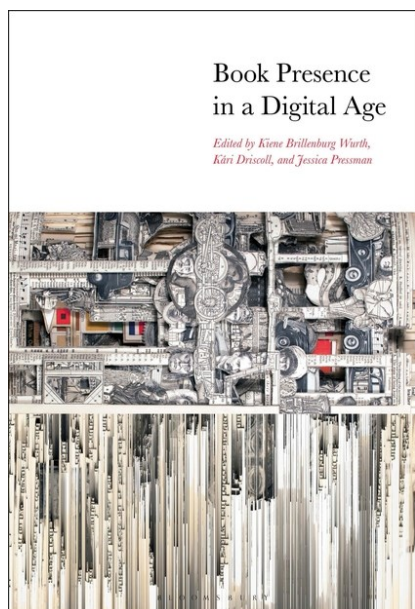


No bounds for the bound book: a digital refresh to reload the page

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Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Káři Driscoll and Jessica Pressman (eds.), *Book Presence in a Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 280 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-2118-4.

In 1955, the “Twentieth Annual Conference of the University of Chicago Library School”, interested in reflecting on the impacts of technological innovations on reading practice, was a milestone at the beginning of exciting discussions about book life expectancy. More than fifty years later, under the decline of its function as disseminator of information and the threat of its extinction as tangible body, the “Book Presence in a Digital Age” conference, hosted at Utrecht University in 2012, showed that the book is still “on the table” — arresting the attention of academics, artists, writers and publishers due to its theoretical, medial and conceptual potentialities. The cover of the volume edited by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Káři Driscoll and Jessica Pressman, published six years after this meeting, features a detail from Brian Dettmer’s bookwork that gives the reader a taste of what he

or she is about to find: incisive clippings and dazzling visions, stimulated by different ways and intensities of contact with the printed book.

As Wurth accurately explains in the introductory chapter, the concepts of materiality and presence link various critical domains and make it possible to zoom in for a better understanding of what book presence means from an interdisciplinary angle. This investigative movement contributes to the emerging field of Comparative Textual Media, thus consolidating N. Katharine Hayles and Jessica Pressman's revisionary conceptions for Comparative Literature by the addition of "analytical and critical perspectives to cater toward the new dimension of the discipline" (2). In this sense, the proposal behind the fourteen essays which make up this work is much more clear-cut in Wurth's striking definition of a post-digital book presence, as it aims to inquire about "[t]he apparition of an 'analog' information medium, including its material potential, restraints, uses, conditions of production and distribution, and its novel actualizations in a digitally mediated present" (9).

While the editorial structure of *Book Presence in a Digital Age* is rehearsing a possible systematization for the new field, it also seems to suggest a kind of separation analogous to the one the texts are committed to interrogate, as witnessed by the three-partite division between "Theory and Overview", "Media Change and Materiality" and "Conceptual Possibilities of the Book". In the chapters concluding each of these sections (interviews with artists Doug Beube and Brian Dettmer, author Mark Z. Danielewski, and scholar Ernst van Alphen, respectively), the fluidity that connects these instances of reflection highlights the counterproductive nature of those artificial boundaries. Still, the editors' careful arrangement of the sequential order of the texts is clearly designed to demonstrate the entanglement between material and immaterial aspects of book presence — above all, the choices of the first chapter of Part One, "Pagina Abscondita: Reading in the Book's Wake," and the penultimate chapter of Part Three, "Revisiting the Book-as-World: World-Making and Book Materiality in *Only Revolutions* and *The Atlas*."

