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Reflections on the meaning of the book, beginning with its physicality: instrument or fetish?

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Abstract

Questioning the meaning of the book as an object today, when faced with the use of digital and multimedia devices, also entails reasoning about the meaning attributed to the physicality of the encounter with a paper object. In this sense, the book is not only represented as an “instrument” for accessing knowledge, but also as an object that implies forms of “ritual” and reflections on the concept of “sacredness”, until it becomes almost a “fetish” (therefore profane) involved in the construction of the Self and symbolically a sign of “late modernity”.

Keywords: Book as object; Practice of reading and writing; Fetish.

The book and late modernity

In this article I intend to expand my reflections on some of the conclusions arrived at in my doctoral thesis (2011) on the *meaning*, today, of the “book” as object.¹

My objective was to understand if – and also if possible how, in the era we are living in (which I identify as *late modernity* rather than as an entirely post-modern era bound to the past it professes to have freed itself from) the meaning attributed to the book by diverse social actors² and the relations that they establish with it, presupposing it to be both a *cultural* and *material* object at the same time, have changed. In other words, my aim was to reflect on the object as simultaneously a product and a promoter of the society that created it, as a container of *wisdom and knowledge* but also as one of its *places of memory and traditions*.

For these reasons I assume that underlying the concept of “material culture” is the idea that cultural connotations are carried not only by objects that transmit the passage of contents pertinent to processes perceived as “cultural”, but also by objects found in situations of daily use that demonstrate themselves to be just as worthy as carriers of socially constructed symbolic values. In light of this, the book can certainly be studied for its literary content but also as a consumer object

¹ The supervisor of my thesis entitled *Materials for a sociology of the book: sense, representations and symbolic meanings of the book in late modernity* was Professor Domenico Secondulfo, Coordinator for the Doctoral Course in Sociology and Social Research at the University of Verona, to whom I renew my heartfelt thanks for having accompanied me throughout my studies. As a whole the thesis is articulated around 3 guiding principles: the *materiality* of the object of the “modern book” and potential substitutes (focusing on the sense attributed to *medium*); the *functionality* of the object (focusing on the sense attributed to *use value*, to *symbolic exchange value* and any *sacred value*) and *corporeity* enacted with and on the object (focusing on the sense attributed to the *sensory dimension*).

² In the research I identify six categories of individuals for which I analyse their particular relationship with the book depending on whether this is, in their daily lives, significantly *present as* 1) *instrument*, 2) *product*, 3) *passion*, *absent because substituted* 4) *in use*, 5) *in production*, 6) *refused*. The selection plan that led to the identification of the *categories* is therefore prompted by the *presence* or *absence* of the book in different areas of *daily life*; this element implied recognition of the areas in which such absence or presence is, in fact, meaningful. The instrument employed for the collection of empirical data was the individual semi-structured interview with low levels of direction in its conduction. I interviewed 46 significant witnesses. The unit of analysis was constituted by residents of the city of Parma.

and as a symbolic object, beginning with its materiality as a “thing”, before looking at the meaning of the words it contains.

In my thesis, and now here, it is this third type of inquiry that motivates my research on the *meaning* of the book, beginning from the relationship that social actors establish with it as a medium, and then discussing its materiality.

All this is while effectuating a historical recognition of the invention of writing – understood as symbolic construction – and its importance until *the present day*, in order to answer the question: are we still a *civilisation of the book*?

In the course of my work, the question has appeared of some relevance to me in light of the ever more frequent debates among scholars of communicative processes and the cultural and social changes connected to the forms of production and the transmission of information and knowledge (in a wider sense: *individual and collective wisdom*).

The concept I use as my starting point in this text is, in substance, that objects are not ‘simply’ “things” furnished with physical properties and specific functions, but exist in dynamic relation with social actors, co-protagonists of those everyday stories that make up social action.

Therefore, objects, by uniting the immaterial aspects provided by *their meaning* (symbolically conceived by man) with a concrete and tangible materiality, are themselves at the centre of social action and testify to the time in which they are created and used.

