The Triumph of Typography

culture
communication
new media

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Compiled and edited by

Henk Hoeks
Ewan Lentjes

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Preface

Typography stands at the very heart of communication in the modern era. The same holds true for the present day, when practical new media and access to 'big data' are often enough to stagger the imagination. The well-known channels of typographic communication are still being used to give shape to global ideas, innovations and civil initiatives. At the same time we find ourselves in a period of transition, in which we can discern the contours of entirely different forms of communication and knowledge.

The new-media revolution is an occasion for all of us to delve deeper into the meaning of five centuries of typographic communication. The discussion concerning digitisation and the growing popularity of e-readers and social media raise many crucial questions that are quite often neglected. What is the cultural value of five hundred years of typography, and what social achievements or limitations are involved? And can we derive insights from the development of printing and the typographic system that are helpful in accurately assessing the media revolution today?

With these kinds of questions in mind, we turn to the broader meaning of the typographic system that was developed at the start of the modern era. Printing and typographic communication lie at the foundation of a new kind of society in which independent thought is nurtured and larger and larger groups are being given the opportunity to participate actively in the social process. Starting from this broad perspective we will then look at the promises that arise within the context of today's new media revolution. We'll take a close look at the most crucial changes and, by way of example, shed some light on the impact those changes are having on the application of typography.

This kind of study of typography has never been undertaken before. It fills a gap in the array of existing literature, with design education being the primary beneficiary. A first step was already taken more than ten years ago by the Werkplaats Typografie (ArtEZ Institute of the Arts), kaAp (Studium Generale of the ArtEZ Institute of the Arts), both in Arnhem, and the Visual Rhetoric Research Group (AKV | St. Joost) in Breda.

We are very pleased to have had the opportunity to realise this book. Our thanks first go to all the contributing authors. We consider ourselves no less fortunate with the work done by ArtEZ Press, who have included this project in the series of educational handbooks that they have been working on since 2006.

We hope this book will contribute to a broader understanding of typography. Naturally we are open to any critical additions to our aims and insights.

Henk Hoeks
Ewan Lentjes

Introduction

Ewan Lentjes

Ewan Lentjes (1951) studied moral theology. He is a design critic and sat on the editorial board for the design magazine *Items* from 1998 to 2003. He taught design theory in the graphic design programmes at ArtEZ, Academie Minerva, the KABK and Academie St. Joost, where he was involved in the Visual Rhetorics research group. Until 2013 he was a researcher in the Art, Culture & Economy research group at ARCCI, ArtEZ Institute of the Arts and HAN University of Applied Sciences. He publishes regularly on graphic design and typography.

We hardly ever think about typography these days. In this digital era, most attention is paid to the innovations that come with smart systems, crossovers and open networks. The new-media technology connects flows of information, which results in new ways to process knowledge. It's an exciting era that is marked by constant transformation. The new-media revolution affects the very foundations of our social system by tampering with established values. The same holds true for typography, which is only spoken of in vague terms. 'Something with letters' is how it was described at a theme evening by the regional Design Platform in Nijmegen in 2013, where lectures were given by specialists such as Martin Majoor, Bas Jacobs and Gijs Frieling & Job Wouters. Apparently, the new-media technology has once again set a new course for the design trade. At the beginning of the twentieth century, attention had already shifted from a mainly subdued typographic attachment to text and language to the public display of a broad visual style that was meant to benefit commercial promotion, cultural diversion or political persuasion. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the next turn is taking place. This isn't so much a shifting of accents as it is a blending or contamination of approaches and perspectives. The new media are characterised by acceleration and compression: everything happens – almost inextricably – at this very moment. Lines of division seem to fall away, between the private and the public, between cultural and commercial values, between thinking and doing. In the catalogue *Graphic Design. Now in Production*, which was published in 2011 in conjunction with an exhibition on the current state of graphic design, Andrew Blauvelt refers to the so-called *pragmatic turn*. He calls attention to a strong passion among amateurs and young designers for making things, which forms the basis of a new Do-It-Yourself culture of entrepreneurship. The pragmatic turn mainly has to do with a change in attitude. 'Where an older generation of designers used to worry about transforming professional (i.e. conventional) practice to accommodate their work or fret about how to reach a more sympathetic audience for their wares, today's designers simply produce now and ask questions later.' Blauvelt doesn't see a speck of scepticism, criticism or pessimism in the work that is circulating freely on the internet. 'In its place is a new-found optimism, the ecstasy of production.'

Why this book?

