

Book Review: Ferrara, S. (2022). *The Greatest Invention: A History of the World in Nine Mysterious Scripts*. United Kingdom: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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The world of writing has made it possible for us to record, measure, and disseminate a wide array of human capabilities expressed separately, as Silvia Ferrara asserts in her illuminating book, through “language, art, biology, geometry, psychology, intuition, logic.” As touted by its author, this story about the greatest invention of the world has not only its own protagonists and scripts, but also the minds, the brains, and the abilities necessary to process and analyze them all through present-day scientific research.

Behind the scenes, which is also the title of the first section, reveals the stories generated by what the book considers to be the use of imagination, brought about by the development of social intelligence with emotions and intentions made viable through things that do not exist in nature. Masterfully displayed would be the world of symbols, enriched by histories, laws, institutions, governments, all made up, and all widespread through “the exchange of information: story-telling, forging alliances, establishing and disrupting social equilibrium, gossip.” (p. 7)

A personal viewpoint is inserted in the same chapter when we read about the voice of our imagination, which takes us into a different world that we create when we relax and spend time on seemingly irrelevant matters, but still set our ideas and thoughts free. As stated in the book, it all started approximately 3100 years before the birth of Christ in places like Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, or Central America. The example provided gives the reader a chance to imagine a Mesopotamian fellow carving a small tablet on which he groups objects he needs to count and to mark down their number:

In the upper right-hand corner, he draws a cane (as in a reed): cane, in Sumerian is *gi*, but *gi* can also mean something else, the verb ‘to reimburse.’ Magic. Or better yet, surprise. The sound is the same, but the meaning is completely different. (p. 10)

In other words, “He has made – he has recorded – a play on words.” (ibid.) What happened in that instant was a wonderful example of homonyms, and their principles are widely used today when we spontaneously communicate in writing. Instinctively and spontaneously, we have created writing by choosing signs to represent sounds.

The same chapter also summarizes the main points the author is presenting for the reader’s perusal: The invention of writing came about as a process; writing as a complete system was devised through the work of many; as such, writing developed through time and therefore was a social invention.

In a journey of self-realization, Silvia Ferrara extolls the values of things, icons, and symbols as details functioning as cogs in an intricate, if not even sophisticated, system of meanings. The wheels in our brains start working as soon as we resort to our visual abilities. Using our instinct and our personal experience we relate to writing because of its strength and its permanence.

To which we might add that whatever we do these days, we do it because it gives us the pleasure of “engaging our intellect, our logical skills, and our intuition.” (p. 24)

Referring to what Iris Murdoch called a “selfless respect for reality,” the author argues for the centers of creation and experimentation, unique places where writing started, and that takes us to the exploration of the Voynich Manuscript and the Indus Valley, to mention just a few. Structured around the idea of storytelling, the second chapter entitled *Undeciphered Scripts*, traces the fertile ground for writing in Crete, where local culture speaks for itself:

In Cretan iconography, cats hold a special place. Not something to constantly show off, like bulls, no. They’re a very different kind of protagonists, of a more, well, feline subtlety. In palaces frescoes they figure as predators, though the scenes evoke the pastoral peace of a pleasure hunt – the cats are shown trotting around, almost playing with the birds and pheasants they should instead be pursuing. (p. 37)

According to the same source, cats were not only decorative, but also functional in the schematic representation which turned *meow* into the syllable *ma* – combining the visual and the auditory perception into drawing and then writing. As mentioned in the same context, syllables are touted as powerful tools in any language: “The alphabet is nothing more than an artifice, a brainy, sophisticated thing, like democracy or philosophy. We think in syllables, communicate in syllables, sing in syllables, and it was in syllables that we invented writing.” (p. 42)

With the view of Troodos Mountains in the distance, the researcher takes us to the Cypro-Minoan tablets, a combination of the Cypriot language and the Minoan script melded together. Though it appears to be three different scripts, the Cypro-Minoan has been preserved on silverware, bronzeware, golden jewelry, ivory plaques, clay objects and seem to have been carved by various scribes, “each with their own handwriting – different people writing in different styles.” (p. 49)

