Text, Image, Asemic: "Reading" Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus* as Paratextual Metalepsis

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Abstract: The task of this article is to situate the *Codex Seraphinianus* in a series of multiple frames, not least of which being that of the teratological (following Italo Calvino), but also that of the pre-linguistic or post-writing frame of asemic text. This combination is less a convergence of disparate themes, but rather a disciplined parallel reading with some intriguing points of overlap and intersection. It is my hope that bringing the asemic and teratological together that it may generate insights germane to both. Ultimately, however, we still must ask if the Codex can be read as a cipher (concealed meaning), or if it is truly asemic and thus "unreadable" in any conventional or systematic sense.

Keywords: Luigi Serafini; *Codex Seraphinianus*; paratext; metalepsis

> *"An order always and already concerns prior orders, which is why ordering is redundancy"*
> – Deleuze and Guattari 1987:75

The task of this article is to situate the *Codex Seraphinianus* in a series of multiple frames, not least of which being that of the teratological (following Italo Calvino), but also that of the pre-linguistic or post-writing frame of asemic text. This combination is less a convergence of disparate themes, but rather a disciplined parallel reading with some

intriguing points of overlap and intersection. It is my hope that bringing the asemic and teratological together that it may generate insights germane to both. Ultimately, however, we still must ask if the *Codex* can be read as a cipher (concealed meaning), or if it is truly asemic and thus "unreadable" in any conventional or systematic sense. If the first test fails, then we may be dealing with an asemic work, which in itself carries some degree of the monstrous as meaning becomes distended, metastasized, or a product of a simulacrum that frequently proves a hostile environment in which to discover stable connections between signifier and signified given a simulacrum's tendency to operate under a different logic that makes strategic use of lacuna, contradiction, and "othering" that resists more classical forms of logical order.

Methodologically, the discussion will trace a few alternate reading routes, or paths, to glean more from the *Codex*, most of which will result in dead ends. These are included in deference to the scientific method whereby negative results possess an extrinsic value for lending support to a positive result. To this end, these reading paths serve as hypothetical's that allow us to frame this discussion by illustrating what is at stake in reading the *Codex*. It is my contention that "reading" the *Codex* must observe the importance of considering both the script and the illustrations concurrently rather than segment these for separate analyses. Although the format of this article will pay especial attention to the script and illustrations independently, the final section will "enframe" the *Codex* as an asemic artifact of paratextual metalepsis. For the purposes of this article, I will be taking paratext slightly beyond Genette's sense of the term as "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (1991:261) whereby it will be important in this very particular instance of an "unreadable" book to rely on some epitext which informs what may be called an extension of the addresser-addressee problem inherent to the narratological framework of metalepsis. Rather than being complicit with the metaleptic binaries of inside/outside, such frames will be treated as "lenses" with which focus exists on a continuum.

Metalepsis is defined as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.)." (Genette 1991:234). Following Genette, any transition in narrative levels must be done explicitly through narrative (ibid.). These levels, in the narratological discourse, refer to varying "frames" of diegesis (whether being extra-, meta-, or hypo-diegetical). The distinction here is between ordered worlds, whether these be enframed within the actual narrative, a subset world-within-a-world, or something that approaches from outside the narrative world of the story. Of the numerous examples in literature of how narrators transcend the levels and fracture the frames of narrative, Borges' short fictions stand as exemplary in this fashion for the way in which he, as author inserts himself diegetically as a character in

his stories, but also how the references within his diegetical frame overrun their boundaries to reference the "reality" outside the story, effectively borrowing from recorded history or the work of philosophers. To that end, one might question to what extent these "borrowings" are auto-reflective within the confines of the world of the story, or if they become "launchpads" or supports to the world of the story. It is far from uncommon that fiction writers will perform these fictional-reality bends as mutual reflective support frameworks in terms of plot development. More specifically to the practice of Borges, his chosen method for the short story blurs the distinction between standard fictional narrative and that of the essay – a format that makes these mutual supports more visible. Another possibly more recognizable example would be the use of frame tales in Cervantes' *Don Quixote.*

The distinct challenge of assessing the narrative framework of the *Codex* is precisely that access to the "text" is both semantically and syntactically blocked due to an apparent encipherment. It is in this way that a "reading" of the *Codex* can only be done at two specific levels: at the level of the visual narrative of the illustrations and the aestheticized "writing," and in the arguably apocryphal paratexts that attend the *Codex* itself. Neither of these levels will reveal the true "meaning" of the book, but it is precisely the idea of meaning that is problematized by this particular asemic artifact. I say "apparent encipherment" because the textual object carries the intention of concealing its "meaning" by use of a cipher designed by the author/artist, Luigi Serafini, but repeated attempts by several hands at decipherment (using both brute and sophisticated methods) has revealed that it is a false cipher with no decipherment.

Introduction: What is the *Codex Seraphinianus*?

For many, this obscure folio-sized book is a sumptuous, hallucinogenic *objet trouvés* commanding a mix of curiousity and respect. Given that the text is all in apparent cipher, this adds an additional layer to the text, one that may prompt a desire to decipherment to gain access to its semantically locked contents. For some, this is an all consuming affair, while for others who take a different view of the book (or who are convinced that the cipher is indeed an instance of Greeking, or the fanciful creation of a language that only appears to have a meaning), the *Codex Seraphinianus* is simply an art book that stands as an example of the theory of asemic reading in practice. There is no doubt, as evidenced in its imagery, that the book is a product of its time, a late 1970s coffee table book of conceptual art entirely conceived by an emergent Italian artist who holed up inside an apartment for two years to develop it. The world of Serafini is surreal, at least insofar as all the objects and organisms in the book resist cold functionalism and mass reproduction, perhaps putting us more in mind of the Italian new wave in design and the undulating, semi-futuristic work of Cesare "Joe" Colombo. But it is not even precisely that, for as much as it may satisfy our desire to situate the book in a recognizable aesthetic history,

reducing its otherness to a series of labels, the book resists this as well. At best, we can say that it is a pastiche resembling a few key sources in art history. This, one can say, is a key component to the book: the idea of resemblance, but it is a resemblance that draws upon the forces of the false, the spectacle, the image in this world, and mixes freely with an entirely different world of which this book is our only known contact. This resemblance is not of the order of model and copy, but that of simulacrum: the marshaling together of component symbols and themes that effectively produce the new model-copy relation. In this way, the book oozes out of the simulacrum machine, made-to-order. A simulacrum can be considered "monstrous" insofar as it violates the original-copy couplet, but also disrupts the signifier-signified chain. In this case, it appears to follow the Cartesian explanation of combined ideas; so, just as Descartes will reference the mythological centaur as being composed of the two distinct ideas of man and horse united, Serafini's illustrations rely heavily on (sometimes very disparate) combinations of ideas that do have a real-world referent.

Most university libraries will have a copy. Generally, it will be shelved in a section dedicated to encyclopedias, fictional languages, and imaginary worlds in the oversize stacks. A first edition copy, published by Franco Maria Ricci, can command well beyond a thousand dollars, with the first "English" edition (Abbeville, New York) priced similarly. In 2006, Rizzoli reissued a deluxe edition (which also came with a separate "Decodex" chapbook in the back cover sleeve, which contains a kind of publisher's colophon in addition to an aggregation of reprinted articles on the *Codex*, mostly in Italian) at a more affordable $250, and again in 2013 with yet another reissue containing new illustrations by Serafini. However, with the Internet, there have been scanned versions placed online. What was peculiar about the Rizzoli 2006 edition was the addition of nine new pages in the preface (as well as inserted throughout the original, at times duplicating or cleaving the numbering system). These new pages are tantalizing, and for all that eager cryptanalysts might think is *mirabile dictu*, Serafini might just be having us on once more in dangling clues that are not really clues.

Since its debut in 1981, the book has resisted all efforts at its decipherment with the exception of the numbers (see Derzhanski 2004; but only those that appear as page numbers, not the separate numeral series that occur in text). The *Codex Seraphinianus* occasionally returns to our attention. There are some who cannot resist the challenge of deciphering it even if the result proves futile. In fact, it is partially the mystery of the book as a whole that keeps it alive and lends it its particular cachet as an esoteric, obscure, and mystifying object. Other connoisseurs of the text, like Peter Schwenger (2001), tell us that deciphering is not the point of the *Codex*, and he devotes considerable attention to the final page where we have an illustration of a page curling up into itself [*explicit est volumen*] and revealing some "rainbow germs" prancing around the authorial hand—a

skeletal reminder of futility, but also possibly an illustrated homage to Da Vinci whose hand was stilled by a stroke, himself a polymath given to writing in code.[1] Those who side with Schwenger may agree that perhaps the worst possible fate this book could succumb to would be in the definitive proof that the language itself turns out to be a hoax, or even worse if it does not and the deciphered text is banal. And, among all of us who gather virtually or in-person to discuss the enigma of the *Codex*, this invariably conjures up our anecdotal tales of how we came across it, a kind of meta-narrative that is associated with the book, sometimes as uncanny and mysterious as the book itself.

