

The Animated Poster: Extending the Typographic Gesture through Motion

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Abstract: The poster has been a vehicle of communication for over 200 years. Serving as a form of advertisement, posters have been used to promote products and events, political parties, calls to action and as an artist/designer medium. A critical part of design's history and discourse, the poster maintains its significance today. However, as digital screens become a prevalent part of our society, the role of the printed poster has shifted (Lupton). With the emergence of interactive environments and screens, the poster is no longer a static entity. While designers have long been using techniques to mobilize the flat plane, creating the illusion of motion and depth, motion offers the ability to engage an audience through a time-based experience.

Within design education, posters continue to be a prevailing teaching tool. In an Advanced Typography course, comprised of upper-level and graduate students, a poster assignment explored the relationships between typography and imagery. After designing two posters, one utilizing type as image and another creating a dialogue between typography and imagery, students created a short animation based on one of their designs. Posed with the question, how can motion transform the traditional poster, students considered how this medium enhanced or altered their message for the viewer. The printed and animated posters were exhibited simultaneously, providing viewers with a multisensory experience.

This paper will present a brief history of the poster, discussing how digital formats have allowed designers to think beyond print, extending historical precedents in expressive typography and

concrete poetry through the animation of traditionally implied gestures. Case studies from an Advanced Typography course will be presented showcasing students interpretation of a moving poster.

Keywords: typography, animated posters, design pedagogy

A Brief History of the Poster

Possessing the ability to persuade, inform, convince, and prompt, among others—the functions of a poster are limitless. “Posters are barometers of social, economic, political and cultural events, as well as mirrors of our everyday lives” (Müller-Brockmann 12). While primitive versions of ‘posters’ can be traced back to announcements and proclamations painted on Roman walls, it was the invention of the printing press that provided the decisive foundation and propelled the visual culture and development of posters. Following the invention of printing, in 1477 Churches throughout England used poster notices to inform the public. Publishers, governments, doctors and communities soon followed suit as this new medium provided an accessible way to communicate (Müller-Brockmann 26).

Posters over the decades are reflective of the techniques and methods designers incorporate into their practice. Movements evolve when a designer challenges the precedent, experimenting with unique approaches. In the book, *The History of the Poster*, Müller-Brockmann categorizes new theories and practices into the following: the graphic experiment, the photo-technical experiment, the printing-technique experiment and the material-technique experiment. Under the graphic experiment, among other techniques he lists, the “presentation of spatially continuing forms—kinetic, film-like principles” (p 208).

Designers, photographers and artists have long sought to bring the passage of time and motion to the static two-dimensional page (Lupton 215). During the late 19th and early 20th century, artists analyzed the page, using it as a means of expression. Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, *A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, 1987 (Figure 1), expressed the visual and semantic potential of page design. Futurist artist Filippo Marinetti coined the term “words-in-freedom” regarding free arrangements of words on a page. He saw space and meaning so intimately connected, as is expressed in his design for the cover of *Zang Tumb Tumb*, 1914 (Figure 1). Driven by speed and tempo, the posters of this movement reflect the

artist and designers goal to transform the linear format of the printed page. This was accomplished through ornate typographic compositions, expressive symbols and various materials such as colored paper, ink and metal (Andel 110). Following advances in photography, posters of the 1920s combine photography and words in unique ways, also known as ‘typo-photo’, a term conceived by artist-designer László Moholy-Nagy. These works demonstrate progress and motion on the printed page through layering, cropping and overlapping (Figure 1).



Figure 1: From left to right, works by Mallarmé, Marinetti and Moholy-Nagy displaying techniques artist-designers were using on the printed page. Source: Andel 2002.

Posters today

A critical part of design’s history and discourse, the poster maintains its significance today—yet, it is no longer a static entity. Technological advances of screens and interactive environments have provided designers with the ability to integrate motion. Motion provides the ability to engage an audience through a time-based experience. Designer Erich Brechbuhl states, “A poster is a poster but the animation acts like a fifth color or special type of printing” (qtd. in Colombi).

Götz Gramlich, a German graphic designer, explores how animation adds another layer of meaning in his posters designed for Herbstzeitlose (Autumn Crocus), conveying the transition from summer to fall (Figure 2).

