The rhetoric of neutrality. Again. Revisiting Kinross in an era of typographic ~~homogenisation~~ globalisation.

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Abstract

Over the past forty years, studies concerning visual rhetoric have become increasingly prevalent, seeping into multiple areas of research, from visual studies to architecture and design. Robin Kinross's *The rhetoric of neutrality* is arguably one of the most influential pieces on visual rhetoric in design. The article was published in 1985, alongside Richard Buchanan's *Declaration by design: Rhetoric, and demonstration in design practic*e and marks an important moment in design and particularly typographic design. The article mirrors sentiments from postmodern typographic design, where stiff modernist grids, formulaic layouts and neutral letterforms were fervently outcast.

Central to this paper is Kinross's rejection that any visual medium can be described as neutral. From the mid-2010s, there seems to have been a renewed interest in "neutral" typographic application. In pursuit of "accessibility", designers and design agencies working in the spheres of branding, motion, advertising and user-experience steadily strip letterforms of their distinctive characteristics; purging them of cultural symbolism to satisfy a kind of "global palate". In this paper, I revisit Kinross's treatise on neutrality and explore possible reasons for a renewed interest within "neutral" letterforms within a global context.

Keywords: Visual rhetoric; typography; Robin Kinross; rhetoric of neutrality; design; globalism.

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Introduction

> The choice of typeface is often telling, in that it indicates the ideas and beliefs
> that inform the *process* of design (Kinross 1985:22, emphasis added).

Kinross penned *The rhetoric of neutrality* in 1985, just as postmodern typographic design had reached full-thrust. At the time, New Wave and Deconstructionist typographers sought to rip apart the pristine clarity and rigidity of modern type forms (letterforms).

While not technically a postmodernist, Kinross seemed to share their zeal for questioning absolute functionalism. His discursive contribution fit snuggly alongside the postmodernists' interrogation of neutrality in visual communication and typographic design specifically. At the very least, his work seemed to cork any lingering perceptions of "neutral design" as a viable concept.

Kinross's article first appeared in the Autumn edition of *Design Issues,* shortly after Buchanan's *Declaration by design: Rhetoric, and demonstration in design practice.* Don Norman's *The design of everyday things* followed in 1988 and since then, discourse on visual rhetoric has widened considerably. Contributions from, among others, Leslie Atzmon (2008a; 2008b), Hanno Ehses (1984; 1988), Ellen Lupton (1988), and Katherine McCoy (2000)[1] have helped forge a robust argument for the rhetorical nature of communication design. That is, they have contributed to the idea that design artefacts cannot be neutral but are instead inherently connotative. They are rhetorical in the sense that they reflect and orchestrate a generation of cultural themes. Moreover, these authors explain that, as persuasive media, designed objects are organised, narrative structures with interconnected meanings, generated by their material form that come together to tell a story for their user (Atzmon 2008a:2).

It is surprising, then, that over the past few years, designers have gradually chipped away at this widely held design mantra. Typography, in particular, has endured a strong pull away from "overly communicative" type formations. In pursuit of "simple" and "uncomplicated" design, designers and design agencies working in the spheres of branding, motion, advertising and user-experience are steadily stripping letterforms of their distinctive personalities; as connotative structures.[2] That is, although many designers may believe that "simplicity" is a key aim in design, my argument is that today, simplicity refers more to design that is muted. Most noticeable is an abrasive and accelerated upswing in letterform pruning that supposedly satisfies a kind of "global palate".

In this exploratory paper, I unpack and probe a tendency toward neutrality in current letterform design and manipulation. Kinross's *The rhetoric of neutrality* serves as a

springboard in contextualising visual rhetoric in design and by extension, typography. Thereafter, I contrast this well-entrenched design practice with an intentional move away from rhetorically communicative letterform application. In doing so, I present several typographic examples with the intention to highlight the move toward "universally appealing type" in design.

As part of a broader investigation into type as a communicative medium, I focus here on the use of typography in branding and logotype design specifically. I do so because, as part of most brand concepts, typography contributes significantly to overarching visual identities that thereafter typically punctuate a gamut of other design spheres.

The spirit of modern typography.

> I don't think type should be expressive at all. I mean, I can write the word 'dog' with any typeface and it doesn't have to look like a dog. But there are people that, when they write 'dog,' it should bark (Massimo Vignelli in *Helvetica* 2007).

In response to Victorian industrialism, modernist designers looked to minimalism as a way of challenging bourgeois excess, privilege, commercialisation, pollution and class division. Led by the likes of Lucian Bernhard, designers-turned-activists instigated a drive toward social responsibility that challenged established decadencies (Jubert 2006:92,108,148). Type became a vehicle for protest.

The first visually definitive uprising in terms of type specifically was galvanised by German Expressionism and Dadaism (Heller & Fili 1999:65). Designers and typographers during this time sought a simpler way of life, and so looked to abstraction as a way to reflect austerity. That is, they would establish a visual system of abstracted letterforms, by stripping away visual ornamentation in Victorian typography (Jubert 2006:154).

I would argue, however, that the truer sense of modernism comes just after this, from the 1920s, where typographic designers were more concerned with formal or structural issues of letterforms. Here, functionalism, or *la forme utile* (useful form), and rationalism came to the fore. At the time, shortly after World War I, Europe and America incurred severely weakened economies. In response, the abstracted and overly simplified modern letterforms come to symbolise a commitment to "improving life through better design" (Vignelli 1994:51).

Consequently, the "functional" letterform took hold. As the decades of modern type design continued, from Bauhaus to The Swiss International Style, the ten-dency to "abstract" and "simplify" typography (and type layouts) grew stronger. "Form followed

function" as practitioners sought to empty letterforms of political and social residue to make way for a "universally neutral" type style (Figure 1). Although it is possible to argue that, like any visual medium, typographic forms are always politically, socially and culturally imbued, modernist typographers crafted sans-serif type specimens such as *Universal*[3] and *Helvetica*,[4] believing these could be beacons of international standardisation. That is, it was the modernists' view that their simplified and mathematically concise letterforms were indeed purely functional (Vignelli 1994:51).

Lufthansa logo, designed by Otto Firle,1959 *Helvetica Bold* typeface.
(Lufthansa logo 2012:[sp]).

American Airlines logo, designed by Massimo Vignelli, 1967. *Helvetica* typeface.
(Martin 2014:[sp]).

Epson logo, designer unknown, 1975. *Helvetica* typeface.
(Epson Timeline [sa]).

Sappi logo, designed by Ernst de Jong, 1979. *Arial Bold* typeface
(Sappi: Company history [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 1** ‹

Selection of iconic logotypes designed using *Helvetica* and *Arial*. (Compiled by the author).

Crucially, as Lupton (1996:47) points out, the move toward a universal typeface meant that completely abstracted forms would bypass "potential interpretation." In other words, as letterforms are pruned to their barest form, characterless characters were intended to serve as vehicles of pure transmission (Righthand 2010:[sp]).

