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Based on a True Story:

A Critical Approach to Ambiguous Veracity in Literature

Noah Selsby

A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

The statement that a work is “based on a true story” is one which is inherently ambiguous as the degree to which the story is factual or invented can be unknown unless directly addressed by the author. As a result, there is a tension felt when this claim is made at the beginning of a text with which a reader is unfamiliar, leading to the risk of assuming which parts of the narrative are true and which were fabricated. This thesis will explore several texts and works of narrative art which bare the markings of being “based on a true story,” but which challenge the reader to think critically when comparing their contents to verifiable sources. By differentiating these works from outright hoaxes intended to deceive, I will further refine the grey area where fiction and nonfiction coexist in an uneasy partnership that can be in some ways dangerous, but also highlight the importance of critical thinking when approaching a text whose relationship with verifiable facts is tenuous.

Dedication

To my parents who worked long hours to provide their children with the best education that they could afford. From an early age they instilled in me the importance of critical thinking and pushed me to excel in my education.

To my adviser Dr. Cécile Guédon, without whom this crazy idea would have never come together. She allowed me to keep my approach quirky, but pushed me towards better structure, clearer statements, and encouraged me to go deeper in my analysis.

Table of Contents

Preface: A Few Elephants in the Room 2
Chapter 1: “Based on a True Story” 5
Chapter 2: Ghost Ships 20
Chapter 3: Spaceships 36
Chapter 4: Codices and Context 61
Chapter 5: The Voynich Manuscript 96
Chapter 6: The Dissatisfaction in Not Knowing 128
References: 135

Preface:

A Few Elephants in the Room

My hope for my master's thesis is to explore several challenging texts which share the distinction of being nebulous about their relationship with the "real world." I will propose that the differences in how this relationship plays out with each lead to a larger perspective on the role of critical thinking when approaching a text which is ambiguous in some significant way. As such, I would like to address a few "elephants" that will become quickly apparent as readers consider this thesis. These problems inspired me to write in a purposely fragmented style, specifically with respect to what I won't address or provide the reader in the thesis itself, but rather encourage them to seek out and experience themselves, with the aim of formulating their own opinion and then consider whether they agree or disagree with my assessment.

The first question is: why I didn't specifically address "fake news?"

After thinking about it in great length, I concluded that addressing the current state of journalism, politics, social media, and information technology's role in the increased speed at which false or misinterpreted information can spread would be detrimental to my goal for several reasons.

I felt that it would distract from the bigger picture argument I am trying to make about the nature of critical thinking and how it relates specifically to fiction. "Fake news" is certainly adjacent to the topic, but ultimately, I am more interested in the grey area where literary fiction is mistaken or misrepresented

as fact. Despite wanting to distance myself from a term which would run the risk of dating my work, I felt that using literary hoaxes as part of a larger spectrum of examples would show that there is a complex relationship between the author, the reader and the text and that a reductive and inaccurate moniker of "fake news" is not adequate to encompass all the possibilities of gradation that lie therein, especially since many of these examples don't inherently intend on deceiving the reader. While all interpretations are incomplete to one degree or another, critical thinking demands that we do our best effort to reasonably investigate the nature of any text given to us without context.

Additionally regarding how addressing "fake news" directly might date my work: one of the key points that I am concerned with arguing here is that this grey area between fiction and non-fiction is not a product of the current age (though it may certainly be heightened by the speed at which information now flows), but rather has existed in parallel with humanity's drive to establish a written record of both history, but also story-telling.

The second question is: why haven't I included any illustrations?

As with the previous question, I considered reproductions of the illustrations to facilitate visualizing the points I've made regarding some of the photographs, illustrations, and other visual materials in the examples used. However, there is an aspect of the act of reading and viewing which I believe needs to be encouraged as a part of the process of interpretation. I want readers to question my own interpretation enough to go look for themselves at what I've described. To put it plainly, I want the reader to look for themselves at the contents of Fontcuberta, Serafini, and the numerous codices that are primarily visual in nature because in the act of looking at the original source, they may see additional information that further expands their understanding beyond what I was able to do in my limited time constructing this argument. This exercise will also allow readers to evaluate my choice in examples in

their own experience and make up their own opinion as to whether they are accurate or are selectively chosen to better fit my argument.

This brings me to my final elephant.

I'm sure I've gotten some things wrong: the goal of my thesis is to show how critical thinking applies to building a valid interpretation. I strongly believe readers can get closer to a text's contents by examining as much information as they can reasonably find, but I also acknowledge that it will never be exhaustive, perfect, or in some cases even correct. Key information may be unavailable and as a result, we may never have full confirmation on the authoritative meaning. The chapter on the Voynich Manuscript is my attempt to crystalize this problem with an example over which many have obsessed and perhaps too eagerly declared their interpretations without enough proof. I am sure that I have not come even remotely close to exhausting all accessible information about the texts I've chosen. I have tried my best, however, to acknowledge the moments where they may be no satisfactory interpretation available and I do hope that I've found some little mysteries and complications that inspire the reader to action when they next read something and are not quite sure of "what it is." Regardless of whether they agree with my assessments and conclusions, I hope that readers will then have the desire look deeper into the rabbit holes for themselves.

Chapter 1:

"Based on a True Story"

The 1996 Coen Brothers' movie *Fargo* begins not with image, but with a block of text stating:

> THIS IS A TRUE STORY
>
> The events depicted in this film
> took place in Minnesota in 1987.
>
> At the request of the survivors,
> the names have been changed.
>
> Out of the respect for the dead,
> the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

The film depicts a botched kidnapping during which a central character buries several million dollars on the side of the road somewhere in Minnesota, marking it with a windshield ice-scraper. In 2001, a 28-year-old Japanese woman, Takako Konishi, was reported in numerous news sources as having gone to Minnesota, allegedly to find the buried treasure. Inspired by the text at the beginning of the movie stating that it was based on a true event, it was reported that she froze to death searching for the place where Steve Buscemi's character prepared a shallow grave for an ill-gotten fortune. Witnesses reported that she was underdressed for the harsh winters of the area and her poor English made it difficult for her to communicate with the locals. The story took on the quality of an urban-legend as it was retold through the media, further adding to the mystique of the claim of "THIS IS A TRUE STORY" at the beginning of the movie. This second narrative which was layered over the movie is compelling, but false.

In 2003, Paul Berczeller wrote an article for *The Guardian* chronicling his investigations into the story of Takako Konishi's quest for the lost ransom money in the long stretches of flat featureless roads. His investigations were set against the tragic idea that Takako did not understand that Fargo was in fact not a "TRUE STORY", concocted by the Coen brothers for effect. However, as Berczeller interviewed both locals in North Dakota and Takako's family members in Japan, a very different story emerged; she had not gone to Minnesota in search of ransom money, but rather to reconnect with American business man with whom she had some brief affair years earlier. In a state of depression after losing her job, she had travelled to the area only coincidentally associated with the movie and not knowing English, struggled to communicate with those she met along her journey. Having shown police a crude map, and repeated the word "Fargo," probably to identify the place where the businessman lived, one of the officers made an incorrect connection with the movie. Perhaps ironically, the language barrier worked both ways and Takako did not understand the officer's attempts to connect her map to the movie; it is not mentioned whether Takako even seen the movie *Fargo*.

This strange coda to the movie *Fargo* thus stands as a fascinating example of the twisted path that a work can take: in this case it begins as a work of pure fiction, presented as being "A TRUE STORY," then incorrectly attributed as the inspiration for an unrelated death, leading to an urban legend, then an investigation revealing the misunderstandings, then an article titled "Death in the Snow" which would be expanded into a documentary *This is a True Story*, and finally a fictionalized account in 2014 called *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter*, which retells the false account of Takako's story. The "TRUE STORY" comes full circle when a misunderstanding and misattribution with an unrelated movie sparks inspiration for a fictional account "based on a true story."

The literary claim of a narrative to be "based on a true story" points to larger questions about the nature of a fictional text's reception in general, and more specifically the path that it can take when it is placed adjacent to a verifiable historical event. Ambiguous texts challenge the reader to

differentiate between the likelihood of a plausible "true story" and the possibility that the text is not what it presents itself to be. Authorial intent sometimes shapes such texts into the realm of the hoax, but it is not a requirement—as with the case of *Fargo* where it would be a stretch to refer to the movie as a "hoax." The question of whether an author can legitimately say that her material is "based on a true story" when it is a pure fabrication is moot; it has been done countless times and is not a recent invention, as will be evidenced by the many odd examples that will be discussed here.

In her *Origins of the Novel* (1980), French literary critic Marthe Robert explores the tensions felt between fiction and non-fiction, particularly through the example of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe:*

> Daniel Defoe, as everybody knows, presented *Robinson Crusoe* as a true story and not a novel – a genre he despised for its insipidity and the sickly sentimentality of its addicts. By 'true' he doubtless implied that the plot was plausible – indeed it was based on the adventures of someone who, according to a recently published account, had really survived a shipwreck and lived for many years on a desert island off the American coast. However, he was probably not aware of the fact that his hero's odyssey involved a different kind of truth and one much nearer the bone (82).

Robert's interest in Defoe's work as an example of an early novel takes her in a different direction than will be explored here. However, her notation of the author's insistence on linking his clearly fictional account to a real event generates serious questions about its intended reception. As previously mentioned, it would not be a leap of logic to label the Coen Brothers and Defoe's self-endorsement of their stories veracity as "hoaxes"—yet few if any readers would likely consider these stories as being deceptive in the same way as true literary hoaxes. If works like these are not hoaxes, then what are they? The answer to this question varies greatly depending on the context of the work; furthermore, this exploration will not limit itself to those works which have blatantly claimed to be "true"; it will also consider a selection of works which present themselves in a more ambiguous way by imitating

documents generally assumed to be non-fiction such as a biography, an encyclopedia, and an instruction manual.

Examining texts adjacent to the "truth"—whether historical fiction, hoaxes, or pure fabrications presented as non-fiction—present the reader with a complex puzzle to consider when approaching a text with limited context. This thesis will use four examples of increasing ambiguity to explore such literary puzzles. Similarly to *Fargo* or *Robinson Crusoe*, Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" (1884) is a work of fiction presented by a narrator under the guise of a fantastic but "true story," and whose reception inspired some readers to question whether the narrative did provide a factual explanation for a real ghost ship. Joan Fontcuberta's biography *Sputnik* (1997) tells the story of a lost cosmonaut, erased from history by the propagandist agenda of the Soviet space program—fiercely obsessed with image and narrative over verified facts. Whether Fontcuberta's work is a hoax is debatable, as closer examination will show that its challenge to the reader is undermined by the comical "hints" that the cosmonaut is an invention peppered throughout the text. Third, the *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981) seems as if pulled from a labyrinthian library in a Borges story, an encyclopedia of indecipherable knowledge from an imaginary world. Finally, a strangely similar counterpart to Serafini's work, the unidentified and unattributed manual known as the Voynich Manuscript (15thc, undetermined) to this day confounds readers and researchers with a document which looks and feels like it is full of meaning, but which, upon close comparison to the types of manuals it most resembles, breaks down into a mystery which may not be as satisfyingly answered as readers hope.

By exploring the historical context, authorship, and reception of these texts, it is possible to formulate a spectrum of the relationship between them, their reception, and their intent (if any) to deceive the reader. This spectrum will show that their reception cannot be correlated consistently with the determination of intent, as these texts, and many like them, have struggled to find un-equivocated labeling as "truth" or "fiction."

Critical theory has also delved into the grey area created by complicated texts that either hide or misrepresent their veracity. Literary critic Brian McHale takes a reasonable approach in his essay "'A poet may not exist: Mock-hoaxes and the Construction of National Identity" (2003) to catalog the genre of literary hoax into multiple categories which highlight the intent of the author's deception, while E.D. Hirsch Jr. offers a careful analysis of the tension between the validity of an interpretation and its plausibility within the work's context in his book *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). Using critical theory will provide further tools to better understand and categorize texts which cannot be taken at "face value."

Though it could be argued that of the examples that will be considered only Fontcuberta's *Sputnik* actually pertains to the genre of literary hoax, it is nevertheless important to explore texts that have been already considered regarding hoaxes to better identify the differences between a non-deceptive literary claim of presenting a text as being "based on a true story" and the direct intent to deceive the reader. Brian McHale categorizes literary hoaxes to provide the reader with the context necessary to evaluate texts which have the built-in challenge of attempting (to different degrees) to mislead the reader in some capacity.

The authors' intent to deceive in examples explored in subsequent chapters needs to be carefully differentiated from the authors referenced by McHale, who purposely intended their works to being misinterpreted, either temporarily or permanently. Nevertheless, the categorizations McHale makes are critical to identifying the nature of these and similar texts on their own separate category. McHale categorizes the literary hoax into three distinct types. He calls the first the "genuine hoax" which is simply identifies as, "perpetrated with no intention of their ever being exposed" (236). This would be the most obvious case of an author presenting something as fact for financial, political, or reputational gain and hopes that no one is able to identify it as being false.

The second category is what McHale labels the “entrapment” or “trap-hoaxes,” which are “designed with [didactic] and punitive purposes… to be exposed by the hoaxer himself or herself when the time is right, to the discomfiture of the gullible” (236). These hoaxes tend to be temporarily presented as fact, but often target certain “experts” in an attempt to get them to certify their authenticity and then, upon exposing their fakery, embarrass and discredit those same “experts” who were unable to discern the hoax.

The final category, the “mock-hoax” is intended to “eventually to be seen through without any traps being sprung” (237). Unlike the other types of hoaxes, these are usually peppered with clues to let the reader know that what is being presented isn’t to be taken at face value and the intent is to encourage the fakery to be discovered by a sophisticated reader.

As stated, the examples that will follow all share a similar path to the hoaxes which are used as examples in each of McHale’s classifications. For this reason, it is important to understand what differentiates the verifiable from the fictional, such as the difference between Conan Doyle’s imagined ghost-ship *Marie Celeste* from the historically documented *Mary Celeste,* to compare truth to the fiction and see where the lines are drawn between them. In doing so, the categorization with which McHale

Spectrum of Literary Deception						
Intent to Deceive	**Total**	**Temporary**	**Intended to be discovered**	**Intended to be discovered**	**None**	**Unknown**
Text Category	Genuine Hoax	Entrapment Hoax	Mock Hoax	Lit. Performance Art	Historical Fiction	Unknown
Example	Irving's fake Howard Hughes Bio	Invented Poet Ern Malley	Mark Twain's “petrified shah”	Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus*	Conan Doyle's "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement"	The Voynich Manuscript
		Joan Fontcuberta’s *Sputnik* (possibly somewhere in this area depending on interpretation)				

begins can be expanded into an even broader spectrum. Complementary categories like “literary performance art” and “historical fiction” lie outside of range of what would be considered a hoax but

nevertheless related in the complex nature of their relationship with the reader. Visualizing this spectrum in a diagrammatic manner might look something like this (see below).

From left to right, the intent to deceive decreases until we arrive at historical fiction as the example of a text which is not intending to deceive the reader, but nevertheless finds itself on the spectrum because of its potential to be misrepresented or misinterpreted. The following examples of the first three hoax types are taken from Melissa Katsoulis' book *Telling Tales* (2009), which use McHale's categorization to explore the rich history of literary hoaxes through the ages. Though she is not focused on the literary theory, she entertainingly recounts the history behind the hoaxes and explores some fundamentally important considerations regarding the relationship between author, reader, and text.

In the first example, Clifford Irving's fabricated biography of Howard Hughes was sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars as a real record in 1971, only to be exposed later by Hughes himself and leading to Irving's imprisonment for fraud (108-114). Irving never intended to be exposed and clearly working under the assumption that Hughes, who by then had become a recluse, would not be bothered or able to contradict him. Once exposed, Irving was tried in court, sent to jail, and then reinvented his career by writing a first-hand account of his hoax.

The second example from 1945, Ern Malley, a fictional car mechanic turned poet, was the fabrication of two disenchanted authors, James McAuley and Harold Stewart who sought to ridicule the "Avant-Guard poetry" trend and more specifically Max Harris who they identified as one of the driving forces of the movement (124-129). McAuley and Stewart sought to entrap Harris by luring him into endorsement of the fabricated poet's work—described as "any funny-sounding nonsense that came into their heads" (125). Though the intent of the fabrication was to expose what McAuley and Stewart

viewed as Harris' own poetic mediocrity, their fabricated poems still managed to capture some attention and are still regarded as worthy of consideration interesting years later (130-131).

The third example, Mark Twain's "petrified shah", is described in a satirical article about the discovery of a petrified figure published on October 4th, 1862:

> "A petrified shah was found some time ago in the mountains south of Gravelly Ford. Every limb and feature of the stone mummy was perfect, not even excepting the left leg, which had evidently been a wooden one during the lifetime of the owner – which lifetime, by the way, came to a close about a century ago, in the opinion of a savant who has examined the defunct.
>
> The body was in a sitting position, and leaving against a huge mass of droppings' the attitude was pensive, the right thumb rested against the side of the nose; the left thumb partially supported the chin, the forefinger pressing the inner corner of the left eye, and drawing it partly open; the right eye closed, and the fingers of the right hand spread out. This strange freak of nature created a profound sensation in the vicinity, and our informant states that, by request, Judge Sewell at once proceeded to the spot and held an inquest on the body. The verdict was that 'deceased came to his death from protracted exposure'." (66)

It does not take a superior reader to detect that Twain's report is intended as mockery of the numerous, fraudulent petrified giants and "icemen" which were in vogue at the time in carnivals and travelling "freak shows." Twain's version of the overused flim-flam cliché is literally sitting on a pile of feces and mummified in the amusing position of thumbing his nose, presumably at the reader. Yet, many did take the report as true, leading Twain to, "… claim astonishment at the gullibility of his readership, whom he never expected to swallow his tall stories without a pinch of salt" (65).

Twain's example is important because it underlines that the misinterpretation of a text often occurs regardless of what the author intended. Katsoulis categorizes Twain's work as an "entrapment hoax" designed specifically to be misinterpreted and then used to expose that mistake. Yet, it is difficult

to lump Twain into that category when considering his humorous composition. Katsoulis acknowledges that it is difficult to classify Twain as an author who is looking to perpetuate a hoax for ridicule of an expert:

> "The sheer unbridles naughtiness of Twain's prose, and the fact that he readily admits to being drunk while writing much of his journalism of this period, make it hard to judge him as we might judge a mendacious journalist today. The mitigating circumstances of the crazy times in the crazy town in which he and his readers were living make his hoaxes far less serious than others of their ilk. Moreover, there is the absence of a formal debunking in which the caught-out author was forced to either admit his crime or foolishly protest his innocence; rather, twain cheerfully admitted when asked years later that *of course* these tall tales were made-up. Indeed, putting the responsibility on the intelligent reader to determine the truth of a text is a canny trick that many subsequent hoaxers would have done well to learn from Twain. It might have saved them, and their readers and publishers, a great deal of trouble if they had." (70)

Twain's example skirts the label of "hoax"—and while Katsoulis does acknowledge its imperfect fit into that category, the reason for its imperfection is that Twain himself is lampooning the question of the relationship between the reader and the author. While his "hoax" fits the basic qualifications for the category of entrapment hoax (published as truth, but later admitted as "testing" the reader and experts), the biggest difference is Twain's use of humor. Though the article predates Twain's major works, which limited the contemporary readers' familiarity with the author's playfulness, at the time of publication there is still enough evidence within the article itself to arrive at the correct interpretation of the text; the similarity to other hoaxes, the position of the fact that the mummified shah is literally thumbing its nose at the reader is a clue which Twain has put in plain sight to signal himself to the reader as a writer of a satirical send-up of similar, true hoaxes, but not a hoax unto itself. As a result, this example is arguably a better fit to the "mock hoax" category than the one which Katsoulis has assigned it.

Once the spectrum reaches the examples of Serafini's fictional encyclopedia and Conan Doyle's fictionalization of the Mary Celeste, the text of scrutiny has arrived at a grey area which is more difficult to categorize. While it closely resembles a hoax in some ways, it is differentiated by the fact that the intent of the text is to inspire a sense of mystery by introducing fantastic elements into a realistic setting, but not necessarily to deceive. The entertainment which the reader is expected to derive from these texts comes from their purposeful imitation of truth, but not necessarily its misrepresentation. In other words, ambiguity is not the same as deception: the tension created by the fictionalization of the "truth" is compounded by the understandable desire of readers to compartmentalize the nature of what they read into binary categories of fiction and non-fiction. Texts challenging this neat divide open the reader's mind to another possibility, to sometimes-unanswerable questions.

This unknown state of a book deprived of context will be explored with Fontcuberta's *Sputnik*, which skirts the line of deception so closely (or confusingly) that it could be placed across many of the categories in the spectrum. On the other hand, the elusive Voynich Manuscript will defy any conclusion regarding the purpose behind it, as there is simply not enough information available to arrive at a full understanding of where it came from and what it was.

However, with texts on the left of the spectrum, or which share some of the hoaxes' intrinsic ambiguity at the right of the same spectrum, the interpretation may fall into different levels of validity depending on the success of their tackling challenges. E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Validity in Interpretation* provides useful tools with which to study challenging texts, particularly because it shows the critic's own struggles with examples that defy interpretation. During his discussion of the relationship between the meaning of a text and the author's intent, Hirsch makes an interesting aside: "(Deliberate lies are, of course, another matter; they have no more theoretical interest than failures of memory)" (9). By placing his statement in parenthesis and adding an emphasizing "of course" to his statement, Hirsch makes it clear that he considers deceit (hoaxes) unworthy of serious consideration, or at least as secondary to

legitimate texts. This dismissal is strangely at odds with Hirsch's analysis which provides many useful tools with which to consider such texts, their relationship with the author, and subsequently why they are important when examining the grey areas between fiction and non-fiction. This statement is made during the consideration of a scenario where an author's opinion or interpretation of their own work has changed over time. Hirsch's analysis of this scenario highlights the difference between saying that a text can be interpreted in different ways independently of the author's intent and saying that a text has a contextual meaning the author intended at the time they wrote it. People change over time as their experiences change their worldview. It is obvious that an author will be a different person after a length of time has passed since the composition of their work. Hirsch points out though, "Clearly what has changed for them is not the meaning of the work, but rather their relationship to that meaning" (8). This statement does validate the fundamental concept that a text can have multiple interpretations; different people know different things and when they read the same texts, their interpretations of the same words can have differences based on their own understanding of the context in which the work is presented. Similarly, Hirsch is alluding to the fact that an individual's perspective can also change over time and therefore, their interpretation of their own words can change as well. Still, Hirsch acknowledges that at the time of writing, the author did have a specific meaning in mind. The question then becomes; is it realistic to think that one can know enough to approximate the meaning imparted while writing? The answer advanced by Hirsch is complex.

One of the important aspects of interpretation which Hirsch focuses on is the success of a text in imparting its meaning to the reader. Hirsch states, "The author's desire to communicate a particular meaning is not necessarily the same as his success in doing so… [the critic] is faced with the problem of distinguishing between the essay itself and the popular use that has been made of it" (11). Once again, Hirsch has focused on the fact that not all texts are written equally effective, therefore their interpretations will vary greatly depending on several factors including the author's own talent for

successfully representing what they are trying to put into words. This is a significant counterpoint to consider against the approach that the text must stand solely on its contents and not be bolstered by the context of its authorship and history. Factors like the author's misuse of a word, or the changing of a word's popular meaning, or the physical fragmentation of a text (loss of physical pages over time) can lead to a completely different interpretation of its meaning, or as in the case of the Conan Doyle's or Fontcuberta's fictionalization of real events, readers simply choosing to believe something is non-fiction when the context to the contrary is confusing or they lack the knowledge of what is being referenced.

A real-world example of the fragmentation and out-of-context presentation of a text changing the fundamentally verifiable meaning of a literary work is presented in article in the New York Times by Caroline Alexander titled "Out of Context." Alexander explores the use of a quote from Virgil's "The Aeneid" to commemorate those who perished in the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. The quotation on the memorial, "No day shall erase you from the memory of time" was intended to commemorate the victims of the attack, yet the source material is not a reference to the victims, but rather the perpetrators of a midnight ambush on sleeping soldiers. Alexander points out that those responsible for choosing the quote for the monument, "never intended [it] to be more than a high-sounding, stand-alone phrase, never intended to lead visitors to any more profound thoughts or emotions" (Alexander A27). Herein is a real-world example of the meaning of a text being warped to suit a different intent out of context; those who chose the quotation were not directly suggesting that the attackers of September 11th will not be forgotten, nor would any reader of those words arrive at that conclusion without being thoroughly familiar with the original poem.

Therein lies the problem: without context, the possibility of a significant departure from one meaning to another is possible, if not probable. While a text may have the potential for a plausible interpretation, such interpretation may not be (per Hirsch's criticism) "valid." Hirsch addresses the difference between plausibility and validity here:

> "… every interpretation is partial. No single interpretation can possibly exhaust the meaning of a text. Therefore, to the extent that different interpretations bring into relief different aspects of textual meaning, the diversity of interpretations should be welcomed; they all contribute to understanding. The more interpretations one knows, the fuller will be one's understanding… interpretations can and do support one another and they can deepen our understanding. The answer is inadequate only insofar as it fails to account for the distinction between compatible and incompatible" (Hirsch 128).

Hirsch's acknowledgement that no reading is fully informed and therefore flawed does remind the reader to exert caution in labeling an interpretation as being absolute. Still, rather than abandoning the attempt to arrive at a valid interpretation due to the partiality of every reading, Hirsch encourages the reader to seek out as much diversity in interpretation as possible, with an eye towards compatibility with the contextual evidence. Only through exhausting the information available to the reader, can the difference be considered between what is merely plausible and what is a more likely interpretation within the work's known place in historical context.

While Hirsch does dismiss the usefulness of the "lie" as a work worth of study early on, he does revisit its potential importance later. Hirsch is unable to escape fundamental questions regarding the success of the text in imparting meaning in the reader, especially when that meaning is contrary to the "truth":

> "The adequacy of the conception can be illustrated by the example of lying. Does the verbal meaning of a lie consist in the meaning that the speaker wills to convey, or does it also carry the additional meaning that what is will is deliberately false? If a lie did carry this additional meaning, which is antagonistic to the usual purpose of lying, then on most occasions there would be no point in telling a lie. In other worse, if part of the verbal meaning of a lie were that it is false, then there would be really no such thing as a lie, since one part of the meaning would rectify the falsity of the other part. We do not say that someone has misunderstood a lie when he is taken in by it. He has understood it only too well; the liar's verbal meaning has been successfully communicated" (55).

Despite his earlier dismissal, Hirsch goes on to say that he revisits lies as an example because, "... borderline cases are often the most informative ones" (55.) Hirsch's focus on the success (or failure) of the lie, and whether that is to be considered the true "meaning," as opposed to the broader context of the interpretation which is fully informed of the facts that reveal the lie to be a lie is at the core of the antithesis to the assertion that the text must stand on its own. Hirsch changes his mind fifty pages into his critique: he goes from saying that lies should be "dismissed" to saying that these "borderline cases" are "the most informative ones." Though there is an almost humorous irony to this change of mind, it is at the center of the examination of the grey area presented by works with ambiguous relationships to the "truth."

These "borderline cases" are what will be explored in this thesis, all four of the texts provided for consideration represent works, which if picked up from a shelf without context, would challenge a reader (depending on their previous knowledge of the relevant background) to arrive at a valid interpretation of their relationship with fact, history, and fiction. The order in which these examples are presented is likewise important: they are intended to represent a movement towards the obfuscation of intent, while at the same time, while having been misread, misinterpreted, and misrepresented, increasing the chance that they may be misunderstood.

