

## *Delivering the Message: Typography and the Materiality of Writing*

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In recent years, those of us involved in the study and teaching of writing have been trying to adjust to life after the process movement. To be sure, the slogan “process not product” long ago lost any critical edge it might have possessed in the 1970s, and the once enabling notion that composing is the critical object of inquiry now seems, in Karl Marx’s words, a “one-sided” view of the production of writing. One can no longer read, for example, Janet Emig’s or Donald Graves’s pioneer composing research without reading into it representations of their research subjects as gendered and racialized subjects of class society. And yet, the moment writing theorists are starting to call “post-process” must be seen not just as a repudiation of the process movement but also as an attempt to read into composition precisely the material conditions of the composer and the material pressures and limits of the composing process. As Robert J. Connors once remarked, the reason we feel we’re living in a post-process era is that process has been so fully assimilated, so exhaustively read into and written over that we forget about the traces it has left in our theories and practices.

The dominant representations of writing typically offered by the process movement—voice, cognition, conversation—despite the crucial differences among them, all picture writing as an invisible process, an auditory or mental event that takes place at the point of composing, where meanings get made. In my contribution to this volume, I want to reread these dematerialized representations of writing in terms of the materiality of literacy, from the perspective that writing is a visible language produced and circulated in material forms. To put it another way, I want to suggest that the process movement’s emphasis on the composer as the maker of meaning (whether that figure entails self-expression, mental activity, or participation in communal discourses) has obscured the composer’s work in producing the resources

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of representation in order to signify at all, to make the special signs we call writing.

### THE MATERIALITY OF WRITING

The line of thinking I propose holds that the figure of the composer we inherit from the process movement can still provide a generative topos in writing studies. The task, however, requires a thoroughgoing reconceptualization of the writer at work—one that locates the composer in the labor process, in relation to the available means of production. In certain respects, of course, such a project has already begun. No doubt the leading impetus to materialize literacy comes from the emergence of digital communication. Marshall McLuhan says that we can see human-made environments only once they have changed, and this is very much the case, I think, regarding the current shift from print to digital literacy. These changes in the technology of writing allow us to compare, say, mechanical means of production such as the typewriter or the Linotype machine and hot type of the late nineteenth-century print shop to the cool cybersurface and digital signals of the computer screen and digital signals. As Christina Haas points out, it is no longer quite so easy to treat the technologies of writing as transparent, to efface the material tools and embodied practices involved in the production of writing.

One of the main obstacles to *seeing* the materiality of writing has been the essayist tradition and its notion of a transparent text. (It is no accident that the process movement’s favored genre has always been the essay, be it literary, journalistic, or academic.) I argued a few years ago that essayist literacy—from the scientific prose of the Royal Society to the essay of the coffeehouse and salon—emerged in the early modern period as a rhetoric of deproduction: a programmatic effort to reduce the figurative character of writing, minimize the need for interpretation, and thereby make the text more transparent (“Essayist”). What I was not aware of at the time, however, is how essayist literacy’s compulsion to eliminate metaphor is linked to Old Testament warnings about graven images and to a Protestant desire to purge writing of all traces of visibility, a desire to replace, as Lester Faigley puts it, the “mindless’ auditory, visual, and olfactory credulity of Catholicism with the power of reason expressed in print” (174–75).

In Faigley’s view, the notion of transparent text results from a great Alphabetic Literacy Narrative that runs through the work of Harold Innis, Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, and Walter Ong. This grand narrative identifies “true’ literacy” with the “abstract representation of sounds—a presupposition that subordinates syllabic and logographic writing systems and banishes pictographs and images to the status of illiteracy” (174). As the graphic design theorists J. Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton say, “Westerners revere the alphabet as the most rational and transparent of all writing systems, the clearest of vessels for containing the words of speech” (21). By this account of literacy, the suppression of visibility in the alphabet’s abstract coding system provides the groundwork for normative representations of both cultural and

individual development as matters of overcoming a dependence on the visual that is taken to be immature, ephemeral, and manipulative. Accordingly, it should be no surprise that David Olson would want to make the essay into the culmination of alphabetic literacy precisely because it appears to transcend the visibility of writing by organizing the speech-sound abstractions of the alphabet into highly integrated grammatical and logical structures, forming self-sufficient, autonomous texts capable of speaking for themselves. The texts of essayist literacy, by Olson's account, appear to transmit meanings transparently, without reference to their mode and medium of production.

