

THIS MONKEY'S GONE TO HEAVEN & IF THE DEVIL IS SIX THEN GOD IS SEVEN.

Against Anti-foundationalism

PART I

BY ELLIOTT EARLS

THE BLOOM IS OFF THE ROSE. Type design has lost its urgency, and has regained its soul. In the mid to late 90s I was working completely alone in a windowless studio, and traveling extensively. Routinely, I would find myself conducting workshops and lectures at American design schools. These alternating frames of solitude and activity left me with an uncanny feeling. It was as if I were watching time-lapse photography of the graphic design field in flux. This perspective, however warped, made it quite easy to put a finger on the pulse of design in America.

It seems as if there is always one idea or medium that is inescapable. Everywhere you turn, there it is. In the mid to late 90s, one of those ideas was type design. Type design was viewed as *the* shortcut to graphic design fame, and everybody wanted a piece of the action. Invariably, I obliged the students and would conduct a letterform design workshop.

Things have changed. No longer do designers lust for the quick buck and easy fame that a signature font will bestow. The reasons are legion and almost irrelevant. The more interesting question becomes: what did we learn from this episode? I learned that the craft of drawing by hand is still a most valuable asset when it comes to designing fonts, and that computer tricks are a poor substitute for intent. I know what I'm talking about because I was there, and I did inhale, happily indulging in the so-called typographic computer "experiments" of the 90s. I've come to acknowledge their shortcomings. Here's what I've learned.

IN AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND typographic form from a purely generative standpoint, I have developed my own simple taxonomy. When an individual sets out upon the arduous journey of designing a typeface, I suggest that the generative formal impulse can be located in one of three areas: historical revival, vernacular interpretation, or exclusively formal extrapolation. While historical revival and vernacular interpretation are self-explanatory, the term "exclusively formal extrapolation" may need some elaboration.

When one is giving birth to a font not spawned directly from an existing model, what is needed most is the establishment of a biological discourse between looking and drawing — between retina and cortex. The Foundation Program at the School of Design in Basel, Switzerland placed clear emphasis on understanding form through drawing. It is in traditional figure drawing studio classes that one learns how to lock the movement of the retina to the movement of the hand. To be successful in this process, one learns that the mind must be quieted. The hand and retina must move in symbiotic lock step as they both trace the physical line. It's through this process that one can learn to trust not the mind, but the retina.

While making marks on paper, the internal non-linguistic dialog between retina and cortex may go something like this: How thick? How black? How thin? Thinner? Thicker! Bigger! Blacker! Smaller! Whiter! Grayer? Closer? Farther! Tighter? Too tight!

I stress that this process, in order to be successful, is non-linguistic. The hand moves, the mark changes, and the eye responds. The eye, and how it relates to mark making, or more accurately, how it responds to the mark made, is the most important thing.

Letterforms are in large measure governed by social contract and simple optical principles, such as the ones' preached by our now debased and debunked High Priest of Visual Thinking, Rudolf Arnheim. And while there are obviously far hipper and much more contemporary developments within cognitive science and perceptual psychology, issues of balance, harmony, scale, as well as principles of *gestalt*, all have a bearing on the function and legibility of letterforms.

As the letterform progresses through successive stages of development and refinement, the process becomes increasingly optical. When the impulse or the "idea" for a font springs primarily from optical phenomena, such as mark making, drawing, handwriting, or manipulation of formal elements, it may be considered to have sprung from exclusively formal extrapolation. The resolution of a font, the successive development and refinement, is always an optical endeavor.

The simple process of making marks on paper is less of an intellectual process than a biological process. One must cultivate a feel for proportion, solidity, balance, etc. Excuse the digression, but when I talk about developing a feel, I know that some of you are rolling your eyes. Some of you may think that the term "feel" might be likened to the term "taste," with all of its class overtones and attendant critiques. Well, back the f@*k up. I'm suggesting that one develops a feel not magically, or through attendance at the finest schools, but through rigorous application, and through working damn hard at acquiring a set of very concrete skills, then forgetting them. And what would those skills be to which one must dedicate him or herself only to eventually forget? Manipulative skills, first person, hand/eye-coordinated, flesh-based skills. What in jazz they call "chops," and in design they call "fundamental graphic exercises" — line rhythms, gradation, and figure/ground studies.

MUSIC IS THE APPROPRIATE METAPHOR. In music, rigorous study of repertoire, theory, and physical application is what allows the musician the improvisational freedom to move the listener. Musical instrument performance represents the perfect synthesis of theory and practice. Theory is study understood and finally applied. But the essence is that theory (or thinking) is forgotten in the moment of

performance. In the visual arts, as in music, it is important to follow a developmental trajectory that after diligent application ultimately includes not so much forgetting, as not paying active attention to these principles. You must trust yourself, and work by feel. Rely on the totality of your experience. Rely on your history to guide you. Think through the body. Arrive on the beautiful shores of naivete and anti-mastery only after toiling in the fields of mastery.

