

**Transcultural Hybridity:  
Extending Visual Language in Design Education**

Catherine Jo Ishino, MA|MFA  
861-155 Dalhousie Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2P7  
Canada  
ishinoc@mac.com  
February 11, 2014

**1, 887 words: Paper and footnotes**

**322 words: Bibliography**

## Abstract

Hybrid visual languages can meet the needs of North/South/East/West design education, without compromising the inherent strengths of any. As we make ‘the global turn’ into the 21st century, we realize how interdependent we are through our shared technological, economic, political and ecological interactions. However cultural media professor Marwan Kraidy states we have come to a place of “Hybridization, or the cultural logic of globalization.”<sup>1</sup> He argues the term ‘hybridity’ be used with utmost specificity and contextualization given its overuse has rendered the concept a meaningless cliché. Also he warns because of the exhaustive post-colonial linkages between hybridity and power, to look beyond historically applied tensions of domination and resistance.<sup>2</sup> Thus Kraidy argues more specific interpretations and applications be investigated to avoid ambiguous views of transcultural interactions.

Keywords: Transcultural Design, Design Education, Visual Language, Hybrid Design

<sup>1</sup> Marwan M. Kraidy, Marwan M. *Hybridity in Cultural Globalization*. (Annenberg School for Communication, Departmental Papers, University of Pennsylvania Year 2002.) [http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1334&context=asc\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1334&context=asc_papers)

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Kellner, Douglas. Book review of “Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*”. (Temple University Press, 2005.” *International Journal of Communication* 1, 2007). <http://ijoc.org>, Book Review 48-50 1932-8036/2007BKR0048, 2007, 49.

## **Transcultural Hybridity: Extending Visual Language in Design Education**

The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is...  
to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world  
in which our subjects live  
so that we can,  
in some extended sense of the term,  
converse with them.<sup>3</sup> - Clifford Geertz -

I propose as North American design educators, we investigate Kraidy's hybridity stance and re-examine our own inherited notions of being historically rooted in Bauhaus and Basel visual languages and practices. I urge we look beyond our own insularity towards differing global pedagogies and semiotic contexts. <sup>4</sup> Ideally we may then better instruct our students for the global and local (glo-cal) communication sphere they are about to inhabit. <sup>5</sup>

### **The Glo-calization of Education<sup>6</sup>**

Through the *Progressive Education World Model*<sup>7</sup> we can imagine how notions of transcultural hybridity may extend our teaching of visual language. The *Progressives* evaluate, then choose from differing international strategies and pedagogies, and compare them with their regional policies. Local educationalists then adapt educational practices best suited to their community needs. Applying this *Model* would help our design

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 13. <http://www.staff.u-szeged.hu/~magnes/downloads/geertz.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Ronnie Lipton, [ff.u-szeged.hu/~magnes/d/Designing Across Cultures](http://www.staff.u-szeged.hu/~magnes/d/Designing%20Across%20Cultures). (Cincinnati, OH: HOW Design Books, 2002), 178 – 178

<sup>5</sup> Glenn Adamson; Giorgio Riello; and Sarah Teasley – Eds. *Global Design History*. (London: Routledge, 2011). Preface, 1-10; 110-122.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Spring, *Globalization of Education: An introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2009). Preface, xiii; *Globalization of Education*, 1-28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. *From the Global to the Local*, 117-143.

students learn how to communicate in the ‘global turn’ i.e. extend beyond their own cultural and semiotic boundaries; yet remain grounded in their locality. <sup>8</sup> Ultimately they may begin to formulate hybrid models through interweaving local and global visual idioms into a hybrid language.

This pedagogical movement was reflected in the 2012 AIGA international design education conference, *Geo/Graphics: design, education, and the transnational terrain*.<sup>9</sup> Presentations laid out program theories, strategies, and activities by educators from diverse global contexts. Session topics illustrated how the organization aligns with the *Progressive Model*. **Design Institutions** included such discussions and presentations as *Transnational Pedagogy and Environments* and *Local vs. Western Models*. **Design Projects** presentations revealed *Transnational Inspirations, Collaborations and Media*, as well as *Serving Distant Cultures*. Also discussions were held in **Design Ideas** in *Transnational Pedagogy Identities, Places In History*, and *Digital Forums* as well as *Understanding Local Cultures* and *Local Perspectives*. Thus the Conference began to map out a new transnational/transcultural terrain other design educators and students worldwide could implement to orient themselves in the global communications turn.

### **Borrowing Practices**

Our students and we as educators could directly engage in other cultural and visual communication principles and practices by attaining a fully immersive experience in another country. This would mimic the best practices of second language learning programs, where students learn quickly and speak colloquially. Although not a new form

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. *Global Migration & Language Policies*, 177-182, 191-198.

