

# Rancière and the demise of the book

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## Abstract

This paper is concerned with the future of the physical book, and everything we know and perhaps hold dear about it as an object. As something treasured, stored, loved and remembered. It draws as inspiration and data upon a question posed by Preston (2014): 'Is the demise of the book imminent?', and the debate held by members of Mirandanet over a couple of days in response to the question. It is a paper that deals with the books hypothetically anachronistic existence within the digital world of technology. Through the identification and exploration of the benefits and drawbacks of Rancière's theoretical approaches, their relevance to social issues will be highlighted through a folkloristic perspective. Given this relevance, Rancière's ideas are applied to the field of educational theory and practice, and an interpretation of 'the demise of the book' is offered.

The second most common critique of Rancière's work according to Whitener (2013) is its anti-scientism. Since, it leaves a dearth of theoretical leverage upon the relationships of authority and a similar lack of apparatus, for the would-be applicator of his ideas, to differentiate between approaches and schemes. Therefore, when considering the debate posed by Preston (2014)<sup>1</sup> 'Is the demise of the book imminent?' one must consider how to apply Rancière's ideas to this aspect contemporary culture. This article will draw specifically upon Rancière's canon of educational theory and particularly 'the ignorant schoolmaster' (Rancière, 1991).

To begin with, though it is perhaps interesting to note the multiple perspectives and views on the matter of the books demise and the bizarre, pullulating, zombie-like

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix A51- Henceforth all appendices will be assumed to be dated 2014, unless otherwise stipulated.

death the book seems to be undergoing, if indeed it is dying. Preston's call itself relates that it was 20 years ago that this particular debate was originally sparked and Self (Self, 2014) equally notes the early modernist novel form's 'crisis' in expressing the relationship it had with the innovative and effective media technologies developing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If teaching is the science or mastery of explication (Rancière, 2002). The source of intelligence was the book; it was the equality. So apart from the banal thematic correlation, a Rancièrian perspective on a topic of debate regarding 'the demise of the book' would be a useful one. Mainly because Rancière is not arguing against school or access to education but to its mode of delivery and the use of power; and the inculcation of a pedagogicised society that occurs and further propagates itself. Undeniably, the use of the phrase 'delivery technology' in relation to printed books caused consternation within the debate and led to the bigger question of 'whether books and screens are just different delivery mechanisms for precisely the same stuff, or is there more to it than that?'<sup>2</sup> This is crucial in the reading of all of the following considerations because if as Fisher states: 'all we think about is different 'delivery' of identical stuff, we are perhaps missing some more subtle, more elusive, yet possibly quite important aspects and implications of our choices of technology.'

Indeed, the delivery of 'identical stuff' holds resonance with the political impulses of what equality in education is to some neo-liberal, Essentialists. Implementing a Rancièrian perspective means we should ask questions about the choice of technology and consequent change in engagement<sup>3</sup>, because it is key to ensuring that new technology does not simply promulgate the same stultifying effects of the

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix A47

<sup>3</sup> Appendix A25

traditional education system and its pedagogy. That it should as a replacement for the book (like Rancière's *Télémaque*) be unencumbered; to ensure an equality of intelligence from the onset to allow intellectual emancipation.

There appear to be two main factors of change being considered by the participants in the debate. Firstly, there are numerous fiscal considerations, from the points of view of education, society, readers, authors and publishers. The second factor is cultural, and what the demise of the book, or conversely, the rise of the eBook and other cogent digital technologies might hold for society, education and democracy. The two factors are inextricably linked, and it would be reductive not to recognise this. So for ease I will address them jointly, throughout the interpretation of participant's comments from the debate/

Bronner, Ellis, and Miller, deliberate over the digital social setting (Bronner, 2014; Ellis, 2012; Miller, 2012). Within their work, there is a recognition of a need to reorganise cultural frames relative to the subject, instead of attempting to interpret innovative forms through traditional frames (Poole, 2015). This is the aim of this very piece: to question the philosophical stance, as Fisher does<sup>4</sup>, of any new mode or medium's incipience before we can truly comment on its benefits or flaws. For example, if we were to apply a Rancièrian lens to the use of new technology within education we should first query whether it emancipates or stultifies.

