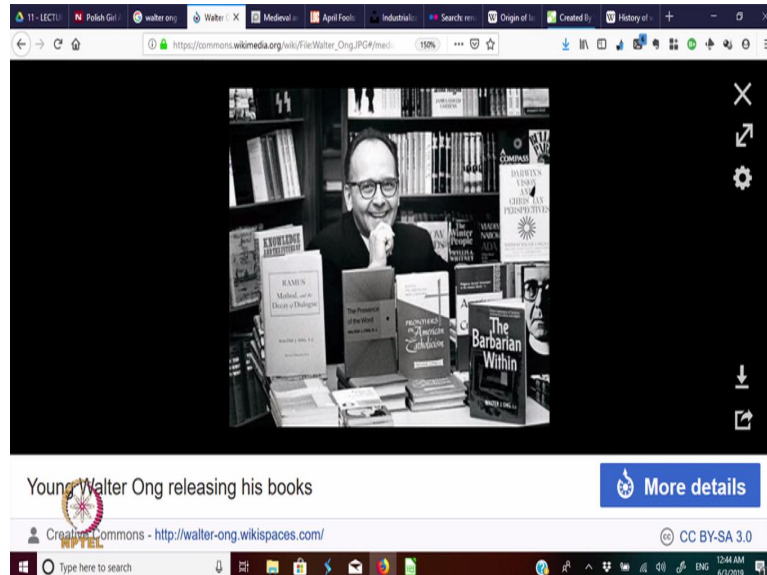


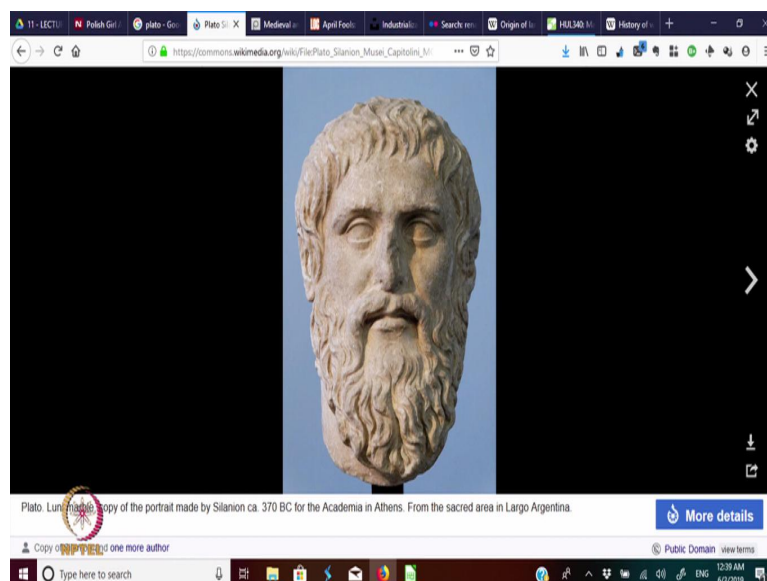
Text, Textuality and Digital Media
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Lecture 4
Walter Ong: Orality and Literacy
Part - 1

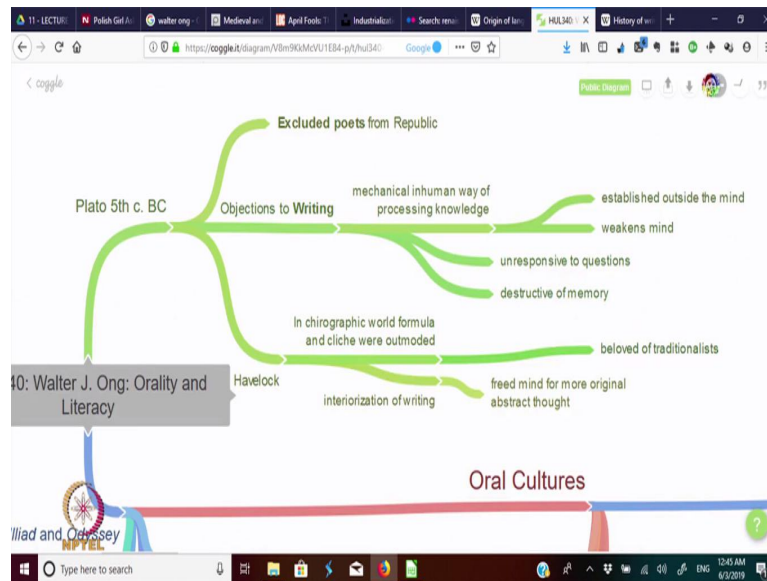
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Welcome. Today again we will take up an essay by Walter Ong on orality and literacy. And this is touching upon the similar kind of theme that we had in McLuhan's typographic man or the distinction between orality and literacy. In this essay, Walter Ong will discuss the effects of this shift from the oral domain to the literate domain. And what far-reaching effects it has not only on human communication but also certain changes in human patterns of the human mind as well.

