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**'Little Heavy Papery Beautiful Things':**  
**McSweeney's, Metamediality, and the Rejuvenation of**  
**the Book in the USA**

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## **'Little Heavy Papery Beautiful Things': McSweeney's, Metamediality, and the Rejuvenation of the Book in the USA**

Alexander Starre

When Michel Foucault asked 'What is an Author?' in 1969, few anticipated that 40 years later the crucial question for authors, publishers, and academics alike would become 'What is a book?' or rather 'What will a book be?'. Just as the intellectual climate of the 1960s and the ensuing theoretical tenets of poststructuralism radically questioned the supposedly privileged and stable entity of authorship, digitization and its technological and material reverberations similarly disrupt most of what we take for granted in books. At this point, it seems doubtful that electronic publishing will eradicate the traditional book anytime soon. Enterprising visionaries of the death of print culture might have grasped as much by consulting Wolfgang Iepl's dissertation from 1913, in which he hypothesizes that new media never entirely replace their predecessors.<sup>1</sup> This line of thought has later been eloquently updated and expanded by such media theorists as Marshall McLuhan, David Bolter, and Richard Grusin, whose findings strongly influence the current debate.

Yet, apart from macro-level observations on the historical trajectory of print, those interested in the future of American writing will have to delve deeper into specific cultural forms that emerge within the new media ecology of the USA. In the following, I will sketch the history of the literary quarterly *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*,<sup>2</sup> the evolution of which provides some indications on where contemporary American writing is headed. I argue that the peculiar McSweeney's house style is an early indicator of a trend towards an emergent form of 'metamedial' literature that interrogates the relationship of verbal art to its carrier medium.

Within the millenarian climate of the late 1990s, American writer Dave Eggers, 28-years-old at the time, founded the literary magazine *McSweeney's* from his apartment in Brooklyn. The venture had a truly grassroots beginning—Eggers paid for the first-issue print run of 1,500

copies with his own money. He then had friends and volunteers canvass the neighborhoods to sell them to independent bookstores in the area. With word of mouth and increasing internet buzz, the issue sold well and following issues quickly ran up to 7,500 copies. The first three issues all had a somewhat similar look and were published as paperbacks, probably due to the financial constraints.<sup>3</sup> Starting with issue 4, the staff began experimenting with the material form of the magazine. This issue consisted of 14 stories and essays each bound in a booklet, with the authors in charge of the artwork for individual front cover designs.

With issue 5 of 2000, Eggers and his staff opted for a hardcover format for the first time. Distinctly straying from the conventional style of a literary journal, *McSweeney's* thus materially entered the domain of the print book.<sup>4</sup> The staff made sure that readers would not ignore the packaging and simply immerse themselves in the stories. Therefore, they hid<sup>5</sup> a mission statement in the small print of their copyright page, which deserves to be quoted at length:

You see, when everyone is talking about electronic books—is that what they are called?—and about books-on-demand [...], and about the future of books and all, we think that the direction we should be going is obvious, and is in some ways the opposite of the way most people are talking about going. Our theory holds that a) people like hardcover books. They like them because they are good to look at, and are permanent, and are decorative, and can be given as gifts, and kept until one dies; b) However, hardcover books are often unaffordable, and so c) People reluctantly wait to buy certain books in paperback form; but d) Given how accessible the technology is—not just the typesetting technology, but also the bookselling technology (for instance, Amazon.com, on which anyone can sell any book), just about anyone can (or should be able to) easily print a book in a hardcover way, and still charge what they are starting to charge for paperbacks—\$14!—and thus expect nice sales (see a & b above), while bringing home a much greater net proceed. Does this make sense? In short we are talking about smaller and leaner operations that use the available resources and speed and flexibility of the market (i.e. the web and other consumer-driven methods), to enable us to make not cheaper and cruder print-on-demand books or icky, cold,

robotic (electronic) books, but better books, perfect and permanent hardcover books, to do so in an [sic] fiscally sound way, and to do so not just for old time's sake, but because it makes sense and gives us, us people with fingers and eyes, what we want and what we've always wanted: beautiful things, beautiful things in our hands—to be surrounded by little heavy papery beautiful things.<sup>6</sup>

