

A Turning Point in Type Design

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This is the second turning point in type design that I have reached during my fifty years of chronic addiction to this basic element in typography. The first one occurred in 1957. At that time I might easily have overlooked it if it had not been pointed out to me by Charles Peignot, one of my oldest and dearest friends. He saw it so clearly that he quickly convinced me that I ought to help him to create ATypI. It was entirely his idea to form the Association Typographique Internationale; and because its creation was the direct result of his ability to perceive that earlier turning point in type design, I want to explain how he faced up to the particular problems which he saw at that point, before I suggest how we must now deal with the new situation which has brought us to a second turning point in type design – and one which again requires a collective effort by members of ATypI.

Charles Peignot's father was a distinguished Parisian typefounder whose career was cut short when he died fighting for his country during the First World War. His three brothers were also killed during that conflict, and all four brothers are commemorated by a street in Paris that was named after them (it is called La Rue des Quatre Frères Peignot). Charles was twenty-one when the war ended and he went into the family foundry with an acute consciousness of the responsibilities that had fallen upon him. The Peignot foundry had become successors to the great Didot family, and had also acquired the punches of the gifted Gillé family; but like his father, Charles commissioned new types drawn by his contemporaries and

proved himself to be very much a man of his own time. He also displayed a remarkably wide interest in the other graphic arts – such as poster design and photography. In 1927 he founded and edited an enterprising new review called *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, through which he came to be known and respected throughout Europe and the United States. He developed a breadth of vision which opened his eyes to the importance of filmsetting as a technique for creating and copying type designs.

During the Second World War, a new and fast method of filmsetting was invented by two French telephone engineers. The French economy at the end of the war was in such dire straits that money could not be raised over there to exploit the new filmsetter. So Peignot came to this country and helped to persuade a consortium, largely made up of men with newspaper interests, to build the new filmsetter. In France it had been known as the Lumitype, but over here it was renamed the Photon, and was first shown to the public in 1949 at a trade convention in Boston.

Peignot quickly grasped the fact that the advent of fast filmsetters for text composition and display meant the end of typefounding as an industry. He therefore secured the right to distribute the Photon machine in France, and undertook to apply his own expertise to designing and manufacturing a suitable wide range of text and display types for the new filmsetter. During the mid-nineteen fifties, the leading makers of hot-metal composing machines such as Linotype, Monotype and Intertype all came onto the market with filmsetting machines. Those early models were later superseded by others of far more sophisticated design; but as early as 1956, Peignot saw what others only appreciated many years later – namely that a turning point had been reached which indicated not only the end of typefounding as an industry, but also an end to the age of hot-metal mechanical typesetting machines.

The French have a gift for inventing slogans. About the time that ATypI was conceived, the French typographical fraternity kept on repeating 'Gutenberg is dead.' Of course he had been dead since 1468. What the slogan meant to dramatize was the fact that printing from moveable type as invented by Gutenberg was fast becoming obsolete. And what Peignot perceived was that the art of typography was now rapidly passing into the hands of entrepreneurs, electronic engineers, lens makers and computer experts who had a totally inadequate understanding of type design. He also foresaw that unauthorized copies of type designs would be made photographically at far greater speed and at

substantially lower costs than had ever been possible when copying a fount of type that was to be cast in metal.

Furthermore, Peignot realized that the new techniques of filmsetting needed new types designed by people who would be capable of combining a knowledge of the traditional skills which had been developed during more than five centuries of printing from moveable type, with a readiness to exploit the new opportunities created by the greater flexibility of the new filmsetting equipment. Clearly it was desirable to create new type designs for the new technology. And as Peignot knew from long experience as a typefounder, with an international market, how quickly unauthorized copies of type designs had been produced between the wars, he was well aware of the need to obtain effective new international legislation to protect type designs.

With this impending revolution so clearly understood, Peignot also saw the need to educate the public in typographical matters, because buyers and readers of printed matter can play a vital part by influencing the acceptance or refusal of new standards in type designs. Furthermore, new international legislation to protect type designs was unlikely to command effective support unless the importance of the subject was properly understood by a broad segment of the public.

