

Investigate the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s. Discuss the work of 3 designers who embraced this new technology to challenge the past and define the future.

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The graphic design industry was revolutionised in the mid 1980s when computer aided design was introduced (Knapp, 1997). This resulted in abrupt change in the industry. With new technology designers had “a new tool to add to the box of graphic effects” (Jones cited in Hollis, 1994, p. 191). Therefore, designers were able to complexify and experiment with their designs like never before, stemming a new style and way of working.

Traditional techniques were swapped for screens, causing original methods such as typesetting and printing to fade (Bos and Bos, 2007). The impact this change had on current designers had was huge, as they had to learn new technology and skills, to stay current and keep up in the industry. In 1984 Apple introduced the first-generation Macintosh (Mac). With Apple’s new technology the screen showed bitmap graphics in black and white with 72 pixels per inch. Due to the easier user interface designers had a higher level of control over the computer and could focus on designing (Meggs & Purvis, 2012).

With the Macintosh becoming more accessible, people who were untrained in graphics could also start designing, which lead to the traditional rules being broken and styles being experimented with, creating a new contemporary graphic style (Greiman & Martin, 2010). This was a sharp contrast to arts and crafts, art nouveau, Swiss style and modernism styles that had inspired designers no less than a century beforehand.

The first part of this essay will examine the work of David Carson who is an example of an untrained designer who utilised the accessibility of technology around the time of the digital revolution.

Carson started as a sociology teacher then went into graphics in the 80s. His design work popularised the grunge aesthetic of the time, which was in-sync with the rise of grunge as a genre of music which featured bands such as Pearl Jam and Nirvana, in the late 80s and 90s.

The next designer is type designer Zuzana Licko who began her graphics career at the start of the digital revolution and started working on Macintoshes during their first year of production. She works for *Emigre Graphics* with her designer husband Rudy VanderLans. The third Graphic designer is British designer Neville Brody, who similarly to Licko played a large part in early postmodern typography and first use of the Macintosh. Brody also excelled in the fields of Punk music album design and magazine design. He also founded his own companies and design studio, as well as more recently teaching in London's Royal College of Art (Brody Associates, 2021).

Before working in graphics David Carson was a sociology teacher. During the digital revolution in the 1980s, Carson attended a two-week graphics class that was taking place at The University of Arizona. Carson instantly enjoyed and took to the subject, he struggled to believe that something this fun could be a profession, and still says that "his work is his hobby" (Carson cited in Adobe Max, 2021). From here, Carson started his work in graphics for the magazine *Transworld Skateboarding*. Carson found the 'freedom' that the magazine gave him pivotal to his early career development as he was able to explore and push his designs, in a lifelong passion topic area of surfing a skateboarding (Carson cited in Adobe Max, 2021).

His designs for *Transworld Skateboarding* were mostly pre-digital revolution so he was using more traditional techniques. For example, the cover from 1987 used "different type treatments from the typesetter for use in paste up, here using not one section of the sheet" (Blackwell, 1995 p.32). This was a precursor to the freedom he would later experience with desktop computing.

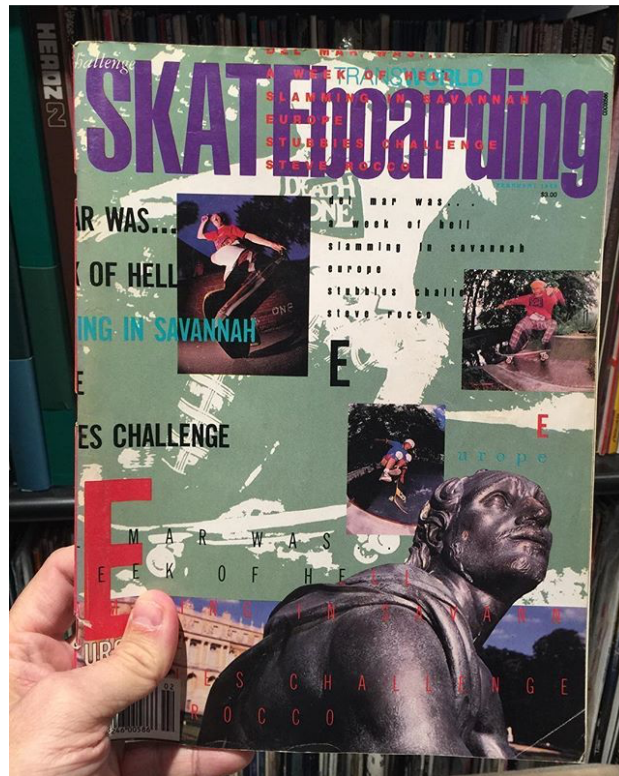


Figure 1: Transworld Skateboarding Cover, David Carson (1987)

The introduction of the Macintosh led to a variety of design styles. Even though lots of Carson's work has printed, handmade and traditional aspects, the change in design styles meant that he could work in a way that broke the traditional rules and contrasted the clean grid systems of Swiss School and Bauhaus styles.

