

The A B C of Visual Theory

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"The ABC of Visible Theory", an encyclopedic essay describing the interrelations between typography, language, and thought, connects the "paraphernalia of the text" with every cultural association which can be brought to bear on these practices. The essay uses historical, fictional, scientific, and other discourses to discuss electricity, font types, strategies, saints, books, journals, paintings, and article titles, language systems, ontology, names, technology, utopia, psychic states, newspapers, games, clichés, fictional animals, typescripts, rules, emotions, institutions, sociological categories, art movements, history, and self-reflexive comment. This enormous web of associations usually lay dormant in typographic effects and if we followed each and every association mentioned in this ABC, we would have to contend with the reservoir of our entire culture. By offering only one or two entries for each letter of the alphabet Visible Theory remains potential. The lay-out and design of this piece encourages comparison between entries and dissolves the apparent opposition between visual images and thinking. Just as each topic suggests a reservoir of cultural history, the over-all design and the lay-out of each individual entry connects to webs of associations.

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Temptation of the alphabet:
 to adopt the succession of letters in order to
 link fragments is to fall back on what
 constitutes the glory of language
 (and what constituted Saussure's despair):
 an unmotivated order... which is not arbitrary
 (since everyone knows it, recognizes it,
 and agrees on it). The alphabet is euphoric:
 no more anguish of "schema", no more
 rhetoric of "development", no more twisted
 logic, no more dissertations!
 Roland Barthes (*Roland Barthes*, p.147)

Agate Rule, The :

Constraints Encourage Invention I. The most influential nineteenth-century American newspapers forbade typographical embellishments, requiring all advertising to be set in neat rows of microscopic agate type. James Gordon Bennett, publisher of the New York *Herald*, insisted that this rule forced merchants to concentrate on what was being said rather than how. In fact, the agate rule prompted attention to typesetting's possibilities. Robert Bonner, owner of the competing New York *Ledger*, proved the most inventive, exploring (long before Warhol) the effects of repetition by reproducing a single ad for seven full six-columned pages. Bonner also used the combination of strategically placed capital letters and the *Herald's* columns to create highly visible

Apollinaire:

Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*

were certainly not the first, but

remain the most famous examples of

concrete poetry. More important, he saw

how advertising would reorganize the relation-

ship between language and typography. This

insight began as a scandalous intuition of

advertising's beauty: "You read prospect-

uses, catalogues, and posters which shout

aloud/Here is poetry this morning and for

prose there are the newspapers" ("Zone," 1913). Its subsequent formulation

made his point more explicitly: "Our intelligence must get used to understanding

synthetically and ideographically instead of analytically and discursively." By rapidly

juxtaposing images of religion, business, and politics, his poetry effectively identified the

twentieth century's

three systems of social

organization, each of

which has generated

a form crucial to typog-

raphy's emergence:

he gloss, advertising,

and all propaganda.

acrostics spelling out L-E-D-G-E-R. Ironically, the typographically austere Bennett was given to massive publicity stunts, like his reporter Henry Stanley's expedition to find the "lost" English missionary David Livingstone. Stanley's trip furthered the mapping of Africa, the filling in of spaces previously blank.

Boredom: Although writing and reading are conducted under the aegis of communication, both in fact are shadowed by the threat of boredom. Writers procrastinate because of the tedium involved in expressing plainly what occurred to them suddenly. They also must work to forestall the reader's ennui, anticipating it, heading it off, knowing that at any moment, the book (or magazine, or newspaper, or journal) may be closed. As children gradually move from books with only pictures to books with only type, boredom's menace increases. For several generations of Americans, the transition was the Hardy Boys series, a jumping off place for forays into uncharted regions of pure type. These books contained only a single image, a drawing appearing as a frontispiece, but illustrating a crucial incident occurring far into the story. For young readers, this picture was an *oasis*, something to look forward to while trekking through the terrifyingly unillustrated pages: it sustained hope, and like a magnet, pulled readers through what might otherwise have been put aside. For adults, chapter breaks assume the same role: resting places where one can let down attention.

Barthes:

Of all contemporary theorists, he was most haunted by that he called "panic boredom". He read less than other academics, but wrote more. Increasingly, he produced books that by avoiding long stretches of unbroken type, responded to his own repudiation of the dissertation. His late work's apparent heterogeneity conceals a persistent effort to introduce typographic

Brecht: Like Barthes, he knew that

pleasure and attentiveness were related.

