M. VICTOR

PRINTING MATTERS

The Materiality of Print
in Early Modern Europe

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Introduction:
The materiality of printed words and images

GRAHAM LARKIN AND LISA PON

The papers in this special issue of *Word & Image* originated at the conference 'Printing Matters: The Materiality of Print in Early Modern Europe' at the Harvard University Art Museums.[1] The purpose of the conference was to encourage historians of the printed word and image to reflect on the relationship between medium and message, considering such issues as transitions between hand production and mechanical production, the ways in which typographic and layout conventions are invested with meaning, and the relationship between visual and textual content. We have maintained the format of the original encounter, where the papers were grouped into three sessions, followed by the responses of Stephen Greenblatt, Henri Zerner and Joseph Koerner respectively. By way of introduction we will investigate the notion of materiality and consider its implications for a number of disciplines relating to graphic forms.

MATERIALITY

The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the word materiality was already in use by the sixteenth century. The obsolete definition as 'that which constitutes the "matter" of something: opposed to formality' is not so very distant from a current definition as 'material aspect or character; mere outwardness or externality.' Both evoke the metaphysical distinction, prominent in Western thought from the time of Plato and Aristotle, between 'mere' matter and the form that is the structure or essence of things. This denigration of matter at the expense of a controlling form or idea becomes less tenable when one considers how technologies of inscription might actually serve to constitute meaning.
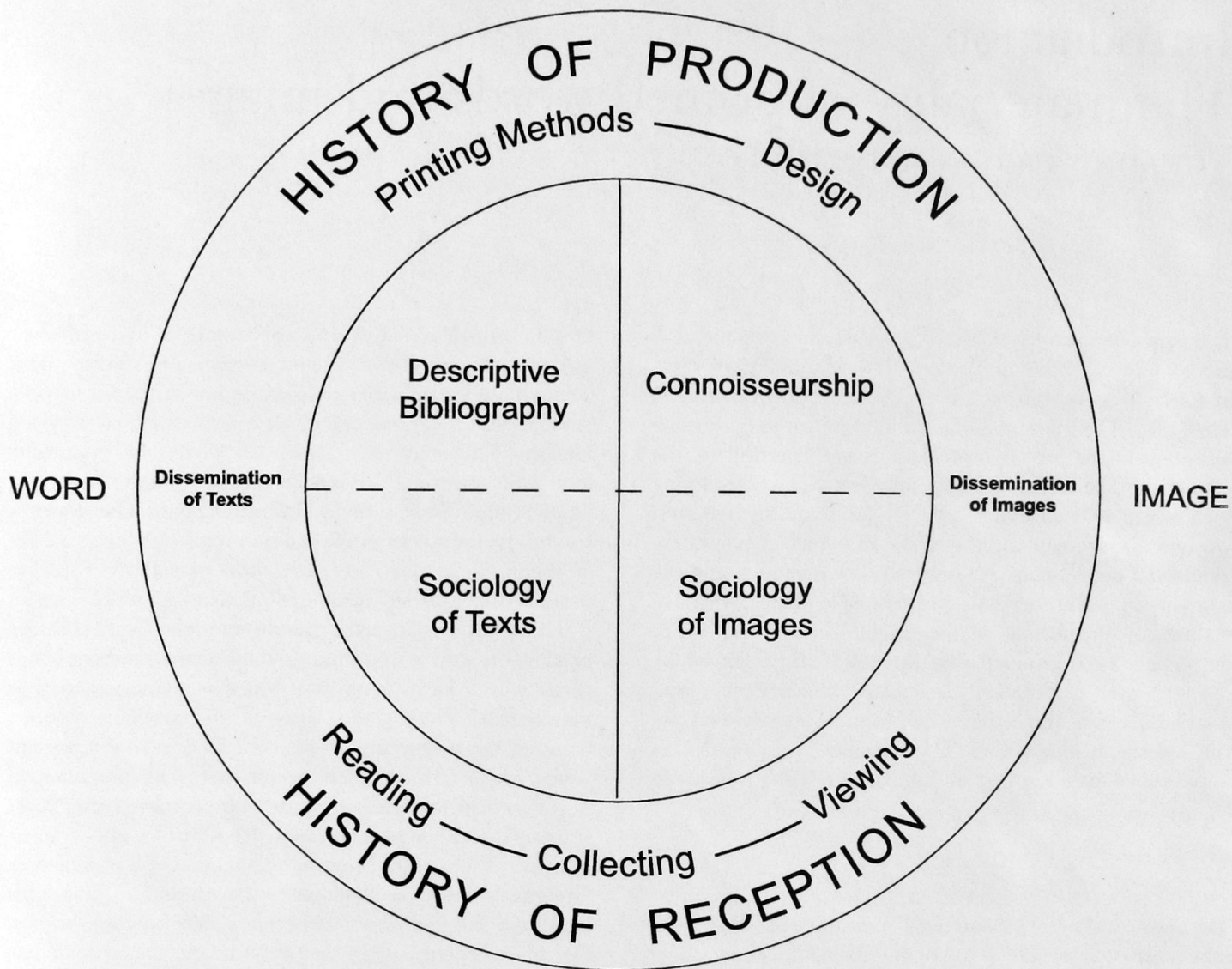
Despite its implicit depreciation of matter, the term 'materiality' is still useful for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is different, but not too different, from the more common term 'materials'. A call for papers on the *materials* of print would more likely have attracted those specialists — conservators, bibliographers, archivists and curators — whose responsibility for the care of objects demands a working knowledge of historical materials and techniques. They might have addressed such familiar issues as the manufacture and implementation of ink and paper, changes in the chemical structure and appearance of materials over time, or the exigencies of preservation and display. This would have been a perfectly legitimate topic for a conference, and a natural one given that it was hosted by the Harvard University Art Museums, where the organizers met while pursuing fellowships in the Straus Center for Conservation. But we had a different agenda. Our concern was less with the science of materials than with the social life of things — in this case early modern texts and images produced by radically novel communications technologies.[2]

