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Some Remarks on the Semio-Anthropology of Writing

A Pluralist Perspective

Abstract: The aim of this work consists in constructing some epistemological foundations for the semio-anthropology of writing. While recognizing the conceptual discord on the ontological properties of writing, the author provides some genealogies of perspectives on writing including the extensive conceptualization inspired by J. Derrida. The author of this paper wants to insist on the epistemological necessity of graphic pluralism beyond the narrow linguistic notion of writing. In doing so, he would envisage to discover the broad and productive domain of semiotics of writing.

Keywords: Derrida; graphism; intermediality; Leroi-Gourhan; semiotics of writing

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1 Introduction

The primary framework of this study is made by a provisional integration of my research of the past ten years, which has been presented in various areas including archaeology of intermediality, semiotics of writing for hypermedia, grammatology of Hangeul, etc. As the scope of this paper covers the semio-anthropology of writing and further pursues to complete a map of the human sciences of writing, this study aims to establish an emergent, creative, and comprehensive research program rather than simply an approach to a single specific theme. Based on a research program of the semio-anthropology of writing, therefore, I would like to suggest that the fundamental issues of the study are as follows:

- 1) What: ontological and functional issues
- 2) When: past, present, and future of writing
- 3) Where: spaces of writing such as social and political space, material space, virtual space, etc.

- 4) Who: subjectivity, agency, power, literacy, etc.
- 5) How: media, materiality, technology, format, etc.
- 6) Why: purpose, social, and political contexts, and destiny of writing

These six questions are related very closely to each other, and are applied from the narrowest to the broadest meaning. In the two main sections of the opening of this paper, I would like to evoke and interrogate key questions of writing, along with establishing a topology of modern conceptions on writing or its genealogies. While demonstrating the nature of writing as well as the fact that there still exists conceptual discord or controversy of what constructs ontological properties of graphism, it is summarized into three sub-genealogies: first of all, it is the micro-perspective on writing, which, as a dominant paradigm of traditionally strong influence on linguistics and classical grammatology, is defined as a deep-rooted Aristotelian and Saussurean notion of writing, while writing is defined as a visual sign to record sounds of natural languages. The second genealogy is a perspective mainly supported by anthropology and pre-historic archeology so that it includes not only phonogram but also a vast range of graphic behaviors without recording sound, that is, an inclusive vision in comparison to an exclusivist conception. The last one is the extensive conceptualization of writing based on J. Derrida, whose idea of grammatology embraces the notions of trace and graphism, and opens up possibilities of converging into the denotation of cybernetics so that “the entire field covered by the cybernetic program would be the field of writing” (*Of Grammatology*, 9). As the most widely extended conceptualization of writing, it takes an ontological and epistemological position of graphic pluralism beyond the restricted linguistic perspective of writing. Indeed, it indicates a magnified range of graphism, including the entire kinds of inscriptions and graphic practices beyond the limits of ‘real writing’ from the conventional writing theory, and the understanding of semiotic and humanistic fundamentals, which operate within the graphic system. As the most productive part of semiotics of writing consists of how the graphic system produces and synthesizes meanings, the semiotics of writing still remains in its infancy.

From the point of view of the intermediality paradigm, writing can be understood principally as a semiotic system of signification and communication with complicated relations to orality, and to other linguistic and aural media such as printing, calligraphy, fashion, and choreography. The semiotics of writing and the grammatology in the sense of Derrida require us to detach writing from its dependence on speech and to recognize that written language

has its own autonomy as a communication system separate from its connection to spoken language.¹ The point is “that writing should be recognized and studied as a graphic communication system rather than solely as a speech-recording system.”² The basic assumption of this work is also to make semioticians and other experts sensitive to the ideological model of literacy in the studies of writing containing different natures beyond uni-evolutionary and purely technological models of script development, which still dominate in some major works of the traditional grammarology.

The extended grammarology considers the writing as both a concrete object and the product of signifying social practices within particular cultural context, ecology of diverse media, and power structures.

