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Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

## *Sense Without (Semantic) Meaning? The Case of Asemic Writing*

Martino Manca<sup>1</sup>

*University of Turin*

ABSTRACT. This paper analyses asemic writing, with a focus on Luigi Serafini's 1981 *Codex Seraphinianus*. Asemic writing, i.e. writing characterised by a lack of semantic meaning, is explored through the lenses of literature and aesthetics, emphasising intentionality, non-semantic meaning, and shared value. Positioned at the intersection of avant-garde literature and abstract art, the linguistic analysis of asemic writing reveals the intricate relationship between graphemes and phonemes, generating a pluri-semantic text with "open" interpretation. The paper proposes a reconsideration of the concept of sense within asemic writing, identifying a pre-linguistic and pre-semantic field that prompts reflection on conventional writing practices. Reader engagement is discussed, highlighting asemic writing's accessibility to a broad audience and its cooperative nature. A minimal set of shared conventions allows for unique freedom, fostering a striving game over an achieving one. The case study, the *Codex Seraphinianus*, is examined through various lenses, including an intellectual "striving" reading by Italo Calvino and deciphering attempts. These analyses unveil the text's nature as a presuppositional machine,

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<sup>1</sup> Email: [martino.manca@unito.it](mailto:martino.manca@unito.it). Some results of Section 4 were made possible by a research period I spent from March to May 2022 at the "Labirinto della Masone" in Fontanellato (Parma, Italy), accessing the archives of publisher Franco Maria Ricci. This research period was generously supported by a scholarship from Cecilia Gilardi Foundation. During my research, I consulted some unpublished material and gained deeper insight into the *Codex*, including the rare opportunity to "read" the original edition; however, for copyright reasons, I am unable to disclose the full details of the unpublished texts I accessed. I am also grateful to Carola Barbero, Enrico Terrone, and Alberto Voltolini for their invaluable insights, as well as to Laurence De Looze for sharing some of his unpublished works with me.

contributing to the understanding of asemic writing as a complex, cooperative interplay between authors and readers.

## 1. Introduction

*Se risquer à ne-rien-vouloir-dire, c'est entrer dans le jeu*  
(Derrida, 1972, p. 23)

There is a certain bias according to which we tend to see written text whenever we observe some graphemes arranged in a linear order – according to our culture, from left to right and from top to bottom. When observing some old AI-generated images featuring some text, we attempt a reading even when the text is actually a jumble of graphemes vaguely resembling Latin letters; AI models have now gotten much better and have shifted the hallucinatory nature of such images from the graphical aspect (random pseudo-graphemes) to the syntactical and semantic one (random and invented words randomly placed), but until few months ago it was not uncommon to come across such pseudo-texts.

This kind of pseudo-text, on initial analysis, is what has been called “asemic writing” (from now on: “AW”). While admittedly a niche form of art, there are examples of intentional AW as artworks, which seem to raise several issues worth analysing. First, they are cases of “nonsensical” written language – i.e. cases where language fails its main goal of either communicating something (locutionary) or doing something (perlocutionary), see Austin, 1975 – yet they have both an artistic (i.e., they are recognised in the artworld, see Danto, 1964) and aesthetic (i.e., we can have an aesthetic experience of them) value. Second, they seem to communicate something beyond their conceptual nature and their obscured semantic value – namely, they tell us something about the nature of writing (and of written language) itself. Hence, they have some kind of “meta” value. Third, they show a cooperative nature for art (in a similar fashion to Eco, 2020), gaining value only insofar as the game between authors/artists and readers is correctly set up and regularly played by all the actors involved. Fourth, they are problematic in their collocation, being at the intersection of linguistic and figurative objects.

In this paper, I will attempt to delve into these questions without claiming to be exhaustive. AW lacks a specific aesthetic analysis, and it is precisely this gap that I intend to fill by drawing upon the few previous conceptions and discussions. It is eventually my belief that a specific study of AW can provide interesting results for the discussions about language and its functions beyond the classical meaning-reference conception, moving us towards a reintroduction of the somewhat outdated notion of Sense.

## 2. Definition

Most of the available definitions of AW are those formulated by artists practising this form of art. As a rule, I feel that one should be adequately sceptical of definitions that come “from the inside” of a specific form of art, since they generally lack the needed breadth and scope and shift their weight towards the normative side, rather than the descriptive. This is to say that, often, definitions coincide with manifestos. It is then with caution that we ought to approach the discussion and the reconstruction of the conceptual *archaeology* (Foucault 2008), however brief it may be – since the concept of “AW” is no more than fifty years old. Another problem emerging from this kind of analysis is the term “asemic” itself; while having a precise origin, it lacks the etymological clarity for the object I am discussing, looking like a confused importation of a misused term for a completely different concept. Yet, the authors’ choice of the term is relevant in a way.

At the end of my preliminary analysis, which is very much an operation of reconstruction, it will be possible for me to draw some conclusions that, far from being a comprehensive definition, will outline some necessary conditions for something to be recognised as “asemic writing” as an art form.

### 2.1. Definitions Review

The first precise definitions of asemic writing can be found in some blog posts, art books, and journal issues edited and written by the very artists who chose this label for their art (see Gaze & Jacobson, 2013 for an anthology). The first to identify this concept were the two artists Jim

Leftwich and Tim Gaze – the former American, the latter Australian – who, looking for a suitable label to describe the quasi-calligraphic works they were creating at the end of the Nineties, ended up not only with a term but with a full-fledged movement. In a January 1998 letter by Leftwich to Gaze (Leftwich, 2016, p. 3), we find the first formulation of the idea: “An asemic text [...] might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning”; and again Gaze in the Introduction to his *The Oxygen of Truth* specifies, without much doubt, “the word ‘asemic’ means ‘having no semantic content’” (Leftwich, 2016, p. 4).

In the first issue of their journal *asemic movement*, the first page is a systematic recollection of the artistic practices of the movement in the decade 1998-2008. Here, we can find the standard definition of AW. They write: AW is “anything which looks like writing, but in which the person viewing can’t read any word” (Gaze, 2008, p. 2), a “class of visual phenomena” which are “(i) deliberately made as an illegible form of writing; (ii) writing intended to be legible, but that, for one reason or another, is not legible; (iii) something that accidentally looks like illegible writing”, then proceeding to list the various possible reasons for which an “accidental” AW might happen in the forms of (ii) or (iii) – including, for example, faulty writing instruments, decay of the support, natural formation, mental or physical distress of the person writing, etc.

Peter Schwenger, a Canadian professor of English, in the first chapter of his *Asemic. The Art of Writing* – probably the only book devoted to AW – attempts a similar reconstruction to what I am doing and explains that AW is made by signs that “don’t belong to any familiar system. [but that] at the same time, [...] put themselves forward in the form of a sign system, recognizable as marks disposed on a page according to certain conventions.” (Schwenger, 2019, p. 2). His discussion recalls Leftwich and Gaze’s original conceptions and eventually links the birth of the asemic movement with the crisis of writing (namely, cursive writing on paper) in the United States and the Western world more generally.

