

SU CUI

PRINTED MATTER OR, TOWARDS A ZINEIC HISTORY OF READING.

This is an awkward defense of print. As tactics and strategies of defending go, this is an odd one because it is not so much provoked by an attack than it is by the *lack-of* attack. On the one hand, it comes a little late. Proclamations of triumph, of the proverbial *Game Over* have been sounding throughout the land for years. Elegies have been written. When there is nothing to defend, writing to defend comes across as being obtuse, like a raving lunatic and indeed, this has all the familiar hallmarks of madness: illogical, repetitive, fixated on a single, somewhat unrelated thing, and prone to anachronisms. Yet the most consummate raves in history were undeterred by the fact that no one's listening (see Nietzsche) and the best defenses were never the ones directly opposed to a single attack. What follows is, in this sense, a positive defense, an affirmative spin on the negative, a series of thoughts that aims to not to

win (or lose) the game, but to keep it going.

“Printlessness”

Many are declaring that print is already dead. Content producers have been migrating in droves towards the World Wide Web since blogs were invented in the late 90s with fervent belief in the power of the online universe for offering new freedoms for reading and writing content: quick, easy and mobile, as the advertorials say. The old and clunky book, the print text, has nosedived in the trend stakes. Print has been abandoned in favor of hypertext; physical content is now regarded as something for old-fashioned hobbyists, nostalgic librarians or stubborn academics.¹ Apparently, *bookless-ness* has arrived.² To self-proclaimed digital savvies, Free and Fast has come to characterize the experience of

1 According to The Guardian, UK academics got together in July 2010 to advocate what they call ‘slow reading’—reading in print form because they thought that skimming online texts is making people ‘stupid’. Patrick Kingsley, “The Art of Slow Reading”. (The Guardian, 15 July, 2010),

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paperless reading and writing, thus explaining the name of one of the most famous and most used online manifestations, Wikipedia: in Hawaiian *wiki* means *quick* or *fast*. Like a closed murder case, the killing of print has lapsed into a distant memory of the excited evangelist who is too busy tweeting the revolutionary promises of the 'digital age' on her well-worn keyboard to for a verdict written down on paper. Before the Internet, it was the Word (of God) rather than the paper that has always been extolled as the soul of communicable existence. In the New Testament, we are told "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"³ Now evangelists of Internet communications treat the hypertext similarly as if infinite and transcendental. Many students schooled in the language medium of English today will be able to attest to online reading: as long as you have a connection and a computer, you can Wikipedia or Google anything anywhere for any assignment. For them, reading hypertext enters the intuitive level of individual skill, and is as ingrained in their sense of self as learnt habits such as eating and sleeping. A defense of print chases a mode of being in spite of these conditions in which we find ourselves: how do advocates of print make a case

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for the value of printedness?

Not so long ago, Books experienced a similar kind of *death* against the voracious spread of the Printed Copy. Prior to mechanical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin tells us, a material presence has ‘aura’ which makes it beautiful and unique—The Original Hard Copy is priceless by virtue of being original and “authentic”. Indeed, early Christian religious life also gave us one of the first valuations of ink-on-paper derived from the Original Material that was Jesus Christ. Hillel Schwartz tells us that over one and half millennia ago, Jesus was believed to be the body incarnate of God; Christ was espoused as “a Son identical and coeternal with the Father” and though in human form, He is both fully divine and fully incarnate. Jesus is the embodiment of God and consequently, of his Word.⁴ The early Christian bishops, the Council of Nicaea, articulated this first personification of God and from the careful meditation and consideration of this Jesus-God equation, inscribed twenty Church Laws. Those who held these canons—the original hard copies—also held religious authority.⁵ As the

4 Hillel Schwartz. *The Culture of Copy*, (New York: Zone, 1996), 212-213.

5 Schwartz. *The Culture of Copy*, 214.

book form moved outdoors, into rich hands and later into the mass market, it moved from Divine Word to Literature. Rolf Engelsing describes how Europeans in the eighteenth century shifted from “intensive’ reading of a small circulation of religious books to ‘extensive’ reading of many secular works.”⁶ Yet faith towards the Original Hard Copy endured in the practice of book publishing in what Moylan and Stiles calls “a given, hierarchized arrangement privileging a first edition or an ‘authentic’ text”.⁷ Followers of the Printed Book still cling to the material’s fidelity to authored subjectivity; the Will to Divined knowledge, the fevered desire to lead the world through the myth of authenticity and Original Reads.

