

# TYPOGRAPHY INSPIRATIONS IN 21<sup>st</sup> - CENTURY: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ROLES OF MODERNIST BAUHAUS IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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**Abstract:** *A critical examination of the historical, political, social and cultural significance of Bauhaus social and cultural impacts is presented in this paper, with a focus on Modernist typography's social and cultural relevance today. Design literature shows that Bauhaus-inspired experimental forms of "new" typefaces and letterforms, initially perceived as avant-garde due primarily to its abstract conformity to sharpness and uniformity, gained eminence as the 20<sup>th</sup>-century progressed, and eventually preferred over traditional type-forms and widely applied to business publications to enhance readability and legibility. Many designers today acknowledge that Bauhaus typefaces have transformed graphic design and typesetting practices through its clarity of visual communication properties which promotes modernity and adaptability to social, technological and cultural trends. This paper analyses the typographic forms and innovations used in modern graphic designs, logos, advertising and brand literature which validate the importance of visual typefaces to improve recognisability and credibility. Through case studies, this paper contributes critical perspectives to type design research by demonstrating that regardless of usage and application, Bauhaus-inspired typographic imageries, letterforms, and logos continue to be relevant in improving visual communication logic, order and clarity, enabling fuller social interaction and cultural exchange by ensuring legibility and visual consistency.*

**Keywords:** *Bauhaus, Modernism, Typography, Type, Visual Communication, Graphic Design, Sans Serif*

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## Introduction

From its founding as a pioneering architecture, performance and design school in Weimar by Walter Gropius in 1919, Bauhaus played a key role in challenging graphic artists to radically reimagine the world of material culture, and to plot a more socially-progressive reaction to the environment of political censure in pre-World War II Germany (Aspen Institute, 2013). Decades after the forced closure of its final site in Berlin in 1933 by the Nazi regime, Bauhaus' core vision is still celebrated for unifying the arts: exploring, innovating and shaping aesthetic forms which combines human problem-solving skills with the rationality of machine and

industrial crafts, to construct and produce socially-unifying designs which appeal to the aesthetics of order, regularity and precision (Bierut, Drenttel and Heller, 2006). The influence of the Bauhaus movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century was driven by the growth of interest in graphic visual communication, through cultural ideological transfer through social and technological deconstruction. *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the German ethos of capturing totality and singularity in art, preceded the development of Modernism in the history of art movements.

Aside from breaking away from traditional elite-class art practices and establishing a new universal standard in the modern era (Arnason and Mansfield, 2010), Bauhaus principles such as visual hierarchy and structural relationships maintain its critical importance in the development of contemporary design education, for its emphasis on integration of design arts with economics, engineering and craftsmanship (Arnason and Mansfield, 2010; Marshik, 2015; Meggs and Purvis, 2016).

### **Problem Statement and Objectives of Study**

Typographic design, one of the fields of standing at the juncture of political, historical and social evolutions, is under-recognised for its role in adapting to influential cultural shifts. Underlying changes to graphic design practice are the growth of mass printing, digital publishing and other technological development affecting the designer's working processes in terms of skills learning and problem-solving approaches. Without clear investigative pathways to understand typographic history, language development theories and spatial concepts, many modern graphic designers lack a strong grasp of typography's role as an "interface between form and meaning" (Carter, Day and Meggs, 2012: p.xi). The primary objective of this paper is to uncover key perspectives which demonstrates the role of Bauhaus typography as a legacy of technological and socio-political progress with its defining characteristic as a "visually functional communication tool". A second objective of research is to explain how type became a successful mass-developed type form through emphasising simplification of design concepts at the heart of expressive visual communication, as adapted and practiced in the digital century. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: *What is the significance of typography in the history of art movements in design history? How far has modern graphic typography adapted and integrated the unique characteristics of Bauhaus ethos?*

### **Literature Review**

Researching typographic roles for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century necessitated visiting art history and critical studies of art by seeking references in academic literature discussing typographic uses for mainstream industries such as advertising and graphic designing, in determining Bauhaus contribution to typography, it must first be understood how contemporary attitudes to German cultural outputs have developed over the last centuries.

