

**In the age of digital surveillance, Futurist
typographic principles are more relevant than ever.**

Visual Culture

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**National College of Art & Design
Graphic Design, School of Design**

**In the age of digital surveillance, Futurist typographic
principles are more relevant than ever.**

Lorna Quinn

**Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of
Graphic Design with Critical Cultures**

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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along with the School of Visual Culture for
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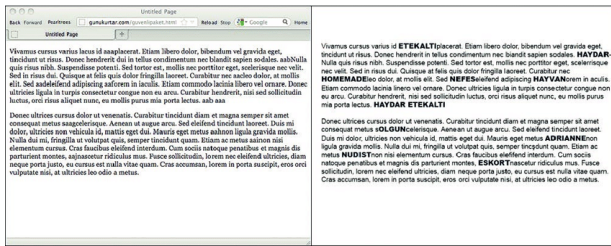


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Introduction

The written word is one of the cornerstones of civilisation, and the development of moveable type has propelled humanity forward at a speed not seen before. “In earlier times, the spoken word was ephemeral but the printed word remained fixed on carved stone or printed page”. (Heller and Meggs, 2001, p. 219) The ability to record and keep, then mass produce thought was revolutionary. Indeed, the printing revolution has had immense effects, allowing for mass communication of “thought, ideas, images, from one mind to other minds.” (Warde, 1930, p. 2) Swanson notes that typographic usage and experimentation has been relatively conservative until recent centuries and attributes that orthodoxy to type and books being used and created by a select elite. (2000, p. 164) Fast forward to today, the tables have all but turned and we now live in an information overload, due to the abounding accessibility of information online. (Hillner, 2009, p. 35) Words and messages can be sent instantaneously around the world, from anyone, anywhere.

On the web, however, we are not alone. Our messages are not just read by humans, “but also a host of digital devices and software applications.” (Lupton, p. 88) Even as this essay is being written, Google is analysing and comprehending the words used to give suggestions of phrases or corrections. The increasing complexity of computer software has meant that our words can be automatically screened and catalogued by corporate or governmental organisations. (Jursonovics, 2015, p. 1) Privacy is minimal online, with software trained to read, process and use our own messages against us. Typographic design as a form of design activism has risen as a result of this, due to typography’s innate “ability to render language visible or invisible”. (Özkal, 2017, p. 136)

When reflecting on the history of typographic insurgence, strong correlations can be drawn between modern subversive typography and the typography of the Futurist movement in Italy during the early 20th century. This avant-garde movement, which was spearheaded by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, became a primary force in the development of modern graphic aesthetics. (Cundy, 1981, p. 349) What makes this relevant is not the subject of the written matter, but rather how the words themselves were presented. Bartram describes how Marinetti’s works intended not to be easily readable, but rather “subversive and disruptive”, which resulted in the creation of new typographic techniques,

and “a new language of unprecedented directness”. (2005, p. 20) This approach to letterforms was singular, with all previous teachings putting the emphasis on readability over aesthetic value. (Lupton, 2014, p. 49)

With a focus on Marinetti, this essay will aim to examine a comparison between the relationship between Futurist subversive techniques and that of contemporary type designers such as Sang Mun, Alper Yildirim and Tré Seals. By analysing these works, taking into account their historical, semiological and political significance, the hope is to make clear this correlation, and to consider how these techniques might be expanded to protect online privacy today. By investigating semiotic theory, with particular emphasis on the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, we can consider how the avant-garde “intended to ‘destroy’ the sign and to undermine the traditional relationship between the signified and the signifier”, thereby expanding the potential of typography and freeing the word from its traditional role. (Sokolova, 2019, p. 184) The political and societal atmosphere that gave rise to this art movement will also be considered, to shed light on how this movement emerged, and why its techniques are needed again in modern design practice.

Although it was not a known concept of Marinetti’s time, his work has many elements which could be considered fundamental to design activism today. The disruption of aesthetic standards, reversal of semiotic order and political nature of his messaging are elements which the designers of today could and should draw upon when attempting to make typographic works of design activism. By comparing Marinetti’s works with more contemporary examples, this essay aims to highlight these similarities, and to prove the political potential typography has to offer.

