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VIEWPOINT

Gutenberg, Garamond, Graffiti, Grunge – the many faces of type

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> 'The typography of tomorrow will not be the sole province of the typesetter or the printer. Typographic communications will belong to a new breed – to millions of typographists. It will be performed in offices, homes, studios, wherever there is a word originator to keyboard information and thoughts. These people – these typographists – will be the "general practitioners" of typography. The knowledgeable typographers of today will become the specialists, the surgeons of typography. There will be room and need for both'.
>
> (Aaron Burns, 1978)[1]

Over the last 500 years, type has played an important role in shaping our civilisation. The fast spread of information through the printed word pushed Science beyond its primitive borders and changed the way we perceive the surrounding reality.

As with any human invention, the design of typefaces has always reflected the available technology and captured trends and fashions of different eras – in short, typefaces mirror society's ethos.

Astonishing changes in both technology and fashion took place between the days of woodcut type and the invention of Postscript language. The last decade saw a tremendous increase in the number of publications, on-line and in print, from workplace newsletters to large format posters, at remarkably low costs. This trend is being accompanied by a landslide decrease in the number of occupations in the graphic arts industry.

Trampled by technology and guided by fashion – not by *function*, which is what Design is about – some designers (and many computer users) chose to experiment frenetically with the design of characters.

My observations, over one decade, of the spread of urban graffiti, as well as my interest in today's graphic design revolution, resulted in an extensive collection of graffiti patterns and grunge typography pieces (over 550 slides). From this I gathered that graffiti is not only a visual reference, but an attitude, which is the drive behind the design of the many contemporary typefaces grouped under the name of 'grunge typography'.

Technology and type

Once adopted a few centuries ago, type has became a commodity that human race could no longer live without. From the nametag tied to the wrist just after birth to the tombstone after death, type is present today at every stage in the lives of virtually every human being. For most, type is that 'invisible' carrier of printed messages, but for the professional communicator it is one of the most valuable of everyday tools.

The history of movable type has some fascinating aspects. The most important is not perceived by many of us: the printing of books launched the concept of reproduction of an object *ad infinitum*, which is the deepest root of industrialism thrust into the core of the Middle Ages, well before the steam engine was devised.

In the early years of letterpress, the knowledge contained in books was that kept by the Roman Catholic Church. Printing thus represented a threat to the scribes in the monasteries and more: books were burnt and printers too were sent to the fires of the Inquisition, charged with having dealings with the Devil. After all, how could one write without using hands?

Since then, type has always mirrored the available technology and reflected the moods of different eras. The first printed works strove to imitate handwriting – using Gothic characters, as did the calligraphers of the time – firstly because no other 'fonts' would be known to the reader, and secondly, for the holy, fiery reasons mentioned above.

From woodcut, type went to lead and remained with that metal for the following four centuries. Although using the same material for such a long period of time, type reflected society's ever-changing trends, be it in architecture or in artistic and philosophic tendencies: Renaissance, Romanticism, Industrialism, Modernism, etc.

The adoption of new technologies, such as lithography and copperplate engraving, linotypesetting and phototypesetting, also greatly contributed to the shaping of characters. The lithographic stone, for instance, allowed wide, round brushstrokes to create ornamental display type with flourishes that captured well the mood of the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

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The thin lines achieved by the burin, used in the copperplate engraving system, enabled typographers to explore contrast. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Giambattista Bodoni created his well-known typeface. By juxtaposing 'hair lines' and thick strokes with elegance, he achieved a pleasant texture to the page and high degrees of readability.

Just over one century ago, lead type was cast up to 96 points. Anything above that size would present two problems: the cost of the font and the weight of the metal character to be set by hand. However, at that time, the American advertising industry launched its most demanding kind of commercial print: the poster. To solve the impasse, type designers went back 300 years in history and re-adopted wood. Large characters in wood were not only lighter but received and transported ink with superior homogeneity, resulting in better prints.

