

Language as Typography

MFA Thesis project

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An idea passes from the mind to the lips continuing
its journey through written language as typography.

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will address typography as it relates to language and human personality attributes, associating it with typographic forms. To support my ideas, I will reference writings in the field of typography, post-structuralism, and theories of Carl Jung.

A typeface originates as part of the aesthetics of the historical period in which it is designed. Its final form is a result of the cultural associations unique to the type designer who created it. The associations I make as a designer between an object and what it communicates are part of my understanding of relationships of form and meaning, visually and mentally. A typographic character is more than a functional letter. The subtleties within its form remind me of feelings, thoughts or people. As a result, my personal experiences with others become part of how I relate to typographic form. It is a language of its own. Printed, drawn or sculpted, letterforms communicate with me as characters on a stage, each one acting according to its role. I am witness to their efforts.

Fundamental to my thesis is the relationship between the original intent of a particular letterform as defined by the designer and the subjective interpretations assigned to it by users.

Before communication, there is understanding.

ANTECEDENTS

Type as an embodiment of personality based on form began with my own experiences as an undergraduate graphic design student. My design class had recently completed a typographic poster project filling our heads with references to type history and morphology. Intuitively associating typographic form with personality, my classmates nicknamed me Dom Casual after the font of that name designed by Peter Dombrezian for American Type Founders in 1952. The idea quickly spread. Each student was given a typographical nickname associated with their particular personality.

The idea was that a typeface could approximate one's personality. In my case, Dom Casual exudes casualness while also expressing certainty of inner being and steadfastness. Its roundness, soft curves and stout build seem to define my own exterior traits. I describe these characteristics not because I attribute them to myself but as a way of describing what my classmates saw as complimentary.

Some years later, I was reading *Erik Spiekermann's Stop Stealing Sheep & Find Out How Type Works*¹. In a section devoted to typographical stylistic associations, several typestyles are listed accompanying a list of associated images depicting different styles of shoes. The reader is asked to make connections between typefaces and objects based on cultural references. Spiekermann's choice of typefaces and the accompanying pictorial examples were primarily based on historical and stylistic references pairing culturally understood items with period-based, decorative typefaces. It was an analogy of fun associations.

While in my first year of graduate school, I underwent a series of personality assessments through the campus psychological testing center. Among the multiple tests I took, the one that made an impression on me was the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The test or questionnaire requires the testee to answer 96 questions relating to a variety of topics to make associations. Ultimately, a detailed description of the testee's personality centers are realized.

The MBTI is based on Carl Jung's theory of Psychological Types² and reflects categorizations that include extrovert, introvert, judge, feeling and sensing. Jung outlines the structure of personality types based on conscious and unconscious behavior beginning with the internal (ego) leading to the individual's persona or the personality portrayed in social settings. Jung also introduces the idea of archetypes, a universal understanding of experiences that have appeared over many generations. I find these categories very useful in my discussions of typographic form interpreted as personality, language and storytelling.

I often find myself making typographic choices based on the interpretive curves and steadfast linear strokes of letterforms rather than the historical appropriateness of a typeface. The consideration is formal but the approach is conceptual. I imagine a modern cave wall covered with historical letterforms, not whole words but individual letters relating to each other as individual personalities, describing stories and events: separate personas translating into a language of ancient metaphors in modern form.

Although the ultimate determination of what is being communicated is subjective, the idea of typography as having characteristics of associative form communicating a personality or archetype is a broad one and one that is of importance to this thesis.

¹ Adobe Press, 2002

² Campbell, Joseph. *The Portable Jung*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. New York: Viking Press, 1975.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

To adequately describe an object, one must experience it by seeing, touching or listening to it. Once conceptualized through a process of familiarization, a descriptive reference can be assigned to the object. If we chose to share our references, the reference or concept is expanded through communication. If enough people agree on the concept, it becomes part of the way we express relationships to objects and conversely, how we receive descriptive information through spoken language.

Language as abstraction

Language is an abstract concept to describe the physical and metaphysical nuances of the world. Speech, as a continuation of the abstract structure of language, is the transmitter of signifiers. It is a culturally agreed upon, vocal translation of language, expressed in sound, forming the basis of dialog or exchange of ideas. It is unseen and therefore intangible, subject to a myriad of arrangements before it is heard by another. If speech is not present between or among people, concepts remain personal identifications of thoughts. There is no objective comparison to a conceptual reference as long as it remains in the mind. If there is a structure at all, it is a memorization of signifiers.

Equally important is the printed, chiseled, applied or otherwise written word. In this case language is represented as visual combinations of letters arranged in a formal way as to be representative of a concept. Combinations of words on the printed page share the structural formulation of language but are concrete in that they are visible. Agreed upon arrangements of words in the form of syntax and spelling avoid abstraction. The organization of letters and words are a significant part of this agreement because of a need for a signifier (label) and signified (object). Language and typography change as cultures evolve, having originated as concepts first and applied signifiers second. The formal structure of grammar, a mediator of language and printed word, allows signifiers to coalesce into a coherent structure of written communication.

Language as observation

In the term “recorded history” we acknowledge that “recorded” presupposes a form of documentation that has come to modern day peoples as a retelling of events that occurred in the past. Early cave drawings indicate this form of communication happened as drawings of people, animals and actions of daily life. The observable forms were part of daily life and thus immediate to the people who drew them. Translation on their part was minimal. It is unknown if the people of that time saw a difference or direct connection between the drawings and their persona, but we can assume they associated the imagery with their lives. Importance of events or stories happened through hierarchy, proximity and repetition of certain images as relevance dictated. Drawn storytelling as a form of communication was the first generation of written association of observed objects into language.