2 Semiotic, Ontological, and Political Foundations of Graphic Pluralism

2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Status of Writing: Linguistics, Semiotics, and Anthropology towards the Extended Concept of Writing

The semantic field of writing is too vast and heterogenous to deal with. The consultation of the French Dictionary *Trésor de la Langue Française* provides fifteen different acceptations from literature, law, etc.

For instance, close to the current definition of writing, provided by *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires*, as “visual mode of conservation and transmission of linguistic message by means of alphabetic signs”, one could find a very specific meaning of writing from Barthes. According to him, writing is an intermediary term between language (*langue*), which he considers as a sort of collective horizon and style, namely the private ritual through which the writer is individualized.

In the vision of Barthes, who accorded a function of literature to writing, writing is “the form seized in its human intervention and linked to the grand crisis of History”. In the semantic and epistemological complexities, writing is to be considered as a complex and socialized object, which should be defined

1 Cf. Roy Harris (1995); Jacques Derrida (1967).

2 Elizabeth Hill Boone (2008: 315).

by its materiality, significant organization, and social usages. In other words, writing is not to be understood as a tool, which serves for the spoken language as commonly defined by linguists, but rather as a means of expression and communication constituted with the reality which is material, visual, and linguistic.

In modern linguistics and anthropology, a controversial issue emerges between an exclusive notion and an inclusive notion of the extension of writing. The evolutionist foundation of the modern grammatology was elaborated by the English anthropologist E. B. Taylor who presented the schema composed of the five-stage evolution of writing from pictography to alphabet via logogram, logosyllabic, and syllabic systems. As the founder of contemporary grammatology, Gelb affirmed the principle of the uni-directional evolution of scripts, namely that all systems of writing follow the trajectory of the evolution step by step, and thus each stage cannot directly advance to the final by jumping intermediate stages. The summit of this evolution is placed in the phonetic alphabet and this epistemological position seems to be exemplary in the magisterial work done by Marcel Cohen. Another epistemological foundation of modern grammatology can be explained by its phonocentrism: for instance, according to the American linguist Bloomfield, real writing has its principal function in transcribing sounds. This phonocentrism is revealed in the work on the nature of writing by major theoreticians such as Ong, Goody, and Clanchy.

In such evolutionist and phonocentrist models of writing, hieroglyphic and ideographic systems are considered as belonging to low-level societies where writing is excluded from the chain of development. Regarding the perspective of phonocentrism, it is difficult to deny that the position that is manifested in the *Cours de linguistique générale* has provided a pretext to neglect the problematics of the writing. Derrida (1967: 63) properly proposed that the modern linguistics issued from Saussure is solidary with phonocentrism and logocentrism, which is the heritage of western metaphysics: “Ce que Saussure voyait sans le voir, savait sans pouvoir en tenir compte, suivant en cela toute la tradition de la métaphysique...”.

However, we should reconsider the place of writing and graphism in the construction and presentation of linguistic theories in the writings of Saussure. The diagrams of Saussurean linguistic theory are not only rich but also subtle in terms of graphic design: tables, formulas, accent, rhythm, etc.

In the genealogy of phonocentric thoughts, writing was considered as a correlated object and material reduplication of the speech. In the same context, Roy Harris severely criticized the general evolutionist theory of writing as an evolutionist illusion by affirming that writing is not merely a graphic leaflet of

the spoken language, but a representational system of thoughts with semiotic autonomy. His critical approach leads us to discuss the more general anthropological question of writing. In fact, such a restrictive conception has competed with several contemporary graphic thoughts, which have reclaimed that writing is not bounded to a simple transposition function for the more or less exact oral language.

It is significant that the “intrusion of graphism in general” marked a new stage in the intellectual equipment of humanity. Goody (1977) and Leroi-Gourhan (1964) would agree in declaring that graphic projection could allow a multimodal ordering or layout of the space of the scriptural signification.