The fatal weakness of the Alphabetic Literacy Narrative and its commitment to textual transparency, however, is its scopophobia and how its fear of the visual causes it to align writing with speech. In this sense, the irony of the grand narrative is that it suppresses the full upshot of its own discovery—namely, that writing amounts to be less a recording of speech than a visual coding system that communicates by employing a range of nonphonetic elements such as spacing, punctuation, frames, and borders, not to mention the eccentricities in codes, such as in written English where different words can have the same sound (its/it's, meet/meat) and silent letters seem to defy phonetic strategies of pronunciation (might, paradigm). Haunted by suspicions of the visual (and hence of the visibility of writing), at just the moment when it elevates alphabetic literacy to a preeminent position in Western cultural history, the Alphabetic Literacy Narrative comes unglued, reminded by the very visibility of the alphabet, as Miller and Lupton say, that writing can only be a "faulty reflection of speech, an artificial by-product of the otherwise natural workings of the mind" (24).

Now, you don't have to be much of a Derridean (I'm certainly not) to recognize a metaphysics of presence at work in such disappointment with writing, the overwhelming sense that what promised to be the vehicle for rational discourse is, in the end, a treacherous medium that continually betrays its own ostensible transparency by thickening into metaphor and material form. My view, perhaps uncharacteristically, is to follow Derrida out of the morass created by the Alphabetic Literacy Narrative and to picture writing not as a derivative of speech at all but instead as a typographical and rhetorical system of sign making. After all, as the turn-of-the-century Austrian architect and graphic designer Adolf Loos put it so concisely, "One cannot *spe*ak a capital letter" (qtd. in Helfand 50).

For post-process theorizing to rematerialize writing, we need to recast the figure of the composer and its essayist legacy—to see writers not just as makers of meaning but as makers of the means of producing meaning out of the available resources of representation. To understand more fully the work of the composer in the labor process of writing, we must see, as Gunther Kress has argued, that individuals do not simply *acquire* literacy but actually *build* for themselves the tools to produce writing. As Kress shows in *Before Writing*, the multimodal activity of young children working with images, shapes, letterforms, the directionality of writing, the page, and an emergent understanding of genre amounts to an active incorporation of sign-making tools into their

practices of signification. By the same token, instead of thinking of writers as "users" who confront computers as machines that they must learn to operate in order to write, we might think in terms of how individuals, through the labor process of writing, appropriate the means of digital literacy, in highly variable ways, into their own repertoire of sign-making tools. In either case, by locating the composer in a labor process that includes assembling the means of making meaning, we can begin to see, as Kress suggests, how writing transforms the signifying resources at hand by consuming them in the act of production and, in turn, how the material practice of writing transforms the composer's subjectivity and the world in which newly made signs appear.

#### TYPOGRAPHY AND WRITING STUDIES

The line of thinking I want to advance starts with the recognition that the major images of writing from the process era (voice, cognition, conversation) neglect the materiality and visibility of writing. The next step is to devise a more adequate account. My claim is that studying and teaching typography as the culturally salient means of producing writing can help locate composers in the labor process and thereby contribute to the larger post-process work of rematerializing literacy. Typography, of course, has been a longtime topic in the writing curriculum. The problem is that, by and large, typography has been ghettoized in technical communication, where many compositionists think of it as a vocational skill. The concerns of typography—such as document design, page layout, fonts, infographics, and reading paths—are associated with at best commercial art and career training and at worst complicity with corporate culture. To put it bluntly, typography, for all practical purposes, has been assigned in the writing curriculum to the marketplace, at a far remove from the belletristic, critical, and academic work of the essay so cherished by the process movement.

