

Container as Content

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the content-form relationship in typographic design possibilities. Case studies of some of the author's work in display typography across academic, mainstream publishing and corporate communications are presented. Exploiting the visual aspects of typography in an attempt to fuse meaning with form – content with container – the case studies show that typographic experiments need not stay in the 'lab' but can work well in the market place as well.

Key words: typeform, context, perception, meaning.

Container as Content

... *typographic symbols appear to us as signposts or keys and they function as containers, revealers, or concealers of meaning to enable us to penetrate deeper into the mystery of life.*

—Angeles Arien (1995)

Introduction

The broad theme of this event is ‘display typography.’ Typically, display typefaces are designed for use in big sizes —as banner headings, in hoardings, posters etc. Most of the typefaces designed specifically for ‘display’ won’t work well for ‘text.’ On the other hand, the well-designed classic text typefaces can work as display type as well. Therefore, a clear cut definition of a ‘display typeface’ becomes difficult. Functionally, any typeface can do the job of display. Nevertheless, I am sure there will be a broad agreement that ‘display’ typography can be seen as ‘visual’ typography, where by the designer tries to bring forth the peculiarities in the form of a typeface as against the concern for readability in choosing a text type.

Objectives

A drawback of ‘specilisation’ is the compartmentalization of a practice. We see this vividly in the fields of medicine and management. Communicators too started with the writer designing the communication himself or in close association with the printer. Specilisation and the development of type technology through 19th and 20th centuries led to the divide between the “producers of meaning” viz: writer, editor, illustrator, photographer etc. on the one hand; and the “producers of form” — designer, typographer, block-maker, printer, binder etc.— on the other. The advent of computers and digital technology has helped to bring the two camps closer. The typographic possibilities that the computer offer have attracted several designers to experiment with type on live projects, which were otherwise confined to art & design schools.

Coming to the topic of this paper, Container (form) as Content (meaning), let us examine how form can be perceived as meaning or as an integral part of it. Linguistic signs are arbitrary. Phonetic alphabets — the signs for writing — are representations of the signs of speech and typography, with its myriad letterforms, is yet another representation of writing! The arbitrariness of the signage system of language stems from the disconnect between form and meaning or *signifier and the signified*. By this argument a pictogram or an ideogram is a more reliable devise for written language than phonetic symbols, since pictures as signifiers are much closer to the signified than the phonetic letters. Phonetic writing too have forms but they do not connect to anything other than the empty, formless sounds of the spoken signs. Typefaces, as a representation of writing, are painfully designed forms of art employing precise geometry and proportion. Every letter is a picture and every word, consisting a group of letters, is a ‘word picture.’ The process of creating meaning through typographic possibilities is essentially an act of bridging the gap between the *signifier* and the *signified*.

Methodology

Out of the countless permutations that are possible with letterforms — individually and as combinations — some will be familiar, some interesting or intriguing and a lot of others sheer gibberish. Those forms or patterns that match with our perceived notions — those that align with the pre-recorded images in the brain — in a given context, create meaning.

In this conscious act, the designer draws from the preconceptions of the familiar, mixes the right amount of ambiguity — just enough, so that the critical parts stay clear — in order to make the message engaging. A design that is too vague is sure to fail whereas a design that is too familiar will end up being boring and therefore ineffective.

Observations/ Results

Featured here are some case studies of my work in visual typographic possibilities. Through the journey, I was greatly inspired by the ‘typographics’ of Herb Lubalin, the play instinct in the works of Paul Rand and the provocative writings of Abott Miller, Ellen Lupton, Zuzana Licko and Catherine Macay.

Spreads from Typographic Synthesis

Typographic Synthesis is a large format (300 mm x 530 mm) book – in fact two-books-in-one – done as part of my academic research at the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London (2000). The larger spreads in the book examine the traditional role of typography for reading juxtaposed with the visual and expressive aspects. While a smaller book at the bottom presents a type morphology of a wide range of permutations in typographic possibilities (fig 1). Two of the spreads from the book are featured here.



