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## Typography in Publication Design

### Picturing Words

#### Associative Typography and the Picture Book

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the use of typography as both word and image to tell a story. It uses varied case studies ranging from European graphic design history to contemporary Indian examples by Tara Books, India's well-known avant-garde publisher to explore how expressive type can convey sound, texture, movement, colour, atmosphere and emotion. Associative typography can allow children (and adults) to discover unexpected meanings and associations in language. While traditional books are created with linear story telling, associative type can allow us to explore the page spatially, leading to new relationships between reader and the book. This talk uses historical examples as well as three Indian picture books designed by Rathna Ramanathan- *Tiger on a Tree*, *Anything but a Grabooberry* and *In the Land of Punctuation* - to make its case.

**Key words:** *type play, associative typography, picture books, design process, Indian publishing*

#### 1. Introduction

When designing children's books, the relationship between the visual and associative aspects of typography and the production of meaning in a printed book has been the focus of my work. Johanna Drucker (1984) noted that 'writing produces a visual image: the shapes, sizes and placement of letters on a page contribute to the message produced, creating statements which cannot always be rendered in spoken language' (Drucker, 1984: 8). Living and working in India, as a designer, one quickly realises that the word is immediately and inseparably both visual and verbal, text and image, written and spoken. In my practice as a book designer, I have been interested by these connections between spoken and written language and typography. Using type play and the concept of the metaphor, I have aimed to push against the conventional use and meaning of words to explore the visual dimensions of language.

## **2. Associative Typography and the Structure of the Page**

Typography within the book can be employed in two ways. It can provide structure both in the organization of the text and in the placement of various signposts (from preliminary pages to running heads) that help the reader navigate the book. There is also an associative use of typography (or what Updike (1922) referred to as 'allusive' typography) that reflects the ideas represented in the text. A well-designed book shows a harmonious balance between the structural (direct) and associative (indirect) aspects of typography.

The purpose of traditional book typography is to communicate the author's message in a legible, readable manner without drawing attention to itself. This means inviting the reader into the text and clarifying the structure and order of the text so the reader can navigate the book with ease, as well as linking the text harmoniously with other elements in the book (including illustrations, captions etc.). On the other hand, associative typography is concerned with the meaning and interpretation of the text and its representation using the visual, verbal and spatial aspects of typography. In both cases, the use of typography is intentional and driven by the content and is not just a stylistic affectation.

The use of associative typography within the book is not new. My own work has been inspired by a range of historical sources from European graphic design. Very briefly, these include movements such as the Futurists, Dada and the Constructivists as well as individuals such as H N Werkman, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Theo Van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters. It is impossible to sum up the practices of these giants for whom typography was an important aspect of their avant-garde practice so I will contextualise them in relation to the picture books I designed for Tara Books.

## **3. Tara Books & the Form of the Book**

For over a decade, Tara Books has worked hard at evolving a distinctive culture of the book. The company has aimed to build a list which is selective, yet diverse, keeping content rooted but universal. An important aspect of the mission is exploration and play with the form of the books. Dialogue is an important aspect of this - the process of a book is a constant conversation between author, designer, illustrator and producer. The philosophy behind Tara's approach is that the designer's use of typography or the printer's squeegee has an equal voice to the artist's line and the writer's idiom.

Working in India, the inspiration for Tara's books comes from eclectic sources: life on the streets, folk and tribal art, struggles for peace and justice and oral narrative traditions. In

a global publishing context that is increasingly homogenous, and profit-driven, Tara's purpose is to remain true to adventures in form and content. When I joined Tara in 1997, I was interested in how the form of the book as we know it could evolve and change. This found synchronicity with Tara's own mission and has led to a fruitful series of collaborations.

#### 4. *Tiger on a Tree* (1997): The Spatial Page and Active Typography

In mainstream children's publishing, books often evolve in the conventional way - the text is written first, the illustration is done in relation to the text and the designer comes in at the end to put these together. With an independent publisher such as Tara, the process can be dramatically different as illustrated by *Tiger on the Tree*.

The book was born when illustrator Pulak Biswas heard the story of a group of villagers who had captured a tiger cub and then let it go. He rendered the storyline in a bold black and white graphic style of illustration. Using the visual narrative as a plotline, the nonsense verse poet Anushka Ravishankar transformed the tale into a rhythmic comic poem. Her use of short sound-words became the typographic cue for my book design.

The work of a book designer differs from that of a poster designer in a significant way. Unlike a poster which is entirely two-dimensional and makes an immediate impact, a book reveals itself in a time-related sequence. This was an important consideration in the design of the book. During the designing of this book I was in London studying for my MA in Communication Design and in the process of researching my thesis on book design and typography, I came across the Italian Futurist movement and its founder, the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Futurist literary theory was intent upon increasing the expressivity of language and used the concept of the New Typography.

Since 1905, Marinetti had promoted from the pages of his magazine *Poesia* (Poetry) the idea of *verso libero* (free-verse), which was intended to break the uniformity of syntax of the literature of the past. Then, just after the launch of the Futurist movement, *verso libero* evolved into the *parole in libertà* (words-in-freedom).

In the first Futurist manifesto, F T Marinetti noted 'Up to now, literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap. We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed...' A Futurist poet would project words from the page.

