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*The New Russian Book*  
*A Graphic Cultural History*

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Birgitte Beck Pristed

# The New Russian Book

A Graphic Cultural History

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*For my sons, Linus and Vitus*

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## A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

Transliterations of Russian names, titles, and terms follow the system of the Library of Congress, with the common variation of omitting diacritics and two-letter ligatures. However, in the main text, names and terms well known to a Western reader appear in their anglophone form (for example, “Yeltsin” instead of “El’tsin” and “glasnost” instead of “glasnost”). Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Russian citations into English are my own. I thank Jesse M. Savage for revising these translations and for his many corrections and comments to the entire manuscript. The responsibility for any mistakes is my own.

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**Fig. 1** Look inside to get the full picture. Vladimir Dubossarsky & Alexander Vinogradov: Russia. Oil on canvas. 195 × 295 cm. 2008. Courtesy of the artists

## Introduction: Research Design

What is more annoying than being disturbed while reading? This is exactly what contemporary Russian book design does. Post-Soviet book covers are striking and confusing. As the visual “surfaces” of literature, they reflect the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet book culture, a transition that brought changes in all the ideological, economic, technical, and sociocultural conditions for the production and consumption of fiction in Russia. Hence, any reader or scholar of Russian literature today is faced with the fact that the materiality of texts matters. There is a striking incongruity between, on the one hand, the uniform rows of monochrome Soviet hardback series on the back shelves of not too well-funded research libraries and, on the other hand, the eye-catching books offered in the book stalls and stores in the busy streets and stations of the Russian metropolises—with colorful glossy covers and shocking illustrations framed by large golden letters. Again and again, the quiet contemplation of the act of reading is interrupted by visual confrontation. Back in the research library, these post-Soviet book covers challenge our seemingly tranquil close-reading analyses of, for example, Chekhov’s use of punctuation and pause, by simultaneously dismantling his works in the present Russian book market.

This book takes up the obtrusive but largely ignored problem of the visual representation of fiction in contemporary Russian book design. Though dismissed as a symptom of cultural decay by Russian art critics and book historians and ridiculed at international book fairs, post-Soviet

book covers merit attention for several reasons. First, they offer a unique material for analysis that illustrates a radically changing notion of literature and adds new nuances to our understanding of this cultural/historical transition process. Second, we cannot pretend that we fail to notice them. As I will demonstrate, cover images are consciously and often aggressively used to position contemporary Russian prose, and they are starting to influence book reviews and scholarly reception of the authors' works. Accordingly, the development of systematic and critical methods to explore the visual aspects of literature is necessary so as not to miss important layers of significance or to reduce them to a matter of good versus bad taste. Third, among all the carelessly bungled covers of mass-published post-Soviet series we also find gems from experimental designers, whose advanced artistic conceptualizations of the book are different from but not inferior to the book art of the 1920s avant-garde and the 1970s underground Moscow conceptualists. With a chameleonic ability to not only adapt to but also respond to changing circumstances, these applied artists transform the design of mass-produced contemporary Russian books into an art form in its own right—just as eye-catching as it is, too frequently, completely overlooked.

Following this introductory chapter that positions the research topic of post-Soviet book covers between the disciplines of literary studies, book history, visual studies, and media studies, and examines contrasting Western and Soviet theoretical ideas of the book, this work is divided into three major sections that approach Russian book design from three different perspectives.

The first part presents a graphic cultural history of fiction publishing in Russia, from the Soviet state's products to those of post-Soviet private publishing enterprises.<sup>1</sup> Its main objective is to investigate how the visual appearance, material form, and sociocultural functions of Russian books and book covers have changed in the transition from a literature-centered Soviet book culture to a post-Soviet cultural industry. The study takes a comparative approach to this question, demonstrating how the post-war mass-published Soviet book materialized into hardback series, as opposed to the parallel Western development of mass-market paperback series, and explains this contrast by looking at the different functions of the book cover in East and West. It then examines perestroika-era and post-Soviet discourses on book design that reflect clashing concepts of the book: as a commodity of unregulated capitalism, or as a symbolic object of the collective cultural heritage. It also discusses the impact that both the

import of Western cover motifs and computer technology and the export of Russian book artists had on the development of a new visual language. Finally, it diagnoses present problems of Russian book design, in which innovation is threatened by growing monopolization tendencies within the publishing industry and an increasing polarization of the book market that is widening the gulf between the ever-diminishing discount paperback series and exclusive leather volumes of new monumental dimensions. In the broadest sense possible, the historical section approaches book design as a material, sociocultural, and ideological form of organizing literature.

