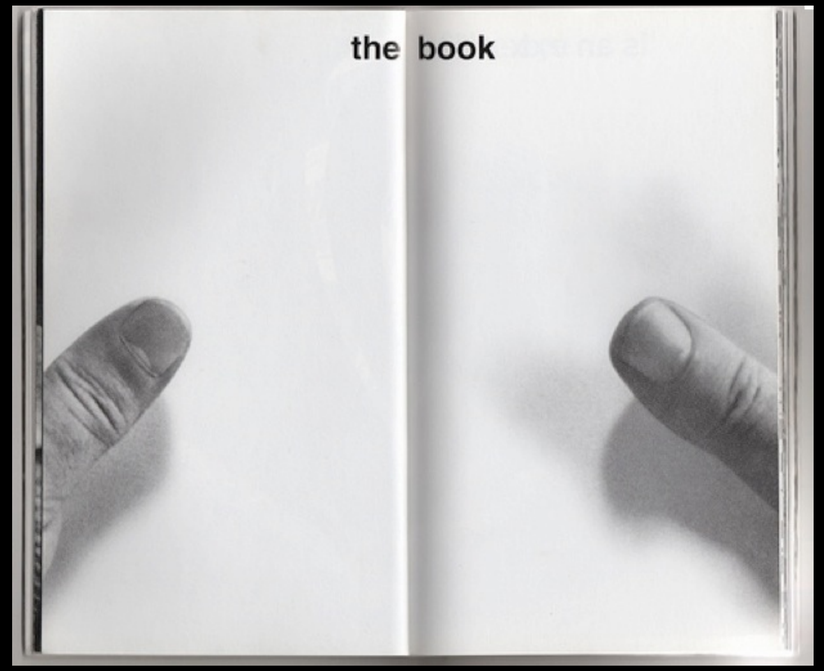

BOOKS!!

ECL 596: Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2025

Day 12: Book as Interface

14

October 29

Arts & Letters

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Q&A + OPEN HOUSE

Join ECL faculty & learn strategies for grad student success. Get your questions answered! Room AL-266.

12:00-1:00 PM

Meet + mix with ECL faculty, students, and organizations. Learn about 2026 courses. Get free candy! A&L Floor 2.

1:00-2:00 PM

Interested in tabling? Contact rporath@sdsu.edu.

Peer Review of Thesis Statements

- *WHAT*
- *HOW*
- *SO WHAT*

1) What do you see?: This is your insight
2) Where do you see it? How is it being done?: This is where you use specific elements from the work to support your insight
3) Why is this relevant? So What?: This is where you explain why your insight is relevant, where you make an argument about what the work is saying/doing with and through your insight. This is where you push your insight to larger conclusions about the work as a whole.

Ch. 4 Book as Interface

- Page as interface
- Digital pages: imagined and actual
- Digital literature

Discussion

- Questions/take-aways from Special Collections lab?
- Topics to discuss today??

Discussion

- Where do you want to focus today?

From your blogs- look AT not through media

- MARIO: I too, am a person who never really paid much attention to the page. I always viewed it as a place to explore one's imagination, but its physical aspect was something I never took into thought. Which is crazy considering how I grew up knowing the differences between the material of paper, but never really the ***why*** its using that specific material. Mak and Borsuk's ideas of looking past the content and looking into the physical form of these art pieces reveals to us that we as a society are starting to lose the real history of some important things because we are blinded by the power of its function.

- DAKOTA: On page 16, Mak writes, "likewise, the structures for arranging these letter forms in manuscripts and printed books are graphic indications of how designers visualized ideas and organized them for themselves and other readers. The processes of thinking and reading, then, may be discerned in part from the clues offered by the page." … The layout is critical for information absorbtion. The page itself has become the message.

From your blogs- looking AS argument

- DELINDA: After reading Bonnie Mak's introduction to "How the Page Matters", it made me think about how I read books. I spend so much time thinking about "the what" when I read (the words, the arguments, the stories) that I rarely pause to consider "the how" when I read. More importantly, how the physical page itself shapes my understanding.

- …W**hat really got me fascinated with the reading the most is Mak's challenge to the notion of "print culture" as a discrete historical era.** I'd always kinda accepted the common narrative that the printing press created a revolutionary break from manuscript culture, but she presents me to see continuity and overlap. Even today, as we navigate between print books, PDFs, and mobile screens, I never would've thought we would be participating in the same ongoing conversation about materiality that medieval scribes engaged with when choosing between papyrus rolls and codices.

- **Mak's work reminds me that intellectual history isn't just about tracing ideas through time. It is about understanding how those ideas have been physically instantiated, designed, and redesigned across centuries.**

From your blogs- ideology of the page

- OZ: “So accustomed to its form, we no longer notice how the page is fundamental to the transmission of ideas and that it shapes our interpretation of those ideas.” **We think in the forms in which we read.**

-

From your blogs- digital page

- ARON: From a modern perspective, the form of the page in web browsing takes on an identity that places algorithmic code as an equal to the stability once introduced with the printing press. Mak writes, “… the advent of the printing press heralded a new epoch in the diffusion of knowledge because a text could apparently be ‘fixed’ and replicated with no degradation” (5). In the digital era, the page is now crossed as an interface that invites the reader’s thoughts and even instant engagement. The latter is the most glaring difference between the technologies of printed and digital works, but the on-screen page serves the same purpose which is to communicate with with an audience.

