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Living Books

Experiments in the Posthumanities

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1 Toward a Diffractive Genealogy of Book History

How can science studies scholars take seriously the constitutively militarized practice of technoscience and not replicate in our own practice, including the material-semiotic flesh of our language, the worlds we analyze?

—Donna Haraway, “A Game of Cat’s Cradle”¹

Although the book as idea and form has played a seminal role within our culture, book history as a separate subject or discipline of study was not established until the 1950s and 1960s.² While the nineteenth century saw the rise of the study of the book as a material object as part of the development of analytical bibliography, book history as a discipline involving the study of print *culture* draws heavily on the methodology of the French *Annales* school of historiography. It was here—and in specific, in Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin’s *L’Apparition du livre* (*The Coming of the Book*; 1958)—that a strand of book history (*histoire du livre*) developed that focused more on the role played by books in social and cultural contexts. Around the same time that book history started to develop as a field, some of the first experiments with electronic books and with digital textual transmission were taking place. Michael Hart, the founder of Project Gutenberg (an online e-book database), is often credited for “inventing” the e-book in 1971.³ However, experiments with e-books and hypertexts were already taking place in the 1960s—if not earlier—with Alan Kay’s *Dynabook*, which he described as “a portable interactive personal computer, as accessible as a book.”⁴ In this sense, even though book history is only a relatively young discipline, its object of study has already seen some remarkable material changes since it was established. The field itself has developed rapidly too: the rise of book historical titles over the last few decades has been considerable, which can

be connected to the increasingly interdisciplinary character of book studies, examining the book in all its past, present, and future forms. Where it was initially an amalgam of history, bibliography, and literary studies, book history today draws its inspiration from a wide range of disciplines and methods, from media and communication studies to even newer fields such as the digital humanities, media archaeology, and software studies.⁵

Its wide and ever-expanding scope notwithstanding, I want to focus in this chapter on some of the most characteristic features to have structured the discourse of book history. As such, this discourse is not discussed in its entire diversity here; instead, some of its key aspects and leading participants are examined to show how and in what way these have been decisive in influencing and shaping the book historical field and, with that, the future of the book. In addition, some of the *oppositions* are highlighted that continue to dominate this often highly agonistic discourse, which have equally influenced and structured the book as a material and aesthetic object, as well as the practices that accompany it. Doing so implies exploring under what circumstances this discourse emerged and what it has focused on: What have been its topics of contestation and which oppositions does it (continue to) embody?

In the analysis of this discourse, attention is mainly given to those histories that describe the transition from manuscript to print (and to a lesser extent, from orality to literacy) and which, in doing so, follow the printed book's further development until the end of the nineteenth century. Having this historical cutoff point serves to bracket this introductory chapter with its more historical overview from the remaining chapters of this book, which focus more directly on the current shift from print to digital and on the more recent history and development of the scholarly book in particular. Yet this cutoff point is also meant to emphasize the importance of this specific cluster of print-culture-focused historical studies—and of the specific theorists and historians it incorporates—for book history as a field. Furthermore, it is intended to highlight the continuing influence of these studies on the *structure* of the discourse that surrounds the future of the book and recent histories of e-books and digital textual transmission.

When sketching this general framework to capture the debate as it has progressed and is still progressing, it is important to acknowledge that it takes place on three levels simultaneously and transversally. The discourse occurs on the level of historical reality (primary sources), on that of history writing (secondary sources), and on a third, metahistorical level of writing

about history-writing (historiography, or, what is book history?). An analysis of the book historical debate should take all three levels of description into account, focusing specifically on the reasoning, the politics and power struggles, and the value systems that lie behind the choices made for a particular perspective.

I want to specifically highlight as part of this analysis that a rethinking of our book historical past has a direct influence on—and reflects how we envision—the future of the book. In other words, the way the past of the book is perceived by a specific thinker or group of thinkers not only casts a light on how they perceive what the present and future of the book could or should be, or which issues will be most important in determining its future; it *also* influences directly, materially and aesthetically, both the object of the book and the discursive practices accompanying it (and with that, it directly influences scholarly communication in the case of the monograph). For example, if we stress that fixity is an inherent property of the printed book and thus something that has partly come to define and stand at the basis of modern science and scholarship, this can have the effect of positioning this property as essential for the future of the book and digital scholarship. This way of thinking comes to the fore in efforts directed toward recreating the fixity and stability associated with print text within a digital book format (i.e., the continuing search for ways to stabilize the book and keep its integrity intact online via DOIs, persistent identifiers, DRM and copyright, author IDs [ORCID IDs], etc., but also aesthetically via book covers, pages, and page numbers, all aspects that mimic the bound and stable printed book online).⁶

To explore what lies behind the continued emphasis on oppositional thinking within the book historical discourse, this chapter subsequently takes a closer look at book history's disciplinary history and the developments literary studies and historiography (in particular new historicism) went through during the rise of book history as a specific disciplinary niche. Following this analysis of the book historical discourse, the oppositions it engenders, and its disciplinary genealogy, an alternative vision for the history of the book is proposed: one that endeavors to go beyond some of the oppositions that continue to structure the debate on the book's history and that can be seen to function as "false divisions."⁷ Instead, the *entanglement* of plural agencies (i.e., technological and cultural, human and nonhuman, discursive and material) as part of the processual becoming of the book is emphasized here. As I will explain, these entanglements get cut up as part of the discursive position-taking that surrounds the history of the book.

The oppositions within the book historical discourse function here as forms of ethical position-taking then, as struggles to try to define (the identity of) the book and with that the future shape of academia. For the discourse on the book's history—and this is especially the case with respect to the scholarly monograph—not only encompasses a fierce debate about how to represent and historicize the past of the (scholarly) book but also can be seen as a struggle to determine its future. To reimagine and perform the future of the book differently, an alternative vision of the history of the book is therefore put forward, one that endeavors to go beyond some of the earlier identified dichotomies in an effort to reframe them, asking how we can “write” an alternative, *diffractional* genealogy of the book.

