

Typography in a Brave New World: Theo van Doesburg's and Kurt Schwitters' *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*

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In 1925 Dutch graphic designer Theo van Doesburg and German graphic designer Kurt Schwitters collaborated on the revolutionary typographic children's book, *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale* (*Die Scheuche Märchen*). *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale* had a radical, but practical, purpose: exposing children to a piece of collaborative design intended to advance the designers' larger program of creation born out of destruction. Doesburg and Schwitters were proponents of the post-World War I design movements Dada and De Stijl. Although Dada and De Stijl had largely discrepant goals, Doesburg and Schwitters found common ground in *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale*—bringing young people to the vanguard of the universal world culture they believed would be realized through total abstraction in design. Employing typographic elements, with their purely abstract visual qualities, suited their cause.

Dada artists and designers challenged the status quo through the individualistic “gratuitous act,” committed unexpectedly and spontaneously and intended to shock. Schwitters—who initiated his own form of Dada which he called Merz—utilized modes of expression not previously considered viable in art. His work (Figure 1, Schwitters' Dada type) was based on the principles of flux, chance and nonsense, which were expressed through “paradoxical, spontaneous gestures aimed at revealing the inconsistency and inanity of conventional beliefs.”¹ Schwitters was an accomplished Dadaist when he met van Doesburg in 1921. According to art historian John Elderfield, Schwitters believed that Dada

reveals “the vast stylelessness of our culture” and therefore “will awaken a great longing, a strong desire for Style (Stijl)...” Dada was important to the creation of a new style because in its confusion, it destroyed earlier static and materialistic concepts of reality and proclaimed a vision of the world in flux.²

Dada and de Stijl together would bring about a world that elevated absolute abstraction in art.

Absolute abstraction (Elementarism) was the intent of de Stijl art and design.

During this period, De Stijl artists and designers produced abstract work that utilized pure geometric elements, typically rectangles (Figure 2, van Doesburg painting). Van Doesburg, who was one of the founders of the De Stijl movement along with Mondrian, believed this work revealed universal harmony and essential truth by ridding itself of the chance nature of variations. He proposed that individualism and subjectivity obscured the clarity of life, giving rise to tragedy, and leading humanity astray from its one essential path. Art must teach humankind, van Doesburg insisted, how to realize universal harmony.

Van Doesburg and Schwitters were aware that Dada and De Stijl philosophies were opposites, the former extremely individualistic trying to destroy the self absorption of the past, and the latter attempting to achieve the universal. To van Doesburg and Schwitters Dada plus De Stijl were “destruction and construction together — in an active polarity—essential to the internal logic of their work.”² Dada would be the force that would sweep away the stale remnants of the past so that De Stijl could create world harmony through complete abstraction.

When van Doesburg and Schwitters met in 1921, each had produced radical typographic work consistent with the goals of their respective movements. Notable in van Doesburg’s typographic work was his 1922 Dutch version of the book *Of Two Squares* (Figures 3 and 4, *Of Two Squares*), a children’s book by Russian Constructivist El Lissitsky. Schwitters had been working on *The Paradise Fairy Tales*, a children’s book that included his story *Der Hahnepeter* (*Peter the Rooster*) (Figures 3 and 5, *Of Two Squares* and *Hahnepeter*). Kate Steinitz, a friend of van Doesburg and Schwitters, who did the “expressionistic and awkward”³ drawings for the book, described *Der Hahnepeter* as “...new fairy tales for our times...only timeless.”⁴

Radical as they were, *Of Two Squares* and *Der Hahnepeter* separated out the traditional art of illustration from the medium of typography. Their radicalism did not extend to the use of typography as image. *Of Two Squares* depended on geometric visual elements and *Der Hahnepeter* turned to expressive drawings to augment the textual and visual narrative. Van

Doesburg and Schwitters agreed to collaborate on an even more radical children's book that built both image and text from typecase elements. They questioned why there ought to be a separate domain of so-called art that functioned on a different plane than the text. In *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, van Doesburg and Schwitters used the utilitarian medium of typography to do the work that illustration typically did. Eschewing the traditional pictorial illustration found in children's books, Doesburg and Schwitters spotlighted the imagistic qualities of typographic elements. They understood that—for children in particular—the anthropomorphic visual character of letters makes them ideal candidates to express symbolic meaning far beyond human verbal language. Each page design innovatively intertwines expressive typography and plot, which together tell the story.

