

It is a black  
art that  
borders on  
artificial  
insemination

Typography, in the Newtonian view, is nothing very interesting or mysterious; it is simply mechanized writing. Now that the silicon chip has joined the wheel, the lever, and the inclined plane, typography is also computerized, digitized writing: more complex than it was, but no more profound, and perhaps increasingly open to fashion.

Seen with fresher eyes, or from a wariar perspective, typography still evokes the wonder and fear with which it startled the medieval world. It is a black art that borders on artificial insemination, and it can pose equally difficult moral questions. Type is writing that is edited, shaped, doctored, and made to reproduce itself through artificial means; and writing itself is a kind of gene-bank for ideas. Confined within the schools, typography is a means of implanting the fruits of chosen minds and lives of others. Set loose in the world, it is an uncontrollable vector, like the malaria-bearing mosquito, able to spread ideas as indiscriminately as viruses or germs. The possibilities for its use and abuse are potent and legion.

Like other arts, from medicine to music, typography also demands both close proximity and distance. This is not what it sounds like, a schizophrenic sense of scale, but a kind of taut completeness. Typography is a process, after all, in which large objects - epics, encyclopedias and bibles, for example - are built from minute components, such as the strokes and bowls of letters. It is work, therefore, in which macroscopic and microscopic perspectives constantly converge. As it that weren't enough, it's also an enterprise in which history is continuously present, and must therefore be kept continuously alive. These are the things that make it unmechanical and nourishing.

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