

Heike Schaefer, Alexander Starre, eds., *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*

Thomas Mantzaris



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/17620>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Thomas Mantzaris, "Heike Schaefer, Alexander Starre, eds., *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2021-4, Online since 06 December 2021, connection on 06 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/17620>

This text was automatically generated on 6 December 2021.

Creative Commons License

Heike Schaefer, Alexander Starre, eds., *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*

Thomas Mantzaris

¹ Heike Schaefer, Alexander Starre, eds., *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*.

² Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pp. 277. ISBN: 9783030225445

³ Author: Thomas Mantzaris, Ionian University, Greece

⁴ This volume positions the printed book in the contemporary cultural landscape, one dominated by digital technologies and big data, volatile media transformations and shifting practices of reading. The editors, Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre, have orchestrated scholarly work whose sharpness not only highlights the printed book's resilience in the present moment, but also indicates its "contemporary renaissance" (6). Their introduction suggests that despite its interdisciplinarity as a field, American Studies "has so far not developed a critical language for the medial form of printed texts" (10). *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture* emphasizes the notions of the printed book as an "active mediator" (8) and "cultural agent" (9), and considers its operations "not ahistorically stable but socioculturally situated" (15), echoing Gunther Kress (*Multimodality* 7), which leads Schaefer and Starre to make the substantial argument that the contemporary printed book is "a different cultural object from the pre-digital book" (10). Departing from divisive sensibilities to the book's life as immaterial text and material object, Schaefer and Starre embrace the significance of materiality in examining the "world-shaping and world-making quality of the book in our contemporary moment" (22). While the individual chapters tread into (seemingly) distinct territories — big data, materiality, developments in book culture and the publishing industry, book design, bookishness, and artists' books — their sequence

reveals the outstanding cohesion of the volume, making it one of the defining qualities of *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture*.

5 The book's multi-chapter section titled "Formations of Knowledge in the Digital Age" begins with "The Books that Count: Big Data Versus Narrative," where Regina Schober insightfully compares how Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* and Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* "negotiate the function of the book in the information age" (31). As both novels "appropriate [the database's] structuring principles within their own aesthetic format" (37), Schober draws upon the concepts of "hyperreading" (Hayles 11), "distant reading" (Moretti, *Distant Reading*), and "solutionism" (Mozorov, *To Save Everything Click Here*) in order to demonstrate the significance of access, human agency, and reading practices against "a pre-structured limitation of knowledge" (42). Despite summoning the debate between old and new media or negotiating the ambiguity of the book as material object and narrative, the novels do not provide a resolution, which leads Schober to describe them as "problematic" (38), although she acknowledges that "[p]ossibly, it is exactly the in-betweenness of these novels that demonstrates that books count" (47).

6 In "US Print Culture, Literary Narrative, and Slow Reading in the Age of Big Data," Antje Kley turns her attention to Steve Tomasula's *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* which she examines "as a metonym for the resilient late age of print that consciously situates itself as an analog medium of written and visual communication in a thoroughly quantified and digitalized culture" (54). Kley interrogates the operations of big data, illustrating how algorithmic processing is in fact a form of scripting, "produc[ing] notions of the normal and rational" (58). The novel's thematic questioning of "the supposedly neutral and clean rationale underlying the concept of choice" (59) is also reflected in its multimodal composition, which affords the reader a spectrum of choices that, however wide, remains particular. Dan Bouk's observations in *How Our Days Became Numbered* lead Kley to note how statistics "d[o] not only mirror but script people's lifestyles and understanding of themselves," which solidifies her argument that "an implicitly formative power underlies data mining" (57). As a counterbalance to the vastness of depersonalized data, literary narratives provide "a view from somewhere" (60), allowing Kley to recognize *VAS* as a reminder of the fact that "the digital does not replace but complement the analog" (62).