The second, analytical part systematically compares the book covers of a selection of Russian editions of three literary works representing, respectively, a piece of classic, popular, and contemporary fiction. This section approaches book design more narrowly as a concrete publishing product and as an object of visual analysis. The aim of the three case studies is to analyze the changing relationship between text, image, and material and to discuss how this change impacts the notion of the literary work. I examine, as an example of the process of redesign and reinterpretation of the literary classic within Russian book culture, how pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet editions present Anton Chekhov's short story "Dama s sobachkoi" to the reader and the consequences this has had for the image of both the writer and his heroine. To illustrate an example of the reception of translated Western popular fiction in the perestroika and early post-Soviet eras, I investigate how Russian book covers transfer the English crime story *The World in My Pocket* by James Hadley Chase from West to East. Finally, to shed light on recent visual representation strategies for contemporary prose, I use Viktor Pelevin's bestselling novel *Generation "P"* as an example, to analyze how its conflict-ridden publication history has resulted in kaleidoscopic images of the work and its writer. The three cases are complementary to each other, but, despite their diversity, they all demonstrate in various ways how the clash of two formerly separate book cultures, the Western and the Soviet, result both in a mixture of highbrow and lowbrow forms and in significant ideological reinterpretations and reinstrumentalizations of the authors' works.

While the historical section is based on quantitative and rather broadly contextualized material, the analytical part encompasses a wide array of specific examples of book cover design, in a diachronic comparison of the editions of three literary works. The first case study focuses on the visual design of Chekhov's "Dama s sobachkoi" from 1899 in a variety of editions from different publication contexts. "Dama s

sobachkoi” was chosen as an example of the Russian literary classic with a long publication history. It was originally printed in the pre-revolutionary period, subsequently integrated into the Soviet literary canon, and then forgotten, for a while, by post-Soviet private publishers; but it has recently been revived. This enables an investigation of not only disruptions and innovations in the Russian visual representation of literature, but also of possible continuities in it.

The second case study forms a counterpoint to the Chekhov story. As an example of the post-Soviet import of Western popular fiction, I trace the fortunes in Russia of a 1958 novel by the British thriller/crime writer James Hadley Chase, *The World in My Pocket*, from its first Russian translation and publication in a Soviet literary journal, its late Soviet dramatization for TV and the self-published “samizdat” editions that followed, to its ultimate boom in post-Soviet publishing. The reason for choosing a translated work, rather than one of the many post-Soviet Russian authors of popular literature, was my wish to extend the comparison of Western and Russian concepts of the book that characterize both the theoretical and historical parts of this work. The juxtaposition of two “incomparable” authors, Chekhov and Chase, will further demonstrate the difficulties presented by the conventional distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow literature when one examines the post-Soviet culture of the book.

The third and final case study centers on visual analysis of the many Russian editions of Viktor Pelevin’s 1999 novel *Generation “P”* as an example of contemporary Russian fiction. The rationale for choosing *Generation “P”* was to examine recent visual representation strategies—in the Russian book market as it appears today—for a work that was first published *after* the 1990s transition crises of post-Soviet publishing. Furthermore, its bestselling and internationally renowned author combines elements of both lowbrow and highbrow fiction in his postmodernist prose, which thus allows for a synthesis with the other two case studies.

The third and last part of this work approaches book design as an action, a negotiable transaction, and an artistic reaction, discussing the individual works of three contemporary Russian book designers, Arkadii Troianker, Andrei Bondarenko, and Aleksandr Utkin. While the first part of this work examines book covers from the standpoint of their influence on the reception of literature, this third section focuses on their production side. Its purpose is to investigate the generational differences, educational backgrounds, and working conditions that frame three dissimilar artistic developments, notions of the book, and understandings



of one's own role as book designer. This section also aims to flesh out the picture of Russian book design developed in the historical and analytical parts by providing qualitative artistic counterexamples to the quantitative mass of standardized covers and stock painting photos, by adding lived experience to general statistics and concrete voices to otherwise mute images. Hence, the third section elevates the question of contemporary Russian book design to the meta-level of artistic self-reflection.

This work has arisen from literary studies and is centered on the interplay between the visual, textual, and tactile elements of graphic representations of adult prose fiction. Hence, the historical section does not consider non-fiction genres, and such titles have not been included in the statistical material. This is also why the case examples of the analytical part are focused on narrative texts rather than drama and poetry, which are potentially more immediately related to the visual arts. Illustrated children's literature and didactic texts of any form are excluded from the study; in these types of book art, image and text have different functions that deserve separate investigations. However, in the last section of the study, I have chosen to include other types of design in order to show the entire range of the individual designers' portfolios.

My primary interest lies in printed publications, and I do not attempt to analyze recent Russian developments in (nor to speculate on future scenarios for) the rise of digital fiction in media such as audio books and e-books, or on the Russian internet. The important and very large question of what consequences the digital "birth" of fiction has for both design and the publishing process should be researched separately. However, the post-Soviet advent of new publishing technologies is an integrated part of my contemporary history of the Russian book. Finally, this book focuses on the design of mass-published literature and does not attempt a comprehensive history of all the possible styles, schools, and aesthetic directions of Russian book art from the avant-garde to the unique post-Soviet art book objects. While I do briefly touch on a few examples of one-off copies, they serve only a contrastive purpose.

