

From bookshelf porn and shelfies to #bookfacefriday: How readers use Pinterest to promote their bookishness

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Abstract:

Millions of readers use Pinterest to catalogue, curate and promote their bookish behaviour. Pinterest holds a vast number of images from anglophone readers celebrating personal reading rituals. Across Pinterest, the *act* of book reading is given great prominence, and *what* is read often remains merely a secondary concern. This creates an inclusive environment that embraces ‘bookishness’ alongside ‘readerliness’. Using Pinterest to perform a visual ethnography means the images (and the material reality they signify) lead the investigation. With millions of users and billions of pins, Pinterest offers both source material and a way to categorise, archive and share those resources. Pinterest, an under-examined platform in its own right, also hosts a range of images that live elsewhere across the web, making Pinterest uniquely situated to capture images from multiple digital platforms. These images challenge notions of how a reader is defined; they include future or aspirational readers in their scope. They also suggest that a broader ‘bookish’ aesthetic is undergoing a renaissance in light of digital-reading experiences. But what does ‘bookishness’ look like? And how are these readers harnessing bookishness to celebrate reading?

Key words: Book history, bookish, Pinterest, new materialism, visual ethnography

Introduction

Once considered symbols of knowledge, power and sophistication, the social surrounds of books are rapidly changing. The staidness of books’ form, unchanged in many respects for hundreds of years, has become a liability in cultures that increasingly privilege the digital and ephemeral. While books were the default medium of knowledge-preservation and -dissemination, the need for books as tools of learning and research, whether in the library

space or home, was rarely queried. Now, libraries can offer information access, knowledge dissemination, and a safe and clean space, all without books; homes no longer need walls of shelves in order to hold piles of reading matter. Today, books compete with other media for resources, attention, time and space. How the quality of this bookless experience ‘stacks up’, however, remains a contentious issue for booklovers.

A decade of commentary about digital book alternatives, and the potential for the book object’s disappearance,¹ has prompted a concurrent flourishing of all things bookish. The ‘bookish’ includes what we traditionally understand to be a book, and also all manner of objects that mimic books, like bookshelf wallpaper, book vases, book teapots, book socks and imitation leather book covers to protect electronic devices. It is no coincidence that the transformations and transmutations tracked in this study abound at this point in history. To understand the impassioned range of reactions to book treatments and bookish objects in the digital era, and to explain the continued tenacity of books in the digital era requires both *that* such objects be studied and also a fresh *approach* to the study of such material objects.

New materialism strives to legitimise the study of matter in a non-empirical manner, acknowledging that matter is an integral participant in our everyday experience, and that matter possesses potential agency (see Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2001, 2010; Bogost 2012; Boivin 2008; Conn 2010; Coole and Frost 2010). By focusing primarily upon the book’s materiality and the book’s interactions with ourselves, a new materialist examination becomes one about bodily experiences and the role of the book in such experiences (e.g. Leah Price’s 2012 work on the non-reading uses of books in Victorian Britain). What is it about a book that fuels the desire to possess it? What is experienced once the book is in the hand or on the shelf and furthermore, how might the book experience this process? I acknowledge the concerns of those like book historian Leslie Howsam who advocate for the inseparability of ‘abstract’ texts and the ‘material forms in which they appear’ (2006, 11; see also Chartier 1995). What I undertake is a rearticulation of the manner in which the book is contemplated in light of the possibility that each material form may exert an agency irrespective of what its content may be.

The key research question for this paper is, how do readers in the Anglosphere use Pinterest to promote their culturally driven notions of bookishness? And how can we, as researchers, use Pinterest to track this same trend? This work does not seek to speak on behalf of readers everywhere – cultural and personal relationships to the book are unique, rising as they do from a particular web of historical, cultural and material circumstances. Further, with 250 million active monthly users, Pinterest captures only a subset of readers (Pinterest, 2019). Note this paper does not differentiate between would-be readers, pretend-readers, audio-readers, digital-only readers and ‘real readers’. It is complex and outside the scope of this paper to differentiate between such types of readers, their reading practices and their motivations. Suffice to say that all the types of readers that indulge in using Pinterest in the ways examined here use Pinterest to imply a readerly status, and whether that is mere puffery is another project.

Key terms

Three key terms to be defined upfront are book; bookish aesthetic; and celebration.

Book

It is important to acknowledge that the definition of this basic term, ‘book’, remains slippery and contested. Here, I will narrow the field of objects by classifying a book as ‘bound paper sheets’. However, when book historian Leslie Howsam ponders, ‘Can we find a way to recognise the bookishness of things that we do not initially recognise as books?’ (2006, 5), I believe the answer to that question is yes. The multiple definitions that I provide in my broader project, of which this paper forms a small part, offer an intellectual scaffold to frame interesting debates, rather than a device to stifle engagement (Rodger, 2017).

Bookish Aesthetic

In my use of the term ‘bookish’ I acknowledge what media scholar Jessica Pressman calls ‘an aesthetic of bookishness – the fetishized focus on textuality and the book-bound reading object’ (2014). Pressman’s ‘aesthetic of bookishness’ tends to refer to a specific focus upon the content of creative literature in response to the digital era. Here, I am less interested in narrative turns towards the book object, and more interested in physical tropes that display and play with ‘an aesthetic of bookishness’. My adoption of Pressman’s term in discussion of the book-related is a way of acknowledging the links that exist between literary and physical manifestations of the book’s form.

When considering a bookish ‘aesthetic’ there are multiple considerations that need to be taken into account. Firstly, there is the aesthetic of the book (-like) object itself, and secondly, the aesthetics of the context in which the book (-like) object exists. Not that these are necessarily separable – a book may be placed within the context of other books, as in a library. Traditional book spaces contribute much to interpretation of a bookish aesthetic. The library, library materials and spatial protocols of the library have been and continue to be mimicked by bookshops and in domestic environments. Pinterest is rife with bookshelves, book rooms, bookshops and libraries, for the dual purposes of admiring this aesthetic and considering how to recreate it. Bookish seems a particularly apt descriptor, as the term ‘book’ continues to be stretched and troubled by its context in a digital era.