As Cypro-Minoan was written – engraved, painted or inscribed, it still remains undeciphered. Meant to be seen, such scripts are “culturally significant and crafted with attention to aesthetic detail.” There are no traces of authorship, but scientific research has found evidence that Cypriots were born to be merchants, expert traders, and entrepreneurs. If not necessarily rich, at least well-off, Cypriot merchants dedicated their workshops to the “god” copper, and that can easily be ascertained when we analyze the probable purpose of their scripts: “Toy marbles” Weights? Votive tokens? Sling bullets?” (p. 54)

On the other side of the planet, our journey takes the writer and her readers to Easter Island, where the inhabitants thought their 63 square miles of land was the center of the world – *Te Pito a Te Henua* – in the local language of Rapa Nui. The fundamental coincidence, the author contends, is that centers of the world can be found across continents, from Istanbul, Babylonia, and Arizona to Easter Island. Every stage is a world, to misquote Shakespeare.” (p. 61)

At the heart of the Easter Island culture we find the Rongorongo language, with its creativity expressed in symbols and petroglyphs carved into rocks, all packed with a wide array of signs. Although some of the tablets remain illegible, the main concept of their writing “follows the path of the ox” – as explained by the Greek word *Boustrophedon* – that is, every other line runs in the opposite direction, left to right and then right to left. The alternating zigzag is what makes it illegible, but there are many other things to be discovered:

Rongorongo, however, makes things (and the lives of us decipherers) even more complicated, since it’s written in reverse boustrophedon: the signs in the second line are upside down with respect to the first, forcing the reader to turn the tablet over every other line. (p. 63)

We are then reminded that in 1722, on Easter Sunday, a group of Dutch sailors brought the first colonizing king, Hotu Matu’a to the island shores. They, however, did not bring any tablets. The scripts discovered later on proved to be the invention of the local population who had to figure out their own writing system, a logo-syllabary, like all other scripts devised similarly in other places. In the same context, the specific object of study, as the author elucidates, is the Mamari tablet. In the language of Rapa Nui, Mamari means “egg,” even if the tablet’s shape looks more circular than ovoid. The reader is encouraged to pay attention to the beautiful designed engravings on both sides of the tablet.

Rooted in the fundamental mechanism of writing, as the author postulates, is the rebus (from the Latin *res*, “thing”), which was based on logograms, or signs that represent things. The basic idea is that a logogram’s sound can have a meaning completely different from the one indicated by the drawing. A good example would be what happens in some languages:

In old Chinese, the logogram of a horse, pronounced *ma*, is the same *ma* sound that means ‘mother.’ A logogram can mean two different things, while the sound stays the same. Using this one, small, versatile unit of meaning, we can express two things on completely different ends of the semantic spectrum, and create humor. (p. 75)

The chapter is also a quick reference to the English language of today, with its wealth of instant tricks that can be played using the same principle – the rebus, which in fact points to the fact that sometimes writing is mainly a discovery and an intuition, but not an invention.

Compelling and coherent, the chapter entitled *Invented Scripts* begins with a quick lesson on anthropology, which takes us back to the cities and states found in Mesoamerica, in the Oaxaca Valley, then Egypt, followed by Mesopotamia, and, later on in the Indus Valley and central China, in the Henan region. What connects them all, as the author avers, is bureaucracy, which grows out of the need to transmit information. Therefore, the birth of bureaucracy means, in the end, the birth of writing. (p. 85)

In perhaps one of the densest chapters of the book we witness the development of the greatest inventions in history – “from the wheel to electricity, from computers to nuclear fission – all born without exception from the spark of discovery.” (p. 94) That being said, the next step is to ask questions that might help us find our way through the complicated history of writing – one of which would clarify the evolution of the Mayan glyphs, the Native American symbols and their counterparts in

Mesopotamia. In short, Egypt's early writings, almost contemporary with Mesopotamia's, appears to have created its own system of writing from scratch. By the same token, we find the Chinese, new and completely different from the Egyptian and Mesopotamian scripts. The inquisitive mind of the author still has another question; "How many times" was writing invented? (p. 98)

