TYPOGRAPHY DAY ~ 2012

Typography in Publication Design

My Umbilical Attachment

Indian visual culture in an age of commercial transformation

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Abstract: The paper takes a closer look at the relationship between tradition and modernity in the present context of commercial transformation of Indian visual culture. Tradition gives an insight to examine the past that contributed to the present, and how it affects future developments. At times, India has shown cultural divide between those who saw tradition as a bastion of resistance and those who saw it as an impediment to modernizing Indian culture. The open market economic policy during the 1990s was one such occasion that witnessed people of both beliefs. How can designers work with tradition? Is tradition = freedom or tradition = limitation? Do we need to have continuity with the past at all when the future is fiercely moving ahead? How does the visual media approach the cultural limitations and aspirations?

Keywords: tradition, modernity, Indian culture.

Introduction

The New Typography: A Handbook for Modern Designers, by Jan Tschichold, mentions, "The important architect Adolf Loos, one of the first champions of pure form, wrote already in 1898: The more primitive a people, the more extravagantly they use ornament and decoration. The Indian overloads everything, every boat, every rudder, and every arrow, with ornament. To insist on decoration is to put you on the same level as an Indian. The Indian in us all must be overcome. The Indian says: This woman is beautiful because she wears golden rings in her nose and her ears. Men of a higher culture say: This woman is beautiful because she does not wear rings in her nose or her ears. To seek beauty in form itself rather than make it dependent on ornament should be the aim of all mankind."

I am an Indian. Ornament imbibed into the visual aesthetics is a part of Indian tradition. It need not be ignored to become modern; rather tradition needs a closer look to understand the ideological issues over time that surrounded the aesthetics.

Sacred Words

Colonel Antoine Polier (1741-1795), a passionate collector spent long years of his life exploring India. During his stay, he collected many Indian books, calligraphies, and manuscripts. Once, Maharaja of Jaipur gifted him a manuscript of a Vedic text but while doing this, he added "the Colonel was to assure him that no leather – impure material! Shall ever be allowed to touch the sacred manuscript."

In the north India, Shri Guru Granth Sahib is the sacred book for every Sikh that literally means, 'The Revered Book that is my Master'. In the eastern India, the festival of Saraswati Puja is celebrated every year when Saraswati, Goddess of all Learning and the Arts is offered worship. Books, musical instruments, inkpots, pens are placed before the goddess in expectation of her blessings.

Figure.1 Shri Guru Granth Sahib, Amritsar

Figure.2 Saraswati Puja

Figure.3 Shri Guru Granth Sahib, Amritsar

Not every manuscript or book is subject to worship in India, nor incense sticks are offered to each book. But somehow the written word still demands some amount of reverence.

Even today, rarely one sees anyone touch a book with his or her feet in India. Sometimes, people would also touch it with their eyes or forehead as if asking for forgiveness.It is believed that knowledge resides in book. The cultural aspect of writing and books explains that typography never existed in isolation within India culture.

It is important to understand the social grounding within which typography breathes to understand the role of typography itself. Neither publication design nor typography can stand-alone isolated from a culture. As Robin Kinross explains, “Typography will inevitably tend to become an abstracted idea, shedding the human and material reality of which it is constituted. In an attempt to understand the socio-cultural aspect of typography, I find it is important to incorporate enquiry outside typographies get a closer look at the commercial visual culture. Hence, I intend to give examples to explain the point with references from Indian television, politics and give typographic examples of my work to reflect my standpoint in relationship between tradition and modernity.

It’s 9.00 p.m.! Time to watch my soap

Figure.4 *Diya Bati Aur Hum*

Figure.5 *Is Pyaar Ka Kya Naam Dun*

Figure.6 *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*

The profile of Shashi Kumar, an automobile engineer based in Bangalore, posted on Jeevansathi.com, a matrimonial web site reads, "My life partner should be both traditional as well as modern… with good qualities… loving in nature. Also, beautiful, not more than 5.5 feet in height, fair complexioned. She should be like Parvati from *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (The Story of Every House) and Tulsi from *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because a Mother-in-law was once a Daughter-in-law too)."[1]

Saathiya Saath Nibhana (Be With Me Partner!), *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai* (What Is The Name of This Relationship), *Navya* and *Sasuraal Genda Phool* (In-law's Home, A Marigold Flower) are some of the popular television serials with a huge fan base.

