

**Temporal  
collapse  
is a  
plastic  
weapon**

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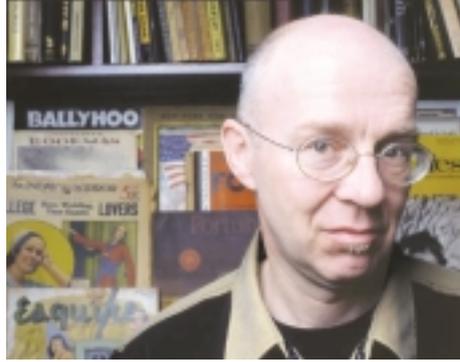


PHOTO: WILLIAM CICCOCIOPPO

**Yo—**<sup>1</sup> **time travel. Dropping out of the present into an old magazine, taken by its musty smell, letterpress bite, fragility of paper, and gone. Oh so vivid, sucked into the strangeness of ancient thought, astounded in the**

**thrall**<sup>2</sup> of unattainable lost techniques, virtuoso draftsmanship of the past masters extemporizing, defining multi-dimensional reality in the trace of a black pen stroke on a flat white surface. Piqued to dizzying peaks of consciousness, the moment grabs the past and pulls it right into the present, simultaneously collapsing and expanding time into eternal now.

Yo—bullet time.

The *musée sans murs* is the *musée sur pages* and the pages are in mass market magazines. We once were they, the people who fleshed out consumer culture, working stiffs laboring in the

**meta-culture**<sup>3</sup> of ad agencies, art studios, type houses, film shops, photo studios, press works, type foundries, and publishing, packaging, direct marketing and sales promotion companies—and why should anyone be forgotten, ever, anywhere?

The end of history, it has been said, and written, and thought, and discussed, exhausting language. Triumph of the

**semiotic.**<sup>4</sup> *Reality is what has been written*—Barthes, claiming the turf for his own. Uh-huh. But it always takes a while for the philosopher to figure things out, after the fact, asserting that there is no significance until it is attached by the intellectual, the moon disappearing as he turns away.

"It was not until the early twentieth century that **meaning**<sup>5</sup> was embedded in visual typographic form" (Katherine McCoy, 1990) is the myth we live with, yet one that excludes the modernism of early 19th century type designers, because that would upset the accepted chronology, *realism > modernism > post-modernism*, swiped from the art world. As if the elite scene of gallery objects functions as the R&D department of the mass media, when the opposite is the

**norm,**<sup>6</sup> artists turning to consumer culture for inspiration and relevance. The pioneers of the sans serif were not Edward Johnson and Paul Renner, but its inventors, Vincent Figgins and William Caslon IV, who beat them to the punch by a century. Yet amid the

**bizarre**<sup>7</sup> menagerie of early 19th century type specimens, the very first sans serif is oft considered an inadvertent oddity, its invention dismissed by Philip B. Meggs, in *A History of Graphic Design*, as Caslon snipping the serifs off an Egyptian. So this

# corrective:<sup>8</sup>

It is those who make culture with their hands who change the world. Those who make it with their ideas change the way it is seen.

The meaning embedded in William Caslon IV's 1816 sans is quite clear; it was, after all, created during a time of revolutionary technological, economic, social and political upheaval. That it is an

# implicit<sup>9</sup>

signification of modernity does not lessen its art, it rather confirms the status, the explicating tags of theory lagging behind events. As Rilke explained, "Works of art are of an infinite solitariness, and nothing is less likely to bring us near to them than criticism. Only

# love<sup>10</sup>

can apprehend and hold them, and can be just toward them." Indeed, there is something solitary and pathetic about the early sans, with its naive, awkward features, when seen in its usual role of contrast face, pitted against vast tracts of scintillating Scotch Roman.

What did Bodoni

# think<sup>11</sup>

he was doing? It doesn't much matter, because he may or may not have been deluding himself; telling the truth or else putting on a show for his fans. At the time the vogue was for the **ancient** world, yet it's now widely accepted, after Foucault, that it was the birth of the **modern** era. The similarities between neo-classicism and modernism are striking.

