



Transmedial Communication Across the Creative-Critical Divide–Book Review

Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell, *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method and Analysis*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2021 218 pp., ISBN: 9780814214565, h/bk \$79.95, p/bk \$34.95, ebook \$29.95.

Torsa Ghosal and Alison Gibbons, ed. *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023 314 pp., ISBN: 9781496222879, h/bk \$65.00, p/bk \$65.00, ebook \$65.00.

Virginia Pignagnoli, *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts*. The Ohio State University Press, 2023 158 pp., ISBN: 9780814215425, h/bk \$79.95, ebook \$39.95.

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Through a creative-critical lens, I have reviewed *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* (2023), *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives* (2023), and *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method and Analysis* (2021) to consider whether the themes and modes described within can be enhanced through a blending of form echoing the theoretical concepts explored in each text like unnatural narratology, multimodality, and digital epitext. Leveraging a creative critical method, I frame the review within a narrative structure to problematize the academic book review while expressing the same theoretical concepts in the texts. The narrative, a conversation over email by two academics, grounds and explores the concepts under scrutiny in the reviewed texts, delivering criticism through a type of dialogue that blurs fiction and non-fiction, as well as academic writing and unnatural narratology.

By playing with the review genre, an intimate interrogation can take place of the texts being studied. Not only are their arguments placed under scrutiny, but so too are the themes and concepts of the text as they are put into practice in the crafting of this hybrid piece. Only through this review's creative critical approach can the texts' themes become transmittable, deconstructed, and blurred, therefore becoming emblematic of the digital, multimodal, and unnatural media all three of the texts aim to interrogate and represent.



On January 4, 2024, at 8:47 AM, Robert Locke <robertlocke654@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Devin,

I hope this email finds you well. A colleague of mine, Dr. Michel Rahem, indicated that you were putting together a piece of work involving digital fiction, multimodality, and paratexts. From what Ram said, it seemed like a significant undertaking.

Where are you with the project? I would be most curious to hear about your progress.

Apologies for the informal outreach but my university email is being rather quirky at the minute.

Best wishes,
Dr. Robert Locke
Lecturer in Contemporary Literature
Universus Inocus

On January 7, 2024 at 8:48 PM Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

This is really unexpected. I didn't realise that Dr. Rahem was, well, let's not get into that...

As for my next project, yes, it does in fact involve those theoretical components, but I am having trouble with establishing a framework that I want to operate in. Digital fiction, multimodality, and paratexts each have significant bodies of work backing them like Bell (2018), Kress and Leeuwen (1996) and Jewitt (2009), or Genette (1997, French original 1987) respectively.

So far, a lot of the groundwork involves author-audience relationships, as well as multimodality, unnatural narratology, but again, just finding that key dynamic to hold it all together has been challenging.

To be honest, any direction at this point would be appreciated. I am basically lost in a field of screens and typeset trying to track down something that remotely looks like a path to what I really want to talk about: digital fiction acting as an extension and expression of creative criticism.

That's where I'm at with it!

Best wishes,

Devin

On January 8, 2024, at 9:49 AM, Robert Locke <robertlocke654@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Devin,

Thanks for getting back to me and for being so upfront with your struggles. It is very refreshing to see. I can see now why Ram recommended I get in touch. We do often struggle to build these things in a vacuum, but that seems to be the nature of the beast, as it were.

I have had a think and believe that I might actually have some recommendations for you. While I am not very familiar with the field of creative criticism, I would suggest these three texts for your other theoretical components: Astrid Ensslin's and Alice Bell's *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method and Analysis* (2021), a collection titled *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis* (2023), edited by Torsa Ghosal and Alison Gibbons, and *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* (2023) by Virginia Pignagnoli.

Each text, I feel, provides a significant, contemporary theoretical overview of each of its theoretical interrogations. So, they should prove helpful in providing some direction. Do let me know if you have any questions. I would be happy to discuss further.

Best wishes,

RL

On January 8, 2024, at 7:50 PM, Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

Thank you for the recommendations. They all sound fantastic and I look forward to getting into them.

I'll be sure to get back in touch if anything comes up.

