



## 2016 Issue No. 27 — Thing Theory, Material Culture, and Object-Oriented Ontology

### **The Forms and Uses of Contemporary Books: Studying the Book as a Mass Produced Commodity and an Intimate Object**

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The modern and contemporary institutions of literature have been unquestionably strongly tied to one material object or thing, the printed book. Even if our times are dominated by visual and digital culture and even if technological developments are supposed to bring changes to the field, the printed book has not disappeared: the dominant mode of literature is still tied to the book. Furthermore, it is not only literature which has for centuries rested on the materiality of the book, but through literacy and education, books have been closely tied to such modern ideals as freedom of expression and rational argumentation in the public sphere. According to different commentators, the book is an object, which along with print technology has significantly contributed to the emergence or the stabilisation of several modern institutions, like nation (Anderson; Eisenstein), constitutions (Johns), science (Eisenstein) and the public sphere (Habermas). Jason Epstein goes as far as to say that printing “gave birth to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the scientific and industrial revolutions, and the societies that resulted: in other words, our present world with all its wonders and woes” (xi).

Despite this intertwined history of literature and books as material objects, and the importance of the printed book as a historical actor, the methods of literary studies or sociology of literature have often ignored material aspects of contemporary literature, or object-oriented methodologies, until now. The mainstream methods of literary criticism have highlighted textual aspects, or alternatively, when materiality has been discussed, it has usually been approached as a background or base structure out of which the art of literature grows. Now, the situation has, however, started to change. Drawing inspiration both from (historical) book studies and the so-called material turn in social sciences, literary scholars have shown new interest in the materiality of contemporary books.

The present article discusses this turn and introduces a framework for studying contemporary literature in its full materiality. Taking an object-oriented approach to the book requires understanding its unfixed nature as a material object. The book is both one of the first *mass-produced* commodities and a *singular* thing that is intimately used and reused by its readers or users. In order to take this unfixed nature of the book into account, this article suggests that books should be studied both from the perspective of their *forms* and of their *uses*. Drawing from literary poststructuralists and material culture studies, it approaches the production and the reception of books as practices that leave investigable traces in the material objects. Books change between editions, and even when they are released and circulated in tens of thousands of “identical” copies, individual readers regularly leave their marks on books, thus, using for their own ends the material affordances the books offer.

#### **Matter in Literature**

Questions concerning matter and materiality have recently interested scholars across the humanities and social sciences, both in what has been called material culture studies and the post-human or new materialist paradigms. The various theorists working within these paradigms have enabled matter to appear as an ontologically and epistemologically unavoidable topic of research. As a consequence, matter now seems to be everywhere.

These emerging theories range from the ontological considerations of post-humanism and new materialism (see, for e.g., Braidotti; Coole and Frost; J. Bennett; Haraway) to more empirically oriented approaches (see, for e.g., Appadurai; Kopytoff; Hicks and Beaudry; Law and Hassard; Callon et. al.). The common aim of the different theories has been to emphasise how apparently inanimate things act on people, and are acted upon by people (Woodward 3) and how things have the capacity not only to impede the will of humans but also to act as forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own (Bennett, J. viii). The interest in materiality has been so wide that some have even referred to a material turn (Hicks), and along with more theoretical and ontological considerations, several handbooks of material culture studies have been released (see Hicks and Beaudry; Buchli; Tilley; Woodward). The current special issue of *Transformations* is, thus, only one example of the trend.

Despite their often different approaches to the ontological questions, these various studies share an interest in objects, things, and materialities in everyday situations. Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen writes that in contrast to ontological, historical or ethical materialism, in the new approaches, “attention is paid not only to the background explanations, but also to the foreground: action and experience with materialities. Matter is not behind pure human interaction. Instead, materiality is regarded as *taking part* in the interaction. Human togetherness implies being together *with things*” (281). Accordingly, material objects can signify; they can incorporate, facilitate, assist and carry meanings.

Slowly, such insights have found their way to the research on art and culture, and a growing number of visual-art and music scholars have approached art as materially supported processes (e.g., Hennion *Baroque, Those Things*, De Nora; de la Fuente). In the field of literary studies, matter and materiality has traditionally been on the agenda of the so-called book studies or textual scholarship, as some book historians have worked on the various physical editions, modifications and routes of historical texts (see, e.g., Myers et al.), but recently also research on contemporary books has started to incorporate material aspects. In particular, certain niche genres, such as artist books, zines, and electronic literature, have been studied in terms of their materiality (see, e.g., Hayles; Thoburn; Drucker; Mays and Thoburn), but also the materiality of contemporary popular books has started to interest scholars (Matthews and Moody; Moylan and Stiles; Mays and Thoburn). For example, the authors of *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* (1996), have attempted to “situate the material text within those webs of production, dissemination, and consumption that constitute and determine meaning in any given place and time” (Moylan and Stiles 3). In their introduction, the editors Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles write: “[W]hen we read books, we really read *books* – that is, we read the physicality or materiality of the book as well as and in relation to the text itself” (2). Paul Duguid has made a similar argument when suggesting that books are not “dead things” carrying preformed information but are, themselves, crucial agents and means of production (79). Equally, for example Ailsa Craig has noted that cultural studies would do well to pay more attention to the physicality of objects, like books, which are often seen as conduits of meaning rather than as constitutive of meaning (49). Finally, N. Katherine Hayles has noted that focusing “on materiality allows us to see the dynamic interactivity through which a literary work mobilizes its physical embodiment in conjunction with its verbal signifiers to construct meanings in ways that implicitly construct the user/reader as well” (131). Texts are always embodied in some materialities, and literature is best understood as the interplay between form, content and medium, as Hayles (31) suggests.

