Context: a brief summary of the *Codex* project

Codex *is a multimedia project by Micah Bloom who, after the 2011 flood in Minot, North Dakota, was struck by the ruined books littering the landscape. With a team of assistants, he photographed the books where he found them, documenting their condition like crime scene investigators, then wrapped them up for storage in a book "morgue." Finally, books were laid to rest in different ways—some buried, some burned in a funeral pyre on a small skiff, returned to the river that destroyed them. The project has taken the form of a film, still photographs, a museum installation and a book, for which this essay was written.*

Image from *Codex*, by Micah Bloom

Brian Prugh, "Micah Bloom's Books." *Codex*, a project by Micah Bloom. The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, 2017.

Micah Bloom's Books

Brian Prugh

QUAESTIO.

Why, after the flood, when Micah Bloom sees a book by the side of the road, suspended in a tree, or submerged in the river, does he feel the need to honor it with a proper burial? I do not ask this question psychologically; I am not interested in who Micah Bloom is that he feels this need, but in what the book is that it could inspire such a need. Can the book bear such treatment?

This is the question: what kind of thing is the book? It is an ontological question, and the answer to that question bears on how I read the project documented in this book. If the book is the same kind of thing as other man-made things like ball-point pens and candy wrappers, then *Codex* must be something of a joke. It must be playing with our rituals of mourning, because we do not reverently bury a ball-point pen or candy wrapper; we throw it away. If it is eventually buried, this is accidental. It would be better if it just disappeared.

With the passing of a candy wrapper or ball-point pen out of usability, there is nothing to mourn, because these objects exist for us exclusively in their use. Once the ball-point pen runs out of ink or the candy wrapper is empty, it goes into the trash, without compunction. But when a human being dies, we *owe* something to the body—we owe it a proper burial—because of the kind of thing a human being is.

The claim latent in *Codex* is that we owe something to the book's body because of the kind of thing that it is. The book does not matter for us exclusively in terms of use, like the ball-point pen or the candy wrapper. The book is a different kind of thing, a more human kind of thing. Again, the question is: what kind of thing is it? What sets the book apart? What makes it fitting for the book to receive last rites?

Note on the state of the research.

This essay proceeds in a series of positions. Each position reaches for something essential about the book and the act of reading. Each fails in some way. Together they gesture at what the book could be—at what, I hope, books aspire to be.

Having spent an inordinate amount of time reading books myself, this study inevitably involves a question about why I have devoted my time in this

way. My life is bound up in books (and in visual art and music), so an account of the book is an account of a significant portion of my life.

This places a great deal of pressure on the book *qua* book. It is a pressure that, sometimes, the book cannot bear. More often, though, it is a pressure that I cannot bear. I know that I fail the books I've read. Failures themselves are telling, though. If a book can fail me, or if I can fail a book, this says something about the way that a book can matter. And the way that it matters reveals something about what the book is.

Most of these reflections apply equally to other works of art (paintings, films, music, a book of images like this) but the image of the decaying book is the starting point so "the book" remains the center of my investigation.

FIRST POSITION: THE IMMORTALITY OF THE BOOK

So long as men can breathe and eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.[1]

William Shakespeare, *Sonnet XVIII*

When I started searching for the joint that might separate books from other kinds of things, I began with the thought that the book is a print, a mechanical reproduction, the visible, readable impression of some more abstract thing—call it the Idea of the Book. This invocation of the abstract order of the book suggests that there is something special about that order that gives us a reason to preserve it in a physical book, or to translate it into another language and print it in another book.

For Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the power of mechanical reproduction of an image is the preservation of the real in it, a reality that gets obscured by the "aura" of singular images. The ability to be mechanically reproduced acts as a guarantee that there is something real in the image, which he opposes to the artificial value created by scarcity or singularity. There is a lesson here that applies to the book—even if the book was once reproduced by hand, it has always existed as something essentially reproducible. And as the reproducibility of the image is the mark of its authenticity for Benjamin, the ability of a book to be reproduced, and the fact of its reproduction, testifies that there is something real in the book.

To push the point in Platonic language, the thought is that the Idea of the Book holds some piece of Reality—the really real—that enters the world in the physical form of the book. This would call out the book as a special kind of

1. Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet XVII." *Shakespeare's Sonnets.* Edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones. *The Arden Shakespeare.* London: Methuen, 1997. p. 147.

