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.

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

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 fluent, 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 move your eyes in unnatural ways.” A new natural then. As Colin Schultz writes on the smithsonian.com 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 an evocative approximation. Right? No? You’re reading down, down, down, dropping, guided by the plumb line of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in natural language (though you could read in other directions, along other lines.) With RSVP, you go down into the temporal depth of the screen. And a repetition

deeper deeper deeper

would simply be a pause in the action of transformation from one word to the next. Deeper remaining there for three frames, as the heart beat of the text stops.

Speed (reading), incidentally, can be slow and fast. Speed merely refers to a replacement of the spacial dimension with a temporal one. As with the difference between the billboard and the receipt, speed arrives with a huge amount of latitude. Stationary and blurred words mark the extremes of this dimension. As 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, such as subvocalisations. The same can be said of the cognitive. 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 semiocapitalism, for example? Perhaps only if you read too fast, or do not use your new-found spare time to sufficiently free your mind? Perhaps also they are a cure for a disorder invoked by semiocapital machinations? A cthonic pharmakon? We would like to form a theory and practice with speed readers that is resistant to narratives of continual accelerations and efficiency, even as they appear to be a metonym for 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, 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 visual signs, from letters to houses, icons and logos to 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.

The neuronal recycling hypothesis developed by Stanislas Dehaene, similarly implies that our brain architecture constrains the way we read with reference to more "natural" or fundamental encounters with shapes. Dehaene argues that our cortex did not specifically evolve for writing, rather, writing evolved to fit 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.

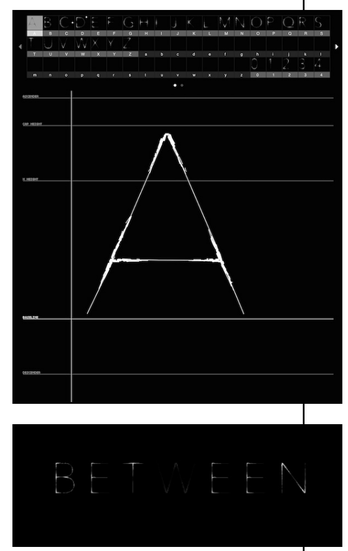
So words look the way they do because of nature – traversing and born between external landscapes and internal networks. This is a reading of the brain itself as a renewable materialism, which we find deeply enticing, particularly in relation to the notion of textual evolution embodied and vaporised in speed reading. Reducing conglomeration to its fundamental core, the Torque liminal typeface accentuates only the areas where lines intersect. It is part of a tradition of typefaces in which the 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 If this is (more than ever) a post-human time, and literature is co-evolving with and folding into technics, is there a hard-fork literature, a hard fork humanity at the point of speed readers? One perhaps that somehow replicates the temporal aspects of language orality, through the shifting visual field of landscape? Is the speed reader the glitch at which we dissolve back into landscape as reading-beings? Or can speed reading be used in such a way that it accentuates the fundamentally humane, suffering, subvocal and involved physiology of reading? Can underexplored potencies in temporal text be deployed to re-engage the throat, the eye, the hand, the empathic connective tissue-echo between reader and writer?

Do the surprising conceptions of legibility and readability within 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 vice versa, the slowness of horizontal reading, 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?

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.

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
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question :
Although
the
modern
brain
has
been
trained
into
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concentration
of
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".