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## Review of *The Future of the Book*

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### **Abstract**

If reviews in the journal bore titles, this review's title would be "Our Love is Here to Stay." The overall burden of the essays collected by Jeffrey Nunberg in *The Future of the Book*, despite some scattered sour notes, is, like that of Gershwin's lyrics, reassurance. Not to worry. The book is here to stay.

### **Comments**

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have their own index of manuscripts cited (for example, Michael Gullick's "From Scribe to Binder" [pp. 240-59]). So why replicate the list? If all of the essays were about manuscripts it might make sense; here it does not.

It would have been useful to have a brief vita of each contributor, since there are many of them and they represent several fields. Few readers would know who all of these writers are. In the final analysis, this is a wonderful contribution to bookbinding literature, including, as it does, a number of scholarly essays and warm tributes to Roger Powell.

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*The Future of the Book*. Edited by GEOFFREY NUNBERG. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996. Pp. 306. \$45.00 (cloth); \$14.95 (paper). ISBN 0-520-20450-6 (cloth); ISBN 0-520-20451-14 (paper).

If reviews in this journal bore titles, this review's title would be "Our Love Is Here to Stay." The overall burden of the essays collected by Geoffrey Nunberg in *The Future of the Book*, despite some scattered sour notes, is, like that of Gershwin's lyrics, reassurance. Not to worry. The book is here to stay.

Umberto Eco notes in the book's afterword, "In the history of culture it has never happened that something has simply killed something else" (p. 304). This Boorstinian aperçu reinforces a point he had made just a few pages earlier, that "books will remain indispensable not only for literature, but for any circumstance in which one needs to read carefully, not only to receive information but also to speculate and to reflect about it." Helpfully, lest the mentally challenged miss his point, he immediately adds, "To read a computer screen is not the same as to read a book" (p. 300). Like the worm uroboros—or do I mean "like T. S. Eliot?"—this book thus carries its end in its beginning, for Nunberg, too, has reassured us in just this way at its outset, "By the end of the decade all our current talk of the 'end of the book' will sound . . . dated and quaint" (p. 13).

I have just quoted the single most salient point of Nunberg's introductory overview. Carla Hesse follows with a breathlessly quick historical summary. She points to the contingency, not the inevitability, of the creation of "print culture," skepticism about the book as "an archaic and inefficient cultural form," and to such ancillary notions as authorship that arose relatively quickly in the course of these developments (by the third page [p. 23] of Hesse's essay, in fact). Because their long tradition makes them venerable, current reincarnations of such doubts need not be frightening. Hesse sees us as experiencing "the public reinvention of intellectual community" at a time when "the key institutions of modern literary culture" are being reconceptualized (p. 30). The "escape of writing from fixity" at a time of digitalized writing ("a new terrain upon which the literary system will now operate" [p. 32]) leaves the book with an uncertain future. Hesse can imagine that "if performative modes of writing supersede structural ones, the history of the book will become nothing more than memory" (p. 33). Such an outcome is speculative only, she makes clear; things need not happen that way.

In the next essay, characterized by general skepticism about prophecy, by a narrowly focused historical perspective, and by a great deal of experience with digital cultures, James O'Donnell speaks about "the unnaturalness of this whole affair our

culture has had with books" (p. 54). Like Hesse, O'Donnell is unafraid of whatever changes may be coming. Paul Duguid tells us that neither "simple supersession (the separation of the past from the present)," and thus the end of the book, nor "liberation (the separation of information from technology)" are genuinely foreseeable outcomes of our present situation. Both dystopian and utopian projections are "oversimplifications" (p. 89). Geoffrey Nunberg sees electronic and print media as learning to work complementarily with one another (p. 133). He feels obliged once again to remind us, lest we forget, that "for the indefinite future . . . there will be printed books" (p. 105). Building on the exemplary edifice of Sartre's *Les mots*, Régis Debray erects a discussion of the symbolic resonance of the book, a resonance that "calls for a lasting and hardened symbolic form" (p. 150).

