Books on the Brink:
two revolutions of reading, why they've been resisted, and whether that resistance can last

by Amanda Lucek

Computer technology has brought about revolutions in almost every aspect of our lives, but (despite many predictions to the contrary) the book[1] world has remained largely unchanged. New technologies have made two different types of book-revolution eminently possible. On the one hand, the typographical possibilities for printed books have simply exploded. Computerized layout programs, proliferations of digital font choices, and improvements in printing processes have made possible the creation of profoundly enriched printed books, and profoundly *visual* books. The ability to manipulate the visual presentation of text has created the possibility of creating meaning via visual aspects of a text – meaning beyond that which can be conveyed by the words[2] alone. Such manipulations constitute what I shall call "meaningful typography." But on the other hand, just as the technology to change the face of printed books has come about, so too has the technology to render printed books obsolete. Ebook technology has been generating hype about a paperless future for two decades now. But neither the visually meaningful book revolution nor the ebook revolution have yet come to pass. We take it

[1] Although I use the general term of "book" throughout this essay, I am in fact concerned only with a specific subset of books – those classified as "literature", which for our purposes can be defined as mass-produced adult novels. Other types of books *have* taken advantage of man's new power over the appearance of text. Thus I must specify "novels" because nonfiction books (especially textbooks) often use visual manipulation of text to organize information more efficiently, such as using colored text to highlight main points. I must specify "adult" because innovation in the form of children's books has truly taken off – books are made in shapes other than rectangles, book are made with textured pages intended to be experienced tactilely, colored text swoops around the page in whimsical swirls, and much, much more. And I must specify "mass-produced" because small-run books are often "artist's books". These books experiment freely with visual form, but do so in a way that incorporates text into image rather than incorporating image into text – they are intended to be taken primarily as a form of visual art and only secondarily as literature.

[2] Throughout this essay the term "word" or "words" will refer to the semantic content of the words (that content which is not materially based) and *not* to the written form of the word(s) *unless the context specifically indicates that the written form is being discussed* (for example, when I say that a single word *appears* on a page, or a word *is written* in blue, or a word *on paper*).

as a tautology that technology fuels innovation; it fuels change. When such change fails to take place, one must question why. Through my research I have come to believe that it has been the ways in which we define "literature" and "books" respectively that have been the dams that have held these revolutions back, and have left these new technologies sitting idle.

But let's begin at the beginning. This whole research endeavor began with a single question: It has now been 10 years since the publication of *House of Leaves* – why are there no other books like it?[3] *House of Leaves*, by Mark Z. Danielewski, was a groundbreaking work – the first mass-produced adult novel to notably take advantage of the possibilities for visual manipulation of text that new technology made feasible, and furthermore to do so in a *meaningful* way. I consider it to be the hallmark of "meaningful typography". This is a term which bears some explanation.

To get right down to it, meaningful typography includes (but is not limited to): intentional use of a particular font, use of multiple fonts, use of multiple font sizes, use of colored text, and/or unconventional layouts of text *used in such a way as to create meaning beyond that conveyed by the words alone.* Meaningful Typography operates through the visual aspects of text, as opposed to the semantic content of the text. It can be used to enhance the semantic meanings of the text, or to create meaning wholly its own. It is important to note here that my definition of "meaning" encompasses more than the usual definition – it includes feelings, moods, intimations, associations – things which

[3] It is not strictly true that there have been no (superficially) similar books whatsoever published in the past ten years. In my researches I came across 3 examples that most people would probably lump into the same category with *House of Leaves* based on their innovative (or perhaps merely *unusual*) typography, but none of them, to my mind, uses typography in as productive a way as did Danielewski. *The Raw Shark Texts* by Steven Hall (2007) includes numerous pages in which text has been manipulated into the shape of a shark. While there are some legible words in these images, there are also clusters of letters that seem to be chosen at random. In this way the text is not enhanced by its typography, but rather ceases to be text altogether and becomes purely image. If Hall's goal with these images is to create in the reader a sense of frustration and confusion, as well as to create the sense of a world ruled by nonsense and impenetrable meanings, then perhaps he has succeeded after all, but he has done so through illustrations of text, not text itself. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005), while it was the best book I'd read in quite a long time, used meaningful typography in a way that distanced itself from the category of literature – the whole effect was to create the feeling that you were reading a scrapbook, not a novel. *The People of Paper* by Salvador Plascencia (2005) likewise did not live up to the example set by *House of Leaves* – it differentiated itself from "regular" books by adopting a columnar page format (which served mainly an organizational purpose: arranging text blocks according to their narrator) and precious little else.

are not explicit or codified. Many people take the term "meaning" to imply explicit, *codified* meaning. Words are taken to contain meaning *because* they have been codified – they have *definitions*; you can look them up in dictionaries. There are no dictionaries of, for instance, color. And yet color *does* have meaning. The meanings of certain colors vary from culture to culture, and even to an extent from person to person, but most colors have some generally agreed upon connotations and associations. Red is the color of anger and of blood. Pink is a feminine color. Green is the color of nature, but also of money.

These examples typify the sort of meaning that are most typical of typography – meanings which are vague and hard (perhaps even impossible) to pin down – different interpretations are possible. Thus some people would argue that the visual aspects of texts, since they have no single, definite meaning, have no meaning at all. A widespread exception to this rule only serves to reinforce the point: one basic formation of meaningful typography is actually very common – so common that it is seen as merely convention, or even as a basic aspect of text, and we lose sight of the fact that is a *visual* phenomenon. I speak of the use of italics to create emphasis. This is a manipulation of the visual aspects of text that *has* been codified, and thus it is accepted. It may be hard to imagine how non-codified aspects of text can be interpreted, but I think this can be illustrated by an investigation of how meaningful typography is used in *House of Leaves*.

Some of the most striking manifestations of meaningful typography in Danielewski's book are also some of the most straightforward. Many pages in the book are quite standard, but the further you read on, and the more distressed, disoriented, and confused the protagonist Will Navidson becomes, so too do the pages themselves become confused. Text may veer at an angle, jutting across from one corner to that opposite. Some pages are covered in text, laid out in multiple directions, in a manner designed to be somewhat overwhelming. Such layouts also engender feelings of being lost, since it is hard to know which text block you're supposed to read first. Other sensations that Danielewski creates include disorientation (as in cases where the text is written upside down), a sense of being trapped (by enclosing certain footnotes inside of boxes set in the

middle of the page). On the opposite side of the spectrum from these pages crammed with words going every which way is the section of pages that contain merely one word each, surrounded by seeming oceans of blank white space. This occurs at a very high tension moment, and encountering a whole section of single-word pages causes the reader to flip through them rapidly, thus feeling the increased pace of the text *bodily*. The sense of urgency we feel is visceral. Navidson's panic becomes our own agitation. The knowledge that he cannot reach, we cannot either – it is not on this page, we do know how many more pages we must push through to find answers.

