Letters that speak: framing experiential properties of type

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ABSTRACT

Letterforms[1] exhibit a great many structural differences across a plethora of assorted typefaces. Opting for the elegance of *Chronicle*'s charming characters over a bolder BEBAS brigade for example, suggests that the structural complexity of each typeface strikes a remarkably particular tone. In my view, these complexities embodied by the letterform are under-explored in design discourse[2] (van Leeuwen 2005:138). I maintain that typography is largely viewed as inherently linguistic – as dependant on the rhetoric of language. Furthermore, I believe that the visual manifestation of type is really a visual manifestation of language, of thought – a "true art". In my experience as a designer and design educator, I have observed that the majority of typographic exploration is limited to the semantic quality of type, where the appropriateness of letterforms – changes in their structural composition – are qualified by the degree to which they promote and elevate the conceptual genius of either language, illustration or other forms of *parerga*.[3]

In this article therefore, I explore and illustrate intricate communicative facets of (Latin) letterforms as communicative entities in their own right. In doing so, special attention is given to type as experiential form. By this, I refer to connotations that we derive from our reminiscent and intuitive perceptions of "abstract" letterform shapes.

Keywords: Letterform(s), non-linguistic typography, experiential form, conceptual metaphor, synaesthesia, reminiscent form, intuitive form.

1. I use the term "letterform" to describe the visual articulation or formal structure of a typeface. I make use of this term to distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic communicative properties of type. While "letter" refers to linguistic properties of type, "letterform" emphasises its non-linguistic communicative property.

2. As I discuss later, I do not discount efforts in discourse that promote the type's non-linguistic eloquence. That is, there does seem to be an agenda for establishing visibility for the letterform as a uniquely communicative and rhetorical medium in its own right.

3. In Jacques Derrida's sense of the term, *parerga* (meaning "about the work") refers to the figurative "frames" of any communicative text. In the context of this study, *parerga* refers to any elements that fall outside or around the letterform. For example, letterform *parerga* may refer to any particular design element (such as colour, line, light or shape) or principal (such as space, width, size, texture or pattern), layout decisions (such as hierarchy, or position), as well as any conceptual manipulation that is not inherently part of the typographic letterform (Lupton 1994:[sp]).

Introduction and rationale

> The ability to select and apply type sensitively is an art form that requires of a designer, an astute knowledge of the communicative complexity of letterforms (Atzmon 2008:13).

Over the past seventy years, "typography"[4] has become an increasingly popular topic of discussion in design discourse and has enjoyed a somewhat belated surge in theoretical enquiry. The craft itself has of course existed for well over five centuries (not counting earlier writing systems), primarily, however, as a practical vocation with very little in the way of a solid theoretical underpinning.

That is of course until the onset of substantial and profoundly influential strides in typographic philosophy were generated by remarkable design schools, collectives and movements from early modernism in the 1920s until the end of the twentieth century. It is encouraging that today, designers, critics, philosophers and other enthusiasts in various branches of visual discourse continue to generate new pockets of type discourse. Increasing contributions to typographic and design journals, magazines, books, along with a growing presence of international typographic conferences, as well as newly-developed typographic courses in tertiary institutions, certainly indicates a burgeoning dedication to critical discussions surrounding type. These initiatives are valuable in encouraging critical debate surrounding type and generating renewed interest in the field. Consequently, they continue to strengthen visibility for typography as a uniquely communicative and rhetorical medium in its own right.

In spite of a momentous typographic legacy however, it is unfortunate that the communicative capacity of the *letterform* remains largely underexplored in design discourse (van Leeuwen 2005:138). In stating this, I realise the potential to reignite a post-mortem on contentions surrounding the contributions of modern versus deconstructivist, postmodern and poststructuralist typographic philosophy. I do not intend to discredit contributions by leaders such as Katherine McCoy, Stefan Sagmeister or Jan Tschichold, nor question the rigidity or uninhibited formal freedom that they and many others[5] have brought to the letterform. Instead, I simply mean that although much exists in the way of typographic experimentation and discourse in general, solid theoretical inquiry into *how* letterforms communicate, as independent rhetorical entities, remains largely unexplored. That is, although seasoned designers tend to develop an intuitive sense for discerning typographic form when selecting and applying type, discourse that underpins this practice is somewhat absent.

4. "Typography" is an umbrella term for the study of letterforms, typefaces and the practical selection and application of type in layout (which includes parerga). In this article, I refer primarily to typography of the Latin alphabet as it is a contribution to Anglomorphic discourse. In instances where I deviate from this (particularly where I discuss sound-image relationships), I analyse the abstracted "shape" of type, where visceral associations with shapes that compose letterforms are the subject of discussion.

5. Other significant contributions emerge from prominent movements including New Wave, Grunge, postmodernism and deconstructivism. These highlight the work of by designers and typographers including (but not limited to) Herbert Bayer, Neville Brody, David Carson, Matthew Carter, Tobias Frere-Jones, Adrian Frutiger, April Greiman, Jonathan Hoefler, Jeffry Keedy, Zuzana Licko, László Moholy-Nagy, Max Miedinger, Paul Renner, Erik Spiekerman, Rudy VanderLans, Massimo Vignelli and Wolfgang Weingart.

This is particularly visible in design education and practice where creative directors and design educators are often especially critical of the way type is selected and applied in various design contexts, yet they are also frequently unable to substantiate suitable substitutes. As is typically the case in design practice, this gap in understanding has spurred a plethora of cyclical type fads that are ceaselessly mimicked. For example, for a period in the mid-to-late 2000s, when asked to produce experimental type designs, designers would typically regurgitate mangled, grunge typefaces without considering the symbolic and cultural connotations they might imbue. Today, there seems to be a trend toward reproducing ornamental Victorian type filigrees as a form of hand lettering, usually set in five or more lines of different typefaces (Figure 1). In addition, designers are constantly bombarded by endless volumes of online "how to" methods for choosing type. Rules include that one should always pair a sans serif[6] with a serif[7] typeface, never "mix moods", and above all, never use **Comic Sans** or Papyrus (Figure 2). The problem is that these fleeting formulas are rather rigid and proclaim to be faultless type commandments; default systems of applying type in any possible situation. Moreover, they are typically implemented purely to achieve "interesting", "lively" or "visually dynamic" layouts that lack conceptual content.

I have also observed a kind of design pretence that is especially noticeable across a plethora of showcase platforms,[8] where designers typically select or indeed recommend a typeface because its decorative, structural quality lends itself to a particular style preference or taste (Bonneville 2011:[sp]). For example, opting for or recommending a particularly "popular" typeface such as Archer Pro, BEBAS or Din, suggests that a designer might belong to a niche echelon of "designers in the know". It appears that free agency is given to any designer who can access "well-designed", authored type. Unlike authorship that is afforded to illustrators or photographers, type is uniquely immune to issues of originality. Therefore, in contrast to the fleeting veneer that encrusts stock imagery, reusing "glorified" typefaces is regarded as good practice. Royalties aside, it is a proud moment when a fellow designer notices your keen use of an established typeface.

On the other hand, braving more "original", "experimental" types is generally frowned upon, and usually result in scoffing. I have noticed that design lecturers and creative directors in particular are prone to scolding junior designers for using "superficial", "decorative" or "arbitrary" eye-candy because they are "ugly" and interfere with issues of legibility (Butler 1989:94; Heller 2008:5; McCoy 2009:82; Trummel 1988:127).

6. "Sans serif" (without serif) describes typefaces without a slight projection finishing off a stroke of a particular letter.

7. "Serif" describes typefaces with a slight projection finishing off a stroke of a particular letter.

8. These platforms include *Bêhance, FFFFound, Graphic Porn, One Small Seed* and *Pinterest*.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

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Have faith & a burning desire poster, designed by John May. 2011. (Lettering experiments 2011).

In advertising and branding particularly, the primary focus of a typical campaign is geared toward generating powerfully emotive photography, illustration or iconography. In most of these cases, in terms of type, designers are encouraged to choose "clean" typefaces that do not detract from 'more immediately communicative images'[9] (Trieb 1989:81). It is also particularly surprising that in specialised fields such as title sequence design where the emphasis should arguably be on type – the text in the "titles" – type is almost always *added* to sequences, toward the end of project production, and at little expense to the client's budget. In these industries, structural differences in typefaces are usually considered only as far as they help convey witty taglines and slogans or clearly showcase pricey celebrities (Figures 3a-b and 4a-b).[10]

Alarmingly, this is even evident in cases where it appears that typography indeed features as *the* primary medium of communication. In Figure 5 for example, although type features prominently, so too does its copper treatment. Although **Gotham's** letters are *useful* here, since their rather bulky, rounded structure aids in conveying the core semantic concept, the letters themselves; the meaning hardwired into their structural anatomy adds very little, if anything, to the clever use of the ellipsis.[11] Thus, the core communicative concept is essentially achieved through the pictorial texture (image) and linguistic copy (language). This is to say, I imagine that setting the copy in **Arial Black** or **Helvetica Bold** would perhaps have worked just as well.