The Scarecrow Fairy Tale—which is only twelve pages long—was intended to expose children to a collaborative Dada plus De Stijl piece that helped promote the ultimate goal of bringing about a brave new world. Here is the story translated into English:

Figure 6

The cover. *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale*.

Figure 7

Once upon a time there was a scarecrow. He had a hat and a tuxedo and a cane and an oh so be-yoo-tif-ul lace shawl.

Figure 8

Then came Monsieur le coq the rooster and he walked with a cane and he went hic and hac and hic haec hoc (This is the sound of hitting in German and also the declension of the Latin word for “this.” The choice of words pokes fun at one of the most basic Latin lessons). He walked on the cane.

Figure 9

...And he had no cane and no oh so beautiful lace shawl.

Figure 10

The chicken came in and the rooster said to the hat and coat and cane and the oh so beautiful lace shawl, “Phooey, old man. You are a scarecrow. Hick, hac and hic hac hoc.”

Figure 11

Then all the little chicks came and fought the cane and hacked. Hic and hac, hoc.

Figure 12

That angered the hat, tuxedo, cane and oh so beautiful lace shawl.

Figure 13

A farmer came and saw the rooster and his little chicks and they went hic and hac and picked up all the little seeds, and the cane didn't fight.

Figure 14

Then the farmer said “Phooey, you scarecrow. You are not a scarecrow. Soon I will make you a corpse.”

Figure 15

Then the hat, tuxedo, and oh so beautiful lace shawl fought back.

Figure 16

But Mr. Rooster continued on with hic and hac. Then the farmer took the scarecrow's cane.

Figure 17

Suddenly night fell and no one saw and no one did hic and hac. The hat and tuxedo and oh so beautiful lace shawl were happy.

Figure 18

The ghosts of the former owners came and retrieved their hat and lace shawl.

Then a bad boy came and stole the cane out of the farmer's hand, and then there was light.

The book is visually and conceptually consistent with both Dada and De Stijl ideals. It's printed

in only red and blue (Figures 7 and 9), with sans serif text. Schwitters and van Doesburg took decorative printers' elements and treated them in De Stijl fashion by rotating them 45° (Figures 7 and 18). Only elements that were horizontal, vertical or placed at a 45° angle were considered "objective" enough for the proponents of De Stijl philosophy. The type blocks in the book are mostly rectangular. The type treatment is also very Dadaistic (Figures 10 and 1). On page four (Figure 10), the expressive typography under the rooster's feet struts like a chicken, the word *ach* or *oh* is exaggerated for effect before the words meaning "so beautiful lace scarf," and the word *alter*, which means old, is set in decreasing size type characters. The plot, in which a rooster, chicks and farmer fearlessly and incessantly attack the scarecrow, parallels the Dada/De Stijl notion of making way for the future by destroying or hacking up the past. On page one (Figure 7), they ridicule the scarecrow's tuxedo, cane and lace shawl, all symbols of the high culture Dada sought to reveal as empty. The scarecrow, who is ironically represented by an uppercase X (as if he is crossed out), has all the accouterments of civilized society, but no substance. The courageous rooster (Figure 10), who has no "...cane and....be-yoo-ti-ful lace shawl" taunts the scarecrow and pecks at him.

Fooley, old man!

You are a scarecrow

Hick hack and hick hack hock

When the rooster spits on the scarecrow, "pfui," the letters f, u, and i stream out of the imaginary mouth of the letter P that is the rooster's head. The scarecrow is simultaneously an old man and literally a straw man. He represents the flimsy convictions of previous ideologies, personified.

Unlike the scarecrow, the rooster's feet are firmly planted on the solid ground of a rectangular De Stijl type block.