The use of “things” can always be read in a twofold way: on one side it speaks of individual action and on the other of collective action. Thus, if such reflections hold for “objects” in general, they do so even more for the book which, understood in the *modern* sense, transmits forms of social communication in so far as it involves both identity and relational aspects, assumes socially constructed symbolic meanings and becomes the material evidence of the conceptions that individuals have of their society in its daily life, both from a cultural point of view and from that of material production (Setiffi, 2009).

This is also because the instruments linked to the *technology of the word* (spoken and written) have always been privileged objects able to testify to different civilisations that have succeeded one another: in my research, availing myself in particular of the studies of Walter Ong,³ I refer to civilisations distinguished by *oral-aural man*, by *alphabetical man*, by *typographical man* and finally by the first generation of *electronic-digital man*.

However, we have already moved beyond this classification.

The new digital media and latest generation multimedia devices are bringing with them momentous changes that are jointly responsible for the start of a new civilisation.

Yes, it is our civilisation of the World Wide Web, of so-called “digital natives”, of the ever more massive computerisation of public and private administrative services, of prolific Social Network use (to mention only global phenomena), but above all (perhaps even firstly) this is the civilisation in which we are witnessing an anthropological change in the *practice of reading and writing*.

This is certainly not the first transformation in this sense. The passage from an oral-aural civilisation to that marked by the invention of writing – first by hand and then by machine – through the artificial use of ever more complex instruments, up to the modern keyboard or touch screen, was certainly epoch-making. But today the stakes are higher: by questioning the book as an object that gathers deposited words, we question the very necessity of the practice of writing and reading for the production and transmission of the knowledge gained by humanity. Not because the new technologies necessarily propose this solution as desirable, but because, quite simply, they make it possible through their very existence.

In reality this is questioned since the new forms of *secondary orality* ever more present in each of our daily lives – forms deprived of text (at times even at the limits of basic literacy), designed to guarantee access to the use of digital or virtual instruments – and the devices that potentially promise to substitute the *hand* of man in its ability to *demarcate* oral and written facts (thus restoring them as a shared resource, albeit infinitely technically modifiable thanks to digitalisation), open new scenarios.

The matter that should perhaps be resolved concerns not so much the question of whether the paper book will survive the *e-book* or *hypertextual* arrangements that move on from the fixed nature of

³ See in particular: Ong, 1967; Ong, 1977; Ong, 1982.

*linear*⁴ writing, but the wider question that, in the pursuit my studies, I have found myself formulating: will we abandon the cognitive aspects linked to the learning of writing (and thus also reading), entrusting the task of such a practice entirely to machines, conserving ‘only’ the capacity to *listen* and thereby slipping into a sort of *post-chirographic oral-aural civilisation*?

Personally, I do not believe so.

Nonetheless, it is certain that the problematisation of these questions concerning what for us has, for centuries, been obvious, namely that the fact that processes of socialisation (and in particular those that develop during schooling) move in the direction of learning the practice of reading and writing, cannot be simply put aside as an excessive fear and thus implausible.

I repeat that personally I do not believe that this change will take place through the elimination of writing created by man (albeit now typed rather than written by hand), nor will it be the case for the next generations.

In this paper, I will present some results on the meaning of the book, taking as a starting point the physical and sensorial relation that ‘my’ interviewees still declare they have established meaningfully with it, and I will expound some reflections that have led me to make such an assertion.

In particular, I will attempt to demonstrate that a *fetish* value is associated with the book, and moreover how this is connected to representations of the present day as a transitional era between *the modern civilisation of the book* and the *post-modern civilisation of the digitalised book*; all this in light of the fact that the link with a fully modern medium, which until just a few decades ago writing relied on almost exclusively and that today is beginning to be hypothesised as obsolete, still seems to be strong: *paper*.

Paradoxically, according to my research, this bond is precisely what will save the book.

In this vein, moving on from reflections connected with the meaning attributed to the materiality of paper-based media, one comes to ponder the question of whether the book is an object endowed with a sacred value or not.

The concept of sacredness, once reserved for both contents and container (beginning, of course, with the “Sacred Writings”,⁵ but extended to the object in all its manifestations) – the book as a *sacred object* inasmuch as it is a *threshold* to the doors of mystery through which only a few ‘priests’ could pass – seems to have failed some time ago. This is confirmed by the interviewees. For them, this is not, however, where the changes of recent decades lie, as they recognise that such a process has been at work for more than fifty years, *i.e.* since we entered the *civilisation of the television*.

