On the 9th of January 2008 the tag list on www.MyFonts.com for the typeface Churchward Marianna read: 3d, blimp, bulbous, cool, decorative, funny, headline, heavy, informal, newzealand, obese, outline, party, poster, retro, round, sansserif, shadow, signage, spunky [suggest]. \(^1\)

A few weeks later, around the 14th of February, a new word had been added to the list: biographical. \(^2\)

How did this word come to appear there? What could its relation be to a typeface?
Marianna,

Your Dad was working all the time; like you said (drawing out the ‘loved’) “He LOOOOVED it!”’. He designed this typeface in 1969, when you were six, and he named it ‘Marianna’.

It was through you that I managed to get in contact with Joseph in the first place, so finally meeting you in Dublin last December felt like quite a significant moment. I was set to interview you on a specific perspective of his practice - connected to how we perceive and understand our parents’ jobs as children. But this was quickly replaced by a lengthy exchange: stories about you growing up, around and eventually working at Churchward International Typefaces Limited, were interrupted by the things I had discovered and made about your Dad’s body of work over the past two years. Incidentally, the interview turned into a conversation. It was quite soon after, maybe even on the ride back to my accommodation in town, that I began to reconsider a question that had been introduced to me in the preceding months by a fellow designer. It was a question that had simultaneously annoyed and intrigued me: ‘Can a typeface be biographical?’ I started to think about it in relation to the typeface your Dad designed for you. Driving through a rainy, dark Dublin night it suddenly occurred to me that the first time we may have actually ‘met’ was by virtue of your typeface in 2005.

Looking back to 2005, in my very first interview with Joseph that you conducted and transcribed for me, he touched briefly on what influenced the typeface Marianna.

I called it Marianna because Marianna was fat in those days and it was a fat design . . . You were plumpy . . . That’s why I called it Marianna, because it was plumpy.

I remember, quite vividly, reading this quote for the first time. It made me laugh out loud. But my laugh was coupled with that warm, prickly-scalp sensation you feel when embarrassed. Being fresh to his work at the time - and it being the closest I had yet come to his speaking voice, well, it just seemed too . . . unequivocal. Even though it touched whole-heartedly on one of the well-established methods of finding a name for a typeface, I didn’t really know that more could be made of it. The ‘Marianna Quote’, along with some other potentially cryptic answers to my initial questions, was stored away in a folder on my computer’s hard drive.

About a month after this interview I was given an assignment to design a poster for our end-of-year exhibition. Spurred on by a friend, it seemed like a good opportunity to fish out Joseph’s quote. The idea was similarly unequivocal: to try and keep the spirit of my initial interpretation while setting the quote about
Marianna, Hey! Together

Marianna in the eponymous font. At the time a digitised version of the typeface didn’t exist. I began the activity of cutting and pasting the quote together, using a scan from an old Churchward’s type catalogue. It felt like the closest (digital) equivalent I might get that would hark back to the good-old-days of composing headline lettering by hand, just like your Dad did (and you, too, some time after).

The process of constructing the quote - spacing and composing the letters to make the design - unveiled a discovery that, in hindsight, could be best described as serendipitous. Aside from the result being a bit humorous to read and look at, the form and content were now mingling with one another. Marianna (the type) not only became more animated all of a sudden, but hinted at something that went beyond the corporeality of the quote. It had acquired an independent, yet discrete personality that seemed to populate the letterforms. An oral, descriptive and formal conflation of Marianna had resulted in a tangible response to my initial disenchantment. I was surprised to notice that it was the work that was speaking. Fig. 3

This idea was made more apparent when, in a telephone conversation with Joseph, the subject of Robert Louis Stevenson came up. Joseph said something that really struck me: “Perhaps
designing a typeface is like writing a book.” It became clear that by using the common definition of ‘biography’ as a catalyst, while also considering this particular insight into your Dad’s designing process, I could make a connection to your typeface. What I mean, is that through Joseph’s process of designing, a narrative was occurring that would result in a biographical disposition being instilled in the Marianna alphabet.

Something else as well. During our conversation in December you reminisced about the occasions when you would sit in your Dad’s studio, swinging your legs on the office chair. Not really talking much and trying to be on your best behaviour because your Dad was concentrating on his designs. I like to imagine that Joseph was designing Marianna during these moments, writing as he was designing. This time he happened to be busy writing about you. Each character – glyph, letter, digit, mark – has something about you programmed into it. Like the time you broke your leg. For the first few days you needed help from your family to stand up and get around and your Dad saw the opportunity to design the ligatures.

Of course - as is generally the case with typefaces - this type of information is often divorced from its expected function. But it could be argued that influences live in a kind of palpable creation system that exists in the circumstances of its genus. This is a place where Roland Barthes’ ‘natural state of the letter’ might be compared with the natural innocence of the child. This idea is perpetuated in the essay ‘The Storyteller’ by the philosopher, Walter Benjamin, where an equal relationship between the storyteller and the craftsman is elucidated.

For your Dad, a typeface is complete when the balance of the letters are found, then - without much pause for reflection - the next one is diligently begun. Even though it is your Dad’s wish that the alphabets are used, this is not the primary reason he obsessively designs them. Instead, he describes it as an ‘inquisitive urge’ or (more tellingly) as ‘Chinese ghosts’ “[Which push him to] do the bloody work!” Perhaps it is in this hypothetical space that the alphabet could also develop a hidden personality. A latent spirit that was planted in the crafting grows and remains embedded as a cipher or code. Maybe these are things are conveyed in transmission. ‘Invisible’ traces to which a viewer might be sensitive; traces that are apprehended for later reference. More often than not, this is how we come to understand, or react to, a style. We receive a signal before we start reading.

