

ON TYPISHNESS: THIS IS MY THEORY.
MY THEORY IS WRONG.

By Karrie Jacobs

The more I see, the less I know. That's how it is with me. I look at ten pieces of graphic design and an idea forms. Above my head is a thought balloon, a glistening ellipsoid of perfection. I look at an eleventh piece of design, and the balloon bursts. Can you picture the Hindenburg in flames over Lakehurst, New Jersey? It happens to me all the time.

I have a theory. Rather, I *had* a theory. I had a theory until I decided that my theory was wrong.

Working on my theory gave me an appetite so I went out for lunch. Afterward I stopped at Rizzoli, the art bookstore, and looked at picture books. Thumbing through a new book on typography, I came upon a *McCall's* magazine spread from the early 1960s designed by Otto Storch. It illustrated a story about parfaits; layered desserts in elongated, bell-shaped glasses. There was a photo showing several concoctions and between two of them was the lead paragraph of the story; a block of type shaped just like a parfait glass. Now, I knew about Storch, that he was famous for that sort of thing. I knew that, but it didn't have any significance until I was standing there in Rizzoli, my belly full of chowder, my head full of theory. The Otto Storch spread became the eleventh design.

The ten pieces that preceded Storch, the pieces on which my theory was founded, were a New Music America poster by Appleton Design of Hanford, Connecticut; a pair of Peugeot ads by HDM Advertising of New York City; a letterhead created for the industrial design firm, Design Logic, by David Frej of INFLUX design in Chicago; two catalogs designed by Thirst's Rick and Noni Valicenti, also of Chicago; a pair of annual reports by Samata Associates of Dundee, Illinois. (Are you counting? That's eight, and they're all in the "Communication Graphics" section of the *ALGA Annual*; an ad for a twenty-four hour French greasy spoon, Restaurant Florent, designed by M&Co of New York; and an ad for Sea Breeze Facial Cleansing Gel that I tore from a fashion magazine, designer unknown.

What they have in common is a trait I call "typishness." They all use type as if letterform were dominoes or tiddly winks, as if lines of copy were pipe cleaners or pick-up sticks. They use type playfully, joyously, exuberantly, with utter abandon. I like typishness. I do. It's a blast. But there's something about it that makes me think that the party is a wake. I think typishness is celebrating the terminal illness of the printed page. At least, that's my theory.

My theory is wrong.

But I'll tell you about it anyway. If I can't give you truth, at least I can show you a good time. Think about it: when have you ever gotten either from a design annual?

Our relationship is on the rocks. That's my theory. Or maybe it isn't quite so bad. Maybe it's just not a sure thing, a forever thing the way it once was. You, me, and the printed word. We used to be inseparable like Manny, Moe, and Jack; like Peter, Paul, and Mary. We were as right as Orpheus and Eurydice. Actually, we're a lot like Orpheus and Eurydice. Do you know that story? No? Well, let me be your Bullfinch.

In Greek mythology, Orpheus and Eurydice were not married long before tragedy struck. Eurydice, pursued by an amorous shepherd, stepped on a snake in the grass, was bitten, and died. Orpheus traveled to the underworld to rescue her from the dead. He sang his heart out and played his lyre, and he so moved Pluto, Proserpine, and their Furies that they allowed him to lead Eurydice away from death. The one condition was that he not look at her until they'd reemerged in the land of the living. But Orpheus, at the last minute, turned to check on Eurydice—one quick glance—and she vanished like a ghost. Orpheus went to embrace Eurydice, but there was nothing there. She had been spirited back down to the underworld.

I picture this happening much the way text disappears from a monitor when the computer goes down. Where do all those words go? To the underworld, I suppose.

My theory is about Orpheus, Eurydice, and typishness. My theory is that if we attempt to separate the printed word from its paperbound form we will make it disappear. We will turn around to look, and it will be gone. And our foreknowledge of this impending tragedy makes us a little odd about type. Some of us have become stalwart preservationists or formalists while others, those with whom I'm concerned here, have become giddy, perhaps a bit bathetic, and typish. Very, very typish.

My theory, of course, is wrong.

For starters, it's based on the sort of punditry I dismiss out of hand. Personally, I don't believe that books as we know them or magazines or newspapers—the ink and paper versions—are going to be snuffed out by electronic media any time soon. (But I do believe that if and when this comes to pass, graphic artists will be as much an endangered species as writers. We'll be the icemen and the punch-cutters, respectively.) There is, however, a constant hum, as annoying as a 3:00 A.M. mosquito, about the death of the book, the magazine, the newspaper, the annual report, the poster, the leaflet, the postage stamp, the dollar bill. Databases have already been substituted for reference works—*Roget's* is on a floppy, *Webster's* is on the hard drive and there are predictions that high-definition, bit-mapped monitors will take the place of books, and be every bit as nice.

For instance in the March/April 1989 *Language Technology* (a magazine published in the Netherlands for “wordworkers” who use computers). I read an article called “In the Future, Paper Will be Used for Paper Cups.” The author, Avery Jenkins, savors, like so many others have savored before him, “the tantalizing promise of a paperless future.”

