The Post-Alphabetic Poster

- Deconstructing a print medium and its role the digital age

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“Post-alphabetic design (...) refashions information as an aesthetic event, and at this moment, print is a good conductor of such events.”

Abstract

This master’s thesis is examining the poster as a print medium in the *post-alphabetic age*. Through the last couple of decades, rumors and predictions have flourished about print media’s inevitable demise. Yet, print has still not disappeared. Is the poster still a medium to be reckoned with, and if it is, how has it adapted to a digitalized society? To conduct this study, I have chosen to deconstruct a quote by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum found in a presentation he held at the *Media in Transition* conference in 1999, where he talks about print’s role in a digitalized society. This quote introduces several key concepts that I examine as part of my analysis of the poster and the effects on this medium by the constant and continuous digitalization of society. Kirschenbaum’s quote suggests that: “Post-alphabetic design refashions information as an aesthetic event, and at this moment, print is a powerful conductor of such events.” This quote brings with it a handful of key concepts, number one being the concept of the *post-alphabetic*. With the poster as the protagonist, this thesis attempts to set “post-alphabetic” on the agenda: What does it imply that a design is post-alphabetic? How does it relate to the era of digitalization? Divided into five chapters, the thesis: 1) places the poster in an historic setting to examine its historic importance, 2) maps the term ‘post-alphabetic’ in relation to other theories and media practices, 3) presents the work and career of David Carson in an attempt to understand the motivations for the appearance of post-alphabetic qualities in his designs, 4) researches the ways in which (information and) the poster can be an aesthetic event and how a post-alphabetic design can enhance the poster as such an event, and 5) applies these findings to six concrete examples of posters that seem to display a post-alphabetic quality within their design, in an attempt to answer the following research questions: - What is post-alphabetic design, and how does it refashion information as an aesthetic event? - If post-alphabetic design has a digital component, how does this manifest in print? - How can post-alphabetic design found in posters say something about the poster’s adaption to a digital climate?
Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven utforsker plakaten som trykket medium i den post-alfabetiske tidsalder. I løpet av de siste tiårene har rykter og prediksjoner florert om at trykte medier lever på lånt tid. Likevel, trykte medier er fortsatt her. Er plakaten et trykket medium man fortsatt kan regne med, og hvordan har den i så fall tilpasset seg et digitalt samfunn? For å gjennomføre denne studien har jeg valgt å dekonstruere et sitat av Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, funnet i en presentasjon han holdt på en konferanse i 1999, kalt Media in Transition. Dette sitatet introduserer flere nøkkelkonsepter jeg undersøker som en del av min analyse av plakaten og effektene et stadig mer digitalisert samfunn har hatt på dette mediet. Kirschenbaums sitat foreslår at: “Post-alphabetic design (...) refashions information as an aesthetic event, and at this moment, print is a powerful conductor of such events.” Med plakaten som hovedobjekt har denne oppgaven som hensikt å belyse begrepet post-alfabetisk: Hva betyr det at et design er post-alfabetisk? Hvordan relaterer det til den digitale tidsalderen? Delt inn i fem kapitler ønsker denne oppgaven: 1) å plassere plakaten i en historisk setting for å undersøke dens historiske betydning, 2) å kartlegge begrepet ‘post-alfabetisk’ i relasjon til andre teorier og media praksis, 3) å presentere arbeidet og karrieren til grafisk designer David Carson i et forsøk på å forstå motivasjonen for utviklingen av post-alfabetiske kvaliteter i hans design, 4) å undersøke måtene (informasjon og) plakaten kan være en estetisk event og hvordan et post-alfabetisk design kan forsterke plakaten som en slik event, og 5) å anvende disse funnene for å analyseres seks konkrete plakat-eksempler som ser ut til å inneha en post-alfabetisk kvalitet i sine design, i et forsøk på å svare på følgende forskningsspørsmål: - Hva er post-alfabetisk design, og hvordan omgjør det informasjon til en estetisk event? – Hvis post-alfabetisk design har en digital komponent, hvordan kommer dette til uttrykk på trykk? – Hvordan kan post-alfabetisk design funnet i plakater si noe om plakatens tilpasning til et digitalt klima?
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Writing this master’s thesis has been a long and tedious process, in many ways. Yet, it has provided me with lots of new insight in relation to both of my fields of interest, graphic design and media studies, and how these can be combined and maybe even benefit from this combination.

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Introduction

The poster is a medium of long traditions that carries with it a colorful history (Barnicoat, 1972). Being a part of the printed media, however, can the poster still be reckoned with in today’s digitalized society? Print media in general has since the first solid suggestions of digitalization in the 80s and 90s been predicted to lose momentum, and eventually disappear altogether (Kirschenbaum, 1999). Yet, even now several decades later, print is still around, even after having experienced an apparent inevitable decline. There are still papers on our desks, still books on our shelves, still posters on the walls and poles of the city streets.

With all the advanced technology that most of us in the Western World surrounds ourselves with on a daily basis in our everyday lives, it seems that we have everything in place to undertake a society and a world completely free from written and printed documents. Yet, as it turns out, the printed media, despite the decrease and decline in reader-mass and an apparent disinterest in the traditional media of yesterday, is still very much existent. The paperless society envisioned by many, was this merely a utopic dream? Is there perhaps a certain quality within print that makes it difficult to part with? Is the digital not the release of print it appeared to be?

As an actor within the field of graphic design, inhabiting a particular interest in print media and print design, my motivation for writing this thesis was to explore the print media’s role within the digital epoch of the 21st century to learn more about the reasons for print to be such a resilient medium in the face the threat proposed by all kinds of e-media. One of my favorite printed artifacts is the poster, and this thesis therefore focuses on the poster as the printed medium of interest as I explore a print media’s role in a digitalized society. While the longevity of printed media such as books, newspapers and magazines have been the theme for several books and articles, it appears that the poster hasn’t reached the same level of interest, at least not within the traditional media studies. Therefore, it could be suggested that there is work to be done here to understand a broader part of print media, and I want to contribute to this by examining the future of printed media through the printed poster.
Graphic design itself, even with its ostensibly close relation to media studies, is an area often overlooked by theorists within the media studies discourse (Kirschenbaum, 1999). Media studies is, by comparison, much more dedicated to for example the craft behind film-making than they are to the craft behind the print media that actually constitutes a great deal of interesting media objects for the media researchers. In relation to print, the academic interest is more directed to the complete object itself, its inherent meaning and its effect on audience. Why is it that the setting of print media such as books, posters and magazines is less covered by research in media studies than that of photography or film? Digital humanities researcher Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (1999) relates this to the lack of theoretic involvement from the graphic design programs and the designers themselves, and Michèle-Anne Dauppe (1995) relates it to a historic divide that exist within academia, one that separates both theory and practice and social science and art. The design profession positions itself habitually in the intersection between social science and art, and as such contributing to a problem of placement as far as academic discourse is concerned. In more current times, educational programs such as ‘media and communication’ and ‘media studies’ still suggest that the doers and the theorists are kept separate (Dauppe, 1995).

Ever since the late 19th century, the poster has been an influential medium in media history (Barnicoat, 1972). As a medium made to communicate information to the masses, with its dwelling in the persuading arts of commercialism and advertising, as a prized collector’s artefact, and as an effective tool for propaganda purposes, the poster has a colorful, powerful and diverse history that is worth taking note of. And, as holds true for other print media such as the books, the newspapers and the magazines, the poster must also admit to the reality of being faced with the direct competition of digital technology. Yet, given its continuous existence, what kind of qualities does the poster posit for it to constantly being able to hold its ground as a relevant medium within the era of digital technology?

As an entry point for this following research on the poster, I am using a quote from a presentation held at the Media in Transition Conference in 1999, by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, named The Other End of Print: David Carson, Graphic Design and the Aesthetics of Media. Kirschenbaum talked about the suggested demise in print media and its relevancy to the extensive digital culture and the appearance of new media. This
presentation appeared in the preliminary research when pondering the theme for this master’s thesis and a wish to combine aesthetics and design to media studies. I will elaborate further on the reasoning for applying such a seemingly nontraditional approach in the “Methodology and material” section.

In the following paragraphs, I will present the Kirschenbaum presentation and the chosen quote further, in an attempt to explain why it might be interesting to use this presentation as the foundation for this thesis’ research. After having presented Kirschenbaum’s presentation and the quote of interest, the rest of this instruction chapter will continue with a presentation of the research questions and theoretical framework, then an overview of the methodology and material, and lastly the thesis structure.

The Other End of Print
Matthew G, Kirschenbaum is an academic specialized in digital humanities and digital culture, working today as Associate Director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities. He has published several books, the first one being “Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination” published in 2008. In 1999, he was as mentioned speaking at that a conference called “Media in Transition”, a conference aiming “to establish a broad-gauged discussion of our emerging computer culture in the perspective of ancestor technologies and older media”. Kirschenbaum’s talk was one of 75 presentations given at this conference, all of which gave different takes on the subject at hand. Kirschenbaum’s presentation, with the name “The Other End of Print: David Carson, Graphic Design and the Aesthetics of Media” takes the listener on a journey in an attempt to understand print within the current (late 90s) climate.

Initially, Kirschenbaum presents the general notion that print is increasingly regarded as a culturally irrelevant medium, “at least, with respect to the global media matrices fostered by advanced information technologies”. Quoting Michael Joyce in a context where Joyce states that we find ourselves “in the late age of print” and that “the time of the book has passed”, Kirschenbaum enters what I understand to be a criticism of commentators such as Sven Birkerts who, in his book of essays, The Gutenberg Elegies, gives too much credit to the printed medium. According to Kirschenbaum, it is important to understand that print does not exist isolated and apart from other contemporary media phenomena. Personally,
Kirschenbaum sees print and the publishing industry as an integral part of the contemporary media ecology.

While Kirschenbaum seems to criticize the likes of Birkerts to commit what is often called a literary bias, he also reminds the “digerati”, that to fully comprehend media, it is important to possess an adequate critical understanding of print. In the reminder of his speech, then, Kirschenbaum seeks to illustrate some of these claims through a presentation and analysis of the graphic design found in several contemporary magazines. In particular, he focuses his attention on the work of designer David Carson. Carson is a designer particularly acknowledged for his work in contemporary magazines in the 80s and 90s, with a stylistic aesthetic highly influenced by the aesthetics of such pop-cultural media phenomena as the TV-channel MTV.

Kirschenbaum presents some claims on Carson’s work, saying that “Carson’s design practice furnishes us – in print – with highly aesthetic representations of such entities as ‘information’ and ‘media’”, and proceed to argue that associated with information there is a distinct visual aesthetic. If he means in general, or in relation to Carson’s work is unclear, but as Manovich says in his text on Info Aesthetics, information needs to be wrapped up in something (visual) for us to be able to make use of it, and this kind of visuals do have a certain aesthetic linked to them, even if the conventions might change depending in the context and type of information.

The aesthetic Kirschenbaum is concerned with, is a particular aesthetic that were found in 90s’ magazines such as Wired and Emigre, presenting a certain signature style found in graphic design programs at schools like Detroit’s Cranbrook Academy of Arts and CalArts of Valencia. This aesthetic is associated with grunge fonts and multi-layered letterforms. It is primarily what these designers’ experimentation with typography that is of interest, and graphic designer David Carson, in particular, made reactions in the graphic scene with his distinct typographic works in magazines such as Ray Gun and Beach Culture. This typography is often described as ‘the new typography’, ‘deconstructive typography’, or even ‘deconstructive typography’, the latter making a point to reflect how this typography came about with a digitalization of the design profession. This kind of aesthetic, Kirschenbaum calls a “post-alphabetic aesthetic”, and he suggest that this aesthetic is “…one that appears precisely at the point of print media’s imperative to formalize a representation
of its own putative demise.” Kirschenbaum argues that this aesthetic is an aesthetic with highly self-reflective qualities attempting to illustrate or “...even iconify the material conditions of print’s communicative exhaustion.” This aesthetic, as such, can be seen as a manifestation on print’s immediate situation in relation to the electronic textualities surrounding it.

From this, it could be possible to understand that the main resolve of this presentation is to highlight this post-alphabetic aesthetic that Kirschenbaum suggests is contributing to inform us of how print’s current (or rather 1999s) status and relation to the digital is reflected in the visual aesthetics found within print itself. Is it possible to learn something about print’s status by examining this concept more thoroughly?

Kirschenbaum’s talk is as previously mentioned named “The Other End of Print”. This is a reference to a compendium of David Carson’s work named “The End of Print”. In the forewords of this book, its editor, Lewis Blackwell, says that this title does not necessarily refer to the death of print, as it were, but rather, that the work of Carson might be pushing the boundaries of print, and as such taking print to as far as it can go. “The Other End of Print”, then, Kirschenbaum suggest, is the end of print as it is established in the discourses of graphic design.

Through the pages of Ray Gun or Emigre, it leaves no doubt, according to Kirschenbaum, that Carson, Vanderlans, Licko, and the designers associated with them “...are engaged in as rigorous and profound an investigation of alphabetic consciousness in the face of radical technological upheaval as, say, the growing circle of critics and writers who have devoted themselves to interactive fiction” (Kirschenaum, 1999). This suggest that Kirschenbaum accepts Carson’s work as an investigation in alphabetic consciousness, whether consciously or not on Carson’s part. Thus, it isn’t surprising that he later in his talk criticizes art critic and writer Rick Poynor for his skepticism to understand Carson’s work as something other than a play with letters, not done with the intention to function as “an instrument of opposition or critique”, as it were. Not to say that Kirschenbaum makes a point to read Carson and designers of similar styles as necessarily having a specific agenda to oppose the status quo in design, but he suggests that the debating on the purpose behind the designer’s point of view may contribute to an occluding of certain key aspects within post-alphabetic texts as media phenomena. As Kirschenbaum states: “To mistake Ray Gun’s
visual field for this, to see the magazine as solely as an experiment in mixed media (...) is to fail to see that the ‘deconstructive’ graphics are trading not on print’s receding communicative horizon, but rather on the multi-channel high-bandwidth mass-media spectacle of print’s endangered commodity status” (Kirschenbaum, 1999).

Kirschenbaum states that his reason for using Carson’s work with Ray Gun as his main example, is that he believes Ray Gun to be “the most powerful demonstration” he knows, “…not only to emulate certain aspects of digital media, but to consolidate and disseminate a particular aesthetic identity for digital media across a variety of cultural channels and representational surfaces” (Kirschenbaum, 1999).

In the conclusion of his talk, Kirschenbaum sums it up as follows:

• Information ca. 1999, is much more than just a binary token of messages sent and received;

• Carson’s work, and post-alphabetic design more generally, refashions information as an aesthetic event; and

• At this moment print is a powerful conductor of those events;

• And print is a part of understanding media.

From this conclusion, it was the concept of this post-alphabetic design that sparked my attention. What did it entail to characterize a design as post-alphabetic, and how could such a design be said to refashion information as an aesthetic event? What characterized the ‘aesthetics of information’ before this refashioning took place? And what could such design tell us about the events taking place in the transitioning from print to digital? It was the concluding statement claiming that “…post-alphabetic design (...) refashions information as an aesthetic event; and at this moment print is a powerful conductor of such events” that I initially wanted to investigate, and it is this quote that will function as the basis for the following research.

There are several years separating the media scene of today and that in which Kirschenbaum gave his presentation. A lot has happened within media since 1999 – why would it be relevant to use a quote from this speech as an entry point for research conducted 17 years later? Media is arguably still in transition, and the presentation’s theme – the end of print and how this prediction does not seem to have taken effect yet, as it were – are still questions that are relevant, perhaps even more now, as print is still around having
been predicted extinct many years ago. What I found particularly interesting in the initial meeting with the quote at hand, was as mentioned above the concept of ‘post-alphabetic design’. What is this ‘post-alphabetic design’ that Kirschenbaum spoke of, and how could such design be reflected in print?

Some of these questions Kirschenbaum answers to some degree. Being a talk at a conference and not an academic paper per se, Kirschenbaum never go into much detail on all that he touches upon in his presentation, thus leaving room for further examination. In the initial research for this thesis work, it quickly became apparent that there did not exist any thorough literature on the term “post-alphabetic”. It did, however, come to light that not only Kirschenbaum had used this term, but also other theorists in the digital humanities and also a handful of hyper-fiction writers. Kirschenbaum mentions in his presentation sources that the term appears to have been first put to use by hypertext theorists Michael Joyce and Don Byrd “…to describe the marked visual dimension of electronic writing spaces.” What could prove to be enquiring to understand in more depth, then, was how a term used to describe a visual dimension in electronic writing spaces could also be said to be used to describe designs found in print.

Research questions

This thesis thus proposes the following research question:

- What is post-alphabetic design, and how does it refashion information as an aesthetic event?
- If post-alphabetic design has a digital component, how does this manifest in print?
- How can post-alphabetic design found in posters say something about the poster’s adaption to a digital climate?

Theoretical framework

Taking the thesis’ main theme and purpose into consideration, in the following pages I will enter and present a few different theoretical frameworks. Some of these are theories and literature found in the Kirschenbaum-quote, and others relate closely to these primary concepts. To generalize, one could say that the thesis will concern itself with the subjects of
the poster, the post-alphabetic, digital vs print and information as aesthetics, as well as communication and graphic design.

The focus on the poster medium suggests that it is of interest to look to graphic design and advertising, and here the thesis will examine what a poster is and how it functions (Lupton, 2015), and gain an overview of the poster’s history as a graphic design artefact (Barnicoat, 1972). It will also look into aspects of advertising and consider such concepts as “uninformative advertising” (Mayzlin & Shin, 2011) and “complex design” (Pieters et. Al, 2010), and argue for how these advertising techniques can seem to relate to what happens within an advertising displaying post-alphabetic qualities.

Examining this concept of the post-alphabetic, the thesis will explore other related concepts and terms such as examining what constitutes the alphabetic age as opposed to the post-alphabetic age, and also how deconstruction and post-alphabetic seemingly is used interchangeable in relation to describing the kind of distinctive design style found in the works of David Carson and other designers of the 1990s (Poynor 2003, Lupton & Miller 1994). Here, I will enter the discussion as to whether deconstruction in design is related to the deconstruction found with Jacques Derrida or not. There are different opinions on this matter, but generally, the main position of this thesis is that the two kinds of uses for the term deconstruction, both the design variety and the philosophical variety, are closely related. Considering deconstruction, and the presenting of David Carson in chapter 3, postmodernism and the different tendencies within this movement in relation to culture, media, art and post-alphabetic design in particular, will also be a movement to examine.

In relation to the alphabet, the thesis will look to McLuhan (1964) to understand how the alphabet impacted society and also the effect of such conventions as the typographic principles. Principles and conventions regarding typography and layout are one of the corner stones in graphic design, and the post-alphabetic seem to be stirring the pot, as it were, on these conventions. And to further understand the post-alphabetic in the way Kirschenbaum defines it, concepts such as information and aesthetic experience and event will also be theoretical areas of interests.

The post-alphabetic aesthetic is not an aesthetic that has prompted much standalone theory. Therefore, this thesis will set out to examine the different applications of this concept in an attempt to pinpoint a distinctive description and definition of what a post-
alphabetic aesthetic is, and what happens when this aesthetic is applied to a print medium such as the poster.

Methodology and material
This research consists of a mapping of a handful of different topics relating to Kirschenbaum-quote, consequently the examination of terminology concerning the concept of the ‘post-alphabetic’, the research on information and the poster as an aesthetic event, the exploring effects in media as it moves from print to digital, and a comparative analysis on the printed poster and its digital, screen-based technologies that have inherited the poster’s purpose. It could be suggested that the use of this quote as the basis for examining the poster’s role and continuous relevance in the digital age will contribute to an original methodology that might reveal interesting and unexpected connections and associations relating to print and digital media.