It is natural to make associations with our bodies and surroundings³. The immediacy of our own physicality allows us to see that we are separate from others. We are alone in our thoughts and feelings unless we desire to communicate. Even when not communicating orally, we give impressions that can be interpreted as communications. Our body acts as a source of language and movement signifying intent. A scowl, a drawing in of our limbs or a certain stance all function as signifiers to others.

People’s movements differ in subtle ways from one another through postures, walking, bending, head movement etc. Our interpretations of these movements differ as well. What is perceived as anger to one may be something entirely different by others’ actions. Clues based on observation can only give us perceived answers of what movement or posture is communicating.

³ Nesbitt, Alexander. *The History and Technique of Lettering*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1957).

Emotions and feelings also play a part in our sense of self and well being and the way in which we interpret the world. Personality best signifies who we are to others. If I meet someone for the first time, I am unlikely to know anything about that person. With simple observation, like ancient peoples who drew on cave walls, I am capable of making an assumption based on my stored signifiers. I then create a language in my head that says, this person is this way or that. Posture can tell me something about the energy of a person, clothing can signify something about their attitude, and so on before even a word is spoken.

The body in design

Jung states the creative mind instinctively plays with objects we are attracted to. Movement is part of play and it is this concept I wish to apply to the form of typography. I see letters not only as form but as playful movement and posture, each character having personality traits signifying how it might be used in print. Much like the ambiguity of body language based on an individual understanding of the world, each person brings personal experiences in their evaluation of a typographic characters.

This is a departure from the more typical considerations of a typeface such as historical or style categorization because it is based on a psychological reaction to the form as opposed a classic typographic evaluation of the form. There may be some overlap between these methods but the concept is to apply the archetypes of personality association to typefaces. After all, it is people who are reading the words composed of letterforms and personalities who are interpreting them.

The problem with this method is that it produces results based on subjective interpretations. And just as designers bring interpretations to our consideration of typographic form, so do end users or readers. Internal dialogue happens on both ends—a language of sorts. If the sign or signified are different for each person, there is no commonality for designer and reader to connect. Responses will be varied and divergent due to a lack of understanding by readers who are unaware of a designer's original intention.

Initial response

We encounter typography many times a day. It surrounds us as soon as we stare at the alarm clock. Being aware of typography is a matter of education or interest but it exists as message, advertising, graffiti and so on whether we understand it or not. The shapes and uses of typography vary from written to displayed characters in innumerable instances as we go about our daily lives.

It is my opinion that most people don't really see type. It surrounds us in all manner of usage and aesthetics but the untrained eye tunes it out seeing only unimaginative words that scarcely bear acknowledging or go unnoticed. I will get deeper into this when I discuss typography as signs and symbols but as of now I am more concerned with how we come in contact with what I call type's innate personality or the essence of its form.

How can type be said to have personality? Is it defined in structural terms such as bold or light or in more metaphysical ones such as happy or sad? I say both. Of course nomenclature is dependent on our previous associations with the characteristics we ascribe to something as described earlier. We may feel happy but unless we understand what happy is, we may have problems labeling it as such.

Labeling is at the heart of what communication is about. I am approaching this as a post-structuralist in that an observer has an effect on the system of observation and the observed, which then translates to a label as an identifier⁴. The observer is essentially the glue that holds the abstract system together.

⁴ Hall, Calvin S. and Gardener Lindzey. *Theories of Personality*, Third edition. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).

Truth or fiction

I have come across some resistance to the idea that type has personality, strangely enough from someone who I would not call a people person or extravert. This is where the personality of the individual comes into play. If one is a people person or an extravert, he or she is likely to draw upon outside sources for definition including personality. If one is a visual learner, he or she is likely to see with a more determining eye than an auditory or experiential learner. Interpretations happen on an unconscious level that determines how we react to a certain face and that the interpretation is an individual response.⁵

The key for me is seeing type as having human qualities. Early humans communicated their experiences and surroundings in drawings, giving creative shape to what they experienced. I see typography using form and stance to communicate expressive qualities. There is a relationship in its form to our body's structure and how it moves to communicate attitude or feeling. Labels such as shoulder, body, feet, obliqueness, angle, tapering, thickness, diagonal stress, etc. are common descriptions of typefaces but can also act as signifiers of corresponding human qualities. It is in this metaphorical usage, where I see type as personality. Even the label "type" is a cross reference of both lettering and psychological personality studies.

⁵ "Visual & Auditory Learners." www.readinginstruction.com/visuallearners.html [accessed December 20, 2007].

METHODOLOGY

Basic signifiers

I have used Carl Jung's writings on personality⁶ as an objective platform to speak about my thesis based on his influence in the field of psychological study and personality types. Jung begins his personality categorization with two broad attributes, extrovert and introvert. The two personality constructs define a holistic approach to the environment, that of fixation on externals and introspective associations. The extrovert reacts to the world around him by relating to external objects. He draws energy from things and people to sustain interests and as the basis for relationships. The introvert is responsive to himself regardless of the environment. This person will always look inward for strength.

