Course Description

This course surveys a number of important themes in Western history and thought by way of our most omnipresent medium: typography. Organized around three major technological innovations—the printing press in the mid-15th century, multi-cylinder and sheet-fed rotary presses in the second half of the 19th century, and the desktop computer in the late 20th century—this course will look at the socio-politically transformative power of print. Topics of study may include print’s relation to: religion and science, censorship and ownership of the press, money, advertising in the public sphere, gender politics, Nationalism, Socialism, late-20th century countercultures, as well as more contemporary concerns that arise from the transition of print to digital and online platforms. In this course we will discover that whether dealing with marketing, journalism, political activism, design, or new media, typography is a fundamental concern.

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Part I: Moveable Type Printing

Week 1-a: Introduction: Gutenberg’s Galaxy

This week will introduce the idea that Johann Gutenberg’s printing press produced irrevocable and far-reaching changes in all aspects of society. In media studies, one could say that Gutenberg has become less a man, and more a symbol for a broad social, political, and cultural state of affairs. Our first class will introduce the idea of the Gutenberg Galaxy, and also the suggestion that this paradigm is fading, if not already overturned.

Marshall McLuhan, selections from The Gutenberg Galaxy
Norbert Bolz, “Farewell to the Gutenberg Galaxy”

Week 1-b: What is Moveable Type Printing?

This week introduces the technology of moveable type printing, and glosses the early history of typography from the Incunabula period through the mid-17th century. We will focus on the technical aspects of this kind of printing, what exactly Gutenberg contributed, and the history of how printing spread from Mainz. We will also begin to get a sense of the monumental changes this technology brought about.

Harry Carter, selections from A View of Early Typography.
Philip B. Meggs, selections from A History of Graphic Design.
Warren Chappell, selections from A Short History of the Printed Word
BBC video Stephen Fry “The Machine That Made Us” (available at Avery Fisher)

Week 2: The Transformative Power of the Printing Press

This week will address the revolutionary power of the printing press through two seminal texts on the subject, The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe, and The Gutenberg Galaxy. (In this week, the focus in Eisenstein’s book will be on religion and printing, as other topics will be discussed in future weeks.)

Elizabeth Eisenstein, selections from The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe
Marshall McLuhan, selections from The Gutenberg Galaxy
Week 3: Enlightenment Perfection: Geometry, Science & Print

This week is inspired by the typeface Romain du Roi, designed in the late 17th century by a committee convened by King Louis XIV. This was one of many instances from the Renaissance to today in which designers tried to use mathematical principles to achieve perfection in typographical design. Using this typographical trend as context, this week will address the ways in which print has affected science, and laid the ground for notions of objectivity.

Elizabeth Eisenstein, selections from The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe
Lorraine Daston & Peter Galison, selections from Objectivity
Robin Rider, “Shaping Information: Mathematics, Computing and Typography”
Timothy Lenoir, selections from Inscribing Science

Week 4: English Civil War & Censorship of the Press

Inspired by the early print history in England, and in particularly the exceptionally long time it took for the development of English typography, this week will focus on the political threat that movable type printing was perceived to be. The first English language text was printed in Belgium, and the early typefaces used by English presses were from the continent (predominantly Dutch). It wasn’t until the 18th century when William Caslon designed his roman typeface that English type design truly began. This delay in typographical progress is largely due to the monarchy’s censorship of the press, particularly during the Reformation. Once produced, Caslon’s typeface was wildly popular, and would become the typeface used by John Dunlap for his printing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. We will use this context to discuss the censorship of press in England and in the American Colonies around the period of the English Civil War, Reformation, and pre-Revolutionary America.

Philip B. Meggs, selections from A History of Graphic Design.
King Charles, “Proclamation for Suppressing the Printing and Publishing Unlicensed New Books, and Pamphlets of News.”
Daniel Berkeley Updike, selections from Printing Types
David A. Copland, selections from Colonial American Newspapers

Week 5: Born in Tandem: The Novel and the Economy

Taking as its historical base the birth of the novel, and the growth of “the economy” in colonial England, this week will address issues around print and mobility, the redefinition of value brought about by printed money, as well as issues of fiction and faith that surround both the novel and printed money.

