

Asemic reading, visual writing: an introduction to 'asemic' poetry' as metalanguage

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Contemporary 'asemic poetry' provides a unique opportunity to consider the semiotics of visuality as it becomes language, developing the distinctions of drawing and writing as material signifiers that align with what philosopher Vilém Flusser has identified as the death knell of handwritten language. The semiotic role of the viewer/reader in parsing the lexicality of written language is an inescapable dimension of these poetics. This introduction to these dynamics addresses their historical lineage that begins with the Romantic rejection of industrialization and reveals the ambivalent visuality that accompanies the organized linguistic recognition by withholding its capacity for legibility.

Keywords: asemic poetry, visual semiotics, design theory, haptics

A 'poesia assêmica' contemporânea oferece uma oportunidade única para considerar a semiótica da visualidade enquanto ela se torna linguagem, desenvolvendo as distinções de desenho e escrita como significantes materiais que se alinham com o que o filósofo Vilém Flusser identificou como a sentença de morte da linguagem manuscrita. O papel semiótico do espectador/leitor na análise da lexicalidade da linguagem escrita é uma dimensão incontornável dessas poéticas. Esta introdução a essas dinâmicas aborda a sua linhagem histórica que começa com a rejeição romântica da industrialização e revela a visualidade ambivalente que acompanha o reconhecimento linguístico organizado, restando a sua capacidade de legibilidade.

Palavras-chave: poesia assêmica, semiótica visual, teoria do design, háptico

Asemic poetry brings the visual composition of the marks on the page into consciousness by showing they are central to the identification of writing, contradicting assumptions informing the Modernist invention of graphic design¹ which aspires to make both encoding and decoding "transparent," and transcend the physicality of writing.² Reading defines this insistence on legibility,³ which design theorists have enshrined as axiomatic: Jan Tschichold's *The New Typography* (1926),⁴ Beatrice Warde's *The Crystal Goblet* (1955),⁵ and Paul Rand's *Thoughts on Design* (1970)⁶ make the same demand that "visual communications of any kind, whether persuasive or informative, from billboards to birth announcements, should be seen as the embodiment of form and function."⁷ But maximal legibility denies expressive *visuality*,⁸ separating a text's 'palpability of signs' from its consideration as a visual object.⁹ Linguistic recognition removes *reading* from the everyday process of *seeing*. For graphic designers, the practice of typo/graphic composition coincides with the act of *reading* to deny the *visuality of writing*, as design theorist Herbert Spencer demonstrates in *The Visible Word*:

The mechanical skills of reading are important because accurate perception is essential to comprehension – which is the aim of all reading. A person who has mastered the mechanical aspects of reading should be able to comprehend as long and complex a unit in print as in speech. Indeed, the skilled and versatile reader is generally able to comprehend difficult material more readily in the printed than in the spoken form.¹⁰

Spencer's treatise approaches comprehension by minimizing the intrusion of *visuality* into the "mechanical process" of identifying marks as-writing; this differentiation between signifying and non-signifying enables the audience to understand the marks on a page through their past experience that engages them *as-if* they are encoded – an action that transforms *visuality* into *writing*. This approach contrasts with poetic utterances' demand for the metaphoric readings¹¹ that semiotician Roman

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1 Wainer, H. (2010). *Preface to the 2010 edition of the English translation*. In *Semiology of graphics* trans. William J. Berg. Redlands: Esri Press, pp. xi-xii.

2 Warde, B. (1955). *The crystal goblet, Sixteen Essays on Typography*. London: Sylvan Press.

3 Helfand, J. (2001). *Screen: essays on graphic design, new media, and visual culture*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 105-110.

