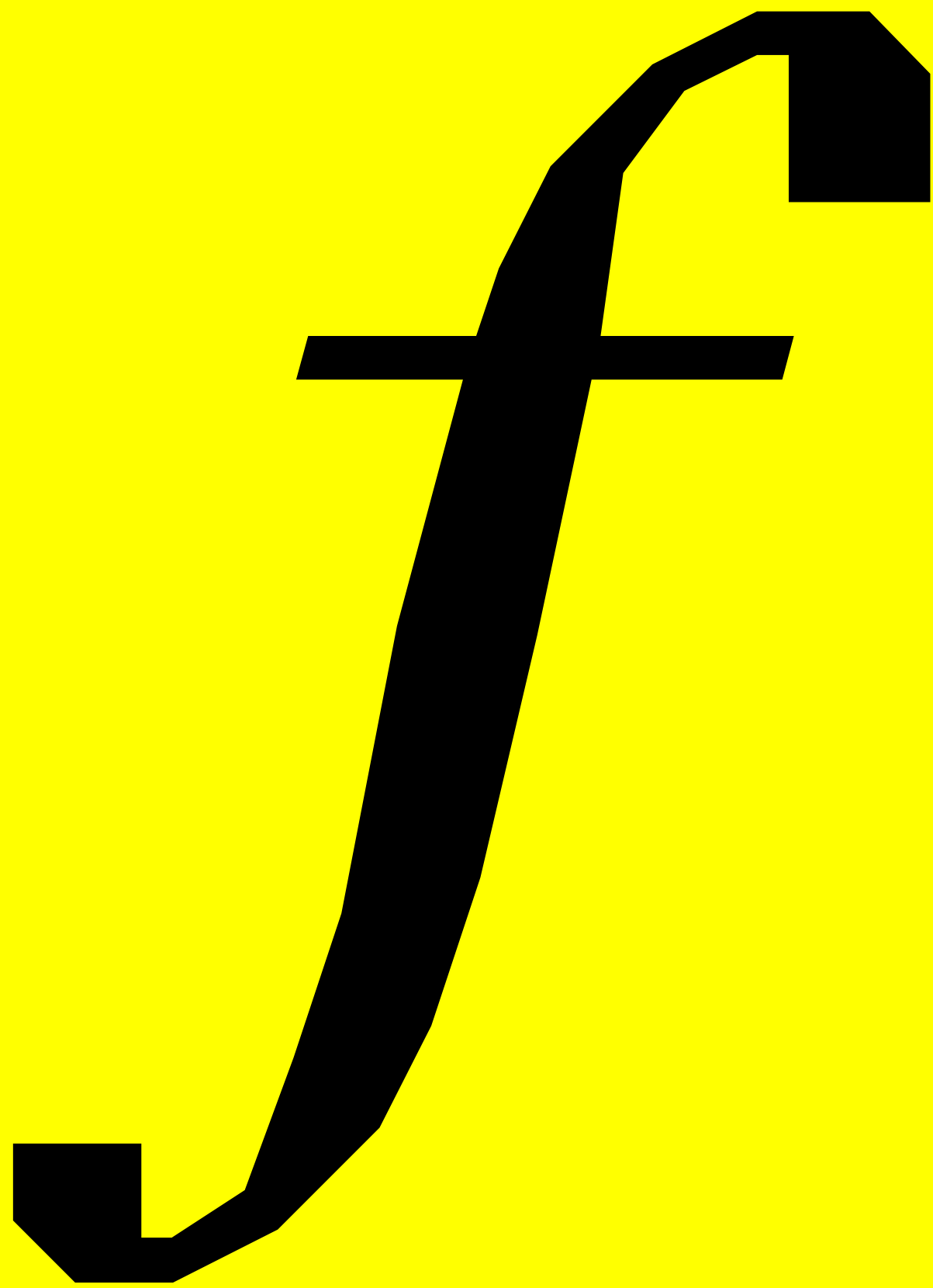


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‘*P!DF* is a fascinating experiment in reading, writing, and publishing. Prem has transformed an invisible medium into a very special text—quirky, critical, and engaging.’

