

It Takes All Types (The Times)

Self-confessed font fanatic Ian Peacock on the terrors of typography

This article is manipulating you. Sorry. I can't help it. It is, after all, printed in a typeface: the Times typeface no less. Whether you like it or not, you're taking it much more seriously than you would if it was in a silly cartoon font such as Comic Sans. The Times typeface is a tweedy academic - comforting, intelligent, incorrigibly British. Whereas Comic Sans is the David Brent of typography: a failed office jester, desperately trying to be your pal.

Every day, we encounter hundreds of typefaces or fonts (I'm using these two terms interchangeably - apologies to typology anoraks), but most of us would be hard-pushed to name any of them beyond perhaps the default computer ones like Arial.

However, they are subtly influencing us all the time, nudging our sensibilities behind the backs of the very words they represent.

"Typography is very manipulative," admits leading graphic designer Neville Brody. "The choice of a font will tell you how you'll react emotionally to the information before you've even read it. It's an invisible level of communication. It's to do with context, association and memory."

Consultant psychologist Dr Aric Sigman has studied the emotional impact of fonts and is convinced that they constitute a "second dialogue." After analysing stern letters from bank managers, he concluded that they are "increasingly using fluffy, friendly fonts in a vain attempt to humanise their message."

Font experts in the type-obsessed world of advertising advise against such obvious clashes between meaning and typography. "I hate it when banks talk to youths in yooofy typefaces," says Julian Vizard of the St. Lukes agency. "It's like William Hague turning up at the Notting Hill Carnival in a backwards baseball cap."

The problem is, of course, that there are too many fonts to choose from and it's all too easy for computer users to go typographically berserk. It's estimated that there are now 50,000 fonts commercially available and Neville Brody says this explosion is motivated by the commercial need to manipulate consumers: "If there was no manipulation in typography, there'd only be one typeface."

There was only one typeface when Gutenberg developed the first printing press in the fifteenth century, simulating the ornate ecclesiastical hand of the scriptorium. The subliminal message of the original Gothic or Black Letter fonts was clear: the words were God and the words were with God.

However, in the sixteenth century, a new, more elegant style was needed to enshrine classical thinking, resulting in so-called Roman typefaces.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fonts became more graceful, no longer doing obeisance to monastic script, and dominated by high-profile designers such as John Baskerville. He was a celebrity in his own right ("Have you read Baskerville's

Virgil?") and was deeply eccentric. A staunch atheist and rationalist, he insisted on being buried upright in his own garden.

Fonts are often named after their designers (Caslon, Bodoni, Zapf); occasionally after the places which inspired them (Chicago, New York, Monaco, Geneva, Harlow...yes Harlow) and sometimes, though rarely, after authors (Byron, Shelley and, more recently, Richler). However, many fonts have names purely intended to evoke their image: Neopolotik, Stormtrooper, Incywincyspider.

Their titles may be confusing, but, thankfully, all fonts can be simply divided into two categories: Serif and Sans Serif. Baskerville's fonts had obvious 'serifs' which projected from each letter and pointed the reader forward, the word 'serif' being derived from 'schreef' which is Dutch for 'dash'. We had to wait until the eighteenth century for Modern fonts, with straight, pencil-thin serifs, designed by Didot and Bodoni.

Then, in 1816, the now-familiar Sans Serif style first appeared, 'sans' meaning 'without' in French. Sans Serif fonts have no serifs at all, resulting in a clean, modernist line. Sans Serif typography dominated the twentieth century, with a blip in 1930's Germany, when the Nazis revived the medieval Fraktur style to immerse Europe in a Teutonic font forest.

This inky romp through typographical history makes it look as simple as ABC, but the course of true type never did run smooth. In 2005, we appear to be suffering from post-modern font overload. In the last year, I've changed my e-mail font from Arial 12 Black (a "rubbish font" according to Neville Brody) to Tahoma 10 Blue, as someone told me that small fonts are more authoritative. But a CV consultant then informed me that I'm an "obvious Trebuchet".