In this debate, there seems to be a resignation to the unequivocal evidence of the paper book becoming a lesser used technology.<sup>5</sup> The influence of digitised texts on the culture of the codex does not go unrecognised either. In that publishers are struggling financially to compensate for fewer paper books being sold and even

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix A47

<sup>5</sup> Appendix A40

academic journals are making their content freely available online<sup>6</sup>, alongside Open licensing and open data formats, newspapers fold, bookshops continue to close, and libraries too (Kennedy, 2014)<sup>7</sup>. However, as we would expect in some views there is an element of protectionism creeping in. Whether this is purist, stultifying, or the act of a Luddite, it would be unethical to assume. There are nonetheless some statements that confirm there is still no replacement for the appreciation of reading a book: the absorption, the challenge, the otherworldliness, the wonder and excitement that is wrought by the printed word, and the printed word alone.<sup>8</sup> Of course, we can use our status as authorised ‘transmitters’ and give our knowledge so others may use it (Jacotot, 1836-1837; Rancière, 2006), but from a Rancièrian outlook, this is ‘stultifying’ the learner’s ‘will’: to expect the manner in which an individual might comprehend what we offer (Rancière, 2010).<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, within society we see public-spirited campaigns: where schools and children are given free books;<sup>10</sup> book clubs are set up to encourage the use of the local library during the summer school holidays; and the somatically pleasing features of books are extolled: ‘the weight and smell of a volume in our hands and the sense of control over turning the page’. Not to mention, the ‘worth of linear content, the power of reading and individual authorship’,<sup>11</sup> as if they were the corporeal incarnations of Gutenberg minds. Such Panglossian meliorism, nostalgias and sentiments abounded within the debate (Self, 2014; Winston, 2010). But beauty aside, do these reasons propel equality, or does the traditional fiscal stranglehold of publishers and the

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix A16 – a truly egalitarian motion – furthermore there is mention of the author paying to be published – the schoolmaster pays, could this be the bizarre egalitarian option of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ through the marketization of knowledge? Or in contrast a Rancièrian ‘Capital’ hell.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix A34 and A38

<sup>8</sup> Appendix 44 – again recalling corporeal features like smell – the low res visual.

<sup>9</sup> Appendix 43 i.e. the assumption that young people ‘will opt for digital books over print book as it is consistent with the way in which they normally acquire information.’

<sup>10</sup> Gove endeavoured to give a St. James bible to every primary school in England.

<sup>11</sup> Appendix A51 and A44

subsequent dissemination of knowledge bring into question the true nature of the traditional technology's equality? Intrinsically, Flintoff is 'still fairly critical of large entities forcing knowledge behind paywalls and single-channel, non-critical distribution models'.<sup>12</sup> Further idealistic positions such as extending free eBook services for all,<sup>13</sup> beyond the worthy inclusive practice of providing them for print-impaired learners would dissipate the fiscal and cultural inequalities, and from a Rancièric position would banish stultification, and 'break out of the non-critical delivery system into a process predicated on student engagement – with an evolving narrative depending upon learner choices'<sup>14</sup>, perhaps even augment edupunk movements?

If it is down to economics, the 'one thing that could kill the paper book as a delivery technology'<sup>15</sup> it seems is cost. Conversely, consideration is also given to 'what will happen if libraries close and a company achieves a monopoly? If the past is any guide, cost will go up.'<sup>16</sup>

The availability of the eBook or accessing knowledge through technical means<sup>17</sup> supports the position that Rancièrè takes when he states that suggesting working class youth are excluded from the higher education and that their cultural inferiority being a result of their economic inferiority is merely a rudimentary understanding. To enquire about these concerns, we must ask to what extent digital technology has replaced analogue technology?<sup>18</sup> And subsequently, ascertain whether the stultifying effect of explication is breaching the new virtual realm? That a new technology

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix A6

<sup>13</sup> Appendix A9

<sup>14</sup> Appendix A6

<sup>15</sup> Appendix A50

<sup>16</sup> Appendix A50

<sup>17</sup> Appendix A13 – it supports it in principle, Jones believes that publishers do not know how to approach the education market for eBooks and are looking to add restrictions e.g. the number of individuals, the number of times, or how long, it can be checked out for.

<sup>18</sup> Appendix A27

automatically brings new opportunities may be such a stultifying perception.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as Self's (2014) awareness of political elitism points out it is not beyond reason that:

'tilting at this papery windmill of artistic superiority actively prevents a great many people from confronting the very real economic inequality and political disenfranchisement they're subject to, exactly as being compelled to chant the mantra "choice" drowns out the harsh background Muzak telling them they have none.'(Self, 2014).

While some participants in the debate just do not want to have to make a 'choice' based on preference,<sup>20</sup> others state there has not 'been a 'ubiquitous book' format for centuries'<sup>21</sup>, citing numerous 'choices' from pop up books to sensory tactile books for toddlers and babies. Some participants think that 'as technology matures and emerges there will be a continual development of usage patterns' where older technologies are 'superseded but not replaced by digital technologies.'<sup>22</sup> However, ultimately it was widely held that all mediums in some fragmentary manner would remain usable; providing 'choice'.

