

MODERN TYPOGRAPHY
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MODERNITY AFTER MODERNISM

The 50's and the 60's had been a period in which a dream of "the modern" could come true, with its spiritual centre in neutral Switzerland. The events of 1968, uprising and political unrest, can be seen as a warning sign. The comfortable years came to end in 1973, when a principal support of the prosperity was removed and national economies were thrown into a different gear. Fonts companies were bought and the rise of the chemical companies in typography followed the change from metal type and letterpress to photocomposition and offset printing.

AFTER SWISS TYPOGRAPHY

The end of the years of comfort can be seen embodied in Wolfgang Weingart work, student of Emil Ruder in Basel. Weingart broke from the serene sense of order. He attacked the image of letters by cutting or other means of visual distortion. A comparison with Karl Gerstner's meaning-directed typography shows the limits of Weingart's form-bound as Ruders.

DIY GRAPHICS

After the years of crisis wore on, other kinds of dissent and attack emerged. From around 1967 the eruption of punk culture, was important to show that anyone could do it. Neville Brody in independent music graphics and strongly graphic and geometric drawn alphabets, makes the typeface design the leading sector within the larger field of typography.

Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko designers of magazine Emigre, switched to Apple Macintosh after its launch. Their typefaces took formal bearings from the constraints of this computer.

In 1989, with the establishment of FontShop, a step towards a new way of publishing and distribution of typefaces was taken. FontShop became a channel for typeface designers to become type manufacturers too.

A DUTCH VOICE

Gerrit Noordzij with was a prime case of the liberation of older practitioners with strong hand skills and some competence with the new machines. In 1970 he presented his theory of letters. Against any historical or normative view, he offered an anarchistic-craftsman's theory of typeface classification. He argued that written forms underlay all typographic letterforms.

LETTERS AS BITS

The persistent goal of all inventions of designing and printing was the advance in speed. In this context of non material necessity, ideals of quality in typography have needed defending. With programmes such as TeX and Metafont the ancient conflict of the rationally correct against less aesthetically satisfying was update again.

THE MOMENT OF POSTSCRIPT

Two closely linked technical developments may be emphasized in summarizing the changes in typography of the mid - to - late 80's. The introduction of personal computer and the computer languages that could describe all the elements of a printed page. The same description was then equally capable of being transmitted in print, bringing problems between commercial interest and manufacturing companies. Postscript was a page description language that could be the common ground between computer and printer. Texts and pictures were treated in the same descriptive terms. Postscript was one of the essential components of "desktop publishing".

FONT WARS

Adobe systems made two formats for Postscript fonts: Type1 and Type3. Only Type3 was published and it was inferior to Type1 which could be visible on screens. Apple and Microsoft joined their forces to develop an alternative format, TrueType, which could only apply in Apple computers. In 1990 Type1 was published, but TrueType had its advantages over it, allowing designers to control character shape at particular sizes. The two companies agreed that the two formats could co-exist. In 1996 Adobe and Microsoft announced that they would develop a new type format, the OpenType, combining Postscript and TrueType and could run on PCs and Macintoshes. OpenType would incorporate the Unicode character set of 64,000 glyphs and any of the world's languages. The first OpenType fonts were released in 2000 and promised an end to the font wars.

LEGIBILITY WARS

The technical disputes of these years began to be accompanied by some fighting on the front style and visual appearance. In 1986 Octavo magazine was established in London by some young Weingartians, and only at 1990 they commented upon legibility in "Type and image" arguing that most people who buy Octavo don't read it". Then Emigre launched the "Do you read me" issue, where it was placed the idea that typefaces and typography should be personally expressive and its products couldn't be separated from their makers, in contradiction to the idea that text should be an invisible container of thought. The pursuit of the personal politics of legibility reached a climax in the mid 1990's where Emigre chose a more commercial policy.

A POETICS OF STYLE

In 1992 Robert Bringhurst's "The elements of typographic style" was published in Vancouver. This book took the model of a manual and applied to more visual and technical domain of typography, in a period of the new domain of desktop publishing and the squabbles over legibility. For all its learning, for all its width of its reference, Bringhurst's book lacked a critical or historical sense, concentrated so exclusively on the well-resolved product and neglecting the dimension of process.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In the sphere of typeface design, aside from the eruption of the new young font designers, there were some notable contributions that exemplify the notion of critical thinking embodied within the design and making process – within form. The prime case is the work of Matthew Carter, who ridden the waves of technical advance, without losing sight of the notion of quality and the lessons of history. His path shows an engagement with problems and challenges as they come up, leaving aside the liberation and personal expression.

REFORM AND RESEARCH

The coming of desktop publishing brought a movement of reform, joying typography to the common world of production. Success in production depended on clear instructions from the typographer to the printer and that intensified the need for clarity of description.

The new machines of the designers, who did not formulate instructions, but rather composed the pages themselves. The software has been designed by computing engineers largely innocent of typography. Their model of typography was regressive, wrapped in the language and the myths of metal printing.

INFORMATION DESIGN

The attempt of information design was to use research and reflection in the work of making products and systems that could be useful in the world. In great contrast to the “theory” that figured in the “legibility wars”, the theories of information design have been modest and often empirical.

In 1983, Erik Spiekermann founded MetaDesign, hoped to introduce a more reflective approach to graphic design than was usual. The ambition was to bring intelligence to the largest design tasks. (ex: German post office). After 1989, with the unification of Germany and Berlin, MetaDesign was able to realise some of the hopes for design as a socially vital activity. But with the fearless plunge into designing for large organizations, MetaDesign itself changed.

DEBATES OVER MODERN

Modernism followed by what became known as postmodernism, a term denoted an espousal of all the things that modernism was said to have rejected. (embrace of complexity≠simplicity, non-rectangularity≠grid, popularity≠elitism, diversity≠monoculture, the old≠the new) The categories became muddled and different cultures provided notably different contexts for work.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's, a fundamental point of reference in ideas and views of the modern was changed. “Modernity” comes to seem a code-word for capitalism, rather than for enlightenment. The style of this latest phase in the West is an imitation of an earlier and rather more authentic moment of modernizing.

GLOBAL PROSPECTS

A hopeful claim might be that with the increasing intermeshing of cultures some unexpected and genuinely humane results will follow. In typography, the best evidence for this is in the emergence of small centres of design and production in places that have been without any culture of the activity. If “democracy” implies a spreading of power to the people, this is the wrong description of what is going on here: it is more a simple spreading of typography among the masses. Enlightenment thus proceeds, amid much babble and confusion. The watchwords remain: doubt, critique, reason, hope.