

2016

Inform or A to Z

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INFORM

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A study in gender and typography

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Media Studies Senior Thesis Project
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4/22/2016

Introduction

As a student of Media Studies, two things have consistently interested me since the first course I ever took in the discipline: first, the influence that any given medium may have on the meaning of its content, and therefore on its audience; and second, the invisibility of the ways media forms are constructed (in terms of the processes of production as well as the discourses surrounding them) and of the ways they function, and as a result the potential danger and insidiousness of the aforementioned influence on meaning. In other words, I continually find myself asking the following question: how is it that we can interact with various media forms a seemingly infinite number of times over the course of our lives, and yet be so shockingly (or perhaps blissfully) unaware of how much those forms corral us into specific ways of knowing and understanding their content?

This is perhaps where my interest in gender studies and related fields overlaps with my interest in media studies. Gender, as Judith Butler (1988, 1993) teaches us, is neither inherent nor meaningful outside of the meaning we give it. This is not to say that it does not have meaning at all, or that it does not have real effects and consequences on the world in which it exists. Rather, in saying that gender is not meaningful outside of a social context, we begin to acknowledge the ways that such a social context actually creates the concept of gender and facilitates its performative nature. I relate this to the deconstruction of media forms in the sense that many such forms are, like gender, often considered to be ubiquitous. It is generally understood among most people that, for example, television exists. What's more, most people have an understanding of what

television is. The same can be said of masculinity, or “maleness” – it is assumed to be understood by virtue of it being present, by the mere fact of its existence. Rarely are either of these things, television or masculinity, further examined or questioned outside of an academic context. Most people watch television without questioning why or how they are seeing the images presented to them, or what those images might mean in a broader social context; similarly, most people enact or interact with masculinity without questioning why certain things are considered masculine and others are not, or how those things affect the ways we understand and treat different people.

Thus it is the act of seeing the unseen, of bringing into the light that which we previously believed we already knew, of unlearning and relearning, that so fascinates me and that I wish to recreate with my project. Typography seems an important and useful vessel for such a task; in many ways, it is among the most ubiquitous and invisible of mediums, silently structuring millions of moments throughout our lives in ways that range from shout-in-our-faces blatant to subconsciously subtle. Nearly every piece of text, every word, and every letter that we see has not only been chosen very specifically for its purpose from a remarkably vast library of typefaces, but also crafted ever-so-carefully and with precise intention by a typographer, a real human being, whose thoughts, beliefs, lived experiences, and artistic tendencies are behind every curve, line, and dot. And yet, despite all of the meticulous structuring that goes into type, it rarely seems to get recognition in everyday discourse as a medium that influences how we understand our world. In fact, as Paul C. Gutjahr and Megan L. Benton (2001) note, “The ethic of typographic invisibility has prevailed throughout much of

modern Western bookmaking and publishing” (1). Beatrice Warde was a champion of this mode of typographic thought; in her essay entitled “Printing Should Be Invisible” (published in 1955, and, as Gutjahr and Benton note, first delivered as a “stirring speech” (1) in 1932), she expounds upon the importance of the idea that “Type well used is invisible *as* type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas” (13). Indeed, she continues, “the mental eye focuses *through* type and not *upon* it” (14).

Yet if type is a lens through which we are able to focus on the text it presents, why do we not examine the lens itself? Why do we neglect to question the effects – the color, the texture, the size and shape, where the frame lies – of the glass through which we’re looking? After all, even the clearest glass mediates how we see what’s on the other side. “[B]oth as writers and as readers,” Gutjahr and Benton write, “we often fail to notice, much less fully consider, the role of type and typography in making a text not only visible but meaningful” (2). Indeed, type contributes to meaning in ways that cannot be ignored. As Robert Bringhurst (2012) writes, “Typography is to literature as musical performance is to composition” (19). The notes may be the same in two versions of a song, but how they are voiced changes how they are perceived. Typography – like music and like gender – is a performance, each typeface an instrument, every typographer and designer a musician.

As Gutjahr and Benton further note, however, “Both the material form of a text and any interpretation of it are inflected by the historical contexts in which they are made” (3). The same is true of gender, for history has shown us that gender norms change over time. As both typography and gender can be thought

of as performances, it stands to reason that the manner in which they are performed would not remain constant, and neither would the ways those performances are received and perceived. And yet, despite the changes over time, many aspects of the performances remain the same. Though it is now much more socially acceptable for women to pursue careers of their own than it was 150 years ago, for example, many women are still encouraged to follow gendered norms in doing so by pursuing caretaking careers (such as nurses, schoolteachers, and domestic workers), and by not stepping on any male toes in the workplace.

Women are frequently encouraged to be minimally disruptive, to rarely if ever voice their opinions, and to look the picture of idealized beauty all the while. In short, they are expected to be seen, but not heard – a truly Victorian ideal.

Typography, too, has maintained a number of aspects of its performance, perhaps most notably its tendency toward invisibility and the desire (our desire) for it not to distract from the message but still to shape it. In fact, many of the typefaces that existed when Warde gave her speech – typefaces that had been in circulation for anywhere between one hundred and four hundred years, such as Garamond (designed in the 1540s), Baskerville (1760), Caslon (early 1800s), and Bodoni (1818) – are still some of the most popular faces used today.

It is my aim with this project, then, to deconstruct typography, a popular and complex medium, in an easily accessible and understandable way while exposing the complexities and subtleties of its form and function. I would like readers to see what they have not seen before; I aim to unsettle in them notions of how type is “supposed” to work, and I hope to confront them with their own blissful ignorance as well as with their own complicity in the decoding process. I

would like both audience and typographer to understand their roles in the process of meaning-making within the context of a specific medium, and to understand each other's roles and the role of the medium itself. In order to do all of this, I have undertaken the task of designing and creating a typeface – which I have named INFORM, for reasons that I hope will become clear over the course of this paper – that is very carefully gendered.

Chapter 1

Before I begin the discussion of INFORM specifically, including the process of its creation and my hopes and goals for its reception, I wish to take some time to situate my project with respect to the larger historical-typographic moment. My project builds upon an already established foundation, a conversation that has been a part of typographic discourse throughout much of the history of the medium. Indeed, as Megan Benton points out, discussions of the gendered nature of Euroamerican typefaces can be seen as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century. It was then, as the printing industry began to see women joining the ranks of printers and typographers in addition to expanding their presence as readers and writers, that anxieties surrounding the perceived feminization of the printed word began to surface, sparking outcry among the men who had dominated the industry for so long (Benton, 71). And, while such outcry may have dissipated in the century and a half that followed, gender and typography are still inextricably linked today. Now, however, the concerns revolve largely around how best to use design – including type – to effectively market and cater to consumers who identify along the gender binary. Thus, while the topic may have changed, gender and typography remain in conversation with each other – and, of course, with us.