In 2009, Luigi Serafini went on record at the Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles in saying that the text is not a cipher at all, that it is asemic, and that it aims to mimic how a pre-literate child would view an encyclopedia. If we apply the principle of charity to this confession or declaration, we have little reason to doubt that attempts at deciphering the book will always end in frustration, but if we take a more suspicious view, then Luigi Serafini may be trying to dissuade us from unmasking the text and revealing its semantic information.[2]

No one so far has stepped into the breach and declared the solution to puzzle save for a few isolated individuals who have coasted on the provocation of their claim without providing much in the way of evidence. There have been no charlatans on the order of Athanasius Kircher who have made bold claims in having translated Serafini's hieroglyphics with any real demonstrative evidence. Said people will publish their dubious deciphering online, but eventually these sites vanish. Of course, this book would have tested Kircher's skills in much the same way the Voynich Manuscript did before he fobbed it off in frustration to others until it was occulted from view and rediscovered in a trunk of a Jesuit College by Alfred Voynich in 1913. Attempts to infer meaning when the enciphered text resists decipherment, may take the form of analysis of the corresponding illustrations. Leaving aside the debate as to whether the Voynich Manuscript is a hoax (Rugg 2004) or an actual encipherment by Roger Bacon (D'Imperio 1978), it is perhaps the illustrations that are the most easily recognizable as signs.
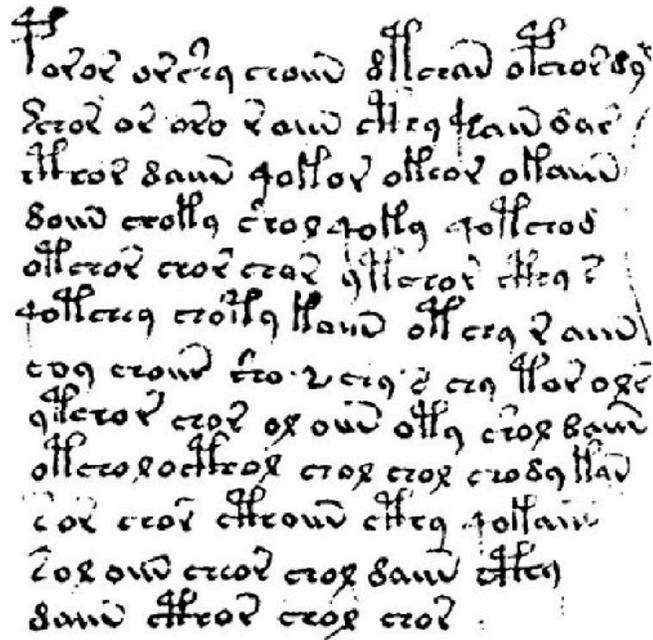
Figure 1. Detail from MS 408, aka The Voynich Manuscript

This may also hold true for the *Codex* given that it "must be read without the help of a common language, through signs for which there are no meanings except those furnished by a willing and inventive reader." (Manguel 1996:95). And, as others have opined with no little measure of admiration, alluding to the polysemous nature of the signs: "There is very little to fasten onto; everything shifts, simmers, slips." (Hofstadter 1985:229).

The *Codex* certainly is captured by the apt term of heterotopia. As Foucault reminds us, heterotopias are

> disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together' (1973:xviii).

And, "heterotopias [...] desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (1973:xviii). The heterotopia of the *Codex* is monstrous not because the images inscribed therein cause fright or revulsion, but that we cannot situate it in a stable frame, within a locus that appeals to a recognized order. Any attempt to unify the *Codex*

under a classificatory or categorial regime risks the "unreading" of what the *Codex* is, and instead becomes a reflective instance of self-reading in the frame of a historical discourse. Unification, under any generalizing or hierarchical regime, reduces difference to a game of determining what the *Codex* is by what it is not. Instead, it may be more worthwhile, in the consideration of both the asemic "text" and the accompanying illustrations, to bundle these together as an instance of *heterotext*, but in such a way that what we sign as heterotextuality is not to take both "text" and "image" as equivalent, but more like a communicating series that crosses the boundaries of their respective frames.

The Flora and Fauna of the *Codex*: The Natural History Frame

> Until the time of Aldrovandi, History was the inextricable and completely unitary fabric of all that was visible of things and of the signs that had been discovered or lodged in them: to write the history of a plant or an animal was as much a matter of describing its elements or organs as of describing the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the foods it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travellers might have said of it. (Foucault 1973:129)

Serafini's *Codex* has a(t least a) double inheritance. For inasmuch as it appears an homage to the lurid rubrications of medieval bestiaries and an increase in the interest in natural sciences coinciding with the wane of scholasticism, the *Codex* also has a debt to surrealism. Apart from the apparent dreamscapes that Serafini depicts for us, it is a cinematic reel seemingly plucked from the subconscious. It is absurd, occasionally disturbing, almost always marvelous. The *Codex* is surrealism without the politics, or without a politics we can access and comprehend. We could interpret the very act of cataloguing and organizing as something inherently political, but this risks throwing another interpretive blind over the work. Throughout the *Codex* we are privy to mutations and fusions, the unlikely mergers of the organic and synthetic, bandaged fruit, trees that uproot and migrate by swimming away, chairs grown in the wild, architects with enormous prosthetic pencils in place of arms, a reverent ritual around the refrigerator, the meticulous measurement of a fried egg using the rules of perspective, glyphs appearing in nature, machines that make rainbows and tie them into bows, and all manner of oddities composed of objects and concepts that have resemblances in our own world.

The importance of attending to the images associated with the sections on flora and fauna is precisely the role they play as "frames of reference" for the readers' access to the contents of the *Codex* as an artifact of potential intelligibility. From the standpoint of metalepsis, the enframing aspect is the interjection or imposition of the reader's competencies in recognizing differences with respect to kingdoms, if not also the inheritance of views that are historically complicit with the hierarchical taxonomy of living organisms. From an authorial standpoint, the metalepsis present in the *Codex* may be said to be in the deliberate organization of the text according to these hierarchical arrangements designed to elicit our recollection of the historical discourse that enframes our approach to nature.
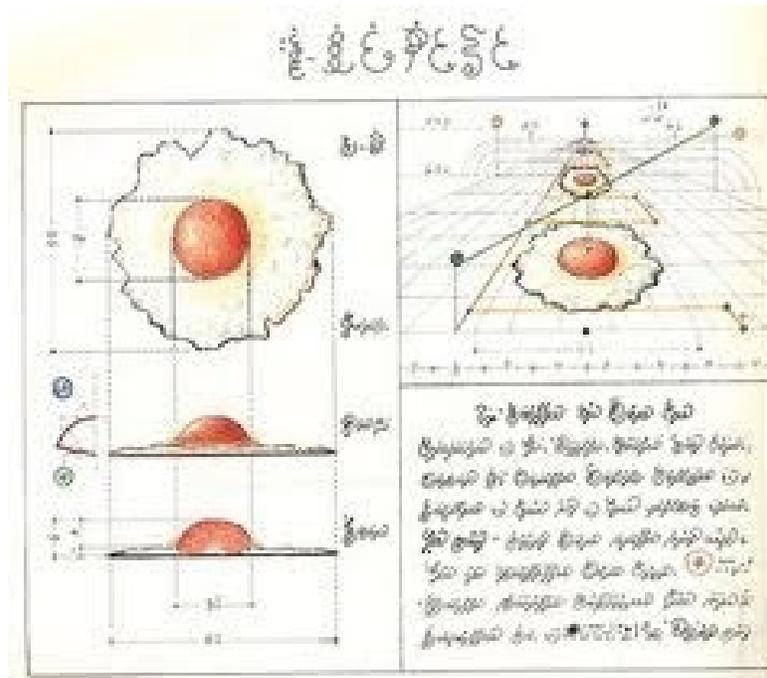
Figure 2. Serafini egg diagram, using perspective

Serafini appears to begin with the most basic units before proceeding to more complex forms and various applications of these plants. The resemblance to medieval herbals is striking, and perhaps intentional. The plant section begins with ostensible taxonomic diagrams before proceeding to illustrate either basic plant-life (microorganisms) or cellular types. As we progress throughout this section, the reader is privy to a host of bizarre hybrids, some of which either resemble human tools (like scissors or a radish containing matchsticks) or carrots with tomato tops, etc. There are also a few pages devoted to trees (that have the ability to uproot, swim, and otherwise migrate, thus inverting the understanding of trees as permanently rooted). The chapter ends with one section demonstrating how chairs and fountain pens appear in nature, and finally with a young boy who has plucked the petals off a daisy, inflates the floret like a balloon, and flies away.
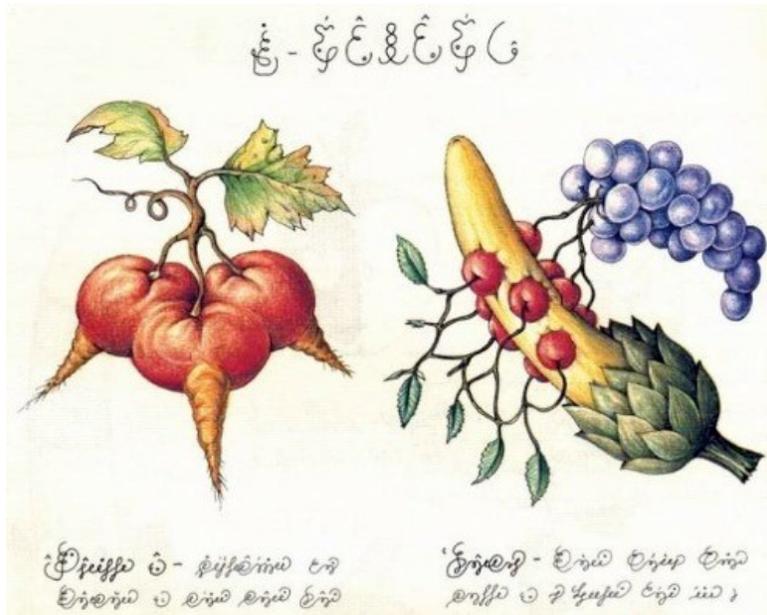
Figure 3. Serafinian "GMOs"

Figure 4. Matthaeus Platearius, c. 1500.

Herbals occupied a very important place in the medieval world as these were effectively medicinal manuals. Minta Collins (2000) divides illustrations of this type into two categories: decorous or ornamental (plant portraits) which aim to represent the plants in an artistic and pleasing way rather than relying on botanical accuracy, and those that are designed to be instructional in nature (plant illustrations). Collins tells us that most medieval Herbals are of the second type. It is unclear to which category Serafini's section on plants belongs, or if this cleavage between portraiture and illustration can be maintained, as there are elements in Serafini's work that bridge the aesthetic and the technical.