Marinetti and the Futurists

The Futurist movement burst onto the scene with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s aggressive yet poetic manifesto in 1909, entitled ‘Manifesto del Futurismo’ (Manifesto of Futurism). (Bartram, 2005, p. 7) His expressive text detailed the intentions and ambitions of himself and his fellow visual poets. He vehemently rejected long established artistic practices. He felt in his manifesto there was nothing to “see in an old picture except the laborious contortions of an artist throwing himself against the barriers that thwart his desire to express his dream”. (Marinetti, Flint and Coppotelli, 1972, p. 97) What aided

Marinetti in his efficaciousness was that he created not just visual art pieces but also produced theoretical essays to strengthen and disseminate his views. Bartram points out that “the Italian Futurists used outrageous and forthrightly warlike metaphors to denounce complacently accepted traditions”. (Bartram, 2005, p. 7)

Marinetti's provocative writings robustly declared the death of tradition in the age of automation, where cities and towns once quiet were now bustling with the noise and clamouring speed of modernity. (Cundy, 1981, p. 349) The Futurists embraced this contemporary sphere of noise and violent progress, with Marinetti himself stating in one of his many essays that “a new beauty is born today from the chaos of the new contradictory sensibilities that we Futurists will substitute for the former beauty”. (Marinetti, Flint and Coppotelli, 1972, p. 97) This took the form of visual poetry, an expressive visual form of typography which broke with the conventional rules of signification and syntax, to focus more on expressing meaning through type itself. (Hillner, 2009, p. 14). This sudden change in lingual representation makes sense when examining the rise of linguistic studies in Europe at the time, specifically within the field of semiotics towards the end of the 18th century.

Ferdinand de Saussure, often credited with the foundation of modern linguistics and semiotics (Orban, 1990, p. 12), was writing his influential works just before the Futurist movement. His writings are key to understanding the influence of linguistics in design, as well as the methods of Marinetti and their effects. Danesi elucidates Saussure's teachings that “the actual physical form of a representation, X, is generally called the signifier; the meaning or meanings, Y, that it generates (obvious or not) is called the signified”. (2019, p. 3) This is important in relation to Marinetti's works as he played with this idea of signification, and the order in which the physical form (the type) and its meaning (the words) were interpreted. The traditional ways of representation and symbolic signification were abandoned, introducing new ways of representation and iconicity, such as verbo-visual texts, or 'Parole in Libertà' (Words in Freedom). (Sokolova, 2019, p. 185) The use of semiotics as an analytical tool is imperative to understanding the importance of Marinetti's work, and its impact on the use of typography as an expressive medium.

What makes Marinetti's works so influential is his ability to comprehend semiotic structure and to subvert it. Orban describes these as “hybrid” forms, where the type is both word

and image. (1990, p. 1) Meaning is difficult to discern upon immediate analysis, and must be searched for. Furthermore, the meaning can be found not just in the words, but how the words and type themselves are positioned. This defies previous typographic conventions on multiple levels, ignoring not only the established conventions of legibility, but purposefully obscuring the meaning to prompt discussion and appraisal. Marinetti also claimed this freed type to “express the facial mimicry and the gesticulation of the narrator”, broadening the communicative potential. (Marinetti, Flint and Coppotelli, 1972, p. 100)

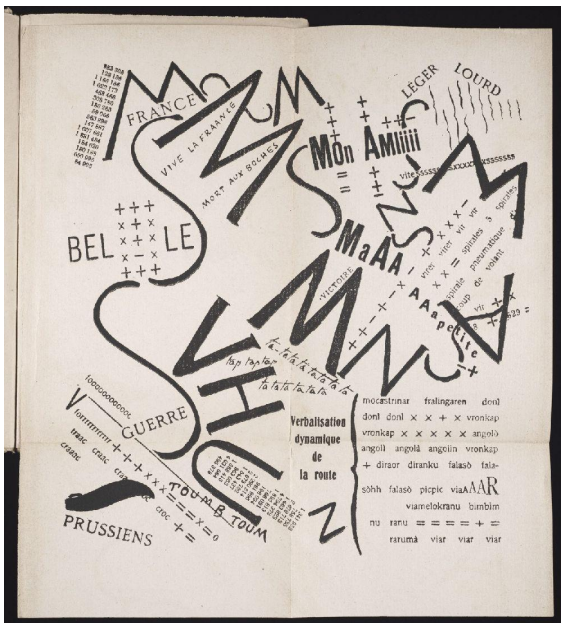


Fig. 1 Marinetti, *Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto*, 1919a.

Fig. 2 Marinetti, *Une Assemblée Tumultueuse*. *Sensibilité Numérique*, 1919b.

