White Space in Editorial Design

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Abstract. This reflection on white space in editorial design is due to the fact that we consider this aspect of particular importance and we think that it is often forgotten and treated as an acquired fact. We consider white space as one of the primordial elements of design, insofar as it is through contrast that perception becomes possible, and if there is printed matter, there will always have to be corresponding white. We characterize the white space, according to the formal configuration and the function, and we try to understand it through the brief analysis of three works by Sebastião Rodrigues, an important Portuguese designer. We reinforce the need of white space, in the accelerated and hyper-populated society we live in, as a means of achieving silence and emptiness.

Keywords: Editorial design · White space · Expressivity · Readability

1 Introduction

The white, or the absence of printed matter in editorial design, is taken for granted, and there's little reflection about it. We give importance to the graphic elements, their sizes, proportions, relationships and layouts, but we seldom think about the support as an element as important as the shapes which rest on it. Therefore, we consider pertinent to focus this study on the white space.

If we make an analogy between graphic and musical composition, we observe that, like in music there are moments of silence which give meaning to the sounds, in editorial design there is white, which indicates pause, marks stopping moments and makes the visual elements understandable and expressive. It is not by chance that the paragraph indication is done by a white space, or that the noblest pages of a book contain a large amount of white (or empty) space, e.g., the frontispiece, the title page and some separators.

As Bringhurst tells us, "Sizing and spacing type, like composing and performing music or applying paint to canvas, is largely concerned with intervals and differences" [1]. These intervals are given precisely by the white of the page. Likewise, Bringhurst also states "Perhaps fifty per cent of the character and integrity of a printed page lies in its letterforms. Much of the other fifty per cent resides in its margins." [2], which, again, considers white space as having the same degree of importance as graphics.

2   Editorial Design: Typographic Elements and White Space

In the scope of editorial design and typography, we can consider that there are four types of elements. Besides the macro and microtipography referred by Hochuli [3], we can also consider the mesotipography and the paratipography – concepts introduced by Stöckl [4].

Microtipography, or detail typography, is linked to the individual components – letters, space between letters, words, space between words, lines and leading and columns of text. Macrotipography – or typographic layout – is related to the format, size and position of text columns and illustrations, and with the definition of hierarchies for headings, subheadings, texts, captions, etc. [5]. Mesotipography, in the sense of Stöckl, presents some common points with microtipography. It is related to the configuration of typographic signs in lines and blocks of text, considering elements such as spacing between words and lines, the amount of printing on a page (and its composition), typographic alignments and also position and direction of the lines, as well as the combination of typefaces. Paratipography relates to the materials, instruments and techniques used to produce graphic objects. It concerns with the quality of materials or media, such as paper, for example [6].

Similarly, we can also consider that white space is classified into four groups, which can be called micro-white space, macro-white space, meso-white space and para-white space. Among these four types of white space, the ones that we consider most pertinent to this study are the micro white space – present between the smallest elements, such as characters, and between the lines – and the macro-white space – among the main graphic elements, such as text columns, paragraphs, or margins.

If we analyse white space from the function point of view, we can consider that there are two types: the passive and the active. The passive white space is the one that occurs more naturally and is related to the micro white space – being present, for example, in the leading and kerning. The active white space is inserted in a more intentional way, with the purpose of creating emphasis, structuring and determine certain flows of reading [7].

3   Micro or Passive – White Space

Although having a less affirmative function in editorial design, micro-white space or passive white space, plays a fundamental role in it. If we consider the type characters – the most elemental typographic unit – the form only exists as opposed to the counterform. In other words, white spaces allow the delimitation of forms and determine the visual characteristics inherent to each typeface. As Gerrit Nordzij states, "the relation between form and counterform, (…) which in writing is equivalent to the relation between black and white, is the basic foundation of perception" [8]. And "writing is based on the relative proportions of the word's white. The various types of writing, with their various constructions and their various shapes, can only be compared to each other in the terms of the white of the words (…)" [9], being "the white of the word (…) the only tool to keep letters together" [10].

