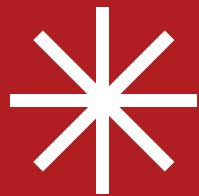
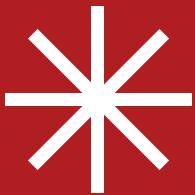
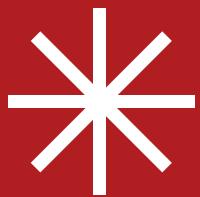
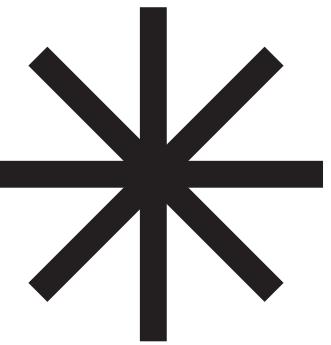


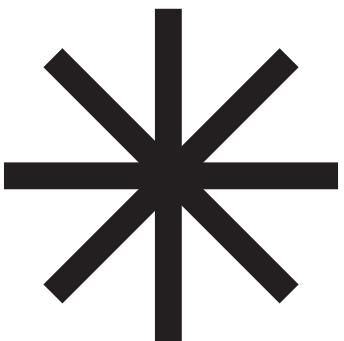
Inside Insignia



Ziona Pelz-Sherman



Contents



Intro
4

Neville Brody

Unusual letters

16

11

12

Uses in media

16

Design influences

19

References

Section 1: Introduction

In the modern era, the multifaceted consequences of technological advancement surround every aspect of our lives. There is not a single facet of our existence that is not touched by, and in many ways improved by, this type of progress. Modern developments in technology have opened new doors for those involved in a wide variety of professions, and graphic design in particular has welcomed these changes with open arms.

Typography, the technique (or as some would say, the art) of arranging type to make written language readable and enjoyable, is especially subject to these advancements.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNPQRSTUVWXYZ1234567890

what I will be doing. In the following paper, I will be elaborating on the context of its creation, describing the life and achievements of its designer, Neville Brody, briefly touching on the unique aspects of this typeface and its particularly noteworthy and unusual letterforms, and discussing its uses in media and publications.

Finally, I will be delving into its influences within the world of design, in other words, how it takes after certain visually significant historical movements and builds off of design trends

With the growing accessibility of software programs and the increasingly widespread use of these programs by trained designers and novices alike, new fonts are being designed, developed, and distributed at alarmingly high rates. New, innovative typefaces are being produced and sent out to the internet to be available at our fingertips like never before; however, we must not forget the myriad of exciting fonts that have been released in the last couple decades.

One of those particular fonts, the one I will be elaborating on in this essay, is called Insignia. Insignia is a dynamic and eye-catching font that is well worth exploring, and that is exactly

that were popular during the time period of its production. What I hope to be taken from this in-depth analysis of this typeface is a greater understanding of the complexities of what may seem to an outsider like a simple font, as well as a new appreciation for all of the various design movements that have to come together in order to conceive of such an innovative font as Insignia.

A B C D E F G
H I J K L M N O
P Q R S T U V
W V Y Z a b c d
e f g h i k l m n
o p q r s t u v w
x y z 1 2 3 4 5 6
7 8 9 0 ? ! % \$ &



Section 2: Neville Brody

“People think that digital language is a fixed language, but it’s not: it’s very fluid. It’s like I’m doing a painting where the paint refuses to dry.”

One of the most important elements to consider about the creation of a typeface is who exactly is behind it all? Which man or woman is the mastermind designing these unique letterforms and taking a new spin on centuries old typographic traditions? In this case, that would be renowned graphic designer and art director Neville Brody. Born in London in 1957, Brody has been referred to as the first so-called “rock star” of graphic design, according to Paul Shaw, calligrapher, lettering designer, and writer for AIGA.

First, however, tracing his artistic and academic origins back to their beginnings leads us to his earliest schooling at Minchenden Grammar school, where he studied A-Level Art. He then went on to do a Fine Art foundation course at Hornsey College of Art in 1975. His early work was said to have been influenced by the emergence of punk rock attitudes in London life. This is especially evident when looking at the posters he designed for student concerts while at college. He was also inspired by certain historical artistic movements, namely Dadaism and Pop Art, writing his first-year thesis on a comparison of the two.

