THE APPEARANCE OF WRITING AND ITS (DISAPPEARING?) AUTHORITY

Simon Rosenberg

Simon Rosenberg *is research and teaching assistant in the English Department at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster. He teaches book studies with a focus on the transitional phases of book production during Late Medieval and Early Modern times, as well as the Industrial and Digital Age. In his PhD, he focused on 'book value categories' and the adoption of technological changes.*

If 'authority' can be defined as the '[p]ower to influence action, opinion, or belief',[1] then it is certainly interesting that, in the midst of all discussions about whether the digital book will replace the physical book, attention has only seldom been paid to the 'structuring and arranging of visual language',[2] in other words, typography.

This seems striking because the significance of the graphic representation of language should not be underestimated. It has more influence, or authoritative power to be precise, than is generally acknowledged. While reading a text, the features of typography itself are not – or just barely – noticed. However, looking at the layout, design and typography in general does have an impact on the reader. Take Siri Hustvedt's 2014 novel *The Blazing World* as an example. It is cleverly constructed as an anthology about an experiment of a female artist who is trying to prove that the art world is, in essence, a sexist environment. This anthology is edited by the narrator of the novel, a university professor. In order to make the novel appear like a scholarly edited volume, Hustvedt uses para-textual elements like footnotes and bibliographical references. When the reader opens the novel on a random page and notices a critical apparatus at the bottom of the page, the first thought might be that he or she is indeed looking at an academic book rather than a novel.

An important work addressing this issue is Susanne Wehde's *Typographische Kultur*. Wehde distinguishes between writing as a primary sign system that needs to be decoded cognitively and typography as a secondary, visual system. Her conclusion is that typographical features and linguistic content are inseparably interconnected.[3] Just as in speech, it is not only what you say, but also how you say it. Irony, for example, needs to be stressed in speech to be noticed.[4] Design, layout and typography reveal more than just a typesetter's work: Typography reveals the structure of a text. One look at a page of a dictionary instantly tells us roughly how many terms are defined.[5] However, it can also signify the very nature of the text: We do not need to read a word, because one look at a printed page immediately reveals whether it is a newspaper, a reference work or a phone book.

It seems curious that, despite the obvious importance of typography, it rarely shows up in current debates about the status of the printed book. In *Merchants of Culture*, an important monograph about the publishing industry in the twenty-first century, John Thompson discusses a total of nine possible 'added values' that digital publishing can offer. These are ease of access, updatability, scale, searchability, portability, flexibility, affordability, intertextuality, and multimedia. He also elaborates on four main problems that inhibit a larger impact of digital publishing within the publishing industry, namely hardware, format, rights, and price. Typography was not mentioned in the added values section nor in the inhibiting factors.[6] This seems striking as Thompson otherwise frequently refers to the physical aspects of the printed book. Naomi S. Baron's *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World*, a current look at what is happening to reading due to the digital revolution, does not discuss the relevance of typography either.[7]

Language, the complex system of communication, is one of the most important factors that distinguishes humans from other life forms. The creation of a visual representation

of language was an important milestone in the history of mankind. Communication was now able to move through space and time. This happened for the first time in ancient Iraq (then called Sumer) on clay tablets in the late fourth millennium BC. Cuneiform writing,[8] the system used by the Sumerians, obviously differed a lot from present-day English. For example, the text you are reading now uses the alphabetic writing system in which signs represent specific sounds, while the earliest writing system used pictographs, signs that convey their meaning through their pictorial resemblance to a physical object.

Throughout the years, these pictographs slowly changed in appearance. Whereas early examples showed curves and round drawings, later ones looked more or less square-cut. This development was the result of the triangular stylus being used as a writing tool. Due to this limitation of drawing into wet clay, Sumerian writing became more and more standardized. After the Sumerian decline around 2000 BC, Sumerian as a spoken language slowly disappeared. However, because of the standardization of cuneiform writing, the following peoples of this area adopted this writing system and cuneiform writing became the norm in the ancient Near East.[9] At around the same time, the alphabet-like West Semitic writing system was introduced. It turned out to be the harbinger of a slow decline of the cuneiform clay tablet. By the second century AD, it had become the first extinct form of the book.

> "Language, the complex system of communication, is one of the most important factors that distinguishes humans from other life forms."

