ADVANTAGES OF INSCRIPTIONS

FOR CONVINCING AND CONVERTING ALLIES

EXCERPTED FROM "VISUALIZATION AND COGNITION: DRAWING THINGS TOGETHER" BY BRUNO LATOUR, 1985

COMIC BY BRET VICTOR, SEPT 2014

Who will win in an agonistic encounter between two authors, and between them and all the others they need to build up a statement?

Answer: the one able to muster on the spot the largest number of well aligned and faithful allies. This definition of victory is common to war, politics, law, and, I shall now show, to science and technology.

We must concentrate on these aspects that help in the mustering, the presentation, the increase, the effective alignment or ensuring the fidelity of new allies.

We need, in other words, to look at the way in which someone convinces someone else to take up a statement, to pass it along, to make it more of a fact, and to recognize the first author's ownership and originality.
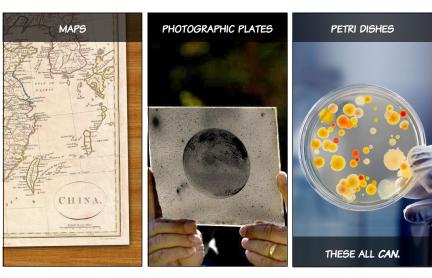
Can we summarize why it is so important for Brahe, Kepler, or Guillemin to work on two-dimensional inscriptions instead of the sky, the air, health, or the brain? What can they do with the first, that they cannot do with the second that lets us see a few of the advantages of the "paper-work" —

If you wish to go out of your way and come back heavily equipped so as to force others to go out of their ways, the main problem is to solve is that of mobilization.

You have to go and to come back with the "things" —evidence— if your moves are not to be wasted. But the "things" have to be able to withstand the return trip without withering away.

Further requirements: the "things" you gather and displace have to be presentable all at once to those you want to convince and who did not go there. In sum, you have to invent objects which have the properties of being mobile but also immutable, presentable, readable, and combinable with one another.

← MOBILE

INSCRIPTIONS ARE MOBILE.

NONE OF THESE CAN MOVE, HOWEVER —

🔒 IMMUTABLE

INSCRIPTIONS ARE IMMUTABLE. THEY MOVE, OR AT LEAST ATTEMPT TO MOVE, WITHOUT TRANSFORMATION.

EVEN EXPLODING STARS ARE KEPT ON GRAPH PAPERS IN EACH PHASE OF THEIR EXPLOSION.
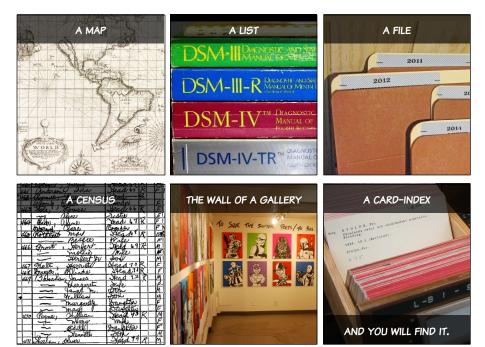
⬛ FLAT

INSCRIPTIONS ARE MADE FLAT.

🗾 SCALABLE

THE SCALE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS MAY BE MODIFIED AT WILL, WITHOUT ANY CHANGE IN THEIR INTERNAL PROPORTIONS.

📖 REPRODUCIBLE
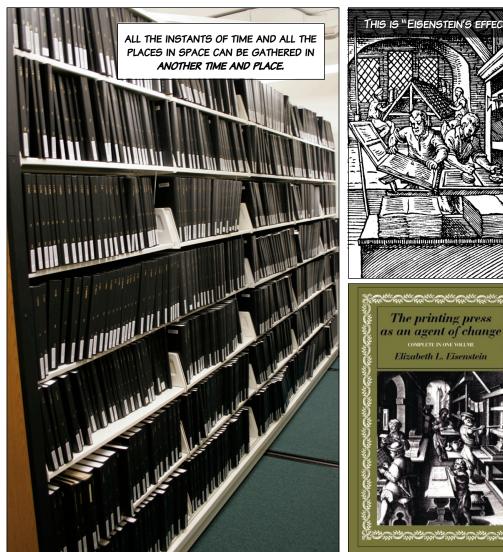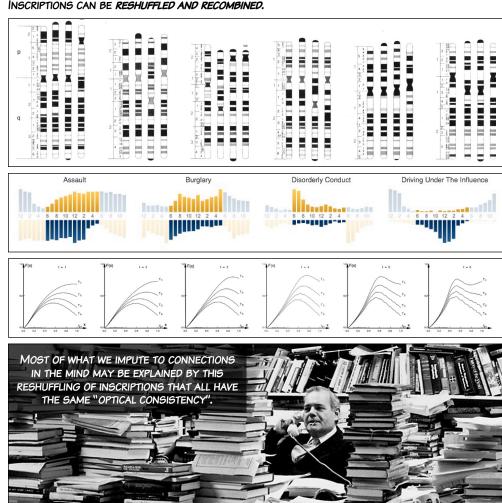
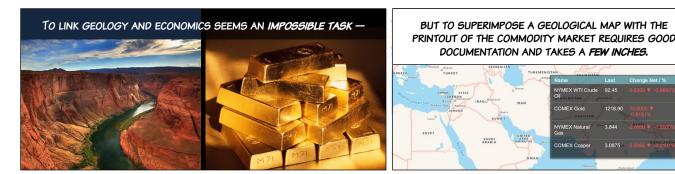INSCRIPTIONS CAN BE REPRODUCED AND SPREAD AT LITTLE COST.

