I began Unit 2 by asking whether design can be neutral. Müller-Brockmann presents the grid as a neutral aid, yet writes that using it means "**submitting** to laws of universal validity" (1981, p. 10). [1] I read that submission as a choice and tested it. I fixed the 1928 railway timetable that Kinross analyses,[2] set it in Müller-Brockmann's 8, 20 and 32 field grids, changed nothing else, and compared **legibility.**[3]
But testing neutrality was a false problem: Kinross had already answered that "nothing is free of rhetoric" (1985, p. 29). What the experiment did show is that the same information changes **when its arrangement changes.**

Paul Bailey read this work as information design; Cyan, a Berlin studio, read it as composition. Following arrangement, I became interested in Thomas Geminus's 1545 **rearrangement** of Andreas Vesalius's anatomical images, and carried out a reediting experiment of my own: cutting, collaging and comparing the rearranged images with their sources, to locate the position of the designer as editor. [4]

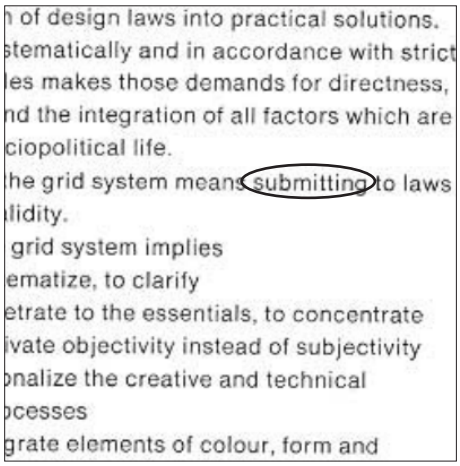
Its weakness is that I focused too much on information design, on how information changes when it is rearranged, so the material could have been almost anything else. A reediting that works on any source may carry no position of its own: I performed rearrangement without asking where I stood.

This weakness became the **turning point:** it raised a question of position. If any material would do, **my position** lay not in the material but in the arranging: in the frame that decides where things go before they arrive. That frame is what my two experiments share, and its most basic form is the grid. So I returned to exploring the grid system itself, and to what it decides before anyone reads.

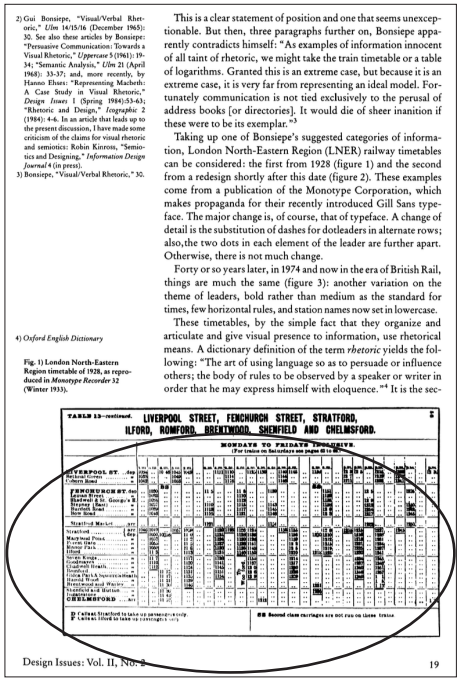
In Timetable, the grid had already fixed where each title, time and footnote could sit. Gitelman names what such planning does: "by dividing mental labor, blanks make bureaucracy" (2014, p. 30). A grid divides the work of a page in the same way: some plan it, others use it. A designer stands on both sides of that plan, following grids set by others while setting grids for others.

Since the decision belongs to whoever rules the grid, it need not stay inside typography. Scott treats **legibility** as a central problem of statecraft (1998): the same word is a tool in design and a condition in administration. As an object, the modernist grid has almost no form of its own, yet it is planned before anyone fills it. The grid therefore becomes more than a layout technique. It is a technical device that is **fitted rather than read.**

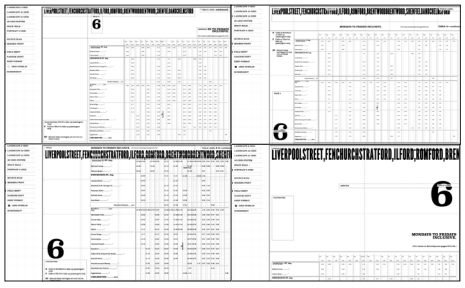
My position has moved from asking whether design is neutral to asking who decides, in advance, what can be entered. Arrangement, then, is not neutral: what can be entered is decided before anyone enters it.


