Textual Practice Critical Introduction: Can You See It Now? Do You Want To?

Introduction

If Marshall McLuhan "got it right" in the 1960s and "the medium is the message," then shouldn't scholars and users have been paying much more attention to the medium than the message over the years? Shouldn't users, academics, and archivists have been poring over text analyzing content (which is important) AND interface? Shouldn't a substantial part of the literary journeys in schools and scholarship have been to explore what constitutes text, how people experience text, and what role textuality plays in their understanding? Alas, it seems they haven't to a large extent and have made the interface somewhat invisible, relegating it to 'something' users and readers may not notice, something that is 'a given' in many respects.

However, with the ubiquity of technology, 'new' media, the veritable glut of possible ways to experience text, scholars and critics have been pondering the interface, discussing its significance, and making users more aware of its influence; they are making it more visible it would seem. But are they really? With so much media available and interfaces changing almost daily, are users able to comprehend this open expanse and how it affects their experience with "text?" Have they even started to define text? Friedrich Kittler suggests "Understanding media… remains an impossibility precisely because the dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions" (xi). Without understanding media or beginning to understand media, users are losing valuable insight into what they should be experiencing or how they *could* be experiencing the text. Therefore, this textual practice (TP) project explores ways interface is connected through a user's perception of them. The idea that an interface can be visible, invisible, or a hybrid of both helps users and readers better understand the role addressing interface plays in having a heightened, richer textual experience.

Visibility

Siegfried Zielinski (2006) discusses the idea that "everything has always been around, only in a less elaborate form" (3). The idea that nothing is new and people don't 'create' anything unique comes into question. Are users in Borges' "The Library of Babel," where everything is already there and they simply have to discover it or leave it alone as they please? If this is the case, the visibility or invisibility of the interface becomes essential to how we *experience* text and its textuality. In looking back at interface and text, it seems users may have come full circle. Before widely available codex and printed text, oral tradition, voice, song, sound were the reigning interface. Much of what was communicated was *invisible* but still real, and interface has come back to this in the form of podcasts and analog texts, discussed later.

With the arrival of machines and the printing press came a more visible, tangible text capable of spanning the globe and offering many the chance to experience this interface, this 'new media,' putting the physical directly and visibly into their hands, giving them a sensory overload of textuality. With print, they could touch the binding, see the words, smell the ink, and hear and taste the paper as they turn the pages. As this TP project presents, the visible text comes in myriad forms such as fascicles, cross-stitch, and wearable technology (WT). 'To Be or Not To Be' communicates differently in a hand-sewn booklet, needlework sampler, or LED enhanced t-shirt. Each interfaces offers a different interaction and affects how someone reacts to it, but without being aware of how the interface shapes the experience or *that* it shapes the experience, the user is not allotted the fullest understanding possible, and therefore cannot know what true meaning this interaction holds, and they become dependent on others' views and influences.

This brings an interesting dynamic to the visible, tangible interface; users have to interact with it, manipulate it, and create it. Fascicles, cross-stitch, and WT don't make themselves. They

have to be shaped and formed by a maker. They are hands on and tangible. Without that interaction and vision, they do not exist; they do not become visible, aligning with Chartier's observation "meaning is born… of the relationship between what is read and the reader" (406).

Invisible Visualities

As aforementioned, mechanization brought a new dynamic to interface and the notion of visibility. While hand-created text (fascicles, cross-stitch, and WT) still need tools to be created, the majority of work and making lies in human hands. However, with mechanization, the responsibility, the power, the creating are *shared* with the machine. There cannot be type without a letter press or a typewriter; there cannot be augmented reality (AR) art without a program like SketchAR. Likewise, a letter press, a typewriter, and SketchAR are tools that won't produce without the human hand's involvement. This hybrid of human and machine interface presents an interesting dichotomy for visibility. With the inclusion of a machine, users somewhat amputate the hand and loose "the intimacy" (Kittler 186) with text it offers. On the other hand (pun intended), Amanda Gould argues that "AR art… wants to perform a reve(a)lin as part of its enactment. Neither the body nor the media disappear…both must be present to access AR art's invisible visualities" (26).

