



AHRC Beyond Text: Performances, Sounds, Images, Objects Programme

Research Programme Brief

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Arts & Humanities
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Beyond Text: Performances, Sounds, Images, Objects

Executive Summary

The **Beyond Text** strategic programme was developed in 2007 following a period of consultation with the arts and humanities research communities which identified visual communication, sensory perception, orality and material culture as key concerns for 21st century scholarship and the wider community. It recognises that today's digital culture means that communication is more rapid and often more transitory than ever before; performances, sounds, images and objects circulate swiftly on a global scale only to be replaced by even newer versions. Who controls and manages this material and its dissemination is now a key political, economic and legal question. Yet these are not new problems but ones with long historical roots. **Beyond Text** will create a collaborative, multi-disciplinary research community to work with those outside Higher Education on these issues. The programme will help inform and inflect public policy relating to our cultural and creative heritages and futures; it can also, for example, help inform educational practice at a time when traditional notions of literacy are being challenged by advances in communication technology. The programme will also foster public understanding of the many oral/aural, material and visual forms in which creativity has been generated and used. Finally, in bringing together those who create works and those who preserve, display and study them, the programme will break down traditional boundaries between practice-led or practice-based research and other forms of investigation.

Programme Specification

The programme centres on five thematic, interdisciplinary areas which take up these challenges: Making and Unmaking; Performance, Improvisation and Embodied Knowledge; Technology, Innovation and Tradition; Mediations; Transmission and Memory. Attending to the full range of sensory perceptions, these themes provide a framework to investigate the formation and transformations of performances, sounds, images, and objects in a wide field of social, historical, and geographical contexts, tracing their reception, assimilation and adaptation across temporal and cultural boundaries. By building on work that is already underway and developing new activities, the aim is to treat these phenomena as objects of inquiry in their own right and to engage in research involving processes and practices that go beyond those associated with the written word and other forms of inscription.

Emphasising both the past and the contemporary, **Beyond Text** will bring together an international, multi-disciplinary community to consider the processes of creating and communicating cultural values through sound and sight, recognising that these often depend for their continuation and realisation on a range of textual practices. Thus **Beyond Text** does not mean 'Without Text'. While the creation and interpretation of performances, sounds, images and objects on both special and every-day occasions is the central concern, their translation, mediation and recreation through text remains key to their investigation. This is an issue that is increasingly important with the rapid transformation of new forms of recording and digital dissemination. Because of these aims, **Beyond Text** is of interest to those within the arts and humanities in Higher Education Institutions but also to those responsible for making, monitoring, preserving and disseminating performances, sounds, images and objects elsewhere and in other contexts. Here, **Beyond Text** provides a key opportunity to build on the strengths of collaborative and interdisciplinary work in

the arts and humanities to develop and support collaboration with non-academic stakeholders, and to develop new research techniques and outcomes.

Programme Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives are designed to ensure that the programme has:

1. Stimulated high-quality research in the thematic areas, and in response to the research questions posed by the **Beyond Text** programme which will both draw on a wide range of disciplinary resources and skills and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, in and beyond Higher Education Institutions.
2. Made distinctive contributions to the theoretical, conceptual, thematic, practice-led and empirical study of these areas.
3. Created an arena for shared debate both within and beyond the academic community on how to use evidence, approaches and methods to generate new questions and issues for those working with performances, sounds, images and objects.
4. Developed a body of theory, methods, approaches and case studies which allow for a comparative analysis of issues concerning these questions and themes across time and place.
5. Facilitated connections, communication and exchange – at both project and programme levels – between researchers and a wide range of individuals and organisations outside academia with an interest in the research and its outcomes, including but not limited to those in the ICT, public policy, legal, creative and cultural sectors, museums, galleries, libraries and archives, performance spaces and the media. These connections will be international as well as British in scope.
6. Contributed to public awareness of this research through programme and project-based outputs and events.
7. Generated research findings and outcomes of international significance, and disseminated them to an international audience both within and beyond academia.
8. Developed a vibrant research community whose activities will continue beyond the life of the **Beyond Text** programme.
9. Built capacity in this field, in part by supporting early career researchers and postgraduate students.
10. Informed and inflected public policy in this field.

