Sensual Literacy: Ivan lllich and the Technologies of the Text

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A CRITICAL NOTICE OF: In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh 'a Didaacalicon by Ivan Illich, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 123 pages.

How do technologies affect the human senses, the conduct of human activity, and, more generally, the manner in which people perceive the world around them? The impress that technologies such as schools and hospitals leave on human understanding and actions has attracted Illich's attention since the 1960s. While those issues are not absent from his more recent work, much of which has yet to be published, he has developed an increasing interest in the effects that technologies render on our senses. In this regard, we must understand his latest book as a watershed in the development of his thought. To some degree, we can view In the Vineyard of the Text as the second volume in Illich's ongoing archaeology of the technology of the text, an endeavour that first produced ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind (Illich & Sanders, 1988). While we can feel the presence of that earlier analysis of the impact of the alphabet as a technological innovation, our experience of In the Vineyard of the Text is guided by Illich's desire to investigate a newer set of technologies introduced into the text from approximately A.D. 1128 to A.D. 1240. These technologies produced major changes not only in the text itself, but also, and more significantly, in the manner in which writing, reading, and, ultimately, learning have since been conducted.

The baseline that Illich moves from, the nature of those aforementioned activities revolving around literacy that were to be impacted by the new technologies, is represented in the Didascalicon. Written in 1142 by Hugh, a canon regular at the cloister of St. Victor in Paris, the Didascalicon was the first book ever written on the art of reading. An adequate understanding and appreciation of Illich's discussion of Hugh's book can only be achieved through our recognition of the extent to which Illich is involved in an archaeology of the human senses concurrently with his archaeology of the text. As we might expect in a work addressing transformations in the writing, reading, and study of the book, our ocular senses are of primary importance to Illich's analysis. Though they have yet to appear in published form, Illich's most recent studies deal with scopic regimes, the great historical epochs in humanity's conceptualization of its sensory capacity for vision.

During Hugh's time, sight is accomplished by means of a cone that radiates outwardly from the human eye in capturing objects in the physical world. The radiant cone of the active eye

illuminates these physical objects, possessed by their own radiance or inner-light, and enables them to enter our sense perception. But the mere presence of these objects within the field of our sensory perception does not alone precipitate our gaining wisdom of their nature. Since the act of original sin, a shadow has dimmed the vision of our fallen race, extinguishing our capacity to immediately comprehend the ultimate good in the universe that is God's wisdom. To restore this capacity, our eyes must recover the brilliance originally bestowed by God in the eyes of Adam and Eve. It is the accomplishment of this task that Hugh designates as the moral imperative of both studium legendi (learning how to read) and lectio divina (divine reading). As Illich summarizes in the following passage, the ultimate goal of reading and study is friendship - a friendship with God:

> *Friendship is the word in Hugh for that love of wisdom which is sapientia, or tasteful knowledge. The friend is paradisus homo, 'his very first presence is beatifying: friendship is a garden, a tree of life, wings for the flight to God .... Sweetness, light, fire, wound.., paradise regained.' When Hugh in the Didascalicon explains the appeal of wisdom, he cannot but use the metaphor of friendship which ultimately motivates studium. (Illich, 1993, p. 27)*

It is true enough that Hugh holds up monastic reading and studies as a remedy for the dimmed vision preventing individuals from knowing the wisdom of God, understood as the perfect good. But these activities are able to restore the brilliance of our sight because of the nature of their relevant object - the page and the words contained therein that give off their own illuminating light. Hugh understands the luminosity of the written word to originate in God's Perfect Wisdom, which reaches out to the reader's eye and amplifies the radiance of that eye's own luminous qualities. We witness in this amplification the redemptive effect that Hugh associates with reading. This intensification of the eye's own light that occurs during the encounter with the written word translates easily, for Hugh, into the moral imperative that he assigns to both reading and study.

