration of redness is red, a picture of a triangle is a triangle, and an image of the letter Q is that letter itself.¹²⁴

And this is what I like so much about PDFs—a picture of a page is a page “because of the distinctive symbolic characteristics of the subject at issue.”¹²⁵ And I like them too, for looking backward to the “fixity of print,” even the hierarchies set into place between author and reader, and most especially for the fact that they look like print and they may be print too.

Marshall McLuhan said that the staccato of a typewriter is the closest thing to speech.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 Stoicheff, Peter and Andrew Taylor, Eds. *The Future of the Page*. Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 2004. Print.

120 Gitelman, Lisa. *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham. Duke University Press, 2014.

122 As quoted by Gitelman. Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

Perhaps, too is the clicking of fingertips on the keyboard of a laptop. The move from this outering on a "page image" to page, to the uttering at G Gallery on February 14th 2015 is the result of this thought process:

David's platform is a platform for a PDF that is a platform for a talk given at G.126

Michelle McGeean
February 2015

126 This PDF was reformatted into a staple-bound publication to accomodate the flipping through of a tangible page in an edition of 25. The publication was read aloud on February 14th as part of Alexandre David's exhibition, "My work has no meaning unless it is used," organized by Yam Lau at G Gallery, January 23 - February 21 2015.