



Images of Letters.

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Images of Letters

-Writing and Image Making in Western Europe Romanesque Sculpture

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Introduction

There are two different ways of considering bimodality in the practice of art - *i.e.* the gathering and mixing of signs within the same image or artifact¹. The first way consists in identifying, within the result of the artistic creation, the different semiotic and semantic actions that produce the meaning, status, and aesthetic effect of the work of art: words and images in comics; music and dance in ballet; music and singing in opera; music and image in

1 The word “bimodality” is used in this text according to the presentation made by the organizers of the International Conference “Writing and Media” of the Institute of Humanities, Yonsei University held in Seoul on May 25th-26th, 2018. This short note retakes the content of the paper presented on this occasion. The author would like to express his gratitude to professor Cho and professor Lee for their kind invitation.

cinema. These joint and fusional actions have at the same time their own existence allowing each of the modalities to signify by itself and to refer (or not) to the work it shapes. In cinema for example, the chime during the opening credits of the *Harry Potter* saga is a melody in its own, but also triggers the presence of the pictures from the movies, for whoever saw them; it makes all the wizard's universe appear in images and actions. The same process of evocation and media switching (from music to images) is at play for the brass of *Star Wars* opening credits, or the guitar for the first *James Bond* movies. Different modalities therefore, both autonomous and dependent.

The second way to consider bimediality is to go backward in the scenario of the artistic creation, and to focus on the respective action of each media, not in the artifact, but in the very process of elaboration of the work of art. Let us remain in the field of music: Keith Jarrett explains for example that the content of his piano improvisations first exists, almost synchronically, as a singing voice in his ear, and his hands translate immediately this invisible partition into music on the keyboard². French pianist Michel Petrucciani, also in the field of improvisations on the piano, describes how he first perceives, in the form of an image, the content of the music he is about to play. These two semantic and semiotic modalities – the singing voice for Keith Jarrett, the image for Michel Petrucciani – disappear in the product of creation. Live performances of this music do not bring any voice or image in front of the audience. They only exist as residual traces in the musical evanescence, and its recording does not allow measuring the richness of the creative process.

These opening examples show that bimediality is inherent to artistic creation that always displays, at different steps of its process, several types of

2 On some recording of these piano improvisations, especially on the famous 1975 *Köln Concert*, one can hear Keith Jarrett's voice humming some of the melodies...

signs in the making of artifacts, images, or performances³. In a way, it defines as a paradigm the practice of contemporary art where the product of the artist's action is explained, enriched, or enhanced by complementary discourses, whether visual, sonorous, or textual. By way of illustration of such a contemporary elaboration of a complex system of medias, one could consider Deborah de Robertis' performance in front of Courbet's 1866 painting *L'Origine du monde*. On May 29th, 2014, the young photographer from Luxemburg wearing a golden dress sat on the floor in Orsay Museum in Paris where the painting is exhibited since 1995, and she posed nude next to the painting. Her gesture has been recorded on video and a series of pictures has been taken to be part of a larger exhibition entitled *Mémoires de l'Origine*. In this violent but meaningful *mise en abîme*, the artist used her body, photographs, and words to create her performance. In an interview explaining her *modus operandi*, Deborah de Robertis said:

Mon origine du monde sort de l'image et adresse la parole. Parler c'est créer, l'acte de parler fait partie de mon travail : Je me suis servie des médias comme toile pour esquisser une version de l'origine du monde qui ouvre les yeux et la bouche⁴.

By dilating Courbet's work in time, space, and media, the exposure of De Robertis' body triggers aesthetic effects in a diversity of shapes and contexts.

Mémoires de l'Origine is an extreme version of what could be consider

3 In his 1976 founding research, Nelson Goodman already presented the interdependency of signs in artistic creation: Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1976).

4 Jérôme Lefèvre, "Deborah de Robertis - Mémoires de l'origine", *Dust-Distiller* July 18th, 2014 (accessed August 28th, 2018):
<http://www.dust-distiller.com/art/deborah-de-robertis-memoires-de-lorigine/>

as bi- or multimediality in art. Nevertheless, it highlights the fact that these two notions do not consider whether writing is at stake in the creation of an image for example, because such a gathering of signs is both obvious and necessary. On the other hand, it urges art historians to analyze the conditions of the persistency and meaning of this conjunction in the final artifact. In order to give some insights about such a phenomenon of “intermediality”, this brief article focuses on the gathering of signs in the sculpture produced during the central Middle Ages in Western Europe by considering the most common modality of such semiotic intersections, namely that of iconic signs and alphabetic signs⁵. After a short contextualization of the text/image relations in medieval art, this paper analyzes the way in which writing actively participates in the image making and the artist’s actions during the Middle Ages throughout two case studies from the cloister of Moissac in France. The main focus of this article establishes the gathering of writing and image in Romanesque sculpture as the place of a semantic action.