The growth of Modernism saw a reduction in handcrafting arts, coinciding with the shift of knowledge and resources towards mechanistic forms of mass production and industrial processes. Some of these 'less organic' aspects began to encroach into graphic design. A breadth of scholarly texts has been published which examines, monographs and critiques the scope, significance and impact of Bauhaus legacy as seen in mass production, high-volume and cost-efficient practices in cultural outputs, from newspaper printing to book publishing to theatre to fashion (Marshik, 2015).

In his thesis, Bretschneider (2012: pp.5-6) cites the importance of workshop-based teaching in the Bauhaus school in its intermediate years, under the leadership of László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers, with lessons on materials exploration, prototype industrial design, and theoretical

principles contextually integrated to provide students a range of vocational pathways. However, Bretschneider (2012) argued that the eventual adoption of mass production ethos conflicted with the original craftsman mission of ensuring the survival of the fine arts.

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, these dichotomies of practice grew substantially, with various authors and scholars conflicting in their views about Bauhaus' *institutional* role. Critics argue that the historical significance of this school is demonstrated in unifying the diverse fields of art, architecture, craft, and technology, but many designers have overlooked the social heritage in lieu of *techniques*. It is thus quite valid to suggest that Bauhaus' sociocultural legacy and historic characteristics, in their contextual application in fields such as advertising and graphic design in the age of machines, have only just recently been treated with special concern (Arnason and Mansfield, 2010; Meggs and Purvis, 2016).

Nevertheless, Carter, Maxa, Sanders, Meggs and Day (2018) appreciate the various "accidental" contributors to modern typography, and state that the Modernist movements of Bauhaus, Constructivism, Dadaism and Futurism have enmeshed their ideologies from diverse toolbox methods, particularly in the development of clarity and integrity of typographic composition as distinctive imagery with meaningfully-arranged visual forms.

Typography, states Poulin (2017), is practiced with a critical eye for letter, character, line and column spacing, and a basic regard for functionality and proportionality. Strong visuality of type strives for simplicity of lines, spatial expressions and shapes, with abstract qualities of lightness and airiness being its key elements (Hostetler, 2010). Modernist typography trumpets clarity and the regularity of geometric sans serifs based on single-story alphabet letterforms (Lupton, 2010).

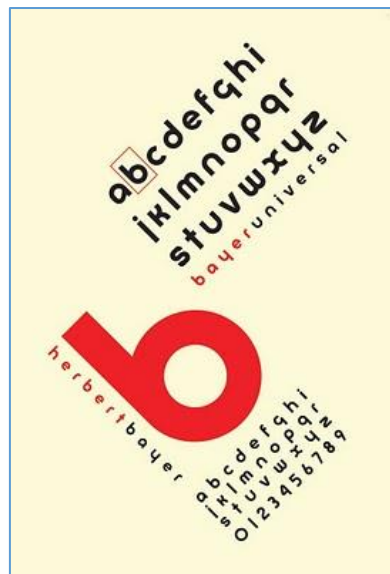
Typographic simplicity is achieved when the final outcomes are reduced to their most elemental forms with strict, geometrical bases built from triangle, square and circular shapes; these metaphorical blocks lucidly symbolise organisational strength and are thus much favoured for corporate logotype designs, being connotative of organisational order, standardisation and rules, by communicating cultural values in the sharpest, most direct way possible (Meggs and Purvis, 2016).

### ***The Influence of Bauhaus Masters in Typography***

Neither typography workshops nor experiments were priorities of Bauhaus in its initial development as the institutional face of Modernism. It wasn't until much later that it became increasingly important under the Bauhaus Masters, Marcel Breuer, Paul Klee and Herbert Bayer (Gomez-Palacio and Vit, 2007). Carter, Meggs and Day (2012) chronicle the typographic systems which these designers created including universal alphabets, unjustified text alignment setting, typeface designs and fonts, preserved now in the Museum of Design in Berlin. Playing a key role was Austrian-born American designer and photographer Herbert Bayer. From being an understudy at Weimar Bauhaus, he later filled the shoes of Director for the Print and Advertising foundry at Bauhaus Dessau (Gomez-Palacio and Vit, 2007).

