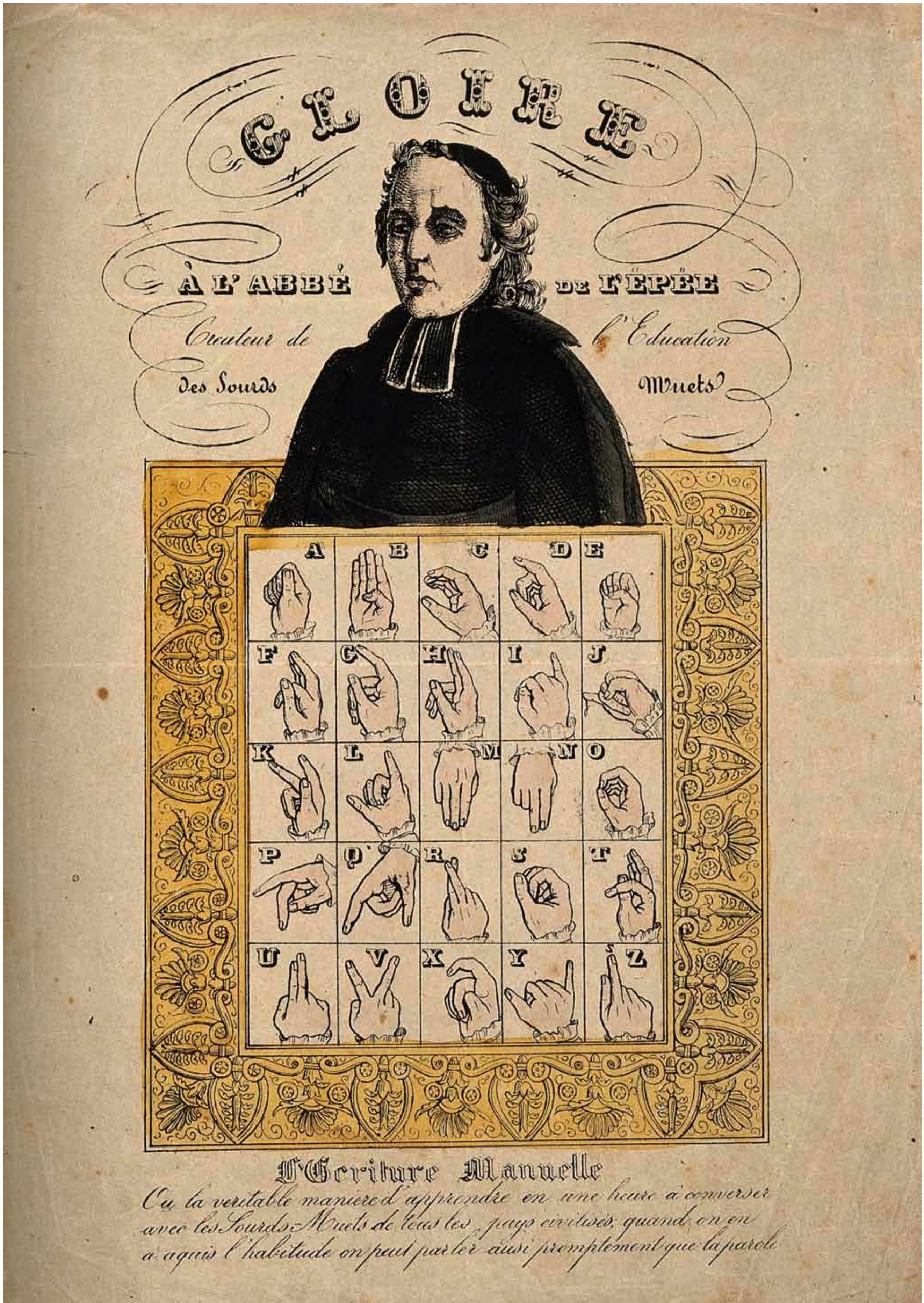

A portrait of the Abbe de l'Éppe above the French sign alphabet. (Wellcome Library, London)