Projects are expected to help in achieving the above, but are not expected to deliver all of the programme's objectives.

This call is open across the full programme specification but the AHRC is particularly keen to encourage proposals for **Small Grants** that would help us meet objectives **3, 4** and **10**.

To achieve these objectives we would like to encourage proposals that use practice as the primary method of inquiry and investigation; proposals that deal

with questions and themes that have a strong historical nature; and proposals that address issues of technological change with a relevance for policy makers.

Attention to the Beyond Programme's aims, objectives and themes, and overall quality, will be deciding factors in the assessment of proposals. The final call is highlighting the areas listed above in the light of commissioning to date, in order to ensure that all the objectives in the Beyond Text programme are well represented once the commissioning process is complete. Proposals dealing with the other Programme themes, aims and objectives are not excluded, even though commissioning has already taken place in these areas.

How do we define what is 'Beyond Text'?

The term '**Beyond Text**' is deliberately broad and designed to encourage innovative research that will address key issues of sensory communication across time and place. This includes all forms of aural, oral, visual, material and performative practices. At the same time, there is an awareness that the very concept of text itself is geographically and historically contingent and will vary according to disciplinary domains; as stressed above, **Beyond Text** does not mean 'Without Text.' For those working on the past, even the very recent past, evidence will have been selected, recorded and annotated, often using writing, notation or other forms of inscription. Such texts will often act as a filter for cultural knowledge and practice. We expect an attention to the tensions, ambiguities and interactions that occur during these mediations, and the ways in which non-textual material sit alongside other forms of recording to lead to some of the most interesting aspects of the programme's research.

The **Beyond Text** programme is structured around five themes which raise a range of research questions where comparative work can play an important role.

Successful projects will be expected to address one or more of the themes, but the questions listed below are intended to be examples of potential inquiry and areas for debate rather than to prescribe individual research topics.

1. Making and Unmaking

This theme marks an important shift from studying the finished object to investigating the processes through which things are either generated, changed, dissolved or destroyed. This involves issues of power and authority as well as questions of creativity.

- *Interpretation and investigation of the process of making:* What is the status of the artefact or performance as a made (or ready-made) object or artistic experience? What are the relations between processes and technologies of design, construction and use, objects and artworks, objects and performances? How can we study things by making them? How does making affect knowing? What are the roles of play and iteration in the making and unmaking of cultural expression? How does and did drawing operate as a cross-media process of observing, thinking and writing? What is the difference between thinking-while-drawing and thinking-while-writing?
- *Loss and preservation:* Who decides when something is complete and when it is worth preserving in a specific state? Who decides what is authentic? How do different bodies, physical or virtual, interpret performance and what changes and losses result from these interpretations? Is conservation beneficial or harmful to a changing

understanding of creative practices? How is loss experienced in the decay or destruction of a monument or archive? What are the needs for preservation and long-term maintenance of multimedia and other digital elements? Do we lose performances forever if they are never recreated? Are objects silenced or rendered meaningless through loss of knowledge about their significance and use? What are the ethical issues involved in these decisions?

- *Reception and the making of meaning:* How does the making of things affect the ways they are received, used and understood? What happens to things after they are said to have been finished? What is the difference between 'reading' things, and reading texts, for their meanings, and for the intentions and actions of their makers or authors?

2. Performance, Improvisation and Embodied Knowledge

This theme emphasises the multi-media concept of the performative and the spectacular; questions of improvisation and its relation to a script; and the issues of sensory, tacit forms of knowing and their transmission in a range of cultural practices and technologies. It looks at how education and the passing on of knowledge occur without textual transmission. It also considers the politics of performance. Who controls performances and what acts of resistance or subversion are possible in different social and cultural contexts?

- *Performance and sensory knowledge:* How is, and was, sensory knowledge performed and what knowledge is, and was, created as a result of performance? In what ways are crafted objects part of networks of knowledge and learning across space, time and culture? How can the synaesthetic or cross-modal transfer of sensory knowledge help to build understanding?
- *Script and/or improvisation:* Whether special events or part of the 'everyday', do performances and spectacles follow a script, and if so, how was, or might this script be written? What is the relation of improvisation to performance and score? How do we address the limitations of textual notation and what happens when the script is subverted by participants?
- *Learning beyond text:* How is the knowledge of improvisational practice passed across time and place? How are (and were) the senses trained, and how are they involved in training? What different kinds of knowledge do they yield? How do political and social groups use both special and everyday performances to create collective identities and shared beliefs in both the past and the present? How can approaches which go 'beyond text' contribute to inclusion, particularly digital inclusion, by involving groups which do not usually use the written word?

