



Experimental Typography

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The dichotomic tension of experimental typography

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**Abstract:**

This paper is written from the perspective of exploring two key words, 'experimental' and 'typography' and their apparent dichotomic relationship and tension. It looks at the historical context of 'typography' being linked to the Modernist ideals of form following function and 'experimental' type relating to Postmodernism, as new technology contradicted and questioned Modernist ideals.

This paper looks at the pedagogic teaching of typography as one of a binary position and explores how best to teach young learners in relation to current movements in the arts and philosophy - the zeitgeist. It concludes that a continued development of graphic design theory is imperative to the education of future graphic designers, as well as an in-depth understanding of the history of the subject through joined-up teaching of theory and practice.

It is imperative learners are taught and respect the values of typographic history and the many canons of thought that have been developed around the discipline. However, we would argue that it is just as important to embrace a more

speculative approach, and this should be at the forefront of design education as we develop design future facing curriculums.

**Key words: Experimental, Typography, Pedagogy, Technology, Media, Transferable Skills, Ontology, Speculative, Zeitgeist.**

### Where we are now?

A cursory search for the word typography results in a description of order and semblance ‘Typography is the art and technique of arranging type to make written language legible, readable, and appealing when displayed.’<sup>1</sup> An equally lazy definition of ‘experimental’ is as follows, ‘... a new invention or product, based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalized’.<sup>2</sup>

The starting position therefore of experimental typography, and indeed the pedagogic teaching of it as a craft and activity is one of binary opposition, and for a young learner not one of a natural, harmonious, symbiotic relationship. It is important to understand where these definitions come from and their relation to the history of typography and graphic design.

Jeffery Keedy in his essay *Style is not a Four Letter Word* identified this binary distinction of typographic practice as being a failing of the contemporary designer as they relinquish ‘ownership’ of the experimental in their pursuit of order.

*‘Unfortunately, the single-minded pursuit of structural meaning and authenticity, decorated only with irony in the aesthetics of the twentieth century, has left style, ornamentation, and beauty in the hands of amateurs.’* (J. Keedy, 2004)

This tension of typographic legibility and experimentation has been an ongoing, and sometimes contentious debate in the emerging field of Graphic Design theory. Graphic Designer Neville Brody and editor Jon Wozencroft created FUSE in 1991 as a vehicle for exploring the boundaries of typographic practice. Arguably, its

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<sup>1</sup> Google search, accessed February 2019

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

concerns were rooted in the development of a culture of experimentation and celebration of the emerging interest in vernacular design. Each edition featured a series of designers responding to a theme, through the medium of typography. The resulting typefaces, for example *Truth* by Darren Scott or *Linear Konstrukt* by Max Kisman are explorations of typographic practice often foregoing the ‘conventions’ of typography including legibility and readability in favor of aesthetics, form and embedded meaning.



Figure 1. Max Kisman - Linear Konstrukt

Whilst Fuse help redefine the topography of the typographic landscape for a new wave of Graphic Designers it wasn't universally well received as cited by design critic Steven Heller *'Vernacular carried to stupidity ...It ain't funny. There are certain extremes that are unnecessary, or too ingrown. Design for design, and so what?'*(S. Heller. 1994)

It could be argued the 'so what?' questioned by Heller is the dichotomic relationship and tension inherent in experimental typography. It's safe to assume many of the typefaces created over the 18 editions of Fuse were never really intended to be used as body-copy typefaces and to communicate language. Their purpose was to establish new thoughts on typographic practice and to present typeface design as a discipline in its own right as opposed to a purely functional set of marks serving the 'master' of language. At the heart of this type of experimental a typeface design is, it still takes rigor to develop that into a working font, as evidenced in the detailed and ordered sketches of *Truth* by Darren Scott.

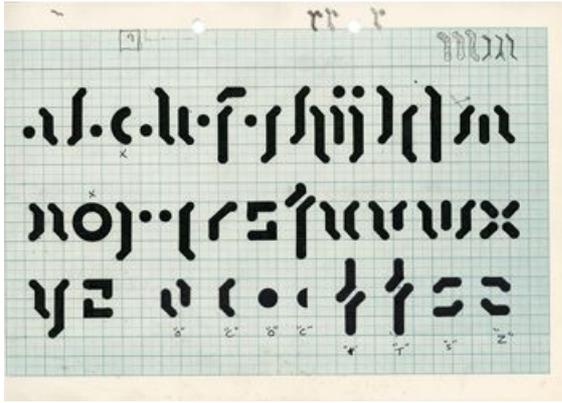


Figure 2. Truth Sketches by Darren Scott

It might be suggested that as we transitioned from a Modernist to Post-Modernist world the aesthetic zeitgeist shifted from words to pictures, and therefore typography as displayed in Fuse was not supposed to function as a Modernist would expect.

