

Typeface Persona: A Review Study

Irma Puškarević¹, Uroš Nedeljković¹, Ivan Pintjer¹

¹University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Department of Graphic Engineering and Design

Abstract: Practitioners and scholarly researchers agree that different typefaces have different personas. Document design, which is largely dependent on the use of different typefaces, stems from the content of the verbal text and the purpose of the text is expressed through typography. In an age of electronic information set in microcosmic structure, possibilities we have come to face present freedom to modify and manipulate visual attributes of a document with software packages. This practice has given the opportunity to many untrained people to become publishers and active users of type and often times this practice is directed without understanding the principles of document design and the very notion of the intended perception of type's persona. The relevance of typeface persona is an important aspect of technical or any other document that has its intended audience. Therefore, by choosing the appropriate typeface, communicators can determine the visual tone and character of the text. This paper outlines the visual rhetoric and consequently the role of typography as a part of that rhetoric. The literature review concentrates on typeface persona in theory, practice and research, exploring the idea of "atmosphere", connotative meaning and semantic quality of type. The paper concludes with a discussion of the demand in the field of practitioners to classify typefaces according to their persona.

Keywords: typography, visual rhetoric, typeface persona, information design

1. Introduction

New technology offers flexibility and today's developments in digital technology have certainly reshaped the field of technical communication and document design. Word processing software as a tool for modifying the format of documents and manipulation of typefaces has become widely available confronting the user with new challenges. The new role of typography is no longer a privilege of the professional designers therefore composing a document with an extensive set of standard typefaces is available to everyone. The rapid development of desktop publishing in contrast to the past complicities of print shops produced "the user with a degree of control and self-direction" [1]. However, software packages offer default settings that might not be optimized for certain writing as well as ready-made templates often developed without the understanding of basic principles of document design [2, 3]. As Lanham [4] argues the personal computer has presented us with a new medium of expression revolutionizing the way we communicate and it is within this rhetorical device that we must take rhetorical approach to solving problems of communication.

2. The purpose of this project

As we discover document design, influenced by the digital era, is gradually abandoning „linguistic resources“ and putting upfront layout, colour and typography [5, 6]. Consequently, writing, in a form of communicative work, has changed. This new kind of writing has recognized the role of visual rhetoric as a major communication medium and the focus of this paper will be on the impact of typography as part of that rhetoric. Visual language enables readers to organise information on printed page using largely accessible variety of typographical tools. According to Kostelnick [5] the rhetoric of document design is shaped with contextual variables "such

as purpose of the communication and the proximity of the visual cues within the document, as well as by the readers familiarity with visual conventions". Likewise, design of the document must abide by specification of constrains [7] where contextual variables help practice communication. However, technical communicators intuitively make choices of a typeface unaware of its connotative meaning in relation to document design. To better understand the rhetorical impact of a typeface they must learn how to analyze and evaluate visual language, in particular typeface persona.

3. Information and document design

According to Kinross [8] written word is not free of rhetoric, therefore information intended for the recipient cannot be visually neutral. The practice of information design is there to help the user, a dominant subject of our age as observed by Lupton [1, p. 73], understand what the information designers have developed. Also, information designers should know how to employ elements on the page to develop a successful document. Redish [9] suggests that technical communicators engage more readily in the process of understanding both information and design, appealing to the contemporary trends in technical communication. Document design process, as argued by Lentz and Pander Maat [7] must abide by specification of constrains thus influencing the tone of the document. Considering that a hierarchical network constitutes a document, technical communicators should be able to employ elements of rhetoric within presented constrains in the attempt to obtain communicative effect. Since the intention of every document is to be read the choice of a typeface is of great significance. But which typeface to choose from thousands and thousands of typefaces available in digital form today? This paper explores potential answers to this question.

4. The rhetoric of typography

When we make a choice of typeface we also make a rhetorical decision. Typefaces are visual elements and, as such, they bear meaning. Empirical results show that letterforms have certain connotations [2, 10, 11, 12, 13]. The reason for this interest in the visual aspect of type can be found in Bringham (1992) statement that „the visual side of typography is always on display“ and we are invited to make judgments whenever we perceive.

In scholarly discussions typeface is regarded as a tool that affects perception of visual data. According to Arnheim [14] our perceptual thinking is often largely unconscious. Therefore, in order to better understand the role of visual language we need to strive to be able to consciously understand the meanings of visual elements as well as their relationship to the document's rhetoric. When faced with the components of the visual language ‚consumers of information“ are not passive recipients. Whenever we perceive we engage in an active thinking process [4, 14] and the outcome of that process is not connected with/to what we see but also the ways in which we see it [15]. If we look at the document as a perceptual object we can conclude that readers actively make judgments when they look at visual data and that their perceptions of that data, typefaces included, is partially formed based on their knowledge, experience and level of information prior to their interaction with the data in question.

More attention is directed toward visual rhetoric and consequently to the role of typography as part of that rhetoric. Reading visual language which can be encoded in the form of a document is the rational as well as intuitive act. According to Kostelnick [5] and Lentz&Pander Maat [7] contextual variables influence the meaning of visual language and contribute to functional context of the document. If technical communicators wish to acquire professionalism or certain definable tone in their documents, knowing the effects of typeface rhetoric can be of significant importance. New technology dictates the attributes of type on paper and we can see it now within desktop publishing just as it was at the beginning of 20th century and industrialization. Gill wrote [16] that people don't invent new forms of lettering but adapt existing ones to suit

contemporary technological capabilities so it is expected that today's documents possess higher level of visual sophistication which eventually will alter our perception of type ,just as typewritten text in the late nineteenth century transformed the perception of handwritten documents" [5].

