
Chapter 1

Reflecting on Writing and Writteness

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Our focus in this chapter is on the premises of material text culture theory that touch on the phenomenon of writing itself. While much research has been carried out and much ink spilt on writing and its history, our interest here by contrast lies not so much in a cultural differentiation of various writing systems or their historical development, but rather in the general aspects of writing as a material and presentic phenomenon. Thus, this chapter is not a contrastive study of, say, Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiform—although a great deal could be said about the material conditions of both writing systems, as has in fact been done by some of the researchers involved in the CRC 933. Rather, we focus here more on writing in a general sense, understood as being interrelated systems of signs that enable communication across time and space. Connected to the notion of an ‘extended hermeneutics’ as presented in the introduction to this volume, we are also primarily interested in writing’s own efficacy beyond its communicative functions. Writing refers to a semantics beyond itself, yet through its material presence—according to Thesis 1 below—it generates meaning that expands or counteracts this very semantics. The notion of authorship and intention are thus secondary to our inquiry, since writing—like language itself—is also based on generalisation and conventionalisation, so that a supposedly individual statement is always overwritten by sign-like conventions and transferred to a new situational (textual) context.

Writing as the totality of signs of a referential, presentic and operational character—that is, disjunctive signs whose application is generally rule-governed¹—makes communication at once possible and impossible, insofar as what is meant by someone cannot be written down as such, as the specific thing an individual had in mind. In communication that stretches across space and time (something which writing is supposed to enable), the semantic decoding of what is individually meant is jeopardised by the absence of sender and receiver. Writing can stand the test of time and thereby transcends the semantic level of its meaning; it appears still as ‘writing’ even when there is no one left who can receive and interpret its semantic message as such.

The first thesis of this volume deals with this expanded perspective on the meaning of the written and its dimensions: “Writing cannot be reduced to its representational function, but has an aesthetic presence and effectiveness in and of itself.” In principle, all further observations are based on this initial thesis. This is because

1 Cf. Grubbe/Kogge 2005.

it is only at the level of the *meaning* of writing as something that goes beyond the semantics of what has been written that the aspects of textual materialisation and the concomitant effects of presence first come into view. The materiality and presence of writing are themselves, deliberately or not, carriers of meaning. They can support what is meant in the text, but they can also ignore or even counteract such meaning. Every written text therefore becomes polyphonic in a certain sense due to its materiality and presence, and this complex web of meaning requires an ‘extended hermeneutics’, which is explained in more detail in Thesis 2: “The materiality and presence of what is written produce their own semantic content.”

Following this, we engage with two chains of thought on the characteristics of writing that occur more frequently in intellectual history. Thesis 3 touches on the intrinsic corporeality of writing and the subject-independent agency that goes hand in hand with such embodiment: “If what is written is not thought of in terms of communication between subjects, it itself takes on corporeality and agency.” Thesis 4 explores the self-reflexive power of writing, which often refers especially to the corporeality or materiality of such writing: “The dimensions of what is written are explicitly or implicitly reflected in pre-modern texts.” Admittedly, these theses emphasise examples from European discourse in particular. This circumstance is to be understood as purely exemplary and in no way excludes the application of these observations to other cultural spheres. Writing’s enduring character beyond the lifetime of any single individual is something that has apparently led cultures across the centuries and around the world to ascribe special power to it.

In some cases, writing itself becomes the subject—it has its own physicality and can act. Writing is present and draws our gaze, whether that be graffiti in large letters on a wall or building or tiny lettering scrawled on a tabletop. Its presence ‘means’ something, even if no specific significance can be inferred automatically. Sometimes, this agency of writing is particularly emphasised in the imagination of a particular culture. This is the case, for example, when writings that have been assigned special (‘magical’) agency are staged, write themselves (as in literatures of the European Middle Ages, for example), or intervene as actors in a story (of sacred nature, for example) and determine it (on ‘writing magic’, cf. Chapter 5, Thesis 24). Such a living character and even sacred potency is ascribed to writing, for example, in rituals still performed today on Bali, in the course of which writing drawn on palm leaves is not permitted to be read, but rather exists as a kind of ‘pure’ writing, autonomous and bearing meaning only inasmuch as it is recognisable and effective in its materiality as ‘writing’. European Antiquity and the Middle Ages, on the other hand, know of ‘speaking’ objects, on which inscriptions in the first-person initiate a complex game involving the notions of authorship and the self-efficacy of writing.²

This power of writing is reflected time and time again in philosophical and literary texts. Such metatextual passages can appear as explicit comments on cultural practices

2 Cf. Edelmann-Singer/Ehrich 2021.

in relation to the material design of what is written, or as implicit, even fictionalised, references (letters that do not arrive, writings that cannot be deciphered, etc.) that allow conclusions to be drawn about the cultural potential of what is written. At times, these commentaries are also self-reflexive in a narrower sense in that the text refers to its own textual materiality and its own status as a written composition. While notions of the special efficacy of what is written on account of its material form or corporeality are more common in pre-modern cultures than in modern ones, the self-reflexivity of writing(s) is not, strictly speaking, a phenomenon specific to pre-modernity. Nevertheless, the pre-modern era especially abounds with instances in which writing refers to its own materiality and writtenness, both explicitly and implicitly, and analysing these instances enables us to gain access to the text cultures of this period.³

Finally, Theses 5 and 6 address the fundamental fact that writing – no matter how long- or short-term its duration, or how big or small its appearance – can only be realised in time and space. (Thesis 5: “The aesthetic permanence of what is written, i. e., its [long- or short-term] temporal permanence as perceived by the senses, is constitutive for the meaning and effect of writing”; Thesis 6: “The spatial realisation is constitutive for the meaning and effect of what is written.”) The meaning of a piece of writing is not only shaped and determined by its presence in space (monumental or restricted⁴), its arrangement in the wider visual context, or its (intentional or accidental) illegibility, but also by the endurability of such writing in the field of vision, or by the permanence or ephemerality of its material, respectively. Viewed thus, we can focus on how what is written interacts with potential recipients in ever new encounters, all of which are nonetheless already conceivable by the initial act of writing. The way in which this encounter actually happens can run counter to how it was initially envisioned: for example, when the spatial configuration of a piece of writing shifts over time, or when the cultural practices surrounding what is written undergo change or become obsolete. In any case, as already outlined at the beginning, the problem (but also the accompanying creative potential) once again comes to light here of a semantic polyphony determining all writing, when we regard it as autonomous and in its efficacy independent of any specific communication situation.

Thesis 1

Writing cannot be reduced to its representational function, but has an aesthetic presence and effectiveness in and of itself.

Writing is materially realised and thus has an immediate presence and concomitant effectiveness. We lose sight of this property if writing is primarily understood as a

³ Cf. Focken/Ott 2016a.

⁴ Frese/Keil/Krüger 2014a.

representational system. In what follows, we trace out an understanding of writing in which it essentially goes beyond being merely a vehicle for conveying thought, which is deemed controllable by the writing subject. When we speak here of ‘writing’ as a cultural technique, we always understand this term in a general way without any specificity with regard to cultures and writing systems. Considerations of the conceptual and practical writing differences that exist amongst, for example, phonographic alphabetic scripts, syllabic scripts, or logographic writing systems such as Chinese characters or Egyptian hieroglyphs are left aside. In order to reflect on the theoretical content of such a general perspective, however, we shall first approach it from the cultural tradition of alphabetic scripts, since they quite clearly illustrate the argument against the representational character of writing.

In most modern-era and present-day European theories of writing—not to mention in everyday life—writing has been understood from the point of view of (spoken) language: namely, writing has been regarded as language that has been written down primarily for the purpose of overcoming the temporal and/or spatial distance between sender and receiver. In such logocentric models, what is written represents oral speech, which in turn is merely the vehicle of a prior inner world of thoughts, the expression of intentions.

Every epistemic and cultural formation constructs narratives on the respective status, genesis, and function of ‘writing’. It is crucial to consider these narratives not as absolute, but rather as culturally dependent conceptions,⁵ and to keep in mind the implications of such narratives for power politics.⁶ In theoretical discourse on the subject of writing, for example, the dominant European narrative in modern times has been decidedly teleological. It has portrayed writing as a secondary cultural technique, chronologically subsequent to language and—depending on the epistemological perspective—increasing the latter’s complexity (Condillac, Rousseau) while at the same time implying a loss of ‘authenticity’ and of the individuality of the immediate expression of language (this ‘phonocentrism’, according to Derrida, has pervaded the whole of Western philosophy since Plato⁷). A model for establishing a hierarchy between language and writing is then argumentatively sought in human phylogeny and ontogeny (and thus assumed to be quasi-natural), according to which human beings come into the world without language and writing, but with the ability to speak. The acquisition of a specific language develops in a given culture without any instruction at the end of the first year of life; literacy develops only with instruction, and is thus seen as a cultural achievement in contrast to language acquisition. This development of the

5 We mean here ‘narratives’ in the sense of a *meta-récit*, cf. Lyotard 1986. On narratives of ‘writing’ in different cultural contexts, see also Gumbrecht/Pfeiffer 1993.

