

# *visuāl&syntactic materiālitīēs in written Language*

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BA Graphic Design

Major context research project

Reading copy

'Visual & syntactic materialities in written language'

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Central Saint Martins

2017

**visual&syntactic Materialities** is a project about the materialities of written language. I have always been interested in language and its workings: how we make sense of things and how the system of communication that we use determines what we say and how. The project emerged from this, as well as a more distilled interest in the printed word. In that way, I set to investigate upon the workings of written language looking at how it is constructed from the inside and how it manifests visually. The term «meaning» is commonly used in language to refer to significations of words and texts. The research sets to investigate the role and nature of written language, and acknowledge its different constituents, their workings, and their indispensable, intrinsic role in the conveyance and production of meaning.

Although the term «written» refers rigorously to handwriting, it is meant to comprise in this project all forms of ‘visual’ or ‘graphic’ language: written, typewritten, printed, etc. Language is inseparable from its actual, physical, material production. For practical reasons of time and knowledge, I limited the investigation to looking at cases that analysed and used only the Latin alphabet system. My main objective was to learn how written language is not just a vehicle for speech, but a complex communicating device.

Three notions had a pleasant echo in me whilst my research: (1) the notion of a diagrammatic piece, where text needs to be activated by a reader and the choice of pathways is never-ending; (2) the proposition of an ‘uncreative writing’, which is the possibility of producing creative writings from fragments: ready-mades; (3) and the concept of constellation. This last one has always caught my attention on the one hand because of an interest in astronomy, and on the other to feeling intrigued to the notion of a network of elements which are interconnected in many ways and create a greater whole. I did a small investigation of the notion of constellation in literary practices: Benjamin and McLuhan view the constellation as a metaphorical device for analysis. It allows to establish connections with a kind of atemporality & unsequentiality, with ‘the known facts scattered like stars across the firmament’ (Giedon in Friesen 2013: 4).

The notion of constellation acts as a metaphor for all the ideas explored in the writing piece. Furthermore, it shows how meaning in written language does not lie on one single thing but clings to multiple at the same time. I decided then to construct my visual piece around the idea of constellation, materialising it visually into a diagrammatic piece that maps my journey through the research. Constellations represent a system that is composed of many, many pieces, and you can look at it as a whole, zoom indefinitely into the units, and see and create connections between them. The visual&syntactic constellation serves twofold: to describe all the elements that participate in the production of meaning in written language; and to show their immensity: a cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common principle. The significance of the constellation lies in its mediating power, in its potential to bring ideas together without the need to reduce one to the other. It is their configuration, their spatial interrelationship, which allows for meaning and recognition. Meaning arises in the uncovering of relationships heuristically. Because written language is no less than that: a continuously changing material manifestation of meanings.

For me, the most significant learning resulted from realising that language is an ever-evolving complex system, and that there are so many things involved in communication that it would take infinite dissertations to analyse each of them. Even the focus I chose –how language looks– was an immense field of exploration. This work helped me understand many things which I was unconsciously drawn to. How language appears manifestly before our eyes, how these shapes, even when pushed to the extremes, don't lose their linguistic meaning; the rules that determine these looks—the visual syntax.

This understanding is essential to me as a graphic designer because I am working with words all the time. Having read and analysed texts about written language, I now think the connection to my studio work is stronger and this last will benefit a lot from my research. In explorations of the alphabet & other writing systems (such as mathematical notation), I am more aware of the different pieces that construct the system.

The font Kazimir is used for the constellation and the titles. It has rather weird shapes which we are not accustomed to see in Latin alphabets, bringing something unfamiliar to the familiar, daily universe. The font was inspired by type errors in early Russian printing, when it was often outsourced to foreign shops where the character sets didn't reliably include Cyrillic. Not discouraged by those minor difficulties, the resourceful printers just invented their own Cyrillic letterforms, and the details they added led to some odd-looking characters. Then, as a nod to the measurement system of distances between celestial objects (on an angle made with regards to an observational point on Earth, measured in degrees, arc minutes, and arc seconds) I bound the book to a 5 degree angle.

Because I am not yet certain about how meaning-making works in communication, I will now need not to stop trying to find out more about it and explore language both theoretically and practically. The work which results might be complete in itself, but it will also gesture at all the other work that could potentially be generated.

Written language communicates: it conveys meaning. It is constructed visually & syntactically, and works at several levels. The term ‘meaning’ is commonly used in language to refer to significations of words and texts, and of the interpretive possibilities they allow. In this essay I will interrogate written language from within in order to ask how it is constructed and how it manifests visually. I will investigate through a thorough theoretical analysis of what an alphabet writing system is and the identification of the elements that constitute its materiality, I will aim to show how text is structured visually: how it looks can reveal aspects of language. Writing is ever-present in our lives and we tend not to acknowledge the richness it can have in visual forms of communication.

