

THEORIZING THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK

Introduction

This chapter covers the main theories and general themes that have developed in book history studies over the past century. It will briefly outline the influence of New Bibliographers such as W.W. Greg and Fredson Bowers in setting the agenda for bibliography and book studies in the first half of the twentieth century, and discuss the works of those who came afterwards. We will look at the work of Don McKenzie in the 1960s and 1970s, and his conception of the ‘sociology of text’ as a means of broadening traditional bibliographical interests to encompass cultural and sociological contexts. The chapter will also briefly cover how McKenzie’s work linked to the *Histoire du Livre* movement that developed from the 1950s onwards amongst French historians with an interest in studying the social and cultural effects of books on society. This section also outlines the place of Robert Darnton’s formulation of the ‘communication circuit’ as a means of studying the circulation of texts in society, Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker’s counter-argument for a more bio-bibliographical oriented approach, and other theoretical models emphasizing the study of the paratexts of books and calling for the study of the ‘socialization of texts’. After a brief summary of the terminology now commonly used to describe book history at work, the chapter looks at how book historians have characterized different stages in the history of books in Western European culture, focusing on the work of Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Benedict Anderson, and Adrian Johns, among others. From there the chapter examines how book historians have interpreted the function of authors and readers in these contexts, and through that how books are being studied for their ‘mediating’ effect in society.

Book history origins

Book History (or the study of the history of the book and texts) has a strong historical pedigree linked to disciplines such as Bibliography, Literary Studies, and

Economic and Social History. The urge to study all aspects of the creation of books, whether as physical artifacts, examples of fine art, products of unique production methods, or unique cultural symbols, stretches back almost to the point at which texts became part of the culture and commerce of civilization. The large and lavish manuscript and book collections amassed by church, state, and wealthy patrons over the centuries, many dating from the Renaissance period, testify to the hold that books have had on individuals both as objects of aesthetic beauty and as carriers of human knowledge. This in turn has often fostered an interest in classifying, codifying, and studying print culture objects for what they have to say about the people who made them and for the meaning and intentions of their creators.

This certainly was the case at the beginning of the twentieth century, when academics interested in early printed texts started asking detailed questions about their production. The printing of early editions of Shakespeare's work, for example, was problematic. How, literary scholars asked, could one distinguish 'authentic' from 'corrupted' versions of his plays? By what means could scholars arrive at the true text as originally conceived by Shakespeare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, given the lack of original manuscript sources and unreliable printed versions? The answer lay in methodologies proposed by the 'New Bibliography' school, led by scholars such as R. McKerrow (1927), W.W. Greg (1950) and Fredson Bowers (1950). Establishing authoritative texts became a matter of examining the materiality of original textual production, of studying texts and books as physical objects (determining differences in type, paper, ink, printing methods and so on) to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' versions of works.¹ The result would be a more rigorous interrogation of the origins of literary and textual production: bibliography, in the words of W.W. Greg, would become 'the science of the material transmission of literary documents' (Greg 1914: 39). By the 1950s, bibliography, as reconfigured by Greg, Bowers, McKerrow and others, became a ubiquitous presence in many Anglo-American English departments, part of the required syllabus for budding PhDs, who were taught, as Robert Darnton notes, to interpret the material conditions of print with extreme rigor, including 'how to recognize formats, collate signatures, detect cancels (leaves with errors or potentially offensive passages), distinguish typefaces, trace watermarks, analyze art work, and identify bindings' (Darnton 2003: 43).

Reconstructing texts (and printing practices that led to their printed creation) was the defining aspect of 'descriptive' or 'analytical' bibliography as practiced by such bibliographers and textual critics under the mantle of New Bibliography. Seeking original textual and authorial meaning, scholars examined the recension of manuscripts in order to produce the most complete and least corrupted version of a text possible. The intervention of agents other than the author in the transmission of the text was seen as part of that corrupting process. Bowers, for

example, warned fellow bibliographers that ‘the uncritical use of the last edition within an author’s lifetime is now, or should be, thoroughly discredited, although it is still occasionally found’: textual authority lay in the ‘printed text closest to the author’s manuscript, that is, to the first authoritative edition’ (Bowers 1950a: 59). The operation of agents in the printing process, including editors and proof-readers, was meant to be retraced in order to distinguish their interference and establish the text which most accurately reflected the author’s final intention. How the author’s final intention was itself to be deciphered was the subject at times of a much less rigorous analysis, and the doubt remains whether the author’s intention existed only as an editorial concept disguising the editor’s own predilections and decisions (Tanselle 1979).

The results of New Bibliography inquiry could often inspire, but equally disappoint, particularly in the wake of theoretical trends such as deconstruction, new historicism and postcolonialism: ‘In their imaginations, Ph.D.s became companions of the workers who first turned Shakespeare’s words into books’, one commentator notes. ‘It was an intoxicating idea, and it did not last’ (Darnton 2003: 43). Others were blunter in their view of where bibliography fitted in the academy: a significant figure warned graduates in the 1980s that publishing history was unlikely to move forward without significant funding or academic support in relevant academic departments (Sutherland 1988). Best stick to general history, was the general suggestion, or study texts through strongly theorized filters.