Many of Marinetti's works were collages of type, taking on a quality more similar to abstract paintings than the traditional book page. 'Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto' (Joffre visiting the front after the battle of Marne), as seen in Figure 1, suggests the content in form, with its meandering route amongst the valleys, mountains and battlefields. (Bartram, 2005, p. 28) Mathematical symbols such as the plus and minus are also used to great effect. While some words are readable, with many being onomatopoeic, the meaning is conveyed in the painterly application of type on the canvas rather than through the overall text. "These works introduced a revolutionary element into the literature - mood produced by means of the medium, the type itself." (Cundy, 1981, p. 350) These pieces of work, often referred to as visual poetry, undermined Saussure's

semiological system. Visual poetry reverses the relationship of the word and image by translating the written word back into an image. “The written word here becomes the second-order signifying system. This is why we may consider visual poetry as a truly revolutionary step in the context of visual communication.” (Hillner, 2009, p. 14)

It is also noteworthy that Marinetti’s works such as ‘Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto’ did not make use of the modern printing technology of his time, such as the Monotypecaster. Instead, he often used older woodblock and practically obsolete foundry types to create his pieces. (Cundy, 1981, p. 350) For a movement which aimed to capture the new aesthetic of speed, it is an interesting juxtaposition of methods which Marinetti uses. It is not the technology which was revolutionary, but rather the way in which Marinetti used the technology.

‘Une Assemblée Tumultueuse. Sensibilité Numérique’ (A Tumultuous Assembly. Numerical Sensibility), an additional work created by Marinetti seen in Figure 2, is another example of *Parole in Libertà*. Tumultuous is a fitting description of this piece, where numbers, signs, letters, and images come together to create a cohesive, if somewhat clamorous image. Depicting Italy’s victories in World War 1, the techniques of Marinetti are fitting to the noisy, violent confusion of war. (Bartram, 2005, p. 7) Indeed, the Futurists themselves wage a war of sorts, with intent to “‘destroy’ the sign and to undermine the traditional relationship between the signified and the signifier, as well as the avant-garde’s tendency to reject symbolical representation in favour of iconical and indexical types of representation.” (Sokolova, 2019, p. 184) The unexpected combination and juxtaposition of elements abandons the normal syntax and conventional linear text in an attempt to directly communicate with the public. (Bartram, 2005, p. 70) The mix of text and image based works such as manifestos, poetry, paintings and more allowed the Futurists to disseminate their ideas across a range of different media, from galleries to novels and journals. The meaning in these pieces is not immediately clear, and prompts further assessment. Much of the type is not even legible, used for illustrative and empathic purposes. Semiotically-speaking, the type acts not as a signifier but as the signified, subverting semiotic etiquette. (Danesi, 2019, p. 18)

Here, the letterforms are representing a crowd in celebration not through the message, but the medium itself. The subject matter of war and celebration is also consistent with

the overarching political themes present in many of Marinetti's works. "For Marinetti, the political revolution was inseparable from the revolution of language and consciousness. Therefore, he proclaimed the need to liberate the Italian language." (Sokolova, 2019, p. 204) 'Une Assemblée Tumultueuse. Sensibilité Numérique' is a perfect example of this liberation, a liberation from convention, columns, linear structures, and most importantly legibility. No longer the *raison d'être* of typography, Marinetti's priorities were different, intending "to be subversive and disruptive" as a way of enhancing the message by directly attacking the nervous system. (Bartram, 2005, p. 21) Again, this aggressive form of reaching the audience was suited well to the Futurist manifesto, which called for a society which embraced a "whirlwind of intense life spinning towards an ideal future." (Marinetti, Flint and Coppotelli, 1972, p. 81) Yet another interesting layer of complication arises from the use of French to name his pieces, displaying his international education and desire to reach a wide audience.

Some scholars such as Bartram argue that Marinetti was not politically motivated in his works beyond creating a general sense of anarchy (2005, p. 20), but many others would simultaneously disagree. Sokolova indicates that Futurist art was indistinguishably linked with the social and political transformations of the 20th century. Whether intentional or not, both Italian and Russian Futurism had considerable impacts on advertising and the structure of contemporary politics due to the creation of new semiotics. (2019, p. 187) Even more plainly, both Figure 1 and Figure 2 reference war, a topic often explored by Marinetti. The effect of politics on typography and vice versa is profound.

