

Orality, Textuality, and Visuality

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Abstract

The oral lore or oral tradition had for long been the only and primary medium of communication, and of the transmission and preservation of knowledge, folklore, cultural material, and canonical scriptures from one generation to the other. It was a fully-fledged, perfected, and complete artistic literary medium prior to the invention of script. The advent of the technologies of literacy (writing and print), however, changed the existing oral-aural based culture into a highly literate, and document-oriented world. The expansion of new media technologies, offering unlimited privileges, relegated to an even more subordinate position the status of this tradition. This paper discusses the concepts of 'oral culture' and 'oral literature', and identifies some of the defining features of an oral context or culture in contrast to a literate or print-minded culture. It also characterizes the oral text, and the written text, points out the fortes (strong points) of both modes, and the thought processes and skills involved in each. The concern of the last section is with new media, also referred to as hypermedia, the privileges they offer, and the sweepingly detrimental power it has had over the art of orality.

Keywords: Orality, oral culture, literate culture, script, print, new media technology.

1. Introduction

In today's postmodern world, audiences have become avid consumers of satellite broadcasting networks and print media. In fact, the introduction of the new information technologies and the rise of the Internet, the pre-eminent driver of this drastic change in the telecommunications and the media landscape, has further redefined, if not disrupted, the status of the oral word, in favor of the written word and the image.

This transition from a primarily oral world, through a document and print-minded culture, to a visually-oriented one has impacted different aspects of Man's existence and each medium of conveyance has certainly served Man's purposes of communication and durability in its own way.

Be that as it may, there arises a need to pose questions as to what it is that oral culture means and subsumes, what its defining features are as opposed to literate culture, what psychodynamics and characteristics define oral and written texts, particularly those characteristics relative to the skills involved in the processing of each, what elements the development of print has added to the development of script, and finally what new dimensions visual media has brought, and how they have proved detrimental to the various forms of the oral tradition.

2. Defining Oral culture

Ong (1982), who has written so compellingly on the subject of oral culture, defines it "as one where people are totally unfamiliar with writing." This definition goes in conjunction with Wilson's (1999: 16) postulate that oral culture can be defined "with reference to its lack of writing". The two definitions are, in fact, clear; an oral culture is one that exists prior to the introduction of script. In this sense, when considering orality, as an expression of culture, one is not so much concerned with what that culture is about as with how that culture is transmitted. The medium of that transmission, being essentially oral, is often juxtaposed with its counterpart medium, writing. Oral cultures are often defined in terms of, and set in opposition to, a literate and literary culture; that is, one which is document-minded; one which has known, and makes extensive use of, writing. This tendency to think of oral culture in literary terms has led to the coinage of the term "oral literature" by Foley (1986) to refer to "literature composed without the art of writing." (Cited in Wilson, 1999: 16)

Of special interest it is to note that inherent to the term 'oral literature', there lies not only an internal contradiction (Wilson: op. cit.), but also a reflection of our own incapacity to construe of the term 'orality' in abstraction from writing and literacy. If literature, in its ample meaning, is, by definition, anything which is written to the exclusion of that which is oral, the combination of the words 'oral' and 'literature' renders the term more of an oxymoron. How then it is possible to talk about orality in literature. Wilson (op. cit.) questions the term 'oral literature', which has been all too often taken for granted, arguing "how can something be oral and written at the same time, if 'literature' implies writing?". Ong (1982) further underscores the internal contradiction in the term 'oral literature', stipulating that the use of this term "reflects our inability to represent to our minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all", (Ong, op. cit: 11).

The etymological connotation of the term is only one aspect of the issue. A number of scholars, in fact, have advanced arguments to the effect that that which is oral should remain oral since once the oral is transferred, or I would rather duly say, 'forced' into the written medium, it ceases to be oral by losing much of its authenticity, originality, and essence; that very thing which makes it. One can view documenting oral culture by

analogy to translation. No matter how one strives at precision and objectivity when translating, the distortion and transformation of the source text proves inevitable. Much of the cultural load of a text is lost when it is transferred from the medium of one language into another language, and cultural context. The same applies when forcing what is oral, such as proverbs, folktales, anecdotes, riddles, etc. into the written mode. Grumet, in his discussion of the development of orality and textuality in Jewish history from the Geonic periods onwards, subscribes to the same view, contending that “the process of translating and anthologizing present the challenge of retaining enough of the original cultural weight of a text into another cultural context and open the possibility for distortion, both intended and unintended.”(See, http://www.lookstein.org/online_journal.php?id=13)