Topics and Dichotomies

Although the book historical field has been described as “scattered in approach” and “so crowded with ancillary disciplines that one can no longer see its general contours,” there are a few major focal points within the debate on book history that can be discerned.⁸ Although it is by now quite dated (especially with respect to the practicalities of digital scholarly communication and book production), Robert Darnton's highly influential publishing communication chain remains a useful model to capture the various aspects of the book's production, dissemination, and consumption that the book-historical discourse has focused on.⁹ First presented in an article for *Daedalus* in 1982, Darnton's communication circuit proposes a general model for analyzing the way books come into being and spread through society. At the same time, Darnton uses this circuit or chain to make sense of and disentangle the sprawling field of studies in book history. Despite the fact that various attempts at improved versions to Darnton's circuit have surfaced in the decennia after it was first designed, and even though this model is based on the lifecycle of the *printed* book, one can argue that it still forms an important element in the discourse on the history of the book as it stretches into the digital domain, if only as a system with which to compare and contrast. For example, take those theorists who foreground the disintermediation of functions in the digital production cycle of the book. Often a reference is made to Darnton's communication circuit (see figure 1.1)—or a more abstracted version of the *publishing value chain*—to emphasize which of

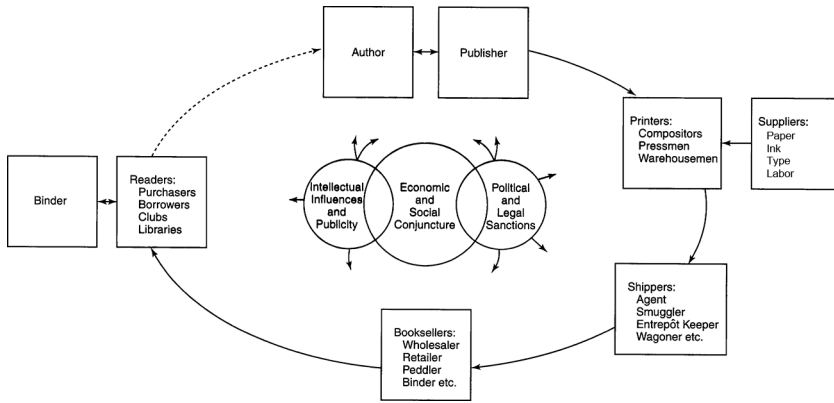


Figure 1.1
Robert Darnton’s communication circuit

the traditional publishing or communication functions are becoming obsolete or have been taken over by one and the same person, company, or institution in “the digital age.”¹⁰

The communication chain focuses on the roles played by authors, publishers, printers, distributors, booksellers, and readers in the production, dissemination, and consumption of the printed book. Readers become authors themselves again—hence the circle—something that is even more apparent within scholarly communication. In addition, the communication chain emphasizes the social, political, and economic influences on these agents within the process of value production. Book historians mostly focus on one part of this process as part of specific specializations, but for Darnton it is essential that “the parts do not take on their full significance unless they are related to the whole”; for him, “book history concerns each phase of this process and the process as a whole, in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural, in the surrounding environment.”¹¹ One important omission in Darnton’s circuit is the book itself, an exclusion already remarked upon by Adams and Barker in their revised communication circuit.¹² As they point out, Darnton’s model focuses too much on a social history of communication. The book itself in its material manifestations and its influence on the book historical discourse and hence on society and culture (instead of only the other way around) is not admitted as a form of agency, nor as

an agential relation in this model. The importance of including the book as a form of agency within a network of agents is similarly emphasized by book historian Paul Duguid, who argues that books are not simply passive “dead things” but should instead be seen as crucial agentic forces within the publishing value chain, a social system that books produce and at the same time are produced by.¹³

Applying these criticisms and expansions to the model in consideration, I want to use this updated communication chain to identify some of the main book historical topics or subfields.¹⁴ First, there are studies that look at the book as an individual, material object. Here the focus lies predominantly on the technical analysis of the materiality of the book, on the importance or influence of format (i.e., bibliography or studies on paratexts), or on the kinds of uses a specific text or artifact triggers or demands. New Bibliographical studies that aim to establish authoritative texts and correct textual meaning would fall into this category, as would studies that take the book in a more abstracted form as their starting point by focusing on the agency of the book—and of print and print culture—and its influence on culture and society.¹⁵

Second, there is the research that focuses on the production of the book and the political economy surrounding the book value chain, which includes publishing, distribution, and sales. This subfield covers studies that analyze the whole system (as Darnton proposed) of material book production and culture and the various agents that play a role in it (also see the work of John Thompson in this respect); more materialist traditions, such as the *Annales* school or what has come to be known as the French *histoire du livre*; and, finally, D. F. McKenzie’s extension and reorientation of (new) bibliography to include the sociology of texts by looking at the specific conditions under which books were produced.¹⁶

Third, there is the research that focuses on authorship. This includes studies that research authorial intention in an attempt to come closer to the “true” meaning of a text or that concentrate on the changing role of the author in the value chain—including the changing author function; but it also includes research that focuses on the development of (authorial) ownership or copyright of texts, for example.¹⁷

Finally, we can identify research that looks at readership, including the history of reading and the role of the reader, and at the historical uses and reception of books (i.e., reception history).¹⁸

Alongside these general topics that can be seen to frame the debate on book history (and let me emphasize that this is not an all-inclusive list), it is important to outline and analyze some of the binary oppositions that have come to structure it, as they continue to influence and structure the discourse on book history in the present. A few of the most characteristic oppositions have been put forward by two of the field's key players, book historians Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns, both in their separate works and in a highly polarized debate published in the *American Historical Review* in 2002.¹⁹ This debate between Johns and Eisenstein is an interesting backdrop against which to describe and analyze the overall dichotomies within the book historical discourse, as the arguments both historians have brought forward for their specific position-taking provide a helpful illustration of the main oppositions that continue to structure it. Although the various position-takings on the history of the book overlap and interact, Eisenstein's work can be seen as representing the materialist-inspired Anglo-American stream of book studies, whereas Johns's work draws heavily on the history of the European continental tradition of social-economic and cultural-historical research in the wake of the Annales school.

Elizabeth Eisenstein is well-known for her seminal work, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979). She was influenced by, while also critical of, the vision put forward by communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, who, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), offered an interpretation that sees the technology of the printed book as having a direct influence on our consciousness and on society. Eisenstein argued for the importance of reevaluating what she calls the *unacknowledged revolution* that took place after the invention of print. She did so by exploring the consequences of the fifteenth-century shift in communications, focusing on how printing altered written communications within the *commonwealth of learning* (an early modern metaphor for what we now commonly conceive of as the public sphere). In this respect, Eisenstein didn't look at book history specifically but at the effects of *print culture* on modern society. In other words, she studied how changes affecting the transmission of records—altering the way data was collected, stored, and retrieved and how it restructured scholarly communication networks throughout Europe—might have influenced historical consciousness over an extended period of time. As such, in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Eisenstein is interested predominantly in exploring the

sociocultural impact of both print and publishing on the advancement of science and on the evolution of the thought of both humanist and reformation thinkers.

In contrast to Eisenstein, Adrian Johns—who has proved to be one of her biggest opponents—stressed that it was human, not medial, factors that were at the basis of the changes that led toward increased standardization and stability in the early modern period. As Johns states in *The Nature of the Book* (1998), what are often seen or regarded as essential elements and features of print are in fact more contingent, transitive entities. The self-evident environment created by print culture encourages us to ascribe certain characteristics to print and to a technological order of reality. However, the most common conviction, that of print being fixed, stable, identical, and reliable, is false, Johns argues, and stands in the way of a truly historical understanding of print. As Johns makes clear, the cultural and the social should be at the center of our attention.²⁰ Accordingly, he argues that both print and science are not universal and absolute but constructions that need to be maintained.

