Freaks of Fancy, Revisited: Nineteenth-Century Ornamented Typography in the Twenty-First Century
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Introduction

In a treatise published in 1902, Connecticut-born printer Theodore Low De Vinne emphasizes the excesses embodied by the previous century’s typefaces in a disparaging quasi-obituary:

The old craving for highly ornamented letters seems to be dead; it receives no encouragement from type-founders. Printers have been surfeited with ornamented letters that did not ornament and did degrade composition, and that have been found, after many years of use, frail, expensive, and not attractive to buyers.1

De Vinne’s remarks offer a glimpse of an ongoing debate over typographic excess that had emerged in nineteenth-century printing discourse, alongside the industrialization of the type-founding and printing trades. The ornamented types critiqued by De Vinne flourished in this context, although anxieties about industrialization were often expressed, as in De Vinne’s writing, through critiques of such decorative letterforms and the compositions in which they were displayed.2 Ellen Mazur Thomson has shown that ideas often associated with modernism—in particular, “its anti-eclecticism and belief that design had a mission to reform the excesses of industrialization”—were very much in evidence in late-nineteenth-century American printing trade periodicals.3 However, De Vinne’s declaration, which would seem to presage the advent of modernist graphic design discourse in the United States, is followed by an acknowledgment that ornamented types had not disappeared but rather had migrated to other platforms. “To see the wildest freaks of fancy,” he writes, “one must seek them not in the specimen books of type-founders, but in the photo-engraved lettering made for display advertisements and tradesmen’s [sic] pamphlets.”4

1 Theodore Low De Vinne, The Practice of Typography; A Treatise on the Processes of Type-Making, the Point System, the Names, Sizes, Styles and Prices of Plain Printing Types (New York: The Century Co., 1902), 359.
4 De Vinne, The Practice of Typography, 360.
Marginalized through much of the twentieth century, the ornamented typography associated with nineteenth-century job printing has long had a penchant for relocating to new modes of production: from letterpress to photoengraving, from specimen book pages to filmstrips, from metal and wood to PostScript and TrueType. The fascination with these forms has persisted in the twenty-first century, with the launch of online collections of digitized letterpress fonts, as well as the publication and republication of several volumes on topics related to nineteenth-century typography and printing. Contemporary digital fonts, like Playbill and Circus, are drawn directly from their nineteenth-century ornamented ancestors, and they appear widely in online and print ephemera of the past 15 years.

In her classic compendium of Victorian ornamented types, Nicolete Gray describes nineteenth-century ornamented typography as “one of the folk arts of early industrial society.” More recently, Simon Loxley has written that these typefaces represent a period of “growing commercial vigor.” In the context of twenty-first-century anxieties about digital media, the compositional methods and typefaces once associated with industrial labor practices, commercialism, and mass production have come to represent the pinnacle of handcraft. Recent engagements with nineteenth-century ornamented typography present provocative possibilities for understanding how historical forms are mobilized in our contemporary political and economic moment, further illuminating how typography can be harnessed to rewrite history.

In this article, I argue that deciphering digital design culture through pre-digital design forms and practices, and building graphical associations between contemporary multinational capitalism and industrial print culture, construct purposeful continuities between past and present by aligning nineteenth- and twenty-first-century modes of production. These alignments, balanced precariously on fraught cultural divisions between hand-made/machine-made and authentic/artificial, are resolutely ahistorical, yet they speak volumes about the dynamics of information capitalism, deindustrialization, and recession in recent U.S. history. I analyze twenty-first-century typographic mobilizations of nineteenth-century-ness for the different ways in which they build continuities with nineteenth-century modes of production, and in particular for the ways they underscore processes and build narratives of these modes. My analysis focuses on two genres of neo-nineteenth-century typographic revivals: heritage letterpress fetishism and digital revivalism. The former genre is nostalgic, with nineteenth-century typographic materials representing an imagined return to authentic handcraft. The latter is future-facing, engaging antiquated styles to confer legitimacy upon new digital design practices.