of design laws into practical solutions.
stematically and in accordance with strict
les makes those demands for directness,
nd the integration of all factors which are
ciopolitical life.
he grid system means submitting to laws
lidity.
grid system implies
ematize, to clarify
etrate to the essentials, to concentrate
ivate objectivity instead of subjectivity
nalize the creative and technical
ocesses
grate elements of colour, form and

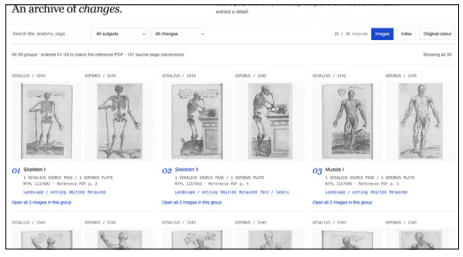
[1] Müller-Brockmann, J. (1981) Grid Systems in Graphic Design


This is a clear statement of position and one that seems unexceptionable. But then, three paragraphs further on, Bonsiepe apparently contradicts himself: "As examples of information innocent of all taint of rhetoric, we might take the train timetable or a table of logarithms. Granted this is an extreme case, but because it is an extreme case, it is very far from representing an ideal model. Fortunately communication is not tied exclusively to the perusal of address books [or directories]. It would die of sheer inanition if these were to be its exemplar."[3]
Taking up one of Bonsiepe's suggested categories of information, London North-Eastern Region (LNER) railway timetables can be considered: the first from 1928 (figure 1) and the second from a redesign shortly after this date (figure 2). These examples come from a publication of the Monotype Corporation, which makes propaganda for their recently introduced Gill Sans typeface. The major change is, of course, that of typeface. A change of detail is the substitution of dashes for dotleaders in alternate rows; also,the two dots in each element of the leader are further apart. Otherwise, there is not much change.
Forty or so years later, in 1974 and now in the era of British Rail, things are much the same (figure 3): another variation on the theme of leaders, bold rather than medium as the standard for times, few horizontal rules, and station names now set in lowercase.
These timetables, by the simple fact that they organize and articulate and give visual presence to information, use rhetorical means. A dictionary definition of the term *rhetoric* yields the following: "The art of using language so as to persuade or influence others; the body of rules to be observed by a speaker or writer in order that he may express himself with eloquence."[4] It is the sec-
4) *Oxford English Dictionary*
Fig. 1) London North-Eastern Region timetable of 1928, as reproduced in *Monotype Recorder* 32 (Winter 1933).
TABLE 13—continued. LIVERPOOL STREET, FENCHURCH STREET, STRATFORD, ILFORD, ROMFORD, BRENTWOOD, SHENFIELD AND CHELMSFORD.
MONDAYS TO FRIDAYS
Design Issues: Vol. II, No. 2
19

[2] Kinross, R. (1985) 'The Rhetoric of Neutrality'



[3] Tao, Timetable


An archive of *changes*.

[4] Tao, Out of the picture

So I began to wonder whether the modernist grid inherited this logic from **bureaucratic** forms, or only works in a similar way. This also answers the weakness of my reediting: there the material could have been anything, and I stood outside it; the grid is the tool I set every day, so I stand inside what I study. From inside, the designer is the point where personal discretion enters impersonal rule.

My question is: which elements in the design language of the grid system itself embody bureaucracy, and which leave room for the designer's discretion? If a grid fixes in advance what a page can contain, it also fixes what an institution can recognise.
The question is therefore not tied to one manual or one medium: now that grids come built into the software designers use, to what extent do they shape in advance how users work and how they see?

Reference list:

Kinross, R. (1985) 'The Rhetoric of Neutrality', Design Issues, 2(2), pp. 18–30.

Müller-Brockmann, J. (1981) Grid Systems in Graphic Design: A Visual Communication Manual for Graphic Designers, Typographers and Three Dimensional Designers.

Gitelman, L. (2014) Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents.

Scott, J.C. (1998) Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.