## BOOK DESIGN IN THEORY

Concrete things such as books and book covers tend to defy theoretical abstractions. In comparison with the wide range of theories concerning narrative, for example, the material aspect of literature has been subject to relatively little building of theory. And why should we complicate things with theory, as Bill Brown has rhetorically asked in his "Thing Theory"

(Brown 2004, 1)? However, despite their immediate palpability, the book and the book cover have been differently conceptualized by various disciplines. This work situates the research topic of post-Soviet Russian book covers on the threshold between literary studies, book history, and recent media and visual studies. However, as Barthes reminds us, “To do something interdisciplinary, it is not enough to select a ‘subject’ (a theme) and to convene two or three sciences around it. The interdisciplinary consists of creating a new object that does not belong to anyone” (Barthes 1994, 1420). Though the subject of post-Soviet Russian book covers finds itself heretofore in a rather uncrowded niche that does not yield vast amounts of research literature, I am certainly indebted to the works of others.<sup>2</sup> Hence, I would like to reformulate the sentence: The interdisciplinary consists of sharing a new object that still belongs to everybody. Since 1972, when Barthes gave his definition of the interdisciplinary, the number of interdisciplinary studies has been steeply rising, and the term itself has tended to become a buzzword in academia. But this does not diminish the continuing challenge of communicating research across both disciplinary borders and language barriers. More dialogue is needed.

The field of Slavic studies apparently has failed to communicate to other disciplines the implications that the fall of the Soviet state publishing system has had for the notion of the book and for book art in Russia.<sup>3</sup> The radically new language of form and the changed functions of post-Soviet book design represent no lesser an aesthetic revolution than the avant-garde books did in their time. Hence, both a *revision* of the Russian and Soviet history of the book and book art and an *update* encompassing the post-Soviet period are also needed elsewhere, not just within the confines of Slavic studies. By taking a comparative approach to the histories of the Western and Russian book design, this work seeks to make a small contribution to opening an East–West dialogue between the disciplines.

The present study points out fundamental cultural differences in the concept of the book and the book cover. In the Anglo-American research tradition, the modern book has been defined and described as a trade object made by the agents of an industrialized publishing business. But in (Soviet) Russia, where market mechanisms were temporarily disabled, the research tradition came to rely on a normative approach that, at least in part, can be dated back to an idealized philosophical concept of the book.

To enable transnational comparisons of the level of book production, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) defined a book as “a non-periodic printed publication of

at least 49 pages exclusive of the cover pages” (UNESCO, November 19, 1964). In this context, the mention of the book cover only serves as a kind of negative delimitation of the statistical unit “book.” But apart from this quantitative definition, it is difficult to find much international consensus on the notion of a book and a book cover.

According to a recent Russian encyclopedia of the book (Zharkov and Barenbaum, 1999), a book is “the most important historically developed form of fixing and transferring diverse information *through time and space* in the form of textual and (or) illustrative material.” This establishes that a book is a mixed medium of words and images. The encyclopedia lists the book cover as one of the constitutive parts of the book. The book cover serves as the “*securing, protective elements*” of the book and can occur in one of the following four basic forms: “pereplet” (hardback), “oblozhka” (paperback), “superoblozhka” (dust jacket), and “futliar” (slip case).<sup>4</sup> As a whole the book is described as “a complex ‘object’ that embodies *material-constructive and artistic unity*” (Nemirovskii 1999, 299–303) (all italics are mine).

A comparison with the English *Encyclopedia of the Book* (1996) by Geoffrey Ashall Glaister reveals clear diversities in Russian and Western approaches. Hence, the British encyclopedia defines the book as a commodity: “book: for statistical purposes the British book trade once assumed that a book was a publication costing sixpence (2.5p) or more” (Glaister 1996, 54). The British and Russian definitions of the book are so far from each other that they hardly seem to describe the same object. The Russian encyclopedia’s understanding of the book as an embodiment of “material-constructive and artistic unity” must be seen as a normative definition, since we can think of numerous examples of Soviet as well as post-Soviet publications which do not live up to this high artistic standard.

The Polish book historian Krzysztof Migon constructs a similar comparison between a West German and a Soviet definition of the book from 1967 and 1970, respectively. In the *Brockhaus* encyclopedia, he finds a purely factual description of the book as a “larger written or printed work of aligned leaves or sheets, in modern times mostly of paper.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the Soviet book historian Abram Barsuk extends the definition by emphasizing the functions of the book in society: The book is “a product of social consciousness, of the ideal-mental life of a society;...[It is] a weapon in societal debates, a medium of education; it serves as an instrument for building public opinion and for scientific and technical progress” (Migon 1990, 16).<sup>6</sup> Like the recent post-Soviet encyclopedia entry, the

Soviet definition of the book is normative; it focuses on the potential of the book as a tool of propaganda and progress. A higher symbolic function is added to the Soviet book, albeit with some metaphorical confusion. While Barsuk describes the book as an ideological “weapon” in 1970, the book was celebrated at The International Moscow Book Exhibition in 1975 with the motto: “The Book in Service of Peace and Progress” (Bol’shakov 1990, 39).

