# Revivalism or Referencing

## Matthieu Cortat-Roller and Gilles Gavillet in Conversation with Davide Tomatis

As any type designer will know, working on a revival implies a series of decisions concerning the delicate balance between historical references and contemporary design. In my attempt to shed light onto this practice, I turned to Gilles Gavillet, founder of the Optimo Digital Foundry – which is currently licensing my Metodo revival – and Matthieu Cortat, head of the Master in Type Design at ECAL. Our discussion touches on topics ranging from the value of historical references in digital typefaces to the transformative nature of revivals. We also delve into the collaborative aspects of type design and its evolution in a rapidly changing design landscape.

**Davide Tomatis** — Nowadays, revivals are becoming more frequent. On the one hand, it is normal to rely on historical models in type design, on the other perhaps it can also become a narrative structure describing and selling a typeface. How much value do you give to the historical references of a digital typeface?

**Matthieu Cortat-Roller** — I'm not sure it is becoming more frequent. It is certainly reassuring for both the designer (legitimacy) and the customer (historical reference), but I do see a tendency among type designers to take a distance from the notion of revival. People speak of fonts "based on" or "inspired by" rather than "revivals" strictly speaking. This movement is quite healthy I think, as it shows that people get more confident about their own productions and need less "historical support" from a model in order to be good enough to be released. Sure, the principle of revival is a marketing narrative when it comes to selling "traditional" fonts in a crowded market. However, I don't think it is an indicator of the quality of the font.

**Gilles Gavillet** — I don't see revivals as a single marketing narrative, or at least not for the typefaces I am interested in. Over the last 25 years, digital tools have enabled designers to revive typefaces that had vanished for historical, technical, and commercial reasons – or even because of their poor early digitalisation. From baroque typography to industrial headlines fonts, through extensive research, some sleeping beauties that were not available reappeared on the market and will continue to raise a legitimate interest from a contemporary audience for their intrinsic design qualities.

This has established a working model – both in terms of design process and communication – that often counterbalances a certain creative vacuum among type designers, and that ends up producing self-referential clones. So, among the plethora of "new" typefaces reclaiming erudite historical

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references, few actually add something conceptually or formally interesting. In the end, it is design relevance, and not historical relevance, that matters.

**DT** — In my opinion, a digital typeface – even if it is a precise and faithful revival – is always an alteration of the original source, because it passes through a translation process, transferring a drawing from lead to coordinate geometry. Do you think a revival is interesting when it is a reinterpretation of the source or as a tool to reproduce exactly the same feeling?

**MC** — Feelings are subjective. You can ask ten designers to do a typeface revival, asking them to capture "exactly the same feeling" and you will still get ten different results. It is necessarily an alteration. Even double: contemporary designers reinterpret forms made by their predecessors, but so do contemporary viewers. People today don't read the same way as they did in the 16th or 17th century, or even thirty years ago. So even a perfectly matching revival would miss the point of making revivals. Typography is a cultural artefact (there is absolutely *nothing* natural in it), so, like any cultural artefact, it ages, it changes, and the perception of it changes as well.

**GG** — If we talk about revivals, I think it should aim for both: to grasp the DNA of an original design and reinterpret it with today's tools for today's requirements. Obviously, the sources often require design-guessing and searching for an objective *Werktreue* (fidelity) is relatively vain. But looking for the precise essence of a drawing and bringing its core identity to a new context of usage is what makes a revival potentially interesting. This is a different creative position from conceiving a typeface as a formal synthesis of historical forms – which can be just as interesting. Even though in the end the typeface is an autonomous product that must be aesthetically self-sufficient.

**DT** — In the *Die neue Typographie*, Jan Tschichold wrote: "Personally I believe that no single designer can produce the typeface we need, which must be free from all personal characteristics: it will be the work of a group, among whom I think there must be an engineer".[1] Speaking about a typeface designed by a group, the work done by the Nebiolo Foundry for the Forma project immediately comes to mind.[2] Long meetings with all the most renowned Italian graphic designers sitting for hours around a table to discuss what the project should have been. In the end, it sounds like a storytelling stratagem again. Can type design really be un-authorial?

**MC** — I think Tschichold did not even consider in his quote the people in the type foundry, who were actually producing the fonts based on the drawings made by the designer. Any lead type had to go through multiple persons, from the punch cutters to

1 Tschichold 1995: 73–74.

2 Forma is a typeface developed by a team of designers at the Nebiolo Type Foundry in the 1960s, which included Aldo Novarese, Bruno Munari and Franco Grignani. The designers' aim was to develop a "universal" typeface.

the founders, needing an entire paper, ink and printing industry to produce the text that he considered made by an *author*. Still today, it is easily possible to forget all the people involved in the *authorial* making of a type form, which can go from the person who coded the software you used to draw (providing automatisms you don't notice when drawing), to the school teacher of your young age who told you how to trace a letter form. The image of the designer-author isolated in the ivory tower of his own mind is very romantic and dated. In reality, creations happen by contact with other individuals and/or other works. A single mind never produced anything. This can be a storytelling stratagem indeed, but so is the opposite approach, focusing on the individual genius with a unique signature. As a designer, you are part of a network, whether you want it or not does not make any difference.

