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“Use my body like the pages of a book”

Tracing the ‘body inscribed’ as a conceptual metaphor for the experience of life in Western Thought and Tradition

This article focuses on the human body as “Textträger”, as an inscribable entity, the material onto which a text can be inscribed or imposed and from which this text is to be read and communicated. It explores the embedding of the ‘body inscribed’ in the metaphorical understanding of life as a text (a book, a chapter) that imprints itself on human beings as ‘parchment’.

1 Prologue

In her paper on ‘Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions’ (1989), Judith Butler criticised Foucault’s notion of the body as a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves. She points to the fact that “to speak in this way invariably suggests that there is a body that is in some sense there, pre-given, existentially available to become the site of its own ostensible construction.”¹ She goes on to argue passionately against the existence of a body proper, against a body as an object or surface on which constructions occur, against the notion of ‘a body’ seen as ontologically distinct from the process of construction it undergoes. Foucault’s notion of the ‘body inscribed’ – Butler wants to say – implies a return to the notion of the body as a given fact of nature rather than a contingent effect of power.

There can be no doubt that this idea of the constructed body has great merits. It radically opposed the political abuse of concepts such as race, gender, class, criminality, colour, and so forth, and it deconstructed the biological reductionisms that accompanied the rise of modernity and their repeated use and abuse for political purposes. On the other hand, a real disadvantage was its forgetfulness about the physical body, the body in the flesh, and – following on from this – a notorious incapacity to engage with more recent theories and modes of thinking about the way realities are perceived and constructed, theories that try to take into account the very materiality of the bodies and brains that actually experience and try to make sense of the world. I am thinking in the first instance of the concept of embodied cognition, developed in philosophy, cognitive science, and linguistics in the last thirty years or so, which

1 Butler 1989, 601.

takes the physical body seriously as the material foundation that enables and shapes human experience and the process of understanding, interpreting and making sense of things. The idea is that the basic concepts underlying human understanding of the world are grounded in bodily experience. In ‘Metaphors We Live By’, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) first developed the idea of ‘conceptual metaphors’; they argued that all abstract concepts in our minds are grounded metaphorically in embodied and situated knowledge. From there an extremely imaginative research project took off, enquiring about the role of embodied experience in thought and language, seeking to find out more about the interaction of bodily experience and mental concepts. Experimental research in Embodied and Grounded Cognition has gone on in many interesting ways to analyse the forms of interaction between bodily perception and mental concepts.² To name just one very straightforward example, there are the experimental studies done by Zhong and Leonardelli under the heading ‘cold and lonely’, which showed that body temperature affects our dispositions. In their experiments, people were asked to fill out a trait assessment questionnaire for a randomly chosen person whilst holding either a hot or cold drink. People holding a warm drink were more likely to rate the target person as being warm and friendly than those who held the cold drink.³ Raymond Gibbs draws attention to what he calls ‘embodied simulations’, stressing that we imagine (simulate) real life experience, bodily activities, and perceptions in our use of language. His research also makes clear that it is not simply the bodily experience in the strict sense that matters for ‘concept making’, but also the way imagination plays with bodily experience. His examples, such as “chew an idea”, “grasp an argument”, “throw away friendship”, or “cough up a secret”, stress the element of simulation, the weight put on imagination, on phantasies, on simulated bodily experience when we put our experience into words, as in the ‘body in mind’ metaphor employed by Mark Johnson in his book on the bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason.⁴

In this paper I want to contribute to this discussion, not by experimental research, as psychologists might do, but by what might be called excavations in the cultural memories of our metaphors. In particular I am interested in the metaphor that depicts life as a text that inscribes itself into ‘Textträger’, of life as constituting a story that imprints itself on human beings as writing material.

Thus the image is used in political speech. Obama’s speech on the eve of the 13th of April 2013, when the assassin Tsarnaev was taken into custody by the police after the Boston Marathon bombing, uses the metaphor: “We’ve closed an important chapter in this tragedy”.

² Barsalou 2008; Gibbs 2010.

³ Ritchie 2013, 99, cf. Barsalou 2010, Zhong/Leonardelli 2008.

⁴ Gibbs 2010; Johnson 1999.

“It’s high time that we close the chapter on August war 2008” was the way Alexander Ankvab formulated his hopes for better relations between the Abkhazians and Russia five years after the war.

Lyrics frequently refer to the image: “One closed chapter opens up another part” (Kanye West in “Don’t Look Down”). Phrases such as “Chapters open, chapters close”, “Closing a chapter in life can be both difficult and joyous” turn up when people speak about how to handle changes in life.

We also find the image of the ‘body inscribed’ in sentences such as “Life has marked him” (“Das Leben hat ihn gezeichnet” in German), and the instruction “to memorise something” as “writing it behind your ears” at least in German (“Schreib Dir das hinter die Ohren!”).

And finally there is a contemporary imagery that employs the ‘body inscribed’ even more radically as a metaphor for lovers, describing the experience of loving and being loved as a process of mutual bodily inscriptions: With the invitation “Use my body like the pages of a book”, Jerome, the lover, offers a future for the love between him and Nagiko, the heroine in Peter Greenaway’s Film “The Pillow Book”. I will return to this phrase in the epilogue to this study.

