



Triumph of the Analphabet

Selected topics from *The Encyclopaedia of Stupidity* for Erick Beltran, Mexican bowling champion

Matthijs van Boxsel

Thumbs that spin yarns

"I see something I could describe as a design. I don't know: it is a palace, a sarcophagus, plan of battle, graveyard, altar; the enormous wing of an unknown animal, the morphology of a non-existent, unpronounceable language."

Giorgio Manganelli, *From hell*

In 2003 Erick Beltran produced a flick book entitled *Running man*. Flicking through the pages you see a man running from left to right, but if you view the images one at a time, that single man dissolves into hundreds of men and women of different ages, occupations and ethnic backgrounds, from a dizzying mix of countries and centuries. A soldier, a football player, Adam, a female swimmer, a whistler, a wrestler on an Etruscan vase, a lancer in a tapestry, an anatomical figure and dozens of others blend into that single human being, who is apparently hurrying to some destination or fleeing from danger.

The little film might be seen as a "deconstruction" of the History of Mankind, revealing contingency amid ostensible necessity. But it is more interesting to enquire how it can happen that we overlook the differences, that we perceive order in chaos, purposefulness in dispersal. The suggestion of unity, speed and causality exists by the grace of the flicking thumb, the machine that accompanies the silent film with a rhythmic rustling sound.

Mute ado about nothing

Beltran has also published a pamphlet with photographs of people all over the world

demonstrating for or against the same thing; they are carrying all-white banners, pasting blank posters on walls, and waving wordless pamphlets. Here he depicts blank astonishment, the blind rage underlying all arguments.

At the same time, the leaflet could be seen as a reportage on people who protest fanatically for or against Nothing. Or does it depict a global appeal for silence?

Perhaps the people are demonstrating for the banner itself. In the big demonstration against cruise missiles in Amsterdam in 1981 someone had a banner that said "BANNER". It expressed the sheer pleasure that is part of all protests, demonstrating for the sake of demonstrating, for the sense of togetherness, with an arbitrary cause serving as an excuse.

Besides the speechless anger, the nothing and the banner, the global demonstration could also refer to the blissful ignorance by virtue of which our civilisation exists: *esse est non percipi*. The world keeps going thanks to a stupidity that only works, by definition, if it is not seen.



Workshop on Chinese calligraphy by the master calligrapher Zou Le Sheng, Amsterdam, January 29, 2005

Frozen words

"Here, here!" said Pantagruel, "Here are some that are not yet thawed." He then threw us on the deck whole handfuls of frozen words, which seemed to us like your rough sugar-plums, of many colours; some words gules (this means also jests and merry sayings), some vert, some azure, some black, some or (this means also fair words); and when we had somewhat warmed them between our hands, they melted like snow, and we really heard them, but could not understand them, for it was a barbarous gibberish."

Rabelais

Just as the separate images of the little film become a story by virtue of the machine-like thumb, the spirit floats into view by virtue of the dead letter, provided we overlook it. But an illiterate will stumble over the unintelligible signs that spell his ignorance. The letters are riddles that give only initiates access to the truth. But an enlightened illiterate like Beltran seeks the secret not behind but in the shapes, on the threshold of significance and cacophony.

It regularly happens that some medical practitioner turns up claiming that all schools of art can be traced to some physical or mental defect. The style of the late Turner supposedly derives

from his failing eyesight, impressionism testifies to short-sightedness, El Greco's elongated figures are attributable to astigmatism. (Patrick Trevor-Roper's *The world through blunted sight* is a case in point).

But there is a flaw in this argument. A painter who, through some mental defect, sees a circle as a square, will paint a circle if he wants to depict a square. An untutored viewer will not notice that in between the circles, example and image, there is a square.

In short, modern art is not a distorted rendering of the facts, but a faithful reflection of the madness that is active in our image of normality. To some extent, there is a square concealed in every rendering of reality. To put it more strongly: people who agree totally with each other about a particular subject will not suspect that there is some misunderstanding at play, an inaudible confusion of tongues, an idiocy that takes on different forms from one person to the next, from one nation to the next, from one language to the next. In *Alphabet*, Beltran tries to develop a morphology of this "non-existent, unpronounceable language."

System of grunts and squeals

"Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless, and more nameless than the colours of an autumn forest: ... Yet he seriously believes that these things can every one of them, in all their tones and semi-tones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals." G.K.Chesterton.

