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THE ILLUSIVE TYPE: HUNTING TYPOGRAPHIC SIMULACRA

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ABSTRACT

Typically, when evaluating iconic typefaces, we investigate the degree to which they communicate well-established connotative narratives. Helvetica, for example, is an icon of simplicity and clarity and so, is applied across various designs to exude similar tones. Bodoni, a showpiece of Neoclassicism, detailing and adornment facilitated by technological advancement during the 18th century Industrial Revolution, often appears in designs suited to premium brands. Iconic typefaces such as these are tied to their symbolism; it appears that their symbolic ‘myths’ have ‘always been so.’ As I demonstrate however, there are examples of iconic typefaces whose myths are in fact entirely fabricated, illusionary; ‘borrowed’ from the origins of other media, to the extent that they appear more real than their true historical origin. They are, I argue, examples of Baudrillard’s simulacra.

While it is possible to argue that typographic simulacra are deceptive imposters, in this paper, I argue that they may in fact also offer designers a way to look at and apply iconic type that breaks with clichéd connotations attached to it. Simulacra can offer an absence of narrative; a clearing out of sorts, whereby designers generate new connotations – breathing new life into stayed typefaces.

INTRODUCTION: LIMIT ON TYPOGRAPHIC MYTHS

“Typefaces are rich with the gesture and spirit of their own era … Letterforms frame the message; they place content in historical and cultural context.” (Rock 1994).

Rock’s view summarises a relatively long-standing and by now widely held view of typography as symbolically rich, rhetorical media. As graphic signatures of our culture, typefaces embody rich historical landscapes as well as social, cultural and technological practices of any given era (Heller 2001). As designers know, when electing a typeface to sign a brand, Helvetica is often a safe option since it signifies a sense of ‘modernity’ and ‘professionalism’. On the other hand, if the intention of a design is to suggest rebelliousness, a designer might overlay distorted letters over body copy, a few degrees off the horizontal access and have it bleed off the side out the margins. Alternatively, a designer might opt for Bodoni’s luxurious variegated serifs, set in gold foil for the logo of a fashion brand. Or, if they are attempting to convey the idea of ‘poor design’ the may elect Comic Sans. For craft beer labelling, a designer may opt for a ‘uniquely’ handcrafted typeface whereas if the beer brand has historical provenance, an ‘established in’ moniker, set in one of the Blackletter variants may be a wise choice. For a space-themed film poster, geometric, condensed letterforms that are widely tracked is usually a safe bet, and for a horror, a spikey or blood-soaked typeface will do. And if the goal is to elevate a brand to ‘global’ status, a designer may seek to subdue visual peculiarities within a typeface to blend in with the rest of the nice, round, pleasant letters pervading the global landscape at the moment (Figure 1).

There are indeed thousands of examples of these sorts of connotative typefaces; of typefaces that embody...
historical, social, cultural and technological practices of an era, a place or genre (Rock 1994; Hyndman 2016). Moreover, it is precisely because they are so prolific that their connotations are in turn, so ingrained. Their connotations become, in the Barthesian sense, cultural myths that conjure associative narratives in the minds of viewers. Because of this, they serve as an expansive visual archive for communication designers since they immediately reference what we already know of their context (Bruinsma 2004). It is indeed the case that in current design practice, designers frequently implement symbolic types in their designs as visual shorthand since they embody immediately connotative structures. Myth has thus become a dominant rhetorical influence in the selection and application of type (Mayo 1993: 41). It is because of Barthes’ mythic analysis that we can articulate, in analytical terms, that as signs, letterforms are extraordinarily powerful connotative structures.

One downside to this is that mythic signification can become a communicative crutch; a kind of narrative regurgitation whereby, in the repetitive application of well-established typefaces, we develop typographic clichés. Type applications that continuously resignify cultural narratives and thus become predictable and prosaic. In my experience as a designer and design lecturer, I share Meggs’ (2001), Bierut’s (2007) and

Heller’s (2015) view that at both the foundational and professional level, there seems to be a kind of type-lathery whereby designers are typically so involved in crafting other, more ‘obviously’ rhetorical design media, such as imagery and layout for example, that type is often only glanced at toward the end of a project. At this point, designers tend either toward ‘safe,’ ‘neutral’ typefaces or otherwise regurgitate typographic trends by grabbing hold of trusty, but overused, type canons. The result is that our design landscape is littered with a spiralling continuum of monotonous type applications; a kind of culture jam where convoluted and virtually identical typographic forms dominate; used in the same clichéd ways, in the most predictable of places, over and over again.

