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On Asemic Writing and the Absence of Meaning

Law Alsobrook
Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar
Doha, Qatar

Abstract

Asemic writing is a wordless form of textual communication, with semantically open content left to the reader's interpretation. By contrast, graphic designers are taught to conceive of text as image in order to compound meaning through graphic representation and typographic nuance. Graphic designers consider the linguistic container beyond its semantic substance, in effect, and attempt to expand the sematic load of language with visual modulation. Analogously, in *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes contemplates Japanese culture as a series of signs that exist in relative ataraxia with their signifying instance, where the alliance of sign and signification mingle as meditative components in a relative yin-yang balance as exemplified by the society within which they exit as philosophical constants. For Barthes, this notion confronts a Western temperament wherein a Platonic ideal seems to foment a continual search for the existence of pre-eminent signs that function as pinnacles of signification. However, when signs are devoid of intentional meaning, what can we glean from the mechanics of sign operations that attempt to establish and create, especially with regards to visual narrative and the heterotopic and temporal devices used by writers, artists and designers, a sense of "otherness?"

This paper examines the heterotopic relationship of asemic writing as a mediated agent of narrative in our post-literate society.

Key words: asemic, narrative, otherness, hypermediacy, heterotopia

Introduction

As a child, I loved the Sunday comics; a supplemental section of the weekend newspaper devoted to games, trivia, and of course, cartoons. I could while away the morning trying to make sense of the crossword puzzle or word search, but I especially enjoyed reading and re-reading my favourite funnies. My favourite comic was *Peanuts*, a beloved American comic strip, featuring the antics of a prepubescent Charlie Brown, his best friend, Linus, and Charlie Brown's dog, Snoopy, among other characters. There was a character in the *Peanuts* that I found both curious and baffling: Snoopy's best friend, Woodstock, a feisty, little yellow bird of indeterminate species. Woodstock was unique in that he rarely, if ever, spoke, but on those occasions when he did, Woodstock-speak was usually rendered as chicken scratch—a series of small, hand drawn, marks that looked like exclamation points without their terminating dots. Of course, I could never understand what Woodstock was saying, yet Snoopy was always able to decipher what was being said.

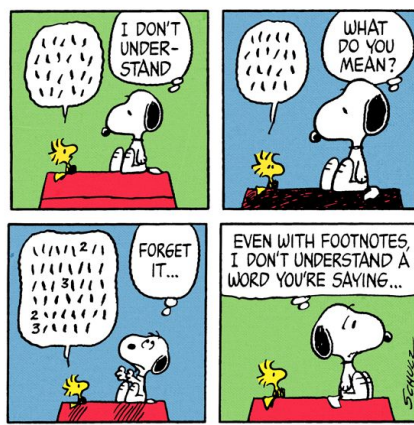


Figure 1: *Peanuts*

Woodstock's ability to communicate, as impossible to decipher as it is, was possibly my first, inadvertent, introduction to the study of typography where the rendered forms of letters lend visual cue, or interpretation, to the meaning or content of the physicality of language. As utterance, Woodstock's words are devoid of meaning because, though rendered for visual transmission, they carry no semantic load for the audience. Woodcock's signifying marks can only be deduced through the responses and actions of Snoopy, or those around Woodstock who are able to understand what he is communicating. The marks depict the appearance of language, but only insofar as they approximate an expectation for how a language should look. As an example of mediated utterance, coupled with expectation, they create a semblance and believability of intelligence evinced within the visual confines of typography. Or what passes for typography.

Woodstock's speech is an example of asemic writing which is roughly defined as text, "having no semantic content" (Gaze, 2000) a term coined by the Australian artist Tim Gaze, who identified this phenomenon as a post-literate art form along with the American poet Jim Leftwich between 1998–2000. As Leftwich noted in an earlier letter penned to Gaze, "A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning" (Leftwich, 1998). To which Gaze further posits:

Writing does not just contain semantic information. It also contains aesthetic information (when seen as a shape or image) and emotional information (such as a graphologist would analyze). Because it eliminates the semantic information, asemic writing brings the emotional and aesthetic content to the foreground. (Huth, 2004)

The word asemic itself originates from the word *asemia*, an aphasiac medical condition wherein the afflicted are incapable of understanding or expressing themselves using any signs or symbols.

