

The Good, The Bad & The Bawdy:

On the Ethics of Typography and the Design of Letters

By Shawn M. McKinney

Reviewed in this essay:

Revival of the Fittest: Digital Versions of Classic Typefaces

edited by Philip B. Meggs and Roy McKelvey

New York: RC Publications, 2000

ISBN 1-883915-08-2

\$35 (hardback), 184 pages

Letterforms Bawdy, Bad & Beautiful: The Evolution of Hand-Drawn, Humorous, Vernacular, and Experimental Type

by Steven Heller and Christine Thompson

New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000

ISBN 0-8230-0464-3

\$35.00 (paper), 192 pages

* * *

Typography is the efficient means to an essentially utilitarian and only accidentally aesthetic end..." (Stanley Morrison, "First Principles of Typography," in *The Fleuron: A Journal of Typography*, 1930).

"Type well used is invisible as type..." (Beatrice Warde, "The Crystal Goblet," an address to the Society of Typographic Designers, 1932).

* * *

"There are at least two separate aspects to a typeface. First, there is the utilitarian/alphabetic aspect, which allows it to create linguistic meaning... The other is the artistic aspect, the different type designs that express the alphabet visually in myriad ways. It is the latter that makes type so desirable... (Rudy VanderLans, *Émigré* magazine, no. 43, Summer 1997) .

* * *

Typography & Ethics

The recent appearance of two books about typography and the design of typefaces, *Revival of the Fittest* and *Letterforms Bawdy Bad & Beautiful*, could easily be perceived as another round in the "Type Wars," the ongoing dispute over what defines good, principled typography versus what appears to be self-indulgent, esoteric rubble. Alternatively and more usefully, these books might instead be construed as the latest chapter in the perennial debate over what constitutes an *ethics of typography*.

Most citizens are likely to acknowledge that a code of ethics guides the practice of journalism, though not all journalists appear to adhere to such high standards of conduct. However, few may be aware that a code of ethics also informs the practice of typography, and the design of typefaces.

Thus, while typography's history mostly emphasizes legibility and functionality, recent years have featured a resurgence of individual expression and experimentation. As a result, the relationship between form and content is frequently contested

and less easily defined. It is from this same relationship that an *ethics of typography* is largely derived.

Ethics, as they apply to journalism, may vary somewhat from one country to another, and even from one medium to another. For the most part, however, a basic *ethics of journalism* encourages fundamental human values (i.e., respect life), prohibitions (i.e., do not lie, steal, or injure), and journalistic principles (i.e., practice competence, independence, trustworthiness, accuracy and fairness).

In contrast, an *ethics of typography* attempts to address such issues as copyright protection (or the lack thereof), appropriate use (or its disregard), adherence to tradition (or its rejection), legibility (vs. readability), utility (vs. artistic expression), and standardization (vs. idiosyncrasy).

Typography & Typefaces

Think of *typography* as the arrangement of letters and words on a page, or a similar surface. Typography primarily takes the form of columns of text; typography is also at work creating headlines, subheads, and captions. Typography, as a whole, represents the *macro* point of view -- the forest.

A *typeface* is a unique representation of the standard alphabet. A typeface must have consistent visual properties and prescribed formal limits. A complete typeface may include over 250 individual characters -- all twenty-six upper and lowercase letters, along with numbers, punctuation marks, and various special characters. The *design* of *letterforms*, or *typefaces*, is the *micro* point of view -- the trees.

Typography then, in combination with images, and/or other graphic elements, is utilized to create pages for publication. The design of typefaces, meanwhile, produces unique versions of the alphabet from which a skilled typographer can pick and choose, as from a vast toolkit, in order to shape or alter, with subtlety or drama, the voice (or voices) on a page.

Classic vs. Contemporary

Other important terms that spring to mind when considering typography and the design of typefaces include *classic*, *modern*, *contemporary*, and *postmodern*.

What makes something *classic*? Standard definitions include: *of the highest rank, and serving as a model*. Others are: *in accordance with established principles, pertaining to antiquity, and standard and authoritative* (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, New York: Dell Publishing, 1973). We might simply think of *classic* as essentially: *something that stands the test of time*.

Modern, in relation to typography, does not refer to the present, the here and now, or recent times, and should not be confused with *contemporary*, which does refer to those things. *Modern*, in the present context, refers specifically to *Modernism*, a theory that described and/or influenced events during a particular period in time (roughly, 1880 - 1945). *Modernism* aimed to erase history, promote rationality, achieve perfection, eliminate artifice, improve craftsmanship, embrace mechanization and standardization, and create a universal visual language.

