Why notational iconicity is a form of operational iconicity

Sybille Krämer
Freie Universität Berlin

Something like a phonographic dogma dominates the theory of writing: writing is considered to be a fixed version of spoken language. This essay intends to overcome the speech-oriented concept of writing by conceptualizing the idea of ‘notational iconicity’. Being hybrids, written texts embody both, linguistic and iconic attributes. The decisive argument in favour of ‘notational iconicity’ is not only its visuality, but the two-dimensional spatiality and operativity of writing. This kind of operational iconicity is inherent to almost all written texts and is based on the fact that written texts materially and perceptively present themselves synoptically and simultaneously. Inscribed surfaces open up a neatly arranged and controllable space of aesthetic presentation and tactile manipulations: Every written configuration can be reconfigured; thus writing is a paper-tool, a laboratory for cognitive and aesthetic activities. At this point the connection between writing and other forms of graphical media like graphs and diagrams matters: The cultural technique of ‘flattening out’ constitutes an important strand in our media evolution, for communication as cognition, for composition as computation.

1. The phonographic dogma

What does ‘inscription’ mean? Few questions seem easier to answer: an inscription is language that has been written down. It holds the ephemerality of the spoken word at bay and liberates communication from situated face-to-face speech. The written word transfers the acoustic sequence into visual configuration; it extends communication over spatial and temporal distances. Turning the spoken into the written also makes control, correction and criticism possible, as well as the dissemination and archiving of what is communicated as text.
It was precisely the debate on ‘orality and literacy’ (Goody 1968, 1986; Havelock 1976, 1986; Ong 1982) in the last third of the past century, which revealed the creativity of writing and raised the written word to the same level as the spoken one. Since then, the oral and the written have been considered two separate forms of language, each with their own ‘performance profile’ regarding their medial, linguistic, and cultural anthropological character (Ehlich 1994; Koch & Oesterreicher 1985, 1994; Olson 1991; Parry 1971; Raible 1991, 1993; Zumthor 1984).

Despite this rediscovery of the potential of literacy, however, one traditional assumption, almost a commonplace within the debate of writing, remained un-violated: It is the belief in the discursive and not pictorial character of writing. In the context of the customary bifurcation of language and image, writing is located within the field of language only. Writing is interpreted as a form of language and not as a form of image. The seminal handbook Schrift und Schriftlichkeit. Writing and Its Use (Günther & Ludwig (eds) 1994) sums up the results of the Literacy Debate and defines writing as “the amount of graphic signs with which spoken language is recorded” (Günther & Ludwig (eds) 1994: VIII; Koch 2009: 58). We will call the view that writing is primarily the fixed form of spoken language the phonographic dogma (Krämer 2003b: 520).

2. Three blind spots of the speech-centred concept of writing

It is possible to diagnose three blind spots of the speech-oriented concept of writing:

1. The assumption that writing refers to speech:

The ancient Greek alphabet never supported the theory that the alphabet solely refers to the sounds of speech, for we know today that the Greek letters referred not only to words but also to numbers as well as musical tones (Kittler 2003: 198–200; Ernst & Kittler (eds) 2006). Or consider the invention of modern symbolic algebra, whose constituent signs consist of alphabetic letters that refer neither to the sounds of speech nor to numbers but rather to structural forms in general. Moreover, the success of the alphabet is also rooted in the organizational potential of the 26 signs, which have proven to be the ideal instrument of precise sorting in all kinds of lists, dictionaries, telephone books, etc. (Günther 1995: 16). Or think of the linguistic function of additional characters like punctuation marks, dashes, parentheses and operational signs for which there is no equivalent in spoken language. Choreography was also

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an important medium in the development of Western dance, just as musical notes were essential to the development of Western music. Mathematics and logic would be unthinkable without notations. The computer would be impossible without programming codes, just as digitalization is rooted in the binary alphabet. It is thus clear that writing is not a secondary system that refers to spoken language as its primary system; rather, it is a symbolic system sui generis, which only occasionally refers to oral speech.

2. *The assumption of linearity as a structural principle in writing:* The theory of the linearity of writing is another problematic, if not an incorrect assumption of the speech-centred concept of writing. The flow of the spoken word constitutes a temporal succession, and it is assumed that the one-dimensional structure of succession is transferred to the spatial ordering of written signs. The principle of the linearity of spoken language is thus also proclaimed for writing itself. However, despite the fact that writing and reading are activities that take place temporally, writing always employs the two-dimensionality and simultaneity or synchronicity of surfaces (Groß 1990: 236–238). In all forms of writing – even phonetic writing – the configuration is structured horizontally as the lines proceed towards either the right or the left as well as vertically from the top to the bottom or in a few exceptions from the bottom to the top. This two-dimensional matrix of writing has no equivalent in oral speech; so writing is clearly not linear (Harris 1990: 39).

