

The Book, Unfolded (Part 2)

ROBIN MITCHELL CRANFIELD continues her examination of books material and digital by considering our relationships with books as objects.

IN 1913, ITALIAN FUTURIST poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, wrote an essay, “Immaginazione senza fili” (Words without Strings), in which he called for freedom from the restraints of Gutenberg. Futurists longed to be free of many things: the weight of their own imperial history, liberal democracy, feminism (they did not long to be free of the patriarchal traditions they had inherited from ancient Greece). For Marinetti, a writer, his desire to “spit on the altar of Art” extended to the form of the book. In his essay, he writes, “As we discover new analogies between distant and apparently contrary things, we will endow them with an ever more intimate value. . . . To represent the life of a blade of grass, I say, “Tomorrow I’ll be greener.” This is a rare point of connection between Marinetti and me. I believe in the grass’s re-emergence each spring, too.

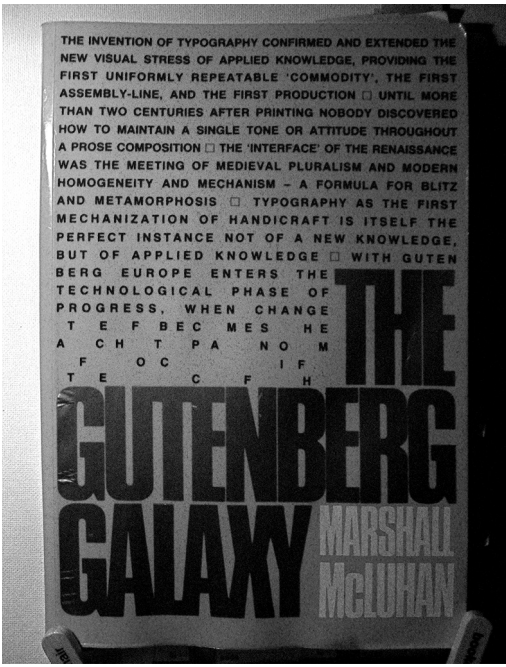
Twentieth-century Futurists used type expressively—scattering and twisting the letters—concurrently with both cultural and technological shifts. They embraced the emerging graphic language of advertising into their art and were influenced by Jan Tschichold’s vision in the teens and 20s for a “New Typography,” which would break with tradition, being un-booklike: sans serif, asymmetrical and graphic. The emerging technology of photo-engraved printing plates made that break from Gutenberg materially possible, allowing Futurist (and Dadaist) poets to create reproducible non-linear (essentially scattered) layouts.¹

Tschichold himself, however, developed in a different direction. In exile from Nazi Germany, rather than doubling down on the principles he’d established in his book *The New Typography*, he tried to abandon dogmatic thinking in general, asking instead whether a given book layout was simply appropriate and well-crafted. It’s notable that he moved in this direction as an art director for Penguin. The content we work to shape

as designers also shapes us, and it may have been the effect of communicating literary and poetic text that increased his flexibility, while the Modernists he split from often tended to work more on catalogues and annual reports.²

In 1958, Tschichold wrote in his essay *Graphic Arts and Book Design*, “If [the typography of books] takes on elements of advertising graphics, it abuses the sanctity of the written word by coercing it to serve the vanity of a graphic artist incapable of discharging his duty as a mere lieutenant.” Tschichold positions himself as serving both the content and the needs of the reader. He wasn’t especially humble about his work (and it’s worth noting that he relies upon the authority of “good taste”), but the position he describes is both humble and flexible. Kenya Hara describes the role of the designer similarly, saying in an interview, “Design is very important, but the designer is not so important. Design is not for designers. . . . Design is a very important concept [for achieving] world peace. . . . so I should be a person who carries the concept of design, who realizes the concept of design.” As I was compiling this essay, I noticed that Hara makes himself a member of a body working toward peace, whereas Tschichold defines himself as part of an army.