The Modernists who came shortly after Marinetti such as Jan Tschichold, Beatrice Warde and many more, vehemently rejected his practices. After seeing the effects of war on Europe, the Modernists like Warde argued against avant-garde typography, asserting that classical typography focused on the neutral communication of information was the ideal and therefore the preferred basis of good typographic practice. (Swanson, 2000, p. 133) Functionality was once again paramount, as stated in Beatrice Warde's famous essay in which she uses the metaphor of a Crystal Goblet to promote an unassertive typographic style. Warde claims that "type well used is invisible as type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas." (1930 p. 2)

After seeing the affects of the war which raged across Europe, the Modernists wished to create a typographic landscape which was “free from any traditional connotations and thus did not impart any unnecessary “feeling” to the text”. (Bath, 2009, p. 232) While not the focus of this essay, it is still essential the Modernist principles be acknowledged, as they still have a profound effect on accepted standards of typographic practice today. Reinking argues that even in the 21st century, “Warde’s analogy of a gold chalice and a crystal goblet succinctly and memorably reflects two fundamental and necessary aspects of engaging with informational texts.” (2019, p. 38)

But this apolitical approach to typography was not to last, and with the rise of digital technology and the internet, the world of typographic design would look unrecognisable to that of Marinetti or Warde. “Typography is no longer just a craft used to give visual form to the spoken language, for contemporary designers have reconstituted type into symbolic icons and expressive visual forms undreamed” (Heller and Meggs, 2001, p. 219) As the human experience shifts more and more into the digital realm, typographic practices are necessarily following. In this post-modern age of the digital anthropocene, type has once again come full circle, and moved past the diminutive role of functional communication. There are, however, political reasons for this change, a situation similar to the rise of Futurism. While war of a physical nature was a theme in Marinetti’s groundbreaking work, war of a different kind is being waged by typographic designers. A war to protect privacy online. (Gale, 2013, p. 4)

Typographic design activism today

Design activism is a concept which has been on the rise in recent decades. Interests has been shown by a variety of academics, designers and institutions alike, such as Alastair Fuad-Luke, Neri Oxman and Stanford University’s The Design for Change Lab. It can be generally defined as design’s role in social progress by promoting change, raising awareness about beliefs and values, or questioning the constraints and perceived norms which are potentially harmful in people’s everyday life. (Markussen, 2013, p. 38) This field is mostly concerned with areas of design such as product design, speculative design or graphic design. Typography is rarely considered to have potential under this category, but when considering type as Marinetti did, as a way of “attacking, disrupting or subverting conventional socio-cultural conditions”, then it is clear that typographical design has huge

potential as a form of design activism. (Gale, 2013, p. 4) By analysing type in a semiotic manner, and in relation to Marinetti's work, we can hope to better understand the activist potential of type design today, and garner understanding into how typographical activism can better protect online privacy in years to come.

As information has become more accessible due to access online, the amount of information which can be accessed has also increased. With the proliferation of informational material competing for the attention of readers, typographic and visual strategies have changed in an attempt to catch and focus attention. (Bath, 2009, p. 223) The way in which we interact with information is changing, and the ability of anyone with a computer to upload or access information has led to an explosion of communication abilities, both benign and harmful. This sudden accessibility to information poses a challenge to typographic designers, a need for online privacy. With unprecedented access to information, this also means many can also attempt to view this information even if they're not permitted. William Binney, a former NSA worker, claims how the "agency began using one of the programs he built, known as ThinThread, to map track electronic activities of Americans to collect all the attributes that any individual has and build a real-time profile based on that data." (Kelley, 2013) This sort of data mining can be done for a myriad of reasons, from predicting potential terrorist attacks, to selling information to businesses so they can better target their advertising to potential customers.

Much of this data harvesting is, however, illegal and done without our knowledge. Automated bots are used by hackers to exploit internet resources and to access and read information. (Lin et al., 2011, p. 1) The bots do this by recognizing text and scanning the information for relevant or useful data. This data can then be sold to other companies or used against individuals in targeted advertisements, political campaigning or further hacking attempts. This places anyone who shares information online in potential danger, and dramatically decreases online privacy. Jursonovics elaborates on this, explaining how even the "world's leading governments" like the US participate in surveillance programs with little to no respect for the privacy of citizens. (2015, p. 1) It is precisely this standardisation of typography and legibility that allows these bots to so easily recognize, scan and process our information. While measures are being taken to increase the

security of online messaging privacy, the battle is continuous and technology develops with increasingly sophisticated text recognition softwares.

Typographic activism is a concept which is slowly building in this area, and with good reason. “It can be found that typographic works that are activist in scope are also referred as ‘political typography,’ ‘typographic activism,’ or as ‘guerilla typography’.” (Özkal, 2017, p. 139) As privacy becomes increasingly important in an age of constant surveillance, the development of typographic innovation is crucial. Much of the type designed today is designed for screen. “Typography, in an environment that offers such diverse riches, must redefine its goals, its purpose, its very identity.” (Swanson, 2000, p. 184) In a world where mistakes can be undone with the simple push of Command Z, who could know the potential typography innovations to come.