The deconsecration of the book from the point of view of its contents and the social role of the author (whose sacred aura we are no longer disposed to recognise and for whom, at most, the concept of “sacred” blends into that of the ‘consecration’ conferred by the media and economic success), the absence of great “bards” and the decline of the symbolic value attributed to the possession of a vast number of books as a contribution to the construction of one’s social image (moreover, almost all the interviewees declare not only that they do not buy, but that they do not even read or give books to boost their self image, although they do still acknowledge there is great value in the culture acquired by reading carefully and conscientiously),⁶ has not however led to any reduction in its symbolic exchange value nor in the sacred aspect that we declare we must recognise to construct what we call the *meaning* of the book today, even if the object is placed *next* to an e-book reader, an iPad or other multi-media devices.

These results are linked to the importance that the interviewees concerned attribute to paper and to the materiality involved in the *encounter* with it.

⁴ If truth be told, it is in any case from here that my research began.

⁵ In the thesis the object is discussed irrespective of literary genres and excluding the nevertheless fundamental area concerning the sociology of religion.

⁶ These are some of the results that emerged during the analysis of the texts gathered in the empirical stage. Others will be mentioned briefly. The interview guide used was divided into 4 parts: 1) Use value: reflections on the book as ‘place’ of knowledge; 2) Symbolic exchange value: the book for the construction of self-image; 3) Sacredness of the book?; 4) Materiality involved.

On the concept of “presence”

One of the distinctive elements that connotes the oral-aural culture civilisation is that in the spoken and heard word, contrary to that written and then read, the sense of *presence* is vital. The word is an *event*, given in a *hic et nunc* in which the meeting between Ego and Alter (single subjects or communities) takes place in the present and not, as happens on the contrary through the use of the book, in the appeal of words written *elsewhere* and *before* by an author distanced from his interlocutor.

This is how, contemporaneously to the birth of the predominance of sight (the sense of modernity and the sense of scientific discovery, among other things) over hearing (efficient only in physical proximity)⁷, the concept of present was overlooked for the whole of the modern epoch – in particular following the invention of movable type, which, albeit over a long period of time, brought about the loss of the social role (before the professional role) of the scribe on the one hand and the public orator (not to mention the storyteller) on the other – until we arrived at a hasty return to grace of those forms of *secondary orality* conferred (and here two random examples are sufficient) by the massive use of audio recorders and, in more recent times, by the exchange of multimedia files in which voices, sounds and images merge allowing the exclusion of the written word.

Therefore, what I would like to propose here is a further step that I believe is correlated with the discourse relative to the assumption, concerning the book, concerning the term “fetish”; my proposal is to make room for reflection on the meaning and the value attributed to the concept of presence, *also* regarding the paper book. Or perhaps I should say: on the symbolic meaning attributed to the fact of leaving *a mark of one’s own presence* on the paper book and, symmetrically, on the wish, almost the need, to find that same presence in it for the construction of the Self.

It is precisely because of this aspect that, in my thesis, it appeared necessary to me to recognise this movement towards the enactment of ritualistic behaviours and the attribution of aspects bordering on a cult⁸ (albeit profane) of the book as object.

⁷ Still fundamental are the previously cited texts by Ong and certainly the studies by McLuhan, beginning with *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). Some exemplary concepts are already expressed by him in the titles of the paragraphs that make up the text. McLuhan, among other things, states that the internalisation of the technology of the phonetic alphabet leads mankind from the magical world of hearing to the neutral world of vision, and also that as soon as the technology reaches *one* of our senses, a new form of culture gets underway at the same speed at which we interiorize the new technology; this is also in the light of the fact that in Europe, the technological phase of progress in which the concept of *change* becomes the archetypal rule of social life began with Gutenberg.

