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Lines of thought : diagrammatic representation and the scientific texts of the Arts Faculty, 1200-15000

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LINES OF THOUGHT:

Diagrammatic representation and
the scientific texts of the Arts Faculty,
1200—1500

- 1 -

Medieval scientific diagrams feature mostly in study aids like *tractatus*, *summe* or *summule*, *expositiones*, and not in *florilegia*, *questiones*, *conclusiones*, *auctoritates* and the like. This division is the result of their different character: the first are explanatory and the latter enumerative, or, in the case of *questiones*, for the highly advanced.

- 2 -

Once Peter of Spain, in the 13th century, designated the dichotomous diagram in logic as the 'Tree of Porphyry', the logical branches became pictorial branches – which caused real tension between the directions of organic growth and reading logic. Despite the tension, the Tree of Porphyry turned into a pictorial tree to fit in with an ample tree-repertoire employed to facilitate spoken discourse.

- 3 -

Whereas early medieval elemental diagrams act as a physical backdrop claiming the perfection of creation, some fourteenth-century diagrams of elements and qualities present a new feature by becoming tools for measurement and calculation, reflecting the growing interest in an analytical treatment of change and motion.

- 4 -

The *Parvulus philosophie naturalis*, a rather minor text, played a key role in the dissemination of the cross-section of the head. Widely distributed as a result of the exodus of German masters and students from the University of Prague following on the Decree of Kutná Hora in 1409, the cross-section became an autonomous and central tool in 15th century education, standardizing several main teachings on cognition.

- 5 -

Instead of considering the success of fifteenth-century textbooks as provoking 'a form of decay' - since compilers cut out extracts from their original context - from a history of science point of view it would be more interesting to approach these texts positively and consider their influential role in building consensus on scholarly topics.

(In response to : Hamesse, J. (1982). "Les florilèges philosophiques du XIII^e au XV^e siècle", *Les genres littéraires dans les sources théologiques et philosophiques médiévales. Définition, critique et exploitation*. Actes du Colloque international de Louvain-la-Neuve 25–27 mai, J. Hamesse (ed.). Louvain-la-Neuve, 181-191, here 191.)

- 6 -

In the majority of cases, images within the text of late medieval scientific treatises are designed by the author and are part of the text's reception of, whereas images in the margins were usually drawn by readers and should therefore be considered to be glosses and commentaries.

- 7 -

The claim that 'imaging craftsmanship is specific to our modern scientific culture' underlines the research setting in which images functioned, and ignores the pedagogical role of scientific images in university education, and as a result, ignores the role of images in pre-modern scientific culture.

(In response to : Latour, B. (1986). "Visualization and cognition: thinking with eyes and hands." In *Knowledge and society : studies in the sociology of culture past and present, a research annual* 6, 1–40, esp. 1–3, 16–17; Kemp, M. (1997). "Seeing and picturing. Visual representation in the Twentieth-Century Science." In *Science in the Twentieth-Century*, J. Krige and D. Pestre (eds.). Amsterdam, 361-390, esp. 363.)

- 8 -

Whereas editing a medieval text is a common and accepted practice, the editing of a medieval diagram is misleading because of the lack of a critical visual apparatus. Instead of editing a medieval diagram, it would be more fruitful to add several photos of manuscript copies featuring varieties of images which indicate its iconographical history.

- 9 -

Where Walt Disney™ draws unrestrainedly and freely from cultural heritage, especially from the historical narratives collected by the Grimm Brothers and Andersen, the company in its turn shields its productions excessively against others searching for inspiration. The extreme lobbying for the so-called 'Mickey Mouse Protection Act', which extended the date on which Mickey Mouse™ would become part of the public domain, is an example of their hypocrisy.

- 10 -

Rights of authorship are beneficial for publishing houses, as is intellectual property law for industries; neither of these protections - the latter already introduced in the nineteenth century - serves the author and inventor for which these laws were originally designed, neither the reader nor the consumer. Consequently, in the new era of e-books and the internet we should seize the opportunity to abolish these laws and rethink the model for more honest access to ideas, in which the fruits of scientific production are made freely accessible to those who raised the tax money to pay for the research in the first place, i.e. society.