Lecture 12: The Digital Author

1) Literacy in a New Media Age

2) The Digital Future of Authorship

3) Retromania?

It may seem odd to suggest that we need to spend some time rethinking the nature of authorship, as it certainly looks as though, at least in literary fields, we've done little other than that for the last four decades or so. Authorship, its institutions, and its practices give every impression of having been under continual scrutiny since the moment of conception of poststructuralism. Nonetheless, the kinds of changes in publishing practices that I'm discussing in this text reveal the degree to which our deconstruction of the notion of authorship has been, in a most literal sense, theoretical. However critically aware we may be of the historical linkages among the rise of capitalism, the dominance of individualism, and the conventionally understood figure of the author, our own authorship practices have remained subsumed within those institutional and ideological frameworks.

(Fitzpatrick 2011, 3)

1) Literacy in a New Media Age

Traditional Definitions of Literacy

a) Dictionaries
Collins 1979:
"the ability to read and write"
"the ability to use language proficiently"
DCE 1981:
"the state or condition of being able to read and/or write (being literate)"
Cambridge International 1995:
"the ability to read and write"
Fig.: "Knowledge of how to use …" e.g. computers ► computer literacy

b) Encyclopedia Britannica:
- "Competence with written language, both in reading and writing, is known as literacy."
- "Two dimensions … are important in understanding the growth of literacy: learnability and expressive power … The two dimensions are inversely related to each other."
- "Whereas oral language is learned quite independently of whether it is taught or not, literacy is largely dependent upon teaching."
- "It is common to think of literacy as the simple ability to read and write … In fact, literacy involves competence in reading, writing, and interpreting texts of various sorts. It involves both skill in decoding and higher levels of comprehension and interpretation. These higher levels depend upon knowledge both of specialized uses of language and of specialized bodies of knowledge. The intimate relations among language, literacy, and specialized bodies of knowledge have contributed to the identification of literacy with schooling."
- **Levels of Literacy (Encyclopedia Britannica)**
    - "As literacy began to be required for … vital social purposes, oral language came to be seen as loose and unruly and lacking in social authority."
    - basic vs. higher levels of literacy? (6 vs. 10-12 years of schooling)
    - environmental or lay literacy vs. specialized literacy
    - elite literacy (e.g. science, law, or literature)
- **Literacy and Culture (Encyclopedia Britannica)**
    - "Consonantal and alphabetic writing systems can express essentially all the lexical and grammatical meanings in the language (but not the intonation) and are thus highly suitable for the expression of original meanings. They constitute an ideal medium for technical, legal, literary, and scientific texts that must be read in the same way by readers dispersed in both time an space."
    - "One could look for the basis of many of the particular features of Western culture in the invention of an alphabetic orthography."

c) Literacy Today

"At a time when children need the broadest set of skills the world has ever demanded of them, literacy is frequently defined simply as the ability to read and write written text. Most educators know that literacy is much broader than this and *incorporates abilities to think, assess, deconstruct, critically analyze, synthesize, create and communicate across a variety of media including text.* Visual literacy, information literacy, media literacy, technological literacy, environmental literacy, mathematical literacy and cultural literacy are just a few components of a holistic understanding of the skills that today's children need in order to participate fully in a global environment."

(http://www.virtualteachercentre.ca/Literacy/Resources/definitions.html)

Literacy in a New Media Age (cf. Kress 2003)

- "… for me *literacy* is the term to use when we make messages using letters as the means for recording that message." (23)
- "*Literacy* remains the term which refers to (the knowledge of) the use of the resource of writing." (24)
- "So far I have insisted that a writing system, or writing itself, is not necessarily the same as 'literacy', which is – for me – writing with letters." (61)

Developments Sparked by the New Media:

- writing   >   image
- book   >   screen
- telling   >   showing
- logic of time   >   logic of space
  (linearity, causality)   (simultaneity, co-presence)
- fixed reading path   >   flexible reading path
- 'empty' meaning   >   'filled' meaning
- imagination focused on >   imagination focused on
  'meaning'   'order'

                makers of meaning:
telling the world   ►   showing the world
▼   **remakers of meaning:**   ▼
interpreting the world   ►   ordering the world (140)