Celebration

‘Celebration’ is a term I selected to describe the enormous variety of book treatments and homages. Celebration is a deliberate word choice in recognition of the scope of activities that occur around the book object and in its honour. Here, celebrating the book means engaging with the book(ish) object, typically in a ritualised manner. Celebrations can take many different forms. Behaviour that one reader deems to be honouring the book can be quite different to, and sometimes seemingly in direct opposition to, what an artist or amateur crafter may feel is honouring the book. For some, damaging a book through use or

repurposing can in fact be interpreted as a celebration of ideas, books, and our relationships with them.² For others, the book is best celebrated by ensuring it remains untouched and pristine. Using Pinterest to track records of these celebrations adds a layer of complexity, as this digital platform enables readers to demonstrate their bookishness merely by saving and circulating *images* of bookish, celebratory acts that are in fact performed by others; no personal ownership or contact is required.

Theoretical framework and methodology

New materialism

There is no default methodology when undertaking a new materialist project, as new materialist work is inherently interdisciplinary. One of the disciplines this project calls upon is studies of material culture, described by ethnographer Phillip Vannini as ‘an open discipline, both theoretically and methodologically’ (2009, 7). There has been a gradual rise in projects that respond to or rebuff critiques of materialism. As a theoretical framework, new materialism validates object-centric inquiry and as such I sought out existing research methodologies that would be sympathetic to this object-orientated approach. After noticing the paradoxical tendency whereby books were disappearing from their traditional domains (like libraries), even as bookish things and celebrations were becoming increasingly apparent in places not traditionally associated with reading (like restaurants), I searched for a rich pool of resources with which to explore this trend. Further, I sought a method to formally catalogue what I was seeing and a language with which to categorise and describe it. Anthropologist Carl Knappett himself acknowledges the ‘pressing need for systematic methodologies with which to study material culture in the past and the present, and [furthermore] the development of such methodologies might enable the different disciplines concerning themselves with material culture to communicate more effectively’ (2007, 23). Sociologist Eugene Halton agrees with this, writing that finding out about things ‘requires a variety of approaches’ (2009, x). One of this research project’s objectives is to experiment with an innovative means to research and understand a very important cultural tool and material object (i.e. the book).

What makes ‘today’ different to even 50 years ago is the visibility of bookish enchantment – books have been honoured for hundreds of years, but never in an era of such prolific, viable alternatives and user-generated platforms.³ This era of digital possibilities is making plain the powerful effect of book objects. The desire for embodied experiences is a powerful motivator of book interactions and celebrations.⁴ Furthermore, these sorts of desires drive contemporary defences of books themselves, and also of key book spaces like libraries and bookstores, that serve as custodians of books and providers of book-related experiences. The materiality of books is an integral part of many book experiences; indeed, even those who ridicule the book focus upon its materiality. Cultural attachments to, and the affordances of, paper books are being made more prominent in an

era proliferate with screen-based reading experiences (see for example Baron 2015; Piper 2012; Wolf 2007, 2018). What may have appeared inevitable in 2004 (the death of the book) has still not come to pass and it is worth reflecting on one of the ways in which the book is proving so unexpectedly 'tenacious' (Howsam 2006, 37).

Books are intersensory objects and have the ability to conjure up tastes, smells, sounds, sights and sensations, not necessarily literally but rather by conjuring memories from past interactions and associations (Connolly 2010, 178; Wolf 2018, 31, 33). Such past interactions and associations might fruitfully be conceived of using political theorist Jane Bennett's terminology. She variously refers to this network of associations as the 'mise-en-scene' (2004, 351), 'happening' (2004, 353), 'process' (2004, 353), 'grouping' (2004, 354), 'conjunction' (2004, 354), 'network of relationships' (2004, 354), 'assemblage' (2004, 354), 'dense web' (2004, 354), 'juxtaposition' (2004, 355), 'our embeddedness in a natural cultural-technological assemblage' (2004, 361) and 'configurations' (2010, ix). This paper offers particular attention to how readers use Pinterest to demonstrate and indulge in the 'enchanted' capacities of book objects, particularly within assemblages that demonstrate the importance of context to how relationships with book objects play out.

Visual ethnography

One existing methodology that appears sympathetic to my new materialist aims is visual ethnography – in this I have been strongly informed by the work of ethnographers Sarah Pink (2013), John Postill (with Pink, 2012) and Gillian Rose (2001). These scholars tend to agree on and encourage personal engagement from the researcher, personal passion for the subject matter, ongoing interaction with potential research subjects, the validity of focusing on the visual, and the legitimacy of the sensual. The key collating and archiving tool for this project, Pinterest, is over-ridingly visual, thus making a methodology that emphasises the visual over the verbal fitting. Pink advocates using methods and sources appropriate to 'local' vernacular or practices; she also encourages sharing data produced (in her case, photographs and videos) with the subjects of study. This also aligns well with Pinterest's own culture of what it calls 'knitting': 'a term its employees use to describe collaboration among groups' (Griffith, 2018). Accordingly, I too gather my data in a manner appropriate to its source members and then share this data with many of those who helped to generate it.

One of the important precursors to the fields of both sensory ethnography and new materialism is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (Thomas 2006, 47–48; Boivin 2008; Coole and Frost 2010). Merleau-Ponty set an influential precedent with his theorising of the sensual experience. His interest in how the body modulates our interactions with the world is part of the greater project examining how bodies approach matter, and matter approaches bodies (2012). Matter approaches bodies through a multitude of senses – the senses do not perform isolated functions and thus visual sources do not prevent other bodily senses from participating in a visual experience. As Pink writes, vision 'cannot be understood as a pure sensory channel of experiencing or knowing' (2013,

33). It is important to acknowledge that in performing a visual ethnography other senses remain at work.