Both of these ideas could apply to this hybrid visibility. It loses the closeness of the human touch in the interface, but it discovers a fresh perspective in the process. The product becomes the focus instead of the machine or craftsmen alone. When looking at a page of print, thoughts might not initially go to the letter press or the printer who positioned all of the letters onto blocks or the craftsmen who carved the letters out of wood. That interface becomes invisible; at the same time the type face, the spacing, the page all affect a reader's perception (as with Charles Olson's or Jen Brevin's work), bringing the interface into focus. As Zielinski

posits, users "find something new in the old" by *performing* with the letter press, the typewriter, and AR and the "results are worthwhile" (3). By combining the two interfaces, artists aren't creating something new, they are creating a new way of viewing text… of viewing textuality.

Invisibility

The tangibility and visibility of print were standard and accepted until the digital revolution turned the tables and readjusted how users experienced text. With machines, users manipulated a hybrid of human and device. With digital interfaces, users navigate technology and leave much of the human element *unseen*. The device does the work. Lori Emerson explores the topic of interface and how the ubiquity of digital affects perception positing "digital interfaces in particular are so familiar to us now that they are de facto invisible" and how that "exerts power over communication" (132-133). Whether the interface's visibility is intentional or not, it affects how a text is experienced as it influences the presentation of the communication.

This concept of the digital launching the invisible introduces a new experience print doesn't but includes one that the hybrid does- action! It doesn't just present information; it enlivens information. With the invisible interface, the human element is quasi-abstract. Humans form ideas and concepts or input data to be manipulated by a device or software, and the interface does the work so humans can enjoy the results. Consumers may listen to podcasts, enjoy digital poetry, or analog "text" without really thinking about how or why this communication is being presented in a certain way; they may be blithely unaware of how that is affecting their experience, for it is not the interface they seek but the interaction and result. Emerson comments on this with the reminder that ubiquitous computing (ubicomp) is almost magical in its workings and offers users an organic, fluid interaction with the digital realm that allows them to forget the interface altogether, but that convenience comes at a price. "These

'invisible' and 'natural' interfaces are also all marketed, of course, in the most joyful terms, to celebrate that these devices sense *for us* what information we need and want" (5). The personalized, human element of the interface fades. While a users' choice and creativity may still be present, they are diminished, leaving users vulnerable to what the machine, the interface, and its creators want followers to experience.

Conclusion

This textual practice portfolio seeks to find meaning in the space between visible and invisible of objects or texts that are not entirely unknown. It discovers new aspects of each TP's textuality, modality, and interface, reconstructing ideas from materials and tools, building the familiar from the unfamiliar. It is influenced by McLuhan's idea of the medium, Borges' notion of discovery, and Zielinski's thoughts on originality. Perhaps all three need to be adapted in some regard to negotiate the growing vastness of textuality and fully appreciate what each interface introduces (or doesn't) and help users interact with and experience text.

Developments may not be new, but perhaps users need to redefine new. Maybe what is needed is a new *perspective*, a new discussion, appreciation, interaction, and experience of text. As Johanna Drucker suggests, "At the very least, a fuller theory of materiality is needed to complicate our vocabulary, adding *relation*, *configuration*, and *association* to the concepts of *inscription*, *notation*, and *representation*" (121). Optimistically, the experiences in this TP can promote further clarity and encourage varied views on the discussion surrounding the importance of interface, textuality, and materiality and how users' experience with various modalities can augment their understanding and appreciation for the visible and the invisible, bring them closer to understanding media, and answering the questions, "Can you see it now? Do you want to?"

Works Cited

Chartier, Roger. "The Printing Revolution: A Reappraisal." *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, edited by Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin, 2007, pp. 397-408, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk8sv.

Drucker, Johanna. "What is Digital Materiality?" *What is? Nine Epistemological Essays*. Cuneiform Press, 2013, pp. 119-127.

Emerson, Lori. *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.

Gould, Amanda S. "Invisible Visualities: Augmented reality art and the contemporary media ecology." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 25-32, doi:10.1177/1354856513514332.

Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Standford University Press, 1999, pp. xxxix-xli; 183-266, b-ok.org/.

Zielinski, Siegfried. *The Idea of a Deep Time in Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006, pp. 3-11, gebseng.com/media_archeology/reading_materials/Zielinsky-deep_time_of_the_media.pdf.