From Content to Context: How Book Collectors Demonstrate the Contemporary Significance of Books

Elizabeth Lenaghan

26 April 2009
MiT6 Conference Paper

Abstract: In past decades, book historians have paid increasing attention to the physical properties of books in an attempt to explore their cultural significance. However, this increased attention has also exposed the tendency of the discipline to foreground the physical aspects of books at the expense of ignoring the social world surrounding them. Thus, the importance of studying the habits and practices of book collectors in order to better understand the significance of the material object of the book not only works to fill in gaps left by book history's efforts to understand books as material objects, but also contributes to our broader understanding of the social practices surrounding technologies. In sum, focusing on the practices and habits of book collectors highlights the crucial role people play in determining the relevance of technologies.

The value of books has long been equated with their capacity to provide knowledge and content to their readers (Altick 1957, Eisenstein 1979, Johns 1998). However, at a time when content is supplied by a variety of media and the digitization of texts affords the chance to access this content in a variety of platforms, such a pragmatic definition is no longer sufficient as a means of understanding a book's value or worth. Rather, to fully illuminate the social and cultural significance of books, we must understand the habits, attitudes, and ideas of the people and institutions whose interests and livelihoods circulate around them (Bell 2007, Darnton 1982, Miller 2006). Doing so not only allows us to more fully comprehend the myriad significances books might hold, but also assists in defining the distinct role books play amongst other media.

My research attempts to do as much by focusing on the practices and attitudes of book collectors. More specifically, it looks at how book collectors' manners of articulating and demonstrating the importance of their habit might help us to understand both the historical and contemporary significance of books as material objects. To do so, I begin by drawing on two fields of scholarship whose attempts to understand the physical and cultural significance of books have, thus far, fallen short. The first, book history, focuses on the material significance of books as a reflection of the social world of which they are a part. The second, material culture studies, demonstrates the opposite impulse, suggesting that the social world surrounding books is a product of the material properties of books themselves. Demonstrating why both of these disciplines insufficiently account for the people involved with the production and reception of books, I turn to book collectors as a case study for understanding the material role of the book within a larger cultural framework. In this paper, I explore the theoretical and practical

evidence book collectors might offer our larger attempts to understand how books are valued in what is often described as a digital society. Where my other work uses archival and historical evidence to illuminate the specific character of these changes, my focus, here, is to articulate the need for such study.

Book History and Material Culture Studies

The importance of understanding the contemporary role of the book is suggested by the frequent prophesies of its demise (Birkerts 1994, Levy 2000, Levy 2007). Though books are one of civilization's oldest and most lasting technologies, they are often understood as part of a teleological continuum whose more recent inductees—radio, television, the Internet—represent steps away from the print culture of our past and toward a more efficient means of information broadcast and retrieval. Book history scholars perpetuate such arguments with various degrees of gloom and glee. In the traditionalist camp, which sees every advance in the digitization of texts as an affront to the supremacy of the printed book, the elegiac moans of Sven Birkets (1994) reign supreme. In his aptly titled *Gutenberg Elegies* he explains the impetus of his argument:

> As the printed book, and the ways of the book – of writing and reading – are modified, as electronic communications assert dominance, the "feel" of the literary engagement is altered. Reading and writing come to *mean* differently; they acquire new significations. As the world hurtles on toward its mysterious rendezvous, the old act of slowly reading a serious book becomes an elegiac exercise. As we ponder the act, profound questions must arise about our avowedly humanistic values, about spiritual versus material concerns, and about subjectivity itself (p. 6).

Such dramatic predictions are counterbalanced by a number of advocates who anticipate the death of print with an almost childlike glee, reading into its demise the opportunity for digital texts to overthrow the hierarchies suggested by linear narratives and

revolutionize the roles of readers and authors alike (Bolter 1991, Landow 2006, Lanham 2006).

Regardless of whether these book history scholars happily anticipate the book's demise or not, the power such scholarship assigns to media (whether print or digital) is exaggerated at a price. Namely, technology assumes agency at the expense of marginalizing the surrounding social practices. Thus, not only do such arguments reek of technological determinism, they are also apt to contradict themselves by the very medium in which they are presented. This irony has not escaped all critics. John Mowitt astutely pointed to this contradiction in his 1992 monograph, stating, "Either the text's relation to the book has been inadequately theorized (you are, after all, holding a book in your hands), or…the text's theorization is unfinished—hence the prolongation of the era of the book" (p. 1). Over a decade has passed since Mowitt's observation, and the book is neither closer to eradication nor has the text been thoroughly theorized.

