

# WHO REALLY KNOWS THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRINTED LETTERS? AN ESSAY ON TYPOGRAPHIC POPULARIZATION

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Barcelona has always been the most productive publishing capital of the Spanish state and, apparently, it is still the first in the world in the publication of books in Spanish, followed closely behind by Madrid. To this incredible task we must add the increasing publication in Catalan which has, by now, surpassed the amount of 30,000 titles.

In spite of these old, comfortable and well-rooted data that familiarize the Catalan people with written culture —though we must admit that not very many people buy books, except maybe on the day of the Sant Jordi celebration—, we cannot tell the difference between one type of print and another. To admit this in a country so rich in typographic symbols may seem paradoxical, but it is a fact. A disheartening fact, especially if we consider the opinion of Peter Behrens, a pioneer of the Modern Movement in architecture and design, who dedicated a great deal of his professional energy to graphic design:

The type —letters— is one of the most eloquent means of expression of a given historical period or style.

Like architecture, it reflects the characteristics of a given period and is the severest testimony of the intellectual level of a nation.

This cultural parameter could be applied to Germany at the beginning of the century, being the traditional creator of typographic print ever since printing was discovered precisely in that country. Unfortunately, this does not happen in Barcelona today, nearing the end of an especially conclusive century and with so little typography of our own that it seems almost ridiculous.

Undoubtedly, the utilitarianism that characterizes our Western society has turned reading into a practical, fast and efficient activity, with little space or time for secondary or less important visual enjoyment. When we read a novel, we go straight to the meaning of the words and pay little attention to the shape (form) of the physical object (type of letter) that connects directly with our perceptive sensitivity.

Thus, in a country with our theoretic typographic tradition, cultured people who read do not pay attention to the design of the alphabetic symbols, those little bits of black ink that have been transmitting information, knowledge or enjoyment —in other words, culture— in an anonymous and patient way since the end of the xv century.

It is difficult to abandon oneself to aesthetics in a utilitarian and dehumanized world such as ours. Nevertheless, we must vouch in favour of this cultural Cinderella and the men who have contributed decisively to making the act of reading not only comfortable, but also beautiful. An act which another important architect, Walter Gropius, defined as «the most elevated act performed by civilized man».

## INSUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE

One of the most important negative consequences of this generalized deficiency is suffered by professionals in the field of design, who often trip over the stone of typography.

Our insufficient knowledge about types of letters, about their stylistic evolution and formal expressivity, is translated into designs which present a preoccupying typographic superficiality, if we think that «it is the severest testimony of the intellectual level of a nation».

For example, right in the middle of postmodernism, the typography that is most used in communications that support this tendency is the *pal sec* type and amongst these, the type of letters known as *Future* type. This type was designed in Germany in the mid twenties with an analytic and functional rigour that was the ideal vehicle for the rationalist Avantgarde movements, which went from Constructivism to the Modern Movement, from the New Typography to Neoplasticism, from the Bauhaus to the New Objectivity. Postmodernism, which forsakes the rationalist postulates, expresses itself systematically with a type of letter borrowed from the enemy! But practically no one has noticed this and, till recently, it has not been a cause for scandal.

One of the sectors that is more directly implied in types of print is that of written press. Everyone knows that newspapers and magazines are basically constructed with typographic symbols, and this traditional cultural product that is organically integrated with the population has, in the past few years, behaved in an encouraging way.

In the decade of the seventies, the chaos in this sector was spectacular. We need only recall the fever for redesigning name titles in an operation of renewal that did away with the few values that the logotypes of *El Correo Catalán*, *El Diario de Barcelona*, *El Noticiero Universal* or *Destino* still had, in favour of bastard and amorphous typographies. The new newspapers that appeared at the time, *Tele-eXprés* and *Mundo Diario*, fell for picturesque childishness in a way that not even the name title of the *Avui* was able to avoid (made with typewriter letters which are the negation of typography); the same can be said of *El Periódico de Catalunya* and, especially, *El Món*, that picked an anonymous type of letter to construct an image as round and consistent as that of the Earth (*Món* means world in Catalan).

Today, things have changed. Fortunately, the name titles and typographies in general have improved considerably in comparison to those of the seventies, even though we cannot yet measure the intellectual level of the country by the type of print used, as Behrens sentenced.

