The Book as an Object of the Shared Understanding of Media Changes

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This essay advances a general cultural understanding of the book. It examines, compares, and evaluates the main approaches to the book in social and cultural theory as well as in everyday practice in all its richness. The hypothesis is that the book as a cultural object plays a crucial role in the sociodynamic activity of understanding the self in social performance.

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Since the late twentieth century, the book has become a common reference. In 2010, my country, Estonia—where 2010 was the National Year of Reading—celebrated the 475th anniversary of the first Estonian-language book. The book is Wandradt and Koell's *Catechism*, printed in Wittenberg in 1535. In Estonia, the first printing shop opened in 1632. Today, the collections of the National Library of Estonia hold more than 3.4 million items, 2 million of which are books, and the stacks are designed to hold up to 5 million books.

The contributors to the conference "Books and Reading in Finno-Ugric Cultures" held in Tallinn in October 2010 stressed that during the Soviet era books (and libraries as their storage points) served as important sanctuaries of collective memory defending Estonia from cultural leveling. Even today, when Estonia's national memory has become part of European values, the role of the book as an object of cultural transfer and cultural translation cannot be underestimated. Books are powerful mediators and a shaping force in establishing multicultural dialogue.

For Estonian as a small language, translation is a very important activity, and all major authors are translated into Estonian. Alongside translations from other languages, the twenty-first-century Estonian novel, the-

matizing multilingualism and asserting its interest in communicating ideas, has also proved suitable for representing cultural exchange in contemporary Europe. In 1997, under the pseudonym Emil Tode, Tõnu Õnnepalu wrote the novel *Printsess* (The Princess; see Tode), which can serve here as one of many illuminating examples because it is useful in decoding approaches to the recent history of Estonia, contemporary Europe, and the multicultural world. In a 2003 interview (see Kender), the author claimed that his intention was to write the kinds of books that do not determine our identities but, on the contrary, expand them *ad infinitum*.

My article advances a general cultural understanding of the book. It examines, compares, and evaluates the major approaches to the book in social and cultural theory as well as in everyday practice in all its richness.

I start with the latter: everyday practice. The twenty-first-century debate about the book as a cultural object is partly based on the concern about the pros and cons of new digital media, which have radically revised the linear perspective in art and print. In the past two decades, Estonia has become an advanced IT economy. Access to new digital services is an important goal here, and e-books form a notable proportion of the library collections of the country. For example, in 2009, users of the National Library of Estonia had access to forty-two foreign databases with 6,725 e-books. By the end of 2011, some 2,000 digitized books had been added to this number. Recently, a notable purchase was made from the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences: digital copies of four Estonian-language books whose only known copies are preserved there. Among them, the oldest and the most notable foreign-language acquisition was the first edition of the estate-management handbook *Liefländischer Landman* (Riga, 1662, first printing) compiled by Johann Hermann, the estate manager of the De la Gardie family.

The explosion of communication technologies in recent decades has made the book an object of analyses and heated discussion even in public school education. On 15 October, 2010, for example, *Postimees* (The Courier), one of Estonia's major daily papers, published an interview with a media professor at the University of Tartu that suggested that all the textbooks and primers in Estonian schools be replaced by e-readers:

> E-readers would bring about a new era of teaching and learning. It is my deep conviction that the future of media depends on the breakthrough of iPads. . . . It weighs only 250 grams and costs less than 140 dollars. One cannot write in it, of course, but the book is designed for reading in the first place. (Hennoste 12)

Moreover, complaining about the weight of schoolbags, which is ten times the weight of an iPad, the professor continues:

> Hence the revolutionary idea: let us convert all Estonian schoolbooks into e-format and put them into e-readers. Its merits are obvious: it can be web-connected, thus enabling all sorts of joint classroom activity. And just think about how many forests can be preserved this way! (ibid.)

A large number of comments were made in response to this article, arguing in favor of traditional paperbound books, which were said to enable larger format illustrations, graphics, and tables, and to serve people better than a 300-gram piece of plastic (see Haljamaa; Mikelsaar; Sula). Moreover, the critics argued, why let Apple or Amazon establish their control over the content of Estonian education? Why let them make a profit on all these gainful services our domestic publishers or promoters of know-how can offer? Why let new technologies exercise their influence over citizens' options and freedom to make their own decisions (ibid.)?

