

On Piracy, Victory and the Just Shaping of Letters

What is it that both Albrecht Durer and Nike understand about the rudiments of branding? In the late Renaissance, Durer's iconic AD monogram became an emblem of high accomplishment, a symbol of quality applied to the remarkable drypoints made by his studio, and hence, synonymizing value to an educated European intelligentsia. Around 1505, Durer was even forced to denounce the Venetian artist Raimondi, who had copied Durer's works and signed them with the famous mark. This is one of the first trials defending the rights of an author and the protection of what is today called intellectual property. So enduring was the visual power of Durer's simply rendered signature that, four centuries later in the mid-1960s, the NY Art Directors Club appropriated the motif for their own identity, a stroke both irreverent and prescient in its acknowledgement of the valuation of typographic branding.

The commercial arena today more readily recognizes unique and proprietary typography as a critical component in effective business-building. In the era before such a crowded, connected and competitive environment existed, a handful of enduring brands gained a foothold in the popular consciousness by promoting their own powerful associations with custom letterforms. The rest languished in a wasteland of similarity while Ford, Coca-Cola, Canon, Firestone, and Pirelli rose up as typographic forefathers to IBM and Walt Disney and MTV. It was only The Artist (at the time) Formerly Known As Prince who challenged this venerable idea a decade ago by introducing a new typographic non-word brand, offering up a single unrecognizable character he insisted was alphabetic, but representing *what*, for it was neither pictographic nor phonic in nature. It simply represented an economic and artistic entity. Prince endured, while the character did not.

The cease and desist order delivered by McDonald's Corporation to Plazm Media, a boutique graphic design company located in Portland Oregon, in March 2004 underscored an awesome evolution in the awareness of the power of typographic assets. Plazm Fonts had distributed an alphabet called *Capitalis Pirata*, a hybrid whose characters were comprised of letterforms gleaned from prominent (and proprietary) commercial logotypes. It is an utterly frivolous, nonutilitarian and distracting font, whose merit lies in the intellectual conundrums it poses about associative signaling as it challenges the very concept of ownership of memes. The font has no functional optical qualities as an alphabet, thus its potential in uses such as body copy are minimal, if not nonexistent. The obvious message sent to Plazm by the injunction was that even fragmentary intellectual assets constitute legally encumbered information signals about a company, and indicates how utterly protective, vigilant, and draconian the owner needs to be to assert its commercial invulnerability. Plazm removed the golden arch M from *Capitalis*, much to the detriment of the alphabet. McDonalds is as ubiquitous as its prestigious neighbors in the font, and would have seen no brand dilution from its appearance in the alphabet. The corporation would only have received further free brand promotion had they allowed its use. This event is a strange and historic footnote to be factored, for now it is a matter of record, and the lawyers once again have prevailed over the intellectuals and academics.

On a less turbulent front, in 2002 Nike commissioned Plazm to design an entire alphabet called Victory, a comprehensive and proprietary typographic family to be used exclusively in its own communications. Victory recollects attributes of Futura, DIN and Avenir, whose origins in the industrial era pervade their flawless geometry. The addition of certain curvaceous details, such as seen in the lower case l and y, suggest a preoccupation with things organic, and echo this generation's obsession with the body, a perfect evocation of the Nike ethos.

The brand was built around the concept of performance. To inject the concept of victory is a logical next step. To date, Plazm has cut light, medium, and bold versions in both roman and italic letterforms. Nike recently commissioned the firm to expand this family to a Russian alphabet, clearly anticipating a growing market.

When an alphabet's intrinsic neutrality as a transmitter of pure information is somehow removed and its first priority shifted to commercial ends, deeper artistic questions are relegated to the secondary role. Victory is, at the end of the day, an impeccably crafted font, whose extended weights are especially alluring from a perspective of design. But it is Victory's embedded symbology encapsulating both Nike's heritage and its vision of itself present and future that predominates. Nike now has an effective and unique vehicle for further consolidating market position. Victory is a success because it expresses many of the corporation's ideals, has high utilitarian and artistic properties, communicates intimations of value and quality, and whose rights are held completely by the corporate entity. In that it is both visionary, forward-looking, and at the same time soundly traditional. Durer would be impressed.

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