A moth ate my homework — reading writing and printing with human and insect bookworms

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Schriftlicher Teil der Diplomarbeit
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
Magister artium

Betreut von O. Univ. Prof. Mag. art. Ursula Hübner
Approbationsdatum: 19. Juni 2024, Linz

Abstract:

Are bookworms truly enemies of books or do the traces they leave behind mean something more? What are the differences between human and insect bookworms? These questions serve as a foundation for research on 'insect literature'. In the spirit of Lafcadio Hearn, the focus is placed on humanimals which are moving between worlds and pages. Paragraphs are structured according to influences of worldbuilding and imaginary languages on pseudo-scripts. These concepts are relevant as they gradually, with examples from 20th century classical music, Kafka's stories, asemic writing and The Language of Bugs, reveal how traces left by bookworms can serve as source material for artists' books.

Introduction

The title of my diploma artistic research comes from the familiar excuse: “A dog ate my homework”. In the original scenario, a dog has the role of a negative character, the one that destroys the work. A moth[1], which will soon be uncovered, is a true collaborator. But only if you give it a chance. Among many other insect species, moths belong with bookworms. Although the first association with bookworms are humans, the insect kind has a much longer history. American librarian and archivist William K. Beatty provides more information on these tiny beings: “One hundred sixty species of bookworms have been identified, including the common bookworm, cockroaches, silverfish and firebrats, termites, booklice, mud wasps, moths, and bedbugs” (Beatty, 1970, 141). His essay *What monstrous creature is this?* gives us insight into more humorous aspects of their history. Books are described as a battlefield between insects who eat books and those who eat other insects, while in the outside world prizes were given away for the “antibookworm weapon”. They are labelled as ‘enemies of books’, yet simultaneously observed with curiosity which discovered their “knowing black eyes” and “a true spirit of investigation” (142-143). This “ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion towards insects”, as depicted in the literary works of

1 In this case, a moth (serb. knjiški moljac) represents the whole bookworm insect family, as it directly relates to Serbian translation of the word *bookworm*.

Lafcadio Hearn[2], extends beyond books as their home/food (Lurie, 2016, 11). Beginning in 1894 with *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, Hearn published annually until his death in 1904. Each of the four collections from 1898 to 1901 includes ‘insect literature’ (10). His writings on insects are drawn both from “the world of gaki (“The World of Hungry Spirits”) and the zoological World of Animals” (Manning, 2020, 20). Hearn’s insects are thus “moving *monstrously*, with *conscious* life” (11). But is it possible to understand ‘insect consciousness’? “Can we ever hope for a Natural History with coloured plates that will show us how the world appears to the faceted eyes of a dragon-fly (Hearn, 1901, 97-98)?”[3] Following the dichotomy between science and spirituality, “knowing black eyes” are looking into insects with souls. Hearn embraces *the weird* of ghostly bugs which H. P. Lovecraft describes as “something that is born in the space between worlds, between a banal world of familiar everyday life and something *unknown* and *outside*” (Manning, 2020, 5). In the case of bookworms, Solberg finds additional overlapping between the species where “some humans write as badly as

2 I owe much of my personal and artistic interest in the topic of ‘insect literature’ to Hearn’s writings, as his essays and stories have inspired me to remain as curious as a hungry bookworm.

3 The Umwelt theory by Jakob von Uexküll, which emerged after Hearn’s lifetime, proposes that each species inhabits its own unique perceptual world, shaped by its sensory abilities and environmental interactions. See *Von Uexküll, Jakob. “A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds.” (1992).*

bugs" and are "all creatures of the book ... differing in quality but not in kind" (Solberg, 2020, 18).

The focus of this paper is on reading the "true spirit of investigation" written by human, nonhuman and insect bookworms. Paragraphs are structured according to influences of worldbuilding and imaginary languages on pseudo-scripts. These concepts are relevant as they gradually, with examples from 20th century classical music, Kafka's stories, asemic writing and *The Language of Bugs*, reveal how traces left by bookworms can serve as source material for artists' books.

What is that buzzing sound?

Discovering imaginary world Kylwiria by the composer György Ligeti, directed me towards possibilities of nonlinearity[4] within worldbuilding. The land he created had "descriptions of the geological constitution of the mountains, deserts and rivers, also studies about the social systems, and a thoroughly *logical language*". This interest in language, as well as other childhood experiences, shaped his approach in composing (Mac Erlaine, 2020). Among the works which "aim

4 As suggested by designer and researcher Tiger Dingsun, worldbuilding can be applied in practices outside of classical storytelling. The advantage lies in "the potential for narratives to sprawl out nonlinearly", and that potential is well captured by the term 'chimeric worlding'. See *Dingsun, Tiger. "Chimeric Worlding: Graphic Design, Poetics, and Worldbuilding." Tiger Dingsun. Accessed May 15, 2024. https://www.tiger.exposed/project/chimeric-worlding.*

to mimic language ... and share the property of non-semantic texts" are electronic composition *Artikulation*, and two dramatic lingual pieces *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*. Ligeti describes humorous and 'non-purist' attributes of his compositions (Mac Erlaine, 2020, 49-52):

Damp, viscous, spongy, fibrous, dry, brittle, granulous and compact materials ... imaginary buildings, labyrinths, inscriptions, texts, dialogues, insects - states, events, processes, blendings, transformations, catastrophes, disintegrations, disappearances, all these are elements of this non-purist music (Ligeti) (Wehinger, 1970, 7-8).

