ECAL A Typographic Atlas

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The Networked Typeface

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It was the most thrilling thing I had ever seen on a computer screen. The wildest sight in digital typography. This was around 2005, 2006. I was a graphic designer from England spending a week at a factory on an industrial estate in Belgium, overseeing the printing of a book for a publisher in the USA. Production was waiting on final text corrections which the publisher was to send at the end of their day—hours after the evening shift in the printer's reprographics department would have gone home. Since neither printer nor publisher could afford to delay, and since I was staying in the small apartment attached to the factory, it was agreed that I would make the corrections. The digital design files had already been taken into the printer's workflow, though, so I couldn't simply modify and resupply the copy of the layout on my laptop. The plan was that I would receive the corrections during the night and input them directly into the printer's file at a computer connected to the server in the reprographics studio. When the morning shift came in at 6 am, the file would be ready for final proofing and plating and production would stay on schedule.

There I was at 2 am, the only person in a vast open-plan studio. Probably the only person in the entire factory. I received the email from the publisher. I transferred their PDF file to the printer's computer on a USB drive. I got to work: correcting spellings, rewording sentences, dealing with the consequences for my line-endings and pagination. Tired eyes triple-checking. I came to a correction which required a few words in roman type to be italicised. I selected the text. Moved my cursor toward the font menu. Clicked on the dropdown. And there they were. *All* of them. Installed on the printer's computer were all the fonts of all my most revered graphic designers and all their distinguished corporate and cultural clients. Thousands of fonts. Whole superfamilies of pricey Dutch historical revivals. Proprietary

fonts of major fashion brands who had engaged those most revered designers to create their unique typographic voices. Mysterious, unnamed fonts. Long since unavailable fonts. Fonts modified against the terms of their licenses. Display fonts with partial character sets which I recognised from favourite cultural projects. Fonts from studios who did custom type for every commission, never to be distributed. Was I dreaming? In disbelief I stared at that screen. At that list. And at the icon of my USB drive, still mounted there, innocently, on the desktop.

What explains this thrill? Little over two decades prior, the advent of digital graphic design had transformed whole historical classes of typographic hardware into files, records of vector points and Bézier curves, lightweight computerised things which could reproduce across devices and networks in an instant. Reconstituted from cases of heavy metal into trivial packets of *information*, the digital typeface, to follow Stewart Brand's maxim, wanted to be free. To copy the file which contained it was—is—effortless and practically undetectable. But the histories of typography and type design have never simply proceeded according to the capacities of media and technology. Ever since Gutenberg went bankrupt, outcompeted by his neighbours who were producing cheaper bibles by setting text in smaller typefaces and therefore consuming less paper, typography and type design have been practiced *economically*. The digital typeface, as we know it today, and as it appeared to me in that moment at the printer's workstation, is a compelling kind of commodity: a telling test-case for the viability of digital media, online commerce, and artificial scarcity.

To someone outside the field of graphic design, the internet marketplace for digital type—were they, for some hypothetical reason, to be exposed to it—would appear as perverse as the economies built up around any luxury good. Indistinguishable typefaces in virtually endless supply are simultaneously sold for thousands of euros and given away for nothing. The difference between the two is, in large part, presentational. In this intensely competitive environment, type designers jostle to get the attention of graphic designers through cultural positioning, storytelling, and laboriously produced multimedia websites. Digital type, for those type designers who have enjoyed the rapid, viral success which it can facilitate, has been a surprisingly lucrative profession. Fonts, as I have already testified, can trigger powerful desires in graphic designers.

The graphic designer's concerns, as a consumer, are many. Typefaces are primary and highly visible components of their professional output. Of a piece with materials and craft, they confer quality and affect. In some cases, typeface choice is the defining element of a piece of graphic design, to which all other elements are subservient. Typeface choices now operate according to the dynamics of so-called 'ingredient branding'. In the same way that the rubber in the soles of your running shoes, the operating system on your smartphone, and the noise-cancelling technology in your headphones are adorned with their own sub-brands, so graphic designers are inspired to label and reproduce the type that they use. All graphic designers aspire to typeset an entry in a project's credits which reads *Custom Font by Young Designer of Repute, Not Too Popular Yet*, published by *Well-Regarded, Judicious Foundry*, and all type designers and foundries endeavour to solicit these statements.

This presentational medium, through which such commercial negotiations between type designers and graphic designers are conducted, has a name: *paratext*. Paratext is a kind of content—text *or* image content—which exists not within an object, such as a digital typeface, but which becomes attached to it in the perception of an audience. Paratextual attachments can be relatively direct: the typeface's name, descriptions, and the other presentational assets which a type designer or foundry uses intentionally to market the typeface, for example. Or they can be relatively abstract: loose associations, sightings, references, and reputations which follow the typeface around like rumours.

Newly published typefaces are innocent and they need to mature quickly. They need paratext to distinguish them in the market. *Fonts* need to get *in use*. These matters cannot be left to chance. The contemporary type designer works on production and distribution simultaneously. They consciously plan and prepare paratext throughout their design processes. They document their archival findings with a digital microscope and scanner, they capture moments in the studio artfully, ever attentive to create appealing media at each step. They choose their font mastering partners with care, they commission photographers, illustrators, and animators, assembling a roster of contributors whose reputations and networks will make success more likely. Constantly they evaluate design decisions not only implicitly, in terms of graphic form, but explicitly, in anticipation of their potential as signifiers. To call these practices cynical

would be naive and old-fashioned. This is networked design: practiced socially and holistically. The contemporary digital typeface is the sum of its paratextual attachments: its messages, images, roster, and references.