The theoretical concept of the Heidelberg SFB “Materiale Textkulturen”, with its focus on the material and bodily foundations of text practice in pre-modern cultures, inspired the inquiry into this particular strand in Western thought, a tradition that understands human experience in the image of the human body inscribed by the text of life: The human body as ‘Textträger’, an inscribable entity, the material onto which a text can be inscribed or imposed and from which this text is to be read and communicated.⁵

I will start from the constructivist concept of bodily inscriptions as developed by Foucault and criticised by Butler, developing it further and transferring it to the field of embodied cognition. It is hoped thus to widen our understanding of the body in its composite nature, both as a discursive event and as a natural fact in terms of the material grounding for experience and interpretation. The keyword then would

5 The term ‘Textträger’ stems from Gordon 2002, 70. When Diamantis Panagiotopoulos and the Altertumswissenschaftliche Kolleg at the University Heidelberg invited me to work together on the theme we first set out to create a history of cultural practices of textbearing, starting from liturgical practices of carrying gospel books during processions, through the *traditio legis* imagery, down to the late medieval “Beutelbuch”. However, recent developments favoured a focus on the exploration of the human body proper in its quality as a ‘Textträger’. Therefore I concentrated on the premodern imagery depicting the human body in its very quality as the material surface onto which texts are written or otherwise applied. The recent fascination with anthropodermic parchments and especially bookbindings made from human skin in a number of volumes in Harvard libraries namely in the Harvard Law School, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library and the Countway Library of Medicine will not be dealt with in the article. Cf. the recent advice for caution <http://etseq.law.harvard.edu/2014/04/852-rare-old-books-new-technologies-and-the-human-skin-book-at-hls/> (Retrieved 28.8.2014)

be embodied experience; the aim would be to supply another metaphor – more precisely a meta-metaphor – that allows us to talk about the natural body in its function as ‘experience-maker’, on which every single process of making sense is grounded, stored in the materiality of the body like a text on the pages of a book, thus adding to the research in embodied cognition from the point of view of a historical anthropologist, who works on the conceptual metaphor of ‘bearing’.⁶

We work from three pre-modern examples – from Flemish art in the late 16th century, medieval English lyrics from the 14th century, and early medieval liturgical practice in the late 10th century – which depict the body in three specific ways as the material precondition for experience and link it with specific sets of mental and cultural concepts, with stories about the pains of hell, the longing for salvation and the burdens of power. Or to put it in another way, the three examples highlight an understanding of human experience as an interplay between the materiality of the body inscribed and that of the ‘inscriber’. The human body proper as ‘Textträger’ in an active mode is a body that in its very materiality experiences, stores and bears with it the texts inscribed onto it in the course of life. On the other hand, the ‘acteur’, the ‘inscriber’ of these texts is experience: the physical experience of human life imposed on the body as factual imposition (‘Zumutung’), stories narrated into the skin and flesh of the human body in its physical materiality. In the epilogue we will briefly turn to calligraphy on human parchment in Peter Greenaway’s film “The Pillow Book”.

6 Cf. my research project *Homo portans. A study of the bearing-element in culture* <http://homoportans.de/> (Retrieved 28.8.2014). The project explores the human ‘capacity of bearing’ as a decisive element in the history and development of human cultures. It aims to trace the long-term evolution of the ‘bearing element’ in culture, found in material artefacts, social practices and discourses as a mental concept, with solid bodily foundations in the universal human experience of bearing and being borne. *Homo portans* aims at a comprehensive exploration of the human ‘capacity of bearing’, structured in three mutually complementary approaches:

- a) as a physical activity with vast consequences for the development of human cultures starting from the great human expansions “out of Africa” some 100,000 years ago down to present-day migrations or global mobility concepts;
- b) as a universal bodily and mental experience that shapes concepts of perception both negative (being weary and burdened), and positive (being capable of bearing) both in the active and in the passive mode; and
- c) as a “metaphor we live by” in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson, that is, a conceptual metaphor constructing meaning as reflected in many languages (e.g. something important carries weight, we are placing a burden on someone, we are bearing responsibility, consequences, costs, guilt, titles, blame, etc.).

The project aims to take up these linguistic ‘incidents’ and outlines a new field of research for interdisciplinary approaches to the nature of human cultures (patterns of interpretation, constructions of meaning, representation of identities etc.) by tracing the long-term evolution of the ‘bearing element’ in culture.

2 Three case studies from the pre-modern period

2.1 Case Study 1: The body inscribed ‘in use’ as book of music. A detail from Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights

The first case study is deliberately provocative and begins in the comic mode: The depiction of a body inscribed with a musical score on the buttocks.



Fig 1: The “Bottom Book of Music”. Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights (Detail).