6 The implications of narratives on ‘writing’ for power politics tend to deny the status of ‘writing’ to other writing systems, cf. Greek views on the scriptless *barbaroi* or the views of colonial powers with regard to Mesoamerican cultures (cf. Mignolo 2003; Errington 2008). Certeau 1990 also posits that generally speaking, writing is an epistemic instrument (of power) of an all-encompassing character.

7 Derrida 1967. The critique of writing in Certeau 1975 proceeds in a similar vein.

individual would then roughly correspond to a history of the development of human-kind in which cultures first have language and then—possibly, but also not all cultures—acquire writing as a regulated system of disjunctive signs that can be used for variable content in variable situations and that can express verbal utterances. This perspective allows historical theories of writing to establish cultural (and in effect, Eurocentric) hierarchies not only between language and writing, but also between different writing systems, as seen for example when such theories posit a path of positive development progressing from mere gestures to pictograms to hieroglyphs, thence to syllabic forms of writing, and finally reaching the apex of alphabetic scripts (Condillac, Rousseau, Hegel). Alphabetic writing is seen in such lines of thought to be the highest level of writing development, since it is said to render the pictorial character of the signs secondary and allows them to become paradoxically invisible, the plainly seen but mainly ignored means for transporting and transmitting verbal utterances.⁸

By contrast, ever since Plato's *Phaedrus*, the traditional critique of writing has established a quite different view for interpreting the connection between language and writing in terms of writing and media theory. With the critique of the mere externality of form (writing) as opposed to the actual internality of content (direct linguistic expression), the teleological perspective becomes a tipping point. Precisely because writing replaces the human voice, Plato considers the former to be ambivalent: as a *pharmakon*, it can be useful, but also poisonous, thus becoming a dehumanising, merely apparent simulacrum. Plato's critique of writing is radicalised by Derrida and Certeau into a necessity: writing and all signs in general (including gestures, pictograms, and ultimately even words, i. e., language itself) are understood as being the condition of the possibility of expression and understanding, and as making it simultaneously impossible to convey what is originally meant and thought. Every written expression, every sign is always subsequent to what is supposed to be expressed and is never 'authentic' with regard to it. The uniqueness of the meaning or thought that is intended to be expressed is always absent in the sign (be it writing, a linguistic sign, or a gesture).⁹

Building on this theoretical foundation, Derrida developed a concept of writing that deduces a reversal in the relationship between writing and language from the absence of the signified in the signifier: Derrida's provocation consists in placing writing *before* language. At first glance, he would seem to contradict not only the historical sequence of the historical development of language and writing as outlined above, but also the sequence of how individuals learn language and writing, as well as ulti-

⁸ On historical theories of writing, cf. e. g. the handbook *Schrift und Schriftlichkeit*, edited by Günther/Ludwig 1994, vol. 1. These assumptions of a cultural-historical development are in line with the framework of teleological conceptions of history and are only based in part on historical studies of writing systems. Moreover, they do not sufficiently take into account the fact that writing can also fulfil non-referential functions distinct from speech communication.

⁹ On the "dangerous supplement" (*dangereux supplément*) of the written and the category of absence, cf. Derrida 1967. On dehumanisation as the de-voicing of writing vis-à-vis the authenticity of speech and bodily performance, cf. also Certeau 1975.

mately the common-sense notion that writing is merely a retrospective record of linguistically composed thought. Derrida's *archi-écriture* is in a certain sense even prior to thinking, in that it prescribes fundamental structures.¹⁰ This 'priorness' of writing is, of course, not meant in historical or temporal terms, but rather refers to the general primordially of the sign before the concrete intention of communication. Derrida's considerations are based on the absence of the signified in the signifier—a central point already in Plato's critique of writing—and on the physical absence of sender and receiver in the situation of written communication (which can be extended over space and time). In this communication between absent persons, however, the sign remains present when the sender is gone and even in cases where it never reaches its recipient. The permanent (present) character of the written sign and the possibility of its use in infinite contexts are the very condition of the possibility of written communication.

The premise here is that writing is 'iterable', i. e., not bound to particular senders or particular contexts, but applicable by all competent users. It can be 'grafted' into ever new contexts by connecting the signs of a specific script to form infinite quantities of text. Writing must thus be completely independent of specific communication intentions in order to be able to function in the absence of sender and receiver. However, this leads to the assumption of a general impossibility of communication—that is, if we understand the latter to be the accident-free transport of an intention from sender to receiver. Derrida therefore understands the core properties of writing to be the "break with the horizon of communication as communication of consciousnesses or of presences and as linguistical or semantic transport of the desire to express oneself (*vouloir-dire*)", as well as the "disengagement of all writing from the semantic or hermeneutic horizons".¹¹ This has implications for the textual hermeneutics that are discussed anew in the context of (post-)structuralism: even from the point of view of their respective contexts, texts as distinct, meaning-bearing units of signs cannot be understood in a simple way and with certainty (with regard to authorial intent).¹²

As is well known, Derrida's theory of absence as being essential to writing leads to a clearly expanded concept of writing, since what has been said about writing also applies to all "orders of 'signs' and [...] [to] all languages in general but moreover, beyond semio-linguistic communication, [...] [to] the entire field of what philosophy would call experience", even to the "experience of being".¹³ It is not necessary to accept the epistemological expansion of the concept of writing (especially since the philosophy of mind offers more epistemological models than that of the external world's representation by ideas as its internal signs) in order to work with Derrida's analysis of the classical concept of writing and the consequences of his thinking.

¹⁰ On the concept of *archi-écriture* as an element of the unconscious and the psychoanalytical implications that follow from this, cf. Derrida 1967.

¹¹ Derrida 1988, 8–9.

¹² Cf. Haß/Noller 2015.

¹³ Derrida 1988, 9.

Besides, Derrida's concept of writing is too expansive for a meaningful theory of material text cultures in terms of its epistemological or even ontological consequences.

What is fruitful, however, is the premise of separating writing from the communication situation if we assume that all written expression, in fact any linguistic expression, is only possible through systems of signs (characters, words) that exist before us and before a given desire for expression. These signs, along with the code that regulates them, enable expression and communication; yet at the same time, they render individual expression as such impossible. In order to be understandable, we have to employ systems of signs that must be fundamentally independent of any individual desire for expression and any specific communicative context. Communication, understood as the undamaged transport of intentions, is just as impossible in the here and now as it is over long distances of space and time.

Derrida's concept of writing can thus be understood as a basis for reflecting on the autonomy of materially present signs in an infinite number of contexts with their very own efficacy. This concept can thus also serve to put the representational character of writing into perspective with regard to language. Reflecting on the autonomy of writing vis-à-vis intentions, thoughts, and language can explain numerous writing practices better than theories of writing can, which understand writing as pure representation, as a repository of the linguistic.

In today's theoretical debates, as well as in the wake of new media configurations, there have been repeated calls not to reduce the phenomenon of writing simply to the linguistic and communicative processes that precede the act of writing. The range of phenomena broadly termed 'writing' also includes notational and arithmetical writing, for example, which cannot be understood in terms of spoken language. Furthermore, the realm of the written has its own practices that are detached from spoken language, such as highlighting, cutting up, and reassembling a text, among others. Moreover, ideas regarding the magical effects of writing or other cultural practices that presuppose the very materiality or ephemerality of writing (such as cultic practices) and play with the categories of (il)legibility or (in)visibility become more comprehensible when the independence and self-efficacy of writing is taken into account. A "meaningful concept of writing" must therefore no longer be considered a "derivative of speech"¹⁴ and must not be thought of solely in terms of the "order of the discursive".¹⁵ Gernot Grube, Werner Kogge, and Sybille Krämer call for a triadic structural model of writing—a kind of *via media* opposed to both an exceedingly narrow concept of writing and the exceedingly broad one espoused by Derrida—which regards the categories of reference, aesthetic presence, and operativity as essential features of the phenomenon of writing.¹⁶

¹⁴ Krämer 1998, 82, our translation, German text: "Derivat der Rede".

¹⁵ Grube/Kogge 2005, 11, our translation, German text: "Ordnung des Diskursiven".

¹⁶ Cf. the publications resulting from the DFG Research Training Group 1458 'Notational Iconicity: Materiality, Perceptibility and Operativity of Writing', which was active from 2008–2013 at the Free University of Berlin.

When we speak of the “aesthetic presence” of writing,¹⁷ we mean that characters are visually perceptible—or at least must have been for a short period of time in order for such characters to be considered as writing. In this context, the enduring quality inherent in something written unfolds its own potential for meaning alongside the meaning that is proper to what is written (see Thesis 5). Scholars have noted that the presence of writing stands in tension between the poles of visibility and invisibility.¹⁸ On the one hand, this alludes to the spatial foundation of writing, which always presupposes an already “formatted space”.¹⁹ On the other hand, writing is always a “pictorial phenomenon”,²⁰ and as such must also be perceived in its creative expression.