3. *The reduction of writing to the primary function of communication:* When records are written of the spoken word, it takes on the communicative function of speech. However, it can be observed that writing is the ideal instrument not only of spatially or temporally extended communication but also of cognition. Writing is a kind of thought tool. Consider, for example, written calculations that enable arithmetical problems to be solved through the application of algorithms that arrange and rearrange written symbols. The notebooks of scientists and even novelists similarly show how inscriptions serve as a medium that enables the gradual development of thoughts and beliefs. Writing thus facilitates the externalization, self-observation, and control of thinking and cognition. The space of writing constitutes a thought laboratory. The idea that writing is a form of language and that the structural order of writing is derived from the linear ordering of speech thus falls short of the mark. But what is the alternative?
3. Overcoming the phonographic dogma

Over the last few decades several different approaches have been developed to overcome the phonographic dogma. It has been criticized and called into question in a lot of different ways, six of which are mentioned here:

1. The role of non-alphabetic and non-European writing has been investigated as a means of political power, organization, communication and thinking (Assmann 1992; Gong 2009; Wilcke 2000).
2. The use of notations in the natural sciences, mathematics and logic has been studied, and this has revealed that science would be impossible without visual marks as writing, tables, and diagrams (Hoffmann 2010, 2008; Klein, Lenoir & Gumbrecht 2003; Mersch 2005; Rheinberger 1999).
3. In literary studies the ‘scene of writing’ (Schreibszene) and the graphic dimension of literature have been examined (Campe 1991; Giuriato & Kammer 2006; Giuriato, Stingelin & Zanetti 2008; Raible 2004; Stingelin 1999; Zanetti 2012), in music studies research on notations and drafts has become increasingly important (Magnus 2016), and in dance studies the focus has shifted to the notations of choreography (Brandstetter et al. 2010).
4. The studies of ancient cultures and classical philology have reconstructed the materiality of written documents as a special order of real things as well as the practices that depend on the use of inscriptions (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2005; Damerow 1993; Schmandt-Besserat 1992).
5. The computer has been recognized as a writing machine, and the role of writing as the basis of digitalization and programming on the one hand and internet communication on the other hand has been discussed (Bolter 1991, 1997, 2005; Grube 2005).
6. The ideographic elements in the development of writing have been stressed. Let me briefly address this important aspect of ideography. With writings traced back to the Greek alphabet it can be observed that they initially consisted of chains of letters which were barely decipherable unless they were read as sounds. Over time, the borders between words were marked through gaps; punctuation, chapter headings, paragraph breaks, footnotes, etc. were also introduced in order to make texts easier to read and to understand their syntactic and semantic structure. Yet these are all elements that have no equivalent at the acoustic level of the spoken word. These aspects are not phonetic but rather ideographic, and these ideographic aspects do not represent spoken language itself. It is thus apparent that the development of alphabetic writing itself already tends to incorporate dimensions into its written image that are independent of and neutral with regard to spoken language (Raible 1991, 2009; Krämer 2005a, 2005b).
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To sum up so far: the phonographic dogma and the concept of writing focused on oral speech have been criticized in many ways. Yet there has never been a theoretical consolidation of these different approaches or the systematic development of a general, phonetically neutral concept of writing that would connect the alphabetic and non-alphabetic, the mathematical, logical, musical, choreographic, and digital forms of writing. It is precisely at this point that the concept of ‘notational iconicity’ is relevant, as it defines a change in perspective from a speech-oriented to a speech-independent concept of writing. The concept of ‘notational iconicity’ aims to provide a critical revision of the phonographic as well as the alphabetic-centred concept of writing. The following reflections attempt to outline this different concept of writing.²

4. Notational iconicity

The concept of ‘notational iconicity’ aims for a revision of the language-dependent concept of writing. A written text no longer counts as a form of ‘pure’ language but as a hybrid of language and image. The crucial point here is that the specific potential of writing – in as far as it stretches out beyond communication in space and time – can only be appropriately understood when we look at its implicit iconicity.