The scene is one of the many amusing details in Hieronymus Bosch’s triptych known as the Garden of Earthly Delights, in the Prado in Madrid. It is situated on the right wing of the triptych, where the delights and the tortures of Hell are illustrated. The mood of the wing is that of a night-time scene in Hell, which – to follow Beltings’ marvellous description – appears in the foreground like a torture chamber and darkens towards a background filled with countless episodes. The many motifs make the work appear like a compendium.⁷ The torture chamber exercises torture in the ‘musical’

⁷ Belting 2002, 20.

mode. Gigantic musical instruments are transformed into instruments of torture: Two sinners are crucified on the strings of an instrument which is a hybrid of a harp and a lute. Next to them a naked crowd – an angelic choir? – led by a monstrous choir master with a frog’s mouth, is bawling notes from a score inscribed on the buttocks of the poor soul stuck under the gigantic body of the hybrid instrument. Further to the right we find a howling horde of woodwind and percussion beneath an upturned hurdy-gurdy. Another poor soul has been placed in a drum that is beaten constantly by a devil. Above him we find a man with a round red face and blown-up cheeks who plays an oversized oboe. Behind them we find another crowd of men in pain, trying to close their ears with their hands to escape the tortures of the hellish music, but apparently without success.⁸

I cannot here go into all of the possible interpretations of this magnificent piece of work. Belting suggests that it means that there is no need for the world to wait for Hell. In the hands of humankind, it has already become hell on earth. He points to the fact that the punishment of cardinal sin by a distorted version of sinful pleasure, as presented here by Bosch, was also a conventional notion at the time, though Bosch’s fantastic imagery goes far beyond the norm.⁹

De Certeau, on the other hand, who speaks of a crisis of signification in Bosch’s work, stresses that the Garden intentionally invites and frustrates the beholder’s desire to decipher visual signs, and insists upon the image’s refusal to be totalized by a verbal commentary.¹⁰

For the present purpose it is important to note that the martyrdom of the body with a musical score on its buttocks, while rendered immobile by being stuck under the body of a giant instrument, opens up an ambivalence between the pains of public exposure and use (the choir sings the notes from the person’s buttocks) and the pleasures of sexual satisfaction. This might be inferred from the relatively relaxed and quiet impression of the body inscribed – at least the visible parts of it – which does not resist being used. On the contrary, the posture seems to imply a certain degree of concentrated occupation, maybe a rather satisfactory occupation that could result from sexual interaction with the abdomen of a second body also stuck under the lute on the other side. We have here an extraordinary and otherwise unknown imagery of a body inscribed on the privy parts, in public use as a musical score, at the same time involved (maybe?) in sexual activity with another body, both stuck between a gigantic third body (a womb?) composed of the musical instrument and an oversized scorebook. Pains and pleasures of the body, inscribed as a body being used, seem to interact here in a most remarkable way.

8 Belting 2002, 38; Zuffi 2012, 83.

9 *Ibid.*, 35

10 De Certeau 1995, 59.



Fig 2: The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch (Detail from the left wing of the triptych).

Belting and others have pointed to the fact that this kind of musical torture has no precedent in literature. This fact, however, should not distract from the apparent modelling of the tortures of hell here depicted on the crucifixion of Christ, a crucifixion in the comic mode, with the typical instruments of the Arma Christi.¹¹ Three men

¹¹ Verderber 2014, 203–204, who points to Bosch’s general rejection of the conventional depiction

on three crosses. While the central figure is stretched on the strings of an oversized harp, we find the second sinner to his right chained to the bridge of the lute part of the hybrid instrument of musical martyrdom. Both men are in even greater pain in view of the large black snails winding round the wooden stems of their musical ‘crosses’. The third man in the gesture of the crucified is situated to the left of the central cross, beside the hurdy-gurdy turned upside down. He is depicted with arms widespread in the shape of the cross, falling to his right side, supported by black hands that grasp the upper part of his breast. He seems to be having a breakdown from the extraordinary noises that surround him, and from the torments of cacophony.

In the same part of the image, right in front of him, another sinner, bent forward, heavily burdened with the weight of the oversized oboe, resembles Christ bearing the cross, his body pierced by a flute stuck in his back. The imagery of musical torture displayed in this hell plays with the instruments of torture displayed in the tradition of the Arma Christi. The crown of thorns might be alluded to in the flower girdle round the opening of the lute. A lance with an indefinable black item (a sponge in the shape of a toad) reaches into the image from the left; the bridge of the lute might also be interpreted as the column, whilst hammer and nails appear in the figure of the gambler nailed to the tavern table in the foreground of the picture. The dice – representing the lots cast for the robe of Christ – appear together with an amputated hand pierced by a knife – on the shield held by the bird-like creature beating him with a rod scourge. Nearby, the dice are cast to roll across the board of a game that has been lost.

Thus the body inscribed with the musical score is embedded into this imagery of the suffering of Christ. It is being victimised, tortured by musical pains, stuck in between the hellish oversized instrument over his body and an oversized music book under it. At the same time, the body is used by the choir as a score, thus enforcing the pains of this musical hell. The body itself turns into an instrument of torture – a body inscribed that helps to increase the pains of hell.

This allusion to the crucifixion of Christ leads us on to the next example, a literary tradition that associates the body of Christ on the cross with the pains of his body being inscribed like the parchment used to issue a charter.

