CONSUMING FASHIONS: TYPEFACES, UBIQUITY AND INTERNATIONALISATION

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ABSTRACT
Typefaces are essential to a designer's ability to communicate visually. The late twentieth century witnessed the democratisation and internationalisation of typeface design and usage due to the ease of access to desktop computer technology and a related exponential growth in the number of typefaces available to users of type. In this paper, theories of fashion, consumption and material culture are used to explain and understand this phenomenon of the proliferation of typefaces.

Theories are explored from outside art and design to position typeface designing as an activity, and typefaces as artefacts, within a more comprehensive societal picture than the expected daily professional practice of graphic designers and everyday computer users. This paper also shows that by tracking and thereby understanding the cultural significance of ubiquitous typefaces, it is possible to illustrate the effects of internationalisation in the broader sphere of art and design.

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Technological and stylistic developments in the design, use and reproduction of text since the invention of the alphabet three-and-a-half thousand years ago were exponential in the last two decades of the twentieth century, due significantly to the ready access of designers to the desktop computer and associated software. The parallels between fashion and typefaces—commonly called 'fonts'— are explored in this paper, with particular reference to theories of fashion, consumption and material culture. This represents the development of a theoretical framework which positions typeface design as an activity, and typefaces as artefacts, within a broader societal picture than the expected daily professional practice of graphic designers and everyday computer users. This paper takes up and builds upon the suggestion of renowned German type designer Hermann Zapf (1994:5) who said:

> *Type reflects trends and developments like any other artistic activity. They follow fashion trends. This does not occur as much with text faces—to our eyes they are the same as Gutenberg's time. But in display types the design must be attractive in order to catch the attention of the reader. This is still an interesting field for the development of new ideas.*

There are many late twentieth century sources of commentary available to readers interested in fashion, consumption and material culture (Craik 1998, Davis 1992, Gabriel and Lang 1995, Mason 1981, McCracken 1988, Miller 1987), but none of these writers mentions typefaces within the broader cultural scenario. Similarly, while there has been passing mention of fashion and trends by graphic design and typography writers and commentators, none has identified a connection between typefaces and the theories underpinning fashion, consumption and material culture. Yet typefaces were viewed at the end of the twentieth century as collectable items, utilitarian objects, objects of beauty, envy and admiration. It is these previously unmade comparisons and parallels which are explored in this paper.

TYPE AND FASHION
The word 'fashion' can refer specifically to clothing and more generally to a gathering consensus of moods and tastes, but in this paper the specific and general are interchangeable—the description of fashion shifts between both meanings without loss of clarity or emphasis. There have been two main sociological theories of fashion: Veblen and Simmel's late nineteenth/early twentieth century trickle down theory (viewed sceptically by writers such as Craik 1998 and Davis 1992); and Blumer's (1969) collective selection theory, which conceived of fashion as a generic process permeating many more areas of social life than simply women's clothing, and based on what he saw as a collective mood, tastes and choice. Davis (1992:113) stressed, however, that no one theory was appropriate to answer fashion's complexity and diversity, describing it variously as polycentric, polymorphous and pluralistic. In highlighting the shortcomings of various attempts to theorise the fashion process, he said:

Whereas sociology may tell us a great deal about how fashion diffuses through a population (ie, the structural outlines of the fashion process), it has thus far offered little by way of telling us what specific fashions mean, (ie, the images, thoughts, and feelings communicated by a new or old fashion and the symbolic devices with which this is done).

The same could easily be said for the type design industry and it is therefore not extraordinary that they might share common ground. What is surprising is that nobody has previously examined their similarities in theoretical terms. Davis (1992) presented the following stages of the fashion process and the labelled stages describe well a similar process of typeface design:
1 Invention (originality, innovation, creative talent)
2 Introduction (presentation to the public)
3 Fashion leadership (adoption by 'key persons')
4 Increasing social visibility (assimilation in the mass marketplace)
5 Waning

Craik (1998) mentioned a number of phenomena in fashion which are of relevance to typefaces. Firstly, Craik defined the process of bricolage (p. x) as 'the creation of new patterns and modes from the kaleidoscopic bits and pieces of cultural debris'. This metaphor of fashion being bricolage was paralleled by the design of particular typefaces in the 1990s (such as Jonathan Barnbrook's 1995 typeface Prototype, assembled from pieces of about ten other typefaces and which he called a 'hybrid' typeface, or Karl Randay's 1997 typeface Merlin which incorporated elements of three Macintosh default fonts).

Breaches of copyright and typeface piracy have been of significant concern to type designers in recent times. The fashion industry, however, has had a different approach to these issues. Craik (1998:213) discussed the fetishisation of top designer labels by mass market consumers, the rise of counterfeit or fake designs and the difficulties involved in the claiming of intellectual property rights over copyright, design and trademark. Craik acknowledged that counterfeits and fakes were seen as a form of flattery by some fashion companies:

Counterfeiting is merely an overt form of the practice of prestigious imitation on which the fashion industry is based—namely, the popularisation of a new style or idea by its modification and differentiation for different markets.

