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## Multitudes of interpretations: intentions, connotations and associations of typeface designs

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Typefaces—commonly called ‘fonts’—are essential to a designer’s ability to communicate visually. The end of the twentieth century was the age of the desktop computer, font design software and page layout programs and the new digital technology removed typography from the exclusive area of the specialist type designer, type foundry and typesetting company and placed it in the hands of graphic designers and non-specialists. This democratisation also led to an exponential growth in the number of typefaces available to users of type.

This paper explores the extraordinary breadth evident in the intentions behind the design of a typeface—the reasons someone decides to create a new set of letterforms—and the associations and connotations which typefaces accrue as they are used by designers as components of visual culture. Reflecting the place of typefaces within a cultural and sociological context, it is the diversity of approaches and outcomes which are discussed in this paper. It addresses the cultural significance and meaning of typefaces by showing the role of personal interpretation and a search for appropriateness in the use of the vast resource of an estimated 100,000 Western typefaces.

## A G D A

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# Multitudes of interpretations: intentions, connotations and associations of typeface designs

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## Introduction

Digital technology at the end of the twentieth century—the age of the desktop computer, font design software and page layout programs—removed typography from the exclusive area of the specialist type designer, type foundry and typesetting company and placed it in the hands of ordinary people, both graphic designers and non-specialists. The results of the freedom enjoyed by both groups have been the subject of intense debate and the ‘democratisation’ of type has become a recurring theme in writing on graphic design and typography (for example, Keedy 1993, Carter 1996, Hollis 1996, King 1999). Traditionalists argued that the accessibility of the technology was accelerating the decline of typographic standards, while liberators enthused about the personalisation of typography to the point that it would reflect the diversity of handwriting.

9      Butterick (1996:18) stressed the changing role of the type designer in the type production process as a result of technological change, from one of professional responsibility

and accountability to the blurring of roles and responsibilities in the age of personal computing:

*Once, those who made type also controlled the means of production—in the days of hot metal, the choice of a Monotype vs. a Linotype caster was similar to the choice of Macintosh vs. Windows. Each platform had its strengths and foibles, but if you needed type, you chose one and stuck with it...This continued through the ages of phototypesetting and early digital typography, where proprietary systems meant proprietary fonts, and proprietary fonts meant type makers could still maintain control over font production and access. But when type technology became commingled with personal computing technology, things changed. At that point, the ability to make and use type became available to anyone with a computer, along with the newfound ability to make speedy, accurate, and untraceable pirate copies. This was better for users of type, but much worse for type designers. Type has had to relinquish the power of its own proprietary barricades.*

As a result of this upheaval, during the 1980s and more so the 1990s, new typefaces or 'fonts' were launched onto the market at an astounding rate unprecedented in the 550-year history of printing since Gutenberg. Typeface distributors have been showcasing the products of this proliferation, representing the work of myriad small and large digital font foundries and designers. In attempting to understand why so many designers spend their time redrawing the letters of the alphabet, Newark (2000:7) said:

*You can see the history of typefaces as an unending experiment with the form of letters. Typefaces are the effect of history on the alphabet. There is no ideal typeface, no single model. Rather, the form of each letter—in Walt Whitman's words—'contains multitudes'. All typefaces are simply interpretations of this non-existent original. There is a point at which the form of a letter ceases to be recognizable, but this point is not a constant point.*

Given such multitudes of interpretations, it is clear that typeface design is not a simple, linear process from point A to point B. There is an extraordinary breadth evident in the intentions behind the design of a typeface—the reasons someone decides to create a new set of letterforms—and the associations and connotations which typefaces accrue as they are used by designers as components of visual culture. Reflecting the place of typefaces within a cultural and sociological context, it is the diversity of approaches and outcomes which are discussed in this paper. It addresses the cultural significance and meaning of typefaces by showing the role of personal interpretation and a search for appropriateness in the use of the vast resource of an estimated 100,000 Western typefaces.

### **History and inspiration**

Where have ideas for these typefaces come from? The inspiration for the myriad letterforms of the past two decades—whether newly designed, reinterpreted or revived—has come from sources including nature, technology, history, works of art and found objects. More specifically, these sources have been as disparate as seventh century manuscripts, nineteenth century American woodcuts, the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh from 100 years ago, refuse, graffiti, ancient inscriptions, industrial forms and craft works. An

example is the launch announcement of his typeface Pontifica by type designer Michael Scarpitti (2000, [Online]) which he said was based on a 12th century manuscript (Cotton Tiberius VIII) and which he classed as 'protogothic'. In a similar vein, Dave Nalle's Scriptorium foundry ([www.ragnarokpress.com/scriptorium](http://www.ragnarokpress.com/scriptorium)) creates and distributes typefaces based on historical calligraphy and digitisations of antique typefaces from Roman, Celtic, Viking, Medieval, Gothic and Renaissance times.