To speak of ‘notational iconicity’ concerns a kind of iconicity which is inherent to almost all³ written texts and which is based on the fact that written texts are materially and perceptibly inscribed onto a space whose two-dimensionality they use and which – independently of the primarily linear processes of writing and reading – present themselves synoptically and simultaneously to their viewer and reader. The written shares its visual and two-dimensional attributes with ordinary pictures, yet it differs from these – and links them to language – by embodying a kind of ordered sign system which is both discrete and syntactic. In this genuine relationship between image-like and language-like aspects, writing offers an operational field for which there is not yet a model neither in the pictorial nor in the linguistic: namely the potential of the graphic medium to form and transform sign structures creatively and in an exploratory manner that is reproducible.

This is what we wish to call ‘operative iconicity’. Operativity takes place when the writing of texts turns into a laboratory for their authors to generate their own thoughts; where composers create music with the help of sheets of music; where

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². The concept of ‘notational iconicity’ has been introduced in: Krämer 2003a, b, and investigated from different disciplinary perspectives in: Krämer & Giertler 2011; Krämer, Cancik-Kirschbaum & Totzke 2012.

³. Exception: Braille or Quipu/Khipu.
a mathematical problem is solved with paper and pencil; where a programmer makes the algorithms of a complex operation readable for machines; where pressing the button of a computer keyboard activates a link opening a website. The written expression becomes a productive and explorative tool to do something, which would not be possible or at least very difficult to perform without it. The written word does not only represent something: it also creates the represented – more or less.

We usually conceptualize iconicity by its visuality. Yet – and this is the ‘hinge point’ of our argumentation – it is not only their visuality but, instead, their spatiality which matters here. A three-dimensional space surrounds us. Written texts draw on another form of spatiality: the two-dimensional space. In contrast to sculpture and architecture, pictures are flat. They share their flatness with other visual artefacts such as graphs, diagrams, maps – and writing. The invention of ‘artificial flatness’ transforms the surface of a voluminous body into a ‘surface without depth’, which is only relevant in terms of what is inscribed on it. From cave painting and skin tattoos over painted canvasses and printed paper to the computer screen and the smartphone: our dealing with spaces covered with images, marks and descriptions emerges as a cultural phenomenon. There is a cultural technique of “flattening out” (Krämer 2014a: 6) which constitutes an important strand in our media evolution. Its relevance is obvious: Our life-world is always situated in a space that is related to a ‘behind’ or ‘below’, that is hidden from our view; and it is this dimension of non-perceptibility and uncontrollability which is cancelled by artificial flatness. If something is projected and inscribed on the surface, the viewer and the reader are relocated to a bird’s eye perspective: A space emerges that is completely controllable and – in case it has a limited extension – can be proximally transported. Simultaneity and synopsis as an important potential of communicative and cognitive ordering is the result.

5. Spatiality

It now becomes obvious why the phonographic concept of writing is too narrow. As long as the relationship between a spoken and a written language is considered to be a relationship of translation, writing is subordinated to the regime of sequenti-ality. The acoustic sequence of sound is transferred into the visual sequence of letters and words, and the linearity thus becomes the organizing principle. However, this sequential vantage point lacks the operative meaning that is encapsulated in

4. On flatness as medium of the pictorial see Summers 2003.
the simultaneity of the written character. There can be no doubt that writing and reading are temporal processes. But texts – which already etymologically suggest a textile woven surface – use two dimensions and not only unfold in a linear fashion from the right to the left (and vice versa) but also make use of the difference of what is above or below. Writing games, such as crossword puzzles and Sudoku, show this most pertinently. But also the way a scientific text is distributed into main text and footnotes, or the way of doing mathematics, by manipulating the numerals underneath one another, or the manner of musical notation of simultaneously sounding instruments on a sheet of music – these all show how the diachrony of the linear is broken up in favour of spatial synchrony.

What differentiates written texts from the acoustic stream of sounds is therefore precisely the cancellation of the principle of linearity (Harris 1990: 39; Groß 1990: 238) – which is exactly what unites it with all forms of pictures. What differentiates written texts from normal pictures and photographs is their ‘interstitiality’ (Zwischenräumlichkeit): they need the blank spaces and the gaps to be visually perceptible and operatively manageable as configurations. A written text depends on having the elements of its sign repertoire to stand in an ordering of well defined positions on the inscribed surface. The written is a configuration which can be formed and transformed, a differentiality which can be structured and restructured in a semantically productive way. The spatial position of elements contributes to sense and meaning. Think about footnotes, tables of contents, titles and indices, notes in music – or look at the numbers of the decimal positioning system, where the value of one sign is determined by its position in the numerical expression. What becomes obvious is that the spatial placement often constitutes or at least evokes the meaning of something written.