Early use of the Macintosh can be seen in Carson's work in the publication of *Surfer* in 1992. He uses photoshop when manipulating type on a double page spread about surfing in Japan. His design shows his manipulated text contrasting the dramatic wave photos, and being one of the main sources of colour on the pages against the darker blue and black and white backgrounds (Blackwell, 1995).



Figure 2: Surfer Magazine Spreads, David Carson (1992)

Following *Transworld Skateboarding*, *Beach Culture* and *Surfer* magazines Carson became art director at *Ray Gun* magazine in 1992. Carson's designs used the grunge aesthetic, this meant that there was influence from heavy metal, rock and punk music. Rawness of the music is reflected in the design's layers, ripped edges, absence of grid, textures and distressed typography (Curtis, ND). As *Ray Gun* is a music magazine this is where Carson's grunge style came in to its own. This challenged traditional design by ignoring grid structures and the minimalist simplicity of Swiss and Bauhaus designs.

Carson worked for *Ray Gun* magazine for three years, it was at this time he had complete creative control, which was unusual for the designer to have that much independence. He then set up David Carson Design (Blackwell, 1995), under his own company, he designed for large corporate companies such as Pepsi, as well as smaller independent companies.

Despite not having a background in design, Carson became one of the most successful designers to emerge out of the digital revolution. One of the first large companies he designed for under the David Carson Design brand was Nike. He was briefed to make adverts for Nike's Air Challenge. He chose to focus on using type to make the adverts interesting. The slant of the lines, inconsistent case and size, and even the placement of the logo make this a unique design (Bond, 2020).



Figure 3: Advert for Nike's Air Challenge, David Carson (1992)

Carson's designs shaped the future of design, with many people emulating his style. Shortly after his work started to gain popularity, many graphic students who were included in the student design yearbook 1998 created designs that were very similar to Carson's style. This shows his influence on young designers and how far his influence went in reaching different audiences as his work was varied and in different areas of design.

His current work shows that Carson still has a distinctive style. Although his work has evolved over time, Carson said “I do not feel that I am reinventing myself, the work just takes its own course. Staying curious is how the work develops over time” (Carson cited in Adobe Max, 2021).

Carson is still designing for clients, his basic approach to designing is understanding who the client is, what they are trying to say, who is their audience and what their competition is doing (Carson cited in Adobe Max, 2021). Carson is still an icon in Graphic design with Masterclasses to teach others the craft, and his work is on the GCSE curriculum. His work still breaks the graphic design rules, and although not everyone is a fan of his style, there is no doubt about his natural creativity and skills.

Carson is an example of an untrained graphic designer. In contrast, Zuzana Licko is a type designer who studied architecture and graphic communications. Her career started simultaneously with the creation of the Apple Macintosh. Licko was born in Czechoslovakia but immigrated to the US as a young girl. She later went on to study at College in Berkeley (Eskilson, 2007). Licko and her husband Rudy VanderLans set up the well-respected type foundry *Emigre Graphics* together in 1984.

VanderLans originally started *Emigre* with two friends who aimed to display their own work in a self-published magazine. *Emigre Graphics* then formed a few years later and together they played a large role in the beginning of digital typesetting and editorial design, looking at the relationship between what could be seen on screen and in print (Hollis, 1994). “Emigre team acquired Apple Macintosh computers as soon as they were introduced in 1984 and set about experimenting enthusiastically with the tools” (Poynor, 2014, p.96). Due to her start in the industry at the same time as the Macintosh, Licko had a blank canvas to explore, as Macintoshes were not common in the public domain until the early 1990’s.