My practice in India was very much influenced by my research in London. I took inspiration from Anushka Ravishankar's *verso libero* to create my own version of a *parole in libertà*. I was particularly inspired by the Futurist reference to speed, movement and sound of the word. The final *Tiger on a Tree* evolved through a process of trial and error. In the process of designing the book, the first step was to remove the illustration's conventional borders and play with the scale of the illustrations. This helped free the page. To this were added Anushka Ravishankar's words employing typography to run, bounce and jump off the page following the little tiger's adventures.

##### 5. *Anything but a Grabooberry* (2004) and Suggestive Typography

Guillaume Apollinaire was a French Surrealist poet who was born in 1880. Apollinaire's most famous work was *Calligrammes*, a collection of concrete poetry in which the visual arrangement of the words (typography and layout) are employed to convey meaning. In concrete poetry, the typographical arrangement of words is as important in conveying the idea as the conventional elements of a poem such as meaning of words, rhythm, rhyme etc. Examples of his work include *La Mandoline l'oeillet et le Bambou* (Mandolin, Eyelet and Bamboo), *La Colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau* (The dove and the stabbed waterjet) and *Il Pleut* (It rains) where type runs vertically down a page assimilating raindrops.

Here the word is viewed rather than simply read. So the reader takes not the literal or semantic meaning of the word but play with its graphic visual sense. In his book *Type Primer* John Kane (2002) illustrates the possibilities of this using one typeface: Helvetica. He finds typographic equivalents for words using simple choices such as size, weight, position on a page all of which can be used to strengthen the representation of concepts, objects, and actions that words describe.

For some time, I have been interested in El Lissitzky's work *About 2 Squares*. When it was first published in Berlin in 1922, *About 2 Squares*, presented a radical rethinking of what a book was, demonstrating a new way of organizing typography on a page and relating it to visual images. The MIT Press refers to this book as 'among the most important publications in the history of the avant-garde in typography and graphic design'. Lissitzky uses typography as his main tool, using it to determine, shape and order the layout of the compositions he creates. The text is suddenly optically expressive, and typography is used to represent verbal and emotional content.

*Anything but a Grabooberry* is India's first children's book that features the designer as an author and uses typeplay as illustration. It began as a poem that Anushka Ravishankar wrote for her daughter. I began by setting the text, page by page like a typographic puzzle, using size, position, scale, colour and texture to bring out the expressive nature of the words. In one or two instances, Anushka worked in collaboration with me, adjusting the text and replacing words that weren't as visual with ones that were. The real success of the book comes from my interaction with a group of children aged 6 to 8 years old. Their reading of the words on the page helped me fine-tune the design and push its expressiveness.

#### **6. *In the Land of Punctuation* (2010) and Political Typography**

*In the Land of Punctuation* was a book project was introduced to me by Tara's editor V Geetha and has been incubating in our collective minds for a long time. At first, the available English translation of German author and poet Christian Morgenstern's text felt too big and complex to illustrate and design, and I felt a bit overwhelmed by it. The project finally fell into place a few years later when Sirish Rao came up with a highly visual translation of the original author Morgenstern's text. My job as a designer was to typographically 'illustrate' the text and design the book.

As the blurb on the book reads: First published in 1905, German poet Christian Morgenstern's *Im Reich der Interpunktionen (In the Land of Punctuation)* is a brilliant comic poem on language. Morgenstern called it a linguistic caprice; and it is a fun romp, populated by punctuation marks as characters with their own agendas ... and yet the political undertones are unmistakable, suggesting systems of control that go beyond language.

An excerpt from an email to publisher Gita Wolf explains part of my design process: I've taken a modernist (some may say militaristic approach) to the design. What I liked most about Sirish's text was the visual but also staccato nature of the text. I've tried to maintain this by giving a very left-right, turn page, left-right, turn page rhythm to the book.

Besides the obvious political nature of the text, I've envisioned this as a modern, contemporary conflict with visual allusions technology, machinery, war... Influences have been, amongst other things, the structures and rigour of letterpress and metal type, Russian posters of the 1920s and 1930s and the work of Werkman.

Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman was a Dutch artist, typographer and printer who worked primarily with the medium of letterpress and worked to liberate forms from their traditional functions. Werkman uses play and surprise as a method and believed that type could communicate by its form and function without needing to communicate a message.

I was also interested in the concept of typography having a political voice. For example, the work of Alexander Rodchenko, a Russian artist and designer who was one of the founders of the Constructivist movement. Rodchenko's aim was to order materials to obtain as he called it 'a maximum visual impact through an economy of means'. This meant the use of a restricted colour palette, large black type, not much white space. The aim was to organize material, reflect content, produce a visual impact and at the same time to be economically and mechanically mass produced. My sense of economy was expressed in three different ways: the use of punctuation alone and no alphabets, the employment of one single typeface - Futura - to create all the illustrations and the use of only two colours.

## **7. Conclusion**

There are four main guiding principles in the use of associative typography. First, the importance of working with associative typography is to use it intentionally in relation to the content rather than simply as a stylistic application. This requires an acknowledgement of the context and an interpretation of the author's message - preferably in dialogue with the author. Second, as Ellen Lupton, famously noted, 'typography is what language looks like' and nowhere is this more evident than in associative type. Associative typography is the real acknowledgment of the materiality of language and its potential to function as an image rather than as just a neutral vehicle that conveys meaning. Third, is that the book, like the rest of graphic design, never resides in isolation. It is a product of a literary but also social, cultural, economic and political context. And finally, that when you work in collaboration to communicate in an indirect rather than direct way, this can lead to unique and memorable reader experiences.

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