Narratives and Media Change
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The (w)righting Hand
Quoting Leonardo
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For Waltraud,
the left-handed woman in her

The concept of „Narrative" derives from literary studies where it traditionally indicates a genre that is by definition linguistic. In what follows, I will argue that narrative is less a literary genre but a mode of discourse that does not necessarily unfold in words, but it may also be visual. This shift in emphasis from word to image, at the same time, introduces the second concept central to this conference, "media change." I will bring these two concepts, narrative and media change, in dialogue with each other by analysing a cultural object, namely a CD-ROM *The Multi-Media Manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci. The Codex on the Flight of Birds.*

This digital text cannot only be understood as emphatically narrative, but it also invites critical reflection on the historical dimensions of media-technological developments. In this essay, I will consider historical media change not in the sense of a strictly positivist mono-linear development from a medium "before" towards a medium "after." Rather, this chronological order will be reversed, resulting in a conception of history that Mieke Bal calls „preposterous history", „which puts what came chronologically first („pre-") as an aftereffect behind („post") its later recycling." (1999b: 6-7) The aim of this analysis is to understand how the contemporary digital medium of the computer "transcribes" or "quotes" a historical medium from "before," namely Leonardo's renaissancistic manuscript. I will ask, in other words, how "we" today deal with a mode of writing from the past.

The page side of the CD-ROM shows a virtual room in 3-D-graphic representing Leonardo's study-room. By gliding with the mouse, the user can walk through this room like a cameraman walking through a filmset. By a click of the mouse, she gains new camera-perspectives, and by roll-over, she may manipulate the objects in the room. In the *visual narrative* unfolding in this interactive game, the user cannot be defined as the narrator who speaks but as "the vision through which the elements are presented" which Mieke Bal in her *Narratology* indicates with the term „focalizor". (1997: 142) According to Bal's narratological model, this subject of vision, or focalization, can be differentiated in an external focalizor outside the fabula and an internal focalizor inside the fabula. Following Bal, I will categorize the (corpo-)real user outside the computer screen as an external focalizor and the multi-perspective, virtual subject inside the 3-D-graphic of the screen as an internal focalizor.

The relationship between these two positions of focalization is shaped in a way that allows the external focalizor to "look with" the eyes of the internal focalizor, but the other way around. The subject of this "non-reciprocal gaze," the first person in this visual narrative, is—to refer to Bal again—"devoid of all substance when he sees without being seen." (1999a: 236) Invisible for the other agents involved in this visual narrative, it falls, so to speak, *out of the frame* of the

fabula. This non-reciprocal gaze will be of interest in the following analysis of other pages of the CD-ROM.

When navigating through the system of the CD-ROM, the user may open a page showing Leonardos *Codex on the Flight of Birds* written on parchment in Leonardo's enigmatic handwriting, occasionally illustrated with drafts of birds, gearwheels, pendulums, or machine parts. This page is fitted out with numerous hyperlinks connecting the manuscript with a diplomatic transcription into typed writing as well as with translations into contemporary English and German. Leonardo's writing, in his time, was considered unreadable because it is written mirrorwise and, contrary to the normal flow of text, from the right side of the page to the left. (Zwijnenberg 1999: 83-111) In the hypertextual system of the CD-ROM, this problem of unreadability is encountered by a function enabling the user to reverse the unreadable "left" writing into readable "(w)righting" by a click of the mouse.

This enactment of Leonardo's handwriting is directed at the computer-user, the second person of this narrative, telling her a story about a third person, about him, Leonardo, the genius, the enigmatic left-handed „uomo universale" of the renaissance, whose brilliance and creativity is inscribed in the trace of the personal hieroglyphic of his handwriting. This hypertext, after all, does not locate the—to echo Nelson Goodman—"allographic," typed-written version of the English translation in its core. Rather, the entrance to the readable version of the text can be entered by the detour of the unreadable, "autographic," image of the reversed handwriting only. Whereas in typed writing, as Martin Heidegger argues, „everybody looks the same," (quoted in Derrida 1988: 75) the cultural function of handwriting resides in its potential to refer—just like a signature—to an authentic, unique, and un-exchangeable author. It is precisely this capacity of the signature that the CD-ROM exploits when enacting Leonardo's autography. The aim of this performance is to exposure the "image" of Leonardo—both in the literal sense of "Leonardo's autographic handwriting" and in the indexical sense of "Leonardo's reputation." The CD-ROM-user is—literally—*handed* the key to decipher the riddle of this genius, namely in form of the mouse that enables her to reverse the writing from left to right, to transcribe it, and to, finally, make it "readable."