Advanced Search
Language Tools

Google Search | I'm Feeling Lucky

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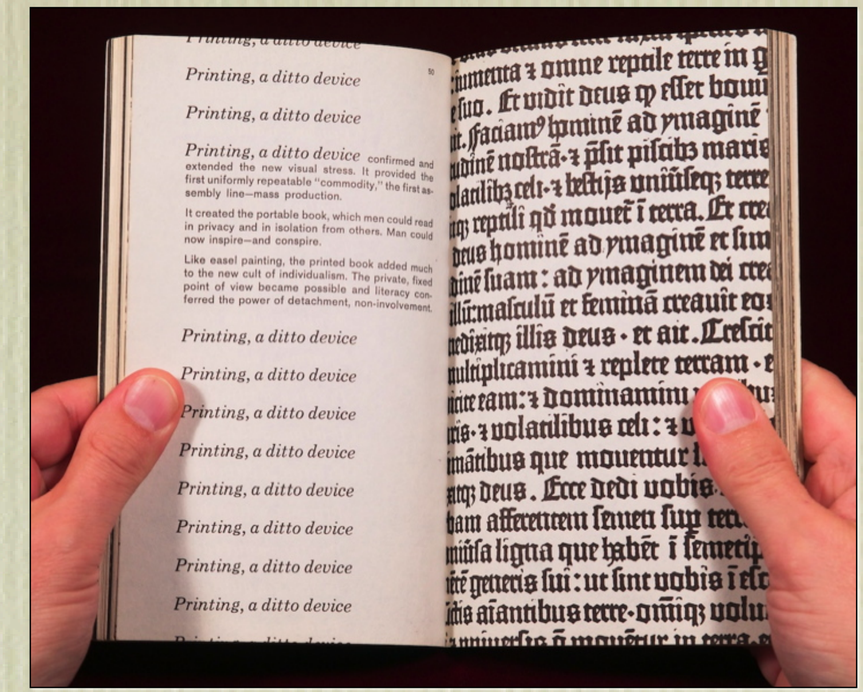
Printing, a ditto device
Printing, a ditto device
Printing, a ditto device confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It provided the first uniformly repeatable "commodity," the first assembly line—mass production.
It created the portable book, which men could read in privacy and in isolation from others. Man could now inspire—and conspire.
Like easel painting, the printed book added much to the new cult of individualism. The private, fixed point of view became possible and literacy conferred the power of detachment, non-involvement.
Printing, a ditto device
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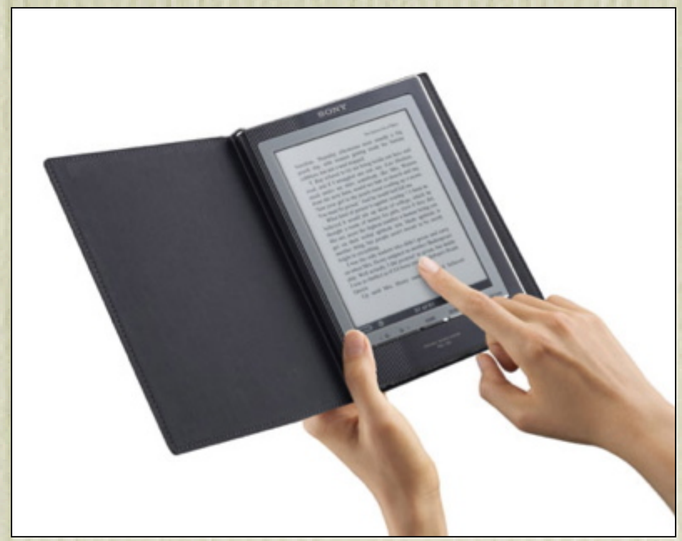
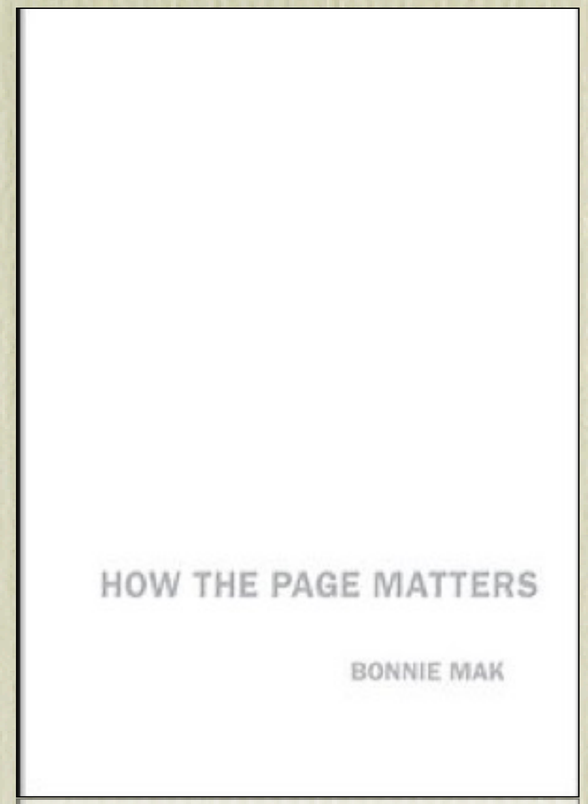
the works of
Geffray
Chaucer
now newly
imprinted


SONY

Page as Interface

- “The page is thus an interface, standing at the center of the complicated dynamic of intervention and reception; it is the material manifestation of an ongoing conversation between designer and reader” (Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters*, 21)



