

THE ALPHABET VERSUS THE GODDESS

The Conflict between Word and Image

By Leonard Shlain

464 pp. Penguin Compass. 1999.

The Alphabet versus the Goddess is a sweeping historical re-write of, well, writing. Author Leonard Shlain posits that the advent of the alphabet—not the Sumerian wedged cuneiform or the Egyptian pictographic hieroglyph, but the symbolic Proto-sinaitic alphabet—changed global cultures. The decalogue of Mount Sinai brought monotheism, a moral code, and the first literacy test (aka bar mitzvah). The attendant cost of alphabet literacy, at least temporarily, was patriarchy, misogyny, and a "distrust of images." (428) Shlain, a vascular surgeon, offers a neuro-anatomical explanation, a physical reason why men compartmentalize and women multi-task. The left lobe (the masculine side) leans linear, sequential, reductionist, analytical, and abstract; and the right (feminine), holistic, simultaneous, and concrete. Alphabet literacy reinforces "left hemispheric modes . . . at the expense of right." (viii) Ergo, Shlain explores the *process* of literacy, not the *content* of its library. For example, we comprehend horizontal script (such as an English-language book) temporally, and vertical script (and layouts, such as a menu) spatially. In conclusion, Shlain foretells a détente with screen culture, whereby computer use (interactive, two-handed, iconographic) balances the playing field—at least between the brain's two teams. But I wonder how he would explain the less cooperative aspects of our internet age, such as cybercrime, computer addiction, and online anti-social behavior. And two decades post-publication, how would he parse virtual reality and other wearable technologies? —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 21 August 2019