In the face of the Digital, these days we see new attempts to bring printed books back from the dead (a transposed desire to resurrect Jesus perhaps?) via another moralized hierarchy. No

⁶ Rolf Engelsing cited in Ian Jackson. “Approaches to the history of readers and reading in eighteenth century Britain”. In *Historical Journal*, 47(4), 2004, 1050.

⁷ Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles. *Reading books: essays on the material text and literature in America*. (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 6.

longer able to make claims for *auratic* qualities of books, there are voices who directly opposing wiki reading and virtual texts by rousing a moral panic: a belief these days that we have a “reading crisis”¹ This phrase was recently coined by *The Evening Standard* on the basis of such “shocking” figures in London as: “only one in three teenagers read two books or fewer a year”.⁸ The allegation is that our *future generations* (children) have forgotten that reading books is the path toward wisdom—this view now has an effect akin to that of parental nagging: falling on deaf ears. Adding insult to injury, the *Standard* emphatically points out, that many of these *illiterate* teenagers have blogs or use Facebook; that is to say, kids these days are engaging in illegitimate or ‘improper’ forms of reading and writing.⁹ More and more critics are venturing to ask what is lost when reading becomes devoid of labour, suggesting Quick and Easy reading might be the formula for breeding the Slow and Stupid. Here, the premise against *wiki* reading is that the reading of online hypertexts is fragmented and offers too many

8 Tom Harper. “Shock figures that spell out the extent of London’s reading crisis” (*The Evening Standard*, 1 June 2011), 1.

9 Harper. “Shock figures that spell out the extent of London’s reading crisis”, 1.

hypertextual distractions, taking out the *laborious* in the experience of reading, and is therefore ephemeral and meaningless. Not so astonishingly, it is worth nothing that this moral panic is invoked in the domain of public education, where the mechanisms of professional publication, public validation and critical literary reception—indeed, the capital ‘labours’ of production, circulation and consumption—activate and confer cultural and moral status to the experience of reading, therefore instrumental to learning and knowledge acquisition.

The Story of Rising Illiteracy may have been exaggerated but even when we discount the sensational journalism, it still misses the point. While ‘quick’ may be an aspect of reading online texts, this does not make it the opposite of reading print. Online texts have their own materiality and our engagement with them cannot be measured against the [Biblical] fetish of the book. All the accusations of meaninglessness and stupidity leveled against reading and writing on blogs may just as easily be used against printed texts: an example of this comes from literary critic (and a fan of the leather-bound, Original Hard Copy, no doubt), Harold Bloom’s famous put-down of J K Rowling and Stephen King: “why read, if what you read will not enrich mind

or spirit or personality?”¹⁰ Equally, the assertion that the wisdom gained from ‘slow-reading’—reading print—somehow eludes ‘quick’ reading borders on technological determinism; the assumption that ‘skimming’ denies the reader deep and proper meaning furthermore reduces the aim of all reading to the reading of authorial content. Reading cannot be reduced to the process of extracting meaning from a conduit, i.e. a *document*, whether print or digital. At the same time, this is not to say we should be, as poststructuralists often are, allergic to meaningful meaning and place all claims of print’s importance in quotation marks.

The quarrel about whether (book) reading is interpretation or explanation originated roughly thirty years ago, when literature and its scholars underwent a kind of existential crisis that now seems like an ironic reversal of the *Standard’s* ‘reading crisis’. It was an anxiety about loss: what is lost when our engagement with literary texts succumbs to a fixation on meaningful meaning? Poststructuralists such as Derrida have tried to respond to this by dismantling the status of literature, through the question: what is literature?