Fig. 3 Mun, ZZX, 2012.

An example of this increased level of design activism is that of Sang Mun who developed the ZXX type family in 2012. “Sang Mun, who worked with America's signals intelligence agency during his time in the Korean military, said he was inspired by Google's attempt to mine almost all of the data that comes its way.” (Kelley, 2013) Having experienced one side of the privacy invasion, Mun was inspired to help the public increase their privacy by developing a typeface and later a type family that would evade the bots responsible for reading and processing data. ZXX, which can be seen in Figure 4, is obscured with various types of visual misdirection and noise, similar to that of the CAPTCHA system. (Wang et al., 2019, p. 5851) Far from being easily legible, the aim of this design is not for

ease of reading, but for insurance of confidentiality. ZXX achieves this by specifically targeting the weaknesses in the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software in a similar way to that of CAPTCHA. 'False', gives misleading information by hiding the actual letter in a larger letterform; 'Camo', camouflages the edges of the letters; 'Noise' scatters the letterforms just enough to confuse the OCR readers; and, in 'Xed' an X form activates four corners, which misleads the OCR software. (Özkal, 2017, p. 144) Without his previous experience with these OCR softwares, neither Mun nor the general public would be aware of how exactly to hide their information.

The name ZXX comes from the Library of Congress' list of three letter codes which denote which language a piece of text has been written in. The code ZXX is used when there is "No linguistic content; Not applicable." (Mun, 2013) This in itself has interesting semiotic implications. The computer is unable to recognize the presence of words, instead seeing an image which is unreadable. This intrusion of one sign system into another connotes a radically modified process of decoding. (Orban, 1990, p. 2) It seems that the computer is relying on the simple system of signifier and signified to be able to comprehend the material. It is as if the inversion of this semiotic order gives the power back to the people, while simultaneously adding another layer of meaning to the message.

By moving the work to another layer of understanding, Mun has moved the real message of the work to the coded iconic message. "This is a symbolic message and works on the level of connotation. The reader is playing a part in the reading by applying their knowledge of the systematic coding of the image." (Crow, 2010, p. 75) Beyond the ironic point that the typeface has to literally be coded to function properly, the 'encoded' message of the typeface is not what is written in the text itself, but in the very design of the face. Mun is making the readers aware the text may be being read by softwares unbeknownst to them, and that "our lives in cyberspace are overloaded with impalpable and extensive personal information that is gathered, intercepted, deciphered, analyzed, and stored." (Mun, 2013)

What makes Mun's designs a work of activism is their kinship with political activism, and its anti-establishment or anti-surveillance roots. (Markussen, 2013, p. 38) Mun is not simply designing for readability or for aesthetic enjoyment; the deeper, more political

implications of this design highlight and inform the public of the potential risks of sharing sensitive information online. In 2013, only a year after Mun's design was released to be freely downloaded and distributed by the public, it was ruled in America that Google may have been breaching federal and California wiretapping laws by computer-scanning emails in an attempt to create user-profiles. These user profiles could then be sold to companies who would provide targeted advertising. (Kelley, 2013) In the age of digital megacorporations like Google and Meta, it is difficult to resist their seemingly inescapable omnipotence. It is this that makes works like Mun's ZXX so vital. While ZXX may be outdated by now in this fast-paced world, it is the proof that type innovation can subvert and challenge the powers that be, and that for each challenge to privacy comes in the future, type designers have the potential power to best it.

