

On books.

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As material objects they are almost worthless. Their specific weight is surprisingly high, and to carry even a few of them is an uncomfortable matter. If you move you find that to transport your library costs more than it is worth, and that to rearrange the books in the new place is a nightmare. Books are a burden which can be measured in kilos, cubic centimeters or hours. We submit to it out of a drug addiction. We seem to be in permanent need of the letters which are contained within books, and we open the books again and again to pick some letters out from there. Now if a Martian (or some other illiterate person) were to read that description, he might suppose that books are heaps of letters from which the letters may be gathered one by one, and the term "literature" which means "a lot of letters" will confirm such an opinion. We, the drug addicts, know better: books are memory supports, and they store information encoded in letters. This is where their value is found: in the information (the software), and not in the paper. Some books contain very valuable information. And this is the reason why we submit to their burden.

But this is an incredible story. Nature is a system which tends to lose information according to the Second Principle of Thermodynamics, so books which store information are unnatural objects. Living beings transmit hereditary information to their successors but not acquired information; so books which transmit information acquired by one person to another person are contrary to the laws of biology, they are anti-biological objects. In fact: books are miracles and, strictly speaking, we should fall on our knees each time we take one of them to read it.

He who is not letter addicted knows this to be sheer nonsense. Books will fall into ashes just as our central nervous system does, and thus are just as much subject to the laws of nature and of life as we ourselves are. There can be no immortality within book covers. But this is not the only reason why those who adore books are mistaken. The attempt to defy nature and death is condemned to failure in everything we do, not only in books, but equally so in paintings, in music, in architecture, in science and in technology which follows from science. All these efforts will be devoured by time, by entropy, and will be forgotten. But books are sillier even than all those other efforts, and that silliness of theirs is easy to show if one looks closer at them:

The information stored in books is encoded in letters. Letters are signs which mean some sounds of spoken languages. Originally they meant the consonants of the Syriac and a few other Semitic languages, but they have come to mean consonants and vowels of other languages lately. This implies that the information contained in a book must go first through the code of some spoken language before it can be written. And it implies that the who wants to get at the information must learn two codes: that of the language and that of the letters. This detour from thought to book by way of language is quite unnecessary. There are ideograms

are ideograms which permit direct access of thought to book: the ideogram "2" (which means "set of pairs") can be deciphered without previous knowledge of any spoken language. Moreover: Not only do letters mean sounds, but for some curious reason they are aligned in rows like pearls on a neck lace. Books have linear, one-dimensional structures. This is why they contain infinitely less information than do two-dimensional surface structures like images, and surfaces carry infinitely less information than do three-dimensional bodies like TV boxes. This is the reason why books are so heavy: since they are one-dimensional, they must contain many lines if they are to carry at least some information. In short books are inefficient information containers.

Those who are addicted to letters will not accept such reasonable considerations. The detour on the way from thought to book through language is what they love most: it is not the information itself that counts, but it is the fact that thought has been pressed into sound, word, proposition, before it has become written information. When we open a book we participate in that conversation which carries and elaborates information ever since the beginning of our species, and we become responsible for its continuation. And the reason why we can do so is that the letters which visualize that conversation are ordered in linear structures. Our eyes follow the line to collect the information progressively, and thus we are being carried by the line toward the future. If we look at images our eyes scan the surface in circles, and circles are eternal repetition. Within the book we experience that time structure which permits no repetition: every instant is unique, and every moment lost is an opportunity lost forever. In reading a book we experience the dramatic urgency of living.

But there is something even more exciting about the linear structure of letters. Of course: each row of letters points to something outside it. Thus the line of letters "it rains" points through the English language to what is seen outside a window. But the lines point in a quite different direction also. Each sentence points at the next one, each argument at the following one, and the whole book points at its final full stop, and this is what "linearity" is about. But beyond that final full stop the book points at its reader. Each book is a hand which reaches out to be grasped by our own hand, and if we throw away a book (and even if we leave one unopened), it is as if we had amputated a hand extended in our direction.

All this is utter nonsense for an observer who does not feel bookish enthusiasm. He will not deny that the invention of the alphabet three and a half millenia ago was then useful. Before that invention there used to be two types of culture. The oral (mythical) one which stored informations in air waves (in words), and the material (magical) one which stored it in hard objects. Air waves are easy to inform (to speak is almost a natural thing), but air is open to noise which deforms information. Stones and bones are good memory supports (a paleolithic knife still shows the information "how to cut"), but it takes an effort to inform hard objects. The alphabet, by rendering air waves visible, un-

ifies oral and material, mythical and magical culture, and it overcomes both by opening up the way toward historical culture. But those are no longer valid considerations. Air waves can now be easily stored in tapes or records, hard objects can now be informed easily, and there are highly efficient methods for information storage and transmission at our disposal at present. The alphabet is no longer useful, and the fact that books continue to overflow in an inflationary wave and that they tend to destroy our forests is a proof of how reactionary we are. We are incapable to understand what is the meaning of the communications revolution which is going on around us.

He who takes this point of view sees the immediate future of our cultural situation as follows: There is an élite of scientists and technicians which uses numbers (algorithms) to articulate the informations it elaborates and to communicate those informations. There is the great majority of people who are informed (and manipulated) by images which tend to become ever more perfect. And there are those who suffer from letter addiction and who are crushed by the numbers on the one side, and by the images on the other. And such an observer of the cultural scene may see even a less immediate situation: The numbers the scientists and technicians use may be transcoded into images, and those numerically generated images may constitute alternative virtual spaces which may be transformed by future artists into new worlds. In such worlds there will be no room left for letters, and all books will disappear from vision.

This is a vision which cannot be accepted by those who love books. They cannot believe that the majestic stream of books which originated in the Eastern Mediterranean, which passed through Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, which divided and re-divided into so many branches, and which has reached us in its maturity, shall now stagnate with us in a muddy river delta. It is for such unreasonable lovers of letters that this song in praise of books is being written in unreasonable letters.