To the extent that investigations into materiality consider production and consumption, they share common concerns with Marxist and post-Marxist investigations into material*ism*.[3] Here again, there is a convenient distance between the two terms. In his contribution to the present issue, Stephen Greenblatt points out that practitioners of 'dialectical materialism' and 'cultural materialism' persistently direct our attention away from surface appearances in favor of something more fundamental. The surface that Greenblatt wants to legitimize is the theater of flesh-and-blood (or ink-and-paper) experience. We might compare Derrida's contention, in *Of Grammatology*, that speech has been unduly privileged over writing, a situation that could be redressed by means of a 'cultural graphology.'[4] Similarly Bruno Latour, in his investigation of scientific practice, claims that historians have greatly underestimated the extent to which inscriptions (as 'immutable mobiles') play a constitutive role in cognition and communication.[5]

A further advantage of the term 'materiality' is that it is already current among literary historians. In an influential 1993 article, 'The materiality of the Shakespearean text,' Magareta De Grazia and Peter Stallybrass bring post-structuralist concerns about the instabilities of language and identity to an investigation of physical features of the text such as 'old typefaces and spellings, irregular line and scene divisions, title pages and other paratextual matter, and textual cruxes.' Whereas traditional bibliographers use such evidence to construct a single and authoritative version of the text, De Grazia and Stallybrass consider how the typographical flux undermines the modern conception of Shakespeare's plays as stable works of literature.[6]

The materiality of printed texts in early modern Europe is inseparable from that of the images that were often

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HISTORY OF PRODUCTION

Printing Methods ——— Design

Descriptive Bibliography | Connoisseurship

WORD | Dissemination of Texts | Dissemination of Images | IMAGE

Sociology of Texts | Sociology of Images

Reading ——— Collecting ——— Viewing

HISTORY OF RECEPTION

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produced by the same methods and the same people — often even on the same page. A synoptic history of printed words and images would acknowledge these common conditions of production and reception.[7] We have emphasized these parallel word/image trajectories in the diagram above. It summarizes the rest of our introduction, which will investigate the outer ring before moving to the four core disciplines. While we have divided texts and images for reasons of conceptual clarity, we urge the reader to bear in mind the extent to which these stories are intertwined. Many of the essays in the present volume investigate words and images together in the same publication. And Ramie Targoff's discussion of the pilcrow (¶), which has an ornamental presence as well as an editorial and ideological function, serves to remind us that distinctions between typography, ornamentation and illustration are ultimately fluid.

PRINT PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION

We will now introduce some basic issues of early modern print production and reception by referring to the bibliography at the end of this essay. It mainly comprises recent introductory sources in English for the scholar seeking a cross-disciplinary grounding in these subjects, with particular emphasis on guides to visual material that might broaden the scope of the many text-centered histories of printing.