The source materials for this project are primarily visual, but that does not by default make the project mono-sensory; indeed a common reaction to pictures of bookshops or libraries on Pinterest is 'The smell!'. Researchers in contemporary publishing studies Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires write that such statements are merely a handy proxy for declaring one's bookishness, 'a trope that can be invoked to badge oneself as a book lover' (2018, 65). While in many instances this is undoubtably true, it should also be acknowledged that when combined with personal memory, the 'sight' of books can genuinely trigger a range of bodily sensations.⁵ Books are verbal and visual tools that invoke other senses, including smell, touch and sometimes even taste. Not only does literature harbour such abilities, so too does the book object. The collaborative research project on ambient literature, between UWE Bristol, Bath Spa University and University Birmingham, is investigating and experimenting with these very capacities.⁶ The book object has the capacity to evoke particular sensations that may or may not then find form in explicit, articulated conceptions.

One of the characteristics of my qualitative approach (though not necessarily inherent to visual ethnography) is the decision not to collect empirical data. This eschewal of empiricism befits the project's adoption of a new materialist framework, because new materialism questions 'ways that were inspired by classical science' as a means of understanding the world (Coole and Frost 2010, 5). Thus, it does not solicit surveys or interviews with people to create large datasets. It does not (as far as is it is possible to separate out literature from the book object) perform a traditional literature-based textual analysis. Instead, this project (both the larger project, and the briefer paper written here) undertakes a qualitative analysis of mostly visual source material in order to understand the book object in the context of contemporary daily life.

Using Pinterest to access, catalogue and archive bookishness

Pinterest is a social media platform that acts like a series of virtual pin boards. Social media can be defined as 'web applications that process, store, and retrieve user-generated content' (Lang and Benbunan-Fich 2010, n.p.). Whereas once people would tear pictures out of magazines to make a scrapbook, or copy and paste pictures onto their website and sometimes offer a link to the original source, Pinterest allows users to perform these tasks online, in a centralised place. Users (known as 'pinners') 'pin' pictures of interest on to one of their existing 'boards' or create a new board. Pinterest tracks where each pin was pinned from, whether it was a user upload, website or another user's board.

What perhaps drives many Pinterest users is the same sensation that drove the first American scrapbookers, a practice tracked by cultural historian Ellen Gruber Garvey (2012). Gruber Garvey explicitly makes the connection between nineteenth-century scrapbookers and today's digital readers: 'Just as present-day readers manage digital abundance with favourites lists, bookmarks, blogrolls, RSS feeds, and content aggregators, nineteenth-century readers channelled the flood of information with scrapbooks' (2012, 5). What

Pinterest offers that many other ‘content aggregators’ do not is a highly visual way of stockpiling ideas and information. Pins are created, firstly, by selecting an *image* from the webpage, and then that image is cropped to a uniform size, with its immediate source and any comments arranged below. The boards have the deliberately retro appearance of a corkboard full of Polaroid photos with captions, neatly arranged in a grid formation. Information is thus curated and collated in the one place and it allows the pictures to act as visual cues. Indeed, often the image is all that is sought. Pinterest pinners are encouraged to set up multiple boards, and to divide up the content by board theme. Board titles and their descriptions (written by each pinner) help others to understand what the board is about, and whether they might like to ‘follow’ that board. Pins from boards that a user has selected to ‘follow’ generate the content of their individual homepage, which is regularly updated.

There are more than 175 billion pins (Omnicores Agency, 2019) and 250 million monthly active users (We Are Social, 2018).⁷ More than 130 million boards are self-categorised as ‘Home Décor’ (Beck 2015), and capture rooms that users dream of having. Used in this way, by those planning both likely and imagined home renovations and improvements, one can see how the pinner performs as Gruber Garvey’s scrapbookers did: ‘[sending] provisions ahead to her future self’ (2012, 4). Media scholar Hillary A. Jones rebuffs the scrapbook analogy, asserting that Pinterest is merely about collating ‘wishes’, whereas she declares the historical practice of scrapbooking as one that features ‘accomplishments and memories’ (2016, 352) This is in contradistinction to Gruber Garvey, who clearly positions nineteenth-century scrapbooking as a practice concerned with the management of information, as opposed to contemporary scrapbooks which ‘merge photograph albums with memorabilia scrapbooks’ (2012, 20).

Jones critiques Pinterest as ‘a postindustrial, postfeminist third shift of labor curating yearning and self-surveilling’ that ‘serves capitalism’ – a shift that is insidiously disguised as leisure – whereas Gruber Garvey suggests historical scrapbooking was in many ways about curation and sense-making, particularly for marginalised groups (including women) (Jones 2016, 352–353; Gruber Garvey 2012, 5). The curation of existing resources is what historical scrapbooking communities encouraged and eulogised (Gruber Garvey 2012, 11). Pinterest, too, encourages sense-making through curation rather than creation (Wang et al 2016; Friz 2016). While there is merit in Jones’ concerns over Pinterest as a self-surveilling tool used by women, and the tacit collection of user data that is mined for commercial purposes,⁸ such concerns do not discredit Pinterest as a resource for this project. Crucially, where Jones and Gruber Garvey’s work aligns is their mutual concern for scrapbooking (nineteenth-century) and pinning (twenty-first-century) as aspirational practices, as a means for the maker to gather up her ‘wishes’ and ‘yearnings’ (Jones 2016) for her ‘future self’ (Gruber Garvey 2012, 4).

According to a Pinterest tagline, ‘Pinterest is a place to discover ideas for all your projects and interests, hand-picked by people like you’. It is a ‘visual bookmarking tool’. Highly contextualised, embedded in people’s lives and accompanied by commentary, each pin is placed within an individual’s board. This placement offers contexts such as how the

pinner understands the picture or idea as fitting within their lives, in addition to any explicit comments that the pinner has made about the pin. Postill and Pink propose that their 'social media ethnography practice further suggests a critical shift from the analysis of online communities to that of digital socialities' (Postill and Pink 2012, 127). Accordingly, I do not assume that interest in the book appeals to the entire 'Pinterest community'. Furthermore, Pinterest users do not form groups in the manner of other social media platforms. Users create a multitude of groups, based on the boards of individuals and companies they choose to follow. The more generous term 'digital socialities' is in fact a more nuanced way of understanding the way Pinterest users may (or may not) interact with one another and their content.

