

# Textual Thingness

## An Introduction

Justin Vollmann

As a preface to MEMO 7 (2020) „Textual Thingness“, this paper asks in what way texts are not only telling about things but may also be treated as things themselves. The first part poses this question in the context of (post-)modern theories of aesthetics while focussing on the concepts of perception (Luhmann), presence (Gumbrecht) and appearing (Seel). The second part directs the attention to the specific features of medieval textuality and mediality, which are much less influenced by aesthetics than by religion (Kiening). Apart from such considerations about the ideational setup, the third part introduces the individual papers of this issue and connects them to concrete suggestions as to what we may understand as ‚textual thingness‘.

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Der Beitrag – der gleichzeitig die Einleitung zu MEMO 7 (2020) „Textual Thingness“ bildet – widmet sich der Frage, inwiefern Texte nicht nur von Dingen handeln, sondern auch selbst als Dinge behandelt werden können. Ein erster Teil stellt diese Frage zunächst in den Kontext (post-)moderner Ästhetiktheorien, wobei die Begriffe der Wahrnehmung (Luhmann), der Präsenz (Gumbrecht) und des Erscheinens (Seel) eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Ein zweiter Teil lenkt dann den Blick auf die spezifischen Merkmale mittelalterlicher Textualität und Medialität, die weniger unter dem Vorzeichen der Ästhetik als vielmehr unter demjenigen der Religion stehen (Kiening). Unabhängig von solchen Fragen des ideellen Überbaus verbindet der dritte Teil die Vorstellung der einzelnen Beiträge mit konkreten Vorschlägen, was alles unter textueller Dinghaftigkeit verstanden werden kann.

The continuous interest of Arts and Humanities in entities inanimate, materially compact and circumscribable – things,<sup>1</sup> in short – enables literary studies to approach their subject anew by asking to what extent we might consider texts as things, likewise. The seventh issue of *MEMO – Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture Online* entitled “Textual Thingness” considers this question from the perspective of medieval studies. The introduction shall (1) place this question in a theoretical context,<sup>2</sup> (2) explain the medieval studies approach

1 A few recent monographs and edited volumes from the field of medieval German studies alone may testify to this interest: Christ 2015, Mühlherr et al. (eds.) 2016, Selmayr 2017, Glasner (ed.) 2019, Bildhauer 2020.

2 In this part I will take up ideas from earlier publications (Vollmann 2016, pp. 455-457; Vollmann 2019, pp. 248-250).



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### Featured Image

Fresco painting 1420-1430, South Tyrol (Detail). Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture, REALonline picture N° 002997. Accessible via REALonline, <https://realonline.imareal.sbg.ac.at/detail/nr-002997/>.

and (3) integrate the individual papers of the issue into a basic typology of forms of textual thingness.

## 1. Theoretical Contextualisation

The following passage from Niklas Luhmann's „Art as a Social System“ may serve as a first approach to the topic:

„What distinguishes the art system from other functional systems is that second-order observation occurs in the realm of perception. [Things] or quasi [things] are always at stake in art, whether we are dealing with real or imagined [things], with static objects or with sequences of events. To cover all of these distinctions, we shall speak of forms in terms of their [thing] like determination. The formal decisions embedded in [things] permit us to observe observations by observing the same object.“<sup>3</sup>

When – in addition to things, real things and static objects – Luhmann is speaking of quasi-things, imagined things and sequences of events, he is obviously aiming at literature, too. According to Luhmann, sensuous perception (including imagination) is of high importance for the whole art system, which is probably why he chooses the term “thing” as a comprehensive concept, even if at first sight it seems to be more applicable to visual art works.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently, however, mere perception is not sufficient: simultaneously, the perceived thing must enable the observation of observations. Eventually, this is a rather abstract formulation for the fact that an artwork is not to be perceived as a “natural thing” but always needs to be observed as something that was „man-made“.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht takes up Luhmann's thoughts and rephrases them along his own lead-distinction between presence and sense (presence and meaning respectively)<sup>5</sup>:

„My own (modest) reaction to these observations, my answer to the question regarding the specific features that mark the objects of aesthetic experience is, then, to say that objects of aesthetic experience [...] are characterized by an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects.“<sup>6</sup>

Then, one page later:

„Essential is the point that, within this specific constellation, meaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and that the – unbracketed – physical presence of things (of a text, of a voice, of a canvas with colors, of a play performed by a team) will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension.“<sup>7</sup>

3 Luhmann 2000, p. 74; unlike Luhmann's translator, I put the word „thing“ (instead of „object“) where the German version has „Ding“.

