Jaroslav Andel. *Avant-Garde Book Design, 1900-1950.* New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002. ISBN 0-929445-09-0. 388 pages. Many illustrations, most in color.\

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

The conventions of page design for books printed with the Latin alphabet were established in the mid-fifteenth century with the publication of Johannes Gutenberg's 42-line Bible. For more than four hundred years after that, printers who followed Gutenberg's layout, derived from the monastic scribes who lettered manuscripts by hand, adhered to the horizontal line by line arrangement of type. Readers followed the text beginning at top left and ending at bottom right. The Gutenberg Bible was laid out in a two-column format, which was gradually replaced by a single column, due in part to the printing of shorter and smaller books.

Within a very few years, German printers began to incorporate black and white woodcuts into their page layouts, thus adding a strong visual element to the original texts. In 1493, Anton Koberger published a major illustrated book, the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, which combined more than 1,800 woodcut illustrations with a text that recounted one of the earliest histories of the world. Layout sketches, known as exemplars, joined pictures of different sizes with linear texts of various lengths. In the seventeenth-century, designers were inclined towards decorative borders for the blocks of text on a page, while typographer/designers a century later such as Bodoni in Italy, Baskerville in England and Pierre l'aîné Didot in France returned to more severe page layouts with white space rather then intricate ornaments surrounding the blocks of text.

Such is the history of European book design that precedes art historian Jaroslav Andel's account of experimental page layout. I use the term 'experimental' rather than 'avant-garde' as the author does because he applies it too loosely to a group of publications that range from the most provocative Futurist manifestos to the syntactic rigor of Jan Tschichold's "new typography" and the more conservative de luxe editions of drawings and paper cutouts by Henri Matisse.

Andel begins his account in the late nineteenth century with a chapter on precursors and pioneers among whom the French symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé is the leading figure. He gives Mallarmé a central position in his narrative, equating the impact on page design of Mallarmé's seminal poem, "Un coup de dés n'abolira le hasard" (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance) with that of Picasso's proto-Cubist painting "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" on the course of modern art. Andel's choice of Mallarmé as a progenitor of experimental page design follows prior claims to Mallarmé's influence by scholars such as Willard Bohn in *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1918* and Johanna Drucker in *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923.*

Mallarmé, according to Andel and others, challenged the regulated linear structure of prior layouts by varying the lengths of his lines, which introduced a new sense of flow to the printed page. He also incorporated the white space into the meaning of his poetry by considering it a 'silence' equal to his words as a part of the speech process rather than as a neutral ground for the printed text. In essence, Mallarmé conceived his texts as performance events in their own right rather than transcriptions of speech.

Following his account of Mallarmé and some lesser known nineteenth- century figures such as Gabrielle de la Landelle and Gelett Burgess, Andel's sequence of chapters incorporates all the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century – Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, De Stijl, and Surrealism – and includes as well discussions of page designs about and influenced by architecture, photography, and film. In establishing a succession of influences, Andel is less careful than Bohn or Drucker whose books are based on tightly constructed arguments about how one avant-garde exemplar influenced or was influenced by another. In contrast to this approach, Andel's narrative is based more on a desire not to leave anything out than it is on developing an argument about why an example should be allowed in.

The book includes 463 illustrations, all of them in color or the original black and white. As an album of images, *Avant-Garde Book Design, 1900-1950* is an exciting volume. Some of the examples have been culled from relatively obscure publications and are not widely known. Andel has done exemplary research in ferreting out works by little known poets, architects, and designers. In a chapter on "The Liberated Sign," which covers publications related to Cubism, he introduces the reader to Czech Cubists such as V.H Brunner, Rudolf Kovar, Jindra Dvoracek, Frantisek Kysela, Vaclav Spala, and Josef Capek. Andel is also thorough in his inclusion of Italian Futurists. Not only does he present examples by F.T. Marinetti, Carlo Carrà, Gino Severini, Ardengo Soffici, and Francesco Cangiullo, but he also features designers from the following generation of Futurists such as Tulio d'Albisola and Bruno Munari. Among the work in other chapters by lesser known European designers is Ljubomir Micic's cover for the Yugoslav avant-garde periodical *Zenit,* Victor Brauner's covers for *75 HP* and *Punct,* Max Herman Maxy's cover for *Integral,* Vit Obrtel's cover for *Acrobat*, a book of poems by the Czech poet Nezval, and covers by the Belgian designers Jozef Peters and Karel Maes for *Het Overzicht*. Andel's book also contains reproductions of better known works that are rarely seen in color – the page with Dada poet Hugo Ball's poem "Karawane," intended for the unpublished anthology, *Dadaco*, John Heartfield's poster for the 1920 Dada-Messe in Berlin, the cover of

Adolf Behne's *Eine Stunde Architektur,* and Moholy-Nagy's cover for his Bauhaus book *Von Material zu Architektur.*