Mergenthaler's machine to set lines of type (the Linotype, 1886), as opposed to manual, one-by-one setting, stimulated the cutting of hundreds of new faces over the following years, especially aimed at newspaper and magazine printing.

Although bulky, noisy, hot and dependent on constant (and costly) mechanical maintenance, linotypes represent a great achievement in the printing history. Despite those 'inconveniences', they must be acknowledged as the midwives of Mass Communication: fast production, ever increasing circulation to cater for thousands, even millions of readers at every print run. The era of industrialism and its mechanical devices, however, was nearing its 'use-by' date.

Phototypesetting was adopted in commercial scale in the 1960s. Within 15 years most of the world's printing plants had adopted filmstrips containing fonts, as opposed to enormous brass and steel magazines containing moulds. Bright, air-conditioned environments displaced steamy, gloomy workshops.

In the 1960s and 70s, American designer Herb Lubalin, using photoletras and phototypesetting, with remarkable mastery explored the new technologies to create neat, clean, puzzle-like letter interactions which brought new insights to the concepts of kerning and word spacing (*Figure 1*).

Word processing was born around 1965. It was the fuse that detonated today's graphic design revolution that many think started only after desktop publishing was introduced.

Publishing in print, however, unlike today, was under the strict control of a relatively small number of individuals, mainly due to the heavy investments in installations and equipment, and the cost of specialised labour. Therefore, only a handful of skilled professionals were called to design type, the basic element of printed communication.

Figure 1. *Herb Lubalin's experiments achieved striking effects with kerning and character interactions, especially with his landmark typeface family, Avant Garde*

Graffiti and the '90s ethos

In the last two decades society has become fragmented into small cells of individuals (*niches*). This is a result, among other factors, of the change in the structure of the large international economic complexes that came after the introduction of the PC as a management tool.[2]

Individualism and introspection are two emblems of the '90s decade: video games and the Web hook youngsters for countless hours indoors, leaving surfboards and footballs untouched in the backyard shed; cable TV and VCRs steal audiences from broadcast TV – and shut down the doors of cinema theatres everywhere.

Unlike the youth movements of previous decades – which produced massive Woodstock-like gatherings of up to half a million people – today's young generations, as in the context of large Australian urban centres, are split in numerous cells: Ravers, Waxheads, Homeboys, Netheads, Goths, Rappers, Silicon nerds, the neo-nazi Skin Heads, Ferals, Skate Heads – some say that there are even sub-groups within them!

One of those cells, however, is of utmost importance in understanding the radical changes in typeface design in recent years, the design trend generically called 'grunge' typography: it is the graffiti gang. I do not refer to the explicit socio-political graffiti practised by oppressed minorities, which existed long ago, all over the world. I refer to the enigmatic (and epidemic) inscriptions on walls in major cities in Western countries.

In the beginning of the '80s urban graffiti changed status: the stigma of vandalism and property defacement offence was softened. From courthouses it was taken to classrooms and ended up in art galleries (*Figure 2*). Its primary message

Figure 2. *Some Community Youth Services in Sydney support art projects aiming at re-integrating graffiti offenders to society. Other States still maintain the hard-line approach to graffiti*

remains almost the same: graffiti conveys emotions, confrontation, non-conformism. It is a form of rebellion against boredom, the coldness, the lack of personal interface – and particularly against the top-to-bottom, one-way form of communication of the established media, to name a few factors. In the last two centuries publishing in print has become a powerful industry and has developed a media–consumer relationship in which the latter is always an amorphous, complacent mass.

From direct observation over the years and some recent interviews, I gather that the drive behind graffiti 'writers' is the risk, the challenge and the pleasure of publishing 'themselves' (to reassure their individuality) as opposed to 'publishing' something on the walls.