Postmodernism (roughly 1970 - 2000) emerged as a response to the eventual shortcomings of *Modernism*, and its decline into surface style. *Postmodernism* is inclusive, rather than exclusive, an

acknowledgement of the past, rather than a denial of it, a plethora of views, rather than a single, universal one. *Postmodernism* reestablished the validity of decoration, historical reference, symbolism, intuition, disorder, self-expression and wit.

Rules of the Game

One thing everyone can agree on is that all of these *-isms* and revolutions have produced a lot of typography, and a lot of typefaces. Type is everywhere today -- on our clothes, in our food, overhead, underfoot -- jumping, dancing and screaming across a multiplicity of screens, millions of (often mixed) messages vying for our shrinking attention spans.

Yet, despite what the many free font sites, and other apparent freedoms associated with the digital revolution suggest, designing a "good" typeface -- one that designers might actually use in their work -- is arguably as great a challenge as ever. It still takes a peculiar mix of skills, talent, knowledge and persistence to complete a typeface, much less market it, or earn a small profit from it. The rules of good typography still matter -- to designers, obviously, and to consumers, on a more subliminal level. While the computer has certainly made typefaces easier to copy and disseminate, typefaces remain notoriously difficult to copyright or protect. And only time (via the whims or tastes of other designers and consumers) can establish a typeface's ultimate value, relevance or durability.

Besides, certain authorities insist, echoing the views of many outside the profession, designing *with* type ought to be challenge enough. Why make more typefaces? Sometime during the 1960s or 70s, Massimo Vignelli, legendary design modernist, is said to have advised: "A designer should use only these five typefaces:

1. Bodoni, 2. Helvetica, 3. Times Roman, 4. Century, and 5. Futura" (*Everything Reverberates*, Chronicle Books: San Francisco, 1998). Revered postmodern designer and educator Wolfgang Weingart, who made a reputation leading a disciplined assault on the confines of modernist typography, even suggested *reducing* the number, declaring: "Four typefaces are enough to address every typographic problem" (*Revival of the Fittest*, pp. 23).

At present then, it appears more difficult than ever to identify "good" typography and appropriate letterform designs, or even justify their relevance, amidst the endless jumble of the merely hedonistic or half-baked.

The Good & the Fit

Admiring the thoughtfully designed pages and unassailable letterform designs that populate *Revival of the Fittest*, ethical standards such as competence or relevance seem self-evident. Here, utilitarian features are equated with elegance and refinement. Time-tested solutions to pesky Modernist problems stand proudly alongside enduring symbols of traditional values. Legibility is paramount. And as this collection of essays by various writers and designers reminds us, many of these typefaces have remained popular for years, even centuries, and continue to enjoy extensive use -- ample evidence of their success, reason enough for close inspection.

Nevertheless, potential readers may ask: How interesting can a group of essays about the digitization (*the conversion to a digital form*) of traditional, classic fonts be? And why (and how, and to what extent) do classic typefaces need to be revived or updated, anyway? The editors begin to address such questions in the *Foreword*, implying along the way that the design of let-

terforms deserves more attention and respect. "Very few other fields of human endeavor have undergone such rapid and irrevocable change as typography" (p. iv), they declare.

Change, of course, is exactly the point. Times have changed, and will continue to do so. Typeface designs should reflect the spirit of the times. As designer Herman Zapf has noted, typefaces are "one of the most visible expressions of an age" ("Typefaces Are Rich with the Gesture and Spirit of Their Own Era," by Michael Rock, *I.D.* magazine, May/ June 1992). Add to this, designer and educator Jeff Keedy's more recent assertion that "you cannot do new typography with old typefaces" (*Eye* magazine, No. 11, Nov. 1993).

Weeds and Flowers

The digitization of classic typefaces is hardly a straightforward process. Throughout *Revival*, editors and writers alike revisit the issues surrounding what is most often a complex and tedious undertaking. The editors characterize the difficulty in separating good typefaces from bad as a competition between "rampant weeds" and "exquisite new flowers" in the "typographic garden" (p. iv). More seriously, the editors point to the basic ethical conflict that any typeface designer must confront in setting out to remake or reshape a typeface classic:

Should a typeface designer slavishly copy the original exemplar, including numerous imperfections and inconsistencies? Or should one draw inspiration from earlier fonts, then exploit the vast potential of digital technology to refine and perfect letters, spacing, and details in the new rendition? (p. v)

Or should one, as the prolific designer Suzanna Licko has of late, take this a step further, incorporating contemporary ideals and postmodern sensibilities in an attempt to *reinterpret* a classic typeface, such that the new one begins, rather than ends, where the classic source of inspiration leaves off?