Speech is the production of sounds that we associate with meanings. If we wish to remember the articulated grunts, squeals and gurglings for any length of time, or to disseminate them across an extensive area, we record the language in written signs. In alphabetic script, each letter corresponds in principle to a sound. In ideographic script, each letter corresponds to a meaning.



Workshop on Chinese calligraphy by the master calligrapher Zou Le Sheng, Amsterdam, January 29, 2005

Sound-catchers

Some 26 alphabets are in use worldwide. Of these, Roman, Arabic and Cyrillic scripts are international. An alphabet can in principle capture any language.

1. Roman letters are used in otherwise unrelated languages such as Dutch, Swahili and Vietnamese. The dictionaries and grammars of the Zulus, Navajo and the inhabitants of Azerbadjan are entirely alien to one another; their languages sound entirely different from one another, but they are recorded in Roman letters.

2. Arabic script is used in the written languages of Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and other countries where people do not speak Arabic. The Arabic alphabet serves nine major languages that are linguistically unrelated to Arabic: Berber in Morocco, Nubian in Sudan, Farsi and Kurdish in Iran, Urdu and Sindhi in Pakistan, Pashto in Afghanistan, Uighur in China, and Malay in Malaysia.

3. Cyrillic script is used by Bulgarians, Mongols, Russians and other peoples who cannot understand one another's languages.

Alphabets do not have linguistic borders. And vice versa: every language can in principle be rendered in any arbitrary alphabet...

Metamorphoses

Azerbadjan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have known three different alphabets over the past ninety years: Arabic and Cyrillic, and Roman in two different periods. Around 1920 the Soviets forced them to jettison Arabic script in favour of the Roman alphabet. Later on, Stalin made them switch to Cyrillic. Although their national languages are not related to Arabic, Russian or Latin, any alphabet can be used to record their spoken languages.

In the early 1990s all the books, tax forms and streets signs were changed back to the Roman alphabet, based on that of Turkey, which changed from Arabic to Roman script under Atatürk in 1928. Each of these changes of alphabet led to years of illiteracy.

The alphabet used for a particular language may be changed for political, religious or economic reasons. Sometimes more than one alphabet may be in use at the same time...

Stultophony

Serbs and Croats speak the same language, but the Serbs use Cyrillic and the Croats use Roman script. Ostensibly this yields two different images of the spoken language; in fact the letters, in their mutual impenetrability, betray something that is inaudible to outsiders, a clandestine dissonant that prevents harmony: the stupidity before which we are speechless.

The point is not that no one alphabet can do justice to the richness of language; nor is every storehouse of letters an arbitrary fund. It is not the spoken language that the characters fail to capture; what alphabets cannot grasp is the idiocy that distorts the script as soon as language groups seek to record their voiced words on paper.

Every alphabet is an anamorphosis of the spoken language. In the distortion, the stultophonic noise surfaces that clouds all communication. To put it more succinctly: alphabets cannot grasp the idiocy that alienates the alphabets from one another. But it is a misconception to suppose that the two alphabets are themselves a source of discord; the two alphabets are divergent attempts to domesticise the idiocy that impedes unity.

The fascinating unknown x of idiom, which is presented as a *je ne sais quoi* and as such unintelligible to outsiders, something that every translator inevitably betrays (*traditore traduttore*), is in fact an idiocy that clouds and... sustains every conversation, even between native speakers. Every dialogue evolves in an effort to understand or persuade the other. Complete agreement is the death-knell of conversation. Language, and its extension, society, is structured around a productive deafness and dumbness.

And that is what gives written characters their magical power: not their capacity to capture sounds and meanings, but their power to domesticise the inaudible idiocy, the note of discord that sustains communication... by hampering it. All culture is the product of vain attempts to grasp the idiocy that impedes culture.

Language of tongues

According to the Dutchman Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614-1699), during speech the tongue, palette, uvula and glottis automatically assume the shapes of Hebrew letters. In short, God designed the organs of human speech for the purpose of speaking Hebrew. Proceeding from this basic premise, Van Helmont devised a method to teach the deaf and dumb to speak Hebrew, as expounded in *Alphabeti veri naturalis Hebraici brevissima delineatio* (1667).

