

Of Type & Time

The relationship between typeface,
technology, and society.

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Introduction

All media shape our society; introduce new ways for us to see the world — new ways to think about our surroundings. Similarly, our media are shaped by our society — they are a reflection of our values, our technology, and our hopes for the future. The automobile, for instance, was born out of a need for more efficient transport in the wake of rapidly-expanding cities — its popularity led to the rise of suburbia, the decline of streetcars, and the development of a massive concrete network that now governs our landscape. [Miner, 2011]

What, then, of the typeface? A medium that spans almost every other, its reach is wide, and yet it often lies unnoticed, overpowered by the content it presents. Do our typefaces shape society, or do they simply reflect it? They are the artefacts of our cultural push-and-pull between technological advancement & humanity, but they might also, it seems, be a driving force behind that battle.

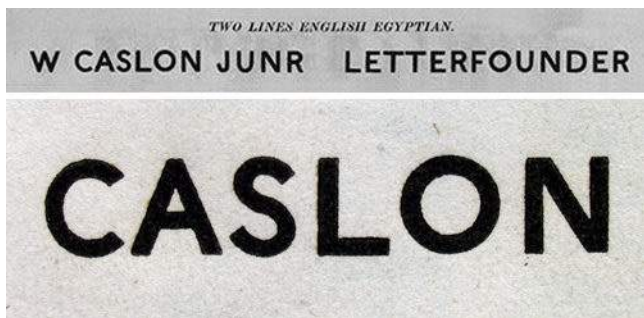


To Boldly Go: The Sans-Serif & Industry

The rise of the sans-serif in the 19th and 20th century has, in many ways, shaped the face of today's graphic design more so than any other development in design: By becoming the face of industrialism, it brought design kicking-and-screaming into an industrial world too.

Though today, the sans-serif is seen as the epitome of modernity and futurism, the opposite was true when it first arose. The first sans-serif fonts, around 1780, (as opposed to the first sans-serif letterforms, which date back millennia) arose as a result of neo-classicist sentiments that permeated Britain in the late 18th century. [Mosley, 2007] These early sans-serifs were influenced by classical principles of form, and as such were monoline and all capitals, evoking engraved typeforms.

The sans-serif form was neither well-liked nor popular in the 18th or 19th century, though they were in favour amongst sign-painters, for whom the forms were easier & quicker to reproduce than serif forms [De Jong,



An early sans-serif from William Caslon, 1816 [Alessio, 2013]



William Thorowgood's Grotesque, 1834 [Typophile, 2010]

2006]. In August 1805, *European Magazine* wrote of the “old Roman letter”:

The warmest advocates of these letters cannot but allow, that they are clumsy in the extreme, and devoid of a single beauty to recommend them, or any thing whatever, except their antiquity.

[European Magazine, 1805, cited in Mosley, 2007]

Its lukewarm reception — and poor adoption — was partially for technical reasons: Quite simply, no sans-serif font had lowercase glyphs [Griffin and McDonald, 2011] — after all, the fonts were derived from ancient majuscule forms. The first sans-serif to have a lower case was Grotesque, an 1834 condensed sans from William Thorowgood [De Jong, 2006]. Over the rest of the 19th century, the sans serif would creep into the libraries of print shops, used primarily for industrial & commercial projects; never deemed appropriate for book design [Griffin and McDonald, 2011]. Though this would be the foundation of the sans-serif's role within industrialisation, the sans-serifs of the 19th century were still decidedly human — they bore none of the sharp geometry or sombre neutrality which would make the sans-serif so suited for the machine-generated world of the 20th century. Instead, these early sans-serifs carried more personality — terminals that stopped at odd angles, claustrophobic counters that gave the forms no room to breathe, and contrasts between horizontal & vertical strokes more akin to those of serif typefaces than of today's sans-serifs.

The turn of the 20th century proved to be a pivotal time for the sans-serif, with the release of several typefaces which would shape the aesthetic of the sans from then henceforth, the most notable of these being Akzidenz Grotesk (1898) and Morris Fuller Benton's

series of American “gothics” – Franklin Gothic (1902), Alternate Gothic (1903) and News Gothic (1908). Unlike previous sans-serif fonts, which were ultimately forgotten to dusty printers’ cabinets, these fonts are still available — and popular — to this day: An indication that the form was, in these fonts, close to perfected.