However, in order to understand this interplay, we need to define more thoroughly what the materiality of the book is – and how it can be seen, approached and understood.

## Book – A Fixed Object or a Hybrid Entity?

What the thingness or the materiality of the book means is, of course, not a straightforward question. The word “book” can refer both to a materially tangible parallelepiped and a textual mass or a textual content that can have different material embodiments. A book can be both a metaphysical immaterial idea and a material copy of a manuscript. “The same” book can be, and often is, released in different formats, in hardcovers and paperbacks, across decades, and in different translations. Even when going through such mutations and transformations between formats, the book is called a book; an audio book is a book, so is the e-book, although neither of them has anything to do with the printed book, made of ink and paper.

The first barrier for doing research on the material culture of books is, thus, the common, and often technology oriented perception that books (or printed texts) are above all fixed and stable. For example, Elizabeth Eisenstein – in her influential book on the emergence of print culture, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* – has named fixity and stability as the essences of printing and hence of printed products. Similarly, Walter Ong has suggested that print “encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion” (132).

This is the commonplace starting point for studies on printed texts: books are taken as reified and fixed objects, and printed texts are seen as fixed entities. Even those sociologists who work with such concepts as assemblages and hybrids, and have an interest in changes and mutations, have emphasized the fixed nature of printed material, rather than its ability or cultural tendency to transform. For example, one of the key theorists of actor-network theory and assemblages, John Law has suggested that the most important element coming out of the laboratory is texts, because they are “durable and extremely transportable,” “reproducible and thus highly diffusible,” and because a text “may act in many places simultaneously” (*Laboratories* 49). He goes as far as to say: “[p]eople may lie to us. Machines do not talk. But texts, once inscribed and diffused, cannot be changed” (Law, *Laboratories* 50).

To a certain extent all this is true. Printed texts are transportable, if compared, for example, to buildings; they are easily reproducible when compared to diamonds; and they are durable when set side by side with scripture written in the sand. However, this perspective easily obscures the ability and tendency of printed materials to transform. Books and printed texts react to their environments; they are interpreted, appropriated, modified and used in different ways. In a word: they change.

One can, thus, say that the aforementioned perspective leaves aside those aspects of printed material that cannot be taken back to technology, or at least not to *printing* technology. To challenge some of these presumptions, we should note how the making of a book does not end when the book comes from the print. The luxury of fixity and closure can be enjoyed only for a short moment. Just as any other forms of stability, also the fixity of books needs to be maintained, as Adrian Johns has suggested. Fixity or stability are not essential virtues of printed material. A book, so to speak, reaches outside and beyond its covers in the form of a web of texts, discussions, human reactions, uses and practices, which makes it prone to change.

This is what literary poststructuralists have suggested while concentrating on the endless production of texts. The instability or relationality of texts and books inspired, for example, Roland Barthes who wrote that the “text is the very theatre of a production where the producer and reader of the text meet ---. Even when written (fixed), it does not stop working, maintaining a process of production” (36–37). For him, text is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 146). Another poststructuralist, Michel Foucault, on the other hand, uses the word network to describe the unfixed and relational nature of books. He points out that the “frontiers of a book are never clear-cut”, because “it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network

... [a] network of references" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 25–6). In doing so, Foucault abandons the unity and the stability of the book:

The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse. (Foucault, *Archaeology* 26)

How, then, to study this complexity, variability and relativity of books? How to find an empirical form for the old insights of literary poststructuralists? In the following, this article draws inspiration from the materially oriented approaches that highlight the changing biographies of things. One way to encounter the empirical reality of the changing books is Arjun Appadurai's notion of the social life of things, according to which we "have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things" (5). Similarly, according to Bruno Latour, to determine the efficiency of a mechanism we should not look for its *intrinsic* qualities but at all the transformations it undergoes *later* in the hands of others (*Science* 258). In the same register, this article suggests, that to determine the efficiency or the meanings of a book we should look at the transformations it undergoes in the hands of its publishers, sellers, readers and users. As Latour writes, we should "consider both the succession of hands that *transport* a statement and the succession of *transformations* undergone by that statement" (*Technology* 106).

