Formats of the Book

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Formats of the book, the scroll, codex or screen, differ particularly in the reading behaviors and reading methods associated with each of them. This suggests format embedded determinants for the comprehension of content. It also suggests persistent roles for each format across time and cultures.

The Scroll Format

Consider the scroll format with its persistent features of cursor, content tracking and the prompting of recitation or spoken delivery. An exemplar of the scroll book format is presented by the Judaic Scriptures. Here the prototypical cursor of the pointing finger is converted to a silver hand with pointing finger (Yad) which is used to follow the words across the scroll. The tracking is exemplified by the unrolled opening to the current passage and the retracting closing which leaves the scroll advanced to the next opening. The scroll provides the prompt for recitation as the assigned readings are delivered to the congregation. This whole array of presentational features exemplifies the use of the scroll format in Antiquity as well as in the present.

This functionality of the scroll, associated with specific reading behaviors and reading methods, is conveyed both by traditional and contemporary technologies. The computer screen is noted for its scrolling presentation of text and its navigational cursors. It could even be associated with prompting recitation whenever the reader comments aloud to others on the results of a Google search!

Perhaps a better exemplar of the function of the scroll in contemporary reading behavior and reading methods is the teleprompter. Here the cursor features and scroll tracking are also present while the prompt for
recitation is clearly intended. Today's politician speaking to a television audience with the assistance of a teleprompter is acting out behaviors and methods of communication of an orator delivering to an audience in the Ancient world who was assisted by a written papyrus scroll to prompt the themes of the presentation.

The goal of teleprompting as recitation and not writing is specified in a web pop-up "Video Tutorial Program Guidelines for Presenters and Technical Editors Using a Teleprompter". "Your presentation should be a "talk", not a reading of a paper. To write a natural sounding script, make an audio tape of your presentation as you normally would in a live setting. By transcribing the tape you will have created a script that you can use as a teleprompter script. Feel free to edit the transcript to make it more concise or add items that have been left out, but don't change the spoken English to polished written English."

The Codex Format

If the scrolling format of the teleprompter is then bonded to audio delivery, is there another format associated with inaudible delivery which could also prompt writing rather than talking? Let's look at particular reading behaviors and reading methods that distinguish and perpetuate the codex format of the book. Here we observe silent reading, manipulated navigation and prompted writing or other reflexive activities.

Silent reading can be contrasted with any verbalization of the read text. The earliest libraries were noisy as readers verbalized to screen out each other. Libraries became silent when verbalization by any single reader, however muted, became a distraction to other silent readers. Silent reading is also associated with a differing receptivity of the mind to concepts conveyed. This is illustrated by the well known encounter of Augustine of Hippo with the Bishop Ambrose which occurred in 385 CE at a time and in a society when the codex had come to prominence.
The changing receptivity of the mind to new behaviors and methods of reading as exemplified by the meeting of Augustine and Ambrose is expressed by Nancy M. Malone in her book Walking a Literary Labyrinth, A Spirituality of Reading. “So St. Augustine describes his conversion, not only as a turning to a new way of life, but as the birth of a new self. It is intriguing to me that he, who marveled at Ambrose reading silently, was born anew in an act of silent reading. And that he, who had been a teacher of rhetoric, the spoken word, became the author of one of the earliest – and greatest –pieces of introspective Western literature, a work that is a marker on the journey of the human race to greater interiority.”

Brian Stock describes the event much further in his book, Augustine the Reader. “Augustine tells us that when Ambrose read to himself, he did so without pronouncing the words aloud, in contrast to the normal manner of reading in the ancient period. His eyes proceeded across the page, while he sought out the sense with his heart. In order to appreciate the context of this statement, one must keep in mind that Augustine was desperate to escape from himself (5.14.2-3; 6.3.1-5). Viewing the Bishop, even at a distance, he saw something that he had apparently not seen before – the silent decoding of written signs as a means of withdrawing from the world and of focusing attention on one’s inner life. Silent reading was the technique: the silent reader, into whose interior world the outsider could not penetrate, was the sign that the desired state had been attained.”

Stock continues that Augustine reading silently “is not a member of a listening audience; he is alone in his library, where the voices that speak to him are from the codices that he has in hand: they enter his mind as he attempts to enter their thought. His awareness that he is reading plays a role in his conception of himself as an author and remains in his thoughts as he engages in...writing...”

The distinctive manipulated navigation of the codex is established by its portability and arm's length, hand held presentation. It is also founded in
haptic responses that augment comprehension as fanning and leafing through, as contrasted with cursoring, incite the hands to prompt the mind into near physical arrangements of information and concepts conveyed. Many other aspects of this manipulative comprehension of the codex are addressed elsewhere at FotB.

But why is the codex especially associated with reflexive activities such as writing and authoring? To some degree this derives from the format's prototypical activity of papyrus letter writing. Here media savvy sectarians from Antiquity to the present day, become early adopters of new means of evangelitic and polemic expression.

The Screen Format

The determinants of the screen format are a composite of all features of the parent reading modes; oral, written and print. So the distinctive feature of the screen is actually the composite presentation itself and its capacity to mimic and incite any of the behaviors and methods of reading.

(to be continued)