In observing the above trend, I have investigated ways to disrupt and re-energise the way designers select and apply type in a symbolic capacity. In researching divergent strands of philosophy, I have considered that it is perhaps useful to look at adapting Baudrillard’s concept of ‘simulacra’ as a framework for dislodging or at least prodding at these deeply entrenched type habits. In this paper I therefore investigate examples of type that illustrate, to varying degrees, breaks in the process of mythic signification. That is, I identify typographic myths that are indiscriminately upended owing to a range of social and technological factors and describe how their narrative ‘origins’ are diachronically unlocatable. As I shall demonstrate, there are examples of iconic typefaces whose myths are in fact entirely fabricated, illusionary; ‘borrowed’ from the origins of other media, to such an extent that they appear more real than their true historical origin. Put another way, I identify clear narrative breaks in each example where the typeface moves from being a mythic reflection of ‘real’ cultural constructions, to that of a hyperreal simulation of reference (Baudrillard 1988b; 1988c).

While there is cause to assert that typographic simulacra are deceptive impostors in this regard, in this paper, I argue that they may in fact also offer designers a way to look at and apply iconic type that breaks with clichéd connotations attached to it. To this end, the methodological focus of the paper is on iconic type specimens and not, for instance, lesser known typefaces. This is because the intention is to disrupt established connotative attachment to ‘iconic’ typeface. In other words, I intentionally narrow the focus of the study to typefaces with uniquely discernible mythic qualities.

Toward the end of the paper I focus on ways of implementing Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra as a rhetorical tool in the selection and application of iconic typography. Simulacra, in this sense, offer an absence of narrative; a clearing out of sorts, whereby designers can engage in generating new connotations that breathe new life into stayed typefaces.

SIMULACRA AT A GLANCE

Having written extensively in multiple discursive fields, from philosophy and sociology to cultural literary theory and media studies, Baudrillard’s discursive catalogue is extensive. He is also widely regarded as an academic chameleon; having written from a Marxist perspective earlier in his career, he transitioned to adopt more of a post-poststructural, McLuhan-esque take on media as communicative simulators later on. Despite his expansive writing territory, there are several core themes synonymous with his work. Of most relevance to this study is Baudrillard’s attempt to make intelligible, one of the most perplexing aspects of the advanced industrial society at the turn of the 20th century – the proliferation of communication through media.

Unlike in earlier decades where communication was limited to relatively local platforms, post-World War II media, Baudrillard argues, employs a kind of world-wide communication montage. Today, our world is governed by pixels on a screen. Communication is governed, that is, by the illusion of images; simulations so convincing that they are more real than reality – they are hyperreal (Baudrillard 1988c). It is a unique reality dominated by objects and signs that are removed entirely from their ‘original’ context and so have no firm referent. In short, he paints a world dominated by media-induced ‘simulations’ (Poster 1988).

Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra is borne from his critiques on ‘structural theories’ that proclaim to provide ‘objective reality.’ For example, Baudrillard critiques Saussure’s structural linguistics as well the universalism described in both Lévi-Strauss and Mauss’ anthropological and semiological systems (Poster 1988). For Baudrillard, no structural ideology; no system – neither Marx’s reductive critique on capitalism nor Saussure’s ahistorical semiology – adequately describe how meaning is produced in the late 20th century (Genosko 2002). Instead, each of these systems exist in theoretical violence, as a cyclical reversal or redoubling of the principals they sought to surpass (Baudrillard 1988b). They exist, Baudrillard suggests, as repetitive, repressive simulations: “...they only evoke themselves in an indefinite metonymic spiral” (Baudrillard 1988a). Baudrillard thus embarked on constructing a ‘new’ theory that would not only describe the production of meaning through signs, but also how signs are circulated.
Baudrillard (1988b) makes the claim that the entire symbolic system; of production and of reproduction is absorbed and recycled ad nauseam. A key aspect to the generation of simulacra is the medium by which they are circulated. Media are simulation machines, Baudrillard argues, reproducing images, signs and codes at a rapid pace (Kellner 1998). He continues that media create spectacles of scenarios that are more intense than scenes of banal, everyday, ‘real’ life (Kellner 2019).

At the apex of ever increasing simulacra, we find the digital and programmatic medium. Simulacra, as a coded signal, proliferate rapidly through media, particularly those that exploit digitality – the Internet, social media, artificial intelligence and so on. By way of a digital medium, meaning is abridged into ‘bites’ of codified responses and are perpetually relayed (Baudrillard: 1988b). Because signs are constantly recirculated within our digital environment, their symbolism too, fluctuates indeterminately. Through constant circulation, each sign’s signification is gradually neutralised and eventually terminated. There is nothing left to ground our systems on, apart from a kind of theoretical violence.

