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Cockroaches and Coffee Table Books; What remains in the Print Culture Apocalypse

In the pantheon of master works of literature, from poetry collections and classic novels to academic articles, the coffee table book is perhaps the most overlooked genre in spite of it being the genre that will outlast them all. As the world witnesses the rapid advances of technology in the 21st century, various facets of our life are becoming digitized including how we communicate and read. As a result of this technology and its changes, the literary world heralds the end of an era of print. Much of this panic is justified, as many do report on how the reliance and abundance of technology that the world is inundated with is changing our ability to focus while reading and replace physical print texts with digital versions. It is this new digital form for texts that, since it is becoming the default for many to write and read with, is seen as the signal of the end of print. However, it can be argued that print culture is not dying but rather evolving, not surviving in spite of digitization but adapting to the digital world, with certain genres of books being the defining example of the new print age to come. What many in the literary world do not recognize though, is that much of what will remain and characterize print culture will be perfectly exemplified in the very same coffee table books they overlook. Therefore, it is important to understand what qualities coffee table books possess that will see them survive this wave of digitization and how these attributes display the new nature of print materials like it. In the wake of digitization and fears surrounding the death of print culture, coffee table books will endure as a result of their unique aesthetic and paratextual qualities.

Furthermore, coffee table books are indicative of not only the kinds of print materials that will survive the exponential growth of digital culture, but also the evolution of print culture rather than its supposed death.

Whether one wants to view the digital age as a threat to print culture's very existence or not, the reality is that technology is dominant and it has changed not only the way the world reads and communicates, but our very thinking. It is only natural, as people use and read digital texts everyday from communication via text and email to receiving news and social updates via various internet platforms. Even more fundamental and important aspects of life are conducted digitally such as financial and health records, and even ordering of basic necessities and transportation. It all is to say that these activities are done almost entirely or solely digitally now, meaning that the way we read is now done mostly in a digital and not a print form. This dominant and routine usage of digital texts affects the way people read and to some in an alarming way, as Frances Robertson in *Print Culture: from steam press to ebook examines the evolution of print culture* explains the "serious anxieties" of numerous academics and scholars. Some of their concerns include how "digital communications appear to threaten those core values of print culture of clear authorship, of the perceived stability and fixity of texts, or that hyperlinks will encourage jumping and browsing so that we will lose interest in following the thread of sustained linear arguments or narratives that are carried in books" (Robertson, 119). In this way, Robertson describes the various implications of digital culture presumably replacing print culture, of note being our ability to focus on every detail of text. Naomi S. Baron in Redefining Reading: The Impact of Digital Communication Media, expands upon this specific effect as "Taken together, all the factors we have been talking about point to an notion of reading that structurally privileges locating information over ciphering and analyzing more-complex

text" (Baron, 200). It is this type of nonreading or skimming of key information that is important to understand for the future of print culture, and also the result of another common trait of digital texts: hypermediation.

Hypermediation is the use of multiple forms of media all at once, with it taking shape in digital texts with the presence of not just typed text, but also photographs, videos, graphs, subheadings, audio options, and numerous advertisements partly or all present in different types of digital text. This hypermediation, with it going hand in hand with the constant presence of digital text, has two almost contradictory effects on reading. On one hand, it causes readers to engage in the kind of information skimming, short attention span, and superficial kind of reading mentioned by Baron to read through all of the media and stimulation for the key information. However, it also causes readers to seek out, appreciate, and most importantly be hyper aware of the visual and presentational elements of a text, both digitally and in print. We become so accustomed to being overstimulated while reading that while our reading style has adapted to this by skimming instead of reading in depth, we now also need our attention to be grasped via the use of different media and visual elements. In his *The Atlantic* article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?", Nicholas Carr describes this particular phenomenon and how "Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages" (Carr). This lack of focus that Carr and many others experience as a result of digitized media and text's hypermediation leads to readers now finding more hypermediated texts more engaging and preferred. A huge component of this hypermediation is the visual element it provides, be it photographs, illustrations, videos, graphs, and even the font, color scheme, layout, and other

physical and especially visual factors that are a part of how the text is presented. Much of these factors seemingly apply almost exclusively to digital texts, however, in the same way that digital texts affect the very act of reading both digital and print texts, digital text with its hypermediation causes readers to desire in much of their print text stimulating and abundant visual and presentational materials. To some, this would appear as if all print material is obsolete if it doesn't completely change to accommodate the digital wave; in actuality though, there are already examples of print texts that demonstrate where print will go and how it has a bright future.