What comes across as a casual rambling in the idiosyncratic McSweeney's parlance appears at second glance to be a manifesto for the rejuvenation of the book, a statement that resonates deeply with aspects of current cultural theory. In focusing on the demands and preferences of the audience, the passage contains a nod to the uses-and-gratifications approach, which in some form or another still underlies much work done in the field of mass communication studies. Furthermore, by emphasizing the role of typesetting technology for the production of books, the authors are in sync with Friedrich Kittler, who holds that writing as a supreme bodily activity has long been subjugated to the 'omnipotence of integrated circuits'.<sup>7</sup> There seems to be but little nostalgia for the lost craftsmanship of bookmaking and setting type, which might be expected from a clique of bibliophiles.

One should note, though, that the editors do not openly revel in the possibilities of digital book design. They employ a strictly utilitarian vocabulary ('resources', 'speed', 'flexibility') when outlining their stance towards technology. Digital hard- and software are tools to be made use of en route to the finished product. Despite the thorough digitization of the printed word, McSweeney's sees the supreme surplus value of print fiction in the tactility of its medial container. In stark contrast to their functional stance towards technology, the editors celebrate the sensory experience of the printed carrier medium ('beautiful things, beautiful things') with recourse to the ultimate aesthetic goal of beauty. The passage resonates with the Kantian idea of disinterestedness by rendering the self-contained pleasure of being surrounded by artful books as an elemental experience of pure, purposeless delight.

Conversely, in most conceptions of literature based on traditional aesthetics, immersion is one of the key factors of the reading experience. Elaine Scarry has formulated such a notion, in which she relegates the physical book to the sidelines:

[V]erbal art, especially narrative, is almost bereft of any sensuous content. Its visual features, as has often been remarked, consist of monotonous small black marks on a white page. [...] Its tactile features are limited to the weight of its pages, their smooth surfaces, and their exquisitely thin edges. The attributes it has that are directly apprehensible by perception are, then, meager in number.<sup>8</sup>

This stands at odds with the self-description of literature that McSweeney's develops. Again, the mini-manifesto from issue 5 resonates with some of the central points brought up by such cultural and media scholars as Mark Hansen or N. Katherine Hayles, who inquire into the meaning of the 'robust materiality' that 'structures our lifeworlds'<sup>9</sup> and conclude that '[p]rint books are far too hardy, reliable, long-lived, and versatile to be rendered obsolete by digital media'.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, Hayles and Hansen are preaching to the choir with such criticism. The basic idea that materiality does in some way or another influence the sensual experience of texts is rather trivial, as anyone switching from a physical book to an ebook will know. Neither is it an entirely new critical idea, as earlier work on the materialities of communication<sup>11</sup> and certain strands of bibliography and book history<sup>12</sup> show. Yet, literary studies still appear to be grappling with the body of the printed book, the study of which obviously undermines the purported reign of mind over matter that is central to liberal humanism. Critical programs recently proclaimed include Hayles's 'media specific analysis'<sup>13</sup> or a new brand of 'textual materialism', which received a thematic section edited by Bill Brown in a recent issue of *PMLA*.<sup>14</sup> While Hayles's methodology departs from electronic textuality and hypertext to retroactively find the effect of digitization in print books, Bill Brown's theoretical sketch appears to rely on an appropriation of bibliographic approaches for literary studies. Brown holds that the affinities between literary theory and book history run deep and wide, e.g., with regard to 'paratexts, frames, folds, borders, margins, authorship and authority, typing and printing, gathering and dispersion'.<sup>15</sup> I do not intend to side with any one of these still vague but promising approaches as of yet. My specific, rather pragmatic interest lies in those parts of literary works where discourse and materiality converge. The McSweeney's style is an apt exemplar. In its self-referential binding of discourse to material, of text to book, *McSweeney's* forms a symptomatic response of the literary system to digitization.

