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Review: Joseph Tabbi, ed. *Post-Digital: Dialogue and Debates from electronic book review* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 2 vols. ISBN 9781474292504, RRP £250.00.

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Founded in 1995, the *electronic book review* (*ebr*) documents the wide-ranging impact of digital technology on culture, theory, and criticism. *Post-Digital: Dialogue and Debates from electronic book review* (so named to move past the ubiquity of the ‘digital’) is a colossal *ebr* retrospective, with 97 eclectic essays across two volumes even the most intrepid reader might be intimidated by. However, throughout *Post-Digital* there are innovative close readings, incisive cultural criticisms, and in-depth discussions of emergent theory that make its two volumes invaluable for scholars of contemporary literature and technology.

Post-Digital’s gatherings represent essay threads found on the *ebr* website, taxonomizing essays into loose categories. After four introductory essays, separate subeditors introduce the gatherings, with helpful abstracts prefacing each piece therein. The first gathering, ‘Image + Narrative,’ is edited by *ebr* designer Anne Burdick. Hinting towards the tension between the electronic subject matter and the printed pages in the reader’s hands, Burdick concedes that ‘unable to recreate the spatiality and temporality of reading multidirectional mixed media works, all [Burdick] can do is show a collection of creative critical writing’ (2020a: 38). The gallery Burdick curates not only samples the innovative visual layouts of electronic texts but also charts *ebr*’s evolution from 1.0 to 4.0, a movement from threads to a more elaborate, discursive weave-like structure. This is followed by a series of book reviews: Burdick’s acerbic critique of Jay David Bolter’s *Writing Space* (1991); Matthew Kirschenbaum’s diagnostic analysis of Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *Remediation* (1998) as a conceptual work lacking concrete examples; and an Adornian reposte to Kirschenbaum’s piece from Jan Baetens that quite rightly points out that remediation may be a result of an industry-driven appetite for innovation and novelty. Finally, Joseph Tabbi moves beyond the idea that hypertext literalizes poststructuralist metaphors of space to reread this theory using electronic literature’s postmodern print precursors.

The second gathering—‘Electropoetics (& Polemics)’—responds to Espen Aarseth’s influential 1997 book *Cybertext*, nostalgically revisiting the critical ascension of cybertext in the early 2000s. Nick Montfort’s pithily-titled ‘Cybertext Killed the Hypertext Star’ suggests that Aarseth’s erasure of ‘the stifling hypertext boundary’ means that scholars can explode the otherwise static hypertext canon (2020a: 105). Marrku Eskelinen and N. Katherine Hayles debate the role of content in cybertextual discourse: for Eskelinen, cybertextual theory enables a shift away from anecdotal interpretation espoused by traditional literary studies; whereas Hayles asks ‘is not content [...] intimately involved in why most users read texts and especially why they return to them time after time’ (2020a: 126)? Matthew Kirschenbaum reappears asserting that materiality matters, using the six different iterations of Michael Joyce’s canonical hypertext *afternoon*

(1994) as effective examples. The section is rounded out by two essays on the literary tool of the hyperlink: Jeffrey Parker's taxonomy is useful, while Scott Rettberg draws on his own experience to suggest that readers of electronic literature favour disruption and transformation over closure.

'Fictions Present' is probably the most straightforwardly literary gathering in the first volume. The thread acknowledges the multifaceted present-ness of writing in keeping with open-ended interpretations of the 'contemporary.' The section charts a movement beyond postmodernism towards more media-rich narrative technologies such as video games and mixed reality experiences. Accordingly, Brian McHale asks 'What Was Postmodernism?' using an array of examples (from Robert Yarber's evocative painting *The Tender and the Damned* (1985) to Disney's 1992 film *Aladdin*) to argue that post-postmodernism is defined by 'the experience of passing through a wrenching, maybe catastrophic, transition in human history [9/11 and Katrina]; the experience of an aftermath' (2020a: 178). Kasia Boddy reads Lynne Tillman's *American Genius, A Comedy* (2006) as a work self-consciously engaging with the ideology of the Great American Novel (microcosms of the nation, doorstep length, literary prestige and masculinity are all symptoms), effectively using author interviews. Daniel Punday's review of *Mark Z. Danielewski* (2011, edited by Joel Bray and Alison Gibbons), suggests that the post-postmodernism predicted by McHale is evident in Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). Considering the essay collection as indicative of a wider trend, Punday pertinently suggests that contemporary critics seem less inclined to ask 'what is writing today?' than 'what are the things that people do with writing today?' (2020a: 201). Gilbert Pham-Thanh compares Steve Tomasula's *VAS* (2004) with Edwin Abbott's much earlier *Flatland* (1884) to tease out the symbolic meaning of vasectomy in the former text, and the section concludes with Timothy Melley's astute review of John Farrell's *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (2006). Melley sees postmodern paranoia everywhere, especially in our networked internet experience. Considering why we may impose individualistic, metaphorical diagnoses on complex systems, Melley ultimately suggests that paranoia—when used right—can be an effective tool of ideology critique.

