Reading as an Act of Remaking in the *Seasonal Quartet*

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Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* is a project about the present, and about how we understand and represent events while they are unfolding. It represents Smith's interest, as she has described it, in 'returning' the novel 'to the notion of the new,' telling stories about ongoing current events and emerging social forms (Armitstead 2019). It is also interested in the art of being present, and in the kinds of presence that art asks of its audience. In *Artful*, her work of creative criticism, Smith writes that art is 'a broken thing if it's anything, and... the act of remaking, or imagining, or imaginative involvement, is what makes the difference' (2014: 25). Smith's citation practice plays a crucial role in her project's attempt to understand and represent the present. Citations abound in the *Seasonal Quartet:* they play a central role in each individual text, connect characters across the series, and offer concrete ties to the world outside each book's covers. Despite the important role that external pieces of art and media play in her novels, Smith's references to them are often opaque, and identifying them relies on a combination of cultural knowledge, search engine savvy, and chance. In this essay, I argue that this opacity—especially when read alongside scenes where characters fail to recognize the art they encounter or repurpose it in creative ways—invites readers to search for the art Smith references and experience it themselves. In attempting to narrate the present as it is happening, using an "old" medium associated with temporal lag rather than immediacy, Smith's project explores the role of the book in the present, inviting readers to consider how the book might be uniquely positioned to help us understand, represent, and navigate contemporary life.

Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* explores, among other things, the transition from a world where books are the default source of information to one where communication, storytelling, and research also happen online. In *Winter*, readers encounter a library that bears the marks of this transition. 'What was once the Reference bit of the library' has been replaced by a room of computers, with 'a sign over its door saying Welcome To The Ideas Store' (Smith 2018: 47). This new title underlines the changing mediums in which knowledge is stored, but it also indexes a changing cultural orientation: while 'reference' entails connections to the past, a model in which knowledge builds on itself, 'The Ideas Store' perpetuates an understanding of knowledge as innovation, implying a break from what has come before. Additionally, the change from public library reference section, staffed by individual librarians, to an 'Ideas Store' signals a shift from efforts to make knowledge publicly accessible to its commodification.

Winter opens with the results of a Google search that one of the main characters, Art, conducted at the aforementioned 'Ideas Store.' He types in nouns followed by the word "is" to see how Google autocompletes the search, finding that almost everything he looks up is dead: 'God was dead: to begin with…. Poetry, the novel, painting, they were all dead, and art was dead. Theatre and cinema were both dead. Literature was dead. The book was dead….,' and the list continues, filling two pages (Smith 2018: 3). By opening with this list, *Winter* recalls fears of the death of the book that have dominated conversations about books and digital media over the course of recent decades. Today, these fears have been repeated so often that they have become cliché. In echoing them, Smith ironically calls attention to the persistence of the book, particularly for those reading her novel in hardcover or paperback.

In what follows, I read the *Seasonal Quartet* as a project interested in part in the affordances of and relationships between different mediums of art and communication, both digital and analog, old and new. In attempting to narrate the present as it is happening, using an "old" medium associated with temporal lag rather than immediacy, Smith's project prompts the question: how can the book help us understand, represent, and navigate the present? In particular, I argue, by emphasizing the contingency and creativity inherent in the act of reading, the novels push back against common narratives about the stability and openness of digital media.

Smith portrays the act of reading, like other forms of aesthetic experience, as something active and creative. Readers, just like the audiences and museum visitors that Smith frequently depicts, are not passive spectators but participants. In *Artful*, a work of creative criticism, Smith describes how 'art itself is a broken thing if it's anything, and… the act of remaking, or imagining, or imaginative involvement, is what

makes the difference' (2014: 25). She continues, 'It's the act of making it up, from the combination of what we've got and what we haven't, that makes the human, makes the art, makes this transformation possible' (Smith 2014: 26). Reading, then, is deeply contingent: shaped by our lived experiences as well as by the inner library of books and other media that we carry around with us.[1] We cannot know what other people do with books, much less how they read them.[2] Today, this contingency is amplified by the book's imbrication with digital media.