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Silent Reading

Nancy Campbell

> *'Gestures are as transitory Hieroglyphics, and are to Hieroglyphics as words spoken are to words written, in that they abide not; but they have evermore, as well as the other, an affinity with the things signified.'*
> Francis Bacon, *Of the Advancement of Learning*, 1605

The use of a language is a political act as well as a communicative gesture. This is evident in the continuing debates around sign languages: for example, British Sign Language (BSL) was only recognised as an official British language by the UK government in 2003; it still has no legal protection. This means that Deaf people[1] do not have full access, in their own language, to services that hearing people take for granted, including education, health and employment.

At least 1% of the world's population use a sign language. While the roots of most spoken languages can be traced to common origins, sign languages are quite unlike any other linguistic system. They differ from spoken languages above all in their use of facial expression and multiple dimension. These very aspects that mark the originality of sign languages, and which some would say are the means by which they surpass speech, also make them difficult to represent in graphic form. It would be interesting to see how typography might have developed if hearing people were a cultural minority.

A Secret Method

Sign language, like any spoken language, is transitory by nature: it exists in the moment of its delivery. That it is likewise a sophisticated and beautiful linguistic system has not always been recognised. Early educators of deaf children had philanthropic aims, but their good intentions were often foiled by their prejudices. Many (including, in the late nineteenth century, the inventor of the telephone Alexander Graham Bell) were adamant that deaf people should be taught to communicate using spoken language as a model. Decades of damage were perpetuated by advocates of 'oralism' who forced deaf children to emulate speech, forbidding any use of sign languages such as BSL; poignant accounts by their wards describe a secretive signing practice in the dormitories of special residential schools. The spurious manifestoes and treatises compiled by these tutors reveal how strongly ideas about language were influenced by existing textual systems and a belief in the primacy of the printed word. I am reminded, reading such bitter debates, of an epigram by the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, recently seen on the wall of London's Institute for Contemporary Arts: 'Stupidity reduces language to words'.

Sign languages, and other forms of communication used by Deaf people, persisted underground against significant odds. A letter from 'Mutus' published in the *Universal Magazine* (London, December 1748), describes 'Dumb [sic] Speech, or the Art of conversing by the fingers only, as well as in the dark as in the Light' as a 'compendious, easy, and secret method' of communication. 'Mutus' elaborates on the potentially sinister uses of this 'natural alphabet, composed on the human hand':

> 'Thus we may in the most private manner, even in the presence of the most jealous heart, assign a meeting or a visit, ask counsel, give advice, forbid, encourage, &c. Nay, one of the two friends may look a third person earnestly in the face, as seeming intent on what discourse entertaineth the company, while he only minds what his silent friend and himself are mutually conversing about on each other's fingers.'

This melodramatic introduction to the manual alphabet is followed by laborious examples of how to form individual letters:

M, by putting three fingers in the palm of the hand.
N, by putting two fingers in the same manner.
P, by putting the fore-finger of the right-hand between the fore and middle finger of the left.
Q, by turning the top of the forefinger of the left-hand to the bottom of the thumb of the same hand…

'Mutus' concludes, no doubt to the reader's relief, 'and after this manner all other words are as regularly composed as by pen and ink, or any other method.' It was easier to 'compose' than to describe such a system, and instructions such as these were soon superceded by visual directions.

Any transliteration, whether of the voice or another means of communication, is reductive and symbolic. When the works of oral cultures are transferred to the page, their sounds alphabetised and defined with diphthongs and accents, not only does the narrative risk change, but so does relation of the tale to the teller. The challenges faced by those who notate sign languages are even greater. 'Mutus' found the manual alphabet difficult enough to describe; yet this alphabet does not form the component parts of BSL in the way that the Roman alphabet provides those of written English. A word in sign language is composed not of strings of letters but of independent hand shapes, movements and facial expressions. Sign language thus resists the stern black-and-white fixity of graphic representation. In addition, many Deaf people are justifiably ambivalent about conventional textual reproduction, associating written records with an oppressive, 'oralist' culture.

