extended essay in the visual arts

the continuities of the International Typographic Style in modern advertising

How is the advertising design of Adobe and Spotify post-2012 derived from the International Typographic Style?

3723 words

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This essay will be focused on the connections between the International Typographic Style (often referred to as the Swiss Style to avoid redundancy) and the modern advertising design strategies of two companies, specifically Adobe Systems and Spotify Technology. Primary sources used will include works of design by pioneers of the International Typographic Style alongside advertisements from Adobe and Spotify. Other sources used will include secondary analyses of the International Typographic Style as well as the statements of intentions from designers of Spotify and Adobe themselves that will outline the purposes of the developments of new advertising styles.

This essay will thus allow for the two overarching styles of old and new design to be directly compared on specific grounds. This comparative analysis will expose the reasons why certain elements of the International Typographic Style have remained in fashion, and perhaps more significantly, will describe the shifts in advertising methodology and perspective that have resulted in differences between the old and new styles of design.

By synthesizing the changes found in design techniques with the analysis of the intentions behind these techniques, I have drawn a conclusion that the intentions behind and constraints of advertising have changed over the years, resulting in significant modifications to the approach of communication heralded by the International Typographic Style, though many fundamental ideas of the style have remained intact for the reason of still being applicable to modern contexts.

BODY

§ a. **comparisons**

In this section, I will alternate between analyzing the International Typographic Style and the advertisements of Adobe and Spotify, making comparisons and distinctions regarding their history and context of their design, their use of language and type, their various implementations of artistic formal qualities, the balance between abstraction and complexity, and the mediums, technology, and advertising intentions of each movement's time.

history and context

"Swiss Style" emerged as a consolidation of various design efforts around the 1950s, especially marked by the founding of the periodical *Neue Grafik* by Josef Müller-Brockmann and various other designers seeking to promote their work to an international audience.[1] The "overriding" aim of the *Neue Grafik* magazine was to establish that New Graphic Design was naturally Swiss, inherently constructive, and a "logical development from

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1   Laurence Mauderli, "The Graphic Collection of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (Zurich Museum of Design), Switzerland," *Journal of Design History* 15, no. 1 (2002): 51.

Modernism."[2] European constructivists were known for rejecting the old traditions of text and using the form of type to suggest meaning on its own, apart from the linguistic meaning of the text, causing typography to be understood as not only a verbal language but a visual one as well.[3]

The International Typographic Style was communicated through considerably consistent mediums. When the Swiss government moved to a practice of proportional representation in 1919, posters played a "propagandistic" role in the increasingly important relations between citizens and politicians.[4] In the 1930s, the Concrete movement evolved these posters from hand-painted posters with little to no use of typography into works of concentrated form for the effect of creating "an immediate understanding of the advertising message"; a more liberal approach to design—embracing cleaner, more modern uses of typography and graphics—was taken in order to herald the "progressive, open-minded country" that Switzerland was portrayed to be.[5]

2   Richard Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style 1920–1965* (London: Laurence King, 2006), 207.
3   Katherine McCoy, "American Graphic Design Expression," *Design Quarterly*, no. 148 (1990): 6.
4   Bettuna Richter, "Catching the Eye in Public Space: Snapshots from the History of the Swiss Poster," in *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design*, ed. Christian Brändle et al. (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2014), 36.
5   Richter, "Catching the Eye," 38.

typefaces and linguistics

The International Typographic Style was notoriously strict about the use of typefaces. Even in the early stages of the style, some trainings in Zurich allowed only the use of Akzidenz Grotesk—though practices differed in Basel.[6]

Jan Tschichold, an influential modernist and contributor to the Swiss Style, laid out his own rules for the selection of type as following:

> "Fewest possible typefaces, fewest possible type sizes, no letterspacing of lowercase, emphasis by using italic or bold of the same face, use of capitals only as an exception, then carefully letterspaced, [and] forming text lines into not more than three groups."[7]

While Tschichold was one of the few designers known to use serifs on occasion—he welcomed the revival of tradition,[8] as he put it—his design principles are characteristic of the concept of "functional typography" heralded by the International Typographic Style, in the sense that it put the reader first.[9]

Liberal use of lowercase, as well as very short and to-the-point phrases to substitute for elaborate language were both

