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Studying Typography Used in Ability "Rashomon: Tenma Tengai" in The Bungou Stray Dogs Anime Adaptation

Kirana Rizqina¹ , Devinnisa Jehan Siddiqa Fabtian²

Visual Communication Design, Faculty of Architecture and Design, National Development University "Veteran" of East Java, Jl. Rungkut Madya No.1, Gn. Anyar, Kec. Gn. Anyar, Kota Surabaya, Jawa Timur, 60294, Indonesia

brzenkakira@gmail.com¹, devinjehan09@gmail.com²

Typography is the art and technique of arranging letters in a way that makes the written language easier to read and more appealing, display, or distribute. Typography is not limited to Latin or Romaji and is seen in the anime industry, especially anime, where it is used in kanji. Bungou Stray Dogs is an anime that adapts old literature to a younger audience and is a perfect study subject for kanji typography. Despite its manga and anime adaptations, it still sticks to its "old literature" antics. Hence, the focus of the typographic study in this article is solely on the anime version of the Bungou Stray Dogs manga, and specifically on the scene in the anime where the words "rashomon: tenma Tengai" are presented utilizing specific typographic approaches.

Key words : typography, kanji, anime, literature

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Introduction

Typography is the art and technique of arranging types to make written language easy to read, legible, and attractive. It is the work of typesetters, typographers, graphic designers, art directors, cartoonists, comic artists, and anyone who arranges words, letters, numbers, and symbols for publication, display, or distribution. (Zapf Hermann, 1970)

Meanwhile, Dendi Sudiana (2001:325) said that “Typography is the most readable visual element. However, the words that the reader reads consist of letters that lead them to understand the meaning or message of a text that may lead to an idea or concept.”

Typography is an important part of the anime industry, with its use being seen in the anime titles. Examples of this include the title writing of *Naruto*, an anime for teenage boys, and *Black Butler* and *Hellsing*, which accentuate the Victorian aesthetic. In the lesser-known anime sub genre called "Bungou", real-life authors are adopted as their characters and heavily reference them, from their works to their habits. *Bungou Stray Dogs* is an anime that adapts old literature to suit the younger audience and is the most well-known manga (and anime) in the Bungou subgenre. This seinen anime adapts real life authors as the characters and their work as their ability, while still holding to the "old literature" antics, aesthetics, and references.

Bungou Stray Dogs' literature heavy influences makes the series the most perfect media for Japanese typography research, particularly the anime adaptation, where extra effects are added by the studio (Studio Bones) to further the literature tone. The most notable is the use of special effects for *Rashomon*'s technique branches, which doesn't depicted the same way in the original media, the manga series. Each *Rashomon* technique branches are emphasized in a special typography effect that uses seemingly different writings for each technique. In this article, we will only discuss the one used in depicting the technique “tenma tengai”.

Creation Method

The design of this research is to use a qualitative approach. The data obtained is the result of direct observation, coupled with documentation and compared with library techniques, which will be described qualitatively. This data is then collected, filtered, and analyzed to produce descriptive data in the form of a visual style that can be used as a reference in the animation pre-production process. The object of this research study is the use of typography in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's “*Rashomon*” technique called “tenma tengai”.

The stages of the research are to formulate issues that need to be explored related to typography used in *Bungou Stray Dogs*, especially in the anime adaptation and how they depict the writing of “Tenma Tengai” using typography analysis under Dendi Sudiana's definition of typography. Followed by observations of the visuals in the writing of the aforementioned “*Rashomon*” technique in the anime adaptation of the manga series. The object of research in this case is explained through a study of kanji typography.