One of the arguments against this starting point could be its atypical nature. In defense of choosing this approach regardless, it could be possible to appreciate this methodology through the concept of Gregory Ulmer’s ‘Mystery’. While research in media studies as in other fields of academic discourse are bound by certain discourse conventions, one of which often entails the separation of the self and the researcher from the research, Gregory Ulmer (2004) proposed the Mystery as a methodology that specifically introduces the self into the research. The Teletheory, Ulmer’s theory which offers the method Mystery, is an interesting methodology in this context, as it is a genre for academic discourse that is intended to function across all types of media such as voice, print and video (Ulmer, 2004, p. 17). And, in relation to the explanation of the backstory and introduction as to how teletheory came to, Ulmer also uses the phrase “a post-alphabetic culture”, making it possibly even more relevant for the premise of my research. The teletheory as a method, concerns itself with the shift from the book culture to an electronic culture, a culture where literacy in Ulmer’s words seems to be shifting towards something he calls videocy (Ulmer, 2004, p. 21). A shift of this manner, Ulmer suggests, also require a shift in academic discourse.

The shift from the age of print toward an electronic and digital age of the video, as it were, is thus a central theme both in relation to the Teletheory method and my thesis. As
Ulmer explains, teletheory and mystery is not a method to explain video, but a method to ‘think with’ the qualities of the medium. Ulmer suggest that video is not something that needs to be explained, but rather, something whose operations have changed the conditions of explanation itself (Ulmer, 2004, p. 12). If the post-alphabetic, deconstructive design seen in David Carson’s work is the intent of applying the video generation’s language to print, teletheory could be understood as the application of the same language to theoretic and academic method. Ulmer proposes that teletheory brings to academic discourse the lessons of the deconstructive artists and their tendencies to “…appropriate the stereotypes and conventions of available genres as well as the materials of particular works as part of a didactic invention” (Ulmer, 2004, p 32). Like the postmodern deconstructionists, then, teletheory facilitates in the postmodernist process of “crossover”, linking different cultural areas that up to this point have been held separate, as if they were autonomous (Ulmer, 2004, p. 32). Seeing how the post-alphabetic aesthetic apparently is closely connected to deconstructive design and to postmodern designers such as David Carson, and how such designs could be understood as an epitome of media cross-over and remixing, applying this method to this topic seems highly relevant and could prove to yield interesting results.

In conducting a Mystory, there is three levels of culture that contribute to the invention cycle: personal, popular and disciplinary discourse. In relation to this, one could say that the initial meeting I had with the Kirschenbaum-presentation in the search for a thesis subject was something that happened to me, something personal that opened up for further research. The preliminary research leading to the discovery of Kirschenbaum’s *The Other End of Print* presentation, and thus the post-alphabetic as a concept, were both driven by a personal interest in graphic design and also by a disciplinary interest in the field of aesthetics, having taken my BA in aesthetic studies. The poster itself, both as a personal interest and as a pop-cultural phenomenon, can arguably be said to manifest the popular aspect of the three-level discourse. Teletheory is a theory or method that is designed with the purpose of promoting within academic discourse a communication between expert and popular thinking (Ulmer, 2004, p. 53), and concerns itself with discovering and inventing the thinking and representation that is achievable to academic discourse in the digital age.

In his presentation, Kirschenbaum does not use the poster as an example when he investigates how the aesthetics of the 90s’ print design is manifesting print’s apparent
expiration, as it were. Rather, he used the magazine as the example of the medium in which he found the best examples of this aesthetic. In light of this, it might be curious why I have chosen the poster as the thesis subject rather than the magazine. As this thesis is called “The Post-Alphabetic Poster” and the aesthetics of the post-alphabetic tendencies of the 90s’ graphic design scene was mainly found in the layouts and covers of magazines, this decision to choose the poster rather than the magazine as my subject is arguably a decision intended to make the thesis an original construct rather than merely an extension of the work already done by Kirschenbaum. The poster is also my favorite print medium, personally, and by bringing this personal interest into the mix in the exploring of the print media’s role through an analysis of the Kirschenbaum-quote might generate a certain viewpoint not possible to create otherwise. It could be suggested that this unsuspected connection brought from the addition of the poster rather than the magazine will prove fruitful to the end result of this thesis and the findings it generates in relation to the topic at hand. Considering Ulmer’s teletheory, this could suggest connecting to the position of pattern generation in terms of the invention of text being as equally important as the actual findings of said text (Ulmer, 2004). This is not to undermine the significance of a coherent and well-constructed thesis, but it underlines the justification of letting the patterns that emerge through the research lead the way to the end results.

In addition to this, the thesis will close the loop by the analyses of 6 different posters. These analyses will function as a discussion and application of the overall theories and perspectives being discussed and presented through the thesis, binding together the general concepts with concrete examples of post-alphabetic posters. These analyses serve as examples on one hand, and as an examination on the other hand. After having researched what constitutes the post-alphabetic aesthetic and how information, and the poster as an information bearer, can be seen as an aesthetic event, the poster analyses will contribute with a specific manner in which to examine the understanding and validation of the Kirschenbaum-quote. As such it might be possible to answer how the poster itself is an aesthetic event through the refashioning of information by the application of a post-alphabetic design. The analyses will also contribute to the finding of different manners in which a poster design can be post-alphabetic, providing a suggestive definition of a post-alphabetic aesthetic in print design.
Thesis structure

The thesis sets out to explore the poster through a deconstruction of the Kirschenbaum-quote, while attempting to understand the meaning behind the quote and to understand how a post-alphabetic quality can manifest in a printed medium. To analyze exactly how “*post-alphabetic design refashions information as an aesthetic event*”, central themes in this thesis will be the concepts of the post-alphabetic, information and aesthetic event. To narrow it down to include mainly relations to the thesis topic, these concepts will be investigated by the way of the poster and theories related to graphic design.

I suggest that in order to conduct my research and attempt to answer my research questions, there are five things that are of essence; 1) placing the poster in an historic setting to examine its historic importance, 2) mapping the term ‘post-alphabetic’ in relation to other theories and media practices, 3) presenting the work and career of David Carson in an attempt to understand the motivations for the appearance of post-alphabetic qualities in his designs, 4) researching the ways in which (information and) the poster can be an aesthetic event and how a post-alphabetic design can enhance the poster as such an event, and 5) applying these findings to concrete examples of posters that seem to display a post-alphabetic quality within their design.

I have chosen to divide my thesis into four theoretical chapters, each presenting a specific theme that I find necessary to include in order to contribute to the solving of the specific approach that I have applied as a means to understand the poster’s role in the digital society as a print medium, and to deconstruct the Kirschenbaum-quote. A fifth chapter is included where an analytical discussion in relation to specific poster examples will take place.

Chapter 1, *The Poster – A Historic Perspective*, creates an historic overview of the poster as an influential medium. Developing a timeline from the Art posters of Paris, to the propaganda posters of war time, the various collector frenzies and the use of the poster today, this chapter’s aim is to place the poster in both historic and contemporary discourse. This chapter begins with an examining of the poster; what is a poster in general, what constitutes a good poster design, and some general notions on the poster medium from current poster designers. From there, the chapter sets off to develop an overview of the
poster’s history, followed by an examination of the poster as both art and visual communication, ending with an overview of the posters of today.

Chapter 2, *Being Post-Alphabetic*, sets out trying to define the meaning of the concept ‘post-alphabetic’, both in relation to its general meaning, its uses and as a quality found within print design. To do so, this chapter starts with an introduction to the phrase in relation to Kirschenbaum and a few other incidents where the word ‘post-alphabetic’ is put to use. From there, because of the post-alphabetic and its reference to something that *comes after* the alphabet, as it were, it seems relevant to examine the alphabet and its effects on society. Because the post-alphabetic often is used in relation to *deconstruction*, this concept, both in relation to Derrida and the more descriptive form found in design, fashion and architecture will be discussed in an attempt to achieve a broader understanding of the post-alphabetic tendencies found in print and graphic design, especially in the 1990s.

Chapter 3, *The Rise of the Digital in Print*, discusses the way in which David Carson’s style comes from an introduction of the digitalization of the design process and the rise of a digital culture. Here, I present graphic designer David Carson and give an overview on the influence the digital technologies had on graphic design and how this manifested itself in the stylistic aesthetics within the print medium. The chapter starts off with an overview of David Carson’s professional career and claim to fame, as a means to understand in depth how Carson is the example Kirschenbaum uses as his main example in his presentation at the Media in Transition conference. Next, it examines the claim on Carson that he is the master of non-communication. Carson himself claims that even choosing to *not* communicate is an act of communicating something, and I examine this issue on communication and Carson’s work in relation to one of his critics, the modernist designer Massimo Vignelli. As the chapter has investigated the effects of the digital influence on the designers in print in the 1990s, the chapter ends with an examination on the way in which print media *turns* digital, as it were, the instances where digital media replace, or rather intrude on, print media’s functions.

Chapter 4, *The Poster as an Aesthetic Event*, deals with how information, or more specifically the poster, can be understood as an aesthetic event. Here, I want to attempt to understand how information can be said to be an aesthetic event, and also how the poster can be said to be an aesthetic event. It will as such be of importance to use the concept of
the post-alphabetic to understand exactly how the post-alphabetic design is able to refashion information as an aesthetic event, as per Kirschenbaum’s suggestion. First, the chapter beings by investigating the concept of information.

Chapter 5, *Connecting the Dots*, will propose to do just that, attempt to connect all the dots that the following chapters have stirred up. This chapter is an analysis and discussion chapter combined, consisting of the analysis and walk-through of six different posters that I have picked out. All these posters, I claim to be post-alphabetic in some way, and the poster analyses will both contribute to the settling and application of this concept to specific ‘post-alphabetic’ poster examples and eventually help answer the research questions by examining the theories and findings presented in the overall thesis in relation to the findings done in the respective analyses.
1 The Poster – A Historic Perspective

“Everybody had posters in their room; everybody had the four symbols of Zeppelin and all that.”
- Alec Baldwin

1.1 Introduction

In the quote above, the American actor Alec Baldwin basically summarizes the relationship most people have with posters; posters are something that are collected, that are hung on the walls, that serves as a means for self-expression and the shaping and creating of identity and individuality. As a medium within the traditional print media, the poster still has a strong presence in our everyday life despite the constant digitalization of society (Foster, John, 2012). Just by moving through the urban cityscape, we encounter posters in a variety of genre and formats; the indie posters plastered on every wall, pole and fence advertising all kinds of local events, concerts and exhibitions; the posters at the subway stations and bus stops advertising the latest fashion and commodity ‘must-haves’; the movies posters outside the local cinema presenting all the blockbusters and indie movies currently screening on the big screen; the posters posted at the bulletin boards of the universities and workplaces announcing new courses, classes and meetings to suitable audiences.

To understand how the poster’s place in media through the decades, I believe it to be important to map out the poster’s history. When did the first posters that marked the beginning of the poster as the pop cultural artefact it has come to be recognized as start to take form? What happened within society that made this development take place?

In the following pages, this chapter will create an overview of the poster’s history, from its beginning and up to the 21st century. First, the chapter will concern itself with the describing and presenting of the poster as a medium. What is a poster, exactly, and what do posters work? Secondly, the chapter continues with an examination of the poster’s origin, starting with the emergence of the Art Poster in late 19th century Paris and the way in which the art posters influenced the further development of the poster as a commercial and informational medium; the poster’s role as a persuasive propaganda tool during the First and the Second World War; and the poster as a collector’s item. Thirdly, the final part of the
1.2 What is a poster?

When I talk about the poster, I refer to the printed sheets of paper that invade the cityscape; the posters that hang on the phone poles, the concrete walls, the trees, the designated billboards etc. and provide their surroundings with a mixed aesthetic of different colors, patterns and letterings. They communicate information on anything from the launch of new products or music releases to cultural events such as concerts, live shows, exhibitions and the likes. A poster, thus, is a medium which has the purpose of communicating something to someone; as a means of communication, as such the specific method or form in which such information is communicated. The poster, like other media, have certain characteristics; characteristics that separate it from while at the same time link it to other media, such as for instance the book, the newspaper or the TV. What kind of characteristics are they?

The poster itself is a medium of long traditions, and as with most other print media, the poster has also been speculated to be a medium of approximate demise (Foster, 2012). Yet, the urban city streets that we walk everyday are still decorated with a large variety of posters in all shapes and sizes, adorning the streets with their various expressions and design. It is this quality of the poster that intrigues poster designer Eike Köning, the way poster designers have to take into account the physical place where the poster will reside, and the way the poster itself contributes to the influencing of the very space in which it hangs (Foster, 2012, p. 98). Posters are as such a big part of our visual culture, presenting to us a large amount of differently designed messages which we are confronted with on a daily basis (Petter & Put, 2012, p. 3), thus they play a part of our perception of the world even merely on a subconscious level.

The posters of the streets are not merely neutral announcements, but act as expressions of power or resistance (Boomgaard, 2012, p. 8). This was especially true in war times, which I will come back to later in this chapter. Speaking to a live audience that they
greet on the streets, the posters, through what they promote, still show that “...the city is shared by theatre lives, free fight fanatics, rave party goers and visitors to ideal home exhibitions” (Boomgaard, 2012, p. 8). With their wide range of promoted messages to specific audience in the city, the posters thus are reflections of what kind of people that resides here.

But what is a poster after its promotional purpose is over? Where does it leave the poster when the event that it promotes has passed? Designer Art Chantry (as quoted in Foster, 2012) contemplates this topic, asking hypothetically if the poster after its initial advertising function turns to junk, garbage, or maybe art? The poster, he concludes, is a cultural artefact. They are pieces of paper that carry the advertisement on a product on them, and they are, in Chantry’s opinion, the purest art form of an industrial marketing culture. The poster as such serves as a “direct link to our everyday lives”, turning into “real folk art” (Foster, 2012). Backing Chantry’s statement, designer Yann Legendre noted that “…the poster becomes an art print the minute it stops existing for anything other than itself”, and that it is essential for posters to have a purpose beyond their decorative exterior, even if looking pretty, as it were, is a key factor for a successful poster (Legendre, as cited in Foster, 2012, p. 122).

What is essential for the poster is the way it is designed. If not necessarily to look pretty, as Legendre noted above, the need for a striking poster design that grabs the attention of the potential onlookers is fundamental. Without a poster design, the poster is merely a blank piece of paper, with nothing more than the anticipation of possible content. And without an attention catching one, the poster is drowning in the busy visual aesthetics of the street. Ellen Lupton (2015), in her book How posters work, has investigated the numerous different approaches poster designers applies to make effective, eye catching posters, and takes note of fourteen techniques that stand out. 1) **Focus the eye** – this is a technique that applies the use of a single large object to dominate the poster, in order to focus the eye on what is essential. Often this object is paired with text that takes part in directing the eye of the viewer in order to read the poster most effectively (Lupton, 2015, p. 72). 2) **Overwhelm the eye** – this technique applies the use of intricate patterns and several elements, which overwhelsms the poster’s surface and by relation the viewer’s eye. In contrast to the previous technique, this technique wants to challenge the viewers desire to
focus the eye (Lupton, 2015, p. 80). 3) **Simplify** – the technique of simplification is a much used in poster design as a means “...to focus attention on a message or product” (Lupton, 2015, p. 96). Simplification and abstraction is techniques that are well applied in graphic design over all, as way to remove distractions and unnecessary information. 4) **Cut and paste** – this technique refers to the collage method, introduced and explored by the cubists. The cutting and pasting made for an experimental expression, allowing the designers to incorporate elements from different kinds of printed media into their poster designs. In addition to the collage, the photomontage of the Dadaists is also relevant here. The photomontage mixed out cuts from photographs, plunging the “cerebral realm of cubist collage into the harsher world of mass media” (Lupton, 2015, p. 106). 5) **Overlap** – well established by the collage and montage tradition, the overlapping of forms continues to be a favored technique in poster design to simulate depth and create tension (Lupton, 2015, p. 116). 6) **Assault the surface** – the assaulting the surface technique is a technique that Lupton refers to as the “...burning, bending or ripping [of] an image” (Lupton, 2015, p. 124), pointing to the images own artifice. This assault often tell stories about how the design process was completed, creating “...a narrative about the making or unmaking of the work itself” (Lupton, 2015, p. 124). Thus, it highlights the poster’s surface, leaving the viewer to look at it, as a construction, rather than through it, as a representation. 7) **Activate the diagonal** – this technique is again a part of guiding the eye. While the moving of the eye is a large part of the consuming of a poster or other kinds of images, activating the diagonal contributes to the rebelling “of the grid and engage the mobility of vision, helping the eye cut across the surface and penetrate its depths” (Lupton, 2015, p. 128). 8) **Manipulate scale** – the technique of manipulating or exaggerating the scale differences of certain objects within the poster is often used to “...amplify the illusion of depth,” or to “...create visual tension among the elements of a composition” (Lupton, 2015, p. 140). 9) **Use text as image** – this technique uses typography in such a manner that it foregrounds the visual representation of text (Lupton, 2015, p. 146). This is not to say that the verbal meaning of the text necessarily disappears. The viewer gets taken in to a loop of consistently shifting between viewing the text as image and the text as verbal signifier. 10) **Tell a story** – this technique in poster design refers to the posters that apply a story telling mode, where image and text are employed “within the fixed frame of a single sheet of paper to indicate an event unfolding in time
11) *Double the meaning* — points to the way some poster designers “construct metaphors, puns, irony, and other devices to create double meanings, turning abstract ideas into vivid mental images and humor and surprise” (Lupton, 2015, p. 170). One way to employ this technique is to merge two symbols or images, so that they convey a new meaning together, for example a poster by designers Kuper and Tobocman (1991) with the text “Crack house | White House” and the image of a skull with a formation resembling the white house functioning as the skull’s teeth. 12) *Amplify* — indicating the way designers can amplify texts “…by scrawling, stenciling, enlarging, underlining, slanting, angling, framing, or otherwise manipulating the scale, emphasis, and physical expression of letter forms” (Lupton, 2015, p. 182). The visual appearance of the text is thus a part of visualizing the sound of the text; is it a whisper, a scream or a stutter? If it is not the sound that is amplified, it could be the poster’s mood or message. 13) *Make eye contact* — when discussing this technique, Lupton refers to the actual application of eyes within the design, or if not eyes directly, the application of the human face. As humans, our vision is naturally drawn to human faces, and within a face we search for eyes, thus attracting a viewer’s attention can well be accomplished by the addition of eyes to the poster design. Applying a human face, covering or leaving out the eyes will provide a different effect (Lupton, 2015, p. 190). 14) *Make a system* — this technique Lupton explains as the use of specific layout applications within a design that suggests order and coherence (Lupton, 2015, p. 200). “Systems”, Lupton states, “pervade graphic design.” Whether it is the typography, the grid or the branding, they all make up different systems for how visuals are managed.

These techniques combined speaks to the variations in design across the poster medium. Some posters apply one of these, and others might use them in combination. Some of them might relate more to that of post-alphabetic design than others. As this thesis continues to explore the post-alphabetic as a concept through the poster medium, the usage of Lupton’s 14 ways on how posters work will be part of the discussion analyses of posters with post-alphabetic tendencies toward the latter part of this thesis. Do post-alphabetic posters apply these techniques, and if they do, which ones are more relevant in that particular setting?

From this, it goes to say that posters are cultural artefacts, advertising a product or other event, employing different strategies to grab the attention of random passersby in the
street. To understand this medium even better, let’s have a closer look at the poster’s origin and its historical impact. This journey takes us at first through the streets of Paris in the early 19th century.

1.3 The beginning:

1.3.1 The Art Posters of Paris

The exploration of the printed poster’s history leads us back to the streets of Paris in the late 19th century. In the year 1866, the citizens of Paris could observe their city’s usually grey and dull concrete walls now being decorated with colorful and vivid lithographic posters in a way which had not been seen before (Barnicoat, 1972). The source behind these artful posters that created some kind of stir within the Parisian public, gaining the attention of art critics and collectors alike, was a mural painter named Jules Chéret (1936-1933). What Chéret was doing of novelty, was the way in which he applied the lithographic technique. He did not use this technique merely as a means for copying already existing artworks, which had been the main purpose of lithography from before, rather, he drew his poster art directly onto the lithographic stone, and as such he contributed to a reestablishment of lithography as a directive medium (Barnicoat, 1972). Thus, the special quality of the lithographic printing technique was the way it made possible the direct copying, and now also the creation, of an artwork.