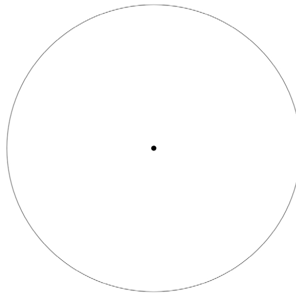
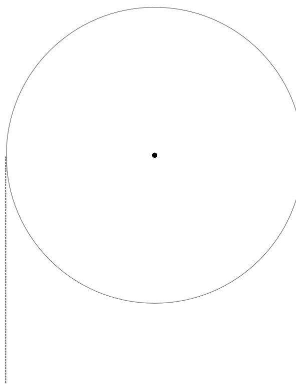


fig. 1



H_1

fig. 2

H_1

fig. 3

thing, a thing with a "spiritual" component that transmits some of its power onto the material remains that have become, through the destruction of the flood, no longer able to carry that component.

It is an idealistic move, calling upon an Idea of the Book that stands behind the physical one, a pure abstract order that the book preserves, takes part in, but does not exhaust. I might say: the book carries a message, some essential communication, some missive from a remote and urgent source. It is in light of this vital communication that we honor the vessel that holds it. It is the duty of the book to carry the message. We mourn the lost book like we mourn the runner who died carrying his message to Marathon.

The problem is that there is an important difference between the book and the runner at Marathon: the runner at Marathon is mourned not for carrying the message but because he was human, he lived and he died. The book, in the emphasis of its existence as a reproduction, is just a piece of technology. It holds a code. And even if the writer is great enough to "give life to" a person into this code, the vessel that carries the code does not matter.

It is an imperfect analogy, because however poetically I might describe the way the copyists hold the keys to immortality, the Idea of the Book remains wholly abstract, cold and distant from the humanity of the experience of reading. The analogy weakens; the divinity evoked in Shakespeare's sonnet flattens as the book's function reduces to storage in binary code—something a computer can do!

SECOND POSITION: THE UTILITY OF THE BOOK

I made this little drawing that I thought about using as the basis for this essay—an image for what the book is, for what it does. It is an image, too, for the work of art, for the piece of music, etc.

It begins with a circle. The circle represents the horizon—everything that can be seen from the point in the center. My horizon is the outer limit of what I can see. It is everything that I can see when I look around. In a very real way, it is my world. On the open ocean on a clear day, the curvature of the earth falls away from a circular horizon with a radius of forty miles. (fig. 1)

If this circle is projected onto a plane perpendicular to it, the resulting figure (H_1) is a line segment, equal to the diameter of the circle. (fig. 2) This is an image of the circle, viewed from the side. In the symbolic geometry of this figure, this image for my world, everything that I know, that I believe, and, most importantly, everything that is visible to me is contained in line segment H_1. (fig. 3) Those who have tried to draw what is in front of them know how very little of what

is in front of them they actually see, how little is actually visible to them before they begin the drawing.

The next few steps create my first image of an encounter of my world with the book.

The book divides my world; it creates distinctions between things. I now see the world in different parts and pieces. There is structure that was not there before. I have names for things I might have long felt but never could articulate, that I never was sure were real. As an image for this, I divide H_1 into four equal segments. (fig. 4)

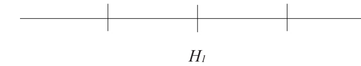


fig. 4

But the book also enlarges my world. I make connections between things that reveal a deeper reality hidden by the visible one.[2] My perception reaches beyond the flat plane that defines the horizon I have drawn. My image for this is to describe a circle through each endpoint of H_1, with H_1 as the radius. These circles meet above the center of the horizon—directly above the point that represents the place where I stand. (fig. 5)

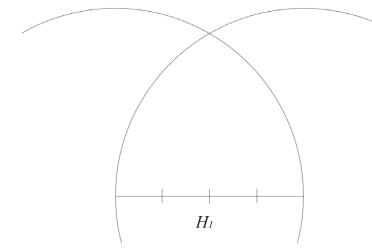


fig. 5

To describe the shape of what the book does, I extend lines from this point to the points that divide the horizon line. The resulting figure looks a bit like a mountain, with paths up to the summit. (fig. 6)

This seems fitting, for an encounter with a book can make a world rise around me like a mountain. It can spur me to reach after higher thing: Justice, for instance. Truth. Understanding. Virtue.