Both of the definitions proposed by Leftwich & Gaze and by Schwenger have, in my account, two substantial problems.

First, they are too broad. It does not seem desirable to place on the same level bad writing or misprint sheets with an intentional form of art that builds on the writing gesture: while the *technological* aspect might be the same, there is a relevant distinction between the *epistemological*

level of what *seems to be* asemic (e.g. an unknown alphabet, as it might be an Asian one for European readers – we have no way to distinguish an authentic Chinese alphabet from the pseudo-alphabet of *A Book from the Sky* by the artist Xu Bing) and the *ontological* level of what is, indeed, truly asemic (a form of writing which cannot be read in *any* case, different even from a cipher as the *Voynich Manuscript* is supposed to be).

Second, they are, so to say, too *parole*-centric rather than properly *langage*-centric (the distinction between *parole* and *langage* is, of course, in Saussure, 2014, pp. 30-32). Asemic seems not to be a matter of a “word”, i.e. of a specific utterance of and use of *langue*, but rather a system that encompasses the *langue* readers are familiar with and their literacy as a general knowledge of *langage* in general. Otherwise, any random string of letters would be AW since “the person viewing can’t read any word” – as stated by Leftwich and Gaze (quoted in Schwenger, 2019, p.2).

The biggest merit of those definitions, which together well summarise the general view of both artists and scholars on AW, is the more or less implicit acknowledgement of the reader-centred stance required to assess AW. AW is then not a simple matter of inscribed traces; Leftwich and Gaze conclude, rather abruptly, “whether something is AW or not is subjective [...] the quality of being asemic is not in the writing, but a consequence of whether a particular person can read it at a particular time”. However, a reader-centered stance does not equate with a “subjective” conception, but rather it has to do with the complexity of a phenomenology of aesthetic experience and, in this case, of a phenomenology of reading – carefully constructed in the past (e.g. by Ingarden, 1973 and Iser, 1980) precisely to avoid the possible “slippery slope” of subjectivism (or rather, *solipsism*) of Husserlian phenomenology.

A better, more precise definition comes from another asemic artist, Michael Jacobson, curator of one of the most relevant blogs on AW (*The New Post-literate*). In a 2013 interview for *Asymptote*, he defines AW as

A wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission. How can writing be wordless, someone may ask. The secret is that asemic writing is a shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing. It uses the constraints of writerly gestures and the full developments of abstract art to divulge its main purpose: total freedom beyond literary expression. (Jacobson, 2013)

From this latter definition emerges what is a characteristic of AW: semantic freedom, both from a fixated meaning (AW, as it will be clear, multiplies meanings) and from a meaning at all (strictly speaking, AW does *not* have a meaning altogether).

Before drawing some conclusions, let us briefly retrace the history of the term. As will be evident in the next paragraph, it is not devoid of problems.

## 2.2. The Term “Asemic”

The etymology of the term “asemic” seems to be rather clear: from Greek, privative alpha (a-) + “sema” in the adjective form. Now, “sema” means both sign (in the physical sense, trace, inscription) and, following semiotics, “minimal unit of meaning” (seme or sememe). Of course, the first meaning (“sign”) generates a paradox: writing is composed of signs, hence how can we have something composed of signs without signs? The second meaning seems to work better: a form of writing non-reducible to even a minimal unit of meaning. In any case, the privative alpha bears with it the mark of absence/privation, contrasting with something (writing) which, by definition, insists on a metaphysics of presence (see Derrida, 1985). This contrast does convey well the impasse of approaching something that seems familiar but that has no meaning, the attempt to read the unreadable. However, it is worth mentioning that there are other alternatives.

A joint post by Jim Leftwich and Marco Giovenale (another artist of the movement, and author of a massive *Asemic Encyclopædia*) suggests the alternative term “pansemic” (again from Greek, “pan” as “all”): since “everything makes sense”, the asemic actually solicits an emotional sphere of sense-making that generates an endless and processual operation of attribution of meanings (see Giovenale & Leftwich, 2015). Therefore, it is not much about the *lack* of a minimal unit of meaning but rather a multiplication that, eventually, encompasses *all* possible meanings. While the proposed solution is interesting as it underlines the duality of absence/infinite multiplication of meanings from AW, it does a disservice to the philosophy of language by claiming that “everything may find its way to – at least – an inner ‘emotional’ (scribble of) meaning”. Whatever this “emotional” component may stand for (but a sensation is not a meaning), what is simply wrong here is that *everything* (i.e. every linguistic expression) eventually has a semantic



content. Instead, there is something, as well envisioned by Wittgenstein when discussing nonsensical expressions, that as long as it *does not* have a semantic content *is* outside of language; however, this does not mean that is devoid of value (this is the point against which Leftwich and Giovenale seem to argue, missing the subtlety of a philosopher) but rather that it may have a “second-order” value, on a meta-cognitive level or in a *critical* one (in the Kantian sense, an analysis on the conditions of possibility). Wittgenstein writes (*PI*, §499 – see Wittgenstein, 2001):

To say “This combination of words has no sense” excludes it from the sphere of language, and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary, it may be for various kinds of reasons. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players are supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one person ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line, that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.

If everything has meaning there is no space left for the absence of meaning (note that Wittgenstein is referring to sense, but, in his account, a proposition has no sense as long as one of its components does not have a meaning); if there is no space for the absence of meaning the field of language becomes an omnivorous monster that encompasses everything, even the formless gibberish, and it becomes impossible to form “life on the borders”, as the one suggested by Wittgenstein. For these reasons, in the following pages, I will maintain that AW has *no* (immediate, semantic) meaning but rather develops other forms of *unities* – of derived second-order meanings.

Another possibility to substitute the term “asemic” is the expression “asemantic” coined in unsuspecting times (in 1974! More than twenty years before the works by Leftwich and Gaze) by Gillo Dorfles when discussing the works by Irma Blank (an artist later included below the tag of “asemic”). He writes that her works feature

an ‘asemantic writing’, a sort of grapho-orthography, which uses a clear individualized sign [...], yet empty and void from any explicit semantics since it is not constructed nor is it separable into ‘discrete signs’ either from a regular or modified alphabet or from ideograms, however altered and newly formed they may be. (Dorfles, 1974, my translation)

Dorfles is very precise in his discussion and, by quoting Husserl, anticipates a point that will be quite relevant later: the fact that this level of writing seems to refer to a *pre-semantic* and pre-logical dimension of language where the primordial sign (and the gesture that produces it) is still undifferentiated and esoteric.

For clarity and to stick to the historical accuracy of the concept, I will still be using “asemic”, but it is evident that the discussion is much more nuanced than what the single term could suggest.

