

Episode 1 / Futura

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Non-Designated Designer for this week: Jason

Episode Summary

In this first episode we talk about Futura, that most versatile of modernist typefaces and its designer Paul Renner, OG Anti-fa.

Anitra tells Jason why the Nazis hated Latin typefaces. We argue about the merits of mathematical proportions and discuss why Futura is probably not classified as a “fun” typeface. Jason unfairly compares Type Designer Mathew Carter to a character from Game of Thrones.

Anitra chose to do the history for this episode thinking that she knows all about Futura because she has read lots of stuff about the Bauhaus, but does she actually? (Spoiler alert, turns out not really).

You can find the show notes and transcript set in Futura at: <https://www.anitraland.com/podcast>

If you'd like to share your own views on Futura, or the pod, email us on designsleuth@yahoo.com or leave us a message on speakpipe.com/thesiswhisperer

You can find us on Twitter: @type_pod and on Insta: @the_type_pod

Our Producer Inger is on twitter as @thesiswhisperer

Anitra: Welcome to The Type Pod.

I'm Anitra Nottingham, a former book designer, former typography teacher, and former co-chair of a graphic design school. I'm now a learning designer, but I'm a type nerd and I always will be.

Jason: I'm Jason Phillips, formerly a book designer and typography teacher. I'm a sometime illustrator and artist. In my career I've never strayed far from type and it will always have my heart.

Anitra: We are whipped into shape by our producer Inger Mewburn, professor at the Australian National University and editor of the Thesis Whisperer blog.

Jason: We are designers and friends who went to the same design school. Anitra failed her typography assignments – but I didn't.

Anitra: Not to boast!

Jason: We met when we worked together at Oxford University Press, where we honed our type skills, became friends and developed a mutual hatred of the typeface Goudy, all of which still burns strong 25 years later.

Anitra: Each episode we deep dive into one typeface, finding out the sometimes surprising history behind the design and the designer, we admire (or not) its anatomy, ponder its uses and cultural impact.

Then we ignore all of that and talk about our feelings.

Jason: This episode we are going to talk about Futura. A transcript is available in Futura and you can download this from the show notes. Let's get started.

Anitra, who designed Futura? When, and why?

Anitra: Futura was designed by graphic designer and type teacher Paul Renner. I chose to do the history of Futura because I thought I could talk about the Bauhaus, because Renner was part of the Bauhaus. Spoiler alert, I can't, because he wasn't. And I think I knew that, but anyway here we are.

Renner knew people at the Bauhaus, he was a sympathiser—and his work is definitely Modernist, and one cannot talk about the modernists without talking about the Bauhaus. So I'm going to do that for a bit anyway.

If you have studied (or been subjected to) any western art and design history you will know that the Bauhaus was a school of art and design that opened in 1919 in Weimar Germany, and that it was headed up by the architect Walter Gropius.

Even if you didn't know the details you probably know the Bauhaus was a school and that the influence of the teachers and students has been vast.

And look if you don't know any of this I'm a little jealous that you never had to sit through multiple lectures that always made your own design school seem a bit... well... second rate...

Even if you know nothing about the Bauhaus you do, because basically you have lived in a modernist vision of the city your whole life. The Bauhaus is the beginning of modernist architecture with all its clean lines, hard edges which we live in today.

Modernism, or "Universal" design, as they liked to call it - is machined, precise, free of ornament - and so is Futura. I think I can be excused a bit for thinking that Futura came out of the Bauhaus, right Jason?

Jason reassures me that this is an easy mistake to make.

Anitra: The original vision for the Bauhaus was grand and a bit handcrafty. Gropius laid it out a bit out in, well, a flyer, which the Getty Research Institute says is a:

rousing manifesto" that is "laced with mystical analogies between creative production and spiritual awakening."

Gropius called for the joining of fine and applied arts (or design as we call it now) and advocated for high . He was a total architect though (sorry architects, sorry inger) where he thought his own discipline mattered and was more important than the others. And that that as the getty research institute says, the new school would:

Produce the socially oriented and spiritually gratifying "building of the future".