However, there have been a number of steps in the right direction. Most notably, the work of D.F. McKenzie (1985) and Jerome McGann (1983) has helped to move textual studies beyond the impulse to create essentialist distinctions between different types of texts (i.e. print vs. digital) and back toward a rhetoric of material forms. McGann, in particular, has specified what he terms "the poetics of the book," which picks up on the work of French theorists such as Gerard Genette (1982) to discuss the production and distribution of books in terms of their material properties (page format, paper, typeface etc.). Using such language to understand the role of print culture in contemporary society is not only useful for helping to make material distinctions between

print and digital texts, but also immensely accommodating for attempts to relate the substantive nature of texts to the social world outside them.

As Roger Chartier (1992) has since argued, "Readers, in fact, never confront abstract, idealized texts detached from any materiality. They hold in their hands or perceive objects and forms whose structures and modalities govern their reading or hearing, and consequently the possible comprehension of the text read or heard" (p. 48). Chartier, like McGann, goes on to point out the institutional structures that govern the reception and production of books, concluding, "We must insist that there is no text outside the material structure in which it is given to be read or heard. Thus there is no comprehension of writing, whatever it may be, which does not depend in some part upon the forms in which it comes to the reader" (p. 51).

Material culture studies, with its focus on these forms, provides yet another arena through which the physical role of the book is theorized. Prominent examples focusing on books include E.A. Levenston's *The Stuff of Literature* (1992), as well as Brenda Danet's "Books, Letters, Documents: The Changing Aesthetics of Texts in Late Print Culture" (1997). Both of these authors focus explicitly on the material aspects of their object of study, but at the expense of considering the larger social world from which these objects are derived. For example, Levenston's book, while explicitly calling attention to how the meaning of a text is constructed by its layout, punctuation, and other paratextual elements, misses the opportunity to relate this meaning to the world outside the text itself. Similarly, Danet's article, while acknowledging that the necessity for studying the material culture of the text is derived in part from the "encounter with the disembodied world of computer-mediated communication," which "startles us into recognizing the

importance of text-as-physical-object in literate culture" (p. 7), does not go far enough in its attempts to relate the material culture of the text to the larger, literate culture of which it is a part. Thus, analyses such as these situate themselves alongside book history's attempts to understand the significance of the books as material objects. That is, they share the impulse of book history for placing the book-as-object at the center of their inquiry, but they do so at the expense of obscuring the complexities of the social world that surrounds these books. Taking the narrow focus of these fields as my point of departure, my research into book collection brings the habits and beliefs of book collectors to the foreground in order to highlight the important role that social practices should play in any attempt to understand either the historical or contemporary significance of books as material objects.

Book Collection as Social Practice

Foregrounding the practices and habits of book collectors situates my attempt to understand the cultural relevance of the book within the larger framework of the social world that surrounds it. I take my cue in this endeavor from cultural sociology and, in particular, Wendy Griswold's work on the cultural diamond (1986, 2004) (Figure 1, below). Within Griswold's framework, the default mode of book history might be categorized as a Marxist or functionalist approach to its object of study in that book historians tend to employ a "top down" view of the way in which the book as a cultural object is a reflection of the social world of which it is a part. In contrast, material culture studies employs a more Weberian orientation. In foregrounding the book as an impetus for their study, material culturalists posit the social world being formed from the "bottom up" (such that the social world is a reflection of the cultural objects that inform it).

Griswold (2004) points out that the limitations to both of these orientations lie in their emphasis on reflection, elaborating,

> For all of their power and plausibility, the theories that concentrate on relating cultural meaning to the social world downplay the role of human agency, of active human beings who produce the ideas, the theologies, the art, the media, and the popular culture that are the vessels of meaning. Similarly, these theories downplay the thoughts and actions of those who receive the cultural messages, who interpret, accept, or reject some of the suggested meanings. In this de-emphasis, they may be said to be incomplete (p. 49).

In contrast, she goes on to suggest, the study of cultural objects should be formulated around what she labels the "cultural diamond," where the cultural objects and the social world (the vertical axis on the diamond) are counterbalanced by the creators and receivers of the objects (horizontal axis). This model of culture, by making explicit the myriad connections between its parts, provides a richer structure through which the role of the book as a material and cultural object might be considered. Research of this sort is increasingly important not only because it fills in gaps left by book history's and material culture studies' attempts to understand books as material objects, but also to our broader understanding of the social practices surrounding technologies. In sum, focusing on the practices and habits of book collectors highlights the important role that people play in determining the relevance of technologies. The extent to which book collectors value books as a product of the even more significant process of accruing them suggests that it is the practice of collection itself that ultimately determines the importance books carry for their collectors.