Leaving aside the fascinating history of botanical illustration and how these demonstrated a growing appreciation of deriving knowledge from the natural world rather than relying on scripture, one is confronted with the obvious question as to what purpose Serafini's Herbal serves. The first series of images appear to depict component parts of plants, or might be microscopic plants. The following series of images is divided between leaf and root variations. On this page we have the beginning and end of plant life: from the root to the flower, so to speak. The roots are roughly similar in each of the series save for the 20th and 23rd which are red, and the 22nd which is black. The following figure shows a variety of twigs with glowing red buds; the twigs are identical save for the orientation of the red light-emitting bud. These positions are as follows:
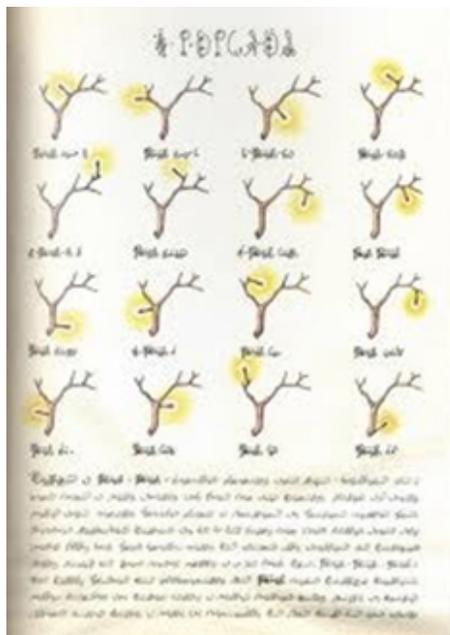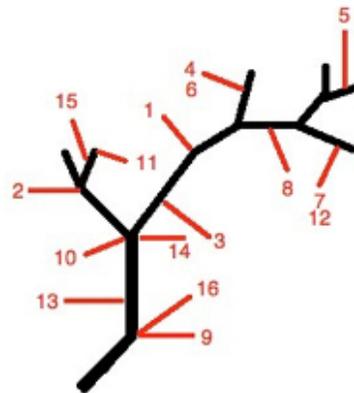

Figures 5–6. Glowing Buds

We note that positions 4 and 6 are repeated as are positions 7 and 12. These orientations may resemble a kind of phytosemiotic signalling system; or, they may signify nothing of the sort, thus presenting yet another tantalizing (non-)clue. We could assume

numerological significance in this presentation, but it would fall short of definitive confirmation of authorial intent. There are several images that appear to be partially numerically driven, especially 7 and 21, with 22 functioning as a "magic" number. As it is the page numbers themselves that yield an actual cipher that has been deciphered, some have been tempted to use a numbers-based approach as a key to unlocking the rest of the cipher.

The "monsters" in Serafini's *Codex* do not contain the general types found in medieval bestiaries such as manticores, sciapods, monopods, blemmyes, gryphons, unicorns, or cyclopses, nor do any of the illustrations seem to resemble Gothic grotesques. In fact, Serafini's illustrations of plants and animals resemble those of naturalists from Gesner to Darwin, albeit "surrealized" to form hybridizations, connecting seemingly disparate ideas. However, we must note that what we consider disparate or widely divergent as ideas may reflect our own imposition upon the images according to a logic that functions in our world as opposed to what may be a different operating logic in Serafini's diegesis.
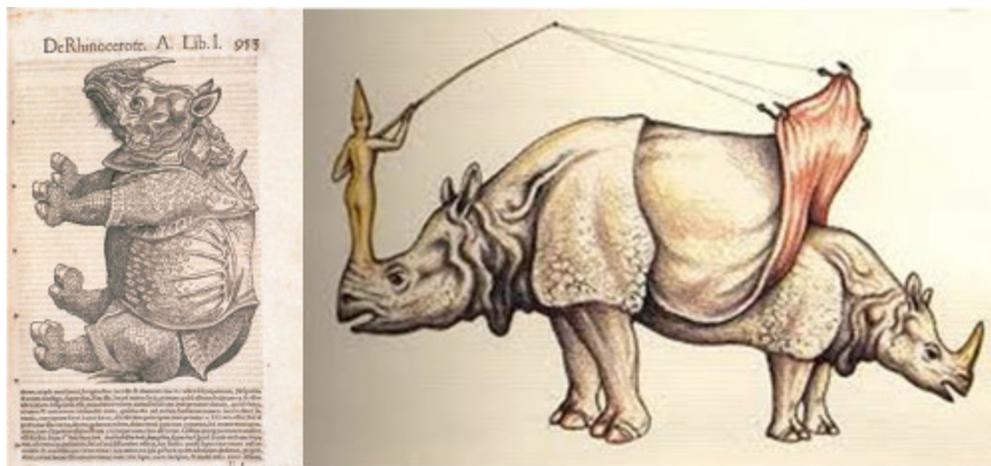
Figures 7–8. Left: From Konrad Gesner, Historia animalium c. 1551-1586; Right: Serafini's "Rhino."

The headless homunculi, to which an entire section of the *Codex* is devoted, are not of the spectacularized and grotesque category as one would find in a Boschian panel. However, despite Schwenger's (2001) claim that Bosch may have been a strong influence on Serafini, one cannot disregard other, possibly more significant influences on Serafini's texts and illustrations, including but not limited to Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Darwin, and the tradition of medieval bestiaries and herbals. Moreover, to impute to Serafini's images too strong an inspirational connection to Bosch may risk classifying the images as part of a Kayserian romantic grotesque whereby said grotesques signify the ruin of a world. If there are "monsters" in Serafini's world, they appear largely benign, if not simply hybridized, somewhat akin to a Hesiodic world: "In Hesiod, these creatures are negative exemplars, failed experiments in the course of cosmic evolution" (Clay 2003:161).

However, in the world of the *Codex*, there is no way of inferring that these creatures are, in fact, "failed experiments" in a cosmological order, for all we can generally say is that this is the cosmological order as presented in the *Codex*. This "cosmological order" as presented in the *Codex* signals an entanglement of frames: the first being the aspect of resemblance to myth and that of the heritage of bestiaries and herbals, while the second frame is that of generative imagination through acts of playful fusion. Combinatorial design produces here a tertiary frame where reference cuts across the other two frames. As we approach the *Codex*, it is the reader that supplies an additional layer of paratext either by the narrative of personal discovery of the book, or by the expectations placed upon it that facilitate the phenomenon of "reading" it.

From the perspective of resemblance, every one of the animals in the Serafini bestiary possess analogical resemblance to those in our world, and so despite apparent differences and additions, we are able to pick out dogs, horses, deer, rhinoceroses, fish, snakes, and beetles. It is for this reason that the teratological may in fact be typological given that we are given illustrated tokens that refer to recognizable types, albeit by variation and hybridization. Although the specific nature of these illustrations is somewhat singular, they would be classed as "accidents." Descartes' narrator in the Meditations attributes folklorist hybrids like sirens and satyrs as the combinatory function of the imagination, linking together the adventitious ideas of the senses:

> For indeed when painters themselves wish to represent sirens and satyrs by means of especially bizarre forms, they surely cannot assign to them utterly new natures. Rather, they simply fuse together the members of various animals. (2006:11)

Even if the artistic creation borne of the fusion of ideas turns out to be so extremely bizarre that it would make it challenging to draw a resemblance that would correspond to a real thing, Descartes' reductionist approach will tell us that there is some simplest of ideas that are universal, even if it is just the colours used in the painting, a shape, an angle, a stroke. A Cartesian explanation may suffice to describe the processes involved in the creation of the book, and perhaps even its structure that follows an encyclopedic order, but it conceals the theoretical import of the book itself. Moreover, a rational description of the parts does not necessarily neatly add up to a full comprehension of the whole of those parts, as it is the sum of these components that have a meaning beyond the reach of such an approach.

The parallel resemblances between Serafini's world and our own may present us with a means by which to approximately identify certain signs as referring to certain groupings or sets. Serafini holds up a distorted mirror on our own world, but it is the differences that make it interesting and heterotopic.
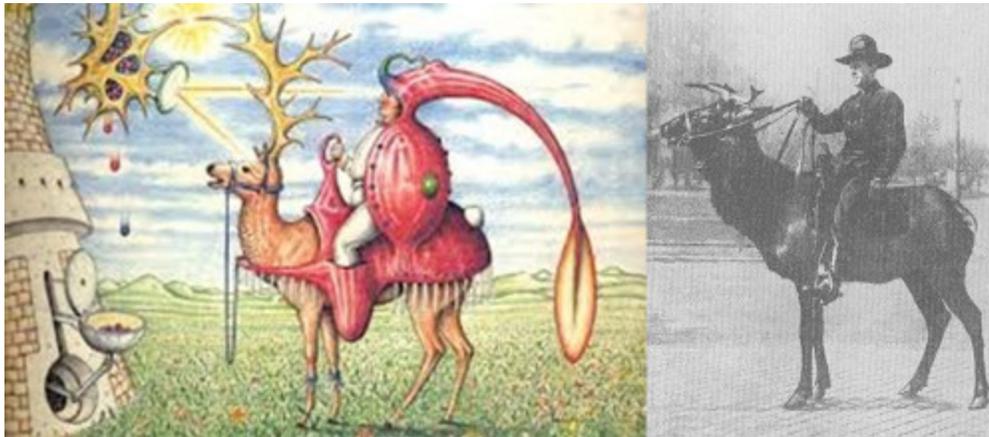
Figures 9–10. Domesticated Elk

It is precisely this tissue of resemblance that so tantalizingly leads some to conjecture that the script might be a cipher. The appearance of methodical intention and purpose is borne by the seeming proliferation of patterns—not only of the glyphs, but of visual metaphors of recurring rainbows and broken eggs. However, a pattern is little more than a necessary but not sufficient condition for there being a ciphertext that can be deciphered, for it is just as possible that one could employ patterns of a glyphic or graphic nature with the full intention to deceive. The same can be said about the appearance of order, any order, as though the intention must be mapped against the backdrop of encyclopaedic, alphabetic, or any other known order. When Foucault speaks of the aphasiac and how they choose to arrange and organize items, to lump or split them, "the aphasiac will create a multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets" (1973:xviii) in a continuous process of lumping identities and splitting them up again until they reach the febrile pitch of anxiety. Serafini does not reach this particular moment of anxiety since the clustering is a fait accompli, however arbitrary it may actually be, or as arbitrary as our reading of the order of the book. How do we know that Serafini did not follow a path similar to that of Linnaeus who, in creating his grand taxonomy, assigned the place for the uncertain creatures that did not fit neatly within his categories into a miscellaneous pile he called "worms"? Are there sections in the *Codex* that are simply "miscellaneous," that resist the classificatory order of the Serafinian world? To know this would be to know what is already well-ordered and essential. It is already a possible infelicity to assume that the contents of the book proceed from simplest to the most complex, a retread of the *scala naturae*, insofar as the extremes of plants and humans can be read as an anthropocentric bias. Without access to a universal grammar

or universal discourse that we can emerges from *within* the text, we have no reliable frame upon which to hang our assumptions other than the discursive frame we inherit and inhabit.

In this "first attempt" at reading, using the flora and fauna of the *Codex* as the entry point, we are already faced with a difficulty of tracing resemblances that refer back to categorial or taxonomic order.