The property of being a disjunctive pattern of ‘arrangement’ (Anordnung) (Cancik-Kirschbaum & Mahr 2005) is what differentiates written texts from spoken language. When we speak, we do not arrange phonemes; we do not make a pause between our words and sentences. The technical recording of oral speech shows a break when the speaker catches his or her breath, but these breaks do not correspond to the syntactic ordering of the spoken. Speech is flux, an almost continuous acoustic flow. Dividing the acoustic stream in phonemes has no physical foundation (Coulmas 1993; 192; Coulmas 1981); the phoneme as a linguistic unity is a projection of the grapheme (Lüdtke 1969; Klein 1985). The discrete character does not only isolate the graphemes from one another, it also introduces grammatical differences in the form of capitals and low case characters and punctuation, none of which exists in the flux of spoken language. That is why written language cannot be an imitation of the oral; on the contrary, the written character offers a cartography of language, it makes language observable and designs language as an independent semiotic system detached from mimic, gesture, prosody, and situative deixis.
6. An example

An example shall demonstrate what it means that the spatial relation is the medium and milieu of writing as a means of thinking (cf. Hayes 2006). This is an anecdote about the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss as a child. A teacher gives his class the task to compute the sum of the first 100 natural numbers. The 9-year-old Gauss offers the correct answer ‘5050’ after only few minutes of work. It is not difficult to explain his elementary principle: The solution depends on manipulating the spatial ordering of the written numbers by operations of grouping, regrouping and inverting the sequential order of numerals.

Hence, the order of the first 100 natural numbers can be written as follows:

\[(1) \quad 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 \ldots + 97 + 98 + 99 + 100\]

The commutative law of addition says that the order in which you add up the numbers is arbitrary; the items can change places when you add them up (commutare, lat. interchange). The associative law of addition says that the items to be summed up can be arbitrarily subsumed within parentheses and associated in any way desired. Instead of

‘1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5’ we could write ‘(1 + 2) + (3 + 4) or ‘1 + (2 + 3) + 4’

That is why, by changing places or groups, the row (1) of the numbers can also be written in such a way that, instead of a sequential order, the first and the last number, the second and the second last etc. can be put together and made into parts of a group that is held together by the parenthesis.

\[(2) \quad (1 + 100) + (2 + 99) + (3 + 97) + \ldots + (49 + 52) + (50 + 51)\]

What becomes obvious in this operation is that the sum within each parenthesis is the same, namely 101.

\[(3) \quad (101) + (101) + \ldots + (101) + (101)\]

From this follows that if 50 such parentheses are given, 101 × 50 must be calculated. Hence, 5050 is the sum that Gauss as a young boy calculated in a few minutes. And if we write them down one beneath the other:

\[(4) \quad 1 + 100 = 101\]
\[2 + 99 = 101\]
\[3 + 98 = 101\]
\[\ldots \ldots \ldots \]
\[49 + 52 = 101\]
\[50 + 51 = 101\]
\[5050\]
The trick with this discovery of the mathematical formula of addition lies in breaking up the sequentiality of the ‘natural’ succession of the numerical sequence: the chain of 100 items is transformed into a chain with only 50. Through this restructuring of an arithmetical expression a new configuration is generated, which opens up a cognitive aha-moment, a ‘sudden insight’: that each newly created group has the same value, namely ‘101’. Breaking the strict sequentiality of written numbers in favour of a remodelling by which ‘the last shall be the first’ effects a change of aspects in the form in which a numerical series appears. Similar to Gottlob Frege’s morning and evening star as modes of Venus appearing to human eyes (see Frege 1962[1892]: 32), there are different modalities of how to represent and order the first 100 whole numbers. For Frege, the planet Venus is called the meaning, yet the morning and evening star is called the sense (Frege 1962[1892]: 26). In our arithmetical operation, the meaning of the sum remains the same, but the sense – understood as the specific form of expression – has changed. This ‘deferral of sense’ by ‘equality of meaning’ is made possible through a non-linear operation with a graphic arrangement.

Since we have characterized the implicit spatiality of the written character, it is worthwhile taking a closer look at the graphism of the written word.

