

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.

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BOOK, TEXT, MEDIUM

Cross-Sectional Reading for a Digital Age

GARRETT STEWART

University of Iowa



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*To and for
the challenging students who keep me
productively off balance in moving
to and fro
between media*

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Prospectus

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

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.

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