Cheers,

Devin

On January 12, 2024 at 5:30 PM, Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

I hope you don't mind that I am getting back in touch. I've only managed to read the first three chapters of one of the texts you recommended so far, but nonetheless I found it very helpful.

The importance of digital fiction continues to expand across interdisciplinary circles and the work done in Ensslin's and Bell's work *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* just highlights that. Throughout their text, the authors aim to "prioritize...the antimimetic [to] support [their] transmedial methodology" (Bell and Ensslin 2021: 9), highlighting how digital fiction distinguishes itself. By focusing on how the "unnatural" takes on a familiarizing air in relation to digital fiction, the two establish the importance of "narrative theories, methods, and analysis...should be medium-conscious" (188). This piqued my interest, especially due to the digital fictions that I want to interrogate as part of my work.

I was a bit stumped though by the structure of the overall argument. In chapter two, the text dives into interactional metalepsis—"the movement of entities between ontologically different spheres" (49)—which felt like a departure from the first chapter and didn't connect well with the third. But perhaps that's just my own reading since I haven't finished the book yet.

Would love to hear your thoughts if you get the chance.

Best wishes,

Devin

On January 13, 2024, at 8:45 AM, Robert Locke <robertlocke654@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Devin,

Glad to hear that you and the text are getting on! If I recall correctly, the first three chapters establish the importance of "spatial experience" and how multilinearity and narrative contradiction are born from the visual being "experience[d] multiple times" (181). Such a framing within the broader context of transmedial narrative theory encompasses the diverse range of digital storytelling practices. Drawing on the works of Jan Alber, particularly his reading strategies, chapter one also introduces the key elements of multilinear storytelling, and how reading experience differs depending on reader/player interactivity, which is something that I imagine you would find the most compelling.

Don't they look at a range of works? Like "interactive fictions" to text-based and web-based "hyper-text fiction[s]" and "narrative video games"? As I recall, in their readings of those works, the authors draw our attention to the importance of how the "unnatural" multilinearity doesn't just contribute to the overall narratives' contradictory construction, but also in the ways it draws attention to

itself (Bell and Ensslin 2023: 19). And in doing so, lay the imperative groundwork regarding how “reader/player-specific levels of experience...and expectations of digital fiction genres and forms” (48) impacts the overall effect of multilinearity.

Something that chapter two’s interactional metalepsis builds on.

In fact, I felt it was an essential element into transitioning to chapter three’s primary focus of unnatural spatiality and temporality. Especially “given the ubiquity of metalepsis across digital media”, and its ability to act as an “immersive technique” (82). Without first establishing the importance of the “movement of entities between...spheres”, and the player/reader’s ability to interact and enable said movement, chapter three’s analysis of *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and “the crucial role of reader/player agency in the perception of antimimeticism” (Bell and Ensslin, 2023, 119) would have been lessened. A relationship that is essential to discuss the examples of “extreme narration” (123) in chapter four.

But I do not wish to go further into my own views if you have not progressed further. In fact, I’ve got a stack of job applications to look at this evening—and a few of my own to fill out—so I might not be as quick in my response. Still, curious to hear how you get on.

Speak soon.

RL

On January 13, 2024 at 5:55 PM Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

Thanks for the input. Having progressed further, I can see where you are coming from.

For me, the most impactful element that stood out in chapter four was Ensslin and Bell drawing on the work of Brian Richardson—a staple in their methodological development—to illustrate how there has been a general shift “away from” conventional narration “to new explorations of ‘you’, ‘we’, and mixed forms.” (Richardson 2006: 13). Dubbed as “post-human narrators”, Ensslin and Bell discuss “extreme narrations as a key element of antimimetic narrativity” (Ensslin and Bell 2023: 123) through an exploration of Richardson’s “five subforms of extreme narration” (123). Each of these elements in turn are explored in thorough examinations of relevant digital and analogue fictions, illustrating how the unnatural re-defines and muddles “narrative phenomena that echo the human fascination with...assumed ‘human’ roles of programmer, fictional character, avatar reader, and player” (149).