There are good reasons to reconsider this marginalization and to bring typography into the mainstream of writing studies. For one thing, typography—quite literally "writing with type"—can help rematerialize literacy by calling attention to the visual design of writing, be it handwritten, print, or electronic. Typography enables us to *see* writing in material terms as letterforms, printed pages, posters, computer screens. It helps to name the available tools of representation that composers draw on to make their own means of production. For another, typography links writing to delivery—the fifth canon of rhetoric. Like typography, delivery has been neglected by the process movement, isolated from invention, arrangement, style, and memory, and, when mentioned at all, reduced to such afterthoughts as neat handwriting and manuscript preparation. From a typographical perspective, however, the visual design of writing figures prominently as the material form in which the message is delivered. That is, typography offers a way to think of writing not just in terms of the moment of composing but also in terms of its circulation, as messages take on cultural value and worldly force, moving through the Marxian dialectic of production, distribution, exchange, and

consumption.<sup>1</sup> From the mass circulation of periodicals to the way junior high school girls write and fold the notes they pass in class (see Finders), the visual design of writing enters consequentially into the activity of composition.

Modern typography is associated with the rise of mass communication, consumer culture, and the society of the spectacle, with roots in both the popular culture of the metropolis and the agitations of the high modernist vanguard in art and politics. Typographical theory and practice developed largely within graphic design movements, from the art nouveau lithographs of Toulouse-Lautrec and Jules Cheret, William Morris, and the Viennese Secession at the turn of the previous century to the avant-garde of Futurism, Dada, and Soviet Constructivism, Jan Tschichold "new typography," Bauhaus, and the federal WPA posters of the 1920s and 1930s to the postwar ascendancy of Swiss Modern and its current postmodern challengers. Though now collected and displayed in art museums (see Friedman; Rothschild, Lupton, and Goldstein; and Lupton for catalogues of major exhibits), typographical work has typically occurred outside the art world, in the realm of commerce and politics—or, in some instances, such as with Futurism and Dada, as an anti-art.

Only recently has there been an organized academic investigation of graphic design theory and history. During the 1980s, the professional journals *Print* and *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* started to feature historical and critical articles. *Visible Language*, founded in 1967 as the quarterly *Journal of Typographical Research*, and journals started in the 1980s such as *Design Issues* and *Journal of Design History* have worked to make typography and graphic design, along with other types of design, into respectable objects of scholarly inquiry. Victor Margolin gives a sense of design history from 1977 to 1987 in an important review essay ("A Decade"). Two textbooks, Philip Meggs's *A History of Graphic Design* and Richard Hollis's *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, and Robin Kinross's *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*, give overviews of graphic design movements and theories, and the three volumes of *Looking Closer* (edited by Michael Bierut et al.) collect both contemporary critical perspectives in the first two volumes and classic statements in the third. Book-length studies, such as Victor Margolin's *The Struggle for Utopia* (a study of the Soviet constructivists El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko, as well as the associated figure Laslo Moholy-Nagi) and Johanna Drucker's *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923*, have started to appear, providing both critical accounts and an alternative to the expensive, coffee-table productions that contain extensive illustrations but little analysis—publications that have tended to dominate publishing on typography and graphic design.

I offer this quick bibliographical tour as an outsider to the field of graphic design and with considerable misgivings. What I hope to suggest is the intellectual ferment that is currently taking place around what we might call in its most general sense "design studies." There are two points to be made. The first is that graphic designers and typographers have started to interrogate design theory and history in ways that are potentially of great interest to those of us who work in writing. I will look at a few of the specific

questions they raise in the final section of this chapter. The second point is more general, for it has to do with the relevance of the very notion of "design" to writing theorists.<sup>2</sup> Design studies and design history are relatively new interdisciplinary fields that take not only typography and graphic design as their objects of inquiry but more broadly "the conception and planning of all the products made by human beings" (Buchanan and Margolin x). In other words, "design" has to do with the work of architects, urban planners, engineers, computer scientists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, marketing and manufacturing experts, as well as industrial and graphic designers and communication specialists (see, for example, Buchanan and Margolin; and Margolin, *Design*). The various efforts to identify a discipline of design that can organize such a range of activities into intelligible patterns go far beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, what is worth noting is the persistent quest in modern design theory for "the essential unity of all forms of making in the circumstances of a new cultural environment strongly influenced by engineering, technology, and commerce" (Buchanan 36).