At the top of the slope, Conan Doyle will show how a fictional account of a historical event can grab the attention of readers by promising a solution to an unsolved mystery, launching endless retellings and embellishments. Next, Fontcuberta will directly challenge the reader by closely imitating known parts of Soviet history, but blatantly framing it with his own fabricated images as a warning against assumption of veracity. Serafini will playfully create a familiar organizational architecture that reminds the readers of catalogs and taxonomies, while eluding any possible decipherment. Finally, the nameless manual known as the Voynich Manuscript, will serve as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the absence

of context represented by the previous texts, ending with a literary Rorschach test, leaving readers to see “what they want to see.” The result of this descent will be an emphasis on the importance of a critical approach to the unknown. While imaginative speculation has always been a useful tool in exploring the meaning of an unexplained subject, critical thinking demands that such explorations be tempered with as much evidence as possible to ensure the validity of any new proposition. Still, as is the case with the Voynich Manuscript, readers must also be prepared to leave some questions unanswered and not jump to a conclusion if it remains is unprovable. This thesis will concentrate on the real danger present in being swayed with the seductive nature of an embellished story, the sensationalism which easily captures the reader’s attention without being verifiable. The differentiation between what can be verified and what is only speculative will help readers with the playful examples provided, but also in the exceptionally important task of navigating between the truth and fiction of non-literary matters of everyday life.

Chapter 2:

Ghost Ships

Arthur Conan Doyle was thirteen years old when he first heard of the mysteriously abandoned ship *Mary Celeste*. Found drifting off the coast of the Azores on December of 1872 by another vessel, the *Dei Gratia*, the details of the odd conditions of the abandoned boat made a mark on the young boy. Those details would percolate for eleven years before inspiring the short story "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement." The reception of Conan Doyle's story, both at the time of publication as well as to present day, is a fascinating example of historical fiction whose ambiguity to this day colors accounts of the real event. The short story has not only been interpreted as non-fiction by many, but has also influenced countless retelling, embellishments, showing how reception can careen out of control, independent of the original intent of the author.

"J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" represents the moment when Conan Doyle realized that his writing could be more than a hobby and the reception of the story in the literary magazine "The Cornhill" gave him a sense of being in the company of his literary heroes:

> "What gave me great pleasure and for the first time made me realize that I was ceasing to be a hack writer and was getting into good company was when James Payn accepted my story 'Habakuk Jephson's Statement' for 'Cornhill.' I had a reverence for this splendid magazine with its traditions from Thackeray to Stevenson and the thought that I had won my way into it pleased me more than the cheque for £30, which came duly to hand. It was, of course, anonymous, - such as was the law of the magazine – which protects the authors from abuse as well as prevents his winning fame." (67-68)

Conan Doyle was pleased with the "great praise" that the story received (even though eleven years had passed after the event on which it was based) and credits the story as the turning point in his life, as the "Cornhill" published two additional stories of his, "John Huxford's Hiatus" and "The Ring of Thoth" (68).

This latter detail about his subsequent publications in the "Cornhill" is interesting because it is seemingly contradicted by Martin Booth's biography of Conan Doyle, *The Doctor, The Detective and Arthur Conan Doyle*. Booth states that while the story of the fictionalized version of the *Mary Celeste* was indeed a success and matches Conan Doyle's account, his subsequent attempts to publish in the magazine were rejected (102-103). Checking the dates of publication for the two stories which Conan Doyle mentions yields the following clarification: "John Huxford's Hiatus" and "The Ring of Thoth" were published on Jan 1, 1888, Vol.10, p.598 and Jan 1, 1890, Vol.14, p.46 respectively. These dates are significant because they come after the publication of Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes adventure *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887. These facts point to a glossing of the details on Conan Doyle's part, most likely to highlight the importance of the success of "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement." While it is possible that Conan Doyle simply misremembered the order of events, it is also more dramatic to say that his highly popular story about the *Mary Celeste* catapulted him into success. That is to say, it is likely that the authorial anonymity required by the "Cornhill" of all its authors contributed to his remaining relatively unknown until Sherlock Holmes made his first appearance. This inaccuracy in reporting the fundamental challenge that is found when considering sources of information about a text, even from the author themselves. The reader must be prepared to take every piece of evidence as needing corroboration to continue to fine-tune their understanding of the text's significance and be prepared for new evidence while investigating to further refine that interpretation as E.D. Hirsch would suggest.

Still, Conan Doyle's perception that his story had rekindled the interest in the real event and that it was to be influential for years to come is not incorrect. Research into the true story of the Mary Celeste, more than often leads to references to "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" and it is easy to see

where the story of the *Mary Celeste* bares the mark of her fictional counterpart the *Marie Celeste*. George S. Bryan's *Mystery Ship: The Mary Celeste in Fancy and in Fact* includes the Conan Doyle story in its entirety as a chapter (86-123). Bryan's examination of the real evidence also takes time to compare the true account to the details in Conan Doyle's story in order to backtrack back through literary history and pick apart the embellishments to which Conan Doyle's story gave birth and which have continued uninterrupted with every re-telling of the story (124-127). Unlike the hoaxes or satirical works which are created to fool the reader or expose ignorance, this example of inarguable historical fiction organically devolves into a misinterpreted literary life which was never intended by the author.

Even the publication of Charles Fay's *Mary Celeste: The Odyssey of an Abandoned Ship* by the Peabody Essex Museum, one of the largest repositories of primary documents regarding the real *Mary Celeste*, devotes significant time to the Conan Doyle story. Most importantly, Fay's book includes a reproduction of the original exchange between Horatio J. Sprague, U.S. Council and John Davis, Assistant Secretary (both were officials who had been involved in the original legal proceedings stemming from the salvage of the *Mary Celeste)*. In short, Sprague is taken by the story, acknowledges all the inaccuracies in it, but appeals to have "the opportunity of examining the author of this extraordinary composition" (142). Davis replies bluntly that the story, while entertaining, is in no way a "satisfactory" explanation of the facts and puts the burden of revealing any connection to the real event back on Sprague (143). There is no further mention of action at that point, but the significance of the exchange lies in the fact that it happened at all. The contrast between Sprague's concern and Davis' dismissal points to larger questions regarding the reception of Conan Doyle's account: what led some people to believe it might hold some truth and what are the lessons that readers can draw for a better interpretation?

That question can be partially explored by examining the Conan Doyle's story, however, before delving into that text, it is critical to understand the factual event on which they were based. Brian Hicks'

2004 exploration of the topic, *Ghost Ship: The Mysterious True Story of the Mary Celeste and her Missing Crew*, contains a thorough attempt to explain the most likely circumstances under which the *Mary Celeste* found itself sailing abandoned and catalogs not only the known details and theories, but also exposes the heavy influence that the Conan Doyle story had on later conspiracy theories and extravagant, unlikely explanations.

The *Mary Celeste* sailed from New York in November of 1872 with a cargo of alcohol destined for Italy. Her captain, Benjamin Spooner Briggs, "thought it safe enough to take along his wife and two-year-old daughter" along with the small crew (7). The ship was found sailing erratically off the coast of the Azores by another ship, the *Dei Gratia.* At first, the crew of the second ship thought that there was a distress flag displayed on the *Mary Celeste*, prompting them to sail closer to investigate. However, on closer inspection it turned out to be the tattered remains of a sail (73). The sight of the torn sail, coupled with the lack of visible crew and the drifting nature of the course was enough for the *Dei Gratia's* captain to decide to investigate aboard. On-board they found a confusing scene: there was no crew, all the hatches were opened, sails had been reefed (some of them torn signaling that the boat had been drifting in this manner for some time), and a few inches of water in the hold, likely from open hatches on deck, but no leaks; despite the minor weathering, the ship was still seaworthy (76-77). Inside the crew's quarters, the passengers' personal effects were still present, signaling that whatever prompted the crew to leave, they must have left in such a hurry as to not take anything with them (78). The ship's log ended on Nov. 24th (ten days earlier) and didn't present anything of interest (78). The ship's galley was found "a mess" but didn't show signs of a struggle—more likely it had just become unkempt during 10 days of drifting in high swells (80). Confusingly, the crew had evidently left their foul-weather gear behind as well and it was unclear how many (if any) lifeboats had been used to abandon the ship: it was hard to say which ropes hanging overboard had come undone during the drifting and which had been lowered on-purpose (80-81). One final detail which did not come out till much later, and which would

figure in many of the subsequent speculations, was that a sword was found below deck after the ship had been salvaged by the *Dei Gratia.* The sword was at first mistakenly identified as having traces of blood which someone had attempted to wipe off (113). This inspired explanation of mutiny or foul-play on the part of the salvaging crew; however, it would later be revealed that what was first assumed to be blood was just rust. Unfortunately, this revelation was not made public, in part because one of the officials, Frederick Flood, who oversaw the salvage proceedings, refused to believe that the crew of the *Dei Gratia* hadn't been involved in the disappearance of those aboard the *Mary Celeste*. In his disappointment with the findings of the forensic report, he left the examining doctor's statement that the stains on the sword were rust sealed (132). This petty and unethical act on Flood's part left a loose thread in the story of the abandoned ship that has persisted to add mystery to retellings as recently as 2015 when an ABC Radio Show on the "The mystery of the Mary Celeste… Solved?" reported "a sword on the deck, as well as what appeared to be bloodstains." (ABC Radiotonic June 25, 2015). This re-telling not only added the blood back but moved the sword from being stored safely below deck, likely unused for years, to being found unsheathed and bloody above deck.

The final detail leading to much speculation on the cause of the abandonment was the fact that nine of the barrels of alcohol onboard were found empty (140). These barrels, marked simply "alcohol", became the source of much confusion as the ambiguous labeling of the contents led many to assume the contents were rum or some other potable form of alcohol. Instead, the contents were pure industrial alcohol, which was poisonous to consume. Confusion about the type of alcohol would lead some to believe that the crew had "gotten into it" and that in a drunken rage, foul-play had ensued. Because there were no survivors, there will never be a verified explanation of what happened aboard the *Mary Celeste*. However, there is a logical and reasonable explanation to what happened based on those nine empty barrels and the other evidence recorded in the official accounts and records. At the

time of the discovery many articles appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, prompting many incorrect theories such as piracy, foul-play.

Before considering some of the better explanations of the events aboard the real *Mary Celeste* shifting to Conan Doyle's fictional account is prudent, so as to compare its plot to the plausible events and see where it is similar and where it embellishes the truth. "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" begins with the basic facts about the *Marie Celeste*, and starts to change the known facts regarding her real counterpart in its first description:

> "In the month of December in the year of 1873 the British ship 'Dei Gratia' steered into Gibraltar, having in tow the derelict brigantine, 'Marie Celeste,' which had been picked up in latitude 38° 40', longitude 17° 15' West." (1)

It is immediately apparent that easily verified details have been altered: the name of the ship, the date on which it was found, and the latitude and longitude are all different from the official record. It would be hard to determine if these changes were intentional, but whether Conan Doyle had access to the previously published details eleven years after their original publication is unknown. While he might have saved newspaper clippings from his fascination as a child, he might have also had to approximate them either from memory or deviated from the true event from a desire to make it clear that this was a fictional account. While his memoirs account for his influences and thoughts on writing, they do not give any detail on the process or motivation behind the changes. Nevertheless, the fact that these verifiable details are presented in error front-and-center should give the reader some pause if they are aware of the historical facts.

The details in the introduction do cover some of the known facts accurately; that the ship had been drifting for up to a few weeks, there was no clear sign of struggle or violence, and that a sword was

found which was originally thought to have traces of blood which had been wiped off[1] (2). The rest of the details are clearly fabricated: the destination of the ship was Lisbon (instead of Italy), the ship was perfectly watertight (as opposed to the state of open hatches), the cargo was "tallow and American clocks" (instead of alcohol) (2). Conan Doyle also added a fabricated detail regarding the real sewing machine which was found onboard:

> "… it may be remarked that a bobbin of silk was found standing upon the sewing-machine, though the least roll of the vessel would have precipitated it to the floor." (2)

This little detail presents the first instance of an almost supernatural nature to the abandonment of the ship. The idea that the precariously placed silk could have remained like that after 10 days at sea without a crew doesn't make much sense, even within the context of the final reveal of the events in Conan Doyle's story. This detail also echoes other embellishments which will be added to the story by other authors which emphasize the impression that the crew and passengers may have vanished instantly due to some otherworldly cause; many of the authors who came after Conan Doyle added details such as meals that were still warm and cups of tea that were still steaming (Hicks, 9).

Shortly after, the narrator states his identity and his reasons for keeping silent for eleven years after the events aboard the *Marie Celeste*:

> "Let me remark, as a preface to my narrative, that I am Joseph Habakuk Jephson, Doctor of Medicine of the University of Harvard, and ex-Consulting Physician of the Samaritan Hospital of Brooklyn." (3)

As with most of the details surrounding the real events, the details of Jephson's background are specific enough that they can be proved to be fabricated. However, to the average reader who did not want to

[1] Conan Doyle's version also mentions that the blood had been sent for analysis, but the report had not been published.

take the time to check with Harvard University for verification, such credentials so clearly stated would add to the reliability of the narrator and ground his sophisticated voice as a character that might be taken as face value. Jephson then goes on to explain why he has been silent for so long: his attempts to tell his story to officials and his family have been met with either "offensive incredulity" or condescending "humouring the delusions of a monomaniac" (3-4). In his frustration, Jephson has decided to write his account for posterity and as such, this sets the stage for an incredible story. Jephson continues to provide additional details of his background as a Civil War veteran of the Northern states and a fervent abolitionist with many published anti-slavery materials (4).

Jephson goes on to speak of his battle experience including Bull's Run, Gettysburg, and finally Antietam, where he is gravely wounded and is forced to recover at the plantation of a slave-owner named Murray (4). It is at this plantation where Jephson tells a seemingly unrelated vignette about being gifted a strange, ear-shaped carved stone by an old slave woman who is grateful for Jephson's treatment of her and seeing him as someone, "who write books and fight for coloured folk – he must be good man and he shall have it though he is white man and nebber can know what it means or where it came from" (4-6). Jephson seems to regard the stone as a lucky talisman, but at this point in the story, it remains an unrelated detail.

Jephson then relates the slow recovery of his war-wound and how, upon being examined further after the war, received the recommendation from a doctor that he should take a sea voyage as treatment for a left lung "in a state of consolidation" (7). Whether this course of treatment seems legitimate or not, the concept of "fresh air" being therapeutic sounds plausible for medical recommendations of the time and readers of the story would not necessarily questioned the decision on Jephson's part to take to a transatlantic voyage for "health" reasons (Conan Doyle, 9). Still, there remains the verifiable fact that the real *Mary Celeste* had been refitted to be primarily a cargo vessel, without extra cabins as described by Jephson for common passengers (Hicks, 48-49). Jephson also

describes his first encounter with the pivotal character of Mr. Septimius Goring, of New Orleans, a bi-racial man with a mutilated hand (Conan Doyle, 8).

The narrative then becomes a transcription which Jephson tells us is from a diary which he kept while on board during the voyage. This, he assures the reader, will be useful in keeping the details as close to veracity as possible as it was presumably written shortly after events happened aboard the ship (9). Anyone familiar with Sherlock Holmes will recognize similarities in the structure of the story that unfolds onboard the *Marie Celeste*; Jephson describes numerous unexplained accidents and as the mysteries aboard compound, the tone slowly turns into horror. Jephson notes that aside from Mr. Goring, there are several crewmembers who are of African descent, including the cook, a couple of the sailors, and Mr. Goring's young servant (10). This detail in and of itself isn't strange but sets a tone when Jephson notices that Mr. Goring frequently seems to have conversations with them. Jephson notes:

> "I observe that Goring frequently talks wo the coloured seamen as he strolls about – a trait which I rather admire, as it is common to find half-breeds ignore their dark strain and treat their black kinsfolk with greater intolerance than a white man would do. His little page is devoted to him, apparently, which speaks well for his treatment of him." (12).

These conversations will be revealed later to be critical to the final reveal of what has been transpiring aboard and are ironically juxtaposed against Jephson's self-identification as a champion of abolition. Racial tension is further alluded to when the captain's complaints about the chronometers (critical to proper navigation at the time) appear to have been tampered with and are out of synchronization: Jephson tells us in the same description that the "dark seamen have proved, as the skipper prophesied, to be very inferior hands…" (12). By linking these two statements, the seed of blame is implied if not stated outright.

Jephson recounts Goring's suspicious behavior: at times he appears to observe Jephson in an unsettling way, hardly speaking, and additionally keeps his own charts and navigation equipment in his

cabin, which Jephson can see through cracks in the wall (13). Distrust of Goring escalates when he almost kills Jephson "accidentally" while cleaning his gun. Goring's misfire hits right where Jephson's head would have been in his bed if he had been in the cabin. Luckily, Jephson had gone up deck for fresh air when the gun fired and after running below at the sound of the shot, describes Goring as being in a state of surprise at seeing him, again implying that Goring's misfire was on purpose (14).

The dubious accident gives way to real horror when it is discovered that the captain's wife and child have disappeared from the ship. The frantic captain and the rest of the passengers comb every inch of the ship to no avail, and the crew member who was at the helm at the time of the disappearance, who also happens to be one of the African sailors, said he didn't see anything (14-15). Jephson proves himself no Sherlock Holmes, concluding that the wife had fallen into the ocean after trying to reach for her child who had themselves fallen overboard (14-15). To make matters worse, Jephson decides to give the captain laudanum to help with his grief, only to find him shot in the head in an apparent suicide (15). The circumstances of the supposed suicide, where Jephson arrives to find Goring already in the room, but does not suspect foul-play, further underscore the unrealistic aspects of the story. The captain's body is buried at sea with the first mate taking his cabin amidst feelings that the ship is cursed or haunted (16).

As strange accidents and clues continue to mount, there is an ironic moment when the first mate, Harton, reveals a theory about Goring: based on finding a scrapbook in his cabin filled with clippings regarding murders all over the United States, the sailor surmises that Goring is a detective on the hunt of a serial killer whom he has traced to Portugal. Harton believes that by travelling on a smaller vessel, Goring hopes to arrive unnoticed in Portugal and catch the criminal with his guard down (17). Jephson's naiveté continues as he awakens to find Goring in his cabin leering over him in a description which makes him seem almost vampiric; Goring explains when caught that he has a toothache and was searching for laudanum since he knew Jephson had the opiate (18-19). Jephson's reaction in this case

adds to the racial tension that Conan Doyle is building by stating that he felt “ashamed” for suspecting that Goring was in the cabin for any other reason.

The relationship between Goring and the African crew takes a strange turn when the flat, ear-shaped talisman which Jephson carries reappears in the story. Goring seems exceptionally interested in the talisman and when he shows it to the other crew members they have an intense reaction to his attempt to throw it overboard (20). Until this moment, it appears the crew of African descent and Goring were working together, but in his attempt to drop the stone off the side of the ship, the other crew physically stop him and make him return the stone to Jephson. This strange exchange gives way to several days of calm sailing, the only unusual detail of which is that the weather appears to be much warmer than Jephson expected for their destination (21-22).

At this point in the story, the journal entries end and Jephson states that the ship has arrived at Cape Blanco in West Africa to the surprise of everyone, including the first mate who cannot understand how the ship’s instruments have misled him (22). From here the first reveal is made that Goring has been in command of the African crew and has slowly done away with the other passengers one by one, culminating in his final murder of the first mate. Additionally, Goring has been secretly altering the ship’s course with the aim of bringing them to the edge of the Saharan desert where they are met by an African tribe with which Goring seems to have some sort of relationship (23-24). It is then revealed that Jephson has been spared by the others because of the ear-shaped stone, which the African tribe believes has some great significance (25). After realizing that he is at the tribe’s mercy and that they have overridden Goring’s decision to kill him, he is taken before a statue in the village from which it appears that the ear was broken off. As the statue’s ear is restored, Jephson states that,

> “I found myself converted from a prisoner into a demi-god, I was escorted back through the town in triumph, the people pressing forward to touch my clothing and to gather up the dust on which my foot had trod.” (27)

The story's finale is as ludicrous as it is dramatic. Goring reveals his master plan of racial revenge: to kill as many white people as he could, culminating in the white crew and passengers aboard the *Marie Celeste.* He further explains that he has been killing white people in the United States over twenty years, but that he has reached an impasse upon realizing that, "There is no satisfaction in revenge when your enemy does not know who has struck him" (30). As a result, he sought to make the *Marie Celeste* his final act and return to this tribe in Africa and be their king. The ear-talisman, however, introduced a complication in his plan as it is the object of a prophecy which the tribe believes: broken off long ago by a splinter group, they believe that one day the ear would be returned to them and in doing so Jephson has distracted the tribe from Goring's "achievements" in the United States (29). Since Goring can't afford to anger the tribe by killing Jephson, he makes him the deal that he will help him escape on the condition that,

> "carry a message back… to the white race, the great dominating race whom I hate and defy. Tell them that I have battened on their blood for twenty years, that I have slain them until even I became tired of what had once been joy, that I did this unnoticed and unsuspected in the face of every precaution which their civilization could suggest" (30).

Jephson is then placed on a small boat, which is assumed not to be the *Marie Celeste*, and set to sail to the Canary Islands[2], a journey which Jephson describes only as "solitary" (32).

The dramatic ending of the story, the reveal of the cause of the mystery, remains unsatisfying when compared to the obvious questions about how it relates back to the real *Mary Celeste*. On the most basic level, the story does not account for how the *Marie Celeste* was found sailing back near the Azores, something which does not make sense in the context of the real event if it were to be a

[2] Mapping the distance between the present-day Cape Blanco in West Africa and the capital of the Canary Islands, the distance appears to be a little over 500 miles.

recollection of how the crew disappeared. Ideologically, the story devolves into racist propaganda, without any connection to the actual event. Still, the popularity of Conan Doyle's version has rendered it almost inseparable from the historical event, and as a result, the reasons for its influence and the implications of how the work was received must be studied to understand the role that fiction takes in influencing subsequent perception of history.

Reception of Conan Doyle's story goes beyond the financial and reputational success that he mentions in his autobiography. Just a few years after its publication, the Boston Herald cribbed the plot of the story and re-printed it as fact in their newspaper. The article titled "STRANGE TALE OF THE SEA. Remarkable Voyage of the Brig Marie Celeste. A Missing Crew and What Became of Them. A Mystery Explained After Many Years." was printed on Friday, April 3, 1885, just over a year after the January 1884 publication of the Conan Doyle story. The article clearly bases the "facts" on the altered version created by Conan Doyle, changing the name, cargo, and asserting that J. Habakuk Jephson was a real person and reliable narrator. It starts with a summary of the details of the ship, but then shifts to a direct reprinting of the Conan Doyle story as a first-person narrative, using the literary device of presenting it as a diary. Aside from the beginning, which is re-written to appear like a news article, a majority of the text is taken straight from the Cornhill Magazine, which is clearly stated as being the original source of the story. The unbelievable nature of the plot did not seem to set off any warnings in those responsible for the re-purposing of Conan Doyle's tale in a legitimate newspaper, as nonfiction.

Strangely enough, the convoluted relationship between Conan Doyle and the *Mary Celeste* continued in an almost comical dance. On November 23rd, 1913, another similar article appeared in the Boston Sunday Post titled, "MARIE CELESTE MYSTERY IS ENDED AFTER MANY YEARS" with the sub-heading stating, "Captain's Mind Broke Down and He Started Strange Swimming Test. Long a Secret of the Sea, Survivor's Diary Reveals Weird Explanation" (42). The half a page article recounts a suspiciously similar, but much shorter, explanation which states an unlikely scenario where the captain, due mostly

because of lack of sleep, made several poor decisions including a strange, clothes swimming test to prove he could swim while dressed. In addition, the rest of the passengers fell into the water while leaning on the poorly constructed on-deck crib that had been fashioned to keep the captain's daughter safe. The article is presented as being a real diary and though it is qualified as being only as true as the survivor states, it does have several strange similarities to Conan Doyle's story. The narrative style of the diary, the presence of the fictionalized name of *Marie Celeste*, and the fact that the lone survivor makes his way to Africa, all seem oddly to call back to Conan Doyle's version. Additionally, the newspaper states that the story's original source is the December issue of *The Strand* magazine, which like the *Cornhill Magazine* was primarily fiction. Searching the original source (the July - December 1913 volume of *The Strand*), once again reveals that the article in question has been misrepresented entirely by the newspaper. Titled "The Greatest Mystery of the Sea: Can you solve it?" the introduction reads as follows:

> The greatest mystery of the sea is, of course, the case of the *Marie Celeste*, which has defied all attempts at a solution for forty years. Nevertheless, some solution there must be, and it has occurred to us to reprint the story (from the *Nautical Magazine)* and to invite eminent writers, who are celebrated for their ingenuity in disentangling mysteries, to suggest solutions. We have the pleasure in publishing most ingenious conjectures by Sir A. Conan Doyle, Mr. Arthur Morrison, Mr. Barry Pain, Mr. Morely Roberts, and Mr. Horace Annesley Vachell. It is possible that the explanation of this strange mystery is really quite simple, and if some plausible solution should ever occur to any of our readers we shall be very glad to hear from them, and to publish and pay for anything we may decide to use. (50)

Astoundingly, not only are the contents of the explanations that follow clearly identified as being "ingenious conjectures," they include an excerpt from "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" unambiguously presented as being a fictional musing (55). The article that was quoted by the Boston newspaper is not among these musing but appears later in the same issue as a standalone work, almost mimicking the Conan Doyle version in that it is presented without framing (485-500). In this version the

account is much longer, and like the Conan Doyle story, presents itself as the first-hand diary and narrative of what happened aboard the ship (which the newspaper likewise altered to appear like a legitimate news piece). Including this collection of theories in this issue, which also contains several other Sherlock Holmes stories by the (now famous) Conan Doyle, points perhaps to a tongue-in-cheek link between the original publication of the Conan Doyle story and this firsthand account which was simultaneously picked up by the Boston newspaper as being "true." Could the editors of The Strand have done this on purpose as a reminder or homage to what happened to Conan Doyle's story over a decade before? While it would be hard to prove, the coincidence is at least amusing if not too "on the nose." Regardless, it is important to consider the inherent danger in the decision of publishing a sensational story rather than an accurate one; whether those responsible for this decision were playing a literary practical joke or not, there is an inseparable financial motivation in publishing a fantastic solution to a decades old mystery that would doubtless sell more papers.

As mentioned before, a real, plausible explanation has developed over the years for what happened on the *Mary Celeste*. Though it has appeared in many sources, Brian Hicks' version stands as a good summary. In short: the nine barrels of alcohol which were found empty are to blame. This theory suggests that these nine barrels have either been improperly sealed or became unsealed during the voyage. The resulting toxic fumes caused the crew to be driven above deck, where still affected by the fumes, they made the poor decision to lower themselves into one of the life rafts and be towed behind the ship while the alcohol evaporated. Because of either a faulty line, or a sudden surge in the waters, the rope by which the lifeboat was attached to the *Mary Celeste* snapped and thus the entirely of the crew was set adrift (241-245).

It is important to note that this explanation, which is arguably more plausible than the racist panic portrayed in the Conan Doyle story, has not been verified either. Furthermore, it is not without issue itself: the idea that the alcohol would have quickly evaporated while they were in the lifeboat,

without much—if any—provisions, doesn't quite make sense and leaves many questions unanswered: how long were they planning on staying in the ship, why didn't they tie the boat more securely, etc.? Still, without a real witness to account for the events onboard, this explanation stands as a reasonable attempt to piece together the evidence provided by the actual historical account. Herein lies the strange juxtaposition between the *Mary Celeste* and the *Marie Celeste*: despite the facts which are and have been available since the historical event took place, readers have treated both the fictional and nonfiction accounts of the events with equal consideration. It is difficult to find accounts of the event which have not been influenced in some way by the Conan Doyle fictionalization; this points to the strong force of gravitation that pulls readers towards the sensational, thus resulting in being misled or misinterpreting a text if its framing is unclear.

"J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" is unambiguous as to its origin, authorship, and relation to the truth. Still, it has been pondered over because of its proximity to a factual event since its publication. As a result, the plausible explanation that the crew of the *Mary Celeste* made a fatal miscalculation in judgement about how to deal with an unforeseen problem aboard the ship has been overshadowed by Conan Doyle's fantastic account. The details from that version bled into subsequent embellishments featuring pirates, the Bermuda Triangle, UFOs, and other supernatural explanations. As a result, Conan Doyle's version stands as a reminder of the skepticism with which a reader must approach any text which begins with an assertion of being non-fiction, lest they risk missing the true relationship, if any, between the work they are considering and the actual events.