Language<sup>01</sup> communicates. It is not the sole way of communicating, nor can everything communicate, but it can a lot. Meaning lies at the centre of communication and thus plays a crucial role in how language operates. Speech & writing are the primary ways by which we use language and decipher meanings. Their core elements are words, which can be used to compose sentences or be deconstructed into letters, the smallest units of written language<sup>02</sup>. Language has an immaterial quality, which lies in the realm of the intangible and the conceptual, and a material one, which is the re of the former. Written language makes sense at an (in)visible level in the syntactic construction, and at a visible level in how it is materialized.

A writing system consists of a set of symbols with which language is meant to be fabricated, and there are rules under which these units must operate in order to make meaning. On the other hand, to exist, language has to be conveyed in some way, it must be manifested in some form for us to be able to grasp the meanings it conveys, take the form of substance/matter. This is the visual appearance of such units: how they look and the means through which they exist visually. Although the term ‘written’ refers rigorously to handwriting, it is meant to comprise in this essay all forms of ‘visual’ or ‘graphic’ language: written, typewritten, printed, etc. Language is inseparable from its actual, physical, material production.

Linguistics is about explaining how we communicate meanings to each other using the spoken or written medium (Crystal 1997). Because of the strong relationship of language with sound (and the fact that it was first spoken than written) speech has always had a predominance over writing. The written has suffered from neglect, and tends to be regarded as merely a technical means of recording/preserving/presenting oral text (Shusterman 2002). Speech being accepted as the predominant form of language, writing serves as a representation of speech. It is not until the 20th century that, in a contemporary context, writing was given a role in the material productions of language<sup>03</sup>. Both speech and writing are material manifestations of language, but

<sup>01</sup> In this essay, the words ‘language’ and ‘writing’ are to be understood to stand for human languages that use words for communication.

<sup>02</sup> There could be a deconstruction into finer units but letters, for the purposes here, are the smallest ‘complete’ units.

<sup>03</sup> It is in the philosophies and theories of language that this blindness occurs, not in the use of language itself. Attention to the aesthetics of writing cannot be neglected in ancient civilisations. *The concern is that many philosophers of language [and linguists] largely ignore the materiality of language as a valid source of knowledge about language.* (Calvert 2011a: 317)

if we are to investigate upon the materiality of written language<sup>04</sup>, it is important to understand how and why it has been often overlooked and how its potential of producing meaning other than semantic has been unacknowledged in time. As Helmer (2000: 100) states, ‘visible language is ubiquitous, taken for granted; it is often processed automatically rather than formally seen’.

The authors presented here are all concerned with the visual aspects of written language, and how it carries a crucial value for the meaning–production in communication. Their points will be used to show that when we pay attention to the visual form of language, material qualities are foregrounded and therefore their role is uncovered in the production of meaning. In this way, paying attention both to the visual & syntactic qualities of language, some workings of meaning–construction are revealed, and can also be potentiated.

In quite a contradictory sense, in a book dedicated to the solid form of language (written), Robert Bringhurst (2004: 13) states that ‘human language, for its own sake, has no need of being written so long as it is spoken’. This controversial point has been tackled by many people. Taking as a basis the reflections of authors such as Richard Shusterman, Sheena Calvert (2011a) notes how the visual qualities of language are often overlooked. Shusterman states that we have an innate disposition to understand text as a visual representation of speech, but having no meaningful value and acting just as a link between linguistics and sound. He writes: ‘cultural presumptions promote an aesthetic blindness to surface, a failure to see the aesthetic importance of the visual face of literature’ (Shusterman 2002: 159). His critique is directed more towards literary theorists, that too often remain blind to the importance of the visual<sup>05</sup>. Johanna Drucker (1994), on the other hand, focuses on the emergence and establishment of linguistics which, in order to work as a science, has long neglected written language (because it poses unmeasurable qualities). She mentions how linguistics became equivalent to phonological study and notes how the written form was willingly ignored:

*Since writing was the means for providing access to spoken language, any of the aspects of its function which might suggest autonomy (writing as a visual medium distinct from spoken language) were necessarily eliminated—not as undesirable, but as inconceivable.* (Drucker 1994: 15)

However, it could be argued that although the majority of alphabets are based on codes for phonetic expression, with their evolution and that of language itself the phonetic qualities have come to a second plane and the graphic ones have gained autonomy. As Flusser (2011) remarks, despite the fact that in our tradition writing is a musical notation of spoken language, it has become a gesture largely independent of speaking. This should certainly be affirmed at least to post–Gutenberg cultures, where

<sup>04</sup> From now on, the term ‘materiality’ will be used to reflect upon the material aspects of written language: how it looks and is constructed.