Under all that grand vision, and a long way from the end products which often look slick and machined, and free of pesky emotions, the Bauhaus was a bit... well, handcrafted to begin with, and honestly a bit kooky. the design for the flyer designed by Lyonel Feininger hinted at this, the getty institute describes it this way:

Feininger illustrated Gropius's future-oriented vision somewhat counterintuitively with a woodcut image of a gothic cathedral replete with flying buttresses, pointed arches, and rays of light emanating from its steeples.

He didn't go too far off brief though. Gropius saw the cathedrals as an example "Gesamtkunstwerk" – or total artwork and this could be a pattern for the art and design of the future. And look, before the pandemic I finally got to admire the Köln cathedral and they are amazing, extraordinary things really. I get it, you can't accuse the Bauhaus of thinking small.

The Bauhaus were all about learning by doing, somewhat radical pedagogy at a university for the time, and the design studio continues to be used today to educate designers. The school thought social time should be fun and creative too, and pictures of the students hanging out look like they are having unforced fun. I kind of thought design school would be like this and, well it wasn't...

Jason agrees that Monash Uni wasn't as fun as the Bauhaus.

Anitra: The teachers and students were free thinkers, progressive, always embracing and trying to create the new. Apparently their parties were legendary – a lot of dressing up, being gay, educating women alongside men, nude sunbathing and the like. So of course the Bauhaus pissed conservatives off. They got into more and more trouble, moving to Dessau before the Nazis shut them down for good in 1933.

I mean not to idealise, it was a bastion of white men only one woman Gunta Stozel ever made it to "master" the equivalent of professor. Originally more women than men applied so Gropius restricted their numbers to make sure the school would have "credibility". Women were "encouraged" to go into the weaving school because they were thought to deal better with 2D than 3D. Whatever. But I guess if you have to choose you'd be on Gropius's side of radical art and fun parties, not the Nazis, right?

Jason agrees that the Bauhaus is better than the Nazis.

Anitra: One of the many things that the Bauhaus inspired which pissed the Nazis off was the "new typography" of which Renner was a major proponent. The new typography was explicitly

inspired by the geometric forms of the Bauhaus. Both Renner and another famous typographer, Jan Tschold, visited the weimar exhibition of 1923, when the Bauhaus was moving out of its handicrafts phase into industrial age machined design.

Christopher Burke in his PhD on Renner (so that topic is chosen, damn!) talks about how the:

post-inflation shortages of the 1920s which gave the Bauhaus its impetus to link art and technology to produce machine-made objects. (Renner participated actively in this movement, developing alongside people such as Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius.)

So now about Renner. He was born in 1878, and he was a painter, graphic designer, type teacher and type designer. Like me and Jason he designed books for a living, then became a typography teacher. He was principal at the Printing Trade School in München, and he was also the co-founder and Director of the Master School for Germany's Printers.

The New Typography is about font design like Futura, and it used asymmetrical unadorned settings which were not traditional. The Nazis mainly hated the new typography because it was Latin – instead of Blackletter. Blackletter is traditional germanic type, think old bibles, or bkie gang tattoos or the juicy culture logo. The Nazis thought that was the only kind of typeface that should be used because, well, it always had been. This argument was pretty "heated" at the time, as the University of Kansas puts it:

Gothic type became enmeshed in nostalgic notions of German culture during the protracted conservative reaction that crystallized radically with Hitler's accession to power. The relative virtues of gothic and roman type in a German context were the subject of much discussion during this time, and Renner had strong views.

Renner lost his job in 1933 because of his strong views. What really finished him off was that in 1932 he released a booklet called "Kulturbolschewismus" or as google translate calls it "Cultural Bolshevism". The Nazis accused him of "intellectual subversion" and for "being responsible for an imbalance that could not be politically justified: Latin typefaces were prioritized over Gothic ones" which just goes to show that fascists are capable of getting annoyed about everything not just who can use a bathroom and whether there are a lot of taco trucks around.

Renner's father was evangelical and a bio on the Uni of Kansas website says that:

He was brought up to have a very German sense of leadership, of duty and responsibility. He was suspicious of abstract art and disliked many forms of modern culture, such as jazz, cinema, and dancing. But equally, he admired the functionalist strain in modernism

His son in law said about him: "A day when he did nothing, at least read nothing serious, was for him a day sadly lost."

