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Author(s): Keskinen, Mikko; Piippo, Laura; Kilpiö, Juha-Pekka

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

Introduction to the Thematic Cluster

(Part 1)

Mikko Keskinen, Laura Piippo and Juha-Pekka Kilpiö

Résumé

Tous les articles de ce double numéro spécial (*Image [&] Narrative* (20.1 et 20.2) traitent du statut actuel de l'objet-livre, tant dans la production littéraire que, plus généralement, dans la culture d'aujourd'hui. La présente introduction situe cette question dans son contexte culturel et médiatique, puis présente les diverses contributions.

Abstract

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). This introduction addresses the cultural context of the notion of book today and presents the various articles of the issue.

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.

In spite of the predictions or even news about its death, the book is very much alive. Or at least it manages to imitate the living by making regular zombie appearances in every publication launch. Books and the logic of their use are present far and wide, in both print and electronic forms, in both analog and digital worlds. Hence the catch phrase “ubique book” in our cluster title. Digital technologies have also enabled or at least facilitated experimentation with typography and the book form. And many of these experiments, although seemingly inseparable from the print medium and unique-looking, have been turned into e-books (Marc Saporta, *Composition No. 1*; Tom Phillips, *A Humument*; Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Fifty Year Sword*; J. J. Abrams & Doug Dorst, *S.*). Perhaps this could suggest that the book format is matchless and exceptionally functional. Hence the attribute “unique” in our heading.

Keith Houston’s 2016 popular study on the codex, *The Book*, bears the subtitle *A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time*. Indeed, Houston concentrates on the book as a material entity, revealing “that the paper, ink, thread, glue, and board from which a book is made tell as rich a story as the words on its pages [---],” as the study’s blurb puts it. Houston’s work aims at giving the readers, according to the blurb, the “momentous and surprising history behind humanity’s most important – and universal – information technology.”

Houston does not mention the word medium in his book, although he is clearly writing exactly about it when he refers to the *bookness* of books – not in the sense of an idea but as material objects: “the weighty, complicated, inviting artifacts” (Houston 2016, xvii). He indulges in the bliss of material tomes and urges the reader to do the same: “pluck a physical book off your bookshelf now. Find the biggest, grandest hardback you can. Hold it in your hands. Open it and hear the rustle of paper and the crackle of glue. Smell it! Flip through the pages and feel the breeze on your face. An e-book imprisoned behind the glass of tablet or computer screen is an inert thing by comparison.” (Houston 2016, xvi)

Books, for Houston, are entities “that have mass and odor, that fall into your hands when you ease them out of a bookcase and that make a *thump* when you put them down” (Houston 2016, xvi). Those seemingly unassuming objects on the bookshelf are, then, quite multimodal, at least in Houston’s reading, with tactile, olfactory, and acoustic qualities. We must add, however, that the bookness of books does not stay put between the covers but seems to ooze out to neighboring media and cultural artifacts. In return, books and bookness are inevitably contaminated with other media during the process.

In addition to popular histories, important scholarly work has been done in book studies vis-à-vis other media, digitality, multimodality, experimental writing, and different conceptions of materiality and presence. We only need to refer to the seminal volumes by Thorburn and Jenkins (2004), Drucker (2004), Hayles and Pressman (2013), Gibbons (2012), Emerson (2014), and by Brillenburg Wurth, Driscoll, and Pressman (2018).

The eight articles in our thematic cluster approach the ubique/unique problematic of the book from a variety

of directions, including semiotic, historical, typographical, and media theoretical perspectives. The present issue opens with two contributions that explore the fundamentals of inscription and its mediation in the codex format. Sami Sjöberg's article focuses on Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus*, a visually attractive but indecipherable book. Sjöberg claims that *Codex's* script and images are equally asemic, but the latter's lack of representation is determined by a strategy in which recognizable objects are made both unfamiliar and "unnatural." This ties in with Roger Caillois's comparative biology and the working of the depicting mind. Veijo Pulkkinen's contribution examines the imitation of the bibliographic codes and peritexts of printed books in juvenilia manuscript books by Finnish authors from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s. Pulkkinen shows how thoroughly the concept of the book determined writing in the first half of the 20th century and how well aware budding writers were of the bibliographical code and peritexts of the printed book.

Danuta Fjellestad's article concentrates on the pervasive practice of (re)producing images of stains, blotches, and other "impurities" in contemporary multimodal novels. Fjellestad proposes that the practice can be seen as a sly forging of a (faux) sense of uniqueness and singularity, as well as intensifying the sense of materiality, conjuring up tactility, participating in characterization, and archiving time. Despite its hermeneutic potential, the practice also challenges the reader with the limits of semiosis. Jan Baetens's essay sketches the book of the future by accounting for the prophesized digital remediation and consequent reformation of the codex but also by returning to pre-digital possibilities suggested. Adrienne Monnier's 1931 conception of the "livre pauvre" ("poor book") serves as Baetens's example of the opposite of what the remediated book of the post-digital era is predicted to look like.

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 285144), as has been the editorial work for the two journal issues.

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Mikko Keskinen is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He is the author of *Response, Resistance, Deconstruction* (1998) and *Audio Book: Essays on Sound Technologies in Narrative Fiction* (Lexington Books, 2008). He has published articles on narrative theory, contemporary literature, and experimental writing in *Critique*, *PsyArt*, *Romanic Review*, *Imaginaires*, *Image [&] Narrative*, *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, and *Partial Answers*. His book chapters have appeared or are forthcoming in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* (Continuum, 2006), *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction* (Continuum, 2010), *Theory of Mind and Literature* (Purdue UP, 2010), and *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (Routledge, 2019).

Email: mikko.o.keskinen@jyu.fi

Laura Piippo is currently finalizing her doctoral thesis (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) on the experimentalism, poetics, and affects of the prominent Finnish novel *Neuromaani* (2012) by Jaakko Yli-Juonikas. Her dissertation seeks to formulate a coherent reading strategy for excessive, materially complex and hard-to-grasp contemporary literary works. Her international articles on aforementioned topics have been or will be published in *Reading Today* (UCL, 2018) and *Humanities, Provocateur* (Bloomsbury Academic).

Email: laura.h.piippo@student.jyu.fi

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 in, 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*.

Email: juha-pekka.j-p.kilpio@student.jyu.fi