"From the first", he wrote in 1949, "it has

been the theatre's business to entertain

people, as it also has of all the other arts.

It is this business which always gives it its

particular dignity; it needs no other passport

than fun, but this it has got to have".

Working in the theater, he confronted a

situation the exact reverse of the book: the

spell of the uninterrupted tableaux

Cinema: As a return to pictorial narrative, cinema inevitably redressed the modern ascendancy of print. Like books, movies marginalize the excluded mode, assigning it to fixed positions: while books often herd illustrations together into one or more special sections, commercial filmmaking restricts writing's appearance to the credits and an occasional establishing shot ("San Francisco", proclaims the overlay at the beginning of *The Maltese Falcon*, just in case Le Bay is unfamiliar). More significantly, cinema popularizes collage, repeatedly demonstrating modern technology's limitless capacity to redistribute and recombine its representations. Indeed, while Hollywood moviemaking minimizes collage, its dominant form (montage) is the special case,

inventiveness. *S/Z*, *Roland Barthes*, *A Lover's Discourse*, *The Empire of Signs* all look strange: they contain italicized type, Roman type, works printed in all caps, numbered fragments, starred paragraphs, marginal gloss, maps, photos, samples of handwriting, etc. The unparagraphed, conventionally punctuated page of type comes to seem, by its willed absence, its forced repression, a figure of death.

enchanted, fostering not boredom but uncritical identification. As a solution, he introduced print (in titles preceding individual scenes), thereby replacing representation with formulation. By the time of his third feature film, *Une femme est une femme* (1961), Godard had adopted the same tactic. As his hero and heroine argue, a series of comments appear on the screen:

Emile takes Angela at her word because he loves her

Angela lets herself be caught in the trap because she loves him

Because they love each other, everything will go wrong for Emile and Angela

They have made the mistake of thinking they can go too far

Because their love is so mutual and eternal.

achievable only by strictly adhering to a carefully policed continuity grammar, designed precisely to overcome the cinema's inherent capacity for spatial and temporal discontinuity. Retroactively, therefore, film exposes the mobility of print, its broken relationship with referent, author, and "original" context: the typesetter becomes the continuity girl, charged with controlling the letters' potential scattering: *Constructivism*: Of the early twentieth-century avant gardes, the Constructivists displayed by far the most interest in typography, concerning themselves with posters, bookmaking, parade decorations, banners, films, and cartoons — all reconceived not only as forms of mass communication and Agitprop, but also as "art-objects". "Engineers create new forms", proclaimed the banner draped over Tatlin's famous *Model for the Monument to the Third International*, and the Constructivist redefinition of the artist-as-engineer expressed itself in an enthusiasm for technology. "His poems weren't spoken", Blaise Cendrars said of Mayakovsky, "his poems weren't written, they were designed". In "How to Make Verses", Mayakovsky himself encouraged poets to treat their work as film montage, by utilizing typographical experimentation to create a printed *mis-en-scène*.

dandyism: With its provocative manner, attention to surfaces (newly labeled “the signifier”), aestheticized disposition, and oppositional hedonism, poststructuralism can be understood as a later manifestation of dandyism, which as Baudelaire observed, “appears above all in periods of transition”. Barthes, in particular, is the dandy *par excellence*, finally making explicit in autobiography and interviews his own chronic need for the new. “In a given historical situation — of pessimism and rejection — it is the intellectual class as a whole which, if it does not become militant, is virtually

a dandy” (*Roland Barthes*, p. 106). Dandyism represents opposition *tout court*; while it may be enlisted by both left and right, it remains apolitical, characterizable only as profoundly undemocratic. Its target is always mass taste and that constituency’s principal tool, assimilation. Thus in the late twentieth century, with books, newspapers and magazines long established, dandyism flaunts alternate typographies: *Glas’s* two columns, *A Lover’s Discourse’s*, marginalia. In the mid-nineteenth century, by contrast, with mass printing still in its adolescence, Baudelaire, surrounded by painters, restricted his costume to the most severe blacks, thereby making himself an icon of what still seemed radical: the rigor of print.

