Somehow
I can’t think about
graphic design,
without thinking about
eurocentrism

A tracing in the positions
of “non-Latin”
Konstfack
University of arts, craft and design

Visual communication, a normcreative masterprogramme

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Behin Roozbeh
Background
upp ett av de tidigare exemplen: flickan fick såklart ingen hemspråksundervisning, men istället gick hon vidare och lärde sig sitt "hemspråk" på egen hand. Ganska snabbt kom hon underfund med att studierektorn hade haft rätt: *Hon var ju lika svensk osv osv.* En småtsam insikt, en förlust, ty det fanns inget andra "hem" att falla tillbaka till när ropen *Stick hem till ditt eget hemland* haglade över henne. Vilken var vinsten i så fall? Jo, hon insåg att förlusten är något som inte kan tilldelas, den är inte *deras* att dela ut och tillskriva henne. Nej, förlusten är och måste vara en egen erfarenhet.


206 Sjatte kapitlet
Between 2013 and 2018 I invested six years in three well-acknowledged schools in Scandinavia. The foundation school Nyckelviksskolan, a bachelor in graphic design and illustration from KHiO – Oslo national Academy of the Arts and lastly a master from the program Visual communication and Normcreativity from Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design. To round off this challenging, educating, fun and exhausting time, I decided to use the master project as an opportunity to reflect over my education, and connect it to the world I was stepping out to. This project has allowed me to go deeper into subjects that interest and affect me. I have been given time to think and reflect over my own practice but also the institutions that have shaped me, and the way I work and analyze graphic design. This has resulted in – “somehow I can’t think about graphic design, without thinking about eurocentrism”.

This report is an attempt to break down the wide and general theme of graphic design and eurocentrism into as small fragments and details as I found possible. First I will share my theoretical research and background in this subject, because I think eurocentrism is a term that is more recognizable and present for some people than for others. The second part consists of my methods and artistic approach. Lastly I will talk about my expected result for the spring show. Hopefully I will connect dots between language, power and visual communication.

I will write and treat this subject with an awareness of the fact that I problematize what is status quo, and even casted in the meaning of the word design, but I will advance with the aim of framing my research, perspective and experiences
in such a way, that they will not be left unacknowledged for who ever takes part of my work.

“Experience” is a keyword because it’s what initiated my project. The word holds a category of knowledge that is sometimes referred to as “silent”, presumably because of the individual qualities of it, your experience is something that is dependent of your entire being, who you are, what you look like, your childhood, class etc. Unfortunately questions related to human experiences like race, class or gender are rarely discussed in relation to graphic design, despite the fact that it’s a medium that is often presented as neutral. It makes it hard not to wonder how it’s even possible to approach an idea of universal neutrality, when the vast majority of the field are historically white men? Graphic design can’t be treated as metadata (data that describes and gives information about other data; for example the book cover gives information about the content of the book) as long as there is some sort of artistic interpretation involved. If graphic design was uncompromisingly equal, neutral and uncolored by somebody’s idea’s of good taste, the norms of graphic design wouldn’t look the way they do today.
Carrying my mother tongue

Everyday I spend hours within institutions, carrying my mother tongue with me. Learning about the Latin letters, their meaning, structure and shape. Eventually, I started to feel that going deeper in the field of graphic design made me feel claustrophobic. Like a detective looking for clues, I counted all the 592 books categorized as graphic design in Konstfack’s library. I found 17 – that in their title and cover reached out to be about graphic design (or a topic related to graphic design) from a different visual culture than the European. That is three percent. As a person who spent the first years of my life close to my family, listening to, and eventually speaking Farsi – I came to identify with those three percent.

In a piece of work by the artist Mladen Stilinovic a fabric in warm pink and red with the text “AN ARTIST WHO CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH IS NO ARTIST” hangs on a wall.
AN ARTIST WHO CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH IS NO ARTIST
To me, it mirrors the political order of linguistics, cultural imperialism, colonialism and specifically pinpoints English as the ruling international art language. As a fluent and secure Anglophone who is not originally an anglophone and a North Germanic speaker who does not have Scandinavian origin, and additionally originally a “native” Indo-Iranian speaker without ever having been an Iranian native, I felt a nerve that was struck by Stilinovic’s words. In all the richness of speaking three languages, sometimes you can feel somewhat lost.