As a printing technique, the lithograph had already been around for a couple of centuries, being invented by Austrian actor and playwright Alois Senerfield in 1798.
Figure 1 La Loie Fuller Dance at Folies-Bergere poster, Jules Chéret, 1893.
Senerfield’s invention of the lithograph was motivated by a need for a more cost-efficient way of printing after one of his screenplays faced printing problems (Britannica, 2015). The reason for its recurring appeal, now exploited by the mural painter Chéret in the 1860s, was the recent improving and perfecting of the technique in 1848, to the point where it was now possible to print sheets at the fast-paced rate of 10,000 sheets per hour (Barnicoat, 1972).

The art posters of Chéret now emerged in the overhauled city as a new and vital art form. Chéret earned his reputation as the first essential name in posters because of his posters’ function as magnificent works of art. He managed, through a combining of the technique of the book-illustrators and the scale and style prominent in the art of mural masters such as Tiepolo, to create an innovative, artistic style within a new and modern format. Being inspired by the kind of visual language being used in popular folk art found in the decorative styles of circus programs and taking this to the larger poster format, Chéret brought an essential ingredient to the field of posters with the application and introduction of the popular idiom in his works (Barnicoat, 1972).

1.3.2 The posters as persuasion and propaganda

One of the more noticeable ways in which the poster has impacted society as a significant medium in advertising and promotion, might be as a means of persuasion and propaganda and an effective tool in war times. It was during the First World War that the genre of the war poster came into play. The poster had already proved a successful medium as to convince and persuade consumers to buy commodities deemed essential by manufacturers and their advertising agencies, such as soap, shampoo, combs and other commodities that we now take as given household essentials (Simmons, Sherwin, 1999, p. 133). At the beginning of war, it now presented itself an opportunity to test the commercial powers of the poster in terms of a different goal – the influencing of citizens’ opinions and ideological convictions about war.

It was the decline in number of available commissions for commercial artists that drove a couple of the industry’s leading artists, Lucian Bernhard and Ludwig Hohlwein, to seek to the creating and designing of ‘war graphics’, and they did so with great success (Simmons, 1999, p. 129). In fact, these ‘war graphics’ weren’t just graphics directly promoting the war effort, sort to speak, but they were adverts for commodity products like...
Manoli cigarettes and Leibniz cookies that positively associated these types of commodities with the war effort (Simmons, 1999, p. 129). In this manner, the qualities and feelings communicated by the brand were transferred onto the idea of war. The popular and cherished brands that the citizens hold dear were in some aspect borrowing their likeability to the acts of war, thus contributing coloring the war efforts as something heroic, brave and almost desirable, rather than brutal, crude and dangerous (Simmons, 1999).

1.3.3 The poster – a collector’s object

Ever since the early art posters of Chéret’s early 1900s Paris the poster has proved to be a well renowned collectors’ item. As Chéret’s posters decorated the walls of Paris, the art poster became popular to the degree that it started a trend where eager and enthusiastic collectors went to such lengths as to start tearing the posters off the wall almost immediately after they had been put up. This overly enthusiastic collector’s joy that had inflicted several of the Parisian citizens, resulted in the French legislators having to enact statutes to protect placards and announcements while the advertisers themselves devised their own systems for safeguarding their investments (Harris, Neil, 1998, p. 12).

Neil Harris (1998) writes in his article The American Poster: A Fitful History about “three great waves” of poster collecting frenzy within the United States (p. 11). The first wave was admittedly the one in which coincided with the rise of the art poster in Paris late 19th century. The posters of Chéret and his astonishing poster designs didn’t go unnoticed across the pond. Reviews of his work by American critics such as J.-K. Huysmans in 1879 and 1880, mentioning Chéret in an approving manner. Many of these critics, with names such as George Seurat, Auguste Rodin, Ernest Maindron, began serious collections. These poster-collecting critics became interested in posters and started focusing on extensive writing about posters in the public newspapers. Maindron wrote a historical survey of the poster for the Gazette des Beaux-Arts, and shortly after he also wrote his larger survey Les Affiches Illustrés. Large poster exhibitions were held in both Paris and in provincial cities, and these exhibitions drew large crowds of intrigued audiences (Harris, 1998, p. 12). The art posters were in such a great demand that Edmond Sagot in 1891 published a catalogue listing and pricing more than two thousand posters by artists ranging from Paul Gavarni, Cham, Honoré Daumier, and Edouard Manet to Albert Robida, Caran d’Ache, Louis Marce Boutet de
Monvel, and Chéret. Chéret had got more than five hundred posters listed in this catalogue, and some of them had attained remarkable prices, reflecting Chéret’s rising fame as a renowned poster artist. Mainly because of their size, posters were hard for people to collect; few people had the spatial resources needed to store them such as galleries, museums and fairs. The posters weren’t only to be found in the exhibitions, of course; their home was first and foremost on the streets. Private collectors not able to buy or store large posters as the ones in the exhibitions were often found to pull posters off walls to reuse them as interior display. In fact, an anarchist-critic by the name of Félix Fénéon “…instructed his readers how to strip the living art by Céret and his colleagues off kiosks and hoardings and remount it in their apartments” (Harris, 1998, p. 13), which one time lead to the arresting of one of his friends.

The second wave of collectible poster frenzy to reach the USA was accompanied by the entry of World War I. As I noted earlier, one of the main reasons posters did make themselves a medium to be reckoned with was exactly in relation to this usage, as propaganda materials of war and the likes. The eminent interest in the posters produced as part of the European mobilization effort preceded the US’ entry into the war by several years. There were different reasons for this. One of the reasons were the widespread sympathy Americans had for Belgium, France and England, but also the designs of the posters seemed to say something about the culture that had produced them (Harris, 1998, p. 19).

As such, it could be noted at least two distinct motivators were present to drive the particular interest in the European war posters with the American people, 1) the desire to document and 2) a sense of injury or sympathy towards the involved parties (Harris, 1998, p.19-20). The posters served as a direct way of capturing and preserving the war times’ news image, and thus became to be understood as imperative to record the important events during the years of war. Some, either truly sympathetic to the cause or personally involved as per sense of injury, wanted the posters to help raise money to those directly inflicted. One example of this was Boston publisher, Charles E. Laurait Jr. He survived a torpedo attack while on board the Lusitania, and this built in him a strong determination to collect posters of British and French origin and use the proceeds he attained from their sales towards war charities (Harris, 1998, p. 21).
Cultural institutions such as universities and libraries, began assembling poster collections of their own to document the historical records. Supplementing the efforts of the institutions, was the collecting efforts of celebrity collectors such as actress Peggy Wood, manager of a chain of vaudeville theatres, A. Paul Keith, and department store owner A. Lincoln Filene, using his store as a display site (Harris, 1998, p. 21).

As the interest in posters were present even before the United States entered the war, it is safe to say that the national interest for posters intensified enormously in April 1917, when the US forces joined the European ranks (Harris, 1998, p. 21). American artists, printers, public institutions and advertising agencies quickly seized the opportunity to put to clever use the combination of patriotism and promotion, while major museums hosted several shows displaying posters of both foreign and domestic domain. The American designers and illustrators now started to produce an abundance of war posters themselves, and worked towards developing their own aesthetic driven by a desire to release themselves from German influences (Harris, 1998, p. 21). They did however fail to create any striking originality, leading most poster historians to agree that although the American artists succeeded in mobilizing the public through their work, their work had tendencies of being too repetitive, longwinded and rather conventional in both idea and performance (Harris, 1998, p. 21).

The third and last wave that Harris mentions as essential to the history of poster collection in America was preceded by a period he describes as the “Hobby Years”. The hobby years could be said to begin at a time where the common interest in the poster had declined, and the collecting of other types of objects, popular ones including stamps, coins, glass, furniture, china, postcards, dolls and so on. The American people were collecting more than ever, it seemed, but in this collecting craze the poster was lingering in its absence. It wasn’t for the lack of poster production; on the contrary, the advertising agencies were still present with poster work in the form of billboards and outdoor advertising in the form of twenty-four-sheet postings (Harris, 1998, 23).

If it was the impractical format of the posters of this time that made the interest for the posters in this time almost non-existent can only be speculated, and it was not until the entry of the 1960s that the third wave of collector interest revealed itself. In fact, this phase extends well beyond the length of the pervious waves, and in many ways this phase could be
said to stretch even into today, but more of that later. What happened in the wake of this wave was a dramatic shift in the purchase and marketing of mass reproduced images that claimed the poster label. As before the passion of poster collecting had been a public interest to communicate commercial publicity and political messages, now the collecting frenzy had taken on a much more personal direction (Harris, Neil, 1998).

1.4 The Poster in the 21st Century

While the iconic posters from the glory years of the posters still are present, such as for instance the propaganda and war posters of WWI and WWII and also the pop art posters of the 60s and 70s, both as rare original print editions and cheap copies, does the poster still play an active role in today’s media climate and also in the urban aesthetics of the city?

When beginning his research on the book *New Masters of Poster Design* (2015), John Foster quickly gained feedback that the poster was a dying medium and that a book of this caliber would not reach any momentum or attention to speak of. Were there even enough prominent designers to compile such a collection? Foster did however manage to collect quite the group of prestigious designers, all of whom have the designing of posters as a big part of their commissioned work.

In the paragraph about the poster’s beginning, I noted that the poster quickly gained the role as a prestigious collector’s item. Even today, many of the same posters are keepsakes, often used to showcase one’s own identity and interests. Online posters sites such as allposters.com makes it easy to search for a variety of posters in different sizes, qualities and genres, ranging from iconic posters of historic value to newer, more generic images available for framing, laminating and shipping internationally. A quick scan through the site reveals in fact that not just posters are available as posters, as it were. One of the most popular genres of posters on the site are apparently posters of famous ‘fine art’ works, such as Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night’ or ‘Waterlilies’ by Claude Monet, to name a few. As such, it appears that the poster format has also contributed to making fine art more available and affordable for the general public, in the form of inexpensive reproductions. At the same time, performing a Google search with the words ‘Chéret original poster’ for instance, reveal that the art posters of the late 19th century are continuing to be a highly-priced commodity
and collector’s object and it is evidently possible to possess a rare and original Jules Chéret if willing to pay for it.

1.4.1 Iconic poster designs
Iconic poster designs are continuing to play a visible role in modern media, yet not always in their original form. In the social media of the 21st, sharing and posting digital images, posters and memes play an extensive part in how social media users communicate their interests, beliefs and cultural affiliations amongst each other. One war poster in particular, have transferred from being a motivational poster commissioned by the British government in war time to become an all-encompassing, pop-cultural phenomenon within itself – namely the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ poster (Figure 2).

Even for the average Social Media user, this phrase and its popularity would have been hard to miss. This slogan has been adapted and put on everything from t-shirts to mugs and also, as mentioned, as well-traveled and far-spread memes across the different social media platforms. Originally, this poster was commissioned, as mentioned, by the British government just before the outbreak of World War II. The ‘Keep Calm and Carry on’ was one of the posters in a three poster-series, and the slogans on the two other posters were “Freedom is Peril, Defend It With All Your Might” and “Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution will bring Us Victory”. Together, they stood as motivation and encouragement, designed by the British Government to “steady the public’s resolve and maintain morale (Hughes, Stuart, 2009)” in a time affected by the uncertainties of lurking war.

The ‘Keep Calm’ poster came back into play in 2000, when a copy was discovered in a box bought at an auction by a bookseller from Northumberland which were intrigued by the design and framed it and put it up for sale at his shop. The bookseller, not being alone with his intrigue of the poster, soon received a magnitude of offers by interested buyers. Refusing all of them, he decided to make copies made for sale, after all, the popularity was not dismissible. From there, the popularity exploded; copies and adaptions were everywhere (Hughes, 2009).
Figure 2 The 'Keep Calm and Carry On' poster, British Ministry of Information, 1939
Figure 3 Uncle Sam "I Want You" poster, James Montgomery Flagg, ca. 1917
In social media, the adaptations are particularly notable. Memes and digital poster images featuring variations on the ‘Keep Calm’ slogans such as “Keep Calm and Eat A Cupcake”, “Keep Calm And Carry On Writing”, “Keep Calm And Ignore Negative People” are widespread and many both on social media and the Internet in general. Pop-cultural references have also gotten their own adoptions, such as the Yoda of Star Wars-inspired one “Calm You Shall Keep and Carry On You Must”, and the Zombie-frenzy-inspired one “Stay Alive and Avoid Zombies”. The poster was also parodied, fostering a poster with the slogan “Now Panic And Freak Out”, playing on the notion that sometimes life is just a little more complicated than presenting one with the possibility of putting your head down and carrying on peacefully no matter what.

Another poster exposed for something similar is the Uncle Sam “I Want You”-poster (Figure 3), a governmental propaganda poster motivating people to join the U.S. Army at the beginning of World War II (Andrews, Travis M., 2107). Like the ‘Keep Calm’ poster working as motivation in any and all cases, just changing the latter part with a new verb or action, the Uncle Sam ‘I want You’-poster works for all kinds of admonitions and desires. The Uncle Sam-poster being a subject of such massive remixing is noteworthy knowing that the original Uncle Sam-poster actually is a remix in its own right. The creator, James Montgomery Flagg, was under a strict deadline when being commissioned to do this poster for the American Government. Also in short of a model, Flagg used his own likeness for his illustration of Uncle Sam. Both Uncle Sam’s pose, with the serious expression and the pointed finger was borrowed directly from a British propaganda poster designed by Alfred Leete in 1914, depicting Lord Kitchener with the tagline “Your country needs YOU” (Andrews, 2017).

1.4.2 Contemporary posters for charity and politics
In 2013, at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery of New York, the poster exhibition Graphic Advocacy: International Posters for the Digital Age 2001-2012 showcased a selection of 122 posters in order to “…offer the public a chance to experience this magnificent body of empathetic and visually compelling messages of our time” (Resnick, Elizabeth, 2013). Despite the conception of the popular poster as a creation of the 19th century, the diverse collection of posters in this exhibition shows in what ways the old format of the poster has been able to adapt itself extraordinarily well to the online, digital age (Phaidon, 2013).
Elizabeth Reznick, the show’s curator, argues that “ready access to broadband and mobile communications and to digital production technologies has expanded the poster’s role well beyond the limitations of the printed surface (Phaidon, 2013)”. The exhibition is made up of posters such as posters for charity campaigns used to raise money for the Haiti’s 2010 earthquake victims and victims of the Japanese Tsunami of 2011, ecological advocacy images, anti-war posters; posters from the Occupy movement and posters from Iranian and Latin American protest movements. For the most part, the images selected were uncommissioned, thus produced by graphic designers’ eager to advocate a certain position of cause (Phaidon, 2013).

Many of the posters from this exhibition were not necessarily printed and pasted up in the streets. Several of them, for instance Lucas Krull’s poster design made to aid Japanese Tsunami survivors, were however sold as prints as an incentive to further financial benefit of the cause. Phaidon’s article covering the exhibition notes that these posters true merits lie in the way they have been designed not only to look good on a brick wall, but also to function flawlessly posted to social media communities such as Facebook or Instagram. Thus, strengthening both the digital and the analogue side of the poster. By adapting to the digital in terms of format, the design can promote and bring attention to the cause by reaching audiences online which the poster wouldn’t have reached online. And with the possibility for dedicated audiences to download the posters and have them printed for the purpose of distributing them on the streets, the promoters are able to extend the poster’s physical distribution beyond what would be possible with mere local print campaigns (Phaidon, 2013).

The poster rose to the occasion as a powerful artifact to raise awareness, money and support in 2011, when a colossal earthquake hit Japan on March 11th. With massive destructions from the earthquake and the tsunami that followed, Japan took major damage, causing the death of many people and leaving the affected areas in a state of disaster and despair. To help the victims and survivors with both means to help with rebuilding and also with means of food and medical aid, artists and designers across the globe created posters and digital images to raise funds through sales (Phaidon, 2013).

In 2008, as part of the Barack Obama election campaign, the poster again proved its popularity and continuous influence on today’s society. The Obama ‘Hope’ poster (Figure 4),
which was a large part of Obama’s presidential election campaign this year, became a pop cultural phenomenon and as such an important symbol in the political landscape this year and after.

The poster was designed by Los Angeles-based contemporary street artist, Shepard Fairey. Fairey got the idea of wanting to help the Obama campaign to influence his audience, and from there to spread the design and the message further. As a renowned street artist, Fairey already had a large audience paying attention to his work. While his normal approach to causes he took a personal interest in and wanted to advertise was to act first and apologize later, he was cautious to do this in the occasion, as he did not want Obama to come across as a politician where the fringe, street artist, radical types were his supporters (Arnon, Ben, 2008).

Fairey said that he underestimated Obama’s popularity, and the poster soon gained excessive spread and popularity. It seemed to exist a need or desire with the Obama supporters to have some sort of icon or symbolic image to help them in their sharing and their showing support for Obama as the next president. As such, the ‘Hope’ poster quickly equipped them with a decorative and visible way of sharing their political views while at the same time help spread this message to influence others. Another aspect of this story is that Fairey wasn’t the only artist creating art and designing for Obama’s campaign. In fact, during the campaign, several different artists joined the creative part of the campaign as part of the “Artists for Obama” (Arnon, 2008).

Both the tsunami posters and the Obama ‘Hope’ posters show that both the political and the collectible life of posters are still very much alive. Even if the digital arena is more and more relevant in order to reach as many as possible in arenas where they are, creating physical posters that meet people in real life spaces that they occupy daily gives an extra dimension to the promoting that one would not gain otherwise.
Figure 4 The 'Obama Hope' poster, Shepard Fairey, 2008
1.4.3 Digital displays – a new generation posters?

The posters – like many other media such as the book or newspaper – compete with new, digital media threatening to leave the old medium obsolete, as it were, by doing its job better and more efficiently. In the cityscape, digital displays have started to take precedence where paper-based billboards and posters used to lead. Yet, is screen displays a genuine threat towards the poster’s existence?

McLuhan (1964) said that “...a new medium is never an addition to the old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace” and that the new medium “...never cease to oppress the old media until it finds new shapes and positions for them” (p. 189). Here, McLuhan indicates that when a new medium is introduced into the media landscape, the old ones are affected to the point where they have to find new ways to claim their continuous existence. Explaining how new and old media affects each other, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) launched the concept of remediation, demonstrating what happens to old media as new media come to build upon their qualities with improvements where the old media falls short, as it were. The new media does not simply introduce a new way of doing things when being introduced as an improvement of the old one; there exists a type of borrowing here, where the new digital media plays a direct borrowing strategy, copying the old media’s modes of representation, in familiar but new surroundings. Borrowing and refashioning, Bolter (2006) notes, is phenomena that constantly takes place in and between different media. While McLuhan (as cited by Bolter, 2006), suggest a linear progression of a medium, where a new medium absorbs and replaces the old medium, Bolter (2006) suggest that the situation is a little more complex than this. Both the new and the old medium will continue the competing stance in wake of the other, borrowing back and forth between them. Even if the digitalization seems to increase, the fact that print is still around indicates that print offers something that the digital cannot, despite the digital’s undertaking to improve where print is lacking.

Looking at an advertising on a digital screen and an advertising on a paper poster, both on the same wall, it goes to suggest that these two kinds of advertising media could appear similar. They both probably make use of typography to get their message across, often accompanied by a visual image or illustration. Thus, one could argue that the digital display
advertising has borrowed and continued the conventions of type and image use as found within the poster tradition, like Bolter (2006) suggest is common for new media. Granted, this will yield some similarities, but what kind of qualities separates them, then?