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Two men sign 'Safer Sex' in an advertisement by Deaf Mesmac. Designed by Health First Graphic Design Studio, Lambeth. Photo by Gordon Rainsford. Lithograph. (Wellcome Library, London).

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Revolution

The two historical moments when sign languages received the greatest public acceptance and support have been times of enormous political and social change. Shortly before the French Revolution, the philosopher Rousseau was engaged in the search for a 'natural' original language from which all others came, a language in which everything had its true name, such as that given by Adam to the animals in Paradise. Rousseau's quest for lost innocence was paralleled in the efforts, and the paternalistic attitudes, of the educators of deaf children during the same period. Much later, in the 1960s and 1970s, the growth of Deaf Pride led to a wider understanding of sign languages, although today rights still remain to be won.

Deaf histories are often accounts of resistance to the power of the printed word and the religious concept of the breath (and hence speech) as sacred. It's not surprising that many of the early figureheads in the education of deaf children were also religious leaders. One has only to look at the work of colonial governments and missionaries to see that communication is often precipitated by political or religious motives. In the struggle to save souls in eighteenth century France, teachers of deaf children aimed to make their charges learn to speak - and so to pray.

While a few tutors used sign language to communicate with their pupils, most relied on representing the voice in a visual form, such as print. The priest Simon Vanin (d. 1759) attempted to teach Christian doctrines to deaf children using coloured prints of biblical scenes to describe the stories. However, Vanin found it impossible to explain the more abstract aspects of religion by recourse to such pictures.

Charles-Michel, the Abbé de l'Epée, had more success; he ran a school for deaf children in Paris that developed into the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets. The Abbé was notable for his persistance in learning sign language from his charges, a step partly motivated by his desire to explain spiritual matters to them. Sign language has great potential for neologisms, and the Abbé created his own words where he perceived a lack. In one account of his teaching, *Institution des sourds et muets par la voie des signes méthodiques* (Paris, 1776, quoted in Rée, page 149), he describes the sign he invented for 'I believe':

> 'I first make the sign of the first person singular by pointing to myself with the index finger of my right hand … then I place my finger on my forehead, on the concave part which is supposed to contain my spirit or faculty of thinking, and then I make the sign for "yes". Then I repeat the sign, while placing my finger on that part of myself which is ordinarily regarded as the seat of what we call the heart … I then make the same sign on my mouth, whilst moving my lips. Finally, I put my hand to my eyes, and by making the sign for "not" I show that I cannot see. It only remains to make the sign for the present tense…'

Towards the end of his teaching career, the Abbé began to compile a dictionary of sign language. Perhaps it is not surprising, given the example above, that he struggled to represent the dynamic movement of the individual signs on the page (though many after him were to experience the same problem). In places the dictionary was no more than an elaboration on the original French, without any description of actual signs. It revealed rather more about the Abbé than the language - 'Brutalize: wine brutalizes those who drink too much too often' - and eventually he abandoned the project. The Abbé is better remembered by the numerous treatises in which he described his educational achievements, and popular prints, such as the one pictured here, in which the manual alphabet (somewhat superceded by an elaborate border of printer's flowers) seems to grow from the priest's torso, while his own hands lie hidden.

Rebellion

In the 1960s, partly due to the growing counter-culture movement and changes in graphic reproduction, sign language became more visible than ever before. Several 'Safe Sex' advertisements aimed at the Deaf community, employing both BSL and the manual alphabet, show the ways in which different forms of notation can used to convey a similar message. A monochrome poster, issued by the British Deaf Association, reads 'The best lovers are good with their hands' in English. But there's more wit than cliché in this: only the 'best lovers' who 'are good their hands' will be able to read the subtext 'U-S-E A C-O-N-D-O-M' which is spelt across the poster in the manual alphabet. The hands are airbrushed, disembodied and perfect as the legs that usually advertise stockings – characteristics common to most contemporary typographic representations of the manual alphabet. This alphabet is generally adopted by sign language users to assimilate alien words or spell out names for which no sign exists (on the rare occasions when a gestural neologism is not invented on the spot). Here the hands are multiple, a pair for every letter, and create a crowded effect. The use of the alphabet implies a formality which is at odds with the intimate context.

