POST-GUTENBERG NARRATIONS

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 Aeschylus 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 grossly modish 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 conset 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 bookmarking permitted the combination of letters and images, cross-connections of image and text became possible, allowing a departure from classical narrowness 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, as a source for his great work Finnegans 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 visibleness, 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 (ripresa) 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 an alchemical model of history, as a coexistence of the seemingly unrelated, as a multifaceted meaning of one and the same symbol before it dissolves and disintegrates into chaos. Stanzas 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 flourished in 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 parallax as, 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 moment, the illustrated book touched the boundaries of the book, if precisely that borderline began the development of CD-ROM and DVD: new post-Gutenberg possibilities of narrative and of image-and-text linkage.

The illustrated or ornamental embellishment of the text continually encountered since the earliest manuscripts stems from the wish to enrich by decoration the minuteness of text as well as to give it to pictorially convive to the written: something of the text’s context. 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 native formation that an image renders more sensual the text means nothing more than that expressiveness of both image and text is heightened by their interrelations. Two codes, namely image and text, interpenetrate and overlap: that is the essence of book illumination, of incunable wood-engraving, of epitaphy painting, of the illustrated texts of edification, of the pictorial bibles (above mortuaries and jubileums).

The scriptures in which hands the illustration often just also had to include minatures next to the coloured headings. Transcending the phase of illustrative 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...
nation, the image painted with the most precious colours became a page of its own, 
etherefore an autonomous form. Within the 
image, the lettering diminished whilst plant and animal ornamenta 
tion unfolded. Entire lines of text were formed from stylized ani 
mals. The monastic artists created strange, symmetrical com 
positions 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 letter 
press 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 gram 
matical errors, sometimes even mistakes that mirrored their mis 
understanding of the original. Through the erroneous transcri 
tions 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 transcribing and transmission. The illustrated and illumi 
nated books refer to other books and contexts. These illustrated 
folios are, above all, folios of psalters, lists of texts, of 
changed, improved, distorted texts. The books are nodes in a net 
work of continuous transmission over the centuries. Meaning is 
generated in a network of transcriptions. The tradition of tran 
scription anticipated the technique of transcribing. 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, bookmak 
ing and writing. From Greek sculpture to medieval miniatures, 
Blake’s work is full of transcriptions, quotations and borrowings of 
aesthetically classical and Northern cultural productions were the 
actual source of his so-called inner visions. Throughout his artistic 
practice, Blake experimented continuously and well-nigh industri 
ously with sketches, which he repeated, corrected and tried out in 
newly composed 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 
taneously inspired creativity. Blake’s originality was not fuelled by 
a meditative vision but by craft, skill, knowledge, education, innova 
tive 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 frees 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 litera 
ture. It is no coincidence that the close connection between the 
visual arts and literature of the period was characterized by grow 
ing numbers of multi-talented artists—among others Eduard 
Mörike (Maler Wolter, 1832), Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, Wil 
helm Busch, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Rudolph Töpffer, Paul Heyse, Wilhelm 
Raabe, Nikolai Gogol. This diversity was congruent with the 
demands and aesthetic programmes (see Friedrich Theodor Vischer’s 
Ästhetik) 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 
inspired 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; (or picture, poems, 
The unity of art was invoked independently and diversely. In 
his “Viennese Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature” of 1808, 
Friedrich Schlegel had already established that Greek-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, art painting, words.” His notebooks (1807–22) 
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 
arquitectural and musical... The novel is a mixture of all the arts 
and sciences with which poetry is related; it is at once history and 
philosophy, and at the same time: Real painting is probably the purely 
figurative:... Does that make painting the truly central art?—That 
would seem obviously to be the poetry between music and painting.

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

1. Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Ästhetik 
der Wissenschaft der Schönheit, 3rd ed., 
1848.
2. Friedrich Schlegel, Zur Poetik 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). As opposed to the book, it enables 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 true 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 and then in the major uncompleted project Le Livre, in which the writer wanted to summarize 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 an 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 spontaneity of the book announced the transition into another medium and dictated the crucial characteristics of the post-Gutenberg narrative forms in media like multi-screen projection and CD-ROM.

The famous simultanéistic book Le Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France (1871) 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, the iron 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 meaning. A novel like Laurence Sterne’s Tristam Shandy (1759–61), thanks to its mixture of text and para-text, its narrative rhythm 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 QuIPO group of authors (Workshop for Potential Literature), of Raymond Queneau (Cent mille milliards de poèmes, 1965), 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. 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 these 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 pages; every user creates their own pages, their own books. Obvi-ously, 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 word was frozen on the basis of letters, the electronic book—CD-ROM or DVD—could be described as a tweaking 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 succ sessions 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
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 encyclopedias. 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 demijure, 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.