

The Typography of Utopia/Dystopia

The fall of modernism was an attack on the notion of the artist, designer and architect as a heroic figure. High modernism had elevated these figures as constructors of utopias, creating new ways of living radically improved from those of the past.⁷ As modern utopias repeatedly failed (e.g. the Pruitt Igoe housing project), utopia thorough standardization became less and less appealing. Within typography, this manifested itself as a an attack on the ideal of a universal typeface, a kind of typographic equalizer.

To the postmodern designer, this idea of type had become boring and unexpressive. It begged for the hand-made touches and flaws seen in the working-class world. Modernist typography had become too clean, too slick, impossible to humanize. The aesthetic of the untrained provided a much richer soil for semiotic play and the visuals of pre-modern culture were appropriated with fervor, as a space outside of the domain of standardization.

The emergence of digital design tools in the late 1980s created new possibilities within type design and

distribution, and type foundries like Fuse and Emigre exploited these new opportunities by releasing intentionally naive typefaces that had built in flaws and failures. These typefaces eschewed the authoritative voice of Helvetica and Univers, challenging them as superficially imposed order which denied the slippery nature of communication, especially written language. Type became both critical and vernacular. The typeface used could say just as much as the content, it was no longer objective.

Jeff Keedy, a Cranbrook graduate and CalArts professor, designed his Keedy Sans typeface as a direct subversion of the expectations of the rational typeface.⁸ Keedy Sans attacks the dehumanisation of language through typography. Its imperfections reference the history of written language, which itself is a history of imperfection, both in form and content. As typography evolved away from referencing the handwritten letter, a loss of center occurred.⁹ The letter became purely symbolic, reaching its ultimate defamiliarization with the sans serif typeface. Helvetica became the most funiversal precisely because it was the most foreign, and to the postmodern designer, it was lifeless and sterile. Keedy Sans reintroduced error into the symbol, inherent in its form and anticipated in its content. Emigre and Fuse typefaces, influenced by Deconstruction theory, which attacked the neutrality of signs,¹⁰ were designed with the expectation of semiotic slippage. Many of the typefaces reference early digital failure, pixelation and glitch, anticipating the world of misinformation that the internet would give easy access to. These fonts were for a new critical kind of reading, designed to the specifications of

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Custards

HOT SNACKS MADE FOR KIDS

ROYAL 

Rodeo Clowns from Sweden

RAYGUNS

THE KING OF CARTOONS

Simple Crafting

the Deconstructionist.

If Emigre and Fuse catered to the critical and experimental typographer, House Industries was for the nostalgic one. The postmodern penchant for vernacular typography is taken to the extreme in the House collection. These typefaces are rarely used in their original vernacular context, but instead pull their various signifieds along with them into a vast array of computer-created design. Every typeface references something, none of them are aesthetically autonomous. House Industries is a celebration of kitsch and retro, mining the past for type treatments and low-culture inspirations. As they describe on their website:

“Exposure to graphic design came through assorted American sub-cultural phenomena from the past few decades, such as the hardcore music scene, skateboarding and video games. It also didn’t hurt to have pinstriping dads who built hot rods and older brothers who collected Mad magazine. Not surprisingly, mimicking Santa Cruz deck graphics was incredibly formative, as were the countless hours spent perfecting the interlocking letter forms of Priest and Maiden logos on notebook covers and jean jackets.”¹¹

The handwritten style of many House Industry faces is an all out war on the geometry and measured line of a Futura or Univers. By taking typography back to handwriting, sign-painting and informal scripts, House Industries

is an endeavor in the refamiliarization of typography after modernism. Despite the internal contradictions of the computer generated brush script, the form is an exercise in critical semiotics, showcasing the conflict of the modern and postmodern: the vision of the past and future.

One commonality that all three of these postmodern digital type foundries share is a dystopian view of the future (most prevalent in Emigre and Fuse) and a glorified, nostalgic view of the past (most prevalent in House Industries). Typefaces that reference the future digital are always fragmented, corroded and illegible, while typefaces of the past are rarely other than pristine. In contrast with modernism, which took an optimistic view of the future, postmodern typography glorifies the signage that escaped high modernist standardization, the aesthetic of psychedelia, hot rod culture, Las Vegas and the gig poster. There is an emphasis in lettering as opposed to the typeface, one-off type treatments as opposed to a universally applicable alphabet. Modernism viewed the past as something to be phased out and replaced with clarity and reason. House Industries is visibly and proudly allergic to the austerity of such measures, while Emigre and Fuse question the nature of technological progress.