The "Human" World of the *Codex*: The Human all too Human Frame

We might come to assume that "cracking" the *Codex* in terms of its hidden meaning might best be done by an appeal to the sections that pertain to what most resembles us. The sections that make up the second portion of the *Codex* are entirely devoted to anthropocentric concerns such as anatomy, ethnology, history and geography, fashion and cuisine, games and entertainment, writing and language, and architecture. One of the more "famous" images of the *Codex* found online, and which also adorned the front cover of the second volume of the 1981 Franco Maria Ricci edition, is the copulation scene:
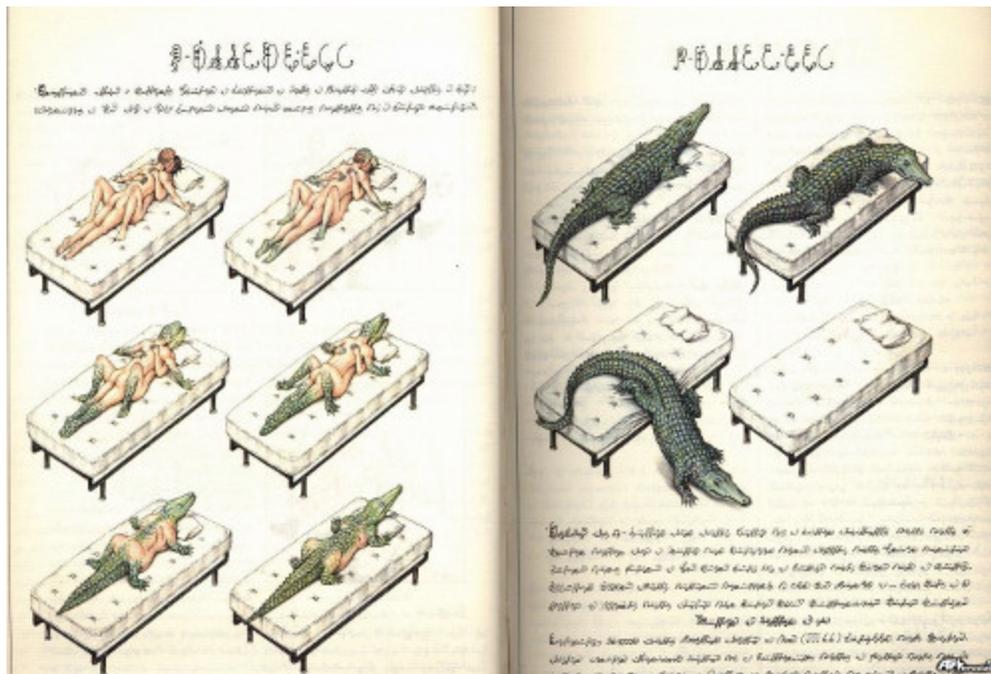
Figure 11. An "allegory" of lovers

This metamorphosis whereby two become one bears a resemblance to the hermaphroditic images of some medieval woodcuts:

Figures 12–13. Images from the Rosarium Philosophorum, an alchemical series of woodcuts originally appearing in volume two of De Alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum (Frankfurt: 1550).

Themes of sex and death are more than likely to pique our interest for all the natural reasons. It would appear that the heavier preponderance on these themes as found in the *Codex* suggests that the Serafinian world is populated by those who share similar concerns.

Figure 14. How to Build a Body Without Organs?

The macabre scene above depicts helmeted figures (with cowboy boots and spurs) rolling flesh onto waiting skeletons, upon a slab of books, nowhere near as grisly or dramatic as

Orozco's mural, *Gods of the Modern World*, which also depicts a skeleton on a slab of books. And yet the themes of life and death return, especially the latter. In one illustration, the dead are encased in transparent slabs and become "bricks" in the archways and walls of a memorial public park. In another illustration, a grave with a man suspended upside-down, his head encased in stone, gradually melts away, at which point an inscription appears astride long purple grass peopled by visitors. Another image portrays a strange contraption of a coffin seemingly hybridized with drag racing car piloted by a figure with a monocle, while the inset caption shows the same "vehicle" closed up as a simple coffin with its protruding tail pipes leaking a rainbow fluid. In the same section devoted to reverence for the dead, the text is indented on both sides in the appearance of poetry— and the final ciphertext of each of the lines form visual couplets as though in imitation of rhyme.

The section on games and entertainment also give us another series of tantalizing clues about this world.
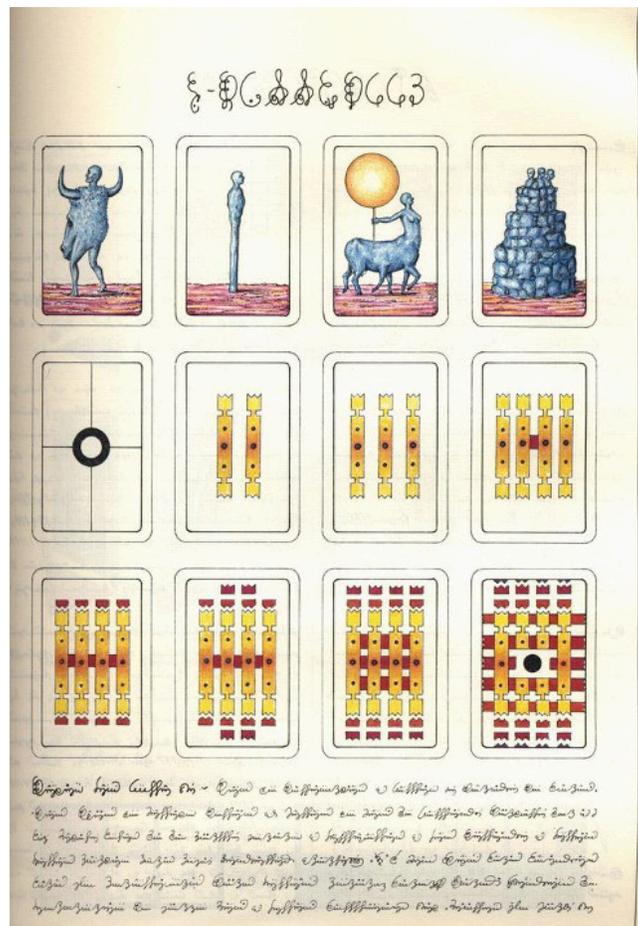
Figure 15. Playing card. There are four "arcana" and eight count-cards in steps of null, 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 15, and 24.

All four card suits are roughly based on animal totems. The "major arcana" cards appear at the top, and the suits correspond two on two akin to our playing card deck of having two red suits and two black. This can be seen in the difference between the cards that sport the strange centaur-esque creature with six legs holding a globed standard. What is also particularly interesting about these decks would be that the numerical sequence moves from one (or zero) in numerically conspicuous steps to a very cluttered and seemingly uncountable card number. These numbers do not correspond with the base-21 of the pagination. Also of note would be the specific use of animals that represent each suit: ass and rhinoceros on one set of pages, and mouse and bull on the other. Setting aside the symbolism of these animals, we know in Latin that these form approximate rhyming pairs: *asino / rino*, *topo / toro*. Once again, Serafini presents us with a tantalizing clue.
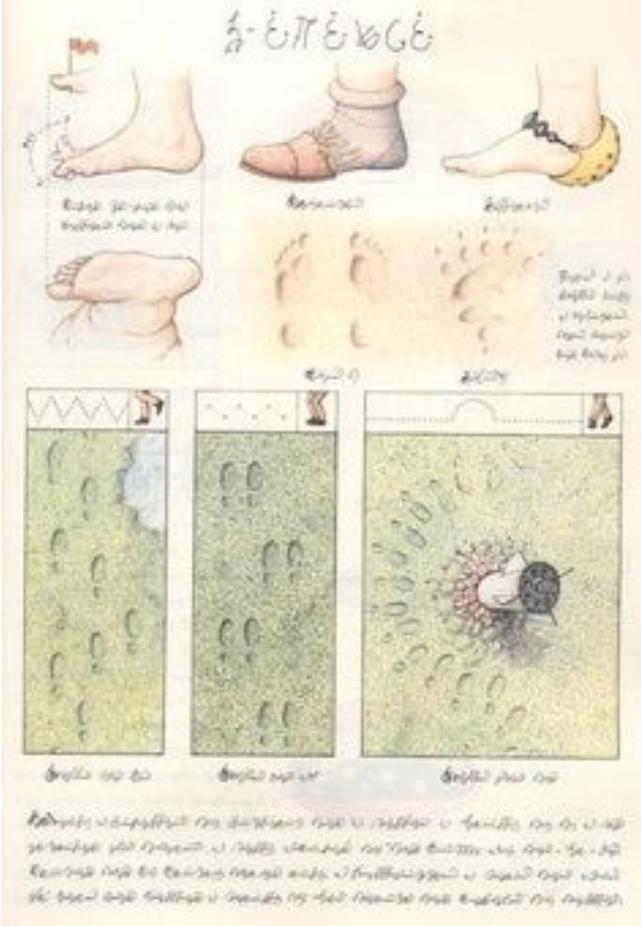
Figure 16. Steps and Footprints

Early humans relied on "reading" animal tracks in the hunt more so than through olfactory means. Hewes argues that the reading of tracks "was a species-specific behaviour which may have contributed to the natural selective enhancement of human cognitive capacities." (1994:139). The reading of human tracks is indispensable in police investigations and, of course, a common plot element in detective novels. Human

footprints are information-rich insofar as they indicate direction, and from which we can infer the gait, weight, and stride of the individual who impressed them. In the *Codex*, we are presented with three variations of steps: a staggered skip, a controlled zigzag hop reminiscent of rabbits, and a crossing-over shuffle around an impacted rocket. As usual, the purpose of this section is not clear: are these dance steps or merely different means of perambulating pending situational context?

The Ciphertext Viewpoint: The Secret Message Frame

For the sake of argument and due diligence, let us temporarily assume that the text is a cipher and perform a brief assessment of said text as an encipherment. To avoid the kind of wishful thinking that marks "Newbold Syndrome" in imposing meaning upon a text that it does not possess, before one can set out to accomplish the decipherment of the *Codex*, a few ground rules might be in order. Assuming that Luigi Serafini took two full years to complete the task of both illustrating and "writing" the *Codex*, that would mean roughly two months per section, or perhaps two pages a day. We have to subtract from this any time he might have spent researching to obtain some inspiration as well as the time it would have taken him to devise the ciphers for the numerals, majuscules, and minuscules. Given their nearly flawless execution and consistency, this might suggest that he practiced writing the cipher beforehand. Given that some of the illustrations are fairly complex, such a task represents a considerable time commitment. Two years does not seem like a lot of time, even if one does nothing else.

