THE LAST FONT—the Rhetorics of Egyptian Typefaces

ABSTRACT: The Last Font explores the development of the Egyptian (also known as Slab-serif) typefaces in the context of cultural, economic and technical changes through the 19th and 20th centuries.

Before photography, complex layouts and more subtle advertising techniques, these letterforms were developed, decorated and ornamented to the extreme in order to give commercial messages greater impact following the rapid growth of advertising that came with the industrialisation. Soon overtaken by a range of new communication tools, these were the last fonts where the shapes of the letters were allowed such a great part in the process of communication.

This paper examines the development of Egyptians through the media theories of Walter Ong (Orality and Literacy) and Friedrich Kittler (Gramophone, Film, Typewriter), rhetoric theories of Richard A. Lanham (The Economics of Attention) and visual information analysis by Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett (Shaping Information—the Rhetoric of Visual Conventions), in order to open up the discourse and unveil a range of new questions related to visual communication.

The work does offer not rules for the use of Egyptian typefaces, but through a broad range of theoretical reference wishes to provide new approaches to the design discourse, for practitioners from the typographic field as well as from related design and communication fields.

Closely linked to my writing is the development of Mido, my own Egyptian typeface. My discoveries while developing the typeface will contextualise the arguments, while the theoretical explorations give new insight to the construction of these letterforms.
INTRODUCTION
Before photography, complex layouts and various advertising techniques, typographic forms were developed, expanded and ornamented to the extreme – to give commercial messages greater impact following the rapid growth of advertising that came with Industrialisation. One of the leading roles in this typographic development was played by the Egyptian typefaces. Their inherent commercial expression make them central to our visual environment to this day.

However, the Egyptians linger at the outskirts of typography. Their close connection to the advertising industry and sometimes blunt forms and loud expressions not suitable for conventional book printing may be the reason for their low status and the lack of research into this area of communication. This paper will follow the development of the Egyptians through cultural, economic and technical changes in the 19th and 20th centuries, using rhetoric and language theory as the method of examination.

As a part of my research I am designing a typeface based on Egyptian traditions, a development which will illustrate the paper. All text in the paper is set in this font.

RHE TOR IC OR TYPOGRAPHY
The introduction of writing separated the speaker from the spoken, according to Walter Ong in Orality and Literacy. By removing words from the world of sound where they had first had their origin writing materialised communication. Furthermore, without the presence of an orator, written words are not tied to a place and time, as spoken ones unavoidably are. With the introduction of the printing press this shift in distribution of information continued.

Print eventually removed the ancient art of (orally based) rhetoric from the centre of the academic education. But Eva Brumberger has identified another sort of rhetoric, and her Ph.D. thesis put forward in 2001 had the title The Rhetoric Of Typography: Five Experimental Studies Of Typeface Personality And Its Effects On Readers And Reading. Brumberger tests how typefaces of different qualities alter the understanding of text and provides strong empirical support for the notion that readers ascribe personality attributes to typefaces and to text passages. Unfortunately, the typefaces investigated are not relevant for this paper, but Brumberger creates a foundation for further research into typographic rhetoric. Just as we conceive of the reader as an active participant in the reading process, we must conceive of the viewer as an active participant in the viewing process. Similarly, just as prior knowledge, expectations, and experience shape readers’ interactions with verbal language, they will shape interactions with visual language. In neither case is the audience simply a passive recipient of presented information.

Whether intentional or not, there will always be a rhetorical aspect of any intervention between people. It is impossible to speak a word orally without intonation Walter Ong writes. Appearance, tone of voice, emphasis and gesture—these are some of the things that in rhetoric terms make up the ethos of the speaker. Looking at the visual manifestations of rhetoric in written communication a new ethos appears, in terms of appearance, tone, emphasis and gesture in the typographic structure. This will, like the body language of a person does for speech, contribute to the understanding and credibility of a text.

The character of the speaker is one of the three components needed in a rhetorical situation; a speech and a listener are the other two. The emotional reaction that the speech (or printed matter) evokes in the listener/reader are described in terms of pathos, and the content and facts provided in the speech are defined as logos.
Aristotle defines rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case all the available means of persuasion". The definition puts an emphasis on the uniqueness of every situation, that one speech – or text – cannot use the same means of persuasion as another. Persuasiveness here means to create a coherent whole, to bring the parts together in the most suited way for context where it will be used. These and many other concepts could be useful in a rhetorical analysis of visual languages as well.