While like many designers his stylistic leanings were somewhat shaped by the study of previously famous traditional artists, he soon switched over to the discipline of design, finding the realm of fine arts to be “too elitist.” This change of career path, and many other details of Brody’s life, are documented in Laurel Harper’s book entitled *Radical Graphics/Graphic Radicals*. Harper writes more about

this perspective shift, stating how Brody wanted to make art for the masses, and how he abandoned pure, classical art in favor of a form of visual communication that served society’s needs. It was in graphic design that he found he was able to really investigate what kinds of alternative artistic endeavors might attract the interest of viewers from all walks of life, as he was really interested in making elements of fine art more accessible to the general public. This is what prompted him to enter into a three-year B.A. course in graphics at the London College of Printing. This field of academia didn’t hold his attention for long, however, because after just one year he left the program to try his hand in the professional design world.

While others may have struggled to find work right out of college, and especially after having left their degree early, Brody instantly gained a relatively modest level of notoriety. His college work with student music groups prepared him for the job he obtained his first year out of school designing album covers for a small record label called *Rocking Russian*; however, he soon moved on to another similar position for another record label, *Stint*. The two years he spent between these two companies prepared him for his move to join an independent label in 1981, *Fetish Records*, where he felt truly free to follow his own artistic impulses for the first time. The work he did designing album cover art for bands such as Clock, 8 Eyed Spy, and 23 Skidoo utilized a great deal of tribal symbols and markings, almost primitive in nature, which evoked strong emotional responses.



"Typography is a hidden tool of manipulation within society."

Conveying his vision through visual elements such as clay sculptures, ritualistic paintings, and macabre shapes, all of his designs were all vividly reproduced in the two-color printing process that was utilized at the time.

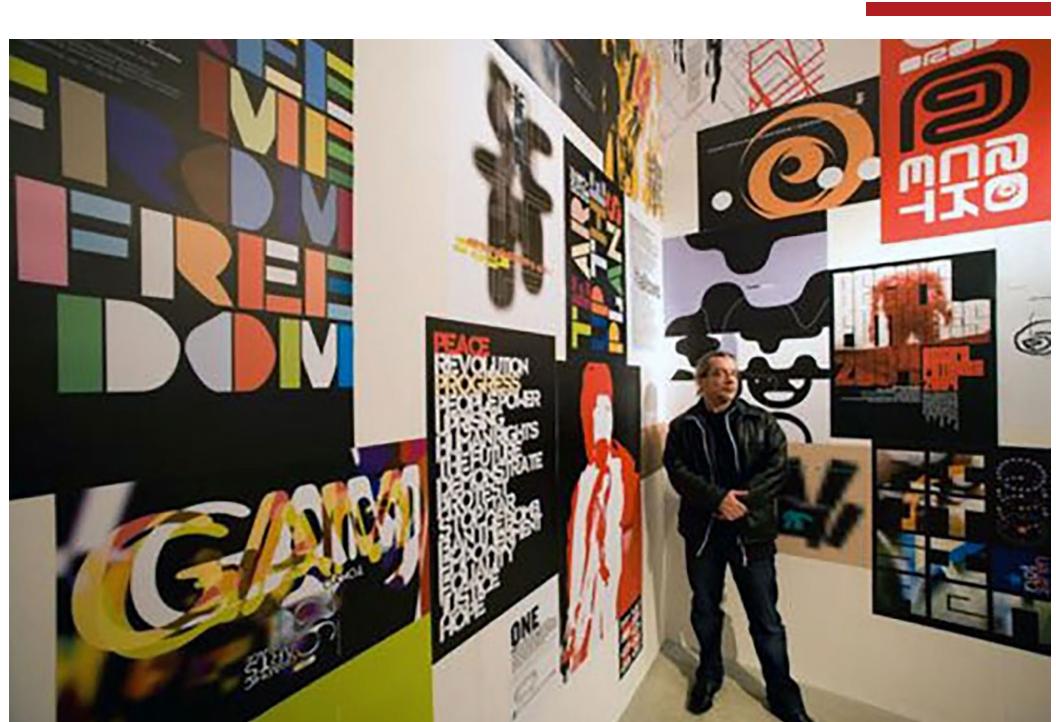
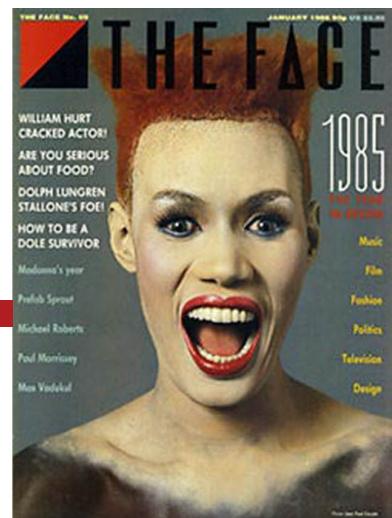
That same year, 1981 to reiterate, Brody also took a position as art director and designer at *The Face*, a British men's lifestyle magazine. It was here that he turned his attention from a more imagery-based focus over to typography, a discipline in which he hoped to make some serious progress. After all, according to Brody, "typography is a hidden tool of manipulation within society." He also stated that most of the established typographic practices of the early 1980s were "boring and overladen with traditions that repelled change."