The cipher could mean nothing at all, if it is even a legitimate cipher. However perplexing the script and the accompanying drawings (or vice versa), there is always that tight coil of doubt that suggests that Serafini is having us on. A pronouncement such as this must be made very carefully—not that we can know either way—since one could just as easily accuse said person of simply trying to close down attempts prematurely, possibly on account of desperate failure to crack the text. Even with respect to the infamous Voynich Manuscript, authors such as Brumbaugh have floated this damning idea that the manuscript could be intentionally nonsensical. To ascribe to the *Codex* that it may be "nonsensical," however, carries a pejorative connotation that rests on a primary assumption of a desire to deceive. In calling the script of the *Codex* nonsensical may unduly reject the possibility of other intentions, such as a desire to produce an asemic writing, or simply an act of aesthetic expression more generally.

We may be able to rule out a monoalphabetic cipher if only on account that a) the repetition of some characters make the result improbable and, b) a Caesar shift would have revealed likely combinations. However, this does not mean that it is enciphered as a polyalphabetic cipher either given the length of the work and the relatively short time it was produced which would have made such a task unfeasible. Instead, there is the

possibility that the language is a language, but that it is synthetic—an artificially produced language operating by its own logic, syntax, orthography, and glyphs. The one drawback of this view (apart from making deciphering moot and the language entirely inaccessible unless one came upon a manual on how to read Serafinese) would be the apparent high level of "noise" in the text, most notably in the majuscules.

Most languages operate according to repeating patterns. A study of any language will reveal lower levels of entropy in the distribution of letters that combine to form recognizable sounds. The orthography of the English language, for example, has many common roots, prefixes, and suffixes. We know, for example, that there are less letters that follow Q than E. We understand that a one-letter word will either be first-person pronoun "I" or the indefinite article "a", and thus will always be a vowel. Many two-letter words will be prepositions such as "in", "of", or "to", and that at least one of the letters will be a vowel. If we set aside the "special glyphs" that only appear once followed by a dash on the illustration pages, there are no single-letter majuscule words in Serafinese. The shortest majuscule words in Serafinese are two letters, but if the vowels are not recorded, then the actual word (if it is enciphered from a known language) might be anywhere between three and five letters long if the vowels are added in.

If we take the *Codex* majuscules as a *whole*, there seems to be high entropy. When we refer to a glyph table, we find 266 D-shaped glyphs out of 2,846 majuscule glyphs, or 9.35% of the total. Compared to English or any of the romance languages, that is on the low side, but not statistically aberrant. We do have to keep in mind that 2,846 letters is only about 575 words in the English language—hardly enough to obtain a reliable frequency distribution. This would not be so problematic if, after we've produced a fairly comparable frequency distribution with other languages, the number of letters that are represented at a rate of ≤0.1% did not constitute a majority of glyph-types. There is a long tail of unique glyphs that appear only once or twice throughout the *Codex*. Although it may be true that a majority of Serafinian majuscules appear under five times, thus increasing the rate of glyphic entropy over the entire *Codex* and reducing the chances that it is a consistent cipher or language, the least frequently appearing glyphs tend to cluster together in the same chapter or section.

By contrast, the minuscule glyph set has far fewer variations. It is vaguely reminiscent of standard cursive writing in that all glyphs are joined, and many of them are constructed of loops and tails. Most of the words end with a rising curled tail, often with a dot inside the curve. It is possible that Serafini has merged the function of the glyph-as-letter with that of punctuation. One may come to notice that there is very little evidence of recognizable punctuation save for the ending of a paragraph that commonly sports a dot followed by a

second dot beneath a tilde. Other marks include a variation of the number system, mostly repeating series of I, V, and /\\s.

Focusing solely on the minuscules, we find that many of the words also contain what appear to be diacritical marks; namely diaereses (e.g. ä) , tildes (e.g. ñ), and carons (e.g.). At times, each diaeresis may contain up to three instead of just two raised dots. We should also take note of one of the most common formations in this glyph set, a character that resembles either a tilted 'w' partially enclosing a dot. It is tempting to see this glyph as a possible ampersand given how common it is, or as some prepositional word such as "to," "in," or, "of." However, one can just as easily speculate that these do not represent words or letters at all, but instead may function as punctuation.

By my own count, the Serafinian alphabet size is both large and small; large in its headers (or what resemble majuscules) and considerably smaller in its cursive script. However, size of alphabet speaks more to the range of phonetic mutations. In the writing/linguistic section of the book, we are presented with a chart of both minuscules and majuscules. The number of minuscules is 50 in total, although their appearance in the actual script numbers slightly higher than this given that the chart appears incomplete. The majuscule chart lists 97, but a comparison with the majuscules in the text itself reveals 412 unique glyphs, 626 if we include all the special glyphs that precede a dash and only appear once. An alphabet of that size suggests a resemblance to ideograms more than a phonetic language. A frequency analysis can be performed by sorting all the header glyphs. The variations are due to the addition of what appear to be diacritical marks and setting aside the special glyphs that precede the dash on the illustrated pages on account of their non-repeatability. The largest glyph family would be the E-shaped group at 591 occurrences in total in all variations out of 3,060 glyphs. The single glyph with the highest frequency would be the D-shaped at 266. In terms of frequency distribution, each glyph on average has a chance of recurring 6.9 times throughout the entirety of the *Codex*. The numbers in brief are provided here:

Number of Glyphs Counted:	2,846 (regular)
Total Glyphs:	3,060 (regular + special)
Glyph-Alphabet Size:	412 (including special glyphs = 626)
Special Glyphs:	214
Average Frequency per Glyph:	6.9 (average of regular glyphs only)
Min/Max Frequency:	1 / 266

Figure 17. Glyph Count

From this, we can tabulate them by occurrence and percentage:

Family	Occurrences	% (/2846)
E-shaped	591	20.77
6-shaped	445	15.64
D-shaped	376	13.21
S-shaped	216	7.59
3-shaped	173	6.08
P-shaped	165	4.60

Figure 18. Glyph Frequency

The "majuscule" header glyphs total 3,060, or approximately 8 per printed page. The frequency distribution of the regular 412 glyph alphabet shows a strong trend in privileging the presence of six particular glyphs that occur over 100 times. When taking the regular glyph alphabet on its own, and dividing this by the six most frequent glyphs, we come up with the following when we compare to a standard English letter frequency. The first column is based on data-compression.com's statistical data from 5.8 million characters drawn from the classics of English literature and is comparable to Richard Blahut's table on similar statistical principles. The second column is drawn from Simon Singh's website, the author of The Code Book. The third column contains my own findings from the Serafini glyphs—this is not to suggest that the glyphs correspond the English letter in the row; this is only for numerical comparison purposes.

Letter	%	%	Seraphini %
E	10.40	12.70	9.35
T	7.29	9.10	7.10
A	6.52	8.20	6.96
O	5.96	7.50	4.60
I	5.58	7.00	4.29
N	5.64	6.70	3.87

Figure 19. Comparative Common Frequencies - English and Seraphinian

In the Serafini glyph set, we see that the frequency distribution is consistently on the lower end (with one exception in the third row), although the overall range is still under 6% (as opposed to Singh's distribution which is exactly a range of 6%). There are a variety of reasons to explain this distribution discrepancy: a) the comparison is with the English language and the Serafini glyph set is of a yet-unknown language base, b) the sample size is limited to 2,846 characters which may not produce the most reliable statistical results, c) we are considering the individual glyphs themselves instead of the glyph-families (i.e., all "D"-shaped glyphs as being variations of the same glyph).

It might prove of some value to compare the Serafini set to a range of other languages. However, we are still left with the problem of a glyphic alphabet that is at least 13 to 15 times larger than any Latin alphabet. And yet, what the above proves is only that Serafinian abides by a pattern, that there is an upper limit to the glyph set, and that there are some near-resemblances to letter frequency in English. Frequency analysis or cross-linguistic matching seems to lead down more dead ends. We can speculate as freely as we like and still not come any closer to determining with certainty that this is a cipher or asemic writing. For example, one could make the assumption that the majuscule cipher could be similar to Syriac alphabet, and thus possess no vowels (in Syriac, vowels are implied *mater lectionis*, and this could account for the heavy use of diacritics). If the majuscule cipher is indeed simply composed of consonants, this would explain the trebling of some glyphs. However, so would the transposition/rotation method that may still be viable, as would some complex variant of a Vigenere Square, or that the plaintext derived from the ciphertext is a syllabary, and so forth.
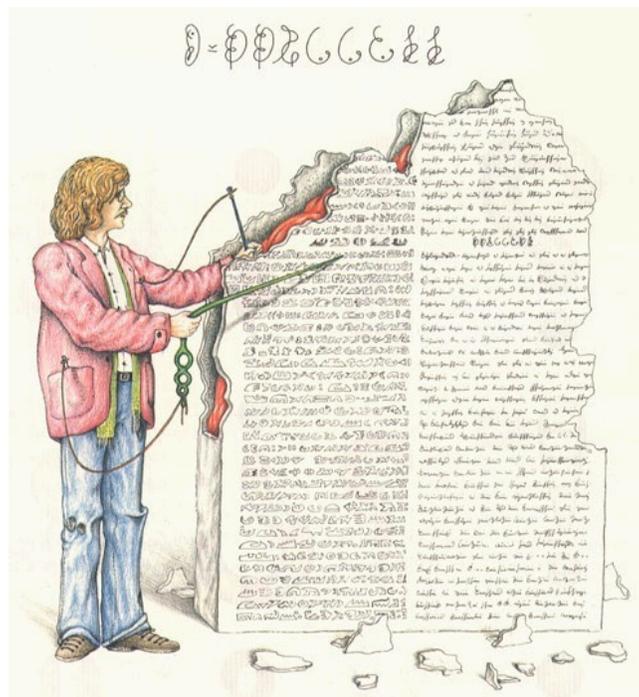

Figure 20. The *Codex* "Rosetta Stone"

If there is an element of potential mischief in the *Codex*, it might be the notorious "Rosetta Stone" nested in the language section. The chapter on language might be the first place we might obtain some specific information about Serafinian. The chapter begins with a diagram of glyphs, and proceeds to an illustration of a person beside a kind of "Rosetta Stone," where Seraphinian appears next to a presumably older root language. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to glyphs that appear in nature, how some inked text under microscope may contain bodies or roads with cars.

Serafini's cipher decentralizes the locus of writing by blocking any access to referential meaning within the cipher, and then relocates writing within the frame of the asemic. Our "reading" of the cipher conjures up games of speculative resemblance: an indecipherable table filled with bizarre notations beside an illustration of a mineral reminds us of geochemistry and crystal forms; diagrams of a cracked egg with precise yet unreadable measurements in a three-dimensional setting reminds us of the early work of analytical perspective in Renaissance paintings.

