



**GENERATOR**

**JANINA SOMMERLAD**

**THE  
AESTHETICS  
OF DIGITAL  
BOOKS**

**FROHMANN**

**Janina Sommerlad:  
The Aesthetics of Digital Books.  
A Dispute with the Digital Medium**

Imprint

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You need to take off your glasses.  
I only see myself in the reflection.  
We are so far away from balance.

Flaneur Magazine  
Issue 03, Rue Bernard  
Montreal

# AC KNOW LEDGE MENTS

For the design of this paper, I was inspired by the digital publishers I interviewed for this paper, mikrotex, Frohmann Verlag, CulturBooks and Das BEBEN, and also by the digital art catalogue 'Playtime,' produced on the occasion of an events series in the Munich-based gallery Lenbachhaus. The catalogue was designed as ePub and PDF by the German agency Herburg Weiland and offers an appealing layout structure, typeface, and image representation. I encountered the publication after the interview with eBook developer and designer Andrea Nienhaus, who called my attention for it. Also, my design is influenced by the publication *Thinking in Type* by graphic designer, writer, and curator Ellen Lupton, the works of German book designer Jenna Gesse, as well as by the magazines of the independent music and art foundation 'Subbacultcha' based in Amsterdam.

The type design of this paper contains the serif font 'Times' for most of the body text. The sans serif typeface 'Roboto' by designer Christian Robertson is used in condensed and bold for headlines and opening quotes, whereas the more 'casual' parts, as well as image descriptions and footnotes, appear in the typeface's regular style. I decided on these typefaces because the disparity between playful and rigid fonts reveals a harmonic and modern arrangement.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Erin La Cour for her guidance, encouragement and inspiration. Thanks also goes to Claire De Jager for her editing work and advice. As my paper deals with issues of design aesthetics, I am grateful to Dr. Carolyn Birdsall and Dr. Carolin Gerlitz of the department of Media Studies for allowing me to cite in Chicago style, which fits the overall design of this paper. I want to dedicate this paper to my family who always support and motivate me.

# 1

## INTRO DUCTION

**In this postmodern world, individuals flee from the 'desert of the real' for the ecstasies of hyperreality and the new realm of computer, media, and technological experience.<sup>1</sup>**

As technology has become embedded into human lives, the relationship between the human body and artificial devices has begun to alter the image of humans remarkably. Indeed, our strong dependence on technologies has an impact and influence on everyday life; according to Baudrillard, individuals are no longer located in the real world, but have escaped to another world, or, let us phrase it more cynically, to an unreal world.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, not only has our environment changed, but so have individuals themselves: we transformed from humans to posthumans once we entered the gate of technological experience. Because Baudrillard interpreted the postmodern world in terms of media development in the late 1970s, and a great deal of advancement has occurred within the field of media since then, I am aware that it is precarious to present the French theorist in this light.<sup>3</sup> That said, I want to stubbornly continue to use his view because I am convinced that it has not become obsolete, as one could argue, but rather is still a fruitful consideration.

Within the realm of the digital era, electronic publishing, writing, and reading take place in the virtual world or *hyperreality*. Electronic publications – or eBooks as they are called – are burdened with the connotation of being 'unreal' since they cannot be held in one's hand (without a supporting device) and they do not smell of ink. These are two examples of why digital products still do not find the same admiration as traditional books, or put differently, why some readers are still located in the *desert of the real*. The history of

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard in Marcel Danesi, *Encyclopedia of Media and Communication* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Mark BN Hansen, 'Media Theory', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23.2-3 (2006): 301.

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard in Danesi, *Encyclopedia*, 49.

eBooks may have started in the early 1970s with the first digital library called ‘Project Gutenberg,’ but gained popularity and worldwide distribution beginning in 2003.<sup>4</sup> So, while the digital book is not a new phenomenon at all, the debate about the format’s advantages and issues is still ongoing even if at times it seems highly exhausted.

## 1.1 Problem and Motivation

Aesthetics play an important role in the production and existence of print books. Designers are offered many options to conceptualize the inside as well as the outside of a book. Since digital books are still in a nascent phase, it seems that they do not receive the same recognition in this particular field. Because paper type, paper thickness, and book jacket are not relevant in the digital medium, the question of what elements are required to create and achieve an aesthetic identity for eBooks arises. In connection to philosopher Vilém Flusser and his examination about photographers, who he states that ‘they do not want to change the world, but [...] are in search of information,’ I argue that we should be in search of information about the digital medium, and hence book culture.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, I want to look beyond the aforementioned debate about formats to instead investigate the design of digital books to “find information” in this field and help them receive a similar aesthetic consideration as print books do. Here, it is important to mention that I will mainly concentrate on born-digital books, which are primarily produced for digital reading, and thereby stand in contrast to converted eBooks, which are based on paper (a distinction that will be explained further into this paper). This will allow me to make the research on aesthetics more applicable and informative as it considers books born from the affordances of the digital medium. This paper, therefore, offers two key considerations, which are strongly related to each other: ‘Aesthetic Standards for the eBook’ and ‘The Aesthetic Divide between Print and Digital.’

