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Type-Cast? Insights on the Rhetorical Fluidity of Iconic Type

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, numerous prominent authors in various spheres of design discourse have discussed the rhetorical potency of type “icons” and how they come to embody cultural connotation. As icons, typefaces offer a universal language system—an expansive visual vocabulary that immediately references what we already know of their context. Iconic typefaces and their letterforms are subject to a process of narrative interpretation where what we “already know of them” is in a constant process of resignification. Here, critics tend to follow a Barthesian view that, as mythic structures, letterforms’ narratives are continuously used and reused as signification in different contexts. This widely regarded view presumes that iconic meaning develops as a chain of signification, where one narrative builds onto the next. This, however, leaves little explanation for instances where symbolism embedded in iconic typefaces develops in unexpected ways. In this article, I therefore investigate and unpack other means by which iconic typefaces evolve rhetorical meaning. By referring to examples throughout, I explore typical perspectives on iconic type in the Barthesian sense, but also trace different processes of signification. In doing so, I aim to offer alternative insights into ideological type as a more fluid rhetorical entity.

Keywords: typography; design; Roland Barthes; visual rhetoric; iconic typography; experiential typography

Introduction

Over the past few decades, numerous prominent authors in various spheres of discourse have dissected and discussed the rhetorical potency of “icons” and “iconicity” and how icons come to embody local or international cultural significance. Authors, writers and critics in design and visual culture studies, including Leslie Atzmon (2008), Max

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Bruinsma (2006), Amanda du Preez (2013), Steven Heller (2001; 2006; 2010), Michael Rock (1992), Keyan Tomaselli and David Scott (2009) and several others unpack the “recognisability” that visual “icons” achieve as graphic imprints of an ethos of a specific culture, and at a specific time. They tend to argue that icons exist as *tangible* cultural beacons that communicate distinctive intangible ideas. Graphic styles in particular serve as rich iconic markers of cultural accomplishments and underpinning ideological tenets of any one time in a historical design landscape (Heller 2006, 8).

Discussions involving iconicity are not, however, limited to “graphic styles” in a general sense. Indeed, discourse on symbolism embedded within iconic typefaces,¹ specifically, has enjoyed a surge in theoretical enquiry. Researchers including Heller (2006), Rock (1992), Hartmut Stöckl (2005) and Theo van Leeuwen (2005; 2006) argue, for example, that letterforms² are imbued with and encoded by rich historical contexts, and consequently conjure powerful associative narratives. Rock (1992, 122) adds that letterforms serve as one of the *most* eloquent means of expressing the style of any epoch.

As icons,³ distinctive letterforms serve as a widely understood language system—an expansive visual vocabulary for communication design—because they immediately reference what we already know of their context (Bruinsma 2004). As icons, they are also subject to a process of narrative interpretation where what we “already know of them” is in a constant process of resignification. Here, design critics tend to follow a Barthesian view according to which, as mythic structures, letterforms’ narratives are continuously used and reused as signification in different contexts (Rath 2016, 60–65). Atzmon (2008, 17) explains that narratives function as “a constellation of meanings embodied in a material artefact that are assembled and reassembled ... over time.” This widely regarded view presumes that meaning, at least in terms of iconic type, develops naturally, in a progressive chain of signification. In other words, symbolism evolves naturally from one narrative to the next, as a sort of “layering of meaning.”

1 In the context of this article, “typeface” refers to a family of letterforms that together showcase a unique formal composition (see footnote 2). Moreover, the term refers to a specific style or physical appearance of a set of letterforms. For instance, *Times New Roman* or *Comic Sans MS* are frequently referred to as fonts (light, regular, bold and so on); however, since they comprise a distinctive structure, I use “typeface” to refer to the design of the face’s style.

2 In the context of this article, “letterform” describes the visual articulation or the formal structure of a typeface. I make use of this term in particular to distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic communicative properties of typography.

3 It is worthwhile at this point to mention that by describing typefaces as iconic, I am referring to the degree of recognisability of their letterforms (Heller 2006, 10). Rock (1992, 122) explains that it is specifically the visual imprint of the letter—the letter’s distinctive form—that evokes the *Zeitgeist* of an age. He continues that it is their structural markers (distinctive features) that are suffused with historical and nostalgic evocation. For this reason, when describing the iconic status of typefaces, I refer to the historical and cultural provenance that is signified by the letterforms of an iconic typeface.

This understanding leaves little explanation for instances where symbolism embodied in iconic typefaces develops in unexpected and less referential ways.

In this article, I therefore investigate several ways in which iconic typefaces come to take on rhetorical meaning. In order to do so, I firstly unpack what is widely understood by “icon” in the Barthesian sense and, in doing so, provide a brief context of popular culture as fertile ground for the process of iconisation. After briefly referring to several examples, I then explore typical perspectives on iconic type and how iconic letterforms are embodied and resignified. Thereafter, I trace *different* processes of signification that inform ideology embedded in type. In doing so, I attempt to offer alternative insights into type as a fluid rhetorical entity, so that visual artists and practitioners, writers and critics might consider these aspects of type’s social and cultural significance.