Results and Discussion

Typography in *Bungou Stray Dogs*

The Ability Activation Illustration

In *Bungou Stray Dogs*, Ability (異能力, *Inōryoku*, Yen Press: Skill) is a special force possessed by many individuals throughout the world. A person who possesses an ability is called an ability user (能力者, *nōryoku-sha*). In the anime adaptation of the series, to introduce a character's ability, the first time they use it, we will get the ability's kanji on the screen with special effects that involve the use of typography. This heavily happened in the first and second

seasons since most of the abilities introduced at that time are referencing Japanese-titled books by Japanese classic author figures. Here is what it looks like:



Picture 1 and 2. Dazai Osamu's ability introduction: No Longer Human (Bungou Stray Dogs S1 EP1 16:31)

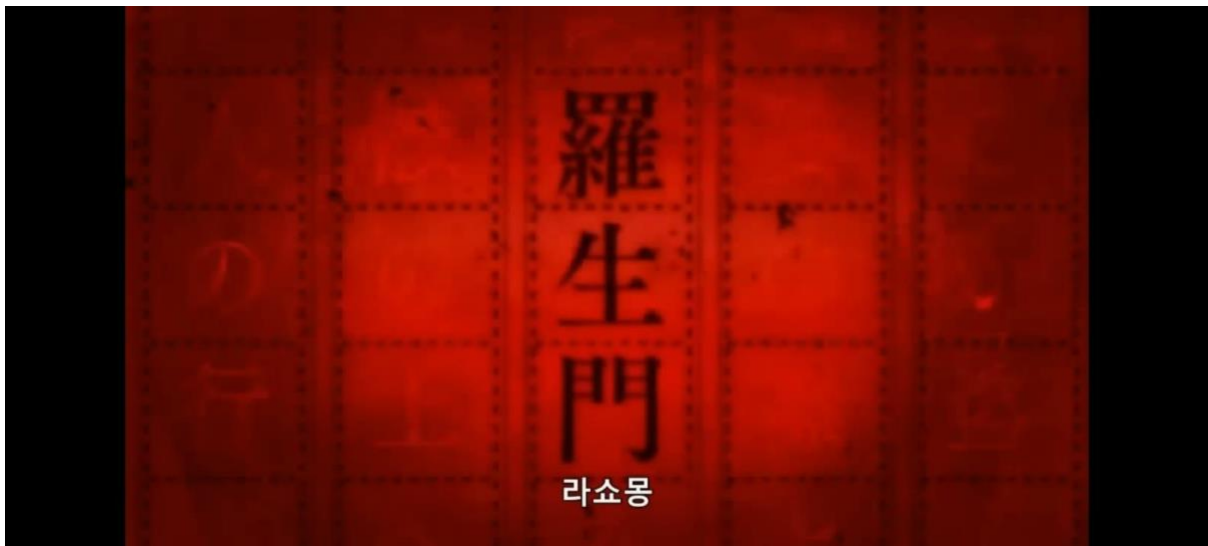
When written vertically, the Japanese text is written from top to bottom, with multiple columns of text progressing from right to left. When written horizontally, the text is almost always written left to right, with multiple rows progressing downward, as in standard English text. As mentioned and shown above, the ability introduction uses the *Kaisho* kanji writing style. *Kaisho* or regular script, block lettering, or "square style" is a precise style of brush strokes that is based on the Chinese *kaisho* in form and function. It was strongly influenced by the Sui dynasty (581–618) and the Tang dynasty (618–907). Early examples of this style in Japan are mainly inscriptions on various statues and temples during the early *Heian* period (794-1185). Over time, there has been a movement in Japan to become more culturally independent, incorporating a *Gyosho* style to copy the Lotus Sutra. There was a second wave of influence during the *Kamakura* and *Muromachi* periods, which primarily used Zen-inspired techniques and were inspired by Zen priests.

This style of kanji is commonly used among people in Japan, as it is the basic form of kanji writing taught in elementary school. The clear strokes and characters written in the style also make this style a basic choice for formal documents and texts. Kaisho typography features straight lines, consistent stroke thickness, rounded shapes, clear spacing, and symmetrical compositions.