Chapter 3:

Spaceships

The meandering path which link up the original events concerning the ghost ships *Mary Celeste* and *Marie Celeste* to Conan Doyle's fictitious representation and to the endless retellings of the story, each embellishing the details and adding layers of mystery is not unique. It is symptomatic of a larger problem pertaining to the relationship between a historically verifiable event and a fictional embellishment which blurs the lines between the different genres. Joan Fontcuberta, a Catalan artist and photographer, has made a career of focusing on that blur. Unlike Conan Doyle's story, which was presented in a fiction magazine, but was misinterpreted repeatedly to be real, Fontcuberta has consistently presented his works as purposely vague in terms of their relationship to fact and fiction, referencing real events in an effort to bring attention to the assumption of trust with which the reader approaches a text and the ease with which that assumption can be taken off course by a carefully fabricated text. Fontcuberta, who sometimes is elusive in his "persona" but also playful and tongue-in-cheek, is fully aware that layering the fabrication of his own works entails that the "joke" is not just the fabrication of the subject-matter, but also its carefully crafted presentation as non-fiction, reception, and impact. Fontcuberta's work will also challenge the categorization of "hoax" by clearly stating its purpose to challenge the reader in clues, placed cleverly in plain sight, but which only the "active" reader will notice.

Though Fontcuberta has produced fictionalized accounts of many subjects, it is the lost cosmonaut Ivan Istochnikov described in his 1997 book *Sputnik* best parallels many of the issues present in the Conan Doyle story. Similarly to Conan Doyle, Fontcuberta did not create his protagonist in a

vacuum; the inspiration for this fictional astronaut stemmed from the Soviet Space program which manipulated fabricated narratives, propaganda, and false claims by the official channels. By examining the true events, coverups, conspiracy theories, and false narratives, it is possible to see the sources from both the original pioneering space exploration of the 1950s and 60s, as well as the modern conspiracy-laden stories from which Fontcuberta likely drew inspiration.

James Oberg, an American journalist specializing in the era of space exploration, tackles the question of propaganda by means of fabricated narrative in his 1988 book *Uncovering Soviet Disasters*, which contrasts "official" accounts of certain events with verifiable facts obtained mostly after the fall of the Soviet Union. Oberg opens his analysis with a quote from a prominent Soviet dissident, Vladimir Bukovsky,

> It is a basic tenant of the Soviet propaganda: Nothing bad of the sort you see in the newsreels about the United States or anywhere else could ever happen in the Soviet Union. (xiiv)

Oberg's thesis reads as follows: the propagandized narrative of the Soviet Union was deeply ingrained into every aspect of the internal and external presentation of "facts." Even into the 80s, news of a negative nature was hard to come by and seemed corroborated from alternate sources rather than official statements from the Soviet state. Oberg reports that in the early 70s journalist Robert Kaiser compiled a list of "forbidden topics" which included:

- Information about the organs of Soviet censorship which discloses the character, organization, and method of their work
- The amount of crime, the number of people engaged in criminal behavior, the number arrested, the number convicted
- Information about the existence of correctional labor camps
- Facts about the physical condition, illness, and death raters of all prisoners in all localities
- Reports about the victims of accidents, wrecks, and fires
- Information about the consequences of catastrophic earth-quakes, tidal waves, floods, and other natural calamities

- Information suggesting low moral-political conditions of the armed forces, unsatisfactory military discipline, abnormal relations among soldiers or between them and the population
- Information about occupational injuries (XVI)

This list presents the practices of secrecy and censorship surrounded the Russian space program, which provided inspiration for Foncuberta's *Sputnik*.

Oberg covers several topics in his book including natural and industrial disasters; tellingly, he devotes three of his chapters to space-related incidents and cover-ups. Oberg is careful to pick apart the verifiable facts from the conspiracy theories which stem from the secrecy and propaganda of the time. Once the underlying practice by the Soviets of editing, omitting, or fabricating the facts became apparent to journalists such as Oberg in the last staged of the former Soviet Union, it led to a general distrust of the "official narrative" being provided and opened the door to speculation and conspiracy theories. The practice of "erasing" a person from the official records literally entailed individuals being air-brushed out of official photos. The practice became noticeable during the Stalinist regime when individuals falling out of favor were noticed by Western journalists to be missing from official pictures and portraits, a practice that would continue through the "Space Race."

Oberg's work into the separation between truth and fiction is critical to this topic because it traces back when the conspiracy theories surrounding the Soviet space program were flourishing. Oberg reports that in his earlier research he examined numerous claims made of "lost cosmonauts":

> By 1973 I had compiled an imposing list of rumors about missing cosmonauts:
>
> Cosmonaut Lodovsky was killed in 1957 on a suborbital space hop from the Kapustin Yar rocket base on the Volga River.
>
> Cosmonaut Shiborin died the following year the same way.
>
> Cosmonaut Mitkov lost his life on the third attempt in 1959.
>
> An unnamed cosmonaut was trapped in space in May 1960, when his orbiting space capsule headed in the wrong direction.

> In late September 1960, while Khrushchev pounded his shoe at the United Nations, another cosmonaut (sometimes identified as Pytor Dolgov) was killed when his rocket blew up on the launchpad.
>
> On February 4, 1961, a mystery Soviet satellite was heard to be transmitting heartbeats, which soon stopped (some reports even described it as a two-man capsule, and several "missing cosmonauts" were listed as Belokonev, Kachur, and Grachev).
>
> Early in April 1961 Russian pilot Vladimir Ilyushin circled the earth three times but was badly injured on this return.
>
> In mid-May 1961, weak calls for help were picked up in Europe evidently from an orbiting spacecraft with two cosmonauts aboard.
>
> On October 14, 1961, a multiman Soviet spacecraft was knocked off course by a solar flare and vanished into deep space.
>
> Radio trackers in Italy detected a fatal space mission in November 1962, and some believe that a cosmonaut named Belokonev died at the time.
>
> An attempt to launch a second woman into space ended tragically on November 19, 1963.
>
> One or more cosmonauts were killed during an unsuccessful space mission in April 1964, according to radio intercepts by Italian Shortwave listeners.
>
> Following the Apollo 1 fire in 1967 which killed three American astronauts, U.S. intelligence sources reportedly described five fatal soviet spaceflight and six fata ground accidents. (162-163)

Oberg's own speculation that "where there is smoke there is fire" was proven surprisingly incorrect when none of these stories turned out to carry any factual evidence to support them. The importance of Oberg's work lies in the careful examination of incidents which are plausible based on some evidence, but which do not hold up to the scrutiny after further investigation. Soviet propaganda and secrecy is a fact, but despite the evidence of constructed narrative, such as cosmonauts being airbrushed out of photos, or re-assigned to dead end position, it is important to avoid assuming that every improbable claim lacks veracity. Two articles were published in the New York Times Feb 5th (54) and August 7th (7) 1961 reporting on the Judica-Cordiglia brothers, from Turin, Italy, who claimed to have intercepted horrifying communications from spaceships burning up in the atmosphere where they could hear the

heartbeats of unconscious cosmonauts marooned in space. The Judica-Cordiglia brothers' dubious claims made enough of an impact to be denounced publicly (New York Times on April 8th, 1965) (3) as "'concoction' and 'wild invention'" by the commander of the Soviet cosmonaut unit. The tension between the verifiably altered narrative and the conspiracy theories can be seen in the persistence of these stories; the claims of "lost cosmonauts" continue to be spread to this day. Fontcuberta draws directly from this tension for his *Sputnik*.

Unlike Oberg's extensive list of non-existent missing cosmonauts, true deception is attested in the case of the most famous Russian cosmonaut, the first man to orbit the Earth, Yuri Gagarin. James Doran and Piers Bizony wrote a comprehensive biography of Gagarin bringing evidence for the paranoia and propaganda around the Soviet space program. In the foreword to their biography, they note that, research into the topic of Gagarin met resistance even in the post-Soviet era, likely stemming from the fear of state-controlled "truth":

> I discovered that – even after all these years – many people who worked alongside Gagarin at the height of the Soviet space effort in the 1960s were unwilling to discuss their experiences, or to share their memories of the man himself. They were still afraid, I think, that some anonymous squad of the men in heavy overcoats might turn up at their apartments in the early hours of the morning to arrest them for speaking out of turn. (2-3)

More importantly, the underlying significance of this paranoia is that the memories of the people will differ from the "official" accounts. This contrast between the actual events and the state-sponsored "truth" behind the scenes is a theme that recurs throughout Yuri's career as a cosmonaut.

The comparison between the real Yuri Gagarin and Fontcuberta's fictional Ivan Istochnikov is made evident throughout not only the descriptions of the space-race related matters, but also in their biographies. As I will demonstrate in my analysis of *Sputnik*, Gagarin is described by Doran and Bizony as coming from humble beginnings on a farm west of Moscow, living a very modest life of a country boy

(11-12). The arrival of the Nazis in WWII adds a tone of extreme patriotism to the narrative when the young Gagarin and his brothers witness a wounded Russian officer heroically blow themselves up with a grenade in order to kill several German officers (13). This incident inspired the brothers to become saboteurs, using their perceived innocence as children to camouflage their guerilla tactics against the Nazis at every turn (14-19). After the war, Gagarin's interests shift, and he is described as being obsessed with aeronautics (20-22). These heroic actions and early interest in aviation will be fictionalized in Fontcuberta's description of Istochnikov as will be seen in the close reading later in this chapter.

The space race between the United States and the Soviets prompted a higher level of risk-taking rhetoric serving as the backdrop to the danger present in both programs—in the Soviet case mostly hidden behind propaganda). Descriptions of the conditions at the launch sites are terrifyingly unsafe and erratic; fuel leaks, accidents, fires, engineering mishaps, communication errors resulting in injuries and deaths, all the while inspiring terror in the technical and flight staff of the possible retribution for causing a delay or even suggesting a postponement (63). The focus on Soviet superiority across the board prompted boasts from Nikita Khrushchev that, "We're turning out missiles like sausages from a machine!" His exaggerated statements implying the ease with which they were producing their rockets contrasts sharply with the explosions at the launch sites at the cost of the lives of dozens of technicians (63). These accidents would not be made public "to the West" for thirty years; Valentine Bondarenko, one of the younger cosmonauts, died of injuries suffered during a test when a fire broke out in the pressurized chamber and left him with burns all over his body, a fact that would not become public till 1986 (64-65).

Echoing Fontcuberta's work, is the conspiracy theory that there was a pre-Gagarian manned space flight which ended in the death of a cosmonaut. The details of the story are as strange as they are

amusing: one month ahead of the 1961 Gagarin flight, Ivan Ivanovich was launched in a nearly identical craft;

> He flew his Vostok well, and took time to send some radio messages back home, although his observations about space were somewhat strange. In fact, he relayed instructions for making soup: *schi* (cabbage soup) and *borscht* with beetroot and sour cream. The exact details of the recipe are now lost, but it seems to have been a deliberate attempt to confuse any Western listening posts monitoring the flight.
>
> Ivan's descent and landing caused great anxiety for witnesses on the ground. Local villagers saw him come down under his own parachute[3], and they decided that something did not look quite right. The instant Ivan's feet touched the ground he fell over, apparently unconscious. Naturally the villagers ran over to help, but a cordon of troops quickly surrounded he cosmonaut's prostrate body. The soldiers made no effort to help but simply stood around him as if to let him die.
>
> In recent times, a sort of Russian 'Roswell' legend has attached itself to this accident. An unacknowledged cosmonaut went up before Yuri Gagarin and was killed during the return phase… (75).

This last assessment is particularly telling as it circles back to the contrast between Conan Doyle's *Marie Celeste* and the *Mary Celeste*. This is an account which is composed of verifiable details pointing to an incomplete account, begging for an explanation. The details in the supposed launch of Ivan Ivanovich are corroborated by other sources: Western listening posts did pick up the transmissions of soup recipes, the villagers did indeed witness the landing, and the cosmonaut did topple over motionless when he struck the ground. However, there are other details—often omitted from the account—pointing to the real explanation of the event. In addition to the recipes for soup, a choir was heard singing. Furthermore, the word "Maket" (Russian for Dummy) was printed visibly on the visor, as well as the name Ivan Ivanovich being equated to "John Doe" in Russian (76). It would later be confirmed that the dummy used for the pre-flight tests was designed to closely resemble a real person and the recordings

[3] Unlike the American space program, many Soviet missions descended on land, requiring cosmonauts to sometimes eject from the capsules and land separately with parachutes as opposed to the water-landings where astronauts remained inside the space-capsules.

used to test the transmission of the human voice just a combination of random sound-clips, the choir chosen specifically to make it clear that it was a recording, "because nobody would ever think we'd launched an entire coir into space… (76-77)." Still, the persistence of the conspiracy theory that there were one, or more failed attempts to put a cosmonaut in orbit before Gagarin, points to the ease with which a false narrative can take hold in the popular culture surrounding a real event. Suppressed deaths like Bondarenko's give an air of possibility to other stories when they surface and point to cover-ups. Thus, when Fontcuberta presents "new evidence" in *Sputnik*, it is not far-fetched to approach the claim with the possibility that it might be true.

Similarly, there are verifiable sources for cosmonauts being "erased" from official records like politicians were under Stalin. Grigory Nelyubov was amongst several cosmonauts who were dismissed and air-brushed from pictures of the core cosmonaut team. Unlike the conspiracy theories, the mundane reason behind their dismissal was simply bad behavior; a drunken brawl with a military patrol on a railway platform embarrassed the program and when Nelyubov refused to apologize, he and several others involved were dismissed and reassigned to far away posts to effectively make them "disappear" (98-99). The Soviet propaganda machine sought to ensure that the embarrassment was never made public and Nelyubov was assigned to a remote air station to fly patrols in fighter jets. The "erasure" of Nelyubov was so effective that he was unable to convince his new peers that he was ever part of the cosmonaut program; in a depressed state, he committed suicide by throwing himself under a train (99).

This verifiable incident of cosmonauts being removed from the program and subsequently "erased" from the official narrative, reinforces the fundamental preoccupation of the Soviet space program with positive image over accurate reportage. This preoccupation permeated their decision-making process when it came to the activities of the cosmonauts. Unlike the American space program astronauts, who continued to be active pilots in both aircraft and spacecraft, the Soviet pilots' risk was

minimized after joining the program to help avoid putting their lives at risk any more than the actual launches did (which in retrospect was considerable). Contrasting the active flight status of the American program, Doran and Bizony highlight that Soviets valued their cosmonauts more as symbols of the narrative of space superiority than as active, skilled pilots (208-210). This shielding of the cosmonauts from active flight duties factors into the controversial and equally murky details surrounding Gagarin's death years later when he insisted on reinstating himself as an active jet pilot.

Gagarin had been paraded across the world as the symbol of the success of the cosmonaut program, but privately his lack of hands-on involvement is proposed as one of the reasons that he began to crave a return to active piloting. Blame for the crash that killed him is spread across many targets, some pointing to deficient radar technology available to the Soviets, other to Gagarin's own rusty skills, rumors of one or both pilots having been hung-over, or even the accident having been a state-sponsored murder orchestrated to prevent potentially embarrassing behavior to become public and tarnish his worldwide reputation (228-233). Still, the fact that the possible explanations for the accident are so broad and disparate makes Gagarin's early death ironic when contrasted amongst so many altered narratives and conspiracy theories. The idea that so celebrated a pilot could die in a relatively simple accident after risking their life in the most meaningful milestones of space exploration deeply mirrors this constructed narrative, lampooned by Fontcuberta in his version of the "lost cosmonaut."

The backdrop of constructed narrative, cover-up, conspiracy, and later discovery of the "truth," is powerfully echoed in Fontuberta's complex construction of historical sources with supporting visual and physical evidence. *Sputnik*'s cover is a collage of photographs: a rocket launch, the Earth as seen from a lunar landscape, and the smiling face of a cosmonaut in a spacesuit. "Sputnik" is spelled out on the side and spine in both Russian and the primary language of the edition.[4] The Spanish edition of the

[4] English/Spanish "SPUTNIK" v. Japanese version which is "スプトニック"

book is divided into thirteen chapters including a fourteenth appendix with an English translation of all the text.[5] The chapters are attributed to different authors/contributors, some of which are listed as members of the "Sputnik Foundation" which is said in the text to be responsible for the investigation and presentation of the "discovery." Still, there are no statements as to the specific credentials of the "authors" of each chapter. Searching online records reveals the names may match real individuals, but there is missing correlation between the work of the verifiable person and the supposed author of the chapters in *Sputnik.* The forward ("Presentation") to the work is attributed to I. Ishi-Kawa. The closest match found was Kenichi L. Ishikawa, Professor of Engineering at the University of Tokyo, specializing in nuclear engineering. The introduction is attributed to Olga Kondakova, who is also identified as the Director of the Sputnik Foundation. There are several academics by that name, but none of them seem to relate directly back to the Sputnik Foundation. Similarly, Michael Arena and Piotr Muraveinik, to whom several chapters are attributed, are hard to pin down without direct reference to Fontcuberta's work.

Ishi-Kawa's "presentation" is a direct callback to the state-crafted stories of Gagarin and the cosmonauts who were (and weren't) erased from history. The text refers to the uncovering of Istochnikov hidden past as being "… rescued from the underworld of 'Reasons of State'" (210). This is also coupled with the statement highlighting the importance to, "… check the nation's History every now and again, verify the facts and discover to what extent they may have been manipulated" (210). The forward ends with a direct challenge of what will follow; a riddle which does not directly reveal the levels to which it is ironically calling its own relationship with truth:

> For there is such a small margin between truth and the appearance of truth that sceptics (and unscrupulous individuals) believe that it is generally impossible to tell them apart, and that this margin cannot be seen, or worse, does not exist. All one has to do is use the right sense to perceive it. Or, in the words of Saint-Exupery: "C'est très

[5] For the purpose of this thesis, the English translation is used to simplify the approach to the text.

> simple: on ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux." (210)

The juxtaposition between the fabricated "State" narrative and the "truth" is doubled over in this quote. The plausibility that the contents within the work reference a real cosmonaut that was "erased from history" by the Soviet state is plausible, and yet it is unclear whether the statements in this section are asking the reader to apply skepticism to Istochnikov's story or to its absence from the official record. The introduction to follow reads very similarly to Oberg's discussion of the wealth of information that became available after the fall of the Soviet Union. The Director of the Sputnik Foundation credits *perestroika* and *glasnost* for the sudden "[freeing] from strict restrictions" which previously existed and making direct reference to the secrecy and propagandized narrative which previously existed (211-212). The introduction further validates its accuracy by providing a list of sources (museums and archives) for the previously unavailable information about cosmonauts and highlights the purpose of the book (as an accompanying piece to a physical exhibit) to "rehabilitate the name of Colonel Istochnikov" (212).

From these introductions, which highlight the themes of altered truth, the narrative presented seems to tell the story of how the hidden past of Istochnikov was discovered. Michael Arena, described as a member of the Smithsonian Institute and the National Air and Space Museum[6] recounts how he happened upon the trail during an auction of Soviet-era cosmonaut memorabilia (213-214)[7]. Arena provides an amusing list of items for sale from the impressive (a cosmonaut suit) to the ridiculous (a bag used for urine collection while in orbit) (214). Arena's own purchase, a collection of documents and photos from a lesser-known member of the Soviet space program, is claimed to have been purchased

[6] Contact with an archivist at the Smithsonian Institute confirmed their inability to verify that there was ever someone named Michael Arena associated with the S.I. or The N.A.S.M. In retrospect, it is absurd to consider that a member of those organizations would lend their name to this work as it would potentially damage their professional reputation.

[7] This auction was a real event taking place in Dec. of 1993. Descriptions of the items available in the NYT article speak of similar listings, though the urine bottle which Arena claims to have been in the listings is not mentioned.

without competition; adding an air of luck and mystery to the discovery which will come later (214). Arena describes the collection as mostly unexciting: preparatory notes and a few photographs, which he admits might have been just as easily discarded if they had not been associated with the space-program (215). Amongst these, however, is one photo which he remembers from a previous publication and upon checking the book in question, he discovers that one of the figures in the photo which he purchased has been air-brushed out of the version in the book (215). Arena immediately makes the connection to the known practice of airbrushing individuals from photos which has been previously discussed and begins the process of investigating the missing figure in the photograph, Istochnikov (215). After a series of failed attempts, he is finally able to confirm his suspicions from Piotr Muraveinik (also credited with several chapters of the book) who recounts the story of the tragic space-flight which ended with the loss of Istochnikov and the subsequent cover-up that claimed that the Soyuz 2 he flew had been unmanned (215-216). Arena goes on to make the comparison between Istochnikov's story and the real events such as those in Oberg's book on Soviet disasters (216). The mixture of Istochnikov's story with others which have been verified historically is a key detail, as it raises the legitimacy of the story told in *Sputnik* to the level of works by Oberg, Doran, and Bizony. A reader comparing the texts of these three books at the same time would be hard pressed to doubt that they belonged next to each other on a library shelf. This said, when Arena speaks of his motivations for "restoring" Istochnikov's story, he ends his remarks with the idea of selling the story:

> The truth is that, I was so convinced of the literary, cinematographic, scientific, etc., news value of "our" Istochnikov's that for a few moments I was tempted to offer the story to Spielberg and Lucas; better still, my mouth watered just thinking about the episode of the "X-Files" that Chris Carter could make with this story. Because there is still a large amount of enigma that has not been cleared up at the bottom of this tragedy, an enigma that might end by producing glimpses of reality at 3001: the last odyssey by Arthur C. Clarke: The astronaut Frank Pool was lost in space because of a flaw in his super-computer Hal, but a millennium later his body is discovered, perfectly preserved, and he is able to be reanimated. If we could find and reanimate Istochnikov, what

> would he tell us? What follows should be understood as an approximate answer (217).

This bizarre side-step to his motivations provides the reader with clues about the story which is told in subsequent chapters. While Spielberg has produced numerous works which are based in reality, his pairing with Lucas, Carter, and Clarke clearly favors the realm of science fiction. The proximity that Arena's motivations hold to monetary matters seems out of character for a person who was supposedly involved in the National Air and Space Museum and the Smithsonian institute and wants to reveal a significant historical moment heretofore has been lost.

The chapter titled "Episodes in a Life Devoted to Space" attributed to Piotr Muraveinik read suspiciously like Doran and Bizony's biography of Gagarin discussed previously. Istochnikov's teen years as a saboteur of Nazi tanks (217) are too similar to stories from Gagarin's similar childhood not to be a direct reference. Istochnikov's biographical details tell the same story of a Russian hero from humble beginnings who was obsessed with flying and would go on to become a trail-blazer in the cosmonaut program (217-222). Fontcuberta bolsters the credibility of the biography with amusing photos such as Istochnikov's childhood drawings of spaceships and astronauts (49, 59), or a picture of him as a boy sitting in a play Soviet spaceship (58). Childhood, adolescent, and family photos are clearly of Fontcuberta himself in every case and contain a mixture of unaltered photos of the author's past masquerading as being Russian in provenance (56-66), or photos altered to insert Fontcuberta's face into Soviet settings, such as his teenaged head on the body of a young Soviet aviator in uniform (62). Yet other photos of farms and unidentified family members may not be altered at all (54-57). A reader with direct knowledge of Gagarin's biography may reach the end of this chapter with suspicion of the similarities—however, it would depend entirely on their knowledge of those details; a different reader, with only a casual knowledge of who Gagarin was, could read this biography and find it completely plausible.

The next chapter "The Empire Strikes Back" attributed again to Michael Arena, recounts the historical fact of the Russo-American space-race which led the Soviets to cut corners on their safety measures in order to secure "supremacy" through achievements in space (222-226). As with the real historical accounts previously mentioned, this chapter highlights the pressure the Soviets felt to beat the Americans and how that increased the risks they were willing to take and ends with the factual description of Gagarin's death in a MIG fighter jet (226). This chapter works as another example of Fontcuberta leaving some history unadulterated, as it reinforces the plausibility of the fabricated elements of his narrative by book ending them with real, verifiable events.

"Journey to Never-Never Land" is Arena's account of the moments leading up to and including the disappearance of Istochnikov in orbit. The chapter is straight forward with some technical jargon thrown in such as the names of the different "phases" of the launch, orbit, and maneuvers (226-229). The believability of the chapter is reasonable, without it ever getting into the realm of "technobabble." The science of his statements could be lifted from legitimate sources, or it could be made up, but this ultimately reads as reasonable for a text aimed at the lay-person.

The next three chapters attributed to Muraveinik are titled "Star Chess," "Signs of Unconsciousness," and "Cosmobitch"[8] respectively. "Star Chess" provides background information regarding steps taken to provide for both physical and mental health of cosmonauts, again relatively plausible, but steering slightly into the comic register by including digressive details of the specific moves in a chess game which was played over the radio to provide Istochnikov with tasks to keep him mentally active and help evaluate the effects of being in space on his intellect (229-231). "Signs of Unconsciousness" is a very different chapter in that it contains another embedded clue as to the nature of the work. The chapter speaks of a journal which Istochnikov kept while onboard and has a specific

[8] "La Cosmoperra" in the original Spanish, which removes insinuation "bitch" may carry in English as an insult. Here referencing the dog participant in the Istochnikov launch.

entry in which he records a dream he had while in space. Istochnikov's description of his dream is a direct quote from the movie *Blade Runner* (232), which along with its source material, postdates this supposed launch by decades[9]. As with the details about the cosmonaut's childhood, a reader who is familiar with the science fiction movie, or the short story on which it is based, will immediately recognize one of its most famous lines, but another reader unfamiliar with the work might just assume that the out-of-context descriptions of space scenes are just the surreal descriptions of a dream. The effect of this hidden reference is to raise the suspicion of any reader that recognizes it; upon seeing the out-of-context and clearly impossible reference the fundamental question of "what else is fake" is brought into the forefront of *Sputnik.* "Cosmobitch" is one of the shorter chapters, being just half a page long. Compared to the previous chapters on the space-race and launch, it reads slightly comedic as it concentrates mostly on the debate between sending up a dog or a macaque on the mission with Istochnikov. The chapter ends with the decision to send a dog rather than a macaque because the cosmonaut had grown up with dogs and would know "what to say" to one to calm it down (232). These two chapters break down the plausibility of the narrative, but do so in their details rather than in their larger context, something which will come into play when Foncuberta's objectives are explored later; "attentive" readers will pick up on the details which are problematic, while "distracted" readers will gloss over them and take the story as plausible based on its similarity to other examples of the era.

"The Enigma of the Meteorite" is a chapter soaked in irony. Attributed to Salman Zagdeev[10], the narrative explores the disaster which claimed Istochnikov's life. While the exact cause was not known, suspicions were that his craft was struck by a meteorite which was recovered in the wreckage. This chapter adds a conspiracy within a conspiracy by examining what was supposedly known (and lost)

[9] The source material, a short story by Phillip K. Dick titled "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep" was published in 1968, after the supposed launch of Ivan's mission.
[10] Another reference for which the only records available point to Fontcuberta's *Sputnik* and related groups.

regarding the study of the meteor. The chapter begins reasonably enough with scientific-sounding descriptions about the rock but takes a quick turn for the incredible when it alleges that the meteor was said to have been inscribed in writing reminiscent of cuneiform when viewed under ultraviolet light (233). As with so much else provided by Foncuberta, photos of the fragmented documents are included (the originals have been lost according to the narrative), showing pictures of the meteor, analysis of its radioactive properties, and even supposed tracings of the "text" which is not visible on the actual photos of the rock (170-175). Most ironically, the narrative states that the whole affair was covered up by one of the high-ranking members of the Soviet space program because it was considered "nonsense and doubts about Martian theories" and would be ridiculed by the Americans should it become public (234). The following chapter "Study of the Asteroid", also attributed to Zagdeev, briefly explores the payload of the Soyuz 2, a probe designed to explore an orbiting asteroid named Kadok, which was successfully launched before the accident (234). The accompanying pictures are of poor and inconsistent quality, suspiciously, one of them appears to be an altered version of the same picture on the cover of the book, which shows Earth as seen from the surface of the asteroid Kadok, but in this version has replaced the Earth with Kadok's miniscule satellite Hexar (178). This small detail stands as another example of something "off" in the details in the narrative. Like the quote from a movie which would not have existed at the time of the flight, the altered photo "evidence" in the same space as so much other conspiracy, brings into question the legitimacy of what is being viewed. Again, an "attentive" reader will recognize that the same picture has been altered, providing another reason to doubt the veracity of the narrative.