Following from here, what is interesting in a book or a text is not only what it originally states, or what the original edition includes, but rather how it gets re-written, modified, reacted and commented on. How does the original object, the printed text (most likely between the covers), transform, and what sorts of interpretations are made of it? How is used and valorised, and what traces do these uses leave? In the following, the article introduces two perspectives to the material culture of contemporary books. In line with Appadurai's notion that the meanings of things are inscribed in their forms, their uses and their trajectories, the article argues that books can and should be investigated both from the perspective of their *forms* and of their *uses*, in order to better map their biographies as things (Kopytoff).

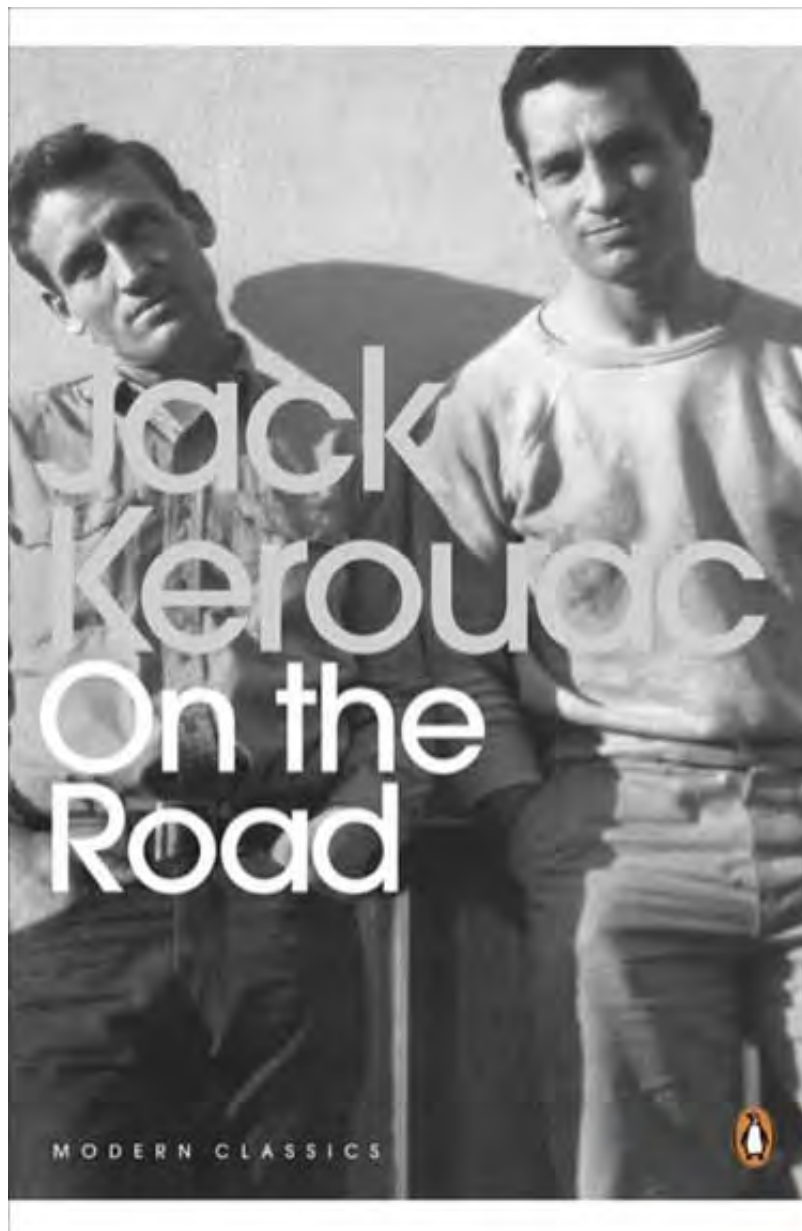
### Forms of Books

The form of a book seldom remains identical with itself or the first edition. Instead, the forms of books change at least in three common ways. First, the literary text may go through changes between editions and translations, which also has an effect on the book's material appearance. Second, the same (or almost the same) textual content is often released in different formats or mediums; a hardcover book, for example, transforms into paperback, audio book and e-book. And third, the paratexts, such as covers and forewords, often change between editions and translations, thus, changing the material affordance of the book. In addition to such conventional changes, many contemporary bestseller books also include different add-ons or extras, such as author interviews, reading group guides, essays and advertisements.

Often such changes take place when the book becomes popular or when it moves geographically and across linguistic borders. Thus, the changes also reflect movement between places, and offer the book as new, in a new place. Moylan and Stiles emphasise the importance of such transformations by suggesting that reprinted texts present fruitful case studies, given that how and why the texts have been repackaged can say much about their cultural and social uses. "Every edition of a text, every printing that adopts a different set of advertisements, every version with a different cover is a different literary object – a different configuration of the forces that shape meaning," they write (Moylan and Stiles 6). Similarly, according to Gérard Genette, such paratexts are always thresholds to certain kinds of interpretations. This question of the threshold is demonstrated below by a small selection of diverse titles from different publishers, years and

countries.

