

Conference Report

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Face Forward: International Typographic Conference

11 - 12 December 2015, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland.

The inaugural *Face Forward* typographic conference, which was held at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in Ireland, forms part of 'ID2015; the Year of Irish Design' governmental initiative, which aims to bring global awareness to various branches of Irish design and by extension, typography. *Face Forward* is the first peer-reviewed conference of its kind, and offered a sizable forum for engaging with and presenting critical research into typographic production, representation and dissemination in use. With eleven tracks and more than seventy presenters, including notable designers, typographers, design critics and researchers such as Tobias Frere-Jones, Cathy Gale, and Denise Gonzales Crisp, the conference sought to bring to light connections between typographic craft, research, theory, history, criticism, and pedagogy.

'Typography' has become especially topical in design discourse and has therefore enjoyed a rather belated surge in theoretical enquiry, in comparison with other design disciplines. The craft itself has of course endured for well over five centuries, however, it is only from the end of the 1950s, that typographic practice began to explore solid theoretical underpinnings. The considerable contributions of Beatrice Warde, Jan Tschichold, Wolfgang Weingart, Katherine McCoy, Massimo Vignelli, Jeffry Keedy and David Carson, for example, have aided in forging widely endorsed, almost autocratic type axioms that persist as typographic mantras for many designers. While it is indeed the case that these magisterial design icons have foregrounded typographic doctrine, it is arguable that their enduring insights, although not without merit, have become dogmatic and prescriptive type anecdotes.

It is therefore encouraging that various branches of visual discourse have now begun to generate new pockets of type discourse. A growing presence of international

typographic conferences that promote increasing contributions to typographic and design journals, magazines, books and newly developed typographic courses, indicates a burgeoning dedication to furthering critical discussions surrounding the role of typography in design. 'Face Forward' is but one, albeit crucial example here. The papers presented at the conference seem to share in this initiative by engaging in diverse philosophies and perspective on type. In this report, I highlight a few of the more dominant themes that emerged, including type as artifacts of cultural memory, the materiality of type, type and language, and educational practice.

The conference commenced with several presentations on type as a historical artifact. Two presenters in particular, Tom Spalding and Elena Veguillas, traced and discussed archival and other documented physical remains of architectural lettering, way-finding and public signage in and around the city of Cork between 1730 and 1840 and London c. 1666 respectively. Spalding sought to engage with the social context in which 'Cork letterforms' were created and how, as iconic remnants of the city, they function as historical markers or cultural artifacts of political temperaments of the time. Veguillas' paper pinpoints a particular case study: architectural lettering incorporated as part of the Truman, Hanbury, Buxton & Co brewery 'house style' (or early forms of 'branding') in the mid-seventeenth century. It is particularly interesting that both papers reveal that as early examples of 'corporate identity', lettering can serve a social function, in codifying or branding an embodied space, as a site of rich cultural memory. On the other hand, however, it struck me that although both authors mention social conditions that surround each particular example, they situate their papers within a purely historical or archival context. Therefore, if these examples are presented as typical sites of cultural memory, what might their social reverberations in a current cultural context be?

The notion of cultural memory seemed to seep into several other presentations as well. Cathy Gale, for example, offered a rather commanding presentation, extracted from her DPhil from Brighton University: 'A practice-based evaluation of ambiguity in graphic design, embodied in the multiplicities of X'. Her study is a substantial and expansive documentary of cultural, social, and religious connotations in diverse contexts that have enwrapped the character, from as early as Egyptian hieroglyphics and Medieval marks on pottery, to a letter near the end of the English alphabet that symbolises uniqueness (X-men), the unknown (X-ray), location (X-marks the spot), the sexual (XXX) and so on (Figure 1a-b). It is particularly interesting, however, that apart from its cultural relevance, almost every example presented invoked the letter's varied symbolism, in a linguistic sense. In other words, X is seen from the point of view of what it connotes as a linguistic sign; how, through language and social use, it is embodied.



FIGURE **Nº 1a**



Logo for *The X Factor* TV show; one X used by each of three judges as a voting sign on the set of ITV TV show *Britain's Got Talent* (2012). (Gale 2015:120)



FIGURE **Nº 1b**



Deleted party members from Soviet Russia, Rodchenko (originally 1934) by David King (1997) in *The Commissar Vanishes*; 'Character Assassination' page from *The A to Z of X*; character sketches, *Ambiguity: A Design Process*. (Gale 2015:86)

And as is typically the case in typographic discourse and debate, type as a linguistic sign or 'type as language' thereafter continued to surface as the primary premise of several subsequent presentations. Sheena Calvert's 'Punctuating philosophy', for example, examined the connotative significance of punctuation marks in language, and in doing so, examined Nietzsche's use of the ellipses as a way to

'suggest the fragmentary, ever deferred nature of thought and experience' (*Face Forward* 2015:30). Robin Fuller's 'Linguistics, grammatology, typography' explored the way in which typographers have, over centuries, evoked language as a definition of typography, since typography represents spoken language.