<sup>05</sup> *Neglect of the visual or graphic in literary text is one of the sad, surprising phenomena of Western aesthetics. Though oral qualities have always been held to be aesthetically central to literature, the role of the written or printed –the visual– has been regarded as aesthetically irrelevant, as merely a technical means of recording, preserving, and presenting the work. Such a view might seem plausible for ancient and pre-Gutenberg cultures, where literature was more often uttered than inscribed, more heard than read, and was preserved through oral tradition. Scholarship has shown, however, that the majority of historical evidence points to the contrary: that most of our literature has been appreciated and preserved through written manuscripts, and that the visual aspects of the manuscript were greatly appreciated aesthetically. Indeed, the visual aspects were considered so important that the first printing presses were designed to imitate as closely as possible the visual properties of the finest and most admired manuscripts, rather than merely print efficiently the same letters.* (Shusterman 2002: 161)

text superseded speech: ‘the invention and development of printing established the visual as a standard product of literary art’ (Shusterman 2002: 160).

In order to understand written language as a fundamental element, somewhat autonomous, in meaning–construction, it is important to understand where written language comes from and its basic modes of functioning; how it looks and how it makes sense. Bringhurst’s *The solid form of language* (2004) traces the history of written languages with reflections on how they have come to be and their differences in how they are constructed. For him, a script<sup>06</sup> in itself is not a language, it is ‘a system of representation, sufficient to catch some (but never all) of a language in its net’ (Bringhurst 2004: 12). A writing system is a method of representing communication in a visual form. Attributes of writing systems fit into broad categories such as alphabets, syllabaries, or logographies. Although the purpose of this essay is not an analysis of alphabets, it is important to make a few points on their characteristics. I will do this based on Bringhurst’s points:

- writing is abstract;
- a writing system is codified;
- the symbols are defined in terms of something else;
- & the system is stylistically as well as symbolically self-contained.

Writing is abstract because what it represents does not look like it: in writing itself (in its present form) no pictorial content remains. It is codified because it consists of a repeating set of symbols that are sufficient to the language that it serves. The symbols stand for something else, which is usually speech but needn’t be speech: what it has to be is language (Bringhurst 2004). In order to get semantic meaning from writing, you need to understand the codes that define the writing system. An alphabet comprises a set of letters, the smallest units of written language, that encode on the principle that the letters (or letter groups) represent sounds. The processes of encoding and decoding writing systems involve a shared understanding between writers and readers of the meaning behind the sets of characters that make up a script.

Bringhurst continues in saying that a writing system consists of a set of symbols, a set of definitions for the symbols (graphic lexicon), and determined values for their use (graphic syntax). The graphic lexicon and graphic syntax are relevant for this essay because they define how language looks. The symbols are realised as glyphs: visible, repeatable marks and shapes, constrained by the propensities and limits of the human hand and eye. For the symbols to be language a specific set of rules has to be met, otherwise they become shapes that lend themselves to abstraction.

Another important note to make is that from now on, for practical reasons and with the aim of delimiting the case studies, I will only consider language that uses the Latin alphabet system, in English. As Flusser (2011: 23) identifies, ‘the alphanumeric code we have adopted for linear notation over the centuries is a mixture of various kinds of signs: letters (signs for sounds), numbers (signs for quantities), and an inexact number of signs for the rules of the ‘writing game’ (e.g., stops, brackets, and quotation marks). Each of these types of signs demands that the writer think in the way that

<sup>06</sup> Although the term script strictly refers to handmade forms of writing, Bringhurst uses it to refer to any manifestation of writing.

uniquely corresponds to it.’ Although the alphabet code was devised before the invention of a mechanical means of reproduction (movable type) it can be argued that it was not until this moment that the alphabet came into its own (Goody 1981). Whether it was only with the invention of print that writers became aware of what they were doing (by putting individual characters in rows and ‘holding’ language in their hands) remains an open question.

Now, the articles *Materia Prima* (2011a) and *Materia Secunda* (2011b) are useful to illustrate one of the distinctions made above, that of the matter of language and its manifestation. Calvert identifies these, respectively, as the ‘raw materiality of language’ (*materia prima*), and the ‘event’ (*materia secunda*). The base material of language requires the stage of the event (uttered or inscribed/printed) to ‘mobilise the full power of language’ (Calvert 2011b: 149). Calvert is concerned with the material qualities of language and the function they play in the production of meaning. The main argument is that language possesses a raw materiality which lies between the functional and substantial aspects of language. This materiality has meaning before conceptual meaning takes place, and has a potential in understanding many more aspects of language. Thus the materiality of language unlocks semantic attributes. Considering the material aspect of language as the contextual element in which linguistic meaning inhabits, context is meaning.

Johanna Drucker’s many reflections lie on understanding the semantic contribution of the visual representation of language for all forms of written language. Her statement that ‘all language is visual when read’ (Bernstein in Drucker 1998: 7) draws attention to the visual qualities of language: the fact that language exists materially on a surface for us to be able to receive it through our eyes. As Crystal and Bringham, she understands the different layers of language in saying that writing is not just made of ideas but also of marks. In *Figuring the word* she sets to question ‘how it is that letters, words, and pictorial elements all participate in producing a work with complex textual value’ (Drucker 1998: 3).

