



**Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing.** By Nicholas Thoburn. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 372 pp. ISBN 9780816621965.

*Anti-Book* is a literary exercise that necessarily hinges on the political. Author Nicholas Thoburn delves into a socio-political narrative by surveying the “anti-book”—an abstract concept that he materializes. It is a writing-from-below approach reminiscent of Deleuze, and Thoburn’s analytical inquiry hearkens back to his critical work *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*.

The author is successful in his attempt to engage with an array of media that describe the transcendental book. Pulp, bibles, digital media, and collective authorship challenged culture and transformed our thinking about the parameters of the written word. Thoburn takes us around the world as he draws a consistent thread between the written word and the unwritten word, often through some form of theological musings. By using examples of corporeal materiality, religious doctrine, and cultural relics birthed from religious dogma, he does well to persuade the reader of the significance of the spirit behind the “presignifying semiotic” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003, p. 117).

The arguments in *Anti-book* follow a logical flow that touches on major cultural signposts such as religion, class, and race. The author gives a brief history of the book, though not in the traditional sense. The social and political context he provides encourages contemplation from the perspective of various disciplines such as sociology, economics, and law, and raises a vital question: what is the meaning of text? While the author provides a historical narrative of the “evolution” of the text, this question marks the beginning of Thoburn’s analysis.

Thoburn investigates sites of emergence of the anti-book, such as art experiments (like Book Works), communist writing and publishing, and the “post-digital,” which is characteristic of contemporary media. Rather than advancing the notion that new media and other technological advances subvert the material text, he instead considers how materiality itself has been made more fluid and malleable as a result of shifting paradigms. In other words, there is something beyond the physical text that affects the meaning of the text. This is a common thread throughout Thoburn’s investigation in *Anti-Book*.

Thoburn’s analytical lens is clearly Marxist. Therefore, the major themes throughout *Anti-Book* are power and capital in relation to the spread of ideas as described in the book. To this end, the author uses Elizabeth L. Eisenstein and Adrian Johns to consider how the printing press has been an agent of change in de-materializing the medium. An example of this is the printing of the Gutenberg Bible in the mid-fifteenth century.

Mignolo, Deleuze, and Guattari consider the book as a stand-in for God where the word “detached from its oral source (the body)” and was attached to the disembodied

“silent voice of God” (Thoburn, 2016, p. 47). This, according to Thoburn, marked a turn in the *power* behind the book since the Bible established “a universal standard across time and space” (p. 47). Mignolo took this analogy further to suggest the book itself, rather than its words, became a symbol of colonial power. The analogy pans out to a wider purview where the book becomes an important tool in cultural imperialism and mass consumption via the “print-capitalism nexus” (p. 44).

The shift in copyright law, where ownership shifted from the publisher to the creator, pushed the publishing medium into new territory; incorporeality of the word was thus heir apparent to the spread of ideas. The socio-political tool was no longer the press itself. Rather, it was the emergence of ideas where copyright law sought to commodify such concepts as “creativity” and “originality.”

Further to this, literacy and deep reading is tied to centuries-old class reinforcements. The author gives the example of how reading was considered to be “enough of a threat” to the elite class that slaves in the American South faced death as the penalty for teaching others to read (p. 46). The point rings true that book culture has a particular socio-economic stratum that has served only to reinforce itself. Consider, for example, the emergence of the eighteenth-century novel, which “enabled ‘a nascent, heterogeneous, and fragmentary middle class to envision itself as coherent, unitary, and stable before such coherence and stability came into being’” (p. 46). In this regard, the book was the perfect vehicle to create a necessary fiction of self.

I appreciate the author’s writing style—a mash-up of the literary and academic—which lends credence to the notion of disrupting the signifier with alternative approaches to producing the sign. The text can both engage the academe and entertain the average reader. Not only does this book do well to enhance our understanding of media theory-meets-practice, it also contributes to our understanding of cultural formations through the text.

I wonder, though, about the author’s use of the word “radical” in the title. The word “radical” comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning root or origin. It also means “to affect the fundamental nature of something” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). We must be mindful that not every approach that is transformative is necessarily radical, and using the term “radical” to describe transformative cultural legacies renders its use political in and of itself. It seems there may be an assumption that any invention, any transformation, is radical. Still, I would say the author rightly chooses to use “radical” to evoke a certain recollection that verges on the political—an apt signifier for any anti-book.

## References

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