

# Typography in Media Historical Perspective. An Introduction

Jack Post and Ewan Lentjes

At first glance, a special issue on the subject of typography might seem an unusual choice for an academic journal dedicated to media history. After all, wouldn't the study of typography be better suited to a publication on the history of art and graphic design, or perhaps the study of books? A quick glance through previous general issues of the *Journal for Media History* (*Tijdschrift voor Media-geschiedenis*, or *TMG*) reveals that the majority of the articles deal with traditional media such as film, television, photography and print media. But *TMG* also publishes special issues on a wide variety of topics, ranging from the monarchy to scandals to representations of nature. These special issues challenge the journal to explore its boundaries, both in terms of research and scope. It will be interesting to see just which boundaries this special issue on typography will be crossed.

Typography is linked more closely to media history than any other media system. Since Gutenberg's invention of movable type in the fifteenth century, unimaginably vast quantities of printed material have rolled off the presses. Over the past five centuries, our typographic system has undergone profound changes. The ability to print books was not just a revolution in the technological sense, but also triggered sweeping cultural and social changes, making it crucial to the genesis of the modern era. Typography and book culture played a vital role in the rise of a new kind of literacy that—thanks to the spread of the Bible in the vernacular—contributed to the development of a popular culture. Printing also paved the way for the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century and laid the groundwork for the rise of free speech, critical public opinion and democratic debate. These fundamental concepts remain the cornerstone of our society's ideas about the public sphere to this day.

Since the advent of the printing press, the typographic system has remained at the heart of Western media culture. According to Marshall McLuhan, typographic printing was the most influential technological revolution in Western history. Over time, typography has evolved into a complex, dynamic cultural system for processing information and transmitting knowledge. Vital to this process was the widespread dissemination of

text and information. During the nineteenth century, technological advances spurred rapid growth within the publishing industry and led to the birth of new genres such as illustrated newspapers and magazines, paperback books, brochures, railway timetables, reports and, of course, printed advertising materials. The intensification of information and communication received an additional boost in the early twentieth century, in the form of modernist experiments of the New Typography. These new typographic forms went on to shape post-war strategies for marketing, branding, and corporate communication—strategies that still profoundly influence the way we experience the world around us today.

Perhaps the most crucial development in the field of typography has been the recent advent of digital media technology, which challenges long-held ideas about communication and ways of transmitting information. The new media revolution represents a radical break with the past, forcing us to re-examine traditional values, including the ways in which we process knowledge and information. The advent of digitalisation has called into question centuries-old typographic concepts such as 'book', 'letter', 'layout' and 'typesetting', as well as presenting a potential threat to the role of the typographer and the field of graphic design.

Once typography began to be combined with images—first with photographs and later with moving images in film and television—it broke free of its traditional context within the printed book. This led to a distinct shift in communication practices, which would later undergo a second, more dramatic shift with the rise of digital media. The digitalisation of text, in which content is being reduced to 'information', can be seen as a 'second typographic revolution': it separates the written text from its physical support and deprives the typographer of control over the final design and layout of the text.

New media technology has irrevocably changed the ways in which we interact with our surroundings. Unlike traditional means of communication, devices such as smartphones and tablets are much more than simply a tool for contacting others. Social media platforms such as Twitter,

Facebook, YouTube and Flickr have cast average citizens in a new role. Rather than passive users, they have become active consumer-producers who are no longer exclusively dependent upon professionals and experts to organise information.

These changes are part of a greater trend toward emancipation, in which access to communication methods is gradually becoming more democratic, allowing the public goods of knowledge and information to circulate ever more freely. The new openness of social media has given a fresh impetus to the 'Do-It-Yourself' culture, which emerged at the beginning of the modern era and has returned in various guises ever since. Crucial to this development is the fact that non-professionals—often amateurs and enthusiasts—have gained access to professional technology. They have become *makers* who use the knowledge and skills they have acquired to design, produce and distribute their ideas.

The introduction of the computer—and in particular, the availability of powerful, versatile and affordable equipment—contributed to the 'semi-professionalisation' of amateur designers, who now possess not only the same tools, but the same creative and commercial opportunities as professional designers. As a result, traditional barriers seem to be disappearing: between professional and non-professional designers, between commercial and independent designers/artists, between paid and unpaid work, and between work and play.