At this point, a short theoretical detour is due. Any attempt at formulating hypotheses about the evolution of literature within contemporary society needs to be based on some understanding of the social status of literature. As we are dealing with an evolutionary subject, i.e., the question of how literature develops and changes through time, some promising theoretical premises can be extracted from the theory of social systems developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. A comprehensive sketch of Luhmann's ideas outlined in dozens of monographs and countless essays is of course hardly possible here.<sup>16</sup> Instead, I will focus on the two aspects of self-reference and media evolution and their respective position in social systems theory.

While literary scholars have long used self-reference to denote a specific form of narrative expression that turns language and fictionality back upon itself, Luhmann's theoretical model introduces self-reference as a fundamental element. For Luhmann, modern society is a closed system that has over time subdivided into functionally distinct units, or subsystems. Among other large social sub-systems like law, the economy, or politics, Luhmann also posits art as one distinct system.<sup>17</sup> By importing the notion of autopoiesis or self-organization from Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana and transferring its principles from living organisms to social formations, Luhmann's theory aims to account for the formation of various distinct social spheres that constantly work according to their own internal rules. If we follow Luhmann, literature as a subsystem of art is in a constant process of (re-)creating itself through communication—as is any other social system. Without a coherent flow of communications and 'connecting communications'<sup>18</sup> the system would cease to exist. Accordingly, a constant flow of new literary texts is not only the result of individual authors composing and publishing their work, it is a vital component of an emergent social formation which relies upon communication to ensure its survival.<sup>19</sup> One of the aspects that make Luhmann's theory such a radical departure from previous theories of social interaction is his insistence on the self-referential closure of each system: 'self-referential systems necessarily operate by self-contact; they possess no other form of environmental contact than this self-contact'.<sup>20</sup> Since the rift between a system based on communication and its environment cannot be breached, the system needs to reproduce selections of the external world within itself. Literary self-referentiality, albeit on a different level than this basal type of self-reference, may thus also function to strengthen the system.<sup>21</sup>

Although Luhmannian systems theory does not put forth a specific media theory, the medium of print holds a central position especially in his historiography of Western societies. The evolutionary process of 'media of dissemination' from writing to printing and from printing to electronic broadcasting entails an explosion of scale. The introduction of media of dissemination 'results in an immense extension of the scope of the communicative process, which affects what is confirmed as the content of communication'.<sup>22</sup> Shades of McLuhan are obvious here, yet for Luhmann, the increased (and still increasing) potentials to communicate integrate with the notion of complexity, another one of his basic premises. One cause behind the formation of systems lies in the endless complexity of the environment, which cannot be adequately grasped by any system, be it psychic or social. Thus, systems will inevitably need to reduce complexity to make themselves comprehensible and to foster interaction between their constituent elements. Due to the omnipresent complexity, successful communication is first and foremost improbable. It becomes even more improbable when the sender and the receiver of communication are separated by time and space, which, in the case of printed artefacts, is a given. On the basis of daily experience, communicative acts hardly seem as unlikely as Luhmann makes them out to be. Yet, within a framework that structures the empirical world into a myriad of self-organizing systems, the possibility of effective communication does appear somewhat doubtful. Luhmann openly acclaims his method of defamiliarizing the familiar when he outlines his 'methodological recipe' as 'seek[ing] theories that can succeed in explaining the normal as improbable'.<sup>23</sup> An abstract and alienating perspective on the literary system might be the adequate analytical tool for a period in which the intricate ties between literature and codex books suddenly seem less natural. Literary studies have for the longest time been, as Hayles has aptly described it, '[I]ulled into somnolence by five hundred years of print'.<sup>24</sup> However, if we reconceptualize literature as a system based on continuous and flexible communication, the current phase of insecurity and reorientation appears much less surprising than the exceedingly improbable phase of stability that preceded it.