As the amount of printed matter increases, so does visual literacy. We read, interpret, and act according to our interpretations. Walter Ong goes so far as to claim that "more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness." Seen that way, it is surprising how little is known about the human consciousness' interaction with typography.

**06.12.28 METHOD**

The first brush stroke of the first letter of my font. The tool I am using initially is a flat brush and ink diluted with lots of water. This brush will give an even stroke width typical for these letter forms, while the watery ink makes it possible for me to draw lots of letters on top of each other, to try out different shapes until I get to my preferred one.

I then trace the outlines of the brush letters with a pencil, forming words to see if these outlined letters fit together. From there I continue working with pencil on tracing paper, sorting the letters in groups based on their similarities in shape:

```plaintext
oce bdpqg kz as il vwyx ftj nhmur OQCGS MMNKZY BPRDJU VAWX EFLHIT
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The next step is to mix lower- and uppercase letters in pairs and adjust them to find a uniform visual language:

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

**THE LAST FONT**

Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that he was "the last philosopher", Friedrich Kittler has titled Michael Foucault "the last historian", and Kittler himself has been called "the last literary theorist".

This is not to suggest that philosophy, history or literature would cease to exist, rather that the conditions of how we look at the disciplines have changed. Critically clarifying the conditions of a discipline as they did can only be done by looking at it from the outside, in a late phase of the development, and thus the "end" of the discipline is revealed. As long as there are no alternative angles to look from, the end of a discipline is invisible. A parallel can be drawn to the history of writing. As long as writing was the only medium in which to store information – before film, record player and computer – the term medium did not exist. Everything that was communicated (except from spoken language) was filtered through written letters.

Until the early 19th century written letters, whether cast in lead or cut in wood, originated from handwriting and the shapes that came from the pen or the brush. Print was mainly used for books and newspapers, and typography developed towards a refinement within those media. With Industrialisation and mass production a new form of writing was needed for billboards, adverts and display windows. The Egyptian typefaces were an answer to this need. In the early...
19th century these fonts appeared, with a geometric expression and large, square serifs. The shapes of the Egyptians mimic those of shop signs painted with a broad brush, a technique which made the lines of the letters monolinear in a way that earlier fonts, stemming from handwriting, never were. The idea of display typefaces, something unprecedented in typographic history, began to emerge. Typefaces began to have their own voice and became more expressive instead of merely quiet servants of readers. Reading, on the other hand, became a non-linear and active process.47 The first documented example of an Egyptian is Antiquote, by Vincent Figgins, 1815.48

It became apparent that letterforms were not only containers for meaning, but that the shapes of the words themselves contribute to communication. It was also shown that these shapes can be taken from anywhere, as long as the words are still understood. By revealing the conditions of the discipline, by showing that handwriting is only one origin of typography, the first Egyptian becomes the last font.49

07.01.12 INSPIRATION

Egyptians have a nice, friendly appearance, despite their sometimes clumsy, heavy shapes. The aim with my font is to keep the friendliness of the Egyptians but to eliminate the heaviness. To start from the completely opposite end of the strict geometry that usually is the origin of Egyptians, I draw plants for an hour a day, focusing on the stems, leafs and joints. I study the in-between shapes, in order to translate them to the counters of the letters. However small these alterations, I think they will contribute greatly to the image of the text.

Thinking this is my own method, I find out that the great 20th century type designer Adrian Frutiger also made parallels to organic forms in his type designs. I am particularly inspired by the lower case n of his beautiful Apollo, which has no straight lines at all.50

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

The typographic development in the early 19th century, and the commercialisation of text that came with it would not have been possible were it not for the recent progress in printing techniques. The character of groups of typefaces has been largely determined by the technical possibilities of the periods concerned.51 Adrian Frutiger makes this claim, and in Type Sign Symbol he broadly sketches the development of print:

First there was relief type, a process that required the design of a resistant form of letter, since ink bleed made the printing of very thin lines impossible. Intaglio engraving came after that and was prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries. This refined method encouraged experiments with extremely thin lines, and what was to be called modern style, including fonts such as Bodoni and Didot. Third, at the end of the 18th century – and this is where our story starts – came the lithographic drawing. It suddenly became possible to draw characters on a flat, polished stone – free from engraving tool and file – with a brush, pen, ruler, compasses or freehand. This revolutionary technique brought about a completely new situation for type-design. Punch-cutters, typecasters and printers were also under its influence. An almost unlimited variety of letterforms can be seen in the products of this time.52

