

Code

Just as the physical characteristics of architecture establish a visual and spatial grammar that orders the activity expected of us in different spaces—where to enter, where to linger, and where to keep moving, for example—there is a code to visual communication that shapes our interpretive experience. Culture determines these conventions for reading visual form. For instance, for those of us who read in English, there is a top/down, left/right code for working our way through text on a printed page. Not so in Mandarin Chinese. In Western cultures, it is typical for parallel lines in a composition—such as the two sides of a railroad track—to diminish in width and converge as they go into the distance. This system of artificial perspective is understood as a Western convention for

creating the illusion of depth in a two-dimensional composition. Historically, Chinese and Japanese compositions communicated depth or distance by lines that converged in the foreground, grew wider in the background, and avoided any shadows that undermined the flatness of the picture plane. In other words, the meaning-making practices of a culture determine these grammatical codes for the arrangement of form, whether through repeated use by producers of visual artifacts or as extensions of attitudes, habits, dispositions, or belief systems built up by the culture over time. While seeming permanent, they are, in fact, frequently in flux and often evolve with the times.

Conformity with cultural codes reduces the audience effort required to interpret the meaning of a message; we rely on past experience to recognize repeating structures. For example, we are used to seeing a monthly calendar arranged in a grid with Sunday at the front of each week and Saturday at the end. There are other ways to organize thirty consecutive days—we find many in contemporary day planners—but scheduling under these alternatives requires more

thought to orient ourselves to the structure before doing the actual scheduling.

Designers can subvert codes for expressive reasons through careful decisions about elements and compositions. For example, if the upper right and lower left corners of visual compositions tend not to attract attention under the typical reading order in English, then placing a visually dominant element (by size, color, or shape) in the fallow corners pulls the viewer out of the normal reading pattern and slows down the mental processing of the composition. If the goal of the design is contemplation, then subverting the typical reading order may add some value to the interpretive experience. It could be an asset in the design of a thought-provoking poster, but not useful in the layout of a novel where maintaining the rhythm of reading from page to page is important ([Figure 2.8](#))

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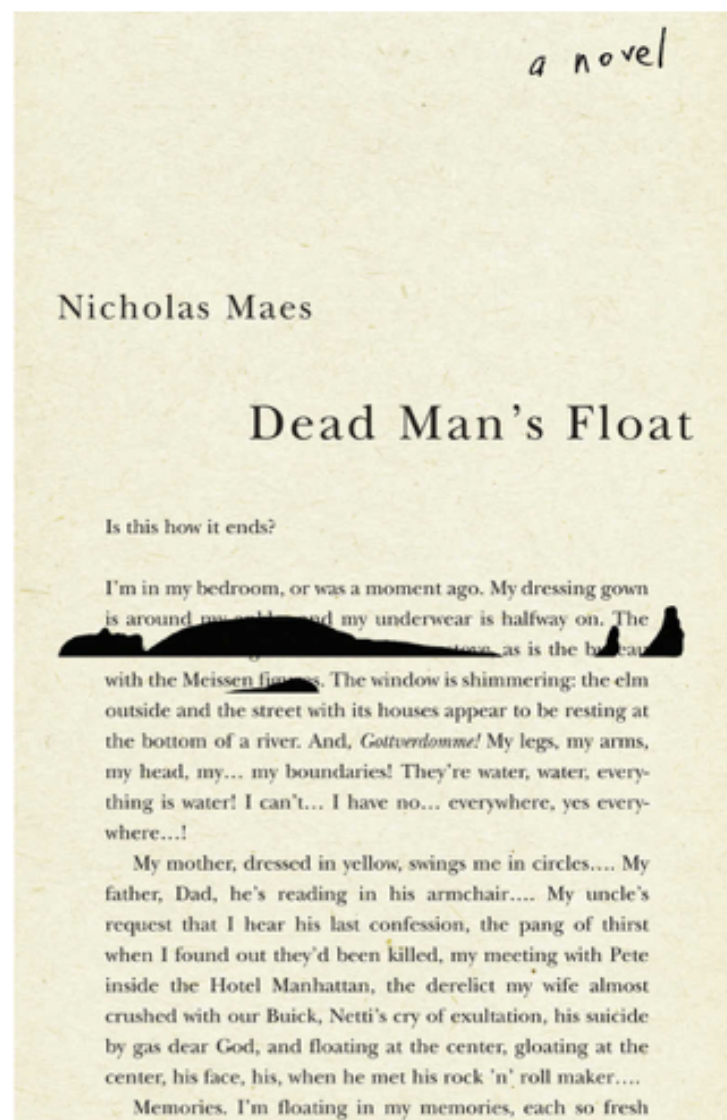


Figure 2.8

***Dead Man's Float* book cover, 2006 Véhicule Press David
Drummond**

Drummond uses the conventional visual code for the typeset design of a book chapter with descending sizes of type as the text moves from the upper left to the lower right. He then undermines this code, turning the text into water by overlaying an illustration and annotating the cover with handwriting in the upper right corner. In doing so, he calls attention to the visual grammar of books while at the same time inserting elements that carry a story.

