

Script

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“In digitization, by the nature of the process, letters become fragmented.”

This is a quote from Robin Kinross, an author on the topic of visual communication and typography. Throughout history, technological advancements have almost inevitably imposed forms of fragmentation onto existing writing systems, materially and/or conceptually dissolved letters into smaller segments before reconstructing them into new composite forms.

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Rewinding to the 15th century, when typography still relied on movable metal type, the Greek alphabet underwent its first stage of simplification when European type cutters abandoned the visual history of Byzantine scripts to avoid the baffling complexity they posed to mainland Europeans accustomed to Latin writings. This moment marked the beginning of modern Greek type design, establishing a style that would continue to shape Greek typography for centuries afterward.

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15th century European typographers failed to fully understand the social implications of typography, nor the range of effects their subjective decisions have to, as Andrew Blauvelt critiqued, “the reproduction of cultural values through the work of graphic design” and “the shifting nature of consumption and reception by audiences.” An integral typography articulates meaning through the structured arrangement of variables in a typographic environment.

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Adjustments to scale, position, texture, composition, or typeface not only reflect the designer's situated perspective toward the content but also alter how audiences interpret and consume the information presented. As these visual forms circulate publicly, they contribute to shaping collective attitudes toward the subjects they communicate.

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But have typographers in the 21st century moved beyond this mindset?

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Winding forward to the 21st century, type design has evolved from manuscripts to metal type, photographic film, and ultimately to programmable units mathematically encoded by computers. Letters now exist in the form of codes, constituting the Unicode systems. Each letter, regardless of its origin, is now assigned with a unique numerical value universally recognised by computers, allowing it to function within digital environments.

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To avoid visual inconsistencies within a Unicode, Charles Bigelow and Kris Holmes proposed harmonisation as their design strategy to assert uniformity across varying scripts: a technical solution that provides a default core font for multiple writing systems in one visually standardised design, achieved through the filtering of what the designer classifies as "noises" while retaining what they identify as "signals" of each letterform.

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However, generating a harmonised typeface that functions between Greek and English through the grid and module-based methodology proposed by Nigel Cottier exposes the inherent flaws of these grid systems commonly found in modern typeface design. The coexistence of Greek and English letterforms relies heavily on the elimination of the cursive structures of the Greek alphabet, as well as on subjective decisions made by the designer regarding which typographic features should be preserved or removed.

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This subjective criteria of elimination and retention during the process of harmonisation reenact the history of Greek typography in the 15th century. Its tendency to ambiguate the distinct characteristics of diverse writing systems reflects a drive towards homogenisation, often at the cost of non-Latin scripts foreign to Western typographers. Contemporary type design conventions remain heavily shaped by Latin principles, disregarding the necessary conditions for non-Latin scripts to be authentically constructed.

If the functionality of digital types is supported by modernist ideals of universality founded on asymmetrical globalisation, does harmonisation remain the best solution for a globalised practice such as type design? Can letterforms, or how can letterforms, function as contested spaces where typographic hierarchies in globalised writing systems are challenged?

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Édouard Glissant used the term “creole” to describe “the entanglement between different cultures forced into cohabitation in the colonial context.” Creolisation thus refers to the processes of ‘cultural and linguistic mixing’ which arise from the entanglement of different cultures cohabiting the same space. This process of ‘transculturation’ occurs in such a way as to produce a vernacular space marked by the fusion of cultural elements drawn from all originating cultures, but resulting in a configuration in which these elements, though never equal, are permanently translated and irrecoverable in their original forms. Scrolling top to bottom collection archive screenshot As non-Latin scripts are increasingly forced into cohabitation with Latin scripts in typographic systems, they risk gradual transformation away from their historical forms, resulting in typographic creoles that retain linguistic meaning but are no longer visually identical to their local cultures.

Creolisation in typographic forms exposes how the advancement of typography has relied on the suppression of non-Latin scripts in favour of Latins. In resistance to this typographic hierarchy, I introduce interlocality into the grid systems of modern type design. Interlocality acknowledges the value of diversity, and seeks to resist the Eurocentric globality by preserving and celebrating the local, cultural, and regional characteristics of marginalised scripts. By adopting an inter-local perspective, I sought to transform letterforms into spaces where Latin and non-Latin writing systems do not cohabit, but confront in attempts to claim sovereignty over shared territories, characterising letterforms as sites defined by tension and contestation, and questions globalisation as a façade for ideological control and graphic communication as a system that reinforces political, cultural, and social inequality.