These examples illustrate the challenge of approaching Russian book design from the outside, framed by Western research concepts that may not be directly applicable to the Russian notion of the book, which has its own tradition. Even beyond the separation of scholarly communities and the obviously ideological rhetoric of the Cold War, there is still today no universal—or hegemonic—understanding of the book and the book cover.

## LITERARY STUDIES: THE BOOK COVER AS A TEXTUAL THRESHOLD

At a first glance, the book cover seems to be a mere surface phenomenon of literature, an irrelevant and random outer decoration with no direct connection to the text it contains. It might even obstruct the reader’s own perceptual images of the fictional universe of the text, or prevent his/her “enlightenment,” like a dirty window that shuts out the sun. The “thingness” of an object makes it non-transparent (Brown 2004, 2; 4). Traditionally, literature has been considered the most abstract of the art forms. It consists of arbitrary signs that the idealized reader perceives in a private, inward reading process. Hence, in his classic aesthetic treatise *Laokoon* (1766) on the difference between the spatial arts of sculpture and painting versus the temporal art of poetry, Lessing privileges the “Geistigkeit” and “Einbildungskraft” of the images of poetry over the sensuous images of painting and sculpture that are bound to “the material barriers of art” (Lessing 2010, 22; 54; 113 [orig. 1766, III; VI; XV]).

As a result of this classic notion of literature, book covers are seldom included in structural analyses of literary texts. In his book *Reading the Graphic Surface*, Glyn White states: “Linguistics-based analysis routinely ignores the material aspect of any text, despite the fact that it is this materiality, the process of publication, that gives the text its communicative power through distance and time and allows it to be discussed by critics” (White 2005, 39). White demonstrates this point through his analysis of experimental British prose that in various ways challenges the conventional use of typography. But is a reading of a text’s graphic surface

only relevant when it comes to marginal literary forms such as experimental prose or visual poetry? This study argues that all texts, including unmarked, “ordinary” prose, where the author has not intentionally worked with the graphic presentation of the text, have a material and visual surface that carries meaning.

Though the field of literary studies generally has not paid much attention to these “material barriers” of the literary work, the French structuralist Gérard Genette is an important exception. By extending Julia Kristeva’s influential concept of “intertextuality” to a broader definition of “transtextuality,” Genette devotes an entire study to the so-called “paratext” of the literary work in *Seuils* (Genette org. 1987; 1997). As the prefix “para-” suggests (meaning “beside” or “alongside”, but with a secondary meaning “abnormal” or “incorrect” to which Genette playfully alludes), the paratext consists of all the verbal and non-verbal pragmatic “extra” texts of the literary work, such as the title, preface, and so forth, that accompany the “actual text” (“le texte proprement,” Genette 1982, 9). The paratext is neither part of the fictional text nor outside it, but rather marks a threshold between text-internal and text-external structures.

Genette lists the book cover as one element of the “publisher’s peritext,” a subcategory of the paratext, where “peri-” refers to the text immediately “surrounding” the actual text. The peritext is created in the process of realizing the literary work as a material book (Genette 1997, 20). The choice of the term “peritext” suggests a certain textual hierarchy in which the book cover has a secondary, peripheral status in relation to the central literary text. While Genette offers detailed analyses of the linguistic aspects of the paratext such as prefaces and annotations in separate chapters, he does not seem very interested in book design and only briefly mentions visual elements (such as illustration and typography) and material elements (such as paper quality). Perhaps he considers these non-linguistic aspects outside his field as a literary scholar. Genette states that a literary work is a *verbal* text (and not an image/text mixture): “A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, that is (defined very minimally), of a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance” (Genette 1997, 1).

An imageless, white book cover, such as that of the original French edition of *Seuils*, does not exactly invite elaborate considerations on the visual aspects of the text. Furthermore, Genette derived most of his para- and peritext examples from literary classics that may not have confronted him with the need for visual analysis to the same degree that the peritexts

of popular literature with glossy, colorful covers would have, had he paid any attention to this type of literature. Nevertheless, Genette's notion of the paratext is relevant to the present study because it breaks with the understanding of the literary work as a fixed entity for interpretation. The flexible paratext constantly changes the face of the literary work, through various editions and the gradual accumulation of surrounding textual layers. Hence, the materialization of the literary work as a printed text fixes and preserves the message and demarcates its limits, but at the same time facilitates its open-ended transmission through time and space.

Genette strives to encircle the paratext by using a number of spatial border metaphors: "a *threshold*, [...] an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside [...] an edge" (Genette 1997, 1–2). If we consider the book cover as a paratextual element of the literary work, it becomes a threshold between the work and the world, or between text and context. Thus the elements of the book cover may relate to both the internal text and the external sociocultural discourse about the text. The book cover does not represent a stable or closed border, since Genette's paratextual approach to the literary work makes it difficult to define where the "actual text" begins and ends.