While it is true that readers are now more accustomed to reading digital rather than print materials, it doesn't mean that these print materials and their culture is dead, but rather has evolved and may be more alive than ever. People are simply beginning to not only read print materials in a different way, but the print materials they are reading in print rather than digital form are kept in print for particular reasons. While Robertson details how digital texts have created a dominant digital culture that has changed the way people use and value print texts, he also explains how certain "discredited, outdated and ' merely decorative ' items also have weight" in the sense that they still persist in print and sometimes "are simply the good taste of the ruling caste" (Robertson, 118). This alludes to the changing nature of print culture and how some of the print texts people will continue to read will be done so in their print rather than digital form thanks to their aesthetic or even social qualities. These aesthetic qualities are the same kinds of visual elements and media forms that make up hypermediation which, again, apply to both digital and print texts. Though it is these visual, presentational elements of print text that will characterize its future, as these visual elements will provide print material with its new primary value and purpose as an aesthetic item. Afterall, if digitized texts represent efficiency

and practicality thanks to how technology and its texts are the most utilized and present form of text, then the print texts will now and in the future represent more than before leisure, beauty, sentimentality, and class. Unless no digital form exists, people will only buy certain print materials if they have aesthetic or sentimental value since the print text is the physical text, and thus will be valued for its physical qualities that readers will be aware of when they otherwise wouldn't be with an intangible, digital text. However, this aesthetic valuing of print texts signifies that the most of the texts that will remain in print form and continue into an increasingly digital age will be those texts which are almost purely made for aesthetic purposes, regardless of how they may have once been overlooked and even disdained by academics.

The prime example of such an underdog of print texts that is quite literally made for its aesthetic and furthermore paratextual qualities that will leave it as the emerging leader of print culture is in fact the coffee table book. These kinds of books can be defined by their paratextual qualities, with paratext being term coined by Gerard Genette in *Introduction to Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* where paratexts are broadly explained as the elements that surround, present, contextualize, visualize, and all around present the text to a reader and influence their perception of it; in other words, the prior mentioned aesthetic qualities. Genette explains how "this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone…A privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that - whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (Genette, 2). Examples of paratextual materials in a book include the cover, font, photographs, bindings, other visual elements, among other elements that present a text and are not only found in a coffee table book but are accentuated in a coffee table book. A coffee table book itself can be defined as a

type of ornamental book usually consisting of primarily photographs and illustration with some text accompanying these images, with the subject matter pertaining to practically anything. It is these paratextual elements that have some, such as Jennifer Harris and Hilary Iris Lowe, describe coffee table books as "too big for a bookshelf, full of beautiful pictures, costing a lot" and "the interplay between literature and material culture" (Harris & Lowe, 183). The paratextual elements of a coffee table book, such as its varying size and the number of types of images included in each book, are arguably more carefully selected than other texts because coffee table books are valued for these qualities. More importantly, readers are far more aware of and critical of these paratextual qualities of a coffee table book since in many cases they purchase coffee table books as a means to display these paratextual qualities to others. This is where coffee table books differ from more traditional "literary" books comprised of more text than image, as "in fact, gaudy coffee table books ("gift books" or Author Homes in Coffee Table Books 183 "furniture books" in older idioms) might compare unfavorably with proper literary books. In both cases, the former is imagined to be an explicitly visual, material, and commercial affair, the latter a deeper textual, imaginative and cultural one. One is superficial and tasteless, the other spiritual and tasteful" (Harris & Lowe, 182-183). It is this explicitly visual purpose of coffee table books that not only sets an example for future print materials and the form they will take, but how digitization has also had another profound effect on readers and their habits.

Coffee table books and more visually appealing, ornamental books will endure and define the future of print as a result of their enhanced paratextual qualities that convey information about both the owner and their subject matter, but this is relevant to readers particularly today. The reason being that digitization and the growth, influence, and constant presence of technology and in particular social media has made people more image conscious than ever before, as people

feel the need to share and in a way create an appealing identity to show off. With identity specifically, Ron Darvin writes in his article "Language and Identity in the Digital Age" explains how platforms such as social media and the multimedia aspect of social media has made us hyper aware of our image and the various ways we not only can construct our image, but that we need to construct it and furthermore construct it in a certain way. This construction is achieved "Through digital affordances, (as) learners are able to perform multiple identities, such as blogger, photographer, gamer or designer, and to document and display their lives through various modalities. This presentational culture, where multiple aspects of one's life are shared with different kinds of audiences, alters notions of private and public spaces and affects the way we perceive ourselves" (Darvin, 529). People use various forms of media to craft images of themselves that will appeal to others for one reason or another, but this image consciousness carries over into the physical world and physical materials that can display one's supposed identity. "By assembling semiotic resources, people are able to construct 'identity repertoires' that enable a performative approach to identity" even if it is not genuine (Darvin, 531). This aspect of the digital age can be extended to print culture and a further characterization of how we are affected by the digital age, as our consciousness of identity and representation will mean what is left of print will be books that are aesthetic, visually appealing, and convey a certain impression of ourselves to others. In person, they will convey aspects of our identity and who we are in much the same way one would on social media in a digital space. The digital mindset extends outside of the digital space and affects our perceptions of material, print items such as books so that the only books we wish to possess are those which display how we wish to be perceived by others. It is the same logic behind print material such as coffee table books but now based on a new mindset that applies to other print texts.