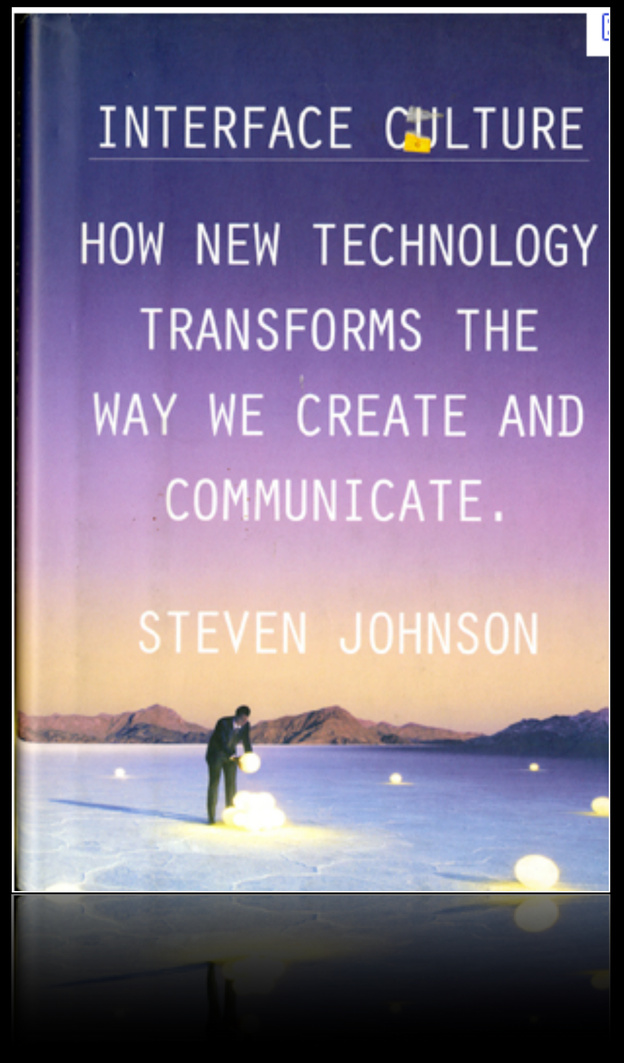
Reading the Page Interface

- “The page is an expressive space for text, space, and image; it is a cultural artifact; it is a technological device” (Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters*, 18)
- “The markings on the page are a part of the ‘cultural residue’ left by a battery of authors, scribes, artists, booksellers, book owners, and readers, and can be read as a compelling narrative about the social history of thought” (Mak, 15)

What is an interface?

"the word refers to software that shapes the interaction between user and computer. The interface serves as a kind of translator, mediating between two parties, making one sensible to the other. In other words, the relationship governed by the interface is a *semantic* one, characterized by meaning and expression rather than physical force"

-Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture* (1997): 14



Interface Design as Storytelling

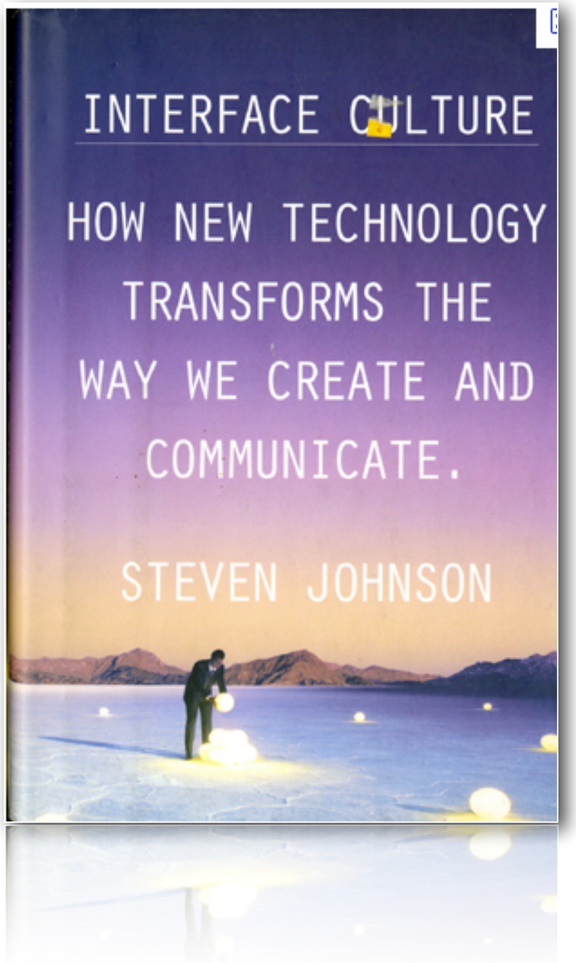
"**Our interfaces are stories we tell ourselves** to ward off the senselessness, memory places built out of silicon and light. They will continue to change the way we imagine information"
-Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture* (1997)*:* 242

Steven Johnson

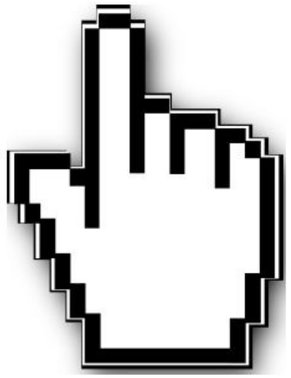
“a computer must represent itself to the user in a language that the user understands (14)

