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Question 1 MATX Comprehensive Exam
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Signature: _____

Question Presented by Thom Didato –

Reflecting on MATX 600, 601, 602, 603 and 604, draw out the concepts, issues, and theoretical frameworks that are of the most relevance to your own research across the fields of media, art, and text. Provide specific examples, focusing in particular on those that allow the demonstration or development across media and disciplines. Your essay should be well argued, with a clearly stated thesis supported with specific examples. Please note: this may not be a simple autobiographical narrative. It is acceptable to use the first person.

Answer by Vaughn Whitney Garland -

During the past year as a doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University's Media, Art, and Text program, one of the main interests developed out of the debates concerning the relationships between an author/creator to the produced document/object. As a student of the studio arts, with a Masters in Fine Arts in Painting, this question weighs heavily on my own interpretation of art object, specifically those objects constructed in context of being sole representations of the artist's hand. The debates concerning the role of the author/creator have produced some remarkable philosophies of ownership and presence among the reader, the text or the art object, and the author or creator; however, there are additional questions yet to be answered or even uncovered. New concerns that emerge from these conversations appear when the position of the author moves from a sole, independent individual to one that shares responsibility as an contributor within a group. While at first this idea—the transformation of the artist/author, changes from a sole creator to shared producer may seem odd within a culture that prizes the heightened position of the created object as a singular objet d'art.

With close reading into philosophies developed by some of the foremost scholars on the subject of authorship, it is compellingly argued that a shared environment is neither new nor abstract, and has been part of the creative apparatus for quite some time. With internet technology, documents can be easily shared, searched, redefined, erased, and even co-written within a community structure wherein a group of people not necessarily in contact with one another assume shared creative ownership over usable material. What is revealed when we look at the transition from oral, to scribal and manuscript, to print – an ultimately to electronic – traditions, is a clearer picture of how Internet technology allows for the development of conversations about the reader, the viewer, and the conscious.

One of the most significant concerns about the Internet platform is the question of authority - can we trust what we see and or read? An independent voice may or may not be attached to a statement and or a document on the Internet – an idea that broadens the discussion about authorship and the role of the document. The Internet makes visible the ways in which the sole creator may not be independent and enlightened, but an individual who is participating in a communal discussion. If to address the Internet as a point of loss for the artistic process, where the artist becomes a participant, or receiver, instead of a director then the discussion on the death of the creator may be a vital concern with significant meaning. But, if the debate about the presence of the Internet as a tool in which one can dismiss the author/creator as a sole individual can be extended past the point where we view artists solely as directors of information, instead of collectors, then the author/creator may be able to live productively and undamaged.

What is uncertain concerning the position of the creative text, and or object, is the question of a possible retreat into a place where one constructs subjects out of a communal setting, where a group of people have a say in an object's contextual, and even possible, formal placement. While Lev Manovich comments convincingly on possible ways to look at "new media" artists I do not agree with his term "new media" as a way to address individuals working with internet, digital, and computer platforms. The main problems with calling digital technology "new media" and calling the artists which work with digital technology "new media artists" resides in the fact that we continue to see new media being used for production of new art movements throughout the history of man, may it be the sounds made from the telegraph, or the possibilities of phone line conversations as a way of addressing time and space. What is important is that Manovich's alludes to possible ways in which we can approach the discussion of a new artistic presence. In the introduction to the widely referenced *New Media Reader*, Manovich states:

New Media indeed represents the new avant-garde, and its innovations are at least as radical as the formal innovations of the 1920s. But if we are to look for these innovations in the realm of forms, this traditional area of culture evolution, we will not find them there. For the new avant-garde is radically different from the old.

1. The old media avant-garde of the 1920s came up with new forms, new ways to represent reality and new ways to see the world. The new media avant-garde is about new ways of accessing and manipulating information. Its techniques are hypermedia, databases, search engines, data mining, images processing, visualization, and simulation.
2. The new avant-garde is no longer concerned with seeing or representing the world in new ways but rather with accessing and using in new ways previously accumulated media. In this respect new media is post-media or meta-media, as it used old media and its primary material.¹

¹ Manovich 2003, 13-25

While the Internet is said to position the author/creator in exciting new ways, as new technology across time has been said to do in similar fashion, the uncertainty of subject ownership generates considerable discussion. As we discussed during the first year of the MATX program, our notions of “newness” in the latest technology and the abilities that technology brings forth is constantly re-presented in the advent of even better technologies. Over time, and with each introduction of new technology, the world is told that this technology will change everything, including the known way of life. With each new technology -- may it be semaphore signals that gave information a way of traveling great distance in less time than a horse, or the development of the Guttenberg printing press, which was said to give freedom and knowledge to anyone who had the ability of read a book -- new technology has been portrayed as life changing.