And these aren't the only boundaries that are shifting; those between producers and consumers are also changing rapidly. With the development of Web 2.0 and the rise of social media, we are witnessing a critical transformation of the traditional production chain model. In our new collaborative economy, consumers are no longer passive recipients but active participants, offering a wide range of products, or content, of their own: from open source software and information such as Wikipedia, to creative products like magazines, books, fan sites, music, blogs, and tweets. Wherever we look, it seems that traditional boundaries—between professionals and amateurs, between producers and consumers—are being redefined. We live in an open economy characterised by collaboration, in which hundreds of thousands of participants find their way with the help of online communities.

Typography—and letter design in particular—has traditionally been the domain of a small elite of highly specialised artisans. But with the onset of industrialisation and the introduction of new technology for letter design and the printing and reproduction of text, the profession of typographer has gradually morphed into that of graphic design-

er. In recent decades, the introduction of 'motion graphic design' for multimedia such as film and television, followed by the rise of web design and interactive design, has led to further expansion and specialisation within the field of graphic design.

Changing attitudes about communication practices have proven essential to this process: no longer is the public being addressed as the 'uninformed masses'. Increasingly, the communication process *begins* by considering the public's perspective and seeks to connect with individual users, who are presumed to be well-informed. These changes are not limited to the public domain; an increasing focus on consumers' needs and wants is underway in the private sector, as well. Corporate design, marketing, and branding have all made their entrance into the market domain. In these fields, listening to users ('user vision') is of the utmost importance.

As a result of these developments, the field of design is entering a new era of professionalisation characterised by a growing focus on reflection and research into design in the broadest sense of the word. Since the 1990s, there has been a steady increase in the number of publications dedicated to design theory. The discussion about a coherent design discourse has begun to take shape in international journals such as *Design Issues*, *Visible Language* and *Looking Closer*. One of the foremost questions raised in these discussions is: on which form of science is design based? A thorny question, given that the discipline of design—unlike conventional scientific disciplines—is characterised by a complex relationship between theory and practice. At its heart is a systematic approach to communication.

Increasingly, communication is focused on making processes more tangible. In *Design as a Tool for Cognitive Metabolism*,<sup>1</sup> German design critic Gui Bonsiepe proposes an approach for visualising complex processes within the context of information technology and data storage. Design can play a vital role in providing insight into complex, otherwise inaccessible information. According to Bonsiepe, in order to transform 'mere data' into 'verified information' (or knowledge), the data must undergo an explicit change in form. Knowledge can be defined as the expression of shared experiences that remain relevant over time, thereby serving as a basis for new insights. Crucially, knowledge can only function in this way when it is communicated and shared between individuals. The field of design is ideally suited to this process of exchanging and presenting knowledge. Bonsiepe notes that while we currently lack a precise definition for the term 'information', a professional practice known

as ‘information design’ has nevertheless emerged. Information design comprises elements of cognitive psychology, linguistics, theory of perception, behavioural and developmental theory, semiotics and—last but not least—graphic design and visual communication. A key aspect of information design is visualisation, or the transformation of processes that would otherwise be invisible in order to facilitate and enhance our understanding of them.

Bonsiepe argues that the term ‘visualisation’ has broadened considerably in scope as a result of the current new media environment. Information is increasingly being presented in non-linear ways. The ability to combine different forms of perception (images, typography, sound, speech, film, motion) serves to enhance the transmission of information, a process that Bonsiepe refers to as ‘the rhetoric of audiovisualistics’. The ways in which digital information is structured (in databases and on the Internet) allows for a wide variety of potential meanings, which only come to light due to individual choices made by users. Throughout this process, design takes on the formal role of mediator, making it essential to the exchange of knowledge and information. But design also has a social, or communicative, role to play: it provides the necessary conditions for the presentation of available knowledge. In this role, the focus of design shifts toward the user. Appropriate aesthetic choices (‘the expert choice of stimuli’) are a prerequisite for capturing the attention of potential users. But in order to *hold* users’ attention, it is essential that information be organised and structured effectively.

Information design helps us to grasp the slippery phenomenon known as ‘information’, making it more accessible. According to Bonsiepe, while our current methods for dealing with complex information may be well-developed from a professional point of view, they are still largely based on practical knowledge. As yet, we lack a coherent theoretical framework for discussing new insights in this area.