If we overlay the concepts of extrovert and introvert onto typefaces, we have to change the parameters slightly but only because type is not a living entity. It does not act upon but is acted on by typographers or designers. Staring with my premise that typography has personality, a viewer would need something on which to base his determination of character. In the case of inanimate objects, it must be conceptualized or drawn from association. The objective association is the form that gives us a clue to the character's aliveness or kinetic qualities. Aliveness can be described as a thing having movement, much as we might use the word "animated" or in Jungian terms, the spirit qualities of the animus.

Much as dance expresses momentum-based interpretations of ideals and metaphors, the movement of type is seen as an impression on the page. Does this type sit flatly, does it appear to rise up, does it reach out, is it demure, is it reserved, can it jump? Going beyond a stance, the movement can be said to further interpret feelings such as happy or sad, contented or uncomfortable. These labels of feelings applied by the viewer are subjective as are broader, archetypal descriptions such as strong, weak or youthful.

⁶ Campbell, Joseph. *The Portable Jung*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. (New York: Viking Press, 1975).

PERSONALITY OF TYPE CHARACTERS

The bold and ultrabold characters

I will begin with several typographic characters that fall into the typical category of bold or ultrabold. The three typefaces are geometric 231, Humanist 521 and Kabel Ultrabold. I chose bold faces as a starting point because of the association of bold (in a personality sense) with extraverted or outgoing. Indeed, the uses of a bold face would be to stand out and be noticed. The choice of sans serif vs serif will be discussed in later evaluations

Visualizing the lowercase of the same typefaces, the attributes that accompany their corresponding lowercase characters are not the same even within the same face. The geometric 231 uppercase M has an informality to it that suggests assuredness and competency. The sloping sidebars suggest strength and stability without a superiority of character. It is a good match for the lowercase discussed below because of the general familiarity or knowing sense within the movement of the kinetic letters.



The uppercase M of the Humanist typeface has a classic “hero’s” stance, wide shouldered, strong, perfect in proportion and stable on its feet, very confident in its presence. It has admittedly thinner strokes than the other uppercase Ms but the stance is what distinguishes it from its brethren. Aliveness exudes from its stalwart stance. Of the letters discussed, this is the most archetypal as monumental in stature and fortitude. Given its name and stature, the match between form and label seems fitting.



The uppercase Kabel M shares attributes to the geometric 231 M in that it has sloping sidebars and an elongated midsection but is characteristically different in that it is unsettled on its feet made visible by the upturn of the terminals on the outer strokes. The nose dips below the baseline adding instability to the character. Although bolder than the previous letter, it is whimsical in its appearance and mismatched to its lowercase personality (see following page, lowercase g).





I mentioned earlier that we are very familiar with our own physicality and the way our bodies function. In looking at the Geometric 231 lower case g, the first thing that strikes me is its “face.” From the top story to the lower ascender, it has the appearance of a face. The ascender coils back to the right then extends down and to the left is a most pleasing curve reminiscent of a smiling mouth. The attitude is one of happiness. Geometry is often characterized as rigid and precise but this character is anything but. An eye is clearly visible as the bowl of the letter, centered but seemingly looking out at the viewer once again, giving us the idea that there is a self awareness in its form.



The Humanist 521 lowercase g, on the other hand, suggests someone who is about to spring into action with its vertically compressed lower story and connecting stroke-bent under tension in a perfect north/south direction. This would normally be described as the character “stress” which applied in an emotional sense, is clearly evident here. The end stroke off the upper bowl is perfectly horizontal contributing to its compressed appearance. It appears to be moving down rather than up because of the open bowl of the upper story is taller than the compressed bowl. Although bold in appearance, it does not appear to be as extraverted as the other lowercase g’s due to the curved angles and mathematical roundness of the upper counters.



The lowercase Kabel g is radically different than the uppercase M described on the previous page. It shares similar formal construction but is dramatically different in its attitude. I would categorize this character as brutish and off-putting. The ascender has a slow curve and ends slightly left of the upper story. The angle at the end of the ascending stroke pulls backward toward the rear of the character suggesting a firm jaw or restrained forearm, recoiled with strength.

Serifs

Serif characters have a unique quality because they contain something extra. The serif serves as a grounding element formally, but as a character trait acts as an accessory to the overall personality of the letterform. The serif may be viewed as a functional element or as something more: this depends on how the complimentary structures are arranged. Unlike a decorative character, which is overt in its aesthetic qualities, a serif is often quiet, acting as an extension of an attitude that is already present.

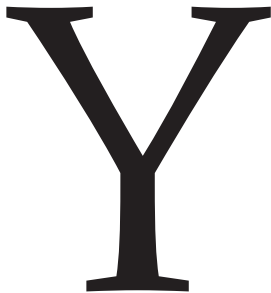
The letter most associated with human form is the roman lowercase e. It has the simplistic structure of a face, eye and mouth. Structurally, the lower strokes curve making it a “smiling” letter. The example shown is the lowercase e from Fritz Quadrata. Formally, this is a low contrast, semi serif because of its consistent stroke width and hint of a serif. The form is oval but the sweep of the descending cup is somewhat outside of the oval making it appear to be slack jawed and open mouthed. The upper bowl is narrow on the horizontal axis giving a squinting appearance. Combining the two elements gives this letter the attitude of a sly, egocentric character, extroverted to be sure and certainly confident. The sharp lines gives me the impression of masculinity but it could also be feminine.

