Graphical Readings
and the Visual Aesthetics
of Textuality

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TYPEFACES, PAGE SIZE, HEADERS, and column width are among the obvious and apparently self-evident graphical features of a textual work. Whether in print, paint, manuscript, or electronic and material formats, such features go largely unnoticed unless they interfere with reading or otherwise call attention to themselves. In looking at Dick Higgin’s artist’s book FOEW&OMBWHNW (New York: Something Else P, 1969) we may be amused by the way the attributes of black leather binding, gold stamping, red fore-edge, and red-ribbon place holder, as well as the double-columned layout of the pages reference psalm books or bibles. As in all humor, our laughter is the response of recognition as some new truth (in this case, about book-form clichés) is called to our attention. But we tend to pass on immediately to the “real” contents of even such a work, reading the text for what it “says”, disregarding—even “forgiving”—the mimicry game of the binding format. Material presentation is a necessary, maybe even interesting element of a work, but once we get serious we just “read.”

Few and far between are the persons whose eyes are trained enough in historical traditions to assess the appropriateness of a type style. Who but a typophile eager to demonstrate expertise cares if a text is set in a face that was invented after that text was written, or three hundred years before it was imagined or according to a sensibility utterly inimical to that for which it is used? If more blatantly perceived, these mis-matches would be ludicrous—the style equivalent
of dressing Pantagruel in a spandex workout suit or costuming the
girl-geek character played by Sandra Bullock in The Net in a white-
shirtwaist-and-black skirt-over-a-corseted-frame to indicate her role as
a female worker in the bureaucracies of another era's new-age office
culture. Most style choices are made to please the eye, make a text
legible and presentable, or produce an “aesthetic” design—not as
studies in historical understanding. And most uses of typefaces or
layout convention can be seen and tolerated as interpretive acts of
reinvention, or as innocently ignorant lapses.

With just a little background into type history, a reader can regis-
ter striking paradoxes. The descendants of the rational seventeenth-
century Roman du Roi is pressed into service for personal ads, and
various black letter types take on the endless-seeming task of symbol-
izing the neo-trans-historical-medievalism that runs rampant in video
and on-line games. This typographic construction of “medievalism”
(and its association with “gothic” themes of vampirism, dark magic,
and undead forces) would make a wonderful cultural study. A design
historian may delight in sighting such peculiarities, but the graphical
effects on the commonplace experience usually register only in the
case of egregious mismatches of style and form—and even then, as
a mere wrinkle, not as a compelling call to historical knowledge or
insight. Few of us leave our morning reading of the New York Times
reflecting on the fate of Stanley Morison’s judicious expertise. Nor
do we pause to ponder the fall-from-grace effected by changes to
logos such as those that succeeded in the modernity-branding of IBM
enacted by Paul Rand whose designs were meant to convey the very
essence of corporate systematicity and global imperialism. Fewer yet
will puzzle through the cultural implications of a genealogical relation
between such designers, their training, and the transformation of
the communicative sphere. We don’t process typefaces on our cereal
boxes by their presentation of competing precepts of humanistic and
rational-instrumental sensibilities. Every material artifact embodies
such aesthetics in its formal properties and history, carrying the legacy
of its use and re-use. Too much attention to these graphical properties
could get ridiculous—tending towards a dictionary of equivalents in
which Neuland + Ezra Pound + wide spacing = fascism through a
reductive literalism.

The discussion of the “meaning value” or the “expressivity” of visual
means, though unfamiliar in particulars, seems to find more or less
ready acceptance as a general idea. With just a little prompting most
readers will acknowledge a begrudging preference for one face or
another or admit to the inflecting effect of graphic styles on semantic
value. A sample display of posters, type samples, or graphic instances
makes clear that such graphical codes affect our reading. Contrasts
of early twentieth-century journals display marked differences meant
to signal appeal to different audiences. Unbroken, measured columns of type composed a page of a serious journal aimed at the masculine sensibility, while broken up chunks of text and graphics aimed at a female reader who clearly suffered from a deficiency of attention span and was gratified to let her wandering eye fall on ads for domestic labor-saving devices, corsets, and pickling equipment. In an exercise I gave my students a year ago, they transposed the text of *The Wall Street Journal* headlines and those of *The National Enquirer* in a kind of design transvestism—so that the banner headline “Bond Markets See Rates Drop By Slight Margin” took on a screaming impact while “Two-Headed Boy Gives Birth to Alien Savior with Telepathic Knowledge of Biblical Past-Lives” was modestly set in the greyest and least exclamatory of formats.