Interesting reasoning occurs here due to the background of the web being considered an egalitarian space based on open standards;<sup>23</sup> a place where 'choice' means equality (Power, 2009). As Lynch states, in mute advocacy of Rancièrian 'will' and 'inferior superiors' (Rancière, 1991): 'Give the people a choice to decide how they want to use information and what the constraints are. Then whether or not paper-based books survive will be down to informed choice. That is what education is all

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<sup>19</sup> Appendix A27

<sup>20</sup> Appendix A44

<sup>21</sup> Appendix A29

<sup>22</sup> Appendix A25

<sup>23</sup> Appendix A22

about.<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, assuming that the web as a platform itself is indeed an egalitarian space.

Howard (2012) extinguishes the myth of the web being an egalitarian space. Born from countercultural movements, but progressively institutionalised, the web to Howard's mind (2012) enables vernacular expression but only through an institutional structure or software, e.g. Twitter and Snapchat. So it cannot be emancipatory. This hybridisation echoes paradoxical sentiments of the balance between equality and inequality, but ultimately if the book is moribund and the replacement is compromised (even if ironically), we must seriously question whether intellectual emancipation is possible digitally.

Moreover, if indeed the consciousness of equality is dubious, it is not merely the apparent lack of instruction we must question, but whether the seditious belief itself stultifies ergo creating inferiors (including those in a supposed superior position). It is a self-fulfilling prophecy either way. Equality of intelligence is a necessary condition for an egalitarian society to exist. The belief in the existence of inequality has a corrosive impact on society: 'Treading water only works so long then you die' is a very good analogy for resistance to inevitable change, but nonetheless we must be wary of the trap Rancière illuminated for the progressive and being complicit in inegalitarian progress.<sup>25</sup>

So from Rancière's policing logic which we could ascribe to the web from Howard's analysis, perhaps the egalitarian logic that should confront it, is the freedom of usage: or 'the ease with which the media lends itself to situated cultural practice'.<sup>26</sup> This same ease could also be more readily policed or stultified. The stage then, if not the

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<sup>24</sup> Appendix A37 and to a lesser extent Appendix A22

<sup>25</sup> Appendix A19

<sup>26</sup> Appendix A27

hybridisation, could fundamentally be open source coding<sup>27</sup> or 'creative commons licensing so that teachers and pupils can freely re-use the content; books in schools will largely be for aesthetic or historical effect.'<sup>28</sup>

Thus, in McLuhan's memorable phrase, being the possessor of a Gutenberg mind ensures a correlated demise, akin to the literary critics: Conceivably a step towards Rancière's organic, naturalised society, we must henceforth consider emancipation as non-linear,<sup>29</sup> and plural.

Self goes on to suggest that actually 'Gutenbergers' (Self, 2014) are unable to fully appreciate the ramifications of dynamic, non-linear communication, like the somewhat satirical conversation between Carlsen and Lynch,<sup>30</sup> because it is literally out of their oppressively socialized (or pedagogicised) comprehension, in that the incipience of the new digital technologies is not merely going to annihilate the codex, but potentially emancipate the Gutenberg palimpsest of a mind itself. This could be the manifestation, away from the institutional control that is required to allow us to reconsider emancipatory education; a Freudian cause (Galloway, 2012; Guénoun & Cassidy, 2004; Self, 2014) within a non-institutional, even folkloric sphere.

This manifestation brings to light the indubitable fact that the virtual world should be recognised as part of the physical world and that vernacular digital communication is essentially redefining the folk and their 'will'. It is a view that suggests through the presentation of more than Self's (Self, 2014) metaphoric ouroboros of the books senescence producing creative writers, the dangers of allowing a stultifying cultural ouroboros to become even more deeply engorged through its own digitisation.

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<sup>27</sup> Appendices A26, A19, A17, A4, A3, A2 & A1 – Such non-stultifying freedom of usage allows any individual to develop from any starting point as such Open Source Software (OSS) is responsible in part for the instigation of the 'edupunk' movement (a phrase coined by Jeff Groom, Groom, Jim (2008-05-25). "The Glass Bees". Weblog bavatuesdays. Retrieved 2008-05-30.)

<sup>28</sup> Appendix A50

<sup>29</sup> A triangulation of artisan, warrior and ruler if you will.

<sup>30</sup> Appendix 20 and 21, consolidated for greater ease of reference.



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