Treating books as a technology, an approach common to both media studies and book history scholars, means 'thinking not just about objects or subjects,' in this case, books and their authors and readers, 'but also about the relationships, networks, and infrastructures that constitute and connect them' (Pressman 2020: 20). This approach makes visible both the affordances of the codex and the norms that structure how readers move through it.[3] Studying contemporary books through this lens requires a post-digital approach that recognizes the digital and the book as inextricably linked.[4] Each step of Robert Darnton's influential communications circuit — a model intended to capture the 'life cycle' of the book — is dramatically altered by digital media (1982: 67).[5]

As a result of the fact that the book is no longer the default way that many access knowledge, we are able to more carefully recognize it as a specific form of media with particular affordances and limitations. Seeing the book as a specific medium, one enhanced by and enmeshed with digital media rather than at odds with it, opens up our understanding of the modes of thought and affective experiences it enables. In turn, as Lori Emerson shows in her work on digital interfaces, 'it is not just that we irremediably see the book through the lens of the digital but that the technology of the book finds its way into the digital' (2014: 135). In other words, it is not only that the book is reconfigured by the digital or that the digital is shaped by the book. Rather, attending to the specific features of one medium can reveal obscured features of the other, strengthening our understanding of the forms of knowledge and the kinds of experiences that both mediums make possible.

In what follows, I argue that Smith's novels offer a theory of reading as a form of remaking in two separate but related ways. First, her numerous intertextual and intermedial references emphasize the contingency of literary meaning as reliant on individual readers' prior knowledge. Unlike hyperlinks, which take users directly to the specific information an author had in mind, references are reliant on readers' prior knowledge. Readers may recognize the source of a reference, or not. They may understand that something is being referenced and go in search of it, or they may skip past it altogether. Second, Smith offers a theory of the temporality of the book

that is "made" anew each time it is read. Understanding reading in this way, I argue, reveals the contingency that is also inherent in the digital mediums with which the book is at once contrasted and deeply enmeshed. I show how this theory of reading as remaking challenges common assumptions about the stability and transparency of tools like the search engine or methods of digital preservation, as well as the notion that with the internet, the "answer" to any question is just a Google search away. Instead, the novels prioritize the process of reading, tracking down references, and making one's own meaning from the text. Given my focus on how individual readers participate in the process of literary meaning-making, the analysis that follows relies on my own experience reading the novels rather than referring to an ideal or assumed reader.

Literary references and the search engine

Smith's citations of artists and authors, historical events, and works of literature and art are numerous, and the objects and events referenced play a key role in connecting the novels of the *Seasonal Quartet*. The novels feature women artists—Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti—whose work has been under-appreciated at best, and at worst, as one of Smith's characters describes it, 'ignored. Lost. Rediscovered ad infinitum' (2017: 239). These artists are, at times, named directly in the novel, but at other moments, all readers get is a description of their work. Citations are not just important to the novels but are also abundant, present on nearly every page. Smith weaves references to Keats, Dickens, Rilke, Shakespeare, Mansfield, and countless other canonical authors into the body of the text, and each book opens with epigraphs cascading down the page. Some of these citations are clearly flagged for readers, while others occur without detail or clear attribution.

Previous scholarship on Smith's work has focused extensively on her use of ekphrasis. Writing about the *Seasonal Quartet*, Laura Schmitz-Justen shows how Smith instructs her readers in new ways of seeing and interpreting the world around them. In describing Pauline Boty's work in *Autumn*, for instance, she writes, 'the ekphrastic use of collage provides an education not only of Elisabeth, but also of the reader,' attributing this in part to the way 'the form of the novel challenges the reader to apply these principles, thus constituting an ekphrastic encounter between the reader and the novel as a literary collage' (2022: 323). For Schmitz-Justen, Smith's use of ekphrasis as a mode of 'critical enquiry' encourages her readers to extend these 'specific way[s] of seeing' to the social, political, and environmental crises of the present (2022: 320, 335). Similarly, Cara Lewis explores the generosity of the ekphrastic education that

Smith's characters–and her readers–receive in the *Seasonal Quartet* (2022). For Lewis, Smith's ekphrasis asks viewers and readers to 'exceed mere seeing, to make artwork the generator of a "reparative sociability"' (2022). For both, Smith's incorporation of art is a crucial part of how the novels both portray the present and contend with its challenges.

