

Metafiction, Bookishness and Aura in Literary Fiction from the 1970s

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Introduction

In a 2009 article, Jessica Pressman introduces the concept of an ‘aesthetic of bookishness:’ a “fetishized focus on textuality and the book-bound reading object” (Pressman 466). She observes this concept in a number of contemporary works of fiction, all published after the year 2000. The article, titled “The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature,” links her observation of this aesthetic of bookishness in these works to the impending demise of the printed, paper-bound book form. The titles she presents as her case study (of which one she discusses extensively: *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007)) all emphasize their paper-bound form in contrast to and in the context of a rapidly digitalizing society. Pressman explains this trend not so much as a desperate attempt to preserve the printed book, rather it is part of the evolution of the paper form, the novel’s novelty, *making use* of the digital threat. Pressman points out that the aesthetic of bookishness is “as old as the book form” itself and she implies that there are in fact multiple aesthetics of bookishness, variations of the concept manifested in the book form in different eras of its evolution. The key element of the aesthetic of bookishness that Pressman identifies in works of fiction of the twenty-first century is that they “present a serious reflection on the book [...] through experimentation with the media specific properties of print illuminated by the light of the digital” (Pressman 466).

I, now, am interested in the concept of the aesthetic of bookishness. Where Pressman has presented its ‘behaviour’ in literary works of the twenty-first century, in this thesis I will put the focus of my research of its application in a different time and literary movement. Namely, deliberately, a period before the rise of the digital, the 1970s. Pressman’s contemporary examples of ‘bookish’ literature arose from the threat of the digital. So what inspired the earlier manifestations of the aesthetic of bookishness, before this digital threat started to play a role? With this research I aim to prove that modern day conceptions surrounding the inventive nature of the book are not as new as suggested. By placing the concept of an aesthetic of bookishness in the historical context of the

1970s, I will show that such artistic interventions as a reaction to fears surrounding the death of the book occurred at that time already. It was the television as a new emergent medium that gave rise to these fears at that time.

Postmodernism has had a great influence on the literary works of the 1970s. The three works of fiction I will present as my case study for this thesis all carry this influence in that they are heavily metafictional works. I seek to investigate how the metafictional, as a set of literary devices, brings about an aesthetic of bookishness in literary works from this period. Examples of metafictional literary devices include: a story about a writer writing a story; a story featuring itself as a story or physical object; a story that features another work of fiction. I am also convinced that the aura of the book as a work of art, referring to Walter Benjamin's theory¹, plays a large role in the aesthetic of bookishness. For my thesis I will research these three concepts, bookishness, metafiction and the aura of the book, in the postmodern context of the 1970s and with the help of three works of fiction from this time period: Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979), Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979) and the graphic work *The Cage* (1975) by Martin Vaughn-James. Three works from different genres and different countries. Michael Ende's fantasy novel, in most cases considered a work of children's literature, starts off with the story of a boy captivated by the very same book the reader holds in his hands: *The Neverending Story*. The frame narrative that follows offers the reading experiences of this boy in between the parts of the story he is reading. You read vicariously through this other reader and you become aware of the way you react to the story and the way you handle the volume you are holding, compared to the reading experiences of that other reader. Up to the point the reality of the reader and that of the story begin to intertwine. Calvino's well-known novel takes this position of the reader to another level. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* addresses the reader directly in alternating chapters by offering a narrative in the second person (you) which therefore describes events happening to the reader of the book, making the whole a strangely self-aware experience. Reading, books, different genres and stories all play a large role in the book and constantly make the reader question these aspects of the book. *The Cage*, finally, is quite a bit harder to interpret. Vaughn-James' experimental graphic work displays only traces of a story, depictions with descriptions of static scenes that apparently lack any characters and events. This work, too, blurs the distinction between reality and fiction; what is outside the book and what is inside it? It makes clear that the reader is needed, because what would the book be without the reader?

The main question I will aim to answer is: *In what ways does the metafiction in these works establish an aesthetic of bookishness?*

¹ I am referring to Walter Benjamin's essay on the influence of mechanical reproduction on the art work's authenticity: "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936).

Theoretical framework

I will first lay out the theoretical concepts used in this thesis in order to form the framework, within which I will then be able to analyse the three case studies I have chosen.