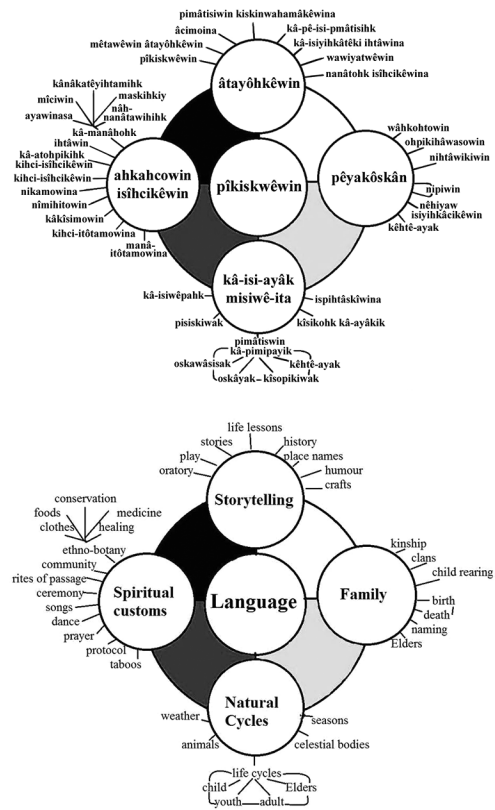
In thinking and writing about the structure of the book, Marshall McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) is an important text for our community, one which Hara references in his own collection of thoughts on the future of print in *Designing Design* (2007). Less well-known than McLuhan is fellow Canadian Harold Innis, one of McLuhan’s influential teachers. In his book *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis traces the implications of changes in communication technologies over time, beginning with a quote from Hegel: “Minerva’s owl begins its flight only in the gathering dusk.” With this supernatural bird’s eye view, Innis traces and links different communication systems as they develop, overlap, and sometimes



Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.
(MihalOrela/Wikipedia)

disintegrate historically, along with the social and political systems they help engender and challenge, spanning from Mesopotamia through to the time of his writing in the 1950s.

Innis notes that although there are differences between cultures with inaccessible writing systems (requiring extensive training to execute, such as the cuneiform), and those with simple and flexible systems of writing, and those with an oral tradition, he allows these systems to overlap and mingle. Simple writing systems do not eradicate the hierarchies that inaccessible writing systems create. Instead, processes of change and adaptation facilitate what Innis calls “monopolies of knowledge,” an example of which is the spread of the vernacular following the invention of the printing press. Oral traditions, Innis writes, are “easy to assume as being the most flexible, but [are] often bound by custom.” In both China and Greece, for example, Innis notes how strong oral traditions develop cultural institutions in conjunction with writing, even bolstering each other. Closer to home, Innis points out the key role the oral tradition continues to play in our own classrooms.



The elements of Cree culture, with language
at the centre. (Solomon Ratt)

Innis and Hara both help reveal and unpack the common tendency to classify different media in opposition to one another, a tendency that also often hierarchically frames the book in terms of its supposed moral character—the page is good, the screen is bad—rather than its basic utility. In *The Wordy Shipmates* (2008), a history of the pilgrims of Plymouth Rock, Sarah Vowell notes, “Puritan lives were overwhelmingly, fanatically, literary. Their single-minded obsession with one book—the Bible—made words the centre of their lives. Not land, not money, not power, not fun.” Does this community’s obsession with the written word make them, as a culture, unusually devoted to language? I wouldn’t reach the same conclusion. When Solomon Ratt, a Woods Cree speaker and professor in the department of Indigenous Languages, Arts and Cultures at the First Nations University of Canada, drew a diagram of the elements of Cree culture, for example, he also placed language—the word



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The Diamond Sūtra. (Wikipedia)

he used is *pikiskwëwin*—at the centre.³ Vowell’s larger story—about the Puritans’ devotion to, and use of, the Bible as an anchor for their community and the mistrust of written authority that grew within many evangelical communities that followed them—is culturally and historically specific, yet the core love and need for language is revealingly common and human.

The codex form has been around much longer than the Gutenberg press, as have printed manuscripts. The oldest surviving printed manuscript, the Diamond Sūtra, is a ninth-century Chinese scroll made of seven sheets of paper pasted together. The scroll was also a standard format in Rome until, as Innis notes, “Parchment in the codex replaced papyrus in the roll.” One group that emerged during the long history of the Roman Empire who made extensive use of this new material and format combination was Christians. The four gospels of the New Testament, for example, require four rolls or a single codex. Furthermore, as Innis notes, the “codex with durability of parchment and ease of consultation emphasized size and authority in the book.”