The typefaces produced by New York-based designer Jonathan Hoefler are further examples of contemporary type designers gaining inspiration from historical documents. Hoefler specialises in the design of original typefaces for clients such as *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated*. His Hoefler Text family of typefaces has been incorporated by Apple Computers into the Macintosh operating system. Hoefler's type design has been described in the following way (Microsoft Typography, 2000, [Online]):

*...an investigation into the circumstances behind historical form. In each of his designs, he attempts to interpret the critical and aesthetic theories which precipitated a particular style of letter, and to spin this internal logic into a foundation for a family of original designs.*

Of course, not all typeface designs are historically influenced. For example, when I asked him in an interview about the motivation behind the design of typefaces, Famira (Cahalan 2004) replied from the perspective of his own professional practice as a type designer and graphic designer:

*I think that a lot of typefaces start off as a secret weapon of some graphic designer. If you draw a very nice word because you know that guy that plays in the band, that needs the record cover, that needs a headline, so you draw the word and then you say, 'Hey, this looks good, I should make that a complete font'. You add some weights and licence it to some font foundry and they try to sell it. It is really nice if the cheques come in four times a year and you actually earn money with it, but I don't think that is the motivation to do the job.*

Famira then provided an example of the satisfaction a designer feels seeing his/her work in use—Famira viewed his typeface in anthropomorphic terms:

*In Kuala Lumpur I came across a book which used my typeface on the cover and I was really glad. It was, 'Look here, they used my typeface Mutilated'. It was a travel guide to Thailand. A weird choice. It didn't look good but it was really nice to come across it. It was like seeing your little kid on the cover of a magazine or something.*

### **Typefaces and chronometers**

American designer, curator and writer Ellen Lupton (1996) stated that a typeface has distinctive physical qualities as well as cultural connotations. The individual designer who creates a typeface may imbue it with particular intentions, yet once the typeface is distributed to the marketplace it becomes the common property of anyone with access to its letterforms. As a new typeface enters the currency of cultural use, it becomes a

chronometer (time-measuring instrument) of graphic design history because it can be used by future generations to date a piece of visual communication by the typefaces displayed. Some examples of typeface associations and cultural connotations include: periods of time (Arnold Böcklin as a typeface representative of Art Nouveau and Broadway for Art Deco), significant events (Binary for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games), locations (Frutiger for airports), industries (Bodoni for fashion) or countries (Garamond for France).

I was telling the graphic design students I was teaching in the mid-1990s that Barry Deck's typeface Template Gothic and P. Scott Makela's typeface Dead History would be memorable as typefaces which were emblematic of 1990s graphic design. Rock (qtd in Cooper 1993) also identified the time-locating or chronometric significance (Lupton 1996) of Template Gothic:

*It was quickly adopted during the grunge era as 'what avant-garde type looks like'. Barry hit a nerve: it was openly defiant: it was pushing against normal standards of taste. Whereas most designers would look to 19th-century models for inspiration, Barry would study the hand-stenciled signs in laundromats.*

In the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century, anyone looking at typefaces in use around them could not help but notice the dramatic rise to favour of Rotis. Designed in 1989 by German Otl Aicher (1922-92), Rotis took less than a decade to rise from obscurity to omnipresence, becoming one of the most visibly popular and emblematic typefaces of the current time.

### **Intentions and connotations**

In terms of the intentions behind the design and use of typefaces, the case of Blackletter is interesting. It was banned by the Nazis in Germany in 1941 primarily to make their propaganda more readable to foreigners. Justification provided to the German people at the time was the claim that Blackletter typefaces had Jewish origins. Rutherford (2000, [Online]) confirmed that this was nonsensical because 'Jews were already not allowed to publish in Germany during the time that these types are supposed to have been made'. In 2000, Rutherford was Professor of Visual Communications at the Bauhaus University of Weimar and he provided a contemporary perspective on the response of Germans to Blackletter. He said that those who lived through the Nazi period might make Nazi connections to Blackletter typefaces, but younger Germans had just as much difficulty reading longer texts in Blackletter as non-Germans, while still recognising the traditional, old style connotations when used on beer labels and quaint retail shops. Rutherford (2000, [Online]) noted that Neo-Nazis used Fraktur, a style of Blackletter, but ironically they probably did not realise that the Nazis had banned Blackletter.