From here, Baudrillard steps it up a gear and contends that since simulations are regurgitated indefinitely – an ‘indefinite chaining of simulations’ – symbolic exchange becomes ungraspable. Meaning is no longer produced, but reproduced to the extent that it is turned against its sign. Through constant reproduction, signs become merely ‘models’; models of the real sign. As models, they reverse origin and finality since its initial symbolism (initial signification) deteriorates as it gradually loses its connotative ‘usefulness’. In other words, the sign’s referential value is nullified because it no longer finds social relevance (Baudrillard 1988b). The result is that there are no longer signs and their signification; referentiality is swept off the table. In their wake are merely their simulations. Every sign, of every system therefore points to a phantom reference; a simulated reference. Meaning is simply reproduced; simulated over and over to the extinction of the ‘original reference’. Simulacra in this way is an allegory of death because, as signs are reproduced further and further (away from its determinate origin), the hyperreal swallows its ‘real’ signification; it becomes reality for its own sake. The sign, in rapid circulation, is emancipated from its origin and is emptied of its historical and libidinal meaning. Gone are the referentials of Saussure’s signification, of Barthes mysticism, of history and of the ‘real.’ All this is surpassed by an era of total relativity; the era of predetermined, meaningless codified prompts and responses (Baudrillard 1988b).

Baudrillard argues that signs today exchange amongst themselves exclusively, without interacting with referential anchors in the ‘real’. The entire ecology of sign-exchange is a spectacle of the real. This spectacle materialises in simulacra of the third order where the binary between the real and the simulacrum collapses. Simulacra produce simulations as signs of the real. They do so to such exactitude that they appear more real than the real:

“It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.” (Baudrillard 1988c).

Baudrillard argues that simulacra proliferate and reproduce further signs in ever-expanding and spirular cycles. In their ‘senseless unfolding’ simulacra leave no room for any meaning – they are anti-semiological. Baudrillard describes this as the ‘precession of simulacra’; a state of constant recycling of mutable signs to the point of such oversaturation that their referents are destabilised; they are generated by models of the real without origin or reality except their own. They are dedicated exclusively to reproduce their occurrence as instances of signs and no longer any ‘real’ referentiality. Simulacra refer only to themselves; a ‘carnival of mirrors’ with no particular aims beyond indefinitely reflecting images projected from other mirrors (Baudrillard 1988b; 1988c).

**TYPE AS SIMULACRA**

Although Baudrillard’s work has been explored in the context of industrial, architectural, interior design and ‘design’ broadly speaking (see Giovannoni 2016 and Holt 2016), I have yet to come across literature that suggests much of a connection between Baudrillardian simulacra as it is applied in typographic discourse specifically. Every so often however, Baudrillard (1988c) refers to simulacra as being a medium of ‘design.’ For instance, he refers to ‘image makers’ as neo-sorcerers who create the illusion of meaning by artificially revitalising the real (Baudrillard 1988c). Elsewhere, Baudrillard also describes the plight of ‘hyperrealists;’ codifiers who reproduce near perfect visual resemblances to the real. He explains that it is the communicating ‘agent’ of a society that organisers signs through communicative media (Baudrillard 1988c). In these citations, although Baudrillard is referring to the ‘designed image’ in general, it is possible to suggest that as a visual image in its own right, type’s visual forms – its letterforms – are potentially a fertile conduit for simulacra. Baudrillard himself seems to insinuate as much when he explains that “as soon as you are in front of the
screen, you no longer see the text as text, but as an image” (Baudrillard 2005). It is thus worthwhile to consider whether type, as a medium of design, may be considered as a form of simulacra in the same way.

Having lived until 2007, Baudrillard would have been acutely aware of how potent typography would become in terms of dominating real estate on screens and other digital interfaces. It follows therefore that the more ‘screen-friendly’ the typographic image becomes, the greater the symbolic reductionism and revisionism it endures (Baudrillard 2005). Baudrillard appears to confirm this when he explains that, as a governing medium of the digital screen, text-based simulacra induce a kind of hyperreal immersion (Baudrillard 2005). Indeed, as designers continue to strip the digital screen of visual debris in pursuit of ever ‘cleaner’ virtual interfaces, they rely more and more on type, as copy, as a descriptive and navigational tool. In doing so, they afford typographic simulacra in particular, the latitude to proliferate extensively within the digital environment. It is therefore possible to argue that type on screen is a prime example of simulacra.