4 Luhmann 2000, pp. 5 and 7 (about imagination).

5 Just like Gumbrecht, I will not make a difference between *sense* and *meaning* in the following section. In Gumbrecht 2004a (translated by Joachim Schulte) the preferred term is *sense* (‚Sinn‘), in Gumbrecht 2004b it is *meaning* (‚Bedeutung‘).

6 Gumbrecht 2004a, p. 106 f.

7 Gumbrecht 2004a, p. 108.

What Luhmann calls „second-order observations in the realm of perception“, Gumbrecht labels as “oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects”. Here, effects of meaning seem to go hand in hand with second-order observations, whereas effects of presence seem to accompany immediate sensuous perception. Similarly to Luhmann, the concept of things – explicitly related to texts here – comes into play when it is about the presence (not the meaning!) of the objects in aesthetic experience.

Martin Seel makes some more differentiations, which are especially useful for literary studies. Instead of a quotation, two figures shall sum up a few central distinctions in his “Aesthetics of Appearing”:

**Table 1**

	sense objects		
	real		irreal
	present	absent	
sensuous perception	X		
sensuous imagination		X	X

**Table 2**

being-so (propositional)	appearing (phenomenal individuality)		
	mere appearing (contemplation)	atmospheric appearing (correspondence)	artistic appearing (presentation, understanding)

A first important distinction is the one between real and irreal sense objects. The former are objects of sensuous perception (given that they are present) while the latter are objects of sensuous imagination.<sup>8</sup> Both sensuous perception and sensuous imagination can grasp their subject in the mode of being-so as well as in the mode of appearing. In the former case, the subject is brought together with a concept, whereas in the latter the subject presents itself in its phenomenal individuality; in fact, only in that case may we really speak of *aesthetic* imagination or *aesthetic* perception respectively.<sup>9</sup> Seel further differentiates between three types of appearing<sup>10</sup> whose third type, artistic appearing, is the most interesting for our questions. Especially for works of art, Seel postulates that they „need to be *understood* in their performative intent“<sup>11</sup>, which

8 Seel 2005, pp. 71-73.

9 Seel 2005, chapter 2, cf. also pp. 26-29.

10 Seel 2005, p. 90-97.

11 Seel 2005, p. 96.

corresponds directly with Luhmann's second-order observation and Gumbrecht's effects of meaning respectively.

On the one hand, literary works of art are real sense objects which, eg. as sound objects, are immediately available to aesthetic perception. On the other hand, they appeal to aesthetic imagination while using it to make appear irreal sense objects. When, as in the passage quoted at the beginning, Luhmann speaks of quasi-things, imagined things and sequences of events, he seems to have in mind those irreal sense objects. When Gumbrecht, in contrast, points out that, for literary texts, "the presence-dimension of the typography, of the rhythm of language, and even of the smell of paper"<sup>12</sup> may easily coincide with the sense dimension, he obviously refers to the text as a real sense object. Therefore, it seems feasible to differentiate according to real and irreal sense objects within the thing concept.

This differentiation also has its consequences for the concept of presence, which is no less central to Seel than to Gumbrecht: "In the sensuous presence of the object, we become aware of a moment in our own presence. [...] Aesthetic intuition is a radical form of residency in the here and now."<sup>13</sup> However, it would be problematic if one attributed to irreal sense objects their own (physical) presence: "[I]rreal objects are 'objects' of a special kind. They are 'given' only in conjunction with projections of them. They lack the self-sufficiency of real objects. We cannot *encounter* them. They do not have a presence of their own."<sup>14</sup> Yet if - like in the case of literary works of art - irreal sense objects are connected to a real sense object (i.e. the text), they can participate in the presence of the latter: „[O]n the one hand, it is a matter of a *borrowed* present and a *borrowed* sensuousness; on the other, the aesthetic imagination finds its way, in the form of a *bounded* imagination, back to a heightened consciousness of the present."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Seel is able to put it like this: „The appearing of the linguistic object allows an absent presence to appear."<sup>16</sup>

Some of the differentiations introduced here will be taken up again in the third part. However, here is what should have become clear by now: The question for the thingness of texts is not quite an innocent one. It joins a tradition which goes back at least to Susan Sontag's famous essay „Against Interpretation"<sup>17</sup> in which she insists that - on the level of sensuous perception as well as on the level of sensuous imagination - the literary artwork makes appear something whose sensuous presence remains more or less out of reach of any hermeneutical grasp. Of course this does not mean that hermeneutics should be completely abandoned, quite the reverse: actually, it is all about the interplay of presence and meaning, of sense and the sensuous. Phrasing "second-order observations in the realm of perception", "oscillation between effects of presence and effects of meaning" or "artistic appearing" is aiming exactly at this.

