



HAL
open science

Towards a Codico-Ecology of Latin

Vincent Debiais

► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Debiais. Towards a Codico-Ecology of Latin. JOLCEL, 2023, Latin's Material Presences, 8, pp.139-147. 10.21825/jolcel.87626 . halshs-04169520

HAL Id: halshs-04169520

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04169520>

Submitted on 24 Jul 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

JOLCEL

JOURNAL OF LATIN COSMOPOLITANISM AND
EUROPEAN LITERATURES.

CURRENT CONTRIBUTION

Vincent Debais, “Towards a Codico-Ecology of Latin,” JOLCEL 8 (2023): 139–47. DOI: 10.21825/jolcel.87626.

*

NOTE

This contribution is the response piece to a larger dialogue of four articles that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “Between Reading and Viewing: Mapping and Experiencing Rome and Other Spaces” by Klazina Staat (pp. 7–42), “The *Incipit* Miniature of the Morgan Gospel of John” by Barbara Baert (pp. 44–67), “Language on Display: Latin in the Material Culture of Fascist Italy” by Han Lamers (pp. 69–101), and “Looking at Latin 1911–1965–2019: An Ancient Language in Modern Art” by Simon Smets (pp. 103–37).

Towards a Codico-Ecology of Latin

VINCENT DEBIAIS

Centre de recherches historiques (EHESS/CNRS), Paris

American actress Angelina Jolie's skin is covered with tattoos. Her arms, back and stomach show symbols, texts, numbers and images. Many articles in magazines and blogs have been written with the aim of discovering the meanings of the inscriptions on her body, and their relation to the main events and upheavals in her life. Birth, adoption, marriage, divorce might have left a trace on Angelina Jolie's body, which seems to have become, over the years, a diary, her intimate yet exposed logbook, where ink memories appear and disappear. One tattoo gets my attention today (fig. 1): on the skin surface that the actress so often reveals in movies and photoshoots, underneath her bellybutton, under her belt, a two-line inscription is drawn in black. It reads in Latin: "Quod me nutrit me destruit" ("What nourishes me destroys me"). The tattoo quotes a very common and still enigmatic formula attributed to English playwright Christopher Marlowe, one of the most talented writers among Shakespeare's contemporaries. The formula has been circulating in many variations since Marlowe's death, in written collections of mottos and refrains. It is also inscribed, in humanistic capitals, on a portrait of a young man in Corpus Christi College, London;¹ this painting still causes much debate as to the identification of its subject—could it be Christopher Marlowe himself (fig. 2)?

As Louis Marin has argued for Philippe de Champaigne's works,² writing on paintings increases the 'opacity' of the image and distinguishes the painting as an object from its subject by proclaiming that the image is nothing else but a painting.³ The Latin sentence in Christopher Marlowe's portrait has the same effect: it reveals the identity of the portrayed, but indirectly, by evocation, and with the use of Latin, enhances its opacity—opacity, that is, not hermeticism. After Marlowe's death, the formula embarked on its secular migration from the surface of the painting to the surface of Angelina Jolie's skin, but nothing remains from its original function of pictorial reflexivity and its meaning during Marlowe's turbulent life. Yet, the phrase "Quod me nutrit me destruit" has never been so intensely reproduced as after the publication of the many articles that revealed the tattoos

¹ On Christopher Marlowe and the portrait in London, see Wraight and Stern, *In Search* and Honan, *Christopher Marlowe*.

² Marin, *Philippe de Champaigne*, 309–13.

³ Marin, *Opacité*, 149–58.



Figure 1: Tattoo of Angelina Jolie, showing the inscription "Quod me nutrit me destruit."



Figure 2: The same Latin quote as it appears on the portrait of a young man in Corpus Christi College, London.

inscribed or drawn on the actress impersonating Lara Croft. Here, there is something both fascinating and dismaying about the contemporary phenomenon of choosing—for a purpose as intimate and personal as the definitive inscription on one's skin—a formula that has become banal, almost outdated, as it has already been traced on so many bodies across the world.