This paper considers the art of asemic writing as part of a broader investigation into storytelling and visual narrative through the lens of graphic design, typography, and hypermediacy, particularly with its emphasis on self-conscious seeing. Further, this paper explores asemic writing as an atemporal condition that exists between text as image and image as text, where the liminal threshold of meaning elides with utterance. In considering this gap, it examines the heterotopic relationship of utterance as a mediated agent of narrative. If the orthographic markings of written language capture the intangibility of spoken language (for preservation, transference, and translation), asemic writing challenges this hegemony and the various systems of meaning ascribed to the written word. Asemic writing highlights aspects of written media and the narrative forms they inhabit as part of the mechanics of communication and visual narrative.

Asemic writing attempts to recognize and replicate visual forms of communication without creating or capturing inherent meaning within the text itself (the semantic load written words transfer to an audience). In effect, asemic writing atomizes the written word, suspending the audience between looking and reading. This suspension is not unlike encountering a foreign language for the first time where one observes the graphic form but has limited access to the meaning contained therein. Texts once thought to be impenetrable, and therefore absent of meaning, include Egyptian hieroglyphs, Linear A, the Voynich Manuscript, and the Codex Seraphinianus. For the former, this was proven to the contrary when Jean-François Champollion deciphered hieroglyphics in 1824 using the Rosetta Stone. To this day, Linear A, presumably used by Ancient Minoans and thought to be one of the precursors to Modern Greek, and the Voynich Manuscript, a mysterious manuscript penned in the 15th century, both remain largely unintelligible, though most scholars believe them to contain substantive meaning. In part, scholars take this stance because the specimens appear to function as language; it is only our inability to unlock and retrieve the information contained within that makes their meaning inaccessible.

The notable exception to this list is the Codex Seraphinianus. Written and illustrated by Luigi Serafini between the years 1976–78, it seemingly describes an imaginary world using an imaginary language. Indeed, the 360+ page manuscript of pictures and text is totally devoid of linguistic content, a fact recently confirmed by the artist himself during a talk in May 2009, at the Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles (Stanley, 2010). His intent, he explains, was to produce in the reader the same awe and bafflement children experience during the preliterate phase before learning to read. For children, letters represent a threshold of mystery, that place inhabited by adults that allows them to encode their world and control it. Children, lacking the necessary tools for unlocking the meaning of letters (until taught to read), are confident (if not over-awed) that letters hold the key to this adult power. It is this same confidence (that letters possess access to meaning) we experience when faced with a written language, however fictive, that intelligence may be uncovered where none may be found.

Inscrutable visual depictions of language are not uncommon in the realm of modern art, where text began to make incursions into the visual world with artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, Cy Twombly, and Paul Klee. Perhaps where asemic writing has had a more far-reaching effect is in the realm of science fiction and fantasy. For it is within these genres where the depictions of language provide a means for inducing an “authentic” sense of otherness, where the curious sensations for encountering and exploring the unknown are key to the narrative construction and implication. When we are presented with entities alien to us through their physical form, or their outright “alien-ness” in action or culture, we more readily accept the certainty of their difference when presented with a writing system that indicates, or signifies, intelligence (one usually vastly superior to our own). We “recognize” as language the depictions we are presented with, but we cannot understand them. Like children, we are rendered helpless when confronting these peculiar orthographies, yet awed and fascinated by their representation and implication.

These depictions challenge the idea of *differance* as put forth by Derrida (Derrida, 1973), in his formulation of deconstruction because the text in these particular cases privileges the physicality of language over the intangibility of its production during speech. Which is to say, the confirmation of meaning in its written form takes precedent over verbal utterance. This visual “otherness” found in such works of fantasy and science fiction grants credibility to the narrative they are a part of because the visual tangibility of the language supersedes verbal understanding. From a hypermediated standpoint, we, as audience members, are made acutely aware of our position outside of the narrative because we, unlike many of the protagonists of the story, often have no recourse for reading the text with which we are confronted. We can enjoy such texts for their formal qualities, but we cannot fathom their intent. It is through the rendering of graphic letterforms (in both denotation and connotation) that this hegemony is called into question. For although we appreciate the text as a container of information, in truth the text in these instances are merely images bereft of functional meaning other than to suggest something they do not contain. The meaning we receive is a mirage.

