

## THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON LITERATURE

**William Egginton** and **Bernadette Wegenstein**

*The Johns Hopkins University*

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### Summary

The growing consensus among literary scholars is that the meaning of literature cannot be properly studied or understood outside of the specific medium of its transmission and archival. This realization can be considered a revolution in literary studies, and its fundamental ramification is the confluence of literary studies and theory with media studies and theory. The fields of media studies and media theory are dedicated to the analysis and understanding of the myriad media through which information is communicated. Under the influence of these fields, the media through which literature is communicated is no longer considered secondary to the literary content or form, but deserving attention in its own right. Moreover, literary content and form can and often are deeply influenced by the media of their transmission, as well as by the particular forms of media prevalent at the time and place of their production. The reception of literature can also be swayed by dominant media forms. This chapter discusses first the fields of media theory and media studies, their origins and current importance due to the explosion of new media in the industrialized world. Then we will look at ten examples from different historical and cultural situations of the relation between media and

literature.

## **1. Introduction**

Media are the various material ways information can be communicated. The fields of media studies and media theory are dedicated to the analysis and understanding of the myriad media through which information is communicated. Under the influence of these fields, the media through which literature is communicated is no longer considered secondary to the literary content or form, but deserving attention in its own right. Moreover, literary content and form can and often are deeply influenced by media of their transmission, as well as by the particular forms of media prevalent at the time and place of their production. The reception of literature can also be swayed by dominant media forms. In what follows we will examine historical examples of the relation between literature and media, as well as examples from a variety of cultural contexts.

## **2. Current Media Theory and Media Studies**

Media theory is the theory of how media function and how they influence perception. Media studies in the field are devoted to the study and analysis of the variety of media humans use to transmit and archive data.

### **2.1. Origins of Discipline**

Marshall McLuhan, considered by many to be the father of media studies, initiated the revolution in media studies with his declaration that "*the medium is the message.*" Although his was not the only theoretical practice to do so, McLuhan's insistence on regarding the medium as a primary rather than secondary focus for analysis was a key factor in a general movement in humanistic and social sciences to redirect attention to process, social context, performance, and other ostensibly secondary or non-essential aspects of texts or artifacts. Recent media theory, but also literary theory, has taken its cue from this movement and paid increased attention to the material conditions of communicative acts, from historical studies of the technologies of writing to more current investigations into the phenomenology of new media and how engaging with new media affects our experience of the world. For example, the highly influential work of German literary theorist Friedrich Kittler has taught a generation of scholars to think of literature as a subgenre of media. The historicist approach he pioneered focuses largely on literature as a mode of data production basically determined by the technologies of reproduction and archival available to its historical and cultural context.

### **2.2. New Media Theory**

New media theory is largely concerned with media dependent on digital rather than analogue technology. Digital technology is technology that utilizes a binary code to transmit or archive data. Data that has been archived or transmitted in this form is then recomposed in a format, or interface, suited to the needs of an end user. Analogue technology, in contrast, transmits and archives information without converting it into code, although the material of the information may indeed be altered. For instance, a telephone using analogue technology converts the vibrations in the air coming from a

speaker's vocal cords into an electronic pattern that then recreates those vibrations in a receiver on the other end of the line. A telephone or computer using digital technology achieves the same effect by encoding those patterns into binary code and then recomposing them with an appropriate interface on the other end. Much new media theory has been concerned to demonstrate that the shift from analogue to digital technology constitutes a fundamental change in how humans organize knowledge and perceive the world. New media theorists concerned with literature argue that this fundamental change is also registered in the kind of literature that is written, and how literature is read. Furthermore, film theorists have been quick to note that the revolution in communication technology has had an equally profound impact on cinema. In fact, the vast majority of today's mainstream Hollywood productions contain some portion of computer animated material. We will return to this after a brief look at the history of literature's relation to its media.

### **3. Historical Examples**

The history of literature and the various media used for its transmission is vast, but a few examples from diverse cultures and historical moments can help to illustrate the profoundly complex relation between media and literature.

#### **3.1. Oral Transmission**

Cultures have traditionally been divided according to whether they are primarily oral or literate. An oral culture is one that is not acquainted with or does not make broad use of writing. A literate culture is one in which writing and reading is broadly disseminated. Seminal work by Milman Perry and his student Albert Lord changed the way scholars thought about works that have always held an honored place as the origin of western, literate culture. Specifically, the epic poetry of Homer, while always assumed to have been memorized and recited by poets, was also thought to have been written by one man prior to its dissemination. Perry traveled to what was in Homer's day ancient Greece, and is now Kosovo, where he studied and recorded the *guslars*, often illiterate singers who compose their songs using formulations remarkably similar to the style of Homer's epic poetry. He became convinced that, rather than being the written work of one man, epic poetry like the *Iliad* was composed orally by performers who passed their stories down to generations. More recent scholarship has begun to challenge the simplicity of the distinction between orality and literacy, however, arguing that the specificity of the medium used to transmit information is more fundamental than whether or not the culture engages in a writing practice.

