

Sometimes a work of art can really work. It flips a switch, or opens a door, or turns on a tap and unleashes something that had not been let out before: perhaps another way of looking or a different way to hear; some kind of change, some shift, albeit subtle and however small, in what can be seen or listened to, or said or done. It doesn't happen often, and even when it does, this isn't always the kind of success that counts for critics and collectors: it isn't only this that they are looking for, if they are seeking it at all. But sometimes an artist really makes this work: a painting that changes perception, a performance that, even for a moment, seems to rearrange the world, a poem that throws everything into the air, an installation that pushes out beyond its exhibition in a gallery to get something moving that was not there before.

Or perhaps a typeface, a new series of signs that seems such a minor intervention, so quiet a gesture, so slight and restrained, but also one which can spill out of the frames in which it is displayed and so do more than it first claims, which in this case is already quite a lot: Bea Schlingelhoff's typefaces take the names of women whose lives had been forgotten or neglected and so insert them into the here and now. They are works which, within certain parameters, themselves carefully laid down, are open to anyone to use. They push against the boundaries of art works as commodities to be bought and sold, stored and hoarded, hidden and exhibited. And they reveal an intriguing tangle of relations between women and writing, the feminine and type, which a text such as this can go on to explore.

Typefaces belong to the cultural infrastructure, the nuts and bolts of a world which gives priority to the finer airs of high culture, the superstructures of thought. They serve and support what is regarded as the real work of writing and, as is the case with translation, typeface design is often poorly recognised and paid. This is perhaps in part because even though printing is no longer heavy and dirty work, typography remains sullied by its association with the noise and dirt of foundries and presses. Typefaces are now cast in digital foundries, but much of the terminology of typography reaches back to this early machinery, and letters are still divided with reference to the two

wooden cases, the upper and lower, in which each series of letters were arranged in the days of cast metal type. On the other hand, typography is marginalised by its inessential quality: the appearance a text assumes seems to be such a secondary, superficial matter, of far less substance than the text itself. Typography serves and supports: it is a vehicle, a carrier, a means to another more important end, concerned only with the fine tuning of something far more weighty and important than the mere appearance of letters and words. Like the translator, the typographer works in the minor key. And yet this work is indispensable. A text can be published in this or that language, typeface, or script, but it cannot avoid making this choice. The written word can pick and choose between fonts and colours and typefaces, even scripts and languages, but typefaces are not like clothes for words, which have no naked form, no natural state before they are committed to paper or flickering on screens: they simply would not be there at all.

Vilém Flusser sees the electronic image upending the linearity of western thought, as writing enters a new visual era and reading is displaced by a new kind of gaze. Digitisation certainly gives such infrastructure a new weight. But writing, by hand or machine, has always been a visual practice: a typeface is a constant reminder that writing concerns images, and that its symbols are drawings which were known to be packed with information long before the advertising industry took the details of design to the sophisticated heights at which every slightest shade and curve is put to work. Typefaces always have character – playful, scary, bossy, green, forward leaning, backward slanting, solid, flighty, bold. At times they are even imagined as individuals with arms and legs, ears and collars, shoulders, spines, and chins: the sixteenth century engraver Geoffroy Tory described his letters as little men, parading like stick figures on the page: "the cross-stroke covers the man's organ of generation, to signify that Modesty and Chastity are required, before all else, in those who seek acquaintance with well-shaped letters." [1]

Something is always being shown and said, even when type verges on invisibility. There are however standard settings and default modes, and so a pretence to neutrality. Such typefaces, like Helvetica, are so common that they become almost imperceptible, as though they are not there at all. But today's transparency can become tomorrow's obscurity. Fraktur, a highly decorative Gothic typeface commissioned by Maximilian I specifically for use with German, was the typeface in which most German language texts were printed well into the twentieth century. Its broken, black letters are now considered awkward and difficult to read, but they were long held to be simple and direct, easily legible and easy on the eyes, as well as an optimal rendition of the German language and character. Such broken scripts had been used for the transcription of religious texts long before Gutenberg split and standardised such letters to make moveable type in the fifteenth century. Diplomas, certificates, and the names of newspapers are still widely written in these broken scripts; they continue to carry an air of authority and solemnity, sometimes a sense of religious gravitas or another traditional weight. In Mexico, for example, where the first books to be printed in the sixteenth century were also printed in broken script, these typefaces remain prominent. Since the 1930s they have also been used by gang members seeking to demarcate territories and bodies with graffiti and tattoos in Los Angeles, and many other regions of the southern states and central America.