4 Tschichold, J. (1998). *The new typography* trans. Ruari McLean. Berkeley: University of California Press.

5 Warde, B. (1955). *The crystal goblet, Sixteen Essays on Typography*. London: Sylvan Press.

6 Rand, P. (1970). *Thoughts on design*. New York: Van Nostrand, p. 14.

7 Rand, P. (1970). *Thoughts on design*. New York: Van Nostrand, p. 9.

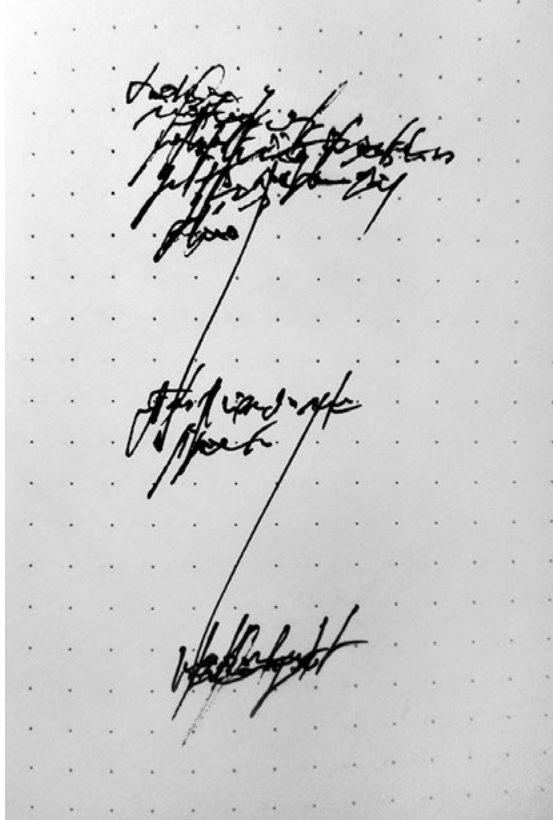
8 Golden, W. (1962). *The visual craft of William Golden*. New York: George Braziller, p. 21.

9 Jakobson, R. (1981). *Selected writings III: poetry of grammar and grammar of poetry*. New York: Mouton Publishers, p. 25.

10 Spencer, H. (1969). *The visible word*. London: Lund Humphries, p. 20.

11 Jakobson, R. (1981). *Selected writings III: poetry of grammar and grammar of poetry*. New York: Mouton Publishers, pp. 18-21.

Fig.1 Asemic poem
Untitled, by Marco
 Giovenale, ink on
 paper, 2017; used
 with permission.



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Jakobson's 'poetic function'¹² identifies: an ambivalent discursivity whose recognition creates signification in excess to the words themselves. The category of "asemic poetry," created by poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich in 1997,¹³ demonstrates the 'process of reading' is not a "mechanical skill," but a product of enculturation; lexicality depends upon audience interactions with 'text.'¹⁴ Any series of marks on the page may become *writing* due to their resemblance to already known, familiar language: the marks in asemic poems elicit an identification of being-language, but cannot be read. They assert the same alegibility that accompanies every unknown language, expressing the turn from *visuality* to *reading* that links drawing to writing. Poet Marco Giovenale terms this fusion "drawriting" (Fig. 1).

By replacing the traditional concerns of poets for meter, rhetoric, and the primacy of language with a haptic visuality, asemic poets undermine the mechanical legibility of typography and graphic design. This metalanguage uses semiotic perception to empty lexia of meaning, proposing a realm of *lexicality-without-encoding* that suggests three distinct strategies which poetically explore the "torn rags of lines with gaping holes in between"¹⁵ that philosopher Vilém Flusser described as the death knell of handwritten language:

[1] partial lettering that inhibits legibility by preventing their immediate recognition (*division, fragmentation*)

[2] manipulations of perceptual cues (*gestalt shapes, positive/negative reversals, simulation*)

[3] combinations of letters that isolate lettering and inhibit word formation (*repetition, scaling, composition, decoration, transparency, overlapping*)