Wilson (1999: 16) refers, moreover, to another issue relating to the pejorative overtones conveyed in the term ‘oral literature’. By setting oral culture in opposition to literacy and writing, by implication, we are making it synonymous with illiteracy and, therefore, with ignorance. The tendency to stigmatize oral culture, and view the written mode as superior has been fueled by debates ad nauseam, which in my view, offer no fertile ground for argumentation. It seems that modern societies have become so much document-oriented and print-minded that acknowledgement is given only to print and writing as the best mode for storing knowledge to the detriment of oral culture. Despite, however, the fact that print excels at storing knowledge, Wilson (op. cit: 17) argues, non-literate societies have, nonetheless, “ a great deal of knowledge [which they store] in other ways”, using poems, songs, proverbs, stories, sayings, riddles, and other forms of oral tradition. It is not in fact so much a question of labeling one type of culture as high and another as low as it is a question of understanding that both oral and written cultures provide different media for the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another, and are thereby characterized in different ways.

3. Characterizing Oral vs. literate cultures

Before delineating the main characteristics defining oral and written texts, it would be methodologically more appropriate to first outline some of the characteristics found within primarily oral contexts and those existing in a highly literate document-oriented culture. A primary oral culture, according to Person (1993: 143) is one where there is restricted use of written texts and where written texts, if there are any, are used only as mnemonic aids to ‘the speaker’s meaning’ rather than as reference records. The emphasis is placed on the actual oral words of the speaker. Person, here, seems to borrow terms pulled from paradigms such as speech-act theory, where two types of meanings are distinguished, notably, the speaker’s meaning, and sentence meaning. In this case, the former would be associated with oral culture while the later is the focal point, and the unit of analysis, in the written text. By contrast, in a document-minded culture, written documents work as permanent, enduring, fixed reference works to the actual words themselves, and not merely as mnemonic tools. In explanation of this point, Person (op. cit: 145) states that “in written language, the words and syntax, “the sentence meaning”, is preserved by the artifact of writing, and mental recall becomes the precise reproduction of that artifact.” Person (1993) identifies, moreover, six distinct criteria he deems to be characteristic component elements in any one literate culture. A literate culture according to this author (op.cit) is, first, one where documents abound; that is, are sufficiently available, particularly for political leaders, and merchants (Troll, 1990: 107); second, It is one where writing technology is of utmost necessity for business dealings (Troll: *ibid.*); third, written texts in literate societies are believed to ‘faithfully’ preserve the ‘truth’(Thomas, 1989:34-45); fourth, these texts are not perceived merely along the lines of mnemonic aids as they are in primary oral cultures, but are considered to be reliable records kept for future reference (Stock 1983:3; Thomas 1989:51); fifth, in a document-oriented society, Person(1993: *ibid.*) adds, writing and reading processes are removed further away from their close oral associations in such a way that voicing or reading aloud comes to be substituted with the sixth element: silent reading (Graham: 1987:31-33; Troll: 1990:108) and writing (Ong, 1982:95; Graham 1987:31-33; Troll 1990:113) .

With this background in mind about what it is that makes an oral, or otherwise, a written culture, it is to be expected that there are a number of distinguishing characteristics between the oral and written text, particularly and most importantly those characteristics pertaining to the processes involved in the storage of each.

4. Characterizing oral vs. written texts

In this respect, Person (1993: 144) states the following:

In oral language, the point, intention or significance of the language, the “speaker’s meaning” is preserved in the mind of the listener; as the actual words, syntax, and intonation are ephemeral, they are rapidly exchanged for those interpreted meanings which can be preserved.

As the above quotation suggests, oral texts involve unconscious reshaping despite strivings at fixity on the part of the speaker. Writing, on the other hand, provides greater opportunities for conscious control of the text. A written text can be preserved and even edited in ways that are different from memorized, rehearsed, and received texts. This flexibility in the oral mode is what makes it in fact more of a natural communication act whereas the written text is rather artificial, and lacks much in authenticity.