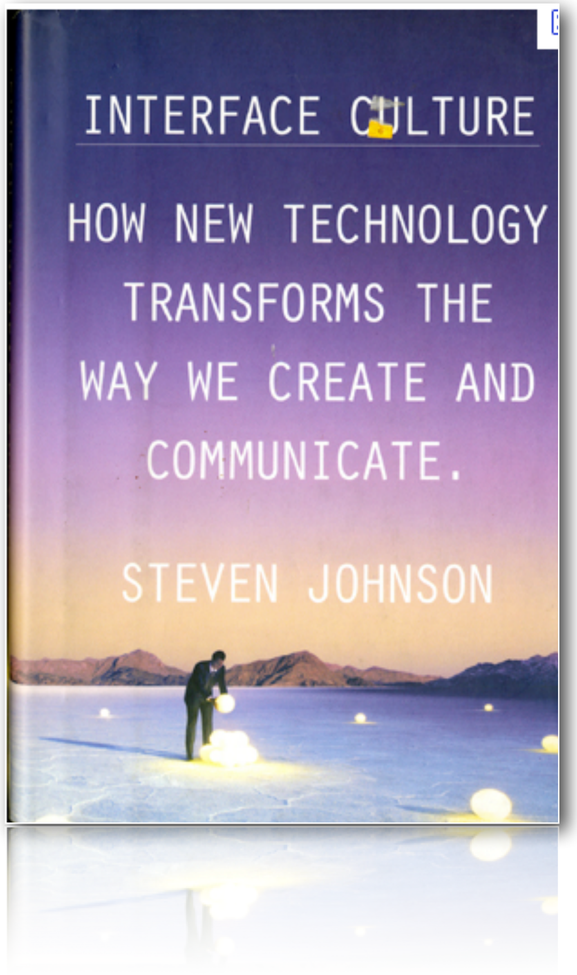
“The crucial technological breakthrough lies instead with this idea of the computer as a symbolic system, a machine that traffics in representations or signs rather than in the mechanical cause-and-effect of the cotton gin or the automobile” (15)

--Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture* (1997)



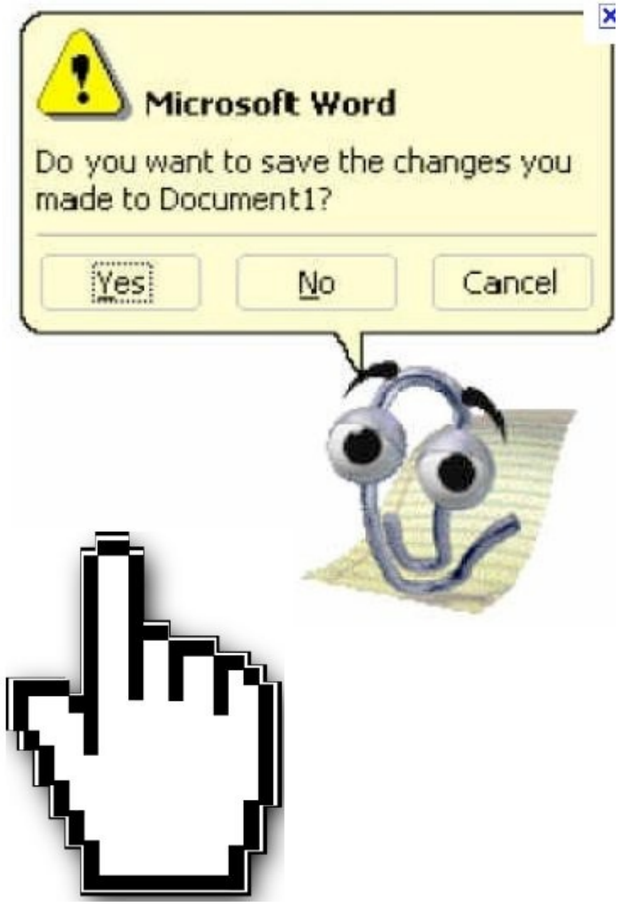
“metaphors are the core idiom of the contemporary graphic interface” (15)
-Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture* (1997)





“There is no such thing as digital information without filters”

-Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture* (1997)*:* 38)



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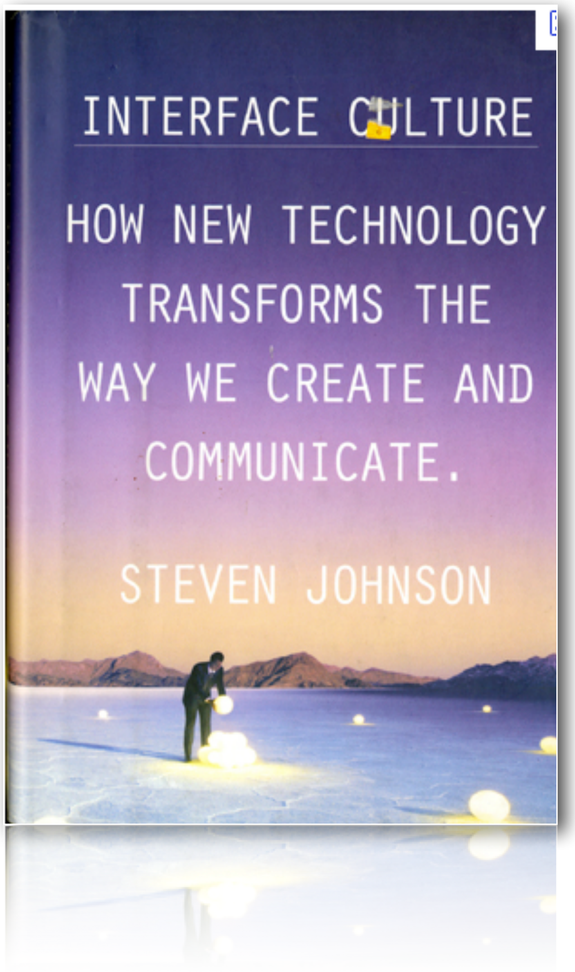