Jessica Pressman introduces the concept of an aesthetic of bookishness in her 2009 article “The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature.” She defines this as “the fetishized focus on textuality and the book-bound reading object” (Pressman 466). In her article she points out this trend in contemporary literary works, published after 2000 (465). The application of an aesthetic of bookishness in their work by contemporary authors of fiction would be a “literary strategy that speaks to our cultural moment” (465). A strategy, that is, to keep the physical, literary book alive. To prevent the death of the book in a time where reading the e-book on a screen instead of reading the physical copy of a book becomes more and more popular. Pressman reasons from a current day point of view and her findings all concern the reaction in the field of literature to the digitalization of printed media.

However, this threat of obsolescence is not new for the book. Throughout history, there have more often been predictions that the book would surely fall into disuse. Often the introduction of a new medium would spark this discussion. In a recent publication, Gabriele Balbi addresses the relationship between old and new media. In her article “Old and New Media. Theorizing Their Relationships in Media Historiography” (2015) she observes different ways media react to the introduction of a new medium. She finds that a new medium often influences older, existing media in such a way that they evolve alongside the new medium in order to adapt to the new situation created by the introduction of the new medium. An example of this in the music industry would be the reaction of the CD to the digital music format of the MP3. Instead of making it just about the music, artists and music producers started to offer CDs in unique album covers instead of the standard plastic ones; or they would include merchandise with the CD you would not get if you bought (or illegally downloaded) the music in MP3 format. It shows that the creators of CDs try their best to keep that medium relevant, by showing how it has an advantage over the new medium. The reaction of existing media to a new medium strengthens Pressman’s point as well as brings me to my next point. Pressman poses digital technologies as the threat to books in our current time. The 1970s did not know that dominance of digital media yet. It was the colour television that became popular and available in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. This was the new medium:

Television completes the cycle of the human sensorium. With the omnipresent ear and the moving eye, we have abolished writing, the specialized acoustic-visual metaphor that established the dynamics of Western civilization (McLuhan 125).

This quote from Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" (1967) voices a shift in the perception of media with the widespread introduction of the television. The book, and with it other text-based communication, was threatened by the audio-visual possibilities the television embodied. It was called, by some, a "communications revolution" (Stephens 9). The same cannot be said of today's digitalization. "Television," McLuhan says, "demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being. It will not work as a background. *It engages you*" (125, my emphasis). Press, movies, radio; these McLuhan calls "mere packaging devices for consumers." The approach of television was a completely new experience: "In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen. [...] You are the vanishing point. This creates a sort of inwardness, a sort of reverse perspective" (125).

The 1970's postmodern literary response to this was metafiction:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 2)

The focus on and switching between fiction and reality forces the reader to pay attention and think about the way the story is structured. The mental balancing act between the artificiality of the story on the one hand and the suspension of disbelief on the other keeps the reader, mentally, on their toes (Rigney 180). I would like to argue that with the use of metafiction, authors of literary fiction attempted to simulate the captivating properties the television offered, the properties text-based communication lacked. These authors wanted to show that books can be more than 'mere packaging devices for consumers.' They can be an experience. Like the television, metafictional literature engages you, more than a regular novel would.

Here then I would like to insert Walter Benjamin's concept of authenticity with regard to the work of art. In his well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936) Benjamin explains how the technological reproduction, especially through photography and film, lacks something relative to the original art work: "the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place" (1053). Reproducing a work of art in this way takes it away from its unique context, from its "sphere of tradition" as Benjamin calls it (1054). The original work of

art in its original context possesses an 'aura' which in the reproduction of that work is lacking. An 'auratic' work would then refer to a work of art that is physically unique and in one place for a recipient to perceive. In case of a book that recipient would be the reader. The television presented for the first time a way to simultaneously transmit images and sound to many people in their own homes, creating the possibility of a mass experience of art, but with that, television separated art from its sphere of tradition. Emphasizing the book as a physical object shows its advantage over the television, in that the book has an authenticity the television lacks.

I will now explore how bookishness, metafiction and aura combine in three exemplary works of literature from the 1970s I have chosen as my case studies.