⁸ The principal results that emerged from the study are: the book, for all the interviewees, must not be burnt, torn or thrown away. “The book is sacred, yes. Try to imagine that you’re in front of your fire at home [...], if you don’t have any paper you get the newspaper [...]. Try to imagine turning around, taking three or four pages from a book and throwing them in. No! There, that’s the sacredness of the book [...].” declares one of many concordant voices. It merits particular *regard* and forms of *respect*: for the majority of those interviewed it should not be dirtied, rolled or screwed up, you do not write on it in biro or with highlighters but only lightly in pencil, if at all. Some did not even use a pencil, believing that the object should be leafed through without opening it too much; almost caressed, and nothing more. All the others, still with a self-imposed *rituality*, mark it a great deal (always only in pencil), thereby rendering the object unique (leaving their personal mark); it can no longer be lent to others or given away because it is *theirs*. Many subjects claimed that “even just knowing that it’s there, on the bookshelf, is a certainty.” The rituality in its use and the taboos in its preservation are more closely linked with the materiality of the object than with the contents. If at one time a sort of social duty imposed the reading of texts in their entirety, today it is declared that that respect for the object does not lie in this; in reality, however, many still claim they want to finish reading it: a relationship is begun with the book and its brusque interruption entails a certain unease. The rituality regards above all: 1) the way in which a book is leafed through and opened for the first time (there are those who read the back cover, those who read the index, those who read the author’s biography, those who stroke or smell the paper, those who look at the total number of pages and so on; always repeating the order of their actions); 2) the way in which one’s own mark is made (use of the pencil, slips of paper between the pages, etc.). The book is no longer recognised as having a sacred value in the original sense of the term: in Durkheim’s terms, the collective social dimension is missing. However, even today, just as for the great sociologist, society, as well as consecrating men, consecrates things (Durkheim, 1912). The consecration, in this case, lies outside the implications of religious cult experienced collectively but is connected entirely with the very symbolic value that the reader invests the object with, beginning with the physicality involved in its use: symbolically the book offers the chance to *tell one’s own story* while acting *with and on* it.

Studying the history of the book⁹, or rather the epochal passage from cultures of *primary orality* to those that came after the invention of writing (long assumed as an almost ‘natural’ element of man but fallaciously: it is a *technology of the word* constructed in a totally arbitrary and symbolic way), we cannot ignore the fact that it was the very start of the use of the book as an instrument that it became possible for the Community Man to have contact with *knowledge* (whether of tradition or innovation) in an autonomous, almost personalistic, way and no longer necessarily bound to the presence of figures such as the sage, the shaman, the priest or the bard.

It is said (correctly, in my opinion) that it is with writing deposited in a book that man knows the experience of finding himself alone with the knowledge contained in the object, unlike the experience of the oral account, which necessarily presupposes the presence of the Alter.

How then to understand the need expressed by those interviewed to describe the concept of “presence” – provided and sought: presence as a *gift* – as vital to the relationship that is established with the paper book so as to allow its proximity to the concept of “fetish”?

At first glance, the two considerations do not appear to concur.

One hypothesis is that it is precisely after the passage that saw man create a private relationship with the book that this relationship became so strong and meaningful that the object began to be defined as a “confidant”, “silent friend”, “travelling companion” and was therefore almost – the exaggeration seems allowable here – *anthropomorphised* (not in its physical traits, but in certain human qualities).¹⁰

If, then, in reality, the process of reifying text (which began with the birth of writing) and the transformation of pure verbal expression into an external and legible “thing” took place definitively¹¹ with the invention of the printing press, then it seems that another process took place alongside that one, but in an opposite direction: the new “things” produced, *i.e.* books, became objects to *personalise*, to render unique by leaving a trace of the self, symbolically finding in these elements the recognition of the Self as a unique and unrepeatable individual. Let us not forget that modernity is also the era of serial reproduction in which the concept of *unicum*, as far as manufactured objects are concerned, has been seriously questioned.

Affirming a personal relationship with the object – a relationship that lifts the object from being one of many (all the same) to being unique, original and peerless – almost approaches the attribution of sacred value.

However, let it be said incisively that it is a sacred value that, with the passing of time, has progressively lost the religious aspect connected with the association between the sacred and the mark of the Divine (in this aspect the book has been progressively deconsecrated throughout the process of modernity, and in particular during the historical passages that saw the modern sciences question – when not outright undermining – the definitions and precepts that were until then considered incontrovertible truths) and taken on other aspects.