For their designs, they borrow parts or whole letters from the conventional Latin alphabet, combine them, add to them new strokes, and cast the author's personal character to the encoded pattern (*Figure 3*). By definition, graffiti patterns ('tags') are not meant to be 'understood' or 'read' by the general viewer. They are supposed to be *there*, loudly present on the walls, and *that* is the message. 'Tags', more than just nicknames, are the artist's ego-fingerprints and only small cells of 'initiates', gathered by common knowledge, age or interests, are able to recognise the author. As a result, graffiti painting remains to the rest of us an intricate (and intriguing) non-decodable statement, triggering all sorts of reaction but indifference.

The '90s saw the rise of Postscript language, cheap colour printers, font-creating software and inexpensive access to the Web (Australians for example, on top of the existing numbers, bought 180 000 new non-impact printers over the last financial year).[3] These ingredients, available to anyone irrespective of training or qualification, gradually changed the borders between design, fine art, and craft. They also enabled the birth of two new sects: the 'overnight' designers and typographers. Experiments with the design of the characters became fashionable – mandatory for some. 'Make it hard to read' became the rule, in the name of the 'right' the self-taught typographer/designer acquired (!) to show off in the construction of the page. According to Joshua Berger, art director for *Plazm* magazine, 'a person may actually have to spend some time with written words in order to understand them'.[4]

Some 3 years ago I jokingly held that 'computers are machines that work so fast doing your job for you that you are left with plenty of time to try to read what comes out of them'.

In July 1996, a leading Australian digital design magazine published its tenth anniversary issue.[5] I did a survey in our university, showing the title of the main article (six words only) to 20 people at random, among general staff and senior academics. The results? Four out of the 20 managed to read it in full, in times ranging from 42 to 90 seconds. Of the remaining, six managed to decipher four of the six words after one minute. The other ten needed more than two minutes to 'guess' two or three words. Sixteen (75%) just could not read the mere six words in that headline (*Figure 4*).

By altering so drastically the original appearance of the characters, fonts like those in the magazine become attempts at creating new *codes*. And as a new code they will end up locked within a circle of initiates to be deciphered and admired. It is most unlikely the general population these days will replace the Latin alphabet just for the purpose of . . . reading!

In recent years, a fair amount of books have been published about grunge typography. Magazines like *Wired*, *Plazm* or *Ray Gun*, to name a few, experimented largely with the use of multi-layered type, and bright and conflicting colours in their design. An outstanding collection of

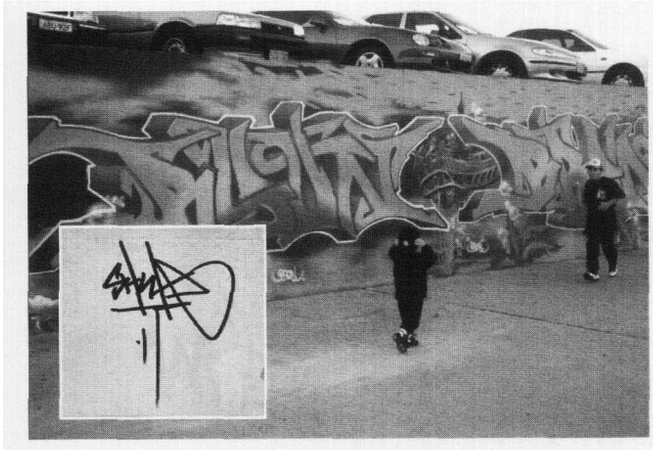

Figure 3. *Either in large murals or just in a simple 'tag' (inset), graffiti artists use elements of the Latin alphabet to create their encoded patterns to please themselves and their peers*

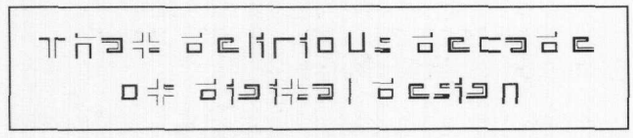

Figure 4. *This headline is as intriguing as a graffiti mural. In the magazine, its translation was printed in 'conventional' typefaces: 'that delirious decade of digital design'*

contemporary, 'unorthodox' typefaces is found in the book *A Blip in the Continuum* by award-winning and best selling author and designer Robin Williams.[6] The book is a showcase of nearly 100 fonts by some 50 type designers.