Figures 21–22. Left: Writing by Prosthesis; Right: A Writing Machine

We might ask at what point do we withdraw our confidence in deriving meaning solely from the text, if we must now contaminate our "reading" of the text by relying on other frames of reference to which we now delegate responsibility. The particularities of the *Codex* become intransigent and bewildering, for they cannot be enclosed within a stable frame, will not serve up the universal: no frame can properly enclose it, and may thus be considered aberrant or even *monstrous*. In relying upon reason and a stable list of categories from which to enclose the text, these function as bad resemblances (the resemblance to a cyclopedia, for example), and thus may be entirely phobic to categorial classification. In seizing upon the *Codex* as an object that possesses some degree of connectivity with a broader discourse, and thus is meaningful, is perhaps, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, one of the conditions of living in the world: that we are condemned to meaning (2002:xxii). This may be the prejudice that cannot be overcome, and which will colour any attempt at reading the *Codex* as a singular artifact. Proceeding by analogies, as we have done in a provisional sense to demonstrate the failure of relying on analogical

resemblance or assuming a legitimate cipher, serves to underscore the shortcomings of approaching the *Codex* by these means.

If we resist the urge to assume that the asemic "text" that accompanies the images, taken as a whole, can only be read creatively; i.e., that we will either succumb to an infinite semiosic chain or alight upon some interpretation that simply satisfies us without actual confirmation from the text's meaning, then we might consider the Eco solution. That is, we identify the points of closure that assist us in decoding portions of the text. Already, Seraphinian has only scant resemblance to other written languages (and this we know because we can recognize it as a writing as opposed to being an arbitrary pattern of embroidery). It appears in a book, and we are accustomed to seeing words printed in a book. If the "text" finds any terminus, it may be in the accompanying images. And yet we are presented with the frustrating temptation of assuming—in vain—that somehow the images will lead to deciphering the text, and this will perform the reflexive function of a deciphered text describing the image. And so, we see an illustration of a tree and we attempt to connect the written text to the image, thinking through several languages in which "tree" may be written.

Inasmuch as a text forecloses interpretive possibilities in being "narcotized" or frozen in a particular way, it may be true that it is critically illegitimate "to make it say what it does not say" and that it will say more than the author intended and less than "incontinent readers would like [it] to say" (Eco 148); however, what are we to do with a text that is possibly nothing but adrift? That is, an asemic text with no linguistic referent other than resemblance itself?—if even that and not a proper simulacrum: "*Copies* are secondary pretenders. They are well-founded pretenders, guaranteed by resemblance; *simulacra* are like false pretenders, built upon by a dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion or a deviation." (Deleuze 1990:256). In such a Platonic distinction whereby the simulacra is "orphaned" or "othered" as to be triumphed over by the form-copy distinction, even that which purports to be in the regime resemblance is resemblance to the *idea* of a thing whilst suppressing any singularity that might arise. In this case, it is the singularity of the asemic text and the images that demonstrate a slavish dependence on relying on resemblance that connects to established ideas or well-founded myths as an ordering principle that narrows our "reading" of the *Codex*. And, to be fair, the author/artist Serafini may have well intended, or could not escape, the condemnation of referential framing that went into the production of the *Codex* according to a creative enterprise that was not created in a vacuum, and thus would have had precursors that make the *Codex* an artifact of tentative resemblance, hybridized in mash-up style from an entire history of the encyclopedia, the Voynich Manuscript, the bestiary, the herbal, the hermetic philosophy, and so forth.
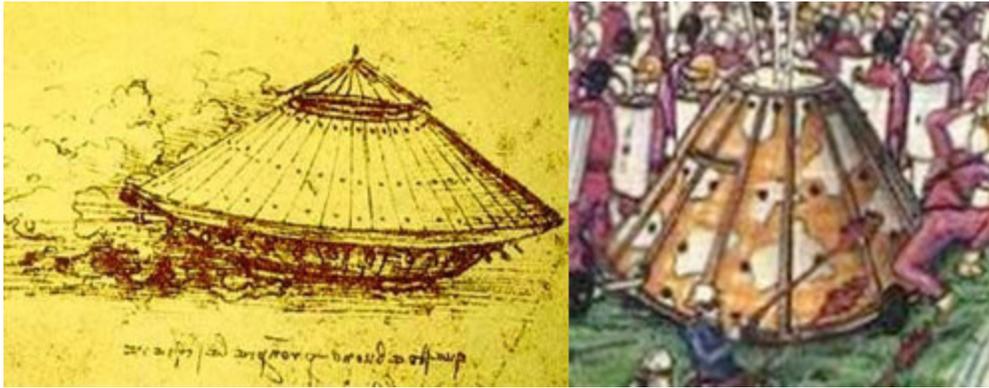
Figures 23–24. Left: Detail of da Vinci's Tank from the *Codex Arundel*; Right: Detail of Serafini's Tank

Yet, it is only by reference to established ideas that initiate our reading of the *Codex*. This incipient "reading" asserts an order that is enabled by the apparent linear sequence of the text that moves from the simple to the more complex, staging the human-like and the human-like fabrications as the apogee. The text and the image converge in the form of diagrams that allow reciprocal reference. We come to the text now with an understanding that it is an attempt to explain something technically: the measurement of a particular organism, the trajectory of a subatomic particle, the range of motion of a limb, a classificatory table of elements or crystals. Resemblance on its own will not permit access to understanding the *Codex*, for the way to decoding the language is still bricked up since it was never there to begin with. It *resembles* the *idea* of language in that the glyphs are relatively consistent throughout its 360+ pages, joined together in the appearance of words broken up by spaces and containing apparent diacritical marks that resemble pronunciation instructions as though suggesting that the written can be spoken. The resemblance of the idea of language is sufficient enough to suggest an aesthetic representation of language, in much the same way that the content of a Lorem Ipsum generator is only meant to represent what text would look like on a webpage, or when an artist uses the abstract to represent writing in a landscape at a distance where the subject is not the writing in the background: only that we should infer that the writing might be intelligible if we were up close.

We might ask if Serafini's attempt to mimic the pre-writing experience (whereby children emulate adults in an act of writing before said children have been taught the relationship between the formation of letters or ideograms and speech)[3] is, in fact, only possible by its double: post-writing. Barring a medical condition such as a stroke or aphasia, we cannot "forget" how to write, or how we form letters, and their assigned sounds. It is this trace that might mark Serafini's passage in the laying down of even this asemic language that cannot be spoken. A post-writing would undertake the process of dissolving all phonetic connection to the shape, even if the shape appears to resemble a letter of the alphabet.

Writing has patterns and statistical normalcy, and so, too, does Serafini's script (see Melka and Stanley 2012). Had Serafini opted instead to use a standard Roman alphabet instead of designing an entirely different glyph-set, apart from making the text slightly less intriguing in its relation to the history of untranslated scripts, the results may have been similar in terms of retaining some degree of pattern and statistical consistency over time without any connection to semantics. Just as commentators on the *Codex* seem to commonly reference Borges' short story, *Tlon Uqbar*, *Orbis Tertius* due to that story's reference to an encyclopedia entry describing an alien world and its language, perhaps the less stable but more appropriate Borgesian reference would be *The Library of Babel* wherein the unnamed librarian narrator speaks of books—all of which are 410 pages in length and contain the permutation of 22 letters and three pieces of punctuation, ostensibly the sum total of all these books in cabalistic fashion an effort to name god, which is the Library itself. Any individual book may contain passages that resemble intelligibility such as a phrase "O Time thy pyramids," but that is most likely the accident of permutation, for there is at least one book in that library that repeats "MCV" throughout all its pages. Had Serafini opted for a recognizable alphabet set of 22 letters only, a pattern would also emerge, but a pattern is only a necessary but sufficient condition for semantic comprehensibility, for it is possible to have syntactically correct sentences with little to no semantic value.

The Asemic Text Viewpoint: The "Art-House" Frame

Asemic writing is an attempt to transcend the barriers of being situated within a particular language or languages, to produce a writing that can be understood universally without words where its extreme individualized and relativized nature makes every interpretation technically correct. Asemic writing as a form of literature generally embraces typographical or calligraphic invention that resembles the legible writing form, but is kept in the abstract. Practitioners of asemic writing liken it to the state of childhood prior to the learning of written language. Schwenger's appraisal of the *Codex* is that it is a form of glyptolalia, or a kind of writing in tongues.

Henri Michaux is one of the aesthetic pioneers of asemic writing, although it is disputable as to whether it can be classified as drawing or writing as, akin to the work of Dotremont's "logogrammes," it occupies the "interstitial spaces between the ideogram and the alphabet, hence between Eastern and Western signifying systems" (Parish 2008:77). What is particular to asemic writing is that it consists of "signs" without referents. This is different than a cipher or code where there is a referent, but it is obfuscated or disguised and requires some form of key to decipher or decode. Even more recent poetic conventions, such as code poetry (Mez Breeze and Vuk Cosic among the more well-known practitioners in this genre) still have some tentative alliance with a referent, even when ASCII code comes to replace select letters or words.
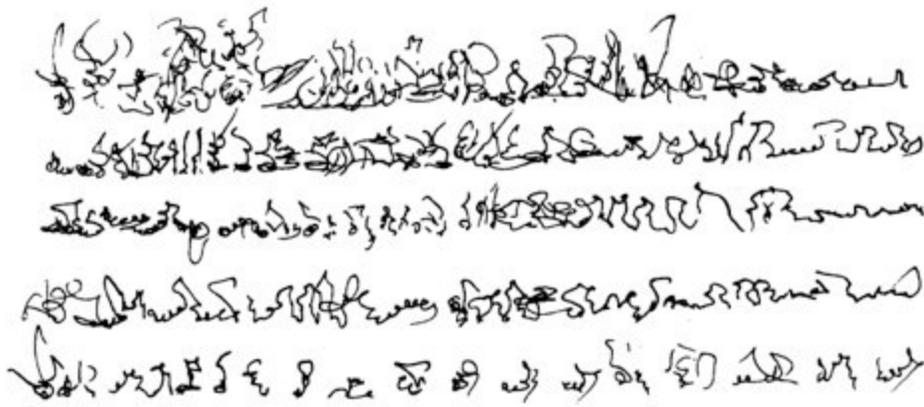
Figure 25. Detail from Narration, Henri Michaux, 1927