The pictoriality of writing indicates that the aesthetic presence of writing (that is, such as it stands in relation to sense perception) is always also an *aesthetic* presence: namely, one related to a particular quality of perception (beautiful or ugly, easy or hard to recognise, large or small, etc.) with its own particular effect. Inscribed artefacts, whether they be manuscripts, books, or screens in the context of historical development, must deal with this fundamental tension between writing’s quality as image on the one hand and as character(s) on the other. In doing so, they can stress either quality to a greater extent in different ways. While some artefacts allow the materiality of the writing to play second fiddle in the act of reception, in hopes that the content of the writing might appear all the more prominently, other artefacts can prevent precisely such a reception and emphasise the materiality and pictoriality, which in turn can ‘block’²¹ semantic reception or at the least force it to compete against other dimensions of meaning that are transmitted by the artefact’s materiality.

If the pictoriality of the writing is very prominent—as is the case in the ornamental use of writing, the creation of images with writing, or the rich decoration of initials (cf. Fig. 4 in Chapter 2 and Fig. 5 in Chapter 5)—the content of what is written (its meaning, its reference) fades into the background, and the dimensions of what the pictorial element itself means must also be taken into account in the act of reading. For example in medieval art this back and forth of written and pictorial elements with regard to legibility shifts away referentiality from the level of the sign to that of the textual environment of the written characters, whereby such characters posit a pictorial meta-commentary that either increases or ironically undermines levels of meaning. In the interplay between writing and image, legibility moves along a spectrum of ostentatious display, of moments of concealment and even of pretence.²² In iconoclastic contexts, for example, writing takes on a complex role as a ‘hybrid’ formation,

17 Kogge/Grube 2005, 14, our translation, German text: “ästhetischer Präsenz”.

18 Cf. Frese/Keil/Krüger 2014a.

19 Krämer 2005, 28, our translation, German text: “formatierten Raum”.

20 Rehm 2019, our translation, German text: “Bildphänomen”. On the ‘pictoriality of writing’, cf. the explanations in Chapter 2, pp. 78–83.

21 Cf. Lieb 2015, 3–4, who also provides further bibliography, especially n. 11 on Gumbrecht; see also Gumbrecht/Pfeiffer 1993.

22 Cf. Horstmann 2024.

in which iconic and discursive elements are united:²³ writing stands in “competition with other visibilities”,²⁴ while at the same time always itself remaining an image and thus subverting the actual critique of images that is fixated on the written form.²⁵

It nevertheless remains relevant that the ‘pictoriality of writing’ (or ‘notational iconicity’, cf. Chapter 2, pp. 78–83) represents a specific rather than pure kind of iconicity, since the sign-like quality is over-coded here by means of pictorial and semantic elaboration. The effect of the pictoriality of writing is based on the fact that the reference of what is written can be pushed aside by its particular material presence—a possibility (following Derrida) that is always inherent in writing. Notably, a potential sign character can here itself be denoted as a ‘reference’; in other words: an image of writing can refer rather to its own inherent possibility of being sign-like than to any external content. The function of writing as a means of communication (the primacy of which is to be questioned here) thus becomes more complex: even the suspension of the linguistic referential function of what is written could be described as a communicative act, since the strategies of the “restricted presence”, invisibility, and illegibility of the written word can for their part be “essentially involved in the production of social meaning” precisely beyond referentiality.²⁶ In this respect, the communicative function of writing could be expanded, such that writing could communicate itself as a possible means of communication, with the pictorial dimension also remaining part of the communication process.

The operational aspect of the triadic structural model²⁷ distinguishes writing from images; writings are “built up of elements which are in principle distinguishable and definite”, and with which “one *can* in principle operate according to unambiguous rules”.²⁸ Consequently, the operability of writing can be detached from individual communication situations and can form its own systems. For example, the binary code of 1 and 0 or a computer programme has no (or at least, no simple) reference in an individual desire for expression; it is not based on anything linguistic. Because of their contextual independence, written characters and writing systems can become self-dynamic and completely independent of semiotic orders. This is also where a self-generative aspect of writing comes into play.

Furthermore, if we broaden the concept of writing to include computer-based media, this basic premise leads to an “auto-operativity” in which signs themselves have the capacity to act,²⁹ being self-generating within their own system of reference. Fol-

²³ Cf. Krämer 2018, 210.

²⁴ Strätling/Witte 2006, 8, our translation, German text: “Konkurrenz zu anderen Sichtbarkeiten”.

²⁵ Strätling/Witte 2006, 9.

²⁶ Frese/Keil/Krüger 2014b, 234, our translation, German text: “restringierte[] Präsenz”, “an der Produktion von sozialem Sinn wesentlich beteiligt”. Cf. also Chapter 2, pp. 78–83.

²⁷ Grube/Kogge 2005.

²⁸ Grube/Kogge 2005, 15, our translation, German text: “aus prinzipiell unterscheidbaren und definiten Elementen aufgebaut”, “[und mit dem] grundsätzlich nach eindeutigen Regeln operiert werden kann”.

²⁹ Krämer 2005, 46; Grube 2005.

lowing Luhmann, writing can also be considered as an “autopoietic system” which in the network of its own operations is itself able to reproduce, further develop, and reflect on structures. “By condensing and confirming writing”, writes Luhmann, “a written text [...] generates a tremendous potential for texts yet unwritten”.³⁰ Here again, neither aesthetic presence nor referentiality are criteria for a basic system-internal legibility of the code, which can be increasingly detached from human actors and the code’s primordial sense of a communicative act.

But writing also unfolds its own capacity for action outside its own system. If writing can be described as a medium that need not be preceded by any (linguistic or) mental concept, then its own dynamic and constructive character becomes clear. Thus, we find an echo of the operational aspect of writing in Derrida’s concept of writing. As a “visualisation of the cognitive”, writing enables a haptic way of dealing with epistemic objects so to speak, which lets these objects emerge into being and makes them tangible.³¹ Writing’s status as mere object vis-à-vis a subject who writes, then, is also itself called into question, and the act of writing, as White and Barthes have noted, could be considered as a ‘mediopassive’ form or voice between the active and the passive in which the act of writing itself shapes the writer’s status as subject³² (one finds examples for this in some Indo-European language grammars). On the surface of the material writing support, the possibility emerges for the constitution of subjectivity in the act of writing, a field of operation that makes the production of the subject possible in the first place and underlines the active dimension of the practice of writing, in its function which does not serve merely to represent, but also to create entire worlds and systems of logic.³³

Thesis 2

The materiality and presence of what is written produce their own semantic content.

At the heart of the first thesis lies the claim that meaning is not simply represented by what is written; indeed, meaning is rendered in some ways impossible. This does not mean, however, that we cannot strive for the meaning produced by what is written via hermeneutic procedures. The unavoidability of materiality and presence, and thus the efficacy, of written signs or what is written is accompanied by the production of further meaning. This additional meaning, however, is just as much beyond the control

³⁰ Cf. Luhmann 1993, 351 and 356, our translation, German text: “Indem er die Schrift kondensiert und bestätigt”, “erzeugt ein geschriebener Text [...] ein ungeheures Potential für noch ungeschriebene Texte”.

³¹ Krämer 2005, 42, our translation, German text: “Visualisierung des Kognitiven”.

³² Cf. White 1993.

³³ On the problem of the *page blanche* cf. Certeau 1990, 199; Foucault 1994.

of a writing subject (or ‘authorial intent’) as is the semantic meaning represented by the signs. This has consequences for the extended hermeneutic approach, which is not concerned solely with the semantics of texts, but also with the meaning of what is written inasmuch as it supplements, overlaps with, negates, or ignores the semantics of the text. In the following, we consider this surplus production of meaning along with the writing-related practices that are associated with and effected by it. In doing so, we also link motifs from media theory to the ‘extended hermeneutics’ proposed here.

The referential aspect of writing—which can become secondary in the overly strong presence of the pictorial aspect or of the operationality of writing systems that can only be read by machines and are devoid of meaning for a human reader—nevertheless remains the vanishing point of our everyday concept of writing. We deal with writing in such a way that we understand it as conveying meaning even when we have no way of deciphering what has been written; we simply assume that it makes sense. We cannot imagine another way of dealing with what is written in everyday life other than as something that can be read and thus ultimately understood—even if its understanding eludes some. Referential means that writing stands as signs for something. This can be, among other things, generic ideas, syllables, or sounds, which usually stand for comprehensible content (meaning) as elements of a natural language.