Along with the eye's recovery of its full luminosity, there occurs in the reader a concomitant illumination, a recognition and acknowledgement of the self. As God's wisdom radiates from the words contained in the text and meets the reader's own radiating gaze, the reader experiences an emergence of the self, a self that was previously shrouded in darkness and unknown to him. One can only know thy Self, according to Hugh, in the light of God. The luminosity of self and sight are, thus, interconnected. In making this point, Illich accentuates the extent to which readers' enlightened state of being not only enables them to know their own Self, a metaphysical entity internal to the person, through the word of God, but the amplification of their eyes' luminosity also develops their capacity to recognize the presence of God in all things existing in the external world of nature. Not only is there an increase in the radiance of one's own gaze, but also in the brilliance of the light emanating from objects in the physical world. For Hugh and his contemporaries, then, the break between the scriptures and the sciences does not exist.

Illich emphasizes that vision is not the only sensory activity associated with the conduct of reading during Hugh's time. Reading at St. Victor in the early 12th century was done aloud, thereby engaging the person's oral and aural capacities as well as his visual ones. It was, as Illich

describes, a community of monastic mumblers whose encounters with the word of God were designed to bring about its total embodiment, as their individual selves were illuminated by the wisdom contained in its light. It follows that this embodiment was to carry over into the daily lives of these canon regulars. I speak not only of their conduct within the walls of the monastery but also, and perhaps most significantly, of their lives beyond those walls in the community of nonreaders, where a second dimension of the moral imperative that Hugh assigns to reading manifests itself.

At one level, reading, for Hugh, carried the moral imperative associated with the recognition of the self and the acquisition of wisdom. For the individual, reading offered the double promise of curing the dimness of vision while providing ultimate wisdom of the perfect good to the emergent new self. At a second level, and because the emergent new self stood as the living embodiment of God's word, Hugh assigns a moral imperative to reading that associates the life of the new self with the civic duty of all representatives of the church. As the embodiments of the perfect good of Gods's wisdom, these representatives of the church were to provide an example that all of the town's citizens could freely emulate.

But Hugh does not confine the moral imperative for learning to the members of the clergy. He becomes the first to call for universal schooling. The latter, and herein lies one of the greatest insights that Illieh offers, did not take Hugh's ideals of reading and studying as its impetus, but rather the conceptualizations of these activities that were produced after the technological innovations in question had transformed the text.

Though Illich does not address it as a major theme in this particular work, the conceptual shift that transpired as the result of these innovations inspired a much different set of relationships between the clergy, the laity, and the text. Reading, for example, ceased to be conducted aloud. Though Hugh had acknowledged the existence of three types of reading (that which I read for my own ear, that which I do for the ear of another, and that which I do silently in contemplating the book alone) the former two were clearly dominant during the era of monastic reading. When innovations such as the underlining of key ideas, the inclusion of marginal notes, and the introduction of tables of contents and alphabetized subject indexes were developed, the last of these three modes of reading became dominant. This signalled the death knell of monastic reading and the birth of what we know today as scholastic reading.

As late as the 12th century, writing, as well as reading, was a vocal activity. Authors did not write the manuscripts bearing their names. They spoke the words that were recorded by the scribe, who used his stylus to scratch them onto a wax tablet. Calligraphers, then, used pen and ink to transpose these markings from the wax tablet to the parchment. Thus, the book was viewed as a record of speech. But the speech to be recorded had to follow the sequential structure of the scripture that it addressed. Illieh explains,

> *Sometimes, the glossa was visually incorporated into the narratio upon which it commented. But glosses were also written on the margin or between the lines. This way of glossing is a visual consequence of the mental process of monastic reading .... Nothing which went through the mind of the reader was deemed inappropriate as a commentary to*

such a text. Texts then grew out of tangents appended to older texts, which were slowly absorbed by them. (Illich, 1993, p. 97)

In the middle of that same century, however, the determinant influence of scripture's sequential structure over writing fell into decline. Peter of Lombard, by incorporating many of the innovations that we know today as common tools of the scholastic trade, contributed heavily toward the inversion of the relationship between text and commentary. These, which Illieh wants us to recognize as technologies, included the creation of a page layout especially suited for silent reading, the underlining of key words in red ink, the use of primitive quotation marks, and references to quoted sources placed in the margins. The text of Aristotle upon which Peter was commenting did not determine the sequence of Peter's writing. Rather, the sequence of Peter's thoughts about Aristotle did.