Before we start discussing how authorship may or may not have changed according to technology, or how the position of authorship carries specific characteristics when we read Foucault, Barthes, McLuhan, and others, I find it important that we take a moment and caution ourselves on the positioning of our own questions. Taking examples from two works, Walter Ong's 1982 “Orality and Literacy: Writing Restructures Consciousness,” and Elizabeth Eisenstein's 1983 “The Unacknowledged Revolution,” it is sufficient to call attention to the problems that one faces when declaring the greatness of a technological advancement without looking at the culture during the time of technological change. For Eisenstein what is essential to understand (using the example of the invention of the Guttenberg printing press that created print culture) is that looking back onto a technological advancement as a life changing experience, and one that happens suddenly, may in fact produce a false perception to the technology's use during

the time when it was first appeared. Both Ong and Eisenstein give historical accounts on the transition between oral and written communication, but what Ong and Eisenstein's revelations suggest is two-fold. First, that it is true some technologies allowed for a more "conscious" experience of the world and the work, but that the transitions between these technological advancements were not at all instantaneous and unexpected. In fact, what Eisenstein calls to mind in her work is that the transition between written culture and print culture took some time and went through various degrees before print culture to appear as a dominant technology.

Eisenstein's work reveals the problems one faces when they are quick to declare a technological feat with great enthusiasm. For many believe – and including myself before taking MATX courses – that when the Guttenberg press appeared the world turned upside down immediately, that the printing press automatically made everything different, and better. Eisenstein wants to show that this, in fact, was not the case. For her, scholars have falsely drawn a dividing line between written culture, manuscript culture, and print culture, especially when it came to the moment of Guttenberg's invention. Eisenstein suggests that some scholars simply saw a disparate break between manuscripts and books that in fact isolated these very similar technologies from each other. Eisenstein relies on one quote from Curtius that exemplifies this misunderstanding, "the immense and revolutionary change which it [the invention of printing] brought about can be summarized in one sentence: Until that time every book was a manuscript."²

² Eisenstein 1979, 143

What seems to be the main crux of Eisenstein's thesis is that with the advancement of the Guttenberg printing press one can still see a magnificent amount of written documents and manuscripts being used at the same time along with the printing document. In fact, Eisenstein eloquently shows that multiple technologies were being used for quite some expanse of time after the arrival of the printing press. On the other hand, one thing that remains a problem for Eisenstein, and becomes example of the multiple platforms of communication during this time, is the lack of documentation that could possibly describe what the transition between written culture to print culture looked like:

Just what publication meant before printing or just how messages got transmitted in the age of scribes are questions that cannot be answered in general. Findings are bound to vary enormously depending on date and place. Contradictory verdicts are especially likely to proliferate with regard to the last century before printing- and interval when paper had become available and the literate man was more likely to become his own scribe...The generalize about early printing is undoubtedly hazardous and one should be on guard against projecting the output of modern standard editions too far back into the past. Yet one must also be on guard against blurring a major difference between the last century of scribal culture and the first century after Guttenberg.³

Like Ong, Eisenstein proposes that during a moment in change – especially during a moment when culture is faced with multiple technologies for communication use that the example of a new technological “explosion” – is not exactly an accurate representation. Eisenstein's example that focuses in on the transition between the scribal culture to the print culture exemplifies the sort of triumphant change we often impose on the technological. For Eisenstein, and for our perceptions on the gravity of Guttenberg's printing press during the time it was created, the provenance concerning an explosion or life-altering changeover is false. In fact, to agree with Ong, that what we do see in the

³ Eisenstein 1979, 145

records is that the story of this change takes place on the pages of the victorious technology, that the story of print culture is printed in books, like the words of Socrates written down by Plato after the fact. Likewise, when addressing the “revolutionary” changes in the positions and status of the author, it is equally essential to elaborate on not just the triumph of technology, but to show that technology is an ongoing product, one that grows out of past technologies, not one that just magically appears and takes precedence.

