

## Penn Humanities Forum ~ University of Pennsylvania

### Writing Surfaces: The Matter of Texts

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#### Writing Surfaces, Memory & Erasable Writing

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Peter Stallybrass elaborates upon two types of writing surfaces, those which are indelible and those which are erasable. Included in the latter category are wax tablets, slates (e.g. blackboards), white-washed walls, and even modern [etch-a-sketches](#). These writing surfaces can be reused continuously, but only at the expense of erasing what you have previously written.



On the other hand, permanent writing surfaces are used only at the cost of using them up once and for all. These include stone, papyrus, parchment, and the oft-taken-for-granted paper. Most writing surfaces made for endurance have been costly in terms of accessibility, production, and economic value. For instance, paper until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century required the mass collection of linen and cotton rags, a time-intensive and expensive endeavor. Benjamin Franklin's main consideration as a publisher was the quality of paper, and consequently the investment that he would have to make in generating any one book. When his edition of Richardson's *Pamela*, which used 17 sheets of paper, failed to sell well, he fell back on the 10 sheets-and-under rule. Unlike the resilient stone upon which pre-Columbian Maya scribes carved the narration of political intrigues and historical affairs, paper is easily subject to the vagaries of insect infestation, humidity, and destructive forces.

"A sheet of paper preserves indefinitely but is quickly saturated. A slate, [which can] always be reconstituted by erasing the imprints on it, does not conserve its traces. All the classical writing surfaces offer only one of the two advantages & always present the complementary difficulty."  
(Jacques Derrida in "Freud and the Scene of Writing")

Juxtaposing the erasable and permanent, Stallybrass inquires – How do these different surfaces shape memory? Referencing medieval scholar Mary Carruthers's spin on Plato, Stallybrass likens the memory of the young to soft wax—easily impressionable, but just as easily rubbed out and remolded. The memory of the aged resembles hard wax, noted for its retention of but also for its resistance to new imprints.

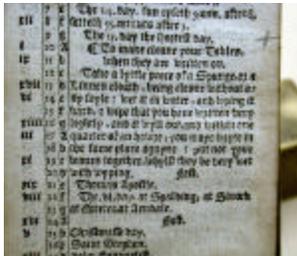
To scrutinize the correlation between memory, writing, and (im)permanent surfaces, Stallybrass treats writing surfaces and their growth prior to and during the Renaissance. He looks at notebooks and their usage to make his point.



For [Michel de Montaigne](#), French Renaissance essayist, a pocket-sized notebook and metalpoint or ink effectively filled the role of *aide-memoire*. Alluding to the inadequacy of his own memory, he writes:

Memory is an instrument of great service, without which, judgment wil hardly discharge his duty, whereof I have great want [=lack]. What a man will propose unto me, he must doe it by peecemeales: For, to answer to a discourse that hath many heads, lieth not in my power. I cannot receive a charge, except I have my writing tables about me.

The remoldable writing surface of **wax tablets** functioned as an important precursor to the notebook. Throughout the Middle Ages wax provided the medium for pedagogical tools, account books, and drafts of poems or letters; writers later copied the latter onto more perduring parchment or paper. Eventually, advances in the production of paper led to the marginalization of wax tablets as viable writing surfaces.



Wiping slates clean, underscoring the impermanence of memory, contrasts markedly with the permanence—the memorializing—of paper. By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, “writing tables” or “tablets” were increasingly used in the place of notebooks. Transportability and easy erasure characterized these writing surfaces.

Writing tables were one of the most common books purchased in Elizabethan London. Presumably, Shakespeare’s Hamlet made use of just such a tablet. In fact, throughout the play, an opposition is set up between technologies of permanence and technologies of erasure.

**Hamlet:** Remember thee?

I, thou poore Ghost, while memory holds a seate  
 In this distracted Globe: Remember thee?  
 Yea, from the Table of my Memory  
 Ile wipe away all triuiall fond Records,  
 All sawes of books, all formes, all pressures past  
 That youth and obseruation coppied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall lieu,  
 Within the booke and volume of my braine,  
 Vnmixt with baser matter...

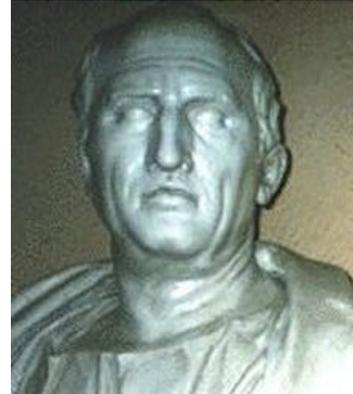
Ultimately, memory was, and is, written on stone or wax, papyrus or paper...with ink or graphite, chisel, or stylus. Memory, like writing is permanent or erasable. But consequently, memory has a history, and history is intertwined with the changing technologies of writing. Stallybrass concluded that the erasable writing tablets of early modern England helped to shape new technologies of memory, even as they were shaped by the existing technologies of printing, chiseled inscriptions, and writing on bodies, walls, clothes, ceramics, silverware, jewels, parchment, and paper.

## Hand of Cicero

Shane Butler, Assistant Professor of Classical Studies

*"The whole proscription board was merely  
a prelude to your death..."*

Shane Butler takes a closer look at the Roman author and orator, [Marcus Tullius Cicero](#) - his life, his work, and his unfortunate death to answer the question "What is a book?". In his presentation, "The Hand of Cicero," Butler questions the anachronistic way in which 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century editors have portrayed Cicero's writings – not his discourse, but rather his practice. Wax tablets, notebooks, codices, books, and scrolls all share a prominent space in artistic renderings of the Roman author. What, in fact, was a "book" for Cicero if writing was but a poor substitute for the living voice of the orator?