The Neverending Story

The Neverending Story is written by Michael Ende and published in the German original in 1979. The book has been translated into 36 languages, among which Arabic, Chinese and Basque.² The book has furthermore been adapted to film, stage play, ballet and opera and it has inspired television series and video games based on the book. For this thesis I am using the 1983 English translation, translated by Ralph Manheim. *The Neverending Story* tells the story of an insecure boy, Bastian Balthasar Bux, with a passion for books and stories. He is bullied for his weight and quirky mannerisms (he tends to talk to himself sometimes) and the book begins as Bastian, fleeing his bullies, finds himself in a bookshop, where he discovers a book: *The Neverending Story*. The very same book the reader is reading. The book seems to captivate Bastian even before he has read a word. We read as he touches the book for the first time: "In that moment something inside him went *click!*, as though a trap had shut. Bastian had a vague feeling that touching the book had started something irrevocable, which would now take its course" (7). Bastian proceeds to do what many readers like to do from time to time: he loses himself in a good book. Still on the run from his reality, he hides in the attic of his school, where no one would find him, and starts to read *The Neverending Story*.

Here already the metafictional character of the book becomes evident. The fact that a character within the book starts to read *The Neverending Story* is an estranging thought. Would that not cause us to read in a circle? It does not in this case, as it turns out the book Bastian is holding does not retell the first fifteen pages just read by the reader. Instead, at this point in the book the

² For the full list of translations, see: <http://www.michaelende.de/en/book/the-neverending-story>

reader starts to read along with Bastian about the fantasy world Fantastica. It seems the initial story of how Bastian finds the book and starts to read it functions as a way for the real reader to step into the story by way of identifying with the fictional reader Bastian. Keep in mind here that *The Neverending Story* is a work of children's literature, which explains why this fictional reader is a child as well. The contents of *The Neverending Story* within the book here start a framed story, an embedded narrative, about Fantastica, a fantasy world in peril. This embedding creates a distinction between two different narrative levels. The highest narrative level, the one in which Bastian finds the book, is called the extradiegetic level.³ Bastian then in a way functions as the narrator of the narrative level below that, the reading of *The Neverending Story*, which forms the hypodiegetic level.⁴ (Rimmon-Kenan 92-3). This hypodiegetic narrative can have several functions. In *The Neverending Story* it fulfils two functions. Firstly, it has an actional function: "some hypodiegetic narratives maintain or advance the action of the first narrative by the sheer fact of being narrated" (Rimmon-Kenan 93). In *The Neverending Story*, the narration of the hypodiegetic narrative and Bastian reading that narrative, happen at the same time. The fact that the real reader reads along with Bastian automatically moves the extradiegetic narrative forward as well. Secondly, the hypodiegetic narrative in *The Neverending Story* has a thematic function: "the relations established between the hypodiegetic levels are those of analogy, i.e. similarity and contrast" (Rimmon-Kenan 93). The extradiegetic narrative in *The Neverending Story* represents the real world where the hypodiegetic narrative takes place in a fantasy land. The extradiegetic narrative features as its main character Bastian, a normal boy, where the hypodiegetic narrative features as its main character Atreyu, a hero.

While reading the story, Bastian does not completely disappear to the background. Instead, this story is repeatedly interrupted as Bastian's thoughts return to reality, much like a real reader would often still be aware of his surroundings while reading a book. A clock strikes the time, Bastian gets hungry or he simply thinks about what he has just read. These interruptions form small passages that intertwine with the framed story, diving in and out of it. There is a typographic distinction made between the book's reality (the extradiegetic level) and the fictional story within that reality (the hypodiegetic level). All descriptions of Bastian's thoughts and actions and everything up to the point where Bastian starts reading, everything outside of the framed story, are in italics. The text belonging to the framed story itself, the story Bastian is reading, is in the default lettering. Page 106 from *The Neverending Story* (Figure 1) shows an example of such an interruption. The paragraph in italics takes

³ Genette's term. Rimmon-Kenan, for her explanation of narrative levels, combines concepts from Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal. For Genette, see: Genette, Gérard. (1972) *Figures III*. Paris: Seuil. In English, (1980) *Narrative Discourse*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; For Bal, see: Bal, Mieke. (1977) *Narratologie. Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes*. Paris: Klincksieck.

⁴ Bal's term. See 3.

The Neverending Story

'Better give in,' Engywook whispered. 'I know the woman from A to Z. When she wants something, she gets it. Besides, you and I have a lot to talk about.'

Atreyu squatted cross-legged at the tiny table and fell to. Every bite and every swallow made him feel as if warm, golden life were flowing into his veins. Only then did he notice how weak he had been.

Bastian's mouth watered. It seemed to him that he could smell the aroma of the gnomes' meal. He sniffed the air, but of course it was only imagination.