E *l e c t r i c i t y :*

What happens when “alphabetic man” becomes “electrical man”? Will induction and deduction, made possible by writing (as Havelock, Ong, and Goody have shown), give way to *conduction*, thinking as a kind of transportation? In his “Preface” to *Un Coup de Dés*, Mallarmé invoked

precisely this metaphor, referring to his own sprinkled words whose appearance on the page anticipated the computer screen:

[The poem is] without novelty except for the spacing out of the reading. The “whites” indeed take on an importance, are striking at first sight; ordinarily versification required them around like silence, to the extent that a lyrical piece or one of few feet occupies about a third of the leaf in the middle; I do not transgress this measure, only disperse it. The paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws, accepting the succession of others, and, as it is not a question, as it always is, of regular sonorous strokes or lines of verse rather, of prismatic subdivisions of the Idea, for the moment of their appearance and while their co-operation in some spiritual setting lasts, for reasons of verisimilitude it is in variable positions to, or far from, the latent conductor wire that the text asserts itself.

Epigraphs:

New techniques repressed by a culture often appear first in less well guarded marginal zones. Because it is regarded as less serious and its experiments less consequential, art thus moves more quickly than science. The university, on the other hand, perhaps because of its own responsible self-image, remains intransigently resistant to developments rapidly assimilated by the rest of society. Thus, while MTV, advertising, TV news, and pop music (especially rap and disco) have long since appropriated the collage aesthetic generated nearly a century ago by Cubism, most academic writing adheres to nineteenth-century discursive practices. In the last decade, however the epigraph has flowered among even the most conservative critics. As quotations mount up at articles' beginnings and section breaks, collage juxtaposition begins to sneak in. When the chosen quotations, shining with the particular brightness of unmounted stones, begin to overwhelm the pallid texts they introduce, conventional dissertations have begun to undermine themselves. Epigraphing is the Trojan Horse of the traditional essay.

F

Footnote : dedication, acknowledgement, preface, table of contents, chapter headings, epigraphs, footnotes, appendices, bibliography, index — the paraphernalia of the text. What happens to writing when these assume greater importance? Historically, the attending apparatus increased in direct proportion to a text's sacralization, with the Bible prompting the most material. Only recently have secular writings (other than Greek and Latin works and a handful of classic authors like Shakespeare) seem entitled the massive annotation. At first, only "primary" writing (*i.e.*, literature) appeared worthy of it. Now, however, it gathers around even non-fiction, signaling its "prestige." For example, the University of Minnesota's Theory and History of Literature series typically aggrandizes its chosen texts with introductions and footnotes nearly equaling the works' own length: Peter Burger's slim 105-page *Theory of the Avant-Garde* comes equipped with 77 complete pages of foreword, notes, bibliography, and index. Barthes's *S/Z* parodies the accumulation of textual apparatus while also citing every word of *Sarrasine* at least twice. It violates one of commentary's last modesties, that while an analysis of a poem may exceed its object, an analysis of a novel should not. In its length alone, *S/Z* thus becomes a prophetic work, pointing towards something beyond even Borges's reviews of imaginary books: footnotes to unwritten texts.

Fraktur : Typography-as-Ideology. The Nazi resurrection of Fraktur type, illegible but prized for its "German-ness", symbolizes a totalitarian politics that encouraged attention to style rather than content. (The concluding lines to Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "This is

the situation of politics which Facism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.") Just as Hitler's speech manner (and nighttime settings) distracted audiences from his message, Fraktur conveyed only a vaguely authentic folkishness. Almost never used to communicate important information, it was suppressed by the German military and intelligence services for their own work. When early victories encouraged them to look beyond Germany's borders, the Nazis, quickly recognizing the usefulness of a plainer, more "European" style, banned Fraktur on 3 January 1941 as a "Jewish invention".

Gloss: While it begins as a gesture of reverence towards prized texts either sacred (the Scriptures) or secular (*The Aeneid*), glossing inevitably undermines the authority of the works it purports to serve. At first the treachery is graphic: the swelling commentary, appearing in the margins or even between the lines, crowds the object text and renders it increasingly illegible. More important, by demonstrating not

G

only the possibility but the necessity of interpretation, glossing shifts attention from the revered work's silent decisiveness to its mute ambiguity. Inevitably, some Church leaders at the Council of Trent called for the suppression of the Bible itself, which was to be encountered only through approved commentaries. What would a civilization be like in which all primary texts had disappeared and only their glosses remained? This science fiction *donnée* in fact constitutes the working premise of psychoanalysis, which seeks to recover lost incidents inferable only from the patient's retroactive interpretations.