In the animation, the letters peel away one by one from the surface to which they have been affixed, revealing their black undersides. Tucked into these corners are bits of information about the event. In the screenprinted version, the static image features each letter partially turned down, with faint black dots forming shadows behind the full letterforms. (Condell 2015)

In an interview with Gramlich, he comments on the status of the poster today stating we it is time for designers to consider the animated poster. Gramlich states, “We have more and more screens on everything and I have not seen good, intelligent executed visuals. I think if animation is used wisely it could be another layer that underlines the strong idea behind the poster.”

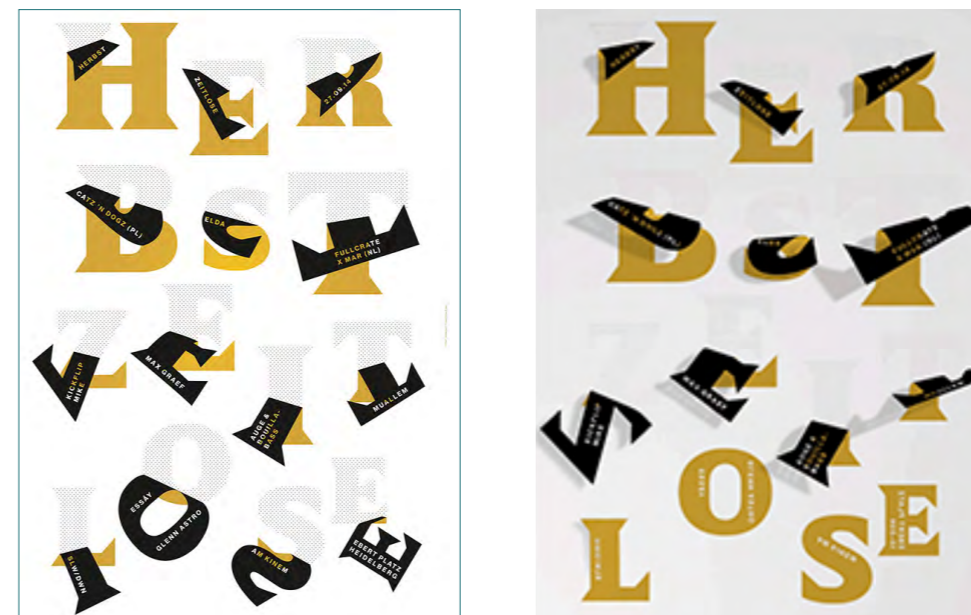


Figure 2: Posters by designer Götz Gramlich. The left shows the screenprinted version and the right a screen shot of the animated version where the letters peel away revealing additional content. Source: <http://www.gggrafik.de/>

The Assignment

This paper focuses on a poster project assigned in two Advanced Typography courses within the School of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University. The classes consisted of 27 junior, senior and graduate-level students. The course investigates the communicative, structural and aesthetic aspects of typography. Projects build on students previous experiences, enhancing skills for shaping verbal messages utilizing type.

The first part of the poster assignment, *Type and Image Poster*, explored the various relationships between type and imagery. Students were tasked with designing two posters that created a dialogue between typography and imagery using methods studied in class. After completing readings from the book, *Type, Image, Message: A Graphic Design Layout Workshop* by Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell, the techniques of separation, fusion, fragmentation and inversion provided a springboard for type and image generation.

The second part of the assignment, *The Animated Poster*, challenges students to think beyond the traditional 2D printed poster. After having selected one of their designs, students created animations, taking into consideration how this medium could enhance, change or alter their message to the viewer. With the added element of time, they were instructed to pay attention to the pacing and introduction of elements.

To generate subject matter for their posters, students discussed their summer break, using this content to create designs which typographically and abstractly conveyed an aspect of their experiences. They were allowed to conceive a theoretical event as the focus of the communication, or create a typographic expression along the lines of concrete poetry, where visuals are crafted using solely text. Posters were required to be engaging and communicative with typography as the driving force and tool.