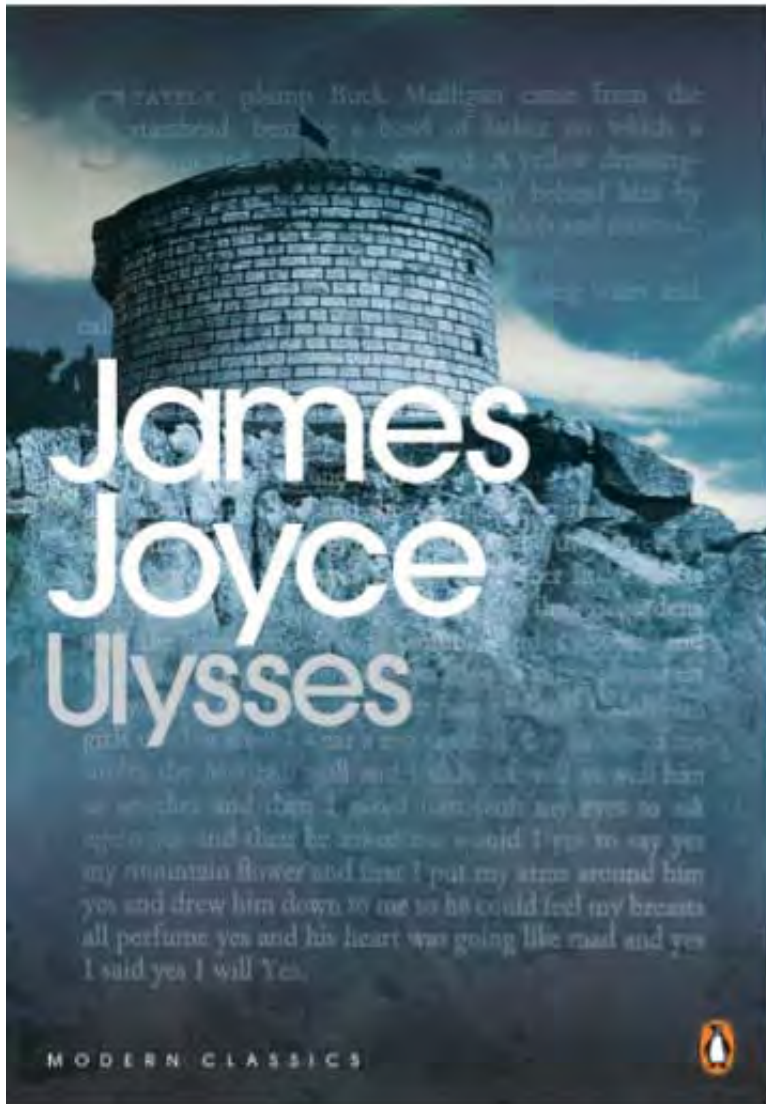
Covers and cover images are particularly strong thresholds, because they are often the first elements of a book that a reader encounters and they have a strong role in book marketing. They are means to position a book (sometimes anew) to its assumed and often segmented target audiences (Phillips). Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, for example, invites and encourages a different kind of reading (and different kind of readers) when the cover portrays a photograph of the author (fig. 1) than when it portrays illustrated, anonymous, vagabonds (fig. 2). James Joyce's *Ulysses* appears different when the front cover includes a statement "Modern Classics" (fig. 3), than when not (fig. 4). Blurbs on the covers elevate a book's cultural value, compared to those editions of the same text that do not include blurbs. Different back cover texts offer "the same" book as different to its readers. Furthermore, the conditions of interpretation or meaning making change or take a drastically new turn, when, for example, a foreword, an author interview or a reading group guide is attached to an edition. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* sets into a new context when the English paperback editions include an "Author's note" or her essay "In the Shadow of Biafra." Similarly, the forces that shape the meanings of Sofi Oksanen's novel *Purge* change radically when the edition includes a reading group guide with a list of recommended readings: Franz Kafka's *Trial*, Khaled Hossein's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. The book could be read very differently, if the list included, for example, Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* or Vladimir Mayakovsky's poems.



**Figure 1.** Cover of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (Penguin Modern Classics edition).  
<<http://www.amazon.co.uk/On-Road-Penguin-Modern-Classics/dp/0141182679>> (Accessed 7.12.2015)