Rationale

From my experience as lecturer of typography at the University of Pretoria, as well as in my capacity as freelance designer, I am continuously confronted by an indomitable trend in typographic design and application where reusing, quoting and remixing mythic narratives embedded in iconic letterforms remains the design *de jour*. This is not to say that reusing these cultural narratives is an ineffective rhetorical tool in the design industry. On the contrary, resignifying and referencing already existing cultural narratives provides designers with a kind of visual short-hand (Heller 2006, 12; Keedy 1998; Lupton 1996, 46). Moreover, in continuously reusing “naturalised” mythic narratives, I have noticed a spiralling continuum of monotonous type application, in two predominant ways.

Firstly, I borrow from Roland Barthes’ own lexicon: myth-making as an *endoxal* practice. *Doxa*, as Barthes (in Allen 2003, 89) explains, refers to the common sense, cliché or dominant ideas that circulate as stable forms of connotation. He refers to myth-making as *en-doxal*, as it presents certain signifieds as inevitable, natural and unchallengeable. If viewed in the context of typography, *en-doxal* type applications that continuously resignify cultural narratives become somewhat predictable and prosaic (Lupton 2003).

Secondly, and as a result of the above, typographic applications appear to be retreating to a modernistic rhetoric of neutrality (Kinross 1985, 29). By this I refer to a current reductionist trend in corporate identity design, advertising, title sequence design and so on, where “connotative” significance is, for all intents and purposes, stripped away. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, there is something to be said for a kind of type-lathery in both design education and professional practice. Designers, students and educators are often so preoccupied with crafting other, more “obviously” rhetorical design media, such as illustrations and photography, for example, that type is only glanced at toward the end of a project. At

this point, “safe” typefaces often make their way onto otherwise well-conceptualised design products, only in as far as they do not interfere with its already carefully constructed rhetorical structure. Secondly, in a globalised and progressively saturated visual environment, or “global village” as Juliana Jones (2011, 363–364) describes it, designers are increasingly pressured to look for ways to construct and convey a universal lexicon when creating meaning for large (often global or emerging) brand identities such as Nike, Apple, Absa and OpenServe, for example. In order to achieve this, any communication that might be conceived outside of a *global* audience’s frame of reference is stripped away until we are left with “approachable” typefaces that—apart from a quaint elevation in the tail of an “a”—are largely generic and undifferentiable. Typographic applications remain overrun, largely, by ingrained convention, unremarkable repetition and monotony (Lupton 2003).

In observing these trends, this article offers a glimpse into divergent ways of interpreting and reworking rhetorical narratives embedded in typefaces, so as to kick-start exploration of other, less literal and monotonous means of typographic application.

Popular Culture and the Icon

The term “popular culture” is often linked to concepts such as pop (popular music), celebrity, frivolity, Americanisation and capitalism. Authors such as Raymond Betts (2013, 2) exacerbate these sentiments by defining popular culture as “the mass-produced means of *pleasure* and *entertainment* that are currently *enjoyed* by billions of people” (emphasis added). However, popular culture theory applies to a much broader set of tangible and intangible concepts that shape a broader understanding of how we navigate and construct complex communication structures in our respective cultures (Heller 2010, 12). Although Betts’ definition does little in the way of acknowledging theoretical tenets of popular culture discourse, it does nevertheless highlight that popular culture is inextricably linked to popular aspects of “culture.”

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and specifically during the Industrial Revolution, mass societies grew at an accelerated rate, with significant technological and mechanical advancement. The need arose for a site of cultural study that described the increasingly shared nature of the collective experiences, conceptions, beliefs and insights of intercultural societies. Intercultural exchanges of fashions, trends, beliefs, conceptions and discoveries were shared amongst otherwise divided cultures (Kemp 2012, 3). Collective or “popular” insights constitute the “approved,” regularly accepted or frequently referenced cultural references (Nachbar and Lause 1992, 4). These references are what popular culture theorists refer to as “symbolic forms.”⁴

4 Popular culture theorists include Bruinsma (2004), Heller (2010), Jennifer Lemon (1996) and Tomaselli and Scott (2009).

But symbolic forms did not begin with the Industrial Revolution. They span extensive historical territories (Jubert 2006, 18), from pictorial manifestations seen in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Middle-Eastern hieroglyphics (3300–3200 BCE) to Chinese “ideographics” (3000 BCE), Sumerian rock art (2300 BCE), schematic pictograms throughout upper and middle Africa, Greco-Roman pictorial alphabets (900 BCE), imagery carved into walls in Christian catacombs up to the sixth century CE, and so on. These symbols served as heterogenic means of communication and offer a considerable library of recognisable imagery today (The icon ... 2003; Jubert 2006, 18–25).

Today, popular visual forms function in a similar way. They serve as inter- and intra-cultural signals of communication because they are localised or intimately familiar, yet also universally interpretable, and therefore achieve massive, often global resonance. Therefore, in the context of communication design discourse, popular symbolic forms are frequently referred to as “icons” (Heller 2010, 10).⁵ Icons are situated in a widely understood catalogue of popular culture(s) where, in an increasingly mediated and globalised culture, what is popular in one culture may be adopted or recognised by another (Du Preez 2013, 144; Kemp 2012, 3).

