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Word – image – imagination

Subtitle: Visualising thoughts and emotions by Japanese typography

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Abstract:

In addition to describing thoughts and emotions using words, how can they be turned into a visual representation by typographic means? During research on Japanese typographic culture, I came across several statements by graphic designers, mentioning their typographic work as a visualisation of thoughts and emotion. This excited my curiosity to explore the different types and techniques of visualising thoughts and emotions by using the Japanese writing system. In this paper, historical and contemporary examples of applied Japanese typography will be used to illustrate and analyse various methods of visualising ideas that originally are not visible in the physical sense. Three main design strategies will be described: making use of the potential provided by the diversity of the four scripts[1] unified in one writing system, the deconstruction of characters to create new shapes and finally the transition of a character[2] to an image or a pictogram.

Key words: Japanese writing system, Culture, Typography, Emotion.

1. Introduction

In the practice of Latin letter-based typography, we tend to associate styles of typefaces with certain attributes. We describe for example Modern typefaces or Didones (such as Bodoni or Didot) as

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[1] The Sino-Japanese characters Kanji, the two syllabic scripts Hiragana and Katakana, and Latin letters.

[2] In this paper Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana will be referred to as characters to differentiate them from Latin letters.

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elegant, transitional faces like Caslon as rational and typefaces mimicking casual handwriting like Comic Sans as playful.

While this kind of comparison is a common practice among typographers or graphic designers, the German literary scholar Joachim Schultz regards this practice of applying characterising adjectives to classified styles of typefaces as inaccurate and as a vague association. Schultz limits the emotional impact of a typeface to the history of its origin and the historical application of a style, which are closely related to cultural aspects (Schultz 1982). According to Schultz, Didot can be associated with the French Revolution and by this to the historical context of its time of origin. The spread of black letters in Germany is according to Schultz associated with Gutenberg's 42-line bible. He regards the use of a metaphorical attempt to characterise the emotional impact[3] of a typeface as highly problematic.

The position of the literary scholar Schultz with his restrictions on the emotional impact of a typeface and the common practice of graphic designers to judge a typeface almost only by its visual attributes can be regarded as two almost opposing extreme positions.

However, the investigation into Japanese applied typography led me to the hypothesis of the existence of a unique implicitness, regarding typography as a tool to communicate thoughts and emotions on a visual base. There seems to be a broader scope for visual expression by making use of the unique characteristics of the Japanese writing system that unite the four scripts.

2. The Japanese writing system

The Japanese writing system unites four scripts to put one language into writing: the Sino-Japanese characters Kanji, the two syllabic scripts Hiragana and Katakana, and Latin letters.[4] Therefore the Japanese writing system is regarded as unique and at the same time as one of the most complex writing systems in the world. Japan adopted the Chinese script back in the 4th century AD.[5] Gradually Katakana and Hiragana were developed in Japan to create a system of writing that could put the Japanese language more accurately into a written form. The history of writing in Japan did not only lead to the hybrid writing system, but also to an exceptional concept of assigning the four different scripts to individual semantic fields. Historically Kanji and Katakana were regarded as the

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[3] Schultz gives the example of characterising an italic typeface as giving the impression of frankness, energy and speed.

[4] Phonetically, the Japanese language could be captured by only one Kana script (Hiragana or Katakana) or even by Latin letters.

[5] Subsequent to the adaptation of Chinese characters to the Japanese language, two ways of reading were assigned to each character. The on-yomi is the Sino-Japanese reading derived from the original Chinese phonetic. The kun-yomi is the native Japanese reading of the representation of a Kanji. The two different readings of one character can lead to quite different interpretations of one word. The two characters 春風 (春 means spring and 風 wind) can be pronounced either _harukaze_ (kun-yomi) describing a pleasant spring breeze or _shunpuu_ (on-yomi) a strong wind during spring. The two different readings represent clearly how the interpretation or mood of a word can be affected simply by the choice of the reading.

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scholarly scripts, while Hiragana were used to express thoughts and emotions in letters, poems and literature. During a reformation in the late 19th century the roles were reassigned. Today Katakana are used for non-Chinese loanwords while Hiragana visualise native Japanese words, grammatical particles and suffixes, among others.

Although both scripts were derived from Kanji characters of equivalent phonetic value, their final shape represents their context of origin. Katakana were designed using single components of Kanji; they are angular in the outer shape and the visual reference to Kanji is obvious. Hiragana are round and have a shape that is easy to recognise. Both Kana systems consist of 46 characters and two diacritics, covering the same syllables.