7. Graphism

Although there are written texts that do not primarily aim for optic perception – think of the computer’s binary alphabet consisting of instantiating electrical impulses, or of Braille notation for the blind – the graphic inscription, whether carved into or applied to a material surface, embodies a paradigmatic form of appearance typical of written texts. Without the management of a writing tool and without the support of the accommodating materiality which allows us to write into it, there can be no written text (Greber et al. (eds) 2002; Ehlich 2002).

From a paleontological viewpoint, it was our upright bipedal posture which freed up our hands and enabled us to raise our eyes, hence creating a new relationship between hand and tool, and between face and viewing activity (Leroi-Gourhan 1980).5 Graphism emerges in the joint act of the drawing hand and the reading eye. This leads André Leroi-Gourhan to presume that pictorial actions such as the drawing or producing and reading graphic symbols only came into being with homo sapiens; nothing comparable existed before him (Leroi-Gourhan 1980: 238). The basis of graphism is formed by the stroke or the line which, together

5. On the relationship between language and gesture, see Armstrong, Stokoe & Wilcox 1996.
with the point period, constitute the elementary repertoire of notations. The phenomenon of scribbling is illuminating, too, as it demonstrates the ubiquitous power of performing graphism outside conventionalism (Driesen 2012). Drawing a line is, at the same time, the trace of a gesture and of an untethered, free draft. We design a world in writing and, in so doing, use signs that are rigorously conventionalized; but this written up world carries, _nolens volens_ – as the trace of a gesture, or as the expression of a person – the personal handwriting and single signature of its author (Böhm & Gätje 2014; Krämer 2014b).

The importance of graphism for our artistic and intellectual development cannot be underestimated. Being able to speak a language is mostly considered the crucial point of culture. But the ability of graphic and pictorial expression is as important as our verbal ability. And that holds _a fortiori_ for our cognitive achievements and for the media we make use of in our cognition. Already Leibniz emphasized that ‘painted and written signs’ are irreplaceable when it comes to thinking and understanding (Krämer 1991: 255). A brief glance into scientific strategies of publications makes plain that these do not only rely on written texts but also on tables, graphs, diagrams, and maps. There would be no science without visualization in writing, images, graphs, and diagrams. And this does not only apply to the presentation and circulation of information in general but also goes for the genuine process of scientific reasoning and research (Hoffmann 2008; Latour 1990).

That is why ‘graphism’ is a concept that, on the one hand, emphasizes the similarity between written texts and other forms of graphic representation that are prototypically expressed in maps, graphs and diagrams; on the other hand, it underlines the explorative and _creative_ and not only representative role of writing. With regard to the many options of cognitive and aesthetic experience within graphism, the relation between space and time seems to be one of the most relevant contributions. The _graphé_ is also always a technique of spatializing temporal processes: succession crystallizes into simultaneity. And, conversely, stable written structures can be made liquefied into temporal processes. This happens when a text is read as a speech, a score is transformed into musical performance, or a computer program is used. Graphism translates time into space and space into time. This may just be the centre of the power of its cultural technical efficiency.

8. Interpretationality

The written character lives in two worlds: it appears empirically-sensually as a ‘mark’ that is situated in space and time. In reading, however, it also transforms itself into the identification of a type, a schematized token which does not signify anything particular but rather something general. As essential as the visual
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The surface of writing seems to be, a graphic mark can only count as a kind of writing when it refers to something outside and beyond itself. In contrast to common poststructural positions, there is an ‘outside’ of the text. This externality can refer to other texts, to spoken language but also to sounds of music, dance-steps, concepts, numbers, computer commands, logical operations etc. Without an external referent, without semantics there is no writing, only ornament. And yet reading, decoding, and interpreting also always demand to ignore the empirical sensuality and concrete aesthetic abundance of the written. Both calligraphy and other headstrong handwriting subvert this maxim of schematism and estrange it. A script-like phenomenon without semantics might be art but it is an example neither of the medium nor of the tool of writing.

Nevertheless, and this is the point I would like to make, the operations we perform with written texts often depend on the suspension of their interpretation. The materiality, perceptibility, and operativity of the written sign are able to secure a relative autonomy of the graphic surface vis-à-vis their interpretive content. The epistemic potential of writing turns on the premise that construction and interpretation can take separate ways. Just think of the example of the cipher zero: ‘0’. Long before anybody had come up with a mathematical interpretation such as George Booles’ ‘empty set’ for the number zero, the sign ‘0’ as written character was successfully used in calculation (Kaplan 2000; Rotman 1987; Krämer 1988: 54–59). We do not need to know what ‘0’ means, not even if it is a number at all, in order to be able to compute with the zero. The construction and the use of written numbers precede their mathematical interpretation. It was only after centuries during which the decimal system was used effectively that an entirely new understanding of numbers emerged: A concept of number was generated that detaches numbers from their denumerability, from their understanding as entities able to be counted.

