

Text and Image, Sound and (E-)Motion: Re-viewing the Bayeux Tapestry in the Digital Era

MIGUEL ALARCÃO

To Professor Maria Angélica Varandas

“A vista chega antes das palavras” (Berger 11)

First of all, I would like to thank the Arts Faculty of the University of Lisbon and ULICES for allowing me this opportunity to return to a subject dealt with in two articles (Alarcão, “Corpo” and “Cometa”), although I will be exploring it from a more practical and pedagogically oriented point of view.

The battle of Hastings (14 October 1066), an historical ‘prologue’ to the Norman Conquest and its literary representation(s) and narration(s), inspired, among others, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (*Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings*, 1848), Charles Kingsley (*Hereward the Wake*, 1866), Rudyard Kipling (“The Anvil”, first published 1911) and Julian Rathbone (*The Last English King*, 1997). But the momentous events of 1066 were obviously committed to writing long before the invention of the printing press (fifteenth century); suffice it to mention the chronicles and annals, coeval and otherwise,¹ like

¹ The digital edition of the tapestry (Foys, 2003) includes (in *Background/Library/Catalogue*) selections from the main primary sources on the Norman conquest: see, for example, the poem *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (circa 1068), by Bishop Guy of Amiens (circa 1014-1074/5), the *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis Normannorum et Regis Anglorum* (circa 1071-1077), by William of Poitiers (circa 1020-1087?), and the *Gesta Normannorum Ducem* (circa 1070), by William of Jumièges (circa 1000- ?). Other sources date already from the twelfth century: the *Historia Novorum in Anglia* (1109-1115), by Eadmer, a Canterbury monk (m.1124?), the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (circa 1125), by William of Malmesbury (1087/96?-1143?), the *Historia Ecclesiastica* (circa 1124), by Orderic (or Ordericus) Vitalis, monk at St. Évroul (1075-circa 1143), and the unfinished *Roman de Rou* (circa 1170-1175), by Wace, a canon at Bayeux (circa 1100-circa 1174), better known for the coverage of Arthurian legends in *Roman de Brut* (circa 1154).

some versions of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Garmonsway 194-200 *passim*).² Nevertheless, in the late eleventh-early twelfth century England, still in the age of the manuscript, how many people would have been able to literally *read* such information? Surely, not many... In fact, a traditional view of the concept of “literacy” – one restricted to the basic skills of writing, reading and counting – would largely fail to apply to medieval society, considering the extremely low percentage of those skills held by our ancestors. We must therefore take a broader and more pragmatic view of “literacy” and contemplate other forms of teaching and learning prevalent in the Middle Ages, namely oral, aural and visual literacy³... and it may be worth adding, by the way, that the appeal of (and to) images, rather than just “words, words, words,” as Hamlet might put it, is something that present-day students can easily and instinctively relate, react and respond to.⁴

Considering then the specific material nature of our primary source (misleadingly called “Bayeux Tapestry”, rather than “embroidery”...), we will neither be discussing here the development “from script to print” (to borrow a title from H. F. Chaytor) or “from memory to written record” (M. T. Clanchy) nor the relationship between “orality and literacy” (Walter J. Ong). But McLuhan’s glimpse, in the early 1960s, is still worth sharing:

What will be the new configurations of [...] literacy as [...] older forms of perception and judgment are interpenetrated by the new electric age? The [...] electric galaxy of events has already moved deeply into the Gutenberg galaxy. (330)

-
- 2 The Parker Chronicle (Until 1070), The Worcester Chronicle (1079) and the Laud/Peterborough Chronicle (1154). Of all these, the Worcester Chronicle provides the longest account whereas the shortest one comes from the Parker Chronicle: “In this year came William and conquered England; and in this year Christ Church [Canterbury] was burned, and a comet appeared on 18 April.” (Garmonsway 196)
 - 3 Michael Camille draws attention to the fact that “Whereas we tend to think of vision in passive terms, as the reflection of inverted images upon the retina, medieval people thought of it as a supremely active power. [...] In a world thick of presences, unseen as well as seen, images of things were far more powerful than they are today.” (19)
 - 4 As António Luís Ferronha points out, “Os alunos vivem numa iconosfera, vivem numa videoesfera, vivem e respiram imagens, crescem rodeados de imagens, nesta civilização [...] que se transformou numa autêntica iconocracia.” (9) and “Para Henri Hudrisier, o maior paradoxo ‘é que nós vivemos num mundo de inflação de imagens e pensamos sempre debaixo do poder do texto’” (31)

Half a century on, this vision has obviously materialized, as Suzanne Lewis recalls:

Assaulted at every turn by sounds and images, words and pictures, we live in an age dominated by electronic and print media. Although medieval experiences of visual and verbal messages [...] were perhaps less ubiquitous than ours, they were nonetheless [...] powerful and influential, shaping the ways in which people felt and understood their world. (xiv)

[...] the Bayeux Tapestry's imaged discourse constitutes a deliberate attempt to conflate past and present, here and there, speaker, audience, and characters, in a transparency of meaning that can be felt to exist beyond the text, beyond words. (134)