Going further back, before I had a place within any cultural field, to growing up sticking out in homogeneous areas, and looking at predominantly white TV I bought the idea that was being sold to me – that European features were the epitome of beauty. So when somebody once told me that I “didn’t exactly look European” I was aware that what was implied was that European looks a certain way, that it’s beautiful, and that it wasn’t me. I grew up feeling gas lighted into denying what could be read as different or foreign about myself. Eventually, as I reached a higher level in an educational context – still predominantly white, I understood that there where more ways I stood out from the norm, and I learned the distinction between what is generally seen as “good” culture and “bad” culture. Stilinovic’s work resonated with my experiences and gave them words, but at the same time it wasn’t news to me. I had already learned that the normative was in a privileged position and that it had the power to decide the value and relevance of things.

If you have a mother tongue that derives from the norm, it can be an important part of your identity, as much as rejecting it can be. Insecurities around it can come from the
outside world but also from inside the home. To not feel entitled, comfortable or have the legal right to express yourself in a language you need is an injustice, because what you lose when you loose a language, isn’t just words, it’s relationships, the news, work, freedom, and much more.

In the field of Graphic design, there are some things that are traditionally taught in schools, amongst them are the ways letters will work and perform in different contexts because before we read, or know the meaning of a word the letters and the visual elements of the text has already spoken to us. For instance, most graphic designers will learn that a fraktur or a san serif have different cultural and historical associations.

As I see it, our institutions currently fail to keep in mind that writing-systems that there are no general read for are still a significant part of our field.

When it comes to letters that fall under the category “non-latin” that was (to say the least) underrepresented in my school library, I believe that they belong to a category of important aspects of the craft that the classic graphic design school does not require you to learn or understand as you are becoming a professional graphic designer. A non-eurocentric view would be more inclusive to the students who identify with cultures that fall outside of the western spectra. And since a majority of those cultures belong to people who are non-white, it would prevent stereotypical ideas about the “other” if non-western cultures would have a platform. This report will be a tracing in the positions of “non-Latin”, how mother tongues are often lower priority and how a language that is actually an asset, can be something that holds people back. To summarize, here is a quote by the visual artist Tala Madani (3):
“Well Language is power, right?
So, what language you use is a
demonstration of your position within
the world order. I told myself that I would
never use Persian language in my work
because there is automatically such an
exoticism. It becomes more decorative if
you use Persian because there is no read
of it. For the same reason I also decided
early on that I couldn’t use the Latin
alphabet either because I didn’t want to
play with that seesaw, shifting all the
weight onto the most Western text. It was
looming in my head: What if the figures
themselves became language?”

If you argue that the written or typed word is
the visual communication of language. Then
you would have to consider that behind
every stroke/line/serif lays a history that is
connected to how our languages move, are
removed or forced upon people. Letters do
not only communicate words or sounds, but
they can also give references to time, status,
politics and values. Different aspects like
technique, interpreting the spoken language,
readability, visual culture and us designers,
define the way letters look. If we as designers
don’t treat that consciously there is a risk that
we reproduce stereotypes or values that are
oppressive.

Eurocentrism is the trope, world view or
opinion that the European culture is centered
and superior to the rest of the world, so when
the most significant factor of the worldwide
use of the Latin alphabet today is European
Colonialism – I believe it’s of importance to
look at the field and see how these values are still present, not only in the library, but also in practice, mind and body. In Edo Smitshuijzen’s introduction from the Arabic Font Specimen book he writes:

I assume that the “we” that Smitshuijzen is referring to are people who do not speak or have an obvious connection to the Arabic language. What he calls “cultural colonialism” is a colonial mindset that is present in our cultural world and preserves colonial values. In order to understand how “cultural colonialism” is manifested in the field, it’s necessary to detangle questions such as whose views should be dominating? What consequences will there be if graphic design, upholds a norm that is oppressive?

“My involvement with Arabic type as a Western designer is hardly unique. There are many more who have played and/or are still playing a far more important role than mine. I have mixed feelings about this kind of involvement (including my own). On one hand there is nothing wrong with inter-cultural exchange—quite the contrary. On the other hand I discovered that the background counts. We shouldn’t be too dominant in our views. And that has happened on some occasions with the development of Arabic type. It sometimes borders on cultural colonialism, which must be avoided.”
... because we are Arabs - Palestinians living in Israel. There's sort of a common fear or misunderstanding of the Arabic language here. So it was an in-your-face message to make fun of people who are scared of the Arabic language and are afraid of it. Because people who don't think much connect it directly to terrorism.

