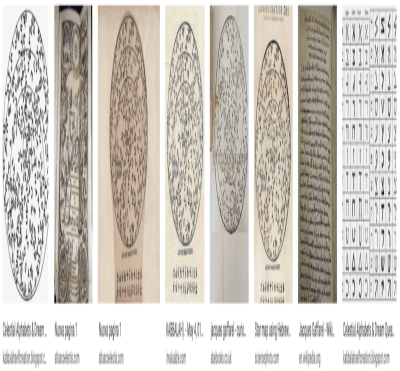
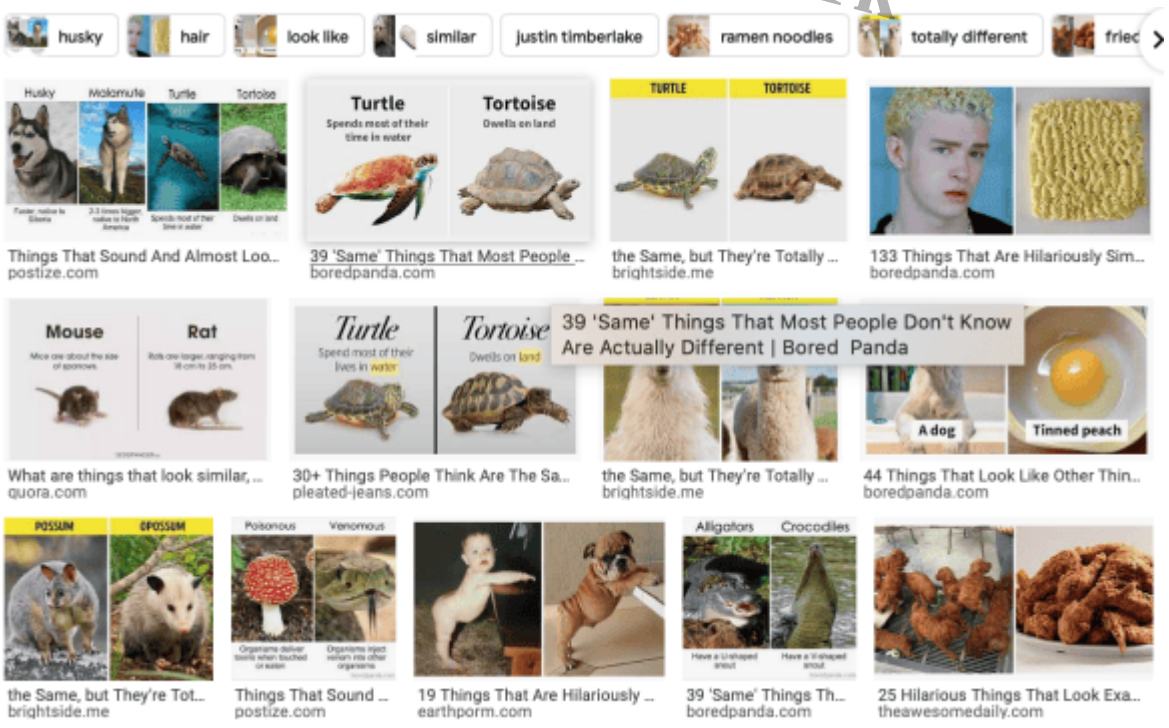


The sky alphabet

Description

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A quick google image search on â??things that look the sameâ?• reveals not just how similar to each other rocks, fruit, trees, animals, food, buildings and people can appear, but how sharply tuned is our propensity to find similarity wherever we can.



The philosophy of the French scholar Jacques Gaffarel (1601-1681) exemplified a pre-modern understanding of the universe based on *resemblances*: attaching significance to similarities in how things look. An interesting book on Gaffarel by Hiro Hirai includes illustrations by Gaffarelâ??s contemporaries: e.g. showing the teeth in a human jawbone that resemble the seed casings of a pinecone, fungus on a twig, and the seeds in a split pomegranate. Another illustration shows that the eye of a fly resembles the skin of a blackberry or a strawberry.

To the pre-moderns the latter resemblance was a reasonable way to account for the attraction of the fly to the fruit. (I think that concept would later inform theories of adaptation and evolution). Gaffarelâ??s resemblance theory offered explanations for how such relationships might operate, notably in explaining how scorpion stings could be cured by stone objects that are shaped like scorpions.

Proquest provides an online version of Gaffarelâ??s text: *Unheard-of Curiosities Concerning the Talismanical Sculpture of the Persians; The Horoscope of the Patriarkes; and the Reading of the Stars*, and the scorpion cure is described on pp. 130-131. However, itâ??s easier to quote what Hiro Hirai says about Gaffarel on the cure. For â??figureâ?• of a scorpion read â??figurineâ?• or â??carving.â?•

> â??One of the medicinal powers highlighted by Gaffarel is the use of the figure of a scorpion against scorpion bites. Why does the figure of a venomous beast heal a wound caused by scorpion bites rather than harm it? â?¦ When the figure of a scorpion, represented on a stone, encounters in nature a poisonous humidity suitable for a living scorpion, the figure absorbs this humidity and gradually perfects itself to become a living scorpion. â?¦ When the scorpion figure finds the poisonous qualities imprinted by the living scorpion in such humidity and absorbs them as food, the wound is no longer affected by these poisonous qualities and will be cured. According to Gaffarel, this phenomenon is also evident when mashed or powdered scorpion is used to cure scorpion bitesâ?• (81).