Hermeneutics deals with the referentiality of texts as a ‘doctrine of interpretation’, which is only necessary because the reference(s) of texts, their semantics, is problematic. Reference can be problematic because the interpreter is insufficiently able to understand what is meant, or because what is meant—or the text—deliberately or inadvertently blocks an interpretation; or because what is written is illegible or the inscribed artefact is damaged; or because the writing system is unknown (e. g., the medieval Voynich manuscript, which to date has not been deciphered). It is also problematic for the illiterate and for children, who nevertheless understand writing in the sense of a (potential) sign code that bears meaning. We cannot deal here with the history and critique of hermeneutics as an assumption of the possible elevation of an inner meaning from its merely external and accidental form, even though the criticism has lost none of its polemical potential in the course of overcoming post-structuralism and the latter’s supposed arbitrariness of meaning.³⁴ It should be noted, however, that a hermeneutics extended to materiality, presence, and efficacy is not concerned with reconstructing an original meaning along the lines of authorial intent.³⁵ What is meant here is that in the understanding of the written word, which is always tied to culture and context, it is not *only* the semantics of the written word which must be included, but that a large number of other elements that carry meaning enter into the hermeneutic endeavour. The materiality and specific presence of an inscribed artefact

³⁴ On this, cf. Haß/Noller 2015.

³⁵ On (the history of) hermeneutics and its critique, cf. the instructive short article by Aleida Assmann, in which she traces the path from a triple configuration (text-reader-pathfinder) via a double one (text-reader) to a single one (text) (A. Assmann 1996).

have their own potential meanings that expand or modify the understanding of what is written. Some are intentional, such as the particular value of the material used; some are accidental, such as the careless scrawl on a clay shard. Even the safekeeping of a piece of writing ‘bestows’ meaning, e. g. the display of a relic authentic in a modern exhibition space as well as the hiding of a secret message or the sinking of a lead tablet inscribed with a curse into a well. The practices in which a given inscribed artefact were involved are often not easy to reconstruct, but nonetheless relevant to its meaning. They too form an essential component of the artefact’s specific presence and are thus part and parcel with its cultural and semantic meaning, which extended hermeneutics enables us to grasp.

The ‘decoding’ of the elements of an inscribed artefact that provide meaning, as well as of—more broadly speaking—its ‘text culture’, can only ever be approximate, since each reception situation comes with its own patterns of interpretation. In a way, the procedure incorporating the materiality and presence of what is written into the hermeneutic endeavour expands the degrees of uncertainty by asking about the meaning of an inscribed artefact that is situated and integrated into a text culture. Such an ‘extended’ hermeneutics also does not establish any instances of authorial intent for the text culture: only in rare cases is there a clear indication of the intent(ion) with which the design or placement of an inscribed artefact was undertaken in the way it was found. In most cases, the historical meaning must be reconstructed provisionally and cautiously. Metatexts, but also the textuality or materiality reflected in a text itself, can provide us with clues to this end (cf. Thesis 4), although the inherent dynamics of any given instance of writing resist being completely ‘decoded’, even with the aid of such metatexts.

What is particularly relevant here, then, is that writing not only transmits a possible semantic meaning, but that it also generates meaning through its specific materiality, presence, and the practices in which it is/was integrated. The generation of this meaning can occur both consciously and unconsciously, and can in fact also undermine the meaning of what is written. Likewise, twentieth-century media theory has not only criticised the assumption that media are mere vehicles of meaning, but has also already identified them as a “source of meaning” of their own, in the sense of McLuhan’s dictum that the medium is the message.³⁶ Especially in the case of disruption, the veil of the medium’s supposedly simple function as content bearer is parted and the medium becomes visible as such. What we see, however, is nothing other than what was already there: the materiality of the medium always generates a trace of its own efficacy, which can be completely opposed or parasitic to the intended transmission. Materiality produces a ‘surplus’, an ‘added value’ of meaning, which is mostly neither intended nor even within the control of writing subjects. Paul Zumthor has described this in terms of the voice as the medium of speech, which—like an

³⁶ McLuhan 1964.

‘unintentional trace’—always bears meaning on its own, often deviating from what is intended to be said.³⁷ Here, the medium itself is not only the bearer of a meaning; “rather the trace of the medium is preserved in the message”.³⁸

Gumbrecht has already argued that media (and thus also writing) produce their own ‘surplus’ of meaning and do not refer deictically to some extrinsic meaning, but rather appear themselves with their aesthetic qualities.³⁹ On “this side of hermeneutics”⁴⁰, the medium’s materiality offers phenomena of presence that elude and run counter to the interpretive gesture—at least insofar as this gesture refers solely to the semantics of a text. The very materiality of the medium thus changes the latter’s status from being an object of investigation to being a subject that determines its own parameters for how to be read. The intrinsic efficacy of materiality is reflected above all in the perceptibility and durability of what is written (cf. Theses 5 and 6), but it also has an influence on semantic content of the written word and can even contradict it under certain circumstances.

Media—and this is equally valid for writing—thus not only condition the possibility of meaning, but are themselves accorded agency in the course of a “crossing, shifting, i. e. subversion” of meaning.⁴¹ Therefore, neither writing in general nor specific instances of the written word can be regarded as an “instrument”.⁴² Writing is not simply a vehicle bearing the meaning with which it has been charged, but rather can enrich what is meant as a source of meaning in itself, or even supply a completely different meaning. As mentioned before, neither this critique of an instrumental understanding of writing nor a general critique of hermeneutics (like Gumbrecht’s, for instance) entail that the reference to meaning should be abandoned altogether. What is problematised is the monosemy and absolutisation of meaning in general, along with the idea that meaning could be detached from its medial forms of expression without them generating meaning on their own. Likewise, the reader is urged to make an effort to understand the text, but is also made aware by the critique of hermeneutics of the fact that references can be infinite and that a clear deduction of them all is impossible. Moreover, from a historical perspective, we see that it is not only the contexts of medial preconditions and thus the ‘messages’ of the media themselves (McLuhan) that are subject to change, but also the practices and forms of reception in the contexts of different cultural systems of knowledge.

³⁷ Cf. Krämer 1998, 79.

³⁸ Krämer 1998, 81, our translation, German text: “vielmehr bewahrt sich an der Botschaft die Spur des Mediums”.

³⁹ Cf. Gumbrecht 2003.

⁴⁰ Here we pun on the title of the German translation of Gumbrecht’s work *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, which first appeared in English; Schulte’s translation into German is entitled *Diesseits der Hermeneutik: Über die Produktion von Präsenz* (Gumbrecht 2004).

⁴¹ Krämer 1998, 90, our translation, German text: “Durchkreuzung, Verschiebung, eben Subversion”.

⁴² Krämer 1998, 90, our translation, German text: “Instrument”.

This sensitisation to contexts of meaning as infinite is, in a certain sense, a first prerequisite for dealing with pre-modern instances of writing, since the cultures from which surviving written testimonies originate stand at a great temporal, and thus cultural, remove from the present. However, the caution necessary in comprehension, as well as the reference to the presence of inscribed artefacts, their topographies, and the practices related to them as sources of meaning in their own right when dealing with pre-modern societies, applies equally to the present day due to the critical engagement with a structural model of writing (see Thesis 1 above). At the same time, it often seems to have been the case historically that in cultures without techniques for the mechanical reproduction of writing, the intrinsic efficacy of the presence of written characters was virtually staged, presupposed for magical practices and often reflected on in the texts themselves. It often is with particular clarity that the specific epistemological situation of pre-modern and ‘non-typographic’ writing cultures allows for the material and somatic dimension of what is written and its own efficacy to show (cf. Thesis 3).⁴³

Thesis 3

If what is written is not thought of in terms of communication between subjects, it itself takes on corporeality and agency.

As stated in Thesis 1, most modern theories of writing, and the self-evident notion of the written word that dominates everyday life today, assume that what is written is essentially a vehicle for communicating the thoughts and intentions of subjects. These subjects, viewed as minds juxtaposed to the world of things, have bodies that provide the material basis for the production and transmission of meaning via sounds, writing, or other signs. If one assumes that writing produces meaning—that is, that writing takes the place of the subject as the origin of meaning and intention—then writing becomes its own body able to act on its own surroundings. The physicality of what is written⁴⁴ at once implies and presupposes agency.

In relation to the ‘Western world’, by which we mean here predominantly Eurocentric cultures regardless of actual geographical location, the corporeality of writing has above all a historical dimension. In the course of technological advancement, especially with the increasing spread of typography and the emergence of hegemonic models of ‘strong’ subjectivity in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries (emblematic in the Cartesian subject),⁴⁵ this corporeality is increasingly replaced by the notion of ‘spiritual

⁴³ Cf. Hilgert 2010 and 2016.

⁴⁴ Cf. Béreiziat-Lang/Folger/Palacios Larrosa 2020.

⁴⁵ On the formation of modern forms of subjectivity at the beginning of the modern era, cf. Folger 2009. ‘Strong’ subjectivity is characterised by the categorical opposition of subject and environment; cf. Dünne 2003, 59.

communication' through the vehicle of immaterial or only incidentally material writing, although retaining some residual significance in modern 'Western' societies (for example, in the religious sphere). Although the assumption of a disembodied writing has become globally relevant with the history of colonial expansion and the concomitant hegemony of 'Western' epistemologies, notions of a corporeality of the written word can be more or less prevalent in other cultures. The corporeality of writing is historically and culturally determined and cannot be detached from specific epistemologies and models of subjectivity. In what follows, we explain this thesis on the basis of Western medieval epistemology, whose roots lie in Greco-Roman philosophy.