The fourth gathering, 'Technocapitalism,' responds to Richard Hardt and Antonio Negri's thought, raising issues that touch upon technocapitalism today. When Aron Pease discusses derivative bioproperty patents, or when Nicholas Spencer suggests that the effect of capitalist technology is the expropriation of social productivity, or when Linda Brigham nuances Hardt and Negri's understanding of networks to be more attuned to their hierarchical possibilities, it is hard not to think of Shoshanna Zuboff's recent exhaustive work on surveillance capitalism. William Wilson concludes the section by

pointing out how Hardt and Negri identify the visual and verbal arts as material objects (like propaganda), rather than aesthetic illusions with multiple interpretations.

The volume's final two gatherings are titled 'Critical Ecologies.' Critical ecologists, according to subeditor Eric Dean Rasmussen, reveal how 'artworks can reorient us so we become more observant, allowing us to make observations about what, why, and how we observe, perceive, and feel during our interactions with(in) these aesthetic environments' (2020a: 284). Timothy Morton accordingly reviews Roderick Coover's visual art piece *Canyonlands* (2009) as belying 'the human aestheticization of the desert as wilderness,' and pines for a 'darker Goth remix' (2020a: 295-6). On the other hand, John Limon praises John Newman's novel *The Fountain at the Center of the World* (2004) as the 'first great global novel' in which nature is as atemporal as corporations and capitalism (2020a: 309). Brian Willems persuasively suggests readers should be more attuned to 'places of mutual infestation' where the boundaries between humans, animals and machines are porous, and Christian Moraru reframes plagiarism in creative terms (2020a: 311). Laura Dassow Walls and Stephanie LeMenager conclude the section with two essays on representation. Returning to Henry David Thoreau's idea of 'deliberateness,' Walls asks how literary texts may 'gather' facts in a more precisely scientific sense, rather than represent them. (Walls would later write the 2017 Thoreau biography *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*). LeMenager takes the opposite track, arguing that fictionality enables authors to create alternate realities in which readers can imagine 'key strategies for building a politics of life in times of epistemic and ecological crisis' (2020a: 336).

'Critical Ecologies (ii)' continues the move away from human subjectivity towards ecological thinking. Timothy Luke posits three types of digital subjectivity: one that arises from humans; artificially generated organisms such as viruses; and hybrid agents best exemplified by the Internet of Things. Maintaining focus on subjectivity, Paisley Livingston evaluates how much Stanislaw Lem's phantomatics predicted virtual reality in 1962. Joseph McElroy's essay on the global water crisis points to the many intersections water makes with our lives, and Rob Swigart considers adaptation as a viable response to climate change. Comparing the traditions of German and American media studies through the figures of James Carey and Friedrich Kittler, John Durham Peters calls for a 'Daimler-Chrysler merger of media theory' (2020a: 404). Finally, Alenda Chang observes human and nonhuman objects and environments are emmeshed in processes of communication and remediation, concluding with a brief yet insightful reading of the 2012 video game *Journey*. In his 'Enclosures' to volume one, Joseph Tabbi compares *Post-Digital* to similar retrospective gatherings made by earlier journals *CTheory* and *Postmodern Culture*. Joseph McElroy's essay on censorship as form concludes the volume.

The second volume begins with a generative ‘Critical Mass Interview.’ Several correspondents are asked about quandaries at the heart of electronic literature: is electronic literature complicit with pre-existing (undoubtedly technocapitalist) media, or does it resist through reinagination and reconfiguration? Should it follow trends towards micro-narratives and reduced attention (see: social media), or should it subvert this practice through an appeal to sustained attention? The majority of respondents argue that a degree of complicity is required to enable resistance. A broader concern the exercise highlights is electronic literature’s influence on wider literary studies. Marie-Laure Ryan in particular suggests that electronic literature needs to penetrate the ‘temperate zone’ of media—synonymous with middlebrow culture—to have traction outside hermetic academic circles (2020b: 5).