— Ellen Lupton, author,
Design is Storytelling

‘*P!DF* encapsulates a celebrated career of thinking and doing from a singularly talented curator and designer, and is—in typically Krishnamurthy fashion—strangely practical. It is, in short, a hell of a read.’

— Ben Smith, media columnist,
The New York Times

‘*P!DF* is a critical, curatorial exegesis packed with excursus (“bumpy” design, e.g.), pedagogic pathways, and a love story by Emily, all unspooling simultaneously sometime in the future and portalled into the present by a design prophet named Prem Krishnamurthy.’

— Ingrid Schaffner, curator,
*Carnegie International, 57th
Edition, 2018*

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Prem Krishnamurthy

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Polymorph!

Part I: Bumpiness



Queen's Christmas message: '2019 has been quite bumpy'

Monarch could be referring to Boris Johnson's proroguing of parliament, among other problems faced this year

Matthew Weaver

01:01 Tuesday, 24 December 2019



Follow Matthew Weaver



The Queen will use her Christmas message to say 2019 has been "quite bumpy", after the year was beset by a constitutional crisis and the Brexit saga.

—

I begin writing this in a flurry: 07:14 GMT+1 on 28 January 2020. Literally: snow accumulating outside my window, close beside my bed. But also: the urge to rid myself of an idea that's been lodged within me for far too long, to let loose thoughts precipitate into something more material.

I'm reminded of the Queen of England's annual Christmas message a month earlier. In it, she dubbed 2019 'quite bumpy'—likely referring to Britain's tumultuous year.

But her term seemed applicable more broadly: 2019 wasn't just a bumpy year for politics in Britain, it was a bumpy year for the world. And 2020 is looking even bumpier.

From certain vantage points, the preceding decades seemed smooth in comparison. The global myth of neoliberal progress was undergirded by certain unshakeable faiths: economies grow, democracy expands, information flows.

This political and economic belief system accompanied a continuous transformation to the physical, digital, and social interfaces of contemporary life. Even in the twenty years since I started working, these touch points have become faster, easier, more comfortable, ever more invisible. The frictionless glide of today's urbanized life lulls people into a sense of complacency and a desire for more more more.

Powered by algorithms out of sight and mind, this system is optimized to bypass critical faculties in order to access the human desire for regularity and safety. The great irony is that it has made the world measurably less safe.

With this smooth acceleration come clear side effects: extractive capitalism has led to climate catastrophe, threatening to destroy the shared world, while catalyzing problems such as increasing inequality, migration, violence, and the rise of nativist politics.

In this contemporary context, a little *bumpiness*—the productive friction that slows things down and forces a moment of reflection—

might prove a necessary, if
discomfiting, corrective.

b

INPUT: When I speak to myself,

. . . I ask myself: What would a person do if they could always act exactly how they want to be seen? What would drive someone to create a specific language, model, workflow, and ultimately ethos? Something fundamental is lost when people stop talking about their 'form' and starting talking about 'content': what is being shown to whom, when, and why?

—

The role of the arts and culture is to reflect upon contemporary life and offer speculative paths for acting differently. This may start in the realm of aesthetics, but is ultimately about politics and ethics.

Early 20th century avant-garde movements attempted this through a wholesale rejection of what came before. These once-revolutionary models overturned their predecessors to become the new, dominant, even oppressive ones.

I believe we're past the era where it's possible to radically transform art and society from a position on a supposed outside. Every disruption is a power move. Instead, we must look for strategies that work from within, that create change iteratively and relationally, using different types of tools.

—

‘Bumpiness’ is a term I’ve been using, shaping, molding, modeling, over the past four-odd years. It started small—a word I once blurted out in an informal talk to students—and is now growing weighty: the subject of this presentation, with multiple avatars as a performance, an exhibition, and an essay.

Perhaps, like all natural lives in this world, it will have its own, inverted arc—growing smaller and smaller again, eventually disappearing with a *Poof!* once its proper time on earth has passed.