From the outset, students were aware they would be translating one of their designs for motion, and as such, they were considering this transition in their conceptualization of the print pieces. In animating their posters, students created storyboards on paper, where they explored how the movement or meaning they constructed in static form, could be reinterpreted through motion. This process

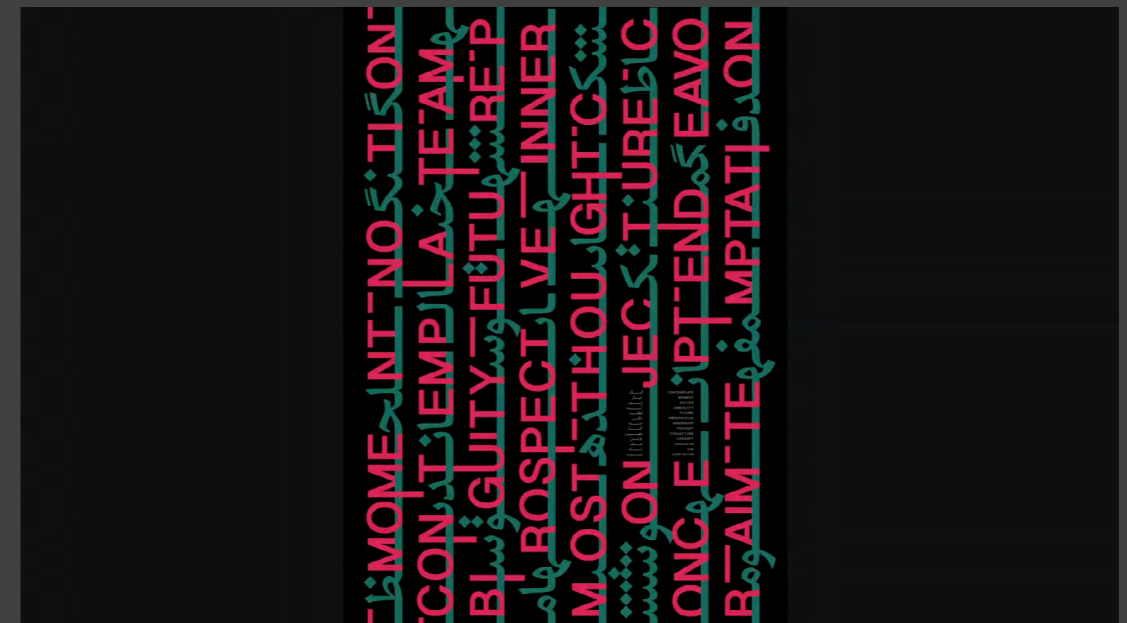
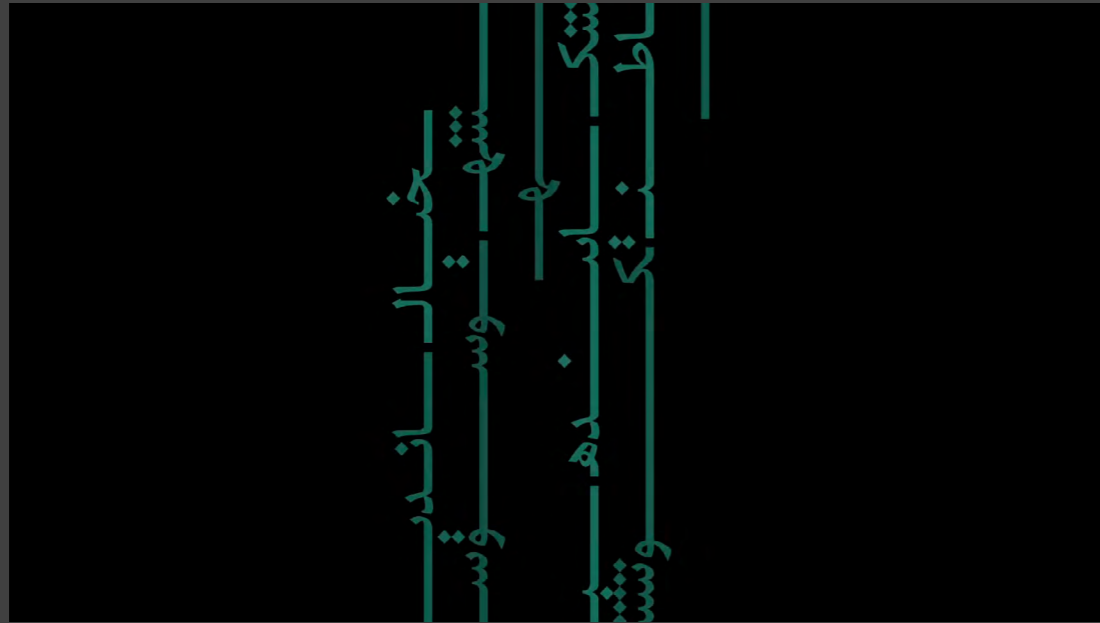
required them to consider the impact of different approaches to movement and composition in terms of time rather than layout, and to be selective in their approaches to the final animated piece.