The critique of the logocentric concept of writing made by the post-structuralists and found in more recent work that takes into account not only the semiotic dimension of such writing, but also the pragmatics and materiality of the same, shows that how one understands writing changes historically and is based on different epistemologies (Theses 1 and 2). The study of writing in pre-modern cultures must not only take into account explicit reflections of writtenness in metatexts, but also the epistemological presuppositions of writing, since these are essential for understanding historical writing practices.

In pre-modern European epistemology, writing had a very special and privileged relationship with the body or the somatic. There was neither the Cartesian separation of mind and matter, nor was there a sundering of the body from its environment. The body was not merely an instrument for the creation of written or inscribed artefacts. Rather, there existed a special relationship of writing to the body, a relationship that imbued artefacts with somatic qualities—in contrast to the Cartesian perspective, in which they were considered inanimate and without any agency of their own.

Before we return to the materiality of writing, however, a few remarks on materiality in medieval conceptions of thought and cognition are necessary. A cornerstone of pre-modern epistemology is the notion that there is no thinking without images.⁴⁶ This principle is affirmed by Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on Aristotle's *On Memory and Recollection* (90–91).⁴⁷ In another text, his commentary on the Greek philosopher's *On the Soul* (432a3–10), Aquinas writes: "Instead, when one actually contemplates (*speculatur*) anything, one must at the same time form a phantasm for oneself. Phantasm are likenesses of sensible things, but they differ from them in that they exist outside of matter."⁴⁸ In his *Summa*, he emphasises the somatic character of

⁴⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 449^b, 48–49. For a description of the basic model of pre-modern Western psychology (as a synthesis of terminologically-speaking, frequently heterogeneous accounts) and its epistemological basis, see Folger 2009, 42–71.

⁴⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In Aristotelis libros De sensu et sensato, De memoria et reminiscencia commentarium*, 311–315.

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *A Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, 391 (transl. by R. Pasnau). Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In tres libros Aristotelis De Anima præclarissima Expositio*, liber III, lectio XIII, col. 237: *Sed cum speculetur, necesse simul phantasma aliquod speculari. Phantasmata enim sicut sensibilia sunt præterquam quod sunt sine materia.*

mental processes: “The body is necessary for the activity of the intellect, not as the organ through which it acts, but in order to supply it with its object; for images stand in relation to the intellect as color in relation to the sight.”⁴⁹

The material body is the foundation of intellectual processes. The *phantasmata* relate to the intellect, just as colour does to the sense of sight. The principle of the fundamental role of images and their phantasmatic quality in all processes of perception and cognition (which led Giorgio Agamben to speak of a “pneumophantasmology”⁵⁰) was the foundation not only of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy in particular, but also of European epistemology in general. This manifested itself in and established the medical and psychological theories of the Aristotelian-Galenic school of thought with very practical implications. The *phantasmata* that are mentioned are neither mental images in the contemporary sense nor are they mere representations. Pre-modern epistemology postulated that *formae*, *phantasmata*, and *species* all emanate from things, moving through a medium (usually the air) towards the eye and being transported through the eye to the inner senses of the *anima sensibilis*.⁵¹ The perceptual and cognitive process was said to culminate in the storage of such images at the back of the brain, the seat of memory. These stored images are then said to be the material basis of the operations of the intellect, i. e., the *anima rationalis*.

What is decisive here is that the *species* are to be understood as the physical basis of mental processes, because these are based on Aristotelian hylomorphism. Regardless of the Aristotelian differentiation between matter (ύλη) and form (μορφή), one cannot speak of any dualism. Just as material objects always have a form, *species* always have a material basis. Because form always requires matter, this explains why a *species* cannot exist without a ‘medium’, even if this be something as ‘insubstantial’ as air. Even the *spiritus* or *pneuma*—which is the medium of all mental processes, especially of the *phantasmata*—is considered to be no more than the most refined product of digestion, that is, matter in its highest sublimation.⁵² ‘Thinking in images’ should thus be understood as an essentially material form of thinking, with this epistemology implying that there was no ontological difference between the physical environment and body and the realm of the mental or psychical. As Suzannah Biernoff notes, “medieval theories of perception and knowledge often employed tripartite, not binary schemata; frequently making a sharper distinction between levels of soul than between soul and body.”⁵³ There is no sharp distinction between *mens*, body, and world. From a Cartesian perspective, this means that in the pre-modern era, the *res*

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 75,2 (p.12–13) (transl. by T. Suttor). Cf. *ibid.*: *Dicendum quod corpus requiritur ad actionem intellectus, non sicut organum quo talis actio exerceatur, sed ratione objecti; phantasma enim comparatur ad intellectum sicut color ad visum.*

⁵⁰ Cf. Agamben 1977.

⁵¹ Cf. Tachau 1982.

⁵² Thus depicted, for example, by the personal physician of the Catholic monarchs, Francisco López de Villalobos, in his comedy *Anfitrión*, 487–489; cf. also Folger 2002, 44–45.

⁵³ Biernoff 2002, 25.

cogitans is either an integral part of the *res extensa* or inherent to it. Thus, when we speak of pre-modern materiality, we must take into account that matter, things, and even human artefacts have a spiritual dimension, because spirituality is necessarily material, even if this materiality is minimal and the prevailing ideology of our day disdains this to the privileging of what is intellectual.

What does this mean for the materiality of writing? First of all, it means that the materiality of written characters in the epistemology described above cannot be understood as a combination of two physical, neutral materials: namely, the means of writing and the writing support (e. g., ink and paper). Writing has an extremely reduced material basis, the extreme case of which being when writing is applied to paper and even more so in letterpress printing, in which the illusion of immateriality can arise. At the same time, writing is highly formed and therefore approaches the spiritual. Thus, it possesses an agency *sui generis* that transcends writing subjects and their intentions. In this respect, writing is an image, but as ‘pictorial writing’ (‘Schriftbild’, cf. Chapter 2, pp. 78–83) it has a particular efficacy.

An interesting variation on this negotiation between a material basis of writing and its inherent spiritual dimension can be found in the Jewish and Islamic traditions of the late medieval Mediterranean. Here, the approach to the spiritual finds its physical representation in the creation of decidedly ‘immaterial’ writings. Letters cut into paper, for example, in which the characters are precisely not applied to the material but consist rather of the empty spaces thus created therein, were described in the fourteenth century by the Castilian rabbi Shem Tov (also known as Sem Tob or Santob) de Carrión as “form without matter”⁵⁴. The corporeal nature of this writing is explicitly stressed and emphasised in the first person, which also lends a subjective agency to this ‘immaterial’ writing: “[M]y body is made of nothingness. I am pure spirit (רוּחַ)”.⁵⁵ The negation here of the corporeal and material dimension of writing refers once again to the somatic quality otherwise attributed to conventional writtenness—and to the special quality of writing whose matter is ‘immaterial’. Shem Tov highlights this incorporeality as a miraculous quality, likening these immaterial letters to God’s own writing on the tables of the law: “Make [with scissors] rows, words cut like the engravings on a seal, like the writing of God engraved on the tablets, standing as a miracle for the peoples”.⁵⁶ Although the tablets of Moses have a heavy, solid, and three-dimensional physical materiality, Jewish tradition describes the writing of these tablets as a miraculous form of writing that was “to be read on both sides”—just like the letters cut into the paper could be.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Sem Tob, *Ma’āseh ha-rav*, 61; English transl. by Colahan 1979, 287.

⁵⁵ Sem Tob, *Ma’āseh ha-rav*, 61; English transl. by Colahan 1979, 287.

⁵⁶ Sem Tob, *Ma’āseh ha-rav*, 54; English transl. by Colahan 1979, 281.

⁵⁷ Sem Tob, *Ma’āseh ha-rav*, 69; English transl. by Colahan 1979, 295. In comparison with this perspective, which emphasises the negativity of the signs in the midst of a material writing support, see also the reflections on the tables of the law in Thesis 5, section 3).

Light also belongs to this dimension of the (im)materiality of the spiritual. In the late medieval Islamic world, glass lamps in Mamluk mosques were decorated with so-called ‘light writing’, often with the corresponding Qur’ān verse, “God is the light of the heavens and the earth” (24:35).⁵⁸ Similar to the blank spaces of letters in calligraphy cut into paper, blank spaces in painted glass can be left out in the form of characters drawn in reverse, allowing light to shine through and projecting ‘words of light’. Likewise, light can be seen as a property of writings having divine origins in Christian medieval literature. This is the case in Meister Otte’s *Eraclius* (ca. 1200), where a letter coming directly from heaven is “written with luminous letters” (*geschriben von liechten buochstaben*).⁵⁹ The fact that light is immaterial yet visible places it in direct connection with the dimension of the spiritual. Such writings of light and letters cut into paper, which are said to “blossom in the air”,⁶⁰ are two examples of writing as a ‘form without matter’ that illustrate the pre-modern epistemology of writing while at the same time rendering it more complex.