In any case, we can say that the most positive contribution that Catalan designers have made during the past decade is, precisely, the aesthetic reconsideration of typographic symbols. This attitude has brought about the ever increasing use of the type of letter as a formal and expressive element of the first order.

This symptom should, nevertheless, be completed with a few theoretical and critical thesis which, so far, are non existent.

## A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE THAT BEGINS IN SCHOOL

Everyone is aware of some of the most important theories on educating the senses in children: Fröbel, Montessori, Decroly, Freinet, etc. But who knows the name of a single educator that has stood out in the sacrificed task of teaching how to read and write?

This anonymity prevents us from personally accusing anyone of the responsibility of a part of education —which is important in our culture— that has been imposed on us by routine.

Many of us, or at least those of us who were in school during the years of the Dictatorship, have a pretty awful recollection of the time when we were taught the letters. When one had passed the boring practical phase of drawing parallel lines, the most frequently applied punishment used by guardian-teachers was, precisely, to force you to write. Thus, an activity that should have been cultural was mocked to repressive limits. To write the same sentence one hundred, two hundred or three hundred times was, after all, the best formula to make us hate writing and, therefore, reading.

In the sinister postwar days, educators (?) used a wellknown and dramatic motto (in Spanish, of course) that defined the tension contained in an absurd educational process: «La letra con sangre entra» (something like, «learning is best achieved with violent methods»).

Irrationality has certainly decreased, but the incongruence of the

archaic models is still maintained, in spite of new programs and reformations. By definition, learning to read and learning to write are two different, though not contradictory things.

Even though some of today's writing manuals propose that reading and writing should be taught simultaneously, the models for reading are generally presented in printed letters, whilst those for writing are usually manuscript letters.

We should remember that the designers of the great classical typographic families have always begun with the study and observation of manuscript letters. Objectively and structurally, therefore, they are not as far from each other as routine would make us believe even if, historically, handwriting has always been better than typography in the Spanish state.

We cannot forget that at the time when America was discovered, typography had just reached the periphery of a terribly centralized country. This is probably one of the important reasons for the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the State about the new German technology.

In those days of «splendour», there was an increase in the bureaucratic activities of administering an Empire «so great that it never saw the sun set», thus producing authentic armies of public officials whose task it was to handwrite.

The fact is that the Empire was lost before the enjoyment of writing was lost and somehow (hard to believe if we think of the teaching methods), this school of manuscripting has survived until our days. In truth, all the manuals for learning to write have stemmed from the leftovers of the great Spanish manuscripting tradition (Yciar, Lucas, Pérez, Casanova, García de Moya, Bueno, Aznar, De Polanco, Santiago y Palomares, Torio de la Riva, Iturzaeta, etc.), in a time such as our youth when typography had totally won over the cultural market and, on the contrary, manuscripting was desperately relegated to a secondary position in the hands of solicitors' bookkeepers and assistants.

## THE TOPOGRAPHY OF TYPOGRAPHY

Compared to manuscripts, typographers have often (since 1460, after the expansion of printing in Italy) identified themselves with progressive ideology and, sometimes, with the revolutionaries. Printers were people such as Marat, Proudhon, Dimitri and Pablo Iglesias, and a close look at the list of burnt printwork and printers burnt at the stake will reveal the significant lack of martyr manuscripts (in the name of the Holy Inquisition or other «holy causes» we find such names as that of Antoine Augereau —teacher of Claude Garamond— or the works on printed writing written by Pico della Mirandola).

Unfortunately, in the Spanish state there has always been a historical preference for despotic forms of power of which manuscripts were always been respectable servants.

The ideological argument has not, therefore, aided the spread of knowledge on typographic work, in spite of the fact that the history of the cultural process of the page printed with typographic letters has an incredible internal coherence and «transcends space and time», in the opinion of one of the greatest visual agitators of typography, the Soviet designer El Lissitzky. As for the formal syntax of letters —their design— we can say that it is simply the structural revision of the relationships and harmonies between the different alphabetical symbols (letters and numbers, capitals and small letters), the equilibrium between the eyes or interior «white» spaces of the symbols, in the proportion between the lines and in the gradual reinforcement of the shoes or bottom part of the letters, etc.

