

GRAPHIC EXCHANGE



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HIP 2B SQUARE

If the fonts you're using aren't post-Humanist, they're out of date.

by Nick Shinn

After a while as a graphic designer (and it doesn't take very long), you find that you're no longer on the cutting edge of fashion.

But that's okay, because neither are most of the target markets you design for. Everybody in business matures within the primary network of their own generation, "fogeyfing" en masse.

Nonetheless, the consumer has a relationship with fashion, and all are victims to some degree until they run out of the ability or the desire to buy new stuff. So you, the art director, have to keep reinventing yourself, updating your style, upgrading the old mental software.

That can be hard, because you've learned to do things a certain way, and it's worked well, and you've become comfortable and efficient. You have a large fonts folder on your hard drive full of old friends. You know how they behave, and you know how to work with them to make them look good. They're more than a simple investment—you've also bought into the whole juggernaut of history and culture. It is to belong.

So you don't immediately put the old workhorses out to pasture, you set them to work in a contemporary fashion. In a headline with every word a different size, for instance, all neatly fitted together. Or an exploded setting, with the type tracked out to 100 or more. Or overlapping, with letters of varying color. Or outlined. Or an all lowercase setting with added horizontal scaling. Or with the application of an effects filter. Anything, heaven forbid, but straight type nicely kerned!

However, sooner or later, if you really want to stay in the game, you've got to have the latest, illest fonts. Square fonts.

You may already have a collection of legacy squarishness. Probably *City* (Georg Trump, 1930), which Adobe has freebied, and *Serpentine* (Dick Jensen, 1972); perhaps *Bank Gothic* (Morris Benton, 1930), or Neville Brody's *Industria* (1984). Aldo Novarese's *Eurostile* (1962) is a beautifully, subtly drawn paradox—both square and round at the same time, as is Herman Zapf's *Melior* (1952), a serifed book face.

You can get by with these faces, but don't kid yourself—you're only faking the zeitgeist.

TRENDY TECHNO SQUAROSITY

Signifying a paradigm shift, techno type has emerged from a variety of subcultures removed from the print medium:

Skaters and B-boys pioneered sportswear as fashion, with big words, numbers and logos as crucial: traditionally sportswear lettering was either embroidered script or applied square alphanumeric, like *Princetown* (1920s baseball superstar Ty Cobb introduced the practice of numbering uniforms, the better for fans to follow his every move).

Cars are holy. Such is their power, beauty, and fascination, that their psychotic ethos infects the culture at large. Look through any windshield and you'll see an anti-type world of lettering: highway signs (from which *Interstate*, by Tobias Frere-Jones,

SQUARIST ANATOMY

Pixelized

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY
The new typography

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz \$1234567890

Screen Matrix (Stephan Müller & Cornel Windlin, FontFont, 1994)

Pixelized types are built up on a grid of equal-size squares. The grid may or may not be shown (in reverse) as part of the design.

Constructed

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY
The new typography

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz \$1234567890

Minimum Plafond (Pierre di Sciullo, FontFont, 1993-5)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY
The new typography

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz \$1234567890

ZygoSE (James Nazaroff, Zang-O-Fonts, 1999)

Constructed types are strictly geometric, all straight lines (and arcs of circle), with a minimum of axes and generally unusual letterforms.

Translated

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY
The new typography

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz \$1234567890

Alphaville (Nick Shinn, ShinnType, 2000)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY
The new typography

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz \$1234567890

Digital Sans (Brendel Informatik, 1999)

Translated types are radically systematized versions of humanist letterforms, with most of the curves straightened out, and quite detailed rendering.

is derived), license plates, and trunk logos. Interestingly, the look of a chrome emblem is just about the coolest effect you can get with a 3D type filter. Square type is ideal for dimensionalization, because it distorts little when the outline is expanded.

Techno music. It's cut and paste, constructed not performed (apologies to turntablists). The heart of humanist type is a performance art—calligraphy—which is all too human, so it's out of sync with the digital drum. Neville Brody's seminal *Industria* was invented in 1984 for *Face*, the London popcult magazine he art directed, in the heyday of electrobeat (Afrika Bambaata, Yaz, Heaven 17, Eurythmics, etc.) because at that time there were no typefaces with the raw industrial structure of programmed percussion or synth bass.

Mac type. Mother of the digital type aesthetic, and co-founder of the influential Emigre, Zuzana Licko created the original DTP pixel types in 1985, followed by *Citizen* (1986), the killer *Matrix* (1986), and the print/monitor *Base* series (1995). She is the Nick Jenson of the digital age.