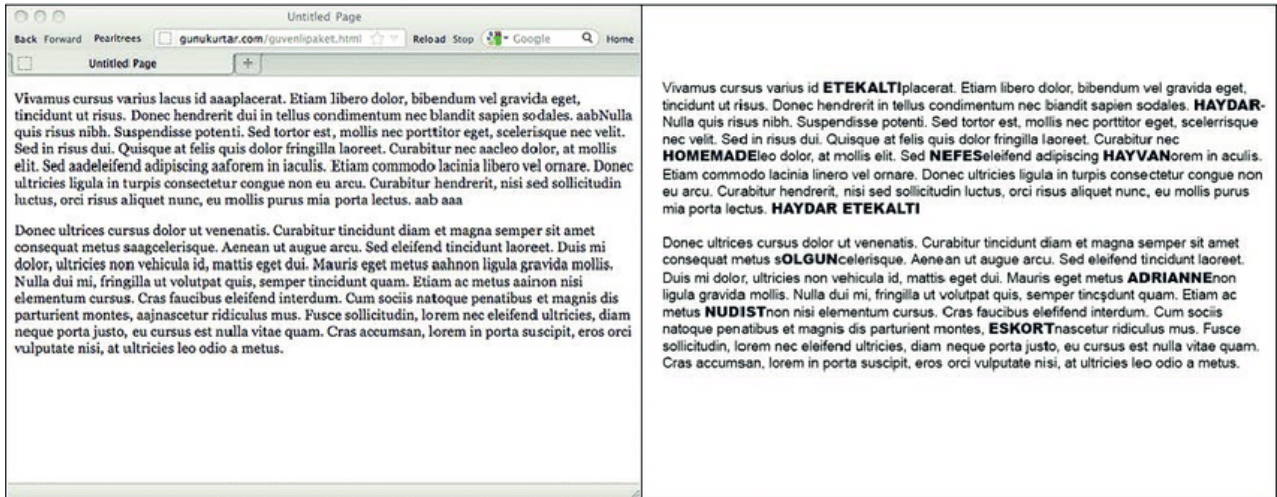


Fig. 4: Yildirim, *Güvenli Paket*, 2012.

Mun is not alone in his development of political typography. Özkal details how Onur Yazicigil's Text Invader project, the Doctrine type family released by Virus Fonts, and Alper Yildirim's Güvenli Paket (Safety Kit) are all similar projects which harness the political and activist potential of typography. (2017, p. 139) Güvenli Paket, a project by Yildirim as part of their Master's Thesis, was a piece of design activism aimed at circumventing Turkey's ban of 138 keywords from domain names in 2011. While a group of these words were directly pornographic, many of the other chosen phrases were seen to have an "erotic allure" such as 'hayvan' (animal), 'Adrienne', 'hikaye' (story), 'etek' (skirt), 'free', 'partner', 'fire' and so on. (Özkal 2017, p. 142; Yildirim, 2012)

With Güvenli Paket, instead of typing in the banned words, users type certain character combinations, such as 'aac', which act as codes. Each of these codes is then tied to a required ligature, and this ligature is the banned word. This means that when the default typeface is changed into Güvenli Paket, all the codes are replaced with the actual banned words, as demonstrated in Figure 4. Yildirim explains how this gives people the possibility to use banned words without being regulated by the authorities. (2012, p. 60) These sorts of tactics allow users to skirt censorship bans, and shows people that typography can be used as a tool to subvert and challenge systems designed to oppress. Markussen defines the term “political” within design as something that “can be experienced through acts of interruption, disturbance, or resistance in public space that either reveals or confronts existing power relations and systems of authority.” (2013, p. 42) By confronting and resisting the ban of words in Turkish online spaces, Yildirim’s design becomes political by definition, and therefore, a piece of design activism.

Although ZXX and Güvenli Paket take different approaches, their core philosophy is the same. Both Yildirim and Mun are aware they don’t design in an isolated sphere; instead they “operate in a multi-layered cultural landscape, a matrix of inter-relationships between media, people and place”. (Gale, 2013, p. 6) Their work is about more than just aesthetic value. They are taking type and reshaping the foundational requirements of what makes good design, championing the privacy and freedom of its users. Lupton details how the majority of type design today is centred on a screen-based outcome (2014, p. 14), and works like that of ZXX and Güvenli Paket highlight the political and radical potential that digital type has to offer. While it might be seen that they are fighting fire (code) with fire (more code), the beauty of language is that it is constantly changing to meet the needs of its users.

But what is interesting to note about both these works is that they use different strategies in the design process to subvert typographic convention. ZXX uses the surface and aesthetic qualities of the type as its area of subversion. Wang et al. details how the deformation of the characters themselves is an embedded aspect of the design, (2019, p. 5851) harnessing the human capability to adapt and overcome the initially confusing aesthetic, something the OCR technologies are currently unable to achieve. Güvenli Paket, on the other hand, works under the surface of the typeface, directly into the coded material, which allows users to bypass typing banned words altogether. (Özkal, 2017, p.

142) This in a sense targets the very DNA of the typeface itself, and works under the surface of the interactive aesthetic. Although the work is aesthetically unseen, the intent to liberate language and allow freedom of expression is consistent with the work of Mun.

