Pixel and Ink

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In the twentieth century the French philosopher Blanchot could write: "Culture is linked to the book. The book as repository and receptable of knowledge is identified with knowledge." I do understand these sentences of Blanchot, but only because I know about the historical situation in which he was writing. During the twentieth century print culture was dominant, and metaphors derived from book culture and print culture were used to make sense of how we deal with knowledge, stories, information, and writing. When thinking from the present conditions, Blanchot's statement is simply strange. It's as if one hears someone speak from a far removed past, when everything was totally different and different metaphors were used to make sense of what's going on in the world.

Of course in the statement of Blanchot, 'book' is not simply a printed book, a stack of printed papers with a cover: the codex as it exists since the early Middle Ages. 'Book' is itself a metaphor. Blanchot writes: "The book is not only the book that sits in libraries (...) The book is the Book. (...) [T]he book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading and writing." [1] But even that notion of 'Book' is linked to a certain way of dissemination of knowledge: namely by way of paper that carries writing.

How do we obtain our information? How do we process knowledge? When we read, what do we read from? When we write, what technology do we use? My reading and writing environment is definitively my laptop, only occasionally I take notes in a little notebook [2]. There are fewer and fewer instances in which I use print, or even prefer print over digital means. One of these instances is reading novels. But even the latter is tied up with digital information, – not only in how that information came to me (the books I read aren't set in lead), also in reading behavior.

At the present moment I am reading Against the Day (2006), the 1085 pages long novel of Thomas Pynchon. Just like many many other readers of that novel I check the pynchon-wiki quite a lot, and google my way around to learn about the historical and scientific sources that Pynchon draws upon. When I find something useful I might put it on the pynchon-

wiki. When I come across a particular passage in the novel that I would like to remember, I copy it, and publish it on my blog. How clumsy print technology is: I have to type all the words again. I am used to copy-pasting, adding comments to existing text, making it circulate and play a role in communications and day-by-day thinking. I know that a digital text of Against the Day exists. I paid for the book, why can't I have access to the digital text? I am a bit annoyed about not having the digital text. The book itself, by the way, is heavier and and more voluminous than my laptop; I don't carry it around everywhere.

Yet there is no doubt that I love books. My annoyance is just another sign of the fact that we do not live in a print society anymore. Print is not the default choice for the distribution and circulation of knowledge, it constitutes a special case. How we deal with information, what we do with it, how we act upon it, how we pass it on, how and when we react, how we read, how we get informed, how we process and share knowledge, is decided by the technologies of online publishing. 'We' westerners with our computers, mobile phones and adsl connections are living in a world in which online information has taken priority over offline information. We might still have books, printed magazines and printed newspapers, but they are a sign of the presence of our past. When we write, we use laptops, a keyboard (mostly) and wordprocessing software. Paper isn't connected so nicely to the networked digital infrastructure where knowledge and news circulates, where most of the debates, discussion and conversations are going on. We have various reading and writing machines that are directly or indirectly linked to that network. Laptops mostly, and home-computers, but also various PDA's, smartphones, iPods, or, the most recent addition, electronic ink-tablets. These reading and writing machines might not be perfect, they might even be clumsy and ugly, but a lot of printed books and magazines are pretty clumsy too.

This situation begs the question: Why do we print? Or, probably the better question, when do we print, when do we prefer hardcopy? We should simply try to answer that question in the full knowledge that the transition from a print culture to a digital culture, is a complex process where technological, cultural, economic and political actors all play a role. [3]

First of all, we prefer printed books sometimes because we love the feel of paper, the smell of ink, the physical quality of a book, the high resolution images. Or because we feel that the the meaning of printed words is dependent on the physical manifestation on paper, in a bound book – and would be different when read from a screen. Such books exist, they

constitute a specialized, quite marginal niche of its own, where one finds artist books. (Actually the current interest of artists for making books and printed magazines might exactly derive from the fact that print is becoming marginal and constitutes a special choice). Books are a luxury. Reading from paper is at the moment also preferred in situations where contemplation is called for. Since our reading machines are often also writing machines and other texts or communication options are just a keyboard stroke away, they emphasize processing information – acting on it – over concentration on the text itself. A printed book on the other hand presents itself (physically) as a closed system, it is finished, has a beginning and end, and the links do not work. It is easier – at least for someone who grew up in a book culture and who loves to read – to concentrate reading a book, than to read from a computerscreen. Offline the desire to follow the links, look at other stuff, quickly check e-mail is less present. Yet I am inclined to believe that this also depends on one's own attitude towards reading from a screen.

We cannot rule out the role of nostalgia here: whomever grew up loving books, will want to hold on to that experience. Neither can we erase the financial question. Books and magazines are objects to be sold, though this becomes more and more difficult. There exists an economy around it that isn't going to disappear overnight. Moreover a book published with a 'real' publisher gives the writer or editor a certain status. The question is, how long will this still be the case?