Case Studies



Figure 4: Student Work, “What If”, Derek Lawrence

The poster series, “Contemplate” (figure 3), by student Hamidreza Sohrabi, is a personal reflection about the uncertainty of his future. The words: contemplate, moment, notion, ambiguity, future, prospective, innermost, thought, conjecture, concept, endeavor, aim and temptation, are represented in English and Persian as they overlap and entwine with one another. While the printed poster provides a compelling juxtaposition of the two languages, the animated version excels at imparting the viewer with a glimpse into the designers conscious thoughts as the words appear, disappear and reappear. The speed shifts from slow to fast while the frame zooms in and out until the entire poster is revealed. These carefully chosen transitions allude to the overall struggle the designer faces allowing the viewer to experience his emotions.



Media from the paper *The Animated Poster: The Animated Poster: Extending the Typographic Gesture through Motion*
 Source(s): Student work, "Contemplate," Hamidreza Sohrabi

In adapting the piece “What If” (figure 4) to screen, student Derek Lawrence creates a functional tool that harnesses the power of animation to work on the mind. The typography begins to rotate and scale when animated, bringing the poster to life. A mesmerizing set of instructions draws you into a peaceful and meditative state. The progression from large immersive type to a birds-eye view of the circular arrangement conveys and elucidates the gradual clarifying and focusing effect of meditation.

The poster “Isolated” (figure 5), was based on the traffic and noise of Chicago. The student, Lesley Teater, drew inspiration from feeling overwhelmed and isolated. The colors convey the frenetic energy of the city. The printed poster displays a moment captured mid-stream. In the animated version, this moment is extrapolated, allowing the viewer to experience the building emotions of isolation and panic through the behaviors of typographic elements, which function as pace-setters for the larger elements, providing a visual commentary on the isolation.