There is another reason, however, for sticking to the term “asemic”, a *philological* reason. The introduction of the term by Leftwich and Gaze is not a *creatio ex nihilo*: it is grounded on a very specific *corpus* of texts and authors (not by chance I referred to Derrida at the beginning of this paragraph...), i.e. the works of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida on writing in a couple of years at the beginning of the Seventies, frequently quoted in the paratexts mentioned about AW.

The early grammatological Derrida discusses in *La double séance* (Derrida, 1972, originally published in *Tel Quel* in 1970) the possibility of a non-mimetic and non-linear writing by discussing an intersection between Plato’s *Philebus* (38e-39e, about truth and falsehood in writing and representational arts) and Mallarmé’s *Mimique* – executing in practice a *deconstruction* of the concepts of meaning and reference, and suspending the certainty of thought on an abyss of undecidability (the *double bind* both co-present and logically irreconcilable). In this context, when discussing the “blank” (the empty space of indeterminateness), he calls (in brackets) the *plus* of the blank (the “*marque supplémentaire*”) an “asemic spacing” (“*espacement asémique*”) – opposed to the fullness of semic (Derrida, 1972a, p. 290). Here, the term asemic is very precise and does not leave any space for a sem-antic interpretation; Derrida is talking about the act of writing, not about the presupposed meaning of a *graphé*. The impressionistic use by the “asemic movement” of Derrida is quite peculiar, yet it still confirms the relevance of the French author for the definition of a conceptual framework outside philosophy.

Much more relevant seems to be Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach to writing (*écriture*). In his *Écrivains, intellectuels, professeurs* (Barthes 2015 – originally published in *Tel Quel* in 1971), he brings forward an example that has already emerged in my analysis: the accidental AW caused by a faulty writing instrument, for example, in copying a manuscript. In those cases :

Le mot produit par la faute (si une mauvaise lettre le défigure) ne signifie rien, ne retrouve aucun tracé textuel ; le code est simplement coupé : c'est un mot asémique qui est créé, un pur signifiant ; par exemple, au lieu d'écrire « officier », j'écris « offivier », qui ne veut rien dire. (Barthes, 2015, p. 383).

In another text written in 1972, *Variations sur l'écriture* (a sort of encyclopedic list of “keywords” related to writing with a brief explanation), for the voice “*Illisible*” (“unreadable”) he never mentions the word “asémique” but he discusses the case of Mirtha Dermisache (yet another artist later added to the asemic canon) and all those artistic AW that, while ontologically different from untranslated alphabets (e.g. the language of Easter Island’s rongorongo glyphs), are undistinguishable from “real” writings.

Il existe aussi des écritures que nous ne pouvons comprendre et dont cependant on ne peut dire qu'elle sont indéchiffrables, parce qu'elles sont tout bonnement hors du déchiffrement : ce sont les écritures fictives imaginées par certains peintres ou certains sujets (il peut en effet s'agir d'une pratique d'« amateur », située loin de toute carrière artistique : tels les cahiers de graphismes de Mirtha Dermisache). [...] Or, l'intéressant – le stupéfiant –, c'est que rien, absolument rien, ne distingue ces écritures vraies et ces écritures fausses : aucune différence, sinon de contexte, entre l'indéchiffrée et l'indéchiffrable. C'est nous, notre culture, notre loi, qui décidons du statut référent d'une écriture. Cela veut dire quoi ? *Que le signifiant est libre, souverain. Une écriture n'a pas besoin d'être « lisible » pour être pleinement une écriture.* On peut même dire que c'est à partir du moment où le signifiant [...] se détache de tout signifié et largue vigoureusement l'alibi référentiel, que le texte (au sens actuel du mot) apparaît. Car, pour comprendre ce qu'est le texte, il suffit – mais cela est nécessaire – de voir la coupure vertigineuse qui permet au signifiant de se constituer, de s'agencer et de s'employer sans qu'aucun signifié ne le soutienne plus. Ces écritures illisibles nous disent (et cela seulement) qu'il y a des signes, mais non point de sens. (Barthes, 2000, pp. 44-45, my emphasis).

His main point (i.e. that “a writing does not need to be readable to be fully a writing” and that in those cases of AW “there are signs but there is no sense”) is interesting insofar he (correctly) recognizes AW as a form of writing (this will be one of the points of my next section when I argue in favour of a linguistic analysis of AW).

Derrida and Barthes provide the (admittedly fuzzy) theoretical background for those artists recognizing themselves in the asemic movement. While it is relevant to acknowledge this more or

less competent inspiration, in my analysis I will often depart from the French background for more fine-grained formulations.

### 2.3. Requisites

It is now possible to discuss what is needed for any piece of writing to be considered AW. But first, a preliminary distinction has already emerged from what I have written so far.

I propose a double parallel distinction to better understand AW as a complex phenomenon:

1. Proper-ontological AW *versus* accidental-epistemological AW
2. Asemic Writing *versus* Asemic Reading

As I have already suggested, it is crucial to distinguish between AW *intentionally* created from those accidents where something that is *not* asemic appears to the reader as asemic. This contrasts with the original conceptions by Leftwich and Gaze, yet I believe this distinction gives credit where credit is due – to the artists actually creating AW.

The second distinction insists on the fact that every form of AW is open to an asemic reading, yet it is possible to asemically read something which is not AW. Consider the *illegibilis* by St. Thomas Aquinas, i.e. the original manuscripts in *littera cursiva* – or rather, a very poor *littera cursiva*. There are very few scholars in the world who can read Aquinas's handwriting. For anyone else it is probably completely asemic. However, this is not AW.

For the sake of this paper, I will focus on the left side of the double distinction – artistic intentional asemic writing. Therefore, there are three requirements for it:

- *Intentionality*: One may argue whether the AI-generated pseudo-writing is truly intentional, however, this is a borderline case. In all the standard cases (AW created by artists), we have no problem recognizing even a minimal form of intentionality in the object created. This allows us to exclude accidental AW in the form of bad calligraphy, untranslated alphabets, ciphered texts with regularly invented alphabets, malfunctioning of the medium (glitches,

printing errors, etc.), decay of the supports, natural “writing pareidolia”, impeded or blurred vision, etc.

- *Shared value*: Just as private language is impossible (Wittgenstein, *PI*, §243), AW should have an intersubjective value, being something more than a gimmick. This can be a consequence of its intentionality and is related to the implicit acceptance of a minimal set of rules within the AW that can work (e.g. the orientation of the writing: left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top, even calligraphic dispositions are fine) – scattered pseudo-letters is not AW.
  - As a corollary, it is clear that AW must insist on a shared form of alphabetical or ideogram writing (either deriving from it or resembling it, thus allowing a pseudo-reading).
- *Non-semantic meaning*: This is the point to be discussed in detail. As shown, AW does not have a semantic meaning, however, it does have *several* non-semantic meanings – what I call *unities* or second-order meanings. Phenomenologically, this happens in a second moment, once we overcome the contrast between observing something familiar (being acquainted with the formal conventions of writing) and the asemic effect at a further examination. My task is to show how these second-order unities are formed.