Google Images accordingly provides a bewildering number of results for “Quod me nutrit me destruit” (many of them showing typos and mistakes in the Latin wording), placed in the exact same spot as the text inked on Jolie's skin, or anywhere else on young, mostly female bodies, literally from head to toe. The arrangement of the ‘source’ tattoo corresponds to that of the Corpus Christi College painting, yet one cannot argue that the written tattoo explicitly follows the painted layout as it uses a different script and transforms the humanistic capitals from the painting into pseudo-gothic minuscules, probably to suggest some chronological distance inspired by Latin. The tattoo “Quod me nutrit” is the only inscription with this letter type on Angelina Jolie's body that reveals a ‘Latin image,’ a material display of the Latin language, deliberately obscure, fundamentally visual, embodying the text into an organic object subjected to movement, alteration, dissimulation, decay and death.

I hope readers will forgive me for using this *pop* digression as a starting point for my response piece to the four beautiful articles gathered in the current issue of JOLCEL, devoted to the visual and material aspects of Latin. Angelina Jolie's skin is indeed far from Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts studied by Barbara Baert and Klazina Staat; very different from the objects and images produced under the Fascist regime in Italy addressed by Han Lamers; it offers no comparison with the works of modern art in Simon Smets' piece. Anthropology shows, however, how much tattoos—and the specific practice of writing on skin—invite us to question the intertwining of written, material and visual cultures of a given society or language, just as the authors of this theme's issue interrogate the impossibility of neatly distinguishing the three aspects of the written, the material and the visual when studying Latin in the *longue durée*.⁴

The focus of the texts is the *place* of the Latin language; with the term ‘place,’ I gather the notions of ‘context’ (i.e., the architectural, natural, and social environment of a text) and of ‘support’ (i.e., the material possibility of sensual manifestation for language). The authors study very different places for Latin, from postage stamps to hillslopes, from manuscript folios to artistic installations, from cities to colonial empires. In such tremendous variations of scale, Latin is first a linguistic fact and presence before it becomes a written object in a specific location:⁵ there is something in Latin, written right there. The material culture of Latin allows for the construction of a linguistic geography. It does so not only in the abstract sense of considering frontiers between languages and mapping them,

⁴ Le Breton, *Signes d'identité*; Cipriani-Crauste, *Le tatouage*.

⁵ The notion of presence is used following Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*. For its application to the epigraphic domain, see Keil, “Überlegungen,” 117–42.

but also in the very concrete sense of tracing written marks on surfaces and of creating a topography of exposed writing ('topography' in this context referring to the act of inscribing written language onto a specific location). The authors' approaches to the subject thus align with the groundbreaking research perspectives opened up by Armando Petrucci's work, in particular with what he wrote about urban written displays in Italy, and about the affordances of writing to structure the way society is imagined.⁶ One of the many strengths of the articles resides in the fact that they address the question of 'topography' not only in relation to real spaces and locations, such as Fascist Rome or the medieval space of liturgical processions, but also to the very spaces of written media: codex, painting, medal, landscape, label. In this comprehensive understanding of what a 'written page' is, Latin can be at the center of its space when it proclaims the beginning of the Gospel or the eternity of the city of Rome, but it can also be located on the edge or in the margin, when it tries to be subversive in modern art or to split voices and discourses.⁷ When given a material shape that organizes language fragments into their social context, Latin produces a living topography of language rather than a theoretical understanding of the place of languages; it no longer shapes a strictly linguistic map but a social landscape. The materiality of Latin is what makes it possible to pass from knowing to experiencing language. Acknowledging important contributions from social linguistics—and I believe the notion of 'geosemiotics' coined by Ron and Suzie Scollon,⁸ or Edward T. Hall's "hidden dimension"⁹ are particularly important here—the authors introduce their readers to insights from the field of anthropology of writing, which pleads for a thorough analysis of the supports and of the material conditions for the existence of signs. From this perspective, and because of its objecthood, written language is, in Beatrice Fraenkel's words, a "situated" gesture and artifact. Hence, one can start considering blueprints, maps and territories for Latin.¹⁰

