

WRITING ACTS: THE RISE OF MECHANISED WRITING AND
THE BODY OF MODERNITY, 1711-1905

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Alongside the telephone and camera, the typewriter is one of the most influential technologies of the late nineteenth century, often understood as being born fully formed and successful in 1874, with the arrival of the Sholes & Glidden Type-Writer on the open market. Yet prior to this machine, there had been over 150 attempts at inventing a mechanised writing machine, stretching back to the early eighteenth century; and after this date, there were a large number of writing machines that presented significantly different design propositions to keyboard-typebar mechanism for the typewriter.

This thesis sets out to explore the pre- and early history of the typewriter, beginning with the first recorded appearance of a writing machine in 1711 and ending in 1905 when, at a meeting of the Union Writing Machine Company, the design of the typewriter became stabilised. In its exploration, this thesis sets out to answer the double question: how has the body written and how has writing 'written' the body. Through these writing machines and alongside a history of writing and a history of machine-body relations, this question is answered through four tropes of mechanised writing: copying, fragmentation, dexterity, and agency.

Beginning in the early eighteenth century, this thesis begins with a comparative analysis of automata, early typewriting machines, polygraphs, pantographs, physiognotrices and handwriting pedagogy to argue that the Enlightenment's writing technologies and techniques were expressive of and formative to a discourse of copying and imitation. It then argues that as the human body became discursively fragmented into discrete units, through physiognomy, phrenology, anthropometry and Bertillonage, writing itself transformed from a process of continuity to one of fragmentation. It also argues that this process of fragmentation was part of the late-nineteenth century's pursuit of media transparency.

This thesis then examines the absorption of women's bodies into the labour market of late-nineteenth century Western capitalism as typewriter operators, arguing that the very domesticated dexterity ascribed to these bodies and articulated through the new theories of evolution and biological science, was a bodily skill through which women were able to subvert the cultural norm of 'angels of the home' to become commercial workers. Finally, this thesis turns to the question of agency and mechanised writing, though an analysis of an 'other' form of mechanised writing machine of the late nineteenth century, the index typewriter. Arguing that these machines are similar technologies to the Ouija Board, the thesis focuses on the phenomenon of nineteenth century Spiritualism, arguing that it can be understood not only as a deeply technological practice, but also one to which the act of writing was fundamental, as the inscription method through which a ventriloquism of agency could be performed.

Through this analysis of pre-twentieth century typewriters and typewriting, this thesis argues that as writing is a bodily act, it is both formative to and a reflection of the key discourses of modernity.

KEYWORDS

Typewriter, Index Typewriters, Keyboard Typewriters, Automata, Pantograph, Polygraph, Planchette, Telegraph, Ouija Board, Writing, Handwriting, Typewriting, Needlework, Piano Playing, Spirit Writing, Silhouettes, Composite Photography, Chronophotography, International Auxiliary Languages, Spiritualism, Magic, Society for Psychical Research, Dexterity, Agency,

FOR MY DAD
WOLF HIRSCHMANN
FOR THE CURIOSITY OF IT ALL

&

IN MEMORY
FRIEDRICH KITTLER
1943-2011

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