Massimo Vignelli critiqued Emigre as dealing with “subcultures, not cultures”¹² and the postmodern type foundry would not deny this claim. It represents the fundamental shift in values from modernism. Vignelli’s work operates under the apparatus of a classical modernism, viewing the achievements of the 20th century as the heir

to the classical tradition of typography. Yet adherents of Emigre would argue Vignelli's classicism is just as artificial as the aesthetics of hot rod culture or punk rock—even more so since it is further from the human hand. Postmodernism proclaims that there is nothing sacred about modernism, classicism, or any other “ism”, all cultures and subcultures, past and present, are fair game for appropriation. Its advancement is forsaking classicism, not laying hold of it, recognizing it as one tradition among equally valid others.

It is this treatment of the past that literary critic Frederic Jameson pinpoints in his astute analysis of Rankus, Manning and Latham's video artwork *AlienNATION*, an assemblage of found footage and animation. For Jameson, the mark of its postmodernity is the way it treats the existing cultural artifact, “reshuffling the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production.”¹³ It is the plundering of the old and the rejection of the new as an absolute that makes meaning so slippery. In such an environment, the signified is multiplied manifold, collapsing the meaning of the original with the various meanings and associations of the cleaned-up reproduction. Plurality of meaning has replaced fixed meaning, and subjectivity has replaced objectivity.

At the same time, the symbols and styles of the past are used in a far more exaggerated and stereotyped way than they were originally. For example, the Constructivism of Kraftwerk's *XYZ* album cover is far more “Constructivist” than El Lissitzky ever was, but it is a shallow and logofied version.¹⁴ It is nostalgic for the

feeling of the original movement, a grasp for association not substance. The signifiers of Constructivism (a modernist movement in itself) become simulacra, a copy without an original. Even the transparency of materials and production methods of Constructivism are bastardized and stereotyped, creating a false surface from what was meant to be an utterly honest one. Appropriation must be done in an intentional and coded way, the design must only reference, not become.

This is also true of the postmodern type foundry. Digital typefaces tend toward a logo-like appearance, even the grungiest or glitchiest font will appear in the same way every time it is typed. Attempts to overcome this through lettering-style ligatures (see House's Ed Interlock) can only provide a superficial solution at best. The computer proves to be both the fatal contradiction and the enabling technology of postmodernism, you can have every typeface ever drawn, but you cannot escape the machine aesthetic.

The contradiction of the personal and technological could not be reconciled before the proliferation of the personal computer. Quirks were from the analog world, idiosyncrasies could only be conceived of coming from the human hand. However, with the explosion of the personal computer, cell phone, and portable digital technology, younger generations have become sensitive to digital personality quirks. The mouse and keyboard are the new human touch, and designers who have grown up using them understand how to convey human qualities through digital design tools.

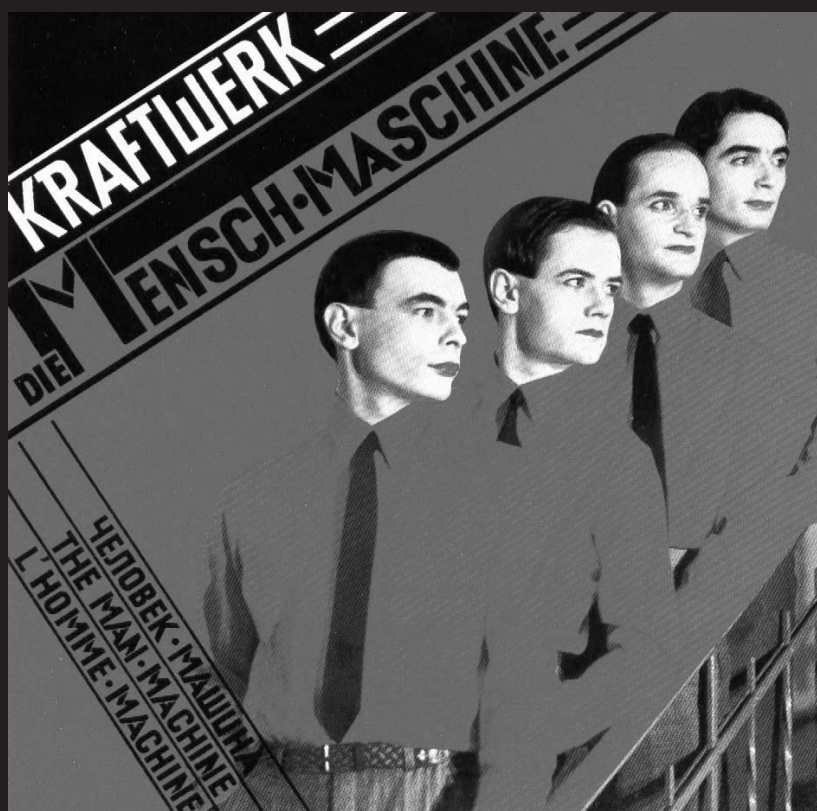
The new digital foundries solve postmodernism's

ED INTERLOCK

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House Industries' Ed Interlock typeface and Kraftwerk's Die Mensch-Maschine.