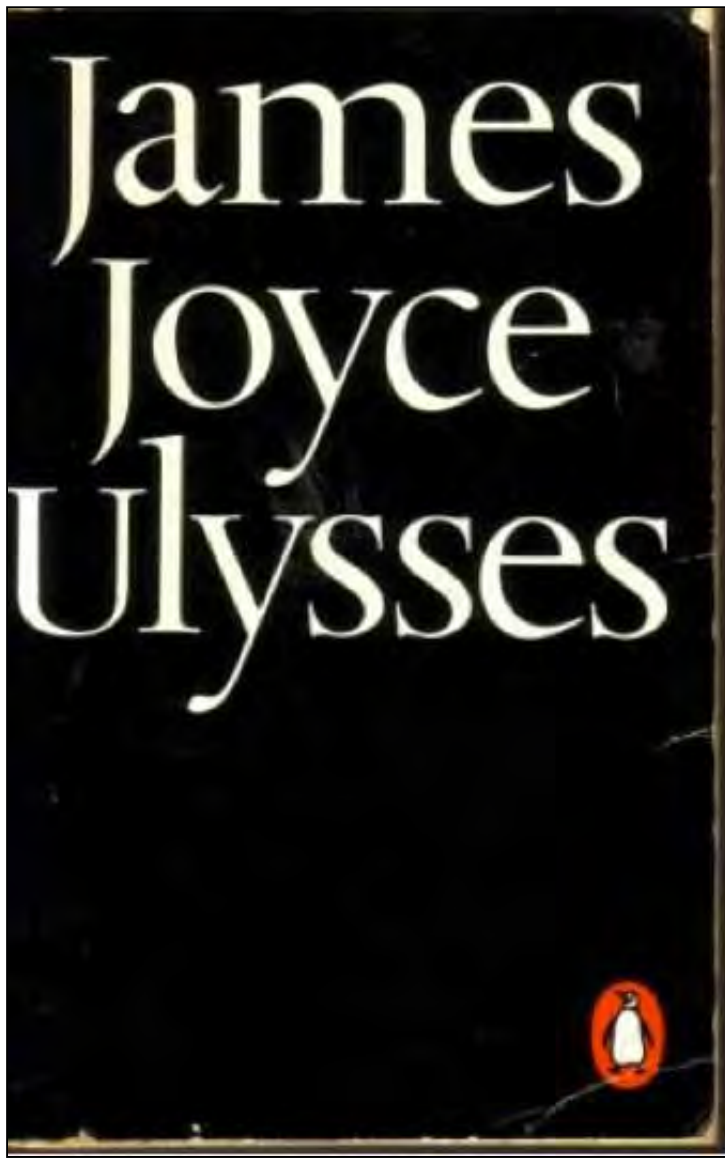


**Figure 2.** Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (Signet Complete and Unabridged edition).  
<<http://flavorwire.com/490727/the-true-story-behind-the-letter-that-inspired-kerouacs-on-the-road>> (Accessed 7.12.2015)



**Figure 3.** James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Penguin Modern Classics edition).

<[http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/theoryandpractice/2014/02/james\\_joyce\\_ulysses\\_1921\\_1.html](http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/theoryandpractice/2014/02/james_joyce_ulysses_1921_1.html)>  
(Accessed 7.12.2015)



**Figure 4.** James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Penguin). <<http://www.book-4u.com/book/details/id/13>> (Accessed 7.12.2015)

Doing research on such different and transforming paratexts or affordances of a book can help us to investigate how the so-called reading formations get organised. A reading formation, as described by Tony Bennett, is a set of discursive determinations that organise the practice of reading, “connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another in constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways” (70). Understanding the role of the material affordances or the changing forms of books, such as different covers and extras, in constituting the reading formations and the objects-to-be-read, is one central function of materially oriented literary criticism. However, this does not mean that the relation between changes in the material embodiment of the book, and the new meanings or interpretations attached to it, would be simple and straightforward: even if the book offers itself to the readers in a new form, and its affordances change, the meanings produced by the reader do not necessarily change in the same direction. A changed paratext does not, in itself, offer an undisputable answer to the problem of interpretation. Readers may still read the text and its paratexts differently from each other. But when the conditions, affordances and the limitations of the book as an object change, in other words, when the actors of interaction change, the relations between the actors change accordingly. This is what actor-network theorists have suggested: actors are always dependent on each other (Callon et al.; Law and Hassard). A small change in one actor, such as a book cover, can transform the entire network of human and non-human actors, in Bennett’s words, the reading formation. Such changes also give valuable information on