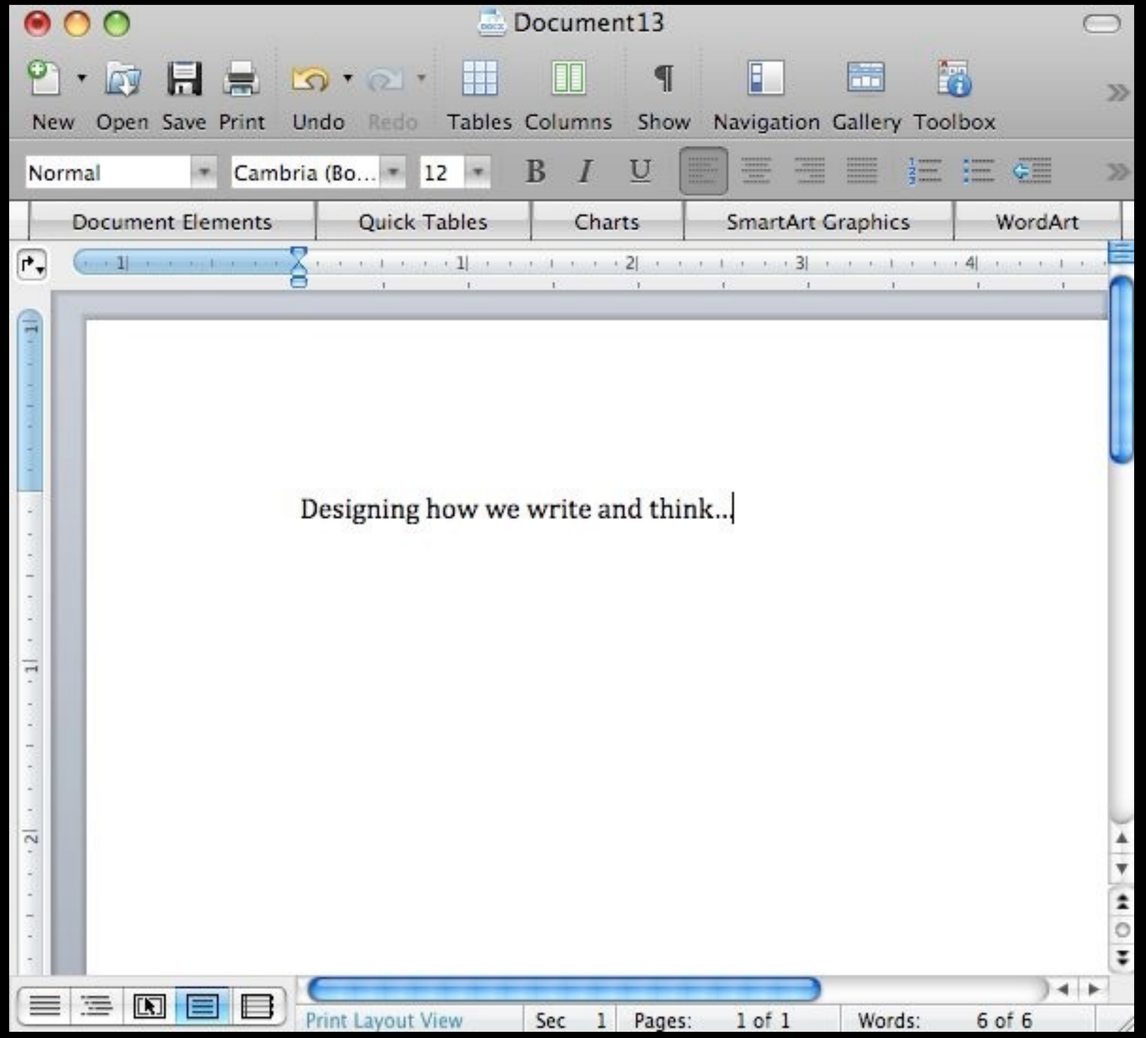
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