In the same way, Gerard Unger also reinforces this importance of white space: "Letterforms are not the only things that enable us to read. Just as important for legibility are the spaces between and within the individual letters and words (…). If you design types, you also design their spaces" [11].

Indeed, because of this assumption, defining font spacing is one of the most important type designer's tasks, and the calculation of these spaces is not done by computer programs or mathematical formulas, it is defined through the typographer's look and sensibility, taking into account that there must be a relation between the interior spaces of the letters and the spaces around them. In this process (called fitting), each character must be given the space to ensure that all characters, regardless of the order in which they appear in the text, will create a uniform pattern, not a text that appears too tight or too wide [12]. All efforts, therefore, go towards Mathew Carter's famous statement: "Type is a beautiful group of letters, not a group of beautiful letters."

The intervention of the designer as typefaces' user also contributes to this aspect. The essence of his work lies in the proper distribution of white space between the various elements. Most of the typographic rules (which can be learned) go precisely in this sense. It is the case of spaces between letters and words, leading, and above all, the correct spacing of prominent texts (headings, for example), in order to form harmonious groups of letters and words.

The idea of the micro or passive white space, as a discrete and reading facilitator element, also leads us to the "invisibility" of the text, defended by Beatrice Warde in *The Crystal Gobelet* [13], published in 1932. In this text, Warde defends the idea that typography should not be interposed between the reader and the text, but rather must, as a crystal glass, be a transparent container. In the same line of thought, Robert Bringhurst also states that typography should be like a transparent statue [14], which abdicates the attention of the reader to enable the act of reading.

4   Macro or Active – White Space

In the graphic design practise, the most visible aspect is the one related to the expressivity, given through the manipulation of macro active white space. This expressivity can be divided essentially into two types: one related to harmony, balance, comfort and reading flow (following the concept of micro white space), and another related to contrast, asymmetry and the drawing attention to certain elements.

The use of active macro white space to achieve harmony grants balance and legibility to the pages. These pages will always have an inherent expressivity, but the final purpose is not the expressive affirmation. However, we should not deem that this kind of use is of less importance (though often considered less creative), because it comprises properties that make a work pleasant or unpleasant to read, as Bringhurst describes: "The page is a piece of paper. It is also a visible and tangible proportion, silently sounding the thoroughbass of the book. On it lies the textblock, which must answer to the page. The two together – page and textblock – produce an antiphonal geometry. That geometry alone can bond the reader to the book. Or conversely, it can put the reader to sleep, or put the reader's nerves on edge, or drive the reader away [15].

In this context, the active macro white space lies in the margins, in the space between columns, in the space between images and texts and in the spaces between the various hierarchical components of the text. A very useful resource to define and keep constant these parameters is the grid, a tool widely studied and explored in graphic design. It is in the balance of all the elements – interdependent among each other and in relation to the format – that resides the quality of a graphic object, according to readability. Or, as Bringhurst epitomizes: "Think of the blank page as alpine meadow, or as the purity of undifferentiated being. The typographer enters this space and must change it. The reader will enter it later, to see what the typographer has done. The underlying truth of the blank page must be infringed, but it must never altogether disappear - and whatever displaces it might well aim to be as lively and peaceful as it is" [16].

The concepts of contrast and asymmetry were especially developed in the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Bauhaus and New Typography, which brought about a greater depuration of typography and editorial design. By then, designers began to attribute more expressive character to the pages, through the asymmetry in the arrangement of elements, the use of simple geometric shapes and sans serif typography. And in this context, white space has gained a more prominent role (along with the graphic elements), assuming itself as a factor of expressivity in a more conscious and affirmative way, not determined by the rules of readability, but by the designer's creativity.

