Afterword. Typefaces to look at / Images to read

Alessandra Graftici

“No, it does not go without saying that writing serves to communicate. It is only out of an abuse of our ethnocentrism that we attribute to writing the purely practical functions of accounting, communicating and recording, censuring the symbolism which animates the written sign” (Roland Barthes).

If we look at writing in the sense of graffiti, in other words, the “overall graphic image of the traces left by a practice” – the practice of writing – it becomes clear that it is precisely the distinction, or if you prefer, the intertwining, between the two dimensions of legibility and visibility that provides a key to interpreting those communicative processes which, throughout man’s history, have employed “writing” as a vehicle of information and means of expression.

From “still” figurative styles of writing up to “alphabetic” forms, the dynamic interactions between the processes of writing and those of reading have intrinsically bound together an essentially perceptive act, “seeing”, and another intrinsically cognitive act, “reading”. It is, moreover, an area which is currently going through a period of renewed interest. Wide-spread attention is once again being paid to the themes of type design, composition and lettering and this involves not just the design of new alphabets, but rather a vast area of experimentation in which the graphic culture is exploring new and dynamic expressive potentials, proving itself able to skilfully interpret the dual value of writing: that of “text” and that of “image”.

The horizon of reflections offered by this number of XY New and ancient graphic signs demonstrates this clearly. Whether it is a matter of reflecting on the identity dimension the “typo-graphic landscape” is able to generate, of critically reimagining segments of the “font”, or of starting to reflect on the logic of complex system’s, “the abstraction of writing to take the written word back to the graffiti, which significantly in the beginning meant irrespective both “writing” and “drawing” at the same time.

In a constant cross-referencing between past and present, the graffiti employed in the treatises reflects this condition, highlighting particular aspects and emphasizing the criticalities. And this process of reflection brings a number of issues to the fore. The fundamental role of lettering in the more or less deliberate construction of Lynch’s “Image of the City”, employing elements more ephemeral and mutable than stone, but no less decisive in determining the two images accompanying the text are intended as a tribute to two extraordinary exponents of a season of modern graphic design that has chosen typography as the protagonist. Their style represents completely different but equally interesting moments and approaches of a story that went through the 1990s marking the evolution of the very way of conceiving the meaning of the use of lettering in graphic design.

Le due immagini che corredano il testo sono da intendersi come l’omaggio a due esponenti di reperitorio di quella stagione del modernismo grafico che ha scelto la tipografia come protagonista. Il loro stile rappresenta momenti e approcci completamente diversi, ma ugualmente interessanti, di una storia che ha attraversato il Novecento segnando l’evoluzione del modo stesso di concepire il senso dell’uso del lettering nel progetto grafico.


3. Ibid.


5. Ibid.


Postface. Lettere da guardare / Immagini da leggere

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“Non, non va da sé che la scrittura serve a comunicare; è solo per un abuso del nostro etnocentrismo che noi attribuiamo alla scrittura le funzioni puramente pratiche di contabilità, di comunicazione, di registrazione, consen- rando il simbolismo che anima il segno scrit- to” (Roland Barthes).

Se si guarda alla scrittura intendendola come “grafica” e cioè il complesso grafico delle trac- ce di una pratica – la pratica dello scrivere”, appunto – emerge con certa evidenza come, proprio nella distinzione, o se si vuole nell’in- treciato, tra le due dimensioni della leggibilità e della visibilità, sia possibile trovare una chiave interpretativa di quei processi comunicativi che, nell’intero arco della storia dell’uomo, hanno utilizzato la “scrittura” come veicolo informativo e mezzo espressivo.