This is the spirit of modernism as we know it today. It is a philosophy that, through the work of, among others, Jan Tschichold (2009 [1928]) and Beatrice Warde (1930),[5] is as much a quest for clarity as it is a proclivity to neutrality. As Warde (1930:40) explains in her well-known essay *The crystal goblet,* the letterform should function as a transparent vehicle that transports the intention of the copy or text, without an '"excess of colour", [that] gets in the way of the mental picture to be conveyed'. For Warde and her contemporaries, clarity is equated with pragmatism and delivers a kind of neutrality through "pure form",

> 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 1964:17).

> Typography 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. A printed work which cannot be read becomes a product without a purpose … (Ruder, in *Typographie/Typography* 1967:23).

For the modernists, the letterform was viewed exclusively as a linguistic device. Typography was seen as an external system of signs, meant to depict speech (Abbott Miller & Lupton 1994:20). Therefore, the emphasis on the letterform is not only legibility, but also the degree to which it facilitates readability (Rath 2016:34). It is important to stress, however, that modern type philosophy is not defined *only* by simplified "formal shells", (which, as I have pointed out, is the key aesthetic for the modernists) but by a *spirit* of utility — an energetic *thirst* for functionalism rather than an apathetic surrender to it.

Kinross and neutrality

From the 1980s onward, modernity lost favour in typographic design as designers welcomed an era of digitisation. The ease and freedom to manipulate and distort typography offered by an influx of design technologies — such as the first Macintosh personal computer in 1984 — and unprecedented wellsprings of visual content at the surrender of the Internet proved too exciting for typographers to ignore. The launch of digital type design software such as Fontographer (1986), Quark XPress (1986) and Adobe Illustrator (1987) encouraged retro revivals and eccentric vernacular

hybridisations. Chaotic visual layouts composed of irregular and crude letterforms littered the pages of type publications (Figure 2) and encroached heavily upon commercial design worldwide (Keedy 1998:[sp]).

More specifically, the modernist mantra that "type is neutral" began to be deconstructed. That is, designers and typographers became disabused with the impossible task of creating perfectly sterile letterforms that could hide any suggestion of human intervention. It is an unlikely coincidence that, amidst this sense of disillusionment with modernism, Kinross wrote *The rhetoric of neutrality.* Alongside Buchanan's *Declaration by design: Rhetoric, and demonstration in design practice* — a pragmatic and robust argument for the rhetorical potential of design — Kinross's article is decidedly more cunning. His is an eloquent rebuttal against modernism specifically — not because he upends the idea of simplicity or functionalism,[6] but because he demonstrates that the very idea that "typography is neutral" is in itself, a rhetorical one. For Kinross,
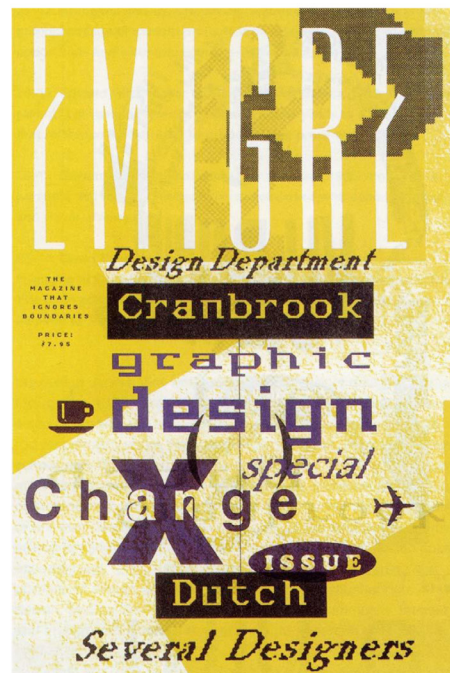
Cover of *Émigré* magazine, designed by Rudy Vanderlans and Zuzana Licko, 1989.
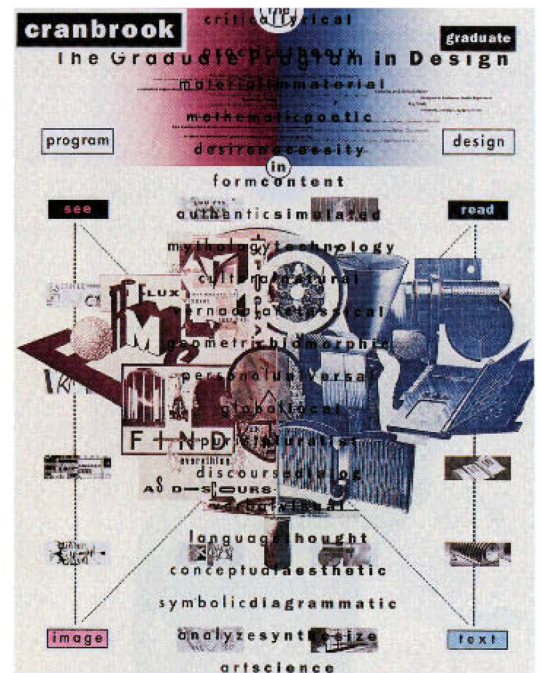
See Red poster for Cranbrook graduate design, designed by Katherine McCoy, 1989.

FIGURE **Nº 2**   ‹

Left: an example of digital type and layout manipulation from the 1980s. Right: an example of deconstructionist layout and typography. (Compiled by the author).

there is great irony in the idea that discipline and craft could ever yield "invisible" design. In discussing the rhetorical extent of railway timetables, he explains that,

> [t]hese timetables, by the simple fact that they organize and articulate and give visual presence to inform, use rhetorical means … suddenly we are seduced. And is not this a rhetorical manoeuvre, in the sense of a set of rules for making information eloquent and more easily understandable, and then — more than this — for sweetening and slipping it down our throats? (Kinross 1985:19-20).

In *The rhetoric*, Kinross follows on from Bonsiepe who, in *Visual/Verbal Rhetoric* (1965), is first to articulate the inevitable fate of "pure" design. Bonsiepe (1965:30) explains that '"[P]ure" information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction.' With regard to neutrality, he continues, '[A]s soon as he begins to give it concrete shape … the process of rhetorical infiltration begins.'