It also became clear to Peignot that the design of typefaces was bound to move away from typefounders and composing machine manufacturers, and that it would pass into the hands of independent designers. The correctness of that view has since been proved by the establishment in this country of the enterprising International Typeface Corporation, and by several freelance designers working independently, or in partnerships.



Over the last twenty-five years, ATypI has often provided a forum for a variety of typographical problems to be debated at international congresses held in various European countries, including some within the Eastern bloc. A committee for those members concerned with education in letter forms was set up in 1972, and during the last ten years a high proportion of ATypI's funds have been allocated to educational activities. These activities are taking place just at the time that we have reached a second turning point in type design. This one opens up so many new roads that we greatly need to discuss which new directions are the right ones for us to take, and how we can prepare ourselves to travel with confidence and success along those directions that we choose. There have been so many changes in the past ten years that we can easily

spend a great deal of time examining the best ways of exploiting the present situation of type design, without devoting any time to what may or may not happen in the closing years of our century.

Sometimes we worry too much about the distant future, and forget that many problems in fact disappear or are solved by completely unexpected discoveries. Let me give you one example. Just about one hundred years ago, a lot of Londoners were getting seriously worried about the problem of removing the ever-increasing quantity of horse dung on the streets. How could it all be swept up, and where could it be dumped? A few years later the first horseless carriage appeared on the streets of London and the problem of dung removal disappeared.

When ATypI was founded in 1957, nobody could have predicted that the laser would be invented three years later, or that this invention would lead to the digitisation of type designs. Nor was it easy to predict the scale on which office machinery would become a substitute for the services hitherto provided by printers. The first IBM typewriter equipped with a golf ball head only appeared on the market in 1961, four years after the foundation of ATypI, and in that same year, the first ruboff letter transfer sheet was sold by Letraset in Europe. The now much-used term 'word processing' only entered the English language in 1964, and the first video cassettes only appeared on the market seven years later in 1971.

I realize that some people have lived their entire lives in a world that always contained golf ball typewriters and dry letter transfer sheets – let alone communication satellites, which like ATypI date back to 1957. I know about six other members of ATypI who were born like me in 1918 – or even earlier. So I realize there is not simply a generation gap between members of ATypI but a gap of two generations: some members may have grandparents who are my age. But I am not worried that these gaps may lead to difficulties between us when we turn our minds to the problems created by the speed at which conditions affecting type design have changed. I take the view that the longer you live, the greater becomes your experience of change, and therefore the greater should be your capacity to cope with change. By now I have reached an age which, to borrow Oscar Wilde's phrase 'I'm old enough to know worse.' All the same, I rejoice that I can now choose between a wider range of options than were open to me when I was younger.

Whenever you have to make a choice, you would do well to ask yourself first the right questions and then to try to

find the appropriate answers. That is what I hope will happen. I would now like to suggest two very broad questions which I think ought to be aired. First, 'What kinds of type designs are needed now?' and second, 'How ought we to approach the problems of designing new types, taking into account the technical changes of recent years and the altered structure of the services which now create printed matter?'

The first question contains an implication with which some people might disagree. For the question implies that we really do need more type designs than we already have. Well, I know a number of printers, and quite a few readers as well, who are both puzzled and irritated by what they regard as a plethora of existing type designs. The word *plethora* means 'an over-abundance, or fulness to the point of excess.' Now it cannot be denied that tens of thousands of type faces have been created during the five centuries since Gutenberg produced the first fount of black letter type. But many of those typefaces have since become obsolete, not only through changes in fashion but through political intervention. For example, the decline of black letter was hastened in 1941 by an edict that designated roman as the standard type to be used in Germany. At least this did not cut off the German people from its cultural roots, which alas happened in Turkey after 1928, when an edict prohibited the printing of books in Arabic, and made the adoption of roman compulsory.

Though some of us may regret the disappearance of a few handsome roman types that were popular in the past, we must remember that many of them were created for religious, political or commercial reasons that are no longer valid. The religious origins of some types are indicated by size names – such as canon or small missal. Others such as the *romains du roi* indicate that they were intended for royal use, while a name like *caractère de finance* shows it was intended for commercial work – though long before the advent of computers.