This compelled him to try and weave excitement into the field by combining unrelated fonts, arranging the words and letters in unusual configurations, or using a photocopier to manipulate them into illegible shapes and never before seen proportions.

His introduction of this innovative new look for *The Face* was said to have made design history. Little by little, over the course of multiple issues, Brody broke down standard elements of magazine layout such as section logos, banners, and headline placements and then gradually rebuilt them into abstract marks.

In doing this, he was investigating the process of visual coding and its role in an editorial setting. This approach went over very well with the public, and sales of *The Face* increased considerably as consumers were just as interested in reading its content as they were in witnessing its visual and stylistic metamorphosis.

After a number of years affecting meaningful change at this publication, he moved his talents over to a rival style magazine, *Arena*, which I will be describing in detail later on in this essay. It was here that he designed *Insignia* as a headline face 1986, and it was released as a font by Linotype in 1989.



"People are using the computer in a very rigid, pseudo-religious way and we are trying to say that the technology is simply a tool of communication and should be treated as organically as any other tool."

"Design is more than just a few tricks to the eye. It's a few tricks to the brain."

After many years working in the public spotlight for record labels and magazines, Brody made the transition over to the private sector. In 1994 he founded a design firm originally named Research Studios, but was recently rebranded (in 2014) as Brody Associates. He speaks on his reasoning for this shift in an interview with Dan Howarth for *Dezeen* magazine. When the name was first decided, Brody hoped for other designers that worked alongside him to be able to present their work free of his shadow, but this name seemed to cause confusion for some clients, and he ended up being part of the consulting team on every project anyway, so they decided to add include his name in their title. Their offices have since expanded to include London, Paris, Berlin, and Barcelona, and their client base is rather extensive as well,

having worked with global companies such as Samsung, Yamaha, Nike, and Coca-Cola.

Apart from his design firm, Brody is a founding member of the London based type foundry Fontworks and has designed over twenty different typefaces during his career. Additionally, his work has been recognized around the world by many galleries, museums, and libraries including Cooper Hewitt (USA), Design Museum (UK), the V&A (UK), and Museum of Modern Art in New York, according to an article written for the Society for News Design. Lastly, Brody is incredibly passionate about creative education and is currently the Dean of the School of Communication at the Royal College of Art in the UK.



A B ~ Section 3: Unusual Letters

{ E F

H K L

• P Q

R *



While designers in the pre-digital age had been using graph paper, compasses and rulers, and photostat cameras, the introduction of the computer led to the development of many new, exciting, and innovative typefaces. Insignia's monoline strokes, round forms, and sharp corners reflect the zeitgeist of that age, suggesting the technology and progress that was currently sweeping the 1980's visual scene. Maintaining the basic forms of established sans-serif, geometric, and grotesque fonts, Insignia remains one of the hip, cutting-edge classics of a computer dominated era.

Probably the most immediately identifiable characteristic of this font is the cross-strokes on the capitals that cut through the main stems of the capital letters, such as on the A, B, E, F, H, K, P, and R. Insignia also has a few unique and quirky additions, such as the descender on the lowercase f that dips below the baseline, the curved ends of the lowercase t and l, and the centered, vertical tail on the uppercase Q. These and other unique characteristics lend themselves well to some dynamic logo configurations, and make Insignia an excellent choice for advertising and display work.