Much more interesting is the phenomenon of Print-on-Demand services that show that print is not dead yet (and that in the development of technologies different paths can be taken). One could've expected that small magazines would disappear as print magazines, arguing that they become too expensive in an online culture. Yet the technology of Print-on-Demand, coupled with online distribution, surprisingly presents possibilities for small print magazines to survive in a printed format. For Print on Demand it hardly matters if you print 3000 copies or 100, or, for that matter just one. Print-on-Demand conjures up an utopia where a copy is printed only when someone actually orders one, for instance through Amazon. (ISBN-numbers can be assigned automatically). Most importantly, it presents the dream of customized books and magazines: the user makes an online-collection of articles on the website of the magazine; the collection is made into a pdf – using xml-to-pdf translation; the pdf is sent to the printer. A week later you have a book delivered to your door by the postman. In the current situation there are still a few bottlenecks, but

The Magnet Reader

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the English magazine Mute is quite far with the development of a usable and also more or less financially sound distribution of customized printed magazines, collected from their online database of articles. Another example in this area is the service that makes POD-books from wikipedia content. Note that in this case all the articles are online available, free of charge. One could also print the pdf on one's own printer. But it might be easier (and even cheaper) to order a POD-copy.

This brings us back again to the question: when does one want to have, and pay for, a printed collection of texts one can read for free online.

Although our infrastructure of networked computers is very good in having information circulate, it is not good in having us actually remember the existence of a certain piece of information. All the different solutions that have been designed for having us remember that a text is present on the machine, that we still should read it, or that can make us remember a reading experience, come across as rather weak in comparison to the physicality of the book . Yes, we put the icon on the desktop that on clicking opens the pdf of a still to be read theory text. Yes, we make bookmarks, and collect links on del.icio.us. We might even put stickies (the real ones) with a url on the hardware. But nothing beats the existence of a stack of paper that is physically present next to our reading and writing machine, a book that is permanently visible on a bookshelf, or a magazine that we carry around in our bags. [4] The physical presence I see as the strongest point of print. (It's a weak point too, when it comes to storing or moving the stuff). Underlining text, writing in the margin, dog-earring pages, putting post-its over text are sometimes cited as making the book a better or more humanly manageable technology. But all those techniques for the future processing of information, of thinking with or against the text, of future remembering are done much better by networked digital means. How to make that post-it work? Do I have to type all those sentences again?

When I would like to carry a text with me for a longer time, I am much better off with a stack of paper. One is prepared to pay for that too. Sometimes one is prepared to pay a lot of money for it, sometimes only a small amount. It depends on the length of time, one wants to be reminded of the text. There are texts that we like to carry around with us our whole lives, like Orthodox Christians do with the Bible, or, in my case Finnegans Wake. Other texts we only want to carry around for a certain time, maybe a few months, or weeks, because they are central to a topical debate, or to an issue one is interested in at a moment in time. These

are the collections of articles and essays on a special subject that we call (special interest) magazines. There is a gap here for small print-on-demand magazines. For these magazines the editorial choice, the care taken in making a collection is crucial – this can be done by editors, by readers, and of course by software that connects and analyses the networked collective intelligence of online users.

But in all the instances the reader also wants an electronic copy. Certainly when one has paid for the information. Why should I, when I have paid for the stack of paper with the text of Against the Day, have to copy sentences by hand when I desire to quote Pynchon on my blog? Why shouldn't I get the possibility to read that very text on a laptop (or smartphone or iPod)? [5]

The Against the Day-example is just an anecdote. Yet I think that customers in the future will come to regard buying non-transferrable text printed on paper as a very strange option. (Just like buying a CD one cannot rip to play on an iPod). But when we like to carry a text with us for our whole life, or when we would even like it to live on after we die, we're much better off by printing it on good paper with good ink. Although we can store much more in much less space by digital means, bit-rot, digital decay and the problem of unreadable disks and tapes seems to do more harm to digital data than moisture and mice do to books. That's why I have started to buy books.

Notes

1. Maurice Blanchot, 'The Absence of the Book' in The Station Hill Blanchot Reader, Barrytown, Station Hill, 1999, p. 471 - 486, (p. 471).
2. It's years since I found a notebook with good paper. The much-praised and far too expensive Moleskine's have rotten paper if one uses a fountain-pen. Also in that 'aesthetic' sense notebooks haven't got much of an attraction.
3. Although in the experience of a lot of people, especially the younger generations, this transition has taken place, our society and economy is still in the middle of it – as the crisis of the printing industry and the strategic developments in the newspaper and content industry show).
4. The only thing that might beat it is programming a pdf to send us an e-mail, a text-message, or even call us once in while speaking the words: "hey, remember me, I want to be read".
5. Would a more or less free circulation of the complete text of Against the Day have had a negative effect on the sale of that novel? I suspect not. I'm not arguing that the text should be available free of charge – although packaging the electronic text with the printed book will in practice make it available for free to those who know to find the underground circuits. When all texts will be ciculated digitally, the power in the content industry will shift. We can only hope – no, we must hope – that GooglePrint will not take that whole market in cooperation with Amazon.