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Romantic Media Studies at the 2013 MLA Convention

Romantic Print in the Media Ecology

Recent reports would seem to suggest that print is being displaced from the position of cultural centrality it has occupied for centuries. Print journalism is following the advertising dollars that support it as they move online. Sales of printed books are being overtaken by digital downloads, according to some claims (Malik). Libraries are cutting down on purchases of printed books in favour of subscriptions to digital collections. Many of these developments, however, do not simply replace print with digital media; they remediate print in a digital environment (Bolter and Grusin). From the page images of eighteenth-century books in ECCO to the news that Apple has patented the page turn in e-reader applications (Bilton), many recent developments should prompt us to think not only about whether digital media is displacing print from its position of cultural centrality, but also about how print interacts with other media. Such intermedial concerns stretch back as far as incunabula, which often imitated the appearance of the manuscript volumes that circulated alongside them. But they became widespread in the Romantic period, when print reached a saturation point that makes it appropriate to speak of a 'print culture' and a position of cultural centrality that is only now being challenged. How did print interact with other media in the Romantic period?

Studies of print culture have done much to show us how print rose to a position of cultural dominance between the 1430s and 1800, and in doing so helped to structure new institutions, new models of social organization, new political ideologies, new religious movements, new sociologies of knowledge, and new understandings of the self. But the concept of a 'print culture' is seriously flawed if it gives the impression that print superseded earlier media, or that it operated in isolation from other media, or to the exclusion of other media. To speak of shifting from an oral to a textual culture overlooks the extent to which conversations, lectures, sermons and public readings persisted in the age of print, and gained currency from their relationships with print. To speak of shifting from a scribal to a print culture overlooks the extent to which manuscript writings, annotated books, hand-copied music, commonplace books and handwritten letters continued to circulate in the age of print. To speak of shifting from a visual to a textual culture (as when Protestantism urged common believers to turn away from icons and towards their Bibles and prayerbooks), or from a textual to a visual culture (as when we complain that students watch films but don't read books), overlooks both the importance of printed images and the complex relations between printed images and letterpress text.

What's needed, then, is an understanding of print culture that restores it to the media ecology in which it was historically embedded. Such an understanding would help us to understand the many ways in which Romantic writers thematized print – from Byron's footnote in *Beppo* signed by the printer's devil, to Coleridge's strategic use of the errata slip in *Conciones ad Populum*, to Blake's printing house in Hell. And it would help us understand their resistance to print – from Blake's gouging Plate 3 of *Jerusalem*, to Coleridge's and Wordsworth's decisions to keep poems in manuscript for extended periods of time. But most of all, it would help us to understand the many intermedial moments and practices of

British Romantic writing, the poems purportedly written in the blank leaves of printed books, or supposedly inscribed on stone before being printed, or sung as well as being printed, or passed around in manuscript, or read aloud in public or in private gatherings.

Articulating this understanding has been one of the aims of the Interacting with Print Research Group, based in Montreal, which I lead. We explored this approach in a two-day conference in March 2012 called 'Print in the Media Ecology'. Our invited speakers addressed the relationships between print and cartography, the theatre, visual art, opera, architecture, and manuscript. The notion of a media ecology allows us to think about culture as a space in which several media interact with one another. Changes in any one medium produce changes in all the others. The introduction of a new medium, or its rapid growth, produces changes in all the others. And any medium can only be properly understood in relation to the others. In recruiting the term 'media ecology', then, we don't aim to use it – as Neil Postman does – to assert the claims of one medium over another. Rather, we seek to understand the relations among media, the ways in which each medium is shaped by the others, and the ways in which those relations change over time.

But don't imagine, because we seek to look beyond print to other media, that we've given up on the idea of a print culture. Rather, we need to formulate new ways of understanding the centrality of print in our period. Once we stop saying that print superseded, displaced or marginalized other media, we can start to think about how print rose to cultural centrality by facilitating engagements with other media, both existing and new. An opera-goer following the performance in her libretto; an exhibition-viewer jotting notes or making sketches in her catalogue; a theatre patron remembering a performance while reading a review, perusing a play-script, or looking at a print of an actor; a stenographer recording a sermon for publication: all these people were engaged in cultural practices of intermediality, in which print thrived by remediating other media. Print, in other words, was a solvent of culture, a vehicle for other media as well as a medium of its own.

Works Cited

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