

Aesthetic Understanding and Written Culture

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Abstract: This article presents the case for bringing aesthetic forms of understanding to the study of written culture. It rejects those assumptions about aesthetic thinking which have tended to stymie its contribution to this field – above all, that it detaches texts from their contexts and contemplates only their artistic properties – and characterises it instead as a mode of cognition which is grounded in the perceptual senses and sensitive to the processes by which phenomena take shape and become knowable to us. Through a comparison between the written Constitution of the United States and the ‘unwritten’ British constitution, the article demonstrates how aesthetic modes of understanding are well equipped to map the constitutive and shaping power of written language as this emerges from its projection within different perceptual regimes. It concludes by contending that it is this capacity, too, that allows aesthetic modes of understanding to map and evaluate written culture studies as a field.

Keywords: aesthetics, aesthetic imaginary, aesthetic understanding, British constitution, United States Constitution

Introduction

In 2019 the first issue of this journal, *Skriftkulturstudiar i ei brytingstid* (“Written Culture Studies in a Time of Upheaval”), set itself the task of defining “written culture” as an academic subject.¹ This included

¹ Strictly speaking, the volume sets out to address what in New Norwegian is called *skriftkultur*. I have translated this as “written culture” throughout rather than “literacy” (with which the Norwegian term is sometimes equated) because several contributors explicitly distinguish *skriftkulturstudiar* from literacy studies.

identifying the field's characteristic theoretical and methodological approaches and projecting how it might evolve in the future, particularly in response to the “upheavals” alluded to in the volume's title.² My purpose here is to describe a way of thinking about written culture which was largely absent from that discussion: aesthetic thinking. To think aesthetically is to ground the process of understanding in the perceptual senses and to remain sensitive to the means by which and the manner in which phenomena take shape before us and become knowable to us.

Aesthetic understanding so conceived is multimodal and prismatic in character. As such, it is more than capable of playing host to the interdisciplinary and comparative forms of enquiry advocated in *Skriftkulturstudiar i ei brytningstid* and of exploring how the production, dissemination and comprehension of writing and written artefacts involve a range of material, intellectual, social, semantic and other networks.³ Its attention to the ways in which phenomena come to acquire perceptible shapes and structures, meanwhile, means that it can fulfil another of the demands made in that volume too: that written culture studies reflect upon its own formation and constitution as an academic field. The claim that the study of written culture is experiencing a “time of upheaval” is, after all, attributed in that volume mainly to the recent shift from analogue to digital technology and to the alterations this has caused in how we perceive and interpret the visual and audible qualities of written language.⁴ A mode of understanding that is immersed in the physical senses and attuned to a phenomenon's shape and organisation would seem to be especially well equipped to register such recalibrations of our sensory and cognitive environments and help us respond to Endre Brunstad's and Stig Helset's call to “orientate ourselves anew and evaluate both the map and the landscape”⁵ of this field of study (2019, pp. 9–10).

2 *Kva er det som kjenneteiknar skriftkulturstudiar i dag?* and *Korleis bør den skriftkulturelle forskinga vere i framtida?* were two of the five questions that the contributors had been asked to address in a preceding seminar. See Brunstad & Helset, 2019, p. 8.

3 Walton, 2019, p. 55 observes that the desire to be “interdisciplinary and comparative” (*tverrfagleg og komparativt*) has acquired an “almost mantra-like status” (*ein nærmast mantraliknande status*) for the subject.

4 See especially Walton, 2019, pp. 62–65 and Apelseth, 2019, pp. 71–79 and 87–89.

5 “*Som skriftforskarar treng vi å orientere oss på nytt, og å vurdere både kart og landskap*”

One of the more modest goals of this article, then, is to present aesthetic understanding as an interpretative approach to supplement the four paradigms that Kjell Lars Berge (2019, p. 27) identifies as most characteristic of the field: the cognitive paradigm (*det mentalistiske paradigmet*); the ethnographic and historical paradigm (*det etnografiske og historiske paradigmet*); the philological-linguistic paradigm (*det filologisk-lingvistiske paradigmet*); and the pedagogy of writing and reading paradigm (*det skrive- og lesepedagogiske paradigmet*). But I have a more ambitious agenda too, which is to propose that aesthetic understanding might also serve as a “meta-paradigm”, a mode of cognition that is capable of mapping and analysing each of these other more circumscribed endeavours and situating them in relation to one another. Berge himself observes that exponents of each of his four paradigms are seldom on speaking terms, except in a partisan and hostile manner (2019, p. 26), while Arne Apelsesteth agrees that the study of written culture all too rarely fulfils its transdisciplinary potential. “The concept of written culture,” he writes, “is a meta-concept and one that different subjects and disciplines have in common.” But, he continues, “rather few relate their work to this master concept; instead, they limit its definition” (2019, p. 73).⁶ Aesthetic understanding, I would contend, has the capacity to bring this composite arena into the open and to map the specific topographies of its more localised practices and epistemological commitments.

If aesthetic understanding is to deliver on these promises, however, it needs first to be rescued from the rather reductive thinking about aesthetics that informs several of the articles in *Skriftkulturstudiar i ei brytingstid*. I would not wish to claim that aesthetic understanding *should* have featured in that volume, but my concern is that it *could* never have done so in the expansive sense I have just described. The rather emaciated form in which aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic studies limp their way through many of the articles indicates the extent to which they have been hobbled at source and would be incapable of playing anything like a constitutive role in the interpretation of writing and written culture or in

6 “Omgrepet skriftkultur [...] er eit metaomgrep og eit overgripande fellesnivå for fag og disiplinær. Heller få relaterer si verksemd til det overordna omgrepet, men derimot til meir avgrensa definisjonar”

the mapping and analysis of the subject's principal paradigms. With the exception of the articles by Jan Inge Sørnbø and Geir Hjorthol, aesthetic modes of interpretation are condemned throughout to what is at best a subordinate role in the study of written culture and at worst that of a hostile combatant lurking menacingly at its disciplinary outskirts. The first task of this article, then, is to bring these assumptions to light, highlight their consequences, and introduce a more invigorating understanding of aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic thinking.