1. Writing and the Medieval Image

Writing in medieval images is omnipresent both in western and eastern Christian context⁶. Exhibition catalogs show innumerable images in manuscripts,

5 The insights and examples quoted in this short article are some of the result of an extended research program concluded in 2017, and presented in the following book: Vincent Debais, *La croisée des signes. L'écriture et l'image médiévale* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2017). The part III of this article proposes a revised translation in English of two of the examples fully analyzed in this book and in former publications in French and Spanish.

6 Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 7.

objects, and monumental works of art with the conjunction of iconic and alphabetic signs⁷. As a constancy in visual practices, this conjunction concerns the entire medieval period and can be appreciated in all materials, subjects, and contexts. Medieval studies have very extensively embraced the question of the conjunction of texts and images (especially between 1975 and the 2000s); nonetheless, disciplinary methods have generally been chosen to approach these phenomena of bimodality (paleography, epigraphy, art history, communication) instead of focusing on the objects as they were created in the Middle Ages⁸. Therefore, medieval art history analyses images without focusing on the writing signs they eventually present, while paleography and epigraphy study writing with little attention to images. In both cases, the encounter of text and image has mainly been considered as a relative juxtaposition of two systems of signs that can actually exist and mean in the same way one without the other. On the capital of the south pillar of the atrium of Saint-Seurin church in Bordeaux, dated 12th century, the inscription LEO has been engraved on the image of a lion (fig. 1)⁹. Barely visible from the ground, this text might appear

7 As an example, see the gigantic catalog of the 1985 Köln exhibition *Ornamenta ecclesiae. Kunst und Künstler der Romanik in Köln* (Köln: Museum der Stadt, 1985) where 90% of the illustrations and plates show inscriptions and tituli.

8 For an overview of the bibliography concerning this topic, see *Texte et image. Actes du colloque international de Chantilly*; 13-15 octobre 1982 (Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 1984); *L'image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident médiéval. Actes du 6^{ème} International workshop on Medieval Societies, Erice*, 17-23 octobre 1992 (Paris: Le léopard d'or, 1996); *Testo e immagine nell'alto medioevo*; 15-21 avril 1993 (Spoleto: CISAM, 1994); *Épigraphie et iconographie. Actes du colloque de Poitiers* (Poitiers: CESC, 1996). More recently, and for a general introduction on the topic, see Norbert H. Ott, "Word and Image as a Field of Research: Sound Methodologies or just a Fashionable Trend? A Polemic from a European Perspective", *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 15-33.

9 This inscription is unpublished; for the other inscriptions from the atrium of Saint-Seurin, see *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 5* (Poitiers: CESC, 1979),



Fig. 1: Bordeaux, Saint-Seurin, church.
Capitals of the lions

as a simple redundancy of the sculpture that would keep figuring a lion even if there were no inscription. Because many medieval inscriptions in painted or sculpted images are names or very short texts, as in Bordeaux, the main historiographical trend establishes the image as an illustration of the text, and the inscription as an identification of the image. Everything happens as if bimodality was only intended to clarify one of the sets, as if the image or the text could not signify, evoke, convince, or share by itself. The simplicity of most of the inscriptions painted

or engraved in the image could perhaps give the impression that writing is anecdotal or superfluous, and that it is used to solve a limit of the image rather than to produce a visual object, rich in its display and complex in its meaning.

The reality of medieval documentation obviously shows that such a utilitarian understanding of signs and semiotics belongs to a contemporary approach to the object, when the Middle Ages actually conceived the encounter of texts and images as the means to produce a solidary and complex object which significance and status precisely raise from bimodality¹⁰. When one considers images as ambitious as the symbolic Crucifixion in the Uta Codex (fig. 2)¹¹, or as subtle as the inscription surrounding the *Ecclesia*

#6 and #7, 91-93.