Katherine McCoy visualized the postmodern design aesthetic in her ‘The Graduate Program in Design’ poster for Cranbrook Academy of Arts in 1989. McCoy challenged the traditional Modernist ideal of reading text and seeing pictures, suggesting you could read pictures and see text, held up as a postmodern icon of graphic design for its articulation of postmodern design practice. The postmodern ideal flipped the modernist hierarchy in graphic design, it used text and image in a variety of ways. It allowed for added complexity and depth and meaning to be portrayed through typography, by treating it as, and using it in conjunction with, imagery.

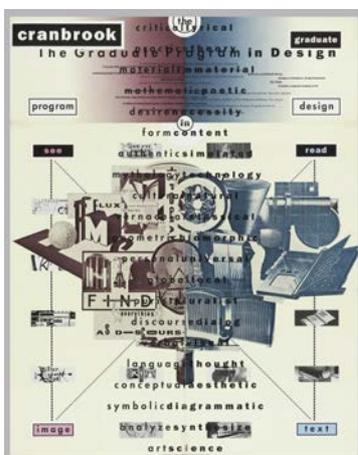


Figure 3. The Graduate Program in Design by Katherine McCoy

Ultimately, some of the greatest graphic design work of the post-modernist era has been forged through rigor and experimentation, reflecting and challenging modernist ideals of universal truths and objective reality, the development of new technologies enhancing and enabling constant experimentation. With Postmodernism typography became a tool that was not only functional but was used to layer, to have depth and be seen as well as read.

The use of text as both readable and yet as part of image is perhaps best shown through the work of British graphic artist Chris Ashworth, who describes his approach as 'Swiss Grit', Editor of Raygun magazine in 1997, he worked at the end of the postmodern era. Ashworth's work is deeply rooted in the historically tradition of Swiss Modernism, and indeed exhibits lots of the traits of this era, hierarchy and reduced colour palette; yet it is also experimental and challenging, referencing and challenging Modernist ideals. It often plays with notions of legibility and readability in its creation, text merges with image, engages its audience on a purely surface level before drawing them into meaning first engaging and then informing and merging typography with imagery.

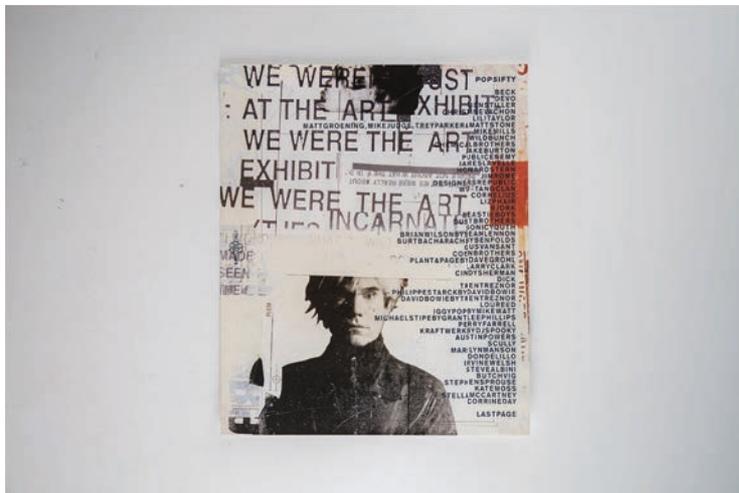


Figure 4. Raygun Magazine Issue 58 by Chris Ashworth

At the heart of our teaching are two seemingly binary opposite approaches, rigour and experimentation. We teach a program with two distinct parts, that as the course progresses we actively try and converge. The basic principles of design can be taught even if the technology is arguably all but redundant. Our students learn typography through amongst other things, letterpress, a traditional modernist tool for design. The chances are most of them in the commercial world will have little,

if any exposure to letterpress - but the principles remain paramount. As designer Brian Webb said *'letterpress isn't made of rubber, you can't cheat it'* (Ambrose Harris, Bloomsbury, 2015) - in other words there is a rigor to it. Conversely, we actively encourage experimentation and deconstruction of typography through workshops using a variety of analogue skills; collage, hand lettering, mark making. We also develop digital skills to encourage students to consider both what they are saying through typography, yet importantly not to abandon aesthetics in favor of the universal reasoning of modernity.