2.2 Case Study 2: The body inscribed enacting Salvation: the body of Christ on the Cross as parchment for a charter

The imagery of the body of Christ on the Cross used as parchment for the charter of salvation first appears in the English literary tradition in a Franciscan sermon book

of the arma Christi. This detail in the garden of delights, with its striking allusions to the crucifixion, therefore seems even more remarkable.

around the year 1300: the *Fasciculus Morum*, edited by Siegfried Wenzel in 1989. In a rather longish meditation on the passion of Christ we find the following images:¹²

“And in the fifth place, Christ suffered and shed his blood so that he might exclude the devil from purchasing us. By his trick the devil had bought mankind from our first parents for less than its regular price – as it were, for an apple of very little value. But notice: we see everyday that he who offers more obtains the goods more easily. But Christ offered and gave more than the devil: not just an apple but his body and soul all together, that he might thus free us from the devil’s hard and cruel power through his bitter and terrible death. As a result, we are his children and not the devil’s. On that exchange he left a most reliable charter for us. Notice, that a charter that is written in blood carries with it extreme reliability and produces much admiration. Just such a charter did Christ write for us on the cross when he who was ‘beautiful above the sons of men’ stretched out his blessed body, as a parchment-maker can be seen to spread a hide in the sun. In this way Christ, when his hands and feet were nailed to the cross, offered his body like a charter to be written on. The nails in his hands were used as a quill, and his precious blood as ink. And thus, with this charter he restored to us the heritage that we had lost, as was explained above, in the sixth chapter of part X. ([...] set huiusmodi carta[m] scripsit nobis in cruce quando ‘speciosus forma pre filiis hominum’ corpus suum benedictum extendit, sicut pergamenarius ad solem pergamenum explicare videtur. Sic Christus minibus et pedibus in cruce affixus corpus suum ad cartam scribendam exposuit; clavos eciam in manibus habuit pro calamo, sanguinem preciosum pro encausto.” (p. 212)

Here we have one of the earliest expressions of the idea of Christ’s body stretched on the cross, being used as parchment for the charter of love, written with his blood, enacting the deed of salvation. Miri Rubin speaks of this striking imagery as an articulation of the Passion through Eucharistic symbolism.¹³ Using the metaphor of a legal document, the promise made by Christ’s suffering body was inscribed on a parchment, the undertaking to be renewed and to offer redemption. The charter confirms the exchange of Christ’s sacrificed body, which brought the hope of redemption for Man’s love. It is a document inscribed on the crucified body, with the wounds as its script. Rubin points to the dizzying qualities of this metaphor: Christ as parchment: one can smell the body in the parchment that had covered it. Christ’s skin is the parchment, his wounds its letters, his blood the sealing wax, and the Eucharist, that section of the charter left for safekeeping in the hands of those striking the legal transaction.

¹² Wenzel 1989, 212–213.

¹³ Rubin 1991, 306–308. Cf. for the legal character of bodily inscriptions the example of Heinrich Seuse in the third example in the first paper of the present volume by Ludger Lieb and Michael Ott; also the contribution by Susan Richter, *Schrift auf Haut*.

In the course of the 14th century the idea was further developed in English lyrics in a poem called the Long Charter of Christ, a Passion lyric from around 1350, described by Emily Steiner as a rather elaborate apocryphal retelling of Christ’s life, told by Christ himself from the Cross (Incarnation, Temptation, Last Supper, Resurrection, Harrowing of Hell, Celebration of the Mass). The crucifixion is depicted as a process of the bloody inscription of a charter using the body of Christ as parchment. The Harrowing of Hell is the renegotiation of the contract, and the Eucharist is the indenture of the charter issued for security and remembrance. The charter itself, the centrepiece of the poem, grants heavenly bliss to all readers and listeners in exchange for a ‘rent’ of perfect penance. In contrast to the previous example, the imagery of the body of Christ as the parchment of a charter had a fair distribution. Steiner mentions more than twenty manuscripts containing this poem, and another twenty-five manuscripts that contain a shorter version, called the Short Charter, and a prose text called the Charter of Heaven. After 1400, revised versions of the Long Charter came into circulation. The rise of this literary form has been contextualized within an ever growing understanding of social life in terms of legal bonds, in a period in which justice was increasingly centred on the written record and in which royal bureaucracy and also personal bonds were verging on vernacularization, a point of intersection between vernacular theology and vernacular legality.¹⁴ Cristina Maria Cervone, in her wonderful book on the poetics of incarnation, develops the implications of this imagery in a most powerful and imaginative way under the heading “When Christ as a ‘Doer’ is also the ‘Love Deed’”. The “Word made flesh” speaks from the Cross the words of the charter of salvation, describing it as being written by and on his own human body. The poet envisions Christ’s skin as proclaiming his lordship heraldically by livery, then reimagines Christ’s skin as if it were parchment for the charter. Her interest focuses on the poetical ways of thinking about Christ’s humanity. This chapter examines agency and action within narrative, particularly the kenotic agency of God’s language of love as 14th-century authors see it:¹⁵

Ne myzte I fynde no parchemyn
 ffor to laston wel and fyn
 But as loue bad me do
 Myn owne skyn y 3af þer-to

 51 To a pyler I was plyzt

 54 I tugged and tawed al a nyzt
 And waschon in myn ovne blod
 75 And streyte y-streyned vpon þe rod

¹⁴ Steiner 2003, 193; Cervone 2012, 86-94, 238–239, n. 2 for full bibliographical references.

¹⁵ Cervone 2012, 87–9, line 51–99.