In doing so, an “authorial code” (150) is established, one which disseminates natural narrativity into the unnatural, which is particularly codified in *The Princess Murderer* (2003) as it uses a “narrative ‘you’” to “evoke...ontological transgressions [that] puzzle or even upset reader/players” (Bell and Ensslin 2023: 151). Thus, through the establishing of multilinearity and narrative contradiction, interactional metalepsis, and “extreme narrations”, the foci of the text are established. As the chapter five title suggests, “It’s All about ‘You’”.

The “you”, more so than other narrative devices, plays the all too important role of “cross[ing] the ontological between storyworld and actual world” (151–2). As such, the authors argue this “antimimetic ‘you’” is “regularly and potentially employed in digital fiction” (152), resulting in a reader/player who can engage with the “ethical responsibility [towards] the lives and feelings [of] fictional characters” (177). I like how the authors place such an emphasis on the “you”, and show that it is a strong “linguistic–rhetorical device for digital fiction writers and developers [when] combined with consistent multimodal and procedural rhetoric” (177). Which, in the context of the entire book, makes a lot of sense.

As someone who is only familiar with the fringe elements of the field, it feels like this book will serve as an essential guide to “unnatural narratology of digital fiction” (179), offering a thorough examination and overview of the field. Through meticulous interrogations of methods, models, analysis, and theory, *Digital Fiction and The Unnatural* establishes itself as seminal reading.

I can see why you recommended it. It’s really given me a lot of confidence in my own work, as it provides in its latter pages an exciting roadmap for future work in the field, inviting the reader(player) to “continuously defamiliarize the creative and critical spheres of unnatural narrative and digital fiction” (189). This is something I hope to do in my own work through introducing creative–criticism into this discourse.

Thanks again for passing this along, I think I’m going to dive into *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis* (2023) next.

Hopefully you don’t mind if I reach out again if I have any questions. You mentioned you were filling out job applications as well? Is everything alright? Hope so.

Cheers,

Devin

On January 13, 2024, at 8:55 PM, Robert Locke <robertlocke654@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Devin,

It sounds like the text has left a strong impression, good. Yes, please feel free to reach out as you progress.

I would be more than happy to act as a sound board.

Best,

RL

On January 20, 2024, at 10:55 PM, Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

Hope things have been going well. I read that the university was running into some financial issues, so hope you're OK? I'm almost finished with through *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives* so wanted to give you a brief update.

When I first opened the collection, and read the introduction, I found the book at first to be, well—forgive the pun—novel. Especially with each “thematic strand” opening with sections from “distinguished published novelist” (Ghosal and Gibbons 2023: 11). I really appreciated this mixture of creative practitioners and further critical reflections to explore multimodality across contemporary literature and media. In a collection such as this, I think it's really important and advantageous that creative practitioners are able to reflect on the “value of multimodality as a creative tool in contemporary culture” while the critical “reflections...address the themes” of their corresponding “section” (11). Such a varied ensemble of perspectives reflects the wide interest and application of multimodality, a key point which is used when assessing how fictionality intersects with multimodality across a variety of forms.

As you know, throughout each section, multimodality, and how it manifests, is evaluated in relation to textual—digital and print—contexts. Whether that's Lance Olsen evaluating his novel, *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) in relation to the Robert Smithson earthwork *The Spiral Jetty* (1970), resulting in “multimodal spillage” due to the novel's parallel video art exhibition which is embedded into the text and takes place outside of the text, too (Olsen 2023: 31–5), or Nina Nørgaard's chapter where the argument is made that photographs generate a “blurring of the

ontological borders between fiction and reality enhance[ing] the central themes of [a] novel about identity and reality” (Nørgaard 2023: 173). While each section is divided into three themes “Constructing Places and Worlds”, “Crossing Borders and Creative Boundaries”, and “Writing, Showing, and Reading from Life”, that main through line of testing the ontological boundaries between fictionality and factuality is successfully present across every chapter that I have read so far. And in collections like this, having that consistent thread makes the overall effect of the book more impactful and a more accessible read. Which was very much appreciated.

I can see there is an inclusion of a postscript from Marie-Laure Ryan, which will definitely be interesting. Especially since I’m certain some of the papers reference her work. I wonder if she’ll respond directly to any of the ways she’s referenced... would definitely be the first time I’ve seen that in an academic text! But then again, I’m still early days, aren’t I?