Depending on type of screen or advertising found within this display, the digital screen display usually consists of more than one poster, switching between displaying different adverts in set intervals. Sometimes these advertisings aren’t merely static within themselves, but consists of animations, giving the advertising a narrative that exists in time, unlike the poster, which Gowin (as cited in Foster, 2015) pointed out, only exists of one single frame, having to convey all the information at once. If this is a disadvantage or a positive, is debatable. However, an animated advertising with a narrative that is dispelled in timed sequences is different to consume than a static poster advertising. Being confronted by a poster walking down the street, it is possible to suggest that the viewer is left with the choice to skim all the information at once, only stopping if one of the elements of the poster sparks a desire to read or watch in more detail. Being confronted by a screen display advertising, on the other hand, the viewer is forced to stop and watch the animation play out, and if passing by at the wrong time, the display might switch the current screen image to show the next ad, not allowing the viewer to finish reading the ad. If wanting to read the whole advertising, the viewer has to wait for the interval to complete and the ad in question is shown again. The poster could thus be argued to have a more predictable nature, to the more unpredictable nature of the digital display, where the content is on rotary display and not static.

The digital display can take up in it functions that the poster cannot; for example, it can integrate video and sound into the equation, engaging the viewer in different ways than an ordinary poster can. The digital display also carries within it technology – such as screen light – that makes it superior in the dark. The poster is dependent on lighting sources from outside sources to be readable at night. Normally existing within the urban city scene, though, the poster is typically surrounded by different light sources even if it does not carry the light source within its own medium.

The technology that the digital display carries in it, while having benefits, can also leave the adverts on this display vulnerable to the unpredictable moods of technology. If the technology faults or the power runs out the adverts stop showing. The paper poster is
spared this faith. Yet, one of the characteristics of the poster is its transience; paper is not a long-lasting material, leaving it at the mercy of outside forces such as weather and time. As such, the poster is also a cost-effective advertising medium, being relatively cheap to print and to reproduce. The display screen on the other hand, is often costly to advertise on, and should it break are the repair costs at the higher end of the scale.

It could be possible to argue that the biggest difference between the digital display screen and the poster is that the digital display screen can ‘contain’ various advertising designs, while the poster is both the design/advert and the paper the design is printed on. It fits one advertising design, and that’s that. McLuhan remarks this with his statement that “...the content of a medium is another medium” (McLuhan, 1964). From this, it could be said that the digital screen display for advertising contains within it the poster, as a medium. And when taking advantage of functions such as animation, it could be said to contain the medium of video.

Don Clark (as cited by Foster, 2015, p. 106) argues that poster art helps to fill the gap that the digitalization of society creates, presenting something tangible and physical to cherish and collect. He argues that the concert poster, for example, fills the gap that the physical CDs turning to digital streaming left behind. The poster thus seems to be relevant because of its analogue characteristic, much the same as many of the other analogue media – such as the vinyl LP – are making a comeback after parts of society’s inhabitants appears to have reached their limit concerning the overwhelmingly digital climate.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that the poster has had a significant social impact in society through its history. It has served a function both as a collector’s artifact and as a propaganda and/or advertising medium, sometimes interchangeably. The development of the poster as a popular medium, I found, was a result of the of the increased efficiency in printing techniques such as the lithograph.

The beginning of the chapter established what a poster is and the different qualities that make up this medium. At the same time, it examined the different ways in which the poster designers can invoke and apply different techniques to create an eye-catching, awestriking and successful poster; after all, posters are created to communicate a
promotional message or piece of information as efficiently as possible. What the most effective technique is to complete this task is highly dependent on which audience one is hoping to reach.

Continuing on, the chapter gave an overview of the poster’s history up to today. We learnt that even from the beginning, the poster’s relation to art was a strong characteristic that contributed to the medium’s continuous success. The visual aesthetics that functioned as the eye-catching part of the advertisement message also contributed to the poster’s desirable quality as an item to be collected and valued beyond its mere advertising function and thus giving the poster a life that exceeds its transient life as advertising.

The poster’s role in war times to spread propaganda and convey patriotic feeling also made it a medium that contributed to the documenting of cultural and socio-historic events, which made the importance of collecting and preserving posters for future generations even greater. This, and the poster’s place in popular culture can be understood as what turned the poster into a cultural artefact.

In politics and charity, the poster seems to play a role as still relevant, being an important part of political campaigns such as Obama’s, while at the same time posters are being used to raise awareness and funds when disasters hit.

While digital screens seem to invade the domain that before were solely reserved for paper based advertising such as posters, the poster still attain some characteristics such as easy and cost-effective to produce in large quantities, tangible and physical, and not reliant on stable technology such as power supply to function properly. These characteristics appears to help the poster stay relevant – it meets a demand that digital technology yet cannot compete with.

To follow up on this line of thought, the next chapter will examine the post-alphabetic, a term that is often used to describe a certain characteristic that has emerged in media in relation to the digitalization of society.
2 Being Post-Alphabetic

2.1 Introduction

“We are headed to what Don Byrd calls the post-alphabetic age. The image impinges upon the word so much as to imperil its hegemony and maybe even its meaningfulness. Storyspace will become more visual even as it insists upon the sensuality and visual qualities of the word.”

— Michael Joyce

As the first chapter elaborated on and looked at the complex history of the poster, concluding that the poster has been an influential medium in many ways and in turn how it came to be an important and valuable popular-cultural artefact, this chapter examines closely the concept of the ‘post-alphabetic’. As Kirschenbaum claimed that print was a powerful conductor of the aesthetic events in which post-alphabetic design refashioned information as, this chapter will examine what the post-alphabetic quality is. Because of the concept’s apparent relation to the alphabet, describing a situation after the alphabet, as it were, this chapter starts with a brief overview of how the alphabet impacted society.

The title of this thesis is “The Post-alphabetic Poster”, entailing that it is about a poster that has a specific aesthetic approach to its design. To be able to understand this concept better, it seems of importance to look closer at this concept, the post-alphabetic: Where does it originate, how has it been put to use? In the research on this concept, other relatable concepts have surfaced, arguably being essential to the understanding of the post-alphabetic. Within itself, post-alphabetic carries the word ‘alphabetic’, initiating that it reflects on something that comes after or exists beyond the alphabet. In an attempt to understand an age after the alphabet, thus, it seems of interest to understand what the alphabetic age entailed and what the alphabet have meant for society. Kirschenbaum’s application of post-alphabetic in relation to Carson’s design relates it to deconstruction, a term also used to describe Carson’s distinctive style of design. A brief overview of deconstruction and its relation to graphic design will thus be conducted; it is here it will be presented how the postmodernist thoughts and the digital thinking came to affect the ways
in which designers came to use typography in new and experimental manners. To further understand post-alphabetic design, the chapter will follow with an examining of how this concept is used to describe textual experimentation in other kinds of arts, poetry and music. It will also be examined how a post-alphabetic poster might relate to such advertising techniques as “uninformative” and “complex” advertising, and why post-alphabetic design might have gained some criticism from theorists of media and design.

2.2 From alphabetic to post-alphabetic

In the quote that initiated this chapter, Michael Joyce, by way of Don Byrd, dubs the age we’re in or headed towards as the post-alphabetic age. This could be seen to suggest that what we’re leaving an alphabetic age behind. What did the alphabet mean for modern society?

The alphabet can be seen as a corner stone in modern society; without it and the printed word, the modern world as we know it would probably not exist (McLuhan, 1964, p. 170). Where the world once relied on nothing but oral means of passing down information and knowledge from one generation to the next, the introduction of print and typography brought with it the possibilities of perspectives and fixed point of view (McLuhan, 1964, p. 175). Before, oral communication and verbal tale-telling suggested the sender’s personal influence in the conveyed information, but with the printed books, this personal touch was lost for a more generalized and standardized information delivery. The alphabet (and its extension into typography), as McLuhan (1964) puts it, thus “…made possible the spread of the power that is knowledge, and shattered the bonds of tribal man” (p. 187). The printed book and typography made the verbal story-telling traditions of the tribal man obsolete, and in this manner, it broke the ties of the tribal families now that the acquiring of knowledge, history and information could be achieved by reading a book instead of conversing with relatives. As such, McLuhan (1964) continues, the book was in many ways the first learning-machine and also the first mass-produced commodity (p. 189). As such, the printed word’s need for, and thus presenting of, a set of typographic principles – uniformity, continuity and lineality – made it so that typography and print culture were one of the main factors of creating uniformity and continuity in Western societies (McLuhan, 1964, p. 15).
conventions of the typographic principles have come to be central in visual communication and graphic design, in order to communicate information effectively to the masses.

But does the post-alphabetic imply a moving away from the alphabet, or might it imply something else? Lyotard (2001) defined the ‘post’ in postmodernism not to suggest a true break from modernism but a kind of conversion; a new direction building from the previous one. Maybe it could be plausible to understand the ‘post’ in ‘post-alphabetic’ in the same manner. Perhaps does ‘post-alphabetic’ not entail a moving away from but a transcending of the alphabet to take the notions of the alphabetic and find new and experimental ways to adapt it to the technological media?

Writing about the post-alphabetic future, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (2000) suggest that “…the real world of digital reality has always been post-alphabetic”. They argue that this might be because “…the letters of the alphabet were too slow to keep up with the light-time and light-speed of electronics” (Kroker & Kroker, 2000, p. 326). The images, however, Kroker & Kroker (2000) suggest that have the ability to move at the speed of light, making it so that in the digital era we leave the Gutenberg Galaxy behind and enter the Image Millennium. The post-alphabetic era might thus suggest a shift in how we deal with the alphabet, in an alleged “turn against text”.

2.3 A turn against text

In his article, Digital Anthropophagy Refashioning Words as Image, Sound and Action, Roberto Simanowski (2010) writes about something he calls “a turn against text” that is happening in the wake of the digital technologies (p. 162). He begins this train of thought with a nod to Bolter & Grusin’s remediation, and how this concept is used to “…describe how one medium reforms another”. New media, he says, is in Levinson’s technological media theory though to functioning as a remedying of the deficiencies of old media; i.e. the photography remedies painting’s lack in representing reality, and film remedies photography’s lack in representing reality in time. As McLuhan (1964) puts it, “…any technology could do anything but add to what we already are” (p. 12). Text is perhaps in need of redeeming too (Simanowski, 2010, p. 162), but in what way? Simanowski continues here to point to how text, in its usual mode of signification carries a disregard for its own materiality; it is not the text’s own materiality (or form) that is generally of essence, but
rather what the text signifies outside itself. In other words, the text’s own appearance is not what is given precedence, but rather its signified creation of meaning. Digital media, he argues, “...emphasizes a focus on the text’s materiality while undermining the effects of its linguistic signification” (Simanowski, 2010, p. 162).

2.4 Deconstruction and the post-alphabetic

The origin of ‘deconstruction’ is found in the works of Jacques Derrida. He first introduced this term in his work ‘Of Grammatology’ in 1967, positioning it as a rejection of modern criticism: “...to uncover the meaning of a literary work by studying the way its form and content communicate essential humanistic messages. Deconstruction, like critical strategies based on Marxism, feminism, semiotics, and anthropology, focuses not on the themes and imagery of its objects but rather on the linguistic and institutional systems that frame the production of texts” (Lupton, Ellen & Miller, J. Abbott, 1994). It can be connected to Martin Heidegger’s Destruktion, which referred to a way of exploring “...the history of the concepts and categories enforced on a word by tradition, which results in a distinct interpretation offering a more reliable understanding of human existence” (Singhal, Anil, 2015). As an analytical approach, destruction is often understood as a means of deconstructing, i.e. breaking into pieces, a text or work of art to decipher and reveal the infinite number of different meanings of the text. In Derrida’s deconstruction, its main concern is to deconstruct the binary oppositions that were deeply implemented in the theoretical work of the structuralists. These binary oppositions, which Derrida claimed were what the whole of the Western culture was governed by, were oppositions like reality/representation, inside/outside, original/copy, and mind/body (Lupton & Miller, 1994). The matter with these oppositions was the cultural and social convention within the circles of science, art, philosophy and literature of preferring one part of the pair over the other; accepting one as truth and one as false, or one as of higher esteem and one of lesser of the same (Lupton & Miller, 1994).

The word ‘deconstruction’ surfaced in the mid 1980s as a term that was used to label everything from architecture, graphic design, products, and fashion. The reoccurring qualities that were found in the objects that were given the ‘deconstruction’ label, were features such as “…chopped up, layered, and fragmented forms imbued with ambiguous
futuristic overtones (Lupton & Miller, 1994).” From this, it could be suggested that this stylistic feature within the different branches of contemporary design and architecture were essentially just a superficial style of design that didn’t signify any deeper essence than that of complying with a stylistic trend of the decade. Possibly, then, could it be insinuated that the usage of the ‘deconstruction’ term in such a manner was a non-valid one, and that this concept should have been given a different name all together (Poynor, 2003)? Lupton and Miller (1994) suggests otherwise; they argue in their article that the concept of ‘deconstruction’ in the visual arts such as graphic design have a place within the theory of deconstruction as per Derrida, and that deconstruction, although often understood as such, is not so much a style or an attitude but a “...mode of questioning through and about the technologies, formal devices, social institutions, and founding metaphors of representation.” Deconstruction, they say, is a concept that belongs both to history and theory, and that it is embedded in recent visual and academic culture while at the same time describing a strategy of critical form-making which is performed across a range of artifacts and practices, both historical and contemporary (Lupton & Miller, 1994).

Even if many designers did not consciously apply the thoughts of deconstructionist theory to their designs, the breaking up of the syntax and the typographic legibility affects the ‘art of typography’, the relationship between form and content, and the possibility of decoding these internal structures echoes the deconstruction principles of Derrida, regardless of the intent of the designer. The designers Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte, for example, suggest a definition of deconstruction in design as a more direct and critically awareness of deconstruction and this concept’s theoretical origins. Byrne and Witte (as cited in Poynor, 2003, p. 49) literally connects the idea of deconstruction as “…the breaking down of something (an idea, a precept, a word, a value) in order to “decode” its parts in such a way that these act as “informers” on the thing, or on any assumption or convictions we have regarding it”. Rick Poynor (2003) suggest that Byrne and Witte’s emphasis of meaning is a notable break with the notion of deconstruction as simply taking things apart for the prospect of ‘reinventing’ form and ‘revitalizing print media’ (p. 49). Typographic design is in the view of Byrne and Witte the most logical visual extension of deconstruction, with its basis in words and text (Poynor, 2003). Byrne and Witte are backed by Katherine McCoy at
Cranbrook Academy of Art, who taught a deconstructionist approach to design rooted in
text theory on to her students (Lupton & Miller, 1994).

Through the methodical playful game of rearranging and breaking up the typography,
it could be said that the designers revealed possibilities of alternative ways of reading
(Poynor, 2003, p. 53). No longer was it necessary to be bound by the traditional conventions
of reading, and these new and alternative approaches contributed to the highlighting of the
physicality of the printed word’s presentation, and also to the establishing of new non-lineal
connections between words, and to the curious exploration of the relationship between text
and image, and the process of reading and seeing (Poynor, 2003, p. 51).

Shetty (2012) notes that the wave of deconstructionist, grunge-y typography of the
90s seemingly disappeared around the mid 2000s, again to be abandoned for the more
classic, organized and modern layouts and typography that generally seem to create the best
means for effective communication. If it is legibility issues that were the case, or if it was the
novelty of the new technologies and their possibility that wore off, is not easy to say (Shetty,
2012). Perhaps it was a little bit of both.

2.5 Post-alphabetic design in other media and arts

To better understand the post-alphabetic design in general, and how it manifested and
applied to print more specifically, it might be useful to look at post-alphabetic design in
other mediated artworks. Some of these instances of post-alphabetic expressions, as it were,
are found both in music, poetry and even contemporary art installations. In the following I
want to present some examples.

In a text on new ways to approach text and letters, Robert Simanowski (2010)
presents several contemporary installations which he considers contains that of a post-
alphabetic quality. One of these are Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv’s interactive
installation, Text Rain, an installation featuring a large monitor that viewers can stand or
move in front of, seeing themselves as black and white projections “…on which letters “fall”
from the top edge” (Simanowski, 2010, p. 160). The title, Text Rain, thus refers to the way in
which the letters pour down and land on the participants’ projections and responding to
their motions, seemingly allowing the participants to lift and manipulate the text before
letting them continue falling. The accumulation of letters is part of the game, allowing
participants to gather amounts of text and sometimes decipher words or phrases. The words and phrases are not totally random either, as it uses passages from Evan Zimroth’s poem “Talk to you”, featured in his 1993 book Dead, Dinner or naked. The installation thus encourages both playing with and reading of text. However, the randomness of falling words and letters does not intend for the participants to be able to decipher the poem in its entirety, consequently engaging the partakers more in a test of interface rather than in a reading process (Simanowski, 2010, p. 160), relieving them of the obligation to search for meaning. Another of the installations Simanowski (2010) mentions is Paul DeMarini’s The Messenger, and this, he suggests, unlike Text Rain, “...turns text completely into unintelligible signs” (Simanowski, 2010, p. 161). The Messenger is an internet-based installation distributing e-mails to three peculiar output devices where they are displayed letter by letter. The installation output devices consist of “…26 talking wash bins each intoning a letter of the alphabet in Spanish; (…) a chorus line of 26 little skeletons, each wearing a poncho bearing a letter, which dance when the corresponding letter are uttered; and (…) a series of 26 electrolytic jars with metal electrodes in the form of the letters A through Z, which oscillate and bubble when electricity is passed through them” (Simanowski, 2010, p. 161). The installation bases its expression on the early suggestions for the electric telegraph (MediaArtTube, 2008) representing the way in which messages in the modern world fade into “the total void” after being received and read by its recipient (Simanowski, 2010, p. 161). Here, the transformed into sound, light and performance, depriving it completely of a traditional form of legibility. There is, however, possible to recover the text through an extensive act of deciphering and collecting all the output, reverting it back to letter forms (Simanowski, 2010, p. 161), even if it is not the presentation of text in legible forms that is the purpose of this installation.

From contemporary art installation in a gallery situation, post-alphabetic play with text are also to be found in music. John T. Newcomb (2011) discusses the representational options of music performances such as blues musician Charles Patton’s 1930 performance of “High Water Everywhere”. He suggests that the alphabet and the printed page are not adequate means of representing this performance, due to this performance’s quality as “…a new post-alphabetic form of modernist textuality” (Newcomb, 2011, p. 376). In Patton’s performance, the lyrics are broken into a series of aural fragments; the vocal performance
includes heavily accented, almost unrecognizable words, phatic interjections, spoken reiterations, hummed melody and expressive noises, which both de-metricalize and materialize his verses (Newcomb, 2011, p.376). This, Newcomb claims, leaves the song unreproducible as far as performances go, rendering the only means for reproduction the duplication of the recording but never as a replication. A different musical performance, “St. Louis Blues” performed by Handy, however, is existing in such a manner that it is fully adequate to reproduce the content of the performance onto paper by means of writing down the word that are played. Here, the articulating of words is done in such a manner that “...the words seem to exist outside the performance, reminiscent of how a given recitation of a poem seldom effaces our senses of its existence on the printed page” (Newcomb, 2011, p. 376). As opposed to the Patton performance, thus, the “St. Louis Blues” maintains the lyric’s metrical integrity and identity, and the performance adheres closely to the standards of articulation used by professionally trained singers (Newcomb, 2011, p. 376).

On the mention of poetry, Jesper Olsson (2011) uses the phrase ‘post-alphabetic’ in order to describe a new type of poetic writing that began to emerge in 1960s Sweden; a kind of “…writing that did not seem to pay proper attention to poetry as a conveyor of metaphoric messages or as an instrument for excavating the depths of the human soul” (p. 273). He describes this emerging of so-called concrete poetry like this:

Non-linearity, hypertextuality, multimediality, and post-alphabetic writing are all characteristics that can be used to describe the “concretist” practice. Moreover, the interest in cybernetics and code, and the investigation of rule-based poems, disclose an “algorithmic imagination” at play that underpins such a comparison.

