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## Masks on Hire: In Search of Typographic Histories

In the wake of recent polemics around the "new" typography, and in an attempt to avert the epistemological limitations of typographic histories informed by technological determinisms and ideological dogmas (neoclassicist or neomodernist), this paper argues that, given the functional relation between typography and language, histories of typography must be informed by those disciplines which bear upon language and its manifestations, namely: linguistics, semiotics, literary theory, art history, bibliography, philosophy, etc. Failing this, chronicles of "natural," untheorized objects will continue to assume the role and claim the status of history-writing.

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## Aims and Objectives

The aim of this paper is not to take graphic design studies one step closer towards a definitive history of typography but, more realistically, to offer some preliminary remarks and guidelines for a critical examination of existing histories and for writing alternative typographic histories, on an renewed theoretical basis.

By opening up the field of typographic history beyond its traditional boundaries — displacing its focus from a dominant concern with technological factors to one concerned with design and related issues — I hope to extend the scope of historical and theoretical research about typography.

Although this paper is critical of recent attempts at dealing with the history of typography, the suggestions that follow do not claim to make previous histories obsolete. The fact that, for centuries, typographic histories have legitimized a restricted range of typographic values and practices should not be overlooked nor dismissed as ideological. Since historical writings cannot transcend the historical conditions and ideological preoccupations through which they come into being, the forms of history-writing I envisage will need to acknowledge the effects of these contingencies on its own claims to truth and face the epistemological implications.

Finally, the challenge, for contemporary historians of typography, is to write histories capable of *presenting typographic pluralism with appropriate theoretical tools*. A direct consequence of this methodological shift will be the opening up of the *typographic scene*—to accomodate a wider range of works and preoccupations—and the redefinition of key terms through which it is to be rearticulated: *text, legibility, reading, typographic reference, interpretation*.

### Dualism 1: (Mis)representing Typographic Differences

The present essay was written out of a personal dissatisfaction with the way typographic differences are (mis)represented in typographic histories, and how they have been obscured in the

recent debate around the “new” typography.<sup>1</sup> As a survey of twentieth-century typographical literature testifies, experimental deviations from typographic forms have often been dismissed for an alleged *lack* or *failure* to comply with rational, objective or universal criteria (the “fundamental principles of typography” invoked by Stanley Morison). Ironically, classic typefaces such as Baskerville and Bodoni have, at various times, been the target of dogmatic criticism, impervious to the argument that the legibility of letterforms and graphic layouts is relative and culture-bound. Karl Gerstner put it succinctly when he remarked: “even with the best of methods, it is not possible to determine which is the most legible face of all, and for one simple reason: the function of reading is based on subjective habits rather than on objective conditions.”<sup>2</sup> The new bibliography reinforces this point when it states: “there is no inherent physical display of text and apparatus that is more natural to a specific work than any other.”<sup>3</sup>

The reluctance, or incapacity of historians, to evaluate typographic differences in term of their cultural, aesthetic and semiological *specificity*, across the full range of typographic practice (from continuous text to display typography, from modernism to post-modernism) continues to be a major obstacle towards writing typographic histories. Regretfully, this incapacity is not the prerogative of a few polemicists, but is characteristic of the *typographic* scene which — from Stanley Morison to Paul Rand, Ken Garland, Steven Heller and others — has displayed a singular dogmatism when confronted with works conceived outside its ideological frame of reference. Unable to acknowledge these ideological differences as productive and significant — constitutive of a legitimate cultural pluralism — these authors too readily take up the role of defenders of Typography against the threat of corruption from the outside. In this, they echo early critiques of modernism which deplored that “many of its early exponents violated both traditional customs and good taste,” and that “there was for a time a danger that the more simple and beautiful forms of typography would become submerged beneath a flood of freak type-faces arranged in most bewildering and

1  
1991. “Massimo Vignelli vs Ed Benguiat,” *Print* XLV:V, 88-95, 142-144 and 148.  
Garland, Ken. 1992. “Stop footling around,” *Design*, 527, 11-13.

Heller, Steven. 1993.  
“Changing of the guard,”  
*Eye*, 2:8, 4-5, and “Cult of the ugly,” *Eye*, 3:9, 52-59.

Various. 1993. “Letters,”  
*Eye*, 3:10, 3-5.

Bierut, Michael. 1993.  
“Playing the game by  
Rand’s rules,” *Eye*, 3:10,  
77-79. Various. 1993.  
“Letters,” *Eye*, 3:11, 3.

Stiff, Paul. 1993. “Stop  
sitting around and start  
reading,” *Eye*, 3:11, 4-5.

Keedy, Jeffery. 1993. “The  
rules of typography accord-  
ing to crackpots experts,”  
*Eye*, 3:11, 48-55.

2  
Gerstner, Karl. 1974.  
*Compendium for Literates*.  
Cambridge, MA: The MIT  
Press, 132.

3  
Greetham, DC. 1993.  
“Editorial and Critical  
Theory: From Modernism  
to Postmodernism,” in:  
George Bornstein and  
Ralph G. Williams.  
*Palimpsest*. Ann Arbor:  
The University of Michigan  
Press, 14.

unorthodox styles.”<sup>4</sup> These remarks, combined with the assertion that “the new typography in England has infused no vitalizing spirit into current typography” sadly represent the main strand of typographic thinking in eccentric Britain between the wars.<sup>5</sup>

From the margins came a different voice which acknowledged the relation of typography to painting and architecture, and regretted that the new typography “has been almost unknown in this country, and has found here not more than one or two disciples.”<sup>6</sup> In Britain, the anti-modernist view prevailed, amidst a display of telling metaphors:

*There is a possibility, noted Atkins, of some of these freak types finding a temporary lodgment in this country, but the inherent good taste of British typographers, allied to their instinctive love for the practical and the beautiful, will enable them to weed out any “alien undesirable” and “nationalize” only those forms of letters which can conform to our national sense of fitness.*<sup>7</sup>

By 1938, the “danger that the new functional materials, the mechanistic typefaces that originated in Germany, would be used with a ruthless logic” seemed averted, as John Gloag looked forward to “a glorious restoration of fun and games with shapes and colours, and an end to the nervous trifling with ‘off-white’, and ‘off-pink’, and angles and straight lines and vast, unrelieved surfaces.”<sup>8</sup> The Festival of Britain was on its way...