Understanding aesthetics and aesthetic understanding

There are, broadly speaking, two schools of thinking about aesthetics. The first is the one I have already outlined and will expand upon in this article. Taking its cue from the Greek word for perception (*aesthesis*), this school regards aesthetics as itself a mode of cognition, in which the phenomena we claim to know – be they material objects, abstract ideas or whatever – have in some way been given specific form and content by the very sense perceptions that present them to us. We cannot know anything objectively or as it is, this theory proposes, independently of the guise in which it becomes perceptible to us.

The other, more familiar, school of thinking about aesthetics imposes instead tight restrictions on what it considers to be aesthetic and thus reduces the domain in which aesthetic phenomena and studies operate and limits the functions they perform. This tradition is liable to stipulate, for instance, that only specific kinds of phenomena can be subjected to aesthetic analysis – usually artworks such as paintings, music and literature, or landscapes. It may stipulate, too, that aesthetic understanding should concern itself only with identifying the presence or absence of a limited range of qualities in those phenomena, such as beauty or unity, and insist that aesthetic understanding engages only a limited number of mental attitudes, such as disinterested detachment at one end of the spectrum or rapt attention at the other. In its most rarefied (and caricatured) form, this school arguably divests aesthetic enquiries of any real *aesthetic* cognitive content. In such cases, the label “aesthetic” does little more than

attribute a specific set of properties to the *object* of analysis and thought, which will then be scrutinised by other means and other cognitive faculties; what it does not do is recognise aesthetics as a distinctive *mode* of analysing and thinking of its own.⁷

Characterised as it is by limitation, this understanding of aesthetics and its ideological commitments and hermeneutic practices has little in common with the pluralistic and interdisciplinary ambitions of written culture studies. It is therefore unfortunate that this is the version which infiltrates several of the articles in *Skriftkulturstudiar i ei brytingstid*. The consequences are in any case unsurprising: aesthetic considerations are either overlooked entirely, subordinated to written culture's more expansive agenda, or dismissed beyond its borders. The general lack of interest in what aesthetic thinking might have to offer is indicated, for instance, by the scarcity with which the word itself appears: six times as the adjective "aesthetic", once in the corresponding noun form, and once in the guise of "aesthetes". The manner in which the word is deployed, meanwhile, explains its marginal status: it is never attached to or suggestive of a term of cognition. On four of its appearances it denotes a practice (*estetisk praksis* (p. 54), *Fløgstads estetikk* (p. 112), *ein estetisk «feil»* (p. 127)) or an object (*den estetiske gjenstand* (p. 113)) instead. The other four instances do gesture towards some kind of cognitive activity – the irritation of many "aesthetes" at the novelist Kjartan Fløgstad's literary style evokes a specific mental attitude, for example, while both "aesthetic evaluation" (*estetisk vurdering*, twice on p. 56) and "the field of aesthetics" (*eit [...] estetisk felt* (p. 72)) tip their hats to acts of judgement and academic study respectively. Nonetheless, "aesthetic evaluation" comes in practice to be contrasted directly with "pragmatic analysis" and confined to a disciplinary field which practises admiration rather than criticism and detaches itself from the messy and fast-flowing traffic of the material world.

Stephen Walton performs each of these etiolating rituals in his swift retelling of how written culture studies came to be born as an academic subject. Sharing the founding belief of the cultural studies movement more generally that acts of "aesthetic evaluation" tend to exclude the

7 See also Saunders, 2020 on this point.

cultural works produced and consumed by the working classes from their purview, along with those associated with “other systematically marginalised groups” (p. 56),⁸ Walton asserts that written culture studies too has always distanced itself from the prevailing assumptions and practices of those subjects in which (alone it seems) such evaluations were conducted. “In the discipline of written culture,” Walton writes,

we swung the axe primarily over the established nation-forming language-and-literature subjects that acquired a bad reputation in the 70s, 80s and up to the 90s. That which written culture should *not* become was a shrunken version of the study of Norwegian, its “mini-me” as it were, with old philology and language history on the one side, and a nation-building canon of dead white men on the other, of the kind who had chiselled out the nation’s finest and most uplifting thoughts, and who could stand as a model for us all. Aesthetic evaluations should be subordinated to pragmatic analysis.⁹ (Walton, 2019, p. 56)

This short skit on the genesis of written culture studies ticks off pretty much every one of the flaws that have been attributed to aesthetic enquiry, even by less parodic surveys. It assumes, for instance, that any such enquiry will be limited, and especially elitist, in its interests. It assumes that it will be backward-looking and old-fashioned (the disciplines that practise aesthetic enquiry are “established,” their philology is “old,” and they concern themselves with language “history” and the works of “dead” white men). And it assumes that such an enquiry will treat the object of its attention as static, concrete, timeless and universal (“a canon [...] chiselled out [...] as a model for us all”), like a Platonic Form that has little to do with the fluctuations and imperfections of material, lived reality. The closing contrast between “*aesthetic* enquiries” and “*pragmatic* analysis” is particularly barbed in this regard: it stresses the point (in case we missed

8 “andre systematisk marginaliserte grupper”

9 “I skriftkulturfaget svinga vi òksa primært over dei etablerte nasjonsdannande språk- og litteraturfaga som kom i akademisk vanry på sytti-, åtti- og inne på nittitalet. Det skriftkulturstudiet ikkje skulle bli, var ein innskrumpa versjon av norskfaget, norskfaget sin mini-me, for å seie det slik, med gammalfilologi og språkhistorie på den eine sida, og ein nasjonsbyggjande kanon av daude kvite menn på den andre, slike som hadde meisla ut nasjonens finaste og mest oppbyggjelege tankar, og som kunne stå som modell for alle oss andre. Estetiske vurderingar skulle underordnast pragmatisk analyse.”

it) that these enquiries pack little analytical punch and prefer to privilege an attitude of admiration over acts of critical scrutiny.