fig. 1

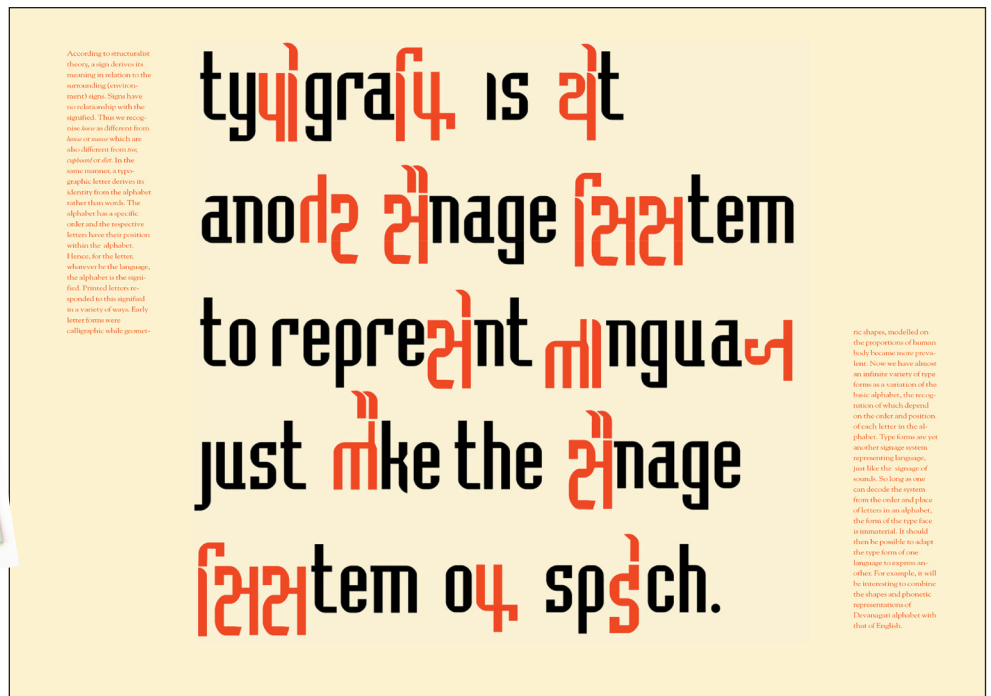


fig. 2

1. According to structuralism, a sign derives its meaning (semantics) not by itself but from the surrounding signs (pragmatics/context) and their sequence (syntax). There is no specific bond for the writing system of a particular language to that language and there are well-developed languages without their own writing systems. In this experiment, scripts of Latin and Devanagari are combined to convey the arbitrary connection of a script to a language (fig 2). The Devanagari typeface was specially designed to match the Latin typeface. It was observed that, those who are familiar with both English and Hindi found it amusing and could decode the message easily. Those who could read only the Latin letters found the message intriguing, but could still read because of the position of the ambiguous letters in the word pictures. The message seems to have worked because of a balanced mix of the familiar and the ambiguous. Much later, I tried to extend this possibility in a proposal for a Sunday Magazine feature in a main stream newspaper (fig 3).



fig. 3 & 3a



fig. 4

Another application was the cover design for a Tamil collection of short stories. When I was approached to design the cover, I had my reservations since I cannot write Tamil and therefore unfamiliar with its type choices. I got the publisher to write down the book title and author's name. Then I looked for similarities in form in Latin typefaces and replicated the Tamil words using the typeface Papyrus (fig 3a).

2. Informed by some of the provocative writings of Katherine McCoy on typography, I was startled to read Stanley Morison's celebrated view on the function of typography – "Typography is the efficient means to an essentially utilitarian and only accidentally aesthetic end, for enjoyment of patterns is rarely the reader's chief aim." This prompted me to rewrite a passage from his book, retaining the key words but in a different syntax to reconstruct the meaning. I took this further to design a spread that juxtaposed the transparent and visual aspects of typography (fig 4).

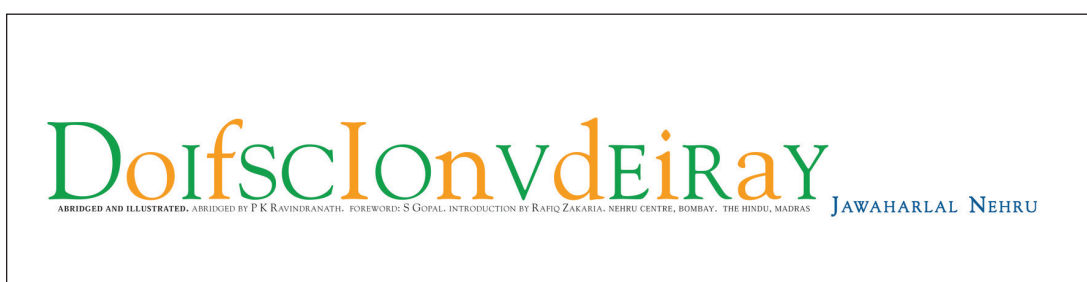
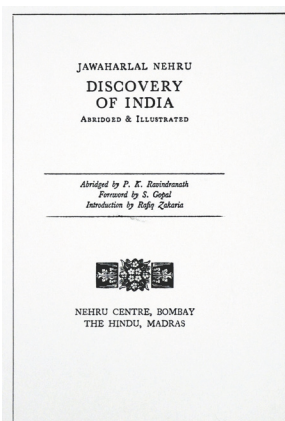