*From 1949 to 1967, under the editorship of Herbert Spencer, Typographica published a extensive range of articles about “major typographic experiments of this century” which, together with his Pioneers of Modern Typography (1969) and John Lewis’s Typography: Basic Principles (1963) contributed to expand the typographic horizon of designers. John Lewis’s Anatomy of Printing (1970) and Müller-Brockmann’s A History of Visual Communication (1971) followed on, confirming the relevance of modernism to contemporary typographic practice.*<sup>9</sup>

4

Atkins, W., editor. 1932. *The Art and Practice of Printing*, (vol. 1-6), London: Pitman and Sons, vol.1, chapter XIV: “Typographic Display,” 198-246.

5

Tarr, John C. 1936. “What are the fruits of the new typography,” reprinted in *Printing in the twentieth century: a Penrose Anthology*. London: Northwood Publishers, 151, 1974.

6

Evans, Bertram. 1934. “Typography in England, 1933: Frustration or Function.” *Penrose Annual*, 58.

7

Atkins, W. *The Art and Practice of Printing*, 1.

8

Gloag, John. 1938. “Design Marches On.” *Penrose Annual*: 19-20.

9

Burns Aaron. 1987. Foreword to *The Liberated Page*. Herbert Spencer, editor. London: Lund Humphries, 7.



Although pitched at a general, introductory level, the works of John Lewis (1963, 1970, 1978) are significant in their attempt to present typographic differences in terms of their respective concerns and overall significance in typographic history. In contrast with Walter Tracy, who excluded Whistler and other artists from the *Typographic Scene* — for reasons which could be described as corporate and technical<sup>10</sup> — Lewis’s acceptance of “Whistler as a typographer” denotes a willingness to extend the field of typography to accommodate significant contributions from outside the profession.<sup>11</sup> Tracy’s insistence, in Morisonian tone, that, “typography is a professional activity directed towards a practical, and usually commercial, result,” warrants his exclusion of major experimental works and closes the field to outside influences and precludes major transformations.<sup>12</sup> It is regrettable and somewhat surprising that, in 1988, one should retain such a restrictive view of the subject; a view which, against the efforts of Spencer, Lewis, M ller-Brockmann and others, insists so categorically in excluding the contributions of artists to typography.

The widespread dogmatism found in writings on typography may be imputed to their authors’ lack of knowledge about those disciplines which bear upon the theory and practice of communication, namely: linguistics, semiotics, cultural theory, bibliography, anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc. It may also be a direct consequence of a restrictive interpretation of information design, and of a tendency to use criticism as a platform for the illustration and defense of corporate views and personal opinions.<sup>13</sup> This is most apparent in the recent polemic around the “new” typography, where lack of insights have been volunteered by designers as serious, responsible criticism and typographic truth.

It could be argued that academic historians do not proceed very differently; however, it is a requisite of academic criticism to address different objects and positions in terms of their own specificity, to consider the interaction and the effect of different factors on any given situation, and, finally, to reach a conclusion on the basis of a reasoned argument. This is not so in typographic writings, where — whether in manuals, manifestos or design journalism — ideas are often presented in

10

Tracy, Walter. 1988.  
*The Typographic Scene*.  
London: Gordon Fraser, 11.

11

Lewis, John. 1978.  
*Typography: Design and Practice*. London: Barrie and Jenkins, 16-19.

12

Tracy, Walter. *The Typographic Scene*, 11.

13

Kinross, Robin. 1989.  
“The Rhetoric of Neutrality.”  
*Design Discourse*. Victor Margolin, editor. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 131-143.

*normative* forms, usually set up *against* existing positions and practices, past or present. Furthermore, the low level of theorizing found in writings about typography is manifest in oversimplified views about the functional relation between typography and language, the role of typography as a public service and the place and function of style in graphic communication. Let's note, finally, that one chief obstacle towards accomodating typographic diversity springs from the insistance, among writers, to view the typographic scene through a stifling dualism.

14

Updike, D.B. 1922  
(2nd ed:1937). *Printing  
Types: Their History, Forms  
and Use*. Cambridge, Mass:  
Harvard University Press.

15

Darnton, Robert. 1992.  
*Gens de Lettres, Gens du  
Livre*. Paris: Editions Odile  
Jacob.

## Dualism 2: Assessing Typographic Literature

In addition to classic surveys such as Updike's *Printing Types*, the most useful texts currently available are those which set out to document specific aspects of typographic history.<sup>14</sup> Allan Stevenson's *The Problem of the Missale Speciale* (1967), for instance, typifies a genre of applied research which brings together, in a scholarly way, a considerable body of documentary evidence concerning technical aspects of print production, for the purpose of dating and making attributions. This form of scholarship is extremely valuable, as it provides an essential basis for history-writing.