The icon is, essentially, the materialisation of a symbolic ethos, since it showcases a recognisable graphic structure and serves as a sign of social and technological development that reflects the consciousness of an era (Ma 2008, 22; Schwemer-Scheddin 1998, 67). The icon exists as a *tangible* cultural beacon that communicates an intangible idea—a rich graphic marker of cultural accomplishments and underpinning ideological tenets of any one time in a historical design landscape—of an ethos and the embodiment of cultural narratives that define a specific culture, at a specific time (Heller 2006, 8; Tomaselli and Scott 2009, 19).

As graphic texts, recognisable letterforms may also be considered iconic, since they too depict what a culture or era looks like. *Baskerville* (Figure 1) and *Bodoni* (Figure 2), for example, exemplify an era in pursuit of technical precision facilitated by technological advancement (c. 1750–1800).⁶ Another example, *Helvetica* (Figure 3), is iconic of a modern drive toward type neutrality and clarity,⁷ while grunge types, such as *Grunge Alphabet* (Figure 4), *Sidewalker* (Figure 5) and *Nylon* (Figure 6), signify a kind of ideological rebellion.⁸ Rock (1992, 122) argues that typefaces composed of letterforms such as these serve as one of the *most* eloquent means of expressing the style of any epoch.

5 “Icon,” from the Greek term “*Eikon*,” refers to an image or portrait that occupies a symbolic function.

6 See Rath (2016, 33–34) for comprehensive insight into relevant tenets of modern Roman typography.

7 See Rath (2016, 49–55) for comprehensive insight into relevant tenets of modern typography.

8 See Rath (2016, 56–64) for comprehensive insight into relevant tenets of postmodern typography.



Baskerville

Figure 1: *Baskerville*, designed by John Baskerville, 1757.



Bodoni

Figure 2: *Bodoni*, designed by Giambattista Bodoni, 1787.



Figure 3: Poster for the film *Helvetica*, directed by Gary Hustwit, 2007. *Helvetica* typeface designed by Edouard Hofmann and Max Miedinger, 1957. (Accessed March 6, 2017. <http://www.hustwit.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/helvetica.jpg>).



Figure 4: *Grunge Alphabet*, designed by Scott Yoshinga, 1995. (Heller and Fili 1999, 188).

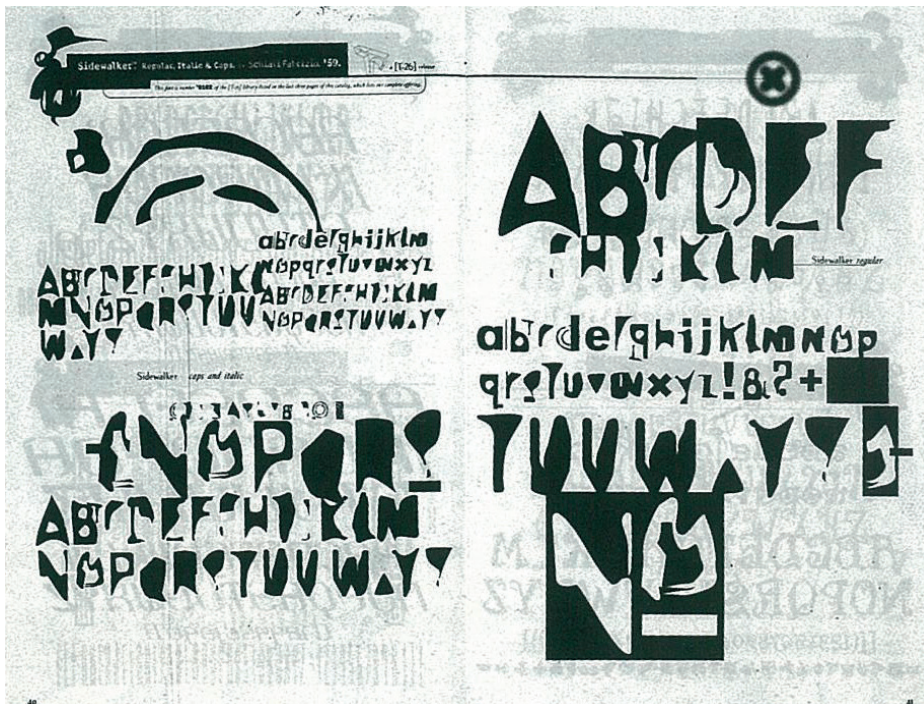


Figure 5: *Sidewalker*, designed by Schiavi Fabrizio, 1995. (Heller and Fili 1999, 189).



Figure 6: *Nylon*, designed by Jonathan Barnbrook, 1992. (Barnbrook 1993, 127).

As icons, letterforms take on mythic qualities whereby their iconic form embodies symbolic narrative structures. As mythic structures, these narratives are continuously used and adapted in a chain of (re)signification. In the section that follows, I briefly investigate what is meant by Barthes' concept of the "myth" as it applies to type icons that are "assembled and reassembled" in current design contexts. I discuss the process by which iconic typefaces come to adopt and adapt meaning.