David Wolske is a letterpress designer who has *'developed new letterpress methodologies and techniques'* (D. Wolske. 2006). Wolske pushes the boundaries, experimenting with overlay and letterforms, deconstructing the assumed conventional use of letterpress. Wolske experiments and abstracts letters, overlaying and subverting long established processes in new exciting ways. This challenging of letterpresses traditional rigour epitomizes in a simple process how we now see modernist ideals.



Figure 5. Paraphrasing 1124 & 0707 by David Wolske

*'David Wolske pushes the medium of printmaking in exciting new ways, urging it to interact with different technologies and experimenting with the different possibilities... The clean lines and simple shapes of his letters and words belie a complex approach to image making.'* (N. B. Abrams, 2018)

An important contextual understanding of postmodernism was its need to challenge not just the aesthetic rules of modernism but its fundamental philosophy as well. Design and typography is used to convey meaning, be that brand, political or emotive and this relates to the current philosophical leaning of the world around us, be that global or local.

As we question, ontologically, how we perceive the world, how should we best prepare design students to respond to these open-ended questions through typography. One proposed theory of the next creative and philosophical movement is 'Metamodernism' as introduced by theorists Vermeulen and van den Akker in 2010:

'... if the modern suggests temporal ordering, and the postmodern implies spatial disordering, then the metamodern should be understood as a spacetime that is both - neither ordered and disordered.' And 'ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.'

(T. Vermeulen and R. Akker, 2010).

In order to visually represent these oscillating poles and everything in between, one might suggest that the designer's understanding of modernist and postmodern ideals is paramount in creating design that speaks to and articulates the current zeitgeist - design theory a necessity in creating innovative future designers. The world now sits between positive Modernism and negative Postmodernism in an indecisive manner, we have ever increasing choice made possible through technological developments in every aspect of our lives on earth. As designers, we challenge, question and embrace technological possibilities in equal amounts. As teachers of young designers, it is important to share the historical rigour of graphic design through lectures, seminars and most importantly, practice-based learning. From this base knowledge of design, informed by modernism, and later, through postmodernism, we as educators should continue to build and develop graphic

design theories, facilitating speculative environments in which students can work and consider their practice in relation to the current zeitgeist.

The current acceleration of technological developments affords designers continual innovation, speculation and experimentation. Metamodernism as a theory states this as ‘a process of never reaching a goal’ (T. Vermeulen and R. Akker, 2010). It enables constant innovation and experimentation to occur. It allows the field of graphic design to consistently grow and evolve, expanding into new areas through a variety of processes, for example 3D printing, creative-coding and moving image.

Teaching through a combination of historical rigour with technological development (or experimentation) is key to challenging how typography is perceived, students need to understand the rigour, yet they also need to consider typography (and design) for a wide range of media and applications that continue to develop and challenge. In order to create engaged and successful designers we need to teach students to be critically engaged and adaptable in their approach. We cannot teach students technologies that are yet to exist - but we can prepare them to be responsive, engaged and active in developing skills when they present themselves.



Figure 6. A23D Typeface using a combination of traditional and the most modern printing techniques. New North Press & A2 Type

A23D is a contemporary letterpress alphabet commissioned by Richard Ardagh at New North Press utilizing both the future and past design technologies. Working in conjunction with Chalk Studios who created the 3-D type, it used both the oldest and newest forms of printing technology - letterpress and 3-D printing to create a font that resonates technological advance and nostalgia in one. This project and its developments achieved accuracy through trialling of new materials and

investigated how letterpresses inherent 'rigor' can be used with new technology to bring archaic technology into the modern age. The resulting font sits meta between the two eras, transcending technologies. Will it ever be mainstream?, arguably not, but it serves as an exemplar of how contemporary designers are both embracing the future speculative (the experimental) while respecting and celebrating the past.

A2 Type are a studio whose rigor and development of font design and typographical practice is inspired by letterpress and traditional (historical) type specimens. The 3-D type is a design device that is steeped in history. The project was culturally and contextually involved - visiting archives at the V&A, and embracing an awareness and sympathy to the rigor of letterpress whilst challenging the notion of what letterpress can be now. The final design was created to test the technological limits of 3-D printing and transcend eras of design - a working letterpress font that is printed once through modern 3-D print technologies and then inked-up and printed a second time through traditional techniques.