As written language is constituted of symbols, semiotics is a useful tool in analysing material qualities. In one article of *Visible Language, Meaning* (2003) proposes that a semiotic division can be made of the major signs and signals of communication into verbal (in which the linguistic element of speech can be separated from the expressive, non-linguistic elements) and non-verbal (which divides into visual and tactile). Drucker’s *The visible word* evaluates the effect of the manipulation of the visual form of language on the production of linguistic meaning. The book analyses typographic experiments of the early twentieth century. She aims to do this from a semiotic perspective, in order to scrutinise the visual/material qualities of language in such works. In her own words, ‘the first step in establishing the basis of the study of semiotics in relation to writing and typography is an examination of Saussure’s discussion: the new status he assigned to written language and the basis on which he laid the groundwork for a theory of materiality in signification’ (Drucker 1994: 7). Thus, Drucker constructs the grounds of a system for inquiry on Saussure’s semiotics. His distinction of signifier and signified transforms in Drucker on that between the ‘visual manipulation of the

linguistic signifier’ and the ‘verbal signified in the process of linguistic signification’. In that way she sets the foundations to investigate the material character of the typographic signifier. She sets a distinction between the graphic signifier and the verbal signifier, the former is what is made conspicuous on the surface. It is visible at many levels and inflects the construction of meaning made in reading.

Two main events in the course of the twentieth century are useful to illustrate the points made above regarding the blindness to materiality. First, the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, which laid the grounds for the work produced by avant-garde artists; second, Saussure’s theories in semiotics.

In literary practice, Mallarmé instigated a breaking point and established a ground for further experimentation. On the one hand, he recognised the possibility of ‘visually scoring poetic language’ by altering letterform choices, and secondly, he ‘distinguished his poetic practice from the quotidian forms of language’ (Drucker 1994: 51). Mallarmé invested in a highly material practice. He manipulated the typographic form, paying close attention to its visual features, and their spatial distribution and capacity to organise the text into a figural order. Mallarmé asks us to consider the act of reading as an act of decoding by actualising and materialising the symbols on the page (Goldsmith 2011).

There also seems to be a parallel development of the way artists, writers and designers came to use text as central in their works and pay attention to attributes other than the linguistic ones and the appearance of semiotics and semiology in linguistics. Johanna Drucker insists on this not being coincidental: Saussure created a break in linguistics in paying attention to the written side of language. I think there’s as well the possibility to link the emergence of these new kinds of visual work to the technical methods of production of the epoch. With the emergence of linotype printing in 1889, letterpress began to see a decadence because it was a time-consuming method of printing. However, it allowed for much more flexibility and experimentation because of the possibilities it offered in type composition. The majority of Futurist, Dada, and de Stijl art was made with either collage or letterpress, and in a similar manner, concrete poetry used either letterpress or typewriting machines. As Drucker (1994: 44) indicates, ‘the material form of the trace, the embodied visual aspect which letters, words, inscriptions, present as evidence, is always subject to the rules of linguistic usage and mechanical means which the culture has at its disposal’. In this sense, the retreat of letterpress in regards to other technologies gives the perfect setting to experiment with it and push it further to its original purpose. Not being the primary method of printing, it could be used to suit other purposes and people could experiment with it more: since it is not the default technology its use is justified by different reasons. Also, the fact that letterpress uses movable type is very important: ‘the physical elucidation of space, combined with the tactile experience of handling the sorts, can be a useful and even intellectual exercise in connecting meaning to form’ (Hitchcock 2000: 168).

As visual properties have the capacity to inflect, shape, and manipulate semantic

value, they play a crucial role in the production of meaning. In order to fully understand language, we need to pay attention to the visual surface: understand the graphic form in and of itself, prove the plastic meaning it carries (Lyotard in Calvert 2011). The concern here is the capacity of materiality to be as well as to mean: I propose to consider written language as diagrammatic in the same sense that Drucker considers graphic pieces diagrammatic:

*They are generative because they structure possibilities for thinking. They are schematic structures that use spatialized organisation to construct semantic value, that bear semantic values in their graphical organisation, and articulate relations through the play of elements within that structure. (Drucker 2014a)*

In this sense, every text, every form of visual language could be considered diagrammatic, because it asks to be activated by the reader. The recognition that the design of written language is part of its semantic operation as a meaning-producing field is implicit in the graphical structure. The textual elements forge links of meaning in their visual and verbal relations but those relations function as their own gestalt, not as the trace or image of some other figurative form.