Mary Poovey, selections from Genres of the Credit Economy
Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality”
David M. Henkin, “Promiscuous Circulation: The Case of Paper Money” in City Reading.

Part II: Rotary Presses, Typecasting Machines, and the Proliferation of Print

Week 6-a: Print and the making of New York City: Victorian marketing and signage

In the second half of the 19th century there was an explosion of new technologies that made printing cheaper, faster, more colorful, and more abundant. This had a major impact on the development of New York City, particularly through the expansion of (and debates over) outdoor advertising. This class will focus on changes brought about by lithographic and woodblock printing, and will look at the impact of print on urbanization.
Week 6-b: Rotary presses, Linotype and the Rise of the American Newspaper

*The Times of London used a double-cylinder press for the first time in 1814, in 1846 the sheet-fed rotary press was patented, the four-cylinder perfecting press was developed in 1875, and in 1886 the New York Tribune began using the Linotype typecasting machine. In this class we will discuss the ways in which these printing inventions spurred an explosion in newspaper publishing and the power of the press in American life and politics. We may also take this opportunity to discuss the birth of newspaper comics.*

Linotype: In Search of The Eighth Wonder of the World (Douglas Wilson, 2012)
Warren Chappell, selections from *A Short History of the Printed Word*
Philip B. Meggs, selections from *A History of Graphic Design.*

Week 7: The Typewriter & The Making of Modern “Man”

*This week will look at the ways in which the typewriter changed ideas around writing, the human body, and gender in the workplace. In addition, this class will foreshadow some of the discussions we will have surrounding the desktop computer. These two technologies share the virtue of potentially delivering publishing into the hands of individuals. But they are also both marked by the importance of fixed-width typefaces (for reasons of physics where the typewriter is concerned, and for reasons of OCR and code where the computer is concerned).*

Friedrich Kittler, “Typewriter” from *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.*
Darren Wershler-Henry, selections from *The Iron Whim.*

Week 8: Modernism: English Industrialization, Socialism and Print

*Industrialization and the accompanying urbanization in England was rapid and occurred earlier than in other European countries. Print played a role in this process, but also in resisting this process. William Morris viewed moveable type printing and a return to handicraft as a means of resisting capitalism, the practices of his Kelmscott Press growing out of his Socialist beliefs. Stanley Morison (designer of the typeface Times) believed the responsibility of printing was to reach as many people as possible, not the specialized audiences that Morris reached. This week will use these debates over the role of print to address the politics of industrial capitalism in England.*

Eric Gill, *An Essay on Typography*
Ruth Kinna, William Morris, *The Art of Socialism*
William Morris, selections from *On Art and Socialism: Essays and Lectures*
Stanley Morison, selections from *First Principles of Typography*

Week 9: Nation, Nationalism and Print

*This week will address the concept of the nation in two ways, first by looking generally at the role that print plays in creating community, shared narratives, and a sense of national identity. And second, we will look at print's relation to nationalism, specifically at the use of blackletter type by the Nazis as an expression of German identity and superiority. This week will also set the stage for the following week and the various rebellious Modernist attempts at achieving universality through print.*

Benedict Anderson, selections from *Imagined Communities*
Ernest Renan, “What Is A Nation?”
Paul Shaw, et al., selections from *Blackletter: Type and National Identity*
Week 10: Modernism: Constructivism, New Typography & Bauhaus

In Russia and Eastern Europe, as in England, Modernist design was reacting to the politics and social changes of its day. This week we will discuss the design philosophies expressed in Russian Constructivism, in New Typography, and in the Bauhaus design (and pedagogy). These philosophies tended to react against fascism with attempts at designing universal typefaces, and they tended to embrace the machine (and in particular photography) as an aid to communication rather than as a loss of pre-industrial innocence.