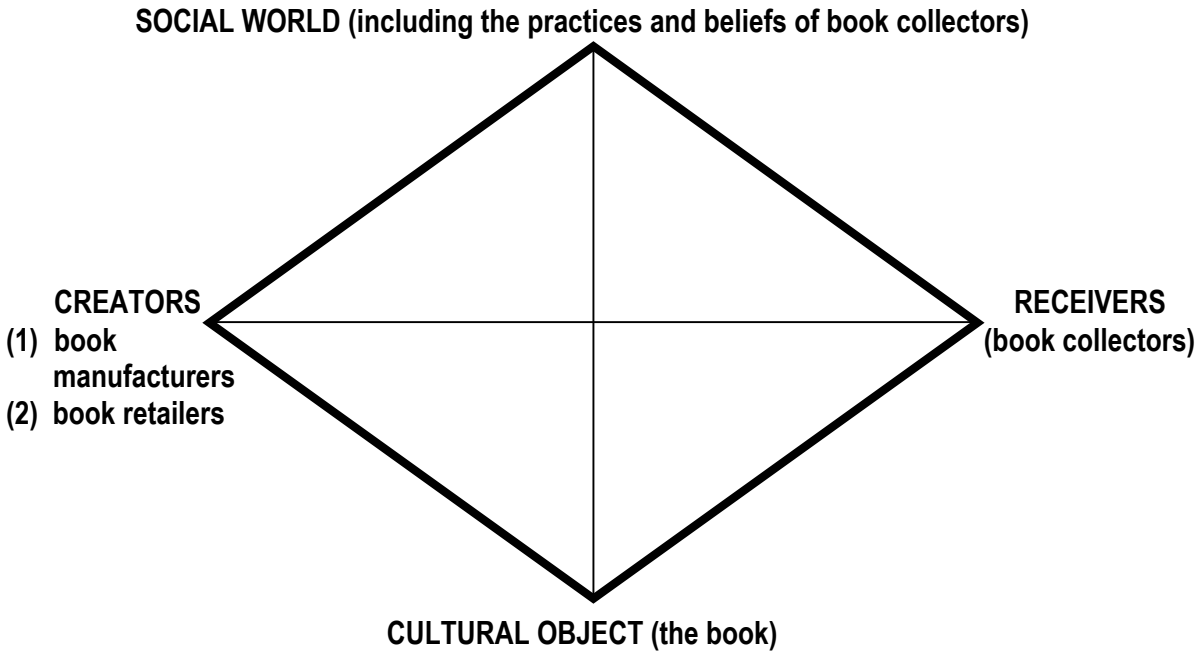

Figure 1: Book Collectors and Griswold's (1986, 2004) Cultural Diamond.

To more explicitly demonstrate the orientation of my work, then, Figure 1 (above) depicts a modified version of Griswold's cultural diamond, with each point correspondent to elements of my own research. The diagram makes explicit the connected nature of the various elements, but also depicts the hierarchical relationship between the social world of the book collector and the people and things that work together to constitute it. Within the framework of this diamond, it is possible to imagine a number of behaviors that characterize the social world of book collectors: attending book fairs, subscribing to collectors' magazines, frequenting rare bookstores, posting messages to online book forums, and participating in exclusive clubs to socialize with other book lovers. While such a list is by no means exhaustive, its emphasis on the practices of book collectors

corresponds with my desire to illuminate the cultural relevance of material books by focusing on the behaviors of those who collect them.

Collection History and Theory

Though, historically, the behaviors and practices of collectors are tied to the rise of consumer society, theoretical explanations regarding collection practices (books and otherwise) emerged more recently. The earliest of these explanations find their source in psychoanalysis. In a 1966 psychiatric journal article, Dr. Norman Weiner described the bibliomaniac as someone with an "inordinate desire" for books. The article concluded such collectors fetishize books to provide "gratification of oral, anal, and phallic strivings" (Basbanes 1992: 217-232). Merely two years later, Jean Baudrillard built upon such ideas in *Le Systeme des Objects* (1968). According to Baudrillard, objects have two functions: utilization and possession. The instant an object is possessed, it is divested of its utility and reinvented in relation to the subject who possesses it. For the collector, the act of possession becomes a way to "exercise control over the outer world" while simultaneously asserting the singularity of one's inner being (p. 11). This intimate relationship between the collector and his/her collection determines certain realities of the practice: A collection will never be complete, as "the act of acquisition of the final item would in effect denote the death of the subject" (p. 13). Collections allow their practitioners to maintain a "dominion over time" in the sense that they harness objects in order to preserve their (and, in turn, the collector's) essence (p. 15). Finally, collecting, while always tied in some way to culture, commerce, and sociability, "is always, first and foremost a discourse directed toward oneself" (p. 22). Baudrillard goes on to relate these truisms to the practice of the book collector, pointing out the fundamental disinterest that

many collectors hold for the subjects of the books themselves. He likens such collectors to the reader "who cannot settle down to read unless he is surrounded by his library of books: at which point the specificity of a given text tends to evaporate…it is not the book that matters so much as the moment when it is safely returned to it proper place on the library shelf" (p. 24).