Patrick Bazin, noting the "bright future" of the book, adds that it has nonetheless been "outstripped by a process of metareading that is becoming a new driving force of culture" (p. 154). Rooting his arguments in his experience as a library director in Lyon, Bazin looks at the altered ways in which libraries organize themselves, increasingly, he suggests, on the basis of "content" (p. 156). He notes that hypertextuality has "exploded" the text, opening it to "the heterogeneous field of shifting experience" (pp. 160–61). A "dynamic textuality" has "freed itself from the strait-jacket of the book" (p. 163), while multimedia has made "text-image complementarity into a true hybridization" (p. 165). These developments have combined to make, not the book, but "the reading process" our central concern. As the complexity of the reading process "grows and . . . combines numerous forms or levels of reading" the process becomes the "metareading" that is Bazin's focus (p. 165). Bazin concludes by asking how libraries can make such new forms of reading lead to "meaning" and thus help to "give . . . coherence to the fact of communal life" (p. 166).

Luca Toschi writes about how hypertextuality has shifted concepts of authorship. Manzoni's revision of the 1827 *I promessi sposi* for the 1840 illustrated edition exemplifies "hypertextuality" *avant la lettre* as well as the difficulties text-oriented editors and scholars have in accounting for the nontextual aspects of the literary works with which they deal. George P. Landow writes cheerily about new forms of digitalized fictions in a discussion that starts by assuming that, "in many ways, we have, for better or worse, already moved beyond the book" (p. 209). Raffaele Simone follows with a discussion of articulated (closed, impermeable) and disarticulated (open, permeable) textual bodies and how, in the new digital environment, the latter form is the one likely to triumph. Like Hesse, he demonstrates the venerability of the open text in order to rob it of its strangeness and ability to frighten. Jay David Bolter points out that it is not "the mere survival of the printed book" but rather "whether . . . [it] will survive as a cultural ideal" that is at stake in much current debate (p. 255). He goes on to note that, "if hypertext calls into question the future of the printed book, digital graphics call into question the future of alphabetic writing itself" (p. 256). Images, natural signs, a new form of *ekphrasis*: consideration of such matters leads him to speculate about "a kind of written communication in which the primary mode of imitation is visual rather than oral" (p. 270).

One more essay and Eco's afterword complete the volume. That last essay, by Michael Joyce, must speak for itself, for I cannot: "The storm circles inward and disperses, belief structures saturate the electronic text, raining down like manna, driving skyward through us like the gravitron, sustaining and anchoring its continual replacement." What is the hapless reviewer confronting such stuff to do? Of

the word "its," I wondered helplessly which of the many possible antecedents provided for it in the preceding congeries of words the author had in mind as the one he wanted his reader to think about. Perhaps I should instead point admiringly at Joyce's creation of belief structures able at once to rain down like manna while simultaneously driving skyward ("like the gravitron")? The marginal comment in my review copy reads simply, and I quote, "golly." Mature reflection permits me no more.

Some things are admirable and thought-provoking in Nunberg's anthology, its last essay to the contrary notwithstanding. A rapid survey of its contents does none of them justice. Toschi's discussion of Manzoni is richly suggestive; an uncommonly common sense often sparkles from the essays by, say, O'Donnell and Eco. Even those essays that do not compel immediate assent nonetheless occasionally compel sometimes useful disagreement. But while its parts have certain virtues, about the whole I am far less sanguine.

The impulse to reassure us about the book's long-term staying power seems to me to have vitiated much that might have made this anthology useful, starting with some thought not about the book's "future" but about its present (a topic about which, perhaps, we might even know more than we know about its future). Its authors tell us, for instance, about "postliteracy," a word that seems designed to make its user and reader both feel ultramodern and up-to-date. By contrast, shabby old "illiteracy," which is (or is it?) a problem for people who don't read or buy University of California Press imprints and therefore really don't count anyway, is not a word whose appearance I recall noticing in these pages at all. Has it nothing to do with that "communal life" that Bazin sees libraries, and book culture, as existing, in part, to promote? Eco notes that we are inundated by "too many books" (p. 301). Most of them, as Eco rightly notes, are garbage (he calls them "products of vanity presses"). Is its current superabundance likely to have no impact on conceivable futures for "*the book*"? Who reads? To what audience is a book such as this one addressed? What audiences do books still retain? Hanging around universities, as writers (and readers?) of university press imprints are wont to do, is not a good way to discover what people read. If we teach, we can tell people to read something, and penalize them if they don't. If we are librarians, we can direct reading, at least in some part, by what we choose to acquire and by what we choose not to acquire. Our audiences are our captives. But when they get out of our classes, away from our libraries, what books—if any!—do you suppose they pack as they trot off for a lovely weekend with Paul or Pauline *à la plage*?