McKenzie and the sociology of texts

Matters began to shift, slowly at first, then with gathering speed from the late 1960s onwards, in part due to the pioneering work of a Cambridge-educated, New Zealand-based academic. The ‘New Bibliography’ approach to textual production had assumed (rather idealistically) that texts were produced by compositors and printers through rational, consistent patterns and means: that, in essence, printing and print production were ‘fixed’ constants that had little effect on output, except inasmuch as printers were liable to make accidental mistakes (dropping or misplacing type, mixing up pages during the printing or binding process, omitting particular portions of text, etc.) that ‘corrupted’ original authorial intentions. Don McKenzie’s work in the 1960s and 1970s called this into question, in particular his controversial, highly original essay ‘Printers of the Mind’, first published in *Studies in Bibliography* in 1969. Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez provide important interpretations and summaries of McKenzie’s thinking in *Making Meaning: ‘Printers of the Mind’ and Other Essays*, their edited volume of his work on issues pertaining to bibliography and the history of the book. As they note, ‘Printers of the Mind’ challenged the orthodox views of analytical bibliographers who had

dominated textual bibliography throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, by demonstrating that the physical production of a text was very much dependent on the conditions in which it was produced. Using primary source material culled from correspondence, printing catalogs, and business ledgers of the London printer William Bowyer and his son, McKenzie proved that printing house operations in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England were not tidy and ordered, but were dominated by what he called ‘concurrent production’: work habits varied considerably, texts were often run off concurrently, and the typesetting and physical printing of texts was not the result of efforts of a single printer or editor, but could be, and often was, the result of the interlinked activities of several compositors and pressmen working simultaneously in complex and unpredictable patterns on a whole variety of texts. The matter was something that could be applied beyond the purely literary text, as McDonald and Suarez noted: ‘The fundamental principles of concurrent production ... applied to virtually all book manufacture’ (McDonald and Suarez 2002: 13).

McKenzie would go on in later work to argue that the study of texts necessarily involved inclusion of issues external to textual meaning: ‘Meanings are not therefore inherent,’ he argued, ‘but are constructed by successive interpretative acts by those who write, design, and print books, and by those who buy and read them.’ McKenzie also argued that the effects of print culture in other cultures could vary according to their social and communicative contexts: ‘It has also come to be recognized that a distinctively *Euro*-centric notion of the book and its circulation cannot account for the role of such texts in other societies with different communicative traditions and widely varying standards of literacy’ (McKenzie 2002: 268). McKenzie applied such sensitivity to his own work, most notably in his groundbreaking study of the formulation of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 between British colonial representatives and Maori chieftains, the printed document that established British sovereignty over Maori land, and whose subsequent, controversial implementation colored New Zealand development and offered a physical example of interpretative clashes based on differences between print- and oral-based cultures (McKenzie 1984).

McKenzie’s most significant legacy was his emphasis on broadening the Anglo-American study of textual meaning beyond the artificial boundaries posited by competing academic fields. Literary criticism of texts too often ignored meaning beyond the borders of ‘the text’; bibliographers too often ignored the sociological context within which the production of texts operated; historians too often ignored the manner in which the products of printing houses entered into the wider public arena and were received and consumed by reading audiences. McKenzie’s classic 1981 essay, ‘Typography and Meaning: The Case of William Congreve’, would draw Anglo-American attention to the revolution in textual interpretation being pioneered by the

French *Annales* school, whose practitioners since the late 1950s had been applying quantitative social history methods to the study of textual production and reception. At the same time, however, McKenzie proposed that scholars move beyond the interpretation of texts solely as the product of an author's intentions, or even solely through quantitative, macro-historical examinations of book publishing and printing trends, towards a study of texts as mediated products within which one could find traces of economic, social, aesthetic, and literary meaning. 'Current theories of textual criticism, indifferent as they are to the history of the book, its architecture, and the visual language of typography, are quite inadequate to cope with such problems,' he concluded. 'Only a new and comprehensive sociology of the text can embrace them' (McKenzie 1981: 236).

Histoire du Livre

The 'sociology of the text' was McKenzie's acknowledgment that texts were a result of a collaborative process, calling for methods of analysis that incorporated attention to the material object and its production and reception, rather than solely to its contents. It would form part of a directed move, led by Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier among others, towards the 'new-style *Histoire du Livre* of the 1980s and 1990s emphasizing readers, materiality, and meaning' (McDonald and Suarez 2002: 7). As Roger Chartier would later comment, the value of McKenzie's concept of 'the sociology of the text' was in the lessons to be learned and applied as a result:

Against the abstraction of the text, it shows that the status and interpretation of a work depend on material considerations; against the 'death of the author', it stresses the author's role, at the side of the bookseller-printer, in defining the form given to the work; against the absence of the reader, it recalls that the meaning of a text is always produced in a historical setting and depends on the differing and plural readings that assign meaning to it.

(Chartier 1997b: 85)

The origins of the *Annales* school of methodology highlighted by McKenzie could be found in the quantitative social histories of Robert Escarpit's *Sociologie de la Littérature* (published in 1958), and also in the same year in Febvre and Martin's *L'Apparition du Livre*. Escarpit's work was notable for his attempt to isolate models of book production, dissemination, and reception from the accumulation of data in a manner taken up by Robert Darnton (1982b) in his signal article 'What is the History of Books?' and in Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker's (1993) response to Darnton, 'A New Model for the Study of the Book'. The *Annales* approach differed, moreover, from attempts such as Elizabeth Eisenstein's to relate the

development of the printed book to broader social and political movements in what has more recently been criticized as an over-determinist and simplistic approach, itself indicated in the title of her major work, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (and discussed later in this section) (Johns 1998). Febvre and Martin are perhaps more accurate in their chapter headed ‘The Book as a Force for Change’. For them, the printing press was only one of a number of actors in a social and political drama; Lucien Febvre offered as the alternative title for their study, *The Book in the Service of History*. Where the book was primarily active in the promotion of change was in the language of texts: as they argued in a point subsequently expanded on by Elizabeth Eisenstein, ‘The unified Latin culture of Europe was finally dissolved by the rise of the vernacular languages which was consolidated by the printing press’ (Febvre and Martin 1976: 332).