Mentored by Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, Bayer's decision to leave Bauhaus in 1928, moving to Berlin to work, and a decade later, to New York to escape political unrest in Europe, were key factors in his design oeuvre: a desire to find a semblance of order in the middle of political and social upheavals during the historic war years (Tschichold and McLean, 2006). Throughout the five productive decades of his life, Bayer designed everything from book jackets, posters, magazine covers, building murals and corporate interior furnishings,

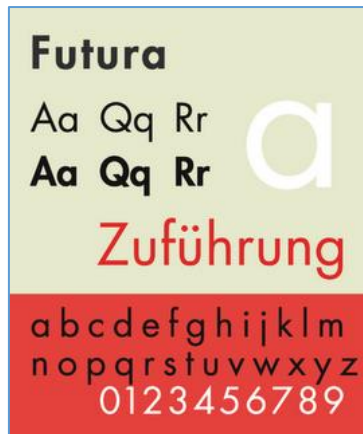
acclaimed as philosophical musings of avant-garde aesthetics, engineered to suggest unification of art with a desire for order, structure and fluid expressions of the visual realm (Aspen Institute, 2013; Poulin, 2017). Armed with little informed understanding about typography's historical precedence, compared to his peer Paul Renner, Bayer cleaved loyally to the ideals of Modernism, demonstrating pragmatism in problem-solving as a design consultant for corporations (Tschichold and McLean, 2006). In 1925, he proposed the abolishment of capital letters, advocating the use of lowercase alphabets by developing the Universal sans-serif typeface (Figure 1), using it to design everything from company letterheads to poster advertisements (Aspen Institute, 2013; Rochester Institute of Technology, n.d.).



**Figure 1: Universal Typeface**

Universal typography represented his opposition to the spirit of conservative art, to “chart new directions [...] for inventive spatial relationships” which, up until the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, was seated within class polemics among Western societies (Meggs and Purvis, 2016: p.262). Modernism, as a radicalised expression in post-World War I, was conceived to reinvigorate European cultural arts. Legibility, clarity and structural logic became premium attributes for post-War communication and typographic design aimed to verbalise language and textual meaning in the fullest clarity. Essentially, sans serif as a graphic type form served to symbolise Bauhaus as an avant-garde institution.

Paul Renner, another design director whose legacy is tied to the development of typography, is an important scholarly contributor, being foremost an educator. Renner's work consistently acknowledged Weimar as a radical institution in his formative years of apprenticeship (Famous Graphic Designers, 2018), and this eventually shaped his inspiration for Futura (Figure 2), where readability is perfected in a clean sanserif; every stem a rectangle or a straight line, while lowercase and uppercase strokes, geometrically even-weighted, the construction of ‘a’ and ‘g’ using single-story glyphs underlines practicability, the appearance of efficiency implying sturdiness (Alessio, 2013).



**Figure 2: Futura Typeface**

In its 90<sup>th</sup> year since launching in 1927, Futura is arguably an accomplished breakthrough as a highly-favoured publication typeface, outliving Renner by being consistently “fresh to the eye ... crystal-clear ... and free from any influence of fashionable form” (Koop, 2017, citing Eisele, Ludwig and Naegele, 2017).

Futura continues to prove its legacy as a default type application for print publications (Poulin, 2017: p.58). It is also a perfect example of a designer forced to confront the difficulties of putting conceptual theory into practice, Renner believed nationalist sentiments were necessary ideologies to incorporate in art and design and Futura was in fact his response to a radically-modernising Germany of the 1920’s (Eisele, Ludwig and Naegele, 2017).

#### ***Criticism of Universal Typeface for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Application***

Traditional Gothic fonts were complicated and hard to read; in comparison, Bauhaus sans serif improved readability through great simplification. Typefaces like ITC Bauhaus, ITC Avant Garde and Futura were replications of Bayer’s Universal typeface. Bayer indeed proved a great inspiration to other typographers to create, experiment and widen its impact and utility (Carter, Meggs and Day, 2012; Tschichold and McLean, 2006).