Kinross's seminal piece was met with great enthusiasm amongst designers and consequently underpinned a network of discourse on visual rhetoric that followed. Among others, we see it in the work of the deconstructionists at the Cranbrook School of Art under the leadership of McCoy (from 1971-1995). The deconstructionists understood that meaning and interpretation are rooted in complexity and that design (and specifically letterform design) is inherently a means of storytelling (Heller 2006:109). In dishevelling letterforms and layering disjoined paragraphs at

Ray Gun magazine cover, designed by David Carson, issue 50, 1997. (Design is history [sa]).
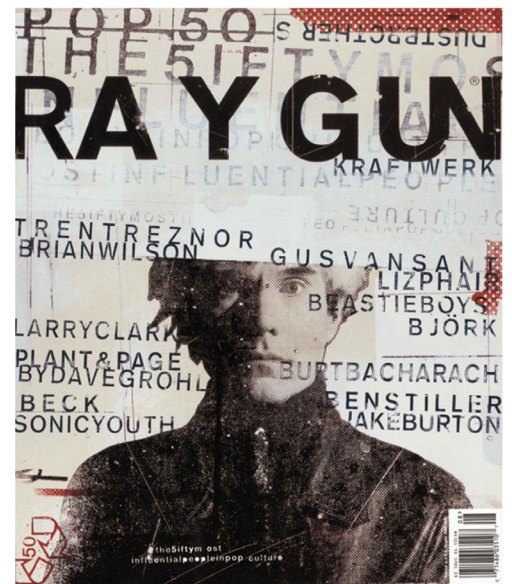
Ray Gun magazine cover, designed by David Carson, issue 57, 1998. (Adam Banks 2016:[sp]).

FIGURE **Nº 3**   ‹

Ray Gun magazine covers. (Compiled by the author).

ambiguous sections of the page, the deconstructionists juxtaposed seemingly discordant pieces of copy to *force* relationships of meaning (Figure 2).

Disrupting modernist tidiness continues throughout the 1990s where cut-up, hodge-podge, punk-style assemblages torment decaying letterform. As decon-structionism's rebellious, punk-rock teenager, grunge too enjoyed conducting fringe experiments on letterforms (Figure 3). Unlike deconstructionism however, typographic "design" at this time was more a medium for novel, textual expression than a comment on neutrality.

Rhetoric of functionality, again

"Ornamentation"' cooled toward the mid-2000s[7] as typography met interface design.[8] I realise this statement is problematic, as typography had, decades before, already been adapted for digital platforms known as 'graphical user interfaces' (GUIs). Bitmap fonts, digital outline fonts (or vector fonts) were indeed introduced in the 1980s; however, massive strides in mobile and web technology meant that "interface design" would evolve as an entirely new genre in design during the twenty-first century.

Digital interfaces, from the iPod to the iPhone, Amazon, YouTube and Facebook, rapidly evolved as a fundamental means of communication. Increasingly, "screens" served as a way to navigate and convey information, and as a means to package a kind of lifestyle (DiSalvo 2002:68). Needless to say, design led the way. As if lifted from McLuhan's *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (1964), design became inextricably tied to the quirks of digital media. And so, typography followed.

While web and mobile technologies captivated the world, typographers were met with considerable design challenges and even more considerable letterform constraints. This is not a unique challenge for type design — it has had to adapt at the onset of every significant technological advancement in human history. The particular challenge for type designers from 1980 to the mid-2000s, however, was one of "economy". In the 1990s, economy meant storage space — a limited amount of storage on early computers meant that meta-information stored in the vector letterforms allowed only a finite number of fonts on any one platform. A typical serif typeface needed twice as much data as a sans-serif because of the number of points required to define a curve of a serif (Carter 2014). The sans-serif, therefore, was far more economical. Moreover, fonts designed specifically for screens replaced fonts that had, until then, been adapted from existing print-based versions. In an effort to overcome poor resolution, binary letterforms were designed within the confines of a pixel measurement so that any given area of a letterform was either "in" or "out" of a pixel (Figure 4).
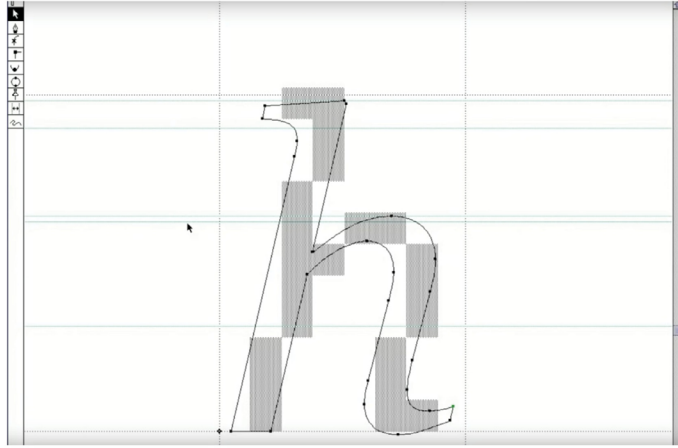
Bitmap '*h*' of *Georgia Italic* typeface, designed by Matthew Carter, 1993.
(Matthew Carter 2014).
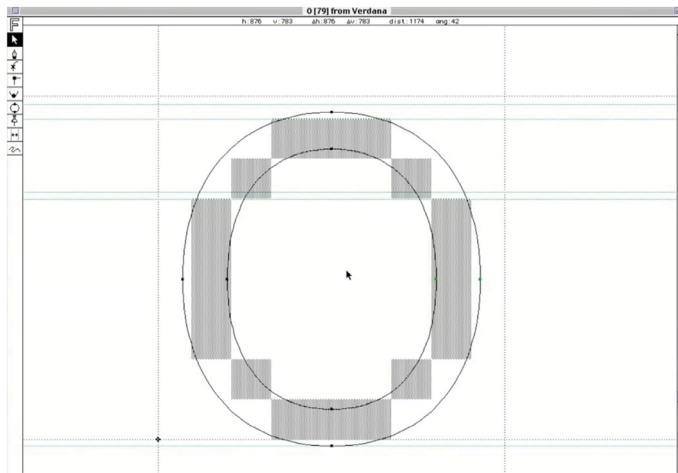
Bitmap 'O' of *Verdana* typeface, designed by Matthew Carter, 1996.
(Matthew Carter 2014).

FIGURE **Nº 4**   ‹

Examples of bitmap letterforms from *Georgia Italic* and *Verdana*. (Compiled by the author).

By the mid-2000s, higher resolution screens and anti-aliasing algorithms sidestepped these technical limitations and so spurred a font frenzy. Hundreds of fonts, multiple font classes and families, were suddenly freely available to use on personal desktop and laptop computers. Choosing a typeface required no more than selecting from a drop-down font menu in Microsoft Word. As font catalogues grew, so too did the digital environment in which they were used.

Mobile technology, in particular, galvanised the way information would be shared in the coming decades. The release of Apple's first smartphone in 2007 sparked an industry of rapacious one-upmanship and brought on a slew of high-tech advancements in mobile cameras, tablets, smart watches and home devices alongside media sharing platforms such as Tumblr (2007), Instagram (2010), Pinterest (2010) and Snapchat (2011). The demands brought on by this burgeoning interface culture meant that more was also expected of typography.