I doubt that anyone would object if aesthetic enquiries of this kind were to be dismissed to a subordinate position within any academic field of study. What is more important to observe is how Walton grafts his caricature of aesthetic enquiry onto the political unit of the nation, since it is by these means that he distinguishes the epistemic structure of (what he believes to be) those enquiries from that which is to inform the study of written culture. The word “nation” is, after all, repeated three times in this short passage alone and its role as both an analogue and an anchor for the supposedly “aesthetic” study of a particular language or literature is one that recurs throughout this volume.¹⁰ Characterised primarily as a spatial unit defined by its borders, its willingness to patrol them, and its consciousness of itself as a unique and coherent entity distinct from any other,¹¹ the nation serves by this equation not only to characterise the sphere of aesthetics as delimited, isolationist, monocultural, internally unified and eager to command our unthinking allegiance, but also to bind it to what has been termed a “container” model of knowledge. This is a model in which knowledge is assumed to flow like water into a vessel which has already been shaped to receive it. It contrasts with the internationalist, interdisciplinary and therefore “networked” model of knowledge favoured by written culture studies in which the production, dissemination and comprehension of writing and written artefacts are at no point taken to operate in their own autonomous zones, but are believed to interact with numerous other cultural, material, societal and intellectual forces instead. In this second model, knowledge is never fixed or pre-ordained but is contingent upon the processes from which it emerges. Aesthetic understanding of the kind I will be advocating here is more than capable of tracing and scrutinising the mobile and multi-faceted networks written culture studies wishes to investigate; aesthetic understanding of the kind dismissed by Walton cannot.

10 Berge, 2019, p. 45, for instance, writes of “nation-bearing literary texts” (*nasjonsberande litterære tekstar*) and “nation-bearing high-literary works” (*nasjonsberande skjønnlitterære verk*).

11 See, for instance, Anderson, 2016, pp. 5–7 and Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 80.

It is therefore unfortunate that every one of the basic assumptions Walton makes about the methods and consequences of aesthetic enquiries finds its echo elsewhere in the volume. When Arne Apelseeth observes, for instance, that “it has been fairly acceptable (if not unproblematic) to interpret *written culture* as a humanities-aesthetics subject belonging to a *high culture*” (2019, p. 72),¹² his unease with this assumption seems to lie not so much in the equation of aesthetics with the humanities or high culture, but in the suggestion that written culture should restrict itself to this disciplinary niche alone.¹³ Despite his call for greater cooperation between written culture and literary studies, meanwhile, Kjell Lars Berge similarly accompanies Walton in labelling the latter “traditional and tradition-bearing” (2019, p. 37).¹⁴ He states too that, in contrast to the interest written culture studies has shown in historical surveys of everyday examples of reading and writing, literary scholarship prefers to isolate and elevate “individual works that for one reason or another have achieved a timeless and therefore exalted status as classics” instead.¹⁵ All three of these articles, in order words, identify seemingly irreconcilable differences between how they believe aesthetic approaches and written culture studies apprehend written texts: the former in isolation, the latter in context;¹⁶ the former as timeless products, the latter through their immersion in historical process; and so on. These subjects are further assumed to aspire to understand writing and written texts in completely different ways too: from a singular and isolationist perspective in literary studies, and from a multidimensional and prismatic set of perspectives in written culture studies. Stephen Walton draws this distinction particularly clearly. “Modern studies in written culture,” he writes,

12 “Det har vore nokså kurant (om enn ikkje uproblematisk) å oppfatte skriftkultur som eit humanistisk-estetisk felt i ein høgkultur”

13 It is notable that in the lines that follow Apelseeth is willing to allow the term “written culture” to remain “in motion” (*i drift*) but he does not extend the same courtesy to aesthetics.

14 “tradisjonell og tradisjonsberande litteraturvitskap”

15 Berge, 2019, p. 38 “Desse skrifthistoriske prosjekta er kjenneteikna ved at dei studerer kvardagsleg skriving og lesing i eldre tider, og ikkje enkeltverk som av ein eller annan grunn har oppnådd ein slags tidlaus og dermed opphøgd status som klassikarar, slik det har vore tradisjon for blant humanistar som studerer tekstkulturar.”

16 Apelseeth, 2019, p. 74, for instance, insists that: “[a]s components in the study of written culture, texts can only with difficulty be extracted as autonomous objects” (*Som komponentar i skriftkultur kan tekstar vanskeleg skiljast ut som autonome objekt*).

“have been characterised by a wish not to reproduce the nation-building mother-tongue subjects such as Norwegian, and *they have therefore* been organised in an interdisciplinary and comparative fashion” (2019, p. 53, emphasis mine).¹⁷

In sum, the problem with bringing aesthetic approaches to the study of writing and written culture, these contributors contend, is threefold: they treat writing solely as an object (rather than as, say, an activity or a process); they exclude from attention any but a limited number of its properties, qualities and characteristics (especially those that are not categorisable as “artistic”); and they insist on perceiving written artefacts in an extremely limited and limiting manner (as autonomous, high status, timeless, and so on). Aesthetic understanding on this view is accordingly extremely restrictive in nature and it serves to concretise both writing itself and the practice of studying it in ways that the field of written culture should refuse to recognise.

Another way of putting this is that these contributors seem to assume (and fear) that if one were to conduct an aesthetic enquiry into examples of writing and written culture, one would invariably be reduced to treating those examples as if they were works of literature. This does a disservice both to aesthetics (since it assumes it is only interested in art) and to literature (since it assumes it exists solely as writing and is somehow disconnected from time, change and material reality). Literature, at any rate, is the only form of writing that is regarded as aesthetic and treated as such in *Skriftkulturstudiar i ei brytingstid*. It duly functions there as a synecdoche for the aesthetic domain more generally and is accordingly characterised in the articles I have discussed as if it consists only of fixed and static objects, whose form and content we might be able to come to know, but which do not function themselves as vehicles or means of knowing. It is telling, for instance, that in their definition of written culture as a triangle of “product, process and external interaction”,¹⁸ Endre

17 “Moderne skriftkulturstudiar [...] har vore prega av eit ønske om å ikkje reproducere dei nasjonsbyggjande morsmålsfaga som t.d. norsk, og dei har dermed vore organiserte tverrfagleg og komparativt”

18 “produkt, prosess og ekstern vekselverknad”

Brunstad and Stig Helset assign literature solely to the first of these categories (2019, p. 12).