With the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the visual appearance of language was equally important. Whether deliberate or not, early printed books closely imitated the look of the manuscript to a degree which makes it almost impossible for a layman to see the difference between a printed and a handwritten page. Many contemporaries commented on the newly created books. Sceptical and supporting voices were more or less balanced.[10] It is certainly doubtful whether the acceptance of the new medium would have been as quick if the book had applied a typographic look distant from the valued manuscript. Indeed, many manuscript features that were copied in the typography were quite expensive to reproduce and, even more striking, unnecessary. Manuscript conventions such as ligatures, contractions and variant forms of the same grapheme were in the interest of economy because they sped up production and relieved the scribes. For the printed book, however, this meant casting much more type material. Whereas a scribe could simply write a variant form of a grapheme, the printer would have needed various forms of the grapheme in stock to reproduce it.[11] Consequently, such manuscript-specific elements were eventually excluded in printed books to cut down expenses and to speed up the production process. The eventual exclusion of such features would signify the moment when printed books were really accepted. In all likelihood, it is safe to say that economic factors shaped the development of typographic design.

A similar situation occurred in the nineteenth century, when printers used stereotype plates to reprint books. With the introduction of printing, books had become a commodity to be produced and sold on speculation (most manuscripts were produced on commission). Printers had to decide how many copies of a title they should print without knowing the amount of customers. If not enough copies were sold, the publisher had invested too much in the production. If print runs did not meet demand, the printer lost potential income. Such successful texts could of course be reprinted. However, resetting the type had to be done manually and was very expensive. In contrast, stereotyping created metal plates from set pages. At least in theory, this enabled printers to print a small edition, evaluate further demand through its initial sale and, if viable, quickly reprint from stereotype plates. The technology

had further advantages like making texts immune to inadvertent changes. But it also had drawbacks: Creating the mould was a delicate task where many individual operations could go wrong and its production was expensive. A subtler disadvantage was the fact that stereotyping essentially locked the typographic style of texts printed from plates so that printers could not adapt texts to new impulses in typographic design. In the fashion- and design-conscious era of the Victorian Age, this could prove a vital disadvantage in the art of book-making. Consequently, the technology, initially invented in the seventeenth century, was only commonly accepted in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Again, economic decisions shaped typographical design.

Since the late nineteenth century, people in many cultures are surrounded by typography. Not just in books, newspapers or journals, but also in everyday ephemera: Advertisements, time-tables, coins and banknotes, tickets, stamps, street signs, posters and so on continue to shape the industry. Further typographical ubiquity arrived in the 1990s with digital typography on the Internet, in emails and websites as well as on mobile phones with short messages and later on smartphones with messaging applications.

The fact that typography seems to be everywhere may lead to an indifference or at least unawareness of its importance. Indeed, its importance is mainly recognized when a text deviates too far from the norm or the perceived standard. An, albeit subtle, example is the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. Known for its more extensive articles in comparison to daily newspapers, it uses Garamond, a typical book font that is suitable for longer texts. A more obvious break is offered by Project Gutenberg, founded in 1971 by Michael Hart. It was one of the earliest projects to distribute texts in a digital format. However, it was criticized for using the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) character-encoding scheme, which makes the texts appear bland.

The use of PDF files circumvents such a problem as it faithfully represents the printed page as it was intended to be in the physical book. This appeases readers in the digital environment as PDF documents imitate the form of the text they are accustomed to.[12] But PDFs also restore one of the most predominant features of the printed book: typographical fixity.[13] After all, printing not only has a quantitative, but also a qualitative impact on the book: The technical result that copies of the same edition are (almost!) identical makes scholarly working much easier since referencing to specific passages of texts becomes possible. This is not impossible in texts in ASCII, but it certainly is not as easy as in a book as a physical object. The page as a unit is no longer a viable concept if the text adjusts to the size of the screen and the chosen font and size.[14] In that sense, PDFs imitate the added value of the physical book by artificially limiting the potential in the digital environment.

> "For now, it is undeniable that typographical features are still relevant on the page as well as on the screen."

But are humans really limiting themselves when they still rely on typography? Adriaan van der Weel, professor of modern Dutch book studies specialized in the field of digitization of textual transmission and reading, argues that '[a]s homo typographicus we take pains to give digital texts a mise-en-page that is congruent with typographical conventions we are already familiar with from the analogue world.'[15] He also states that typography has become a second nature to humans, but that computers are severely handicapped in a typographical environment. That is why humans should focus 'more on the logical form of text, even if this is much less intuitive.'[16] Indeed, it can be argued that PDFs, by locking the typographical design and making it an inflexible document both for humans and computers, are simply the stereotype plates of the twenty-first century. However, the question remains whether we need to (or even can) change our approach to text only because computers would be able to work more efficiently with a different approach.