Since the beginning of Kanji usage in Japan, new characters have been added to the character set using the above-mentioned methods. Kanji designed in Japan are called Kokuji "national characters (国字)" and reflect specific elements of the Japanese culture. A very pictorial example are the multiple Japanese-made characters to transcribe fish species (Fig. 1). Currently there are approximately 1,500 characters in this particular category.

Figure.1 Nishiwaki replaces each radical positioned on the left-hand side of a character by an illustration of the visualised fish. The right-hand, which remains as a character, changes in calligraphic/typographic style. The set of fish kanji are well known representatives of Kanji made in Japan.

Nishiwaki Yuuichi: (西脇友一) 絵本形式による和文タイポグラフィの試み魚河岸, book illustration, 1963.

3 Visualising thoughts and emotions using the Japanese writing system and typography

In the following, three different techniques for visualising thoughts and emotions through typographic design will be introduced. The examples focus on design decisions going beyond those which simply rely on the choice of a typeface in a certain style. The arrangement (layout), the selection of a certain script (sometimes ignoring the standard) and the (de-)formation of characters themselves, will be matters of interest. The examples are only a small sample of possible methods.

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3.1 Characters of emotion – Kanji

The Japanese graphic designer Ito Katsuichi (born 1940, 伊藤勝一) created in 1972, in the context of his typographic experiment on Kanji, a neologism for the word Kanji, based on a homophone. The idea only becomes understandable when the words are written in Sino-Japanese characters. The original characters for Kanji 漢字 consist of the character 漢 (*kan*) describing China of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and 字 (*ji*) for character/letter. Ito used in his neologism the character 感 (*kan*) with the meaning *emotion* or *thought*. Instead of the original meaning of Kanji as *Chinese character* 漢字, Ito connected the phonetic Kanji to the idea of *character of emotion or thought* 感字. In this way, Ito emphasises the connectivity between the meaning of a word and its visual appearance (Kudo, 1998 and Ito, 1986).

As well as his word creation, Ito designed and published around 220 characters between 1972 and 1986 demonstrating his idea of Kanji 感字. In his work, Ito turns Kanji characters of different complexity into pictographic interpretations of the meanings they represent. The applied tools are reduced to a few components, such as prime colours, a typeface in the style of a mincho,[6] modifications of strokes (new arrangements, repetitions) and the addition of simple pictographic shapes to replace parts of the Kanji character. Unlike other didactic visualisations of Kanji often used in the education of children or foreigners, in Ito's work elemental components[7] in a character are not replaced by illustrations of their meaning. While some examples can visually communicate the meaning of the character, even to an audience with no knowledge of Kanji, others require elemental knowledge. As Ito mentions in the introduction of this book, he explored a game of visual communication. Being totally aware of the fact that characters are not images, he introduces a second neologism: Kanji as *visual character* 観字.[8] With his typographic experiment Ito is exploring the potential of associating a meaning and the connected emotional aspect of a character by its visual appearance. Kanji characters become an illustrative representation of their meaning.

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[6] Typefaces in the style of Mincho are often compared to serif typefaces in the Latin letter-based context. They show triangular serifs at the right end of horizontal strokes and have a clear contrast between light horizontal and stressed vertical strokes.

[7] According to the six principles of writing, pictograms and ideograms.

[8] 観 pronounced in the Japanese phonetic reading as *kan* with the meaning visual.

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Fig. 2.1

Fig. 2.2

Fig. 2.3

Figures.2.1–3 Unlike Nishiwaki's fish visualisations, Ito does not replace a radical of a Kanji by its semantic illustration, but by a pictographic illustration that supports the association with the message he wants to convey (Fig. 2.1 left: sow, right: grow). By colouring (Fig. 2.2 left: lamplight) or

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spreading elements over the layout area (Fig. 2.2 right: explode) he illustrates the meaning of the word by rearranging existing components of the character. While those four examples can be visually decoded even by people without any Kanji knowledge, other examples are more subtle. Fig. 2.3 left: the dot on top of the right radical is reduced in size to visualise the word shrink and the radical 米 is shown twice to show the idea of "to succeed" (**Ito 1986).**

3.2 Adding an exotic mood to the message by the choice of script

The graphic designer Kasai Kaoru (葛西薫, born 1949) thematised in his writing the idea that the 'soul can be turned into words' (Kasai 2009) by typographic design.