For this reason, the development of a suitable research model is one of the primary challenges facing the field of design today. In the Netherlands, design theory and research have received relatively little attention, though this did change somewhat with the establishment of Premsele, Institute for Design and Fashion in The Netherlands. Since its founding in 2004, Premsele (since 2013 altered into Het Nieuwe Instituut / The New Institute) has hosted the annual Benno Premsele Lecture, as well as publishing a free design magazine for students known as *Morf* and working to preserve Dutch

design heritage. Thanks to these efforts, there has been a modest increase in the number of research publications and monographs on the development of design theory. Most notable of these is Jeroen van den Eijnde’s 2015 dissertation, a massive tome entitled *Het huis van IK. Ideologie en theorie in het Nederlandse vormgevingsonderwijs* (A Survey on Ideology and Theory in Dutch Design Education).<sup>2</sup> However, education and training programmes for graphic design continue to devote surprisingly little time to a systematic treatment of design theory, the occasional endowed chair or lectureship for typographic design notwithstanding. Research positions are established, only to disappear again a short time later as quietly as they came. There seems to be little need for continuity in this area, let alone interest in achieving it. The St. Joost Academy of Art and Design hosted a ‘Visual Rhetoric’ research group from 2003-2012; the University of Amsterdam and the Association of Dutch Designers established an endowed chair for ‘Modern Typography and Graphic Design’ that lasted from 2007-2010; and the University of Leiden had an endowed chair for ‘Typographic Design’ from 2006-2012. All of these positions were discontinued some time ago and there are currently no plans to revive them.

Many of the abovementioned changes in typographic communication and the typographic system are discussed in *The Triumph of Typography: Culture, Communication, New Media*, published in 2015 by editors Henk Hoeks and Ewan Lentjes.<sup>3</sup> In this publication, typography is not reduced to its simple, functional definition of ‘laying out letters in an orderly fashion so they can be read’ but is presented instead as ‘a system of information processing and knowledge transmission’. The book’s publication was one of the inspirations for this special issue of *TMG*.

The key question posed in the call for papers for this issue was:

What can we learn about the cultural, aesthetic and social changes related to earlier ‘revolutions’ in typography, such as the invention of the printing press in the second half of the fifteenth century, the forming of a new kind of literacy and public debate in the sixteenth century, the processes of standardisation and rationalisation of type forms and expression in the late seventeenth century, the development of mass printing in the nineteenth century, and the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century?

In this special issue on typography, *TMG* shines a spotlight on research in the fields of typography and graphic design. The contributions cover a wide range of topics and subject areas, including historical analyses of developments in typography and design (based on reviews of three different design journals), an essay on the pros and cons of e-books as a new medium, linguistic research into the development of emoticons and emoji in modern communication, recommendations on the conservation of lead type at the Plantin-Moretus Museum, a study of the readability of patient information leaflets, an exploration of crossover research into the role of typefaces in reading instruction for children, and a visual essay on designing a system of images for a recent 'place branding' project.

Kristof van Gansen's contribution to this issue on the French graphic arts magazine *Arts et métiers graphiques* (AMG) and Katrien van Haute's article on the Belgian graphic design periodical *Grafiek* both shed light on the early years of graphic design. The field of graphic design began to take shape in the 1920s and 1930s – a process that was not without its challenges, as both authors demonstrate. In those days, would-be designers were caught in a kind of tug-of-war between the two diametrically opposed worlds of artist and craftsman, a struggle that is reflected in the magazine title 'Arts et Métiers' (literally, 'arts and crafts'). Journals such as *Grafiek* and AMG, which were often published by print shops and publishing houses, played a crucial role in the professionalisation of the field of graphic design. They brought like-minded people together, from craftsmen (printers and typographers) and publishers to teachers and students in related subject areas. These publications also served as catalogues of new design concepts and technical innovations, thereby helping to establish a new canon of design practices. In addition, they published reviews of design handbooks and exhibitions and offered commentary on such topics as education and training programmes, labour conditions, and the importance of copyrighting typefaces and other designs. These and other contributions helped to shape the field of graphic design as we know it today.

Emily McVarish's contribution, an analysis of *Emigre*, founded by Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko in 1989, deals with more recent changes in the field of design. *Emigre* was the first magazine to be fully designed and produced on a Macintosh computer. McVarish examines how the community of designers involved in creating the magazine reflected on the emergence of digital tools within the field of graphic design. The introduction of the

Macintosh heralded a revolution in the practice of graphic design and typeface design, as well as in design education and training. In her article, McVarish explores the ways in which the designers and authors who contributed to *Emigre* attempted to conceptualise the practical, business-related, aesthetic and ethical questions raised by the introduction of the Macintosh computer. Because they found themselves squarely within the transition phase, the magazine contributors were unable to predict just how far-reaching the consequences of the new technology would be. Nevertheless, *Emigre's* unique mix of professional and critical perspectives made it an invaluable resource: it offered a platform for experimenting with digital tools, while also taking the first steps toward reflection on the impact of these tools on the field of graphic design. Seen in this light, the magazine can be considered a clear forerunner of what would become a contemporary critical, reflective professional practice.

