

Aaron Kashtan, *Between Pen and Pixel: Comics, Materiality, and the Book of the Future* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 224 pp.

Reviewed by **Barbara Postema**, Massey University

Aaron Kashtan's monograph joins a growing body of work on materiality, including influential studies by Johanna Drucker and Katherine Hayles. He builds on the latter to define materiality as being "at work both when the physical and technological forms of a media text impact the reading experience and when the physical and technological forms of a media text are shaped by the desire to produce a specific type of reading experience" (6). Kashtan chooses to think about materiality specifically through the lens of comics, for reasons he lays out convincingly: comics inherently draw attention to their "material rhetoric" (5).

For Kashtan (following Beatrice Warde), the medium of conveying textual literature, whether a book or a digital format, works as a "crystal goblet" in that the carrier is all but invisible and doesn't draw attention to itself (8). It hardly matters if one reads a novel in hardcover, paperback, or on a Kindle. To study the materiality of literature, Kashtan argues, we should not be looking at literature but at another medium, where the carrier is not invisible and where "the effect of materiality is much harder to ignore" (11). The medium he has in mind is comics since there, "it is impossible to dissociate the semiotic content of the text from its physical form . . . [making] attention to materiality the *default* position" (14). In its layout of panels on the page and in its lettering that reflects the tone, emphasis, even the sound of the voice in speech balloons, "the comics text is always instantiated in a specific visual and typographical form, and this form cannot be changed without radically altering the text itself" (15). Yet as Kashtan points out, comics have also successfully made the jump from print to digital, which again shows why this form is a useful subject for considering the materiality and mediacy of print: "Because comics take advantage of their own materiality as a signifying resource, and because they deliberately cultivate awareness of materiality, they are useful for understanding the current debate between print and digital literature" (16).

The book starts with a detailed reading of Bechdel's *Fun Home*, to clarify what kinds of questions are at stake when considering the materiality of texts. He draws attention to the hand-drawn typewritten letters in *Fun Home* and to examples of book fetishism in a text that itself exists as hardcover, paperback, and e-text. The next chapter also deals with comics that fetishize books in one way or another, referencing works by Carla Speed McNeil, Lynda Barry, and Matt Kindt. Kashtan discusses gradations in which these comics themselves exploit their medium or format, from hardly at all in the case of McNeil, to profoundly so for Kindt's work (which even refers to aspects of comics production in its form, with references to the "live area" of the page, for example [86]). In this chapter, Kashtan introduces the concept of "Biblionecrophilia"

(after Ben Ehrenreich), a provocative and useful term concerning the relationship between print and digital (54). Kashtan defines it as the fascination with, or attraction to, the death of the book. He seems, however, to conflate biblionecrophilia and bibliophilia, as when he discusses “both a positive and a negative sense” of the word (60). Can there really be a positive sense of biblionecrophilia? There certainly isn’t for necrophilia, from which the term is slyly derived, so I would like to see a clearer distinction kept between the (positive) love of books and the (negative) fetishizing of their demise.

The chapter on primarily print-based comics is followed by a chapter on comics that are primarily digital and on how print still influences such works. This is the shortest and lightest chapter. Chapter four discusses the increasingly common practice of releasing comics in both print and digital media, as well as some of the challenges of “translation” that occur when either converting paper-based comics to digital, or digital comics to print. Kashtan is optimistic here: “comics developed for one medium (print or digital) can be effectively remediated to the other medium, as long as this is done carefully. . . . [retaining] the reader experience” (136). The most substantial chapter is the final one, which includes sensitive close readings of the materiality of Chris Ware’s *Building Stories*, a thought-provoking discussion of the various formats of Jason Shiga’s *Meanwhile*, and a provocative suggestion of future possibilities based on Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse’s *Between Page and Screen*, a work of experimental poetry, rather than comics.

Kashtan explains why he includes this lone noncomics example: there is no comics text as of yet that combines print and digital in the way *Between Page and Screen* does, using an interplay of a printed text and digital text, where readers need to engage both simultaneously to read the work fully (182-84). This is his only example of such a text, and it perhaps hints at a missed opportunity. First, *Between Page and Screen* is discussed as the most futuristic of contemporary books and as possibly a view of the future. And *not* a comic, which somewhat contradicts the title and overall point of Kashtan’s book. Furthermore, in his introduction Kashtan reveals one of his motivations for his work: to make comics studies more broadly relevant. While he makes strong points for why people interested in the humanities, materiality, mediacy, and so on should pay attention to comics, the book remains primarily a work of comics studies. Throughout, Kashtan uses personal anecdotes in connection with points of criticism or analysis, such as his own experience reading and teaching Ware’s *Building Stories* (144), or his childhood memory of receiving a composition notebook as a gift, just like the one Barry uses as the prototype for her *Syllabus* (73). Throughout, his experience as a fan, consumer, reader, and collector of comics animates his analyses in useful ways.

Between Pen and Pixel shows that it could have broken out beyond comics studies, not merely by showing how comics are relevant to materiality broadly, but by also considering some noncomics in fuller detail. (He mentions Anne Carson’s *Nox*, along

with works by Mark Z. Danielewski and Jonathan Safran Foer repeatedly, but he also puts them outside of the scope of the work). As a comics scholar, I understand the desire of this “comics evangelist” to keep the focus on comics (21), but if the intention is to demonstrate wider significance, then that broader range of primary texts might have been a strong move. After all, he ends the introduction with a summary of what he wants to achieve with his book: it “attempts, perhaps overambitiously, to contribute to that goal [of legitimating comics studies] by showing how comics help us develop a better understanding of a pressing question in academic and popular debate over the humanities: the question of the nature of the book of the future” (22). In order to reach out to readers beyond comics studies, it might have been worth discussing some more traditional literature. On the other hand, that would dilute the comics scholarship of the book, so it seems there are two mutually exclusive drives at work. This caveat aside, Kashtan makes a strong case for the significance of his argument to the wider field of media studies. In his discussion of specific comics, Kashtan does demonstrate that comics as a whole can be seen as a case study for the print/digital debate, as a result of how comics display and use materiality and mediacy far more explicitly than printed verbal texts do.

The book ends with a call to comics scholars and teachers “to be more sensitive to issues of materiality in our pedagogy,” to “help model both the future of the book and the book of the future” (193). This feels slightly deflating after reading the whole study since the opening point seemed to be that *all* literary or book scholars ought to be more sensitive to those issues, and that indeed comics scholars are already more likely to be doing this kind of work. As one way of expanding the field, Kashtan advocates for the importance of comics scholarship in comics form, since he feels comics studies has “fallen behind other fields in terms of our promotion of production-based scholarship” (193). The good news there is that comics studies is catching up, with the online journal *Sequentials* now regularly publishing scholarship drawn in comics form (see sequentialsjournal.net).