Transforming Books: Paper, Metamedia and Digitisation - Book Review of White Magic: The Age of Paper*, Lothar Müller and Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization

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BOOK REVIEW

Transforming Books: Paper, Metamedia and Digitisation

*White Magic: The Age of Paper**, Lothar Müller, Cambridge: Polity, 2015, ISBN: 978-0-7456-7253-3

Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization, Alexander Starre, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015, ISBN: 978-1-60938-359-6

*First published in German in 2012 as *Weiße Magie: Die Epoche des Papiers*, München, Carl Hanser Verlag

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This review asks what a history of paper and a study of metamedia tell us about the paper v. digital debate reported in the media taking place within the trade book publishing industry just as figures reported in 2016 show that eBook sales are slowing and print is showing a very tiny recovery. Müller's book shows how paper was the 'old' digital, transformative, mythical even, whereas the rise of metamedial literature in Starre's book reflected a rise in interest in the material aspects of book objects (and control of) by authors as the vanilla incarnation of digital – the eBook – disappointed. As the mixed ecology of print and digital looks set to continue as both books argue, this review asks whether industry concentration and consolidation is becoming the lead story not ever increasing levels of digital activity.

Keywords: Paper; history of the book; publishing; digital publishing; eBook

For well over a decade the trade book publishing industry has appeared to be travelling along a multi-lane one direction highway to 'digital', a destination (precise form unknown) equated with publishing success. The smart money and the high profile industry mantras were all going to be digital in the future, for both large and small companies. This narrative was variously proclaimed, sometimes feared, but mostly celebrated by true believers and the expedient. It entailed the dismantling of established industry structures, promised new dawns of narrative innovation and experimentation and the arrival of an era of unparalleled consumer

sovereignty where 'content' would be delivered by the survivors of this disruptive turmoil of disintermediation instantaneously to everybody, everywhere. It would result in a customer experience so satisfying and endlessly adaptive that pirates would be nullified and trade book publishing would take its place as a bona fide member of the new media club. A bright future was on the horizon, but only for the digitally savvy business, versed in the habits of its readers, committed to (what in practice are) almost unachievably numerous and diverse distribution channels. Disruption in publishing circles was inevitable but endeavouring to manage the process was not all about smart technology as some claimed and was not entirely about replacing paper with bytes despite the rhetoric. This may have become a little clearer when something surprising happened in 2015 as *The Guardian* (Flood, 2016) reported the first drop in eBook sales for the 'Big Five' publishers in the UK market. A comparable figure in *Publisher's Weekly*, (Milliot, 2016a) for the USA showed a decline of 13 per cent. Shortly after the more conservative leaning UK news outlet *The Telegraph* (Furness, 2016) confirmed on 13 May that print sales in the same year had actually risen fractionally to '£2.76 billion in 2015 from £2.748 billion in 2014', still dwarfing digital sales that had fallen from £563 million in 2014 to £554 million in 2015. For the US it was the case that print sales had risen by around 2 per cent in two consecutive years (Milliot, 2016b). (Note these figures and the subsequent discussion relate to the trade sector and not the academic or educational publishing markets that have experienced different types of transformation.)

In different ways both Müller and Starre's books anticipate in their conclusions this temporary plateau in eBook sales, or a turning point if you are inclined towards a more dramatic interpretation. Müller's history of the role of paper publishing and printing declares with confidence that 'the paper age is not finished' (263). Starre's *Metamedia on* the other hand looks to the aesthetic potential of metamedial literature reflecting on, 'the possibilities of this ancient contraption of paper and ink, *which has never appeared more modern than now*' [Starre, 264, my itals]. Ours is a hybrid age. Though neither use the term each emphasizes the tangible physical properties of print, in what might be considered a materialist approach, with a small 'm'. Indeed it is true that with the gift market being a core element of the sales year, book publishers probably pay more attention to items like varnish, finish, trim, design, format and packaging than ever before.