Under the auspices of pre-modern ‘Western’ epistemology, including the variations on the (im)materiality of writing from the Jewish or Islamic tradition that circulate there, one cannot speak of a representational function of writing, but rather of the ‘formal’ co-presence of the signified in such writing. Writing is thus not a vehicle for the intentions of writing subjects, but is in a powerful sense the embodiment of a spiritual content that is not limited to the dimension of semantics. In the sense of the physicality of writing, spatiality—understood as the integration into an arrangement of other more or less spiritual environments endowed with agency, or as mobility (cf. Thesis 6)—and permanence—understood as ‘lifespan’ (cf. Thesis 5)—are essential parameters of the efficacy of writing and its concomitant practices.

Thesis 4

The dimensions of what is written are explicitly or implicitly reflected in pre-modern texts.

In many respects, pre-modern texts are concerned not only with the written word itself, but also with the practices associated with writing (such as reading and the act of writing) and with the materiality of text supports. After some introductory remarks, we identify metatextual reflections on these and other dimensions pertaining to what is written, according to their degree of explicitness.

By ‘dimensions of what is written’, we mean here the properties that are inherent in the presence of the written and which allow for instances of the written word to be

⁵⁸ Graves 2018, 238.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ernst 2006, 116, our translation.

⁶⁰ Sem Tob, *Ma’aseh ha-rav*, 68; English transl. by Colahan 1979, 294.

further qualified: in addition to materiality itself, these are, for example, the physicality of what is written (cf. Thesis 3), its aesthetic permanence (cf. Thesis 5), and its spatiality (cf. Thesis 6).

In this thesis, we focus on corresponding reflections of pre-modern texts. Such texts, which we refer to as ‘metatexts’ in relation to the specific research interests of the CRC 933 (see Introduction, p.19), play an important methodological role, both in terms of the concrete reconstruction of actual pre-modern practices (in the sense of written sources) and as a reflection of pre-modern thinking on writtenness and practices related to written material.⁶¹ Different academic disciplines tend to have respective aspects on which they focus in the study of metatexts. While explicit metatextual reflections are often good at inferring real practices, metatextual reflections of an implicit nature, and especially those found in fictional, literary texts, are often broader in comparison to actual instances of writing and do not necessarily depict actual writing practices with accuracy.

Explicit reflections on what is written can be found, for example, in pre-modern treatises that deal with literary criticism, although the focus of such treatises is usually less on the practices of writing and reading themselves than on questions of content or style with regard to the composition of literature in certain genres. Corresponding reflections on the drafting of historiographical texts can be found, for example, in Lucian’s work *How to Write History* (*Quomodo historia conscribenda sit*). Explicit reflections on the production and reception of what is written in general have been the subject of pre-modern philosophical texts ever since Plato’s *Phaedrus*. It is not only in this dialogue that writtenness is reflected in opposition to oral speech; this juxtaposition is emblematic of pre-modernity insofar as the beginnings of ancient literature at least emerge from a culture of performance. This culture did not lose its significance in subsequent centuries, as is shown, for example, by imperial-era epideixis and individual reading practices. Perhaps this is why this performance is evoked at least *ex negativo* in many pre-modern reflections on writtenness. And literature in the vernacular languages of the Middle Ages also has its origins in such a culture of performance.

The term ‘what is written’ or ‘the written word’, however, by no means refers only to literary pieces of writing in the broader sense. Rather, pre-modern texts of European antiquity (for example, within the framework of methodological asides) reflect precisely on the extent to which literary texts differ from other types of the written word. Thus, in literary texts themselves, the practices of literary and epigraphic writing are juxtaposed one to another, as well as the characteristics attached to the inscribed products resulting in each case. Depending on the writing support that is usually used in the respective writing process, the respective degree of material longevity and of free circulatability of what is written varies, for example (cf. Theses 5 and 6).

⁶¹ See here especially the volume of conference proceedings, *Metatexte. Erzählungen von schrifttragenden Artefakten in der alttestamentlichen und mittelalterlichen Literatur* (Focken/Ott 2016a), as well as Gertz et al. 2015 on ‘metatext(uality)’.

The dimensions mentioned here of what is written are reflected, for example, in the historiographical works of Herodotus and Thucydides (for instance, in their respective methodological chapters and in Thucydides's funeral oration of Pericles). When different writing practices are discussed—for example, the historiographical writing that emerged with these works or more traditional inscriptional writing—this is partly done implicitly through epigraphic semantics (i. e., through the transferred use of vocabulary that (more) literally refers to inscriptions and the practices associated with them). In these methodological chapters, by contrast, comment is made more explicitly on the functions of what is written, including above all the suitability of one's own written medium for the creation of a lasting *memoria*. Thucydides, for example, describes his work as a “possession for all time” (κτῆμα ἐς αἰεῖ), distinguishing it from a “prize-essay to be heard for the moment”,⁶² a juxtaposition that aims at the contrast between the permanence of what is written and the transience of what is spoken.

In the literature of European antiquity, however, there are also implicit reflections on the dimensions of what is written, with the result that literary texts in which inscriptions are mentioned or quoted can be interpreted as inscription-related metatexts.⁶³ This does not apply only to historiographical texts such as Herodotus's *Histories*, in which even real inscriptions and the artefacts inscribed with them are mentioned; in rare cases, like the so-called Serpent Column (Herodotus, *Histories*, 8.82.1), these artefacts and inscriptions still exist today, and thus modifications (here by Herodotus) compared to what is really inscribed can be recognised.⁶⁴ Fictional novels, such as Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, can also be understood as metatexts, since they speak, among other acts of writing, of the affixing of inscriptions to herms, stones, and temples (*Aethiopica*, 5.5.1). At the same time, the way in which inscribed *memoria* and its concomitant material conditions are staged suggests a certain perspective on the “memorial culture profile”⁶⁵ of the metatext itself. Metatexts can thus draw attention both to similarities and to differences between the two writing practices involved, while simultaneously bringing other dimensions of what is written into focus: besides the respective intended acts of reception themselves, for example, the conditions of these acts in the form of spatial realisation or the aesthetic permanence of what is written can also come into view (see Theses 5 and 6).⁶⁶

However, the kind of metatextuality discussed here thus far is only one possible way in which pre-modern texts can implicitly reflect on the dimensions of what is

⁶² Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.4, transl. by C. F. Smith.

⁶³ Cf. Allgaier et al. 2019, 200; cf. also Allgaier 2022.

⁶⁴ On the discrepancies between the actual column and the inscribed artefact as depicted by Herodotus, see in detail Allgaier 2022 with reference to, among others, West 1985, 280.

⁶⁵ Allgaier et al. 2019, 200, our translation, German text: “erinnerungskulturelle[s] Profil”.

⁶⁶ On this, cf. also Focken/Ott 2016b, 7.

written—and the different practices of writing and inscribing represent only one of the many aspects of the written word that could be considered here in contrast. Metatextuality can be understood not only as a certain relationship of one text to another (following Gérard Genette), but also (according to Zoran Kravar) as a reflection of a text on itself, either with regard to its entirety or to individual aspects.⁶⁷ Thus, to stay with the example above of text production, pre-modern literary texts not only present by way of contrast alternative writing practices in their plot—e. g., the chiselling of inscriptions into stone or the embroidering of a textile fabric with a text, such as we see in Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, by means of which a mother communicates across spatial and temporal distance with her daughter who was abandoned years ago—but they also stage literary writing itself. Such a representation can then be interpreted as *mise-en-abyme* and thus as an implicit, self-referential reflection on the dimensions of what is written, especially if there are further signals for such self-referentiality.⁶⁸

Other definitions take metatextuality even further: for example, Markus Hilgert's definition of a metatext as being “what is written about what is written” (“Geschriebenes über Geschriebenes”).⁶⁹ However, the arbitrariness resulting from such a definition is heuristically problematic, since “almost every piece of writing is likely to be characterised, at least in terms of its genre, by certain features of other pieces of writing that are incorporated or transformed in it”.⁷⁰ Such a broad definition of metatextuality is thus difficult to put into practice; regardless of any fixed criteria, exegesis can proactively interpret any texts as metatexts in the above sense. In this case, the process of reflection on what is written no longer takes place within the text itself, but is undertaken by the text's recipients. In terms of how research is carried out, it therefore makes more sense to restrict the concept of metatextuality to those texts in which what is written plays a role on the level of plot. Particularly when a text belongs to a genre in which plot does not play a major role, it also makes sense to speak of metatextuality when what is written is present on the level of the imagination (e. g., on the level of metaphor).