fig. 5

fig. 6 & 7

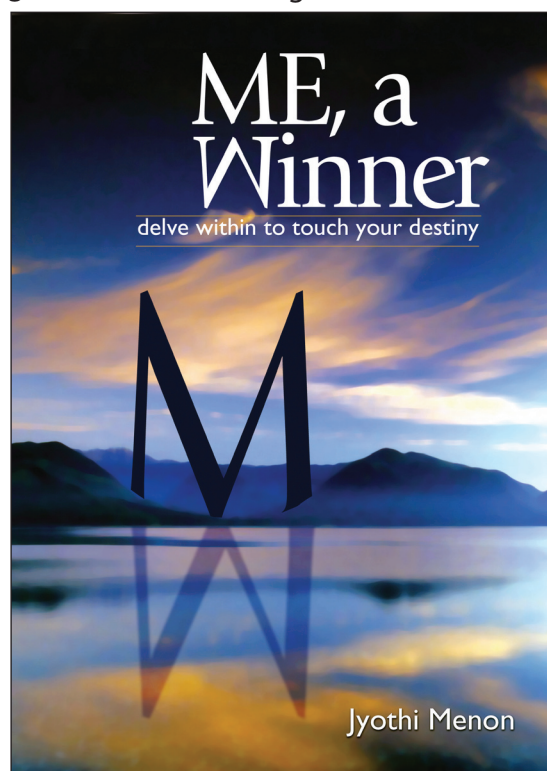


fig. 8

Discovery of India – Title page redesign

In 1995, I designed an illustrated version of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*, jointly published by The Hindu and Nehru Centre, Mumbai. The title pages featured here are from a redesign five years later. The attempt was part of an experiment to look at a typical letterpress composition (fig 5) against the possibilities thrown out by the computer (fig 6 & 7). Despite the letters of the word 'discovery' scattered around, reading and making sense happens through the fun element of engagement and 'discovery' of the word in context. The second composition relies on the gestalt theory of perception, helping the eye to group letters of similar colours to 'discover' the book title.

Me a Winner – Book Cover

Association of images to the development of scripts (acrophony) is well known – the letter A representing the first sound of 'alph' and the association of the letterform to the head of an ox (alph) and so on. In an attempt to connect the letter M representing 'me' to the context, the imagery of a mountain is used in the book cover design here (fig 8). The composition further exploits its reflection to form W, representing 'winner.' The unified cover design echoes the message of the book – there is a 'Winner' in every 'Me' waiting to be discovered.

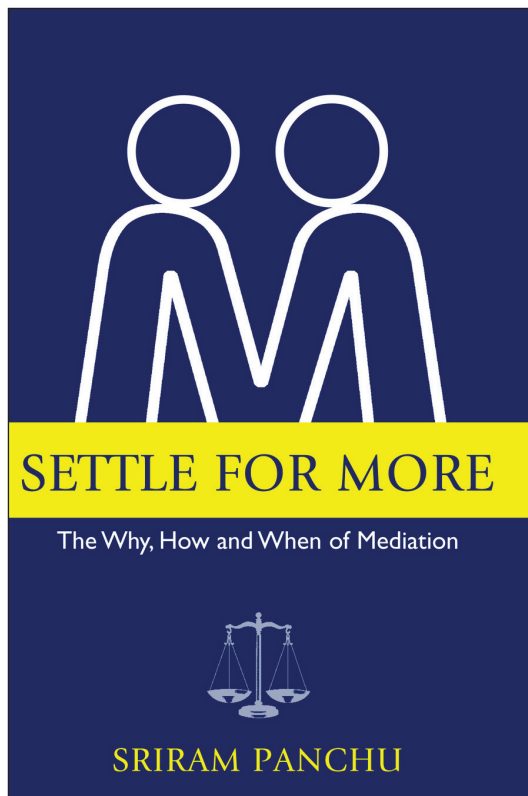


fig. 10



fig. 9

Mindworks

MINDWORKS was an identity developed for a corporate employee's event. This design too exploits the similarities in the forms of M and W to create a visual riddle (fig 9). The sense of the message is delivered the moment the viewer decodes it since the very process of decoding involves putting the mind to work.

