

SPEED READING AND LIMINAL TYPE: ABSORBING CONTENT

Sam Skinner and Nathan Jones

This text by Sam Skinner and Nathan Jones (torquetorque.net) describes and explores the implications of speed readers, and their intermixture with graphically reduced type faces. It is presented here in a form intended to evoke, and perhaps remediate, the speed reader form.



A 2014 Honda advert used speed reading to invoke the relation between our ability to "push harder" and evolve our reading ability, and Honda's innovative car-making. The advert was banned after only a short showing, because it is deemed irresponsible for a company to make "speed" the central theme of a car advert.

Speed reading applications isolate words from bodies of text, and display them sequentially, one after the other, often with the middle letter highlighted to retain the focus of the eye in this specific area. Rapid Serial Visual Presentation (RSVP) of this order can increase reading speed from 100 to 1000 words per minute. It does this in part by suppressing the need for the visual system to perform eye-saccades. In *normal* reading, when reading a word among many others your eye is scanning ahead for words within your parafoveal vision, and back again. This saccadic twitching of the eye is echoed by the subvocal twitching of the throat.

These physical components of reading might be considered wasteful, and furthermore present a number of obstacles to *pure* reading. For example, many reading disorders are associated with a failure to perform efficient eye-saccades, rather than any issue with character recognition or interpretation. This poses the question : Although the modern brain has been trained into a concentration of its singular focus, do the eyes themselves retain an integral archaic distraction? Speed reading apps like Spritz and Spreader describe the process of scanning back and forth across a page itself as "disorderly" or "unnatural".

So increased speed of reading is only one of the possibilities afforded by RSVP. Commercial apps like Spritz and others like it, appropriate and redirect the science of optimal viewing position toward fluid, immaterial experience of text, claiming to smooth over disorders. Spritz declares on its website that : "You'll find that you will be able to inhale content when you regain the efficiencies associated with not moving your eyes to read. And you will no longer have your eyes in unnatural ways." A new natural blog, "the process feels less like reading and more like absorbing the text."

Within the format of this publication we cannot show you speed reading, and the text here is far from its vaporous form. Perhaps it is boiling though. If it were a flick book with one word on each page then perhaps it might evaporate. Instead, here every space is replaced by a carriage return. But it's evocative approximation. Right? Not! You're reading down, when you drop, guided by the plumb line of structural rules governing the physical and cognitive capabilities, amplifying some physical responses, such as blink reflexes and iris contractions, over others, as subvocalisations. The same can be said of the visual signs. How does rhythm, frequency, enter into the semiotic regime now? What is reading-watching? Is this text happening to us, rather than us happening to it?

Speed (reading), incidentally, can be slow and fast. Speed merely refers to a replacement of the spatial dimension with a temporal one. As with the difference between the billboard and the receipt, speed arrives with one huge amount of latitude. Stationary and blurred words mark the extremes of this dimension. At well as raising interesting conceptual questions, the speed reader asks new things of our bodies and minds. It can push against and cut across our physical and cognitive capabilities, amplifying some physical responses, such as blink reflexes and iris contractions, over others, as subvocalisations. The same can be said of the visual signs. How does rhythm, frequency, enter into the semiotic regime now? What is reading-watching? Is this text happening to us, rather than us happening to it?

There seems to be an urge to politicize these questions, this new medium. Are speed readers a symptom of semicapitalism, for example? Perhaps if you read too fast, or do not speed your new-found spare time sufficiently free your mind? Perhaps also they are a cure for a disorder invoked by semicapital machinations? A cthonic pharmakon? We would like to new form a theory and practice with signs, from readers that is constant to narratives of continual accelerations and efficiency, even they appear to be this very trajectory in the contemporary environment.