Slick, expensive devices demanded equally sophisticated interfaces. As interfaces became more varied, type had to retain its integrity across a variety of media and platforms. Website responsiveness and platform adaptivity meant that no matter where you were in the world, or what platform you used, the way information was presented would remain constant (Lupton 2006:24). With this free-format liquidity, designers and web engineers had to identify and implement tight parameters surrounding the display of typography to ensure standardisation. Most prominently (and despite an influx of fonts), limitations in HTML[9] and CSS[10] languages at the time meant that interface designers could only use a handful of "web-safe" fonts (default fonts that designers could safely assume would be installed on, and thus display correctly on any platform).

Moreover, with the rise of search engine optimisation and data capture, "selectable text" played an integral role in website indexing, ranking and data analytics, and so, type had to remain "live" and thus, "searchable". If a designer opted to venture outside the pool of web-safe fonts, s/he would have to convert text to flattened images, use javascript/flash replacements and in the process, sacrifice website searchability and "user-friendliness".

Another obstacle is that, at the time, the majority of interface designers were pried from print-based agencies and so the crossover to screen-based media brought with it numerous frustrations. Body copy, for example, had to be displayed larger for screen than for print, since precision offered by printers were unmatched by limited screen resolutions. In addition, variegated serifs had to be adjusted or redesigned to work as "display" types so that when resized to body copy, contrasts in line thickness would not drop below pixel width and disappear. Print-orientated designers also had to adapt layout hierarchies and rethink the impact of white space. For the most part, vertical scrolling conventions on most interfaces meant that large chunks of copy, set in two or more columns were impractical and were therefore abandoned in favour of shorter bites of copy. Moreover, in order to compensate for varied interface widths, website pages were set to snap points[11] and adjusted depending on the display area of the device or platform — kerning was out, widows were in.

Until this point, the need for a vocation dedicated solely to solving these interface problems had not really existed. Subsequently, interface design became a field of specialisation in its own right. In a way, the interface designer took on the role of typographic curator, tasked with sifting through an immense flood of online information and organising it in such a way that it became interesting and "friendly" to the user (Twemlow 2006:93; Reichenstein 2006:[sp]).

With so many variables, functionalism returned to the letterform as a matter of necessity. The vigour, speed and industriousness with which designers had to problem solve marks a kind of no-nonsense hustle evident in interface design during the 2000s. Therefore, concerns surrounding function were not only rhetorical, but also as a matter of pragmatism. Functionalism drove the rhetoric of simplicity adopted in interface design to the extent that "simplicity" was seen as a mark of ingenuity, not retreat.

Around this time, we also see a spike in discourse sur-rounding visual rhetoric. This is because, alongside a return to functional letterforms, theorists retained a deep understanding of the rhetoric inherent in typography — an understanding that the choice of typeface, whether for expressive or utilitarian purposes, is also a rhetorical decision. For instance, Atzmon (2008b:13), Emanuel (2010:22) and Foss (2005:114) argue that the "material form" of letterforms inform the way we understand them, how to interpret them and what they express, rhetorically. In other words, even though typographic designers were having to navigate function and form, there was cognisance of the rhetorical nature of their design choices.

Rhetoric of neutrality, again

In 2012, Microsoft launched a "revolutionary" interface design, referred to as *Metro*, for the new Windows 8 operating system. One year later, Apple introduced a dramatically simplified interface with the launch of iOS 7 for mobile and tablet operating systems and in 2014, Google tossed its iconic 'Gooooogle' serif for a more "geometrically sound" visual style. All three systems, released within a year of each other by three tech heavyweights, ushered in a new visual style;[12] one that pervades, still today — that of "flat design".

Until 2012, skeuomorphism dominated user interface design. Skeuomorphic "imagery" or "icons" such as "Trashcan" and "Folder", for example, mimic the textures, lighting and perspective of their real world equivalents, to evoke a sense of familiarity and realism in an otherwise "digital" environment (Bowie 2020:[sp]). Flat design, on the

other hand, is so named because of its "flat" appearance (Figure 5) that trades materials and effects for basic shapes and flat colours (Ambrose Curtis 2015:2,15). The idea follows the modernist mantra here; that in building better user experiences, "ease of use" (*la forme utile*) facilitated by clarity and simplicity, should be the primary role of design. Moreover, owing to a significant tech boom spurred by remarkable strides in mobile and wearable technology during the 2010s, brands had to increase their digital presence. Therefore, design elements (most of all typography) are designed to be as "clean" as possible, so that they work across a variety of digital platforms.

It is, however, interesting that the flat design trend — composed of rudimentary design elements — comes to dominate the digital interface *at the same time* as drastic improvements in technologies that would enable variety in the selection and application of typography. That is, it is paradoxical that as technological restrictions were gradually rendered more obsolete, there is at the same time a sense that designers should be held to strict typographic conventions, to ensure universal usage.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Comparison of "flat design" (left) for iOS 7, and "skeuomorphic design" (right) for iOS 6. (The pros, cons, and future of flat design 2020).

In 2014, for example, new coding languages such as HTML 5 and CSS 3 were released alongside screens with notably better resolution displays. Where designers were previously limited to a handful of web-safe fonts, the gamut increased significantly, as fonts were now saved to online servers (as opposed to a user's local computer), and then pulled through or "served to" the user, live on a webpage. CSS 3 also accommodated a diverse array of effects such as drop shadows, gradients and blurs so that typography could appear 3-dimensional and grounded in more of a material environment. CSS 3 also enabled text-based animations that could bring movement and realism to the interface. Adaptive columns and font sizes meant that when displayed across a variety of interface sizes, the number of columns and sizes of text could be set to adapt proportionately. Retina screens meant that serif typefaces, italics and hairlines were finally legible on digital interfaces, as significantly better resolutions meant crisper and more accurate displays of variegated weights and widths.

In most other spheres too, design was far less constrained by technological capacity. Brands moved online, magazines escaped print, and wayfinding systems took up residence in "software navigation". Industries reconfigured traditional methods of communication for the perks offered by digital interfaces. Despite all these digital opportunities, the tyranny of flat, humdrum and uncomplicated typefaces continued.

It is of course reasonable to argue that aspects of the functional aesthetic were already present during the 2000s (as I have shown); however, there is a distinct shift in intent and initiative here. For the past five or so years, the *delight* of flat design has dulled and so too has the zest for interesting typography. Flat design is still a dominant design trend[13] and has become more of a default style that tries to be without insignia or orthodoxy.

Typography too has been rendered seemingly "flat" in the sense that designers seem to want to use apparently indistinct letterforms as sterile shells. I first noticed this in 2013,[14] when Yahoo! — one of the first internet search engines and email juggernauts of the 1990s — introduced a makeover for their then iconic brand. The 1996 design[15] by David Shen (Figure 6), was intended to echo the "Yahoo" yodel that had become the company's signature login tone. In order to achieve this, Shen set each letter at different baselines and introduced uneven serifs, ascenders and descenders to imitate the inconsistent register of passaggio voice in a yodel. Perhaps the most iconic aspect of the logotype is the increasing size of the last two 'o's, which visually mimics the climactic rhythm of a yodel — "Yodel-ay-eee-ooO''.

