



Lost—and Found—in Translation

Revisiting the So-Called
“Legibility Wars” of
the ’80s and ’90s

by Steven Heller

EMIGRE MAGAZINE PHOTO BY EIGENE MAGAZINE
(FOTOGRAFIE SELBST ERSTELLT), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

WHAT DID YOU DO during the Legibility Wars?” asked one of my more inquisitive design history students.

“Well, it wasn’t actually a war,” I said, recalling the period during the mid-’80s through the mid- to late-’90s when there were stark divisions between new and old design generations—the young anti-Modernists, and the established followers of Modernism. “It was rather a skirmish between a bunch of young designers, like your age now, who were called New Wave, Postmodern, Swiss Punk, whatever, and believed it necessary to reject the status quo for something freer and more contemporary. Doing that meant criticizing old-guard designers, who believed design should be simple—clean on tight grids and Helveticized.”

“Do you mean bland?” he quizzed further. “Maybe some of it was bland!” I conceded. “But it was more like a new generation was feeling its oats and it was inevitable.” New technology was making unprecedented options possible. Aesthetic standards were changing because young designers wanted to try everything, while the older, especially the devout Modern ones, believed everything had already been tried.

“I read that Massimo Vignelli called a lot of the new digital and retro stuff ‘garbage,’” he said. “What did you say or do about it back then?”

“I was more or less on the Modernist side and wrote about it in a 1993 *Eye* magazine essay called ‘Cult of the Ugly.’” I wasn’t against illegibility per se, just the stuff that seemed to be done badly. I justified biased distinctions not between beauty and ugly, but between good ugly and bad ugly, or what was done with an experimental rationale and with merely style and fashion as the motive.

As I wrote in *Eye* at the time, “Ugly design can be a conscious attempt to create and define alternative standards. Like war paint, the dissonant styles which many contemporary designers have applied to their visual communications are meant to shock an enemy—complacency—as well as to encourage new reading and viewing patterns.” To make my point, I cited Art Chantry. “[His work] combines the shock-and-educate approach with a concern for appropriateness. For over a decade Chantry has been creating eye-catching, low-budget graphics for the Seattle punk scene by using found commercial artefacts from industrial merchandise catalogues as key elements in his posters and flyers. While these ‘unsophisticated’ graphics may be horrifying to designers who prefer Shaker functionalism to punk vernacular, Chantry’s design is decidedly functional within its context. Chantry’s clever manipulations of found ‘art’ into accessible, though unconventional, compositions prove that using ostensibly ugly forms can result in good design.”

“... So you were a reactionary?” my student probed.

“I guess so,” I responded, slightly annoyed. “But you had to understand the times.” The Modernists were fighting for their principles in academic articles and seminars, but mostly among themselves. I was caught up on both sides, but chose to go on record against the larger problem of illegibility, which I defined as ugly. Later, I surrendered to the forces of inevitability and

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the realization that there was no war to be won, no battle to be fought or skirmish to be had. There was no getting around the fact that newly developed—and newly available—technology would stimulate new ways of doing things.

“Other than a few designers,” he asked, “did anyone care?”

“I don’t know,” I muddled. “Not too many ‘anyones’ care about graphic design other than those of us who are involved, anyway.”

While many may have forgotten them today, the Legibility Wars are indeed part of our collective graphic design history—an encapsulation of a defining (or more aptly, *redefining*) moment when the scales shifted toward the new digital era. And that’s why I’m writing this personal reexamination of what the legibility skirmish was all about, where it ended up and what, if anything, it means to practitioners, teachers and scholars today.

DEFINING THE ERA

Modernism in the 1920s was a revolution that replaced out-moded traditions with radical methods of producing art, architecture, design, music, dance and literature inspired by science and technology—as well as psychology. We still admire its collective output and celebrate it in countless exhibits and books. Collage, asymmetrical typography and anarchic layouts were raw and exciting—a new language. But ultimately the next evolution, Swiss Modernism, was hijacked for political and institutional uses. The Modernist vocabulary became a means

of communicating to and from the global corporate world in the 1960s, which gave way to modernistic styling. The Swiss Style’s characteristics included very readable sans serif type, generous amounts of white space, geometry and an emphasis on simplicity. It ran the gamut from the exquisite to the bland.