Asemic poetry offers a range of expressive dimensions that parallel Jakobson's phonic, grammatical, and lexical morphologies,¹⁶ and thus expands his 'poetic function' by making the haptic irregularities of torn paper, chipped Letraset transfers, and idiosyncrasies of handwriting into expressive gestures navigated via interpretive "bets"¹⁷ about what is and is not encoded.¹⁸ However, asemic writing is neither a foreign, unknown language, nor a purely visual expression. Poems by Rosaire Appel, Michael Jacobson, Federico Federici, and Giovenale all employ haptic gestures linking writing to visual art via the visual (or material) properties of language, as Federici explains in his book *Biophysique Asémique*:

Writing is a kind of factory. The universe is its first and last home. [...] Writing consists in increasing the independence of the word in relation to its surroundings and in such a way that the writing is born naturally. [...] The reception of the message supposes the study of the very act of reception as an irreversible and unbalanced process of transition of the receiving system from a less stable state to a more stable state.¹⁹

Federici evokes Roland Barthes's classic manifesto of readerly aesthetics, "The Death of the Author," in this convergence of quantum theory and semiotics. The reader who recognizes the cues of language can identify a series of marks as-lexical without reading them, thus conjuring "lettering" by imposing order on a chaotic and unstable reality. To recognize *writing* denies its *visuality*: readers transform marks into symbolic, encoded expressions by choosing *when* to interpret a series of marks as-if they were encoded, allowing their understanding as-language. Asemic poems retain

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12 Jakobson, R. (1970). On the verbal art of William Blake and other poet-painters. *Linguistic Inquiry* 1(1) pp. 3-23.

13 Touchon, C. (2022). *Listening with the eye: selected drawings*. On Asemics.org.

14 van Fraassen, B. (1974). *The labyrinth of quantum logics*. In *Logical and Epistemological Studies in Contemporary Physics* ed. R. S. Cohen, and M. W. Wartofsky. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, pp. 224-254.

15 Flusser, V. (2011). *Does writing have a future?* trans. Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 136.

16 Jakobson, R. (1981). *Selected writings III: poetry of grammar and grammar of poetry*. New York: Mouton Publishers, pp. 22-26.

17 Harris, R. (2012). *Integrating reality*. London: New Generation Publishing.

18 Gaze, T. (2021). *Glyphs of uncertain meaning*. Minneapolis: Post-Asemic Press, p. vi.

19 Federici, F. (2021). *Biophysique Asémique (French edition)*. Amazon.fr, np.

Fig.2 *Typoem 2021-104*,
by Michael Betancourt,
vectorized typography
created with Adobe
Illustrator, 2021;
copyright © 2021
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this dimension of written language, opening discourse to an encounter with the duality of /objects/ (visuality) and <<signs>> (lexicality) that modulates recognitions of marks, letters, and words as Appel explains in her book *untranslated, a catalog*: “With the nonspecificity of asemic writing there comes a vacuum of meaning which is left for the reader to fill and interpret. All of this is similar to the way one would deduce meaning from an abstract work

of art.”²⁰ These inchoate expressions, allusive, literally ‘words without thoughts’ continue the twin lineages of [a] visual or concrete poetry and [b] the nonsense, sound or noise poem—modulations of formative elements as signifiers in themselves. This metalinguistic poetics brings the reversibility of text::image into consciousness as the materiality of handwriting or physical manipulations of broken and fragmentary typography (Fig. 2).

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²⁰ Appel, R. (2013). *untranslated: a catalog*. New York: press
rappel, np.

Fig.3 Page 48 from
The Giant's Fence,
by Michael Jacobson,
ink on paper, 2006;
used with permission.

Concrete poetry that collaged printed words/ letters, apparent in poems by Hansjorg Mayer,²¹ Norman Ives,²² or Cecil Touchon,²³ anticipates the fragmentation and illegible haptics of asemic poems by Giovenale,²⁴ Scott Helmes,²⁵ or Tim Gaze,²⁶ while the painterly asemics of Anneka Baeten²⁷ or Marilyn Rosenberg²⁸ make the superposition of writing and drawing apparent by evoking the printed page through familiar issues of arrangement and design. This haptic presentiment of hand illumination recalls Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan's observations about the European invention of moveable type by Johannes Guttenberg in ~1439. Returning to writing's original *visuality* in asemic poetry challenges the supremacy of the machine:

Typography as the first mechanization of handicraft is itself the perfect instance not of a new knowledge, but of applied knowledge. ... For it cannot be sufficiently explained that the mechanization of the ancient handicraft of the scribe was itself "applied" knowledge. And the application consisted in the visual arresting and splitting up of the scribal action. That is why, once this solution [the printing press] to the problem of mechanization was worked out, it could be extended to the mechanization of many other actions.²⁹

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press increased the distance of *textuality* and *writing* from *visuality*, replacing those features of language³⁰ that are subjective with standardized letterforms which eliminate the literally authorial "hand"—personal idiosyncrasies of script, handwriting, and composition. Thus the early Romantic *opposition* to the machinery of industrialization by poets such as William Blake also refused the standardized letterforms that dominate the machine-made 'perfection' of typography which has resulted in the steady decline of handwriting and non-mechanical text.³¹ These aesthetics were amplified by the design reformer William Morris,³² whose Arts and Crafts movement³³ was inspired by John Ruskin's arguments for a return to Mediaeval craft, a rejection that was understood as a moral corrective to the dehumanization

of industrialization.³⁴ Flusser's concern with an "end to handwriting"³⁵ belongs to this lineage of critical objections to machinery.



Defining the opposition between expressive haptic aesthetics and automated digital technology clarifies how asemic poetry returns to the model of the Mediaeval illuminated manuscript, continuing this challenge to the displacement of humans by machinery. While there is no necessity for asemic poems to correspond to the formal devices of handwriting, they almost exclusively do. Conceiving *writing* as visual language-pictures fuses their design and presentation with meaning (Fig. 3). Drawing, collage, and handwriting – all signs of a 'human touch' in asemic poetry – parallel the visible hammer marks contained in Arts and Crafts metalwork.³⁶ Poets such as Appel create digital-but-handmade renditions of haptic gestural marks that contrast human action with digital processing; the "hand-made aesthetic" apparent in the collaborative graphic novel *A Kick in The Eye*³⁷ transposes the irregularities of asemic handwriting into the defined linearity of digital vector graphics, ironically recalling the Arts and Crafts Movement's propensity to use the signs of handicraft as a demonstration of authenticity.

21 Mayer, H. (2014). *Typo*. Köln: Walter Konig, p. 47-142.

22 Hill, J. (2020). *Norman Ives: constructions & reconstructions*. Brooklyn: Powerhouse Books.

23 Touchon, C. (2019). *The Cecil Touchon asemic reader*. Minneapolis: Post-Asemic Press.

24 Giovenale, M. (2019). *Enciclopedia asemica volume 1: 2011-2017*. Rome: ikonaLiber.

25 Helmes, S. (2019). *Magazine: the cut-up asemics*. Minneapolis: Post-Asemic Press.

26 Gaze, T. (2021). *Glyphs of uncertain meaning*. Minneapolis: Post-Asemic Press.

27 Baeten, A. (2017). *50 Celestial snippets*. Sydney: Ferrets in My Head.

28 Rosenberg, M. (2019). *False fiction fractured fact altered*. Minneapolis: Post-Asemic Press.

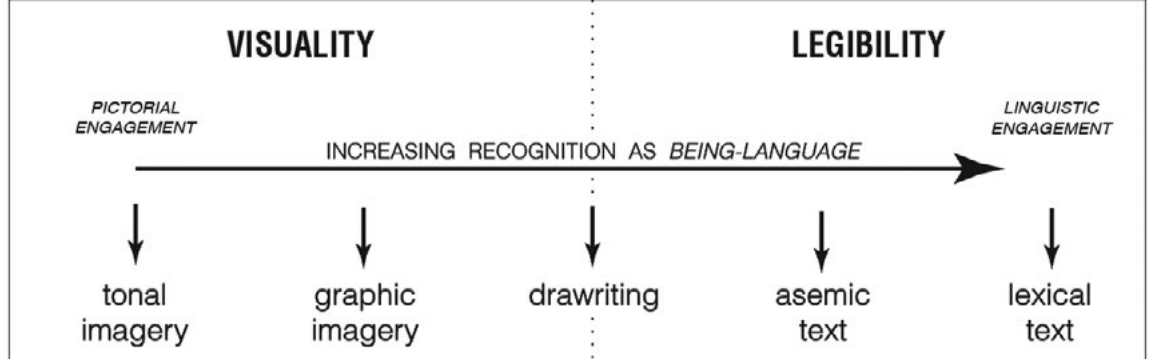
29 McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg galaxy: the making of typographic man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 184.