10 Harold Bloom. “Can 35 million book buyers be wrong? Yes.” (Wall Street Journal, 11 July 2000), 1.

¹¹ Using Kafka's parable in *The Trial*, "Before the Law", Derrida suggests there are conventions in place that predetermine what may be considered a 'literary text' or given the name of 'literature'. For Derrida, these conventions behave like rules or laws and readers must necessarily know these laws before even reading—entering—the text.¹² Reading literature involves crucially, with Derrida, a contract with an abstract textual notion which *acts* like a law: inaccessible, decipherable and repeatable at the same time. Thus literature is, for Derrida, a possibility rather than a type of text; it refers to the possibility for any text to be read—whether authorial intent, reader's interpretation or both. His approach renders the worries and doubts about meaningful meaning moot because for Derrida not knowing is half the fun; not knowing which way to enter the text makes it possible to read it: the text is the law, the law is the text. Instead of framing the issue around the crisis of loss, Derrida proposes a celebration that we *can*, in fact, have a dialogue with all texts, that we can read readability.

The value of Derrida's stance may arguably

11 Jacques Derrida and Derek Atteridge. *Acts of Literature*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 181.

12 Derrida and Atteridge. *Acts of Literature*, 197.

be extended beyond the realm of textual examination. His emphasis on possibility and transfer rather than on textual meaning allows one to use these qualities to account for the physical properties of a text: can we propose a readability of material and if so, what does it mean to read a material? Of course, there have been claims for both medium and materiality in the 1960s such as Marshall McLuhan's argument that media technologies transform content and therefore, the subjectivities those content imply.¹³ However, literary scholars who treated their books as immaterial constructs largely ignored this. Nevertheless, while ink and paper or screen pixels may not be able to think, feel, or act, as humans impact the world, the print or online text cannot be reduced to pure object or subject—not only is it impossible to sieve out the contributions of either reader, author or text in any discussion of meaning, one also cannot ignore the impact of the material which delivers it. The value of reading a text cannot merely be the result of pitting one materiality over another, of pitting its form against other forms. These are rhetorical tricks rather than dialectical debates.

13 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. (London: Routledge & Regan Paul, 1964).

Discussions about print has been too often shoe-horned into false dichotomies of form versus content, authority versus freedom, physical versus virtual, such that the *lived* projects of reading—encompassing uneven intelligibilities, and singular moments in time and space—are compromised rather than celebrated or heaven forbid, enjoyed.

Textures and Readability

I want to propose a justification of print by pointing out its inextricability from meaning, and not just internal meaning of the text, but also meaning forged externally, in fickle ways; a starting point that displaces the separation of form and content with only the former. By form, I mean not only to take the shape of print—paper and ink—but also the way they are combined to give both physical and abstract meaning. To be sure, scholars of bibliography already attempt to account for materiality via historicist and sociological projects about the book form. G Thomas Tanselle is particularly instructive in noting the odd neglect of physical materiality:

Presumably many readers do recognize

or would quickly do so if they gave thought to the matter that the design of any book is worthy of study as a reflection of the taste of its time, as an indication of the statures of the author and genre represented in it, and as a clue to the nature of the audience expected for it. They would then assume that specialized studies of these matters must exist ... In the first of these assumptions they would be correct, but not in the second.¹⁴

Moylan and Stiles tried to fill this gap in their seminal examination of print culture, *Reading Books*, asserting their support for the view that “the text and material are inseparable—that texts are always material and that materiality is itself a kind of textuality.”¹⁵ I hope to develop this further to ask: is materiality only understandable in textual terms? In other words, I am asking what does it mean to see a text as both *textured* and textual? What is a printed text and what does

14 G. Thomas Tanselle, “A Description of Descriptive Bibliography,” *Studies in Bibliography* 45(1992), 4.

15 Moylan and Stiles. *Reading books: essays on the material text and literature in America*, 4

it mean to read it? I am re-casting the notion of the print form from the purely tangible and technological definitions. For *a printed matter*—rather than print—its form or materiality does not only refer to tangible qualities of paper, ink and their delivery, but also to the momentary and singular qualities that emerge between reader and the physical *constructs* of the text: grain, surface, pagination, binding, colours, smell, and so on. Ironically, some of the most interesting attempts to tackle pre-digital materialities should come from those most outspoken about the digital. These voices are futuristic and anticipatory, rather than nostalgic about print, and they set about debunking the commonplace assumption that Internet communications necessarily implies disembodiment or immateriality: the idea that digital is the separation of words from paper into an intangible cyberspace. Sean Cubitt makes the case for the material of books while writing *Digital Aesthetics* and in particular, for the idea of texture:

The space of the book, the material between its covers, has been for centuries not just a repository, a mnemonic store, but an interactive playground. The whiteness of white sheets has been a lure for doggerel,

commentary, digression and refusal. The book is not, and has never been, a self-contained thing. It has always required the services of its readers, the interplay between the way the book unfurls the text materially and the way the reader reassembles it mentally, a conflictual or negotiated interface which, for two generations since the massive expansion of university education after World War II, made the study of literature the most popular of the humanities.¹⁶

Manifest as books, the Gutenberg printing press detached literature from the single source, allowing literature to develop, as Cubitt points out, into an object of study. Literary-ness soon eclipsed the book's thing-ness and soon gained its own reified status; thing-ness is treated as constructed or represented, a thing is something outside the literary text. Our interactions with a book—reading—has most often been described in non-physical terms. Cubitt defies this by

16 Sean Cubitt. *The Materiality of the Text: Outtake from Digital Aesthetics*. 22 June 2011. < <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/digita/materiality.html>>.

proposing what he calls a “materialist account of reading” in order to “[expose any] theological concept of the infinite text that inhabits cyberspace”.¹⁷ Given that *Digital Aesthetics* was published in 1998—way before Facebook or blogging were invented—Cubitt’s argument that the material of the text—paper, ink, pixels, etc., affects reading no less profoundly than textual abstraction, seems prophetic. In fact internet reading or ‘wiki’ reading, Cubitt argues, “still respects older distributions of reading” since the Internet borrows its “metaphors of surfing and browsing from nomadic reading, neither negating place nor universalizing it, but wandering, and taking the hereness and newness of place with it as unstill reference point.”¹⁸ By reminding us of the geographies and histories of reading, Cubitt shows how reading can be understood as having different modes—such as wiki reading and book reading—whilst sharing similar functions and language cultures. And within each mode, the physicality of the interface is an undeniable function of the many ‘heres’ and the ‘nows’. Just as we recognize the flickering computer screens, “[w]e can recognize in the physical characteristics

17 Sean Cubitt. *Digital Aesthetics*, (Sage, 1998).

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18 Cubitt. *Digital Aesthetics*, 6

of books that that is what they are—books ... they must have destinations, or they fade away ... they are both strangers and familiar”¹⁹. It would take another four years before N. Katherine Hayles embarks on a systematic dismantling of the unrecognized assumption that print texts are embodied texts; she does this by combining traditional textual concepts with cybernetic terms. Implicitly, Hayles recognizes the inherent challenge of making a move towards materiality: no matter how strong the plea, the phrase “the materiality of the text” is essentially a theoretical statement, it is an abstraction of the ‘thing’ we want to focus on. We access and speak about things using names and in doing so, commit a gesture of abstraction. Things and their names are inseparable. Likewise, Hayles also notes the reverse: “to change the physical form of the artifact is not merely to change the act of reading but profoundly to transform the metaphoric network structuring the relation of word to world”.²⁰ Therefore, some notion other than ‘textuality’—a term that carries a lot of literary baggage—is required for reading materiality; extending materiality beyond the

19 Cubitt. *Digital Aesthetics*, 7

20 N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines*, (The MIT Press, 2002). 23-25.

physical necessitates a Derridean move; what is the metadata of this new, embodied literature? Where and what is the information that gives us recognition of its readability?

In their own ways, Cubitt and Hayles both refute the age-old quarrel among critics about whether reading is interpretation or explanation by tethering the meaning to physical form and its materiality. This immediately discounts the authority of the text as something that can be specified in advance. In its place is, however, no stable notion of materiality either. Hayles's insistence on what she calls the "emergent property" of materiality focuses on how a text "mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user's interactions with the work."²¹ In this sense, the notion of an embodied text is not simply a book or webpage to be read by a 'reader' or 'user'. The reader also becomes maker, creator and writer, rather than merely the reader of a book. Thus, the notion of materiality as an emergent property of the print text reflects a mutual de-emphasis of reading as a gesture that privileges the reader's needs and actions, and that of our (Biblical) fetish of physical objects. Materiality is not so much a state of being as it