I would like to note here that, unfortunately, my project is relatively limited in scope. As I am only familiar with the English alphabet, the focus within this paper is rather Eurocentric: I will be referencing the typography and discourse of Europe and America specifically, using mainly English and American critics to further my discussion. What's more, I must acknowledge that it is not

within the realm of possibility for this paper to cover the entirety (or, indeed, even a substantial chunk) of typographic history in any significant depth. I will, however, offer a brief summary of some important moments in Western typographic history (keeping in mind that the medium of print as a whole has a long and illustrious history in China, among other places in the world), in keeping with Carter, Day, and Meggs' (1985) understanding of the “four revolutions” in typographic production.

The first of these four revolutions began with the first known examples of human writing, dating back to around 3150 B.C. These early forms of lettering took the shape of symbols engraved on clay tablets and used to keep records of transactions at ancient marketplaces. However, while largely pictographic, these early typefaces also contained elements of what would become serif letters. According to Robert Bringhurst, serif letterforms emerged in early Greek inscriptions and later “served as models for formal lettering in imperial Rome” (120). Unserifs – now commonly known as sans-serifs – also appeared first in these Greek inscriptions. As Li Yu (2008) notes, the presence or absence of serifs divided type into two basic categories that remained common even through Gutenberg's foray into the world of moveable type in 1450.

The second of the four revolutions took place from this point through the nineteenth century. During this period, the European Renaissance brought about a shift toward humanist philosophy, inspiring a surge in elaborate and elegant typographic design, including many popular display faces. Here, in Figure 1, we see an example of Nicolas Jenson's humanist typeface, designed around 1475:

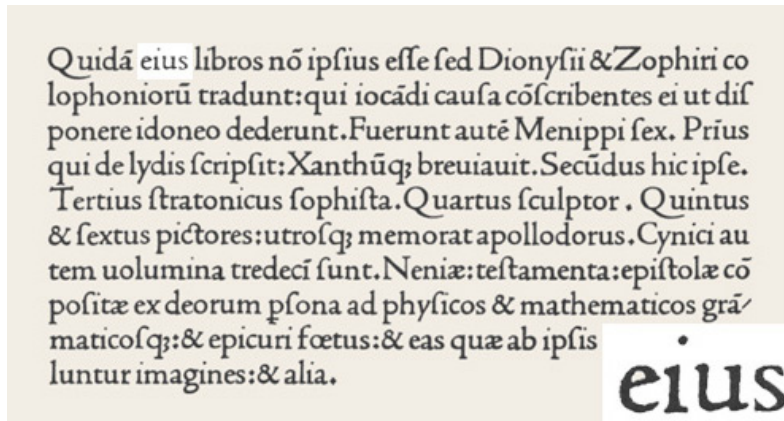


Figure 1, Ilovetypography.com

Beatrice Warde makes note of the emergence of the “modern’ style of type with horizontal serifs” during this time, specifically during the years 1698-1702 (208). She notes 1757 as the date of publication of John Baskerville’s first book, and thus “the beginning of Britain’s international prestige in typographic design” (208). Figure 2 shows a specimen of type designed by Baskerville around this time:



Figure 2, Ilovetypography.com

The Industrial Revolution in the first half of the 19th century marked the beginning of the third revolution. As printing technology advanced at a more rapid pace than ever before, numerous typefaces were designed, many of which are still commonly used today. What’s more, over the course of approximately a century and a half, the advance of Modernism brought with it the proliferation of

the idea that ‘form follows function.’ In “Printing Should Be Invisible,” Warde claims that “all good typography is modernist,” and should follow first and foremost the question “not ‘*How should it look?*’ but ‘*What must it do?*’” (12). Jan Tschichold, writing in 1928, boldly states that typographic form must be created out of function. “Only then,” he writes, “can we achieve a typography which expresses the spirit of modern man” (117). Bringhurst makes note of the ways this idea took hold in two of the many facets of typographic modernism: first, in the “reassertion of the Renaissance form”; and second, in the tendency for the typefaces designed in this period to be “rough and concrete more than lyrical and abstract” (133). The slab-serif, a style which originated in Britain early on in this period, was designed specifically with display functionality in mind, notes John Boardley (2008). A few examples of slab-serifs can be seen in Figure 3 in the words “PREMISES,” “Corn Market Street, Oxford,” and “MALLAM & SON”:



Figure 3, *Ilovetypography.com*

Indeed, designers continued to challenge traditional modes of typographic thinking in new and innovative ways well into the second half of the twentieth

century, when the fourth revolution began. The technological advances of the information age allowed for more and more precise manipulation of type, and, in conjunction with the rise of the Postmodernist movement, helped spawn an era of typographic design concerned less with function and more with form. As Bringhurst writes, “Postmodern art is for the most part highly self-conscious, but devoutly unserious” (135). Designers in the postmodern school worked to “recycle and revise” other design forms, all the while adding “postmodern humor” as well as “the fruits of typographic sophistication: text figures, small caps, large aperture, and subtle modeling and balancing of form” (136).

For the purposes of my project, we will begin our look back at the conversation between typography and gender as Benton does, with Theodore Low De Vinne who, in 1892, wrote in praise of the movement that produced the slab-serif faces seen in Figure 3. He lauded them as being “darker, heavier, more ‘robust’” (71). Broadly seen as one of the leading experts in American print, De Vinne was responding to the trend of contemporary nineteenth-century type, exemplified here by the typefaces designed by Giambattista Bodoni:

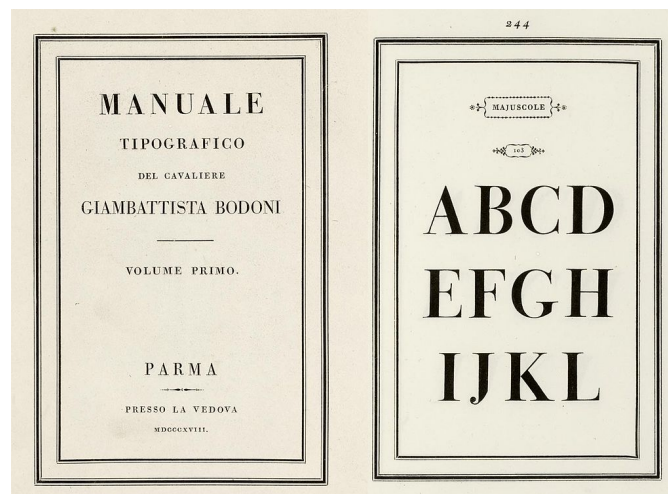


Figure 4, Wikipedia.com

De Vinne, along with many other typographers and printers (including William Morris, pioneer of the British Arts and Crafts Movement), felt the modern typefaces lacked the “vigor and ‘virility’” of preindustrial letterforms like the blackface letters seen here, in the Gutenberg bible:

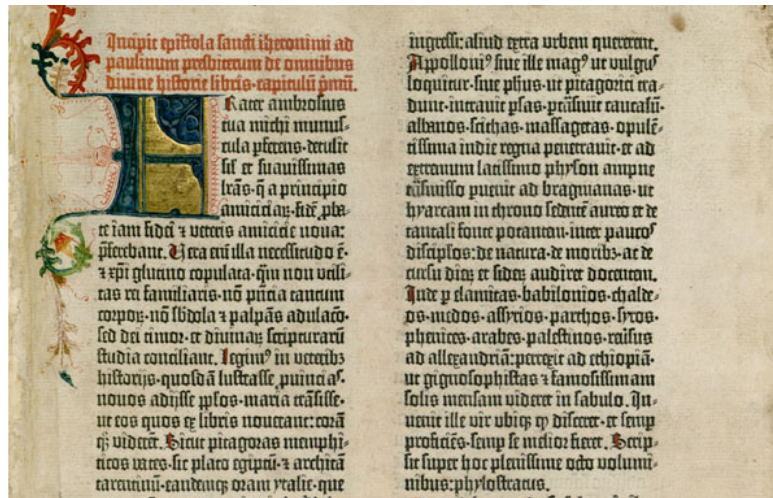


Figure 5, Wikipedia.com

Indeed, writes Benton, “they deplored the former as fussy, pale, and ‘feminine’” (71). This reaction to modern typefaces came at a time when the print world was, in fact, becoming increasingly feminized. Women began to enter the field both on the production and reception ends, and as print became more physically and economically accessible, more women in Europe and America were afforded the opportunity for education and literacy. Printers began using typefaces like Bodoni – which allowed more space in between letters and lines of text, and were therefore easier for people with less literary experience to read – in order to cater to the burgeoning market. These faces, of course, were in direct contrast to the preindustrial faces so adored by De Vinne and co.; naturally, writes Benton, “many men felt that they had lost control over books...as women

authors and readers seemed to dominate what had once been a mostly masculine world” (71).

Thus, the public (or, at least, public within the world of Euroamerican typographers and printers) outcry over the “discredited feminine typographic page” (72) began. But what, specifically, was the nature of their complaint? What comprised the masculine “virility” that De Vinne so missed, and what were the characteristics of contemporary typefaces that allegedly challenged said virility? According to Benton, De Vinne saw two different kinds of feminine type. The first was contemporary type like Bodoni (Figure 4), which was a very popular style for books and large bodies of text and was referred to simply as “modern.” Modern type “featured a relatively small surface area, compressed forms with shortened ascenders and descenders, pronounced contrast between thick and thin strokes of the letters’ form, and very sharp, hairline serifs” (72):



Figure 6, Ilovetypography.com

In essence, these typefaces took up less visual space than the heavier typefaces that preceded them, and, thanks to modern technology, were constructed with more intricacy and finesse than had ever before been possible. Where some praised this style of type as “preeminently artistic and cultured,” De Vinne saw only typographic weakness, which he associated directly with femininity.

The second variety of typeface he so abhorred relied on elaborate ornamentation, a popular style during the Victorian era. As Benton points out,

“It had long been commonplace to associate decorative and finely detailed form with feminine taste and to align darker, simpler forms with masculine taste. Equally ingrained in Western culture is a tendency to devalue decorative embellishment as ‘useless,’ as De Vinne called it” (76).

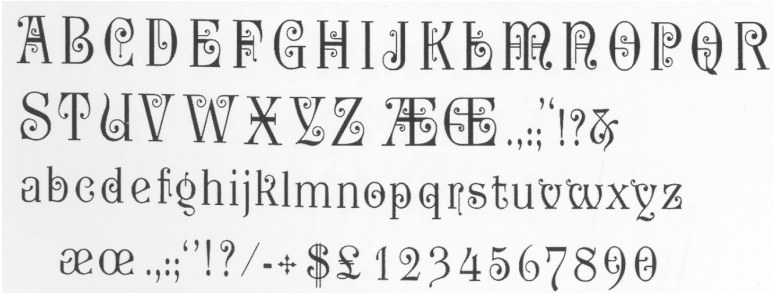


Figure 7, Luc.devroye.org



Figure 8, Indiana.edu

Thus the excess of decoration and ornamentation in this style of type – exhibited above in Nymphic (1889), by Herman Ihlenburg (Figure 7), and the hand-drawn lettering from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1860) (Figure 8) – was considered diametrically opposed to what De Vinne called “masculine printing... which he characterized as ‘noticeable for its readability, for its strength and absence of useless ornament’” (76). He conflated masculine printing with fundamentally good printing, attributing qualities such as directness and strength to the typefaces of which he approved. To this end, he applauded William Morris for using typefaces that had “more traditional tapered serifs, larger surface areas, and more moderate contrast in the weight of their thick and thin strokes” (80), as he did for this 1896 edition of *The Complete Works of Chaucer*:

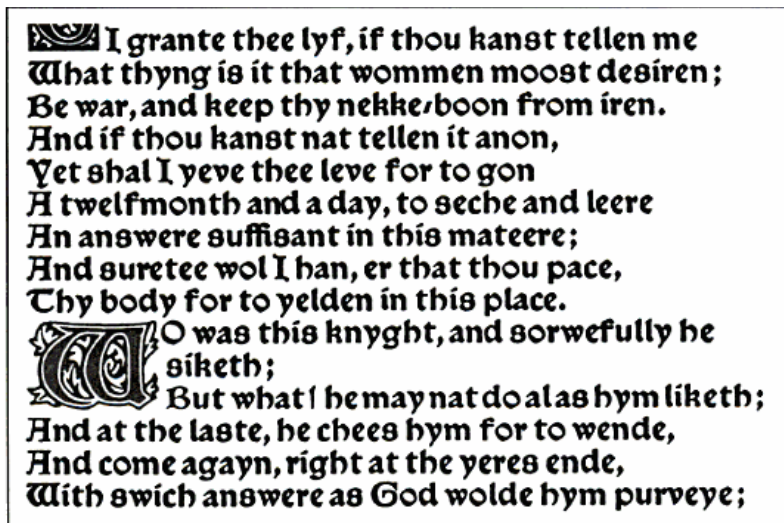


Figure 9, Illuminating Letters (84)

Type that occupied space on the page and that was bold, serious, and straightforward was seen as masculine and therefore good, and vice versa. De Vinne’s notions of what constituted gender and what constituted typographic

quality were inseparable, intimately intertwined so as to constantly be (in)forming one another, each simultaneously reinforcing and reflecting the other.