The penultimate chapter is presented as a partial transcription of the communications between Istochnikov and the tracking ship in the Indian Ocean. The transcript has what would be considered mostly "small talk" including some of the previously mentioned chess-playing, as well as general descriptions of the views from space. Most notably there are references to the value of the

communication as potential content for the Pravda, as well as a section which is edited out with the explanation “Paragraph omitted by the censor” (235). The chapter ends with communications breaking up as Ivan loses control of the spaceship (236). Fontecuberta’s allusion to the Soviet obsession of narrative over facts aligns perfectly with the historical background to the cosmonaut program. The allusion to constructed narrative in the transcript further confirms that Fontcuberta is well-aware of the way that image was prioritized over truth in the reporting of the cosmonauts’ endeavors.

The final chapter attributed as a collaboration of Arena and Muraveinik makes note of the suppressed report given by the cosmonaut aboard the surviving Soyez 3 which was the sister ship in Istochnikov’s lost mission. It reads mostly realistically with the cosmonaut Beregovoi providing a few possible scenarios for the causes of the failure (primarily that the meteor strike severed Ivan’s umbilical back to the ship, marooning him in orbit), however the final statement by Beregovoi states that, “… A possibility of abduction should also be considered, however imaginative or crazy it may sound, which in fact it is’ (237). Beregovoi goes on to reference Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* as a possible analogy to a forceful counterattack from the asteroid Kadok, which like Lem’s sentient ocean planet, may have misinterpreted the probe sent to study it as aggression. The chapter ends with the foreboding note that Beregovoi died coincidentally the day before he could be interviewed by Arena and Muraveinik (237). This final chapter cements the message of conspiracy theories within conspiracies; the paranoia and fear of retribution referenced in Oberg, Doran, and Bizony’s works echoes here with the conspiracy theories being suppressed and even alleged to lead to the suspicious death of one of the primary participants in the historical event. The layers with which Foncuberta stratifies as the chapters get progressively less realistic are like an ever-louder alarm to the reader, signaling that what they are reading is not what it seems.

Fontcuberta’s work is presented against the backdrop of known history, framed against real events, and in some ways echoing the plausibility (or lack thereof) of Conan Doyle’s “J. Habakuk

Jephson's Statement." The details presented are based on real events, or mimic known details such as Gagarin's biography, so as to create an event which sounds plausible at first, but breaks down if the reader scratches the surface, or is already aware of the source materials. The ambiguity with which the "contributors" and allied institutions are presented (and mixed with real, verifiable sources) presents numerous questions regarding the intent of the book. Still, in its reception, there are additional layers of subterfuge where Fontcuberta's playful nudging to be more "attentive" and less "distracted," lead to something more complex than a simple attempt to fool the reader. By examining how readers and viewers have processed *Sputnik*, there is a bigger question at stakes: is it a hoax or is it something else?

The undergraduate paper[11] "Camouflage Wearing Camouflage: Photofictions Based in Historical Conventions" written by a Harvard student, Heather Visco[12], recounts their experiences with *Sputnik*, as presented as part of a Visual and Environmental Studies course taught by Fontcuberta in 2004. Visco echoes the narrative already covered previously and makes some key observations about the way that Fontcuberta ran his course that may shed some light on his approach to present *Sputnik*. Fontcuberta opened the course with a slideshow featuring photographic "evidence" of Istochnikov's flight and accident while narrating in the darkened lecture hall. Fontcuberta presented the "facts" just as the book does: Visco was drawn into story as being a true discovery (1-2). Immediately after the slideshow, the illusion was burst:

> When the lights went on and the slide show was over I got my first good look at Fontcuberta. It was then that I realized that I had been duped, for the face that I now saw was that of the very same missing Russian cosmonaut. This slide show and the exhibit were the artistic work of Joan Fontcuberta. (2)

[11] A request for an interview with Fontcuberta was denied because of his busy schedule, however his assistant did provide a number of materials, including the academic papers referenced here, as well as interviews and other materials regarding *Sputnik* and Fontcuberta's other works.
[12] Harvard Alumni Association records verify Heather Visco as a student that graduated in 2004.

Once Fontcuberta revealed himself to the lecture hall, Visco made the most fundamental discovery regarding *Sputnik*; anyone with knowledge of the author's identity will immediately know that he is indisputably Istochnikov. That glaring fact, contingent on the reader/viewer knowing what Foncuberta looks like, causes *Sputnik* to immediately unravel as a work of historic discovery and becomes a different question altogether; a critique of readers willingness to take a text at face-value if the plausibility of its claim is reasonable enough. Visco's focus on the paper is the physical exhibit which accompanied the book, though many of the contents are identical. Her paper's questions concentrate on the larger scope of the fabrication of history and the dangers of taking seemingly convincing evidence at face value.

A 2001 BA dissertation from a University of Westminster student, Siv Birgitta Systad[13] also provides a similar reading of *Sputnik*. As with the Visco paper, Systad does a solid job of picking apart the real from the fictitious as he covers much of the same ground previously mentioned. However, there is one detail regarding the reception of the book and its accompanying physical exhibit which stands as an interesting aside: the report that the Russian Ambassador to Spain reacting negatively to the exhibit book. It is mentioned several times in the dissertation (1, 2, 12), and in one exchange in Systad's interview of Fontcuberta, mentions a government official who brought a Geiger counter to the exhibition out of concern regarding the potential radioactivity of the materials in the exhibit.

> 1. How have the reactions from the public been? Have people believed Sputnik to be a true story?
>
> J.F.: I would say that an attentive reading of the exhibition or the book reveals its fictitious character, but a partial, distracted, or superficial reading can give the impression that it is a true story. This has happened many times, and there are many funny anecdotes, like the one about the Russian ambassador in Madrid who complained that we were "ridiculing his country's glorious history", or when the officer from the Environmental Department brought a Geiger counter to the exhibition in the planetarium of Pamplona to investigate whether the kryptonite meteor (in reality, a simple piece of mineral) was radioactive and dangerous.

[13] Name appears too common to verify, but this is not a reason to doubt source.

Fontcuberta packs the answer to the question about reception with many interesting details. On the surface, he plainly states his intention to distinguish between "attentive" and "partial, distracted, or superficial" reading in order to get to the "true story." Ironically, the two examples he brings are difficult to verify: both the government official and the Russian ambassador always trace back to Fontcuberta's account of those events; the only verifiable sources for these events are Fontcuberta or people quoting him.

Imago, Ergo Sum[14] (2015) constitutes a catalog of the physical exhibits for his publications which Fontcuberta has installed to that date. The catalog opens with the amusing photograph of the author as Istochnikov and covers not only the exhibit which accompanied the release of the *Sputnik* book, but also many of the artist's major exhibits which all share a similar approach to other areas of science such as botany and zoology. The accompanying essays regarding Foncuberta's work shed light on the larger themes he is concerned with. Sema D'Acosta notes in his essay "Joan Fontcuberta, Beyond Photography":

> Developing his work from preexisting elements or recurrent situations, he creates new models of interpretation that activate automatic associations in the viewer's brain, which the latter accepts, despite the fact that they are neither true nor have they been double checked. Impartially and intentionally, he blends artistic creation with historical events, placing the two seemingly antagonistic disciplines on the same level—a dialogue between reality and fiction that contravenes the logic of methodological orthodoxy, usually more concerned with not trespassing the allotted area of each of the discrete compartments of knowledge than with deepening its foundations.
>
> Ultimately, the way in which the chronology of any event is built depends on the perspective from which it is looked at, a position that changes with the passage of time and that is conditioned by technological and social developments. As he himself notes: "history is nothing other than approximations, estimates, versions that we make up as we go to verify whether they can provide us with a convincing—but also a useful—answer regarding the past." (8)

[14] Image, therefore I am

This analysis provides several key considerations regarding Fontcuberta's methods and message. The propensity of readers to "automatically" accept that what they are reading can be taken at face value, especially with historical accounts. Fontcuberta seeks to break down this assumption so as to challenge the reader/viewer to realize that even in supposedly historical accounts, there are still choices being made by the author which can greatly affect the veracity of the contents. The idea of approaching fiction and history "on the same level" forces the "dialogue" between them; while it would be hyperbolic to say that no historical account is ever questioned, and all are taken as "truth" without scrutiny, Fontcuberta is correct in that the fundamental assumption behind the label of "history" carries a weight of truth which fiction does not. Forcing the reader to cast aside that weight encourages the "attentive reading" that Fontcuberta references in several of his interviews.

The other exhibits and works presented in the 2015 catalog show the same mixture of historical and fictional woven into *Sputnik*. The collision between established discipline of scientific enquiry and the fantastic is recognizable in all works cited. *The Herbarium* exhibit is ostensibly presented as an hommage to the real 19th century botanist Karl Blossfeldt but concentrates instead on what Fontcuberta calls "pretend plants" and "artificial pseudo-plants" (32-45). Real botanical photographs are placed side-by-side with fabricated examples pastiched from different plants. *The Herbarium* has a fair amount of subtlety because at face value: it is only upon close examinations of the photographs that the viewer realizes that the creations are, as the anonymous preface states, "ephemeral assemblages built from industrial detritus, pieces of plastic, bones, parts of plants and of all sorts of animals found by the artist as he roamed industrial sites on the outskirts of Barcelona" (33). As with his other works, Fontcuberta is plainly peeling back the veil on the lesson which he is providing his readers/viewers; anyone who takes the time to attentively read the prologue will immediately have the "truth" of these constructions made clear. However, "distracted" readers who only glance at the images, maybe reading a label or stray

statement, may very well not pick up on the fabricated nature of the work's subjects. Fontcuberta's *Fauna* accounts for the work of Professor Peter Ameisenhaufen, who is described as "a mysterious character, imbued in the study of hybrids, mutations and genetic malformations" (51). Unlike Blossfeldt who is a verifiably real person, Professor Ameisenhaufen[15] is a fabrication akin to Istochnikov; the animals which are part of the exhibit are clearly fabrications in the vein of the Fiji Mermaid.[16] The creatures are impossible and amusing, such as the baboon-centaur (54) and a snake with legs (56). As with *Sputnik* the photographic "evidence" provided for the imaginary animals is presented as "real" including x-ray images, sketches of the skeletal structures of the animals, and pictures of the animals "in the wild." The exhibit spaces themselves look and feel as if they would befit any real museum, indistinguishable from their display cases, signage, and set-up (58). Fauna is arguably different from *Sputnik* in that a large part of its charm comes from its allusion to 19th century sideshow attractions which fabricated exhibits in a similar way, just as was lampooned by Mark Twain in his account of the "petrified shah". Still, to call it a full-on side-show would not be correct; as with his other exhibits, the production values of the exhibit are on-par with those of any "legitimate" museum, a contrast with the contents being exhibited which could have easily fallen within the realm of the "side-show." This collision between the legitimate museum environment and the charlatanism of the "freak-show" aligns heavily with Fontcuberta's message of being skeptical in the face of legitimizing packaging of information. The museum setting is akin to the label of "history" to a written work: it sets an expectation that the contents have been validated by experts in their given field, curated and verified to be taxonomically important examples of what is being set on display.

[15] Trans. Anthill

[16] The Fiji Mermaid was a 19th century hoax popularized by P.T. Barnum which combined the dried head and torso of a monkey with the tail of a fish to produce a grotesque side-show attraction that looked like a realistic creature.

The section on *Sputnik* has the added benefit of being able to show that the physical installation included items which further cemented the "truth" behind the mystery (68-91). The irony in the exhibit is that the items shown are not the relics of a lost cosmonaut, but, rather, the props used by Foncuberta to create the photographic evidence of Istochnikov: uniforms (85), models of spacecraft (82), medals, newspapers, and other items presumably rescued from the wreckage of the doomed ship or meant to represent what was taken aboard (86). As with the other exhibits, the physical space adds an air of legitimacy in that the materials, displays, signage, and general organization are identical to that of a museum exhibition space. The only clues to its true nature being hidden in the details which the viewer/reader may or may not have the historical context to recognize as false. Unlike the humbug nature of fabrications in *Fauna*, the *Sputnik* exhibit is more realistic in its presentation. Still, the companion document contains a final image on its last page which directly influences its interpretation: an image of Istochnikov, but this time with facial hair and winking (192). Fontcuberta appears to have digitally altered the "original" photo of Istochnikov in a final act of playful hinting at the truth: the helmet is almost certainly the same one in the original photo, but Fontcuberta has digitally replaced the face with a more current photo, his face older, with a white-speckled beard, and winking knowingly at the viewer as if to suggest that they are "in on the joke."

Fontcuberta's other exhibits highlighted in *Imago, Ergo Sum*, follow the same pattern with Fontcuberta inserting his own image as a miracle-working monk, accompanied with pictures of him levitating (123-139), and as an Al-Qaeda terrorist leader holding an amusing fake product "Mecca Cola" (140-155). Strangely enough, the quality of the digital insertion into some of the images appears to be of lesser quality than some of his earlier work, begging the question as to whether it is intentionally done to draw the suspicion of the viewer/reader. Still, the overall effect of this collection of his exhibits and accompanying books is to underscore that his work may look like a hoax in some cases, but it is presented in such a way that the hoax is unsustainable. It could be argued that if the viewer/reader

were aware of the author/artist at all, it would be inaccurate to refer to it as a hoax at all since the author's appearance front and center would immediately dispel any questions of authenticity, as it did with the Harvard undergrad who saw Fontcuberta when the lights came.

Fontcuberta's exhibits all follow the pattern of demanding "attentive reading." Still, the line at which fiction and truth are drawn in his work is not as clear as even his own encouragement of this exploration would suggest. Fontcuberta was interviewed by Stuart Jeffries for The Guardian in 2014 and the experience left Jeffries in a state of paranoia; after his interaction with the author/artist he found himself wondering if anything could be trusted in Fontcuberta's work,

> … A Russian ambassador apparently threatened a diplomatic complaint because Fontcuberta had insulted "the glorious Russian past".
>
> Fontcuberta and I giggle over this story, but then I wonder. Perhaps there was no credulous journalist called Iker Jimenez, no stereotypically angry Russian ambassador. Maybe these characters were invented as part of a more elaborate hoax that Fontcuberta inserted into his Wikipedia page and online interviews to make a monkey out of the Guardian's interviewer. I glance sidelong at the genial 59-year-old as he takes a swig of beer: I wouldn't put it past him. (3)

It is no coincidence that the language that Foncuberta used to reference the Russian ambassador to Jeffries is almost identical to that of his answer to the interview question posed by Systad previously: it has become part of the narrative of *Sputnik.* Whether it is true or not is now irrelevant because it has become part of the image that Foncuberta carefully cultivates around the reception of his work. Jeffries is correct in developing suspicion of Fontcuberta's answers—just as with the label of history evoking certain levels of legitimacy, so does the format of an interview with the author. Fontcuberta likely would revel in the distrust and skepticism displayed by his interviewer because it aligns with his encouragement of the reader to question and seek more information by exposing them to playful, aesthetically enjoyable humor based on real life, but requiring an "attentive" reader to distinguish fact from fiction.

Returning to McHale's classification of hoaxes, *Sputnik* tenuously falls under the category of the "entrapment hoax" which seeks to expose ignorance by presenting something as truth to an expert and then demonstrate their inability to discern it from a real piece of evidence. Still, Fontcuberta's work doesn't quite fit with that model: it is arguable that Fontcuberta isn't looking to entrap at all, but rather highlight the need to read with a higher attention to detail to see the faults that are in plain sight. As a result, *Sputnik* remains as a prime example not of a hoax, but as something slightly different; something which would have the qualities of a hoax, but which the "attentive" reader would quickly realize is not.

As evidenced by the sudden realization of the Harvard undergraduate who looks into Fontcuberta's face when the lights of the lecture hall are again lit, it is hard to argue that he is hiding Istochnikov's true identity. Being placed front-and-center on the cover of *Sputnik*, Fontcuberta is taking his concept of the "attentive reader" to the most extreme case by disrupting the work's ability to deceive in the most prominent way that he can. Fontcuberta is providing the reader/viewer with the most obvious evidence possible to underline the ease with which a text can be misread. By making himself the subject of the joke, Fontcuberta highlights the fragility of the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction by challenging the assumption that by placing his own image as Istochnikov's it would immediately be recognized. While in certain circles this may be true, a context-less reader unfamiliar with his works could miss the playful joke and assume the work was to be taken at face-value (either as being true, or as being a genuine hoax intended to deceive). Even if the reader picked up on the textual hints that reveal the fabrication, they may still think that the picture on the cover was created from a stock photo, or actor, that had been used for this purpose. Fontcuberta's genius lies in his balance between the explicit and the ambiguous, yielding a message that encourages critical thinking, skepticism, and ultimately the motivation to know more about what is being presented.

Chapter 4:

Codices and Context

Luigi Serafini's imaginary encyclopedia *Codex Seraphinianus,* first published in 1981, is a fascinating experiment in removal of context. As with Conan Doyle and Fontcuberta, Serafini's magnus opus seeks to create a scientific narrative as it imitates a nonfiction genre but removes a significant portion of the context in its presentation, leaving the reader in a state of open-ended curiosity which the "text" of the work cannot fully satisfy. Further, the *Codex Seraphinianus* cannot be approached through the acts of direct interpretation and "attentive reading" as Fontcuberta suggests. The reader is challenged in the most fundamental way because, by design, no one can read the language the book exhibits. Yes, by examining the genres of texts from which Serafini gathers his inspiration, one can see patterns and meaning seep through the mystery, leaving the reader with a much broader understanding of what the *Codex Seraphinianus* might be, despite its initial suggestion of indecipherability.

A "starting point" for the *Codex Seraphinianus* is arguably difficult to find because the language in which it is written is unreadable. However, some visual clues serve to remind the reader of certain recognizable genres such as encyclopedias, and codices. Martyn Lyons' *Books: A Living History* provides a logical launching point to consider the different categories of works bearing striking similarities to what Serafini has constructed. Martyn tracks the transformation of recorded language from tablets, to scrolls, and ultimately to bound volumes as the technology to organize the written word gravitated towards the convenience they provided. The advantages of the codex (book) over its predecessors, such as scrolls, were many: compact, easier of hold which allowed for easier note-taking, introducing page

numbers for easier referencing and quotations, and indexing which would allow for better organization of the information contained therein (36-37).

By labeling his work as a "Codex" and by adding a Latinized version of his own name to it, Serafini sets certain expectations in the reader which allude to a long tradition of work collected into illuminated, bound volumes also titled "Codex _____." To say that Serafini is "imitating" a specific codex would not be accurate, as the subject-matter of his encyclopedia is undoubtedly of a fantastic nature. However, by examining some of the real-world examples of books sharing traits with his work, it is possible to understand the structure he is alluding to and to approximate an interpretation of meaning behind the *Codex Seraphinianus*.

The earliest examples of codices were predominantly, though not limited to, religious texts created by monastic scribes. A tradition amongst these early codices was the "illumination" (illustration) of the texts with images (40-42). These illuminations could be either illustrative in nature, painting a picture of what the contents were conveying, or decorative such as the gilded lettering at the beginning of chapters (42). Beautiful examples exist such as the *Book of Kells* (43-44) and though the styles differ, the fundamental mixture of text and image are a possible inspiration for what Serafini created.

Other examples of illuminated texts which bear comparison with the *Codex Seraphinianus* can be found in the British Museum's collection of illuminated manuscripts, which has been recently digitized since the fragile nature of the original manuscripts makes viewing them in person restrictive. This collection contained many volumes, including a collection of bestiaries and books on knighthood from 13th century. An anonymous bestiary referenced as Sloane 3544 shows a striking resemblance to the construction seen in Serafini's work; pages contain detailed illustrations of animals, both real and fantastic, followed by descriptions and commentary. The collection of animals varies from the common place such as the stag and goat (8,9), to the exotic such as the lion, tiger, hyena and fantastic, such as

unicorn (1,2,4,6). Similarly, a document attributed to Peraldus (Harley 3244), also from the 13th century, has numerous charts, cataloguing different topics such as vices (27v), virtues (28), and bestiaries containing similarly mixed accounts of factual and fantastic animals such as panthers (37) and griffins (38v). Familiarity with these kinds of texts allows a reader to see parallels in the way that Serafini organizes and structures his writing and illustrations.

Another useful counterpart to the *Codex Seraphinianus* is the *Codex Gigas*, otherwise known as the "Devil's Bible," not only because of its contents, but also because of the uniqueness of the tome, the mystery surrounding its creation, and the aura of otherworldly intervention ascribed to its production by years of consideration by scholars. A thorough analysis and digitization was made of the codex in 2007, when it was loaned from the National Library of Sweden to that the National Library of Czech Republic. The book written to accompany its digitization catalogs the book's history as well as its impressive physical characteristics through numerous essays by historians and librarians.

The book's massive dimensions (920 x 505 mm) make it just over three feet tall and one and a half feet wide; handling the book for the digitization process was listed as a major challenge (15) and it is noted that the codex holds the Guinness World Record for the largest bound book (16). In addition to its size, the book has a long history of fact and legend which adds to its mysterious nature, elevating the meaning of the book beyond what is contained on its pages: rumors, legends, curses, and unnatural origins have all be layered onto the codex over time. Though the codex would seem to have relatively standard content for books of its kind, primarily the Old and New Testaments with additional selections of medieval texts on medicine, history, and magic, it has been referred to as a "book without natural readers" due to the near impossible act of reading it. That is, the book is so big, and the text so small, that it is almost impossible to "sit down and read it" as a typical reader: a reader would literally have to

lie down on the book itself to be able to get to the top of the page in a legible manner (18).[17] Zdeněk Uhlíř, from the National Library of Prague and one of the contributors of essays to the 2007 publication of the *Codex Gigas*, highlights the absurdity of the contrast between the size of the book and the size of the text and suggests that the *Codex Gigas* needs to be considered in a different light from other works. Uhlíř separates out the interest in books into two distinct groups:

> Today we know that concerning books we can distinguish between two main categories of their users and adherent, namely between "researchers" and "bibliophiles". Researchers use books in accord with their typical aim, i.e. as external memory for preserving undamaged and unchanged information, which means that they concentrate on the book as a "record". On the other hand, "bibliophiles" use books… as a self-enclosed artifact, which means that they concentrate on the book as a "barrier" … Three fundamental, intentional features are peculiar to the "bibliophile" interest: aesthetic splendor something like attraction, peculiarity, or even curiosity; and the individual relationship, somehow immediate, private and intimate. The first feature is obvious; the largest book in the world is definitely in its own way splendid and in its monumentality certainly also aesthetic. The second feature is also fulfilled, because the largest book in the world is undoubtedly singular; it is a curiosity among the other books… The problem is how to fulfill the third feature, as such a gargantuan book can only with great difficulty be perceived as individual in the right sense, and even less as private and not at all as intimate. Therefore, the *Codex Gigas* not only carries mystery but also induces uneasiness (19).

Uhlíř's separation of a functional book from a book with an alternative purpose adheres nicely to what Serafini creates with his codex. The differentiation between a text which is meant to collect and preserve knowledge, as opposed to a text which is in and of itself a physical object of desire based more on its aesthetic properties than its meaning is at the core of his endeavor. As with the *Codex Gigas,* the

[17] It might be possible that the book would be legible if propped up on a custom book-stand, allowing the reader to stand in front of it, kneeling at times as they travel over the three feet in height. Still, in its present state, such a stand would potentially damage the book given its size/weight and there is nothing in the analysis provided to suggest this approach to handling the codex has ever been considered.

Codex Seraphinianus creates that sense of "unease" Uhlíř refers to by refusing to provide the reader with the basic functions of any book.

The contributors of essays to the digitization of the *Codex Gigas* in 2007 take care to separate fact and legend which collide in the *Codex Gigas* due to the unique circumstances surrounding its construction. Most of the scholarly contributions concentrate on the historically verifiable aspects of its creation: estimated as being originally made sometime in the 13th century, the materials and effort needed to create it would have been monumental for the time; the writing alone is estimated as requiring a decade to finalize (24). When compared to other works, which may have been a "haphazard" collaboration, the *Codex Gigas* stands as an amazing undertaking as it seems likely it was written by a singular scribe (24). Though the exact details of the author and his methods are unknown, the codex itself does record some details of its provenance and ownership, referring to a Podlažice monastery in 1295 (61-62). The analysis takes care to lay out the known chronological details in the codex itself as well as the meandering path of ownership that it takes through different religious orders, wars, and monarchies, eventually taken as spoils of the Thirty Years War to its present-day home in Sweden (94-95).

All this factual evidence is contrasted sharply with the fantastic legend following the Codex Gigas. Kamil Boldan's chronological account of ownership ends with a short section on the association between the codex and its supposed link to the devil. Boldan states that the subject has been "purposely avoided" until this point in the analysis because the origin of the legend cannot be accurately traced before the 17th century when it was already in Swedish possession, which he suspects (but cannot verify) is where the story was first concocted (96). Jindřich Marek also corroborates that the origin of the legend can only be confirmed to Swedish possession of the codex, though in their own accounts they add seeming legitimacy to the legend by suggesting that the story "came with the codex" (115-116). Nevertheless, such claims are framed as further examples of embellishments to add mystery

to the back-story of the codex. The legend itself varies according to the source, often touching on different Faustian themes which were popular at the time: the devil assisting some laborer with an impossible task at the cost of their soul. Still, the legend associated with the codex generally follows the same basic narrative: a monk condemned to die for some transgression agrees to the impossible task of writing the codex in one night. When he realizes at midnight that the task is impossible, he calls upon the devil to assist him in the task and in gratitude for saving his life, paints a portrait of Lucifer on one of the illuminated pages (96, 115). Variations on the legend are many, some with the monk being "walled up" with the devil for forty years for some terrible crime (97), others where the monk is condemned to write the codex as punishment for falling in love with a beautiful Jewess, again over the lengthy period of fifteen years and likewise assisted by the devil (116). The monk's fate also varied, sometimes redeemed by the Virgin Mary and Archangel Michael, other times the monk is condemned for his unholy bargain (116). The undeniable physical accomplishment of the book itself makes it a prime example of a text that is "larger" than the sum of its contents, in this case clearly marked by the decision of its creator/author to design and craft a book so ridiculously large that its basic function is almost impossible. As Uhlíř suggests with his characterization of the object of "bibliophiles" obsessions, the *Codex Gigas,* is a prime example of the physical objects that are valued not only for their information, but primarily for their uniqueness, mystery, and flirtation with the magical.

Additionally to medieval codices of European origin, Mesoamerica also had a rich history of proto-books, also cataloged under the moniker "codex." Lyons' chapter on these works puts them in context with the arrival of Spanish conquistadors and missionaries who unfortunately met the native populations' cultural artifacts with xenophobic contempt. Lyons states that only fifteen codices from the era survive after the Spanish purging of the texts (84). Examining the images contained in these remaining documents provides a rich source for possible inspiration for Serafini's work; though the original codices were not "books" by our standard as they were collections of paper-like plates folded in

such a way that several "pages" could be viewed at once, the artistic rendition of Pre-Colombian life is organized in a manner that is strikingly similar to the organizational nature of the *Codex Seraphinianus*. Gisele Diaz and Alan Rodgers are credited with the restoration of the *Codex Borgia*, one of the original ancient Mexican manuscripts which outlines primarily the relationships between the Aztec calendar, their deities, and rituals. Diaz and Rogers took great care in their attempt to reproduce the drawings of the codex, using techniques that came as close as possible to the original Aztec methods. The result is a visually clear publication that shows the wonderful artistry and detail of the original work, while retaining some of the mystery behind its usage (xi). Bruce Byland provides useful analysis of the possible purpose of the codex in his introduction which highlights their religious use by priests to catalog rituals, calendars, procedures for prognostication in marriage and descriptions of pre-Columbian deities among other subjects (xvi). The fragmented nature of the meaning of the *Codex Borgia* fuels the feeling of magical undertones when perusing its images casually. For example, the sections on marriage prognostications are segmented into eight consistent compartments each with differing depictions of couples, rituals, sacrifices, offspring, traditional dressings, and coded numerological information (18-20). Though different than later European encyclopedias, there is a consistency in the way that the information is presented: it shares the fundamental purpose of such works; providing the reader with organized examples on a certain topic to be compared and contrasted and at its core, it is meant to be instructional or didactic in some capacity.