In their debate in the *American Historical Review*, Johns and Eisenstein further detailed their respective book historical visions.²¹ As part of this debate, Eisenstein provides a comprehensive overview of their main theoretical differences, to which Johns subsequently responds. The first opposition or discursive struggle that deserves to be highlighted from this exchange is related to the *intrinsic properties of print*. According to Eisenstein, Johns denies that technology or the printing press has any intrinsic powers or agency, whereas for her the press affected significant historical developments. For example, where Eisenstein (along with Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan) focuses on the establishment of fixity and standardization as effects of print technology, Johns states that they are the outcome of social constructions and practices. He points out that fixity is not an inherent property or quality of print but that it is transitive, acted upon and recognized by people, where Eisenstein argues that the circumstances that determined print culture can be attributed to print. For Johns, then, a book is the material embodiment of a consensus or of a collective consent, and therefore he argues that the development of a print culture was not as direct and straightforward as Eisenstein would have it, but was marked by uncertainty and a shaky integration. This disagreement illustrates a larger division visible in the book historical literature between technological determinism and cultural constructionism, or between gradations of both forms. Here the focus is on the

attribution of historical agency: Does agency lie with impersonal processes (triggered by innovations in communication technology, i.e., media or book agency), or with personal agents and collective practices (i.e., human agency)? In other words, is print a result or a cause of culture?²²

According to Eisenstein—writing in the 1970s—up to then there had been a paucity of studies looking at the consequences of the introduction of the print trade in Europe, and a lack of explicit theorization around what these consequences had been.²³ Eisenstein's moderate form of technological determinism can thus be seen as a revisionist strategy, wherein she argued that a lack of attention to the shift in communications and a continued focus on the prevailing schemes of *multivariable explanations* only skewed perspectives further in the future. According to Eisenstein, the focus should have been on exploring why “many variables, long present, began to interact in new ways.”²⁴ Although accusations of technological determinism were indeed put forward by her critics and successors, Eisenstein has refuted any, as she states, “monocausal, reductionist and technological determinist reading” of her work, emphasizing that print was only one factor that was influential in bringing about change.²⁵ Acknowledging the importance of the human element, she believes impersonal transmission and communication processes must also be given due attention, as that is where print did have special effects. Although print did not *cause* the developments she described (it was merely *an* agent of change, not *the* agent of change), Eisenstein states that these developments were definitely reorientated by the communications shift.²⁶

In *The Nature of the Book*, on the other hand, Johns clearly illustrates the constructivist nature of the book: how the very identity of print has been created and how print culture has been shaped historically.²⁷ According to Johns, it is not printing that possesses certain characteristics, but printing *put to use* in particular ways. He is thus interested in studying the genealogy of print culture in order to analyze how the bond to enforce fidelity, reliability, and truth in early modern printing was forged and to reappraise where our own concept of print culture has come from—but also to explore how print differed from place to place and how it changed over time when it took hold, as well as to investigate how books came to be made and used.

It is important to emphasize that in his reply to Eisenstein, Johns stresses that he does not see his view as being necessarily opposed to hers. He regards his position as a supplement in terms of approach, and primarily wants to

acknowledge the importance of print in a different way and therefore asks different questions: “Where Eisenstein asks what print culture itself is, I ask how printing’s historic role came to be shaped. Where she ascribes power to a culture, I assign it to communities of people. Most generally, where she is interested in qualities, I want to know about processes.”²⁸ In other words, Johns does not want to focus on a history of print culture but on a cultural history of print. As he points out, a cultural history of print should be broadly constructivist about its subject. He sees this as an essentially empiricist undertaking, arguing for the “inseparability of social reality and cultural understanding.”²⁹ Johns is thus not saying that print determines history but that print is conditioned by history, as well as conditioning it. As he stresses, the effects or implications of technology are not monolithic or homogenic; they are both appropriated by users and imposed on them. The book is therefore the product of one complex set of social and technological processes and the starting point for another. For Johns, addressing the dichotomy sketched by Eisenstein directly, *The Nature of the Book* is not simply the negative component of a dialectic; it is not solely a critique of print culture and Eisenstein. Rather, it questions claims about print and examines how they came into being, and why we find them so appealing and plausible.³⁰

The second opposition to highlight in this debate relates to the *perceived speed of the transition from manuscript to print*. Should we talk about a print evolution, or revolution? Should we stress the continuity of the manuscript book and written textual transmission, or the discontinuous revolutionary character of the introduction of print?³¹ Eisenstein believes the establishment of printing shops inaugurated the communications revolution, whereas Johns—according to Eisenstein, at least—believes the “printing revolution” was a retrospective discursive construct that emerged in the eighteenth or nineteenth century.³² Johns downplays the difference between script and print, Eisenstein argues, whereas she sees a big difference and a transition taking place between the two: the shift from manuscript to print involved a Europe-wide transition, one that occurred in a relatively short time span. The adoption of print was therefore not a slow revolution but a remarkably rapid and widespread development.³³ However, Eisenstein does not so much emphasize a revolutionary view as envision the transition as a line that was both continuous and broken, simultaneously consisting of continuity and radical change. Nonetheless, her emphasis within this

transition is on aspects of change, rather than on continuity. We shouldn't underestimate the large cluster of changes that took place, she claims, and the essential role print played in these. Eisenstein is therefore not interested in a simple *impact model*, as she calls it; changes brought about by printing are not easy to grasp and characterize more a change of phase, wherein the character of the links and relationships—the cluster itself—underwent change. It is about finding the balance, she argued, between saying that print changed everything and that it changed nothing.³⁴

Johns, on the other hand, claims that Eisenstein sets printing outside of history in her definition of print culture: in her account, it becomes placeless and timeless and does not pay sufficient attention to how these essential properties of print and print culture as a whole emerged. His work, by contrast, is concerned with the relation between print and knowledge, and its focus is on the history of science. By exploring the history of the book and print in the making, we get a better understanding of the conditions of knowledge, Johns claims, and of the ways in which knowledge has been made and utilized. Print culture is based on practices and conventions, and Johns is interested in how these practices came to be shared, as well as in the people and the places that make print possible: the agents of the book trade. Part of the importance of *The Nature of the Book* therefore lies in Johns's reconstruction of how, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these agents decided and constructed what print was and ought to be by looking at its historical origins or by a reconstruction (in the way of a struggle) of the historical origins of the press.³⁵ As he argues, it is the appearance of print that has veiled real conflict in history. The principles that seem to us most essential to print have in fact been heavily disputed by the various stakeholders within the book trade for centuries. Johns thus shows that the uniformity exhibited by printed materials was as much a project of social actions and struggles as it was of the inherent properties of the press.³⁶

Third, divergences in both historians' viewpoints are apparent with respect to what Eisenstein calls the *geography of the book*.³⁷ Within the book-historical discourse, some theorists concentrate mostly on the effects and practices surrounding technology as a local affair, versus research that focuses upon their supposedly international—though in most cases highly Western-centric—reach. The most obvious example of the former is that of the localist methodology followed in Johns's *The Nature of the Book*, which focuses on England. Johns argues that there exist a variety of different (local) print cultures as print

culture knows specific sites of cultural production, dynamic localities constituted by representations, practices, and skills.³⁸ Eisenstein's work, on the other hand, is more cosmopolitan in character, following a Europe-centered perspective. She would even argue that it was print that enabled such a cosmopolitan ethos and perspective in the first place.³⁹

