Intemporal Futura

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Petra Eisele, Annette Ludwig e Isabel Naegele. *Futura: The Typeface*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2017. 519 pp. ISBN 978-17-8627-093-1.

Futura is one of the best-known typefaces in the world. We can recognise its shapes even without being aware of its existence as we are submerged by marketing communication either through online or offline channels used by world-renowned brands like *OMEGA, Nike* or *Absolut Vodka*. From watches to sneakers and vodka, *Futura* has been omnipresent in visual communication.[1] It is probably the most successful heir of modernism, being present on a wide range of mediums and typographic weights without losing its formal characteristics.

Created during the 1920s by Paul Renner, *Futura* merges "the radical design trends of the Bauhaus or the New Typography" with the classic antique inscriptions of the "Roman Capitalis Monumentalis" (p. 21). This book is

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[1] OMEGA, Paypal, Nike, CISCO, Canal +, Gillette, Rai, Red Bull, USA Today, FedEx, Absolut Vodka, Spotify, Fox News are brands that use Futura as their logotype typeface.

dedicated to Renner's work and especially to the life of the *Futura* typeface, which managed to survive between the wars and claim its space as a geometric sans-serif which still lives nowadays, far beyond its original intents and scope. It was created when Europe was still recovering from all the political and social changes that resulted from the World's first global conflict. Germany was living an economic prosperity "which led to booming advertising scene that quickly become professional" (p. 23).

Antiqua, *Black Letter* and other contemporary forms weren't capable of giving the look of that modern time, and *Futura*, drawn from the *Roman* elegant simplicity and stripped of unnecessary adornment, provided text with the functionality and legibility needed in a society living in progressively faster pace. In Renner's perspective, typography should be "exact, precise and impersonal" (33) as printing is a function performed by a machine. Typeface form should be stripped of ornaments or any inheritances or influences from handwriting. Calligraphy is dynamic as it has the expression of the act of writing, something that a mechanical process could never emulate properly. In this sense, letterpress should not be confused with the process of writing, but be accepted as a device which reproduces human content faster than before.

Futura was Paul Renner's attempted answer to the process of reading as it forms groups of letters and words, instead of looking into the characteristics of each individual letter. This was achived by using the simplicity and elegance of *Roman Capitals*, which consist of "circles, triangles and squares […] the […] most antithetical forms imaginable" (p. 26), reduced to their skeleton. Thus each character drawing has been optically balanced to reach a visual geometric font, stripped of any reminiscence of handwriting, "such as starting and ending strokes" or raising slightly «the apex of the "A" and round of the "O" […] above the cap height» (p. 37), among other adjustments. It allows the reader to capture the "dominant word forms in the paper as it [the eye] flies above them" (p. 33).

This spirit of modernity, infused with technical and functional rationality, influenced Paul Renner on the drawing of *Futura*, breaking with the old through reduction of "the form of every letter to its function" making it "exact, precise and impersonal" (pp. 63-65). One of the major challenges accomplished by the design of *Futura* is the harmony between lower and upper case. The frequent use of capitals in the German language "disrupted the picture of the lower-case because of their own rhythm and foreign shapes", so Renner reduced the form of lower-cases to "the simplest elementary planes" inspired by the *Roman Capitals* known for "their easy legibility" (p. 81). He brought back the *Roman Capitals* typography's "original roots" to modernist font shapes, preventing *Futura* from being a pure geometric font-

face of constant stroke weight or just a compass-drawn form replacing a complicated form in opposition to Russian Constructivists. To achieve this kind of typography Renner made important adjustments on the form of each letter, either in upper or lower case, enhancing its optical centres, its ascendants and descendants, and the relationship between each character, kerning, and how texts behave in blocks of several lines of text, and leading. *Futura* has a formal preoccupation with the experience of reading and not just with the change of cultural typographic landscape in order to reflect the tide of new times.

The book follows the career of Paul Renner since he was appointed Director of the Faculty of Commercial Graphic Design and Typography in Frankfurt (one year after he took the Direction of the Master School of German Letterpress in Munich). At the same time, he managed to conclude the prototype of *Futura* and begin its production by *Bauer Type Foundry* in 1927. It is in this period that Renner invites another modernist type reference to teach in Munich, Jan Tschichold, who claimed "enormous savings" by eliminating all the capitals from text as it would be "easier to read, and much more economical" (p. 115). It wouldn't be necessary "two alphabets for one word when the same result can be archived with half" (p. 115). The fact is that the shapes of *Futura* are largely recognised on lower-case due to the advertising of this time, and later on through the way it is adopted by major worldwide trademarks for their logos.

After presenting a brief and detailed biography of Paul Renner, the book explains to the reader how the *mise-en-page* of typefaces was practiced at this time in analogy to other major visual art, painting. Reading is a movement in which typography shapes the direction of the eye, defines text readability and is part of the material relationship with the text. In advertising and other print arrangements, text layout and typographic choices can define the global direction and optical flow, making a graphic piece unbalanced or suggesting plenty of movement without even being read. It is not only the range of choices made on a macroscopic level, as the overall main shape of text, including the font face choice and its distribution through the page, but also the micro-typographic options, such as the letter spacing, the number of characters and words per line, leading and gutter, all these aspects together contribute to the perception and effectiveness of reading a text with aspects that go beyond its content, for example, the artistic styles inherited from the forms of type. The book also describes the relationship of *Futura* with other modernist artists and typographers as we travel through other Central European cities. During this journey we can find important thoughts of design history. Sutnar compared a book cover to a building facade (p. 274) and Kalivoda and Moholy-Nagy redefined "typography's

function [...] as a means to free vision" (p. 277). The journey continues to Paris where *Futura* was named *Europa* by the *Peignot Foundry* and Maximilien Vox saw it as "wonderfully suited to headings and short texts" (p. 296). As time went by, Vox recognised how *Futura* is the "type of our [modern] time":

> the type that will dominate all visible applications in the coming decade will not be Antiqua, but a further development of the Antiqua, a type with an almost perfect interplay of cuts, without serifs (until further consideration), with proportions of greater variety and liveliness than the former commonly used Antiqua fonts. There are already many versions of this type in Germany [...] and one in England [...]; in France, there are developments under way that are sure to be very successful (p. 309).

As National Socialism came to power in Germany and modern art was politically rejected and defamed, many intellectuals, architects, artists and typographers fled to the United States. These events mark the globalisation of *Futura* as it was first introduced to New York and soon spread to the rest of the American continent. Johnston and Erbar considered it a "true expression of the technical process" (p. 478). In the second half of the 20th century the first phototype-setting machines came to market which "led to the end of the type foundry business", yet at *Bauer Type Foundry* the demand for manual typesetting was so high that they couldn't fulfil orders on time, to the point that they outsourced the production of matrices to an English foundry (p. 493).

The globalisation of *Futura* made it not only a font of its time, but a font whose presence and influence extends to our own time. Which other font had been a fetish of film directors like Stanley Kubrick or Wes Anderson? Which was the first font to land on the moon? That's right: *Futura*. *Futura* as an expression of technical process has taken into account the particularities that centuries of written language have developed in our means of visual perception. A font made from the root of *Roman Antiques* which now lives on bits and bytes, surviving the end of metal font foundries and of phototype. *Futura* continues to look fresh and contemporary, capable of serving either the harsh corners of Concrete Poetry or represent elite sport values.