However, Genette seems also interested in the paratext as a zone through which the literary work extends its own limits as a physical text and becomes an artistic experience in the reader's personal perception of the work. In *Palimpsestes* Genette speaks of transtextuality as "textual transcendence" (Genette 1982, 10), but immediately modifies this statement in one of his own playful, paratextual footnotes that give his text a certain Bakhtinian dialogic character. Here he emphasizes that he uses transcendence not as a mystical, but as a purely technical term opposed to textual "immanence." Genette's redefinition of terms over time presents some difficulty in reading him; but in his later work *L'Œuvre de l'art* (orig. 1994) (*The Work of Art* 1997), immanence and transcendence become two key concepts. Here an "object of immanence" ("objet d'immanence") refers to the physical and material character of the work of art, as opposed to its transcendent ability to evoke perceptual images in the recipient (Genette 1994, 16).

## BOOK HISTORY: THE MATERIAL BOOK AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE TEXT

In the 1980s, at the same time that Genette developed his concept of the paratext, the Anglo-American interdisciplinary research field of book history took shape. Book history broke out of the narrower, specialized areas

of bibliography and editorial philology, influenced by the French Annales school and by the historian Lucien Febvre's *L'Apparition du livre* (1958). Looking beyond the "idealized reader" of German "Rezeptionsgeschichte" (Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser), it focused on "the social and cultural history of printed communication" (Darnton 1982, 65–66).

In contrast to Genette, who in *Seuils* marked a division of labor between literary studies and bibliography (Genette 1997, 20), bibliographer Donald McKenzie states in his 1985 lecture "The Book as an Expressive Form" that he does not acknowledge any border between bibliography and textual criticism on the one hand and literary criticism and literary history on the other, since every aspect—from the smallest detail in the material text to the literary and sociohistorical context—carries meaning (McKenzie 1986, 14). McKenzie suggests an extended definition of text that includes not only verbal, but visual, oral, and numeric data, and he speaks of "texture" as woven material (derived from the Latin and Greek origins of the word text). Printed texts in the material form of the book constitute a special type of text in which non-verbal elements and spatial disposition also have an expressive function in conveying meaning (McKenzie 1986, 8).

In *The Textual Condition* (1991), textual and literary scholar Jerome McGann has introduced another alternative to Genette's hierarchical distinction between the "actual" text and the paratext, by suggesting an approach to the literary work based on an understanding of the text as an interlaced network of linguistic and bibliographical codes (McGann 1991, 13). The bibliographical code differs from Genette's paratext because it includes all the non-linguistic aspects of the body of the text, such as ink, typeface, and paper, and because McGann considers these elements central, not peripheral, to the understanding of a literary work. McGann states that imaginative literature, as compared with informational texts, foregrounds its materiality at the linguistic and the bibliographical level alike (McGann 1991, 14). Like Glyn White, he seeks his examples in experimental literature, in this case the modernist poetry of Ezra Pound, where this "self-attention" of the literary text might be more clearly expressed in its linguistic and bibliographical codes than in the case of "plain" prose.

However, as early as 1983, in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, McGann programmatically declares that "literary production is not an autonomous and self-reflexive activity; it is a social and institutional event" (McGann 1983, 100). In 1991, he further develops this argument in *The*

*Textual Condition:* “[A] ‘text’ is not a ‘material thing’ but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (McGann 1991, 21). By stressing that the material text is an act rather than an object, McGann points to the fact that the material body of the literary work is subject to constant change and negotiations between the agents involved in the production, distribution, and reception of the text. McGann does not regard literary works as “channels of transmission,” that is, as “message carriers” within a simple communication model, but as “particular forms of transmissive interaction” (McGann 1991, 11). According to McGann, the particular, sociohistorically conditioned “life histories” of different texts should be the subject of textual studies (McGann 1991, 9).

What happens, then, if we regard the book cover as a material event of “transmissive interactions”? Focus is moved to the historical development of the material text that is created by the agents of the literary work. These agents include not only the demythologized figure of the author, who loses his status as the single genius originator of the literary work, but also the figures of the publisher, the critic, the bookseller, the empirical book consumer, and, of course, the book designer, all of whom take part in the complex and open-ended design and redesign process of the literary work. For times of strong societal changes, as in the period of transition from Soviet to post-Soviet publishing, I believe that this question of how literary works are designed and redesigned becomes even more urgent. A study of the turbulent “life histories” of Russian book covers in this transition period might contribute to a better understanding of the “transactions” that unfold in the blurred zone between text and context.