Type as Myth: Signification and Resignification

Cultures engage with mythological narratives as a means of galvanising and mobilising cultural revelations (Campbell 1960, 3). Entertaining and light-hearted fables of otherworldly beings that face perilous or moral tribulations are often seen as cultural truisms to be adapted and applied in real-world instances. In his book *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes refers to myths of a similar nature. While his examples substitute Greek and Roman tales for localised and cultural myths, they nonetheless highlight myths as narrative devices (Barthes 1972, 107). Barthes (1972, 109) defines myth as a connotative sign and classifies it as a common mode of signification. As Tomaselli and Scott (2009, 19) point out, myth actively naturalises meaning; since it is established over time, it suggests that the narrative evoked by a sign has "always been so." In this way, myths are derived from a type of social usage—from the evolution of human history that converts cultural meaning into naturalised "fact": "a myth postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (Barthes 1972, 117). Essentially, the myth is signification that has *already* been worked on. From this interpretation, it is possible to argue that iconic letterforms are ideal examples of mythological structures, because their structural form signifies or embodies naturalised historical connotation that is read as naturalised cultural narratives—as non-linguistic signs that *already* exist (Tomaselli and Scott 2009, 19).

In current design practice, designers frequently turn to type icons in their designs, since their distinctive letterforms are immediately connotative structures. I refer back to *Bodoni* and *Helvetica* as examples here. Although *Bodoni*'s myth is quilted from an extensive historical landscape, it is arguably most associated with Roman type, where elegance of form is inspired by a drive for precision and so, is frequently implemented to signify a sense of prestige. In illustrating *Bodoni*'s particular appropriateness on the cover of *Vogue*, *Elle* and other high-end fashion magazines (see Figures 7a and b), Simon Garfield (2010, 206) argues that "certainly there is no quicker way of saying class." *Bodoni* and other modern Romans, such as *Baskerville* and *Didot*, also typically feature as core typefaces of several iconic logos for many high fashion brands where "high-end," glamour, elitism, prestige and class are key concepts.



Figure 7a: *Vogue Paris*, November 2008 (cover). Logo set in *Bodoni*. (Accessed December 15, 2016. <https://rocketrend.wordpress.com/2008/11/04/november-08-magazine-covers/>).



Figure 7b: *Elle Romania*, November 2011 (cover). Logo set in *Bodoni*. (Accessed December 15, 2016. <http://estilo-tendances.com/>).

In another example, *Helvetica* is viewed as an icon of modern simplicity, clarity and rhetorical neutrality. The typeface is routinely applied in corporate logotypes that seek to exude similar tones (Figures 8a–c). It is notably used in the logos of American Airlines, Lufthansa, Target and several others, but more recently as the default typeface in the redesign of the iOS interface—Apple Macintosh’s mobile and tablet operating system—in 2013 (Figure 9). From their crisp, white product packaging to the minimalist and ease-of-use approach to product design, Apple’s drive for simplicity is mirrored by *Helvetica*’s clean, modern aesthetic.

American Airlines®

Figure 8a: Massimo Vignelli, American Airlines logo (1967). (Accessed March 6, 2017. <http://logok.org/american-airlines-logo/>).



Figure 8b: Otto Firle, Lufthansa logo (1959). (Accessed March 6, 2017. https://mobile.lufthansa.com/rs/home?l=en_US).

American Apparel®

Figure 8c: Designer unknown, American Apparel logo (c. 2000). (Accessed March 6, 2017. <http://store.americanapparel.net/en/>).



Figure 9: Interface design for Apple iOS 7 (2013). Typeset in *Helvetica light*. (Screenshots by the author).

When (re)using type icons, designers tend to recycle cultural myths embodied by the letterform, which in turn become ever more ingrained. Michael Herbst (2005, 30) and Barbara Brownie (2009, 8) explain that a naturalised myth and its signification therefore becomes an icon's dominant or "origin" myth. Compounded by our increasing dependency on telecommunication, broadcast and social media channels, in a postmodern context where visual literacy is increasingly shared, additional, concurrent (often conflicting) meanings may simultaneously be embodied in iconic type (Bruinsma 2006). A plethora of intertextual⁹ visual imagery induces a saturated visual environment where not only are designers exposed to a wider vocabulary of type icons, they also begin to "mix" symbolism in ways that form "new" visual expressions (Bruinsma 2004).

Polysemic visual communication is an especially relevant concept in the context of mythic connotation (Barthes 1972, 114). Barthes explains that mythic connotation is derived from an associational chain of signification. Therefore, what is initially seen as logical connotation attached to a naturalised icon becomes a signifier for a *second* order of connotation. In typographic terms, this means that an iconic typeface's initial connotation may be reinterpreted and assigned a new function; it undergoes a process that Judith Butler (1993, 21) refers to as "resignification." Here icons are naturalised and mobilised so that, over time, they are reorientated or readapted to signify new meaning. In this way, the (typographic) myth is a malleable narrative apparatus that is open to appropriation by the designer at the time it is conceptualised and then again when it is revisited.