This forward-looking perspective is carried through into volume two’s first gathering, ‘Histories of the Future (& Now)’. The gathering reckons with what Brooks Sterritt labels ‘the horror and unknowability of our own time and the monstrosity of the future’ (2020b: 17). Stephanie Strickland and Marjorie Luesebrink write a ‘progress report’ on the future of electronic literature, based upon a panel organized by the authors at ELO 2012. The [S]creed for Digital Fiction (authored by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, David Ciccoricco, Hans Rustad, Jess Laccetti and Jessica Pressman) outlines strategies for digital fiction critique. Ed Finn describes his team’s attempt to write, edit and publish a book in three days at the 2014 Frankfurt Book Fair; considering the hectic and performative process, Finn suggests that the future of publishing may lie in greater transparency. David Golumbia posits that the English language dominates digital environments, both in content and in the underlying informatic structures, leading to ‘the plight of linguistic variety itself’ (2020b: 50). The section concludes with a series of writings by Victoria Vesna and Stephanie Strickland discussing Vesna’s projects *Datamining Bodies* (2000) and *notime* (2001), artistic renderings of an autonomous social network for people with no time to actively participate (ironically the most interesting people, Vesna notes).

‘Writing Under Constraint’ begins with two close readings: Brian Lennon identifies a ‘procedurally cybernetic sensibility’ in the poetry of Joan Retallack, and Thomas Hartl discusses the mosaic-ness of Ronald Sukenick’s 1999 novel *Mosaic Man* (2020b: 84). Mark Amerika calls for theory mash-ups and academic remixing, eschewing constraints keeping critical and creative writing separate. Louis Bury’s critifiction answers Amerika’s call, mimicking the alphabetical style of Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa* (1974): only able to use words beginning A–E, Bury finds ‘awkward, constrained descriptions add considerable excitement’ (2020b: 105). Paul Harris also writes in a constrained fashion: interrogating claims that electronic textuality liberates cognition

from the limits of print, his piece celebrated New Year's Day 2000 by being exactly 2000 words long.

'Music/sound/noise' engages with and remembers noise, reflecting *ebr*'s interest in multimedia literariness. Elise Kermani sees a spectrum between music, sound and noise, and in particular nuances the idea of noise as both something that 'sharpens consciousness' and yet also 'dulls the senses' (2020b: 129). Olivia Block considers the English language in Kyoto, where Americanised advertisements and slogans estrange words from their typical uses. And finally, Tom LeClair uses noise as a metaphor for literature, arguing that this makes the novel monstrous: it represents 'a fabled, combinatory, unnatural, hypertrophied use of language that grotesquely deviates from normal discourse' (2020b: 138).

'Fictions Present,' subedited by R.M. Berry, draws substantially from Berry's own work. In the introduction, Berry identifies three notions of the present in texts: the present of publication, the present of setting, and the present time of telling. Berry also signposts the importance of Wittgenstein's thought to the cluster of essays and especially the method of aesthetic negativism, apparent when 'the inadequacy of reducing the meaningful to the factual is exposed without representing what it leaves out' (2020b: 155). This discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophy is continued by Andrew Lindquist, who uses a review of Michael LeMahieu's *Fictions of Fact and Value* (2013) to trace Wittgensteinian aesthetics in American postwar literature. At the heart of this cluster, however, is a discussion of Amy Hungerford's 2016 book *Making Literature Now* (in particular, of that book's final chapter, where Hungerford examines her own refusal to read David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) as a refusal of academic obligation and the author's misogyny). Berry responds to Hungerford's practice by cautioning against treating 'socially specific features of practice as the determining conditions of literature's production,' yet does suggest that such refusals of marketing hype and discourse can 'dispel aesthetic hegemony and reengage critical practice with the sources of its power' (2020b: 162–3). In a more stinging reply, Tom LeClair defends *Infinite Jest* against accusations of misogynous content (Wallace wants to 'fuck up,' rather than 'fuck' the reader), and suggests that Hungerford is unaware of her own entitlement and social networks and how that may have eased the publication of *Making Literature Now*. Implicitly rounding out this discussion is a glowing review of *Infinite Jest* by Piotr Siemion. *Making Literature Now* is alluded to and referenced throughout the cluster, yet Hungerford's own arguments are only paraphrased, reviewed or repeated by others; the constraints of the collection mean we cannot read Hungerford's arguments in her own terms. Concluding 'Fictions Present' are a series of pieces centred on Berry's work: a correspondence between Joseph Tabbi and R.M. Berry on the subject of Berry's

novel *Frank* (2002); an essay from Berry asking relevant and pressing questions about experimentalism and marginalization; and a transcribed conversation between Berry and author Flore Chevaillier.