Mediation – Book Cover

In this cover for a book on the role of mediation as a means for out-of-court settlement, the form of Bauhaus Std uppercase case 'M' is used, adding two circles, to create the feel of mediation (fig 10). This possibility is unique to this particular typeface and style – another case where form and content work hand-in-hand to complement the message.

Corporate Communication – A Letter from the Managing Director

During one of the industrial down-turns in the new century, the top man of one of the prominent engineering companies wanted to communicate with all executives about a 'break-through' programme that the company wanted to launch. The message, calling for everyone to think out of the box and make a difference to the efficiency and productivity of the company, had to be conveyed through a letter addressed to the key employees. The idea started with a regular letter, but well decorated and printed in colour using special paper to match its importance. The trouble was, there was a gross mismatch between the content (out of box thinking, improved efficiency and productivity through cost management etc.) and the lavish decorative form. The familiar perception of the form of a typical 'letter from the Managing Director' stood in the way for an appropriate design. Finally a solution was found by thinking out-of-the-box on the form of the letter as well as the treatment of words. The letter was made like a small booklet. Its content was treated visually to bring out the spirit and feel of words (fig 11). The form of the letter and treatment of its content helped to take home the message that the communication intended to convey. Despite the initial skepticism on how the employees of a conservative company would receive such a daring experimentation, there was an overwhelming positive response to the communication. The campaign then continued with leaflets and posters for specific events under the programme (fig 12).