### 3. An Aesthetic Collocation

AW is at the intersection of abstract art and avant-garde literature. This is particularly evident when considering some authors who came to AW from literature and poetry rather than art. This is the case for one of the three “ancestors” identified by Schwenger (2019, pp. 19-31) – Henri Michaux (especially his 1927 *Narration*). Starting from words and coming to images and drawings moved by a need for unconstrained forms of expression and inspired by artists like Paul Klee, Max Ernst, and Giorgio de Chirico, Michaux accompanies his artistic work with a reflection on language and communicability. What seems to emerge is the idea of an absolute continuity between written words and abstract images, a continuity of the gesture and of the movement (one of his asemic works is titled *Mouvements*): script-like signs become images, compose and decompose in quasi-

organic structures, following a metamorphic state of dynamism. His handwriting organically becomes drawing, which, in turn, *represents* writing and eventually becomes writing again, and so on. There is a certain gestural pleasure in “reading” Michaux’s proto-asemic works, in arbitrarily following the flow from left to right, from top to bottom, catching glimpses of broken and disintegrated strings of letters; it is no surprise that the French poet was so influential for the early formulations of AW.

However, when analytically facing the works of Michaux, as a prototype of AW that explicitly intertwines the literary and the visual, the reader has two possible approaches, each working but mutually exclusive in the singular moment of experience:

1. *Representational solution*: Here, AW invites the user to contemplate it and consider the way it imitates (*mimesis*) the written words. Here, the AW is fully representational according to a mimetic relationship. It is figurative in displaying a primordial form of writing. The right support for this kind of view is, of course, the painting, with a frame, the single page on display – this is the way most of Michaux’s works are displayed.
2. *Enactive solution*: Here, AW invites the user to interact with it and with the environment in which it is inserted (including the physical aspects and the consideration of the “outsides” of text and paratexts), mainly through the act of reading. AW is familiar to us firstly because it appears as a form of writing, and writing invites us to read it, rather than merely contemplate the framed page for its representational value. The apt support is the literary text either in the form of the codex (the book) or in the form of digital text (not limited to digital literature), allowing the reader to experience turning pages or scrolling a screen. Interestingly, most 1990s AW was published and circulated as *blog posts* (see the bibliography for a list of the most relevant asemic blogs).

While both solutions work equally well, for my analysis, I will focus on the second one which seems to be more respectful of the authorial intentionality. Indeed, excluding figurative artworks *a posteriori* added to the AW canon, the vast majority of examples are presented in the form of a written text – printed, handwritten, or as displayed text on a screen. Moreover, keeping a

Western-centric approach (with its limitation), the typical form of unreadable writing of AW is based on *alphabetic* writing, consisting of graphemes that become un-phoneme-isable, rather than on an ideogram-based form of writing (a pictographic and mnemonic technology).

One last disclaimer: the two proposed solutions are, of course, on the side of general engagement and interpretation of AW artworks and do not have anything to do with the ontological status of those objects. I believe that, ontologically, one may reach the AW status from several different categories of art (Walton, 1970); one may be tempted to identify a set of properties specific to the set of AW (in a similar fashion to my requisites) and eventually define AW as a cross-categorical form of art (differently from the heuristic approach I have used when defining my requisites, which work *a posteriori*). While I may agree that, for sure, AW *crosses categories in art*, I do not believe there is enough autonomy in the definition of a set of properties (considering the derivative and constructed nature of the “movement”) to define AW as a *cross-categorical form of art*. Its strength, instead, relies precisely upon the possibility of being in movement across different categories rather than synthetically keeping two or more different and contrasting categories in a newly formed and static one.

### 3.1. Engagement

Now for the question: how does one engage with AW? Considering my previous point about an enactive approach, how does one *read* AW?

Laurence de Looze, in an unpublished work he kindly shared with me (de Looze, 2023), concludes that “*one has to know how to read in order to know how not to read*”. This means that the semic/asemic distinction can only arise from interpreters who are not only acquainted with shared writing conventions but also possess a minimal degree of literacy, specifically the ability to read the source alphabet upon which the AW is modelled. There is a technological aspect of reading that is independent from both the whole discussion about the meaning of the content and the problem of the form and style of a piece of literature; what De Looze is saying is that, on the one hand, there is the epistemic value of reading (reading-to-understand) and, on the other hand, there is the performative value (reading-to-perform, as in Kivy, 2006), and that AW heavily relies on this

second value. While reading can easily be substituted by other forms of narration without losing much of its original epistemic value (e.g., changing the medium to listening to an audiobook), this is, of course, impossible for AW.

What I suggest, then, is to reintroduce the “old” concept of Sense, broadly taken as a theoretical term expressing the cognitive significance of something, not limited to the meaning. While the Frege discussion in 1948 is much more focused on names, which Kripke’s critique (1980) also does, the theoretical relevance of Sense in this context is to accommodate the lack of semantic meaning (i.e. a direct reference) with the possibility of having common and shared unities of (second-order) meanings. Sticking to a Fregeian nomenclature (different, for example, from Putnam’s terminology in Putnam, 1973), Sense is the intensional dimension of a word, which is intersubjective, while reference substitutes the notion of meaning to indicate the extensional dimension of the social and communicable.

So, if the aforementioned criteria are verified, the AW makes sense and allows a reading of the performative kind. Reintroducing the idea of Sense also allows for a nice integration with speech act theory, which seems to be the most suitable for a performative reading: once the sense is individuated, it can be used, it can be played, it can thus incorporate some external elements that have something to do with the tone, the style, the context, and the paratextual map.

Assuming that an AW has a sense (otherwise it would just be dismissed), at that point the reader has to confront that game of frustrated expectations set up by the paradoxical nature of AW, which allows it to be approached with the expectation to unveil a meaning but that it reveals itself as unreadable. The two choices the reader has are, naturally, two *ludic* approaches, thoroughly analysed by C. Thi Nguyen (Nguyen, 2020):

1. *Achieving*. The reader chooses to try to solve the AW, treating it as epistemic AW, attempting a deciphering, guessing the real alphabetic letters hidden behind the AW. As for the “achieving game” for Nguyen, readers here achieve a solution, a non-disposable goal. Here the AW operates as a *resistance* to the readers’ interpretation, hindered and eventually impossible.



2. *Striving*. The reader accepts the absence of semantic meaning and resorts to the fuzzier nature of Sense. From this moment on the reader can *playfully* attempt some non-serious forms of achieving games (with end goals that are disposable) and persevering in the ludic nature of AW for the sake of the game itself, trying to interpret, explode, and imitate the AW. Here the AW operates as a *prompt* to the readers' (possibly infinite) interpretations (plural).

