

metonymic books

(recto-verso)

The different reading experiences that derive from a book and the meaning-making that goes into this, or: the intrinsic quality of books as critical cultural objects and how form contributes to meaning.

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As substances, books play a crucial role in the process of meaning-making that derives from reading experiences. For much longer than we think, humans have used print to move ideas across time and space: whether carved, hand inscribed or printed, these devices have served to visualise knowledge. I consider books a conglomeration of meaningful form and meaningful content and in this sense interesting objects of enquiry to the ways in which they communicate. A book has intrinsic physical qualities since its ultimate purpose is to make visible that which is not –ideas, propositions, beliefs, discourses, and endless more forms of information. The role of the book, thus, is to communicate that information. This converts the book into a critical cultural object that plays a significant role in the performance of meaning-making in our culture. Being such, their workings are intriguing to study and question.

Books act as critical cultural objects in the sense that they have had a fundamental role in shaping human history and culture. Leslie Atzmon (2014) notes in the introduction of *The Open Book Project Book* that they are crucial to the flow of visual and verbal information. This stems from their primary function as deliverers of information but can go all the way as to how they can modify the way we read. As critical cultural objects, then, books are *means* of information and communication. This refers to the rawer nature of books as functional objects made with the only

purpose of serving as carriers of information. Book forms date a long way back in time to text and image as a central source in different cultures. Whether they were made to preserve information or to pass it around, they are the medium *through* which this information flows.

A meaningful first question lies on delimiting what is understood by 'book'. With this I just want to open awareness of mindfully and consciously thinking about the word, not attempting to find a definition, but on the contrary, to expand the panorama of what it can be. To that end, I think it is interesting to trace the etymology and semantics of the term in order to suggest how it has been misinterpreted throughout time*. Just as the history of books 'might as well be called the social and cultural history of communication by print' (Darnton, 1990, p.107)†, the term book should comprise more than a reference to a particular format (fig. 02a). Jacques Derrida (2005) makes an analysis of this on *Paper Machine*, tracing how *book* stems from *biblos* and *liber*, terms that referred to the papyrus *support*. These evolved to denote *writing* in general, and ended up finally as an index for any book form, making no distinction for example between *volumen* and *codex*‡. Books exist long before some man was 'able to imagine a variably sized mould for the production of those tiny square cast bits of metal' (Drucker, 2010)§. One of the intentions of this essay is, to borrow Pollack and Mak's (2013) terminology, to unbind the book form from the codex. Most of the time a book is associated with this format when it should perhaps instead designate the functioning and purpose of the device (fig. 02b: fig. 02c). In this essay, I'd like a book to be understood as a vehicle for visual or textual content, deliberately made visible on some surface.

A communication process unfolds from the consideration of books presented in this essay. As cultural objects, they have inherent qualities as matters and consequently are not neutral in delivering information. However, as Phil Jones (2011) points out,

* 'One of those metonymic slippages like the one that led to the Greek noun *biblion* being kept, or the Latin noun *liber*, to designate first of all writing, what is written down, and then 'the book' — even though at the beginning it meant only the papyrus bark.' (Derrida, 2005: 13)

† The 'circuit of communication' that Robert Darnton proposes is a system in which different protagonists of the book panorama play a significant role, continuously influencing each other. These include the author, publisher, printers, suppliers, shippers, booksellers and readers; as well as external influences, whether economic, social, political or intellectual. Darnton subtly notes how, if studying books, it would be inconsequent not to consider each of these actors no matter from what point of view the history is being analysed.

‡ 'The codex, that gathering of pages superimposed and bound together, the current form of what we generally call a book such that one can open it, put on a table, or hold in the hands.' (Derrida, 2005: 9)

§ The man being Johannes Gutenberg and the invention Letterpress.

these material elements provide prompts for meaning construction, rather than the actual meanings. Just as words do not contain packets of meaning waiting to be unwrapped (Evans, 2009, cited Jones, 2011, p.164), neither are they the beginning and end points of communication (Barsalou, 1999, cited Jones, 2011, p.164).

Following these ideas, how does the nature of books as delivery devices (which are embedded with narratives) come together with the material configuration in order to create meaningful reading experiences? Consider three cosmoses within this book universe: books as substances, reading experiences, and meaning-making (fig. 00).

According to Johanna Drucker (2013), the physical presentation of a book plays a significant, yet frequently overlooked, role in the transmission of information: this materiality may emphasise, augment, or even undermine the verbal message of the book. Nonetheless, this materiality requires an agent of contemplation. This agent is the reader, 'who encounters the book as a sort of material witness' (Malčić, 2013). Malčić (2013, p. 47) explains precisely how, in terms of materiality, when the reader (or user or witness) encounters the book form, the 'embodied production of meaning begins'. Rather than thinking of the book as a substrate onto which information is inscribed, Jones (2013) suggests book-forms that are associated with words and images, through which concepts evoked by this form allow for meaning to take place.

Reading experiences stem on the core of the relationship between reader and book. As soon as the reader gets in contact with the book, a two-directional relationship develops (fig. 04). Both are actively affecting each other. Each reading experience is unique to the specific book and reader who holds it: no two should be the same**. Hence, depending on the book, and on the reader, different reading experiences emerge from the book as a communicator. An example that undoubtedly exemplifies this is Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, as we will see later. Meanings are accordingly not given but made by both content-maker and content-viewer at opposite ends of the communication process (Jones, 2011). The shape that content takes is, therefore, a variable in the process. When I talk about form I do not necessarily mean books being objects as such (i.e. a codex), but rather accessible through our senses. They are entities that have come to the world in a visible, or sensible way; that is: the materialisation of text, for example, into something reachable by the reader. The particular form they take is irrelevant (to this argument), it's the fact of content becoming conspicuous that's important.