I examined two examples of the political side of language, expressed through graphic design. The bag made by Sana Jammalieh and Haytham Charles Haddad (Rock Paper Scissors) with the text written in Arabic.

“This text has no other purpose than to terrify those who are afraid of the Arabic language.”

It's a direct and powerful message about stigmatisation of the Arabic language, a confrontation of Islamophobia and a reminder of how the languages we use are in relation to the bodies we inhabit. Then there is this example of fake Cyrillic text when letters are used “regardless of phonetic matching” as a trope to evoke Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, or Russia. It's like the letters are wearing a funny costume. Sometimes you see this sort of typography sold on t-shirts and...
sweatshirts in stores, or sometimes they are at restaurants to present a kind of food, like Greek or Chinese. In the book “The politics of design” by Ruben Pater (2) this is referred to as “ethnic typography”, meaning that it’s supposed to signify certain “ethnicities” but instead uses a stereotypical image that prevents the public eye from seeing accurate representations of minorities.

The Latin alphabet has come to symbolize a system that carries knowledge and positions everything it doesn’t include as decorative, mysterious or funny, and the meaning behind the words are often neglected. So what does power mean in a typographical context? I would say that power means, that without even trying you’re always the loudest and most visible in the room.
In the text *Japanese typography* Émilie Rigaud writes about Motogi Shozo. He invented types for Japanese characters and is said to be behind the prosperity of Japanese typography and is in some ways an equivalent character to Johannes Gutenberg – the man who European schools acknowledge as the genius who in his solitude invented a method of printing books on a larger scale, and thereby laid the foundation of a democratic society. Shozo created the first Japanese metal type of modern standard in 1870, and revolutionised Japanese printing. Rigaud, describes how Shozo was part of an international human network, and through these different influences was able to put different techniques and methods together. In the same way Shozo is a person who plays an important part in the global modernisation of print and typography, and reminds
us of the important fact that our schools frequently miss, Gutenberg didn’t exist in a vacuum and doesn’t stand alone as the singular factor of modern type worldwide. She rounds off the text by writing:

From my experience, the fact that the categories of what is called modern, contemporary or new, only seem to belong to the west is very familiar. The Latin writing system together with standard English create a strong norm that slices and censors what doesn’t fit in.

“My actual research about the figure of Motogi Shozo tries to break down such separations, and to show that there are modern elements in what has been regarded as traditional, and that there is a tradition behind what has been taken to be just ‘modernist’.”
Arabic type anatomy from earth to sky

This typographic demonstration explores the anatomy of Arabic type through the lens of Lulu type. The diagram shows a new model of Arabic type, focusing on the typographic principles that underpin Arabic typography. It highlights the importance of understanding the structural and visual relationships between characters, which is essential for designers working with Arabic scripts. The diagram emphasizes the interplay between height, width, and other typographic properties, providing a comprehensive view of the typographic anatomy of Arabic type.
Life outside school

As a person who is culturally bound to a language that categorizes as non-Latin, I see a rich and growing design world in the periphery life outside of university, but experience a school that doesn’t give opportunities or encourages you to become a part of it. As I evaluated my own education in graphic design I remembered the first time I encountered typography related work that in depth treats the subject of “non-latin”. It was an article by Gerry Leonidas in Eye magazine. It introduces the reader to a variety of professional designers, their work, and a conversation about how the market is growing thanks to multinational companies, globalization and the development of software. In the end Leonidas suggested that it’s time for “non-Latin” to die as a term. The article gave me a good insight in what the world of graphic design beyond Europe and North America looks like today, but it also left me with the question – where am I? The capitalistic economy in which I will have to navigate my practice brings a market logic to the table that requires high professionalism, competition, and streamlined design – there was none of that in my awkward and stumbling, childlike way of writing Farsi. It left me thinking, can my mother tongue ever be included in my professional practice? Secondly, after six years design education, why is it not already?