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6   Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 215.
7   Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 147.
8   Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 146.
9   Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 147.

techniques with a similar goal. The sans-serif typefaces used, most notably Helvetica and Akzidenz-Grotesk (both very similar), not only allowed for a high degree of readability but also suggested meaning of their own in expressing stability and rigid confidence through their consistency of line. The font on the left is a good example; the thickness of line hardly varies from section to section of a letter, unlike the tapered ends of elegant serif typefaces. Rather than expressing elegancy, the type is rigid and clear. Thus, the typography of the International Typographic Style achieves its goal of using type primarily as a form of communication. I have found that clarity is often further enhanced by directness of communication. In Figure 1, Müller-Brockmann employs only two words in his powerful piece, *Weniger Lärm* —"less noise."

Müller-Brockmann does just that in his principles of design—by reducing the use of overall variety in the work, instead focusing on the simplicity of negative space and geometrical contrasts, he decreases what is figuratively described as "noise" in the image. The bright red of the text represents an extremely economical use of color, and the medium-gray background framing the photograph carries little to no texture, and frames the text in the diagonal grid by providing negative space symmetrically across the baseline of the type. All of this leads to a
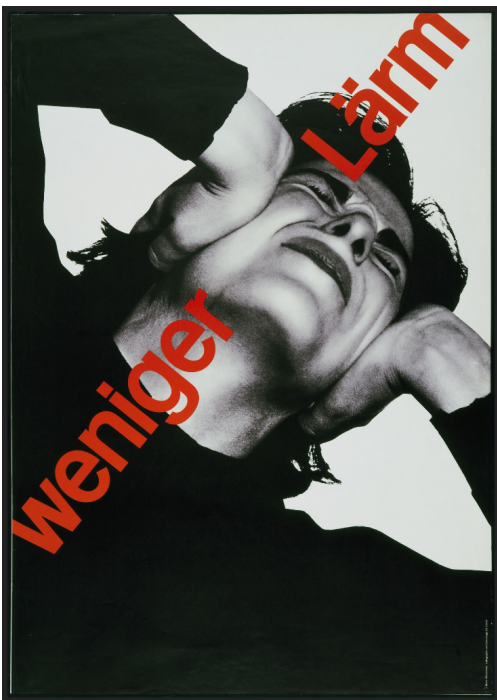

Figure 1: Josef Müller-Brockmann, *Weniger Lärm*, 1960, Museum of Modern Art, moma.org/collection/works/7339.

simplicity of structure that frames and highlights the text well without cluttering the overall image. What's more, kerning is again cut to a minimum, which allows for a compact display of text and decreasing the distance the viewer's eyes have to move from letter to letter. *Weniger Lärm* is thus not only an artistic exploration of simple clarity but also an ideological statement of its own right, an expression of frustration at the "noise" created by poor design. By way of limiting the visual noise on the paper, the artists of the International Typographic Style left their work completely unobstructed and the clarity of information presented to the reader was maximized.

Spotify and Adobe follow this to a moderate extent. While the images covering Spotify's in-app categories are necessarily short—to reflect the title of said category—their larger advertisements, such as those that take up most of the app's screen, or are displayed on a billboard such as the one on the left, are often of considerable complexity. This specific excerpt from one of Spotify's more successful campaigns exemplifies their more intricate, detailed approach to art; complementary colors of red and cyan are used right up against each other in the design (and even between the text and its background), providing intense visual contrast and a whole lot less of the sim-
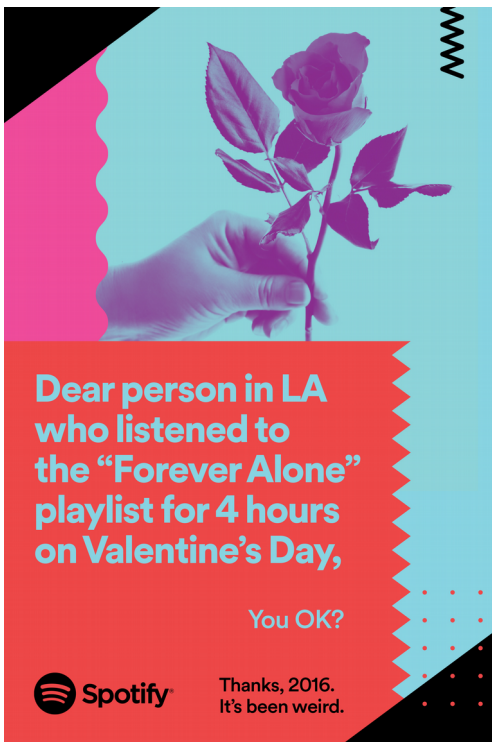