The new technology the Macintosh gave to designers enabled “colour, texture, image and typography to be stretched, bent, made transparent, layered and combined in unprecedented ways” (Meggs & Purvis, 2012 p. 533,). This gave more freedom and scope for the designers and typographers. With this new creative ability, a new style developed. Licko was fascinated by the idea

A key part of the new computer aesthetic was the Bitmapped typefaces (Poynor, 2014). Bit-mapped typefaces are the original low-resolution typefaces designed for 72 dots per inch (dpi). These were a key player in the start of Postmodern typography (Meggs & Purvis, 2012). Unhappy with the limited fonts available to the early Macintosh user, Licko created new Typefaces for the public domain on software such as *Font Editor*. It was these fonts that “revolutionised digital typography” (Rubinstein, 2002), these fonts included Emperor, Modular and Oakland.

Figure 4: Emperor font, Zuzana Licko (1984)

Figure 5 Modula, Zuzana Licko (1986)

Figure 6: Oakland font, Zuzana Licko (1985)

As the abilities and resolution of the Macintosh grew, Licko's designs developed, becoming more experimental and edgy. This was also helped by the start of software such as MacWrite and MacPaint (Eskilson, 2007). Licko's new typefaces were described as "controversial perhaps but never boring" and an "artistic expression" (Haley, 2001 p.96).

Presently Licko is still designing and running *Emigre*. She has revisited some of her older typefaces and adapted them to today's technology and continues to design new typefaces. For example, her *Modular* 1986 type face was updated to high resolution and round and ribbed fonts were added to the family. Swapping angular diagonal serifs for rounded ones, the font was able to come in to its own as a headline font and creating a ribbed effect from *Fontographer's* drawing tools (Emigre, 1995). This revitalised the typeface with a modern trendy twist.

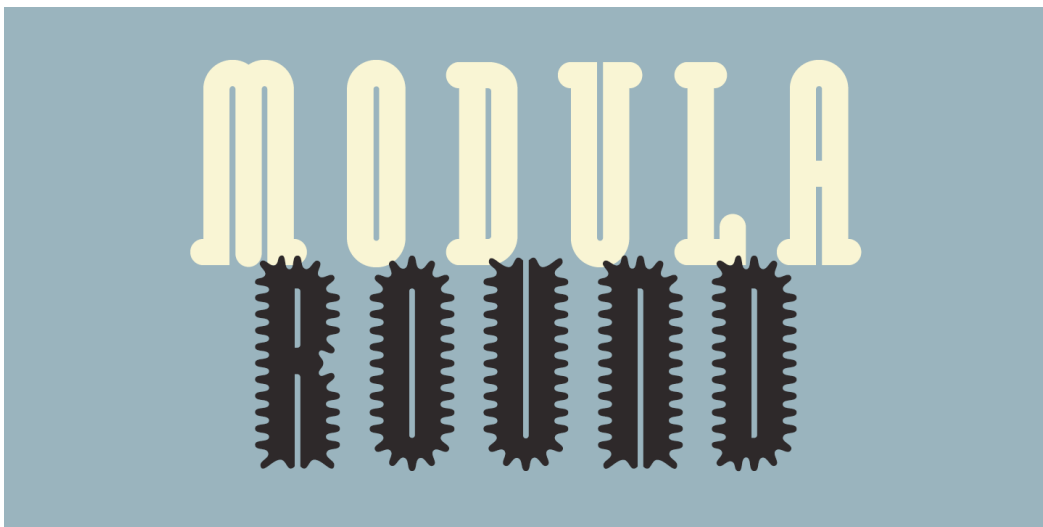


Figure 7: Modula Round and Ribbed Font, Emigre Graphics (1995)

When asked in an interview what impact the Macintosh had on design, Licko replied that the Macintosh gave an equal playing field for people and design professionals, increase the power of everyone's communication (Emigre, 2002). Another point Licko made was that it is critical that graphic designers think more strategically about their design choices (Emigre, 2002). With everything already done before, designers need to think about keeping their designs interesting whilst still being able to communicate effectively. This is something that Licko achieves in her designs by paying

homage to the computer styles of her early career, whilst embracing modern trends and making her type more appropriate for today's use.

Neville Brody is a graphic designer with broad design experience, but like Zuzana Licko, has focused on type design at points in his career. Brody was born in 1957 in London where he remained for his studies at London College of Printing (Eskilson, 2007, p.407). One of his first jobs in graphic design was working for *Fetish*, an independent record company. His time there was pre-digital revolution, so almost all work was handmade. However, some of his work still looked as if it had been made using the computer, with the complexity of a cluttered layered look, which suited some of the Punk bands Record covers he was designing (Eskilson, 2007, p.359).



