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English 451: After Books

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Return of Paper: The Immortality of Books in the Digital Age

As the digital age progresses, many people fear that the physical book will become extinct. Jessica Pressman cites platforms such as the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, *January Magazine*, and author Jeff Gomez as being some among many that have published articles and books touting the “death” of the book in the digital age. The developing “digital revolution,” the turn from mechanical technology in favor of digital electronics, hints at the outmoding of paper in favor of digital platforms, namely e-books or e-readers. With generations now growing up as familiar with a touch screen as they are with a paperback book, it is easy for many to imagine that one day, print books will no longer be needed. This is simply not the case. Since the invention of paper in antiquity, it has been the most widely used source for the dissemination of knowledge. Though the book has existed in many forms – the clay tablet, the rotulus, and the codex, to name a few – the central idea of it has been crucially influential in the development of modern society. If the book has persisted for so long without having been outmoded yet, it is safe to say it never will be. By looking at its past, it is clear that the physical book will never become extinct. Evidence for this can be found in the economic role that print books play in the publishing industry, the cultural function of books, and the transformation of books in art. Scholars such as Pressman and Nadine Vassallo hint at the changing nature of the book during the digital age, even going as far to suggest that the

print book is endangered. Though they describe the future of the physical book as being unclear, this is not at all the case. The physical book will continue to exist no matter what digital advancements occur.

Economic Role of the Book in Publishing

Despite the rise of e-books, print books remain a critical component of the book publishing industry. In her article “An Industry Perspective: Publishing in the Digital Age,” Nadine Vassallo examines the impact that book publishing has on the United States market. She accounts for the contribution of both print and e-books according to statistics taken by the Book Industry Study Group’s (BISG) *BookStats* and the Association of American Publishers (AAP) from 2010 to 2014. In a comprehensive look at the industry, Vassallo first looked at the rising representation of digital formats in the publishing sector. She reports, “Between 2010 and 2013, digital formats (including e-books as well as apps sold by publishers, digital learning materials, and audiobook downloads) went from representing 14.8% of all U.S. publisher revenues to 20.5%” (Vassallo 21). When e-books first hit the market, their growth was tracked at 355%; however, Vassallo reports that e-book sales hit a plateau and showed hardly any growth between 2012 and 2013. It was due to other digital formats supported by the publishers that aided this rising representation. As the initial craze of e-books died down, so did the e-book market. As of 2013, “physical books (hardcover, softcover, print textbooks, and mass market paperbacks, as well as physical audiobooks) continue to account for the vast majority of publisher revenues, representing 69.5% of all net earnings in 2013” (21). Despite what the “digital revolution” might imply, print books were not drowned out by e-books. In fact, they remained a solid force in the industry. Vassallo goes on to explain

that year-to-year, the industry changed very little and the book's consistent economic contribution is highly predictable, thus indicating that there is no reason to believe print books will suddenly spike downward in sales any time soon.

Vassallo highlights the differences between “immersive” and “nonimmersive” reading experiences and how they contribute to the industry (see figure below, taken from Vassallo's article). Immersive reading, namely through works that deeply engage the reader, lends itself well to e-books while nonimmersive reading does not. During immersive reading, readers reportedly do not notice or do not mind the on-screen format of e-books. The content of the story makes up for whatever differences in format that might otherwise annoy the reader. With nonimmersive reading, readers prefer the print book option. Because they are not as deeply engaged with the text, the reader is more likely to notice the differences between the format of print books and e-books. Vassallo reports that cookbooks “have seen virtually no success in terms of e-book sales and yet remain, overall, the second highest selling nonfiction category” (25). Cookbooks, which utilize high quality pictures to go along with recipes, lend themselves better to print than they do to digital formats, which is why they have had no success in e-book sales. Vassallo explains that it is according to “the way users interact with these sorts of nonimmersive, nonfiction content” that publishers are unable to garner the same success with these genres in e-books like they are with romance, mystery, or fantasy books (26).