The above examples are all related to manipulating the reader's emotions so that they are in synch with the characters in the book, but this is hardly the only thing Danielewski uses meaningful typography for. Consider, for instance, his use of color. Every instance of the word "house" in the novel is written in blue. This creates meaning on multiple levels. On the most basic level, the blue serves to highlight the word "house" – to give it importance. On another level, Martin Brick points out that in today's networked world, snippets of blue amongst a predominantly black text call to mind hypertext links in an internet document (Brick). This gives the impression that the house in the novel is connected to, and thus must be considered in light of, things not present on the immediate page. Whether connected to other parts of the book or to things wholly outside the book remains ambiguous. But perhaps the most important effect of coloring the word "house" blue lies in the fact that the coloration is the link that ties all of the multiple narrators together. Even the instance of the word in the publisher's name ("Random House") on the title page is colored blue. This consistency throughout the narratives hints at the existence of Danielewski himself – someone unmentioned who is controlling or overseeing all of the allegedly independent character's narration.

Use of multiple fonts (another feature of *House of Leaves*) is not necessarily indicative of meaningful typography. Some authors choose to use different fonts to represent different characters without giving much thought to the properties of the fonts they are using – this sort of usage is purely organizational, telling us which character is speaking, but telling us nothing about that character as a person. Danielewski, on the

other hand, chose his fonts very specifically. He has spoken in interviews of his decision to use the font named "courier" for text written by the character Johnny Truant. He chose the font not only because of its associations with typewriters (and thus with unprofessional typesetting) but also because Johnny served as a sort of courier throughout the book (Wittmershaus). Since many readers do not recognize fonts by name, Danielewski explicitly states early on, in footnote 5, the names of the fonts used. (Brick) But even if the fonts did not convey anything of the personality of the narrators, multiple fonts were really a necessary device for the book. The book is allegedly composed of notes written by Johnny about a manuscript written by Zampanò about a film by will Navidson, all then edited by the mysterious figure of "the editor." As Brick puts it, "set[ting] various voices in different typefaces… creates the appearance of an historical document, one that has been produced through time by many hands." (Brick)

For a view of what some of Danielewski's more radical pages actually look like (as well as some explanation of a few more examples of how textual manipulation can take on meaning) see the scanned page images from *House of Leaves* included as Figures 1 and 2 at the end of this document.[4]

By now, I have hopefully given the reader a good introduction to the idea of the *value* of meaningful typography – an awareness not just of what it *is*, but what it can *do*. In theory, *House of Leaves* brought this same awareness to the literary world at large ten years ago. The novel's immense success[5] brought new possibilities for typography into

---

[4] I think it is important that I note that these images were specifically chosen for their extremity, to help readers see or imagine what intensive typographical manipulation can look like. I did NOT choose the images as representatives of any sort of ideal of meaningful typography – I absolutely do *not* advocate that all novels should embrace that level of typographical manipulation. There reaches a point where typography becomes so elaborate and complex that it creates what Espen J. Aarseth calls "ergodic literature" – literature which requires significant effort on the part of the reader simply to follow (Wikipedia, Ergodic literature). There is nothing wrong with literature that requires thought to be appreciated, but when literature requires the reader to focus all their thinking on basic interpretation of the text, on the *act* of reading, it actually hinders their ability to apprehend meaning in the text. Danielewski walked a very fine line in his book – it hovers on the edge of being ergodic, but somehow Danielewski manages to keep the text from crossing that line. To go to the extremes that Danielewski did without devolving into senselessness requires no small amount of talent, and is something I believe most authors would do best not to attempt.

[5] In addition to critical acclaim, including awards from both the New York Times and the HWA, the book garnered immense popular acclaim. It instantly became an official bestseller, and entered into its fourth printing within a month of its release (Wittmershaus).

the limelight. But while the novel generated a fair bit of talk, it did not generate any successors. When I read *House of Leaves*, vast wells of typographic potential came into view – a veritable goldmine shone in my eyes. Thus I found it somewhat bewildering that no one else was stepping through the doors that *House of Leaves* flung so wonderfully open. One would have expected at the *very* least the general clutch of imitators that follow in the wake of any highly popular novel, hoping to make a quick buck off the relation, but even such opportunists shied away from the opportunities of meaningful typography. I have come believe that this is because meaningful typography simply does not fit into current conceptions of what literature *is*. Currently such things as colored text are considered "juvenile." Nonstandard page layouts are deemed "distracting" at best. But this was not always the case.

Writing, throughout most of its existence, was colorful and visual. From writing's earliest incarnations as hieroglyphics in 3000BC ("Bring a Mayan or an Egyptian back to life, show him a printed black and white page, and he would have said that you are crazy to stare at such monotony for hours on end." (Kirschenbaum 83)[6]), to the scrolls of the Greeks at the turn of the century ("The Roman historian Pliny, a critic of ornate colors, noted that the scientific and literary texts of his day were 'most attractively' written in the colors of plants." (Kirschenbaum 20)) all the way up through medieval manuscripts of the 14th and 15th centuries (see Figures 3 and 4 at the end of this document), writing was acknowledged and embraced as visual. (Danielewski himself has said that in creating *House of Leaves* he often "looked to medieval manuscripts as models." (Brick) [7]) In part this was due to the fact that books, scrolls, tablets, etc. were, throughout their early history, rare and often sacred. And in ancient times, that which was sacred was seen as deserving ornamentation. To decorate the pages of a bible was to honor it and to give it reverence. This reflects a very different mindset from that of today. As Kirschenbaum puts it:

---

[6] Quote not reproduced in original color or font. This applies also to all subsequent quotes from Kirschenbaum, and is notable because Kirschenbaum considers these textual aspects to contribute to the reception and meaning of her writing.

[7] Danielewski, of course, puts his own spin on traditions. The common monastic writing process that inked words in red was called "rubrication", and was supposed to heighten the authority of the document. Although there is not time to get into it here, Brick makes a good argument that Danielewski's text involves a sort of "anti-rubrication" that dismantles authority.

"When we see ornament, we see the superfluous. When the [ancients] saw ornament, they saw essence." (Kirschenbaum 317)

But in the mid-1400's, everything changed. Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, and made possible the mass-production of books. The invention of the printing press has generally been heralded as an unambiguously positive step forward for mankind, even as "the one technology that has made all the others possible, by recording and storing information" (Howard ix-x). Seldom mentioned is the fact that the process of bringing books to the masses imposed new limitations on bookmaking. Some of these limitations were mechanical and came from the press itself. Other limitations were essentially financial in nature, and were a result of the transition to mass-production. The market for luxury books remained small. For mass-produced books to be profitable, they had to be affordable. And much of the graphic nature of the book simply fell by the wayside in the name of affordability. Kirschenbaum's lament of this transition may be somewhat maudlin, but perhaps for that very reason it stands as a powerful summary of the overlooked losses of this transition: "Explicit liber beati: 'And so ends the beautiful book.' It is the perfect metaphor for what happened to books after Gutenberg… Knowledge declared himself king and unseated Beauty from her throne. Colors, illustrations, all forms of beauty were lost, subservient to a new institution, the black and white word." (Kirschenbaum 375). Words which previously had been made manifest by the hands of servants of God were now imprinted by a machine – their functionality overrode their piety.