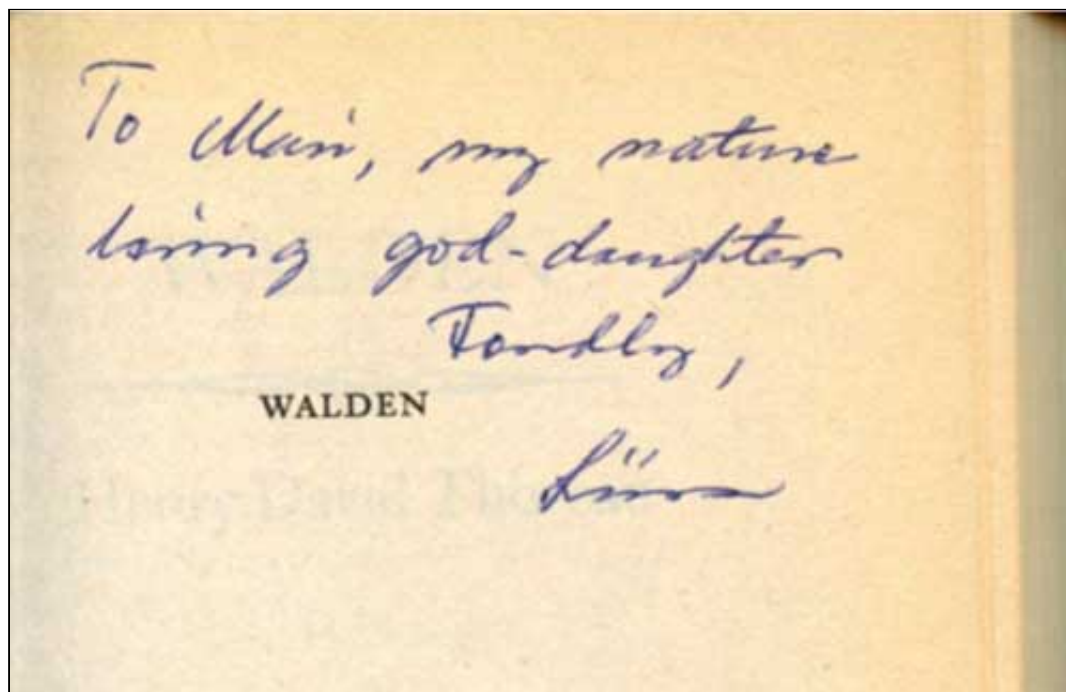


the different interpretations and valuations of the producers, such as publishers, editors, and cover designers, along with the authors. Changing covers reflect underlying assumptions about consumers, as Angus Phillips has noted in “Cover Story: Cover Design in the Marketing of Fiction”. When a book cover transforms or a reading group guide is attached, the transformations reflect changes in the relations at the producing end, for example between the text and the cover designer, or between the author and the publisher. But these changes will also constitute new effects and influence the reception in ways that organise the future readings of the book anew.

## Uses of Books

The perspective of forms focuses mainly on the changes a book goes through in the production process, before it is printed or reprinted. Investigating uses sheds more light on what happens after a book has been printed and released.

In addition to being read, a book can be used, for example, as a status symbol, under a table’s leg or as tinder. Its uses are variable, and the same book, or different books with the same form, can get used in different ways in different places and times. At one point, a specific book can be capital for a bookseller, at another point a gift to a lover. It can be both a culturally valued asset and a commodity to be sold (Miller). Igor Kopytoff and Appadurai have been interested in how things move in and out of the commodity state, and how their social lives and biographies, thus, change. Such movement is also visible in the context of books: books are very much commodities that are produced for the market and can be re-sold and bought in second-hand book stores, but the common habit of dedicating books, or attaching bookplates on them, suggests that the traditional book culture also encourages to remove books from their commodity state, to privately singularise them (Kopytoff 74–77) and to turn them into intimate objects that are supposed to be non-exchangeable. Such singularisation has taken place, for example, when a copy of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* has been dedicated to someone named Mari with the following words: “To Mari, my nature / loving god-daughter. / Fondly, / Liisa” (fig. 5).



**Figure 5.** Dedication in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, found in a second-hand bookstore in Helsinki, Finland. Photographed by Hanna Kuusela.

The fate of this particular *Walden* that was found in a second-hand bookstore, and the large amount of dedicated books in second-hand bookstores, in general, however, suggest that the removal from the commodity state is often only temporary and can be subverted, so that a once

singularised book gets re-commoditised.

Thus, investigating the material culture of books should not only mean research on different editions but also on individual copies that are used and reused. The changing uses of books can be investigated, for example, by doing research on readers' annotations and marginalia. William H. Sherman (2009) has suggested that instead of reading books we should perhaps talk about using books. He writes:

Not all of the uses to which books can be put should be described as 'reading'. I am also trying to avoid that word's associations with particular protocols and etiquettes – including privacy, linearity, and cleanliness. I am endorsing Stoddard's suggestion that textual scholars must also be anthropologists and archaeologists, putting books alongside the other objects that can help us to reconstruct the material, mental, and cultural worlds of our forebears [or for our contemporaries]. (Sherman xiv)

Most scholars working on marginalia and readers' annotations take a historical perspective, and concentrate on early modern or pre-modern annotators, or alternatively, on the annotations of famous historical individuals, such as authors or politicians. More research could and should be done on the practices of annotating in the contemporary context, or by the so-called common readers (Wevers). Doing such research on the (individual) uses of contemporary books can mean, for example, following and collecting different copies of the same title – and, thus, understanding how different readers have approached the same text. For example, Kajsa Dahlberg's artist books *Ett eget rum / Tusen bibliotek. A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* (fig. 6) and *Ein Zimmer für sich / Ein eigenes Zimmer / Ein Zimmer für sich allein / Vierhundertdreißig Bibliotheken* collect such private annotations and offer them for comparison. *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* is a compilation of marginal notes or annotations that appear in the different Swedish library copies of Virginia Woolf's 1929 pamphlet *A Room of One's Own*, whereas *Ein Zimmer für sich* is its German counterpart compiling the marginal notes made by readers in copies, held by the Berlin libraries, of Woolf's *Ein Zimmer für sich allein*, *Ein eigenes Zimmer* and *Ein Zimmer für sich*. Together these artist books show how different passages carry different meanings to different readers in geographically and linguistically distant places.