For the 29 days prior to the 2013 launch, Yahoo!'s inhouse design team released 29 play-ful variations of the logotype to build excitement around the official release (Figure 7).

These experimental wordmarks, some more successful than others, are enduring. Yahoo!'s then president and CEO, Marissa Mayer (30 days for this? 2013:[sp]), explained that '[I]t's our way of having some fun while honoring the legacy of our present logo'.

Once the actual logotype (Figure 6) launched however, the rebrand was met with palpable disappointment. Many criticised the rigidity and lack of quirkiness and whimsy in the new logotype. Indeed, the characteristically unruly logotype was tamed, so that it might appeal to a wider audience. The new logotype was also meant to invoke a "business-like" tone that would appeal to the financial channels that the company had acquired. As Glen Tokunaga (in Ralev 2012:[sp]), art director and senior brand specialist

Yahoo! logotype, designed by David Shen, 1996.
(Reproduced by the author).

Yahoo! logotype, designed by Marissa Meyer, Bob Stohrer, Marc DeBartolomeis, Russ Khaydarov and Max Ma, 2013.
(30 Days for This? 2013).

Yahoo! logotype, designed by *Pentagram* design agency, led by Michael Bierut 2019.
(Yahoo [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Evolution of the Yahoo! wordmarks. (Compiled by the author).

FIGURE **Nº 7**   ‹

Experimental logotypes for the 2013 launch of the Yahoo! rebrand. (30 Days for This? 2013).

for Yahoo! at the time states, 'standardizing around the purple logo will create a consistent experience for Yahoo! users, advertisers and employees, and it will strengthen our brand going into the next decade'.

While it was not a revolutionary move, I do not mind the logotype. The intention was to evolve the brand by neatening some of the more obviously "cartoonish" elements. Although I would argue that some of the initial attempts (Figure 7) were more playful, the official logotype still gives a visual nod to the yodel, and in retaining a curve to the letterforms, the wordmark retains its irregularity.

In 2016/2017, Yahoo! was bought by Verizon Communications and by 2019, the wordmark had once again been remodelled in conjunction with an entirely new identity. This time, the identity was designed by Pentagram, led by Michael Bierut (Figure 6).

The new logotype lacks much of the personality evident in earlier iterations. Set in the sans-serif *Centra No. 2 Extrabold*, it is largely indistinguishable from a plethora of other logotypes to have emerged in the last five years. The irony here is that Pentagram attempted to promote "uniqueness" that is somehow echoed in the logo. On Pentagram's site, it states,

> Pentagram has worked with Yahoo on a refresh of its visual identity that captures the exuberant personality of the brand … The identity reflects a new brand strategy for Yahoo that focuses on helping users find a more *personalized,*

customized experience online. In the decades since Yahoo first launched, the internet has grown to be so big and *ubiquitous*, it's easy to become overwhelmed with information (Yahoo! [sa]), emphasis added).

Apart from the obvious irony here, Pentagram continues that the "loud," and bold letterforms help to "amplify" the brand, 'the strategy positions Yahoo as an "amplification brand", amplifying the things that matter, helping to "amplify you". Although it is fair to assume that the boldness of the letterforms does indicate "boldness", I find this motivation somewhat inconsistent for a number of reasons, primarily because the letterforms are set in lowercase and are mostly rounded — not something I might readily associate with "amplification". Pentagram proceeds to suggest that the new logotype is somehow evocative of Shen's original version, stating that, 't]his strategy of simplicity and amplification is expressed in a new logo … that looks back to the original, quirky 1996 logo'. The agency even goes so far as to suggest that, 'as with the original logo, the new identity captures the voice of a brand named after an exclamation of joy and discovery, and still looks like it should be shouted or yodeled'. In an interview with Mark Wilson for *Fast Company*, Bierut (2019) explains that when designing the new logotype, he was "conscious" of the 1996 version, which he describes as "cartoony" and distinctive to the brand. As Bierut rightly points out, "quirkiness" is endemic to Yahoo!'s character. In contrast to their explanation, it seems to me, however, that Pentagram did not see a strong enough argument for invoking it. Beyond the exclamation point and purple colouring, there is little that is reminiscent of the "exuberant personality" in the 1996 version.

Another key observation is how Pentagram describes the global positioning and digital optimisation of the rebrand,

> [t]his strategy of simplicity and amplification is expressed in a new logo that is simpler and more flexible than its predecessor … The logo has been optimized to work across various platforms and scales, from the small canvas of a mobile app to the side of a building. The identity is further streamlined with a simple "y!" monogram, useful for favicons and social media icons (Yahoo! [sa]).

There is something immensely telling here, not only in terms of Yahoo!'s rebrand, but of the reductionist trend that many brands are adopting. As we move toward an ever more globally intertwined visual environment, it seems that "flexibility" is used as a scapegoat for "sterility". For one, a logo should be flexible enough to work across a variety of print and digital media. And a "flexible" logo is one that is general enough that it satisfies a "global palate".

Globalism in design, again

Discourse on globalism in design has been extensively covered. Nevertheless, I still find it is relevant today, although retrospectively. In 2004, Thomas Oosthuizen (2004) cautioned that as brands become more "global" in terms of occupying a global market share, they face the challenge of localising context and directing "preferred read-ings". He (2004:61) clarifies that communication conceived outside of one's frame-of-reference is often misinterpreted. This is of course a widely understood mechanism at play in the classical model of the rhetorical situation. That is, in encoding a message into a medium (in this case, a design medium), there may well be a discrepancy as to how the medium is decoded by an intended audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:30; Reyburn 2013:78). Linda Fu (2006) adds that the moment a message produced in one culture is processed in another, intercultural communication is inevitable and so, it is difficult to achieve a 'preferred reading' of a brand.

Oosthuizen, Reyburn and Fu offer loose insights and refer mostly to communication at a cultural level. They also tend to cite simplistic examples to illustrate this. Oosthuizen (2004:63), for example, explains that a piece of communication marinated in 'Irish humour' may work well in Ireland, but perhaps less so in another country. Of course, at the time, very few "global" brands were truly global, and many larger brands really only had to satisfy local needs (Oosthuizen 2004:61). Furthermore, the few multinational brands who had to appeal across cultures, often translated their core identity piecemeal from one country to another.

Oosthuizen, Tim Brown (2008) and later Julianna Jones (2011) also offer a few remedies for potentially global brands to overcome the challenges of "universalism". Brown (2008:6;9) suggests that global brands take a "systems view", where, in accounting for vast differences in socio-economic conditions, businesses should engage in "human-centered" design. They should consider not only their brands' universal qualities, but also come up with innovative solutions to reach different audiences. Oosthuizen (2004:65) and Jones (2011:374) suggest that while maintaining universal appeal, global brands would also need to interpret their core identities to individual cultures, in a more local context. Moreover, Jones (2011:363-364) reminds us that identities with familiar social-cultural meanings are insightful measures of society, and, that if designers utilise these powerful cultural symbols, it will help brands to translate their ethos to smaller groups.