This long cultural process has become formalized in a hundred different types of letter (Jenson, Manuzio, Garamond, Baskerville, Bodoni, Didot, Caslon, Egipcian, Clarendon, Venus, Futura, Univers, Times, Helvetica, etc.), each of which has systematized a series of *round*, *italics*, *fine*, *semibold*, *bold*, *superbold* or *narrow* variations, and has generated a great number of indescribable anonymous derivations.

Nevertheless, all these are insignificant visual details, if we consider the extremely discreet attention that all this effort has received from the eyes of everyday history.

But to what extent is the eye responsible for this systematic blindness?

Taking the metaphor to its ultimate sensorial consequences, blind people have an exact knowledge of what they touch and, as far as reading is concerned, the sense of touch substitutes eyesight in an attentive and detailed exploration that reconstructs the shape, size, situation, relief and other accidents that form the words in the Braille method.

Maybe those of us without eyesight impairment don't realize what we are seeing because we see more than we look.

In sensorial perception, the eye is less developed —consciously— than tact, hearing, taste or smell, in spite of the fact that what penetrates through our eyes is, apparently, fixed in our memory in a more permanent way than with any other of the senses.

From an instinctive appreciation, it seems that the cultured classes, for example, have developed the ear more than the eye. An almost complete lack of visual education or training is often found in a person capable of noticing relatively subtle differences in a certain piece of music. There are probably thousands of Catalan citizens who can distinguish perfectly whether the same piece by Chopin is played by Rubinstein or Benedetti. But how many can distinguish between a typographed Bodoni and one that is photocomposed?

This is no joke, especially if we share the view of Behrens and Gropius. When a person reads a book for enjoyment —say, a 200 page novel— he is «swallowing» at least five hundred thousand typographic matrixes, that is, printed letters. Once he has finished reading, this typographic «swallow» will have «eaten» half a million symbols without grasping their shape, thickness, typology, whether they have «shoes» or not, etc.

It must certainly take an incredible amount of visual indifference to «swallow» all this without enjoying its taste for a single second; truly without looking at them, without remembering them beyond the scarce instant that it takes to figure out the meaning they portray.

On the other hand, if we ask the reader once he has finished the book, whether it contained pictures, if these were photographs or drawings and if they were in colour or black and white (independently of what they represent), he will probably answer every single question correctly.

## ILLITERACY IN THE CULTURE OF IMAGES

At present, nothing can be done about this situation: printed letters have bad press. It seems paradoxical, but the truth is that the country with the greatest production of books in Spanish has an indifferent, even distrustful attitude towards this subject, ranging from school all the way to popular knowledge.

At school, printed letters are all stacked together, in an indiscriminate and unclassified manner. In the street the indifference turns into cruelty when we speak of «small print» (synonymous of fraud). This idea —poor typography!— refers to the small print used in contracts and documents which usually contains the «bad news» in reference to the interests of the client. It almost seems like the revenge of the manuscripts, traditionally the writers of these kind of papers, for having had to give in to printing for the sake of productivity.

It is probably utopic to want to recover the enjoyment of reading whilst paying attention to the beauty and shape of the typographic symbols and the harmony of the printed page. We would first have to rid ourselves of an ancestral curse and learn to enjoy the beauty of both new and old typographic families.

In today's culturally agonizing Europe this would have to be done quickly before it's too late and we are no longer in time to avoid having to go to ethnological museums in the future in order to find the shapes that have aided us in transmitting written culture since 1450 to the year 2000.

Mind you there are reasons to be impatient. On the one hand, the future of the printed book is uncertain. With his usual exquisite irony, Pere Calders used to say

there are times when I feel I am discovering a tremendous conspiracy against books, books such as we know and love them today. We are instinctively lazy (maybe due to some remnant of barbarism) about replacing the dream of a room full of books for the dream of a little box full of microfilms, even if we do accept the practical aspect of it.

On the other hand, the definite prepotence of the audiovisual communication media, with the irruption of personal computers, is changing the characteristic design of printed letters and numbers. The heptasegmentary system, for example (which we come across in elevators, scales in markets, digital watches, tv screens and elemental computers), which is availed by the most advanced and convincing technology, is distributing worldwide a new formal structure of the alphabetic and numeral symbols, uniforming them with the same aseptic and geometric style, all the same height (everything in capitals, because of the module), a formation disordered by the rigidity of the preestablished space, much worse than that which began to appear one hundred years ago with the invention of typewriters.