Van Doesburg and Schwitters encourage their readers not to fear the spectacle of historical precedent—even though scarecrows are obviously intended to instill empty fear. On page 5 (Figure 11), chicks—reminiscent of a group of school children in a circle—peck at the

scarecrow's cane. The scarecrow doesn't fight back. Not only could young readers delight in chicks fearlessly hacking at the scarecrow, but they could also relish gleefully the scarecrow's terror when the farmer threatens to kill him (Figure 14). Reminiscent of children's alphabet books (such as A is for apple) the farmer is made up of a large uppercase B for bauer with lowercase b feet. He raises his arm to strike the scarecrow and says, "You are not a scarecrow. Soon I will make you a corpse."

At this point, the scarecrow fights back and the rooster and chicks join forces with the farmer. Just as the farmer is about to strike a deadly blow, night suddenly falls (Figure 17) represented by a large blue rectangle—the ultimate De Stijl abstraction. This sudden change is also evocative of the unpredictability of Dada poetry.

On the last page (Figure 18), the plot, body type and image type are so integrated that it becomes difficult to differentiate among them. The ghosts of former owners come and retrieve the hat, stick and shawl. Not only is the scarecrow himself not formidable, but his fancy outfit really belongs to the spirit world. Reminiscent of typographic treatment in Dada poetry (Figure 1), the ghost of the hat's former owner is made up of the word "*hut*" (hat) repeated in hat-like tiers to make up his body. At the bottom of the page, a "bad boy," like the farmer, is created from an upper case B, but his body is provocatively oriented in the opposite direction of the body of the adult farmer. Fusing image, text and plot, this boy doesn't only steal the stick from the farmer's hand, but also appears to carry away some of the text. The boy literally "has the last word" just before the new beginning suggested in the next, and final, line of the book. In his essay "Painting and Plastic Art: Elementarism" van Doesburg explains that the De Stijl distillation of expression to its most basic elements is

directed not only at Art, Architecture, and Design, but [is] also concerned with man and his joy in life and the community. It seeks to provoke and strengthen the revolutionary spirit of the coming generations and counts on a larger group of younger people for the collective realization of a truly inner renovation of human attitude.

The fresh boy is, after all, the most important character in the plot because he, and others like him, will realize the De Stijl vision of a brave new world.

The last line in the story, “Then there was light” (Figure 18) is reminiscent of the line, “Let there be light” when God first creates the earth in Genesis. It is the only typography in the story oriented vertically. The fairy tale is suggestive of the Genesis story in the creation of a brand new world. This is an association that would not be lost on children trained in the western religious tradition. The Scarecrow Fairy Tale—a visual and ideological Dada and De Stijl collaboration—presented children an alternate creation story that offered them power to build the future. The end of the scarecrow (and the book) is also a new beginning rendered by the interaction of type elements.

Visual analysis of textual material is often given short shrift by scholars outside of design history because it is considered, at best, incidental and, more commonly, inconsequential. Typographic design is frequently taken for granted; it is “invisible” to those who encounter it and use it. When the user is aware of typography, its design is often misconstrued as surface decoration—simply an attractive veneer. In reality, typographic design takes into account the underlying structure and function of visual narrative. Doesburg and Schwitters assumed that typographic design embodied intricate symbolic visual narrative equal to the verbal narrative in *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale*.

Typography is also mistakenly thought of as merely the conveyor of words to be read, even in children’s literature. In fact, typographic design entails consideration of the underlying structure and function of a printed piece. Design analysis—exploring such motivations in the design process—reveals rich anthropomorphic meaning and propagandistic functions in *The Scarecrow Fairy Tale* that aren’t readily apparent to most people. These insights require the process of design analysis to manifest them.

¹ John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 12.

² Elderfield, 129.

³ Kate Steinitz, *Kurt Schwitters: A Portrait from Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 32.

⁴ Steinitz, 40.