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In the essay Ong begins by discussing certain objections that Plato the Greek philosopher had on writing- on the practice of writing. Because remember, they were moving from an oral universe to a written universe. Writing was slowly coming into existence. The rules of writing were slowly getting formed at that point of time. Plato is known as a philosopher, who excluded poets from his Republic. He had a notion of what an ideal Republic would be, but he excluded poets from the Republic, because he says that poets and when he said poets, he would have meant any imaginative kinds of writing. Of course in an oral domain, you only had poetry; you did not have much of prose writing. This is something that we have to also look at, because poetry is something, is a form which is closely associated with oral practices. Poetry actually supports and works in tandem with oral practices, so the various kind of techniques of poetry writing. In fact, saying poetry writing is also a kind of a misnomer as an oxymoron because oral poetry is not written.

So it's a creation of poetry really what we should be talking about. But, returning to Plato, why did he exclude poets from the Republic? He said, that poets exist in the level of imagination. They do not exist in a domain, which is tied to the to the real universe, but it exists in the imaginative domain. And therefore, poets do not actually practice analytical forms of discourse, argumentative forms of discourse.

Now there is a fallacy in this argument that Plato is making, which is something that we will see. Because this disjunction has a certain contradiction between Plato's exclusion of poets from the Republic, and his objections to writing. I will come to that point in a moment. What

were his objections to writing? He says that, it is a mechanical way and an inhuman way of processing knowledge, because remember, writing externalizes.

It is writing established outside the mind, and therefore he says, it weakens the mind. Because it is destructive of memory. When we are in an oral universe, we learn something, we do so within the body, within the self, within the mind. It does not exist outside it. So, the articulation is inhuman in the sense it is non-human. It is a more mechanical articulation.

And, this destruction of memory is looked upon with great suspicion because that would mean that knowledge actually stems without an internalization. It would be an articulation of something that is written on a piece of paper or a scroll which I can read and it would be a very superficial sort of process. Therefore, it weakens the mind because the mind is not getting exercised. Because one of the things that gets associated with learning- as I had pointed out in the previous lectures- is memory. To know a certain text by heart, a certain piece, a literary piece by heart is looked upon as a practice of great learning.

So the moment that need for memory is reduced, it is looked upon as something that has done away with a certain bit of learning, that people are going to become lesser knowledgeable simply because you do not know the text. However, the alternative is, he says, in a chirographic world. It actually freed the mind for more original and abstract thought. Whereas in an oral universe, the entire emphasis was on trying to remember something.

When you have to tell the story of the Iliad or the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, you had to know the story by heart. You had to know the story in order to be able to tell it. So, a large part of human endeavour in the learning process was internalization and memorization of a certain piece. Whereas, now that the mind is not occupied by that need for memorization, the mind gets freed up for other abstract modes of thought.

And therefore you have more scientific discoveries, mathematics- that is something that starts developing the the knowledge processes, which are not dependent on memory anymore. They are dependent on our ability to associate various forms of knowledge without being preoccupied by the act of memory.