Typography has become the subject of chats in the workplace, cafes or on the beach, and no longer the domain of graphic arts professionals.

Type: electronic graffiti?

Even though tuned to fashions, moods and tendencies over the centuries, type has maintained its primary purpose which is to represent spoken sounds (words) onto a (generally) bi-dimensional medium.

A character is basically a conventional *symbol* and the alphabet is a visual *code* (or system of symbols). This code represents and transmits a message between a source and a recipient through a basic and abstract 'channel' of communication. In the process, any message is subject to errors or interferences called *noise*. Thus, in principle, the less noise there is, the higher the level of communication.

Noise, however, is the major feature in today's grunge typography.

What has been heralded by many authors as a 'revolution' in typeface design consists basically of the addition of loads of noise, i.e., distracting elements to the ambience of the printed page aiming to slow down the pace of reading. In some experimental fonts, the letters exhibit distortions like those which accidentally happened in the photo-mechanical days (*Figure 5*). Some 'new' fonts are mere defacements of consolidated typefaces (again, the graffiti attitude), by slicing off serifs from some stems leaving the rest intact (*Figure 6*). Most typographists seem not to realise (or deliberately ignore) that design should perform a function and relate to the adopted medium: print, computer, TV screen, etc. Thus, some low resolution, yet effective works created for the Web, are often output onto paper and have an effect similar to finding a 'surfie' in a gathering of 'goths': it is totally out of context (*Figure 7*).

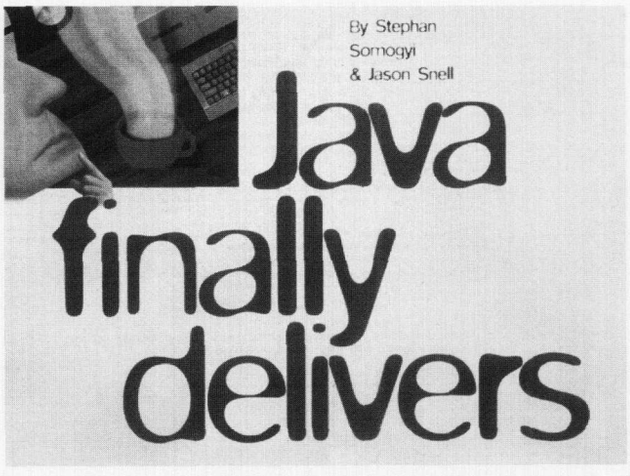

Figure 5. *Any foreign object inadvertently left underneath the film during the exposure of an offset printing plate would degrade the type's original face. That effect inspired a widely used 'new' font*