To answer such questions, Silvia Ferrara resorts to a thorough research of Egypt, with its Pharaohs, where the symbols appearing on pottery, seal impressions, ivory tags, and even pottery vessels, as she asserts, would not look so different from the modern labels we find today on wine bottles, for example. The most intriguing findings are those that form a narrative and can be found on pottery. "We find more than a hundred inscriptions on pottery, painted with ink, using signs such as scorpions, fish, falcons, and boats." (p. 102)

The wealth of material is overwhelming, and, according to the author, not easy to interpret, since the system of symbols appears to have "its own logic and coherence." Specific examples would give us the *serekh*, a sign depicting a palace façade, toppled by a falcon – "a heraldic emblem that always represents the king." (p. 103) Furthermore, this type of icon-based system is thought to be communicating something precise using single signs that are reminiscent of logograms with symbols helping us understand what they mean and how they are pronounced.

The language of the writing is also the language of images. We get a chance to flip through a gallery of Egyptian rulers and their prestige made visible through a profusion of hieroglyphs coming to impress us together with images, in other words, iconographic compositions. What the author does so well to communicate is the fact that

With few exceptions, all the alphabets in the world – not just the Roman alphabet (our own), but the Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, and Thai alphabets, too – were cast in the same mold. And that mold is the Egyptian hieroglyphic script. (p. 108)

However, before we continue our appreciation of the alphabet, we need to switch our attention, at least temporarily, to Mesopotamia – the region between the Tigris and the Euphrates - where writing originated from pebbles going back to more than ten thousand years ago. The author expands her description of pebbles when she posits that "These pebbles were small stone or clay symbols, technically called 'tokens,' and were molded into a variety of geometric shapes: spheres, crescents, parallelepipeds, cones." (p. 114) Specifically, these geometric shapes referred to a different trade good, i.e. "the sheep had its token, cows and bread had theirs, and so on."

After a quick detour meant to analyze the Mesopotamian culture, the author perceives an invariable connection between one nation and the others – like Hittite, Assyrian-Babylonian, Egyptian and others – that was rendered in the way they communicated using the cuneiform style. All thanks to the Akkadian cuneiform, which lasted for a long time, perhaps millennia.

By the same token, and speaking of longevity, the section entitled *Chinese Turtles* delves into the longest-lasting and most stable writing in history – the Chinese script – which is deemed to have been created "from scratch." At the core of the findings the author mentions the plastron (the belly of a shell) and other inscriptions carved on the shoulder blades of oxen – both chosen probably because of their durability. The content of these communication tools appear to have been used in divination practices, which also related to dreams, previsions, and sacrifices. In a nutshell, the Chinese language remains a separate entity, with its own characters and structure mainly dealing with signs representing a cultivated field, a mouth, a turtle, a horse, an eye, an elephant, a mountain, a fire, and many others. (p. 136)

Following a careful analysis of the Mayan scripts, we need to approach the story of writing as a gradual process from early signs of wordplay to "the creation of a complex catalogue of signs, an agreed-upon set that can be passed down from generation to generation: in short, a multistep trajectory from discovery to invention." (p. 154) And that brings us to the development of new writing systems.

A smooth transition takes the reader to the chapter entitled *Experiments*, rooted in historical figures like the alchemist (the Polish Wilfrid Voynich), the asemic (the Italian Luigi Serafini), the wizard (Sequoyah, the silversmith born in Tennessee), and the illiterate (the Vietnamese Shong Lue Yang). Nonetheless, the research would not be complete without additional "Isolated branches," as the author calls them. A typical example would include the Inca paradox: "Could it be that the largest pre-Columbian empire in the Americas existed without a jot of linguistic notation? Could someone have created the magnificence of Machu Picchu without a single sign to describe its beauty?" (p. 183)

Going back in full circle, Silvia Ferrara takes us back to the Minoans, where more mysteries attract our attention. A compilation of symbols, on both sides of a tablet, depicting "men of various sorts and various poses, a woman, a fish, a flower, a jar, axes, a bee, a dove, and many other figures," – the Phaistos Disk, an obvious representation of the Minoan world. What makes it so interesting is the fact that these hieroglyphs were conserved because they were burned but not destroyed. "Baking the clay renders the tablets almost indestructible." (p. 195) The mystery continues when the engraved tablets turned out to have been stamped, a precursor of the Gutenberg movable type.