During my research I briefly reflected over Tajik, the official language of Tajikistan. When it comes to the relationship between a spoken language and the connected writing system – Tajik has been written in Arabic, Latin and lastly Cyrillic. This is the Tajik socialist coat of arms from 1929 that has been recreated to a newer version. You can see the desire to do so, since the older one is very small and pixilated. The image itself is
The same concept, with different writing systems in a circular shape was used by me when I did an exhibition poster for the separatist group Brown Island at Konstfack. Most of the work behind this poster was put in figuring out how to make the Arabic and Bengali type work, technically and visually. The research frustrated me, since it was time-consuming but always lead to simple solutions. My clumsiness didn’t only come from lack of knowledge and know-hows, but also the arrangements for working with “non Latin” on your laptop. The average digital tools we have are not built for multi-type as a norm. While most smart phones switch between alphabets easily, how do you
work with two different writing systems on your personal laptop? I remember thinking that there would have been no way for me to do this, without the network around me with people who have a background outside of Europe who speaks and writes in other alphabets, additionally – how many posters with other writing systems have I seen at Konstfack before?

Sara Ahmed, professor of race and cultural studies at Goldsmiths University in London explains the concept of diversity workers in one of her lectures (4):

Everything I question in my project is a result of structures that start outside of art school, but are integrated in the politics that rule these institutions. For instance, the tuition fee that filters out non-European citizens who are not wealthy, the system that randomly decides who is entitled to be educated in

“Someone appointed by institutions with an explicit aim of transforming them; or a diversity worker might be someone who does not quite inhabit the norms of an institution. People of color often end up being diversity workers in both senses (but one sense obscures the other). Given institutions take whiteness as a semantic norm, we (people of color) are assumed to be diversity, and because of that we are often given that task of doing diversity work.”
- Institutions are the effects of what has been generally willed, and thus resistant to will.

- I will be referring to diversity workers in two senses: a diversity worker can be someone appointed by institutions with an explicit aim of transforming them; or a diversity worker might be someone who does not quite inhabit the norms of an institution.

- People of colour often end up being diversity workers in both senses (but one sense obscures the other).
their mother tongue, or the voices that are trying to deny people that right completely. I believe that the urgency in this project lies within the experience of a so-called “second generation immigrant” as the name itself is a marque that we will never really own the culture that is around us, questioning this tradition is my point of departure. On a personal level, I want to develop a method to analyze graphic design from a perspective that doesn’t reproduce these values and broadens my view on what graphic design can do. To the outside, I hope I can give some space to a narrative and a perspective that I was missing during my education. Sometimes the way we treat and practice graphic design has been frustrating to me, as I experience that it has a depoliticizing effect on language.

Designers have power to make a difference through conscious design choices, I wrote some things I believe are things that should be taken in to consideration while working with graphic including “non-latin”:

Don’t do design work based on your imagination of what other cultures look like.

If you are working with a writing system that you don’t know, make sure to involve somebody who does and is paid in proportion to the knowledge and work that is put down, It’s common for translation companies to charge for translation-services, without paying their workers properly, or settle for unqualified translators who charge less and produces low-quality translations and therefore bring down the quality of the reading experience.

Don’t let you own idea of what is “modern” “new” or “fresh” motivate your design choices in a culture that is not yours. To take on a culture you don’t have sufficient
insight in and put yourself in the forefront is a logic that rhymes with a colonial way of thinking where exploitation was happening but motivated as a favor of civilizing, modernizing people, and their lives.

Don’t use other languages as decoration, if the translation has no function, or is incomplete, why is it there?

Pay attention to the hierarchies you use while doing layout, usually the starting point is the Latin writing system and that can reinforce the idea that it is the writing system that represents legibility and the text that was treated secondary, is visually read less-important.

If you have insecurities towards a writing-system that is involved in your own culture in some way, don’t fall for other people’s ideas about what is “correct”. You define and you are a part of the definition of how and what typography looks like.
Methods
Since this report partially is a reaction to the lack of representation in the library and more generally in the field, the question of how you design, or build something constructive from a critical and questioning point of view arose, my experiences and intuition became an important tool to help me create a visual process, and be productive. It’s easy to say that the book that I found in my parental home had sentimental value, because it reminded me of the times I practiced Farsi with my mother, teacher or friends. I held on to the book because of a feeling that I might need it someday. Since I am a designer who is visually driven and motivated by the content I am working with, I realized that there is something in this book I can use. I started to experiment with the form and applying my ideas to it with the purpose to get closer to understanding my project. Since my framework has been teaching and educational books, knowledge production and sharing of knowledge has been central in my work.

The most important insight that came to me after this process was the thought of a book as a common place. Normally, I see books as something that will be experienced in solitude and that a reading experience is an experience of intimacy between yourself and the writer. Educational books are different, they engage more people, and from a minority perspective those relationships can be very important.

