

Thinking in the Book Format

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What does it mean to *think* in the *book format*? To compose in the shape of a volume, within its constraints as a physical object? Or within its conceptual parameters? Either or both? As a physical form, the book, composed of quires sewn in a fixed sequence, with their text blocks, images, and orderings, is an utterly familiar object capable of bearing a nearly infinite variety of contents. We rarely ask how its object-ness imprints on its composition.

And yet, at this moment of dissolution of the apparent boundaries of the supposedly bound book, we begin to apprehend that the assumptions of form and format may have shaped our writing processes as surely as the five-paragraph SAT essay shapes the American high-school student’s intellectual development. Should I think in topic sentences? Chapters? Tables of contents, subtitles, foreword and preface, dedication and epilogue? Or is the composition of a book more symphonic, extensive, only incidentally segmented, ordered after the fact of its original flow? Fiction, non-fiction, essays, references, manuals, anthologies, collections and miscellany—the genres of book each suggest different answers to these questions.

Where to begin?

This is me at eleven years old, notebook and pen in hand, caught in the flashbulb glare. I am a writer, and I am writing a book. Not just a story, but a book. Why? Because the book is the form in which literature makes itself known to me.

This is the book I am writing, my first novel. I think this novel, conceive it, according to very clear iconic notions of what a novel should be. The destination for my composition is—

—this, the bound book. I am not simply composing a text, I am writing *this*, so that it can be read—

like this. The book form, printed, bound, and published, confers authority, but also, organizes the reader's relation to the written text.

Ten years later, I will learn to print, bind, and make a work in the book format.

I carve the text into pages, organize it around images, writing to fit and editing to optimize the graphical capacity of presentation, make it integral to the work.

I will go on to make many books that are written according to bibliographical codes, rather than poetic or other literary ones. The pseudo-bibliography, *From A to Z*, with its activation of the paratextual apparatus throughout—

—linking each reference, citation, line, and allusion in a web of social relations among the poets featured in the book. This is book as a literary network, a self-referential world.

I come to understand the book, then, as a web of intertextual relations distributed across a spatial volume in which the graphical and physical features of format are used as part of the semantic field. These features signify, even if they do not have independent “meaning,” they structure the intertextual play of elements in the semantic field.

Ultimately, I will understand the book as a diagrammatic space, one in which the spatialized relations articulate a system of meaning production through graphical features—proximity, hierarchy, juxtaposition, and so on.

I discover the history of aesthetic experiments with the book format, the complex dynamics of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, originally designed in 1896, whose mobile equilibrium is organized around the central spine on which the lines and pages turn.

In the Russian avant-garde work, like *Worldbackwards*, 1912, we encounter the raw energy of the book as social instrument, mobilized by its circulation, an isotope of radical thought in motion through the thought streams of media culture, whose codes of production signal the subversion of mainstream values even in advance of encounter with the text.

Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billions of Poems*, 1961, activates the codex book's combinatoric potential, literalizing the rhymes and resonances at play in a bound volume.

And book artists investigate all the illusions and possibilities of the self-conscious codex in thinking conceptually, creatively, about the spaces of surface and depth, the *mise en abyme* and graphical as well as cognitive frame-jumps that can be performed in and across pages, as in Janet Zweig's *Heinz and Judy*, with its shadowplay of graphical tones, spatial tricks, and verbal modalities.

The book is iconic, and as a cultural form, works mythically as well as structurally. The early video-adventure-puzzle game, *Myst*, capitalized on all the clichés of treasure tomes and secret knowledge associated with old books.

But also, it was conceived within that moment when hypertext was about to move from CD closed circuits to the WWWeb.

This brought the other major aspect of the codex book into play—for if it was/is worked as an enclosed space of intertextual play, it was also, in every instance in dialogue with other texts, works, projects. This became evident to me also at an early age—in my encounter with this object, *Ut Pictura Poësis*, a pamphlet reprint of Renssaeler Lee's famous essay. What struck me in my first encounter, sometime in my early adolescence, was the enormous textual apparatus—those notes, that active scene of exchange with other authors' texts and arguments. What did this mean? My mind was blown. I saw that the boundaries of the book were an illusion, and that every book was a slice across the network of social relations of which it was a part.

Fast forward twenty years, to the present, when the techniques of multiple pathways, design of linked and hyperlinked information, and data, are all underpinnings of the reading environment, as in this *Knotted Line*, project produced in Scalar.

Or when our encounter with what used to be a "book" but is now a "text" is performed through a set of analytics, as in this text analysis project of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. These are writing *and* reading practices, enabled and supported as encounters between the "book" and the human.

But as the book explodes its boundaries, virtually and literally, how does this change our approach to composition? To the ways of thinking that are so internalized we approach the writing practice with forms already programmed? What new programs run themselves through us in this environment?

If the book as bound form is shown to be unbound, by virtue of its networked conditions of conception and production, and then by the actualization of reading practices that expose these conditions within the field of what may be read, does that change our relationship to the “book” as a construct and concept? As a structuring frame?

As a scene of encounter?

In closing, I put these two images together, without boundary or break. Each is an inventory of concepts and practices. On the left, the iconic book, an inventory in this case of approaches to its composition and types of information that might be found in its pages—here standing improbably in fanned position to provide glimpses of the illuminations, musical score, texts, and other decorations and devices that activate its space. On the other side, the “book” of the future—the fully realized space of networked connections, paratextual analytics, reference fields. This is the “book” as a contingent space, bounded temporarily, contingently, in each reading and instant, according to the calls and protocols of its composition on the screen. I “think” in this format as an intervention, a dip into the Heraclitan stream of cultural production, in which my conceptual boundary is a framing act of momentary organization. The conditions of that organization will never repeat themselves precisely, any more than was the case in the reading of the book on the left, which was also, always, only an encounter between a “book” and a “human.”