Müller's engaging study takes the idea of paper's modernity one stage further by presenting digital as the new paper, paper as the old digital and still unvanquished at that. Those of us used to thinking of paper as a dead tree medium are taken back to a time when paper (then made from rags) was up against parchment and papyrus. When first introduced paper was in the process of, 'slipping into the gaps in communication systems, transmission media and governance techniques'. It solidified in the first wave of bureaucracy or what we might today call the 'audit society', and was mostly recycled from repurposed rags collected by an underclass, a practice that Müller tells us continued until midway through the nineteenth century. Müller quotes Paul Valery's justly famous refrain on the electrifying abilities of paper as a 'storage battery' and 'conductor' (xi). He notes (within the covers of a book on *very* white stock) how paper seemed transformed by the powers of bleach and classier typography into a whiter surface – the hue of modernity as Apple's designs have demonstrated once again. Paper was the medium of speed, globalisation, order, 'a precursor to digital in the analog world' (7). It was considered a technology of almost mythical power, a 'universal substance' (63). Historical practices like excerpting, double-entry book keeping, newspaper clippings, paper's umbilical link with the postal system (for which read email) offer numerous instances of a point, not overplayed in the book, that overall, 'certain aspects of paper-based letter culture only becomes apparent when viewed from the perspective of email and text-messaging' (Müller, 122) and vice versa. In this reading, enthusiasm for the digital echoes with the language of the

technological sublime as that of paper before it. In practice there is and always have been overlapping technologies. As Müller says when speaking of newspapers, print and online, are not best thought of as opposites but, 'it would be more accurate to speak of different mixing ratios' (258). Such conclusions are somewhat hard won by the reader as the author's exposition is largely structured around the narrative history of institutions and even more via the closes of analysis of key texts from the literary canon at key moments by authors such as Cervantes, Defoe and Rabelais through to James Joyce and William Gaddis. While interpretations such as the discussion (86) of the symbolic significance of the blank page (a highlight of *White Magic*), are not without interest it is difficult to envisage students or scholars of the media absorbing all of these with relish. Correspondingly there is relatively little treatment of the book publishing or even printing industries beyond the mid nineteenth century and the transition to wood pulp, for example, arrives surprisingly late in the narrative which dwells on the pre-modern era and lacks some of the detail found in the author's explanation of how rags, made their way to became the raw material for the print surface – the paper – of the books of the day before technology rendered wood pulp economical (There is a parallel with the slow progress of computers here but in both cases the perceived need and desire to oust the older material, predated the reality). These caveats may not judge *White Magic* on its own terms, which is to revisit the general idea of the still lingering Gutenberg era and bind paper more centrally into the covers of a millennia-long history of overlapping communication technologies. In an excellent conclusion the author makes it very clear that this long, even epic, story of paper is to be continued.

   Metamedia has a very different argument. Starre's book does not touch upon many aspects of the trade book publishing industry but is rather very concerned with its aesthetics, typography and production. His argument is that as a consequence of the digital revolution, 'American literature has begun to confront the unlikely amalgam of fixity, permanence and aesthetic flexibility embodied in its traditional paper container' (Starre, 7). He identifies a group of writers – notably Dave Eggers, Mark Danielewski and to a lesser extent Salvador Plascencia, Reif Larsen and Jonathan Safran Foer – that embody a trend whereby, 'unprecedented levels of bibliographical expressivity' (63) appear as a central feature of their works. For the reader there is the possibility of absorption, 'not merely in the narrative, but in the entire designed artefact' (172) Metamedia has nothing to do with metadata – the surrounding information and categorisation that underpin selling of many products (including books) in a digital space – the term it evokes on first reading. Its significance is rather that in Starre's words, 'A literary work becomes a metamedium once it uses specific devices to reflexively engage with the material medium to which it is affixed or in which it is displayed' (8). The practices of these writers are however linked to the market. With extreme attention paid to the material form of literary works, Starre suggests that the minute levels of awareness the books of his chosen authors draw to their own bibliographical codes are 'upping' their value, culturally and economically. It could be said that 'in a medial sense, one could thus claim, books canonize themselves' (Starre, 86). By taking control of the means of production – desktop publishing, printing, design – a writer/publisher like Eggers is also reasserting the autonomy of the literary system, resisting the lazy and generic design habits of the market with the end result being in this account not profit but 'beautiful things, in our hands' (Eggers' words, 87). It is difficult not to find this impulse and even Starre's understated enthusiasm for it rather hipsterish, the bibliographic equivalent of vinyl worship, but the author is aware of the paradoxes here. Starre does not disassociate himself from an aesthetic preference for complexity that for all the newly-enabled abilities of digital technology to enable authorial customisation and control in book production he dates back to Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* a major predecessor for writers in the growing modern metamedial canon he outlines.

