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# Typography: Macro- + Microaesthetics by Willi Kunz

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Whenever we speak or write, we communicate. Language, whether spoken or written, is part of what makes us unique as humans. Spoken language is ephemeral and intangible, it disappears as soon as it is uttered. When written, language is captured in a visual and spatial form, permanent and concrete. As the art of visual language, typography is inherently communicative.

Like language, typography is both functional and expressive, serving purposes of utility and beauty. The function of typography is to communicate a message so that it effectively conveys both its intellectual meaning and its emotional feeling. This is a cognitive task, making use of letters and words which can be recognized and comprehended by the reader. At the heart of good typographic design is a critical interpretation of the meaning of the message: the more astute the interpretation, the more effective the design.

If function is important to the intellect, then form is important to the emotions. Form is the aesthetic component of design; it is what attracts attention, invites participation, and offers enjoyment. Our day-to-day life is enriched or degraded by the aesthetic qualities of our environment. A neglected building is not only unattractive to look at, but also depressing, thus affecting us psychologically. Likewise, poorly designed visual communication assaults our sensibilities, creating a kind of visual pollution.

Typographic form and message content are inextricably linked. Even the simplest design not only objectively conveys information but also gives subjective cues for the interpretation of this content. Typography seeks to integrate and balance form and function, recognizing the importance of each. Function without form is dull; form without function or purpose lacks substance and meaning.

Perhaps the most difficult task faced by the typographic designer is to master this balance. An interesting visual effect may enhance a message, but it can also overwhelm it. When form dominates content, form in fact becomes the message and the content is weakened, even lost. Such design may initially look exciting, but it lacks depth,

honesty, and conviction. On the other hand, if form were inconsequential, typography would become rote and dull. A message would be communicated on a cognitive level, but the artistic purpose of typography – to inspire and delight – would have vanished.

The argument that visually challenging typography will entice a reader to decipher a message is invalid. Complexity is an obstacle, not an invitation. As more and more information becomes available, less and less time is spent consuming each piece. Attention spans shorten, powers of concentration decrease – and an impenetrable message will be passed over in favor of something more accessible. Typography must not only allow people to read and comprehend information, but make it both easy and pleasurable to do so. Given the amount of information we are confronted with each day, this consideration is vital.

It is less difficult to create an exclusively aesthetic solution than to create a solution that communicates effectively while remaining visually appealing. Designers must be diligent in ensuring that the aesthetics of a design do not overwhelm its content. When in doubt, it is more appropriate to adhere to the basic typographic principles that stress function than to resort to unbridled self-expression. And in the visually chaotic environment in which we find ourselves today, simple solutions often look fresh and unexpected.

A design that pleases the eye is always more effective than one that does not. What pleases, however, is a contentious point. The one certainty is that no two people appreciate - or create - design in exactly the same way. Where one person might intellectually analyze a visual composition, another might intuitively sense the harmony of a design. Sensibilities differ. Such differences produce variety. They also produce disagreement about which designs are good, and why.

Lacking analytical, consensual terms, decisions become based on vague notions, "gut" reactions, and unproven authority, prejudicing discourse among designers and their clients. The inevitable results are not only less than optimal but - wanting constructive, critical tools - beyond repair.

The primary constructive tools for typographic design are a knowledge of communications theory, a good grasp of typographic principles, knowledge of the intended audience, and a clear focus on the goals of the communication, rather than on nebulous aesthetic ambitions. These principles are the general foundation on which specific designs can be built and evaluated; they focus the design process and making it more manageable. Weaknesses in a design can be more productively discussed when measured against specific semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic criteria.

A focus on the objective goals and concerns of the design process is necessary for any design, yet in itself it does not guarantee a good solution. Good typographic design must also create a perceptual, subjective effect: in other words, aesthetic pleasure.

Aesthetics are more difficult to judge than the clarity of a message because aesthetic taste is more personal and culturally specific. Deciding on the visual style or treatment that will best convey the message is more problematic than choosing the words and composing the sentences that communicate the objective and subjective content. There are no visual dictionaries or grammar books to define the subtleties and exactitudes of meaning

of any particular visual representation. Aesthetics must be adapted to the environment in which the communication takes place. Fitting the aesthetics to their context is a complex process and must take into account not only the historical moment and cultural context, but also the graphic medium and the socioeconomic status and level of education of the intended audience.

