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Schneider, Ute

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THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE PRINTED BOOK AS A MEDIUM

Ute Schneider is a professor of Book Studies and Director of Studies at the Gutenberg-Institute of World literature and Written Media / Book Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz.

Social practices of using printed books in the digital age are mostly based on the symbolic power of book communication. All contemporary values attributed to the printed book are built on (traditional) social practices on the one hand, as well as triggering dynamical social practices on the other hand. The following contribution covers some examples of using printed books with the aim to generate situations of follow-up communication in various social dimensions. We still can find a common agreement in western societies about the values of the book as a medium, which obviously cannot be expressed by an e-book. These values are only some of the reasons that lead to the survival of the printed book.

Keywords: book symbolism; BookTube; communication power; #hotdudesreading; slow reading



Introduction

Since late 2017 a new trend in private libraries of the U.S. has been observed: “backwards books.” Owners of books turn their books backwards on the shelves. In this way, you can only see the front of the book block, so author names and titles are hidden.¹ Nobody

can see which book is which. Only the quantity of the available books gives an impression of the collector’s suspected reading performance. In a German newspaper article this strange kind of collecting books was called “burn-out-library”,² because the books do not disturb the stressed readers and owners respectively. What is the reason behind this behavior? Is the

book simply an object of decoration? The individual reasons are hardly interesting. More important are the reactions and comments of the observers; almost all disapprove of this treatment of the book.³

This almost unanimous verdict leads to the question: What values do we associate with printed books?

The book as a medium is a system of valences. It develops its importance and power mainly through its multifunctional use. The functions of books become apparent while using them, because the only way to determine the meaning of something is through its use. The traditional values attributed to the printed book are the following: the book is regarded as a place of certain knowledge, as an adviser and as an object of memories, not least as an entertainment medium. So, the book is separated by materiality from its environment, but, at the same time, reading a book triggers social practices through its medial elements and characteristics. Not only the contents of books, but also their materiality communicate special semantic meanings.

Theories in Material Culture Studies have shown that the materiality of objects can be grasped as social references, which can be generally understood in society.⁴ It is easy to prove how the social reference of books works: a large number of books, properly arranged in the bookshelves of a house, symbolizes accumulated knowledge, such as literary interests and literacy.⁵ If the art of literature belongs to high culture, it

stands for a certain intellectual level. The entire society understands the symbolism of books. For example, a background of books is used in journalistic contexts in order to give interview partners a certain degree of seriousness on television. The book as a symbol of knowledge and scholarship has a symbolic tradition going on for centuries. Even in the digital age of media change, the printed book remains a frequently used instrument of social positioning, especially through social networks.

Reader's Identity and the Pile of Unread Books

Readng books is – undisputedly – one way to create your individual identity.⁶ Especially reading fiction is a way of discovering new worlds, or becoming acquainted with other models of life. The function of the book and reading as instruments for the creation of individual identity should be separated from the function of the book and reading as an expression of one's reading identity. In the first case, the book serves as a means to construct one's own identity in a social context; in the second case, it serves as a symbol of the concrete reading identity and the values associated with it. These typical media techniques of the self are obviously not outdated. In March 2016, the German Börsenverein⁷ started a survey with the question: what object would you like to be photographed with for a portrait? Two-thirds of the people who took part in the survey answered that they would like to be portrayed with their books, followed by their pet and their sports equipment.⁸ Book possession is part of one's identity; consumer goods can 'fulfill the

function of personal distinction solely through the individual combination of many existing objects.⁹ However, this is only successful if all actors are aware of the symbolic meaning of these objects. In western societies, not only reading ability, but also the capability of understanding long and complex texts, are seen as necessary requirements for participating in democratic processes. In domestic settings, books are more important than any other type of object because they serve as the embodiment of these ideals, as well as expressions of religious or professional values.¹⁰

Since the possibilities of social media platforms like YouTube have grown, everybody can take part as an active user and this has resulted in a flood of so-called BookTubers uploading videos every day. In their vlogs, they show their filled bookshelves and demonstrate their reading interests. These practices stem from times when the book was undisputedly the main means, and reading the only way to create a media-based identity. The staging of the self by what one reads or does not read is usually closely linked to what is socially desirable in a social milieu.¹¹ Reading in social reading groups offers the possibility of a follow-up communication after the reading act, in order to confirm or correct your opinion, if necessary. In many facets, literary critical statements are posted online by many readers. Their vlogs reach a considerable number of clicks up to well over one million. These videos are used both for the dedicated advertising of individual book marketing, as well as for the self-presentation of the mostly young literary critics. The criticism of readers for other readers is quite standardized

in the videos: a lay, often female, critic stands in front of her bookshelf holding a printed (!) book she has already read, and stares into the camera in order to give a summary of the book, as well as a positive or negative evaluation of her reading impression.