In the explanations so far, we have concentrated primarily on those dimensions of the written word that are dependent on the materiality of the respective writing supports: the practices of writing and inscribing; the function or suitability of what is written as a memory support; and aesthetic permanence and spatial realisation, as will be dealt with in the theses below. With regard to this thesis, however, the aspects mentioned here of what is written should be understood as exemplary and not as

⁶⁷ Genette 1993, 13; Kravar 1994, 274. On this, cf. also Focken/Ott 2016b, 2.

⁶⁸ Cf. also Focken/Ott 2016b, 3–4.

⁶⁹ Focken/Ott 2016b, 3, who refer to Hilgert 2010, 98, our translation.

⁷⁰ Focken/Ott 2016b, 3, our translation, German text: “fast jedes Schriftstück dürfte zumindest seiner Gattung nach von bestimmten Merkmalen anderer Schriftstücke geprägt sein, die in ihm aufgenommen oder transformiert sind”.

exhaustive. Metatexts, for example, also reflect other preconditions of text reception, such as the necessity of competence in a certain language or literacy on the part of the recipient. However, if the targeted use of writing systems is presented, whose mastery is reserved for certain social groups, epistemic aspects of power relations emerge as a dimension of what is written.⁷¹

Thesis 5

The aisthetic permanence of what is written, i. e., its (long- or short-term) temporal permanence as perceived by the senses, is constitutive for the meaning and effect of writing.

The written word always has the function of standing the test of time. This time span, i. e., its temporal permanence, can be of different lengths, ranging along a scale between the long-term and persistent to the short-term and ephemeral. Its (intended, assumed, or actual) length has a lot to do with the material permanence of what is written. The sensual perception of this materially conditioned duration often results in a specific effect on the recipient and a specific attribution of meaning to what is written.

Writing is always linked to some kind of material and to this material's physical properties: it is what we term *aisthetically permanent*,⁷² whereby a sensual perceptibility of its permanence (gradually scalable between the poles of persistence and ephemerality) is meant. Amongst its physical properties, the actual temporal permanence of the material in question (or one assumed by the writers and recipients) is often particularly relevant to what is written. This is fundamentally connected to the fact that the written word usually has the function of enabling communication in situations that are temporally separated from one another: the producer (writer, client, author, sender) and the recipient (reader/addressee, either silently or aloud; receiver) of what is written are usually not at the same place at the same time. Therefore, a minimum of material permanence is required on the part of what is written. We can often observe that there is a natural correlation between the (believed, desired, assumed, or actual) relevance of the writing to possible recipients in the distant future on the one hand, and the material permanence of what is written that is generated in the production process on the other. For example, what is important for future generations (or con-

⁷¹ Cf. Focken/Ott 2016b, 7 with a list of further aspects of communicative configurations that metatexts can reflect.

⁷² Here we are setting a "substantial material concept as a foundation [...] as outlined by the meanings 'material' and 'raw material'" (Meier/Focken/Ott 2015, 25), our translation, German text: "substantiellen Material-Begriff zu Grunde [...], wie er mit den Bedeutungen 'Rohstoff' und 'Werkstoff' umrissen ist".

sidered to be such) is set in stone so that it can be received by future generations for as long as possible. By contrast, concrete information and instructions for action, which only need to last for a few hours or days and are only relevant to specific individual short-term recipients, are written – if at all – on transitory supports such as post-its or wax tablets,⁷³ i. e., such writing is only recorded ephemerally and (as a rule) is soon destroyed or lost.

In this kind of correlation between materiality and writing, where the relationship between the two is thus held to be purely functional, the material takes on a necessary, albeit subsidiary role, serving merely as an instrument for the communication made possible by the written word. This approach, however, leaves aside a whole gamut of aspects that go hand in hand with the sensual perceptibility of the written word's permanence, but which do not fit into its communicative functionality. If these aspects are emphasised, we see effects come into view that go beyond the pure communication of information as transmitted by means of the written text:

- 1) *The perception of a correlation between texts considered of permanent importance and their persistent materiality.* Some inscriptions are intended for a permanent reception, e. g., those that are affixed to monuments (gravestones) and serve the permanent *memoria* (or the visualisation of the deceased in such a *memoria*). They are primarily affixed to writing supports made of stone precisely because “materially immanent properties [...] such as hardness, durability, permanence (longevity) and resistance” allowed for an “expectation of significant permanence with regard to the continued existence of the inscribed content”.⁷⁴ Written content of a legally valid nature (in the context of permanent legitimization efforts), such as can be found on boundary stones, at city gates, or on other public buildings (think here of length measurements on a medieval parish church, for instance), is also usually engraved into writing supports made of stone.⁷⁵ The perception of the persistence derived from the material results in the attribution of authority and power to the author of the writing, and of temporal validity to what is written.
- 2) *The attribution of (auratic) meaning due to the perception of a large quantity of permanently preserved written material.* The abundance of codices consisting of a plethora of parchment pages tightly bound together and stored on solid shelves or in massive chests in a medieval library can be perceived as an example of the persistence and consolidation of knowledge and the texts that contain such learning. This aesthetic permanence then evokes wonder and admiration at the pres-

⁷³ Wagner 2019.

⁷⁴ Cf. Balke et al. 2015, 248–249, our translation, German text: “materialimmanente[] Eigenschaften [...] wie Härte, Beständigkeit, Dauerhaftigkeit (Langlebigkeit) und Widerstandsfähigkeit [lassen] signifikante Dauerhaftigkeit im Hinblick auf den Fortbestand des verschrifteten Inhalts erwarten”.

⁷⁵ The permanence or ephemerality *ex negativo* of materiality can be coded iconologically (or semi-ologically) in these contexts; cf. Raff 2008, 49–60.

ence of knowledge in this one place (as an outstanding nexus of past and future practices of thinking and writing), engendering reverence for those who know the practices that pertain to the management of this intellectual abundance. And this permanence ascribes a very specific meaning to what is written: namely, that it is part of a nucleus, a consolidation of knowledge, and can thus lay claim to an inherent relevance.

- 3) *The perception of ephemeral materiality and ephemeral writing as a marker of meaning.* It is true that the choice of a writing support characterised by material ephemerality can affirm the ‘ephemeral’ meaning of the written word and express the expectation of its very limited effect, e. g., because only a single, clearly delimited situation of use is anticipated for its reception (a shopping list, for example). But the opposite can also be the case: particularly in the religious sphere, ephemerality quite often correlates to maximum meaning and effect.⁷⁶ This is the case, for instance, with the word *menetekel*, which is written (painted?) on a white wall as though by the hand of some spirit and which passes devastating judgement on King Belshazzar, who dies the same night (Dan 5); or in the episode with the adulteress, when Jesus writes with his finger on the ground while the scribes and Pharisees insist on the law written (!) by Moses, according to which the woman is to be stoned to death (John 8:1–11): the ephemerality of what is written in dust or sand (the wording of which is not even mentioned) paradoxically points precisely to the eternal validity of the message, the *logos*, which is a message of grace and of not imputing, of not writing down sin: “Go, and from now on sin no more!” With the ephemeral writing on the ground, Jesus causes the persistent stone writing of the tables of the law of Moses to be crushed to dust and itself to be blown away.
- 4) *The accidental persistence of ephemeral materiality and ephemeral writing as a recoding of meaning.* When a piece of writing that was once ephemerally recorded is later found, reused, or newly charged with meaning, persistence occurs rather accidentally.⁷⁷ The aesthetic permanence of what is written can, as it were, be recoded from one (former) present to another (later) present in such a way that, depending on the parameters of reception, the meaning and efficacy of the writing also changes. The graffiti and dipinti, for example, which can still be found in great numbers today both inside and outside the houses in Pompeii and Herculaneum were often ad hoc creations, components of current-affairs communi-

⁷⁶ Cf. Lieb 2017.

⁷⁷ An artefact biography can then be written with a view to the different situations of historical reception, which helps “to neatly separate the different layers of function and meaning chronologically, locate them in their respective cultural contexts, and determine transcultural processes” (Meier/Tsouparopoulou 2015, 50–51), our translation, German text: “die unterschiedlichen Funktions- und Bedeutungsschichten chronologisch sauber zu trennen, in ihren jeweiligen kulturellen Kontexten zu verorten und transkulturelle Prozesse zu bestimmen”; on this with examples, cf. Allgaier et al. 2019.

cation or else ephemeral ‘scribblings’, which as a rule were intended to have a very limited effect in time and space and were only intended for a specific group of addressees.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, they enjoy special attention today because they are evidence of ancient communication and writing culture, with a historically conscious present-day therefore ascribing significant testimonial value to them. A similar situation can be seen in written evidence that is secured as part of a criminal case: such instances of writing no longer serve their initial, perhaps ephemeral, purpose, but are made persistent for the purpose of later evidence. Another prominent example of such a historically conditioned reinterpretation or new attribution of meaning is the so-called *titulus*, which according to the account of John the Evangelist (19:19–20) was written on Pilate’s own behalf in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin before being affixed to the cross of Christ so that its admonitory and provocative content could be received by the Jews passing by: “Jesus Christ, king of the Jews”.⁷⁹ It is true that the biblical tradition does not provide any information about the material nature of the writing or the writing support here. Yet due to its reference to the crucified Christ, whom the tablet was intended to identify to the addressed Jews as their ‘king’, we can assume that the inscribed tablet was originally produced rather ephemerally: it only had to serve its purpose until Jesus should be taken down from the cross. However, the medieval tradition of legends surrounding the finding of the cross by Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, reinterpret the persistence of the *titulus*. In this interpretation, the *titulus* is not preserved by chance: it must cede its original, merely ephemeral efficacy as intended by Pilate in favour of the long-term identificatory function as seen in the finding of the cross by the emperor’s mother, something said to be predetermined by God. Ambrose, who can be regarded as the author of the oldest known and oft-quoted account of the cross’s *inventio*, thus takes care to report that Helena, guided by the Holy Spirit, was only able to distinguish the true cross of Christ from the other two crosses of the thieves crucified alongside him by means of the still-preserved and still-legible *titulus*.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Cf. Lohmann 2018 and Opdenhoff 2021.

