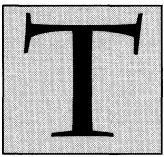


## INTRODUCTION

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## MEDIEVAL AUDIENCE, PERFORMANCE, AND DISPLAY



THE 232-FOOT-LONG STRIP OF EMBROIDERY known as the Bayeux Tapestry gives an account of an event that had just occurred – the Norman conquest of England in 1066. In the retrospective view offered by this remark-

able pictorial narrative, however, the Battle of Hastings was not meant to happen.<sup>1</sup> When seen in the context of wider Norman ambitions, England seems different only because it was an outright military conquest. If a more characteristic strategy had been allowed to follow its course, the increasingly close bonds between England and Normandy would have been sufficient to guarantee William's claim to become the legitimate successor to the English throne. As unanimously insisted upon by Norman sources, the childless King Edward named Duke William as his heir,<sup>2</sup> and it was only the unanticipated and duplicitous usurpation of royal power by Earl Harold Godwinson of Wessex that forced the invasion in 1066. This is the narrative crux that provides the visual opening in the first episode of the Bayeux Tapestry (Fig. 1).

Although the Battle of Hastings ranks as one of the most decisive military engagements in the history of the Western world, William's conquest left a jagged edge of controversy that cut deeply into the consciousness of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons who experienced the radical changes brought about by the new regime. Defensive responses to this violent rupture re-created (filtered, suppressed, transformed) the past as a way of creating and controlling the present.<sup>3</sup> The understanding of past events was reshaped in ways that defined past and present in

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terms of a new continuity.<sup>4</sup> No "document" problematizes that experience more powerfully than the visual narrative represented in the Bayeux Tapestry, which is thought to have been created between 1077 and 1082.<sup>5</sup> Late-twentieth-century audiences are still affected by its compelling and enigmatic "voices," as they find themselves drawn into a remote medieval world of unresolved tensions and conflicted loyalties. Thus, we shall explore how the monumental visual narrative draws the viewer into a carefully constructed web of indeterminacy in which the past can be re-created and transformed.

As it distances itself from the lingering late antique conventions that prevailed throughout the early Middle Ages, the Bayeux Tapestry takes on special importance as one of the first large-scale visual narratives that can be recognized in retrospect as a full-blown medieval conception of pictorialized text. Because narrative can receive its meaning only from the worlds that make use of it,<sup>6</sup> my vision of the work will be a bifocal one in which I hope to recover medieval ways of seeing in the post-structuralist terms of semiotics and narratology.<sup>7</sup> My goal is not to add yet another interpretation of what the work means, but to explore the strategies and conventions that made meaning possible both then and now. As Wolfgang Iser and others have argued, the meaning of a text is not a definable entity but something that happens, guided by structures of effects (in text and image) and response (by the viewer-reader).<sup>8</sup> In the view of Stanley Fish, meaning is not something one extracts from a text, like a nut from a shell, but an experience one has in the course of reading.<sup>9</sup> Texts initiate "performances" of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves, and it is the relative indeterminacy of the text that both allows and generates a spectrum of actualizations.<sup>10</sup>

The medieval audience was essential to the experience of the Bayeux Tapestry as an agonistic social drama and cultural paradigm.<sup>11</sup> Initiated by an irreparable breach of norm, in this case an oath sworn by Harold of Wessex, causing a crisis in William's succession to the English throne, redressive mechanisms (armed invasion) are introduced into the performance of a sociopolitical ritual in which the transgressor (Harold) is sacrificed. Within the paradigmatic framework of the discourse, the winner

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of the social drama requires cultural performance to legitimate and perpetuate his success. By involving the audience in a process of social and plural reflexivity, the Tapestry converts and distributes particular values and ends over a range of actors into a system of shared or consequential meaning. In Victor Turner's words, "Meaning always involves retrospection and reflexivity, a past, a history."<sup>12</sup> The social drama of the Bayeux Tapestry constructs an interpretation to give the appearance of sense and order leading up to and constituting the crisis. The audience becomes caught up in a network of structural contradictions and norm conflicts – a state of indeterminacy. At the same time, the ritual performance in the Bayeux Tapestry constitutes a declaration of form against indeterminacy that can be resolved only by the viewer who finds in the narrative a way of manifesting the self and of recognizing where power and meaning lie and how they are distributed. Ritual performance thus creates a dialectic process that transforms the viewer within the structure of its ideological discourse.