The above mentioned authors are revered in design spheres globally, and translate the conventional view of rhetoric for a design audience. They also optimistically, offer recommendations as to "the future" of global brands, as they saw it. What they foreseen

however, is the sheer scale and impact that "social" media would have on brand penetration. I must point out that in referring to "social" media, I am not referring to "social media" in the popular sense (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram *et al*). Instead, I refer to the social impact that different forms of media have had on engineering brand personas.

Over the past decade, international corporations have become *more* global — as have we. The immediacy of brand consumption has changed the way brands have had to communicate. Brands are more accessible than ever before and therefore, the circulation of their visual identities is far more rampant. Corporate identity designers are well aware that as corporations grow, their initial (relatively innocuous) brand identities may threaten tremendous fall-out. That is, in an era rife with "woke-ness", they have real concerns about the cultural impact of their designs; and the social threat posed in circulating ideas, visuals and values from the "west to the rest" (Fu 2006). We are no longer simply interacting with cultures, but with both mass social movements (think #metoo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ issues, land appropriation, and so forth) and individual sensitivities at a micro-level. The risk of overstepping "socially acceptable" boundaries is increasingly tricky, as brands (and all forms of visual communication for that matter) are increasingly scrutinised.

Oosthuizen and Fu offer a few insightful and accurate predictions, however. Oosthuizen (2004:61-62) anticipated that global brands would face tremendous upheaval in attempting to customise their message in smaller social contexts. He predicted two ways that brands might tackle this. Either brands would customise their identity in unique way to every society, or they would be universally "flattened". In 2020, the latter is certainly the route designers have attempted to adopt. Fu (2006) affirms this in her forecast that globalisation would eventually result in a homogeneous world culture — a monoculture.

With regard to typography specifically, this is sadly accurate and extends beyond only Yahoo! Another recent example is the rebrand for Skype in 2019. In 2003, Skype first entered the telecommunications sphere as a revolutionary form of communication where families, friends or couples could engage in long-distance video calls. As its name suggests, the initial "Sky"pe identity is designed to mimic clouds — a "head in the clouds" metaphor that evoked a sense of joy that comes with making long-distance contact with loved ones (Figure 8). In 2011 however, Microsoft bought Skype and in doing so adopted the *Metro* flat design style (Figure 8). In 2017, Microsoft once again reworked its logo as they felt that the video chat service did not quite fit in with Microsoft's ultra flat identity. In an interview with Tom Warren for *Verge*, designer Peter Skillman (2018) explains that in order to create synergy between the two brands, '[w]

e needed to take a step back and simplify!' Subsequently, a reworked wordmark for Skype was released. The 2019 version features a "stripped back", generic and straight-edged wordmark that looks as if it was merely "typed out" in a default, unrecognisable typeface (Figure 8). The Skype identity as whole, from the website to the brand manual and overall tone, endured a similar process of sterilisation. In the 2008 Skype brand manual, the identity is unpacked in playful, engaging copy. The write-up for the logo for example, explains that: '[O]ur logo is a very valuable asset. We must treat it nicely. Never abuse our logo, it doesn't have arms so it can't fight back (our lawyers however, are another story)'. The 2019 version on the other hand, reads as a rulebook, expressed as emotionless, largely logistic directives. For example,

> You must not incorporate any of the Skype brand assets, or variations of them, into your own product features, product names, service names, trademarks, logos, company names, domain names, or social media accounts unless otherwise permitted by the Microsoft Trademark & Brand Guidelines. You must not copy or imitate the Skype trade dress, "look and feel," or other identifiable and unique visual elements of the Skype brand assets or www.skype.com website, including (but not limited to) the color combinations, graphics, sounds, imagery, presence icons, typefaces, or stylization used by Skype (or anything similar thereto).

This sort of "standardisation," as Johnathan Barnbrook (in Twemlow 2006:92) refers, has introduced an era of insipid, soulless type use. With a few exceptions, more and more brands are invoking neutrality as a form of "accessibility".

The wordmark designed in 2008 for Animal Planet, a family-friendly broadcast channel, received a similar rework in 2018 (Figure 9). Although the "leaping elephant" icon[16] is arguably, sensitively designed, the actual wordmark, set again in lowercase, is fairly plain. It is telling that in remarking on their redesign, the agency, Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv, make no mention of the wordmark specifically when they explain,

> [t]he historic Animal Planet logo—an elephant with the globe—retained a great deal of recognition and affection. Moreover, the core concept was appropriate, as an elephant is a majestic, exotic, and intelligent animal, wondrous enough to represent the entire animal kingdom. In this fresh and distinctive rendition, the new leaping elephant captures the joy and energy of the beloved Animal Planet brand (Animal Planet [sa]).

As with Skype, the firm highlights the "online adaptability" of the logotype: '[T]he new visual identity for Animal Planet needed to be optimized for use everywhere around the world, responsive in digital, and to allow for the brand to diversify into many products and services'.

Skype logotype, designer unknown, 2006.
(Skype logo [sa]).

Skype logotype, *Microsoft* in-house design team, 2012.
(Skype logo [sa]).

Skype logotype, *Microsoft* in-house design team, 2017.
(Skype logo [sa]).

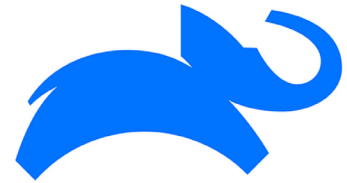FIGURE **Nº 8**   ‹

Evolution of the Skype wordmarks. (Compiled by the author).

Animal Planet logotype, designed by Dunning Eley Jones, 2008. (Leap of Faith [sa]).

Animal Planet logotype, designed *Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv*, 2018. (Leap of Faith [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 9**   ‹

Animal Planet wordmarks 2008-2018. (Compiled by the author).

Companies in the financial sector have also readily adopted this reductionist trend. Most notable is the rebrand for Absa bank, which, in 2018, discarded its iconic "A" for an encircled, lowercase wordmark.[17] South African based design agency, Grid Worldwide, describes their redesign as more "human," "approachable" and having a sense of "Africanacity" (which, I suspect is gleaned from the font name, Ubuntu). The new brand (Figure 10), is yet again positioned as "digitally-led" with "global scalability,"

> [o]ur new brand is an expression of the new identity we are creating as an entrepreneurial, digitally-led bank with deep knowledge of African markets and with global scalability.

Absa logotype, designer unknown, c.1998. (Absalutely African [sa]).

Absa logotype, designed by *Grid Worldwide*, 2018. (Absalutely African [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 10**   ‹

Absa wordmarks 1998-2018. (Compiled by the author).