Martin Heidegger, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," claims that truth happens in the work of art (54).[3] One of Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorisms in The *Gay Science* is a meditation on the book: "What good is a book that does not lead beyond all books?".[4] In my diagram, I create an illustration for the way that the book enlarges my world, allowing me to see the things in my world in new ways, from different heights. Once my world has been enlarged, once the truth has happened, once it is visible, I no longer need the book. It has led me beyond the book, if not all books. This is the utility of the book.

The consequence of this view is that, far from being an occasion for mourning, we should expect to see books littering the sides of roads, spilling out of the trash cans in subway stations, floating along rivers as they pass under bridges—that, in fact, this is their proper place, their owners having left them behind when they did not need them anymore—when they had gotten beyond the books.

2. Baldwin, James.
"The Creative Process."
The Price of the Ticket.
New York: St. Martin's / Marek, 1985.
pp. 315-318.

3. Heidegger, Martin.
"The Origin of the Work of Art."
Poetry, Language, Thought.
Translated by Albert Hofstadter.
New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
pp. 15-86.

4. Nietzsche, Friedrich.
Die Fröliche Wissenschaft.
Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1982.

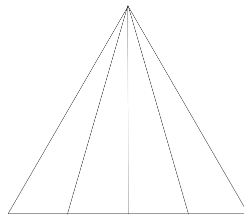


fig. 6

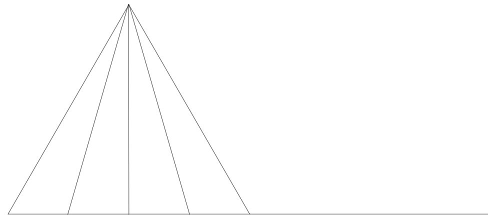


fig. 7

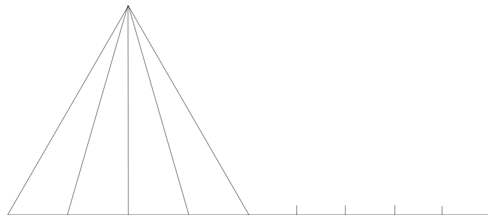


fig. 8

5. Jabès, Edmund. *Le Livre des Questions I.* Paris: Gallimard, 1965. pp. 22.

THIRD POSITION: THE FINALITY OF THE BOOK

> *A lamp is on my table and the house is in the book.*
> *I will finally live in the house.*[5]
>
> –Edmund Jabès, *The Book of Questions*

Meyer Schapiro—deeply suspicious of Heidegger's political commitments—took him to task about his interpretation of a painting of shoes by Van Gogh that formed the interpretive center of "The Origin of the Work of Art." (This discussion between Heidegger and Schapiro figures prominently in Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*.)

The upshot of Schapiro's critique is that Heidegger makes Van Gogh's shoes mean what he *wants* them to mean—that a closer inspection of the painting reveals that the truth that Heidegger claims "happened" in the painting was less in the painting than in Heidegger. This is the danger of the view of the book set out exclusively in terms of the effect that it has in *my* life: I am in danger of losing sight of the book, or distorting the book, in the service of my own ends. I doubt Nietzsche or Heidegger fall easily into this pitfall, but the pitfall is there, and worth heeding.

While Schapiro's critique of Heidegger's reading of the painting does not necessarily undermine the deeper philosophical argument, it does carve out an important space beside the work that the book or work does on the reader and insists on its importance. For Schapiro, it isn't enough that Heidegger saw a painting of shoes by Van Gogh. He wants to know *what* painting of shoes he saw. Because, for Schapiro (and he's right here, it seems to me), the particulars of the painting matter for the truth that is available in it. There is no truth in the generic idea of a painting, only in the particular painting. And it is this insistence of returning to the painting, of returning to the book—picking it up, humbly judging that I might have been too hasty in having considered myself beyond it—that is the guiding force for the second half of this construction.

In my diagram, I draw another line segment (H_2) next to the mountain of the first. (fig. 7) Another line, another world. Jabès lives in the house that is the book: the book is a world he has made, it is the world he lives in. I draw another horizon next to the book in recognition of the fact that when I read the book, I meet another person. I encounter another world.