Where text seeks to capture and contain verbal productions (its first and foremost function), it is the visual conundrum of text that contains no meaning where notions of difference begin to falter. While it can be argued that the contention to challenge linguistic philosophies is not the chief concern of these works, nor do all such narrative efforts go to such extremes to convene and maintain this state of otherness, those narratives that do, often rely on visual manifestations to create a sense of reality that is more familiar and therefore more believable. For this reason, and much like the children we are invited to become, we suspend our sense of certainty in order to become immersed in the story the visual narrative weaves. Because these systems are graphic and appear complex in pattern and configuration, they mimic what we understand language to look like. The tangibility of these alien configurations we take to be language makes the narrative space in which they occur more veracious. We cannot read these languages, but we do infer that there is intelligence behind their façade. Thus, there is an implied semantic load where one does not exist, and the visual representation becomes the privileged means of accessing meaning. For Barthes, the *ataraxia* he finds in the Japan of his *Empire of Signs*, is perhaps most akin to that here. To quote:

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object . . . so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also – though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these

being the major gestures of Western discourse) – isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan (Barthes, 1982).

When confronted with signs the way Barthes is, we may only contemplate these signs as philosophical constants without ever gaining clear insight into their ultimate signification. The system we create relies on the narrative world in which we participate as mediated passenger.

While asemic writing is fairly novel, and its status as an art form only recently established (there are websites and Facebook groups devoted to the subject), examples abound in the various media forms that science fiction and fantasy generate, especially when they seek to create veracity of otherness. Comic books and graphic novels, as unique forms of art that rely heavily on the visual and pictorial to achieve narrative, were perhaps the first such modern media to depend heavily on these visual devices, as can be seen in early panels from Superman. The caped crusader is illustrated penning his thoughts on a rather grandiose scale of stone tablets in his Fortress of Solitude, but does so in his native tongue in order to obfuscate the nature of his message. Why the superhero would need to commit anything to pen and paper may beg the question of his super abilities and his super memory, but what we observe in the panel verifies what we have been assured simultaneously – we will never know what secrets are contained within these enigmatic letterforms (though we are superficially informed vis-à-vis his soliloquy) (Miller, 1958). Again, we are cast outside the narrative matrix of the story because while we can see what is being written, we have no way of accessing its implication. There is undoubtedly little danger of anyone ever reading this text (or comprehending it) because the message only appears to have meaning where meaning is in fact absent.

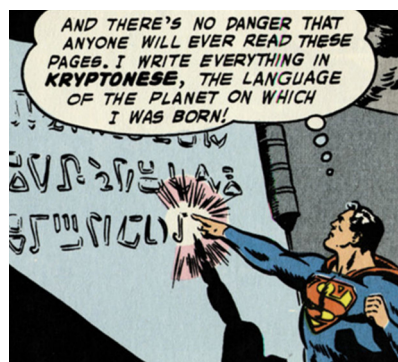


Figure 2: *Superman*

To borrow examples from the mediated worlds of the believably unreal, the Star Wars universe spawned a staggering number of alien species for our media consumptive contemplation. While the first movie in the trilogy introduced us to worlds and creatures beyond our imagining, it was during the third installment, Return of the Jedi, where we first glimpse the alien script that passes for language on a monitor screen aboard the second Death Star. Confirmed as gibberish by fans and linguists since its first appearance, Aurebesh, as the alphabet was later labeled, has since been developed into a full fledged alphabet (including punctuation marks), and surfaces throughout the franchise, most notably in video games where players are tantalized with visual fragments throughout game play. Again, these

instances are relatively meaningless, but they do bolster the illusion of worlds and creatures that surely must understand what the amalgamation of glyphs convey.