Moving beyond the debate between Johns and Eisenstein and the binaries around cultural and technological determinism, the (r)evolutionary character of print culture, and the geography of the book it has drawn attention to, there are two further oppositions to shortly highlight here that have similarly structured the book historical discourse. First of all, a further distinction can be made between what is called *cultural pessimism*, or dystopian thinking, and *technological utopianism*, or futurology, concerning the book and the rise of new technologies. Reflecting a general reaction to media change, this is clearly apparent in the current debate surrounding e-books, which has been classified by some theorists as a debate between bookservatists on the one hand and technofuturists on the other.⁴⁰ However, it illustrates a cultural feeling (from unease to euphoria) and a depiction of historical change that can already be discerned in the transition from manuscript to print, and even in the introduction of writing.⁴¹

Finally, the discourse around the book embodies both *teleological* and *antiteleological* strands. Topics here focus on whether technology (and human society as a whole) progresses, or whether there is such a thing as technological advancement or a driving force or prime agent behind it. Teleological strands can also be found in book historical debates that focus on the new (i.e., e-books or print books) and the old (i.e., print books or manuscripts) and those that make a clear division or cut between the present and the past and emphasize a progressive linear development, as opposed to describing histories as plural genealogies, nonlinear and cyclical, or as postdigital, for example.⁴²

A Representationalist Discourse

If we look at the debate between Johns and Eisenstein in more detail, we can see that, although I have outlined and emphasized the main differences between the two thinkers, both are anxious not to be accused of any form of technicist or culturalist determinism or oppositional thinking. Eisenstein, for instance, is very careful to argue that print was only *an* agent of

change, not *the* agent of change, and that the transition to print was not a revolutionary one, but a rapid, widespread development, both continuous and broken. Nonetheless, her emphasis is clearly on the “unacknowledged *revolution*,” on change rather than on continuity, and on how print was incremental in bringing about this change. And, as I stated previously, Johns points out that his view is not opposed to that of Eisenstein but that he just asks different questions.⁴³ *The Nature of the Book* is not simply the negative component of a dialectic, he states; he is not opposed to print agency but wants to acknowledge print in a different way, as “print is conditioned by history as well as conditioning it.”⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Johns does clearly emphasize the constructivist nature of the book and that it doesn’t have inherent qualities but only transitive ones. To this end, Johns argues that the cultural and the social should be “at the center of our attention.”⁴⁵

Taking the debate between Johns and Eisenstein and the various positions they adopt as representative of the larger discourse on the history of the book, I want to make the claim that this discourse for the most part adheres to forms of *representationalism* in its depiction of the medium of the book. This becomes clear from, among other things, the technician (Eisenstein, McLuhan, etc.) and culturalist (Darnton, Johns, etc.) assumptions that continue to underlie the debate. From a representationalist perspective, media describe or represent an objective reality from which they remain disconnected. As in Plato’s cave metaphor, they stand apart from the real material world, of which they only offer mirror images. In a similar vein, science (or scholarly discourse or ideas) focuses on knowing and observing an objective material world “out there.” Karen Barad defines *representationalism* as “the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing.”⁴⁶ In representationalism, separations (between words and things, discourse and matter) are thus foundational. On the level of history writing or historiography, this is manifested by how both Johns and Eisenstein, for example, do not take into account how *their own representations* might be (materially) influencing the things they represent—in other words, how their descriptions of the past of the book shape both that past and the current and future material becoming of the book. More importantly, they fail to acknowledge their own *becoming with* the book through their discursive practices and the exclusions they create through their specific

position-taking. In this respect, Eisenstein's technicist-inclined account is based on the presumption that books are real objects in the world—separate from ourselves, society, and culture—that can have certain effects on the world. As Kember and Zylinska make clear, however, from a *performative* viewpoint, “media cannot have *effects* on society if they are considered to be always already social.”⁴⁷ In other words, books and society are always already entangled; they are not static and homogenous categories. There is an *a priori* connection between them. Books are already part of society and of the social, so logically, the one—books, conceived as (technologies of) representation—cannot have an *effect* on the other—the social or society, perceived as reality—as they do not stand in a position of externality to one another. Barad explains how in this respect, “neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other.”⁴⁸ Bolter emphasizes that “technologies . . . are not separate agents that can act on culture from the outside.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, Johns argues from a more constructivist-inclined view that the book has been constructed or represented by the “agents of the book trade,” outlining a position in which culture is inscribed on the book, making it into a more or less passive entity, limiting the possibilities for the material agency of the book. Where Eisenstein and Johns *do* give credit to cultural and machinic agency, respectively (as a form of limited constructivism or weak determinism), it is important to emphasize that they see both as complementary, as part of a set of influences (in which one set is always emphasized as being more influential). As a result, they maintain the ontological (and ethical) difference between discursive and media agency, instead of seeing them as coconstitutive and entangled relational and agentic phenomena, as I want to do.

In a nonrepresentationalist performative view, there is no simple causality between media on the one hand and culture/society on the other, as these are already interconnected from the start. In a dichotomy, the opposition is already implied in its negation, as Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin explicate in their book *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. This implies that both sides of a dialectic are in a relation, part of the same “intimate” framework of thought.⁵⁰ If we want to reframe the book historical discourse, we should thus focus on the relationship and coconstitution of these oppositions. Along with bringing forward this performative view of book history, I want to further examine how the specific representations that have been put forward by both Johns and Eisenstein, as well as by the

larger debate on the history of the book, have come about. This involves taking a closer look at the context from which they derived: What kinds of cuts or dividing discursive practices have been promoted or excluded through these materializing representations? Cuts (such as the divisions created by our representations) have to be made, but it is in the acknowledgement of our own responsibility and contextual involvement herein that we can make a start with cutting differently, and perhaps more ethically. As Donna Haraway has argued, “worlds are built” from our articulations and from the distinctions we make as part of our entanglements.⁵¹ Here it is our responsibility to enable transformative instead of merely iterative effects to come out of our performative processes. We have to insist on a “better account of the world.”⁵²

It must be granted, Johns does acknowledge that a reappraisal of a social history of print culture in the making is consequential and can contribute to our historical understanding of the present conditions of knowledge.⁵³ However, Johns does not seem to acknowledge *his own* involvement in print culture in the making in this respect—for instance, the specific cuts that he makes by abiding to the publication practices of scholarly publishing by presenting his ideas in a fixed, objectified, printed scholarly monograph, although he is from a historical viewpoint very attuned toward the construction of these specific forms of fixity. It was McLuhan who was actually more attentive to this issue, as he actively experimented with the form of his own representations, taking into account the entangled nature of his words and the medium in which they were represented.⁵⁴

Both Eisenstein and Johns, as part of their representationalist accounts, are thus not able to evade oppositional thinking and can in fact even be seen to enforce it. Yet notwithstanding awareness of their limited validity, a continued use of binary oppositions remains common in scholarly analysis more in general too. Kember and Zylinska argue in this respect that “even where these false divisions have been identified as such—and of course many writers are aware of their limited currency—it has been difficult to avoid them.” They point out that this is partly due to the “residual effects of disciplinarity” and its embracing of sets of essential key concepts, but also due to the predominance, in media studies in particular, of social sciences perspectives, bringing along with them what could be classified as an inherently positivist and humanist outlook.⁵⁵ To explore what might be behind the continued emphasis on (different forms of) oppositional binary

thinking in the debate on the book's history, I want to take a closer look at book history's disciplinary history and the specific developments literary studies and historiography went through during the rise of book history as a specific disciplinary niche.