Importantly this search for what Richard Buchanan calls a "new architectonic art of design" emerges in the modern era not so much out of the profit motive of the market as from a utopian vision of the designer's relationship to mass production, on the one hand, and to the fine arts, on the other. As Walter Gropius says of the Bauhaus:

Our guiding principle was that design is neither an intellectual nor a material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life, necessary for everyone in a civilized society. Our ambition was to arouse the creative artist from his other-worldliness and to reintegrate him into the workaday world of realities and, at the same time, to broaden and humanize the rigid, almost exclusively material mind of the businessman. Our conception of the basic unity of all design in relation to life was in diametric opposition to that of "art for art's sake" and the much more dangerous philosophy it sprang from, business as an end in itself. (20)

Gropius's desire to "humanize" the business classes may sound naïve, particularly after so much of modernist design has been assimilated by advertising, mass media, the "corporate identity" programs of the postwar period, and the current "branding" campaigns of global capital. Nonetheless, like the aspirations of Morris, Lissitzky, and others to design for social ends, the Bauhaus's utopian goal of dismantling the boundaries between fine and applied art and of designing for social usefulness and the enrichment of everyday life still retains its critical edge.<sup>3</sup>

The desire to design for life has particular relevance to the study and teaching of writing. Not only does it emphasize the rhetoricity of design as deliberation and argument about the possible worlds we might construct, it also calls attention to genres of writing that have traditionally fallen outside the mainstream of writing instruction. As Walter Benjamin says:

Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms

that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and posters. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment. (qtd. in Kinross xv)

If we substitute here the “universal gesture” of *the essay* for that of *the book*, we can read Benjamin’s remarks as a pertinent critique of contemporary writing instruction (and the residual hold of its essayist legacy). Benjamin’s notion of “prompt language” amounts to the design of messages for mass circulation, timely responses to the twists and turns of class struggle “actively equal to the moment.” Long considered ephemeral and beneath notice by writing teachers, Benjamin’s “inconspicuous forms” break with the “universal gesture” of the essay to deliver messages in the history of the contemporary. And in this light, typography and the visual design of writing can no longer be marginalized in the writing curriculum as afterthoughts or preprofessional training; they appear instead as essential elements in an emergent civic rhetoric. If anything, the call to write for the social good found in public and community service writing can help to materialize Benjamin’s figure of the author-as-producer as a post-process representation to replace the process movement’s composer as the essayist maker of meaning.

#### TYPOGRAPHY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Three issues in typographical theory and practice seem to me to be of particular interest to writing studies: the narrativity of letterforms, the page as a unit of discourse, and the division of labor that produces written text. The comments that follow are meant to be suggestive rather than programmatic, to indicate some of the paths typography opens to further investigation in our own intellectual work.

#### THE NARRATIVITY OF LETTERFORMS

The history of letterforms is a complex one involving changing philosophies, technologies, and social uses of writing. In Gutenberg’s fifteenth-century print shop, handmade letterforms imitated the calligraphy of the older scribal tradition. During the Renaissance, humanist designers departed from the naturalistic pen strokes of handwriting to fix the ideal proportions of the alphabet by using the tools of geometry; and in 1693, Louis XIV commissioned a study of the Roman alphabet that imposed a rational grid on letterforms, resulting in the *romain du roi* that was meant to embody the authority of scientific method and bureaucratic power. Hopes for such an absolutist, idealized system of letterforms, however, disappeared within a century. According to Lupton and Miller, the Enlightenment typographers Giambattista Bodoni and Françoise Ambroise Didot broke the “ancestral bond between contemporary typefaces and a divine classical past” by reducing the alphabet to “a system of oppositions—thick and thin, vertical and horizontal, serif and stem,” in effect paving the way to an understanding

of letterforms “as a set of elements open to infinite manipulation” (55). From the nineteenth-century proliferation of display type to modernist experimentalism and now the vast repertoire of computer fonts (including inexact and degraded forms and bi-fontal crossbreedings), the alphabet has changed, as Miller and Lupton point out, from a “pedigreed line of fixed, self-contained symbols” to a “flexible system of difference.” The emphasis in typography has shifted “from the individual letter to the overall series of characters,” exchanging the “fixed identity of the letter for the relational system of the font” (23).