Streyned to drye vp-on an a tre
 As parchemyn oveth for to be
 Hereþ now and 3e shulle weton
 Hou þis chartre was y-wryton
 Vpon my neb was mad þe enke
 80 Of iewes spotel on me to stynke
 The pennes þat þe lettres wryton
 Weron scories þat I wiþ was smyton
 Hou many lettres þer on ben
 85 Red and þou maist weton and sen
 ffive thousand CCCC fifty and ten
 Woundes on me boþe rede and wen
 To shew 3ou alle my loue dede
 Mi self I w[ill] þe chartre rede
 90 3e men þat gon forþ by the weye
 Abideth and lokeþ with 3oure ye
 And redeþ on þis parchemyn
 3if eny serwe be lyk to myn
O uos omnes qui transitis per viam attendite
 Wiþstondeþ and hereþ þis chatre rad
 95 Whi I am wounded an al for-blad

The speaking subject of the poem, Christ himself, offers his very skin – suitably stretched and dried on the Cross, as parchment ought to be, as material on which to write a charter in order to make the conveyance of his gift (redemption) as secure as possible.

I follow Cervone’s interpretation in the following description:¹⁶ The image of Christ’s skin, stretched and dried as if it were parchment, is a specifically imagined, painful reminder of the cruel reality of his suffering on the Cross. It heightens the emotional intensity of this vivid narrative. The poet insists over and over again on the shocking notion that Christ offered his skin as parchment. The passage relies on the strong contrast between the overwhelmingly sickening wetness of “washon in myn ovne blod” and the unendurable stretch and desiccation of “streyned to drye vp-on a tre”. Cervone reminds us that anyone who has been cut suddenly and deeply can identify with the instinctive horror experienced at the first gush of blood and drop in blood pressure. In the same way, the poet relies on his readers having experienced some discomfort from pulling or even touching badly dried-out skin. The bodily activities of ‘tugged’ (76), ‘tawed’ (76), and ‘washon’ (77) give way to the apparently passive pain of ‘streyned’ (78 and 79). However, the appearance of the parchment’s passivity is deceptive, for what is described is a case of the body’s active sufferance.

As to the reasons for the use of Christ’s skin as parchment, we are told that they lie in his poverty: he had no parchment and therefore gave his skin. Cervone reminds us

¹⁶ Cervone 2012, 88.

of the powerful play with the bodily pains in the choice of verbs and adverbs (‘streyte’ (tautly)/‘y-streyned’ (stretched), ‘to drye’ in painful contrast to ‘waschon in myn ovne blod’). Moreover, there is implicit approval of the use of Christ’s body because of the special suitability of this particular skin for this particular task. The gift of the donor’s very own skin, which at the same time necessitates his death, paradoxically reiterates the largesse of his gift of eternal life. Cervone points out how this reinforces the notion, expressed early in the poem, that the kenotic act of Incarnation (a deed) initiates the gift of salvation (a deed). “From its inception within the narrative, the charter metaphor reinforces Christ’s lordship, his aristocratic heritage, and his concomitant lordly responsibilities.”¹⁷

Christ next makes his own agency clear by indicating how the charter itself was written and what it says. Writing the charter was his idea, he explains, and as lord he is the one who gives the gift. He does not write the charter with his own hand, however; the Jews act as his scribes, writing out his intent: their scornful spitting is the ink, their scourges the pens, the red wound from scourging the rubrication.

The reading of the charter continues: Christ’s humanity both enables and embodies the poem’s poetic conceit of the ‘love deed’. Indeed, his wounded human body serves as a central pivot for the poem’s form, physically voicing the words of the narrative enacted both by and on itself. [...] After reading the text of the charter, Christ notes that the deed was sealed with the five wounds, impressed on the sealing wax of flowing blood.

Christ then goes on to say that because the charter was written on his skin, he must journey to hell in person to show the charter to the devil. In a wonderful extension of the charter metaphor, he explains that he will leave an indenture (copy for the grantee) on earth in the form of the Eucharist.

The metaphor of Eucharist-as-indenture ensures that all Christians, living and yet-to-be-born, may obtain an efficacious copy of Christ’s body, the charter. There is no limit to the number of indentures possible, and each indenture retains the power of the original without diminishing that original; so too, each Eucharist host bears the efficacy of the original hostia without diminishing that original. Christ’s body, his skin, becomes the vehicle for the message of salvation while his body, the Eucharist, is the infinitely replicable form available to Christians throughout time. The original grantor’s copy, his crucified body, is preserved archivally in heaven until needed as a witness at the end of time.¹⁸

The body is inscribed in action. The painful and lethal experience of being sacrificed empowers the body to enact salvation. In the process of being inscribed with the utterly unbearable, the body proper acquires qualities hitherto unknown to it: The capacity to enact ultimate freedom in a position of ultimate constriction, stretched

¹⁷ Cervone 2012, 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

on the cross, unable to move, dried out, treated and written upon like a parchment by the parchment-maker, and finally sealed with the wounds of Christ, the seals of death. Here the history of salvation, the human need for redemption, is translated into the imagery of the body inscribed acquiring transforming powers, the transforming powers of a story inscribed into the body of a human being, in a way that is to be read by others: we might call the process a process of production of material virtualities in which the story of salvation is inscribed in the body of suffering humankind, unable to accept defeat, transforming its hope for redemption in a material proof of victory: a charter, a legal document the validity of which lies beyond doubt.