It is my view therefore, that typography is still seen as inherently linguistic – as dependant on the rhetoric of language and that the visual manifestation of type is really a visual manifestation of language, of thought – a "true art". In my experience as a designer and design educator, I have observed that a majority of typographic exploration is strictly limited to the semantic quality of type, where the appropriateness of letterforms – small changes in their structural composition – are qualified by the degree to which they promote and elevate the conceptual genius of either language, illustration[12] or other forms of *parerga*.

I believe that this underestimation occurs because many designers are simply unsure of the meaning underlying letterforms as non-linguistic media, as well as the power of the communicative choices they make. Letterforms exhibit a great many structural differences across a plethora of typefaces. Surely the act of choosing one type-form over another suggests that each strikes a particular tone. In this article, I therefore explore rhetoric embedded in non-linguistic or "abstract" aspects of the letterform. In doing so, I hope to highlight considerations that might perhaps underpin a designer's choice of typeface.
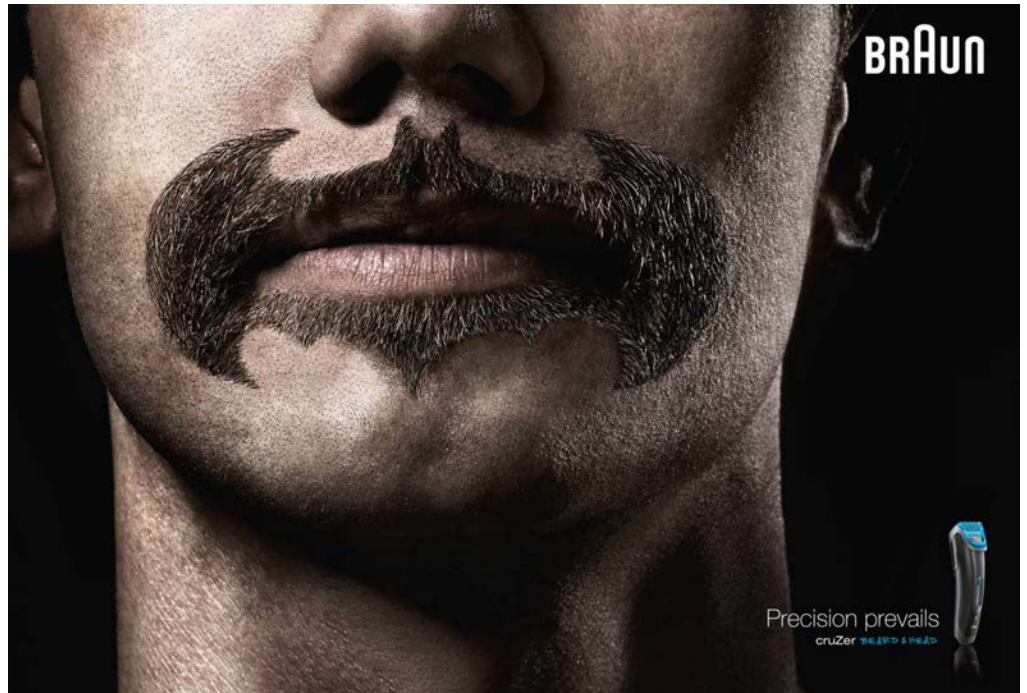
9.   According to Marc Trieb (1989:81) and Leslie Atzmon (2008:13), designers typically tend toward more immediately communicative media such as illustration, illustrative graphics, icons or photography as their primary medium of communication. Images, unlike type, are believed to provide a richer source of 'visual grammar' for semiotic interpretation (Trieb 1989:81). Susan Hagan (2012:107-108) agrees and argues that the abstract nature of letterforms renders type less obviously communicative in comparison to 'more pictorial media' (such as photography or illustration, for example).

10.   I am not suggesting that the use of type in any of these examples should necessarily be more expressive nor that designers should refrain from using imagery as a communicative medium. I am merely making an observation that in many design agencies, type is generally considered secondary to and separate from the communication of a design text (Serafini & Clausen 2012:[sp]).

11.   As a rhetorical design scheme or tool (and as it is used here), ellipses refers to the deliberate omission of an element in a design, where the omitted element is implied (Ehses & Lupton 1988:17). As a "gutter" of sorts, ellipses offers a lead to the implication and encourages a viewer to "fill in the gap".

12.   Outside of a niche "type" sphere, designers typically reserve type for more utilitarian purposes and focus instead on generating imagery as their primary medium of communicative purposes, because they are trained to see it as more emotive.

FIGURE **Nº 3a** ‹

Braun: super beards print advertising campaign, designed by BBDO Proximity, 2013.
(Braun: super beards, batman 2013).

FIGURE **Nº 3b** ‹

Women's domestic abuse in KSA print advertising campaign, designed by Memac
Ogilvy, Saudi Arabia, 2013/4. (Women's domestic abuse in KSA 2013/4).

FIGURE **Nº 4a** ‹

Still frame from *True detective* title sequence, designed by Elastic design studio, 2014. (True Detective 2014).

FIGURE **Nº 4b** ‹

Still frame from *Black sails* title sequence, designed by Karin Fong and Alan Williams, 2014. (Black sails 2014).

FIGURE **Nº 5** 〈

Wired US magazine spread, designed by Sawdust, [sa]. (Sawdust: Wired US magazine spread [sa]).

I begin by exploring traditional (and still prevailing) preconceptions surrounding the function of type and thereafter, position the letterform as separate from typography in the traditional sense (as a linguistic tool). In turn, I attempt to analyse whether the letterform's visual grammar – the visual articulation or the formal structure of a typeface – is indeed connotative in its own right; whether unique visual shapes and structures evident within the structural make up of letters' forms can elicit connotation.

I analyse and discuss *how* meaning is attached to a letterform's distinctive structural features as a result of our experiential perception of them. I propose to use "experiential form" as an umbrella term when analysing and discussing how the meaning potential of letterforms is derived from our interpretation or experience of *form*; how we internalise connotation and thereafter, how we articulate it. I delineate two subcategories that have emerged continually during my research in this field, in which letterforms connote experientially;[13] type as reminiscent form[14] and type as intuitive form.

In this article, I engage with a number of theoretical approaches and disciplines and study fields. For example, I refer to design theory that is entangled with philology, phonology, linguistics, synaesthesia and numerous other disciplines. I do so because for scholars interested in exploring the communicative complexity of letter form, a cognisance of how these fields shape its complex social usage, is essential.

Prevailing perceptions on the function of type

It has certainly become a cliché in type discourse, that any "legitimate" investigation into typography should begin with, or at least mention Gutenberg's printing press. This may be because in c. 1450, when Gutenberg realised a process that would mechanise writing, not only did he tip the first domino in a chain of rapid mechanical and technological (re)production that still reverberates in design practice today, he also tunnelled a bona fide vocational byway for the practice of typography.

Gutenberg's press influenced centuries of typographic development and spurred unprecedented growth in print output; from simple lampoons of the fifteenth century, to the advent of advertising and house styles[15] at the beginning of the twentieth century (Jubert 2006:38). The press legitimised print media, and in doing so, also established typography as a respectable and desirable vocation. From humble, working-class typesetters to esteemed typeface designers and massive type foundries funded by wealthy patrons, the legacy of the press meant that typographic craft became big business and consequently, occasioned the rise of a large professional workforce (Jubert 2006:77).

It also meant that typographers and typesetters could test the limits of their hardware in experimenting with alternative and unfamiliar printing methods, developing substantial quantities of type specimens and engineering a level of technical precision and refinement[16] that had not until that point, been attainable.[17] The press also lay the foundation for several other print mechanisms including lithography (1797), the pantograph (1834), monotype caster (1844) and rotary press (1850), all

13. Since the focus in this section is on visceral association with *letter* form, other symbolic and linguistic alphabets or codes such as musical notation or phonetics are not discussed. Although these are indeed pictorial and clearly illustrate a kind of image-sound relationship, whether they too have additional aspects of connotation embedded in their formal composition (independent of their function as learned code), is beyond the limits of this article. It is indeed possible that further research might investigate this.