So therefore, in a chirographic world he says, formula and cliché were out mould. So if you look at poetry for example, one of the important features of conventional poetry is rhyme and rhythm, because rhyme and rhythm are aids to memory. If there are couplets you remember

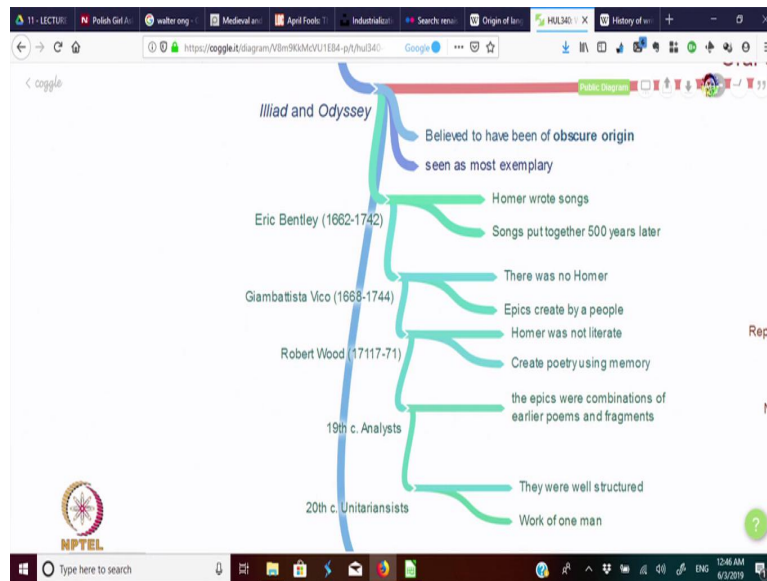
better if you know the rhyming pattern. When you try to remember lyrics of a certain song, if you take away the tune, it is more difficult to remember the song but if you remember it in tune if you memorize it in tune, it is easier to actually remember the lyrics of a particular song.

So, therefore there is a certain formula in it. That rhyme or rhythm is a formula that was a technique which allowed memory to function. Now in a written universe, that rhyme and rhythm is no longer required, is not of great importance. And therefore you had more and more prose construction, where memory no longer becomes that important. So even when you have to learn something, in an oral universe, you did not have people who remembered long pieces of prose. Because prose first of all did not exist. But prose is not is not very attuned to memorization. So, it was possible to have other kinds of writing as well. You cannot think of scientific writing or factual writing in the form of poetry through a certain clichéd or formulaic mode. If I can tie this to the original idea of Plato's exclusion of poets from the Republic, it is clearly a certain contradiction because he is excluding poets from Republic, because of their imagination and lack of link with the real world. But it is actually writing which makes space from the need for memory, for more analytical and abstract thought, which reflects back to the real world. It is not really a critique of Plato because Plato existed in a historical period, where he could not possibly have fathomed the changes that are taking place.

It is very similar to the kind of changes that are taking place today between the print and the digital world. And we are like Plato, placed in the world: we probably do not have the kind of understanding of what these changes really mean as someone who would look back to our times historically, about a hundred years from now. But we do have an advantage over Plato. And that is our study of history. And that is why we are studying the history of communication in this course: in order to understand the present.

But what this particular instance of Plato's objections to writing show us, is how difficult it is to fathom the the true implications, of the shift of communication from oral to the chirographic.

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Ong moves to look at the creation of the Greek epics, Iliad and Odyssey. Now we all know who is the author the Iliad and Odyssey. Everybody will say Homer. But, it is not as simple as that. Various literary historians have disagreed on very specific things: that we do not know exactly where these mythologies or myths have actually originated from. Just as any mythical story, even within the South Asian context.

There are literary historians who have suggested, that there have been many texts which we can fall back upon. But, we do not exactly know because they are very very old. And mostly, mythologies have developed through oral practices. Oral practices do not have chirographic records.

Historians have to fall back upon tangible resources in order to be able to trace the development of a certain text or a certain practice. So it is very difficult because many of these texts actually existed in the oral domain for hundreds of years. Before they were written down for the first time, we do not know where it exactly originated from.

Valmiki wrote the Ramayana. But the stories of the Ramayana would have existed even before the first act of writing. So it is difficult to reach that history. Anyway, so Eric Bentley suggested that Homer wrote the songs. But the songs were actually put together five hundred years later. So there is a contradiction. Vico has suggested that there was no home, that the epics were created by a people, that it was in the practice of telling of stories, that the epic was created. One person tells the story in a certain way, person B listens from person A, tells the story in another way and slowly the story develops.