In this order of ideas, I propose a lens through which analyse and understand the materiality of language based on three distinctions found in the texts researched (constellation). At one end is the matter, what Calvert would call ‘materia prima’, which is what can become visual language, or what Drucker would call ‘visual signifier’. At the other end is the purely conceptual, immaterial aspect of language: language as idea. For Drucker this is the ‘verbal signified’. In between these two there are infinite stages, and any involvement/engagement with language is situated in one (or more) of these points.

language  
*communication*



verbal signified  
linguistic signified

idea  
(signified)

{ immaterial qualities  
abstract  
inarticulate

+

material

manifestation  
(signifier)

{ physical attributes  
enactment  
representation



visual language

articulate written,  
typewritten,  
printed...



visuals



workings

conspicuous }  
material  
substance  
morphology  
aesthetics

{ functioning  
(in)visible  
linguistic rules

graphic lexicon    graphic syntax  
graphic signifier  
material signifier

This is an inquiry into the workings & visuals of written language in creative practices. It looks to identify the visual quality of language as a valid source of knowledge and meaning in it. Because of its interdisciplinary character, typography can be used to trace the transformations in which literary and visual practitioners conceive their object. In analysing typographic practice, we can look specifically into issues regarding the nature and structure of visual and verbal modes of signification. In this order of ideas, I will aim to evaluate the effect of the visual form of language on the production of meaning. The case studies will be restricted to works which only contain words but are still recognisable producers of linguistic value. Subjects such as materiality, visuality, verbality and signification will be explored. The case studies engage with the general discussion of written language but focus on the conscious use of materiality in language.

With the intent of linguistic consistency and aesthetic fluency, the investigation is limited to works that use language in typographic style, in the Latin alphabet in English language, and were created in the course of the twentieth century. Typographical design is work specific and surface specific, from typeface choice to page layout, etc. Claims of a particular language influencing thoughts and modes of representation<sup>07</sup> can be made but are beyond the scope of this essay. The consequences of using the alphabet system, as well as the repercussion of print in the production of visual works in creative practices are sufficiently explained in the following quotes:

*Language works on several levels, endlessly flipping back and forth between the meaningful and the material; we can choose to weigh it and we can choose to read it. There's nothing stable about it: even in their most abstract form, letters are embedded with semantic, semiotic, historical, cultural and associative meanings. Language is substance that moves and morphs through its various states. (Goldsmith 2011: 34)*

*The development of a democratic form of writing followed the invention of the alphabet, though it was not until the invention of mechanical reproduction by means of movable type that the alphabet came into its own. (Goody 1981: 135)*

*It was only with the invention of print that writers became aware of what they were actually doing by putting characters in rows. Typography is to be considered here less as a technology for the production of printed materials or as a method for distributing alphanumeric information than as a new way of writing and of thinking. (Flusser 2011: 47)*

Although written language appears to hide its methods, they are, if we have a closer look, strikingly visible. How it appears spatially, how it is ordered and constructed are elements that silently speak about the workings of language. Surfaces are generally thought to be the most apparent or visible of things. They are, however, often overlooked, and we generally see through them rather than at them. George Perec's

first Space in Species of spaces (1974), and Johanna Drucker's Diagrammatic writing (2013) celebrate the surface of the inscribed.

In writing one inhabits the space of the surface: elements are placed spatially within it, and these decisions reveal a lot about the accepted rules of language that allow for it to make sense. In Diagrammatic writing Drucker is illustrating mainly how all the paratextual elements work alongside each other, and the paths we are taking and accepting in the established format of the page of the codex. 'Ever since the format features of the codex began to emerge from the scriptura continua of late antiquity in the West, the recognition that the design of a text was part of its semantic operation as a meaning-producing field has been implicit in its graphical structure' (Drucker 2013: 7). Linear reading is just one of these, but in placing the words on a page the maker began to define some localisations, one of which is justification. A justified block of text has an even edge on both left and right sides, which is when consecutive lines are forced to correspond in (visual) length by inserting different amounts of spacing between words. Although it is possible in handwriting, it is primarily achievable depending on what the technology used offers regarding spacing –mechanical means like movable type and linotype permit to adjust the line spacing before printing. It is, if we think about it, completely arbitrary, as the placement of words in the page is determined by their size or quantity, and not by a logic inside language. This is what Stefan Themerson aims to challenge with his Internal Vertical Justification, or IVJ, which is an extreme form of unjustified setting. Themerson was questioning both Jan Tschichold's left alignment and Max Bill's justified text which regarded the aesthetic values of text in a page. Themerson's reasoning has nothing to do with abstract principles of balance or geometry, but with questioning the conventions that frame the text the reader is about to read (Bertolotti-Bailey 2013). As Bertolotti-Bailey (2013: 22) notes:

*(...) the semantic value of language is much less unique to it than the syntactic conventions, and the available means of communicating word values such as 'morning', 'sadness', or 'exit' are considerable, whereas the means for constructing a prepositional relation 'of' or 'to' of a sequence of tenses or a conditional are essentially impossible within the visual realm.*

The structure seems to be the opposite of space-saving and one could argue that it requires more participation by the reader; it is in a sense a more explicit diagrammatic piece than a justified text. It reveals the different constructs of a sentence, and their interlinks. It adds semantic meaning by the disposition of the words on the page. Diagrams spatialise semantic values into a legible graphical system: 'the organisation of a text, its graphical encoding as a text within a space that plays with the delimiting principles of boundedness to any degree, is subject to the systematic play of these semantically structuring elements' (Drucker 2013).