The meticulous attention to the medium (size, colour, shape, texture, visual effect) is evident in the four articles, and the authors dedicate time and effort to describe the substrates on which Latin materializes. Three main types of media can be identified: the traditional writing supports (a book, a postcard, a poster), the artifact (a medal, a painting, an installation), and the monument (building, city or nature when transformed into a monument through its inscription). These media types vary in their material device, scale, status and function, granting Latin a material, object-like, sensitive and visual dimension: sometimes discrete, sometimes overwhelming; obvious or invisible; coherent or disruptive. However, the careful attention to the material and visual properties of the medium immediately challenges these categories. The study of the folio in the Morgan Gospels shows, for example, that the letters sown on the background of the painting, however subtle they may seem, proclaim the very principle of incarnation and the power of the divine voice in a monumental way; similarly, without artifice and in the

⁶ Petrucci, *Jeux de lettres*, 180–92.

⁷ On the notion of margin for the manuscript, see Camille, *Images*.

⁸ Scollon and Wong Scollon, *Discourse in Place*, 414.

⁹ Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*.

¹⁰ Fraenkel, "Actes d'écriture," 101–4.

discretion of a traditional layout, the itineraries for Rome draw the contours of a global urban geography. Conversely, the formal architectural shapes of Fascist monuments are only fragments in the system of propaganda, overshadowed by the grandiloquence of their supports, often elusive to the reader's interpretation; similarly, the excessive deployment of Latin on large-format artifacts from several contemporary artists does not invite the reader to engage with the verbal message and makes hermeticism and failure the aesthetic devices for the display of Latin language.

Such complex observations originate from the authors' recognition that the 'place' of Latin exclusively as the support of writing, that is to say as a surface, neutral and technical, simply allowing the implantation of alphabetical signs. They rather consider Latin's place as a *milieu* featuring a texture, empirical and symbolic properties which affect the status and function of inscribed messages. Anne-Marie Christin's seminal work on writing has been fundamental to address these questions through the concept of 'screen.' Christin employs this concept to acknowledge the diversity of the objects under study and to validate first a visual, then a written manifestation of language.¹¹ In staging the Latin text, the primordial screen—Angelina Jolie's skin, the parchment, canvas, wall, artifact—is organized, ordered and framed. The screen also features formal qualities co-shaping the inscription's effect on the beholder. The Ottonian painter transforms the skin of the animal into a marble surface mixing water and mineral; the Carolingian scribe from Reichenau models the blank page into a map of the monastery; the architect of the Casa del Mutilato (House of the Wounded) in Pordenone shapes the pediment of the building into an epigraphic screen. What Anne-Marie Christin calls the 'screen thought' allows to locate writing not only on a flat plan but also in volumes, reintroducing for texts spatial arrangements according to depth and grounds.¹² On what 'screen' does one write when landscapes are modified by pruning the forest to make trees proclaim the word *DVX*? Does one write on the hill, on the territory of Rome, on the Italian space, on nature itself? What is the real support for Giulio Paolini's banners? Is it the piece of fabric on which the letters are inscribed, the street that opens in its background, the social group stopping underneath the banner to read the text? This focus on what lies beyond writing goes beyond Latin, and the articles gathered here prompt fascinating questions about the symbolic nature of written supports. They invite to systematically consider the actual definition and status of all written supports when spaces, objects and materials are transformed into writing screens.

On these screens, the first manifestation of Latin is in the form of its letters; a so-called 'Latin' writing presenting various designs. It is difficult to phrase it unambiguously, but the objects the authors discuss seem to be affected by a chronological tension, or at the very least, they show referential ambiguities.¹³ Does this impression emerge from the fact that the letters used to display Latin language seem to belong to different environments? The answer varies according

¹¹ See, among others, Christin, *L'image écrite*, 17.

¹² Bouchy and Fraenkel, "La notion d'écran," 14–16.

