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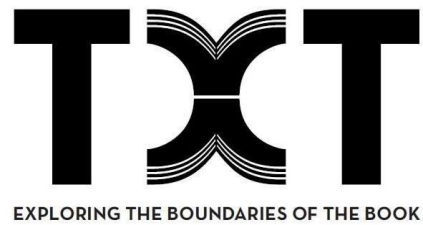
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The Book and Place, the Place of the Book

By Dan Visel

Cofounder of Unfold, and former researcher
at the Institute for the Future of the Book

Fresh out of college at the turn of the millennium, I spent a year in Rome, working on a magazine for tourists. I took with me a single book, *Ulysses*, thinking that I would finally have time to read it properly. I did; but I also found myself buying more and more books, most of them grievously overpriced at the handful of English bookstores in the city. I had the Internet while I was at work, though email was my primary use of it. Hearing from friends in New York and Boston, I had the feeling that I was living in some kind of cultural backwater. Exciting things were happening there: new books that I had to read, magazines that I could not get, new journals that were not making it out of States. And so I read, imagining what it would be like to discuss the new Jonathan Lethem in New York. I was on, I felt, the fringes of a world of letters that I wanted to be a part of. I was interested in Italy, of course, but the Italy I was primarily interested in was that of the past. Rome is not a place one goes to consider the future.

Looking back, the mindset I was in seems bizarre, even parochial. It is understandable in a certain sense: American publishing is (or was) disproportionately concentrated in New York. There are smaller centers—Minneapolis, western Massachusetts, once San

Francisco—but book culture in the U.S. is based in New York. I went there because I was interested in books; it did not seem like there was any alternative. Thousands of young people arrived in New York every year with the same idea; they still do, though the numbers may have dropped.

Arriving in New York in 2001 was paradisiacal, in no small part because of the book stores. St. Mark's had all the latest theory being mulled over by a clientele who seemed to care; the Strand had ancient hard cover editions of things I had always heard about, often for pennies. Shabby but pleasant used book stores were all over Manhattan. One apartment I lived in had five Barnes & Nobles stores within a twenty-minute radius: the selection was not good enough for a connoisseur such as I supposed myself, but it was easy to spend an extended lunch reading. The publishing world was there: I knew editors, agents, designers, illustrators.

Over the next decade, that changed as the publishing industry changed. Any book imaginable became available from Amazon, often as soon as you could think of the title, often for the price of shipping. Small bookstores closed, first the ones no one cared about; later, even Barnes & Noble would find itself on the ropes. That is not to say that book culture was not still happening: it was. New spaces opened up: but more spread out, on what had been the periphery of the city. iPods—which had appeared on the subways of New York a few months after I had—were replaced by iPhones and then iPads. People stopped reading newspapers in the subway; Kindles started appearing on the more affluent lines.

What I am describing is not the experience of reading itself, but the space in which reading occurs. In different ways, the book and the bookstore are places where this happens. There can be the same frisson of excitement when you discover a book on Amazon as when you pull it from a dusty stack; the same moments of revelation can happen whether you are reading from a scroll or a paperback or an iPad. (This is not, of course, to say that these experiences are the same: they are not. But that is a broader subject than I can take on here.) What happened in New York was similar to the experience of many people in the past decade: as attention shifted from the printed page to the networked screen, physical space seemed to recede in importance.

And New York's importance as a place for books shrank for me. Certainly I treasured dinners with old novelists, the pleasure of meeting someone interesting at a reading. But there was writing on the wall: cultural workers being forced to live further and further out, many giving up and heading to greener pastures. Publishing exploded, and people's understanding of book culture became increasingly atomised. The expectation that cultured people had read a certain book of the moment wore down with time, as one might

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expect: the Internet makes it possible to find exactly the sort of books we want (be they old or new), and, should you not have someone in the neighborhood who shares your taste in, say, minor Surrealist novels of the 1930s, it is easy to find someone online who wants to talk about them.

Where does this leave literary culture in New York? A cynical eye might paint it as more gossip than anything else, a record of who the hot young writer is, who did what at the latest party. It is entertaining enough, though it does seem to be played for embarrassingly small stakes. Too often what was being argued about in Brooklyn would mean nothing to those in Queens or the Bronx. Is there really the conviction that writing can change anything culturally? One wonders.

After twelve years of living in New York, I find myself in Bangkok: my wife, a librarian, took a job here, and I came along, shipping a few thousand books at ruinous expense. Bangkok is a city without much book culture: it is very difficult for most people to think of a Thai writer—any Thai writer—though it is comparatively simple to think of a Thai artist or filmmaker. (Certainly there are plenty of lurid memoirs and thrillers by Westerners about the city—but reading them one almost always feels they would make better movies.) Amazon does not bother delivering here.

But we do have the Internet. And in a strange way, Bangkok feels almost exactly like New York: everywhere you go, people are pointing smartphones and tablets at things to take pictures of them. The social networks are slightly different here—Line and Facebook rather than New York’s Tumblr and Twitter—but the way they are used, like the games middle class workers play on their phones on the Skytrain, is not essentially different

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of the book stands for:
a vehicle for
the transfer
of big ideas
and experiences

from the way they are used in New York. This leveling is not confined to reading: wandering the streets of Bangkok, you see as many 7/11s and ATMs as you do in present-day Manhattan.

I am not by any means claiming that Bangkok is devoid of culture: the city seethes with culture. But, by and large, it is not book culture. There are plenty of historical reasons for this: the lack, until relatively recently, of a large educated class; the persistent lack of



freedom of the press; the linguistic isolation that was a side-effect of not being colonised and a relatively peaceful history. What one can learn from Bangkok is that the road to the future does not necessarily proceed through books. The future is already arrived here.

What can we learn from this? I have my library: my unread books, were I to read them systematically, would keep me busy for years. And I have the internet: the arguments in New York are mostly available here at twelve hours' remove. I worry, sometimes, that I have not gone far enough. (In honesty, escape is no longer something we should think possible.) What about everyone else? Millions of other people in Bangkok are perfectly happy not having a library of their own, and this makes me wonder about my own relationship with books, culturally conditioned as it is.

Books are symbols. They can mean the pleasure of interiority; the flash of understanding that we are not alone; the understanding to work our way out of a situation. They can mean the beauty of a well-designed object. We connect them with our youth and self-definition. The form of the book has changed and continues to change. It is worth noting, of course, that the form of the book has never been more popular: maybe it took the threat of its disappearance to make the codex an object almost universally beloved. I love it as well, perhaps past sense.

It might be worth reflecting that it is not the form of the book that is most worth protecting. Rather, it is what the image of the book stands for, a vehicle for the transfer of big ideas and experiences. Any number of new forms can potentially accomplish this. But it's the already literate who are in a position to best take advantage of this: to analyse the bias of a post on Facebook without thinking about it, to find symbolism in the television drama of the week.

The book has been a force for change, although it is important to remember that it comes with high barriers to entry, though those barriers can be surmounted by almost anyone given enough time. We forget how long it takes to read: most of our education is devoted to learning to read in forms more and more specialised. New forms of media offer a useful immediacy that the book cannot match: a two-year-old can operate an iPad. What might be lost if we are not careful is what we have gained from books: how the book has transformed us, whether we realise it or not. ■

