The Moon is Down

Ten years ago the nation's computers were full to bursting with typefaces, in complete contrast to an earlier period where you would have been fortunate to gain access to one of them. To have a typewriter was a luxury and the world of typesetting was as distant an option as a weekend in Prague. People discuss the ins-and-outs of the Microsoft operating system and the "Comic Sans" font and rarely speak about how our perception of words has been modified. The power of print is not what it was, and we blame journalists for that. What about design?... Taking care of text before it gets to be printed matter – have words become children? Typography mostly consists of deciding which flavour of crisps you fancy and thereby the flavour that other people get to eat.

PC and Macworld isn't that bothered about new typefaces nowadays, though they keep coming. The new thing is to collect mp3 files and have 10.000 hits to hand. In today's computer matrix it is music that is getting a hammering. A simple thing would be to call it the 'Tesco treatment', but the damage was done a long time ago – when, within a short period in the mid-1980s, the CD format was introduced, the independent distribution network self-combusted, and corporate sponsorship became loud. Lately, mobile phones came to be sold alongside music. Is there some strange relationship between the state of music and the advances in obesity and plastic surgery?

In Eastern Europe, covered by a lesser media forcefield and whoever owns EMI, the flip-side is to put on a 'Hard Disk Party' and have everyone come with a coach-full of downloads. The party can last for a weekend, and you head home with 75 years' worth of music. How many copies of the new Coldplay album might you end up with? If it wasn't for the shuffle button, you'd need a 100 years to edit the file names...

Thank God the hard disks can take it. Think how they must feel. They're grown up now, but looking on in suspension. Having to summon-up typefaces, JPEGs, music and movies on DVD all at the speed of [your] silence. The noise a DVD player makes when it is loading feels like a more definite scream than the fax machine made when it kicked in. Soon start up disks will be going to the moon... What is there left to imagine? How it came to be thus? To remember that for the Apollo 11 landing, the on-board computer had 36k worth of memory.

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Ten years ago it was possible to look at all the qualities and dilemmas of the design world – its connection to advertising, print production and commercial art – and see it as being pivoted between progressive action (the art and craft of the medium) and short–term gain (advertising/corporate patronage). The fact that the personal computer impacted first on graphic designers throws this into deep relief, because here was a major opportunity to take a progressive turn. It never happened.

Software, desktops and manuals all fall back on Graphic Design for their common language, almost always with lamentable results. Graphic Design interfacing with music is not a good idea either. The triumph of the i-Pod has been to upgrade graphic design minimalism, but it is matched with the worst effects of the digital upon music – compression codes, endless versions of the same tune, piss-poor headphone quality. "Use Hearing Protection", an early Peter Saville poster for Factory recommended... this isn't the half of it.

Readers might wonder where is the way forward in all this? It's not where one normally would look, it is not there for you on the front page, nor spilling out of your headphones, it is the isn't-yet-computerised experience. Google might summon up something, but first a non-digital reality check, a particular line of enquiry would be better than a race-chase for more 'stuff'.

Extreme conditions and an obvious overload should be a catalyst for refusal and regeneration. Imagine the possibilities, a world at once conscious of what it is hearing, rejecting the "deaf dumb and blind kid" direction. Stand around a Tube exit for any length of time and observe the % of passengers streaming out, giving the outside world a miss in favour of wearing headphones, whilst fingering mobile phones with nervous hands. It is all there, somewhere, on CCTV, an excellent end-point to the first Lumière film in 1896 where the train arrives at the station, and the public is astonished, whereas this time everyone is leaving the station, and they seem oblivious to what is going on around them.

Funny to consider how 20th century music was all about exhorting its audience to 'wake up'.

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