Jan Tschichold, selections from The New Typography
Walter Benjamin, “Author as producer”
Johanna Drucker, selections from The Visible Word
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, selected essays
Herbert Bayer, selected essays
Walter Gropius, “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus”

Week 11: Non-Roman Alphabets & the Universality of Type Revisited

While Eastern European and German Modernists discussed the idea that certain typefaces express the country in which they were designed, and sought to design typefaces that would express ideas across borders, they rarely addressed the issue of non-Roman alphabets. This week we will discuss the history of non-Roman alphabets in print: the birth of moveable type printing in China and Korea centuries before its emergence in Europe, and the challenges these ideographic and pictographic alphabets pose for print; the design of Greek alphabets early in print history; William Caslon’s first typeface, an Arabic typeface for use by missionaries, etc. We will also take a step into the present day to discuss the current state of non-Roman alphabets (particularly Arabic) in type design.

Mourad Boutros, selections from Arabic for Designers
Video: Yanone’s design of a joint Arabic and Roman typeface
Peter Bilak & Satya Rajputohit, “Interview” (on design of Fedra Hindi)
Typo, “Design of a New Japanese Typeface”

Week 12: Print Advertising, and the Definition of Youth

Inspired by Thomas Frank’s book The Conquest of Cool, and by the designs of Helmut Krone (VW bug ads) and George Lois (Esquire magazine covers), this week will look at print advertising, mainstream magazines, and the co-opting of youth and countercultures in the 1960s. We will look at the contrast between the mainstream press’ expressions of youth culture and the posters that were produced by countercultural movements themselves (such as the Mai ’68 posters, which tended to be silkscreens).

Thomas Frank, selections from The Conquest of Cool
Michael Bierut, “Helmut Krone, Period.”
Adam Michaels & Jeffrey T. Schnapp, selections from The Electric Information Age Book

Part III: Desktop Computers and the “Democratization” of Print

Week 13: Early Desktop Design & the Deconstructivist Theories Behind “Grunge Type”

This week will introduce digital printing technologies, and the possibilities and challenges that they pose to print (looking for instance at the problem of pixels and the development of anti-aliasing). We will also look at the social and political implications of these technologies (particularly in the 1980s and 90s). Designs that fall under the labels “deconstructivist” or “grunge type” reveal reactions against Reaganism and Thatcherism, as well as an embrace of the sense that new technologies were democratizing design, encouraging designers to
break the “rules” of proper design. But we will also address the ways in which fears about new media’s undermining of human intentionality are reflected in print.
Bigelow & Day “Digital Typography”
Wim Crouwel, “Type Design for the Computer Age”
Ellen Lupton & J. Abbott Miller, “A Natural History of Typography,” and “Deconstruction & Graphic Design”
Chuck Byrne & Martha Witte, “Brave New World: Understanding Deconstruction”

Week 14: Copyright, Digital Type and Other Issues Raised By the Ikea Font Scandal
When Ikea announced in 2009 that it was replacing its standard typeface Futura with Verdana there was an uproar in the type community that gained mainstream media attention. Why were these typophiles so upset about such an apparently inconsequential change? While some were upset for purely aesthetic grounds—believing that Futura is a superior typeface to Verdana—the uproar also highlighted a number of key and still unsettled issues facing print and typography today. The Ikea shift offers an opportunity to address issues of corporate identity, copyright, as well as the transition from print to digital media.
Margaret Re, ed., selections from Typographically Speaking: The Art of Matthew Carter
Hermann Zapf, “The Changes in Letterforms Due to Technical Developments.”
Ted Striphas, selections from The Late Age of Print
Chipp Kid TED talk on book design

Week 15: Helvetica or Comic Sans: Design and Cultural Capital
This week’s discussion grows out of the two most discussed typefaces in recent years: Helvetica and Comic Sans. We will look at the history of both, discuss where they come from, in terms of design styles, technologies, and purposes. But we will focus our discussion on the cultural status that is associated with each face—the instant cool of Helvetica, and the shameful immaturity of Comic Sans. These typefaces will allow us to discuss the concept of cultural capital, the connotative content of design, and the ways in which we express identity through the brands and cultural objects we consume, and the typefaces we use.
Gary Hustwit, “Helvetica”
Rob Walker, selections from Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are
Simon Garfield, selections from Just My Type

This syllabus is subject to change.