One aspect of Pinterest that I acknowledge, and thus a limitation of this research project, is the homogenous user-base. Of the 250 million monthly active users, nearly half are from the USA (Griffith, 2018). The majority of Pinterest users are also women (Pew Research Centre 2015). The profile of the Pinterest user-base, however, continues to change. The number of online adults (in America) using Pinterest doubled between 2012 and 2015 (Pew Research Centre); sixty percent of new users are from outside of the United States (Roof and Lynley 2015); and more than half of new users are male (Pinterest, accessed 28 January 2019). Pinterest is, like many social media platforms and technology companies, protective of its algorithms and data (Beck 2015). This means that the data captured from Pinterest is not necessarily a balanced representation of bookish sentiment. Further, while the gender bias within Pinterest may elicit potential resistance, much as Victorian-era British media mocked women reading novels (see Price 2012) and North Americans 'derided women's scrapbooks as miscellanies of trivial poetry and household hints' (Gruber Garvey 2012, 11), this distinct gender bias has been increasingly prevalent throughout book history. Book usage, and even production, has gradually transitioned from masculine domains like monasteries to feminine domains like the home (Spain 1992).

I gathered Pinterest data through participant observation, that is, as a fellow 'pinner'. While I attempt to avoid gratuitous subjectivity, the work of Bennett and Vannini (among others) demonstrates that at times self-reflection can be appropriate and provides powerful opportunities to experience and then explore further moments of human and nonhuman porosity. All of my book-related boards continue to be public, making this collection available to any fellow pinner who 'follows' those boards. Postill and Pink describe the work of a social media ethnographer as 'sensorily embodied' experience (2012, 128). The regular and sometimes intense clicking, scrolling, typing and screen-reading required have an effect on the body. This is in addition to the 'Many digital traces of the ethnographer [...that] remain part of the internet' (Postill and Pink 2012, 127). Participating in this social media platform inevitably creates a digital trail, something that is difficult if not impossible to avoid. Ethnographer Gillian Rose would likely describe leaving this trail visible as an ethically appropriate approach; she stresses the importance of acknowledging the impossibility of ever being a neutral observer (2001, 188). Such neutrality is impossible given each observer's unique historical, geographic, cultural and social position (Rose 2001, 188).

Any attempt at neutrality is further compromised by the technological mechanisms of social media platforms themselves, and the demographics of the average Pinterest user.

As media scholar DeNel Rehberg Sedo points out, investigating reading practices on social media platforms brings ‘ethical and methodological implications that researchers may never before have had to consider’ (2018, n.p.). My management of the data collected from Pinterest is transparent – I use Pinterest to collect, categorise and archive the visual resources required for this project. The data is no more unstable or publicly positioned on my Pinterest boards than it would be pinned on the boards of others, which is where almost all of the content on my Pinterest boards originated. The notable exceptions are photographs of public places that I have taken on fieldwork and shared on my Pinterest boards, and pictures pinned from a small range of other publicly available (and almost exclusively commercial) websites.

Pinterest canvases a number of ethical issues in their *Privacy Policy*, *Acceptable Use Policy* and *Advertising Standards*. Pinterest users are warned in the *Pinterest Privacy Policy* that ‘Anyone can see the public boards and Pins you create, and the profile information you give us’ (2016).⁹ It is also in the nature of Pinterest that users do not expect their content to remain within their circle of known contacts; Pinterest intermingles content from the user’s known contact list with content pinned by millions of other users presumably unknown personally (Friz and Gehl 2016, 691–693). While Pinterest has a range of privacy settings that can be changed, private pinning is discouraged (for example when the private pinning feature was released in 2012 each user was permitted only three secret boards, versus a limitless number of public boards. This limit was discretely lifted in 2014). Pinterest encourages sharing, repinning and curation from within Pinterest; unlike other platforms (such as Instagram), Pinterest tacitly discourages users from uploading self-generated content (Friz and Gehl 2016, 694–696).

The ‘tantalizingly valuable’ (Gruber Garvey 2012, 1) yet ephemeral content of online sources parallels the dilemmas suffered by nineteenth-century newspaper readers (Gruber Garvey 2012, 5). While Pinterest as a social media platform may yet suffer a drop in popular usage (the way Myspace has, for example), its suitability as a visual record of personal bookish cultural practices remains undiminished; even as it records and collates reams of data, it participates in changing and shaping cultural practices and can sit comfortably beside other related historical social practices.

Readers and the bookish aesthetic on Pinterest

Books can be considered warm, comforting items. Nowhere is this more obvious than on Pinterest. One of the most literal examples of the affective qualities of bookshelves is the range of ‘Bookshelf Porn’. Popularised by the Tumblr account of the same name,¹⁰ this term is now a more generic term used to describe images of bookshelves lusted after by their viewers (see for example Barnett 2010, n.p.). Porn is broadly understood as media that excites the body in a sexual way.¹¹ Bookshelf Porn’s tagline is ‘Giving people the urge to read since 2009.’ Such images of bookshelves (whether on the Tumblr or shared across

Pinterest), however, give viewers more than simply an urge to read. Rather, viewing these books inspire the urge to engage with the affective and effective powers of a book. Reading lists inspire reading urges. But these shelves of books inspire desires that are both physical and cerebral. It is an urge to be surrounded by books, enveloped by books, overcome by books. An urge to collect them, smell them, touch them and hold them.

Investigating ‘bookshelf porn’, whether on this particular website, Tumblr or across Pinterest (where it exists in abundance), is my way of answering literary and material culture scholar Bill Brown’s call ‘to show how [things] organize our private and public affection’ (2001, 7). I will not deny the extensive assemblage of which these images form a part on this website. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention to the power of the books in prompting these sensations. Brown usually shies away from anthropomorphising things, but in considering how to change standard perceptions of subject-object relationships, he asks ‘not whether things are but what work they perform’ (Brown 2001, 7). The books may not be talking, but they impress, overwhelm, and in a group this large their seductive powers are significantly increased. As sociologist Bernward Joerges writes, ‘things do more than speak. [They] do much more than mark the social place of their owners. They do work, among other things’ (1988, 224). While the books have been collected or displayed with a particular social-cultural intent, the viewing of these books via a social circuit of images like Pinterest or Bookshelf Porn sidelines such intents. Instead, the books are elevated into an overt performance undertaken regardless of original provenance or ownership. The books take the stage and ‘line up for applause’ (Petroski 1999, 5). These books awe the viewer, cause intakes of breath and inspire feelings of longing to be with them.