Good Machines: Letterpress Fetishism

Twenty-first-century letterpress fetishism draws from a broader cultural nostalgia for the handmade, based in craft discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By both materially and rhetorically binding multiple modes of graphical production, designers can build narrative associations between industrial-era typography, digital typography, and the human hand. These associations are rooted in historical conjunctions between production methods but are mobilized in the service of nostalgia. Esther Leslie has analyzed Walter Benjamin’s engagement with Marxist ideas concerning the relationship between machine and worker under industrial capitalism, which hinges upon a transition from workers’ use of machines (craft) to machines’ use of workers (industry). Benjamin constructs his own rhetoric of authenticity and redemption through craft practice, and Leslie argues that the hand is the site of nostalgia for Benjamin, insofar as it is key in both craft and storytelling.

Problems with this craft-to-industry narrative are revealed in contemporary revivalist genres like steampunk. A literary subgenre of Neo-Victorian science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction, steampunk emerged in the late twentieth century and often adopts nineteenth-century machinery, aesthetics, and social perspectives while simultaneously incorporating anachronistic technologies from an imagined future. Artist Art Donovan links steampunk to contemporary do-it-yourself (DIY) and maker culture, aligning diverse steampunk artists and practitioners under the rubric of dissatisfaction with “the injection-molded plastic design of today’s mass-produced products” and a shared investment in “crafting a romantic new standard for modern goods by taking traditional nineteenth century materials and applying them to twenty-first century technology.”

Elizabeth Guffey highlights steampunk’s rejection of industrial capitalist production methods, writing that steampunk draws “from the rich craft and skill-based traditions and evokes the spirit of John Ruskin and William Morris in their call for material engagement.” Morris and his colleagues rejected the industrialized production methods of late-nineteenth-century commercial printing as emblematic of the evils of industrial capitalism. Their Gothic-inspired fine printing was situated within a larger reformist narrative of reviving authentic pre-industrial craft.

Doug Clouse and Angela Voulangas attribute the recent resurgence of interest in nineteenth-century ornamented type partly to the popularization of steampunk. However, such uses of nineteenth-century ornamented typography represent a significant departure from Arts and Crafts reformism insofar as they inculeate an ambivalent nostalgia both for anti-industrial craft
reformism and for Industrial Age commercialism alike. Glenn Adamson has located the roots of this ambivalence in early discourses of industrialization itself, arguing that craft did not prefigure industry but emerged alongside it as its “other,” a static figure of traditional practice against which industrial capitalism might be defined. Industrialization, he argues, did not threaten or destroy the work of artisans so much as it fundamentally repositioned both their cultural roles and their everyday practices. “From the Arts and Crafts movement around the turn of the century through to the Studio Craft movement, the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s, and today’s fashionable DIY scene,” Adamson writes, “the constant has been that craft is an antidote to modernity.”

In the context of the printing history of the United States, Adamson’s characterization of the field is apt. Much printed matter produced in the nineteenth-century United States was created not by factory-style printing offices but by individual job printers operating small-scale, hand- and foot-powered presses, and many type foundries were slow to adopt mechanical typesetting technologies. Similarly, letterpress has been continually used alongside offset printing and digital print design. Still, some contemporary letterpress printers dealing in commercial ephemera, such as posters, invitations, and business cards, employ a rhetoric of preserving the past through the continued use of historical production tools and processes. The continued use of old types is not simply an instance of printers’ stubbornly refusing to excise outmoded materials from their collections—a practice described in Rob Roy Kelly’s 1977 edition of American Wood Type—but rather constitutes a declaration of identity. Contemporary typographic allusions to industrial age craftsmanship pay a striking homage to their nineteenth-century precedents when they engage both mechanical and digital platforms, echoing that period’s slippage between technical modes of production.