Walter Ong’s chapter, “Writing Restructures Consciousness,” isolates the changes between the oral culture, when language depended on an one-to-one or one-to-many physical relationship, to the transition to and expansion of a more, realized, consciousness when an individual is faced with written culture. With written culture, the individual is conflicted with the presence of an external force outside the physical, – when information is mediated through written text rather than directly from a living, breathing source. With the written word the reader has to make way for a multitude of questions in relation to the information’s source. Therefore, the numerous conscious stratum are identified at one given moment in reading a text. Ong suggests that written culture is an artificial culture, because one must be directed to look outside the natural, or physical, order to isolate a connection. Writing is not a human condition as is the oral:

By contrast with natural, oral speech, writing is completely artificial. There is no way to write ‘naturally’. Oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired learns to talk. Talk implements conscious life but it wells up into consciousness out of unconscious depths, though of course with the conscious as well as unconscious co-operation of society... Writing or script differs as such from speech in that it does not inevitably well up out of the

unconscious. The process of putting spoken language into writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulable rules.⁴

What Ong is referring to here, and in the rest of his work, is that with oral communication, one advances through the process of transcribing thoughts into speech through an unconscious act. On the other hand, written texts require knowledge into the laws and regulations that are used to define them. Thus written communication is a conscious act. The reason Ong is important in my own research is that his ideas have ramifications of how the created document/object rests in this connection between the conscious and the unconscious act. My own question, and one I have not been able to answer so far, is what happens when the written text, that moment when the conscious decided the text's nature, is hampered by multiple individuals that bring in an equal amount of differing consciousnesses? What happens when one conscious has to make room for the many?

Ong's subject of consciousness extends from of his own mentor, Marshall McLuhan. The position McLuhan takes in *The Guttenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, is less historical than that of Ong or Eisenstein. In this work McLuhan suggests that technologies, like Guttenberg's printing press, allow people to rely on more visual than audile material. With oral culture the individual relied on their hearing instead of the visual document. With the creation of the written document, and especially the print document, a dramatic shift happened between the audible and the visual experience. Along with this sensory reliant shift came a deeper shift with the conscious. Since, the "reader" was asked to look at the words on a page, understand them as symbols and conventions, then produce them as a sound, the process between the

⁴ Ong 2002, 101

image, the thought, and the act allowed the reader to become more developed – and, therefore, more present. McLuhan relies on the example by of medieval scribes to make his point. “When the eye of a modern copyist leaved the manuscript before him in order to write, he carries in his mind a visual reminiscence of what he has seen. What the medieval scribe carried was an auditory memory, and probably in many cases, a memory of one word at a time.”⁵ McLuhan goes on to suggest that the recall, reminiscence between the audible to the oral, is less alienating than the partitioning of the oral, written, and the conscious: “But the more fundamental reason for imperfect recall is that with print there is more complete separation of the visual sense from the audible-tactile. This involves the modern reader in total translation of sight into sound as he *looks* at the page. Recall of material read by the eye then is confused by the effort to recall it both visually and auditorially.”⁶ To follow this point further McLuhan suggests that the formation of print brought a less productive manufacturer, that up until the moment of print “the reader or consumer was latterly involved as producer.”⁷ While it is significant that further stress is applied to the process by which the recipient, in this case the reader, changes, I find it critical that McLuhan used the idea of a less-produced effect when the individual is engaged in the reading of a text. If this is true – that the medieval monk who would hear a word or phrase and recite that over as a produced affect, and that the invention of the printing press brought on a less productive actor – would it be sufficient to ask if the internet community forum is thus allowing a return to production, to further engagement with the creation of the text than was allowed between the separation of the

⁵ McLuhan 1969, 115

⁶ McLuhan 1969, 116

⁷ McLuhan 1969, 120

written book and the individual? In Ong's case, the text on the page cannot be argued with and therefore is truer than a statement that has the ability to be addressed because of the physical action of speech. But with McLuhan's position in this segment, do we see a reversal that thusly gives power back to the text, and the act, as a reinstatement and a production?