If at this point you feel the need to accuse me of anti-intellectualism, you'd be barking up the wrong tree. I'm an advocate of practice informed by theory and life. It's really a question of priorities and balance. And I'd like to be clear here. I am not suggesting that the type design process necessarily adheres to a strict taxonomic progression. And I'm certainly not an advocate of a rigid categorical approach to design of any form. Quite the contrary. It's my contention that the edge condition, the tension that exists in the gap, is where the action is. But for the designer interested in beginning to come to grips with letterform design, locating ones work within the three categories described above is often helpful.

The question I am most often asked by students is some variation of the following: "Where do you begin? How do you get an idea or a concept for a typeface?" My answer is twofold. First, one should never use the term "concept" in same sentence as the word "typeface." Typefaces are not conceptual, they are formal¹. Second, I tell them to study examples such as Zuzana Licko's Mrs. Eaves, which is an excellent example of an historical revival; Christian Schwartz's Los Feliz, which is an excellent example of vernacular reinterpretation; and Frank Heine's Remedy, which is based on pure formal extrapolation.

But as they say, "God (or the Devil, or possibly both) is in the details." Quite possibly the biggest challenge facing type designers who are just starting out is that most cannot see, nor can they draw (I should amend that slightly; most haven't looked, nor can they draw.)

Students who begin drawing typefaces must first learn to look at typefaces. I am often shocked and amazed at my students first attempts to construct, for instance, the termination of a stroke. It usually involves a student using Fontographer. And when looking closely at the letterform, one often notices a complete lack of rigor, coupled with a hyper-kinetic line quality, which almost always leaves me with the impression that I'm teaching type design to a class of methamphetamine addicts. (Which I have found is usually not the case.) One need look no further than the plenitudinous offerings of foundries such as T-26 or Garage Fonts to find textbook examples of this undisciplined methamphetamine line.

There was a brief moment (December 1, 1991 through February 3, 1993 to be exact), when this approach to letterform design was culturally redeemable. Access to Fontographer enabled the designer, for better or worse, to cut the development time and cost of creating an alphabet to almost nothing. The "Blend" menu in Fontographer would take two fonts and mathematically extrapolate, to produce a third new font. This process took seconds, and the results were fluid, kinetic, and seemed, from an historical perspective, refreshing. I'd like to also point out that in 1984, the hairdo worn by the front man for Flock of Seagulls, Mike Score, looked fluid, kinetic, and, from an historical perspective, refreshing. The letterforms produced in this way were a complete rejection of everything that type design represented to this point. And although this statement was desperately needed, it quickly became excruciatingly obvious that the baby had been thrown out with the bath water. Students in design programs across America latched onto this methodology like Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield's

ear, and the results were about as culturally, intellectually and formally stimulating. On some levels it seems that the T-26 and Garage Fonts type catalogs are less type catalogs than exercises in cultural anthropology. They function best as an informal taxonomy of nearly every undergrad type design project ever initiated.²

I AM RESOLUTE IN MY BELIEF that there is simply no correlation between time and quality, and that all things historical are not necessarily bad. The geezers didn't get everything wrong. Although Modernism has become shorthand for dogmatic, imperious, doctrinaire, dry and anal, it is also rigorous, studied, quintessentially optimistic and highly formal. In a recent Print magazine article, Kathy McCoy encourages educators to abandon hand-based exercises in favor of the computer.³ I would absolutely agree if it pertains to typographic skills for tracking, kerning, leading, comping, font selection, etc. I would completely disagree when it comes to the typographic skills of letterform design.

The ability to see, (no, to feel) the correlation between the ruling pen, nib, chisel and/or brush and the final letterform is essential. Does this imply that all letterforms must have serifs or strokes that are in some way informed by the ruling pen, nib, or chisel? Of course not! As a matter of fact, some of the most interesting typographic specimens bear no correlation to these tools. The great artist or designer is s/he who is no longer constricted by the rules. But anti-mastery comes after mastery.

Fontographer (the computer) is a great tool for some, but a terrible tool for the tenderfoot, the greenhorn, the neophyte, novice, rookie, or initiate. Fontographer has been a pox. It has spawned a plague upon the house of Montague. What is so inherently stifling about drawing on the computer? Tactility and nuance are the first casualties. Drawing with a mouse or a tablet is like driving a tank while looking through a drinking straw.

How do you design letterforms? Kick it old skool style. Draw them big, with a ruling pen and Plaka, and some Pro White. Focus on the serifs or the termination of the character. Don't so much understand how a letter is drawn: experience how a letter is drawn. Then refine the letterforms through successive redrawing. Sit back, evaluate them optically (with your retina). Then draw them again. Making them thinner here and thicker there. Become intimately familiar with the French curve. Is it possible to achieve all of the above using only the computer? Of course, given sensitivity, discipline, and a true biological understanding of some of the preceding issues.

