

# POSTYPOGRAPHICAL

Literature created beyond the boundaries  
of the Gutenberg Galaxy

by Fabio Doctorovich, 1995

## The Postypographic Era

The publishing industry has remained virtually unchanged since 1455 when Gutenberg first printed the Bible. Now, we are assisting to the most important technological transformation in literature since the invention of the printing press: the Gutenberg Galaxy is starting to disintegrate into a myriad of small postypographical nebulas: the McLuhan Entropic Galaxy.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, the printing press is being complemented -not YET substituted- by a number of other publishing technologies such as audio recordings (in the form of sound poetry and audio books), computer media (CD-ROMs, electronic networks and computer art), videotaping, and others. On the other hand, old "literary" techniques as for example singing and acting are being revamped by performance and sound poetry (both of them frequently using technological refinements as well).

Not only the publishing industry, but also the act of reading, unchanged for several centuries, is being altered. In the case of computer CD-ROMs, reading has become an active, participant directed process rather than passive, author directed: turning pages in a book has been transformed into following hypertext links. The rational-visual act of reading has become an experience of sight, sounds, and colors. In the case of performance poetry, reading (a lonely act with a slow asynchronous response by the readers) mutates into a collective experience (a social action in which the answer of the public is received in an immediate and synchronized manner).

As it would seem obvious, the writing techniques are also being profoundly altered. The writer of the not-so-distant future will have to be a more complete and unespecialized artist that will need to blend his writing skills with oral and visual artistic abilities and even technological knowledge. This, together with a literature that allows an active participatory reading and even the introduction of modifications made by the reader in the work of art, will perhaps help to rehumanize literature and achieve the avant-garde's unfulfilled fantasy of merging art and life.

Literature and literacy as we know them today are not going to perish, they will simply acquire new meanings and dimensions: those of the Postypographic Era.

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## The future of poetry

- Writer must be an imagologist (Mark Taylor; *Imagology: Media Philosophy*).
- Some literary genres died out with the introduction of printing (Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin; *The Coming of the Book*).
- At some point there will be new forms of publications that don't have any counterparts in print...like Gutenberg all over again (Mitch Kapor).
- Reading will become an active, participant-directed process rather than passive, author directed. Finally, reading will be a total experience of sight, sound, an animation. Rather than turning pages in a book, readers will follow hypertext links to explore a total sensory experience of sight and sound (CD-ROM) (Dore Perler; *Computer Monthly*, April 1993).
- Posttypographical Poetry: one that utilizes technologies other than Gutenberg's.
- The changes that are beginning to emerge in our culture as a result of the large scale introduction of computers parallel many of the changes that took place in Europe as a consequence of the information revolution that followed the invention of printing (Provenzo Jr., E. F. *Beyond The Gutenberg Galaxy*. New York and London: Teachers College Press, **1986**).
- With books involving elaborate visual design (like visual poetry), sophisticated typography, and related types of input, the process remains much more in the hands of the author. In this sense, telematics has reintroduced a series of procedures for the manufacturing of books that is reminiscent of the early history of printing, when author/printers such as William Caxton crafted books by handling the entire process from writing through typesetting, even to the final printing (artist's books) (Provenzo Jr., E. F. *Beyond The Gutenberg Galaxy*. New York and London: Teachers College Press, **1986**).
- In order to understand the importance of this change, we must keep in mind that all literary genres have utilized printing during centuries as its main technological tool. The impact of the introduction of new technologies such as photography, video or computer manipulations in the field of literature has been increasing during the past few decades and will probably be tremendous on the next century. Even old technologies forgotten by poets (such as theater or singing) are being nowadays rediscovered all over the world.

The influence of new technologies on poetry is going to be as decisive as Gutenberg's invention, though in an inverse way: at the time printing started, oral and other non-typographic poetry were gradually abandoned as a consequence of the arising power of the printing press. Not only computers but also other electronic media such as radio or TV are contributing to the creation of new languages which attempt to adjust to the new technologies. The consequence of this is that the limits of literature are being gradually shifted to the point that **literature is not only written word anymore.**

-Some changes are inversely parallel to the changes that occurred at the beginning of Gutenberg's era. While, according to McLuhan, the printed page revealed for the first time the separation between poetry and music,<sup>i</sup> a striking feature in *Paralengua* is the fading of the esthetic frontiers that separate poetry from other arts or media, in that sense contributing to a redefinition of not only literature but other arts as well. Also according to McLuhan, the portability of the printed book contributed immensely to individualism. The fact that *Paralengua* is performed on a stage under the presence of public changes the notion of "reading" (a lonely act with a slow asynchronous response by the reader) for that of "collective experience" (a group action in which the answer of the public is received in an immediate and synchronized manner). The presence of an audience at the moment the poem is performed not only improves the poet-reader communication but it also makes feasible the participation of the public in the making of the poem.

-On the other hand, the loss of immortality menaces to the new generation of poets: while the printed book has been the way of achieving eternal memory<sup>2</sup> and a permanent record of the writer's work, the poetry performance is -unless video recorded and edited- instantaneous and perishable. Nevertheless, Sartre said that "poetry, the same as other literary genres, needs in order to have existence not only of the author, but also of the reader." Considering the microscopic amount of existing readers (and therefore, the minuscule quantity of surviving poets), and the fact that new ways of making poetry could increase exponentially the number of potential "readers," the loss of immortality seems to be a minor point.

It is likely that within the next decades the importance of posttypographic poetry will increase exponentially, as the younger generations -those born and grown under the enormous influence of TV and computers- start to play their roles in literature.

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<sup>i</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, **1962**.