10 On this topic, see Vincent Debais, “Stratification, montage, symbiose. Les textes et les images du calice et de la patène de Saint-Godehard d’Hildesheim”, *Perspectives médiévales* [online], 38, 2017 (accessed August 28th, 2018): <http://journals.openedition.org/peme/12326>; DOI : 10.4000/peme.12326



Fig. 2: Munich, Stadtbibliothek. Uta Codex (ms. clm. 13601), fol. 3v



Fig. 3: Prüfening, Abbey Church. Wall painting of the Ecclesia

image in the abbey church of Prüfening (fig. 3)¹², it becomes easy to realize that writing does not make anything more obvious or simpler. On the contrary, it seeks to transform the discourse of visuality by densifying it: the Crucifixion is described in all its theological and spiritual implications in the manuscript, and the Church is described as Christ's spouse, empress of the world in Prüfening. Bimediality does no longer superimpose two types of signs but it totally blends them into a new, single visual object. The artists used for this purpose devices allowing the conjunction either by intermingling signs, as in the case of Bordeaux lion, framing the image, in Prüfening for example, or using objects on the image as support of writing, as one can see the books and phylacteries sculpted on the façade of Notre-Dame-la-Grande canon church in Poitiers at the end of the 11th century (fig. 4)¹³.

11 Munich, Stadtbibliothek. Uta Codex (ms. clm. 13601), fol. 3v (ca. 1025); Adam S. Cohen, *The Uta Codex. Art, Philosophy, and Reform in Eleventh-Century Germany* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000).

12 Heidrun Stein, *Romanischen Wandmalereien in der Klosterkirche Prüfening* (Regensburg: MLA, 1987).



Fig. 4: Poitiers, Notre-Dame-la-Grande, façade.
Prophets holding books and philacteries



Fig. 5: Bayeux tapestry. Kind Edward in his
palace

In order to schematize what bimodality brings into medieval art, one can establish four main purposes and effects of the encounter between texts and images¹⁴. 1) By naming an image and by distinguishing it from another image, it allows the institution of this very image as a representation. In Bayeux tapestry for example, the name EDVWARD REX makes the image of a king exist as a representation of King Edward (fig. 5)¹⁵. Most of the short inscriptions, mainly names, written as close as possible to what they designate, correspond to this first purpose. 2)

The encounter text/image allows the creation of forms of narrativity in static images by bringing, through the location and content of texts, a temporality and rhythm effects staging scenes and figures into a sequence. On the capital figuring Daniel in the lion's den in San Pedro

13 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 1 (Poitiers: CESC, 1974), #24, 22-25.

14 In 2008, French art historian Christian Heck started a new research program on this topic. His introduction in the publication of its results makes a very useful survey about the function of inscriptions in the images: Christian Heck, "Un nouveau statut de la parole? L'image légendée entre énoncé, commentaire et parole émise", *Qu'est-ce que nommer? L'image légendée entre monde monastique et pensée scolastique. Actes du colloque du RILMA*, 17-18 octobre 2008 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 7-28.

15 Debais, Croisée, 113.

de la Nave church, the inscription transforms the single image of Daniel praying for his salvation into a representation of the entire biblical narrative (fig. 6)¹⁶. 3) The encounter text/image reveals what is contained in the image but escapes the means of figuration, such as voices, sounds, sensations, feelings. On the 12th century capital figuring the Annunciation to the shepherds in the canon church of Chauvigny, the inscription stages on stone the angel's voice and makes it resonate in the image (fig. 7)¹⁷. 4) It allows, thanks to the poetic elaboration, to transform what is shaped in what has to be seen, to go beyond the



Fig. 6: San Pedro de la Nave, church. Capital of Daniel in the lion's den



Fig. 7: Chauvigny, canon church. Capital of the Annunciation to the shepherds

form towards an increased and complex meaning. The verse inscribed on top of the image of the Virgin and Child in the façade of Saint-Aventin church invites the viewer to contemplate the entire mystery of incarnation beyond the sculpture of a mother and her son (fig. 8)¹⁸.

16 Roberto Coroneo, "I capetelli di San Pedro de la Nave", *Medioevo: immagine e racconto. Proceedings of the symposium of Parma; 27-30 september 2000* (Parma: Electra, 2003), 130-141.

17 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 1-2 (Poitiers: CESC, 1975), #17, 22-24.