To blame Gutenberg for everything, however, would be an oversimplification. Interest in the visual nature of text did not disappear in one fell swoop. Although I have not heard this theory expressed elsewhere, it does not seem unreasonable to me that Gutenberg's inventions could actually have created *increased* interest in the appearance of letterforms, at least among certain select circles. Letters had long been seen as a gift from God (Sacks 46). They were divine objects, and men had a duty to shape them well; to shape them such that their appearance was worthy, and also so that it expressed their

divinity. The advent of the printing press and cast type brought with it a means to create more uniformity between letters, all of which could be made geometrically precise.

Philosopher-artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Geofroy Tory created manuals describing in painstaking mathematical detail how best to form each letter. Exact proportions were seen as the key to creating letters that would "reflect a universal harmony and balance" (Sacks 46), but achieving such proportions was no simple task. To write letters out by hand without measuring would result in imperfect proportions, but to complete the numerous and laborious steps calculated measurements specified for creating ideal letters would take so much time as to essentially halt all progress of writing. With cast type, the measurements only had to be done once to create a letterpunch from which a mould could be made in which one could cast numerous identical copies of the letter, which in turn could be combined to create numerous identical documents. In other words, Gutenberg (and subsequent refinements of his inventions) brought about the possibility of creating texts whose letters achieved levels devotion (expressed aesthetically) previously undreamed of.

Tory and Dürer were both writing in the 1520's, so at the very least one can say that interest in the appearance of text was still alive and well almost a century after Gutenberg.

Indeed, interest in visually enriched books was still alive to some degree as recently as 1929. "When William Faulkner finished *As I Lay Dying* in 1929, he wanted each of the characters to be represented by a different color ink. But the publisher balked, declaring it too expensive." (Gomez 125)

But the obstacles that Faulkner faced in 1929 have been hurdled. There is nothing standing in the way of color writing (or other forms of meaningful typography) today except the negative cultural perception of it.[8] Color, in the world of 2010, is viewed as

[8] This assertion is based both on various quotes from Kirschenbaum, including her statement that "designer writing is [now] both economical and practical" (Kirschenbaum 307), and also her observation that many non-literature books (cook books in particular) have already made the shift from b&w to full color. I do not mean to imply here that color printing involves no expense beyond b&w, but rather that the added expense is no longer insurmountable, and furthermore, in many cases the use of color has proven to

juvenile – it has no place in *serious* adult literature. When Kirschenbaum shared her ideas about using colored writing in her high school English classroom with other professors she met with such comments as "'A preference for black and white reading indicates a higher cognitive function' [and] 'Well, those inner city kids need whatever help they can get and if colorful designs help them, fine. But the brightest kids, the crème de la crème, will always prefer black and white.'" (Kirschenbaum 305)

But where did these perceptions come from? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to that question. Rather, many, many factors can be cited whose influences, great and small, all came together to shape our views of what literature *should* be like, thusly shaping what we *make* literature be like.

First let us consider one of the simpler shifts: the disappearance of illustration from adult novels. (While illustration fits only awkwardly into the category of meaningful typography, its disappearance is a prime example of the repression of *visuality* of books in general.) In the medieval manuscript, illustration was used to give sacred texts the elegance they deserved and also "to make the text easier to read and more comprehensible by illustrating the subject matter" (Bettley 14). In today's world, illustrations decrease rather than increase the value of a book meant for adults. This is (at least in part) because images themselves have become so radically devalued. In the medieval period, illustration was done painstakingly by hand. It was a task only entrusted to specialists. It was, quite simply, a luxury. Woodcut, developed in Europe around 1400 (Wikipedia, Woodcut) allowed for the production of multiple copies of an image, but the medium did not allow for nearly the amount of detail as hand-drawn images and had the further drawback that the woodcut degraded with each print made. Hand-drawing remained the method for truly quality images. That is, until lithography came on the scene. Lithography, invented in 1798 (Howard xiv), ushered in the era of the mass-produced image. From that point onwards, printing technology only got better, and images became ever more prevalent, eventually becoming the inescapable and

---

increase consumer interest to such a degree that it actually increases the profitability of a book beyond that which it could attain in b&w.

ubiquitous things we know them as today. Things that are rare are valuable, things that are common are not – they are "cheap" in every sense of the word. And to make matters worse, printed images and illustration became most closely associated with advertisement, where their intent was seen as crass, manipulative, unrefined, and far from subtle. The once noble image became inextricably tied with the ignoble practices of hucksterism.

But even despite all these negative connotations, illustration may well have remained a standard feature of literature were it not for the invention of television. When illustration was no longer valued on a par with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, it lost its purpose of bestowing reverence upon the page, but a new purpose was brought to the forefront: that of entertainment. Human beings seem to have a certain need, or at least predilection, for visual stimulation. There are plenty of books on the market today which are panned by critics as being meaningless drivel, and yet there is still a market for them. So too, I believe, would there be a thriving market for illustrated books, labeled as crass or no, if not for the fact that consumers now have access to an even more enticing form of visual stimulation in the form of Television.

Attempting to understand the reasons behind current conceptions of (or should I say denial of) meaningful typography is not nearly so simple a case as that of illustration. Such conceptions are the product of a multitude of influences. I can't hope to pin down every issue at play here, but I can shed light on some of the factors I consider most potent.

The first such factor is rooted in the way we define literature as being the product of a (single) author coupled with the fact that, from the time of Gutenberg (and thus ever since the novel truly emerged as a major form of writing) authors did not have control over the layout of their text. In 2004, Keith Smith wrote that "For the first time since printing began, the writer can have control over the look of the published page." (Smith viii) Smith goes on to state that "When the writer composes the text but relinquishes the structure of the format to the publisher, the resulting book is relegated to a warehouse for words." (Smith xviii) If the words of a book are produced by its author but the appearance of the words is not, then it truly makes *sense* to ignore typography when evaluating literature. The alternative would be to consider a novel a piece of