New Historicist Genealogies and Feminist Critique

Book history has its roots in bibliographic and literary studies and in the study of history. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an eagerness in these disciplines to get beyond earlier historiographic and literary traditions. What is important here is that these traditions (history and literary studies) started to merge increasingly during this period, a period that also saw the rise of book studies as initially an amalgam of the two. What we see in the development of book studies, for instance, is clear traces of *new historicist* thought, which emerged in the 1980s as a literary theory mostly reacting to the formalism of structuralism and certain strands of poststructuralism (mainly the forms of deconstructionism developed within the Yale school of literary criticism), as well as older forms of historicism.⁵⁶ New historicists argue that these theories focus mainly on the textual object for meaning extraction, whereas they state that we need to understand a text or work through its historical context too. In the famous words of literary theorist Louis Montrose, new historicism's concern is with "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."⁵⁷ Especially in literary criticism, new historicism is therefore seen as a theory that focuses on the relationship between a text and its context.⁵⁸ New historicists critique the text/context divide that they claim had been upheld until then, as well as the focus on dominant readings of classical works. By contrast, they argue for a renewed emphasis on neglected readings and dissonant voices and for the study of a variety of historical documents, not just the canon.

In the 1970s and 1980s, new movements also emerged in historiography or the philosophy of history. These movements were mostly placed under the heading of *new cultural history* or *new historiography*.⁵⁹ They include new forms of cultural studies, such as the *histoire des mentalités* and the *nouvelle histoire* of the third generation of *Annales* scholars in France (e.g., Jacques Le Goff, Pierre Nora). These new cultural histories distinguished themselves from the earlier analytical philosophy of history by means of their focus on narrative, subjectivity, and a plurality of interpretations rather than on

historical objectivity and facts. This meant doing away with positivist perspectives of objectivity and the possibility of truthfully representing the past in favor of poststructuralist theories of representation (e.g., De Certeau, Foucault) and the focus of historians on their own historicity (i.e., the way historians cannot exclude themselves from their investigation; instead, the present subject is seen as directly influencing the representation of the past).⁶⁰ Related to this, Attridge et al. have argued that poststructuralism can be seen as an attempt to reintroduce history into structuralism, but this naturally also poses questions about the concept of history as such. Under the influence of poststructuralism and, most importantly, Derridean deconstruction, history became *différance*, whereby the assumptions of a history, a single, objectified, final and absolute reading of history, came under attack.⁶¹

It is interesting to note that there are a lot of similarities and overlaps between the literary forms of new historicism and these new cultural histories; the former can be seen as wanting to put history back into literary studies and the latter as wanting to put literary studies into history.⁶² It has even been argued that new historicism can “be taken to be the literary-critical variant of what Frank Ankersmit has termed the ‘new historiography.’”⁶³

We can clearly detect the influence of new historicism and new cultural histories on the rise of book history and the book historical debate; book history can even be conceived as an example of a new cultural history, especially in how it developed from within the *Annales* tradition. Furthermore, book history has been at the fore when it comes to arguing that it wants to collapse the text/context (or matter/culture) distinction, as well as the literary studies/history distinction. However, although new historicism and new cultural histories embraced poststructuralist perspectives—both with respect to doing literary studies and history, and related to their object(s) of study—they have not been able to embrace “difference” (insofar as it is possible to do so), nor to get beyond thinking in binary oppositions. Furthermore, as I will show in what follows, new historicism, especially within book historical studies, has been unable to fully take into account its own historical position.

One of the main issues faced by new historicism, its critics claim, is that it has a hard time getting beyond the text/context binary. Literary theorist Chung-Hsiung Lai argues in this respect that new historicism is faced with an insoluble predicament: How can it simultaneously deal with the perceived (post)structuralist focus on textuality and the historicist focus on

contextuality? This double claim (of both textuality and contextuality), and especially the claim of neutrality between the two, becomes impossible, resulting in a situation in which it ultimately remains focused more on textuality and in its intended neutrality remains more closely allied with formalism.⁶⁴ If we add to this the standpoint of feminist critique, Judith Newton argues that new historicism thus “produces readings of literature and history that are as marked by difference as by sameness.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, this focus on neutrality leads to new historicism ultimately taking in an *apolitical posture*. This can partly be explained, as Lai and other feminist critics of new historicism such as Newton do, as due to new historicism’s discursive focus on the early work of Foucault, as part of which history is seen as a system of power relations, structured by struggle. Yet power in this vision is seen as overdominant; there is no way to perform it differently (similar to forms of constructionist thinking). New historicism adopted a similar discourse focused on the universalization of power, lacking any meaningful politics of resistance and/or subversion. From this position of critique, attempts have been made to change this position by writing feminist scholarship and theory *into* the history of new historicism. For example, Lai suggests that in order to get beyond its textual focus, new historicism should focus more on plural sociohistorical dimensions and on dynamic forms of power that enable forms of subversive resistance. Lai uses an exploration of feminist genealogy to reconcile new historicism and feminism and to lift new historicism out of its textual formalism and early Foucauldian power theory. This includes a different reading of Foucault: Newton points out that “while feminists have drawn upon Foucault, they have also been insistent, for the most part, upon identifying those who have power and asserting the agency of those who have less.”⁶⁶ As such, both Lai and Newton argue that new historicism needs to give up its apolitical condition and take material conditions seriously, to provide channels for the voices of the oppressed in order to really go beyond history as usual. Its focus should be on plurality, diversity, and difference so that new historicism can indeed become otherness-driven.⁶⁷

Following a vision similar to feminist critics of new historicism, I propose a strategy that lifts the *discourse on book history* beyond an overtly simplified binary thinking, by reading it with, alongside, and through the discursive-materialist and performative practices put forward by theories of (feminist) new materialism—in specific, the work of theorists such as Karen

