**Alien Scripts: Pseudo-Writing and Asemisis in Comics and Graphic Novels**

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**Abstract**

‘Asemic writing’ is defined by Tim Gaze as a collection of forms ‘which appears to be writing’, while ‘having no worded meaning’. Asemic forms may bear the hallmarks of writing, either through their shape or organization, but have no specific verbal signification. These signs are typically abstract, geometric glyphs, arranged in linear sequence so as to invite the act of reading, but that do not allow verbal interpretation. The relationship between literacy and asemic signs has been established historically, and many past examples of asemic writing (sometimes described as ‘pseudo-writing’) can be found in historical artefacts which convey a sense of status, power and exclusivity through asemic decoration. Asemic language appears within images in Shaun Tan’s wordless picturebook, *The Arrival* (2006). Tan uses this pseudo-writing to represent a generic foreign language, with the aim of showing a sense of alienation. These images demonstrate that language, when it is not understood, can be isolating. In other examples, asemic writing is used to convey a sense of otherness. Dylan Horricks (2014) uses shading within speech balloons to describe ‘words [that] were not understood by us’. Here, the use of a speech balloon signifies verbal communication, though no verbal meaning is present. Numerous texts contain decipherable alien languages, painstakingly developed by linguists (such as Christine Schreyer’s Kryptonian). Such sign systems can be directly transliterated, offering the readers the challenge of deciphering messages. However, other comics embrace asemisis. These present alien or animal languages that are never intended to contain decipherable messages, and instead convey a sense of otherness through the impossibility of understanding. This chapter will explore the motivations for featuring asemic signs in comics and graphic novels, seeking to consider how meaning is achieved through meaninglessness in indecipherable symbols. (Plagiarized)

**Key Words:** Shaun Tan, The Arrival, Peanuts, Dylan Horricks, Tim Gaze, writing, otherness, transliteration, symbols, communication, xenolinguistics.

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1. **Introduction**

The comic book medium is defined partly by its characteristic treatment of the relationship between words and images. The role of images and written words is usually clearly differentiated, with images presenting subjects and events, and words presenting dialogue. There are occasions on which this distinction is not clear-cut, when readers must employ their verbal skills in the reading of images, or their visual skills in the reading of words. This is particularly the case when glyphic forms have no precise linguistic meaning, and yet are presented to the reader as dialogue.

Tim Gaze identifies a continuum that exists ‘between abstract image and legible writing’, or ‘between text and image’.[[1]](#endnote-1) At one end of the continuum lies ‘legible writing’, which lies beyond ‘asemic writing’, then ‘abstract images’, and finally ‘recognisable images’.[[2]](#endnote-2) ‘Asemic writing’ is defined by Tim Gaze as a form or collection of forms ‘which appears to be writing’, while ‘having no worded meaning’. Asemic forms may bear the hallmarks of writing, either through their shape or organization, but have no specific verbal signification. Visual elements within comic books fall across this whole continuum, but this chapter will specifically address signs that may be identified as ‘asemic’.

Asemic signs are employed in comic books to represent alien or foreign languages, which are incomprehensible to readers and other characters in the comic. Such languages must convey otherness though indecipherability, but must also bear familiar hallmarks of writing to ensure that the reader recognises them as being linguistic.

Gaze’s continuum, and examples of asemic writing, seem to assert difference from image without moving entirely into verbal paradigms. By being, according to Gaze’s continuum, neither figurative nor abstract, and yet having no identifiable linguistic/verbal meaning, this writing asserts its otherness. As a result of its resemblance to writing, the audience may seek connections to language, but will find none. This sense of otherness, combined with visual signifiers of language, makes it ideal for representations of aliens or strange non-human creatures.

It is important to differentiate these asemic alien languages from those which may be translated or transliterated. Superman’s native language, for example, has been presented as ‘Krytonese’ (an alphabet of 118 letters, developed by E. Nelson Bridwell in the 1970s), and since 2000, as ‘Krytptonian’, which may be directly transliterated to English. What differentiates such languages from asemic signs is that they are decipherable. With a little knowledge from elsewhere, readers can interpret the text to find precise meaning. Asemic signs, however, are never intended to be understood. Indeed, even the writer who draws the signs on the page may not know their meaning. They deliberately deny the reader the possibility of reading, or of finding prescribed meaning.