Jennifer Walshe
starts transient
text score
messaging project

The Avant Garde
Raisonné
a comprehensive catalogue
Herb Lubalin
Crossbred and stylistic

contradiction in a modernist way, they are referencing the technology used to create and display type in the digital age. Yet despite digital's potential for perfection, this new typography maintains the quirks and flaws consistent with digital technology. Atelier Carvalho Bernau describes their Lyon typeface as such:

"Lyon reflects our convictions about modern digital typeface design: A decisively digital outline treatment that reveals our modern repertoire of tools, and the typeface itself as a modern design tool, paired with a certain Times-like unobtrusiveness in the Text sizes, contrasts nicely with Lyon's 16th century heritage."¹⁵

The new digital typeface is designed for the screen, not merely adapted for it. Matthew Carter's Verdana is a prototype for this kind of thinking. Designed to be legible on screen at small sizes, it was one of the first typefaces to recognize a change in the way most people were viewing typography. Verdana addresses the same problem that Bell Gothic's ink traps did, but in pixels, not ink. Such adjustments are characteristic of the new hypermodern type design.

Progressing from Carter's Verdana, many current type designers prefer to build in structural quirks and false or naive geometries as formal statements, independent from function. Several emerging digital type foundries specialize in letterforms which are comfortable with their state as computer-designed, such as Radim Pesko's

RP Digital Foundry and The Entente's Colophon Foundry. Both foundries work with designers who have grown up using the computer and are engaged in forward-thinking critical work, but a perusal of their type libraries will show that the cutting edge of typography has become rather tame since the days of Emigre and Fuse.

If type design is any indicator of the treatment of signs under hypermodernism, then there is a significant objectivity of the sign emerging in the digital type foundry. The letterforms of these designers cannot be called fragmented or vernacular as the foundries of the 80s and 90s could, and though they reference the computer, it is not by pixelated diagonals or glitch-ridden Franken-fonts. The typefaces of Fuse and Emigre harnessed a kind of fear of the digital peculiar to postmodernism, but this new typography showcases the mastery and precision of its tools. It is a new modernism, but not a satirical one. The lessons of form and balance are well taken, but there is a hint of humanity implied by the digital hand.

Radim Pesko's Fugue references the geometric construction of Futura, but in a optically unadjusted way. The quirks have been left in, but there is a precision to the quirks, a barely perceptible angle in the lower-case l, a 45 degree cut on an otherwise perfectly round G, or a stacked double-decker g. Pesko describes it as "an appreciation of and going-back-to-the-future-and-back-again with Paul Renner."¹⁶ There is both an objectivity and a personality to Fugue, it communicates clearly, but invites a second look. It is totally at home being digital, a typeface that "could only be designed on a Mac."¹⁷

Fugue along with Benjamin Critton's *Raisonné*, Swiss foundry Lineto's *Replica* and a handful of others represent a new generation of distinctive sans serifs that are principled and modern in their construction, a stark contrast from the experiments of *Fuse* and the vernacular type of *House Industries*. The new digital typeface references the current state of technology, invisible pixels and precise design tools. The lack of digital grunge in these faces indicates a fundamental change in attitude toward the computer since the late 80s and 90s—it now has the potential of a utopia. The hacker ideal of the web as a libertarian paradise is not too far removed from the modernist vision of a physical one to be brought about by architectural projects. *Fugue* and *Replica* also are available in monospaced versions, the type style of the programmer, an homage to the builders of network architecture. It is this new kind of architecture of the surface that hypermodernity is concerned with, the “anorexic, hyper-thin architecture” of the web page. Within this there is endless space for communication, a designer's paradise, but endless potential for accident: the modernist challenge posed in hyperlinks.

Yet even the digital type foundry is in danger of being outmoded by the digital and robotic experiments of designers such as *Lust* and *Jürg Lehni*. These projects express the familiarity with the computer in an even more natural sense, and can truly be considered postdigital. Is the digital foundry to disappear in the face of projects like *Atelier Carvalho Bernau* and *Lust's* upcoming type generator for the *Sandberg Instituut's* website? Such

developments threaten type design as graphic design's last safe haven of craft, but again point to a new standardization through digital forms.