Again, both of these two approaches are perfectly acceptable. However, there are good reasons that the game set up by AW is precisely designed to resist the quest for a fixated solution, and never *serious*: the implied reader (Iser 1980) of AW is engaged in a striving type of game. This will become clearer when discussing a real case such as the *Codex Seraphinianus*.

### 3.2. Perception

Before moving on to the cognitive level (i.e. what kind of unities can we grasp from AW), it is relevant to briefly address the way we perceive the asemic.

A general definition of writing can be: the fixation of linguistic signs over a durable support and according to an organised system. More simply, the organised inscription of speech acts. As a consequence, it is clear that the main threat of writing is its functional nature. In writing, the illocutionary (communicating something concrete) and the perlocutionary (creating an effect to do something) prevail over the mere locutionary aspect of speech acts – i.e., it is not just a matter of writing down sentences. We appreciate writing (in a non-aesthetical way) precisely because it manages to successfully communicate something – a truth, an order, an instruction – by fixing it in a replicable trace. On the other hand, (one of) the main features of the aesthetic seems to be the disinterestedness of its judgments (see Kant's third Critique, especially the *Analytic of the Beautiful* – see Kant, 2015). In this framework, we appreciate art just because it is “beautiful” and not because we have any form of desire or end towards the artwork.

Writing, thus, is not limited to a semantic value but also has an aesthetic relevance that lies in the calligraphy, in the chosen font (a paper written in Comic Sans would be comically bad), in

the disposition of the written words, etc. AW attempts to capture this visual aspect of narrative in the physicality of written language rather than in *phoné*.

AW is a form of writing that is appreciable aesthetically (note that this is different from the aesthetic appreciation of the semantic meaning of a written text, as it happens for fiction – I have already ruled out this possibility by dismissing the meaning). Hence: is AW simply a form of writing failing in its premises, or rather a form of art that consciously uses the technology of writing as a way to create an aesthetic effect in the users?

In my view, the answer lies somewhere in between, or perhaps the two extremes can converge in this case. A proposal towards this direction has already been put forward more generally by Vittorio Gallese (Gallese, 2020) and the neuroscientific approaches, with the idea of unifying the aesthetical and the functional. Another attempt to systematically link the aesthetic and the technological, by considering artworks as “experiential artifacts”, is currently carried out by Prof. Enrico Terrone and his group working at the ERC Starting Grant titled “PEA – The Philosophy of Experiential Artifacts” (see Terrone, 2024 for a programmatic discussion of the project).

All in all, it does not seem too strange to consider the two aspects on the same level, especially when dealing with a form of (pseudo)writing: the function of writing is of course not respected in AW, yet it calls for a functional analysis and resists the “figurative pull” of the aesthetic side. Otherwise, we would not understand why graphological analyses and (futile) attempts to decipher what the “real” writing would have communicated, minus the asemic element, are so common in AW.

Also, consider that, at a perceptual level, there is only a minimal difference by degree between how we perceive real alphabetic letters and scribbles (similar to asemic graphemes) – as shown by Heiman, Umiltà & Gallese, 2013:

Analysis of the present EEG data showed that the observation of *all* stimuli (letters, characters and scribbles) produced central alpha ERD in both hemispheres [...]. Moreover, since the mean values of central alpha frequency power indicate an ERD also during the perception of “scribbles”, our data seems to support the notion that not only linguistic symbols, but *any possible hand-gesture trace* [...] can evoke the activation of observers’ cortical motor system. (Heiman, Umiltà & Gallese, 2013, pp. 2838-2839, my emphasis)

Of course, in the case of AW, as I will argue, there is a superior form of unity in the process, but, in general, this confirms what I said before: in the first moment (given the expectations), we perceive AW as normal writing, then, in a second moment, when focusing, we realize it is not proper writing.

### 3.3. Cognition

How do we understand AW? Relinquishing semantic meaning and accepting the field of Sense leaves us, the readers, in a middle ground where many possibilities appear equally valid. A plurality of unities can be derived, and an infinite game of interpretation can begin. This is not *beyond* meaning (even if I said it is a “second-order” level) but it is actually *before* semantics; this is explained with an analysis of epistemic AW, where, when we do not have immediate access to meaning, we start from pre-linguistic data we can gather (e.g. other statistical occurrences of the same writing system, if we are dealing with an unknown alphabet or a badly written regular text), and then we eventually attempt to go back to meaning – it is an *imposition* to understand. In true AW, we accept the absence of meaning and we take a step back to the pre-logical field of Sense, where a kaleidoscope of “second-order” meanings can be (playfully) generated and different unities can be found rather than relying on a singular, fixed reference.

The absence of an immediate semantic meaning allows this game, which is all *within* language (not limited to its verbal/visual nature), and the possibility of understanding is an *invitation* to imagine and play. The result is that, eventually, semantics can be freely imaginable in the second-order level of sense, while the only non-deductible element is the syntax – i.e. the formal element of language, which AW replicates making it, in a way, alien to us.

From this point, it is possible to develop a table of unities that are (not) present in AW at first and that, eventually, once the game (the *Sprachspiel*) has started, can ultimately be imagined within the field of Sense.

<i>Types of Unities</i>	<i>AW – first approach</i>	<i>AW – Sprachspiel</i>
Spatial	Present	—
Phonetics	Absent	Imaginable (constrained)
Morphology	Absent	Deductible
Syntax	Absent	Non-deductible
Semantics	Absent	Freely imaginable
Functional/Narrative	Possibly present	Freely imaginable
Metafictional	Possibly present	Freely imaginable

A brief explanation of each point:

- Spatial unity (or, alternatively, graphical and dispositional): It is, of course, the only immediately present unity since it relies on the purely visual aspect of writing and the minimal set of shared conventions about the writing system referenced (see the corollary of the “Shared value” requisite). This is to say that, for example, observing a Western-based AW, we can immediately understand that the spatial organisation of writing is the same one we know: from left to right, from top to bottom. And more: we can distinguish between prose (blocks of text) and poetry (ordered shorter lines of text) and individuate some textual elements only because of their spatiality – for example, lists, captions, etc. A good example of how AW does not need anything else but the spatial feature is Marcel Broodthaers’s rendition of Mallarmé modernist poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (“A throw of the dice will never abolish chance”) – realised in 1969 and based on the 1897 poem. Mallarmé’s poem is a free verse example of early concrete poetry, much relying on the typographical disposition and font dimensions of the verses; Broodthaers “blocked out the lines of the original work with solid black bars of varying width, dependent on the original type size, turning the original text into an abstract image of the poem” (from the MoMA

description of the artwork). Even a few black lines are enough to understand that this is (i.) pseudo-writing, hence with an AW artwork, and (ii.) some form of typographic poetry.