12 Gumbrecht 2004a, p. 109.

13 Seel 2005, p. 32 f.

14 Seel 2005, p. 71.

15 Seel 2005, p. 78.

16 Seel 2005, p. 80.

17 Sontag 1966.

## 2. The Perspective of Medieval Studies

Luhmann, Gumbrecht, Seel: In the previous section I took (post-)modern aesthetic theories as a starting point<sup>18</sup> to outline the topic of this issue in a first step – in the firm conviction that modern theories may well be applied to pre-modern texts, too. Yet obviously, the mentioned theories rest on explicit or implicit premises not applicable to the Middle Ages,<sup>19</sup> like for example the idea of fine arts embracing literature while strictly separating literary from non-literary texts. Therefore, the following section will ask how this topic could be handled from the historical perspective of medieval studies.

Once again, Gumbrecht could perhaps lead the path as he uses his seminal distinction between presence and meaning for a prototypical distinction between cultures of presence and cultures of meaning.<sup>20</sup> Since today we live in a culture which emphasizes meaning while triggering a “massive need for presence” (and this need, by the way, obviously motivates Gumbrecht, too), it might perhaps be “rewarding to experiment with the thesis of the Middle Ages as the exceptional case of a balanced relation between a culture of presence and a culture of meaning”<sup>21</sup>. Gumbrecht uses, among other things, the Eucharist to illustrate this:

„The early modern history of Christian theology leads us to the assumption that the Eucharist, the central rite of the Middle Ages, was simultaneously experienced as an evocation of the real presence of God and as an emblematic reminder of the incarnation of God.”<sup>22</sup>

The Middle Ages as the historical exceptional case of a balanced relation between a culture of presence and a culture of meaning: If this is true, the thing-like dimension of texts in premodern times must have been far more distinct than in modernity, which is affected by the Cartesian separation of spirit and matter. Besides, one may assume that the appearing of sensuous presence in the Middle Ages was rather understood under religious than aesthetic signs. In this context, Christian Kiening’s media historical study “Abundance and Lack” offers rewarding insights and a smooth link-up to Gumbrecht’s Eucharist example.<sup>23</sup>

Kiening is looking for the absolute medium, in which the represented is not only represented, but also ontologically present. The paradigm for this is Jesus Christ who, synergizing divine and human nature, acts as a true intermediary between divine and human sphere and who, through the proceedings of the Eucharist, is made present in the *hic et nunc* of the mass.<sup>24</sup> Kiening then asks for forms of medieval writing which at least approximate the outlined „model of Christological mediality”<sup>25</sup>. I will pick three examples in which the connection of writing, divine presence and materiality or thingness becomes particularly evident.

18 Brown 2001, Harman 2012 and Morton 2012 are worth mentioning in this place, too; cf. Chinca 2016, p. 389 f.

19 In a programmatic manner: Speer 1994.

20 Gumbrecht 2004b, p. 6-9, cf. Gumbrecht 2004a, p. 78-86.

21 Gumbrecht 2004b, p. 15.

22 Gumbrecht 2004b, p. 15.

23 In the following, I will draw on single parts of my review of Kiening 2016 (Vollmann 2018).

24 Kiening 2019, chapter 2.

25 Kiening 2019, p. 44.

Firstly, the focus can be put on the sacred dimension of writing, as it is evident in the Tablets of the Law, inscribed by God's own finger. Time and again, the materiality of writing is transcended like e.g. when Paul reframes the Tablets of the Law into a the concept of Christ as a divine inscription into the human heart. At the same time, however, this materiality plays a central role in a theological context, be it in the figural poems of Hrabanus Maurus or in sacred acts of reading and writing.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, writing can be brought together with material artefacts such as the church building and its interior. An example would be Suger of Saint Denis: in his writing *De administratione* he gives an insight into the intended reception of the church building he had initiated. Additionally, he prudently furnishes the building with inscribed instructions in order to ensure the ascension from material splendour to immaterial meaning. However, descriptions and interpretations of artefacts which first have to be imagined by the recipient – such as Noah's Arc interpreted by Hugo of St. Victor – may serve spiritual orientation.<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, an outright symbiotic connection is observable between writing and relic. Writing „authenticates the relic, and derives its own authenticity from its proximity to the relic“.<sup>28</sup> First of all, Kiening shows this by means of the Legend of the vernicle of St Veronica. As *vera icon*, a true image of Christ not made by human hands, it conjures up the imagination of an absolute medium. Then he elaborates on a hybrid narration which interweaves secular and sacred elements in an idiosyncratic way: the tale of the Grey Robe of Christ, „[a] textile text as the representation of a textile that was, for many years, only available in textual form“.<sup>29</sup>