14. Reminiscent form refers to a reminiscent or metaphorical experience of letterforms; how associations (such as sharp, soft, wild, bold, whimsical, friendly, stable, masculine, threatening, bloody or elegant) are drawn.

15. The concept of "House style" it similar to what we know as corporate identities today. It refers to formative visual identities or logomarks developed for larger companies such as Truman &Co (Veguillas 2015:46).

16. With regard to the term 'refinement', Heller (1999:10), Reed (1920:10) and Jubert (2006:68) refer to the precision of character width contrasts that yielded ultra-sharp, finely calculated and geometrically crafted letterform details.

17. The evolution of the Roman serif from Garamond in 1529 to **Romain du Roi** in 1692, Didot in 1784, Bodoni in 1787 and finally Baskerville in 1800, for example, illustrates a process of significant geometrical refinement (Jubert 2006).

of which had a profound impact on booming type industries, particularly for flamboyant and opulent[18] type design during the Victorian and Edwardian eras (Figure 6) (1837-1910) (Heller 2006:322).

It is possible to suggest, therefore, that the drive behind typographic practice was essentially one of production. Because of this, typography was mainly seen as a "craft". That is, despite their fine craftsmanship and technical ingenuity, typesetters and designers were rarely held to the status of *auteurs* or conceptual artists. Instead, typography was seen as being in service to the arts; a practical way of documenting the work of "true" visionaries. By setting witty copy devised by advertisers, recording the artistry of poetic prose or accomplished philosophical thought, typography was largely perceived as the art of output (Heller 2006:22-27).

A few decades later, at the height of Modernism's drive for abstraction and simplicity (particularly evident in the International Style c. 1950), any trace of artistic expression that existed was deliberately and unceremoniously eradicated from the letterform. Perhaps the most impassioned justifications of type as a strictly practical linguistic instrument occurred at this time, and with confident resolve:

> The aim of typography must not be expression, least of all, self-expression … In a masterpiece of typography, the artist's signature has been eliminated. What some may praise as personal styles are in reality small and empty peculiarities, frequently damaging, that masquerade as innovations (Tschichold in Heller 2006:218).

For Modern typographers such as Theo Ballmer, Herbert Bayer, Max Bill, Karl Gerstner, Markus Kutter, Emil Ruder, Jan Tschichold and Beatrice Warde, the true beauty of type is realised only when it is rendered "invisible". They held that only a letterform, stripped of all clutter and expression (Figure 7) can best serve type's clearest function: to *carry* objectively and not *conflict with* true 'expressive thought' (Warde 1930:40):

> Expression of thought, man's most profound gift, is best captured in written text. [Thus], [t]ypography has one plain duty before it, and that is to convey information in writing. No argument or consideration can absolve typography from [t]his duty. Type well used is invisible as type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas.

18.   Flamboyant typographic posters showcase a prolific array of immensely detailed, ornate letterforms spurred, in large part, by a drive to engineer eye-catching type specimens for a fairly young, yet thriving advertising industry at the time.

As I pointed out previously, these ideals remain deeply entrenched and permeate considerably throughout many design disciplines today. Exceptionally reductive visual forms of type are repeatedly and habitually used in design education and practice, and illustrate an uncompromising modernist devotion to type as a primarily linguistic vehicle or support mechanism for other forms of expressive thought.

FIGURE **Nº 6**

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Exposition Universelle, designer unknown, 1855. (Heller & Fili 1999:25).

FIGURE **Nº 7**　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　‹

Universal, designed by Herbert Bayer, 1925-1926. (Jubert 2006:202).

Perspectives on type form

Up to now, I have suggested that for non-linguistic communicative purposes, designers typically prefer various forms of imagery or expressive copywriting. I have also suggested that type is consequently seen as a sort of communicative henchman for the image, and is therefore best kept in reductive form, or alternatively, as elaborate visual decoration.

It is therefore ironic that for thousands of years our language systems have *depended* on pictorial writing systems and early typography in order to convey simple concepts. That is to say, the image quality of type has long since served a pivotal role in even the most basic forms of communication. Early writing systems such as hieroglyphics, ideographics, rock art and even shorthand dictation,[19] for example, illustrate an art of visualising ideas, actions or emotions pictorially; created using pictures and illustrations as a way to refer to identifiable concepts, actions or emotions more directly (Barthes 1977:155). In these early examples, the linguistic function of the letterform is understood only by means of graphic marks on a surface.

In much later examples such as medieval drop caps, instances of *Schriftbild* (writing pictures) as well as Peter Flotner's *Anthropomorphic alphabet* (1540) and Giovanni Batista Bracelli's *Alfabeto figurato* (1632) (Figures 8a-b), we begin to see more

19.　I refer to a stenographic (derived from Greek for "narrow writing") system of symbolic abbreviation that accelerates writing speed and dates from as early as classical antiquity (mid-fourth century).

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Anthropomorphic alphabet, designed by Peter Flotner, 1540. (Bruinsma 2000:2).

recognisable Latin letterforms emerge, yet a clear pictorial quality remains evident.[20] Here, graphic features, already laden with connotation, are borrowed from imagery and imported into the domain of letterforms (Brownie 2009:12). Essentially, typography takes on communicative traits whenever it employs structural resources typical of an image. The term itself ("typography" from type and graphic), poetically highlights this connection (Stöckl [sa]:78).

Over centuries of type refinement, however, the boundaries between imagery and letterforms have become increasingly blurred (van Leeuwen 2006:143; Brownie 2009:12). Letterforms have gradually become streamlined to lessen their dependence on pictorial forms, and the majority of letterforms now appear less obviously pictorial owing to their "abstract" construction (Crisp 2007:206). While this is indeed evident, it is important to point out that the "image" quality of these typefaces is not entirely absent. That is, while letterforms are clearly less pictorial, their "image" quality is still interpretable. Stöckl ([sa]:78) uses the term 'typopictoriality' to explain that type may be seen as a form of abstracted imagery that conveys recognisable figures; a visual grammar if you will, that is not inherently pictorial. This visual grammar may be used ideationally to represent specific emotive qualities. For instance, letterforms can be divided polemically and demarcated texturally by their degree of similarity or difference

20.   Mathew Battles (2016:39) cites several other writing traditions (and their sub-genres) including Arabic, Greek, Gaelic, Gallic, Mesopotamian, Cuneiform, Etruscan, Hebrew, Persian, proto-Canaanite, Dravidian and even mythological or "fictional" scripts (such as Walter Battiss' *Fookian*, James Cameron's *Na'vi* or *Klingon* from the *Star Trek* franchise) that have also, at different times in their development (from ancient, post-classical and modern history), shown evidence of "pictorial systems" and inscribed signs or pictograms that encode ideas and language visually.

FIGURE **Nº 8b** 〈

Alfabeto figurato, designed by Giovanni Batista Bracelli, 1632. (Bruinsma 2000:3).

(van Leeuwen 2006:143). They may be described as masculine or feminine, soft or hard, quiet or loud, energetic or intimate, dangerous or fragile, sensual or emotionless, extravagant or reserved, brutal or delicate, and so on.

It is perhaps possible to suggest then, that like images, letterforms are indeed constructed of elements of a "visual grammar". That is, it is the unique visual shapes evident within the structural make up of letters' forms that elicits these kinds of connotation (Stöckl [sa]:78; Heller 2006:8; Ma 2008:32). Here, visual structures such as line, shape, contrast, size, weight and texture inherent to letterforms, although "abstract", function as communicative structures (Serafini & Clausen 2012:[sp]). In Figures 9a-b, for example, it is possible to argue that geometrical precision, curves and extreme contrast variations unique to the *Argö's* formal structures communicate a sense of fluidity and elegance, whereas *Besom's* rather more gestural structures

argö

Argö, designed by Anthony James, 2014. (James 2014:[sp]).

BESOM

Besom, designed by Krisjanis Mezulis and Gatis Vilaks, 2015. (Mezulis & Vilaks 2015:[sp]).

may suggest informal and colloquial connotations. We might say that certain organic shapes unique to the Survival (Figure 10a) typeface may register as playful, organic and exuberant, while the precision of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines of the characters in Reckoner (Figure 10b) may read as industrial, calculated and mathematical.

FIGURE **Nº 10a** ‹

Survival, designed by Fabian de Lange, 2015. (De Lange 2015:[sp]).

