recent proliferation of new typefaces should have anyone interested in advancing the tradition of typography in a state of ecstasy. It is always possible to do *good* typography with old typefaces. But why are so many typographers insistent on trying to do the impossible—*new* typography with old faces?

Inherent in the new typefaces are possibilities for the (imaginative) typographer that were unavailable ten years ago. So besides merely titillating typophiles with fresh new faces, it is my intention to encourage typographers and type designers to look optimistically forward. You may find some of the typefaces formally and functionally repugnant, but you must admit that type design is becoming very interesting again.

16   Electronic Typography: The New Visual Language

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In 1968, Mattel introduced Talking Barbie. I like to think of this as my first computer. I remember saving up my allowance for what seemed an eternity to buy one. To make her talk, you pulled a little string; upon its release, slave-to-fashion Barbie would utter delightful little conversational quips like "I think mini-skirts are smashing" and "Let's have a costume party." If you held the string back slightly as she was talking, her voice would drop a few octaves, transforming her from a chirpy soprano into a slurpy baritone. What came out then sounded a lot more like "Let's have a *cocktail* party."

I loved that part.

What I loved was playing director—casting her in a new role, assigning her a new (albeit ludicrous) personality. What I loved was controlling the tone of her voice, altering the rhythm of her words, modulating her oh-so-minimal (and moronic) vocabulary. What I loved was the power to shape her *language*—something I would later investigate typographically, as I struggled to understand the role of the printed word as an emissary of spoken communication.

Twenty-five years later, my Mac sounds a lot like my Barbie did then—the same monotone, genderless, robotic drawl. But here in the digital age, the relationship between design and sound—and in particular, between the spoken word and the written word—goes far beyond pulling a string. And don't be fooled by voice recognition software: The truth is that the computer's internal sound capabilities enable us to design *with* sound, not in imitation of it. Like it or not, the changes brought about by recent advances in technology (and here I am referring to multimedia) indicate the need for designers to broaden their understanding of what it is to work effectively with typography. It is no longer enough to design for readability, to "suggest" a sentiment

or reinforce a concept through the selection of a particular font. Today, we can make type *talk*: in any language, at any volume, with musical underscoring or sci-fi sound effects. We can sequence and dissolve, pan and tilt, fade to black, and spec type in Sensurround. As we "set" type, we encounter a decision-making process unprecedented in two-dimensional design. Unlike the kinetic experience of turning a printed page to sequence information, time becomes a powerful and persuasive design element. Today, we can visualize concepts in four action-packed, digital dimensions.

Multimedia has introduced a new visual language, one which is no longer bound to traditional definitions of word and image and form and place. Typography, in an environment that offers such diverse riches, must redefine its goals, its purpose, its very identity. It must reinvent itself. And soon.

Visual language, or the interpretation of spoken words through typographic expression, has long been a source of inspiration to designers, artists, and writers. Examples abound, from concrete poetry in the twenties to "happenings" in the sixties, and in graphic design, dating as far back as the incunabula. Visual wordplay proliferates, in this century in particular, from F. T. Marinetti's *Parole in Liberià,* to George Maciunas's Fluxus installations, to the latest MTA posters adorning the New York subway walls. Kurt Schwitters, Guillaume Apollinaire, Piet Zwart, Robert Brownjohn—the list is long, the examples inexhaustible. For designers, there has always been an overwhelming interest in formalism, in analyzing the role of type as medium (structure), message (syntax), and muse (sensibility). Throughout, there has been an attempt to reconcile the relationship between words both spoken and seen—a source of exhilaration to some and ennui to others. Lamenting the expressive limitations of the Western alphabet, Adolf Loos explained it simply: "One cannot *speak* a capital letter." Denouncing its structural failings, Stanley Morison was equally at odds with a tradition that designated hierarchies, in the form of upper- and lower-case letterforms. Preferring to shape language as he deemed appropriate, Morison referred to CAPS as "a necessary evil."

Academic debate over the relationship between language and form has enjoyed renewed popularity in recent years, as designers borrowed from linguistic models in an attempt to codify and clarify their own typographic explorations. Deconstruction's design devotees eagerly appropriated its terminology and theory, hoping to introduce a new vocabulary for design: it was the vocabulary of signifiers and signifieds, of Jacques Derrida and Ferdinand de Saussure, of Michel Foucault and Umberto Eco.

As a comprehensive model for evaluating typographic expression, deconstruction proved both heady and limited. Today, as advances in technology introduce greater and more complex creative challenges, it is simply arcane. We need to look at screen-based typography as a *new language*—with its own grammar, its own syntax, its own rules. What we need are new models, better models, models that go beyond language or typography, per se—models that reinforce rather than restrict our understanding of what it is to design electronic media. "What we need," says design and new-media consultant Wendy Richmond, "are extreme and unusual metaphors."

Learning a new language is one thing; fluency, quite another. We've come to equate fluency with literacy—another outdated model for evaluation. "Literacy should not mean the ability to decode strings of alphabetic letters," says Seymour Papert, director of the Epistemology and Learning Group at MIT's Media Lab, who refers to such a definition as "letteracy." And language, even to linguists, proves creatively limiting as a paradigm. "New media promise the opportunity to offer a smoother transition to what really deserves to be called literacy," says Papert. Typography, as the physical embodiment of such thinking, has quite a way to go.

The will to decipher the formal properties of language, a topic of great consequence for communication designers in general, has its philosophical antecedents in ancient Greece. "Spoken words," wrote Aristotle in *Logic,* "are the symbols of mental experience. Written words are the symbols of spoken words." Today, centuries later, the equation has added a new link: what happens when written words can speak? when they can move? when they can be imbued with sound and tone and nuance and decibel and harmony and voice? As designers probing the creative parameters of this new technology, our goal may be less to *digitize* than to *dramatize.* Indeed, there is a theatrical component that I am convinced is essential to this new thinking. Of what value are bold and italics when words can dance across the screen, dissolve, or disappear altogether?