1. **‘The Hallmarks of Language’**

In order to be perceived as language, asemic signs must contain some signifiers of spoken or written forms. This may typically be linear arrangement of similarly-sized shapes. In comics, the convention of using speech balloons, and locating dialogue close to a character’s mouth, are additional signifiers of spoken language. Readers can use these signifiers as indicators of the presence of language, even when no translatable signs are present.

Kevin Huizenga locates asemic signs within speech balloons, thereby transforming otherwise meaningless glyphs into some form of undecipherable spoken language, which we assume has all the properties of speech (such as sound and linguistic meaning). Huizenga is among several comic-book artists who also enclose pictorial forms within speech balloons. He presents shapes within speech balloons which, when located elsewhere, would be deciphered as image rather than text, often with conventional meanings which are subverted or distorted when they appear in the context of speech. In *Curses*, we are invited to consider an alien race whose speech loosely equates to our understanding of three-dimensional geometric shapes – in a way that we can conceive but not fully comprehend.

In Dylan Horricks’ *Incomplete Works*, rough crosshatching is contained within speech balloons to represent a language that is ‘not understood by us in the least’. Its form is so far from any human letters or characters, with none of the visual signifiers of writing, that only its location within speech balloons tells us that it is language. The English narrative tells us that the language is a ‘hissing sound’, suggesting that even the verbal manifestation of this language exhibits no markers of speech. Notably, this example is a representation if sound rather than writing, thereby defying both the conventions of human language and the conventional use of speech balloons, which would not ordinarily contain sound effects.

In Dave Cooper’s alien encyclopaedia (*Weasel*) we see signs that bear many of the hallmarks of familiar languages. The signs are all similarly sizes, they contain variable stroke width, and ascenders and descenders which step from a consistent baseline. We also see features that are common in foreign languages, such as the frequent diacritics, which, for English-speaking readers, enhance the sense that this language is somehow foreign or strange.

Such examples are meaningful in their otherness. The fact that they cannot be deciphered is their most important characteristic. It is in this indecipherability that readers find meaning. The meaning is emotional rather than verbal: an expression of strangeness and uncertainty that is threatening, unnerving, or simply curious.

Asemic signs have a strong sense of otherness when they are accompanied by images that are similarly familiar-yet-strange. Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus* resembles an encyclopedia. Its illustrations are detailed enough to suggest that they are studies of real subjects - as if to connote objective reality – and some are even diagrammatic. They are accompanied by asemic writing. Laid out like an encyclopedia, the form of the book suggests that there is knowledge to be found in its pages. However, this knowledge is kept from us by the indecipherability of the writing.

1. **Pseudowriting and Literacy**

Asemic writing is frequently associated with literacy, illiteracy, or intersections between literacy and illiteracy, as in the process of learning to write. By creating ‘pseudo-writing’, children familiarise themselves with the practice of writing, and many of its conventions, before acquiring familiarity with specific sets of characters.[[3]](#endnote-3) In historical societies with low literacy rates, writing was viewed as ‘part of an elite identity’, symbolising ‘authority’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Asemic writing, in these historical societies, existed to suggest ‘prestige’ to illiterate audiences.[[5]](#endnote-5) Among children learning to write, and the illiterate populations of historical societies, asemic writing is symptomatic of aspirations of literacy.