Still, thanks again for recommending and hope to hear from you soon.

Best regards,

Devin

On January 23, 2024, at 8:55 PM, Robert Locke <robertlocke654@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Devin,

I am doing alright, thank you. Trying to weather the storm as everyone else is at the moment. We’ve begun hearing rumbles of voluntary redundancies here for our administrative team, so doesn’t bode well for the faculty...still, can’t dwell on that now.

I had forgotten about the structure of the collection! And agree with you that including the chapters from creative practitioners at the start of every section does wonders for the pace. I particularly like how it almost grounds the concepts that are going to be discussed further.

As for Ryan’s postscript, it does a lot of heavy lifting to highlight how there is “intense literary and theoretical activity” around fictionality and multimodality demonstrated by the emergence and re-popularization of genres like “nonfiction novel”, “true fiction”, “autofiction”, “creative nonfiction”, “True Crime”, “historiographic metafiction,” and “theoretical fiction” (Ryan 2023: 280). In doing so, Ryan expertly ties this observation with the importance of multimodality, and the ways in which “multimodality is indifferent to the distinction between

fact and fiction” given that visual elements are present in both fictional texts and non-fictional texts. Both are often active in establishing some sort of authority or qualification towards what is being said (283). Ryan actively engages with all of the chapters in the text, even offering responses and criticisms to those who actively reference Ryan’s own work.

It is this unique balance of discourse and dialogue that sets this collection apart. A dialogue which may have been leveraged further given the collection’s decision to place chapters by creative practitioners at the start of every section. While Olsen, Tomasula and Roy’s chapters on the importance of multimodality as a creative tool provides insight into the practical elements of a multimodal creative practice, a contributing creative piece that is further in direct communication with the theoretical elements explored in the later chapters of their section would have lent a creative-critical angle to the collection. Which, in turn, would be more thematically in line with the “hybrid zone between fiction and fact and the metaphor of a blurred boundary between the two” (282) that Ryan states the collection to be.

Still, *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives* feels like a seminal collection, doesn’t it? Built upon scholarly work in fictionality and multimodality (Klauk and Köppe 2014; Skalin 2005, 2008; Fludernik and Ryan 2020), the collection attempts to answer Catherine Gallagher’s call that fictionality “needs recovery” (2006: 366). A notion that is evermore present given technology’s ability to increase not just the flow of information, but the flow of disinformation (Ghosal and Gibbons 2023: 6). But while the collection might not include a significant deal on the impact of digital technology (only two out of the twelve chapters incorporate digital elements in the form of digital literary narratives in Alexander Starre’s chapter or Sara Tabderup’s look at digital online communities in relation to Mark Z. Danielewski’s *The Familiar* (2015–17)), it does an excellent job of providing an overview of its central theoretical theme of multimodality’s significance and reflection in, and of, contemporary culture.

An element that I feel links well with Ensslin’s and Bell’s work since both texts interrogate multimedial and transmedial phenomena which, while appearing unnatural or blurring the line of fictionality and factuality, are simply reflective of our everyday lives.

Looking forward to hearing what you think about the last text, Devin. I believe you will find it the most inspiring.

Best

RL

On January 24, 2024, at 11:55 AM, Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

Glad to hear that you're holding up alright. Yes, there is a bit of comfort knowing that we're all weathering the same tides at the minute. I can't even tell you the sea of rejections currently in my inbox.

As for the final text, *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* (2023) by Virginia Pignagnoli, you were right. I really like the direction Pignagnoli's text takes by focusing on digital epitexts. Websites and social media posts are such active tools in literary culture at the minute. So, the way in which Pignagnoli leverages them, and their widespread application, for her argument of the post-postmodernist novel's emergence unfolds organically. Therefore, providing authors new ways to expand their creative practice beyond the printed form and communicate with their readers.