5   White Space in Sebastião Rodrigues's Work

To illustrate what we have been referring to, we will focus on some works by the designer Sebastião Rodrigues – a major name in the Portuguese graphic design history. We show, therefore, cases in which the micro-white space is assumed as the main factor to be controlled, others in which the objective of the macro white space is to achieve harmony and readability and others where the purpose is the expressivity, through the asymmetrical placement of the elements.

In Sebastião Rodrigues's work there is a great concern with the micro-white space, mainly in headings (of posters or publications), in which the designer corrected the spacing meticulously. Having developed the profession in a pre-computer age, he used to cut out and glue letters into small pieces of cardboard, to photograph and produce the artwork.

Figures 1 and 2 shows us posters designed by Sebastião Rodrigues for the Monastery of Batalha, where we can observe the micro-spacing aspects we referred. The letters cut and pasted into cardboard, allow the handling and positioning in the correct place, to achieve the perfect composition. In some of these cases, there was also a change in the character design and even its overlap.
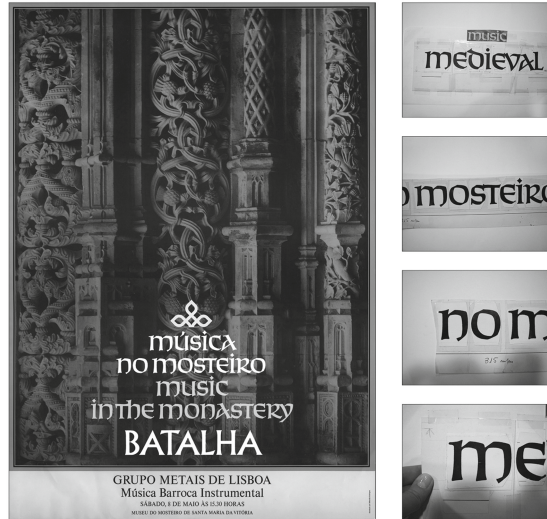
Fig. 1. Poster "Música no Mosteiro da Batalha", 1981, 48 × 68.2 cm, Mosteiro da Batalha, Museu do Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Vitória. (Source: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Art Library, Author's photo).

Fig. 2. Poster "Imaginária Medieval" (Exposição), 1984, 50.°— 70 cm, Mosteiro da Batalha, Museu do Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Vitória. (Source: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, ArtLibrary, Author's photo).

Considering harmony and readability, we can see how the macro white space can be used, observing the work "O Papel-Moeda em Portugal" (Paper-Money in Portugal) [Fig. 3].
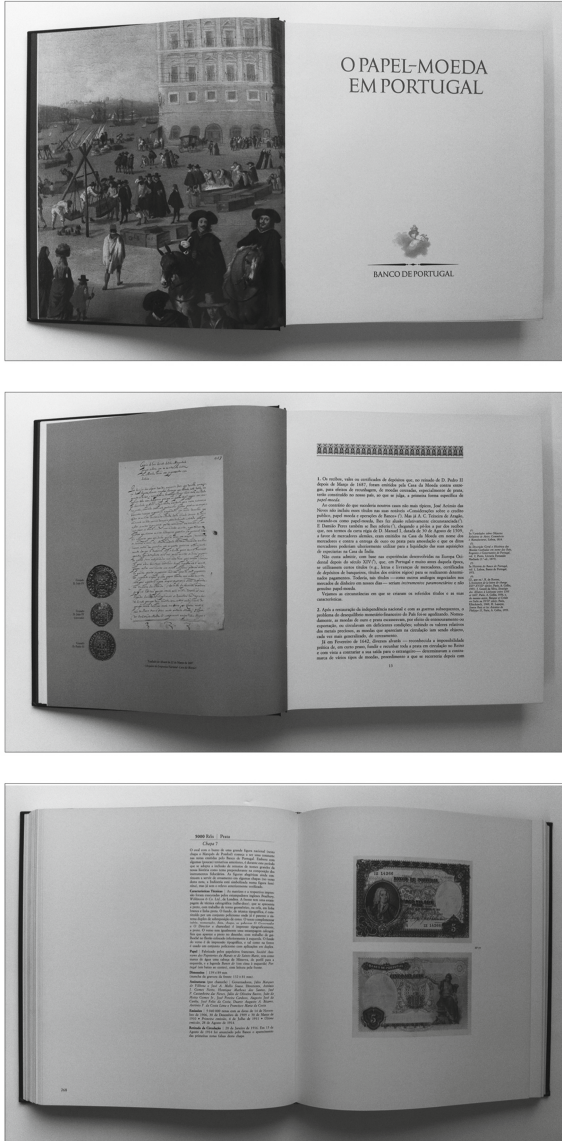