A later codex which offers a compelling comparison to Serafini's work is the *Codex Mendoza*. The most significant differentiation from this codex with those that preceded it is that it was composed post-Conquest and unlike other Mesoamerican codices, it is the collaboration between Spanish and Mexican artists:

> The Mendoza Codex has awaited adequate interpretation for four hundred years. It includes some of the earliest manuscripts, drawn by a Mexican artist and annotated by a Spanish writer for the enlightenment

> of the Council of the Indies at Seville, incorporating not only copies of a record of Mexican history and of a list of tributes paid to Montezuma by subject clans or cities, but also an original document depicting Mexican manners and customs. As a historical record, the Mendoza Codex is invaluable. The vicissitudes of the manuscript, as sent by the Viceroy of New Spain and intended for the eye of Charles V, are related by Major Cooper Clark on other pages; it was a strange wind that blew the chronicle aside not only to British territory but to the library of Oxford where, early in the nineteenth century, Lord Kingsborough saw it. (vol. 1, xi).

This note by T.A. Joyce[18] in the preface to the 1938 analysis and reproduction of the codex shows the layered complexity of this work: it captures not only the rare art and culture of the pre-Colombians but represents a later collaboration which perhaps seeks to mend some of the loss caused by the Spanish destruction of so many of the original codices. Furthermore, the text itself is imbued with additional mystery by it being temporarily lost to history, only to be found in a foreign library and later recognized for its historical value. As with the *Codex Gigas* and ultimately the *Codex Seraphinianus*, the nature of its origin and the path which it has taken is part of the aura of mystery piled on the text. This creates an air of being more than "just a book" and transforms it into an artifact with deeper, mysterious—if not magical—properties. The editor and translator, James Cooper Clark, divided his analysis and reproduction into three large volumes. The first volume provides background information on the imagery and glyphs as well as the English translation of the Spanish text with annotations of the images of the codex. The topics covered by the codex are categorized into three major themes: history, catalogue of tributes, and details of pre-Colombian daily life. There are also two appendices which touch upon "Three early Missionaries to Mexico: Olmos, Sahagun, and Molina," as well as, "The Games of *Tlachtli* and *Patolli*" (v). The second volume is devoted to glossaries of names, places, selected bibliography, and additional background information on pre-Colombian and post-Conquest Mexico (v).

[18] Thomas Athol Joyce, 1878-1942, anthropologist associated with the British Museum, specialized in American and African anthropology.

The third volume is devoted entirely to a facsimile of the original codex, with an additional tissue overlay for the English translations of the original Spanish text (v).

As with the *Codex Borgia*, the images of the *Codex Medoza*, are similar to some of the ones which can be found in Serafini's work, specifically in its organization. Catalogues of tribute show numerous illustrations of items consisting from beads, to headdresses, to live birds provided to Montezuma (vol. 3, 46). Again, the taxonomical nature of the depictions and accompanying Spanish text carry with them the weight of "collected knowledge." In the case of the *Codex Mendoza* however, we have a bridge to understanding by the fact that the collaboration between Mexican and Spanish individuals provides an unambiguous certainty as to what is being represented. Unlike Serafini, or the unknown authors of the *Codex Borgia*, the reader is able to fully appreciate the meaning and context of what is being presented and as such, the *Codex Mendoza* stands as one of the only examples of an initially obfuscated text which bridges the gap that is present in other similar examples. The *Codex Medoza* has the information necessary in its primary version to impart its full meaning, unlike the *Codex Borgia,* whose meaning is fragmented, or the *Codex Seraphinianus* whose meaning strikes as fully out of reach. Still, the three codices are visually comparable on a structural level in the way that they present their systems of "knowledge." Clark further dissects the *Codex Mendoza* by providing useful breakdowns through his first two volumes and the tissue overlay on a majority of the images in the third. This natural predisposition to fully understand a mysterious text will be taken on by numerous scholars in an ultimately failed attempt to read the *Codex Seraphinianus*.

Returning to Lyons' history of books, a consideration of influences on the *Codex Seraphinianus* would not be complete without considering Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (107-109). Along with Jean d'Alembert and numerous others, Diderot produced one of the first and most comprehensive examples of a modern-day encyclopedia. Published in the mid-eighteenth century, it was the collaboration of some of "Europe's best intellectuals," including Voltaire and Rousseau (107):

> The *Encyclopédie* was more than just an encyclopedia: it was a manifesto for the rational thinking and social criticism of the Age of Enlightenment. It aimed to disseminate up-to-date knowledge of scientific inventions and practical arts, making new ideas and procedures accessible to any educated reader. The *Encyclopédie* also attacked prejudice and tradition, and put social and political institutions under the microscope, promoting liberal economic policies and an end to royal monopolies. It questioned the historical truth of the Bible, the reality of miracles and the Resurrection, and the principle of priestly celibacy. It attacked the parasitical position of the aristocracy, and defended individual property rights as the foundation of society. In 1752, after the publication of the second volume, the monarchy banned it, but this did not deter the editors, who continues the project with the tacit approval of figures close to the crown such as Madame de Pompadour." (107)

The importance of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* is layered not only in its attempt to collect all the knowledge of its time, but also in its challenge to the status quo of the monarchy by an appeal to rational thought. Though the *Codex Seraphinianus* pales in comparison as far as its size is concerned (a little over 350 pages as opposed to the tens of thousands of articles contained in the *Encyclopédie's* multiple volumes), the general construction has a striking similarity, especially with its illustrations, deploying numerous examples of a given category. Out of context, many of them might fit quite naturally in Serafini's version such as a plate showing the various steps of knitting (41), the multiple images showing the process of creating the convoluted loops of yarn on knitting needles, or the complete mechanical deconstruction of several looms and spinning wheels (43-65). Diderot's *Encyclopédie* is predominantly textual, consisting of thousands of articles organized alphabetically, but when images are introduced, one can see the taxonomical logic that is clearly being mimicked in the *Codex Seraphinianus*: individual items are shown in relation to other examples so that they can be compared and contrasted, as well as carefully labeled so that the corresponding text can be used to understand the classifications or breakdowns of components. This practice across Diderot's work emphasizes the clear understanding of the subject, so that the reader can better absorb the details of the fragments which make a whole and understand its relationship with similar adjacent examples.

Despite the unsolvable impediment of an untranslatable text, Serafini's work borrows this fundamental approach to present the reader with a work that "reads" like the *Encyclopédie* even though it cannot be translated.

Originally published in 1981 in two volumes, reprintings of the *Codex Seraphinianus* have been consolidated in subsequent editions into one large volume measuring 9.4 x 1.8 x 13.7 inches. While by no means a codex of the physical presence of the *Codex Gigas*, its size is large and heavy enough to make it a volume requiring it to be placed on a table or desk to be comfortably reviewed. As with its historical predecessors, the physical qualities of the book make for an important part of the experience of interacting with it. The cover binding of the third reprinting from 2010 differs from the previous two re-printings in a few ways. Aside from the obvious single-volume first edition, the codex's cover has also been updated; whereas the first printing was two volumes, in black, with selections from the contents, the later editions have an update cover which shows a donut-shaped red circle which appears to be made of a viscous material from which ladybugs are forming. Luigi Serafini's name and the title of the *Codex Seraphinianus* are the only readable text aside from the publisher, Rizzoli, at the bottom of the page. Later reprintings of the work also show further alterations of the cover, though subtler: the 2013 edition is almost indistinguishable, but on closer inspection shows more ladybugs have emerged from the donut. At each corner of the cover there are two outlined doodles which appear to be mirrored, but do not match the writing below the donut, which is the first exposure the reader has to the imaginary writing created by the author, a single paragraph on which two errant ladybugs are walking. Along the bottom of the cover is a line of golden bodies with crowns resemble the donut at the center of the cover, arms and legs stretched out in a comical fashion. The entire cover is bordered in a gold line which is repeated on the spine and back cover. The spine is relatively clean with just the title, gold border, the R of the publisher's name, and the little king-donut. The back cover is mostly blank save for a single character in a gilded box at the center which might be implied to represent an "S" if where to follow

similar conventions to the "R" on the spine for the publisher. Two donut-kings are above and below the character and the four same mirrored doodles are in each corner of the golden outline. The 2010 Italian edition has a small sticker which has been placed after the fact with the price, a ISBN code and a brief quote from the publisher in Italian:

> Questo codice miniato fantastico e misterioso, "l'enciclopedia di un visionario" (nella definizione di Italo Calvino), continua da anni ad affascinarci per la sua capacità di revelazione, che si cela dietro l'enigma di una grafia chiarissima epurre sfuggente. Una nuova edizione, arricchita e aggiornata dall'Autore, di un'opera che abita ormai nella memoria profonda di tutti noi. (back cover)[19]

The need for this sticker is in part practical, having the cost and the ISBN/UPC code for scanning at a check-out counter, but the fact that someone felt that the codex needed a readable "blurb" is interesting, if not counterintuitive to the nature of the book's contents. Though it is not overtly stated, this points to a disagreement in how the codex is presented without context; clearly someone, be it Serafini himself, a member of the publishing firm, or some third-party along the publishing route, felt that presenting the book "as is" without any explanation was not acceptable. Similarly, the third edition contains a small booklet, cradled in a plastic holder inside the back cover titled "DECODEX" whose contents are mostly in Italian with one English article and are a collection of reviews and commentaries on the codex. Two more details of note regarding the physical construction of the codex: the paper is of a heavy weight and has a texture which is thick and vellum-like, suggesting a higher quality than the average mass-produced book. There is also a ribbon for book-marking attached to the spine, again a practice which is only seen in higher-quality volumes and again suggests that the physical construction of the codex is of a higher quality.[20] The last note to make about the codex in a general sense is that

[19] Reviews of the reprinting for English-speaking audiences have complained that that this sticker is much larger on that edition (almost ¾ of the space) and covers some of the art work on the back cover.

[20] The current rarity of the *Codex Seraphinianus* is debatable. The first edition from 1981 was five thousand copies and can be found on rare book sites for $5,000-$8,000 at the time of writing. The first American edition, which

while the base content has transitioned from edition to edition, Serafini has mentioned in numerous interviews that he would like to add content to subsequent editions and the third edition does contain a "preface" which is not featured in the previous versions. As with any encyclopedia, Serafini's willingness and encouragement of others to update the *Codex Serafini* after he is gone adds to the nature of veracity that he is trying to inspire in the reader/viewer. No encyclopedia is ever "finished" and by allowing "updates" Serafini is mimicking the most basic and important aspect of critical approach to the categorization of knowledge. Any legitimate work attempting to capture the "best understanding" of a subject must be open to a newer, better interpretation and therefore subsequent versions of any such record are expected to contain an evolution in understanding.

The content of the *Codex Seraphinianus* can be summarized succinctly as an encyclopedia of an imaginary world written in this world's language. At the core of the experience of "reading" the work, is the fundamental question: can it be understood? Whether the language is or isn't decipherable, the reader will experience it as foreign regardless of its ultimate translatability. Still, it is very important to acknowledge that the way that the text and images have been constructed strongly suggests meaning, even if it cannot be directly translated.

Aside from the physical construction already mentioned, the first major indicator of meaning can be partially translated: numbers. The *Codex Seraphinianus* follows a basic convention by having page numbers. As such, an average reader can look at the bottom of the page and know instinctively that what they are seeing. From this assumption, the reader can start at "page one" and attempt to decode the meaning of the glyphs that represent a number. This leads to the first discovery of the codex: the number system is a real numerical system and not gibberish. The system is base-21, meaning that there are 21 unique glyphs that represent those numbers 0-20. Upon noting that and seeing the way the

consolidated the volumes into a single tome can be found for $800 at the time of writing, while the third edition used for this thesis was acquired for under $200. Current editions are under $90 and available at on-line booksellers.

glyphs interact with each other, the reader may assume that the numbering would work in a fashion similar to other systems such as Roman numerals, but, it is more complex as the pages reach the end. The average reader will recognize the structure of the page numbers as logical, but it would take some knowledge of mathematics to be able to fully articulate the model on which the numerical system works[21].

Related to the page-numbering, there are other structural decisions made by Serafini which communicate meaning to the reader. Primary among these is the index at the beginning of each chapters (2). Several key aspects of the index further cement the idea that this is a recognizable structure that can be found in other encyclopedias. First is the construction of the index into titles, dotted lines, and page numbers. A quick check of those titles and page numbers does show that they align and are consistent: the assumption being that if the reader is adept at understanding the language, they would recognize the title headers and be able to use the index to skip to the section of the codex which they were interested in reading at the time. As will be discussed in more detail throughout the close-analysis of each section, the chapters themselves each tackle one aspect of the imaginary world that Serafini has constructed. This said, the third edition does contain an additional nine-page preface seemingly breaking with the themes of the original chapters. This preface does contain some consistent clues to meaning, particularly the larger representation of the same glyph which is on the back cover and may represent an "S" for Serafini and the rendering of the same donut-king, though this time visibly happy and holding a paintbrush, as opposed to the surprised look on the outer covers (preface 1). The first page of the preface also contains an interesting detail in the text where the usual glyphs seen elsewhere in the codex are followed by what appear to be hastily written versions of some of the glyphs

[21] Several mathematicians have been credited with "decoding" the base-21 numbering in the codex, as of writing, I have been unable to find any publications aside from personal websites. A good example of one which is well articulated is by Ivan Derzhanski http://www.math.bas.bg/~iad/serafin.html and is credited in other sources for providing one of the better analysis of the consistent numerological structure.

that appear to be colored pencil practice attempts at the glyphs without being constructed into words, almost as if presenting an example of how the writing drafts occur. The rest of the contents of the preface match the general artistry and language of the original contents, but do not seem to follow a general theme of taxonomized examples on a specific subject. Each page of the preface has its own unique theme and it is unclear what this adds up to:

Preface

1. Introduction: mostly text with the single large “s” glyph and the happy donut-king.
2. A black marble/particle with a rainbow emanation, three vegetables connected to machinery.
3. A man in a tuxedo, possibly on a stage, next to a disembodied finger, a rug with a shadow of himself on fire. A separate image of a desert island where several unhappy cat-like kings are coming ashore from a sea with floating cooked eggs.
4. A man sleeping on an ice-cream cone, dreaming of himself sleeping on an ice-cream cone. Along the bottom of the page, several characters in unusual dress with ambiguous features continue the opposite page 5.
5. Continuation of the ambiguous characters from page 4 and a panel with another ambiguous character in a clown outfit next to a headless Dalmatian with a crossword puzzle in the background.
6. Two panels with text showing a scene with two small yellow creatures next to a collection of unidentifiable common objects, below with what appears to be the creatures generating from a single yellow blob.
7. Four panels with text, two containing ambiguous characters missing limbs or faces and two containing ambiguous machines.
8. Contains text and one of the ambiguous characters from page 7 in a surreal landscape.
9. Like page 8 with the other ambiguous character from page 7.

Unlike the main content of the codex, this preface shares the artistic style and invented language, but seems to lack the cohesiveness of the rest of the work in that there are allusions to the content that follows, but they do not seem to have a clear category and rely heavily on a more abstract/surreal theme. In contrast with this newer preface, the original contents of the *Codex Seraphinianus* follow clear themes for each of its sections and though the art-style and representations of objects, people, animals, plants and other topics share the same Surrealist aesthetics, the underlying subjects of biology, physics,

architecture and other topics covered in each chapter give the reader a point of recognizable reference from which to draw a comparison to the expectations set by the indexing and organization of the work.

The first chapter tackles botanical formations and contains a clear progression of the complexity of the subject from the small and simple to the large and complex. The chapter follows a page of text on the left with a catalogue on images on the right page. The first two pages appear to have a discussion on the subject including a matrix which may be an imitation of Gregor Mendel's charts for heredity[22], the right page contains several labeled images of molds, spores, or lichen (3-4). The next section implies a progression by tackling the subjects of leaves and roots, as with the previous section the variations noted seem to be in shape, color, and size (5-6). The content of these two first sections appear to be realistic studies of differences in morphology. However, the following two pages begin the descent into surrealism as they show a similar collection of text and images depicting the placement of a glowing pod on a branch (7-8). Without being able to decipher the text, the one inference one can make is that the glowing pod has shifted position on the same branch in sixteen positions. The next section depicts plants, tubers, flowers, and other botanical organisms steering heavily into the surreal (9-16). As with some of the previous codices discussed, the instructional dimension of the structure of the pages aspires to the legitimacy of a catalogue of plants, even if the borderline surrealistic representation of the plants suggest they are not real: a plant which appear to mimic a cloud and literally waters itself (10), a plant which mimics spiderwebs or a piece of paper complete with writing (12), plants with flowers than resemble wrapped candies, or ladders (14), plants which resemble lit matches, sharpened pencils, fried eggs, or scissors (16). As the codex continues to progress through its presentation of botanical life, it becomes clear that they are representative of examples which do not exist. The chapter continues to get

[22] Gregor Mendel was a 19th century pioneer of genetics whose breeding experiments showed how cosmetic traits (such as the color of a pea) were passed down through heredity. His conclusions are often represented in charts which show the patterns of heredity and bear a similarity to some of Serafini's charts in this and other chapters.

increasingly surreal as the plants become less and less probable: following discussions show cross-sections of the plant's roots as they grow in different soils. Some of them float magically above their roots on little clouds without any connective tissue and others act as little islands in ponds (18). A recognizable apple is made bizarre by including a parasitic twin along with a banana which as a translucent section composed of what appear to be pills (22). Next is a section devoted to hybrid fruits, vegetables, and tubers that contain comically impossible combinations (23-24). Rather than the expected hybridization that occurs in real plants where two different organism produces a third which has traits of the other two, these "hybrids" are chimeras where its parent parts are literally cobbled together like Frankenstein's monster: a banana studded with cherries growing off a grapevine, or a bulb of fennel with walnuts for leaves and a radish at its base, or a green pepper filled with soup. Trees that seem to get fed up with their current location, raise roots, and swim away to new locations (27-28). The chapter on botany ends with what appears to be a discussion of agriculture and the interaction between people and plants. As with the other content, there are surreal representations along with the images of a gardener; plants that become floating balloons, plants which grow into useful forms such as fountain pens and chairs (29-36). The literal nature of section on botany is fundamental to the universe which Serafini is building in his codex: there is no subtlety to the surrealism, the illustrations lead the reader to believe that the built-in function of his "practical" plants is to be taken at face value. The plant which looks like a pen probably functions as one, the one that is a chair can be sat on when it is matured, the wrapped candies are edible. One interpretation could be that Serafini is commenting on the nature of taxonomical categorization by taking it to its extreme: humans ascribing of order and function to an uncategorized universe is artificial, otherwise it would look (and function) more similarly to the fantastic one he has created where meaning and use of the object is undeniable.

The second chapter is devoted to biology and begins with several pages of text including another index for this section (32-34). It is notable that Serafini is not afraid to provide pages in the

codex which are entirely text and have no imagery; this works to the effect of adding legitimacy to the possibility that the text in question is in some way legible and contains useful information. In comparing it with previously discussed illuminated manuscripts like the English bestiaries or the religious codices, the *Codex Seraphinianus* mimics the wealth of information that those works contain by using this clever device. I don't mean to say that it would not be as effective if it were to mimic the pre-Colombian codices and favor artistic depictions over language, but as displayed it implies that the text is as important as the images by the length of these sections. As with the chapter on botany, the biology chapter shares a similar structure and progression of sub-topics which adds understandable context that a reader can compare across different chapters. The first four series of animals discussed appear to be microscopic or small animals which exist in several environments: some float in light from streetlamps (37), some float amidst what appears to be plant matter (39), and yet others live in the different colors of the rainbow (40-41). As with the presentation of the botanical specimens, these seem to be organized and labeled according to their similarities and differences in such a way that again mimics old scientific textbooks. Just as with the botanical section, the size, complexity, and absurdity of the animals increases as the chapter continues with the next section devoted to larger animals that take on similarly amusing characteristics: an animal that is also a key, another that has wheels, a flying pencil, a blob-like creature with a tennis racket for a tail among others (42-43). This chapter also contains the image of the donut shaped circle which seems to give birth to ladybugs: in the broader context provided by the page devoted to this the nature of the donut is expanded on by an image showing that the donuts exist on the branches of trees in their natural state, eventually bursting into lady-bugs, presumably due to their "ripeness" as seen in a section of text that appears to include commentary about the darkening color of red (47). The act of returning to the image on the cover is significant in that Serafini is calling back to something which might have been taken as purely artistic and providing deeper understanding of its nature. This act lends a feeling that nothing in the codex is merely there for aesthetic purpose, but

rather a representation of a “real” thing. Next there are several pages devoted to the containment of animals in man-made enclosures (48-53). These mostly resemble the small barriers that are sometimes erected on beaches to protect turtle eggs before hatching, though predictably, the strange eggs, pods, and creatures being sheltered within the fences are difficult to characterize. The following section is devoted to animals that live in hives (54-57). After those is a section devoted to fish which contains an often-reproduced image of fish shaped in such a way that they look like a pair of eyes when they are at the surface of the water (58-63). The bestiary continues with snakes doing amusing things such as being used a shoe-laces (67) and odd birds which never hatch or are only rooster heads with feet (74). Another section is devoted to eggs, dwelling on size, shape, and thickness of the shell while also adding a surreal twist by including humanoids who lay eggs and live in trees (76-79). The animals get larger as dogs (81), deer (82), and horses (83) are all given their own fantastic alterations such as fleas that hold balloons, deer heads that grow like plants, and horse armor that includes spring-loaded horse shoes. As with the call-back to the ladybug donut image, the organization and pattern to the presentation of this bestiary is a clear allusion to real encyclopedias which seek to organize animals into logical progressions of “linked” examples which are related in some way, be it geographical or evolutionarily. These examples are organized in a logical (though partially indecipherable) way to suggest that the relationship between the real and the fantastic is more complex than just a series of invented drawings of nonexistent animals.

The third chapter (92-110) is one of the most abstract in that it deals predominantly with disembodied legs which have a variety of vestigial replacements for what would be the body. As with previous chapters, it does have an index, though this one appears to have several empty categories (95). This chapter is somewhat difficult to describe due to its abstract nature but does have a considerable amount of consistency it its oddness. The chapter presents numerous legs without bodies that are themed according to costumes or items such as harlequins, fins, spikes, noodles, clouds, rainbows, and paper scrolls (96-97) Whatever these creatures are, the labeling and accompanied text appears to be

consistent. After the catalog, the creatures are presented in a number of situations–with lights participating in a gondola procession (99), white ones with blob-like appendages that seem to sweep the floor at a trash heap (101), ones made of yarn interacting with normal people in a park (104), and ones with umbrellas walking on a busy intersection amongst other typical people (105). The chapter ends with a dual section showing variations of the creatures with torsos (108), only to explode on the next page revealing leopards inside the torsos which escape after bursting forth (109). Interpreting this chapter is difficult, it is hard to discern if the object of study are legs or pants or both. Still, the chapter's consistency in dealing with the subject carries it by emphasizing that whatever the subjects are intended to be, they exist in varieties of not only aesthetic difference, but also of function. As with the previous sections, it is perhaps a commentary on ascribing an order which is ultimately artificial and only exists in the drive for humans to understand their surroundings through categorization.

The fourth chapter devotes itself to sub-atomic particles and physics-like interactions of particles and rays. Unlike the last chapter, this one seems to return to a more traditional approach—the images describe things which are analogous to a real scientific study, ranging from four pages discussing sub-atomic particles (114-117), two pages of what appears to be about magnetism or polarity in simple and compound particles (118-119), two pages on strands of intertwined particles which resemble DNA (120-121), a section on other sub-atomic particles and their measurements (122-127). The chapter ends with what appears to be experiments used on particles and minerals, showing devices and processes that lead to discernable "product" (128-139).

The fifth chapter concentrates on engineering mechanisms and automation (141). As with previous chapters, it has several pages of text and an index as an introduction (142-144); it is then followed by a collection of automated feather-dusters (145). The humor in this section is premised in the concept of over-design, or rather, devices which have been created with extraneous components such as convoluted handles, multiple blades attached to wheels, and mechanisms whose purpose is

indecipherable from their construction (146-147). The perfect example of the type of over-design featured in this chapter is the three-handled shovel which one would surmise could allow three people to simultaneously use the same tool, but in practice would be impossible to maneuver efficiently, if at all (147). As the chapter progresses the devices become increasingly elaborate: a machine designed to transcribe writing through a series of gears, pulleys and sensors, yet the design is so odd that it is difficult to tell which side is reading the writing and which is copying it (149). Other devices are difficult to understand or don't seem to do anything that would require a device at all such as a bicycle-powered shirt hanger (150) or an automated silverware dryer that consists mostly of just a large slide with a colander to allow water to drain (151). The next two inventions appear to move groups of people through no discernable purpose, one of them literally goes "in one ear and out the other" of a giant metal head, while a related device seems to extrude an endless line of people as if out of an anus (153). The impractical engineering continues for many more pages covering different wheeled inventions, conveyances, boats, and planes (154-165) The final inventions in the chapter include a rainbow-powered flying machine (166-167)[23] and two vehicles designed to automatically display recognizable hand-gestures (169). The last invention, a casket car with an exposed lower extremity of a body with the buttocks in the air is an image which has been reproduced in other sources as a prime example of the surreal nature of the of the codex (171). As with the previous chapters, Serafini is presenting engineering as a concrete science in this universe, producing physical objects that interact with their operators and their objectives, but which are at odds with practicality (or at least seem to be). Considering the indecipherability of the text, it is possible that this chapter is highlighting the alien nature of an object taken out of context.

[23] Aside: Italo Calvino interprets the device as producing the rainbows rather than being powered by them in his essay on the codex (addressed later in this chapter). Upon closer inspection, it may be correct .

The sixth chapter, concentrating on anatomy and anthropology, provides the most recognizable human forms in the entire work, peppered with strange alterations such as wheel feet, pen and hammer hands (178), a categorization of strange teeth and eyes (180-181), and a human body seemingly hybridized with plants (183). It is from this chapter that the most famous of all the *Codex Seraphinianus* images has been pulled: two lovers on a bare mattress in mid coitus who slowly merge and transform into an alligator which slithers away leaving just an empty bed (186-187). This image has been used in countless reviews and stand out posters as a prime example of Serafini's work. The next section is presented in an anthropological context, providing several examples of different tribal groups, their typical dress, and their dwellings (188-201). As with everything else in the codex, the costumes and dwellings imply a correlation between the tribe's location, their dress and homes; the people who live in houses suspended above water dress like fishes and don swimming goggles as part of their attire (191), while the trash-heap tribe wears and lives in garbage (196) and the people who live in huts built on the top of street lamps make their armor from traffic signs (197). Returning to the literal nature of the botany and bestiary chapters, Serafini is perhaps alluding to the artificial nature of categorization and taxonomy by presenting an anthropological relationship between these tribes and their locations which is so obvious that it is reflected in a way that leaves no doubt as to the function of their society as it is related to their proximity to a specific environment. In his universe, Serafini has constructed relationships which are impossibly unambiguous by being directly reflected in each tribe's clothing.

After the tribes, the codex shifts to professions including the businessman who has multiple interchangeable faces (203), the faceless general whose body is both fat and empty but as loaded with weapons (204-205). The next profession, and perhaps the most promising in terms of giving clues within the text, is the writer. A self-portrait of the author, wearing roller-skates and donning a fountainpen for his right hand, a giant ink bottle to his right as he scribbles writing on a note-pad in an easel, allowing some of the words to pour out onto the floor. In the second page, the author lies dead, impaled by a

giant ball point pen and appears to be bleeding ink (206-207). These pages contain is a unique detail that bares mentioning: the text on the page and the ink bottle all are in the same language as the codex, implying it is the natural language of the world in which the writer exists, yet on his notepad the language being written is French. The words are readable but partially obscured by the author, but what is written vaguely translates to "the orgiastic girl popped up and divined on the dike of Balbe…" (206). "Balbe…" is obstructed by a fold in the notebook but may be a reference to Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, with an imaginary French village called Balbec where narrator recounts early loves. Consideration of the use of French in this section might lead the reader to juxtapose the invented language and French: in this universe, French is the gibberish while the seraphinian language is the "real" mode of communication. By using French and including a passage which can be traced back to a real-world author, Serafini has again suggested that if the reader had the ability to decipher his invented language, they might find meaningful content. The opposite could also be suggested: Serafini's alter-ego in the fantastic universe is undertaking the same exercise, but in a mirrored fashion in that in his objective is to use the familiar to fool the reader into thinking there is meaning behind the writing when there is none.