Thus, for Baudrillard, the fundamental fault of collectors lies in their instinctive desire to place objects ahead of people, and to equate their own worth and longevity with those objects. While he does not go so far as to characterize collectors as deranged, he does use words like "impoverished" and "infantile" to describe their practices, ultimately assuming their proclivities contribute to a "depraved humanity" while simultaneously doing a disservice to the functional value of objects themselves. This bleak assessment might be juxtaposed with the Marxist analysis offered by Walter Benjamin in his autobiographical essay, "Unpacking My Library" (1931). Like Baudrillard, Benjamin does not believe there is any relationship between the contents of a collection and the impulse to collect. He posits the act of collection as a fundamentally dialectical relationship between order and disorder, which punctuates a "very mysterious relationship to ownership…a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value" (p. 60). Unlike Baudrilliard, however, Benjamin does not take issue with the absence of use-value imbued on collected objects. Rather, Benjamin is adamant that the book collector has no imperative to read the objects of his acquisition, and that doing so would actually strip them of their value as fetish objects. Thus, rather than explore the psychoanalytic implications of collection, Benjamin concerns himself more with the social and economic functions of the collector. This situates his analysis of

collecting, generically, and book collection, specifically, in a more sociological tradition than that of his predecessors.

It is within this sociological tradition that many of today's theories on collection belong. While certain critics still emphasize the psychological impulse to collect, the majority of today's studies take up collection as a social practice. Ranging from John Fiske's (1992) singular analysis of collection as a means of accruing "cultural capital" to more wide-ranging understandings of collection's role as a functional transmitter of cultural knowledge (e.g. Shelton 1992 and Pearce 1992, 1995). Susan Pearce, most recently, has conducted extensive survey research in order to determine seventeen far-ranging motivations for collection: leisure, aesthetics, competition, risk, fantasy, a sense of community, prestige, domination, sensual gratification, sexual foreplay, desire to reframe objects, the pleasing rhythm of sameness and difference, ambition to achieve perfection, extending the self, reaffirming the body, producing gender identity, and achieving immortality (1992). In her later work, she goes on to classify these motivations within specific typologies, meant to define collectors' styles. The first of these styles is "systemic collecting," which has an intellectual rationale and is typified by the desire to accrue complete sets of objects. Second is "fetish collecting" where the objects become the dominant focus of the collection, which centers on the attempt to assemble as many collectibles as possible. Finally, there is "souvenir collecting," wherein the practice is dictated by an attempt to fulfill and perpetuate one's autobiographical or teleological role within society (1995: 32).

Recently, film studies scholar Janet Staiger (2005) has operationalized this understanding of collection to interrogate the meanings that material objects might hold

within contemporary society. Specifically, her work looks at movie fans' collections of memorabilia in order to classify them according to Pearce's schemes. She uses this classification as evidence "of the functions of popular culture in everyday lives," further suggesting that collections offer a "material site" for examining how fans make meaning of their habits. She concludes, "Certainly, stopping to look at collections and collecting behaviors will provide insights into the places of media in social formations and subject self-fashionings." My impulse to look at the historical and contemporary habits of book collectors is driven by a similar understanding. Specifically, in looking at how book collectors understand their practice to be informed or changed by technology's intervention into collection cultures, I suggest significant differences in both the motivations and practices of contemporary collectors reveal how the value of books is directly connected with the social and cultural behaviors and institutions surrounding them.

Looking specifically at the ways in which the practices and attitudes of book collectors demonstrate an engagement with the material properties of books, this research fills a significant gap in previous studies of the book as a material object. Namely, by focusing on the habits and practices of book collectors, it provides a case study for understanding books within a larger cultural context than previous attempts book history and material cultural studies have made to do the same. Of course, it should be noted that book collectors make up a small segment of the book-buying community. However, understanding the book collectors' relationship to the physical object of the book (and the physical world that surrounds it) to be necessarily distinct from that of the everyday book buyer need not imply book collectors have nothing to teach us about the myriad ways

books (and, by extension, other media) are valued in contemporary society. Indeed, as Janice Radway has made clear in her studies of women and middle class readers, dismissing the opinions of communities who value books differently risks disenfranchisement of a much greater sort. She explains:

> [I]t is worth keeping in mind that the critical dismissal of literary works and institutions that do not embody these [highbrow] values *as failures* is an exercise of power which rules out the possibility of recognizing that such works and institutions might be valuable to others because they perform functions more in keeping with their own somewhat different social position, its material constraints, and ideological concerns (1988, p. 519).

