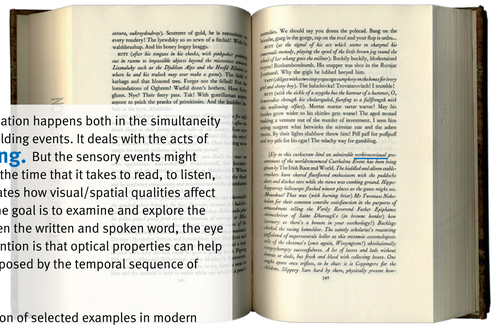
Department of Art + Design

Isabel Meirelles m.meirelles@neu.edu

Topography / **Typo**graphy: the role of visual/spatial properties in conveying meaning, rhythm, expression



▲ James Joyce coins the term "verbivocovisual" in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). For Haroldo de Campos "each verbi-voco-visual unit is at the same time the continent-content of the whole work and instantly myriadminded... a whole metaphoric cosmos is contained in a single word" (1955, *The Open Work of Art*).

▼ Preface by Mallarmé to the 1897 *Cosmopolis* edition of *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*. (translated by Daisy Aldan).

The dynamic communication of information happens both in the simultaneity of space and in the succession of unfolding events. It deals with the acts of **reading, listening, seeing.** But the sensory events might be perceived with different durations: the time that it takes to read, to listen, to see. This ongoing research investigates how visual/spatial qualities affect the perception of kinetic messages. The goal is to examine and explore the interpenetrations and tensions between the written and spoken word, the eye and the ear, space and time. My contention is that optical properties can help suspend (or relativize) the linearity imposed by the temporal sequence of events in a time-based message.

The point of departure is an examination of selected examples in modern poetry that activate the printed space such that they are experienced through coexistent acts of reading, seeing, and listening. The study starts with Mallarmé's *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* (1897) and includes Futurist, Dada and Brazilian Concrete poetry. The selected works have the formal (including typographical) arrangement of words as integral to the poems themselves, in that optical properties partake in conveying meaning, rhythm, expression. I believe it is not coincidental that those attempts were performed by writers who saw the possibilities offered by printing processes (and elements) as constitutive of poetic constructions. Poems allow the collision of all dimensions provided by language.

While this poster presents only few examples of modern poetry, the research extends beyond the printed page and considers contemporary experiments that include dynamic text in its attempt to examine to what extent the presentation of text can instantiate its meaning and ultimately its performance. The research also takes into consideration studies in psychology of perception and cognition that shed light on the role of spatial and temporal properties in how we comprehend messages.

language	vocal	visual
	to hear	to see
	spoken	written
	performance	presentation
	succession	simultaneity
	time	space

verbi voco visual

coexistence
correspondence
encounter
in-between
interaction
interchange
interdependency
interpenetration
interrelation
interplay
multiplicity
space-time

The "whites" in fact, assume importance, make the first impression; the versification requires this, as ordinarily, silence around a lyric work or one of few feet which placed in the center, occupies approximately a third of the page: I do not transgress this measure, merely disperse it… The difference in the type between the major motif, and secondary and adjacent ones, prescribes its importance in the delivery; and the stanza, in the middle, upper, or lower position on the page, will indicate whether the intonation rises or falls.

Stéphane Mallarmé: *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*. Originally published in 1897, this edition is the Gallimard 1914.

Stéphane Mallarmé: *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*

Mallarmé experiments in this seminal poem with innovative communication strategies (for the end of the nineteenth century), such as varied type formatting and the use of spreads rather than individual pages as the poetic space. Verbal and visual systems are inseparable and affect both its meaning and experience. The diagrammatic analyses use the 1914 Gallimard edition of *Un Coup de Dés* and considers the main directions of reading, the division into six typographical groups, and the main occupation of space by text.

It is my view that Mallarmé uses all four basic types of information that we can gather from temporal structures: duration, order, repetition, and simultaneity. The order of the succession of events and their duration play a major role in how we design and perceive dynamic media. Repetition refers to cyclic occurrences and recurrences and is fundamental to our notions of rhythm and the ways we construct rhythmic structures. Temporal simultaneity describes events happening at the same time, such as two instruments playing concurrently. Simultaneity is a familiar concept to designers, since it is the foundation of all our understanding and perception of spatial structures.

Selected examples

Sample of modern literary experimentation with visual and spatial elements as integral to the works. The works had their visual rendering done by the writers and not *a posteriori* treatment. Overall, works could be grouped into three main categories in terms of how optical properties instantiate text:

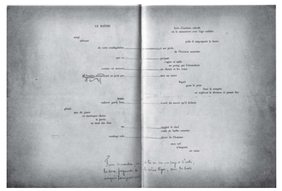
- making images (figurative)
- making sounds (onomatopoeic and scores)
- making systems (structural)

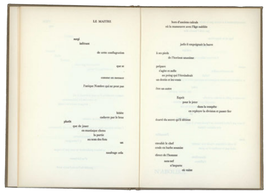
Failure in the age of mechanical reproduction?

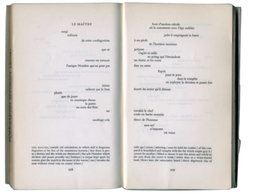
From a designer's perspective it is possible to discuss two misfortunes in communicating the poem *Un coup de Dés* over its 110 years: the failure to reproduce it according to Mallarmé's guidelines; and the failure to investigate it within the Communication Design discipline.

It is well documented that the poem was never published exactly as originally devised. What are the results of such reproduction failure? Is it analogous to a flawed interpretation by a musical performer? As designers we are well aware of strategies that create structure, contrast, hierarchy, etc. How does the failure to reproduce a visual system affect communication and, ultimately, interpretation?

Mallarmé's poetic legacy is largely examined in literary criticism. However, he is almost inexistent in Communication Design literature, including recent surveys in New Media Design, where most books start with Apollinaire and the Dada. These works are different in content and intent from those of Mallarmé, who explored structural means of integrating verbal and visual/spatial information in meaning making.



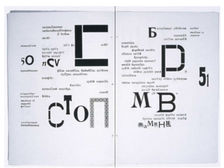




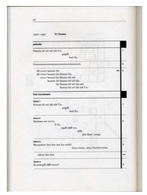
Spread #4 of Mallarmé's *Un coup de Dés*:
Top left: Reproduction of the proofs Mallarmé was correcting at the time of his death in 1898. The set of proofs—known as the "Cahure proofs"—were first published by Robert G. Cohn in his *Mallarmé's Masterwork: New Findings* (The Hague: Mouton,1966).
Bottom left: Gallimard, 1914. Considered the "re varietur" edition.
Top right: *A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*. Translation by Daisy Aldan. Tiber Press, 1956. This is the first translation of *Un Coup de Dés* into English which was authorized by Gallimard and Mallarmé's heirs.
Bottom right: Penguin Books, 1965. Edited by Anthony Hartley.

Augusto de Campos and Julio Plaza: "Poemóbiles," 1974.

Décio Pignatari: "beba coca-cola," 1957.



Ilia Zdanevich (Iliazd): *Ledentu*, 1923.



Kurt Schwitters: "Ursonate," 1922–32.

Filippo Marinetti: "At Night in Her Bed...," 1919.

Pierre Albert-Birot: "Poem for declaiming and dancing: the aeroplane," *SIC* magazine, 1917.

Guillaume Apollinaire: "Il Pleut," *SIC* magazine, 1916.

Guillaume Apollinaire: "Petite Auto," 1914.

Lewis Carroll: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865.