

The Gutenberg Parenthesis (Renegotiating Mediaeval Studies and Media Studies)

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This presentation will recommend the notion of a “Gutenberg Parenthesis” as a useful way of combining the suggestions made from several different perspectives that recent developments associated with the digital media and the internet are a reversion to “medieval” conditions prevailing prior to the rise and dominance of literacy, print and the book.

The media and cultural traditions of the pre-parenthetical (oral; memory-based; improvisatory) phase and of the post-parenthetical (digital, internet, interactive) phase have more in common with each other than either has with the bound-book-bound phase in between. Mediaeval Studies and Media Studies have accordingly much to tell each other, and the productive confusions and controversies involved in entering the parenthesis (in the case of England corresponding to the Shakespearean period) may be better understood by juxtaposition with those discernible now during our emergence from the parenthesis (and vice-versa). It will be emphasised that the parenthesis is a complex phenomenon also involving the autonomy, originality, independence and integrity of the cultural product, and seems to have been co-terminus with a lot of other enclosure-movements -- cultural, topographical and coporeal.

Along the way I will illustrate the topic with one or more aspects of my own research, most of turns out to be related to this picture. Options include Shakespeare’s “sampling” of other people’s texts and the players’ remixing of his (and parallels with African American vernacular culture of the mid-twentieth century), and exploration of the thesis that the material world (particularly in the form of bodies and environments) is perceived and represented on fundamentally different principles in parenthetical and extra-(pre- and post-)parenthetical narrative traditions -- illustrated by the startling changes in “Little Red Riding Hood” from folk tale, through nursery story, to film and computer game.