For now, it is undeniable that typographical features are still relevant on the page as well as on the screen. We cannot isolate typographical form and linguistic content. Just think about Comic Sans, which has probably become one of the most hated

fonts. A random image search for Comic Sans reveals many interesting and mainly derogatory comments about the font, from 'Ban Comic Sans now' to '7 reasons not to use Comic Sans' to 'Every time you use Comic Sans, Faye will punch this adorable little bunny'. French design studio We Are Cephalization illustrated the lack of authority of the type by recreating famous logos and substituting the respective fonts with Comic Sans (see Figure 1). It becomes instantly clear that the purpose of Comic Sans is different from the intended purpose each logo was designed for.[17]

Typography usually links to a product, a company, a band and vice versa. The famous logo of The Beatles with the boasting B and the long t extending below the baseline is a prime example. Similarly, the typography

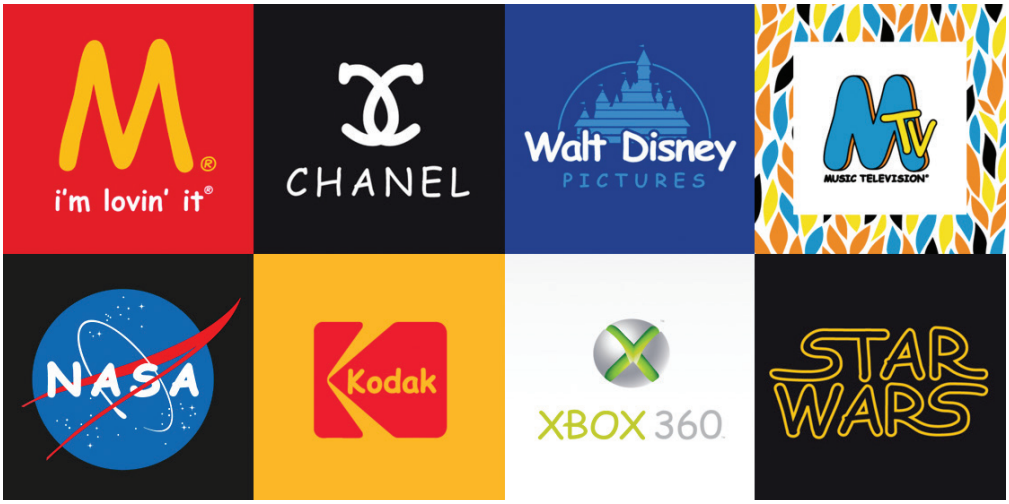

Figure 1. Famous logos recreated using Comic Sans. Source: We Are Cephalization/Les Jeunes Loups.[18]

of Amy Winehouse's album Back to Black, a mixture of the fonts Ondina and Atlas, is instantly connected with the artist.[19]

The relevance of typography in the digital world is further stressed in Theresa Heyd's dissertation in which she elaborates on the forms and functions of email hoaxes – messages 'containing false or at least problematic information that is passed along via the forward function of email programs.'[20] Such mails are mainly formatted in ASCII because this provides the highest compatibility with most mail programmes. However, this leaves little options for formatting. Heyd discusses three typographical aspects this results in, namely, the use of upper case letters (writing in upper case only is considered 'shouting' in a written form and deemed impolite), emoticons (for example ';-)' or '^^') and the clustering of quote tags due to repeated forwards (>>> >> >>).[21] It is interesting to note that even in an environment with only few options, typographical elements like these do matter. They do not go unnoticed.

Finally, typography is also used by publishing houses to imprint their style into books. Every now and again, novels offer para-textual elements like 'A note on the type' in which the history of the used type is explained and why it was chosen. Haruki Murakami's publisher for example states in *Wind/Pinball*:

> The text of this book was composed in Apollo, the first typeface ever originated specifically for film composition. Designed by Adrian Frutiger and issued by the Monotype Corporation of London in 1964, Apollo is not only a versatile typeface suitable for many uses but also pleasant to read in all of its sizes.[22]

Indeed, typography seems to be the only place left in which the publisher can implement some sort of identity and symbolic value, if every physical aspect of the book is vanishing in the digital format. If you are reading this article in the printed version of

TXT, then you are encountering the text in Roboto. If, however, you read this text in an online edition, it might be presented to you in a different type, depending on how you access the website, which operating system and browser you use and other factors. Thus, the publisher might lose his/her say on the appearance of the text.

