

# The Posthuman Pragmatics of the Book: A Multimodal Reading of a Digitised Manuscript

PLM2018 Session: In the eye of the beholder

Keywords: multimodality, Guillaume de Machaut, posthumanism, pragmatics, digital manuscripts

## Abstract text

A text is more than the words it contains. The pragmatics of the medieval manuscript page have profound implications for how its contents are understood (Carroll et al. 2013; Maxwell, Simpson, and Davies 2013). The interplay of the different resources on the page – textual, paratextual, visual, musical – combine to create meaning: medieval manuscripts are thus inherently multimodal (Maxwell 2015a, 2015b, 2018). Yet recent work on multimodality and the medieval manuscript has rarely taken into account the reading situation itself, which, due to the recent surge in manuscript digitisation, is now more likely to take place with a laptop than in a library.

In the digital reading situation the pragmatics of the manuscript page are altered: they are ‘remediated’ (Bolter and Grusin 1998). This is true not only for individual texts, but also for whole manuscript books, which are no longer viewed as weighty, tactile volumes but as thumbnails on a screen, their folios no longer turned but clicked and scrolled through. At the turn of the millennium, Katherine Hayles (1999) proposed a model for understanding posthumanism in literature; here, I will adapt that model as the basis of a multimodal analysis of an entire codex – to my knowledge, the first of its kind.

Even in the digital age, we still read. I call this paper a ‘multimodal reading’ because the experience of reading a manuscript is effected by changes in technology. Catherine Brown (2000) explored the intense experience of reading a medieval text in a library accompanied by the paratextual markings left by a long-dead medieval reader. Brown’s article, though, describes a reading situation that is very different from reading a manuscript online, via a digital repertory. How is the reading experience changed when the encounter with the word-on-flesh is remediated (again) through a hypermedial digital interface that seeks to efface itself?

This paper will take as its case study the manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds français 1586, widely known as the Machaut manuscript C. It is the earliest of the group of manuscripts that apparently contain Guillaume de Machaut’s complete-works corpus, and is a luxury book that was almost certainly intended for the dauphine Bonne of Luxembourg, but was instead converted into a memorial for her upon her untimely death in 1349. With the juxtaposition of text, image, and music that is found in the core manuscripts containing his works, Guillaume de Machaut can be said to be the multimodal medieval poet-composer *par excellence*. As a unique artefact in a unique tradition, an analysis of BnF fr. 1586 provides an example not only of the semiotic interplay of the different aspects of the ‘texts’ it contains, but also of the experience of reading the book itself.

## References

- Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin 1998. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press
- Catherine Brown 2000. 'In the Middle'. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30(3): 547–574
- Ruth Carroll, Matti Peikola, Hanna Salmi, Mari-Lisa Varila, Janne Skaffari, and Risto Hiltunen. 2013. 'Pragmatics on the Page: Visual Text in Late Medieval English Books'. *European Journal of English Studies* 17(1): 54-71
- N. Katherine Hayles 1999. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Kate Maxwell 2015a. 'An Analysis of "Mode" in Guillaume de Machaut's Lay mortel ("Un mortel lay", Lay 12)'. In Bjarne Markussen, ed., *Lydspor: Når musikk møter tekst og bilder*. Kristiansand: Portal Forlag, pp. 273–293
- Kate Maxwell 2015b. 'When Here is Now and There is Then: Bridging the Gap in Time with "Sumer is icumen in"'. In Janina Wildfeuer, ed., *Building Bridges for Multimodal Research: International Perspectives on Theories and Practices of Multimodal Analysis*. Sprache, Medien, Innovationen, 7. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 259–267
- Kate Maxwell 2018. 'The Medieval (Music) Book: A Multimodal Cognitive Artefact'. In Miranda Anderson and Michael Wheeler (eds), *A History of Distributed Cognition, Volume 2: Medieval and Early Modern*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (in press)
- Kate Maxwell, James R. Simpson, and Peter V. Davies 2013. 'Performance and the Page'. *Pecia: Le livre et l'écrit* 16: 7–15