It was the formulaic side of the equation that was being critiqued by a new generation who believed design had to have more flexibility than flush-left Helvetica, and serve more than just corporate identities. So in 1984 when Apple’s first TV commercial announced that the Macintosh was the next major design tool, young creatives embraced its power, in part to make use of primitive techniques like pixelating, overlapping, under-printing and serendipitous digital flaws. Illegibility was a flaw turned into a code used by ’80s graphic designers just like psychedelia was for ’60s poster artists. Designers were also being a tad sadistic—like cats playing with mice, illegibility was like batting around Modernists before the kill.

On the whole, legibility is not the same as readability. The sin is not in breaking the former but in breaking the latter. It can be argued that when something is illegible it is unreadable, but in fact, it *is* readable for those who crack the code. In the early 1920s, Dada and Surrealist typography broke many of the classical rules of printing, but could be read by anyone with the patience to solve the puzzles or pass roadblocks to unfettered comprehension.

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RAYGUN IMAGE BY EIGENE MAGAZINE (FOTOGRAFIE SELBST ERSTELLT); SWISS STYLE POSTERS BY 에르스트 클러; NEXT SPREAD: WWW.ALABOUTAPPLE.COM (IMAGES VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

In the mid-’80s and ’90s, Rudy VanderLans’ *Emigre* magazine, the voice of the new type and digital typography movement, was dedicated to showcasing a coterie of avid contra-Modernists who railed against dead style in favor of a so-called Postmodern, or Po-Mo, approach that, in part, questioned the very form and function of type and imagery and the role played by the grid in making type read well. Again, illegibility was only a small part of the questions and answers. But altering these standards often meant taking license both in practice and theory. Katherine McCoy, who ran Cranbrook Academy’s graphic design program, saw this legibility/readability construct as part of a linguistic evolution: “Visual phenomena are analyzed as language encoded for meaning. Meanings are deconstructed, exposing the dynamics of power and the manipulation of meaning.” This played out in the more experimental design schools and programs that gave students permission to see how far illegibility could be pushed before incompressibility set in.

Illegibility, such as it was, showed up in *Emigre* and in niche magazines like David Carson’s *RayGun* and *Speak, Shift, Blur* and *Lava*, among others. But even the complex layering of type, pictures and doodads that gave an impression of illegibility was never entirely so. (In a more extreme example, David Carson set an entire *RayGun* in dingbats rather than type—but the text was still published in the back of the magazine.) For those who had no patience for deciphering, if it wasn’t clean then it was considered illegible.



Above: Steven Heller and Anne Fink’s *Faces on the Edge*, and Rick Poynor’s *Typography Now Two*, which chronicled the new era of type. Below: The work of Ernst Keller, the “father of Swiss graphics.”



With Rick Poynor’s first *Typography Now* book (Edward Booth Clibborn Editions, 1991), the question about whether or not what was taking place was a legitimate type revolution was answered. There was enough “new typography” to prove a real generational movement. In 1997, I made my own contribution with *Faces on the Edge* (co-authored with Anne Fink, Van Nostrand Rinehold). Poynor’s *Typography Now Two: Implosion* (1998) curiously brought closure to the illegibility debate, since even the most radical were readable. And his *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (2003) summed up the whole phenomenon as a complete historical epoch from 1980–2000. In fact, illegibility had stopped being a defining Postmodern issue years before the last regular issue of *Emigre* (#69) was published in 2005.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

The real revolution was technology, which also had the effect of starkly increasing the power of women in design—and the number of women experimenting with illegibility and readability was considerable. April Greiman had been entrenched in Modernism until 1984, when she embraced the first Macintosh with gusto. While most graphic designers were skeptical or afraid of its mystery, Greiman established herself as the pioneer—specifically of the digital co-mingling collage of video and still photography with type. Mixed media played a role in how text was composed and rendered legible or illegible,

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and Greiman's work was called New Wave in the design press while it defied all imposed labels.