Mose's Tablets of the Law, Suger of St Denis and his sacral building captioned with inscribed instruction manuals, the close relationship between writing and relic: All these are aspects of a strong textual thingness rather characterized by religious than aesthetic aspects. However, Kiening shows how the concepts he carved out – namely those of a writing focused on presence – also find their way into texts which today we would call literary in a narrower sense. The model of a participation in the Eucharist in the *Tristan* prologue,<sup>30</sup> the way in which writing in the sphere of the Grail's secret becomes auratic, dynamic and transcendent in *Parzival*,<sup>31</sup> or the broadly laid-out and strongly media-reflexive description of the Grail temple in the *Jüngerer Titurel*,<sup>32</sup> are all worth mentioning here. These cases and similar ones would be apt to show that the (post)modern theories discussed in the beginning are quite relevant for medieval texts.

### 3. Presentation of the Individual Papers and Basic Typology of Textual Thingness

The texts treated in this issue – mostly German, but also Latin or Italian – cover a period from the Early Middle Ages up to Early Modern Times, while

26 Kiening 2019, chapter 5.

27 Kiening 2019, chapter 7.

28 Kiening 2019, p. 233.

29 Kiening 2019, chapter 9, quotation p. 255.

30 Kiening 2019, pp. 102-105.

31 Kiening 2019, pp. 140f.

32 Kiening 2019, pp. 198-203.

the spectrum of text types is ranging from inventory, prayer and gloss over didactic speech, *maere* and fable to legendary narration and courtly romance. We considered this variety in order not to narrow down the scope too much on certain forms of textual thingness as they might prevail at a certain period or in a certain genre. Thus, we are confident that our collection of relevant phenomena is comprehensive enough to enable a basic typology of different forms of textual thingness. This typology determines the order of the papers in the issue and shall be briefly presented along with them.

When talking about textual thingness one will probably first think of the concrete thingness of the material medium, which Christina Antenhofer in her paper about late medieval and early modern inventories focuses on. Ironically, research interested in the material culture of premodern times has long limited itself to reading inventories as mere texts which – hopefully – revealed something about the things listed in them. Only recent research has begun to be aware that inventories always tell a story, the understanding of which is essential for grasping the things they contain – or perhaps don't contain. According to Antenhofer, however, inventories must not be seen as texts alone if we want to decipher these narratives, but they need to be taken serious as things whose layout can imply e.g. an administrative or a representative function.

Apart from this concrete thingness, there is a metaphorical thingness discernible whenever a text – either by its own author or by some other party – is called a thing or equated with a thing. Based on their armour imagery, some early medieval prayers for example are named *lorica* (breastplate) by contemporary poets themselves; first of all, this points to their apotropaic function. Sophie Marshall, who in her paper analyses a Latin example of this Genre containing Old High German glosses, refuses to make do with this functional explanation and searches the *lorica* for further aspects of “plating”.

What she finds pertains to a phenomenon we may call media thingness. It encompasses certain visual or sonic qualities of a text that stay more or less the same even with different writing materials, scripts, or different voices realizing a text. Media thingness is particularly interesting where it is used ostentatiously by the text itself, e.g. by calligrams on the visual level or by rhymed texts on the sonic level. Marshall argues that the *lorica* is characterized by an extreme over-structuredness of the textual surface, which is caused by rhymes and other relations of equivalence. Thus, the prayer obtains the impermeability of an almost magic armor of sound by far exceeding the mere metaphorical thingness. The Old High German gloss reacts to both metaphorical and media thingness in a meticulous way, however, not in the visual mode (as glosses usually do) but also in the mode of sound.