The BookTubers present themselves as enthusiastic readers who always maintain a positive attitude towards the cultural techniques of reading. Moreover, they always keep a so-called “pub”, a pile of unread books, in the background, which reveals future reading experiences. Some vloggers post videos just to display their unread books and to announce further reading adventures, as well as to prove that they are able to fulfill intellectual and social challenges.¹² Demonstrating the huge size of one’s pile of unread books can hardly be realized with e-books. Reading printed books is connected with the imagination of a great achievement, which will be rewarded with appreciation in one’s social milieu. Hence, printed books offer high potential in integrating cultural and habitual identities, because, apart from their specific content, their materiality and contexts allow them to communicate social values which are understood by many people – not only by readers.

Printed books as symbols of a delightful and sustainable life

In 2001, the literary scholar Sabine Gross presented a wealth of examples of how readers associate their reading habits with a place, a piece of furniture or a time of the day.¹³ Readers without fixed reading habits have hardly been found. The readers’

self-placement in a special armchair, or on the couch of their living room, or their bed, on a deck chair in the garden etc., is often ritually connected with physical enjoyment. Readers actively shape their settings: the body must feel “comfortable”, and the preparation of special props such as coffee, tea, champagne, wine, cigarettes, or nibbles completes the enjoyment. Almost twenty years later, nothing of this has changed, as can easily be seen on today’s social media platforms.

A close look at the online platform Instagram offers a meaningful overview of the contemporary symbolic staging of printed books. Users post innumerable pictures with books as instruments of self-referential expressions. The symbolic meaning can be decoded by the target group, maybe the peer group of the user who has posted the pictures. One of the most important values that the pictures project is that reading printed books is delightful.

Books are very often accompanied by homemade food and drinks.¹⁴ Cakes, biscuits, fruits, and any other kind of tasty food surround books, along with coffee, tea and wine. It seems that it is impossible to read a book without drinking a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Not only photographers, but also illustrators

display a reading atmosphere in similar ways. Last August, the famous US magazine *The New Yorker* had a cover

of a family on holiday. The mother is reading and sipping wine.¹⁵ Reading settings are in most cases illustrated in this way. The book as a motif in context with treats in general and with food in particular, seems to be a generally imagined tableau.

More typical contexts for displaying books on digital platforms can be found. In many cases, the books are closed. The materials

surrounding the books are often wood, flowers,¹⁶ wool,¹⁷ as well as pets, mostly cats.¹⁸ Cats, books, and reading are a very popular triadic.¹⁹ We can also find herbs, trees, and more nature in the pictures posted. Uncountable examples present books surrounded by natural products. What does this mean? In the virtual space of the transitory and volatile internet, books and other things are symbols of permanence and stability. Reading printed books does not signify temporary pleasure, but a long lasting passion, like using wooden things and wool. Printed books are used to slow down the hectic digital age and to join the current mainstream idea of a simple and sustainable life.

Instagram users often present themselves as empathic readers. The act of reading printed books should

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be associated with a certain lifestyle, frequently combined with the rejection of cultural mainstream ideals and turning away from technical progress. Homing and cocooning are the most often shown contexts for an aesthetic representation of printed books. Most people have to handle electronic media for professional use. Private leisure time gives them a chance to create their individual, old-fashioned slowness. Slowness and the empathic use of slow, printed books are the favorite contexts in representing the book as a medium. The pictures regularly quote aesthetic traditions, which are very old-fashioned; nowadays, these traditions undergo a renaissance, like crafts and traditional cooking, getting in touch with nature, and: reading printed books.²⁰ This renaissance is caused by the search for an intensive, healthy, sustainable, and aesthetically simple way of living.