What this shift enables us to see is the figurative, narrative character of letterforms. We might read, for example, Josef Alber’s 1925 stencil typeface, Herbert Bayer’s 1925 “universal,” and Tschichold’s “new typography” not simply as failed modernist master codes to produce a rational font out of standardized, interchangeable parts but also as expressions of technological and humanistic optimism about to be shattered by the atavistic nationalism of black letter type under Hitler’s Third Reich. By the same token, we can find the story in the use of vernacular forms by current typographical designers such as Jeffrey Keedy, whose 1990 Manuscript “combines an anti-heroic amalgam of Modernist geometry and grade-school penmanship” to recall the “naïve yet normative scenario of learning to write”—an exercise that results “not only from external technologies but from the disciplinary socialization of the individual” (Lupton and Miller 24).<sup>4</sup> And finally, to bring things closer to home, we can read the manuscript conventions of the student essay as the story of the transparent text, where the neatness and clarity of standardized type on the printed page seek to efface the visuality of writing and bring the teacher-reader in direct and unmediated touch with the student’s mind.

#### The Page as a Unit of Discourse

The standard units of discourse in writing instruction are the word, sentence, paragraph, and essay; and there is a sad—though now largely repudiated—history of arranging them as a developmental sequence. In the essayist tradition, the page itself is of little account, for as readers we are supposedly not looking at the visual design of writing but following the writer’s thoughts. Typography, on the other hand, calls attention to how the look of the page communicates meaning by treating text as a visual element that can be combined with images and other nonverbal forms to produce a unit of discourse. Early printed books, for example, often sought to emulate the multimodal capacities of illuminated manuscripts by using borders, rules, columns, marginalia, textual inserts, and woodblock illustrations to design the page. Typography in the modern period has, in many respects, been eager to recover the visuality of the page from the monotony of standardized letterforms and dense monochromatic blocks of text by incorporating onto the printed page the available means of visual communication, from the engravings in such nineteenth-century periodicals as *Frank Leslie’s*

*Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harpers Weekly* to the mid-twentieth-century photo essays in *Life* and the computer infographics of *USA Today*. In addition, poets such as Stephane Mallarme, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Filippo Marinetti sought to free the word and the poetic line from the conventional horizontal and vertical structures of the printed page by mixing size, weight, and style of type and pasting letters and words in visual patterns to create nonlinear compositions. More recently, Dan Friedman's now famous design exercise, drawing on the mundane text of a weather report, raised questions about the emphasis on clarity, orderliness, and simplicity in the modernist use of the grid, rules, and information bands as the basis of page design to explore how "legibility (a quality of efficient, clear, and simple reading) is often in conflict with readability (a quality which promotes interest, pleasure, and challenge in reading)" ("Introductory" 139). And, with the advent of computers, designers such as Rudy VanderLans at *Emigre* magazine, April Greiman, and Katherine McCoy at Cranbrook Academy of Art have made use of the new digital technologies to give the page a formerly unimagined depth, layering and overlapping images and text in deep perspective in ways that confound the traditional opposition between seeing and reading and that call on reader/viewers to participate in making sense of the page.

The complicated relationship between reading and seeing text and image raises interesting questions for writing studies about how we might think about the page as a unit of discourse—about how, say, the juxtaposition of articles, photographs, and advertisements on a newspaper or magazine page creates larger messages than any single item can convey (see Kress, "Text," for an analysis of how the articles on a single newspaper page articulate complex and contradictory representations of poverty); about how "hyperactive" pages encourage browsing rather than reading (see Giovannini's warnings about the "capitulation of text to layout" [204]); and about how individuals find their own reading paths to negotiate the page. Finally, we might ask what is at stake in writing instruction by the common practice of taking articles and essays off the printed page on which they appear (along with other articles, images, and advertising) and reproducing them in handouts or anthologies.