Extending this methodology into the field of social and cultural history, Robert Darnton's studies of the production and distribution of books in eighteenth-century France, not only extends the scope of typographic histories, but also dispells a few myths about the role of authors, publishers, printers and book sellers in the dissemination of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> In *The Coming of the Book*, first published in 1958, Lucien Febvre had begun to redirect the aims of typographic history, from its previous focus on the history of techniques to a critical examination of their social, political and cultural implications:

*...the story is about something other than the history of a technique. It has to do with the effect on European culture of a new means of communicating ideas within a society that was essentially aristocratic, a society that accepted and was long to accept a culture and a tradition of learning which was restricted to certain social groups.*<sup>16</sup>

Measured against Febvre's methodological concerns, recent histories of typography and graphic design display a marked theoretical naivet  in their assumption that the facts of typographic history can speak for themselves, when allowed to unfold along a chronological path, unhindered by theory or ideology.

The least theoretically developed aspect of typographic histories is that of typographic analyses, where the methodology remains disappointingly pedestrian. This is a direct consequence of the insufficient theorizing of typography as a discursive practice; for, in spite of G rard Blanchard's attempt in *Pour une S miologie de la Typographie*, the project of a semiology of typography still awaits theoretical formulation: as a discrete field of enquiry, characterized by a specific object (typographic design), its conditions of possibility/existence, structural determinants, the modes and contexts of its production, distribution and uses.<sup>17</sup> In the absence of a developed critical methodology and language, writings on the subject remain superficially descriptive and bound by a *probl matique* centered around technical factors and parameters.

Among recent histories, Robin Kinross's *Modern Typography*, subtitled "an essay in critical history," announced itself as a critique of "the existing model of the genre." Kinross's objections concerning "books about 'the pioneers of modern typography' or 'Bauhaus typography' [that] situate their subjects in a vacuum, without historical precedent and without relation to the unmentioned but implied contemporary traditional norm," are justified and welcome; as is his intention to focus "away from products...towards the ideas that inform production."<sup>18</sup>

However, the omission of futurism and dada from his account of modern typography, the dismissal of the "new" typography and of the problems it poses, seriously undermine its claims. The exclusion of two of the most radical typographic experiments of the twentieth century, directed simultaneously at language and its typographic presentation, is somewhat problematic in a book (c)aiming to be "an essay in critical history."

16

Febvre, Lucien. 1993  
(1st ed: *L'Apparition du Livre*,  
Paris: Albin Michel, 1958).  
*The Coming of the Book*.  
London: Verso, 12.

17

Blanchard, G rard. 1979.  
*Pour une S miologie de la  
Typographie*. Andenne:  
Remy Magermans.

18

Kinross, Robin. 1992.  
*Modern Typography: An  
Essay in Critical History*.  
London: Hyphen Press,  
11-12.

It is symptomatic, however, of the closure which prevents historians of typography and graphic design to address design issues outside the binary structures which set up established values (whether classicist, functionalist or modernist) against alternative new styles. This can be verified by charting the negative response to *die neue typographie* in Britain during the twenties and thirties and, today, to the new trends associated with Neville Brody, the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Emigré graphics and, more generally, all forms of experimental typography. Kinross's omission of two key moments in the history of typographic design could also be read as demonstrating, by default, the enduring challenge raised by those two movements — from their museum grave — to the impoverished (“one size only”) view of modernism perduring in official circles.

What I hope to make clear in the ensuing pages is that reference to universal typographic criteria is not likely to produce *critical* histories of typography, but, more likely, to consolidate typographic *orthodoxies*. One central argument running through this paper is that the writing of critical histories of typography requires a higher level of *theorizing* than is currently brought to bear on the subject. Failing this, typographic histories will continue legitimating entrenched dogmas, tracing their genealogy from a mythical origin, along a Vasarian path — oscillating between grandeur and decadence — towards an ever-deferred promise of perfection.

## Definitions

Since ontologies and teleologies crystallize in definitions, I shall begin with a critical examination of the concepts of “typography” and “typographer,” their definitions and semantic transformations, pointing out structural correlations between definitions and typographic theories and practices. The plural form used in the title signals the intention to avert essentialism by acknowledging that, whatever our aspirations and claims to truth, typographic histories are primarily *discursive objects*, functionally linked with material and ideological preoccupations, and that their references to historical events,

problematic as they stand, need to be subjected to a rigorous epistemological critique. The outcome is not likely to be an objective account, free from ideological constraints, but a narrative which acknowledges the effect of interests and ideologies without attempting to clothe them in a veil of universality.

### *The Object/s of Typographic Histories*

The 1986 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* acknowledges that "some confusion and 'some lack of uniformity'" is "involved in talking about typographers and typography."<sup>19</sup> This view is echoed in Alan Marshall's remark that typography is characterized by "conflicting schools of thought" and, "despite its conviviality...has never been free of dissension," but "thrived on it."<sup>19</sup> This is to be expected for, as Georges Gusdorf remarked, in his *Introduction aux Sciences Humaines*: "the meaning of words is established in relation to time and events; meaning changes with the times, in such a way that the same word may be used to pose and resolve essentially different problems."<sup>20</sup>

Modes of production, distribution and consumption, combined with a concern to establish functional relations between the form and function of printed matter, have informed definitions of typography, from the time of the second invention of printing from movable types in Europe. It should be noted, however, that the nature of the Chinese script, the higher cultural status of calligraphy over printing and other historical and cultural factors, prevented the first invention of printing from movable types, by Pi Sh ng in China, to achieve the worldwide impact the second invention by Gutenberg et al. had; a reminder that the historical impact of a technological "break through" is determined, above all, by its socio-economic, political and ideological relevance, at the time and in the context(s) in which it occurs. In this instance, linguistic factors played a decisive part in shelving a potentially revolutionary invention; revolutionary, that is, for those societies which had adopted alphabetic writing.<sup>21</sup>

19

Marshall, Alan. 1993. "Typereview" (Review of Kinross's *Modern Typography*). *Bulletin of the Printing Historical Society*, 35:16.