The introduction of new media (e.g., e-books or hypertext) that co-exist with the previous forms of information storage and transmission, appears as a potential source for disorder. This further intensifies the rift between the potential for communication and its actual successful occurrence.<sup>25</sup> The sheer mass of stored information on the internet makes it highly unlikely that these texts will be read by a significant

number of people. For the literary system, the occurrence of an alternative carrier medium poses a problem, i.e., it increases complexity. Where formerly, authors had no alternative choice for the medium of their work, a second option has now forcefully entered the scene. As its environment changes, the literary system needs to find ways to adapt.

To return to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, it is obvious that its preoccupation with the medial aspects of print is part of its foundational structure. As in any serialized cultural product, the beginning of the series is a critical cornerstone since it creates the basic norms and common themes that will have to tie the ensuing instantiations into a unified whole. In the following, I will therefore focus on the first three issues of the magazine. The minimalist typographical title page of issue 1, through the absence of pictorial content, shows the magazine's large investment in letters. In the middle of the page, the reader learns that the staff is 'dedicated to: Stamping out sans serif fonts',<sup>26</sup> which one might easily verify by browsing through the pages. It furthermore contains much self-reflexive humor, for example when it gives eight alternative titles for the new literary journal. The designers of the title page noticeably emphasize the intricacies of punctuation and the visual differences between lower case and capital letters. On the very bottom, we read that the journal was printed in Iceland. As we can infer from contemporaneous reviews of the first issue, this tiny addendum created a large stir, as Dave Eggers frequently had to explain the seemingly random decision to pick Oddi Publishing in Reykjavik to print his journal. The material appeal of this cheaply produced magazine profits from the fact that it was printed in a location as remote from San Francisco as possible. The book thus counteracts the loss of aura that Walter Benjamin famously diagnosed with regard to the mechanically reproduced artwork.<sup>27</sup>

Instances of self-reference abound within the issue proper. In one section, a contributor imagines what the slogans of conceptual artist Jenny Holzer would look like if instead of her signature style she 'used a serif font, in small italics, center justified, on uncoated stock'.<sup>28</sup> This piece feeds into the specific *McSweeney's* style which is constantly employed and refined throughout the journal's installments. Bran Nicol has given a useful summary of this peculiar style: 'Each *McSweeney's* issue includes a similar range of supplementary texts, such as acknowledgements, graphs, "rules and suggestions", graphic and typological gimmickry, and is written in a distinctive "house" prose style

which is ironic in tone and mixes the high-minded with the colloquial'.<sup>29</sup> On one level, the small piece about Jenny Holzer is indicative of a lighthearted attitude towards words, akin to postmodernist narrative gameplay. Yet, the phrase 'uncoated stock' calls forth a type of reflexivity that transcends the effects of traditional narrative self-reference. It triggers reflection on the material properties of the page; it asks the readers to consider the wood pulp, the bleach, as well as the lack of a glossy finish of the page they are holding in their hands. In short, it triggers strong awareness of the medial aspects of literature, a phenomenon which may—in close analogy to metafiction—be called 'metamediality'.

For the following attempt at a short definition of this analytical concept I have taken the oft-cited explication of metafiction by Patricia Waugh<sup>30</sup> as my inspiration: *metamediality* is a form of artistic self-reference that systematically mirrors, addresses, or interrogates the material properties of its medium. Literary metamediality therefore draws attention to the status of texts as medial artefacts and examines the relationship between text and book. In linking discourse and medium, metamediality also reduces complexity by stabilizing a specific sensory experience of a literary work. Building on this short sketch of the concept, we might understand metamedial forms of literary expression as an element of an evolving semantics<sup>31</sup> within the literary system that attempts to cope with the increasingly diversified channels through which texts circulate in digital environments.