Meaning is produced, after all, not exhumed, and such exercises are dramatic demonstrations of this principle. Most literates are fully ready to believe that the massage of meaning goes beyond surface effects even if many of these same readers, textual-studies and lit-crit persons, will also tend to shrug these observations off as trivial. Most are closet transcendentalists, harboring a not-so-secret belief that after all it is the “sense” that “really matters.” (Note here that perverse use of the word “matters”—for what could matter more than material, or be more truly “matter” than the manifest text?) We could likely agree without too much dispute that any instance of graphic or typographic form can be read as an index of historical and cultural disposition. Attention to the “character of characters” is laudable, maybe even useful, and similar observations could be made with regard to other elements of layout and design.

Graphical expertise used to be an esoteric art, the province of professionals trained to “spec” type. Desktop publishing changed this and increased general sensitivity to design as a set of familiar variables. The features of graphical expression, when enumerated and described, comprise a set of entities which, not surprisingly, are now present in the menu bar of Word or Quark or other text and page description programs. These graphic elements of a text’s “appearance” must be specified or the default settings kick in and provide the “normal” *Times*, 12pt. Single-spaced, unjustified, 5.5” block with standard margins, word space, and letter fit. The desk-top user is offered a set of choices for transforming font, format, point size, leading, alignment, tab settings and so forth. But this approach, like the discussion of historical analysis of style, is premised on a few assumptions that limits the scope of a larger inquiry into graphical aesthetics. Why?

Manipulation of every one of these graphical components assumes that it is an “entity” with an ontologically self-sufficient autonomy and self-evident completeness. This is misleading. Interested as I am in material histories, the crux of my argument is that the very conception
of these elements as discrete “entities” is problematic. The “entity” identity reinforces the idea that these are menu items whose figurative appearance is chosen from a list of named, finite, definite, and discrete alternatives to be distributed on the page, rather than constitutive elements of a system in which expressivity is acquired relationally. No letter has a “character” in a discrete sense but rather, it assumes a character according to its use (position, juxtaposition, and context). One senses this dramatically when working with a line of hand-set lead, shifting it up and down a galley until the right position in relation to its companions can be felt.

The calling into question of the “entity“ of any graphical element is most dramatically demonstrated when we try to name and discuss the ground—or the page, or the material support, or the base essential to a graphic work, whether in traditional or electronic format. Each of these terms suffers from the same sense of “entity” that misleads our sense that graphical elements (type style or size, column-width, or leading) are “things’’ to be collected from an inventory and then used. In addition, terms like “ground” or “support” reinforce a hierarchy in which the base is subservient to the substantive figures of text and/or graphical elements that are “on” it. I doubt I would have much difficulty convincing readers with the argument I sketched earlier—the value of understanding graphical features in their historical dimensions. But I’ve set myself a different task here, to dispel the notion of design elements as “graphic entities” and to dislodge the presumptions it carries. That may prove more difficult. I want to rework the conventional approach to the idea of the “page” as an a priori “space” for graphical construction. In its place, I want to propose an understanding of all graphical elements as dynamic entities in what Jerome McGann and I refer to as a “quantum field”—or more recently, “system.” Not only are graphical codes the very site and substance of historical meaning, rich and redolent with genealogical traces of origin and use, trailing their vestiges of experience in the counters and serifs of their fine faces. Not only are conventions for the organization of text into textual apparatus and paratextual appendices themselves a set of codes that predispose us to read according to the instructions embedded therein. And not only are the physical materials as well as the graphically expressive distribution an arrangement of verbal materials an integral and inherent part of the semantic value of any text—so that any remnant of the old “vehicular” notion can be laid permanently to rest. No, not only do all these elements deserve their particular, specific, descriptively analytic attention for the contribution they make to our processes of interpretation. But also, the very possibility of interpretive acts occurs within this “quantum system” which is not a pre-given physical, metrical “space” in the literal sense, but is
a relational, dynamic, dialectically potential “espace” constitutive of, not a pre-condition for, the graphical presentation of a text.

To reiterate, I’m suggesting that the specific properties of evident and obvious graphical elements, though frequently unnoticed, are an important part of semantic meaning production—the expressivity of these “inflections” is more than superficial, and can and should be understood as integral to textuality. But important as these specifics are, I’m suggesting a radical re-consideration of the process by which these “appearances” are constituted. In this reconsideration, I want to use the example of white space and demonstrate that this space is not inert, not pre-given and neutral, not an a priori face or entity, but is itself relational and constituted through dynamic relations.

