

The Future of the Page

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Stoicheff, P. & Taylor, Andrew. *The Future of the Page*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press., 2004 ISBN 0-8020-8802-3 (cloth), 0-8020-8584-9 (paper)

Academic considerations of ‘the future’ of anything (agriculture, religion, journalism) tend frequently to become dated very quickly. It has for some time been easy to laugh at turn of the (20th) century descriptions of how flying contraptions and electricity would bring about an entirely new world. In a similar manner, media studies also struggles with the future of the media. To say anything enduring about the future of any medium of communication takes careful attention to major themes in history, and to the minute details of how media become insinuated into a wide array of social, institutional, organizational, and cultural contexts. This is no mean feat.

In 2000, the University of Saskatchewan hosted a symposium entitled “The Future of the Page,” and this book is culled largely from the papers presented at that symposium. While the book’s origins in a symposium does seem to constrain the range of ideas here (a solid majority of chapter authors work in English departments), this is nonetheless a blessedly varied volume. The authors are, despite the odds, up to the task of careful (and yet still gutsy) analysis of the unfolding of the future.

Many chapters in *The Future of the Page* concern the connection between the page and colonialism. John Dagenais’s “Decolonizing the Medieval Page” takes off from the assumption that “[w]e stand before the medieval page...much as European colonialists stood before the new cultures they conquered” (p. 38). “In a move typical of all colonizations,” he concludes, “we have denied the coevalness of the manuscript page,” leading us to think of the page much as anthropologists regarded putatively ‘primitive’ civilizations. This ignorance of the connections between the medieval page and the contemporary page, argues Dagenais, is connected to our own troubles trying to understand where the contemporary page is headed in the future. Marie Battiste and L. M. Findlay each offer chapters subtitled “Indigenizing the Page.” Both outline strategies whereby the colonial legacy implicit in literacy can be rejected through attention to the competing literacies offered by peoples of the First Nations in North America. In “Artist’s Pages: Decolonizing Tactics in ‘Writing Space’,” Lynne Bell takes up what she considers to be the ‘aesthetic unsettlement’ to be found in the artists’ pages, and her analysis focuses on how these pages “decolonize Western print culture” (p. 256). This range of post-colonial studies in a book dedicated to the history of the page indicates a particularly strong concern for how writing and print have been connected to colonialism. This focus is both a strength and weakness of this book, as eventually, it seems to occlude other potential approaches to the future of the page.

Other chapters focus carefully on the history of the written and printed page. David R. Carlson’s “Nicholas Jenson and the Form of the Renaissance Printed Page” examines the technical mastery of 15th century Venice printer Nicholas Jenson, and posits that Jenson’s

chief legacy is “the result of his willingness to submit to [printing] machinery, rather than struggling against it” (p. 92). William S. E. Slights’s “Back to the Future—Litorally: Annotating the Historical Page” makes a persuasive case that what “Derrida has argued about reversing centre and margin and about the integral nature of supplementarity using postmodern examples certainly applies equally well to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century marginated books” (p. 79). Slights shows how margin annotations function within the context of the printed page of the early modern period.

Thankfully, and of particular interest to those who concern themselves with issues of literacy and technology, there is considerable attention here to how the meaning of the page may be shifted by the extension of computer technologies. Jerome McGann’s “Visible and Invisible Books” describes in close detail how the online (Dante Gabriel) Rossetti archive reminds us of the nonlexical features of the page that have always been there. McGann foresees that, “like the advent of printing in the fifteenth century, the computer comes bearing great promise to literary scholars” (p. 157). Similarly disposed is Michael Groden (“James Joyce’s Ulysses on the Page and on the Screen”), with his analysis of how online versions of Ulysses and other work by James Joyce illustrate the potentials and limitations of transferring print to screen. Groden cleverly observes that print finds itself in a situation comparable to that of Leopold Bloom, “who knows how problematic ‘home’ is.” He predicts that “the pages of Ulysses will experience a new kind of fullness and an equally new, and fuller, incompleteness—home is incomplete and an abode of bliss at the same time” (p. 172). Allison Muri (“Virtually Human: The Electronic Page, the Archived Body, and Human Identity”) reviews how the human body has itself become turned into a kind of text. Her chapter makes a convincing case that pages have been important tools for thinking about bodies, and changes in pages will themselves bring about some important changes in how we think about ourselves (and whom we entrust to tell us who we are).

One disappointment in *The Future of the Page* is the lack of attention paid to ideas that come from some of the scholars who are (in communication, at least) most closely associated with broader theoretical considerations of the meaning of literacy and print. The ideas of Marshal McLuhan, Harold Innis, Elizabeth Eisenstein, William Ivens, and Walter Ong do not get much attention here. Nevertheless, the authors successfully find interesting things to say without having to thread their ideas through these established ideas. All told, *The Future of the Page* lacks much of the range that it promises. It covers crucial themes in history, literary studies, and (to a lesser extent) media studies. Through a studied avoidance of overconfidence of prediction, a careful attention to the limitations and potentials of new media, and a persistent attention to the continuities that join the past and the future, *The Future of the Page* succeeds well beyond this reviewer’s (admittedly jaundiced) expectations.