As the above usages suggest, the phrase and term ‘post-alphabetic’ can be used in a wide variety of different contexts. However, in every instance where this word has been used, there seems to be proposed a state in which letters either seize to exist or deviate from their recognizable form, leaving any original text on the borderline of illegibility. Referring to Bianca Isaki (2009), it seems plausible to suggest that the venturing within or towards a post-alphabetic age or era will be of profound significance to us as human-beings, when since the
becoming of the alphabet we have hard-wired into us an “alphabetic body” through the act of alphabetic writing.

2.6 Uninformative advertising and post-alphabetic design

In a more applicable manner towards the poster as an advertising medium, it could be argued that the result gained by creating a post-alphabetic poster design is comparable to the strategy of withholding information on product attributes or other kinds of information in advertising. Dina Mayzhin and Jiwoong Shin (2011) writes about this type of advertising tactic in an article, named Uninformative Advertising and an Invitation to Search. Due to its limited surface, the poster can only contain a certain amount of text before communication is compromised, or rather one runs out of space. However, failing to feature enough product attributes in the advertising can make it difficult to be distinguished from other, lesser attributed products. This, Mayzhin & Shin (2011) suggest, can be resolved by relying on the uncertain consumer to become an active consumer and as such take active measures to research the product further. With a high-quality product, a firm might not fear this withholding of information, as they know that the information that the active consumer will find is positive information reaffirming their thoughts on the product as a high quality one (Mayzhin & Shin, 2011). Thus, withholding the information can be said to work in the favor of the advertising company. In today’s digital media climate, it is also possible to use uninformative advertising with the purpose of exploiting the cross-media platforms available today, leading the spectating consumer to search for additional information online and find complementary information in this manner. As such, creating a poster or other advertising design with a post-alphabetic design where legibility is compromised could encourage a curious spectator to pick up their smartphone, for instance, and attempt to search in order to learn more about the advertised event.

2.7 Complex design

It could be argued that a poster featuring a post-alphabetic design, one that deconstructs a text from its traditional conventions and putting it together in an orthodox manner, are showcasing a complex design. Pieters, Wedel and Batra (2010) discusses the use of complex design in relation to the stopping power of advertising; a good poster (and advert in general)
is as previously noted one that catches attention by its design. They not that in regard to complexity in advert design there exists two opposite views - one side emphasizing simplicity, claiming that complexity hurts advertising, and another, endorsing complexity as a means to slow down the reader down by making it more difficult to take in. Through their study, Pieters et. al. posit two types of visual complexity in advertising: 1) feature complexity, and 2) design complexity. They explain ‘feature complexity’ as complexity found in the basic visual features of the ad image, such as color, luminance and edges. “The more detail and variation there is in the three basic visual features across the image, the more computer memory is needed to store the image; in turn, this provides a convenient measure of feature complexity” (Pieters et. al, 2010, p. 49). In contrast, ‘design complexity’ refers to how elaborate in its design the advertising is, in terms of shapes, objects and patterns. Thus, feature complexity refers to the “…unstructured variations in the visual feature of image pixels” (Pieters et. al, 2010, p. 50), and design complexity refers to the “…structured variations in terms of specific shapes, objects, and their arrangements in the advertisement” (Pieters et. al, 2010, p. 50). On this note, it seems possible to argue that post-alphabetic design inhabits a strong sense of design complexity, having much to do with exactly that of specific shapes, objects and their arrangement. The design complexity exists within the advertisement’s creative design (Pieters et. al., 2010, p. 50). Through their study, Pieters et. al. (2010) finds that “…design complexity increases attention to the pictorial” and that increases the positive attention towards an ad, given that brand identifiability is high (p. 56-57). They also found that adverts with high design complexity often had high brand identifiability, while adverts with high feature complexity (clutter) often scored low on brand identifiability (Pieters et. al. 2010, p. 57).

2.8 Criticism of post-alphabetic design

Not everyone is in awe by this creative expression embarked upon by the graphic artists, and some, like Peter Dormer (as cited in Poynor, 2003, p. 16) argues that “…the rules of the craft are the craft”, and as such he proposes that graphic design without any rules soon would cease to be graphic design. Poynor (2003) claims that this is even more the case with typography; that to make sense of typography certain rules must be followed.
McLuhan (1964) highlights in relation to this, the phrase “...a place for everything and everything in its place”, which he identifies as “...a feature that is not only for the compositor’s arrangement of his type fonts, but of the entire range of human organization of knowledge and action from the sixteenth century onward (p. 218)”. In post-alphabetic design within the print medium, one could say that there no longer is a place for ‘everything’, and ‘everything’ do not have its place anymore. When the way we display and communicate information is so strongly embedded into our culture, breaking with such conventions could be problematic.

One theorist who emphasizes this challenge, is Jorge Frascara (1988) in his article, Graphic design: Fine art or Social Science. Here, Frascara argues that graphic design is a social science, and that creative experimentation of this nature should be left to the artists who perform within the fine arts and not to be dabbled with by graphic designers whose primary concern should be to communicate something in a functional and legible manner. His view is backed to some degree by Johanna Drucker saying that as much as she finds experimenting with type to be interesting, she would not want to “…be confronted with an innovative post-alphabetic design when (...) looking through the Yellow Pages for a plumber and [the] living room ceiling is falling in” (Drucker & Kirschenbaum, 1997). Thus, it goes to suggest that there is a time and place for post-alphabetic design, and that in some instances, it is simply not justified.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, the intention was to find out about the concept of post-alphabetic, its usages and such in order to create an understanding of what it means that a design is post-alphabetic. It was found that the term has origins back to hyper theorists Joyce and Byrd, and that it is often used to describe tendencies in digital technology, even often as a replacement for digital, such as Joyce, for example, calling the era of today the post-alphabetic age. From Kirschenbaum (1999), it had already been established that a post-alphabetic design suggested deconstructed letterforms and alternative approaches to traditional conventions of layout and typography. The alphabet and the art of printing was found to have great impact on society (McLuhan, 1964), and the typographic principles promoting such characteristics as uniformity, continuity and lineality was an important
reason for this impact, given how it made fixed points of view possible and created the individual away from the collective.

Taking Lyotard’s ‘post’ description into account, it seems possible to conclude that a post-alphabetic age does not necessarily mean a move away from the alphabet, as such, but perhaps instead a development or conversion from it. The use of the term ‘post-alphabetic’ to describe both concrete poetry and art installations’ application of letters and text in unconventional manners suggest this; the alphabet is still in use in post-alphabetic art and media, but in different ways, often in situations where it is virtually detached from its signified, linguistic meaning.

As deconstruction was also a manner in which to describe the post-alphabetic streak in graphic design, the chapter also looked to explore the connection between the postmodernist concept of deconstruction and the post-alphabetic. While some designers and other academics were critical in relating these two, judging by the findings that imply that the post-alphabetic challenges the letters’ relation to form/meaning or form/content, it seems possible to conclude that the post-alphabetic features a kind of deconstruction of letters, in a way that might be linked to the philosophical concept of deconstruction. The deconstruction of letters also opens for acts of deciphering and decoding, which could be possible to relate to deconstruction’s aim to suggest that a text could hold an infinite number of meanings and the revealing of these were of essence to understand the depth of the text.

In relation to applying post-alphabetic design in advertising, the chapter examined two concepts could be found relevant; the effective application uninformative advertising and complex design. This suggested that reducing legibility of certain elements of a poster could have a positive effect on its effectiveness as an advertorial poster.

Even if there were several artists in the postmodern period of the 80s and 90s that were prone to tendencies of favoring a deconstructive, post-analytic kind of design, Kirschenbaum (1999) suggested that David Carson was the ultimate example. The next chapter will therefore look at Carson’s background, career and critics, in an attempt to understand this type of design further.
3 The Rise of The Digital in Print

3.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, different applications of the term post-alphabetic has been examined, providing us with a better understanding of this concept and the way in which it refers to the use of text to the point of illegibility and a move from content to form and text to image, as it were. The following pages will concern themselves with the influence that the digital technologies have had on the printed media, and how this came to influence the graphic design style of the 90s. By first presenting David Carson and his non-design background, to understand the motivations behind his design choices, this chapter will examine some of the criticism of Carson and his response to this. The chapter is called “the rise of the digital in print” because, in many ways, Carson’s style is influenced by the digitalization of the 80s and 90s, and this chapter will examine the motivations behind Carson’s so-called deconstructive, post-alphabetic, design style.

3.2 David Carson – The End of Print

It seems that whenever one encounters writings about the different rules and laws in the graphic design field, graphic designer David Carson is often mentioned as one that broke all the rules and yet had tremendous success. As actors within the graphic design field is fully aware, good design follows certain rules; rules that apply for everything from composition and typography to coloring and readability. If these rules are broken, the design could be claimed to be less good, if not bad, design (Poynor 2003, Frascara 1988). The graphic design community in general seem to be busy tearing each other’s work down any chance they get, especially when big corporate rebranding jobs are revealed, but that is a different story. But, of course, some rules are made to be broken and no rules are without exceptions.

In the 1990s, a handful of designer paved their way in the graphic design field, making a name for themselves, names like Rand, Brody and Carson, to name a few. They put their unique and innovative design styles on the map, and made their expertise something to be reckoned with, making them gurus by reputation (Blackwell, 2000, p. 5). His non-traditional, unconventional style of rule-breaking design made his contribution to the design
community an attitude, rather than a movement. He pushed his peers and followers to create their own rules and their own work, instead of passing down a handbook full of rules and a certain style to be obedient to (Blackwell, 2000, p.5). As Blackwell (2000) puts it:

“Carson’s work was so concerned with not complying to the rules and moving in new and unexplored directions, that the work he inspired wouldn’t necessarily look like the work he produced himself. It was, after all, the concept of “changing what you were doing if you recognized it as rule-bound” that stood in the foreground of the ‘Carson tradition’, and thus to ‘copy’ his style would be the opposite of this concept’s message.”

David Carson had initially a BFA degree in sociology, not considering a career in design, when a random flyer advertising a summer program in graphic design at the University of Arizona in Tucson 1980 ended up in his mailbox. He signed up to this class, and ended up finding a lifelong friend and mentor in the leader of the design program, Jackson Boelts, which in turn inspired him to enroll to another workshop, this time in Switzerland, led by instructor Hans-Rudolf Lutz (Lupton, 2014). This led Carson pursue a career in design, and after graduating from a school of commercial art, he combined his passions both for surfing and for design and started working as a designer for a small surfers’ magazine called Self and Musician (Famous Graphic Designers, 2017). From there he moved on to working for Transworld Skateboarding magazine, which enabled him to do work that allowed for an even more experimental exploration of layout and form. It was during this time Carson developed his signature style which emphasize the use of unconventional ‘dirty’ or ‘grunge’ typographic and photographic techniques. Now, having had the experience of working as an art director both for Transworld Skateboarding and later also the magazine Beach Culture, Carson went on to accepting a job offer for the alternative music magazine Ray Gun, which came to be one of the magazines which is the symbol of the peculiar style that makes up Carson’s career. It was the publisher of Ray Gun who recognized the true potential of Carson’s graphic design skills, and as it turns out, by the help of Carson Ray Gun tripled its circulation and attracted a wider scope of readers (Famous Graphic Designers, 2017).

With Ray Gun, it could be said that Carson was at his most experimental. He distorted the layout and broke the frame constantly “…attempting to disrupt preconceptions about
how and where the relationship between headline, caption, body text, image and page border was established” (Blackwell, 2000, p. 2). At what could arguably be his most extreme, he went as far as to publish a presumably tedious interview with Bryan Ferry in Zapf Dingbats (symbol) font (Figure 1), and as such leaving the whole interview illegible. This design approach was done in regard to Carson’s opinion on the article. As he was putting together the magazine, upon reading the piece on Bryan Ferry he concluded that it was boring and not reader-worthy (Blackwell, 2000). As such, he set the complete article from beginning to end (only excluding Bryan Ferry’s name) in the illegible Zapf Dingbats font, perhaps with the intent of making the content more interesting than it originally was. With this layout and font decisions, transforming the text into unrelated symbols, Carson ostensibly made an uninteresting text into a visual kind of artwork. The strategic placements of the “title symbols” on the first page of the article, where the large symbol in red covers most of Bryan Ferry’s name to the point that if you didn’t know why Bryan Ferry was you might not be able to comprehend it, reveals the unimportance Carson put on this article. Just this use of the Dingbats font shows the use of the digital in Carson’s designs. The Dingbats symbol fonts is by nature digital, requiring as such a digital text editor of some sort to transform real words and letters to this system of symbols. The Zapf Dingbats typeface was designed by the typographer Hermann Zapf in 1978 and was created for the purpose of easy access to common and useful symbols such as the bullets to create bulleted lists in written documents, or to serve other decorative or practical functions within a layout.
Blackwell (2000) suggests that even without Carson these forms of style aspects would have happened anyway (p.2). After all, the society within the 90s’ media scene was already heading in the direction of constantly being influenced by, and also enabled by, the massive digitalization of technology. With the new digital technology available to them, graphic designers could streamline their work more than ever before. In the late 80s the famous Adobe Creative Suite were taking its first small steps into becoming the graphic design fields leading digital tool package of choice, and Carson’s go-to programs PageMaker and QuarkXpress were released in their first versions already in 1985 and 1987, respectively. As such, through the 90s, all these programs saw a growing in usage and in numbers of versions, consequently changing the scene of graphic design for the next generations (Blackwell, 2000). Now, graphic designers were invited into the realm of typographic construction to a much greater degree.

Carson always designed completely aware of the media reality of his audience, in which the television, radio, and the massive advertising saturation served as an all-consuming stimulation (Blackwell, 2000, p 2). In the media and art landscape that
surrounded both Carson and the audience of *Ray Gun* and his other design work was the rise of the World Wide Web and the focus on globalization and topics such as race, sexuality and multiculturalism (Farago, 2015). As the World Wide Web kept expanding, the world seemed to be shrinking. Things were available to us now in a whole different way than we were used to, in a much bigger pace than we could comprehend. National boundaries were not as rigid as before, opening new ways of communication and means of entertainment. The new digital opportunities also influenced art. Even though Carson resisted the idea of getting overly excited about the Web, criticizing for instance the bandwidth restriction as an obstacle to the kind of work he wanted to do, the multimedia richness of his work with *Ray Gun* functioned as some sort of experimental statement about how information might be delivered to stimulate a new way of engaging with text (Blackwell, 2000, p. 2). In his layout work with the magazine, Carson explored different ways of deconstructing and displaying text in untraditional manners. Words were blown up, shrunken, overlapped, twisted and cropped, leaving it up to the reader to complete the task of deciphering and interpreting the message within the pages of the magazine. Carson’s work pushed in this regard print beyond its limits, with the intent of consistently challenging the media well aware that the current society’s young consumers did not consume information following the traditional reading behavior (Blackwell, 2000, p. 2). His designs then came to imitate the distorted, multifaceted way of presenting information that were found in other types of media, to be able to reach his audience by adapting their mindset and learning from the current backdrop of the mediated world.

### 3.3 To *not* communicate is not an option

One of Carson’s most treasured mantras is that one cannot *not* communicate; whenever you make something – a poster, an advertising, a piece of art or whatever it might be – something is, by necessity, communicated. Carson’s reason for this mantra is evidently to answer back to his critics claiming his designs are deconstructed in such a manner that it is impossible to obtain any particular meaning and communicative message from them.

One of these critics was Massimo Vignelli, dubbing Carson the “master of non-communication” (Kirschenbaum, 1999). Carson’s go-response to critics who claims his ability to communicate is somehow less than average, is that to not communicate is never an
option; “you cannot not communicate”. While people did criticize Carson for his seemingly lacking communication skills as far as his graphic design work goes, Vignelli, suggesting Carson was a master in the game of non-communicating, admired Carson’s talent. In an interview for Print in July 1996, journalist Ellen Shapiro engaged with Vignelli in a talk on his harsh attacks on the aesthetics of Emigre and their use of fonts, calling them “garbage” and “an aberration of culture”. While the trend of the 90s’ magazine culture seemed to be all about breaking with the “prison of the grid”, it probably came as no surprise that a designer such as Vignelli, with his rigid application of grid systems and typographic principles, would speak up against this new trend. Shapiro, opening the interview with a diplomatic streak, asked Vignelli why he was so eager to make judgement calls on what is “good” and “bad” design based on style. Was it not possible to appreciate different kinds of styles? He responded that it was indeed possible to appreciate different kinds of design styles, but only if those styles held any form of quality. The style of the Emigre typefaces, as far as Vignelli is concerned, had “zero refinement” and “zero grace”, not contributing to typography at all. In an attempt to rebel, he argued, the designers of Emigre fell flat on their face, failing to provoke and instead came up with something shallow.

Even with this harsh judgement on the style of Emigre magazine, a magazine which people such as Kirschenbaum connects to the kind of style found in Ray Gun and other work by David Carson, Vignelli proclaimed in the interview that David Carson is a terrific artist. One of the reasons for Vignelli’s acceptance of Carson’s work is possibly the fact that he did not view Carson as a graphic designer at all, but rather as an artist with an extraordinary talent in his experimentation and play with type. As such, Vignelli can be said to agree with Frascara (1988) and his concern that radical experimentation of typography and layout was reserved for artists and not the designers.

In the event of Vignelli’s passing in 2014, filmmaker and photographer Gary Hustwit wrote a tribute text to his dear friend on his website. Here, Hustwit retells a story about a meeting between Carson and Vignelli in the 90s, when the two designers were invited to speak at the same design conference. This was at the same time as Ray Gun’s heydays, and Vignelli had spoken some rather harsh words in the press about Carson’s work for the magazine. Carson told Hustwit that because of this criticism, he was scared to meet Vignelli, but his fears were unwarranted and the two ended up bonding over wine and women, as it
were, during the speaker’s dinner at the opening night of the conference. The following day, as Vignelli was interviewed by a journalist, he was asked what he thought of Carson’s work. “I love it, it’s fantastic! It’s not graphic design, but it’s fantastic!”, he responded eagerly.

Perhaps it was the professional schooling of the designers of *Emigre* that made Vignelli more critical and disapproving to their experimentation than the experimentation of Carson? Carson was a self-taught graphic artist, and not labeling his work as graphic design might have given Vignelli the benefit of judging Carson’s work in a different light than he did the designers of *Emigre*. Maybe it was their professional schooling within the design profession that made Vignelli hold the designers *Emigre* to different standards? Or perhaps he was indeed biased after having met and bonded with Carson in person, no longer capable of judging him with the same neutrality as before.

Whatever it was, this will only be speculations on my part. However, the fact was that Vignelli was in many ways the manifestation of the pertinence of the typographic principles, always so immaculately sticking to and complying with the grid in his work, and Carson was the manifestation of the *breaking with* the same principles. Together with the other designers of the 90s, Carson opposed and rebelled against the very same principles of communication that were the cornerstones of Vignelli’s career. As such, it was probably not all that surprising that a designer of his caliber would oppose a trend sending into mayhem, as it were, all the rules that were designed to foster good quality communication.

Even if he came into Vignelli’s good graces, receiving the title of “master of non-communication” probably did not sit well with Carson, who persistently kept insisting that everything is communication, even *non-communication*. In an interview with his editor Lewis Blackwell, printed in the revised edition of *The End of Print: The Grafik Design of David Carson*, Carson says just because something is legible does not mean it is communicating, or at least, it does not mean that it is communicating correctly. He points here to how completely legible encyclopedias and other kinds of books may not appeal to young people design-wise, thus not motivating them to pick them up and read them in the first place. Thus, if a fully legible book does not communicate well enough to be picked from the shelf, or communicates so poorly that it is quickly put back down upon reading, that the book fails to communicate on the most basic level. Carson says that it is not legibility, but rather the emotion within the message that is of importance to him.
In the same interview, Blackwell points to much the same as Vignelli, suggesting that the approach that Carson has to designing; bringing to the art of communication something personal that he finds within him, is more the approach of an artist rather than that of a designer. Carson goes on to confess that his approach is indeed a very personal and interpretative one, saying that he can’t justify working through a different approach. It is the personal flare you get when you put yourself into the work that keeps it from becoming deadly and boring, he argues, suggesting that complying with rules and rigidity promotes the risk of producing boring designs. The designers even risk being bored themselves, and bored designers do not nurture intriguing design work.