Both of the examples discussed above are focused solutions which target and overcome specific issues, both of which could be seen to be 'out of date'. This is a continuing issue in the field of online privacy and other areas of digital security. The rapid development and rise of softwares capable of harvesting information means the dangers are changing and growing at a frightening rate. (Lin et al., 2011) As new security measures are put in place, countermeasures soon arise, and prompt revision and further development. This means that a security system like CAPTCHA or the work of Mun and Yildirim may soon if not already be obsolete. However, by assessing and learning from designs like ZXX and Güvenli Paket, we can examine the various ways in which type can be harnessed, warped and developed to meet the rising privacy invasions. Kelley notes that soon, more fonts like ZXX may become commonplace, and that even now, Mun continues to work on updated versions of his typeface to meet the challenge of newer OCR technologies. (2013)



Fig. 5: Jiménez, *Abolish White Supremacy and All Black Lives Matter*, 2022.

However, innovations in typography have not been taking place solely in the digital realm, and the field of design activism can be seen also in the physical world, in the works of designers such as Tré Seals. While not directly related to the issue of information privacy online, strong developments in typographic activism have been made across the field in design, particularly in the works of contemporary protestors. Gosling details the impactful work of Black Lives Matter protests, and the handwritten signage which worked in “powerful ways”, capturing the passion and spontaneity of the movement. (2020) Strong correlations can be drawn here to Marinetti, who similarly created groundbreaking work not through the newest technologies, but through new techniques on older machines. Tré Seals is a prominent type designer who is quickly rising in fame.

One of the fonts designed by Seals was used in creating the infamous ‘Abolish White Supremacy’ and ‘All Black Lives Matter’ murals on the streets of Newark. As seen in Figure 5, the works are striking, and Seals notes in his interview with PRINT magazine how the experience of seeing his typeface which was inspired by the Civil Rights movement be then used in the Black Lives Matter movement was surreal. (Beach, 2022) As the concept of typographic activism spreads and becomes more prominent in the works of protestors and activist designers like Seals, the opportunities to harness typographic potential to further investigate online privacy become more mainstream.

The activist potential of Marinetti’s principles

While the work of Marinetti and that of Yildirim, Mun and Seals might vary widely in aesthetics, process and political aims, it is their disruptive and subversive potential which draws them together. The use of type to trigger “new conceptions of typographical design” make their works meaningful beyond the traditional role of type and worthy of comparison. (Toschi, 2020, p. 1) Özkal, a key figure particularly interested in the development of typographic design activism, recognizes how

“these works subvert and defamiliarize us from conventional typographic representations. In this way, we become not only aware of the constructedness of its language, but also discern what kind of ideological discourses can be loaded behind the typographic surfaces.” (2017, p. 139)

The way in which Marinetti, Yildirim, Mun and Seals all 'encode' their designs with political messaging beyond the words used highlights the complicated and multi-layered way in which language can be harnessed. A message can have multiple meanings, and the semiotic effect of a signifier can be bound up in a system of references and other signifiers to give more than one connotation or interpretation. (Danesi, 2019, p. 18)

During the period of time in which Marinetti was working, many artists and designers felt it important to give their work a moral, if not revolutionary quality. The design of protest was a major motivator in an age where speed and noise became a cornerstone of aesthetics. (Bartram, 2005, p. 7) Very similar things can be said about the more modern works discussed. Digital technologies developed in the 1980s and beyond triggered a cultural and typographical paradigm shift, breaking the established principles of type once again prioritising expression over legibility. (Hillner, 2009, p. 84; Reinking, 2019, p. 39) This cyclical process of rebellion against the old and embracing of the new is an established facet of artistic evolution. Marinetti himself in his manifesto denounced the traditional aesthetics of his time, instructing others to "put your trust in Progress, which is always right even when it is wrong, because it is movement, life, struggle, hope." (Marinetti, Flint and Coppotelli, 1972, p. 82)

It is difficult to ignore the subversive similarities between the Futurist movement and that of modern design activism. Mun explains how "ZXX is a call to action, both practically and symbolically, to raise questions about privacy." (2013) While Marinetti was not exactly concerned with online anything, we can gather from his work how he wished to change language structures in the hopes of creating more direct and meaningful methods of communication. Taking what we have learned from Marinetti, it is not the tools, words or messages that make the work disruptive, but the way in which they are used, and the intent behind their creation. Learning from this, and applying it to modern examples, it is clear that the works of Yildirim and Mun have the potential to once again break the barriers of established typographic convention, and give power to the designer, who had previously been relegated to the position of mediator. (Swanson, 2000, p. 98) For it is in this process of mediation where the subversion and disruption can be introduced, through the reversal of semiotic order and the introduction of alternative meaning.