An understanding of all these scripts, in the author's opinion, is closely connected to the idea of communication, with language and writing at its core. When we do so, we also look for a goal to be accomplished:

When we decipher a script or examine a language, we do so for no greater purpose than to discover something we didn't know before. These aren't tools to be used for manipulation, to feed an ideological confirmation bias, or to throw a smoke screen over history. (p. 198)

In other words, language and writing should never be linked to ideology and politics - which brings us a series of questions related to the scripts in general, whether we include the Egyptian, the Mesopotamian, and the Indus Valley or the Minoan scripts.

An extremely relevant point in the history of writing and its creation and re-creation is made obvious in a section entitled *Social Inventors*, with names such as Atatürk, who “ruled in 1928 that citizens must use the Roman alphabet to record the Turkish language, replacing the previous Ottoman script, which was based on a consonant Arabic *abjad*.” (p. 205) In the same vein, the author being a researcher and a writer at the same time, we the readers are delighted and thrilled to learn that writing, as a form of communication, is generally an imperfect game, and experiments continue even today.

Contrary to what Saussure, the father of linguistics, said about writing being subordinate to language, Silvia Ferrara argues that “Writing has a parallel, independent life of its own. A script can notate several languages (just think of the alphabet, which records hundreds, all very different from one another), but a language can be notated in several scripts (Greek is one example, written with the alphabet, Linear B, and the classical Cypriot syllabary).” (p. 213) The author, furthermore, defends writing and its power of transmission being able to be “selected, used, and re-used, transported and remodeled, and, especially, adapted to other languages.” (ibid).

Language and writing are taken to another, a higher level of analysis, in the chapter dedicated to *Discoveries*. In the process necessary to compile this volume of enormous scientific research, the author and the readers travel through the world of invention, with its conventional and non-conventional methods. Therein the author points to a very important relationship between language and writing, although they are deemed to exist as two separate entities:

Even so, it remains a common error to mistake one for the other. But there’s a stark difference between language and writing. Especially when you’re talking in terms of decipherment. Because you don’t decipher a language. You decipher a script. (p. 222)

Furthermore, whether we are dealing with a known script and a known language, or whether the script is known but the language is not, the challenge remains the same. And this applies to deciphering scripts as well, and the unexpected turns out to be a crossword puzzle, with its idiosyncrasies and peculiarities.

A special touch is added in the last section of the book when our curiosity is aroused and our senses are delighted to read that one major factor in keeping track of everything we write is memory. A quick reminder takes us back to Simonides of Ceos, who invented the powerful mnemonic device using the method of *loci* and giving us the science of memory, also known as mnemonics. His visual memory is used in this case to recall where every invitee was seated, which in itself is the starting block of the method of *loci*, or the connection between object and location. This new concept can easily be explained by the ability of memory to move through physical space:

We link the things we want to remember to precise points in space. Then, to recall them we revisit this associative path in our mind, the spatial relationship between object and location. Which allows us, like Cicero, to remember what we want to say when we’re giving a speech, what we want to buy at the grocery store, what chores we have that week, what clues we’re gathered to track down the murdered (in Sherlock Holmes’s case). We’re back in making lists again, in other words, only we’re not writing them down. (p. 263)

The whole project is a compelling and coherent plea for the values of decipherment, with several touches of hilarious comments and references to cultural events that might help us comprehend what is meant in situations when decoding proves to establish the plausibility of the message. The organization of the material leads us to the seemingly debatable idea that scientific method rarely lies. In fact, as the author reveals, we have made giant steps in understanding and deciphering the internal structure of scripts, although in many cases scientists have not figured the language behind it.

What the reader takes from his wealth of documented and obviously well-researched information is exactly what is included in the title of the book. Writing viewed as the greatest invention is right in front of our eyes, created by us and transmitted by us. We find examples of cultures where they started to write because there was a need to communicate. We are the protagonists of the story of writing and we are taken on a pleasant and meaningful journey of discovery.

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