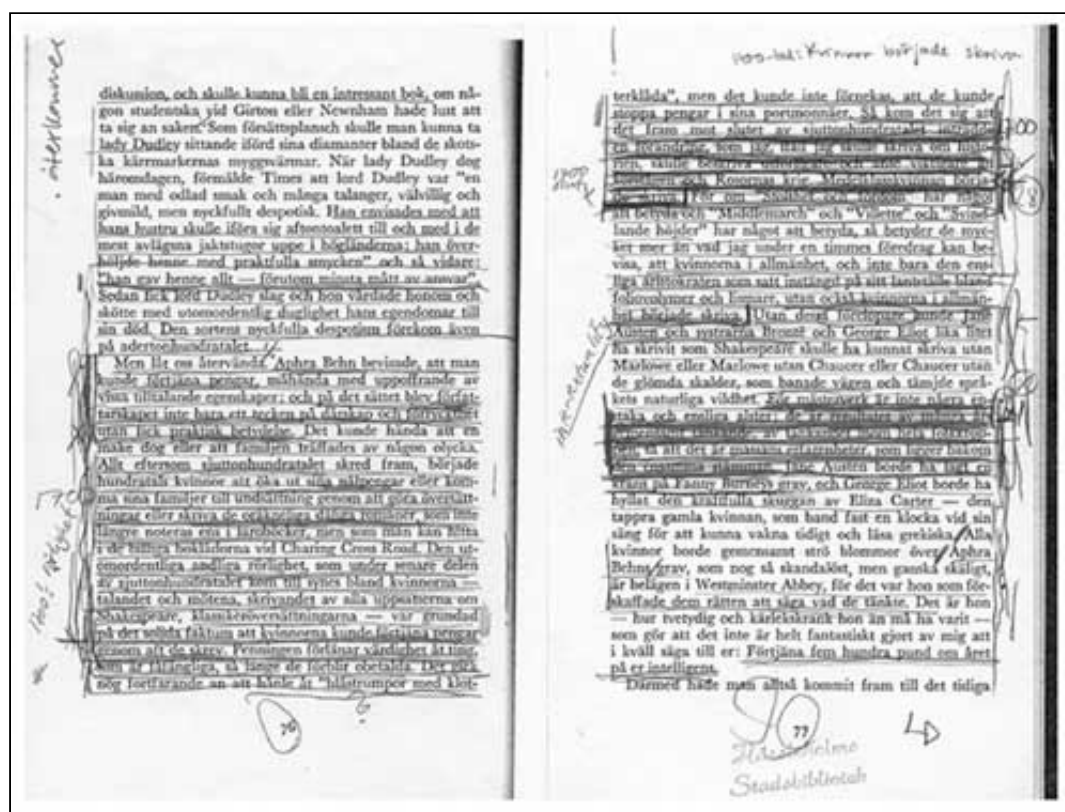
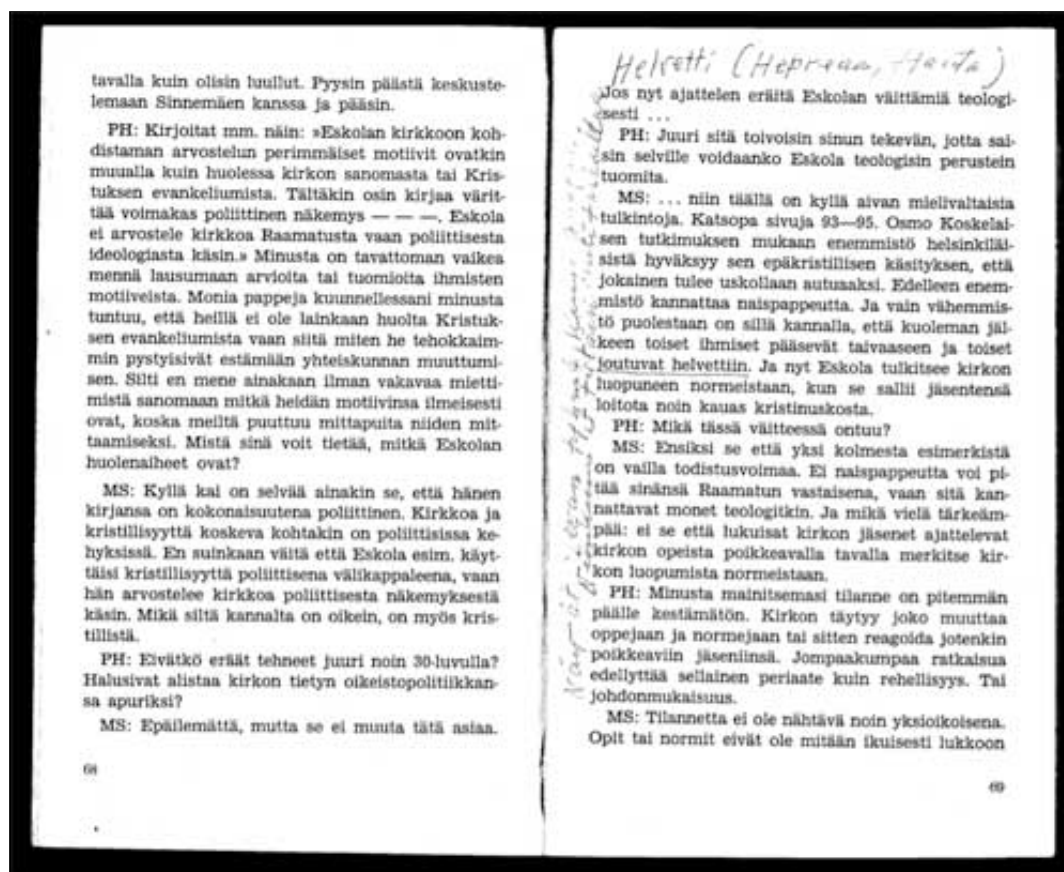