Such questions are at the heart of this *Revival*. As the editors remind us, typography and letterform designs are "as susceptible to shifting sensibilities and fads as the fashion industry" (p. v). No easy answers are forthcoming. What a designer *can* do, whenever possible, is clearly state their intentions and cite their sources, as part of any instructional or promotional materials that accompany a typeface, or inform a work of typography. Otherwise, when in doubt as to the appropriateness of individual expression or artistic license, a designer should always let context (and conscience) be their guide.

Both a *Prologue* and an *Introduction* employ the weight of history to advance the editors' points of view. A succinct review covering letterform design and related methodologies guides us from the early days of Gutenberg's 42-line *Bible* to the present. Profusely illustrated, this represents a more entertaining journey than a similar one found inside (*Revival* editor) Meggs's still definitive *A History of Graphic Design*.

The rest of *Revival* is devoted to classic typefaces and typeface genres. Chapters are arranged in alphabetical order and named after a typeface, or group of typefaces (i.e., *Baskerville*, *Centaur*, *Egyptians*, *Geometric Sans Serifs*). Bits of history, terminology and analysis are included in each chapter, along with appropriate design examples (both old and new), in order to establish or uphold the classic nature of these types.

Revivals based on well-established fonts often represent no more -- and no less -- than an accurate, respectful digitization of classic forms. In restoring classic types, designers generally make every effort to ensure faithful reproduction or render any improvements indistinct. The object is to restore order, not reinvent the wheel. Seldom does a type designer featured in *Revival* attempt to reinvent a typeface, or take issue with an original designer's intentions. On occasion however, a chapter may include a few more imaginative designs, faces that merely allude to characteristics common to their genre, or utilize such data more as referential than reverential source material.

The Bad & the Bawdy

Letterforms Bawdy Bad & Beautiful takes a distinctly different tact, beginning on its cover. There, a loud orange backdrop struggles to contain a squirming mass of black and white letterforms. Flipping the book over, readers will discover a similarly heavysset paragraph. "Traditionalists Beware!," it begins. "This is not a book for devotees of pristine type, or a collection of crystalline letterforms representing a single standard of quality." Pointed references are made to "type play at its most eye-popping and quirky" along with "idiosyncratic, rambunctious, and anarchic" letterforms.

Inside, in what serves as an *Introduction*, the prickly tone of the covers gives way to a more measured account:

The three Bs mark an end to strict typographic rules once necessitated by the constraints of antiquated technology. Yet do not fear: Time-honored standards are not in jeopardy. What we have here represents a realignment, not a

revolution. 'Bawdy' is an alternative to precision, not to quality. 'Bad' is a rejection of neutrality, not a challenge to aesthetics. And 'beautiful' is defined by context, not preexisting ideals. The goal of this book is to show the nexus of functional and artful typography -- the junction where readability and expression converge. (p. 7)

In this case, judging a book by its cover leads readers to assume that within they will discover a bold alternative to the standards and values espoused in *Revival*. The cover, however, akin to certain contemporary works of art, intends to mislead. Inside, after all, the authors assure readers that *Bawdy* represents "a realignment, not a revolution" (p. 7).

What gives? Well, what it takes to be deemed a successful example of typography or letterform design in our present century depends on who's asking -- or judging. Essentially, the authors of *Bawdy* want to have it both ways. "Skill and artistry are always required to transform the bawdy into the beautiful" (p. 8), they assert. To this they add, somewhat disingenuously: "Rules are only as effective as those who follow them" (p. 9).

More helpfully, the authors cite various preconditions for "bawdy, bad, and beautiful type play" (p. 9), chief among these an appropriate context. Excused are most corporate communications, books primarily meant to be read, and practically any directional signage. The authors suggest that type "play" ought to appear "natural," rather than "contrived," that such processes should produce "a logical result," rather than an "imposed conceit" (p. 9). More ethically mindful than revolutionary, they insist that designers be "thoroughly fluent in the rules and languages that they want to break" (p. 10). In other words, the

authors reaffirm that innovation is rooted in the lessons and examples of history, a point of view echoed in *Revival*.

Another key point emphasized by both books asserts that, as set down in *Bawdy*, "many typefaces are designed with characteristics that reflect the eras in which they were originally produced"; that is, they "underscore a distinct aesthetic moment in time" (p. 11).

The bulk of *Bawdy* is divided into lengthy sections punctuated by alliterative, punchy titles. *Vernacular Visions* attempts to describe the increasingly fine line between parody and pastiche, between high and low, treasure and trash. Heller and Thompson define "vernacular" here, as follows:

Vernacular is the common language of a particular group, culture, or society, and thus has many varieties. In graphic design terms, vernacular broadly refers to what used to be called commercial art -- that is, art made for commerce. (p. 16)

A key concept in forming the vernacular is "continued use," another is "familiarity" (p. 16). Today's new idea, after all, may well resurface as the vernacular of tomorrow, only to be discarded (at least temporarily) the day after that.