18 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 8 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1982), #13,



Fig. 8: Saint-Aventin, church, façade.
Sculpture of the Virgin and Child

This overview is of course caricatural because of the uniqueness of each of the encounters between texts and images - this uniqueness being one of the main features of medieval documentation. The conjunction of writing and image is everywhere in medieval art, but it is neither mandatory nor systematic. It always belongs to the artist's or patron's choice who decides to combine alphabetic and iconic signs to produce a complex and unique visual paradigm. Any attempt to find models or structures is therefore futile. It is actually more important to look at medieval bimodality as an imprint of the artistic creation itself.

Medieval studies have often tried to find out what the text/image relation means for the audience of medieval images. As any sociology or analysis of the reception of ancient art, this research raises insoluble methodological and historical questions. In order to establish the function of these texts and images, it would be necessary to attest that they are actually visible, then readable by a certain type of audience, and that the density of the message produced in the written and iconic bimodality can be interpreted properly by such audience. Let us take for example the well-known inscriptions of the tympanum of Sainte-Foy in Conques¹⁹ (fig. 9), described by the successive editors as a moral exegesis of the Last Judgment intended for the conversion

49.

19 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 9 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1984), #10, 17-25.

of the faithful observing the portal; the texts are in fact difficult to read from the forecourt of the abbey church and the formulas used in the verses are complex and probably not very effective for mass catechesis. One could multiply the examples no limited readability²⁰ with the stained-glass windows of



Fig. 9: Conques, Sainte-Foy church. Tympanum of the west façade

the Gothic cathedrals, or the objects of metalwork preserved in church treasures. The reception of these texts is thus sometimes limited and their ability to communicate the content of the image or to identify it is canceled. It does not mean however that artists have knowingly produced a device that is doomed to fail. On the other hand, it means that the action of the conjunction of signs is less thought for the potential audience of the work of art than for the artifact itself and its creator. Writing in the image is thus more a question of creation than of reception.

II. Writing in the Image Making

Bimediality at work in the encounter of texts and images in medieval art does not need to be perceived in order to act and produce an effect upon visibility. Therefore, it is less functional than ontological, and it corresponds to

20 On the concept of restricted publicity of medieval texts, see Tobias Frese, Wilfried Keil, Kristina Krüger, *Verborgen, unsichtbar, unlesbar. Zur Problematik restringierter Schriftpräsenz* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), especially 117-142.

the Christian theological context in which a medieval theory of images has been developed²¹. The incarnation, the meeting of flesh and word, constitutes the paradigm of the encounter between material and writing²². The colophons, these short texts closing medieval manuscripts, regularly present poetic analogies between the ink and parchment relation on the one hand, and the relation Verb of God/body of Christ on the other hand²³. The action of the artist is therefore one of the manifestations of this very rich conception of the installation of writing in material. As a consequence, and because of this complex theological background, writing makes what the words contend visible, present, and efficient into the world. Letters, in their unfolding and installation in materials, launch the presence and effect of what writing designates. There is no need, therefore, to consider, from the audience's point of view, a relative reception and a possible action of the conjunction text/image.

To consider the question of the presence of writing as a way to make the image be and act in its context, I would like to address the case study of a small dimensions object today kept in the Museum of Fine Arts in Lyon, a pastoral staff ivory node, dated 12th century (fig. 10-11)²⁴. Flattened at the top

21 On the Christian context of writing, see Cécile Treffort, “*De inventoribus litterarum*. L’histoire de l’écriture vue par les savants carolingiens», *Summa* 1 (2013), 38-53; Benjamin Tilghman, “The Shape of the Word: Extralinguistic meaning in Insular Display Lettering”, *Word & Image* 27-3 (2011), 292-308.

22 Very recently, Cécile Voyer proposed fascinating and original insights on this topic; Cécile Voyer, *Orner la parole de Dieu. Le livre d’Évangiles et son décor*. Paris, Arsenal, ms. 592 (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018).

23 Lucien Reynhout, *Formules latines de colophons* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006) makes a catalog of these complex formulae and poems. See also Eva Caramello, “Si tu ne sais ce qu’est l’écriture. La corporalité de l’acte d’écrire à travers l’iconographie romane”, *Revue d’Auvergne* 2014, 161-173.