Section 4:

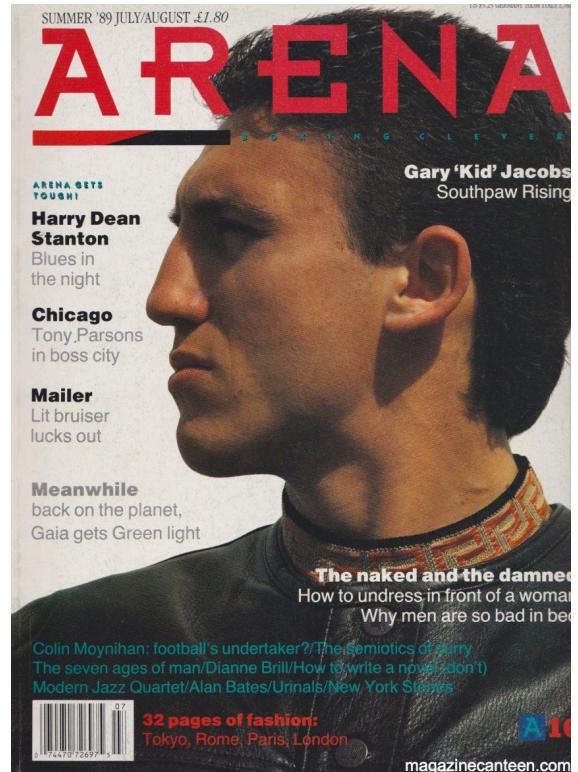


Uses in media

Since its conception in 1986 for *Arena* magazine, Insignia has been incorporated into a variety of commercial and literary projects. In this section, I will describe a few of the ways in which authors and corporations have used this font to create sensational logos, book titles, and magazine headlines.

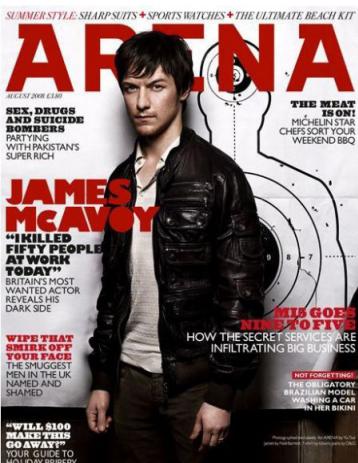
Insignia's bold and dynamic forms make it a fantastic title font, and a number of publications have used it to make their covers or front pages really stand out. The first example I will give of publications that have utilized this font is the book *Nancy Is Happy*, written by Ernie Bushmiller. Published in 2012 by Fantagraphics Books, this book is the first of three volumes, each utilizing Insignia as a title font for their covers, that reprints and documents every one of the daily *Nancy* newspaper comic strips going back to 1938.

Another use of Insignia in modern media is as a logo font for the company Manhattan Bagel. This restaurant and catering company specializes in fresh-baked New York style bagels and describes themselves as a staple of their community. Manhattan Bagel is a relatively successful commercial business with locations



spanning across the United States. While this version of their logo is not the one they are currently using on their websites and storefronts, like many successful companies, their logo design and promotional materials have gone through many iterations of layout and they have experimented with a number of different fonts since their conception. Although the typeface used in the design is slightly modified (it seems to be the same except for the minor alterations made to the uppercase A and the L), this logo stands as a great example of Insignia as an exciting, eye-catching typeface that can be very useful to brands looking to accentuate their products and services.

Insignia has also been used for *Classic Pop Magazine*, as well as a proposed advertising campaign for the city of London, and several Neville Brody tribute projects.



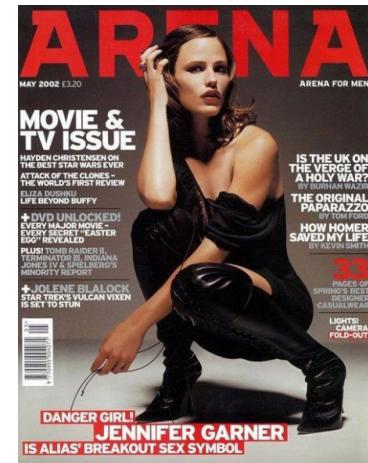
This of course brings us to the font's very beginnings, when Neville Brody created it as a headline face for the publication *Arena*. When he left his former employer to work here as the art director, he had a new vision for the magazine that stood in stark contrast to the content he had been previously designing for *The Face*. Drawing again from the book published by Laurel Harper that I have referenced earlier in this essay, Brody has been cited saying that it was time to "take some of the hysteria out of graphic design." He had a goal here to shift the emphasis back onto the content of the magazine, and he achieved this through refined template that utilized a heavy focus on emotive photography as well as text set in the bland typeface of Helvetica Black.