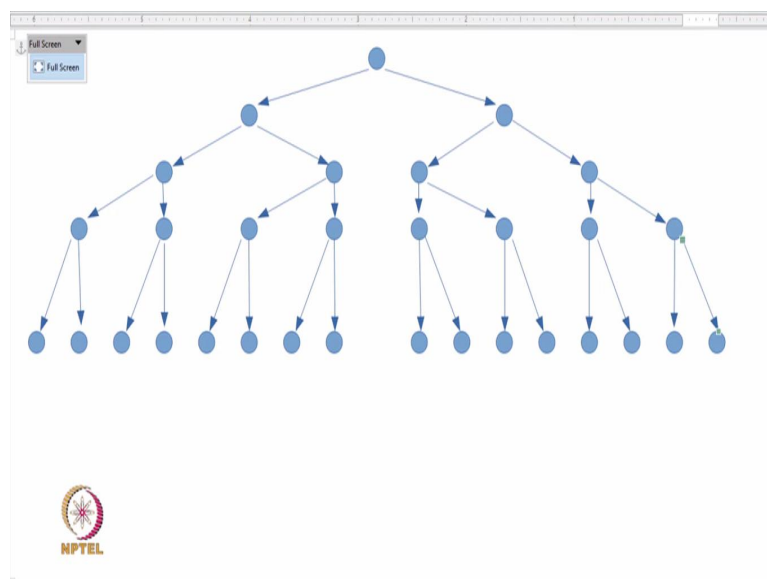
As people keep articulating or telling these stories, the stories take a certain shape and become a dominant sort of practice. There is no single articulation. There are as many tales as there are tellers. So there could be as many versions of a certain myth as there are tellers. Each person says a certain thing, it is much like the way gossip operates: you hear something from a certain friend and you go ahead and tell it to another person.

You do not say the exact words, or the exact things. Either you associate it with another incident or you may be imaginative in your articulation. So there are various aspects which are involved in it. Robert Wood, on the other hand, says Homer could not possibly have written the Iliad, or the Odyssey, because Homer was not a literate person. He created poetry using memory. So, it was not written.

So there are varying ideas of how Iliad and Odyssey was created. Nineteenth century analysts suggested that epics were combinations of earlier poems and fragments. For these poems and fragments, these songs existed earlier and they were only brought together and combined.

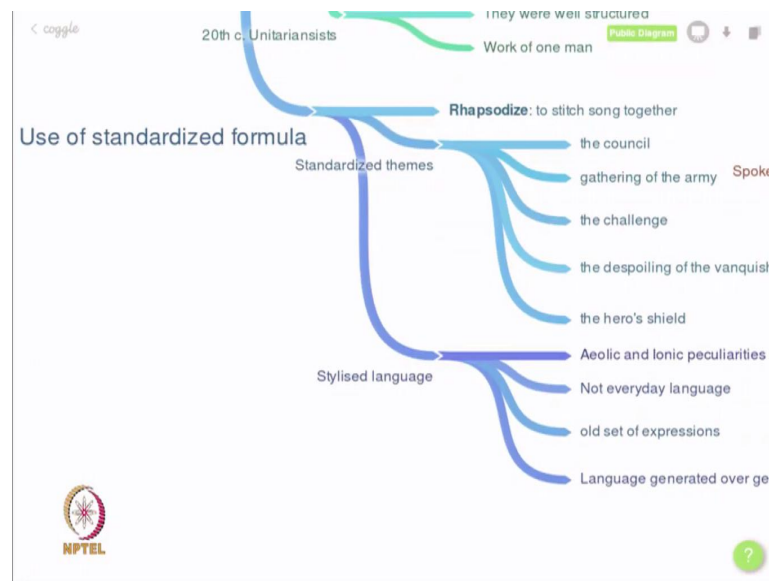
Even if you look at some of the stories in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, you would find that there are certain stories which can be told separately. A very good example is the Panchatantra. Within Panchatantra, you have branch like characters. Some of the stories of the Panchatantra are told independently but each of the stories also have stories embedded within them. It is almost like a tree branch like character, so the stories move about according to the interaction between the audience and the teller.