## MEDIA AND VISUAL STUDIES: THE BOOK COVER BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE

The renewed attention to the book as an object and to the social and cultural history of printed communication can also be seen as a reaction to the appearance and spread of new digital media, which has provoked a discussion of media history and led to a rediscovery of older media forms (Ekström 2008, 33). Media historians have tended to make their point of departure the news media and printed press of the nineteenth century or the modern mass media of the twentieth century, but have not generally



treated the book as a medium (Jülich et al. 2008, 13). This research object has been left to the discipline of literary studies, which for its part has regarded the material book as irrelevant to literary analysis. Hence, the book as a medium has fallen outside the borders of larger, well-established research disciplines.

If we consider the book and/or the book cover as a medium of printed fiction, we can start to ask: How is literary meaning mediated and designed? What happens with literary meaning when it is remediated, redesigned, or transported from one context to another? The book cover is a visual interpretation, presentation, and mediation of the literary text; it frames the conditions of the production of literary meaning that are imbedded in institutional publishing practices, and both the visual and the material aspects lead far beyond the verbal communicative intention of the single author.

Any sign needs a material carrier, that is, a medium, in order to be realized and perceived at all. In the case of printed fiction, its linguistic and pictorial signs would be carried by letter types in ink on paper sheets, unified in the codex form of the printed book. Apart from such clear models that might be accused of simplifying media to mere “containers” of meaning, the concept of “media” is often broadly and vaguely defined. While a certain sector of German media studies, most notably represented by Friedrich A. Kittler, has been focused on the history of the technical evolution of media and has understood media narrowly as the physical devices or cultural techniques for recording and reproducing information (Kittler 1987), a younger generation of cultural media theorists (e.g., Gitelman 2006) views media more broadly as the social forms and practices of institutionalized communication.

Especially within the aesthetic disciplines, media have often been approached as modes of representation (linguistic text as the medium of literature, the image as the medium of painting, sound as a medium of music, etc.), which are often linked to a dominant sensory mode; we talk of auditory and visual media, for example. The borders and intersections between the different artistic modes of representation have since the 1990s been explored by a growing field labeled variously in anglophone research as comparative art studies, interart studies, word and image studies, and/or visual studies, and in German research with the umbrella term “Intermedialität” (“intermediality”) (Rajewsky 2002, 6). However, a common problem with the budding models of intermediality is that intermedia forms are explained as border phenomena of particular art

forms (e.g., visual poetry or ekphrasis as border forms of “pure” literature) instead of viewing mixed modality as a basic condition and possibility of all media and art forms.

The cultural scholar Aleida Assmann describes the development of modern literature and the shift from oral to written narratives in the codex form of the printed book as a reduction from multimedia forms (performative and ritual repetitive variation of the mythic narrative, including dance, music, words) to a single sign system, the apparently fixed, bodiless, and non-sensuous written word (Assmann 2008, 65ff). Obviously, the written word never completely replaced the spoken word. Rather, new media extend, coexist with, and converge with traditional media forms (Jenkins 2006, 10). Though the printing press preserves words and makes texts technically reproductive, it is a simplistic reduction to regard the printed text as a fixed form. As both Genette and McGann have demonstrated, every new edition, translation, or redesign of a printed text reactualizes and adds new meaning to the flexible text, similar to the way in which a ritual performance varies a myth. The book is not non-sensuous; it consists of mixed pictorial, verbal, and tactile modalities. The original protective function of the book binding and dust jacket points to the fact that the act of reading a printed text is not only a contemplative but also a physical act: It leaves marks and traces on the text in the form of dog-ears, greasy fingerprints, coffee stains, and pencil lines. The book and its cover can be regarded as a medium of the literary work, as an artifact of design and art history, as well as simply an ethnological object for everyday use.

The graphic elements of the book cover often reflect the status of the work they represent. The book cover can visually indicate, for example, whether the work belongs to classic, popular, or contemporary literature. This reflection is not just passive, but has an impact on the notion formed by the viewer of the work represented therein. To paraphrase literary theorist and art historian W. J. T. Mitchell, we might say that the book cover participates in a “demarcation dispute” between literary and pictorial art over the right of representation.

In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), Mitchell interprets and deconstructs the culturally and historically determined dichotomy between words and images. Through the Western history of philosophy and poetics Mitchell investigates the relationship between word and image as an ideological fight between iconoclasts and iconophiles: “The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance

between pictorial and linguistic signs. . . . At some moments this struggle seems to settle into a relationship of free exchange along open borders; at other times (as in Lessing's *Laocoon*) the borders are closed and a separate peace is declared" (Mitchell 1986, 42).

