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Ubique and Unique Book: The Presence and Potential of the Codex

Introduction to the Thematic Cluster

(Part 2)

Mikko Keskinen, Laura Piippo and Juha-Pekka Kilpiö

The articles in this two-issue thematic cluster of *Image [&] Narrative* (20.1 and 20.2) explore the contemporary status of the book (in literature and, more generally, in culture). Books and bookishness indeed seem to be everywhere, and in a multitude of forms, shapes, and purposes.

The eight articles in our thematic cluster approach the ubique/unique problematic of the book or the codex from a variety of directions, including semiotic, historical, typographical, and media theoretical perspectives. The present issue can be seen as exploring the interfaces between the graphic and the electronic, between the analog and the digital, and between the artistically created and the conceptually emerging.

In his essay “The Book to Come,” Jacques Derrida writes: “There is, there will therefore be, as always, the coexistence and structural survival of past models at the moment when genesis gives rise to new possibilities. What is more, you can love more than one thing at a time, and not give anything up, as with the unconscious.” (2005, 16) Put another way, Jussi Parikka defines the basic maxim of the media archaeological research field thus: “new media and old media” exist “in parallel lines” (2012, 5). To be sure, this applies to the book as well.

According to Dhiraj Murthy, the new medial forms seem to, in fact, highlight the qualities and affordances of the older media (2013, 16). As literary media multiply and, for instance, digital literature as well as performance poetry continue to thrive as distinct fields in their own right, it is possible once again to examine printed and paper books afresh and zoom in on what they – and perhaps they alone – are capable of. Instead of any alleged opposition, when printed literature is contrasted with networked and programmable media, the particular qualities of each can come into view more clearly. True digital literature uses those features that are possible only in programmable media. What if a printed book, likewise, had to justify why it is indeed a printed book?

Based on the articles in this issue and the literary works they analyze, it appears that the book form always brings along its own layer of meaning to the text housed within it. Just like rhetorical figures, narrative devices, or illustrations, the book itself can function as a signifying unit.

The book refers at once to a material object and to a conceptual entity. As an object, the codex – a bound book – has media-specific or even *matter*-specific qualities that come with it by default but can also be put to use and charged with meaning, particularly if it is not considered simply a carrier of content. For one thing, the book is not a support only for writing but can bridge word and image and blur the boundaries between them. This is especially the case when the interaction between and entanglement of the material substrate and the graphic signs is tight enough that the book cannot be converted into any other medium or platform. Such qualities are analyzed in the first two articles of the issue.

On the other hand, as a conceptual entity, the book can function as a backdrop against which medial and more general cultural logics can come into view. For example, conceptual writing, where the text is often lifted from web reservoirs and then published as a printed book, draws part of its meaning from the democratic ideal related to the affordable production of print-on-demand paperbacks but also from the cultural stature and prestige of the book form more generally. Transmedial works, in turn, with one foot in print and the other in digital media, are able to demonstrate and call into question, by way of contrast, the inherited cognitive assumptions and the notion of completeness associated with printed books. These questions are examined in the latter two articles of the issue.

The opening article by Juri Joensuu and Juha-Pekka Kilpiö focuses on the material basis of the print medium, ink, and paper. The *black block*, a rectangle of black printing ink on the page of a book, surrounded by blank margins, is a peculiar graphic device. Its literary tradition has usually been considered to start from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which includes a renowned black page in memory of "poor Yorick". Nevertheless, Sterne's gimmick can be seen as an allusion to an older typographical tradition of the so-called mourning pages, which were featured in books remembering the departed decades before *Tristram Shandy*. In their article, Joensuu and Kilpiö analyze the ways in which the black block is used in narrative literature, with examples chosen mainly from 20th century experimental fiction. The block proves ambivalent in that it seems to fall somewhere between text and image and, moreover, between the storyworld and the world of the book. Often, it underscores the technological aspect of print literature but, at the same time, gives rise to comical effects.