Which makes him a weird mix, maybe not that fun at dinner parties I suspect, but he was an anti-fascist, which makes him a cool guy. I mean it's kind of cool to be kicked out for liking sans serifs and being an "intellectual subversive".

In "Kulturebolschewismus?" Renner said: "One day the ever more malicious and violent political idiocy will be able to sweep away the entire Western culture with its dirty sleeve."

And dude, lately, I totally get what you are saying. Weirdly he made sure one of his guys took over and he was called, wait for it... George Trump.

Jan Tschichold was also at his school, and I will probably save my Tschichold love for another episode when we get to Garamond, but let's say that's quite the staff he had there.

Renner wrote three other books: *Typographie als Kunst* (Typography as Art), *Die Kunst der Typographie* (The Art of Typography) and *Color Order And Harmony*.

Futura was commissioned in 1924 by Jakob Hegner who wanted a typeface that was "artistically liberating", it was made for the Bauer Type Foundry. Renner worked on the typeface for four years, and it was commercially released in 1927. Futura became the cornerstone of "die neue typographie" which Creative Pro has a nice line on:

Form follows function became the key words and careful reasoning constrained all the character shapes to their utmost functional simplicity. With Futura, in typographical terms, the industrial revolution had reached its logical conclusion.

Futura is a sequel if you like of Renner's earlier typeface "Renner" which uses a dot where the stem of the 'r' should be and has an excitingly zig-zag lowercase 'g'. Futura came after, and was arguably influenced by, Johnson's typeface for the London Underground. Although Renner claims that other typefaces at the time, Gill Sans and Erbar, were influenced by him because he took a slide show around, "telling the whole world what had lead me to this new type form".

The words Renner first set in Futura were "die schrift unserer Zeit" or as Google Translate told me: "the font of our time" and it kind of is. I mean the typeface is almost 100 years old but it still looks modern, and maybe it always will.

It was a hit from the beginning, Renner reported that by 1925 most of Frankfurt was set in Futura by order of the city planning office. Ironically the Nazis ended up using Futura because it made signposts easier to read. Also you need your propaganda to be easily understood as well. They did a 180° and denounced gothic Blackletter text as "a Jewish abomination" – which, of course they did.

Renner lived in "internal exile" after the Nazis fired him, after the war he became a centerist, he didn't like the german taste for large books for instancer bcause he thought that's the kind of vanity that got germany into all that trouble to begin with. He died in 1956 during the time of the "International" style which he helped lay the foundations for.

Jason: So, 1925 what else was happening at that time Anitra?

Anitra: Other things that happened in 1924–27, when Renner was working on Futura: the first Winter Olympics were in 1924; Petrograd was renamed Leningrad; a radio time signal was first broadcast from the Greenwich observatory; in 1927 the first telephone call was placed between New York and London. In 1924 the Islamic Caliphate, which had been going for 407 years, was abolished when the last caliph was deposed. Hilter was jailed for the Beer Hall Putsch – he only served 8 months. Which is more than Trump served, just sayin. The last Californian grizzly bear was sighted. The first television was demonstrated in 1926, the same year *The Great Gatsby* was published. The Scopes trial convicted John

Scopes of teaching Darwinism, and the Ku Klux Klan had a parade with 35K marchers. Locally the city of Brisbane was formed.

Jason: Now for our next section, Anatomy, where we check out our typeface for this episode.

Let's get into it, Anita give us the details about Futura's body:

Anitra: I should first explain why we call this section "anatomy". That's because this is literally the word that typographers use to talk about typefaces and describe their parts.

Most of the language around type is anthropomorphic, which is partly why we made talking about type this way a theme of this podcast.

In *Just My Type* Simon Garfield explains that when type was made out of metal the whole character was known as the "body", the space below a raised letter was a "beard", the flat side the "shoulder", so the whole raised part is called the "face" – hence typeface. The bottom of a 'P' is called a "foot", the stroke of an 'R' is called a leg, the inside of a lowercase 'e' is called an eye. It's a bit weird so you just have to go with it really.