FIGURE **Nº 10b** ‹

Reckoner typeface, designed by Alex Dale, 2014. (Dale 2014:[sp]).

We read these typefaces as collective type-images or 'macrotypographic signs' whereby we identify and decode each shape as an instance of graphic communication (Stöckl [sa]:81; Trummel 1988:121). Following Gestalt theory, we essentially perceive the collective type-image as connotative because we are able to identifying clearly distinguishable features in the 'macrotype' (Finke, Manger & Fichtel 2012:105).

But these insights surrounding the non-linguistic aspect of letterforms, although relatively recent considering the scope of our typographic trajectory, are not new. Despite my earlier assertion that the majority of type discourse excludes discussion surrounding rhetoric hardwired into letterforms, a relatively small number of theorists, including Barnbrook (1993:127), Brownie (2009:4), Heller (1999, 2001, 2006), Nørgaard (2009), Rock (1992:123), Serafini and Clausen (2012), Stöckl ([sa]) and van Leeuwen (2005, 2006) clearly recognise this particular non-linguistic aspect of the letterform. They tend to agree that type's formal expression; the style of letterform, is part of its communicative content – that is, the mechanism by which concepts are communicated.

For example, Rock (1992:123) follows McLuhan's (1964:9) assertion that 'the medium is the message' and argues that in the same way, the typographic medium – the letterform – frames connotation. In referring to the letterform specifically, Heller (2006) follows Barthes' (1977:162) suggestion that it is the 'syntagm' of denotation (the style of the form) that exhibits its communicative complexity. Van Leeuwen in particular, has contributed substantial theoretical insight in this regard. In *Towards a semiotics of typography* (2006), he refers to 'physical instances' when he speaks of the visual quality of letterforms. He describes 'visual quality' as the visual patterns of recognisability or 'shapes' that make up an identity of the letterform and identifies the associative, defining or differentiating visual shapes that describe the appearance of a letterform. In addition, he describes the 'distinctive features' of the letterform and outlines several preliminary categories (weight, expansion, slope, curvature, angularity, orientation, connectivity and regularity) by which he believes a majority of distinctive typographic features may be grouped (van Leeuwen 2006:147-152).

Although these authors – and particularly van Leeuwen – provide eloquent, if basic, overviews of letterform connotation, they cover only part of a massive typographic territory. That is, many of their categories refer to general layout or hierarchal *parerga* and not the letter *form* in particular. For example, when referring to 'slope', van Leeuwen refers to the degree at which a character may lean (italic application). He explains that sloping letterforms seem to connote 'organic', 'personal', 'informal' and 'hand-crafted' in contrast to their formal, mass-produced counterparts. Although van Leeuwen is correct in asserting that a letterform's italic disposition contributes

an additional level of communication, it does not address the idiosyncrasies unique to a particular letterform. Namely, although van Leeuwen's observation is useful in determining differences between Baskerville regular and *Baskerville italic* for example, it says little of Baskerville's unique structural composition as such. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the intricacies of typeface and letterform design extend far beyond these categories.[21] Essentially, the authors' rather brief discussions do not explain why we experience the formal qualities of letterforms in a particular way.

Therefore, in the following section I analyse and discuss how the meaning potential of letterforms is derived from our interpretation or experience of form, how we internalise connotation and thereafter, how we articulate it. I approach the analyses from a ready-to-hand[22] perspective where case-specific examples are identified and analysed on a case-to-case basis in order to compare and contextualise letterform perception or meaning, as opposed to *classifying* letterform characteristics.[23] In this way, communicative aspects of the letterform are investigated or interpreted in context.

In the sections that follow, I continue from the position that letterforms are indeed communicative as non-linguistic signs and explore how, based on perceptual experience of a letterform, we may experience a letterform's "distinctive features". I examine how letterforms draw associations based on both the viewer's reminiscent experience of material metaphors, as well as our instinctual or visceral perception of letterforms. I therefore delineate two *ways* in which distinctive features of letterforms are commonly interpreted and present them as motives for the selection and application of type.

Type as reminiscent form

As I have pointed out, the image-quality of the letterform is considerably more abstract when compared to other forms of visual communication that appear to provide concrete physical representations of ideas. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:124), when engaging with and interpreting abstract media, we subconsciously activate our conceptual system, an autonomous system that we are not normally or readily aware of. For example, we understand the concept of an "argument", however, we may not as easily illustrate a visual representation of it.

The authors point out, however, that as soon as we move away from concrete physical representations and engage with abstract concepts we begin to reason *metaphorically*. We use "metaphors" to convey or map familiar concepts onto otherwise unrelated domains. As with most anything abstract that we try to make sense of, we attempt to relate them back to something we know, something what

21.   Van Leeuwen (2006:154) agrees and points out that it is necessary to conduct studies that reach beyond his own preliminary work, which covers only part of this territory.

22.   In *Tool-being* (2013), Graham Harman refers to the Heideggerian concept of 'ready-to-hand' as a practical, organic way of experiencing matter. This may be seen as a type of *qualitative* interpretation.

23.   Harman (2013) speaks of 'present-at-hand' reasoning as a theoretical, categorical way of observing and analysing 'objects' as dead matter. This may be seen as a *quantitative* interpretation.

have already experienced. In this way, through substitution, something vague is understood in terms of something that is familiar. I refer again to the example of an argument here. We might say that the 'argument" be understood metaphorically, as a kind of war. We exercise metaphorical expressions such as 'your claims are indefensible', 'the strategy behind his argument' or 'I won the argument' in order to position our understanding of an argument (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:124). We understand the inference of an argument since we understand what is inferred by war. Metaphors work in what Lakoff (1993:213) refers to as 'containers' – if a concept (x) proves true for one of two domains (a), and that domain is compared, by means of the metaphor, to a second domain (b), the concept should prove true for the second domain as well. In other words, if we say the argument 'hit a dead end', and a dead end refers to a halt, then the argument is halted. Metaphorical reasoning therefore enables a *systematic* progression of understanding that structures the understanding of abstract concepts.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980:124) maintain that metaphors are helpful in various areas of study since they govern our everyday functioning and experience of a variety of phenomena. They continue that all the ways in which we experience our surroundings is a matter of metaphorical experience and that our everyday behaviour reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience. Therefore, since conceptual metaphors are present in everyday metaphorical expressions, some of our most basic concepts are understood by means of the metaphor.

Therefore, although this classical concept is intended for linguistic prose, it is perhaps possible that the communicative challenges presented by abstract letterforms may be addressed in a similar way. Van Leeuwen (2006:146), for example, speaks of the 'experiential metaphor' – a concept similar to Lakoff's metaphorical containers – in addressing letterform perception. He explains that the distinctive features of a typeface can evoke meaning that is derived from or reminiscent of our physical experience of materially similar phenomena. Trummel (1988:123) refers to a similar kind of metaphorical perception, and explains that in perceptual experience, the abstract visual stimulus of the letterform creates a structural skeleton that helps determine the referential connotative role. Phil Jones (2007:[sp]) agrees and explains that it is precisely because of their abstract quality, that letterforms serve as perfect examples by which to realise the efficacy of metaphors. He explains that the process of metaphorical mapping is evident when examining the formal structure of letterforms since these forms are reminiscent of phenomena we have *already* experienced. Crisp (2007:206) refers to the mimetic nature of letterforms and explains that typographic embodiment is imitative of things we

encounter in the physical world. In other words, visual qualities or distinctive features of letterforms may be key in identifying metaphorical links to physical experience.

Thornface (Figure 11), designed by South African designer Jan Erasmus in 1997, is a typical example of what is meant here. In examining the typeface from a metaphorical perspective, a process of conceptual mapping, similar to that described above, may be observed. Erasmus (2007:71) explains that the distinctive features of his typeface may be compared to natural defensive mechanisms such as horns, claws, stings, beaks and razor wire. He states that the typeface's 'T', for example, reminds him of rhino horns, while the sans serifs remind him of the splintered end of a thorn pulled off of a branch. Here, the surface representation of the letterform has a quasi-pictorial form, which evokes the experience of 'mimicking an image' (Kazmierczak 2001:184). We might therefore draw a mimetic comparison between the typeface and a collection of thorns. Metaphorically speaking, we might suggest that '*Thornface* looks like a collection of thorns'. Furthermore, it is possible to suggest that typically, thorns connote themes such as danger, defence, difficulty, constriction, discomfort (a "thorny issue"), pain, sharpness, desolation, evil, treachery or even heartbreak. And since the typeface shares a container with "thorns", it inherits these concepts and therefore it is possible to suggest that in s similar way, *Thornface* suggests danger (or defence against danger). The metaphor is invoked and, since *Thornface* evokes these (and similar) concepts, it may be appropriate to use in design contexts with similar themes.