The

# nowness<sup>12</sup>

of Bodoni's type penetrates the far distances of past and future, illuminating the vista of history.

The Victorian (Scotch) Romans were termed *Modern Roman* in the early 20th century, to distinguish them from Old Style Roman; but they soon lost popularity, and the Bodoni revivals came to be the main examples of this class of type. Then, as the precepts of modern art spread (in particular formal minimalism), the

# severity<sup>13</sup>

of Bodoni reinforced its categorization as "modern", a natural match for Futura.

The defining terms only go so far. Under the surface there's the communal ideal, the spirit of the Didone genre; we all know what it means, which is why it's possible to recognize a badly drawn Bodoni. And type designers riff on the archetype—prompted periodically by the adjustments required by

# new<sup>14</sup>

technology.

Ultimately, the motives of a single artist count for very little. When not just the

# art<sup>15</sup>

press, but the American mass media as a whole were psychoanalyzing Jackson Pollock and his action paintings in the '50s, Robert Motherwell

# commented<sup>16</sup>

"Plastic automatism is very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon with which to create new forms."

# Open<sup>17</sup>

to serendipity, the designer's urge to invent is, to a degree, indiscriminate, seizing whatever weapon looks most promising (and a Big Fucking Gun makes a lot of

# noise).

Nonetheless, we each have our strategies, and here's mine: *temporal collapse as plastic weapon*. Hanging ten on the surfboard of fashion, my ass snug in the armchair of history, centuries collide and the phenomenon emits typefaces.

TYPEFACE	CONTEMPORARY IDEA	HISTORICAL IDEA
Fontesque	Grunge, Deconstruction	Letterpress artefacts, Goudy's impeccable imperfections
Beaufort	PostScript sharpness	Times Roman, Early twentieth century lettering
Oneleigh	Parallel universe	1920s historicism
Merlin	Goth culture, Distress	Humanist/textura hybrid, Gothic revival
Alphaville	Techno, vector tools	Godard's movie, Crouwel's "Stedelijk"
Richler	DIN metrics	Palatino
Artefact	Deconstruction	Drawn from scratch, Victorian details

It's not just a matter of bouncing *then off now*. Into the **mix** goes whatever will resonate, making the confection rich and complex, integrated by technique. Hence Morphica.

There is much in **digital** culture that is Post-modern. But it is more obviously synthetic, in both the sense of being artificial, and of being complex, built up from combinations of simpler elements.

Morphica is a methodically **synthetic** typeface, merging several understated thematic devices. It has a techno skeleton, yet it's not reductively modernist. It mixes sans and serif, yet there is no pointed, cut and paste, Post-modern dialectic (as in Dead History, Eudoni, or Missive). It has exotic letter forms, yet it's not anarchic or anaesthetically process-driven, but systematically harmonic. The intention is sweetness, and the technique is precise and fanciful.

Up against the printed fact, **rationalization** falls short. Theory is a poor kickstart for creative concepts, leave that to happy coincidence. There are no accidents. Circumstance holds the strings, and this was certainly true for Bodoni Egyptian, a face which represents the convergence of many factors.

In the first place, I had some very large, exquisite alphabet samples of Headliners Bodoni, from the 1970s, which I had acquired with the intent of producing—I've no idea what, because the results led nowhere. These were my primary reference.

In 1997 I had designed a typeface, **Artefact**, that had only a few weights (an italic being impossible), and I was looking for ways to conceptually bundle it with some other faces and thus hopefully interest FontShop International in publishing what was otherwise outside the category in which they had me placed — and not particularly desirable, being a rather unsettling

**MISFIT** OF A TYPEFACE, BOTH CONSTRUCTED AND DECONSTRUCTED AT THE SAME TIME, THE SORT OF TYPEFACE THAT DOESN'T FIT NEATLY INTO ANY ESTABLISHED GENRES. IN OTHER WORDS, IT WAS A FACE WAITING FOR INTERPRETATION. I HIT UPON THE IDEA OF PAIRING ARTEFACT WITH WALBURN,