From my research it emerges that, while on one side the book is losing its sacredness – its contents have not been regarded from a perspective of religious cult for centuries –, on the other, almost all of the subjects interviewed affirmed that today this object still requires forms of behaviour and care reserved for ‘sacred’ objects.

In the end, then, the idea of “sacred because significant and relevant to one’s own personal history, past, present and future”, is associated with it.

Therefore, the book is sacred to the Self, not to the collectivity.

⁹ See in particular: Barbier, 2004; Bertolo, Cherubini, Inglese, Miglio, 2004; Gilmont, 2004; Tuzzi, 2006. In addition, on the transformations of the book and the start of the process of modernisation, see Eisenstein, 1983.

¹⁰ Among the interviewees, an editor declares: “[...] The book is a presence, is a friend, is a confidant. In a word, it’s like having a live dog and a toy dog, a memory stick is a toy dog”. A teacher echoes his words: “an object that is a friend but also an enemy [...] Friend because a source of joy, richness, satisfaction, but enemy because [...] in life [...] it has been a very strong obstacle [...] it is an object because it is something material, but contains something absolutely immaterial, that is: thoughts, ideas, stories, it can even be numbers, but it is the physical representation of something that is not physical”. Then we arrive at what the President of a library institution holds: “For me the book is not an object. [...] I would say a subject. Why [...] ? [...] because it conveys a power, a potential energy. [...] I, on almost all the long journeys I make [...] bring a book. [...] because it really is a travelling companion, it fulfils what could be called an angelic role.”

¹¹ Ong puts it well in *Orality and Literacy* when he affirms that the press suggests that words are things, much more than writing has ever been able to do (Ong, 1982).

To pick up from footnote no.8, in my thesis, after showing how the paper book is underlined, drawn on, written in (but never in biro of course, because even though the mark will almost certainly never be removed it must nevertheless be removable in order to avoid altering the original form in an irreparable way: the text remains the work of the author and the reader affirms it thus), how bookmarks are left and so on, I expressed the following idea: “[...] the subject-object relationship refers to a version of the profane-divine dualism (where the divine is in the object) that is certainly more earthly, but not completely secular. The book [...] becomes an object imbued with sacred power not so much because it is a sign of the Divine, but because it is consecrated by what of our own [...] we leave in it. *Fetish* from the Latin *faticius* meaning “manufactured (idol)”; a product of man that nonetheless assumes autonomous power through what it represents and is, above all, a power that is revealed in the relationship with the reader who, through [...] the *personal imprint* they leave on it, recognises its active quality and transforms it from an inert object, almost into a being a relationship may be forged with.”

According to my research, none of this occurs with the new media.

The new multimedia devices have merits that can be readily recognised¹². But as for the possibility to leave and then find anew an imprint that, once transferred to the book, gives it an almost totemic power, nobody appears disposed to associate this with any medium other than paper.

It seems, then, that it is the medium that allows the passage from ‘neutral’ object to fetish.

It is a medium that involves different senses: in addition to sight, touch (up to now the feel of paper has not been emulated by the materiality of the *touch screen*), smell (the odour of ink or of new/old/dusty, *etc.* paper) and, last but not least, hearing (the rustling of pages being thumbed as a distinctive and unmistakable element that, if reproduced artificially, is rather disappointing)¹³ are implicated as vital elements of the intimate relationship that is created with the object.

Apart from a handful of indomitable lovers of technological progress – who retain that losing the use of paper and giving up the sensuality it guarantees is an acceptable price to pay for access to a new era – all the interviewees involved recognise in this the factor that will prevent the disappearance of the object.

It should be made clear that these individuals are not computer illiterates. On the contrary, many of them are computer literate both as a personal interest and love and for professional reasons; all of them, however, envisage a near future in which different media – paper and others – will coexist, allowing the producers of texts and those who enjoy them to choose, according to different criteria, the best media and thus the best device to improve any given communicative situation.