Knowing full well that that curious audience members will often attempt to decrypt what they discover during the course of entertainment, writers and artists will often play games with loyal followers by using what appears to be asemic writing in their works, but are in fact simple substitution codes. Two examples for this popular form of encoding come from the British television show *Dr Who* and the American cartoon *Futurama*, where what seem to be alien languages are in fact enciphered forms of English. So, while the language in question is not asemic (because it ultimately contains meaning), it is a visualized form of language that lends mystery, or an element of fun, to narrative composition. The intent here is twofold. One intention is to give the illusion of “alienness” to the storyline, vis-à-vis a visually graphic indicator; the other is to increase the entertainment value between the media and the audience by providing a message that can be shared by diligent audience members, no matter how much it makes them aware of the media in which they are participating. In so doing, however, it does strengthen the bond between audience and the narrative medium because the “game” of decipherment allows the audience to “virtually” participate in a world to which they have become attached. This, too, creates an interesting sense of heterotopic otherness because those who have uncovered the meaning of the text now possess knowledge that in some way sets them apart from their confreres. They now belong to a distinct group of audience members in the know (so to speak), yet still excluded from the narrative reality of the mediated world they observe.

Where asemic writing lacks meaning beyond its visual orthographic presentation, something akin to abstract art some have argued, constructed languages, or conlangs, stand out in contradistinction because they attempt to produce meaningful languages using linguistic structures and rules, some going so far as to produce letterforms and visually typographic representation. Conlangs are endeavors at creating a language from scratch, sidestepping the cultural and evolutionary tactics such activities usually must undergo in order to produce a facsimile of a functioning language. For this reason, conlangs are purely artificial in that they do not have as users any natural born speakers in the group, nor do they have historical reference of use or origin – they are pure products of invention. Many conlangs are often experimental attempts made by linguists, or the linguistically curious, to test hypothesis concerning the nature of language and communication. These can include constructions that can test temporality, infixing, and/or agglutination to name a few constructions. Esperanto is perhaps one of the most well-known conlangs in popular use, as well as an example of an agglutinative construction.

While Esperanto may have been an attempt at constructing a politically neutral language (however naïve that may seem in retrospect), it is not asemic because it relies on an existing alphabet to encode information. For the consideration of conlangs, perhaps the most famous to enter into popular culture is the Elvish tongue Quenya (and its derivations) created by the linguist and writer J R R Tolkien, for the *Lord of the Rings* series. The languages Tolkien developed for the Ring cycle were experiments in linguistics (and orthography) long before the actual story came into being, in effect, the languages created what we conceive of as Middle Earth. Early Quenya was asemic in nature because at the time of its publication, only Tolkien knew what the written text explicated. However, since its insertion into our mediated environment, it has seen tremendous growth over the last sixty years, especially amongst ardent and dedicated fans who have helped craft and broaden the language of a fictional time and place, going so far as to create a dictionary and further grammatical elaborations of the

Elvish tongue based on Tolkien's rudimentary notes and examples (Tolkien, 2004). This graphic conlang has become quite popular; we can now not only buy clothes and cards with Elvish inscription, we can even adorn our bodies with Elvish tattoos to show our allegiance and belonging to a fictional world. Interestingly, we now have evidence of a few heterotopic insertions from within a visual narrative spawning a new reality, at least amongst die-hard fans that chose to learn the language and incorporate it into their quotidian lives.

Another example of a media captivating conlang, if somewhat dissonant in its guttural production, is the language of Klingon developed for the Star Trek universe. As a way to engender authenticity in an alien culture, what began as no more than a few barked and growling commands spoken by Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott in the 1979 Star Trek: The Motion Picture, Klingon has since become a full-fledged language consisting of its own alphabet, language lessons, and dictionaries to help interested parties learn this otherworldly form of communication. The Klingon alphabet does not encode by substitution, as seen in previous examples above, but gives typographic form to the actualities of the Klingon language. What is most salient about the letterforms of Klingon are the semblances they share to the weapons favored by this most warlike of alien creatures, particularly the bat'leth seen several times during the course of the various franchised TV shows and movies. From a graphic design point of view, this derivative process is a fundamental design procedure where some item is used in an iterative fashion to create semblance and cohesion within a design environment. This is clearly the case here when one makes a visual inventory from within the various narratives of the Star Trek universe and, consequently, begins to see the progressive development of the visual language in conjunction with the expanding variety of weaponry that the Klingons seem to have. What is particularly fascinating from both a design and linguistic perspective is the number of typeface varieties in design and use for Klingon. This not only indicates the powerful influence visual connotations have for the seriously vested fan in promulgating the visual narrative of mediated utterance; it also provides evidence of where *differance* and difference elide within visual narrative confines. Here we can see the development of language concurrent to the visual form it manifests, oftentimes the visual representation preceding the verbal utterance.