collaborative art in which the editor is considered as co-artist and his contributions to the form of the book are considered to be carefully designed to create meaning. It's not hard to see why no one takes this view. Editors are concerned with putting words on paper, doing so efficiently, and with a minimum of errors. For an editor to try to add his own content to the book through formatting would be like a gallery owner adding extra paint to a client's canvas – it's simply not their place. The typesetter's aim is thus to suppress any typographical meaning. As a part of my research, I sought out the writings of many famous typographers. I thought that surely people who worked with the appearance of writing would appreciate the value of that appearance and what it can do. But again and again I was met with the same attitude: that typography should absolutely *avoid* "doing" anything - typography should be as *unobtrusive* as possible. Jan Tschichold, author of *Die neue Typographie*, and considered by some to be the most influential typographer of the 20th century, said such things as: "the arrogant pushiness of [artistic typographic] style… can only ever hinder the free and uninfluenced functioning of the content. The book as an object is nothing more than the carrier of a certain content and typography has the sole task of communicating that content in the *clearest possible* form." (Tschichold 313) and "Every individual modification of the pure, basic form [of the letter] contradicts the nature of typography as a servant, which in itself should not be noticed at all (especially not in books!)" (Tschichold 313). W. A. Dwiggins, another extremely influential typographer, credited with first coining the term "graphic design", had the following to say: "By a remarkable paradox the one person who should not be called upon to perceive the fine qualities of the shapes of letters is the person who reads them. …If any single character presents itself to his attention as a single character, the process of reading is disturbed." (Heller v, quoting W. A. Dwiggins)

Typographers have long been aware that fonts have the ability to convey certain moods or atmospheres. As I was browsing through the typography sections of the library stacks I came across numerous books which instructed designers on how to do precisely that. *100 Moods in Lettering*, published in 1947 by Stephen McMahon, is a prime example. It exhibits 100 different fonts that have been classified as being dainty, crude,

glamorous, friendly, masculine, feminine, youthful, reverential, and so on and so forth. This is just one example out of countless books that link typography to mood. But these books aren't aimed at writers producing books, they're aimed at graphic designers producing, for the most part, advertisements. In advertising, the creation of a certain mood is key; in literature the creation of mood has come to be something that is to be avoided.

As already noted, typography creates mostly non-codified types of meaning – it is not particularly suited to expressing information, but rather it lends itself best to the creation of feeling, mood, or tone. And *feeling*, according to Karin Littau, is precisely what must be *suppressed* under the current paradigm of literature. This is a relatively recent development in how we define literature (or rather *good* literature): "For the ancients… poetry's capacity for generating affect was a testament to the greatness of the poet." (Littau 2) And even as recently as "in the eighteenth century… the greatness of literature was judged by its capacity to *move* its audience." (Littau 9) But in the nineteenth century things changed, in no small part due to the influence of Immanuel Kant, and to respond to a novel emotionally came to be seen as indicative of a passive reading style. Passive reading may sound innocuous enough, but philosophers do not see it that way at all – they condemn passive reading as dangerous, harmful, even "poisonous" (Littau 77). The consequences of passive reading include "the negation of the autonomy of the subject and, with it, … rational agency." (Littau 5) To put it more simply, to read passively is to "forsake self and reason" (Littau 8). These ideas are based on a duality that has been set up between reaction, which diminishes the self, and reflection, which elevates the self. Emotions are seen as reactions. One does not, normally, *decide* to have an emotional response. Thus experiencing emotion indicates a loss of control of the self, which is further seen as a partial loss of one's very selfhood. Lost as well is "rational agency". This is not merely because emotions are seen as irrational, but because "reactions" of any kind as seen as being *incompatible* with rationality. The theory goes that true contemplation can only arise in "tranquility" (Littau 8). Deep thinking requires the focus of the entirety of one's mind – it cannot occur if part

of the mind is occupied with emotion. "Sensation" impedes "sense-making" (Littau 82). And thus "passional consumption [has become] synonymous with mindless consumption" (Littau 81). And "sensation" is associated not only with emotions but also with simply sensory overload: Janet Murray praises books over television because "their meager sensory input makes their illusion easier to resist" (Littau 80, quote from Janet Murray). Thus meaningful typography is doubly damned: as a producer of emotions and as visual stimulation.

Since the time of Kant, a succession of different theories of literary criticism have taken over the place of dominance, but despite their many differences, the ideal of sense-making over sensation has remained a central tenet. Roland Barthes, whose seminal essay "The Death of the Author" (1967) still exerts considerable influence over literary theory today, wrote that "the goal of literary work… is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of text" (Littau 104, quote from Barthes). Barthes is still talking about the repugnance of the "passive" reading state (which he equates with "consumption"), but he constructs an opposite mode of reading: "active reading" which he also calls "production". Barthes' paradigm of reading allows readers to be empowered in a way not present in any previous theory. By reading "actively," readers are seen as actually producing the meaning of the text – a function previously reserved for either the author or text itself. But when he speaks of "the goal of literary work" he is setting ideals and definitions for what constitutes good literature, and they are much the same as before in that thought and feeling are opposed, with the former deemed "good" and the latter "bad". Specifically, Barthes' version of these values is expressed by stating that good literature should not act upon the reader (and thus should not incite emotions), it should allow the reader to act upon *it* (the act of interpretation (thought) being the producer of meaning).

Littau discusses the shift in values from lauding affective power to shunning it with relation to literature, but in actuality the shift was much larger: values of art in all its many forms underwent this same shift. Not all prose aspires to be *high* art, but the novel has come to be considered an "artform," and thus our thoughts on or definitions of art

impact our thoughts on or definitions of books. The most influential theory of art of the past century was, in my opinion, Modernism, and even though it has largely been discredited in recent years, its defining ideas have not been forgotten. One of these ideas was that of "medium specificity," which purported that each different type of art (painting, sculpture, etc.) had an "essence" that could be defined in terms of the essential qualities of the medium, and that each art should have as its goal the expression of this essence. So for instance, painting was defined by a flat, 2-dimensional, rectangular canvas and colored paint. Things like 3-dimensionality did not belong in painting, so to create illusions of perspective would only impair the work from being able to express its essence. Modernism, as interpreted by its staunchest advocates, was very extreme. Even such things as shapes were seen as detracting from a painting's essence, because they created a foreground and a background, which was a representation of space. Use of metallic paint was also a no-no, because it imitated the appearance of metal, which was not a material associated with painting. I've been illustrating the stringency of Modernism by talking about painting, but Modernism's influence extended in varying degrees to all of the arts – to theater, to music, and, I would have to assume, to literature. If the goal of literature is to best express its essence as words on page, emphasis on visuality would be out of the question.

Finally, our definitions of literature are influenced by our definitions of writing as a whole. In her book, *The Visible Word*, Johanna Drucker speaks about academia's reluctance (and at times outright refusal) to acknowledge the visuality of writing. Writing was long viewed by linguists as *purely* a representation of speech. The written word had no identity that was not tied to the spoken word. The consequence of this, as Drucker explains, is that "since writing was [viewed as] the means for providing access to spoken language, any of the aspects of its function which might suggest autonomy (writing as a visual medium distinct from spoken language) were necessarily eliminated – not as undesirable, but as *inconceivable*" (Drucker 15) Furthermore, Drucker claims that linguists actively suppressed the study of the visual properties of writing in order to legitimate linguistics as a "real" science. "Linguistics did not merely privilege the

phonemic, phonetic, acoustic, and articulatory aspects of language," she says, "it did everything possible to ensure that the visual support of language was unacknowledged, unnamed, in short, invisible." (Drucker 16) Linguistics concerned itself solely with the measurable waveforms of sound that constituted the spoken word (whose study could be classified as "hard" science), and ignored the less quantifiable form of language that is writing (the study of which would, at best, be denigrated as "soft" science). Thus visual properties of writing were excluded from its official identity - its definition.

