Typography papers 2

Review of *Counterpunch* (Smeijers)

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Fred. Smeijers, *Counterpunch: making type in the sixteenth century, designing typefaces now.* 1996, London: Hyphen Press. 192 pp., 120 illustrations
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This is an inspired and inspiring book about some less researched aspects of typography, namely, the material genesis of a punch for type and the ways this influences the design of the face. In part, it is an autobiographical tale by a modern type designer trying (for his own instruction and that of his more technically oriented colleagues) to elucidate the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of present-day romans and italics. This quest led the author to learn the art of punchcutting by himself, relying thereby first on the study of the the ancient punches preserved in the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, then on the help of his father, a knowledgeable metalworker, and finally on what could be gleaned from old sources such as Moxon (1683) and Fournier (1742). It is an enquiry – fascinating in several respects – into the ways in which old punches were cut or engraved. It is also a demonstration of how knowledge of these apparently antiquated techniques is helpful both for an understanding of historical typography and for an appreciation of current – mainly digitized – type design.

Excluding publicity and ornamental types, book typography in roman types has used, since the beginning of this century, letterforms in essence copied from late fifteenth- or sixteenth-century models, for example those by Jenson, Griffo, and Garamont. Working as a typographer in a present-day manufacturing firm, the author was urged to explain to himself and to his colleagues why these designs appear more appropiate, more easy, more elegant (at least for our current reading habits). Final answers, he felt, could not be given by arguments taken from the techniques of drawing letters or of writing with a broad-nibbed pen. Not scared by the arcane topic nor by the effort involved, he went for the essence: a rediscovery of the craft of punchcutting.

The opening and closing chapters of this book are specifically addressed to modern designers and typographers. They answer some basic questions: what is type, how does it differ from writing, how can we evaluate typefaces, and what can we learn from an historical enquiry, nowadays when large-scale drawings have to be transferred to very small type sizes.

The bulk of this book reports on the material genesis of hand-made type. Its main thesis is that of the centrality of the punch – not of the 'strike' (unjustified matrix), not of the matrix, not of the lead type, not of the printed image of the type. These are only the derivatives of designs, engraved by a craftsman on a small bar of steel of half an inch in diameter and about two to four inches long. Doubtless this is absolutely right, although it has perhaps been given too little stress. Type historians study typefaces appearing in books and type specimens; possibly, they add archival information from old typefoundries and printing offices. Rarely do they incorporate considerations about the artist or craftsman responsible for the existence of the typeface: the punchcutter.

The author stresses two points: first, the relative easiness of punchcutting and, second, the advantages of using counterpunches. The hardship of cutting unhardened steel has been much exaggerated, says the author: 'At moments like this [i.e. cutting with a graver], steel is no longer steel. It looks and feels much more like cold butter: there is the same ease, pressure and pleasure with which you cut off larger or smaller curls of butter with a knife' (p. 85).

This proposition is perhaps not untrue, but it is plainly not in accordance with the general sentiment. Since the seventeenth century punchcutters and typefounders cultivated a form of secrecy and stressed the need for a long and intensive training. Nicholas Kis, the Hungarian scholar-turned-punchcutter in Amsterdam about 1680, testified about his training:

> Although my teacher [i.e. probably Dirk Voskens] told me when we made the agreement that though he will pass on to me all the principles faithfully, only nine or ten years practice makes a man 'perfect' in this craft – as I told him that I would have liked him to make me 'perfectus' in it. (Buday, 1974: 24)

And the same master asserted that 'he would not teach his art to one of his own nation for a hundred thousand florins' (Davis and Carter in Moxon, 1958: 376).

Joseph Moxon, the British typographer writing in 1683–4 on his craft, expressed the same feelings as follows:

> Letter-cutting is a handy-work hitherto kept so conceal'd among the artificers of it, that I cannot learn any one hath taught it any other; But every one that has used it, learnt it of his genuine inclination. (Moxon, 1958: 87)

Two generations later William Caslon also apparently came independently to the art of punchcutting, having been apprenticed to an engraver of arms and making tools for bookbinders (Reed, 1952: 230). The secrecy and scarcity of the trade has fostered an unwarranted belief in its extreme difficulty.