Thankfully, two articles in the volume – by Jan Inge Sørbo and Geir Hjorthol – take literary texts as their main focus and demonstrate how they too shape and are shaped by the social, historical, cultural, linguistic and other networks in which they participate in much the same manner as the volume as a whole would have us engage with examples of written culture more generally. They do not treat literary texts solely as objects or products, for instance, but also as processes within which “external interactions” become manifest and meaningful. They demonstrate, too, how works of literature engage in and produce the kinds of cognitive modes of analysis and enquiry in which written culture studies is interested, not despite or aside from their artistic qualities, but precisely because of them. Different styles of writing, these two articles illustrate, be they fictional or factual, create the conditions of possibility for different ways of thinking and understanding.

Sørbo and Hjorthol duly perform a valuable service in keeping aesthetic thinking alive and relevant in the study of written culture. Nonetheless, their focus on what in Norwegian is called *skjønnlitteratur* (literally “beautiful literature”) might mistakenly be taken to illustrate how the kinds of aesthetic understanding they enact must be grounded solely in the perception of a written document’s artistic qualities. One problem with this misapprehension, were it to occur, is that it would ensure that aesthetic understanding retained only a subsidiary position within written culture’s knowledge economy, as a technique for observing how writing’s aesthetic qualities contribute to – rather than, say, constitute – its social, cultural, intellectual, but at any rate no longer recognisably aesthetic ends. It might continue to assist in the work carried out within each of the four paradigms identified by Berge, in other words, but it would be unlikely to be accepted as a paradigm in its own right, let alone as a meta-paradigm with the capacity to map those other paradigms, situate them in relation to one another, and subject them to scrutiny. For this, we must turn to the alternative school of aesthetic philosophy I mentioned earlier, in which aesthetic understanding is not directed only at works of art or otherwise delimited by the nature of its object, by the intellectual

attitude it involves, or by the interests or agenda of any one academic discipline. It is instead there considered to be a distinctive mode of cognition in its own right, a way of apprehending and interrogating the world that is grounded in the physical senses and attuned to the means and manner in which phenomena take shape before us and thereby become knowable to us.

This school of thinking about aesthetics is as old and prestigious as its more familiar rival. It appears, for instance, in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* from 1750, a work that has been credited with establishing aesthetics as an independent field of study. Defining aesthetics as "the science of sensory cognition" (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*), Baumgarten conceived of it as a branch of epistemology rather than as art criticism (Baumgarten, 1750, Prolegomena §1).¹⁹ In stark contrast to the notion that aesthetic enquiry involves perceiving the object of one's attention in splendid isolation, the kind of knowledge Baumgarten believed aesthetics could produce recognised the interconnectedness of phenomena and drew attention to their multifaceted nature. Like many philosophers of his time, Baumgarten took as his starting point the ancient Greek distinction between *aisthēta* (objects of sense) and *noēta* (objects of thought). In keeping with convention, he also believed that in order to comprehend objects of thought one needed to bring one's rational faculties such as logic into play and to use them to isolate individual concepts and apprehend them in a clear and distinct manner. Objects of sense, he further agreed, seldom rendered themselves up in such clear and distinct forms to human perception, but generally appeared to be somewhat misty and multifarious in nature. Where Baumgarten broke from convention was in refusing to accept either that the knowledge we acquire through our senses is necessarily inferior to that produced by pure rationality and logic, or that it might not also have something valuable to contribute to our understanding of objects of thought. To apprehend ideas purely in isolation from one another and apart from their potentially informing contexts, he believed, might in some regards be akin to seeking to

19 The discussion of Baumgarten that follows is informed by Gregor, 1983; Gross, 2002; Welsch, 1997 (esp. pp. 34–35 and 40–41), among others.

apprehend the perceptible phenomena of this world in that way too. Logic and rationality, that is, are liable to overlook as much as they grasp, including the important interconnectedness, multiplicity and richness of things and concepts. Since such interconnectedness, multiplicity and richness are also constituent elements of the sensible world, and the aesthetic mode of understanding is especially well equipped to register and interpret these qualities, there is no reason to keep that mode in quarantine, away from other forms of cognition. Rather, for Baumgarten, it is one of the defining features of aesthetic understanding that it engages the whole human being in knowledge – our senses and our reason – and it enables us to apprehend what he called the *consensus phaenomenon*, the manifestation of how things fit together.

Since Baumgarten's time, there have appeared numerous inflections of his theory, but they all bear three core propositions in common. The first is that all human knowledge is dependent in some way on our sense perceptions. The second is that we can only know a phenomenon in the form in which it is projected to us (perhaps the most famous statement of this is Kant's claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that we can know *a priori* of things only what we put into them, such as our human categories of space and time). The third proposition is that we do not perceive anything through any of our senses without any kind of cultural framing: sounds, sights, and so on all come already freighted with associations and meanings. All three points of orientation are consistent with the epistemological commitments expressed in *Skriftkulturstudiar i ei brytingstid*. Since we have more than one sense perception through which we might apprehend individual phenomena, for instance, aesthetic understanding is perfectly capable of being multimodal and multidimensional. Since it recognises that all the objects of our knowledge – and, indeed, knowledge itself – are shaped and fashioned, it is just as likely to attend to the processes by which examples of writing and written culture are shaped and fashioned as it is to the concretised forms they might acquire in any given context. And since it is aware that our sense perceptions are themselves culturally framed, any such aesthetic enquiry is likely to want to interrogate the different framings in operation and so pursue a necessarily interdisciplinary study.