In essence, *McSweeney's* is the symptomatic prototype of the metamedial book. In ever so many ways, it constantly asks its readers to appreciate its bodily existence. Issue 2 features a second title page that exclaims, 'See this journal. / Study its odd little walk. / Mumble its name. / Touch its shoulder. / Turn it around to get a better look. / Meet its gaze. / Shake its hand. / Give it your time. / It needs your mercy'.<sup>32</sup> The bodily metaphors abound, presenting the book as a living, breathing subject. In their shameless direct address to the reader, these lines are also reminiscent of interactive creativity books.<sup>33</sup> The second issue of *McSweeney's* also lists the individual stories with their number of words, their estimated reading times, and their subject matter. The pieces of fiction are thus categorized like collectible objects while the reading experience undergoes systematization and commodification. The historically potent ideal of *celare artem*—concealing the artistry—which found artistic expression fulfilled when it left no traces of its own constructedness is thereby reversed.<sup>34</sup> While reading a *McSweeney's*

issue, readers are constantly reminded that they are reading stories. This presumed loss in textual immersion is counterbalanced, however, by a meta-awareness on a higher level that observes the physical book while processing the words on the page. The ideal lurking beneath the surface could possibly be reformulated as *ostendere artem*. The resulting effect is one of medial immersion, in which the enjoyment of the narrative illusion is simultaneously complemented by the sensual experience of the medium.

The last aspect I want to discuss concerning the initial issues of the journal is the proliferation of text into every nook and cranny of the book. The reader will find snippets of text in some very unusual places. Building on the previous two issues, this method is intensified in issue 3. The cover, which includes more pictorial elements but is still largely text-centered, contains many brief references to the book production and design process, such as 'Editing for space is too easy to be moral', 'Count the imperfections. They are many, they are ravishing', or 'This area was blank for the longest time'. The empty space on the physical page, as well as the potential ways of filling it with meaningful content are at issue here. The spine contains the gloomy miniature story 'Projected but not improbable transcript of author's parents' marriage's end, 1971' by David Foster Wallace. By placing the story here, the editors signal that their concept of a literary work of art includes all those areas of the book that are usually reserved for paratexts.

The bloated copyright page forms a running commentary on the production and distribution of the magazine, while both ridiculing and reinventing the publisher's peritext. Inside the issue, a blank page reveals some minuscule print in the fold between the two pages. The short text explains that the fold-out pictures in this section are responsible for the empty space and that one may remove the page if it impedes the enjoyment of the book.<sup>35</sup> With the placement of this text, the designers typographically invade the space that bookmakers refer to as the 'gutter'. The text is typeset so close to the fold of the book and in such a small font that it requires bending the book and moving up close in order to be readable. This operation will likely result in a creased book spine, which emphasizes the precarious materiality of the paperback object. Once again, such transgressions function to lay bare the conventions regarding material ordering.

Similarly, the signature *McSweeney's* page design visibly frames the text. Every page of each issue is framed by a thin line that encompasses

the text and marks the space for the page numbers and the running headlines of each piece. With low-level intensity, this visual setup invites reflection on the borders of the page and on the creative space that is inherently limited to the dimensions of the book. As if to further assert the presence of this frame, it is broken up by a self-referential letter to the editor. The fictional (?) letter writer states 'I enjoy your journal, but I must say I do not like the rigidity of so many of your pages', only to push one of her lines through the frame far into the middle of the book.<sup>36</sup> The degree of explicitly self-referential strategies—both in texts and paratexts—is at its peak in these first issues of *McSweeney's*.

Taking a step back and reformulating some of these observations in a systemic context, we can see that the artistic strategies that *McSweeney's* employs to fulfill the vision laid out in their manifesto form a specific intra-systemic reaction to digitization. The individual media of communication can never be an integral part of a social system, since the system itself owes its existence merely to the process of communication and connecting communication. Thus, there is no *a priori* connection between literature and the book medium, even though almost 600 years of co-existence seem to suggest differently. Therefore, as literary communication can never fully include the book's materiality, it needs to find ways to replicate its preferred medium in its texts and thus establish an at least simulated materiality. Hayles has argued for a similar non-essentializing notion of materiality, holding that it is an 'emergent property' that is 'bound up with the text's content'.<sup>37</sup> Metamediality as a textual strategy aims to achieve this link. It tries to breach the gap between discourse and materiality, or between system and environment. As a self-referential process, metamediality also functions to strengthen the system since it significantly reduces the complexity of decoding. *McSweeney's* textual-material interactions are fixed in time and place; they cannot freely circulate throughout digital channels (think Kindle or iPad) without losing vital parts of their informational and aesthetic value.