The first part of our bibliography deals with *printing materials and techniques*. It includes introductions to the identification of the major techniques of print production and layout, arranged either as histories (Twyman, Griffiths, Hunter, Landau and Parshall) or as handbooks (Gascoigne, Gaskell, James). Of all of these studies Carlo James's *Old Master Prints and Drawings* might be the least familiar to a general audience, both because it is relatively recent and because it is mainly a handbook for conservators. James's

book does for graphic media what the *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* has long been doing for paintings — namely combining scientific, archival and stylistic examination, in an effort to better understand the history of techniques and materials. It is precisely the emphasis on historical techniques of making, storing and preserving that makes the book so valuable to historians interested in the social life of works on paper.

The subject of *design* moves beyond issues such as methods of manufacture or storage to investigate the style of layout, typography and binding. 'Style,' which is intended in a broad sense, has been recently defined as 'a coherence of qualities in periods or people.' The author hastens to add that it is 'one of the most difficult concepts in the lexicon of art, and one of the chief areas of debate in aesthetics and art history' (Elkins 1996). The style of independent prints, or of the typography, ornamentation, illustration and binding of printed books, should be linked to broader stylistic currents in graphic design (Meggs 1998, Tufte 1990) and the decorative arts in general (Gruber 1994ff.).

Insofar as it provides the link between the publisher and the reader/viewer, *dissemination* features in both production- and reception-centered studies. It therefore appears at the juncture between these two halves of our diagram, though it has largely been subsumed into other areas of our bibliography and discussion. Nonetheless, certain studies seem to be especially pertinent to considerations of the role of printing in cultural exchange, including the classic studies by William Ivins, Marshall McLuhan and Elizabeth Eisenstein. These three very different authors all agree that print is an inherently uniform and stable form of communication — a notion which, as we shall see, has more recently been questioned by historians such as Roger Chartier and Adrian Johns. Peter Parshall's consideration of prints as objects of consumption also seems especially relevant to the subject of dissemination.

Finally, we have grouped together the subjects of *reading, viewing and collecting* at the end of our bibliography, and further down our diagram under the general heading of reception. The recent English translation of Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier's splendid *History of Reading in the West* includes an introductory chapter by the editors, thirteen essays by leading scholars, and excellent bibliographies. As examples of the best work being done in the history of textual reception, we have also selected some microhistories by Carlo Ginzburg, Anthony Grafton and Ann Blair. These can be supplemented by studies in the theory and criticism of reception and reader-response (Holub 1998, Rabinowitz 1994). Also useful are histories of collecting, such as the exemplary books by Pomian and Findlen, and the articles in the *Journal of the History of Collections*. Studies of the impact of modern technologies, including important works by Walter Benjamin and Jonathan Crary, can help us to gauge our distance from early modern viewers.

DESCRIPTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY AND CONNOISSEURSHIP

In the top half of the diagram's central circle, we have placed two disciplines that have long attended to physical features of texts and images. Descriptive bibliography and connoisseurship both aspire to an objective, scientific description and analysis of objects. Giovanni Morelli, who is often described as the father of connoisseurship, valued the internal evidence of art objects above all else. 'The only true record for the connoisseur,' he wrote, 'is the work of art itself,' more important than the critic's aesthetic intuition or the historian's documents.[8] Bernard Berenson, a great proponent of Morellian method, felt that personal scrutiny of each work of art was vital to his project of grouping Italian paintings and drawings as products of specific regional schools and individual artists. In his 'note to the second edition' of *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* Berenson urges the reader 'to call attention to the fact that, with one or two exceptions, *he* [Berenson] *has mentioned no pictures that he has not seen.*'[9]

Traditional bibliography is likewise concerned with the material forms of books, rather than with secondary evidence. By compiling evidence from as many copies of a book as possible, the bibliographer seeks to describe the ideal copy of a text, 'the most perfect state of a work as originally intended by its printer or publisher following the completion of all intentional changes.'[10] Characterizing the ideal copy makes it possible to produce accurate editions of a given text; an exhaustive description of existing copies can enable the researcher to identify publishers and printers who would otherwise remain anonymous. R. A. Sayce's monumental study of more than 2800 books provides a framework for identifying the place and date of a printed book through the form of its signatures, which are symbols appearing at the foot of a page to facilitate the assembly and folding of printed sheets.[11] In a similar manner, the connoisseur finds clues about a work's origins in features easily overlooked by the casual viewer. Morelli recommends that a connoisseur pay less heed to consciously learned aspects of a painter's style (such as physical types of figures, or forms of drapery) than to things like the shapes of hands or ears. By looking closely at 'these material trifles (a student of calligraphy would call them flourishes)', the connoisseur can identify individual painters and separate the work of masters from that of their pupils.[12]

By the first quarter of the twentieth century, the methods of descriptive bibliography and connoisseurship had rapidly developed into coherent systems. They proved very effective in those places, such as the auction house, the library and the museum, where it is essential to characterize each item with some degree of specificity. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, these practices were increasingly ignored or dismissed by the intellectual avant-garde. Nonetheless, a few scholars,

including Michael Baxandall and D. F. McKenzie, used these same skills to address a much broader range of concerns.