In Barnbrook's *Nylon* typeface (Figure 12), another example of metaphorical mapping is evident. Barnbrook (1993:128) explains that for this typeface, he aimed to design a set of characters inspired by the fragility and chaos generated by cold, mathematical images of man-made structures. In order to achieve this, he created haphazard combinations of irregular, triangular shapes that intersect at uncomfortable angles. In characters such as the "S" and "O", for example, contours and width consistency seem imperfect, while serifs are inconsistently placed throughout. Therefore, in referencing organic, distorted structures metaphorically, we might say that characters in *Nylon* look like a mélange of misplaced junk.

I have also come across instances where metaphorical mapping may be reminiscent of less material (and therefore more abstract) experience. In *Echo* (Figure 13), for example, designer Tobias Frere-Jones (1999:232) makes use of fragmented forms in order to trace the movement of an echo visually. Since its distinctive features refer, visually, to how the sound of an echo may be transcribed, associations such as vibration, movement and dynamism (that are relevant to the concept of an echo) are also hardwired into *Echo's* letterform.

Thornface, designed by Jan Erasmus, 1997. (Erasmus 2007:71).

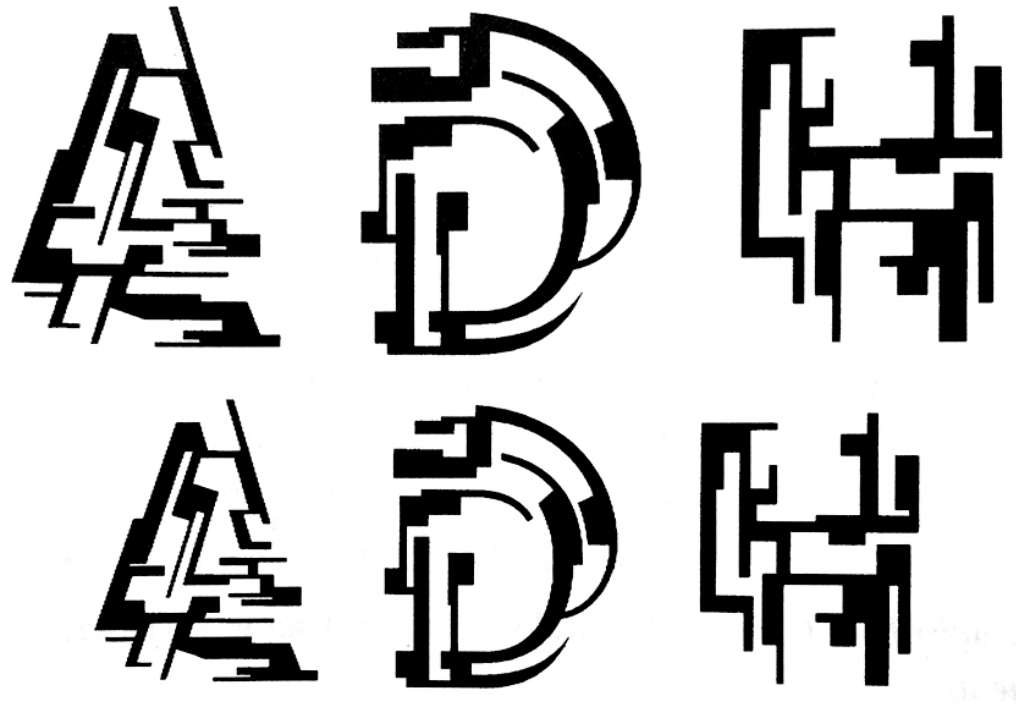*Nylon*, designed by Jonathan Barnbrook, 1995. (Barnbrook 1993:127).

FIGURE **Nº 13** ‹

*Echo*, designed by Tobias Frere-Jones, 1991. (Frere-Jones 1999:323).

From the examples above, it is evident that the metaphor is grounded in perceptual experience. Therefore, it is possible to state that letterforms can communicate metaphorically by mapping phenomena that we experience daily. Pictorial features are borrowed from any visual paradigm and imported into the domain of letterforms, bringing with them a range of connotations. As Lakoff (1993:240) points out, however, the viewer cannot map themes between two domains if they have no prior (first-hand) understanding of either domain or their inherited concepts. That is, metaphorical mapping occurs because most of what we know is realised through vision; if we see something, we know it to be "true". If we can see something and know it to be true, we might say that we have therefore experienced it. Thus, the resulting metaphor seems completely natural. If the viewer is not immediately aware of a material reference however, connotation is often derived in another way.

14a   14b   14c
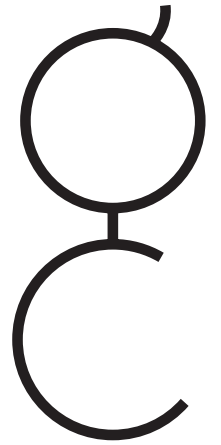
FIGURE **Nº 14**   ‹

Diagram illustrating 'g' type letterforms. (Compiled by the author).

15a   15b   15c

FIGURE **Nº 15**   ‹

Diagram illustrating 'Q' type letterforms. (Compiled by the author).

Type as intuitive form

As outlined in the examples above, it is perhaps a logical observation that indeed most letterforms must, to a degree, refer to some kind of material experience. While this is perhaps true of many typefaces, I have found that not all may be as easily or readily interpreted in this way, since it is not always possible to "place" the distinctive features of a letterform (van Leeuwen 2005:140; Drucker 2002:153). That is, although a typeface is composed of unique structural nuances, we are not always able to draw structural comparisons to a particular material experience. A typeface's features may perhaps not be recognisable in that they invoke concrete visual references, yet its features convey – rather intuitively – a distinctive essence (van Leeuwen 2005:14).

In Figure 14a for example, we may argue that in comparison to other letterforms, this "g" evokes a quirky or peculiar personality, even though we may not be able to immediately refer to a visual example of "quirk". We may ask what it is about the geometry and symmetry of Figure 14b that exudes slickness and a degree of retro, while the similar geometric precision in Figure 14c conveys rather more technical or scientific qualities. A designer may opt for the sleek movement of Figure 14b when branding an innovative or cool sport brand, whereas Figure 14c may be more suited to sci-fi or techno thriller film poster, for example. In these examples, it is possible to argue that while each of the lowercase "g" characters are composed of "distinctive" or unique features, they are less immediately reminiscent of material reference.

I have made use of these letterforms as examples of intuitive forms, however, it is of course entirely possible that certain viewers are indeed able to "place" their *distinctive* features. This is probably because each of the letters are distinctly different in terms of their formal composition. When comparing letterforms of a similar structure, however, an intuitive response toward the letterform becomes decidedly more apparent. For example, it is possible to argue that the dramatic contrast, geometrical precision and curved gesture of all three Roman "Q" letterforms in Figures 15a-c suggest "classical elegance". If we examine the distinctive qualities of each letterform alongside each other in greater detail however, we begin to assign slightly different characteristics to each. For example, it is possible to suggest that the structural rigidity, controlled gradual contrasts and larger surface areas of the tails in Figures 15a and 15b are to a greater extent opulent and regal, whereas the shorter, curled and ovoid tail of Figure 15c conveys a sense of charm, frivolity and delight. In practical terms, a designer may elect to incorporate Figures

15a or 15b when envisioning more of a mature elegance, whereas Figure 15c may be more appropriate for branding a princess tea set, for example.

From these examples, it is possible to argue that the meaning potential of letterforms is not exhausted by metaphorical connotation (Ma 2008:91). In cases such as these, a stimulus of another kind is at play. Here, we perceive meaning through synesthetic or kinaesthetic pathways (Cho 2005:11). Gromala (2007:3, 27) offers an alternative interpretation and explains that when referential negotiation of the structural body fails, we invoke a visceral response to structural stimuli. In other words, in order to make sense of less obviously referential phenomena, we engage with our affective or visceral experience of them.

Insights into intuitive form

The observations above are to a degree grounded in synaesthesia, a much larger body of theory that has, in centuries of experimental research, investigated possible links that exists between affective, associations. In this section, I outline several strands of synaesthesia, beginning with phonology, in order to map out a brief history of research conducted on affective, *shape*-associations in particular.