21 Hayles, *Writing Machines*, 33.

is a possibility between the two, like Derrida's notion of readability. The unit of analysis for any reading is no longer the book or the reader but both, which also calls for a rethinking of the notion of 'a book' as a self-contained object. The reader is the book and the book is the reader. This conception of reader/book also diminishes the authorial view of writing with echoes of Barthes' famous claims: "[Unlike the Author] the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate."²² Although his focus was not on materiality, Barthes' refusal to treat the book as a mere "predicate" for meaning (being) does pave the way for materiality—as opposed to authority—to join interpretative strategy of the printed text. Of course this is a big challenge. Like Hayles, Christopher Pinney is very much cognizant of the fact that "the purification of the world into objects and subjects cannot be easily undone" and in fact for Pinney, our concerns with materiality deal with questions that are not only ontological but also ethical and epistemological: "the more objectively the object appears, the more subjectively the subject arises, and the more our

22 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music Text*, (Fontana, 1977). 145

teaching about the world turns into a doctrine of man.”²³ This leads us to a radical break from the efforts of bibliographic studies to treat materiality *as part of textuality* because the material remains subordinate to the same cultures and histories that spawned “literary studies”. In this sense, Hayles is more useful than Tanselle, Moylan and Stiles, because her notion of the “emergent property” of materiality (used to create notions of “material metaphors” and “technotexts”²⁴) may be taken to suggest she does not decide in advance that materiality is a manifestation of a textual force. Rather, it is the materiality of the print book that creates its own systemic force field. Materiality is not just another sign in the book’s textual system and its comprehensibility, or *readability* cannot be reduced to the “triumph of semiology over corporeality”.²⁵

Keeping this view in mind, I want to use the zine form as an example of the kind of textured

23 Christopher Pinney, “Things happen: or, from which moment does that object come?”. In Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 257-258.

24 Hayles, *Writing Machines*, 18-34.

25 Pinney, “Things happen: or, from which moment does that object come?”. In Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality*, 266.

and textual form requiring an act of reading that involves uniting material and text, form and content, in which it is their “printedness” that can drive a history of reading. Temporarily, I will call this a shift towards “zineic history” of reading. Crucially, this approach builds on, but moves away from the work of bibliographic studies. Borrowing ideas from Cubitt, Hayles and Pinney, I argue that there are two properties at work in reading the zine medium: materiality and textuality. The former refers to the fused relationship between the zine and the reader while the latter provokes an inquiry into what sort of history of reading may be determined by the struggles occurring at the level of print textures. For this purpose, textuality helps to construct a historical representation of reading in which textures are not simply the set of evidence of closed cultural, social and indeed, religious contexts at work.

Towards a ‘Zineic History’ of Reading

Historians and archivists have traditionally categorized zines as ephemeral print among

posters, flyers, brochures, comics, newsletters and all kinds of publication that cannot be comfortably classified as books or literature. In the category of ephemera, zines is a relatively recent invention evolved from the comics and fan zines of the 1940s to gain roughly defined dimensions in the punk movement of the 1970s. A zine is usually handmade using rough and ready methods of collage, handwriting, scanning and photocopying. Like the term ephemera suggests, a zine is not made for the purposes of enduring posterity or commercial profitability. Early zine makers create zines at their own expense for no other reason except because they can and want to write/make and publish whatever they want for whoever chooses to read them. From the standpoint of the politics of culture, Amy Spencer explains that a zine is a format created for defying the mainstream of published content and for the “celebration of the amateur writer”.²⁶ This attitude, Stephen Duncombe explains, is carried over from low production values in the punk music movement of the 1960s and 1970s both in America and in the UK, lending the term ‘lo-fi’ for describing the

²⁶ Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 2008), 17.

aesthetic principle of zine-making.²⁷ The lo-fi zine is an adamantly unpolished object that operates against “fetishistic archiving and exhibiting of the high art world.”²⁸ Visually, Teal Triggs identifies zines as having “a graphic language of [cultural] resistance” in which the “small, stapled format, ‘spontaneous’ page layout, the production values of the photocopier” are visual reflections of punk identity and anti-capitalistic politics.²⁹ Any typographic and design ‘errors’ or tears in the pages and binding are deliberate, and “instead of allowing readers to relax and slip into the medium, zines push them away ... zines are dissonant, their juxtaposition in design and strong feelings in content are unsettling”.³⁰ Duncombe considers this the punk zine’s Brechtian strategy of instigating ‘reading-as-acting’, as Mark G of the 1976 British zine, *Sniffin’ Glue*, declares: “All you kids out there who read ‘SG’ don’t be satisfied with what we write. Go out and start your own fanzines”.³¹ Evidently, these examinations of zines

27 Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture* (Bloomington: Microcosm Publishing, 2008), 125.