Books and bodies do not rest in a state of passive juxtaposition – they continuously affect each other. This suggests that the book object can exert force over bodies, that is, over people. Bennett calls such powers ‘enchantment’ (2001), and hers is a provocative proposition because she paints a worldview whereby matter performs acts and, by default, reduces the absolute agency of human actors. Another way of describing the vibrancy of objects is by describing objects as having ‘Thing-power’, which is ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’ (Bennett 2010, 6). Bennett’s work on the power of objects has much in common with media scholar Karin Littau’s examination of the book and book readers’ bodies and the flow between the two (2008). Bennett draws on Spinoza and Dewey in discussing the porosity of things and bodies (2010, 102). Littau, too, is concerned with the impact books and bodies have on each other. This is, furthermore, an aspect of book history that she rightly feels to have been neglected.¹² Literature cannot be wholly separated from the book object – but that is why an examination of the experience of the body of the book and the body of the reader is worth undertaking. They engage each other. In such an examination Bennett flattens the subject/object dichotomy and sees only objects, engaging each other. Even for Bruno Latour, whose actor-network theory (ANT) differentiates between human and nonhuman components, they are all equally labelled ‘actants’, and there is no presumed hierarchy between the two. As cultural ecologist David Abram suggests, such traditional hierarchies

are 'wrecked by any phenomenology that takes seriously our immediate sensory experience' (1997, 48). Taking sensory experience seriously means conceding that knowledge can come from sources other than intellect. Such acknowledgement upends Descartes' adage 'I think, therefore I am.' Feeling, smelling, touching, hearing, tasting and seeing all offer the body knowledge and ways of understanding the world that do not necessarily rely on cerebral interpretation.

In each bookshelf porn image, the books would have, in some manner, suggested themselves for the task by means that are entirely material and affective. Book artist and visual theorist Johanna Drucker describes these communicative means as a 'power' within the book, which 'animates them beyond their material limits generating a metaphysically charged atmosphere which surrounds [it]' (Drucker 2004, 94). Drucker writes in a manner sympathetic to a 'vital materialism' (Bennett 2010), although she does reserve her enthusiasm for particular books (not specific books, but she is unwilling to enthuse about 'all' books as an entire category of object). Drucker's description for what such books possess is 'a mystique, a sense of charged presence. They seem to bear meaning just in their being, their appearance, and their form through their iconography and materials' (2004, 93). As Drucker notes, the book's material composition is intricately related to its role, its status, and its relationship with the world.

Shelfies

A 'shelfie' is broadly understood to be 'an image of artfully styled shelves, often but not always including books' (Fletcher 2016, n.p.). Urban Dictionary describes it as 'A picture or portrait of your bookshelf'. The term is a portmanteau of the words 'selfie', a photographic self-portrait and 'shelf'. Shelfies could be understood as bookshelf porn on a small, personal scale. Instead of either recording or admiring an enormous collection of books, and a collection of books that may not belong to oneself, a shelfie is generally understood as a photograph of one's own bookshelf or 'TBR' pile (to-be-read pile, often beside a bed). The irony of viewing these images via Pinterest is that most of these shelfies would be generated elsewhere, by others, on platforms that encourage user-generated images (like Instagram), and then gathered up by pinners to consume and share their desire for such a shelfie via Pinterest.

A search of #shelfie on Pinterest reveals all manner of bookish vignettes: sparse shelves with seven books and a pot plant;¹³ bookshelves with all the books turned spine towards the wall;¹⁴ bookshelves arranged by cover colour;¹⁵ instructions on '12 must-have objects to style the perfect shelfie'¹⁶ and '8 shelfie mistakes to avoid'.¹⁷ Each of these examples I found while writing this paragraph and using the specific search term shelfie – I have a larger and longer-standing collection, however, across my Pinterest boards 'Bookshelves and Bookrooms' and 'Book props and vignettes'. The hundreds of images on my Pinterest boards were not found using that explicit search term, but rather through the more 'naturalised' processes described by Postill and Pink of clicking, scrolling, cataloguing and genuine participation on the platform over many years.

Shelfies are a way of asserting the legitimacy of this now feminised, oft derided, object. The contemporary book is often regarded as a feminised object (this is most particularly true in the case of romance books). Scholar Daphne Spain's *Gendered Spaces* (1992) provides a convincing account of how spatial and social practices intertwine and interact, specifically with regard to educational opportunities, employment practices and domestic duties, each of which shares a relationship with access to books and reading practices. Not only did the stratification of spaces isolate women from such activities and the objects involved therein, like cigars, guns and books, it also prevented women from conversations in such spaces where topics such as politics and economics were discussed (1992, 117).¹⁸

Circumstances eventually changed, however, and homes gradually reduced domestic gender segregation. Spain explicitly states that 'by bringing books into shared women's and men's spaces, [architects and designers] were setting the stage for (and reflecting) women's changing status' (1992, 127). So too the changing status of the book itself. Since books' time as part of the sacred domain of monasteries and other male-dominated religious bastions, they have largely transitioned from being perceived as masculine to feminine. This transition has been aided by the opening up of male spaces like universities and libraries (and the feminisation of library employment), but also the broad feminisation of domestic spaces. As books have become increasingly feminised, however, their status has shifted. As illustrated across Pinterest, books are often popularly viewed as design objects, practically a soft furnishing suitable for posing into vignettes. Furthermore, the categorisation of books as feminine contributes to the general dismissal of books as passive objects. Books were long considered masculine objects belonging in masculine spaces. Books, and especially novels, however, have become linked in the popular mindset with women and most particularly with louche, neglectful or subversive women. Nor is this a historical quirk – as literature and gender scholar Tania Modleski argues 'women's entertainment is judged to be trivial compared to men's pursuits' (2008, xxvi). As feminine objects, books have accordingly been awarded lower status. For example, despite the scholarly nuances now afforded to the reading of romance literature – and the reclamation of this space and these types of books as an important part of female reading – significant public prejudice against the romance genre continues to exist.

