10,000 Original Copies

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Typography Articles

European concepts of originality and authorship form our current understanding of typeface design. Typographic history is written as a series of “originals” created by “authors” in a discrete sequence. But can “copies” be equally as important?

This lecture was delivered by Kris Sowersby at TypeCon 2018 XX in Portland, Oregon.

Note: I didn't have any slides, but used this animation on the screens. The animation was created by Andrew Johnson. I wanted people to focus on what I had to say. It was a bit of a gamble. I wanted to see if I could talk about a thorny subject through the lens of philosophy. I wanted to try a new format, not just a series of cool slides / portfolio show.

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Hello Portlandia!

Once upon a time fonts were shipped by the kilogram — what you call "pounds". The design, production, manufacture and distribution of them was a massive industrial endeavour. The design of new typefaces was a slow, laborious and expensive process involving lots of people.

But technology changed in the 1950s and 60s.

Phototypesetting was introduced, and letters were now divorced from lead and married to light.

Typefaces were uncoupled from the rigours of lead production. This also meant manufacturing costs came down, and opened the door for more people to participate in the process of designing typefaces.

This is probably the most important part. The maturing and cheapening of type technology opened the potential for all sorts of people to create typefaces. What was previously a field dominated by white European men started to creak open a little bit.

Since the 90s typefaces have been created digitally. This has lead to massive disruption in the industry, both financially and stylistically. The desktop computer allowed almost anyone to create a working, usable typeface. The barriers to entry are almost nil. Distribution online is frictionless and immediate. This means the participation from anyone on the gender spectrum or cultural background is possible. A typeface once took a whole platoon of people to produce, now it can all be done by a single person.

In 2016 I wrote an article on my website called "Welcome to the Infill Font Foundry". It was a direct response to a quote by Rudy Vanderlans from Emigre. In the 90's, Emigre were one of the first digital pioneers. They paved the way for independent typeface designers, proving that it was possible to design, market and sell your own digital fonts outside of the major industry players.

This is Rudy's quote from 2016:

> *In terms of new typeface designs, we believe we've reached a point that we refer to as 'Infill-ism', where designers are simply filling in the few remaining options left. Which begs the question, how many more Helvetica or Futura inspired designs do we really need? We're less interested in those pursuits.*
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> *We coined this term 'Infill-ism' because it's something that we've been thinking about a lot lately. It's easy to imagine that with each addition, there are fewer type design options left to explore, since type design is restricted by the structure of the alphabetic characters. And, although the options are technically infinite, it becomes increasingly difficult to see the differences between designs. We're left with filling in the gaps, and the gaps are getting smaller and smaller. We're starting to question the point of adding one more variation.*

This really pissed me off, for two reasons.

Firstly, Emigre themselves designed and sold typefaces inspired directly by the classics. Mrs Eaves and Filosofia are revivals of Baskerville and Bodoni. They're their best sellers.

Secondly, implying the concepts and ideas embodied in Futura are the best expressions of those concepts and ideas is dangerous. It leads to veneration of the classics and dissuades any critical reappraisal or reinterpretation by future generations. It forgoes Futura from being viable and valuable source material for new typefaces, and suggests a sort of cultural/aesthetic half-life for any subsequent works referencing Futura.

What Rudy is effectively implying is that we don't need more copies. These days, particularly in American and European cultures, to say something is a copy is to use the pejorative. It's not an original. And if it's not original, it's no good. To call something a mere copy is to imply that its a lesser creation. In fact, suggest that it's not even a creative act.

I remember the first time I heard the song Hurt by Jonny Cash. Such a powerful song, with deep emotional resonance. It was like a punch to the gut. I bought the album and listened to it all the time. Several years later I heard Hurt by Nine Inch Nails. I immediately thought wow, what a terrible cover? Why did NIN have to ruin a perfectly good song?

A while later someone told me the Cash version was the actual cover, and NIN wrote the original.

When Trent Reznor, lead musician from NIN first heard Cash's version, he said:

> *It was a good version, and I certainly wasn't cringing or anything, but it felt like I was watching my girlfriend kiss somebody else.*

After seeing the accompanying video to the Cash version, he changed his tune:

> *I just lost my girlfriend, because that song isn't mine anymore.*

There are further parallels in music. It's impossible to know what an original Bach symphony sounds like. What we have now are re-creations and performances by contemporary orchestras and instruments. But we don't dare call them copies, or even think that they're not original — we consider them on their own terms.