28 Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 134.

29 Teal Triggs, *Fanzines* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 46-49.

30 Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 134.

31 Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 125

demonstrate a keen awareness of the physical qualities of the interface between maker, zine and reader; Duncombe's Brechtian interpretation of punk zines does go some way to giving focus to the materiality between the zine and reader as a force that mobilizes both the reader's cultural subjectivity and zine object, an effect not unlike the "emergent property" of print as earlier pointed out by Hayles. Nevertheless, the cultural-social approach risks treating the reading of zines to the interpretative tool of literary textuality. For example, in Alison Piepmeier's argument for zines and their makers as an "embodied community", she stresses the importance of "bindings, illustrations, paper, typeface, layout ... as parts of a semiotic system, parts of the total meaning of a text".³² Piepmeier gives the example of how in the mid-1990s Nomy Lamm used her zine, *I'm So Fucking Beautiful*, to "document her frustration with being a large woman in a culture that derides fat ... deploying visual and spatial properties of her medium" to resist social conventions of female representation.³³ The zine's

32 Alison Piepmeier, "Why Zines matter: materiality and the creation of embodied community", *American Periodicals: A journal of History, Criticism and Bibliography*, 18(2), 2008, 216-217.

33 Piepmeier, "Why Zines matter: materiality and

material qualities—handwriting, angry scribbles and scrawls, visible typos and small 4”by 3” size—is viewed as an enabler of a human community of social affect—in Lamm’s case, a community of women—and therefore the zine remains treated as an empty object that owes its significance to pre-given discursive structures of meaning. There appears to be a dialectical process in which (punk/female) subject makes (zine) object makes (punk/female) subject but as Pinney warns, “to stress the smoothness of this process” is to fully assimilate the object’s disparate specificities of time and places into a “coterporaneous” context.³⁴ As such, the materiality of zines could all too easily be absorbed into the disembodied histories such as punk culture or feminism. These are valuable polemic projects, but such endeavors act as an ahistorical demand of zines.

Thanks to work such as Duncombe, Spencer, Piepmeier and Triggs, the significance of zines as an instrument for deterritorializing culture is now more widely understood than before but arguably, their work produce histories of punk, DIY, craft, politics of the individual rather than that of zines as material and printed (or photocopied)

the creation of embodied community”.

34 Pinney. *Materiality*, 268-269.

textures. Within these narratives, reading is understood a cultural retaliation affirming both human agency and subjectivities of networked communities both online and offline. And even such claims can be qualified in many ways. For example, these communities are less sharply defined than suggested, since crafted, 'punk' and self-styled autographical zines today are also widely circulated and consumed by new cultural intermediaries within art and design practice and the creative elite who appropriate white space, typefaces, Xerox ink and paper grammage into markers of class taste for visual feasting rather than real commitment to a (or against) unified 'big idea', if such a thing even exists. A more complex account of zines might stress the factors of cultural and commercial economy that both constitute and fragment these zine 'communities'. This may go some way to suggesting that reading is a differentiated and situated material practice as much as it is a textual one.

The task of understanding the materiality and textuality of printed matter is still largely untouched. The readability of zines remains strictly a privilege of specific groups (punks) or individuals (fans) who make culture and history and we are nowhere nearer to dissolving the textual primacy of (non)histories of printed

matter. For example, less often emphasized in popular zine histories is the fact that the punk movement had perhaps less to do with the zine ‘revolution’ than the photocopier machine. As Roger Sabin points out:

One other factor probably fuelled the small press boom more than punk: the photocopier, increasingly available in offices, libraries and high street shops after 1980. The small press equivalent of punk fanzine *Sniffin’ Glue*’s famous rallying call, ‘This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. *Now form a band*’ would be, ‘This is a felt tip pen. This is a piece of paper. This is a photocopier. Now start a *comic*.’³⁵