3. Technology, Innovation and Tradition

New materials, instruments, systems of production, distribution and reception have all had an important impact on our understanding of creativity and its development. But while recent technological advances have ostensibly transformed global communications, linking peoples of different economic circumstances, political systems, and geographical location, how much has really shifted in terms of reception, social networks and the trust and value placed in communication? What can we learn from cultural practices in earlier technological eras?

- *Innovation and its impact:* What is the impact of innovation on the history of performance and cultural practices? How might new technologies recover or change practice? Do we see and hear differently because of the technology that is available to us? How geographically, politically and socially contingent are our experiences of visual and oral technology? What ethical implications arise because of this? Does an understanding of technological change in the past help us to understand the implications of the fast-moving shifts that we are facing today?
- *Technology and trust:* What is the impact of visual and auditory technologies, past and present, on social and political relationships? How does the legal context for this changing technological environment impact on what can be disseminated and by whom? What challenges are posed, and have been posed in the past, to notions of copyright and intellectual property by concepts of public ownership or open access? How is trust in images, sounds and objects generated in different cultural and historical contexts undergoing technological change?

4. Mediations

The dichotomies posed by the traditional contrasts between 'text and image', 'notation and music', 'script and performance' suggest unhelpful divides. This theme goes beyond binary divisions to look at mediated relationships which may include text but could also concern the interaction between images and sounds, images and objects, or sounds and objects. These relationships may be both enabled and constrained by the material forms in which they are communicated and increasingly by the developments in technology and the management and the legal environment that shape their potential for distribution and redistribution.

- *Image, inscription and understanding:* If the comprehension, evaluation and further articulation of images and objects cannot be entirely dissociated from written texts, what are these inter-relationships and how are they expressed? What is the difference between the viewing experience of reading words and of looking at other images, objects, and performances? How have images and other non-textual embodiments allowed us to interpret and contest texts? How has this changed over time and place and what implications might this have for multi-media experiences today?
- *Notation, description and instruction:* When does description become notation? What knowledge is created as a result of musical or theatrical performance? How is it transmitted? How are notational systems used to execute activities? How is knowledge generation enhanced by bringing in other forms of notation than the written word? How do we address the limitations of textual notation? What creative potential lies within notation?
- *Object and description:* How is the full sensory experience of a performance or object including taste, smell and touch, preserved for posterity? How can these experiences be described and in what ways might the possibly tacit know-how of makers be transformed through its descriptive explication? How might this depend on whether the explication is textual or other-than-textual?

5. Transmission and Memory

Written texts have been, and are, crucial to the processes of social memory and to the transmission of knowledge across generations and between societies. Yet other media and forms have played an equally important and often neglected role. This theme focuses on the work of memory in terms of objects, oral cultures and performance, and the ways in which it brings about transmission across time and space.

- *Memory and the senses*: How does transmission work when it is multi-sensory, and what is the role of the senses in processes of knowing and remembering across time and place? How do we capture the sensory experiences of the past and what does this mean in terms of cultural memory and identity? How does this relate to immigrant, national and trans-national cultures?
- *Memory and witnessing*: What is the status of witnessing as opposed to notation? How does this bear on oral testimony and oral history in the context of legal and historical research? How reliable is oral or visual evidence considered to be, relative to that of textual documents and why? How do we study secrets, rumour, gossip and other transitory forms of communication? How is memory silenced and by whom?
- *Memory and loss*: What happens when memory fails, when transmission of oral, aural and gestural traditions does not occur and when knowledge is lost? What happens when language is lost and what are the ethics of its preservation? Can different modes of transmission (in the past or present) be in tension with or work against one another? How should we account for the emergence of post-literate communities in relation to texting, signing, and new linguistic groups that possess a significant oral culture?