HUMUMENT, A: sub-titled “A Treated Victorian Novel”. Tom Phillips’s book finds new narratives, fragments, dialogues, lyrics, and meditations by painting over (to leave only certain words exposed) W.H. Mallock’s 1892 *A Human Document*. On the first page, Phillips, primarily a painter, leaves legible, scattered across Mallock’s page where they happened to appear in entirely other syntaxes, these words:

The following

sing

I

a

book.

a book

of

art

of

mind

art

and

that

which

he hid

reveal

I

An allegory of every present’s relationship to its past, which it rearranges, screens through the palimpsest of accumulated interpretations, memories, stories, amnesia, ideological revisions. For many people, what is Shakespeare now but a phrase (“To be or not to be”) whose context has receded? The present as a treated book, read for purposes other than its author(s) intended.

Identity:

Postmodernism’s founding problem involves the copy, increasingly available from the modern technology that begins with print. Borges’s Pierre Menard reproduces portions of the *Quixote*, Duchamp signs a urinal identical to one found in a bathroom, Warhol issues Campbell Soup cans, rap producers make “new” songs from sampled extracts of recognizable hits.

Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" remains the most profound discussion of this development; poststructuralism, with its faith in citation, has only started to implement its ideas.

index: As Jack Goody has pointed out, certain written devices like the list and the index enable a kind of thinking impossible for a purely oral culture. Ironically, our own indexes do not always correspond to our most "advanced" knowledge. In structuralist books, for example, that boldly announce the death of the author, all but the most conscientiously produced indexes remained organized around not concepts, but proper names.

J

Journal of Typographic Research : Constraints Encourage Invention

II. What would an article for this journal be like if it restricted its sources to work previously published in the same place? Some candidates:

- Typography without Words
- Patterned Note-Taking: An Evaluation Readable/Writable/Visible
- One Second of Reading Why Duchamp Loved Words
- The Typography of El Lissitzky At the Edge of Meaning The Typographic Element in Cubism, 1911-1915
- 'No, says the signified': The 'Logical Status' of Words in Painting Biblioclasm: Derrida and His Precursors
- Visible Language in Contemporary Culture Typography: Evolution = Revolution One Hundred Essential Sight Words
- The Effects of Changes in Layout and Changes in Wording on Preferences for Instructional Text
- The Changing Responsibilities of the Typographic Designer
- Selected Theoretical Texts from Letterists How Typewriters Changed Correspondence
- Poetry as a Means for the Structuring of a Social Environment
- Communication Theory and Typographic Research The Future for Books in the Electronic Era
- The Development of Visual Poetry in France
- The Visual Editing of Texts

Each of these titles seems at once optional and necessary; how can any one be eliminated? How can any article use them all? (*Roland Barthes*, p.100: "not to have read Hegel would be an exorbitant defect for a philosophy teacher, for a Marxist intellectual, for a Bataille specialist. But for me? Where do my reading duties begin?") The information explosion demands a shift from coverage to concept formation. What would happen if for one year, *Visible Language* required its authors to cite only from work published here? A forced economy, a moratorium on "new" ideas, an experiment in ecological recycling and combination.

K

Kanji: Saussurian linguistics insisted on each language's completion, its adequacy to its user's needs. Thus even languages with much smaller vocabularies than English are regarded as no less finished, just as a game with only four possible moves is not defined as a stunted version of chess. No insight proved more central to the structuralist project, best exemplified by Lévi-Strauss's critique of "primitivism" as an ideological tool. What can we make, however, of a writing system whose hybrid difficulty seems to inhibit its users? As Edwin Reischauer argues, the Japanese had "the bad luck" to discover first a writing system (Chinese ideograms, called *Kanji* in Japanese) designed for the exact opposite of their own highly inflected language. The result is the contemporary compromise: four writing systems, used interchangeably, often intertwined in a single text — *kanji*, the English alphabet, *katakana* (a phoneticized syllabic script), and *hiragana* (used primarily for grammatical distinctions). For Barthes (see *The Empire of Signs*), a *lucky* accident that continuously calls attention to the materiality, the elegance of the signifier, and thus the founding principle of Japanese civilization.