Sans serif typefaces developed from the abstraction of supreme geometry, a theoretical concept founded by Russian artist Kasimir Malevich who considered the black square to be the ultimate graphic expression (Heller and Vienne, 2014). This simplified form of typeface is ideal for printed texts: when designing logo, for instance, elements that are not functional would be “disinherited”. Simplicity aids recognition as memorable logos ease associative cognition of brands, which is the whole point and purpose of a company logo (Heller and Vienne, 2014). Abstracted forms, when broken down, proves that geometrical simplicity is the perfect solution for replicability, ensuring universal appeal and utility (Holland, 2001; Hollis, 2006).

Some scholars take divergent views on this. In his thesis, DiGioia (1995: pp.31-32), for instance, argues that typographic forms should be flexible to allow greater participation in meaning making. This suggests conceptual theories of post-structuralism by claiming that typography is one of many functional means of “communicating to the imagination”. From these assumptions, it would be futile to ignore typography’s usefulness in modern graphic designing, particularly their utility for interactive web designs.

Henry Kim (2017: pp.138-39), Coca-Cola Company's senior design director, sought out the historical precedents including basic methods of Bayer's early artist training as the primary inspiration for the Universal typeface. Understanding Bayerian rationality, Kim believes is a constructive way to grasp the purity of linear refinement expressed as radically simplified forms.

Nevertheless, Kim (2017) states that contemporary application of typographic design is but broad abstraction of "ever-widening visual experiences", more crucial is the way purist Bauhaus methodology have symbolically absorbed the impacts from political and socioeconomic shifts which descended upon Western communal arts in the history of the movement itself (Hollis, 2006: pp.21-24).

Renner claims the balance between capital and lowercase letters of Futura is more effective for industrial applications than Bayer's Universal typeface (DiGioia, 1995). Futura itself always comes up in commercial billboard displays, logos, corporate slogans and in books where small text is needed. Futura has undergone significant modification for readability compared to the more purist Universal, with capitals leading lowercase letters rather than being in structural harmony with it.

Despite this essential difference, it should be fairly noted that without Universal as a pioneering type, the evolution of Futura as a subtler form of geometric sans serif with experimental curves and tonal value, decidedly would not have happened (Lupton, 2010).

### **Research Methodology**

The qualitative method of research for this paper is grounded in Bauhaus theories of social construction, the idea that spaces and rules should be laid out cohesively in organisation of textual information, consistent with the philosophy of "visually functional graphic design" (Aspen Institute, 2013: p.5).

The scope of research on typography applications stems from key understanding of traditional typography which emphasise values of timelessness and visual hierarchy. Based on this principle, it is assumed that the quest for essence in typography is a crucial aspect of design communication, and that typefaces must bear "elements of the universal language of vision" (Lupton, 2010: p.27), constructed to be commercially available, pragmatic, with accessible components for mainstream application such as advertising and marketing communication.

Literature proves that many commercial applications of type today aim for strong brand identification through legibility and readability of logotypes and letterforms (Lupton, 2010); yet, undeniably it is also a case of personalised craftsmanship which inspires the creation of typographic art.

As Bretschneider (2012: p.41) states:

*In the studios, craftsmanship became a primary focus [in advanced design learning]. Next [is] good design and form coupled with concept. [This leads to the development of] a sense of a total work of art or "Gesamtkunstwerk" and could now apply the principles and elements to my art. These ... pieces [are] expected to be meticulous and beautiful.*

Via a selection of case examples from branding and political communication, this paper socially constructs the roles which typographic design is applied in visual imagery to demonstrate the contextual links between the great tradition of Bauhaus typography and their social, technological and cultural contexts today (Arnason and Mansfield, 2010). This approach enables the researcher to identify and explore the contextual roles attributed to typographic elements in contemporary visual communication, and the ways in which Modernist graphic type demonstrates expressive attributes, enhancing its usefulness for business communication efficiency and effectiveness. Research is also directed to offer practical solutions for typographic design users such as businesses in finding creative ways of engaging with their audiences.