The typographic interpretation of the copy text in the advertisement for Suntory[9] vodka from 1974 is a distinctive example of this idea. The headline *koori no kuni no hito* (氷の国の人) can be translated as 'A person from a country of ice'. The peculiarity of Kasai's design is how Kasai spelled the copy. The Japanese orthography indicates nouns written in Kanji: ice (*koori* 氷), country (*kuni* 国) and person (*hito* 人), and the particle from (*no* の) in Hiragana. While Kasai used Kanji characters for the nouns as it is the regular practice, he chose Katakana to set the particle *no* ノ. Kasai justifies his design decision by describing the visual appearance of the two Kana systems. While the outer shape of the Hiragana の is round and does not suggest a cold atmosphere, the Katakana ノ, consisting only of a downstroke to left, reminds him of a *katana* (blade). Simply by changing the two Hiragana to Katakana, the appearance of the original headline changes from 氷の国の人 to a hard and at the same time cold visual interpretation of the same text: 氷ノ国ノ人. In addition, to that the unusual spelling gives the Japanese audience an exotic impression of the text. The portrait of a young Western woman with blue eyes and a fur hat further strengthens this exotic mood.

For an image campaign for the Japanese fashion label United Arrows, Kasai used Latin letters to visualise a Japanese text. Similar to the previous example, the designer does not follow the established systems[10] of spelling. The design of the campaign was a collaboration by Kasai and the Italian illustrator Gianluigi Toccafando. In order to give the copy an exotic Italian touch, Kasai changed the spelling to capture the Italian accent of the illustrator while pronouncing Japanese words. The welcoming phrase used in Japanese shops and restaurants, *irasshaimase* was respelled to *irassyaimase.* This idea was applied to a series of posters. *Kokoroni uta wo* was changed to *Cocoloni ùTAo* and *karadani ai wo* became *CaRadani Aio*. As well as the exotic mood, the presentation of the sen-

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[9] Suntory is one of the oldest Japanese brand of beverages as it was founded in 1899.

[10] There are mainly two systems of transcribing the Japanese language using Latin letters: the Kunreishiki and the Hepburn method. The Hepburn method was developed by the American doctor and missionary Dr James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911). Parts of this system were incorporated into the Japanese method Kunreishiki.

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tences in Latin letters (as using Latin letters to capture a Japanese text is already uncommon) fulfil the task of softening the message of the text. While *Kokoroni uta wo* can be translated as *a song for the soul* and *karadani ai wo* to *love for the body*, this text can be easily misinterpreted if the context of an advertisement for a fashion brand is lost. To show this statement using Kanji and Hiragana would lead to a more serious or even inappropriate impression.

However the typographic design of the above-mentioned example is rather modest. Kasai visualises the text by using typefaces in the style of Modern faces, in a plain setting underneath the illustration.
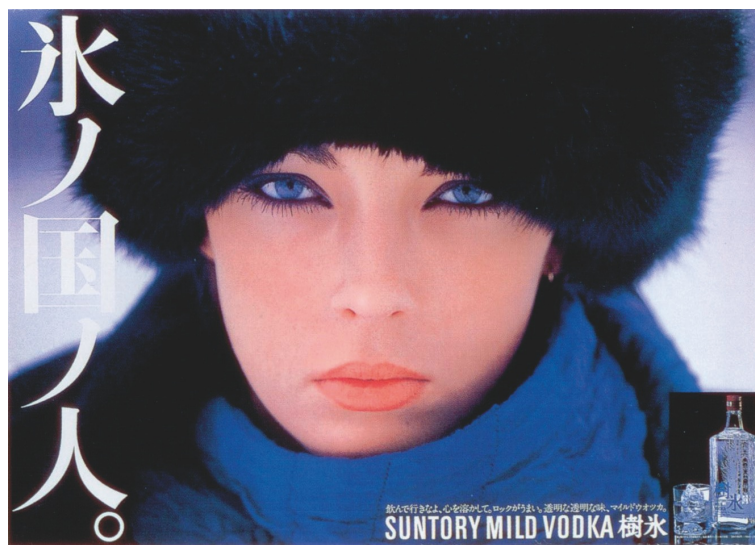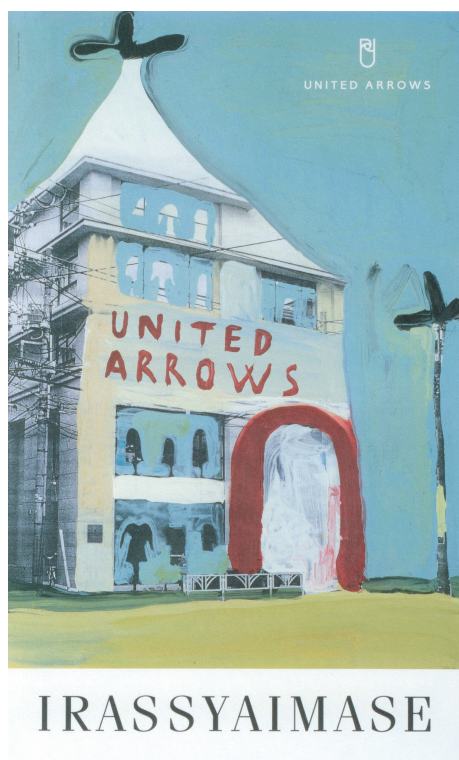

