

Beautiful Books

Angus MacWilliam in his 2013 Paper ‘The Engaged Reader’ draws our attention to a small moment in history when postgraduate Alan Kay posited the notion of the ‘Dynabook,’

‘a portable interactive personal computer, as accessible as a book.’

This 1968 notion was to eventually evolve into ebooks which are now consumed on a variety of different devices and are integrated into our everyday lives. A four-year research project conducted by the Book Industry Study Group ‘Consumer Attitudes Toward E-Book Reading’ suggests they have become a ‘normal means of consuming content.’ The public appears to have accepted them, notwithstanding generational variations. The ease and convenience of a lightweight and relatively small gadget holding a number of books has enticed us. The Publishers Association’s Statistics Yearbook 2013 shows that Ebooks now make up 33% of fiction sales and 7% of non-fiction/reference sales. UK consumer e-book sales altogether rose 18% to £263m, overall it is a relatively buoyant sector.

There was much hand wringing by publishers when they thought that this easy and convenient digital revolution would kill traditional publishing. However this doomsday prophesizing isn’t new, Albert Abramson in ‘The History of Television, 1942 to 2000’ notes that with the advent of the TV and the collapse of academic jobs anxiety over the loss of traditional publishing increased between the 1960s and the year 2000. And publishing still managed to survive, we still read physical books. In the UK with publishers selling 685.5 million physical books in 2012 (PA Statistics Yearbook 2012, The Publishers Association), print books must still be doing something right. Are publishers, writers and artists doing something new?

One clear area is perhaps not so much new as very, very old...back to the days of limited print runs rather than mass media, artist’s books and self-publishing. While print books can’t offer digital interactivity they can readily offer an entirely different, more visceral interactive experience through the printed book as artefact. Limited print runs for the artist/author are achievable as are limited edition covers for Traditional Publishers. Arifa Akbar notes (The Independent 27 November 2014) that he sees more and more beautifully designed books in the postbags he receives each week.

A great example of this is Brazilian designer Gustavo Piqueira’s book project, ‘Mateus, Marcos, Lucas e João’ which is a darkly humorous 21st-century spin on the Bible. Masterfully referencing the classic design elements of Medieval illuminated manuscripts and manuscript grid he revisions the world of the Old Testament, set now in a world of traffic jams and fast food. The book was launched alongside an exhibition, Inanis—iluminuras para o século 21; at the Biblioteca Brasileira Guita e José Mindlin library, at Cidade Universitária, in São Paulo. An excerpt is available for download from the exhibition website.

Another great example is Haruki Murakami’s ‘The Strange Library.’ Its enigmatic cover with attached library ticket holder draws you in to a beautifully designed experience in which a young schoolboy stops at the library

on his way home to returns some books. Yet another beautiful example is Riverhead Books' limited edition cover for Chang-rae Lee's novel 'On Such A Full Sea' which was the first ever 3D printed slipcover. Set in a future America we follow the story of Fan, immersing ourselves in tales of hope, betrayal and the human condition.

So what is there that we can learn from the 'new' experimental design ethic in books and our appetite for them? We might ask if digital interactivity has had the effect of making us keener on interactivity in every experience, or indeed if the digital world has made us weary of interactive everything and we are looking for something that feels better crafted and more real? Naturally these aren't the only questions, every question raises others; How else can art and design experience be integrated with texts and print? What new freedoms does this give to auteurs and how should we price such artefacts?

Publicado no blog Creative Conversations, em 05.05.2015.