This essay builds on that work while shifting its focus slightly. Instead of considering how Smith renders artistic mediums like collage, sculpture or photography in text, I explore how the internet mediates readers' ability to experience the pieces of art she references. While readers of ekphrastic passages have always hypothetically been able to see the works themselves, doing so no longer requires a visit to a museum. It is easy to imagine, as many scholars do, that the internet changes ekphrasis by making visual art readily accessible to readers, a mere Google search away. Liliane Louvel, for instance, writes that '[t]he fact that the image of a painting, for instance, is so readily accessible seems to free ekphrasis from its primary function: that of making the absent image visualizable' (2018: 248).[6] Louvel and others are correct: on some level, the internet does enable increased access to information and to images. However, the "openness" that has historically been attributed to digital technologies, from free software to the democratizing appeal of early social media platforms, is coupled with a deep opacity.[7] While many users understand how to interact with computer programs, and computers themselves, via their user interfaces, few understand the devices' inner workings.[8] Nearly anyone can conduct a Google search, for instance, but proprietary algorithms prevent users from understanding why certain results are prioritized over others. Rather than making ekphrastic objects straightforwardly accessible, search engines and the internet complicate the picture.

Characters in the *Seasonal Quartet* search for references online, offering insight into the practice of citation in the digital world. At the opening of *Summer*, Grace quotes, 'Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life' to her daughter, Sacha, asking her, 'What *is* that? Where's it from?' (Smith 2020: 7). Grace cannot remember, and, frustratingly for Sacha, will not look it up online. According to Sacha, her mother is 'constantly forgetting things and constantly trying not to look up online the things she's forgotten…. In real terms, what this means is her mother annoys everybody for half an hour *then* goes online and looks up whatever it is she can't remember' (Smith 2020: 15–16). Grace associates her lapses in memory with the internet, though the nature of that association is unclear. Does she attribute her memory problems to the internet? Does she see the internet as the pinnacle of what memory should be (stable, comprehensive, predictable, easy), illuminating the faulty nature of her own?

Regardless of the faith that Sacha and Grace place in the internet as a repository of knowledge, its reliability is repudiated from the very outset of the novel. When Sacha looks the passage up for her mother, she does not find the source of the quote.[9] Instead, 'up comes drugs. Drugs, drugs, drugs, then quite far down, something about Jane Austen and Victorians' (Smith 2020: 31). She tries again, scrolling until she finds an image of Greta Thunberg, noting sardonically that 'only the mighty Greta can upend the internet's determination to make the word heroine refer not to a female hero but to a misspelling of a Class A drug' (Smith 2020: 32). While she does not find what she is looking for, Sacha nevertheless makes meaning out of her search results, piecing together a critique of the social norms and values that search algorithms both reflect and help to determine.[10] While many of Smith's readers may recognize Grace's quote, those who do not are left waiting for sixty pages, until the novel finally identifies its origins. Virtually out of the blue, as the reference hasn't come up since its first appearance, Grace exclaims, 'David Copperfield!... That's it! Sacha, that's it. Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life! First line of David Copperfield' (Smith 2020: 97). Charlotte corrects her immediately: 'It's hero, though, isn't it?' (Smith 2020: 97). Grace responds, nonchalantly, 'Yes, I know, but we did our own version' (Smith 2020: 97). As it turns out, Grace is not quoting Dickens himself but a feminist reinterpretation her theater company performed in the 1980s. Together with her theater group, Grace made her own meaning out of *David Copperfield*—participating in a long tradition of readers repurposing decontextualized fragments of text, from early commonplace books to scrapbooks and self-help—an interpretation with a feminist critique whose importance is reinforced by the results of Sacha's Google search.