Figure 2: Amy Wang, "Spotify is mocking your sad, lonely life on massive billboards around the world," Quartz, last modified November 30, 2016, qz.com/848463/spotify-launches-a-set-of-billboard-ads-that-mock-the-musical-tastes-of-its-users/.

plicity and comfort of reading that the International Typo-graphic Style had advocated for.

Furthermore, modern advertisers such as Spotify tend to deviate from the International Typographic Style in terms of line grouping and leading—while designers of the Swiss style had usually kept to using little more than one line for headings and large text, modern advertisements often group clusters of lines that change the overall color—as graphic designers use to reference the weight or density of a body of text—to be rather strong. The previous billboard is an example of this, as five lines of bold text with minimal leading create an almost overall geo-metric form for the paragraph, and it would look like a square or rectangular prism if it weren't for the small intricacies and gaps within the letterforms that create meaning. As such, blocks of text are often used within more detailed works of design in the same way that large print was used in the International Ty-pographic Style; it often creates a form of its own with heavy visual weighting that becomes a major element in the spatial composition of the piece.

As seen in the above image, and also throughout other advertisements such as the one on the left, Spotify has charac-teristically developed an advertising language that consistently targets and speaks to the viewer. Rather than passively display-
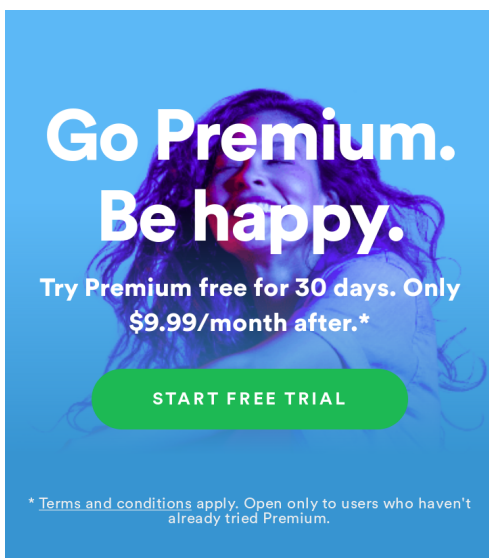
Figure 3: "Go Premium. Be happy."
Spotify, accessed September 6, 2018,
spotify.com/us/premium/.

ing a short concept or phrase—e.g. "premium," as Müller-Brock-mann might have done, their ads speak in a more natural fash-ion in order to isolate the viewer and designate them as of importance, creating a connection between the brand and the user. Furthermore, the text itself takes an imperative grammati-cal mood that emphasizes this directness of communication. For the same reason, photographs in Spotify's premium ads most al-ways include a young person of their target demographic, pre-sumably a user.

the role of the photograph

Photography especially remains a significant form of art used in both the pieces of Swiss design and the modern advertisements of Adobe and Spotify. In Josef Müller-Brockmann's book *The Graphic Artist and his Design Problems*, he outlined the use of photography to replace illustration as a core principle in his the-ory of Swiss graphic design, along with the use of a grid to serve as a tool for order.[10]

In Figure 4, a poster for the 1958 Swiss Women's Exhibi-tion, for instance, two photos are placed in the center left and bottom right of the image, with an arrangement of filled-in grid squares leading the viewer from the leftmost to rightmost photo, suggesting an evolution from the sexualized and traditional de-

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10 Hilary Kenna, "Emil Ruder: A Future for Design Principles in Screen Typography," *Design Issues* 27, No. 1 (2011): 39.

piction of a woman's body on the center left to the determined, modern headshot shown on the right. The green block of color is also symbolically reminiscent of a flexed arm, with forearm curled inwards, representing the ideal of a woman's strength and power.