Before I proceed, let me quote one of our hosts:

Se Texto é tudo o que pode ser lido (no sentido de interpretado), então todas as manifestações culturais e artísticas se traduzem numa textualidade que, por essa mesma razão, não é apenas característica da escrita [...]. No Texto são explorados os modos de significação que se traduzem quer de forma escrita quer [...] oral e, na nossa perspectiva, também [...] pictórica. (Varandas 257)⁵

This extended notion of text(uality) is all the more important, because, as Shormishtha Panja et al. argue in the Preface to *Word, Image, Text*: “Although interdisciplinarity has transformed literary research, it is, for the most part, confined to the relationship between literature and the social sciences. In comparison, the interrelationship of the arts has been a somewhat neglected domain of exploration.” (ix)⁶

5 See Chapter III.1, “A Imagem como Escrita”, 225-261.

6 To Mikko Lehtonen, “The foregrounding of printed texts in our culture in general and in literary studies in particular has suppressed the fact that literature exists as a part of a larger whole of signification. This whole consists of speech, music, other visual signs, etc. Hence, I suggest a new object of theorising: Literature in the context of all signifying practices. [...] the printed word does exist as such but is always accompanied with other cultural forms. Hence the currently quite established concept of intertextuality should be supplemented by the concept of *intermediality* – intertextuality transgressing media borders.” (50)

According to these views, which we share and endorse, looking at the Bayeux Tapestry – an intricate visual narrative⁷ and a multilayered ‘needle-script’, clearly meant to be exhibited and seen – might be an effective and straightforward way of teaching and learning about the Norman Conquest for all those who, back in the Middle Ages, would not be able to read written sources. Likewise, I assumed that undergraduate students who, although (e-)literate, might not be willing to read books, chapters and articles about 1066⁸ would probably respond better to a visual presentation of the Tapestry and hopefully learn something from it. And, like I once wrote, there is much to be learnt:

[...], além da excelência artística propriamente dita, a tapeçaria de Bayeux possui um valor histórico-documental incalculável, legando-nos representações realistas de traços e práticas civilizacionais e materiais do quotidiano medieval, da arquitectura civil e militar ao vestuário e equipamento bélico, da construção e do aparelhamento dos barcos à caça, sociabilidade e alimentação, das relações de suserania e vassalagem aos rituais seculares e litúrgicos, etc. Paralelamente, a conjugação simbiótica entre estímulos visuais e sugestões auditivas, amplificada pelo dinamismo que da peça se desprende, justifica uma ilustração [...] das suas virtualidades sinestésicas e cinéticas. (Alarcão, “Corpo” 74)⁹

Grounded on my own teaching experience, the following four ‘ways of seeing’¹⁰ will illustrate the pedagogical potential of the Tapestry:

-
- 7 Suzanne Lewis regards it as “[...] one of the first large-scale visual narratives that can be recognized in retrospect as a full-blown medieval conception of pictorialized text.” (2), adding that “The most distinctive and obvious strategy that separates the Bayeux Tapestry from contemporary texts telling the same story is its material visualization of the events.” (30) In terms of genre, according to Lewis, the Tapestry dwells on, and binds together, the conventions of history, epic and panegyric. Likewise, to Martin K. Foys et al., “As a medieval artefact, the Bayeux Tapestry is [...] a real outlier: it is art; it is chronicle; it is propaganda; it is multimedia; it is narrative experiment; it is monumental spectacle; it is a storehouse of eleventh-century medieval objects, crafts and customs; it is a cultural icon (and modern commodity); and it is literally the fabric of history.” (xii)
- 8 “[...] agora os jovens já não pertencem à Galáxia de Gutenberg, pertencem à Galáxia de Marconi.” (Ferronha 30)
- 9 As Richard Brilliant puts it, “by energizing the viewer’s eye, the image could indirectly stimulate both the recollection of the noisy accompaniment of battle and its rehearing through the reactivation of memory.” (in Foys et al. 71)
- 10 Expression borrowed from the title of John Berger’s book.

1)

I started taking Wolfgang Grape's book with me to the Faculty, so that students might have a look and pass it around. All in all, I would say they were mildly interested, perhaps vindicating Richard Brilliant's remark that "Works of visual art, like the Bayeux Tapestry and other pictorial representations of battle, may provide explicit, demonstrative imagery of [...] conflict between contending forces [...], but, alas, they are silent. They seem to lack the power to convey the noise of battle (...), precisely because they have no accompanying soundtrack." (in Foys et al. 71)

2)

In 2003, my Faculty's research group on Medieval Studies organized a conference entitled "O Corpo e o Gesto na Civilização Medieval",¹¹ whose proceedings came out in 2005. Bearing in mind Michael Camille's assertion that "medieval pictures cannot be separated from what is a total experience of communication, involving sight, sound, action and physical expression." (qtd. in Varandas 234), my paper included a film-like digitalization of the battle scenes in Grape's book, synchronized with the first part of Carl Orff's *O Fortuna (Carmina Burana)*. When listening to the way the rhythm accelerates, the volume increases and the different instruments are pressed into service, it will not be difficult to imagine the countdown for the battle and the development of the fight itself.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nG-fya3vutQ> (2:41).

