Analogues to the Gutenberg Revolution

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HYPERTEXT the convergence of contemporary critical theory & technology

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If we find ourselves in a period of fundamental technological and cultural change analogous to the Gutenberg revolution, this is the time to ask what can we learn from the past. In particular, what can we predict about the future by understanding the "logic" of a particular technology or set of technologies? According to Alvin Kernan, "the 'logic' of a technology, an idea, or an institution is its tendency consistently to shape whatever it affects in a limited number of definite forms or directions" (49). The work of Kernan and others like Roger Chartier and Eisenstein who have studied the complex transitions from manuscript to print culture suggest three clear lessons or rules for anyone anticipating similar transitions.

First of all, such transitions take a long time, certainly much longer than early studies of the shift from manuscript to print culture led one to expect. Students of technology and reading practice point to several hundred years of gradual change and accommodation, during which different reading practices, modes of publication, and conceptions of literature obtained. According to Kernan, not until about 1700 did print technology "transform the more advanced countries of Europe from oral into print societies, reordering the entire social world, and restructuring rather than merely modifying letters" (9). How long, then, will it take computing, specifically, computer hypertext to effect similar changes? How long, one wonders, will the change to electronic language take until it becomes culturally pervasive? And what byways, transient cultural accommodations, and the like will intervene and thereby create a more confusing, if culturally more interesting, picture?

The second chief rule is that studying the relations of technology to literature and other aspects of humanistic culture does not produce any mechanical reading of culture, such as that feared by Jameson and others. As Kernan makes clear, understanding the logic of a particular technology cannot permit simple prediction because under varying conditions the same technology can produce varying, even contradictory, effects. J. David Bolter and other historians of writing have pointed out, for example, that initially writing, which served priestly and monarchical interests in recording laws and records, appeared purely elitist, even hieratic; later, as the practice diffused down the social and economic scale, it appeared democratizing, even anarchic. To a large extent, printed books had similarly diverse effects, though it took far less time for the democratizing factors to triumph over the hieratic -- a matter of centuries, perhaps decades, instead of millennia!

Similarly, as Marie-Elizabeth Ducreux and Roger Chartier have shown, both printed matter and manuscript books functioned as instruments of "religious acculturation controlled by authority, but under certain circumstances [they] also supported resistance to a faith rejected, and proved an ultimate and secret recourse against forced conversion." Books of hours, marriage charters, and so-called evangelical books all embodied a "basic tension between public, ceremonial, and ecclesiastical use of the book or other print object, and personal, private, and internalized reading."

Kernan himself points out that "knowledge of the leading principles of print logic, such as fixity, multiplicity, and systematization, makes it possible to predict the tendencies but not the *exact* ways in which they were to manifest themselves in the history of writing and in the world of letters. The idealization of the literary text and the attribution to it of a stylistic essence are both developments of latent print possibilities, but there was, I believe, no precise necessity beforehand that letters would be valorized in these particular ways" (181). Kernan also points to the "tension, if not downright contradiction, between two of the primary energies of print logic, multiplicity and fixity -- what we might call ‘the remainder house’ and the ‘library’ effects" (55), each of which comes into play, or becomes dominant, only under certain economic, political, and technological conditions.

The third lesson or rule one can derive from the work of Kernan and other historians of the relations among reading practice, information technology, and culture is that that transformations have political contexts and political implications. Considerations of hypertext, critical theory, and literature have to take into account what Jameson calls the basic "recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical -- indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political" (*PoliticalUnconscious* , 20).

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