24 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 17 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1994), #44,



Fig.10-11: Lyon, Museum of Fine Arts. Ivory node of a liturgical staff

and bottom, this circular piece was located in the upper part of a *baculus*, the bishop or abbey staff, just below the curved part. The ivory knot is carved with many figures (archangels, evangelists) between two circular medallions carried by angels, presenting Christ in majesty in the first one, and the Virgin and Child in the second. Around the upper edge, one can read the names *Matheus, Johannes, Michael, Uriel, Gabriel* and *Raphael*. These names make the figures exist as images of the evangelists and archangels, following the first purpose of the medieval encounter between text and image. The verse *Omnipotens humile benedic hoc semper ovile* (“O Almighty one, bless forever this humble herd”) is engraved around Christ in majesty; around the Virgin and Child: *Stella parens solis cultores dirige prolis* (“Thy, Star who engenders the Sun, guide those who worship your child”); on the phylacteries connecting the circles: *Marcus* and *Lucas*.

In its arrangement, nominal inscriptions strengthen the unity and number of carved figures, and the circular inscriptions isolate and enlighten the figures in the medallions. If the first ones can actually have a certain function of identification, the texts inscribed on the mandorla produce an entirely different effect on what is represented in the ivory node. The construction of

the two rich leonine hexameters is complex and connects the central figure to the context of the object, namely the pastoral staff used in liturgical ceremonies. While other figures carved on the node are instituted in material by their name, the content of the medallions is made visible by writing following another modality. The artist, the designer or the sponsor has made the choice to refer to the image by a paraphrase, *Omnipotens* for Christ, *Stella parens solis* for the Virgin, *prolis* for the child, and thus to transform the obviousness and immediacy of figuration into an evocation of its least representable qualities. The use of the two imperatives *benedic* and *dirige* in the inscriptions of the medallions does not only refer to the image they contain but to the broader context of the ivory object. If the inscription of Lyon belongs to the rich corpus of texts written on staffs and sticks, insignia of certain ecclesiastical charges during the Middle Ages²⁵, the wording chosen for this object is original and inserts its images in the particular context of its liturgical activation²⁶.

The verbs *benedic* and *dirige* refer to the actual movements and uses of the staff held by the abbey or the bishop blessing the congregation at the end of liturgical celebrations and guiding his entrance at the beginning of it. In these two circumstances, text and image are in action; they participate in the celebrant's gesture and movement. The effect produced by the encounter of the text and the image is independent of any perception by a potential audience. The function of writing lies in the institution of the content of the image in a given place, a theater of actions, words, and movements which in turn acquires, in the resonance of bimodality, an overloaded dimension.

25 Robert Favreau, *Épigraphie médiévale* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 230-233.

26 The concept of "activation" for liturgical objects has recently been studied by Éric Palazzo, *L'invention chrétienne des cinq sens* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2015).

Following the pastoral staff means following the one whom the Virgin miraculously engendered; standing in front of the staff during the blessing means receiving the blessing from the Almighty himself. Writing makes the images exist and act in a particular context, and it expands its content beyond the limits of forms.

The crucial point for these inscriptions is not to be read, but to be materialized in ivory in order to create a unique image that perfectly echoes its liturgical function. The artist did not seek to clarify the image, but rather to deepen its meaning. Questions of readability then become very relative, and the terms of the encounters of texts and images serve another purpose.

III. Bimediality as a Feature of Medieval Visuality

The encounter texts/images traces a path towards a complex dimension of medieval visual world that escapes the limits of figuration, and that does not need any audience to be and act. This is exactly what happens in the case of a large number of monumental images, invisible or illegible in their material display (colors, sizes, locations), or complex in their formatting (letter designs, prosodic structures, lexical compositions). The inscriptions carved on the capitals in Moissac and studied by Meyer Shapiro and Ilene Forsyth present this apparent contradiction between a monumental staging within the cloister and a kind of limited publicity, showing that bimediality constitutes a common and meaningful feature of medieval artistic creation²⁷.