While it is only fair to note that book collectors, unlike women and middle-class consumers, are not oppressed by the power structures of academic discourse in entirely the same way, their story is nonetheless absent from academic theory at least in part because our enterprise is so heavily focused on the *content* of texts that it largely overlooks their material properties and the value that might be derived from them.

Book collectors provide a unique community for whom the *context* of books trumps their content. Studying their social practices as well as the manner in which they ascribe books with value provides a useful case study for examining the meaning of technology in practice. Further, as books *do* occupy a uniquely prolonged role in the history of technology, the social circumstances surrounding this longevity might prove useful in media historians' and sociologists' attempts to understand other media cultures and their relationship to digital technology. That is, not only might a comprehension of the contemporary role of books as material objects suggest their endurance amongst other seemingly competitive media, but the myriad meanings emergent from my study of the

social practices surrounding books may well provide a framework for understanding and interpreting other technologies in practice.

WORKS CITED

Altick, Richard. 1957. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. "The System of Collecting," pp. 7-24 in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal. London: Reaktion Books. (Originally published in *Le System des Objets,* Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968).

Basbanes, Nicolas. 1992. *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes and the Eternal Passion for Books.* Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing Co.

Bell, Bill. 2007 "Symposium: What Was the History of the Book" *Modern Intellectual History* 4(3): 491-544.

Benjamin, Walter. 1931. "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" pp. 59-67 in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Birkets, Sven. 1994. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Boston/London: Faber & Faber.

Bolter, Jay. 1991. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Chartier, Roger. 2002. "Labourers and Voyagers: From Text to Reader," pp. 47-58 in *The Book History Reader*, eds., David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery. London: Routledge. (Originally published in *Diacritics* 22.2 Johns Hopkins University Press (1992) 49-61).

Danet, Brenda. 1997. "Books, Letters, Documents: The Changing Aesthetics of Texts in Late Print Culture" *The Journal of Material Culture*, II(1): 1-38.

Darnton, Robert. 1982. "What is the History of Books?" pp.9-26 in *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery. Londont: Routledge. (Originally published in 1982).

Eisenstein, Elizabeth. 1979. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, 2 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fiske, John. 1992. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," pp 44-62 in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis. New York: Routledge.

Genette, Gerard. 1982. *Palimpsests: La Litterature au second degree.* Paris: Seuil.

Griswold, Wendy. 1986. *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre 1576-1980.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Griswold, Wendy. 2004. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World.* Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Johns, Adrian. 1998. *The Nature of the Book: Print and knowledge in the making*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Landow, George. 2006. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in the Era of Globalization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lanham, Richard. 2006. *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Levenston, E.A. 1992. *The Stuff of Literature: Physical Aspects of Texts and Their Relation to Meaning*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Levy, Stephen. 2000. "It's Time to Turn the Last Page" *Newsweek*, January 1: 96.

Levy, Steven. 2007. “Books Aren’t Dead, They’re Just Going Digital: The Future of Reading.” *Newsweek*, November 26: 56-64.

McGann, Jerome. 1983. *A Critique of the Modern Textual Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McKenzie, D.F. 1985. *Oral Culture, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand: The Treaty of Waitangi.* Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press.

Miller, Laura. 2006. *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mowitt, John. 1992. *Text: The Geneology of an Antidisciplinary Object.* Durham: Duke Univ. Press.

Pearce, Susan. 1992. *Museums, Objects, and Collections*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian.

Pearce, Susan. 1995. *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*. London: Routledge.

Pearce, Susan, Rosemary Flanders, Mark Hall, and Fiona Morton, eds. 2005. *The Collectors Voice: Critical Readings in the Practice of Collecting vol. 4: Contemporary Voices*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

Radway, Janice. 1988. “The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of ‘Serious’ Fiction.” *Critical Inquiry* 14, 516-538.

Shelton, Anthony Alan. 1994. “Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collectiosn and the Incorporation of the New World,” pp .177-203. in *The Cultures of Collecting* eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Staiger, Janet. 2005. “Cabinets of Transgression: Collecting and Arranging Hollywood Images.” *Particip@ations* Vol 1, Issue 3.