Three major forms emerged: Fat face, mixing extremely thin and extremely thick lines; Egyptian, moving towards an equal width of strokes and serifs and increased blackness; and Sans serif, monolinear and extremely simplified.

The naming of these new families is everything but straight forward: “It seems that the sans serifs also competed for the name Egyptian.”53 During this time the Antique was popular. Napoleon’s army had plundered Egypt, and, after the defeat, handed over some findings to England, among them the Rosetta stone. This black slab, covered in writing in three languages, was a part of the huge interest in Egyptian culture, and the type foundries must have seen the commercial value in associating their new releases with this trend.
A refined version of the first Egyptians, called Clarendon (by Robert Besley), appeared in 1845 and was intended as a bold font to accompany ordinary text faces in dictionaries. It became very popular and has been widely copied, today the name signifies a whole group of typefaces with similar characteristics. They are lighter than the first Egyptians, and the serifs are thinner. Some of the letters end with curls, which was a typical characteristic of this time.¹⁵

Clarendon is still a very popular typeface for commercial use such as for shop signs and logotypes. An investigation of shop signs on a Swedish high street will show a range of Clarendon users, from retailers such as Dressmann and Din Sko to fast food restaurants. The font’s strong personal character, or ethos, makes any name set in it almost instantly look like a logotype. Another reason for its popularity might be the combination of usability and decorative details. It is easy to like the font, it has got strong pathos. The curls that end some of the letters gives it a sympathetic look, cute even, and it was the first favourite font of the author of this text.

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⁰7.02.01 SERIFS

My serifs have made quite a journey. They started off being thick and sturdy—I wanted them to make solid outline of the words, which would allow the inside to be more dynamic.

Advised to reshape the serifs to avoid their heaviness slowing down the reading, I make them thinner and give them a more modelled shape, by letting some light in under the bottom serifs. I allow the top serifs to curve slightly upwards. This way I leave the conventional route of the monolinear Egyptians, which I prefer to recreating historical models.

I then had a meeting with Dutch type authority Gerard Unger at a café in the Old Town of Stockholm. He told me off for having serifs too thin in comparison to the thinnest parts of the letters. This was a problem I was aware of, but had not yet dealt with. Now I finally decided to make the joints a lot thinner, while the serifs will get slightly thicker again. We move on to talk about sports. Unger advises me to follow a saying attributed to the American baseball player Yogi Berra, when I find it difficult to make up my mind: »If you come to a fork in the road, take it«.

TyPewriter

The problem with pinpointing visual language is that it is anything but universal or fixed. It is dependent on human interaction, just like spoken language. However, spoken languages are easier to analyse, since they can be organised in sounds, words and grammar, while components of visual language are hardly ever articulated. There is no possible way of creating a dictionary of visual languages, however mapping out the »grammar« could be a start. Typefaces are only a small part, one of the codes, of the visual messages at work in graphic design. The appearance of typefaces is not fixed either, it alters with the context and surrounding signals.

»Information design is infused with conventional codes, local and global, textual and non textual, which are blended«¹⁶

Shaping Information – the Rhetoric of Visual Conventions, written by Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett, presents a theory that is useful for understanding the components of visual communication. Readers and viewers have a lifelong experience of visual information, of which they understand the codes. Some of these codes can be studied, like musical notation and road signs, while others, such as dress codes for subcultures, are learned by experience.

»Conventional codes are vulnerable because they are social constructions that depend on groups of users learning and practising them. Like speakers of verbal languages and dialects, users of visual language are members of discourse communities that share similar experiences, needs and expectations.«¹⁷

Discourse communities can be large or small,
and everyone is a part of a number of discourse communities; professional, social, regional, or based around special interests.

»Conventions so densely populate our perceptual landscape that it neutralises them – that is, we believe they mirror nature, rather than artificially represent it.« An example of a neutralised convention is that of writing direction. Readers of this text are all part of a large discourse community that have left-to-right reading as a common convention. The danger, though, when we see conventions as natural, is that we see them as the good way of doing things, rather than conventions for our part of the social world.