3)

Also, in 2003, a digital edition of the Tapestry came out, and so, rather than Grape's book, I started taking Martin Foys' CD-ROM with me to the Faculty. Due to the amount and detail of historical, geographical and bibliographical data, the students were impressed, but something seemed still to be missing... After all, as Richard Brilliant has forcefully put it:

War is very loud. The din of battle, the shouts of struggling men, the crash of arms, the clash of charging warhorses, the blaring of trumpets – these were common to the [...] medieval battlefield and to those who participated in such violent, deadly actions. Survivors remembered both the

11 Reviewed by Pedro Picoito in *História*.

experience of battle – [...] the overwhelming noise, the groans of stricken comrades, [...] the war cries that summoned them into action – and its aftermath – the calls that marked [...] victory or defeat. (in Foys et al. 71)

In the clash of arms, there is sound; in the scream of wounded men and horses, there is sound; in the battle cries of fighting men, there is sound; in the pounding of horses' hooves, or in the rhythmic strides of marching men, there is sound; in the call of trumpets, in the beating of drums, there is sound: the sounds of war. (76)

4)

And so we reach the last section, combining, after our title, text and image, sound and (e-)motion:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtGoBZ4D4_E&feature=related (4:24)

All things considered, the medium may not (always) be the message..., but it can certainly help! In the scope and framework of “digital humanities”, a final point for debate remains: even though we, as 21st century *teachers* – not just lecturers, authors, researchers, supervisors, academics... –, should be able to ‘surf’ what the late Alvin Toffler (1928-2016) has called “the third wave” (1980), how legitimate is it, deontologically speaking, to animate sources for the sake and purpose of pedagogy?

Works Cited

- Alarcão, Miguel. “Do Confessor ao Conquistador: figuras do cometa de 1066”. *Letras & Ciências. As Duas Culturas de Filipe Furtado*, edited by Carlos Ceia, Miguel Alarcão and Iolanda Ramos, Caleidoscópio, 2009. 445-461.
- . “O Corpo e o Gesto na Tapeçaria de Bayeux (séc. XI)”. *O Corpo e o Gesto na Civilização Medieval*, edited by Ana Isabel Buescu, João Silva de Sousa and Maria Adelaide Miranda, Edições Colibri, “Gárgula”, nº 2, 2005. 71-76. <http://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/15122>.
- Berger, John. *Modos de Ver*. Edições 70, “Arte e Comunicação”, 2002 (*Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books Ltd., 1972).
- Camille, Michael. *Gothic Art. Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World*. George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., “The Everyman Art Library”, 1996.

- Chaytor, H. F. *From Script to Print. An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature*. Sidgwick and Jackson, 1966 (1945).
- Clanchy, M. T. *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*. Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1989 (1979).
- Ferronha, António Luís. *Linguagem Audiovisual. Pedagogia com a Imagem. Pedagogia da Imagem*. Elo-Publicidade, Artes Gráficas, Lda., 2001.
- Foys, Martin K. *The Bayeux Tapestry. Digital Edition*. Scholarly Digital Editions, 2003.
- Foys, Martin K. et al. *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations*. The Boydell Press, 2016 (2009).
- Garmonsway, G. N. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., “Everyman’s Library”, 1984 (1953).
- Grape, Wolfgang. *The Bayeux Tapestry. Monument to a Norman Triumph*. Prestel, 1994.
- Lehtonen, Mikko. “Seven Theses On Theory”. *The European English Messenger*, vol. X, nº 1 (Spring 2001). 49-50.
- Lewis, Suzanne. *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry*. Cambridge University Press, 2011 (1999).
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*. Signet Books/The New American Library, Inc., 1969 (U of Toronto P, 1962).
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. Methuen & Co., Ltd., “New Accents”, 1987 (1982).
- Panja, Shormishtha et al. *Word, Image, Text: Studies in Literary and Visual Culture*. Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009.
- Picoito, Pedro. “Corpos e gestos da Idade Média”. *História*, Year XXV, III Series, nº 62 (December 2003). 20-23.
- Van Houts, Elizabeth. “The Memory of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066”. *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200*. Macmillan Press Ltd., “Explorations in Medieval Culture and Society”, 1999. 123-142.
- Varandas, Maria Angélica. *A Voz no Bestiário: Ecos da Raposa na Literatura Inglesa Medieval*. PhD dissertation, unpublished, 2003.
- “O Fortuna | Carmina Burana | Carl Orff (lyrics)”, uploaded by Rex Falsus, 22.08.2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nG-fya3vutQ (2:41).
- “The Animated Bayeux Tapestry”, uploaded by Potion Pictures, 21.09.2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtGoBZ4D4_E&feature=related (4:24).