Fig. 3.1

Fig.3.2

Figure.3.1 Kasai Kaoru: poster design for Suntory Jyuhyo, 1982.

Figure.3.2 Kasai Kaoru: poster design for United Arrows, 2003.

3.3 Concrete poetry

Poets in Europe started to experiment with the visual form and with the typographic design of poems in the early 20th century. They explored how the words and their visual representation can interact. The expressiveness of the design can differ significantly. In the 1960s and early 1970s, concrete poetry reached the peak of its popularity in Europe.

The Japanese poet and painter Niikuni Seiichi (新国誠一 1925–1977) started to get involved in concrete poetry in 1952. He continued to experiment with the potential of visual forms provided by the four different scripts (Kanji, Hiragana, Katakana and Latin letters) until his death. Especially in his work from the 1960s onwards, Niikuni develops an interesting approach by focusing on Kanji, their meaning and their components. In his work "rain 雨" from 1966, Niikuni shows the character "rain 雨" once and fills up the space of the layout area with the multiplication of the four dots included in the character. With this arrangement, showing an even rhythm and only by using the dots, he creates the atmosphere of a steady and continuous rain.

The work "darkness 闇" shows a different approach. Although the characters are similar to the previous example arranged in an even grid, three characters put in a sequence. The top nine lines are filled with the character "gate 門". The last 20 lines consist of the character "sound 音". These two groups meet in the middle in a line showing the character "darkness 闇", in which the "gate 門" embraces the "sound 音".

In "elegy 悲歌" from 1972, Niikuni changes the layout strategy. Instead of filling the rectangular 'text area', he works with the white space and creates a contrast and a tension between filled and unfilled space. While he deconstruct the character "sorrow or sadness 悲" into its two components, "non/denial 非" and "mind/soul 心", he does not show the whole word "悲". He arranges multiple "非" in different sizes and rotations in an irregular cloud and a small "心" at a distance to the group of "非". The idea of "悲" and by that the meaning of "elegy 悲歌" will be developed in the mind of the reader/beholder.
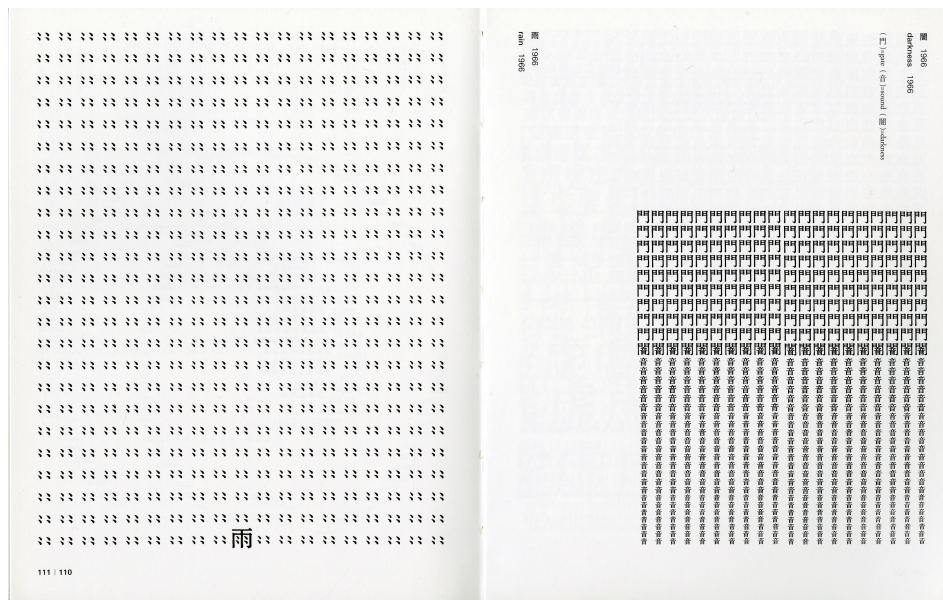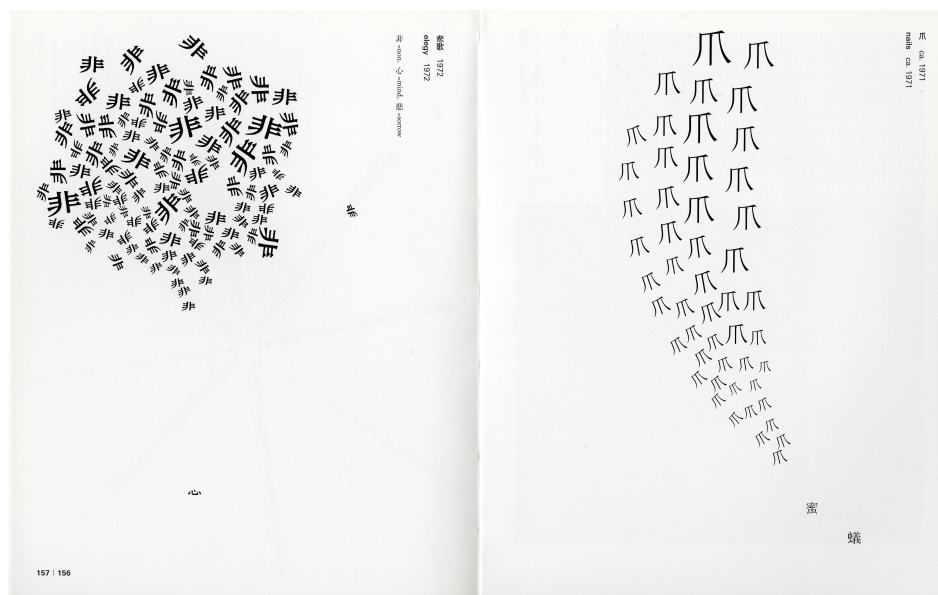
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Fig. 4.1