In remarking that the fabrication of tableaux, lists, and formulas has its unique origin on the advent of writing and that the passage of speech to the written text provokes the transformation of thoughts owing to formal operations of graphic nature, Goody stresses that it is necessary to rectify the presupposition of Saussurean linguistics. According to Goody (1977), writing reproduced speech because the writing transforms the nature of practice of the language neatly in several manners.

While modern anthropologists have focused on the technological and intellectual dimension of the written forms and their logic with imposing them on thoughts and memories, Leroi-Gourhan (1964) seized two essential elements: the verbal-graphic dualism and a certain independence of graphic symbolism in relation to phonetic symbolism. In this regard, graphic images seem to enjoy a dimensional freedom, which alphabetic writing engendered by the phonetization, linearization, and abstraction of thoughts lacks. After writing was conquered, graphic expression became completely subordinate to phonetic expression.

However, the linguistic liaison to graphic expression belongs to coordination, not to subordination. According to the eminent prehistorian Leroi-Gourhan, we have difficulty in conceiving of the mode of pluri-dimensional expression, which is radiant graphism prior to phonetic writing. In referring to his notion of mythogram, Derrida indicates the historic necessity of such pluri-dimensional structure:

Ce qui se donne aujourd’hui à penser ne peut s’écrire selon la ligne et le livre, sauf à imiter l’opération qui consisterait à enseigner les mathématiques modernes à l’aide d’un boulier. Cette inadéquation n’est pas moderne, mais elle se dénonce aujourd’hui mieux que jamais. L’accès à la pluridimensionalité et à une temporalité délinéarisé n’est pas une simple régression vers le mythogramme: il faut au contraire apparaître toute la rationalité assujettie au modèle linéaire comme une autre forme et une autre époque de la mythographique. (Derrida 1967: 130)

2.2 Paradigm Shift from Evolutionary History to the Archeology of Cultural Intermediality: From Writing to Graphism

First, it is crucial to construct relevant points of view in order to allow the characterization of complex relationships between writing and media, on the one hand, and its social and political space, namely the economic circulation of the media of writing within cultural usages and diachronic transformations, on the other hand (one of the most exemplary works on the economic and political circulation of writing is included in the book published in 1988 by Henri-Jean Martin, *Histoire et pouvoirs de l'écrit*). Certainly, it would be prudent to avoid reasoning purely in terms of conversion and evolution from one medial regime to another, and deepening the problematics in terms of intermedial and intercultural relations. This study is based upon the places and scenes of writing chosen by a comparative perspective of intermediality, which produces objects of writing within a historic and cultural context. Equipped with a material semiotics, one should consider the institution of material forms in the account of the social interrelation between the sense and the form of semiotic objects.

In sum, the entire question about writing-reading of every new media and the cultural complexity of the medial topology should be envisaged. In the place of a cumulative logic, it is proper to feed oneself of the epistemological and semiotic reflections on the effects of the intermediality of writing in avoiding a simple evolutionary approach as a mere accumulation of functionalities.

Along with an explosion of studies on writing from various fields and perspectives during the 1990s, scholars of ethnology, anthropology, art history, and philosophy have tried to demonstrate that many different graphic systems constitute an integral part of visual culture in a society. Not only “true or real writing” but also diverse graphic practices from petroglyphs and quipu to the cybernetic program need to be considered in the framework of writing. I would like to call these converging debates as a scriptural or graphic turn. It is historical and anthropological common sense to examine people’s way of organizing action through visual signs and graphic behaviors in order to understand their past. In many academic areas, however, such evidence has been ignored due to the conceptual discord in the ontological status of writing and graphism. The term ‘graphism’ should be understood in the inclusive approach of Leroi-Gourhan (1964: 187–216).

As a matter of fact, a deep-rooted Aristotelian and Saussurean definition of writing is so pervasive in modern linguistics that it is quite easy to reveal

phonocentrism. I would like to mention two examples of deservedly influential compilations: *The World's Writing Systems* (Daniels and Bright 1996) and *Les langues du monde* (Cohen and Millet 1952).