7 In "'Books and Books and Books . . . an Oasis of the Forbidden': Writing and Print Culture as Metaphor and Medium for Survival," Reingard N. Nischik demonstrates how the printed word and the writing process serve as a means for survival in the dystopian context of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her analysis underlines "the indispensability of the written word, of print culture and the printed book," as characters insistently cling to them in order to contrast, and ultimately resist, the authoritarian forces of suppression and control in the Republic of Gilead (81). To this end, Nischik eloquently sketches the "contrasting symbolic value" of electronic and print media in Atwood's novel as agents for suppression and re-construction, respectively (75). In addition, Nischik's commentary on the remediation involved in the transcription of audio tapes by the two scholars (as noted in the novel's epilogue), shows how the written word becomes a tool of survival not only for Offred, but also for her story.

8 Janice Radway brings a different dimension to the discussion on the future of the printed book by focusing on zines and their cultural value as objects of dissent. In the

last chapter of the section, Radway examines the multifaceted transition of zines from the underground to the space of the library, and she observes their double life as highly individual objects of a singular voice, and as collective forces of expression that oppose mainstream culture and forge interpersonal relations. Radway traces one of the zines' fundamental quality in their resistance to conform to the corporeal transformations of the publishing industry, and highlights the zines' insistence to a performative role. Urging us "to think more rigorously about the larger economic, social, and cultural systems within which printed books are issued" with the piece "Zines in the Library: Underground Communication and the Property Regimes of Book Culture," Radway brings the politics of print and book culture to the fore of her discussion, without being overtly political (102).

9 In "The Book between Media Convergence, Media Specificity, and Diverse Reading Communities in the Present-Day US Culture," Christoph Bläsi approaches the printed book in relation to recent transformations of book culture and the publishing industry. Calling for further empirical research on contemporary reading practices, Bläsi sketches the current landscape of books in America along three main axes: the decline in reading in the general population, the multiple effects of screen-based reading, and the shifting economies of publishing. He concludes that the resilience of the book can be observed in its dual role "as an originating medium for stories" and "as a contributing medium in franchises" (131).

10 Aleida Assmann begins her chapter titled "Homage to the Book in a Time of Media Transformation" by noting a shift in scholarly focus from the abstract, immaterial text to the book as a material object. Assmann examines Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* as an example of "a fresh and self-reflexive sense of the material medium of the book itself" by drawing connections with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (142). Cunningham's novel, according to Assmann, is not yet another adaptation of a literary classic but "a shrine" (150) for Woolf's text that situates it in the contemporary context of media transformation, bringing forth the values of immersive reading and those of the printed book that we may be "leaving behind" (152).

11 The section on "The Book as Commodity and Fetish" concludes with the chapter titled "There's Nothing Quite Like the Real Book: Stop-Motion Bookishness," where Jessica Pressman embarks on a discussion of different manifestations of bookishness, the subject and title of her recently released book, triggered here by the stop-motion film *The Joy of Books* (Sean Ohlenkamp, 2012). Arguing that "bookish fetishism permeates our contemporary global, digitally networked culture" (158), Pressman illustrates how bookishness as a "cultural phenomenon and aesthetic strategy" (156) constitutes a means for overcoming the mourning for the purported death of books as well as for expressing our desire and affinity to them as material objects. Positioning "The Joy of Books" amid broader cultural processes and transitions, Pressman goes on to suggest that "[i]n a cultural moment of medial shift from books to e-readers and from film to CGI, the return to a pre-digital mode of animation is an act of defiance and fetishism" (163). Pressman extends her discussion to current labor conditions and capitalist structures that underlie the economy of book culture, and openly remarks that Amazon constitutes not only "one of the driving forces of the contemporary literary condition," but also "one of those invisible but prominent capitalist powers" (165; emphasis in original). Though it is questionable whether "the fetishization of books is a response to

late, global, networked capitalism" (167), it nevertheless places the printed book in dialogue with the underlying conditions of its production.