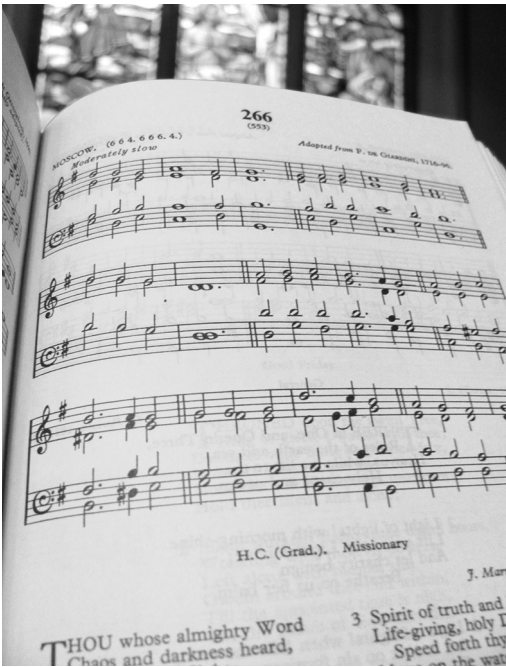
More prosaically, the codex is a good design solution. The rectangle, although not a very natural form, is both orderly and an efficient storage format. Scanning words on a page feels natural, and it’s a convenient way for people to take in information according to their own speed and rhythm. But the apparent authority of the printed book and what it means for the book to lose that authority—the cultural implications of that—are central to what we’re talking about when we worry about the future of the book. Ironically,

this is actually the same worry spawned by the invention of the printing press: we went through this before when the scriptoria emptied out.

BOOKS: LOVE ’EM OR LEAVE ’EM

This brings me to my last point about the book. Or rather, I pushed it to the back. What about our living, personal relationships with books now? In the 17th century, booksellers would sell separate signatures that buyers could select, order and then choose a binding for, even providing their own cloth for the cover. Conversely, such a book might not have a cover; that, too, was a choice. Once the book was assembled, the owner eventually had the pleasure of slicing the pages open before turning them for the first time.⁴ This kind of bespoke, customized experience is very different from ordering an edition on demand today, with its inexpensive web offset printed pages, consistent (marketing-approved) cover, and pre-trimmed pages. To be honest, I enjoy the convenience of the pre-made book. I’m a greedy reader, and I don’t find the idea of having to put my everyday reading material together by piecemeal as a regular task too appealing. I would rather have the time to read than assemble. Maybe I should acknowledge here that I assemble books for other readers as my own profession. And it may be that I am a greedy reader partly because I grew up in a time and place where books are so available that I simply cannot keep up with their abundance. This is an era of ever-peaking consumption, and we have a lot of books.⁵ Maybe sometimes too many?

The Japanese “organizing consultant” Marie Kondo has sold over 8 million copies of a book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2014), that has a whole chapter devoted to “decluttering [getting rid of excess] books.” She is best known for the concept of only keeping items in your home that “spark joy.” Put simply, her approach is very similar to William Morris’s well-known axiom: “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.” But instead of beauty as a measure, it’s the positive emotion that an object “sparks” in the owner that she follows. That said, she doesn’t think you should throw away your wrench, however unemotional an experience it might be for you



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"Each hymnal was solid, a member of a whole."
(Peter Mitham photo)

to hold it. Instead, she suggests that you cultivate gratitude for its functional design and how that design serves you. If much of design practice today relates to inspiring people to purchase goods, Kondo looks at how we live with items after we purchase them. One woman who consulted with Kondo had so many books that she stacked them in piles covering her staircase, forming a thick layer. How did this woman *feel* about her books when she not only couldn't part with them, but also walked on them every day, risking her neck?