This concept of the mutual reflection and reinforcement between gender and type remains salient today, and is a key focus of my project. However, as I mention above, the conversation surrounding the two has changed a bit. As the medium of print has aged and become seemingly omnipresent, and as typographic production has increased exponentially since De Vinne's time (especially in the digital era), the relevant discourse on gender and typography has shifted away from close examination of the kinds of typefaces that are being produced and toward a discussion of how to choose which ones to use. In this sense, the broader theme of the conversation remains, at its core, the same: it is a discussion of the elements that make up an effective typeface. However, the approach has shifted slightly, for as Euro-American capitalism has grown and become increasingly globalized, the standards for typographic effectiveness have changed. It is no longer enough for a typeface simply to be legible on the printed page; in addition to functioning across a variety of different mediums, a typeface today must communicate very different messages than it did in De Vinne's time.

As an integral part of the world of advertising, marketing and branding – relatively new fields, according to Gloria Moss, who, in her book *Gender, Design, and Marketing* (2009) cites the early 1940's as the beginning of marketing as we know it today (19) – type, as a piece of graphic design, branding, and product design, now bears much of the responsibility for selling products. Capitalist endeavors have brought typography out of the art world where, arguably, it was originally conceived, and into the corporate one. In Gary Hustwit's 2007 film

Helvetica, designer writer Rick Poynor points out, “Maybe the feeling you have when you see particular typographic choices used on a piece of packaging is just ‘I like the look of that, that feels good, that’s my kind of product.’ But that’s the type casting its secret spell.” Indeed, type must cast a spell that conveys all the feeling and purpose of the company employing it, to whatever end the company desires. Most often this means selling a product, and this is, of course, where gender factors into the equation. Conventional wisdom states that men and women (the only two gender identities ever considered in such “wisdom”) are fundamentally different, and as such they must desire and require fundamentally different *things*. The companies marketing and selling these *things*, then, must take those differences into account in order to design and market the *things* accordingly. What’s more, modern branding and marketing ideology revolves around the idea that it is not simply a *thing* that is being sold, but rather a feeling, a way of being, a lifestyle.

In *Gender, Design, and Marketing*, Moss explores the view that “there should be congruence between the brand personality and the consumer’s self-concept on the basis that purchases are thought to offer a vehicle for self-expression” (31). A person’s self-concept very often includes, at least in part, their gender identity; for many companies, the thinking goes that it *always* includes their gender identity, and that their gender identity must be *either* male *or* female. Ergo, products are marketed to men *or* to women, to boys *or* to girls. For an easy example of how this manifests, one may simply look at the toy aisles in any department store and compare what is seen (hint: the pink aisle is for girls). In fact, because the gender binary is so firmly engrained in the contemporary

social consciousness, any attempt a company might make to step outside of said binary is often subject to public backlash, as evidenced by Target’s recent shift toward using gender-neutral packaging and presentation for many of their products. Thus, in their attempts to brand and market products with specific ‘male-or-female’ consumers in mind, companies must follow design aesthetics that conform to – and thereby reinforce – conventional ideas about gender and gender roles.

Here is where typography becomes so vitally important. What, exactly, allows a typeface to convey masculinity or femininity today? Fortunately, we have access to a broad catalog of answers to this question in the form of contemporary corporate branding. My favorite case study involves Gillette, the shaving and personal care product manufacturer. The company has both a men’s and a women’s line of products (the women’s products are known as “Gillette Venus”), and uses different logos for each, as seen in Figure 10:



Figure 10, Gillette.com

Taking “Venus” out of the equation for a moment (though there is much to be said about the letterforms seen here), let us look solely at the different versions of the Gillette logo used in each product line. The men’s version dominates the page, boldly asserting its presence and pushing forward at an angle with hard, heavy letters. Even the tittle of the lower-case ‘i’ has been made square and pointed, cut at an angle (which extends into the upper-case ‘G’) to evoke the

razor-sharpness and precision of the products. The women's version, by contrast, is slimmer (reminding the consumer that this product falls in line with contemporary standards of conventional beauty), more approachable, and far less present on the page. The tittle of the 'i' has been re-rounded, removing the sharpness and its attendant danger from the word altogether. The 'G', too, has been rounded out, its strong angles giving way to an open, easy loop. The letters hardly touch, creating space that allows for an ease of reading, a flow and an openness not found in the bold, compact men's version (which perhaps evokes an object cut from a single hunk of metal and stamped firmly onto the page, rather than one composed of delicately carved individual letters neatly assembled and placed carefully atop the word "Venus").

Now, if we look at the word "Venus," we see a continuation of these themes; indeed, they seem to be taken to an extreme. The letters curve and swoosh, never seeming to find their footing in any firm way. The 'V' – a letter usually comprised of a single, sharply acute angle – has been curved and rounded at every opportunity. What's more, it has been given contrast, and as the letterform progresses it thins to a literal breaking point before swooping up in a rounded terminal to evoke a water droplet – a calming and gentle motif, in contrast to the razor's edge seen in the men's logo. The 'e' is left agape, giving it a whimsicality and a top-heavy feel that contributes to the destabilization of the word as a whole. Even the 's' looks as though it is simply one stroke of a painter's brush, gentle and easy and avoiding geometric symmetry. Any boldness the word might attempt to present is immediately undercut by the sense of soft fragility the

letters provide in their openness and wide spacing. It is a liquid word, as easily wiped off the page as it is splashed upon it.

I would venture to say that De Vinne might find the logo used for Gillette's men's products very satisfactory in terms of its masculine presence. Indeed, the logo is easily described using much the same terminology that De Vinne claimed made up good, masculine type and printing practices. I conducted the majority of the above analysis of the Gillette logos prior to reading about De Vinne's distaste for and descriptions of the typefaces he deemed "feminine." Upon looking back, I find it remarkable that my descriptions of the differences in the two logos – particularly notions of occupying space on the page – so directly echo his sentiments about what defined masculine and feminine printing. It becomes clear, then, that while the conversation surrounding the intersection of gender and typography may have shifted slightly, many of the standards we use for creating and judging the typefaces themselves – in other words, the gendered norms that we project onto and read in the type – remain staunchly the same.

With this in mind, the question presents itself: how does my project, INFORM, fit into this larger discourse? First and foremost, it is a continuation of a conversation that has been had before, and that is continuing to be had today. The sites of intersection between gender and typography surround us perhaps more than we are willing or able to recognize, and have existed long before corporate brands began using them to market gendered products. Of equal importance, however, is the fact I am pushing this pre-existing conversation to move in a different direction. INFORM challenges us – as typographers, designers, marketers, readers, consumers, etc. – to come at the conversation

from a different angle. It asks us to consider the conversation that has been had, and to question why we have been having it within the parameters that have been set forth. Why, for example, does the conversation only ever involve rigidly defined notions of masculinity and femininity? Why must the typefaces and the people who interact with them only ever be considered *either* one *or* the other, and why do the pages and products to which they get applied have to fall into the same two limited categories? In short, by what mechanisms did we, gender- and typographically-speaking, get to where we are today? It is my hope that INFORM calls all of this and more into question, building upon and critiquing the existing conversation along the way.