Some twenty-first-century letterpress printers are comfortable positioning their work at the intersection of past and present. The Minnesota-based Kenspeckle Letterpress uses the tagline “19th Century Solutions to 21st Century Problems” on its website, and the “About” section blithely places the work of the shop’s two founding members in these different centuries. Other letterpress outfits have been known to conflate a fetish for letterpress with a somewhat spurious neo-luddism. The Nashville-based Hatch Show Print letterpress shop was founded in 1879 and continues to use century-old display fonts. In a 1995 interview, manager Jim Sherraden distinguished his shop’s work from other local printers: “[W]e’re not competing with them; computers and offset presses simply have no place in this shop.” Although Sherraden and his team have branded the shop as a resolutely non-digital space for

decades, Hatch Show Print has a website, as well as active Instagram and Twitter accounts. The company’s history page describes the shop’s work as “the antithesis of digital design,” adding: “Hatch Show Print looks forward to carrying on the 19th-century traditions and practices of the letterpress poster shop it was founded as three generations ago.” In such cases, the simultaneous coalescence and conflict of nineteenth- and twenty-first-century printing technologies is expressed through the use of decorative display typefaces once associated with cheap, mass-produced commercial ephemera but now linked with handcraft.

In some recent corporate advertising campaigns, nineteenth-century ornamented typography has been used to convey the harmony of craft and industry. The typography used in the ongoing Guts Glory RAM campaign, launched circa-2011 by the Dallas-based Richards Group advertising agency, features digital adaptations of original nineteenth-century lead type in print, television, and web advertisements for the RAM truck company. In this campaign, letterpress is both style and process and, moreover, style as process. The ads reveal what is under the hood, so to speak, of contemporary graphical practice: a heritage of metal and wood type absorbed seamlessly into digital workflow, and a series of historical references yielding hybrid forms with polysemic cultural currency. To create the campaign’s typography, the creative team created a custom “digital letterpress.” Marketing scholar Stephen Brown has described this hybrid of old-fashioned styling and contemporary hi-tech as Repro Nova, a genre of retromarketing. The RAM digital letterpress includes images not only of letterforms, but of every physical component of the letterpress printing process: the chase, or the metal frame that contains composed letterpress type; furniture, or the wood or metal blocks used to hold type in place and create space within the page composition; the reglets and leading used to fill smaller gaps between pieces and lines of type, respectively; and quoins, used to lock the compositional elements into place within the chase. In the advertisements, all of these elements converge to create a digital simulation of a physical letterpress forme, horizontally reversed to render the type legible.

The 21st-century RAM emblem coexists with vintage typography in all of these digitally designed ads, including a font that bears a marked resemblance to a William Page foundry typeface that can be found in digital form as the Wooden Type Fonts foundry’s William Page 500. Boundaries between modes of production are further transgressed in a 30-second television advertisement, “Guts & Glory: Letterpress,” shot at the International Printing Museum in 2011. The ad showcases a performance of setting custom-made, left-to-right-reading metal type props around a
metal RAM emblem on a press bed. The Richards Group has explicitly connected this production process to that of its client, linking the heritage of craftsmanship in printing and design to its client’s manufacturing ethos.24

Once a product of the Dodge brand, RAM is an artifact of the rise and fall of U.S. car manufacturing. Chrysler, once one of the “big three” U.S. auto manufacturers and parent company of Dodge, has undergone three major financial bailouts, culminating in a $4 billion bailout from the Bush administration in 2008.25 After Chrysler’s Chapter 11 reorganization in 2009, RAM was established the following year as a separate brand. The Richards group campaign was a crucial component of this rebranding process in the wake of Chrysler’s Great Recession crisis. The U.S. auto industry was at the center of the media discourse about U.S. manufacturing’s decline in the final decades of the twentieth century, as well as that of the Great Recession of the twenty-first. In this light, the Guts Glory RAM campaign’s aesthetic investment in nineteenth-century machinery offers salvation by association with the birth of the U.S. industry.

Within this context, the hybrid aesthetic of digital letterpress helps to convey a narrative of unbroken U.S. industrial power by forging visible connections between the production methods of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. That the typographic products of this era simultaneously represent skilled handcraft and industrial power is appropriate, considering the coexistence of hand and machine during the industrialization of the printing trades and the rise of commercial graphics in the nineteenth century. Yet RAM’s rebranding efforts, as well as the context surrounding them, also constitute a conduit between a myth of U.S. industrial might and the realities of deindustrialization—the decline of manufacturing in affluent countries like the United States.26 By forging connections between nineteenth-century letterpress processes and materials, digital design methods, and mass-produced machinery, the campaign demonstrates how some corporations have, like steampunks, purposefully re-imagined nineteenth-century convergences of hand and machine. However, in this contemporary corporate folklore, a troubled and complex labor history is replaced by a romantic symbiosis between workers and industrial production methods.