Concrete, metaphorical, medial: the forms of textual thingness mentioned so far all relate to the text as a real-present sense object. However, „[t]he appearing of the linguistic object allows an absent presence to appear“:<sup>33</sup> a present full of unreal – or real, yet at the time of reception only textually available – sense objects like e.g. a precious gemstone, a dog lead inscribed with gems or a tablet ornamented with jewels. In the case of these things, which are not objects of sensuous perception but of sensuous imagination (even though they are, of course, bound by the sensuously perceptible text), one could speak of

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33 Seel 2005, p. 80.

an imagined thingness. In the following, I will mention two (combinable) possibilities to turn this imagined thingness into a decidedly textual thingness.

Firstly, textually mediated things can be made transparent at the mediating text in a poetological way. The method is similar to that of metaphorical thingness but working vice versa. While metaphorical thingness is starting from the text and in a second step equates with a thing (e.g. a breastplate), imagined thingness emerges from a textually mediated thing (e.g. a gemstone as part of the narrated world) whose quasi-allegorical interpretation is then applied to the text. Thus, the Fable of the Rooster and the Pearl traditionally equates the rooster's handling of the pearl to an uncomprehending recipient in the face of the fable itself. In a comparative analysis, Silvan Wagner shows how Der Stricker, a poet of the second quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, uses this constellation: the three short pieces discussed by Wagner relativize the metaphysical power of gems, analyse it in terms of social aspects, and – in the case of the fable – show its poetological dimension.

Secondly, textually mediated things may themselves be media of writing. In a way, we have come full circle ending up at concrete thingness again, though the realm of possibilities in the narrated worlds is by far wider than in the world outside the text. A more than twenty-yard-long dog-lead makes a case for this when, as the *Jüngerer Titurel* from around 1270 has it, a whole treatise on the courtly virtues is inscribed in precious gemstones on it. In her paper, Tamara Elsner shows how the drama around the so-called “Brackenseil” unfolds between the opposing poles of presence and meaning, of thingness and textuality. At the same time the message of the text is more or less ignored, while instead the Brackenseil as a desired thing (love token, barter object, trophy) directs the characters' actions.

In contrast, the gemstone-trimmed tablet of Gregorius in the homonymous narration by Hartmann von Aue, probably composed towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, is a comparatively conventional medium of writing. Florian Nieser asks if the weathering of the compromising writing on the left-back tablet indicates forgiveness of the incestuous ensnarement or if, quite reversely, the durable gemstones are continuous reminders of the protagonist's sins. Through a comparison with other texts like the *Willehalm* by Wolfram von Eschenbach (the gemstone-epitaphs of the heathen kings, Arofel's shield) and the *Wilhelm von Österreich* by Johann von Würzburg (gemstone inscription on the Cupido-helmet) Nieser shows how all the things analysed point out the metonymic relationship between writing and writing medium, textuality and materiality, meaning and presence.

I attempted to present a basic typology of forms of textual thingness. Subsequently, we might ask whether certain text types show an affinity to certain forms of textual thingness or to certain kinds of things. To answer this interesting question, however, we would have to look at the extant material more thoroughly. With regard to metaphorical thingness we may observe, for example, a rise in titular thing metaphors such as *speculum* (mirror) from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards in learned Latin writing.<sup>34</sup> As far as imagined thingness is concerned, long narratives (e.g. *Jüngerer Titurel*) seem to prefer larger things (e.g. the Grail Temple) while short narratives (e.g. the *maere*) seem to

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34 Cf. Lehmann 1953, pp. 27-57, about *speculum* pp. 30-44.

choose those small things (e.g. dices, nuts)<sup>35</sup> which were at the focus of the latest issue of the journal “Das Mittelalter”.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the example of the *lorica* has shown that a combination of different forms of textual thingness can result in an exceeding material compactness – another observation worth pursuing.

## 4. Conclusion

In what ways can we treat texts as things? The typology presented above seeks to give some concrete answers to this question one level beneath the overarching ideational (religious or aesthetic) aspects. A second-order observer would probably not be satisfied yet; he or she would want to know why we ask this question at all. One possible answer would be that we want to get hold of textual thingness in exactly the liminal phase of its impending slip sliding away into the digital. Once there, it will either blow out or take on new, unimagined (perhaps even increasingly “medieval”?)<sup>37</sup> forms.

(English translation by Gabriele Schichta.)

35 Cf. Mühlherr 2018 and Mühlherr 2019.

36 Dempsey/Jasperse (eds.) 2020.

37 Greetings from McLuhan 1962: the „Gutenberg-Galaxy“ as a temporary state of exception.

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