Progressing through the years, the nucleus of ideas about textual materiality that shaped these early issues came to full fruition as Eggers's crew granted the contributors increasing creative freedom. As early as in issue 4, the editors laid out the principle that authors should have more say in the look and feel of their final book: 'One can count the number of authors who have been satisfied with the look of their book on one hand. [...] why should the author not be satisfied, or gleeful even, with the way his or her book looks, the way it is being presented

to a glancing and fickle public?'<sup>38</sup> The following years saw a number of guest-edited issues devoted to a specific theme and resulting in some very strange bookish objects. Whether it is Michael Chabon who edited issue 10 (*McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*) in the form of a pulp paperback or T.C. Boyle who designed a cigar box with multiple war-related items for issue 19—materiality and textual form remain the very cornerstone of McSweeney's aesthetics.

It is perhaps due to the serial form that the explicitly metamedial strategies eventually recede and leave the reader with a more implicit awareness of tactility. The devoted reader of or subscriber to *McSweeney's* gains cumulative serial memory about its aesthetics, thus rewarding long-term involvement. In the realm of literary journals, *McSweeney's* has evidently found a new answer to the serial dilemma described by Umberto Eco as the precarious balance between innovation and repetition.<sup>39</sup> Most long-running American literary journals—such as the prestigious *Southern Review* or *The Paris Review*—provide repetitive layout and style and rely on their submissions for innovation. However, an emergent new form of the literary journal can be discerned that reverses this mechanism—as is obvious, apart from *McSweeney's*, for example in *Zoetrope: All-Story* founded and funded by Francis Ford Coppola. This short-story quarterly heavily invests in its visual quality and in its production value, inviting guest designers such as Helmut Newton, David Bowie, or Gus Van Sant for each issue. The serial anticipation here rests just as much on the innovative material form as on the content.

I believe that it is plausible to extrapolate from McSweeney's turn toward materiality to hypothesize about a general trend in the American literary system. After all, literary journals function as a testing ground<sup>40</sup> for new forms of literary expression as they have—at least in the United States—often been the first step of young writers toward a writing career. Similarly, the demographic of the *McSweeney's* reader promises that this type of journal has a commercial future. The *New York Times* already called it 'a key barometer of the literary climate, especially among the young and hip'.<sup>41</sup>

The metamedial mode of linking discourse to material ensures that the journal will function best in papery form. It is no surprise, then, that copies of its earlier, out-of-stock issues in mint condition fetch upward of \$100 on Amazon. The collectability of physical products—and especially serialized products—fosters the fetishization by devoted fans. Electronic

publishing thus means little competition, and as if to hit this point home, the McSweeney's website counters the bookish splendor with a distinctly ironic minimalist design, which has been virtually unchanged since 1999.<sup>42</sup> The metamedial impulse has also left its mark on the contemporary American novel, as exemplified by such recent bestsellers and cult novels as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Salvador Plascencia's *People of Paper*, originally published by McSweeney's in 2005. In various forms and in differing degrees of self-reference, these post-millennial novels of a young generation of writers inquire into the relationship of their imaginative creations and their medium of choice—the book. They follow a generation of American postmodernist writers who faced their most pressing concern in the complexities of post-industrial consumer society and the (in)adequacy of language and storytelling to create meaningful fictions.<sup>43</sup> Despite experimenting with literary techniques and page design—think William Gass—these authors still fed a literary system that channeled its communications through a fixed medium. Literature in such a highly technologized society as the 21st-century United States no longer enjoys the alluring simplicity of having a 'natural' medium. Instead, the literary system is now forced to engage with the book more closely and develop a new semantics of materiality.