<sup>9</sup> AIGA Educators Conference: *Geo/graphics*, 2012. <http://aigageogfx.com>

of pedagogy, it has proven to be highly effective. It follows, in experiencing daily visual encounters in another culture's communications environment, design students and teachers visual learning would also increase.

Another practice established by Symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) maintained culture is "a system of meanings embodied in symbols. ... [and] cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses... drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses... and mapping out its bodiless landscape."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore he argued a researcher must be a highly perceptive observer and an active participant. Geertz believed by doing actual observations *in situ*, the most accurate 'thick descriptions' of cultural symbols could be made.<sup>11</sup> He urged colleagues to carefully observe how symbolic meaning is activated and engaged by social interactions, placement and the agency of participants. account.<sup>12</sup> Thus Geertz's practices were interpretive, as well as a semiotic based.

By applying the practices of Second Language Immersion learning and Geertz's semiotic 'thick description,' I believe an extended visual language could readily be acquired in North American design education. Even if we cannot travel to distant countries, we can make use of our multi-ethnic metropolitans comprised of multicultural communities. By observing and immersing ourselves in other cultures' neighborhoods

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30. <http://www.staff.u-szeged.hu/~magnes/downloads/geertz.pdf>, 13.

Marwan M, Kraidy and Patrick D. Murphy, *Shifting Geertz: Toward a Theory of Translocalism in Global Communication Studies*. (Annenberg School for Communication, Departmental Papers University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

Yarrow, ANDREW L., *Clifford Geertz, Cultural Anthropologist, Is Dead at 80*, (New York Times, November 1, 2006). <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/obituaries/01geertz.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>11</sup> IBID, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 10.

would be a good first step to begin creating transcultural hybridity in design education.

### **Glo-cal Design Examples in East Asia**

Two designers, through their personal transcultural experiences, have devised a design hybridity that simultaneously communicates with Eastern and Western audiences. Their visual language extends into glo-calization i.e. without compromising the integrity of either's aesthetic.

**Wang Min** was born (1954) and educated in China. He left to study design in East Berlin and attended Yale graduate school. Later he became creative director at Adobe, and ran his own design firm in the USA. After 20 years, he returned to China in 2003 when his firm was selected to design the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. The concept of the 'New China' must be reflected for its debut on the world stage. The reflective questions Wang pondered were ones that only a migratory designer would consider:

How can we create ... an Olympic look that combines the Olympic spirit and Chinese values?

How can we create an Olympic look that blends the traditional with the contemporary?

How can we create an Olympic look that is uniquely Chinese in color and form?<sup>13</sup>

So in designing pictograms for the Games sporting events, Wang transformed Western modernist forms used in past Olympics, and translated them into hybrid icons. He extracted ancient seal characters etched on his Chinese ancestors' bronze vessels, and transformed these ideograms into white brush strokes on black rice paper (Figure 1, Olympic symbols and Ancient Inscriptions). Thus Wang's pictograms were at once

<sup>13</sup> Min Wang, *Pictograms of 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games*  
[http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/min\\_wang.html](http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/min_wang.html)

familiar Western yet also Chinese cultural icons; both readily be understood by Eastern and Western audiences.

Appointed by the Chinese Government, Wang was also made the Dean of Design at its China Central Academy of Fine Arts. His mission was to usher in New China into the global design turn. He brought in Eastern and Western designers, so CAFA students would directly engage in dialogical teaching and learning encounters. Wang also hosted global design conferences, exhibitions, and residencies to incubate a contemporary design sensibility in China.

**Robert Appleton** (1947) was appointed CAFA's first designer-in-residence from 2006 to 2007. Born in Glasgow, he was an AGI member, a seasoned designer, art director, musician, artist and teacher who had worked for Saatchi & Saatchi and BBC Television in London, where he also studied with Tony Oxley and played drums on the jazz and new music scenes. He had his own firm in Connecticut and New York City working for AIGA, Graphis Press, The Verve Music Group and others.<sup>14</sup> He had taught at Cooper Union, Parsons School of Design and given workshops in Istanbul, Portugal, Helsinki, Beijing and Nanjing<sup>15</sup> before focusing on research called Vortex a new language of the visual aural and textual, which now takes him round the world.<sup>16</sup> Though Appleton's work had crossed the disciplines of design, art and music, his yearlong dual appointment at CAFA and Glasgow School of Art in China was his first immersive experience in a non-Western country. (Figure 2: Appleton Self Portrait)

While at CAFA, Appleton gave his students a yearlong project, entitled "Crossing Cultures" which involved exploring the dynamic cultural intersection of East and West in

<sup>14</sup> [Robert Appleton Design](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Robert Appleton, Students, China, USA, Turkey and Canada](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Robert Appleton Vortex](#)

type, image, sound and motion, philosophy, history, technology, music, art and design. The objective was to create content which would stretch the envelope of communication and express a hybrid reality understandable by Chinese and Western audiences. One project was to design a cross-cultural poster. (Figure 3- Student poster) This student's written explanation of his poster reads:

‘The ruler’ defines ‘the map’ as infinite.  
Space and time’s limitations link to infinite possibility,  
surmounting the language barrier with a mark  
of mutual recognition,  
achieving shared goals.