On the basis of the belief that the human mouth forms itself into the shapes of the letters it pronounces, another Dutchman, J.K. Rensburg (1870-1943), devised the diagraphic Universal Script with a view to promoting interstellar communism. "Diagraphic script is composed of a combination of the only Letter root of human language and at the same time the one-and-infinite symbol of this language: the Cross-section of the Mouth." No other script is so easy to learn, he explains, "because the phonetic and physiological divisions into throat, tongue, palette, tooth and lip letters are largely preserved in their construction, and people therefore see them, comprehend their derivations, and hence remember them more easily than letters." (*Theorie der evolutie* 1931) The true alphabet is a language of tongues.

Blessed ink

"Letters written with ink do not really exist qua letters, for the letters are but various forms to which meanings have been assigned through convention. What really and concretely exists is nothing but the ink...One has to cultivate, first of all, the eye to see the selfsame reality of ink in all letters, and then to see the letters as so many intrinsic modifications of the ink."

Haydar-i Amuli

Islamic mysticism has a theology of the alphabet in which each letter contains part of Creation: Raphael is the guardian angel of waw (the sixth letter), which stands for love, air, the zodiacal sign of Gemini, the planet Mercury, and camphor. One branch of devotional linguistics concerns itself with breath; by pronouncing a letter with utter concentration, you can feel God flowing out.

Tulips play an important part in Islamic calligraphy, because according to alphabetical numerology, the word "tulip" has the same letter value as the word "Allah."

According to Shiite mystics, it is wrong to reduce a letter to a number, a sound, a concept or a meaning. Nor is the letter's shape ultimately of any significance. What is essential is the material world; the Creation is the true writing of God.

To master the sacred formula, children must lick clean a little slate on which is written, in honey: "In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate."

The true believer does not write books to testify to his devotion, he immortalises the words by sucking the ink into his pen from the paper.

According to an Islamic tradition, the pen was God's first creation. In an allegory derived from calligraphy, in writing a man's life, God rubs his heart between His fingers.

The stupidity of vowels

"A costume was designed to express the letter "R.". They also have a costume to express the letter "Vstts." It all works quite well, except for the letter "Khng." But the three costumes are very expensive. Many people unable to afford them can only gabble when those letters pass by, unless they possess very, very strong magical powers."

Henri Michaux, Au Pays de la Magie

The malbush of the Kabbalah is a divine garment woven from letters that precedes the material creation. The spiritual is realised through language. The Hebrew prohibition against revealing the name of God is also related to this primordial nature of language.

Without the right clothing truth is offensive. Communication exists by virtue of a certain disguise. Make-up, masks and tattoos are signs of civilisation. Language too is a manner of

communicating your most intimate feelings without getting too close to the other.

But not everyone is capable of pronouncing all the letters. Consonants, in particular, require a great effort. Vowels are for the stupid. Michaux notes that the (real or imaginary) Banto tribe sees the letters e and i as indicative of weakness, because they occur in the languages of all peoples known to them.

Michaux describes Hindi as a language of “hypocritical words that are pronounced with a coarse, lethargic oafishness, with a vast quantity of very thick vowels, âs and ôs, with a kind of swollen, heavy vibration, or calculatedly drawn-out and fastidiously, îs and above all ês – such a foolish letter! – a real cow-like bê” (A Barbarian in Asia).

The Greek writer Cadmus brought the first alphabet to Boeotia; he changed the order of the letters and put alpha first, because aleph means “ox” in Phoenician and Boeotia is the land of oxen. Boeotia is also proverbially famous as the homeland of nincompoops...

The trees and the wood

The proto-alphabet of the Greeks, which was guarded by the priests of the Moon, is related to the calendar: its letters are cut from twigs of trees that grow in the different months of the year. The consonants of the Old Irish alphabet (which was sacred and which it was forbidden to write) also allude to trees; the alphabet is called Beth Luis Nion (birch rowan ash) after its first three consonants, BLN, which were associated with the months of December, January and February. They were followed by F (alder), S (willow), H (hawthorn), D (turpentine tree), T (holly), C (hazel), M (vine), G (ivy), Ng (reed), and finally R (elder), which was associated with November. Vowels represent the division of the year into quarters: O (gorse) stands for the spring equinox, U (heather) for the summer solstice, E (poplar) for the autumn equinox. The A (fir or palm), the tree of birth, and the I (yew), the tree of death, stand for the winter solstice. Frisians believe that every tree species stands for a different letter. Every walk through any arbitrary wood will yield a different story.