In an interview with *Asymptote*, Michael Jakobson describes asemic writing in terms reminiscent of Derrida's notion of trace: "Personally, I think asemic writing is a wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission [...] 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."
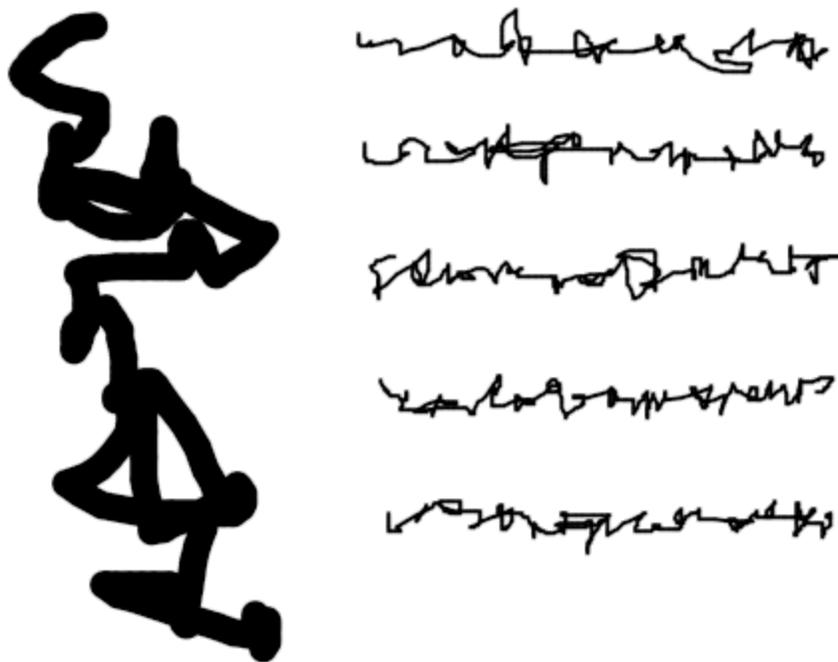

Figure 26. Still from Michael Jacobson's kinetic "blovel," Mynd Eraser.
http://mynderaser.blogspot.ca/

It is Barthes who may be credited as having taken initial interest in asemic writing (although not using that term) in his writing on Cy Twombly (incidentally a cryptologist before becoming an artist). Barthes' focus is on the idea of erasure, the perverse palimpsest:

> [T]he hand has drawn something like a flower and then has begun "dawdling" over this line; the flower has been written, then unwritten; but the two movements remain vaguely superimposed; it is a perverse palimpsest. (Barthes 1985:165)

The erasure precipitates its own contingency in the act of "redrawing," but Barthes inverts this relation so that anything written or drawn will precipitate its own erasure as its prompt, a form of creative destruction (in a non-neoliberal sense!). In asemic writing, however, it is the pre-erasure of stable meaning and fixity to linguistic code, while retaining only the surplus "gestures" of writing. Asemic writing must resemble writing without intelligibility, and it must resist fixity of connection between any signifier and signified beyond, perhaps, itself as asemic. Put in other terms:

> A wide spread manifestation of asemic writing seems to materialize not through typographic means, but instead as a hybrid form of output which resides somewhere between drawing, doodles, signs or icons which are arranged and aligned in such a way that they resemble text"(Ayiter 2012:n.p.).

The asemic writing "symbolizes" indecipherability as its sign, but its existential relation by which we could qualify the clinamen of difference does not afford a distinction between any manifestation of meaning within any "chunk" of asemic text. The sign's external referent may, in fact, be furnished by the paratext that encloses it, a form of *externalized* discourse that recognizes or announces the asemic text as belonging to a class of aesthetic writing whereby the aesthetic refers to the appearance of the text rather than literary exposition. It is here that asemic writing shares a connective zone with typography. To what epistemological regime does the asemic belong? Or, how is it captured or represented by symbolic consciousness?

If Seraphinian has a referent, it will not be to a recognizable linguistic frame; however, this does not necessarily mean that the "framework" in which the asemic is "written" does not

have some semiotic connection, even if the meaning does not manifest itself singularly.

One way in which to view asemic writing would be to assign them a "value" as "asemicons" whereby each instantiation or authorial hand has particular "icons" that relate to its family or set. Going "outside" the frame of asemic text to find correlates as an index or as a symbol will not yield a connection. In terms of sets, it stands in its own set with no other members and thus has no similarity and no contiguity. So how is it even an icon? A possible if not preferable distinction would be to assign asemic writing and its glyphs the term of *asemicon*. From a distinctly Deleuzo-Guattarian understanding, the *asemicon* might be that which reterritorializes the indexical sign to produce the intensities and flows of text. No longer arrested in the word-thing signifier-signified relationship, it is the possibly anarchic excess of the asemic icon—the *asemicon*—that is taken up to produce the new diagram: an asemic text that is its own special assemblage.

If the asemic will remain an obstinate outsider to semiotics, it is perhaps only the grasping of the asemic text experientially in its wordlessness that may provoke the construction of meaning, regardless of how individuated, singular, relativist, and arbitrary it may be. We can liken such an experience as a form of recognition, but without prior object, a kind of ineffable, phenomenological "firstness":

> Everybody has that feeling when they look at a work of art and it's right, that sudden familiarity, a sort of...recognition, as though they were creating it themselves, as though it were being created through them while they look at it or listen to it (Gaddis 1993:535).

Metalepsis and the Tension between Para[text] and Para[work]

We might allow the introduction of an accessory to the metaleptical terminology, and one that appears somewhat germane to this discussion: *parerga*. Following Derrida's (1987) reading, the parergon in Kant's third critique, refers to that which supplements the work (thus *para* and *ergon*), and is also a "frame." If we can be permitted a few general remarks before exploring Derrida's explicit use of Kant's term, we might state that the parergon abides by an ontological distinction between the inside and the outside. So, for example, the *work* of art (work as noun, not verb) is situated within the frame, designating its boundary from the outside (the "non-art" of the supplemental space that contains the "work"). Determining what is essential and what is merely accessory is inherently problematic. Is the signing of the work of the *Codex* an external referent, presumably to this world's author? What of the frame of this world and Serafini's *Codex*? Is our "frame of

reference" (and that to which it refers) a divergent series whereby the reader occupies the cut between the world of representation and a represented world? We are also privy to that problematical frame of language, or its reticent asemic representation, a pictorial language that is neither picture nor text, but appears as either. We are presented with the tenuous link to language even if the writing is unreadable:

> What is specific to the drawings and paintings of great writers (Hugo, Michaux...) is not that these works are literary, for they are not literary at all; they attain pure visions, but visions that are still related to language in that they constitute an ultimate aim, an outside, an inverse, an underside, an inkstain or unreadable handwriting (Deleuze 1990:113).

In a simpler register, there may be several *parerga* to the *Codex*, supplements furnished by a publishing apparatus, or by the senses of its "readers," where it may not be clear as to what belongs in or to it. Although the illustrations of an alien world seem to be singular in many respects, they are not without resemblances to the world in which the reader inhabits. Instead, the elements are hybrids as stated above, freely remixing seemingly disparate elements that refer the reader to representations linked to *this world*. They are not so alien that they do not have an analog in the world outside the *Codex*, at least in component parts or ideas. The sense of the *unheimlich* that causes the illustrations to stand in their particular way must blend two known but disparate components in an elaborate and surprising encounter: a leopard leaps out of the body of a headless and armless hominid, a child losing one of his milk teeth is hooked up to an apparatus to play a peculiar version of tabletop soccer with the now freed tooth, an urban warrior is in the full regalia of found garbage fashioned as implements of war, a machine flies through the sky to paint rainbows that knot and twist (out of which emerge tiny organisms). To what world or frame do these belong? These are points of access for the "reader," for they are iconic links to the world outside the *Codex*, a reference to known components and ideas. Yet, in this surreal confabulation that includes both reference to known elements in their parts and at least the resemblance of a writing system, it is not strictly mimetic. There is a deviant arc away from the Platonic form-copy relation, indicative of that third, orphaned genus of the simulacrum. We cannot determine with any accuracy if Serafini's *Codex* can be classed under an illustrated literary text or enframed as an "art book" with inscriptions that occupy the inside frame of the aesthetic. Perhaps, then, one could situate the text within a frame only to allow it to metastasize within it, causing it to bulge and distort:

> The literary text is a play of textuality, not simply in the obvious sense that a "work" of art always originates in the historical field of predecessors. Its own play of difference mirrors its displacement and reappropriation of other texts, and anticipates the necessary critical text which must "supplement" it. (Riddel 1976:589)

Frames, being problematic, might be replaced by networks instead. A book "is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (Foucault 1969: 23). In S/Z, Barthes wields the network metaphor as a means of liberating the text in a pluralistic fashion whereby it is composed of networks that "are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable" (1990:5).

Frameworks and networks are not be semantically conflated, for the former binds the work in its discursive milieu, whereas the latter has openings and closures to permit the "contamination" or exchange of elements within a discursive system of reference. A network analogy seems to permit a more democratized reading of the text, but it will carry some nodocentric assumptions. Despite the apparent freedom in a network-based reading, with its multiple access points and cross-linkages, nodes are still (even if temporary) occupying a degree of centrality that may order other nodes, but also it relies on both a kind of Boolean logic and linear reading. A network may be its own kind of frame.

There is another seemingly important and conspicuous supplement, another *parergon*, that manifests itself among those who are familiar with the *Codex*, and is part of the paratext of the book, but which adds to its enduring mystique as a cult object. Invariably, among most reports or the paucity of studies relating to the book, there seems always to be the invocation of the personal story of how the individual was introduced to the book. For Bök, it was a chance encounter in the book collection of fellow poet Steve McCaffrey.[4] For Justin Taylor, his narrative begins with how he was introduced to the book via an eccentric professor in the context of an English course. The telling of the personal story of how one came into contact with this incredibly detailed and peculiar tome is almost a password among those who would choose to write about it. Even this author's first chat with Peter Schwenger almost immediately turned to how we were first introduced to it, under what circumstances and who was the "messenger." For me, it was

an eccentric reader of the Kabbalah who brought me to the oversized books section of our university library. Just as interpretation appears to conform to a wide and relative latitude, so, too, are the apocrypha that form a living paratext. As well, in considering the historical, contemporary, geographical, and educational influences of Serafini himself that insinuate themselves in the formation of the *Codex*, based on his competencies at the time, this is yet another frame. Although this may resemble "gossip" or peripheral information that might be excluded from the frame of the *Codex* among those who insist upon a "pure" reading, its own mystery leads other readers and scholars to consider those details as somehow an access point to resolving or simply appreciating that mystery. Moreover, the insertion of a "Decodex" paratext in the 2006 Rizzoli edition attests to the importance of describing the text by an appeal to its "outside." Derrida problematizes the assumed safely inscribed borderline between life (bios) and writing (graphe): "What one calls life—the thing or object of biology and biography—does not stand face to face with something that would be its opposable ob-ject." (Derrida 1985:6). So, if Serafini's life, and our own experience as "readers," can be considered paratextual phenomena, it may be considered at least on the grounds of an attempt by Serafini to reconstruct (or recollect) the pre-literate experience and our own approach to "reading" the linguistically unreadable that also recollects our pre-literate experience. However, as will be discussed below, this experience is non-retrievable in its essential state, for it is non-reproducible even as a copy of that form of experience. Instead, what we are left with is a hybrid, simulacrum experience of the pre-literate.

