Introduction

One of the central missions of *Book Practices & Textual Itineraries* is to explore the variety of ways in which a text’s interpretation is influenced by the medium in which it is delivered. Attention to this relation between the medium and the message has been fundamental to the most groundbreaking work in media studies and textual scholarship of the past half-century: from Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) through Friedrich A. Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986) and Jerome McGann’s *The Textual Condition* (1991) to more recent works like Peter Schillingsburg’s *From Gutenberg to Google* (2006) and N. Katherine Hayles’s *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008). Our conceptions of what texts are and how we understand them have been repeatedly called into question as we think from fresh perspectives about how they are recorded, disseminated and conserved.

This question has become infinitely more complex with the development of electronic forms of textuality and the multiplication of delivery systems that characterise the digital age. As questions have been asked about what electronic texts are and how we relate to them, it has been necessary as well to rethink existing concepts of print textuality. For, as Hayles reminds us,

> In the contemporary era, both print and electronic texts are deeply interpenetrated by code. Digital technologies are now so thoroughly integrated with commercial printing processes that print is more properly considered a particular output form of electronic text than an entirely separate media. (5)

In his 1997 work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen J. Aarseth, writing from a different perspective from Hayles’s, likewise insisted upon a rethinking of the way in which readers (or users) interact with the medium in which texts are delivered:

> The concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. […] During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of ‘reading’ do not account for. (1)
As we grow accustomed to living in the digital age and to working within the paradigms it presents, we are forced to carry forward the extension of the field of textual studies urged by D. F. McKenzie in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986). For McKenzie, in the 1980s, it was necessary to enlarge the notion of text ‘to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography’ (13). Carrying this process forward into the contemporary environment involves coming to terms with the parallel existence of texts in multiple forms and with the rapid acceleration of textual mutations and exchanges that characterise the information age. It also involves calling into question traditional assumptions about media hierarchies, and even long-held assumptions about the stability of the text itself. As a result, McKenzie’s often-cited metaphor of the text as a tree, and the different media through which it is disseminated as branches, is much more problematic today than it was when first proposed¹.

In order to come to terms with the consequences of developments in information technology and the spread of digital media, it is necessary for us to pose challenging questions about how to facilitate productive dialogue between textual scholarship, book history and other related fields. The ‘text’ must be sought at the crossroads of increasingly interdisciplinary scholarly reflection, where the concepts and research methods of one discipline are nourished and challenged by those of complimentary fields of study.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, digital textuality was considered to be a revolutionary development, as announced, for example, by Richard A. Lanham in ‘The Electronic Word: Digital Study and the Digital Revolution’ (1989) or by George P. Landow in *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1991). Today it is a dominant paradigm and has fully entered mainstream discourse and practice. Writers, readers and scholars are accustomed to constantly migrating between print and digital environments, and are open to continual technological advances.

We have reached a tipping point, an event horizon where enough text and literature have been encoded to both allow and, indeed, force us to ask an

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1. ‘What seem to be the different branches, each with its own luxuriant foliage, are the several media in which texts are stored and transmitted. But the single, hidden stem, the source of the animating principle which flows in each different branch, is the text’ (42).
entirely new set of questions about literature and the literary record.
(Jockers 4)

As textual scholarship is increasingly influenced by the input of ‘digital
natives’, in the years ahead this process will only accelerate.

The authors of the articles collected in this volume offer different
perspectives on how conceptions of textuality have been influenced by
recent technological developments. They reflect on such questions as what
is meant by the ‘dematerialisation’ of texts in electronic media, differences
in physical interactions with printed matter and computer
screens, the hybridisation of texts, or textual ramifications in different
media. All of these articles put forward a dynamic conception of
textuality, foregrounding its ability to migrate between media and its self-
transformative qualities. The etymological meaning of the word (with its
roots in the Latin textere, ‘to weave’) is thus more than ever valid,
pointing to a web of diverse materials that are woven together or
intertwined in a range of different media. These include electronic tablets
such as Amazon’s Kindle Reader, Barnes and Noble’s Nook, Apple’s iPad
or the Sony Reader; ‘traditional’ computer screens; hybrid books and
books with digital spin-offs; as well as printed matter. The articles in this
collection stress the great impact that digital resources have on our writing
and reading practices and point to the new perspectives they open. At the
same time, they remain alive to the limitations of electronic texts,
choosing to emphasise ways in which print and digital media are currently
converging, rather than arguing that the former is in the process of being
supplanted by the latter.