However, not just any borrowed idea will do. Heller and Thompson correctly note that "even vernacular has its highs and lows" (p. 18). Distinguishing clever borrowing from irresponsible plundering remains a notorious ethical quagmire, one that Postmodern artists and designers exploit, or disappear into, on a regular

basis. Such instances are perhaps best evaluated on a case-by-case basis, with equal measures of bravado and caution.

The next section, *Handwrought HighJinks*, reminds readers that "before the photocopier, laser printer, and computer there was an efficient tool for making type and letters: the hand" (p. 57). The authors mention that today, producing multiple copies of entire alphabets may only require a few keystrokes. However, with such efficiency, something is lost: "the tool often dominates the aesthetic" (p. 57). This can lead to an "atrophy of the skills -- and even the instincts -- needed to create beautiful, and beautifully bawdy, handlettering" (p. 57). Thus, Heller and Thompson insist that:

In all of the handlettered work shown in this chapter, the real keys to success are the unforeseen mistakes, misplaced marks, and careless juxtapositions that appeal to us not only because they are visually pleasing, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because they are evidence of the human touch. (p. 61)

In defense of "making things... more or less temporal, or actual, as opposed to virtual" (p. 13), the authors wander into disputed territory. Good on them. A debate as to whether people or machines, ideas or processes (should) drive the work we do and the artifacts we create is both healthy and relevant. Consider, for instance, the implications of recent developments involving cloning, or genetically enhanced food. Bad typography probably won't kill anybody, but it can certainly drain the life from meaningful, even vital messages.

Next up is *Digital Devils*, a section that addresses head-on the impact of digital technology on all things typographic. Pioneering digital foundries including Émigré, T-26 and Hoefler Type Foundry receive special mention. Among the individual typefaces singled out are the randomizing Beowolf (as much a software application as a typeface), and Dead History (one of the earliest true hybrid types, composed from parts of two earlier, unrelated fonts). A valid, if tired criticism of the digital revolution is included here: "By making it so easy for almost anyone to produce competent-looking results," the authors write, "[the computer] has also encouraged a higher level of mediocrity... and a greater potential for idiotic work" (p. 117). Perhaps, but as Jeff Keedy once asserted: "Diversity and excellence are not mutually exclusive; if everything is allowed it does not necessarily follow that everything is of equal value" (*Eye* magazine, no. 11, Nov. 1993). In other words, give everyone a chance to contribute, then rely on typographical ethics to edit the field.

A final section, *Funny Faces*, spotlights design humor. Heller and Thompson remind us that a visual pun "is the most common form of humorous type play" (p. 153). They define a visual pun as "a single image that has two or more meanings, an overt one and a surprising one" (p. 153). What falls under this rubric includes "type-faces," or type used to simulate a human (or other) face and/or facial expression. Other examples include everyday objects made "into something extraordinary and memorable," and letterforms "substituted for other pictorial material, simultaneously serving as word and picture" (p. 155).

Ultimately, humor is in the eye of the beholder; what is funny to you may not be funny to anyone else. And humorous

type treatments are funny on different levels. Some are hilarious, others merely clever... (p. 157)

The examples collected here make up a noticeably loose and fuzzy definition of typographic humor. Many examples are indeed intriguing or clever. But even as the authors point out, whether they are also *funny* (in addition to being *ambiguous*) is arguable.

The Long View

Like *Revival of the Fittest*, *Letterforms Bawdy, Bad & Beautiful* ends inconclusively. The last line of text simply reiterates that "wit is important to most typographic communication" (p. 157). Oddly enough, the *Introduction* actually provides a more suitable conclusion. In "the final analysis," the authors write, "work in this book represents a long view of typographic practice" (p. 13). Similarly, the *Introduction* to *Revival* ends with the editors proclaiming that "faces chosen for this book will continue to be vital players in the future" (p. 31). Again, we are reminded of the enduring conundrum that bedevils typeface design -- only the test of time, essentially outside of individual control, can determine ultimate success.

I am reminded of these oft-quoted lines by the great English poet, T.S. Eliot: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (*Little Gidding*). Ultimately, both *Revival* and *Bawdy* arrive at the same place. Close inspection reveals both books to be firmly rooted in the history and standards of practice (ethics) long associated with the art and craft of good typography and letterform design. Only time will tell which of today's bawdy or beautiful typefaces, and

works of typography, will endure long enough to be designated "classic."

First impressions and personal biases aside, the application of ethical standards still provides the clearest judgement available to meaningfully evaluate a particular typeface and its use or abuse. Even when the subject matter is primarily visual, the surface may only tell part of the story.