Still, I like that Pignagnoli is quick to emphasize that the purpose of the text isn't to "provide a systematic classification of all the possible new forms of author-audience interactions in the digital world" but is instead interested in the "connections of twenty first century fiction with epitextual material...[to] investigat[e] the relationship between...digital author-audience interactions and the emerging poetics succeeding postmodernism" (3). Pignagnoli doesn't linger on the question of whether or not we have moved past postmodernism and references scholars like McLaughlin (2012) and McHale (2015) to acknowledge the question exists. Instead, the text turns to what a post-postmodernism signals, culturally: a "switch of dominant toward issues of communication, intersubjective relationship, earnestness, and sincere exchange" (5). Something that likewise meshes well with *Fictionality and Multimodal Narratives*'s questions surrounding fictionality and factuality.

In doing so, post-postmodernist fiction does "not deny its artificiality but exploits genre-blurring to emphasize the possibility to communicate sincerely" (7) through whatever medium it chooses to present itself through. I am ashamed to say that I have never read any of the texts Pignagnoli specifically focuses on, but after engaging with her close readings, I definitely think it would be worthwhile to do so—but where to find the time? It's a full-time job making applications that are rejected!

What did you think of the texts used? Have you read them before?

Thanks, again.

Devin

On January 26, 2024, at 11:55 PM, Robert Locke <robertlocke654@gmail.com>

wrote:

Dear Devin,

I actually haven't read any of the books Pignagnoli mentioned either, so I can't give much of an opinion on them.

Still, I liked how the texts Pignagnoli selected examine post-postmodernist devices of blurring fiction/nonfiction aspects and communicative digital epitexts through "foucs[ing]...on the communicative digital epitexts...[of Chabon's] Instagram feed...with explicit connection[s] to... *Moonglow*" (Pignagnoli, 2023: 43).

It's interesting then that similar epitexts, like Twitter conversations, are evaluated by "foreground[ing] the presence of meditaion" (62), but can have different narrative impacts. Like, for instance, how the usage of "pronouns 'you' and 'yourself' address [a] Twitter audience" which mirrors *The Answers*'s narrative as it causes the reader to "eng[age] with existential... ethical and political, issues" (87). Each are compelling ways to introduce these post-postmodernist elements, as Pignagnoli establishes the importance of these digital epitexts for the reading of contemporary literture, and the impact "co-construction" between author and audience has in creating "a cultural context that promotes both the sharing of one's reading experience and its dialogue with other readers' sharing of their own reading experience" (108). Such a culture, likewise, is echoed in the previous two texts we've read. As it could be argued that the transmediality of unnatural narratology and the multimodal of fictionality and factuality are themselves forms of "co-construction".

It is then a bold strategy that within the conclusion, Pignagnoli decides to undermine the digital epitext, highlighting a metamedial discourse that acknowledges the power structures involved with digital epitexts. Digital epitexts are not owned by individuals but the corporations and contemporary models that control these digital media and conversations. Through noting that "people's growing engagement with online media and communication devices comes surveillance systems and loss of privacy" (116), Pignagnoli offers a poignant counterpoint within her own argument. Are questions of sincerity, earnestness, and intersubjectivity even possible given the context in which digital media exists within our contemporary culture? Take our emails as an example. Yes, we choose what is said, and how it is said, but the infrastructure in which we communicate is out of our hands.

Still, glad I could be of assistance. I hope you found this exploration useful and please do get in touch further as your work progresses. While things are tough out there, I do hope you stick it out.

Best wishes,

RL

On January 27, 2024, at 7:04 AM, Devin Tupper <tupperdevin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Robert,

Thank you for the kind words and encouragement. I greatly appreciate all the help you have given me. I find it really compelling that each work has been able to provide distinct views on their respective fields, yet each seem to continue to gravitate towards this central idea of normalcy within a destabilized contemporary culture.

Whether that is through Ensslin's and Bell's unnatural narratology which has only found itself pronounced in contemporary, transmedial fiction, Ghosal's and Gibbons's collection's focus on the blurring between storyworld and the real world, or Pignagonli's collision between the reader and authorship through the digital epitexts. Each denotes a new-normal while illustrating through close readings and engagement of contemporary texts the importance of the ever-expanding web that is the intersections between art and discourse.

With this under my belt, I hope to share more work with you soon. Perhaps we could even find something to collaborate on together in the future. Even if it's just a book review.

All the best,

Devin

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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