Let me reiterate that there is no inherent nexus between literary texts and books; one can imagine a functional literary system that is based on a different medium of dissemination, i.e., electronic reading tablets. However, the evolution of technological gadgets appears to have stirred increasingly metamedial forms, which promise just as much innovation in the print book as electronic literature does on the web. In light of these developments, I agree with Bill Brown who sees no reason for 'textual materialism in a nostalgic key'.<sup>44</sup> The 'papery beautiful things' that McSweeney's has produced over the years cast some doubt on Friedrich Kittler's eminently quotable vision of the digital revolution: 'Before the end, something is coming to an end. The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. [...] [A] total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium'.<sup>45</sup> To arrive at this conclusion, which has since congealed into the paradigm of media convergence,<sup>46</sup> Kittler obviously approaches media theory with a strict focus on the technological processes of production. However, if we distinguish the production technology of print from the printed medium—the book—the verdict can be surprisingly reversed. Through experimental, metamedial literature

and book design, the 'digital base' of contemporary media society appears to have ushered in the rejuvenation the papery medium.

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### Notes

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- 1 Labeled as Riepl's Law, this premise turns up every now and then in recent discussions about the effects of computers and the internet on older media. See Wolfgang Riepl, *Das Nachrichtenwesen des Altertums mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Römer* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913).
- 2 In the following, the shorthand *McSweeney's* refers to the literary journal. The non-italicized version *McSweeney's* indicates the San Francisco-based publishing house.
- 3 Directly addressing the reader of the magazine, the staff openly discussed the financial plan behind their initial issue. With printing and shipping the cost of the first issue totaled \$5,509. They hoped to sell around 1,500 copies, resulting in profits of about \$1,991. See *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 1 (1998), copyright page. The following issues continue these remarks on finances, often satirically rejoicing in the growth of the profit margin.
- 4 Incidentally, it was around the same time that *McSweeney's* started to publish individual books and thus became a publishing house. One of the first *McSweeney's* books, *Lemon* by Lawrence Krauser (2000), was wrapped in dustjacket with a blank front so the author could finish each issue with hastily scribbled doodles.

- 5 It certainly seems counterintuitive to print such a programmatic statement in a place as easily overlooked as the copyright page. Yet, by the time of the fifth issue, subscribers had already been well prepared to regard these paratextual elements as an elemental, innovative component of the *Quarterly Concern*.
- 6 *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, 5 (2000), copyright page.
- 7 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 19.
- 8 Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 5. For a more in-depth discussion of Scarry's concept in connection with more material perspectives on the book as a medium see Leah Price, 'Reading Matter', *PMLA*, 121.1 (2006), 9-16.
- 9 Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000), pp. 4-5.
- 10 N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 33.
- 11 The earliest and most influential publications within this arena of research are Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., *Materialität der Kommunikation* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1988) and *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche: Situationen offener Epistemologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991). Large portions of the first collection and some essays from the second were translated as *Materialities of Communication* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).
- 12 One of the most authoritative and comprehensive resources for this field is the recently published *Oxford Companion to the Book*, ed. Michael F. Suarez and H.R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010). It bears mention that this two-volume encyclopedia is also lavishly produced with heavy paper and well-balanced typography.
- 13 See Hayles, *Writing Machines*, pp. 29-33 and passim.
- 14 See Bill Brown, 'Introduction: Textual Materialism', *PMLA*, 125:1 (2010), 24-28.
- 15 Brown, 'Introduction', 24-28, p. 24.
- 16 Cornerstone of his social systems theory are *Soziale Systeme* (1984; translated as *Social Systems*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) and *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997).