The poster does make heavy use of a grid system, but it primarily serves to convey the suggestion that the two photographs alone tell a story. As Müller-Brockmann had taught, the photograph is the illustration; the path of squares is merely an enhancement.

A somewhat similar approach is seen with the modern works of Adobe and Spotify's designers. Many of their advertisements start, from the ground up, with one or more photographs, and then computer graphics overlie the image to create their own meaning. Newer advertisements particularly tend to make use of blending the two components with illusions of depth and interlocking that is seen sometimes—though to a lesser extent—on works of Swiss Style.

the decline of abstraction

Overall, the photography taught by the Swiss schools of the International Typographic Style was reliably more abstract and bold than that in the advertisements featured here from Adobe and Spotify in general. I also find the art of the International Ty-
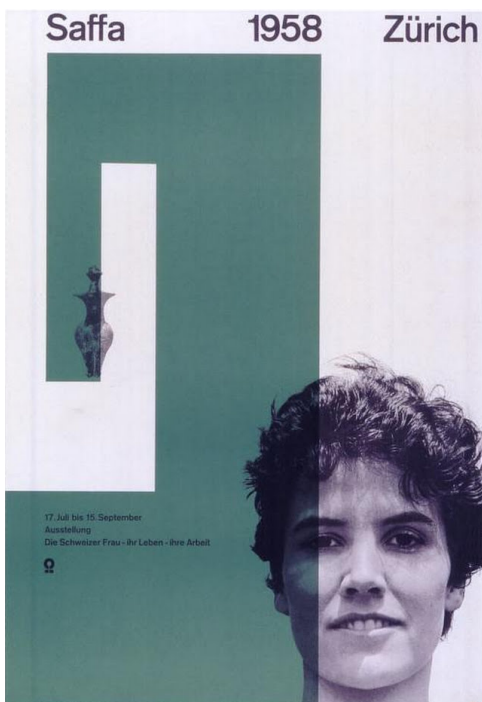

Figure 4: Nelly Rudin, 1958, in Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 220.

pographic Style to be far more cryptic than the straightforward advertisements of today. While both approaches often put forth a message in the form of shorter, isolated phrases, the adaption of Swiss concepts in modern applications of advertising removes much of the subtlety of the style. For an example, consider Figure 5 to the left, which I have extracted from Spotify's website.

We can most certainly observe many classic techniques reminiscent of the International Typographic Style, such as nearly monochromatic (though not grayscale) photography as the basis of form, the addition of analogous colored shapes, and so on. A strikingly Swiss font is used: a sans-serif typeface in bold, with tight kerning, though it is placed more simply, directly in the center of the composition. Overall, it largely misses out on the abstruse qualities of classic advertisements like the one from Armin Hoffman here (Figure 6).
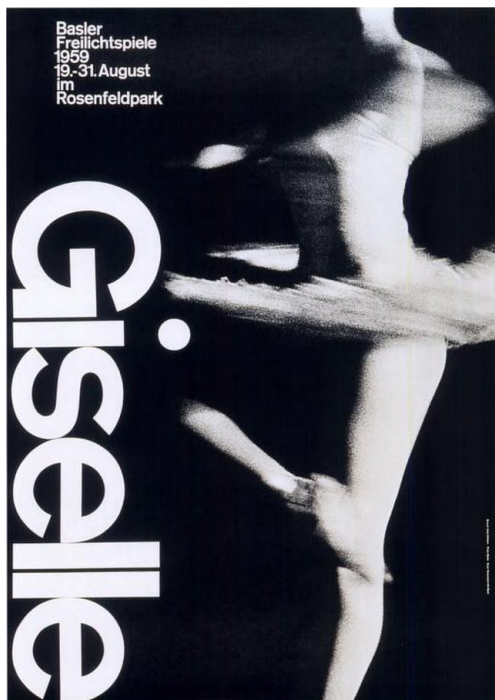
In both advertisements, the photo is used as the foundation of the image, as it takes up the entire pane. But in the former, the forms of the photograph expand throughout the image in an invasive manner as the dominant element, but in the latter the only visible form in the photograph—the illuminated right half of the dancer—has a clear (though blurred) silhouette of figure and does not intrude into the text. Thus, the text at lower left is visually weighted almost equally to the photograph

