IDEA LAB

Becoming Screen Literate

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Everywhere we look, we see screens. The other day I watched clips from a movie as I pumped gas into my car. The other night I saw a movie on the backseat of a plane. We will watch anywhere. Screens playing video pop up in the most unexpected places — like A.T.M. machines and supermarket checkout lines and tiny phones; some movie fans watch entire films in between calls. These ever-present screens have created an audience for very short moving pictures, as brief as three minutes, while cheap digital creation tools have empowered a new generation of filmmakers, who are rapidly filling up those screens. We are headed toward screen ubiquity.

Jonathan Bruce Williams

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Video Citing: TimeTube, on the Web, gives a genealogy of the most popular videos and their descendants, and charts their popularity in time-line

When technology shifts, it bends the culture. Once long skills of memorization, recitation and rhetoric instilled in societies a reverence for the past, the ambiguous, the ornate and the subjective. Then, about 500 years ago, orality was overthrown by technology. Gutenberg's invention of metallic movable type elevated writing into a central position in the culture. By the means of cheap and perfect copies, text became the engine of change and the foundation of stability. From printing came journalism, science and the mathematics of libraries and law. The distribution-and-display device that we call printing instilled in society a reverence for precision (of black ink on white paper), an appreciation for linear logic (in a sentence), a passion for objectivity (of printed fact) and an allegiance to authority (via authors), whose truth was as fixed and final as a book. In the West, we became people of the book.

Now invention is again overthrowing the dominant media. A new distribution-and-display technology is nudging the book aside and catapulting images, and especially moving images, to the center of the culture. We are becoming people of the screen. The fluid and fleeting symbols on a

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charts their popularity in time-line form.

screen pull us away from the classical notions of monumental authors and authority. On the screen, the subjective again trumps the objective. The past is a rush of data streams cut and rearranged into a new mashup, while truth is something you assemble yourself on your own screen as you jump from link to link. We are now in the middle of a second Gutenberg shift — from book fluency to screen fluency, from literacy to visuality.

The overthrow of the book would have happened long ago but for the great user asymmetry inherent in all media. It is easier to read a book than to write one; easier to listen to a song than to compose one; easier to attend a play than to produce one. But movies in particular suffer from this user asymmetry. The intensely collaborative work needed to coddle chemically treated film and paste together its strips into movies meant that it was vastly easier to watch a movie than to make one. A Hollywood blockbuster can take a million person-hours to produce and only two hours to consume. But now, cheap and universal tools of creation (megapixel phone cameras, Photoshop, iMovie) are quickly reducing the effort needed to create moving images. To the utter bafflement of the experts who confidently claimed that viewers would never rise from their reclining passivity, tens of millions of people have in recent years spent uncountable hours making movies of their own design. Having a ready and reachable audience of potential millions helps, as does the choice of multiple modes in which to create. Because of new consumer gadgets, community training, peer encouragement and fiendishly clever software, the ease of making video now approaches the ease of writing.

This is not how Hollywood makes films, of course. A blockbuster film is a gigantic creature custom-built by hand. Like a Siberian tiger, it demands our attention — but it is also very rare. In 2007, 600 feature films were released in the United States, or about 1,200 hours of moving images. As a percentage of the hundreds of millions of hours of moving images produced annually today, 1,200 hours is tiny. It is a rounding error.

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