

Handwriting

as a Cultural Practice in the Age of New Media

a. Research Topic

The subject of this project is handwriting as a western cultural practice in the 20th century. Writing, in our contemporary communication society, at first sight appears to be a standardized, replicable, power-driven, or most recently electronic articulation that refers to a typewriter or a computer rather than to a “human hand.” *Handwriting*, however, also occupies an important position. It is used in many diverse cultural practices, such as in different forms of (literary) writing, private correspondence, advertisement, urban graffiti, to name but a few. Handwriting, moreover, is not only generated by a “human hand,” but also reproduced by new (print and visual) media—such as photography, (silent) film, microfiche, Xerox, fax, scanner, and computer.

These new technologies situate handwriting in a new perspective and, thus, ask for a reinterpretation of handwriting. Research on handwriting under the conditions of technological and medial transformations has so far scarcely been done. This project seeks to remedy this gap by focusing on three practices of handwriting, 1. diary writing, 2. electronic reading and processing of handwriting, and 3. calligraphy.

The three central questions of this project are:

1. *on an historical vector*, how the practice of handwriting is influenced by mediatechnological innovations over the run of the last century, studied from the point of view of diary writing;
2. *on a technological vector*, how the practice of handwriting is influenced by digital technologies that allow analysing, reading and even processing of handwriting; and
3. *on an aesthetic vector*, how handwriting, as a corporeal practice, has to be understood from the point of view of calligraphic writing.

These three vectors cannot be treated strictly isolated; their complex interconnection is at the core of this study. The goal of this project is to gain new perspectives on handwriting, resulting in a new interdisciplinary theory of handwriting

b. Approach

Methodologically, I want to ask historical, technological, and aesthetic questions by contrasting handwriting to its cultural opposite, *typed* writing (Kittler. 1986. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*). Three central concepts will inform this theoretical framework: 1. authenticity, 2. (inter-) mediality, and 3. corporeality.

1. Authenticity

The cultural importance of handwriting, as opposed to typed writing, resides traditionally in its *authenticity*. Handwriting is regarded as an *autography*, as an un-exchangeable, *unique and authentic* “signature” that claims to guarantee the presence of an individual writer during a historically unique moment of writing. Whereas typed writing is by definition *allographic*, that is, *iterable and reproducible*, the reproduction of an authentic handwriting risks to be considered a forgery.

This view on handwriting has a long tradition in different disciplines, most importantly in jurisprudence, but also in historical studies of original sources, and in art theory, where it delineates the status of the artist/author (Fraenkel, *La signature. Genèse d'un signe*, 1992; Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 1976.) In philosophy, the uniqueness of the signature has been challenged by Derrida in “Signature, Event, Context,” 1990.

This section of the project investigates these diverse views on the concept of authenticity from the point of view of diary writing, more precisely, of the probably two most urgent diaries of modern western history, that is Adolf Hitler’s alleged diaries, forged by Kujau, and Anne Frank’s diaries. The immense cultural interest in both these autographs—be they true or false—is, after all, based on their historical materiality and their ostensible authenticity.

*The idea of this section of the project is to rethink the concepts of uniqueness and iteration, of authenticity and counterfeit of handwriting with regard to the practices of reproduction media. What, I will ask, happens to the autographic operations of handwriting when it is reproduced (Benjamin. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 1937; Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, 1995)? What is the relationship among a diary displayed in a museum, its photocopy published in a magazine, and a film-scene showing the act of*

writing (or of forging) a signature? The diaries of Anne Frank and of Adolf Hitler, for they both have a rich publication history involving diverse media, can serve as complex and controversial examples to study the concept of authenticity.

2. (Inter-) Mediality

Writing, in traditional philosophical discourse, is regarded as logocentric, that is, as an almost invisible, immaterial medium to *immediately* depict thought. Profound critiques of this *immediality* of writing is provided in different disciplines, in philosophy by Derrida in his *Of Grammatologie*, 1967; in media studies by McLuhan *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962.