Carson’s personal, self-indulgent approach to his designs, then, promoted criticism based solely on the fact that he weighted so heavily on the personal aspect in his designs (Blackwell, 2000). For the critics, design should be focusing on how to best communicate with the audience without considering personal preferences on look and layout. Of course, one should possess the ability to consider what is aesthetically appropriate, but this should be a trained ability in complying with the formality of rules rather than a non-professional instinct based on guess-work, as it were. Carson does suggest in the interview with Blackwell that editorial work such as his work with Ray Gun and Beach Culture is generally different than doing commercial work, implying that commercial work is more restrictive. However, big brands did approach Carson, intrigued by the experimental qualities of his design, despite the critics claiming his lack of communicative abilities. Carson himself suggests that this interest in his work from the big guns of advertising nods to the possibility of his work not being as inaccessible as some critical voices might think.

Given the criticism thrown at Carson due to his discarding of the rulebook, as it were, one would think that a grid master such as Massimo Vignelli would be high in esteem with most. Yet, even Vignelli, claiming “the grid is the underwear of the book”, prompted his share of disapproval. Being the modernist to Carson’s more postmodernist strike, Vignelli was concerned with the clear and concise delivery of message, with no visual clutter or superfluous design elements. His most significantly known works is the New York City subway map, which arguably could be seen as the embodiment of his grid-based visual style. With the trends of the 80s and 90s moving towards a rule-breaking regime, the new
designers opposed the “prison of the grid” which they blamed modernists like Vignelli to hold in high praise (Shapiro, 1996).

Calling himself an “information architect”, Vignelli took his job to communicate information to the masses seriously, designing with classic fonts and tidy layouts that did not compromise the message or the consuming of it. In other words, the modernists took their social responsibilities that Jorge Frascara calls for in his article Graphic Design: Art or Social Science. In their design practice, Massimo Vignelli and his wife, Lella Vignelli, designed with account for form and function (Agia, 2014). With the belief that his job as a designer was to change and improve the world around him, one design at a time (Agia, 2014), he strongly followed suit the modernist tradition of being “systematic, logical and objective”, as he put it, stating that “modernism took out all the junk [of graphic design], and postmodernism put it all back in (Remington, 2012)”. This statement indicates clearly how Vignelli felt about the postmodernist tendencies in design during the 80s and 90s.

3.4 Carson – the postmodernist

In addition to his style being described as deconstructive and post-alphabetic, David Carson’s style has also been described as postmodern. The postmodernist movement was a movement within philosophy, art and culture in the mid to late 20th century, breaking with the ideals of modernism that had been prevailing since the cultural changes in the West that took place during the late 19th century (Butler, Christopher, 2002). As an art movement, postmodernism is hard to pin down due to the massive variation in art works that came from this period. Now that we have suggested that the chaotic style of Carson and his fellow designers of the 80s and 90s with their grunge-y, deconstructive, rather gritty, style is of postmodern origin, as it were, it might seem odd that also the style that is minimalism is also a postmodern expression.

What characterizes the postmodern movement is then not merely the support of certain aesthetic –isms, such as minimalism and conceptualism, but is rather a movement that caters to a special worldly outlook – “...a distinct way of seeing the world as a whole and use a set of philosophical ideas that not only support an aesthetic but also analyze a ‘late capitalist’ cultural condition of ‘postmodernity’” (Butler, 2002, p. 3). The change that happened to affect the capitalist cultural conditions in the latter part of the 1900s then, was
the extensive development of electronic media communication and digital media. With the easier access to information resulting in turn in a massive distributing and creating of new information, a distrust towards the authenticity of said information followed suit (Butler, 2002, p. 3). Some might say that the general distrust within the postmodern condition bordered towards paranoia, as such contributing to several conspiracy theories.

While the styles of the postmodernism were indeed hard to group together under a set of characteristics due to the lack of a single line of development, this does not mean there were not certain qualities that could be understood to unify the art works of the postmodernists. Art critics Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan had already by the mid 1960s started to pin down some specific features that we now understand to be particular for a postmodern aesthetic. The works of the postmodernists, Sontag and Hassan argued, were “deliberately less unified, less obviously ‘masterful’, more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the processes of our understanding than with the pleasures of artistic finish or unity, less inclined to hold a narrative together and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation, than much of the art that had preceded it (Butler, 2002, p. 5)”.

The postmodernism as a philosophical movement discarded the metanarratives of modernism and, by way of Derrida’s deconstructionism, consequently questioned the binary oppositions of good/bad, real/unreal, true/false, life/death etc., not buying into the universally accepted truths as they were presented by the regimes of power. Another opposition that were often subject to scrutiny by the postmodernists were the relationship between ‘high’ or ‘low’ art. This predisposition to characterize some types of art as ‘high art’ and thus put this art above art genres of lower prestige, as it were, was a staple of the modernist culture. Postmodernism, on the other hand, was in ranks with popular culture by way of a mutual alliance and thus came to be understood as a movement of anti-elitist, anti-hierarchical inclinations (Butler, 2002, p. 5). Poynor refers to how the postmodernist erosion of the old boundaries between modernism’s distinctions between “worthwhile ‘high’ culture and trashy ‘low culture’” as such allowed for the development of new hybrid forms within graphic design (Poynor, 2003, p. 11). At the same time design also took on some of the self-expressive characteristics traditionally related to art (Poynor, 2003, p. 11), a characteristic that as noted above Carson puts to the highest concern in his designs, the expression of self and the personalization of style.
While many of the postmodern artists played with the tension between day-to-day objects and art, often being lenient towards a definition of art as the objects found within the walls of an art gallery (Butler, 2002, p. 1), like Jeff Koon’s New Hoover Quadraflex (1981-1986) immersing the ordinary consumerist object the vacuum cleaner into the art galleries, the postmodern graphic designers problematized the meaning and challenged the conventions of design, pushing even the boundaries of legibility to its limits in an attempt to disrupt the status quo (Poynor, 2002, p. 12).

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the primary goal has been to investigate David Carson and his work, and simultaneously demonstrate how the digitalization that evolved in dramatic speed during the 1980s and 1990s influenced the working strategies and by relation the styles of the graphic designers of this time. One of the number one qualities in Carson’s work that has been highlighted by his critics, has been his deconstruction of text to the border of illegibility. As we learned in the previous chapter about the post-alphabetic as a concept, this tendency of transforming text from that of legible content to abstract forms, as it were, is one of the characteristics of the post-alphabetic aesthetic and style. Not necessarily reflecting over his work as deconstructive himself, it is possible to argue that Carson does apply a strong sense of deconstructing content into form to his work.

Beginning his career as a designer in the early 90s, Carson came to be influenced by the digitalization in popular culture and also in the tools of his craft. While the MTV generation presented a new visual aesthetic, the digitalization of the graphic design tools by the introduction of the Macintoch computer and design programs such as PageMaker and QuarkExpress contributed to a stylistic influence. Carson did suggest that one of the main features he valued in design was the adding of a personal touch in the design; without catering to the designs in a personal matter, he suggested this would compromise the design, also suggesting that the fact that his style and the 90s’ mediated aesthetic was more a coincidence than a planned strategy. Being a designer of the postmodern era, however, it seemed that Carson did share similarities in his approach with other postmodernist designers and artist.
Even if people criticized the distorted, post-alphabetic aesthetic many designers came to nurture in the 90s (Frascara 1988, Drucker & Kirschenbaum 1997), Carson was eventually given the bill of approval by modernist designer, Massimo Vignelli, suggesting that Carson was a master at his craft, but a graphic designer he was not. Kirschenbaum (1999) suggested that this stylistic aesthetic found in Carson’s work among others refashioned information as an aesthetic event. The next chapter will therefore examine further what an aesthetic event is, and how it is possible to refashion information into such an event.
4 The Poster as An Aesthetic Event

“That there is a distinctive visual aesthetic associated with information is plain to see” – Kirschenbaum, 1999, Media in Transition

4.1 Introduction

The last chapter covered the career and style of designer David Carson and the way the emerging of digital tools and technology influenced the print media and the designers designing for print. The following chapter will concern itself with the aestheticizing of information and how information, by way of the printed poster, can be an aesthetic event. In his presentation at the Media in Transition-conference, Kirschenbaum said: “…that there is a distinctive visual aesthetic associated with information is plain to see”, indicating like Leo Manovich in his Info Aesthetics that for a recipient to process information this information needs to be wrapped up in a form, and this form is often that of a visual variety. To examine how the post-alphabetic design can refashion information as an aesthetic event as Kirschenbaum claims, this chapter then sets out to examine the concepts of ‘information’ and ‘aesthetic event’ to gain further understanding on how this kind of aestheticizing of information takes place.

Kirschenbaum mentions that “…post-alphabetic design refashions information as an aesthetic event”. As the 2nd chapter covered the ‘post-alphabetic’ part of this equation, this chapter will explore how and when information can be said to function as an aesthetic event. Examining this, I attempt to learn the way in which the poster itself can aestheticize information, and also how a poster can be, or be a part of, an aesthetic event.

The reason for the desire to research these questions is the thesis’ initial claim that it might be central to understand the concept of information as an aesthetic event to fully be able to grasp what exactly is post-alphabetic design. It is also here suggested that the poster is in the business of aestheticizing information, and that to learn more about the incident for information, aesthetic events and the aestheticizing of information can offer valuable insight into the field of the poster. To map out the field and subject in question, I will present a selection of researchers that have done inquiries in the event of an aesthetic event, as it were. For instance, Lev Manovich (2007) wrote an article with the name Information as an
Aesthetic Event. This article by Manovich seeks to understand “how designers of information technology understand the interaction between the users and the devices” and “how they design user interfaces”, thus implying that an aesthetic event is something that occurs in the meeting between a specific object and its user, or more generally a spectator or some kind of interacting audience. In another incident where the aesthetic event is of primary concern within a research article, researchers Frieder Nake and Susanne Grabowski (2004), writes about aesthetic computing in their article, The Interface as Sign and as Aesthetic event.

These two articles lead me to suggest that there is in fact a particular interest within the field of computing and interaction technologies in relation to the exploration of the form of aesthetic event that these kinds of technologies inflict in their users by means of the interaction processes that take place within the meeting of the user and the technological artefact. This interest might come from the fact that the new technologies per definition is “made for interaction”, as it were, and the concept of aesthetics in turn is concerned with the forces at work as the individual consciousness encounters the objects of the outside world – the aesthetic experience.

4.2 The poster and information

When talking about information, a number of different theories and perspectives comes to mind, from the theory of information by Claude Shannon (1948), to the way in which our society is frequently dubbed an “information society” (Lombardi, 2004). Going into detail about different theories about information would not be expedient, due to the particular purpose of this thesis, but it could be worth noting that information, according to D.A. Bell (1957) (as cited in Lombardi, 2004), is “…measured as a difference between the state of knowledge of the recipient before and after the communication of information”. As such, it could be understood that something needs to communicate information for a recipient to gain access to said information, whether this communicator comes in form of an object being perceived by a person informing about its characteristics, or a person consciously conveying information to a specific recipient. Shannon’s theory supports this, suggesting that communication requires 1) a source, 2) a receiver and 3) a channel (Lombardi, 2004). Receiving a piece of information from a source could be said to turn information into
knowledge, supported by Fred Dretske (as cited in Lombardi, 2004) and his connecting of the theory of information to the theory of knowledge.

As a form of advertising, the poster is a tool for communicating specific information about a promoted event to a specific recipient. As such, in terms of Shannon’s information theory, the poster serves as the ‘channel’ in communicating a message from the advertiser (the source), to the consumer (the receiver). Philip Nelson (1974) suggests that it is not the information providing that is the primary goal of the advertiser; the information providing taking place by an advertising poster is a means to a different end – the selling of products. The information communicated by advertisers to their consumers is thus not something that necessarily generates correct knowledge of a particular product, but rather information, sometimes even misleading, constructed and tweaked in order to trigger an action by the consumer (Nelson, 1974, p. 729).

The essence of graphic design, as defined by Phillip Meggs (1983), is “…to give order to information, form to ideas, expression and feeling to artifacts that document human experience.” The artifacts created through the craft of graphic design such as the poster, could as such be said to be the examples on how graphic designers approaches this essence in different ways. As noted in chapter 1, the poster works in different ways to communicate their message efficiently (Lupton, 2015). And it is through the applications of these different techniques that could be said to contribute to the aestheticizing of information, making the poster an aesthetic event. On that note, what does an aesthetic event entail?

4.3 What is an aesthetic event?

Examining the etymology of the word ‘event’, the word itself appear to stem from the latin word ‘eventus’, which in turn comes from the verb ‘evenire’ which means to ‘result’ or to ‘happen’. The word evenire itself comes from the words ‘e-’, meaning ‘out of’ and ‘venire’, which means ‘come’, thus referring to something that ‘comes out of’ something else or an ‘outcome’ if you will. Generally, it is used in relation to: 1) a thing that happens or takes place, especially of importance, 2) a planned or public occasion, or the more scientific 3) a single occurrence of a process, e.g. the ionization of one atom (Wiktionary, 2017).

The etymology demonstrates that the word event refers to something that happens – an occurrence. In terms of cybernetics and computer usage, for instance, the actions a user
takes when interacting with an interface could be considered an event. When a user moves
the cursor around the screen, clicking a button and the interface changes as a result of this,
an event has taken place. This may indicate that not every perception is an event, but rather
that an event implies a manner of interaction. Something, in this case a user of a computer,
interacts with something outside itself, in this case the computer’s interface, and causes
something to happen with said interface.

“The simplest possible taxonomy of events”, argues Paddy Scannell (as cited in Kjus,
Yngvar, 2009, p. 9), “distinguishes between the things that happen to us and the things that
we make happen.” Pursuing that thought, he also distinguishes between unforeseen
“happenings” (such as an accident) and planned “events” (such as a celebration). In modern
societies, the media performs key roles in both, it conveys the meaning of happenings in
retrospect, and it anticipates events, establishing them, in effect, prospectively. Kjus (2009)
suggests that one of the key features of an event is that it is intended to satisfy a desire of
some sort (p. 9-10). With that being said, what contributes to make an event one of the
aesthetic variety?

The word aesthetics was coined by Baumgarten in 1735, when he introduced it as
part of his master’s thesis to the episteme aisthetike or ‘the science of sensory cognition’
(Beardsley, 1966). In this regard, looking at my initial wish to explain ‘event’ as every act of
perception, which is something done through our senses, it is relatively logical to assume
that there is as such a strong link between the notions of both the aesthetic and that of the
event. If you sense something and imagine something, is this not an occurrence taking place
and, as such, by definition an event? Although acquiring its name in 1735, the field of
aesthetics has been a field of philosophical debacle since Plato. Plato and Aristotle were very
much concerned with the effects of art and society and the relationship between art, nature
and the human consciousness (Gaut & Lopes, 2001).

In his book, Kunstens filosofi (2004), the Danish philosopher Søren Kjørup writes
about the aesthetic experience. He suggests that humans might possess a latent ability to,
and a latent interest for, having an aesthetic experience. To have the ability to experience
something in an aesthetic manner, Kjørup explains, is the ability to find joy in and be excited
about beautiful and interesting things, thrilling experiences and awestriking nature
phenomena (Kjørup, 2004, p 43). While the aesthetic experience in modern day first and
foremost is trained in relation to art, Kjørup (2009) goes to suggest that the modern aesthetic experience happens in the moments where we experience non-artistic phenomena aesthetically; experiencing them as art. In relation to the aesthetic experience, Kjørup (2004) mentions the concept of ‘disinterestedness’. It is an occurring idea that it is only when asserting a certain ‘disinterestedness’ in meeting with the outside world that one can genuinely conduct what is called an aesthetic judgement. ‘Disinterestedness’ is a word known to be used by Immanuel Kant in relation to the judgement of taste and beauty, which might be said to be one of the original concerns of the aesthetics. Kjørup (2004) does not necessarily approve of the need for a so-called disinterestedness to be present for an experience to be defined as aesthetic; he argues that being in awe over a beautiful scenery or being scared and thrilled by horror movies are perfect examples of aesthetic experiences, and that they do imply a particular interestedness, as it were. Still, he suggests, that a certain kind of disinterestedness does come to play in the aesthetic experience in the manner where the satisfaction lies within the experience itself, and not in relation to what the experienced can mean in reference to something outside itself (Kjørup, 2009, p. 55). It is, as such, the aesthetic experience itself that is the ultimate giveaway in such a sensory event.

The experience of a poster as an aesthetic event or object, thus is arguably not so much the initial meeting of the poster as an advertising for an event or product, it seems to move beyond that. The experience of the poster as an aesthetic object, thus experiencing the poster in an aesthetic manner, is when we are removed from the poster’s primary functions and rather engage with the poster in a different manner, as such as being moved by the color choices or the intricate shapes and general compositions.

Mixed media designer Marcos Faunner (2016) writes this about what he understands as the printed poster’s value in a digital age:

“I believe that the value of printed posters in this digital age is the relationship between the body and the piece of art. You move yourself around the poster. You can touch the poster, move your head and your body to enjoy the piece’s details and reflect on the art. So, it is more than just a better vision or the best resolution — the printed poster is essentially a corporal question.”
Here, it is possible to suggest that Faunner points directly to how the physicality and tangibility of the poster take part in the influencing of how a spectator might experience it as an aesthetic event. The poster, Faunner argues, is a physical artefact existing in physical space, meeting its intended audience with a printed message. This message is generally presented in an artsy manner, as it were, in an attempt to gain the interest of random passersby in order to get them to engage with the poster, examining it more closely and thus being exposed to the poster’s advertising message. Unlike the digital display, the poster presents its poster design and only this, within its paper surface. The viewer can consume the poster, its visual aesthetic and its message in quiet, moving around it, moving closer, touch it and ponder its expression. With the poster, you’re in direct contact with the poster, Faunner suggests, as opposed to the same design presented on a digital display.

When Roberto Simanowski (2010) discusses the interactive installation Text Rain, as discussed in chapter 2, he points to how the viewer is no longer obliged to find meaning in the text and can instead immerse herself in the art work and “...enjoy the moment of playing” (Simanowski, 2010, p. 161). This could proposedly be seen as a primary example of how a post-alphabetic work of art becomes an aesthetic event; the viewer is encouraged to engage with letters and word in an unexpected manner as opposed to the traditional reading and consuming of meaning. While the art installations Simanowski (2010) examines differs from the post-alphabetic tendencies we find in the print works of Ray Gun and Emigre in the manner where they remove themselves more abruptly and thoroughly from the consumption and creation of meaning in relation to the viewer, as the post-alphabetic works of the 90s magazines intends for the viewer to re-construct or decode a specific meaning, both kinds engages the viewer in a form of play and engagement with text that are not found in traditional texts and reading.

4.4 How can information be an aesthetic event?

In this chapter’s previous pages, it has now been established that the poster communicates particular kinds of information that are selected to promote an event or a product to a specific audience. And an aesthetic event is something that occurs in the meeting between a person and something outside it, such as an artwork or other kinds objects that foster
aesthetic experiences, such as natural phenomena or movies etc. But what does it imply to aestheticize information or rather, when can information become an aesthetic event?