## IT IS IMPORTANT TO LEARN ABOUT TYPES OF PRINTED LETTERS

What we know about optical perception is, mainly, its physiological causes. Naturally, more profound experiments are carried out in reference to vision, for example, pre-attention perception, on which the Hungarian professor living in the United States, Bela Julesz, has worked during the past twenty years.

Apparently, when visual information has not yet reached the brain—and is, therefore, not conscious—the eye has the proved capacity for establishing formal differences between what it sees immediately.

This proves that, potentially, the capacity for registering forms—no matter how subtle—is consubstantial with the most primary or basic mechanics of vision. We can therefore deduce that, even though it is not a fully conscious act, the eye grasps something more than the mere meaning of the alphabetic symbols when fast-reading a given text.

Thus, we must believe that the form of the letters—their design—is registered well enough during this pre-attentive reading (unconscious) and that this aesthetic information never (or very rarely) becomes conscious.

What is it that prevents this so systematically?

In a country such as ours that has excelled in architecture, an activity which Behrens and Gropius have situated somewhere near typography, this impenitent anonymity is strange (a part of the best architecture has come to be known by the public) surrounded, as we are, by printed types of letters.

There can be no other culprit than the most puritan sector of utilitarianism and common sense, that all Catalans possess in some degree or other.

Till now, neither of the two pillars of our collective intellectual personality has consciously overseen, one for the other, the suggestive initiative proposed by Susan Sontag a few years ago: to enjoy any aesthetic object in a sincere and sensorial way, without a prioris, experiencing the decisive mechanism in the contemplation of artistic forms with a healthy eroticism; just as we do with food in general (everyone from the most puritan to the most erogenous citizen), one of the few physiological tasks in which eyesight still plays an important creative or recreative role.

They say that we eat certain dishes with our eyes. What would have become of Babette's Feast (turtle soup, «blinis Davidoff» or «perdrix au sarcophage») without the visual spectacle that is an invitation to taste them?

Well, in reference to reading, utilitarianism has dealt us a great deal of damage. Instead of adopting the visual ceremonial that we apply when we are in front of a table laid with food, we have decided to swallow letters as if they were pills, doing away with the most basic aesthetic ritual.

Functionality dominates over contemplation, as was foreseeable in a world such as ours, in which the ever more complex pressures of social organization are gradually doing away with the freedom of our free time, filling it with a series of subcultural leftovers that we cannot do without.

Defeated by the tyranny of the objective of utilitarianism, we have repeatedly been trapped by a mythical idea of human activity which is dangerously insensible: «get down to work». From this position, our act of looking being enslaved by the finality (objective), we «see» printed letters without emotion, without ever really «looking».

Beatrice Ward, a British professor of typography and contemporary of the great theoretician and renewer Stanley Morison, used an impeccable metaphor to explain the function of design in printed letter types: «The type of a printed letter is like a wine glass: the container of the content.»

This image makes us think that, although in general we are not experts in the art of making glass, whenever we drink wine we look at, and usually remember, the type of glass it was served in.

And printed letter types deserve no such treatment!

It is true that reading is a more complex and difficult activity than drinking a glass of wine, in which the pleasure derived from the form of the letters is only one option amongst the many that this ecosystem offers us. For example, as Miquel Martí i Pol wrote a long time ago in the «Davantal» section of the *Avui* newspaper,

no matter how much attention is paid whilst reading, we will rarely achieve the intensity of translating, though reading and translating appear to be different activities.

Following the same line of thought, the poet ended up by making a surprising recommendation:

Those who wish to read a book not written in Catalan in a way that they have never done before, should attempt to translate it into our language, not mentally, but writing out the translation and doing so with the same rigour as if they were doing it for a living.

The same could be done in the case of those who wish to really understand the morphology of printed letter types: have them make a book that they like, have them attempt to manufacture it typographically, not mentally but materially, as do the specialists who do this kind of job for a living.