This trend persisted throughout various other themes as well. In his paper 'Teach content, not type! Active learning in typographic education', for example, esteemed board member of ISTD (International Society of Typographic Design) John Paul Dowling, offered insight into a particular issue that he feels faces typographic education. Both he and Denise Gonzales Crisp explained that traditional and rule based type education has become somewhat dated and results in perhaps irrelevant instances of typographic design. Both advocated a kind of *Deus ex machina* in type education spheres; new ways, in the form of 'unusual' educational methodologies, of thinking about type as a means for problem solving (the aim of design). It is worth mentioning the vast number of student work shown, where these methods are applied. As Dowling's title might suggest, however, his paper and many of the supporting visual examples seemed to propound the old adage that 'concept is king', and by means of this, stressed the importance of developing a conceptually sound design solution using linguistic semantics, before typographic form is even considered.

Keynote speaker, Tobias Frere-Jones, appeared to reiterate and poetically cap-off *Face Forward*'s clear underpinning focus on the efficacy of linguistic semantics. In 'In letter we trust', he discussed how letterforms are and were implemented on American bank notes, as a means of qualifying authenticity. He eloquently presented ongoing research into cunning ways that 'colonial' letterforms and various glyphs or graphic marks were (Figure 2), at any given time in American (but also Australian and British) history, ever so subtly morphed, cropped, inverted or exchanged by typographers, as security mechanisms, and were rendered otherwise undecipherable to anyone but the receiver of revenue (*Face Forward* 2015:40). With the aid of many fascinating examples, Frere-Jones showcased numerous peculiarities in typographic *form* as a key focus. However, it is nevertheless quite clear that it is specifically the linguistic interpretability of these forms that underlies his research.

From the very first of examples of letterforms and writing systems that have been documented, it is clear that type was intended as a pragmatic medium of translation and transcription. Today, type is certainly still first and foremost a linguistic medium, and to casually whitewash how well adept and finely crafted this system is at displaying, so eloquently, our many social narratives, is surely shortsighted. However, it is perhaps equally imprudent to overlook the subtler vocal intonations in typographic form; how as a communicative medium in and of itself, it is perhaps more than a colourless,

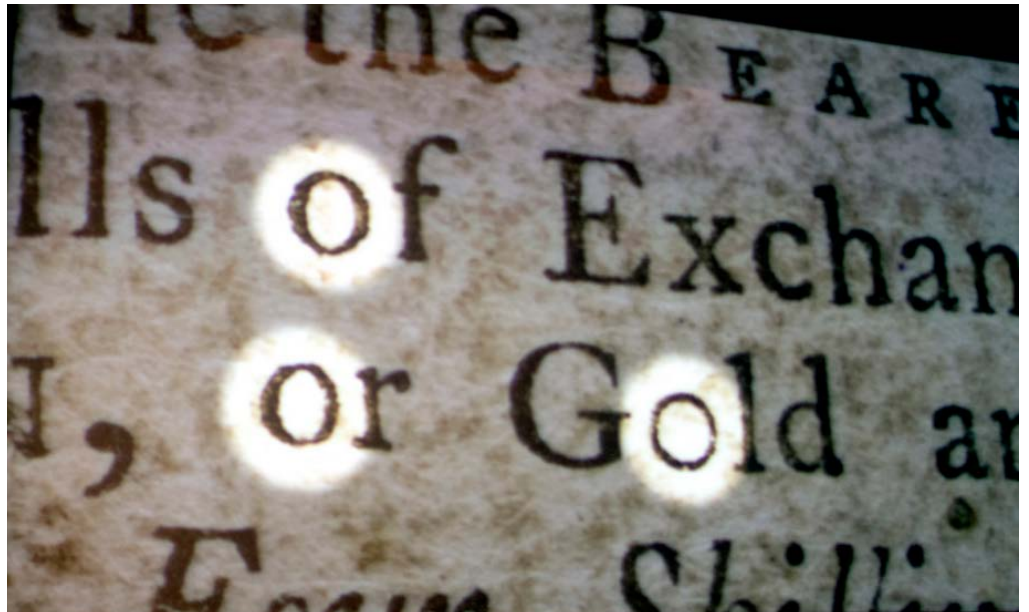


FIGURE N° 2



Example of letter inversions, using a number zero, as opposed to a letter 'O', as a security feature on the Maryland four dollar bill of exchange. Printed by Anne Catherine and William Green, 1770. (Event Recap/Tobias Frere-Jones: In Letters We Trust. 2014).

crystal goblet. As I have already conceded, research presented at this inaugural conference is immensely valuable to our research as designers and particularly typographers. I wonder, however, whether research into the purely anatomical aromas of type warrants further consideration.

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