Many designers make the relationship of visual elements (syntax) their primary concern. In practice, the stress on visual syntax often detracts from meaning (semantics) and each element's effect and affect on the reader (pragmatics). A design may be exciting to the designer, but fail to resonate with its audience. In the initial stage of a design, visual syntax should not be the main concern, because a message is never communicated on a purely syntactical level. It is more important to find the forms of expression appropriate for the particular audience. In many instances, designers face the choice between satisfying their own aesthetic sensibilities and ambitions and creating a design for an audience with very different tastes and needs. To find and work with an aesthetic that supports communication and stimulates the reader, designers must constantly expand and refine their intellectual capacity and visual sensitivity.

The rapid introduction of new technology into the practice of typographic design has caused confusion about its role in the design process. The computer has replaced the automobile as the latest fetish of our techno consumer society. Computer power, programs, and capabilities are discussed endlessly, with no less ignorance than reverence. Whatever has been generated digitally is deemed state-of-the-art and good; everything else is obsolete and bad. Rarely do such discussions consider the quality of the actual work produced on – not by – computers. Increasingly, it is forgotten that it is the designer's intelligence, not the software, which makes the difference between mediocre and outstanding design.

The explosion of desktop publishing and the proliferation of computers do not, themselves, weaken the designer's importance. Rather, the triumph of the computer only intensifies the need for intelligent, aesthetically pleasing design. The postindustrial information age, if it means nothing else, means more messages: messages that must be sorted, sifted, and represented in ways that people understand, enjoy, and most importantly, can use. As we become inundated with information, thoughtful, perceptive design will become a more important mark of distinction, a competitive edge.

The information age also presents new challenges to the designer: electronic media, virtual reality, interactive TV, and other modes of expression which have yet to be developed present largely unexplored territory for intelligent design. The skills already possessed by designers – organizing and visually displaying information, managing the interplay between the verbal and the visual – continue to be essential in new media. This is not to say that designers need not learn new skills, it emphasizes that their old skills will not become obsolete. The semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic principles of typographic design provide a firm basis from which to approach old challenges as well as new. The flexibility required to produce vital, creative work can come only from a deep rooting in these principles.

How do principles apply in a world that is drowning in information and reeling with distraction? Do principles inhibit creativity and individual development when typography is about exploring new directions? Principles are important in everything we do, in typography as well as in life. Principles are not ends in themselves, rather they are points of orientation highly open to interpretation; they constitute a road map which may look very clear but does not convey a picture of the final destination. Even when principles are strictly applied, the end result is always surprising.

Typography today is based on the same principles as it was centuries ago. And it must be so, as long as letters, words, and sentences communicate. We understand a message, or we don't. This does not mean that the design of visual communication should do no more than simply transmit information. A design should also enlighten the reader and further the continuity and history of typography. The best typography communicates the conviction that it has resolved a design problem in a way both central to that problem and at the outer limits of its own possibilities.

In typography, developments that last are not revolutionary: what is new and hot does not suddenly, completely replace what is old and cold. Rather, the significant new is evolutionary; it develops out of past traditions, while responding to present circumstances. Its persistence depends on its contribution to the continuum of typographic form and sensibilities.

Today, I sense an anxious anticipation among designers. Is this millennial fear? Is it professional uncertainty about the state and fate of design? Is it the rapid pace of technological change? Information anxiety?

For millennia, visual communication was a transaction of information within relatively small groups of people. With the invention of letterpress printing in the 15th century, the world entered a second phase of mass-produced and widely distributed information. The power of mass communication, however, was limited to those who had access to the specialist with printing equipment. With the introduction of personal computers, graphics software, and electronic media in the early 1980s, communications entered a third phase in which virtually everyone can send and receive messages. The result is a democratization of information with unpredictable consequences.

Other social pressures have caused uncertainty. Environmental concerns raise serious questions about the future of traditional print media. The nature of reading and attention are changing, too: over the World Wide Web, information can be exchanged instantly around the world. The media increasingly presume that their audience processes information not by active reading and reflection but by passive looking and listening. Electronic media such as television and video promote info-nuggets, palatable and easily digested. Designers can adapt to the complexities and frustrations of working in today's cultural climate — but only if they learn to think flexibly: to abstract essentials from the information available, integrate it with their own methodologies, and create not according to style but principles.

Design is not a paint-by-numbers discipline — there are no prescribed solutions to the unimaginable diversity of communication problems. Instead, typographic designers rely on a process which enables them to assess each situation and respond with an appropriate solution based on their knowledge of typographic principles, visual sensitivity, and personal vision. It is this foundation that gives designers the flexibility and intelligence needed to meet the challenges of a fast moving world, with its new contexts, media, and modes of communication. It makes typography exciting and pleasurable, an endeavor whose challenge can span a lifetime of work.