SOCIOLOGY OF TEXTS AND IMAGES

Turning back to the diagram, we find in the lower half of the inner circle a subdiscipline (the sociology of texts) and a potential subdiscipline (the sociology of images). The idea that descriptive bibliography might expand into a 'sociology of texts' was introduced by D. F. McKenzie in his 1985 Panizzi Lectures at the British Library.[13] By calling for a broader consideration of physical properties of the text he hoped to redirect a field that too often viewed words on a page as arbitrary marks whose meaning was extraneous. By contrast, McKenzie advocated attention to the historical dimensions of 'the processes of transmission, including [the] production and reception of texts as recorded forms.'[14] His vision of a 'sociology of texts' encompassed a broad range of concerns:

> At one level, a sociology simply reminds us of the full range of social realities which the medium of print had to serve, from receipt blanks to bibles. But it also directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption. It alerts us to the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse, past and present.[15]

The sociology of texts, then, embraces an impressive range of objects from traditional materials to often-neglected ephemera, and extends its attention to issues of reception as well as production.

As art historians, we are interested in proposing a similarly expanded role for connoisseurship; for present purposes we are calling this a 'sociology of images' in order to reinforce the parallel with McKenzie's outlook. By making connoisseurship central to considerations of materiality, we are agreeing with Henri Zerner's provocative contention, made in another 1985 lecture, that this practice, too often viewed as moribund, is actually 'in its infancy' and needs to be more broadly conceived:

> [T]o make fine visual distinctions, to identify specific visual features, to correlate them to one another through notions of rhythm, recurrence, and relative irregularity . . . to be attentive to all the indications we can obtain from the examination of artifacts, from the slightest inflections of the maker's hand to the largest configurations, to make this study disciplined and coherent, this should be the task of connoisseurship. It can tell us an extraordinary amount about how things are made, to what purpose, and about their later destiny and use.[16]

Thus considered, connoisseurship is potentially as far ranging as McKenzie's sociology of texts.

Traditional connoisseurship is rooted in postromantic conceptions of originality, authenticity and value; it is therefore unsurprising that its methods were not as extensively applied to prints as to unique objects like drawings and paintings.[17] Elaborate painted sculptures are the focus of one very fruitful example of a sociology of images, namely Michael Baxandall's *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*. This famous study — oft-reviewed since its 1980 appearance, yet not easily summarized — considers how the style and technique of sculptors such as Tilman Riemenschneider and Veit Stoss responded to the physical properties of a particular kind of wood, and beyond that to wider circumstances that might have been economic, theological, or even musical.[18] The term 'visual culture', which Baxandall is often credited with inventing, hardly does justice to his success at linking material practices with the fullness of social existence.[19]

Baxandall's success is due, in no small part, to his unprejudiced ability to combine different kinds of institutional expertise. While his work in British and American universities was obviously crucial to the brand of social history put forward in *Limewood Sculptors*, the book is also the fruit of the author's experience as Assistant Keeper in the Department of Architecture and Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The art museum was Baxandall's laboratory, just as the rare books library is the one indispensable workplace of the McKenzian sociologist. These institutions provide the ideal conditions for the close scrutiny and comparison of artifacts fundamental to any materials-based discipline.

Baxandall's skill as a connoisseur is fundamental to the organic relation between the text of *Limewood Sculptors* and the original hand-crafted and hand-painted objects of study. A comparable sociology of printed images would treat a different set of concerns, given that prints are relatively cheap multiples produced by a process of mechanical transfer. Such a study would need to show how attitudes toward originality, authorship, value and fixity were played out in particular historical circumstances. All of these issues seem far more complicated today than a generation ago, when historians such as Eisenstein taught us that print was an inherently uniform and stable medium. More recently, scholars such as Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton and Adrian Johns have shown how the vicissitudes of early modern book production, transmission and reception actually created an extremely volatile situation.[20] Scholars of early modern literature, including De Grazia and Stallybrass, have come to similar conclusions.[21] By attending to the materiality of printed objects, these historians are questioning many of the assumptions that had led to an oversimplified history of the rise of printing in Europe. The manifold subjects and approaches of the following papers are part of this same intellectual ferment.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Design

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Meggs, Philip B. *A History of Graphic Design*. New York: Wiley, 1998. A well-illustrated history, with particular emphasis on work of the past few centuries.