Phonology, or sound symbolism theory, is a well-documented process of sound-to-image mapping that emerged in c.1700. Research in this field postulates that sounds are meaningful beyond their semantic value and that there is a distinct relationship between sound and connotation (Cho 2005:8). Essentially, phonological discourse assists in illustrating how linguistic sounds may be visualised.

From its conception, phonologists have looked to linguistics as a means of describing sound-meaning relationships and began to examine the phonological features and structures of language (Drucker 1994:15). At the same time, linguists, poets[24] and writers alike undertook to engage with phonological expression in their respective arts. They discovered that the sounds of words can *feel* a certain way (sharp or muffled, for example); that they can provide a visceral or kinaesthetic response. The letter "p" in words such as *pip*, *pop* or *pout* for example, serves as an instance of an 'explosive' sounding letter (van Leeuwen 2005:140). Consonant sounds "b", "g" or "d" in words such as "brood" or "grand" connote slowness, while fricative, higher frequency sounds "f", "v", "s" and "z" in words such as *zip* and *fizz* communicate speed. The mental image of sound affects a listener on an emotional level, without recourse to concretised meaning. Therefore, a link between the acoustic image of sounds and the mental concept or emotion they construe became well established from the eighteenth century (Drucker 1994:23).

24. Arguably the most significant break-through in this line of thought occurred much later, between 1916 and 1921. At this time, the *Zaum* poets of Moscow, under the charge of Ossip Brik, studied patterns of sound in subconscious thought.

In order to break apart the linguistic concept from the emotional response, phonetic scientists turned to visual form (as opposed to linguistic description) as the most reliable vehicle for their recordings[25] because, according to Drucker (1994:18), the graphic image strikes the eye as a more permanent and lasting impression than mere linguistic sound transcription. Research therefore saw intensified focus on interpreting the acoustic value attached to shapes. Experiments were conducted using "inscriptional" apparatuses that could produce shapes when affected by sound. Ernst Chladni, for example, found that two distinct shape-patterns were created when he ran a violin bow against the edge of various glass plates (Cho 2005:18). Edourd-Leon Scott de Martinville's invention of the photautograph (1857) evidences similar transcriptions, only this time by way of vocal recording. When a subject speaks into the photautograph's funnel-shaped collecting chamber, an elastic membrane and stylus at the opposite end of the chamber leave a graphic trace on a steadily moving strip of paper. These and several other experiments[26] from the 1800s illustrate a divergent strand of language studies, where investigation is primarily concerned with mapping the phonological features of shapes (Drucker 1994:15).

A more recent study named *Takeluma*, conducted by Cho in 2005, consists of an alphabet that explores similar sound-image relationships, only here it takes the form of an interactive or reactive installation. According to Cho (2005:23), when a participant or speaker vocalises a phoneme sound (into a microphone), sound reactive filaments within the installation appear to bend and distort a shape of digital pixels according to patterns that are produced by the sound waves. Cho transcribed the resulting forms into a ready-for-print alphabetical system (Figure 16) where similar types of sound (for instance, p and t or b and d) are materialised in visually similar shapes. In addition, high or low-pitched vowels resulted in forms that were, either tall and thin or wide and rounded respectively.

The examples I have presented until now affirm that form may be conceived through visceral engagement. Although these theoretical associations trace the relationship between sound and image, several other sites of investigation have, however, also suggested a potential link between *emotive* sounds that manifest in *connotative* forms. In 1911, for example, Ferdinand de Saussure developed a theoretical analysis that would transfer scientific outcomes into a critical case study of visual forms that he termed 'the image of language' (Drucker 1994:17). For de Saussure, the sound-visual relationship resulted in the formulation of a sign that may be understood beyond mere transcription. De Saussure's studies later became the cornerstone of methodology for the Formalists[27] at the Prague School who, as a means of privileging 'pure form', looked to de Saussure's linguistic case studies of the phonological sign and attempted to adapt them in form analyses. Yuri Veltrusky

25.   Sound-image mapping is not unique to studies of the 1700s. The study of sound-image representation dates to the time of Pythagoras (c. 571-495 BC), who is credited with discovering the numerical relationships that determine tones of the musical scale (Cho 2005:18). A few centuries later (mid-1400s), sound is once again reimagined in visual terms in the example of Hangul, the Korean alphabet (Cho 2005:6). Again, in 1799, the discovery and interpretation of the Rosetta Stone serves as yet another reference point. Here, language was deciphered by the link between spoken sounds and (hieroglyphic) visual signs (Drucker 1994:14).

26.   A vast history of shorthand dictation originates from as early as 1909; for example, Theodore Rosset developed a mechanical device consisting of a tube, a mouthpiece, a drum and vibrating needle that tracked the disturbance of air, onto paper, during sound pronunciation (Drucker 1994:16).

27.   As an ideological framework, Formalists views the visual image as divorced from history, cultural context or any form of social conditioning (Drucker 1994:36).
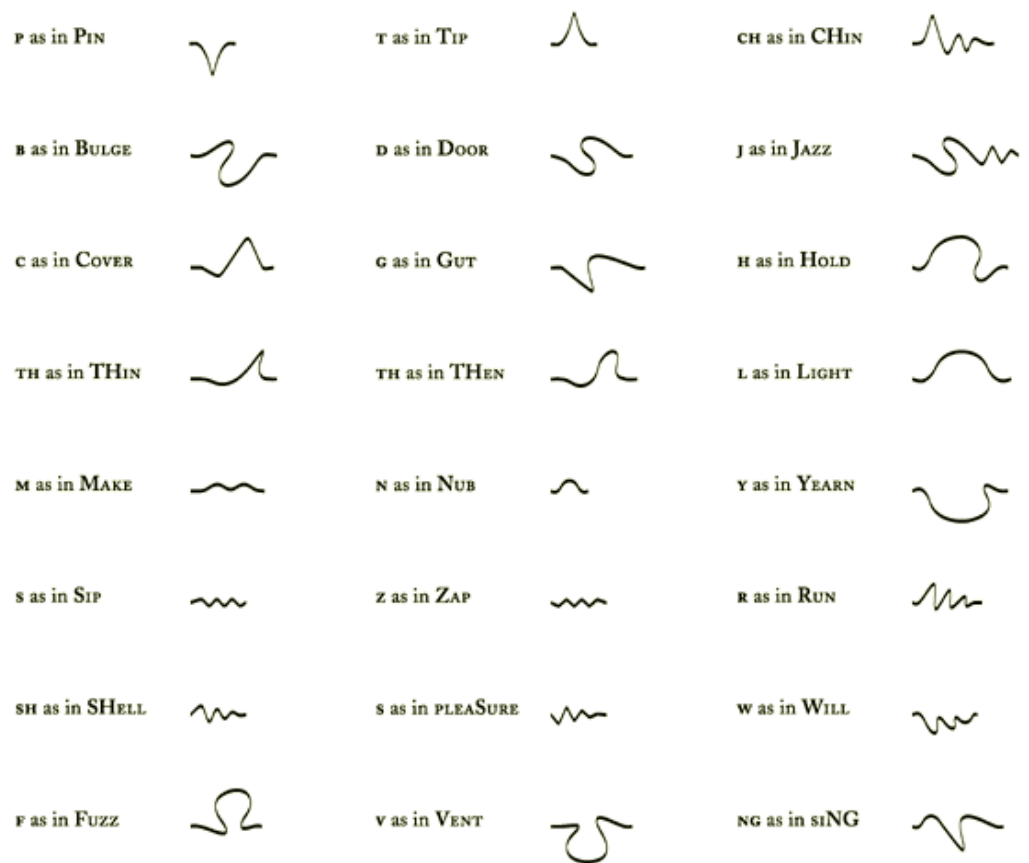
P as in PIN	T as in TIP	CH as in CHIN
B as in BULGE	D as in DOOR	J as in JAZZ
C as in COVER	G as in GUT	H as in HOLD
TH as in THIN	TH as in THEN	L as in LIGHT
M as in MAKE	N as in NUB	Y as in YEARN
S as in SIP	Z as in ZAP	R as in RUN
SH as in SHELL	S as in pleaSURE	W as in WILL
F as in FUZZ	V as in VENT	NG as in siNG

FIGURE **Nº 16** ‹

Specimens from the *Takeluma* project, Peter Cho, 2005. (Cho 2005:23).

(in Drucker 1994:32) writes of extensive visual experiments that were conducted between 1934 and 1940 at the Prague School, where emotive sound was recorded by means of emotive forms. Drucker (1994:15) describes their examinations as the investigation into the *visible trace* of *expressive* sound.

