



THE ITALIAN ACADEMY
for Advanced Studies in America

From Internet to Gutenberg

A lecture presented by Umberto Eco

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According to Plato (in Phaedrus) when Hermes, the alleged inventor of writing, presented his invention to the Pharaoh Thamus, he praised his new technique that was supposed to allow human beings to remember what they would otherwise forget. But the Pharaoh was not so satisfied. "My skillful Theut, he said, memory is a great gift that ought to be kept alive by training it continuously. With your invention people will not be obliged any longer to train memory. They will remember things not because of an internal effort, but by mere virtue of an external device."

We can understand the preoccupation of the Pharaoh. Writing, as any other new technological device, would have made torpid the human power which it substituted and reinforced - just as cars made us less able to walk. Writing was dangerous because it decreased the powers of mind by offering human beings a petrified soul, a caricature of mind, a mineral memory.

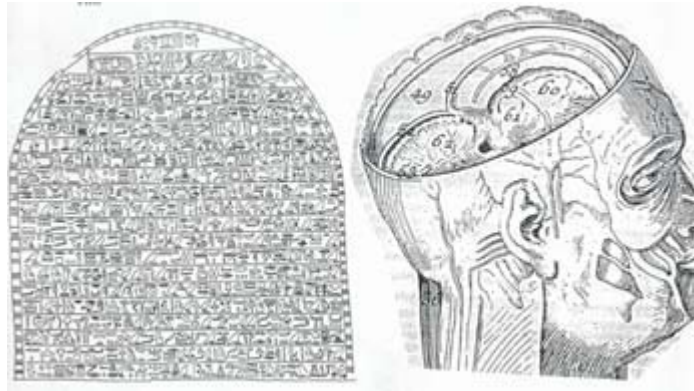
Plato's text is ironical, naturally. Plato was writing his argument against writing. But he was pretending that his discourse was told by Socrates, who did not write (since he did not publish, he perished in the course of his academic fight.)

Nowadays, nobody shares these preoccupations, for two very simple reasons. First of all, we know that books are not ways of making somebody else think in our place; on the contrary they are machines that provoke further thoughts. Only after the invention of writing was it possible to write such a masterpiece on spontaneous memory as Proust's *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Secondly, if once upon a time people needed to train their memory in order to remember things, after the invention of writing they had also to train their memory in order to remember books. Books challenge and improve memory; they do not narcotize it.

However, the Pharaoh was instantiating an eternal fear: the fear that a new technological achievement could abolish or destroy something that we consider precious, fruitful, something that represents for us a value in itself, and a deeply spiritual one.

It was as if the Pharaoh pointed first to the written surface and then to an ideal image of human memory, saying: "This will kill that."

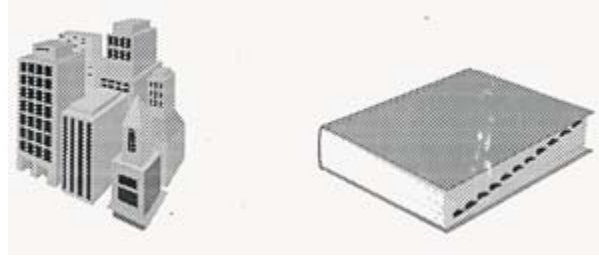


More than one thousand years later Victor Hugo in his *Notre Dame de Paris*, shows us a priest, Claude Frollo, pointing his finger first to a book, then to the towers and to the images of his beloved cathedral, and saying "ceci tuera cela", this will kill that. (The book will kill the cathedral, alphabet will kill images).

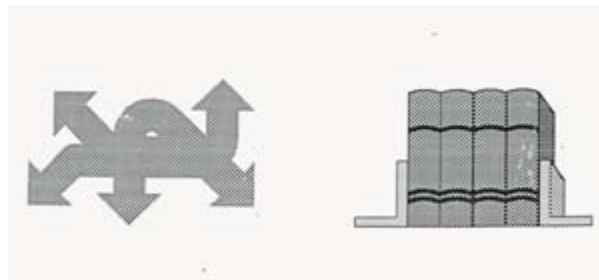


The story of *Notre Dame de Paris* takes place in the XVth century, a little later than the invention of printing. Before that, manuscripts were reserved to a restricted elite of literate persons, but the only means to teach the masses about the stories of the Bible, the life of Christ and of the Saints, the moral principles, even the deeds of the national history or the most elementary notions of geography and natural sciences (the nature of unknown peoples and the virtues of herbs or stones), was provided by the images of the cathedral. A medieval cathedral was a sort of permanent and unchangeable TV program that was supposed to tell people everything indispensable for their everyday lives as well as for their eternal salvation. The book would have distracted people from their most important values, encouraging unnecessary information, free interpretation of the Scriptures, insane curiosity.

During the sixties, Marshall McLuhan wrote his *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where he announced that the linear way of thinking insured by the invention of the press was on the verge of being substituted by a more global way of perceiving and understanding through the TV images or other kinds of electronic devices. If not McLuhan, certainly many of his readers pointed their finger first to a Manhattan Discotheque and then to a printed book by saying "this will kill that."



The media needed a certain time to accept the idea that our civilization was on the verge of becoming an image oriented one - which would have involved a decline of literacy. Nowadays this is a common shibboleth for every weekly magazine. What is curious is that the media started to celebrate the decline of literacy and the overwhelming power of images just at the moment in which, in the world scene, appeared the Computer.



Certainly a computer is an instrument by means of which one can produce and edit images, certainly instructions are provided by means of icons; but it is equally certain that the computer has become, first of all, an alphabetic instrument. On its screen there run words, lines, and in order to use a computer you must be able to write and to read. The new computer generation is trained to read at an incredible speed. An old-fashioned university professor is today incapable of reading a computer screen at the same speed as a teen-ager. These same teen-agers, if by chance they want to program their own home computer, must know, or learn, logical procedures and algorithms, and must type words and numbers on a keyboard, at a great speed.

In this sense one can say that the computer made us to return to a Gutenberg Galaxy.

People who spend their night implementing an unending Internet conversation are principally dealing with words. If the TV screen can be considered a sort of ideal window through which one watches the whole world under the form of images, the computer screen is an ideal book on which one reads about the world in form of words and pages.

The classical computer provided a linear sort of written communication. The screen was displaying written lines. It was like a fast-reading book.

But now there are hypertexts. In a book one had to read from left to right (or right to left, or up to down, according to different cultures) in a linear way. One could obviously skip through the pages, one - once arrived at page 300 - could go back to check or re-read something at page 10 - but this implied a labor, I mean, a physical labor. On the contrary a hypertext is a multidimensional network in which every point or node can be potentially connected with any other node.

Thus we have arrived at the final chapter of our this-will-kill-that story. It is more and more stated that in the near future hypertextual Cd-roms will replace books.