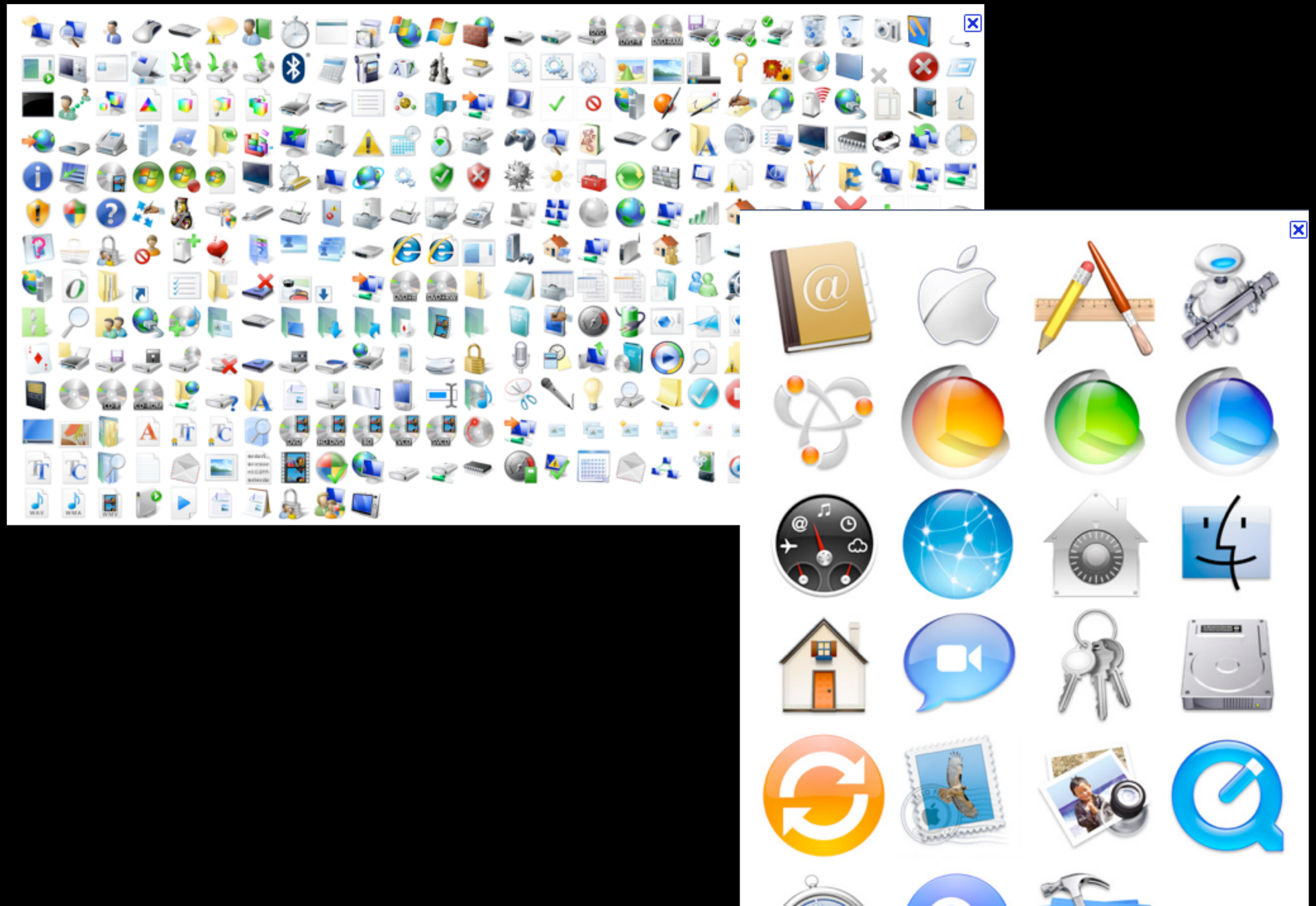
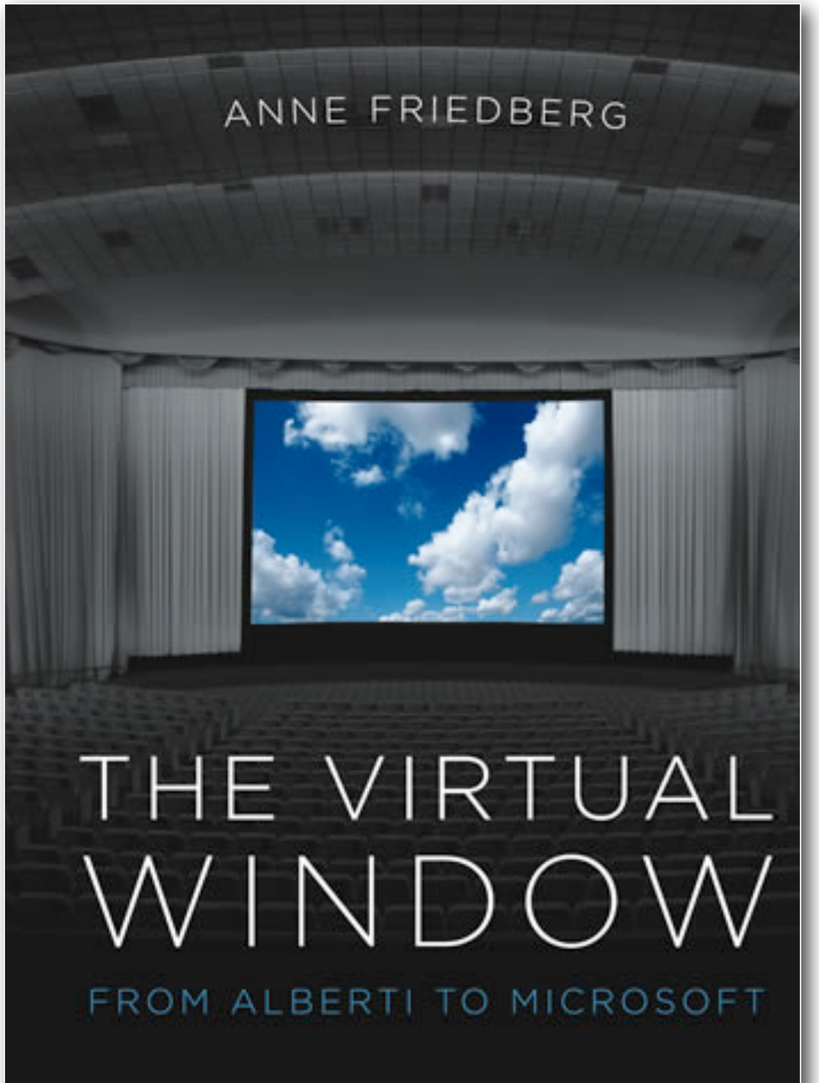