Indian television consists of a wide variety of shows comprising of games, gossips, block-busters, comedies, dramas and daily soaps. I would like to focus on Indian television serials based on Indian family drama. There are primarily two reasons to choose Indian serials based on family issues. Firstly, they are the most popular television serials. Secondly, if we look at the history of Indian television, we find family drama-series have been popular since the 1980s. The chapter doesn't describe a media-centric cultural change (i.e. focusing on culture influenced by television) but attempts to place television within the cultural processes of a society.

STAR TV

The liberalization of Indian economy and globalization introduced international satellite broadcasting in India during 1990s. Entertainment programs had begun and advertising became Doordarshan's primary source of funding. STAR TV (Satellite Television Asia Region), owned by Rupert Murdoch, was one of the first international television channels to enter India with shows that were predominantly American and British. Today, STAR TV is India's leading media and entertainment company broadcasting 20 television services in

eight languages (English, Hindi and six Indian regional languages). It attempts to penetrate in the Indian market with mass appeal as a general entertainment channel produced locally in local languages and by local talent.

One of the STAR TV channels, STAR Plus has been "India's No.1 cable channel" for six years and features 40 of the top 50 weekly programs on Indian cable. Prime time programs on the STAR Plus record more than 50% of viewers in Hindi speaking general entertainment markets.3

With a population close to 400 million viewers per week, daily soaps have occupied the centre stage of Indian television. Stories based on Indian women are the primary themes of these unlimited and formula-tested soaps. These serials usually depict the bonding and complexities of a joint family, marriage, the role of woman in strained relationship with her husband and eventually the battle between good and evil. The story would usually revolve around a particular middle-class joint family and the issues that they come across while living a respectable life in the society. What can be the reason for the popularity of such serials, which depict 'pure' Indian culture? The 'new' Indian society has a 'modern' sense of fashion, food and mindset. Workingwomen are no more clad in 'ghoongat'. The main characters of these television serials, the daughters and daughter-in-laws clash with women of real life. In such a case, what can be the reason for a transnational media company as well as the Indian audience to encourage such scenes of tradition?

Television as a Cultural Space

A 'cultural space' consists of "recurring everyday practices, networks of relationships and value recitation and is bound by common understandings of representations that define what is permissible and non-permissible within that space. It is within these arrangements that identity is established."2 Television with its image vocabulary and content can be considered as a constituent of a cultural space reflecting the values and shared thoughts of a particular society.

This explains how, during the 1990s, the dissemination of television images on certain channels depicting a woman's body were considered to breach Indian values and corrupt Indian culture in return. For instance, Rupal Oza mentions that three civil writ petitions (CWPs) were filed at the Delhi High Court between 1995 and 1996. All the petitions argued around violations of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986. The fictional series, such as "Campus, Beverly Hills Cop, Baywatch, Banegi-apni-baat (We'll

have our say)," as well as "vulgar movies, indecent songs and misleading advertisements" were found to be "full of sex for attracting advertisers to spoil the culture and ethos of our country".[3] Women shown in short clothes, exposing the 'form of the body' or having 'a sexual identity' (such as Pamela Anderson in Baywatch) were highly criticized by people as this was an 'indecent representation of a woman'.

Things don't seem to have improved in TV serials till present. Today, the stories of Indian television serials depict the utter importance of respect and reputation of a family in a society. The good characters are made to follow the rules and be responsible for the family's honor. The values and cultural limits reinforced by these television serials question the role of imagery and image-makers in the development of a particular society.

A 'good' daughter doesn't transgress certain behavioural boundaries on television. Digression or overstepping the boundaries usually attracts some form of censure by the society. This act of boundary construction allows the cohesive act of the components of cultural space.

It is also interesting to understand how a foreign media corporation can restructure a culture or satisfy a culture's need. STAR TV, a foreign media company, directs the kind of images to be shown to its Indian audience. Today, it intends to reaffirm the old, traditional values of Indian culture. It attempts to localize itself among the local audience and depict the home-based values unlike during 1990s when it was charged with responsibility for misleading the Indian youth with its foreign serials (Baywatch and Dallas to name a few). Today, it becomes STAR India and attempts to create a place in the hearts of a changing India showcasing everything that is 'traditional' with an act of 'inventing tradition' in India.

"Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition."[4] Hobsbawn argues that traditions are invented at times of rapid and unsettling change. These television serials are not produced to honor the past but are a necessity for people during the current anxious times of change within India. They help to identify themselves and link to their roots. Citing Lowenthal that the past is integral to our sense of identity; the sureness of "I was" is a necessary component of sureness of "I am".[5]

The $90 million brand

Figure.7

"Repetitive rallies, long speeches and expensive ad campaigns are out; building a brand is in." Economic Times, January 2009.[6]

Here, I will focus on branding in Indian politics as a recent marketing tool to communicate party's message to public. It will discuss how today's Indian political parties extensively use modern media as a device to promote their message, often based on traditional values.

Branding, in relation to the political market, can be defined as, "a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors'."[7] A brand is comprised of attributes that can help a political party to be better understood by its consumers. The chapter attempts to analyze the brand image created by the Indian political party in 2004 general elections and highlights the existing ways of propaganda and how modern methods are used to draw in consumer's attention.

Before that, we can have a look at the value of branding during India's national struggle for independence. Although it was never a deliberate act to use branding as a marketing strategy for national struggle, but one could still see the impact of the use of symbolism in fuelling a national movement.

M.K. Gandhi launched Khadi movement in the 1920's to encourage people to use hand spun and woven khadi. Indian textile production was India's foremost important profession after farming. Indian National Congress was the first party to promote Khadi. The 'sacred' fabric became a symbol of defiance and self-reliance. Gandhi henceforth referred to it as the "Livery of Freedom." The image of Charkha, spinning wheel became a visual symbol of a non-violent nation. Eventually, the popular logo ended up becoming a part of the Indian National Flag, till it was replaced by Ashoka Chakra. Gandhi's selection of traditional

loincloths for his dress reinforced his brand image as a common citizen. Khadi became the brand identity and Gandhi himself, the brand ambassador. The brand extension was the khadi cap (white cap) which Gandhi himself never wore.[8] He once said: "Khadi is more of a thought than a cloth... it is a symbol of Swaraj, a symbol of national emancipation."[9]

"Trivedi argues, nationalists and common people used khadi to construct a common visual vocabulary through which a population separated by language, religion, caste, class and region communicated their political dissent and their visions of community. By the time independence was won, khadi had been inextricably woven into the fabric of India's life."[10]

Branding & Indian Politics in the Past

Political billboards and posters, flags together with television and radio, have been the traditional form of expression. Huge hoardings and cut outs would be seen trying to jostle with the cinema banners on the streets during elections. Rallies were an important part of the campaign as well. Politicians visiting small villages, door-to-door campaign to convey the message was an important part of the branding strategy. Recently, the increasing technologies of the Internet, mobile phones and television campaigns have replaced the older methods of propaganda. And with the new media, the political parties are beginning to see the value of branding and marketing techniques as they go into elections.

India Shining Campaign

'India Shining' campaign was launched by BJP, the ruling party in the Indian Government in 2003. The campaign was meant to celebrate India's progress and promote India internationally. The launch was well timed right before the next general elections when BJP was at power, hence no party logo was used, and rather it was promoted as a Government campaign under BJP rule. Advertising firm Grey Worldwide won the campaign account in 2003; the slogan and the associated campaign was developed by national creative director Prathap Suthan, in consultation with Finance Minister Jaswant Singh.[11]

In spite of a huge campaign in terms of media space and investment, declaring the initiatives taken by the BJP Government, it still lost in the next general elections of 2004 for various reasons. As a part of a studies in brand marketing and politics, IS makes a very interesting case study.

"India Shining, I know now, is not a movement or political party, but that even more important holy grail sought after by institutions around the world: a brand."[12]

The campaign with its slogan 'India Shining' became a confident voice of India giving a message to the world about India's prosperity. It was the first time when electronic media was innovatively used and played an important role in a political campaign. IS was the biggest campaign in the Indian television history.[13] "The campaign was so dominant, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, that it "worked its way into daily life, headlines, and even other ads."[14]

A Closer Approach

Figure.8 India Shining Print Adverts

IS looked colourful and commercially designed, with the use of professionally shot images. It had a designed brand identity in saffron, the brand colour of the BJP. There was a design consistency throughout the campaign launched on various media. The campaign saw an extensive use of Internet[15] and mobile technologies. 5% of the campaign budget was allocated to e-campaign, revamping its campaign website, sending text messages, pre-recorded voice clips and emails to its database of 20 million emails and phone users offering campaign-related mobile ringtones for download.[16]