On the other hand - as your Dad quite clearly reflects - ‘It’s there, you just have to find it’.
Looking further, I discovered that these kinds of transmissions are not uncommon in various historical manifestations of communicative writing. For example, in Oriental calligraphy, or ideographic writing cultures in general, the practitioner’s hand infers an important layer of meaning and narrative. In the early Irish written tradition from the time of the Book of Kells, complex scripted letterforms were ‘inhabited’ with stories, symbols and figures. These figures were apprehended by the speaker and the receiver, the literate and illiterate, as much by the eye as by the ear.17 Fig. 5 More recently, these visual transmissions seem to prevail in the coded backgrounds of uncontained letters that are found in multitudes of graffiti pieces. Similarly, a more specific example is seen in 12-year-old Kate McCann’s entry for the 2008 ‘Doodle for Google’ competition. Miss McCann’s work is entitled ‘Up My Street’. The small ‘g’ of Google is a school; the ‘e’ is a fully fledged train station.18 6 It seems the activity of inhabiting letters with ulterior meanings is still prevalent. In the more black and white world of typefaces you might have to look a bit further to read these transmissions. There are other ‘daughter’ typefaces around, such as Eric Gill’s ‘Joanna’. Gill’s emphatic insistence that letters were ‘things, not pictures of things’ already presupposes an inextricable link between
both Joanna’s letter and her anatomical renderings. Recently, on receipt of the type specimen for Typotheque’s latest typeface, I encountered the eponymous Greta, adjacent to her alphabet, staring out at me from the cover. Again, Barthes is a good reference point about how, when regarding reading and form, these manifestations of transmission work. For example, when describing Erté’s illustrated alphabet in ‘Érte or À la Lettre’, Barthes suggests a relationship between the human and the letter via the motif of silhouette:

The silhouette, if only by its etymology, is a strange object, at once anatomic and semantic: it is the body which has explicitly become a drawing.

He concludes,

The silhouette is an essential graphic product: it makes the human body into a potential letter, it asks to be read.

When considering Marianna’s optical provocations, and because it is evident that typefaces and humans share some common physical characteristics, I wondered if (in person) you might share ‘common terms’ with a written description of the typeface Marianna. Also, I was curious about how this description...
might reflect back on you? To test this out in a kind of controlled situation I consulted a curious feature of the MyFonts website. It is possible to search for a particular style of typeface by adjectives or keywords. A compilation of these related words (tags) is listed for every font in the MyFonts system. By revisiting this list (see the beginning of this essay) – and since meeting you – I could quite easily relate these words to your character: 3d, cool, decorative, funny, informal, newzealand, party and spunky. Used in this way, the adjectives create a set of idioms that relate to both the typeface and the subject. Consequently they touch on some kind of language that designers generally use to describe events or choices in their work – however much they’re intended or innocuous.*

Inevitably, this led towards a curiosity about how these ideas might be transmitted in more tangible ways: through reproduction. (Designers, in general, are quite pre-occupied by reproduction.) When considering the many ways and means by which Marianna has been applied, printed and disseminated over the years, I wondered if this matter might contribute to a burgeoning biographical myth? During the course of its 39-year-long existence, Marianna has been rendered for use by the various available technologies of the day.

From its more humble beginning as hand lettered forms, to mechanical production as photo-lettering, Dia-type, Computa-type and Letraset, Marianna has recently been born again as a fully-fledged Opentype version. It is within these systems of production and reproduction that a biographical message might be conveyed. If Marianna has been designed as writing, which is very much about you, each rendering also conceivably carries an adumbrated - albeit arrangeable - account of your story. Maybe this begins to up-size the original question from ‘Can a typeface be biographical?’ to ‘Can a typeface be a biography?’ That is, where the typeface is a kind of gestalt that captures the character of a person.

* To present a small digression: whenever I look at a typeface I feel I am being confronted with a surface paradox. It is something that meaning can be projected onto (whether designing or reading) and something that also has an intrinsic meaning, a meaning that stares straight back at you. I think this paradox is personified quite well by the teenage characters in recent Gus van Sant films. In Elephant and Paranoid Park, for example, the teenagers ultimately seem to be the proverbial ‘blank slate’. They are characters that you can feel familiar with and can easily project your own thoughts onto. But as much as you can inhabit them, or read them, there are things intrinsic to their characters that you might never see - or be allowed to see. That is, unless you dare to go further. The action in these two films is a kind of testament to this (some characters are also quite dangerous). Fig. II
Together

When taking these different prospects into consideration, two possible readings of Marianna in relation to the term ‘biographical’ seem to eventuate. First, there is the optical recognition of the alphabet – the messages sent via its morphology. Second, is a more latent message that exists in its crafting, or creation. Both readings seem capable enough of holding an account of both person and personality – and there exists the possibility that these accounts oscillate in this ‘inhabited alphabet’.

Since its creation, Marianna has been published a few times over by a handful of different publishers. ‘She’ has been purchased, swapped and used by many people in different places. Now that it is fully digitised it takes up just 120kb of hard disk space on a computer, so – if you have it - Marianna is always attendant. Whenever I make use of Marianna I am conscious of also sending something about you out into the world. Something akin to digital pollen, transmitted by wires, disks, signals, film, ink and paper that takes hold over screens, objects and printed matter.

David Bennewith, 2008.

ENDNOTES

FIGURES
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


