Font-tastic

Film sheds light on creator of first Canadian typeface

College partners on limited edition companion book that celebrates the work of Carl Dair, father of Cartier type

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Carl Dair at Enschedé: The Last Days of Metal Type, a film co-produced by Sheridan and Massey colleges premiered Sept. 21 at Trafalgar Campus.

Dair is most famous for designing the first Canadian typeface, Cartier, for the centennial anniversary of Confederation.

The film depicts a day in the working life of Paul Riidisch, who was Dair’s mentor in 1957.

Matthew Carter, who received instruction from Rädisch before Dair, narrates the film and provides an epilogue, while Rod McDonald, a Canadian who designed a digital update for Cartier, delivers the prologue.

“The fact that he shot this film is quite interesting because in the almost 500 years of typeforming metal type, no one had ever filmed it,” McDonald said about Dair.

“I think he’s worthy of study and certainly worthy of understanding.”

The event included the opening of a gallery exhibit in the AA wing of Trafalgar Campus with items provided by Massey College.

The gallery holds photos of Dair and examples of his typefaces.

A few booklets Dair wrote on typography are also in the gallery though they are being stored under glass during the exhibition.

Donna Braggins, Sheridan’s associate dean of Design, Illustration and Photography, introduced McDonald and the film.

“Making this film available to the public is 16 years in the making,” Braggins told the audience. “Two of the people in the room tonight are the people who started this and that’s Matthew and Rod.”

Though in the prologue to the film McDonald himself said “full credit goes to Sheridan College” for the assistance the college lent in putting the film together.

Braggins brought McDonald up on stage before the screening to talk about Dair.

“Carl Dair was arguably one of the great design pioneers in Canada,” McDonald said. “The fact that he’s so little known upset me so I’m hoping that eventually this film will make up for that.”

The prologue gave a short profile on Dair and why he went to Holland.

What followed was slightly under 15 minutes of footage from Enschedé, a type workshop in Haarlem, Holland.

The footage was very detailed and Carter’s effective narration took the audience through the now-abandoned method of forming type with metal.

The precision and patience that the work required when forming pieces of type was extreme.

The footage takes the audience through the process of shaping the letter P out of steel.

Rädisch used many small files, which he kept organized in an old cigar box, to shape every detail.

The process becomes complicated after this transferring the shape of the P from a piece of steel to copper and finally to lead pieces, in theory.

This is done using a press that Henk Drost, Riidisch’s assistant, is shown operating in the film.

Before the transfer, between steel and copper, the steel piece of type is tempered to an extreme heat before being cooled in water.

This, in theory, stops the piece from cracking when it is put in the press.

At the end of Dair’s footage, unfortunately, the piece of type Rädisch had spent all day making broke.

The epilogue features Carter explaining some of the details that may have been missed in the film as everything happens quickly due to the hot metal.

After the film, the panel discussed type design in the technological age.

Allan Haley led the discussion and topics ranged from how to educate students about typography to what typeface would be best for an older person reading on an electronic device.

Braggins confirmed that the film will eventually be made available at the Sheridan library but a date has yet to be confirmed.

“We’re very proud that Sheridan has been able to partner with Coachhouse Press to produce a limited-edition book which collects Carl Dair’s letters from the same period as the film,” said Braggins.

The book will also be available at the Sheridan library.

Carl Dair died in 1967, on a flight from New York City to Toronto, the same year Cartier was put in print.