This fetish for imagined history is akin to Arjun Appadurai’s concept of the “imagined nostalgia” invoked by mass advertising, which is linked to revivalism but also to the ways in which consumption practices construct time:

…consumption not only creates time, through its periodicities, but the workings of ersatz nostalgia create the simulacra of periods that constitute the flow of time,

conceived of as lost, absent, or distant. Thus, the forward-looking habituation to predictable styles, forms, and genres, which drives commodity consumption onward as a multiplicative and open-ended activity, is powered by an implosive, retrospective construction of time, in which repetition is itself an artifact of ersatz nostalgia and imagined precursory moments.\(^{27}\)

The RAM campaign’s romance is rendered plausible through the atmospheric perspective of a distant past reimagined by and for a current manifestation of capitalism, rife with its own oppressive convergences of hands, machines, and networks. This romance speaks aptly to the present-day convolutions of production methods and socioeconomic structures. Writing for the New York Times in 2008, Penelope Green has traced the growing similarities between the labor practices of DIY “makers” and factory production methods, whereby an “anti-industrial, anti-institutional, and highly entrepreneurial” twenty-first century craft movement has synchronized with corporations (e.g., Urban Outfitters, West Elm) that are cashing in on the “handmade look.”\(^{28}\) In an article for *American Craft* published the same year, Sabrina Gschwandtner quotes artist and business owner Stephanie Syjuco, who identifies growing similarities between the labor practices of DIY “makers” and factory production methods: “[I]n some cases, you’re pumping out these things and acting like a machine. What’s the difference between doing that and sending it out to people in China?”\(^{29}\)

The examples above construct imagined precursory moments by importing nineteenth-century materials and practices into digital platforms and distorting them. As Lev Manovich has argued, contemporary design aesthetics have been defined not by software, but by the import/export operations inherent to digital workflow.\(^{30}\) Contemporary mobilizations of nineteenth-century ornamented typography demonstrate that the operations of this workflow also have a historical function, compelling nineteenth-century typography to rewrite itself in the voice of the twenty-first.

**Bad Machines: Digital Revivalism**

The New England type foundry, William Page and Company, released its *Specimens of Chromatic Wood Type, Borders, Etc.* in 1874. The specimen features nearly 100 pages of display type and ornaments designed for printing in two or more colors, often layering to produce a three-color effect.\(^{31}\) Clarendon Ornamented, which had debuted in the foundry’s 1859 specimen (see Figure 1), lent itself readily to a chromatic infusion. The typeface’s heavy shadows, alongside interior shading pierced by spearhead-like shapes, could accommodate three colors to striking effect (see Figure 2).


Figure 1

Figure 2
Ninety years after the publication of the Page chromatic specimen, the Headliners International phototype supplier released a catalog of typefaces culled from the Morgan Press Type Collection, a repository of nineteenth-century wood types collected by publisher and printer Douglas O. Morgan. “W 105,” the phototype adaptation of Clarendon Ornamented, was one of the 129 typefaces featured in the Headliners catalog, and it appears prominently, in two colors, on the cover. In a 2007 obituary for Morgan, Steven Heller attributes Push Pin Studios’ interest in Victorian type to the Morgan Press Type Collection, which began selling types to designers in the late 1950s; John Alcorn, who designed and illustrated the Headliners catalog, had been a member of Push Pin during this period. One page of the catalog reimagines Gertrude Stein’s famous word play, featuring the word ROSE in a monolith of six nineteenth-century ornamented typefaces alongside an illustration of a dancer’s body blooming from bright pink petals (see Figure 3). W 105, the only open-style typeface of the bunch, is filled with the same pink hue.