In addition to showing characters searching online, at times the narrators seem to invite readers to do it themselves. At the beginning of *Summer*, for instance, the narrator describes a video we later learn is a clip from a film by Lorenza Mazzetti of a man carrying two suitcases 'silhouetted against the sky because he's balanced on a very narrow brick ledge which runs along the edge of a high building, along the length of which he's doing a joyous and frantic dance' (Smith 2020: 5). The narrator follows this description with a series of questions that escalate in their intensity from 'How can he be going so fast and not fall off the edge of the building?' to 'Why is he risking everything?' until the unnamed narrator pulls back abruptly, declaring, '[t]here'd be no point in showing you a still or a photo of this. It's very much a moving image' (Smith 2020: 6). Though the novel provides a written description of the clip, the questions that follow do more to convey the film's tone. When I read this passage, the insistence that there was 'no point' in showing a photo of this 'moving image' piqued my curiosity. If a photo would not suffice, what is it doing in a book? Is the narrator suggesting

that language can capture the movement in a way that a still image cannot? Or is it suggesting that the book, too, is incapable of capturing the intensity of the video? I read the intensity of the questions as conveying a sense of movement, but I also felt the need to search for the video clip online to try to experience the 'moving image' for myself. By focusing on characters' affective responses to an aesthetic experience, I felt Smith's novels encouraged, or at least invited, me to find and experience the pieces for myself.

Despite the important role that intertextual references play in the *Seasonal Quartet*, however, they are often opaque, showing up unmarked in the body of the text. By simultaneously making works of art central to her novels, and making it difficult for readers to figure out which specific pieces and artists she is referencing, Smith creates a puzzle for readers, inviting them to engage deeply with each artist's oeuvre. For instance, *Autumn* (2017) does not name Pauline Boty until page 138, approximately half-way through the book, by which point it has already described in detail her biography and the significance of her work. Page 73, for instance, contains a lengthy description of one of Boty's collages: a 'rich dark blue' background, onto which is layered a 'shape made of pale paper that looks like a round full moon,' 'a cut-out black and white lady wearing a swimsuit,' and 'next to her, as if she's leaning against it, there's a giant human hand' (Smith 2017: 73). The description continues in great detail but never names the piece for readers. Most of the articles discussing Boty's art online include images of the same five or six pieces. The collage Smith describes is not among those commonly included, and, to the best of my knowledge, appears to be an untitled piece from 1960–1961. I did manage to find the image online, but it took a surprising amount of effort, requiring me to look closely at many of Boty's pieces before I found one matching Smith's description. For someone interested in reviving interest in an overlooked artist and restoring her place in the history of British pop art, it seems odd that Smith keeps readers in the dark for so long about Boty's identity, offering incomplete citations to her work. However, the puzzle created by Smith's elusive references coupled with my ability to access images online led me to a deeper knowledge of Boty's work.

Smith's incorporation of a Barbara Hepworth statue that appears throughout the novels offers a similar puzzle, albeit one I was not able to solve. In *Autumn*, a character describes a statue as 'the stone with the hole through the middle of it' (Smith 2017: 44). That same statue surfaces again in *Winter*, described in more detail as it plays a growing role in the narrative. In *Winter*, we learn the sculpture was made by Hepworth, and it is described as 'sort of a mother and child pairing, the child stone the little one and the larger stone the mother. The larger stone has the hole in it and a flat place on it where the smaller stone is meant to sit' (Smith 2018: 272). Then, the narrator describes 'pick[ing] up the smaller rounder stone... cup[ping] it in her hands,' before she 'fingers

the hole through the larger stone. It's nothing but a circle carved through stone. But it's sort of amazing. It's unexpectedly satisfying to touch' (Smith 2018: 273). Smith's novel insists on the physicality of the piece, emphasizing the specific affordances of the artistic medium. The sculpture, the narrator says, '*makes* you walk round it... see different things from different positions' (Smith 2018: 273). The sculpture surfaces again in *Summer*, and we learn that it is one of the objects that binds the characters and the novels together.