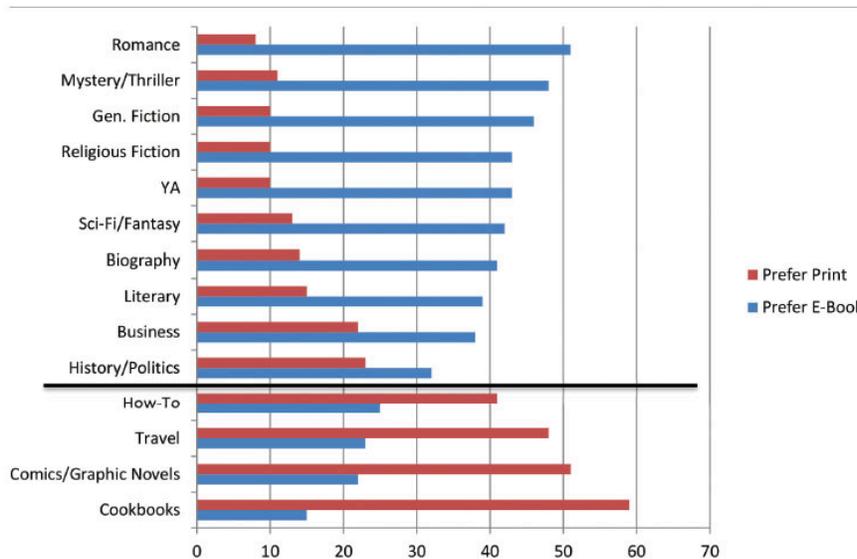


Figure 3. Preferred genres—e-books vs. print books.

What Vassallo fails to address in this discussion is the noteworthy presence of comics and graphic novels on the above chart. The graphic novel is an anomaly among the other listed genres. Like cookbooks and travel guides, graphic novels rely heavily on images to convey the storyline and thus could be considered a nonimmersive reading experience. However, unlike cookbooks and travel guides, graphic novels also communicate a fictional narrative with all of the traditional components of a story, which would designate them as immersive reading. The chart indicates an extreme difference in the number of readers who prefer to read graphic novels in print versus on an e-book. Those who prefer print books more than double the amount of those who prefer e-books. Though this does not debunk Vassallo's claim about the compatibility of immersive reading and e-books, it is important to note how graphic novels play both sides of this assumption. Additionally, graphic novels are a rising force in the publishing industry. Michael Tunnell and James Jacobs discuss graphic novels in their 2013 article, "The Origins and History of American Children's Literature." As the graphic novel combines what Vassallo considers immersive and nonimmersive reading, it also combines medium

and audience. The graphic novel is a union of picture and text that targets multiple demographics. Tunnell and Jacobs write, “The publishing success of graphic novels is another new trend. Despite a comic book-like format, these illustrated novels have had an almost cult-like following in the past among adult and teenaged readers. Today, these books have entered the mainstream of publishing and are aimed at both younger and older audiences” (Tunnell and Jacobs 85). With the publishing success of graphic novels only just beginning, it can be expected that their popularity will maintain a spot in the industry and continue to contribute to sales of print books. Following Vassallo’s argument and the nonimmersive quality that the graphic novel brings with its reliance on images, if the graphic novel has not already been successfully translated to e-books, it most likely never will and the print book will continue to flourish.

To sum up Vassallo’s argument, even in the face of a digital revolution, print books continue to benefit the U.S. publishing industry. With digital formats only bringing in \$5.4 billion in 2013, sales of physical books accounted for a whopping \$21.6 billion. This contribution cannot be ignored. Though many readers have already made the switch from print to digital, it is clear that there is still a large market for the physical book. As Vassallo states, the publishing industry market has proven to be very predictable. Based on the studies conducted between 2010 and 2014, it can be understood that the market for physical books will change very little. In addition, graphic novels have not yet made a successful transition to e-books, yet they are a growing genre in the publishing industry. Until publishers find a way to successfully translate nonimmersive texts and graphic novels to a digital format, and it is unlikely that they will, print books will continue to play a large part in the publishing market.