Figure 3

Phototypesetting, now obsolete, was used widely in the 1960s, disrupting the dominance of hot metal typesetting systems like Linotype by incorporating photographic processing techniques into layout and printing. Film negatives of individual letterforms could be manipulated to the desired size and projected onto a strip of film, which would then be mechanically processed for use in layout. Phototypesetting machines ran on punched tape, a system of data storage with roots in the mechanical looms of early textile manufacturing that was also used to store data in early computing technologies. Hot metal machines—notably, Tolbert Lanston’s Monotype System—had been tape-driven since the 1880s, but high-speed phototypesetting represented a powerful integration of the efficiencies of computing into the printing process. By the mid-1960s, the high-speed phototypesetter was one of several computer-driven machines used in print communication.

Headliner’s W 105 is a product of the social, economic, and technical developments that braid together the histories of computing and graphic design. As the output of obsolete technologies, it is also a casualty of that nexus. Still, W 105 might be considered the logical link between Clarendon Ornamented and Rosewood (see Figure 4), its present-day digital counterpart. Imagining that the name is a dual reference to lumber and to John Alcorn’s typographic blooms is tempting, although no evidence supports this connection. Rosewood, alongside other wood type adaptations, such as Pepperwood and Zebrawood, debuted in the Adobe Originals digital font collection in 1994. The font has been attributed to Carol Twombly, Kim Buker Chansler, and Carl Crossgrove, although sources do not always agree on the particulars of this attribution. The description of the Rosewood font family, currently available on the Adobe Typekit website, offers up the 1874 Page specimen as the font’s direct antecedent. This rhetorical link to the nineteenth century plays a small but significant role in Adobe’s innovation narrative.

In 1982, Adobe developed its PostScript programming language, critical to the development of desktop publishing in that decade, and licensed it to Apple. Subsequently Adobe turned its attention to developing professional-grade fonts for digital platforms, and Sumner Stone was hired as the company’s first Director of Typography in 1984. Stone led the team tasked with building the PostScript font library, which was later released as the Adobe Originals series and used typefaces licensed from the Linotype

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and ITC foundries. In a string of Adobe Typekit blog posts commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Originals series, Stone’s approach to digital typography is described as a fusion of multiple platforms and practices. He is quoted as saying: “On the second day I was at Adobe, I had them move a drawing table into my office, just to indicate that it wasn’t just on the computer that we design typefaces.”

In 1988, Stone hired designer Carol Twombly to develop a series of historical fonts for the Adobe Originals, including the now well-known Trajan font, as well as a set of fonts based on nineteenth-century wood types that includes Zebra-wood, Cottonwood, and Rosewood. According to Twombly, Stone had asked her to develop “some really solid historical revivals to prove that this new medium can live up to the metal type and the phototype industries. Because nobody really knew if that was true yet—even us.”

Adobe’s typographic engagement with revivalism—as a means not only of building continuity with existing professional practices among clients but also of tackling the implications of the new medium—can be viewed dialectically. To illustrate, in her comprehensive analysis of Walter Benjamin’s unfinished Arcades Project, Susan Buck-Morss interprets Benjamin’s description of the historicist architectural ornament used on the iron-and-glass arcades (which were the nineteenth-century precursors to indoor shopping centers) as a dialectical claim about the relationship between mass cultural artifacts and social structures:

> By attaching themselves as surface ornamentation to the industrial and technological forms which have just come into existence, collective wish images imbue the merely new with radical political meaning, inscribing visibly on the products of the new means of production an ur-image of the desired social ends of their development. In short, even as they mask the new, these archaic images provide a symbolic representation of what the human, social meaning of technological change is about.

For Benjamin, to invoke the past through new technological platforms is a symbolic act that employs historical forms to interpret new technologies, and thus to project desires for the future.

Scholars of media history have developed frameworks for understanding this dialectic in the context of digital culture. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued that remediation, or the refashioning of previous media forms in new media, defines media production in the digital age. They write that new digital media “emerge from within cultural contexts, and they refashion other media, which are embedded in the same or similar contexts.” In the context of digital graphic design, the concept of
remediation offers a way to interpret the future-facing counterpart to Appadurai’s account of “imagined precursory moments.” The designers at Adobe, by remediating wood type and phototype as computer type, constructed an imagined future by way of nineteenth-century forms. This imagined future was cast, once again, as a rebirth of authentic handcraft in a post-industrial era of digital production—in other words, as digital revivalism.