This kind of debate about the book as a crucial link between social structure and the individual actor is a characteristic response to our everyday experience of media change. Throughout the 1990s, a debate ranged among scholars and practitioners alike about the gains and losses brought about by the new media. In a way, it paralleled the voiced concern of the nineteenth-century romanticists, whose argument may at first glance also seem to have been rooted in personal anxieties about the fate of literature in the coming age of mass literacy. In fact, however, the nineteenth-century romanticists and our contemporaries shared a deep sense of the broad social effects of media change.

In her essay "Nation, book, medium" (2009), Miranda Burgess suggests that "the book, whether figured as a traditional object of nostalgia or as a threatened ideal in need of defense, serves as *compensatory objects* in the face of medial and social history" (Burgess 216; my emphasis). "Books are the virtual windows into the world," says Burgess. As such, they become "the real recompense for change," helping "to make visible the experience of history" (ibid.). She concludes that the concern of the twenty-first-century commentators and academics about their displacement by the new media cannot be taken merely as self-serving, but as "a behavioral response to our shared understanding of the agency of change" (213).

One cannot but fully agree with this statement. The Estonian media professor's radical demand for digitized schoolbooks may (in a way) serve as compensation for the fifty-year gap in the canon-building process of Estonian literature. The digitized textbook may also be interpreted as a compensatory object for all those "adverse" books destroyed by the communist regime in its purification activities of the 1940s and 1950s.

In my attempt to redefine the role of the book as the interface between the subject and society, I cannot but emphasize how, in certain

environments, an apparently inanimate thing such as a book can act upon people, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity. The book as an object of social formation and transformation has already been treated in Michel Foucault's seminal *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault demonstrates how it is through certain objects that social power and control is established and challenged. Among these objects, books are the most powerful social markers—books are markers of aesthetic and cultural value, sites of cultural and political power, and, finally, markers of our identity.

Speaking of the book in terms of cultural power and diffusion, scholars often argue that without preliminary intellectual training and a figurative way of thinking one cannot even approach it. This means that, apart from an element of material culture, the book is first and foremost a mental object and should be analyzed as such.

Yet, there are many other demands made on the book that are also very high in the light of contemporary "new media" practices. In the words of the Estonian writer Sven Kivisildnik: "Today, without a package of sheer gold and without media patronage, a book of serious literary production simply cannot be a success" (Kivisildnik). Hence, in order to meet the needs of contemporary media, a contemporary writer is supposed to be at home in all aspects of production: in book design, formatting, marketing, advertising, and so on. Nonetheless, the rumors about the death of paperbound books are strongly exaggerated. Each year around one million new titles are added to the total number of printed books in the world. In 2010, 3,045 new books in 4.6 million copies were printed in Estonia, which amounts to 4.1 copies per citizen. Book reading remains an everyday activity in Estonia. Despite the low subsidies, the population of Estonia traditionally buys many books.

Although it is an irreversible process, digitization of literature, far from happening overnight, takes some time. It is estimated, for example, that it would take more than ten years to turn the entire corpus of Estonian writing into e-format. Major publishers have launched electronic books, so far without much success. Few e-books are sold, and there is nothing to suggest that they might become serious competition to paperbound volumes.

One of the future issues in e-book development seems to involve social networking. Here, the mediating function of libraries becomes very important. E-books set new demands for libraries: to draw in visitors primarily for socializing purposes. The U.S., where e-books are already sold in more numbers than paperbound volumes, may be a case in point because every year American libraries are increasingly changing from silent temples of reading and meditation to social and cultural centers. With

public-sector financial support, libraries could play an important role in making information accessible for those that cannot afford to buy books.

One cannot overlook the book as an outstanding object of material culture. A primary assertion of material culture studies is that objects have the ability to signify things—or establish social meanings—on behalf of people. According to Ian Woodward (5), the current interest in material culture—and in the book as one of its primary objects—is associated with two key developments in the social sciences: the profusion of research into consumption across the range of disciplines, and the rise of post-structural and interpretative theory. Woodward presents a list of objects in people's homes that are most important to them; books are listed in fourth place (146). In Estonia very similar studies have been conducted about books as markers of identity. The studies demonstrated that certain books serve as extensions of ourselves. If a copy of the Bible in a home is usually accepted as an object of Christian identity, the epic of *Kalevipoeg* in an Estonian home will certainly denote an extension of national identity.