27 Meyer Schapiro, "The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac", *Romanesque Art: The Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1993; 1st ed: 1931), 131-264; Ilene Forsyth, "Word-Play in the Cloister at Moissac", *Romanesque Art and Thought in the*



Fig. 12: Moissac, Saint-Pierre abbey. Cloister

The cloister of the Saint Peter abbey in Moissac is a major monument in the history of medieval forms (fig. 12). It is at the same time the largest and best-preserved Romanesque cloister in France, making it a centerpiece at the scale of the medieval West. The sculpted elements in place today (columns,

bases, capitals, arches, corner pillars) date from around 1100, in the time of abbot Ansquitol (1085-1108), patron of the construction and decoration of the cloister. Writing is everywhere in the cloister of Moissac, particularly on the corner pillars where inscriptions give the name, sometimes the function or title, of the figures, and on the capitals. It is therefore almost always linked to a monumental image, and thus combines signs of different nature to compose a gigantic sculpted milieu²⁸. 30 of the 76 capitals of the cloister present one or more inscriptions placed on the abacus, the dice or the basket. The length, spelling, layout, literary type, and content differ from one capital to another.

Many of these inscriptions are difficult to read despite of the apparent obviousness of the message, or their close relationship to what they refer to, as one can see in the capital figuring the Annunciation to the Shepherds²⁹.

Twelfth Century: Essays in Honor of Walter Cahn (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, 2008), 154-178.

28 On the cloister of Moissac, see recently Quitterie Cazes, Maurice Scelles, *Le cloître de Moissac* (Bordeaux: Sud-Ouest, 2001).

29 *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 8* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1982), #TG47, 175-177. On this capital, see Vincent Debais, "Las cabras de Moissac", *Románico* 20 (2015), 194-201.

On the west, south and east sides, an angel is announcing Jesus's birth to a group of shepherds surrounded by their herds of oxen and goats (fig. 13). The visual presence of nature at the background of the scene, is reinforced by the alphabetic signs sown in-between the figures. With no apparent order, letters are inserted between the legs of the animals and the trunk of the trees; engraved directly on the background without any particular device, they seem to occupy the available space near the figure they give the identification. Some letters are drawn



Fig. 13 : Moissac, Saint-Pierre abbey, cloister. Capital of the Annunciation to the shepherds

backwards or forwards; some words are reduced to the initial; the graphic segments are linked together without respecting the traditional alignment of writing. Such an installation, apparently without order, is found many times in the cloister of Moissac for nominal inscriptions placed on the basket, but also for more complex sentences, portions of dialogue between different characters, etc. The majority of the texts placed on the basket are thus immersed in the carved decoration; they share the place of material but seem reduced to an existence in the "interval" of the images. Such a device is however too recurrent in the cloister to be interpreted as the sculptors' lack of interest for the epigraphic use, as their inability to integrate letters in the sculpted composition, as an evidence of craftsmen' inability to mastering writing, as their desire to give letters a magical status through hermetic displays. All these arguments have been proposed in the historiography and it is probably useless to refute them one by one as they are disconnected from the conditions of visual production in the Middle

Ages. Inscriptions here do not have to be read nor perceived; they were installed in material in order to produce an accurate image. Letters inhabit the capital as what they designate inhabit nature. Writing is a creative tool, not a communication device. The shape and content of inscriptions are visual means to elaborate on the meaning of the image.

This is also the case for the capital representing David and the sacred musician s³⁰. On three sides, the name of the musician and of his instrument has been written in a complex arrangement which can recall that of the boustrophedon. The arrangement of the letters could stand out in the representation of what the sculpture does not show, namely the musical sound emanating from the instruments and the harmonic relations thus established between the four characters all around the basket. Letters would show a perfect order and would be a creative resource to visually displays what can only be heard. On the south face (fig. 14), David is accompanied by the inscription: *David citaram percuciebat*



Fig. 14: Moissac, Saint-Pierre abbey, cloister. Capital of King David and his musicians

in domum Domini (“David was paying the cithara in God’s house”). This narrative inscription is not placed here on the abacus, like most of the narrative inscriptions in Moissac, but on the background of the image. This can be explained by the ability of writing to institute the figure in the raw material of the capital and to transform the stone in an image of the *Domus Domini* evoked in the Psalms. Unlike many capitals in the cloister of Moissac,

30 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 8 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1982), #TG17, 143-144.

the sculpture of David and the musicians has no architectural form, no city, house nor door figures, while the inscription of the south face is the only one to use a term designating a construction element. One can therefore consider that writing in stone makes the temple appear in the space apparently left untouched by any representation.

The engraving of inscriptions in these two capitals does not create any gap between the figure and writing. Bimediality makes texts and images become consubstantial, and allows the artists making the meaning escape the material, technical, and formal boundaries of shapes.