**TYPOGRAPHIC SIMULACRA - ACCESSIBILITY**

As I alluded to above, certain typefaces achieve a level of ubiquity where their connotative myths are perpetually recycled, so that although they are adapted over time and in different contexts, the distinguishable link to their original myth is strengthened through each adaptation. One might argue then, that as a typeface becomes more iconic and ubiquitous, its myth is further entrenched. In particular instances however, the opposite occurs whereby it is precisely a typeface’s ubiquity that renders its origin unlocatable; what might at first appear to be a surplus of meaning is in fact directly destructive of itself.

**Comic Sans**, designed in 1994 by Vincent Connare is a prime example of typographic simulacra here. The typeface was included as a free, supplementary typeface for Windows 95 and upon release, quickly achieved global exposure since anyone with a desktop computer could access it. **Comic Sans** was originally intended to annotate instructions and prompts delivered by a sweet, child-like illustration of a dog named Microsoft Bob (Figure 2). Initially, Microsoft implemented the more formal **Times New Roman** typeface to annotate the programme. However, after receiving largely negative feedback from focus groups, Connare was approached to design a ‘friendlier’ typeface to complement its barking counterpart. Connare explains that he looked to various comic style typefaces of the 1980s from DC and Marvel comics since they appeared to emanate a more relaxed tone. Connare thus drew **Comic Sans** by hand, using a felt-tip pen, to exude what Garfield (2010) describes as letterforms comparable to the soft, round and blunted end of a child’s scissors. In the decades that followed, unimpeded access to **Comic Sans** has meant that its intended signification is typically overlooked. Since the typeface is so easily accessed on most design and desktop publishing software, it is also haphazardly sprawled across restaurant menus, ambulance and transport decals, clothing, porn sites, church brochures, health and safety signage, instruction manuals, and a near infinite array of other applications that have little or nothing to do with the iconic typeface’s ‘friendly’ tone (Figure 3).

In the case of **Comic Sans**, a primary driving factor in its dissemination is its accessibility through digitality. As I have pointed out, Baudrillard argues that it is through the digital screen that we become progressively less cognisant of the exhaustion of the reality principle (Clarke et al. 2009). Although Baudrillard unpacks this idea in reference to the digital screen specifically, he recognises that the visual screen broadly speaking, induces a kind of immersion that extends to any medium (Baudrillard 2005).
In the case of *Cooper Black* (designed in 1918 by Oswald Cooper) for example, accessibility is promoted not so much via its channel of delivery, but primarily through its structural form. The typeface was designed at a time when advertising was reaching a new zenith owing to a great resurgence of product demand after the second World War (Heller, in *Vox* 2020). At the time, several other headline fonts including *Block Condensed*, *Hadrino* and *New Century Schoolbook* were also disseminated for similar purposes. Yet none were nearly as prolific as *Cooper Black* which was used in newspaper headlines and large scale posters to advertise a vast gamut of otherwise disparate products, from car advertisements to cold medicine, music lessons and turntables to soap, ginger ale, Kelloggs, Spaghetti, puzzles, ketchup, anti-thumb sucking devices, storefront signage, hair products and so on (Figure 4) (Heller 2014).

Apart from vigorous marketing to printers across Chicago, what made *Cooper Black* particularly popular is its formal irregularities (Heller 2014). Compared to other headline fonts, its edges and corners are substantially softened and rounded to the point where, as Heller (in *Vox* 2020) describes it, the letters look like “... somebody took an air pump to a tire ...” Moreover, the typeface’s counters (particularly evident in the ‘o’) share a uniquely tilted vertical stress. In addition, the baselines of the letters and their serifs are curved (as opposed to straight, as
is typically the case in headline fonts) resulting in a
typeface rather forgiving of misalignment, kerning issues
and rotational errors. At a time when the materials used
for advertising and publication printing – wood and
metal – were prone to such errors, it meant that where
irregularities in other, more rigid typefaces looked like
obvious errors, in Cooper Black, it appeared to be an
intentional ‘quirk’ in its design. Importantly, this meant
that the typeface was particularly accessible to the average
user. For instance, smaller businesses and run-of-the-mill
shop owners who could not afford a skilled typesetter
or signage designer could get away with rudimentary
headline and logo applications.