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So if the audience asks the question then I give it- that is the structure of the Panchatantra. Someone within the story asks a question and in answer, the teller tells another story. So a story within a story within the story; that is how these stories actually get woven together. However, twentieth century critics suggest that these are very well structured stories and have got to be the creation of one person. Because, how can something be so well structured, and be created by many people.

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There are disagreements historically between how Iliad and Odyssey were created. But the point is, not to understand how the Iliad and Odyssey were created, but to problematize the fact that we cannot look upon a text written in the oral universe within the same paradigm as that created in the literate or printed universe.

Because, in the oral universe these texts are much more fluid and they get accumulated over time through telling through generations. The texts get passed on from generation to generation purely through memory. And one of the important points to be noted is that when a certain piece is created, we cannot really say that it is created because it is constantly getting created. So let us understand it.

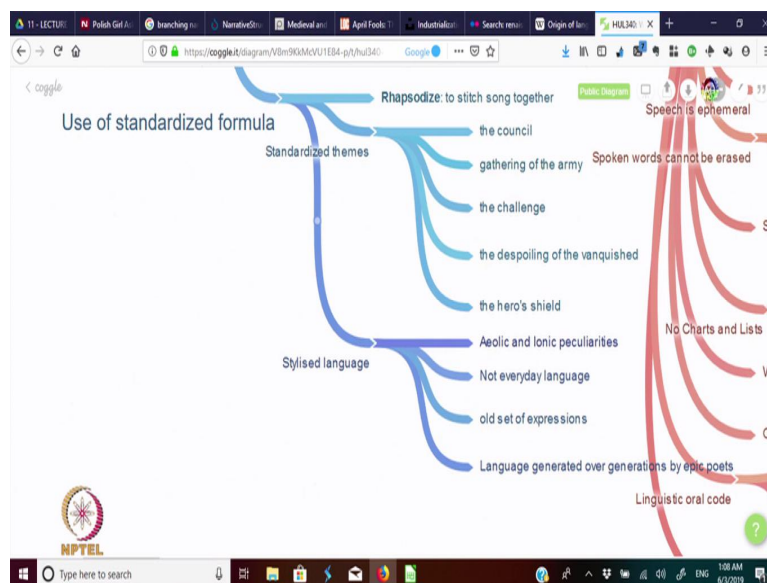
When a certain piece is created in an oral universe, it is important to keep repeating it, because the moment you stop repeating it, you might lose it, because there is no written record. If you are listening to this lecture, there is a record and server on which this lecture is uploaded, so that server will have a backup. Maybe some of you are taking notes.

Tomorrow you probably will come back to those notes and take a look at it. So there is always a record. You do not have to depend on your memory. But imagine if you were told that you are not allowed to carry a pen and paper inside. There are certain examinations where students are not allowed to take the question paper out.

They are supposed to answer it and go out. They have to depend on their memory and then they go out and then tell the questions to their friends or others- that this was the question. And then somebody may write it down and then it appears on the internet. So, the point is, we are talking about an oral universe where these resources did not exist.

There was no way to write something down because alphabet did not exist, the articulation of writing, the process of writing materials, the availability of writing materials did not exist. Simply because, writing was not a predominant practice. So, people had to remember things purely by memorizing.

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So that is something that we need to learn, but in order to remember, this memory was aided by certain things. It was never pure memory because the construction of the texts were so organized that it becomes easier to memorize. Now we did talk earlier about how rhyme and rhythm are aids to memory, but there are more aids to memory in the oral universe than only rhyme and rhythm.

So point number one that Ong sort of articulates, is that he introduces the concept of rhapsodizing. What is a Rhapsody? According to him, rhapsody is the act of stitching songs

together. The song is not written down at one go. But you are taking things bits and pieces from various places and putting various ideas and putting it together. Various stories are strung together and that is a Rhapsody.