Alphabet of nature

According to Edward Topsell, a contemporary of Francis Bacon, it is only through nature’s own writing that we may be initiated into the secrets of life and death. Natural history is:

“a chronicle [...] made by God himself, every living Beast being a word, every Kind being a sentence, and all of them together a large history, containing admirable knowledge and learning, which was, which is, which shall continue, (if not for ever) yet to the world’s end.”

It is the task of the encyclopaedist to reconstruct the chronicle lost after the Fall by tracing the elements of which nature is composed, just as a language is composed of the letters of an alphabet.

Ironically, in most encyclopaedias the great story of nature is obscured by the alphabetical classification of knowledge. The alphabet creates the illusion of system, but is completely random. The only kind of encyclopaedia in which alphabetical order is justified is an encyclopaedia of the alphabet. Any reader seeking knowledge of the cosmos cannot see the wood for the trees of the alphabet.

Proto-alphabet

Virtually all alphabets can be traced back to the Phoenician alphabet that was devised in Egypt in c. 1000 B.C. This alphabet spread to the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans, eventually reaching the entire world.

This first alphabet was devised by people who were excluded from the mysteries of Egyptian hieroglyphics – literally “sacred carved letters” – which were venerated as a gift from the god Thoth. Hieroglyphic script dates from c. 3000 B.C. and consists of about 700 symbols: pictograms, logograms and phonetic signs. This hieroglyphic system incorporated an alphabet of some 25 images, each one denoting a separate consonant. Nineteen of the letters in today’s Roman alphabet can be traced back, in shape, sound and order, to this proto-alphabet.

Mnemotechnology

The Phoenician alphabet has built-in mnemonic aids;

the letters have a fixed order: aleph, bayt, gimel etc.

the names of the letters allude to familiar objects: aleph = ox, bayt = house, gimel = camel, kaph = hand, mem = water.

the shapes of the letters resemble rough images of the objects they name: the A is the stylised head of an ox, the O is an eye, the M is undulating water. With the passage of time, the forms became stylised to enable rapid writing. The choice of writing materials and the urge to distinguish oneself from others also influenced the letters' shapes.

Every letter begins with a different sound; bayt (house) denotes the b sound; dalet (door) the d sound, kaph (hand) the k sound. This principle is familiar to us in today's radio alphabet: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie etc.

Language atoms

Simplicity and precision are the keys to the alphabet's universal success. In principle every letter represents a single sound. In the right combination, a relatively small number of letters can render the sounds of virtually every language. (Standard Dutch requires 26 letters for its approximately 37 phonemes, with which a vocabulary of some 500,000 words can be recorded.) The basic selection of the alphabet makes it possible to re-create the smallest elements of speech, the phonemes, the atoms of language, the subtlest nuances of bleating, squeaking, hissing, blaring, gurgling and roaring. The alphabet is a simple system that enables everyone to learn to read and write within a few years.

Ideogrammar

China, Taiwan and Japan do not use alphabetic script. Instead they employ ideographic systems: the characters represent not sounds but concepts, such as tea, middle, or to hear. Chinese has not only logograms but pictograms, symbols showing stylised images of the subjects they denote. (In Roman script we write the word "telephone" with nine letters that combine to re-create the word's sound. A single symbol used to represent "telephone" would be a logogram. If you denote the concept "telephone" by drawing a miniature telephone, you are using a pictogram. In the imaginary conversation that results, everyone brings along the subjects of discussion: a bowl of rice, his brother, a pagoda, a snowy mountain...)

What is more, in Mandarin or Cantonese a word can mean different things depending on tonal differences, which call for different symbols. Depending on tonality, the Mandarin word ma can take on a variety of meanings, including mother, horse and witch. Alphabetic script gets into difficulties when it has to distinguish homonyms.

The people of the Dutch province of Limburg have been called the Chinese of Europe because of their many dialectal homonyms: though they do distinguish between the haas that means "hare" and the haas that means "glove", outsiders will be hard put to hear the difference.

The Chinese system has about 2,000 symbols for everyday use, out of a total of 60,000 symbols. Because there are more ideas than there are language sounds, Chinese schoolchildren take about three years longer to learn to read and write than Western children.

Compared to this, the alphabet should be child's play...

The law of exception

Designing an alphabet means analysing the sounds of a language and assigning a letter to each sound. Thus, St Cyril and St Method devised a special alphabet for the Slavs that minimises the likelihood of spelling mistakes. And in the 5th century, the Hangul system with 28 symbols was developed in Korea.