Barad and Donna Haraway. And, similar to Lai, this strategy also includes looking at the later work of Foucault, including its emphasis on resistance and interventionism. As stated previously, I argue that we need to see discursive and media agency as entangled agential processes instead of a property that an entity (be it a machinic or human one) has. On the level of history writing, this means emphasizing that book historical studies (as well as new historicist ones) need to take their own historicity, as a form of performativity, into account more. Michel Callon qualifies a discourse that contributes to the construction of the reality that it analyses as *performative*. As such, he states that “scientific theories, models . . . are performative, that is, actively engaged in the constitution of the reality that they describe.”⁶⁸ Yet although Johns, for example, narrates the way seventeenth-century publishers struggled over the construction of the origin of the book—and through that struggle partly came to define the future of the book—there is not enough acknowledgment, both within *The Nature of The Book* and in Johns’s debate with Eisenstein, of how *his own history writing* and his position taking within the debate (indeed, even the debate itself) can be seen to influence and shape both the past and future of the book. Indeed, there is a lack of recognition here of how, as Bolter makes succinctly clear, discourses (be they utopian and dystopian) on the past and future of the book belong to and shape the materiality of our writing technologies: “The technology of modern writing includes not only the techniques of printing, but also the practices of modern science and bureaucracy and the economic and social consequences of print literacy. If personal computers and palmtops, browsers and word processors, are part of our contemporary technology of writing, so are the uses to which we put this hardware and software. So too is the rhetoric of revolution or disaster that enthusiasts and critics weave around the digital hardware and software.”⁶⁹

I want to propose here that book historians become more attentive toward their own discursive agency: there is currently a lack of awareness of how, through their own position-taking, they produce the object of their study and, with that, structure its future. This includes paying closer attention to how this object, the book, both in its materiality and as a metaphor, is and has been influencing their discursive practices. The debate on book history lacks in this respect a clear focus on its own publishing and scholarly communication practices as structuring entities, as well as a more feminist-oriented perspective that tries to go beyond simple binary thinking. To

what degree, then, are book historians taking responsibility for their own choices and focal points?⁷⁰ As with new historicism, although the discourse on book history is in many ways critical of and aware of the dichotomies described earlier, it can be argued to still uphold them. Furthermore, it runs the risk of, as Lai points out with respect to new historicism, taking in an apolitical position when its main focus is on describing and analyzing instead of critiquing, changing, or intervening in society. Book historians, I want to put forward, should therefore be more aware of the parts they play in the struggle for the future of the book. To start from this position, how can we get beyond this kind of oppositional thinking that, as I argue, still structures the debate? What can be the “beyond” of book studies in this respect?

An Alternative Vision: The Discursive Materiality of the Book

One of the more interesting media theories that has come to the fore recently, media archaeology, offers some valuable insights for book history and any attempt to move “beyond” its structuring oppositions. Media archaeologists construct, in the spirit of Foucault and Kittler, alternative histories to the present medial condition, counter histories of the suppressed and neglected, which challenge dominant teleological narratives.⁷¹ Media archaeological approaches thus address “the rejection of history by modern media culture and theory alike by pointing out hitherto unnoticed continuities and ruptures.”⁷² As a theory, media *archaeology* should not be seen as being distinct from the genealogical method, however, in the sense that some thinkers emphasize the contrast between archaeology and genealogy as being a clear distinction in Foucault’s thought, for example. Media theorist Wolfgang Ernst argues in this respect that as a method of analysis media archaeology is complementary with a genealogy of media: “Genealogy offers us a processual perspective on the web of discourse, in contrast to an archaeological approach which provides us with a snapshot, a slice through the discursive nexus.”⁷³ Media archaeology can therefore be seen as an incorporation of both archaeological and genealogical methods.⁷⁴ Similar to book history, new historicism and new forms of cultural history were important influences on media archaeology, which further draws connections with the Annales school. From within this context, media

archaeology formed its own niche in 1990s media studies, bringing more of a historical perspective to new and digital media studies.⁷⁵

What is interesting with respect to the approaches adopted by media archaeologists is that media archaeology is seen as a different way to theorize, to *think media archaeologically*. It investigates new media cultures by analyzing and drawing insights from forgotten or neglected past media and their specific practices and interventions.⁷⁶ In this respect, media archaeology is much more of a practice, a doing, an intervention than “regular” media histories and, as part of that, the book-historical debate. It is disruptive rather than representationalist.⁷⁷ From this perspective, media archaeological approaches could potentially be a valuable companion to book-historical studies, where they stress the multilayered entanglement of the present and the past and emphasize “dynamic, complex history cultures of media.”⁷⁸

However, as with new historicism, the question can be asked: To what extent, in its focus on histories of suppressed and neglected media, is media archaeology repeating and again emphasizing these exclusions? In what ways does media archaeology really “perform media history differently” through its (scholarly) practices, and in what sense is it really a “doing”?⁷⁹ In its creation of an entanglement of “alternative” and “neglected” media histories, how does it take responsibility for its own decisions and cuts?

It is here that an accompanying reading of the work of (feminist) new materialist thinkers—in specific, the work of thinkers such as Barad and Haraway—can be particularly valuable. Such a reading can emphasize this focus on ethical position-taking and on taking responsibility for our choices—or cuts, as Barad calls them—in media archaeological, new historicist, and book historical studies. Through a reading of feminist new materialist theories, I want to start exploring how we can write a book history that will perform a different vision of the book, one that is open to and responsible for change, difference, and exclusions and that accounts for our own ethical entanglements in the becoming of the book.

As part of this, and as outlined previously, I argue for a vision that seeks to move beyond (simplistic forms of) binary thinking with respect to both the book as an object and the discourse surrounding the history and future of the book. In a social constructionist or constructivist vision of media, technology is seen as embedded and understood predominantly by looking at the social context from which it emerges. Power structures—who controls,

defines, owns the media, and so on—are essential here. Technological determinism tends to stress that technology is an autonomous force, outside of forms of social control and context, and is seen as the prime agent in social change—except that technology is always shaped and constructed and is always political and gendered. The problem with constructionist theories, however, is that they tend to ignore material bodies as agential entities. Material bodies are not passive entities, just as technology is inseparable from politics: they are sites of bodily and material production.

Barad, in her theory of *agential realism*, focuses on the complex relationships that exist between the social and the nonsocial, moving beyond the distinction between reality and representation and replacing representationalism by a theory of posthumanist performativity. Barad's work triggers a variety of questions: How are nonhuman relationships related to the material, the bodily, the affective, the emotional, and the biological? How are discursive practices, representations, ideas, and discourses materially embodied? How are they sociopolitically and technoscientifically structured, and in what ways do they shape power relations, including the materiality of bodies and material objects? Bringing this back to a book-historical context, I am interested in exploring the following question: How is the book situated through and within material and discursive practices? From a new materialist perspective, discursive practices are fully implicated in the constitution and construction of matter. In this vision, materiality *is* discursive, just as discursive practices are always already material; that is, they (re)configure the world materially in an ongoing manner. As Barad argues in this respect:

Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another; rather the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. But nor are they reducible to one another. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other.⁸⁰

The last two sentences in this passage are very important in the context of the study of the book: there is no prime mover or most essential element; neither social, discursive, or material practices nor the technology or object itself is solely *of itself* responsible for change, and they are each neither cause

nor effect. Barad speaks of matter as *matter-in-the-process-of-becoming*. The same can be said of media or media formats such as books, which, as I propose, should be seen as dynamic, performative entities. By focusing on the nature of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena, by accounting for nonhuman as well as human forms of agency, Barad extends and reformulates the discursive elements of, for instance, Foucault's theory, with non- or posthuman object materiality.⁸¹ Following this vision, agency becomes more than something reconfigured by human agents; it includes how media practices affect the human body, society, and power relations. In Barad's terminology, both the object and the human are constructed or emerge out of material-discursive intra-actions (which Barad calls *phenomena*), a vision that actively challenges the dichotomy presently upheld to a greater or lesser extent in most book-historical studies.