20

Gusdorf, Georges. 1960. *Introduction aux Sciences Humaines*. Strasbourg: Publications de la Facult  de Lettres.

21

Carter, T.F. 1955 (rev. by Carrington Goodrich, L). *The Invention of Printing in China*. New York: The Ronald Press.  
See also: Tsuen-Hsui, Tsien. 1985. "Paper and Printing," in *Science and Civilisation in China*, ed. John Needham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol.5, part 1.

In English, the interchangeability between the terms “typography” and “printing,” on the one hand, and “typographer” and “printer,” on the other, dates back to the beginnings of printing. Today, in spite of the considerable changes which have affected modes and relations of print production, this semantic overlap continues to prevail in modern dictionaries: not only in sections dealing with the history of the terms, but also in those which list their current usage.

After pointing out its derivation from the Latin “typographia” (1493), via the French form “typographie” (1577), the *OED* defines typography as: “1. the art or practice of printing,” and by extension: “a printing establishment, a press,” “2. the action or process of printing; esp. the setting and arrangement of types and printing from them; typographical execution; hence, the arrangement and appearance of printed matter.” From a contemporary perspective, the formulation is somewhat problematic, as what we would call today typographic *design* (the *semiological* dimension of printing), is subsumed and appears conditioned by technological factors. Put differently, this emphasis on the material aspects of typography marks the acceptance of technological determinism over design, not only in the “setting and arrangement of type” and in the corresponding “arrangement and appearance of printed matter,” but also in the historical accounts which ensued.

Anchored in the technological constraints inherent to the modes of print production in the early printing office, and reinforced by the adoption of a restricted range of (typo)graphic conventions from manuscript books, this determinism retained its validity throughout the history of printing and lasted well into the twentieth century, when new historical conditions brought about the rise of the *designer* and, with it, the possibility of free individual interventions and radical transgressions.

Two early examples given by the *OED*: one from an eighteenth-century advertisement stating: “The typography of both editions does honour to the press” (1793), another from 1900, stating: “The typography is clear,” suggest that, before



the rise of the designer, typography — defined as a specific set of rules — could only be good or bad. In that context discourses on typography could either lay out typographic norms — to be followed and emulated — or issue warnings against negligence or failure to comply with the rules. These texts, from Hornschuch's *Orthotypographia* (1608) to John Southward's *Modern Printing* (1912: 3rd ed) — subtitled: *a handbook of the principles and practice of typography and the auxiliary arts* — emphasize, by their names and in their content, the prescriptive nature of typographic literature. Characteristically, Fertel's *Science Pratique* (1723), Smith's and Stower's *Grammars* (1755 and 1808), Momoro's and Pierre Fournier's *Trait  s* (1793 and 1825) and Timperley's *Manual* (1838) follow a didactic rather than a reflexive approach to their subject.

### *Typographer ancillus Typographiae*

With characteristic symmetry, the *OED* defines "typographer" as "one skilled in typography; a printer." By the time Moxon wrote his *Mechanick Exercises* (1683–4), the division of labor between letter cutter, caster and dresser, compositor, corrector, press-man, ink-maker, smith and joiner (for the making and repairs of the presses), was already well established: "For the more easie managing of Typographie, the Operators have found it necessary to devide it into several Trades, each of which (in the strictest sence) stand no nearer related to Typographie, than Carpentry and Masonry, & are to Architecture," noted Moxon. The effects of this fragmentation, deplored by Moxon and others before him, called for a central figure capable of coordinating work in and around the printing office. It is from this context that Moxon's definition of the Typographer acquires its full significance. For Moxon, the Typographer was the unifying agent who could "either perform, or direct others to perform...all the handy-works and physical operations relating to typographie."<sup>22</sup>

In retrospect, it should not come as a surprise that Moxon linked the quality of printed matter with the technical and material aspects of print production. Since the Middle Ages,

22

Moxon, Joseph, 1683–4.  
*Mechanick Exercises on  
the whole art of Printing*  
(reprinted: Davies, H. and  
Carter H., editors. London,  
Oxford University Press)  
1962, 11–12.

the scholastic theory of the *artes mechanicae* had defined “art” as a fixed set of rules for the correct execution of any given task. In the words of Thomas Aquinas: art is nothing but the correct deduction of things to be done (*ars nihil aliud est, quam ratio recta aliquorum operum faciendorum* or, more concisely, *recta ratio factibilium*).<sup>23</sup> According to this view, the correct application of the principles of the “art” of printing could only produce good typography; imperfection arising not from the rules of the art, but from a failure by the artisan to implement them. Conversely, individual interventions in the mechanical arts did not affect the rules of the art, but merely removed the obstacles which prevented their implementation: “art does not add to what is, but remove the obstacles towards its manifestation” (“*non generat novam artem,*” noted John of Saint Thomas, “*sed tollit impedimentum exercitii ejus*”).<sup>24</sup> In this context, the modern concept of the designer as initiator of new practices was absolutely irrelevant.