In addition, cultural perspectives on Bauhaus Modernist type application are provided to further discuss and examine their social roles in communication. To correlate with the study objectives, case illustrations in advertising communication will be qualitatively analysed to show the impact of Bauhaus-inspired typeface application in social, technological and cultural designs today, and the findings from these case examples are discussed in the section, *Diversity of Values* which follows.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In examining patterns of Modernist typography in design works today, other critiques have also added their adjuncts. As economic opportunities increase and branding strategies require more creative options, it would be hard to assimilate the idealism of Bayer's geometrical perfection and simplification to every organisational need. To modern typographic challenges, new archives can and should be added or experimented upon, and letterforms which expand the variations of Universal while still emphasising legibility, should be welcomed (Stinton, 2014).

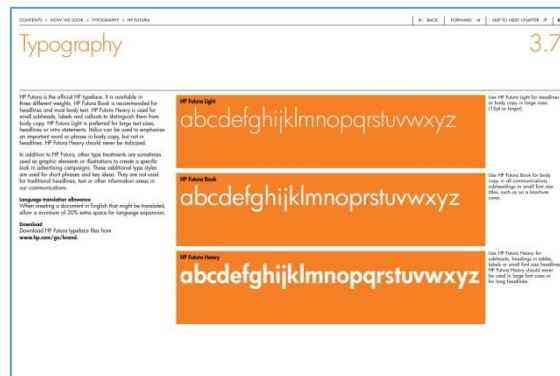
#### ***Social Impact of Type in Advertising***

The need to differentiate brands is an ever-crucial factor in the age of mobile devices and social marketing, and O'Neill (2017) argues that many cutting-edge corporates seeking a boost in recognisability have been looking to Futura logotypes to ensure their brands stand out from the "play-safe" pre-dominant typeface, Helvetica. Futura and its variations feature in an array of contemporary media, from magazines, billboards and shop-front displays, product packaging and corporate identities (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Futura Type Design for Corporate Logotypes**

Hewlett-Packard (HP) is an example of Futura’s visibility, aiding the company’s positioning as a specialist in semiconductor devices and technologies, founded on strong brand loyalty. Futura typeface used for HP logo design communicates forthright simplicity, with lowercase letters of its brand name effectually used to convey a sophisticated brand identity, as a global information technology corporation. The typeface in HP brand advertising materials clearly depicts the company’s promise of trust and credibility (Figure 4a).



**Figure 4a: Futura HP Brand Identity**

The sapphire blue-white logo (Figure 4b) is structured from a rectangle set within rounded corners, representing high-performance computer chips, processors and semiconductors, ringed with the fonts “hp”, symbolising the reliability of business computing. Its instant recognisability enables HP to deliver its core message of quality standards, durability and reputation impactfully.





**Figure 4b: HP Logo**

### ***Digital Revolution in Graphic Typography***

In spite of newer typographic forms employing a breadth of styles, shades and sizes, the greatest advantage of classical typefaces, according to its advocates, is the intentional structuralism; giving type designs a fully functioning mode for visual communication in its physicality, vivacity and lucidity (Carter et al, 2018). In the digital era, the creation of typography via computerised software is a sensible proposition in democratising the work of designers, lauded for cost-, time- and labour-saving advantages (DiGioia, 1995). Digital typesetting enables textual configuration for corporates, enterprises or institutions in the hands of non-designers, editors and untrained users alike (Meggs, 1994). In text-rendering, today's graphic designers are constantly debating the challenges of digital typesetting as double-edged sword in the print and publishing world. As design academies and universities began emphasising mastery of computer technologies and software manipulation, a comprehensive, contextual appreciation of visual communication arts in the interest of knowledge sharing and design social responsibility is being lost (Carter et al, 2018).

Steven Heller (2011) believes that layout of content and form is no longer as integrated as they were in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Type is easily deconstructed on digital media: audiences simply glide around webpages, applications and Internet sites, not overtly noticing typography as a unique asset, hence “pushing design into the background” (p.25).