The debate about authorship has been largely exemplified between two key articles, one by Roland Barthes titled "The Death of the Author," and the second by Michel Foucault titled "What is an Author." Barthes' 1967 article stressed that the author, a previously independently knowledgeable creator, was in fact a person who used language to re-present content and that this author was nothing more than an well versed performer. For Barthes, the writer was one who had a master on language but it was language itself that allowed for the creation, language gave the writer what the writer needed:

It is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, thorough a prerequisite impersonality (not al all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that pint where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'...Language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together'. Suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.⁸

In large part Barthes removes the author as a source of identity in the text, allowing the text the ability to form independently away from the artistic creative environment that was defined by the identity of that artist. "Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."⁹ In this short work Barthes

⁸ Roland Barthes, 1977, 212

⁹ Roland Barthes, 1977, 213

exposes the text to explanations and discovery that may exist outside of the exclusively created object guarded and defined by the life experience of a particular human. Here, the text is allowed to breathe on its own, untouched by the adopted identity of the person who “performs” and dictates the words on the page. For Barthes, much of the text’s creation and understanding comes not from the author but from the culture that has shaped the texts long before the author has ever picked up a pen. “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God’ but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, nor of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawing from the innumerable centres of culture.”¹⁰

Michel Foucault answers Barthes in 1969 with “What is an Author?” Foucault describes how the reader may look at the purpose the author’s relation to the text as a way of realizing the text. In his response to Barthes, Foucault proposes that we have had four main ways to look at the modern author. Foucault will call the possibilities where one may scrutinize the utility of the author, and thus the meaning of the text, the “author-function.”

The first method Foucault uses to describe a function of the author is to look at an author as the governor of the created text. This traditional viewing of the author stresses the writer/creator. Here, the creator is verified as being the revealer of the text’s true, self-created meaning. The second way to address the modern author, and the way Barthes explains it in his article, is as a interpreter who is not directly attached to the creation of the text but positions the text to function as a cultural re-presentation. The

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, 1977, 213

third way Foucault locates the modern author is as if to address the nature of the text in relationship to the creator where the creator becomes the key to a critique the text. Here Foucault discusses the “proper name” of the author and a way to look at the work created under that name. The author may also be a historical reference to a time, location, or gatekeeper to understand a particular historical account.

The fourth method in Foucault’s author-function description is a little less understandable, but can be viewed as a type of “non-author.” The function of the “non-author” Foucault seems to be alluding to a figure of an author who may be more appropriate to our own digital culture, where the importance of the author’s role is not asked. “I [Foucault] think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint-one which will no longer be author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced”¹¹ Mark Poster picks up on this final author-function to describe digital authors. In “The Digital Subject and Cultural Theory” Poster describes this final “non-author” as a digital author. The reasoning for this attribution to digital cultures resides in a possible future ways an author’s presence may in fact be removed from its position with the text. Here, as Poster explains, the function of the author will become detached completely from our understanding of the text:

Digital writing may function to extract the author from the text, to remove from its obvious meaning his or her intentions, style, concepts, rhetoric, and mine – in short, to disrupt the analogue circuit through which the author makes the text his or her own, through which the mechanism of property solidify a link between creator and object, a theological link that remains in its form even if its content changes from the age of God to the age of man. Digital writing may produce the

¹¹ Foucault 1977, 291

indifference to the question, ‘Who speaks?’ that Foucault dreamed of and may bring to the fore in its place preoccupations with links, associations, and dispersions of meaning throughout the Web of discourse. And this is so not simply for alphabetic text but for sounds and images, as well. The issue rests with the mediation, with the change from analogue to digital techniques.”¹²

It is possible to suggest that Poster’s enthusing might be premature to link Foucault’s final author-function. Yet, Poster does bring up an interesting point, and one that deserves more comment. If, to include McLuhan’s and Ong’s interpretation of the advancements of consciousness when technology advanced from the oral tradition to the written tradition and finally to the print tradition, Poster’s proposal to a new type of non-author as a final steps alludes to an intriguing uncovering of yet a further development in the growth of the conscious. While much of our own understanding remains in the early hours of a true realization of the relationships between our present Internet and digital culture as compared to past forms of communication, I find Poster’s revelation of Foucault to be uplifting and exciting. But, as an artist, I am equally worried.

¹² Poster 2001, 230

Sources

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