Swanson (2000a, [Online]) cautioned type designers that their 'intent' is of interest in the level of a curiosity, rather than a categorical imperative aimed at the control of the actions of others. Capeto (2000, [Online]) acknowledged the original intentions of designers when designing typefaces and the multiple uses of typefaces, by noting that Hermann Zapf's 1950 typeface Optima (in all capital letters) was used by Maya Ying Lin to list the names of the 59,000+ dead American soldiers on the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, DC. Capeto asked whether it might be the best use of the face yet. It would certainly be one of the most poignant and yet one that Zapf could never have envisaged

when he originally designed the typeface.

The strategy of the Dutch type designers Erik van Blokland and Just van Rossum from Lettererror in The Hague (Lettererror 2001, [Online]) has been to combine design and technology in so-called random fonts such as Beowolf (1990):

*We became aware that if we treated typefaces as computer data, instead of fixed letterforms, we could create some very bizarre systems. One idea was to connect a font file to a self copying moving mechanism to create a virus font; a self distributing typeface: a great way for young and ambitious type designers to get their typefaces known and used. No type manufacturer would be able to compete with that kind of immediate proliferation.*

van Blokland and van Rossum continue to utilise their combined design and technology knowledge not only to create innovative typeface designs but also to combat the potential piracy of their typefaces.

### **Expression and interpretation**

Type practitioners and commentators have strong views about the meanings, appropriateness, connotations and associations of typefaces and this role of personal interpretation is significant to understanding the need and desire for the creation and use of an increasing number of typefaces. A range of these views will be presented below. For Nguyen (2000a, [Online]), 'progress in typography is striving for new means of contemporary and future expression. That means not following the contemporary clichés and not taking any typographic rule for granted'. He noted that US copyright laws made a distinction between a utilitarian function and an expressive function, but saw that this is a problem for typefaces because the expressive function of a typeface was inextricably linked to its utilitarian function. Nguyen used the script typeface Poetica which is strongly influenced by calligraphy as an example, stating that its designed intention was for 'frilly' situations, so its 'expressive frilliness' determined how designers would use it in their work. He also noted that readability and restraint should not have to be the primary standards by which every typeface was judged, but that distinctly trendy typefaces were best suited to ephemeral usage and that 'the projected life span of the end product should not outlast the lifespan of an expressive typeface'.

Responding to questions of taste, Crewdson (2000, [Online]) suggested that while it may be easy for 'typophiles' to dismiss ephemeral typefaces, it was important to appreciate the 'overly-expressional' alphabets of the time, comparing their timeliness with Art Nouveau alphabets of the early twentieth century. Nguyen (2000b, [Online]) asserted that describing certain typefaces as being appropriate or inappropriate for the present could be restrictive. He said that to many designers, typefaces like Rotis and Interstate had become popular because they supposedly conveyed the 'look' of the present and a suggestion of what the future will look like. Responding to Nguyen's belief that typefaces were required which look like the future, Kinross (2000, [Online]) noted that any typeface that was consciously designed to be of its own time would have a short life.

Brady (2000 [Online]) expressed his frustration with the process of typeface categorisation:

*Optima this, helvetica that, quadraat the other! Aldine descendants! Sans serifs are legible, sans serifs are illegible. Univers is better than helvetica. Folio is a competitor of both. Times is overused. Whatever happened to melior? Souvenir sucks.*

Personal preference and interpretation have obviously been widespread and possess inherent dangers. Hudson (1999, [Online]) also expressed his frustration with discussion by restating the legibility/creativity conundrum:

*The purpose of typography is to articulate texts, and while it may be desirable to be 'distinctive' that isn't a very good criterion from which to begin. I would be reluctant to suggest a typeface for any publication without having a good idea of the kind of texts which will need to be set. I don't just mean the content of the text, but the kind of arrangement, the amount of material likely to need setting in italics or smallcaps, the presence of tables...The important thing to remember is that the most beautiful typeface in the world might do a lousy job of articulating your text.*

### **Typefaces and personalities**

In what could clearly be dismissed as superficial interpretation, self-labelled 'fontologist' Diane Simpson (Artstar Magazine 2000, [Online]) claimed it was possible to analyse a typeface and then determine the personalities of those who favoured it. She discussed Garamond, designed in the sixteenth century, and noted that it was simultaneously modern. Of Garamond users she said, 'the choice of this typeface reveals someone who resents the implications of being questioned and who'll negotiate only on their own terms'. She suggested that 73-year-old Gill Sans was legible, yet slightly dated. Of Gill Sans users she said, 'Somewhat lacking in subtlety and nuance, users of Gill Sans are unambiguous and slightly pedantic. The choice of this typeface reveals someone who is actively endeavouring to be seen to be putting their house in order'. Given that Gill Sans is the typeface used in my PhD thesis, this analysis is of particular interest to me.