While there is less of the hero-worship of top designers evident in the type design industry (certainly the top type designers are not household names as are the world's top fashion designers), the issues of copyright and piracy were of critical importance in both the type design and music industries at the end of the twentieth

century. Well-known type designers such as Hermann Zapf (1994:4), whose type designs have been copied without due recompense, would abhor the suggestion that the benevolent description of 'prestigious imitation' in fashion might equate to what type designers have described as plagiarism and theft of their type designs.

In discussing consumerism, Gabriel and Lang (1995:99) identified the following 'marks of a fashion' which apply equally well to typeface design:

Universal appeal, seeming inevitability,…a cottage industry of media pundits and image-makers sustaining it and a stream of celebrities embodying it.

Without offering any answers, Larabie (2000, [Online]) asserted a number of the issues addressed in this paper:

I think the natural evolution of type design is an accelerated fashion cycle. Planned obsolescence creates a need for brand-new designs. Type is no longer a long-term investment these days the same way men's suits are no longer a long-term investment; men's suits can be worn for about 6 years before they look dated. Today's Cholla [typeface] is tomorrow's ITC Anna. You can't sell very many classical business suits if your buyers have hundreds of classic business suits in their Corel Draw CD.

It is possible to see evidence in both fashion and type design of what Bourdieu and Delsaut (qtd. in Davis 1992:136) termed 'strategies of conservation' (typical of older, more established designers building steadily on their reputations) and 'strategies of subversion' (utilised by younger designers who trade on the unexpected and the untoward). It is not difficult to see type designers such as Barry Deck (USA) and Jonathan Barnbrook (UK) in this latter category. Deck caused an uproar with his 'homage' to the revered British type designer Eric Gill in Deck's typeface Canicopulus Script (1989) and Jonathan Barnbrook caused similar angst when he named one of his typefaces Manson (1992), which invoked a connection to US mass murderer Charles Manson. (The typeface was eventually released under the name Mason.)

There are a number of constraints on fashion, including the basic physical features of garments such as dimensions and proportions which make them able to be worn. In the case of type design, the letters of the alphabet—except in cases in which type is being deliberately treated as an illustrative or graphic element—need to be able to be read. In this way, a garment's relationship to fashion can be compared to a typeface's relationship to reading and the recognised forms of the alphabet. Further to the notion of utility and function, it is also clear when reading fashion literature that the segmentation of fashion into work, leisure and going out clothes (Craik 1998:215) could well reflect the utility of corporate or workhorse typefaces (such as those provided as computer default typefaces), casual or script typefaces and decorative display typefaces.

Another area which is highlighted in type preference surveys (such as Holleran 1992, EyeWire 2000, Cahalan 2004) is the desire and striving for typefaces which could be called 'classics'. Hermeneutic philosopher Gadamer (1989:288) said of classicism:

The 'classical' is something raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes. It is immediately accessible…when we call something classical, there is a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and that is independent of all the circumstances of time—a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.

Candy (2002, [Online]) used the example of denim jeans to describe the concept of timelessness in fashion. It is not difficult to work from the metaphor of denim jeans as timeless fashion to consider the quest for timeless typefaces:

Jeans are at once bland and imbued with cultural reference; both uniform and intensely personal. I think they are an example of timeless (and universal) design because they subtly understand them as somehow encompassing both the past and the present. They are objectifications of history and of time: their look and function is about time changing—they stay the same—but we see them differently. Denim jeans encompass the full range of transactions between people and design—practical, tactile, aesthetic, social, cultural.

Perhaps, in the context of type and fashion, the ubiquitous typeface Helvetica (1951–53) is the equivalent of denim jeans in fashion.

TYPE AND CONSUMPTION

Consumers of typefaces in say, the nineteenth century, would have been represented by a very specific group of tradespeople, primarily printers. Gabriel and Lang (1995:1), however, identified a significant late twentieth century shift in the encompassing term of 'consumer':

We have gradually learnt to talk and think of each other and of ourselves less as workers, citizens, parents or teachers, and more as consumers.

Gabriel and Lang (1995:27) stated that 'choice lies at the centre of the idea of consumerism, both as its emblem and as its core value'. Certainly the proliferation of typefaces—a 2,762 per cent increase since 1974 (Cahalan 2004)—has dramatically increased the choice for consumers of typefaces. Any cause for celebration by 'consumers as choosers', however, is countered by the power exerted by computer manufacturers who decide which typefaces consumers will be allowed to have immediate access to by the typefaces they have bundled with their hardware or software.

The use of favourite typefaces fits well into Gabriel and Lang's (1995:47) description of 'consumers as communicators, using material objects to express social differences as well as personal meanings and feelings'. Examples of typeface designers and users utilising typefaces to stand out from competitors include the design of corporate typefaces such as Freda Sack's design for NatWest Bank (UK) or Jeremy Tankard's Harmony typeface designed for Telstra in Australia.