His stomach growled audibly. In the end he couldn't stand it any longer. He took his apple and the rest of his sandwich out of his satchel and ate them both. After that, though far from full, he felt a little better.

Then he realized that this was his last meal. The word 'last' terrified him. He tried not to think of it.

'Where do you get all these good things?' Atreyu asked Urgl.

'Ah, sonny,' she said. 'It takes lots of running around to find the right plants. But he – this knuckleheaded Engywook of mine – insists on living here because of his all-important studies. Where the food is to come from is the least of his worries.'

'Woman,' said Engywook with dignity, 'how would you know what's important and what isn't? Be off with you now, and let us talk.'

Mumbling and grumbling, Urgl withdrew into the little cave and a moment later Atreyu heard a great clatter of pots and pans.

Figure 1. Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, page 106 (1979).

place on the extradiegetic level. The rest of the text, in the standard lettering, takes place on the hypodiegetic level.

The distinction between reality and fiction is important in this novel, which shows its

metafictional properties again. As Bastian reads on, the book he is reading is starting to have an effect on him. At first, this can be explained by the way readers who are emotionally engaged in a book can react to what they are reading. For example, where the story takes place in Spook City (a rather spooky place as the name suggests) Bastian suddenly experiences his surroundings as more scary: “In the flickering candlelight the glass eyes of the fox, the owl and the huge eagle looked almost alive. Their moving shadows loomed large on the attic wall” (165). Again, this perhaps affects young readers even more than adults. At this point the real reader may experience an uneasy feeling as well. The parallels between the book and Bastian’s surroundings get more and more prominent the further he progresses in the story. They lead up to the point where, about halfway through the story, Bastian actually becomes part of the story in the book he is reading. What occurs here is in Gérard Genette’s term ‘narrative metalepsis’: “the act of fictional characters and/or narrators breaching different nesting narrative levels” (Bhadury 302). The diegetic levels mentioned earlier suddenly flow into each other, which has a very strange effect. It is not specified how it happens, but Bastian is somehow transported into the world of Fantastica, the land inside the story-world of the book he was reading. The typography makes this clear as well, as from this point onwards parts of the storyline focalized through Bastian are in the default lettering, instead of the italics before (Ende 233). The italic type does not return until the very end of the book where Bastian returns to the real world again.

There is one more element in the story before Bastian enters it that is worth mentioning here. The story-world of *The Neverending Story* features a figure called The Old Man of Wandering Mountain, whose task it is to write down everything that happens in a book called *The Neverending Story*. The book contains itself yet again in another deeper diegetic level. The Old Man of Wandering Mountain starts to tell the story again, thereby entering “the Circle of Eternal Return” as he explains that “I shall have to write everything all over again. And what I write will happen again” (Ende 224). In other words, this book forms a hypo-hypodiegetic narrative. It is what makes the story ‘neverending.’ However, in this telling the first fifteen pages of Bastian finding the book are actually included. This hypo-hypodiegetic narrative is identical to the extradiegetic narrative. This not only leaves Bastian extremely confused, but also stresses the relationship between reality and fiction from the perspective of the real reader. Bastian is forced to break the narrative level of the story (by entering it) in order to escape the book eternally retelling itself.

Bastian, arriving in the story-world, is given an important job. He has to rebuild the fantasy world of Fantastica. In this world, whatever he imagines becomes reality. Bastian tells the story and experiences it at the same time. The call, the attraction of the book, and this task Bastian is given form one of the main points of this book: Every story *needs* a reader. If a story is not read by a reader, it does not happen. The captivating nature of the book Bastian finds, the trap mentioned

before that shuts on him, it represent the story's need for the reader. The book becomes in a sense a character with motives that benefits from being read. Pressman, in her article, notes that:

The aesthetic of bookishness [...] unites novels that pursue a thematic interest in depicting books as characters and focal points of narrative action. Protagonists embark on quests to find a particular edition of a book and books or paper-filled spaces serve as physical places of refuge for traumatized characters. Formally, the pages containing these narratives make visually manifest the fact that the reader is interacting with a book that takes itself seriously as a material object [...] Books become aesthetic objects that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction (Pressman 466/7).

The Neverending Story, in depicting the book as a character, can thus be counted among those novels united by the aesthetic of bookishness. Pressman presents the aesthetic of bookishness as a direct consequence of the reader experiencing the book as a physical object.

