

Loss of roots in design

BY JOEL BIROCO

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I learnt what a 'widow' was early on in my dealings with blocks of text. So it came as some surprise to me, after a few years on the job and every single page of the Letraset catalogue committed to memory, that this widow nursed an accompanying 'orphan'. It took an old-school sub-editor with an obsolete but beautiful Monotype typescale in his top pocket to point out to me that we really should also be getting rid of orphans and not just widows, that the ends of sentences left at the bottoms of columns were just as ugly as the ends of sentences left at the top of columns, just less obviously so. (SEE *Orphans and Widows sidebar*)

He had a point. I'd been blind to it.

A few years later I decided to get an old letterpress printing machine and trays of lead type. Suddenly I discovered that the quaint terminology of typography that had lost its meaning found its meaning afresh. Leading was made of lead, spaces between words came in three varieties: thin, mid, or thick. More variety was available by combining them. Then there were lead ens, ems, double ems, triple ems.

It was through not tightening my '26 soldiers of lead' tight enough in the forme before printing one time that a thick found its way to 'type height' and so took ink from the rollers, which explained to me in a flash why in some old letterpress books you sometimes saw an inexplicable black rectangle between words.

I had no idea. So that's what it was.

I learnt more about typography through letterpress printing than I ever realised there was to know.



PHOTO: ANDY BARRASS

Despite the mathematical perfection of computers, the old way of doing it seemed vastly more precise. Hand-justification had many insights to offer. There was a certain Zen to it, I learnt I could hand-justify more attractively by reducing space in a line of text rather than by increasing it, reducing it to such an extent the words were almost touching, yet varying the space between words according to their terminal and initial letterforms.

For instance, rather than a thin, mid, or thick, a homemade scissor-cut 12pt sliver of three-sheet card would make a perfect space between two rounded letters, such as a word ending in 'o' and one beginning with 'c'. The concept of 'optical space'. You had time to devote to individual letters in a block of type.

I took this learning into the desktop publishing (DTP) world, where many æsthetic compromises had taken hold and become normal practice. Nonetheless, with typographical ligatures in 'expert' and then Opentype Pro fonts (ff, fi, fl, ffi, ffl) and kerning/tracking you could at least spend a little time on refinement here and there, particularly if you turned off automatic hyphenation. But in general

art departments had little time for this kind of fiddling and the routine of emptying text into columns and forgetting about it soon took over.

ORPHANS & WIDOWS

Authorities disagree on the definition of a 'widow' and an 'orphan', but the way I was taught to look at it involved the *aide-mémoire* that a widow 'goes on alone' and an orphan 'gets left behind', which could be used to settle a few arguments among typography buffs. The word 'orphan' mainly refers to the first line of a paragraph left at the bottom of a column (hence 'left behind'). It has also been used to describe one or a couple of words at the end of a paragraph at the bottom of a column. It is better to break a column mid-paragraph or fill out a short ending line. Some purists regard any line ending a paragraph with just a single word as an orphan and strive to add superfluous words to fill it out. A widow is the final line of a paragraph appearing at the top of a column.

On my own DTP projects at home, however, I would spend hours on kerning individual letter combinations in body text that irked me as I came across them, sometimes over a 200-page book regretting that I'd started. The closer you looked, the more imperfections you'd see. Only the pride of a job well-done that comes from hand-setting type in lead would ever make a person consider kerning individual words in body text. The irony is that lead body type very rarely needed kerning.

It struck me that as technology advanced it became ever harder to reach the aesthetic standards previously easily attainable. And new media brought a new set of problems so it took just as much time to do it worse. Not that I would want to go back to my *Imperial 55* typewriter and abandon the computer or word-processor.

Most daily newspapers today are published in far fewer editions than when they were printed letterpress. And to my taste modern newspapers seem blandly designed compared with those of the 30s and 40s.

To find typographical ligatures being used in a recently published book is the sign of a good designer at work, yet in letterpress books it was the norm.

And then came the web. And the mass amateurization of aesthetic skill.

These days many programmers fancy themselves web designers and the terminology of typography is disappearing from what will one day be the primary medium of publication. Web designers in general don't seem to spend a great deal of time on even typographical basics. The minority who know about typography usually learnt it elsewhere and brought their knowledge with them when they came to the web. Most of the 20-something generation of web designers have probably bypassed print design altogether, finding it irrelevant rather than an essential tradition.

People without a design background start to see that they can produce designs almost as good as the designs of those they consider to be true professionals. It's not hard when all you're doing is copying a few types of layout and altering them slightly.

The next generation of web designers will probably be completely cut off from the roots of their art and only a few will venture to study it. CSS is impressive for its positioning precision, yet few web designers seem to have natural aesthetic flair for the juxtapositional relationships between page elements and harmonies between colours. I'd venture to suggest they haven't had enough time to develop their talent aesthetically, being bound up in the technology of it. It takes a long while for design aesthetics to settle in your mind.

Most web designers are too busy learning PHP, JavaScript, and indeed are expected to apply themselves more to backend solutions than to the sheer look of the site. To declare oneself purely a *designer* these days is almost like an admission of not being up to the real job of managing servers and coding up the database. To say that primarily you're interested in various shades of reds and how they go together, and pastel colour schemes versus bold primary colours, size of type and column width, is asking for trouble. Those who commission the jobs don't want people with highly refined aesthetic design skills any more, they want a techie jack-of-all-trades.

Being a designer and *only* a designer you start to feel like a know-nothing charlatan hawking an insufficient portfolio, eventually you get the message, you retire, write books, and design the occasional website for friends to keep your hand in. Your designs are admired and people wonder why you gave up professionally something you clearly have a gift for.

Frequently I follow back links to sites of 'web designers' who have commented in design blogs. Nine times out of ten the design of their site is mediocre and

TYPE TIPS FOR THE WEB

Indentation and eliminating paragraph line spaces

For book-like type, close up paragraphs by setting the margin on the p tag to zero and indent:

```
p { font-size:11px; line-height:21px; margin:0; padding:0; text-indent:1.3em; }
```

A first paragraph and one following a sub-heading or blockquote shouldn't be indented, so create a 'noindent' class:

```
p.noindent { text-indent: 0; }
```

Dashes

Use an en dash with a space either side (character entity `–`). The em dash is too 1950s for the web and modern print. But if you do use an em dash, perhaps to mimic an old work, strictly it should have no spaces either side. An en dash without space should always be used in a date range, not a hyphen, eg: 1977–80.

Ellipsis

If you want three dots, use the character entity for the ellipsis: `…`

they're writing about programming or iPods. This is web design today, the aesthetic passion and cultured tastes of yesteryear have flown out the window to be replaced by an ever more burdensome weight of technological know-how that must be absorbed. I see this very clearly coming from a print design background, but I can understand that those who started off on the web don't want to see a problem when the solution involves looking beyond the web. →