A partire dalle scritture “ancora” figurative sino alle scritture “alfabetiche”, il dinamico interazione tra i processi di scrittura e quelli di leggere ha legato intrinsecamente un atto es- senzialmente percettivo, il “vedere”, a un altro intrinsecamente cognitivo, il “leggere”. È il passaggio dall’uno all’altro che accostina e sor- prende: «vediamo il testo, lo guardiamo, ci minciamo a leggere e il testo visibile scompare, mentre si manifestano comprensione e significato”, che va dunque a guadagnarci. Ovvero, il testo e il contenuto per un istante svanisce di nuovo”. Il tema è di straordinario fascino. Chiamano in causa i fenomeni percettivi che “il gioco della lettera” – per così dire il bel testo di Gerard Unger – è in grado di innescare e la tentazione di guardare al tema della “scrittura” – e dunque della grafica – non già attraverso il messaggio di cui essa è stroma, ma attraverso il gioco delle parole di cui essa è teatro”, è irresistibile. L’altronde disporre lettere sulla pagina bianca è stata ed è una sfida per il graphic designer. Infondo grafica deriva da “grafo” e dunque la “scrittura” in senso stretto – e il gioco del grafico, inciso, quindi scritto. Grafica è scrittura e infammente “notazionale”: che si occupa di trasformare cose in “segni”, e non solo di “segnare” ma anche di interpretare in modo sapiente la doppia valenza della scrittura: quella di “testo” e quella di “immagine”.


Nel continuo rimanendo tra passato e presente le “grafie” protagonisti dei saggi rispecchia- no questa condizione, ne evidenziano aspetti esclusivi, ne sottolineano le criticità. E nel riperco- rere questo itinerario di riflessione al- cuni argomenti hanno assunto maggiore rilie- vo. Il ruolo fondamentale del lettering nella rappresentazione del linguaggio e della grafia che Lynch definisce “immagine di città”, utilizzando elementi più effimeri e mutuevoli delle pietre, ma non meno determinanti nel-
its aesthetic horizon. The extraordinary fasci- nation of those notational systems and those non-linear textual structures that formulate both systems of graphic artefacts in space and, at the same time, complex systems of sense, clearly linked to the field of infographics which represents such a large part of graphic design today. Retracing significant passages in the ways typefaces dialogued with power, de- fining its communication tools and strategies and delineating its identitarian features. Ver- ifying, in the dynamics of the graphic design, the power of grafia as a form of narration. It is precisely the aspect of narration that represents the possible leitmotif of the entire volume. An essentially visual narration in which the graph- ic designer becomes above all producer, be- cause "the graphic designer's page make-up – in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession in other words, that operation which, through the layout of a page, modulates the succession of the "ac- tion" of the graphic design, which lives and is nourished by the construction of "positional relationships", the attribution of morphologi- cal, dimensional and chromatic values, the identification of topological connections, the definition of hierarchies of meaning and per- ceptive value, and the construction of spatial-temporal sequences… a challenge in which a far from marginal role is entrusted to those formative processes responsible for construct- ing the aesthetic and functional awareness of that universe of forms of grafia which repre- sent the basis of graphic design.

The diffusion of the digital technologies since the 1980s has had a very significant impact on definition of this "staging" and it is not sur- prising that every now and then a reflection on the effects of this process emerges from the complex recesses of the debate. The simplicity with which the digital techniques have facil- itated even the most far-fetched experimentation on the use of typefaces (close-setting, super- impositions, subtractions, "con-fusions...") and the design possibilities – practically un- limited and apparently without rules – of- fered by digital systems have opened up a vast scenario in the field of type–graphic design, resulting in, yes, interesting expressive forms, but also exposing it to the risks of every form of improvisation. The fact is that this process, which we could define as democratization, generated by the transition from analogue to digital, does not seem to have coincided with the diffusion of either a greater awareness in the use of typefaces, or a typographic sensi- tivity able in the majority of cases to save the creative process from the confusion of free stylistic experimentation. The challenge is to recover the profound significance of the “ac- tions” of the graphic design, which lives and is nourished by the construction of "positional relationships", the attribution of morphologi- cal, dimensional and chromatic values, the identification of topological connections, the definition of hierarchies of meaning and per- ceptive value, and the construction of spatial-temporal sequences… a challenge in which a far from marginal role is entrusted to those formative processes responsible for construct- ing the aesthetic and functional awareness of that universe of forms of grafia which repre- sent the basis of graphic design.

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