12 The volume's subsequent section, "Redesigning the Codex," opens with "Remediation, Oral Storytelling, and the Printed Book: The Stylistic Strategies of Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Fifty Year Sword*," where Alison Gibbons situates her discussion of Danielewski's novella amid the critical terrain of bookishness (Pressman) and remediation (Bolter and Grusin). Gibbons approaches *The Fifty Year Sword* as an instance of folkloristic oral storytelling, and underlines "the cultural and historical importance of storytelling as a shared, human, collaborative endeavour" (199). Showing how *The Fifty Year Sword* "conjure[s] forth the mythology of the ghost story" (198), Gibbons examines the stylistic strategies Danielewski employs that create the novella's polyphonic textuality, multiply its semantic potential, and enhance its bookishness. Connecting the archetype campfire story to the book design of *The Fifty Year Sword*, Gibbons offers valuable observations with regard to authorship, community, and the timeless craft of storytelling.

13 Monika Schmitz-Emans contributes to the volume with the chapter "Book Design as Literary Strategy: Aka Mochiladze's Novel *Santa Esperanza* and Its Poetics of Playful Storytelling." *Santa Esperanza*'s "unconventional outward appearance—as a series of booklets contained in a felt bag" is explored in relation to wider authorial and artistic practices that exploit the capacity of book design to offer multiple readings paths and create meaning (214). Schmitz-Emans draws parallels between Mochiladze's novel and different works by Italo Calvino and Milorad Pavić in order to highlight the "playful arrangement" (222) of *Santa Esperanza* and establish its position among experiments in literary history and book art. The focus on "how the material design relates to the narrative" (209) is very promising, but while design is invoked, content is primarily examined.

14 In "Authorial Impression and Remediation in Anne Carson's Quasi-Artist's Book *Nox*," Kiene Brillenburg Wurth demonstrates the ambivalence between the visible imprints on the book that signify authorial presence and the very act of reproduction that undermines the intended intimacy. Situating her observations within the cultural theory of new materialism, Brillenburg Wurth shows how "the paper page unfolds as a screen that displays visual impressions of 'analog' inscriptions" (229). Placing *Nox* in dialogue with the early form of the screenfold, artists' books, and personal zines, Brillenburg Wurth comments on the hypermediacy of Carson's work as well as illustrates how *Nox* can inform our understanding of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in the digital age.

15 The volume's afterword, "The Storied Book," probes into the creative engagements of an array of contemporary artists with the printed book and the act of reading. Garrett Stewart engages in a critical dialogue with the chapters comprising the volume, showing how the insights of individual scholars comprise a "mounting whole" that centers on the novel and the long-form story "as almost an archetype of modern reading" (256). Stewart's afterward pays homage to the observations made throughout the chapters and, perhaps more importantly, extends the scope of the volume via the examples of book-related art he cites, subtly alluding to his concept of remediation.

16 The incisive contributions by scholars render *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture* an unequivocally thorough study on the printed book in the early twenty-first century, and position it firmly in the critical scholarship of American Studies. Attuned

to the reconfigurations of the digital age, Schaefer and Starre have composed a volume brimming with fresh insight, comprehensive research, and interdisciplinary perspectives that brings forth the richness in contemporary engagements with the printed book. Skillfully calibrated to ensure smooth transitions across chapters, *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture* reveals the current media landscape as a transformative terrain for the printed book's regeneration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage, 2010.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT P, 2000.

Carson, Anne. *Nox*. New Directions, 2010.

Cohen, Joshua. *Book of Numbers*. Random House, 2016.

Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. 4th Estate, 2003.

Danielewski, Mark Z. *The Fifty Year Sword*. 2005. Pantheon, 2012.

Douk, Dan. *How Our Days Became Numbered. Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual*. U of Chicago P, 2015.

Hayles, Nancy Katherine. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. U of Chicago P, 2012.

Kress, Gunther. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge, 2010.

Morchiladze, Aka. *Santa Esperanza*. 2004. Translated by Natia Mikeladse-Bachsoliani, PendoVerlaag, 2006.

Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. Verso, 2013.

Mozorov, Evgeny. *To Save Everything Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems That Don't Exist*. Penguin, 2013.

Pressman, Jessica. *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age*. Columbia UP, 2020.

Sloan, Robin. *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*. Atlantic Books, 2014.

Tomasula, Steve. *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*. Illustrated by Stephen Farrell, U of Chicago P, 2004.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. 1925. Penguin, 2020.