Starre has an ongoing debate with the critic Sarah Brouillette who, following Bourdieu, he feels downplays the literary field's 'aesthetic interior' (Starre, 125) reflected in these meta-medial texts. Thus in her reading of Eggers's work for example she does not see beyond the larger book industry world of capital and commodity production. Indeed, one of *Metamedia*'s finest features is an ability to engage in such side-debates, for instance where he debates the paradox of the rise of ergodic fiction at the same time as the eBook reader that, 'affected the entire literary system precisely because it seemed so far from revolutionary' (Starre, 20). Like many, one suspects – as many in the industry do – he laments the lack of innovation in a system still geared towards the aesthetically and generically familiar and that is still seemingly ill-disposed to the possibilities of hypertext. He is still hopeful for new aesthetic forms that might either dissolve the boundaries between readers and writers via, as some have postulated, an 'emergent paradigm of collaboration' (171). As he notes however, the 'rapid obsolescence' of digital devices and the transferability of digital mark-up languages will continue to 'forestall localized electronic writing' (117) and the track record of book publishers to engage productively in the world of apps, games and digitally-driven media beyond licensing for it is patchy at best. Starre also notes that for all the love and labour of some extraordinarily productive and hard-working authors, 'no literary author can credibly claim to have a decisive say in the development of devices like the Kindle or the iPad . . . [that] pass over the head of novelists' (262). This is true and whilst Amazon's Kindle has given self-publishing a big shot in the arm, its dominant market share of ebook sales (over 90 per cent in the UK) raises questions over sustainability and whether the game is not so much about consumers needs, but rather stifling competition in every corner of the sector.

Returning to 2016's reversal of recent trends, do these two books suggest an industry – the production of long-form text content – that is both riven and fuelled by digitally driven creative disruption? Or rather one where paper still dominates, where the traditional gate-keepers, agents, editors, retailers, ably described by Thompson (2010) are still in place, and where the author-as-brand propels the marketing of titles (Brouillette, 2014) and in which big publishing and now big digital are stably dominant? The digital/print split may not be that big an issue in an environment where the big conglomerates always operate and lead in both channels. Amazon is the number one sales account for publishers of virtually any ilk in either channel. Self-publishing – in some respects a close relative to Starre's artisan authors – could offer a challenge to the publishing ecology but it is difficult to see beyond the Amazon behemoth already confirmed as the dominant route to market for self-propelled authors and even now extending its reach into its own physical book stores. Random House and Penguin's merger in 2013 was predicated on assembling a united force that might have the capacity *not* to have terms dictated to it by Amazon. So whether paper or digital, the most important future developments for books may turn out to be those that are substantially propelled by industry concentration in conventional political economy terms not the result of unforseen new digital technologies or the result of the paper v. digital struggle as we have so often been told. On the one side Amazon and, to an increasingly diminished extent, the likes of Apple and Kobo; on the other the 'Big Five' (Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Simon and Schuster) publishing conglomerates. This is a narrative largely of consolidation not revolution and opportunities increasingly shaped by corporatist agendas aimed at shaping market parameters and actively organising distribution chains for their benefit. If there is a counter-revolution driven by media then it has yet to surface or may even already be in retreat.

In their detailed accounts, Muller and Starre's work offers valuable ammunition to those who see a future for paper and see more continuities between the digital and paper eras for trade and literary publishing than disruptions. They both make a solid case that each offers

unexplored angles for students of each to see the other afresh. Their reliance on literary case material yields many useful insights; it will be for others to fill out the picture with a fuller history of the wider publishing business ecology.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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