Despite the release of Rosewood, Cottonwood, and Zebrwood in 1994, these fonts did not appear widely in American graphic design media until the turn of the twenty-first century. Only a little more than a decade hence, Rosewood in particular has attracted the ire of some designers, at times on par with that reserved for typefaces like Papyrus and Comic Sans. Nevertheless, like the ornamented typefaces decried by De Vinne, it continues to be used widely in vernacular graphic design. The font Coffee Tin, designed by Rick Mueller in 1999, bears a striking resemblance to Rosewood and can be downloaded and used commercially at no cost. Within the space of two decades, Rosewood and its ilk have passed from markers of handcraft to signifiers of cheap commercialism and amateurism. This transition marks a return, perhaps, to De Vinne’s typographic ash heap, with ornamented letterforms ready to rise again.

**Good History/Bad History, Revisited**

Twentieth-century aesthetic revivals of nineteenth-century type have been well documented. The convention of using Tuscan types to advertise performance and spectacle was well established by the middle of the twentieth century, likely echoing the design of nineteenth-century theater broadsides. French Clarendon is a more heavily contrasted embellishment of the British Clarendon, a slab serif popularized in the 1840s, and has been associated not only with theater (with the conventional *Playbill* font constituting a 1930s update of a French Clarendon face), but also with the “American” Wild West. During the ascendance of the so-called International Style of typography in U.S. corporate identity and advertising programs of the 1960s, designers associated with New York’s Push Pin Studios used the ornamental typefaces and eclectic layouts of the previous century to signify contemporary music and youth culture, as well as nostalgic Americana.

Emily King has contended that commercial iterations of Victoriana in the 1960s and 1970s draw from the underground press and music-related graphics of the period. Writing on retro visual culture, Elizabeth Guffey has argued that the incorporation of late-nineteenth-century Art Nouveau aesthetics in 1960s psychedelia liberated designers from the dominant commercial design principles of the time and generated innovative hybrid forms.
typographic revival of the nineteenth century would seem, then, to represent a patchwork of conventions, nostalgia, countercultural opposition, and fashion cycles.

Yet surprisingly few contemporary critics and scholars have offered ways to interpret more recent revivals of nineteenth-century decorative type. In a 2013 interview appearing in How, designer Tiffany Wardle deSousa suggests that contemporary updates and reinterpretations of Victorian typography “could very well be a reaction to the world of white space and simplification.” 45 This interpretation recalls an argument put forth by printer-historian Rob Roy Kelly, who in the 1970s attributed the midcentury revival of Victorian typography and lettering to “a reaction brought on by the severity of Bauhaus styles, which in turn had been a reaction to the Victorian styles.” 46 Both explanations suggest, at first glance, a postmodern scenario. Nearly 30 years ago, postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson critiqued the pseudo-historical aesthetics of late capitalism, “in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history.” 47 Jameson described this revivalist onslaught of contemporary culture as pastiche: a “neutral practice” of stylistic mimicry, devoid of parody or a satirical impulse, “the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language.” 48

In No More Rules, Rick Poynor details the debates surrounding historical appropriation in the postmodern graphic design of the 1980s and 1990s. The postmodern nostalgia generated and harnessed by corporate advertisers in the 1990s was driven, he suggests, by designers’ nostalgia for “a time (modernism) when novel inventions seemed to pour from the drawing board.” 49 In their famous 1990 polemic, “Good History/Bad History,” designers Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, and Karrie Jacobs accuse graphic designers of aesthetically pillaging the past in their search for content, detaching politically and culturally significant forms from their original contexts and thus rendering them superficial. 50 Writing from a marketing perspective, Keith Naughton and Bill Vlasic have described the advertising fixation at the end of the twentieth century on the (primarily midcentury) past as a “nostalgia boom.” 51 However, Stephen Brown has rejected this “fin-de-siècle thesis,” arguing that retromarketing has been the rule rather than the exception: “Retro,” he states, “is the normal state of affairs.” 52 Brown views this retro orientation not as static or inert, but as a dynamic strategy of constructing both present and future. 53 Guffey’s historiographic perspective on retro offers a conceptual key to understanding how ahistorical views of the past constitute a crucial component of cultural progress narratives, and she situates her analysis within postmodern theoretical frameworks, engaging explicitly postmodern themes, such as self-reflexivity and irony, to argue that retro engenders historical rupture.

