

The Visual Editing of Texts

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Words mesmerize more than they inform. Any piece of writing is an image as well as a message. Hence, whether you want to mesmerize or to inform you must acquire a mastery over the proper letterforms and how to arrange them on any surface. This is more than can be taught in primary schools where all teaching begins as handwriting. Typography, as an extension of handwriting, can no longer be considered a preserve of specialized craftsmen. Therefore all teachers at any level in any branch of learning should be able to analyze, to study, and to describe any text as a *constellation* of alphabets and a *configuration* of columns and lines — that is, to perceive what is on the page and to practice the visual editing of the case one wants to defend. Adapted from a lecture given at Stanford University, May 1983.

The idea I want to develop here can be expressed briefly as the argument for analyzing, studying, and describing text pages as *configurations* of columns and lines and as *constellations* of alphabets. But before I begin developing the idea as an extension of the teaching of handwriting, I want first to put my subject into perspective.

The fundamental importance of handwriting and all its technological extensions as typewritten, printed, and computerized matter in the various worlds of learning, in the several systems of education; in the arts, in the sciences, in politics; in business as well as in the business of everyday life need not be stressed. Of importance here is the fact that Stanford University is the very first “to perceive the need for a new program in the study of digital typography where computer scientists and artists may be taught the fundamentals of typographic understanding.” Given the circumstances this may prove a decisive step towards meeting, if not solving, the innumerable challenges of the Computer Age. If only because the Stanford example may induce more universities to resume their leading role in pressing advanced technology into the service of the written word — which is the technology of technologies — just as the printed word and alphanumerals have been pressed into the service of NASA to send homo americanus physically to the moon and back. This is not only in keeping with all due respect for the poetics and the aesthetics of learned tradition, but also in conformity with the ever pressing and timeless urge to establish more

and more connections in an ever closer network of human interchanges.

This is about the right time to be mindful of the historical fact that for better and for worse advanced technologies and writing have always been directly linked with the seats of power and learning. In princely and clerical chanceries, in libraries and universities, it was a saying and a fact that the pen was mightier than the sword. This is as much as to say that the uses of the pen were not exclusively calligraphic. It is not less relevant to remember that the introduction and development of the art of “writing without pen on the press” (to use and translate the contemporary description) was eagerly adopted by the universities, the humanists, and the reformers. And that all this eventually resulted in the one new format which was invented after the passage of scroll to codex, namely the newspaper format. Clearly the press is now mightier than the pen. It even proved mightier than a President of the United States. This is not to say that the press — or the screen or the chip of whatever — is mightier than the alphabet and the written word.

Given the circumstances it is altogether relevant to reconsider what used to be called the teaching of writing, meaning handwriting. This is generally discussed in terms of style, method, model, or tool: pen, nib, ball-point, or whatever. What strikes me is that in spite of all the cultural differences of the older continent as opposed to the traditions of the New Continent, there is everywhere an obvious malaise concerning the teaching of handwriting in particular as well as concerning teaching in general. Fair enough. It is pointless to inflict on you citations from *Visible Language* let alone recent issues of *Time*, *U.S. News*, *Reader's Digest*, et al. They are all too familiar. As early as the thirties a Belgian teacher examined 30 contemporary Belgian methods and concluded that teachers are more important than models or systems or methods. I agree.

Today some radicals want to do away with all the handwriting humbug — suggesting “Writing is something of the past.” I disagree most emphatically, as a matter of course, and shall content myself with recalling that the U.S. Postmaster General a few years ago passed the message that “Handwriting is a root of democracy.” Good for him. Good for you. And, incidentally, good for me; because his commemorative postage stamp coincided with a modest contribution I had made myself to the same effect in *Visible Language* at about the same time. This must suffice to suggest all the implications of depriving anyone of the essentials of social, political, and individual freedom and self-expression — namely: reading and HANDwriting.