### 1. Aesthetic Standards for the eBook

Aesthetics in general refers to the sensory experience of individuals, and mostly is connected to the idea of beauty. This approach is mainly

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<sup>4</sup> Marie Lebert, *A Short History of eBooks* (Canada: University of Toronto, 2009), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Flusser in Brooke Wendt, *The Allure of the Selfie: Instagram and the New Self Portrait* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2014), 10.

based on the theorists Paul Hekkert, Clement Greenberg, Paul Ford, Walter Benjamin and Nick Peim, who will be demonstrated further into this paper. Due to the reason that decisions on aesthetics are normally influenced by personal senses, the theory is difficult to grasp and to consider impartially. However, when we shift away from subjectiveness and rather define beauty with the help of standard criteria, aesthetics might become less blurred. Different fields of media, such as art, music and literature have determined criteria in order to evaluate aesthetically beautiful objects. In focusing on the field of literature and more specifically the design of books, whereas print books need to fulfill certain well-established standards, the importance for digital book standards has not been recognized yet; eBooks are still said to be labelled with personal taste and thus do not receive full aesthetic recognition.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to find and develop standards for eBooks to be able to evaluate their aesthetic appearance in the same objective way as traditional books. To find and compile criteria, I interviewed four digital publishers from Germany, mikrotext, Frohmann Verlag, CulturBooks and Das BEBEN, who already claim a digital aesthetic and try to produce valuable eBooks for their readers. The reason why I selected these publishers is because they each offer an appealing and conceived design concept, albeit in very different ways. The reason why I exclusively concentrate on Germany is because the eBook (pure digital) community is considerably large and was formed in early 2012, especially in Berlin and Munich.<sup>7</sup> Besides many publishers concentrating ‘only’ on the digital book business and production, there are also plenty of events that aim to promote the digital medium in general, including The Electric Book Fair in Berlin (EBF), which was launched in 2014 by some of the interviewed publishers. The debut fair brought together digital experts and hosted talks on topical issues, including ‘The New Kind of Publishers,’ ‘Real-time Publishing,’ ‘Visualization,’ ‘Reading in the 21st Century,’ and ‘Piracy.’<sup>8</sup> Besides the EBF, there is the eBookathon, an eBook meet up group, as well as the eBook Network, an initiative and community for digital publishing in Berlin.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the scene also includes

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Nienhaus, interview by Janina Sommerlad, April 1, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> ‘E-Book Verlage und Distributoren’, accessed June 1, 2015, <http://www.text-manufaktur.de/e-book-verlage.html>.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Programm 2014’, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://2014.electricbookfair.de/en/ueber>.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Information Text’, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://ebooknetworkberlin.blogspot.nl/>.



independent distributors such as the eBook boutique [minimore.de](http://minimore.de), who focus on the selling of eBooks only and thus work apart from large platforms like Amazon, for instance.

Overall, as Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard once said, ‘when Shakespeare is the greatest poet and Minetti the greatest actor, then Siegfried Unseld is the greatest publisher.’<sup>10</sup> Unseld was a German publisher and head of the famous publishing house, Suhrkamp. As the quote shows, when it comes to the topic of publishing, people still refer to reputable, traditional publishers. And yet, as the book culture has transformed and developed further into a digital realm, the question then arises: Who is the greatest digital publisher? Significantly, the purpose of this paper is not to award the best digital publisher; however, with the establishment of aesthetic standards for eBooks, perhaps in the future, a digital publisher will be able to join the list of the ‘greatest’ and complete the aforementioned sentence according to the digital movement and current age in general.

## **2. The Aesthetic Divide between Print and Digital**

With the publisher’s data and information about their design concept, I wanted to learn if digital books have their own aesthetic look tied to the digital medium, or if, on the contrary, they overlap with the print medium, meaning that born-digital books share aesthetic features from both print and digital media. Possible results could be that the print and digital medium intertwine and that the design is hybrid, consisting of old elements in new forms. For instance, when we consider the production of both book formats, it becomes clear that they intersect: not only digital books, but also print publications are produced digitally, in Microsoft Word or InDesign for instance, and first when the PDF is sent to the printing shop, the physical character becomes visible.<sup>11</sup> Since this example shows that it is problematic to regard the media separated to each other, it is important to consider if the same can be applied for the field of aesthetics. However, another result could be that the ‘new’ digital medium should be considered as detached and disconnected from the print medium because its aesthetics, in

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Muender, ‘Siegfried Unseld: Chronik 1971’, *CulturMag*, April 8, 2015, <http://culturmag.de/rubriken/buecher/siegfried-unseld-chronik-1971/86936>.

<sup>11</sup> Nienhaus, interview, 2015.