In the decades that immediately followed, the typeface’s
popularity grew exponentially. It was even adopted by
DIYers of counterculture movements during the late 1960s;
particularly by activists who protested the Vietnam war
and proponents of various pro-black movements (Figure
5). At the same time, Cooper Black’s bloated forms also
came to symbolise the tongue-in-cheek aesthetic of the
’swinging sixties’ and of ‘flower-power.’ Indeed, up until
the 1970s, Cooper Black was the go-to typeface, enshrined
upon popular vinyl album covers to visually connote ‘soul,’
‘funk’ and ‘disco’ (Figure 6). Today, the typeface is used
indiscriminately in a plethora of applications, spanning
multiple thematic genres: in advertisements for television
comedies; on packaging for products as varied as ramen
and pasta, hotdogs, beans, beer, chocolate and coffee; in
corporate airline branding; metal and rap album covers;
identification signage, fashion, political posters, religious
regalia and, as it appears, even in editorial design for Polish
hip-hop artists (Figure 7).

Figure 4: Examples of 1920s newspaper advertisements featuring Cooper Black, designed by Oswald Cooper, 1918-1920.
Comic Sans and Cooper Black serve as examples of ubiquitous typefaces that have been repurposed so prolifically and indiscriminately that they no longer point to a particular historical origin. It is perhaps possible to argue that connotation evoked by these typefaces is exclusive to either the viewer’s unique frame of reference, or the formal appearance of the letters. In most instances, however, they are most likely implemented because they are accessible. In almost a viral effect of popular culture, the more each typeface is used, the more they are used.

TYPOGRAPHIC SIMULACRA - TACTICAL ILLUSIONS

Where the above examples illustrate a somewhat spontaneous precession of typographic simulacra, in other cases, mythic displacement is more deliberate. Here, I am referring to instances where typographic narratives might at first appear given and organically resignified, but upon closer inspection, are deliberately ‘staged.’ In these examples, typographic simulacra proliferate by strategically hijacking the narrative of another, presenting it as its diachronic origin and in doing so, making it appear as if it had always been so. In these instances, they propagate what Baudrillard refers to as tactical hallucinations; illusions that protect and construct an origin by depending on a pretext of another reality (Baudrillard 1988b; 1988d).

Playbill, designed in 1938 by Robert Harling, is a particularly interesting example of typographic simulacra in this sense. Conventionally, the typeface is perhaps most immediately evocative of old western genre films. In particular, many would recognise its fat slabs and stretched characters from ‘wanted’ posters (Figure 8). The typeface was, however, not intended as an icon of the Wild West. Playbill is actually an example of a late-Victorian Egyptian slab; a family of typefaces characterised by particularly fat (or bold) slab serifs. To begin with, the nomenclature, ‘Egyptian,’ (or Egyptian) itself is a form of appropriative simulacra since nothing would have resembled such a type style in Northern Africa or the Middle East. The name first appears at the turn of the 19th century when, upon returning from a three-year expedition of Egypt, Napoleon brought an array of exotic artefacts that ignited a craze for Egyptian-esque oddities. Egyptian naming conventions thus took hold across Europe, not least by type foundries in France and England who dubbed their newest font styles ‘Egyptian slabs’ (Penney 2016). Hence, Egyptian slabs like Playbill proliferated advertising posters on street poles and theatre playbills across the continent (Figure 9).

Owing to a significant uptake in information transmission, Victorian design spread globally toward the end of the 19th century contributing to an explosion in printed advertising industries (Jubert 2006). To meet competitive print demands, typographers capitalised on the near limitless capacity of ornamental freedom that technological advancements afforded letterform manipulation, by dressing characters in heavily ornamental flourishes (Heller 2006). Loud, decorative characters, like Egyptians, attained diversity and richness, spawning eclectic innovations composed of expanded, outlined, in-lined, extruded, faceted, floriated, perspectival and bowed forms (Jubert 2006).

A little over 60 years later Playbill makes its rather abrupt appearance in western genre films. Hollywood’s predilection toward Playbill in particular, is curious however, since the expensive, bulky type presses needed to design and reproduce it were not readily available in the sweeping desert landscapes and rugged rural terrain of the American frontier. Instead, as Garfield (2010) points out, typography before 1880 would most likely have been hand-written since they were circulated locally with limited quantities needed. It is possible that a printing press – which was at the time the only way to reproduce Playbill – was used, however, it would have proven far more practical to transport a compact typewriter from larger cities. Even after the 1880s, when national bounty agencies such as the Pinkerton Agency had largely standardised wanted posters, they made use of Bodoni or similar Didones predominantly (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Examples of ‘Wanted’ poster designs, featuring Playbill, designed by Robert Harling, 1938. A | Wanted poster design for Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973). B | Screenshot from The outlaw Josey Wales (1976). C | Wanted poster design used in Django unchained (2013).
There is therefore little to no systematic or historical link to suggest a natural connection between Playbill and the western film genre. The United States (US) has and continues to dominate global communication via screen-based media and is frequently accused, including by Baudrillard, of haphazardly ‘borrowing’ convenient narratives from other cultures. As is typically the case with Americana, fierce capitalistic endeavours upend the typeface from its original diachronic timeline and supplant it as a hyperreal simulacra. That is, today Playbill appears to have virtually no connection to British or French Victorian type design and even less with the *Egyptienne exotique* of 19th-century Europe, but has instead become a simulacrum of the American frontier, cemented in American pop culture (Rath 2016).

