



## The immoveable typist

### Description

Johannes Gutenberg's (1400-1468) printing press allowed knowledge to accumulate and contributed to the idea that knowledge accumulates. But there were other benefits as it released energies from the laborious task of copying and transcribing texts by hand and other cumbersome and unreliable processes for reproduction, such as woodblock printing.

According to social geographer and historian David Lowenthal's energies released from tasks of retrieval and preservation could focus on other creative activities, thereby detaching inspiration from the bondage of imitation (88).



Lowenthal's famous book is called *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Intellectual life pre-Gutenberg appears alien to our current age. For example, Ramon Llull's memory wheel (described in my [last post](#)) can't easily be inserted into a linear history in the development of the computer. As with the Medieval arts in general, this particular calculative invention confounds attempts to distill any purely utilitarian and computational operations from this occult, mysterious and cosmological apparatus of reproduction of divine mimetics.

The memory wheel operated in a world imbued with an understanding that art, knowledge and understanding derived from imitation.

## Almost modern

Contrary to Lull, Alberti's [cipher wheel](#), developed under the sway of the printing press and moveable type, represents a transition to something resembling the modern era. It still adopts the grammar of the sacred circle and axis, and is divided into "houses," as if constellations, but it also adopts the new functional processes of mass production: reproduction, modularisation and combination.

Like the printing press, Alberti's cipher wheel combines letters of the alphabet. For Quinn DuPont, "both the movable type press and the cipher wheel utilized reproducible, modular, indexical, and combinatory forms of representation" (95).

## Digression

I'll explore this further in my slow-release exploration of cities and ciphers, but I'm suddenly taken by the idea of *indexicality*. DuPont says, "the indexical reference, tying notation to notation, works without ambiguity or semantic slack," which is why encryption can "losslessly" return to the original message through decryption" (110).

I've just completed another index, this time for my book *Peirce for Architects* where I've argued that one of Peirce's main contributions to knowledge, and indirectly to architecture, is the idea of **indexicality**. Creating an index on a book about the index involves bondage to a laptop for several hours, if not days. Producing a book index is a labour in exacting combinatorics, a mind-numbing diversion from "other creative activities." I include the first page draft here.

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## Bibliography

- DuPont, Quinn. 2017. The printing press and cryptography: Alberti and the dawn of a notational epoch. In Katherine Ellison, and Susan Kim (eds.), *A Material History of Medieval and Early Modern Ciphers: 95-117*. London: Routledge.
- Lowenthal, David. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

## Note

- Image above is the Fesch Palace library in Ajaccio, Corsica.

## Category

1. Architecture

## Tags

1. Alberti
2. ciphercity
3. imitation
4. indexicality
5. Llull
6. Peirce

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