Following this approach, scholarly communication can be seen as a set of performative material and discursive practices (e.g., from the material act of book publishing to the discursive agency of book studies). The scholarly monograph itself can be analyzed as one of these practices and at the same time as a process, as a relationship between these practices and how they are constituted or embodied. Scholarly practices—such as publishing—cannot simply be reduced to material forms but necessarily also include discursive dimensions. Similarly, these practices do not only include the doings of human actors (such as authors or readers) but are constituted by, or encompass, the whole material configuration of the world (which includes both material objects and relationships). As Barad claims, following Butler, our practices are temporal and performative; they constitute our lifeworld as much as they are constituted by it. Related to this, Barad sees agency as being similarly performative and as something constituted *within* relationships; therefore, as a *relationship*—and not something that someone *has*—agency is a doing.⁸²

We can find related views within the work of media theorist Katherine Hayles, who has argued that materiality is an emergent property, something that cannot be specified in advance and that, as such, is not a pre-given entity (and thus has no inherent or salient properties).⁸³ Materiality is and remains open to debate and interpretation. As Hayles points out in relationship to texts as embodied (relational) entities: "In this view of materiality, it is not merely an inert collection of physical properties but a dynamic quality that *emerges* from the interplay between the text as a

physical artifact, its conceptual content, and the interpretive activities of readers and writers. Materiality thus cannot be specified in advance; rather, it occupies a borderland—or better, performs as connective tissue—joining the physical and mental, the artifact and the user.”⁸⁴ A variety of material agencies entwine to produce our media constructions: the natural and the cultural, the technological and the discursive are all interwoven.

This perspective, I propose, offers us a way to rewrite these modernist oppositions. It is not so much that we can speak of assemblages of human and nonhuman but that these assemblages are the *condition of possibility* of humans and nonhumans in their materiality. What is important in this vision is that specific practices of, in Barad’s words, *mattering* (where matter is conceptualized not as an object but as an emergent process) have specific ethical consequences.⁸⁵ Things are intertwined, but the separations that people create (e.g., through their specific position-takings within book-historical debates) signify that they create inclusions and exclusions through their specific focus. This separation, or *agential cut*, as Barad calls it, enacts determinate boundaries, properties, and meanings. Where in reality differences are interwoven, agential cuts cleave things together and apart, creating subjects and objects. From this viewpoint, scholars have a responsibility toward and are accountable for the entanglements of self and other that they weave, as well as for the cuts and separations and the exclusions that they create and enact. As Barad phrases it, as scholars, we are responsible for “the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.”⁸⁶

By envisioning the book either as a form of agency cut loose from its context, relations, and historicity or as a passive materiality on which forms of political and social agency enact, book historians make specific ethical choices or *cuts* for which they can be held accountable. *Living Books* explores why these incisions are made within the book historical discourse: What are the reasons, the politics and struggles, the value systems that lie behind these choices? At the same time, the book—and with it, scholarly communication—is repositioned as a material-discursive practice, as a process that gets cut into. *Living Books* aims to think through what this alternative vision of the book could signify for scholarship and academia. What does it mean, for instance, to enact a different vision of the book through our practices and actions?⁸⁷ How can we perform the book—and with it, ourselves as subjects—in such a way that we promote and enable the development of a more ethical publishing and communication system, one that

encourages difference, complexity, and otherness, fluidity and change, but also responsibility and accountability for our choices and exclusions?

To explore this ethical dimension more in detail, I want to connect Barad's vision to the *minimal ethics* of Emmanuel Levinas; both stress that ethics is already part of our entanglements from the start.⁸⁸ As Barad states, "Science and justice, matter and meaning are not separate elements that intersect now and again. They are inextricably fused together."⁸⁹ Following Levinas, ethics is inevitable and foundational (it precedes ontology), where we are always already confronted by "the infinite alterity of the other."⁹⁰ This other makes me responsible and accountable, where *s/he/it* needs to be responded to as we are interconnected with them, with other beings and with matter more in general; *they/the other* are/is already part of *us*.⁹¹ In this sense, ethics should be perceived as relational, as it stands in relation to and is responsive to alterity from the inside; that is, the self and other do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another either. As Derrida puts it, "Could it not be argued that, without exonerating myself in the least, decision and responsibility are always of the other? They always come back or come down to the other, from the other, even if it is the other in me?"⁹² Following this vision, ethics is not outside or external (it doesn't involve the application of strong ethical injunctions or any predefined system of values); it is always already present in our practices and institutions and cannot be imposed from the exterior as it is performed *through* these practices and institutions. This is why taking in a position, why making incisions into "the fabric of the real" is an ethical decision, one that needs to be made responsibly, following an ethics that is not defined beforehand but always open and that is capable of responding to specific situations and singular events. Furthermore, this obligation to take responsibility for the differences we enact in the world through our actions should include an awareness of how we simultaneously come about *through* these incisions, as part of which we "become different from" the world. As Zylinska has argued in this respect "we humans have a singular responsibility to give an account of the differentiations of matter, of which we are part."⁹³

Reading Book History Diffractively

As part of my own incision and intervention in the book-historical debate, I argue that debates on all three of the historical-discursive levels I described

in the introduction (i.e., on the levels of the sources, of history writing, and of historiography) determine our vision of the book as a medium on a material level, and the book as a material entity in turn influences and structures these debates. Matter (i.e., the book) and discourse (i.e., book studies) are both emerging from this continuous process. The book as a medium is thus never “done” and gets reconstituted and reimagined constantly: by technological developments; by the ongoing debate over its meaning, function, and value; by historical developments (i.e., reactions to other, “newer” media via remediation, appropriation, or remix); by the political economies and social institutions with their accompanying practices, within which the book functions; and by new uses, which include new material practices and the changing context of the production and consumption of books.⁹⁴

Nonetheless, a few salient features, which remain very much debatable and in many cases have become central topics in the debate on book history, are increasingly seen as essential parts of the book in the common imagination, mostly in a reaction to the rise of digital media and the internet, to which the book is often compared and is similarly contrasted against in various ways.⁹⁵ These salient features include notions of stability and fixity; the integrity of a work (bound with a cover), as well as that of a clearly defined author with distinct author functions (responsibility, credibility, authority, ownership); and the selection and branding by a reputable press, which additionally vouches for a book's authority and quality. It is these features, however contested they might be, that have become the most well-known aspects used to define a *book* in common discourse. Furthermore, these perceptions are reproduced and fixed through our common daily practices, through which they eventually become the basis of our institutions. As a result, the salient features that have come to define the printed book look highly similar to the scholarly communication system that gets promoted within academia: one that is qualitative, stable, and trustworthy.