Soon after Bastian becomes part of the story, he realizes that he must be read as well at this point: "Maybe his present adventures and sufferings were in the book even now. And maybe someone else would read the book someday — maybe someone was reading it at that very moment" (254). Bastian then proceeds to create a sign in the story-world. He writes his initials 'B B B' large in the sand of the desert he finds himself in. And sure enough, there they are for the reader of the real book to read them. It is the realization that it is now the real reader (you, me) that propels the story forward by continuing to take in its words and meaning.

Its many translations and adaptations show *The Neverending Story* to be a very popular work of fiction throughout many different cultures. Despite or thanks to the books experimental narrative choices, it has made a large cultural impact. We can recognize several metafictional devices in *The Neverending Story*. The book features itself as a narrative, creating a hypodiegetic narrative within the extradiegetic narrative. As this narrative distinction is broken, the book challenges the relation between reality and fiction. The reader is no longer certain what is reality and what is fiction in the story. It forces the reader to stop and think about the way the story is structured. Stepping outside the story like this makes the reader aware of the physical object in which the story is presented to them, the object that makes this specific reading experience possible. The reader shifts his focus to the book-bound reading object and becomes aware of an aesthetic of bookishness.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller is a well-known novel written by Italo Calvino. The Italian original was published in 1979. For this thesis I am using the 1981 English translation, translated by William Weaver. The novel is known for its rather peculiar format of alternating chapters that do not all seem to be related. But perhaps a more notable feature is that all the odd numbered of these chapters are written in the second-person singular perspective. Where *The Neverending Story* requested some empathy of the reader in order to identify with the main character, here that identification happens by the book addressing the reader directly and placing them inside the story. In other words, the narrator addresses the main character of the story with 'you', making the real reader feel as if the narrator is addressing him. The 'you' in the story is later introduced going by the name of the Reader (capitalized). The 'you' in the story is reading a book, more specifically, 'you' are reading *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Much like we see in *The Neverending Story*, here, too, the book you are reading itself plays a major role in the story within the book. Another similarity between the books is the separation of the story-reality and the story-fiction. Where *The Neverending Story* uses typography to achieve this, in this work by Calvino the alternation of the chapters has that function. The odd numbered chapters, with 'you', the Reader, as the main character, provide the extradiegetic narrative in the novel. The other chapters are books being read by the Reader and form the hypodiegetic narratives. Like with *The Neverending Story*, the main character in the extradiegetic narrative is narrating the hypodiegetic narrative *by* reading it. Thus we see here again the actional function of the hypodiegetic narrative: moving the extradiegetic narrative forward, in the literal sense of making the main character on that extradiegetic level read a book.

The bookish subjects of reading, readers, authors, books and the blurring of reality and fiction indicate the metafictional characteristics of this novel. The experimental nature of this book that comes with the use of metafiction is an attempt at making the book as a medium interesting again. It shows that books are not always as straightforward as they seem. They can be strange, play with the expectations the average reader has when encountering its rectangular shaped collection of paper and text. The book as an object is foregrounded in Calvino's text. When the Reader finds himself in a bookshop and finds a book there: "an object fresh from the factory, the youthful bloom of new books, which lasts until the dust jacket begins to yellow, until a veil of smog settles on the top edge, until the binding becomes dog-eared, in the rapid autumn of libraries" (6). This passage responds to the physical properties of the book as a medium. A physicality that often also brings a reader joy or, at least, adds a dimension to the reading experience. It is the aura of the physical medium of the printed book that provides added value over immaterial media, like the television.

The first line on the first page of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* starts off in the second

person narrative. 'You' are being told "you are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*" (3). With this approach the actual reality and the independence of the reader are challenged. Opposite from the first sentence of the book, the very last sentence reads: "'Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino" (260), spoken by the reader in the book. This construction frames the actual reader in the exact same position as the reader in the book, starting and finishing *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* at the exact same time. The story not only describes what you do or are about to do, it also makes use of the imperative, preparing you to read the book, telling you what to do: "Well, what are you waiting for? Stretch your legs, go ahead and put your feet on a cushion..." (3). As the story-world you starts to read *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* it turns out this book is a misprint. It only consists of part of a different novel. Frustrating as this is for the Reader, to not be able to finish the story, the actual reader experiences the same. The story proceeds to send the Reader on a search for the rest of the novel, not only serving their own interest, but that of the actual reader as well.