#### **3.2. Pictography**

Pictography is a writing system in which information is communicated through illustrated figures. The earliest known pictograms were used in Mesopotamia, and may have developed into the cuneiform inscriptions of the Sumerians in the fourth millennium BCE, although some scholars argue that the earliest writing forms originated in accounting systems, not pictograms. While technically a pictogram resembles what it intends to convey, in practice pictograms can be quite abstract, and are the basis of more complex pictorial forms of writing such as ideograms and

hieroglyphs. Ideograms are figures that represent ideas, and hieroglyphs, mainly associated with the ancient Egyptians, are symbols that contain both ideographic and alphabetic elements. As writing systems develop, symbols associated with a specific object or idea begin to operate according to the rebus principle, and representing a phonological element in the spoken language. As this phonological element can be used in combination to represent large numbers of ideas, alphabetic systems tend to have increased flexibility over pictographic ones. There is reason to believe that pictographic systems such as those of the pre-Columbian Mesoamericans also contained phonetic elements. Some scholars have argued that most Mesoamerican civilizations were aware of the possibilities of phonetic writing systems, but chose not to develop them, finding them impoverished relative to a well developed pictographic system. Writing systems that are entirely pictographic or ideographic would nonetheless be highly context dependent. For instance, the pictographic symbols used in many countries to distinguish between men's and women's restrooms would be hard to comprehend in a culture in which women were not associated with dresses and men with pants. Literature produced in cultures that depend on primarily pictographic writing systems will therefore of necessity rely on highly culture-specific forms of expression. This in turn makes pictographic writing systems much more difficult to decipher than might be supposed. It was not until the discovery in 1799 of the Rosetta stone, for example, which juxtaposed the same passage in two ancient languages (Egyptian and Greek) on the basis of three different writing systems (Demotic Egyptian, Hieroglyphic, and Greek), that the meaning of the hieroglyphs was revealed.

### **3.3. The Andean Khipu**

Although there is some controversy as to the nature of the information transmitted by the *khipu*, there is no doubt that it constituted a basic medium of communication in pre-Colombian Andean civilization. A series of colored strings tied in conventional patterns of knots, the khipu was probably used mainly for accounting purposes, but also might have been used to convey more complicated information, from brief messages to historical narratives. There exist several alphabetic texts from the colonial period that claim to be transcriptions of khipus. Scholars have analyzed these narratives and concluded that the content and form are unique, and that there was likely a dialogic relationship between the content and style by the specific medium of the khipu and the civilization's communication practices and experience of the world as a whole. Specifically the centrality of the khipu may have instituted a primarily numerical way of thinking about stories and narration, which in turn influenced alphabetical renderings of Andean historiography in the colonial period.

### **3.4. Manuscript**

Manuscript is any medium that transmits information written by hand on paper or parchment, although other materials have been used as well. It is distinguished from inscription, which refers to the pressing of letters or figures into a malleable surface with an instrument, and printing, through which letters or figures are imprinted on a surface using blocks or moveable type, which allows for their continual reproduction. Manuscript has existed for millennia in many different cultures, and obviously continues to be a viable medium today. That said, the period of manuscript's dominance

as the exclusive or even most important medium of communication is long over. In Europe, manuscript culture began to die out with the introduction of the printing press in Germany in the 1450's by Johannes Gutenberg. Gutenberg cannot be said to have invented the printing press, however. Block printing had existed both in Europe and Asia for centuries, and the innovation of moveable type, allowing for much faster organization of pages, dates to the early fifteenth century in China. Scholars of medieval literature and culture believe that the reliance on manuscript for the archiving and transmission of knowledge led to specific practices and presuppositions. For instance, in order to be disseminated, the information in manuscript would have to be copied by hand. During this process, the text being copied would accumulate minor and major changes and commentaries, becoming along the way the work of multiple authors, in a phenomenon called by scholars of medieval French literature *mouvance*. Because of *mouvance*, as well as the close relationship between a specific manuscript and its context of production, the text during the age of manuscript had a far less independent relationship to its various material manifestations than is widely assumed to be the case today, after centuries of gradual abstraction and independence due to changing media. It is in part due to this close material relationship between something written by hand and the content of the writing that manuscripts and other hand-written media have had in the past and continue to have today a close association with religious practice and sentiment. In many cultures words written by hand carry a certain power or even magical properties that one would not associate with the printed word. In medieval Europe, for instance, words scraped from a hand-written parchment could have magical effects when consumed as a potion, and even today, the autograph of a famous or admired person is greatly sought after.

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### Biographical Sketches

**William Egginton** received his PhD in Comparative Literature from Stanford University. He is currently Professor of German and Romance Languages and Literatures at the Johns Hopkins University. He is the

author of *How the World Became a Stage* (2003), *Perversity and Ethics* (2006), and *The Philosopher's Desire* (forthcoming 2007).

**Bernadette Wegenstein** received her PhD in Romance Languages and Linguistics from Vienna University. She is currently Visiting Associate Professor at the Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory* (2006), and the producer of the documentary film *Made Over in America* (2006).

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