In fact, this imagery of the body inscribed took shape in a way in Foucault's later work, when he concentrated more and more on issues relating to the care of the self and the other. A project that emerged out of his concern for asceticism and 'spirituality', not in the Christian sense but rather borrowed from the Greek notion of salvation (*sozein*) as the idea of caring for the self, the purpose of which was to ensure the well-being, the good condition of someone, or something or of a collective – "a pro-active taking care of, guarding, and perhaps nourishing the goods of one's life, material and spiritual".¹⁹

Foucault's striving for salvation in this sense brings back the universal dimensions of the need for salvation, expressed in different cultures in different ways. The body of Christ imagined as the parchment for a document that enacts salvation once and for all in the form of a charter is thus a most powerful image for the act of salvation through the bodily gift of love.

2.3 Case Study 3: "The body imposed" with the burden of the book: The gospel laid on the back of the future bishop of Rome

Whereas the foregoing examples portrayed the materiality of the body in its quality as material to be written upon, the third – and chronologically earliest – example highlights the body as 'Textträger' in the very literal sense. It depicts the body laden with the weight of a text imposed on it: The body of the future bishop of Rome as 'bearer of the gospel' on his back; more precisely, on the nape of his neck.

This at first sight seems a very unusual way to use text, a rather unusual 'text practice': A book with its pages opened up, laid on the back of a person in a semi-inclined posture. It forms part of the liturgical rituals that accompany the ordination of a bishop. Our knowledge stems from liturgical books with the words of the texts and the gestures to be performed on the occasion, the so-called ordines.

¹⁹ Rabinow 2009, 39f.

The earliest sources attest to the ritual date as far back as the 6th century A.D., when we find mention of the *Impositio Evangeliorum*, the imposition of the open Gospel on the body of the bishop of Rome on the occasion of his ordination, in the Chancery Book of the Roman Curia, the *Liber Diurnus Romanorum Pontificum*. In the chapter “*Der ordinatione pontificis*”, in the rules for the ceremony we find the following instruction: The bishops present at the occasion are to say prayers over the candidate to be promoted to the bishopric, they lay their hands on the head of the candidate, and after that the open gospel is to be laid on the candidate’s head (*super caput!*) by the deacons present. (“*Postmodum adducuntur euangelia et aperiantur et tenentur super caput electi a diaconibus*”).²⁰ The mention of the head as the place where the gospel is to be placed is usually interpreted as a sign that this ritual element was taken over from the East, where it had been known in the 4th century as part of the ordination ceremony in the apostolic constitutions. It seems clear that it came as a new rite to Rome in the 6th century.

Future developments to be reconstructed from the so-called *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua* preserved the *Impositio Evangeliorum*. It still forms part of the ordination ceremony in a slightly changed mode, however: two bishops hold and lay the open evangile on the neck of the future Pope, one of them says the benediction, and the other bishops present touch the head of the candidate with their hand.²¹

So it is no longer the deacons, but the bishops themselves that lay on the gospel. Moreover, they lay it on the candidate’s neck, rather than on his head. Richter sees here an evolutionary development in the rite, possibly triggered by a tendency to diminish the role of the deacons, and secondly for rather pragmatic reasons: The bishops simply got tired of holding the heavy gospel, with its cover and the precious stones on it, over the head of the candidate, so they rested it on his neck.²² That explanation, however, did not ring true for contemporary medieval minds: The imposition of the gospel was paralleled with the joke mentioned by Christ in Mt 11,30, about the

20 *Liber Diurnus* 1958, 209ff., here 318; cf. Richter 1972, 20–22; see 13, n. 63 for the wording of the whole ordo: “*Psallent secundum consuetudinem. Proceedit electus de secretario cum cereostatis septem et venit ad confessionem. Et post laetanium ascendunt ad sedem simul episcopi et presbiteri. Tunc episcopus Albanensis dat orationem primam. Deinde episcopus Portuensis dat orationem secundam. Postmodum adducuntur euangelia et aperiantur et tenentur super caput electi a diaconibus. Tunc episcopus Ostiensis consecrat eum pontificem. Post hoc archidiaconus mittit ei pallium. Deinde ascendit ad sedem et dat pacem omnibus sacerdotibus et dicit ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo’*”

21 Kleinheyer 1984, 37f., *Handauflegung und Ordinationsgebete*. Canon 90 of the *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*: 90: “*Episcopus cum ordinatur, duo episcopi ponant et teneant euangeliorum codicem super cervicem eius, et unus super eum fundente benedictionem, reliqui omnes episcopi, qui adsunt, manibus suis caput eius tangant.*” Cf. Kleinheyer 1962, 65–66.

22 Richter 1972, 21 with reference to Botte, B. *L’ordre d’après les prières d’ordination* (*Lex orandi* 22), Paris 1957, 19. I was not able to trace the reference.

responsibility to preach the gospel mentioned by Paul as a great burden (“Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!”, 1 Cor 9,16).²³

The image of the text of the gospel laid open on the back of the future bishop of Rome is quite remarkable, and remained confined to the ordination of the popes.²⁴ Engels mentions a letter by Pope Urban II from the late 11th cent. where he discusses the implications of onction and points out the difference between *forma* and *virtus sacramenti*. Whereas *virtus* might get lost, in case the ordained leaves the community of the church, the *forma* of a sacrament, he says, functions like a seal, once imprinted on the body it stays with its bearer for ever and enables him to exercise spiritual power. The gospelbook imposed on the candidate might be best compared to a seal, impressed onto the pope’s body as writing material for the continuation of God’s salvific history with humankind.²⁵ I even found a depiction of exactly this element in the *ordo*, namely in the Sacramentary of Warmundus of Ivrea, drawn up around the year 1000.