Historical examples of asemic writing (often referred to, in historical contexts, as ‘pseudo-writing’) can be found in artefacts produced by and for illiterates. As Helène Wittaker observes, Greek Archaic vases occasionally included ‘fake letter-forms’, and personal ornaments from Iron Age Scandanavia were inscribed with ‘fake runic letters’.[[6]](#endnote-6) In these cases, since literacy was reserved for the elite, pseudo-writing was ‘associated with the expression of status and power’.[[7]](#endnote-7) The purpose of ‘fake writing’ on, for example, Greek vases, ‘was to increase the prestige and value of the vase’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This connection between asemic signs and illiteracy is one focus of Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*. *The Arrival* tells the story of an immigrant who arrives in an unfamiliar land, and struggles to find a role for himself in foreign society. Throughout the foreign land, the immigrant encounters an undecipherable foreign language, invented by the author to allow readers to share the sense of alienation that immigrants may feel when first arriving in their own country. Shaun Tan uses this pseudo-writing to represent a generic foreign language, with the aim of showing a sense of alienation. These images demonstrate that language, when it is not understood, can be isolating. The fact that these illustrations are not accompanied by a text-based narrative enhances this sense of isolation. Recognisable language is significantly absent, reminding us how integral language is to our everyday lives. Many of the scenarios presented in Tan’s illustrations show how difficult it is to function when a written language is not shared. On one occasion, the unnamed protagonist is found to have unknowingly pasted a number of posters upside-down, being so unfamiliar with the signs printed on them that he cannot tell which way up they ought to appear. In such scenes, it is suggested that the signs do indeed have meaning, and that their meaning is understood only by the privileged. The signs, therefore, are not meaningless, but their meaning is inaccessible to the immigrant and the reader.

The reader’s experience of Shaun Tan’s incomprehensible language is similar to that experienced by audiences of Xu Bing’s *A Book from Sky* (1988), an art installation which features 400 handmade books and suspended scrolls. Each page contained within these books, and the hanging scrolls, are filled with text that, at first glance appears like written Chinese, but on further inspection ‘is utterly without meaning’.[[9]](#endnote-9) In order to print the books, Bing invented and carved 4000 asemic characters into wooden blocks, taking care that none could be confused with genuine existing characters.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The setting and arrangement of these characters does much to fool the audience into thinking that they should have linguistic meaning. Being contained within books and on scrolls, in contexts which one would associate with the practice of reading, these characters establish the expectation of reading even before the viewer approaches each artefact. The characters are arranged neatly in rows, as if to aid the linear process of reading.

Bing’s decision to create printing blocks, rather than using calligraphy, originated from his observation that calligraphy is viewed as ‘personal’, whereas the appearance of type connotes ‘public’.[[11]](#endnote-11) This adds an authority to the characters which perhaps increases the expectation that they should be understood. The ‘personal’ calligraphy of an individual writer could perhaps be excusably indecipherable, but when this indecipherability is experienced in characters that have what Bing describes as a ‘public’ appearance, the impression that they are somehow ‘wrong’ is enhanced.

Jerome Silbergeld observes that audience responses to Bing’s work are frequently negative, citing anger and frustration as common reactions to finding that the characters are meaningless. Audiences have gone so far as to describe the work as ‘an abuse of language’. This reaction is in particular, he notes, observable among audiences who can read Chinese.[[12]](#endnote-12) Silbergeld’s observations were made in the context of an exhibition of Bing’s work at Princeton University, where a largely Western audience could be expected. To this non-Chinese speaking audience, Bing’s work has very different connotations.

Although these characters are intended as being free of linguistic meaning, they do have cultural meaning. They are distinctly oriental in appearance, grounding them firmly in a particular tradition and location. To a Western audience, it may be less troubling that these characters are without linguistic meaning. When encountering oriental characters, a Western audience may have the expectation that (s)he will be unable to decipher the text, even when it has genuine linguistic significance. To such an audience, the characters would contain the same non-linguistic meaning as genuine Chinese.

Xu Bing’s *A Book from Sky* and the asemic writing in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* deliberately deny the reader the possibility of reading. In this way, they render every reader illiterate, highlighting that language is a culturally specific, learned skill.

1. **Indecipherability**

The asemic signs of Shaun Tan and Xu Bing relate to issues of cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication, specifically the sense of discomfort that may be experienced when one is faced with signs that one is unable to decipher. They demonstrate that asemic signs motivate the desire to understand, and then the frustration of never having that desire fulfilled.

Many of these comics and strips, however, often seek to clarify or narrow meaning by placing these signs in a specific and familiar context. In *Peanuts*, for example, Woodstock’s tweets are located in the context of a conversation with Snoopy. Snoopy provides triggers, in English, for the birds’ tweets. Readers can infer meaning – or at least the general intention – of Woodstock’s tweets. In some cases, the response specifically repeats keywords so that it is possible to make reasonable assumptions about the content of the tweets. Snoopy’s response, which often apparently repeats some of Woodstock’s words in English, enables readers to make assumptions about what the bird has said.