Gaze, spectatorship, cinema, capitalism

“the window is both practice device and epistemological metaphor” (26)

-Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (MIT Press, 2007)



Windows

“The window made it possible to see information-space in a new light” (105)

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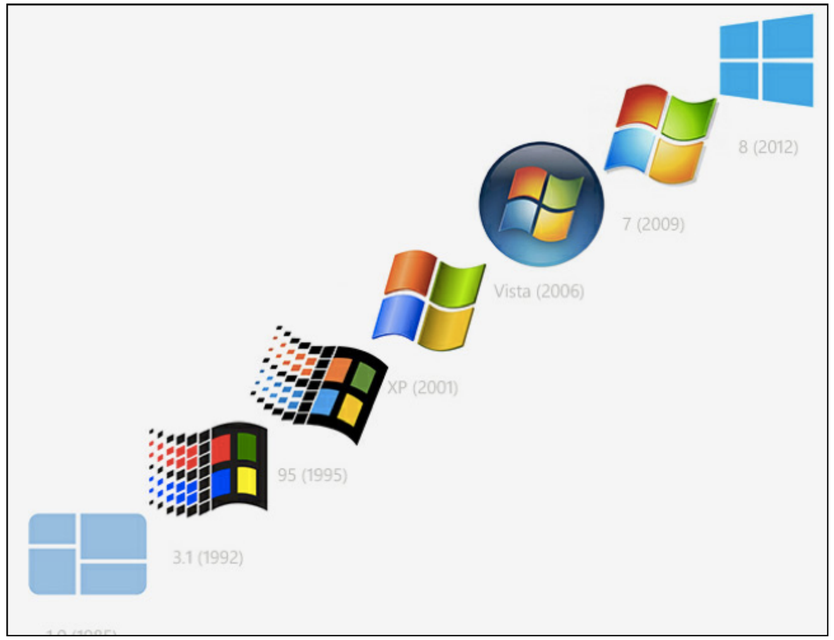
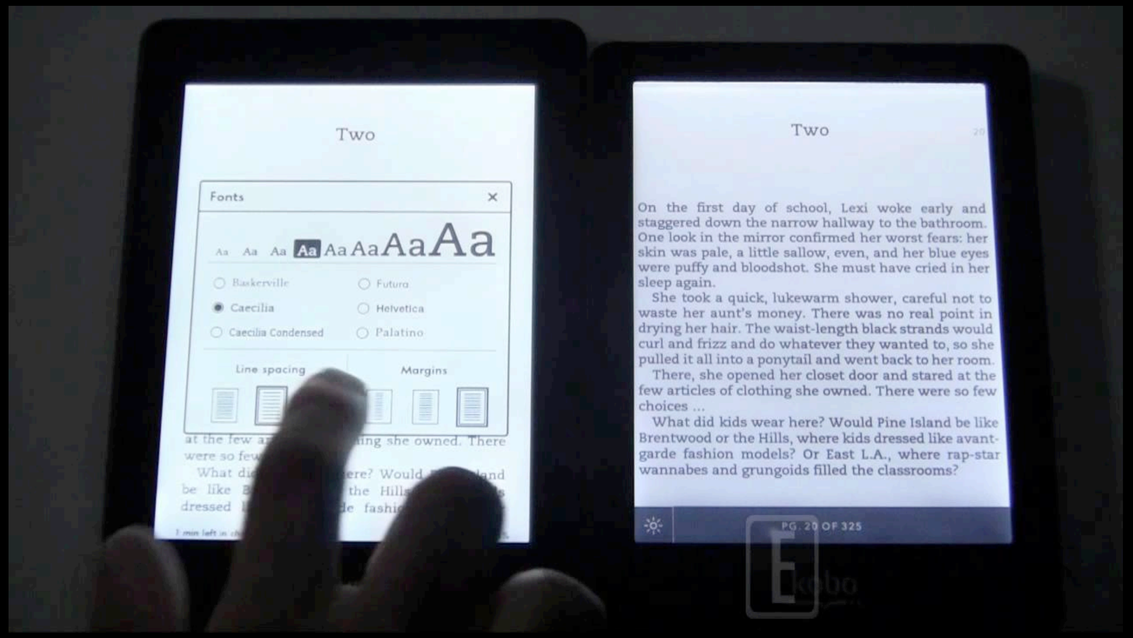
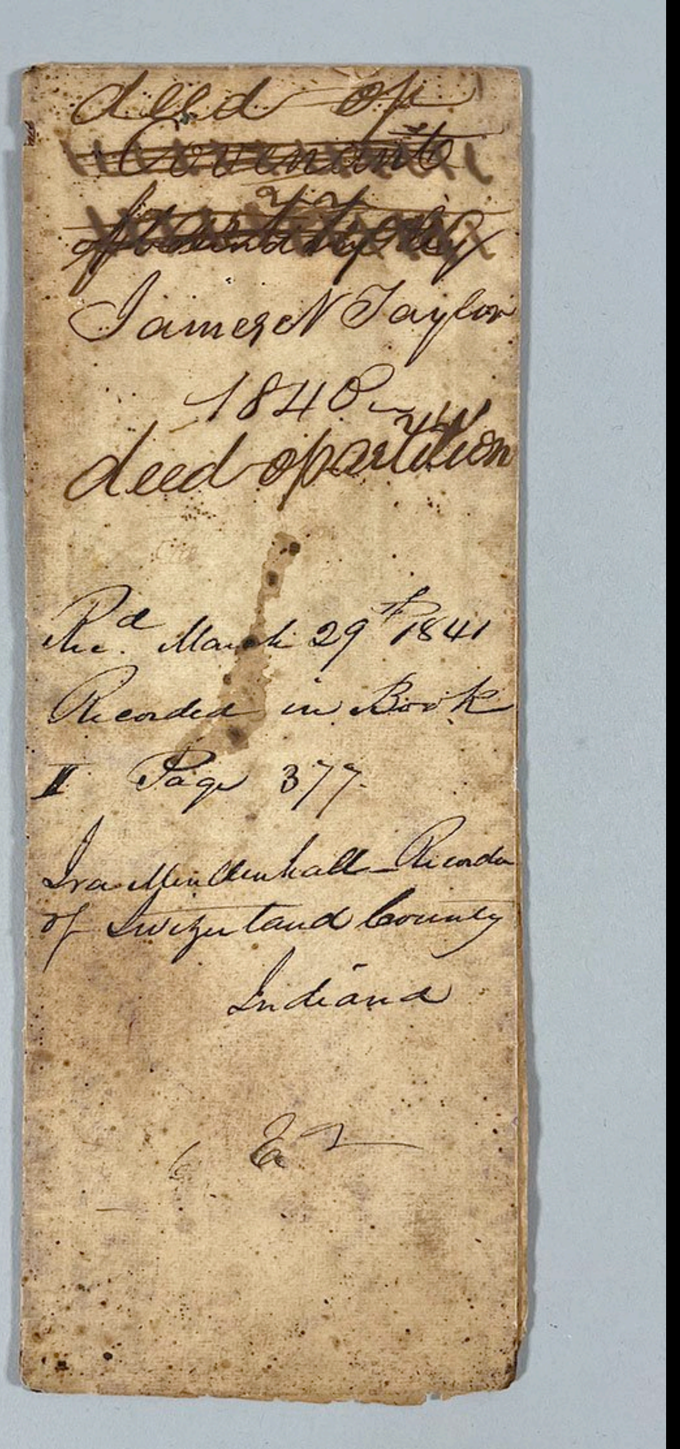