Scholar and romance academic Lisa Fletcher ran a *Summer of Romance* campaign in 2016/2017, of which #lovemyshelfie was a key part, encouraging social media users to snap and share photos of particular Mills and Boon novels. Intriguingly, a significant portion of those photos shared were not in the home, but rather of Mills and Boon at opportunity shops or libraries. This mirrors the dearth of Mills and Boon 'shelfies' on Pinterest, a notable absence given the strong demographic crossover between Pinterest users and Mills and Boon readers. It also highlights the aspirational nature of Pinterest, whereby it is implicit that the images pinned are of what the pinner wishes their home or shelf looked like, rather than necessarily a stark reflection of domestic reality.¹⁹

Memes

It is not just the display and maintenance of the domestic libraries featured on Pinterest that is prone to ritualization, but also private reading practices. These reading rituals nurture a symbiosis between the body, the mind and the book. It is, as religious studies scholar Catherine Bell writes, that ‘the strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body, specifically, the interaction of the social body within a symbolically constituted spatial and temporal environment’ (1992, 93). Bookish memes abound on Pinterest. For this article I use the term ‘meme’ generously to encompass book-related images with quotes or phrases overlaid. Memes that are concerned with the bodily relationship between readers and books seem particularly prevalent.²⁰

The ‘social body’ portrayed in recurrent Pinterest memes is a body taking a moment away from the demands and responsibilities of daily life with a book and a cup of tea, alone or perhaps with a cat (the feminisation of such rituals is supported by Janice Radway (1984) and Belinda Jack (2012).) These memes are typically word based, other times the text is overlaid on an image of a comfortable armchair, with a pretty mug or cup of tea and a careful arrangement of books, or even just a vignette that suggests the experience.²¹ The implication, either explicit or implicit, is that regular tea and book time is restorative and an appropriate way, especially for women, to take time alone, relieved of any domestic and familial duties. In such memes the content of the reading matter may or may not be acknowledged; of much greater concern is that a moment alone is taken with a cup of tea in one hand and a book in the other. The power of such memes can also be explained by political theorist William E. Connolly, who writes that, ‘The tactile and the visual are interwoven, in that my history of touching objects similar to the one in question is woven into my current vision of it’ (2010, 182). Connolly implies, therefore, that viewers of these images can both imagine what the book would feel like in their lap or the cup of tea in their hand, and also bring their own book-plus-tea moments to bear while looking at such pictures. Awareness that many others perform similar book rituals simultaneously normalises the act and validates the ritual. Many women may find such validation comforting, particularly as reading books as they neglect their familial duties is a recurring trope of many bookish memes on Pinterest.²² Intriguingly, not only do such tropes have long standing ties to reading, but also to pornography: ‘pornography comes to stand for a wide range of social ills and anxieties [among them] neglect of the family and the moral good’ (Attwood 2002, 97).

This seems an apt juncture to introduce journalist Anne Fadiman’s book-love terms ‘courtly’ and ‘carnal’ love (1998, 33). Courtly readers maintain books in a pristine fashion; carnal readers are inclined to demonstrate their affection in a bodily fashion for example through annotation, dog-earing, and stroking. Not all readers identify clearly with one type of love, as expressed in the meme ‘717. Part of me wants to have books that are weathered and wonderful, but the other part of me wants to keep them brand new.’²³ Reading practices of all types attract strong sentiments, and these are displayed and shared with particular passion on Pinterest.

Retribution-seeking themed memes on Pinterest abound, likely from courtly readers railing against book transgressions. The bookish transgressions include returning books late to the library, library books showing use from other patrons, reading books in the bath tub, dog-eared pages, stealing one's books or 'hurting my baby'.²⁴ A more general collection of book-loving memes from Pinterest include the following sentiments:

Some girls dream of a big walk-in closet in their bedroom. I'd prefer a walk-in library in mine. (www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591888866385/)

Bookish problem #57 Some people want to live in a perfect house. You just want enough space for all your books.
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591888866374/)

I am planning to have a library in my house one day, not just for me but for my future children as well. I want them to grow up surrounded by books.
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591888866280/)

Reading to children, even before they can understand words, teaches them to associate books with love and affection.
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591884906139/)

I plan on becoming a crazy book lady when I'm old
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591886376198/)

Of course size matters. Doesn't every girl want a big library?
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591888668753/)

Collect books, even if you don't plan on reading them right away. Nothing is more important than an unread library.
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591887318541/)

I look forward to the day when the biggest decision I have to make is what book I'm going to read while lying on the beach all day.
(www.pinterest.com/pin/22236591886852795/)

In viewing the bookish pins of Pinterest, it is worth considering the work of archaeologist Nicole Boivin, who suggests that, in part, books may be celebrated for their presence and materiality, quite aside from their coded symbolic significance:

These items of the material world do not necessarily symbolise anything else: their very power may lie in the fact that they are part of the realm of the

sensual, of experience, and of emotion, rather than a world of concepts, codes of meaning. (2008, 9)

Boivin is supported in her statement by the proliferation of images of bookshelves, comments and memes across Pinterest. Memes like ‘The feeling of pride you get when you just look at your own bookshelves.’ Or ‘Bookish problem #126. You actually have to step back, take a moment, and admire your bookshelves every time you add a new book’ or ‘I don’t just put my books on the bookshelf when I’ve finished reading them. I tuck them in their spot and kiss them goodnight’ or the stridently solo declaration ‘My bookshelf is my boyfriend’. Bookshelves invoke deep feelings of pride, happiness and connection in these people, and that is not due entirely to their symbolic power, but also to their sensual and emotive nature.