Ong (1982) moreover outlines some of the features and noetic characteristics peculiar to the oral folkloric

expression. He (op. cit) maintains that if thoughts, in oral cultures, were not expressed in forms not only to be constantly repeated, but also which are amenable to the memory, then much of that culture would be lost. This is to say that there are aspects of oral culture that make retention possible. Among such aspects, Ong (op. cit.) contends, is the additive nature of utterances rather than a subordinative one. Thinking, moreover, is mnemonically patterned for a more readily available oral recurrence (Wislon, 1999: 18). Expressions tend also to be aggregative, typically redundant and copious, heavily rhythmic and consisting in balanced patterns, agonistically toned and phrased for stronger impact on the hearer, empathetic, homeostatic, situational (i.e. specific) rather than general or abstract (Ong, 1982), replete with assonances and alliterations, and finally participatory, rather than distanced; that is, inclusive of the audience as active participants (Wilson, 1993: 18).

This last characteristic relating to the involvement of the audience is reiterated by Vansina (1985) in his contention that:

One of the basic characteristics of oral communication is that it is based on the interaction of a speaker and his audience. It is a social activity, in which the personality and skill of the speaker (or singer) is complemented by the participation of the listener(s), whether that be passive (that is, through shared experience in the event and in common understanding of the semantic field of meaning of the words and paralinguage), or active (that is, by vocal or other response).

The transmission of oral culture is necessarily participatory since the oral medium, unlike the written medium which does not necessitate the reader, requires the physical and immediate presence of an audience (i.e. the listeners) and the speaker(s).

Fiske (1992: 313), in his "politics of the popular", similarly, argues that "the power of audiences-as-producers in the cultural economy is considerable". Fiske restates his point more clearly, giving further detail in the following extract, wherein he compares popular culture or what he calls "cultural economy" to "financial economy":

The power of the audience derives from the fact that meanings do not circulate in the cultural economy in the same way that wealth does in the financial. (...) they are harder to control because the production of meaning and pleasure is not the same as the production of the cultural commodity, or of other goods, for in the cultural economy the role of the consumer does not exist as the end point of a linear economic transaction. Meanings and pleasures circulate within it without any real distinction between producers and consumers.

It is of special interest to note two relevant points here. The first point relates to the postulate that meanings in oral texts are "harder to control". This is intended to mean that oral texts do not lend themselves to hermeneutic analyses in the same way written texts do. Ong (1982: 78) makes the same point, arguing that writing gives room to the existence of discourse since, in an oral speech, chances are that such discourse cannot be directly contested given that discourse is detached from its producer. The second point is concerned with Fiske's contention that there exists no "real distinction between producers and consumers." This, in fact, refers us to some type of fusion between the narrator, the text (i.e. the performance), and the audience as part of the text. This fusion is in fact what gives a sense of dynamism and authenticity to popular oral culture. As a counterpart to the narrator-text-public pattern in popular culture, the conventional forms of writing display no such similar fusion between the writer, the text and the reader. With regard to this point, writing, Ong (op. cit) maintains, "restructures our consciousness", by distancing the source or originator of a thought from the receiver (i.e. the reader). The classical form in writing is one which includes the writer, on the one hand, and a receiver, as a potential reader, on the other, both of whom are detached from the text. In other contexts, one might have the text and the reader only to the exclusion of the writer (i.e. reader-response theory), or otherwise, a more radical form admissible of the text only, and "nothing outside the text" (i.e. formalism). In popular oral culture, the power of the audience -of 'the masses', of 'the people'- probably stems also not only from the fact that the relationship the audience entertains with the narrator is mainly based on the sharing of meanings and pleasure, but also from the type of processes and skills listeners need to actively deploy during the transmission, and the storage of, those meanings and pleasures.

In this regard, Wilson contends (1999: 17) that "Simultaneous to transmission, storage is taking place through a process of listening, repetition and memorization. Through the practice of the same skills, the speaker or singer is retrieving what he has already stored. Orality, therefore, is a complex combination of these component skills, by which information is passed on and learned in such a way as to be possible of recall."

Based on the above quotation, it can be argued that while the written text presupposes the use of thought processes such as reading, understanding, analyzing, and interpreting, the oral text requires such skills as listening, repetition, and memorization to be used, all of which are geared towards, and conducive to, enhancing and facilitating the cycle of transmission, retention, and retrieval. The different skills, whereby the written and oral texts are attended to, lead us, in fact, to another no less important characteristic of oral texts, which is the fact that they rely heavily on the senses, unlike the written text, which appeals more to cognition and analytical skills. Ong (1982), in this respect, stipulates that "the more entrenched writing becomes as a mode of expression, the more we move from an oral-aural-based sensory world to one where vision reigns supreme."