We now know that the new media revolution has led to the introduction of entirely new forms of communication, which can currently only be understood by contrasting them with the 'old' (typographical) print culture. In an eloquent essay written for this special issue, Arjen Mulder takes readers on an almost phenomenological exploration of the experience of reading text in e-book form. Like a forensic examiner, he guides us step-by-step through an investigation of how reading electronic texts compares to the experience of reading printed books, pointing out the distinguishing characteristics of each medium, both positive and negative. The digitalisation of books has steadily eroded the control held by graphic designers over the appearance of the final product. Mulder's contribution highlights these challenges, ending with a 'shootout' straight out of a Hollywood western, featuring the e-book and the printed book as implacable opponents. It is not yet clear who the winner will be, as we have only just begun to explore the possibilities afforded by this new way of reading.

Marc Küster's contribution concerns the secondary characteristics of writing systems: everything that goes beyond the decoding of the words themselves, such as alphabetical order, punctuation, letter shapes, and modern emoticons and emoji. Our language system sorts information alphabetically; a fact that has a significant influence on the way we order, shape, and perceive our world. Far more than just a helpful way to sort encyclopaedias, our alphabetic system provides the basis for structuring personal records, computer databases and the internet. The modern practice of using punctuation marks such as emoticons and

emoji in digital media initially seems to present a challenge to our centuries-old typographic system. But in a sense, emoticons actually return some of the system's original visual credentials to it (in a manner similar to pictograms). When used in emoticons, our 'transparent' letter forms, which normally exist only to convey information, suddenly become visual forms that must be deciphered. Küster argues that this development could potentially have far-reaching consequences for the ways in which we process information and transmit knowledge. This view is not only supported by the popularity of communication apps like WhatsApp, but also by typographic experiments such as the recent translation of the Bible using emojis and emoticons (available in the iTunes store under the name 'Scripture 4 Millennials').<sup>4</sup>

Patrick Storme's contribution deals with a very different topic, one related to the historical printing technology: the conservation of lead-based type. The invention of cast metal type is what made it possible to print books on such an enormous scale. The Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp has a sizeable collection of type, which is unfortunately subject to corrosion. Until recently, conservation efforts were largely focused on the punches and matrices used to cast the type, rather than on the type itself. Storme notes that this can raise questions about the type's authenticity: after all, how can we know whether it is original or was cast at a later date? He argues that historians must combine archival research with scientific analysis carried out using modern techniques such as non-invasive X-ray fluorescence (XRF). Physical examination of the materials not only allows researchers to draw conclusions about the composition—and therefore the age—of the type, but also aids in the formulation of an appropriate conservation plan.

The final three contributions to this special issue are all centred around specific examples of current design practice. Karel van der Waarde provides a critical evaluation of the history of European legislation concerning patient information leaflets included in medication packaging. These leaflets are often extremely difficult to read, featuring large amounts of text printed in tiny type on translucent paper. According to Van der Waarde, these issues are due to European regulations concerning standardisation, combined with the pharmaceutical industry's reluctance to incur the steep costs involved in changing the present system. As a result, the current conventions for creating package inserts remain firmly entrenched, making it nearly impossible for typographic designers to optimise the transfer of information. The current

practices also prevent the use of modern digital technology, which could otherwise help take into account the increasingly active role taken by patients in their own care, as well as the diversity of patients' cultural, social, and medical backgrounds. Van der Waarde also questions why those responsible for drawing up regulations on the typography and design of patient information leaflets failed to make use of existing professional knowledge and expertise, such as Swiss typography, which was developed in close collaboration with the Swiss pharmaceutical industry.

Ann Bessemans' essay about designing suitable typefaces for children's reading instruction is deeply rooted in both design practice and scientific research. She calls on designers and researchers to work together to investigate typefaces for beginning readers from both artistic and scientific perspectives. Bessemans explains that there has never been a consensus on the kinds of typefaces that are most suitable for use in materials for teaching children how to read. Educators have tended to base typeface design on unquestioned assumptions and force of habit, while scientific research into legibility often lacks any grounding in the principles of typography. According to Bessemans, this problem can only be solved by close collaboration between scientific researchers and graphic designers, or perhaps even by combining research and design into a single role. Her own interdisciplinary research into typeface design for visually impaired students serves as a prime example of this.