Laura Shackelford edits the fifth gathering, 'Critical Ecologies after Posthumanism.' Within are two book reviews: Lisa Swanstrom reviews *Beyond the Screen* (2010, ed. Jorgen Schafer and Peter Gendolla), and Cary Wolfe reviews Luc Ferry's *New Ecological Order* (1995), anticipating the development of critical posthumanism through a critique of liberal humanism in Ferry's work and possible incoherencies in deep ecology. The gathering concludes with an essay from Stephanie Strickland interrogating the different temporalities of multimedia works, and how they may help readers reckon with epistemological shifts precipitated by technology.

In the sixth gathering, 'electropoetics,' N. Katherine Hayles responds to Diane Greco's hypertext *Cyborg: Engineering the Body Electric* (1989) to suggest that the term 'cyborg' can signify multiple things: actuality, metaphor, ideology and text. Heckman collaborates with Serge Bouchardon to argue figures of gestural manipulation and a rhetoric of grasp enable (and disable) readers to take action on/with a text. Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs continue this attention to haptics by proposing an 'ethos of touch' in digital writing, calling forth 'body memories' that are forgotten in typographic culture: touching, grasping, and movement as opposed to stillness. Robert P. Fletcher discusses works that employ augmented reality, and traces the magical ekphrasis of these works to 'an uncomfortable sense of the uncanny' (2020b: 304). Zuzana Husárova and Nick Montfort persuasively taxonomize shuffle literature—loose-leaved texts that can be shuffled like a deck of cards and read in any order—and reflect on how their aleatory poetics might more closely represent cognition and memory. Finally, Joseph Tabbi proposes 'all over writing': 'a way of linking content together through conceptual writing so that relations that tend to be implicit in a print archive are made explicit and present in one place' (2020b: 337).

'What (in the World) was Postmodernism' complements the first volume's 'Fictions Present' cluster. Simon During traces the history of postmodernism in New Zealand, while finding postcolonialism and neoliberalism are intertwined. Amy Elias charts postmodernism's return to metaphysics through Frederick Ferré, while Birger Vanwesenbeeck reviews Mark Taylor's *Rewiring the Real* (2013) as a work that argues religion is foundational for postmodern literary culture. Brian McHale's appropriately named essay 'The End' concludes the collection's final gathering, attempting to find answers (postmodernism or postmodernisms?) while speculating on the 'name-that-period sweepstakes' that contemporary scholars are reckoning with after postmodernism's end (2020b: 381).

While the first volume had ‘Enclosures,’ the second volume looks forward with ‘Continuings.’ Friedrich W. Block examines various paratexts supplementing collections and archives, finding that electronic literature ‘continues to form itself anew on the grounds of openness and potentiality’ (2020b: 398). Matthew Kirschenbaum’s ‘ELO and the Electric Light Orchestra: Electronic Literature Lessons from Prog Rock’ does exactly what it says on the tin: the essay is a rollicking yet thoughtful comparison between Jeff Lynne’s band and the literary discipline, laying out a roadmap balancing innovation and surprise with maintenance and repair. In another reflective piece, Eugenio Tisselli considers his departure and subsequent reconnection with the electronic literature community. The embodied, extractive and environmental costs of digital living are carefully identified by Tisselli, who then looks for ways to incorporate displaced and exploited communities into his own creative practice. Stuart Moulthrop then considers the ethics of studying digital creativity at a time when fake news, toxicity, and trolling dominate the discourse. Paraphrasing Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ (1956), Moulthrop concludes that ‘we are mutually in the soup, good and bad alike’ (2020b: 427). Work must continue, but with an objective critical distance to the flaws of platforms and technologies we are all ensconced in.

The second volume ends with a selected annotated bibliography that is important to scholars carefully following up on the plethora of citations and references used throughout the previous 850+ pages. For those looking for an entry into the field of electronic literature and criticism, another collaboration between Tabbi and Bloomsbury—*The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature* (2018)—offers more thematic entry points. Yet while *Post-Digital* may be a retrospective of *electronic book review*’s ‘alternative history’ to the digital humanities, the broad and diverse nature of the essays within have inaugural implications for researchers picking up the challenges first identified by *ebr* (2020a: 9). Editor Joseph Tabbi attests to the continued relevance and importance of these discussions, believing *Post-Digital* represents a ‘sustained reflection on the field constructions that individual *ebr* authors [...] have gone on to achieve’ (2020a: 5). Readers of *ebr* and *Post-Digital* have big shoes to fill.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

References

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