In consequence of delimiting gesture on the domain of grammatology, the vast range of graphic behavior was put outside of the boundary of the category of writing. However this has incurred different reactions from specialists in Pre-Columbian culture. For instance, Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter Mignolo's *Writing without Words* (1994) brought this issue to the attention of a wide humanist audience, in providing a new fresh perspective to the Ignace Jay Gelb's attempt in 1952 to theorize non-phonographic alternatives under the rubric of "semasiography". By this term Gelb suggested another category of signs that refer not to speech sounds but to the objects they designate.

2.3 Semiotic and Ontological Perspectives on Graphic Pluralism

The ideas of "graphic" and ontological attitudes toward "graphic pluralism" are several and even heterogeneous (cf. the special issue of *Ethnohistory* in References). Furthermore, it is necessary to keep in mind two crucial semiotic properties of writing: visuality and double spatiality. The particularity of the writing space can be characterized as an ambivalence of this simultaneous tabular and linear relationship. In fact, writing possesses a double semiotic functioning: a visual representation of sound structures and the total graphic autonomy independent from verbal language. Roy Harris (1995) conceptualized them as 'glossic' and 'non-glossic' functions. Klinkenberg (2012) has proposed a typology of non-glossic functions, which are composed of four types: iconic, symbolic, topographic, and indexical. It is reasonable to combine all these types of semiotic functions of writing into semio-anthropology in order to examine multiple semiotic capacities that constitute the richest field of the semiotics of writing.

We see there is a dichotomy in actual notions of writing. The first notion might be termed as an exclusive limitation on the domain of writing restricted to writing systems and their usage. The second one corresponds to what we would call the inclusive notion, which embraces the visible and material representation of meaning more broadly. However, there occurred in this second notion the issue of limitation to the graphic, which might virtually include all kinds of material elements. This inclusive attitude is frequent in the practice of anthropologists.

Such an expansionist notion of writing has produced the necessity to define the boundaries between the whole orbit of signs and the graphic domain in distinguishing graphic systems from other systems of signs. It is more reasonable to recognize the values and rationalities of these two notions of writing since each one has a specific attitude, logical and also metaphysical presuppositions, and scientific strategies in the study of writing. However, I would like to underline the *raison d'être* of a graphic pluralism to construct a new grammatology in a more productive way. Graphic pluralism means that numerous objects and their examples are omnipresent: the typical case is the use of multiple scripts for different languages within the same linguistic community, for instance, the poly-scriptural marks in the streets of Seoul. In addition, the intermediality of phenomena, namely the mix of media and the contrasts among media within graphic representation would be a good candidate for this notion.

Graphic pluralism is also useful to explain the functioning of multiple semiotic or linguistic principles in the same writing system, i.e. the mix of iconic, phonetic, and metaphoric elements, which are used in Egyptian hieroglyphs and Náhuatl glyphs. It is of particular interest to remark on the ideological and axiological dimensions in the political and cultural contexts of the adoption or the absorption of a new graphic system into pre-existing semiotic systems. A good example is the creation of the Korean writing system in the middle of the 15th century during the Joseon dynasty, which had employed the Chinese script ten centuries previously.

In terms of graphic pluralism I would like to evoke a cybernetic and biological imaginary in the notion of writing, which was treated by Derrida. Here is a key passage from his work, *Of Grammatology*:

Le biologiste parle aujourd'hui d'écriture et de *pro-gramme* à propos des processus les plus élémentaires de l'information dans la cellule vivante. Enfin, qu'il ait ou non des limites essentielles, tout le champ couvert par le *programme* cybernétique sera champ d'écriture. (DG 19; OG 9)

The context of this passage is as follows: First, Derrida reminded the extension of the Saussurean linguistic model to a wide range of human sciences, and noted an inflation and a devaluation of the word 'language'. In the second phase he remarked a new inflation provoked by a pervasive use of the word 'writing'. Writing eventually embraces the essence and content of different types of human activities (OG 9).