A consequence of these linguistic views is that words are seen as intrinsically immaterial. "The notion of linguistic transparency implies [that]… nothing of linguistic value is contributed by the form of the written inscription, which serves merely to offer up the "words" in as pure and unmediated a form as possible." (Drucker 14) In other words, all that matters is *content*.

But while we may view "content" as the sole source of *literature's* being, and thus the sole determiner of its value, we do *not* see content as the sole source of a *book's* value or being. If we did, then much of the opposition that exists against ebooks would simply dissolve.

And thus we have finally reached the other side of the coin: the ebook. For just as technology could usher in an era of visually enriched printed books, so too could it usher in an era in which we abandon printed books altogether.

The assertion that "content… is king" (Gomez 191) is the rallying cry of the ebook industry. In order to get consumers to accept the elimination of the book's material form, the ebook industry must convince them that doing so does not constitute a loss – that the material form is inessential and superfluous. Propaganda to that effect has been used heavily by ebook supporter, ranging from such basic statements as "words [are] special, …books are just paper" (Gomez 193) to more obviously derogatory proclamations such as "Books are just husks" (Gomez 167) all the way to the truly incendiary: "[in the future], books will be irrelevant except to those 'addicted to the look and feel of tree flakes encased in dead cow'" (Duguid 66, interior quote from William Mitchell).

Quotes of this nature abounded especially in the 1990's. They were used by some to try to convince people to jump on the ebook bandwagon, but more frequently they were used as arguments to explain why the rapid takeover of the book market by ebooks was a foregone conclusion. In the 90's, the ebook revolution seemed to many to be a sure thing. "Early projections had print books becoming obsolescent by 2001, or losing half their market to ebooks by then." (Crawford) When 2001 arrived, ebooks had made hardly a dent in the book market, but people were still convinced that the revolution was right around the corner. "In 2001, Accenture projected 28 million dedicated ebook readers in the U.S. by 2005 and that these readers would be spending $2.3 billion per year on text sales for those devices. Forrester projected… $3.23 billion in digital textbook sales. RCA, making ebook appliances at the time, dismissed Forrester's projections as 'ridiculously low.'" (Crawford) When 2005 actually rolled around, worldwide ebook sales had not even netted $12 million, according to Crawford – less than 0.4 % of the "ridiculously low" estimates and only about one one-thousandth of a percent of total book sales worldwide. While other sources disagree about the exact amount of revenue from ebooks, citing slightly higher figures than Crawford, no one denies that ebooks failed yet again to even approach predicted sales levels. So why didn't the predictions pan out? And why are people *still* making similar predictions today?

Mike Elgan explains these predictions by saying "So many predictions about the future have failed because futurists tend to overemphasize the possible over the desirable. They give too much weight to technology and not enough to human nature." (Elgan) He goes on to elaborate on how this tendency has manifested itself over and over, citing examples from the past: "Once upon a time, 1950s-era futurists predicted that by the 21st Century (as in right now), food would be made from sawdust, cars would be nuclear-powered, and everything in your house would be waterproof -- you'd clean up by hosing down. They believed, and they were right, that technology would make all these things possible. But few stopped to think: Do people really want to eat sawdust?" (Elgan)

Many book lovers attribute society's seeming rejection of ebooks to an emotional attachment that they assume is felt throughout the culture at large to books as we know

them – to physical books, to the act of turning their pages, to their smell, to their individual cover images or bindings, and simply to their physical presence as knowledge or sentiment incarnate – knowledge that can be held in one's hand. It is implied that this attachment is deeper than a mere preference for the familiar. Beyond familiarity lies historicity. As Gerald Lange puts it: "the book [is] humankind's most cherished recorder of its own identity, its achievements, and its dreams." (Lange 383) Books are symbolic objects as much as they are physical objects – and their symbolism, built on their history, is tied to their historical form as paper bound between covers. A book, to almost all people, exudes a sense of learning, whereas an electronic reading device does not. Physical books have been accumulating such symbolism for over 1500 years. They have become deeply embedded in the fabric of human culture. Consider what the reaction would be if the United States government decided that they wanted to change the national flag. People would be in an uproar. The flag has accumulated meaning through history, meaning that no new flag – a flag *without* history - could possibly have. But what does the new generation care about history? And what about all of those people calling books "husks" and "tree flakes" as quoted above?

Obviously these explanations only paint a part of the picture[9]: presented with an ebook reading device, we may feel a lack of love, but even more we feel a sense of incongruence. Such a thing cannot be accepted not primarily because of a lack of emotional attachment, but rather because it cannot be reconciled with our definition of what a book *is*. Our views (perhaps unconscious) of what a book *must* be like in order to *be* a book are channeled into feelings about what a book *ought* to be.

And according to our definitions, a book must be made of paper pages bound between a front and back cover. It could even be argued that these physical characteristics are more important to our idea of books than is the presence of words.

[9] And in fact all my ensuing explanations still only paint a partial picture. Many people have many different ideas about why ebooks have not succeeded, and it would not be possible to list them all here. One obstacle to the acceptance of ebooks that *does* bear at least mentioning however is the issue of DRM, otherwise known as Digital Rights Management. DRM is a complex topic that I will not get into here, but in essence it involves limitations encoded into ebooks that makes it impossible for the texts to be printed, shared or transferred from one device to another.

Dictionary definitions bear this out. Pulling a dictionary at random off the shelf at the library (The American Dictionary of the English Language) I found a book to be defined as "a collection of sheets of paper bound together, either printed, written on, or blank."

The importance of pages over words in the dominant definition of books is illustrated vividly by James Bettley when he speaks of *Book 91, String Book* by Keith A. Smith (images of which are included as Figure 5 at the end of this document). "Words are not necessary to make a book," says Bettley, "In *Book 91, String Book,* the artist does not use words or ink. He attaches a number of pieces of string to a page which he then weaves through punched holes on the subsequent pages" (Bettley 170). This may seem to us to be a very strange book, but a strange book is still a book – the lack of words does not prevent us from referring to Keith's production as a "book". Pages without words still make a book, but words without pages have only the most tenuous of claims to the title. Many people would feel very reluctant to refer to a novel published on the internet as being a "book". This is because our view is that of book-as-object. *Book 91, String Book* reinforces this concept, but to the thoughtful "reader" it may also hint at an alternative view. In describing the process of reading Smith's book, Bettley notes that "As one opens the book and turns a page the friction of the string against the punched hole creates a sound." (Bettley 170) The author himself says of the book that "The sound, cast light and shadows and their focus and movement, are not part of the physical book. They are physical, but they only come into existence during the act of experiencing the book, that is, turning the page." (Bettley 170, quoting Keith A. Smith) One realizes that one's own actions – their act of reading – is somehow a *part* of the book, and perhaps it dawns on one that a book can be an experience.