The emergence of the turn-of-the-century sans coincide with advances in industry — 1901 saw the first assembly line, which would pave the way for a century of mass-production and mechanisation [Norman, undated]. These fonts, particularly Akzidenz Grotesk, feel closer to this spirit of industrialism than previous sans-serifs do — their angles more constant, their counters more open. They still keep a very tangible sense of humanity, however — a humanity that would later be lost in the geometric typefaces of the 1920s and 1930s. “Akzidenz” itself translates to “commercial” or “jobbing” [Griffin and McDonald, 2011] — Evidently, the sans-serif and industry were, at that point, inseparable.

Benton’s Gothics wear their humanity on their sleeves more so than Akzidenz Grotesk, but even they feel vastly more mechanised than the grotesques that preceded them. Society’s tendency towards industrialisation is far more evident in these fonts than those before them, and this ever-increasing tendency would continue to be reflected in design — and specifically, in type design — reaching a peak with Futura (1927), the

Die geehrten Leser ersuchen wir in ihrem eigenen Interesse bei Bestellungen sich auf unser Journal berufen zu wollen

H. Berthold
Berlin SW.

Bauer & Co.
Stuttgart.

Geschrift.

Accidenz-Grotesk.

No. 760. Diamant auf Nonpareil (corps 6). Min. 2 Ko.

Studium der neueren Naturgeschichte und der Mineralogie
Ergebnisse und Schilderungen aus dem Vortriebe im Westen Böhmens
BANDERHAUSEN 1935 EWENDINGEN

No. 762. Nonpareil (corps 16). Min. 4 Ko.

Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den alten Griechen
ORANIENBURG REBENHAUSEN

No. 764. Corpus (corps 10). Min. 6 Ko.

Konstantinopel Bremen Donaueschingen
HUSUM WORMS

No. 766. Mittel (corps 14). Min. 7 Ko.

Demmin BONN Genthin

No. 768. Text (corps 20). Min. 10 Ko.

Gumbinnen Hermsdorf

No. 770. Doppelmittel (corps 28). Min. 12 Ko.

Johannesburg

No. 761. Perl auf Nonpareil (corps 6). Min. 3 Ko.

Verhandlungen des Deutschen Aertztelages in Mainz
Gesellschaftsreise des Vereins der Freunde der Naturwissenschaften
HEIDELBERG 4889 NEUKIRCHEN

No. 763. Petit (corps 8). Min. 5 Ko.

Helnersdorf Neubrandenburg Diedenhofen
BORKUM GUBEN MINDEN

No. 765. Cizeo (corps 12). Min. 8 Ko.

MOSEL Niederschöneich SEINE

No. 767. Tertia (corps 16). Min. 9 Ko.

Bergen GENF Hameln

No. 769. Doppelcizeo (corps 24). Min. 10 Ko.

Nauheim Eisenach

No. 771. Canon (corps 36). Min. 14 Ko.

Rautenstein

No. 772. Kl. Mixal (corps 48). Min. 16 Ko.

Emden Colmar



Accidenz Grotesk from Berthold Type Foundry, 1898 [Clark, 2013]

A B C D E F G
H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U
V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j k
l m n o p q r s t u
v w x y z

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0

PLATE No. 13—FRANKLIN GOTHIC

OVER

Franklin Gothic from Morris Fuller Benton, 1902 [Puckett, 2012]

pinnacle of mechanisation within typeface design [De Jong, 2006].

Though the impact of industrialism on the sans-serif is evident, the impact of the sans-serif on industrialism is even more striking. These fonts would provide a vessel for the machine to merge with the most human medium of all — words. By separating language from the humanity of hand-lettering, serifs & blackletter, and combining it with the more mechanical sans-serifs, designers of the early 20th century gave people a way into industrialism — A way to connect with it, and, ultimately, a way to accept it.

At the heart of this was the idea of a machine aesthetic, and how closely it aligns with the aesthetics of the sans-serif — Mumford describes this aesthetic as “elimination of the non-essential.” [Mumford, 1934] Brolin writes:

[Machines] performed their tasks simply and efficiently. The aesthetic qualities of the machine — simplicity and geometry — became desirable in themselves.