#BookfaceFriday and #bookstagram

The quintessential book space is the library, an institution that, like the book, has strong historical ties to religious institutions (see for example Campbell and Pryce 2013; Lyons 2011). Even in seventeenth-century North America, ‘the first libraries were collections of religious books’ (Rumsey 2016, 66). Libraries continue to be ritualised spaces, even as such rituals become secular, codified behaviours. In the digital era, libraries seek out ways to connect with their publics, to entice would-be readers to interact with them, and bring them into their spaces and use their collections. One of the techniques that been used is to support this crossover between physical collections and digital interaction with an individual library is #BookfaceFriday.

The bookface hashtag is ‘the name given to social media images that depict book covers blending into three-dimensional scenery’ (Bussel 2015, n.p.). A small collection of these is archived on my Pinterest board Book Props and Vignettes.²⁵ For individual examples you can follow the footnotes to #bookfacefriday examples of *The Hobbit*, *Brooklyn*, or *Miniature Schnauzers*.²⁶ The trend took off in North America around 2014–2015, with large libraries like the New York Public Library (NYPL) leading the way. As Johannes Neuer, director of digital engagement at the NYPL, said ‘When you think about the library, you think about written text, but what we’ve shown here is that we have a vibrant visual side.’ Liana Flumiani, a library technician at the much smaller public library in Brantford, Ontario said it’s ‘a fabulous way to show how fun we are’ (both interviewed by Bussell 2015, n.p.. Neuer is now the Director of Customer Experience at NYPL).

Bookshops, too, seek to raise brand awareness and customer engagement via social media. For example some bookshops use #bookfaceFriday, others share bookshelf porn or publicise author signings and reading workshops. A trends that warrants a mention here is #bookstagram, #bookstagramming and #bookstagrammers. Bookstagram combines the terms ‘book’ and ‘Instagram’. Journalist Mara White describes it as ‘an Instagram hashtag used to denote a book related picture’ (2017, n.p.). While this article’s focus is on Pinterest, there is a frequent overlap between Pinterest and Instagram content – that is to say, many

of the highly stylised book images added to Pinterest in recent years may have originated on Instagram. Using the search term #bookstagram on Pinterest returns countless bookish images. Those who take such bookish shots regularly are also known as ‘bookstagrammers’. Those most successful at it appear to use their #bookstagram shots not simply to take ‘nice’ photos of books, but also to review and recommend books, promote book projects and authors (see for example the Huffington Post’s review of top bookstagrammers).²⁷ Chittal describes social media as a saviour of the independent bookstore, and the popularity of #bookstagram forms a part of this. ‘A heavily filtered photo at your local indie bookstore [...] signals to the world your sophisticated literary preferences’ – indeed, some bookstores ‘became so popular on the platform that they regularly attract visitors who come there solely for the ‘gram’ (2019, n.p.).²⁸

The wider use of social media platforms to engage in bookish behaviour is worth examination in its own right. Here, however, I will briefly elucidate some key differences between Pinterest and Instagram. Pinterest is based on found content; Instagram is based on user-generated content. On Pinterest there is no need to explicitly state whether an image is not one’s own or a #regram from another day – rather, it is generally expected that the images are not one’s own. Further, this means that those wishing to demonstrate their bookishness do not need to actually be in the presence of those books, that ‘TBR’ (to be read) pile of books beside a bed or even that steaming cup beside the open book at the rain spattered window. The implication on Instagram, however, is that unless specified, the user took the photos themselves and that the photos are of their own life. Pinterest was specifically designed for the curation and categorisation of images, a function that exists in only a basic form on Instagram. Further, Instagram remains aggressively smart-device focused (i.e. smart phones and tablets), whereas Pinterest has been optimised for all manner of devices, including desktop computers. This difference in functionality is matched with differing ideologies, whereby Pinterest is aspirational, future focused and about pinning one’s desires, while Instagram is about recording one’s life (albeit filtered and idealised) and sharing that with others. (Such differences, and the ever-growing place of Instagram in today’s media landscape are worth exploring, however they remain out of scope for this paper.)

Conclusion

Pierre Bourdieu describes home decoration as ‘opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept’ (1984, 57), and indeed books have long been used as markers of social rank (or the desire to attain a particular status). For some, using books merely to pretend a social image or personality is a terrible, even sinful, misuse of them. This is not to say that all specially arranged bookshelves are composed of books not read. What such styling bookshelves and vignettes have in common is that they are arranged for maximum visual appeal. Chronology, topic, author, title—these factors are often irrelevant to the arrangement of such a bookshelf.

Bookish Pinterest users are often willing to overlook the foregrounding of a book's colour or material aspects. Pinterest's focus on design, décor, aesthetic appeal means such bookshelves and arrangements find their fans. The arrangement of books by colour, for example, is an apt test of Brown's summary of Marcel Mauss, that 'However materially stable objects may seem, they are [...] different things in different scenes' (Brown 2001, 9). The effect created in a domestic space of similar books, arranged by colour is different to the effect that would be created if the books were arranged instead by author or subject or size. Waste historian Gay Hawkins describes the importance of object transformation to object recategorisation: 'It is the possibility of transformation and misuse that makes waste available to other systems of objectification. But you have to be willing to see and feel this' (2006, 73). The bookish devotees on Pinterest are just some of those who are willing to see, feel and create such transformations. It is in books' 'outmodedness', their latent and active supersession by digital counterparts, that the moral freedom to embrace the bookish has flourished. Despite potential classist objections, the styling of books, in the sharply curated way that the bookish of Pinterest admire, is an increasingly legitimate and feasible way of saving and celebrating books. As evidenced in my study across Pinterest, there is ongoing interest in the book object, bookish objects, book spaces and residual fascination with the hold that these objects and spaces have on people.

Biographical note:

Dr Nicola Rodger is an independent researcher, whose latest work centres on book and print cultures and their current state of flux. This includes the radical transformations of books and the wild and unexpected acts of remediation books are currently undergoing. She is also exploring: libraries and community placemaking efforts; and manifestations of environmental ethics and awareness. Theoretical frameworks of interest include: vital materialism and enchantment (e.g. Bennett 2010; 2001), thing theory (e.g. Brown 2003), sacredness and ritualization (e.g. Alasuutari 2006; Bell 1992) ecocriticism and the ethics of waste (e.g. Dryzek 2013; Fox 2000; Hawkins 2006; Scanlan 2005); embodied experience as a site of knowledge (e.g. Alaimo 2010; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Littau 2006); liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and Actor-Network-Theory (Akrich and Latour 1994; Latour 2005). She has taught at both Monash University and Melbourne University. Contact: rodger.nicola@gmail.com.