Another piece that reveals the workings of language is Charles Bernstein's Lift off (1979), which is composed of everything that was not written or meant to be written. It triggers the concern of sense not being foregrounded as being of initial importance. Other questions need to be asked of the text. The piece is what its title says it is: 'a transcription of everything lifted off a page with a correction tape from a manual typewriter' (Goldsmith 2011: 23). Careful reading will reveal bits of words and the

occasional full word that was erased. What we are left with are scatterings of language comprised of errors from unknown content. In this way Bernstein emphasises the fragmentary nature of language, reminding us that, even in this shattered state, ‘all morphemes are prescribed with any number of references and contexts’ (idem.).

Whereas ‘traditional’ Swiss typography mainly focused on the syntactic function, Wolfgang Weingart was interested in how far the graphic qualities of typography could be pushed and still retain its meaning. This is when the semantic function of typography comes in: Weingart believes that certain graphic modifications of type can in fact intensify meaning.

Weingart’s experiments on the letter M serve as a good case study of an exhaustive exploration of the aspect of letters, and of the rules that make these last belong to a graphic lexicon:

*I set up a modular system of composing with the photo prints from the M-cube that was similar to the five-hundred-year-old typesetting procedure. Like a hand composer who found his signs in single compartments —letters, accompanying ligatures, accents, numerals, punctuation marks— and rearranged them into a message, I organised the progressive positions, sizes, and distortions of M, and made my selections. (Weingart 2014: 233)*

Weingart pushes the letter to its limits, almost making it lose its orbit in the linguistic system. The experiments insert a new semiotic component, the plastic signifier of the graphic signifier of the verbal signified. In plastically exploring the visual face of language he also underscores an investigation into our habits of reading in meaning-making. He discovered that as increased space was inserted between the letters, the words became graphic in expression, and that understanding the message was less dependent upon reading than we suppose. As from inertia the eye absorbs meaning from letters, constantly constructing a language out of them.

His work, abstract or concrete, though the product of trial and error, is never gratuitous, never decorative. Always interesting, always the result of a meaningful idea, without which form is mere decoration. His typographic experiments were strongly grounded, and were based on an intimate understanding of the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic functions of typography. Weingart’s experiments on the letter M also incite a reflection upon how much the graphic lexicon can be pushed before it ceases to be it. As experimental and graphical as these pieces seem to be, void of semantic meaning, they are still reminiscent of one of the letters of the alphabet. These M’s are, in a sense, residual letterforms.

The last piece that will be analysed is Johanna Drucker’s *The word made flesh*. Drucker makes an interesting case study because she has led a practice both as a visual practitioner and a researcher. The word made flesh attempts to challenge linear reading by calling attention to the visual materiality of the text. The form the writing takes refers continually to the elementary units of language. Drucker is thinking about typography in terms of a system of differences that has a fully syntactic expression (Portella 2013).

‘The work embodies and uses language as a physical form, one whose properties cannot be ignored by arriving at a disembodied content’ (Drucker 1952).

The text begins with a subtle yet powerful notation: ‘à l’intérieur de/du la langue/langage’. As Marjorie Perloff notes, ‘Drucker’s poem physically enacts that journey’ (Perloff 1991: 121). Johanna Drucker works in the tradition of the poet-typographer to explore the visual materiality of the text. The texts are set in different faces, and use red and black ink. A single large-scale black letterform dominates each page, the individual letterforms combining on successive pages to spell out the title of the book. Surrounding each large black letter are smaller black letters in a variety of sizes, patterns and typefaces which can be read deliberately as explorations of the nature of language. A simple linear reading of these texts however is impeded by the complex layout of the words and phrases, compounded by the use of individual letters now forming part of one word, now part of another. It forces the reader to meditate on the process of reading itself. As Perloff poetically notes, the black words are the word made flesh and the red words the flesh made word (1991).

To begin with, the mode of production is itself part of the meaning. We could refer to the phrase ‘too much takes place in [language] for [language] itself to become the object of consciousness: the sign can signify anything except that it is in the process of signifying’ (Danto in Calvert 2011a: 314). Well here, the sign is in the process of signifying but is itself a signifier. One could speak of a material signifier of the graphic signifier of the verbal signified. The word made flesh is a journey through language that reflects upon it with it. As in Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés*, it is not just an experiment with form and space, but the work itself is posing the questions both visually and semantically.