Grid Worldwide also designed an identity in 2015 for Open Serve, Telkom's infra-structure division (Figure 11), not unlike ABSA's, for which they received heavy public criticism.

Recently, the automobile sector has also opted for the "flat" approach. BMW, Volkswagen and Nissan are currently rolling out "refined" versions of their logos, stripped of texture, lighting, bevels and all other 3D elements in favour of flatter, more "digitally flexible", 2D models (Figure 12).

Absa logotype, designed by *Grid Worldwide*, 2018. (Absalutely African [sa]).

Open Serve logotype, designed by *Grid Worldwide*, 2015. (Open serve [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 11** ‹

Comparrison between Absa and Open Serve wordmarks. (Compiled by the author).

Empty vessels

In the examples above, I maintain that typography is clearly an afterthought. There is, however, another approach in corporate identity design where letterforms are at their most aseptic — a so-called "logo system".

A logo system is a dynamic way of appropriating or tuning a logotype for different occasions, events or themes. I would argue that as a *system*, it is dynamic since it allows for an identity to evolve. As a counterpoint however, its letterform(s) must remain fixed so as to ground the evolving system. In this way, the logo system makes use of letterforms as graphic scaffolding that points to other, "more communicative" imagery. There is nothing inherent in these letterforms — the forms do not matter; it's about what they can hold (Posner 2015:[sp]). In other words, it is only their "fat" shapes that are of use insofar as they showcase a definable area of the contained image. As Posner (2015:[sp]) points out, ' ... regardless of the shape [or] style … it might not matter what your logo is'. In this way, letterforms are viewed as little more than cookie cutters.

Volkwagen logotype, original VW stack was designed by Franz Reimspeiss,1937. This version is from 2000. (Frame of Mind [sa]).

Volkwagen logotype, *Volkswagen* in-house design team, 2019. (Frame of Mind [sa]).

BMW logotype, *BMW* in-house design team. This version is from 1997. (Propelling Laterally [sa]).

BMW logotype, *BMW* in-house design team. This version is from 2019. (Propelling Laterally [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 12**   ‹

Evolution of Volkswagen and BMW logotypes. (Compiled by the author).

FIGURE **Nº 13**

Logo system for Hillary Clinton's 2015/2016 presidential campaign, designed by Bierut, 2015. (Annalisa Merelli 2015).

Arguably the most recognisable[18] example of this is the Google logo — specifically, the Google doodle. In 2015, Bierut (*à la* Yahoo!) designed a similar system for the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign (Figure 13).

Yet again, typography is merely a convenience. It appears that, increasingly, "neutral" typography is the go-to approach. My issue therefore, is not with the system, but how Bierut marginalises the importance of typography in it.[19] In a 2015 interview for Vox, Bierut describes letterforms in very much the same way as Warde (1930:40), some 90 years earlier,

> [s]imple forms … designed to hold whatever you want … It's really about thinking about these symbols as being empty vessels in a way, and you pour the meaning into them.

(Re)markable design.

Unlike a photograph, illustration, colour or texture, typography hides its methods. These visual elements are typically seen as inherently communicative whereas in most cases throughout history, typography has had to concede to its other, more utilitarian function — a medium with which to depict speech (Atzmon 2008b:13; Abbott Miller & Lupton 1994:20).

Letterforms cannot be neutral. They are complex rhetorical structures since they convey different meanings to different audiences at different times. They are some of the most vibrant and rich iconic markers of cultural accomplishments and underpinning ideological tenets of any one time in design (Heller 2006:8). In the process of articulating letterform communication, designers will always (either intentionally or passively) evoke meaning (Serafini & Clausen 2012:[sp]). The power of typographic rhetoric lies in the understanding of its communicative facets. In gaining a more robust understanding, designers can negotiate the field of association so that their choice of typeface is directed toward a specific meaning (Bruinsma 2000:8; Lupton 2012:12). That is, the strategic structuring of a rhetorical narrative in type leads the audience through a systematic sequence of corroborating signs, which cultivates a preferred reading (Atzmon 2008b:14).

There has and will likely continue to be a feud between form and function with regard to type. Unlike the modernist zeal however, there is a troubling sense of indifference[20] as we move into design for the 2020s. As a practicing designer and design lecturer, I am repeatedly exposed to phrases such as "the design should feel more modern, simple and clean". Where these terms evoked an attitude during the modernist era, today, a growing number of designers and design students simply refer to modernism as a kind of aesthetic that "looks clean, does not interfere too much with other design elements" and frequently, is "a safe choice".

Interface and print design have become saturated with exceptionally clean, inexpressive typefaces that exhibit hardly noticeable stylistic differences. "Simple" typography is no longer simple by design; it seems to me to be a surrender. Letterforms are invoked as if they carry no intrinsic content. This particular brand of "neutral" design has encouraged laziness among designers, since it offers them a style that they can pretend is not a style.[21]

As Keedy (2006:102) notes, if there are to be designers in the twenty-first century, what will they be experts in? His observation is palpable, and I am disheartened by its fidelity. I am troubled by a kind of "poverty" that flat design has imparted to typography. I have no gripe with "flat design" *per se* - it has a place. Once it reached saturation by 2015 however, it overshot simplicity and ushered in an era of flat*ness* in design. Interface and print design alike are saturated with inexpressive typefaces[22] that exhibit hardly noticeable stylistic differences (Figure 15). In desperation to satisfy a global palate, where brands seek to be brand*less*, typography must blend in with the rest of the nice, round, pleasant letters pervading our visual landscape. Simplicity is strangled by standardisation, expression by accessibility and persuasion by homogenisation as letterforms grasp for fresh air. There is, as Pareto (in Perelman &

android mastercard.

animal planet

open serve absa

Skype **yahoo!**

FIGURE **Nº 14**   ‹

Various wordmarks. Icons and colour have been removed to highlight only the letterforms. (Reproduced by the author).

Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:33) points out, no real value in trying to appeal to everyone at the same time. He continues that such an attempt would be fruitless because communicating to a universal audience is typically an appeal to an apparent consensus of what is generally considered "appropriate". Instead of discarding expressive letterforms, designers should be capitalising on them (Keedy 2006:102). I am reminded of a quote by designer Al Robertson who, in 2006 explained that,

> In the real world, the money world, your ideals will turn to custard before the might of money. In this world, typographic design serves to reduce complexity to accessibility, by way of simplicity, to eliminate conceptual confusion or "noise" (Robertson 2006:188).

In these instances, designers retreat behind their work. In a world where "user-centered design" is a proudly worn moniker, users seem to be directors and the designer is somehow invisible. I come across this term — "invisible" — frequently in my research. Great user-centered design is invisible, great editing is invisible, great visual effects are invisible and great typography — that, is certainly invisible. This is at once insincere and paradoxical. The idea that a designer's immense effort and craft is hidden, is, as Kinross would argue, impossible.