A couple of articles I have come across examines information as an aesthetic event as something that often takes place in digital technology such as in graphic user interfaces. Lev Manovich (2007), for example, suggests in his article, *Information as an Aesthetic Event*, a trend he calls “aesthetisation of information tools”, which for example were visible in the changes found in mobile phone design in the mid 1990s. Before, the interfaces attempted to be invisible, but now the designers instead treated interaction as an event and went to purposefully create orchestrated experiences, instead of just treating these digital tools as a means to an end. As such, Manovich (2007) suggests that the interface engages its user in a kind of game where the user is “…asked to devote significant emotional, perceptual and cognitive resources to the very act of operating the device.” The transformation Apple made, from being a company making hardware and software to becoming a company that are world leaders in consumer product design, Manovich suggests as the most prominent example of this kind of ‘aesthetisation’. Here, the design part of things suddenly became as essential to the market as the function of the products, inviting the users to engage in a new kind of aestheticized experience (Manovich, 2007).

Frieder Nake & Susanne Grabowski (2004) discusses something similar in their article *Interface as a Sign and as Aesthetic Event*. They point out that in order to promote successful communication, interfaces of interactive software systems need to concern themselves with being “functionally effective” and “aesthetically attractive”. Aesthetics first and most important aspect, Nake & Grabowski (2004) suggest, is sensual perception, following the second most important, namely beauty.

Information can thus, from what is discussed above, be understood as an aesthetic event when the visual appearance of the information takes on such qualities that it becomes as much of importance as the mere information itself.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter have attempted to shed light on what it means that information, and by relation the poster, can be an aesthetic event. First, it explored the way poster and information related to one another. Information, as such, was found to be something that

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alters the state of knowledge in a recipient after an act of communication has taken place. A poster, in form of its advertising abilities, conveys information about a product or event to a specific audience by way of the advertising party. As an aesthetic event was found to be the way in which a person interacts or experiences an object in a specific manner, perhaps the sensual perception of something similar to that of beauty. Information, thus, by applying a kind of visual appearance that speaks to human senses in a different manner than mere information “stripped” of any extravagant décor, as it were. Graphic design can as such be seen to be in the business of aestheticizing information, putting information into forms and layouts that are visually pleasing to potential readers. And, since Manovich suggested that information displayed in such a manner that the interacting with, and consuming of it, engaged the user in a kind of game, was part of what turned information into that of an aesthetic event, it seems likely to suggest that post-alphabetic design in print achieves something similar. As noted in chapter 2, the post-alphabetic installations examined by Simanowski (2010) invited to decoding and play, and thus can be understood as fostering a kind of aesthetic experience upon its participants where the occurrence as a whole can be said to be an aesthetic event. The poster, as such, being a print medium and a product of graphic design puts information into form by way of typography and layout, giving information a visual aesthetic within its paper form, presenting this information to passersby in the street giving them the possibility of consuming the information, touching the paper and positioning themselves around the poster and observing its texts, colors, shapes and forms. In this manner, the poster can be said to aestheticize information and involve its spectator in an aesthetic event.

In the next and final chapter, the post-alphabetic quality will be examined in six poster examples, in an attempt to put the theories and perspectives this thesis now has examined to use, in the detecting and further understanding and assessment of what a post-alphabetic quality within poster design can imply for the reading of, and the function of, the poster.
5 Connecting the dots

5.1 Introduction

Through the previous pages, the thesis has now presented and discussed several topics in relation to the poster, such as examining the poster’s role in history and today, looking to how concepts such as information and aesthetic experience, and the introduction of an increased digitalized society, have affected the way consumers relate to print, and how the visual aesthetics of print was influenced conclusively.

In this chapter, these theories and perspectives that now have been examined for the purpose of decoding the Kirschenbaum-quote in the previous chapters will be applied in a more tangible analysis on the post-alphabetic aesthetic. Through an analysis of 6 posters that could be argued to have post-alphabetic qualities, I will attempt to investigate the post-alphabetic aesthetic by analyzing the different ways in which these concrete posters experiment with typographic expression. Some of the posters might be more straightforward easy to judge as post-alphabetic, while others might seem to exist in a borderline between alphabetic and post-alphabetic, and I will examine them both individually and together.

As the previous chapters have shown, post-alphabetic, while a concept that is not very much examined or written about, it is a word that is often used in describing the new digital world, a world after the alphabet. Simultaneously, it is used to describe an approach to text and type that breaks with the traditional norms and conventions found in the typographic tradition after Gutenberg and in modern graphic design.

Since posters are more related to art than editorial layouts of magazines are, it is not difficult to find posters that inherit an experimental approach to typography. What is perhaps more difficult is to draw the line on what kinds of conventions in poster design to call ‘post-alphabetic’. Is a post-alphabetic tendency in posters a breaking with conventions or is it a typical convention for this medium?

After the findings in the previous chapters, it is possible to understand the post-alphabetic as a concept or phrase often used to describe a quality in the digital era, an era where the alphabet is either left behind completely or taking in new forms to keep up with the speed of the digital technology. At the same time, it is used to describe a way to
experiment with type and typography to a point where the text’s linguistic meaning is less valuable, or at least competing for the attention with the visual appearance of the letters. This relates to deconstruction in the way where it challenges the binary opposition of form and content where content generally trumps form; now the visual shape and form is emphasized, pushing typography beyond its mere linguistic, signified meaning.

This thesis’ initial hypothesis was that the post-alphabetic with its relation to and use in describing the digital, had an intrinsic, digital component. Now, it is possible to consider that this hypothesis might be inappropriate. Perhaps it is not that the post-alphabetic has a digital component, but rather that the digital itself has a post-alphabetic quality? Through the following analytic discussions of the handful of post-alphabetic posters I have chosen, I will see if I can find something to resolve this issue in a result that will either break or support my original hypothesis. Examining the posters one by one, I will look at how the different posters approach typography and layout, if they seem to possess any characteristics that is reminiscent of digital technology, if they can be dubbed post-alphabetic in the ways we would expect after exploring this terminology, or if they differ, and what this does to the poster experience.

Simultaneously, I will examine and discuss the way in which a viewer might respond to and interact with the poster. Do the post-alphabetic qualities found in these posters exaggerate the posters expressive function and the way it communicates information to the point where it involves its viewer in an aesthetic event?
Figure 6 “Dubai Festival of Creativity” poster, David Carson, 2015
5.2 Poster for Dubai Festival of Creativity by David Carson (2015)

This poster (Figure 6) is a poster promoting the Dubai Lynx International Festival of Creativity, 2015, by designer David Carson. The Dubai Lynx Festival is an annual festival celebrating the creative output of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) regions. Being a key speaker at the festival, David Carson was also given the job of designing the poster.

While the post-alphabetic tendencies Kirschenbaum takes note of in his presentation about print is an aesthetic most prominent in the 90s, this poster is from 2015 and proves that post-alphabetic tendencies in design is still a thing, as it were.

As Carson was a key speaker of this festival, the application of such an obvious “Carson-esque” aesthetic could be guessed to have been a way of highlighting Carson’s presence at the festival by choosing the style that people know as “classic Carson”.

Carson says that as a key speaker he was given lots of freedom in his poster design, and because of this he included a picture of himself at a printing press in Barcelona designing the “End of Print” posters and also a picture of his son, whom he loves so much. This nods to the personal flair that Carson stresses in his work, always suggesting that he designs what feels right for him rather than being dictated by what he think his audience would want.

The design of this poster seems at first glance to mostly consist of letter forms. Immediately, it seems that legibility is compromised to the point where the viewer has to take special considerations in order to understand what text is purposeful and what text is not. The first impression of the poster is almost overwhelming to the eye to the point of near information overload. What info is superfluous and what info will make this poster sensible to us? While our gaze is used to search for letter forms and words to make sense of, it doesn’t take too long to single out the words of ‘Dubai’, ‘Creativity’ and ‘Festival’ and at the same time noticing that the numbers 17:30 – 18:00 indicates that this poster promotes an event that happens on this time of day. And further down on the poster, very much removed and separate from the information on the time, ‘Sunday 8’ and ‘March 8’ are written, giving the viewer the information on which date this event takes place. Following the conventions of typography and layout, one would expect the information of time and place to be positioned in close quarters. This poster breaks obviously with these
conventions, giving the viewer the task of searching through the composition and connect the dots, as it were. There exists no apparent order as to how this poster should be read, and the information given is for the viewer to collect and decode. When first localized, it is however clear that Carson is not specifically experimental with the shapes of the letters that are intended for reading – they all are set in a basic, easy-to-read typeface reminiscent of Helvetica or Arial.

After decoding the poster to the point where one has understood what event the poster promotes and when and where this event takes place, it is apparent that the poster consists of more words, letters and numbers. The layout and the graphic elements is arranged in a chaotic manner, and the way some of the background letters and numbers are arranged in a vertical, descending manner are very much reminiscent of the way letters and numbers are often arranged in MS DOS systems, and arguably also in backend coding, the coding that makes the visual interfaces possible. One main characteristic or specific ‘trait’ of the MS DOS (and also that of coding) is that they are said to ‘have no visual appearance’.

One iconic pop cultural phenomenon that uses this kind of aesthetic in their design and visual expression is the movie franchise The Matrix. Here, the code that makes up the matrix is visualized like a downward flow of vertical, descending characters that makes up a kind of “digital rain”.

While the composition mainly consists of words, letters and numbers constructed in a seemingly random fashion, the poster also consist of elements such as the two black and white photographs featuring two male figures, and also other forms which I recognize as typographic elements such as dashes, parentheses and periods, some of them so overlapped by surrounding forms that they are hardly recognizable, such as the tall black shape in the poster’s upper left corner that functions as a continuing of the letter ‘C’ in ‘Carson’. Similarly, there is placed a black shape behind the letter ‘s’ in ‘Carson’, contributing to a deformation of the letter ‘s’ and the reduced legibility of this letter and the word it is a part of. This technique adds a kind of movement to the composition and enhances the chaotic expression of the poster. By way of the techniques mentioned by Lupton (2015), it could be said that this poster makes use of the “cut and paste” and the “overwhelm the eye” techniques.
Figure 7 “Sun: I’ll Be The Same” poster, Mark Gowin, 2011
This poster (Figure 7) is a poster designed by Mark Gowin for music duo Sun and their album “I’ll be the same”. It was commissioned by the music duo Sun’s record label Preservation Music in 2011, as a cd cover leaflet poster for the album’s cd release. As such, this poster was apparently not intended for being posted onto a city wall, but still I suggest that it makes for a good example to explore post-alphabetic tendencies in the poster medium.

Gowin included in his poster design a typeface he had drawn year before this project, finding that this typeface’s aesthetic and the deconstructive application of this typeface was especially suited to accompany Sun’s unconventional methodical approach to his pop sounds, and featured as a direct reference to “Sun’s loose approach to composition” (Gowin, as cited in Foster, 2012, p. 80).

“Sun I’ll be the same” can be said to use deconstruction as part of its design. As noted in chapter 2, a deconstruction of letters can seem to be happening when letters are removed from their ordinary order or shape, reducing their signified meaning in preference of form. This typeface is used as part of the visual pattern, and the parts that appears legible after examining the poster for a while is probably not of much importance to what is intended to communicate to the reader. When meeting this poster, it seems that one is approached by some characters and shapes that both resemble and not resemble letters at the same time.

The most common thing to do when meeting with shapes that resembles letters it to start a decoding process in order to make sense of the chaos, as it were. Here, it seems to be generally of such difficulty to decode the presumably letter forms that to re-construct them into something legible and sensible cannot be the main point but rather a bonus. Knowing the album is named “I’ll be the same”, reading the poster will consist of a search to find letters that match this sentence and these words.

The deconstruction of text towards the utmost limit of legibility in this poster, with even a typeface that is so separated from the way we’re used to see letter forms, is a good example on how the letters’ meaning as letter seizes to exist and the letters’ shapes and forms and the way they contribute to the creation of an abstract pattern is of more
importance. This exemplifies how deconstructing letters and words into a presumable post-alphabetic design transforms content into that of form.

When doing research on the background of this poster, I sought out the music that this poster promotes and found that the cover made for streaming services like Apple Music uses the same typeface, but construed in a more linear and conventional manner, writing out “Sun: I’ll be the same” in a more legible and orderly fashion. When knowing the album title and now the shapes of the different letters according to the Apple Music thumbnail visual for the album, it was now even easier to decode the letters and thus the digital streaming cover came to function as a decoding sheet for reading and recognizing the letters on the poster.
Figure 8 "Feel & Think: New Era of Tokyo Fashion", Mark Gowin, 2011
5.4 Feel & Think: A New Era of Tokyo Fashion by Mark Gowin (2011)

This poster (Figure 8) is a poster designed by Mark Gowin for the Feel & Think Exhibition, the same designer that designed the previous poster, ‘Sun: I’ll be the same’. The Feel & Think exhibition at SCAF is an Australian iteration of an exhibition originally held at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery in 2011.

This poster is seemingly at the limits of what could constitute as a post-alphabetic poster, at least when comparing it to the first two posters. The reason I make this statement is because through the examination of the post-alphabetic as a concept, one of the ways to give letters a post-alphabetic quality is to deprive them of their linguistic value (Simanowski, 2010). The letters in this poster is seemingly following a grid system, placing them in an orderly manner, and they are placed in a logical order, inviting to traditional reading from left to right, starting with the first line and moving downward. Yet, with its texturized typeface, to a point where legibility is compromised, I suggest that the fact that the poster’s aesthetic makes for the necessity of an attentive reader to concentrate to comprehend the message and text presented to them through this poster, this poster definitely hold post-alphabetic tendencies. The knitted surface the text it displayed on makes the plasticity of the text and the texture almost more prominent than the literary, straightforward content and reading of the text. As I also have established, it is not necessarily a full depriving of linguistic value that is the main characteristic of a post-alphabetic text, but a play with text that makes the plasticity and tangible form of the letters grab the viewer’s attention, and not merely the communicative content.

Despite the letters’ gridded placement on the page and their presentation in a tidy and orderly manner, the poster is not particularly easy to read. Even the standardized and normally legible typeface the letters are written in, reminiscent of Arial or Helvetica, as opposed to the orange letters in the previous poster example, does not make up for the fact that the poster’s text requires a conscious effort in order to read and make sense of. The way the letters is presented visually on a surface that seems knitted, is one thing that is contributing to this reduced legibility. Additionally, the kerning and line spaces are of equal size, thus not separating words in a conventional manner, which in turn makes it less obvious if one is supposed to read words from left to right or top to bottom; there are no
typical separation of words and thus it takes some effort to understand where one word ends and another one begins. *Are they even words at all, or just random letters on a page?*

The gridded layout could suggest that this poster by Gowin is making use of what Lupton (2015) calls the “make a system” technique. Here, the application of this specific system allows for “surprising forms to emerge”. Eloquently, the text is not divided like one would expect, with the colon placed first on a new line instead of in connection with the previous word, and the word “fashion” are divided with “fa” on one line and “shion” on the next, with the purpose of making room for some red text written in a very small font size. This text, although I was not able to acquire the poster in a high enough resolution to make out what it reads, supposedly inform the reader of the time and place of the exhibition.

The knitted surface that patterns and makes out the entire poster, suggest a nod to the “fashion” theme of the exhibition, giving the viewer a reference to knitted fabric and knitted clothes. By weaving the letters into the knitted background, as they were printed directly on to a knitted fabric - or knitted into it - gives the letters a tangibility and pixelated quality that make them hard to read. While the knit technique nods to the handcraft and the analogue, the compromising legibility and the way this text reads with this effect nods to something more digital: the text a user is obliged to type when confronted with reCAPTCHA technology made to keep robots away from internet content they should stay out of.

The reCAPTCHA project is a small code and visual snippet scheme that has users perform an action to prove that they are humans and not robots. Over the years this validation process has used different approaches, the one I am thinking about is the one where the user has to decode and enter the letters that are distorted and skewed. This version of reCAPTCHA was used as a means both to keep robots from signing forms, commenting and registering online (spamming) and also as a way of helping to decipher and to digitalize books. Critical voices let it be known that they found the reCAPTCHA ‘write what you see in the field below’-technique to be too complicated, arguing that having users jump through hoops and solve intricate riddles to be able to perform simple registration etc. online was less than userfriendly. These complaints might have resulted in the much more generally accomplishable ‘check this box to verify that you’re not a robot’-approach.

Besides having similarities with the reCAPTCHA technology, this poster could easily be compared to the eye test that one is subjected to at the optician’s office. The eye test
consists, like the poster, of letters composed and placed in equal kerning and line space size (making the space surrounding the letters in equal size on each side of the letter). Unlike the poster, these letters are not intended to read chronologically in order to construct a meaning or message, but rather to recognize and read in order to determine if one’s vision is impaired.
Figure 9 “Four Tet and Matthew Dear” poster, Sonnenzimmer, 2010
5.5 Four Tet and Matthew Dear by Sonnenzimmer (2010)

The Four Tet and Matthew Dear poster (Figure 9) is designed by Sonnenzimmer, the creative pairing of designers Nick Butcher and Nadine Nakanishi, promoting electronic musician and DJ, Four Tet and his warmup acts Matthew Dear and Jon Hopkins’ performance at the Metro, October of 2010.

In this poster, the post-alphabetic text seems to give its reader the job of separating the typography and words that have purpose, as it were, and are supposed to be read, from the typography that are just for show. At first it seems like one is intended to read all of the noticeable letter forms in order to read the poster message, yet, when beginning the activity of constructing meaning it seems that it does not make sense to read any more than the first two lines and the “Matthew Dear” at the bottom. The middle section seems completely nonsensical and illegible, and if one were to make any attempt to read them, they seem to only repeat the wording found in the two first lines, in an even more shattered, deconstructed manner.

In addition to this post-alphabetic text, the poster layout includes a field of red text in the middle of the colorful, shattered letters. This text is placed directly in the middle of the colorful text fragments, and as such functioning as an element that is part of fragmenting the main text. This text is in conventional type, informing the reader of the time and place of the event. In a poster, giving the viewer too hard of a time to decode the most essential information conveyed there would be against good marketing strategy, therefore, the application of a more conventional typographic to express the fundamental information as time and place seems to be a necessity.

The post-alphabetic, distorted and colorful text, then, arguably works as the attention catcher while at the same time functioning as the decorative element of the poster, making the need for additional images or figurative elements in the poster superfluous. This nods to the technique Ellen Lupton (2015) found as one of the more essential ones found in poster design and creation relating to post-alphabetic design, the approach to “use text as images”. This use of text as image, or rather, as the decorative element reduces the need for additional décor or visual elements. The text as such does double-duty as decorative, eye-catching element and also as information, as it were, at least
as soon it is deciphered. This “use of text as image” technique is generally found in all the post-alphabetic posters, as the turning letters into visual forms is part of the post-alphabetic process.

The way the text is deconstructed and shattered, is reminiscent of the way digital text is often pixelated and distorted on screen when the technology is failing. Within the first lines, it could look like the technology is starting to fail but the text is still fairly readable, and as the lines progress the computer crash is so approximate that the text is pixelated to the point where the structure of the words and letters are completely broken down to illegibility.
Figure 10 "Public Bike" poster, Paula Scher, 2012
5.6 Public Bike by Paula Scher (2012)

This poster (Figure 10) is a poster made for the PUBLIC theatre in San Francisco, 2012, by graphic designer Paula Scher. I have included this poster as part of my discussion analyses because, in relation to the post-alphabetic and how we have seen that this design aesthetic seemed to come from a postmodern direction, this poster is often referred to as a “prime example of the modern poster”. And if that is so, how is it that this is a poster it could be relevant to turn to in a setting like this?

The Paula Scher poster does apply an interesting approach to typography. We find orange letters scattered seemingly random on a page, somewhat reminiscent to the design found in the “Sun: I’ll be the same” poster by Mark Gowin, but then again not: the similarities end quickly after color, white background and shattered text, but what is different?