A contrast to certainty is the lowercase p of Goudy heavyface BT. This character exudes an aliveness but is socially withdrawn. The uncertainty comes from the upper part of the bowl where the curved hairline stroke meets the vertical downstroke. It appears as a high eyebrow, and decidedly timid. The elongated, narrow bowl adds to the furrowed brow in shape. For all its weight, the stance is one of coyness and uncertainty, easy to confuse or overcome. The full roundness of the letterform suggests a matronly figure accented by the decorative elements such as the cupped serif on the descender and the upper, tapered serif which also lends to the body quality by its affiliation with the bowl to its right, an extension of hair, or arm. Unsure, timid, uncertain are words I use to describe the demeanor of this letter.

The lowercase n of news 701BT is a good example of a character that dances. It is motion about to happen, kinetic energy. Its arching upper right stroke stretches itself beyond the confines of its legs, waiting to leap. I see an exuberance of spirit that wants to express itself. The thick serifs are well grounded but compliment the idea of a dancer, waving its serif behind as it prepares to lunge forward off the ground. An openness in the counter as it leads the eye upward in the vertical stress suggest a strong stance. The subtlety of curvature on the upper stroke expresses its entire attitude. This is one fun guy.

A large, black, serif uppercase letter 'W'. The letter has a classic, slightly decorative appearance with wide, cupped serifs at the top and a central vertical stroke that is slightly narrower than the side strokes.

Old fashion but light hearted is how I describe the lowercase w of Minister Light, not because of its wide, cupped serifs but its staid-ness of stance. It is a conservative character and complacent where it sits. There is a calmness of attitude that tells me it is content to be by itself which is complimented by the oblique stress of the letter, semi-reclined as at rest. The wavy bracketed serifs convey its place in type design history, but I see them as a frilly decorative element dressing the character with style. It has been well documented that letterform design is a reflection of the period in which it originated and this letter, with its Galarde characteristics, is well suited for a gentleman of the 16th century.

A large, black, serif uppercase letter 'Y'. The letter has a strong vertical backbone and two upward-tapering strokes that end in small, cupped serifs. The overall impression is one of strength and upward reach.

The uppercase Y of ITC Leawood is several centuries ahead of our last type character and is joyful to say the least. Its upwardly tapered strokes evoke a skyward reach as if trying to touch the sky. Although a serif could be seen (and used) as a terminal ending for an upward stroke, these serifs are opening their palms upward as is the rest of the character. There is a slight cup in the semi slab serif that implies a upward longing, especially since the stress of this letter is strongly vertical. It's more than a traditional Y shape in that it has so much personality or energy starting from its arched toes to its cupped palms. I could easily imagine ancient peoples using such a character as representative of their own persona.

A large, black, serif uppercase letter 'J'. The letter is tall and slender, with a very narrow vertical stem that tapers to a hairline at the bottom. The top of the letter has a bracketed serif, and the bottom of the stem curves into a small, elegant hook.

Another gentlemen's character is found in that of the uppercase J of Cheltenham Book. I say gentleman because of its regal stature and constrained exuberance of style. The tall, slender character could easily be a mannequin in a fine gentleman's clothing store. I see it as wearing a bowler hat of the aristocratic type giving it that "top of the day" gesture. The lower stroke is the only real variation within the formal quality of the letter in that it narrows to a hairline to connect the bulbous embellishment, which serves as a terminal for the strong vertical backbone. The bracketed serif, flat on top, is evocative of the transitional cultural aesthetics coming into the early 20th century in which it was designed. It is constrained formality. There are many style variations in the Cheltenham family of which this particular uppercase letter is comparatively conservative. The narrowness of the vertical hints at the extreme verticality of some of its related family members.

Oblique, sloped or Italic

Italics or Obliques are an easy target because they have a built in flamboyance by virtue of their slanted posture. It's easy to see a persona in these typographic characters. Motion is so associated with life (as stillness is to death) that it would be difficult to not see aliveness in their form.

The lowercase k of Berkley oldstyle is a fine example of what appears to be a walking person. There is a body, stomach, legs, foot and even a cowlick. I have seen this interpretation before but without the emotive value. The letter has a bouncy, "on the go" quality to it by its inclination and almost literal foot stepping forward. Once again, the attitude is one of exuberance as the bowl/counter is angled to the northeast following the overall thrust of the letterform. The beautiful transition between the hairline and fullness of the counter is robust in shape suggesting a zestfulness and self confidence difficult to imagine in a san serif. The terminal of the backbone is at a slight angle allowing for the character to rock on its feet that adds to the overall energy of the letterform's directionality. The calligraphic quality of the lines suggesting, once more, the humanness of the typographic interpretation is evident in this character. It's a friendly, driven, spontaneous character.



As a transitional letterform, the lowercase a of Baskerville semibold italic is a modest translation of oldstyle classical restraint with a desire for modern expression. There is implied movement in the horizontal narrowness of the bowl and spine; not sweeping movement but a rocking backward as if impatient. When viewed close up, the compressed oval and the sloping spine, grasp onto each other as if to support this swaying. The connecting stroke by itself is reminiscent of a wagging tail, turned upward as in playfulness. Outside of its formal historical significance, the metaphorical transition is one of staid restraint morphing into a gleefulness of spirit, a self exposure to the world, seemingly at odds with the era it was created in.