Figure 5: "Rain Sounds," Spotify, accessed September 6, 2018, open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX8ymr6UES7vc

Figure 6: Armin Hoffman, 1959, in Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design*, 216.

whereas in the Spotify advertisement it acts only as an annotation, merely restating what has already been conveyed in the photo. Ultimately, all of the square images that advertise Spotify's categories do not include the text of their label as a very significant visual form in the artwork but instead position them conveniently for the viewer to read at a glance. With possibly a dozen or so of such categories being displayed on a single screen, Spotify's designers no doubt thought it too risky to display text as aggressively as in the International Typographic Style demonstrated by Hoffman above, as rotated text would take slightly longer for the user to read and would look disorganized among arrays of such artworks.

However, I have also neglected what is potentially the most obvious difference between these advertisements—the use (or lack of use) of color.

color's re-emergence

Virtually all of the advertisements of Spotify and Adobe are in some way colorful, though they range from the loud combinations of or gradients between distinctly complementary colors to the reserved use of analogous schemes. With regard for Adobe, consider the following composition, taken from a page in one of their digital marketing reports.
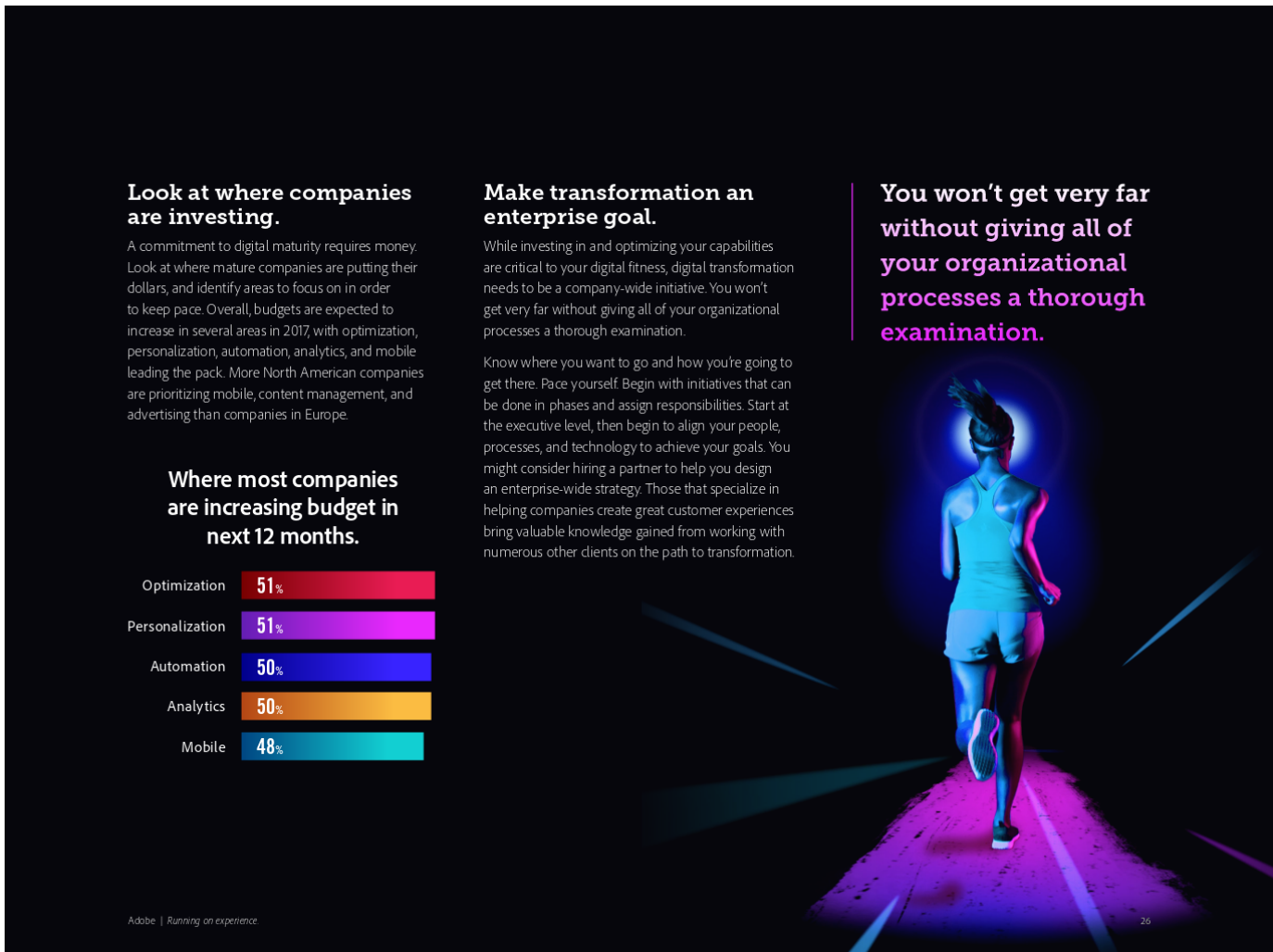
Figure 7: Adobe Systems, *Running on Experience: 2017 Digital Marketing Study* (2017), wwwimages2.adobe.com/content/dam/acom/en/modal-offers/digital-marketing-report-2017/pdfs/171101388.en.exp-cloud.whitepaper.2017-digital-marketing-report.pdf.

