

POST-GUTENBERG NARRATIONS

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ADDITION TO TRADITION The Standard for narrative forms was set over the past two-and-a-half thousand years by epic verse from Homer to John Milton, drama from Aischylos to Shakespeare, novels from Rabelais to Dostoevski. As modes of narration, these works influenced the models of our perception of the world. The narrative logic of these works corresponded *grasso modo* to the rationalist philosophy of western culture. Causality, linearity, and sequence were thus part of the fundamental character of classical narrative techniques. Narration became a technique for organizing material in line with the criteria of linearity and causality. These apparent categories of content and philosophy, which determined the structure of narrative—the construction of narrative material—were in fact equally shaped by the demands of the technical carrier medium. The book, with its sequential letters, rows of lines and consecutive pages, created a tight technical corset into which were embedded the narrative causality and linearity. Modes of narration had as much to do with the technical disposition of the book as they did with philosophical-ideological demands. Rebellions against the classical methods of narration therefore always began with revolutions of the technical disposition: in the book itself. Once bookmaking permitted the combination of letters and images, cross-connections of image and text became possible, allowing a departure from classical linearity as well as initial attempts at simultaneity. *The Book of Kells* (c. 800 AD), the book of Gospels attributed to the Irish monastery Kells and a pinnacle of early medieval book art, already abolished the linear sequencing by a technical device: images became letters, letters became images. Tellingly, it was *The Book of Kells* that James Joyce cited, alongside Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*¹, as a source for his great work *Finnegan's Wake* (1922-1939). So intertwined are the images and letters—especially the initials—in *The Book of Kells* that they are often indistinguishable. One is sometimes unsure whether one is reading an image or looking at a text. Because of its extreme visibility, the text becomes illegible, so to speak—it can be read only by those already familiar with it, by those who remember the Gospels. *The Book of Kells* requires a pre-existing knowledge of its text, of its historical and cognitive context. The meaning is revealed only to those who remember, who remember again. The Gospels return in another form and in another time.

The Book of Kells corresponds in structure to the model of Vico, who suggested a new model of history—a kind of simultaneity of situations separated in time. History, he said, was a cyclical process in which known elements constantly recur. Occurrences in

one cycle have parallels in others; the figures of one cycle return with different names in other cycles. This philosophy of recurrence (*ricorso*) is not solely interpretable—in line with Nietzsche—as the recurrence of the identical but might be interpreted as a splitting up of homogenous elements into heterogeneous elements, as development and evolution. The philosophy could also be interpreted as a rhizome-like model of history, as a coexistence of the seemingly unrelated, as a multilayered meaning of one and the same symbol before it keels over and disintegrates into chaos. Stratas of meaning and code types (images and words) overlap and pass through each other. By taking to an extreme the merging text and image, the art of illumination sought to create a historical space where nothing is separated or excluded.

Book illumination furnished the following centuries not only with models for new crossovers of image and text, but also for forms of narration as coexistence, as simultaneity, as parallelism, as cyclical process, as a manifold field of relationships between text and image—in short, the model for media that go beyond the possibilities of the book, for CD-ROM and DVD. In its finest moments, the illustrated book touched the boundaries of the book. On precisely that borderline began the development of CD-ROM and DVD: new, post-Gutenberg possibilities of narration and of image-and-text linkage.

The illustrated or ornamental embellishment of the word continuously encountered since the earliest manuscripts stems from the wish to enliven by decoration the monotony of text as well as from the desire to pictorially convey to the illiterate something of the text's content. The significance of image and that of text have thus been interrelated since the very beginnings. Inherent in book illustration is the merging of image and word, the overlapping of different languages and codes into an absolute unity. The naïve formulation that an image renders more sensual the text means nothing more than that expressiveness of both image and text is heightened by their interrelated. Two codes, namely image and text, interpenetrate and overlap: that is the essence of book illumination, of incunabulum wood-engraving, of epistolary painting, of the illustrated texts of edification; of the pictorial bibles (*bible historée* and *bible moralisée*).

The scribes, in whose hands the illustration often lay, also had to include miniatures next to the coloured headings. Transcending the phase of miniature painting, the figurative or ornamental decoration of handwriting and books became the book illumination that is now an important document of early art practice. In illumi-

¹ Giambattista Vico, *Principi di una scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*, 1725. (*Principles of new science concerning the common nature of the nations*, Trans. Th. G. Bergin, M. H. Fisch, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968.)

(dis)locations, ZKM digital arts edition, Buch und DVD-ROM, ostfildern, 2007

nation, the image painted with the most precious colours became a page of its own, and therefore an autonomous form. Within the image, the lettering diminished while plant and animal ornamentation unfolded. Entire lines of text were formed from stylized animals. The monastic artists created strange, symmetrical compositions and images with visionary character. Illumination as a whole increasingly tended towards illusionist realism. Illumination, the first sign of a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', of a synthesis of text and image, began to wane in Europe in the 16th century, rendered superfluous by the rise of the printed book and printed illustration. The letterpress took the place of handwriting and graphic book illustration replaced illumination.