My point is our first exposure to the classics is often by contemporary reinterpretation, or reproduction, in reverse chronological order.

For example, we see images of paintings and sculptures in order to decide whether we want to see the real ones in art galleries. And once we get there, we are not faced with the originals in their original state. The passage of time fades colours, rots canvas and fractures statues. What we often see are the current "state" of the artworks, as interpreted by conservationists trying preserve or restore the works over the intervening centuries. Even in modern art, there are philosophical and practical problems.

One article describes how conservators of modern art are increasingly confronted with the problem of the "elusive original." "Traditionally, scientific analysis has been able to distinguish authenticity by the nature and age of materials," she said. But what is the status of the "original" when the artist's hand wasn't directly involved in the fabrication of the work?"

In one effort to restore a series of Rothko murals at Harvard, her preservation team used digital coloured light projection to return the works to their original colour. Now, what if the projections alone could produce the same optical effects? Then the "Harvard Murals" could be displayed anywhere in the world, or in multiple places at once, and the paintings themselves could be discarded.

Does digitisation mean an artwork can transcend one medium to another and still be considered the same thing? Would we consider the digital projection to be the original?

In a similar vein, I can imagine almost no contemporary practicing designers have seen or handled the "original" metal Futura fonts. But if you ask them what fonts they've been using in their design, they'll say "Futura, Helvetica, Garamond". For

the people actually using our work, there is no clear difference — it's not important that they're not "original".

Now, as we know there are plain technical things to consider in translating type from one medium to another. For example, which is the 'original' form of the metal typeface: the punch, the strike or the print?

This a problem that I came up against trying to digitise this thing, based on the Fell Types. During the process it dawned on me that I was trying to capture an impossible aesthetic, that I was trying to mimic a technology that isn't used. So I decided to make it as 'digital' as possible, to be 'true' to the spirit of the thing. I made the points infinitely sharp, I detailed it to be contemporary and rigourous. I want it to be a product of our time and our digital culture.

I think this is what Vanderlans was trying to say. Did he simply want contemporary designers to make contemporary typefaces? Or are we to completely abandon all historical examples?

This is an impossible request.

I often have to turn to other fields for philosophical and practical nourishment. The industrial designer Jasper Morrison says:

> *Where would we be if human efforts of the past were ignored for the sake of preserving the dubious notion of complete originality? Working with historical typologies to keep them alive and fresh seems to me a worthwhile occupation.*

A few months ago I read a book called *Shanzai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, by the renowned contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han. It completely floored me, reversing my latent ideas about originality. Shanzai is a Chinese neologism that means "Fake", coined to describe the knock-off cell phone market. He argues that they're not merely crude forgeries, but stylish and multifunctional, sometimes better that the originals. There are shanzai politicians, celebrities and books.

There are Shanzai Harry Potter books: Harry Potter and the Porcelain Doll. In it, Harry is Chinese with Chinese Friends, and he defeats his enemy Yandomort.

Han explains that these products do not set out deceive, their attraction lies in how they draw attention to the fact they are not original, but that they play with the original. They transform the original by embedding it in a new context. Their creativity is based on active transformation and variation.

He explains this cultural process by going back in time, using painting as examples. He writes:

> *With it's unrelenting metamorphoses, process also dominates the Chinese awareness of time and history. For example, transformation takes place not as a series of events or eruptions, but discreetly, imperceptibly, and continually. Any kind of creation that occurred at one absolute, unique point would be inconceivable. To this end it does not accept the idea of the original, as originality assumes a beginning in the emphatic sense. Not creation with an absolute beginning, but continual process without beginning or end, without birth or death.*

I like to imagine typeface design in this way, a continuing process of rediscovery and re-creation. Han uses painting to illustrate his thesis:

> *It was of no small importance for a painter's career in China to get a forgery of an Old Master into the collection of a well-known connoisseur. He who succeeds in such a forgery of a master's work gains great recognition, as it provides proof of his ability. For the connoisseur who authenticated his forgery, the forger is equal to the master.*

Of course, this was also standard practice in European painting as well. Cézanne copied the masters. Delacroix complained that copying was becoming neglected. Han says:

> *The cult of originality relegates this practice, which is essential to the creative process. In reality, creation is not a sudden event, but a slow process that demands a long and intense engagement with what has been, in order to create from it.*

And of course, Michelangelo was a master forger. He borrowed paintings and returned his copies.