Sigman (quoted in Uhlig 2001, [Online]) equated the message carried by a user's choice of typeface with the way that personalised answering machine greetings and mobile phone ringing tones reflected the values and personality of their owners. He said that one's choice of typeface 'serves as a form of social coding', classifying its users e.g. 'garish and flamboyant' versus 'understated and refined'. In what some might suggest is as open to interpretation as astrology, Sigman asked readers, 'Which font is for you?' and provided the following sweeping analysis of the personalities of people making various typeface selections:

Courier: anorak font, stuck in the past

Helvetica: modern, in touch with contemporary issues

Times New Roman: trustworthy and a link between old and new

Arial: a safe choice, like a pair of sensible shoes

Georgia: soft and curvy, popular with 'pop chicks'

Comic Sans: attention seeking, nauseating

Handwriting fonts: the worst offender—presumes familiarity

## **Typefaces and appropriateness**

Swanson (2000b, [Online]) acknowledged that the way a typeface is used by a graphic designer can express emotion but questioned whether it was the typeface itself which could be called 'emotional':

*There is something to be said for the notion that 'geometric' corresponds to 'rational' and thus opposes 'emotional' but would we really say that more geometric = less emotional? Is Helvetica then more emotional than Futura or Avant Garde Gothic?*

In maintaining the oft-repeated analogy between type and music, Swanson continued, 'Is atonal music more emotional than is more mathematically restricted music?' In response to Swanson, Rehe (2000, [Online]) made the distinction between text and display typefaces:

*There are studies of the so-called connotative value of typefaces, which is science-speak for emotional flair or lack thereof. Here we are talking of text type, where little research has been done...Part of the typographer's job, I think, is a sensitive interpretation of the meaning of the message and the selection of 'appropriate' type faces. It presupposes, of course, a high degree of legibility of a font in the first place.*

Walker et al. (1986, pp. 29-42) researched the factors appreciated as contributing to the appropriateness of certain typefaces, such as traditional typefaces appearing suited to representing traditional professions, or optical character recognition typefaces being deemed suitable for representing computer or technology clients. Their research with a cross-section of the general public (no typographers or graphic designers) suggested, however, that there were other multi-modal adjectives—such as sharp/blunt, big/little, rough/smooth, loud/quiet, bright/dull—which were also important in judging the appropriateness of typefaces to a variety of professions and that this was dependent on the degree to which the typeface shared features with the intended purpose or concept.

Childers and Jass (2002) built upon the work of Walker et al. by developing a conceptual framework to address 'the impact of typeface semantic cues within a marketing context'. Specifically, Childers and Jass explored the semantic pathways through which typefaces convey meaning in print-based advertisements for consumer brands. The results of their two experiments suggested that typefaces convey meanings to prospective purchasers of products and services which, when combined with the advertisement image and body copy, influence how consumers perceive and remember information about brands. In summarising their work, Childers and Jass (2002:105) suggested the following:

*That typefaces should be viewed as more than a design afterthought. Typefaces do more than communicate verbal material, they convey unique associations independent of the words they represent...Overall, this study directs attention to the importance of understanding issues related to typeface selection beyond the aesthetics of their style.*

## Conclusion

This paper has explored an area of the type industry filled with personal judgements, assertions and assumptions to better explain and understand the complexities of the phenomenon of the explosion of typeface designs. An appropriate conclusion which summarises this range of issues is contained in an article first published in FontZone in 1997 by van Blokland (n.d., [Online]). He unambiguously stated his views on the value of type and the intentions behind typeface designs:

*If a typeface was made by someone else, it would have been different, even if the intent was to make the same thing. It is that collection of personal, specific decisions and opinions that make a typeface useful, appropriate, good or bad, that is its value.*

The diverse and often competing views in this paper show that trying to accurately identify the intentions, connotations and associations surrounding the vast resource of typefaces is far from simple to achieve. For every professional user who claims a particular typeface as their favourite, there is a similar number who claim it as their least favourite and this situation is also reflected in the views of non-specialists and home computer users. Given this situation and the fact that the resource is still growing, the challenges for professional users and design educators to attempt to manage this unwieldy tool of the graphic designer—typefaces—will become increasingly problematic. The importance of this issue to the future of visual communication, however, should not be underestimated.

In a twenty-first century world in which the competition for an audience's attention is increasing exponentially, graphic designers require new knowledge about typefaces for visually branding or customising their clients' messages. The resource of as many as 100,000 typefaces is there for designers to utilise, but it is the identification, appreciation and appropriate use of the vast resource of typefaces which is needed to provide graphic designers with the visual and editorial edge vital to effectively compete in such an environment.

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