Drucker is working primarily with the syntactic construction of written language, and challenges it using the same letters for multiple words. A certain linear writing stays, and one could argue it is necessary in order to make sense of the whole, but certainly not to be able to grasp the syntactic games. The workings of language also resonate deeply in this piece, as the author is constricted to a set of rules (graphic syntax) and elements (graphic lexicon) with which she can construct meaning. Drucker herself notes:

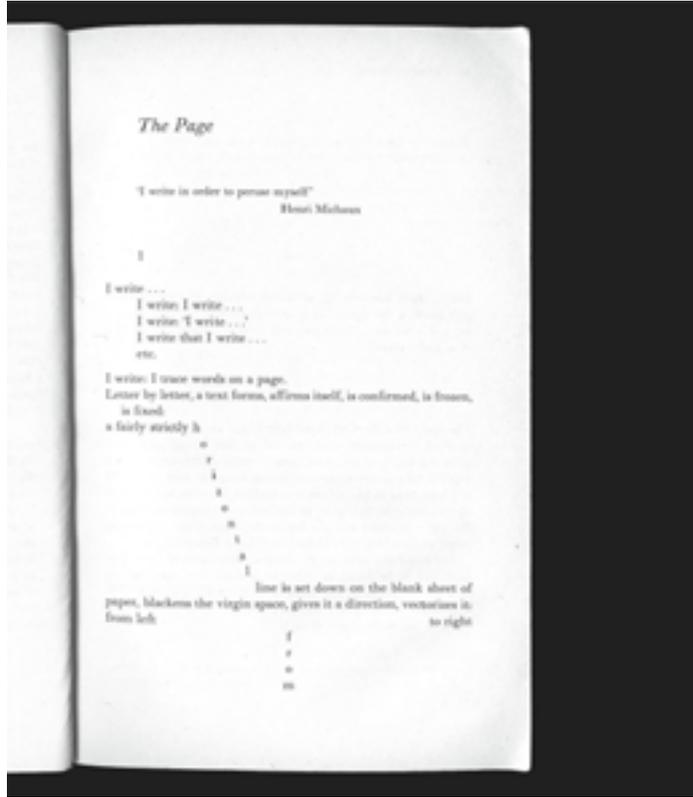
*The syntactic recursivity of language is made to mirror the syntactic recursivity of typography as a combination of type units. The layering of verbal and typographic meaning is equally complex: the text offers many typographical paths to take. The result is ‘a dynamic engagement of readers in deciphering words and sentences while moving between the background and foreground plane. This play with the materiality of typeforms enacts the meaning of the title in the experiences of trying to make sense of words and sentences at their basic material level.*

In Drucker’s case, visual syntax becomes a central device. She is manipulating what she herself calls the graphic signifier in order for it to shape the verbal signified. It is as well a diagrammatic piece, as it demands the action of the reader. In Drucker’s words, the diagrammatic operations ‘do not depend upon the representational and concrete vision of the ideogram but instead suggest a kinetic, mobilised field of articulated relations that expresses the belief that the very condition of poetic form is its suspension

between the arbitrariness of language and the temporary configuration of meaning (“constellation”) through the figure of the poet’ (Drucker 2014: 5).

The narrative itself tackles issues with the graphical/visual manifestation of language (the word made flesh) but parallel to this is the counter-narrative, the ‘flesh made word’. The typographic embodiment of the word becomes a figure for the creation of the human through language. This project works as a book on the strength of the typographic argument. The theme of word made flesh and the counter theme (written in red copperplate field) of the flesh made word are so completely integrated into the presentation, and in such an unequivocal, graphically striking manner, that the theoretical issues are rendered explicitly. Johanna Drucker has a profound aesthetic engagement with written marks and visual codes as visual embodiments of language. Her work is an exquisite example in the workings of language as visual form and literary form.

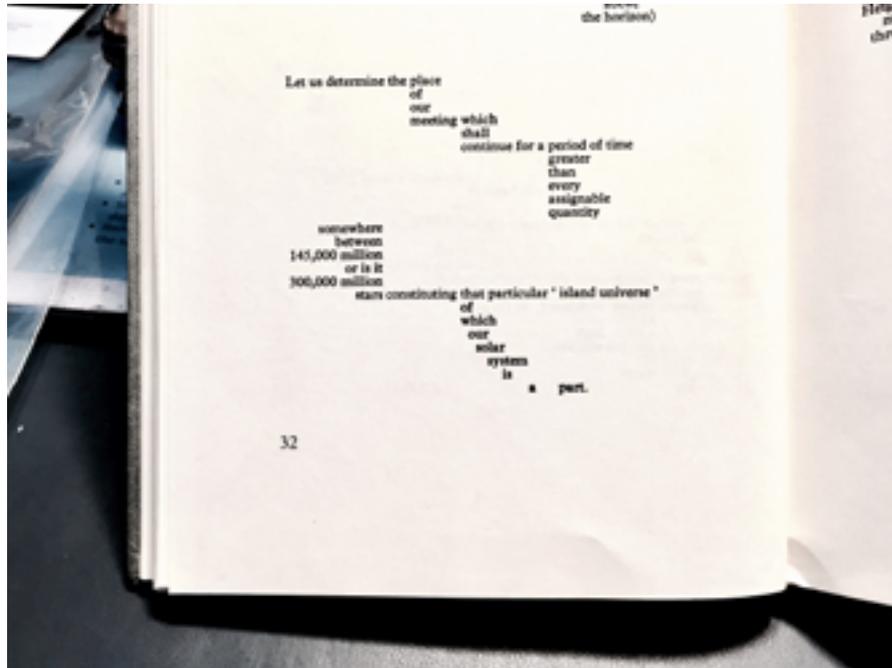
*Species of spaces: The Page*  
Georges Perec