Alongside Ligeti's language explorations, notable speech pieces include Olivier Messiaen's *Catalogue of Birds.* Each composition in the *Catalogue* represents a different bird species, with Messiaen drawing on observations made "in the wild". Consequently, the landscapes of France play a significant role in his music, as much as the birds themselves. The role of landscape was the key difference to other birdsongs made before and after Messiaen's lifetime (Kang, 2020, 41). Being an ornithologist, he prioritized accurate notation of his observations. However, as Kurenniemi points out, Messiaen's intention was not to "communicate with the birds" (Kurenniemi, 1980, 126). Instead, he achieved a form of mimesis, translating bird sounds into his own musical language. While the composer didn't set out to represent nonhuman/bird experience, he acknowledged the challenge of

avoiding the influence of his own perception: “But, obviously, it is I who listen and unintentionally I may introduce something of my manner of listening in reproducing the birdsong” (Messiaen, 1976).

Looking over the literary field, we realize that translating nonhuman experience is a universal challenge. Franz Kafka’s 1922 story *Investigations of a Dog* points out that “human autobiographical gesture is necessarily inscribed in writing about nonhuman animals” (Anderton, 2016, 271). The narrator of the story is a dog who describes different members of dogdom and through reasoning and quasi-scientific methods tries to gain self-knowledge. The dog-narrator’s focus on the canine race underlines a species-specific form of anthropocentricism, uncovering the limitations of both canine self-knowledge and human introspection: “All that I cared for was the race of dogs, that and nothing else” (278). Anderton clarifies: “For Kafka, then, it seems the goal of human language is to evoke the shared silence that sits at the heart of literary anthrozoology and human self-reflection” and that “such silence manifests a failure of language” (279). Consequently, fictional animal languages have similar limitations. But if we don’t use language as we know it, what other channels of communication are available for humanimals?[5] According to

5 Humanimals are human-animal hybrids. See *Leatherland, Douglas. “The Capacities and Limitations of Language in Animal Fantasies.”Humanimalia 11, no. 2 (2020): 101*-130.

Leatherland “the significance of nonhuman forms of communication, and the place of human language within a spectrum of sign-systems” can be found in the field of zoosemiotics.[6] These “sign systems” fall into category of non-verbal channels of communication, which are present in animal fantasies that rely on factual details of animal behavior: bats’ communication through echoes, dance language of bees and pheromone signals (Leatherland, 2020, 102-122). Ultimately, humanimal stories are there to raise questions of translatability between species through fiction and facts.

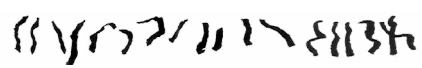
In 2019 a different kind of dog[7] made its own research. This time, the narrator buzzes in a language less burdened by quasi-scientific methods. Through pages with Bachmirgonian[8] nonverbal writing and drawings, it shares hints of its habitat. Those hints include drawings of an ID card, flies holding hands (the official coat of arms),

6 “Coined and founded by Thomas A. Sebeok in 1963, zoosemiotics denotes the study of systems of communication within and between species (intraspecific and interspecific communication, respectively)” (Leatherland, 2020, 101).

7 In Kafka’s *Investigations of a Dog* world, this type of researcher would probably be described as an air-dog. In this context, the researcher is a fly.

8 Bachmirgonia is an imaginary world which I created spontaneously in a conversation with a friend. I describe it as a place where rodents, flies, jack russel terriers, puma-taxis (half puma, half taxi public transport) and two humans live in. There weren’t many proofs of its existence except a few newspaper stories of hamster fights, puma-taxi protests, truffle-hunting festivals and short conversations with flies.

a library card (FOR FLIES, FOR EDVCATION, FOR SCIENCE) and signs humans almost understand. If this book was borrowed from the Bachmirgonian library, could we also become members? The answer is:



Language of Flies

The illegible writing you see above is called Language of Flies. It can be described as a form of 'sign language' which flies show with their 'hands'. This is clearly demonstrated on the first page of *Investigation of a Fly* and on the last one:

Flies are tiny creatures that have the ability to communicate through sign language. That is why it gets our attention when they rub their small hands. ... I imitated those hand movements my unusual visitor performed and it suddenly felt like we were talking, about something only the two of us understand (Ćubović, 2019).