Bernhard Metz looks at how the electronic reading and writing
devices which have developed since the 1980s have at the same time
changed and re-established reading habits in the West. Using the
examples of Umberto Eco’s Il pendolo di Foucault, John Barth’s The
Book of Ten Nights and a Night, Renaud Camus’s P. A. and Jeanette
Winterson’s The PowerBook, Metz examines the interface between
printed books and e-books and discusses the impact of new media on
traditional layout and conventional typesetting. Taking Laurence Sterne’s
Tristram Shandy and Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela as cases in point, he
assesses the textual gains and losses implied by the adaptation of books of
the Western literary canon and typographic tradition into digital editions
for electronic reading devices. He argues that the importance of
typesetting, layout and book design – or what he calls ‘sensitivity to these
features of textuality’ – has varied with time, and that the typographic
quality of e-books today is strictly time-related, and therefore likely to
change as the digital medium and its correlated technology develop.
contends that printed books and e-books are not antagonists but rather mutually enriching forms allowing for reciprocal adaptation and improvement. Writing, printing and reading practices have been developing and will continue to do so along with digital technology, and e-books offer new possibilities and horizons to writers and readers alike.

From a different perspective but in the same vein, Camelia Grădinaru challenges the idea of an opposition between paper-based textuality and computer-based textuality and investigates the profound links between them. By ‘reinsert[ing] the body into the analysis of textual practices’ and examining the corporeal implications of the reading process, she offers ‘a more complete picture of the subject than is possible from the perspective of digital Cartesianism’. Combining the study of materiality and corporeality with cognitivist approaches to the interpretation of texts, her goal is ‘to bring into clearer focus the positive and negative traits and uses of digital textuality’ and ‘to position scholarly debate on the subject on a more solid foundation’. Applying the concept of pharmakon and the remedy/poison duality it implies to digital textuality, she focuses on the unfavoured term of the opposition and investigates the episteme/techne, mind/body and information/materiality oppositions which are associated with it. Offering a ‘theoretical voyage through the present and future landscape of digital textuality’, she argues that ‘the idea that the emergence of a new tool entails the eradication of a pre-existing technology does not stand up to scrutiny, since there are many examples in which technologies coexist (and not only in the interval of transition from the old to the new)’. Grădinaru therefore considers digital textuality not only in relation to print textuality, but also to inherited philosophical or ideological assumptions. She argues that digital textuality ‘must not be discussed only against the background of postmodernist frames of reference, as has frequently been the case’, and calls instead for an enlargement of ‘the hermeneutic frames within which we study the subject’.

Anaïs Guilet investigates changes in textual materiality in the digital age, using Renaud Camus’s P. A. and Anthony Zuiker’s Level 26 as examples of ‘plugged in’ books and transmedia works. Both are printed books complemented by digital hypertexts and, therefore, textual hybrids which engage in the recreation of material textuality by involving other media in their printed forms. Guilet posits that their interest resides in this process of transmediatisation, while they run the risk of ‘gadgetising’ the book and, by extension, literature. To her, P. A. surpasses Level 26 in the sense that the transmediatisation it involves serves the literary and autobiographical quests of its author. Yet Level 26 surpasses P.A. in its
guiding of readers, notably in the forms of instructions on how to use its cyber bridges. In more general terms, Guilet explains that such transmedia works are complex and quasi organic in the sense that their parts function in relationship to the whole in which they partake and to which they contribute, both individually and collectively. She examines the still marginal case of transmedia literature and attributes the belated development of this seemingly promising field to both writers’ and readers’ reserved attitudes to the transmediatisation of the literary artefact. Camus’s poetic experimentation in and Zuiker’s more sensationalist approach to transmediatisation both point to the problematic nature of transmedia works which, on the one hand, reflect the new media ecology that is part of our daily lives and which, on the other hand, present themselves as vanities, or examples of art for art’s sake cyberculture products. Responding to the new circumstances of the digital age is therefore presented as a risky challenge for contemporary writers.

Like Grădinaru, Christine Evaín & Simon Carolan put the human subject at the centre of their assessment of writing, publishing and reading in the digital age. Scrutinising the idea that the digital age allows for the creation of ‘enhanced’ stories and books, they investigate the question of transmedia storytelling from various perspectives – and notably from the point of view of authors, publishers, readers and actors of the digital industry. Using the research and testimonies of a wide range of experts and entrepreneurs, they highlight the possibilities of transmedia storytelling and analyse the psychology of both the creator and the consumer of transmedia stories. They examine the concept of enhancement from literary as well as commercial perspectives, looking at its embodiment and development in the academic world as well as in industrial settings. Borrowing notions such as participatory culture from media literacy experts, and others such as intertextuality, hermeneutic codes and reader-response criticism from literary experts, they combine theoretical and practical approaches to reflect on the producers and consumers of transmedia products. Considering both artistic creation and artistic experience, they first look at the different forms of artistic creation made possible by digital media, while pointing out the advantages of a continuing book-centric logic in today’s transmedia world. They also highlight the fact that, in the digital era, artistic cross-fertilisation is developed for its own sake but also out of personal and financial interests. They then compare the role of the codex text reader (who has, since reader-response criticism, been seen as a producer of meaning and a co-creator of the text) to that of the multimedia ‘experiencer’ of digital texts (whose communication/consumer experience is deemed to require active
participation). ‘[T]rue booklovers’, like consumers of transmedia products, they claim, experience the participatory nature and viral dimension of reading (albeit differently), which allows both printed and transmedia stories to be considered as art.