Arja Karhumaa's essay is a description of her *Epägenesis (Ungensis)*, a piece of artistic research conducted by a graphic designer exploring how design and language are connected. The project consists of experimental writing based on seventeen found text documents, gathered from everyday textual practices. Through *Epägenesis*, Karhumaa examines the material aspects of written language in a holistic manner, weaving together artistic methods of conceptual writing, models of analysis used in multimodal research, and her practice as a designer of texts. The essay gives an outline of Karhumaa's process and procedures of writing, and of designing the resulting catalogue publication, *Epägenesis : Katalogi*. Applying Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges, the essay maps out a terrain where the designer appears as an inherently hybrid presence, and embodied skill and knowledge is seen as a significant node in emergent material networks where written language is created, used, and transformed.

Matti Kangaskoski's article seeks to articulate the differences in reading and interpretation of print and digital poetry through the concept of affordance. Kangaskoski conceives of reading as a culturally guided action that includes the process of reading through interaction with the interface as well as means of making sense of what has been read, i.e. interpretation. A typical work of poetry can be circumscribed by the book covers, and they demarcate the affordances – potential uses, enabled actions in a certain environment – of the codex interface. The familiar affordances become more pronounced in contrast with other media: a digital poetry application often has no clear textual boundaries, no front and back cover, no linear or conventionalized direction of reading, and the text can be accessed in many ways, sometimes in pieces as small as one word or one letter at a time. Pieces of the work can be encountered singularly, detached from the other elements of the (often assumed) whole. These features, afforded by the digital interface, suggest a different logic of reading that changes not only *what* we think about the poetry in question but also *how* we think about it. Reading poetry entails material, processual, cognitive, and culturally defined affordances that suggest certain means, a certain *logic* of reading.

Finally, Laura Piippo's article studies what happens to the poetics of a text originally written on or for a certain internet platform when it is later copy-pasted to a different literary medium – that of an edited and printed book. The main target of the discussion is Finnish author Karri Kokko's conceptual literary work *Retweeted* (2016), a print-on-demand book, the roots of which are firmly in both the traditions of print media and the digital interfaces of the social media platform Twitter. The analysis pays close attention to the medial qualities of both Twitter and the conceptual book that draws material from it. The article aims to highlight the poetic qualities of the material produced and circulated on Twitter, the affectivity of the platform itself, and the effects the transposition into the codex format has on these phenomena. Piippo argues that when investigating the poetics of internet-based collages, and social media platforms more generally, one must be mindful of 1) the logics of writing and revenue on internet platforms, and 2) the paratextuality of both the original online platforms and the book at hand.

The articles in the two-issue thematic cluster are based on a selection of the papers presented at the international symposium *Ubique and Unique Book: The Presence and Potentialities of the Codex* (University of Jyväskylä, Finland, October 26–27, 2017). The symposium was organized and funded within the Academy of Finland project *The Literary in Life: Exploring the Boundaries between the Literature and the Everyday* (project number SA 285144), as has been the editorial work for the two journal issues.

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Laura Piippo is currently finalizing her PhD thesis on the experimentalism, poetics and affects of the prominent Finnish novel *Neuromaani* (2012) by Jaakko Yli-Juonikas at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research seeks to formulate a coherent reading strategy for excessive, materially complex and “virtually unreadable” contemporary literary works. Her articles on these topics have been published or are forthcoming in such international publications as *Reading Today* (UCL, 2018) and *Humanities, Provocateur* (Bloomsbury Academic).

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Juha-Pekka Kilpiö is finishing his PhD thesis in Literature at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The thesis focuses on kinephrasis, or the verbal representation of cinema, in US postmodernist fiction and poetry. Kilpiö’s article on Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* was published in *Reading Today* (UCL, 2018). He has also studied, and published on, other media-related issues in literature, such as the use of typewriter in concrete poetry. Kilpiö doubles as the editor in chief of the leading Finnish poetry periodical *Tuli & Savu*.

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