Although the notion of the “designer” as a free, autonomous agent, capable of initiating change was incompatible with this episteme, the division and organization of labor within the printing office called for an individual capable of ensuring that the *rules* and the *fundamental principles* were followed scrupulously, at all stages of the process. Moxon’s allegorical representation of the “Master Printer” as “the soul of Printing” and of “all the Work-men” as “members of the body governed by that Soul, subservient to him,” who “would not carry out their art...but by Orders from the Master-Printer,”<sup>25</sup> emphasizes the importance of coordination. The picture of a printing office (*figure 1*) illustrating “the Master’s duties, the correctors’ chores, the work of readers and compositors” as well as the harder labor of press-men and apprentice (present in the image, but absent from the caption), highlights the managerial role alongside the craftsmen’s diligence and application. What the picture does not show, however, is the system of rules, prohibitions and fines which ensured order in the *chapel*.<sup>26</sup> Contrasting with this emphasis on the material aspects of printing, a contemporary allegory (*figure 2*) reminds us that the aspiring typographer was expected to acquire mastery over

23

Quoted from:  
Maritain, Jacques.  
*Art et Scholastique*. 1920.  
Paris: Librairie de l’Art  
Catholique, 10, 28.

24

Maritain,  
*Art et Scholastique*,  
17 and 122 n.15.

25

Moxon, Joseph,  
*Mechanick Exercises...*, 12.

26

On the the organization of  
printing workshops or  
“chapels:” Avis, FC. 1971.  
*The Early Printers’ Chapel in  
England*. London: FC Avis.

# OFFICINÆ TYPOGRAPHICÆ DELINEATIO.



**Figure 1**

Picture of a printing office.

*This cut, the work of Thymius' accurate hand  
Shows all at once how printing shops are manned:  
The masters' duties, the correctors' chores,  
The work of readers and compositors.  
To this small book then you'll apply your mind  
Good reader, if you're not the vulgar kind,  
So that a picture in your mind may rise  
To match this picture that's before your eyes.*

**E**N THYMIUSculptoris opus, quo prodidit unâ  
Singula chalcographi munera rite gregis.  
Et correctorum curas, operasq; regentum,  
Quasq; gerit lector, compositorq; vices.  
Ut vulgus fileam. tu qui legis ista, libello  
Fac iteratâ animi sedulitate fatis.  
Sic meritæ cumulans hinc fertilitatis honores,  
Ceui pictura oculos, intima mentis ages.

*L. I. L. F.*



**Figure 2**

"Typographia:" allegory of Typography,  
from Gessner's *Buchdruckerkunst*  
(Leipzig, 1743).

six aspects of language — represented by six concentric levels: from reading, writing, understanding to grammar, before he was deemed worthy of serving typography (*sic dignus es intrare*). The allegory implied that competence was to be acquired through a guided ascent, at the term of which the typographer could *serve, but in no way substitute himself for* *Typography*.

27

Hornschuch, Hieronimus.  
1608. *Orthotypographia*.  
Leipzig: M. Lantzenberge, 5.  
Reprinted with an English  
translation by Cambridge  
University Library, 1972.

### *Design-led and Profit-led Typographies in the Eighteenth Century*

In 1608, in a text described by its modern editor as “the first in a long line of technical manual written for members of the printing trade,” the German corrector Hornschuch urged master printers to take greater care over all aspects of their work. After deploring that too many printers “do everything solely for the sake of money and whatever is given to them to be printed they send back ever worse, with types often so worn down and blunt that their feeble impression on almost crumbling, dirt coloured paper can scarcely be detected by the keenest eye,” he concluded: “they debase their material whatever it is with so many shameful mistakes, with the result that one cannot find ever one page completely free of errors.”<sup>27</sup> Departing from idealized textbook stereotypes, Hornschuch’s account is valuable as it highlights, in very specific ways, the negative consequences of commercialism in the early seventeenth century.

In the light of these examples, it should be clear that the distinction we draw today between typographic design and printing, as two discrete branches of graphic communication, was incompatible with a system of knowledge in which causality operated through the *system* rather than through the individuals working within it. In that context, the “art” of printing stood out as the determining factor in the production of good typography, individual merit measuring the ability to excel *through* the parameters and *within* the boundaries of the art.

expressing them came together explosively," that "futurist typographers scream with large black type waving in all directions" and that consequently "the world of typography was blown on to a new course," shows an unfortunate vulnerability to the power of the most predictable futurist metaphor. The author's lack of ease and familiarity with the subject may explain the cursory treatment of futurism with respect to other movements. Let's note how, in this form of external characterization, futurism is construed as an excentric form of deviance, and the reader *confronted* with a collection of images rather than *engaged* in a productive dialogue with futurist principles and their implications for the *production of texts* and their *typographic presentation*.

Meggs's characterization follows a similar line, encapsulated by his remark that "Marinetti and his followers produced an explosive and emotionally charged poetry that defied correct syntax and grammar." Although Meggs is more specific in his account of futurist achievements, he never discusses the implications of futurism on typographic history.

It may come as a surprise to find two classic texts attempting to deal with futurist typography without referring *specifically* to those manifestos which spell out futurist intentions in detail. In Meggs's case, it is somewhat paradoxical as his bibliography lists the very source in which they were reprinted, in translation:<sup>30</sup> The consequences of this oversight are serious, for not only do these authors fail to provide an adequate description of futurist intentions and achievements, but also, more importantly in a historical account, their treatment of futurism precludes any assessment by the reader of its *historical significance* and *contemporary relevance*.