Reading printed books is sexy

Reading printed books in public spaces draws attention to readers and their books. Many people try to identify the reader's book in order to start a conversation on the book's content, or to draw conclusions about the reader's mentality. Since 2015 a group of six women and seven men, has been posting pictures of young, very good looking and seemingly smart men under the hashtag *#hotdudesreading* on the platform Instagram. The account has now got over 900 thousands followers, both male and female. All the pictures of the young men were taken in a moment of concentrated reading. The men are sometimes partly undressed and stand, or sit, in a pretty relaxed way, in the New York subway,

the Central Park, or any other subway station, while they are reading. All of them hold the old fashioned printed book in their hands, none of them gazes at an e-book. This is important. One comment of the followers on the highly concentrated readers in a situation full of intimacy, for example, is 'old-school guys (so hot)'.²¹

In 2016, seventy-five of these photos were published in a printed book by American publisher Simon and Schuster.²² The comments on these photos are also cited in the book. Some of the commenting people pick up on the erotic undercurrent, for example: '[t]his sexy striker must be killing time before his next scrimmage, and I'd love to be picked first to help warm him up'²³ (on a picture of a football player), or '[i]f he didn't look so comfortable on that bench, I'd cozy right up next to him and show him he's not the only one who prefers it horizontal'²⁴ (on a picture of a man lying on a bench and reading). The reviews of this book, on the platform Goodreads.com, for example, are without any exception similar and extremely enthusiastic: '[n]othing is as sexy as a man reading a book'.²⁵

It is not even relevant for the intended effect whether the readers were really passionate readers, or whether a scene is possibly only staged. All comments in the pictures go in the same direction: male readers have an erotic charisma whether they hold a fiction or a non-fiction book in their hand. However, it is decisive that the books they are holding give these men an air of intelligence. Perhaps, reading in the eye of the viewer is identified as intelligence, and intelligence is estimated as erotic or sexy. Reading

looks seductive.

Apparently, this opinion has general validity. A publicity campaign of the German book trade was accompanied by surveys on different topics around the book as a medium. In 2015, one of the surveys confirmed the assessment: 'reading men are better lovers'.²⁶ And to read out loud to each other triggers erotic anticipation. It seems that reading as an intimate process has an erotic effect.

This appears to be true even for a group of readers, not only for single readers. From New Zealand and the U.S. a new reading practice has been imported to Europe: "slow reading". Slow, highly concentrated and deep reading is a reaction to our fast and digital everyday life, and therefore people meet to read together in silence. Everyone reads their own book. They meet in hotel lobbies and clubs in order to read silently, without talking about the books, or to each other.

The flow-experience and the happiness of reading in so-called silent reading parties, starting in Seattle in 2014, caused a journalist of the newspaper *The Stranger*, Christopher Frizzelle, to talk about an 'Unexpected Sexiness of Many People Quietly Reading and Drinking in Public'.²⁷ The harmony of

body and book-reading merge together to create the feeling that reading is a sexy thing. It is obvious that reading and the communication capability of printed books symbolize intellectual wealth on the one hand, but on the other hand also develop sensual potential.

The social effect of book communication

It should be emphasized that the content and, in particular, the materiality of every book represents not only cultural values, but also the social value of communication. The communication power of the book is its *most important* and in fact, its *essential* value. Of course, book communication naturally also includes a storage and a reminder function, but the social value of "communication power" is more important to constitute the specific practices of the use of a book. The communication power includes actual reading, as well as a symbolic function: every symbolic use

'The act of reading printed books should be associated with a certain lifestyle, frequently combined with the rejection of cultural mainstream ideals and turning away from technical progress'

of a book communicates social values just as every functional use of a book is based on social values.

The users of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest and other social media platforms are used to dealing with digital media, with online

communication and the newest hipster trends. But it seems that it is important for them to show their skills in dealing with the old-fashioned printed book. Reading printed books is indispensable and has acquired a high reputation in the virtual world. The presentation of books and reading processes is being realized in traditional ways, but through new digital media.

nor can we find a social agreement on certain reading subjects. The treatment of books is on the one hand *individually* designed, but on the other hand *collectively* practiced in its structure and character. This treatment of the book seems permanently established in western societies and will, presumably, not be outdated in the future.

In a socio-cultural dimension, the reading process is neither fixed or limited to special reading media,



¹ Some pictures of backwards books can be found here: *news.com.au*, ‘“Backwards books”: New interiors trend is driving people nuts’, <<http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/home/interiors/the-backwards-book-trend-is-one-of-the-silliest-things-weve-seen/news-story/bf6e3841a6c14db0ae2cd236fcc71f7a>> (12 February 2018).

² Author’s translation ‚Burn-out-Bibliotheken‘. P. Kümmel, ‘Die “umgekehrten” Bibliotheken’, *Die ZEIT*, 11 January 2018, p. 43.

³ See here for example: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/BdySqYnhn6r/?hl=de&tagged=backwardsbooks>> (9 February 2018).

⁴ For an overview see: D. Hicks & M. Beaudry (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: University Press, 2010).