Several other cognitive psychological studies have yielded further practical examples of this rather intuitive sound-image mapping. In 1947, Wolfgang Köhler released *Gestalt psychology, an introduction to new concepts in modern psychology*, in which he argues that there may be natural or intuitive constraints in the way that sounds are mapped onto visual forms. Köhler presented two, otherwise non-figurative shapes (Figure 17) – one rounded and one spikey – to an undisclosed number of English-speaking subjects. Along with the shapes, he verbalised two non-sense[28] words; 'Maluma' and 'Takete'. Köhler asked the participants to pair

28. Köhler points out that it is important to consider that the selected non-sense words be detached from considerable social and cultural conditioning.
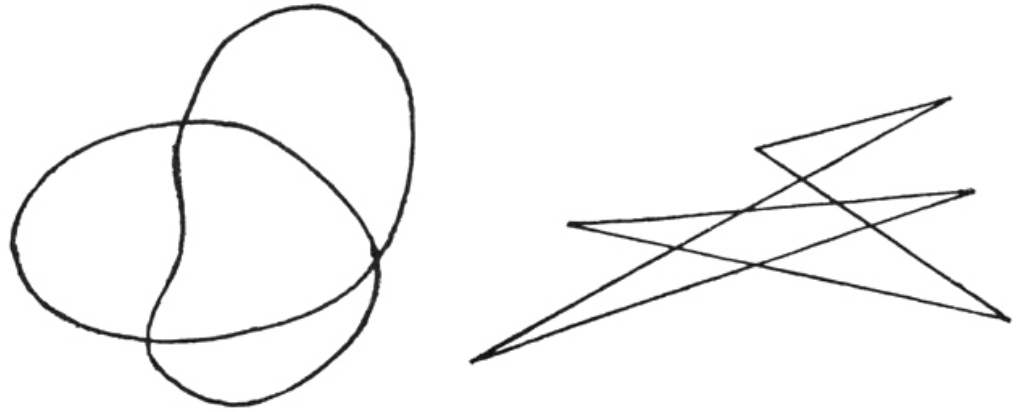
Illustration of maluma and takete, 1947. (Cho 2005:8).
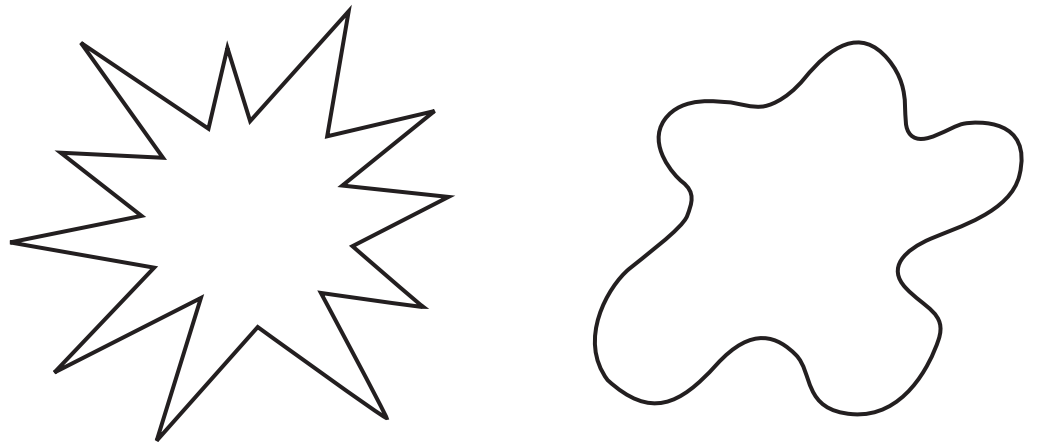
Illustration of Kiki and Bouba, 2001. (Kiki & Bouba 2012).

the respective shapes with the word they found instinctually more appropriate. In his reports, he indicates that a vast majority of the subjects assigned 'Maluma' to the rounded shape and 'Takete' to the spikey shape on the right.

More recently (2001), a similar (and arguably more prominent) experiment, known as the Kiki and Bouba effect, was conducted by researchers VS Ramachandran and EM Hubbard, which resulted in similar findings (Ramachandran & Hubbard 2001). The scientists presented two shapes (Figure 18), similar to 'maluma' and

'takete', to independent participating viewers and asked them to pair each shape with either 'Kiki' or 'Bouba'. The researchers found that 95 per cent of English-speaking participants instinctively associated the round shape with Bouba and the spikey shape with Kiki. Peiffer-Smadja (2010:6) explains that the short, fast and sharp 'ki' sound in Kiki mimics the sharp physical appearance of the angular shape. In the case of the deeper sounding 'Bouba', the slow transition from 'boo' to 'ba' results in a forward to backward motion of the mouth that appears to imitate an organic, continuous 'gloop' or 'round' motion of a blob or blob-like shape. Cho (2005:9) adds that the deeper 'boo-ba' intonation is 'more to swallow' and therefore connotes a 'slower' shape in comparison to the faster 'ki-ki' sound. It is also possible to argue that the structural quality of these shapes (sharp or rounded) appears to echo the vibration of the sound. Peiffer-Smadja (2010:6) agrees and explains that there is a geometrical resemblance between the textual sounds of the words and the shape of these objects. Therefore, certain vowel, consonant and intonation combinations represent visual or tactile properties of objects.

There is also evidence in developmental discourse that further highlights this relationship. In discussing reading difficulties that are associated with Autism, Cerebral Palsy and Down's Syndrome, Janice Light and David McNaughton (2012:[sp]) explain that in early developmental stages, children begin to recognise letterforms as a means of associating sounds with sensory experience. By means of this, they build awareness of sound-image signification and thereby strengthen their instinctive or motor reactions to the visual appearance of words during the reading process.

The above examples are instances of synaesthesia where perception is interpreted viscerally. Peiffer-Smadja (2010:6) explains that examples of synaesthesia are not reliant on metaphorical memory association; rather, their associations are of a sense-related nature. Synaesthesia is a result of cross wiring in the brain, where any given sensory sensation is experienced in response to stimulation of another sense (Peiffer-Smadja 2010:6). David Robson (2011:[sp]) adds that people seem to blend sensory experiences, including sound-image relationship, sound-smell relationships[29] and image-smell relationship. Although the hypothesis for this is still unknown, a majority of sound symbolist scientists base the results of this effect on a type of instinct (Peiffer-Smadja 2010:7). According to Cho (2005:11), this kind of visceral perception is particularly prevalent in instances where a more abstract experience is to be interpreted. In other words, in order to make sense of less obviously referential phenomena, we engage with our affective experience of them.

29. Several tests were conducted at the University of Edinburgh in 2010 that explore the links between sounds and tastes using different vowel sounds to identify bitter, sweet, salty or sour taste sensations. The researchers, Christine Cuskley, Simon Kirby and Julie Simner found that certain words elicit cross-sensory connections in the brain. After dropping bitter, sweet, salty and sour solutions into their subject's mouths, they were asked to produce different kinds of vowel sounds that seemed to best match the taste they experienced. The findings show that sweet tastes are associated with high vowel sounds, in which the tongue is placed near the roof of the mouth. Lower vowel sounds are associated with sour tastes while flat vowel sounds are equated with bitter tastes (Robson 2011:[sp]).

Cho (2005:2), Drucker (2002:153) and Gromala (2007:3, 45) maintain that synaesthesia may be framed as particular kind of existential phenomenological response (not reminiscent) to stimuli. The authors explain that existential phenomenology is essentially a philosophy devoted to understanding the *essence* of an object by means of visceral experience[30] (Ma 2008:36). One might say that synaesthesia is a kind of existential phenomenological response to phenomena because, in the process of synesthetic mapping, the viewer gains a subjective or visceral experience of the visual. Ma (2008:38) refers here to the 'intentionality' in phenomenological theory that refers to the internal experience of being conscious of the essence of something. Gromala (2007:45-47) refers to similar 'essence' in defining introspective perception. She explains that through visceral engagement with the 'body' (or external structure) of an object, we achieve a subjective, internal reading of it that is exclusive of any referential description. We therefore seek to interpret the essence of the visual, which evokes a phenomenological or visceral response (Husserl in Ma 2008:38).

Therefore, when interpreting abstract features of a particular letterform, we may follow a similar process. Megan Fowkes' phenomenological typeface experiment[31] (Figures 19 & 20) serves as particularly relevant and practical example here because, in her design, she systematically outlines the process of intuitive letterform perception. For the experiment, Fowkes pairs two phonological words, 'gwah' and 'wizi' – set in *Velvet* and *Organics Elements* respectively – with two respective illustrated characters[32] based on her phonological and visceral response to the distinctive features of both the characters, as well as the typefaces (Figure 19). By means of this, she highlights intuitive perception as a possible motive for selecting typefaces.