🔱 COMBINABLE

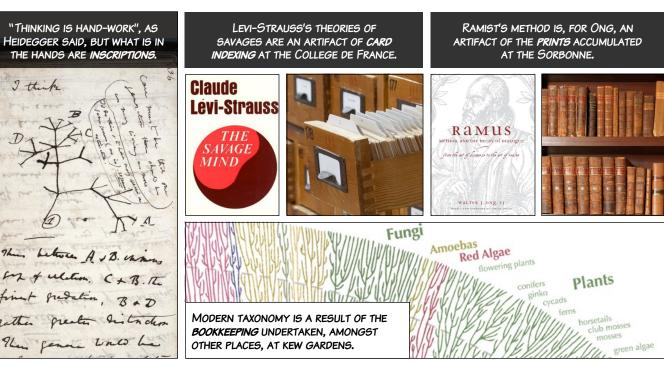INSCRIPTIONS CAN BE RESHUFFLED AND RECOMBINED.

🗄 SUPERIMPOSABLE

ONE ASPECT OF THESE RECOMBINATIONS IS THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO SUPERIMPOSE IMAGES OF TOTALLY DIFFERENT ORIGINS AND SCALES.
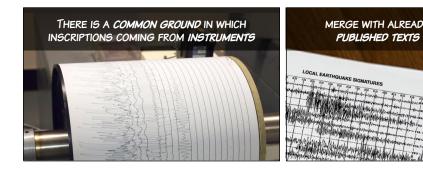
MOST OF WHAT WE CALL "STRUCTURE", "PATTERN", "THEORY", AND "ABSTRACTION" ARE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE SUPERIMPOSITIONS.
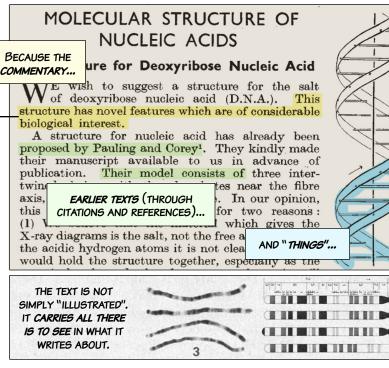
📖 PRINTABLE

A MOST IMPORTANT ADVANTAGE IS THAT INSCRIPTION CAN, AFTER ONLY LITTLE CLEANING UP, BE MADE PART OF A WRITTEN TEXT.

MOLECULAR STRUCTURE OF NUCLEIC ACIDS

Claude Lévi-Strauss
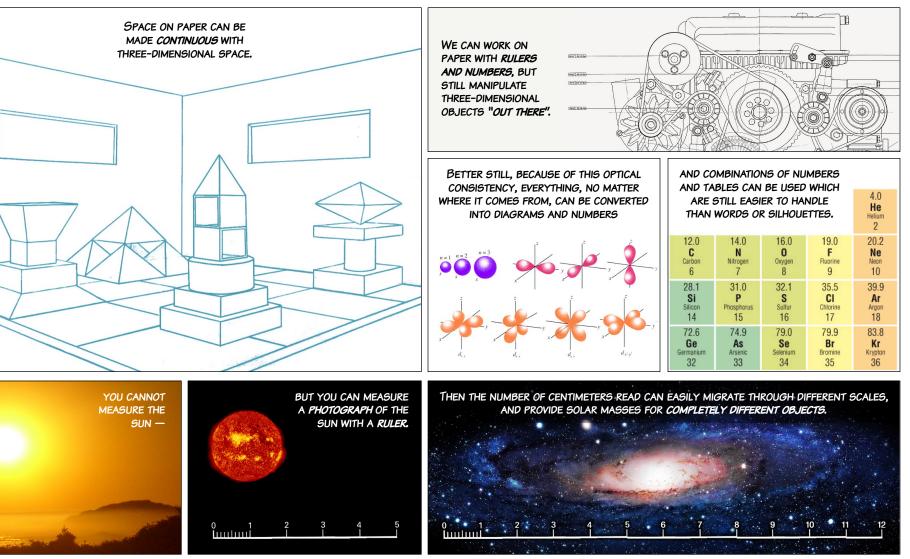
⬡ GEOMETRIC

BUT THE LAST ADVANTAGE IS THE GREATEST — THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTER OF INSCRIPTION ALLOW THEM TO MERGE WITH GEOMETRY.