**GG** — For me, the collaborative process of typeface development does not diminish the central role of the designer. Beyond the impact of tools and techniques, I think that designing typefaces is fundamentally about aesthetic choices and personal taste, and the intrinsic quality of a drawing. Even if it is the outcome of a collective context (a type foundry, an art director, or a client's brief), the quality of a project always relies on the vision and curves shaped by its designer. This is even more appreciable today, with so many skilled professionals repeating endless variations of the same ideas. There is a lot of noise, and fortunately some distinct projects still stand out thanks to the designer's point of view.

> **DT** — I have the perception that *Die neue Typographie* defines a moment when graphic design started to be mapped out as a precise discipline with strict rules to be followed. And that's probably what Modernism is, after all: a method to work efficiently, a commercial efficiency. During his life, Tschichold changed his mind and refused this way of seeing the discipline, but somehow, I feel it is still relevant today. In a period when design has to be fast and efficient, there is not much time to lose on decoration. Is this why it is getting so common to design custom typefaces? To base an entire identity on the simple use of a typeface?

**MC** — Yes, this stage of Modernism happened at a time when the word "graphic designer" was starting to get used. It was a time when the profession emerged, and when it was still difficult to convince clients to pay for a service (design) that used to be included in the printers' fees. One way of convincing people was to say: "Design is art". That was the attempt of the entire Art Nouveau movement. Another way was to say: "Design is science", and to support this, strong rules and radical statements were helpful. In the second part of Tschichold's life, he may not have felt the need to have this engineer's approach to be legitimised in the position of designer.

About the second part of the question: being fast and efficient is still the focus of practice. Isn't it a defining feature of capitalism? Saving on production costs to generate income. Our economy is just as capitalist – or rather, more so – than that of *Die neue Typographie*. Having said this, I don't know if it has a relation with the use of custom type as the main tool for corporate identities.

**GG** — The antagonism between modern efficiency and artistic quality feels obsolete to me. The boom of custom typography has more to do with technology and the omnipresence of typography through screen usage in our everyday life, starting with smartphones. Typefaces are now rendered so precisely that more and more people have become aware of their power in visual communication, and typography is now increasingly regarded as one of the core assets of any brand identity – for small and large companies alike.

**MC** — Maybe people do notice the screen rendering quality of smartphones. They certainly are constantly flooded with images. So, a communication based only on images, with a basic system font, is no longer noticeable. Images are not enough. That is also a reason why brands and graphic design firms are interested in custom fonts nowadays.

**DT** — Type design is more democratic today, it is certainly faster. It's not sci-fi anymore to think that Artificial intelligence will soon start developing fonts. Will it create the most neutral typeface because it was designed by a machine? What will be the task of the type designer at that point?

**MC** — Is it still anyone's goal to design the most neutral typeface? If the purpose of creating new fonts is all about efficiency and productivity, then I think we should just leave it to the machines. I don't think any type designer went into this professional path for these reasons. It is for the pleasure of creating and drawing. I came across a Twitter post recently, in which architect Karl Sharro claimed: "Humans doing the hard jobs on minimum wage while the robots write poetry and paint is not the future I wanted".[3] I don't know what the task of a type designer will be in the future. But I can imagine that soon after you have AI-generated fonts, "fully hand-made" fonts might have an extra value. It takes time, energy and imagination to produce good stuff.

**GG** — It will certainly redefine many paradigms in the contemporary type industry. Some parts of the type design process are extremely time-consuming without offering much pleasure in return, so it will be interesting to see what AI has to offer.

Regarding design itself, I am more concerned about how it will affect intellectual property and copyright on an international scale. The lack of protection towards type design already undermines the work of type designers and foundries, and AI will take it to a new level.

**DT** — Do you see the personality of Aurora and Normal Grotesk in Metodo, even if it's a loose reinterpretation and not a faithful revival?

**MC** — I don't really care nor mind seeing the personality of Aurora and Normal Grotesk in Metodo. Sure, there is some. I'm rather interested in seeing Davide Tomatis's personality in this. Because Davide Tomatis is a contemporary designer, who reflects the present time and has contemporary ideas about the time we are living in. Of course (some) design-

3 Sharro 2023.

ers of the past were good and showed distinctive personalities. But they belonged to their time. Imagine your young great-grandfather travelling through time and discussing with you. I think you would be horrified by his view of the world. He would probably sound racist, sexist and anti-Semitic to some extent (everyone was, at that time). There would be things you consider normal that would shock him, and vice versa. Even though you might recognise some shared common cultural traits, you live in different worlds. Aurora and Normal Grotesk come from a different world. There is no point in attempting to revive their personality.

**DT** — What was Optimo's interest in publishing and commercialising Metodo?

**GG** — Metodo is a substantial evolution of a series of early Modernist typefaces and some elements of Aurora and Normal Grotesk still resonate in some shapes, but this is secondary indeed. It is a very sophisticated design that captures the specific physicality of the modern metal type in a contemporary digital typeface. From headlines to text size, this feature provides a subliminal substance to words and overall visual texture. This raised our interest in publishing it, as it was addressing something not yet covered by the Modernist typefaces in our library. Since then, it has been used in some beautiful projects and I always enjoy seeing how its aesthetics interact with the different contents it encounters, from art books to digital brands.

**References**

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