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Experiments and Explorations in Education of Typography

Renaissance man's Achilles heel – The rise and fall of typography

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Abstract: This paper describes how graphic design has become a victim of its own success and is subject to a process of deskilling and commoditization and how different educators are revisiting typography as a keystone to design education and a means to face the challenge of forming design professionals in the digital age.

Keywords: Typography, democratization of technology, commoditization, transmogrifying skill

1. Introduction

Typography, the historic craft of lettering whose practitioners would have formerly undertaken an apprenticeship, has been absorbed by the modern 'renaissance man', the graphic designer, who through necessity has become master of all crafts. This amalgamation is fraught with dangers as typography is not simply part of graphic design, it is a separate discipline, but one that is nowadays mostly delivered as an adjunct to mainstream graphic design. As Robert Bringhurst said in The Elements of Typographic Style (Bringhurst, 1996), "As a craft, typography shares a long common boundary and many common concerns with writing and editing on the one side and with graphic design on the other; yet typography itself belongs to neither".

This paper will look at how typography design is taught in mainstream education and present strategies for enhancing and preserving its future.

2. Typography and graphic design

Looking into the past there is a clear and separate lineage of typography that is closely related to the history of book production and then the rise of mass circulation newspapers long before the ubiquitous term 'graphic design' was first used. Then, at some point around the mid-twentieth century, it seems to have been absorbed into the new occupation: graphic design, resulting in the gradual erosion of standards and appreciation of the craft. This process of decay has accelerated in the last twenty or twenty-five years through the rise of desktop publishing and software that puts 'typography' and even typeface design within a mouse click of anyone with a laptop, tablet or smartphone.

The words *graphic design* were first used together in 1922 by William Addison Dwiggins, the American type designer and calligrapher, as a means of labeling a wide range of often unrelated tasks that he performed as a newspaper designer. It was not until the 1950s that graphic design came into common parlance and began to take the recognizable form of the activity that we recognize today. Graphic design essentially concerns the performance of a series of disparate activities that on the surface seem related—the various tasks with creating and producing a publication, for example—although they are not always. The theory and practice behind how a graphic designer works with images is not the same as the theory and practice behind how they work with type.

Like a warrior state that demands conquest to perpetuate its existence, the role of the graphic designer has expanded over the years to include more and more activities and disciplines from the print production process. This ever expansive discipline continues to grow yet further to occupy and assimilate an increasing number of tasks.

Angus Hyland, partner at Pentagram, at a recent International Society of Typographic Designers (ISTD) awards ceremony described graphic design as being like an umbrella, a discipline made up of several discrete 'segments', images, colour, animation etc, with typography being the 'stick' that supports it. He continued the analogy describing how we think of an umbrella as being a means of repelling raindrops, but turned upside down it becomes a device for capturing water, indeed capturing ideas. He alludes to a position where we can consider typography's relationship to graphic design being similar to the relationship of drawing to illustration, it is the thing that underpins it. Typography is a device not only for crafting letterforms, words and paragraphs; it is also a means for developing and capturing ideas.

3. The democratization of typography

The rise of desktop publishing in the 1980s facilitated the expansion of the role of graphic designer from being an art worker into a compositor as well. Subsequent improvements to both computer hardware and software has seen this compositor role become easier to perform and firmly incorporated within the suite of services of a graphic designer, whilst the term compositor is rapidly becoming an anachronism. Graphic designers now routinely undertake many tasks that were previously the remit of separate and specialist trades, that have subsequently all but gone extinct.

Typography continues to be subject to the democratizing effects of technological advancement. In fact, now it is increasingly escaping the hands of graphic designers and being undertaken by people without any foundation at all in the creative arts, dealing another blow to typographic standards.

Democratisation brings many benefits, such as the broader array of individuals with different backgrounds and inspirations that add to the typographic oeuvre. Controlling this potential presents unique challenges, particularly for educational approaches: does one focus on the diligence of the craft of typography or the fresh visual aspect? At heart, this challenge represents the difference between creating a set of characters with a particular visual style, graphic attributes and personality, and the discipline of working a particular visual approach, through a full set of characters and associated punctuation to function together as a typeface rather than a mere collection of stylish characters. J. Abbot Miller and Ellen Lupton, in their essay A Natural History of Typography focused on this challenge when they posited the question: "is the history of typographic evolution towards perfect forms, or is it a string of responses to random catastrophes in the philosophy and technology of design?"

The very strength of graphic designers—the renaissance men and women—with competence of a wide range of skills that was once empowering will ultimately become their downfall as design tasks continue to become deskilled, ubiquitous and generic.