This novel fits neatly into the works Pressman projects under the aesthetic of bookishness. The whole plot revolves around the search after a particular story. It highlights the typical desire a reader experiences when reading a story. To wish to know how the story ends, in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, is the Reader's motivation to undertake action. Not only does the reader of a story want to know how that story ends, he typically expects that he will find out by reading the story. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, Calvino repeatedly rouses this expectation starting new hypodiegetic narratives that never get finished. For the average, unsuspecting reader, the one represented by the Reader in the story, this is a very frustrating experience. The reader is made aware that a story does not always follow the same rules. The reader also becomes aware of his dependence of the will of the author and the story. As opposed to what we have determined in *The Neverending Story*, here the reader *needs* something of the story. Carl D. Malmgren argues:

From one perspective the reader may be at the author's mercy, but reading ultimately involves the desire for the "beyond"; a reader goes to a fictional text, surrenders to it in order to make elusive and ephemeral contact with something that is lacking in the real world (113)

With this last remark Malmgren points to the fact that "the book should be the written counterpart to the unwritten world; its subject should be what does not exist and cannot exist except when written" (Calvino 172). We read fiction, because of a desire for fiction, where everything that cannot be in reality, is. Still, in this work, too, like in *The Neverending Story*, the book is depicted as wanting to be read: "...or, rather: it was the books that looked at you, with the bewildered gaze of dogs who, from their cages in the city pound, see a former companion go off on the leash of his master, come

to rescue him” (Calvino 6). Books want to be read, because they want to fulfil the purpose for which they were created.

The fact that so many narratives are started without ever being finished, makes *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* an extremely fragmentary story overall. And not only are all the embedded narratives just short teasers, they are all extremely different from one another. Each story represents a different genre and is written in a different style. It shows all the different possibilities of the book, all the different choices an author can make in creating a story. And it shows that the reader in this equation, is never in control.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller knows many metafictional aspects. The work immediately challenges the relation between reality and fiction by placing you, the reader, within the fictional story world. By never losing reading, readers, books, authors and other bookish subjects out of sight, the reader is constantly aware of the fact that these elements are all involved in the making of a book. Thus the reading itself loses some importance, while the elements that make up the possibility of reading become foregrounded. The reader realizes he needs to have that one correct copy of the book in order to be able to satisfy his desire for a complete story. The reader is made aware of the desire of wanting to know how a story ends and is then consequently denied that satisfaction.

The Cage

The Cage, finally, is a wholly different case than the other two novels used in this thesis. Drawn and written by Martin Vaughn-James in the early years of the 1970s, it was first published in Canada in 1975. It is a unique piece of work and, even though it does not know the same popularity as the other two novels discussed in this thesis, in its own niche *The Cage* is considered an unparalleled masterpiece. The fact that the work has been reprinted 30 years after it was first published, proves, too, that *The Cage* still raises interest.

The Cage is a comic missing most of the essential characteristics of a comic and it can be best described by the modern term ‘graphic novel.’ Still, the only real properties that confirm this labelling is that it consists of pictures and text. That is an accurate description of *The Cage*. Pictures and text. The work appears to lack any form of plot and characters, the drawings seem mechanical and the text surrounding the panels is fragmentary. *The Cage* is by far the most experimental work presented here. It leaves you with more questions than answers. “But getting the answers isn’t all that important to the experience of reading this book,” states cartoonist Seth (penname of Gregory Gallant) in the introduction of the book. “*Experience* is the key word here. You experience *The Cage* rather than understand it” (Vaughn-James 8).

In *The Cage* every page consists of only one picture, often accompanied by text, but not every time. “The text occasionally seems to be interacting with the illustration, occasionally seems to be interacting with illustrations earlier or later in the book, and occasionally seems to be channelling either the thoughts of the writer or, perhaps, the thoughts of the reader” (Miller). The text at certain points offers metafictional commentary on the work. Beneath an image of a room overgrown almost completely with large, leafy plants it reads: “... the leaves, all very similar in shape, vary in size depending on their supposed distance from the picture plane” (Vaughn-James 121). The fact that the comparison to the picture plane is made, shows that the narrator finds himself at the same level as the reader, looking at the work from outside the pictures (Figure 2).