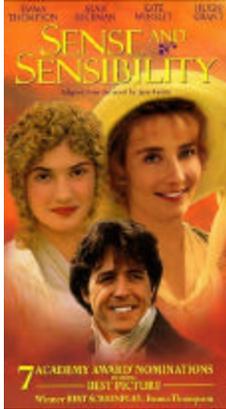


Butler also looks closely at Cicero's changing audience – Roman statesmen, buyers from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars. In ancient Rome, the power of Cicero's words was realized through his political writings, judicial accountings, and personal correspondences. It was this assertion of power that would cost him his hand and his life. For 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century buyers of Cicero, a book represented somewhat of a time machine in the sense that it could collapse temporal and spatial boundaries. A reader was connected to past authors, as well as contemporaries engaging in similar acts of reading. Writing surfaces varied while ideas expressed via the written word remained transcendent. However, 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars' rational and scientific approach to reconstructions of the past denigrated anachronisms, instead focusing on origins and "truth." In doing so, our modern vision of ancient Rome has underestimated the importance of writing in public life, regardless of the surface upon which this writing occurred.

## Son of Book: Cinematic Adaptations of Literary Works

Millicent Marcus, Mariano DiVito Professor of Italian Studies

Millicent Marcus approaches the question "What Is a Book" by asking herself what it is not. The emphatic answer—"A book is **not** a movie!" This truth is often forgotten by two groups of people: filmmakers earnestly seeking to make "faithful adaptations" of literary classics and audiences expecting to re-experience the pleasures of their favorite novel in movie form. For the filmmaker, the end vision can be problematic if the cinematic production presents an obsequious adaptation, too tied to the written word and unwilling to exploit its medium-specific strengths, namely its audio-visual properties, to tell the story. Ultimately, the filmmaker's inability to bring the book back to life for the audience will result in a disappointing version. In the process of reading a novel, we vocalize the script, cast and costume the actors, design the set, and compose the musical score. No filmmaker's rendition does justice to our own private one—while watching the film adaptation we make invidious comparisons with our own recreations. Nonetheless, a good cinematic adaptation recognizes and celebrates differences between the two art forms. Marcus proposes the concept *lateral relationship*; such a relationship allows an individual who is simultaneously a reader of text and viewer of movies to acknowledge that two distinct versions represent equally legitimate ways of telling a story.



Consequently, a cinematic adaptation, no matter how unfaithful or outrageous, signifies the literary text's revival. A boost in book sales occurs concomitantly with the release of a classic's film adaptation. Film adaptations bring their books back into the public eye, causing us to reconfront the text, whether it be William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or **J.R.R. Tolkien**. We become more attentive readers – attuned to the specificities of the written word and appreciative of what literature can do that film cannot. However, from the film we can reveal the filmmaker's personal agenda, as well as cultural changes that have taken place since the writing of the literary work.



Ultimately, Marcus is interested in the process by which the textual version is transformed for the screen. Filmmakers who self-consciously build into their films awareness of this adaptive process especially intrigue her. Marcus refers to these scenes in which the filmmaker foregrounds his or her relationship to the parent text as *umbilical scenes*. She uses the child-birth metaphor to emphasize how the filmmaker's self-conscious adaptation, regardless of its deviation from the "parent" text, is the best way to bring about the text's rebirth. Marcus references several *umbilical scenes* from Italian cinema to accentuate her point. One powerful example of an *umbilical scene* that Marcus cites is Francesco Rosi's film version of *The Truce*, a narration of **Primo Levi's** nine month odyssey from Auschwitz to his home in Turin. *The Truce's* umbilical scene, in which Rosi the filmmaker announces his commitment to bear witness and to produce a medium-specific adaptation of Levi's ordeal, occurs early in the film.

The scene is set in a market place in Krakow. Primo is trying to earn a meager living by selling shirts. Still wearing his Auschwitz jacket, Primo becomes the object of uncomprehending stares. A kind and cultured lawyer who speaks French and German agrees to translate Primo's message to the Polish onlookers. *"I had an avalanche of urgent things to tell the civilian world."* Levi writes in his memoir. *"About myself and everyone, bloody things, things that should have shaken every conscience to its foundations--of Auschwitz nearby and yet, it seemed unknown, of the mega-death from which I, alone, had escaped, everything."* In his translation, the lawyer censors Primo's testimony about his Auschwitz internment, substituting *"Italian political prisoner"* for *"Italian Jew."* When Primo questions this mistranslation, the lawyer responds, *"C'est mieux pour vous. La guerre n'est pas finie,"* – it's better for you...the war is not over." Such a statement offers chilling proof of the difficulty Primo will face in engaging the sympathies of his audience. The corresponding scene in the film is shot in a style which calls attention to the presence of the filmmaker and his particular "take" on events. When Primo asks the lawyer, *"Why didn't you tell them I am a Jew?"*, the patronizing French answer found in the text is not forthcoming. Instead, the camera cranes up high enough to afford an aerial view of the scene as the crowd withdraws from Primo. Rosi uses a very conspicuous cinematic device to announce that from now on **he** will correctly translate the written text of Levi's memoir via the language of audio-visual spectacle. The textual passage ends with the dispersion of the crowd members who have gleaned the substance of Primo's quarrel with the lawyer and refuse to be a party to the "uncomfortable truths" of Auschwitz. Unlike the market crowd, the film's audience does indeed bear witness.