Once again, I refer to *Helvetica* as an appropriate example. As I have pointed out, the typeface is frequently referred to as a typographic standard in many fields of design, where it is heralded as one of the most neutral, "clean" and "well-designed" typefaces available. *Helvetica* has also garnered "celebrity status" as a "designer" font. One need only view the *Helvetica* documentary (Hustwit 2007) to grasp the gravity of its prolific penetration.¹⁰ It is therefore possible to argue that the typeface has garnered somewhat of a cult following amongst designers, as a sign of a designer who is well trained or "in the know."

On the other hand, because of its (over)use in communication design, *Helvetica* has also garnered a reputation as an extremely safe and humdrum typeface: "If I see a brochure, with lots of white space and six lines of Helvetica ... the overall communication that that says to me is 'do not read me, because I will bore the shit out of you'" (Stefan Sagmeister, in *Helvetica* [Hustwit 2007]). In Figure 10, for example, designer Guilia De Amicis mocks *Helvetica* as a designer's habitual typeface by literally "dressing" the

9 Barthes (1977, 156) refers to a similar state of intertextuality in his discussion on the polysemy of images. He explains that the symbolic image (or the icon) is never without intertextual signs.

10 The documentary highlights several examples, from subway information graphics, branding and brand paraphernalia to textile design, motion graphics and poster design, each of which prominently showcases several examples of the typeface on display.

typeface in fashionable apparel. She explains that the intention of the project is to “make fun of this specific design habit about Helvetica-fashion” (De Amicis 2013). In another example (Figure 11), Paul Kawai highlights *Helvetica*’s apparently mundane structure in his poster entitled *Helvetica Boring*, while in Figure 12, Ilana Bean pokes fun at the typeface as a symbol of strict and clean design by setting the word “clean” in *Helvetica* on a cloakroom mirror, in cleaning detergent.



Figure 10: Giulia De Amicis, *Helvetica* (2013). (Accessed March 6, 2017. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/3565331/HELVETICA>).



Figure 11: Paul Kawai, *Helvetica Boring* (2011). (Accessed March 6, 2017. <http://paulkawai.com/Posters-Illustrations>).



Figure 12: Ilana Bean, *Clean Typography* (2014). (Accessed March 6, 2017. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/22841635/Clean-Typography>).

In the examples above, *Helvetica*'s signification diverges; its meaning is repurposed and resignified to introduce new meaning. Essentially, new layers of meaning are *added* and naturalised associations allow the myth to communicate in a new way (Bain and Shaw 1998, 14; Bruinsma 2006).

When new meaning is introduced in mythic or iconic form, it is, however, always aligned (to varying degrees) with the original, established connotation. Yvonne Schwemer-Scheddin (1998, 57), for example, argues that when resurrecting an iconic typeface in a new light, historical connotations endemic to it will prevail for as long as the typeface remains in circulation. Barthes (1972, 110) explains that the myth postulates a kind of knowledge—that is, it points to a past or historical memory; it is “chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the nature of things.” Heller (1994, 34) points out that the

designer cannot discard the dominant narrative, since it is the framework of reference that governs the icon's initial connotation and gives rise to the secondary resignification in the first place. Brownie (2009, 4) adds that it is the initial connotation that *contributes* to the connotation of the repurposed typographic icon, while Tomaselli and Scott (2009, 21) go so far as to state that new meaning may even be contradictory, but that if the icon is to endure, the contradictions must be subsumed into a dialectical dynamic that accommodates the original signification.

Type as Simulacra and Accessible Type

In the examples illustrated above, it is clear that the ideological underpinning of *Helvetica* is emphasised in order to achieve divergent communication in the (re)use of the typeface.

Thus far, I have suggested that, typically, iconic type achieves new meaning by closely aligning with already established connotation. In this sense, meaning is divergent yet still related.

In observing certain icons, however, it is possible to suggest that they do not necessarily require “historical memory” in order to garner symbolism. Madonna, for example, is generally considered an iconic pop figure, although her “identity” is hypermediated since it occludes connotation to the historical or religious symbol. In this way, icons such as Madonna escape the history of the object they represent (Tomaselli and Scott 2009, 18). In researching and consolidating iconic typefaces, I have come across several examples where connotation is derived from social usage as opposed to mythic or historical constitution.

Iconic Typefaces as Simulacra

Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra is by now well studied in visual culture discourse. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard describes simulacra as the “implosion of meaning.” He presents this theory as antithetical to the tenets of Barthes' myth,¹¹ since he nihilistically negates the idea of resignification. He continues that in a postmodern context, meaning is never “reinjecte”; instead, it implodes and is devoured. Baudrillard (1994, 79) argues that meaning has little to do with resignification and maintains that connotation is never naturalised. Instead, as objects of simulacra, icons are directly destructive of meaning. He describes this as a process of dissimulation, where an iconic image is no longer referential; it is the generation of a new “real” or “hyperreal” without origin (Baudrillard 1994, 3). In his analysis of Disneyworld as a microcosm

11 It is worthwhile to mention that Baudrillard (1994, 81) acknowledges the presence of myth; however, he maintains that we are usually not aware of its historical provenance.

of the USA, for example, Baudrillard (1994, 12) explains that its meaning is severed from its source; “information devours its own content.” The image of Disneyworld as a phantasmagoria or “pleasurable America” is seen as an artificial map of the “real” America, that constitutes (in part) poverty-stricken ghetto cultures, manic gun assaults, rapists, trailer parks, murders, corrupt politicians and so on (Baudrillard 1994, 13). In contrast to the mythic sign, the Disneyworld simulacrum evidences a short-circuiting of meaning, since it exists in isolation as a hyperreal text that liquidates referential ties to the “original.” The simulacrum therefore becomes the original and evokes wholly new connotations.