This is a tradition that exists elsewhere in spoken language, particularly in science-fiction film and television. ‘Wookieespeak’ is evidently understood by Han Solo, whose responses provide indication of the general gist of Chewbacka’s spoken dialogue. In a vastly different context, the children’s TV show, *The Sooty Show* (BBC 1955-1967, ITV 1968-1992)*,* the puppet Sweep communicates in a series of indecipherable squeaks. The show’s human presenter can evidently understand Sweep’s squeaks, and often responds by apparently repeating, in English, what he has heard. What this example demonstrates is that, the inability for some characters to speak in a genuine language ‘presents no problems for the smooth flow of interaction’. In their analysis of *The Sooty Show’s* spoken interactions, Emmison and Goldman observe that ‘the use of strategies and devices which are commonplace in … ordinary conversation’ enable an apparently natural discourse to occur between characters, and for the audience to follow the essence of the conversation.[[13]](#endnote-13) These recognisable markers of conversation help to identify Sweep’s sounds as meaningful, even when meaning is not directly provided to the viewer.

In comics, the meaningful context may alternatively be visual. Another frame from Tan’s *The Arrival* displays asemic signs on a telephone dial, creating the assumption that these signs must be numeric. Of course, there is no guarantee that this assumption is correct, as the reader is forced to frame her understanding of the depicted object in her own experiences, having no other frame of reference.

1. **Conclusion**

In a world of global trade and communication, we are experiencing increasing cultural erosion. Some theorists predict a ‘monoculture’, in which the cultures of the world will merge and difference will be erased.[[14]](#endnote-14) Without the exoticism of difference, it has become desirable to imagine strange new languages that recreate a sense of desirable otherness that is now missing in the real world. Asemic signs are mysterious and unfamiliar, and provide welcome relief from the mundane and familiar.

These signs invite us to approach written language with the fascination of a child who has not yet learnt to read, and so learn to appreciate the aesthetic features of letterforms that are otherwise be underappreciated. Typographer David Carson has embraced illegible writing because he observes that the overwhelming quantity of text we encounter every day makes us numb to its value.[[15]](#endnote-15) Through asemic signs, perhaps it is possible to reinvigorate interest in the written word.

**Notes**

1. Tim Gaze, *Asemic Movement 1* (2008), viewed on 13 July 2011,

   <http://issuu.com/eexxiitt/docs/asemicmovement1>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Gaze, ‘Semiosis, by John Keane and Christopher Stackhouse,’ in Tim Gaze, *Asemic Movement 1,* 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Roy Harris and Brett Wilbur observe that children, before learning to write, will invent asemic characters in ‘pseudo-writing’. Roy Harris, *Signs of Writing* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 86; Brett M. Wilbur, ‘Finding Self in the Nuts and Bolts – Hidden Quality in the Service of Organisation,’ n.d, 3, viewed 13 July 2011, <http://www.metaphorms.com/uploads/Microsoft_Word_-_Nuts_and_Bolts_article.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Helène Whittaker, ‘Social and Symbolic Aspects of Minoan Writing’, *European Journal of Archaeology* 8.1 (2005): 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. WGBH Educational Foundation, ‘Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky’, Culture Shock*, 1999, viewed 20 August 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/xubing.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Simon Leung and Janet A. Kaplan, ‘Pseudo-Languages: A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay’, *Art Journal* 58.3 (1999): 88-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Xu Bing, interviewed in Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jerome Silbergeld, ‘*Book from the Sky:* A Work by Xu Bing’, (Princeton University Art Museum, 2002), 2, viewed 20 August 2010, <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/assets/archivedmaterials/Xu%20Bing%20handout.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Michael Emmison and Laurence Goldman, ‘What’s That You Said Sooty? Puppets, Parlance and Pretence,’ *Language and Communication* 16.1 (1996): 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Robert L. Peters, ‘Identity Matters’, *Voice: AIGA Journal of Design*, (2005), viewed 18 July 2007, http://voice.aiga.org/content.cfm?ContentAlias=%5Fgetfullarticle&aid=1357823. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Rick Poynor, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2003), 63.

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