Fig. 4: *Impositio Evangeliorum*. Ordination of Pope Sylvester II in the Warmund-Sakramentary (Detail), *Bibliotheca Capitulare Ivrea*, cod. LXXXVI, fol. 8r (Mariaux 2002, Planche 4).

²³ Lengeling 1962, 19.

²⁴ Engels 1987, 717.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 727.

The scene depicts the ordination of Pope Sylvester II. We see here the very moment of the *Impositio*, depicted in double: a deacon in blue standing behind the candidate holds the open gospel over the candidate’s head. At the same time, there is something lying on the candidate’s back. It is implausible that the item could be part of the garment, since it is not attached by laces or anything else. Quite obviously, the item depicts the beautiful binding of a bound manuscript laid upside-down, with the pages opened on the back of the Pope-to-be.²⁶

In order to ensure that the book does not fall, the candidate’s body has to stay in a bowing position. The book is not only a load to bear for the candidate, it also forces him into a rather uncomfortable posture: A posture of submission to the text of the book to be borne.

Whereas modern research on liturgical studies is rather sceptical about this ritual element within the ordination ordo for the Pope (as we have seen with regard to Richter), contemporary theologians were happy to interpret the act and give it a spiritual meaning.²⁷

First there is the obvious reference to the weight of the office that the candidate is about to take on. The *Impositio Evangeliorum* calls to mind – and to body! – the factual weight linked to the office. The ‘*onus apostolicae sedis*’ here materializes in the weight of the gospel book laid on the body of the future Pope. Later this ‘onus’ also found expression in the ever increasing size and weight of the Pope’s Crown, the tiara,²⁸ and in the 13th century Pope Clement IV, in a letter to a cardinal priest, literally describes the office as a burden, and seeks support to bear the ‘*onus apostolicae sedis*’.²⁹

Another interpretation seems to ascribe transformatory powers to the act of imposition of the gospel book. This dimension implies analogies to contemporary magical practices, as inherent in the carrying of amulets. Maybe this is the reason why some early medieval interpreters, such as Amalar von Metz, doubt the legitimacy of this ritual element “*Dicit ...ut duo episcopi teneant evangelium super caput eius: quod neque vetus auctoritas intimat, neque apostolica traditio, neque canonica auctoritas.*”³⁰

The word incarnate, the story of the gospel made flesh in the letters inscribed in the parchment of the gospel, is imposed on the body, into the flesh of the ritual candidate, the future Bishop of Rome. This *Impositio Evangeliorum* is an ‘imposition’ on the body in the true sense of the word: it weighs heavy on the back of the candidate,

26 Thank you to Paul Binski and Patrick Zutshi (Cambridge), who kindly looked at the image and confirmed the identification of the item as an open book.

27 Santantoni 1976, 138–147.

28 Paravicini-Bagliani 2010, 52–53.

29 Pasztor 1999, 334.

30 Richter 1972, 22, note 128.

it weighs him down and makes his body suffer the weight of the grand narrative of death and salvation told and retold by generations over the centuries. The act of the imposition has been interpreted as an act of communication between the text of the gospel and the texture of the body of the future Pope. In this sense the book itself, the weight that it puts on the body, the impression it makes on the skin is the actual instrument of inscription: the brush, which inscribes the body of the future Pope with the story that he now, as leader of the church, has to continue writing. Moreover, the book placed open and upside-down embraces the Pope's body, turns it into a page within the volume, thus incorporating him into the grand narrative he is supposed to continue.

2.4 Conclusions of the case studies

We attempted to trace the imagery of the 'body inscribed' as a conceptual metaphor for the experience of life in Western Thought and Tradition, beginning with the observation that in present-day language we often refer to the concept of 'life as a book' or life seen as a series of chapters. Phrases such as "Chapters open, chapters close", or "We closed that chapter" are used to describe changes in life. In a more literal sense, the image of the 'body inscribed' appears in phrases such as "Life has marked him", or in the admonition: "Präg Dir das ein".

In three case studies from the pre-modern period we have reconstructed different dimensions of the conceptual metaphor, all of them giving expression to the idea that experience inscribes itself onto the body, and – vice versa – that the body that lives it, writes the story of life.

The book of music on the buttocks of a poor sinner, suffering the pains of musical hell, pictures the body inscribed as a body 'in use': a body exposed to the public (the choir) who witnesses the painful situation and sings from the body without sharing the pain. At the same time, the body inscribed seems to acknowledge its situation, inescapably stuck between the instruments of torture, suffering the process of being inscribed without resistance, finding other pleasures, maybe erotic satisfaction, in the shelter of the enormous body (womb) of the lute.