### Division of Labor

Typography was traditionally a craft, an artisan's labor that belongs to the print shop. In the early modern period, printing was often thought of as "black magic," and its secrets were guarded by guilds of craftsmen who passed their hermetic arts from master to apprentice. As printing spread, however, "a new occupational culture associated with the printing trades" began to appear, in which the print shop provided "a new setting for intellectual activity," and the master printer became a "hybrid figure"—by turns entrepreneur, lexicographer, editor, cultural impresario, sponsor of scientific research, and political activist—who "presided over the rise of a lay

intelligentsia" (Eisenstein 24, 25). If printers like Benjamin Franklin played a central role in the scientific and democratic revolutions of the modern era, in the twentieth century, typography settled into the division of labor under corporate capital, becoming a career path for graphic artists in design studios, publishing, the media, advertising, and academia—another profession with its associations and publications.

I recount this brief historical overview to sketch a typical (if oversimplified) pattern of specialization in professional life and to suggest ways in which such specialization is now under pressure. With the rise of desktop publishing, the division of labor is beginning to flatten, and the distinctions between author, designer, and printer are starting to collapse. For example, the design, composition, production, and distribution of a memo or report may well be the continuous activity in virtual space of a single figure at a connected computer terminal. In the contemporary workplace, this is what new-age management gurus call "multitasking," where digital literacy overcomes the divisions of labor in the era of mechanical reproduction, eliminating secretarial pools and mimeograph machines and transforming managers into information designers.

But the pressure on specialization can do more than serve the ends of corporate restructuring. Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer" anticipates the progressive possibilities inherent in a collapsing division of labor:

What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it revolutionary useful value. But we shall make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography. Here, too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer of the foundation of political progress. (230)

Writing in 1934, Benjamin must have had in mind the work of revolutionary artists such as John Heartfield, whose photomontages used the airbrush, captions, and cut-and-paste techniques to turn the apparent transparency of the photograph into revolutionary messages ("prompt language") in the struggle against fascism (see Pachnicke and Honnef). At the same time, Benjamin raises questions for us today about how, with the rise of digital typography and online communication, we might imagine new possibilities for designers and authors to become producers, to take over the available tools of representation in order to transform the distribution and use of messages. Given the recent eruption of interest in visual culture within composition, Benjamin offers a way to think about how the study and teaching of writing might take up the visual (and the visibility of writing) as more than just new texts and topics for theorists and students to write about in interpretive and critical essays—though I certainly endorse the value of such work.<sup>5</sup> What remains to be seen, in theory and practice, is how typography—the productive art of writing with type—can be "actively equal to the moment."

## NOTES

1. For an extended argument on the importance of circulation to the study and teaching of writing, see Trimbur, "Composition."
2. The notion of "design" is already seeping into writing studies, as a possible replacement for "composing." See Kaufer and Butler; Petraglia; and Cope and Kalantzis. The view of "design" in this essay is aligned in important respects with the latter volume, but I think, at this point, it is important to keep the idea of "design" an open one—to see where it might lead us.
3. In this regard, see the three *Looking Closer* volumes (Bierut et al.) for the ongoing discussion of the social responsibilities of graphic designers. Also see Daniel Friedman, *Radical*, for an heroic attempt to join design and everyday life (as well as negotiate the demands of modernism and postmodernism on the contemporary designer), and *Adbusters* magazine and Web site <www.adbusters.org>.
4. In this narrative vein, typographer Jonathan Barnbrook has designed a Nixon typeface "to tell lies" and Prozac to "simplify meanings."
5. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Kress and van Leeuwen) provides, in my view, the preeminently useful social semiotic analysis of the "look of the page," but I can't resist pointing out the irony that it "explains" visual structures in terms of Hallydean linguistic ones.

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