My objective in sharing this framework is to outline an aesthetic approach that privileges productive friction and positive discomfort over conformity and ease.

It comprises a collection of bumpy things that inform my thinking. They come from different time periods and contexts of cultural production, without being exhaustive. Instead, they're suggestive of potential groupings as yet-to-come—by me or perhaps by others.

—

Bumpiness is an intentionally squishy word. It evokes material textures and uneven surfaces. Rough, uncertain, unexpected things.

I quite like its lumpiness,

its multiple
scales,

its evasion of

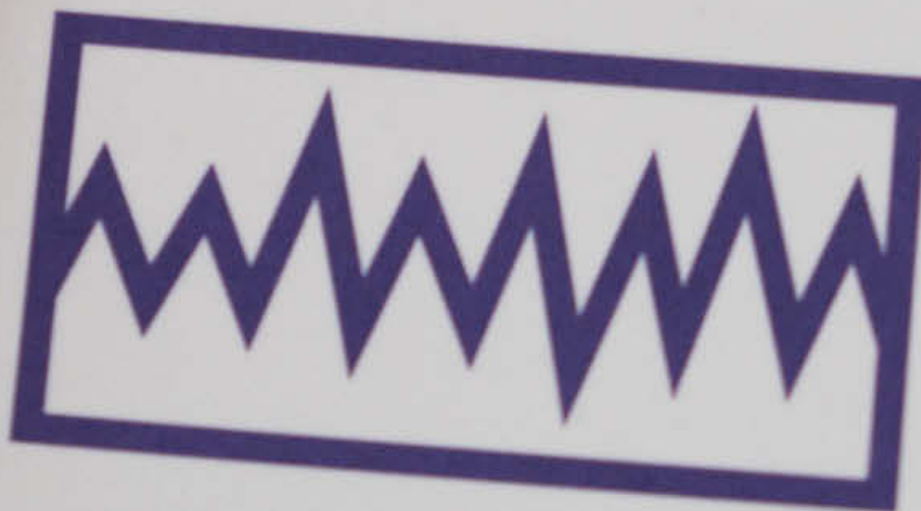
clear definitions,

and the feeling in your mouth
when
you
say
the
word
out
loud.

(Bṛm'pē·nēs)

So, instead of defining it outright, let's start with positioning the term along a spectrum—from *smooth* to *jagged*,

Bolaño



with *bumpiness* sandwiched right in the middle.

As I've touched upon before, 'smoothness' is the contemporary tendency for systems, formats of presentation, and things to appear as natural, neutral, or objective. Smooth things provide the comfort of familiarity that keeps you from thinking twice.

Think of the endless scroll of social media or the one-click buy-now button; uniformly-formatted art fairs, biennials, and art exhibitions; pitch-perfect online talks. Even further: filtering algorithms to help tell you what you want, self-driving cars, and other invisibly automated encounters.

Smoothness suggests easy
consensus, the false notion that everyone
ought to agree.

At the other end of this spectrum is what I dub 'jaggedness'. Jagged things self-consciously and visibly do not conform. They're calculated to provoke a reaction.

I'm reminded of art movements like Dada or Situationism; of the aesthetics of early punk rock, which were intended to offend social norms on multiple levels. This stance has transformed itself into the contemporary mantra of 'disruption', permeating tech and cultural discussions.

Jaggedness can manifest as the willful desire to contradict others, for the sheer sake of opposition, novelty, or attention—rather than out of a desire to be known or to understand.

‘Bumpiness’ represents something in-between. It straddles this spectrum of smoothness to jaggedness, embracing some of the best qualities of each.

It sympathizes with the seductive appeal of smoothness, while embedding the calculated resistance of jaggedness. It's slick enough to be sexy, yet rough to the touch. It makes you wonder how something was made, why, and for whom. It invites you to go deeper.

Bumpiness suggests that there's pleasure within the irregular, in what's not already expected and familiar.

It may also be contentious.