Schapiro, Meyer. 'Style,' in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society* (New York: Braziller, 1994), pp. 51–102; 'Script in pictures: semiotics of visual language', in *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language* (New York: Braziller, 1996). Broad-ranging investigations by an art historian deeply interested in semiotics.

Tufte, Edward R. *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990. An original attempt to develop transhistorical categories of graphical excellence.

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Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979. A groundbreaking study of the shift from manuscript to printed texts.

Ivins, William M., Jr. *Prints and Visual Communication*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1953. An original consideration of how printing techniques affect the transmission of visual information.

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Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990. An investigation of the historical formation of the nineteenth-century observer.

Findlen, Paula. *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Charts the appearance of museums and the development of natural history as a discipline in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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Grafton, Anthony. *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. Case studies of humanistic and scientific scholars in the first centuries of print.

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NOTES

1 – The symposium, held in November 1998, was made possible through the generous support of HUAM director James Cuno, his excellent staff in many departments, and the M. Victor Leventritt lecture fund. For the publication we are grateful to the editors of *Word & Image,* and especially to John Dixon Hunt for his support at every stage. Finally, we wish to thank Roger Chartier and Anthony Grafton for reviewing the introduction.

2 – *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also the discussion of print in Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

3 – Stimulating investigations of early modern materialism appear in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds, *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

4 – Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, corrected edn), p. 87.

5 – Bruno Latour, 'Drawing things together' in *Representation in Scientific Practice,* eds Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 19–68. For Derridean graphology, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds, *Materialities of Communication* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) ; Timothy Lenoir, ed., *Inscribing Science: Scientific Texts and the Materiality of Communication* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

6 – Margreta De Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, 'The materiality of the Shakespearean text', *Shakespeare Quarterly,* 44 (1993), pp. 255–303, p. 256.

7 – For publishers of both word and image, see Robert W. Scribner , *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn 1994); and Lisa Pon, 'Prints and privileges: regulating the image in 16th-century Italy', *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin,* 6/2 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–60.

8 – *Italian Painters: Critical Studies of their Works,* trans. C. J. Ffoulkes (London 1900), pp. 26–7.

9 – (London, 1905), p. v. (Berenson's italics). But see also Morelli's statement that 'the art connoisseur ought to live among his photographs' (*Italian Painters,* p. 11).

10 – Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography,* p. 321.

11 – 'Compositorial Practices and the Localization of Printed Books, 1530–1800', *The Library,* 21, 5th series (1966), pp. 1–45. Roger Stoddard kindly provided this reference.

12 – *Italian Painters,* p. 75. Not surprisingly, Morelli's method fascinated Freud, as Carlo Ginzburg points out in 'Clues: roots of an evidential paradigm', in *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 99.

13 – The lectures were published as *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1986).

14 – *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts,* p. 4.

15 – Ibid., pp. 6–7.

16 – Henri Zerner, 'What gave connoisseurship its bad name?', in *Drawings Defined,* eds Walter Strauss and Tracie Felker (New York, 1987), pp. 289–90. While there are obvious parallels in the aims of both speakers, Zerner's remarks could serve as a corrective to McKenzie's collapsing of verbal and visual evidence into the category of 'text'; any consideration of the materiality of print should respect the inevitable differences, as well as the similarities, between text and image. The works of Meyer Schapiro and Nelson Goodman are still basic starting-points for inquiry into relations between text and image.

17 – For an excellent example of the latest techniques of print connoisseurship, based on extensive stylistic, historical and technical knowledge, see Jan Piet Filedt Kok *et al., Lucas van Leyden* (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sound & Vision Interactive in co-operation with the Rijksprentenkabinet, 1996).

18 – *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). For a bibliography of reviews, see the special issue of *Art History* devoted to Baxandall (21/4, December 1998), p. 595.

19 – For some recent considerations of this fashionable and amorphous term, see the Visual Culture Questionnaire in *October,* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 25–70.

20 – See Johns's extensive discussion of Chartier and others in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 1–57. For Darnton's work, see also *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

21 – See also, for instance, Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and the general introduction to *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare,* eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 1–68.