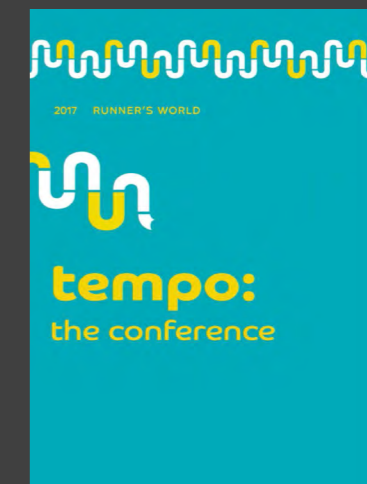
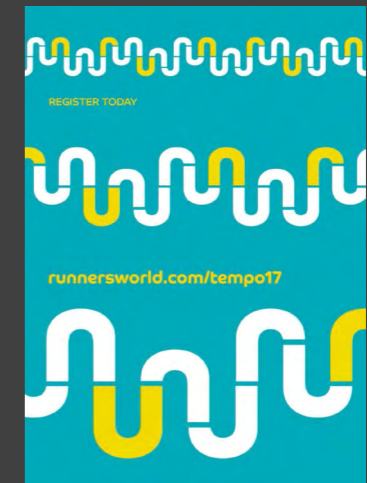
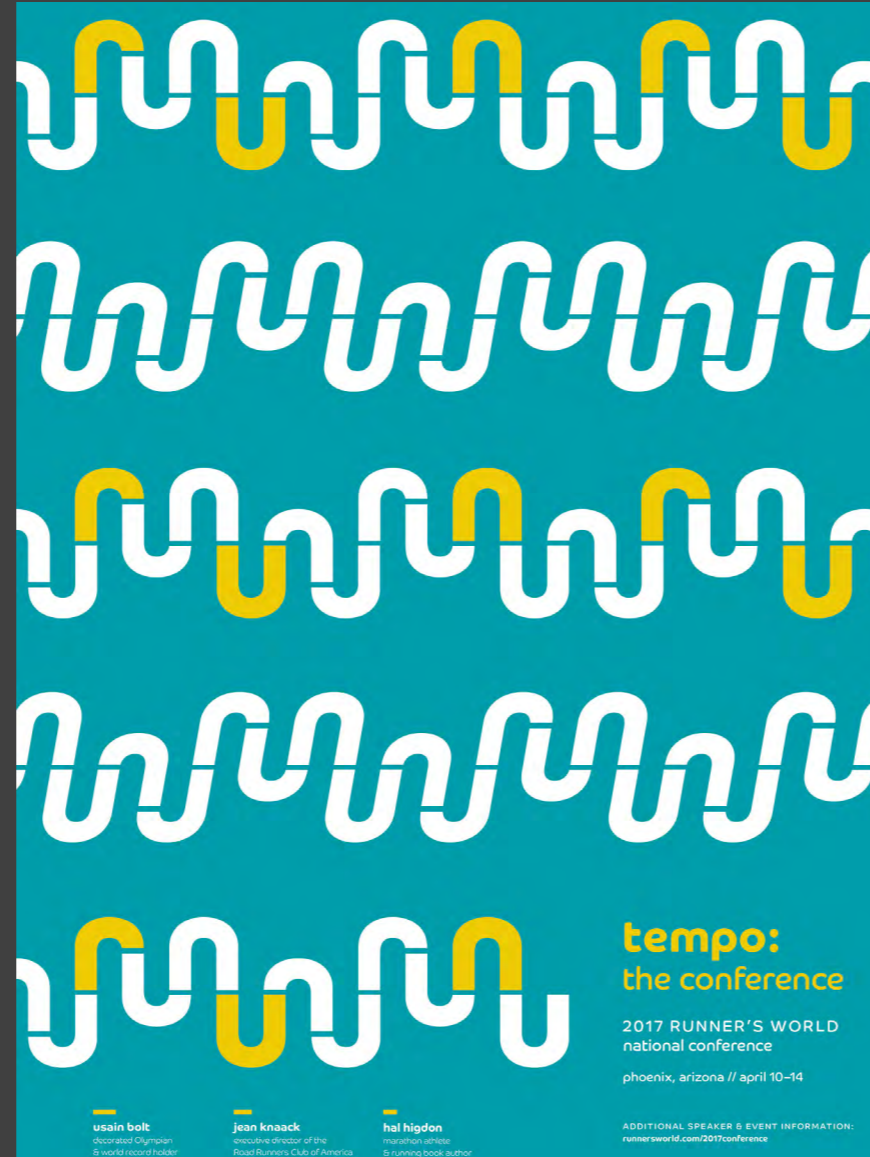


Figure 5: Student Work, “Isolated”, Lesley Teater

In the poster series “Tempo” (figure 6), student Emily Thomas focuses on rhythm and pace as the subject matter. Having developed a conference identity for runners, the poster and animation serve to promote the event. In the print, movement is implied and a rhythm created through the repeating forms which, when broken apart, abstractly spell out the word ‘run’. The rhythm oscillates from upright to slanted to convey stature and pace. These movements are amplified in the animation, where the lines of pattern bounce as though keeping time in a running rhythm, and the use of scale change both pulls us into the movement as well as creating a sense of perspective, as though the finish line is getting nearer, and we are approaching the event. In this way, the animation extends the typographic gesture.



Figure 7: Student Work, “About Work”, Nico Ciani



Media from the paper *The Animated Poster: Extending the Typographic Gesture through Motion*
 Source(s): Student work, "Tempo," Emily Thomas

In the poster series “About Work” (figure 7), student Nico Ciani amplifies the upward movement of the reading direction found in the printed piece by creating a simple animated GIF. The backgrounds switch out, to create a glitching quality, as though the signal is faulty, and we are transported to four other ‘somewhere’s. The change in the background image underscores the static nature of the larger type elements, making the frame appear a rigid entity from which the mind escapes. This concept is central to the content that generated the posters themselves, which were born out of a stifling office environment.