[Brolin, cited in Brummett, 1999: 41]

This aesthetic is echoed strongly in the aesthetic of the sans-serif: the non-essential serifs were eliminated, and the designs were imbued with a strong geometry — greater use of straight lines and right angles, and increased consistency between letterforms. By increasing uniformity, the letters became interchangeable and the

font became less a design, more a system. The font became a machine — not a machine stored away in factories, but a machine shown to the public wherever they looked. The font became the poster boy, quite literally, of industry.

Marshall McLuhan theorises that the impact of a medium comes from the medium itself, not what it communicates:

The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.

[McLuhan, interviewed by Norden, 1969]

The impact of these early sans-serifs, however, is related directly to the content, and how they could be used to offset the messages they were communicating — messages of objectivity. Alone, these instructions & directions — these mechanical dicta — would be cold and unwelcoming, but with the subtle humanity of the early sans-serifs, they could be given life. In *The Crystal Goblet*, Warde submits the idea that:

Type well used is invisible as type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas.

[Warde, 1955]

However, for early sans-serifs to be the “perfect talking voice” for industry, it could not be invisible, but it had to lend its own voice to the conversation — one of authority, but of understanding. One that looked to a me-

chanical future, but kept one eye on the humanity in the rearview mirror.



Borne Back Ceaselessly: The Script & Our Search For The Hand

If 20th century typography was about surrendering our humanity to machinery, 21st century typography is about reclaiming it. The re-emergence of the script in the late 2000s/early 2010s came at a time when digital technologies had become all-encompassing — our world was Web 2.0; it was glossy and well-maintained and soulless. The “retro” aesthetic was a counterblast against that culture [Zandl, 2005], and with it brought a glut of new script fonts, each reminiscent of a bygone era where our designs were crafted not by code, but by hand.

It is perhaps ironic, therefore, that these scripts came as a direct result of the advances in technology — It was really the first time that scripts could effectively be used as digital fonts. Because of low screen resolutions, the first computers had only bitmap fonts — fonts drawn on a pixel-by-pixel basis, as opposed to today’s vector fonts which render shapes from mathematical expressions [Haralambous, 2007]. Bitmap technology simply didn’t suit script fonts, though that didn’t stop

designers from trying — two of the fonts included on the first Macintosh could be loosely classified as scripts: Susan Kare’s Los Angeles and Bill Atkinson’s Venice [Kare, 1983].

With the introduction of the sub-pixel rendering engines CoolType & ClearType in 2000 [Cope and Kalantzis, 2001], vector fonts became far more usable, but by that point, scripts simply weren’t in demand: the aesthetic of the time was already a digital one — one that looked to the future — and scripts reeked too heavily of the past.

The web was also a sticking point for the script, though it ultimately proved to be its saviour. Prior to the arrival of fast and secure font-embedding technologies on the web, the only fonts that designers could use for websites were those that the user would have on their computer. With different platforms being loaded with different fonts, the selection of “web-safe fonts” was extremely limited: a handful of sans-serifs; a couple of serifs; Courier New & Comic Sans [Cranford Teague, 2009]. It was only once font-embedding became possible that script fonts could flourish on the web, but it was precisely for that reason that they did flourish — with the new freedom to use any font they wanted, designers rushed for the fonts that had most eluded them on the web: scripts.

The script’s revival may also have had an

Los Angeles 12 at the perfect, original size.

*Los Angeles 24 at the perfect,
original size.*

Venice 14 at the perfect, original size.

Susan Kare's Los Angeles & Bill Atkinson's Venice [KreativeKorp, Undated]

economic basis — scripts were particularly profitable for type designers. Unlike other typographic styles, which had been fonts for decades before digital typography, scripts had always been the work of calligraphers, letterers and sign-painters. They were unique to the those who rendered them, and as such, there were no classic script fonts. When the demand grew for script fonts in the late 2000s, the market was underpopulated, and thus a very attractive proposition for type designers. Scripts are also cheap and quick to design: As they're not used in body text, they do not require multiple weights & styles, and their hand-generated heritage makes them more forgiving towards imperfect Bézier curves and offbeat letterforms. By that point, with the introduction of online marketplaces and consumer-level font-generation software, type design was well-and-truly democratised [Biłak, 2009], and a flurry of script fonts flooded the market, ranging from the beautiful & innovative to

the ugly & utterly unusable.

Though the technical advancements are certainly significant, they do not answer one important question — why scripts? And why this particular brand of 50s Americana scripts? The revival could just as easily been of blackletter fonts, or handwriting fonts, so what was it that caused the return of these saccharine sign-painter scripts? The answer, it would seem, lies not in the technology, but in the culture.