Gabriel and Lang (1995:49) also made the point that the use-value of objects—'seeing objects as the means of satisfying material, psychological and social needs'—did not address consumers' eagerness to purchase non-utilitarian commodities such as designer perfumes and expensive brand name products. Instead, Gabriel and Lang posited that 'the attraction of objects in advanced capitalism lies not in their function but in their aesthetic qualities'. In relation to typefaces, this explains why responses to favourite and least favourite typefaces in questionnaires and type preference surveys (such as Endersby 1994) elicit such strong positive and negative responses to the aesthetics of particular typefaces.

McCracken (1998:123) added another consumption perspective when he described the 'Diderot effect' (named after the French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot) as 'a force that encourages the individual to maintain cultural consistency in his/her complement of consumer goods'. McCracken suggested that the Diderot effect could be used to make sense of the cultural properties of consumption. In the case of typefaces, this might serve as part of the explanation for the suites and sets of typefaces which have been compiled and sold as typeface libraries, bundled with computer hardware or software, or assembled by individual users of typefaces. It might have ramifications for the marketing of typefaces and explain why some designers will work with the libraries or sets of typefaces with which they are

provided or feel most comfortable, while others will add to their sets in a more experimental way—at the extreme level, collecting and trading their typefaces as commodities like Pokémon cards.

This latter group of typeface consumers and the numerous free font websites they access fit well with what Gabriel and Lang (1995:71) called the 'consumer as explorer'. They quoted Baudrillard's reference to the reawakening of a 'universal curiosity' and yearning for novelty which encouraged consumers to browse and explore, to excite their curiosities, to nurture and satisfy them and provided the example of the local grocery store which had been transformed into a hypermarket stocking 'up to 40,000 different items'. They stated (1995:72):
  Consumer explorations are not searches into deep unknowns, inner or outer.
  Instead they are explorations of minute variations, of infinitesimal idiosyncracies of
  style, products, brands, signs and meanings.
It is again not difficult to see a parallel with the 25,000 typefaces made available in the one FontBook from FontShop International (Truong et al 1998) which provided a hypermarket of typefaces of 'minute variations' and 'infinitesimal idiosyncracies' to excite the curiosity of potential users. The challenge for type designers, therefore, is being able to identify what to others may be imperceptible differences between typefaces to provide type consumers with a sense of uniqueness after the point of purchase. A weakness of the metaphor of the consumer as explorer is that it fails to explain why consumers often stick with the familiar or the safe, as identified in type preference surveys for typefaces like Helvetica or Times New Roman.

A further possible explanation is provided by Gabriel and Lang (1995:91) in their description of the consumer as identity-seeker—a central feature in postmodern theory. They suggested that 'schizophrenia becomes a perennial condition for the postmodern consumer' and this could be used to explain the apparent contradiction of some consumers of typefaces seeking difference and yet still maintaining the familiar and safe. Gabriel and Lang (1995:92) quoted Bauman's positive view of consumer freedom and healthy competition—a concept which could easily be describing the ebb and flow, ubiquity and invisibility of typefaces:
  In the game of consumer freedom all customers may be winners at the same time.
  Identities are not scarce goods. If anything their supply tends to be excessive, as
  the overabundance of any image is bound to detract from its value as a symbol of
  individual uniqueness. Devaluation of an image is never a disaster, however, as
  discarded images are immediately followed by new ones, as yet not too common,
  so that self-construction may start again, hopeful as ever to attain its purpose: the
  creation of unique selfhood.

CONCLUSION
The late twentieth century witnessed the democratisation of typeface design and typeface usage due to the ease of access to desktop computer technology and a related exponential growth in the number of typefaces available to users of type. This paper has shown that due to the commodification of typefaces during this time, it is both feasible and appropriate to apply theories of fashion and consumption to typefaces to assist in explaining and understanding some of the critical issues which have arisen in response to the proliferation of typefaces.

The explosion of typeface designs has caused the significance of typefaces to move from being viewed as the products of a specialist area of printing craft with its own mystique and history to one of a tradable commodity of debatable value within visual culture, susceptible to piracy, and able to be considered in theoretical terms of

consumption, trends analysis and fashion. This still presents, as Kinross (1996:13) said, 'ground that no one ever quite described before' and by tracking and thereby understanding the cultural significance of elements of visual culture as ubiquitous as typefaces, it is possible to illustrate the effects of internationalisation in the broader sphere of art and design. The many parallels and points of reference and reflection described in this paper show clearly that this is an area for further research and development.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS
Anthony Cahalan has broad-ranging experience in graphic design, marketing, public relations and design education. He is currently Deputy Head of the School of Design and Architecture and Associate Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Canberra. He is the country delegate for Australia of Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI), and state president and national councillor of the Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA). He studied visual communication at Sydney College of the Arts, has a Master of Design from the University of Technology Sydney and completed his PhD at Curtin University of Technology in Perth.

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