Futura is a Lineale Geometric in the Vox classification system. We will talk about a bit more about what the Vox system is in upcoming episodes because it's got its own weirdness and controversy. All you need to know for now is that, like any profession, when you want to talk about – or sell – something visual, especially if you haven't or can't see it, you have to find ways to classify it, so everyone knows what you are talking about. To designers "lineale" means it's "sans serif" ; it doesn't have the strokes at the bottom of letters. Geometric means it's based on mathematical shapes, full circles, vertical strokes, not proportional. The stroke is the same all the way around. However, Roy Johnson, quoting Christopher Burke again, discusses the interesting notion that

this essentially modernist font actively suppressed the differences between lower and upper case in the pursuit of a purely 'rational' design. Yet a weighted stroke emerged as it developed – because it was quite clear that the purely geometric form looked ugly.

This is why Futura has some very thin and very wide letters. It's not designed in a way to please the eye necessarily, it's designed by math. Although Bringhurst in *The Elements of Typographic Style* says it's "one of the most harmonious and rhythmic sans serifs ever made, it's proportions are graceful and humane and can be set as extended text". Which I dunno, I think that might be pushing it a little bit.

Jason: Anita, I think I have to take issue with that assessment. I mean, absolutely Futura is modernist and geometric, but there are lots of little quirks that, to me, mean it isn't mathematically precise and perfect, and that also makes it pleasing, to my eye at least. Several of those apparently "perfect" circles in fact aren't, like the 'O' and bowls of the 'a' or the 'b', and some of the curved strokes taper ever so slightly where they join the vertical strokes. Sometimes in design you're faced with a choice between being optically correct – which looks right – and being technically correct – which looks wrong – and I think this is a tightrope that Renner walks with absolute confidence here.

The other counterpoint I would make is that combination of wide and narrow letters is very reflective of Roman and other traditional capitals. Whether we've been influenced by those existing typefaces or it's a natural tendency, I think it's also more reflective of the proportions when we write characters, some broad and some narrow. Other typefaces, like Helvetica for example, make much more of an attempt to regulate the width of the letterforms, and I find it comes across as very forced and artificial.

OK, Overall impression and best feature/worst feature?

Anitra: Getting back to the Vox system for a sec, the interesting thing about any classification system, as Derrida would tell you, is that ultimately binaries break down and things escape and it's hard to classify type too. Have a look on font websites and you will see the ways they are classifying type to help you search. "Fun" is a good classification category.

Anyway this is all to say that Futura is not fun and I think that's kind of its worst feature. I think of it like a modernist architect, like relentlessly style over comfort. The architect's sketch with the rotating knives springs to mind... it's the Barcelona chair, which looks great but is uncomfortable, I mean is it for one person? Or two? Which is kind of like how I feel about the 'O' being so wide and the 'j' being so straight and thin.

Futura was originally released in 6 weights. Futura Black was added much later and it looks different, more stencil-like. Futura Bold is far and away the best font of all the Futuras. The Ultra Light is way too weedy and should never be used. It's also not good at large sizes, or really small ones either.

Jason: There are a couple of letterforms I might quibble with – I do prefer my 'lowercase 'j' to have a curl in the tail, and the question mark is a bit bonkers – but otherwise I can only admire the simplicity and economy of Futura's forms. And overall these proportions and the integrity of each character remains through all the different weights, even the condensed faces, which is quite an achievement. A LOT of typefaces fall flat in this regard.

I think every designer finds it hard to shake certain aspects of what was fashionable when they formed their personal design aesthetic. People talk of the 80s as being the era of big hair and big shoulder pads, but it was also a time of generous kerning, and Futura is a typeface that can handle a lot of kerning and still remain cohesive – something that can't be said for every typeface.

Next to an important section, why should (or shouldn't) you get into a relationship with this typeface? Each face was made for, or is good for, a purpose or purposes, so what is Futura good for and not good for?

Anitra: You can see Futura on Absolut Vodka bottles and Domino's pizza – where it's used for the logo. Costco is Futura Italic. Red Bull and Louis Vuitton; it's used a lot actually.

Jason: Eagle-eyed viewers of the ABC comedy series 'Rosehaven' might recognise Futura from the signage for McCallum Real Estate.

Anitra: You can see why in there was a movement to boycott in 1992 called 'Art Directors Against Futura Extra Bold Condensed' published in *TDC Typography 13*.