In a further example, typefaces of the ‘Chop suey’ family, bear a similar mark of American capitalism whereby their historical narratives are entirely manufactured from the moment the typeface is disseminated. Chop suey is a type of ‘ethnic’ or ‘exotic’ typographic classification, that

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Figure 10: Examples of genuine wanted posters from the early 1900s. None feature *Playbill* (Fifer & Kidston 2003). A | Wanted poster for Jesse Scoble and Calvin Cochran, Blaine County, Idaho, 1913. B | Wanted poster for John Horge, Cando County, North Dakota, 1914.

demarcates types designed for consumption by western audiences with the explicit goal of capturing the ‘essence’ of ‘authentic’ Chinese culture (and orientalism in general). These types, which include Mandarin, Peking, Karate, Jing Jing, Rice Bowl and a plethora of others, are liberally disseminated across various ‘Chinese’ applications – from traditional print media such as Chinese restaurant menus and signage to spatial demarcation branding for various ‘Chinatowns’ around the globe (Figure 11).

Chop suey fonts are however by no means endemic to traditional or cultural Chinese writing practices. Instead, the typefaces’ historical constitution is a by-product of Chinese diaspora and of race-based immigration policies in the US. Briefly, Chinese migrants first arrived to the US as slaves in the early 19th century and by the 1870s, after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, anti-Chinese sentiment escalated. Since the US was experiencing a significant economic downturn at the time, the public generally viewed cheap labour as an economic threat. Subsequently, in 1882, several political institutions succeeded in urging the US government to sign into legislation, a Chinese exclusion bill, which made it increasingly difficult for Chinese immigration and prevented newly settled immigrants from becoming naturalised citizens. The exclusion lasted for roughly 60 years (until World War II where China assisted the US in opposing Japan) during which time Chinatowns around the US developed as sanctuaries for Chinese immigrants. To attract business, local communities within these Chinatowns approached US architects to develop ‘tourist-friendly’ spaces. According to Boman (2022), the architects, having little knowledge of authentic Chinese architecture, incorporated exaggerated ‘oriental features’ such as dragons and winged pagodas, into their designs.

One of the chief by-products of this ‘branding’ exercise, was the development of a similarly branded wayfinding and signage apparatus centred around a typographic system of curved and pointed wedge-like shapes. These shapes, crafted into the letterforms, were intended to mimic the characteristic form of Chinese brush calligraphy. However, as is the case with the cuisine namesake, Chop suey types are in fact American inventions. That is, Chop suey fonts bear no real relation to authentic Chinese calligraphy since their letterforms do not conform to the stylistic nuances endemic to authentic Chinese script (Boman 2022). The most obvious is that the strokes of Chop suey characters tend to be forced, at random, onto the armature of Roman letters in a manner that ignores the calligraphic emphasis on structural balance and harmony in traditional Hansu.

Moreover, the traditional orientation of Hansu characters – fashioned in self-contained ideographic cubes so that they can be read from top to bottom – is also compromised so that text can be ‘read,’ from left to right, by English and other Latin-based speakers (Shaw 2009).

In the examples above, there is clearly tactical redirection of the diachronic trajectory of each typeface’s origin myth. The examples illustrate how typefaces, as simulacra, may present tactical hallucinations – illusions that depend on the pretext of another reality – as a means to construct and subsequently strengthen origins of their own (Baudrillard 1988b; 1988d). The hallucinations are tactical in that like a carnival of mirrors, as they proliferate, they come only to reflect origins of other visual ‘screens’ (Kellner 2019). Typographic simulacra offer a spectacle, not of the real, but of the historical dimension; of our memory of the real. Typographic simulacra induce a kind of performed memory; a failure of historical representation to the extent that reality is delimitated indefinitely (Baudrillard 2005).

It is also worthwhile pointing out that all the fonts presented here have a uniquely discernible visual quality. Interestingly, the more memorable a typeface is, the more susceptible it seems to be to the whims of simulative infiltration. This might seem somewhat counterintuitive and ironic, since, as I have pointed out, the more iconic a typeface is, the more ingrained its historical origin, its diachronic myth, should be. This is however, what Baudrillard (1988b) alludes to when he contends that simulacra short circuit myth.

RHETORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1 Chop suey types are not the only example of typographic simulacra that hijack stereotypical ethnic narratives. For example, the simplest way to declare that you are a ‘Greek’ store owner is to substitute any Ε’s in a brand’s logo with sharp, straight-edged triangular sigmas. A bizarre visual canon has also been established where Victorian Tuscans have become shorthand for authentic Mexican food and alcohol. According to Hyndman (2021), scholars are unable to shed much light on the origins of this visual connection. One theory is that the letterforms’ spikey silhouette may be reminiscent of traditional hacienda architecture or perhaps cactus thorns. Another follows a particular trend in the practice of digitising Tuscan wood display typefaces during the 1990s, where different types were named after kinds of wood to assign some sort of arbitrary provenance to a wood type origin.
Now that I have illustrated what typographic simulacra entail, it is worthwhile to unpick communicative implications that may arise, of which designers may wish to consider. There are, for instance, a few scenarios whereby the implementation of typographic simulacra may result in unintended communication; a rather tricky communicative situation that requires more nuanced rhetorical navigation. In promoting the proliferation of numerous and vastly different mythical narratives encapsulated by one typeface, there is a risk of encourages what Baudrillard (1988c) describes as the ‘precession of simulacra;’ signs that proliferate in a ‘senseless unfolding,’ producing further simulacra *ad infinitum*. There is certainly a concern that left undirected, a network of unruly connotative offshoots may potentially communicate in unintended, or perhaps even devastating ways.

Let me initiate this brief discussion by commenting on Baudrillard’s position that simulacra evolve from the short-circuiting of *difference* through *distance*. He explains that, particularly in the digital environment, distance is everywhere abolished. As we enter the visual screen unimpeded, the visual is stripped of its historical dimension. As soon as we engage with letterforms upon the screen, we no longer see text as text, but as simulacra; visual noise whose historical dimension is removed from memory (Baudrillard 2005). As I alluded to earlier, the virtual image is uniquely positioned as a prime form of simulacra, especially as it rapidly disseminates, often without contextual reference, across networks. When users view, like and share typographic images (or images that contain typographic content) across digital networks, they often do so in a way that promotes what Szabla and Blommaert (2018) refer to as ‘context collapse’. Owing to the speed and ease with which we view and share information online – that we respond to emotionally, empathetically or intellectually – we may not always have, nor take the time to build as well defined contextual insights or symbolic interactions as we have traditionally done with other, slower mediums of interaction. Thus, our (visual) interactions that revolve largely around contextualisation in online communication are disproportionately flexible when compared to other forms of traditional interaction.

The virtual medium is also powerfully adept at erasing contextual signification that is uniquely perceptible by cultures in particular geographical demarcations,
when viewed by those elsewhere. What is immediately understood by cultures positioned in different geographical regions, may differ immensely. A young South African may not have the same cultural frame of reference by which to interpret the myths attached to *Playbill* typeface, as someone who has lived for a period in England, for instance. Therefore, introducing a typeface that has well defined myths in one geographical area, to a culture that has had less exposure to such myths, may induce fresh perceptions, derived from other forms of ethnographic knowledge.

The same may be attributed to perceptual differences that arise as a result of distance in time or era. It is not by accident that above, I refer to a *young* South African. Age is of course not the only factor that defines an individual’s frame of reference, since access to historical context is fairly accessible in the digital era. What I mean is that as we become socialised from birth, we develop layers of understanding as we age and build ‘lived experiences’ naturally (Mead 1972). For instance, those who were raised between 1920-1970 may have a greater understanding of the narratives that enwrap modernist typography than those after 2000. In many instances, if a teenager today is confronted by a conceptually rich, modern typeface, they may not have a working knowledge of its myth(s). Moreover, although they may have means of accessing streams of information that help clarify, particularly owing to digitalisation, the amount of time they engage with a particular instance of typographic simulacra may not warrant the resources needed to engage thoroughly.

Difference in genre is also an area whereby simulacra may be developed. Our understanding of genre develops as we are exposed to different phenomena. Our interests shift over time as we develop new social groups, alter our political inclinations, experience changes in our personality or find new economic grounding for instance. As a result, our formal tastes also alter as we are exposed to differences in taste. We may develop a preference for simplicity over clutter, familiarity over the strange or specificity over ubiquity, for instance.