What is fascinating about copies and interpretations is that a masters entire oeuvre is subject to transformation as well. It shrinks and grows. New pictures suddenly turn up to fill it, and pictures that were once ascribed to a master's oeuvre disappear. For example, the oeuvre of a famous master looks different in the Ming dynasty from how it looked during the Song dynasty.

Han says:

> *A temporal inversion occurs. The subsequent or retrospective defines the origin. Thus the inversion deconstructs it. The oeuvre is a large lacuna or construction site that is always filling up with new contents and new pictures. We might also*

> *say: the greater a master, the emptier his oeuvre. He is a signifier without identity, who is always being loaded with new significance. The origin turns out to be a retrospective construction.*

He goes on to explain:

> *Each era visualizes the master differently. For example, the master's true originals are replaced with forgeries that suit contemporary taste. In this case, the forgeries have more art-historical value than true originals. Indeed, they are more original than the originals. The aesthetic preferences of an era, the prevailing contemporary tastes influence master's oeuvre. Pictures treating subjects that are no longer fashionable are forgotten, while pictures of preferred subjects proliferate.*

During the renaissance it was normal for typefaces to be replenished piecemeal: if a metal sort was damaged or lost, a new punch was cut in the same style. Jean Jannon complains about this — that nobody wants new types because they're happy with slowly replacing what they have.

It reminds me of the classic philosophical paradox of Theseus's Ship:

Suppose that the famous ship of Theseus is kept in a harbour as a museum piece. As the years go by some of the wooden planks begin to rot and are replaced by new ones. After a century or so, all of the planks have been replaced. Is the "restored" ship still the same object as the original?

A real example of this philosophical problem is the 1,300 year old Japanese Ise Shinto shrine. In practice, this shrine is dismantled and rebuilt every 20 years to exacting specifications. It is extremely expensive ceremonial process. The shrine is rebuilt every 20 years as part of the Shinto belief of the death and renewal of nature, the impermanence of all things, and as a way of passing building techniques from one generation to the next. The buildings will be forever new and forever ancient and original.

Now this illustrates a difference between eastern and western thought. After many heated debates, UNESCO removed the shrine from the official list of World Heritage sites. To them, the shrine is only 20 years old.

It's not physically the same shrine, but to the Shinto worshippers it has the same functional and emotional resonance. It's exactly the same resonance as a contemporary designer using a contemporary Futura.

Over the last 10 years or so I redrew National, one of my first typefaces, as National 2. It's completely redrawn, no two letterforms are exactly the same, and I added a bunch of new styles. But to me it is still National. It's what I wanted to draw 10 years ago, but didn't have the skill, time or patience.

While I was writing this talk I realised that, in effect, I had torn down my own shrine and rebuilt it.

I'm doing the same thing with Futura, Helvetica, the types of Van Den Keere, with Akzidenz Grotesk and Plantin. I am not going to let them die in the museums. I'm going to take what I want, and remake them in my own voice, style and accent.

It's taken me a long time to become comfortable with this idea. Because we all seem to worship in the church of originality, whether we are aware of it or not.

Now, a few years ago I was inadvertently confronted with practical example of originals and copies.

Erik van Blokland ran a small experiment: he scanned a lowercase 'n' and asked about 80 designers to digitise it. All we had to do was wrap our own vector outlines around it and send it back.

The fascinating result was that with 80 different designers — all digitising the same letterform — no two points lined up. There was, in effect, 80 original copies from 80 different designers.

In retrospect, this is a very direct way of illustrating what Han is saying.

And it made me realise this is what we are all doing. We're taking the planks from masters, and building our own ships. We are making ships in our own image, in our own languages, in our own accents.

But it won't be a single ship.

It will be an international flotilla, keeping the spirit of the masters alive and relevant for those hard working designers that actually use our fonts.

We are not interested in preservation. We are interested in active transformation. We are in effect, shanzai designers, taking letterforms from the past and embedding them in new contexts and cultures.

We are not merely filling in the gaps with 10,000 fakes.

We are taking part in the natural typographic cycle of birth and death.

We are doing this by making 10,000 original copies.

Thank you.

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- Retail Fonts
- Custom Fonts
- Download Test Fonts
- Font Design Info
- Fonts In Use

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- FAQs
- Account
- Font Licenses
- Payment Info
- Refund Policy
- Privacy

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- Awards & Accolades
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- Events

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