The communication circuit

Robert Darnton’s groundbreaking essay, ‘What is the History of Books?’, drew attention to the plethora of research methods and avenues facing those engaged in the study of the history of the book in the early 1980s. The intrepid researcher faced a disorienting crisscrossing of disciplines, ‘less like a field than a tropical rain forest ... analytical bibliography pointing in this direction, the sociology of knowledge in that, while history, English, and comparative literature stake out overlapping territories ... and bewildered by competing methodologies, which would have him collating editions, compiling statistics, decoding copyright law, wading through reams of manuscript, heaving at the bar of a reconstructed common press, and psychoanalyzing the mental processes of readers’ (Darnton 1982a: 10). Darnton’s solution was to propose a general model for analysing the manner in which books made their way into society, a ‘communication circuit’ running ‘from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader’ (Darnton 1982a: 11). The circuit would work within and between these key players – thus allowing room, for example, for demonstrating the manner in which readers could influence textual production (a point those working with nineteenth-century serialized novels had often drawn attention to), or the influence of booksellers on publishing decisions (as Darnton demonstrated with a case study drawn from eighteenth-century French print culture tracking the contraction and expansion of the French book trade through bookselling orders). Darnton’s circuit derived from similar models in communication studies, but his intention was to offer book historians a way of conceiving the production of texts as a multifaceted enterprise encompassing social, economic, political, and intellectual conditions. ‘Books belong to circuits of communication that operate in consistent patterns, however complex they may be,’ he concluded. ‘By unearthing those circuits,

historians can show that books do not merely recount history; they make it' (Darnton 1982a: 22).

Darnton's model was by no means perfect, as he himself acknowledged. For a start, it was rooted in an understanding of textual production particular to eighteenth-century European printing and publishing conditions (that included such fascinating and unusual matters as 'colportage' and book-smuggling over national borders in times of revolutionary ferment, underground print networks, and the production of illicit or banned texts). Parts of the model were unsuitable for the study of pre-print manuscript culture, or for explicating the inflection of oral culture within written traditions. But, if anything, it signaled an attempt to establish common ground within disparate and competing book history agendas, and was absorbed, developed and utilized with increasing frequency over the coming years.

Since Darnton's formulation of the 'communication circuit' as a means of examining the role of texts in society, book history has begun increasingly to focus on what McGann has described as the 'socialization of texts', that is, the impact of books as artifacts traveling from private to public spaces. In this formulation, production becomes very much part of a process of, as Paul Duguid notes, 'producing a public artifact and inserting it in a particular social circuit' (Duguid 1996: 81). Or, as a recent, important survey suggested, what is now becoming increasingly important are conceptions of 'the activity of producing and consuming books that decenter the principal elements and make them interactive and inter-dependent: publishing history, in other words, as hypertext' (Jordan and Patten 1995: 11).

The bio-bibliographical communication circuit

But not all have been satisfied with Darnton's (and his successors') definition of key arenas within this 'communication circuit'. In 1993, two eminent British bibliographers (Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker) set out a model that argued with and proposed an expansion of Darnton's model. For them, the point was to draw attention to the bio-bibliographical dimension that many steeped in bibliographic traditions felt was missing from a post-print (that is, after 1500) perspective on print culture and book history. The answer to the questions 'What did people imagine a book was? What was it for?' involved acknowledging a deeper connection between people and texts in antiquity than might be expected. 'The modern tendency is to assume that a book was what it is now, a tool,' they noted, continuing:

It is difficult to recognize how recent a concept this is, the creation of mechanical multiplication, five centuries old but still new. In one sense, a real and practical sense, it was not new in the fifteenth century. Multiple

copying of texts, by a variety of means, had existed for at least two millennia: what was new was an abrupt change of scale, of volume. Books possess an earlier, greater power, as the vehicle of knowledge or inspiration that outlives the time in which they were first conceived or written.

(Adams and Barker 1993: 8)

While acknowledging that Darnton's 'communication circuit' had its uses from the perspective of social history analysis, Adams and Barker critiqued its approach as too centered on explicating communication processes, thus moving away from the significance of books as artifacts. Their model was one based on processes, whereby the circuit was made up of five events in the life of a text (publishing, manufacturing, distribution, reception, and survival), surrounded and affected by four 'zones' of influence (intellectual influences; political, legal, and religious influences; commercial pressures; social behavior and taste). The result was a reversal of emphasis: 'The text is the reason for the cycle of the book: its transmission depends on its ability to set off new cycles.' This is a circuit that does not follow how people interact with texts, but rather one that follows texts 'whose sequence constitutes a system of communication' (Adams and Barker 1993: 15).

Theoretical incursions

Similar issues have been raised by Gerard Genette in his influential work *Seuils*, published in France in 1987 but first translated in English in 1997 as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Genette's work has dovetailed with Adams and Barker's through his focus on the study of the 'paratext' of a printed work (the liminal devices that control how a reader perceives the text, such as front and back covers, jacket blurbs, indexes, footnotes, tables of contents, etc.). What traditional bibliographers had often sought amongst these areas, though (clues as to printing techniques or variations in textual production), was not of great interest to Genette. Instead, he has focused on how these paratexts become zones of *transaction*, 'a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading' (Genette 1997: 2). In other words, an insight into the production devices that are utilized to ensure 'for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose' (Genette 1997: 407). Scholars have followed through on this by writing on such liminal issues as footnotes and marginalia (Grafton 1997; Jackson 2001; Norton and Norton 1996). This in a sense is an attempt to theorize particular hermeneutical values and processes as a means of contesting cultural representations and receptions of finished texts.