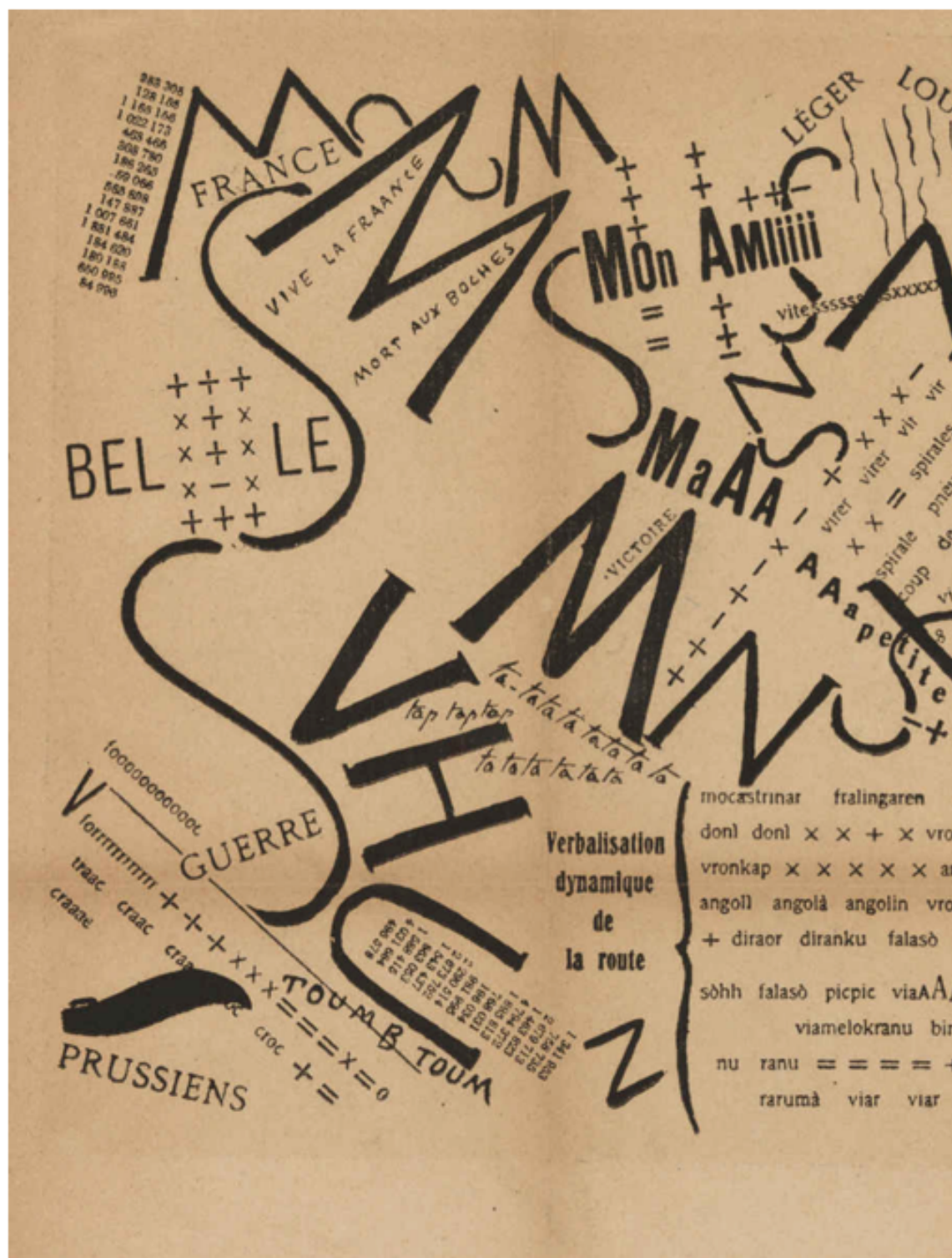


Figure 2.9

***After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Car*, 1915 Filippo
Tomasso Marinetti (1876–1944)**

The avant-garde Futurists used the disruption of syntax—the visual ordering of words and images—to challenge the traditional visual codes of printed communication with the intent to “wake up” a complacent reader.

contemporary improvised music

1990

23, 24 en 25 november 1990
the Hague

THEATER KORZO

21.00 uur
Prinssestraat 44

contemporary improvised music festival

the Hague



European structures

23 11 Concert

1a	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone
1b	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone
2a	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone
2b	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone

24 11 Concert

1a	Gerter Christmann	Flute, alto
1b	Gerter Christmann	Flute, alto
2a	Gerter Christmann	Flute, alto
2b	Gerter Christmann	Flute, alto

25 11 Concert

1a	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone
1b	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone
2a	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone
2b	Luis Roelands	Joachim, saxophone

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improvised

Figure 2.10
CIM Poster, 1990 Allen Hori

Like the avant-garde work in the first part of the twentieth century, postmodern designers of the 1990s explored the role of syntax in visual messages. Forgoing an obvious hierarchy among elements, these compositions challenged a singular reading of the text.

Breaking the rules or undermining the accepted code is a typical strategy for design movements that challenge the status quo. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Futurists experimented with fragmenting the linear reading order or *syntax* of text. By breaking apart the logical sequencing of words in sentences and paragraphs—instead arranging typography in compositions with random letterforms of different sizes and fragments of sentences—designers sought to “wake up” readers for more critical interpretations of the social and political discussions of the time (Davis, 2012) ([Figure 2.9](#)).

At the end of the twentieth century, communication designers turned their backs on modernist compositional codes that favored clear typographic hierarchies thought to communicate the singular

meaning of an author's text. Believing that meaning is inherently unstable and ultimately constructed by the reader—that we think differently about a text each time we read it and on the basis of our cultural position—designers explored compositions in which every element had multiple relationships with other elements on the page. No single element overshadowed another, and therefore, many meanings were possible. The shifting relationship could never be seen as producing a single interpretation because elements were always in struggle for dominance with others in the composition ([Figure 2.10](#))

In both historical examples, designers challenged conventional Western reading codes to express new ideas and to produce specific experiences for readers. Such challenges usually arise from shifts in theories about how meaning is made and associate the disruption of visual conventions with particular philosophical movements or time periods in design history.