As well as offering a means and methodology for analysing examples of written culture, aesthetic modes of understanding are also capable of mapping and scrutinising the discipline of written culture studies itself. When Kjell Lars Berge states that “[a] *written culture* is a community of people in which the use of language participates in the constituting norms of interaction in a culture” (2019, p. 24),²⁰ for example, he is in effect characterising a written culture as an aesthetic phenomenon, one that is shaped through a combination of its citizens’ practices and the way in which those citizens apprehend those practices. Stephen Walton acknowledges the contribution scholars make to this practice when he observes that “it is a meta-characteristic of studies of written culture that they themselves enter into that written culture *and thus participate in forming the phenomenon that they as a point of departure set out to describe*” (2019, p. 54, emphasis mine).²¹

When Walton adds shortly after this that “Written culture studies are close to endless, not to say shapeless” (2019, p. 55),²² he is therefore correct in an abstract sense but not a practical one. For every instantiation of either a particular study or a particular example of writing and written culture can be apprehended as an aesthetic phenomenon with its own distinctive shape and perceptual and cognitive regime. As such, it is susceptible to an aesthetic analysis, one that attends to the modes of perception this instantiation employs and attracts, to the perceptible forms it allows and acquires, and to the cultural contexts within which it takes place. Every instantiation of written culture, that is, whether it be a particular object of study or the field of study, participates in what I will call an “aesthetic imaginary”.²³ This is the regulatory system that governs what can be

20 “*Ein skriftkultur er eit fellesskap av menneske der bruken av skrift inngår i dei konstituerande samhandlingsnormene i kulturen*”

21 “*er det metapreget som studiar av skriftkultur stort sett har i og med at dei sjølve inngår i skriftkulturen, og såleis er med på å forme det fenomenet som dei i utgangspunktet skal beskrive*”

22 “*Skriftkulturstudiane er tilnærma endelause, for ikkje å seie konturlause*”

23 The aesthetic imaginary is closely related to the social imaginary, although one could debate whether it represents the social imaginary’s aesthetic dimension or whether the social imaginary constitutes its social dimension. Discussions of the social imaginary that point to its aesthetic dimension include Anderson, 2016, pp. 24–5, 36; Taylor, 2004, p. 23. For detailed discussions of the aesthetic imaginary, see Ghosh, 2017; Habegger-Conti & Johannessen, 2020; Johannessen & Ledbetter, 2019.

perceived and known within any attempt at understanding. It is defined on the one hand by the perceptible forms the objects of its attention acquire and on the other by the specific sense perceptions involved, the specific functions these are taken to perform, and (therefore) by the forms of consciousness and cognition to which this imaginary plays host.

It is the task of any aesthetic analysis to make manifest the various components of this prism. In what remains of this article I will offer a brief sketch of how this might be done, first in relation to two usefully contrasting examples of how writing is apprehended, comprehended and enacted differently depending on the aesthetic imaginary within which it is projected – the written Constitution of the United States and the “unwritten” constitution of the United Kingdom; and then, still more concisely, in relation to written culture as a field of study. At no point will art or artistry receive much attention.

The British and American constitutions: An aesthetic analysis

It is widely perceived to be a fundamental feature of the United States Constitution that it is “written” and an equally fundamental feature of the British constitution that it is “unwritten”. This tends to result in any comparison between them focusing on whether writing as such can better protect democracy, life, liberty, happiness and other key values, or whether it can do so only in a manner that makes sense for, and is true to, just one of those countries. The debate, in other words, concentrates on the constitutive power of writing and in particular on its perceived ability to contribute to the forming and shaping of a people and their polity, either for their benefit or their detriment. In treating peoples, societies, values and so on as, in effect, aesthetic phenomena, the modes of understanding employed in this debate themselves invite an aesthetic analysis.

The analysis I will outline here takes as its starting point a proposition Jacques Rancière makes in *The Politics of Aesthetics*: that every sphere of human thought and activity is shot through with an aesthetic dimension in as far as it engages in “the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2013, pp. 7–14). Anything is aesthetic, that is, in as far as it regulates what is

perceived and what is not perceived, and in as far as it influences how these phenomena are perceived. Rancière further indicates how one might structure one's interrogation of this aesthetic dimension when he maps the intersections between aesthetics and politics in particular. "Aesthetics," he writes,

can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (Rancière, 2013, p. 8)

An aesthetic analysis of the written Constitution of the United States and the "unwritten" constitution of the United Kingdom will thus have to include a consideration of how they each administer sight, sound and the other senses. By "administer" I do not just mean how and to whom and to what these constitutions distribute perceptibility and imperceptibility, but also how they freight alternative modes of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching with different cognitive, emotional and other properties. Every aesthetic imaginary has the capacity, after all, to do more than just distribute visibility and audibility (say) differently; it can constitute them differently too, especially – as Rancière signals – if these sense perceptions are to unfold within different arrangements of space and time. Yet aesthetic analysis, as Rancière also indicates, needs to direct its attention beyond the aesthetic regimes by which any political (or other) arrangement operates as well and investigate "the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" in the first place. In the case of the constitutions of Britain and the United States, this involves untangling why they are perceived to be "unwritten" and "written" respectively, the senses in which they are taken to be so, and the cultural matrices that recognise in writing – or its absence – its particular performative power in each instance.

The perception that the British constitution is "unwritten", for example, has underpinned many analyses of its strengths and weaknesses, but

it is neither strictly accurate nor of great antiquity. The British constitution actually plays host to innumerable writings, most of which are completely unknown to the public, although a few – such as Magna Carta of 1215, the Bill of Rights of 1689, and the Acts of Union of 1707 and 1800 – enjoy a certain celebrity. It only came to be labelled “unwritten” after the emergence of constitutions such as those of the United States and France which were written down, codified and collated *into a single document* as a matter of deliberate policy.²⁴ The British constitution *became* “unwritten”, in other words, because of a shift in the global aesthetic imaginary and because the forms of civic and personal life with which writing, speech and other forms of communication came to be associated changed accordingly.