Among the genres most affected by the shift from an oral-aural-based culture to a literate culture is the narrative. Ong (1982), in his work on orality and textuality, contrasts the structure of the narrative in oral cultures as opposed to literate ones, maintaining that narratives delivered orally consist in the rhapsodizing and stringing together of episodes. Focus, moreover, is on interaction with the audience, which enables the narrator/performer to foreground the elements of his/her narrative. Orally-based narratives also tend to not only include flat characters, but also to give less regard to a linear plot structure. On the other hand, narratives in a literate culture follow a linear plot line, makes use of heavy subordination, and is structured in such a way that the narrator/writer is detached from the reader.

5. The development of print

The development of print had even more incidence on the ‘art’ of orality than had the development of script. With the introduction of print, Ong (1982) contends, the objective was no more to recycle knowledge back into speech, that is, words are not written merely to be read aloud, but print, rather, suggests that “words are things”. Ong (op. cit) further argues that print, given that it consists mainly in arranging and embedding words in the limited space of a page, is suggestive of “closure and finality”; limitations which have never been present in oral storytelling, for instance.

Kerman (1987: 48-55), in addition to Ong (1982) and other scholars, has also expatiated on the ‘logic of print’ as he put it. Kerman (1987), drawing from the works of McLuhan (1962) and Einstein (1979), identifies three main features of the print logic: multiplicity, systematization, and fixity. By multiplicity, Kerman (op. cit.) refers to the variety, and availability of a multitude of works and also of copies of the same work. By systematization, kerman (op. cit.) refers to the systematic production and organization of a book. Fixity, on the other hand, is concerned with the permanent nature of books.

It may well be true that writing and print have presented serious threats to the oral tradition. Yet, new media technologies remain by far the most detrimental of all to the oral tradition

6. Visual media: advantages and threats

Many scholars such as Jhonson (2006) argue that the visual has indeed almost killed the oral, and that listeners, likewise, have been replaced by viewers. This seems to be to a large extent true because this new form of communication integrates elements extending beyond those used in oral and written forms- the aural and textual elements respectively- to the visual dimension (Jhonon, op. cit.). New media seems to also offer its incomparably large audience the privilege of ‘immediacy’, which was once exclusively offered by the oral tradition. Technology also allows for an unprecedented advanced and sophisticated manipulation and reproduction of not just the image as a static representation, but the moving image, together with the sound. In this sense, new media appeals to the senses in a probably more powerful way than does the oral mode. The situation has in fact become more acute for the oral tradition since even the element of participation is incorporated by new media technologies. The new media user is not only a passive consumer, but can be, if he/she chooses, a producer of messages through the various channels of new media (e.g. facebook, twitter, blogs, etc). Given its visual richness, and incorporation of a multiplicity of forms of expression, Jhonson (op. cit.) duly describes new media as being at once “powerfully compelling, engaging, and [effectively] communicative”.

The edges brought about by visual media over oral and print media seem to be overwhelming. Yet, in retrospect, one cannot fail to see that despite the many advantages and fortes offered by the use of new media, there are inevitable problems posed by such use. Indeed, concomitant with the expansion and ease of accessibility of new media, a number of media experts and professionals such as Rob Williams, and Robin Rieski, inter alia, have shown concern as to the importance of media literacy and education in sensitizing viewers to the dangers of propaganda, and the hidden agendas of media owners. These experts have also drawn the attention of those individuals, who are not media owners, but who actively participate in the production and dissemination of messages to the importance of responsible and ethical use rather than abuse of new media.

7. Conclusion

Orality has persisted along with the textual and the visual, though in a subsidiary position. Having taken hold of the psyche of large audiences, print and technology-mediated cultures have certainly affected orality in several ways, but remain, however, far from eliminating it. This is perhaps attributable, above all else, to the fact that oral culture is Man-mediated rather than computer or print-mediated. Oral culture, indeed, incontestably remains the primary location for ‘the human consciousness’ to realize its fullest potential and to produce, as Finnegan (1992) puts it, "verbal performances of high artistic and human worth." The fact that the oral tradition could survive and has been kept in use as a repository of knowledge, ideas, and art in many contexts and societies despite increasing rates of literacy all over the world may be proof that orality is not merely a simple medium of communication as other media. In fact, oral culture should not even be situated in a dialectical relationship with literate culture because that as noted above subordinates orality to an exercise associated only with societies that

are deemed 'backward' and illiterate. The ubiquitous nature of the oral tradition, and its being highly diverse, multifunctional, and dynamic makes, in my belief, for its primacy as Man's first and lasting medium of expression.

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