Monasteries borrowed and lent books among each other to make copies. During copying, the scribes made spelling and grammatical errors, sometimes even mistakes that mirrored their misunderstanding of the original. Through the erroneous transcriptions many differences developed between separate manuscripts, variations of the same or recurrence in a different form. These early manual book illustrations and illuminations are the first forms of transcoding and transmission. The illustrated and illuminated books refer to other books and contexts. These illustrated folios are, above all, folios of palimpsest, layers of texts, of changed, improved, distorted texts. The books are nodes in a network of continuous transmission over the centuries. Meaning is generated in a network of transcriptions. The tradition of transcription anticipated the technique of transcoding. Transcription concealed a technique that, liberated, would become a new means of artistic production, thus demonstrating that a culture only starts to produce culture by passing it on.

A classical case in point is William Blake (1757-1827), the great artist who ingeniously synthesized the arts of painting, bookmaking and writing. From Greek sculpture to medieval miniatures, Blake's work is full of transcriptions, quotations and borrowings of art-historical stock. The external cultural productions were the actual source of his so-called inner visions. Throughout his artistic practice, Blake experimented continuously and well-nigh industrially with sketches, which he repeated, corrected and tried out in constantly new compositional variations. Blake was working, by that time, in an industrial medium: the book. He delighted in experimenting with the new mass medium, and invented his own techniques (among them colour monotype and relief etching). Yet this desire for technical experimentation and his art-historical citations also underlined the calculated side of allegedly so spon-

aneously inspired creativity. Blake's originality was not fuelled by a madman's vision but by craft, skill, knowledge, education, innovative will, ideology and imagination. This imagination is most clearly evident in his artistic method, in the fabrication of his images: specifically, how he brought together image- and text space. His drawings fragment the lines, his lettering frays out into drawings. Lines become letters; letters become waves; ornamental patterns form figures. With image and text engaged in a permanent border conflict, his images become allegories, and the meaning of the text and the meaning of the image build a dynamic unit.

19th-century art was virtually overflowing with painted literature. It is no coincidence that the close connection between the visual arts and literature of the period was characterized by growing numbers of multi-talented artists—among others Eduard Mörike (*Malers Nolten*, 1832), Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, Wilhelm Busch, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Rodolphe Töpffer, Paul Heyse, Wilhelm Raabe, Nikolai Gogol. This diversity was congruent with the demands and aesthetic programmes (see Friedrich Theodor Vischer's *Ästhetik*²) of an age for which there existed only one Art. As a consequence of the artistic unity sought by the entire Romantic movement, coinciding text and image in books was increasingly aspired to. In almost all Romantic artists we find the endeavour to explain one art on the basis of another; to transform one art into another; or to merge one art with all the others: *Ut pictura poesis!*

The unity of art was invoked indefatigably and diversely. In his 'Viennese Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature' of 1808, Friedrich Schlegel had already established that Graeco-Roman art and poetry tended toward a strict separation of the dissimilar; whereas Romantic art loved the indissoluble fusion. In his Paris-Cologne lectures of 1803-4, he added: 'Poetry combines all art... poetry is music, is painting in words.' His notebooks (1807-12) record the following statement:

For poetry there is a principle produced not in the territory of language but taken from another sphere... The art form cannot, it seems, be well-separated. A poem that is pictorial must be also architectural and musical... The novel is a mixture of all the arts and sciences with which poetry is related; is at once history and philosophy, and then art too. Real painting is probably the purely hieroglyphic... Does that make painting the truly central art?—That would seem obviously to be the poetry between music and painting.³

Thus, the adjective 'Romantic' was applied to that form of art combined, in considerable measure, with other art forms: to poetry

2. Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen*, 1845-1858.

3. Friedrich Schlegel, *Zur Poesie und Literatur*, 1812.

that is musical or painterly, to painting that is literary or musical, to music that is poetic or colourful.

In truth, this union of philosophy and history, of music and painting, of science and poetry was first made possible through the new technical medium of the CD-ROM (and somewhat later DVD). They, as opposed to the book, enable music to become image or text, to be poetic or colourful. They allow, unlike the book, painting to become text or music or architecture. In the post-Gutenberg era, the CD-ROM makes possible the Romantic aesthetic of artistic unity. Those who advance the art of colour with words and transform the word into music win aesthetic unity, yet at the same time lose the narrative unity and harmony. Several voices speak at once. The signs bear multiple meanings; homogenous elements become heterogeneous. Reversal and recurrence, cycles, simultaneity and parallelism replace linearity.