The nearly complementary combination of magenta and turquoise presents a harsh contrast, and the bar graphs to the lower left represent colors from a wide range of hues—only green is largely unrepresented—and account for a lot of visual noise. Adobe's aesthetic decisions here are to differentiate the different bars from each other, to break free of what could be considered redundancy in today's world, but would have been an example of consistency and simplicity in the International

Typographic Style. Armin Hoffman, the Swiss designer of *Gazelle*, above, once stated the following in a passage about his poster work—translated to English, of course:

> "I have endeavored to do something to counteract the increasing trivialization of color evident since the Second World War on billboards, in modern utensils and in the entertainment industry. [. . .] It seemed to me that finely graded gray values and the subtle disposition of light-and-dark figures evoke and leave more colorful and lasting impressions [. . . .] I have tried to give the symbolic character of the picture more attention."[11]

Although this rejection of the "trivialization" of color grew to be extremely popular among designers of the International Typographic Style, it seems to be largely forgotten in the new advertisements studied here. Advertisements no longer use a motif of a single color here or there, but use bold gradients and harsh, saturated, complementary colors to make a ruckus and draw attention. Contrasts in chromaticity are leveraged as a method of drawing the eye of the viewer even more aggressively than the employment of leading lines of the blurred streaks surrounding the runner's body. In the prime of the International Typographic Style, such attention was drawn not with

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11 Armin Hoffmann, *His Work, Quest, and Philosophy = Werk, Erkundung, Lehre,* trans. D. Q. Stephenson (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1989), 11.

the liberal use of a plethora of colors but rather with blatant contrast in type sizes and values such as is seen in the *Giselle* poster.

Another deviation from the abstract consistencies of the International Typographic Style would be the variety in type justification shown above. While flush left, ragged right alignment prevails, which is consistent with traditional typesetting, centered justification is also used (see center left), as is right-alignment for the graphic on the lower left. These are employed to create horizontal symmetry, representing a departure from the Swiss ideals of abstraction and a transition into order.

As the design was found in a marketing report, the reason behind this shift seems to be straightforward. Many designers of the International Typographic Style, such as Max Bill, had liked to strip away "purely aesthetic considerations" to instead put "the requirements of language and legibility" at the helm.[12] Adobe, however, sees no such goal in their advertising. In 2014, Adobe released a "New Creatives Report" through their company blog, declaring that creators of their day were under "pressure to deliver creative ideas and content faster than ever."[13] This indicates an ideal of the "new creative" that Adobe has been

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12 Patrick Cramsie, *The Story of Graphic Design* (New York: Abrams, 2010), 245.
13 "'The New Creatives Report' Is Here, and It's Good News," Adobe Systems, June 15, 2014, theblog.adobe.com/new-creatives-report/.

pushing towards their audience. Adobe does not treat their audience in a humanist, utilitarian fashion like was emphasized in the Swiss style, but rather pushes its audience towards the idealized state of a frenzied, even belligerent artist. Much like Spotify has done with their direct, imperative communications with their target audience, Adobe says, in essence: *you* are new, and *you* are creative—and thus, *you* should buy our products. Complexity in design is thus no longer an obstruction of communication but rather a *demonstration* of complex artistic capabilities.