Conditions prevailing in 1983 are very different from those under which type designs were made and sold in the past. Formerly type designs were either made to meet the specific requirements of some important user, or they were made to conform to what a typefounder believed were the needs of enough customers to show him a profit, preferably in cash or at least to his reputation. The typefounder's market was limited by the distances over which he could deliver. During the nineteenth century, better communications by railway and steamship extended the typefounder's markets; but some of his customers were lost

near the end of the century to the composing machine manufacturers who were soon to become serious rivals. These manufacturers developed larger and more international markets, so their ranges of types had to be broad enough to serve a wide variety of typographical tastes and needs.

Composing machine makers sold type designs in the form of matrices; and for many years sales of matrices were regarded merely as adjuncts to the more valuable sales of machines. Only in the twenties did the idea progressively gain ground that machine sales could be enhanced by offering a better range of type designs than your competitors could provide. A few discriminating publishers, advertisers and printers also cottoned onto the idea that a distinctive array of good type designs was likely to attract new customers, and also to improve the reputations of those who could provide them.

As the typefounding trade contracted, the founders gradually came to terms with the composing machine makers: mutually advantageous deals were concluded between them, whereby the same type designs became available for both hand setting and machine composition. During this period typographical designers found little difficulty in deciding which type designs to specify because at that time comprehensive type specimens were available from all the different suppliers, and it was not difficult to locate a printer who could provide or obtain the specified types. Those convenient conditions change drastically with the advent of filmsetting. A great many types no longer exist for practical purposes because they are simply unavailable to the clients who would like to use them. A further aggravation is that even if a particular type is known to be available, it is often very hard to obtain adequate specimens of the entire range that can be generated on filmsetting equipment.

A quickening in the pace of life has brought about other problems. A great deal of printing – probably most of our printing – is now needed in a hurry. I have noticed that the printing services which have grown up around office copying machines – (to which so many people now turn for their printing) – are called ‘instant printers.’ You will often find them on the main street next to the ‘quick cleaners.’ This being an age of hurry and pressure, the only types that can be considered as existing for practical purposes are those which are *instantly* available and *cheaply* available. If you accept this view, then you will find that far from there being a plethora of type designs, there is now a dearth. Only the unhurried customer with a fairly elastic budget can

expect to find a supplier who can provide him with the type design he wants to use – and the customer may have to scour the world to find that supplier.

Under the circumstances I have just described, I am convinced that we have reached a turning point at which a great quantity and a great variety of new type designs are needed. In a moment I will explain what kinds of text types I believe we need; but first let me deal with display types in which diversity of design is of paramount importance. Extreme novelty is out of place except in display types. However, it is as hard to predict which kind of display type will become popular as it is for a book-publisher to pick out the best-seller from among the stack of manuscripts which thud unsolicited onto his desk. The only certainty is that nothing will ever deter writers from writing, any more than it will deter designers from drawing display types. If you want to understand what makes them do it, I suggest you try to catch the next revival of a film which Alfred Hitchcock based on John Buchan's novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. In the screenplay written in part by Hitchcock's wife, the title became the code-word for a spy ring that is uncovered by Buchan's hero. The climax is reached when a music-hall performer called Mr. Memory (based on a real performer who answered almost any factual question put to him by the audience) is asked during his act by Buchan's hero 'What are the Thirty-Nine Steps?' Even though Mr. Memory is aware that his spymaster is in the theatre with a gun trained on him, and knows that he will be shot if he reveals that the Thirty-Nine Steps is the spy-ring for which he is working, he still gives the right answer. He is shot, but before he dies, he manages with his dying breath to give the police the exact wording of a secret document that he memorized for his spymaster. I tell you this story because it strikes me that Mr. Memory has this in common with many designers of display types. Not even the risk of death will deflect them from their professional compulsion to exercise a skill in which they take pride. My remark is meant as a compliment, not criticism; but I have sometimes wished that type designers could be as self-critical as the late James Thurber after he had written a play. 'It had only one fault,' he said, 'it was kind of lousy.'