Adriaan van der Weel argued in 2010 that the symbolic value of e-books is still wanting and that this might be one of the reasons the e-book has not been as fully adopted as digital advocates had estimated a couple of years ago.[23] The question remains whether publishers will at one point (re)gain the possibility to decide the typeface of their books in the digital environment. Current popular reading devices like Amazon's Kindle offer the reader a choice of fonts.[24] Undoubtedly, the book as a medium has developed over the centuries towards more convenience for the reader (especially in price and format). The possibility to choose out of a variety of fonts seems to be the next step. It would be interesting to conduct empirical research to see whether digital readers cherish this possibility or whether they ultimately wish for publishers to make decisions concerning the typographical design.[25]

Talking about the future of typography obviously implies that typography will have a future. Can we be so sure about this? Predictions about the future of the book are hardly academic, and past forecasts have proven this over and over again. Still, is it absolutely out of the question that we might witness a return to older ways of writing? Indeed, hashtags like #ifihadanotherchance do resemble scriptio continua quite a lot. So what about the visual appearance of letters? Instead of using typography, David Bowie's latest album Blackstar uses different bits of the artwork's star to write 'BOWIE' (Figure 2).

One would assume that a typographical experiment by an artist would not encounter much dissent. However, 'Bowie' is a brand in itself and, as such, an added value for the record company. Using artwork that specifically omitted standard typography (the lettering 'Bowie') meant a risk of losing money. Chief designer Jonathan Barnbrook elaborates:

> There were one or two people at the record company who were nervous about this but I do believe legibility is about familiarity – and once you get used to it you can only read it as 'Bowie'. This was a painful many hours of working to try to get his name to be legible enough, but not too legible, to read it straight away. I tried many different stars and endless combinations for this one, but I think this has the right balance.[27]

Certainly, David Bowie was always interested in experimenting with musical and visual forms of art and it is not necessarily the future of typography to use symbols imitating letters. But maybe communication will go even further, or further back? Current technological possibilities make it possible to be more precise with illustrations. So-called emojis, ideograms and smileys certainly have a great impact on written communication via the various social networks. Even though it is seen as a light-hearted pastime to encode and decode famous films or novels in these pictograms, it is sometimes striking how obvious some titles are, for example John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is depicted by these four emojis 🍇🍇🍇☹. Even highbrow newspapers and journ_als have devoted articles to this topic.[28] For now, this is primarily a way to communicate on a private level. Still, it cannot be neglected that emojis also have authority. Why else would the Indonesian government censor certain emojis in messaging apps as they allegedly clash with their social values?[29] So, is it entirely out of the question that, with these technological possibilities at our disposal, we return, at least partially, to using pictographs as a writing system, just like when the Sumerians introduced

Figure 2. Artwork for David Bowie's album Blackstar. Source: http://bowieblackstar.net/.[26]

writing?

Technological advances can either enhance or limit the possibilities to non-verbally present language, no matter which writing system is used. It seems ironic that, more often than not, limitations enhance the quality of the writing system, as was the case with the stylus standardizing the written signs in Sumer or the printing press reducing manuscript elements like ligatures or contractions. One might be inclined to conclude that limitations improve writing systems. In the digital environment, possibilities seem almost unlimited. However, it seems doubtful that the importance of the visual form of the written word will vanish. If we will not see a return to pictographs, then writing may see an increase in the importance of typography precisely because of the seemingly unlimited possibilities. It is certainly curious that early typography was hardly influenced by ideas about legibility. Only with the rise of more and more typefaces in the industrial age was it necessary to study it more closely.[30] In the digital age, this awareness seems even more important. Indeed, some typefaces are more suitable for digital devices than the printed page. However, do we have to make this distinction every time for the sake of legibility? Typography can never be completely neutral. Changing it purely to be more legible undermines and threatens its authority. It will certainly be interesting to observe how editors and publishing houses grapple with this problem. If they are serious about what they want to communicate with their products, then typography is an element not to take lightly.

Notes.