Even the most seemingly arbitrary or ‘dead’ signs can develop a kind of meta-narrative; a deep cultural code – a pattern or theme – that replicates and spreads, despite divergent or pre-programmed interpretations. To a large section of the public, certain typefaces may look familiar, yet their cultural codes are not immediately understood. In the case of *Cooper Black* for instance, different, unrelated bytes of information accumulate and render the typeface widely resonant within a global *Zeitgeist*. Although not all readers participate in the values of the symbol, there seems to be a general agreement – a ‘global think’ – that it indeed has some sort of symbolic value. As a result, the typeface is somehow registered as ‘cool,’ ‘irreverent’ and ‘youthful’. Today we observe these sorts of mythic narrative envelope typefaces more readily. I agree withHenriques and Görtz (2020) that this is largely due to an increasingly digitalised internet society. We like, comment on and share images in more or less an *ad hoc* manner. They are passed on indiscriminately, received largely without much in the way of context, and then shared over and over, to repeat the process. In a snowball effect, each time a typographic image is received, its signs are reinterpreted and reattached alongside an accumulated mountain of others.

One way to mitigate unintended communication is to order and direct it. Barthes (1977) refers to this as the practice of ‘anchorage’. He explains that the rhetorician makes use of various techniques to fix the chain of ‘floating chains’ of polysemous signs, in such a way as to counter the ‘terror of uncertain sign.’ He extends that the rhetorician “helps me to choose the correct level of perception” (Barthes 1972). Designers are rhetoricians in this sense. Their ‘techniques,’ the compositional, hierarchical and conceptual design decisions that, in understanding the social and context of the reader, a designer makes, directs or ‘anchors’ a preferred reading of the design artefact (Rose 2001). I agree with Bruinsma (2000) and Lupton (2000) that the importance of designers as mediating agents in this sense cannot be understated. It is integral to the practice of design that designers have a robust working knowledge of, or at least an ingrained discipline to research

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[1] Although there is a case to be made that the digital environment has ‘virtually’ eliminated geographical distance (our cultures are becoming ever more mixed and homogenised), our perceptions are nevertheless still largely shaped by ethno graphic interactions surrounding local symbolism, social and language conventions, experiential evidence, scientific, biological, contextual knowledge and so on (Strauss 1993).

[2] This may of course be because its ‘blobbish’ forms convey a generalised ‘retro’ aesthetic, but then again, there are at least dozens of other, similarly formed typefaces that have not achieved the same level of social usage.
the historical significance of the typefaces they engage with. The task of the communication designer is to build narrative connections between their designs and audiences. To do so, they ground their work to some degree, in historic precedent, tapping the familiarity of existing symbols and styles (Lupton 2000). In strategically structuring these rhetorical narratives, the designer directs the audience through a systematic sequence of corroborating signs, which cultivates a preferred reading (Atzmon 2008). Designers, practised in the art of researching the visual literacy of a given audience are catalysts in this sense. They come to understand an audiences’ cultural references and trigger communication through the visual imagery they produce (Bruinsma 2004; 2005).

**DISCUSSION**

To this end, I propose there is a potential communicative benefit in encouraging the generation and implementation of certain typographic simulacra in design. I propose that beyond simply adapting catalogues of already existing typographic myths, designers might proactively engage in evolving and directing new mythic trajectories that might yield unique narratives and draw fresh associations.

I recommend however, that although I have unpacked, in some detail, the application of simulacra in the context of typography specifically, designers might consider how simulacra might be framed in a similar (or in fact, different) way, in various other design fields. Moreover, I maintain that although as designers, we must remain cautious and vigilant in the way our design media communicate, simulacra may be useful in disrupting fixed communicative practices – of mythic regurgitation in particular – in design discourse and practice. In purposefully limiting communication that draws on predicted contextual frames of reference, most design media, much like a typeface, may be read as forms of simulacra. In this way, illustration, photography, iconography and many other image-based media may be interpreted through other experiential pathways which, in turn, provides a ripe environment for design simulacra to generate new mythic concepts. In this way, designers may have at their disposal an even greater index of potential visual myths which they can navigate in fresh ways.

Finally, I maintain that the power of typographic rhetoric lies in generating a more holistic understanding of its many communicative facets. I argue that for designers, a thorough understanding of the complexities involved in symbolic typographic communication necessitates not only an understanding of the naturalised myths that already enwrap letterforms, but also to consider other, less readily accessible rhetorical strategies. If the rhetorical intricacies of type are understood, whereby inter-communicative components of symbolic typefaces are synthesised, designers may be more deliberate in selecting and applying letterforms and therefore direct, and advance mythic associations (Buchanan 2001). In acknowledging and understanding the rhetorical complexity of letterforms – that particular letterforms embody interconnected and multi-layered connotations – a designer can be more considered in reshaping meaning.

**REFERENCES**


