Metamorphoses of the Letter

Tentative Program

Required texts:
– Course packet, bookstore (contains: “Death of the Word”; ABC par ekivoche; “Correspondence”; A Void)
On reserve: (unfortunately, all the main texts for this course are currently out of print)

Week 1: 8 Jan.: Introduction: what is an alphabetic letter? What does it do?

Week 2: 15 Jan.: histories of origin
Peruse: José de Acosta, The Naturall and morall historie of the East and West Indies. (Online) or Fry, Edmund. Pantographia; containing accurate copies of all the known alphabets in the world; together with an English explanation of the peculiar force or ... London, 1799 (Online)
– Isidore of Seville, Etymologiae I: 3-4 (if you read either Latin or Spanish; there is no English trans.)
– Plato, Cratylus sections 393-94, 426-37 (in Complete Works of Plato, on reserve)
– Drucker, Alphabetic Labyrinth, chaps. 1-3.
Assignment: 1-2 page reflection on a particular theory regarding the development of letters or a particular letter; you may choose to theorize about the theory.

Week 3: 22 Jan.: letter forms - paleography; alphabet as ordering principle
– Drucker Alphabetic Labyrinth, chaps 4-6
– read and bring any ABC book; consult the Figure Alphabet of Giovannino dei Grassi (late 14th century); NB: also the ABC par ekivoche in course packet.

**Assignment:** 1-2 page reflection regarding the implications of an ordering principle for the alphabet. You may want to consult other books that are ordered alphabetically (e.g. books of recipes, etc., or even critical works (such as the Abécédaire critique by Jean-Charles Gateau, Weldon: PQ 294/.G 38/ 1987).

Week 4: 29 Jan.: letters and meaning
– Drucker *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, chapt 7-10
– Kendricks, *Animating the Letter*, chapt 5-6, and conclusion
– Zumthor, “Carmina Figurata” in *Langue, texte, enigme* (French original) and ______ (English translation)
– Geoffroy Tory, *Champ Fleury* (complete work on reserve, Weldon; excerpt in *Imagining Language*, 386 ff)
– *Imagining Language*, 327-431

**Assignment:** 1-2 page reflection relating the question of how letters can be bearers of cultural ideologies because of how they are formed or arranged. You may want to pick an example from *Imagining Language, Concrete Poetry*, any of the facsimile books, or texts provided. (NB: the interest here is with the cultural/semiological value of individual letter forms and scripts). We will take up the importance of typography *per se* in the following week. You may want to look at Michel Leiris’ “Alphabet” in *Scratches/Biffures*.

Week 5: 5 Feb. What’s in a Typeface?
- Alexander Lawson, *Anatomy of a Typeface*: “Arrighi” and “Baskerville” (on reserve)
- Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* (on reserve) (pages tba)
- J. Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton, “A Natural History of Typography.” In *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* (on reserve)
- Watch documentary *Helvetica* (in A&H film room)

**Assignment:** 1-2 page reflection paper on how letter forms create (or are seen as creating) meanings. Include a reproduction of any typeface you discuss.

Week 6: 12 Feb.: illuminated letters; letters as art
– Discussion: Expressionist and Art Nouveau letters; Paul Klee; Xul Solar; Torres-Garcia; calligrammes; juxtaposition of letter types; letters as buildings, as sculptures, etc.

**Assignment:** 1-2 page essay on a particular example of a letter as art. Include a colour reproduction of the letter and 8 black-and-white xeroxes in case your essay/example is used for class discussion.

Week 7: 19 Feb: no class (Reading Week)
Week 8: 26 Feb.: letters and universal language projects (16th-18th century)
From your readings you will already be somewhat familiar with one of the following. Pick one and learn more about it:

-- Wilkins, John, *An essay towards a real character, and a philosophical language* (1668) (Online) and *Mercury, or The Secret Messenger* (1641)
-- Dee, John. *A true & faithful relation of what passed for many years between Dr. John Dee ...and some Spirits (The Book of Enoch)* (1659) (Weldon and online)
-- Ward, Seth, *Vindiciae academiarum* (1654) (Online)
-- Mersenne, Marin. *Harmonie universelle* (1636) (Weldon and Online)
-- Top, Alexander. *The Olive Leaf* (1603) (Weldon)
-- Agrippa, Cornelius. *De Occulta Philosophia* (1529)
-- Beck, Cave. *Universal Character* (1657)
-- Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont. *Alphebeti Vere Naturalis Hebraici* (1667)
-- Kircher, Athanasius. *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652).
-- Lodwick, Francis. *A Common Writing* (1647)
-- Porta, Giambattista. *De furtive literarum notis vulgo zypheris libri quinque* (1563)
-- Trithemius, Johannes. *Steganographia* (1499) and *Polygraphia* (1506)
-- Leibniz, Gottfried. *De Arte Combinatoria* (1666)
-- Maimieux, Joseph de. *Pasigraphie, ou premiers elémens du nouvel art-science* (1797)
-- Comenius, J.A. *The Analytical Didactic of Comenius* (Eng. Trans, V. Jelinck, 1953). See also *J.A. Comenii orbis sensualium pictus...Translated into English by Charles Hoole* (1659)

Assignment: what is the role of alphabetic letters in the project you have studied? How are letters used? How does their use (or lack thereof) tell us something about the alphabet? If the project uses a means other than letters, how is that fact significant? How does the historicity of the project affect it?