Using such war metaphors, Mitchell's "pictorial turn" was formulated to contrast to philosopher Richard Rorty's notion of a "linguistic turn" (1967), by which he characterized the increased attention of twentieth-century Western philosophy to linguistic structures and signs. But as a response to the ever-increasing stream of digital images in the postmodern, globalized society, Mitchell has advocated for the cognitive possibilities of a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality" (Mitchell 1994, 16). Mitchell has admitted that a "new world" constituted by pictures might sound like old news and a postmodernist cliché in "a post-Cold War era of the final victory of capitalism, of a global culture of images and simulation" (Mitchell 1994, 41). Similar to Francis Fukuyama's influential contemporary thesis of an *End of History* (1992), which described the end of the History of Mankind in universal liberal democracy, the 1990s were characterized by a naïve belief that the digital revolution would dissolve all differences between media into bits and bytes and lead to an "end of Media History," as Gitelman critically remarks (Gitelman 2006, 3ff). The global computer revolution did not replace the printed book but did significantly change the technological conditions for not only book design but also for our entire visual perception. Hence, Mitchell's polemic tone now seems a bit redundant in a struggle that has long been settled to the benefit of the postmodern hegemony of pictures.

Nevertheless, Mitchell's attention to the ideological implications of the word versus image problem is very relevant to analysis of Russian book covers in the politically supercharged cultural situation during the transition from Soviet state-run publishing to post-Soviet private publishing. Here the technical computer revolution coincided with a larger, system change and led to a glaring hierarchical shift from the dominance of words to the dominance of images in the representation of literary works on post-Soviet book covers.

It would probably be a gross oversimplification, however, to interpret this change in the visual layout of books from Soviet to post-Soviet times as merely a transition from a literature-centered to a visual surface culture, and to take this as yet another confirmation of the pictorial turn. For example, while the applied art of producing illustrations was cultivated within the Soviet book

culture, in post-Soviet publications the use of in-text illustrations was severely reduced in order to lower costs and shorten production time to accommodate the new market conditions of publishing. Instead, flashy and even aggressive visual devices on the book cover, often completely independent of any literary content inside, became an important feature of post-Soviet publications. Does this new post-Soviet independence of the cover motif from the literary text represent a liberation of pictorial art from literature? Or is it rather an “emptying” of the picture—of literary meaning, at least—and a new subordination of it to difficult publishing conditions and new authority structures? Should the pictorial turn as expressed in post-Soviet book covers be seen as a “final victory” of the picture over the art of literature, or rather as an irretrievable impoverishment of its possibilities of interacting with the literary word?

Mitchell’s notion of the pictorial turn and its supposed global spread and significance is based on a discourse analysis of strictly West-European philosophical and poetic concepts. However, Russian book culture draws not only on this familiar heritage but also on its own long tradition of image–text concepts, most notably expressed in the different status of the icon within the Eastern and Western church. It would be far beyond the scope of this study to give an account of the Russian cultural history of the image–text relationship; however, I will attempt to point out significant differences in the concepts of the book between Western and Russian scholars, in order to highlight the cultural blind spots in existing Western research on the book.

## RESEARCH DIVERSITIES: THE WESTERN BOOK CONCEPTUALIZED AS TRADE OBJECT...

Despite the differing approaches to book history in the West, a common underlying assumption is, apparently, the idea that the book should be understood as a trade object. This is expressed not only in the above-mentioned encyclopedia definition but in a number of case studies too: on the connections of the material book to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rise of capitalism, for example, or on the industrialization of book publishing, the development of a modern book market, or the individualization of readership and writing (see for example Woodmansee and Osteen 1999; Frost 2012; and Rem 2008).

The implicitly assumed commodity status of the book also leaves its mark on Western scholars’ studies of book covers. G. Thomas Tanselle, who was one of the first researchers to legitimate dust jackets as objects of scholarly interest in the 1970s, points out in his seminal article “Dust-Jackets, Dealers

and Documentation” that book dealers’ trade with dust jackets has been a primary factor in their preservation. In contrast, research libraries have only recently stopped regarding dust jackets as irrelevant ephemera to be thrown away (Tanselle 2011, 46–55). Apart from their value as informative sources about particular works or authors, Tanselle regards dust jackets as central to the history of bookbinding and of graphic design, and to an understanding of the changing taste preferences in the book market and of the salesmanship of publishers. He briefly surveys the evolution of American and English dust jackets from the late eighteenth century, when they were primarily protective devices, to the 1920s, when jackets underwent dramatic development as a marketing tool. “From then on,” he asserts, “the history of book-jackets is primarily the story of shifting tastes in graphic design and in advertising style, rather than of changes in form or function” (Tanselle 2009, 88–89).

A survey of twentieth-century book cover design is given by Renate Stefan, Nina Rothfos, and Wim Westerweld in the catalog *UI – Vom Schutzumschlag zum Marketinginstrument* (2006, 19–25), with a special focus on the book cover’s communicative functions; they note its importance for readers’ recognition of genre, their judgments of publishers’ merits and the author’s “brand,” and their formation of particular reading preferences. Similarly, Nicole Matthews’ and Nickianne Moody’s anthology *Judging a Book by its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction* (2007), which also focuses on twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century book design, especially for popular fiction, emphasizes the relationship of the book and its cover to the modern marketplace.