It is at this point where it may do well to avoid any complicity in the use of paratext, and thus follow Genette in asking the specific questions of a paratextual status, including those that are spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, or functional. (1991:263). So, for each instance where we suspect that there is a paratextual relationship to the *Codex*, we ask the key questions of its spatial position, when it appeared, the substance of that text in its expressive mode, the communicative context whereby the paratext splits between addresser and addressee, and the utility of the paratext itself. For Bök, the position of the paratextual event occurs initially with his reported visit to McCaffrey's home where he had occasioned upon the *Codex*, which thus may be considered an event of epitext. Additionally, his writing on the *Codex* in a book on forgotten or overlooked books edited by Michael Ondaatje is spatially related to the *Codex* by the reference he makes to it, when he made it (the date he wrote it and the date it was published). The publisher's colophon in the "Decodex" speaks to the pragmatic element of the paratext insofar as it is the publisher addressing the audience, an *ad lectorem*, specifically to the readers of the book as opposed to potential but not confirmed reviewers, librarians, booksellers, or anyone considered outside of the book's reading circle. However, when it comes to the pragmatic aspect of paratext Genette describes as the illocutionary force (1991:268), it is here where matters cease to be as clear. Nowhere, in the readable portions of the text

proper, is it announced or suggested that the *Codex* is an encyclopedia, a collection of doodles, or anything at all. There are no procedural instructions for how to read, or in what sequence, as may be found in prefaces.

There are also the plain details of the book's construction and availability that form part of this frame: that the book was created by Luigi Serafini in a small Rome apartment between 1978 and 1980; that the book with its first publisher, Franco Maria Ricci, was issued in a very small print run, and likewise with Abbeville Press in New York; and that the "author" was silent for decades about the nature or truth of the cipher. It is this last point that forms another narrative wedge, for despite Serafini's own claims that there is no underlying meaning to the text, that it is not actually a cipher, this has not prevented others from doggedly pursuing some way of cracking it. As a few others (Melka and Stanley 2012) have indicated, there is a statistical pattern to the glyphs, suggesting that it is not entirely random and has the appearance of meticulous encipherment. This is, of course, problematized by the number of repetitions of glyphs that fall far outside the letter frequencies in any known language. Of course, the question of randomness is not a serious one given that human beings are not capable of producing true mathematical randomness. It is likely that Melka and Stanley's investigation resulted in demonstrating that there was degree of statistical coherence as opposed to each glyph being uniquely singular.

These supplementary narratives add a significant layer to the text itself, for it would not be considered unreasonable for the curious to launch their own investigation to append to their understanding of the text where the text is resistant to revealing a single rather than relative and ambiguous meaning, as this underscores the almost hermeneutic desire to situate the text in a stable regime of meaning and interpretation. Within the text itself is an apparent system of order, following a taxonomic line from the simplest to the more complex in organisms in the first half, while the second is devoted to the products and cultural productions of the hominids in this world, with the highest forming the final section on architecture. That each section represents an analogous discipline (botany, zoology, microbiology, chemistry, physics, anthropology, sociology, geography and history, and so forth), the reader may be pardoned for drawing more stable links with the disciplinary progression of the text, situated in the context of the cyclopedic tradition. The imaginative leaps Serafini makes in the portrayal of this alien world may remind us of the speculative zoology of Dougal Dixon, or possibly the hybridized monsters depicted in medieval bestiaries. The symbolic referents in the images of the *Codex* are misleading unless we take into consideration that the illustrations were deliberately building on connections with the motifs that we could recognize in our own world.

It is here that we consider the *Codex* as a resistance to the reader's attempts at interpretation, as it is an apparent inversion that in terms of its *parergon* that the illustration is an "ornament" or supplement to the text given that the very text itself is also the unreadable ornament of the illustration. An attempt to arrest what we cannot read, but can see, in some epistemological frame of reference is only self-reading that reaches back into an inherited discourse that is saturated in a discourse of history which in itself proceeds by representations. The portrait before us is set in a frame, but the frame leaks, overruns itself, and it is there that asemic text and image merge their flows and processes. Any derivation from the image or text that would present to us a stable relation to the *eidos* is false, or rather that the *eidos* is fixed to a different surface entirely that is extrinsic to the *Codex*. At this point, then, we might ask much to the exasperation of the objectivist if the surfaces that make up the world outside the *Codex* are not in some way supplements to the *Codex*. This risks positing a kind of idealism to the *Codex* as something singular, and reverses the flow of meaning so that it must emerge from the text to give breath [*souffle*] to a world that is nothing more than the book's clay pigeon. The frames, multiple, turn themselves inside out. The *Codex* is a faithful image of itself alone, and any imposed layer that intrudes upon the *Codex* to deliver it to our safe side of the resemblance to reality, to a mimetic order, is to mirror only what is "outside" the *Codex* and cast a shadow upon it that occludes reading it on its own terms. Instead, we retreat back into the prison of our familiar discourse and read those graven image-signs. To read the *Codex* under these conditions is to be on familiar footing: to be semantically locked outside of it, and not to be reading it at all.

The images and the unreadable text extend beyond their narrative frames to form a metaleptic enclosure that includes the narratives of the readers who approach the *Codex*, but also a system where the asemic writing is the paratext of the illustrations, and the illustration function as the paratext of the asemic writing. Taken together, we both read and see them both, even if there is no semantic entry to its circle.

Where Do We "Read" From Here? – Implications of an Asemic World

We began with the claim that there may be something monstrous, or teratological, about the *Codex* given how closely it seems to follow a simulacral line in resisting or rejecting the form-copy relationship. There is little to nothing in the *Codex* that can be logically verified except for the mundane facts of the identity of the author, when and where it was published, and that it is a book. We then demonstrated the attempts at performing cipher-based analysis, which yielded up only in cracking the page number system as base 21, while the rest of the "text" remains resistant to decipherment. The cipher-based approach is important in this context, for it allows us to see that the *Codex* cannot be adequately enframed in this way. And, if we take Serafini at his word, there is no way we can force the

text to reveal what it is not concealing. Having performed my own attempts using an arsenal of decipherment techniques, I became reasonably satisfied that Serafini is telling the truth. Still, no matter how many people try and fail by whatever decipherment means, there will always be some who will remain unconvinced that there is no cipher.

It did not matter what interpretive frame we tried to use to tease out the meaning of the *Codex*, given that every attempt ultimately fails. Even Genette's theory of the paratext and the use of metalepsis cannot fully contain or enframe the *Codex*. What we are left with is to consider the *Codex* as containing a surplus of "meanings" whereby quasi-signifiers proliferate with no stable connection to a signified, and so therefore the asemic route seems a justified explanation. For the pre-literate child, the world is composed of floating, astonishing signifiers with no linguistic order to contain them. In this way, a more desultory form of invention takes the place of established linguistic order to produce meanings according to the cognitive ability of the reader to interpret visual signs.

We are left with what we started with: an artifact at the ends of semiosis. At the foot of the circle stands a truly asemic text that both undermines meaning-construction, and resists any and all attempts to decipher and interpret the images and texts that, in themselves, reside on a blurred boundary.

Endnotes

1. But is this the author's colophon? An epilogue? And, if either, which author? Is it the author with the legal relation to this world as held under copyright, or the fictional author (if there is one) that signs this ending? We cannot be certain, for Serafini's signature does not appear inside the covers of the text. The question of who signs? may be more contingent on whether we are speaking of the work or the text, the former belonging to the "Father" and the latter an orphaned and irreducible remainder, a trace, a passage to a limit (Barthes 1977:160, 162).↵

2. Just to sound a note of peculiarity outside what is already peculiar, I was invited by the editor at Scriptjr.nl to submit my very old and quasi-satirical essay on the *Codex* that I had written quite a few years ago. During that time, the editor (Quimby Melton), attempted to contact Luigi Serafini but received no reply. Yet, he did start receiving mail-art shortly after by a Serse Luigetti, postmarked from Perugia, Italy. Could this be Serafini acting out an alter ego, the jape of an artistic enthusiast, or mere coincidence? There is very little record of Serse Luigetti beyond his mail-art—no online biography or maintained website.↵

3. The study of pre-writing in children is of interest in literacy development. In one study by Norris et al (1998), it was determined that children who were instructed to draw a story before writing it performed with a richer lexicon than those who started initially with writing.↵

4. Bök's enthusiastic appraisal covers all the usual comparative suspects of association that other authors reference: the Voynich Manuscript, Borges' short story on the enigmatic 46th volume of an encyclopedia entry on the people of the Tlön, and the appearance of an unhelpful "Rosetta Stone" inside the *Codex*. Bök (2000) describes it as a "work of natural history, more bizarre than any treatise by Linnaeus or Alembert, since the *Codex* functions as a pataphysical extravagance, describing an arcane system of imaginary knowledge." Although he is not adding anything new to our understanding of the book, his reference to a "pataphysical extravagance" is provocative. It is debatable whether pataphysics itself is capable of indulging in "extravagance" unless by this is meant an extravagant attention to particularity whilst transcending metaphysical boundaries. The number of "inversions" within the *Codex* may attest to the playful literal renderings of Jarry's Caesar Antichrist and Ubu Roi, but if we take the *Codex* as a reliable reportage of an alien world—albeit imaginary—then it is possible that the presentation for those who inhabit this world would find the content mundane, and so only to us, on the outside of that imaginary world, can we derive anything pataphysically "extravagant," which thus commits us to reading it in a very particular way.↵

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