Some have suggested that Genette's approach is limited in value to book

historians because it does not reach far enough into the ‘sociology’ of the text. As Juliet Gardiner has noted, a fundamental flaw in Genette’s theorizing on paratexts is his ‘frequent failure to account for the distinction between the author and the publishers, his tendency to see the publisher as the enabler, indeed the continuation, of the author’s intention, and paratexts as the vehicle, signals an untenable, essentialist fixity of meaning for the text’ (Gardiner 2000: 258). Jerome McGann argues similarly against Genette in *The Textual Condition*, at the same time noting that the value of Genette’s approach, a response to past literary theorists whose interests in the linguistic nature of texts (the words contained within the borders of books) had pushed such extra-textual apparatuses to the margins (as it were), was in his insistence that such ‘paratexts’ were of fundamental value to the study of textual meaning. Contrasting text with paratext was a useful exercise in itself, a means of recovering authorial meaning and intention as their words passed through the publishing process filter.

But McGann’s concerns are with Genette’s specialist, focused approach, for, as even Genette admitted, his paratextual interests stop when it comes to the more material aspects of textual production – ink, typeface, paper, the physical production process itself – as these do not treat of the *linguistic*, so going beyond Genette’s literary influenced purview. ‘But of course all texts, like all other things human,’ McGann argued, ‘are embodied phenomena, and the body of the text is not exclusively linguistic’ (McGann 1991: 13). In the influential argument that followed, McGann sketched out his opposition to the type of analysis he felt had pervaded textual study up to the 1980s – a linguistic approach that wrapped up literary texts in a close-spun web of hermeneutics and textual interpretation. ‘Textual studies remains largely under the spell of romantic hermeneutics,’ he declared. ‘In such a view texts, and in particular imaginative texts, are not imagined as certain kinds of social acts, and to the degree that they *are* so imagined, the action of the text has been too subjectively (and too abstractly) conceived in its linguistic conditions.’ His solution was to propose grounding the study of texts within contexts that were both social and materialist based: ‘One breaks the spell of romantic hermeneutics by socializing the study of texts at the most radical levels’ (McGann 1991: 12). McGann’s ‘socialization of the text’ would prove an influential rallying call in the development of book history research, joining Don McKenzie’s ‘sociology of the text’ as a means of underlining how book historians differentiated their areas of investigation from those that worked from a strictly literary or historical base.

Print culture and book history

To be certain, the terminology used to define what one now does in ‘book history’ is contentious. As we have seen, it has been called variously ‘print

culture', 'the sociology of the text', 'publishing history', 'textual bibliography', and so on. In part, the reason has as much to do with the strengths as well as the failings of the label 'book history' – for those whose interests are mainly in the study of manuscripts, or medieval and ancient texts, or who refract texts through culturally inflected analysis of readers and reader responses, the term 'book history' can seem too exclusionary for their purposes.

'Print culture' is one alternative that has been proposed, following the critical influence of work by Lucien Febvre, Henri-Jean Martin, Elizabeth Eisenstein, and others. Harold Love summarizes 'print culture' as a term used to refer to:

- 1 a 'noetic world' or consciousness constructed through print;
 - 2 the industrial relationship of book production and distribution;
 - 3 a body of practices arising from the social relationship of reading and information management; and
 - 4 a specialized field of study within the wider discipline of Communication.
- (Love 2003: 46)

Love's summary encompasses the type of insights sought by those who drew on Darnton's formulation of the 'communication circuit' for inspiration. But 'print culture', despite this precise definition, has not satisfied either those whose work on orality and handwritten texts fits outside such a category, or those who have been attracted to Adams and Barker's shift of the 'communication circuit' to inflect and reflect more the physical production and movement of texts within intellectual and social spheres.

In 1998, the editors of a new journal in the area utilized the first issue to establish ambitious parameters for the history of the book that would be broad enough to accommodate all such concerns. *Book History*, they declared, would be about 'the entire history of written communication: the creation, dissemination, and uses of script and print in any medium, including books, newspapers, periodicals, manuscripts, and ephemera.... The social, cultural, and economic history of authorship, publishing, printing, the book arts, copyright, censorship, bookselling and distribution, libraries, literacy, literary criticism, reading habits, and reader responses' (Greenspan and Rose 1998: ix). Or, as another scholar stated more succinctly, the history of the book 'is centrally about ourselves. It asks how past readers have made meaning (and therefore, by extension, how others have read differently from us); but it also asks where the conditions of possibility for our own reading came from' (Price 2002: 39). Such a broad definition is likely to be the one that finds most favor with those who study book history, given that it covers all aspects of print activity. Let us turn to how it might be seen within the context of the history of communication.

Modeling the rise of the book in Western culture

A simplistic model of the development of the history of the book in Western culture (or, in more generalized terms, the history of human communication), suggested by Walter Ong (1982), Jack Goody (1987), Marshall McLuhan (1964) proposes that its development can be broken down into three key ‘revolutionary phases’: 1) the movement from oral to written cultures (subdivided into the development of the alphabet, the acquisition of language, the creation of economic trading structures, the acquisition of writing tools – ink, paper, codices – and the fixing of systems of writing); 2) the movement from literacy to printing (the development of manuscript culture, the development of printing, its gradual insertion into cultural and social institutions, its provision of materials for mass consumption within an increasingly industrialized society); and 3) the movement from print to computer-generated content (a transformative phase we are currently experiencing).

Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan are frequently cited for their insights into the social and cultural shifts from oral to written to print cultures. McLuhan’s gnomic utterances about the nature of print in his 1960s bestsellers *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* and *Understanding Media* would prove attention grabbing but later fall from favor (until the networked electronic world he had predicted appeared to become a reality from the 1980s onwards). In these works, McLuhan stressed the disruptive effect of writing and print on oral cultural formations, pointing to the ‘breaking apart of the magical world of the ear and the neutral world of the eye, and to the emergence of the detribalized individual from this split’ (McLuhan 1964: 32). The private nature of reading texts and printed books, he argued, irrevocably shifted patterns of human interaction. For McLuhan, such splits were not the result of the evolution of written culture but rather of the typographical revolution instituted by Gutenberg. As he would pronounce sententiously, ‘It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type, that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimensions broke away from the other sense’ (McLuhan 1964: 70). Elizabeth Eisenstein would reformulate and reinterpret this in more restrained language in her conception of ‘typographical fixity’ (discussed later in this section).

Walter Ong revisited the matter in his classic work, *Orality and Literacy*, arguing that the introduction of writing and print imprinted a new kind of ‘consciousness’ in social communication – writing ‘reconstituted the originally oral, spoken word in visual space,’ while print ‘embedded the word in space more definitively’ (Ong 1982: 121). The result was an imposition of linearity on cognitive experiences, a sense of spatial organization that allowed easy retrieval of material and the encouragement of a sense of closure, ‘a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion.... Print encloses thought in thousands of copies of a work of exactly the same visual and physical

consistency' (Ong 1982: 129–30). Later commentators would draw on both McLuhan's and Ong's work in discussing the 'mediating' effect of print and textual culture in social formations, reading practices, and communication patterns. As one critic would note, McLuhan's and Ong's insights offered a conception of culture as 'a modality of consciousness, a structure of beliefs and perceptions, a socially constructed subjectivity' (Love 2003: 54).

Tracking shifts in social communication from oral to written to print, however, has led scholars to conclude that demarcations between these communication patterns are remarkably fluid, with a tendency to overlap and coincide. The boundaries between each are not fixed – thus oral culture did not terminate with the invention of writing implements, nor was manuscript culture instantly toppled by the assimilation of printing techniques pioneered by Johannes Gutenberg and his successors from 1450 onwards. As work by Harold Love, Henry Woudhuysen, Margaret Ezell, David McKitterick, and others attests, manuscript transmission remained a vital aspect of many Western European communities through to the late nineteenth century (Gómez 2001; Love 1998; Woudhuysen 1996; Ezell 1999; Justice and Tinker 2002; Fox 2000; McKitterick 2003). The results confound attempts to impose neat chronological finalities to human processes. As David McKitterick points out, 'Whether one considers scribal texts or illumination and decoration, the boundary between manuscript and print is as untidy chronologically as it is commercially, materially or socially' (McKitterick 2003: 12).

McKitterick's contention is in part a response to a view of book history that has prevailed since the publication in the late 1970s of one of the most influential studies on early modern print culture, Elizabeth Eisenstein's (1979) two volume classic *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*. Eisenstein drew on a wealth of material, utilizing and arguing against a range of unconventional critical sources, including Febvre and Martin, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong, to develop the influential thesis that Western European communication patterns had been ineluctably transformed by the introduction of the printing press: the use of the new technology irrevocably altered methods of data collection, storage, retrieval, and communication amongst learned groupings in Western Europe from the late fifteenth century onwards. The result was what Eisenstein referred to as 'typographic fixity' (Eisenstein 1979: I, 116–20). The term denoted how print culture innovations, by increasing the capacity of society to produce and disperse information, established, as another critic has summarized, 'a series of techniques and practices that allowed the world's stock of recordable knowledge to be put to use with a fearsome new efficiency' (Love 2003: 46–7). Put another way, 'typographical fixity' involved 'the ability of printed books to give to the words and ideas they print a substantial and durable form, and to amplify this objectified verbal reality

by the distribution of numerous identical copies of the same organisation of words on the page' (Kernan 1987: 53).

Benedict Anderson has drawn on Eisenstein's concept of 'fixity' in formulating his influential vision of 'imagined communities' and national identity, arguing that 'print-capitalism' in particular has been crucial to establishing the conditions for the creation of national consciousness. For Anderson, the mechanical reproduction of language, 'print-language' as opposed to spoken language, formed the foundation for modern national consciousness and the development of the nation-state in three ways: it 'created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars ... gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation ... [and] created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars' (Anderson 1983: 44–5).

Anderson links fixity with human activity, noting that the results of utilizing print technology in the Renaissance period came about due to 'the explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity' (Anderson 1983: 45). Anderson, however, is careful to differentiate his stance from Eisenstein's main argument, which he suggests 'comes close to theomorphizing "print" *qua* print as the genius of modern history.' 'It is worth remembering in this context,' he continues, 'that although printing was invented first in China, possibly 500 years before its appearance in Europe, it had no major, let alone revolutionary impact – precisely because of the absence of capitalism there' (Anderson 1983: 44).