Liminal type The typeface (pictured) Skinner designed for a speed reader accentuates areas where contours intersect. It engages with the notion of text's evaporation. Perhaps its relative lack of materiality compared to these letters here, speed might make it easier to absorb or for it to absorb us. The liminal typeface is both easier and more difficult to read. It is influenced by the work of Mark Changizi which describes how all human efficient notations that fit the organization of our brains. The neuronal recycling hypothesis developed by Stanislas Dehaene, similarly implies that our brain architecture constrains the way we read with reference to a "natural" or fundamental encounters with shapes. Dehaene argues that use of cortex did not specifically evolve for writing, rather, writing evolved to fit the evolution of the cortex and to be easily learnable by the brain. A massive selection process, where over time, calligraphers, writers, designers developed evermore efficient notations that fitted the organization of our brains. Maps and dry stone walls, possess a similar signature in their configuration distribution. This suggests there are underlying principles governing their shapes. He provides an ecological hypothesis : that visual signs have been culturally selected to match the kinds of conglomeration of contours found in natural scenes. Perhaps because that is what we have evolved to be good at visually processing skills developed for orientating ourselves through landscapes or divining fruitful trees, for example.

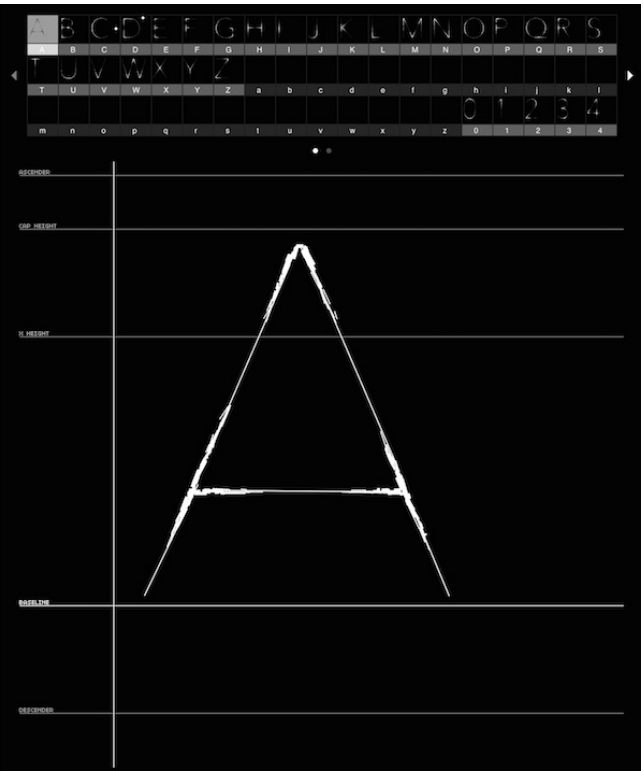
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So words look the way they do because of nature is traversing and born between external landscapes and internal networks. This is a reading of the brain itself as a renewable materialism, our which we find deeply enticing, particularly for relation to the notion of textual evolution embodied and vaporised in speed orality, through the shifting visual field of its fundamental core, the Torque liminal typeface accentuates only the areas where visual lines intersect. It is part of a tradition of typefaces in which stone marks are reduced to their bare-life, least-lines, finest, lightest form. Hanging in the balance between non consciousness and consciousness, the liminality of the type evokes a forest at night, just as the speed reader interface can invoke vertigo, nightmares or panic.

We finish this project precipice with questions do this speed reading and liminal type afford new possibilities for content, typography and the physical-cognitive relation in reading? Where do the lower limits of legibility lie, the need for speed? The withering of graphical marks? Or replicates the vice versa, the slowness of horizontal reading, through the heaviness of type? In a sense are we, with the horizontal page, already at the furthest degree of "unnatural" reading? Are our abilities to absorb information from conglomerations of lines already suppressed into their most contorted form, waiting to spring back to archaic, unfocussed, fundamental efficiencies? What do machinic systems of computation and display enable, awake, replace, or stupefy, and how in turn does this affect our reading of and with the world?

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Finally, now machines are learning to read, will we read to or through or with them?



Some stills from Skinner's liminal Torque typeface, ver 1.