It is now well known that structuralism in fact combined models of interpretation extrapolated from linguistic notions with concepts of a higher

level of abstraction imported from cybernetics: communication, control, feedback, program, code, information, and message. For a grammarologist such as Derrida, it is the concept of ‘program’ that fits most adequately to the structuring principle of ‘writing’.

It is also in this *épistémé* of grammarology that the contemporary biologist speaks of writing and *program* in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. Derrida ultimately acknowledged the convergence of grammarology and cybernetics in proclaiming that the entire field covered by the cybernetic *program* would be the field of writing (OG9).

2.4 Political Economy of Graphic Systems

It is important to comprehend the nature of socio-political relationships and inequalities that are revealed in the graphic practices and texts in different societies. Through a semiotic and anthropological analysis of graphic practices, it would be possible to examine the semiotic process by which macro-sociological categories are realized in micro-contextual writing acts (cf. Silverstein 2003). Therefore it is significant to underline the ideological dimension of writing practices. Linguistic ideologies are based upon the value and beliefs of linguistic systems that are foundational to other cultural beliefs and practices (see Silverstein 1979).

What comes to the fore in considering the ideological model are indigenous concepts of what writing was and what writing does, who was entitled to read and write (implying gender relations as well as those of social status), and the predicaments of cross-generational transmission. (Houston 2004: 6)

Therefore, the semiotics of writing must include not only the syntagmatics of the graphic space but also the pragmatics of writing, which treats writing-in-use and writing-in-context.

Especially in terms of graphic pluralism, the political economy of graphic systems can reveal different kinds of social and axiological varieties. In this regard, the study of graphic practices would demonstrate an intimate connection between language use and its mode of production, consumption, and distribution. In particular the power structure is a key issue in the study of writing systems and practices. Lévi-Strauss (1961: 292) insisted that the graphic is never neutral in hypothesizing that “the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings”. The question of power structure generates an equally important issue

of ethnocentrism, which is to be contextualized in the circumstance of decolonization.

Moreover, Lévi-Strauss's position to writing, which is characterized as the self-reflexive voice of Western civilization, is to criticize Western ethnocentrism.

As another example, axiological systems and beliefs about writing systems in East Asia are strongly attached to political ideologies because of the multiple associations between writing and colonialism, western civilization, traditional writing practices, both assimilation and resistance force, and so on.

3 Speech, Gesture, Image: Towards an Archeology of Writing

Derrida's predictive remarks demand a presentation of principal ideas of the great prehistorian Leroi-Gourhan, and extend our reflections on the relationships among myth, gesture, and writing. Leroi-Gourhan proposed considering the evolution of a capital fact that emerged with *Homo sapiens* in the development of the Anthropos, that is, the capacity to express thoughts by means of material symbols. He was specifically interested in the birth of graphism. The bipolar technicality of vertebra reached its peak at the anthropoids in the formation of two functional pairs: hand/tool, and face/language. On the one hand, such bipolarity made the driving function of the hand and the face as a decisive factor in the process of modeling of thought in instruments of material action, and in sound symbols on the other hand. It is highly interesting to observe that graphism did not occur to reproduce reality: the first graphism expressed rhythm rather than forms. Also, from the point of view of geometry, we encounter the fascinating fact of the massive presence of abstract and geometric figures and signs. At the first stage, it was a general form of thoughts that evoked the animal. Accordingly, the geometric figures such as points, lines, surfaces, and volumes, entered into the domain of thought as symbols and as abstraction of symbols. The keyword is here "evocation", which is conducted as abstractions in tandem. Close to the recognizable figures, early humans observed the coexistence of the great number of geometric signs such as rectangle, triangle, trapezium, etc. In the absence of binary referentiality between a sign and its meaning, the figure-sign, contrary to the recognizable figure, is fully independent from the signified one, and an artificial creation of the mind, preparing the way towards the ultimate study of figures for themselves. We can conclude that Paleolithic people were the first inventors of the surface of representation, i.e. the basic elements of the figure in general.