Scher’s bike poster greets the viewer with a cluster of letter forms. It is fairly easy to register the orange shapes on the white background as letters, but arguably harder to grasp exactly what kind of word(s) the letters form. Searching for a word that these letters compose might eventually result in being left with the word ‘PUBLIC’. This does however leave the viewer with two ‘o’-shaped forms. By examining the peculiar formation that the letters are composing, an observant viewer might construct that the purpose of the placement of letters in this manner is the creation of the visual shape of a bike. And it is only then, when one eventually sees the bike that these ‘o’-shapes are not meant to be the letter ‘o’ at all, but rather, they function as the bike’s wheels. The ‘P’ is the bike’s handlebar, the ‘U’ is the bar connecting the front wheel, the ‘B’ is the bicycle’s body, the ‘I’ is the bar for the seat and the ‘C’ is connecting the back wheel.

This poster, unlike the other ones I have analyzed above, does not have a distorted background or deconstructed letter shapes, and it does not have visual clutter or anything to remove the attention away from the pure shapes of the letters. It does however present the letters in a surprising manner, creating a second image (and second purpose) for the text that goes beyond their linguistic meaning. And it is in relation to this that I suggest the post-alphabetic quality of this poster comes in. One interesting factor to note here is that the composition of these letters does not simply move them beyond their linguistic values, but
also give them a new meaning as an image, or rather the icon, of a bike. In the other posters, the letters do not come together to add a new familiar symbol, but rather break up, or deconstruct, their form or layout by means of pixelated distortion of letter forms, such as the ‘Four Tet’ poster, or by the blurring of text by mixing it with the background, like in the ‘Feel & Think’ poster, by the transformation of letters into barely recognizable letter forms such as the ‘Sun: I’ll be the same’ poster, or the assaulting the eye technique found Carson’s ‘Dubai’-poster. Scher’s bike poster is cleaner, more minimalistic and consists of pure shapes. It is not so much the distortion of the letters (or layout) that is the main point here, but rather the construction of the shape of the bike by the use of these letters. In the other posters, one could argue that it is the distortion that is the point, and that this distortion does not mean to communicate a new symbolic meaning but rather the distortion itself is used as a way of bringing a specific visual interest to these letter forms.

This poster, then, while possessing qualities that could be argued to be post-alphabetic, such as an organizing of letters that borders unconventional and the use of letter forms to construct an entirely new form – here a bike – could seem to be lacking a more explicit “digital technology”-reference found in the majority of the other posters. If one was to reveal ‘traces’ of something digital within this poster, what might they be? The letters are set in a type face which presumably are digitally set. Simultaneously, the letters, especially the unrelated ‘O’s making up the bike wheels, seem to be distorted in shape in order to perceive perspective and depth in the bicycle illustration. This type of distortion is one that is made easily achievable for designers by way of their digital tools, with programs such as Adobe Illustrator or Photoshop, using tools such as the ‘perspective grid’ and the ‘transform’ function.
Figure 11 "The Ellery Eskelin Trio", Niklaus Troxler, 2007
5.7 The Ellery Eskelin Trio by Niklaus Troxler (2007)

This poster (Figure 11) is a poster made for the Willisau Jazz Festival by Swiss graphic designer Niklaus Troxler. Troxler founded this festival in 1975, and directed it every year until 2009, making every promo poster for the festival himself. Like all the posters Troxler made for this festival, this poster is an exploration of experimental use of typography and typefaces.

This play with typography that Troxler exercise in this poster is a common approach that he uses throughout the series of festival posters. In the different posters, he examined different means of experimenting with expression of letterforms that exceeds the general norms of typography and typefaces (Lupton, 2015, p.84). As a result, the posters come to “reflect on the process of jazz itself (Lupton, 2015, p. 84)”.

Talking about his design style and heritage, Troxler stated that "I never wanted to look like a typical Swiss graphic designer. My influences come more from Pop Art, different art styles and, of course, the music. I always wanted to get sound into my posters, and also movement and rhythm (Rawsthorne, 2007)”.

The design of this poster is a simple, monochrome one, in black and white. At first glance, it might be difficult to comprehend that the poster presents to us anything other than what looks like spilled black ink on a white surface, in a random pattern. Through closer examination, though, it becomes apparent that some of the ink splashes are actually letters. Some of the splashes are in fact ‘actual’ splashes with no particular letter forms, giving the impression that the poster was made with actual ink or paint, and that the person painting the poster was in such a hurry that the letters became inconsistent and ink were spilled as the pencil rushed through the motions onto the surface.

Compared to the majority of the other posters I have discussed, this poster seemingly does not have a distinctive nod in the direction of digital technology. Or does it? Even in comparison to the “Public Bike”-poster by Scher, the typography in this poster have a much more organic and handcrafted expression. If wanting to compare it to something external like I did the previous posters, this poster’s design elements, with the seemingly splashed black ink, is reminiscent of the Ink Blot, or Rorschach, tests – a test used by psychologists as a method of psychological evaluation. The principle is to have the patient look at sheets of
white paper with black ink formations and tell their therapist what they envision that the ink represents.

While there is no psychologic evaluation being composed on the spectators of this Troxler poster, the spectator is almost obliged to apply a visual and cognitive shift in order to decode and make sense of the ink splashes the poster presents. Some of the letters are so smudged that they do not make sense without their fellow letters that come before or after them, and thus the interplay and position of the letters help in the reconstruction and deciphering of the distorted letters into yet again meaningful letter forms.

Although, as I mentioned above, the first impression of this poster makes one think it is not as digitally inclined, as it were, as the rest of the posters I have analyzed so far, due to its seemingly organic, hand painted character, a closer look might indicate otherwise. Examining the splashes and the shapes of the letters, although none of them seems to have an equal, it is possible to speculate if the poster in fact is constructed with the brush tool found in Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator; the ink marks’ pristine and crisp contours might indicate this. Not knowing anything about Troxler’s production methods, there is also a possibility that the technique used is the creation of a personalized brush tool for Adobe Photoshop made specifically for this poster’s design. The brush tool of Adobe Photoshop is a tool used for painting digitally within the Photoshop interface. Giving its user the option to pick from several brushes or even load or create their own, many of these brushes mimic onscreen the way an analogue pencil, as it were, would look on paper.

While the pixelated and distortedness of some of the previous analyzed posters are something arguably directly related to the quality of digital technology, what is interesting with this poster by Troxler, is that it is imitating digitally a hand crafted, hand painted quality, thus almost functioning as a double-reversed remediation. By this I mean that while remediation is often used when a new medium is ‘remedying’ the flaws of an old one, taking up in them the old medium’s characteristics and improving them, this poster design is copying the digital medium’s copying of the hand-drawn, analogue pencil on paper, instead of merely copying a true digital trait. Perhaps it could be said that a similar double-reversed remediation is found in the Feel & Think poster, as the knitted appearance refers to knitted fabric, and the blurring this knit effect creates a reference to the digital reCAPTCHA technology.
5.8 Conclusion

In the above poster analyses, different ways to experiment with typography within a poster design were presented. Even as much as the specific approaches differed from one another, using text in a visual manner was apparent in all of them. Looking at these specific posters and their characteristics, it appeared possible to identify different ways in which a poster design can invoke post-alphabetic qualities. The first poster, by David Carson for the Dubai Lynx Festival, made use of a distorted layout and the use of collage and overlapping of elements. The second poster, by Mark Gowin for Sun and Preservation Music, applies a deconstruction of the letterforms to the borderline of recognition as letters, scattering them across the page as an arbitrary pattern. The third poster, by Mark Gowing for The Feel & Think exhibition, applies a blurring of foregrounded text and background and a distorting of words by applying unconventional kerning and blank space between letters, making the reading less intuitive. The fourth poster, by Sonnenzimmers on FourTet’s performance at the Metro, applies a deconstructive pixelation of text, removing the letters from their familiar forms and into that of a colorful pattern or object. The fifth poster, the “Public Bike” poster by Paula Scher, transforms the letter forms into a new object, giving the cluster of letters a new iconic meaning by way of their arrangement. The sixth and last poster, by Troxler, could be said to apply a similar technique to that of Gowin’s “Sun: I’ll be the same”, deconstructing the letterforms in such a manner that it is difficult to differentiate them from the overall “ink splatter”.

A similarity found in the majority of the analyzed posters, is the addition of ‘relieving text’, as it were, a text which releases the viewer from the reconstruction of meaning. This text is often smaller in size than the generally deconstructed text, and after the main design has attracted interest and intrigue by its poor legibility and got the viewer to approach the poster to read the ‘fine print’, this text contributes to take the viewer out of the deciphering activity and closing the loop of the information flow. By approaching the poster and reading the ‘relieving text’, the viewer learns what the poster is for and thus is ‘relieved’ from her deciphering duties.

Another similarity is that many of the poster designs attempt to visualize qualities about the event they are advertising for. The “Feel & Think” poster by Gowin uses a knit-like surface, with an obvious nod towards knitted fabric, clothes and fashion. The “Sun: I’ll be the
same” poster attempts to catch the vibe Gowin felt from Sun’s music, and its loose approach to composition. Troxler’s jazz poster wanted to visualize the fleeting and experimental quality found in jazz music.

The majority of them also use visuals that are reminiscent of visual characteristics found in digital technology. The way these posters nod towards a digital technology can be said to be an occurrence of remediation, as per Bolter and Grusin (1996). As noted in chapter 1, remediation concerns the way old and new media borrow from each other and refashion content and functions between them. The post-alphabetic posters thus arguably borrow visual elements from digital technology.

As such, the previous analyses have arguably revealed that a poster design can be post-alphabetic in different ways, depending on the designer’s implementation of text and its relation to the background and to the general layout, often with a nod towards digital technology either in terms of visual traces of digital production or a direct visual form of borrowing from more modern media forms.
6 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined the role of the poster in the digital age, and attempted to understand what constitutes a post-alphabetic design in the poster medium. The concept of the post-alphabetic, as a concept not particularly elaborated on in other literature, seems to suggest a relation to the digital technologies, yet Kirschenbaum (1999) demonstrated in his *Media in transition*—presentation that he had found a post-alphabetic quality within print design. His connecting of this post-alphabetic quality to the print media and their being influenced by the emergence of digital tools and digital media, intrigued an interest for examining this quality in an attempt to learn something about the poster in the digital age. With a close examination of concepts relating to the Kirschenbaum-quote, I have conducted an overview of different theoretical frameworks which has contributed to a broader understanding of the ‘post-alphabetic’ and how it exists in print design.

The first four chapters elaborated on different topics, each contributing to the solving of the thesis’ purpose. With the examining of the poster history, it was established that the poster is a medium with long traditions that have functioned on different premises, such as its use in persuasive, advertising and propaganda purposes, its role as a valuable collectible, and its functions as decoration and a commodity in its own right, and it was found that the poster still holds many of its traditional roles to this day. By way of Ellen Lupton (2015), different approaches to a successful poster design was revealed, suggesting that a post-alphabetic design might be described through one or more of these design approaches.

The investigation of the alphabet and its implications on society showed that the invention of the alphabet contributed to the development of modern society, and that the digitalization seemingly has resulted in a transitioning back to oral traditions, causing a leaving behind of the alphabet or at least different ways to approach text. As Ulmer (2004) suggested, people will probably not stop using print in the wake of the digitalization of society any more than they stopped talking when beginning to write, but they might use print in different manners than before. These different manners of using print could as such be said to find traces of in David Carson’s design style, the way he discarded the rules of design and the typographic principles (McLuhan, 1964) and pushed print to the limits of what this media could do (Blackwell, 2000). It was found that such an approach to text was
not limited to graphic design, but was also found in different kinds of art and media, such as contemporary art installations (Simanowski, 2010), music (Newcomb, 2011) and poetry (Olsson, 2011).

What all of these different post-alphabetic approaches to text had in common, was the experimenting with text and letters to the point where an emphasizing of the letters’ and text’s visual aesthetics took place, giving the significant meaning lesser value than usual – legibility of sensible content was no longer the main priority. This transforming of text to visual forms rather than legible content, and as such questioning or challenging the relationship between form and content, makes a suggestive nod to deconstruction (Derrida) and the way deconstruction challenges such binary oppositions from a postmodernist mindset. It was found that deconstruction as a term is often used in relation to tendencies in art, fashion and architecture, to describe a breaking with the conventions of western traditions, creating objects that are disassembled, fractured or put together in surprising manners. Here, I discovered an argument that deconstruction in design and fashion should be held separate from and not confused with the philosophical concept of deconstruction (Poynor, 2003) while others argue that an application of philosophical theory was the specific purpose of deconstructive design (Byrne and Whitte, as cited in Poynor, 2003). The post-alphabetic, deconstructionist tendency in design emerged in the 1990s, with schools such as Cranbrooks Academy of Arts as front runners, taking the theories of postmodernism and applying them to the practice craft of graphic design challenging the status quo of the modern society of the Western world.

6.1 The post-alphabetic way

The post-alphabetic has in many ways functioned as the core of this thesis, being the concept that was up for exploration in an attempt to explain its meaning, its origin and its relation to digital and how it comes to light in print media, and specifically the poster, by way of a specific approach to design. From its origin in writings by hypertext authors Joyce and Byrne (Kirschenbaum, 1999), to its use in describing ways of experimenting with text’s conventional characteristics (Simanowski 2010, Newcomb 2011, Olsson 2011), the definition of post-alphabetic design seems to be a design that uses a deprivation of text’s signified meaning, emphasizing its visual shape, in order to create a design that grabs attention and
involves the spectator in an event of deciphering the advertised message. As I noted in discussing uninformative advertising (Mayzin & Shin, 2011) and complex design (Pieters et al., 2010), downplaying legibility and presenting a poster scoring high in design complexity could work in favor of the poster by making it visually striking and giving the viewer a reason to engage with the poster, deciphering the message and also possibly searching outside the poster for additional information. In the poster examples presented and analyzed in chapter 5, I found that many of the posters, while containing visuals that consisted of post-alphabetic, deconstructed, text, often provided additional text that was not post-alphabetic, but rather a text written in a more conventional manner, following more closely the principles of typography in graphic design. Through the poster analyses, it became apparent that the addition of this conventional text could be said to ‘reveal’ the poster’s purpose, which at first was hidden by the post-alphabetic text, and as such functioning to break the spectator out of the deciphering loop, taking on a ‘relieving’ function.

The first research question asked: “What is post-alphabetic design, and how does it refashion information as an aesthetic event?” As the above paragraph covers the first part of this question, how did this thesis come to understand how post-alphabetic design refashions aesthetic event? As noted in chapter 4, an aesthetic event is the way in which a person is exposed to an object to the point where an aesthetic experience is had. The poster gives its spectator the possibility of moving around the poster, touching the paper and shifting positions in order to take in all the poster design’s components and be attentive to detail (Faunnner, 2016). A poster does this in a variety of manners (Lupton, 2015), and by applying a post-alphabetic approach to the text the poster is able to invite its spectator to engage in an act of playing (Simanowski, 2010). A poster’s main function is, as we have seen, to convey an advertised message to a consumer audience (Nelson, 1974), and the primary way of doing this is by text and photo. A text presented in a manner that follows the conventions of the typographic principles lets its signified meaning, its content, take precedence and as such the visual manner of the text is easier to overlook. Experimenting with the text and letters to the point of compromising legibility, however, allows the visual form and shape to challenge content’s superior position. Post-alphabetic design can thus be said to refashion information as an aesthetic event exactly like so; transcending information from mere content to

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aesthetic form in a manner that provokes conventions and indulge the spectator in an act of deciphering and play.

The second research question was: “If post-alphabetic design has a digital component, how does this manifest in print?” When examining the six posters possessing post-alphabetic characteristics, as it were, it became apparent the possibility to detect traces of digital influence, either from a design or production point of view. Through the analyses, I observed several manners in which the poster could be said to reflect a digital aesthetic within their visual style, such as the “Feel & Think”-poster’s reminiscence of the reCPATCHA or the “Four Tet and Matthew Dear”-poster’s nod towards pixelated TV or computer text. The poster as a print medium, then, can be seen to function as an arena for remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2004), where the print medium borrows qualities found in digital media to achieve a certain effect. Kirschenbaum (1999) suggests that the tendency of print to mimic or borrow aesthetics from digital technologies might demonstrate the proposed “end of print” to be visualized within print’s own aesthetic. The borrowing between media (Bolter & Grusin 2004, Simanowski 2010), as noted, happens both ways, and it could possibly be argued that by the introduction of a new media, the new medium is the first to approach such a remediating quality, mimicking the older medium’s qualities but at the same time proposing to “do it better”, as it were. It might now seem possible to suggest that the post-alphabetic itself does not have a digital component, but rather that the digital often have a post-alphabetic one, and that by executing a post-alphabetic approach, a design for print often nod towards aesthetics found in digital media.

The third and last research question read as follows: “How can post-alphabetic design found in posters say something about the poster’s adaption to a digital climate?” To some extent this overlaps the previous one. Even if I discovered in my research that the deconstructionist streak in design that leaned towards such styles as grunge and punk inspired by aesthetics of the MTV-generation seemed to have disappeared as fast as it appeared, the experimentation with typography seems to always have been a vital part of poster design and graphic design. Applying a post-alphabetic design to a poster coincides with approaches in effective poster design such as making a design that overwhelm the eye or uses text as image (Lupton, 2015). Kirschenbaum (1999) suggested that post-alphabetic design in print reflected how print was influenced by digitalization. The findings in my poster
analyses makes evident how digital tendencies can be detected in the designs, reflecting both stylistic inspiration and means of digital production. Because post-alphabetic design is not the primary way of approaching a poster design, but rather one of several techniques to construct a poster with stopping power, as it were, it suggests that while post-alphabetic design in posters seems to possess a kind of remediation towards digital media, the digitalization’s effect to the poster as a print medium is the way in which production have changed to involve more digital tools and techniques. These digital production techniques are often visible in the design, as I found in the “Public Bike”-poster by Paula Sher, with evidence of digital tools such as perspective grid and the skew function, and in Niklaus Troxler’s “The Ellen Eskelin Trio”-poster, with possible evidence of the use of a digital tool such as Adobe Photoshop’s pencil or brush tool.

6.2 New perspectives

In the duration of this thesis, it has been established that the poster, as many other types of printed media, finds ways to adapt to a digital climate. Some poster designs take on a life in different media, while the poster medium itself still validate as a suitable way of advertising or informing about certain events, political or charitable, and others function as decoration – either with decoration being their sole purpose, or decoration being their new resolve after their initial advertising purpose is over. The post-alphabetic as a concept have now been mapped and defined, and as such the previous pages has contributed to shed light on a concept not previously elaborated on, even if it has been a term that has been used in different contexts.

Due to the limited capacity of such a thesis as this, with the necessity of a narrow scope, it has not been possible to examine every end to which the research has opened up in relation to its subject on the post-alphabetic and the poster. Learning about how the post-alphabetic is often used in reference to the way in which the world is consistently digitalized, further research on how digital media might break with the previous alphabetic / literary society and venture into a post-alphabetic era and how this might affect its literate users might be interesting to pursue. The atypical approach this thesis has taken has also resulted in an examination of the poster medium in a less traditional manner and as such concrete data on how the poster fares in a digital climate is not part of the findings revealed by this
thesis. Because of this, further studies that specifically set out to examine the poster’s role in today’s digitalized society in a different manner – for example with quantitative analyses of the spread of street posters, or qualitative analyses interviewing graphic designers and others in the field to learn how they design more or less posters than before, and their own understanding of the future of the poster medium could be possible to conduct to gain further insight on this prospect. Another leads this thesis has generated, although a little on the side of the original topic, is the usage of iconic poster’s in social media. The ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ poster, for instance, is a pop-cultural phenomenon on its own, and examining the usage of this in social media remixes could be attractive to pursue in a ‘media studies’ setting.

It can be said to have been established by this thesis, then, that the post-alphabetic is often used to describe the digital era where the traditional uses of the alphabet are transforming, and that it at the same time is used to describe an experimental manner of approaching letters and words, both in art, music and poetry. Within design and posters, the post-alphabetic thus seems at the same time to be used as a reference to the digital climate and an effective way of creating eye-catching, memorable design.
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