In a similar way I divide the horizon line next to my mountain. For the purposes of this diagram, I divide it into five segments: this world is divided differently than mine. (fig. 8) And in a like manner, I draw lines through the vertex

of the equilateral triangle constructed on that line segment: I draw the mountain of the person standing beside me, the mountain of the person I encounter in the book. This image is now of two mountains, side by side, touching at a single point that is the book. (fig. 9)

But this is a critical point, because at this point something unexpected happens. The problem with my diagram is that there is no obvious necessity to the next construction. It is an idea that I encountered while studying philosophy: the fusion of horizons.

The thought that I have taken away is that when there are certain kinds of encounters between people; whether through conversation, mutual action, a life together, through art or books, these two people, each of them living in their own worlds, meet, and their horizons merge so that they can look, together, out at a larger world.

The image in the diagram was to connect the peaks of the two mountains: to draw a new horizon created by the points outside of themselves formed by the peaks of their searching. (fig. 10)

Having arrived at this image in my drawings I thought I was done. But there was still something wanting in the figure. So I drew lines connecting each mountain peak to each dividing point. (fig. 11) It gave the figure strength, stability. A two-point perspectival grid emerges between the peasks. And this visual effect symbolically knits the reader to the writer.

With these lines the drawing claims that the encounter widens that original horizon-line to encompass both worlds. And the figure is strong because the worlds have become enmeshed. One can no longer be pulled apart from the other. But here the book is not subsumed into the self of the reader. On the contrary, the reader and the book assume the stronger form only when they stand together.

(I make this claim with the works of "high art" that have shaped my life in mind, but the thought also applies to simpler things. Consider, for instance, a recipe for a meal. I read the recipe, and get an idea about how to prepare the meal. As I cook, I consult the recipe. I cook *with* the recipe. The recipe shapes my understanding of cooking, and I shape the recipe into my own meal. The meal comes from the recipe, but also from me. I prepare the meal, together with the recipe.)

This is my strongest case for the humanity of the book. And it is this image of the book that I would put forward as justification for Bloom's treatment of them. For the mystical power these lumps of plant fiber, glue, thread and ink hold for us. But doesn't this romanticize the book? Isn't it absurd in its implications?

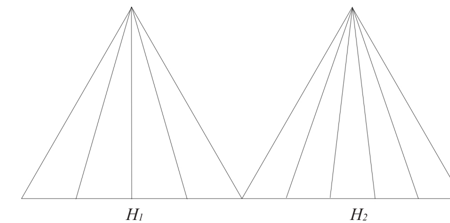


fig. 9

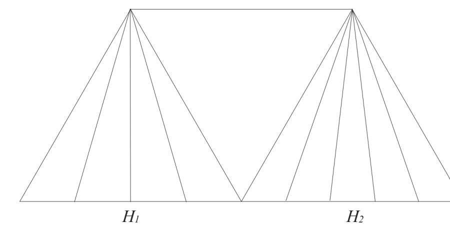


fig. 10

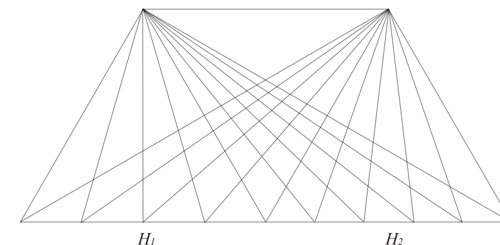


fig. 11

fig. 12

Figure 12.
Maxwellj040.
Photo of "Green Boots," the Indian climber who died in 1996 on the Northeast Ridge of Mount Everest, 2010.
Licensed under Creative Commons Share Alike 3.0 Unported license, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green_Boots.jpg.

FOURTH POSITION: THE ABSURDITY OF THE BOOK

This is a photograph of a climber who died on Mount Everest at 27,900 feet, about 1,100 feet below the summit. (fig. 12)

It is one of many bodies on that giant mountain. Above a certain elevation, the removal of the bodies of the dead becomes practically impossible. More than one climber has died attempting to remove the remains of lost climbers, as Antigone gave up her life to bury her brother. The bodies are there, exposed to the elements like the books photographed in this volume.