A connection of form and function can often be made with italic letterforms because of their close connectedness to the calligraphic tradition, whether truly hand drawn or as a compliment to a roman face. This is the case with the lowercase of ITC Cushing book italic (and many similar characters). It has an expressive musical form. Formally, there is a connection with larger stringed instruments that feature sound chambers labeled as the "f-hole." Its diagonal slope is not so much indicative of movement as it is with certainty of importance and an aloofness of style. The terminals end in a generous, bulbous curve, dipping far below the baseline as if to say, "I am here." Metaphorically, the lyrical form gives it an expressive character. Used in combination with other letters, it overshadows even complimentary characters saying "I stand alone," and indeed, it does.



The Italic San Serif

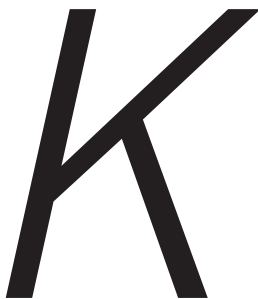
A san serif italic is difficult to pin down because it is neither decorative nor flamboyant, but a pile of sticks that looks like a letter. Modern concerns with strict linearity and right angles has produced skeletons of letters that evoke illusions of modernity. It is a natural progression from the modern letterforms of Didot and Bodoni with their flat serifs to letterforms that are flat in every respect. This form is considered characteristic of the 20th and 21st century and features sleek and functional lines. I would not say that san serifs are without character, rather, they are highly simplistic hieroglyphs of life in contemporary times. The obliqueness is still there, the attitude persists but the fullness of the character seems lost.



A look at Univers 45 light italic reveals it is a stable letterform, sure of itself as universally practical. The sloping stems of the capital A are solid and structurally sound, ending in a flat terminal and grounded to the baseline. If character is to be found, it is in the low horizontal stroke, sitting well below middle, acting as a passageway from lower to upper stability. In this respect, it is a masculine letterform which has a low waistline, short legs and long torso, unlike feminine builds which are often the opposite. There is little personality other than what one might call a “all around nice guy.” This is a nod to its name as well as its functionality.



There are always exceptions to the rule. The uppercase Q of Eras book is not technically an italic. There is not even a version of italic that accompanies the roman. However, I would call this a sloping roman and as such, allow it to fit into the italic category. When viewed in normal sized print, the Eras family looks amazingly colorful compared to other san serifs. This is solely attributable to its uniqueness of form, which of course translate into character, charm and personality. In some respects, it is a stable typeface with a firm groundedness and a slight slope to the northeast. But this letterform has a feature not seen in any other letterform spoken of so far; a slightly extended, squat, ponderous look. In this case, the Q is a squat oval, burdened under the weight of its own importance. The cap height is slightly less than the average, which gives it that gravity laden appearance. It sits on its own tail as if uncomfortable, unexpectedly making hard contact with the ground. Unlike most of the letters discussed, this one is worried, burdened by its own uniqueness. It stands out from other letters because of its extended letter width which accounts for a small portion of typefaces overall. “If I must, I will” it says.



The uppercase K of Trade Gothic light italic translates visually well. It would not take a stretch of the imagination to see this as a glyph of an older person using a crutch. There is character to the form, which lends itself to being archetypal of age, infirmity, dependency and nobility. I earlier stated that san serif forms are difficult to pull meaning from but this particular character was chosen as an example of the possibilities of minimalism and meaning. It easily communicates traits that act as a language as much as any serif is capable of. The diagonal stress is strong to the northeast. But with the stress comes dependency of agility. Since the upper diagonal extends beyond the lower, this further emphasizes the need for support. If not for the lower stroke supporting the rest of the character, it surely would fall down. This letterform certainly has nobility in its stature, competent that it will not fall because it is well grounded. Falling implies movement, which is seen in the forward motion in the obliqueness of the spine. It is aliveness is encouraging.

The flamboyant or decorative faces

By the title of this section, it is obvious to see that I consider these historical faces to be flamboyant or outrageous. I find them wonderfully different than the usual classifications of serif or sans serif (although some do fall into those categories). These are mostly historical faces that represent, more than most, a certain period of typographic design. In many ways, the faces are so linked to the cultural era in which they were designed that they are consistently used for communication purposes where a stereotypical visual reference is desired. In my evaluation of the characters, I may touch on this but as I am most concerned with form I will concentrate on their personalities.

The flamboyancy is easily readable in the uppercase T of Arnold Böcklin; so much so that it should be obvious to even the untrained eye. It is theatrical as if a prima-donna acting on stage and standing proud with legs together and chest out about to sing a tune. Formally, it shares some traits of italics in that it is more fanciful than standard romans although it pretends to be one. Unlike an italic, it does not compliment but is primary standoffish in its presentation. In this light, the decorative curvatures allow the otherwise mundane capital T to flourish as a theatrical proscenium or gateway into a fantasy world. It stands proud of what it is, confident in its upturned shoulders and cupped palms. Posture is the key here, the self confidence, the sheer boldness of spirit makes this character prominent beyond mere flamboyancy, relating well to the Art Nouveau period's exuberance for overt posturing.



Brush Script is also related to italics with its formal qualities of a sloping hand, but differs in that it is completely informal, making it most useful for less austere occasions. Its uses vary but almost inevitably, it speaks in a welcoming way, drawing people into its purview. It is easy to see the relaxed friendliness of the letterform as it loops around itself making subtle but generous curving motions. Rather than an adult persona, it has a baby like quality, soft and cuddly, even gurgling. It is neither male nor female but genderless as a baby might appear. Adding to this analogy, the softly tapered curves vary from thick to thin as the fat on a baby's arms wrinkles when it moves. There is nothing dangerous or hazardous in this face, only humility and a gentle ego.