As for utopic reading of an absolutely fulfilling nature, we would indeed have to translate and photocompose it. By doing so we would also follow one of the precepts put forth by Robert Schumann when he tried to convince his pupils of the importance of doing the most boring piano exercises: «You will not understand the spirit till you have grasped the form.»

This type of demand in reference to reading would take us at least a few years per book. If we think about it, and with the more modest pretensions of a simple initiator, maybe it would be enough for now if we tried to recognize the formal differences between the different types of letter reproduced in the present article.

This might refine our sense of perception and maybe after some time, many readers would be capable of distinguishing between the most common typographies; during the process they might also learn to distinguish the most important differences that can be found within the same type (for example, whether this is in linotype or sensitized in photocomposition); and finally, what is most important is that this would help in demanding the typographic and publishing dignity that any book deserves, no matter how cheap the edition.

With this impunity favoured by readers who look at books without really seeing the letters, the manufacturers of printed culture often defraud us with a pile of deficiencies that are repeated too often because we judge them as involuntary:

– Reprints that are full of defects, with letters that are too dark and stuck together or too light and stained.

- Faulty bindings that cause the book to come apart page by page.
- Badly cut books or books with practically inexistent margins.
- Bookcovers with colours that are completely out of register.

In a country that produces more books than sausages (even though more sausages than books are consumed), it is about time that as consumers of culture, we learn to demand our minimum rights. This type of individual quality control would, in the long run, produce a considerable rise in the number of clients. But at present, we cannot apply it till we learn to appreciate printed letter types. In other words, until we are able to grasp the beauty of the forms behind the typographic symbols.

As the fervent admirer of typographic letters, the artist Kurt Schwitters, said,

formalization is the essence of art and, thus, typographic form is not simply the representation of the textual content.



## VIRTUAL OBJECTS

ANTONI MERCADER

The total reflection of light on polished surfaces or on the separation between two layers of air with different temperatures produces visual representations that do not respond to any effective reality or existence or to any actual existence. For this reason, in relation to mirroring and mirage, we sometimes refer to a fantastic world of transformations, of seductive illusions or misleading experiences that take us from Narcissus to Alice.

Nevertheless, the same situation can be obtained by using certain artifacts through which the visual representation of an object is formed by dominating and controlling different radiations or complex electronic or informatic systems, from Galileo Galilei and the long distance field glass, to Theodore Harold Maiman (1927) and holography. It is in relation to these and other implications linked to the world of science, technified systems, poetic inventions and natural knowledge, that we speak of objects and visual and auditive universes (including tact, taste and smell) that are not necessarily real: we will refer to them as «virtual».

## THAT WHICH HAPPENS NOT NECESSARILY

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Restrictive conceptions of the object present it as being directly related to reality, to the senses and to sensitive perceptions. If we define the object, according to the dictionary, as «everything that can be known or sensed by the subject, including the subject himself» or as «what serves as matter or subject for the exercising of mental capabilities» or as «the end or termination of acts, of potencies», the object is always an end or an attempt; sometimes, it is hard to relate this way of understanding the object to the less accurate attitudes which strictly refer to the material object. The concept of presence is not wide enough either. Presence and object, object and presence appear linked, and not only in the material sense, but also in the immaterial sense. Presence means that it exists at the present moment, it is the act of being present (materially or immaterially) referred to objects, to representations or evocations of objects, or to everything we refer to as image in the widest possible sense (from the generation, synthesis and production/manipulation phases, to storage or memory, as well as availability, reproduction and permanence).

There are images that correspond to material objects (such as the mirror), others are representations of immaterial objects (as in the case of holography) and others, according to Paul Virilio, «are the product of an imagery with no apparent support and with no other persistence than that of visual, mental or instrumental memory». As images, all these are a product of the imagination or of the capacity (natural wisdom) for obtaining representations, figures and ideas in a live and efficient way which can, by means of the articulation of a language, substitute objects (material or immaterial) and even have the virtue of producing an effect and going beyond that in achieving an existence. As we have pointed out before, among images with a certain virtuality there are those that proceed from phenomena understood as «natural» (the mirage that confuses us), those that are obtained by artificial procedures (the long distance eye glass that draws a far away object nearer), those that are a product of technological synthesis (interactive devices for flight training aircraft carrier pilots, carried out without aircraft or ships, only with video and graphic computers), or virtual images that can articulate that