Fig. 3. Book "O Papel-moeda em Portugal", 1985. 28.5 × 31.5 cm, Banco de Portugal. 502 p. (Source: Author's photo).

In this work, in addition to the first pages, there are three main typologies of pages that convey different information: main text pages, secondary text pages and pages with images and their descriptions. The format of the book is 28.5 × 31.5 cm and has a symmetrical grid, in which the outer margins are bigger than the interior ones, existing in the outer margin a column reserved for the notes. All page typologies present a large amount of white, letting the graphic elements "breathe". In addition to the function of establishing favourable conditions for reading, this white space gives prominence to text blocks and especially to images, which appear in colour on almost empty pages. This large amount of white also conveys to the object the idea of quality and luxury.

In the work "Museus Porquê?" (Why Museums?) [Fig. 4] we can observe the use of the macro active white space in a more intentional way, with texts arranged in an expressive and communicative way, varying the elements scales and exaggerating some of them. White is here assumed as an expressive surface in contrast to the black of typography.

In this work there is a large amount of white, but it doesn't appear as luxurious as "O Papel-Moeda em Portugal" (The Paper Money in Portugal), partly due to the small format (17 × 17 cm) and to the irreverent arrangement of the elements. It is a publication that provides a rhythmic and interesting reading that stimulates curiosity and arrests the reader. This is essential considering the topic. It is intended to captivate public for museums, so the graphic object has to contradict the preconceived idea that museums are too serious and boring places.

6   Final Remarks

We can therefore conclude that white space always plays a major role in the communication, regardless the scale in which it is used and the communicative strategy of the graphic object.

However, to think of white as matter, reminds us about movable type, in which, like the characters, the whites were made of metal pieces, differentiated only by a bas-relief (not to be printed). In this sense, we must mention the poster that Sebastião Rodrigues designed using typographic whites (printing them), achieving an abstract texture, designed to promote a series of conferences [Fig. 5].

Since graphic design and its effectiveness depends on the rhythm, we can consider the white or the emptiness the element that allows to mark cadences and to define speeds and stops, through the contrast. It is not by chance that several authors establish parallels between music and typographic relations.

From another perspective, and considering the crowded with messages world we live in, focusing the attention on the blank or empty space in pages may be an interesting communication strategy. Our society is experiencing an accelerated time where there is little room for contemplation and silence. A page in which the white assumes a more notorious presence can be an important opposition, not only as a requirement to the ideal conditions for reading, but also as a philosophical attitude. It is no coincidence that nowadays so many talk about life-deceleration strategies, such as meditation, mindfulness or slow food, for example. The world is becoming aware that it needs time, space

Fig. 4. Brochure "Museus Porquê?", 1972, 17 × 17 cm, MNAA, 20 p. (Source: Author's photo).

Fig. 5. Poster "Para uma Compreensão do nosso Tempo", 1969, 44.1 × 44.1 cm, MNAA. (Source: Author's photo).

and emptiness. The white in the graphic design intends to be a little of that space and emptiness, because, as Kenya Hara states, "'There is emptiness' in white, and there is also 'white' in emptiness" [17].

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