

**GD315A  
HISTORY  
AND ANALYSIS  
OF DESIGN**

**EXERCISE #5**

- 1 In "The Curse of Literacy" Leonard Shlain states his theory that, essentially, when a matriarchal culture establishes and uses a written alphabet, the culture becomes patriarchal. Briefly comment and respond to Schlain's theory. Refer in your response to class discussion of the article, and your knowledge about the early dissemination of the written word in books of the 16th and 17th Centuries, i.e. who wrote and read the books, who was kept from reading them, what were the cultures like of the people who read—and who were kept from reading—books.
  
2. Read the excerpts from *Techniques of the Observer*, *A History of Reading*, and *The Old Way of Seeing*. Answer the following questions:
  - a. Is there a common theme or common element shared by all three readings? If so, what is it?
  - b. Specifically compare what Hale is saying about Daguerre and photography to what Crary is saying about photography being a "...central element...in the reshaping of an entire territory on which signs and images, each effectively severed from a referent, circulate and proliferate."
  - c. What does the Manguel reading, about Saint Nilus and the *Biblia Pauperum*, say about the use of illustration to shape people's thoughts and beliefs? Do you think that illustration is different from photography in shaping the way people "read" or understand the images presented in each? Use what you have read from Crary, Manguel, Hale and Shlain to shape your response.
  - d. Is your personal opinion to part c, above, different from any of the authors? Briefly explain:

Within this new field of serially produced objects, the most significant in terms of their social and cultural impact, were photography and a host of related techniques for the industrialization of image making. The photograph becomes a central element not only in a new commodity economy but in the reshaping of an entire territory on which signs and images, each effectively severed from a referent, circulate and proliferate. Photographs may have some apparent similarities with older types of images, such as perspectival painting or drawings made with the aid of a camera obscura; but the vast systemic rupture of which photography is a part renders such similarities insignificant. Photography is an element of a new and homogeneous terrain of consumption and circulation in which an observer becomes lodged. To understand the “photography effect” in the nineteenth century, one must see it as a crucial component of a new cultural economy of value and exchange, not as part of a continuous history of visual representation.

Photography and money become homologous forms of social power in the nineteenth century. They are equally totalizing systems for binding and unifying all subjects within a single global network of valuation and desire. As Marx said of money, photography is also a great leveler, a democratizer, a “mere symbol,” a fiction “sanctioned by the so-called universal consent of mankind.” (Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling [New York, 1967]. p.91). Both are magical forms that establish a new set of abstract relations between individuals and things and impose those relations as the real. It is through the distinct but interpenetrating economies of money and photography that a whole social world is represented and constituted exclusively as signs.

—from *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary (MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1991), p 13.

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We do not know what Saint Nilus’s monastery was like, or where exactly it was located, but in one of his many letters he describes certain ideal features of ecclesiastical decoration which we may assume he used in his own chapel. Bishop Olympidorus had consulted him about the erection of a church which he wished to decorate with images of saints, hunting scenes, birds and animals. Saint Nilus, while approving the depiction of saints, condemned the hunting scenes and the fauna as “trifling and unworthy of a manly Christian soul” and suggested instead scenes from the Old and new Testament “painted by the hand of a gifted artist.” These, he argued, set up on either side of the Holy Cross, would “serve as books for the unlearned, teach them scriptural history and impress on them the record of God’s mercies.”

Saint Nilus imagined the illiterate faithful coming to these scenes in his functional church and reading them as if they were the words of a book. He imagined them looking up at decorations that were no longer “trifling adornments”; he imagined them identifying the precious images, linking one with another in their minds, inventing stories for them or recognizing in the familiar pictures associations with sermons they had heard or, if they happened to be not totally “unlearned,” with exegeses from the Scriptures. Two centuries later, Pope Gregory the Great would echo Saint Nilus’s views: “It is one thing to worship a picture, it is another to learn in depth, by means of pictures, a venerable story. For that which writing makes present to the reader, pictures make present to the illiterate, to those who only perceive visually, because in pictures the ignorant see the story they ought to follow, and those who don’t know their letters find that they can, after a fashion, read. Therefore, especially for the common folk, pictures are the equivalent of reading.” In 1025 the Synod of Arras stated that “what simple people could not grasp through reading the scriptures could be learned by means of contemplating pictures.”

...sometime in the early fourteenth century, the images saint Nilus had intended for the faithful to read on the walls were reduced and collected in the shape of a book. In the regions of the Lower Rhine, several illuminators and woodblock engravers began to depict the echoing images on parchment and paper. The books they created were made almost entirely out of juxtaposed scenes, with just a few words, sometimes as captions on the sides of the page and sometimes issuing from the mouths of characters in banner-like cartouches, like the balloons in today’s comic strips.

...The first such volume we possess dates from 1462. In time, these extraordinary books came to be known as *Bibliae Pauperum*, or Bibles of the Poor.

Essentially, these "Bibles" were large picture-books in which each page was divided to allow for two or more scenes...

Chained to a lectern, opened to an appropriate page, the *Biblia Pauperum* would display its double images to the faithful sequentially, day after day, month after month. Many would not be able to read the words in Gothic script surrounding the depicted personages; few would grasp the several meanings of each image in their historical, moral and allegorical significance. But the majority of the people would recognize most of the characters and scenes, and be able to "read" in those images a relationship between the stories of the Old Testament and the stories of the New, simply because of their juxtaposition on the page.

—from *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel (Penguin Books USA, NY NY, 1996), pp 97, 101, 103.

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...such inventions as the water turbine (1832), the reaping machine (1831), chloroform anaesthesia (1831), the sewing machine (1829), and the dynamo (1831). Steam automobiles chuffed along the new highways of England until the railroads deliberately put them out of business. In 1832 Charles Babbage's automatic calculator was built. When Samuel Morse invented the electromagnetic telegraph in 1838, everyone said it was only a matter of time until voices would be transmitted by wire.

Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre was a painter obsessed with verisimilitude. In 1822 he created the Diorama, a Paris theater in which a *trompe l'oeil* set was the entire show. It was a huge success. Yet at least one critic saw in it the emptiness that was to haunt the new way of seeing: "The idea produced is that of a region—of a world—desolated; of living nature at an end; of the last day past and over." In 1837 Daguerre invented the photograph. Mumford writes, "The camera-eye that developed with photography brought about a new self-consciousness ...not self-examination, but self-exposure."

In 1828 Hector Berlioz wrote his first masterpiece, *Eight Scenes from Faust*; in 1831 Goethe completed his last, *Faust*. The Faust legend obsessed artists and writers; in dozens of works they told the story of the modern predicament: in gaining the power of industry, the world was sacrificing its soul. It was not the new machines themselves that were feared—there were not yet very many—it was machine thinking. "The age of arithmetic and of criticism has set in," wrote Emerson. And Carlyle wrote, "We see nothing by direct vision; but only by reflection and in anatomical dismemberment.... This deep, paralysed subjection to physical objects comes not from Nature, but from our own unwise mode of viewing Nature."

—from *The Old Way of Seeing*, Jonathan Hale (1994), p 43.