Bumpiness can challenge and raise difficult questions, when two surfaces rub up in an attempt at mutual *comprehension*—quite literally, the grasping of an idea, together.

During my studies in the 1990s, we were introduced to earlier, related models for aesthetic strategies of disjunction. One example is Bertolt Brecht's idea of *Verfremdung*—the dramatic estrangement or alienation that shatters the fourth wall between audience and stage, in order to unmask social, political, and ideological structures. This approach also felt linked to the intellectual self-reflexivity of institutional critique in contemporary art.

Yet in contrast to Brecht, bumpiness feels less overtly antagonistic, less demonstrative, less rhetorical. It's more subtle, more connected to the texture of the thing, and how it feels to encounter it.

It could be compared more productively with scholar Sara Ahmed's understanding of the value of discomfort and unseatedness in her essay, 'The Phenomenology of Whiteness'. Reflecting on the experience of inhabiting a body of color within a context that takes whiteness as the norm, she points to the fact that 'comfort' is only a baseline condition for specific kinds of people with specific privileges. Yet, in denaturalizing 'comfort' as a universal concept, she also allows for the emancipatory potential of its opposite:

things to be habitual, then we might also acquire a tendency to be behind us.

To be not white is to be not extended by the spaces you inhabit. This is an uncomfortable feeling. Comfort is a feeling that tends not to be consciously felt, as I have suggested. You sink. When you don't sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as a world that is gathered in a specific way. Discomfort, in other words, allows things to move by bringing what is in the background, in what gets over-looked as furniture, back to life. In a way, the experience of not being white in a white world not only gives us a different viewing point, but it disorientates how things are arranged. This 'not' does not always feel negative. Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort, of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground. So yes, if we start with the body that loses chair, the world we describe will be quite different.

Conclusion: on arrival

ance of negation, of being stopped or feeling out of place, does not 'stop' there. When the arrival is noticeable, it generates

So let's take this leitmotif of *discomfort*¹ as a positive principle while we look together at some things I might call *bumpy*.

1. Reverend angel Kyodo Williams offers an even more expansive consideration of the value of discomfort: 'Our teachers—as much as we love our embodied teachers that come in flesh and bone and sit on cushions—are really the people, the situations that we confront moment to moment, day to day, month to month, year to year, that incite a sense of discomfort, dis-ease,

awkwardness in us. ... I think that if we can move our work, whatever work we're up to, whatever kind of desire that we have for our own development in life, to be willing to face discomfort and receive it as opportunity for growth and expansion and a commentary about what is now more available to us, rather than what it is that is limiting us and taking