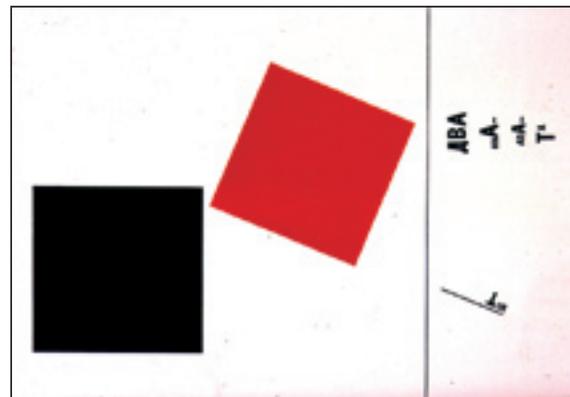
Figures



Figure 1, Schwitters' Dada type



Figure 2, van Doesburg painting



Figures 3 and 4, *Of Two Squares*, Dutch and Russian versions

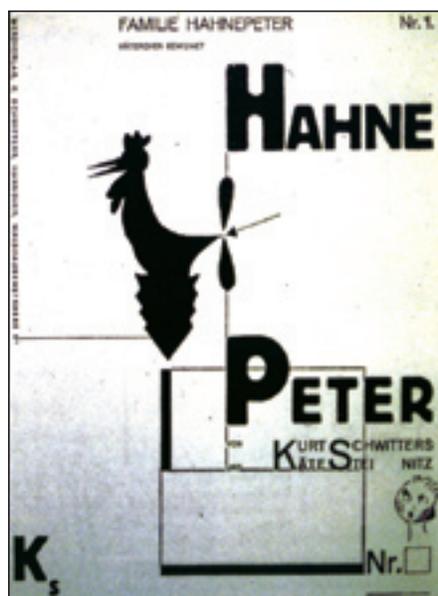


Figure 5, *Der Hahnepeter*



Figure 6, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale* cover



Figure 7, Scarecrow Fairy Tale, Page 1

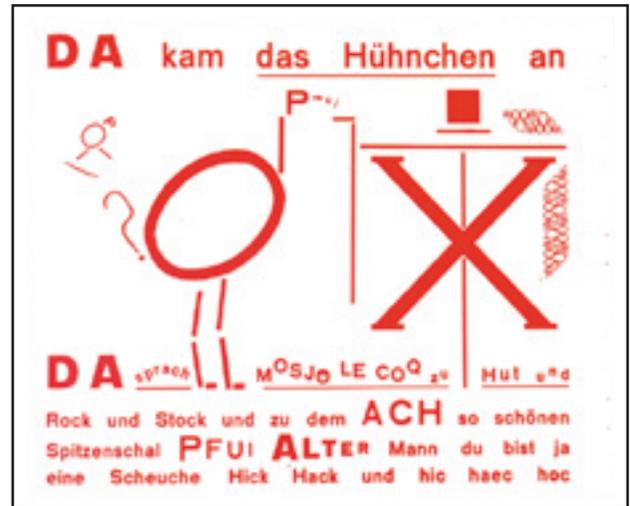


Figure 10, Scarecrow Fairy Tale, Page 4

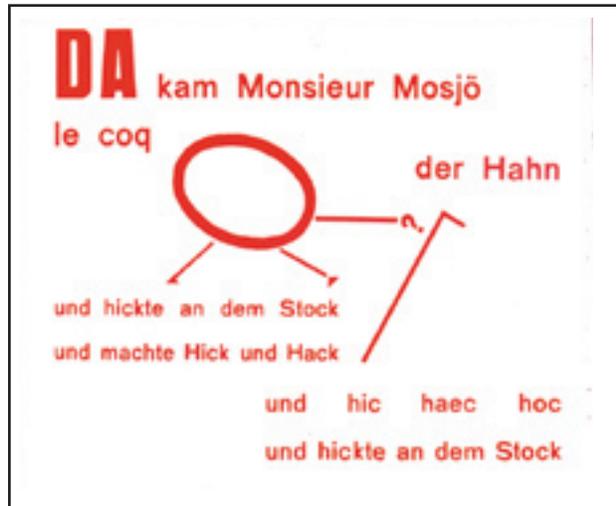


Figure 8, Scarecrow Fairy Tale, Page 2

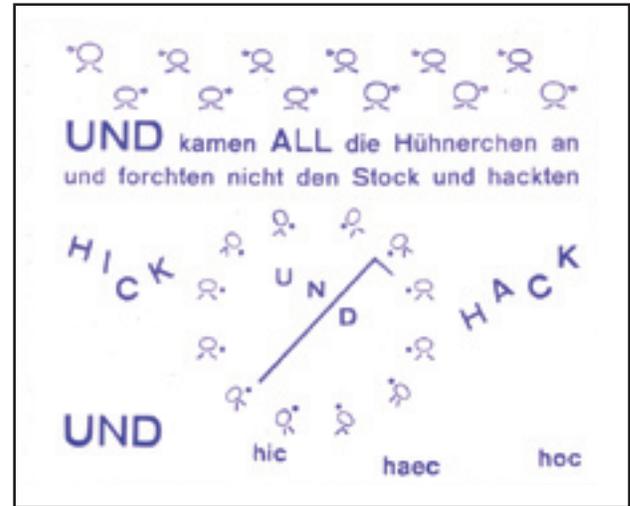


Figure 11, Scarecrow Fairy Tale, Page 5