Conclusion

The practical conditions of the encounter of writing and image in Moissac must be read in the context of contemporary artistic production in the South of France. However, the way in which the sculptors have combined writing and images on the capitals, playing off the boundaries between the nature of signs, pushing away the limits of readability in favor of the creation of complex visual compositions, is the reflection of the Christian understanding of art.

In the examples analyzed briefly in this note, bimediality proposes a continuous echo, inherent to visual compositions, between what one sees in the forms (an animal, a man, a family, a landscape), what resides beyond visibility (an evangelist, God, a theological dogma, Heaven), and what is reflected in the presence and content of signs (words and images). The inscribed object, in its full materiality, is a machine of meanings submitting visibility to processes of densification and deepening. Whether we consider the

obviousness of nominal identifications in Bayeux and Moissac, or the hermetic compositions of the verses engraved in the ivory node of Lyon, the conjunction of writing and image invites to exceed what has been shaped to see what remains inaccessible to physical senses. Bimediality seeks to make this distance visible and readable within the creative process. Rather than being intended for a clarification of the image for the audience, writing becomes the means for the artist and the designer to thicken the visual.

The properties of medieval writing, its depth and transcendence on the one hand, its real presence in the world on the other, allow letters to obtaining meaningful material qualities: size, color, position, ornamental features... Letters thus become objects, sometimes works of art by themselves, as it is the case for example in the first page of John's gospel in Carolingian precious books, where the opening letters of the prologue (*In principio erat Verbum*) have been installed as monumental shapes within the parchment (fig. 15). Writing creates forms, symbols, and images of letters. Medieval art is, on this aspect, the source of the recurring practice of works of art made of letters (mostly painting and sculpture), as one can still appreciate in contemporary art



Fig. 15: Épernay, BM, ms. 1, fol. 135.



Fig. 16: Robert Indiana (1928-2018), *Love Park* (Philadelphia).

with Robert Indiana's 1970 *Love Park* sculpture in Philadelphia for example (fig. 16). These letter-build objects could be thus manifestations of an artistic understanding of bimediality which consists in making a single type of signs switch from one media to another (writing becomes images; images become music; dancing become images). By involving both a sensorial encounter and a mental operation, aesthetic experiences trigger phenomena of synesthesia which can be considered, in medieval as in contemporary art, a common feature of bimediality for artistic practices.

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[국문초록]

이 글은 서양 중세 시대의 시각적 문서, 특히 로마네스크 조각에 대한 관점에서 “이중매체성”이라는 개념을 사용하여 하나의 예술 작품 내에서 다양한 유형의 표식을 수집하는 지적 및 미학의 함의를 보여준다. 그것은 두 가지 관찰로 시작된다 1) 예술 관행은 항상 복잡한 담론을 만들기 위해 상징적 인 표식을 다른 매체 (음악, 노래, 편지, 춤)와 혼합하거나 병합 한 시각 장치를 사용했다. 2) 이 부분에서 중세 미술은 다르지 않다: 그림은 그림, 조각, 모자이크, 열록 안경 등에서 도처에 있다. 이 글은 이러한 자료들에 대한 서기 비문의 기능과 상태, 그리고 의미와 효과에 미치는 영향을 강조하고자 한다. 예식적 또는 종교적 맥락에서의 이미지는 이중매체성 장치가 중세 시대에 이미지를 만들기 위해 사용되었고 그것들이 무엇을 시각적 세계에서 현존하고 활동하는 것으로 인식한다.

[Abstract]

Images of Letters

-Writing and Image Making in Western Europe Romanesque Sculpture

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This article aims to put the notion of “bimediality” in perspective with the visual documentation of the Western Middle Ages, especially with Romanesque sculpture, to show the intellectual and aesthetics implications of the gathering of different types of signs within a single work of art. It starts with two observations: 1) the practice of art has always used visual devices mixing or merging iconic signs with other media (music, singing, letters, dance...) in order to create complex discourses; 2) medieval art is not different in this aspect: writing is everywhere in painting, sculpture, mosaics, stain glasses, etc. This article intends to emphasize the functions and status of epigraphic inscriptions on these materials and their impact on the meaning and effect of images in liturgical or religious contexts. It speculates that the bimedia devices were used during the Middle Ages to make images and what they figure present and active into the visual world.

【Key words】 Medieval Art, medieval epigraphy, Aesthetics, Romanesque Sculpture, Moissac

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