I know from researching Kondo that instead of inspiring decluttering, she might just as easily inspire an avid book lover to spit on the ground and grab a musket and stand in front of their jam-packed bookcase. Before you find your buckshot, however, please know that neither Kondo nor I have set out to convince you to get rid of your books. But looking at her methodology is worthy, even if you don't actually, physically, do it. Her method is this: Take all of your books off of your shelves. Gently clap the dust off each one. Hold the book but don't open it. Keep it if it makes you *feel* good and put it back on the shelf. It's the *not checking inside* part of the process that's

most interesting to me; it recognizes that books are often much more than the content of the text within them. The book with a permanent place in Kondo's shelf is *Alice in Wonderland*, a book she describes as being in her "personal Hall of Fame," meaning a book that she wishes to live with, as opposed to read and pass on.

Kondo's own book exists in the context of our age. She would not have needed to declutter Montaigne's library. He had only five shelves, custom built to fit the south-most tower of the Château de Montaigne in the Dordogne *département* of France—forming a bridge between the linear efficiency of the codex and the rounded medieval architecture that remained standing in the new world, even as its role as "the handwriting of the human race"⁶ had begun to give way to the printed page.

As I was writing this, I thought about my own personal relationship with books. I gave away most of mine, and I don't regret it. My husband kept most of his, and he doesn't regret that, either. It's also working out for me: I've started reading his. One of my favourite book memories is of the hymnals at one of my schools. The books were communal and belonged to the school's chapel. These were small, thick books with wordless, grass-green linen covers and soft white pages. The text inside was plain black, no images. They were a satisfying weight on your lap during a long sermon. They were fun to snap shut with one hand (this was also not actually allowed). They probably smelled good.

The chapel was small and every surface was polished dark wood and we dressed in grey, so the books were the brightest item in the space. My own hands grew over the years I held these books; our respective scale changed. The books did not contain music for the hymns—we learned melodies from the community—but they contained the memory of that music. This is an example of the codex as a haptic experience, of touching more than one sense. This speaks to Hara's idea of balance—balancing the senses, not prioritizing them—as well as to Kondo's point that the book, as an object, is one we relate to emotionally as well as intellectually. What was the purpose of these books? Partly, they were to allow us to follow songs together as a community, which is

how we started each day. We only ever sang about 25 of the hymns out of the few hundred in the book—the songs our community preferred, and knew, and preferred through our knowing them. But the thickness of the books and the durable binding felt much different than a collection of photocopies. Each hymnal was solid, a member of a whole, and maybe that was its main job.

I enjoy reading about other people’s individual relationships with their books. I found Montaigne through Nick Hornby’s diary of reading in a collection of his essays called *Housekeeping vs. the Dirt* (2006). Hornby recommended the Montaigne biography I quoted, *How to Live*, by Sarah Bakewell. And through Bakewell I read about the essays that Montaigne, in trying to accurately observe and convey his own life, wrote and rewrote and rewrote, perhaps remaining unfinished, but edited and re-edited, then published, then becoming banned, then republished, and now studied, translated and annotated, passing through different hands well into a future that Montaigne never would have imagined, and yet each time emerging as himself—a constant, “a mirror in which other people recognize their own humanity,”⁷ a star viewed in parallax, one out of millions. Isn’t it great?

- 1 P. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, 3rd edn. New York, Wiley & Sons, 1998, p. 235.
- 2 J. Hochuli and R. Kinross, *Designing Books: Practice & Theory*, London, Hyphen Press, 2003, p. 24.
- 3 A. Ogg, “Solomon Ratt: Elements of Cree Culture,” *Cree Literacy Network*, [web blog], 26 January 2017, <http://creeliteracy.org/2017/01/26/solomon-ratt-elements-of-cree-culture/>.
- 4 M. Fusco, ‘The Incunabulum and the Plastic Bag’ in *Give Up Art*, Los Angeles / Vancouver, New Documents, 2017, p. 122.
- 5 IKEA head of sustainability Steve Howard (the main bookshelf maker, no less) remarked in 2016 that we have reached peak home furnishings, and that, “we’ve hit peak red meat, peak sugar, peak stuff.” See <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jan/18/weve-hit-peak-home-furnishings-says-ikea-boss-consumerism>.

6 H. A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984, p. 24.

7 S. Bakewell, *How To Live*, 13th edn., New York, Other Press, 2010, p. 3.

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