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New Reasons To Design Type

Type designers are often asked the question, whether there are not enough typefaces yet. On the one hand Laymen ask the question about the meaning of new typefaces and then by the look of them they ask what is new about it (Unger, 2006). The fact that the very ordinary and very original can appear to be compatible in one design (Lommen, 2003) does not make things any easier for the “non-designer” reader. Letterforms do not draw the attention of the reader as long as they keep their visual consistency. While the variation among the existing typefaces seems to be too limited to design with for some designers, for others it appears to be too large. Within the design community it is sometimes claimed that three typefaces should be enough to design with, but it seems to be impossible to agree which three that would be.

Although many may think that the conditioned forms of the letters leave little room for the creative input of the type designers, the reality is rather the opposite. There is sufficient space for building up personal structures on these foundations (Unger, 2006). Type designers not only have the knowledge, but also the insight to come up with new type designs. At this point, the question of whether there are not enough letters can be considered irrelevant. The reasons for designing new typefaces are just as diverse as those of all other art disciplines (Blokland, 2001) and, by extension, of each of every artefact that humans have designed so far.

Type design can have either an aesthetic/expressive or an ergonomic motivation. If the starting point of the project is originated by a rather aesthetic/expressive motivation, the design contributes to the diversity in all possible forms in which letters can exist. In line with this, we find around 20% of the type production being driven by a “free idea” of the designer (Blokland, 2001). There is great freedom within this idea, its application is less defined and the requirements are vaguer. The value of this concept lies in the pleasure of making the letters with the main purpose of expressing beauty as well as entertaining the senses. Such type designs are more in line with the approach in the liberal arts. This way of designing comes the closest to what is generally thought about type designs (Blokland 2001: 65).

In contrast with this 20%, 80% of the type production encompass the design of new typefaces: (1) for a specific application or (2) for the adaptation of an existing font, for example, a new use or a new application (Blokland 2001: 63). The application of the new typeface is clearly outlined and its requirements are clearly stated. The aesthetic quality is one of the design components that the designer needs to consider, but this is not necessarily a priority when type needs to be designed for a specific application or adaptation.

In the last decade, this 80% of the type production has witnessed the introduction of a blooming scientific approach to typography and type design that has created its own category within it. This category belongs to the new typefaces that are created within the academic framework of a doctoral dissertation (or research project) and aim to enhance specific issues for specific target groups. The design process of these typefaces are preceded by an in-depth research of the nature of the matter from those different perspectives that cover that particular issue and are involved in the act of reading. This process is therefore orchestrated by the interdisciplinary approach that lay the foundations of the science of reading research. As type designers we have the inestimable opportunity and the ethical responsibility to contribute to society by creating new artefacts that better suit the needs that arise every day in any community. When letters are designed functionally -this is, when ergonomics precedes aesthetics-, they intended to represent an improvement. This way of designing corresponds better within the approach of the applied arts. Type design is here a means of generating knowledge: it brings thoughts, ideas, images, from one mind to another (Warde, 1956).

The latter forms the core of typographical science. Therefore, the discussion may arise whether a typeface is or is not an art form since, as referenced above, its first goal is not always necessarily express aesthetics and entertain the senses.

Because type designers mainly design mass products, it can be said that typography is in the domain of ergonomics. That makes typography an ergonomic application. Herein the mass products, letters, are adapted to the human physical, in this case to the properties of the eyes and brains. Type design must be adapted to this so that readers can rely on the letters and take in the content. This means that type design and typography is more than just an art discipline. Not only does the type designer/typographer have a self-satisfaction with the end result, but there is also satisfaction with the contribution of effectiveness for the target audience (Tracy, 1986).

As a type designer, you constantly think about your readers and try to represent their needs and interests (Unger, 2007). Through a combination of aesthetics, experiment and legibility, the type designer tries to come up with his sense of designing type to new fundamental forms where unity prevails. The typeface is capable of fulfilling the fundamental skill of reading, however the content prevails. Letters are not unimportant, but it should be noted that the content / language will always be stronger than its visual form. After all, the letters remain just a means to represent and transfer content.

The use and design of typefaces is both a matter of taste, feeling and even responsibility. The fact that letter shapes are inexhaustible as a source of interest and pleasure is something to be thankful for (Tracy, 1986). Type designs can serve special needs, for example for a specific purpose or separate target group. New letters are used as fuel for new typography, design (Blokland, 2001) and insights into legibility. New type designs not only contribute to the design world but also to the scientific world because it provides insight into the complex concept of legibility.

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