4. Design strategies in education

Writing this paper has involved inquiry into how typography programmes are currently being delivered at graduate level education. At the University of Brighton—where I teach—we have mapped how longer modules or projects, predominantly typographically based, impact student grade trajectories. We currently run a type elective module where students undertake

a semester long investigation underpinned by observation, drawing of letterforms and the acquisition of technical skills. The module builds upon knowledge and skills acquired during first year tuition in typography, including history, anatomy, classification, terminology and conventions and combines context, theory, instruction and practice to enable students to develop skills and knowledge in the principles, tools and techniques used in typeface design. We also run a module that integrates the ISTD assessment scheme; again, a longer, more dedicated and focused typographic exploration. Initial indications are that students studying longer, dedicated modules of typography appear to have a more consistent grade trajectory. This isn't to say that this is purely due to typography. I suspect it isn't, and hypothesize it is to do with undertaking a series of concentrated study over a long period of time, and arguably this could be drawing, knitting or learning a language, the hypothesis being that it is the act of learning, rather than what your are learning that is important.

Internationally, one can also see organizations recognizing the need to either preserve or introduce this type of focus to mainstream graphic design studies. Michael Worthington, faculty of the graphic design programme at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in the US describes their current approach thus: "We've kept type at the heart of the design practice at CalArts. I think this is somewhat of a rarity. While we teach other areas of design it's often with type in a central holding role. It provides the core of our educational practice along with composition, which is obviously related. But in reality typographic education has often been poor. It's really been for a small subsection of designers who want to specialize in that area," he says.

A similar approach is adopted by Prof. Stefan Bufler MA(RCA) & Prof. Michael Wörgötter of the Faculty of Design, Augsburg University of Applied Sciences in Germany. "The practice of typography and typesetting requires a high degree of rigour, control and patience which forces students to progress their work systematically. They have to properly plan their design process in order to achieve the desired results (idea generation, sketching and designing, typesetting, proofing, prepress, choice of materials, printing and finishing). And with letterpress printing this all happens without an 'Apple+Z' undo button at hand. Such a structured approach is applicable to many of our creative disciplines. Secondly students of typography are invited into a world that is not only full of complex rules and conventions, but also incredibly rich in history. It's one of these vast fields of study which grows the more you know about it; easy to get lost in, but equally addictive. Graphic designers with a love of

typography will have a better understanding of where they come from and, hopefully, what they can contribute today," they say.

5. Typography's Achilles heel

It is a truism that technology is a facilitator but the path of progress, by the very nature of its advance, is also a destroyer of the established order at any given moment of time, or rather than a destroyer, it simply makes it irrelevant, obsolete. Graphic designers were once the beneficiaries of this power of sweeping change, but alas, they are now on the receiving end of it.

People can obtain pre-designed templates for everything from websites to invites to corporate presentations and business cards, and yes, whilst a designer may have created these, the product of his or her work means that at a click of a mouse thousands of design jobs no longer need to be commissioned from a graphic designer. Those that do want something more unique can post a job brief on one of many websites that see dozens of professional and non-professional designers around the globe compete for the job, in what is essentially a shark tank that spirals the value of work down to a pittance. The apps in our smartphones help those ignorant of design principles compose photos and then edit them, apply effects, correct colour, crop etc just by moving a finger across a screen, with no knowledge of the design fundamentals guiding their decisions. The pattern is clear: design is being commoditized.

How can design remain relevant and a valued discipline in the face of the technological onslaught that is commoditizing it? How can educators plant the seeds of a diverse and enjoyable career in students that are perhaps already, unwittingly, doing quite advanced design work on their smartphones?

6. Typography as a transmogrifying skill

Arguably the starting place for any designer interested in typography should be acquiring a basic knowledge of how type works. In one respect, the practice and usage of typography has changed beyond recognition: would a compositor or journeyman of the mid-twentieth century recognize the digital industry we now operate in? Arguably not. However, it can be argued with equal vigour that not as much has changed as we may suspect and that the principles underlying good typographic practice, remain little changed.

> "Can one think of a single design principle today, that didn't exist 500 years ago? I have tried to think of one, but I am not sure that I can. Even motion, which is the great

invention of my generation was there 500 years ago, in theatre, in ballet, in sports, in the art of gymnastics. This is simply transmuting what has already been learnt. If you take the various defined movements of classical ballet, you are looking at something very similar to the more austere forms of typography. We can also see in it modern dance breaking down some of these traditions. These all live side by side, as indeed to various forms of graphic design."

Here, (Garland 2015) British graphic design Ken Garland is making a fundamental assertion of the link between design, typography, the free-arts and the wider gamut of cultural activities in general. The argument is that there is a rigor and discipline in many of these arts that are basic, core transferable skills, or as Garland goes on to elaborate (Garland 2015), transmogrifying, which implies a sense of magic or wonder.