5. Typeface persona in theory

The relevance of typeface persona is an important aspect of the technical document and education of technical communicators. By choosing the appropriate typeface, technical communicators can determine the visual tone and character of the text. Academic discussions over typeface persona have been neglected. Barbara Emanuel [17] finds that one of the important aspects of a typeface is the actual shape and appearance of the characters themselves, meaning their visual characteristics such as line thickness, corner smoothness, width, height and so on. Just like our faces, these are the specific traits that give the typeface its personality. Given that these factors all influence the way we perceive a certain shape and form our impression of it, the selection of the typeface is by all means a rhetorical decision. The personality as such is a property that people relate to most when observing something. The visual elements of a certain shape or image communicates to us the "tone" and character, therefore, Rick Poynor explains in a rather casual manner: "...particular typographic choice can make us go ,I like the look of that' ,that feels good' ,that's my kind of product' ,that's type casting it's secret spell"[18]. However, in this case we are not referring to the artistic or typographic qualities or the craftsmanship of the typeface, but rather its communicative qualities in relation to the information and document design. Therefore, the visual rhetoric of the typeface is in direct relation to the discourse which it is a part of instead of being rhetorical in its own right [19].

6. Typeface persona in research

Because the typeface is the most prevalent design element in visual materials, its role as an important visual tool is recognised both by academicians and practitioners. The earliest research concerning typeface identify certain atmosphere values (see Berliner, 1920, [20]). Poffenberger and Franken's assumptions relate to reader's preferences and their assessments of typeface personalities. Burt studies contribute to the field of typography investigating aesthetic preferences [21]. According to Kostelick visual language suggests a stance [5] whereas Schriver [22] emphasizes the importance of rhetorical appropriateness while exploring the mood of the typeface, personality and tone and accentuating the importance of connecting these properties to a document genre, purpose and content. A number of authors tend to assign attributes to typefaces. For example, type can "sound" serious, funny, formal, friendly and so on [23]. Strizver observes the ability of typeface to convey different feelings and moods stating that typeface can evoke strength, elegance, agitation and other moods [24]. Therefore, if visual communicators intend to match the tone of their document, they must consider the impressions created by typefaces.

Significant results can be found in the work of Brumberger [2, 10]. Her studies explore whether particular typefaces and texts are consistently perceived to have particular persona. According to her proposals, the rhetoric of typography is in direct correlation with its persona. Therefore, if the persona of a typeface can be identified, further research can determine to what extent persona matches and mismatches affect reader's interactions with a document.

Apart from the group of studies that offer insight into the typeface legibility and readability, we are much more concerned with the group concerning the research on aesthetics. Perception based theories suggest that typeface characteristics connote a range of impressions. According to Henderson, Giese and Cote [12] typeface design can be distinguished by universal and type-specific characteristics. Universal design characteristics rely on perception and therefore are subjective descriptions. Typeface-specific design characteristic provide an explanation to

additional variances according to graphic patterns of the fonts which do not relate to universal dimensions. There are examples in practice that graphic descriptions are independent of universal design descriptions (e.g. handwritten or typed appearance) but there's also evidence where they do not synchronize. Still, we look at the typeface-specific characteristics as means of engineering a typeface to meet specific goals.

Mackiewicz and Moeller [25] investigate what personalities different typefaces have according to participants' assessments. Analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data they determined that participants identify different persona of typefaces based on their previous experience with those typefaces. Additionally, participants' comments suggest that their perception of typeface persona is an intuitive act where participants have no principled manner in distinguishing among personalities. As Mackiewicz [26] concludes "many technical writing textbooks overlook this visual element and its contribution to a document's rhetorical effect". Technological advancements are in direct relation to the possibility of multiple design decisions that are available to technical writers today. Therefore, it is important to include a rhetorical property to the visual language of a document.

7. Conclusion

The document design is directly derived from the content and purpose of the text expressed through typography where the reader is not a passive recipient of the presented information, but rather an active interpreter of the entire visual experience making typography a part of the document's organizational context and therefore requiring the appropriate choice of the typeface persona. Organizing the document implies that we need to organize its typographic features and design it in a proper and functional way in order to provide the reader with seamless readability and legibility as well as the proper emotional value of the text.

Based on the reviewed empirical findings concerning type atmosphere, connotative meaning, semantic quality etc. it has been determined that the typefaces possess their own persona, yet unfortunately this information has remained largely underrated and was not able to move forward into the active practice, especially given the fact that the technical writers would greatly benefit from applying these findings in practice. The only thing that remains to be done in order to bring typography and typeface persona closer to the more mainstream public is to classify the typefaces by their persona in a functional and understandable way. Reflecting Kostelnick's [5] observation that we need models which will contribute to the evaluation of visual language, we can assess that the visual rhetoric will become an essential part of the technical communication, and surely the technical students will have it included within their curriculum someday.

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