The seventh chapter follows the theme of people and seems to concentrate on geography and anthropology (213). Several chapters are devoted to profiles of individuals, though the exact purpose of showing their differences is hard to discern from the context given; it could be regarding the hair-styles of different regions, or it could be something akin to phrenology[24] (217-221). Next, the chapter depicts different fantastic cities, such as one where the entire city is built from translucent bricks which have people embedded in them (223). As an architect, Serafini's preoccupation with buildings and people intersect some sort of commentary about the relationship between buildings and their inhabitants.

[24] Phrenology was a pseudoscience which saw a popularization in the 19th century claiming there was a relationship between the size and shape of the skull and traits such as intelligence or criminal tendencies.

Buildings unarguable exist for the purpose of being inhabited and as such it is possible that Serafini is extending his exploration of the fantastic to a relationship that is impossibly close, where the people are not only the cause of the cities, but the very materials of which they are build. A map interrupts the city-driven pages to show the way that an archipelago has been altered, presumably because of an expansion of a country or influence signified by a growing red area that spreads across the map (226-227). As with so many other sections, the images suggest something organized and familiar such as a map showing the growing influence of a global power because of the progression of a war. The chapter then turns to scenes from what appear to be different cities during what might be celebrations, rituals, or interactions between governments (228-243).

The eighth chapter is ironically short given that it centers around language and linguistics (245). The preface just before the index contains new patterns in the writing suggesting that it may be exposing the alphabet of the language in which the codex is written (246). This exposure of the alphabet again teases the reader/viewer with the possibility of translatability. This impossible promise is further expanded upon by the most playful image in the book: an imitation Rosetta Stone containing both the script that the codex is written in as well a new set of glyphs which are side-by-side on the tablet (249). As with the real artifact, this pseudo-Rosetta Stone shows similar broken edges on the tablet and multiple texts. The arrangement of the two columns of text further suggest they are the same content in different script by having a break in the visible text and a title line in the same place of similar length. Below the image of the professor figure pointing at the stone with a lecture rod there is text that further suggests the possibility of translation by showing what appear to be key phrases from the stone and their hieroglyphic equivalents side by side. A clear representation of its real counterpart, the implication in this page is that translation of the codex may be possible, yet it is not surprising that the alternate glyphs on the stone are no more real than the script they mean to translate, destroying the possibility immediately.

As with the brief phrase of French on the writer's notebook, the next two pages treat real punctuation as physical objects (250-251). The objects are recognizable as question marks, exclamation points, colons, semicolons, quotations, percentages, and brackets. The codex then returns to a similar treatment of the seraphinian text, showing it as not only writing but also physical in nature (252-263). At time the text appears to be made of different organic, botanic, or elemental materials (254-255). In one detail, a magnification of the script shows that it can be composed on microscopic roads with cars, rivers with fish, and even molded from endless bodies (261). A possible interpretation of this magnification is a commentary on the power of writing; that a series of scribbles (in this case literal scribbles) can contain more information in them through closer examination. The irony is that in the case of the *Codex Seraphinianus*, this examination is limited if not impossible. The final two pages of the chapter seem to imply that the written language may have some sort of infectious quality as one image shows a man drooling words onto a bib, another an unconscious person having words fished out of their mouth, and finally two restrained individuals which appear to be undergoing some sort of forced procedure to affect their use of language somehow (262-263). The relationship between language and living people appears to be explored through the transformation of the word as a physical object which can be handled and interacted with as easily as the page of a book. By solidifying the ephemeral nature of the words, Serafini is giving them literal weight and again highlighting that the artificial has become tangible in the universe he has built.

The ninth chapter (265) is divided into two separate topics, cooking (266-285) and clothing (286-303). As with the preceding chapters, the contents continue the surreal and fantastic themes showing varieties in each topic, some of them familiar such as what appears to be an examination of a mortadella-like meat (268-269), a croissant used as a fishhook when served with coffee (272-273), impossible skewered kabobs for grilling (274-275), and strange plates which allow for quick shoveling of food, or pre-chewing to allow it to be consumed through a straw (278-279). The clothing displayed

seems to be organized into related sets with specific functions, their colors, shapes, and textures match in each grouping, though their purpose is elusive (289-299). The final collection is of fantastic eyewear, which like so many of the other inventions, does not seem to be designed for practicality or function (300-303). By adding surreal and impractical embellishments to the fundamental nature of the relationship between people, food, and the tools that they use to facilitate the process of feeding, Serafini is highlighting the artificial nature of the use of such items he lampoons. While plates, skewers, and other utensils serve clear purposes in the "real" world, these are all fundamentally based on assumptions that are not necessarily logical, but rather human constructions based on etiquette. A fork and knife may exist to provide some advantage to cleanliness, but there is nothing fundamentally impossible or impractical to eating with one's hands.

The tenth chapter, another short one, is devoted to games of different kinds (305). Card games are an interesting combination of the familiar, such as the typical card representing a suit and number, and the alien, such as the "face card" of unrecognizable: instead of kings, queens, jacks and aces, these are replaced with the winged person with an animal's head for a body, the armless person, the centaur holding a sphere, and the rook (308-313). Other aspects of the game's rules are shown in different illustrations including a card with a hole in it which is meant for the player to look at his opponent. Chips appear to be used in the game, as well as an arm band which designates a player's suit. The suits appear to be: thorns (308), shells (309), a tadpole-like creature (310), and a gilded band (311). A board game using pins is shown (314) as well as what appears to be a game made up of shaking hands (315). Other games in the chapter are hard to decipher but appear to be out-door activities vaguely reminiscent of kite-flying, badminton, or gymnastics (316-321). As with the chapter on tools, the artificiality and arbitrary nature of games is at the core of this chapter. Though these games may seem impractical or bizarre, it could be argued that they are no more so than the perception of cricket to someone who is only aware of baseball or vice versa.

The final eleventh chapter is dedicated to architecture (323)[25]. It is composed of drawings of cities, architectural plans, and images of infrastructure. Some interesting examples to note are: are a rainbow city which becomes a beam of light at night (327), a city built on a dam (334), another suspended across a canyon (335), designs for elegant homes (338-339), parks, waterways, and farms (340-343), off-shore structures reminiscent of oil-rigs, but for unknown purposes (345), and sky-scrapers (346-347). Finally, and perhaps a reference to the imaginary labyrinths of Borges, there are several designs for structures containing mazes (350-353). Again, Serafini is challenging the tension between the practical, the cosmetic, and the arbitrary by putting front and center the assumptions that most viewers would have concerning the form and function or architecture. While many of the aspects of his imaginary buildings are impossible or at the least impractical, they all serve the purpose of introducing doubt to the nature of "real world" architecture. A modern city might look just as impossible or fantastic to an individual from the Stone Age and by drawing attention to this air of impossibility, Serafini is encouraging the reader to second-guess their assessment of their own world's architecture.

The *Codex Seraphinianus* retains its commitment to the artifice of structure by ending with a final index or glossary (355-356). As with the other similar indexing, it is impossible to know its true purpose, but its existence at the end of the codex serves the same structural function that it would if it were decipherable. The final page, perhaps an "afterword," is another example like the section on the self-referential writer or the pseudo-Rosetta Stone in that it breaks the "fourth wall" with the reader: the text of the page peels back as if revealing a hidden compartment in the book, the writing scrolls back onto itself losing some of the text behind it and revealing the bones of a hand, a ring nearby, with hopping lice of some sort and a pile of unidentifiable detritus against the wall (357). The text on the page contains scratched-out errors and the bones of the hand appear to be incomplete. Whatever

[25] It should be noted that Luigi Serafini is consistently referred to as an architect in his biographies: having this be a final chapter is significant as a central interest of the artist.

meaning the text may have wanted, the imagery that has been revealed points to finality, entropy, and loss, be it meaning or life. The inclusion of errors and corrections suggest fallibility and contrasts with the fundamental message of an encyclopedia as striving towards reliability. The final message, again, seems to be one of encouraging suspicion rather than the assumption of accuracy.

Experiencing the *Codex Seraphinianus* in a vacuum of direct context is part of the experience that it was designed to promote. The attempt at analysis done here approximates what the interaction with the "mysterious" book is meant to create. Yet, there is an irony to the increasing popularity that the book has enjoyed. Luigi Serafini has granted numerous interviews and participated in many follow-up interactions regarding the codex and from these has provided direct and clear answers which might even be counter-productive to way that his most well-known project works on its own. Searches online return a wealth of interviews across many publications, websites, and videos. Serafini does not seem to shy away from answering questions and as a result has confirmed several aspects of the codex.

In an interview titled "Look Inside the Extremely Rare *Codex Seraphinianus*, The Weirdest Encyclopedia Ever" from Wired Magazine in 2013, Serafini speaks of his inspirations and process for writing the codex. As with many other interviews, an important transformation which Serafini refers to is the fundamental shift in the sharing of information as the internet grew in popularity. Serafini tells of a hitchhiking adventure he had across the United States in the early 70s which was the birth of the inspiration for the codex: whenever he tells this story in interviews, he links it to the internet in that he explains that the experience of "making connections" across vast distances is one which was difficult in the 70s, but is now easy thanks to the hyper-connectivity people experience through the internet. He feels that the sharing of information is some sort of "proto blog" (3-4). Perhaps more importantly, when asked about the purpose of the codex, Serafini stated, "What I want my alphabet to convey to the reader is the sensation that children feel in front of books they cannot yet understand" (5). As with Uhlíř's assessment of the bibliophile in his discussion of the *Codex Gigas*, Serafini seeks to tap into that

feeling of the book being more than a collection of words and pictures meant to convey knowledge, but as a further object of wonder and desire brought on by the feeling of alienation at not being able to read it or know its meaning. Yet, at the same time, Serafini is able to go beyond the simple act of providing the reader/viewer with a garbled mess by introducing specifically crafted order, or hints of order, into his fabrication, thus insinuating deeper meaning where there is none.

In a 2015 interview for the Bird in Flight online publication, Serafini speaks to his influences and intent. When asked about the composition, Serafini paints the process in a way that harkens back to the medieval illuminated texts, "I worked for nearly three years. I lived like a monk, like a hermit. I didn't go anywhere, didn't talk to anyone, didn't make any money. It was a very ascetic life. I would just sit and draw and accompany the drawings with non-existent, mechanical writings" (6). He goes on to directly state the link between the codex and its predecessors when answering the question: "Are you a religious person? No. But the Codex without a doubt is an homage to all the great canonic books having to do with religion. To all of them, after all, religion is a codex too, it is an organizing system…" (8). Serafini's awareness of the relationship between the religious codices and his own speaks to a clear impact on how it is likely to be perceived by someone picking it up for the first time, either with or without context to its background. Unreadable as it may be, it has the potential to suggest its relationship with other objects that it resembles. As noted previously, Serafini also states that he hopes to continue to add to the codex throughout his life to further bolster the feeling that it is a "real" encyclopedia which is updated edition to edition,

> The Codex is constantly growing and developing, additions are being made to it, new chapters appear in new editions of it. I am going to keep it this way. When I am too old to go on, I will call a competition and choose the person who is going to make additions to the Codex after me. (11)

Still, the life of the *Codex Seraphinianus* after its publication clashes with its initial sense of wonder in one key aspect: its rarity and mystery. As the popularity of the work has increased primarily through its popularity on the internet, Serafini has been quick to dismiss attempts to claim that there is meaning in the writing, rather than the imitation of meaning. The 2017 interview with Olivier Zahm for Purple Magazine in connection with a gallery exhibition of some of the original illustrations for the codex, Serafini states, as he does in many other interviews, that there is no "secret" to the text, that it is meaningless (1). Still, the reliability of Serafini's dismissal of the possible meaning of the text is suspect in some regards. When asked "what he thinks about when he writes," Serafini compares himself to a Sufi in a trance, implying that the act is automatic and that it doesn't have the organizational thought involved in other types of writing (1). This seems like an overstatement when one considers the meticulous structure of the writing itself, the way that it is organized into sections, often accompanied by charts and graphs, and most importantly, the consistency with which words match accompanying labeled notes on the illustrations an act which shows a very deliberate link between sections of the book, even though there may be no translation to the actual sentences. As with Fontcuberta, there may be an element in the way that Serafini presents his methods which is intended to further add mystery to the tome but insinuating that its composition is less planned than it was.

This suspicion is somewhat strengthened by some of the more bizarre related activity that has surrounded the *Codex Seraphinianus*, primarily the "University of Foolosphy" event which is documented in a video produced by François Gourd[26] and published November 25, 2015 on YouTube. This video consists of a pastiche of a live performance of poets, musicians, and projected images of the *Codex Seraphinianus* in what appears to be a disjointed attempt to bring the imaginary world presented in its pages to life. The event is also interspersed with interviews of Serafini and scholars who vacillate

[26] An enigmatic French-Canadian figure who is best known for forming the "Rhinoceros Party" aimed as an artistic critique of government, emphasizing absurdity. He has also identified himself as a poet.

between serious discussion of the contents of the codex and performative interpretation like the live event in that it acts as if the codex is representative of a real world. The event itself appears to have happened to a packed audience who witnessed what appears to be individuals' interpretations of what the imaginary language would sound like when spoken, or sometimes as accompanied by instruments or dissonant sounds produced in several ways such as speaking nonsense through a teapot. The performance, while visually similar to some aspects of the codex, lacks the connective tissue that is found in the text itself. The attempts by the performers to replicate the language comes across less as an organized language and more like glossolalia or "speaking in tongues." The counterpoint between what is going on the stage and the images which have been chosen to be projected seems in most, if not all cases, to be random and lacks the cohesive nature of the work itself (5:25, 21:00). Serafini seems to be an active participant though: he is filmed riding a merry-go-round and putting a clown nose on a statue in Paris (4:14). The interviews with Serafini do produce some useful background information such as highlighting the first image that was created noted earlier (8:10), once again confirming that the language is not decipherable (4:53) and retelling the inspiration that came from hitchhiking across the USA (6:10). He further adds detail to the process of creating and "stabilizing" the text, which he said took two years of the composition time (9:05). That detail underscores that there was a lot of thought put into its structure and writing and not the "trance" he has claimed elsewhere in this video. Serafini also comments on the bibliophilic nature of the original printings of the book, highlighting their rarity and prized nature as collector's items (26: 50). The impression given by the video is that by 2015 there was a cult-following of the *Codex Seraphinianus* which culminated in the strange attempt to bring its knowledge to the stage. Still, there is a feeling of overexposure when one watches this video: in attempting to bring that world to life, it is disconnected from its source which speaks more to the cult of fandom than it does to a real analysis of the text to determine where the line is drawn between what little can be deciphered from its patterns and what is just gibberish.

A good alternative to this video can be found in the preface to the third edition of the *Codex Seraphinianus* by Italo Calvino, who stepped in to write it on short notice after the untimely death of Rolan Barthes who had originally agreed to be its author. An online translation by Theodora Lurie, allows an evaluation of Calvino's experience with the codex to show a much more thorough exploration of what the experience is of picking the book up without context and attempting the personal exercise of deciphering it in a vacuum. Calvino gets to the crux of the experience immediately;

> The anguish triggered by this Other Universe derives less from its unfamiliarity than from its unnerving resemblance to our own world. So too with the writing, which is believable enough to belong to some alien but not unfeasible linguistic zone. On reflection, one realizes that the peculiarity of Serafini's language is not just in its alphabet, but in its syntax as well. The universe evoked by this language, as illustrated in the encyclopedia's plates, almost always contains things that we recognize; it's their relation to one another, the bizarre juxtaposition of these things, which strike us as strange. (I say "almost always" because there are also unrecognizable forms which serve a very important function, as I'll try to explain later on). The crucial point is this: if Serafini's language has the power to bring life to this world whose syntax is so alien to us, then beneath the mystery of its indecipherable surface it must contain an even deeper mystery that concerns the internal logic of language and thought. (1)

Calvino's assessment of Serafini's work is spot on: it is through the imperfect analysis of the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the recognizable and unrecognizable that these juxtapositions show the reader the clear line between what can be understood in the codex and what remains a mystery. The act of "attentive reading" as Fontcuberta would say, allows the reader to build a concrete (though imperfect) understanding of the world of the *Codex Seraphinianus*. It will always be partial, but it is considerably more meaningful than the scattered nonsense spouted by the performers on the stage of the "foolosophy" event. The key word that Calvino uses is "syntax," and it is what differentiates it from the trance-like mutterings of those who have not caught on to the self-referential patterns which the book contains. To put it plainly, the order of things in the *Codex Seraphinianus* is not random: it has

indexes, references, notes, and clearly traceable structure. The reader is never able to fully "crack the code," but all these tools are effective at convincing the reader that there *is* a code to crack. The *Codex Seraphinianus* can hardly be called a random collection of images and scribbled fake language as it is highly organized into discretely identifiable topics, progressions, and has a logic, that while flawed, highly suggests that it is "real" when it is not. Calvino goes on to give his interpretation of some of the images, which are sophisticated and clever, thus proving that despite the language being indecipherable, meaning is being effectively transferred to the reader through recognizable patterns. Surrealism remains, but the syntax and organization that Calvino describes is undeniable and as a result, the *Codex Seraphinianus* continues to inspire its readers to search for a translation or explanation beyond what is truly capable of being understood.

As a coda for a discussion of the *Codex Seraphinianus*, it might be amusing to consider its relationship to Jorge Luis Borges' "The Book of Sand," a short story regarding the acquisition of a possibly magical tome by a book collector who then becomes obsessed with its ambiguous and undefinable nature. Luigi Serafini has mentioned Borges in passing amongst his influences (BA3YLON, 3:55) and reading the short story about a mysterious tome, it is easy to see that the *Codex Seraphinianus* bares striking similarities to the fictional manuscript. The Book of Sand has near magical properties: a book whose pages are so thin and densely packed that flipping through them one can never quite get a grip on the first or last page, the description of the tome as being indecipherable and composed with "unfamiliar characters," filled with knowledge that has been arbitrarily paged, and perhaps religious in nature (481). Once again harkening back to Uhlíř's description of the fetishism of the bibliophile,

> I showed no one my treasure. To the joy of possession was added the fear that it would be stolen from me, and to that, the suspicion that it might not be truly infinite. Those two points of anxiety aggravated my already habitual misanthropy. I had but a few friends left, and those, I stopped seeing. A prisoner of the Book, I hardly left my house. I examined

> the worn binding and the covers with a magnifying glass and rejected the possibility of some artifice. I found that the small illustrations were space at two-thousand-page intervals. I began noting them down in alphabetized notebooks, which very soon filled. They never repeated themselves. At night, during the rare intervals spared me by insomnia I dreamed of the book. (483)

The narrator's obsession becomes unsustainable. He first considers destroying it to free himself, but fearing that an infinite book will burn infinitely, decides to lose the book instead, placing it on the shelves of the National Library without paying attention to where (483).

Though the provenance of the *Codex Seraphinianus* is clear and its now waning rarity has stripped away its commoditization as an object difficult to view, its contents still seek to bring the same sense of forbidden wonder and indecipherability as the fictional Book of Sand by teasing the reader/viewer with a sense that there is more meaning than there actually is. Perhaps ironically, its popularity has now fully exposed it—no longer lost on some obscure shelf of a vast labyrinthine library, it now is paraded out in garish exhibitionism; circus clowns on a stage fruitlessly attempting to imitate its language. Hirsch's example of an author who has changed over time may apply here: the original mystery imbued into a faux-ancient codex has become performance art, its carnival atmosphere accurate to the book's illustrations, but failing in its structural integrity. Still, Calvino's suggestion stands as a truer approach to its waning uniqueness; the experience of ignoring the noise of the subsequent revelations and pursuing the codex in its simplest form and seeing the influences from which it draws can lead to a very personal reading of it which with the proper context makes the reader feel like they have attempted to touch the Book of Sand.

The fantastic nature of the subjects within would likely lead a reasonable reader to the conclusion that they were handling a work of art rather than a real collection of otherworldly knowledge. Still, "attentive reading" would nonetheless inspire many questions, which might cause the

reader to have second thoughts about what they were viewing. The images catalog an impossible world in an undecipherable language, however, the line at which the codex goes into the invented is not as clearly drawn as might at first be seen: page numbers can be identified, titles and labels are clearly referential, organization into clear topics exists. An “attentive” reader who had avoided any background information about the codex would without doubt have many questions about the line between the clearly fantastic and the amount of information that is discernable in its pages. As Serafini has stated overtly; the experience of picking up an unknown text in an unknown language has a predictable effect of inspiring curiosity to know more about what it is. The sense of wonder that a child has in leafing through a book whose language is unknown to them is the first step in seeking out more knowledge. Still, while a person may be inspired to learn a new language by picking up a book in Latin, Chinese, or whatever foreign tongue is being considered, Serafini is striking at the core of this experience by providing a language which is not decipherable in that way. Instead, it could be argued that the inspiration leads to a different type of learning; by exposing the artifice, the reader/viewer is led to increased critical thinking, skepticism, and ultimately a better understanding of the possibility that the answer to their inquisitive nature may not be as satisfying as a clear translation, but rather a call to accept the possibility that no translation is possible.

Chapter 5:

The Voynich Manuscript

The previous chapter explored a fictitious codex begging to be deciphered; a physical object reminiscent of the type described by Borges in his labyrinthian libraries. While Serafini's work is undoubtedly fabricated, puzzles of the world's libraries still remain lost behind obscure shelves. The process by which actual examples of Book of Sands are evaluated is eerily similar with the *Codex Seraphinianus*. The Voynich Manuscript is one such puzzle that continues to confound its readers, even after hundreds of years of examination. Those who have leafed through its pages have likely felt the sense of wonder and curiosity in visually examining the strangely constructed pages and alien script—and likely felt the aura of something unique and valuable which Serafini sought to inspire with his codex.

The Voynich Manuscript also harkens to documents seemingly geared towards collecting and cataloguing information as seen in the historical background of the previous chapter. The encyclopedias, codices, and illuminated manuscripts open the door for the Voynich Manuscript to potentially "fit" into those categories. Rather than revisiting the same type of examples used to set the stage for the *Codex Seraphinianus*, it is productive to approach the concept from a critical approach. Michael Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) seeks to interrogate the categorization of knowledge into discreet, logical collections in the history of science. On the cover of the 1994 Vintage Books edition is a picture of five yellow nestling Russian dolls, lined up meticulously, and labeled "fig. 111." This frontispiece is illustrative of the examples covered in the previous chapter; clear illustrations of an item with a label indicating to the reader that there is further information to be seen elsewhere. In this case there isn't, but the cover

serves as an archetype for the concept of the organization of knowledge that has been explored in the codices and encyclopedias previously.

Foucault's preface tells of his inspiration from Borges' fictional short-story Chinese encyclopedia Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge, which like so many of Borges' invented sources, sounds plausible as a title but quickly deteriorates upon closer inspections. The "certain Chinese encyclopedia" describes a taxonomy which launches Foucault's discussion into the history and logic behind the idea of classification of knowledge:

> 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b)embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) Fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'. (XV)

Foucault points to the struggle that these classifications engender; they are precise, but at the same time show little relation to each other and don't form any discernable spectrum or totality of the animals being classified; there doesn't seem to be any "common ground" to these enumerations and their disjointed nature calls attention to the juxtaposition between an imaginary, non-functional taxonomy as opposed to a logically constructed one (XVI). At the core of this exploration is the difficult concept of organizing the infinite, which Foucault labels as a central concern during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (17). The basic question being asked was: where to begin to organize seemingly endless knowledge? Foucault explores the history of attempts to create a standard system of organization through four concepts which he outlines as being the fundamental basis for taxonomies, or at least represent the thought process from which categorization first became organized historically.

The first among these is *convenientia*, which denotes proximity of items to one another but, "pertains less to the things themselves than to the world in which they exist" (18). Foucault provides a

relational example showing the relationship between the seed, the plant, the animal that eats the plant, and the man who eats the animal (19). All those discrete items are independent but connected by their proximity to each other in a relational thread which binds them all logically. Next is *aemulatio*, or emulation; where different things reflect each other even though they may lack direct connection such as the sparkling in the eye of a person to the sparkling of the stars (19-20). *Analogy* is the superimposition of *convenientia* and *aemulatio;* Foucault provides an example in the breakdown of a man's body as an analogy of a world with different parts of the anatomy corresponding to the different rivers, oceans, and landmasses (22). The last is *sympathies* which connotes the attraction between things such as heavy things being attracted to the ground while light things attracted to the air (23). These examples from which Foucault draws are arguably too reductive and as such dated; an attempt to categorize a set of examples using these four concepts would only be slightly more successful than an exercise using the ones in Borges' Chinese encyclopedia. Nevertheless, the core of which these principals speak are still useful from a conceptual perspective as examples of fundamental commonalities between things in order to find logical categorizations with which to collect and thus pass on knowledge in a useful way (as opposed to the chaotic and irrelevant taxonomies of which Borges speaks). Foucault's aim is to understand how meaning was brought to an unorganized universe: "This is why the face of the world is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words – with 'hieroglyphics'… all that remains is to decipher them" (27). Though the relationships established are artificial, the proximities, attractions, imitations, and similarities all work as possible frameworks with which to provide a description to a reader.

Foucault is also careful to point out that at the time that these explorations were taking place, "magic and erudition" shared an "unstable mixture of rational knowledge, notions derived from magical practices, and a whole cultural heritage whose power and authority had been vastly increased by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman authors. Perceived thus, the learning of that age appears structurally

weak…" (32). As a result of this, these early attempts at organization will have a mixture of what would eventually become solidified by the scientific method (reproducible results stemming from verifiable concepts tested repeatedly to form a relevant sample size for study) and the mysticism. This is exemplified by Isaac Newton who not only pioneered some of the most fundamental concepts in physical sciences but devoted also a considerable effort to advancing organization and thought in alchemy, occult, and religious matters. His groundwork in science remains foundational in the exact sciences, whereas his other works remained relatively ignored until receiving considerable attention today due to their juxtaposition with his legacy in the hard sciences.

The biggest advancement highlighted by Foucault is the transition from the mere presentation of information to its categorization and meaningful selection into something larger than the sum of its parts; by organizing knowledge into meaningful taxonomies and selectively omitting that which is extraneous, a "bigger picture" becomes visible when it wasn't accessible previously. Foucault uses a comparison of two naturalists with arguably the same access to facts, but different approaches:

> When Jonston wrote his *Natural history of quadrupeds*, did he know any more about them than Aldrovani did, a half-century earlier? Not a great deal more, the historians assure us. But that is not the question. Or, if we must pose it in these terms, then we must reply that Jonston knew a great deal less than Aldrovandi. The latter, in the case of each animal he examines, offered the reader, and on the same level, a description of its anatomy and of the methods of capturing it; its allegorical uses and mode of generation; its habitat and legendary mansions; its food and the best ways of cooking its flesh. Jonston subdivides his chapter on the horse under twelve headings: name, anatomical parts, habitat, ages, generation, voice, movements, sympathy and antipathy, uses, medicinal uses [2]. None of this was omitted by Aldrovandi, as he gives us a great deal more besides. The essential difference lies in what is *missing* in Jonston. The whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unraveled and removed: and the living being, in its anatomy, its form, its habits, its birth and death, appears as though stripped naked. (130)

The shift which Foucault is alluding to is the trend to, “replace the circular procession of the ‘show’ with the arrangement of the ‘table’.” (131). Rather than a random collection of details, these are arranged into a formulated narrative which allows for better comparison and contrasting by the consumer of the information that is relevant. Regardless of its empirical truth, it gives a foundation from which it can be refined and better understood as more information becomes available, but at the same time aims to collect whatever knowledge is at hand in that moment in time.

Taking Foucault’s discussion of these early attempts to catalogue knowledge, the Voynich Manuscript might gain some recognizable context from a visual perspective by exploring some of the ways that it imitates or deviates from other taxonomical texts. Understanding its place as a possible attempt to catalog selected knowledge, perhaps alchemical in nature, requires a consideration of the work’s substantial and verifiable history. Still, despite the controversial claims of many researchers during its long history, the manuscript remains mysterious. The 2016 edition of the manuscript stands aside previous reproductions in many ways: being published under the direct supervision of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University (the home of the book for the last five decades) it contains analysis and essays by those closest to the manuscript. Additionally, it reproduces every aspect of the book visually, and recreates the complex pull-out charts to give the reader a clear understanding of the unusual physical nature of the tome. The edition has an exhaustive physical reproduction of the manuscript, including not only details on every aspect of the binding, but also information regarding its provenance, and several essays reconstructing is past, its possible sources of influence, scientific study of the materials which compose it, and ultimately the pitfalls that have proven to this day insurmountable in its decipherment.