The creative role in disregarding meaning is not reduced to mathematics: also poetry lives from the potential of the deferral and suspension of meaning. Only because the written words in a poem are joined together in unusual and innovative constellations is poetry able to ‘liberate’ the language into a life of its own that has often never before been heard and that is completely new. The formal and poetic deployments of the written word thus both draw on the sovereignty of the form of writing vis-à-vis its content.

9. Mechanizability

This sovereignty of form versus content indicates a mechanical core in the use of writing. It is no coincidence that the introduction of the Indian-Arabic counting with written characters produced the first mechanical calculating machine,
since configurations of the number signs could be embodied through gear positions (Krämer 1988; Künzel & Bexte 1993, 1996). The computer – which today is primarily used as network for communication and visualization as well as for simulation – is and remains a text-based machine (Bolter 1991, 1997; Hayles 2002). The word ‘gramma’, Greek for ‘letter’, reminds us of the written nature of programming. Not only writing, reading, and calculating, even the activity of programming represent the cultural technique of using scripts (Bolter 2005). Only the binary alphabet that was invented by Leibniz (Leibniz 1705) and that to humans is both confusing and ineffable to use as a computing tool is what enables the digitalization of our culture in the sense of preparing machines to transform one medium into another one. Computer performances are grounded in transferring written structures into the operations of electrical impulses that are invisible to the human eye. But without the synoptic presentation of digitalized data on the computer screen’s flat simultaneity, without the mediating role of interfaces, this technique would run at idle.

Writing acquires a new trait in our digital culture. This begins with the barcode which identifies things in order to introduce and implement them into a virtual world. It is with the specific feature of digitalized use of writing that temporality can be applied to the spatial configurations of written texts. By writing and reading we usually do something with the written characters and therefore need it to be stable. But the computer’s ‘auto-operative’ writing acts autonomously, though of course within a certain programmed framework of how to act and react. As a consequence, the symbolic structures take on a more dynamic form which is prototypically realized in computer simulations (Gramelsberger 2010: 255–275). Moreover, we also encounter this self-operativity of digitalized writing in the phenomenon of the ‘link’ which gives us access to the interconnected data universe. In short: until the computer age, written texts represented a cultural technique for structuring information by spatialization; what now becomes clear is that writing in the realm of digitalization has advanced to become a cultural technique for structuring information by temporalization. The connection between space and time within digitalized writing is much more complicated. Yet the implementation of temporal operativity within what is put down in writing is a remarkable new stage within the evolution of writing.

6. This concept is discussed by Grube et al. 2005.
10. Conclusion

‘Notational iconicity’ is an operative concept, functioning to overcome the ‘phono-graphic dogma’. It has to suspend the reductionism of the written text as language written down in favour of a concept of writing independent of spoken language. It intends to turn away from an attitude widespread within the humanities: We tend to divide our capacities of symbolism into two separate fields: the linguistic realm and the pictorial. Yet, to contemplate the perceptibility and operativity of inscription is not the same as to liberate writing from the discourse on language and to allocate it into the discourse on pictures. The fact that inscription is visual does therefore not mean that script it is an image. We do not wish to introduce the ‘iconic turn’ into the debate on writing. The reason is that doubt can be cast on the question of whether there is at all something like a ‘pure language’ or a ‘pure image’.

What makes sense methodically is to have the concepts of ‘language’ and ‘image’ mark the endings of a scale between which almost all our symbolic accomplishments can be located as mixed phenomena in different graduations as to discursive and iconic instances. With the discursive perspective, the discreteness and the syntactic constitution of writing as well as its property to represent something matters. Yet this representational capacity does not necessarily have to be linguistic: it could also be based on numbers, musical sounds, machine instructions, logical entities, chemical elements, dance-steps. With the iconic perspective, the visibility and the two-dimensional order of simultaneity is at stake. For inscriptions, the modalities of saying and showing are affiliated; but the specific mixture of the linguistic and the iconic differs for each type of writing and must be specified for every different writing system on its own. Written texts do not follow the bifurcation of being either language or image; as hybrids they embody both: something linguistic and iconic. The concept of notational iconicity orients itself on the premise that the writing laboratory can set free cognitive and aesthetic processes and experiences for which no models or prototypes exist in the realm of pure language or pure iconicity.

References


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