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Postscript

When I first tried to approach the question of literacy and materiality, I was convinced that there was a strong sense of the “appropriateness” of a given materialization of a message in each society. I still think that there is such a sense—however, the examples of this volume show that behavioural codes related to the materialization of a given message are not so often questioned *in principle* by actors involved in a specific act of communication. Rather, these codes are understood and put into practice unconsciously by almost everybody. So it would seem to miss the point to compare practices depicted in this volume to a near-contemporary episode such as the one I mentioned during the workshop on communication and materiality that took place in October 2012: earlier that year, there had been a debate (mostly online) on whether certain computer fonts should be banned from being applied in scientific contexts. This happened in the aftermath of a presentation by scientists at the famous CERN laboratory in Switzerland, who had used the font “comic sans” on their power point slides for announcing the discovery of the so-called “Higgs boson”. The font, that was fiercely criticised, was originally designed for a user manual to introduce those completely unfamiliar with using a computer (such as children) to the technique on a very basic level. Hence, the critics of comic sans denounced it as being good for children only, i.e. not really being sophisticated or to be taken seriously. According to this perception, using comic sans has been described as “being equal to turning up to a black-tie event in a clown costume”. In the light of these then-recent developments, it seemed useful to ask about the appropriateness of certain materializations in specific contexts. As for the “typographic era”, similar questions had been raised by scholars such as Gutjahr and Benton, who were interested in “the relationship between a text’s typography and its literary interpretation”¹.

However, as this volume has shown, human actions related to texts in pre-modern, largely illiterate societies have to be approached from a different angle—as the precise content and material implementation of a given message were seldom the only relevant aspects (as far as the examples presented have illustrated) for the recipients. There were thus two core questions raised in the introductory part of this volume. The first was how communication worked in mostly illiterate societies—and how it was conceptualized by a given regime. The second was about the ways in which the (im)materiality of a given message affected the communicative process between senders and/or addressees. As the contributions to this volume on “Communication and Materiality” (not to be mistaken for a volume entitled “Materialities of Communication” from the 1990s, co-edited by the German literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht) are

¹ Gutjahr/Benton 2001, 3–4.

from a diverse range of regions and historical periods, analysing a variety of communicative milieus (from sacral spaces to more “profane” areas such as “gossiping” milieus), the answers tend to stress diverging points. Nevertheless, there are several aspects that are common to every single one of these contributions. Here I would like to highlight some of the “golden threads” that seemed striking to me.

One of the two overall results of the volume is that all of the societies depicted tend to communicate through the “material”. Material artefacts such as inscriptions on buildings and other monuments or portable objects (textiles, eye-catching documents, carefully arranged tablets) become carriers of “meaning”, going beyond the writing they may contain. This implies that the dichotomy between text and image is constantly negotiated—texts are not necessarily to be understood by way of their semantic cores, but rather as material contexts for very specific messages. The carriers of meaning are part of behavioural codes that are usually understood by the individual groups that interact within these societies. Besides the significance of communication through the material, the societies depicted here often communicate through the “immaterial”, i.e. the spoken word plays a major role in including wider parts of a given population in the “streams of communication”. The material and the immaterial are thus two sides of the same medal, rather than opposites. However, each of the contributors to this volume assesses the extent and the relevance of literacy quite differently.

Christina Tsouparopoulou has shown that the material and immaterial spheres of communication represent intermingling streams of information. Communication in ancient Mesopotamia should be understood as a system with manifold aspects, not merely as a “top-down”-strategy of rulers. Even random objects can “play a part in this information flow”—a statement that reminds us of Bruno Latour’s notion of actor-network-theory (ANT). Literacy thus does not seem to be a category that excludes certain groups from communicative action. Similar results can be discovered when it comes to the analysis of Linear B tablets (Angeliki Karagianni). Although confined to a very limited administrative sphere and applied primarily for mnemonic recording only, the communicative potential of Linear B script was exploited on the highest level. Thus, the tablets discussed can be described both as medium and message in a primarily oral environment—which implies that a more or less fixed system can become a starting point for multifaceted material practices. However, as Lisa Wilhelmi has shown, materialities could alter under certain circumstances (in this case the materiality of Neo-Assyrian divinatory communications)—and so did the influence of individual soothsayers at the royal court. Douglas Fear in turn highlights that the “meaning”, intelligibility and significance of a certain writing system depends on the context of application. Despite the fact that Darius chose a remarkable monumental materialization of his kingly message, Old Persian cuneiform remained a script confined to a very specific context. For many centuries, illiteracy in Old Persian cuneiform was to prevail.

Illiteracy in medieval Europe did not prevent insurgent groups from communicating with the powerful (who were often illiterate themselves), as Christoph Mauntel suggests. Instead, there was a so-called “language of action”, which relied on visibility, symbolism and materiality and was understood by most of the actors in society. Authorities and subjects alike used to rely on the same code of communication for their differing purposes. In this framework, literacy does go beyond reading abilities: the capability of interpreting the materiality of an object becomes important too, if not more important than the understanding of the words *per se*.

A very similar result can be stated with regard to the “textile performance of the written word” in medieval Islamic societies (Rebecca Sauer): the comprehension of their semantic meaning was not necessary in order to grasp their symbolic communicative potential as corroborating factors of social hierarchies. Rather, it was the knowledge about the inscriptions that mattered, and which provoked actions and re-actions.

When looking at the results outlined above, the question of literacy in these pre-modern (yet heterogeneous) contexts seems to be somewhat anachronistic. Meaning used to be constructed beyond the realm of semantic intelligibility—in fact, the oral and the material were both strong constituents of communicative processes.

Bibliography

Gutjahr, Paul C./Benton, Megan L. (2001), *Illuminating Letters. Typography and Literary Interpretation*, Boston.