The black one is my first attempt at making a new book out of the old book. It resulted in something similar to a “facsimile”– a copy of a historical document. In my next attempt (violet) I re-evaluated my decisions. I made the pages of the book bigger than their original size and didn’t leave any contrast between the original book and
my book. Trying to make the form look like less of a sentimental object, but rather something that is new and in some way still relevant. But as I went on I had some difficulties leaving the book the way it was – content wise, since I felt that there where parts of it that weren’t relevant for my project or needed other discussions than the one I wanted to have. My third attempt was a bit more dramatic. I removed all text, and made a selection out of the illustrations. I cut out all the illustrations of adults. I printed the last version on overhead paper because I wanted to experiment with ways of presenting the theme of my project in a room as an installation, or projected on a wall. The format is A4 because it’s easy to copy and fast to print and bind if you would like to print many. As you often do in educational situations.

I see the reading of longer text as a
relatively private and intimate experience. My visual work will be put under a spotlight under the public eye, which I have very little control over. And since the graphic design medium often is so reduced, details play a big part in the visual communication. Therefore, a challenge has been to set the conditions for how my work can be read. In order to do so I tried to answer the questions, what do I want people to read? And what can I show, without being there to explain?

The intention for this research was for it to eventually translate my thoughts and theories into norm creative design work like a font, publication, poster or something that is commonly considered graphic design, but I realized that the work I am doing is a deconstruction. What product or service is critical of its own medium? I don’t know any, thereby the most radical thing would be to not produce any design at all.
A book stand, Koran stand or Rahl, whatever name you would choose for this piece of furniture, it existed in my parental home, holding a thick book in bright blue and yellow with the words “Svensk Grammatik” (swedish grammar) on the cover. It was used by my mother while sitting on the floor on a soft rug, working with translation. I was always so intrigued by how easily you could take it apart and put it away, as you could put it together and it would function beautifully – as good design should. To bring that in my project was a way for me to remind myself that, even though modernist ideas seem to hold the definition power of what falls under the design spectra, design is actually present and exists everywhere and can function as a universal way of thinking, even for something as simple as how your body is resting while you read.
As I started to sketch in a 3D landscape, I felt that this was a way for me to apply more layers to my work. Since the program also allows me to use different representations of materials, I was able to create an illusion of glass. It was an intuitive decision, but I related to the letters that felt vulnerable, hollow and transparent.

I added sound that disturbs the form with its frequency. The abstraction of the letters dissolves their being and opens up an opportunity for me to speak about what actually matters. Visually, it sets the spheres that are fragments of the letters in a crumbling motion while they still are limited by the outline of the letterform, this rigidness came to be the most important factor in this visualisation, because it is what keeps the letter from falling apart completely and becoming nothing.

The sound is a voiceover by Ezgi Özberk, her voice is similar to my own, but she has many more theatrical qualities than I have, yet she doesn’t sound like a polished voice narrator which is beneficial for the film, since the expression would have become far to sterile and without edge if so. The text she is reading is the following:

The countdown doesn’t really make sense until it arrives at zero and the voice is saying – This is what I have to give. I’m giving it all to you.
Whose language am I speaking?
When the word design is casted in eurocentrism, and needs to be detangled to pinpoint the exotification I experience.
Together we realized that whatever we'll manage to do,
the limitations will follow us
We felt like fragile glass set in a crumbling motion every time voices disturbs their form with their frequency.
We related to the transparency of the material, a visual world that is fragile and hollow.
We thought about rigidness, because that is what keeps the shapes from falling apart completely and becoming nothing.
In the end we thought: somebody could say that this is about people trying to reclaim a language that has been lost or taken from them, and that will be true.
Somebody could say that this is about the beauty of the script, and that will also be true.
Somebody will say, that this is exotifying – and even this, will be true.
This is what I have to give. I’m giving it all to you.
My idea is that the question: “what does it mean” – from an outsiders point of view, will be more directed towards the actions and the movement, than the actual symbol/word. The work will be read very differently, depending on who the viewer is. For me this is an animation that is showing us a letter form that is struggling to exist and a visual world that in its fragile and transparent state is filled with self doubt, but not self hatred.

You don’t question things if you think everything is fine. The itching adverb “Somehow” in my title is from when you understand that you shouldn’t feel or think in a certain way, but you still do and that’s why somehow graphic design, isn’t just graphic design.

Thank you,
Johanna, Maryam, Parasto, Behzad, Moa, Sara, Jonna, Mikael and my class!