1 'authority, n.' *OED Online*. December 2015. Web. 15 February 2016.
2 Baines, Phil and Andrew Haslam. *Type & Typography*. 2nd ed. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005. Print. 6.
3 Wehde, Susanne. *Typographische Kultur: eine zeichentheoretische und kulturgeschichtliche Studie zur Typographie und ihrer Entwicklung.* Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000. Print. 14.
4 There have also been attempts to signify irony or sarcasm with typography. However, it has not established itself. See Houston, Keith. 'Irony and Sarcasm'. *Shady Characters: Ampersands, Interrobangs and other Typographical Curiosities*. London: Penguin, 2013. Print. 211-244.
5 On the imitation of typographic elements of the digital *Oxford English Dictionary*, see Rosenberg, Simon. 'Van aflevering naar scherm: De presentatie van informatie in de *Oxford English Dictionary* in de negentiende en eenentwintigste eeuw'. *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis* 19 (2012): 163-175. Print.
6 Thompson, John. *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century.* 2nd ed. New York: Polity Press, 2012. Print. 313-376. In the first edition, Thompson only discusses seven added values.
7 Baron, Naomi S. *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Print.
8 Named after the Latin word 'cuneus' meaning 'wedge'. The writing resembles wedge-like impressions.
9 The term 'ancient Near East' is shaped by a European perspective and refers to a specific region which corresponds approximately to the modern (Western) understanding of 'Middle East'. It includes, inter alia, parts of modern Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Israel and Palestine. The region is considered to be one of the cradles of civilization.
10 For an overview of the different reactions, see Eisenstein, Elizabeth Lewisohn. 'First Impressions'. *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Print. 1-33.
11 Hellinga, Lotte. 'Printing'. *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume III, 1400-1557*. Eds. Lotte Hellinga and Joseph Burney Trapp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print. 65-108, 70.
12 Van der Weel, Adriaan. *Changing our Textual Minds: Towards a Digital Order of Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011. Print. 53.
13 Eisenstein, Elizabeth Lewisohn. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Print.
14 Bonnie Mak refers to the page as 'a powerful interface between designer and reader, flexible enough to respond to a variety of demands while remaining comprehensible and communicative.' See Mak, Bonnie. *How the Page Matters*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. Print. 3.
15 Van der Weel. *Changing our Textual Minds*. 53.
16 Ibid. 141.
17 Labarre, Suzanne. 'Oh Hell No: 12 Iconic Logos Redrawn Using Comic Sans'. *Fastco Design*. 1 September 2012. Web. 18 February 2016.
18 We Are Cephalization/Les Jeunes Loups. *Comic Sans Project*. Web: http://comicsansproject.tumblr.com/.
19 Garfield, Simon. *Just my Type: A Book about Fonts*. London: Gotham Books, 2010. Print. 269-282.
20 Heyd, Theresa. *Email Hoaxes: Form, Function, Genre Ecology*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2008. Print. 1.
21 Ibid. 41-42.
22 Murakami, Haruki. *Wind/Pinball: Two Novels*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. Print. n.pag. Knopf is known for offering 'a note on the type' in their books.
23 Van der Weel, Adriaan. 'e-Roads and i-Ways: A Sociotechnical Look at User Acceptance of E-books'. *Logos* 21.3 (2010): 47-57, 56. Print.
24 Current Amazon 'Kindle Paperwhite' readers offer Baskerville, Caecilia, Caecilia condensed, Futura, Helvetica and Palatino along with eight different sizes. The latest models introduce a new font called Bookerly which was designed specifically for digital reading. See Amazon. 'New Bookerly Font and Typography Features – Read Faster With Less Eyestrain'. *Amazon*. n.d. Web. 16 February 2016.
25 Some online message boards discuss the possibility to (albeit illegally) install further fonts onto the Kindle devices, so there are definitely users who are unhappy with the offered fonts.
26 Web: http://bowieblackstar.net/.
27 Sinclair, Marc. 'Bowie, Barnbrook and the Blackstar Artwork'. *Creative Review*. 26 November 2015. Web. 14 February 2016.
28 See for example, 'Wie der Döner ins Smartphone kommt'. *Zeit Online*. 12 October 2015. Web. 12 February 2016. And Bethge, Philip. 'Invasion der Emojis'. *Der Spiegel*. 21 February 2015. Web. 12 February 2016.
29 'Indonesia Bans Gay Emoji and Stickers from Messaging Apps'. *The Guardian*. 12 February 2016. Web. 15 February 2016.
30 De Jong, Ralf. 'Typographische Lesbarkeitskonzepte'. *Lesen: Ein internationales Handbuch*. Eds. Ursula Rautenberg and Ute Schneider. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015. Print. 233-256, 233.