An attempt to actually decipher what the flies are saying can't end successfully as these writings don't have a verbal expression in human language and can be compared to asemic writing. Australian poet Tim Gaze, who coined the term alongside his colleague Jim Leftwich, simply defines it as "anything which looks like writing, but in which

the person viewing can't read any words" (Asemic Movement 1) (Schwenger, 2019, 2). The illegibility of asemic writing is purposefully there to bring out the graphic elements of 'text'. Peter Schwenger, author of the book *Asemic: the art of writing* further explains: "Asemic signs, precisely because they defy translation, allow us to let go of conventional words and to grasp, or to grasp at, something that would otherwise elude us" (31). Once established, this form of illegible writing, it was impossible to ignore its presence outside of usual writing surfaces. Additionally, writers don't necessarily need to be human. The "asemic-suggestive shapes" found in nature can be placed into category of eco-asemics. One of the examples is graphic granite, a type of rock that uncannily resembles archaic cuneiform. (65). Traces which snakes and other animals leave in the sand and wiggly pieces of branches can also become text. However, there are disagreements around the intentionality of these traces. On the one hand, the argument is that the lack of a human author can only produce an "accidental likeness of language," and that mere resemblance is not enough (Knapp and Michaels) (67). Conversely, Schwenger reminds us that "all words are resemblances." He continues with the explanation: "It's not that they resemble in the least whatever it is that they signify. They resemble each other: other markings in similar configurations that are reproducible for agreed-upon purposes. It is only such a resemblance that makes words readable at all, and makes it appear that meaning is inherent in them" (67). A lack of clear meaning

in asemic writing allows us to perceive signs in nature, but it also prevents us from decoding them to fulfill our innate urge to assign meaning (71). But, the focus and curiosity to decipher asemic script is still placed on human-made writings. The most notable attempts at deciphering have centered around the *Codex Seraphinianus*, created by Luigi Serafini in 1981. Alongside mysterious text, encyclopedia-like format features surreal illustrations of flora, fauna, races, civilizations, and customs, as well as sections on food, clothing, rituals, and architecture (137-138). Included in the 2006 re-release of the *Codex* was a small booklet called "Decodex". In it, Serafani finally clarifies that the text in the *Codex* was, in fact, not a code:

Do you remember how, when we were children, we'd leaf through picture books and, pretending we could read before the children older than us, fantasize about the images we saw there? Who knows, I thought to myself, perhaps unintelligible and alien writing could make us all free to once again experience those hazy childhood sensations (Serafini, 2006).

Insect literature

With similar dedication and thoroughness, Zhu Yingchun worked on the book *The Language of Bugs* but with the help from unusual collaborators. Book descriptions already reveal that it is entirely 'written' by insects, from the preface to page numbers. The accompanying leaflet, titled *The Birth of the Language of Bugs*, explains how Zhu, while gardening, noticed leaves with white bite marks made by bugs. This observation led him to systematically gather the traces. By creating "little ink ponds" of vegetable juices and placing paper for bugs to crawl through, the author also acted as an archivist, gathering and preserving the bugs' marks over five years and across half an acre of land. This effort resulted in a unique book, presenting the collaboration with over hundred bug species (Pyyhtinen, 2022, 4-5). What is consistent with works with pseudo-scripts, as mentioned in the case of *Codex Seraphinianus*, is the search for hidden meaning. Pyyhtinen argues against it: "Bug-writing is not a graphic means to record or mediate sound and meaning, nor is it a code to be cracked". At the same time, he searches for other qualities which we can read: Bug-writing ... is about the patterns, rhythm, shapes, width and density of lines" where "the line becomes the trace of a bodily movement" (9-10). Are the bugs using asemic writing then? Schwenger gives us a possible answer: "... writing that locates its essence in the rhythms and gestural relations of marking. It is precisely this vision of writing that asemics wants to convey" (Schwenger, 2019, 66).

Collecting artists' books which focus on animal traces/languages and communication between species is the main focus of *Interspecies Library* project by Oscar Salguero, where I discovered *The Language of Bugs.* Materiality of writing is the topic of another curating project titled *Cunning Chapters*,

which is also a collective artist's book. Tiny traces are featured in the chapter by Finlay Taylor who "uses snail technology, where text is that which is eaten away, in treated areas of paper, consumed by snails."

The materiality of books, which Solberg recognizes as our "current fascination", doesn't have enough associations with traces left by bookworms. They are used by scholars for two basic purposes, as "an indicator of authenticity" and "as evidence of infestation" (Solberg, 2020, 18). In rare occasions, they have received "strangely beautiful descriptions", where "the entomologist William Reinicke (1879–1929) describes books *so bored through with holes that the page looks like a sieve*; leaves that *when held up to the light, resemble pieces of rare lace*; a codex that, *as you grasp it, you are covered with a miniature snow storm of paper flakes*" (16). Artists' books can explore the opposing qualities of bookworms and introduce the tension between perceiving the marks left by them either as beautiful or as damage.

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19.6.2024