The second example, the image of a document being written on the body of Christ on the Cross, who functions as a parchment for the Charter of Salvation, known from late medieval English passion lyrics, explores the body inscribed enacting salvation. In the drastic description of the painful process of producing the parchment (washed in blood, drenched, dried out and stretched on the cross with the nails) the reader suffers the process of inscription together with the body inscribed, and thus participates in the deed of salvation. Here the body inscribed in its very materiality performs salvation, it suffers inscription with the aim of transforming suffering into the good of all. The body inscribed is a caring body in that it enacts salvation, thus taking an active part in the production of meaning (*salut et solace*).

Finally, the body is inscribed in the imagery of the *Impositio Evangeliorum* as known from the Roman liturgy for the ordination of Popes since the late 6th century. Here the body inscribed is depicted as the body laden with the weight of the Gospel. The imposition of the open gospel book onto the back of the new Pope is a strong expression both for the weight of responsibility, the weight of the office, and for the inclusion of the body inscribed into the history told in the book. The body inscribed turns into a page of the book, of the story of life that he himself is supposed to continue to write.

3 Epilogue

Let me end with Peter Greenaway’s 1996 film “The Pillow Book”. In fact, this film seems to prefigure the concept of “Materiale Textkulturen” in a most idiosyncratic exploration of the work of the late 10th-century poet Sei Shonagon, a lady in waiting at the court of the Japanese Empress Consort Teishi. Her pillow book – a term used to describe collections of casual writings of men and women after they retired to their rooms at night, kept in the drawers of their wooden pillows – is a most remarkable piece of literature. A random collection of notes it seems, such as lists of things she liked (plain paper if it is nice and white [148]) and disliked (depressing things: One has written a letter and receives no reply [13]), reflections on unsuitable things (ugly handwriting on red paper [32]), nature descriptions (clouds [137]), pleasant things (looking through old papers as one of the things that arouse a fond memory of the past [17]), observations (I saw a woman who had an excellent hand-writing and sent a beautifully written poem to the man of her choice, and he replied with some pretentious jottings [144]), diary entries (It is getting so dark that I can scarcely go on writing; and my brush is all worn out. [185]), etc.³¹

Sei Shonagon’s apparent preoccupation with writing and the activity of collecting written notes runs through the whole of her work, and Peter Greenaway’s modern adaption develops this into an obsession of his heroine Nagiko, the daughter of a calligrapher, first for being written upon by her lovers and eventually for writing herself on male bodies. The experience of having words written on her skin dates back to her childhood, when her father inscribed readings from Sei Shonagon’s *Pillow Book* onto her body. She later marries a calligrapher, whom she leaves because he is incapable of performing beautiful calligraphy. Her desire to be written upon gets ever stronger and she eventually hires calligraphers as lovers to perform calligraphic services on her body until she meets Jerome, who challenges her to become the brush and write on his body after he discovers that he is unable to write on her, and is blamed as

31 Shōnagon 1976, 11; Nutu 2007, 36–44.

a worthless ‘scribbler’. Her cutting rebukes lead Jerome to challenge her to write herself: “Use my body like the pages of a book. Of your book!”

Frightened – she first runs away – but very intrigued by Jerome’s suggestion, Nagiko and Jerome dive into the experience of mutually inscribing each other’s bodies in a most powerful sequence of scenes, pictured as an exploration into the innocence of the Garden of Eden (subtitled *sexe d’un ange*). Out of this satisfaction arises Nagiko’s desire to become a writer, and Jerome agrees to serve as human parchment. He takes over the function of writing material as well as that of a means of communication for her “First Book of Thirteen”, by becoming the life-messenger of the text to the publisher.

The publisher, who had originally refused to accept Nagiko’s work, finds pleasure both in Nagiko’s first book, and in reading it from Jerome’s body. He licks the writing and tastes the flesh that bears it. The act of deciphering the text is also that of discovering the body of its bearer, and he and Jerome become lovers.



Fig. 5: Nagiko being inscribed by her husband the calligrapher, from: *The Pillowbook*, A film by Peter Greenaway, 1996.

Nagiko, deeply hurt by this betrayal, starts sending other male bodies, inscribed with the texts of her books, to the publisher, who in turn betrays his lover Jerome, as he prefers the body of an inscribed messenger to the now writing-less body of Jerome. The situation eventually drives Jerome to suicide (although by accident), and the story

ends in a tragic completion of the work of Nagiko, writing her sixth volume “The Book of The Lover” on the skin of Jerome’s dead body. Her thirteenth and last book, the “Book of the Dead”, is delivered to the publisher by a messenger who finally kills him.

The inscription of bodies in this powerful *mise en scene* of a story of love and betrayal has been read in many different ways, e.g. as a story of Nagiko’s transformation from the child inscribed by her father to an independent woman writer, from passive paper to active brush, from what is generally perceived as a feminine role to a masculine one.³²

For the present purpose however, the imagery of the bodies mutually inscribed as an image for the gift of love – however fragile – suggests an interesting afterthought to the findings presented above: Peter Greenaway’s imagery of the bodies of lovers inscribed in the relation between Jerome and Nagiko is a very powerful image for the experience of love as a craving for the word to become flesh in the lovers’ bodies. Both the creative and destructive potential of love is vested in the ambivalent desires of the self (the author) in search of self-expression and bodies in want of inscription offering themselves as a means of fulfilment: Or – to put it in other words – the experience of love is conceptualised in the image of “life as a book in need of parchment finding fulfilment in the lover’s body inscribed”.

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32 Nutu 2007, 92.

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