This concept of book-as-experience instead of book-as-object is, according to Gomez, critical to the future of the ebook. Gomez believes that a shift from the one view to the other will be necessary for ebooks to succeed. Currently, consumers are not willing to pay as much for an ebook as they would for a print book – not even close. The view is nicely summed up in a comment made online that "$1 or $2 dollars is enough [for an ebook] considering there is no cost in duplicating the work. $1 is actually more than

the author receives for a paper novel. $1 for the author and $1 for the publisher should be more than adequate." (Gomez 170-171, quoting an anonymous online post) Ebooks have no material costs, no manufacturing costs, no shipping costs, no storage costs – is it any wonder than consumers feel they're being cheated when publishers price their ebooks as high, or nearly as high, as print versions? "To combat this perception," Gomez writes, "publishers need to emphasize the fact that a book is an experience like going to the movies. When you go to the movies, all you leave with is your ticket stub. What you're paying for is the experience of living with that movie for two hours. The ten or fifteen dollars of the ticket price goes mostly to the studio producing the film. Books must be similarly produced" (Gomez 171). Shifting the mindset of untold millions of people from book-as-object to book-as-experience seems like a huge and improbable leap, but Gomez has complete faith in the power of marketing to effect this change.

And that brings us to the very important point that our definitions, these things that have been holding these revolutions back, *can change*. I have spent this essay investigating how our definitions set the bounds on what we will accept as "literature" or as a "book", and thus act as blockades to revolutions of the book's form. In doing so I have implicitly treated such conceptual blocks as solid and unchanging, even while giving explanations of how such conceptions have been drastically changed from what they were in medieval times. Does this reduce my arguments to mere runaround? If our definitions can change, does the question of why books haven't changed simply become "Why haven't our definitions of books changed?" Is an explanation of cultural definitions really an explanation at all? I think it is. Most of our preconceived, cultural definitions are deeply ingrained; change to them is usually resisted. Thus they do constitute significant blocks to the revolution(s) of the book. But I never said that such revolutions would necessarily be blocked forever. Changes can and do occur. And the fact that our society is changing more rapidly than ever before paves the way for changes in ideas to occur faster as well.

So do I personally think either of these revolutions will come to pass? In the case of ebooks, yes. First off, people already *do* read many things on screens. Mail is one

arena in which digital can be said to have already won out over paper. The newspaper industry too has been greatly impacted by customers switching over from reading printed newspapers to reading their news online. And the book industry, despite the failure of ebooks, has also been profoundly impacted by the internet and digital writing. Gomez asks the germane question of "[Seeing as how] the internet… has already had profound effects on the way people buy, write, produce and talk about books… why not the books themselves?" (Gomez 201-202) Why not? For one, because the ebook generation hasn't yet emerged. But it will. Digital reading is only increasing. The generations of the future will grow up fully accustomed to reading off a screen, and I don't think they will feel the same sort of emotional bond to printed books that many people feel today. When the ebook generation arrives, the stage will be set. But issues of pricing, of viewing book-as-experience, etc. will still need to be hurdled as well. So I think it will take time - probably more time than the companies pushing ebooks and associated devices would hope - but those companies will continue to push and eventually ebooks will have their day. How *much* of the market they will claim is something I have less certainty about. Will they completely replace paper books, or is it possible that digital and analog could find a way to coexist?

In many ways, the story of the ebook reminds me of the story of paperbacks. Although books with paper covers had been issued here and there "since at least the sixteenth century" (Bettley 74), it was not until the 1940's that paperbacks really caught on (Drew 38), and eventually overtook hardcovers as the dominant form of the book. This proves that the failure of a new format to catch on right away is not a guaranteed predictor of its ultimate level of success. This also proves that multiple forms of books can coexist because the hardback is still an everyday item. While I realize that the analogy with regards to coexistence is somewhat tenuous – paperbacks and hardcovers are infinitely more similar to one another than either is to an ebook, so their situation does not really reflect on the question of the coexistence of truly divergent forms – it still gives me hope. For I must admit that I am one of those sentimentalists who wilts at the prospect of a paperless future. The colorful spines adorning my shelves are, for me, a

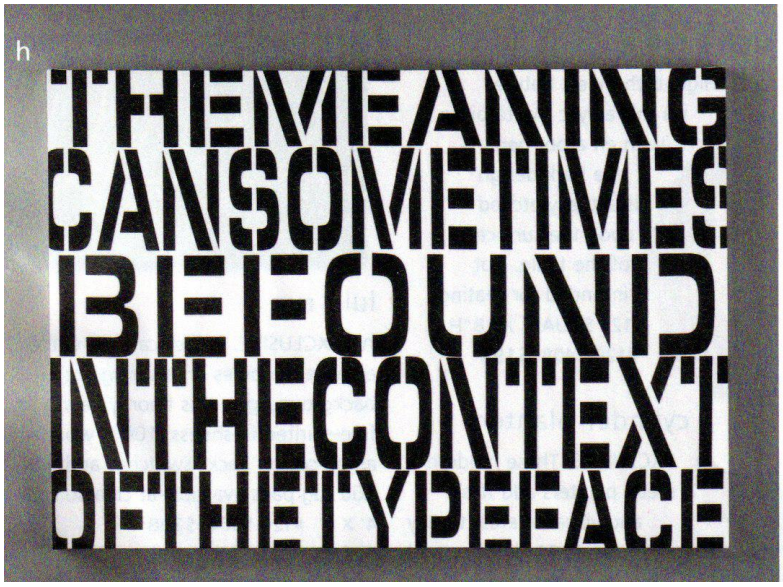
form of self-expression. When visitors come to my home and peruse the titles they see my values made manifest, and I am revealed to them more effectively, perhaps, than in any other way.

But what about meaningful typography and the revolution of the visually meaningful book? Do I think that that revolution will come to pass? It may, but I feel no certainty about it. Whole legions of people are actively pushing the ebook revolution – money has been invested in its success, and people are determined to find a way to make good on those investments. There is no comparable group of lobbyists trying to force meaningful typography on the world. Meaningful typography is not an industry, it is merely a form of writing, and since it's something new its usage is seen more as a financial risk than a source of increasing profit. But are not artists interested in exploring new modes of expression and creating ever better art? Perhaps – but those artists will produce the "artist's books" I mentioned in footnote #1. Mainstream books are inescapably products of capitalism.