There is a certain formula to the creation of that Rhapsody. There are standardized themes. For example, some of the standard themes of mythical poetry is the Council of the King where there are various courtiers and they utter various speeches. The gathering of the army and the description of the army is a very standard theme within mythological poetry.

The challenge between two warriors, between Karan and Arjun or between Achilles and Hector, becomes a very important point. Like the despoiling of the vanquished, the spoiling of Hector's body- when Achilles defeats Hector, he takes Hector's body and carries it around the chariot all across the battlefield in order to show anger and demean his opponent.

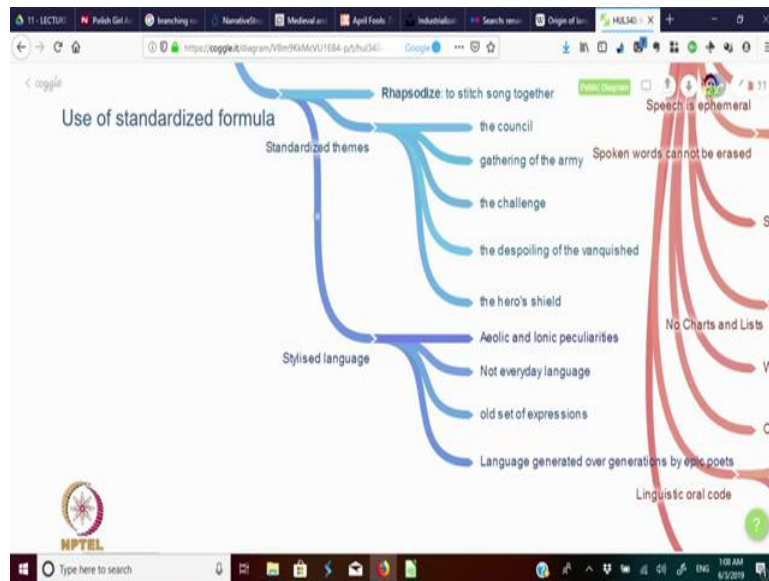
The description of the heroes shield- there is a great amount of description of a shield in the Iliad, similar to the description of the bow in the Ramayana. These descriptions are formulaic. There are certain things which poets should be able to remember.

When poets use these descriptions, what are the things that they have to enumerate? They would immediately remember to talk about the colour, shine, and about the various inscriptions. That becomes an aid to an inventory which aids the memory.

Then there are other kinds of formulas which are important. For example, the description of a sunset. The description of a sunset is a template. So is a description of an elephant. It could be any elephant. When I have to describe an elephant, I would have a standard description of an elephant in my mind. And I would utter it before the audience put it at the correct context in a particular story.

I do not have to remember a specific description of an elephant while I am articulating, and telling the story; I can change the description a little bit. If the audience likes the description, I can heighten it a little bit, maybe speak about the elephant a little longer. I can tell various other kinds of stories associated with the elephant. Maybe I will even branch out and tell the story of another elephant, a heroic elephant and come back to it.

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These kind of movements, in and out of narratives and in and out of descriptions, is something that is characteristic of oral poetry and oral narratives. The other important point in the use of the formulaic in oral mythological storytelling, is stylized language- when I am telling the story, I try to grab the audience's attention. I can see whether people are listening to me intently or showing signs of disinterest. Therefore, my language has to be something that impresses upon people. It cannot be normal and everyday language.

Another reason why normal everyday language is not used also, is because in the beginning of times, these mythological stories spoke about gods and goddesses. And gods and goddesses would not speak in ordinary language. So, it is a very different and archaic kind of language, a very elevated form of language.

And this is a language that gets generated by generations of poets, which passed on from one generation to another, through memory and articulation. The memory within the oral domain is not a kind of photographic memory. It is not the same kind of memory as that which exists on hard drive. In a hard drive you put a file, it is supposed to exist in exact iteration, but this is a memory in the oral form which gets articulated each time it is uttered and it changes- it is malleable. It keeps on changing in the mind, but there are certain formulas which help you hold it altogether. It is not a verbatim memory but a memory which fills into various slots and formula and articulates a certain text. Thank you.