

CRUSHING BOOKS

“The invention of writing consisted not so very much in the invention of new symbols, but rather in the unrolling of the image into rows (‘lines’).”

Vilém Flusser, ‘The Codified World’ (1978)

By translating oral information into visual information, writing had the effect of re-constructing reality in terms of linear information code processed by the mind via the eye. This code is comprised of a set of rules and symbols formed into a visual array of ciphers, and organized in terms of a syntax and semantics that the receiver must first learn. Writing is a sophisticated technology that moves words from the realm of sound to that of space, and this tendency, which began over five thousand years ago, was consolidated and greatly intensified by the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Words were locked yet more firmly in spatial position.

Through representing the world by means of a point sequence the lines used in writing impose a specific structure on thought. With the development of text based code there emerged the tendency to construe time as directional – as a linear narrative or history into which humanity is henceforth imprisoned. Writing also encouraged a preference for situations of linearity, closure, precision and detail, and as a result, the idea that it is possible to adopt a fixed and detached point of view comes into being. Consciousness is biased towards the prioritization of the epistemological values of objectivity, abstraction, and analysis, and the ontological values of individuation and emotional detachment.

Writing constrains the visual within an artificial, strictly determined, socially-conditioned, informational system, through a logical and ordered system of spacings. In the West, writing and reading a script requires we follow the line of text from left to right, jumping from line to line while moving from above to below, and turning the page from left to right every so often. But insofar as written words are also visual - are marks laid down on a surface - they have an existence apart from their function as carriers of code. From the point of view of the discursive task of writing, however, such elements are irrelevant, and are to be used only for decorative reasons in order to supply visual pleasure. The letters of the alphabet are a finite set of visual stimuli

that are sharply focused, familiar, and over-learned. Especially in printed texts, we pass effortlessly from the signifier – the material vessel - to what is signified – the referent or meaning. “The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion”, writes Merleau-Ponty.

My eyes follow the line on the paper, and from that moment I am caught up in their meanings, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eye and the body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed.

This segregation, which divides the visual field into small areas of conscious attention and much larger areas of unconscious attention, repeats the more general cognitive activity through which visual stimuli are divided into loci of focus and areas that slip into unnoticed, unfocused vagueness. For every object perceived and set up as ‘figure,’ there is related material that is unconsciously perceived but not attended to. This ‘ground’ is construed as an essentially passive and negative entity, for which indeterminacy is an inherent quality.

When we read a word it becomes the locus of attention - the ‘figure’ - and we automatically consign the rest of the visual field – the ‘ground’ of the page upon which the word to cognitive oblivion. But this ‘ground’ has interesting qualities of its own. There are many kinds of paper, with different textures and colours. We automatically call the colour of book paper ‘white’, but in fact it can vary considerably in hue and tone, as well as undergo change (and decay) over time. Decisions concerning the use of different kinds of paper stock are determined by economic, practical, and aesthetic considerations, and greatly influence the durability and pleasure of a book.

For a printed text, the colour black is almost universally adopted, so that the contours of letters stand out optimally against the lightness of the ‘invisible’ ground. Changing the colour of the letters may render them more difficult to see, but will have no effect on the information content of the text. The size of letters is standardized, and follows strict protocols. **Titles** may be larger than the body of the text, and printed

in bold type. If words within the body of text are printed **in** different

sizes

, they automatically draw attention to themselves through the visual

difference from their neighbours.

The shape of a font rarely register while reading a text formatted in the conventional way. While you are reading this sentence, you are most unlikely to have noted the shapes of the letters. In fact, this is a font called ‘Times New Roman,’ which has its own unique visual shape, as well as history. In 1929, the Times of London hired the celebrated typographer Stanley Morison to create a new text font for the newspaper, one whose appearance fitted the high esteem in which the Times was held. ‘Times New Roman’ builds on the font styles of classical Rome and the Neo-Classicism of the eighteenth century, thereby signaling through its shape the noble character of the user. It became standard for the Times, and was subsequently adopted very widely as a font. The subliminal messages communicated by different fonts enhance at an unconscious level the meaning of the text which they act as vessels. If the font with which this text is written is changed to ‘Calibri,’ it is likely that you will suddenly become consciously aware of its shape, and may even attribute to the content a somewhat different value. ‘Calibri’ is a member of the modern, and more visually minimalist, family called ‘sans serifs’ - it is a font without the slight projections at the end of the strokes of letters, which is a carry over into typeface design from the era of hand-written scripts. ‘Calibri’ was commissioned by Microsoft in 2002, and designed by the typographer Lucas De Groot, and is now the default typeface in several of Microsoft's applications, including the one in which I am writing this text – Microsoft Word for Mac, Version 15.2 .

The ordering of dark coloured words into tightly packed parallel lines, which are arranged centrally into discrete rectangles on a lighter, larger rectangular surface, is essential if the text is to fulfill its role as a code carrier. Once dislodged from this grid, words cease to deliver coherent coded information. Odd things happen to printed texts once they are partially released from the strict conventions of the book. The simple action of cutting pages from their binding, and folding and crushing them into a limited spatial frame, releases them from their customary linear straightjacket. In my *Crushed Books* series, pages from the same book are crumpled, squeezed, bent, crushed, wedged, overlapped, and placed at different angles to each other. The images printed

on the pages undergo a similar deconstruction, rendering them equally dubious as coded messages. As a consequence only fragments of linearity remain – oasis of logic amidst the ‘chaos.’ But out of this mess, other and less regimented and pre-ordained kinds of meaning will emerge - meanings that are multiple, and provoked by memory and imagination. The words start to behave more like the images that sometimes accompany them.

Visual space unfolds in depth, and is gestural, rhythmical, embodied, and about connecting rather than dividing. Unlike a written sign, an image is therefore potentially infinite in form and structure, and is inherently polysemic. As a result, an image is always more difficult to ‘read’. But we should remember that image-making is often subordinated to verbal code. When it is a system produced through the medium of lines, an image functions in a ‘graphic’ space (the word derives from the Greek *graphein*, which means both to write and draw). This space is the space of signs, a rationally coordinated arena for learning, analysis, discourse, and *logos*. Like writing, drawing can be flat, linear, tabular, two-dimensionally regulated, and organized around spacings, divisions, and intervals.

But while in order to comprehend the message carried by a written text we must follow it sequentially, with images, by contrast, we in a sense get the message first and then afterwards break it down into legible parts. This is also what happens when you look at one of the *Crushed Book* series.

While linear writing space is about *learning*, visual space is involved in *looking*. The *Crushed Book* series attempts to prize the book away from its allegiance to learning, putting it instead at the service of looking.