

THE WORLD IN YOUR HEAD – THE BOOK AS CULTURAL OBJECT

by Maria Fusco

‘To read too many books is harmful.’

Mao Zedong

‘A proposition that emanates from me... I claim it...everything
in the world exists to end up in a book.’

Stéphane Mallarmé

How are we to know what the symbolist poet Mallarmé really meant when he wrote these words in 1895? Who is to say are best for the shimmering particles from the swaying flux of our daily lives to be preserved, trapped, displayed, and shared? I for one believe that this potential universe of quotidian culture belongs in books. Or rather, although it may belong in books, there are many different species of book. For it is clear to me that it is the sorting, the paring and the editing that constitute a book, and not the simple presence of a spine, contents, and colophon (although such things do make them easier to sniff out!). And though getting your fair share is all about exchange, the relationship between the reader and the read is a tender one that requires an acute account of critical complicity, a measure of the type that might normally be associated with students and exams. This activity, however, is not compulsory and, for many of us, takes place in what may be termed ‘free time’.

In his book *The Pleasure of the Text*⁰¹, semi-ologist Roland Barthes speaks of the social economy of makers and their products commenting that

our modernity makes a constant effort to defeat the exchange: it tries to resist the market for works (by excluding itself from mass communication)... And even so, modernity can do nothing: the exchange recuperates everything, acclimating what appears to deny it: it seizes upon the text, puts it in the circuit of useless but legal expenditures: and behold, the text is back in a collective economy...

This would seem to suggest that books continue to retain their own specific sustainable cultural value – reintroducing themselves back into a value system that has no immediately identifiable use

for them – one that is practically indestructible and therefore, that as readers, our own ‘collective economies’ are, in some significant way, invigorated and engorged by book production. On the other hand, if we were to concur with the former dean of the School of Architecture and planning at MIT, who described books as ‘tree flakes encased in dead cow’ then we might never pick one up again.

This potential for the singularity and plurality of experience is very close to the form of the book. Walter J. Ong suggests in *Orality and Literacy*⁰²

thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a ‘line’ of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. Back-looping can be entirely occasional, purely ad hoc.

How many times have you recommended or lent a well-thumbed tome to a friend, only to have it returned barely looked at? How many times have you skipped sections that you consider to be boring, and, in doing so, effectively create your own version of the book you are reading?

‘In books’ writes Thomas Carlyle ‘lies the soul of the whole Past Time: the articulate audible voice of the Past, when the body and material substance of it has altogether vanished like a dream.’ Causality, that is to say quotidian cause and effect, and its experiential relationship to time are central to looking at and making sense of almost anything. Here I am considering ‘time’ as the chronological space within which looking takes place – both in terms of the personal time spent in the act of ‘reading’

and the historic timeline or literary lineage within which a work is placed, suggesting temporal compression, through looking as an activity in itself. This activity is not without effect.

Books are a pro-active experience: they can create and influence our contemporaneous realities. Plato said that the muses gave us the arts not for ‘mindless pleasure’ but ‘as an aid to bringing our soul-circuit, when it has got out of tune, into order and harmony with itself’. ‘*The Reading Cure*’⁰³, a recent feature by writer Blake Morrison in *The Guardian*, explores the growing phenomenon of ‘bibliotherapy’, reading as a restorative treatment, the basic premise being that books can make you better. Across the UK, and doubtless in other countries too, poetry is being read to elderly men and women with dementia, the analytical dissection of prose is being undertaken by battered wives, and teenage cancer patients are reading and writing their way out of excruciating pain. All of the groups reaped encouraging results, demonstrating that books exist outside of the normal rules of engagement. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure once observed that

a language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound; this could only be done by an abstraction.

Even if we cannot verify the results of such bibliotherapy, we all can comprehend and appreciate Umberto Eco’s observation in a recent collection of his essays *On Literature*⁰⁴

- 01 Roland Barthes, 'The Pleasure of Text'
Hill and Wang, 1975.
- 02 Walter J. Ong, 'Orality and Literacy'
Routledge, 2002.
- 03 Blake Morrison; 'The reading cure'
in 'The Guardian', Saturday January 5, 2008.
- 04 Umberto Eco, 'On Literature', Harcourt; 2004.

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...Let us try to approach a narrative work with common sense and compare the assumptions we can make about it with those we can make about the world. As far as the world is concerned, we find that the laws of universal gravitation are those established by Newton, or that it is true that Napoleon died on Saint Helena on 5 May 1821. And yet, if we keep an open mind, we will always be prepared to revise our convictions the day science formulates the great laws of the cosmos differently, or an historian discovers unpublished documents proving that Napoleon died on a Bonapartist ship as he attempted to escape. On the other hand, as far as the world of books is concerned, propositions like "Sherlock Holmes was a bachelor", "Little Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf and then freed by the woodcutter", or "Anna Karenina commits suicide" will remain true for eternity, and no one will ever be able to refute them... There is little respect for those who claim...that Superman is not Clark Kent. Literary texts explicitly provide us with much that we will never cast doubt upon, but also, unlike the real world, they flag with supreme authority what we are to take as important in them.

Considering Eco's observations about the irrefutable veracity of fiction, as a 'fixative' of meaning (even the shape of the planet on which we live is debatable), then surely this suggests that the container of the book is an anchor around which to secure our daily experiences. Does this go some way to explaining why the book as object endures, while all contemporary technologies refute that it still needs to exist in a form as repellent (and yet as beautiful) as 'tree flakes encased in dead cow'?

And so, back to Mallarmé – well, yes, everything does exist to end up in a book. It just depends on how you read it.