Chapter 2

In this chapter, I will explore the process of designing each letter of INFORM, broken up into thirteen sets of two. The goal of this detailed dissection is twofold: firstly, and on a surface level, to explain what it is the typeface does, and to look at its form; and secondly, to explore how (or perhaps whether) the typeface accomplishes the goals I set forth for it, and the impacts I hope it will have upon reception by the audience. I will begin with former of these – the “what” of the typeface – before moving into the description of my design process. I would like to recommend having the typeface readily available to reference while reading this chapter.

What, indeed, does INFORM do? Put simply, it works through the alphabet as a progression, beginning with letterforms that are easily described and thought of using stereotypically masculine language, norms, and ideals. Over the course of the alphabet the typeface shifts, shedding those masculine stereotypes and slowly accumulating feminine ones, thereby ending with letterforms that can be easily described and thought of using stereotypically feminine language, norms, and ideals. In the process, it creates letters that fall in the liminal space between masculinity and femininity, that can be rightly described using language from both sets of stereotypes and language that falls outside of those sets entirely. What’s more, it places highly masculine letterforms in conversation with highly feminine ones by virtue of their being parts of the same typeface. In doing so, the stark contrast between our socially defined ideals of masculinity and femininity is highlighted, and a disjuncture is created when

the letters are made to work together to form words or sentences (a concept which I will discuss in more detail later on).

I began the process of designing INFORM after studying and taking into account the historical relationship between gender and typography, including 19th century typographic discourse and contemporary branding examples. With all of this in mind, as well as my personal experience learning the ins-and-outs of numerous popular typefaces (one example being Helvetica; Gary Hustwit’s documentary of the same name is a wonderful examination of the omnipresent typeface, and one that I highly recommend), I set about designing the letters first and foremost based upon my own understandings and relationships to gendered stereotypes. That is, I started by sketching an ‘A’ (as seen in Figure 11) based on the stereotypes of masculinity that have been ingrained in my consciousness:

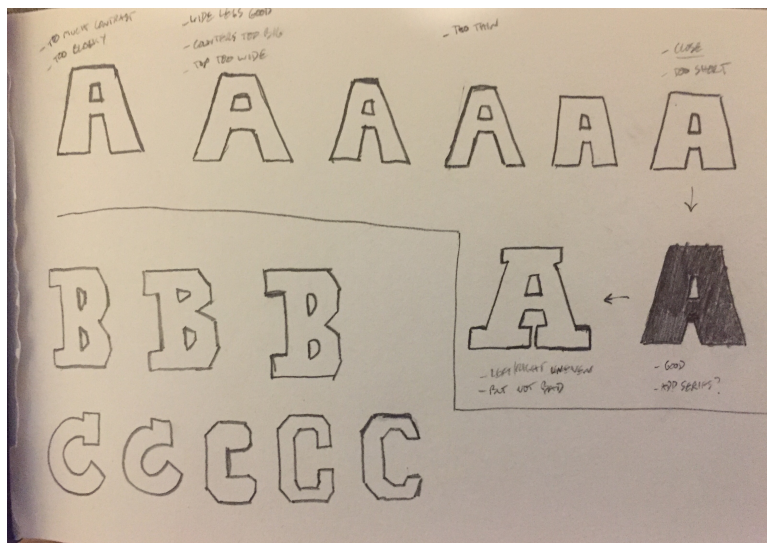


Figure 11, author’s sketches

Designing in this way – as opposed to relying solely on pre-defined design principles or someone else’s notion of how an ‘A’ should look, while still allowing myself to be informed by such principles – was important in my efforts to

implicate myself, the designer, in the creation and perpetuation of gender stereotypes in type, another notion I will discuss further at the end of this chapter.

The goal in designing each letter was to make it fit with the letters that immediately preceded and followed it, while also making minor changes that distinguished it and moved toward or away from certain stereotypes. As such, it makes most sense to examine the letterforms in pairs of two, beginning, naturally, with 'A'. However, it is important to note, I think, that after designing the 'A' I moved directly to the 'Z', creating the most feminine letterform I could think of. In doing so, I gave myself the two polar opposites of the spectrum within which I would be working, and an endpoint for the letters to work toward over the course of the alphabet.

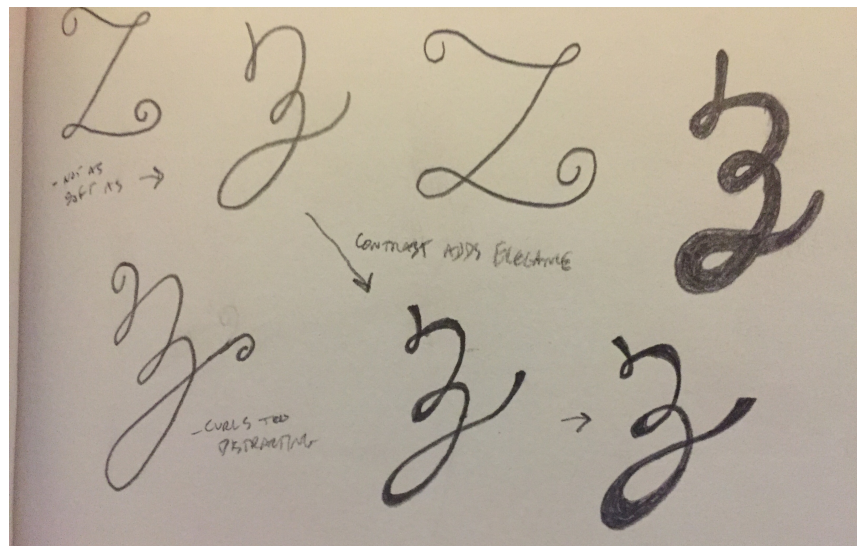


Figure 12, author's sketches

I created the 'A' to be, first and foremost, the boldest and most assertive letter on the page. The lines are extremely thick, and the counters are intentionally small, allowing for very little negative space. The 'A' takes a wide-legged stance, occupying as much space on the page as possible, making its

presence obvious at first glance. The slab serif nature follows De Vinne's praise of the preindustrial typefaces, and allows for a sense of rigid, immovable stability. What's more, the thick, blocky serifs contribute to the over-all lack of curved or rounded edges; the 'A' remains stiffly angular, with little noticeable contrast at all. The only ornamentation – and it is perhaps telling of a certain image-consciousness that there is indeed ornamentation, however slight – comes in the form of spikes on either leg of the 'A' (interestingly, I was inspired to add these spikes while enjoying that most masculine of pastimes, watching football with my father; the logo emblazoned on the field featured typography that was similarly adorned). This spiked weaponry gains further significance in that the lack thereof is one of few noticeable difference between the 'B' and the 'A' – this is the first, albeit tiny, step in moving away from dominant masculine ideals. Otherwise, the 'B' follows very closely in the trend set by the 'A': it is similarly bold, similarly angular and lacking in any softness or roundedness, and similarly stable and assertive. Though the 'B' begins to allow for a little more counter-space, both 'A' and 'B' unapologetically occupy a significant amount of visual space.