Deborah Harkness, an American scholar well familiar with alchemical history, is in a unique position to a thorough overview of the manuscript, clarifying how William M. Voynich came to acquire the manuscript and became one of the earliest modern proponents of its uniqueness and potentially

important knowledge (vi). Harkness gives quick overview of some of the interpretations of the manuscript including the misattributions to Roger Bacon and John Dee, both of which were dismissed as highly improbable given carbon dating results of the materials of construction (viii).

The preface by Raymond Clemens provides additional details of background and analysis done to the manuscript. Clemens clarifies the naming of the book by highlighting that while popularly known at the Voynich Manuscript, it also has typical catalogue names for anonymous works, in this case the Beinecke Cipher Manuscript or simply Beinecke MS 408 (xi). Clemens summarizes the scientific findings which show that the manuscript likely was written in the early 15th century (xii). Clemens also confirms one of the most crucial aspects of the manuscript: no other document has ever been found which uses the same alphabet (xiii).[27]

Clemens discusses the possibility that the Voynich Manuscript was a collaboration of multiple people, perhaps an illustrator and an author. This theory is bolstered by the fact that the illustrations would logically have been done first since intertwined text would have been much easier to place in the way it is in the manuscript and instances where text was done first, leaving spaces for illustrations at a later point often met with poor execution as can be seen in the examples provided where image and text overlap due to this poor planning (xiii). However, Clemens also points out that this is not verifiable and that in many instances of this kind of collaboration, evidence of marginalia with instructions for the illustrator are often present, which in this case it is not (xiv). As for the contents, Clemens outlines that the agreed upon sections in the manuscript fall under four categories: "herbal, astrological, balneological (relating to healing baths), and pharmacological," but also noting that while the sections

[27] There is a "book" referenced in the late 90s called the "Kolbrin Bible," but is somewhat dubious and is more than likely a modern hoax. It is described as including a mish-mosh of Egyptian, Celtic, New-Age, UFO, and other conspiracy theory laden information. The central issue is that there is no verifiable "object" of provenance, that is, there is no manuscript, only on-line information claiming such a document exists. There are, however images associated with it online which show what look like modern, possibly digital, text in the "Voynichian" alphabet. The lettering in the images available appear to be digital rather than hand-written, further suggesting that it isn't a real historical document, but a modern pastiche.

are recognizable as topics, their examples seldom conform to known real-world examples (xiv). Clemens also provides a 14th century Italian example which bears a striking resemblance to the Voynich Manuscript to highlight the similarities in the structure of the illustrations and text on the page (xiv). This comparison underlines the importance of the taxonomies which Foucault explored in his work, showing that despite the enormous hurdles that stand between understanding and the Voynich Manuscript, there are footholds that are rooted in traditions of the time. This is, however, contrasted with the subject matter which is explored, being unverifiable or referenced by the text and in a similar way to Serafini, forces the reader to find familiar patters with which to establish the "what" or contents of the text they are viewing.

Finally, Clemens provides some background and clarification regarding the later, readable pagination that was added to the manuscript likely sometime in the 16th century. Clemens suggests that while it was common for manuscripts to remain unpaginated at the time of the Voynich's creation, a later scholar or owner likely added the numbers out of convenience for referencing while trying to study it and as a side-effect of this numbering, it has been discovered that there were nine missing folios, for which the corresponding page numbers are missing (xvi). Clemens also clarifies that the pagination isn't the one familiar in modern books, but rather refers to the specific page both front and back, as a result, the agreed-upon referencing for the Voynich Manuscript is to have the page number followed by either r for "recto" being the front or v for "verso" being the unpaginated back page (xvii).

The verifiable chain of possession for the Voynich Manuscript is not without controversy either. The next essay by René Zandbergen provides a list of verified owners up to its acquisition by Voynich. Despite several gaps in the time-line, there are a handful of documented owners that can be traced back to the late 16th and early 17th century as the first known owner, Jacobus Horcicky de Tepenec's signature was discovered on the first page during analysis (5). The manuscript then passed on to a renowned alchemist, Georgius Barschius who spent considerable time trying unsuccessfully to decipher the

manuscript and accounts for the first correspondence that discusses the manuscript and its mystery (5). The manuscript passed to Johannes Marcus Marci after Barschius' death and Marci continued to search for collaborators with which to attempt to solve the puzzle (6). Marci's correspondence is also the first recorded mention that the manuscript was originally sold to Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II and that it was attributed to Roger Bacon, both claims without substantiating evidence (3). After Marci the trail of the ownership becomes muddled, but it is assumed that it passed to the Jesuit order in Rome as it was kept with several other works that were purchased as a collection and which were considered valuable enough by the Jesuits to be kept in private libraries rather than the general library to avoid confiscation during the unification of Italy (7). In 1903, 380 Jesuit owned manuscripts were sold to the Vatican and it is assumed that the cipher manuscript was among them due to the proximity of other works which were part of the package that Voynich would later purchase in secrecy (7). The secret sale of the manuscript collection took 9 years to complete and the circumstances of the sale remain mysterious and poorly documented (8). The frontispiece of the Yale reproduction also provides a copy of a hand-written, posthumously opened note in which Voynitch's wife Ethel speaks of the secrecy with which the tomes were purchased from a Jesuit named Joseph Strickland, though this has not been corroborated or the reason for the secrecy revealed (frontispiece 1). Given that Voynich became an accomplished bookseller in his life, and that the rest of the works he purchased as part of the deal yielded him with a "small fortune" (8), it is prudent not to assume that the secrecy was not specific to the cipher manuscript, but rather the sale itself, which may not have been fully approved by the Vatican.

The subject of Voynich's connection with the manuscript which would later borrow his name often questions the possibility that Voynich was either a forger or was otherwise trying to use the undecipherable text as a money-making scheme. Arnold Hunt's biographical chapter on Voynich paints a subtler series of facts which point to a sincerer, but still financial relationship with the text. Voynich's legacy is a varied one, painting him as fluent in 20 languages, both serious and eccentric, successful and

struggling, but always consumed with a thirst for knowledge, and possessing an incredible memory (11). His early life was filled with adventures as a revolutionary in Russia. This led to his imprisonment and later escape taking a long and winding route across Siberia, Mongolia and China before emigrating to England. There he became a part of the anti-Tsarist movement in London and while working on the group's publishing efforts, was able to get both the taste and knowledge of publishing endeavors. He also became part of the "tea and anarchy" circle described as, "a lively, creative, occasionally comical mixture of English upper-middle-class liberalism and Russian revolutionary socialism" (12). This exposure to the intellectual circles in London was instrumental in the inspiration to delve into book selling,

> Voynich had no experience of antiquarian bookselling—by his own admission, he did not even know the titles of the standard reference books and bibliographies – but he was widely read, well traveled and cosmopolitan in outlook, with an exceptional memory and a remarkable gift for languages, all of which, in the insular world of the London book trade, gave him an immediate advantage over his competitors (13)

As his business prospered and it became clear that he had a talent for bookselling, his interests shifted away from his revolutionary roots and became a dedicated businessman (13). Voynich developed a well-respected reputation early in his career due to his ability to provide thorough bibliographical information along with his stock and while his books were not necessarily the most notable examples at first, he was known to occasionally carry rare or unique items (14). His growing standing amongst the book-selling community opened doors and increased his ability to shift into rarer books such as illuminated medieval manuscripts (15).

Returning to the question of whether there was any chance that Voynich could be the perpetrator of a well-constructed forgery (and despite the physical evidence that contradicts such a theory): there are a few instances early in his career where Voynich had sold forged items, one of which to the British Museum. While there is no question as to whether the miniature in question was fake,

what is known is that the quality of the forgery was sophisticated enough to have fooled the expert the museum and though the provenance of the item should have raised red flags to anyone seeing it, it is highly unlikely that Voynich would have risked his reputation over a 75£ sale when he had so many other legitimate works (16). Though it is impossible to know for sure, the few instances of involvement with forgeries seem more like the mistakes of someone early in their career than an attempt to defraud and given the consistent growth of his reputation along with his legitimate business success, it seems likely that these were just honest missteps.

Voynich's own assertion of the meaning behind the manuscript was steadfast. Having received with accompanying information stating that it was the work of Roger Bacon, Voynich was also convinced that it had been sold to Rudolf II by the famous alchemist John Dee, though carbon dating would later prove both associations almost impossible (4). As for the contents, the exploration of the four sections in later essays give good reason to believe that Voynich's exposure to "real" alchemical texts would have likely given him some of the "tropes" which were common in such works and recognizing them in the cipher manuscript he unsurprisingly assumed it to be another work of alchemical knowledge. Still his inability to decipher it limited his success marketing it and created a somewhat unique juxtaposition between his fascination with the work and his desire to sell it; this would lead him to refer to it as his "ugly duckling" (17). Like the ugly duckling of the children's story, Voynich was absolutely convinced of the work's hidden value would someday come to light and assigned a ridiculous asking price for the time of $100,000, stating as well: "I will prove to the world that the black magic of the Middle Ages consisted in discoveries far in advance of twentieth-century science" (18).

Voynich died of lung cancer in 1930 after struggling through the Great Depression, which took a considerable toll on his business (18-19). Though not with the wealth at the height of this success, his estate did survive the accounting of his debts and what was left over was split between his wife Ethel and Anne Nill, his personal assistant and close collaborator, with a slight majority of the estate going to

his wife (19). Voynich left specific instructions to have the cipher manuscript sold to a public institution rather than a private collector, likely inspired by his insistence of its importance. It languished without a buyer for 30 years until Ethel died and Nill inherited it. Nill in turn sold it to another prominent book seller, H.P. Kraus, with an agreement that she would receive a portion of any proceeds from a future sale. He in turn attempted to sell it unsuccessfully for $160,000 as the "Roger Bacon (Voynich) Cipher MS." Despite some buzz developing and many scholars asking for access to the manuscript, Kraus was not able to find a buyer and finally donated it to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library in 1969, where it remains today (19).

The next chapter on the physical findings by conservationists and scientists credited to Paula Zyats, Erin Mysak, Jens Stenger, Marie-France Lemay, Aniko Bezur, and David D. Driscoll, provides a wealth of technical information on how the Voynich manuscript was analyzed, dated, and compared to contemporary documents to establish its likely age; in their own words:

> This chapter reports the findings of Yale University's library conservators using their trained eyes, knowledge, and experience with historic bookbinding techniques, parchment production, inks, and pigments. This group's insights are complemented by the results of advanced imaging techniques and a variety of material analyses carried out by scientists at Yale and elsewhere (23).

From it there are details pertinent to this discussion, though readers are encouraged to seek out the original for its thoroughness and level-headed approach to contextualizing the manuscript as well as can be done based on its physical qualities.

Unlike the codices which have been discussed previously, the Voynich Manuscript is physically small and unassuming, lacking a proper cover and no details of its author, title, or similarly identifying marks (24). The binding style is rare, though not unique, and inconsistencies in the methods are likely due to a combination of misplaced binding holes, insect damage, and later rebinding, likely from the 18th

century (25-26). An illustration in the larger fold-out astrological section (86r6) shows a stylistic similarity between battlements drawn in the manuscript and architecture common in the 14th and 15th centuries from southern Germany and northern Italy (27). Analysis of the vellum used for the pages verified that it was calfskin and while this is not unusual, the sizes and quantities used are somewhat rare and would have meant a considerable financial investment for whoever created it (27). Carbon dating of the document places it within the date rages of 1404 and 1438 with a reasonable accuracy (28). Extensive analysis of the skins and ink shows nothing problematic concerning the methods used for its production given the results of the carbon dating, though further study is suggested in those methods which may allow for additional narrowing of the area of provenance (28-29, 33-35). An interesting side-note of this section is that remnants of an attempt to decipher the alphabet and assign it to roman characters was found on the first page; though barely visible in the reproduction, it seems to be evidence of an early scholar's attempt at breaking the code (32). All things considered, the physical evidence seems to point to the document being legitimate in that it was produced in the early 1400s with methods consistent of that time and showing no reason to suspect that Voynich was involved in any subterfuge beyond insisting on its meaning, subscribing to the theory that Roger Bacon was the author, and asserting that it was in fact an alchemical or occult work.

The cryptographic analysis of the Voynich Manuscript has been thoroughly discussed in the next essay by William Sherman (39). While there is evidence that the manuscript has been attempted to be deciphered consistently throughout its known existence (such as the partially erased alphabetical comparison on the first page), Sherman concentrates on the well-documented 20th century attempts, as previous endeavors lack documentation as to the logic and methodology used. Sherman begins his summary by speaking to the classification of the text itself, which has been referred to consistently as being "based on Roman miniscule characters" (39-40). This is a problematic statement as previously discussed, there is no other example of this writing in any other document.

The first reasonable attempt to decipher the manuscript was undertaken by William Romaine Newbold in 1921, an eminent historian specializing in medical history and philosophy. Assuming the author was Roger Bacon based on Voynich's assertion, he started his analysis using the types of codes and ciphers known to Bacon and settled on a dramatic finding of the being described as,

> …anagrammed micrographic shorthand. This type of cipher requires transposition (changing the order of the letters, abbreviation using a system taken from ancient Greece), and micrographic notation (whereby individual pen strokes within a single character, when magnified serve as shorthand symbols for other letters) (40).

Though his claims were met with brief excitement, it was quickly dispelled by an eminent medievalist, John Matthews Manly who all but decimated the whole system and ultimately showed that Newbold simply "[saw] only what he wanted" (40). Manly then enlisted one of the top military code creators/breakers, William F. Friedman who headed an informal group of his colleagues to study the Voynich Manuscript at length using not only conventional methods, but also some of the earliest computers available from IBM (41). By 1954 Friedman had collaborated with a significant number of accomplished academics including not only code-breakers, but also mathematicians and historians. After decades of study they never got further than deciding that the alphabet was of southern German or northern Italian and erroneously attributing it to the 15c (pre-carbon dating results). In 1959 Friedman gave up and made a final statement in an article called "Acrostics, Anagrams, and Chaucer," which playfully concealed its own code to be broken within the article itself. Upon his death in 1970, no one had been successful in breaking the code and the sealed solution was reprinted stating, "The Voynich MS was an early attempt to construct an artificial or universal language of the *a priori* type. – Friedman" (41-42). The fact that Friedman's code was of such strength that it required the key to be decoded after his death was perhaps his way to proactively head off critics who would question his team's skills as cryptologists. Though there have been additional attempts to decipher the code since

(and these will be addressed later) Sherman's summary of the 20th century attempts clarify that these were not insignificant. Friedman's conclusion, as unsatisfying as it is, may have been interpreted as deepening the mystery—however, in evaluating the text later in this chapter, I argue that he may have been closer to solution than modern claims of deciphering have managed.

Returning to Foucault's discussion of the familiar and unfamiliar as related to taxonomies, Jennifer M. Rampling's essay on the link to alchemical traditions within the manuscript outlines what are the likely inspirations for the illustrations as these are the only real foothold with which the content can be considered (45). As with the illustrations in Serafini's codex, approaching the Voynich Manuscript visually is the only option once the text has been exhausted for clues to meaning; still, Rampling does warn that the assumption that the text and the images may not have the type of clear relational links that are seen in other texts (such as the *Codex Seraphinianus*) (45).

The one tradition which seems to approximate (though not directly match) the illustrations at a recognizable level is alchemy. Alchemical texts are known to use analogies to talk about chemical processes, such as describing these interactions as being analogous to human reproduction. Such analogies were easier to illustrate, so it may be a reasonable assumption that the illustration in the Voynich Manuscript may not be taken literally if they have meaning. These traditions were well-established around the time the manuscript was likely produced, so the conventions of mixing text and images for a document of that time would reasonably lead to the assumption that its creator(s) drew on some inspiration regardless of whether the text has meaning (46). While the work does conform to some known practices of cataloguing and as such, conclusions can be made as to what sources were known to the author(s).

One of the most compelling examples provided by Rampling is a 15th century alchemical illustration showing women bathing in fountains in a manner reminiscent of the Voynich Manuscript

(47). Other illustrations from the same treatise show gold and silver, personified by a king and queen, bathing in a hexagonal bath and being united by a dove. These different images represent a chemical reaction between metals and solvents to produce new materials (48). Despite the similarities, Rampling is careful to note that what the Voynich Manuscript lacks are the clear interactions between allegories for certain chemicals. The figures in the cipher manuscript are all female and do not seem to show any progression of the types of known interactions with which the alchemists pursued the philosopher's stone. Without a better understanding from the text, it is pure conjecture to assume that the manuscript was alchemical. In her words: "The absence of context means not only that we cannot read its images, but that we cannot know even that the images were intended to be read. Tropes become tropes because they signal to a known tradition, offering footholds to prospective readers. If the images in the manuscript do have meaning, and that meaning is concealed within the "Voynichese" text, then we must suppose that the meaning was only intended to be understood by a very limited audience of *cognoscenti*, in which case we remain, unfortunately, none the wiser" (50). Rampling backs off at the end of her piece, still leaving the possibility that the Voynich Manuscript has a clear meaning. However, her evidence and examples point to another possibility that is aligned with Friedman's inability to find anything decipherable in the text: there may be no meaning, and only the imitation of meaning. Bluntly: the author(s) of the Voynich Manuscript may have been aware of alchemy as a concept, but lacked the knowledge to understand it and in attempting to imitate it, was unaware of the alchemical "tropes" and in the end produced something with the basic structure of an alchemical treatise (herbs, astrology, alchemical apparatus and recipes), but lacking the detail and meaning of a real document.

Raymond Clemens conclusion titled "The World's Most Mysterious Manuscript" returns to the enigmatic letter written by Voynich's wife Ethel. Clemens points out that while the note's mention of the secret sale and vows of privacy on her husband's part are compelling details that add to the "mystery," they are unfortunately unsubstantiated and there is nothing to separate them from

embellishments that either Voynich could have made either out of a desire to increase its potential value or an earnest belief that it could one day lead to a significant historical, if not scientific discovery (53). Strangely enough, Clemens ends his summary on a note that brings the cipher manuscript into closer proximity with the *Codex Seraphinianus* than expected: the frustrating nature of its undecipherable text has inspired readers to create music, introduce it into young adult fiction, and add it to modern retellings of Sherlock Holmes (56-57). When presented with lack of context, readers are not satisfied, and might create works "inspired" by the elusive materials to offer a fictional solution to the puzzle. Perhaps Serafini's circus is not as garish as it seems. Perhaps these artistic explorations are the compromise made by individuals who cannot leave the book without a meaning alone, like Conan Doyle, embarking on providing an answer through fiction to an elusive riddle.

A "close reading" of the Voynich Manuscript offers similar challenges as one of the *Codex Serafinianus* in that the indecipherability of the text not only limits the direct meaning of the contents but also greatly limits the relationship that can be established between the illustrations and said text. Like the *Codex Seraphinianus* though, there are basic structures and "tropes" as Rampling calls them, as well as hints of possible taxonomic relationships by establishing discrete collections of botanical and pseudo-alchemical matters. Another difference that should be noted before attempting a similar exercise with the Voynich Manuscript as with Serafini's work is that they are of slightly different genres; as Rampling notes in her essay, the cipher manuscript most closely aligns with an alchemical text, though not perfectly, and this is a different type of document than the encyclopedic inspirations for Serafini. Rather than attempting a broad sweep of as much knowledge as possible, it has been suggested that the cipher manuscript theoretically tackles one subject, broken down into four sections which presumably add up to a practical manual of some sort.

The physical nature of the Voynich Manuscript is comparatively humbler than the *Codex Seraphinianus*, while the materials to produce it would have represented a considerable financial value;

the size of the manuscript was probably a result of what materials the person(s) responsible for it had access to at the time. While small, 10x7 inches, it has a considerable length of 234 pages, some of which fold out into larger sections as big as 6x2 pages (24). Whether the original cover was lost, or was never there, is not known. As mentioned before, the manuscript is divided into four sections: a catalogue of herbs, presumably of some useful properties, a section on astrological charts, a section regarding bathing (or perhaps representing something else allegorically as discussed in the essays), and finally a section with what are presumed to be recipes, perhaps pharmacological in nature. The text, like in Serafini's work, is relatively consistent though there are variations due to unrelated factors such as the quality of a batch of ink or a specific vellum.[28] Examining vellums 1r and 85r shows that variations in the text can be significant: the first page contains larger spacing and lighter ink, towards the bottom of the page the text slants slightly showing that the lining was done either by eye or at least not with the objective of meticulous alignment (1r), while on a comparable page of text in the bathing section, the script is smaller, darker, more tightly packed and slants towards the right immediately from the top (85r). The construction of words and sentences appears to be relatively consistent, though it is possible that the text might have had multiple authors, the variations aren't dramatic enough to make it obviously two different hands and later examples of errors, inconsistencies, and lack of attention to details may suggest that the variations are a product of a single scribe's limited artistic capabilities.

As mentioned previously, the illustrations in the herbal section seem likely to have been drawn first as the text intertwines between the leaves, branches, and roots, of the different plants. The artistic style of the illustration appears to be representational, though subjectively it could be said that the illustrator was not as adept as those in other illuminated texts. The illustrations are comparatively

[28] Earlier analysis by other sources have claimed that there are two distinct text types, referred to as Voynich A and Voynich B, however the current opinions that will be discussed later in this chapter are that these are just as likely to be variations of the same scribe (http://www.voynich.nu/writing.html#handwr).

rudimentary and like the text, show a lack of meticulousness when it comes to the consistency with which color was applied, some of it not filling the illustration's outline completely (1v, 2r). Comparing the way that the herbal page is constructed with a 14th century equivalent provided in the Yale edition, *Liber de herbis et plantis* there are consistency in its format and style, though the illustrations appears to be the work of a less talented artist (xiii). For most of the herbs, there appears to be one subject per page and usually one to three paragraphs of "information." Illustrations of the plants usually contain the full plant: flower(s), stem, leaves, and roots. Unlike Serafini's work, the text does not seem to feature a title or name in any recognizable way in this section, so if the name of the plant/herb is the first word, it is not distinguished in any way from the rest of the text, though this is not necessarily inconsistent with the previously compared document. The herbs themselves have defied identification, with some botanists insisting that there are a few representative illustrations. However, the illustrations are so rudimentary that the few similarities between real plants and those in the manuscript might be pure coincidence given that the clear majority are simply not analogous to real-world examples (45). If a majority or all the plants represented in its pages are not identifiable, this leaves the reader with only a handful of possibilities:

1. The plants are so poorly represented that they are unidentifiable
2. The plants are undiscovered
3. The plants are extinct
4. The plants described are either magical or other-worldly
5. The plants are fabricated

The first option is unlikely as it seems that even a poorly illustrated version of the herbs and plants would yield considerably more recognizable plants than are evident. The next two options also seem unlikely as the European origins of the manuscript make it nearly impossible that this number of plants would go unnoticed or unidentified and likewise the idea that they may have gone extinct would still be verifiable through other botanical sources of the time. Though the fourth option is fantasy, it still is important to address as the nature of the cipher manuscript has been alleged (even by Voynich) to be

magical and occult. This is unverifiable. This leaves the most likely option in that these illustrations do not represent real plants. Rampling's essay on the possible alchemical influences for the manuscript again suggests that the author(s), in seeing catalogs of herbs, simply imitated the concept but without actual subjects, inventing the dozens of plants from a motley collection of imaginary flowers, leaves, and roots. This is lent some credence by the fact that while many of the herbs appear plausible in that they don't have particularly odd features, there are several ones which show unlikely or impossible traits as they are illustrated. A shrub-like, blue-flowered plant shows that the single shrub connects via three separate plants with individual roots but sharing fruit across their branches (11r). Similarly, another plant which seems to sprout two distinct types of flowers, one red and the other blue, has a stem which divides at the roots only to rejoin again, symmetrically, at the leaves (22r). Other examples may or may not represent impossible plants as there isn't enough information to gather whether the illustrations are meant to be idealized or literal. For example, many of the plants show a very distinct symmetry such as the side-by-side examples where one plant has two identical flowers on one side, eight leaves on the other, and is topped with another unique bloom (31v), the other plant shows an almost mirrored symmetry across a horizontal plane with a realistic looking plant with blue, white, and yellow blooms (32r). Another plant, which vaguely resembles a poppy pod, shows faces in blubs in its roots (33r), reminiscent of the mandrake root which has been anthropomorphized throughout its history, suggesting that like the mandrake, some liberties have been taken in its illustration, perhaps even an allegorical representation which unfortunately lacks translation. Another thematic detail seen in several plants are those which appear to share root systems (23r, 43r, 45r, 46r); such plants do exist in nature, called clonal colonies, which remain connected to each other via root systems. However, as with the other plants in the manuscript, they have not been identified as any known plants. There are a few instances of illustrations including animals: in one plant, a small reptile (or dragon) is shown possibly chewing at the leaves (25v), in another a worm or snake is seen intertwined in the roots (49r).

The division between the herbal section and the astrological section is not distinct, as there is a chart on 57v followed by additional herbs on 65r-66v. The contents then shift exclusively to astrological diagrams with the first two-page fold-out on 67r. Without additional context it is impossible to know whether this is on purpose, or whether there might be some mis-ordering of the folios at some point before the numbering was added to the manuscript. The first chart on 57v may also not be astrological in that it does not contain any stars. However, the methodology of its construction (probably with a simple compass to make clean circles) is consistent with that of the charts which appear in the section with astrological themes. This chart consists of four concentric circles with text and other symbols, in the center are four busts, two which face the reader and two which look away, all of them have labeling which is also connected to a small cloud in the center.

The first astrologically inspired charts on 67r and 67rb should also be taken with some skepticism because while they conform to a typical illustration of a celestial firmament, there are several inconsistencies in it which raise questions as to whether it is merely imitating an astrological chart, or whether it contains actual information that is consistent with any astrological or astronomical tradition. The first chart is composed of three concentric circles of text with a double crescent, human-faced moon, surrounded by blue, red, and starred rays. The rays lead to hand-drawn sections with either stars or text in a spoke pattern. The starred rays contain between 5-12 stars, some of them repeating, and without any pattern which might suggest constellations. The spokes contain text which is aligned with the blue rays, while those spokes which are aligned with the stars also contain usually two stars.

The chart on the opposing fold out, 67rb, has a central star surrounded by text and spokes like the previous chart which contain text and what appears to be small crescent moons. These might suggest phases of the lunar calendar, but on closer inspection are all identical with the only distinction being that some are red and others yellow. This chart also shows an error in the use of the compass evident in the lower right of the last concentric circle, showing perhaps a lack of planning in layout, or a

lack of attention to detail. Unlike the spokes on the previous chart, these appear to have been made with a ruler, as opposed to the clearly hand-drawn ones in the previous chart. Finally, this chart sets itself aside in that it contains both red text as well as a slightly different notation in its last circle which may be a numerical system, though it could easily just be a pattern for aesthetic purposes. These small inconsistencies, errors, and the haphazard nature to the illustrations juxtapose themselves with the theme they seem to be imitating: while astrology, as non-scientific as it may be, depends on the ability to identify constellations and planets for the purpose of its prognostications. The Voynich's stars do not seem to align to anything recognizable and in fact seem to put the stars as equidistant from each other in their locations. Many stars are labeled, but again, without the ability to read the associated text, there is little to recognize (68vb, 68vc, 68vd). Some charts such as 70va, 70vb, and 71ra combine the bathing themes of the next chapter including concentric circles of bathing people. At the center of these and the charts that follow are fish, rams, people, insects, and ambiguous animals which may be allusions to known astrological signs but are difficult to identify due to their vague details.

