# Reply to Commentaries on "XML and the New Design Regime"

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## Abstract

*The author responds by agreeing with some of the commentator's points and by clarifying his meaning related to others. He also offers additional discussion and references to the literature concerning some of the article's ideas.*

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## Clarifying a point: the notion of reaction

Burch comments—rightly, I think—that the article's discussion of the notion of reaction is both abbreviated and discontinuous. I will try to correct that here. Passing in review, in the article, Figure 1 illustrates the historical and social character of the history of writing at least since the Early Modern era as marked by innovation *and* reaction, by a dialog between avant-garde and retro-garde, and writers, readers, and printers. Existing regimes of graphic organization often assume a normative character, informing the period of experimentation by providing models to adapt or appropriate, or grounds on which to base evaluations; existing regimes of graphic organization also provide concrete evaluative grounds for those who argue that standards are in decline, that reforms are required. The closure achieved around a new literate practice generally occurs only after sustained and critical reaction that seeks to harmonize the new regime of production and distribution with past aesthetic or production standards, a "historicizing" (to borrow from Kinross) that results in norms of use and meaning that ground themselves in an aesthetic of historical continuity.

Examples of this process abound in the critical and historical literature.[1]

Kinross argues that the figure of the typographer-as-a-professional enters the professional classes as a "reaction," a reaction against what is perceived to be the undermining of standards by those who produce and distribute cheap print using the latest methods (Kinross, 1992 41); Kinross cites William Morris and his Kelmscott Press (active in England around the 1880s) as part of a general revival of interest in craft labor known as the Arts and Crafts movement. Machine production was responsible for the undermining of quality and taste; artists and artisans looked backward for grounds for reform (Kinross, 1992 38).

Consider also the case of W.A. Dwiggins, a highly influential American designer-typographer who in the mid-1920s abandons advertising to design first books, then typefaces (Kinross, 1992 49); he also writes "prolifically"—assuming a critical stance—arguing for standards of taste and quality. According to Kinross,



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"[Dwiggins] leaves the field [of advertising and designing direct mail marketing vehicles] just at the time of the rise of this second class of advertising, with its dependence on photography and machine-produced letterforms, in which there would be less place for his hand skills" (Kinross, 1992 49).

At about the same time, in 1928, Walter Morey "conceives of the idea of driving linotype machines from coded paper tape"; earlier, in 1925, RJ Smothers "patented the earliest phototypesetting machine" (Ferguson & Scott, 1990 42). The costs of printing and typesetting crash; more print enters circulation. The division of labor changes. Standards decline.

Dwiggins' entire project was to recover—to appropriate—the past forms produced by craft labor into the new regime of production. His reforms took the form of a critical stance toward Modernist innovation; based on his criticism and evaluative criteria, Dwiggins is commissioned to produce typefaces he thought both rational and elegant, e.g. Metro Black (Ferguson & Scott, 1990 42).[2]

Just as the Italian humanists looked backward for models to appropriate to lend meaning to a new technological practice, Morris of the Kelmscott press collected and drew upon hand-lettered manuscript codices for models of what writing should look like; similarly, W.A. Dwiggins thought calligraphy and the material action of pen on paper should set the standard for rational and readable typefaces (Kinross, 1992 48). In another instance of typographical reform, the *Roman du Roi* typeface of Louis XIV's *Imprimerie Royale* drew on epigraphy and chalcography as its model, not calligraphy (Morison, 1997 23).

The narrative of new writing practices occasioning variation which in turn occasions reaction-cum-reform also occurs in the critical literature. For example, Poynar authors an article that perfectly recapitulates—I mean *precisely*, in every detail—the motion from changing technology to variation to arguments regarding standards of value and social roles. In "Type and Deconstruction in the Digital" Poynar claims that digital tools extend the franchise of type production from typographers to anyone who can use a computer. The result is an increase in noise; an explosion of horrid design—i.e. a sense of declining standards—but also opportunity, the opportunity for designers to produce "typographic ideolects," typographies tailored to specific texts or genres or literate gestures; or a typography that reflects the private concerns of typographers-as-artists. But, argues Poynar, this will require *reforms* that assume the character of a new role for typographers and graphic designers—typographers as "visual editors" who apply their "acute perception to the reading of the text." In other words, the new typography will require agreement on a new set of norms, norms that govern use, meaning, and standards of value (Bierut & American Institute of Graphic Arts, 1994 83-87).