Recent work of French historians helps looking in a different direction and for a different approach. In the two volumes of *Lire et Écrire, l'Alphabetisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Editions de Minuit, 1977) François Furet and Jacques Ouzouf have analyzed and worked out 16,000 answers to a questionnaire which was designed in 1877 by M. Maggiolo, a retired teacher. He wanted to know something about the spread of literacy in four periods: 1686-90, 1786-90, 1816-20, 1872-76. Sixteen thousand teachers were willing in 1877 to look up in the archives and find out how many people managed to sign their names in their marriage certificates during these four periods of time. The result is a unique monument of historic information, remarkably summarized by the authors as follows: "Literacy is *not* a product of the school system. Literacy as a product of the school system is a mistaken view shared in equal measure by the most irreconcilable enemies. The republicans believe that the French Revolution introduced the primary school. While the monarchists believe that the French Revolution made an end of it. As a matter of fact, the French masses went on learning to read and write from Calvin's day until the end of the nineteenth century — and 1789 was in no sense a landmark in the process. Both practices have been encouraged, organized, and financed by the families and by the communities, in other words by society itself. They were felt as equally indispensable: for salvation in the first place, when Reformation had dislodged the clergy from their monopoly of Holy Writ. Later on literacy was equated with modernity because there can be no market-place of any description without written contracts between free people. That is why the history of literacy is so dependent on the various kinds of inertia in a social fabric which is considered as a cultural model to be handed down by the 'elite' to the 'popular' classes."

My second French source is also a lasting monument: the *Histoire Mondiale de l'Éducation* (4 indexed volumes, a total of 1700 pages by 40 contributors) under the editorship of two professors in French universities and specialized in the subject. The title *World History of Education* is self explanatory. This is the kind of work that even the editors prefer not to summarize in a few sentences. I have read a lot of it and I intend to read much more; I cannot say that I read the lot. Therefore I confess that I am going to use it shamelessly to my purposes. I am not even going to try to give you a broad outline of its contents.

In my view this work has two essential merits. First, it tries to assess a complicated subject in the widest possible context. In doing so it brings together a large amount of valuable information scattered

among countless specialized sources (to be found in the bibliographies of the individual contributions). Second, it contains far more direct and oblique criticism than the individual contributors would accept from any outsider. One author even admits that "The USSR and Eastern Europe, the Countries of the Warsaw pact, dispensed with many educational experiments, utopian or uncontrolled." Probably because they found other ways to spend the taxpayers' money.

In the last paragraph of his chapter on the techniques of elementary training during the nineteenth century, M. Vial is quite explicit: "Contempt is now the general attitude for this menial and manual discipline." The chaos resulting from such an attitude over a period of one hundred years is hardly surprising, however alarming it may be. To try and put the blame on any one person or political party or any particular system would be a waste of time.

How this attitude developed and prevailed in the face of the glaring fact of the servability of handwriting can be explained very briefly. Learning and for that matter teaching handwriting has never been a pleasant occupation. Not everybody has a calligraphic penchant. Not everybody is a born teacher. For most people the serious business of writing was copying, that is to say: drudgery, pure and simple. By the end of the nineteenth century writing masters had all but died out — at least in the West. Literary and commercial hands were all alike and fast degenerating. Printers were no longer humanists. Teachers and school inspectors were coming into their own under the compulsory school system for educating the masses. By that time the graphologists had developed a method which associated calligraphy exclusively with the copperplate hand, then in its more degraded state and equated with a total lack of personality — as well as plain stupidity. Physicians, hygienists, and psychologists resumed the battle over vertical against sloping letterforms, which according to Javal (France, 1905) had divided the writing masters for over a century. In the United States Thomas Edison took sides in favor of the vertical style. It was also at that time that longhand gradually gave way to be finally and totally replaced by the typewriter in all commercial and administrative offices.

Not surprisingly, handwriting is as unpopular as ever — or even less popular.

