
TOWARDS THE CAUSE OF GRUNGE

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Why has grungy typography become so attractive to so many designers? Where legibility and clarity were highly prized, tension and noise are the new goal. Album covers, magazines, commercials and posters shiver and twitch with entropy and decay. Why did *Sassy* magazine commission Jonathan Hoefler to draw a rough, irregular rubber-stamp type for its headlines? Why is Barry Deck's Template Gothic appearing on NBC promo spots? Why does Remedy show up everywhere?

The current trend may never be properly explained until it has passed. But as dirty type becomes increasingly common, its causes become apparent. Here are two causes out of many, one from the graphic designer in the marketplace, the other from the type designer in the technological environment. While both are plausible on their own or in tandem, neither discounts any undiscovered causes.

THE PITCH

Desktop publishing has left much of the design community in disarray, wondering how to explain its services to potential clients. As Michael Rock explains, there are two ways that a designer can validate his or her authority. The first, more modernist approach, is to package oneself as a "visual engineer" or some other quasiscientist. Here, the designer studies the problem and returns with the most efficient and clear method of communicating. This is what many of us were taught in design schools and academies. The second is to emphasize the "artistic" nature of the design product. Here, the client comes to the designer in hopes of a product that embodies a specific Gestalt. The measure of legibility is allowed to slide in favor of creating an atmosphere. The audience's gut reaction is just as valuable as legibility, and far more memorable.

With thousands of computers in place around the world and software flowing like water from mail-order distributors, the modernist design agenda begins to feel not only redundant, but also very hard to sell. Why should anybody pay a designer thousands of dollars for an annual report when all the necessary equipment is already in the data entry department? The ingredients for design are now available to everybody, even if the less obvious skills are not. The great "democratization" of typography will threaten the livelihood of many designers unless they change their selling tactics. To justify the costs of design commissions, the benefits must become obvious: the designer must provide what the secretary cannot. Why be clear and legible when ANYBODY can do that now? The folks in data entry can now make a fairly good facsimile of the Bauhausbücher series (to the eyes

of the accountants, at least) but they can't make *Ray Gun*. For designers who want a nonmodernist and individual portfolio, grunge becomes a seductive method of self-identity.

THE MACHINE

Of all the branches of graphic design, type design is always among the first to become involved with a new technology. Type is a tool and not an end product, so type designers must behave as engineers as well as designers. Drawing a font implies being able to reproduce it mechanically somewhere else, so a change in the technical environment has a profound impact on the type community. With the introduction of copperplate engraving, lithography, wood type, and phototype, designers were suddenly allowed to create forms and systems that were previously impossible. At each new stage in history, another set of constraints was lifted, and with varying degrees of seriousness, designers would investigate the potential of new media. In the nineteenth century, wood type manufacturers seized upon the new methods of die-cutting and routing to create the loudest, most garish designs conceivable. The wood studios released fonts with outlines, spurs and knobs, inverted contrast, double-tone shadows, and chromatic fills, all at sizes worthy of billboards. Phototype studios of the sixties and seventies took advantage of the flexibility of spacing allowed by film, and designs with interlocking characters and exuberant swashes filled the specimen books. All the popular faces of the day, from Bookman to Times to Univers, were adapted to the filmsetter's format, but not before swashes, finials, ligatures, and biform alternates were added. One film version of Univers 55 totaled nearly three hundred characters. The tyranny of lead was officially over, and the designers had a field day.

A new technology has arrived, and with it, a new age of experimentation. Now it's perfectly reasonable to produce an entire font (or three or four, while you're at it) in a day. The length of time needed to develop a full character set has imploded to the point of being almost negligible. In addition to the inherent functions of digital type, the ability to generate fonts instantly has let any idea find its way into a consumer product. Every source, from venerated history to random experiment, can now be exploited for material. Drawings for the early design of Futura, before Paul Renner honed it to the form we know, have been digitized and released. The Bauer Foundry, which published Futura in its refined form, would never have considered releasing the early version of the font, even as an alternate member of the family. The risk of time and money were too great to justify. Now, the designer only needs to risk a few hours and a blank disk. This change in the time required is the most profound change in font development. If the design of a font still had to last weeks and months (it still can, if anyone wants it to), then we would see many fewer grunge fonts for sale.

Each set of experiments has been followed by a condemnation of new designs as lurid, grotesque, and useless. From many quarters, this call is being raised again. Is anyone checking to see if these new products are useful? Did anyone need four-foot-high wood type? Did anyone need hundreds of swash alternates? When the customers saw it, they wanted it and felt they needed it. Supply does not always follow demand. Given the right atmosphere, any new design can create its own need; it was only when art directors saw fonts like Remedy and Trixie that they thought of actually using them. The sheer force of novelty was enough to install them on art directors' hard drives.

The livelihood of studios and foundries has always been based on following the

technology closely and generating products that nobody else can. Each time a new medium arrives, a new crop of designs comes with it. At each point in history, designers and manufacturers have exploited what is specific to the new technology. While some of the fonts currently in production may be difficult to use or read, they are very easy to make; many of these new designs are being produced exactly because it's possible. For the first critical years in a new market, having a best-seller is far more important than having a slow, but steady, classic. From the financial view, grunge is the debris from the marketing wars of different foundries. Every font manufacturer from Adobe to FontFont is scrambling to add dirty, crunchy or decayed type to its library because everyone else can—and is—doing it.

Against a backdrop of defaults and prepackaged templates, grunge stands as a rebellion against the default of the computer. If left alone, a digital environment will produce forms of perfect alignment and straight edges. It's amusing that the tool that makes for such mechanical exactitude is what makes all the grunge possible. Behind all the grunge is a quiet joke that such a precise tool is being configured to spout dirt.

The new ability has become the new aesthetic. This attachment to new possibilities is far from reprehensible. Designers should search out every function of new tools before these tools become commonplace. But like any other trend, grunge has firmly dated itself and many are already tired of it. Like the arabesques of the 1880s and the swashes of the 1970s, the contortions of the 1990s will fall out of favor, but not before showing us what the new tools can do.

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FELLOW READERS: NOTES ON MULTIPLIED LANGUAGE

Robin Kinross

FREE-FOR-ALL MEANING

It is the world of words that creates the world of things."¹ Jacques Lacan's motto—extreme, absolute, unreal—sums up as clearly as can any single formulation the tendency of poststructuralist theorizing. Over the last twenty years the quite rarified ideas of a few thinkers in Paris have become common currency in intellectual discussion. And now, late in the day, and after they have been seriously questioned at their source, these ideas have turned up in the rude world of design. A full discussion would need to consider the ways in which this theory has been applied to typography and graphic design, with illustrations drawn both from design work and from theoretical writing. But, for the purposes of the present brief argument, this tight, self-enclosed circuit of ideas might be adequately described in a summary such as the following. We know the world only through