There is also the fact to consider that if the ebook revolution really does take off, if it gets to the point where their physical counterparts fade to memories, then printed books may never even get the chance at revolution. The technology to create visually enriched printed books would have no outlet. Thus it might seem that the rise of ebooks will preclude the visual advancement of books before it even has a chance to start. In actuality, however, I think the opposite may be true. Certainly the ascendancy of the ebook would impede the rise of visually meaningful *printed* books – but why cannot ebooks be made to be visually meaningful? Instead of the ebook revolution *preventing* the visually meaningful book revolution, it may *cause* it, and, just possibly, it may even *depend* on it. If the printed book does give way to the ebook, it seems likely that the nature of the book would shift as well. All sorts of possibilities are opened up by the ebook format – possibilities for visuality far beyond that which is possible in the print book, such as the inclusion of video clips. And while ebooks are still new and still forming their identity experimentation will abound. In this way the ebook revolution may *cause* books to become more visual, but how could it *depend* on such a change? Almost all of the articles and books I read on

the topic of ebooks agreed on one thing: that ebooks cannot succeed by marketing themselves as imitations of a paper book – after all, who wants an imitation? Ebooks cannot succeed unless they offer something *more* than the print books already on the market, and perhaps what they shall offer is a more visual experience. And thus the two revolutions would become one.

"Will the revolution(s) actually take this form? Who's to say. But one thing is certain: the grounds for revolutions are afoot. The signs are all around us. Just last week on the train, the woman sitting across the aisle from me was reading an ebook off of a kindle device. And as I idly flipped through a junkmail catalog I'd received in the mail the other day, I was stopped short by following piece of wall art offered for sale:



typeface wall art

h Context is everything when it comes to this graphic image. Printed on canvas and mounted on a pine frame—just like an original painting, except it's readily accessible—and affordable. If words, or black-and-white contrast are your thing, then this is the art find for you.
46"W X 32"H X 1.375"D.
#120-5195 **$288**

image taken from the Spring 2010 Chiasso catalog

Our conceptions of what literature is and what books are have acted as a dam, holding back change. It has been a solid dam, but all dams weaken over time, and it seems that perhaps the little Dutch boy is about to pull out his finger.

Fig. 1 – Two pages from *House of Leaves* showing some of the effects discussed (text oriented along separate axes, text trapped with a box, text which cannot be followed linearly, but requires the reader to jump between a choice of multiple segregated sections) as well other effects not previously mentioned, such as the spatial isolation of specific words, text that is written out backwards, and text that has been negated by being struck through.

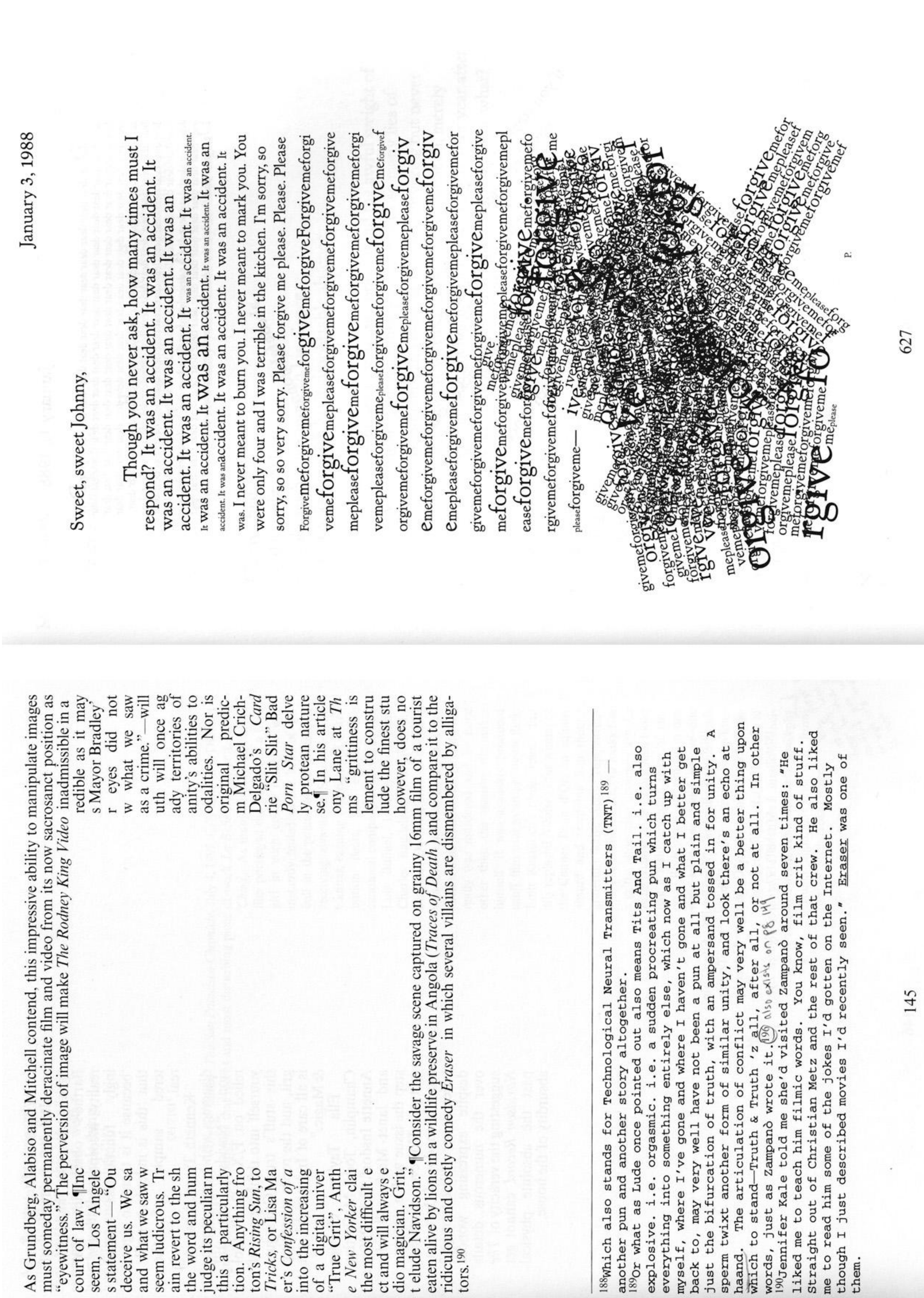


Fig. 2 – More examples of Danielewski's typographical manipulations not previously discussed. The main block of text on page 145 is disrupted and fragmented by a large square gap placed in its center. Words are broken into parts and a sense of something missing looms large. Page 627 exhibits a progressively more obsessive repetition of words, which multiply beyond the page's ability to contain them, piling up and overlapping each other in a state of visual chaos reflecting the madness of the obsession.

Fig. 3 – Page from a manuscript produced in Rome in 1465 showing colored text and illustration.

The image was taken from page 18 of Bettley.

