BOOK, TEXT, MEDIUM

Book, Text, Medium: Cross-Sectional Reading for a Digital Age utilizes codex history, close reading, and language philosophy to assess the transformative arc between medieval books and today’s e-books. It examines what happens to the reading experience in the twenty-first century when the original concept of a book is still held in the mind of a reader, if no longer in the reader’s hand. Leading critic Garrett Stewart explores the play of mediation more generally, as the concept of book moves from a manufactured object to simply the language it puts into circulation. Framed by digital poetics, phonorobotics, and the rising popularity of audiobooks, this study sheds new light on both the history of reading and the negation of legible print in conceptual book art.

Garrett Stewart is James O. Freedman Professor of Letters at the University of Iowa. He has written five books each on literary analysis, art history, and film theory, most recently The One, Other, and Only Dickens (2018), Transmedium (2018), and Cinemachines (2020). Stewart was elected in 2010 to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Editor
Peter Boxall, University of Sussex

As the cultural environment of the twenty-first century comes into clearer focus, Cambridge Studies in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture presents a series of monographs that undertakes the most penetrating and rigorous analysis of contemporary culture and thought. The series is driven by the perception that critical thinking today is in a state of transition. The global forces that produce cultural forms are entering into powerful new alignments, which demand new analytical vocabularies in the wake of later twentieth-century theory. The series will demonstrate that theory is not simply a failed revolutionary gesture that we need to move beyond, but rather brings us to the threshold of a new episteme, which will require new theoretical energy to navigate. In this spirit, the series will host work that explores the most important emerging critical contours of the twenty-first century, marrying inventive and imaginative criticism with theoretical and philosophical rigor. The aim of the series will be to produce an enduring account of the twenty-first-century intellectual landscape that will not only stand as a record of the critical nature of our time, but that will also forge new critical languages and vocabularies with which to navigate an unfolding age. In offering a historically rich and philosophically nuanced account of contemporary literature and culture, the series will stand as an enduring body of work that helps us to understand the cultural moment in which we live.

In This Series

Joel Evans
Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern: Literature, Culture, Theory
Adeline Johns-Putra
Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel
Caroline Edwards
Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel
Paul Crosthwaite
The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction
Jennifer Cooke
Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity
BOOK, TEXT, MEDIUM

Cross-Sectional Reading for a Digital Age

GARRETT STEWART

University of Iowa
To and for
the challenging students who keep me
productively off balance in moving
to and fro
between media
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Figures</strong></td>
<td>page viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prospectus</strong></td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intro\Retro</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I. The Hold of the Codex</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Bibliographics</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Platformatics</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II. The Grip of Inscription</strong></td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Reading In</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Reading Out</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part III. The Give of Medium</strong></td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Phrasing the Sayable</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Between Language and Text</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parting Words</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

1.1 Buzz Spector, *Off the Shelf* (November 2012)  page 34
1.2 John Cayley, *The Reading Room* (2011)  40
1.3 Marco Palmezzano, *St. Jerome in an Extensive Landscape* (1503)  47
1.4 Marco Palmezzano, *St. Jerome in an Extensive Landscape* (1503), detail  48
1.5 Jacques-Emile Blanche, *Portrait of Arthur Acton and Harold Acton Seated in a Room at Villa La Pietra* (1913)  49
1.6 Antonello da Messina, *St. Jerome in His Study* (c. 1475)  51
1.7 Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse, *Between Page and Screen* (2013)  54

2.2 Nick Yulman, *Index Organ* (2014)  71
2.4 Mika Tajima, *Negative Entropy* (2018)  78
This is the first book to venture, in a fully material sense, a sustained conjunction of book studies, textual studies, and media studies: or, better put, book history, verbal analysis, and media theory. It convenes them as equal partners in marking, as anagram might have it, the long arc between medieval bookes and today’s e-books. First such book – at least, that is, from the standpoint, a never-fixed point, of literary immersion. In an age of screen reading and the phonorobotics of self-taught machine intelligence, old demarcations are collapsing fast. Not just verbal delivery, in voice or script, but the signature power of human speech has ceded irreversible ground to digital processing. Yet that encroachment of computerization has a way, we’ll find, of clarifying the nature of literary writing rather than obscuring it.

Reading (so it’s still called), along with listening and utterance, is often now done by machines, whether in microphonic or graphic traces. But unless we were simply to say that the medium of our language has become electronic – algorithmic rather than linguistic – distinctions persist. This book pursues and secures certain of them in a three-way reading that cuts across the once dominant physical format of the codex and the different materiality of the silently performed language it channels. This is how an account of literary texture, anchored in the codex tradition but not necessarily bound by it (in either sense), enters into conversation with media theory. Ultimately, the strata of investigation – not by turns, but in a rethought continuum – are physical, philological, philosophical. They address each other inextricably.