Typography fares no better. In one generation photocomposition and word processing have disrupted the professional training of printers and composers, such as it was and such as they were. I have a graphic illustration of the resulting situation — at least in French speaking countries. Right now, on my desk in Belgium, I have five manuscripts

by five authors, all of them academics and working daily on books published in France during the sixteenth century — the best book typography there ever was. As a matter of course, they are daily consulting the bibliographies of their subject. Even so when it came to put pen on paper, to type their own bibliography, they were at a loss. The publisher of the volume is an antiquarian book dealer and a newcomer in publishing. So is the printer in this particular branch of typography. They came to me not only as a book designer but also as a teacher because they had never been given any information about book production — so that they cannot even learn from the books they are using, consulting, studying daily. Of course, that is good for me! But the total situation is a serious matter indeed. So much so that in France, Charles Peignot in 1980 went straight to Georges Bonnin, directeur de l'Imprimerie Nationale asking him to join forces in order to try and restore the typographic tradition in France.

The Imprimerie Nationale was founded by Richelieu in 1640 and is to the French typographic tradition what the Académie Française (also and significantly founded by Richelieu, 1636) is to French literature. The antecedents of the Typefoundry DeBerny-Peignot can be traced back to Honoré de Balzac in the nineteenth century. Since the Art Nouveau period, the Peignots have been leaders in the “typographie a la française.”

The Imprimerie Nationale accepted the challenge and for the last three years an informal group of twenty people have met monthly in the Imprimerie Nationale, with the late Charles Peignot as the chairman of the we call “le CERT,” Centre d'Études & de Recherches Typographiques. The first decision made was to publish a book to celebrate the Tradition Française (what else?) under the poetic title, *De Plomb, d'Encre, et de Lumière*, which to the French mind suggests the evolution from hot metal to cold type. This book was followed by meetings with an ad hoc commission interministérielle which will very soon make practical decisions — at least I hope so.

I contributed a chapter to the book, “Constellations et Configurations d'Écritures,” which I already described as a method for analyzing and describing text pages (as distinct from title pages, in the manner of DeVinnie). By the configurations of text matter I mean the lines, columns, notes (footnotes, headnotes, endnotes, sidenotes), cut ins, page numbers, signatures, running heads, etc. By the constellation I mean the several letterforms, written or printed, in various styles which are eventually combined on one text page. All this is illustrated with examples taken from the homework of a schoolboy, a typewritten page of copy, a commercial letter, a few novels, dictionaries, and a

daily newspaper. Every single example — of growing complexity and diversity — is fully commented on. These examples suggest the kind of exercises which would be done any time, anywhere, with whatever piece of written or printed matter happens to be around. The object of the exercise is not to help boys and girls forget about handwriting. Quite to the contrary. This is intended to help the boys and girls as well as the scientists all through their several studies to become aware of the form as well as the content of what they are reading or writing.

Teachers and students alike can only benefit from being made more perceptive of what I would describe as the *visual editing* of any piece of written matter that they may be handling as reader and as writer. Everybody benefits by being more alert to the fact that the visual editing is not part of any medium but must be made part of any text. Calligraphy in the 1980's is clearly an art form in its own right and should be taught as such. Visual editing as an extension of handwriting should be part of any course of studies. In such a way and to the extent that even a hopeless scribbler ought to know how any piece of writing worth distributing, should be adequately edited — visually as well as grammatically — in order to be efficient as well as acceptable to the addressees. Whatever the system used, sobriety, clarity and coherence (i.e., style) can be given. This is a matter of culture.

If this is as simple as all that, why ignore it? If it is difficult, this is only one more reason why visual editing should be taught generally. If only as the one technique which is instrumental during a lifetime in all technologies and arts. Also because everybody can really *do* something about that at least. And however modest, it is something meaningful to oneself and to the community. It should no longer be considered as a matter of professional, specialized training. Today it is a matter of general literacy.