On the other hand, in posters issued by Mesmac, black-and-white photographs suggest risqué real-life stories, reminiscent of popular graphic narratives. One poster, set outdoors, shows two men in overlapping dialogue, signing 'safe' and 'sex' respectively. No longer disembodied, the message conveyed by the arrangement of the men's hands is both an intimate proposition and

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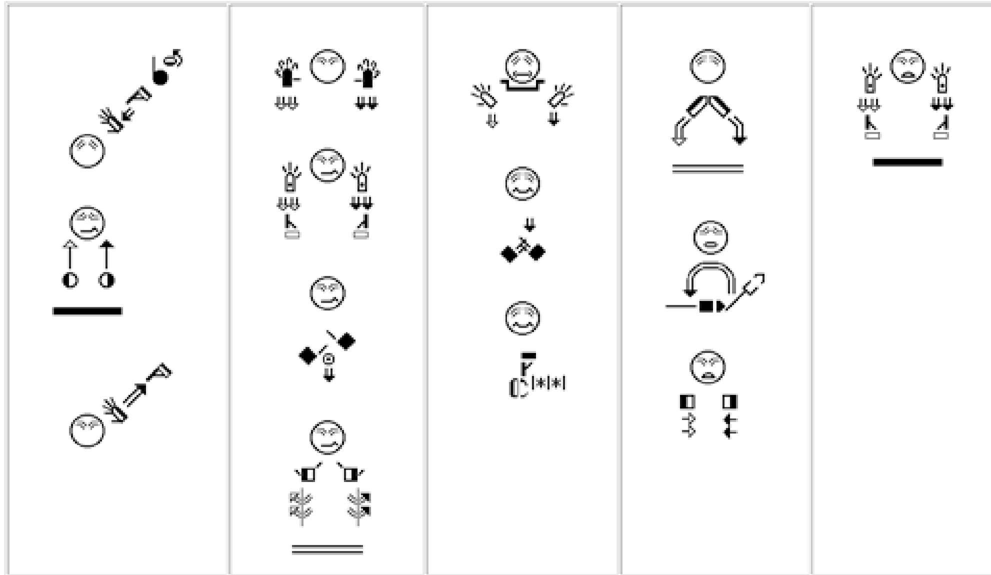

The Cat in the Hat by Dr Seuss, transcribed in Sutton SignWriting by Cherie Wren.
This notation represents the lines of the poem: 'The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play.
So we sat in the house All that cold, cold, wet day.… (www.SignWriting.org)

Useful everyday phrases in BSL (www.deafblind.com)

a graphic message set in context by the photograph.
In another poster from the same series, four men are photographed sitting in a café drinking coffees and juices. They are captured mid-conversation, in contrast to the distinct, posed signs in the previous example.
English words are reduced to erotic graffiti on the wall and a newspaper laid on the table, on which - ironically - the word 'SOUND' is just visible. In using photography of BSL in action rather than notation of the manual alphabet, these Mesmac posters prioritise an inclusive, personal language.

Digital technology enables the letters of the manual alphabet to be replicated instantly. There are a number of online conversion programmes and it is easy enough to find free fonts to download for personal use. The manual alphabet can be reproduced along the same typographic models as the Roman alphabet and most digital fonts are offered in bold and a variety of colours. However, the presentation of sign language on the page is infinitely more complex. The notation must express many subtleties of hand shape, movement, duration, location, orientation, and even facial expression.
In 1960, William Stokoe, one of the earliest students of sign linguistics, published a paper called *Sign Language Structure*. This work was the first to address the multiple aspects of sign language. Oliver Sacks, in *Seeing Voices*, says 'Stokoe was convinced that signs were *not* pictures, but complex abstract symbols with a complex inner structure.' By analysing these structures rigorously, Stokoe provided a foundation for all subsequent notation systems, and even succeeded where many others had failed in creating a dictionary, published in 1965.

