

Books before Print

This video provides a summary and some of my notes on Howard, chapter 1. With this guide as a starting point, I encourage you to read chapter 2 on your own and make some notes to help you prepare to write Assignment 2.

Introduction

“No other technology in human history has had the impact of this invention. Indeed, the book is the one technology that has made all the others possible, by recoding information and ideas indefinitely in a convenient and readily accessible place.” (vii-viii)

“By examining the book as a technology, we get the best example of how profoundly information and media technology affect culture and history, and how vital the technology of the book has been to cultural and intellectual change.” (ix)

These two quotations from Howard’s introduction present the crux of her argument about the value of studying books as a kind of technology. With this argument in mind, let’s turn to chapter 1.

1 Ancestors: Books before Print

From antiquity (800 BCE) to the European Renaissance (1300s)—the early history of books is necessarily a history of the transmission and adoption of an array of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese techniques for recording information and images.

Many early books looked very different: clay tablets, papyrus scrolls, etc—but they were used for similar reasons as books: read aloud, collected, loaned by libraries, used in university classrooms, given as gifts, sold in bookstores.

One of the most famous libraries in history was in Alexandria, Egypt, known for having the most extensive collection of literary and scholarly texts in the ancient world, most in the form of papyrus scrolls. Sadly the library of Alexandria was burned in 48 BCE when Julius Caesar set fire to his own ships during a battle in the harbor and the fire spread to nearby docks and then to the library itself. Many ancient works were lost forever, but many more were preserved thanks to lots of scholars and scribes who had copied out by hand their own editions.

Books have long served a dual purpose: as physical objects, and as preservers and conduits of information

In order for writing to be preserved, it has to be inscribed on some kind of surface. For centuries, the most common writing surfaces were papyrus, made from a reedy plant that grew along the banks of the Nile River; and parchment, made from animal skins. Papyrus was limited by the fact that it grew only in a narrow geographical area; parchment was more widely available, but time-consuming and expensive to produce.

The technology of paper is one of the most critical developments in the evolution of the modern book. You could spend the entire course studying the history of paper making.

As Howard chronicles, paper made from silk was first used in China in the first century BCE. Silk was expensive, so other alternatives were tried, including hemp, and finally a kind of pulp using bark and scraps of rags was developed.

Paper takes an interesting route—from China to the Arab Empire to the Mediterranean, by way of the Silk Road. Islamic culture and the Umayyad dynasty were especially important for the spread of paper making: as Howard writes, “the spread of Muslim culture and values is especially important in the history of books” (6). Baghdad was at one point the intellectual center of the world.

—

So paper is one of the foundations of the book’s core technology. Another core technology is the format itself, known as the codex.

For centuries, the primary format was the scroll, a single long roll of papyrus or parchment that was read by spooling from one end to the other. (We still use the term “scrolling” when referring to web pages, in an interesting historical holdover.) Scrolls are pretty good for storing texts, but retrieval is a bit harder. To get to a particular location in a text, you might have to unroll many feet of papyrus. Moving from one section to another was not easy.

The Romans had developed something called a diptych, made from two panels of wood with a hinge in the middle. This two-panel system was extended into a longer codex form by adding more panels or pages. The codex became popular among Christian monks and missionaries, mostly because of its portability and ease of use. It was much easier to flip pages to find a passage than to unroll feet of papyrus on a scroll.

—

One of the key surprises of the early history of the book is that books existed for centuries before the invention of the printing press. Think about what that means—entire libraries of texts were copied out by hand!

Howard’s section on Making a Medieval Book (12-15) describes the laborious process used to make books prior to the invention of the printing press.

Several things are notable here:

--there was a robust textbook market long before the printing press--bookstores popped up near the universities in cities like Paris as early as the 12th and 13th centuries. Students could pay to borrow a master copy text from which they would copy out by hand sections or passages.

—the primary production sites for bookmaking were monasteries. Scribes worked in scriptoria attached to monasteries, where they would copy out religious and scholarly texts. Scribes developed very elegant letterforms, and the first type faces replicated these letterforms. This is a trend in book technology: the new imitates the old. Metal type faces first were made to look like hand-lettered script, because that was what was most familiar to readers!

The initial centers of book production, at least in Europe, were the universities and the monasteries. It's not surprising, then, that most of the books that got produced and circulated were classical scholarly texts like Plato or Socrates, and religious texts like Bibles and prayer books. The location of the making of books, it turns out, has a direct connection to the types of books being produced. Most early book publishing was not based in writing new stories or advancing new knowledge, but in preserving and copying knowledge from the past.

Howard also discusses readers and who was reading during this time period. In the European middle ages, readership was almost microscopically small. Most people were not taught to read prior to the development of printing. Books were too expensive and were to be found mostly in the homes of wealthy landowners and in churches and other religious sites.

The last section of chapter 1, *The Eve of the Renaissance*, describes how the intellectual landscape of Europe was beginning to change in the 14th century. "With its roots in fourteenth-century Italy, the cultural and intellectual rebirth known as the Renaissance pulled Europe away from many medieval traditions. In a complex way, the Renaissance affected people's values, their views of the world, and the kinds of knowledge they sought. At the center of this change was an ideology known as humanism: the notion that man should seek out and embrace new knowledge, and that this knowledge could and should be excavated from the classical past." (24) Hence the name Renaissance—re-birth—suggesting this idea of a rebirth of classical Greek and Roman philosophy, literature, and science.

This was important for the book: The book needs not only a technology for production (the printing press) but also an appetite for consumption. There is no reason to mass produce something nobody needs. But the middle of the 15th century, as Howard chronicles, "Europe was ripe for the innovation that would make books more widely available." (25)

The story of that innovation is covered in chapter 2.