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Notes:

¹ For digital era optimism, see for example Darnton 2009, Kelly 2006 and Ulanoff 2016; for anxiety, see Cope and Phillips 2009, Loney 2012, Nunberg 1996, Piper 2012, 2013, Woodward 2019, and Young 2007.

² A notable example that explores such behaviours is the work of book historians Gill Partington and Adam Smyth (eds.), *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary* (2014). Of particular interest is Kate Flint's chapter, *The Aesthetics of Book Destruction*, which examines the transformations wrought by artists who use books as their sculptural medium of choice, and the wide-ranging cultural implications (2014, 175–189).

³ For example, cognitive neuroscientist and reading scholar Maryanne Wolf describes the current transition as radically different to previous communication transitions (2018, 3, 6).

⁴ As journalist Nisha Chittal writes, 'The technology backlash has been a boon for books. As people try to tamp down their screen time, they're turning back to reading more physical books' (2018, n.p.). Wolf's latest work, meanwhile, deftly articulates the unique 'multisensory and linguistic connections' laid down when children read paper books (133), and the important role of both human *and* physical interaction with books and print as 'the building blocks of the later reading circuit' (136). Wolf describes the type of deep reading facilitated by books (currently lacking from digital media), and the significant cultural consequences if this ability is not engaged with or altogether lost (2018). Her work provides timely and robust support of popular public concerns about reading, and offers multifaceted strategies for cultivating 'biliterate' brains.

⁵ See also, Ensslin et al in this special issue.

⁶ Visit their project site at <http://research.ambientlit.com> (accessed 28 January 2019).

⁷ By way of context, Facebook is the leading social media platform globally with more than two billion monthly active users; Instagram has 800 million (We Are Social, 2018).

⁸ Consider for example a *New York Times* profile of Pinterest, describing it as 'a shopping mall disguised as a mood board' (Griffith, 2018).

⁹ Viewable at <https://policy.pinterest.com/en/privacy-policy>

¹⁰ <http://bookshelf-porn.tumblr.com/>

¹¹ Porn and pornography are difficult terms to define, as the work of Michael Rea (2001), David Andrews (2012) and Feona Attwood (2002) demonstrates. All write of the widespread reluctance to define porn, the difficulty in classifying porn, and the pitfalls of clumsy definitional work. As Rea writes, 'the definition of 'pornography' is as elusive as the referent is pervasive' (2001, 118). Porn here has been used as a shorthand term to connote indulgence, obsession and physical pleasure that may well not be sexual, a usage trend that has taken off on social media platforms, with users describing their photos of lavish meals as 'food porn', for example. As Attwood says of porn, it offers 'vulgar, thrilling and physical pleasures' (2002, 97). To a degree, the voyeurism of Bookshelf Porn offers exactly such pleasures to the bibliophilic viewer.

¹² The works of Stephen Colclough (2007) and Leah Price (2012), for example, are rare exceptions to this.

¹³ <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/780178335421021427/>, accessed 24 June 2018.

¹⁴ <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/807833251884308491/>, accessed 24 June 2018.

¹⁵ <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/189291990568955284/>, accessed 24 June 2018.

¹⁶ <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/24980972910268794/>, accessed 24 June 2018.

¹⁷ <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/376191375109642389/>, accessed 24 June 2018.

¹⁸ For example in 1872, landscaper/architect Andrew Jackson Downing recommended that a man would find a room full of 'good books' a 'sanctum', with the added bonus of a library perhaps doubling as an office and retreat for the 'master of the house' (Spain 1992, 123).

¹⁹ This is true of many social media platforms, however there is a difference between using the images of others to suggest 'this is what I wish my life looked like', and editing one's own life so as to present an augmented version of reality ('this is what my life looks like'), as now tends to happen on Instagram. As journalist Nisha Chittal describes it, 'the Instagram grid has gone from a random assortment of photos of your meals and vacations to a carefully curated and highly edited expression of your identity.' (n.p., 2018).

²⁰ My Pinterest board 'Book Memes and Quotes' has dozens of such examples

<https://www.pinterest.com.au/lapetitenicola/book-memes-and-quotes/>.

²¹ Once, Pinterest was the dominant home for such images. As the popularity of Instagram has risen, however, so too has its use as a way to present a highly stylised version of one's life (not just one's 'wished for' life). Instagram is now host to a plethora of book-related images of readers posing their hot drink, blanket, candle, pet and book of choice. As journalist Danielle Braff notes, 'It's not enough just to read anymore. It's not even enough to post your reading on Instagram anymore. Today, you have to create an atmosphere to show just how analog and sensual you're being' (2019, n.p.).

²² For example, see

www.pinterest.com.au/pin/AQ6DnDbENYxvwUPUD4UZLVVrpPPhvVC9f704dUaDeYTMTUvEtCqy4Ilg/ and www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591889582130/.

²³ www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591889326070/

²⁴ View these examples at www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591889326070/;

www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591889297266/;

www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591890239318/;

www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591889297102/;

www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591889065866/

and www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591888712366/.

²⁵ www.pinterest.com.au/lapetitenicola/book-props-and-vignettes/

²⁶ See www.pinterest.com.au/pin/22236591890308431/;
www.pinterest.com.au/pin/299559812705199241/; and
www.pinterest.com.au/pin/449515606541887541/.

²⁷ See www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bookstagram-how-readers-changed-the-way-we-use-instagram_us_59f0aaa2e4b01ecaf1a3e867.

²⁸ Presciently, the iconic English-language bookstore in Paris, Shakespeare and Co, banned photo-taking inside the store long before Instagram. Given the cramped confines of the store, one imagines this was to improve the experience of those genuinely seeking to browse the stacks. One must instead rely on other methods, like carrying their branded cotton tote bag to publicly demonstrate their patronage.