The rhetoric of power in the Bayeux Tapestry refers not to the rules of discourse but to a much wider, more inclusive kind of cultural construction that involves a dialogic understanding of discourse and of "truth" itself.<sup>13</sup> In this multidimensional work involving both image and text, rhetoric exceeds not only documentary or referential functions but all instrumental uses of language. Above all, the rhetoric of power exploits ambivalence and role tension in language use by multilingual speakers and readers in the late eleventh century and their relation to the interaction of discursive modes.<sup>14</sup> As we see the rhetorical power of the Bayeux Tapestry ride roughshod over the demands of historical accuracy, we become fully displaced within the peculiar realm of a medieval understanding of "truth."

As late-twentieth-century reader-viewers, we find ourselves engaged in a Foucauldian analysis of the discursive practices that constitute a culture's reality, exploring the gap between history and textuality in the rhetoric of power.<sup>15</sup> Within the post-Conquest world of the Bayeux Tapestry, power tends to be conceived in the simple, straightforward terms of feudal order, as structures of domination and submission, inclusion

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and exclusion. Whatever acts may be undertaken are instantly inscribed within established structures of dominance. Most important is the realization that power creates "truth" and hence its own legitimation.<sup>16</sup> Discourse can thus be explored in Foucauldian terms, as the order of the relations of power, but not without drawing attention to the subversive and suppressed components of England's new Anglo-Norman society.

Within the framework of contemporary semiotic analysis, the Bayeux Tapestry's narrative is organized in a conventional structure outlined by Greimas but first shaped by medieval chronicles, whereby a given order of things is disturbed, bringing about a new regime.<sup>17</sup> Within the same contemporary critical schema, whose roots can be found in the medieval *chanson de geste*, subjects (*actants*) operate along conflicting axes of obligation and desire. In terms of context, "such plots cannot be explained *within* the rules of society because they are *about* those rules."<sup>18</sup> In the sense that narrative is a social transaction between the work and its audience,<sup>19</sup> the Bayeux Tapestry is structured as a highly self-conscious, dramatically voiced discourse. The visual and textual unfolding of the story is heavily marked by what Barthes termed "signs of the narrator," codes through which the presence of the narrator and reader can be detected within the narrative itself.<sup>20</sup> Each time the figures gesture not for the benefit of other characters within the narrative, but for the audience, they stop "representing" and recount aspects of the situation otherwise unknown to the viewer. Similarly, the inscriptions allow the narrator to expand the limits of the story from what the characters can observe or know, by creating distinctively different voices carrying the plot line.

Although the story or plot constitutes an invariant core or constant against which the variables of presentation (discourse) can be measured in any narrative,<sup>21</sup> the Bayeux Tapestry presents a particularly complex cognitive experience. Within its context of historical contingencies, the operative assumption of a story existing prior to and outside the narrative was not fictive but real. Consequently, as the narrative involves modification or effacement in its representation of events, prior tellings (other sources) become a critical measure of its distortions. On the level of intertextuality and literary genre, the Bayeux Tapestry is very much a

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text about other texts. The work offered a network of ready-made, culturally produced signs that rendered the discourse transparent to its contemporary audiences.<sup>22</sup> Codes of accessibility can be found in the culturally generated structures we call genre. Constituting a "context" of texts, genre offers recognizable sets of rhetorical operations and discursive practices that enable the reader-viewer to treat everything in the discourse as a way of interpreting and evaluating what happens. In this way, "context" is generated by the work itself. It creates an historical site of production and reception, a performative discourse active in the present.<sup>23</sup>