- **Phonetic unity:** It is absent, yet imaginable (we can try to imagine how the graphemes may sound). However, I believe, this imaginative act is not completely free since some cognitive biases come into play: it is somehow natural to associate a shape with a sound, as shown by the so-called “bouba-kiki effect” (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001) – a non-arbitrary synesthetic connection between the shape of an image and the sound of the associated word. This, of course, applies to graphemes as well. For example: writing a (meaningless) word in a gothic-like font versus the same word in a cursive-like one, the sound we imagine is different.
- **Morphological unity:** It is absent but, rather than being imaginable, is deductible. This is the area that most achieving attempts tend to explore since a statistical analysis of morphemes and graphemes seems the best way to actually reach a semantic meaning. I will provide some examples in the next section.
- **Syntactic unity:** It is absent and non-deductible, since, even by grasping a morphological unity, there is no way to determine the role in the proposition of a certain recurring graphemic construction – this assuming that the AW language works syntactically in the same way as the one we know.
- **Semantic unity:** Absent but freely imaginable. As said, once we accept the game, AW can mean anything.
- **Functional/narrative and metafictional:** Those dimensions may be present in the paratexts that accompany the AW but are always freely imaginable. For example: when observing the “Martian” automatic writing by the French medium Hélène Smith, while knowing the whole discussions among the surrealists, we may understand Smith’s graphemes as a narrative support for her medium career and eventually metafictionally start an imaginative game on the nature of spontaneous and “trance” writing.

It is now the case to analyse a specific example of AW and to test my “table of units”.

#### 4. Luigi Serafini's Codex Seraphinianum

The *Codex Seraphinianus* is a two-volume illustrated encyclopedia created by the Italian artist (architect and designer) Luigi Serafini between 1976 and 1978 and published by the prestigious publisher “Franco Maria Ricci” in 1981 – the aristocrat from Parma is known for having built the biggest labyrinth in the world in the countryside of Fontanellato, for having published in Italian the works of Jorge Louis Borges and Diderot and d’Alembert *Encyclopedie*, for having started the most relevant Italian art magazine in the Eighties (*FMR*, pronounced *éphémère*, ephemeral) and for having collected over the years an impressive collection of previously undiscovered artists such as Antonio Ligabue. The *Codex* perfectly fits Riccian’s idea of a contiguity between writing and images and his encyclopedic ambition. In the introduction of the last volume of the series “La Biblioteca di Babele” (“Library of Babel”, edited by Borges himself), titled *Borges A/Z* and presenting a list of “Borgesian” themes in alphabetical order, Ricci writes “Each one of us brings with himself a little potential Encyclopedia: it is sufficient to ordinate our opinions by argument, then our arguments by alphabetical order, and the Encyclopedia takes form” (Borges 1985, my translation). A principle of contamination and unity that the *Codex* perfectly respects, as all the other books of the series “I segni dell’uomo” (“Human Signs”): for example, a volume on Ligabue with a poem by Cesare Zavattini; Calvino’s *Castle of Crossed Destinies* with the illustrations of Visconte’s tarot cards, Erté’s artworks accompanied by a text written by Roland Barthes, Aloys Zotl’s bestiary with the prose of Julio Cortazar. The unity of written words and images in the *Codex* does not need an external linking between two artists (one writer and one figurative artist), but it is rather contained within the text itself.

The *Codex* is presented as a manuscript with a cursive AW in a Semitic-like writing alphabet. The whole encyclopedia is consistent in its AW (thus allowing a morphological analysis), and features what is, without doubt, a table of contents, an afterword, several tables, lists, graphs, and other typical “encyclopedic” elements. The division into two volumes is coherent with the typical separation of knowledge into natural science and human sciences. By checking the typographical structure and the illustrations, it is possible to guess the fictional thematization of chapters (this is a second-order, inferred meaning!): for the natural sciences we have (i) Botany,

(ii) Zoology, (iii) Teratology, (iv) Physics and Chemistry, and (v) Mechanics; for the human sciences (vi) Anatomy, (vii) Anthropology and Mythology, (viii) Linguistics, (ix) Cooking and Food, (x) Games and Fashion, and (xi) Architecture. The illustrations are metamorphic, featuring some recurring themes, blending different categories of objects (the natural with the human-made), creating a sense of the uncanny and wonder.

There is no text without paratexts and *seuils* (Genette, 2002). For the *Codex*, the most immediate are:

- The Publisher presentation: the two volumes, with a black cover and golden letters and high-quality pagination and print, devoid of every other element that may break the fictional game of having a *real* “alien” encyclopedia.
- The name of the author reflected in the title: Luigi Serafini, not so well-known until the publication of the *Codex*.
- The title with the immediate insertion of it in the tradition of “*Codices*” (in the prefatory *Letter* it is compared to Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, Lucretius’s *De Rerum*, Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Maius* and, of course, to the *Encyclopédie*).
- Two other paratexts: the *Letter by the publisher* in the original edition, printed on a separate page, and the small pamphlet, also separated, with the title *Decodex* included in the more recent Italian Rizzoli edition.

Of course, the *Codex* is immediately demystified, and its fake (or fictional) nature is quickly unveiled by the *Letter* and the *Decodex*. As stated in those texts, Ricci’s original idea was to include a comment in the form of a foreword realised by some of his authors (“from Borges to Calvino”). Still, then he realized that “it would be a mistake to introduce explanations into a work of encyclopedic nature, born to explain itself” (*Letter*, my translation), with the intent to create the same feeling that might have struck an illiterate Barbarian entering a Latin library and finding a miniated codex or like a child who cannot read but still can “rejoice in the dreams or the fantasies the images suggest.” (*Letter*, my translation) The *Decodex* (also titled, pretty explanatorily, *Quis Quid Ubi Quibus auxiliis Cur Quomodo Quando*) is even more transparent, providing a narration

of the context of creation and a glimpse into the autobiographical events leading to the *Codex*: Serafini, he narrates, starting from images to text, ended up composing the *Codex* in an almost “automatic” way of writing (just like Surrealists did), pushed forward by the original search of the feeling of approaching a text as an illiterate kids. Beyond a curious geographical obsession, the *Decodex* is rather laconic and simply dismisses all the fuss around the *Codex* by concentrating on a white cat Serafini met in those years. Writing asemic is nothing more and nothing less than writing anything else, as also confirmed by several interviews that Serafini released in the last decades: he is explicit that it is worthless to attempt any translation or understanding, since the *Codex* is (intentionally) asemic.

