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Playing with Words: Typography and Text

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by Suzanne Buchan

Written language is a way of communicating abstract ideas through symbols that we learn to understand throughout our lives. We encounter it constantly, perhaps taking for granted how different our lives would be without it, emotionally, sensually and intellectually. Letters form words, words phrases, and accumulations of sentences into paragraphs, poetry and literature have formed and furthered the development of knowledge in the literate world. Besides conveying meaning as a collection of signs, typography is also an image which, in that it is designed and not a personal handwriting style, also has a pointedly graphic and aesthetic function. And because type and text are graphic symbols, if they appear in films, they can be animated.

Since the handcrafted intertitles in silent film, type has been consistently ubiquitous in moving image production. There is a wide range of stylized type in commercials, TV broadcasts and fanciful title sequences for feature films – like Saul Bass' for Hitchcock, Preminger and many Bond films. This is where the moving image comes into play and with it, especially, the techniques of animation. Even though they are on screen for a short time, some of us remember the title sequences better than the films.

Type is critical in conveying information, but also style and personality. Usually animated text and type is usually limited to a brief encounter, bracketing or selling something else, but animated type and text can be central to a film's design or even a main narrative feature. By making typography and text move, letters and words can be endowed with new levels of meaning beyond semantics.

A great example of this is Joachim's Dictionary that takes us through the alphabet's 26 letters with the same amount of French words in the style of Ambrose Bierce's Devil's Dictionary. Rejected by the Tours Film Festival in 1965 because it was deemed 'harmful to art's prestige', the film is a wonderful example of Walerian Borowczyk's distinctive graphic style, his absurdist humour, and of how his films transcend earlier criticism. If you like this film, don't miss the Borowczyk tribute at this year's festival!

In painted, drawn 2D animation like Borowczyk's film and others in the programme, letters and words can be designed to accommodate or even be identical the film's visual style. Yet in the 3D spaces of live action or puppet animation film, the inherent planar flatness of text and type contrasts sharply with the shapes and forms. David Lynch's unusual early short The Alphabet mixes live action with animation. Featuring his wife, the film is based on a dream about reciting the alphabet that Lynch interprets by adding animated letters to the live action film. Some of Lynch's stylistic preferences in later works are already evident in this film. The interplay of letters is both visual and aural: letters are invoked as type in the image, recited by voices and sung as a song.

The development of typography has a long history, and since the invention of the printing press and cast metal type, it has experienced two ravishing developments in visual media. One is the explosion of typographic styles used in publishing, some of which are featured in the programme's films. Another development came with the digital shift. Although typography expert Andres Janser suggests that the 'double nature of type was not fundamentally changed by the digital revolution', individuals using computers now have immense freedoms to explore what typography, in its present democratisation, can be beyond a static form.

Computers are probably the best example of how type can be played with once it is emancipated from industrial hardware. Ian Gouldstone's guy 101 plays not only with computer-based type, mostly sans serif to be easier on the eyes, but also with iconography that also has a relationship to the symbolic value of type and text. Pop-up windows of text and image gradually reveal the personality and experiences of a man at the other end of an internet chat site. A wise child of the information age, Gouldstone's film is a canny comment on virtual encounters and cruising, and their reliance on text communication. His inclusion of computer programming code deconstructs images and web pages to incomprehensible jargon.

In moving image forms, the term 'visual poetry' can take on new meaning. Suzie Hanna and Hayley Winter's The Lines features a poem by Poet Laureate Andrew Motion. In a landscape, animated text and sound create a visual play of some of the words in the poem, acting and reacting to Motion's use of language. Other films can use typography to present us with a written poem that is then visually interpreted through the filmmaker's artistic ability. The programme pushes typography into longhand writing in Poetry is Child's Play, where doodling lines form written excerpts from the Dutch poet Lucebert. Two lines of evolving writing get tangled up and turn into a snarl that eventually loosens again become loopy, floating lines in space.

Animators exploit the possibilities of moving type and text in different ways: to underpin a visual design, to support or steer a story. Typography can be an active participant in the narrative. Hitoshi Takekiyo's upbeat, funny Banana, for instance, uses pictograms and Chinese characters to help someone getting ready to go to work. Lesley Barnes' graduation film Herzog and the Monsters is based on Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are. She was inspired by the interaction of text and pictures in children's books, and how the combination

of them helps to tell a story. Words float in and out of the frame, and the emulation of Sendak's artistic style give this film the feel of moving through pages of an animated children's book.

Typography is based on original designs: once it is made into typesetting fonts or computer ones, it is available to be used. But the design part of it is done usually by an artist in drafts and sketches. Nina Chakrabarti's Wonderful plays with visualising the entire text of the eponymous Beta Band song. Animated in a record two weeks (by Ian Gouldstone, director of guy 101), it takes the form of simple, sometimes goofy hand-drawn emulations of different typefaces that seem to be inspired by the love and peace generation in the 60s – think the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper style and mood. Loopy, ornate but almost rudimentarily drawn letters of pen, coloured pencil and felt pen – not type at all – float dreamily through the film, echoing and underpinning the singer's voice both in the literal words but also in the different styles. Because their shape can change, the letters can 'Mickey Mouse' (imitate) movements, volume and pitch of the singer's voice.

Another recent example of music being part of the animator's motivation for moving type and text around is Jonas Odell's pop promo Take Me Out for Franz Ferdinand. It is a Dada-inspired collage of Russian constructivist photomontage that includes dynamic and forceful artwork and typography of the twenties in sync with the band's industrial, pounding beat.

The visual exuberance of some of the films is in stark contrast with others in the programme that have a pragmatic, minimalist use of typography and text. Peter Rose's disturbing yet brilliant Secondary Currents is about relationships between the mind and language, and it has been the subject of a number of articles on the use of language in the arts. It confronts us with a spoken narration, commentaries and images of text passages whose content and meaning is undermined over time to end in an uncanny, Babel-like gibberish, where even numerical formulae replace letters. In itself it a mind-bending experience to watch: sentences and words begin to fall apart, visually underpinning the speaker's increasing struggle with language and meaning. We are disoriented, too: it is the titles, stark white on a black screen, that become the centre of focus.

Related to Rose's film in its minimalism in that what appears on screen is solely type and text, Paul Sharit's stunning Word Movie is a sixties 'structural film' based on the 'flicker film' of the same period that pushes the boundaries of human perception. Each frame contains a single word and during projection fifty words and their fragments are recombined in changing order and position within the frame. Watching the film, we are helped by the fact that at least one of the shared letters for the words flashing in front of us remains in a central position, and this helps us recognise at least some of them. The effect is essentially an optically-merged four minute-long word poem with a combination of thousands of different meanings, and each screening is unique for every individual viewer. It is possible to step through the single frames to find out what the 50 words are...

The films were selected for their playfulness with type and text imagery – which is not to say that all the films are light-humoured. The programme hopes to show how animated type and text can be flippant, cheeky, express through visual onomatopoeia what the word itself means and that the animation of typography and text can indeed expanded the power of what letters and words mean to us.

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