On a more concrete note, with modern technology we have lost much of the inconvenience of color printing, and it is much easier to represent a range of colors across many modern mediums. The altering of justification is similarly done with only a single keystroke. So lastly, we must consider the different mediums between the modern advertisements and the magazines, books, and posters used by the Swiss artists of the past.

a new technology

When smartphones hit the markets, most notably the iPhone with its closed ecosystem of apps, mobile application design was introduced as an incredibly competitive field with new innovations and concerns.[14] Since then, application and advertisement

14 Philip Meggs and Alston Purvis, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 595–596.

designers faced different complications and used some different

techniques than the designers that worked in the era of posters;

this gave rise to the field of user experience design, often abbre-

viated as UX or XD.

Adobe's experience design team, for example, had kept a

blog of their design process and the intentions behind large

changes. As will be explored farther later on, their design

evolves with the development of the technological screen and

the changing expectations of users in the digital era.

Leland Maschmeyer, executive creative director of Spo-

tify, stated that Spotify's redesign was made with flexibility in

mind, even testing their design concepts for "tiny mobile ads on

tiny mobile screens."[15] Given that the designers of the Interna-

tional Typographic Style almost exclusively worked in large

print, the diversity of Spotify's advertising actually represented

a significant constraint as they were pressured for clarity and

versatility at many resolutions and devices.

shifts in advertising paradigm

Perhaps the most primary and concrete cause of the shift away

from International Typographic Style is simply that the advertis-

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15 Linda Tischler, "Spotify Unveils A Bold New Brand Identity," *Fast Company*, March 12, 2015,
     fastcompany.com/3043547/spotifys-new-look-signals-its-identity-shift.

ing intentions and strategies of Adobe and Spotify each uniquely differ from the motives of the Swiss Style.

Adobe, on one hand, has turned their focus towards emphasizing the individuality of its users in order to suggest that their software offers no constraints to the artist, and is what they make it. Adobe's brand experience blog stated that the advertisements of years past "taunted you, suggesting that if only you were skilled enough […] then you, too, could create something like this."[16] As a caveat, such an evaluation of Adobe's original intent in designing those older advertisements is somewhat dubious; the blog is written as a validation of newer design trends and has little authority in analyzing the works of designers past. Nonetheless, the blog stands as a significant source to represent Adobe's current design methodology as it explains what they stand for in the present—as their mentality has changed and their focus has shifted to a wider range of skill levels and techniques, their ads have increasingly incorporated artist-submitted work of a variety of styles, and now usually put their own text to the side, so as to not obstruct the image. This can be seen clearly in the following advertisement from Adobe's

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16 "The CS6 Desktop Brand System," Adobe Brand Experience, last modified May 16, 2012, archived January 13, 2017, web.archive.org/web/20170103060818/http://blogs.adobe.com/brandexperience/2012/05/16/the-cs6-desktop-brand-system/.

website for Illustrator CC, one of their primary graphic design

products.

Gorgeous typography that says it all.

Incorporate a company name into a logo, create a flyer, or mock up a
website design with the best type tools out there. Add effects, manage
styles, and edit individual characters to create typographic designs that
perfectly express your messages.