"I am totally convinced that the acquisition of skills is a fundamental part of the training in design. Even if these skills are obsolete, it is still the ability to acquire them that distinguishes us from laypersons. We have learned the ability to learn skills during our period in formal education. This is the master skill. The skill to learn other skills. Sometimes it takes a lot of convincing to get students to learn skills that they suspect will shortly be obsolete. But I would argue that none of these skills become obsolete, they are transmogrified. They are turned into something else that is very close but not the same. If we look at the start of print in the Western world through the 14th–16th centuries, we are looking at the skills of the manuscript writer, transmogrified into the typographer. Indeed, the first books were made to look hand written, as they couldn't see any other way of representing type. So if that happened then, the same thing surely is happening now. Looking back, we don't regret that early books took the style of the manuscript. It all began with the transcribing, or as I say, transmogrifying of one skill into another."

7. Approaches to typographic education

Garland refers to the teaching and learning of obsolete technologies to acquire skills. Typography, as a discipline, has had more than its fair share of technologies that have prevailed and then become obsolete as technology has advanced. In learning about typography however there is an absolute quality to some of these antiquated technologies and skills that

help to preserve the integrity of typographic practice, as Brian Webb of Webb & Webb Design confirms (Webb 2015):

> "You can't cheat with letterpress. Craft is key to the design. As things become more and more digital, we want to return to more tactile things. The first thing my typography tutor said when I was at college was 'type isn't made of rubber', you can't cheat it."

This is further reinforced in an article by Terry Irwin, the Head of School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University; and what I have seen in my personal design experience is testament to its veracity.

> "In the progression of technology Quark Express, which was THE page layout software application in the late 1990's and early 2000's was superseded by the now ubiquitous Adobe InDesign. In the digital age, where any measurement is possible, the default of these programs sets the margins at an irregular number, the mysterious 12.7mm. Students regularly ask me why this is, why such an odd measurement is a default. A little historical typographical knowledge reveals that 12.7mm is exactly 36 points, a far more logical and manageable measurement, but one that is from a system that is increasingly failing into disuse. This example underlines that learning about antiquated technology has its advantages and uses that are still relevant today. Recognition and propagation via teaching of such antiquated systems is crucial in the preservation of typography as a craft," says Irwin.

Irwin makes a valid point in regard to typography as a discrete set of skills, and the pressure placed upon it while it is taught under the umbrella of graphic design. The increasing demand of 'tech' provision in curriculum delivery has the potential to squeeze, or even exclude, a full delivery of typographic practice in favor of more 'current' concerns.

How relevant is it to continue to teach the fine points of typography and typographical practice? Is learning how to use a letterpress just a novel way of passing time or is there something fundamental in the experience that a budding designer will be able to draw upon throughout their career? As Heller (2002) said:

"Craft seems to represent the antithesis of technology, which is changing so rapidly that it can't help but impose its speed of change upon our design programmes. The computer compels us to reexamine how and what we teach each time a new software version is released. More than once I've had a student ask me why quotation marks should "hang" outside the left text margin if Quark doesn't make it easy to do so—a logical question for someone who grew up with computers. Each time significant changes in the software occur, the pressure increases to eliminate classes in drawing or color theory, or even a third semester of typography in order to replace them with classes in computer skills. It is particularly challenging to introduce students to the subtleties, rich history and meditative quality of making fine typography within the context of a chaotic, ill lit and understaffed computer lab. My lectures on the accomplishments of Robert Granjon or the beauty of a page of type set by Claude Garamond just don't seem as relevant when directed to a room of shadowy figures whose faces are lit with the blue glow of the computer screens."

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper isn't advocating the abandonment of technology, nor promoting the idea of teaching typography as a separate discipline to graphic design. Technology is part of modern graphic design and typography continues to be an inherently integral part of communication. However, caution needs to be taken at this junction in the development of graphic design as a mature contemporary discipline. The cautionary note is that the very strength of graphic designers, the renaissance men and women, with competence of a wide range of skills that was once empowering will, if not managed correctly, ultimately become their downfall as design tasks continue to become deskilled, ubiquitous and generic.

This paper has explored the concept of typography being a master or transmogrifying skill able to generate a wider appreciation of graphic design practice. In the same way as drawing could be said to underpin illustration, typography serves to underpin graphic design – it is integral to how we articulate and develop ideas and designs.

Arguably the future of typographic practice is embedded in the past, in a rich lineage established constructs that shouldn't be abandoned. Typographic education should welcome the future, but retain the past, otherwise Renaissance man's Achilles heel, the desire to be all conquering and pervasive could bring about the fall of typography and graphic design.

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