⁷⁹ The Greek and Latin wordings of the *titulus* text have come down to us in the respective recensions of the New Testament: *Iesus Nazarenus rex Iudaeorum* (*Biblia Sacra Vulgata*); Ἰησοῦς Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων (*Novum Testamentum Graece*). While no ancient copies of the New Testament have survived in Hebrew, the Aramaic/Syriac Peshitta renders the text thus: ܝܫܘܥ ܢܐܙܪܐܝܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܝܘܕܝܐ (*Syriac-English New Testament*), and the translation of the text into Biblical Hebrew by the Jewish convert Ezekiel Margoliouth (d. 1894) and published in 1923 reads: ישוע הנצרי מלך היהודים (*Hebrew New Testament*). See also the parallel passages in Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38 and Matt 27:37.

⁸⁰ Heussler 2006, 76. The *Oration on the Death of Theodosius*, attributed to Ambrose, was given in 39 CE.

Thesis 6

The spatial realisation is constitutive for the meaning and effect of what is written.

Characters unfold spatially and can be read from right to left, from left to right, or from top to bottom (in rare cases also from bottom to top). In order for characters to be identifiable as such, there must be a certain amount of space between them.⁸¹ What is written thus always encompasses space, regardless of the support it is on. Inscriptions not written on parchment or paper, but rather carved into wood, chiselled into stone, engraved or etched into metal, sewn onto textiles, or cast into or applied to a substrate, also reveal a tangible three-dimensional ‘height difference’ vis-à-vis the writing support.⁸²

The development of inscribable materials, styles and types of writing, and reproduction processes has always been accompanied by a specific treatment of the spatiality of writing. In cultures that did not yet possess standardised reproduction processes for writing, striking interactions between the appearance of the writing and the support material come to the fore more frequently. The angular shapes of runes, for example, facilitated carving into solid materials such as wood, stone, or bone,⁸³ while conversely, rounded characters such as those found in many scripts from India and Southeast Asia enabled the use of palms leaves as a writing support, which otherwise could be torn through more easily by angular letters.⁸⁴ The genuine spatiality of writing also plays an important role in terms of text layout. Not only do the positioning of what is written and the relationship between the inscribed and non-inscribed surface areas guide one’s perception of an artefact; the size of the script also plays a role in this process. While minuscule scripts or types of writing that form ligatures (such as cursive) are generally space-saving, majuscule scripts take up a relatively large amount of space. They are therefore also suitable for drawing attention to certain informational content.

What is written, however, occupies space not only through its own spatial expansion, but also in its potential mobility. Here, too, the materiality of the artefact plays an important role: small and light objects such as amulets, papyri, scarabs, and gems⁸⁵ lend themselves particularly well to being carried and moved. Such artefacts, “which carry the writing they ‘bear’ by virtue of their materiality from one place to another”, we call ‘locomobile’, while we term spatially bound writing ‘locostatic’.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Cf. Krämer 2018, 210.

⁸² Lieb/Ott 2015, 17.

⁸³ Schulz 2019, 43–44. On the correspondences between writing support, layout and characters, see also Chapter 2, p. 67 and Thesis 7.

⁸⁴ Cf. Steever 1996, 426; Kuipers/McDermott 1996, 480.

⁸⁵ Theis 2015.

⁸⁶ The terminology here follows Ehlich 1994, 30; quotation from Lieb/Ott 2015, 16, our translation, German text: “die jene Schrift, die sie kraft ihrer Materialität ‘halten’, von einem Ort zu einem anderen bringen”.

The portability and concomitant mobility of what is written is often a prerequisite for its function and meaning; it determines the practices that deal with writing. Inherently mobile writing supports such as letters or epistles, for example, enable interpersonal exchange. The practices of transmission are decisive for the function of the written word, and epistolary networks can be more precisely deduced from them.⁸⁷ Conversely, small inscribed artefacts such as amulet scrolls enable a physical relationship of proximity. What is written can be touched and kept close to the body, and it is precisely these practices that are determinative for the protective function attributed to the written word in such cases, regardless of whether the text is actually read or not.⁸⁸ Furthermore what is written is wearable when it enters into a particularly close relationship with the human body: writing interwoven into or embroidered onto textiles can be worn,⁸⁹ while human skin itself can also become inscribed, as in the case of tattoos or stigmata.⁹⁰

The special significance of the mobility of inscribed artefacts can only be adequately described by the relational spatial concept of topology.⁹¹ The paths that the written word can take, the relationships of proximity and distance that it can enter into, cannot be described in terms of topography, but only by means of the interactions between people and things that constitute this spatiality in the first place.

By contrast, the spatial arrangement of locostatic inscribed artefacts—such as inscriptions on buildings, tombstones, walls, gates, columns, or statues—is much more stable. Such writing is usually addressed to a larger community, tends to be designed so as to be visible in the public arena,⁹² and as a rule is created from durable materials suitable for commemorative occasions. Of course, what is written can also be involved in various other practices besides simply providing information: it can offer orientation, impress, politicise, commemorate, call to action, or even codify a status quo. A legal text, for example, gains authority when it is fixed on stone in the centre of an administrative unit. This is even more clearly the case if the plaque is located in the physical vicinity of a court, for example.

For the hermeneutic endeavour to reconstruct the original meaning of a (possibly heavily damaged) inscription, the spatial arrangement (position, size, visibility, interrelationships with other artefacts, etc.) therefore offers important clues. Conversely, inscriptions on static artefacts can also provide information about the (planned) semanticisation of space. Writing on bridges, doors, and gates, for example, has a liminal function and serves to indicate the transition between adjacent spaces. By occupying the threshold between here and there, inside and outside, public and pri-

⁸⁷ Hamouda 2020.

⁸⁸ Hindley 2020.

⁸⁹ Lieb 2019.

⁹⁰ Béreiziat-Lang/Ott 2019.

⁹¹ Dickmann/Witschel/Keil 2015, 113.

⁹² On the phenomenon of the restricted presence of writing, cf. Frese/Keil/Krüger 2014a.

vate, sacred and profane, etc., inscriptions have a normative effect on the delimitation of spaces—indeed, they cause us to become aware of the border that is crossed between different areas in the first place. In this respect, locostatic inscribed artefacts can also be profitably included in the analysis of the social constitution of space, the scope of which has become visible in the evolving theoretical frameworks in recent decades of cultural studies.

Finally, interactions with (mobile as well as immobile) inscribed artefacts, such as can be observed especially in urban space, can extend over long periods of time and encompass different stages of cultural development. Their temporality, however, is not necessarily linear but can also become interrupted and broken. Inscribed artefacts have a kind of inherent temporality. With regard to the function of inscriptions in medieval Italian municipalities, for instance, Armando Petrucci has noted that the rediscovery of the civic and political function of open urban space took place by means of a more or less conscious recourse to ancient epigraphic models.⁹³ In this way, inscriptions can be recombined palimpsestically, piled up and layered on top of one another. Wide-ranging historical configurations can become embodied in them—spanning, for example, between the late Middle Ages and antiquity—whether this be due to a purely practical reuse of inscribed artefacts, or whether it be as a conscious ‘invention of tradition’ or an expression of a historical self-localisation on the part of those who use them.

The longevity of solid inscribed artefacts, but also the various historical decisions to preserve, relocate, supplement, or restore written testimonies, is due today to a material sedimentation of what is written, the original spatial realisation of which can often be reconstructed only with great difficulty.

⁹³ Petrucci 1986, 5: “Tale situazione [sc. of the Middle Ages] venne a modificarsi in Italia, fra XI e XIII secolo, in corrispondenza della rivoluzione urbanistica delle città e della conseguente riscoperta della funzione civile e politica dello spazio urbano aperto, che fu segnata anche da un più o meno consapevole ritorno al confronto (se non proprio all’imitazione) con i modelli epigrafici antichi”; on this, cf. also von der Höh 2019.

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