** However, 'our understanding of the world is achieved with our bodies and brains, and since we share similar cognitive and physical faculties, we are likely to attend to stimuli and construct meaning in similar ways'. (Jones 2013: 123)

Meaning-making happens, or is potentiated, when reading experiences and books as substances come together.

This is to say: the reader acquires meaning of content *through* the book, just as the content of the book, although existing by itself, gains meaning *through* the reader. Form is, then, a *filter* for the experience of reading, a stage in the process of meaning construction. Form is meaningful at a basic level in that our understanding of it is driven by our selective attention and need to find meaning in experience; material form is meaningful, therefore, as an articulate feature of this experience. I argue in this essay that a particular book form does not impose one set of meanings on a text, but that both the formal elements and the textual elements associated with them have the potential to be merged cognitively to allow meanings to emerge.

As Johanna Drucker (2013) points out, the form of any book is the site of potential meaning–production. It is potential, on the one hand, because it is there waiting to be possible by the engagement of the reader; and on the other hand, because of the *many potential* meanings there can be. Mallarmé indirectly suggests this in his preface to *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*: in the first sentence, he advises the reader *not* to read this note^{††}. This is because he does not want to influence the reading experience in any form: he wants the reader to dip into the poem without any preconceptions. So the reader has two choices: either he begins the book without any introduction, or with one. Another reason I take this specific book as an example is that there are also endless ways to navigate through it because of the inherent form it has been set up (typographically). This is an ultimate example of how form influences content, thus influences meaning. As Derrida (2001) notes, the linearity to which we so often associate book writing is questioned, to the extent that one cannot read the text out loud (in the linear successiveness of a temporality) without destroying the sizes of letters and their typographical disposition. When confronted with a spread of the poem, our eyes, accustomed to western left–right, top–down reading habit, move in the form of a directed sequence of horizontal and bent lines: ‘we cannot read the page unless we decide which reading path to follow; which words or complexes of words to combine’ (Lykourioti, 2011). This unique imprint affects meaning, even in a *not–so–conscious* way (fig. 07b)

On Mallarmé’s poem, the reader has control over the ways in which to read but the content stays the same, and there is a certain linearity to it. This is not the case in

^{††} ‘I would prefer that this note was not read, or read through, it was even forgotten.’

Editions at Play's books, in which, due to their nature as publicized in digital media, the reader can interact with the content and therefore also alter it to some extent. Editions at Play sell books 'powered by the magic of the internet' (EAP, website). They aim to 'explore a new kind of book: one which makes use of the dynamic properties of the web, and thus allow writers to create books which change dramatically on a reader's phone or tablet using the internet' (ibid.). Hence the reader has a great amount of control in the sequence in which these books are read: for example, in *Entrances & Exits* (fig. 08), a book which uses Google Maps, the reader has a choice of different paths to navigate the narrative, without knowing if the story would be different were a different path chosen. Unsurprisingly, all these reading experiences would not be so important if the form in which they were presented could vary. The last examples also serve to demonstrate the nature of books as substances: the form of the book matters. Just as Mallarmé's poem would not be the same if it were set in couplets, quatrains or sestets, Editions at Play's books could never be read that way if they were printed.

From letterpress printing' and the codex format' establishment, books did more than bring uniformity to the *machine à lire*. There were always printers, binders, and later also designers who searched for innovation in type and typography, in the use of paper, in binding and in the relation between image and text. Books continue today to be a central object for humans. The design of books is now an established practice and considers from the smallest to the biggest variable. Dutch designer Irma Boom has designed some of the most captivating books to have been published in the last decades. Reading one of her books is like embarking on a visual adventure. By beginning each design project with rigorous research into the book's content and discussions with editor and author, she ensures that the aesthetic impact of her work is entirely empathetic with the text. Boom has designed books that push the limits of typography and text—image conventions, materiality and binding. Her work is visually seductive, but also a vehicle for meaning (fig. 09a). With each new publication, she seems to reinvent the book (Miltenburg, 2014). If the context and the content are taken away, only a small proportion of the message can be received. She researches and challenges accepted truths about the physical structure of the object in question and comes up with a solution intended to create a degree of difficulty that will cause the reader, user or viewer to work a bit harder in order to understand (Farrelly, 1994). The whole idea lies in making the reader or viewer discover meaning for themselves.

Books transmit messages, transform them *en route*, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again (Darnton, 1990). Once the intention of the author and designer is inferred by the reader, particular sets of assumptions that are suggested by the book tend to manifest themselves more than others do. Then there is space for meaning to take place, unique to a specific reading experience in space and time (fig. 06). A book's substance is fundamental to this process. No matter which form the book takes, the one it does *does* contribute to the reading experience and *does* influence meaning-making. And that is how reading experiences come together with books as substances to give way to the meaning-making process. The convenience of books and their availability will serve some purposes for a long time, but it is not just books, but reading experiences, that are changing. The future of the book will be integral to the future of narratives, to the performance of meaning, and to the shaping of culture through communication devices. What does the book as an idea, as a repository of information, and as a physical object mean to us any longer?

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