In analysing the project further, it is possible to argue that from a phonological point of view, Fowkes' phonological word compositions[33] highlight specific sounds or intonations that describe a particular mood, energy or unique physical aspect of each character.[34] In analysing the choice of typeface in relation to its respective phonological sound, it is possible to argue that the high-pitched, ascending quality of 'wi' to 'zi' appears to mimic the meticulous or sharp, albeit mischievous, nature of the first character. Fowkes therefore sets 'wizi' in *Organic Elements* owing to its sharp features and curved embellishments. The sharpness and whip-like curvature, created by dramatic contrasts in shape thickness, seems to portray a sharpness of mind, mischievous enthusiasm and perkiness. On the other hand, the heavier, thud of the 'gwah' sound represents the unmoving and perplexed or dumbfounded demeanour of the second character and is emphasised by the bulkier, elongated structures unique to the *Velvet* typeface. Essentially, the characters' visual forms are abstracted to achieve its essential quality or characteristic. This process results in an image-sound relationship.

30. According to Husserl (in Ma 2008:38), visceral experiences refer to the *lived experience* of an object; that is, the way we make sense of the everyday world as it is lived and felt.

31. Fowkes' designs form part of a 2014 typographic project conducted under my supervision for the Information Design degree at the University of Pretoria and is presented here as an experimental process of sound to image mapping.

32. Illustrated by Shaun Otackl, 2005.

33. The phonological words are intuitively intonated.

34. It should be noted that the "appropriateness" of her word choices is greatly impacted by their compositional juxtaposition since, as I previously mentioned, visual texts are often understood polemically and demarcated by their degree of similarity or difference.

FIGURE **Nº 19** ‹

wizi (set in Organic Elements) and *gwah* (set in Velvet bold) logos, designed by Megan Fowkes, 2014. (Scanned by the author 2014).
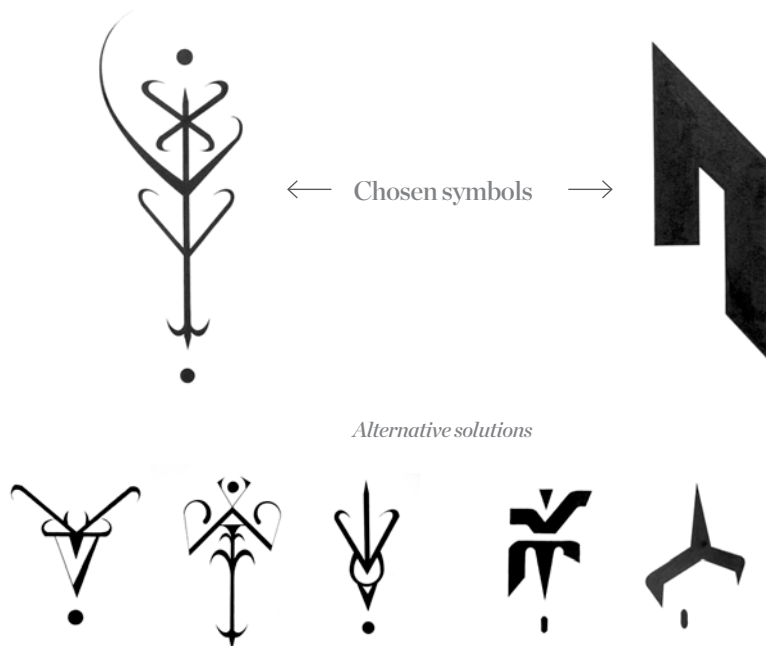

← Chosen symbols →

Alternative solutions

FIGURE **Nº 19** ‹

Abstracted *wizi* (left) and *gwah* (right) symbols, designed by Megan Fowkes, 2014. (Scanned by the author 2014).

As part of the experiment, Fowkes also created abstract 'symbols' (Figure 20) – derived from dissections or the distinctive features of their respective typefaces – that capture an essential or common 'essence' shared by the character, its assigned sound and letterform. For instance, the symbols created for the first character seem to share an energetic, sharp, meticulous and upward striving slant to their form. In contrast, the simplified, angular and thick forms in instances of the second set of logo marks tend to communicate heaviness, dejection and disbelief. The first-hand encounter of stimuli presented here demonstrates a step-by-step re-mapping of emotive essence from one medium (illustration) to a second (sound), and finally to letterforms. That is, Fowkes intuitively experiences or *feels* the essential quality of the typeface. Therefore, following my earlier assertion that a letterform's distinctive features are not always immediately reminiscent of material experience, it is possible to argue that letterform perception may also be intuitive and of a visceral nature.

It should be noted that some of the examples presented may appear more "successful" than others since each interpretation is subjective. Drucker (1994:44) and Ma (2008:37, 40) agree that a phenomenological response or *feeling* is highly subjective and therefore the process of signification between the viewer and subject is significantly complex. It follows that when more than one viewer is exposed to the same letterform, one subjective response does not necessarily correspond with another. Nevertheless, these examples point out that visceral responses do exist and a designer's intuitive experience of a letterform can be the motive or strategy in the selection and application of type. As demonstrated in the Kiki and Bouba effect, it is imperative for the designer to identify and consider which of these subjective interpretations are widely accepted or recognised as natural. In defining 'essence' Husserl (in Ma 2008:37) explains that although the interior quality or condition of a thing is subjective, is it also simultaneously universal. That is, he maintains that although interpretation begins as subjective, we find that they are usually shared. Therefore, common subjective interpretations of a letterform's visceral evocation may be harnessed and applied appropriately to a design.

As a communicative strategy, it is important for the designer to consider the physical or material aspects of signification, as well as more abstract or visceral connotation in achieving appropriate selection and application of type. That is, while letterforms may communicate at a metaphorical or reminiscent level, they may communicate on an intuitive level as well. Designers therefore need to consider both metaphorical and intuitive letterform perception as communicative strategies. According to Drucker (1994:43), neither should be considered in isolation since each continues to interrupt the domain of the other in a 'happy play of signifiers'.

Conclusion

Type, as a communicative agent, can be implemented as a highly effective rhetorical design tool. Over time and with a practiced hand, designers begin to evolve an innate sensibility and sensitivity for type application. As I have pointed out, however, many (typically inexperienced) designers are unsure of how to apply type sensitively and therefore, type selection and application has noticeably fallen slave to caprice and whim, where it is often decoratively applied to almost any artefact, from clothing, to décor and furnishings, upholstery, baggage, packaging, posters, pamphlets, directional signage, and so on. In these instances, type is often selected for its decorative quality and designers are heavily criticised for this. I have found that harsh criticisms, in turn, deter designers from using more expressive typefaces and encourage a stronghold of safer typographic standards. Motion, interactive and print design alike are saturated with exceptionally clean, inexpressive typefaces that exhibit hardly noticeable stylistic differences. With a renewed interest in "clean", functional design, I am often disheartened by a kind of "poverty" or monotonous standardisation with regard to the type's use in the design landscape. Engaging experiences with forms of communication cannot occur when the ultimate goal of communication is to make the medium invisible (Botha 2011:96).

Letterforms are of the most eloquent communicative objects because they speak in quieter, subtler tones (Stöckl [sa]:77). In this article, I have argued that letterforms evoke connotation – an "inherent essence" – independent of linguistic expression. Moreover, I have suggested that our experiential perception of letterforms may be a valuable avenue of investigation since it offers insight into why design might select particular typefaces. In subdividing experiential perception further into reminiscent and intuitive experience, I have indicated that on the one hand, connotation may be evoked from the metaphorical interpretation of letterforms, but that a typeface's essential form can also evoke a visceral or intuitive response. A designer's experiential perception of letterforms is thus derived from the ability to extend physical experience metaphorically (for example, the spine of a character may be *as* sharp or dangerous *as* a thorn as in Figure 11), as well as intuitively (for example, a particular curve may connote sensuality versus another that might connote flamboyancy, as in Figures 8a and 10a respectively).

To this end, I maintain that letterforms are powerfully communicative non-linguistic structures in their own right. With such powerfully communicative visual tools, designers are tasked with the role of director where, in an ecology of visual saturation that forces visual communication into a constant state of competition, it becomes ever more important for the designer to discern and internalise intentionally the communicative complexity of letterforms.

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