¹³ Kendrick, *Animating*, 147–70 about "Enigma and Authority."

to the implied intentions of communication. Some objects show graphic forms referring to the authority of Latin (authority in the chronological distance or authority in the hierarchy of writing);¹⁴ others use the forms available in the inscriptions' environment as common devices. In these paleographical and typographical choices, Latin becomes visual, and language becomes image—Angelina Jolie's tattoo artist has chosen the awe of a gothic script that conveys, in a contemporary American point of view, the absolute manifestation of temporal otherness, independently of the actual reading (and language) of the text. In most cases, lettering must contribute to make Latin look even 'more Latin' by using letters from Roman inscriptions in an Ottonian manuscript or on a facade of Fascist Italy; by spelling the names of Roman monuments using a minuscule invented during the Carolingian Renaissance, also used to copy normative and liturgical texts in Reichenau; by carving on contemporary limestone blocks letter types and diacritical marks that evoke the humanistic hypercorrection of modern Latin. In their analyses, the authors of this themed issue pertinently point out the necessary distinction between the theoretical paleographic evolution of forms on the one hand, and the multiple choices offered to writers when they pretend to transform traditional writing into images of Latin on the other hand. This approach does not ease the identification of visual references (quotations, repetitions, influences, contagions) from one writing type to another, but it invites to consider Latin, when it is materially anchored in the visual, as what we could call an 'icono-language'; as an image displaying language visually, in addition to its textual content, and understood as a social phenomenon.

Latin's primary iconicity seems to rely on the primordial epigraphic feature of its written manifestations. Latin is the 'icono-language' of inscriptions; for the ancient written landscape of the Forum and its altars, statue bases, the triumphal arches; for the Christian written impact on Late Antique and Medieval cities and their inscriptions of consecration and epitaphs, Byzantine mosaics and Romanesque wall paintings; for the Renaissance, Classical, and Baroque solemnity of both sober and monumental displays of religious and civil mottos on temples, palaces, and civic places. In these historical and cultural contexts, inscriptions stand out as the paradigm of Latin visuality and are evoked on the marble page in the Morgan Gospels, on Giulio Paolini's *Nullus* plaque and on Ian Hamilton Finlay's *VNDA* blocks. The survival of ancient inscriptions allows for a continued presence of Latin in social spaces of the West (and beyond). Furthermore, the almost epigraphic nature of the Latin language, with its materialization in the form of classical capitals, its ruled and framed dispositions, and the scale of its support, endures in objects that do not have an epigraphic purpose. For Latin texts, there seems to be a sort of inherent 'epigraphicity' that enables them to produce the traditional effects of inscriptions (authority, longevity, publicity) without necessarily producing epigraphic *documents*. The literary practice of *epigraphs* in Latin for the opening of a book is undoubtedly the most obvious manifestation of this feature.¹⁵

¹⁴ Stirnemann and Smith, "Forme et fonction," 67–75.

¹⁵ Genette, *Seuils*, 147.

The visual and material features of Latin produce a double authority; the first based on a chronological otherness granting the text the merits of *antiquitas*; the second on a hierarchy of letter types bringing into non-epigraphic texts the solemnity of inscriptions. A third type of authority could possibly arise from the fact that Latin, when it is displayed on spaces or objects and when it imposes itself materially on its environment, often elicits awe in its beholders, either because Latin appears in an unexpected shape, or because it appears unexpectedly in the first place. Such effects of the uncanny are produced by the fact that many of the objects examined are materially shaped and publicly displayed. The apparent stability of Latin, which prompted its use for the designation and classification of species, is challenged by the dynamics and displacement of written objects, by the modification of their support, by the alteration of the context of their exposure, by the subversion in the use of Latin language. In such a fluidity of deixis induced by the mobility and modifications of inscribed objects, phenomena of redundancy or incongruity occur, which give to Latin a superfluous, unstable, destabilizing connotation, or on the contrary, a normative, reassuring, acceptable one. The material and object-like existence of the language in its context embodies a three-term relationship between language, its medium and the social actors; exposed writing transforms the experience of written object into a discovery through all the senses, unlike what happens for a strictly vocal use of language. The encounter with the written object implies seeing the language, touching its sounds, and entering into symbiosis with it.