Week 9: 5 March: missing letters; decipherability; cryptography, imaginary alphabets; Voynich Manuscript (by Roger Bacon?), *Codex Serafinius*, *Sylvia Ptak*. 
– See film π (“Pi”) in A&H Film viewing room.
– Codex Serafinius (on reserve)
– *Imagining Language*, 127-52.
  – **Paper topic due**

  **Assignment:** 1-2 page discussion that considers the relationships between evident sense, occulted sense, and non-sense as they relate to cryptography and decipherability. You may want to investigate a particular example mentioned Druckner, *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, pp. 171-76. (NB: No cryptographic writing!)

Week 10: 12 March: the letter and the body
– Balzac, “Sarrazine” (available on line); Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (portions).
– Josipovici, “Death of the Word” (in packet)
  – review: medieval initials as corpora (examples in Drucker, Nicolette Gray, Geoffroy Tory, etc.)

  **Assignment:** 1-2 pages on the relationship between the letter and the body (identity, sexuality, gender).

Week 11: 19 March: *Oulipo* and the Potentiality of Literature
– Pèrec, *La Disparition*

  **Assignment:** 1-2 pages on the application of arbitrary rules to production of “letters”; if arbitrary rule is applied is it no longer arbitrary – that is, does it have implications that infuse it with meaning and rob it of arbitrariness? (NB: your essay is to discuss these matters not to imitate them, though if you can write your whole essay as one long palindrome, so much the better).

Week 12: 26 March: No Class (professor at conference [giving talk on alphabet])

Week 13: 2 April:
– Pèrec, *La Disparition*
– Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel” (in *Ficciones*); “La muerte y la brújula (Artificios); “La escritura del dios” (*El Aleph*)

  **Assignment:** 1-2 pages on the letter and loss. (NB: if you wish to write your essay as a lipogram, that is fine. But it has to be intelligible as an essay...).

Week 13: 2 April: Wrap-up

**Required Work:**
Class Participation 20%: Your primary responsibility is to well be prepared. This means not only being present, but having read and thought about the primary and secondary texts assigned. Participation grades will be based on the degree of preparation and the nature (quality and quantity) of classroom contributions. To miss one class is to miss almost 10% of the class sessions. As part of class participation, you will also have responsibility for a particular letter. I will pass around a sign-up sheet on 19 January, at which time each student will sign up for one of the letters A-Z; students who want to choose a non-Western letter or character should see me. You will be expected to familiarize yourself with the history, forms and possibilities of your letter and to be ready to comment on it in class discussions if asked to do so (You will want to consult some of the histories of scripts in Bischoff, Nicolette Gray, David Diringer, Drucker, Sachs, Sprengler, etc., as well as some of the eccentric treatments of letters in Tory, Drogon, Haab, Massin, McCaffery, Alexander, etc.). It may prove that we need one additional class meeting, most probably during the exam period; we can discuss this as a group.

Reflection papers 20%: These are short (1-2) page, typed discussions to be handed in in class on the day’s readings. All students will be required to do 7 of these during the term. On any given day I may ask some of the students who have done a précis for that class to read theirs aloud as part of our class discussions. Or I may read one aloud myself. A précis is always due at the beginning of the class meeting and none will be accepted later.

Research Paper 40%: This is a major essay (around 20 typed pages, double spaced) with full critical apparatus (notes, works cited, etc--see MLA Style book), which scrutinizes some issue/text/aspect that has come to light during the course. You are strongly encouraged to come talk with me at the earliest possible time about potential paper topics--but only after you have delineated several in writing. At the very latest, you must inform me of your topic in typewritten form by 5 March. As noted below, the topic can grow out of the seminar discussion you have led (this will be explained in greater detail in class). The due date for essays is 16 April. Late papers will be penalized. All papers must be handed in in print form (no email submissions).

Seminar 20%: You will be expected to give one 25-minute seminar presentation in which you will report on (e.g. analyze) one of the readings for the week. You must let the professor know one week in advance which text you have chosen. I will circulate a sign-up sheet on 15 January. Each student will be held to 25 minutes and no more, since for conference presentations you will need to learn to respect a strict time limit (practice your presentation at home so that you know exactly how long it takes). In your seminar report you will want to work from notes, but, as at conferences, you can put your audience to sleep if you simply read a text that a person would need to read carefully in order to follow. The seminar report may be used as a basis for the research paper, if you wish.