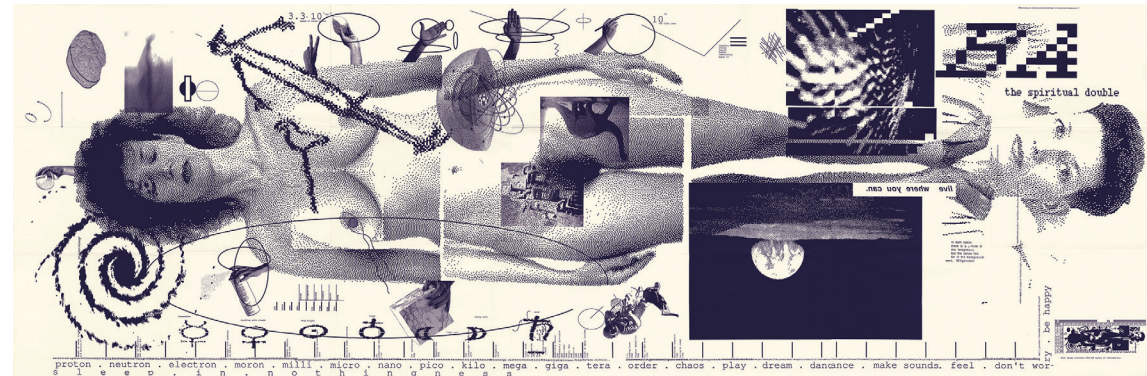
"[She] had been rocking the Modernist boat for a few years when she undertook a major assault upon the design community's sensibilities and preconceptions of what constitutes design," the AIGA stated in 1998 when it awarded her its lifetime medal of achievement.

The incident in question? In 1986 Greiman was the subject and designer of *Design Quarterly* #133. It was an opportunity not only to present her digital work to the world, "but to ask a larger question of the work and the medium: Does it make sense? Reading Wittgenstein on the topic, she identified with his conclusion: 'It makes sense if you give it sense,'" noted the AIGA.

Illegibility was simply an outcome of other perceptual experiments. Greiman trashed the standard 32-page format of *Design Quarterly*, and instead created a poster that folded out to almost 3-by-6 feet. On the front was a pixilated image of Grei-

man's naked body amid layers of text and image; the poster also included notations on the digital process, and the whole thing was composed on the Macintosh and MacDraw. "Beyond considering whether digital technologies made sense, the *Design Quarterly* poster seemed to embody the disillusionment of a nation deeply wounded by the Vietnam War and shaped by the growth of feminism, spiritualism, Eastern religion, Jungian archetypes and dream symbolism," the AIGA wrote.

While completely readable, Greiman did not make it easy on purpose. She showed that illegibility simply needed translation—and when translated, its power was apparent.



April Greiman's *Design Quarterly* #133.



At left: A spread from *Faces on the Edge* featuring Elliot Earls' Blue Eye Shadow (left page); Rodney Sheldon Fehsenfeld's International Disgrace (top right page); and Jonathan Barnbrook's Excocet. Below: Zuzana Licko's Base 9 (left-hand page, top, 1994), shown with Base 900 (2011), in *Emigre Fonts: 1986-2016*.



Elsewhere, digital typeface design was a significant Postmodern outlier and no one captured the essence and evolution of the '80s and '90s better than Zuzana Licko, the creator of such early digital fonts as the pixel Lo-Res and dot-matrix Matrix. Dozens of her faces both precise and grungy, classical and novel, helped to typographically define graphic design that can in some instances pinpoint Postmodern's moment of conception and in others, like Mr & Mrs Eaves, have the timeless look that defies the stereotypes and clichés of either "-ism."

This type was not illegible. It was type! Type is legible by definition. Users could do whatever they pleased with it. And while some layered and distorted it, others used it straight up and easily readable. The fact that messages needed to be read was never a question. Only *how* they'd be read was of concern—and who would read them. I contend the illegibility skirmish was about designers talking to other designers. It was a natural outgrowth of a profession in transition.

Today, all kinds of design theatrics coexist separately or together. Rather than one or two dominant styles, there are multiple personalities in graphic design, and a lot more on digital screens. The experimental versus classical discourse may occasionally flair up—as will the difference between readability and legibility—but the polarization that spiced up the earlier argument is over. In its wake is the sense that graphic designers are freer from hard-and-fast rules, but rarely is the issue more radical than that.

"The truth is," I told my design history students, "Making type and typography more readable was ultimately more useful to old and young designers alike than making it less so."

Most clients would agree. ■

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