In summary, these two designers serve as positive models – transcultural designers and teachers. By their example, we can envision how hybridity extends our North American visual language and education. Their experiences can be emulated through similar encounters of multiculturalism in our own metropolitan neighborhoods.

### **Begin Now: Glo-calization Teaching**

We, teachers could begin immediately using technology available in their classrooms to communicate globally and initiate cross-cultural projects with other design schools or designers through the WWW. We could use hardware and software applications conducive to immediate interaction, such as Skype, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. Course materials could include online fictional film and video documentaries to simulate a sense of other culture. Design books already published could be integrated into courses, such as: *Multicultural Design* by R. Lipton, *Design Without Boundaries* by R. Poyner; *World Graphic Design* by G. Caban Millerand and so on.

Additionally design students could take courses already offered on their campuses such as Second language learning, Semiotics, Intercultural Communications, Cultural Studies, Visual Anthropology, and so on.

In summary, there exists a wealth of information and materials teachers could gather to create transcultural design projects in the classroom right now or in their surrounding neighborhoods.

## Conclusion

We're all engaged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global turn, and to extend North American visual language within design education, we must communicate transculturally. The best solution is to create hybrid visual communication historically grounded in Bauhaus and Basel vocabulary, yet reaching forward into transcultural, post-postmodern visual language.

## Bibliography

Adamson, Glenn; Riello, Giorgio; and Teasley, Sarah – Eds. *Global Design History*. (London: Routledge, 2011). Preface 1-10, 110-122.

AIGA Educators Conference: Geo/graphics, 2012, 1.  
<http://aigageogfx.com>

Designboom.  
[http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/min\\_wang.html](http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/min_wang.html)

Fortune, Tara, Williams, Tedick, and Diane J.: Eds. *Pathways to multilingualism: evolving perspectives on immersion education*.  
 10. Developing a Critical Awareness of Language Diversity in Immersion / Diane Dagenais. (Clevedon, Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2008).

Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.  
<http://www.staff.u-szeged.hu/~magnes/downloads/greetz.pdf>

Kellner, Douglas. Book review of “Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*,” (Temple University Press, 2005. *International Journal of Communication* 1, 2007, Book Review 48-50 1932-8036/2007BKR0048, 2007. Licensed under the Creative Commons). <http://ijoc.org>.

Kraidy, Marwan M. *Hybridity in Cultural Globalization*, (Annenberg School for Communication, Departmental Papers, University of Pennsylvania, 2002).

Kraidy, Marwan M, Murphy, Patrick D. *Shifting Geertz: Toward a Theory of Translocalism in Global Communication Studies* (Annenberg School for Communication, Departmental Papers, University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

Nederveen Pieterse, J. *Globalization and culture: Global mélange*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). Chapter 3, *Globalization as Hybridization*, 45- 68. <http://www.uvm.edu/rsenr/rm230/Nederveen%20Pieterse.pdf>

Scherer, Brooke N. *Culture and Design Education: Pedagogical Discourse for a Globalized World*. (Open Inquiry Archive, Volume 2, Number 2, 2013).

Sparke, Penny. *An Introduction to Design and Culture, 1900 to the Present*. (London: Routledge, 2013).

Spring, J. H. *Globalization of Education: An introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2009). Preface, xiii; *Globalization of Education*, 1-28; *Global Education Networks & Discourses*, 29-54; *The Marketing of Knowledge*, 83-116; *From the Global to the Local*, 117-143; *Global Migration & Language Policies*, 177-182, 191-198. *Globalization & Complex Thought*, 200-206.

Wang, Min. *Square Two World, Square Two Design: TWO WORLD DESIGN*. (N.D. @ 2001) <http://www.square2.com>

## Illustrations

Wang, Min. *Pictograms of 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games*. Figure 1 [http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/min\\_wang.html](http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/min_wang.html)

Appleton, Robert. *Crossing Cultures*, Undergraduate/Graduate course at China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing 2006-07. Figure 2, 3. <http://bit.ly/GzFikX>.