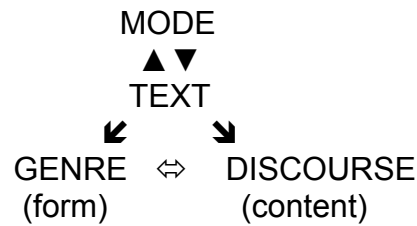iteracy = the ability to read and write all kinds of texts
                          ↙   ↘
to order and interprete   to create and communicate
↕(to think, assess, deconstruct, critically analyze, synthesize)↕

multimedial literacy = literacy + visual literacy
                          ↕media literacy↕
                          ↕cultural literacy↕

MODE
▲▼
TEXT
↙ ↘
GENRE ⇔ DISCOURSE
(form) (content)

Consequences:

- orientation towards 'completed texts' gives way to orientation towards 'information as it is supplied' (163)
- "Reading of written texts is becoming simpler, for instance in the decreasing clausal complexity of sentences, and it is becoming specialized. At the same time, reading of the multimodal message/text is becoming more complex ... with the dominance of the new media, and with the 'old' media ... being reshaped by the forms of the new media, the demand on readers, and the demands of reading, will if anything be greater, and they will certainly be different." (167)

2) The Digital Future of Authorship

- the 'wreader' (George P. Landow 1995)?
- accessibility vs. gatekeeping?
- 'net literature'? (cf. Hartling 2009)
- the role of e-readers (Kindle etc.) and electronic distribution in general
- authors' rights/copyright/intellectual property?
- stability vs. flux? (Fitzpatrick 2011)
  > effects of the replacement of closed forms by open forms?
  > effects of the replacement of 'writing' by 'typing'?
- the key issue of interaction

➔ from product to process
   from originality to remix
   from text to ... something more (multimodality)

(Fitzpatrick 2011, 8-14, 14-18, 18-22)

3) Retromania?

The intersection between mass culture and personal memory is the zone that spawned retro. Time, perhaps, for a provisional definition distinguishing retro from other modes of relating to the past:

1) Retro is always about the relatively immediate past, about stuff that happened in living memory.

2) Retro involves an element of exact recall: the ready availability of archived documentation (photographic, video, music recordings, the Internet) allows for precision replication of the old style, whether it's a period genre of music, graphics or fashion. As a result, the scope for imaginative misrecognition of the past – the distortions and mutations that characterised earlier cults of antiquity like the Gothic Revival, for instance – is reduced.

3) Retro also generally involves the artifacts of popular culture. This differentiates it from earlier revivals, which, as the historian Raphael Samuel points out, were based around high culture and originated from the higher echelons of society – aristocratic aesthetes and antiquarians with a rarified taste for exquisite collectibles. Retro's stomping ground isn't the auction house or antique dealer but the flea market, charity shop, jumble sale and junk shop.

4) A final characteristic of the retro sensibility is that it tends neither to idealise of sentimentalise the past, but seeks to be amused and charmed by it. By and large, the approach is not scholarly and purist but ironic and eclectic ... It uses the past as an archive of materials from which to extract subcultural capital (hipness, in other words) through recycling and recombining: the bricolage of cultureal bric-a-brac.

(Reynolds 2011, xxx-xxxi)

What does that imply for notions of authorship?

a) postmodernist deconstruction of Romantic and Modernist notions of authorship along the lines of Salman Rushie's "How does newness come into the world? ... Of what fusions, translationsm conjoinings is it made?" (*The Satanic Verses,* p. 8)
b) heightened responsibility of authors / theories of authorship in order to not let the future die as illustrated in Simon Reynold's last words "I still believe the future is out there." (428)

➔ **We may be postmodernist, but we are certainly not postmodern**

I want to suggest, however, that such shifts are not, in actuality, radical alterations of the nature of authorship, but rather an acknowledgement and intensification of things that have been going on beneath the surface all along.

(Fitzpatrick 2011, 7)

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