The images of happy citizens (children, youth, middle-aged and old people) receiving better opportunities, infrastructure and medical health care facilities were used in the campaign. The content explained the improving conditions of Indians in the contemporary times. These images have an 'aspirational' character, as Ronald describes here:
"The older governmental ads were informational. The "India Shining" ads were aspirational. They were aimed not at the purely rational citizen who required information in order to make a decision but at people who were also wishers and dreamers. The older ads were also familial and/or national. The "India Shining" ads were personal. Instead of asking people to do things for their family and nation, even to sacrifice for them, the "India Shining" ads urge people to do things for themselves."[17]

Furthermore, the campaign title was in English, 'India Shining', though the campaign had Hindi television ads included as well. It could be that English supported the 'aspirational' character of the message. This could support the reason that the brand was related to 'elitist'. On the other hand, as the message was a statement that India is becoming global. English is assumed to be the chosen language to support the cause.

'India Shining' is a case study with an idea to understand the role of a political brand in a context of a fixed time frame such as a general election campaign. Gardner and Levy's propose that apart from a brand campaign with a fixed time line, political brand is also conceptualized by public through a body of associations with the brand developed over a period of time. The BJP is a party that had its origins in Hinduism and its ideology based on *Hindutva*. This is the reason, apart from the modern methods to reach the 'developed' section of society through urban images and new media, BJP planned to organize '*yatra*'[18] (procession) to retain its associations with *Hindutva*. This was called *Bharat Uday Yatra* (India Rising Procession), a nationwide procession to reach the traditional, older section of the society. Religious processions have been an important practice in Indian history. BJP reiterated the custom of procession as a means to communicate to the conservative part of

the society in order to retain its brand association to tradition.

Why did the campaign fail, if all efforts were made to reach every Indian citizen – traditional and modern? Although, there can be plenty of reasons to explain the loss of a party in politics, but there are few reasons in the brand campaign that could have added to the loss. One of the reasons why is that the campaign showed an 'imagined economy' of the country. The message wasn't promising enough for people as to what better will happen to them if they vote. It was celebratory and a declaration about the improving economy for a very small segment of urban population that has nothing to do for an ordinary rural man. I find it to be a state of myth and reality where it was an 'imagined economy' in the minds, but in reality, there is huge number of people still suffering from poverty.[19] Here comes a point where the message in the branded campaign lost its voice when it couldn't make a concrete promise to the ordinary man on the streets. This is a reason to explain how Indian National Congress counter reacted with its slogan, "*Aam aadmi ko kya mila*?"

Furthermore, the party's marketing through text phones and Internet seem to be too commercial which eventually was not accepted. As Vir Sanghvi mentions, "Vajpayee is not the sort of man you expect to get a phone call from. When he calls you in the manner of some call-centre salesman trying to sell you a credit card, it damages his stature and dignity." How effective are such branding exercises? "The brand of a party is like a quiver of arrows, with a suitable arrow that can be fired as and when needed. A lot goes into creating the image of a party. This includes the use of colour, words, backdrops and even the clothes its leaders wear," says image guru Dilip Cherian. Is branding about manipulation? Should brand makers maneuver the image of a party with its expertise and politics speak a language of style over substance? Does this mean we can be influenced and make mistake in choosing an honest leader? If a party is trying to get into people's minds, shouldn't it talk in real terms, rather than putting up pretty pictures of a developed nation? The India Shining campaign didn't promise the changes that will happen in the future but it cannot be held sole responsible for a party's loss as too many issues get involved in politics of a country as diverse in language, religion, caste, creed and social systems.

An Expressive Idiom

Figure.9 Portrait of Jayalalitha, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, painted on a public wall

Figure.10 A party supporter paints a wall with party logo

Figure.11 Sonia Gandhi as a Hindu Goddess

As the national politicians adopt new branding strategies and updated communication media, the older methods of political marketing are diminishing. These include political posters, hoardings, cut outs and hand painted walls advertising political campaigns. There are benefits to active involvement of the fan followers in the party campaign – the making of cut outs, painting billboards and so on. These methods were once a way for a common man to express him or herself. The recent poster of Sonia Gandhi projected as a Hindu Goddess hints at common man's interpretation of a politician (Fig 11). It reflects a seamless relationship between religion and politics in India. Religion can be considered as a 'private affair' that becomes a medium for creative intervention to express political support.