“The arbitrary nature of language can invite the viewer to rediscover the ordinary”, (Crow, 2010, p. 22) and it is precisely this arbitrary nature and semiotic relationship that gives the work of Mun, Marinetti and Yildirim their power. Marinetti desired to enhance the visual significance of the printed word, converting poetry into an expressive tool which exemplifies and creates layers to the textual content. (Toschi, 2020, p. 9) Mun on the other hand is almost striving for the opposite in some ways, attempting to hide the true meaning of the message from hackers and government agencies, in its own way adding deeper meaning to the message. While it can be argued that Mun is attempting to both reveal and conceal the message simultaneously, comparisons can still be closely drawn to Marinetti, who infused in his work an “ambiguity that is often inherent in strong design solutions”, provoking “a moment of rest because it invites viewers to examine the work more closely.” (Hillner, 2009, p. 56)

Swanson warns against how the typographic field may be “compromised by the evils of this new technology”, and how traditional letterforms are threatened in the digital landscape. Yet at the same time, we can see how once a tool is born, it is released from its original origins and free to evolve and improve as needed. (2000, p. 185) It is hard to ignore how the work of Mun looks very different to the letterforms Modernists held dear, but the change is necessary. While the Modernists called for an apolitical approach to design which prospered in the 20th century, this is no longer achievable in the age of digital wiretaps and data collection. (Kelley, 2013) Without the inclusion of noise, misdirection and camouflage, the political intent of the work would be obsolete, and therefore not fit for purpose. These elements are crucial aspects of the type, just as the serif is a part of Baskerville. As we move into a digital culture, it seems that the development of typography will have to follow. (Heller and Meggs, 2001, p. 39)

Conclusion

By looking at the works of Marinetti and other Futurists, we may be able to garner further insights into how work like that of Mun and Yildirim can become more commonplace in society. By attacking the accepted linguistic and typographical structures which found the basis of character recognition, the new age of typography can both conceal and reveal our thoughts, depending on who we wish to see. (Mun, 2013) Type will look a little less like a Crystal Goblet, and more like a two-way mirror. While the idea of digital type is not

new, Marinetti shows us that it is not the advancement of tools which can give rise to revolutionary practices, but the way in which they are used. The base set of letters that Marinetti used are exactly the letters we utilise today, and have utilised for centuries, but what Marinetti has shown is that by using typography as an expressive tool in itself, one can “enhanced both the meaning of the individual word and the impact of text as a whole.” (Bartram, 2005, p. 20) Yildirim explains how “a typeface can mediate the reader through ideologies and political statements.” (2012, p. 3) This is something his work has in common with Mun, Seals and even Marinetti, as they all understand and harness the connotative potentials of typographic design.

These principles laid out by the Futurists might be the key in advancing online privacy. If we evaluate the impact Marinetti’s work had on the political landscape of his time, we see how “the Italian Futurists’ participation in politics, as well as that of avant-garde artists in other countries, was of a radically Utopian nature and led to many clashes” (Sokolova, 2019, p. 203) This ties closely to what Markussen says about modern design activism, stating that

“on the one hand, design activism has a political potential to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and authority, thereby raising critical awareness of ways of living, working, and consuming. On the other hand, design activism shares an aesthetic potential with art activism in its ability to open up the relation between people’s behavior and emotions”. (2013, p. 39)

So it is fair to say that although it was not a known concept of Marinetti’s time, his work had many elements which could be considered fundamental to design activism today. The reversal of semiotic order, upheaval of accepted aesthetic standards and infusion of political messaging into his works are elements which the designers of today consistently display in works of design activism. While the works of Mun and Yildirim could now be considered obsolete in the face of ever-changing technologies, Seals demonstrates that the potential of typographic protest is yet to be exhausted, and innovation is possible.

Bartram argues that “the work of the Italian Futurist poets could still have something to contribute”, (2005, p. 158) and when compared with the work of design activists today, it is hard to disagree. By analysing the history of typographic evolution, strong correlations can be drawn between the typography of the Futurist movement in Italy during the early

20th century and modern subversive practices. The field of design activism shows huge potential as the world continues to grapple with large-scale issues like racism, the climate crisis and privacy invasions. While the work of Marinetti may not be directly linked to solving the fact that Google knows which brand of markers I prefer, it would be remiss to ignore the potential insights that could be gained from a comparison, and the advantages that come with considering the past.

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