In ‘Disembodied Texts, Online Materiality’, Cécile Beaufils investigates the anxieties and challenges brought about by the mutations of the book trade and its gradual transfer to the online world. She uses Granta, a contemporary British literary magazine which now combines paperback format and online publication, as a revealing example of this development. She argues that Granta’s editorial team has been dealing with these anxieties and challenges by operating a re-focusing on the body and the materiality of language in its exploration of the world of digital publication since 2003, and by translating the disembodiment of the book into the exposition of embodied anxieties. Her investigation leads us to question not only the materiality of the book as an object, but also the very idea of materiality. She argues that the materiality of printed texts can no longer be conceived in terms of its opposition to ‘the fantasmatic, dematerialised economy of the digital’. In her view, ‘materiality also belongs to the digital’. The paradigm shift implied by the dematerialisation of cultural productions has led to a range of experiments attempting to bridge the gap between the book as a material object and the possibilities offered by online publication. The online companion pieces to Granta are ‘digital excrescences to the magazine’ which ‘showcase how the materiality of the text remains an important feature of digital publications’.

While Beaufils analyses a paradigm shift in the conception of the materiality of publication, Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera discerns and dissects a paradigm shift in academic publishing. He questions the process and methods of the traditional academic practice of peer review, and sees this practice as a flawed form of social and cultural power, due mainly to ‘protectionist inclinations against new ideas, unstable editorial demographics, affiliational biases, and occasionally unethical and/or corrupt protocols, or the avoidance of protocols’. He puts forward ‘open-source peer review’ as a solution to these dilemmas – an emerging evaluation system which allows the readers of a journal to offer feedback on submissions before they are officially sanctioned by a publication. He argues that ‘the concept promises to offer a more democratically and demographically stable evaluation system, one that has the potential to avoid some of the problems that are inherent to traditional scholarly reviews’. He presents the anxieties and reasons of the opponents to ‘such egalitarian shifts in publishing’ – ‘elite scholars who would lose an
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element of the social power that accompanies their position in the
traditional system’ – and refutes them by explaining that in an open
review system, editors ‘would continue to express opinions in the same
way and with the same regularity as in the conventional system’; yet ‘they
would be accountable for these opinions, and their judgments would be
complemented and enriched by reflections from others’. Such a system,
which ‘value[s] democratic and egalitarian mores above traditional
prescriptions of academic authority’, would allow for ‘the integrity of
academic freedom, equality or impartiality’. ‘[T]ransparent, straightforward and democratic’, it would turn publication into a
‘collective activity’ and secure its ‘universal accessibility’. It would
moreover offer a ‘redistribution of social power across all demographic
groups’, and the possibility for ‘an ethical progression’ of publication
toward greater and fairer representation of the academic community.

In the final piece of this volume, Benoît BERTHOU questions the
distinction that has traditionally been made between ‘text’ and ‘book’ or
‘index’ and ‘codex’, and argues that it is no longer valid in the digital age.
The ‘text’ being now produced digitally, the idea of the ‘book chain’, and
the role of its traditional agents, are invalidated. Referring to projects such
as Google Book Search, the judicial issues they raise and judicial actions
undertaken by associations such as The Authors Guild in the US or the
Société des Gens de Lettres in France, Berthou shows that a text exists
independently of the form it may take or the type of production which
may be chosen for its diffusion. A text is first and foremost an author’s
work and the result of a willful process of creation, and must therefore be
respected as such; it is not simply some raw material awaiting
materialisation in some medium or other, but is endowed, like its author,
with ‘moral’ and ‘non-transferable’ rights. It is certainly not restricted to
book or any other form of diffusion, which are means of its existence
rather than its existence itself. By placing the debate over books, texts,
authors and their rights in the context of the digital age, and by looking at
tools which we all use in our daily, academic practices, Berthou, like the
other contributors to this volume, invites us to probe our fields of research
and reflect upon their present and future states and developments.

Taken together, these essays capture multiple facets of how texts are
read, exchanged and understood in the contemporary digital climate. As
technological advances bring into being new book practices and open a
wide range of previously unexplored textual itineraries, it is imperative
that scholars adopt fresh critical tools to engage with these developments
and the polymorphous works that result from them. These essays
contribute to this perpetual questioning, readjusting, redefining and
reconfiguring of such key notions as author, writer, text, book, production, editing, printing, publishing and reading. They take part in ongoing efforts to trace the contours of a broad and amorphous field of studies that is coming into being at the confluence of digital technologies, the humanities, textual scholarship and book history.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