I couldn't avoid speaking of Broadway BT's showmanship because it has become part of common vernacular since it appeared in the 1920s. Unlike the previously discussed typeface, Broadway BT is extravagant, lavish in its style with sweeping gestures and grandiose charm. It beckons you to its side. In particular, the lowercase g from Broadway BT is truly stuck on itself, even to the point of saying, "I don't even have to be complete to be seen as a letterform. Take me as I am." The upper bowl with its narrow counter and slight protruding serif looks as an eyepiece of an elegantly dressed man of the era. The lower swash is dramatic, transitioning between thick and thin, flowing in the wind as a scarf. Exuberance shines as one might expect from a Broadway Star, proud, a little bit of a showman and certainly welcoming.





In the category of decorative letterforms, attitudes vary from face to face even more than usual because of their unique aesthetics. The uppercase E of Stencil Standard is a great example. Rouged, strong, confident and tactile, it is an extroverted face bordering on angry. The multifaceted stencil quality makes it very masculine, carrying an attitude of toughness and stubbornness. Its individual pieces coalesce to form the overall but not at the sacrifice of each part. Each segment stands proud in its boldness, signifying function and determinedness of place as a letterform. Formally it is fragile, not referencing the common use of the typeface but as a fractured letterform. If not for the heavy spine connecting the upper and lower serifs, it might indeed look broken. This is a letterform to be reckoned with but only if its use is well thought out. It will dominate, hook or crook.



It's no wonder that so many decorative faces suggest theatrics. If used in advertising, they slyly beckon you to "come hither" because of their exotic appearance. Originally a condensed Clarendon, Playbill refers to not only the name of the face but its category as a late 19th century advertising face. The lowercase s is not much different from the oddities it might have advertised, a mutant letterform, intended to attract as a curiosity. Tall, extremely thin but robust in stature, it doesn't really pretend to be anything else but what it is and as such, is not haughty or self-centered, just different as if it had no choice. In another faces, its boldness might stand out as aggressive but not here. The slab serifs simply act as a grounding element of an otherwise childlike presence.



The lowercase o presented here is an example of a semi-decorative Tuscan face from the mid 1800s. I speak formally because it is such an unusual looking character with its jutting side ornamentation and suggestive negative spaces on either side. It is designated a Tuscan for this very reason which makes it aesthetically different than its peers of the era. One doesn't have to look very hard to see a pair of lips or even an alien shape in its structure. Whatever the case, it is most certainly an orphan of style in today's culture. It is a bit too formal to be a representative of persona, more of an oddity, a thing rather than a being. Its symmetry suggests conformity only unto itself, having no objective comparison other than what is considered standard by most. How alone it must feel.

Calligraphic Types

Calligraphic types are a curious bunch because so many in use today are approximations of centuries old hand lettering. Some of the faces in contemporary use are culturally associated with business or merchant transactions, having long been out of fashion as book text. They are caricatures of themselves rather than having intrinsic importance as they would have when used by the Roman Church for religious or inspirational purposes. That sacred intent remains in contemporary use as calligraphic type in weddings and other ceremonial uses communicating a certain religiosity that is at best a weak connection to its past. One could call them (by today's standards) the first generation of decorative typefaces serving as a stereotype of history to contemporary audiences.

The lowercase d of Engravers Old English is a proud letter and timid in character and quietly elegant. In our imagined, contemporary cave wall, it would represent not lived experiential traditions but a medieval sensibility of formality resigned to class. Its persona is one of proud humility; not that it wants to be humble but is imposed by authority which it clearly imitates. The transitions of stroke width are abrupt as one might assume a pen drawn character to be but forced by the mirrored act of imposed mechanics, which serves as authority. In every way, the character is what it is because of servitude to a class distinction and is resigned to that place.

On a different note, the uppercase S of the Blackletter 686 is a true aristocrat; noble in its self importance and regal in its presentation. There would be a cultural divide for the previously discussed letterform because of upper and lower class differences. The Blackletter 686 exudes social graces in its slow, lingering curves, diagonal movement and sweeping upper sashes reminiscent of flags. The flamboyance is an embodiment of attitude in its upright stance. There is a deliberate decorative quality within the engraved areas that are its badges or insignias of distinction. Belief in its own importance is its hallmark and exaggeration its extravagant character.

Simple, unpretentious and tattered describes the uppercase G of Celtichand. It is closest to the actual hand than the other letterforms I have described and thus, more human in its line quality. It has the aura of an ordinary yet is used culturally to reference pagan or earth traditions. It looks natural as if it grew from the earth. The Celtichand G is also natural at bringing to bear its serious point of view with its strong horizontal stroke terminating well into its generous counter. The connecting right horizontal stroke pulls back on its jaw as if restraining itself from acting yet implies, reckon with me.



A large, black, calligraphic uppercase letter 'J'. The letter has a decorative, wavy top that curves to the right and then down. The stem is thick and tapers slightly towards the bottom, ending in a small, curved hook.