While it is possible to argue that Baudrillard’s view of simulacra as an all-encompassing postmodern depository of meaning is perhaps over-exaggerated—especially since I have outlined the potency of myth—it is an interesting idea with regard to meaning embodied in iconic type. It is of interest because, in contrast to “reworked association,” here, iconic forms appear to “stage” meaning.

The *Playbill* typeface is a particularly interesting example of simulacra in this sense. Conventionally, the typeface (along with several derivatives) is perhaps most iconic of the old western film genre, owing to its prominence on typical “wanted” posters (see Figure 13) featured in a plethora of Hollywood blockbusters.¹² Designed in 1938 by Robert Harling, the typeface is a bastardisation of Egyptian slab-serifs, a popular font category frequently used during the Victorian era as decorative, fat (bold) Regency style embellishments (Heller and Fili 1999, 20). Therefore, there is little if any systemic or historical narrative to suggest a natural connection between *Playbill* and the western film genre. It is probable that expensive type presses, needed to achieve the elaborate ornamentation of the “old western” typeface, were in short supply in the romantic setting of sweeping desert landscapes and the rugged rural terrain during the American frontier era (Gillman 2009). Instead, as Garfield (2010) and Jubert (2006, 98) point out, type during this period would most likely have been hand-written or, in formal instances, typed using a typewriter. As is often the case with Americana, fierce capitalistic endeavours rip the typeface from its natural timeline and, as Baudrillard suggests, supplants it as a hyperreal icon; today, *Playbill* has become endemic to “western” American pop culture.

12 Most notably *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *True Grit* (2010), *Rango* (2011) and *Django Unchained* (2012).



Figure 13: Designer unknown, replica of a wanted poster used in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, set in *Playbill*. (Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://www.rustyaccents.com/product/billy-the-kid-old-west-wanted-poster>).

Accessible Type Icons

In other instances, typefaces may become iconic simply because they are accessible. Default web and Microsoft Office fonts such as *Arial*, *Courier*, *Times New Roman* and *Trebuchet*, for example, are often viewed as go-to fonts simply because we are confronted by them on a regular basis. *Comic Sans MS* (Figure 14) too seems an appropriate example owing to its prolific social adoption. Although an iconic typeface, its relatively unknown historical association makes it a particularly interesting example here.



Figure 14: *Comic Sans MS*, designed by Vincent Connare, 1994.

The typeface was designed in 1994 and originally intended as a custom type for Microsoft Bob, a software package designed to guide users through the work flow of the Microsoft Office programs (Garfield 2010, 19). Initially, Microsoft implemented a more formal *Times New Roman* typeface as the default type for the program, alongside “child-friendly” illustrations (such as the user’s guide, Bob himself—a sweet, helpful companion). However, after receiving largely negative feedback from several focus groups regarding the visual appeal of the platform, Microsoft tasked designer Vincent Connare to design a “creative,” “friendly” and hand-drawn typeface. Connare looked to various comic style typefaces from DC and Marvel comics of the 1980s, such as *Batman* and *Watchmen*. He perceived the hand-drawn appearance of the letterforms, which mimicked lettering executed in felt-tip pen, to connote a friendlier, warmer tone. After several weeks of prototyping, Connare set about creating *Comic Sans MS*, a hand-drawn, casual typeface which he observed as comparable to the soft, round, blunted end of a child’s scissors (Garfield 2010, 22). Upon completion, Microsoft purchased the typeface and soon after included it as a free, supplementary font as part of the Windows 95 software launch. Next to only a handful of other font options,¹³ the typeface soon reached global exposure, as anyone who had access to a desktop PC could use it. The “friendly” typeface quickly became a favoured choice, applied to anything from wedding invitations to poster design. One reason follows research that suggests that the typeface’s structural simplicity makes it an exceptionally legible and readable typeface (Rello and Baeza-Yates 2013). Moreover, studies focusing on dyslexia in particular suggest that sans serif typefaces such as *Comic Sans MS*, constructed primarily of curved or rounded shapes, offer greater visual contrasts between upper and lowercase letters (“Q” and “q,”

13 Upon release, Microsoft Windows 95 offered a total of seven free font families, including *Arial*, *Comic Sans MS*, *Courier New*, *Marlett*, *Symbol*, *Times New Roman* and *Wingdings*.

for example) and are better suited to reading for low vision comprehension disabilities (BDA 2015).¹⁴

Owing to its “friendly” appearance, the typeface is indeed often used in the logos for kindergartens or in comic strip captions, where a “friendly” ethos is intended. It is possible to argue that in these instances, *Comic Sans MS* serves as an appropriate mythic structure. The typeface, however, is also frequently sprawled across an infinite number of indiscriminate, perhaps less “fitting” media that have little to do with the icon’s informal connotation. Restaurant menus, ambulance and transport decals, clothing, pornography sites, mobile applications, church brochures, health and safety signage, instructional manuals (Figures 15a–c) as well as many other applications also sport the typeface.