45 In discussing the work of particular designers, the interviewer, Sherry Gruendler, affirms that while “[t]hese aren’t actual letterforms […] they are typographic applications from the Victorian era, and I think they’re absolutely charming.” See: http://www.howdesign.com/design-creativity/fonts-typography/victorian-typography/ (accessed September 20, 2015).
46 Kelly, American Wood Type (1977), 212.
48 Ibid., 17.
50 Kalman, Jacobs, and Miller distinguish their concept of jive modernism from postmodernism, which they describe as “anything that departs from the most austere, Swiss-born, corporate-bred Modernism.” Kalman, Jacobs, and Miller, “Good History/Bad History,” 28.
52 Brown, Marketing—The Retro Revolution, 15.
53 Ibid., viii.
and evacuates meaning. Retro’s cultural purpose, she argues, is to provide “a form of deceleration or opposite thrust, forcing us to take stock of our perpetual drive to move forward in space and time.” Thus, according to Guffey, every glimpse into the future has within it a glance back at previous technologies, social structures, and political institutions.

Some scholars have considered this mode of future gazing to be a nineteenth-century innovation driven to its zenith in the postmodern era. Dianne Sadoff and John Kucich preface their 2000 edited collection of essays on what they call “postmodern Victoriana” by reminding the reader that the nineteenth century itself is the site of Jameson’s concept of “the break”: a moment of rupture in which history can only be represented, not made. They suggest that, from the nineteenth century onward, all cultural production is to some degree postmodern. This perspective might explain why many scholars in the field of Neo-Victorian Studies, which encompasses a variety of media ranging from literature to film, view contemporary reinterpretations of nineteenth-century materials and sensibilities as symptomatic of ongoing processes of reflection upon and remaking of capitalist modernity. An oft-cited definition of Neo-Victorianism holds that the “texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.”

As Elizabeth Ho and others have suggested, contemporary mobilizations of Victorianism need not be limited to reinterpretations of nineteenth-century England; instead, they might encompass a variety of international and cross-cultural contexts, including the United States and its far-reaching economic and political power. Ho, as well as Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, have amended the theoretical territory of Neo-Victorian Studies to include postcolonial considerations, whereby the reflexive stance of Neo-Victorianism yields reconsiderations of the heritage of imperialism and its lasting effects on global political and economic systems. David Harvey’s dialectical view of global political economy paves the way for scholars like Ho to see continuity rather than true rupture in that economy’s cultural products and critiques; Ho cites Harvey’s notion of U.S. capitalist imperialism in her invocation of the “ghostly presence in present-day neo-imperial relations.”

I position my analysis of U.S. revivals of nineteenth-century ornamented typography upon this inclusive theoretical foundation. Although scholars of retro and Neo-Victorianism powerfully engage with postmodern theory, they see semiotic plenitude and cultural dynamism rather than emptiness and stasis in contemporary nineteenth-century revivals. This approach to history is shared by media archaeologists like Erkki Huhtamo, who has used...
the concept of the topos—“a stereotypical formula evoked over and over again in different guises and for varying purposes”—to theorize the crucial continuities underlying apparent ruptures in media culture. For Huhtamo, the “postmodern predilection for rummaging the archives,” a tendency fueled by increased access to the Internet, has inspired producers of all manner of media to mobilize archival materials for contemporary cultural contexts. That nineteenth-century ornamented typefaces should be considered topoi in their own right would be difficult to argue, but they do represent one manifestation of contemporary evocations of nineteenth-century-ness. Huhtamo’s theorization is particularly apt because it offers the groundwork for a more nuanced picture of the relationships between media—one not hinging on innovation but rather on overlapping and interwoven technologies, forms, and systems.

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[62] Ibid., 36.