I will try to demonstrate this with a dramatic example—the use of white space in William Morris’s *Kelscott Chaucer*, in a page from the translation of Boethius’s *Consolatione*. This work offers ample opportunity for observations of “space” not as something inert and neutral, but as an “espace” or field in which forces among mutually constitutive elements make themselves available to be read. Some people may think I am making too much of a simple matter, but, at the very least, I hope to demonstrate that “white” space is visually inflected, given a tonal value through relations rather than according to some intrinsic property.

I’ve divided my observations into three categories of space, depending on the behavior and character of the white areas as primarily graphic, pictorial, or textual. I define these as follows:

1) graphic (structural organization, no figural or semantic referent), providing framing and support of the supposed ground;
2) pictorial (identifiable image or visual meaning in shape or pattern); and
3) textual (organizational convention, keeps elements discrete).

The specific white spaces in the page comprise a longer list, each belonging to one of the basic types defined above. Looking at them in detail shows that each area takes on a particular character and value in a graphic sense. By this I mean a tone, or color acquired in relation to the density of other graphic elements in proximity, and also a signifying (if not quite semantic) value. I’ll list only the most obvious and important instances and map them to the image by a sequence of letters:

a) The area that comprises the upper margin and space between the edge of the text blocks and into the spine provides a defining frame that stabilizes the page elements within a visual field (graphic).
b) By contrast, the white areas that indicate the curved surfaces of leaves give a sense of volume and shadow within the conventions of printmaking tone (pictorial).
This page from the William Morris 1896 publication of Boethius’s *Consolatione* with borders by Morris and image by Burne-Jones shows a very wide range of different kinds of white space. The numbers key the reader to the points made in my text—and are not part of the original.
c) Around the image white space bands alternate with a second frame separating the scene of the image from the decorative edge, identifying them as distinct orders of visual information (graphic).

d) The defined areas of the plant stems become striking, substantive seaming objects within their dark black defining outlines (pictorial and iconic).

e) In the pictorial image, the tonal value of the paper surface gets defined as a range of different architectural and spatial elements depending on the frequency of lines in relation to the dimensions of the area encompassed (pictorial—non semantic).

f) The tonal value within objects and figures takes on reference to specific qualities of flesh, textiles, and other materials (pictorial, semantic).

g) The image of a an open book plays with the capacity of the page to be defined as a surface, again, and be called to our attention through the use of representational, iconographic lines (pictorial, semantic).

Every area of the pictorial scene carries a specific material reference value as a result of the way it is defined and demarcated within the page.

Typographic elements also depend upon the use of white space to sustain the careful articulation that gives them their stylistic specificity. Morris’s letterforms are as much an effect of the way the spaces breathe through the lines of type as they are of the character of the strokes. Like atmospheric pressure, the white space plays a primary role as a supporting medium in guaranteeing the typography its stylistic identity.

h) We see evidence of this in the way the space holds open the counters of letters keeping them to specific degrees of curvature or slant (textual).

i) The incredibly obvious and yet utterly essential space between image and text lines divides the elements of the graphic universe into those two primary categories (graphic). A subset of this fundamental vocabulary is comprised by

j) the spaces between lines (textual),
k) spaces between the text block and the background, and
l) other distinct margins within the area of the text, each of which has a place within the visual hierarchy that organizes our reading.

Similarly,

m) the space between columns and text blocks creates the measured pace for reading while referencing the specific histories of book design and format features (textual).

We can go on here to distinguish:

n) the space between ornaments and letters (textual),
o) the space inside an initial cap ornament (textual);
p) the majuscules within the intricately composed initial letter, layered, and interlocking (textual);
q) the spaces within the outlined decorative letter (textual-iconic.

r) Lower margins keep the textblock from slipping off the page while also giving an indication of textual continuity or termination (graphic);

s) various areas of white space are cues to the layers and planes on which overlapping visual elements can be kept distinct and registered as discrete (pictorial).

All of these distinctions could be refined even further, to a surprisingly high degree of granularity that would extend to noting the differences in value between the spaces that separate words, those that exist between letters, and those inside counters and strokes within individual typographic characters. A unique and yet systematically defined value could be ascribed to the white space in each instance.

Dwelling on such matters, the minutiae of spaces within letters, around lines of text, frameworks and borders, particularly in so elaborately even excessively ornate a work as that of Morris, might seem to lavish attention on details that have little or no relevance to "regular" or daily habits of reading. I'd argue the contrary. Another elaborately useful case study would be, of course, Stephane Mallarmé's 1896 vision of his poem Un Coup de Des. In that work, white space has a spatializing dynamic as well as graphically structuring function. Morris's sense of successive planes and openings, the deep space of representation in relation to the scene of the page, makes a striking contrast with Mallarmé's use of space as relational and active, creating the full three-dimensionality of his work as it is suspended in the full space of a book turned, read, imagined, conceived.