Figure 15a: Designer unknown, The Stove Doctor vehicle branding. Typeset in *Comic Sans MS*. (Photograph by the author).

14 Luz Rello and Ricardo Baeza-Yates (2013) argue that this may be because *Comic Sans MS* facilitates the uptake of information in terms of quicker response times; it reduces fixation time and allows for better content comprehension, which quickens reading time.



Figure 15b: Designer unknown, Danger signage for SSE power distribution plant in Illinois. Typeset in *Comic Sans MS*. (Photograph by the author).

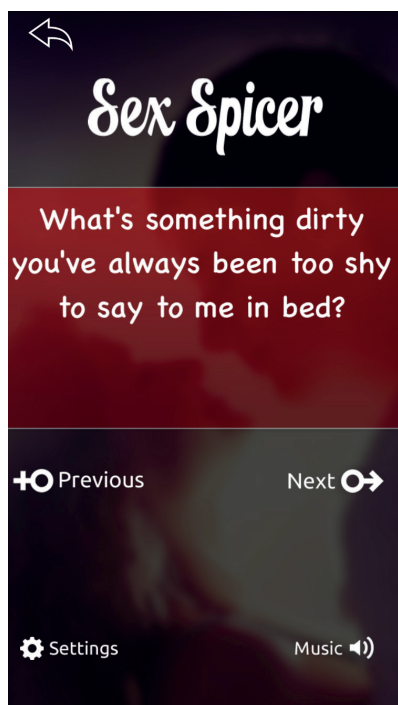


Figure 15c: Designer unknown, Sex Spicer mobile application interface. Typeset in *Comic Sans MS*. (Screenshot by the author).

Owing to such numerous disparate uses, *Comic Sans MS* has received widespread global criticism (extending beyond design critics) as a terrible, thoughtless or “cheap” and therefore “poorly designed” typeface. In his article “Six Fonts that Piss People Off,” for example, Cliff Kuang (2009) highlights designers’ particular disdain for the typeface: “The jolly typeface has spawned the Ban Comic Sans movement, nearly a decade old but stronger now than ever, thanks to the Web. The mission: ‘to eradicate this font’ and the ‘evil of typographical ignorance.’” In *Just My Type*, Garfield (2010, 24–25) explains that numerous critics denounce the typeface as of the worst typefaces available.¹⁵ For example, he refers to the “Combs” manifesto, a call to ban the use of *Comic Sans MS*. Garfield describes the manifesto as a call to the “proletariat to rise up against the evil of Comic Sans, and to sign a petition for its prohibition” (2010, 25).

It is indeed generally regarded as taboo in design practice to make use of this typeface in any serious way. Used in jest, however, the typeface often evades criticism. In Figure 16, for example, Caleb Holloway overtly criticises the typeface by conceding that it is beyond aesthetic reproach. On the poster *Yeah, Okay*, the type, set in *Comic Sans MS*, is overlaid three times in translucent primary colours and is captioned “a desperate attempt at featuring Comic Sans in a project and having it look something other than horrendously unacceptable” (Holloway 2014). More ironic use of the typeface may be seen in a business card design (Figure 17) by Bridget Jöhve. Here, in subverting a design standard typically reserved for safer typographic choices (such as *Helvetica* perhaps), it is probable that Jöhve’s playful use of *Comic Sans MS* points to the typeface as a symbol of bad design. In another example, Toxel.com features several tongue-in-cheek logotypes of “well-established” brands where *Comic Sans MS* replaces the otherwise present typeface (Figure 18).

It is possible to argue that the humour of these designs (where arguably “well-designed,” “serious” or “elegant” logotypes are reduced to *Comic Sans MS*) would be overlooked had the typeface not become synonymous with “poor design.” In 2014, the typeface even endured a facelift by designer Hrant Papazion (owner of MicroFoundry), who addressed the “technical concerns” of the typeface in his design of *Comic Neue* (Figure 19), showcasing considerably neater, mathematically constructed versions of the original letterforms.

15 Toward the end of *Just My Type* (2010), Garfield refers to academic research conducted in 2007 by Anthony Cahalan which situates *Comic Sans MS* among the least favourite fonts across a sample of participants. In addition, authors such as Matthew Carpenter (2011), Natalie Kitroeff (2015), Janie Kliever (2015) and Vladimir Gendelman (2013), as well as online sites such as Bored Panda (2015) and Fastcompany (Garfield 2011) list the typeface as a “bad” typeface among designers.

