

SFB 933 ‘Material Text Cultures’
Working group 3 – *Form, Content and Material*

Aim

This working group will examine inscribed objects as to the connection between a) textual content (i.e., the information that a text conveys), b) physical and non-physical form (such as the shape of the object, the layout of the written text, the prosody of the underlying linguistic utterance), and c) material (such as clay, stone, paper etc., on which the text is inscribed). The group will consider questions regarding how the three elements (material, form, and content) influence each other in the creation and use of an inscribed object. For instance, to what extent is the choice of a particular material for an object affected by its textual content, or what links exist between the shape of an inscribed object and the layout of the written text? In order to answer questions such as these, the group will establish individual biographies of not only the inscribed objects, but also trace the development of the textual content. The earlier work done within the SFB (MTK, vol. 1) on terminology provides the working group with a headstart on the pertinent terms.

Terminology

While the working group intends to further develop the pertinent terminology in MTK 1, it will also examine the group’s eponymous terms: material, form, and content. These terms are worth examining as they are ‘baked into’ many of the governing concepts and procedures that make up the standard scholarly repertoire. For example, a distinction between form and content is the basic presumption of the transliteration into Latin script characteristic of many modern critical editions. Similar notions are at work in most conventional accounts of translation ‘between languages’. In each case, success is judged by the extent to which the transformation remains true to an original. The interplay of identity and difference does not appear contradictory because of the distinction presupposed between form (which is seen to change) and content (which is seen to exist separately). Yet, on reflection, it seems we would have difficulty in evaluating the fidelity of a given transliteration or translation without it. Similarly, a

distinction between content and material underwrites a crucial relationship for text-critical analysis—namely that which is thought to obtain between a text and “its” manuscripts. Textual content is the principle that, in critical practice, unifies and transcends the difference embodied in the material multiplicity of manuscripts.

Method

The connection between the three elements (form, content and material) is not a static, but rather a dynamic one. In order to explore this dynamic, we will use a series of ‘biographies’ (life cycle, *chaîne opératoire*) to work through the rethinking of the relationship between the three elements. By taking an inscribed object (material and physical form) as a departing point, each member of the group will chart its history through the intersection of the biographies of the material, content or form. Our aim is to proceed by asking not what these terms mean in the abstract, but instead how they have shaped our approach to inscribed objects and how they are interconnected.

For example, in the biography for *material* we will apply the following five-fold scheme:

- 1) *Presence*: origin and availability of the material(s) from which an inscribed object is created.
- 2) *Production*: conversion or preparation of raw material(s) into an inscribable item; distribution of the pre-produced material.
- 3) *Inscribing process*: application of text on the processed material. This is where content, form and material intersect in the most obvious way, as during this step, all three aspects of production come together.
- 4) *Usage*: utilisation and handling of an inscribed object.
- 5) *Disposal/re-use*: discard, re-use, discovery and scholarly examination.

We anticipate both similarities and differences to emerge between our biographical case studies. As each member will analyse inscribed objects using the biographical approach, the multitude of studies will enable the group to draw more general conclusions on the connections between content, form and material. One could single out strikingly strong links between them, try to determine the reason for their existence,

and identify possible patterns.

For example: in early imperial China, there were legal norms for official documents, which stipulated a certain format of writing tablets for certain types of content. The width of the tablets mentioned in the norms, strongly suggests that they must be made from wood, since this was the only largely available material that could produce slips of the required size. Here, the connection between content and form is influenced and at least partly established by legal norms. The relationship between form and material is predominantly established by the physical properties of wood. Among the materials that were available, such as wood and bamboo, wood was apparently best suited to produce a writing support for the format.

Future plans

In the course of the following months, the working group intends to produce biographies of inscribed objects from a broad range of historical and geographical areas. These selected objects derive from our individual projects. We will also explore the relationship between form, content and material, highlighting both the scholarly utility of these concepts and the difficulties they produce. In the long run, the individual biographies could lead to a jointly edited volume or workshop. Through such contributions, we aim to derive, from both the methodological approach of the biographies and a theoretical re-consideration of our three main terms, a broader understanding of the creation and use of inscribed objects in non-typographical societies.

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