There is now general agreement that the Bayeux Tapestry was made in England shortly after the Conquest, most likely at St. Augustine's, Canterbury.<sup>24</sup> The work was probably commissioned by Odo, William's half-brother, who accompanied him on the military campaign in 1066 and was rewarded with the earldom of Kent, making him the second most powerful man in Norman England next to the king.<sup>25</sup> Since the military conquest was scarcely complete before 1070 and the transformation of the old monarchy into a functioning component of the new Norman feudal state had barely begun, the Bayeux Tapestry can best be seen as an imaged performance text played out on a newly constructed, transitional "stage" for court audiences with residual Anglo-Saxon ties as well as strong Norman sympathies. Although Hastings was a great victory, and chroniclers talked of the conquest of England as a single battle, the Norman settlement was a long, drawn-out process. Initiated in 1067–9, William's post-Conquest policy involved nothing less than the feudalization of England and the Normanization of the aristocracy and upper clergy.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the Conqueror emphasized the legality of his rule and continuity with the Anglo-Saxon past. Indeed, the complex texture of William's England cannot be understood outside his claim to be the true successor to Edward the Confessor.<sup>27</sup> On a more basic level, the Bayeux Tapestry assured its diverse Anglo-Norman audiences that nothing much had changed in aristocratic life since 1066. As Frank Barlow

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reminds us, "There was the same lack of privacy in hall or castle, the press of servants and retainers, the stifling promiscuity . . . an even greater disdain for agriculture and a greater love of war or its substitutes – the chase, hawking and military training."<sup>28</sup>

Because such government-sponsored or quasi-official histories lacked the power or means to disseminate their messages widely, the term "propaganda" can have had only a very limited application for most of the Middle Ages.<sup>29</sup> Initially reaching only a small circle of men and women at court, the Bayeux Tapestry might nevertheless be seen as commanding a large enough audience to warrant the epithet. Notwithstanding its possible installation in Bayeux Cathedral after 1077,<sup>30</sup> the work was probably first made for display in secular sites in England, most likely in great baronial halls, such as the one in Chepstow Castle built by William fitzOsbern, Norman vice-regent with Odo.<sup>31</sup> Among his vast post-Conquest estates in Kent and Normandy, Odo could conceivably command several potential viewing sites where the 232-foot-long pictorial cycle could have been either hung or unrolled in sections on a long table.<sup>32</sup> We can imagine Odo possessing at least one hall of the rectangular shape and dimensions of the great dining hall of Dover Priory, with a 254-foot perimeter of interior plain walls up to a height of 12 feet with windows above, offering a large, continuous flat surface, which could have afforded visibility of the figures and inscriptions at fairly close range.<sup>33</sup>

Made of simple, flexible fabric, the Bayeux Tapestry can be conceived as having been designed expressly as a portable object, folded over upon itself like a ribbon and transported in a wooden case about the size of a funerary casket. Probably intended to function as a "traveling exhibition," the visualized, captioned account of the Norman Conquest could well have accompanied the peripatetic earl-bishop Odo from castle to castle and from castle to cathedral on both sides of the Channel, reaching a viewing public that included not only discrete enclaves of feudal lords and their retinues but clerical elites as well.<sup>34</sup> As we shall see, the circulation of texts and images within a medieval manuscript culture involved mobility of a more fundamental order than merely changing

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places – the work itself tended to be basically unstable.<sup>35</sup> As John Fiske has recently argued, all popular culture texts are relatively “open,” in the sense that they are completed only by their readers or viewers who insert them into their lives, thus giving them meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Despite its enormous length, the narrow strip of embroidery, only 20 inches high, was clearly designed for close viewing. At the same time that its narrative scope and sheer physical length achieves impressively monumental proportions, the relatively small scale of its inscriptions and figures demands the kind of tightly focused optical attention that enlists the intense involvement of the viewer. We shall thus center our attention on the kind of close reading (deconstruction) of episodes and sequences demanded by the visual narrative itself. Considered within its late-eleventh-century context of patron and audience, as well as its potentially wide circulation and performance function, the Bayeux Tapestry can be seen as an elaborate staging of visual propaganda, unique in its own day, addressed to a narrow but disparate range of powerful elite viewers, each of whom still had a very real stake in the controversial causes and outcome of the event that formed the center of its discourse.