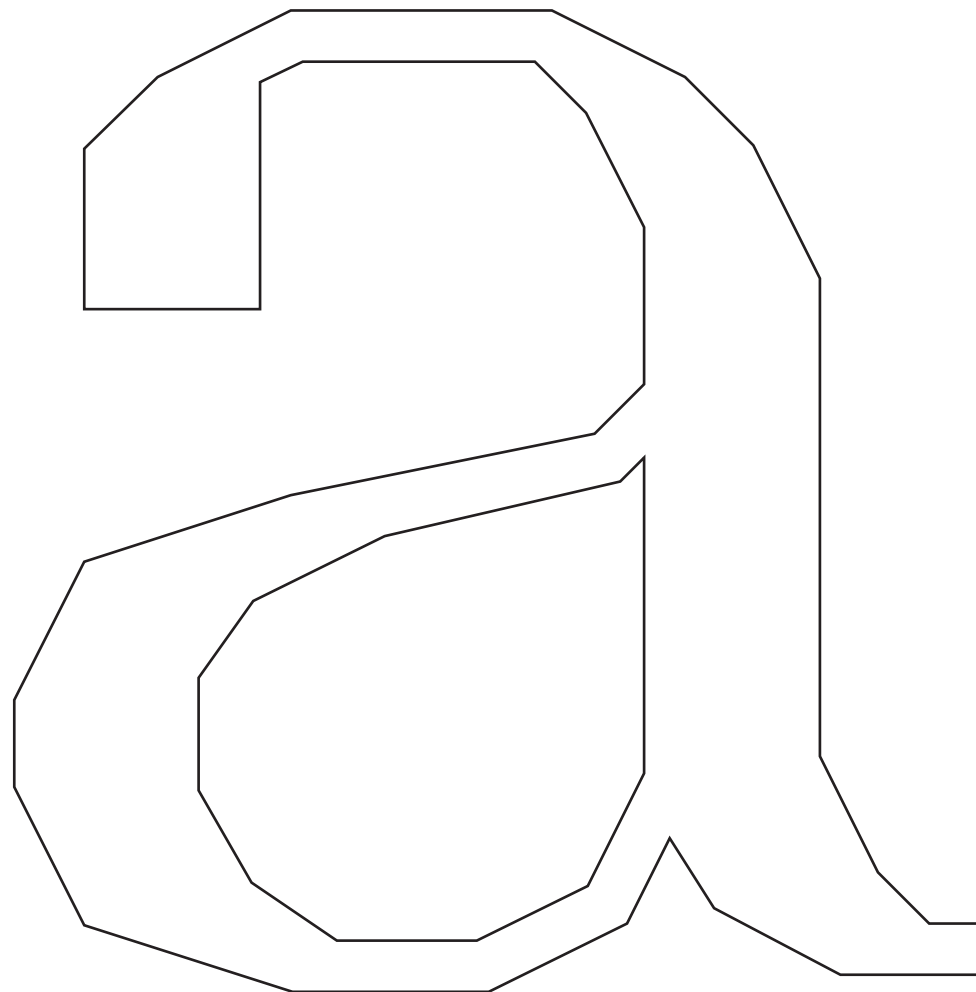
something away from us ... in no time at all, we will be a society that enhances the lives of all our species.'

Full interview and transcript: <https://onbeing.org/programs/angel-kyodo-williams-the-world-is-our-field-of-practice/#transcript>
Accessed 20 March 2020.

We can start with the primary typeface of this presentation itself, *Minotaur* by Jean-Baptiste Levéé.

Jean-Baptiste Levée
Minotaur, 2014

Digital typeface consisting of six
families (Light, Light Italic,
Regular, Italic, Bold, Bold Italic)
Courtesy Production Type



Jackdaws

Love

My Big

Sphinx

of

Quartz

Minotaur is constructed only from straight, faceted cuts. Pronounced when enlarged, these surfaces nearly disappear at smaller sizes. This feature lends the reading experience (particularly onscreen) a slight blurriness and awkwardness, which might make you look a little closer.

The type designer Fred Smeijers championed the functional value of irregularity for reading. Writing during the 1990s transition from analog to digital typography, he argues in his book *Counterpunch*:

...drawing letters...
...have done a job correctly too. It is a com-
precision lies beyond human perception. It is just as with hi-fi audio
equipment, where even experts cannot hear difference in sound-
quality, but need instruments to measure it. Then they can say that
installation X is, by a certain percentage, better than installation Y.
So with type. Often typographers do not look at what is in front of
them, but rather they judge it by using technical knowledge that
lurks at the back of their minds. This is not a good way to proceed.