Perhaps I should opt for Times New Roman which has been the most widely-used font on earth since it was designed by Stanley Morison in 1932. It was specifically devised for The Times newspaper to combine cool classical elegance with legibility and a hint of the modern.

Morison was a mostly self-taught traditionalist and friend of sculptor-typographer Eric Gill. He had a dread of anarchy and loved the Church and antiquarian books. After analysing classics such as Bodoni and Gill's Perpetua, inspired by the writing on Trajan's column, he decided that The Times required a font embodying its core values, demonstrating "strength of line, fineness of contour and economy of space." A special Times font committee was set up, including the Surgeon Occulist to His Majesty's Household. They read articles in several typefaces and reported a "freedom from fatigue after a long session" with Times New Roman. In a publicity pamphlet, the newspaper put the emphasis on modernity and easy legibility, arguing that it would "increase the comfort of reading" in twentieth century environments such as "cars and aeroplanes." The Times continues to use a descendant of Morison's font, called Times Classic. The original Times font is still hugely popular in publishing and has now replaced Courier on US diplomatic documents.

Graphic designers either love it or hate it. To Neville Brody, Times New Roman is the chintz of print.

"It's as ugly as hell. It's like an ugly relative who knows all the rules and comes round and tells you where to put everything."

Intriguingly, though, it's only adults who get themselves worked up about typefaces. According to a recent survey of 250 children, "99% of them simply don't notice fonts at all." But adults have had time to develop font memories and prejudices. In the cut-throat grown-up world of work, you're likely to have your CV rejected within 30 seconds if your prospective boss doesn't like the look of your typeface. And, as February 14th approaches, be warned. Love letters are apparently very font-sensitive. Don't write them in fonts reminiscent of government documents, bills or letters from the Inland Revenue, and, unless you want to look like a sad fop, avoid Comic Sans at all costs.

Off I go again. Font geeks like myself are united by only one thing: a tendency to develop violent phobias against particular typefaces. And most of us have really got it in for cuddly Comic Sans. Call me old-fashioned, but it is, in my view, the typographical equivalent of bindweed and ought to be eradicated from polite society and confined to comic speech bubbles where it belongs. Font fanatics revel in such draconian diktats and delight in factions and fracas. We luxuriate in the typographical Babel that bombards us wherever we go. So, to ruffle the pro Comic Sans lobby, here's one of my favourite jokes:

A Comic Sans font walks into a pub. And the barman says: "Sorry. We don't serve your type in here."

Font Signs – The New Zodiac

If your favourite font is...

Ariel: you are a default person and can't be bothered to explore life's drop-down menu.

Bodoni: you are a good-looking Italian with a Vespa, probably living in a chic part of Milan.

Comic Sans: you desperately want to be loved and considered nice, funny and possibly even wacky, but cry a lot when alone.

Copperplate Gothic: you are a lawyer or business-person, wear a suit at home, and live in or near Milton Keynes.

Courier: you smoke, use a typewriter, and are probably either an elderly secretary or embittered old journalist.

Curlz: you are probably called Lee or Kylie. You are a hairdresser.

Futura: you live in a Bauhaus building and are currently sitting on a Mies van der Rohe chair fondling your Filofax.

Georgia: you are probably female and like Kettle Chips, Pinot Grigiot, girly nights in, George Clooney and pink things from Monsoon.

Gill Sans: you are tasteful, design-conscious, probably gay or bi-curious, and you have lots of brushed stainless steel in your kitchen.

Helvetica: you may be Swiss or German, or you could be a sixties Conran type or wannabe hippy. Prince Charles allegedly likes this font.

Rockwell Extra Bold: you live in East Anglia, wear a stetson, speak in a fake Wild West accent and may be dangerous.

Verdana: you design websites, spend a lot of time on your blog, and have never knowingly read a book.