Several things are lost in these accounts: the fact that behind and through the aggressive rhetoric of futurist typography (its most easily spotted "noisy" side), comes a specific, extensive and coherent critique of typographic orthodoxy, and the realization that addressing the *probl  matique* opened up by futurism is important for a contemporary practice, especially in the wake of the debate around post-modernism. Put differently, address-

30

Apollonio, Umbro. 1973.  
*Futurist Manifestos*.  
 London: Thames and  
 Hudsons, 95-106.

ing futurism at its face value — rather than at the level of its theoretical preoccupations — has generated different forms of *estrangement* leading either to marginalization or dismissal, or to superficial admiration, inspiring stylistic “rip-offs” and fashionable pastiches.

Against typophilia and “belle-lettrisme” Marinetti argued that “the so-called typographical harmony of the page” is “contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and burst of style that run through the page.” This observation, printed in a section entitled “typographical revolution,” was followed by a set of recommendations which situates Marinetti in the tradition of expressive typography traced by Massin, in *Letter and Image*, from Rabelais to Apollinaire.<sup>31</sup> Let’s note, however, that Marinetti’s personal contribution to typography extended beyond its literary precedents, in that it advocated a radical intervention on language, at the level of seven grammatical parameters: noun, adjective, verb, onomatopoeia, syntax, modes of reference and orthography.

The theorising of the “semaphoric adjective,” for instance, provides some useful insights into the relation between typography and language. After remarking that: “one should treat adjectives like railway signals of style, employ them to mark tempo, the retards and pauses along the way,” Marinetti notes: “What I call a semaphoric adjective, lighthouse-adjective, or atmosphere-adjective is the adjective apart from nouns, isolated in parentheses. This makes it a kind of absolute noun, broader and more powerful than the noun proper.” Marinetti’s concern to liberate images and analogies and to express them with “unhindered words and with no connecting strings of syntax and with no punctuation,” aimed to produce more than a few burst of energy onto the page, as current characterizations tend to imply. Marinetti summarized his objectives in a manifesto published in *Lacerba* on 15 June 1913:

With words-in-freedom we will have: CONDENSED  
METAPHORS. TELEGRAPHIC IMAGES. MAXIMUM  
VARIATIONS. NODES OF THOUGHT. CLOSED OR OPEN FANS  
OF MOVEMENT. COMPRESSED ANALOGIES. COLOUR

31

Massin. 1970. *Letter and Image*. London: Studio Vista, 155-244.



## The Author as Typographer

Before *design issues* could emerge in typographic literature, technological determinism first had to be *relativized* and the design process conceptualized as an activity capable of challenging — as Marinetti did — technological norms and their design implications. Conversely, not before a functional distinction and a relative autonomy between the material and design aspects of printing were granted, could the figure of the typographer emerge as the person capable of *redefining* typographic practice on the basis of innovation.

Given the corporate organization of printing as a trade, and the tight regulations used to preserve order in the *chapeles*, it is not surprising that, in the area of book design, deviations from typographic norms were first instigated by authors seeking more appropriate typographic forms for the presentation of their texts. From the historical precedents of Laurence Sterne in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) and Restif de la Bretonne's setting of *Monsieur Nicolas* (1796–97) to Whistler's *Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1876), Mallarm 's *Un Coup de D * (1897), Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1917) and Marinetti's *Mots en Libert  Futuriste* (1919), the expressive use of type and deviations from typographical norms were motivated by authorial decisions. What was new in these and other experiments was the deliberate exploration of the relation between typography and language. Instead of accepting the standard typographic conventions set by the industry, these authors — in collaboration with sympathetic printers — took up the initiative to experiment with new typographic forms.

The significance of these experiments should not be regarded as marginal or peripheral — as Walter Tracy intimated — but as an essential part of the typographic scene, like the long neglected mass of Victorian display typography, now available for study, thanks to the pioneering work of Nicolette Gray (1939), Michael Twyman (1966; 1970), and John Lewis (1962; 1976).<sup>28</sup> The object of these experiments was not, as often imputed, to engage in gratuitous games (form/decoration for its own sake) or shout louder than their neighbor in the frenzy

28

Gray, Nicolette. 1938 (2nd rev ed: 1976). *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Types and Title Pages*. London: Faber and Faber.

Lewis, John. 1962 (2nd rev ed: 1990). "Printed Ephemera: The Changing Uses of Type and Letterform," *English and American Printing*. London: Antique Collector's Club.

Lewis, John. 1976. *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. London: Studio Vista. Twyman, Michael. 1970. *Printing 1770–1970*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.

of self-expression or economic competition, but to consider how the limits of typographic conventions may be extended *purposefully*.

Today, the insertion of these experiments in a *general* history of typography, calls for an examination of the issue of *typographic reference*; that is to say of the referential function of typography in relation to the texts it presents. Too long obscured by claims and counter-claims about legibility, the transparency or invisibility of the text, and other related issues, the question of typographic reference has been effaced from typographic writings. This needs to be remedied if typographic differences are to become intelligible, within an enlarged typographic scene; enriched by more sophisticated theoretical tools.

29

Gottschall, Edward M. 1989. *Typographic Communications Today*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2, 18.

Meggs, Philip B. 1992. *A History of Graphic Design*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 241, 485.