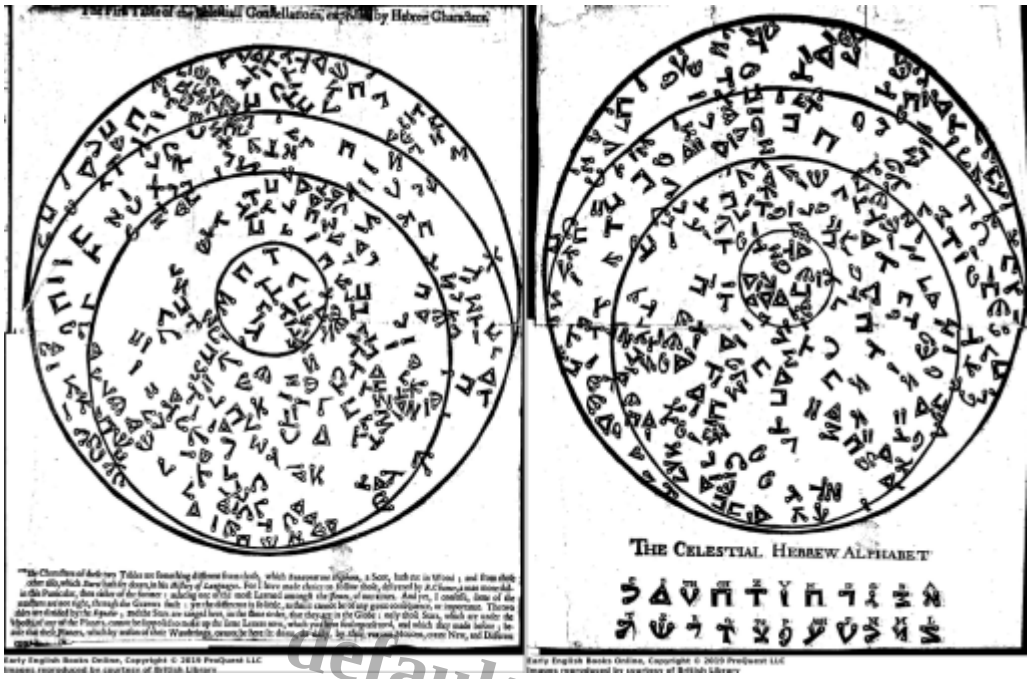
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Michel Foucault explains the pre-modern era in his book *The Order of Things* in terms of how people drew on resemblances. The pre-modern period, including the Middle Ages and Renaissance, was governed by *resemblance*: look for what is similar between things, whether causal, systemic or accidental, and group them together. See post A brief history of signs. Such groupings yielded potential advantages, not least an explanation of causes and the hope of medical cures.

Gaffarelâ??s writings were well known and respected in the 17th century. According to at least one source (Vladimir Kirsanov) the philosophers Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) knew of Gaffarelâ??s writing.

Celestial cryptography

Gaffarel is of interest as a proponent of cryptic writing, and notably the alluring presentation of what he terms â??The Celestial Hebrew Alphabetâ?•. That exploits apparent correspondences between constellations and letters of the alphabet. He seems to present this system as an alternative or complement to the signs of the zodiac and for reading the sky for interpretations of earthly events now and in the future. This illustration is from the ProQuest scan of Gaffarelâ??s *Unheard-of Curiosities*.



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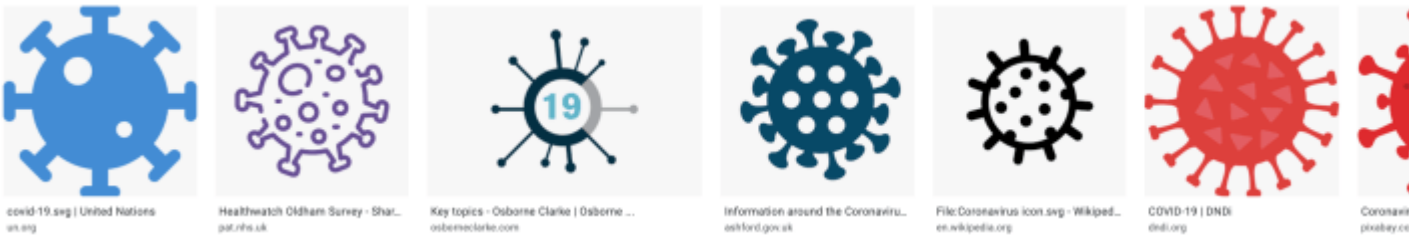
A helpful article by Arnold Lebeuf explains the authority claims behind the system.

> â??The Renaissance esoteric tradition of sky alphabet was directly influenced by the Jewish Cabbalah, mystic ideas presenting the creation of God as a text, a piece of literature, a mathematical and semantic potential of creative combinationsâ?• (320).

Of course, itâ??s easy for the modern mind to refute such propositions.

> â??in a quasi infinity of points and their arbitrary combinations, the only trouble is with choice. With such methods, one can find and prove anything at all, at best it makes a good gymnastic for the brains [sic]â?• (319).

Here are some results of Google image search on â??covid icon.â?• Is the infamous sphere with pinhead spikes now the celestial curative, talisman and figure of our times?



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Date Created
August 14, 2021
Author
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