These shifts occur neither occasionally nor only sequentially; different aesthetic imaginaries can be in operation simultaneously. The ongoing and often heated debate about whether it is right, or even viable, to bring an “originalist” framing to one’s reading of the United States Constitution is a good example of this. As Justice Amy Coney Barrett explained during the Senate hearings prior to her appointment to the Supreme Court in 2020, her claim to be an originalist means

that I interpret the Constitution as a law, that I interpret its text as text, and I understand it to have the meaning that it had at the time people ratified it. So that meaning doesn’t change over time and it’s not up to me to update it or infuse my own policy views into it. (*Amy Coney Barrett*, 2020)

The alternative is to understand the United States Constitution as a “living document” instead. Rather than view the Constitution as a fully embodied physical object whose text has been fixed in unmoving print for all time, this requires a different mode of perception. One might, for instance, perceive in its remarkable concision a skeleton awaiting flesh and animation,²⁵ and begin to discern this animation by apprehending and understanding its language as “performative” as well as “constative”

²⁴ The seminal importance of Edmund Burke’s 1790 pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to the continuing debate about Britain’s “unwritten” constitution bears this out.

²⁵ Beeman, 2009, p. 339 notes its concision relative to most constitutions.

and by listening to it speak as well as watching it repeat the same statements time and again.

I will return to these two alternative projections of the United States Constitution and their effects shortly. For now, though, I would like to stay with the more general question of how the perception of the British constitution as unwritten and of the United States Constitution as written has borne significant consequences for the workings of each. One respect in which the appellation “unwritten” yields some kind of harvest for the former is that it recognises the extent to which it does not consist of writings alone. Whatever one might make of Amy Coney Barrett’s definition of the American Constitution as “law” and “text”, it would never pass muster for its British counterpart. This is commonly understood to consist of a host of unwritten customs, conventions and practices besides and thus to inhabit a more hybrid space than one delimited and nourished by writing alone.²⁶ It was, by contrast, one of the genuine innovations of the United States Constitution that it sought to embody and represent the American people *in itself, as a piece of writing*. This had never been attempted before at a national level. As Michael Warner explains, the writing of first the Declaration and subsequently the Constitution enacted

what Jürgen Habermas analyzes as a structural transformation of the public sphere – from a world in which power embodied in special persons is represented before the people to one in which power is constituted by a discourse in which the people are represented. (1990, p. 39)

The specific concretisation of this discourse as a written – and in particular a printed – document aided its trajectory towards representational embodiment precisely because it was a constitution that could be seen and held as a physical and spatialised entity, unlike its British analogue.²⁷ Warner captures the basic circuitry of this projection neatly. “‘We the People,’” he observes, “speaks only in print, and for precisely that reason speaks with the full authority of representative legitimacy” (1990, p. 96).

²⁶ See, for instance, Saunders, 2008, p. 76.

²⁷ This explains why I have used a capital “C” for the United States Constitution and a small “c” for the British constitution throughout.

There are other regards in which the perception of the United States Constitution as written and the British constitution as unwritten correlates with specific understandings of the people of those two countries too. This includes how “the properties of the spaces” each of these written and unwritten polities has been taken to sustain affect their peoples’ access to power, representation and knowledge. The codification of the United States Constitution and its collation into a single document, for instance, allows it to be perceived as a physical embodiment of its own stated intention “to form a more perfect Union” (Beeman, 2010, p. 21). Its manifestation as a slender and infinitely reproducible printed text, meanwhile, has made of it a locus and an example, as well as an instrument, of American democracy. As a highly visible reference point that every citizen, regardless of their actual location in time or space, can see, touch, carry, consult and therefore grasp (in both senses of that word), its ongoing iteration and distribution around the nation further binds together different times and places and intensifies this sensation of a shared civic space.

The absence of any corresponding sense that the writings of the British constitution are similarly interconnected, united or graspable as a whole reflects their immersion in a perceptual environment that not only distributes visibility, audibility and so on differently but constitutes them differently too. The dispersal of Britain’s constitutional writings and their purely partial role in Britain’s constitution, that is, equates with their lesser perceptibility and knowability and with the alternative manner in which they are apprehended. Like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in the United States, Magna Carta, for instance, has at times played a highly visible and audible role in British public debate. Its actual text, however, is little known and seldom read.²⁸ As its deployment during the recent Covid-19-induced lockdowns illustrates, wherein some businesses believed that placing a copy in a window entitled them to ignore government orders to close, Magna Carta signifies primarily as a visual icon but without the accompanying invitation to rational scrutiny

28 Not everyone who cites Magna Carta as a founding text of Englishness, for instance, is aware that it was originally written in Latin or translated first into French. See Anderson, 2016, p. 118.

which (as we shall see) the visual dimension of the United States Constitution affords. Its semantic payload tends to land instead in an explosion of blinding majesty that derives much of its spellbinding aura from its projection as an antiquated, precarious, seldom-viewed, but imaginatively august piece of illuminated medieval parchment.²⁹

This perceptual regime has not been confined to the comprehension of Magna Carta alone. In his hugely popular book *The English Constitution* of 1867, for example, Walter Bagehot pays homage to the rich sensory feast this constitution provides but acknowledges that these same features seem irrational and obfuscatory when subjected to closer scrutiny. This, though, is in his view the secret of the British constitution's success and allows it to work by way of a deception. Hidden (rightly) from the cognition of most of its citizens, its simple and always modernised core performs the task of governing the nation. Yet wrapped around this core is an exterior of "historical, complex, august, theatrical parts," which "appeal to the senses," "claim to be embodiments of the greatest human ideas" and "guide by an insensible but an omnipotent influence the associations of its subjects" (Bagehot, 2009, pp. 9–11). Political participation by conscious, rational and enlightened assent this certainly is not and Bagehot's further observation that the English "stumbled on" (2009, p. 10) rather than designed this arrangement heightens this projection of the British constitution as the product of a natural evolution based on practical, lived experience rather than logical scientific thought. It is a projection, moreover, that extends from at least the time of Edmund Burke at the end of the eighteenth century up to the present day and sustains the notion that the British know and conform to their constitution through intuiting it or sensing it naturally rather than by reading or grasping it intellectually. "In England," declared Burke in 1790, and drawing an implicit contrast with revolutionary France and its recently introduced written constitution,

29 It is notable that Edmund Burke too perceives the British constitution to be "written on the parchment roll of England" rather than "cut into the brazen tablet of Rome" (2014, p. 265).

we have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate, those inbred sentiments which are the faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals. We have not been drawn and trussed, *in order that we may be filled, like stuffed birds in a museum, with chaff and rags, and paltry, blurred shreds of paper about the rights of men.* We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity. (Burke, 2014, p. 89, emphasis mine)

Nearly one hundred years later, in 1885, the constitutional theorist A. V. Dicey (1835–1922) was still making the same argument. The constitution, he declared, “was the fruit not of abstract theory but of that instinct which [...] has enabled Englishmen, and especially uncivilised Englishmen, to build up sound and lasting institutions, much as bees construct a honeycomb” (Dicey, 1915, p. cxxvi).