Storyboard

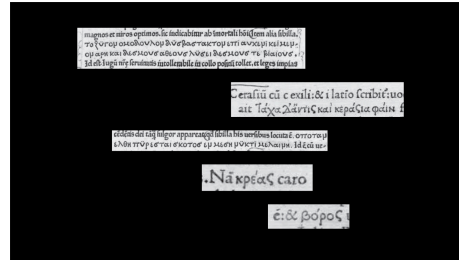
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—Robin Kinross, *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*

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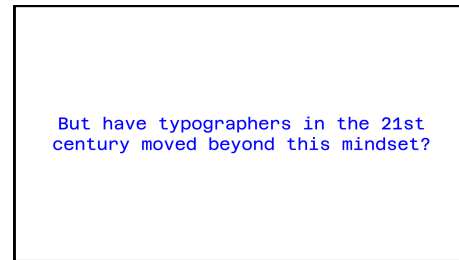


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“Graphic design history has yet to undertake the task of understanding its social context... from the reproduction of cultural values through the work of graphic design to the shifting nature of consumption and reception, both conspicuous and symbolic, by audiences.”

—Andrew Blauvelt, *An Opening: Graphic Design's Discursive Spaces*

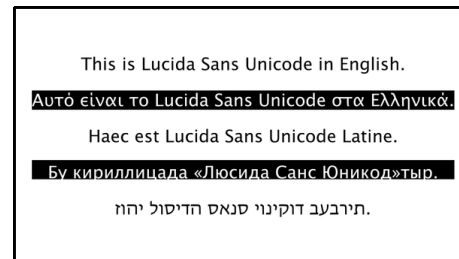
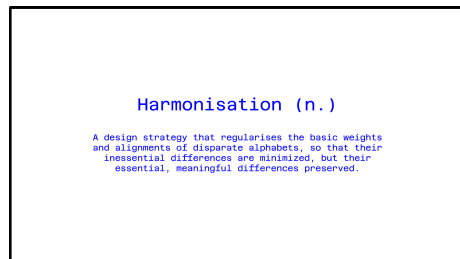
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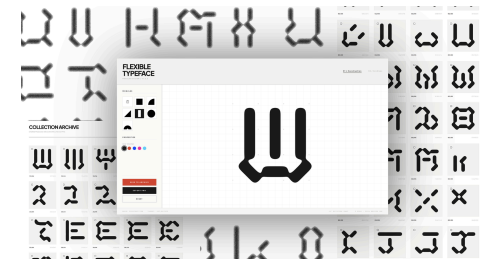
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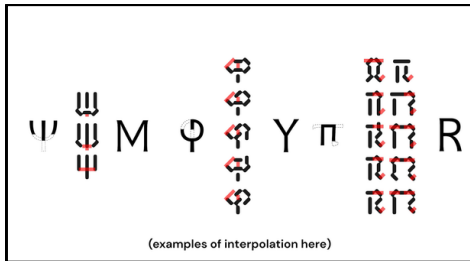


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Storyboard

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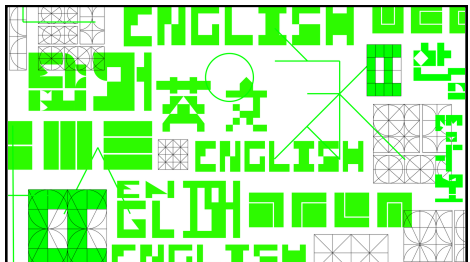
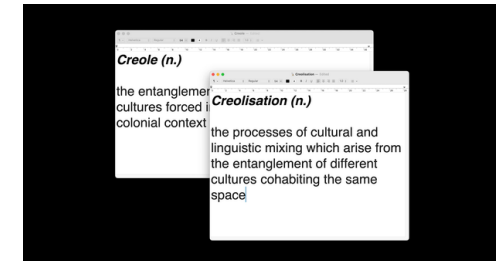
(visual examples of texts built with Latin grid here)

Narration:

Its tendency to ambiguate the distinct characteristics of diverse writing systems reflects a drive towards homogenisation, often at the cost of non-Latin scripts foreign to Western typographers. Contemporary type design conventions remain heavily shaped by Latin principles, disregarding the necessary conditions for non-Latin scripts to be authentically constructed.

How can letterforms function as contested spaces where typographic hierarchies in globalised writing systems are challenged?

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