Cultural Significance

The popularity of the print book has much to do with the physical appeal of its “bookishness.” This term, when used in this essay, refers to an understanding and appreciation of the book form in its most physical sense: the cover, spine, pages, ink, and everything in between. Jessica Pressman uses this term in her article “The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature.” In Pressman’s argument, aesthetic bookishness refers to “a trend in novels published since 2000” that is a response to “the threat posed to books by digital technologies” (Pressman 465). She writes that “it is an emergent literary strategy that speaks to our cultural moment” where books work as “a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies” (465). Pressman’s aesthetic bookishness is inextricably linked to the digital and she claims that the physical book *needs* the threat of digital technologies if it is to survive. Pressman examines how different authors and books adapt different styles of aesthetic bookishness to survive this digital threat. In using Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* as an example, Pressman writes, “These born-digital works exploit the aesthetic of bookishness by adapting the appearance of paper and translating the print-based reading practices onto the screen” (467). *House of Leaves* combines traditional narrative styles with digitally stylistic choices, like formatting the word “house” in blue as if it is a hyperlink and using an online forum as a space for decoding the novel’s many hidden messages. It combines print with digital to combat the threat Pressman references, proving that the print novel is capable of adopting digital formats if it must. Her primary example is *The Raw Shark Texts*, a novel by Steven Hall from 2007. The titular shark represents a predator for the

as literature is. The print book, as the primary way for publishing and distributing literature, serves as the mode by which literature can critique culture, present new ideas, and tell stories. Pressman describes the bookishness that refers as an understanding and appreciation of the physical book form as a “fetishized focus on textuality and the book-bound reading object” (466). Choosing to use the word “fetish” immediately brings the implication of an unhealthy obsession with something that is rooted in stereotype, prejudice, colorism, racism, or sexism. It is a problematic word at best and a strange choice on Pressman’s part. Referring to bookishness as a fetish denotes those who value bookishness as people who are only engaged with a superficial understanding of it when, in fact, it is most often valued because of its cultural significance.

In *How the Page Matters*, Bonnie Mak gets at what Pressman overlooked: the relationship between the book form and its content. Mak describes it as a “dynamic relationship between the material embodiment of the page and its mattering” (Mak 7). She begins her argument by describing the early forms of the book: the “rotulus” or scroll of antiquity. Used by early Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations for documentation, the scroll devised a setup by which text was arranged into columns called *paginae* – pages. The physical form of the scroll had just as much to do with the experience of reading its contents as the written text did. The way the reader unfurled the scroll determined what they saw first, shaping their first impressions and attitude about the scroll’s content. The scroll, as a rather unwieldy object, was a force to be contended with while reading the information it contained. The physicality of the scroll played into how its information was read, which professions used it, and how it evolved. Since 1 CE, the codex has maintained “a central place in the transmission of knowledge, and its particular

formulation of the page has become embedded as a default in our cultural imaginary” (4). The codex, the evolved scroll, refers to the embodiment of a manuscript in the format of what is known today as the book. Pages are contained within a front and back cover and its content can include both text and illustration. The page itself has changed very little since antiquity. Text is still arranged in columns and it is used to convey information; it “transmits ideas, of course, but more significantly influences meaning by its distinctive embodiment of those ideas” (5). The physical book becomes part of the story. The handling of it and experiencing its physicality adds to the effect of reading the text. The sensations felt by the reader, the exterior cover against their hands and the feeling of the paper between their fingers as they turn the page, becomes connected with their comprehension of the content. The physicality of each book is different; “whether thick, thin, brittle, smooth, dog-eared, or stained, every page discloses a unique identity that has been shaped by cultural forces over time” (10).

The source materials for the book speak directly to cultural forces. In antiquity, papyrus was the primary resource used to make writing material because the developed civilizations of that time were located in the Mediterranean where papyrus was abundant. However, demand for supplies outgrew the natural resource and manufacturers were forced to look elsewhere. Additionally, as reading and writing spread to civilizations outside of the Mediterranean, other sources had to be found. Animal skins became the next primary resource. They provided a sturdy material for what became known as parchment, which was really the only option for writing material until the eleventh century when the West adopted the method of making paper that China had been using for a millennium before them. Each different material used by a civilization spoke to their

geographic location, economic demand, and social situation of the time and became a way to transmit cultural ideals.