Despite several mutual influences between Western and Russian graphic design (e.g., the Western reception of El Lissitzky, or the late Soviet celebration of Jan Tschichold), Western research approaches to the book come a bit short when dealing with Russian book covers. While book jackets were developed as marketing tools in the West from the 1920s onwards, market conditions were temporarily disabled in Russia during the Soviet period. One could of course argue that the Soviet book functioned as an object of exchange on the black market or in the complex gift economy of the deficit conditions of the planned economy. However, only within the most recent post-Soviet times has the commodity status of the book (and thus the marketing function of the book cover) become a dominant factor in Russian book design. Elements typically addressed in Western analyses of book covers—such as blurbs, advertisements, price tags, and biographical information about the author—have only recently begun to appear on post-Soviet book covers. Dust jackets had a different

and problematic status and function in Soviet publishing, and are still comparatively rare in post-Soviet publishing, as I will later demonstrate (see [Chapters 2](#) and [4](#)). Hence, Tanselle's reduction of the twentieth-century history of book design to a matter of shifting tastes and fashions cannot be applied to the case of Soviet and post-Soviet publishing, which has been marked by truly radical changes in the fundamental functions of the book, the book cover, and literature itself.

### ... VERSUS THE RUSSIAN BOOK SACRALIZED AS AN INTEGRAL ORGANISM

In contrast to the Western understanding of the book as a trade object, the Russian definition of the book, as expressed in the Russian book encyclopedia, is rather elevated. An important source for this ideal notion of the book may be traced back to the Russian orthodox priest, philosopher of religion, physicist, mathematician, and art historian Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937) and his ideas of the book as a work of art. Florenskii is probably best known for his theories about ancient Russian icons, according to which the icon represents a window through which another transcendent world may step into contact with the viewer. In *Ikonostas* (1922) and *Obratnaia perspektiva* (1919–1920) Florenskii presents the “poly-perspective” or “reverse perspective” of icons as an alternative tradition to the linear perspective of Western Renaissance and realist art, which he criticizes for being illusionary, ego-centered, and useless, technical “doublings” of nature (see Werner on Florenskii 1996, 24). Less investigated is his close cooperation with the contemporary graphic book artist Vladimir Favorskii (1886–1964). But how did their common concept of the book and the book cover influence Soviet book art, and how does post-Soviet book design respond to this heritage today?

In the 1920s Favorskii was a professor at the famous Higher Art and Technical Studios, VKhUTEMAS, a Moscow center of the Russian avant-garde. Invited by Favorskii, Florenskii presented there his series of lectures entitled *Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni v khudozhestvenno-izobrazitel'nykh proizvedeniakh* (Analysis of space and time in works of art) (1921–1924). In these lectures, Florenskii broadly defines culture as an “activity of organizing space” (Florenskii 1993, 55). Without this dynamic ordering and reordering of our living and mental environment, the world would end in passive entropy and chaos. On the one hand, our cultural activities are technical; we build practical infrastructures and organize

societal spaces. On the other hand, we structure reality with our knowledge, and this organization of space is philosophical. The purpose of all artistic activities is to transform (or re-form) reality (Florenskii 1993, 71), and the space art creates has a dual character: The work of art manifests technique because of its visual and material perceivable form; but it also creates an imaginary space that is independent of our everyday life and is thus similar to philosophy.

Florenskii criticizes the conventional “industrial” classification (Florenskii 1993, 69) of the art forms according to their material for reducing art to pure technique. Any attempt to separate poetry from painting (as Lessing did, by claiming that in literature actions follow after each other in time, whereas in painting objects are placed beside each other in space) would make no sense in Florenskii’s synthetic thinking, since all works of art organize time in space. Instead, his analysis of the art forms is based on *how* they organize spaces. The book is seen as a complex entity of different art forms (or types of spatial organization).

When Florenskii considers literature as organization of space, an analysis of the form of the book itself becomes inseparable from literary analysis. The plot of the literary work develops over time, while it creates imaginary impressions of spatial topographies for the “inner eye.” But this internal unity of space and time in the literary work is only part of a higher unity, namely, that of the physical book. Florenskii states: “The book as a whole should be a work of art in itself and, accordingly, should have *its own* composition and *its own* construction” (Florenskii 1993, LXXIII, 237). The visual and material aspects of the book cannot be reduced to a random appendix to the work, but *are* the work. All elements of the book, from paper to margin sizes to the cover, are irreducible expressions of the “inner rhythm” of the work.

Such an inclusive view on book graphics may be exemplified by Favorskii’s cover to Florenskii’s *Mnimosti v geometrii* (*Imaginary Quantities in Geometry*), Moscow: Pomor’e, 1922. Using black lines, geometric figures and signs on colorless paper, Favorskii established different spatial levels on the cover. Florenskii was so inspired by this graphic expression of his philosophy that he gave an analysis of Favorskii’s cover in a paratextual postscript to the work, “Poiasnenie k oblozhke” (Interpretation of the cover). Favorskii created book covers for several of Florenskii’s texts, but not all of them appeared on the published works, most of which did not appear until perestroika.