This constellation of ideas about how the British constitution is composed – that it is natural rather than intellectual, rooted in local and concrete conditions rather than universal and abstract ones – and about how British citizens understand and adhere to it – viscerally rather than intellectually, intuitively rather than consciously – correlates neatly with the distinctions that have conventionally been drawn between spoken and written language.³⁰ At times, this correlation is made explicit and the kinds of “liberties” (say) the British constitution is taken to uphold are projected as those of an authentic, living, evolving, highly individualised and physical oral culture that stands in opposition to the bloodless identities imprinted on a people when their constitution acquires the mechanical form of an endlessly reprinted document.

And indeed, if one shackles the written Constitution of the United States to the kinds of aesthetic regimes and imaginaries that have governed the more celebratory interpretations of the British constitution I have just outlined, it is liable to seem somewhat machine-like too. But one could just as well argue that it activates (or at any rate reflects) through

30 Ong (2012) remains the classic account of the different cultural, social, intellectual and other affordances that have conventionally been attributed to speech and writing respectively.

writing – and print in particular – a redistribution of what is perceptible and what is not perceptible, and it realigns the composition and content of the various sense perceptions, in such a way as to instigate (or at any rate reflect) a reorganisation of the properties of space and the possibilities of time so that a different kind of balance and a different kind of liberty come into being instead.

The Constitution of the United States has, for instance, tended to be associated with a very different culture of visibility from the one that Bagehot and others have attributed to its British counterpart. Whereas Britain's unwritten constitution is alleged to conceal as much as it reveals and, when it does become visible, to do so in the form of a theatrical spectacle primed to elicit a dazzled and emotional assent, the United States Constitution operates under a light that is both constant and unremittingly rational in nature. This light traditionally derives its energy from the era when the Constitution was written – the Enlightenment – and from its print culture in particular. Michael Warner describes this culture in detail in his book *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, but the principal point he makes is that the majority of pamphlets and newspapers which appeared in the American colonies during the eighteenth century sought to cast an objective light over the public sphere and invited their readers to cast their gaze over this fully illuminated arena in an attitude of rational scrutiny. The authors of a 1733 article in the *New-York Weekly Journal* provide just one example of this thinking in practice. Defending their decision to go public with one of their stories, they assert that “[t]he facts exposed are not to be believed because said or published; but it [publication] draws people's attention, directs their view, and fixes the eye in a proper position that everyone may judge for himself whether those facts are true or not” (Warner, 1990, p. 52).

As Warner himself comments, “The sense of sight is not necessarily more appropriate to the public world than any other sense is; yet the optic and spatializing metaphor of supervision became [...] the dominant way of conceptualizing the public” in the United States (Warner, 1990, p. 52). Western philosophy has tended to treat sight as a primarily intellectual sense in this way, which objectifies, spatialises, distances and abstracts

from its immediate surroundings the target of its attention.³¹ It should therefore not surprise us that the consequence of bringing an “enlightened” mode of viewing to the written Constitution of the United States has generally been to see it as a physical object and to discern in the public spaces it projects none of the localism, obscurity or irrationalism of its British relative. Hannah Arendt (1963) argues, for instance, that whereas previous constitutions (such as the British) concerned themselves only with protecting private freedoms, the United States Constitution was unique in creating an environment of public liberty, and certainly the opening up of a public square that is illuminated by the light of reason rather than blinded by privilege or prejudice, that is accessible to the participation and scrutiny of all, and that is regulated by the universal and impartial “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” as the Declaration puts it (Beeman, 2010, p. 3), awards ideas of “balance”, “liberty” and “equity” a rather different aesthetic structure from the British constitution as viewed through Burke’s, Bagehot’s and other eyes in that perceptual tradition.

To observe that the written Constitution of the United States makes possible a different, and even arguably a freer and more equitable, polity from its unwritten British counterpart does not, however, in itself liberate it from the charge that it remains more mechanical. The highly visualised mode of perceiving and understanding the United States Constitution, which projects it as a space to be scrutinised, comprehended and participated in by all, is also the mode of perception that tends to entomb and embalm the document itself and divest the arena it regulates of any real sense of diversity or variety. The life it sustains, in other words, becomes experientially imaginable as merely iterative of the unvarying repetitions of the printing press or the unbending laws of nature which produce and govern this document and its arena respectively. It can result, for instance, in Justice Barrett’s assertion that the Constitution’s “meaning doesn’t change over time and it’s not up to me to update it or infuse my own policy views into it” and in the conundrum identified by Michael Warner that “[i]t is the invention of the written constitution, itself now the original and literal embodiment of the people, that ensures that the

31 Ong (2012) offers just one of many influential examples of this way of thinking.

people will henceforth be nonempirical by definition” (Warner, 1990, p. 103).