In a celebrated essay, *The Obscene Typography Machine*, Philip Meggs (1989) stated that digital applications for graphic designing, and specifically, for typography, may be the singular source of painful adjustment among trained typographers who begrudge younger counterparts and non-specialists as they flit through collection of graphic procedures made instantly and effortlessly available with software, going berserk over the “new toy” with their stretching, rotating, squeezing, skewing and butchering of flawlessly-weighted lines of type and letterforms that represented traditionalist printing heritage.

These are notably seen in iterations of digital typefaces packaged as “value-added products” on commercial web design platforms, such as Adobe Creative Cloud and Google Fonts (*Web Design Trends 2015 & 2016*). Younger designers also seem to prefer experimentation with the online configurations of both serif and sans serif families downloadable from commercial sites (Arora, 2018).

### ***Cultural Roles of Typeface***

The shift of perspectives towards art and design as detached and ‘remote from the world’ to a ubiquitous global practice within organisational climates denoted the descent of today's cultural consumption ethos from post-World War I modernity. As the mass production of cultural goods in the last century started taking privileges away from artisans - a metaphorical turn from aristocratic to mechanistic, many adaptations of aesthetics clearly signify the symbolic breaking down of social structures and the start of a more reformist attitude towards “cultural rejuvenation” (Burke, 1998: p.24).

Researching typographic design education shows that a substantial legacy from the previous century of *gesamtkunstwerk* has been re-conceptualised for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century design education philosophy, perhaps most obviously seen in modern art education approaches which return artists to fundamentals, teaching students to re-evaluate basic materials and rules of design, to exploring elements like simplicity, symmetry, angularity, economy of space, lines and composition (Meggs and Purvis, 2016). Typography reveals existing dialogues between graphic imagery, textual meaning and the audience. It enhances communication by telling impactful stories, thus enabling cultural ideology transfer (Heller and Vienne, 2014). This is exemplified in the Futura-engraved inscription on the commemorative plaque left behind on the moon by NASA's Apollo 11 (Figure 5) astronaut team in 1969 (Eisele, Ludwig and Naegele, 2017).



**Figure 5: Lunar Plaque in Futura type (NASA, 2009)**

Examining its cultural role suggests that Modernist type is a progressive, fashionably-conscious response, implying a mind-set of “breaking all rules” by pushing the boundaries of values, encouraging a diversity of interpretations. Type, in this sense, performs its cultural role as a container for messages, and media is the stage upon which the aesthetic drama unfolds for public attention and appreciation. Two recent examples are discussed here.

#### ***Case Study I: 2008 US Presidential Campaign Poster***

The US Republican presidential campaign of 2008 featured Gotham, a Futura-inspired bare typeface created by Tobias Frere-Jones in 2000 (Figure 6a, 6b, 6c). The poster design created admiration among schooled designers and ordinary citizens alike for its lucid representation of the quietly unassuming, no-nonsense mission of Sen. Barack Obama, delivering the campaign message of *Hope*.



Figure 6a



Figure 6b

Perfect geometric shaping of the “O” of Obama’s name through wide, sans serif letterform appeared on posters and banners to represent Obama’s open, stylish approach in engaging with constituents. As media observers stated, Gotham worked subliminally to win Obama his Presidency in 2008, implying the importance of visually functional communication, from which voters perceived the sense of honesty, assertiveness, warmth, confidence and nearness to the idealism of the political principles Obama embodied (Tschorn, 2008; Rainbird, 2012).