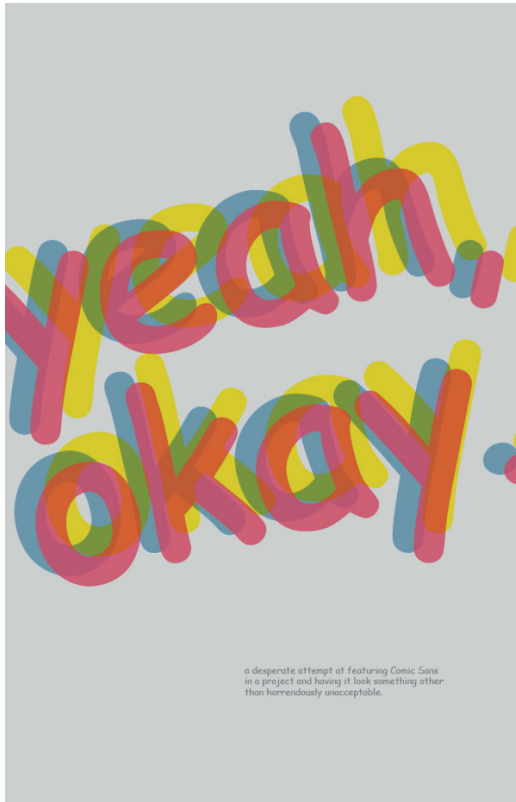


Figure 16: Caleb Holloway, *Yeah, Okay* (2014). Set in *Comic Sans MS*. (Accessed June 1, 2016. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/14954931/Yeah-Okay>).



Figure 17: Bridget Jöhve, business card (2014). Set in *Comic Sans MS*. (Accessed June 1, 2016. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/18632611/Business-Card>).

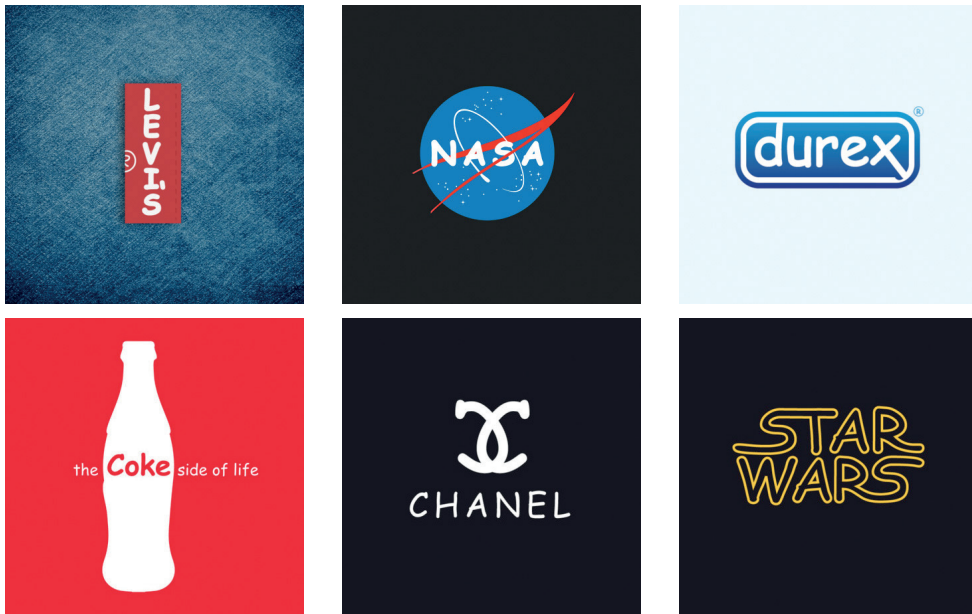


Figure 18: Designer unknown, logo subversions (2012). Set in *Comic Sans MS*. (Accessed June 12, 2016. <http://www.toxel.com/inspiration/2012/12/19/comic-sans-logos/>).



Figure 19: *Comic Neue*, designed by Hrant Papazion, 2014. (Accessed June 12, 2016. <http://comicneue.com/>).

Clearly, the iconic stature of *Comic Sans MS* seeps into the fabric of visual culture in unexpected ways. In these examples, the initial myth of *Comic Sans MS* is, however, not resignified. Instead, its initial myth is overlooked and assigned wholly new connotation. It is possible to argue that as a symbol of “cheap” design, the typeface side-steps Connare’s initial connotative intention. Instead, the typeface becomes iconic through virtue of being accessible and through an almost viral effect—the more the typeface is used, the more it is used and disliked.

Conclusion

Iconic letterforms serve as embodied structures of signification. They offer a widely understood language system—an expansive visual vocabulary for communication design—because they reference what we already know of their context (Bruinsma 2004). In this article, I have illustrated, however, that iconic letterforms can also evoke connotation that develops in less linear, unexpected and less referential ways. In doing so, I have unpacked other means by which iconic letterforms come to take on or evolve rhetorical meaning.

I should note, however, that in no way do I expect that the two identified categories serve as comprehensive or all-encompassing perspectives on iconic letterform connotation. I hope to have highlighted the rhetorical complexity of iconic letterforms, which I believe is largely dwarfed in current popular discourse. In doing so, I hope this article functions as a springboard for further research that might investigate different tones in which iconic letterforms speak.

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