Readability—according to Derrida's „Signature Event Context"—is not totally synonymous with iterability (e.g. for future readers) though. Rather, each iteration, each quotation, has a breaking force in it offering the possibility of a rupture from the context and thus of generating new meanings and new interpretations. I consider the "frame" of the digital graphic of the CD-ROM such a rupture. The virtuosity of this graphic, after all, does not just simulate Leonardo's historical reality, but it rather perfectionalizes it. In doing so, it veils the fact that this digital handwriting is iterated, "quoted." At the same time, the high level of the visual quality of the graphic on screen makes the physical materiality of Leonardo's handwriting appear realistic, or even hyper-realistic. This visual performance of the CD-ROM, can be considered, in a way, invisible, all the more because, as I have argued earlier in this essay, the relationship between the internal and the external focalizors is organized non-reciprocally. In this sense, it makes Leonardo's writing readable in the logocentristic sense of the word.

Yet, the "frame" of the digital graphic—including the icons, the cursor, and the symbols in the frame of the screen-surface—may also arrest the mono-directional gaze of the user and destabilize the fixed oppositions between inside and outside of the fabula, between a focalizing invisible first person and a focalized third person as an *immediately* graspable historical object. In this sense, this emphatic visuality of Leonardo's unreadable *hand*writing can be considered such a parergon framing the artwork in the Derridean sense of the word, that is external to the artwork and yet meddles in its inside. (1987: 53-54) This *left* hand obstructs the *right* process of

signification by emphasizing its corporeal dimension. Readability is under the *handi*cap of the body writing.

I want to explore this corporeal dimension of handwriting by referring to Freud's essay "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood" (1910: 99). In a footnote of this essay, Freud discusses an anatomical drawing assumed to stem from Leonardo and representing a sagittal view of a coitus. Freud interprets this drawing by referring to "Dr. R. Reitler" as an indication of Leonardo's sexual displacement (*Sexualverdrängung*), arguing that this drawing is anatomically wrong, not only with respect to the representation of the genitals of the female figure, but also with respect to the feet of these figures which are reversed; the left foot of the male figure should be his right foot, and the right foot of the female figure should be her left foot.

Like Freud, I want to claim that this anatomical drawing has the potential of functioning as a "theoretical object." However, I will not make it productive for a theory of psychoanalysis but rather for a theory of writing. It is, after all, only a small step to shift this exchange of left and right foot to an exchange of left and right hand. In Leonardo's drawing, the confusion of vision, on further consideration, seems to result from the fact that the bodies represented are seen from different points of view by different internal focalizors excluding each other. (Neef 2000: 226-230) The Freudian slip, the deformation, the "gauche-ness" in this drawing, is an effect of the rupture between the gaze of the external focalizor holding a stable position outside the fabula, and the pluralist gazes of the internal focalizors looking at the bodies from both the left and the right hand side.

Whereas Freud interprets the exchange of left and right as a meaningful somatic sign to problematize the binary opposition between male and female, I will argue in addition to Freud that this opposition between left and right, male and female, mirrors an encompassing and complex binary system of our western cultural semantics that does not only privilege the right hand—one is sitting at the right hand of God—and discriminate the use of the left hand—when greeting, when swearing, and when writing—by means of strict pedagogical rules, but that, in the same gesture, opposes male and female, straight and queer, (w)right and wrong. (Sofri 1998) In Leonardo's drawing, however, left and right do not function as immobile opposites. Rather, they get reorganized depending on context, on focalizing positions and, in doing so, they question the hierarchy between, the "right" hand in the sense of the "(w)riting" hand, which is responsible for the readability of writing in the logocentristic sense of the word, and the "left" hand, sinister, maladroit, gauche, queer, awkward, and unable to secure thought on paper, or, if writing at all, generating a writing that looks rather like an image.

The more unobstructedly the CD-ROM user gazes at the hyper-realistic manuscript on the computer screen, the more emphatically she experiences Leonardo's left hand as an obstacle. This left hand postpones its corporeal dimension between writing and meaning and, in doing so, draws the attention of the user towards the medial enactment and the medium change. This redirected look no longer gazes at a unrestrictedly available historical "before," but it gets also caught by the "supplement" of the material externalities of the medium performing the transcription. Any medial iteration, any quote, offers by the gesture of transcribing the possibility for a rupture, for a change, also with respect to its mediality. Within this medial difference, the oppositions discussed in this essay—between autographic manuscript and allographic digital writing, between visual image and alphanumeric writing, between readability and unreadability, left and right etc.—cannot be saved or even stabilized in some kind of left-right marching system.

The concept of "media change" in the sense of a „preposterous history" cannot be reduced to a simple description of a historical development from a fixed before towards a fixed after,

nor to a simple reverse of this order. "Media change," moreover, does not only mean the act of reformulating a visual pre-narrative of an unreadable, corporeal, left image-writing, into a linguistic post-narrative in readable right typed writing. The concept does not just aim at making the quote readable, but it also has a serious interest in the "frame," the "*hand*icap," as metaphored in the gesture of the writing hands, beyond an opposition between left and right.

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