The pattern is this: new writing practices occasion new opportunities for graphic expression. The possibilities are explored, the boundaries tested. Voices arise, arguing for reform, for norms and standards to bring discipline to the practice. They argue on various grounds; principally, readability, predictability, and historicity (the use of past models—generally this manifests as arguments for continuity). What is important about these developments—these negotiations, these arguments about value, about how we evaluate text and text production—is precisely this: the settlements of these disputes condition, to some degree, how we produce, consume, interpret, and evaluate texts.

This brings me to the question Payne poses against the article—"What is XML today, as it is used in communities of practice, and is it in an incunabula stage of development?" XML, HTML, SGML etc. are metalanguages—designed objects, the products of conscious and sustained analytical labor; so I agree with Payne, XML cannot be considered to be in its incunabula phase of development—nor could it ever. XML is precisely as Payne describes it: a "full-grown technology," "rigidly defined" and pre-specified.

What I want to say in the article is that electronic text production in general is in its incunabula phase, and that XML is evidence of reaction against a sense of disorder or declining standards, evidence of the empire striking back—it is a proposed solution, like Romanized type for the Italian humanists. In graphic design reaction specifies itself in a particular figure or personality (e.g. Dwiggins), reflecting the craft-labor, master-apprentice character of the profession; in computer mediated communications, reaction manifests itself in terms of fora and consortia (W3) issuing industry-wide standards, reflecting the institutional-boundary spanning nature of network infrastructure.

## Clarifying a point: representing the world using language

Payne argues that while the analysis may be valid for understanding "how labor is divided in the production of XML-based communication," it is "not valid for [understanding] how the norms, standards, and conventions of XML technology use are determined." In one sense I agree: the norms and standards and conventions that govern the use of XML and how they will be determined are beyond the scope of this study—they will be decided by the fora and consortia that Payne describes. XML as it functions in this study—or, more precisely, as it emerges in the USENET discussion that becomes the data for the study—is a trope, an epistemological figure, it represents for the participants a way of organizing electronic text discourse that some of the participants would like to say is a good way of organizing electronic text discourse.

In another sense I respectfully disagree: the method of the study is discourse analysis or content coding—it works at the level of representation, instances when people represent the world using language. More precisely, the data are instances of people talking about what constitutes good writing or good design under certain conditions. If this qualifies the researcher to identify the norms that underwrite talk about the division of labor as Payne allows, then why does this not also qualify the researcher to identify norms that underwrite talk about what sort of writing is good writing, and what sort of writing is not? I hope this also speaks to Haynes's methodological question: "what criteria [does] Wilkes use to separate meaning from non-meaning in this study?" When the contributors to the discussion talked about writing or design, especially what constituted good writing or design, it became "signal"—it got coded.

## Clarifying one last point: privileging content over technology

Payne quotes a line from the article that reads: "It is important in that the materiality of the channel—its possibilities and constraints—condition any notion of what is a good text, and what is not." Payne counters that "it is not the 'materiality of the channel,' but the material communicated via the channel that determines the value of that particular channel."

I agree with Payne's counter-claim on its face. But I need to clarify what I meant in the original statement: what I meant was simply that in the context of the discussion, the affordances and constraints of the channel—in this case, the web—became, for the participants, normative grounds for evaluating documents. For example, richer content was considered bad by some because it consumed too much of a user's time, system resources, and the shared resource generally referred to as network bandwidth. (This is why I used the un- or under-specified verb "condition" in the line quoted by Payne.) I did not mean to express, suggest, or imply a personal commitment to the notion that the materiality of the channel should in some way be privileged over content.

I would like to thank Burch, Payne, and Hayes for their useful, insightful comments: they provide rich grounds for both clarification and correction.

## Footnotes

1. Examples abound, but not everywhere. The exceptions are instructive. Kinross avers that "the common pattern of revival and reform" in the history of typography does not hold in the Netherlands as it does in Germany, Britain, and the United States. Kinross speculates that where industrial development and technological change are not major factors, reaction against a sense of declining standards does not occur; e.g. France and the Netherlands never had an "arts and crafts" movement of their own and "were little effected" by Britain's. (Kinross, 1992 80).

2. Designers often debate the appropriation of historical forms. Kalman, Tibor, Muller, and Jacobs complain that many designers treat the recycling of prior forms not as a "catalyst for new ideas," but as "an alternative to having ideas" at all. Worse, the authors contend, designers often decontextualize earlier forms, ignoring or accepting uncritically the class interests or ideologies that underwrote them. (Bierut & American Institute of Graphic Arts., 1994 31.)

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