Indian visual culture has always been a mix of social, political, cultural and artistic traditions that have resulted in a colourful cacophony of images. Is following Western modernity our best solution for our growth and if we follow it, how can we retain our past? Development has discontinued the 'ephemeral yet consistent trail of images'[20] created by people on streets.

Recently, the Election Commission of India has passed a new rule objecting to the 'defacing' of any public or private property during elections. Section 3 (1) of the Act on penalty for defacement of property says that "whoever defaces any property in public view by writing or marking with ink, chalk, paint or any other material except for the purpose of indicating the name and address of the owner or occupier of such property, shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine which may extend to fifty thousand rupees, or with both."[21]

Images connect the politicians and supporters. Up till now, it was interesting to watch the voters involved with images – making, putting up, distributing and watching. These older means gave freedom to a party's supporters to connect with a two-way communication. This is different from brand marketing, as it doesn't shove the brand down our throats and interfere in our daily lives with promotional phone messages but exists in the public space as created by people themselves. "These "[c]ollective experiences of mass media… can create sodalities of worship and charisma…" (Appadurai 1996:8) and therefore not only create a form of collective fandom but also inform the daily, intimate relation of a fan with his hero. This enables a form of agency, "both in direct acts of consumption and in the indirect acts of producers aiming to satisfy consumers" (Freitag 2003:398)."[22]

The new modern strategy of branding political parties has brought new discussions with it. The questions raised are different from those raised to discuss the local art involved in politics. For instance, the questions asked for a branded campaign can be which company designed the campaign? How can the campaign address such a diverse country with different languages, castes and class? What is the unique selling proposition of the brand campaign? What is the response of people? How is it done in the West? Eventually, the final objective of a branding exercise is to help win the party in a limited time period before it is off the air. On the other side, such questions dissipate in the discussion of local art done by the party supporters. Instead, one begins to ask, what are the reasons for the people to involve in this kind of popular imagery? How does it add to the visual landscape of the city? How will it make a difference if such an involvement is mutated in the new times? Or in other words, these are the traditional means of communication that provide space and opportunity to supporters for reinterpretations and leave a 'trail of images' rather going off the air after the campaign.