*Diagrammatic writing*  
Johanna Drucker



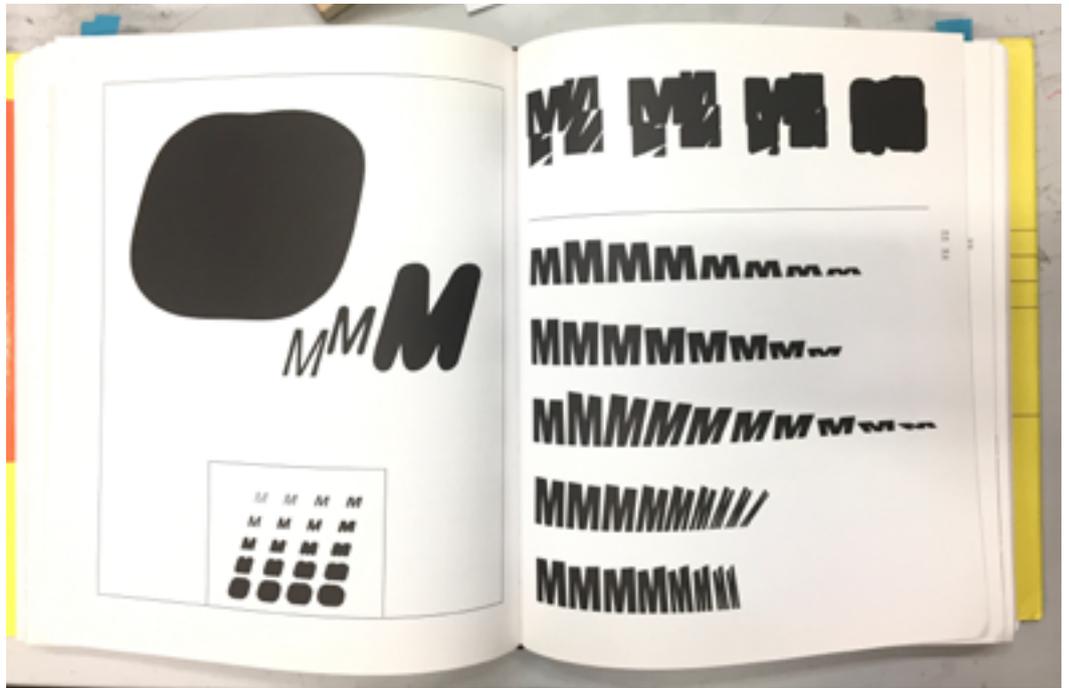
Internal Vertical Justification  
Stefan Themerson



Lift-offs  
Charles Bernstein

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Wolfgang Weingart



*The word made flesh*  
 Johanna Drucker



Language is inseparable from its actual, material manifestation. Words are both carriers of semantic meaning and material objects. In this sense, we can speak of a visual materiality & syntactic materiality. Writing is, as Vilém Flusser would put it, the articulation of language in letters that are put on surfaces. It is sufficient that the symbols are distinguishable from one another in the surface for them to exist as part of a linguistic system. Those letters represent sounds of a spoken language, but by representing them they change the structure and thus the meaning of that language. The visual features of the written word are themselves crucial to the construction of meaning in language.

The works presented above also suggest how writing is so closely linked to reading: a careful, in-depth reading of *The word made flesh* undoubtedly takes more time in the format presented than that to which we are accustomed, rectangular blocks of consistent-flowing text. This shows how a lot of meaning-producing in our brains is dependent on habits, and in the same way that we are accustomed to linear writing, we are accustomed to a blindness of the visual face of language.

The neglect of the visual is a hole in an opportunity to appreciate more fully the visual form of language. Recognition of the visual would encourage the reader to pay more attention to it and thus have a potential in perceiving new features, aspects, or meanings that would enrich the understanding and appreciation of the work. All writing has the capacity to be both looked at and read, to be present as material and function as the sign of an absent meaning. Meaning-making happens in the written form of language as much on account of the properties of physical material as through a text's linguistic content.

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