Stanley Kubrick used it for just about every film title. There's a quote from Tony Frewin, who did the graphic design for his films, that says he tried to turn Stanley away from sans serifs, but he was having none of it, remaining "wedded" to that style regardless of the film. Sympathies to Tony, clients can be annoying. Wes Anderson has carried on the tradition – he uses it on things like signs and documents inside his films as well, which probably bores the pants off his designer too.

Carrying on the space theme, Futura is the first typeface on the moon. The famous "we came in peace for all mankind" plaque is set in uppercase Futura.

Fun fact: in 2009 IKEA switched from Futura to Verdana and this ignited a "type war". I quote from *Just My Type* here:

Most customers didn't like the switch. There was rudeness on websites, newspapers wrote about it in cutting ways, and there were frank exchanges on BBC radio.

he says it

did mark one of those moments when a lot of people found they cared about something they had never cared about before. One walked around ikea and felt a little queasy – or rather queasier than normal" he points out it "caused consternation not only among type geeks, but real people – suddenly there was a font war.

Garfield puts this down to the fact that Futura is "quirky" and Verdana was associated with Microsoft so "it must be bad". And it's true, designers are Mac users – it's a tribal thing.

I think I used Futura on a young adult book about a time travelling girl, Bembo/Futura – for the "modern/history" vibe. I mean, it still looks modern and it's 100 years old. I also used it on a student project for vitamin bottle packaging which is where I first realised it's a bastard to work with. I did get an HD for that project, though.

Jason: For me Futura is a typeface I might not use for a while – I think all typefaces can suffer from overkill – and then I do, and I fall in love with it all over again. The style of the lowercase 'a' and the 'g' – what we call 'single storey' – means that to some eyes Futura has a slightly juvenile feel, but I find it provides a really useful contrast when needed to complement a classic serif font. Sort of like the pairing between a crisp wine and a rich cheese.

Now for our final section: Kiss, date, kill or marry? When we talk about why we would want to be with this typeface (or not).

Is this typeface a one time thing, or do you just go out with it occasionally. Do you never use it, or do you use it so much you worry about yourself? Let's get real.

Anitra: Like, kiss occasionally, maybe? I used it a lot in school, and when I worked in book design so I guess as I went into corporate work I wasn't able to choose it as much. But I was using it less even before then. Like I used to be in love with it but these days I will admit Verdana is better than Futura. Garfield calls Verdana more "crafted" and "rounded", and it is. Verdana is also designed by type designer Matthew Carter, who rocks a long silver ponytail and who I once embarrassingly fangirled over at a type conference in New Orleans. So good on Ikea really. Also it can be hard to work with, I mean, you could classify it as a difficult person depending on the project. How about you, Jason?

Jason: This may be our first and only episode, seeing as we have such a different response to this typeface. I confess I would marry Futura. I guess at least I wouldn't be competing with you for its affections!

Like I said, Futura is typeface I come back to again and again, and each time reminds me why I love it. I guess we're talking a lifetime commitment. Hey, don't pull that face! Yes, Futura is kind of ubiquitous, probably overused, but whenever I see it, I don't think, oh Futura AGAIN (which is usually my response to Helvetica), I have to admire its versatility and utility. How many designs can you still say that about nearly 100 years on?

Anitra: Wrap up!

Thanks for listening! These are our feelings and opinions about typefaces, we're interested in yours!

You can email us on the address in the show notes or leave a review on Apple Podcasts - where you can also rate us and make the pod easier to find.

If you want to join us with a question or opinion, a great way to do that is to record it via our speakpipe page. You can find it at <https://www.speakpipe.com/> We'd love to hear from you!

You can find us on...

Jason: Email me at designsleuth@yahoo.com

Anitra: @anitrannot on all the things and anitraland.com

Our producer Inger is @thesiswhisperer on Twitter

Join us next week when we talk about Times New Roman – the 10 pounds of shit in a 5 pound bag typeface. Although putting 10 pounds of visual shit into a 5 pound bag is often the designer's job, we still prefer to do that with something other than Times New Roman because it's boring. In the next episode we will talk about why it's boring, but we will make it interesting. Promise.

Thanks for listening!

Jason: Thanks for your company!