

CMS.998/CMS.600: New Media Literacies
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Lecture Notes

Session 4, 2/20/07

- Plato reading: What did you think?
 - Despite the fact that it rails against writing as opposed to oral history, this text is only possible by the fact that it is written. Plato might say that the way that writing changes thought is bad, but it's already too late
 - Maybe it would seem less "written" because it's supposedly a transcription of Socrates' speech

- Questions about Socrates: break into discussion groups of three
 - What is Socrates' (Plato's) view of writing? Of orality? What is the relationship of orality to literacy?
 - Protectionist discourse
 - Literacy destroys the virtues of orality
 - In an oral culture there's no such thing as an obsolete word, because it just wouldn't be used anymore, but in written texts you still come across these words – Plato would consider this a fault
 - The audience of writing can't be controlled
 - Writing is not wisdom, only its "semblance"
 - The text is static, and no matter how many times you read it, it never develops new knowledge
 - Writing is a "pastime" and not serious business (this sounds a lot like people's critiques of new media today)
 - What does writing do to memory, according to Plato? To knowledge? To thought? To the process of thinking?
 - Writing destroys memory
 - Writing can only act as a reminder, not as a teacher
 - In oral culture, you can't say something verbatim – that idea is a product of literacy
 - Writing is intractable. Set upon an idea and closed to discourse
 - Just because you read something doesn't mean you understand it
 - In this context, what purpose can/does writing serve?
 - Writing is a reminder of prior knowledge
 - In Plato's view, historical accounts would be chronologies of events
 - Writing destroys orality. With true orality, you can't have writing. Writing destroys memory.

- Questions about Ong: break into discussion groups of three
 - Ong is often where a lot of literacy historians stop
 - He's often considered the best thinker, the be all end all

- A lot of people consider him sort of the penultimate thinker in literacy
- However, we're starting with Ong, not ending with him, because this course is about *new* media literacies.
- Questions:
 - According to Ong, what is the relationship between orality and literacy?
 - Literacy comes after orality
 - Literary tradition changes world tradition – it alters that which came before, including the oral tradition
 - Literacy technologizes word. It doesn't just come after spoken word, but it's intimately connected with that which came before.
 - For a text to be intelligible, it must be reconverted into sound, directly or indirectly (pg. 23). You never completely lose orality, because in order for text to make sense, you have to convert it to oral information. (American Sign Language as an example.)
 - Does Ong agree with Plato? Ong sees a place for writing, Plato doesn't. Oral communication comes first, and literacy is privileged, but Ong sees them as complementing each other.
 - What does Ong mean when he says writing is “artificial?” What is “natural” about orality?
 - To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. It's indeed essential for fuller human potentials. (pg. 23)
 - All cultures have orality; while there have only been 106 written languages, compared to thousands and thousands of oral languages
 - What is the relationship between writing and thought; writing and knowledge?
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 - What does writing do?
 - Dialectic
 - Exactly how is writing a technology?
 - Speech requires sound, writing requires tools (pencil). Writing itself is a technology that allows for communication.
 - The technology of writing allows you to distance yourself from the process of writing itself.
 - Is writing a medium?
 - Writing is not just an aid, it's a transformation of consciousness – this is Ong's major thesis.