Despite its significance to the *Seasonal Quartet*, the statue is never named. Given its significance to the novels, I wanted to find the piece for myself. I knew enough of Hepworth's distinctive style to connect her to Smith's initial description of the statue, but I had to wait for the later novels to be released to gather enough details for a real search. The closest to a name the novels offer is 'the mother and child maquette' (Smith 2020: 167). Scrolling through the images of Hepworth's sculptures on the website of her estate, I learned that a number of her sculptures are explicitly named 'Mother and Child,' though none with this name match the description in Smith's novels. I spent a long time searching this website, along with museum catalogs and exhibition descriptions, looking for the specific piece the novels reference. To be clear, I did not engage in a thorough scholarly search. I limited myself to tools that would be available to most of Smith's readers. Encouraged by the narrator's investment in its physicality, I wanted to at least see it for myself, even if I could not touch it or walk around it as the narrator describes. The piece that seemed to best fit the description is titled 'Nesting Stones' (1937), but given the importance of the mother and child motif in Hepworth's work, I remain unsure if this is the exact piece Smith is referring to. Though I did not solve the puzzle, I found the search process itself meaningful: it gave me a much more intimate knowledge of Hepworth's body of work. By providing incomplete citations and inviting readers to nonetheless seek out the art they reference, Smith's novels embrace the multiplicity of readerly (mis)interpretations, suggesting that value lies both in the act of research, and in the creative openings made possible by this irresolvable uncertainty.

Read and refresh: the present tense of the book and the digital archive

Autumn opens with a bleak riff on canonical works of literature. The narrator declares, 'It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature' (Smith 2017: 3). Referencing canonical authors like Dickens, Achebe, and Yeats seems, at first glance, an odd way to start a project Smith pitched as 'returning [the novel] to the notion of "the new"' (Armitstead). The way Smith tells it, the project was an experiment in the capacities of the contemporary publishing industry. The four books were released between 2016 and

2020, each written and published over the course of a year, significantly condensing normal timelines for book publication. She explains, '...the concept was always to do what the Victorian novelists did... Dickens published as he was writing *Oliver Twist*. He was still making his mind up about the story halfway through' (Armitstead). In the *Seasonal Quartet*, however, it is not only Smith who determines the course of the story: each novel incorporates and responds to world events contemporaneous with its composition.

Why start a series of novels about the present with a reference to literary works from the past? The emphasis on the word 'again' in *Autumn*'s opening lines hints at the novels' answer. In the bleak temporality of this opening line, the future is predetermined and immutable. While Smith voices this sentiment through a collage of writings from the past, it corresponds with an increasingly common way of talking about time in the present.[11] In contrast to the cyclical temporality it describes, Smith's opening makes something new out of Dickens, Yeats, and Achebe's words rather than simply repeating them. Through her intermedial and intertextual references, the portrait Smith paints of the present in her novels depicts time as cyclical, overlapping, and full of anachronisms. This mirrors a particular approach to thinking about the contemporary from scholars of art and literature, articulated clearly by Amy Elias and Tim Burges in their introduction to a volume on time studies in the present. Building on work by Peter Osborne, Terry Smith, and others, they understand the contemporary to 'uniquely signify *today* an emerging structure of temporal *multiplicity* embedded in a history that has constructed the present as an experience of *simultaneity*' (Burges & Elias 2016: 3). Wendy Chun's *Updating to Remain the Same* offers a crucial link connecting this model of contemporary time to digital media. Chun argues that today's digital networks create a temporality that we experience as 'a series of crises or "nows"' that take the form of 'constantly updating bubbles [in which] the new quickly ages and the old is constantly rediscovered as new' (2016: 27). Smith's novels both depict that temporality, through details like the reference library turned 'Ideas Store,' and attempt to disrupt it by weaving together a story of the present from references to the past.

In *Artful*, Smith writes that books 'are tangible pieces of time in our hands. We hold them for the time it takes to read them and we move through them and measure time passing by how far through them we've got' (2014: 31–32). This description emphasizes the variability in the temporality of reading, as 'the time it takes to read' a book varies from person to person and reading to re-reading. What's to say that a reader will move through the second half of the book at the same speed they did the first? Other forms of art and media have more structured relationships to time: while YouTube lets you watch videos at 1.5 or 2 times speed, most of the time we watch movies and TV at a speed

determined by the producer, or listen to music at a tempo chosen by a combination of the conductor, composer, and musicians. The book's relationship to time, on the other hand, is determined in large part by individual readers, creating contingency and complexity.[12] For instance, I read each of the novels in the *Seasonal Quartet* quickly the first time around, as the pace of Smith's writing paradoxically seemed to push me forward. Upon re-reading them, however, my pace slowed, as I paid careful attention to her writing and references. Smith accounts for this kind of changing relationship between the book and reader, describing how in addition to being 'tangible pieces of time,' books move with us in time (2014: 31). What she calls this 'present-tense ability' of the book persists, Smith suggests, even as the book and our relation to it shift across time (2014: 32). We can inhabit the now of a book in a way that we cannot inhabit the historical present, which always slips out of our grasp. The now of the book Smith writes, is made 'from word to word… always in reference to what went before, what's on its way, in a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a section, a chapter' (2014: 32). The now of the book is tangible, determined by the reader's position in between the words, phrases, and pages already read and those yet to come.