Software interface. The trompe-l'œil bas-relief look of high-tech machinery consoles, all industrial buttons, sliders and pop-ups, is something we spend a lot of time in front of. With the low resolution of monitors, there's not much room for serifs or subtle curves. At small size, Matthew Carter's *Verdana* (1998) loses its roundness and generates fine, intricate text that dissolves into pixels, merging with the medium, form following function to perfection, the essence of squarism. Anti-aliasing?—turn it off.

WHAT IT MEANS

Many people react to techno type the same way they do to hip hop: to them it seems crude, mechanical, reductive, even indecipherable, compared to the beautiful, complex, cultured typefaces that ride on the crest of the centuries, central to the Western typographic-literate tradition.

That's just it. We're at the end of one history, starting another.

Because there's more to this than just being trendy for its own sake, of being anti-establishment to capture the youth market. Art addresses the issues of the day, and

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LEGACY SQUAROSITY

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

Van Doesburg (Théo van Doesburg, 1919)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY The new typography

City (Georg Trupp, Berthold, 1930)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

The new typography

Raleigh Gothic (Morris Benton, ATF, 1935)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY The new typography

Eurostile (Aldo Novarese, Nebiolo, 1962)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

The new typography

Data 70 (Bob Newman, 1970)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY **The new typography**

Serpentine (Dick Jensen, 1972)

now the big question is Turing's: what are the boundaries between meat and machine, human and artificial intelligence, biotech and natural evolution?

So society's probes—engineers and artists—work on this threshold from two directions, with people imitating machines, or making machines that imitate people. In Mamoru Oshii's 1995 anime film *Ghost in the Shell*, two cyborg agents discuss the nature of being against the backdrop of a post-apocalyptic landscape dominated by crumbling signage. For creatures such as these, a visual communication system that takes its style from the inky trace of feathers in the hands of long-dead scholars is bunk.

For five hundred years the dominant letterforms have been derived from Renaissance handwriting, enshrining the humanism of its broad curves in moveable type. But now that's losing its cred (although the functionality remains in many print genres).

Freed by the desktop revolution and the purgative power of grunge, we're moving beyond the literate-typographic model that's part and parcel of legacy Western culture. Now, sentences

DIGITAL SQUARISM

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY The new typography

Industria (Neville Brody, Monotype, 1984)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY The new typography

Oblong (Rudy Vanderlans & Zuzana Licko, Emigre, 1988)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

Ultrabronzo (Rick Valicenti, Thirst, 1993)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

Outlander (Rian Hughes, FontFont, 1995)

The new typography

Bad Xcuse (Patricking, Thirst, 1997)

THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY

Eboy (Kai Vermehr, FontFont, 1999)

are shrinking. Sophisticated linguistic arguments set in nuanced humanist types, so glorious in the days of their swan song a mere fifteen years ago, are on the wane. Replaced by type-as-image, logoism, iconics, semiotic diagrams and GUI infographics, all floating on oceans of ambient eye candy. In this environment, the evolution of post-humanist typefaces is quite natural.

It has been argued that the angularity of techno type impedes legibility. But it's worth remembering that there is no such thing as fundamental legibility. Before the Renaissance, Europe made do with nasty, awkward Blackletter for centuries. And the first phonetic (syllabic, actually) lettering system was Sumerian cuneiform (2000 BC), with nary a curve in sight.

For better or worse, the status quo is not an option. It's better to be slightly illegible than completely irrelevant. ■

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SANS HISTORY

a

Gill Sans (Eric Gill, Monotype, 1928)

Humanist. Quite simply, designs based on the unadorned skeleton of the old-style typefaces, with the serifs removed.

a

Akzidenz Grotesk (Anon., Berthold, 1898)

Grotesque. The ubiquitous postwar types Helvetica (Max Miedinger, 1957) and Univers (Adrian Frutiger, 1957) with their full curves and counters with small openings, are based on the 19th century Grotesques.

a

Futura (Paul Renner, Bauer, 1926)

Geometric. Form follows function. The 1920s modernism of Weimar Germany saw the rationalization of the alphabet to a system of basic shapes.

a

Raleigh (Morris Benton, ATF, 1935)

Square. In the U.S., Benton's rectangular types caught the mechanical rhythm of an age in love with automation.

a

ZygoSE (Nazaroff, Zang-O-Fonts, 1999)

Techno. The horizontal stretching, the bizarre letterforms, the facility of execution — these futuristic devices overtly dissociate techno type from the past, truly expressing the epochal impact of digital culture.