The *Codex* fascinated many intellectuals, from Alberto Manguel who references it in his *A History of Reading* (Manguel, 1998, ch. *Picture Reading*) to Douglas Hofstadter who discusses it in parallel with another wonderful and weird book – *A Humument. A Treated Victorian Novel* by Tom Phillips – in his *Metamagical Themas* (Hofstadter, 1985, ch. *Stuff and Nonsense*). There are some lost traces: in a 2017 interview in *Linus* (Carrozzi & Manuppelli, 2017 – where, among other things, Serafini discusses psychedelics, the Voynich manuscript, and the attempts of decoding), he mentions an idea of a comic (a “noir” graphic novel) discussed with Giorgio Manganelli – unfortunately, it never happened. In another online magazine article (rather relevant for “Seraphinians”, Taylor, 2007), the author reports that he got in touch with Shelley Jackson (author of narrative hypertext masterpieces such as *Patchwork Girl*) and Arthur Danto himself – but again, there is nothing written by the American art critic and philosopher about the *Codex*. While not exactly a cult, the *Codex* has undeniably created a bibliophilic, meta-narrative layer of discussions and debates that thrive beneath institutionalized art, and that moves on the Web and by oral transmission (note that Serafini’s art *has also* been institutionalized, see for example the recent MACRO exhibition in Rome and the various references in Vittorio Sgarbi’s academic works). It is always a pleasure to introduce someone to the *Codex*, making them part of a bigger game of inter-textual connections and imaginative speculations.

Let me try, now, to test my “table of unities” for the *Codex*.



#### 4.1. The Asemic Unities Tested – Two Readings

The table for the *Codex* is as follows:

<i>Types of Unities</i>	<i>Codex Seraphinianus</i>
Spatial	Codex/Encyclopedia model.
Phonetics	Cursive writing → Pleasant sounding phonetics?
Morphology	Recurring phi-like letters, recurring disposition of numerals at the bottom of the pages → We can try to decode it on a basic morphological level.
Syntax	—
Semantics	Semantics of sections linked to the images and the structural organization (captions) → We can try to imagine in detail what is about.
Functional/Narrative	We may speculate that it is an alien encyclopedia with the function of presenting an alien world to us.
Metafictional	Serafini writes about it in the <i>Decodex</i> and some paratexts (interviews, etc.) and may speculate that it is a metafictional reflection on writing itself, on art, and the nature of interpretive acts.

To better understand the possible readings of the *Codex*, I will briefly analyse two approaches: one focusing on morphological unity and the other on semantic unity.

The first one is a collective *achieving* attempt to decipher the *Codex*, pursued both in academic circles and across the Web. The only successful decoding involves the page-numbering system (admittedly, the only truly ciphered aspect), cracked by Bulgarian linguist and mathematician Ivan A. Derzhanski (in the *Linus* interview, Serafini says “The Bulgarians are good

mathematicians”, Carrozzi & Manuppelli, 2017, p. 8), where he discovers the base-21 system and briefly discusses the possibility of deciphering the text as well (Derzhanski, 2004). Tomi Melka and Jeffrey Stanley (Melka & Stanley, 2012), clearly fascinated by the *Codex*, attempted a transliteration rather than a deciphering, acknowledging the asemic nature of the writing (in the acknowledgments both Peter Schwenger and Tim Gaze are mentioned). Tomi Melka is not new to the transliteration of real (Melka, 2012 on *rongorongo* script) and invented (Melka & Misteckýc, 2019 on H. Beam Pier’s *Omnilingual* Martian script), and utilises the same approach for the *Codex* – i.e. e a frequency analysis of glyphs and an evaluation of the distribution and positional analysis to grasp a morphological consistency. Admittedly, “the tests [...] do not intend to definitely resolve ambiguities, rather than provide a number of plausible options from a writing system perspective” and “there is zero credible evidence that *Seraphinian* is phonetic”; the *Codex* here is a test sample for the methods used for a real-world script system. A more recent, more refined attempt, which goes along the line traced by Melka & Stanley, is in Ponzi 2023; having already worked on the *Voynich manuscript*, he applied a Neural-Network system (developed by Harald Scheidl) to transliterate the whole *Codex* (while Melka & Stanley worked on only a few pages), concluding with distributive frequencies of glyphs and words, comparing those results with other natural language texts. The takeaways are i) that Scheidl’s Neural Network system works consistently even with asemic texts, and ii) that certain features of the *Codex* are shared with another (apparently) asemic text, the *Voynich manuscript*, but not with other real languages. Those are:

- the existence of two distinct sections with different glyph frequencies;
- high rates of both perfect and partial reduplication;
- line effects (in particular the preference for certain glyphs to appear line-initially). (Ponzi, 2023)

Other web-based attempts to decipher the *Codex* were found on paleolaliens.com and the “Seraphinians” blog (both now inactive and accessible only through the Wayback Machine) and in Google Groups discussions on the *Codex*. While the efforts are heartfelt and the results somewhat interesting, it is clear that AW here works only as a heuristic test for a more or less consolidated system, since the impossibility of getting something more of an arbitrary morphological analysis is hindered by the very nature of the text itself. However, this is precisely the point: such attempts

are exactly the kind of interpretive games the *Codex* (and AW in general) invites. These endeavours are, in fact, part of the game itself.

The second semantic game is the one undertaken by Italo Calvino. While, as stated before, he did not write any foreword, he did write a short but witty article published in the first issue of *FMR*, with the title *Orbis Pictus Seraphinanus* (Calvino, 1982, also collected in his *Collection of Sand*, Calvino, 2007b, pp. 555-560). Here, Calvino lets himself loose in a *striving* game of savvy attempts to understand the *necessary* “deep mystery about the inner logic of language and thought” below the “shallow mystery” of its impenetrable alien syntax (Calvino, 1982, p. 64, my translation). Calvino describes “Serafini’s universe as teratologic” with a logic structured around the contiguity and permeability of various spheres of existence (e.g., anatomy and mechanics) and the centrality of metamorphosis. Calvino then describes briefly the various sections and identifies some recurring central figures: the *skeleton* (i.e. the resisting matter, what is constant despite the metamorphosis), the *egg* (i.e. the original and primordial element), and the *rainbow* (i.e. light, both beam and matter). Calvino’s game is no less fantastic than that of the *Codex* itself, lost in a myriad of hypertextual and hypermedia *fugues* (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lear’s *Nonsense Botany*, Bruno Munari’s “crazy” machines) and absolutizes the element of writing, concluding that Serafini’s universe is a “universe-writing” and that “maybe all that Serafini shows us is no more than writing: only the codex varies” (p. 64).

What is important here is to understand that Calvino is playing with us (and with Serafini), and, while all the games are in a way “serious”, we should not really believe that his is a systematic explanation – we are talking about the same author who recognized in the nonsense of Lewis Carroll the great virtue of “not taking himself seriously” (Calvino, 2007a, *Filosofia e letteratura*, pp. 188-196) and that begins his *American Lectures* with the word “Lightness” (Calvino, 2007c, pp. 631-655). However, just as with the previous decoding attempts, this approach is *perfectly valid*. The AW of the *Codex* calls for such playful interpretations

In conclusion, it seems that in readings of the *Codex*, any interpretation is valid as long as it maintains internal coherence. The interpretive level corresponds to the ontological sphere that Italo Calvino distributes in “levels of reality” when discussing literature (Calvino, 2007a, *I livelli della realtà in letteratura*, pp. 381-398); however (I suspect Calvino would agree), since in the AW

of the *Codex* the literary dimension is not enclosed exclusively by the (pseudo)text, here the level of reality is *chosen* – or rather *negotiated* – by readers and/or interpreters.