The simplest questions get analysis underway. Has the phrase “book reading” always been a colloquial misnomer – long before it may have come to sound like an anachronism? Outside of antiquarian circles, or the book studies protocols of academic research, has it even really been the book itself that is read? Rather than merely opened for its “reading matter”? And how materialist, in turn, is the usual understanding of that very idiom?
Or, more pointedly: what does it mean that such explorations of the codex and its post-print successors have been featured, lately, in art galleries as often as in libraries? That question arises from no idle notice — or exaggeration. Computerization has put the traditional codex back in the spotlight and the gallery track light at once. In terms of traditional reading, however, what to make of the ongoing conceptual work of book sculpture — the bibliobjet rendered by way of simulation, appropriation, or desecration — as distinct from the more artisanal and decorative mode of artists’ books? How, in these more forensic works, does the book study itself by proxy or displacement — and often in the light of its partial digital eclipse? And how might recent parodies of artificial electronic voicing by conceptual poets and sculptors help delimit the alternate and primary focus of this study on the silent charge — and reverberant medial feedback — of language executed and performed on the literary page?

Cued by such inquiry, the first phase of Book, Text, Medium (Part I) offers in part a guided tour of recent innovations in contemporary book sculpture, bringing its refashioned objects into relief against a longer tradition of the painted scene of reading and the “bibliographics” — the scriptive wordworks — descendent from it. When read as a plastic form in its own right, the bound book comes bearing a received “iconology” whose altered sculptural platforms or surface arrays may be figured in a given case as resilient or outmoded, transformed by computerization or usurped by it. An analysis of recent gallery bookworks looks in part to their often harbored verbal tropes (or outright visual puns): their plays on the very wording they seal tight, distort, or efface, including the phonetic “volume” they deliberately mute by illegibility. Building especially on the latest exhibit in this vein, “The Internal Machine,” at the New York Center for Book Arts in 2017, discussion then moves, by contrast in Part II, to a close linguistic scrutiny of the alphabet-driven literary event, the text itself, in exploratory writing from reflexive modernism forward (from Virginia Woolf to contemporary novelist Bennett Sims): the engaged page where densities both phrasal and palpable were for centuries conjoined. It is here that a media theory of reading grounds itself in the exemplary disclosures of literary readings.

Next, via triangulation in Part III with newly translated work by philosopher Giorgio Agamben on the ontological crux of human language (“On the Sayable and the Idea”), his metalinguistic tenets, intersecting those of media theorists Friedrich Kittler, Régis Debray, and Vilém Flusser, are tested on prose examples from Herman Melville through D. H. Lawrence to Don DeLillo, as well as on poetic instances from Walt
Prospectus

Whitman and Emily Dickinson to Adrienne Rich. At this point, the cross-sectional comparison developed by *Book, Text, Medium* exerts a closing pressure on its third term. Against a millennial backdrop spanning from “anthropogenesis” in the very fact of speech (Agamben) to the electronic intonations of artificial intelligence, including recent experiments in digital fonts meant to adjust rates and scales of linguistic comprehension, what results is a revisionary leverage on the matter—a matter phonic, graphic, and cognitive at once—of verbal texture in action. This often thickly layered and overlapping action, this generative process, emerges as a function independent, even “for a digital age,” of any one technical platform, whether paperback or so-called tablet, imprint or screen, spewed ink or liquid crystal. Reading syllabic language closely enough takes us not only back to the cultural imaginary of the tangibly ingrained page, vestigial or not, but down to any text’s expressive possibility in the structuring force of language itself. That back and down is the way in which closeness not only digs in but cuts across. And the force revealed is to be grasped not just as a differential system but as a medial circuit, volatile by definition, foundational in its channeled flux, alive with the material static entailed by transmission.

In what we might call this variable grammar of engagement, books open upon writing; writing opens to the conceptual space of text; text opens out to meaning; meaning opens back to the medium that is its means; and this last (and first) instrumentality opens up in turn the whole question of material bases in the cross-sectional disposition of the book/text/medium nexus. Opens up—and closes in on. Exactly where—and how—is the topic ahead. In expanding on this brief front matter, what follows next, by way of a fuller introduction, is meant to spell out the implicit codex historicism on file in that wide and otherwise ungainly range of gallery and literary objects sampled in subsequent chapters. If the net effect inevitably favors, after all, the library over the museum—as the testing ground of textuality—to say so isn’t to concede that the topic is intractably centered in this way as book/text/medium. Instead, the greater the spread of separate evidence amassed at either end of the spectrum—by graphic or codex artifacts, on the one side, and by a philosophy of language, on the other—the greater the elucidating pressure on the evinced materiality of literary enunciation. Focus sharpens amid a dense and restive field of view. It is across such a field, back and forth, that investigation now moves.