The networked state of contemporary type creates a notionally global marketplace, but the concept of global type has almost no cultural currency. Digital type is made available practically anywhere on the planet by cloud storage and online payment providers, but if it were possible to observe, in the aggregate, the transactions which flow through this infrastructure, they would presumably reinforce flows of culture, literacy, taste, and influence which long prefigure the network. A hypothetical global typeface, designed to support every script and every technological platform with indiscriminate intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and stylistic mastery is an anachronistic fantasy, beyond the scope of type design as it is practiced today in every respect. Not only that, regardless of the difficulties of realising such an imaginary global typeface, there is no market for it. A global typeface would be undesirable: oversized and overbearing, it would recall outmoded, modernist notions of universality. The market would reject this fictive ur-font outright.

The globalisation of type proceeds not toward any such singular form, but instead according to capitalism's relentless drive for renewal. One mechanism of global commerce which is of particular relevance to type is known as transcreation. Its name derives from *translation* but abandons that word's aspiration to fidelity. Multinational corporations transcreate when they localise their advertising campaigns for different territories, not by simply translating a script or a slogan, but by treating entire concepts and narratives as interchangeable: replacing graphics, images, and cultural references from one territory with their best equivalents in another. In this way, the fundaments of twentieth century corporate branding have been undermined. Styles of type which gain currency in one culture are rapidly remade for other cultures, with their paratexts adapted to appeal to that culture's preferences. You like the antipodean trend for rounded slab-serifs but don't like the connotations of the brands they have come to be associated with? No problem, your favourite European foundry will have an equivalent for you in no time.

Renewal in type design is essential not just to satiate capitalism but also for reasons of basic human psychology. Paratext is the type designer's prerogative, but of course, no cultural producer can

maintain control of an artefact's narrative once they release it into the world. Paratext is a highly volatile substance. The digital typeface Fleischmann, from the Dutch Type Library, is a telling example. Designed by the German Erhard Kaiser, based on the 1739 8-point roman type of German punchcutter Johann Michael Fleischmann, this typeface could, for many years after its release in the early 1990s, boast exemplary paratexts. DTL was an early digital foundry which successfully created an image of academic authority and rigour. And Kaiser's Fleischmann had a distinctive aesthetic—its presence on the page, not overly rationalised by computerisation, appealed to the fondness with which many graphic designers of Kaiser's generation regarded the visible imperfections which were characteristic of the letterpress-printed types on which Kaiser's design was based. Then, at some point in the mid-2000s, online type forums became aware of Kaiser's public affiliation with right-wing anti-Islam politics in Germany. On the network, Kaiser's discriminatory personal politics began to mix with Fleischmann's existing paratexts, irreversibly altering the typeface's meaning. Alongside Fleischmann's initial release, DTL had published an extensive PDF specimen, which can still be accessed at the foundry's website. In it, Kaiser describes the culture of an old Europe in which Johann Michael Fleischmann lived and worked. Now, decades after it was written, Kaiser's historical commentary begins to betray him, fusing with the revelations about his politics to form a new narrative in which this typeface romanticises an idea of a Europe before twenty-first century mass migration. It does not matter whether Kaiser's political radicalisation occurred after the typeface was published (as DTL stresses in defending its decision to continue distributing Fleischmann). Paratexts are inherently anachronistic. Narrative particles from the past and the future become attached to objects in the present. It is by these paratextual mechanisms that cultural objects such as typefaces are credited and discredited. As one becomes tarnished, over-used, or too-closely associated with a particular brand, so the need for new and unburdened typefaces is created.

New type will always be in demand because old type will continually be subject to paratextual reassessment. A typeface is more than its control points and Bézier curves, more than its range of weights and file formats. On the internet, a typeface is a whole mixture of identities, affiliations, and messages, covered in a paratextual gloss. That covering might, for a time, imbue it with a lively

cultural currency, but it will always contain the potential to withdraw that currency, to spoil the typeface and condemn it to abandonment.

Returning, at last, to my sleepless, delirious encounter with *all the fonts* on the printer's computer. Of course, what made that experience so unforgettable was temptation. Circumstances had conspired to create the conditions in which I could freely acquire those fonts without detection or consequence. A pure moral dilemma it was. Tens of thousands of euros worth of digital type, but only a few megabytes—they'd be copied onto my USB drive almost instantaneously. Every conceivable style, enough to last the rest of my career, provided I was careful about it. Presumably that's how it must have felt in that moment. Perhaps it would have given a subversive thrill to use them. Or perhaps any project I attempted with those fonts would have been ruined by the personal paratextual association with my having stolen them. In any case, the idea that those thousands of fonts would have satisfied me indefinitely seems as absurd to me now as Massimo Vignelli's famous claim that seven fonts sufficed for his entire career. Of course I would have craved new fonts. In our post-internet reality, new type is indispensable. We graphic designers desire it for contradictory and irreconcilable reasons. We want to consume it and we are drawn blindly to its unfamiliar newness; and we need it to enable us to take positions, to reset and rewrite the paratexts of our work.