The pleasure of silence

The form typography takes dictates its volume. Of all the volume settings, 'mute' is the most difficult to achieve.

The 20th-century composer John Cage famously wanted to know what it felt like to experience true silence and so arranged to be placed in an anechoic (soundproof) chamber at Harvard University. After a period of adjustment, he realised he could still hear two sounds, one high and one low. Later, when he described these to the engineer he was told that the high one was his nervous system and the low one was his blood in circulation. Clearly, complete silence does not exist.

The form that type is given and the form in which it is arranged determines and defines its function. There are many different methods of reading to suit a variety of purposes. We read to gain information through research and study, and we read to relax and be entertained. Directories and dictionaries are obviously designed to be used differently from newspapers, which, in turn, are different from novels. Typographic form follows function.

Reading is an insular, private, silent affair. Even in a room full of people (for example, the reading room of a public library) each person will be engaged in their own thoughts. Even the surroundings are noisy and tawdry (for example, a café or bar) a reader can consciously ignore these potentially disruptive activities and, effectively, make them evaporate.

Just as the reader can control extraneous noise, so the printed letters on the page can be made to evaporate as the reader forms images in his or her mind from the author's words. The typographer cannot control the noise that might surround the reader, but by careful arrangement of form and detailed adjustment he or she can contribute greatly to the essential ability of the printed word to evaporate for the reader. Appropriately, type and typography which refuses to evaporate in this way is often referred to as 'noise'.

It is often said that to enable this vanishing trick to be accomplished, typography and typeface must be 'normal' that the reader is never caused to look at the words or their arrangement. Nothing unusual, nothing to attract unwanted attention to its individual form or to the way it is arranged. The result is that the reader can read without fatiguing. This is the selfless, entirely anonymous notion of 'service' described by Stanley Morison (page 10 of this book) that is provided by the typographer to both author and reader. This is, undoubtedly, a noble principle and one that attracts some graphic designers to specialize in typography.

In order to achieve silent typography it is generally assumed that all the typographer must do is to stick rigidly to the conventions. Such conventions, however, are anything but rigid, in fact they are often little more than a set of intentionally vague opinions. Such opinions can be read in numerous books. Morison's First Principles of Typography being probably the best-known example. But for a description of cut-and-try typographic conventions there can be nothing better than the guides or manuals published by the larger printing houses during the 20th century.

These house style guides are generally aimed at a wider readership, including authors, editors, proofreaders and compositors, and address all aspects of typographic form as well as, for example, issues concerning spelling and punctuation. Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers comes under this heading, its original title being Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers Employed at the Clarendon Press, Oxford (1860). Books such as this prescribed the company rules for those areas of typographic form and English usage where solutions to grammatical or technical problems might vary. The aim of house style guides was to standardise the process of typographic composition (its setting) and make it more efficient. The standardisation of the text in this way also ensured a noiseless text for the reader.

The titles of such manuals suggest a conformity to prevailing standards, for example, De Vinne's Correct Composition (1869). In fact, what these 'authorities' aimed to achieve was often less prescriptive than might be imagined. John Smith, in his The Printer's Grammar of 1755, aimed to provide 'conformity to a standard that the consensus of opinion recognises as good'. De Vinne's stated intention was 'to define the fixed practice of the greater number of authors and printers'.

What Smith, De Vinne and Hart recognised was that there are many aspects of good typography that are the result of the typographer's tacit knowledge of typographic form, a kind of sensory discernment that comes from a practical understanding of the raw materials and the vagaries thereof. The reference so often signalled in classic manuals to the compositor consistently acknowledges this fact.

Such deference exists because typographic conventions of a technical nature will always require ingenuity in their application, which, in turn, requires that the typographer maintain the motivation to interpret such rules. The following statement is from the first edition of The Chicago Manual of Style of 1906 and has been updated in every edition since. 'Rules and regulations must be applied with a certain amount of elasticity. Exceptions will constantly occur, and ample room is left for individual initiative and discretion.'

Such rules and regulations point the way and survey the road rather than remove the obstacles.

The titles of these manuals suggest an ominously difficult read and, at first glance, everything about them (in their typographic form) is designed to make them appear authoritative. And yet, once the reader has engaged with the texts, especially those of De Vinne and Hart, they are, perhaps surprisingly, very accessible and even humorous, and although undoubtedly authoritative, not nearly as authoritarian as might initially be expected.

There is an important point here. There is more to be learned on the printed page than a mere sequence of letters and that text communicated to the reader before a single word has been read. In fact, it is the quality that distinguishes the format of a document from a simple document of letters that might, finally, be described as 'typography'.

That is to say that the intention of the author of a text before it is read is unacknowledged and to ensure an effective (intended) interpretation is a key function of the typographer.

Even if the typeface itself (clearly a key decision, but no more important than the choice of size or weight, or how it is arranged) provides unavoidable signals. It is remarkable how much 'character' can be designed into a typeface which, later, can evaporate when the reader begins to read. The type designer Gerhard Unger describes it like this: "The only basic shapes need to comply with what we are used to. For this conventional frame, the type designer applies the features that give typefaces their characteristics. Every designer has particular fascinations that occur through the typeface design."

There have been several attempts to design a universal typeface with a sufficient range of weights and widths to make it all possible purposes. But every typeface is (or, more accurately, becomes) the product of its designer, of its time and place, and of its technology. These are characteristics which must, inevitably, add something to what the author wishes to communicate.

But it is also possible for a typeface to be the product of an author. AT/SW/KH design a different typeface for every client (above left), enabling them to produce letterform in their details to a particular aspect of each different project. There is something vaguely anarchic about AT's celebrated lack of restraint which suggests a healthy lack of preciousness. Even in this digital age, their achievement is remarkable, and very flattering for the client.

Fonts that have established associations will, inevitably, contribute these to the sense of the author's words. The body text (designed and produced by David Jury, above) consists of two texts set in two columns, side by side. Monotype Grot (unquilted) is used to present an oncolour, uncoloured text, in contrast with Monotype Baskerville (justified) which is used for its English, stiff, upright stance and presents the self-centered version intended for publication. The arrangement of the texts allows readers to see what the author thought (in 1934) but the sensor would not allow them to read.

A text in which a reader is subsumed by the thought of the author is one that succeeds in connecting with the reader and expectations of its audience. This does not, however, mean the type or the typography is somehow 'neutral'. As discussed above, neutral type does not exist. It should also be remembered that the purpose of generating text is never for it to remain unread. Printed matter must be designed into something, an object that can attract the attention of those whose attention is sought. In other words, it must solicit. But the means of attracting must not sacrifice the message. The typographer aims to create typographic forms that both attract the reader while enhancing the meaning of the author's words. This is a precarious balancing act, but when it succeeds - and there are numerous successful examples on the following pages - typographic communication is not only fluent, but also inviting and exciting.

Typography invites rational thought, and controlled and directed communication. Consciously or unconsciously, it creates and preserves social links, and provides a remarkable parallel to social form and function.