## 4.2. Metalepsis as the Key?

When discussing the *Codex*, Peter Schwenger surprisingly focuses less on its asemic qualities, describing it as a “hallucinatory encyclopedia” that conjures visual manifestations of impossible entities – arguably, a characteristic similar to any form of fantastical representation. His main point seems to be the contrast between the encyclopedia’s functional nature and the obstructed readability of the *Codex*, ultimately challenging traditional categories and exposing the arbitrariness of categorical order and selection. At the heart of this analysis is the connection between graphemes and phonemes. It has been proven (Dehaene, 2007; Kemmerer, 2014) that in the reading of alphabetic writing the two paths are distinguished but plastic – i.e. that it is possible both to associate the sound to a grapheme and to come to graphemes from onomatopoeic and glossolalic sound formations. Using this idea, though without directly referencing neuroscientific discoveries, Schwenger argues that the *Codex* script embodies “glyptolalia”, which, much like my own analysis, “simultaneously invites and withstands attempts at interpretation”. While the category is nicely introduced, I still believe that Occam’s razor is a good epistemic principle, so I will stick to the concept of AW.

In another analysis (Faucher, 2016), the duality between unreadability and playfulness in the *Codex* is explained through the narratological concept of metalepsis (see Pier, 2016 for an introduction). Faucher claims – and I agree with him – that we should read the *Codex* as the point of metaleptic intertextual convergence of various paratexts. In this case, metalepsis refers to the blending or violation of boundaries between diegetic levels on an ontological plane. Thus, it is possible to identify distinct diegetic frames within the *Codex*, which remain separate in analysis but are interwoven and entangled within its narrative

1. First frame (original idea): The *Codex* presents itself as a “found” book (*objet trouvé*), written entirely in an asemic writing (AW). Notably, Serafini initially intended to omit both a Latin title and his own name from the original edition.

2. Second frame (1981 edition): The *Codex* now includes the author's name and an introductory letter by the publisher, marking the first instance of metaleptic contamination. Here, Serafini disrupts the *Codex*'s narrative autonomy by introducing external, contrasting elements. There is still a possibility for decryption and Serafini himself may suggest so. Calvino's discussion in *FMR* enforces this possibility.
3. Third frame (subsequent editions, interviews, etc.): By this stage, it is evident that the *Codex*'s writing is asemic, making decryption impossible. Nevertheless, the interpretive game persists.

Regardless, the *Codex* exists as an object in the world and thus maintains a connection to a broader discourse. This connection can best be understood through the interplay between its writing and imagery, where text accompanies images and images correspond with text. Our reading is, therefore, since the first moment, always analogical, yet never resolved since the mimetic aspect of writing and, in general, of representation is broken.

Ultimately, what matters is the level at which we position ourselves as readers and the kind of interpretive game we decide to engage with, oscillating between the extremes of achieving and striving. In this process, we become narrators; though extra-diegetic, we are also, metaleptically, drawn into the diegesis as we reconstruct forms of unity using the interpretive tools we select.

## 5. Conclusions

Admittedly, choosing the *Codex* as the primary example for AW is, in a sense, cherry-picking. The *Codex* exemplifies AW *at its finest*, showcasing an elegance, intertextual finesse, and seamless integration of images and text that are often absent in more "vulgar" examples of AW. For instance, the most famous example of AW, the *Voynich Manuscript* (Beinecke MS408), which I have only mentioned briefly, is less compelling. To start with, it may not even be true AW. The script is far less precise and uniform, allowing for a broader interpretation, whereas Serafini's graphemes are immaculate and consistent. I would argue, however, that the same conclusions applicable to the *Codex* can easily transfer to any other example of AW, once we set aside the distinctive nuances

unique to Serafini's work: given its open nature and its invitation to generate a plurality of possible meanings, AW acts as prop for a plurality of different games (not limited to *representational* games) and, given the minimal acceptance of the convention AW shares, what is equally important is what we consider *beyond* the AW text itself.

Returning to Derrida: in *Of Grammatology*, his well-known phrase, “*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is no outside-text”, Derrida, 1985, p. 227), does not imply that language encompasses everything, nor that everything can be reduced to language. Rather, it suggests – methodologically speaking (as indicated by the title *L'exorbitant. Question de méthode*) – a conjunctive logic that rejects verticality in favour of horizontality. This horizontality mirrors the intertextual network I've tried to construct around the *Codex*, and which is necessary for a nontrivial reading of any form of AW – otherwise, even mandarin peels arranged on a table might qualify as AW! What AW accomplishes, then, is to make explicit – beyond methodological debate – the need to temporarily bracket the traditional vertical structuring of language into signifier-signified pairs or Platonic ontological hierarchies, favouring instead a multidimensional horizontality or *field* approach. This is for the simple reason that leading AW back to language as I have chosen to do at the beginning of §3 it would be *uninteresting* to analyse it – a mere imitation of writing. In AW, Derrida's notion of “no outside-text” holds because every differentiation remains internal to its hallucinogenic textuality. The asemic field, then, eventually encompasses an entire intertextual game of infinite possible interpretations or *unities* that can emerge from it: the simplicity of the vertical meaning-referent simply does not work, and the text *is* the game

Thus, AW offers a valuable enclosed space to explore the boundaries of language and locally challenge traditional, static theories of reference, opening possibilities for new discoveries. Although the outcomes may be limited to local insights, a broader methodological caution emerges: we should avoid quickly dismissing what seems to “not make sense” upon first glance.

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## Asemic blogs and websites

Michael Jacobson blog:

<https://thenewpostliterate.blogspot.com/>

Tim Gaze blog (Wayback machine):

<https://web.archive.org/web/20240628211537/http://www.asemic.net/>

Asemic blog (Wayback machine):

<https://web.archive.org/web/20240708045000/https://scriptjr.nl/>

Google Groups discussion on the *Codex Seraphinianus*:

<https://groups.google.com/g/rec.arts.books/c/iZjm-ndNW30/m/8pf5iVz4AAAJ>

Seraphinians blog (Wayback machine):

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110807085743/http://seraphinianus.tribe.net/>

Snapshot from the paleoaliens thread (Wayback machine)

[https://web.archive.org/web/20210221213527/http://www.paleoaliens.com/event/seraphinianus/codex/matrix\\_1.jpg](https://web.archive.org/web/20210221213527/http://www.paleoaliens.com/event/seraphinianus/codex/matrix_1.jpg)