The problem with applying properties to media is that the process of doing so often relies on a historiographic fallacy: what historically came to be the characteristics of printing have been projected backward as its natural essential logic. However, it took a long time for these features to be established and perceived in the way they are now. They are the outcome of material processes of practice and dispute, and as concepts and practices they are changing constantly. What we perceive as fixity, standardization,

and authorship changes over time; their functions change; and the way these features and practices get produced and reproduced changes. For instance, now that we have started to experiment with preserving our collective heritage within sequences of DNA, the book might start to look like an incredibly unsteady and temporary storage medium.⁹⁶ It is interesting to see how these ideas connected to the printed book will now be reconfigured, reimagined, and challenged again by digital media, which serve as an added catalyst for the discussion on the future of the book. For example, as Kember and Zylinska point out, under the influence of the debate on new media, a distinction is upheld between *new media*, which are seen as interactive and converged, and *old media*, such as the book, which are seen as stable and fixed. However, arguably, if we take into consideration the work of Johns or the history of artists' books, books can be seen to be just as "hypertextual, immersive, and interactive as any computerized media."⁹⁷ As Kember and Zylinska emphasize, "the inherent instability of the book never disappeared, it just became obfuscated."⁹⁸

There are additional reasons that it is important to keep on questioning, critiquing, and reconfiguring what are seen as essential print-based features. Print has come to shape and serve certain functions for scholarship. By continuously emphasizing and fixing what are in essence fluid and contestable features, we run the risk of making both print and the book, and with them eventually the scholarly communication system, into a conservative and conservationist entity. This can lead to an essentializing approach, wherein a medium's essences become fixed and differences are erased. Such an approach will limit our understanding of the book and its heterogeneous, multiple interactions.⁹⁹ However, when we start to recognize and emphasize that these so-called salient features are contested concepts that are reconfigured constantly when the book's materiality changes, readers change, the production methods change, and the discourse changes, we can begin to acknowledge that the book as a medium, concept, and material object keeps on changing too in relation to new contexts. Books are among beings and among agencies, interwoven with and implicated in them. As scholars, we are involved in the processes of becoming of the book, in our analyses and histories, as well as in our uses and performances of the book. In this sense, we have a responsibility when it comes to the creation of conditions for the emergence of media, where we emerge *with* these media; we "do" media, just as media are performative through their specific yet *relational*

affordances. When we start to acknowledge agential distribution, we can begin to look at the book as a processual, contextualized entity; the book becomes a means to critique our established practices and institutions, through its forms and the decisions we make to create these forms, through its discourses, and through the practices that accompany it.

A further important aspect of my critique of the perceived salient features of printed books focuses on the underlying humanist assumptions they perpetuate. We can see this in the way authorship is conceptualized and continuously reasserted following a liberal humanist notion of the author as an autonomous subject or agent. Indeed, this anthropocentrism, affirming the primacy of man in the creation of knowledge, remains strongly embedded in our publishing practices—instead of emphasizing the multiple intertwined agencies (human and nonhuman, technological and medial) that are involved in the production of research, for instance—from the printing press to desktop publishing software. Here, as Barad has argued, a humanist notion of agency as a property of individual entities is maintained. These kinds of essentialisms are further upheld when the book is talked about as an “original piece of work” and as a fixed and bound object or commodity, which can have certain material effects.

These humanist visions pertaining to the book, or to the scholarly monograph more specifically, are repeated within digital or postdigital spheres, together with essentializing practices such as copyright and DRM, which further objectify the book as a commodity. This situation is then sustained by a discourse on the (history of the) scholarly book that does not fundamentally critique or aim to rethink these humanisms, including those maintained through the political economy that surrounds the monograph. It is foremost our scholarly publishing institutions that have invested in the cultivation of this print-based situation and humanist discourse, and these institutions are eager to maintain their positions and defend their established interests. Although book historians are aware of how this humanist focus on the book has been constructed out of various power struggles, I again argue that they do not concentrate enough on their own publishing practices, nor do they formulate potential alternative visions of the book—based on open-endedness, for example.¹⁰⁰

As a reminder, and as I mentioned in the introduction, when I mention *print-based features* or the *discourse of the (printed) book*, I am referring to the essentializing and humanist aspects that have been brought forward by this

discourse and by the institutions and iterative practices surrounding the book as object and commodity that are similarly maintaining them. In the following chapters, I analyze three aspects in particular that can be seen as some of the most fixating, essentialist, humanist, and print-based features of the book: *autonomous authorship*, the book as a *commodity*, and the *fixity* or *bound nature* of the book. Although each of the following chapters discusses one of these topics separately, they cannot be considered independently: as scholarly practices and institutions, they overlap and reinforce each other. Nonetheless, chapters 2–5 proceed by analyzing the institutions, practices, and discourses that have influenced and shaped these print-based features of the scholarly book in relation to the historical development of the book and book history as a discourse. At the same time, I discuss how these essentializing aspects are simultaneously maintained and critiqued in a digital context by analyzing various digital experiments with the book that have attempted to think beyond these fixtures and that have tried to challenge the stability, authority, and commodification of the book. This includes projects that have experimented with concepts and practices such as remix, fluidity or liquidity, and openness. However, as critical as they may be, I will show how many of these digital book experiments continue to adhere to humanist mechanisms, practices, and institutions.

The book historical discourse as discussed in this chapter plays an important role in each of the coming chapters, where it frames and introduces each of the three previously mentioned humanist and print-based features from a book-historical perspective—or, to be more specific, from how this perspective has been discursively positioned and produced. Yet instead of presenting these various book-historical position-takings in opposition to each other, each of the next chapters commences instead with a *diffractive (re)reading* of the discourse on book history related to that specific topic. It is thus not my aim to dialectically read the various positions in the debate on book history in opposition to each other, as I have done at the beginning of this chapter to expose the binary tendencies in the discourse and to illustrate the differences in position-taking between Johns and Eisenstein. Instead my aim is to read these book-historical insights together diffractively to acquire an overview of the debate from multiple positions, while being attentive to how diffractive readings, as Haraway explains, “record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference.”¹⁰¹ At the same time, I want to use this diffractive methodology to emphasize the genealogical aspects of

the debate (de-emphasizing linear origin stories); as Barad has noted, by reading insights through each other, we can explore where differences emerge and get constituted.¹⁰² To explore where these differences emerge, I am reading the debate diffractively in relation to each specific theme that structures this book (authorship, the book as commodity, and the book as a fixed and stable object). The next chapter introduces such a diffractive reading in order to analyze the role humanist authorship plays within academia.