Turning now to text types – by which I mean those designed for continuous reading – here the criteria are of two kinds, functional and stylistic. Of course the second is closely related to the first if you agree with the old dictum that form follows function. The functions which a text type must perform are partly human and partly mechanical. The human eye must be able to read a text type without

difficulty or distraction, but at the same time the human mind must derive some degree of conscious or unconscious pleasure from the impression which the design creates. When we evaluate a text type, we have to take into account the many differences which exist between readers of various countries, as well as differences of age, intelligence and reading habits. The only continuous texts read by millions of people in the developed countries of this world are read in newspapers, not in books. Consequently, the type designs which those millions find easiest to read are (through sheer force of habit) newspaper types in small size and set to a narrow measure. It is regrettable that so many newspapers are still set in types designed to be printed from hot metal even though a high proportion of newspapers are now printed from filmset text and offset plates. Furthermore, the lighting conditions under which we read newspapers are generally far brighter now than they were during the century before fluorescent lighting was introduced.

It may surprise some of you if I now raise the question whether we should give equal importance to stylistic as distinct from functional criteria when judging the merit of a text type. Many of you may be convinced that functional criteria are paramount. But from reading reports on a great many investigations into the legibility of type, I would suggest that stylistic criteria may be of greater importance. The outcome of many experiments indicates there is no statistically significant difference between the legibility of a wide variety of text types, even between seriffed and unseriffed types. On the other hand, differences of real statistical significance were detected when readers were asked which styles of type they preferred. The fact that they were capable of reading a great many different styles of type with virtually no degree of difficulty did not prevent them from giving very firm opinions about the types which they *preferred* to read. This finding ought to be studied by those who decide in what types to compose the vast amount of printed matter that is intended to attract or to persuade, but which nobody is *obliged* to read. For it clearly matters quite a lot whether the right type is chosen to appeal to a potential buyer or voter – or to anyone else who becomes a target for persuasive as distinct from obligatory printed matter (like airline schedules or railway timetables which we all have to read from time to time). The truth revealed by careful experiments is that our remarkably adaptable nervous system is quite capable of decoding most typefaces without difficulty, but that it also leads us to develop quite strong personal preferences for a few particular types.

These conclusions rejoice my heart. If so many readers have expressed statistically significant preferences for particular styles of type that are unrelated to the functional efficiency of those types, I am reassured that human beings are not robots, nor consistent, and that they are (to me) exhilaratingly unpredictable. This may of course dismay all those who prudently try to avoid financial risks by carrying out systematic market research. When it comes to type designs, many potential consumers will say they can only tell you what they like when they see it, and that there is nothing they like better than a nice change.

Never before have readers been exposed to so much change in the kinds of letter forms confronting them. In our daily lives we have become accustomed to substantially different forms of letter and numerals adapted to the present limitations on the design of pocket calculators, wrist watches, or (on a larger scale) video displays and airport flight information boards. Many people now have to spend a great part of their working lives reading data on a visual display unit, while others make increasing use at home of various kinds of teletext. I naturally hope that the quality of letter forms at present used on these kinds of apparatus will improve greatly in the near future. But whether or not that happens, I maintain that our frequent exposure to so many radically different letter forms must affect our readiness to accept a faster rate of change in the design of our text types – change that will in any event come about for various functional and stylistic reasons.

I admit to having one anxiety about the likely trend of change in text types. Most of the best type designs of the past were skilful adaptations of letter forms that had been created for handwriting or for inscriptions. These forms were then adapted by trained and skilled craftsmen working in the actual size of the types needed. Today we tend to use a keyboard more often than a pen or pencil. Moreover, there is virtually no characteristic handwriting or inscriptional work of our own period from which type designers can take their inspiration. If any new trend in type design is to take a firm enough direction for it to be followed by the emergence of a distinctive new style in type design, I believe a great deal will depend upon the quality of type designers to develop their innate creativity through acquiring a deep understanding of past typographical achievements. In this way they will also build up their confidence to branch out in new directions, secure in their knowledge of traditional typographical practice.

'Tradition' is a word that has wrongly become tainted in recent years with overtones implying that it is the opposite of innovation. The literal meaning of the word is 'handing over,' and tradition ought to command respect and confidence if it relates to practices that deserve to be handed over from one generation to the next. Indeed, I could argue that if you believe in democracy, you ought also to believe in tradition, because the English author G.K. Chesterton once wrote, with the insight of a poet that 'tradition is the democracy of the dead.' That aspect of tradition is reflected in the ringing phrase 'time-honoured' coined by William Shakespeare. But there are some designers who believe that to create anything that is different is bound to be better than to create a thing in the traditional way. They ought to heed a remark made by the Hollywood producer Arthur Freed to Alan Jay Lerner, who wrote the book of *My Fair Lady*. Freed once said to Lerner: 'Don't try to be different. You don't have to be different to be good. To be good is different enough.'