⁵ About the cultural power of bookshelves, see: C. Norrick-Rühl, ‘(Furniture) Books and Book Furniture as Markers of Authority’, *TXT Magazine*, 3 (2016), pp. 3-8.

⁶ A. Kuhn, ‘Lesen als Identitätskonstruktion und soziale Integration’, in U. Rautenberg & U. Schneider (eds.), *Lesen. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 833-851.

⁷ The *Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels* is the syndication of the German booktrade to represent its professional interests.

⁸ See Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels ‚Pressemitteilung Umfrage-Ergebnisse: Mit welchem für Sie charakteristischen Gegenstand würden Sie sich gerne für ein Porträtbild fotografieren lassen?‘, <https://www.boersenverein.de/sixcms/media.php/976/16-03-10_Vorsicht-Buch_Portraet_Umfrageergebnisse.pdf> (12 February 2018).

⁹ Author’s translation. T. Habermas, *Geliebte Objekte. Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1996), p. 187.

¹⁰ Author’s translation. Books are ‘mehr als jede andere Objektart bedeutsam, weil sie der Verkörperung von idealen und dem Ausdruck religiöser und beruflicher Werthaltungen dienen’. M. Csikszentmihalyi & E. Rochberg-Halton, *Der Sinn der Dinge. Das Selbst und die Symbole des Wohnbereichs* (München, Weinheim: Psychologie Verlags Union, 1989), pp. 86-87.

¹¹ L. Holbe, *Konstruktion von Leseidentität am Beispiel des BookTube-Kanals Kossis Welt* (Master

Thesis in Book Studies, JGU Mainz 2016), still unpublished.

¹² Examples: YouTube, 'MEIN SUB!! Juli 2017 | Stapel ungelesener Bücher Teil 1 | katharia', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHy96jadpVc&t=68s>>; YouTube, 'Mein RIESIGER SUB Teil 2 | Stapel ungelesener Bücher #2 | katharia', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUN5rWVLT0Y>>; YouTube, 'Keine Lust mehr! | Mein SuB und ich', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuFlfxxveI0&t=337s>>; YouTube, 'Ich habe meinen SuB satt | Bücher werden nicht schlecht!' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rF1q-YbH3Fs&t=629s>> (5 February 2018).

¹³ S. Gross, 'Das Buch in der Hand. Zum situativ-affektiven Umgang mit Texten', in Stiftung Lesen (ed.), *Leseverhalten in Deutschland. Eine Studie der Stiftung Lesen* (Mainz, Hamburg: Stiftung Lesen, Spiegel Verlag, 2001), pp. 175-197.

¹⁴ See here, example for coffee on Instagram, 'bookish_girll', <https://www.instagram.com/bookish_girll/?hl=de> (12 February 2018).

¹⁵ See The New Yorker 'The Magazine, August 21, 2017', <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/21>> (12 February 2018).

¹⁶ See for example Instagram, 'booksandflowers_', <https://www.instagram.com/booksandflowers_/?hl=de> (12 February 2018).

¹⁷ See for example Instagram, 'eatsbooksfordinner', <<https://www.instagram.com/eatsbooksfordinner/>> (12 February 2018).

¹⁸ See for example Instagram, 'reading.with_cats', <https://www.instagram.com/reading.with_cats/?hl=de> (12 February 2018).

¹⁹ For example see Instagram, 'eatsbooksfordinner', <<https://www.instagram.com/eatsbooksfordinner/>> (12 February 2018).

²⁰ L. Stahlmann, *Der zeichenhafte Gebrauch des Buchs* (Master Thesis in Book Studies, JGU Mainz, 2016), p. 86, still unpublished.

²¹ 'Between the covers'. *Hot Dudes Reading* (New York: Atria Books, 2016), (pages not numbered).

²² *Hot Dudes Reading* (New York: Atria Books, 2016).

²³ *Ibidem*, 'pier40' (pages not numbered).

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 'Christopher Street pier' (pages not numbered).

²⁵ Goodreads, 'Hot Dudes Reading', <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27220739-hot-dudes-reading>> (12 February 2018).

²⁶ Author's translation 'Lesende Männer sind die besseren Liebhaber'. See Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels, 'Jetzt ein Buch/Presse/Lesende Männer sind die besseren Liebhaber', <<https://vorsichtbuch.de/presse-downloads/pressemitteilungen/zeige/lesende-maenner-sind-die-besseren-liebhaber/>> (12 February 2018).

²⁷ The Stranger, 'The Silent-Reading Party. On the Unexpected Sexiness of Many People Quietly Reading and Drinking in Public', <<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/the-reading-party/Content?oid=3845017>> (12 February 2018).