“Flickering signification”

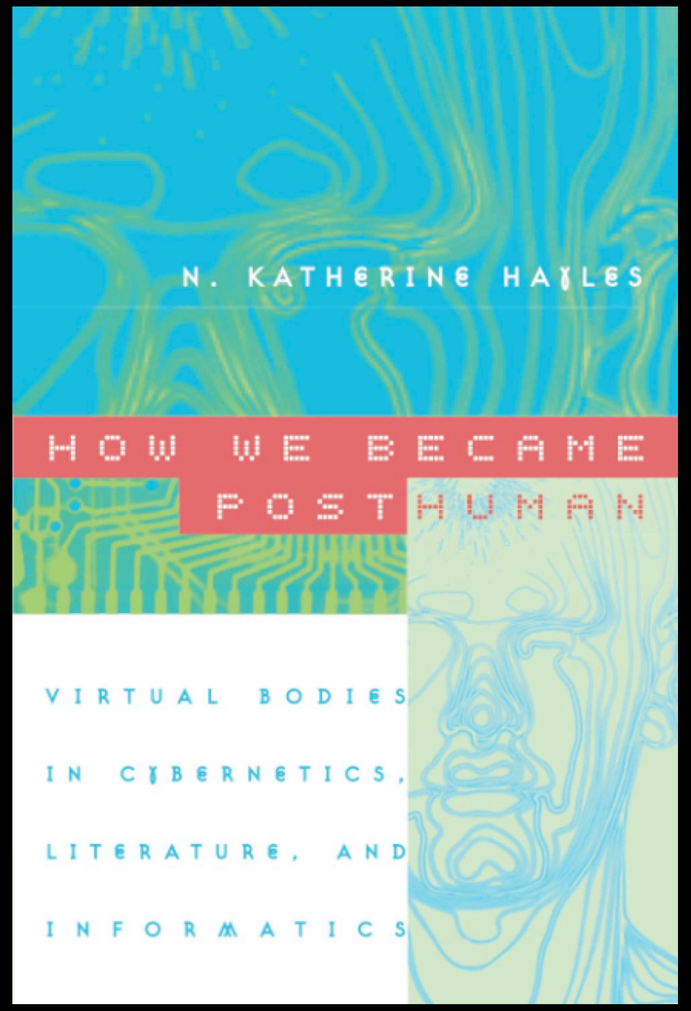
- difference between inscription and flickering





Hayles: "Flickering signifier" = the posthuman and digital text

- From Lacan's arbitrary floating signifier (pace Saussure) to Hayles' material-based digital flickering signal and signifier
- =Pattern and randomness instead of presence/absence— different implications for materialities, bodies, and theories of subjects



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Take aways/questions?