As for fascist Germany, it remains so closely associated with broken, or black letter typography that one can almost imagine the alternative types of Schlingelhoff's women against Hitler fighting this jagged, bold enemy. But Hitler himself was not a Fraktur fan: he was keen to see a more modern script established as the face of the Third Reich, and instead favoured the use of Antiqua, modelled on the Latin scripts of imperial Rome. The old German script, he declared, "does not fit well in this age of steel and iron, glass and concrete, of womanly beauty and manly strength, of head raised high and intention defiant". It looked old fashioned; it was too ornate, too prominent, too visible: indeed, one of the arguments in favour of its use was that the Gothic script was more open to typographical experiment than the simple, definitive letters of the Latin face, which confines typeface design to tiny details, subtle shifts, small strokes and fine

adjustments here and there. The letters can vary in appearance, but not too much: the constraints are high, the room for manoeuvre small. And this was precisely what made it attractive to Hitler. Antiqua was clean and streamlined, rooted in imperial Rome but also modern and perhaps most importantly, more accessible to a global audience, whereas Fraktur and the other broken scripts were barely legible beyond Germany. An edict condemning Fraktur as "Jewish lettering", itself rather ironically headed in Fraktur, was issued in 1941 in an attempt to establish a more modern Latin type as the new face of the German language: "in the future the Antiqua script is to be described as normal script. All printed materials are to be gradually converted to this normal script... only the normal script will be taught in village and state schools... appointment certifications for functionaries, street signs, and so forth will in future be produced only in normal script." [2] Fraktur did eventually fall into disuse, but the fact that today's far right, new and *alt*, continues to rely on broken script says as much about its ignorance of its own past as about its longings to revive it.

Schlingelhoff's typefaces intervene in other narratives as well. The ambiguous position of typography as both vital and frivolous, necessary and yet peripheral, has a striking parallel with the roles which women have often had to play, not least in 1930s Germany, and other "lesser arts" traditionally considered to be women's work: textiles, ceramics, cookery and care. These too are crucial to the infrastructure and at the same time mere details, part of the furniture and not to be taken too seriously. For many of the women who sought to resist the Nazi regime, this low status and lack of visibility brought some slight advantage: who would suspect this elderly woman or that young mother or these empty-headed teenage girls of thinking and acting for themselves! The acts of resistance made by the women remembered here as typefaces were sometimes bold and defiant: Ella Trebe and Marianne Baum were communist activists openly involved with what the regime called the Red Orchestra; Hannah Solf and her gloriously named daughter So'oa'emalelagi Gräfin von Ballestrem, who surely deserves a typeface of her own, were prominent intellectuals involved in smuggling many Jewish people out of Germany. More often women made much slighter gestures, quiet acts of defiance which were insignificant in the big scheme of things but sometimes highly

effective in their own small ways: passing on a message, making space at the kitchen table for a meeting, hiding a lover or a child, accidentally dropping bread for impoverished Jewish compatriots, carrying a bag of shopping in each hand so that it was simply not possible to make the required salute to military officers who surely would not dare to challenge a woman with her hands full of provisions for her precious German family. Not much, perhaps, but better than nothing at all.

And even such small acts of resistance were punishable, often by death. Some of their perpetrators survived: Anna Mettbach lived to continue her resistance to the fascism that had targetted not only Jews, but also Roma and Sinti like Mettbach herself. *Wer wird der nächste sein?* she asked in her 1999 memoir. But few of those who took a stand or lifted a finger or whispered a curse against Hitler survived the war. Sophie Scholl, a leading figure in the White Rose resistance who was guillotined in 1943, wrote from the farm on which she had to work: "Sometimes I want to scream 'My name is Sophie Scholl! Don't you forget it!'" [3]

But how are we to remember such names? With monuments and statues? Perhaps street names? Schlingelhoff does not put them on pedestals or build monuments or memorials, but draws them out and turns them loose, extending their reach, putting them into circulation in another time, a different economy. It animates them, activates them, gives them currency. It honours and multiplies the gestures they made. It gives them faces once again.