Even though no characters are seen throughout the pages of *The Cage*, what can be found in the eerie images are what seem to be traces of human presence. A bed with messy bed sheets, as if just slept in, clothes draped over a chair, headphones lying around. These all make it seem the main character may just have walked out of the frame, invisible for the reader apart from the signs someone was there. The character might be hiding, but a perhaps more interesting theory is that the images in *The Cage* are viewed through the eyes of the character, thus that the eyes of the character and the reader see the same. Although never indicated by a visible limb or a reflection in a mirror, this could solve at least this absence, that is, if this absence needs solving. I would like to argue, along with Miller, that the reader *is* the character in this work. In order to experience this experimental graphic novel, you, the reader, are trapped in *The Cage*.

Much like in Calvino’s novel, *The Cage* plays on a desire of the reader. In this case, that desire is even more primitive, namely the desire to make sense of the work. The reader is looking for a form of cohesion and continuity in the story, but *The Cage* does not offer that. The desire to at least understand the work is not satisfied.

Vaughn-James, in the preface added in the 2006 reprint of the work, confesses he does not completely understand the work himself. He describes *The Cage* as “a narrative ‘created out of nothing’” and proceeds to explain that he made *The Cage* as an image generator with the ability to produce “atemporal, self-accumulating images that would roll like snowballs and rise like houses of cards” (11). With this Vaughn-James seems to take away all but the initial authority of the author and put the responsibility of the work with the work itself. However, with this statement Vaughn-James does hint at some form of agency. Snowballs do not roll themselves, nor do houses of cards build themselves. Does Vaughn-James then intend that the reader is given the authority in this work? In that sense, we can regard the book, the work itself, as a character as well. And, as we have seen with *The Neverending Story*, the work attempts to draw the reader in and trap him. In the case of *The Cage* (it is in the name) obviously without the intention of letting the reader go. It represents the



... the leaves, all very similar in shape, vary in size depending on their supposed distance from the picture plane. The stems and branches are long and slender, thickening slightly at their wrinkled joints ... the impression is of artificiality (accentuated, perhaps, by the stylized treatment used throughout).

Figure 2. Martin Vaughn-James, *The Cage*, page 120 (1975).

idea that, even though a reader can stop reading, *The Cage* with its unsettling imagery and confusing behaviour will still be on the reader's mind. Mainly in the form of questions.

By presenting the reader with a bizarre piece that conforms to very few of the conventions of a fictional work, in *The Cage* the reader is left to figure the work out for himself. And in this lies the metafictional nature of the work. The reader becomes aware of what is missing to be able to understand the work. The reader is set to think about what it is that makes a work of fiction what it is. Does *The Cage* fit that description? Does a work need a character in order to fall into that category?

Conclusion

Books and literature thrive under pressure. Whether this pressure is the fear of the digital threatening to make the physical book obsolete, or a communications revolution forcing a new approach to keep the book and reading interesting. Though these underlying causes differ in nature, the reaction of the book to them is similar. Three works of fiction from different genres and different countries: *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* Italian fiction, *The Neverending Story* German children's fiction and *The Cage* a Canadian experimental graphic work. All three, too, are in their own way influential works. All show deliberate use of metafiction, foregrounding books, stories, reading and readers to the point of creating an engaging work of art, forcing the reader to reflect on it. The reader is given an active role involving them in the medium. Books as objects at certain points in the story become characters that even seem to have a form of agency, or at least a strong influence on other characters in the story. The emphasis on the book as an object and its physicality is key to its auratic properties, stressing the books authenticity in light of other media. The complex interrelation of bookishness, aura and metafiction in literary fiction from the 1970s, proves such artistic interventions were applied at that time as a response to fears surrounding the death of the book.

The metafictional devices are constantly presented to, or even forced upon the reader, in these works of fiction from the 1970s. This makes sure the reader never forgets they are dealing with a physical reading object. The reader is constantly reminded that their reading experience is facilitated by this physical reading object. I believe it is this awareness that ultimately establishes for the reader an aesthetic of bookishness. Like television, books can provide an engaging experience, but through its materiality, the book as a work of art has its own unique context. Something the television will never have.

As my research progressed I found that I lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to properly analyse a graphic novel, especially one of the complex stature of that of *The Cage*, which is

why I ended up borrowing the majority of that analysis in order to be able to make my point. Furthermore, I feel like I have not been able to properly explicate the concept of Benjamin's aura in every one of my case studies, causing it to this part of the research to end up slightly underexposed. The juggling of the three concepts proved more difficult than I had anticipated. Finally, I am aware that there is so much more to say about each of these three works I do not have room for.

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