This commentary evolves visually as Peter's own line of thought is nourished by frequent references to a work of Aristotle. Here the gloss has the purpose of bringing out an order which Peter has read into a text. The learned book has ceased to be a sequence of commentaries that are strung like beads along the thread of somebody else's narration. The author ... chooses a subject and puts his order into the sequence in which he will deal with its parts. The visible page is no longer the record of speech but the visual representation of a thought-through argument. (Illieh, 1993, p. 99)

After its transformation from a record of speech to a record of thought, the book comes to be perceived as requiring new skills for reading. An emergent class of scholastic clergy claims a monopoly over those skills. Illich describes how the new book led to the formation of a new social duality beyond the older clergy/laity duality. There entered into social space a distinction between "those who are scribes and those who are not" (Illich, 1993, p. 84). The model provided by the scholastic scribe informed the modern call to universal literacy and, consequently, universal schooling. Reading, as Illich points out, "is not to be what Hugh envisioned: a way of life for those who are edified by nonfunctional, gratuitous exemplary readers, and who freely emulate them" (p. 85). Instead,

reading, as it is culturally defined since the thirteenth century, is a competence reserved to the clergy and those taught by them .... The vita clericorum became the ideal forma laicorum, the model to which laymen had to aspire, and by which they were inevitably degraded into the 'illiterate,' to be instructed and controlled by their betters. (Illich, 1993, pp. 85-86)

While we should not neglect the significance that this transformation of the book held for the relationship between the clergy and the laity after the 13th century, and while we should not fail to recognize the pattern that it establishes for the later formation of the modern university and the subsequent establishment of mandatory public schooling, Illich's central issues deal more specifically with the type of writing, reading, and studying that the new technologies produced. Lombard succeeded in doing more than helping to transform the book from a record of speech to a record of thought. He also introduced new technologies designed to accelerate readers' abilities to find what they were looking for in a text. Whereas Hugh viewed the text as a vineyard through which one would leisurely stroll in plucking and nourishing himself on the fruits contained

therein, Lombard conceptualized the text as a mine where one had to sift through mounds of immediately superfluous material in order to locate the desired object. To accelerate this process he introduced chapter titles, key words and ideas underlined in red ink, quotation marks, and source references listed in the margins. More revolutionary than even these new technologies, in Illich's estimation, were those based upon alphabetization. Illich attaches great significance to the resistance to change demonstrated by our alphabet's sequential order, noting its fertility as a technology of systemisation that allowed for the invention of other technologies (e.g., indices, library inventories, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and so on).

Taken together, the technologies introduced into the text between the 12th and 13th centuries represent, for Illich, the expression of a new will to order. Speed of access and quantity take on increasing importance as the era of scholastic reading unfolds. In the 100 years following Hugh's death, England witnessed a 50 to 100-fold increase in the number of written accounts. Technologies emerged to assist scribes produce smaller letters as they wrote. This contributed to the book becoming smaller, portable, and possessed by individuals. Later, with the reintroduction of paper to Europe, the available access to books was further increased. Replacing the heavy parchment, paper also helped the book to become lighter and, hence, easier for individuals to carry with them.

But Illich finds us at the close of the era of this bookish text and the scholastic reading that has accompanied it. He sees computer literacy displacing the literacy defined by the new book produced in medieval Europe. Already we hear talk of the information explosion. And, for Illich, himself an inheritor of the bookish text, information differs from knowledge as much as knowledge differed from Hugh's understanding of wisdom. Metaphors such as the "Information Super-Highway" express the global trajectory of the information age. But are we certain where it will lead us? How has the computer already changed the manner in which we, and especially our children, conduct our reading, writing, and thinking? What long term consequences does it hold for the human mind and the human body? For Human societies and cultures?

In demonstrating the efficacy that alphabetical indexes, marginal notes, tables of contents, and chapter titles possessed in fermenting profound transformations in human understanding and experience, Illich makes us feel uneasy about our present situation. On the surface, at least, those technologies would seem to pale in comparison with the technologies surrounding the computer. What new order is being willed into existence? Is the intentionality of this will fully informed of the potentialities contained in the order that might or might not emerge as planned? Illich leaves us holding our breath.

REFERENCES

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