Although my text centers on narratology, my purpose is not to argue theoretical positions but to bring the most powerful insights of Barthes, Bakhtin, Genette, and Todorov to bear in practical, demonstrable ways upon an exploration of narrative in the Bayeux Tapestry. The theoretical framing of my analysis is not meant to stand as a barrier to the reader's understanding. Instead, its insights, particularly those developed from film theory, are enlisted to provide a more direct access to the ways in which the work both advertises and conceals its secrets. How do the creative distortions of its images and texts open themselves to audiences both then and now? As Frank Kermode observed, the problems begin only when secrets are noticed.<sup>37</sup>

We read texts and look at images with expectations of meaning and closure, achieved in ways that resemble ordinary acts of communication.



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Both then and now, there is a demand for narrative statements that can be agreed with, for problems that are rationally soluble. The Bayeux Tapestry remains both fascinating and elusive in its enigmatic play of surface transparency and deeply repressed secrets. Because its narrative clearly belongs to the realm of "history," both medieval and modern audiences have tried to play its game according to known rules only to be frustrated by multiple, detectable signs that different games are not only possible but essential to the formation of meaning. As conventional notions concerning the true claims of history seem to break down, the reader-viewer is challenged by the problematics of genre. Exactly what kind of text is the Bayeux Tapestry? This is the problem with which my inquiry begins.

The first chapter centers on the disturbing ways in which the text-image cycle runs counter to the sense and expectations of "history" as genre. Cast in a prose style that is self-effacing and rational, the narrative voice of the inscriptions seems to lack resonance and connotation. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the "artlessness" of the anonymous narrator is not a guarantee of factuality so much as a sign that the text is extremely artful.<sup>38</sup>

In the next chapter we consider how the plausibility of narrative turns on the distortion and blatant erasure of dialogue. As the viewer is called upon to fill in the gaps left by these silences, he realizes, along with Conrad's Razumov, that there may be truth in every manner of speaking. Such disconcerting "discoveries" pressure the viewer into an increasingly more active and complicit role in coming to terms with the secrets embedded in the Bayeux Tapestry's artful narrative. Running parallel to the string of mute dialogues, a relentless shifting of episodes from place to place introduces another strategy of disruption that both advertises and conceals more secrets to be uncovered in the deeper strata of the narrative. The viewer is maneuvered into a realization that the discourse is very much about mapping places of power.

The last two chapters explore the most complex, often "cinematic" structures in the designer's multiple manipulations of episode and sequence. As these close readings inevitably open onto the problematics



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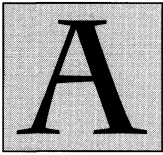
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of context, they confront equally complex intersections with historical contingency and ideology. We thus conclude with a reassessment of the game strategy in which the tapestry's patron, Odo of Bayeux, becomes a dominant player and the viewer faces the cycle's ultimate problem of narrative closure.

## CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEMATICS  
OF GENRE

AS A CELEBRATED “HISTORICAL DOCUMENT,” the Bayeux Tapestry has often been measured against a number of narratives that tell the story of the Battle of Hastings, but the work has rarely been considered as a “text” in and of itself, one among many accounts belonging to a literary genre or class of text. When its status as “text” is recognized, however, the Bayeux Tapestry can be seen as a distinctive narrative, uniquely capable of creating a challenging horizon of multiple expectations that defined its purpose or project for late-eleventh-century audiences in ways that have not yet been considered. That the designer intended to claim the work’s status as text is made abundantly clear by the profusion of Latin inscriptions, describing each event as well as identifying persons and places. As the Norman Conquest inaugurated a new era of written documents in England, the Bayeux Tapestry stands at the beginning of a gradual new confidence in the written record.<sup>1</sup> Judging from their distinctive orthography and spelling, the inscriptions were formulated in England for an Anglo-Norman audience.<sup>2</sup>

Within a new Norman bureaucracy of unprecedented scale, Latin replaced Old English as the only language of record.<sup>3</sup> Although among the aristocracy the ability to read Latin became a necessity, most readers were literate only in a minimal or practical sense, in contrast to the fully developed literacy of “cultivated” readers.<sup>4</sup> After the Norman Conquest, linguistic usage in England became extraordinarily complex, caused primarily by the introduction of French as the language spoken