Adrian Johns argues similarly that 'fixity' is actually transitive rather than inherent: it 'exists only inasmuch as it is recognized and acted upon by people – and not otherwise' (Johns 1998: 19). Furthermore, Johns argues that the development of print culture during the period covered by Eisenstein was less straightforward, marked by uncertainty and shaky integration. Johns approaches textual production from a position influenced by Darnton, Chartier, and others of the *Annales* school: 'a book is the material embodiment of, if not a consensus, then at least a collective consent,' he writes, 'a nexus conjoining a wide range of worlds of work' (Johns 1998: 3). More importantly, he argues against Eisenstein's position that 'typographic fixity' is something that became an inherent quality of print culture – that it was a natural aspect of printing wherever it was transported to. For Johns, the main thrust of Eisenstein's work is that the circumstances of print culture can be characterized by the traits attributed to print – that when books were created, disseminated, and utilized, they were assumed to embody conditions of standardization, dissemination, and fixity. Books could be reproduced exactly, and repeatedly, in any location, utilizing standardized tools and techniques, thus eliminating the corruptive elements inherent in manuscript creation. The result was Eisenstein's influential claim 'that the Renaissance and

Reformation were rendered permanent by the very permanence of their canonical texts, that nationalism developed thanks to the stabilization of laws and languages, and that science itself became possible on the basis of phenomena and theories reliably recorded' (Johns 1998: 11).

Such claims have validity within certain contexts. But scholars have countered that this picture is not completely accurate, that circumstances were more complex for the first centuries of book production. The underlying principles that we have inherited from the evolution of book and print culture can be crudely summarized as:

- 1 knowledge that printed texts will generally be exact duplicates of others printed from the same edition (with minor deviances that analytical bibliographers spend time tracing), thus enabling effective and efficient transmission of knowledge across time and space; and
- 2 that such fixing of texts enables 'trust' to be invested in the 'author' to whom the words are credited. While 'authorship' as a profession is a relatively recent phenomenon, the authority invested in such figures is an important event ascribed to the early development of print and book production.

Johns counters, drawing on Roger Chartier's work on reading practices, that 'trust' and 'reliability' in a text were less inherent in the reception of printed texts during the first centuries of book production than has previously been suggested. Contemporaries decried the unreliability and textual corruption of early book production, problems that were not resolved for several centuries. As Johns writes, 'The first book reputed to have been printed without any errors appeared only in 1760. Before then, variety was the rule, even within single editions.' Shakespeare's first folio, as many have pointed out, printed over one hundred years after the development of printing techniques in Western Europe, could still count over six hundred typefaces in its makeup, with erratic and non-uniform spelling, punctuation, divisions, and page arrangements. 'In such a world,' Johns concludes, 'questions of credit took the place of assumptions of fixity.' That is, readers were asked to make judgments of individual texts based on critical appraisals of its identity, credit, reliability, and 'assessments of the people involved in the making, distribution, and reception of books' (Johns 1998: 31–2).

As technology has grown increasingly sophisticated, and society has developed institutional and social filters to control and assess print outputs (publishing houses, editorial staff, periodical and literary reviews and reviewers), we have grown accustomed to placing trust in corporate identities and 'brands'. Our dependency on and trust in the printed text has not diminished in the face of an increasing domination of the personal computer in commercial and social transactions, and the increasing diversity of information and activity now available and

utilized via the World Wide Web. And skills in communicating information orally (to which has been added the ability to project a telegenic presence if involved in visual media arenas such as film and television) are still valued within an increasingly globalized world whose media sources intertwine visual, oral, and written communication material in their content and delivery.

On the other hand, commentators such as Roger Chartier have responded to the three-part model of social communication development noted above (oral, written, print), by arguing that it does not fully account for particular innovations that created as fundamental a transformation in society as the writing tool and the printing press. (And could be deemed to be more important, perhaps.) It would be more accurate, they argue, to suggest that movements from oral to written to print cultures might be marked off by other, additional ‘inventions’, namely:

... the invention of the codex, which, in the first centuries of the common era, enabled the transition from the book which one unrolls to the one in which one turns pages, thus giving the book the form, structure, and organization it has retained up to the present; the invention of the ‘author’ in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which endowed certain contemporary authors (above all Petrarch) with the authority of the proper name that had been traditionally reserved for the ancients and Christians of the classical era; the invention of the copyright, which in the eighteenth century established an author’s perpetual and imprescriptible control over his work on the basis of the theory of natural law and of a new aesthetic of originality.

(Chartier 1997a: 11)

Authorial intention

One of the legacies of the early nineteenth century that has left its mark particularly in literary criticism has been the tendency to equate authorial activity with creative genius, investing such individuals with value as creative originators, individuals in possession of a creative soul from whom emanate unified texts that resonate through contemporary and future cultures. The rise of the cult of the author is arguably in Western culture a product of the Romantic age, exemplified or typified most dramatically in the figure of Lord Byron, whose tempestuous nature (and even more tempestuous business relationship with his publisher John Murray) epitomized the creative temperament of the period.

How this works its way into book history can be seen in the juxtaposing views of Barthes and Foucault on the issue of authorship and an author’s relationship to texts. Roland Barthes’s oft-quoted ‘The Death of the Author’ set the tone in the 1960s for overturning previous assumptions about the role of the

author in the formation of texts. His point, and likewise the point of Michel Foucault's response, 'What is an Author?', was to attempt to shift critical emphasis from author-centered inquiry to reader-based analysis. More on this matter can be found in Chapter 4 when we turn to discussing 'Authors, authorship, and authority'.

Decentering and decoupling the author from texts was not a new concept: elevating the common reader to ultimate creator of textual meaning was. But as Foucault was clear to point out, eliminating the authorial role completely from the textual production equation was not satisfactory. 'Authorship' was a cultural formation inseparable from the commodification of literature: literary reputation could and did shape cultural responses to texts in a manner not accounted for by Barthesian analysis. Subsequent developments in book history studies have expanded and developed critical thinking regarding these matters. Particular attention has been paid to the struggle over authorship as a concept, which can be located in the creation of literary property under copyright legislation in Britain in the eighteenth century, itself a product of national struggle between the Scots and the English (Rose 1993; Ross 1992).