## On Futurism's Birthday

*"Writers like James Joyce were giving new form to the English Language, but our typographers were not doing much about it."*

J. Lewis (1978:50)

In spite of the growing consensus around the historical significance of modernism, historians of graphic design and typography tend to signal the existence of such experiments with a surprising brevity and lack of attention to typographic language. Although both Gottschall's *Typographic Communication Today* (1989) and Meggs's *A History of Graphic Design* (1992) acknowledge the historical significance of futurism, both, in my view, fail to provide an adequate account of futurist typography and an assessment of its contemporary relevance.<sup>29</sup>

Gottschall starts with a predictable quotation from Spencer's *Pioneers of Modern Typography*: "The heroic period of modern typography may be said to have begun with Marinetti's *Figaro* manifesto of 1909," and follows by reiterating the usual art historical clichés about the beauty of speed. His observation that, "In futurism, social protest, new ideas, and new ways of

BALANCES. DIMENSIONS, WEIGHTS, MEASURES, AND THE  
 SPEED OF SENSATIONS. THE PLUNGE OF THE ESSENTIAL  
 WORD INTO THE WATER OF SENSIBILITY, MINUS THE  
 CONCENTRIC CIRCLES THAT THE WORD PRODUCES.  
 RESTFUL MOMENTS OF INTUITION. MOVEMENTS IN TWO,  
 THREE, FOUR, FIVE DIFFERENT RHYTHMS. THE ANALYTIC,  
 EXPLORATORY POLES THAT SUSTAIN THE BUNDLE OF  
 INTUITIVE STRINGS.

To an attentive reader informed about linguistic and literary theory, Marinetti's experiments deserve more than the cursory mention or stereotypical treatment they receive in typographic and graphic design histories. A preliminary line of research could involve a comparative study of the tools and modalities of *reference* in typography, starting with a definition of typographic reference and a discussion of typographic *denotation* and *connotation* in relation to theories of writing, editing and reading. This would have the advantage of extending the scope of typographic writing beyond closed dualisms (between traditionalisms and avant-gardes) and superficial formalist descriptions.

Since Lewis mapped out "the influence of art and history" on typographic design, in his *Anatomy of Printing* (1970), typographic histories have reiterated, with minor variations, the same themes and motifs, without substantially extending the analytical tools necessary for a better description of typographic texts. Unfolding from a mythical origin (the controversial context of the invention of printing and the laying out of its foundations by its founding *fathers*), along a Vasarian path, typographic histories do not question the assumptions upon which they rest. Paradoxically, the systematic *taming* of the literary text brought about by the invention of printing, and its consequences on typographic design, have never been examined as a subject in its own right. Twenty four years after its first publication, the impressive body of visual material anthologized by Massin in *Letter and Image* is still awaiting *adequate* theoretical and historical contextualization. Thus, the impoverishment and closure (through standardization) brought about by the invention of printing from movable types — with respect to the variety of approaches found in the manuscript

presentations of text in the pre-Gutenberg age — has been obscured by the more optimistic themes of the advancement of learning and democratization of knowledge arising from the diffusion of books. In conclusion, I would like to suggest that attention to Marinetti's critique of language and its conventional typographic presentations could, if related to *other* areas of typographic history, renew the *problématique* of typographic histories by inducing a closer examination of the effects of typography on the presentation and interpretation of texts. This would extend the debate on legibility beyond the retinal/optical dimension stressed by traditionalists to the much neglected *cultural and semiological implications of typographic structures*.

One conclusion I shall draw from this discussion is that, *in the 1990s, one should not attempt to write typographic histories without a sound knowledge of those disciplines which bear upon typography and language, namely linguistics, semiotics, literary theory, art history, bibliography, philosophy, etc. Failing this, chronicles will continue to assume the role and claim the status of history-writing.*

## The Function of Typographic Histories

A close examination of the historiography of printing shows that the writing of typographic histories has always been functionally related to typographic practice. James Watson's stated objectives in translating and printing La Caille's *History of the Art of Printing*, in 1713 — "to know to whom we are oblig'd for so fine an Art, and how it began," — reminds us that one important function of typographic history was to anchor typographic practice in an exemplary past which provided models for those training in the "typographic art." Experiencing typographic history in narrative form became a significant part of the *rite de passage* through which the apprentice was admitted into the trade.

The relevance of typographic history to practice was acknowledged by Fertel who, in his *Science Pratique de l'Imprimerie* (1723) refers his readers to two "traités d'histoires de l'Imprimerie:" La Caille's, from 1689, and an anonymous *De Germaniae...*, published in Leipzig. For a functional

integration of history and practice, we need to turn to John Smith's plan to follow his *Printer's Grammar* of 1755 with a separate volume on *The History and Present State of Printing* and to Luckombe's *History and Art of Printing* (1771), which offers a "Historical Account," outlining "a concise history of the art from its invention to the present time," and an "Instructive and Practical Part," dealing with technical aspects of printing: materials, presses, paper, composition, corrections, casting off copy, alphabets and warehouse management, followed by a glossary of technical terms used in printing.

Although Momoro's *Traité El mentaire de l'Imprimerie* (1793) only included a brief sketch of "the birth of printing and the propagation of this art," Stower's *Printer's Grammar* (1808), Johnson's *Typographia or the Printer's Instructor* (1824) and Hansard's *Typographia* (1825) provided substantial accounts of typographic history, which, in Johnson's and Hansard's case, represented one half of the entire treatise. The first Dutch manual published by van Cleff in 1844 contains a brief survey as does Henri Fournier's *Traité de la Typographie* (1825).