Culture always has a tendency to look to the past: From the neo-classicism in the 18th century to punk's revival of the greaser look in the 1980s [Guffey, 2006], our cultural history constantly informs our future. Guffey posits that this retrospective tendency is a form of Postmodernism:

The attributes of retro, its self-reflexiveness, its ironic reinterpretation of the past, its disregard for the sort of traditional boundaries that had separated 'high' and 'low' art, all echo the themes found in Postmodern theory.

[Guffey, 2006: 21]

When the status quo looks to the future, the avant-garde look to the past. This specific retro craze came after a period of economic development in the West, which suddenly came crashing to its knees in 2008. As the once-bright future dimmed, we searched for brightness in the past. As Guffey writes:

The retro past is [...] implicitly linked with loss of faith in the future.

[Guffey, 2006: 22]

What made this particular period more significant than most was that it came at the same time as other cultural developments that complemented it: The rise of the hipster, the revival of a DIY/craft aesthetic, and mass-gentrification created thriving *retropolises*, and, in turn, a profitable market for retro design [Flew, 2012].

Alako-Bold

Dancing Script

Honey Script

*Marketing
Script*

Mural Script

Pacifico

Rochester

Sacramento

Yellowtail

Grand Hotel

A selection of fonts from the recent script explosion [Textuts, 2013]

But script typefaces were not adopted solely by the counterculture — they quickly became popular in corporate branding too (MailChimp, Airbnb, Bitly.) Unlike pre-existing script logos (Kellogg's, Coca-Cola, Old Spice), these brands were not designed to communicate heritage or tradition — instead, they communicated a certain humanity and a “we’re-all-in-this-together” sentiment. If turn-of-the-century sans-serifs were primarily mechanical, with a faint whiff of humanity, then modern scripts were primarily human, with a faint whiff of the machine.



MailChimp, Airbnb & Bitly logos [Logopedia, Undated]



Kellogg's, Coca-Cola & Old Spice logos [Logopedia, Undated]

Our culture's obsession with technological advancement had brought us so close to the precipice of

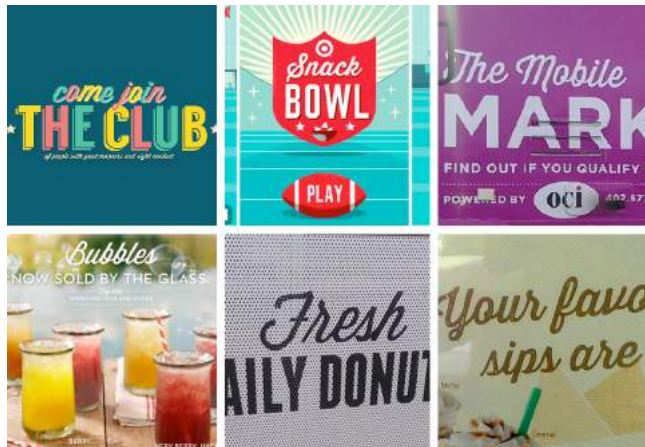
a fully-mechanised aesthetic that we had begun to lose sight of the humanity within design. The hand, which had been such a vital part of the design process before, had been replaced by the cursor. These script fonts gave us back the sense of the hand — they gave a personality to the pixels that displayed them. The messages they communicated were still mechanical ones, but the fonts that communicated them told a different story — a story of mistakes, of manual labour, of excitement. The fonts were often gaudy, sometimes overplayed and usually illegible, but more importantly: they were personal.



The overuse of Pablo Impallari's Lobster [Russi Díaz, 2012]

What caused script fonts to fall out of fashion,

however, was the same reason that caused them to come into it — their humanity. A script's most important feature is its individuality — no other hand could have created that work. A font, however — by very definition — is designed for mass-production and mass-distribution. Certain script fonts — most famously Wisdom Script, Bello & Lobster — became grossly overused, due to their affordability, legibility & versatility [Austin, 2012]. Quickly, these fonts lost their individuality, and grew to reek of inauthenticity, a stark contrast to the authenticity that had plunged scripts into popularity in the first place.



