

Out of the Darkness

DIN and the Mythic Power of Type

Students of typographic design are forced to initially consider the technical issues of optical engineering for the visual universe. Yet they rarely focus on the ideological underpinnings and conundrums. The student of typography often views their subject as a series of rigid constraints, principles of scale and proportion and mechanical possibilities, fair game for manipulation. Rarely is typography viewed as part of an organic process of evolution, a working construct of ephemeral existence in a greater time continuum. As fonts evolve they carry forward echoes of the history that created them and the myths they bear. One cannot easily place a monetary value on myth, though some will try.

How deeply a brand values typography –and its ability to carry forward myth- varies widely. The little players use generic, esoteric or readily available letters for their corporate signatures and communications. Some companies commission custom letterforms. Some eventually buy global licenses for entire typefaces, attaching their own myth or borrowing from that of the typeface. Some fonts, such as Times Roman, Fraktur, Playbill, Clarendon and Old English migrated into mythical presences themselves.

Such a font is DIN, whose creation by Wagner in 1932, yielded a typographic institution so grandly proliferated as to be imitated to this day. We are awash in its grotesque children. As always, a window backwards serves to remind how and why.

The earliest monotone letterforms, composed of strokes of even thickness can be traced to written Ancient Greek from the 5th-2nd Century BC. From them comes the name Grotesque, and the designation sans-serif. The casual baseline seen in fragments extant belies a letterform suited to the sparsest elegance and economy, allowing lofty flights of random artistry. Later, the Romans, with their chisel serifs, drove the Grotesque into hiding for 2000 years. Letterforms approximated handwriting for centuries to follow, even to the dawn of moveable type. While the eventual introduction of serif fonts widely succeeded, it was not until 1816 that we can track the first recorded reappearance of a sans-serif font in Germany, a transnational typeface that followed the Napoleonic era of plunder and destruction. The primary uses of the font were for display purposes, and there was little understanding of the

interaction between individual characters. The elemental caps adhered to simplistic geometric modeling, with perfectly round counters, wider footing, the near-equilateral pyramid A, a scenario of uncompromising kerning. This was a typeface that symbolized enlightenment coming from the face of darkness, with stoic freedom in all communications. It was a typeface heralding the industrial age with its relentless mechanical precision.

Around 1898 two pivotal typefaces appeared, at the exact cultural moment when Art Nouveau was transiting into an era of proto-futurism, anticipating the emergence of Art Deco. Akzidenz Grotesk was designed with an economic verticality modeled on the demands of moveable metal or machine set type, introducing an upward compression expressed in condensed letterforms, which were meant to be mechanically arrayed. Copperplate Condensed, of the same era, was produced no doubt to satisfy the demands of the cabal of *serifim*, but produced in an uppercase only. Copperplate's cap set roughly emulates that of Akzidenz, both in proportion and drafting, as well as in optical color. Neuzeit Grotesque, cut in 1928 by Wilhelm Pischner, adapted the thick regular strokes and square corners of Akzidenz, suggesting an even stricter rectangularity and harsher geometry.

It was the decision of the German Standard Committee in 1936 that DIN 1451 be specifically employed in technology, traffic, administration and business. The Committee deemed the type easily read and written, promoting its ubiquity. But there soon came vivid debate about the typeface's aesthetic attributes. Of course the artists won, and DIN quickly infected the artistic realm, insinuating itself into advertising with a singular vengeance. DIN's cap set was approximately modeled on the letterforms of Akzidenz, largely assuming the optical character and color of Copperplate Condensed. Curve stress of the counters is most apparent in the lower case a, m, n and r. DIN's numerals have been simplified and streamlined for the convenience of the end user. There is a loftiness in DIN's intent, which believes everything can work together, while things florid and artistic shall occupy their own space; DIN's rapid adoption for aesthetic uses refuted any such preposterous limitation.

The 1950s saw the emergence of highly evolved industrial fonts, designed by enlightened and talented typographers: Univers, which celebrated the aesthetic of precision; and Helvetica, which promoted the mass proliferation of the mundane. Both made a lasting impression on communication, literacy, taste. The essential impersonal blandness of

Helvetica, though, came to symbolize a world homogenized, devoid of any humanistic refinement.

Thus, in 1995 Albert-Jan Pool created the magnificent FF DIN, rebuilding this herald of the end of the industrial age with a grace, elegance and ease, superimposed on a matrix of formal, architectural right angles. This recutting created a standard of beauty and function, spawning a tidal wave of imitators all possessed of a cold and clinical mediocrity, which managed to obfuscate the mythical quality of the original. It is a curse of our era that dissolution and devaluation are often the result of high technology's ease of operation. Everyone can be a typographer, the mistaken idea goes. But the newer cuttings looked antiseptic, uninspired, over-refined to the point of the innocuous.

In 2002 Adidas, a German athletic footwear company, commissioned a proprietary font family of 12 faces named adiHAUS, created to communicate the sensibilities of their brand. Plazm Fonts, retained for the project, proposed basing its earliest letterforms on a classic, antique cutting of Wagner DIN 1451.

The key word to remember with Adidas is *competition*. While Nike built its brand on *performance*, Adidas had attached itself primarily to professional competition and is credited with almost all athletic footwear innovations prior to Nike's waffle sole, which was introduced in the 1970s. Witness the recent resurgence of interest in classic Adidas Olympic shoes from the 60s and 70s. The mythos of the brand is embedded in the concept. Plazm Fonts symbolically referenced this by introducing the typographic idea of setting one's self up in opposition to the past, drawing differences between the forerunner named DIN 1451 and the challenger named adiHAUS. Times had changed, too. Plazm Fonts rendered adiHAUS more extended, more open in the counters, suggesting a more stable base, a more assured landing, and the foundations of balance. Paradoxically, the designers added a slightly higher waistline, rendering the font even more bottom-heavy, with a lower center of gravity, an effect not mediated by a deeper descender line. adiHAUS is a contrarian font where the lower case a, l and y stand simplified in symbolic opposition to their DIN antecedents, while the numerals 1 and 9 engage in a comparable conflict, only in reverse. adiHAUS has altered the altitude of center horizontal strokes in A,B,E,F,G,P and R to reflect the volumes of the extended counters- but other than that and some manipulation of the cap Q, the upper case is largely undistinguished, an homage to DIN, and a concession to our antipathy towards

uppercase, which in digital world is considered loud, pushy and aggressive. Finally, adiHAUS demands and seizes more horizontal and vertical space proportionately than its predecessors, symbolizing brand's attachment to the gains of competition. While the font met the objectives of the commercial mythos, it left behind the very mnemonic signals of its heritage.

Adidas eventually retired adiHAUS in 2004, instead opting for a global license of FF DIN from Font House, who administer world rights. We can only speculate on the true rationale, for the company had invested a year and a king's ransom to create their own proprietary typeface, then quickly abandoned it. In that action, Adidas demonstrated how much and how little it valued typography. Perhaps the myth of FF DIN outshone the myth of Adidas- that the company sought to place less emphasis on competition, and more on coming out of the darkness and into the light.

There is a classic Zen koan which talks about what is outside the vessel being as important as the space within. adiHAUS pushed Adidas into the zone outside the vessel, and (to employ a student typographer's vocabulary), thereby redefined the meaning of the term negative space.

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