Thoughts on behaviour today and in the immediate future were sought; certainly no broad subjective opinions on the future were offered. One pressing fact must be mentioned however: the hypothesis of a world without paper books, without libraries and bookshops, was defined as literally “devastating”.¹⁴

¹² The interviewees identify the following advantages: 1) *faster access* to finding information (in the sphere of the Web they prefer to speak of “news and information” more than “knowledge” and, therefore, the facilitated completion of *specific research*; 2) the greater opportunities to *compare* different sources on the same topic; 3) *interconnectivity*, the greater ease in making *contacts* and *forms of exchange* (driven by informal dialogue modes) among different users. It should also be mentioned that the idea connected with the concept of the *veracity* of sources was, however, developed at length – this was also strongly questioned for the paper book as well, but certainly more so for the *mare magnum* of information that can be found on the Net – as well as the potential *democratisation of knowledge* made possible through free publication on the Web compared with the selectivity that reigns in the production of books. However, if the greater ease in publishing one’s own writings online is seen as an advantage in different situations (fundamental particularly in recent years as far as the role of the “active citizen” in the practice of participative politics is concerned), it is also true that the fear expressed is that the continuous uncontrolled exchange of information and publication of ‘simple’ *personal opinions* entails a need to develop a strong *critical ability* that is believed to be often missing among those who navigate or enjoy multimedia content in an inexpert manner.

¹³ “Significant corporeal relationship”, as defined by one of the interviewees.

¹⁴ Here are some of the many testimonies gathered in this vein: “I get goose bumps thinking about it” one blogger says; “[...] it could be apocalyptic [...] the disaster would be for humanity [...] but why would they eliminate books? Do you want to make me cry?” asked one teacher; “I’d shoot myself! [...] No, nothing would be gained! [...] You lose the joy! Period!” affirmed a writer. “But this is sacrilege! What on earth are you saying?! [...] that sounds sacrilegious to me, that” declares a passionate reader.

Therefore it is possible to summarise in three thematic points why it will be paper, according to almost all those interviewed, to save the book (and its fetish aspect):

1. The sensory aspects that the paper book allows us to experience and the corporeity involved in its enjoyment are elements useful to creating *profound experiences* in the practice of study (scholastic and individual), in contrast with the demand for and offer of speed and superficiality in the collection and diffusion of information imposed by society today. Indispensable advantages are recognised in the Net and various new devices, but it is believed that the traditional book is the most efficient instrument for training oneself in the necessary *feeling of effort* that the acquisition of knowledge imposes. At least until now.
2. At the moment it is not believed that a medium as convenient and personalisable as paper has been invented. Even if we acknowledge the improvements in the latest screens, none of the existing digital media appear capable of superseding paper as far as sight, touch and smell are concerned.
3. Taking note that, at present, the promise of the sensory reproducibility of paper is a disastrous falsification, it is believed that the new objects can already (and certainly will do so in the future) coexist alongside the traditional book – in other words, we welcome new instruments with new functions that are impossible for the book –, but it is forcefully stressed that these must be supplements and not substitutes, as the same physical-sensory experience, the individual's corporeal relationship with paper, is unrepeatable or, rather, unachievable. The new devices will have *a meaning* only if they become promoters of different experiential modes.

Final reflections

I have tried to say something about what is done *to* the book. The point is that, although they are needed, similar accounts on what is done *to* new devices are not listened to. Perhaps *through* the new media, but not *with* them in a significant and almost 'living' relationship.

With these media, no personal relationship is established.

Care is taken not to break them, granted. They are protected from damage because they are extremely useful in terms of how far they allow us to *do things* that are unthinkable with pencil and paper, more quickly and aided by computer programs that increase human potential.

But with them no relationship, almost between two 'subjects', is embarked upon, imbued with the regard we feel the *duty* to show towards those we have *respect* for. Everything is limited to rational usage, albeit of great importance.

They open up new perspectives and widen the field of action, but up to now their capacity to become *unique* to the owner assuming an *added* value has not been recognised in general, much less by my interviewees.

When we speak of books, more than "possession" we speak of "encounter".

In the fully modern civilisation, having many books (and preferably having read them!) was in many cases considered a must that contributed to the recognition of social prestige. Today, even though the book no longer plays such a role, it has not been replaced by other items: possessing the latest-generation instruments is indeed an imperative for technology lovers, but there are nowhere near the same implications in terms of social recognition. The possession of these objects does not necessarily say anything significant either about social class or the owner's level of culture. It is the interviewees themselves that affirm this.