Figure 8: Student Work, “I Wish My Country Spoke In One Voice”, Grace Harms

After visiting Quebec in the wake of a recent referendum on language, student Grace Harms focused her poster on the dual-lingual nature of the area with the poster series “I Wish My Country Spoke in One

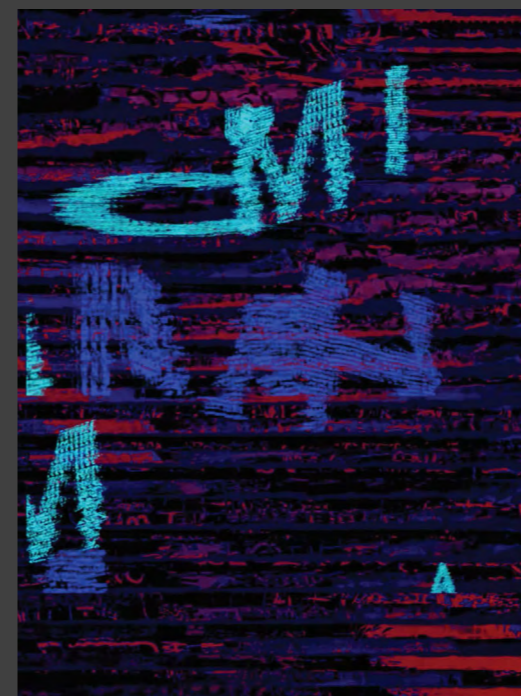
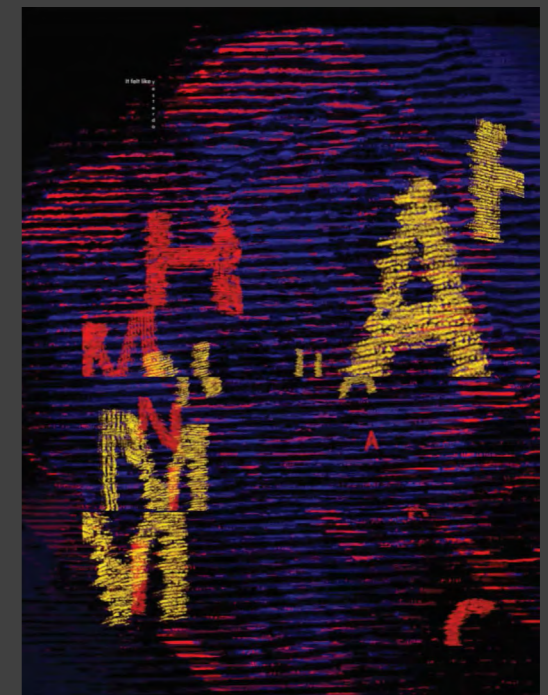
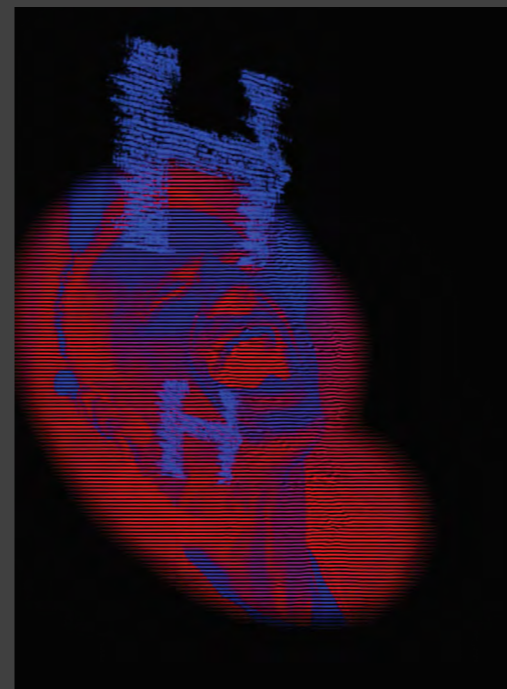
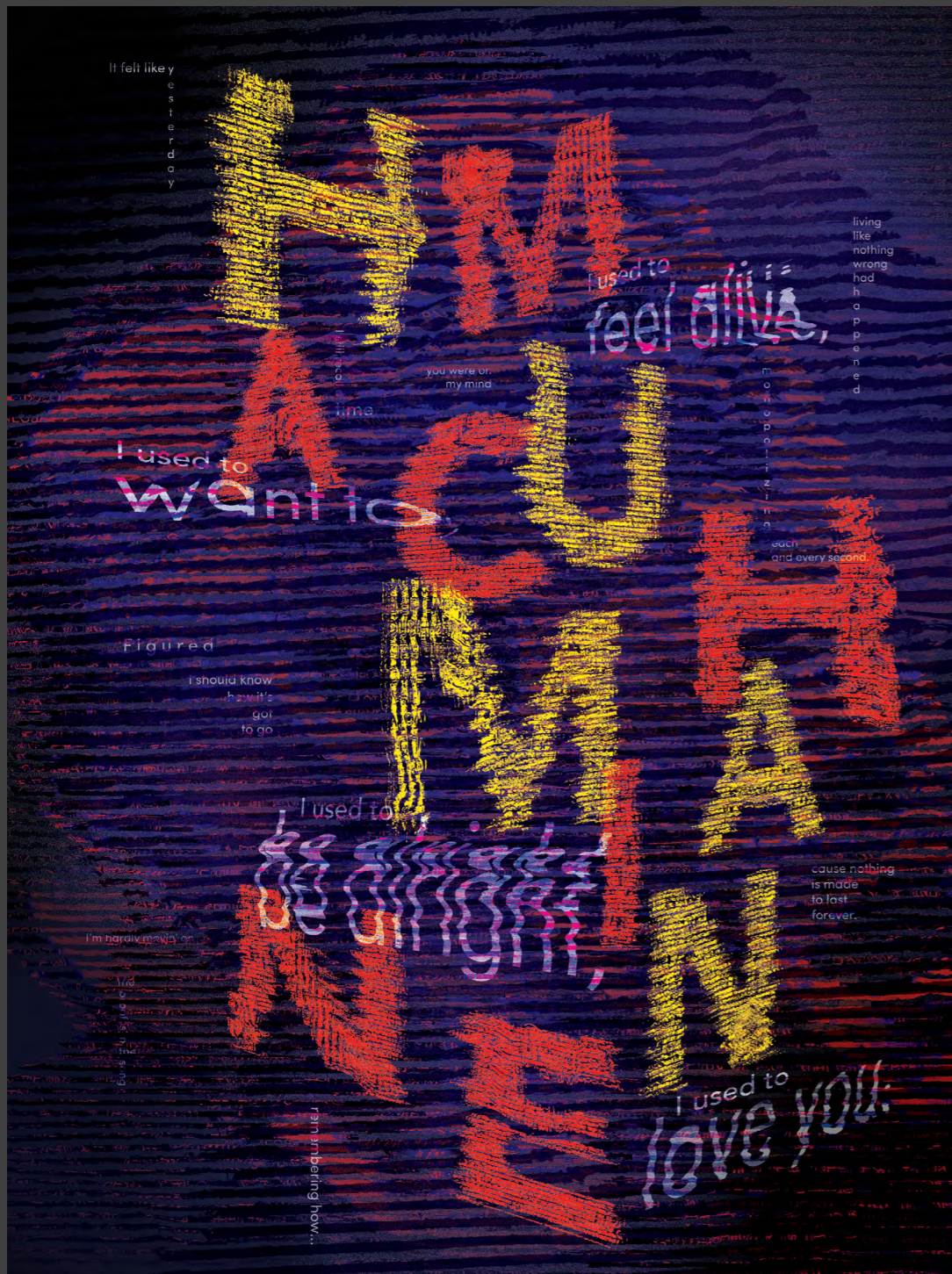
Voice” (figure 8). The poster sets French and English on equal footing, and can be turned upside down and read in either direction, thus creating a visual tension between the two tongues. This is further evoked through the subtle use of the red and blue as dualities in the background. In the animated piece, this duality is pushed further, and the notion of a conversation is evoked with the languages receding and advancing in response to each other. This powerful action brings life to the typography, and allows it to fully convey the immediacy of the spoken word in a way that the print version can only suggest or imply.