We can't think of the atom as that tinker-toy model, with balls and sticks, rings of wire constraining "electrons" in fixed orbits, any more. That notion, so charmingly modular, has the scientific validity of Ptolemaic models of the structure of the solar system—or of Newtonian, rather than quantum, physics. Atoms, molecules—the mechanistic understanding of these "entities" got dispelled in a theoretical frame that took forces and conditions of perception into account in the early twentieth-century work of Heisenberg and others. In "quantum physics" a phenomenon is produced by the intersection of a set of possibilities and an act of perceptual intervention. At the level of granularity we are used to experiencing in daily business, matter appears to operate with a certain consistency according to Newton's laws. But at the atomic and subatomic level, these consistencies dissolve into probabilities, not certainties, providing contingent, rather than absolute, identities. We should simply think of letters, words, typefaces, graphic forms in the same way. Think of the page as a force field, a set of tensions in relation, which assumes a form when intervened through the productive act of reading. Peculiar? Not really, just unfamiliar as a way to think about "things" as experienced. A slight vertigo can be
induced by considering a page as a force field, a set of elements in contingent relation, a set of possibilities, instructions for a potential event. But every reading reinvents a text, produces it, as an intervention, and that is a notion we have long felt comfortable invoking. I’m merely shifting our attention from the “produced” nature of signified meaning to the “productive” character of signifying field.

In closing, I’d just like to make a few remarks about the historiography of graphical aesthetics and to put my own methodology in this paper into perspective. Attention to the graphical features of texts is not a new phenomenon. Typesetters, designers, practitioners of book art and graphic communication have always been attentive to the materiality (and its implications) of their work. Compilers and descriptive chroniclers of visual forms appear throughout bibliographical history, and the study of approaches to the history of writing and the alphabet can be used as one way to track a succession of epistemes in the area of graphical analysis. Nineteenth-century scholarship is marked by shifts from the search for mystical and cult origins, to imagined histories, and then to approaches grounded in archaeology and commerce. Just as turn of the twentieth-century structural linguistics cut the ties between diachronic philology and synchronic approaches to language, so modern design delighted in inventions it considered “universal” in their contemporaneity while eschewing the historical dimensions of graphic work. Typographic history and design history are linked to the history of the book, publishing, and bibliography through their descriptive approaches, concentrating on individual talent and production issues at a level that can be examined through close reading of literal artifacts. While such methods provide essential skills for graphical reading, the conceptual framework I’m proposing here has another genealogy.

When I first became interested in the materiality of visual language, as a poet/typographer/book artist, I worked intuitively and through example (vernacular as much as experimental traditions). As a scholar/critic my intellectual formation was initially shaped by exposure to semiotic theory, film theory in particular, in which the “materiality of the signifier” and the modernist “exposure of devices” were key terms. The simple realization that inflection, carried in material expression, introduced slippage between the elements of representation conceived of as a “sign”—allowing a massaged signifier to affect the substantive value of the signified—was quite profound to me in 1982. Research into material histories and historical approaches to materiality showed rich resources for informed study. Work in Renaissance writing by Jonathan Goldburg, William Sherman, Stephanie Jed, or calligraphic traditions and study of expressivity, or in children’s writing, and handwriting analysis—all provide ample evidence of engagement with the material properties of visual language as a substantive concern. The work of literary persons interested in visual
poetics or its study including Marjorie Perloff, Steve McCaffery, Charles Bernstein, Michael Davidson, Dick Higgins, Herbert Spencer, Marc Dachy, Andre Massin, Gerald Janacek, Jerome McGann and a handful of others (the materiality of language was not a topic with a huge following twenty years ago) went beyond a descriptive or semiotic approach into the realms of poetics, aesthetics, cultural and artistic history. More recently, I've come under the influence of bibliographical studies and textual theory, specifically in the context of projects concerned with the “digital turn” and the profound impact it has had on the questions we can ask. These are intimations of “im-materiality” as I've said elsewhere, invoking a paradox that only resolves with the realization that the material condition of digital texts merely intensifies our profound engagement with these issues in a continuum with paper-based, traditional forms of material expression. Not news, then, this approach to graphical aesthetics and the material properties of text. As the field expands, and as scholars and critics engage with this topic, I suggest we should not limit ourselves to a literalized “reading” of materiality. Instead, the idea of a dialectical quantum approach to materiality in textual studies is what I hope to call forth.

Note: Debts to exchanges with Jerome McGann are obvious; less obvious are those to Maura Tarnoff, who accompanied me in going through the William Morris and making the inventory on which this analysis is based.