Despite this, I am hopeful that these homogenised forms will become tiresome and, as intended, disappear in the crowd. Moreover, I am optimistic that thoughtful designers do indeed persist. I say this not to be glib, but because amongst the menial drudgery I see glimmers of well-considered typographic design. I therefore end with an example of a rebrand for Duolingo, a language-learning and proficiency website and mobile application (Figure 16). The identity pivots largely on a bespoke typeface (Feather Bold) that, by means of synecdoche,[23] mimics Duo, their owl mascot. The quirks of the logotype are nuanced, but delightful. The articulation of the new identity is an exercise in simplicity, but without losing character. Like many of the examples above, Duolingo lives primarily online, yet the identity can extend beyond it. For a brief moment, *language* gives typography room to speak.

Duolingo wordmark, designer unknown, 2014.
(A feather in your cap [sa]).
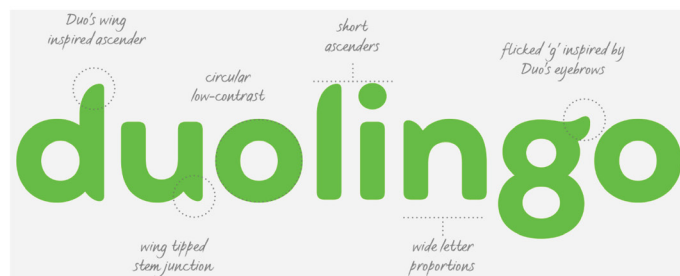
Duolingo wordmark, *Johnson Banks* design agency, 2019.
(A feather in your cap [sa]).
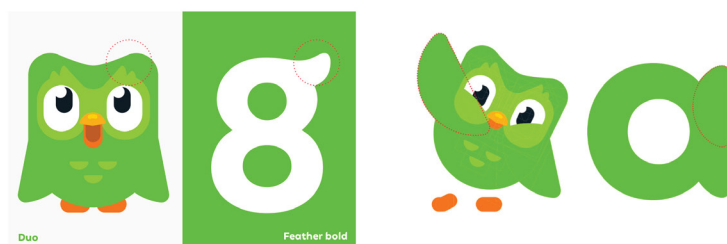
Duolingo brand assets, *Johnson Banks* design agency, 2019.
(A feather in your cap [sa]).

FIGURE **Nº 15**   ‹

Duolingo brand assets. (Reproduced by the author).

Notes

1. Other notable contributions in this field come from Gui Bonsiepe (1999 [1965]), Anneli Bowie, née Botha (2011, 2018), Cristina de Almeida (2009), Bárbara Emanuel (2010), Sonja Foss (2005), Soojin Jun (2009) and Marian Sauthoff (2007).

2. This is of course a subjective position. I do not suggest that this applies to every designer. For example, there are indeed pockets of exciting contemporary type experimentation. In this article, I am referring to *a specific* trend that has emerged.

3. Designed by Herbert Bayer in 1925.

4. Designed by Max Miedinger in 1957 (with input from Eduard Hoffmann).

5. Among them are Otl Aicher, Bayer, Max Bill, Adrian Frutiger, Hoffmann, Ernst Keller, El Lissitzky Miedinger, László Moholy-Nagy, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Emil Ruder, Theo van Doesburg and Vignelli.

6. It is a common misconception that Kinross took issue with "modernity" as such. He never disputes its tenets of *simplicity* and *functionalism*. Rather, his gripe is with the "general understanding" that modern design and typography are somehow neutral, rhetorically speaking.

7. This is not to say that typography succumbed to rigourous abstraction altogether — letterforms still sprout decorative detail at this time in design.

8. In the context of this article, I refer to "interface design" as it relates to screen-based technology specifically. That is, while I am aware that an "interface" can describe any media that serves as a point in communication (Doris Bravo 2003:[sp]), I limit the term here for illustration purposes.

9. Hypertext markup language. A standardised coding system used to build the infrastructure of a website.

10. Cascading style sheet. A styling language used for describing the presentation of fonts, colours, graphics and hyperlink effects on a document written in a markup language such as HTML.

11. A preset width dimensions at which a webpage displays alternative layout formations depending on the available space of the display medium.

12. I should point out that Microsoft first introduced "flat design" for their Windows mobile interface in 2010. However, it is possible to argue that it became popular only when it reached Windows 8 (Bowie 2020:[sp]).

13. I have also noticed an emerging trend known as "neomorphism", which is essentially flat design, but includes drop shadows and embossing to lift flat elements from the canvas. See Michal Malewicz (2019): https://uxdesign.cc/neumorphism-in-user-interfaces-b47cef3bf3a6

14. This was not the first time Yahoo! had rebranded. For a comprehensive timeline, see: https://logoblink.com/yahoo-logos-from-1994-till-now/ (accessed 20 March 2020).

15. This is not the first design for Yahoo!; however, it is arguably the first "official" variation.

16. Within the context of this article, I refrain, as far as possible, from discussing logo "marks" or "icons", as my focus is on typography specifically. However, in the interest of future research, it may prove fruitful to interrogate other aspects of a brand identity. I suspect that since icons are typically seen as 'more communicative' than type, attention to crafting identity is usually directed here. A study such as this might also investigate the fall-out for typography as a result.

17. It is also worthwhile pointing out that the 2018 rebrand comes as ABSA separated from the Barclays Group. There is something of a trend, it seems, that design agencies tend to opt for "safe" letterforms where major shifts occur as companies merge, disband or become part of a global conglomerate.

18. I should point out that in the 1980s and 1990s, MTV had already developed the framework for a logosystem. See *Ultimate collection of 230 MTV ID idents adverts bumpers.*

19. Again, I must point out that I have no issue with the system in itself, it is practical — especially for campaign or event branding, where a logo must adapt rapidly, day-to-day. Moreover, this may be a useful solution to what Oosthuizen (2004:61-62) meant in explaining that global brands would need to uniquely customise their identity in a unique manner for different cultures

20. Ironically, Bierut predicted this in 2007, in *Seventy-nine short essays on design.* In referring to his own dissolution with what he refers to as 'neo-modernists' who trade 'point of view' for passivity, he appears to predict his own fate (Bierut 2007:146).

21. This is reminiscent of Baldassare Castiglione's concept of *sprezzatura* from *The Courtier* (1528). Castiglione describes *sprezzatura* as 'a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless'.

22. We seem to be rebuilding our safe-fonts library with types such as *Avenir, Proxima, Open Sans, Product Sans* and *Roboto* — the more "robotic", the wider the appeal.

23. This might also be interpreted as personification, metonymy or polyptoton. In this case, I make use of synecdoche with reference to how Ehses and Lupton use the term in *Rhetorical Handbook* (1988:16). They explain that '[S]ynechdoche uses a part of an object to represent the whole … a recognisable characteristic … represents a commonly known attribute'. Subtle tweaks in Feather Bold represent the structure of a wing for example.

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