Yet if writing is thought of as *handwriting*, this critique gets an extra-dimension. *Handwriting*, after all, does not pretend—as typed writing does—to exclusively refer to a signified meaning. Handwriting is often unreadable, and it cannot deny its material mode as both linguistic writing and visual image. This *intermedial* character of handwriting invites a new interdisciplinary critique of writing.

*This section of the project seeks to explore how the concept of the (inter-) mediality of handwriting is to be understood from the point of view of digital technologies such as IFA (Intelligent Fond Analysis) and OCR (Optical Character Reading). OCR does not only capture handwriting by means of a scanner as a pure visual image, but it also analyses handwriting and even—up to a certain degree—“reads” it as alphanumeric writing. IFA, moreover, enables the user to create a fond in her or his own handwriting, thus allowing her, for example, to write handwritten e-mail messages by means of the computer keyboard. In doing so, both OCR and IFA implicitly make theoretical assumptions on some basic principles of handwriting, such as its material shape as both visual image and linguistic writing, along with the problem of the readability of handwriting. How, I will ask, do these software systems conceptualize handwriting? Which cultural view on handwriting do they imply and how do they refashion this view by means of the digital technologies offered by the computer? (Bolter/Grusin, *Remediation*, 2000; Winkler, *Docuverse*, 1997) And finally, which implications do these digital interpretations of handwriting have for a new theory of handwriting?*

3. Corporeality

Handwriting, a compound consisting of *hand* and *writing*, not only asks for an analysis of the status of *writing* but also for an analysis of the status of the *hand* writing, thus of the body. Whereas typed writing refers to an inanimate machine—a typewriter, or a computer—*handwriting* is written by a hand and thus refers to an authentic and unique human body.

The concept of the body (or the hand) and its role in the process of writing has been discussed controversially in different disciplines. Whereas in media studies and in philosophy, writing is mostly seen as independent from the body (criticized in Derrida „La main de Heidegger (Geschlecht II),” 1987), in grapho-psychology, the movement of the hand writing is seen as a trace of the character of the subject writing (Klages. *Graphologie*, 1905-1927).

These body-conceptions will be studied from the point of view of contemporary calligraphy. On the one hand, the aesthetics of calligraphy today often alludes to the aesthetics of a pre-technological age, since calligraphers preferably use original ancient techniques of scripting and bookbinding, thus articulating a nostalgic desire for sensuality, authenticity and corporeality (Ouaknin. *Mysteries of the Alphabet*, 1999). The aesthetics of calligraphic writing, on the other hand, also results from a standardisation of the alphabet that shapes the subject of writing as a historical, geographical, cultural community rather than as a unique, corporeal individual. This act of disembodiment is even more radical in calligraphic practices that make use of digital technologies of fond design.

As a result, calligraphy inscribes an authentic human body in its writing practices, and it simultaneously oppresses the body by the use of standardising or even digitising technologies. *The aim of this section of the project is to explore how the concept of (dis-) embodiment is to be understood when analysed from the point of view of the aesthetics of contemporary calligraphy, with special attention to the impact of reproduction media and of digital technologies on the physical act of writing.*

Relevance for Scholarship and Surplus Value of the Programmatic Set-up

Handwriting in the 20th century constitutes an important topic of research because it is both culturally urgent and neglected in scientific discourses. However, the innovative potential of this project resides not only in the topic chosen, but also in its interdisciplinary methodological set-up. First, this project considers handwriting as a practice in different cultural domains, in diary writing, in digital technologies, and in calligraphy. Second, the three central concepts of this project—1. authenticity, 2. mediality, and 3. corporeality—are not regarded as being stable, monodisciplinary or even normative, but this project seeks to understand how these concepts gain different meanings depending on different disciplinary backgrounds. The aim, then, is to bridge these disciplinary boundaries by an intense dialogue between (theoretical) concepts and cultural objects.

This approach can be schematically summarized as follows:

concept:	authenticity	(inter-)mediality	corporeality
cultural object	diary writing	OCR	calligraphy
vector:	historical	technological	aesthetic

This interdisciplinary approach allows this project not only to tie in with current research in cultural analysis, media studies, art history, literary studies, philosophy, and psychology, but also to converge these existing insights for establishing a new interdisciplinary theory of handwriting.