

Media Affordance and the Construction of Textual Aesthetic Forms in the Pathways of Dissemination*

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This study adopts the materiality and mediality of publications as its dual foundations. The findings reveal that the material carriers, technological mediators, and disseminating agents collectively shape the presentational forms of texts. By analyzing typical cases of print classics and digital-native publications, this research clarifies the specific affordances of different dissemination stages in shaping aesthetic experiences. The study provides both theoretical and practical insights for optimizing aesthetic production and dissemination in the publishing industry within new media environments.

Keywords: publications, pathways of dissemination, media embodiment

Preface

Driven by the dual forces of media technology iteration and cultural consumption upgrading, the form and dissemination of publications have undergone transformative changes. From oracle bones and bamboo slips to paper books, and further to e-books, interactive fiction, and audio publications, the evolution of carriers has not only reshaped the efficiency of information dissemination but also profoundly altered readers' modes of aesthetic perception. The traditional linear publishing pathway of "editing—printing—distribution—reading" is increasingly being replaced by the networked pathway of the digital era: "multi-source publishing—network-wide diffusion—interactive feedback—community-based reproduction".

As the core link in the realization of a publication's value, the generation of aesthetic experience is no longer a reader's unilateral interpretation of the text. Instead, it is shaped by multiple factors, including the medium, channels, and context of dissemination. Exploring the evolutionary logic of publication dissemination pathways and analyzing their intrinsic connection with the formation of aesthetic experience have become important subjects in publishing studies and aesthetic-cultural research.

The Materiality of the Carrier Medium and the Foundation of the Aesthetic Basis

As the physical shell of publications, the materiality of the carrier medium directly establishes the aesthetic foundation of the text. The texture, mode of presentation, and sensory stimuli of different carrier media shape fundamentally different dimensions of aesthetic experience.

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The materiality of the paper-based carrier is its core aesthetic feature. The texture of the paper, the hue of the ink, and the form of the binding collectively constitute a dual tactile-visual aesthetic experience. Take, for instance, a thread-bound edition of *Three Hundred Tang Poems*. Printed on xuan paper, bound with silk thread, and featuring a woodblock-printed cover illustration, it offers the reader, while turning the pages, the tactile sensation of the paper's texture, and the silk threads' patterns, coupled with the visual perception of ink density and page layout, resulting in an aesthetic experience imbued with both classical charm and material warmth. This materiality endows paper publications with "collectible value" and "symbolic value", transforming them into cultural symbols.

The virtuality of the digital carrier introduces a novel aesthetic experience. The luminous effects, resolution, and interactive design of electronic screens constitute the aesthetic foundation of digital publications. E-ink readers, simulating the appearance of paper and minimizing blue light, foster an immersive reading experience akin to that of paper. In contrast, the color screens of smartphones and tablets support dynamic visuals, embedded videos, and other multimedia presentations, adding a dimension of "visual dynamism" to the aesthetic experience.

Audio publications, with audio as their carrier, center their aesthetic dimension on "hearing". The timbre of the voice, the pacing of speech, and the background music collectively shape the auditory aesthetic form of the text. Thus, the material differences among carrier media determine the initial aesthetic form of publications and establish the fundamental framework for readers' aesthetic perception.

The Intervention of Technological Mediation and the Innovation of Aesthetic Presentation

As the core instrument within the pathways of dissemination, the evolution of technological mediation has driven the continuous innovation of aesthetic presentation in publications. From printing technology to digital technology, each technological breakthrough has led to an upgrade in aesthetic forms.

The development of traditional printing technology shaped the classic aesthetic forms of paper publications. Woodblock printing established the aesthetic of layout in ancient Chinese books, characterized by the "frame—line arrangement—fish-tail" pattern. The widespread adoption of movable-type printing enabled the standardization and diversification of fonts, providing greater possibilities for book design. The Qing Dynasty compilation *Siku Quanshu* (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries), produced using woodblock printing with its neat and elegant regular script and well-spaced layout, stands as a model of aesthetic presentation through traditional printing technology.

The intervention of digital technology, however, has brought about aesthetic innovations characterized by "interactivity", "multimedia", and "personalization". Interactive technologies allow digital publications to break through the static limitations of text, achieving an interactive aesthetic between "text and reader". For instance, in the interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, viewers can click the screen to choose the plot direction, with different choices leading to different endings. The viewer thus transitions from a "spectator" to a "participant", and the aesthetic experience gains a "constructive" and "contingent" quality.

Personalized recommendation technology, based on a reader's habits and preferences, pushes tailored publications to the reader, achieving a "precise match between aesthetic supply and demand". The "Guess You Like" feature in WeRead, for example, analyzes a user's reading history via algorithm to recommend books aligning with their aesthetic preferences. This makes the reader's aesthetic experience more "targeted" and enhances aesthetic satisfaction.

The intervention of technological mediation has shifted the aesthetic presentation of publications from “static and singular” to “dynamic and plural”, and from “standardized” to “personalized”, profoundly reshaping the way aesthetic experiences are generated.

The Encoding by Disseminating Agents and the Establishment of Aesthetic Orientation

Within the pathways of dissemination, disseminating agents establish the aesthetic orientation of publications through “aesthetic encoding”. The aesthetic choices made by editors, publishing houses, and platform operators directly determine the aesthetic form and dissemination impact of a text.

In traditional publishing, editors and publishing houses are the core encoders. An editor’s selection of topics reflects an understanding of contemporary aesthetic trends; the editorial process involves the “aesthetic refinement” of the text; and cover design completes the aesthetic encoding of the material form. In digital publishing, platform operators emerge as new encoders. The interface design, content categorization, and recommendation algorithms of a platform all embody an aesthetic orientation. For instance, the interface of Qidian Chinese Network features a dark background to highlight book covers and ranking lists; its content is primarily categorized under genres like “Fantasy” and “Xianxia”; and its recommendation algorithm prioritizes click-through rates and reader donations. This establishes a “mass-oriented, entertainment-focused” aesthetic orientation, which directly influences the creation of web literature and the aesthetic experience of its readers.

Authors, as the initial encoders, provide the core foundation for a publication’s aesthetic orientation through their creative style. However, during the dissemination process, the encoding by disseminating agents can “reshape” or “reinforce” the author’s aesthetic style. This aesthetic encoding by disseminating agents endows publications with a clear aesthetic positioning from the outset of dissemination. This positioning is then communicated through the dissemination pathways, guiding the direction of the reader’s aesthetic experience.

Conclusion

Dissemination pathways, through media affordance and agent encoding, construct the textual aesthetic form of publications. The materiality of carrier media establishes the aesthetic foundation, the intervention of technological mediation innovates aesthetic presentation, and the encoding by disseminating agents defines aesthetic orientation. These three elements collectively shape the initial aesthetic form of a publication.

Aesthetic experiences under different dissemination pathways exhibit significant distinctions: The linear dissemination of print publications fosters an immersive aesthetic experience; the networked dissemination of digital publications enables an interactive aesthetic experience; and transmedia convergent dissemination gives rise to a composite aesthetic experience. Each of these three experiential forms possesses its own strengths, catering to the diverse aesthetic needs of readers.

Within the context of the new era, only by understanding the evolutionary logic of dissemination pathways and respecting the generative mechanisms of aesthetic experience can publications integrating intellectual depth with aesthetic value be created, thereby facilitating the high-quality development of the publishing industry.

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