The absence of any historical account from Charles H. Timperley's *The Printer's Manual* (1838) was explained by the author's intention to "concentrate all that is useful and requisite to the inexperienced apprentice or journeyman." Similarly, Savage's *Dictionary of the Art of Printing* (1841) and Frey's *Nouveau Manuel Complet de Typographie* (1857) both focus on technical aspects of printing without delving into its history. Timperley's *Dictionary of Printers and Printing* (1839), reissued in two volumes, in 1842, under the title of *Encyclopedia of Literary and Typographical Anecdotes*, provided a "Chronological Digest of the Most Interesting Fact Illustrative of the History of Literature and Printing from the Earliest Period to the Present Time," a clear indication of the persisting relevance of typographic history. Timperley's publication of technical and historical material in separate form, however, signals a functional differentiation in the readership of books on typography, and an acknowledgment, by the author, that the appeal of typographic histories extended to a wider public of nonprofessionals, incorporating those Momoro called "*les curieux de l'historique*."

A close look at the ways early typographic manuals dealt with historical information reveal significant differences in conceptions and attitudes. As Harry Carter noted, Pierre Fournier “was determined to be the historian as well as the practitioner of his art” and many of “his notes on the old letter-cutter were often simply reprinted in biographical dictionaries until the middle of the nineteenth century. By contrast, Momoro’s reasons for not dwelling on typographic history were determined by considerations about his intended readership, “the inexperienced apprentice, or journeyman,” whose preoccupations he distinguished from those he termed “*les curieux de l’historique*.” Furthermore, we know from his Avertissement that the lack of comprehensive and up-to-date books on the subject — since Fertel’s *Science Pratique* (1723) — combined with the extent of technological progress, informed his decision to focus on technical and practical aspects (*ce qui a rapport absolument à son but*).

Hansard’s intended readership, however, was broader; it embraced two categories: “the young practitioner” and “the amateur.” This may explain the balance between the sections dealing with the history and the practice of typography. Momoro’s decision to provide an update on recent technological developments — rather than to reiterate the well established facts of typographic history — was understandable; for one feature of history-writing was the incestuous practice among authors to liberally borrow their material from each other. Thus, Hansard remarked that “upon a close comparison much of Luckombe will be found to be plagiarized from Smith, altered a little in arrangement and phraseology and that in his turn Stower copied from Luckombe.” Luckombe, however, had acknowledged that the historical part of his book was derived from Ames, Moxon and others. It is somewhat paradoxical, therefore, to see Hansard praise Luckombe’s account of *The Introduction of the Art into England*, as “the most satisfactory of any to be met with; in proof of which, it may be seen that every subsequent writer on the subject has either copied his work, or quoted, by his means, the same authorities which he had consulted,” when Luckombe had clearly stated



that his account was “extracted” from “a curious dissertation concerning the Origin of Printing in England” written by “Dr. Congers Middleton, Principal Librarian of Cambridge,” and “printed in 1735.” In 1841, Savage summarized the situation rather well when he noted: “There has...hitherto been but little said on the History or Practice of Printing, the numerous books on the subject being chiefly copies from one or two of the earliest writers.”

## Envoi

To this day, educators have reasserted the relevance of typographic history to typographic practice: whereas for John Lewis it represents a useful set of references for finding one’s own style,<sup>32</sup> Ruari McLean emphasises the role of history in ensuring quality by providing a basis for the reinterpretation of tradition.<sup>33</sup> Today, however, the desire to preserve *continuity* between past and present is less of an issue among the exponents of the new typography. Free from the rules and technical constraints of letterpress, designers who developed an interest in typography through the Macintosh™, in a do-it-yourself art school environment — “on a crash course to typo-hell,” as a student put it recently — many exponents of the new typography experiment with a blissful disrespect of rules they never learnt.<sup>34</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that a longstanding way of inducing conformism within typographic practice has come to be regarded with suspicion by the new vanguard.

It is interesting to note that, in Britain during the late seventies and throughout the eighties, the formalist account presented by Herbert Spencer in *Pioneers of Modern Typography* inspired young designers, dissatisfied with the conservatism of art school training. As Jon Savage pointed out at the time, this led to a shameless plunder of modernist forms;<sup>35</sup> on a more positive level, however, it gave a new impetus to typographic design which, through the work of Neville Brody for *The Face*, Peter Saville and Malcolm Garrett in record sleeve design, and that of many others, contributed to draw typography out of the rarefied atmosphere of the workshop, to a new, younger audience, eager to consume it without any preconceptions.

32

Lewis, John. 1978.  
*Typography: Design and Practice*. London: Barrie and Jenkins, 13.

33

McLean, Ruari. 1980.  
*Manual of Typography*. London: Thames and Hudson, 12.

34

Manchipp, Simon. 1993.  
“Typo mystique.”  
*Typographic News*, 68, 13.

35

Savage, John. 1983.  
“The Age of Plunder.”  
*The Face*, January, 44-49.

Whatever we may think about the results, they are undoubtedly significant and, like the explosion of display typography which occurred in the Victorian age, are an integral part of typographic history. To insert these developments into a comprehensive history of typography is no easy task, as it requires a number of epistemological and ideological decenterings which are not easily achieved by a single person.

Another difficulty about writing typographic histories in the 1990s is the unilinear format of the academic paper. This unilinearity encourages authors to oversimplify and cut corners. In the light of recent developments in multimedia technology, and given the longstanding claims of “hypertexts” to deliver more than traditional printed texts, it may be opportune that typographic histories should consider the possibilities of developing multilinear accounts of typographic pluralism. Combined with the epistemological and ideological decenterings such moves would imply, the histories I have in mind would delete the ambition of restoring the past to its pristine glory, and settle for an exploration of the possibilities opened up by the dimension of the work. At that point, typographic histories and criticism would assume the role of a hermeneutic of interpretation, in collaboration with other disciplines, generating meanings without intimation of transcendence. □