In addition to the physicality of the page, books became the vehicle that furthered – and continues to further – culture. In “Books, Gadgets, and Freedom,” Mario Vargas Llosa asserts, “Nothing has pushed forward cultural life as much as the invention of printing, nor has anything contributed more to its democratization. From Gutenberg’s times until today, the book has been the best propeller and depositor of knowledge, as well as an irreplaceable source of pleasure” (Llosa 3). Llosa argues that the advancement of culture is only possible through freedom, which is entangled with the book. With Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the 15th century, information was suddenly made accessible to the masses. This was revolutionary because, prior to this invention, reading material was only accessible to the elite. Print books were not a common household item as they are today. When books began to be printed for the masses, the freedom to information blossomed and culture outside of a classist society was able to grow. This persists even today. Books are the method by which information is made widely accessible. In “Books and Literacy in the Digital Age,” Ralph Raab calls the print book “the cornerstone of democracy” (Raab 37). The democratization of information was made possible by the invention of the printing press. Since then, books have played a large part in ensuring that kind of democratization. Llosa determines that, should these fears of the book’s extinction come true, “the culture of freedom” will also vanish (4). He defends this argument by explaining that other mediums of information and entertainment, such as audio-visual culture, are “infinitely more easily controlled, manipulated, and degraded by power than is the written word” (4). The book, or the

written word, is the one medium that can resist this kind of control so that the powers over a society cannot control those who live within it. The freedom to choose how one accesses their information is crucial to furthering culture because, “when freedom does not exist or is faint, human creativity shrinks and literature and art become poor” (7).

Creativity, literature, and art are also critical components to the development of culture. Llosa explains this by comparing two societies: Greek antiquity and the Tudor era of the late 15th to early 17th centuries. In Greek antiquity, history was relayed orally through a poet, who was considered to have divine capabilities that enabled him to recount origin stories of the gods and tales of heroic battles. The poet was often accompanied by music of some sort and was given creative license to dramatize the retelling. The poet was the one who enabled the rest of society to understand the stories of their culture. Llosa stresses the freedom given to the poet as being necessary to the culture’s growth:

To that unconditional freedom that the poet enjoyed the Greek culture owes its particular development, that evolution that allowed it both to attain a prodigious richness of invention and knowledge in the field of ideas, art, and literature and to fix a certain pattern of beauty and thought that changed the history of the world, imposing upon it a rationality from which the entire technical and scientific progress of the West as well as the gradual humanization of society were to derive (6).

Llosa then contrasts the beauty of Greek civilization with the intolerance and brutality of the Tudor era. Religion was mandated, theater shunned, and information regulated. It was an era of censorship, in which “a close eye was kept on people’s religious behavior, and

any sign of heterodoxy on the part of Catholics or Puritans was punished with prison, torture, or death” (6). The arts were considered “vulgar” and part of “plebeian amusement” because they were not subject to “the punctilious control that was exerted over religious or political texts” (6). In the following age of Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare brought about “winds of change” with his writing that was only made possible by “the freedom to create” that was denied in the previous era (7). By comparing these two societies, Llosa draws the conclusion that the freedom to choose how one accesses their information – namely, through books – is an absolute must in the preservation and development of culture. In “Book Publishing: An Underrated Industry,” Manuel Valdehuesa writes that the task of the print book “is to generate and communicate the best thoughts, the most useful ideas, and the common aspirations of a given people” (Valdehuesa 709). Books, as the medium not so easily controlled by the powers at be, and cultivation of the arts enable a culture to grow, foster new ideas, recover from past injustices, and move toward a brighter future. As Llosa argued, digital formats such as the audio-visual culture mentioned earlier are vulnerable to manipulation. This can be said of e-books and e-readers, as well. Moving text to a digital platform opens it to that same vulnerability, as well as ownership issues and continual availability. Print books, on the other hand, cannot be changed, controlled, altered, or manipulated once they are purchased. As they have been in the past, books will remain a vehicle of cultural development far into the future.