30 Eisenstein, E. (1980). *The printing press as an agent of change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

31 Schwenger, P. (2019). *Asemic: the art of writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 2-4.

32 MacCarthy, F. (2014). *Anarchy & Beauty: William Morris and His Legacy 1860-1960*. London: National Portrait Gallery.

Fig.4 The semiotic range of 'lexical function' that distinguishes *visuality* from *legibility* by the reader's identification of the 'image-object' as being-language.



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Expressive language, typography, and imagery all belong to the same continuum defined by assumptions about the integrity of lettering and legibility (Fig. 4). Asemic poetry explores the expressive modulation arising from the transition between image and language identification itself, forcing the audience/reader to engage their interpretive actions as contingencies: these unstable *readings* are guided by the resemblance of the 'image-object' to *writing* – forcing the reader to acknowledge the act of *reading* is unstable and problematic. Unlike familiar lettering and words in visual and concrete poetry, the asemic suspension of lexical decoding creates a potential collapse into non-signification, drawing attention to how any recognition of encoding arises. Composition, placement, or arrangement of letters/words in visual poetry express something *about* the text, as in Guillaume Apollinaire's calligram *Il Pluit* (It's Raining),³⁸ where slanting lines of text illustrate the rain without abandoning lexicality (Fig. 5).

Visuality dominates asemic poems, replacing *reading* and *writing* with ambiguous marks drawn on the page. These poetics cohere around the capacity of human intelligence to invent new expressions. Asemic utterances unmask the distinction between familiar signs and unfamiliar non-language as a construct, destabilizing meaning in an abyssal of signification³⁹ that separates visual and concrete poetry from the emergence of asemic writing (despite their common basis in haptic *visuality*).

Fundamentally, asemic poetry does not make established knowledge of existing lexical 'rules' moot; their articulation depends on acknowledging, no matter how closely asemic poetry resembles everyday language, that meanings imposed by the reader are fictions because there is no a priori set of rules to enable decoding. Readers' foundational recognition of *being-language* becomes a stoppage where semiosis normally *begins*, hesitating between the status and organization of *reading* or the *visuality* of the pictorial: this metalanguage truncates, interrupts, disrupts – revealing the ambivalent *visuality* that accompanies the organized linguistic recognition by withholding its capacity for legibility.

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Fig.5 The visual poem *Il Pluit*, by Guillaume Apollinaire, from the poetry anthology *Calligrammes*, 1917.



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³³ Kaplan, W. (1987). *The art that is life*. In *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875–1920*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, p. 59.

³⁴ Pevsner, N. (2011). *Pioneers of modern design*. Bath: Palazzo Editions, p. 36-57.

³⁵ Schwenger, P. (2019). *Asemic: the art of writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3.

³⁶ Kaplan, W. (1987). *The art that is life*. In *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875–1920*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, p. 301.

³⁷ Appel, R.; Burhouse, T.; Gaze, T.; Giovenale, M.; Hopkins, G.; Kaikkonen, S.; Shipley, G.; Skinner, C.; Tarczynski, L.; Tierney, O.; Uzal, S.; Vassilakis, N. (2013). *A kick in the eye*. Amazon.com: Create Space, p. 114.

³⁸ Apollinaire, G. (1925). *Il Pluit*. In *Calligrammes*. Paris: Librairie Gallimard, p. 64.

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