Jerome, St. : Simultaneously translating the Bible (into Latin) and inventing a punctuation system, he anticipated found poetry by breaking the given text into reading units, each lasting as long as either its sense or the imaginary reader's breath. This method is called stichometry, and strung out on a page, the resulting weave (one of Barthes's metaphors for writing) evokes that word's etymology: *stitching*. Fourteen centuries later, in the second half of the 1800's American publicity changed profoundly with the introduction of lavishly illustrated, carefully designed newspaper ads created by the makers of sewing machines.

Louie, Louie:

The Kingsmen's 1963 hit version depended enormously on the evasion of printing. By not reproducing the lyrics on either single or album cover, the group insured that a confused, but imaginative listener would hear as vaguely salacious what in fact was a clumsy attempt to imitate Calypso's pidgin English ("Me catch the ship across the sea"). In doing so, the band had intuited a classic strategy of all intellectual vanguards: the use of tantalizing mystification. Lacan's "Imaginary" and "Symbolic", "the mirror stage", "The unconscious is structured like a language"; Derrida's "deconstruction", "grammatology", "différance", "There is no outside the text", etc. — these terms and phrases, while committed to writing, remained elusive, inchoate, quasi-oral charms. As such they enticed, beckoned, fostered work. Lacan explicitly pointed to the paradox: at one moment in his year-long seminar on "The Purloined Letter", knowing full well that almost no one in the enormous lecture hall had actually *read* Poe's story (since by that time, Lacan himself had become a celebrity, provoking curiosity among many people who had little interest in his subject matter), he turned and addressed his audience:

We find ourselves before this singular contradiction — I don't know if it should be called dialectical — that the less you understand the better you listen. For I often say to you very difficult things, and I see you hanging on my every word, and I learn later that you did not understand. On the other hand, when one tells you simple things, almost too familiar, you are less attentive. I just make this remark in passing, which has its interest like any concrete observation. I leave it for your mediation.

M

Middle? No. :

With its even number of letters, the 26-character Roman alphabet, the central organizing system of Western civilization, has itself no center. A sign of secularization? Significantly, most ancient alphabets afforded other possible calculations: the Phoenician (19 characters), Old Hebrew (19), Early Greek (21), and Etruscan (17).

The modern writing systems, on the other hand, progenitors of philosophy, are centerless: Classical Greek (20), Early Latin (20), Arabic (28). In *The Empire*

Morris, William

(his typographical experiments, his belief that a beautiful house and a beautiful book are the most important goals of art, his furthering of the traditional connection between radicalism and printing);

of *Signs*, Barthes points to the
 uneasiness engendered by
 quadrangular, centerless cities
 like Los Angeles and to
 the paradox of Tokyo: a
 metropolis organized as a center
 (the Emperor's palace) that
 remains forbidden,
 surrounded by walls and trees,
 openly imaginary.

Lest the reader think that
 this entry represents an evasion,
 a failure to come up with
 appropriate entries for M and N
 by themselves, the following
 adumbrations must suffice:

N

Mr. Mxyzptlk

(Superman's nemesis, a parody of the similarly consonantless name of God, JHVH);

Manifestoes

(Futurist/Constructivist manifestoes as typographic pioneering, poststructuralist writing as assuming manifesto forms: hyperbole, volatility, graphic experimentation);

Memory

(analogized both to writing as in Freud's "mystic writing pad", and to its opposite, as in the ancient mnemonic of memory palaces that associated items to be remembered with images);

Navajo

(the rare language used by American marines for radio broadcast in the South Pacific; known by fewer than two dozen non-Navajos, it avoided the need for further encoding; the Japanese never deciphered it);

Naming

(Derrida's "signature effect", used as a research procedure in *Glas* and *Sign-sponge*);

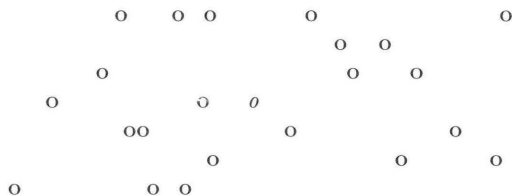
Notation

(musical vs. written — their adequacy to oral forms of jazz and regional dialects).