I have to smile when looking at the uppercase J of Goudy text MT, Lombardic Caps because of its wavy, undulating lines that are seemingly endless. If not for the decorative qualities, this letterform would not exist at all; completely ornamental. To my contemporary eyes, this character is an amusing shape evoking poshness and comfort but it has an abstraction quality to it that begs to be interpreted. The midsection evokes a well fed belly shape protruding out from its midsection with a pompadour hairdo on top and fancy shoes on the bottom. This is an amusing shape but also one of rare means. As a character, it exudes the attitude of a dandy with frilly sleeves, its demeanor that of privilege and its countenance of means. Much like the opulent life it alludes to, styles change over time leaving this letterform in the difficult to relate to all but a formal category.

A large, black, calligraphic capital letter 'B'. The letter has a thick, rounded top that curves to the right. The stem is straight but widens at the bottom. The bowl is large and rounded, with a trailing serif at the bottom.

The capital B of Pontifica is a beautiful thing, a queen of typefaces. Its natural curves lend an air of authority that isn't one of absolutes but of natural, uncontested leadership. The generous bulbous bowls, the straight but not rigid spine, its widening curvature and trailing serifs all lead to matronly imagery, age and charm. I relate to this letter as a grandmotherly figure or someone who is a crone and wise with age and clearly the matriarch of the family. She knows where she sits and wants the best for those she nurtures.

A large, black, calligraphic lowercase letter 'm'. The letter is highly decorative and complex, with multiple curves and a jagged, broken appearance. It has a thick, rounded top that curves to the right, followed by a series of sharp, downward-pointing strokes that create a sense of movement and energy.

If proportion attracts me, then ill proportioned distracts me. Such is the case with the persona of 18 Fete Fraktur Black. The lowercase m is jagged and broken (thus its name) making it ill suited to the humanness of the calligraphic hand. It is a busy letterform, which does not know what direction to follow. The counters and surrounding space lend as much to its form as the form itself because of its constant reversal of strokes and interplay of dark and light. I am aware that it is a cultural familiarity that allows this letter to work but the severity of line quality and clustering of shape leads me to see a crippled, unhappy but persistent figure, incapable of asking for the help it deserves. In that, I take pity for the figure than cannot help itself; crying out for mercy but doing nothing to better itself.

Prolouge

Although my characterizations of various categories of letterforms may seem fanciful, typographic hieroglyphs representing humanity and life surround us. What leads a person to make judgments on another, good or bad, is primarily that which we bring to the reading. The imaginary cave wall is our proving ground for refining those characteristics which ultimately say as much about the choice of typeface as it does about our preferences.

Practical Application

One way of objectifying conceptual ideas is to bring them into actualization and make them concrete. In the case of a structural approach to a typographic associative language, the most concrete way of realizing this would be to graphically construct a system that reflects all the important elements within my defined structure.

In the introduction to Sir Cyril Burt's book, *A Psychological Study of Typography*⁷, he states that "there are different kinds of public and hence there are different kinds of typography." Although he is speaking primarily of legibility, he does differentiate between differing classes and readers. This makes sense given the unique understanding we impose upon that which we read based on our conceptualization of language. Wrapping an objective structure around a subjective conceptualization is key to my methodology.

The typographic cave metaphor is an example that communicates a subjective expression of storytelling, however, a more utilitarian approach is needed for the application of theory as a way of objectifying personal-psychological expression. A number of design approaches were considered, including book layouts, surfaced based typography (referring to the cave metaphor) and flash cards. The solution which was suitable for my goals was a deck of playing cards which not only served as a graphic reference to historical printing methods but was contextually easy to manipulate.

To begin, I wanted to make associations of typographic form with personality character traits as well as color. Research began with a set of 78 playing cards, divided equally into three categories; typographic form; color; and character attributes. The backs of the cards were painted with a color field. The typographic elements on the card face were applied through Xerography.

The uppercase characters A-Z along with their lowercase equivalents were applied to the faces of the initial series of cards. To ensure variation, typefaces were chosen representing many historical typographic periods and styles. The name of the face was also applied for personal reference. The second series of cards were printed with psychological personality traits ranging the gamut of feelings and expressions such as mean, lively, sad, etc acting as signifiers of expression. The third series had color manually applied using a brayer. Colors ranged from deep burgundies and blues to pastel yellows and pinks also acting as associative signifiers.

Although the work was to be a serious consideration, it took on a more game-like quality as it developed following the traditions of historical cards such as Tarot and chance games. The system was structured in that each participant was asked to make associations with the three cards picked from the three face-up piles, one from each category. However, because of the subjective nature of the effort, participants were not limited to any specific combination and might be attracted to either form, color or expression depending on their approach. If the associations were meaningful to them, the "play" was achieved.

The outcome of the three card associations corresponded to a chart of personality types, loosely based on established psychological traits such as codependent, centered, etc. The participant's card choices had a numerical value that, once totaled, pointed to a broad personality profile. While not absolute in determination, it did serve to complete the goals discussed below.

Upon presentation of the set to my peers, it was viewed as a fun process dealing with form and meaning. The three categories of cards, each with 26 varieties, were presented at the same time. Participants were instructed to pick one card from each category. Although the color, personality trait and typeface were placed in a stack beside one another, the participants quickly shuffled and mixed them, apparently looking for something that attracted their attention. The set was scattered

⁷ (New York: Cambridge University press, 1959)

about the table and each person drew their cards, often discarding one for another until a definite personal connection was established.

Given that the participants sampled were graphic design students, I was not surprised that communication centered on the specifics of the design elements presented. Each student was overheard at some point explaining why they thought or felt they related to a color, shape or word or combination thereof, often disagreeing with another over interpretation. Some attempt by the students was made to spell words or even phrases which, although outside of the parameters of the rules, signified an attempt to think beyond what they had been given which in itself, suggests a personality trait.