In this dynamic landscape, our static definitions of typography appear increasingly imperiled. Will the beauty of traditional letterforms be compromised by the evils of this new technology? Will punctuation be stripped of its functional contributions, or ligatures of their aesthetic ones? Will type really matter?

Of course it will.

In the meantime, however, typography's early appearance on the digital frontier doesn't speak too well for design. Take e-mail for example. Gone are the days of good handwriting, of the Palmer Method and the penmanship primer. In its place, electronic mail—which, despite its futuristic tone, has paradoxically revived the Victorian art of letter writing. Sending electronic mail is easy and quick. For those of us who spend a good deal of our professional lives on the telephone, e-mail offers a welcome respite from talking (though it bears a closer stylistic resemblance to conversational speech than to written language). However, for those of us with even the most modest design sense, e-mail eliminates the *distinctiveness* that typography has traditionally brought to our written communiqués. Though its supporters endorse the democratic nature of such homogeneity, the truth is, it's boring. In the land of e-mail, we all "sound" alike: everyone speaks in Monaco.

Oddly, it is laden with contradictions: ubiquitous in form yet highly diverse in content, at once ephemeral and archival, transmitted in real time yet physically intangible. E-mail is a kind of aesthetic flatland, informationally dense and visually unimaginative. Here, hierarchies are preordained and non-negotiable: passwords, menus, commands, help. Networks like America OnLine require that we title our mail, a leftover model from the days of

interoffice correspondence, which makes even the most casual letter sound like a corporate memo. As a result, electronic missives all have headlines: titling our letters makes us better editors, not better designers. As a fitting metaphor for the distilled quality of things digital, the focus in e-mail is on the abridged, the acronym, the quick read. E-mail is functionally serviceable and visually forgettable, not unlike fast food. It's drive-thru design: get in, get out, move on.

And it's everywhere. Here is the biggest contribution to communication technology to come out of the last decade, a global network linking an estimated 50 million people worldwide, and designers—communication designers, no less—are *nowhere in sight*.

Typography, in this environment, desperately needs direction. Where do we start? Comparisons with printed matter inevitably fail, since words in the digital domain are processed with a speed unprecedented in the world of paper. Here, they are incorporated into databases or interactive programs, where they are transmitted and accessed in random, nonhierarchical sequences. "Hypertext," or the ability to program text with interactivity (meaning that a word, when clicked upon or pointed to, will actually do something), takes it all a step further: by introducing alternate paths, information lacks the closure of the traditional printed narrative. "Hypertextual story space is now multidimensional," explains novelist Robert Coover in a recent issue of *Artforum*, "and theoretically infinite."

If graphic design can be largely characterized by its attention to understanding the hierarchy of information (and using type in accordance with such understanding), then how are we to determine its use in a nonlinear context such as this? On a purely visual level, we are limited by what the pixel will render: the screen matrix simulates curves with surprising sophistication, but hairlines and idiosyncratic serifs will, to the typophile, inevitably appear compromised. On a more objective level, type in this context is both silent and static, and must compete with sound and motion—not an easy task, even in the best of circumstances. (Conversely, in the era of the TV remote, where the user can mute at will, the visual impact of written typography is not to be discounted.)

To analyze better the role(s) of electronic typography, we might begin by looking outside—not to remote classifications imported from linguistic textbooks, or even to traditional design theories conveniently repackaged—but to our own innate intelligence, our own distinctive powers of creative thought. To cultivate and develop adequately this new typography (because if we don't, no one else will), we might do well to rethink language altogether, to consider new and alternative perspectives. "If language is indeed the limit of our world," writes literary critic William Gass in *Habitations of the Word*, "then we must find another, larger, stronger, more inventive language which will burst those limits."

In his book *Seeing Voices*, author and neurologist Oliver Sacks reflects on sign language and looks at the cognitive understanding of spatial grammar in a language that exists without sound. He cites the example of a deaf child

learning to sign and describes in detail the remarkable quality of her visual awareness and descriptive, spatial capabilities. "By the age of four, indeed, Charlotte had advanced so far into visual thinking and language that she was able to provide new ways of thinking—revelations—to her parents." As a consequence of learning sign language as adults, this child's parents not only learned a new language, but also discovered new ways of thinking as well—*visual thinking*. Imagine the potential for multimedia if designers were to approach electronic typography with this kind of ingenuity and openmindedness.

William Stokoe, a Chaucer scholar who taught Shakespeare at Gallaudet College in the 1950s, summarized it this way: "In a signed language, narrative is no longer linear and prosaic. Instead, the essence of sign language is to cut from a normal view to a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again, and so on, even including flashback and fastforward scenes, exactly as a movie editor works." Here, perhaps, is another model for visual thinking: a new way of shaping meaning based on multiple points of view, which sees language as part of a more comprehensive communication platform—time-sensitive, interactive, and highly visual. Much like multimedia.

Addendum: In gathering research for this article, I posted a query on Applelink's typography board. I received the following response:

> As a type designer, I am sort of surprised to find myself NOT VERY CONCERNED with how type is used in the fluid context of multimedia. In a way, type is as flexible as photography or illustration in a mm context . . . i.e., it's a whole new ballgame for everyone.

Though my link-pal claimed not to be concerned, he did take the time to respond. And as I read his reply, I realized how important it will be for all of us to be concerned: not merely to translate the printed word to the screen, but to transcend it.

Then I found myself wondering: what would Stanley Morison have thought of all those CAPS?