Rather than thinking about the book as a static 'old media' in the face of new digital technologies, then, we might think of the book as contemporary, in the sense that it is made anew with each act of reading. In *Autumn*, a chapter halfway through the book begins with a narrator stating: 'Here's an old story so new that it's still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it'll end' (Smith 2017: 181). While this sentence refers to one specific character arc within one of the novels, it also describes the larger project of the *Seasonal Quartet*. Perhaps the most obvious example of this contingency is that *Summer* includes references to COVID-19, an event Smith could not have been anticipating long before the book's release in 2020. Smith writes in *Artful* that the novel is 'always about now, both the now in which it is being written and the now in which it is being read,' emphasizing the dynamic nature of 'now,' the way its referent shifts depending on who is describing it (2014: 37). In this formulation, now is both a particular moment in time (when the novel was written) and an infinite number of other moments in time, extending into the future, in which it could possibly be read.

Understanding the temporality of the book that is made present by each act of reading helps to illuminate the similar temporality of digital archives, a technology that, like the book, is often treated as a stable medium for the preservation of knowledge. Building on Wendy Chun's work, Matthew Kirschenbaum describes how 'digital memory is *always* degenerative and in need of active regeneration' (2021: 31).[13] Kirschenbaum notes that 'at the deepest of computational levels, the images we see'

when looking at digital manuscripts 'are reconstituted anew each and every time the files are accessed.... refreshed and renewed with each revolution of a diskette and each migration or update or patch to the server... each new budget cycle and org plan and fire marshal's inspection' (32). Like the book, digital archives—whether they hold images of manuscripts or sculptures or family photos—do not offer stable and unmediated access to the past. They too contain a constitutive contingency, one often erased by the marketing of cloud storage tools.

Kirschenbaum's description of the digital archive sheds light on the ending of *Winter*. Early in the novel, Art hires a stranger, Lux, to pose as his girlfriend. At one point, she surprises him by describing the most beautiful thing she had ever seen: the mark of a rose pressed in a Shakespeare folio. She describes it as 'the mark left on the page by what was *once* the bud of a rose, the shape of the rosebud on its long neck' (Smith 2018: 212). As her description continues, she emphasizes all that is unknown about its unlikely existence:

> And it's nothing but a mark, a mark made on words by a flower. Who knows by whom. Who knows when. It looks like nothing. It looks like maybe someone made a stain with water, like an oily smudge. Until you look properly at it. Then there's the line of the neck and the rosebud shape at the end of it (Smith 2018: 212)

It is not the folio itself but this chance remnant of a past reader that has stayed in Lux's memory. Its beauty seems to stem from its unlikely existence and uncertain background. In the very last pages of *Winter*, months after he hears about the folio from Lux, Art goes to look for it, first in a library, and then online, where he searches for an image of the rose, looking at photos until he finds something, or 'at least, he thinks he does'—note that even his search results are uncertain—pulling up 'the photograph of an old page on his screen' (Smith 2018: 319). Digital imaging enables him to see the page of this manuscript, despite its location halfway around the world, and even zoom in to look more closely. His description echoes Lux's:

> Is that it? Is that the flower?
>
> That sort of smudgy mark?
>
> The ghost of a flower is more what it looks like.
>
> Who knows who pressed it in the book, who knows when? There it is.
>
> The shape left by the bud makes it like the ghost of a flame too, like the shadow of a steady little flame.
>
> He magnifies it on the laptop screen so he can see it more clearly.

He looks at it as closely as he can.