Copyright legislation allowed authors legal rights to be recognized as originators and therefore owners of a specific commodity (in this case, text). It formed the basis for a new profession and industry to develop exponentially in the eighteenth century, one that combined the manufacture and distribution of cultural commodities with an affirmation of the author (rather than as before the printer/bookseller) as the original source of such material. The resulting changes in social and cultural networks of literary production laid the groundwork for the full-fledged emergence of authorship as a respected and lucrative profession in the industrially driven and print-literate world of nineteenth-century Western Europe and North America.

Another French theorist whose work has built on Foucault's reorientation of authorship in commodified terms is Pierre Bourdieu. His articulation of the concept of the 'literary field' has proven fruitful for those concerned particularly with contemporary (nineteenth- to twenty-first-century) print culture and authorship. Bourdieu's 'literary fields' stress the juncture between culture, society, and material production, and are defined as common social, intellectual, and ideological arenas linking producers (publishers, editors, and authors) to products (books, periodical publications, literary works). In particular, Bourdieu is concerned with how 'cultural status' is acquired, lost or retained by literary elites, with 'literary fields' representing distinctive, relatively autonomous social microcosms within and between which move cultural producers and their products. Crucial to Bourdieu's argument is his contention that such fields are generally self-contained, 'an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated' (Bourdieu 1993: 164). Individuals operate within these fields, struggling to gain cultural capital that can be translated

into more material rewards, whether it be recognition of artistic merit, financial gain or advance in social status. As Bourdieu contends:

This universe is the place of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, who is a real writer and who is not. The important fact, for the interpretation of works, is that this autonomous social universe functions somewhat like a prism which *refracts* every external determination: demographic, economic or political events are always retranslated according to the specific logic of the field, and it is by this intermediary that they act on the logic of the development of works.

(Bourdieu 1993: 164)

It is important to note that Bourdieu's concerns are with general esthetic and cultural production – his analysis takes in literary texts as well as art and music. His interest is also less with the material production of texts as with how such cultural production can be manipulated or interpreted within particular social, literary, and artistic structures to enable movements between such 'literary fields'.

Janice Radway has utilized and reinterpreted Bourdieu's concept of literary fields (as literary planes) in her work on US 'middlebrow' culture, and most specifically in her work on the activities of the US Book-of-the-Month Club from the 1920s onwards. As part of its attempt to create a distinctive 'marketing' tool for targeting home-based readers via a mail book service, and as a consequence to create a unique identity and role for itself as a mediator, arbiter and filter of literary production, the Book-of-the-Month Club established an internal panel of 'expert' judges to read texts for subsequent recommendation and sale to club members. Their procedures in essence replicated an internal variation of the Bourdieusian 'literary field', where texts were evaluated for their cultural capital and then categorized and differentiated for sale to particular audiences. 'The key moves in the evaluative practices of the Book-of-the-Month Club judges,' Radway notes, 'was not judgment at all, but rather the activity of categorization, that of sorting onto different planes' (Radway 1996: 24). The Book-of-the-Month Club established a blueprint for viewing texts within 'a series of discontinuous, discrete, non-congruent worlds.' In doing so, the Club created links between producer (author) and consumer (reader) whereby the disseminator, in this case the Club's organization, with its built-in filters of judges categorizing titles rather than providing esthetic judgments of books, became less arbiters of worth and more literary managers of textual production (Radway 1996: 24). And in many cases, different arenas or planes of textual production, whether they be how-to manuals, atlases, science textbooks, biographies, or novels, quite openly operated on differing planes of meaning, meeting differing audience needs with discrete

and technically distinct codes, structures, and formats. The Book-of-the-Month Club, begun as a purely commercial proposition, established an overarching identity for itself as a non-judgmental yet trusted provider of quality texts in a variety of subject areas, operating simultaneously on different textual planes and arenas.

Reading and book history

Scholarly inquiry over the past thirty years into the encounter between text and reader has shifted matters to the point where Barthes's stance that the 'death of the author' enabled the 'birth of the reader' can now be read as anachronistic in intent, reflecting the concerns of 1960s poststructuralist revolutions against the literary strictures of New Criticism. More on this can be found in Chapter 6, which covers issues of readers and reading.

The 'reader', as studies by Roger Chartier, Michel de Certeau, and others have demonstrated, was not as omnipotent and creatively autonomous as Barthes would have us believe (a point Michel Foucault alluded to in his rebuttal of Barthes, 'What is an Author?'). Rather, as Chartier reminds us, reading is a historically mediated activity – textual meaning 'depends upon the forms through which they are received and appropriated by their readers (or listeners)' (Chartier 1989b: 48). We must recognize, as Chartier continues, 'that forms produce meaning, and that even a fixed text is invested with new meaning and being (*statut*) when the physical form through which it is presented for interpretation changes' (Chartier 1989b: 48). The result is that any study of reading practices and reader response must necessarily confront the contexts in which such activity takes place: 'A history of modes of reading must identify the specific dispositions that distinguish community of readers and traditions of reading' (Chartier 1989b: 48). To do this appropriately, Chartier argued elsewhere, involved embracing the opportunities offered by book history, whose aims included reconstructing and interpreting 'the conditions of the encounter between the world of the text – which is always a world of forms, supports and objects – and the world of the reader – who is always a reader socially defined by the competency, conventions, expectations and practices of reading that he shares with others' (Chartier 1997a: 10).