Typography in Akutagawa's Rashomon Ability Illustration

The Ability Introduction

What captures people's attention to Akutagawa's ability from a first glance in the anime adaptation, is the red background and black letters, instead of black background and colored letters like the other ability introductions. This is most likely to reference Rashomon (kanji: 羅生門; literal meaning: Gate in Old Kyoto), a short story based on tales from the Konjaku Monogatari-shū written by Akutagawa Ryunosuke in the 1910s. The story revolves around a destitute man, who ponders whether to resort to theft in order to survive or to starve to death and is more widely known from the movie adaptation directed by Akira Kurosawa using the same title in 1950.

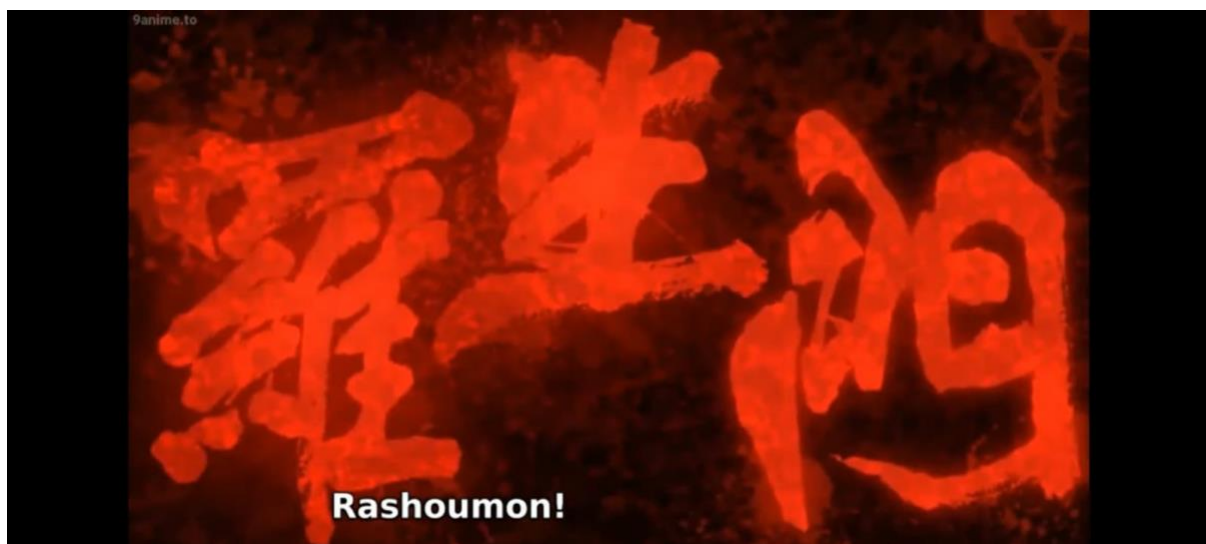


Picture 3 and 4. Akutagawa Ryunosuke's ability introduction: Rashomon (Bungou Stray Dogs S1 EP3 15:35)

Aside from the strikingly different color chosen to introduce the ability, we can see that “Rashomon” has many forms and all of them are introduced with special illustrations of the kanji using typography in the anime, mostly using the color red and black with blurry red backgrounds. One of the popular speculations about the many forms of Rashomon in the series that no other ability have (except Nakajima Atsushi’s tiger transformations) have is that there is an effect in fictional media that is called the Rashomon effect. It is a way of storytelling and writing in the film adaptation of Rashomon by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, where the actors present different perspectives and perspectives to interpret or explain events in contradictory ways. In the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film Rashomon, he portrayed a murder by four witnesses in four contradictory ways, hence the name. The term deals with motives, mechanisms, and events for reporting facts, as well as controversial interpretations of events, disagreements about evidence, and subjectivity and objectivity in human perception, memory, and reporting. It is a solid evidence for the excellency of the movie adaptation of "Rashomon".