This font visually transcends eras and techniques that posits a significant importance to the context of typography. Students need an awareness of the implications of their design choices - allowing them to make well-informed decisions transcending technology, working across media, irrespective of time or epoch. Combining contextual (theory) and design (practical) projects and workshops is inherent to develop strong graphic designers and those able to challenge relevant subject matter within their discipline - forwarding the 'known' of our arguably embryonic and emerging subject.

Further to this technological consideration is the need to set typographic and graphic design briefs that use the current and speculative movements in society as starting points. How do we respond to the pendulum swing of *hope* and *melancholy*; *naïveté* and *knowingness*; *empathy* and *apathy*; *unity* and *plurality*; *totality* and *fragmentation*; *purity* and *ambiguity*'?

**Conclusion - Where we going?**

It could be argued that this balance, this dichotomy of rigor and tradition, combined with challenging experimentation through technological advance is the aim of contemporary design. Informing and engaging audiences with the movement of society in mind, a movement that encourages consistent and never-ending experimentation continually swinging between two poles, one a stationary modernist past (rigour), and the other a movable, evolving future of technological development (experimentation) can't be seen as being separate entities. Pedagogically, we need to teach both graphic design theory (historical and speculative) alongside practical application of design to allow students to engage, question and challenge the current status quo.

### **So where does typography sit within this proposed vision of future possibilities?**

Ultimately, modernism was always poised to fail. Initial intentions of universality and the grand narratives ultimately became inward looking and self-referential. The value of experimentation suppressed by the desire for a universal truth. It manifested in a very rule driven approach, reflective of the notion that the world is narratable entity and typography merely a vehicle for telling these stories, nothing more and nothing less. This led to the rise of the ubiquitous sans serif, asymmetrical designs that removed local vernacular and nuances.

“Eventually there emerged the notion that modernist art is practised entirely within a closed formalist sphere, necessarily separated from, so as not to be contaminated by, the real world.” (Witcombe. C 1997)

### **The promise of postmodernism**

Post modernism offered a counter to the prevailing universality of modernism. Dissatisfied with, and disenfranchised from the earlier promises and visions of universality post modernism saw a resurgence in the specific, the ordinary, the unique.

“Postmodernism was not a style, but a group of approaches motivated by some common understandings. It wasn't a theory, but a set of theoretical positions, which have at their core a self-reflexive awareness of the tentativeness, the

slipperiness, the ambiguity, and complex interrelations of culture and meaning”  
(Hall)

Postmodernism countered the notion that the world is easily narratable, and indeed many designers actively rejected these notions. David Carson famously set an interview of musician Bryan Ferry entirely in Zapf Dingbats, rendering it illegible by modernist values, though in the postmodern tradition it still communicated. Arguably it is very succinctly communicated that there is little, if anything worth reading in this article. Carson also stresses ‘Don’t mistake legibility for communication’ and we could all, as designers, do well to consider this. Carson, with his lack of formal training was arguably never concerned with the positioning of graphic design in either a modern or postmodern framing, and this would have afforded a freedom from any such classification or restriction. Early proponents of modernism also latterly moved away from the rigidity and binary positioning. Jan Tschichold, an early modernist convert, later denounced his book, *Die neue Typographie* as ‘too extreme’ and he reverted to more classical approaches to typography, including using roman typefaces for body copy instead of the modernists sans serif. Weingart, also a advocate of modernism, through the so called Swiss Style, also later rejected this in favor of more immediate and experimental approaches to typographic design, pioneering what became known as Swiss Punk.

‘Ideology and rules collapsed in the face of his (Weingart’s) boundless energy.’  
(Meggs).

Referring back to the quote by Vermeulen and Akker earlier in this article and their proposition that ‘metamodern should be understood as a spacetime that is both - neither ordered and disordered’, perhaps now is the time that this will come into being. Typographic practice is just that, a practice. But it isn’t independent, it is part of the wider range of cultural practices, for example dance, music and performance that constitute culture, and in turn shape society. It both drives and is reflective of the desires of a given time and zeitgeist. The future of typographic development lies in this intersection, the ordered and the disordered, offering

both communication and personal expression without having to compromise on either.

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