From its origin, figurative art was directly related to language and very near to writing. That was a symbolic transposition, rather than a copy of reality. Figurative art is inseparable from language and precedes the pairing of phonation with graphic expression. The important portion of figurative art can be explained by what scholars term 'picto-ideography'. But even today the relationship between language and its graphic expression is that of coordination rather than subordination. The image possesses dimensional freedom, which writing inevitably lacks. While the image could suggest the verbal process that reaches its peak in the recitation of the myth, the image was not attached to such process and its context disappeared with the narrator. Leroi-Gourhan called this writing 'mythography', that is, a multi-dimensional construction based upon verbal communication. However, peoples of the agricultural revolution had invented a graphic system as linear writing. The mythogram is in fact already an ideogram. Ideography in this form preceded pictography so that Paleolithic art was ideographic. With the emergence of figurative graphic representation, parallelism was re-established: the hand has its language with the look, and the face has its own language that is related to hearing.

Written language, phoneticized and linear in space, became completely subordinated to spoken language, which is phonetic and linear in time. Agricultural people's way of thinking was organized in time and space from the initial point of view of the reference-omphalos around which the sky revolves. From this reference distances were ordered and measured. This supports the view that writing tended towards the constriction of the image and the strict linearization of symbols.

Along the same lines, Marcel Jousse, another French anthropologist left us a very rich program on the gestural origin of writing in considering the primordial character of human gesture. According to Jousse (2008), the Mimogram, which has its origin in the "intentional mimeme", is a primordial way of writing, while it became a poor algebra of the great mimographic expression due to the degradation of gestures, corporeal and manual, laryngeal-buccal and graphic aspects, because it lost its original concretism after a hundred centuries:

Nous écrivons A, alpha, c'est-à-dire un boeuf; B bêta, c'est-à-dire une maison, etc. Nous en sommes encore à utiliser des résidus de mimogrammes, souvent sans le savoir. C'est cela que j'appelle l'Algébrose. Direz-vous que c'est "abstrait"? Non, c'est nécrosé, et vous n'aurez aucun avantage sur moi en ignorant que ceci vient de cela". "Notre écriture a tout momifié et nous a fait perdre le contact avec la Vie un point que nous ne soupçons même pas". (Jousse 2008: 107–108)

Indeed, the gestural origin of writing has been confirmed in the concrete etymology of Chinese writing. For instance, the idea of sacrifice was rendered by the gesture of the right hand presenting the flesh of the divinity. This concrete translation of abstract ideas by human gestures was demonstrated by the detailed analysis of the group of examples illustrating the concrete etymology of Chinese writing by his Chinese disciple Tchang Tcheng Ming in his Ph.D. dissertation “L’Écriture chinoise et le Geste humain”:

According to the main theoretical tenets of this thesis, the beings and the actions are represented by the categories in its sensible realities, namely each with its proper nuance and characteristic details. This constitutes the first aspect of concretism of the Chinese writing-aspect purely graphic. (Tchang Tcheng Ming 1937: 163–168).

In the same context, the metaphysics and the mythology of Mayan writing are in accord with the opinion of Jousse and Leroi-Gourhan. Mayans, having placed the glyphic writing in the center of their mythic experience, assumed a danger in alphabetic writing, which was considered to produce the solidification of thoughts and to reduce the mystery of the world into a false transparence. If the sense is obscure, the writing should remain enigmatic. For the Maya, logos was never separated from muthos. Graphic reason remained mythic different from the case of the Greeks. The presence of the image in glyphical writing is the trace left by the myth, so that such mute myth (muthos) expresses what is discovered in the foundations of the myth and the affects in the silent language. Thus the image is related to the necessity of leaving the passage open, which is re-conducted to the affects without proceeding too rapidly towards the words. Behind the enigma, there is no clear answer but an obscure meaning.

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