# Post-<sup>24</sup>

Moderns,” but you can’t have a group of two, so a third face was needed. Well, obviously Bodoni is *the* modern, so I started doodling – letting the hand think – and before I knew it I had sketched Bodoni

# Thin.<sup>25</sup>

It was a no-brainer, even for the hand, because of the way I used to render serified type, in comp layouts, as an agency art director in the ’80s – drawing outlines with a series of quick strokes with a fine pen, then filling in the letters with a thicker marker. This toolic separation of outline and fill, I suspect, made it easy to conceptualize a Bodoni that was all hairline.

From this

# kernel<sup>26</sup>

—the monoline Bodoni—the development grew, informed by a number of prejudices along the way.

Item: discarding such a large part of the Bodoni

# identity,<sup>27</sup>

namely the vertically-stressed high contrast, it was crucial to hold fast to Bodoni’s skeletal letter shapes and proportions, with no deviation, or else the face would drift rudderless, aimlessly.

Item: Being

# true<sup>28</sup>

to the principle of a monoline led to two other decisions; to avoid the thinning out of joints found in *Clarendon* or the heavier weights of *Beton*; and to give caps the same stroke weight as lower case.

This latter is rather unusual, because the idea that cap strokes should be **heavier** than those of the lower case is so prevalent and deeply ingrained, attested by the fact that the larger area of a capital thins out the weight of the character, requiring some compensation by heavier strokes.

However, in BODONI EGYPTIAN the notion of the parity of serif and stroke as structural elements demands that all stem lines in the font — upper and lower case, stroke and serif — be of apparently equal thickness. In effect, the

# dominant<sup>29</sup>

**principle of even color is overridden by the lesser principle of even stroke weight; and where once this would have seemed crass, now it is quite in keeping with the way pixelized type displays on a monitor.**

Often, at

# parties,<sup>30</sup>

I find myself explaining type design in terms of some other thing, like music, or the wine at hand. How absurd, when type design is the most important thing in the world, and everything else makes sense in terms of *it*. Theorists explore the big issues with language, but type designers do it with fonts. And when the subject is time and culture, there is no better benchmark. Type forms are the most durable, consistent cultural

# matrix<sup>31</sup>

there is. Trajan and Jenson are as contemporary today as when they were created.

In fact, I will be releasing a Jenson “revival” in the new year—with a large x-height, a Tony Stan Garamond kind of thing. What sacrilege! And so the dialectic continues, across the centuries...

1. Brown, *ShinnType*  
2. Oneleigh, *FF*  
3. Artefact, *ShinnType*  
4. Brown, *ShinnType*  
5. Fontesque Sans, *FF*  
6. Beaufort, *ShinnType*  
7. Merlin, *FF*

8. Worldwide, *ShinnType*  
9. Alphaville, *ShinnType*  
10. Fontesque, *FF*  
11. Bodoni Egyptian, *ShinnType*  
12. Goodchild\*, *ShinnType*  
13. Shinn, *Red Rooster*  
14. Beaufort Antique\*\*, *ShinnType*

15. Beaufort, *ShinnType*  
16. Beaufort, *ShinnType*  
17. Beaufort, *ShinnType*  
18. Worldwide, *ShinnType*  
19. Brown, *ShinnType*  
20. Morphica\*, *ShinnType*  
21. Paradigm, *Agfa*

22. Artefact, *ShinnType*  
23. Monkey, *DsgnHaus*  
24. Walburn, *ShinnType*  
25. Bodoni Egyptian, *ShinnType*  
26. Handsome, *ShinnType*  
27. Eunoia\*\*, *ShinnType*  
28. Bodoni Egyptian, *ShinnType*

29. Alphaville, *ShinnType*  
30. Richler†, *ShinnType*  
31. Goodchild\*, *ShinnType*

\* Release Jan. 2003  
\*\* Experimental concept  
† Not for sale