Fig. 4.2

Figure 4.1 Niikuni 2008, 110–111.

The left-hand page shows the work "rain 雨" and the right page "darkness 闇", both from 1966.

Figure 4.2 Niikuni 2008, 157.

"elegy 悲歌" from 1972 on the left-hand page.

4. Conclusion

The three different examples given in this paper demonstrate different possibilities for integrating scripts as a visual source to show and share abstract and often also personal ideas. The works show how multiple scripts are integrated into the design despite their original assignment. At the same time those works demonstrate how strongly the semantic and the visual aspects are intertwined. A

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character alternates between a phonetically readable representation of a text and a pictographic visual representation of an idea within one design.

Gerard Unger said: "it is almost impossible to read and look at the same time: they are different actions." (Unger 2007, 38.)

The typographic works presented in this paper are experimenting with the two different actions of reading and looking.

However, the design is not just a simple visual presentation of the text; it adds an aspect or dimension to the entity that words cannot express. Japanese typographic work uses the visualisation of thoughts and emotion to convey different ideas contained in one message. In this way, the visual form of a written character becomes an extension and communicates in a subtle way ideas that cannot be put into words, but which can be visually experienced. It gives us a glance into the opportunities for an impressive game of words, image and imagination, involving the imaginative power and ability for contemplation by the reader.

Notes

Japanese names referred to in this paper are written according to the common Japanese order of family name followed by the given name.

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Illustrations:

Fig. 1: Nishiwaki Y. (西脇友一) (1963) 絵本形式による和文タイポグラフィの試み魚河岸. Book illustration. In Matsuoka S. Tanaka I., Asaba K. (1999), *Transition of Modern Typography in Japan 1925-95*. [松岡正剛・田中一光・浅葉克巳: 日本のタイポグラフィックデザイン・文字は黙って いない] Trans Art, Japan, p. 91.

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Fig. 3.1: Kasai Kaoru, poster design for Suntory Jyuhyo, 1982. Photography: Tominaga Minsei. In: Tanaka Ikko (ed.) (1998): *Kasai Kaoru. World Graphic Design 35*, ggg Ginza Graphic Gallery, Japan.

Fig. 3.2: Kasai Kaoru, poster design for United Arrows, 2003. In: Kasai Kaoru (2010): *Kasai Kaoru 1968*. Art Design Publishing, Japan, p. 271.

Fig. 4.1: Niikuni Seiichi, concrete poetry "rain 雨" (left) and "darkness 闇", both from 1966. In the National Museum of Art, Osaka. (Exhibition catalogue, 2008). Niikuni Seiichi works 1952–1977. Shichosha, Japan, pp.110 and 111.

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