That this is untrue for the material (but not for the aesthetic) aspect of punchcutting was affirmed by Harry Carter, like our author, a typographer who also cut punches by hand before he turned to book history, attesting:

> The art of cutting letters in relief in steel has an evident affinity with the trades of goldsmith, die-sinker, and general engraver. There is little in the technique that presents difficulty to an engraver, and that little can be learned by experience or from experienced justifiers of matrices. It is, however, rare to find the aptitude and inclination for minute metalwork combined with a sufficient capacity for drawing the alphabet. This last qualification means much more than mastery of a trade. (Moxon, 1958: 376)

In accordance with his view about the relative ease of the craft, the author belittles the belief that during the sixteenth century the average rate of work was one punch a day (p. 124). Somewhat boldly, he proposes up to four punches a day. Here again, Carter (1969: 34) is more cautious: 'the punch, on which the letter has to be cut turned left-to-right, may turn out well in an hour or two or may take several days before it looks right.' Similarly, Carter (1966: 348) labelled Fournier's assertion (1742) that he had cut 4600 characters in six years (or two to three a day, for a punch and a matrix): 'A feat almost beyond belief'.

William Caslon I's productivity was reputedly high: he cut thirty-five founts in fourteen years, or some 300 punches a year (Reed, 1952: 235). This agrees with our information from the Plantin archives (Voet, 1972, 2: 82) about Granjon's work rate in the 1560s: he cut about one and a half punches a day (in an undetermined number of hours and probably with the assistance of an apprentice).

Nevertheless, the expert opinion of Fred Smeijers deserves

attention. We are still in need of a good hypothesis to explain the rather overwhelming profusion of typefaces in incunabula.

A good deal of this book is devoted to the counterpunch: important enough in the eyes of the author to stand as the title of the whole publication. A counterpunch is a tiny punch, which allows the cutter to strike the counters of a given character neatly and deeply in a blank punch. For instance, the counter of a capital A can be engraved but is mostly made by a counterpunch in the form of a triangle. On technical grounds Fred Smeijers strongly advocates the use of this preparatory instrument. He suspects that it may explain the productivity of our ancient masters at least for romans and italics. The technique was broadly described by Moxon (1683) and Fournier (1742). And he shows that Hendrik Van den Keere, a Flemish punchcutter working for Plantin in the 1570s, used the method, while Garamont did not, or certainly to a lesser extent.

Traditionally, counterpunching is considered as being not very important during the sixteenth century. In his classical work on English letter foundries, Reed (1952: 102) stated:

> With regard to the process described [by Moxon (1958: 106–8)] as counter-punching, it is necessary to admit that this constituted a refinement of the art of punch-cutting apparently unknown to the first printers. The freedom of their letters, consequent on the imitation of handwriting, which served as their earliest models, makes evident that they were cut by eye rather than by mathematical rule. But as typography gradually made models for itself, the best artists, particularly those who aimed at producing regular roman and italic letters, discovered the utility and expediency of arriving at uniformity in design and contour, by the use of these counter-punches, which stamped on to steel the impress of the hollow portions of the letters they were about to cut, leaving it to the hand of the engraver to cut round these hollows the form of the required character.

Perhaps we cannot generalize too much about the use of counterpunches for the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century romans and italics. These were as a rule never conceived or made as families of typefaces in a broad range of sizes. Apart from three sizes of a very similar italic design (1534–44) by Peter Schöffer the Younger (Carter, 1969: 111), I suspect Jean Jannon (1621) of Sedan was the first to do so (Williamson, 1987–88). And although this is a moot argument, I would like to mention that in the large collection of nearly 5000 punches in the Museum Plantin-Moretus, only two sets, respectively of four and seven counterpunches, were preserved. Both are by Van den Keere and for relatively simple music notes (Vervliet, 1968: 334, 352).

The publication has no footnotes and some propositions cannot easily be checked. But it closes with a reasonably complete list of references. It may be completed by the bibliography given by Lane (1991). The illustrations are excellent, well chosen and illuminating. But here also a more exact referencing of the photographs would have been helpful for the reader wishing to check or to pursue the investigation.

In his preface the author states that he tried to look beyond the historical particulars in order to be able to see what is fundamental and of enduring relevance. He also says that 'this book [was] not written for historians – though it would certainly not hurt them to read it'. I am happy to agree completely with the last part of this sentence.

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