The torn thread of linearity and its interweaving into a texture of simultaneity was taken up, in a modern version, by Mallarmé: first in the book *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*⁴ and then in the major uncompleted project *Le Livre*,⁵ in which the writer wanted to summarize of all his knowledge and the entire cosmos. The distribution of words and lines over great expanses across the white pages of *Un coup de dés* allowed for countless possibilities of linking between the lines and words, resulting in continuously varying readings and meanings. *Le Livre*, on which Mallarmé worked for the last 20 years of his life, would have been the masterpiece of combinatory logic on a million levels. *Un coup de dés* is a first example of network structure, of combination theory, multiple choice and/or random access to a text or work. The interconnected structure and random combinations characterized the most extreme positions of the Gutenberg book at the summit of Modernism. At the same time, the apotheosis of the book announced the transition into another medium and dictated crucial characteristics of the post-Gutenberg narrative forms in media like multiple-screen projection and CD-ROM.

The famous simultaneist book *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (1913) by Blaise Cendrars—typographically wholly innovative and with the folded reproduction of a Sonja Delaunay painting (one of the first examples of abstract art)—carried forward Mallarmé's experiments. The book was a leporello two metres in length. Lined up alongside each other, the 150 books printed in the first edition were intended to measure 300 metres: the height of the Eiffel Tower, that icon of the modern.

Mallarmé's vision of *Le Livre* expressed a narrative openness

that ushered in the disappearance of the author in favour of an algorithm, an instruction that invited the reader to participate, if not indeed presupposed a participant as opposed to author as a precondition for creating the work. A novel like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), thanks to its mixture of text and paratext, its narrative *ritardi* and astounding pictures (black and marbled pages), was likewise an ironical play upon, and voluntary rejection of, the linear tradition.

20th-century experimental literature, especially that of the *OuLiPo* group of authors ('Workshop for Potential Literature'), of Raymond Queneau (*Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, 1961), of Georges Perec (*La Vie, mode d'emploi*, 1978), and of Italo Calvino (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979) furthered the tradition of a simultaneous and combinatory reading and/or technique.⁶ Despite the technical limitations of the Gutenberg book, these extreme and avantgarde examples were early demonstrations of what our new media would be able to deliver: parallel and simultaneous representations of (visual and verbal) information, combined networking of, and random access to, that information. Contemporary electronic media have made absolute and optimized the three types of communication already contained within the book, at the same time creating new modes of narration.

NEW FORMS OF NARRATION AND AUTHORSHIP If we say that the CD-ROM or DVD continues the form of special books such as *The Book of Kells*, such a statement is relative and restricted because the CD-ROM does not know the border of a local page. Because I can jump directly from any point of information (word, image, sound) to another point on another page, I—the user—create the page; every user creates their own pages, their own books. Obviously, the database is limited just as the alphabet is limited, but the text that I construct from it is, in principle, infinite. If due to the mechanical medium—the page, the book—the narration of the Gutenberg age was characterized by a casual sequence of events in which the world was frozen on the basis of letters, the electronic book—CD-ROM or DVD—could be described as a thawing out. Therefore, the narrative form that develops from these new media can be called anti-narration because it allows non-linear, non-causal, non-sequential, singular and fragmentary successions and branching out of information. The user links the points by jumping from file to file and thereby creates the image or map. Compared with historical notions of narration, the CD-ROM is thus a kind of anti-book and anti-narration. While film generally follows the narrative

4. Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish the Hazard*. A first version was published in 1897 (in the magazine *Cosmopolis*), appearance as a book in 1914.

5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Le Livre* (*The Book*), cf. Jacques Scherer, *Le 'Livre'*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

6. Raymond Queneau, *One hundred million million poems*. Engl. version J. Crombie, Paris: Kicksaws, 1983; Georges Perec, *Life, a user's manual*. Trans. D. Bellos, London: Collins Harvill, 1978; Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Trans. William Weaver, London: Secker & Warburg, 1981.

conventions of 19th-century plays and novels, we might say that the CD-ROM is a kind of anti-film.

The CD-ROM places in question not only the concept of Gutenbergian narration in films and books, but also that of Gutenbergian authors. The true CD-ROM is not indexical but narrative, albeit in the sense of the anti-narration we know from the great 20th-century narrative experiments of writers from James Joyce to Marguerite Duras. An index is not the work of an author; therefore the majority of contemporary CD-ROM's are not authorial—they represent a trivial multimedia version of the indexical encyclopaedias. The true and important CD-ROMs or DVDs are anti-narrations, are new narrations by a new type of author. This author is hardly the classical author of books but rather a classical example of the postmodern multiple subject. The author can be the reader or a collective, a network of subjects on both sides of the CD-ROM, because the user produces, through the chosen links, the actual message. The user's choices deliver the interpretation and generate the information. In proposing and establishing possibilities of connection, selection and interpretation, the authors of the database did the same. There no longer exists a strict separation between author as demiurge, as constructor of a text universe, and the reader as occupant of this universe of the author's design. Instead, a collective of authors in the historical sense has proposed several parallel worlds. And the users (formerly known as readers) construct from these possible virtual worlds their own and singular real worlds. One might say that the CD-ROM confronts us with an anti-author. Therefore, it is all the more necessary to point out that the CD-ROM or DVD is a product of this new form of authorship whereby the author is no longer the sole guide, but the reader himself compiles the itinerary.