fig. 11

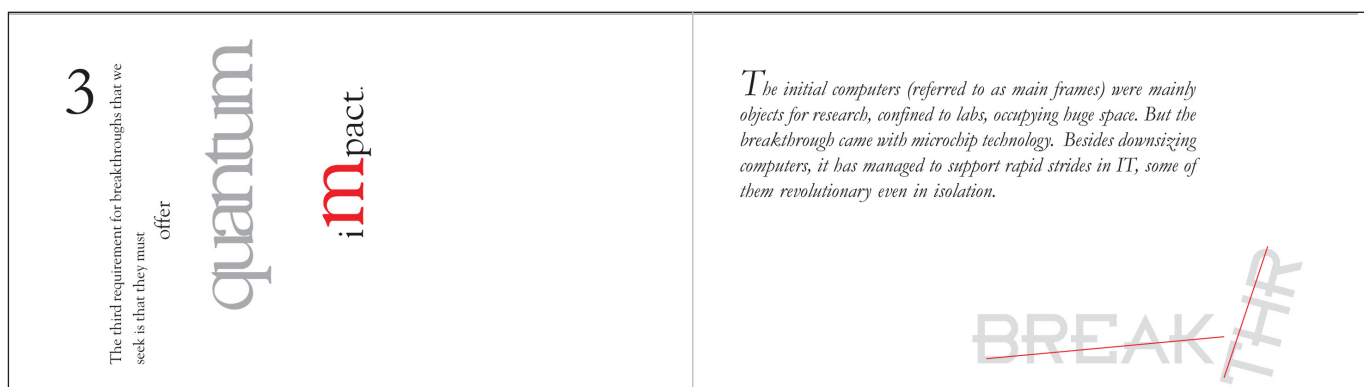




fig. 12

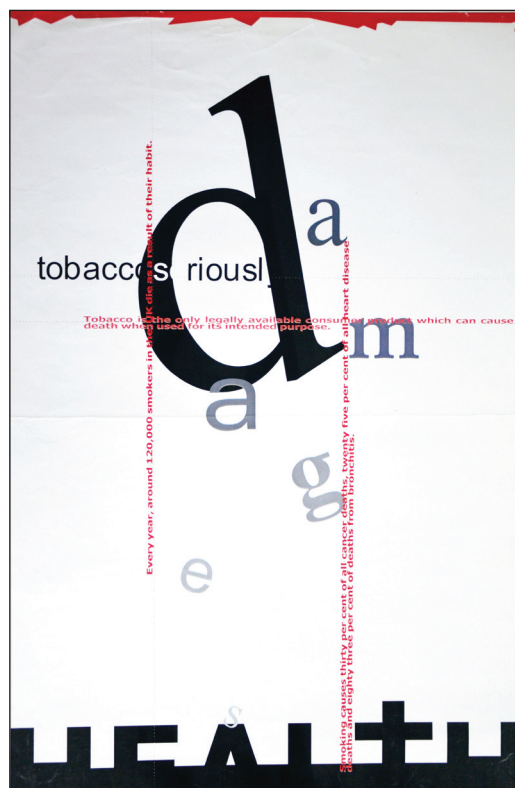
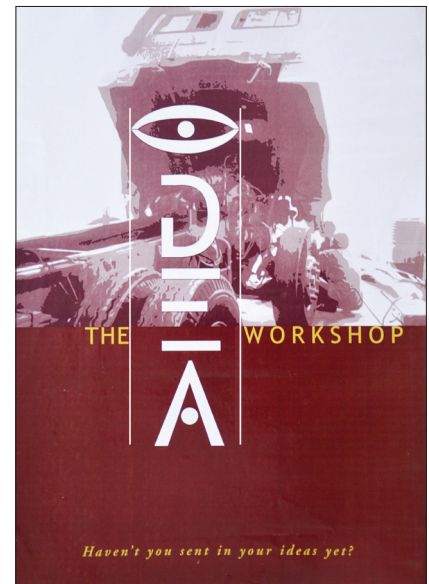


fig. 13

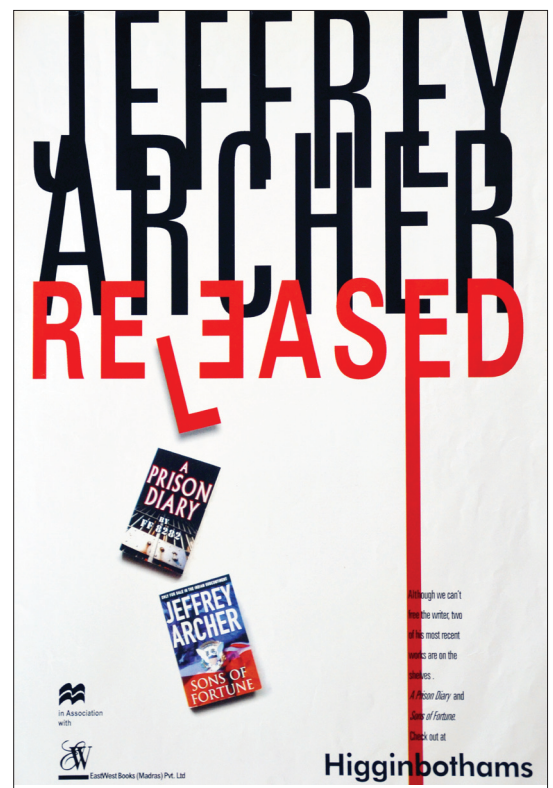


fig. 14

Poster – Tobacco Damages Health

Subliminal stimuli have a more lasting effect on the mind than conscious perception as the former works from within. The poster here (fig 13), meant to spread awareness on the ill-effects of smoking, implies “death” without explicitly stating that. The focus on the letter ‘d’ and imagery of a ‘cross’ created by heavy uppercase T (of the word HEALTH!) at the bottom suggest death/tombstone. Popular text typefaces Times Roman and Helvetica are used here as display faces.

Poster for Jeffrey Archer’s Books

The two books in this poster were released in India during the time the well-known author was in prison. The caption of the poster “Jeffrey Archer Released” was aimed at arousing the curiosity of the author’s huge fans by a pun on the word ‘release.’ The typographic design of the poster (fig 14) tries to capture this mood.

Conclusion

“Container as content” projects the designer a person who can fuse content and form to give the message a unified identity. But then who owns such design innovations? The intention of this paper is not to create a struggle for supremacy between the ‘content creators’ and ‘form creators’ but is rather to emphasise the absolute necessity for them to work closely. The design innovations happen out of the intended purpose of a message, the text & imagery, the context and the many typographic/design possibilities – none of which the designer owns. The typographic possibilities exist, and the designer goes in search of them and discovers. Thus, in the process of creating or augmenting meaning, the designer has to make a considered choice from among the vast possibilities. The designer should therefore be true to the message, honest in his explorations and faithful to the audience in order to be credible. In such a design, content and form cease to exist as separate entities, but one.

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