The final contribution to this special issue is Pier Taylor's visual essay on the process of designing and creating informational displays for the place branding of Ede-Wageningen's Food Innovation Strip. This area is at the heart of the 'Food Valley Region', one of the regions designated under the Dutch government's Top Sector Policy (*Topsectorenbeleid*) in 2011. Taylor's essay, which describes a work in progress, is one of the few examples of design research written from the perspective of the designer. This makes it a uniquely valuable document which offers us a behind-the-scenes view of the design process, from concept development all the way to prototype creation. In this visual essay, Taylor reflects extensively on typography and on its potential applications in related fields such as illustration, spatial design and environmental design in the context of new media. His typographical research eventually led him to design a visual language: a writing system made up of pictograms that are meant to be read as logograms (that is several pictograms read in one line one after another, as in a sentence). Taylor also designed a digital font

for his visual language, making it easier for others to use the pictograms on displays and other informational objects.

With this unique selection of articles, we hope to provide a fresh impetus to historical research into typographic systems and graphic design practice. But above all, we hope that the publication of this special issue will lead to further reflection on the relationship between theory and practice. In order to advance the study of design as a discipline, we must develop an effective research model and find answers to questions concerning the scientific basis of design—something that applies equally to other creative design fields, including film, television, radio, photography, and print media. This special issue of *TMG* is unique in that it includes not only peer-reviewed articles, but also non-peer-reviewed articles, visual essays, interviews and portfolios. We believe that this mix of different contributions allows *TMG* to position itself squarely at the intersection of media history and media practice, ensuring that it remains appealing and relevant for a wide audience.

December 2016  
Jack Post (*TMG*)  
Ewan Lentjes (guest editor)

This special issue of *TMG* on Typography in Media Historical Perspective is the fruit of one and a half year of close collaboration and research into a new innovative design of this (online) academic journal. The experimental design of this special issue is the work of Kemal Eroğlu and Ekaterina Zaitseva as part of their final work for the study Graphic Design ArtEZ in Arnhem (The Netherlands). The coding was done by Bernd de Ridder.

## NOTES

1. Gui Bonsiepe, "Design as a Tool for Cognitive Metabolism: From Knowledge Production to Knowledge Presentation." Paper gepresenteerd op het internationale symposium 'Recerca+Design', over de reikwijdte van industrieel design-onderzoek, Politecnico di Milano, mei 2000, [www.guibonsiepe.com](http://www.guibonsiepe.com).
2. Jeroen van den Eijnde, *Het huis van ik. Ideologie en theorie in het Nederlandse vormgevingsonderwijs* (Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2015).
3. Henk Hoeks en Ewan Lentjes, red, *De kracht van de typografie. Cultuur, communicatie, nieuwe media* (Arnhem/Houten: ArtEZ Press/Terra, 2015). Engelse vertaling: Henk Hoeks and Ewan Lentjes, ed, *The Triumph of Typography. Culture, Communication, New Media* (Arnhem/Houten: ArtEZ Press/Terra, 2015).
4. The anonymous translator first began sharing his or her work in the form of tweets. See this article in the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/business/media/the-word-of-god-now-available-in-emoji.html>

## BIOGRAPHY

Jack Post is senior lecturer at the Department of Arts and Literature, Maastricht University (The Netherlands). He holds a PhD in Semiotics of Film. His research is titled *Media Dispositives: Technology, Spectators and Texts* and his current research focuses on the field of digital textualities with an emphasis on digital typography. He published recently about computer games, mannerist and neo-baroque cinema, semiotics and typography, and kinetic typography. He wrote several contributions for the recent publicised handbook on typography: *The Triumph of Typography. Culture, Communication, New Media*. He is currently writing a book proposal on the Semiotics of Kinetic Typography.

Ewan Lentjes studied theology. He is a design critic and sat on the editorial board for the Dutch design magazine *Items* from 1998 to 2003. He taught design theory in the graphic design programmes at ArtEZ, Academie Minerva, KABK The Hague, and Academie St. Joost, where he was involved in the Visual Rhetorics research group. Until 2013 he was a researcher in the Art, Culture & Economy research group at ARCCI, ArtEZ Institute of the Arts and HAN University of Applied Sciences. He publishes regularly on graphic design and typography. In 2015 *The Triumph of Typography* was published, a study he compiled and edited with Henk Hoeks. Currently he is working on a publication about the design method developed by Dutch designer Gerard Hadders.