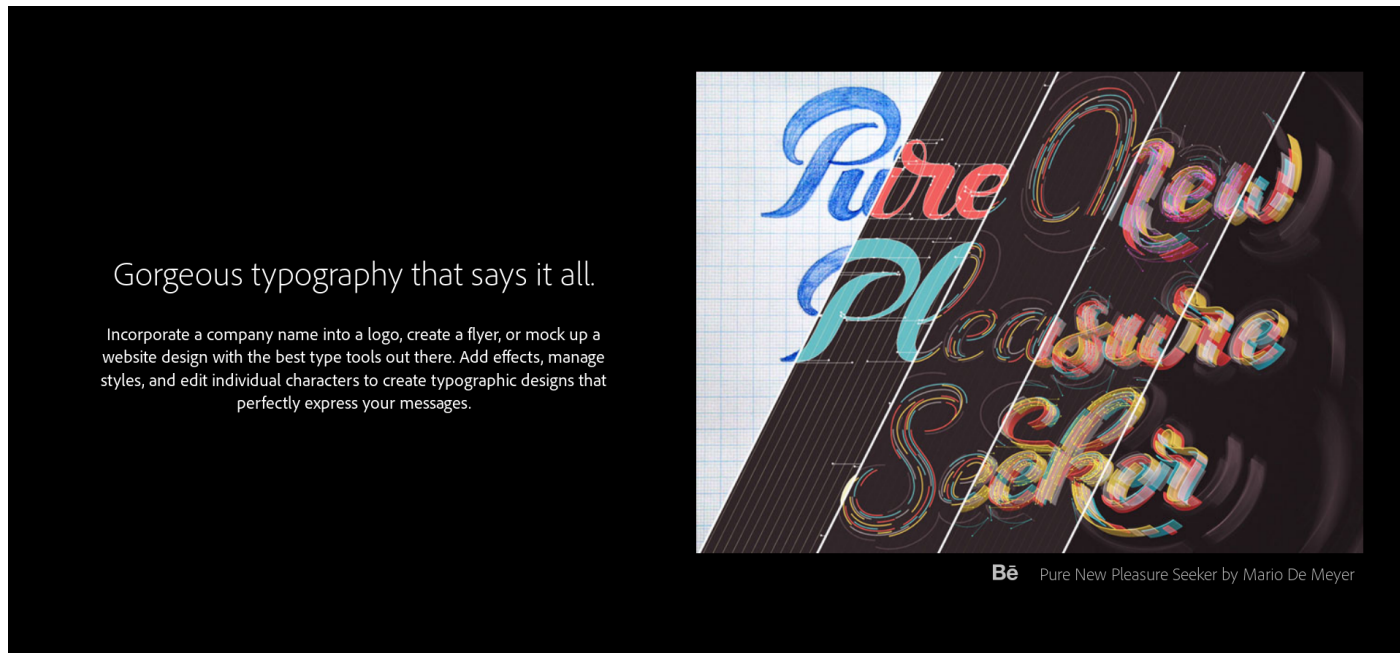Bē   Pure New Pleasure Seeker by Mario De Meyer

Figure 8: "Buy Adobe Illustrator CC,"
Adobe, accessed September 9, 2018,
adobe.com/products/illustrator.html

Here, while they still embrace some of the advice from

the International Typographic Style, such as the consistent use

of minimal, sans-serif typefaces and the embracing of symmetry,

their work in this particular ad is now necessarily derived from

the International Typographic Style to a somewhat low extent

as the image is presented separate from the typography, and

there is no harmony between the illustration and text. Instead,

the illustration is simply presented on its own as proof of the ca-

pability of their design suite, and does not easily communicate

Adobe's message on its own but is rather used as a reference in

the main text. The design itself is intentionally split into five

styles to represent potential steps in the artistic process that the

hypothetical user might take or alternatively several different techniques that the user could take advantage of. By focusing on a variety of user content instead of applying their own visual identity to the images made by their applications, they have stopped targeting a professional niche of designers enthusiastic with a particular style and instead broadened their audience to embrace new attitudes towards the individualism of creativity.

§ b. conclusion

Ultimately, the advertising design of Adobe and Spotify is thus derived from the International Typographic Style to a low extent in terms of language syntax as well as the use of color and to a moderate extent in terms of the role of photography. However, the more specific and technical methods in which type is used—such as the choice of typeface and size of kerning and leading—have largely remained consistent with the International Typographic Style.

Furthermore, the modern companies are pressured by a completely different set of constraints as opposed to those that applied to the designers of the International Typographic Style. The rise of the mobile market and electronic mediums like webpages have created a need for flexibility in the dimensions of advertisements, so the scalable and versatile grid system has

remained critical though text is often placed in a less bold manner to ensure readability across devices. Color, as a result, is used in with variety to provide emphasis and complexity without the finer controls of placement and space.

Finally, much of the shift away from an International Typographic Style in the advertising design we see today can be explained by changing motives and techniques of advertising, by a new, personal message that advertisers are trying to express. While the designs of the International Typographic Style treated the audience in a utilitarian manner, delivering information clearly across as broad of a global audience as possible, Adobe and Spotify have instead chosen to establish and market towards cliques of vibrantly individual users.

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