Such an embodied approach to Latin might help not to consider the material and visual dimensions of Latin language exclusively as relics. The articles skillfully steer clear of perceiving Latin as an abandoned remnant, and refrain from viewing Latin-inscribed objects as mere vestiges of an obsolete culture. They thus also consciously avoid interpreting references to chronological otherness as evidence of language becoming fossilized. The display of Latin on visual and material objects allows for an archaeology of language, and a search for written or artistic Latin models. However, this archaeological survey should not cut the object from its contexts of immediate use, from the *hic et nunc* of its environment—the ‘here and now’ of the liturgical reading for the manuscript from the Morgan library, the meditative reading in the case of the itinerary to Rome, the reading during the installation and performance for the artifact of modern art, the political reading in the intensity of Fascist celebrations. On the contrary, it necessitates considering temporalities with the same level of profundity as that attributed to physical locations; it questions what remains of Latin texts proclaimed in imposing epigraphic capitals when the manuscript is closed, what remains of the formulas inspired by Vergil on the facade of monuments today considered as instruments of oppression, what remains of Latin inscriptions painted on a banner when the artistic performance ends. By considering Latin’s material and visual dimensions, we therefore acknowledge its potential as an archive. In doing so, we should not consider archives as the chilly place of death, but as the possibility for documents to encapsulate both the intermittence of its public exposure and use, and the guarantee of their permanence. In its form of material written object, Latin possesses the dual nature of both circulating and maintaining stability; it eventually

communicates and disseminates meaning while materially anchored in a meaningful milieu.

The examples considered in this issue of JOLCEL finally also provoke thoughts on the notion of actuality applied to languages, not only in the evolution of the practices associated with them, but also in the immediate effects their uses can have in each specific context. Inscriptions on the facade of public monuments and in the opening paintings in manuscripts hold a primary form of agency. This agency does not arise from the written display of Latin in isolation, but rather from its capacity to stimulate social phenomena such as adhesion, rejection, participation, identity, and shared action among those who interact with the inscribed objects. The notion of 'affordance' seems quite appropriate to define the possibility of Latin when embodied in, and as, an artifact.¹⁶ However, its application may make the examination of the effect of languages overly theoretical, whereas one would like to assess the actual mechanisms involved in the discovery, examination, manipulation of these texts. In any case, the authors invite us to adopt a double approach based both on a thorough examination of each written object to which Latin is applied, and on a careful contextualization that considers the very moment of reading and the 'duration,' as it were, of the text. This approach could be defined as a 'codico-ecology' of Latin.

References

- Bouchy, Karine, and Fraenkel, Béatrice. "La notion d'écran chez Anne-Marie Christin. Enquête sur l'histoire du mot dans son œuvre." *Écriture et Image* 1 (2020): 3–25.
- Christin, Anne-Marie. *L'image écrite ou la déraison graphique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995.
- Cipriani-Crauste, Marie. *Le tatouage dans tous ses états: à corps, désaccord*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008.
- Fraenkel, Béatrice. "Actes d'écriture: quand écrire c'est faire." *Langage et société* 121–122, nos. 3–4 (2007): 101–12.
- Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil, 1987.
- Gumbrecht, Hans U. *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Hall, Edward T. *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books, 1965.
- Keil, Wilfried E. "Überlegungen zur restringierten Präsenz mittelalterlicher Bauinschriften." In *Verborgen, unsichtbar, unlesbar – zur Problematik restringierter Schriftpräsenz*, edited by Tobias Frese, Wilfried E. Keil and Kristina Krüger, 117–42. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.

¹⁶ Levine, *Forms*, 7.

- Kendrick, Laura. *Animating the Letter. The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997.
- Le Breton, David. *Signes d'identité: tatouages, piercings et autres marques corporelles*. Paris: Métailié, 2002.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Marin, Louis. *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*. Paris: Husher, 1989.
- . *Philippe de Champaigne ou la présence cachée*. Paris: Hazan, 1995.
- Park, Honan. *Christopher Marlowe: Soldier and Spy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Petrucci, Armando. *Jeux de lettres: Formes et usages de l'inscription en Italie*. Paris: EHESS, 1993.
- Scollon, Ron and Wong Scollon, Suzie. *Discourse in Place: Language in the Material World*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Stirnemann, Patricia, and Smith, Marc H. "Forme et fonction des écritures d'apparat dans les manuscrits latins (viii^e-xv^e siècle)." *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 165 (2007): 67–100.
- Wraight, Allan D., and Stern, Virginia F. *In Search of Christopher Marlowe*. Chichester: Adam Hart, 1993. First published 1965 by Macdonald (London).