Finally, I claim that books as objects of material culture and social recompense cannot have cultural efficacy without performances—at least not in Estonia. Extending this view more broadly to the question of consumption as a performative accomplishment, one can understand why the media pay so much attention to the book today. In a 2004 article on "Cultural Pragmatics," Jeffrey C. Alexander (529) defines cultural performance as "the social process by which actors . . . display for others the meaning of the social situation." If one places the contemporary author in this role, then ultimately his or her goal is, as with any social actor, to harness the symbolic thing (the book) at hand in order to successfully convey its meaning to others. Today, the ways of doing this have immensely changed: presentations, roundtable talks, TV interviews, book festivals, book fairs—all these types of consumer performances offer new paths of conceptualizing the consumption of the book. After this kind of social performance, the book often starts its own independent life: everybody claims to have read it (even those that have not); the opera, drama, and screen versions of the book are staged; the political elite attend performances and presentations, and so on.

Because the case-study approach is always an aid to theory, an example can be given: the scenario I have just sketched out is exactly what happened to the Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen and her prizewinning novel *Puhdistus* (see Oksanen; Estonian translation: *Puhastus*, 2009; English translation: *The Purge*, 2009). The book proposes a good interpretive account of taste and consumerism, truth and fiction, and reality and representation. It provided a useful object of analyses and interpretative

approaches. However, it also provided the ground for multiple manipulations. Already a bestseller in many countries, the novel and its accompanying performances in Estonia may also be looked upon as compensatory objects for the self-victimizing post-communist identity of Estonians.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that the book as a cultural object plays a crucial role in the sociodynamic activity of understanding the self in social performance. Books as mental and material objects are part of social performance—they act and are acted upon to achieve social goals. Indeed, book history itself demonstrates how a cultural object becomes a crucial part of a social pattern, first as an object of status, honor, and distinction, then as a vehicle of the formation of self, and finally as a potential object of social performance and manipulation.

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Knjiga: Predmet skupnega razumevanja medijskih sprememb

Ključne besede: literatura in družba / bralna kultura / množični mediji / medijske spremembe / e-knjiga / bralnik / kulturni transfer

Od konca 20. stoletja naprej je knjiga predmet raziskovanja in pogovorov. Debata o knjigi kot mediju je posledica dvomov o pridobitvah in izgubah, ki so se pokazale ob novih digitalnih medijih, ki so korenito spremenili umetnost linearne perspektive in tiska. Vloge knjige pri vzpostavljanju transnacionalnih kulturnih mrež ni mogoče zanikati. Pa vendar je eksplozija komunikacijskih tehnologij v zadnjih desetletjih naredila knjigo – kot historični premislek narativnega procesa – za orodje analiz in žgočih razprav.

V svojem prispevku obravnavam knjigo manj kot samoumevnega posrednika kulturnih prostorov in bolj kot predmet raziskave, ki ga je treba redefinirati. Ko govorimo o knjigi z vidika razširjanja kulture in kulturnega okuževanja, je treba priznati, da se to ne more dogajati brez pismenosti, brez predhodne izobrazbe in figurativnega načina mišljenja. Literatura je poleg fizične kulture duhovna disciplina in zahteve, ki se jih v luči sodobnih »novomedijskih« praks zastavlja knjigi, njenemu avtorju in bralcu, so zelo visoke. Oziroma, kot je zapisal znani estonski pisatelj: »Danes knjiga resne literarne produkcije brez dodatka čistega zlata in pokroviteljstva medijev ne more uspeti.« (»Postimees«, 17. 6. 2010, str. 9.) To pomeni: da bi zadostil sodobnemu bralcu, se mora današnji pisatelj počutiti domače na vseh področjih – pri knjižnem oblikovanju, prelomu, trženju, v medijih itn. V naših poskusih redefiniranja vloge knjige kot vmesnika med subjektom in družbo lahko izhajamo iz družbenih in procesualno orientiranih pristopov k vnovičnemu premisleku žanra v delih Todorova in Bahtina.

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