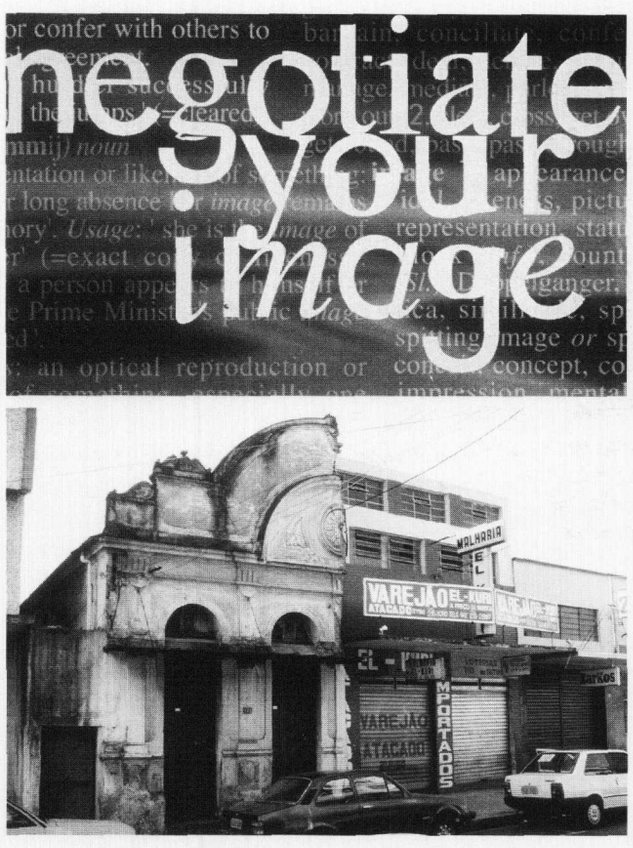

Figure 6. *The headline at the top was created by cutting and pasting elements of different fonts, to cause impact. The clash of styles (as in the old building) can be impacting, but not necessarily pleasant*

Computers gave designers – and today's *typographists* – unlimited power to handle type and colour with ease and at reasonable cost. Again, technology comes in handy to depict the mood of the times through typefaces, as we learnt. By

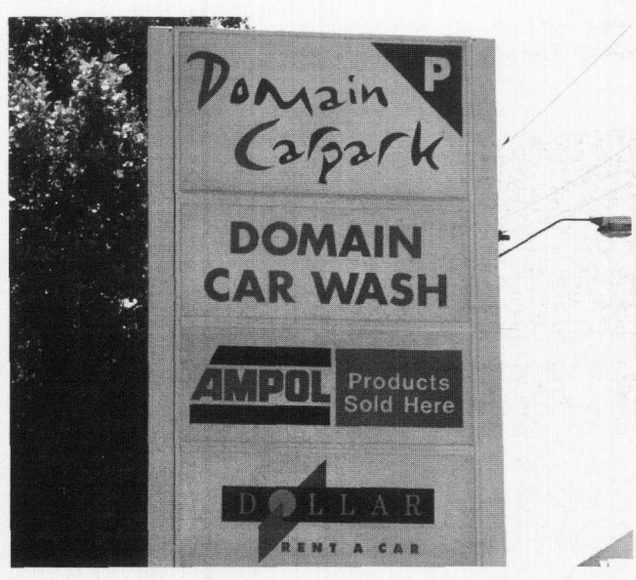

Figure 7. *Sydney's urban furniture started to display grunge fonts in the last few years. Typefaces that look suitable for a kindergarten's facade may look out of context in a car park sign*

reading Robin Williams's note in the last page of her book I seem to find some support for my premise that the graffiti artist's attitude, that self indulging challenge to the established, is behind most of contemporary typographical creations. She writes:

> 'I have taught traditional and electronic design and typography for about fifteen years now, and I must say that creating this book was the most fun I have ever had in design.
>
> 'I do think it is more satisfying to break the rules if you know what the rules are in the first place. And you can break them better. As I was putting type on the page, I found myself cackling away as I smashed one inhibition after another. "Ha! Here's a rock through a window!" I cried as I forced a widow to appear. "And here's toothpaste squeezed out in naughty words all over the floor" as I created bad letter spacing. "And here's egg on the ceiling" as I tortured the line spacing. "And here's a running slide into a large mud puddle!" as I bumped columns into each other and let the text fall off the page. Oh, it was truly exhilarating. I don't think I'll ever be the same again'.

Despite this immense power computers brought to typographers, Apple and IBM, for example, remain faithful to the centenarians Garamond and Bodoni, respectively, as their corporate typefaces, aiming at broader audiences. Conversely, many typographists replaced the spray can with the mouse to cater for some niches in this fragmented decade. Indeed, the death certificate of cold, impersonal Mass Communication is being set in grunge type. Hence, Burns was right: there is need and room for both, typographers and typographists.

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