With the poster series “Human Machine” (figure 9), student Brenan Stetzer drew on his experience of traveling to a concert. The music genre is ‘Math Rock’, which combines heavy distortion and algorithmic sounding beats. The piece conveys the sense of being immersed in the music, and the related emotions felt while experiencing the live performance. The glitch-like quality of the texture is created by manually editing the typographic image in a text-editor, a process which creates a breakdown of the forms in the image, as well as unpredictable artifacts and distortions. The dichotomy between the organic and the mechanical explored in the print poster is further expressed in the animation, where the image of a face is slowly glitched and morphed into the typographic treatment we recognize from the poster. The two words float as unconnected letterforms with the ambient colors shifting and moving around the canvas, much in the way that a strobe light would in a dark club. The animation in this sense extends the central concepts of both the music and elucidates the visceral experience of the show in graphic form.

Observations

Peer learning

One positive outcome, although unintended, was the development of peer learning based on the students’ struggles with software. As students completed their animated posters, the diversity of software knowledge among peers was evident. This realization ended up being beneficial as it led to an unplanned, but wholly organic growth of peer learning. During class critiques and workdays, students were eager to share their knowledge with each other, assisting students who were not as comfortable with the tools (figure 10).



Media from the paper *The Animated Poster: The Animated Poster: Extending the Typographic Gesture through Motion*
Source(s): Student work, "Human Machine," Brenan Stetzer



Figure 10: Students share software knowledge during a class critique.
Source: Author photo

In working with technology, peer learning can be highly effective in the adaptation of software. Rather than working alone, students learn how to use hardware and software more quickly and effectively when they work in peer groups (Dwyer 1994; Dyer 1993). As they alternate between the role of teacher and learner in disseminating information with peers, students' communication skills are developed and strengthened. They become active participants in the learning process, gaining valuable skills in cooperation, listening and communication (Topping 2005). As a result of peer teaching, students display a heightened sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Exhibition

The printed and animated posters were exhibited simultaneously, providing a multi-sensory experience to viewers. The addition of sound to some of the posters afforded the viewers with an auditory experience in addition to the visual, heightening the overall environment. In displaying the work together, one is able to note how the designer used motion to alter or enhance the posters original message. The animations were projected onto two large gallery walls and, as expected,

viewers stood to the side taking in the work. An interesting moment occurred when a toddler engaged with the animations, physically touching the typography as letterforms danced across the walls.

Conclusion

The relevance of skills in motion design, with particular regard to typography, is evident in the increasing prevalence of typographic identity designs which utilize motion, allowing a generative and adaptable identity to reform and evolve. In our networked, immediate and fast-paced media, the ability to consider how movement functions as an added venue for meaning is as important as skills in composition or typographic detailing. Approaching the traditional poster, an assignment prevalent in design education, through the lens of motion provided students with the opportunity to reconsider this additional context.

In a final comparison of the printed and animated poster designs, the animated posters afforded our students with a means of integrating another level of conceptual thinking and expressiveness in their work. Regarding the future of poster design, technology and designers will dictate the direction this method of communication will take. "Technology is now evolving at a very fast rate and as the posters begin to respond to their given environment, designers will be expected to create new ideas that will integrate information gathered from different sources, such as cameras and audio devices" (Colombi). For now, utilizing motion in poster design expands the possibilities of the traditional two-dimensional poster. Referring back to designer Müller-Brockmann who states, the evolution of posters are reflective of the techniques and methods designers incorporate into their practice. As we look to define what a 'poster' is, it will be up to designers to adapt and challenge the paradigm.

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Jillian Coorey is an Associate Professor in the School of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University. She earned her MFA in Graphic Design from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research encompasses design pedagogy, k-12 design education, process and creativity and typography. She has presented her research at TypeCon, Design Research Society and AIGA Design Educators conferences, among others. Her professional work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and has been recognized and published in Graphis.

Aoife Mooney is an Assistant Professor at the School of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University where she teaches classes in typography, typeface design, and graphic design. She holds and MA in Typeface Design from the University of Reading (UK) and a BA in Visual Communications from Dublin Institute of Technology (Ireland). Her research focuses on the relationship between typography, language and personal expression, and this informs her practice as a typeface designer. She presents on her research regularly and internationally—most recently at TypeCon Seattle and ATypI Warsaw. She has written for Design Observer and Typographica and in the last year her BioRhyme typeface family was released with Google WebFonts, and she worked on the development of the Mallory typeface for Frere-Jones Type (NYC). Before returning to academia, she worked for 3 years in New York City as a typeface designer with the Hoefler & Frere-Jone Type Foundry, on the Idlewild, Tungsten and Surveyor families among others.