After the charts shift towards bathing women, the so-called "balneological" section begins which again returns to illustrations on which is intertwined text. The images show almost exclusively women bathing in green (75r) or blue (84v) liquid. In most of the illustrations the bathing tubs in which the women reside show interconnected plumbing, or in some cases a progression of the liquid from one tub to another in an ambiguous manner (78r). This section does use considerable labeling on many of the illustrations. However, it is hard to discern what is being labeled as many could apply to a tub, an individual, a liquid, or a duct being used to move the liquid from one bath to another (77v). Some pages do not have direct labeling at all, though the text present may be intended to look as though it matches to the adjacent illustrations (80v). Repeatedly throughout the section there is imagery of the water emanating from a series of petaled blooms which are reminiscent of the flowers on such plants as those described on 11r, 31v, or 41v, but without additional information it is impossible to tell whether the

waters are coming from flowers or stylized clouds (78r, 79v, 84r, 84v). The balneological section also contains the largest folding vellum of the work, 85v which has nine charts that seem to combine themes of liquids from the bathing section, herbs, stars, and text (85va-c). This fold-out also contains the imagery of the battlements which was previously stated may bare some physical resemblance to a style common at the time in southern Germany and northern Italy. The reverse of the fold contains a page devoted to the vague clouds/herbs which produce water that was previously seen in the balneological section (86v).

The balneological section leads to the pharmacological section in a similar way to the uneven blends with the other chapters. After the previous section there are two pages which seem to reproduce the formal of the herbal section (87r, 87v). The first page of this section is relatively logical in its construction with three lists of herbs, mostly concentrating on the roots and leaves (88r, 88v). To the left on both pages are containers or vessels which might be for cooking, fermenting, or otherwise preparing or storing the recipe. It is impossible to tell from the construction of the page where the recipe begins or ends, whether it represents several recipes per page, or whether it is a long list of steps for one recipe. The chapter continues in this fashion with the most significant change being different types of vessels used for different sections, again, their exact purpose is not clear, only the standard placement on the left of the page next to the list of herbs and text (88va - d). After the visual recipes, the manuscript returns to the format of plain herbal descriptions (89v - 96v) before returning to the visual recipes with corresponding containers (99r – 102v).

On page 103r, the text takes a sudden turn to exclusively bulleted (or in this case starred) lists. From here to the end of the manuscript on page 116r, the pages are all text, with paragraphs denoted by stars, usually alternating red and yellow, though sometimes alternating with white ones with red dots at their centers. At the end of the last page on 116r there is a block of text without stars. This section has been included in the pharmacological one but given that there are no illustrations and no way to

relate the text back to the pharmacological recipes, a case could be made that this might be something else.

The very last page of the manuscript contains a few unusual scribbles which appear to be a mix of the voynichese, German, and a few errant illustrations (166v). The content on this page seems draft-like and while it is not addressed in the essays of the Yale reproduction, one of its contributors, René Zandbergen, has expanded on its possible meaning on her personal website which contains extensive additional information and interpretation of the manuscript. Zandbergen's website is a considerable source of up-to-date information regarding the current state of attempts to understand the Voynich Manuscript, and as such, an invaluable resource from which to gather additional points of information to consider. This is particularly important given that the on-going attempts to decipher the text have sometimes yielded questionable conclusions. Many statements have been made about the authorship of the manuscript for which Zandbergen has introduced caution. As mentioned in the essays, a fundamental question of the number of people involved in the manuscript's construction has been debated and some have suggested that multiple people might have been involved yielding to some referring to two scripts, Voynich A and Voynich B. Zandbergen, however, points out that these divisions are not a strong conclusion as several handwriting experts have stated that the entire document is written in the same handwriting.[29] Though she qualifies her suggestion heavily, Zandbergen suggests that the last scribble of the manuscript contains clues to the possibility of a single author: the use of the voynichese along with illustrations in an apparent single session, are consistent with the ones in the rest of the document and could be interpreted as a single author doodling on an errant page.[30] This is a particularly astute warning because of the implications of each possibility: the idea that the Voynich Manuscript was a collaboration adds an air of legitimacy to the document as it implies that the authors

[29] http://www.voynich.nu/writing.html#handwr
[30] http://www.voynich.nu/writing.html

shared knowledge of the true meaning of the work, as opposed to the scenario where the manuscript is the work of a single author who may or may not have imparted meaning to the mysterious tome.

Herein lies the danger with which the approaches to interpreting the manuscript have suffered for its known history. Those who seek to decipher it have often launched their efforts from the reasonable assumption that there is a meaning to the text, as opposed to a case like Serafini's work where there isn't. Most recently in early 2018, several websites reported that the Voynich Manuscript had finally been "cracked" or "deciphered." In an era of "clickbait," where websites vie for attention by using inflammatory, exaggerated, or otherwise misleading titles to lure readers to their sites, and subsequently their advertisers, this piece of news seemed dubious. Surely enough, the first suspicious detail regarding this announcement is that the research upon which it was based was not, in fact, new. The short study was published two years ago in April of 2016. Bradley Hauer and Grzegorz Kondrak, from the University of Alberta's computer science department, submitted a short paper titled "Decoding Anagrammed Texts Written in an Unknown Language and Script" alleging that the Voynich Manuscript turns out to be written in complex anagrams using a style of ancient Hebrew (85). The paper contains many leaps of logic, assumptions, and problems which the layperson can question. They claim that the system that they have used has a 97% and 95% accuracy in deciphering different sets of known languages and ciphers (75), however, this assumes that the text in the Voynich Manuscript is a language and not something fabricated like the *Codex Seraphinianus*. Hauer and Kondrak claim to have subjected the first ten pages of the manuscript to algorithmic deciphering totaling over 3,726 words yet, they have provided only one sentence which is filtered not only through their own "corrections of spelling," but also Google Translate, which works under the assumption that the data being submitted is meaningful: their final conclusion being that the first sentence says, "She made recommendations to the priest, man of the house and me and people" (84). The authors are careful to use words like "suggests" to qualify

their conclusions (85), but the sudden popularity of the two-year-old story shows that a "suggestion" that is interesting is far more likely to grab a reader's attention.

By February of 2018 several articles had been written refuting the recycled claim including *Mosaic* magazine's "No, the Mysterious Voynich Manuscript Is Not Written in Hebrew Despite the silly claims of two computer scientists." The Jewish-language columnist who goes by the moniker Philologos breaks down the problems in assumptions, lack of knowledge of Hebrew, and poor use of tools such as Google Translate, to offer a compelling counter-argument that the assertion that Hauer and Kondrak make is unsubstantiated and poorly concluded;

> At this point, it must be said, Hauer and Kondrak's paper descends into silliness. Quite apart from the unlikelihood of even the most esoteric of manuscripts beginning in such a manner, one can only compliment Google Translate on its ingenuity. She made recommendations to the priest, man of the house, and me and people? Even after "spelling corrections," the Hebrew words in question mean no such thing. In fact, they mean nothing at all. Translating them without Google's finessing, one comes up with something like "And he made her the priest each man to himself to his house and on me his people the commandments." If this was the winning entry in the trial-decipherment round of competition, one can only imagine its rivals.[31]

Philologos' ridiculing of the questionable conclusions of the paper does not discount the fundamental principal behind the attempt, but rather underlines that their attempt was flawed due to their assumptions about the meaning behind the text, and their shoe-horning of meaning using questionable tools. All things considered, Hauer and Kondrak's attempt at deciphering the text ends up sounding like the early attempt by William Newbold, especially in the over-complexity needed to justify the repetitive nature of the text and the authors seeing "what they want to see."

[31] https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2018/02/no-the-mysterious-voynich-manuscript-is-not-written-in-hebrew/

Still, the overlap between computer science and cryptographic study is not necessarily problematic in and of itself. Perhaps ironically, there is a 2010 computer science thesis at the North Carolina State University by Jeffrey Christopher Stanley titled "To Read Images Not Words: Computer-Aided Analysis of the Handwriting in the *Codex Seraphinianus"* which is an almost identical goal (in principal) to what Hauer and Kondrak attempted, but launching from a more pragmatic question: what happens when you try to decode gibberish algorithmically? Stanley uses the *Codex Seraphinianus* specifically to explore the problems with computer-aided deciphering of known languages by using a text which is known to be untranslatable. His aim was to further fine-tune the accuracy of this practice by closely examining the results of what such algorithms would do in the case of something designed to only look like language (4-5). Another interesting observation which Stanley makes is that Serafini's statement that his writing is "automatic" is questionable: he explores some of the history of automatic writing, its relationship to glossolalia, otherwise known as speaking in tongues, and raises questions about whether the actual procedure of writing the codex would be as "automatic" as Serafini claims (9-11, 34-36). This link to glossolalia will be explored later in this chapter in relation to the Voynich Manuscript and stands as a compelling explanation for the type of exercise which can be used to produce something language-like without meaning.

Similarly to what is seen in the Voynich Manuscript, Stanley's detailed analysis of Serafini's work shows that there is a mix of consistency and inconsistency in the characters used, some repeating with variations which are to be expected with something that is hand-written (32-41). Stanley also examined the recurrence of words and headers in the indexes and matrices (42-47) as well as how computational analysis deals with text which is not visually uniform due to proximity, overlapping, or other issues that may confuse a digital eye (57-59). Stanley reaches an interesting conclusion regarding the way that Serafini uses his labels for illustrations, which to the eye signal taxonomy and order, but upon closer inspection show an "unsustainable" tendency to invent something new each time he creates an

example, something which would not be necessary if there was meaning behind the seraphinian language (66-68):

> This observation shows two things. First, if he intended a language, Serafini certainly made up the language or parts of the language as he wrote. Secondly, he was more concerned with the appearance or novelty of the language than its utility; otherwise he would not have created more work for himself without any functional benefit (68).

In short, Serafini is, applying an established taxonomy to bring a visual order to his text, though in this case it lacks meaning. Stanley's conclusion regarding the nature of the *Codex Seraphinianus* and his theory regarding Serafini's methodology is a good model for potentially understanding the Voynich Manuscript:

> As stated in the discussion of results, the only clear finding about the writing in the codex is that it is intended to be visually interesting. Serafini put time and effort into visual features that appear to serve no linguist purpose. These visual features are balanced in a way that creates patterns without continual repetition of words and symbols. Being an artist and not a linguist, Serafini may have thought that this visual balance would be the best way to create a pseudo-language (74-75).

Stanley's assertion that the "visually interesting" is emphasized over the linguistic plausibility matches what is "seen" in the Voynich quite plausibly. Furthermore, Serafini's limited knowledge of linguistics creates a measurable limit to what his "language" looks like from an algorithmically analyzed perspective: the subject's knowledge of the structure of language greatly affects their ability to produce invented language that "sounds" plausibly real. It remains important to separate out what is and isn't known about the Voynich Manuscript in this light. While Serafini is an artist who has clearly stated the purpose of his work, the author and purpose of the Voynich Manuscript remains a total mystery. It is possible to surmise that the text might be some sort of "automatic writing" or "textual glossolalia"

whether the author sought to create a hoax to be sold, or whether they felt an unexplained drive to imitate sources may never be known.

Returning to the Voynich Manuscript with this idea, it is possible to gather supporting evidence from another unsuccessful attempt at deciphering its text through algorithmic methods by Gordon Rugg titled "An Elegant Hoax? A Possible Solution to the Voynich Manuscript" published June 4, 2010 in *Cryptologia*. Rugg's attempt is unfortunately launched from the incorrect assumption of the connection between the Voynich Manuscript and John Dee, who himself applied complex ciphers using matrices and "grilles" to create a language which he claimed was the divine speech of angels (35-38). As discussed in the essays of the Beinecke reproduction of the manuscript, carbon dating of the manuscript and its methods of production place it in a date-range which pre-dates Dee considerably, making any assertion that he was involved in its fabrication highly unlikely (Clemens 28). Still, Rugg's assertion that the text was somehow fabricated provides useful transcriptions for analysis which in and of themselves become quite familiar when comparing them with other possible sources. Take for example Rugg's transcription of the first five lines from 78r:

> tshedor shedy qopchedy qokedydy qokoloky
> qokeedy qokedy shedy tchedy otarol kedy dam
> qckhedy cheky dol chedy qokedy qokain olkedy
> yteedy qotal dol shedy qokedar chcthey otordoror
> qokal otedy qokedy qokedy dal qokedy qokedy skam (35)

Reading Rugg's transcription into recognizable letters allows a reader to immediately notice that the language "sounds" very repetitive and taking into account Stanley's suggestion that the *Codex Seraphinianus* may be related to the phenomenon of glossolalia, there might have been a similar technique applied in its composition.

The study of glossolalia from a linguistic perspective is decades old with one of the most recognized studies being done by the linguist William J. Samarin, whose 1972 book *Tongues of Men and Angels*, investigates the nature of glossolalia primarily in Pentecostalism but also contrasting it with other religious and non-religious sources. Samarin notes in his preface that the phenomenon known otherwise as "speaking in tongues" has been recording not only in the Christian Bible, but also in variations across the globe in many different cultures, religions and denominations (xi-xii). While Samarin concentrates on a specific Episcopalian group from which he gathers most of his examples, he is careful to note that his theories on its nature are not specific to one group and are applicable at a larger scope (xii). While the discussion of the history of glossolalia and the psychology of its practitioners that he provides is interesting, what is relevant to this discussion are the patterns which Samarin noted in the transcribed examples and the variations that he saw from person to person. At the end of the study, Samarin includes transcriptions of some of the examples of glossolalia:

> kelalaiyanano. kelalalaiyenayenano. kelalalyeyino.
> kelalayanankelayanano. kelakelahorayanayelalaiyelayaanaiyo.
> kelalaiyenanayano. kelalayeyina…
>
> kohinayakayowana. palainyanokoyialalainakayuwara.
> halayoninhirakayainyiakatodoinna.
> payanapoyananekiyalauwannakayeraraynaykiyalaya.
> haloyenapapayenakiyalalionoyanapayera…
>
> kolamasaido,laboka tohoriamai, lamo saido, laboka tahandoria, lamo saido kolamasi labo siando, lakatandori, lamo siambaka katadondo, lama fia, lama diandoriako, labokan doriasando lamo siandoriako, labosia, lamo siando, labakan doria, lama fia, lama diandolokolamababasi, labo siando, lama fiatandoria, lamokayamasi, labo siando. (252-253)

The similarities that can be seen in the repetitiveness of this example's construction and syllables is reminiscent of what is seen in the Voynich Manuscript. The limited bank of syllables and sounds from

which the speaker chooses causes the text to seem like gibberish or baby-speak, as opposed to actual language: this is also plausibly seen in the previous transcription of the voynichese to Roman characters.

Samarin's linguistic analysis of glossolalia arrives at a very clear conclusion: it lacks the grammar necessary to be analyzable or teachable (73). As such, it has patterns which differ from person to person, but as with all the examples considered here, when methodical analysis is applied, it breaks down and cannot be catalogued appropriately. It is not to say that certain "styles" cannot become recognizable (77), which is consistent with what is seen in both the Voynich Manuscript and Serafini's work. Samarin alludes to an "illusion of word-structure" (81) which is quickly dismissed when linguistic analysis is applied, but which visually (or auditorily) sounds plausible. Furthermore, Samarin makes references to the specific distance between the person's native language and that of their glossarial language (87). In non-religious examples, Samarin highlights that the variations and complexity depend on the person's knowledge of language and how long they have been practicing glossolalia, emphasizing that the person's concept of what "sounds" foreign is somewhat limited to what they have been exposed to previously either through study or in passing (134-138). Most notably, Samarin highlights the example of a French medium who claims to be able to speak in a variety of dialects including, "a 'Sanskrit' in her 'Hindu cycle' and 'Martian,' 'Ultra-Martian,' and 'Lunar' in her 'Martian cycle.' They are all, however, to one degree or another, recoded forms of her native French, and, when she wrote Martian, as she often did in trance, the two languages are matched word-for-word" (135). This example shows that the nature of glossolalia is not necessarily tied to religious origin, despite its common link to it. Furthermore, it emphasizes the link between the subject's knowledge of language and the distance from the languages that the subject knows and their attempt (conscious or unconscious) to invent an alien language, be it religious or extraterrestrial. Samarin concludes his study with a somewhat blunt statement about the nature of glossolalia which serves as a potential clue for not only Serafini's known

method of composition, but potentially also for an explanation of how the "language" of the Voynich Manuscript works:

> There is no mystery about glossolalia. Tape-recorded samples are easy to obtain and to analyze. They always turn out to be the same thing: *strings of syllables, made up of sounds taken from among all those that the speaker knows, put together more or less haphazardly, but which nevertheless emerges as word-like and sentence-like units because of realistic, language-like rhythm and melody*. (227)

Circling back to Serafini's statement of his intent to create the feeling of a reader that is handed a text in an unfamiliar language, there appears to be a factor in whatever conscious or unconscious mechanism is used to create an invented language that benefits from this distance. To put it simply: glossolalia seems to benefit from sounding, or in the case of Voynich and Serafini where there is arguably no spoken quality, looking plausibly linguistic, but fundamentally foreign since it is not real.

Stepping back from these examples, the fundamental question of the Voynich Manuscript's nature takes an interesting turn: regardless of the potential meaning of the text suggested by its script and illustrations, the assumption that there is meaning is not one that can be made in light of the possibility that it is some form of religious, artistic, or even purposefully hoaxing glossolalia. Since the purpose of its construction, its author, and its subject will likely remain unsolved until such a time as a contemporary document be uncovered that reveal those details, the Voynich Manuscript will remain ambiguous on whether it was constructed to deceive, whether it was the product of a glossarial fugue-like state, or even a conscious attempt to make an artistic work like Serafini's. The unsatisfying nature of such a conclusion leaves the door open to sensational headlines for unsubstantiated decipherment. What has been dissected from the limited information points to the imaginary rather than the factual and as a result, the Voynich Manuscript stands as another example of the caution that readers must exercise in the face of suspiciously sensational explanations for unsolved mysteries. Readers should take

warning from, rather than be motivated by, their natural predisposition to be excited by an extravagant solution to a puzzle. The many failed attempts to finally “close the case” on the Voynich Manuscript should show that reasonable verification can only be arrived at when a claim is validated with facts and when facts are hard to come by, responsible speculation of what is likely rather than what is sensational. While conjecture can be a useful starting point to exploring an unknown text, it is prudent to remain open to the possibility that the most legitimate interpretation possible may not be as exciting or satisfying as those proposed by talented imaginations.

Chapter 6:

The Dissatisfaction in Not Knowing

Frank Herbert, who is better known for penning the science-fiction series, *Dune*, spent much of his early writing career in a similar struggle as Conan Doyle's: writing short stories for fiction magazines and finding it likewise difficult to make ends meet though that activity alone. Before *Dune* would be recognized a classic in the genre, Herbert published a story in October of 1964 called "The Mary Celeste Move" in *Analog* magazine (which would shortly publish the first installment of what would later become the novel *Dune).*

As evidenced by the title, Herbert's story draws from the legends surrounding the Mary Celeste ghost ship, albeit in a thoroughly distanced way. The story's protagonist, Martin Fisk is introduced driving a 1997 Buick on a super-freeway. The world in which he lives is described as rushed, futuristic, and alienating due to the increased role of automated technology. Fisk is implied to be some sort of government comptroller who is investigating a strange series of unexplained sudden relocations that have been happening from large cities to small towns throughout the country. The details in the story points to the overwhelming speed at which everything happens in the future: cars are semi-automated and exceedingly fast, meetings have been condensed to minutes, constant medication must be taken to help with blood pressure, and most of all there is a sense of hypervigilance on the part of the government which is able to analyze the patterns in society through data. While not all his predictions of the future of 1998 are verified today, there is a remarkable accuracy to his vision of the increased pressure under which society exists.

The “Mary Celeste Move” which is referenced in the story is described as middle-aged individuals (mostly men, but also some women) who suddenly move long distances to remote, less developed areas in the country without explanation, often abandoning their professional and personal lives without notice and having to retroactively arrange for their effects to be transplanted to their new locations without a satisfactory reason. Herbert directly references the ghost-ship in his story when Fisk is reporting his findings at the Pentagon and explains the origins of the name as being the aforementioned ghost ship’s. Amusingly, the general to which he is reporting tells him that he is already aware of the story of the Mary Celeste, and Fisk goes on to recount some of the reasons why the name was chosen including the popular one of meals still cooking on the stove when the disappearances happen. Fisk and the general discuss the political and economic implications of what might be the early signs of an epidemic; the concern that the steady increase in incidents suggests the beginning of a larger trend permeates their conversation. When the “reveal” behind the mystery is provided, the explanation given seems like a critique of the literal and figurative speed at which the society moves: Fisk explains that in each case, the subjects of the unexplained move tend to be middle-aged and uncomfortable with the nature of the hi-speed, semi-automatic driving that has become common place. Fisk states that the individuals have been victims of wrong-turns while driving, finding themselves on super-freeways and travelling at speeds up to 300mph. Too scared to take control of their vehicles, they allow their cars to take them as far as the back-water towns where the speeds are automatically reduced. Once there, the individuals are too scared to ever get back in their cars and rather than admit to the embarrassing nature of their predicaments, decide to re-locate to whatever small town they have found themselves and start new lives in the less stressful environments to which they have unwillingly been driven. The individuals also are all afraid to fly in airplanes.

Fisk leaves the briefing and as he goes, he contemplates such a move himself. It is unclear whether Fisk is simply musing on what he would do if he was one of those individuals, but as he ponders

this while looking at an automated walk-way, it is implied that he is also aware of what these automated conveyances represent: the movement of bodies against their will. The alienation that comes with a society that has advanced to such an extent that the people have become pieces of a larger machine, moved at super-speed for the benefit of the whole rather than the individual. Fisk wonders if his wife would join him on such an escape and the reader is left with the sense that the protagonist might not fully believe the "real" explanation that he has provided in his briefing.

This short exploration of the legacy behind the name of the Mary Celeste serves as a prime example of the mystique it continued to carry. Herbert was probably aware of some of the facts of the "real" story behind the Mary Celeste—his story carries the additional weight of the embellishments which were added by later authors looking to explore the story through fiction. The meals still cooking, the unexplained nature of the moves, and the dissatisfaction with the official explanation, all mimic the event for which the story is known. Still, in highlighting those extraordinary aspects of the Mary Celeste, Herbert finds himself paying homage not to the real event, but rather the legacy of embellishments which have followed it. Therein lies the real irony of the story: it provides a similarly satisfactory explanation to its own mystery; but the main character also undermines the mystery by showing that the truth may diverge from what he has just reported to the general at the Pentagon.

The intersection between the real and the embellished leaves a trail of mixed fact and fiction which can be intensely misleading. When Fontcuberta tells his readers that *Sputnik* originates from a real auction of cosmonaut memorabilia, this adds a layer of authenticity to a narrative peppered with plausible statements which aren't based in fact. Just as the statement that "THIS IS A TRUE STORY" at the beginning of *Fargo* is verifiably not true, the act of verification is not assumed and can just as easily lead to further confusion. Even after the problematic nature of the relationship between the Coen Brother's movie and a real-life tragedy of the supposed Japanese "treasure hunter," *Fargo* lives on in a TV series (now into its third season) of which every episode begins with the same statement made by

the movie: that what follows is “A TRUE STORY.” With each successive season, the reasons to doubt the statement continue to mount as the plots of the TV series stray further and further from believability, still, without having seen the entire series, or having knowledge of the context of the movie on which it is based, a new viewer may not have reason to question the statement driven home at the beginning of each episode.

Similarly, the *Codex Seraphinianus* presents itself as a recognizable form, an encyclopedia, which by its nature aims to collect observable phenomena to provide an organized method of didactic cataloging of all that is known about specific subjects, discretely taxonomized into logical silos of digestible knowledge. Any reasonable reader will immediately recognize that the subjects of Serafini’s illustrations are more comical and fantastic than real. Still, as with the other example explored, he is not satisfied to leave it as plain fiction, but rather hints at deeper meaning and decipherability by making his invented language, indexes, and organizational method look legitimate enough to suggest real purchase on the physical world. Readers, unsatisfied to just leave the catalog on its own merit, still search for the cipher code, be it literally in the case of computer scientists who would put its language to algorithmic tests, or the more creative audience who would seek to reenact its knowledge through “foolosophy.” Both camps are egged on by what they recognize in Serafini’s text; and find their own ways to “test” its veracity, by feeding its language into a system designed to produce meaning, or by re-interpreting what they have been given in an attempt to breathe life into that imaginary universe.

When Voynich found the cipher manuscript amongst his mysteriously acquired cache of Jesuit tomes, he must have felt a sense of wonder at finding something within the collection that was “not like the others.” While lacking any context of origin or authorship like the other works examined here, its proximity to verifiably “real” texts in the collection in which it was discovered lent it a legitimacy which inspired Voynich to believe that the pages contained meaningful knowledge and perhaps of a significance which equaled its mysterious nature. The challenge Voynich faced, with every subsequent

reader exposed to the cipher manuscript, was the assumption that the initial statement of value is correct. The Voynich Manuscript does imply it has meaning to a reader who lacks the right framing and it is in what we uncovered as an imitation that the passive statement is made about its value: it is a manual showing the relationship between herbs, astrology, and alchemy. A more sophisticated reader who was fully versed in the "tropes" on which the Voynich Manuscript plays may recognize that the imitation is partial and simplistic, however, it is important to consider that the intended readership (if any) of the manuscript will likely remain forever unknown) and it virtually impossible to know whether the author worked with any intent to share the fruits of his labor with anyone. If the Voynich Manuscript turn out to be an elaborate, but meaningless, doodle, it would not be subject to value judgements as to its intent to mislead any more than a painting of a non-existent subject.

The reader is challenged every time they pick up a book without pre-conceived notions about what they are about to read. With the overwhelming amount of information afforded by present day technology comes the challenge of verification. The separation between fact, fiction, opinion, and hoax is becoming increasingly muddled. As can be seen in the fact that the mysteries presented by the texts examined here span hundreds of years, the challenge to discern the relationship between a text and a potentially real event has long existed. The grey area between fiction and history will continue to be a challenge that needs to be recognized due to the importance of ensuring that fiction and history be constantly questioned to avoid a misrepresentation of an embellishment as fact. Simply labelling such grey areas as historical fiction, doesn't capture the tension that exists between their publication and their reception. This tension is felt in countless works which present the lives of historically verifiable figures, but for which liberties are taken to add narrative arc, drama, and fundamentally make them more "interesting" or "marketable." As seen with the success and influence of Conan Doyle's short story about a real event, the details of which being fundamentally unsatisfying because even the most

rational explanation will never have full confirmation in the same way as his fantastic version, verified by a trust-worthy, Harvard-educated physician of impeccable reputation.

Still, it would be an unforgivable hyperbole to say that fiction should never seek to skirt this line with the truth. All these challenging mysteries are in their own way wonderful because they speak to their readers' sense of wonder at encountering a challenging text. Voynich's desire to believe that the cipher manuscript was more than it might be, that it carried with it some magical power that could unlock new areas of knowledge, if not finally add legitimacy to an area of ancient study which is all but dead-ended, is at the core of our experience when we are faced with something that is drawn between the line of what might be possible and what is probably fabricated. Fontcuberta's artistic mission seems to draw upon that natural fascination that readers will feel when facing unrealistic plotlines and to encourage their "attentiveness" to take such a discovery to a proper conclusion. He wants readers to understand, as fully as possible, the relationship with truth and to avoid the assumption of veracity before it can be tested appropriately.

There will not always be answers. Though there is no evidence that Arthur Conan Doyle ever intended to have his work considered anything but a fiction, pieces of it persist in making their way into non-fiction explenations of the *Mary Celeste's* fate. Fontcuberta's *Sputnik* continues to be referred to as a hoax, even though the truth is far more nuanced than a straight-forward lie. Serafini's work, without a doubt fictional, still inspires readers to imitate its imaginary universe, just as the Voynich Manuscript has continued to be "solved" despite such resolution having no more validity than the works of fiction which have also fantasized about finding the cipher that would finally allow its supposed true meaning to be known. Readers must resist the temptation to accept a solution to a riddle when none fits. That is, while the theory of the open alcohol on the *Mary Celeste* is arguably the most plausible one to surface out of all the extravagantly sensational ones, readers must not assume that it represents the uncontested "true story" of what happened aboard. While Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest explanation is

often the correct one, unless an actual record is found in some form, the washed-up lifeboat, additional writings of a true survivor's story, the unsatisfactory conclusion of simply not knowing will be the only "true" state of the event.

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