Oulipo : Constraints Encourage Invention III. Oulipo: an acronym for Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop for potential Literature), a group founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. Oulipo writers (among them Italo Calvino), insisted on the bankruptcy of traditional modes, experimented with fantastically rigorous generative devices which Le Lionnais's first Manifest argued stimulated invention and discovery. Queneau also explained:

What is the objective of our work? To propose new “structures” to writers, mathematical in nature, or to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures that will contribute to literary activity: props for inspiration as it were, or rather in a way, aids for creativity.

The N + 7 composition method replaces every noun in a given text with the seventh noun occurring after it in a dictionary. With multiple-choice plots (fully developed by Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*), the reader chooses at every fork which path to pursue: instructed at one juncture, "if you wish to know the rest, go to 20",



he follows directions only to learn that “There is no rest and the story is finished”. The most notorious Oulipo device, the Lipogram, requires writing without one or more letters, the supreme example being Georges Perec’s *La Disparition*, a long novel deprived of the letter *e*, the fulfillment of Borges’s “prodigious idea of a book wholly impervious to chance”. More than simply a late version of surrealism, Oulipo represents a remotivation of traditional mysticism’s obsession with the mathematics of the alphabet. The Oulipo writers were not cabalists; they did not expect their methods to reveal the universe’s hidden truths. With them, pseudo-science became practical aesthetics, a way of getting started, a serious game without metaphysical consequences. Similarly, Derrida’s puns and coincidental etymologies serve only as sifting devices, vehicles for filtering the massive wash of information for traces of possible knowledge, a prospecting tool designed to locate that hidden region where two apparently discrete discourses share a common vocabulary: “Genet” as poet’s name/ “*genêt*” as wild flower → “the flowers of rhetoric” and botany (*Glas*); the single word “race” is discovered to connect the problems of racism and the arms race.

Of rock's three revolutionary moments (Elvis: 1954-1956; The Beatles: 1962-1964; and Punk: 1976-1978), each of which spawned hordes of amateur garage bands, only the last occurred after the general dissemination of cheap photocopying. The poster advertising made possible by this technology characteristically depended on a *bricolage* of appropriated images and letters inspired by Warhol. For the bands who intuited the Constructivist lesson that revolutions must advertise, postermaking served one vital function: it enabled musicians to play primarily original songs, something that the two previous waves had not dared. Further, by calling for skills normally developed in the visual arts, the new possibilities for self-promotion attracted art students away from their traditional alliance with literature into a new partnership with music. With every band having its own graphics designer (in charge of posters, record covers, and fliers), New Wave rock music achieved a postmodern *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Posters:

P

Paysan de Paris: Aragon's surrealist memoir inspired Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. At first glance, it seems tame by today's standards, but the sudden intrusion of typographical difference, in the menus and wine lists and wall posters inserted into the narrative, called attention to the book's frame, thereby anticipating Derrida's

interest in "margins" of every sort. Significantly, from the 55 woodblocks of

Hiroshige's *Tokaido*, a child selects the one in which a snow-covered moun-

tain breaks through the upper border.

Q: **Questionnaire:** Often used as a marketing tool, it could have flourished only in an age of commerce. Its success, however, depends on its being an exception to mass media's normal one-way communication. Appearing amidst sheets of uninterrupted print, the questionnaire's open spaces solicit a reader by providing a space for his reply, *and* by restricting its length (thereby eliminating the principal cause of writer's block, the purely blank page). It follows that all texts laid out with expansive margins seem friendly; they invite an exchange by opening the text to conversation: marginal questions, notes, objections. They convert reading and writing into a serious game, like the one Proust played with his friends: . . . Where would you like to live? Who is your favorite painter? What for you is the definition of happiness?

Rochefort, Joseph: In February 1918, William F. Friedman, director of the U.S. Army's cryptography school, posed for a graduation picture with his students and colleagues, whom he had arranged into a cipher spelling out Bacon's aphorism "Knowledge is power". Coming up short by four people (for a system using heads facing front or sideways), Friedman had to stand in himself for the letter *R*. In 1920, Friedman published *Index of Coincidence and Its Applications in Cryptography*, called the most important book in the field's history; just before World War II, he managed to break the Japanese diplomatic code (Purple) produced by the J Machine or Alphabetical Typewriter. After Pearl Harbor, Friedman's missing four men and letter *R* appeared in a four-man team led by Rochefort, whose cracking of the Japanese naval cipher enabled the United States'