The technology is getting better and better by the minute, says Jenkins. And Hugh Dubberly, Apple's creative director for computer graphics, wrote in the winter 1989 edition of the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*: “Now, I readily admit that computer screens are not great places to read books. Not today, anyway. But screens are improving—even surpassing the quality of laser printers. Last spring at the National Computer Graphic Association convention, you could see a nineteen-inch computer screen with a resolution of 200 dots per inch. Each dot could be any of 256 greys. Type looked like type. Photos looked like they came out of an annual report.”

The technology threatens the death of type as we know it. I'm not talking about the progression from hot metal to cool digitization. I'm talking about the end product, symbols on paper.

Technology portends the death of books as tangible objects. Whether or not I believe it will happen is beside the point. The potential is real.

Books have died before. In the Middle Ages, the works of antiquity were destroyed or hidden away in monasteries for centuries. Writes historian Peter Gay in the first volume of *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, “When Boccaccio visited the great Benedictine library of Monte Cassino, he found it a room without a door with grass growing on the window sills, and the manuscripts, covered with dust, torn and mutilated ... he asked one of the monks how such desecrations could have been permitted and was told that the monks would tear off strips of parchment, to be made into psalters for boys or amulets for women, just to make a little money.”

The constant of our time isn't invasion by barbarians, it's rapid technological change. This change both allows and encourages typishness. Computers mean that anybody can be perfect. They also mean that anybody can be willfully imperfect. In the desk-top era, every amateur can conjure precision and so precision becomes an amateur's game. Professionals, then, are obligated to go crazy. This is part of my theory. But if the pundits are right, technological change means that the most advanced output equipment, high-resolution devices like the Scitex or the Linotronic, will be obsolete in no time. Output will be unnecessary. All the wildness and all the perfection will be for naught. Type will be a ghost. We'll turn around, and it will be gone.

Typishness indicates to me that type is being treated the way we create our prized icons, our endangered icons, the ones we love too much to give up. Type has become a juju. Like the green glass Coke bottle which has made a recent and very calculated reappearance. Like the Horn & Hardart Dino-Mat, a camped-up tribute to the nearly extinct automat. Like ceiling fans. Like muscle cars. Typishness is the swan song of the printed word.

Who is typish? Richard Pandiscio of the *Paper*, a New York downtown arts monthly magazine, is extremely typish. He's been typish for years. In the April 1989 issue, he had columns of type curving to match the figure of actress Joanne Whalley, who plays a seductress in *Scandal*. Helene Silverman was typish during her tenure as art director of *Metropolis* (represented in the Cover Show), and she is currently being typish in the post-literate world of MTV. In a video for a song called “Anna Ng” by a band, They Might Be Giants, she used lyrics moving a bit too quickly to be read, emphasizing the beat. Likewise, Tibor Kalman of M&Co, who is consistently typish in print, was even more so on his firm's video for Talking Heads, which relied heavily on dancing typography. Of course, these are all people from whom typishness is expected.

Look, and you will find typishness at work in surprising places. There are corporate reports by Pat Samata, whose type does everything except line up in columns. There are Peugeot ads from HDM Advertising, which use type in literal, so-dumb-they're-smart sight-gags. One, with the headline “It'll have you believing the world is flat,” shows a car driving across a block of copy consisting of shattered letters and bumpy, potholed lines of type.

Look at the advertising in magazines and you'll find type doing the fandango, the mazurka, the limbo. Type follows the contours of a model's face in a cosmetics ad, and it undulates in a department store ad. On television, commercials have become profoundly typish. In some campaigns, the entire concept is built on type. Typewriter type, reversed-out type, flashing type, blinding type, pounding type. Television commercials now have more subtitles than a festival of

foreign films.

So, if typishness is the death rattle of the printed word, then what's it doing on television? Hell, I don't know. I told you that my theory is wrong.

What happened to me at Rizzoli was that Otto Storch's parfait glasses posed a tough question. They asked, how can contemporary typishness be the last fling of the printed word if Otto Storch was typish in 1960? How could that theory be correct if Bradbury Thompson was typish in 1949? And Lester Beall in 1935? And Ladislav Sutnar in 1941? And Alexander Rodchenko in 1923? How?

How, indeed.

Certainly we are in a period of ostentatious design. Designers have renounced the one-typeface, one-way approach of a decade ago, and they've moved on to type fetish, a fevered romance with letterforms, both perfect and distorted. And technology plays a star ring role in many, but not all cases. In fact, some of the most typish designers are also the least enamored of high-technology. But this type frenzy is nothing we haven't experienced before.

The real problem isn't the holes in my particular theory. The problem is the practice of trying to coherently sum up the contents of an annual, trying to draw real conclusions from fragments of a year. It can't be done. Every theory based on a selection of a year's worth of design is bound to be wrong. Every round-up of trends in graphic design is a fiction.

My theory is that today's typishness is a final, nostalgic, heartfelt tribute to a dying medium. My theory is wrong. At least, I hope it's wrong. When I turn around, I want to see something there.

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