Unfortunately, the text does not live up to the rich selection of illustrations. Andel has culled a lot of information from the literature in his exhaustive bibliography but in attempting to cut such a wide swath with his narrative, he has flattened out the theoretical arguments of his sources. The basic problem is with the faulty conception of the book. It falls somewhere between an encyclopedia of experimental page design and a theoretical account of how designers have followed Mallarmé's lead to liberate the visual sign and produce entirely new syntactical arrangements. Yet it satisfies neither aim. While the text contains a lot of information, it is far more descriptive than analytic. Andel begins his introduction with the claim that the Internet is "gradually replacing the printed page as the primary carrier of information and accelerating the accessibility of information worldwide." (10) He then goes on to argue that the computer screen has now become the new site of experimentation for the arrangement of images and text, suggesting that the examples in this book are precedents for the ways that contemporary artists, architects, designers, and film directors are working with the latest technology. As an example, he speculates that El Lissitzky's famous call for an "electro-library" in his 1923 manifesto "Topography of Typography" anticipates the Internet. Yet, basing a claim for such a connection on an ambiguous phrase by an avant-garde artist in the 1920s is not persuasive. Without better examples to demonstrate the relation between experimental page design and contemporary motion graphics, Andel's assertion of their relation rings hollow. If he intended it to be the thesis of his book, it was not helpful to end with the artists' books, magazine covers, and posters by Marcel Duchamp and Henri Matisse, which are the most material of objects and certainly do not form a bridge to the dematerialized words and graphics of Internet displays.

Andel's text is also problematic because of some narrative assumptions and errors of fact. I am most familiar with the Soviet material where some glaring mistakes are evident. Like a number of other authors, Andel links El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko together as Constructivists though nothing could be farther from the truth. Andel also asserts that Lissitzky went to Berlin at the end of 1921 as an ambassador of Constructivism, which he did not. In Berlin, Lissitzky was involved with many different groups ranging from the Scythians, who disputed the Bolshevik Revolution, to the Jewish modern artists around the journal *Rimon* to the Western Constructivists whom both Christina Lodder, in her book *Russian Constructivism* and I in my book *The Struggle for Utopia* showed to be completely different from the Russian Constructivists.

In his discussion of photomontage and its impact on page design, Andel suggests a movement of the technique from the avant-garde publications of the German Dadaists and Russian Constructivists to the German leftist publication *AIZ* and the Soviet propaganda magazine of the 1930s, *USSR in Construction*. What is missing in this account is the way that photomontage was used differently to serve varied political and artistic ends. It was not a technique that guaranteed a common visual form no matter what its use was. Photomontage looked different and was practiced with very different aesthetic intentions, depending on its application.

In his desire to create a history of continuous innovation, Andel has ignored all the disruptive and disjunctive tendencies that mitigate against this project. Where scholars of the avant-garde once sought unifying formal or performative characteristics for all avant-garde groups, contemporary scholarship is focused much more on what has made these groups different, despite some common characteristics that have earned them the rubric of 'avant-garde.'

The assertion that some things are like other things is problematic for Andel not only in his written text but also in some of the illustrations he includes. Rodchenko's and Stepanova's parachute issue of *USSR in Construction* is far more different from their earlier Constructivist work both in appearance and political intent than Andel's presentation of it suggests. Likewise, his page of Isotype figures by Gerd Arntz sits too close to examples of Czech functionalism and Bauhaus graphics to sufficiently reveal the more important social intention of Isotype to convey information about social life of the 1920s to a mass audience by using pictorial statistics.

Aside from these complaints, however, there is some value in seeing so many experimental page designs in one place. The book is like a blockbuster exhibition that includes everything you ever wanted to know about a subject yet it does not sufficiently explain it for you. At the end of the exhibition, however, you nonetheless remember certain images and are glad to have seen them. While Andel's book provides us with reproductions rather than originals, the scale of the images (some appear to be reproduced in their actual size) and the exceptionally high quality of the reproductions (covers of *AIZ*, for example, are reproduced in their original brownish rotogravure tint rather than in black and white) comes as close to the originals as one might hope. Although the narrative structure is problematic and the reader does not move easily from Futurism to Andel's final avant-garde movement, Surrealism, there is enough along the way to keep one interested.

The sheer number of examples that Andel provides in this book, make the point many times over that page design after Mallarmé was no longer constrained by the regulated format that had dictated its structure since the printing of the Gutenberg Bible. Though derived from avant-garde innovations, many of the new page layouts became established norms against which younger designers continue to rebel. Instead of stopping at 1950, Andel would have done well to continue his narrative to the present, including such neo-avant-garde movements and techniques as Fluxus, concrete poetry, and David Carson's barely legible magazine layouts of *Beach Culture* and *Ray Gun.* This would have helped his claim to a link between avant-garde page layouts and Internet graphics, though it could have also worked the other way to reinforce the conviction that the printed page is a more durable medium than prophets of its decline might think.

In either case, the absence of post-1950 material leaves unaddressed important questions about how avant-garde graphics before World War II influenced work after the war that led to contemporary page design.

Andel's visual documentation of experimental graphics up to 1950 is so thorough and abundant that one wishes he could have avoided the two major flaws in the book: a weak text and a lack of material after World War II. Nonetheless, what he has provided will serve as a valuable reference for designers and historians alike.