Figure 9, Scarecrow Fairy Tale, Page 3



Figure 12, Scarecrow Fairy Tale, Page 6



Figure 13, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, Page 7

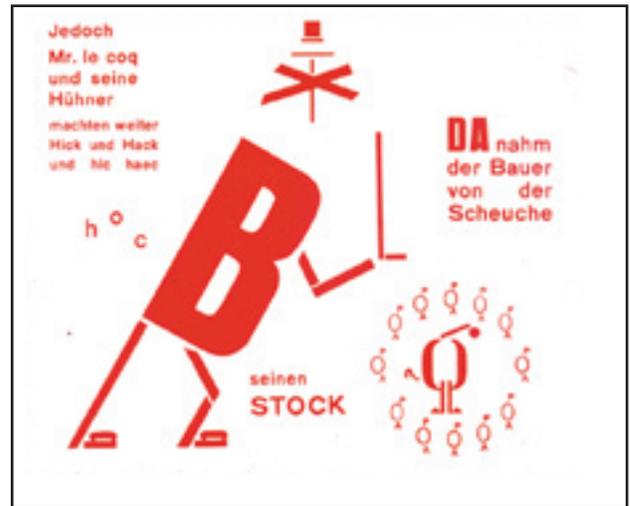


Figure 16, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, Page 10

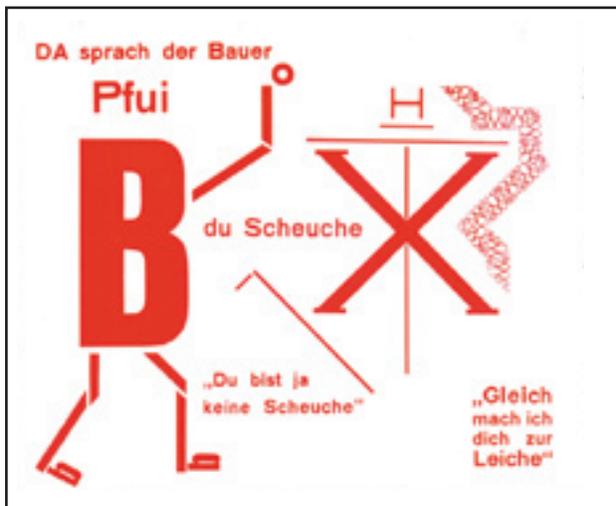


Figure 14, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, Page 8



Figure 17, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, Page 11

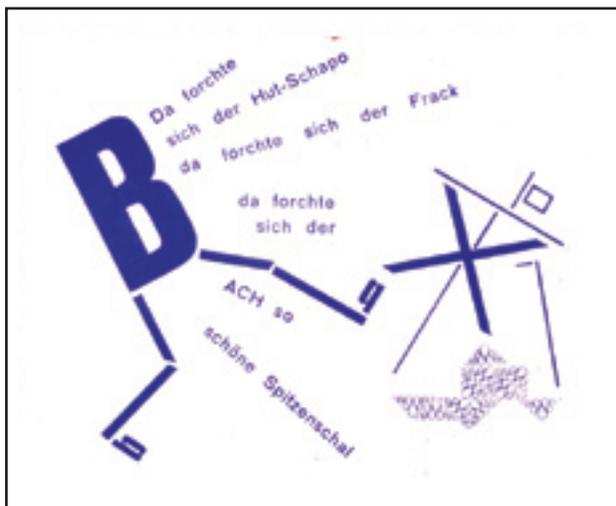


Figure 15, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, Page 9



Figure 18, *Scarecrow Fairy Tale*, Page 12