Furthermore, we can also remove the photocopied materiality of zines from Sabin’s context of punk legacy to show how the Xeroxed surface did not always read as Anti-Establishment and Anti-Design Materialized. The (lo) fidelity of a photocopied copy is to light not to the textual substance and meanings. Chester Carlson, while meditating on psi— a term from parapsychology

35 Roger Sabin, *Punk rock: so what? The cultural legacy of punk*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 111.

denoting the transfer of information or energy via unknown mechanisms—in 1967 wrote of his pursuit for “true painless copy”. His invention of the photocopy process that would later give offices all over the world the Xerox copier, held the aim to “reflect a higher-order transcription, its metamorphosis of light into charge into image into record akin to the metamorphosis of spirit from one body to the next”.³⁶ By 1971, billions of pages were annually photocopied all over the developed world and somewhere among them were perhaps the photocopies of *Sniffin’ Glue* zines, moments belonging to True, Painless Photochemical Copies of Corporate Documents on the one hand, and that of DIY Revolution on the other. And while I am being rather flippant here of Schwartz’s superb history of Copy, Carlson’s story shows how photocopied objects diffract, like light, in unpredictable ways to implicate a complex reading of zine materiality and textuality that is not sufficiently explained by the histories of counter-cultural resistance or subcultural movements. My critique is not to suggest that zines are completely unconnected to these cultural histories. What I am positing is that zines are also a part of a textured and material territory that can produce no less

36 Schwartz, *The Culture of Copy*, 232.

political histories of our engagement with printed matter than the usual cultural timelines. This has important implications on how we understand the notion of reading.

Spatializing Textured Reads

The zine form is such that reading them often takes place in bedrooms, pubs, fairs, out of cardboard boxes and specialist bookshops. The idea of preserving, organizing and cataloguing zines is paradoxical since they have such low monetary value and are not usually made to last, however lovingly they are put together by zinesters. Unlike books, the practice of building archives and designating reading areas for zines is a fairly recent phenomenon. In 1993, avid zine collector, reviewer and maker of *Factsheet Five* zine listing, Mike Gunderloy, donated about 10,000 zines to the New York State Library.³⁷ This donation marks the beginnings of printed zines into public reading spaces. However, before Gunderloy, zines might have snuck into library archives under the umbrella label of ephemera.

³⁷ Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture*, 40-41.

Institutions have been building collections of printed ephemera over the last 100 years. Oxford's Bodleian acquired the John Johnson collection of printed ephemera in 1968 and it contains over a million items that date from 1508 to 1939. It is hard to say whether zines, as we understand it today, existed that long ago but much of the archived material, such as 19th century entertainment, book trade publications, pamphlets, advertisements and popular prints, certainly share some formal qualities with zines. These value of these collections is not dissimilar to book libraries who, in their founding statements, express "a conception of reading as knowledge", a view that Cubitt reminds us, is "an imperial conception".³⁸ Libraries value printed ephemera as a research instrument for scholars interested in popular culture, gender, print and visual culture, architecture, consumption and many other types of subject matter. Modern libraries view zines in much the same way. Stoddart and Kiser assert that zines should be in libraries because they "provide insight into today's modern popular culture" and zine collections will help "preserve an alternative point of view, celebrate individual expression, or provide a written document of

38 Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics*, 9.

our accelerated culture”³⁹ Nevertheless, the challenges of translating library devices for books—catalogues, index, bibliographies, access, preservation—into those for zines is a often an awkward and unwieldy task. Although some zines can be treated as a periodical itemized by ‘author’, ‘title’, ‘serial number’ and ‘subject matter’, such a catalogue will completely ignore the material and textured aspect of zine reading, turning them into objects of specific reading subjects. The catalogue design in libraries is usually organized based on the assumption that reading is a purely textual experience. Even if we accept for the moment that zines *should* be in public reading spaces, the consideration of *how* must avoid effacing the readability of the zine material under the sign of the Text. According to Cubitt,

We read quite often for the purposes for which originality, authenticity, the formal properties of the text or quality of experience are unimportant ... and in focusing on communication over medium, negates at once the specificities of the interface ... evokes

39 Richard A Stoddart and Teresa Kiser, *Zines and the Library*, in *Library Resources & Technical Services*, 48(3), July 2004, 193.

a social world in which neither text nor place of reading is specified, and potentially all places become the same. But rather than make a map the size of the world, we construct social places which can function as universal; the library foremost among them.⁴⁰

Classifying and storing zines as printed ephemera, especially in the space of great libraries such as the Bodleian, may in fact result in a space in which no zine reading occurs at all, since the textures and materiality of the printed form will be subordinate to the usual meta markers of textual readability. Along with a reconfiguration of our notions of reading comes the necessity of recasting our notions of access, catalogue, preservation and crucially, our notion of archive.