Robert Darnton reiterated this call to historicize and contextualize reading studies as part of an expanded, sociologically inflected remit in book history in his 1986 survey piece 'First Steps Toward a History of Reading' (Darnton 1986). Darnton called for further research into a history of reader response that would enable the contextualization of the place of print in ordinary life: 'We need to work through more archives,' he argued, 'comparing readers' accounts of their experience with the protocols of reading in their books and, when possible, with their behaviour' (Darnton 1986: 157). Furthermore, book historians had to be sensitive to the flexible and reciprocal links between readers and producers of

text, and the manner in which meanings derived from texts could change over time. Historians of reading required, in his view, ‘to confront the relational element at the heart of the matter: how did changing readerships construe shifting texts?’ (Darnton 1986: 187). Having studied reading as a social phenomenon, book historians ‘can answer many of the “who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” questions, which can be of great help in attacking the more difficult “whys” and “hows”’ (Darnton 1986: 157).

We are now, in Darnton’s terms, exploring the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of the history of reading as much as the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘when’. The sources for this history remain fertile and problematic: the archival, including booksellers’ lists, library records, and state registers, offers generalized data which can be used to ascertain patterns and trends which may or may not be localized; and the personal, including letters, diaries, and autobiographies, offers presentations of the reading self which can provide cautious insights into the individual’s reading habits and practices. For example, Richard Altick’s (1957) account of reading in Britain from the late fifteenth until the turn of the twentieth century, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, illustrated the richness and density to be derived from this material as well as alerted us to the need to recreate the *mentalités* of the culture under review – the ‘why’ and the ‘how’, as so rigorously demanded by *annalistes* such as Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier, Robert Escarpit, and others.

Darnton’s ‘how’ included both the paratextual elements of the printed word (a theme already noted in relation to the work of Jerome McGann and Gerard Genette) and the nature of the act of reading itself. The latter theme was the subject of the school of reader-response criticism which emerged from Germany in the 1970s and in which Wolfgang Iser was the predominant figure. Iser restored the reader to the center of the act of reading, a position from which a blinkered focus upon the author’s ‘intentions’ and the structures of the text had dislodged him/her. Within Iser’s model of reading, the reader was an active and creative participant in the creation of meaning from the text. This model might seem then to underline the importance of the historical, since it follows that different readers at different periods will derive different meanings from their reading. This notion has proved important in allowing the historian of reading to move from data about individuals to conclusions about audiences – to attempt to refute Darnton’s assertion that ‘the experience of the great mass of readers lies beyond the range of historical research’ (Darnton 1986: 177).

Book history and mediation

With such a broad scope of themes and concerns available, book historians have increasingly taken to framing their work in terms of ‘mediation’ (taking cues from, among other things, Darnton’s ‘communication circuit’). ‘Mediation’ is a

crucial concept underpinning contemporary interpretations of what is the history of the book and print culture. As Joan Shelley Rubin explains, ‘rejecting the view that a printed artifact is simply the embodiment of an author’s words, the term denotes the multitude of factors affecting the text’s transmission’ (Rubin 2003: 562). Michael Winship supports this interpretation, noting: ‘Basic to the history of the book is an understanding that literature is a human institution, part of a matrix of social and cultural forces from which it emerges, rather than a pure or abstract ideal, independent of history’ (Winship 1993: 95–6). Others have moved outwards in their examination of this matrix from literary works to texts as varied as anthologies, religious catechisms and readers, and children’s textbooks (Price 2000; Howsam 1991; Monaghan 1989).

Book history as a field of study marks both an end and a beginning. It is clear that as we move into an era marked by discussions of the ‘new’ electronic revolution, the ‘old’ print revolution, begun in the fifteenth century, assumes a clearer focus and a natural closure. Just as manuscript traditions merged with new print technologies, so too we are now seeing similar mergings and complementarities between new and old media. The embedding of visual culture into cultural formations from the twentieth century onwards (the advance of film, television, the World Wide Web) has meant also a reshaping of print culture to accommodate such media of communication. We can see this in the manner in which books now form a part of contemporary Western cultural industries, where creativity, capitalism, and consumption are linked through production of mass media products based on texts (books to films and subsequent film ‘novelizations’). It is also evident in the manner in which printed texts (newspapers, journals) are now only one among many media communication systems competing for the attention of mass audiences. One has only to survey the multiple media through which humanity now communicates to see that print culture is slowly being displaced from the center of social communication to the periphery, still necessary but no longer the sole form of information in an electronic age.

But if the book in the future will no longer be the main form of human communication, this does not signify, as some critics would have us believe, the death of the book. Nor does it lessen the impact of print on social formations. Book history is important for what it says about human development. Without the portability and reach of print and texts, social, cultural, legal, humanistic, and religious formations would not have developed, been transmitted, and shaped beliefs and systems around the world.

Conclusion

This section has outlined some of the major theories, and briefly surveyed the work of some of the major theorists who have shaped the discipline of print culture and book history studies over the past century. It has shown how book

history has moved from past traditions in bibliographic and textual studies that sought to establish stable texts and precise textual intentions, to current preoccupations with understanding books and print within broader and more fluid cultural, sociological, and bibliographical contexts. The chapter has also covered how book history has developed interests in linking book and textual production with studies of authorship and readership. It described how book historians are increasingly framing their work in terms of 'mediation', shifting the emphasis from recovering exact meanings in text to understanding the place of texts within contemporary society. With new media practices and the World Wide Web challenging the fixity of print and creating new links between visual, oral, and textual communication forms, it is inevitable that we should shift how we view texts (past, present, and future) to acknowledge the wider contexts in which they exist. In order to do this, as this chapter has demonstrated, book history is drawing on and borrowing from a combination of analytical tools and insights derived from various disciplines, ranging from literary studies to history, media, and communication studies. Book history is no longer simply the province of bibliographers or literary critics, but rather can be seen as an integral part of the history of human communication.