At this point, it would seem prudent to have a lengthy discussion about technical considerations. We should discuss what lead hardness to use in your drafting pencil or the benefits of vellum over plate bristol. I should provide you with a diagram on the proper method of loading a ruling pen with ink, and discuss how to successfully transfer your drawings into Fontographer. The nuance of these activities is critically important. But it's precisely because the nuance is so important that any discussion of them would be counterproductive. The gap between language and experience becomes a gaping hole as one begins to discuss issues of craft.

To borrow from our musical metaphor again, it's quite easy to rough out a plan of study for the guitar. It's quite easy for a guitar teacher to communicate to a student the technical aspects of any given musical passage. But it is nuance or "feel" that separates the chimps from the apes. And no guitar teacher or book or computer program can teach "feel." The nuance of the activity mirrors the nuance of the typographic form, which mirrors the nuance of a life. Gary Griffin,

Metalsmith in Residence at Cranbrook Academy of Art, speaks eloquently about the “practice” of metalsmithing. He places emphasis on the literal definition of the word “practice”: 1. To do or perform habitually or customarily. 2. To carry out in action; observe. 3. To do or perform repeatedly in order to acquire or polish a skill. It’s all about craft. And craftsmanship demands practice. It is through the practice of type design that one will develop mastery and come to a deep understanding of all of the technical issues.

Walter Gropius was famous for his exhortation to his students in Weimar to “start from zero.” It’s when you invent the way a stroke terminates, or when you devise a new armature, that you can benefit most from traditional techniques. It’s when you begin with the blank page of purely formal extrapolation that the old skool skills are most important. The geezers passed these methodologies down in a master/apprentice environment. Some of the skills, and I stress *some* of them, were not simply about reinforcing a professional caste system. Some of these skills are worth re-examining.

But craft is only one part of the equation. Next, I must deal with the infinitely more difficult issue of exactly how one uses their craft to make work that moves the viewer. Which brings us to intent. We’ll tackle that in Part II in Emigre #66.

1. It is almost completely without exception that I find discussing work in terms of form/content dichotomy extremely counterproductive. I vehemently reject almost any attempt to discuss one as if it is not inextricably fused to the other. Style is ideological. And yet here is the exception to the rule; it is my firm belief that letterform design is about functional formalism to the exclusion of this thing we often refer to as “content.” Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself (“I am large, I contain multitudes.” – Walt Whitman).

2. “Wait!” I hear you say. “Aren’t you, Elliott Earls, the designer responsible for archetypal typographic examples of the methamphetamine line? Didn’t you design Blue Eyeshadow, Subluxation Perma, Dysphasia, and Mothra Paralax? Isn’t this a simple case of the pot calling the kettle black?” To which I say: “Yes and no.” If we look at Blue Eyeshadow, for instance, it’s important to first point out the origin of the name. For to name it is to claim it. In the late 1980s, when I was an aspiring high school Scottish soccer hooligan, living in that midwestern cultural hotbed and bastion of radical liberalism, Cincinnati, Ohio, I wore a mullet. Needless to say, in 1984, in Ohio, we wore mullets without a hint of irony. We thought we were tough and “new wave,” and we thought the chicks would dig it. Yeah, the chicks. It was all about the girlies. And let me assure you, they had an equally distorted and perverse interpersonal aesthetic. It was the 80s. We were young, upper middle class, ultraconservative Catholic boys and girls and we had a paucity of suitably fashionable role models. The guys had mullets or “boy hair,” and the girls wore tons of foundation, white lipstick, and blue eyeshadow. I should point out that these young women wore heavy blue eyeshadow regardless of their complexion or eye color. Because at that historical moment it was an established scientific fact that if one wore enough blue eyeshadow, the eye would look blue! Now, even at the tender age of sixteen, before my acquaintance with Josef Albers or color theory, this seemed all wrong. Even then, I often found my gaze transfixed, nay locked, upon the upper eyelid of a typical brunette with brown eyes. Something was horribly wrong here! The clash of color. The slavish adherence to dress code at the obvious expense of personal dignity. The spurious and questionable folklore or “weird science” underpinning it all. The font Blue Eyeshadow is in large measure irony. It was meant as a critique. It was a statement about the 1993 mid-cult typographic world on the verge of metamorphosis. It was a reflection on all the horrible emerging grad school typographic clichés *before* they made their slow death spiral into the mainstream, and subsequently onto your tray liner at Taco Bell. Blue Eyeshadow was (and is) a funeral dirge, a death rattle. Does that make it superior in kind to the aforementioned aborted undergrad type projects? You be the judge.

3. Print, Learning Curves, Katherine McCoy, vol. 57, no. 1 (2003), p. 30, 124–5.

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