Figure 8: Diddy Wah Diddy Record Cover, Neville Brody (1980)

Brody's design of the *Diddy Wah Diddy* record cover shows the textures of painted backgrounds mixed with mark makings. One of Brody's colleagues, graphic designer Jon Wozencroft, author of *Graphic Language of Brody* thought that the design was grotesque and macabre due to the "lack of human expression" (1998, p.54). The viewer can also see the mixed manipulated type and the layers used even though this is predating the Macintosh.

Brody started working in graphic design around the time when new languages and new technology emerged, resulting in a cultural and aesthetic shift within graphic design. During this time, there were conflicting attitudes amongst designers around the use and potential use of computers.

However, like Zuzana Licko, Brody was an early adaptor of Macintosh technology in 1985. In an interview, he claimed that “the Macintosh enables the idea to be translated into a clear communicative graphic design. But the thinking behind it has nothing to do with that process” (Brody cited in Eye magazine, 1994). Brody was a forerunner in using this technology and using it to suit the chaos of his punk designs. Brody went on to say that “They haven’t yet realised that the computer isn’t just a tool – it’s a language in itself” (Brody cited in Eye magazine, 1994). This could be because forms can be manipulated on a computer, compared with the constraints of earlier printing techniques. Brody tamed Punk style for his work with *The Face* magazine, exposing to consumers to the aesthetic (Hollis, 1994). Along with *The Face* magazine Brody published *Fuse*, which showcased experimental fonts, and founded *FontShop International* with Designer Erik Spiekermann. Although his work is highly acclaimed and suits the punk aesthetic, it could be argued that his layers and clashing colours mean that his style is not as transferable as cleaner, grid structure designs.

Brody played a key part in postmodern typography. His work with *The Face* transformed the conventional layout of magazines by using unique letterforms for headlines often using the art deco style of geometric shapes. These were a combination of computer-generated designs and made styles (Hollis, 1994). He “never learnt the rules of correct typography, which left him free to invent working methods and spatial configurations” (Meggs & Purvis, 2012, p.481). Brody exposed postmodern design in typography to the public more than any other British designer. This created a new generation of graphic artists that would reject the traditional conventions of typography (Eskison, 2007).

Brody’s impact on typography increased when he co-founded *FontShop International*, a platform where designers could publish their created typefaces (Eskilson, 2007, p.407). Brody’s involvement and creation of this platform allows all designers to get their work seen and celebrate the fact that anyone could design type if they had a computer with Macromedia’s *Fotographer*. Brody supports

this by saying “with the personal computer, there was an opportunity to democratize the fiefdom of typographic design. Finally, we could work with a number of people and explore ideas that challenged our core notions of what typographic language should be” (Brody cited by Heller, 1999). The introduction of the personal computer put design opportunities into the hands of the general public and Brody was in full support of this shift in design.

Throughout his career Brody has been influenced by Geometric style from Russian constructivism and ideas of Dada (Meggs & Purvis, 2012) as well as his own personal political and philosophical views. That can be seen in his progression of work and career path, as he brings attention to the future of creative education when he was Art Director of Design and Art Direction and becoming a professor at London’s Royal College of Art (Brody Associates, 2021). Along with Carson, Brody is also studied on the GCSE curriculum, showing his prominence in the graphic design world.

In summary, the digital revolution provided a new way of designing, not only developing new techniques but a way of pushing and investigating how traditional techniques could be experimented with. All three designers studied used the Macintosh in their own style and different fields of graphic design, in a new way of creating designs or to develop pre revolution styles.

These designers have impacted my own practice in the past, now and in the future. I studied Carson at A level and was tasked with creating designs influenced by Carson’s style. I liked Carson’s approach when using some of the more traditional techniques and then manipulating them on the computer, and I carried this approach into some of my current designs. However, I did not like the chaos and lack of grid and structure in Carson’s work, so I moved away from this style and developed a cleaner style. I feel that Zuzana Licko will influence my future designs as she was a pioneer in digital typography and typography is something I only learned since I started studying at degree level. I aspire to gain a deeper understanding of typography as this is key part within professional practice. Being such a big name in graphic design, Brody has been influential without necessarily

attributing the designs to him. All three have had such an impact in graphics history that it is difficult for them not to have had influenced my work in some way.

This essay has provided a mix of male and female designers from different parts of the world, starting at various points before or during the digital revolution. For David Carson and Neville Brody, their work started before the rise of the Macintosh, and adapted their work to the new technology.

All three designers used design software available with Macintosh computers, showing that Macintosh was prominent for changing the face of design in the digital revolution.

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