To look at typographic rules as a set of visual conventions changes the perspective completely, in a liberating way. If everything is convention, shared by a certain community, then nothing is fixed, for certain or forever. The notion of typography as a set of conventions might make it harder to justify breaking those conventions (one might not be understood), but may on the same time encourage a more dynamic use of those conventions. The awareness this phenomenon will open up for further studies and greater knowledge of the codes and subtleties of graphic languages.

»Though a technology gradually grows old, conventional practices that originated with it often continue.« The layout of typewritten letters initially resembled that of the handwritten ones that preceded them, and early computer documents initially mirrored typewritten ones. The Slab-serif Courier was long used for letters that were meant have a personal appeal, which is interesting, since when the typewriter appeared in the 1870s, type written letters were considered impersonal.

The choice of a Slab-serif as the typewriter font is not a stylistic one – letters hit onto paper, through inked fabric, demands rugged type forms. Had the letters been thinner, or the serifs pointed, they might have ripped the paper. Monospaced, monolinear, and with thick and sometimes long serifs to fill the gaps between the letters in a word.

07.02.07 MIDO
I have a break and watch an appalling football game—a friendly between Sweden and Egypt, played in Cairo. Suddenly, for no obvious reason, the audience start cheering loudly. Not because of the game, but, as I find out, to greet the Egyptian star striker Mido, who has been substituted and is thanking the crowds for the support. His popularity is overwhelming and his nickname is nice and friendly. Just like I want my font, now called Mido, to be.

STYLE OR SUBSTANCE
With products to sell and no photographs in common use yet to help show off the items, typography had to both grab attention by its form and to communicate content. During the second half of the 19th century, the solid black forms of the Egyptians and contemporaries eventually failed to be expressive enough, in competition with letters that were framed, shadowed, internally decorated with flowers, or drawn with 3D-effects. Sometimes all at once. Some forms were taken even further than that, in the oddly named font styles such as the Tuscans, with frilly edges, and the Italiennes, which had reversed proportions: serifs and horizontal lines much fatter than the vertical strokes. The extreme character of these letters makes it hard to disconnect them from the »Wild West« where they were first used. The well-documented myths and stories of this time preserve the Italiennes within this context.

It is against this background that the modernist ideal, wishing to get rid of all the excesses of the times preceding it, should be seen. An influential typographic text from this time, by Beatrice Warde, states that »printing should be invisible«, that it should be looked through and communicate the meaning of the words without altering the content or being noticed itself.

Responding to these ideas, Richard A. Lanham builds an argument around the concept of looking at or through the
world. At one end, the through ideal. Minimal awareness of an expressive medium. At the other end, the at ideal. Maximal awareness of how we say what we do, or paint it, or sound it out. In the middle, the daily mixtures. Please note: no point in the spectrum is intrinsically evil or virtuous; it seeks to describe rather than proscribe, to analyze rather than condemn.

Lanham discusses the effects of design stripped from any form of decoration, of minimalist design with nothing but the essentials remaining. We feel its absence of ornamentation as intensely ornamental. It occupies, at the same time, the through and at extremes on our spectrum. The two ends of the spectrum seem to be pulled together into a style/substance pun. In our most common conversation, style and substance are contending opposites. The more of one, the less of the other. It makes it easier to go by if the world is structured in opposing pairs. Lanham refers to the educational system of classic rhetoric which did not present style and substance as contending opposites but as fruitful collaborators. From a rhetorical perspective, style is not incidental, superficial, or supplementary—it is about how ideas are embodied in language and customized to communicative contexts.

The concept of pure substance is hard to imagine. Style of some kind is unaviodable, and the challenge is to use the most suited stylistic language, wheter the intention is to be transparent, or to go against conventions. Transparency is a relative concept, depending on the context. The fonts used in the illustrations of this page would have blended in well in a Wild West comic book, while in a research paper the style stand out.

**07.02.22 FIGURES**

With the lower and upper case characters drawn and digitalised in FontLab, I start drawing the numerals, noticing how much easier this is now that I am familiar with the method. I read in Karen Cheng’s »Designing type« about the fascinating development of numerals. Before Claude Garamond in the 16th century designed the first numerals specific to a font, printers usually used the same set of numerals for any job. Since Garamond’s numerals were intended for use in text, they had ascenders and descenders, and proportions similar to that of lower case letters, only slightly taller:

```
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
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This was the standard until the 19th century, and the style is today known as »old style figures«. During the industrial revolution printers created taller figures, more similar to upper case letters. These figures became known as »modern«:

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0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
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With the introduction of mechanical typesetting in the late 18-hundreds »oldstyle numerals were often omitted from typefaces for reasons of economy. At the time, text figures were less fashionable, so most fonts included only upper case numerals. So fashion had it that the form of larger figures became standard, and still is what we learn at school and consider standard.

**CHANGES IN RESOLUTION**

The extreme ornamentation of letterforms in the end of the 19th century caused a backlash and the Egyptian fonts lost popularity in the first decades of the 20th century. At the same time we see interesting developments in other communication media such as the radio, film, and photography, competing for the same attention as the printed word.

Along with Modernism, the Sans serifs caught on. Influenced by these new ideals, a revival of the Egyptians took place in the thirties, this time even more geometrical. The initial idea of these letterforms – total monolinearity, equally thick serifs, strict geometric forms – was finally used to the
This time the development started in Germany, from where it soon spread, and the fonts, such as Memphis and Rockwell, all show similar characteristics.\footnote{Keith Tam’s essay, The ›revival‹ of the slab-serif in the 20th century, will provide a more in depth analysis of the typographic development of this time. Ruari McLean’s An examination of Egyptians in Alphabet and Image, is another good source.}

In England, around the same time, the type designer Eric Gill went the completely opposite direction in his development of Egyptians. He started by designing Solus, a font with humanistic proportions, but low contrast between thick and thin lines. The font was designed to be used in books, but will still be called an Egyptian, since the serifs are square and unbracketed. Solus did not really catch on, but its successor Joanna (used for this text) did. This is a completely new direction for fonts of this former display family.\footnote{This trend of combining the ideals of the Egyptians with humanist proportions was continued in the late 20th century with for example Scala by Martin Majoor.}

A third dominant influence pushed the development of the Egyptians during the 20th century: the introduction of new printing techniques. When Photosetting was developed in the fifties Adrian Frutiger designed Egyptienne (which is also the authors favourite Egyptian) specifically for this new method of reproduction. Frutiger’s succeeding Egyptians – Glypha and Serifa – look monolinear at first glance, but the lines are subtly altered to optically let more light into the letters. Fine details like this would have been eaten by ink with earlier reproduction techniques.

More influential for the form of Egyptians was the invention of the personal computer, and particularly the primitive laser printers with relatively low resolution output. Suddenly the reproduction quality regressed. Lucida Serif (by Holmes and Bigelow), an Egyptian with humanist proportions, was the first typeface to be designed to cope with this low resolution printing. The slab serifs, which began as aesthetic choice (since the new printing techniques in the early of the 19th century allowed it), are now used for the opposite reason; that the printing technique cannot reproduce other forms of serifs. Erik Spiekermann’s Officina Serif, designed in 1990, was customised to work on low-resolution printers and fax machines. The stroke width is relatively even and the serifs are heavy, to allow printing of small sizes under rough conditions. Another feature of the font is the resemblance to typewritten letterforms, which mimic a familiar visual language for the introduction of this new tool.

\section*{Looking Ahead}
Untouched by the purity of modernism and other trends, there have always been commercial spheres with a common use of typography. To this day, numerous hairdressers use an Egyptian font for their shop sign, and the same goes for budget stores such as Willy’s and Dressmann, as well as tabloid newspapers such as Aftonbladet and News of the World. Seeing how habit controls our visual landscape, fonts of this kind are most likely to keep appearing within these commercial contexts, since the discourse communities that use (or choose not to use) these services understand the codes and associate logotypes and shop signs with certain values. In this paper I have not touched upon the use of colour in text, but it is worth noticing that the logotypes for the services above all are combinations of the colours red/black or yellow/black. Bold, sharp and loud.

The typographic debate is often occupied with how thing »should be«, whether to stick to tradition or to break loose from it. But an area rarely investigated is to look at what is actually happening in the daily communication between people. This area of investigation is found in the cross section of typography, rhetorics and language theory.

As the amount of communication grows, so does the need to fill the gap in knowledge of the effects of it. In this paper I have briefly covered a small typographic area. Since our visual landscape is saturated with codes of this kind, further investigation is needed.
I continue to draw and extend my typeface to the Latin-1 set, which consists of 256 glyphs (=characters, figures, diacritics and marks), supporting the major languages of Europe. Latin-1 is one of many sets of glyphs listed in The Unicode 5.0 Standard, a book (or a brick rather) which lists all the glyphs that have so far been given a data code. The aim is that eventually all glyphs from all the languages in the world will be covered by Unicode. In this context my 256 glyphs seem quite modest.

The Unicode Standard introduces all groups of languages in the world in dry but beautifully precise words: »The European scripts are all written from left to right. Many have separate lowercase and uppercase forms of the alphabet. Spaces are used to separate words.«