John T. Hamilton's "Pagina Abscondita" begins by deflating the triumph of digital over print underlining how book instantiations behave like a chain of complementarity, and never substitution: "digital technology does not smother our bibliophilia, but rather allows it to flourish" (28). For the author, the contrasting condition resulting from this coexistence is the basis for the development of "embodied text" and "incarnate text" notions, whereby the book assumes, respectively, a supportive function (mediated, bodily encounter) and the autonomy of an object (immediate, carnal encounter), through which he draws parallels with Greek mythology and the Christian incarnation. While Hamilton uses these notions to counterbalance

some complementarities between the digital and the printed word, it becomes clear that virtual embodiment may stimulate “the objectifying processes of pure cognition” (40) whereas the incarnation metaphor “invites a consideration of the reading experience that differs from conventional acts of semantic interpretation” (40) due to the substantiality of the book’s physical form.

The questions addressed in this chapter reverberate across the volume, although under different prisms of analysis. Garrett Stewart, who coined the concept of “demediation”, discusses the book’s persistence in the digital environment through the notion of Skeuomorphism, “indeed, symbolic recycling” (45), in the passage of affordances from the bound book to other scopes, for instance, alternative forms of textual mediation or even artistic explorations. Stewart’s notion has an active correspondence with Jessica Pressman’s concept of “bookishness”, namely “the proliferation of creative acts that fetishize and aestheticize the book as artefact” (60) — also discussed in detail in the interview with Beube and Dettmer. Hannes Bajohr, on the other hand, uses reflections around the possibilities of print on demand (POD), in which “print” can designate both the electronic file and the bound volume as an expression of self-factography, that is, the fact that books “become self-aware of the conditions of their production” (81). While Anna Polletti exposes this same meta-referentiality of the book in her analysis of the synergy between the self-factography genre and the materiality of zines, Liedeke Plate uses the iconic metafiction *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino as an epistemological key to demonstrate that “materiality is not just a feature of certain — experimental — books, but of all of them” (11).

The impact of the “material turn” on literary studies is approached from the point of view of production and reception in Emma de Vries and Yra van Dijk’s analysis of *S.*, through which they find that “the question of the future of the book is essentially a question of diachronic identity of the objects” (134). This is also the major focus in the enlightening interview with Danielewski, marked by the revision of the idea that the text is the mainstay of literature. If Simon Morris corroborates this thesis by highlighting the non-cognitive component that reading involves in the conception of his own works, Lisa Gitelman contributes by taking it to the limit in her discussion of “EMOJI DICK; or 🧠”, and explaining “how not reading variously entails and delimits reading itself, mobilizing a host of changing assumptions about readers and the conditions of readership” (207). The consequences of this paradigm shift are thoroughly discussed by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth in the field of literary writing, in which the digital abstraction of the alphabet has resulted in the increasing opacity with which we deal with verbal expression in literature, now “also [...] an art and practice of orality and visuality” (217).

Finally, Inge van de Ven examines the book as an allegory of the world. More than the dichotomic image of the imaginative withdrawal suggested by this allegoric relation, according to which the book is experienced “as a space to escape in,” the author emphasizes the idea of openness, of an inclusive system that consists of changing influences, “a space that is impossible to escape from” (228). This paradox helps mitigate the value of an objective view of both world and books because we are always part of the experience, as made explicit in *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions*. These books show that “[o]rder and orientation can no longer be derived from transcendental anchoring points outside the material, existential space we inhabit” (229), highlighting materiality as crucial to the “reciprocity between world and book as continuously forming, reforming and deforming each other” (231). The book thus persists as a “sphere of reference” to “rethink our expanding relations to the world and to others in a variety of scales” (243).

The lucid form with which this collection of articles deals with a complex problematic is impressive, not the least in the way its Comparative Textual Media approach offers a new critical perspective on the full range of book forms in our post-digital context. As Ernest van Alphen points out in the closing interview, “*medium specificity* is historically conditioned, but it is also materially conditioned” (252). It follows that any analysis focused on the book cannot ignore the relevance of its presence, literal and conceptual, alongside the “conventions and traditions that determine the ways we use these qualities” (248). *Book Presence in the Digital Age* demonstrates how dense and powerful the printed pages of a codex can be, and how the premature diagnosis of its impending demise could not have anticipated the continued relevance of its transformed presence.