But the first writers generally lack the courage and imagination to design a new script. They take refuge in existing alphabets, which forces them to stick letters together in groups to render certain sounds, violating the basic principle of the alphabet, whereby each sound has a single letter. The history of orthography is the history of an aberration. Every time that the number of letters fails to correspond to the number of sounds, the linguists are compelled to formulate special rules. Every rule produces exceptions which produce new rules which complicate matters even more. And so on.

The changing pronunciation also hampers stability. In Lucian's Consonants at law, the letter

Sigma accuses the letter Tau of theft and assault before the court of the Seven Vowels, because in the Attic dialect, words with double “s” were suddenly being pronounced and written with a double “t”. The semi-vowel “S” is afraid of being devalued into a hiss by the actions of silent letters like the “T” which can only make themselves heard with the aid of vowels like alpha and epsilon (tau). Sigma urges the court to condemn T to be crucified on its own image.

Second Babel

The orthographic chaos is a second Babel; the confusion of tongues was followed by a scattering of forms. Conservatives point out the potential entertainment to be gained from all the homonyms, ambiguities and synonyms, a source of inspiration for crossword puzzles, rebuses and poetry.

Radicals advocate phonetic script. We must go back to the beginning and rebuild the entire system from point one. The point is not to write in the same way as one speaks – there are too many varieties of speech for that – but to give every sound that distinguishes one meaning from another a sign of its own, ignoring regional, social or individual discrepancies. A rational alphabet, based on the phonetic characteristics of sounds, would separate vowels from consonants and assign different places to dentals, gutturals and labials.

Spelling reformers try to suppress deviations. But the rules are so complex that every change generates a chain reaction. In the Netherlands, a new spelling committee was set up to reform the language every five years throughout the twentieth century. The result is an absurdly complicated mechanism that is functional, although no one is able to use it without making mistakes.

The alchemy of the word

Poets crush the chains of the alphabet to create a new language that expresses the ineffable and records vertigos. Max Ernst, Paul Klee and Henri Michaux devised new alphabets, taking their inspiration from characters drawn by mental patients. Tvan Slobex has developed Illiterature that can only be read by illiterates. Others shake up the existing alphabet by adding inadmissible declensions and synaesthesias.

Rimbaud invented the colours of the vowels: “A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. I made rules for the form and movement of each consonant, and, and with instinctive rhythms, I flattered myself that I had created a poetic language [...] (Une saison en enfer).

Velimir Khlebnikov explores the relationship between language and gravity, and saw palindromes, which render the direction of reading irrelevant, as a victory over the gravitational force. Khlebnikov also assigns spatial features to sounds: “Words do not exist, what is, are movements in space and the parts of it: of points, of flat surfaces.” The futuristic primeval language zaum erects new buildings from the letters:

“Ka is the encounter and hence standstill of many moving points in a single immovable point. Hence the ultimate meaning of Ka: serenity, shackling.

Ha is the obstacle of a surface between one point and another that is approaching (shack, quarry).

Chè is a false volume, whose emptiness is filled with a foreign body. So it is a curve circumventing an obstacle. [...]

Gè is the movement of a point – beneath a right angle – away from the ground movement. Hence it is height.” (Zangezi, A Supersaga in Twenty Planes)

Johann David Steingruber (1773) designed baroque palaces based on the shapes of letters. By wandering through the castles of the alphabet, you can discover the poetry of the literal.

Pansemiosis of stupidity

To believers, the Book of Nature was written by God. Paracelsus described the pilgrim as turning the pages of the earth with his feet. Galileo saw the universe as a great book, “written in a mathematical language, using as letters triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures.” Coleridge compares nature to a gigantic wind-harp:

‘And what if all of animated nature/
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into

thought, as o'er them sweeps,/Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,/At once the soul of each, and God of all?'

In a vain attempt to decipher the Book of Nature, work is in progress on the Book of Culture, a global enterprise that testifies gloriously to its own failure. To erudite illiterates like Erick Beltran, this Encyclopaedia of Stupidity is a permanent source of astonishment and inspiration.

Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam
Rozenstraat 59 / 1016 NN AMSTERDAM
tel +31 (0)20 422 04 71 / fax +31 (0)20 626 17 30
tue / sun 11:00 - 17:00 hrs. / e-mail: mail@smba.nl

Curator SMBA: Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen
Original design: Mevis & van Deursen
Webdesign: Jacob Clemens
Copyright 1999 - 2004, all rights reserved.