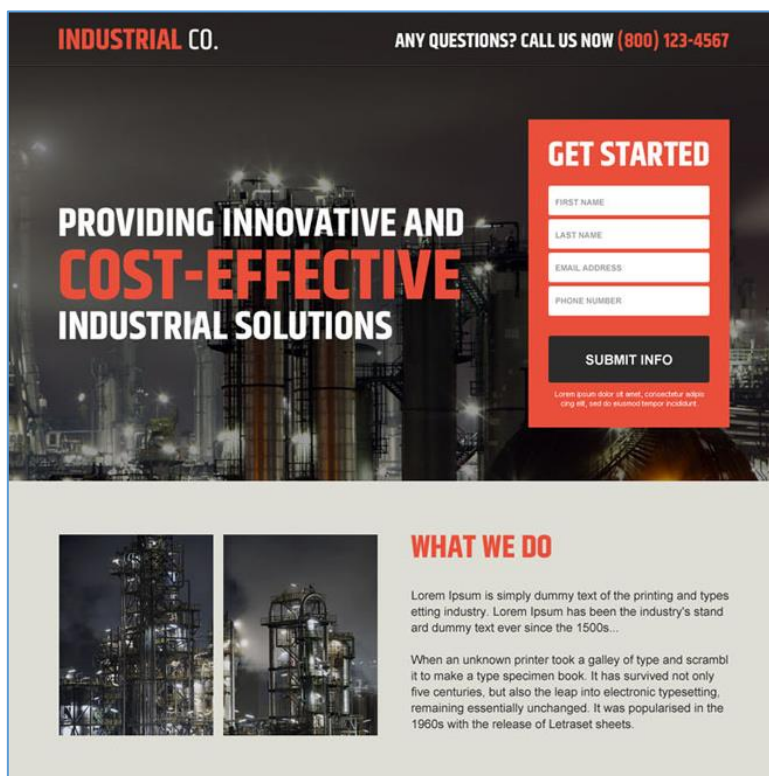
Figure 6c

### ***Case Study II: Diversity of Values***

Culturally speaking, a diversity of typography trends helps spread knowledge and interest in aesthetic craftsmanship. Philip Meggs (2016: p.493) notes that where once “playful, unexpected and disorganised” was perceived to be discordant with cool clarity and objectivity of classic Bauhaus, today’s graphic designers have grown much more confident in their ability to reinvent and manipulate type designs to fit or broaden their needs yet exhibiting minimalism, legibility and spatial efficiency. An example is the current trend of *dramatic typography* (*Web Design Trends 2015 & 2016*). A “sense of drama” is achieved from layout of isolated words or sentences, and type becomes the visual element that directs attention, particularly on digital screens. The type form lucidly emphasises on appearance: enlarged, blockish and free from embellishments, resulting in overt symbolisms of mood, structure and impact (Figures 7a and 7b).



**Figure 7a: Dramatic Typography Emphasises Feeling**



**Figure 7b: Dramatic Typography with Standout Typeface**

## Conclusion

In this research, a review of scholarly literature on typography and visual communication was undertaken together with case studies of advertising and other innovative approaches used in contemporary graphic design. Bauhaus-inspired typeface specimens, with discernible qualities of precise workmanship such as clarity and structural logic, is an attribute of strong designs for a host of cultural mediums from traditional advertising to political propaganda, web-based and digital media (Marshik, 2015). At the same time, typography is increasingly crucial for corporate branding identity communication today, increasing the reputational cache of organisations.

This research conclusively demonstrates the legacy left behind by the Masters of Bauhaus typography had made a lasting contribution to graphic design's historicity; much more creative

typographic techniques remain to be discovered. This paper scopes the importance of historic and sociocultural fundamentals of Modernist typographic principles, where clarity, contrast, tension and precision are integrated as hallmarks of the “stark aesthetics” of typefaces (Stinton, 2014). Bauhaus visual systems and principles stem from ideological, industrial and social frameworks - in all its divisiveness, disparities and decline (Hollis, 2006).

In this regard, it can be argued that for typography to enjoy long term survivability, design researchers must critically examine its subconscious connections to human perceptual requirements which demand visual communication logic and structuration. Awareness of its role in modern organisations ensures it continues to be an inspirational storehouse of future typography artists and designers, and effective application for social, political and cultural ideology transfer.

In summing up the arguments from a designer’s viewpoint, applying the right typography with appropriate graphic elements helps create a specific look, indicating clarity of informational hierarchies, with messages fitting the voice, tone and image of institutions. Designers as visual communicators must strive to continue learning, experimentation, adaptation and expansion of type and aim to engage audiences in powerful and stylish typography capable of meaningful communication and culturally-relevant expressions.

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