Moreover, when reasoning about the new devices and the future they may delineate, almost nobody identifies the *e-book* as 'the' device to use. To be more precise, in some ways it is already considered (despite the fact that it has not yet been exploited to its full potential) almost 'old', quickly surpassed, replaced by something even more innovative in terms of new models of practising reading and writing.

The e-book fails to convince precisely because it attempts to emulate the scheme of traditional writing: rigid and linear. It does not convince simply because of its promise to resemble the paper book as closely as possible.

New reticular, hypertextual forms, in which the reader articulates his own path, would be more desirable. They would be completely different to “books”, while the promoters of the e-book declare they want to preserve the word (in its purest definition); however, this form of the word, when deprived of the sensory aspects mentioned above, is insupportably jarring.

In this case, just as when horses were exchanged for cars, beyond the rigidity imposed by the difficulty of entering into the “new” (which, as with cars, will disappear with the new generations who will live their present as the only one they can have direct experience of), a *new name* is needed for *new things*.

Yet it is not only a question of definitions. It is the collective imagination that will have to paint itself a new picture, a new representation.

There is still some confusion today about the e-book, excluding the knowledge of expert users and workers. Anchini’s definition in a very recent piece of work can be useful to us here: “[...] an e-book is, as a whole, a combination of hardware (*e-reader*, the machine for reading) and software (the reading interface), as well as content (*e-text*, the words that form the text) distributed according to precise procedures and rules. The old system of the text at one with the paper of the pages is inevitably thrown out by this medium, as the same device can host an infinite series of texts, configured as ‘pure essence’, [...] like a speech. This is the first great peculiarity of the new form of textuality, which it will be worth reflecting on because of the impact it may have on the collective imagination of readers” (Anichini, 2010: 190).¹⁵

In Anchini’s text the distinction between the device for reading, the medium and the form of writing is well highlighted. Equally clearly expounded is the principle I used as the starting point for these reflections: not only is the technique changing, but at the same time the new representations deriving from anthropological changes in the practice of reading and writing will characterise the change.

The paradox is that, in a world where devices for immediate communication and social networks as amplifiers of the pieces of the self that we wish to share (staying connected with ‘our’ world) are used daily and ever more extensively, it seems that with the book we prefer not only to maintain a more intimate relationship, but also to give life to a relationship in which it is the *proximity* between object and person that contributes to the definition of each. The impossibility of the same phenomenon occurring with the new devices is the crux point that means we are not disposed to completely give up the traditional version of the book.

The situation is different for the possibilities offered by social networks and the like, precisely by virtue of the fact that while these new “things” do not have long histories and were born with distinct definitions and functions, the book has a long and weighty past that we cannot forget. Not yet, anyhow.

The new offerings, contrary to the book, are fully post-modern in this.

The book is redolent of late modernity, it finds itself in the condition of having to extricate itself from a definition it hopes to move beyond, since it cannot identify itself totally with this if it wishes to survive, and from the uncertainty created by having a new definition (“digital book” or whatever it may be) that, if assumed *in toto*, would imply full entrance into a future in which forms providing a cross between oral communication and writing (forms that must still be imagined to a fair extent) will be not only a mark of the new medium but also the transformation of its substance.

Today the meaning of the book is late modern because it is associated with the idea that the object should be understood as a piece of a larger puzzle, in which the experience of the reader (and before that the writer) is amplified. It is a puzzle in which the different pieces mix the marks of the past with those of the future. Today the new multimedia devices give form to *paths of meaning* that are not exhausted in the practice of traditional reading but proceed through the exploitation of video, images, voices and music available to download elsewhere: connected to each other, but not in a univocal way.

To conclude, I can do no better than to quote Cambi: “The new writing of our post-modernity will, more than yesterday, perform a precise formative function: to give voice to many different forms of

¹⁵ Translation by the author.

thought and to actively place them in a social space that brings writing and communication ever more closely (and more intimately) together” (Cambi, 2010).¹⁶

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¹⁶ Translation by the author.