There is something absurd about climbing mountains, and something of this absurdity touches my diagrams. There is no earthly reason to imagine I can see outside my horizon, or to imagine that the mountain that grows out of it is anything but a fiction. This charge is often leveled at the more bookish among us, that an obsession with these books (reading them, writing them, printing and preserving them) is selfish or unhealthy, that the "real world" demands our attention.

This absurdity sits in a strange way upon the climber pictured above. Climbing Mount Everest looks, from the outside, like an incredibly selfish act. Expensive, dangerous, and available as an experience only to those with incredible resources, it would appear to be the height of human folly, the pinnacle of Romantic longing.

Why climb the mountain? Did not the local people not have a greater reverence for the mountain by looking at the summit only from below? What is gained by looking at the base from above? Why climb when it has already been climbed? Why attempt what has already been done? What is to be gained in the repetition? Better to turn our attention to more pressing problems.

The evidence against this is this body: material proof that, at least to one person, it was worth dying for. To die on Everest is not the same as to die in a car accident, in a war, of disease, or fighting for justice. One need not intend to die to be killed in these ways: death is pressed upon the person by the force of necessity. (I must get home.) (The soldiers are approaching the city.) (I am mortal.) (Justice demands that I fight.)

We mourn these deaths in the usual ways: to the extent possible, we collect the remains. We clean them, present them at a funeral, and reverently lay them to rest. This is the normal course of events after a person's death. And the *Codex* team attempts to honor the material remains of books in these usual ways.

But by photographing them as they were found, Bloom subverts the usual order. He presents us with images that, when humans are involved, are

usually filed away, out of public view (crime scene photographs, for instance). So we see the “bodies” out in the elements, like we see the body of the climber on Everest. Even if Bloom does go on to bury these books, the photographs leave them there. And their folly, in a way, becomes even more visible.

There is no necessity in climbing the mountain. Nothing demands the ascent. It is undertaken with the full knowledge that dying on the mountain is a possibility. The death is therefore gratuitous: this life is given freely. The body on the mountain reminds us of this. It questions, from above, the certainty of those who maintain the absurdity of such frivolous activities.

I read in the images of *Codex* a call to do more than mourn the loss of something that can live in the reader. I see a symbol for the book and the culture of books, for the absurd expedition ascending the steep face of that culture, for the danger of rendering it frivolous—I see in Micah Bloom’s books the climber lost on Everest, out of reach of human recovery.

SED CONTRA.

If I understand the motive to bury these books, it is because I understand the need to bury the bodies left on Everest. But I must acknowledge that many of the families of those climbers have asked that the bodies of their loved ones remain on the mountain.[6] I acknowledge this because it speaks to something important about the relation of the climber to the mountain.

In an important way, those bodies belong to the mountain. Because climbers do not make the mountain a part of themselves, they become part of the mountain. Those who have climbed the mountain and have safely descended are part of the mountain. Those who remain are part of the mountain. And their bodies testify to this. And this testimony rejects the logic of the world, the utilitarian calculus, the pride of those who know that climbing mountains is stupid.

The book is made of trees, processed in water. It surely belongs to the earth, suspended in a tree, submerged in water, every bit as much as it belongs to its reader. But the book calls out from the river. It calls out from under the snow. It calls out from the rocks lining the railroad tracks.

It also testifies, but to what? I have attempted four times in this essay to articulate that testimony, but none succeeds. So what do I say, *on the contrary?*

Do I say (against the first position) that the reality of the book is not exhausted by the order of words preserved within its pages? Do I say (against the second position) that while I read books in order to grow, that the book is not exhausted in my growth? Or, further (against the third position), that it is

6. Andrews, Travis M.
“The extraordinary cost of removing dead bodies from Mount Everest.”
The Washington Post.
27 May 2016,.
www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/05/27/the-extraordinary-cost-of-retrieving-dead-bodies-from-mount-everest/?utm_term=.baf87b179e48.

not exhausted in the bonds of human community? Do I say (against the fourth position) that for all of its absurdity, the book is in fact *not* absurd, but a necessary and natural outgrowth of our being in the world?

But perhaps the true *sed contra* is not a claim, but an image. I do not yet know which image. Perhaps it is the fading light of the funeral pyre as it floats down the river. Or, perhaps, the book speaks more clearly in the very place where it does not belong, the place where it called out to Micah Bloom and began the project that became this book.