Many light hearted comments were also heard such as “game, fun, believability, embarrassment,” further suggesting how they felt about the process. On the whole, the participants liked the process and found it easy to comprehend.

My goals were to observe how different psychological personalities could be related to typographic form and how those associations bring about communication and interaction when presented with color, form and multiple personality traits. The type choices were the motivating factor in the behavior of the participants. Personality -> typeface -> personality. Given that goal, I consider my efforts a success leading to an objective way of solidifying an abstract linguistic concept.

Artwork for Masters Thesis Show

To compliment my thesis writing I designed a typographic installation for the master's thesis exhibition entitled "Language As Typography." The piece is constructed of Lexan, frosted vinyl and brushed aluminum standoffs for mounting.

The concept for the piece derived from my readings into typographic history and readings of Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas on language and communication. A synthesis of my reading is summed up in the phrase I wrote for the piece, "An idea passes from the mind to the lips continuing its journey through written language as typography." It makes a direct statement that an idea, which is ephemeral, can evolve through speech, the written word and eventually as the printed word. The interpretation is one of evolution of thought, deriving from Saussure's writings on the exchange of language and whether an idea, which begins in the mind, is the same once it has been translated into formal terms, such as a book. I carry the concept beyond just referencing the printed word into one of concretizing print through my field of study, typography.

The piece is site specific in that it relies on the interplay of light through acrylic and vinyl doubling the text as a ghosted appearance on the wall just below the actual text on the mounted piece. This speaks to the transitory nature of an idea. Formally, the ghosted text is a focal point of the piece.

Each of the five panels were installed in a long hallway at eye level, one inch from the wall and spaced varying distances from each other. This created a temporal effect when the text was read. The hallway had the effect of creating a passage, both of time and thought. The text was obscured upon approaching the signs, then revealed itself as viewers passed in front of it. Finally the text diminished after passing by. All of these formal elements enhanced the concept of the transitory and the objectified.

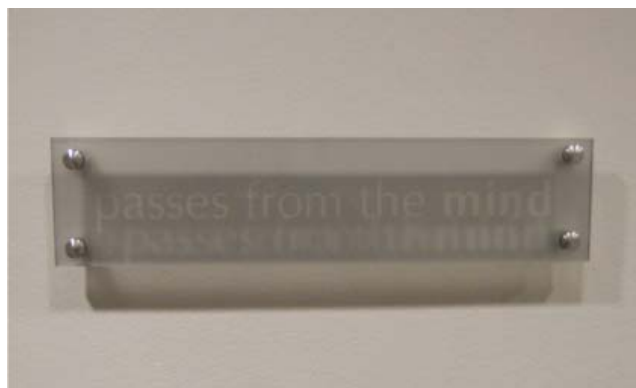
The typeface used in the piece is Zapf Humanist designed by Hermann Zapf in 1952. It has the legibility of a true sans serif such as Helvetica with a hint of calligraphic hand lettering. Placement on the wall references type history, echoing the original carved letterforms found on Roman architecture such as Trajan's column, on which the roman letterforms were based. As part of my study of type history I had the chance to study actual carved type by Eric Gill and original Zapf manuscripts. I felt my piece was completing a circle of typographic historical relevance as well as semiotic association of language and form through its use of light and translucency.

MFA Thesis project artwork

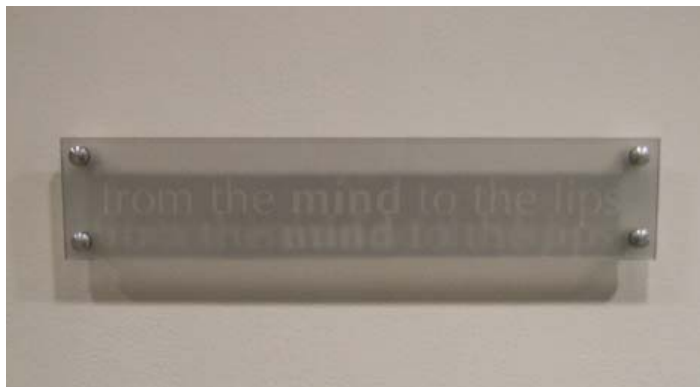
1



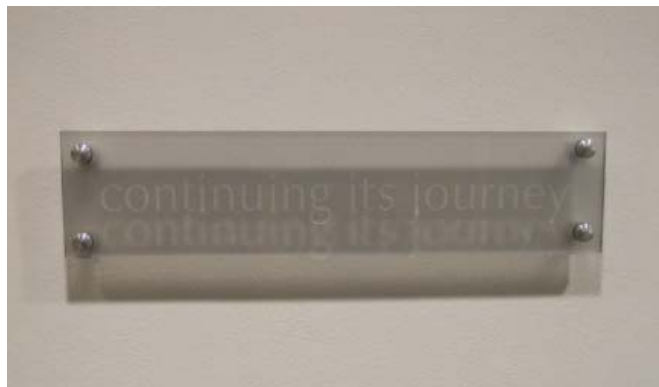
2



3



4



5



Hallway spacing of thesis artwork



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Plastic card holder sheet containing
9 examples from the card game.

Language as Typography

MFA Thesis project

David Damico

May 2008

MFA Thesis Project David Damico Language as Typography May 2008