Part of this mindset that the new era of print materials will encapsulate will be a specific aspect of identity that is particularly fundamental to coffee table books and their appeal: status. A part of the paratextual qualities of print materials to convey information about their owners and what they read, coffee table books in particular convey via their subject matter their owner's interests and by extension if their interests and lifestyle are of a certain class. Elise Taylor in her Vogue article "The Best Coffee Table Books for any Well-Appointed Home" defines the nature of the coffee table book as literature that is meant to "Lend insight into the interests of the owners" as "While libraries and bookshelves are full of novels half-read or to-be-read-maybe-someday, these serve as personal statements" (Taylor) but Robertson more specifically states that "discredited, outdated and ' merely decorative ' items also have weight" particularly if they "are simply the good taste of the ruling caste" (Robertson, 118). Coffee table books have the capacity to convey this kind of good taste for those who aspire to be of the upper class, as in the same way one would use social media to craft an image of someone with a high brow lifestyle, coffee table books and other highly paratextual print materials can do the same. Coffee table books have a history of this, as succinctly summarizes in "A Brief History of Coffee Table Books: Origin, Precursors, and Popularity" in which Addison Rizer makes claims about the popularity of coffee table books and how "One of the most alluring aspects of coffee table books is the ability to bring previously expensive and intellectually protected topics into the hands of the everyday person" (Rizer). In this way, coffee table books and other print material like it can be used to create an image of an educated, elite, upper class individual. Though ironically enough, in using the medium of coffee table books to convey status, not only are there certain customs to adhere to in order to achieve status and appear sophisticated with these books, but in using them one inadvertently demonstrates they are aspiring to be of the upper class. Paul

Fussell explores this in *Class: A Guide Through the American Class Status System* by explaining how "your real middle class refuses to show any but the most bland books and magazines on its coffee tables: otherwise, expressions of opinion, awkward questions, or even ideas might result…The middle-class anxiety about ideology is strongly implied by a phrase popular among the middles, 'good taste,' which means, as Russell Lynes notes, the 'entirely inoffensive and essentially characterless'" (Fussell, 89-90). As Fussell claims, the middle class have a certain conception of what it means to appear as high class and part of this is not only displaying certain kinds of books they deem 'high brow' or pertain to that status, but specifically books that do not offend.

Print texts can be used in much the same way coffee table books can be as a social climbing tool and furthermore can help to contribute to and amplify certain cultural and aesthetic conventions; in much the same way social media and technology can by constantly presenting certain lifestyles and communities, whether real and authentic or manufactured and fake, and connecting those aspiring to be and already in those communities together. These kinds of echo chambers that are created online via digital text technologies once again extend into the physical world, as people can carry these echos into their living rooms and libraries with the use of print texts. Print texts that thanks to their paratextual and therefore visual abilities, function in the same way digital text technologies do, such as social media, in crafting identities that appeal or deceive others; identity and ones image being of particular prevalence today. While print texts' paratextual features, if used and designed accordingly, can help shape one's desired image they wish to project, in this case in the physical space, print's paratextual qualities also cause it to be valued not just for its artistic qualities, but valued as an art or craft. No doubt this perception of print materials such as coffee table books as artistic thanks to their paratextual qualities is what

can make them a status symbol in the same way art itself does. However, this future perception

of print materials as art is falling in line with a precedent of other tangible, physical, technologies

including those relating to text. Rache Nuwer writes in a BBC article how "Like woodblock

printing, hand-processed film and folk weaving, printed pages may assume an artisanal or

aesthetic value. Books meant not to be read but to be looked at – art catalogues or coffee table

collections – will likely remain in print form for longer as well. 'Print will exist, but it will be in

a different realm and will appeal to a very limited audience, like poetry does today,' Stein says"

(Duwer). This explanation by Duwer of the place for print in the future encapsulates the

discussion of print's evolving role in the world and how coffee table books, whether used overtly

as status symbols or merely appreciated for their artistic and visual features, set their own

president for what most if not all print text will appear as in the future.

  The paratextual qualities of coffee table books are an example of the kinds of print

materials that will remain in print as readers continue to rely upon and become affected by digital

text, whether in regards to their reading abilities or desire to save face. There is such a focus on

the ills of digitization that many assume that it can only spell disaster for print text and print

culture at large. Though as explained earlier, digitization is merely another step forward in

literacy and does not mean an end to print culture but a change in its value, function, and even

form. Time will only tell what is to become of print culture or for that matter digital culture, but

it is clear that certain standards set by the digital age for texts will be incorporated into print

texts, resembling many of the qualities already possessed by coffee table books. One can say that

it is perhaps the simplicity of the coffee table book that makes it set its own precedent for print

works, but a simplicity that sells and one that certainly appeals.

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