Such uses of typefaces have form: Mrs Eaves was a minor figure in the history of typography until she became a typeface in 1996. Sarah Eaves was the housekeeper, lover, and colleague of John Baskerville, who became famous for his work with print and type after his successes with japanning and other decorative industries in eighteenth century Birmingham. Abandoned by Mr Eaves, with whom she had five children, Sarah moved in with Baskerville and married him sixteen years later when she learned of the death of Mr Eaves. Some of her children took the Baskerville name

and worked in the same trade; Sarah herself worked alongside Baskerville and completed the printing of the volumes on which he had been working when he died. This is a common pattern in the history of typesetting and typography: several women have taken over from husbands in the trade. The wife of Giambattista Bodoni, whose typefaces, like those of Baskerville, shaped the writing of the modern world, also continued her husband's work, completing the tasks he left unfinished at his death before going on to produce a magnificent book of her own: Margherita Dall'Aglio Bodoni's *Il Manuale tipografico*, published in 1818, has been called "the specimen book to end all specimen books." [4]

The font that is named after Sarah Eaves is a continuation, and also an unorthodox elaboration, of the typeface to which Baskerville had given his own name. It is light and airy and untidy – perhaps she was this kind of woman too. Somehow too uneven to be set on the page, it often appears on book jackets and in other spacious contexts where letters are not forced into blocks of text. It was amongst the first wave of typefaces which responded to the demands and sought out the potential of digital design. Within a few years of its launch, it had become one of the most successful typefaces of its day, honouring Sarah Eaves not in a monumental fashion, with a statue or a public square, but right at the level on which she worked, in print, on the typeface, just like Baskerville.

Zuzana Licko, the woman who designed and named Mrs Eaves (and also continued the story with the launch of Mr Eaves in 2009), has observed that the lack of public recognition for her work is due not to her gender but rather to her trade: graphic designers often seem to take the credit for effects produced by those working with typefaces and their fonts. [5] And it is true that even Baskerville himself has no statue of his own (although there is an elegant monument to his typefaces in Birmingham). Perhaps typography is too essential here, so deep in the heart of the machinery of writing, that it struggles to be seen. In this respect it shares the neglected no man's land occupied by textiles and ceramics, cookery and perfumery, and much of the

activity considered minor, even feminine. It plays in the minor key, too entangled with the machinery of writing, the body of the text and its processes, to be admitted the purer airs of high culture. It is expected to look good, but to know its place in the background too; its proportions are admired, but it is also despised for its heightened concern with image and appearance. It transmits, but it does not create. It mediates and supports the more important work of writing, which still, however, needs it, and cannot proceed alone. Type is unavoidable.

Such are the lines of thought on which Schlingelhoff's typefaces can run as they involve a certain kind of resistance, recall specific women's names, and draw out the written word. They do another kind of work as well. Unlike Baskerville and Mrs Eaves, these typefaces are neither designed for commercial use, nor intended to be inaccessible, confined to their frames in a gallery. For as long as they are exhibited, they can be downloaded at no cost. But their availability is limited: once the exhibition closes, they can no longer be accessed. This too is a minor gesture, just like those to which it refers: a message carried here, a serif added there, a detail changed, a shift of register. But this attempt to redesign the terms and conditions on which art works may yet prove to be the most important level on which Schlingelhoff intervenes.

Notes

[1] Ellen Lupton, *Thinking with Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, & Students*, Chronicle Books, 2014

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiqua-Fraktur_dispute

[3] Annette Dumbach and Jud Newborn, *Shattering the German Night: The Story of the White Rose*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986, p. 62

[4] <https://graphicarts.princeton.edu/2016/05/31/the-specimen-book-to-end-all-specimen-books>

[5] "It's not a problem of being a woman in a man's world. It's being a type designer in a world that gives little recognition to this art form", Eye 43, Spring 2002,
www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/reputations-zuzana-licko

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