victory at Midway, the decisive naval battle of the Pacific War. If as anthropologist Dan Sperber has suggested, some ideas

spread epidemically (they are “catching”), semiotics’ success derives from its adoption of the vocabulary of cryptography (Greek for “hidden writing”): encoding, decoding, message. A childhood fascination persisting into adulthood (where they appear principally in mystery and spy novels), codes and ciphers are the alphabetic equivalents of the fantasy of invisibility, of power without responsibility, of escape from the censor. From the child’s viewpoint, all writing represents an impenetrable code; acquiring literacy, he learns a system simultaneously efficient and useless, since it arrives “broken” and widely distributed. Only becoming a cryptographer, or an avant gardist working in not-yet-readerly codes, can the adult assume the status he had envied as a child. Hence, too, the appeal of jargon, which allows initiates to communicate to what Stendhal called “the happy few”.

Rasé : By writing the notorious letters “L.H.O.O.Q.” below a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp confirmed Sontag’s and Barthes’s point that a caption is worth a thousand pictures: from a theoretical perspective, the added goatee was merely superfluous naughtiness. When however, he subsequently issued and untouched postcard of the *Mona Lisa*, modified by only the single word *Rasé* (shaved), Duchamp managed something more radical: with the sequence of readymades, he effectively assumed ownership of Leonardo’s image itself.

S/Z : At the exact midpoint of his book about Balzac's *Sarrasine* and *la Zambinella*, Barthes pauses to examine the S which not only begins the hero's name, but also replaces its usual Z (*Sarrasine* = the conventional French spelling). Z as the "letter of mutation," "an oblique and illicit blade" that "cuts, slashes" and appears in Balzac's name — "the initial of castration," the "geographical inversion" of S's curves. This Oulipoian moment represents Barthes's shift from structuralism's dream of exposing the hidden signified to the post-structuralism method of following the obvious signifier, a move

Technology: As civilization's founding technology, writing inevitably attracted civilization's recurring objection: technology makes things too easy. Writing (as Plato argued) obviates memory. Similarly, photography evades the demands of painting, and the microphone those of the unamplified concert hall. In particular, twentieth-century technologies (film, video, audio recording) eliminate the need for the consecutive complete performance, replacing it as working unit with the "take", the fragment achievable at any point in the piece's making. Post-structuralism's embrace of the fragment, its preference for writing that can be taken up and stopped at different places, represents the equivalent of a recording studio's creation-by-tracks. Just as contemporary music never requires the presence of the whole band, contemporary writing no longer needs the single, elaborated thesis.

initiated (and then aborted) by
 Saussure's investigation of the
 anagrams he found in Latin
 poetry. The premise:
 that language knows
 something; hence Derrida's
 essays generated by etymo-
 logies and puns, the traces left
 by meaning's adventures.

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Utopia: The coincidence of More's work with the first great innovations in printing and papermaking is telling. As a *topos*, "utopia" has always been rhetorical, the very word an effect of homophony: "utopia",

Greek for "no-place", is pronounced the same as "eutopia", "good place". Utopians, therefore, have always been bookish, writing what could not yet be realized. Many have gravitated towards alphabetic, typographic, and spelling reforms: from More's Humanist Circle's Utopian Alphabet, to Morris's Kelmscott Press, to Shaw's new rules for English spelling, utopians have necessarily attended to the only medium in which their work exists. See Barthes on Fourier.

Unconscious, *The*: By *positing the unconscious as behavior's* prime cause, Freud furthered the "*hermeneutics of suspicion*" begun by Marx and Nietzsche. This symptomatic reading strategy regards all discourse as a code whose explicit meanings serve only as decoys. Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Lévi-Strauss — all practice symptomatic reading, looking for what apparently straightforward languages consciously or unconsciously repress. Freud's unconscious is a rebus, a site for the layering and mingling of words, images, and behavior: the Wolf Man's butterfly with yellow stripes switches homonymically from a pear with similar coloring (a "grusha") to a nursery maid with the same name who, by opening her legs, repeats both the movement of the butterfly's wings and the shape of the Roman V, the hour of the patient's chronic depression.