The overuse of James T. Edmondson's Wisdom Script [Sacco, 2014]

The remnants of the script revival still echo around the design world today, but for the most part, designers have reverted to clean lines, solid colours and geometric sans-serifs. Scripts are certainly not yet dead — they still lie scattered around bestselling font lists at the end of each year [MyFonts, 2015] — but they appear to have lost the authentic voice that they began with, overrun by corporate zeal just as the *retropolises* that homed them have been.



Extensions of Man: Typeface As Medium

To truly understand the significance of typefaces, and their effect on society and technology, it is important to see the typeface not just as a design, not just as software, but as a medium. A medium through which other ideas are spread, but also a medium through which the ideas of the typefaces themselves are spread. Marshall McLuhan defines a medium as:

Any technology whatever that creates extensions of the human body and senses, from clothing to the computer.

[McLuhan, interviewed by Norden, 1969]

He theorises that the wheel is an extension of the foot; the book an extension of the eye; clothing an extension of the skin [McLuhan and Fiore, 1967]. The typeface, then, is an extension of the voice — it allows us to talk in new ways; expressing nuances that the human voice can not. It reveals truths not present in the words alone.

Where the typeface differs from the voice is that it acts within a visual space, whilst the voice lies in an auditory space. The crucial difference here is that:

The auditory field is simultaneous, the visual successive.

[McLuhan, interviewed by Norden, 1969]

Our culture has become so immersed in the visual space that we are more attune to it — we are more receptive to nuances in the visual than in the auditory space. As such, our voices can be better heard through typography, and the changes it can make to society are more dramatic.

If the typeface truly does effect change as much as its content, what, then, is the change that it effects? It provides new paradigms through which to see things. It provides a human voice in a sea of technology, or a mechanical voice as a gentle warning of things to come. Used correctly, the typeface makes incomprehensible content understandable, or forces the reader to spend more time over that which they may just skip over. By changing the way we look at words, the typeface, in a very subtle way, changes the way we look at the world.

Different typefaces, however, have different effects, much of which is down not to aesthetics, but to the level of engagement. McLuhan categorises media into two subsets — hot and cool:

A hot medium excludes and a cool medium includes; hot media are low in participation, or completion, by the audience and cool media are high in participation. [...] A lecture [...] is hot, but a seminar is cool; a book is hot, but a conversation [...] is cool.

[McLuhan, interviewed by Norden, 1969]

In the case of typefaces, the sans-serif and the script sit at

the two ends of that spectrum: The sans-serif is hot; the script is cool. The sans-serif is designed for legibility — it takes no effort for us to read. Indeed, we have learned to do so without thinking. We need not engage in the medium in order for its message to be communicated.

The script, however, demands participation — we must first process the letterforms before we can parse the content contained within them. Scripts lack the conventions that bind sans-serifs together, and as such, are a more laborious medium. Indeed, this is why scripts and sans-serifs work so well together: They create rhythm — An ebb and a flow.

McLuhan hypothesises that the cool medium will always give way to the hot eventually: The stone tool gives way to the metal tool; the painting gives way to the photograph [McLuhan, 1964]. As we advance further into civilisation, and away from tribalism, we create media that hinder progress as little as possible. So it was with letterforms — the script gave way to the hotter serif, which in turn gave way to the hotter-still sans-serif. The return to the script echoes a desire to return to tribalism in the wake of a Capitalist system that had failed so many.

By applying McLuhan's ideas to typefaces, we can see a greater societal pattern begin to emerge — a constant tension between technological advancement and humanity; the push of civilisation against the pull

of tribalism. This battle is not just reflected in our typefaces, but influenced by them too — the typeface acts as an entry-point into each world; a door beckoning the reader into a way of seeing.

Conclusion

As designers, it is important for us to see this change, and react to it. Our work lives within a cultural battleground, and neutrality is not an option. As McLuhan puts it:

Inherent in the artist's creative inspiration is the process of subliminally sniffing out environmental change. It's always been the artist who perceives the alterations in man caused by a new medium, who recognizes that the future is the present, and uses his work to prepare the ground for it.

[McLuhan, interviewed by Norden, 1969]

Our designs, in some small way, mould the futures into which we bound. Collectively, they create a culture which shape how humans think, how they act, and how they, in turn, create. These designs need no permission from us to do this — indeed, we can not stop them. But by recognising the impact of design in the past, we may be more considered in what we put into the world, and just what we want our future to look like.



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COVER IMAGE

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