It's the ghost of a flower not yet open on its stem, the real thing long gone, but look, still there... (Smith 2018: 319)

This passage portrays the book as a vessel of time, carrying the marks of earlier readers. It also shows the book as an object containing mysteries, prompting questions—who pressed the flower in the book, and when?—with impossible answers, questions whose indecipherability creates room for readers' own interpretations. It also shows the specific affordances and limitations of digital media: Art can't smell or touch the folio, though he can interact with an image of a text a continent away. When read alongside Kirschenbaum's analysis, Art's interaction with the flower is not about accessing the past or about the past appearing in the present. Instead, this passage emphasizes the 'enduring and ephemeral' nature of the digital manuscript, made up of files that 'will be there and... will "happen" again' each time they are accessed (Kirschenbaum 2021: 37).

Where books used to be the default medium for storing knowledge and passing on stories, today we often turn to tools like search engines or cloud storage without a second thought. Emerson describes how 'the glossy surface' of our digital devices 'mask [their] underlying machine-based processes,' limiting the ways that the vast majority of users can interact with their devices (2014: xi, 47). This thread of opacity runs through everything from machine learning algorithms to the iPhone. For Andrew Piper, this means that 'where books are closed on the outside and open on the inside, digital texts put this relationship in reverse order' (2012: 15). Books are "open" on the inside to readers' interpretations, allowing the act of reading to be an expression of creativity. In contrast, digital technologies allow their readers to engage with a user interface but block access to their underlying protocols. Smith's references invert this formulation, bringing opacity to the interior of the book. In doing so, the novels show that opacity need not go hand in hand in with closure: uncertainty can open up opportunities to exercise agency rather than foreclosing it. Even though readers may lack knowledge of the actual object Smith is describing, may miss references entirely, or may completely misinterpret them, uncertainty facilitates creativity rather than hampering it. By depicting readers searching for references and inviting her readers to do the same, and by showing the book as a medium made present by each act of reading, Smith's project reveals how close attention to the materiality of the book can help us better understand and engage with the opacity of digital technology. The role of the book in the present, then, is not only its ability to depict the present as made up of traces of the past, but also its ability to help us navigate an often overwhelming contemporary media environment with agency and creativity.

Notes

1 Pierre Bayard *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Bloomsbury USA.

2 Christina Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Nan Z. Da, 'Other People's Books,' *New Literary History* 51: 3 (Summer), 475–500.

3 See Lisa Gitelman's definition of media in *Always Already New*, which includes not only technologies but also the 'protocols' that guide their usage: 'a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus' (2006: 7).

4 Florian Cramer. 'What Is "Post-Digital?"' *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, eds. Michael Dieter and David M. Berry. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 12–26. For an example of a post-digital approach to contemporary reading, see Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5 Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires. 'The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit,' *Book 2.0* 3: 1 (June), 3–23; Simone Murray, 'Secret Agents: Algorithmic Culture, Goodreads and Datafication of the Contemporary Book World,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24: 4 (December), 970–89.

6 Likewise, writing about Smith's work, Yvonne Liebermann concludes that 'living in an age *where access to knowledge is always just a click away, constantly accessible*, many of us still yearn for the yellowed pages of manuscripts or the awe of standing in front of century old pieces of art...' (2014: 148; emphasis mine).

7 See Astra Taylor. 2015. *The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*. New York: Picador, 2015; Frank Pasquale. 2015. *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

8 Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces*, xi.

9 Interestingly, when I tried to replicate Sacha's search, the top results took me straight to *David Copperfield*. However, the results replaced 'heroine' with 'hero,' correctly identifying the quote, replicating in the process Smith's critique of the normative, and in this case misogynistic, force of search algorithms.

10 For a more in-depth articulation of Sacha's critique, see Safiya Umoja Noble. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.

11 As Lisa Baraitser describes it, 'we appear to be holding our breath, *waiting*, not for a pending catastrophic "event"... but for a diffuse catastrophe that has already happened to unpredictably play itself out' (2017: 7).

12 In *Artful*, Smith describes how books 'go at their own speed regardless of the cultural speed or slowness of their readers' zeitgeists' (2014: 31). While to some degree, there are features of a text that guide the way that their readers approach it, and reading practices are informed by cultural norms, books nonetheless give readers the ability to progress at any pace they choose.

13 He builds on Chun's work in 'The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory' *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 148–71.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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