Fig. 4 – Page from a devotional, produced in France around 1480, showing colored text and illustration.

The image was taken from page 22 of Bettley.

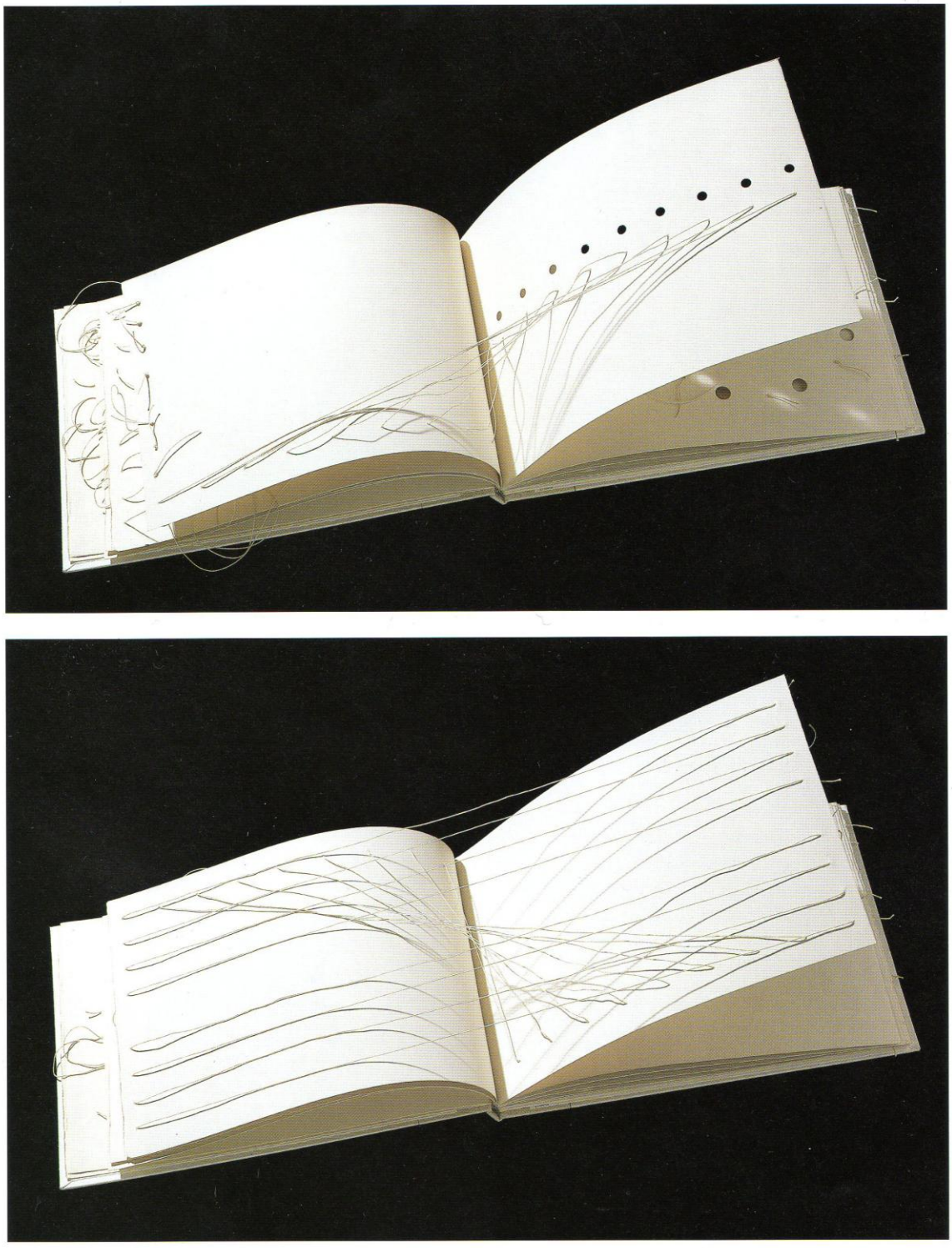


Fig. 5 – Two views of *Book 91, String Book* by Keith A. Smith

The images were taken from page 171 of Bettley.

Bibliography

Bettley, James. *The Art of the Book: From Medieval Manuscript to Graphic Novel*. London: V&A Publications, 2001.

Brick, Martin. "Blueprint(s): Rubric for a Deconstructed Age in House of Leaves," *Philament* 2 (2004).

Crawford, Walt. "Why Aren't Ebooks More Successful?," *EContent* (Oct. 17, 2006).

Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. 2nd Edition. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.

Duguid, Paul. "Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book." In *The Future of the Book*. Ed. Geoffrey Nunberg. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996. 63-101.

Drew, Ned, and Sternberger, Paul. *By Its Cover; modern American book cover design*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.

Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible Word*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Dürer, Albrecht. *On the Just Shaping of Letters* (1535). Reprint, New York: Dover, 1965. "On the Just Shaping of Letters," although published separately in 1535, first appeared as a chapter in Albrecht Dürer, *Four Books on Measurement*, originally published in 1525.

Foer, Jonathan. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Gomez, Jeff. *Print is Dead; Books in Our Digital Age*. New York: Macmillan, 2008.

Hall, Steven. *The Raw Shark Texts*. New York: Canongate, 2007.

Heller, Steven. Forward to *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*. New York: Allworth Press, 2001.

Howard, Nicole. *The Book: the life story of a technology*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005.

Kirschenbaum, Valerie. *Goodbye Gutenberg: Hello to a New Generation of Readers and Writers*. New York: Global Renaissance Society, LLC, 2005.

Lange, Gerald. "The key to the survival of the book." In *book art object*, Ed. David Jury. Berkeley, CA: The Codex Foundation, 2008.

Littau, Karin. *Theories of Reading; books, bodies, and bibliomania*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

Lyons, Daniel. *The American Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Peter Fenelon Collier & Son, 1900.

McMahon, Stephen. *100 Moods in Lettering*. Oak Park, IL: Offset Press, 1947.

Plascencia, Salvador. *The People of Paper*. San Fransisco: McSweeney's Books, 2005.

Sacks, David. *Letter Perfect: the marvelous history of our alphabet from A to Z*. 2003. New York: Broadway Books, 2004.

Tory, Geofroy. *Champ Fleury* (1529). Reprint, New York: Dover, 1967. The Dover edition is a reprint of the 1927 version published by the Grolier Club.

Tschichold, Jan. "Book 'art'?" (1927) Translated by Robin Kinross. reprinted as Appendix B in Christopher Burke, Active Literature; Jan Tschichold and New Typography. London: Hyphen Press, 2007: 312-313.

Wikipedia, *Ergodic literature*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ergodic_literature (as of Mar. 03, 2010).

Wikipedia, *Woodcut*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodcut (as of Mar. 03, 2010).

Wittmershaus, Eric. "Profile: Mark Z. Danielewski," *Flak Magazine* (May 5, 2000)