Vertov, Dziga:

The most
important
Constructivist
filmmaker; his
significance
for contempo-
rary theory's
typographical
experiments
could well
derive from a
single diary
entry, dated
1 April 1941:
"What condi-
tions will
guarantee
success?... (2)

W

Wall Street Journal, The :

By eschewing all illustrations (except graphs and sketched portraits) and by holding its advertisers to standardized forms (especially in the prominent notices of security issues, properly called "Tombstones"), it intends to convey high seriousness, a commitment to meaning. It shares this strategy with *U.S. News and World Report*, whose ads often show famous models testifying to their preference for a magazine that has "No fashion, no flair, no style". Barthes once diagnosed this repudiation of art:

on the one side the "thought", object of the message, element of knowledge, transitive or critical force; on the other the "style", ornament, province of luxury and leisure and thus futility, to separate the thought from the style is in some sort to relieve the discourse of its sacerdotal robes, to secularize the message

Whimseys : A nineteenth-century parlor game that made poems (sometimes with rhymes and regular metric schemes) out of given texts especially the Bible, but also Dickens). Thus, from *The Wall Street Journal* :

Everything
except the
boring.”

Or, more modern, *à la*
William Carlos Williams:

John Mulhern, the arbitrager,
Arrested for allegedly
Threatening the life of former
Takeover speculator Ivan F.
Boesky, again agreed to the
Government's deadline for obtaining
An indictment.

McGraw-Hill

surged 4 1/2 to 68

amid speculation

that a restructuring

is in the works.

There were rumors

circulating inside

the company

that it would spin off

all

its
operations

except

Business Week

magazine

X Marks the Spot: The structure of writing is the structure of crime and its detection. A deed is committed, followed by a delay: a reader appears to decode the mysterious marks left behind as a *memento mori*. Hence the inevitable association of the letter X with the mystery story. As the simplest letter to make, the mark of the child or the illiterate, it stands for all the others. More importantly, as the universal mark of cancellation, it represents alphabetic culture's murder of the author, and the resulting liberation of his words. One of Poe's strangest stories, "X-ing a Paragrab", implies a literal version of death-by-the-letter-X. Engaged in a competitive newspaper war, an editor is accused by his rival of excessive reliance on the letter O. He takes the bait and composes a long editorial using as many Os as possible. ("So ho, John! Told you so, you know. . . . Go home to your woods, old owl, — go! You won't? Oh, poh, poh, John, don't do so! You've got to go, you know!") Running out of Os, the typesetter makes the customary substitution for missing letters: "Sx hx, Jxhn! hxw nxw! Txld yxu sx, yxu knxw." The next morning, the town erupts in a furor, but the editorial's author, without explanation, has vanished, never to be seen again.

X

Yak: What do the following have in common: yak, vole, x-ray fish, ibis, umbrella bird, and newt? Answer: they exist almost entirely to accommodate children's alphabet books. (I except the perennials, the zebra and koala bear, which seem to have independent existence outside of such schema.) If the yak did not exist, would we have to invent it for the sake of alphabetic completion? To what extent does an alphabet cause objects, events, behavior, to come into being? If the letter Q exists, do we have to use it? Typographical Playfulness Leading to Scientific Truth I: a nonsense line from *Finnegan's Wake*, "three quarks for Mr. Marks", leads to a definition crucial to contemporary physics. Oddly, no actual quarks have ever been observed; "quark" in colloquial German means "nothing".

Y

Zettel's Traum: the novel-as-typescript, 1,334 pages, atlas size. Like *Ulysses*, Arno Schmidt's novel takes place during a midsummer day, but reduces Joyce's scope to four characters discussing Edgar Allan Poe. *Zettel* = the German translation of Shakespeare's *Bottom* (*Midsummer night's dream*, the Schlegel version); the anatomical *bottom* = the German *Po*. *Zettel* also = the slips of paper on which Schmidt composed, in fragmentary fashion, his novels. *Zettel's Traum* resembles the Rosetta Stone: impenetrable, promising, demoralizing. With its footnotes, glosses, corrections, interlinear additions, multiple columns, drawings, maps, etc., it seems intent on reproducing civilization's complete repertoire of graphic effects. Schmidt worked as a map-maker, and his many essays and novels include a biographical study of Fouqué, the nineteenth-century French geologist who produced rocks and minerals artificially. Schmidt as alchemist, intent on using typography to transform the blank page into an image of the mind at work.

Z