It is this very optimism about uncomplicated production that gives us pause. Like Blauvelt, we wonder what the cultural value of design can be in this context-free production space, which holds any form of social orientation or criticism at arm's length. But more

01   *Dutch Type* (2004) by   hundred years of typog-
      Jan Middendorp is a   raphy and font design
      historical survey of five in the Netherlands.

than that, this book is also concerned with how the digital revolution and the *pragmatic turn* affect typography and typographical communication. And in raising this question, we want to stress the importance of reflection – and to do it within a context of optimism about production and entrepreneurship. This book sees typography as a system of information processing and knowledge transmission. While we certainly are interested in technological development, our main concern is the cultural significance of typography. In our opinion, a book with this kind of perspective has been missing up until now, certainly in the Netherlands. At the same time we have observed a great need to discuss these kinds of questions, both in the field and in the area of design education. Up until now there has been no reflection at all on the context in which typography is practised. The Netherlands does have a long tradition of highly principled craftsmanship, but knowledge of the history and development of the trade is lagging far behind.

At the moment it is difficult to find a decent handbook that covers the history of typographic design in the light of digital developments. In his *Dutch Type* (2004), Jan Middendorp provides a good overview of the history of five hundred years of typography and type design in the Netherlands. His approach is merely descriptive, however, and the more recent period of digital design and the new media is shown only by way of example. David Jury provides a somewhat more systematic approach in *Over typografie* (*On Typography*, 2003 – the Dutch edition of *About Face. Reviving the Rules of Typography*, 2002). But this compact handbook, which is perfect for beginning students, is mainly a brief treatment of the rules of typography. More penetrating studies of this material, comparable to Robin Kinross's study and treatment of modern typography, are not yet available. There has even been a discernible stagnation in the stream of technical publications that once accompanied the development and renewal of book typography. Except for the revised edition of *Letterfontein* by Joep Pohlen and Geert Setola (2009; English edition, *Letter Fountain*, 2011), the only critical type manuals to appear recently have been published in other countries, and then only sporadically. Examples are *Thinking with Type* (2010) by Ellen Lupton, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (2004) by Robert Bringhurst and *Type & Typography* (2005) by Phil Baines and Andrew Haslam. While these publications certainly compare favourably with the classical twentieth-century books on typography by Johnston, Tschichold, Morison, Gill or – in the Netherlands – Hellinga and Ovink, they pay too little attention to the *cultural value* of typography within the context of the new-media revolution. Even the appointment of Gerard Unger as lecturer in typography at Leiden University did not result in a balanced reflection on typographical history in the digital age. Unger's inaugural speech, *Typografie als voertuig van de wetenschap* (*Typography as a*
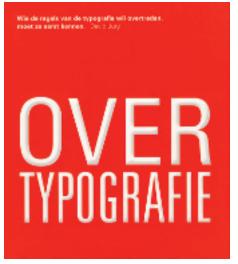
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02 *Over typografie* (2003; the Dutch edition of *About Face: Reviving the Rules of Typography*, 2002) by David Jury chiefly deals with the ground rules of typography.

03 *The Elements of Typographic Style* (2004) by Robert Bringhurst is one of the more well-considered, critical handbooks on typography, although he, too, fails to pay systematic attention to the *cultural value* of typography in the light of emerging new media.

04 In *Typografie als voertuig van de wetenschap* (*Typography as a Vehicle of Science*, 2007), Gerard Unger's inaugural speech marking his appointment as professor at Leiden University, the author makes an animated appeal for accessible and readable typography. Unfortunately, he pays little attention to cultural developments and their effect on typographical communication.

Vehicle of Science, 2007), may be an animated and pertinent piece of skilful writing, but it remains trapped in its defence of an accessible and readable typography. Any critical inquiry into technical or cultural developments and their effect on typographical communication is missing here as well.

The cultural meaning of typography

We are witnessing a cultural revolution that is having an impact on 'traditional values'. The new-media revolution is forcing us to reflect on and reassess all the once indisputable constants in the field of typography. Accepted concepts such as book, letter, page layout and typesetting have been jeopardised by the introduction of digitisation, which is necessitating a fundamental reconsideration of the typographic craft. How will all this play out? What new developments in the field of communication are being set in motion as a result? In an attempt to answer these questions, this book will be following a course consisting of two tracks:

1   A *historic track*, in which the developments and ruptures in the history of typography will be examined. We will investigate the impact of five hundred years of book typography. We will discuss the most important technological developments and the circumstances under which they took place. What have been the social consequences and cultural effects of these developments and changes?

2   A *systematic track*, which will examine the impact of the new-media revolution on typographic communication. We will first try to determine the inner cohesion and logic of the typographical system (the 'typographeum'). Next, we will discuss the effect that the new-media technology has on typographic communication. What new social needs and cultural interests has it created, and what changes in the field have taken place as a result?

So this book does not provide instructions for the design process. Its focus, rather, is on the meaning of typography as a system of information processing and knowledge transmission. The central question it poses is what we in the present context of radical change can learn from the revolutionary turn of events brought on by the invention of the printing press in the second half of the fifteenth century. Printing, after all, was crucial to the genesis of the modern era. It marked a radical break from the earlier forms of information processing. It didn't confine itself to a technical revolution alone but it also triggered a series of cultural and social changes. By studying the processes that played a role in the printing revolution we can search for parallels with the present