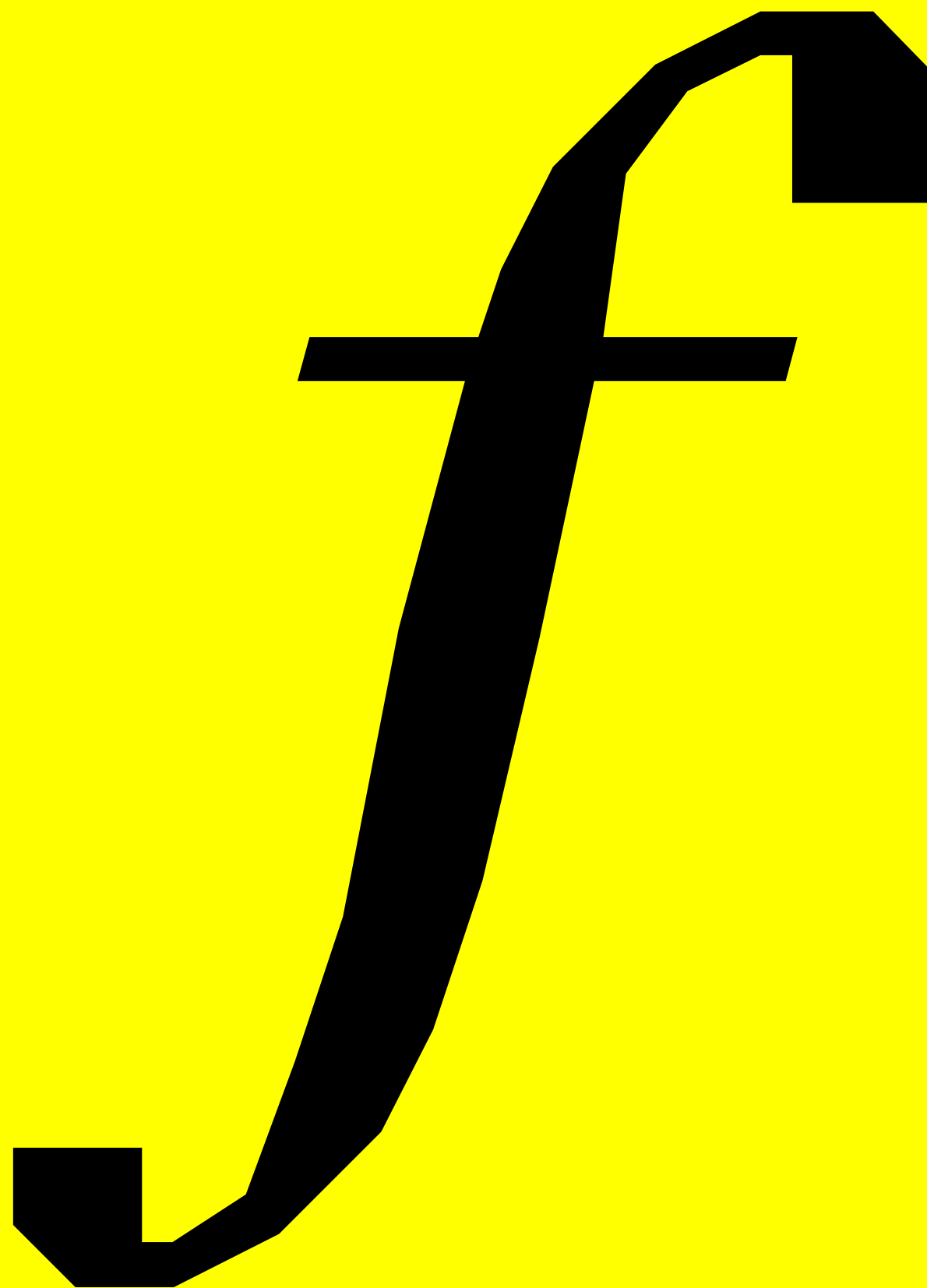
Most typefaces – certainly any belonging to the Garamond
category – should have optical irregularity and variety if they are to
function satisfactorily. This is not a shortcoming of the punchcutter
or of punchcutting technique. Rather, it is a positive quality, and
one that has been lost. Whether the early punchcutters really under-
stood this, is, in the end, not open to us to know. What is interesting
and relevant for us is the question of whether we can bring ‘imper-
fection’ back under present conditions of design and production.

With steel and gravers the punchcutter also had a high preci-
sion instrument. But he depended on its precision only when that
was useful. The limits of precision are determined by human factors:
by the limits of human perception. By working in that way, the
old masters often gained a quality that can hardly be
explained merely by imperfect
...the imperfections
...ceived.

He maintains that slight imperfections keep the human eye from becoming bored. In this view, irregularity helps improve legibility and the understanding of complex ideas.

Could this principle scale up? To shape how we present and communicate new concepts more generally?





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