I have foreborne mentioning how badly proofread this book is, or how light Nunberg's allegedly "editorial" hand. Why burden Toschi—who has, after all, been translated into English—with such Italianate constructions as "*dodicesimo* female characters" (p. 171)? Perfectly adequate English words exist. Why allow Joyce the David Mamet-like repeats of gnomic little phrases (themselves perhaps better relegated to another place): ten (10!) "scene is seen's" or "seen is scene's"; three "I want to speak carefully's"; two "print stays itself, electronic text replaces itself's"—three, if you count one slight variation. Reassurances about the future of the book tend to fall a bit flat in a context that takes the book in which they themselves appear so casually.

My fundamental difficulty with this collection of essays, however, is that, so far as I can tell, none of the contributors has actually asked what the beast is like right now. Nor have they asked any of the hard questions—only a very few of which I have tried to pose as examples—that consideration of "the future of the book"

might have raised. For all the talent that went into the making of this book, it seems to me to represent first and foremost an opportunity squandered.

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*The Image Directory*, an electronic publishing project by the Academic Press. San Diego, Calif.: Academic Press, 1998. Web page: [www.imagedir.com](http://www.imagedir.com).

There are always two things to take into account when reviewing Web sites, especially of the visual resources variety. First, the combination of visual resources and the world of the Web always stimulates, in the more than casual observer, a kind of euphoric adrenaline outpour at the thought of a well-cataloged Visual Resource that will soon contain almost nothing short of every image, from everywhere, for everyone. However, costs, standards, and vexing copyright issues effectively regulate the adrenaline flow, often down to a trickle. The second consideration concerns the incomplete nature of such sites. In effect, the reviewer is standing over the author's shoulder, having read a good many chapters in a never-ending book, perused a never-to-be-completed index, and wondered about a table of contents which, if nothing else, forecasts the titles of future chapters.

The Academic Press's *Image Directory* is an online database of image information derived from numerous collections, including museums big and small, slide vendors and archives, private collections, stock image companies, and art historical photo resources. Images often accompany the information, which frequently includes artist, date, medium, materials, and dimensions. The point of the *Image Directory*, according to the many "reviews" written by the Academic Press staff, is to make information about images available in more or less the same manner that *Books in Print* does about books. Institutions give cataloging information and sometimes thumbnail images in the hopes of disseminating their collections and attracting the interest of patrons who will buy reproductions from them. The *Image Directory* earns its keep by charging access fees to subscribers such as universities, colleges, public schools, and public libraries.

The Academic Press database aims to facilitate searches across collections. The juxtaposition of images from a variety of sources will be a welcome accompaniment to catalogs of permanent collections and crucial for poorly cataloged collections. But to be able to search, say, for Jackson Pollock regardless of where his paintings reside necessitates the production of standard data fields that apply to records from all institutions. The *Image Directory* is, thankfully, big on standards, so this all sounds wonderful. The only problem is that many of the 100 or so institutions that have contracted to supply information (many have not yet supplied any) have already cataloged according to their own needs. Casting aside the *Books in Print* analogy, the *Image Directory* can be described as a kind of image dissemination clearinghouse that allows institutions to place their images and information online without having to sell their copyright souls and without having to reinvest in cataloging projects. The *Image Directory* accepts just about any kind of reasonable record, and with forty-seven data fields, it can accommodate most.

Is there a danger of inconsistent records? Yes. Does it matter? No. The innocuous inconsistency that I have come across concerns for the most part the depth of the record; some records have more fields than others. Inconsistency, of which I am a sometimes fan, in this case serves the rather useful purpose of making much infor-