'C' and 'D' remain angular in the same ways as 'A' and 'B'; in fact, they maintain a fairly rectangular shape over-all, a trait that is significant and noticeable in two letters that often feature prominent curves and/or rounded segments. Furthermore, both 'C' and 'D' remain bold and noticeable on the page. However, the lines used in each are ever-so-slightly thinner than those in the previous letters. The counter-spaces become slightly more prominent, allowing for a little more contrast and ease-of-reading. Finally, the slab serifs fall away

beginning with the 'C'; while far from being soft or cuddly, both the 'C' and 'D' begin to minimize the aggressive masculinity seen in 'A' and 'B'.

'E' and 'F' continue in the trend of slowly minimizing masculinity and become very slightly thinner than the letters before them, though they remain visually strong and present in comparison to the latter portion of the alphabet. Though the metal-cut feel of the previous letters perhaps begins to dissipate here, still we see a resistance to roundedness or curves. Everything in these letters is constructed at perfect ninety-degree angles, with thick, rigid blocks. The perfectly vertical and horizontal lines give the letters an almost militaristic straight-backed pose and a very professional, clean-cut feel. There is nothing excessive or particularly remarkable about these letterforms, to the point where one almost loses sight of them in between the surrounding letters. They are utilitarian to a point, simplistic and strictly even throughout.

In the 'G' we see the first really noticeable shift in style, in the form of the rounded corner edges. However, the 'G' maintains its rectangular form in spite of this roundness, and reasserts the angular nature of its predecessors in the right-angle corners on the terminals. Furthermore, it remains comparatively bold, though, as ever, thinner than the letters before it. It maintains its masculine presence in these ways, all the while moving ever-so-slowly toward a more feminine one. The 'H', following immediately afterward, presented an interesting challenge: as arguably one of the simplest letters in the alphabet, it would seem to fit best right alongside the E and F in a rigidly symmetrical style. What's more, as the 'H' is constructed merely of three straight lines, I opted to go against the expectations of roundness set by the 'G', reverting back to the ninety-degree

angles seen in ‘E’ and ‘F’. In order to move away from the strict utilitarianism of those letters, however, I simply lowered the crossbar of the ‘H’, removing the horizontal symmetry usually found in the letter. This slight change allows the ‘H’ to maintain its masculine rectangularity, while simultaneously destabilizing it by lowering its center of gravity. The lowered crossbar gives the ‘H’ just a hint of character; it steps outside the simple, bold utility of the letters around it, the asymmetry making it just a little bit comedic, a tiny bit friendlier.

The ‘I’ is certainly the simplest character in INFORM. Composed of a single, still-bold vertical line, it seems not to move too far from the clean, sharp simplicity of the letters before it. However, the ‘I’ does two things very subtly: first, as expected, it is slightly thinner than the ‘H’; and second, it introduces rounded corners. While it is not the first instance of roundness in the typeface – ‘G’ has that honor – it is the first letter that allows roundness at its terminals, thereby hinting at a softness that has not been seen previously. This rounded softness becomes more obvious in the ‘J’, as does the casual feeling that these two letters evoke. Moreover, the bowl of the ‘J’ is less than half the height of its stem, putting it on par with the crossbar of the ‘H’ and continuing to suggest the possibility of having a somewhat friendly personality.

It is at this point in the typeface that defined stereotypes begin to blur slightly. The letters, though still bold and straight-edged, are noticeably thinner and rounder than before, with attendant feelings of lightness and softness creeping in. The assertiveness and aggression seen at the beginning of the alphabet is largely absent from these letters; the sense of danger initially evoked by the ‘A’ is gone entirely. Thus, while it is still very possible to use stereotypically

masculine language to describe these letters – they are still bold, still professional, still sturdy and unburdened by ornament or decoration – it also becomes possible to describe them with stereotypically feminine language, such as the softness and friendliness described above. This seeming contradiction of having both masculine and feminine traits places these letters, and the six or seven following them, in an interesting liminal space between stereotypes. It is this liminal space, this resistance to adhering to strict definition by gendered norms, that actually allows these letters to be the most useful, as I will discuss later on.

Despite this blurring, it is still relatively easy to see the masculine roots in both the ‘K’ and the ‘L’. The lines, despite being distinctly rounded, are thick and even; there is no evident contrast, and both letters are sturdy and straight-backed. However, the almost-completely-rounded terminals of the ‘K’, coupled with the welcoming curve of the upper arm and the laid-back lean of the lower leg give the letter a distinctly warm feel. There are almost no more right angles, and the one found in the ‘L’ is one of the last instances of such an angle in the typeface. The ‘L’ is even thinner than the ‘K’, and the terminals have been completely rounded out. It occupies very little space on the page – it is visually less present than even the ‘T’, despite having a lower bar that makes it necessarily wider. In fact, the lower bar does not extend very far at all, as if hesitant to creep too far into the negative space around the letter. This results in a slight destabilization of the ‘L’, giving the reader the sense that a stiff breeze might topple it over.

Upon arriving at ‘M’ and ‘N’, it becomes clear that all sharpness and angularity has been left behind, giving way to roundness in almost every aspect. For letters that are usually so stiffly and jaggedly angled, the letterforms seen

here are almost surprising in their easy, arching nature. The only rigidity that remains is in the spindly verticality of the legs, and yet even this is destabilized by the round terminals on which the letters are delicately balanced. Both the ‘M’ and the ‘N’ are noticeably thin on the page, with the arches providing for plenty of counter-space in and around the letters. Despite being wider letters, they seem to occupy no more space than the ‘L’ before them, and are hardly more noticeable except in their lack of sharp angles. Like the letters before them, they remain simple and unadorned, and still they stand firmly upright – remnants of their masculine heritage.

The ‘O’ is, visually, a perfect circle. Its stroke width remains uniformly thin, and though it is wide it does not have a demanding presence on the page, as it doesn’t use much ink. Indeed, the over-all width of the circle gives it a certain comforting presence; it is friendly in its softness and welcoming in its openness, with no hint of the angular or rectangular constraints that dominate the first half of the typeface. It is simple and unassuming, qualities it shares with the ‘P’ that follows it. Though the ‘P’ does include a single right angle, it does so timidly, using the corner merely as an anchor point from which the bowl may balloon gently outward. It is a remarkably plain letter, taking up very little space and remaining visually quiet on the page. Of course, it maintains nearly all of the softness of the ‘O’, and becomes even lighter in the process. Furthermore, its top-heavy construction – facilitated in part by a significant curve at its peak, where the stem meets the bowl – allows it a slightly comical effect, which is compounded by its balloon-like nature. It seems to peer forward shyly as though, like the ‘L’, it is hesitant to take up too much space.