As he continued to design later issues, he moved away slightly from this level of simplicity and returned to his more painterly and expressive uses of typography that made the work he produced for *The Face* so popular. However, unlike the hip, experimental attitude exuded by that publication, *Arena* always projected a unique kind of quiet elegance. Just as his design strategies for *The Face* became appreciated and reproduced on a widespread scale, his work for *Arena* was imitated by many aspiring designers that were hoping to emulate his innovative and inspiring style.

Although he had attempted to put a stop to those who were so eager to copy his work, he was unable to prevent his influence from being proliferated throughout the contemporary design scene at the time.

If you look closely at the early covers that were designed in the 80's you will find that an alternative version of the font was used, with half serifs on the E. The magazine is no longer in production, but in the 90's and through the early 2000's they utilized another alternate version of the font. In this updated adaptation of the typeface, one can see thicker strokes, a shorter serif on the vertex of the A, no protruding crossbar on the outside of the R, and flattened points on the top and bottom of the N. If anything, this evolution of the headline face shows how fonts, like many aspects of digital language and culture, can shift and change with the times, and that these graphic elements are not set in stone.

A quote by Neville Brody that exemplifies his stance on this subject matter reads, "People think that digital language is a fixed language, but it's not: it's very fluid. It's like I'm doing a painting where the paint refuses to dry."



Section 5: Design influences



One of the major design periods from history that Insignia draws inspiration from is the new wave of typography developed during the German Bauhaus movement. While its influence reaches across the fields of art, architecture, and interior design, it has a particular impact on the world of typography. Its values and ideas of visual simplicity can be seen clearly in this font as well as in elements of design popular even today.

The actual Bauhaus School was founded in 1919 in the German city of Weimar by architect and modern designer Walter Gropius. This school was created to support a movement that intended to utilize the 20th-century machine-oriented culture in order to design furniture and buildings with the belief that form follows function. They held firmly to the idea that artists and craftsmen should work together to focus on productivity of the design rather than its mere aesthetic beauty.

In teaching typography, the Bauhaus School were strong advocates of sans-serif type, confident that its simplistic, geometric form was more attractive and useful than the elaborate German standard of blackletter typography (Moriarty). Elements of Bauhaus typography can be seen in Insignia when one considers its balanced and harmonious letterforms, its simplistic and geometric shapes, and its striking and powerful overall look.

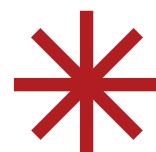
Another set of trends that obviously made an impact on Insignia's design are the popular design conventions of the 1980's. This decade marked the beginnings of a digital revolution, as the introduction of personal computers coupled with the development of new graphics software programs had a momentous influence on graphic design. Within the span of just one decade, the industry had changed forever.

A blog post by *Cassette Print* details many of these changes as well as a number of more minor movements that can be identified within the scope of 80's design. With the introduction of new programs such as PageMaker Adobe's first desktop publishing software released in 1985, designers now had the power to create 3D images, easily manipulate layout and color, and experiment with type in exciting ways. Some have referred to this era of risk taking and experimentation in design as the Deconstructive Typology movement.

There also were many smaller trends that were popular at the time that built off this technological progress, such as 80's Deco, a resurgence of the iconic 1920's movement that relied on clean lines and specific color palettes; Neon Noir, characterized by a combination on brightly colored script fonts overtop dark backgrounds; and Cyberpunk, which was all about sharp lines, grids, and dark colors.



Overall, the 80's were about loud, bold design styles that made a statement and grabbed your attention. Insignia is merely one of many fonts that were produced during this time, and there is a lot that can be gained from studying the visual and typographic conventions that make the 80's such a memorable decade.



Colophon

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Although Insignia was designed and released in the late 1980's it carries many of the design trends that became popular in the 1990's. An article written by Brant Wilson for *Inspiredology* cites a blog post reviewing an exhibition on rave flyers that described the 90's as one of the "least subtle eras in graphic design history."

Similar to the 80's, it was a period of widespread experimentation and risk taking. Much of this is due to the development of even more complex software programs that allowed designers to try new things and push the boundaries of conventional typography. One of these such programs is Photoshop 1.0, which was released in 1990, exclusively for Macintosh computers.

There are many memorable logos and font styles that emerged during the 90's and are recognisable even today, such as the Starbucks logo, the scroll-y, handwritten font style of the "Friends" TV show logo, the posters for "The Matrix" movies, and the monochromatic Apple logo still in use today.

The development of Insignia can be traced back through history as building on a number of design trends and typographic conventions. Like all fonts, its origins are complex and multifaceted, and there is a lot that we can learn from looking back through the decades to see what the designers that came before us have to offer.