The most recent visualization of alien speech comes in the form of coffee ring-type blotches as circular linguist signifiers from the movie *Arrival*. In a film wholly devoted to the interpretation and understanding of an alien language (albeit fictionalized), the director and artists involved (including a linguist) go to great lengths to outline how the process of unpacking meaning found in extraterrestrial languages might work. Aliens have traveled to Earth to ask for our help, but in order to render our aid, we must first learn to use their language, a tool that deforms time to the users' reality. Debates of the merits and demerits of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis aside (the notion of linguistic determinism and one's primary language affecting one's reality), what is of particular interest here is that in order to explain how the language comes to mean something is akin to the magician explaining away his tricks. We are invited to understand their world by using the very thing that helps them communicate with us – their language. The believability of their arrival is predicated on the one thing that brings verisimilitude to their narrative – the codification of their written word.

What makes codes and conlangs germane to this discussion is that while these are no longer strictly asemic in the purest sense, they do offer a rich deposit for the self-conscious seeing that hypermediacy avails itself of when confronting the impact of technology on our expanding art forms. Hypermediacy calls to attention that moment when technology divides the audience from the entertainment it enjoys (much like Barthes and his notion of Japan),

creating a self-awareness that delineates and separates the technology and the media it conveys. In effect this rupture of the narrative flow obliges us to become self-conscious of our position outside and apart from the reality created within and by the narrative. This is striking given that the very thing that goes into creating veracity within the narrative also produces the very thing that can shake us out of our mediated reverie because we cannot access the meaning it seems to imply.

When discussed in conjunction with asemic writing, conlangs offer interesting comparative features for heterotopic analysis, or that split between the otherness that the unknown provides in visual narrative. Asemic writing deliberately interrupts this paradigm by causing us to pause and reassess our involvement with media. We cannot, nor will we ever know what is underneath the meaning of the text with which we are presented, and therefore we stand apart from it and its significance. In point of fact, the role of asemic writing can be seen as the betrayal of text in favor of image. Conlangs seem to serve two purposes. One, they are used by linguists to ascertain various facts about the nature and construction of languages in order to better understand how languages operate in describing the world or for uncovering the mechanics behind how and why a language functions the particular way it does. The other use is similar but rather than understand the nature of language, in general, conlangs of this variety attempt to create and establish the nature and construct of the society that uses them in order to produce a narrative environment we can come to believe in and trust as an alternate reality.

To further illuminate this distinction, graphic designers are taught to conceive of text as image (words devoid of their linguistic representation), in order to later compound the meaning inherent to what the text stands for by marrying words to graphic representation (colour, image, etc.) and typographic nuance (typeface choice, spacing, etc.). In crafting communication, graphic designers consider the linguistic container beyond its semantic substance, in effect, attempting to expand the semantic load of language using visual modulation. While designers create intentional meaning through formal concessions, asemic writing produces the image of textual abstraction where meaning is an occluded facsimile.

Asemic writing, and those that are its practitioners and adherents, ask that we consider the typographic container of language as a façade for semantic substance. As an art form, it can be debated that this post-literate form is somehow an extension of abstract art, where modern and contemporary art have increasingly relied on words to impart the meaning beneath the surface. Asemic writing asserts that the emotional and aesthetic content are enough. That whatever ataraxia this imposes, we are given pause to contemplate the significance of meaninglessness as a meaningful pursuit.

Conversely, when used to bolster the portrayal of the “other,” especially in science fiction and fantasy media, this heterotopic container requires us to accept the visual manifestation of language as demonstration of meaning above and beyond our own understanding. Suspended between true comprehension and graphic appreciation, we are lulled into the mediated state of believability necessary for our acceptance of the extraordinary. We cannot know what is not there, but we take great pleasure in trying.

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Corresponding author: Law Alsobrook

Contact email: lcalsobrooki@vcu.edu