The 'Q' also bears a striking resemblance to the 'O' in its roundness, though the still-lighter width of its lines means it is necessarily less present. The tail is the defining feature of this letter, as it signals the beginning of a new trend: ornamentation. It is an easy, looping tail that hints at a human element in the design process. What's more, the tail more obviously works to remove the businesslike aura seen earlier in the alphabet, a process that has slowly been taking place over the past few letters. It has a quirkiness to it, beginning to add a sense of fun that hasn't been seen in previous letters. The 'R' follows in this mode, with almost no rigidly defined shapes (the only exception being the upright spine). The loops and curves are more obviously hand-drawn, adding more of the human element seen in the tail of the 'Q'. What's more, the 'R' actually breaks the connection between the spine and the looping bowl and curving leg. Any stability provided by the spine is compromised, as the rest of the letter seems to float easily alongside it. There is a slight delicateness to this mode of construction that also maintains a friendly, fun-loving air.

At this point, the letters in the typeface begin to be constructed in such ways as they can no longer rightly be described with stereotypically masculine language. Feminine stereotypes dominate the understanding of the letters from this point on, as all rigidity disappears and letters become necessarily more human by virtue of their hand-drawn nature. The letterforms are thinner and more delicate than ever before (harking back to the gendered standards of beauty reflected in the Gillette Venus logo), and resist at all costs being noticeable for their physical presence on the page. Rather, what makes these letters stick out is

their affinity for ornamentation and decoration, a trait that becomes very obvious with the arrival of the ‘S’.

The ‘S’ has easy, looping bowls with the beginnings of curlicue ornaments at the terminals. It seems to revel in its curves and its curls, soaking up the softness with a playful, asymmetrical aesthetic. Indeed, it is this asymmetry that reminds the reader of the human hand that drew the letter, making it altogether un-intimidating while necessarily rooting its form in the human body. There is plenty of space in and around the ‘S’, in part due to the ever-lighter weight of its lines. It has a friendly personality, to an extent that is almost kitschy. This kitsch continues into the ‘T,’ which is at once more elegant and more human in its script-like shape. The human element continues to be evident as it is in the ‘S’, though perhaps more so due to the uneven line width used in the letter, in an effort to simulate pen strokes. The lightly arcing crossbar is detached from the swooping, curved body of the ‘T’ (returning the sense of floating-on-the-breeze seen previously in the ‘R’), and both parts are obviously ornamented.

Both ‘U’ and ‘V’ are extremely light; the line weight used is very thin, allowing for a thread-like sensibility. The continued use of the uneven, pen-like stroke provides a hint of contrast while emphasizing the slight imperfections wrought by the human hand that constructed the letters. The obvious ornamentation curling up at the terminals – though, importantly, not at the top right of the ‘U’, removing any possibility of symmetry – are also clearly hand-drawn, and perhaps also evoke the soft bounciness of curling locks of hair. Moreover, the ‘U’ is modeled after a lower-case ‘u’, as evidenced by its tail, a fact that further removes it from any sense of seriousness or importance. The letters

here are flowy and the lines waver throughout, never quite settling without a final twirl at the end.

With the ‘W’, the line weight takes the thread-like feel to an extreme, retracting its width and presence to what seems like an almost impossibly small amount of space on the page. However, this is balanced by the addition of slight contrast in the curves. This contrast adds to the sense of elegance, refining it from the hints seen in the previous letters by adding finely finessed detail. The ‘W’ is meticulous in its construction and decoration, though the lack of a full curl at the right terminal allows it to feel effortless and human, as though a hand simply swooped through and left a thin trail of ink in its wake. It is fluid and whimsical, with wide bowls that cushion and bounce as the eye traverses them. The ‘X’ follows in step, but adds more contrast with one swish that is thicker than those in the ‘W’. This crosses over another line that is, almost imperceptibly, even thinner than its counterparts in the ‘W’. The curlicue ornamentation persists, becoming slightly more circular while still resisting symmetry. Thus the ‘X’ maintains and enhances the elegance put forward by the ‘W’, while also upholding the playful personality seen throughout the previous few letters.

The large, wide bowl on top of the ‘Y’ welcomes the reader in immediately, and the contrast between the thick and thin strokes that constitute it provide a continued sense of elegance. The top-heavy nature of the letter destabilizes it, and allows for the feeling that the ‘Y’ is lounging on the baseline, dipping below for just a quick moment. What’s more, the contrast serves to emphasize the extreme delicateness of the thin lines, making the letter feel light and airy despite the use of thicker lines in certain places. The curled ornament is even wider and

curlier in the ‘Y’, and the tail is a flowing wisp that flicks out behind with a sophisticated flair. This flair continues in the ‘Z’, which begins with an elaborate, almost feather-like curl before looping around into the wide loop-de-loops that comprise the body of the letter. It is the most elegant letter in the typeface, with the thinnest thins and thickest thicks providing the most contrast of any letter in the alphabet. The decoration is more ornate and thus more delicate than in the preceding letters; it is a fragile letter, to the point where it seems that it might simply snap if lifted by the wrong piece. It is also a beautiful letter, and that is precisely what it is designed for: maximum beauty with a disregard for functionality. It is a letter created to be looked at, carefully constructed to be soft and welcoming in its wide, swooping curves while simultaneously untouchable in its unparalleled elegance and style. It is an idealized depiction of femininity crafted from a (my) masculine perspective, a letter that feels at once human and so perfect as to be utterly impossible to reproduce.

Having dissected the “what” of INFORM and discussed at length the various forms seen therein, I would like to move now to a discussion of the “how” – that is, the way the typeface functions. My goals for this project were manifold, and I will outline them all here. It is my hope that the typeface I have created achieves these goals, and perhaps reaches toward some I had not previously considered.

The first goal is perhaps the simplest: I wish to call attention to two aspects of daily life – typography and gender norms – that often slip by unnoticed. As I mention in the introduction to this paper, the act of seeing the

unseen is crucial to the process of unlearning and relearning that which we believed we already knew. Both typography and gender are assumed to be understood by virtue of their existence, and the processes by which they are created and the effects they have on people who interact with them are largely overlooked. Both are performative, according to Butler's (1988, 1993) definition of the word. That is, both are created and maintained through ritualistic practices that reaffirm their existing modes of functioning. We are taught that a closed circle is the letter 'O', and that when it is bolded it is important; we are taught that men are to be aggressive and women subdued. Every instance in which these ideas are repeated – every performance – is an instance in which they are reaffirmed as true, as immutable, and as somehow occurring naturally rather than socially. My intention in creating this typeface is to call into question the belief that gender norms and typography have inherent meaning beyond that with which we endow them by pointing the spotlight at both gendered stereotypes and the process of the creation and reception of a typeface.