Transformation of the Book in Art

A final way that books will ensure their place in the digital age is through their transformation into art objects. Garrett Stewart breaks down this transformation in

“Bookwork as Demediation,” where he discusses the advent of book-work, the object, and bookwork, what the object does. Stewart defines demediation of text as “the process by which a transmissible text or image is blocked by the obtruded fact of its own neutralized medium” (413). With sculptural books, or book-works, text is neutralized because the role of the book changes. The book is made into an art object and it is no longer a tool of information or literacy. It is remediated, in a sense, because it is repurposed. Various artists try their hand at bookwork, crafting different ideas of what it is and what it can be. Brian Dettmer carves out the interior of books to create scenes or miniature sculptures while Marta Minujin recreated the Parthenon with banned books as a statement on censorship. No matter what path the artist takes, bookwork seeks to change the way text is perceived. Books become conduits for understanding their alternate role within a museum space in the digital age, which “remobilizes a library’s expendable matter in the age of data processing, with textual surplus rescued from pulping for sculptural irony” (416). Like many other scholars, Stewart hints at the hybrid future of the book. Having to accept the digital age for what it is, books are adapting to certain stylistic modes. As discussed earlier, works like *House of Leaves* or *The Raw Shark Texts* incorporate digital elements with traditional, text-based storytelling. In bookwork, books are responding to the digital by refiguring their purpose. Bookwork demediates the role of books as vehicles of information. They instead become visual artifacts of the literary past, present, and future. With the text stripped away, viewers are forced to rethink their own preconceptions about the book in order to understand its new meaning.

In his focus on the demediation of text, Stewart fails to hone in on the codex as being crucial to both art and literature. He refers to it as being among “dispensable

technologies” that are now “concretized as pure dysfunctional images when no longer determined by the efficacies of human scale, inflated to monuments rather than instruments” (420). The irony in this, however, is that books are not at all dispensable technologies. Even bookwork that seeks to demediate text must rely on the codex in order to accomplish its demediation. Critic John Lurz claims that Stewart is “conceptually divorcing medium and message” in his process of explaining demediation (Lurz 346). True to this statement, Stewart seems to overlook how connected the book form is with its message, whether that be textual or sculptural. This, in turn, connects the book sculpture with culture. However, according to Stewart, by preventing the reading of text, bookwork continues to “keep on reading our need for the cultural experience they suspend” (Stewart 431). The example he provides with Minujin’s *Parthenon of Books* refutes this idea (see image below, taken from Stewart’s article). Minujin replicated the Athenian structure with volumes of currently banned books and assembled the exhibit on a site in Germany where Nazis burned books. It is an impressive commentary on censorship, using the Athenian democratic symbol of the Parthenon as the form the book sculpture took. Returning to Llosa, the relationship between books and “the culture of freedom” is made evident with Minujin’s replication. With censorship, the freedom of choice is stripped away. Minujin demediates the book by using it as an architectural resource, rendering it unreadable in its sculptural form, but she in no way suspends the cultural experience. Quite the opposite, Minujin declares her support of cultural freedom with *Parthenon of Books*, proving that the book form is not separate from the message it carries.



FIGURE 2. Marta Minujín, *Parthenon of Books/Homage to Democracy* (1983).

The physical book is capable of taking many shapes. History has seen it develop from the rudimentary tablet to the mass produced object readers are familiar with today. Whether as a scroll, codex, or sculpture, the book persists as a cultural icon despite the digital revolution that many fear will extinguish it. Despite this fear and the scholarly skepticism regarding the book's future, books will not only survive the digital age – they will thrive. The monetary contribution print books provide to U.S. publishers will not be changing any time soon. As Vassallo indicated, there are many genres of text that have yet to successfully transition to a digital format. Publishers know that until that changes, print books will continue to make the bulk of their sales. The beauty of bookishness will maintain its cultural importance because the print book has a quality that e-readers do

not: the physical experience of handling a book as one reads it. The artistic transformation of books into museum spaces shows that books can be remediated without losing cultural significance. All in all, the print book's contribution to economic, cultural, and artistic growth will ensure its place in the developing digital world. There need be no fear about its extinction – the book is here for the long run.

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