The reason this particular visual regime has a propensity to produce these kinds of results is that it places a greater emphasis on space, which is generally perceived to be static, than on time, which is conventionally perceived to flow. Benedict Anderson (among others) has outlined how the print culture of the eighteenth century intensified this propensity by distributing large numbers of copies of the same text in different places at the same time. This, he argues, allowed the new written forms of the novel and the newspaper – and, one might add, the written constitution – to act as a “device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogeneous, empty time,’ or a complex gloss upon the word ‘meanwhile’” (Anderson, 2016, p. 25). The apparent contrast with the British constitution could not be starker. This has never been perceived to have somehow frozen time or to have situated itself outside of chronological progression, but to have emerged within time as an expression of British history and society. Like the local, organic nature of the British Isles to which it appeals, it continues to evolve, stumbling upon and feeling its way towards solutions rather than basing them on abstract principles. This is why one cannot “know” the unwritten British constitution as an intellectual proposition in the same way one can “know” its printed American counterpart: it does not project a fixed, universal or eternal position outside itself from which one might perceive it in the round or objectively. The acts of apprehending, understanding and assenting it sustains occur only within organic time and space, so for many of its participants it is only glimpsed or intuited dimly. It is therefore arguably fitting that, unlike the text of the United States Constitution, which is very difficult to amend and even harder to erase, the British constitution can easily be “unwritten”. All it takes is a single piece of parliamentary legislation and even Magna Carta can be left to fade and crumble like the antiquated parchment on which it is written.

There is no objective reason, though, why the United States Constitution should be perceived and understood solely through these Enlightenment modes of visibility or extricated from the flow of time accordingly. Hannah Arendt’s discussion of this document and the Declaration of

Independence in *On Revolution* (1963), for instance, shows how they can be read not to have frozen time as such but to have started it again and awarded it an alternative structure. As she notes, whereas the unwritten constitutions of the Old World (such as Britain's) tended to formalise practices and customs that were already in existence, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution sought to constitute in the more radical sense of "found and establish" by bringing a new polity and people into existence.³² She treats this achievement primarily as an aesthetic event, moreover, and in this demonstrates (though this is not her purpose) the extent to which the qualities and capacities of writing are contingent upon the aesthetic imaginary within which it is perceived to operate. For what was truly revolutionary about the Declaration of Independence, she argues, was not its call for independence or the theories of government, moral principles or natural science it espoused in support of this decision, but its very existence *as a declaration* – the impulsion it represents to "publish and declare" these reasons to a "candid world" out of "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" (Arendt, 1963, pp. 125–126).

To perceive the Declaration to be declaring in the sense of "making bright" is to imbue its printed words with visual effects. There are, of course, alternative visual regimes one could enact, but the dominant interpretive practice towards this document has been to adhere to the Enlightenment tradition in which vision objectifies, intellectualises, abstracts, universalises, spatialises and, therefore, freezes time and depersonalises its territory. One might also suggest that in the culture of the West the closing and opening of one's eyes and the play of light and dark have also been taken to provide a better analogue for the act of beginning anew than any other sense. In a comparable act of creation *ab initio*, at any rate, God first gives the newly created earth form by dividing the darkness from the light (Genesis 1: 1–4). From this visual dimension, then, the text of the Declaration and Constitution achieve their revolutionary act of starting history again and bringing into being an innovatively rational and fair people and polity.

32 It is also notable that neither of these texts grounds its account of the people and polity it constitutes in a narrative of any kind of distinctly American history.

But time in this polity must also progress – it is inhabited by humans, after all – and this is where the oral dimension of these documents’ printed words might also come into play. “To declare,” after all, can involve projecting a clarity of voice too and the written text of the Declaration, like that of the Constitution with its famous opening “We the People [...] do ordain and establish” (Beeman, 2010, p. 21), adopts a speaking voice (as does God when He creates the heavens and the earth at the beginning of time). Perceived within this more multimodal aesthetic imaginary, that is, these written words set in motion a powerful interplay between the projection of a polity by way of sight that is eternal, universal, objectified, intellectually graspable but also thereby experientially abstract, static and distanced from individual human life, and the projection of a polity by way of sound that is time-bound, contingent, personal, open to interpretation but also thereby more alive and human in scale.

There has long been a debate about whether the language of America’s constitutional documents is primarily “constative” (i.e. it records what already exists) or “performative” (i.e. it brings what it announces into being)³³ and this correlates with this alternation between the visual and oral properties of their printed words. Jacques Derrida has argued that it is the very undecidability of the relationship between those two dimensions of its written language that allows the Declaration of Independence to do its work (1986, pp. 9–10). It is this undecidability too that means that the modes of perception activated by writing and the forms of understanding it sustains are never likely to be fixed or settled but they remain contingent upon the aesthetic imaginaries within which they take place. The sphere of aesthetic analysis, or the aesthetic understanding of writing, is thus no more limited than the sphere of writing itself.

Concluding remarks

My purposes in presenting this case study have been many, but they are ultimately – I hope – all of a piece. In the first place, I wanted to demonstrate that it is possible to conduct an aesthetic analysis of writing and

33 For this debate see, for instance, Derrida, 1986; De Ville, 2009; Honig, 1991; Warner, 1990, pp. 102f.

written culture without reducing the field to an outpost of literary studies. In the second, I wished to connect the familiar trope that writing does not emerge already pre-programmed with a specific set of qualities but acquires them through an interplay with its immediate contexts with the less familiar proposition that these contexts are fundamentally aesthetic in constitution. What writing is and what it can do changes, that is, depending on the perceptible forms it assumes (unified or dispersed, manufactured or hand-written, and so on), on the sense perceptions that are brought to its interpretation (sight, sound, but also touch and smell), and on the cognitive and affective qualities with which these senses are associated. The key word here is “undecidability”: sight is not necessarily clarifying or intellectual, for instance, but it can be obfuscatory and elicit blind faith instead; nor indeed need understanding be conscious.

Aesthetic analysis in the form presented in this article is well equipped to map and scrutinise these shifting perceptual and cultural matrices (which I call “aesthetic imaginaries”) within which individual examples of written culture carry out their work. For this reason too it should also be able to function as a meta-paradigm capable of modelling the various perceptual and cognitive practices that define the more localised versions of written culture studies which characterise the field. This would not be a question of situating these versions in relation to one another on a shared map but of recognising how – as the contrast between the American written Constitution and the British unwritten constitution was designed to show – the different perceptual regimes they employ and the different properties of space and possibilities of time they unfold all contribute to reconstituting that map anew.³⁴

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³⁴ I would like to thank my brother, Robert Saunders, for some invaluable discussions on the British and United States constitutions. He is no more to be blamed for the claims I make, however, than Socrates is to be censured for the ill-informed utterances of his interlocutors.

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