What's more, beyond simply bringing both gender and type into popular discourse, I seek to demonstrate the ways the two are constantly forming and informing each other – this is, of course, where the name INFORM originates, in addition to its play on the idea of gender being inscribed in the forms of the letters themselves. Gender norms necessarily inform the creation of typefaces because they are a part of the lived experiences of the typographers – as typographer Erik Spiekermann, interviewed in Hustwit's *Helvetica*, notes, “everyone puts their history into their work.” In turn, the typefaces act as part of the performance of gender, reinforcing those gendered norms by virtue of their

repetition. We come to associate certain styles of type with certain gender stereotypes because of the ways they are used; Gillette makes us associate bold, heavy, aggressive letters with masculinity and maleness, and thin, soft, airy (and sometimes even broken) letters with femininity and femaleness. We – including typographers – are socialized to internalize these ideas, and thus we bring them into the creation of new typefaces, continuing the cycle of in/formation.

Additionally – and this is perhaps the second goal of the project, though it bleeds from the first and into the third – I seek to use INFORM to point out the utter pervasiveness of gender stereotypes, norms, and ideals. That is, my project is an examination of the ways we are able to ascribe gender and gendered terminology to almost anything, down to even single letters that are no more than simple organizations of lines and dots. Lines and dots do not have genders, nor do gendered ideals arise naturally from the ways in which they are organized. Rather, such ideals are learned and ascribed to the letters during each part of the process of creation and reception.

This relates directly to the pieces of text that I have formed using the letters I created. The idea here is to call into question the usefulness of these gender stereotypes that are so completely ubiquitous. Because the letters in the typeface are defined by different gendered stereotypes, they necessarily look different, and as such do not work together the way the letters of a traditional typeface would. In particular, the letters that are most rigidly defined by gender stereotypes – those at the beginning and end of the alphabet – clash with each other the most, while those letters that are able to be described with both sets of language (or neither) prove to be the most versatile. In essence, the more

stereotypes embodied by a given letter, the less useful it is in the over-all context of the typeface. This is intended to make the viewer reconsider gender stereotypes as perhaps unnecessary or, at the very least, necessarily problematic.

Furthermore, the words I chose to set in INFORM were picked very specifically for the purpose. I wanted to stay away from words and phrases that might be traditionally gendered (e.g. his/hers, man/woman, mom/dad, king/queen, etc.), and so I chose to use “filler” text (nonsense Latin phrases, commonly referred to as “Lorem Ipsum”). The goal in avoiding such gendered language was to highlight the letters themselves; that is, part of the purpose of INFORM is to cause a disruption when reading, and to make the typeface itself visible (or, to use Warde’s phrasing, to make the type visible *as type*). In doing so, I seek to make the design of each individual letter stick out, as a way of calling attention to the gendered norms being inscribed upon them and the simple fact of their having been very intentionally designed. Furthermore, by placing the typeface name at the top of the page of text, I emphasize the fact that the reader is not being informed by what is written, but rather by how it is being written. After all, as Marshall McLuhan famously said, the medium is the message.

This brings me to the third goal I have for INFORM: the implication of the audience/viewer/reader in the process of gendering. Every person who encounters INFORM arrives with a unique set of ideas, lived experiences, and ways and modes of knowing. Regardless of the diversity in those ideas, experiences, and epistemologies, they are always shaped (or created entirely) by the culture in which the person who holds them came to understand their world. The social defines our belief systems and ways of knowing, and those belief

systems very often include understandings of gender. Thus, when a person encounters INFORM, they are always already bringing with them ideas and conceptions of what masculinity and femininity mean, how they are defined, and how they function in the world. As Stuart Hall (1980) points out, any media object, in order to have meaning, must be decoded by the person receiving it. This decoding is done in accordance with the socialized ideas and beliefs held by that person; thus, the reader of any typeface may decode gendered messages from the letterforms, regardless of whether or not the typographer intended for them to be read as such. By highlighting stereotypical gender norms, INFORM forces the viewer to consider the ways they are complicit in the process of gendering, whether it be the letter 'A' or a person they pass on the street.

Of course, in approaching such a goal in this way, I necessarily implicate myself, the type designer, in the same process. This was the fourth goal of my project, to make the typographer and the creation and design of the typeface a visible part of the medium. Just as readers encounter type with their own lived experiences and preexisting notions of gender norms that help them decode the messages therein, so too do typographers bring their own lived experiences and socialized ways of knowing to the design process, thereby influencing the ways messages are encoded (another of Hall's terms). I implicate myself very explicitly in this project: I designed the letterforms using my own understandings of gender stereotypes, attempting to craft them based on impulsive representations of those that have been ingrained in my consciousness. Thus I intentionally encoded the letterforms with meanings that I hope to be decoded by the audience; in doing so, I call attention to the process of encoding itself, and I ask the reader to recognize

the problematic nature of the process by which I have gendered the letterforms. This is particularly important with regards to typography, as typefaces are very often accepted simply as they are, and the fact that they are designed and have meaning inscribed upon them by human beings with specific ideologies is a fact all too rarely considered.

Moreover, I seek to call attention to the responsibilities held by the typographer/designer as a creator of media objects that necessarily have meaning in social contexts. We must be aware of the meanings with which we endow such objects; we are complicit in the process of meaning-making, in molding and shaping the ways readers see and understand the world around them, and thus we are complicit in the proliferation of norms and stereotypes that are often damaging and/or dangerous. It is our responsibility to recognize this complicitness, this power, and to use it consciously to better that world, for the readers and for ourselves.

Conclusion

It is my sincere hope that my project has fulfilled the goals outlined in the previous chapter. Typography is a medium too often overlooked for one that surrounds us in almost every aspect of our lives. We encounter typography thousands of times each day, and rarely do we give it the attention it deserves, as a medium in its own right, and therefore as a powerful force in shaping the ways we come to know and understand the world around us. Because of this, I found it to be a perfect medium through which to examine gender, a social construct that is overlooked equally as often and that has much more profound effects on the ways we understand and relate to the world and people around us. Indeed, the two constantly form, re-form, and inform each other, a process that my project highlights. We must continue to be conscious of the ways media affect us, and the ways we affect media; our world is being shaped for us just as we shape it for others. With this act of making the invisible visible – of examining the glass through which we are constantly looking, bringing into the discourse the construction and implications of this glass – it is my hope that INFORM makes the reader think more deeply each time they encounter type. After all, as Rick Poynor reminds us in Hustwit’s film, “Type is saying things to us all the time.” It is vital that we listen to it, so that we may bring what we hear – and what we’re making type say – into the conversations we have every day.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone in my life who has helped me with this project, from thinking through its initial conception to encouraging me when I doubted its merit. In particular, I would like to thank my advisors, who have offered genuine, honest support and feedback throughout the entire process. Thank you!

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