Few Works

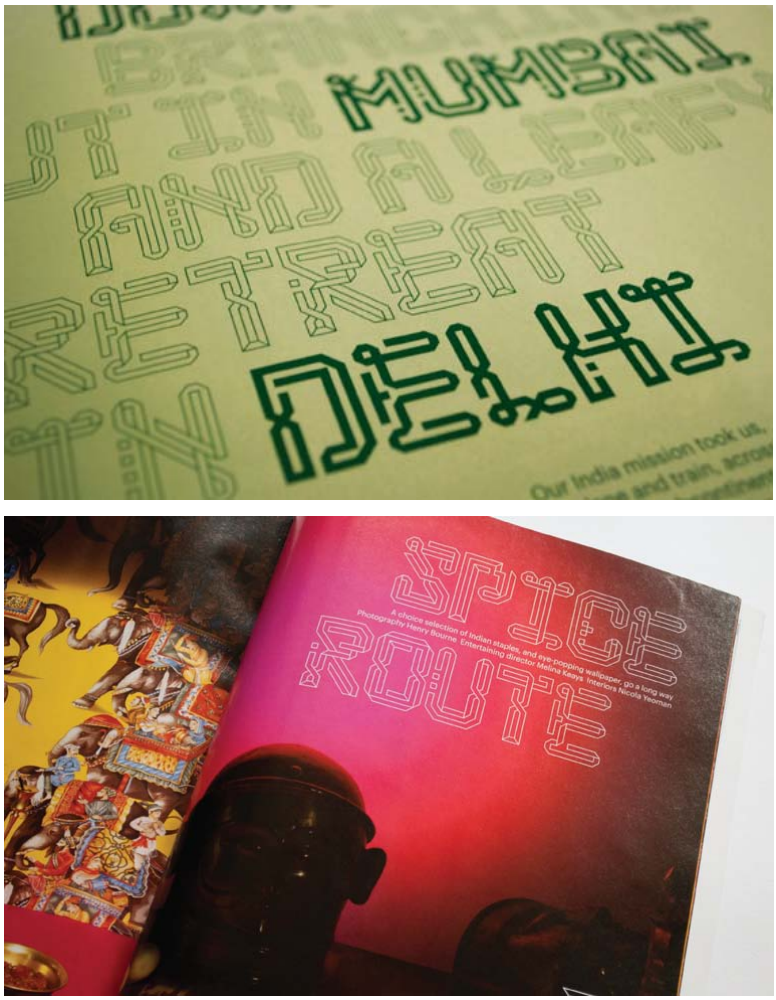

Figure.12 Wallpaper* Magazine, June 2011

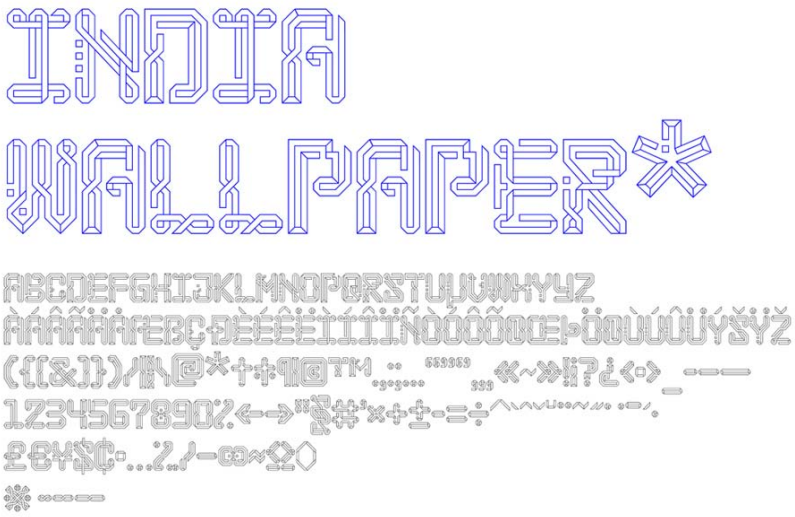

Figure.13 INDIA Typeface

Figure.14 Kolam

I attempt to develop work that integrates tradition and look for moments when vernacular 'transforms' into designed. Traditional art holds cultural clues of a society's past that can be transformed through innovation. Finding new routes while deepening roots challenge my work.

My recent project involves creating a typeface for Wallpaper* magazine issue, Reborn in India, that references the rich visual culture of India. It is done in collaboration with Henrik Kubel, partner of A2/SW/HK. INDIA typeface is inspired by Kolam, a floor decoration art practiced by local South-Indian women. The type is based on a grid and has an outline and filled version that can be layered to create a third outline-filled version. The vernacular and type intertwine to articulate forms that find their own entity.

Figure.15 U Ok No

Figure.16 Welcome

Figure.17 Happy

Furthermore, I developed a type that I collaborated with the local women in Bangalore. Type is created with inspiration derived from Kolam patterns and given back to women to recreate. While, an intention to let the local artists speak through their own language, an intervention leads to discover new territories and rearticulate tradition. Typography becomes a fertile ground and speaks a new language while the tradition 'revitalises' in its presence.

'Happy', a site-installation at Wolff Olins, London is created on the floor inviting people to get involved. Holi colours are used and patterns are created using an underlying grid. The recording of the making becomes a moving image work.

Figure.18 Englishes

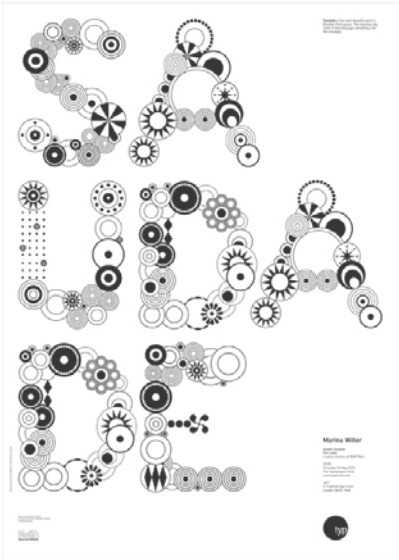

Figure.19

Conclusion

Tradition has never existed on its own accord. It is always embraced and cultivated. But as Alvin Lustig mentions, “As we become more mature we will learn to master the interplay between past and present and not be so self-conscious of our rejection or acceptance of tradition. We will not make the mistake that both rigid modernists and conservatives make, of confusing the quality of form with the specific forms themselves.”I explore the abstract entity of the alphabet and its ability to embrace culture through type design. Reinventing the past can make things improve while helping in progress because “using” the vernacular, it tell us “not only who we were and are, but who we hope to be”.

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