Acknowledging the fact that the Internet is changing the way reading environments are configured, libraries including the Bodleian and the British Library are digitizing large quantities of their print holdings, especially those printed ephemera whose degradation is inevitable due to paper quality, usage and storage conditions. Converting ink and paper to pixels and putting

40 Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics*, 10.

them online is seen as a way of overcoming material ephemerality; the underlying assumption in such digitization projects is: once we remove materiality and texture, the content is set free into the realm of immaterial, electronic permanence and reading can now take place anywhere and anytime outside the brick and mortar library spaces. On the one hand, this seems like an obvious solution for zines as well; not only are we able to preserve these valued evidences of culture and society for future study, reading zines—which are often short, mostly visual and only loosely linear—seems to bear some resemblance to Net surfing or browsing. On the other hand, some zines are already designed to be ‘natively’ digital. Triggs describes e-zines emerging from the late 1990s made by producers who applied the DIY principles to the Internet medium.⁴¹ Alongside these digital zines emerged online discussion groups, newsgroups and cover page zine listings, taking full advantage of technology for interactivity, feedback and distribution. They “allow for a greater flexibility to move in between texts or through links to external sites” and thus producing “a different sort of connection between reader and producer”.⁴² E-zine makers who do

41 Triggs, *Fanzines*, 171.

42 Triggs, *Fanzines*, 175.

not know how to program their own websites use blogs as handy interfaces with their readers and other zine makers. E-zines are so popular nowadays that its fans claim that printed zines are just paper blogs. This leads us to an interesting scenario: a quarrel has emerged between digital zines and print zines not unlike the quarrel between purveyors of books and online reading. There are “print purists”, to borrow Triggs’ phrase, among fans of paper zines who deride digital zines for their lack of material design and argue that the virtual interaction of zine readers is inferior to the ‘laboured’ experience of meeting and swapping zines face-to-face, reading them in zine fairs.

Again, the divide between virtual reading and print reading is a false one because each medium’s specific materiality interacts with that of the zine. In other words, a printed zine becomes a wholly different zine when scanned and digitized and likewise, a natively digital zine is fundamentally transformed when converted into printed matter. Furthermore, the digitized-from-print zine is also different from the natively digital zine. Why? Because a new object is formed in each medium’s materiality. The dream of digitized and eternal ephemera, freed from the mortality of bodily decay and age is a reader’s textual fantasy. As

Richard Rogers reminds us, web archives are in fact, fed and sustained by both hardware and software, the “fixed” ephemerality is a precarious material state, more “undead” than dead, more zombies than ghosts.⁴³ The easy clicks, categorized hyperlinks and fast-scrolling through listings hide the material mechanical workings of the ‘fixed’ ephemera from view, privileging the virtual pages of print as a stable, separate and non-physical objects. For libraries attempting to archive and catalogue printed zines, there is a risk of taming the experience of reading by taming zines into objects separate from subjectivity.

Therefore, if we indeed have a ‘reading crisis’, it should have more to do with the fact that ‘readability’ is often only recognized when it has a reading subject who perceives either the text or the material in arbitrary hierarchies; and the reliance on perception rather than reading as a specific practice instantiated by *both* material and textual properties, that our notion of reading should account for the textures and material we take in using, as Hayles points out, our “vision,

43 Richard Rogers, *The End of the Virtual: Digital Methods*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 10.

tactility, smell and proprioception”⁴⁴ Just as paper and ink manuscripts and printed books expanded empires by creating, colonizing and organizing knowledge, the wholesome ubiquity of zines is so easy to love but if such printed matter are to be valued, rather than *purified*, we must ask ourselves, what mode of reading dominates our love?⁴⁵

44 Hayles, *Writing Machines*, 75.

45 Indeed, the love of zines is also the love of the amateur, a person whose name is derived from the French word for love: amour.