Figure 6. Two pages from Kajsa Dahlberg's artist book *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries*.

<<http://kajsadahlberg.com/work/a-room-of-ones-own--a-thousand-libraries/>> (Accessed 7.12.2015)

In addition to collecting copies of the same title, investigating the uses of books can also mean collecting empirically and classifying the varying, but recurrent, forms of annotations or the uses that books are put into. Are dedications, signatures, underlinings and bookplates equally used in different genres, or what sort of differences can be found in the ways in which people approach books? Do these marks tell us something of the (perhaps changing) motivations or reading practices of readers? Can cultural or linguistic differences be found between annotators, and what kind of norms can be discovered?

As material interventions, such uses that leave marks on the object can also have (literary) political significance. A reader who annotates her books is, namely, an agent who puts into brackets the unquestioned power of the author as the sole owner and master of the discourse. Annotating is, thus, also a means to relativise the power of the author. As H. J. Jackson has noted, in annotations, “[a]uthority itself is at stake. Readers’ notes are unpredictable --- the annotating reader always has the last word”. One example is the Finnish reader, who writes a comment to the author in the margin of a book that was later on sale in a second-hand bookstore: “It looks like you are as dumb as a donkey [boot, in Finnish]. As if you did not know what Hell means (Hebrew, Tomb)” (fig 7).



**Figure 7.** Marginalia from a book (*Kirkon salaliitto*, by Pertti Hemánus) found in a second-hand bookstore in Helsinki, Finland. Photographed by Hanna Kuusela.

According to Jackson, annotation “introduces a second voice where writers and publishers intended only one; the reader talks to the book” (242). It is, thus, a means to control, challenge and undermine the author function of which Foucault (*What is*) has written. The introduction of the second voice can also be interpreted as a form of appropriation that challenges the well-designed power effects that a book tries to constitute. Marcus Boon has discussed the two different

meanings of the term appropriation that are also useful when analysing marginalia. The first meaning refers to appropriation as the act of claiming the right to use, make or own something, or use it as if it were one's own – as is the case with signatures. They are means to claim ownership or the right to use the book. But secondly, the adjective appropriate also denotes that which is proper to a situation, that which is appropriate (Boon 2007). This is the aspect that seems to be at play in many annotations: they make the printed text more *appropriate* to the current situation or context, more than it would perhaps be without the marginalia. Annotations make, for example, Woolf's old pamphlet more proper or approachable to the feminist needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, building perhaps a dialogue between contemporary readers and their ancestors. Annotating as appropriation is a means of the reader to make the text proper to the situation in question. Boon also reminds that appropriation has traditionally been a strategy of the powerless. In the context of this article, it could be called the strategy of the powerless reader. All this may begin to change due to electronic reading: the public highlighting feature in some e-books (Barnett) or different feedback loops that can be attached to texts may increase interaction between readers (and perhaps authors), but the direction of this development remains to be seen and stays outside the scope of this article.

### Understanding the Moving and the Ephemeral

This article has introduced the current state of material culture studies in literature and suggested two different approaches to studying the materiality of literature and books: those of forms and of uses.

Doing research on the forms of books, allows us to better understand the valuations of the publishing and marketing industries and how they perceive the reading audiences and their needs in different places. Working on the uses, on the other hand, helps us to get closer to the valuations of readers. Together these perspectives and the material culture paradigm with its emphasis on the analytical importance of trajectories and transformations, can hopefully take us closer to the messiness of actual book cultures and reading practices. When defending atypical or unorthodox methods, John Law (*After Method*) has highlighted the importance to do research on the private, moving and ephemeral. Also John Urry has noted that we need new methods to recognise "how cultural objects are variably on the move and how they may hold [or change] their meaning as they move and are moved around" (34). The material traces, even stains, that books carry, remind us that just like texts, neither objects are untouchable or unchangeable entities. Books move and change, and investigating these movements and changes may tell us something of the ways in which people value them, just as Appadurai has noted.

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