For those who do not require a full dictionary, there are many smaller information charts available, employing a range of informal styles. I downloaded 'Other Useful Signs' from a series of elementary lessons offered online at www.deafblind.com (this chart, among the others depicting signs for the days of the week and the weather, seemed to be the one most relevant to book artists). Some phrases are based on the manual alphabet (such as 'Word Processor' which is simply the letter 'W' followed by 'P'). Other signs are iconic, inspired by the action or the object itself, such as 'Sellotape' (a raw pulling motion), or 'lunch' (a gesture towards the mouth). The friendly, comic-book style provides a simplified view of the relation of the hands to the torso and facial expressions (such as the raised eyebrows of the interrogative 'who' or the slightly manic expression that accompanies the sign for 'Sellotape'). However, notation of this kind would become confusing in any more extended text conveying a narrative rather than isolated signs.

There are a number of notation systems that can be used to transliterate complex texts in sign language.

Above: Sutton Signwriting online – 'Search Google' in Signwriting http://www.signwriting.org/search/

Below: Sutton SignWriting is useful in many situations. Photograph by Stefan Woehrmann (www.SignWriting.org)

SignWriting, invented by Valerie Sutton, is just one example. SignWriting has affiliations to other systems of notation and can also be used to record choreography and even music. The signs are sharp and edgy, a codified representation of facial expression, the position of the body, the movement of the hands. Valerie Sutton explains 'SignWriting … is simply a set of visually designed symbols that records how people sign. SignWriting captures on paper the visual subtleties of any signed language in the world, because it records body movement.' The SignWriting website (www.SignWriting.org) gives a comprehensive explanation of how the system works, with downloadable pdfs for teachers and students.
Sutton has actively explored the practical applications of her system, founding the SignWriting literature project, which aims to make classic works of literature available in SignWriting (such as *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr Seuss - see illustration).

In recent years, since film has replaced paper as a medium more suitable to recording time-based performances, the notation of sign language has become

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a less urgent concern. Rachel Sutton Spence (in *Analysing Sign Language Poetry*, page 17) quotes an unpublished dissertation by Heidi Rose who claims that for sign language 'The video form of preservation parallels the invention of the printing press.'

It will be interesting to see how the typographic representations of Sign language develop in response to new media. The Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol launched Mobilesign, 'a video dictionary' for mobile phones, in 2007. The free resource, available at www.Mobilesign.org, provides short videos of individual signs which can be downloaded and sent by mobile phone. Sign language uses multiple dimensions, in the way a book artist will use all aspects of a book – binding, typography, illustration, not merely a text – to communicate a message. Typography is often compared to choreography; it seems that sign language and its notation suggest potentially exciting ways for everyone to explore the relationship of communication to the human body.

Nancy Campbell is writing on a book on Sign Language poetry, *Language for the Eye*, commissioned by the Center for Writers and Translators at the American University in Paris.

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Notes

1. Following a convention in use since the rise of Deaf Pride in the1970s, I use 'deaf' to refer to deafness as a medical condition, and 'Deaf' (capitalised) to signify a broader cultural and community identity.

2. I use the term 'sign language' to refer to a total linguistic system such as BSL, American Sign Language (ASL), or Auslan in Australia. Sign languages are distinct from other means of communication used by Deaf people such as the manual alphabet ('finger spelling') or Signed English.

I am grateful to the poet John Wilson for his guidance while writing this article. During my initial research on the history of Sign Language and the manual alphabet I was fascinated by Jonathan Rée's study, *I Hear a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness, and the Senses* (HarperCollins, 1999). *Analysing Sign Language Poetry* by Rachel Sutton-Spence (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) is an indispensable guide to the formal criteria for assessing creative aspects of Sign Language. Anyone wishing to read further on the subject will surely find both books of interest; I also recommend Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices* (Picador, 1991) as a good general introduction to Deaf culture and the politics of Sign Language.

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