- 17 See Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000).
- 18 Luhmann speaks of 'Anschlusskommunikation', a term that is, like large parts of his terminological toolbox, hard to translate. 'Connecting communication' as used in the standard translation of *Social Systems* (cf. p. 143) conveys the sense of linkage of the German original. Yet, the aspect of sequentiality would probably be addressed more adequately if we think of 'follow-up communication'.
- 19 Note, however, that Luhmann uses a tripartite communication model that distinguishes the message (form) from the information that is transmitted and the understanding necessary to distinguish them. A text is nothing more than an artifact until it is processed within the social system. This model argues for a holistic understanding of communication in which the literary text is as important as any communication based on the text or on literature in general.
- 20 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 33.
- 21 Seen in this light, the early examples of novels that employ metafictional strategies, from the novels-within-the-novel in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to Sterne's intrusive narrator in *Tristram Shandy*, can be read as aesthetic strategies to reassure the young genre of the novel of its own devices. For a lucid discussion of the metafictional aspects of both these books, see Brian Stonehill, *The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 32-48.
- 22 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 161.
- 23 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 114.
- 24 Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p. 29.
- 25 Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 311.
- 26 Timothy McSweeney's *Quarterly Concern* 1 (1998), title page.
- 27 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), esp. p. 22.
- 28 McSweeney's 1, p. 82
- 29 Bran Nicol, 'Dave Eggers and the Memoir as Self-Destruction', *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 102.

- 30 'Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text' (Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, New York: Routledge, 1984, p. 2).
- 31 For Luhmann, semantics means a "supply of themes" (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 163) that enables easy integration into communicative processes. Semantics constantly have to adapt to the changes in the environment of the system. Luhmann also posits a direct connection between the development of new media and the ensuing volatility in social semantics (see Luhmann, *Gesellschaft*, pp. 312-315).
- 32 *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 2 (1999), p. 5.
- 33 This genre has recently seen some very interesting, metamedial publications like Keri Smith's *This is not a Book* (New York: Perigree-Penguin, 2009) and *Wreck this Journal* (New York: Perigree-Penguin, 2007), which ask its readers to shower with the book, to rip out a page and chew it, or to splash their coffee and their dinner onto pages. The strong link between medium and content that these interactive books exemplify also seems to have inspired the creators of *McSweeney's*. Various issues contain interactive components (e.g. cut-outs, fake order forms, name tags).
- 34 Cf. the definition of this principle by Werner Wolf: 'The tendency of illusionist fiction to minimize aesthetic distance and the inconspicuousness of its discourse is regulated mainly by a principle which, in accordance with the rhetoric of antiquity and post-medieval aesthetics, may be called the principle of *celare artem*. [...] This principle favors immersion by concealing the mediacy and mediality of representation [...]' (Werner Wolf, 'Illusion (Aesthetic)', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 144-159, p. 153).
- 35 *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 3 (2000), foldout between pp. 224 and 225.
- 36 *McSweeney's* 3 (2000), p. 14.

- 37 N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 103.
- 38 *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 4 (2000), copyright pages. One should note that specifically in these first issues the narrative voice behind these editorials has to be attributed to Dave Eggers himself. In this context, he is also relating his own experiences with the publishing world during the production of his debut, the memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- 39 See Umberto Eco, 'Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics', *Daedalus*, 114 (1985), 161-184.
- 40 I freely borrow this term from Henry Jenkins, who uses it in conjunction with comics, which he sees as an avant-garde form that tests themes which will later find their way into mainstream culture. See Henry Jenkins, 'Comic Book Foreign Policy? Part Two' in *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, found at: [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/07/comic\\_book\\_foreign\\_policy\\_part\\_1.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/07/comic_book_foreign_policy_part_1.html) [accessed 8 Sep. 2010].
- 41 Charles McGrath, 'Not Funnies', *New York Times*. 11 July 2004, found at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/11/magazine/11GRAPHIC.html> [accessed 4 Dec. 2009]. Bran Nicol even sees an 'informal collective' developing around Dave Eggers and McSweeney's that might 'herald a new departure in American writing' (Nicol, 'Dave Eggers', p. 102).
- 42 See <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/tendency>.
- 43 Bran Nicol likewise situates Dave Eggers and McSweeney's in a generational matrix: 'Here is a new generation of authors with different ideals and preoccupations from earlier established US writers like Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and John Updike, and who are unlike even 'blank fiction' contemporaries [...] such as Bret Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland and Jay McInerney' (Nicol, 'Dave Eggers', p. 102).
- 44 Brown, 'Introduction', p. 27.
- 45 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 2.
- 46 On the convergence paradigm, see for example Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York UP, 2006), esp. pp. 1-24.