Akutagawa’s “Rashomon: Tenma Tengai” Typography Analysis

Akutagawa's ability Rashomon allows him to create a series of black tendrils that act as defensive shields, slicing weapons, and transporting himself and others. These tendrils are based on the "Rashomon Gate" and can manifest in different forms, each with its own name and unique abilities. One of the forms of Rashomon is the one called “tenma tengai” (kanji: 天魔纏鎧). Akutagawa's demonic armor, Tenma Tengai, resembles the black shield on his body made from Rashomon’s tendrils. From the appearance, this form of Rashomon is strikingly different from the other Rashomon form that takes the form of tendrils or even jaws of a monster. The power and strength enhanced by this ability allow him to create an exoskeleton shield and attack opponents with his offensive capabilities. Its name is derived from the demon Mara, whose dubbed as “Tenma” (天魔) in Japanese, the demon of the sixth heaven in the realm of desire who tries to prevent people from doing good in Buddhism, and “Tengai” which consists of the kanji “纏” (mato) which means “wear, wrap, or tie” with “鎧” (yoroi) which means “to arm or to put an armor”, which when being put together read as “Tengai” that means “to wrap an armor around one(self)”.





Picture 5, 6, and 7. Rashomon's special technique: Tenma (the second screenshot) Tengai (the third screenshot) (Bungou Stray Dogs S2 EP11 17:20)



Picture 8. the original depiction of "Rashomon: tenma tengai" in the manga (Bungou Stray Dogs Manga Chapter 35 page 21, raw version)

In Bungo Stray Dogs, there's a compelling visual aspect that enhances the character's ability activation process is the typography of the kanji that appears whenever Akutagawa activates his "Rashomon" ability. The kanji's bold and stylized typography conveys the strength and intensity of the ability. Furthermore, the characters are written in a calligraphic style, emphasizing the show's Japanese cultural influence and enhancing the visual impact. The deep red color chosen for the kanji is also meaningful because it is commonly associated in Japanese culture with power and danger. This highlights even more how remarkable Akutagawa's ability is. Besides that, the typography gives the viewer a visual cue to recognize when Akutagawa's ability is being used.

The visual representation of the "Rashomon" ability activation in Bungo Stray Dogs utilizes a form of calligraphy known as "*Gyosho*" or "semi-cursive script". This style of calligraphy combines elements of the regular script and cursive script to create a flowing, cursive appearance. *Gyosho* gives brush movement a sense of quickness and adaptability. It enables the development of ideograms in incredibly unique ways. It's acceptable to alter the order of the strokes and to change the brushstrokes to fit one's personal aesthetic and artistic creativity. The *Gyosho*'s flexibility gives the *Shodo* artist the chance to create outstanding works. The majority of Japanese calligraphy is also created in *Gyosho* for this reason. The unique feature of the *Gyosho* style is that the beginning and end of a brush stroke must show the directional movement of the next stroke-where it came from and where it is going.

When used to illustrate Akutagawa's "Rashomon" kanji in the anime version of Bungo Stray Dogs, the rough and splattered stroke is still created with this principle in mind. While the overall stroke appears chaotic, each individual stroke follows the principles of *Gyosho* calligraphy. The resulting sense of flow and movement enhances the symbolism of the ability, emphasizing its destructive and unpredictable nature. By using *Gyosho* calligraphy for Akutagawa's "Rashomon" ability, Studio Bones and others who may be involved (the illustrator and author) have effectively reinforced its impact. The flowing brushstrokes create

a sense of untethered energy and motion, while the rough and splattered effect represents the explosive power of the ability. Together, these elements effectively convey the chaos and destruction that the ability Rashomon caused.

Conclusion

Gyosho calligraphy, which is the art of writing in the Japanese calligraphy style, enhances the ability of the fictional character Akutagawa Ryunosuke in the anime adaptation of "Bungo Stray Dogs" to use the "Rashomon: Tenma Tengai" ability. The kanji is bold and designed to convey the force and intensity of the ability, and the characters are written in a calligraphic style that emphasizes the show's Japanese cultural influence and enhances the visual impact. The Gyosho style combines elements of the regular script and the cursive script to create a flowing, cursive appearance that conveys speed and agility. This study confirms that outside of the common Roman style of calligraphy, there are also forms of calligraphic art that use other types of writing styles, such as kanji. Especially in modern media that is centered on the use of Japanese kanji in entertainment, such as the popular animation known as anime.

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