Unlike display types, the qualities to be looked for in a text type are the absence of any marked peculiarities in the letters, and the ease with which the complete set of letters combine into words. I doubt whether many people would contest that view, but a very different opinion was held by that eighteenth century male chauvinist, Sir Anthony Absolute. In a comedy called *The Rivals*, a friend reminds him that his late wife was fond of books. Sir Anthony replies: 'Aye – and sufficient injury they were to her, Madam. But were I to choose another helpmate, the extent of her erudition should consist in her knowing her simple letters, without their mischievous combinations.'

The combinations which type designers need to take into account today are more mischievous than ever. So many countries throughout the world now use the roman alphabet for a dazzling variety of languages. Some require an alarming quantity of accents above and below the simple letters, not to mention a few letters that are severely mutilated so as to make their special meaning immediately recognizable. Furthermore, the potential uses to which a roman text type may be put are now so vast that no designer can possibly anticipate all the functional criteria by which his design may be judged. Of course his task is made easier if he is asked to create a new type for a specific purpose – such as a newspaper, a magazine or a telephone directory – always provided that he is given enough information about the readership, conditions of use, and methods of printing. What is far harder is to create a new text type for general use.

The market for such types is not likely to be quickly enlarged by recent newcomers to the ranks of text-composing systems, including those who market word-processors and office machines. Quite understandably most newcomers use copies of types that have already proved to be popular. Just the same thing happened earlier in this century when hot-metal composing-machine makers copied the types made popular by the typefounders. History teaches us that new composing systems rarely lead to new text types until the new systems have become firmly established.



But the outlook for the future is by no means one of unrestricted gloom for the design of new text types. Costs of manufacturing or generating a typeface have dropped far below the former costs that were involved in creating several sizes in hot metal. So the chances are improving that more design-conscious firms will commission new text types for their own proprietary use. And contrary to what you might expect, a type that is designed for the limited needs of a particular user may turn out to be very well suited to much wider use. Even the naming of Times New Roman after a London newspaper in no way hampered it from becoming widely popular. It is impossible to prove how much the success of a type may be affected by its name, though to name it after its designer may make it easier to obtain trade mark protection. But I can tell you of one case where the name given to a type neatly matched one job for which it was used. Some years ago the French tax authorities decided it was time to redesign the annual tax-return form on which all earnings are meant to be declared. Now the French are notoriously forgetful when it comes to filling up these forms. So it was not perhaps altogether accidental that the redesigned form cunningly reminded at least the type-conscious French of their duty, by using a type whose name (in French) means remember or recall – that type called *Souvenir*.

I wonder what names will be found for the large number of new types which ought to be designed specifically for the new equipment that proliferates around us as we enter the new Information Age. For our greatest need now is not so much new types for printing as new types for print-out. We have already reached a point where there is virtually no limit to the amount of information that can be stored and processed; and the speed at which that information can be generated and transmitted has been accelerated by the rate at which cable and satellite are being linked to increasingly sophisticated microcomputers. However, we must always remember – and point out to others – that the rate at which

we can comprehend this electronically transmitted knowledge will continue to depend upon the ease with which we can decode and absorb the alphanumeric output given to us in the form of type designs. Of course, a great deal of knowledge can also be transmitted in audiovisual form; but only the alphabet allows each of us to read and verify the information transmitted at a speed which suits our individual capacities. Varying levels of intelligence and differing degrees of familiarity with the language spelt out in letters will affect the speed at which we can absorb the knowledge transmitted by type designs. So a great deal of attention ought to be paid to the peculiar problems of devising type designs tailored to the changed conditions under which so much knowledge is now transmitted.

The invitation to attend the ATypI seminar made it clear that one of its purposes was to bring together engineers and designers for future cooperation in type design. I expect that this cooperation will continue far into the future because of two shared convictions – first, that computers can be used to advance type design; and second, that the hand – not to mention the head and the heart – will continue to play a decisive part during the tremendously exciting period in our lives that I have called ‘a turning point in type design.’