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Review: Roderick Coover (ed), *The Digital Imaginary: Literature and Cinema of the Database* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2019), ISBN: 978-1-5013-4756-6 (hardback) / 978-1-5013-4759-7 (online). £72.00 / Open Access. 208 pp.

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The Digital Imaginary: Literature and Cinema of the Database is a unique, wide-ranging and sometimes frustrating book that not only surveys the current status of electronic literature but also offers an exciting new approach to edited collections. As Roderick Coover, who is both a creator and academic of electronic literature, writes in his introduction, the book seeks to embody the interactivity and multimodality of the digital artworks it examines. Nevertheless, *The Digital Imaginary* remains primarily a printed text, meaning this experiment is pursued through its structure rather than materiality. The first three of the book's four parts opens with interviews of artists conducted by Coover, followed by commentaries by scholars who in many cases are also practitioners. The fourth and final part consists of two 'metacommentaries', which are essays 'connecting the works and conversations' across the previous sections (2–3). Drawing on a number of interlocking fields including new media studies, game studies and critical theory, the individual ideas and reflections offered by each contributor cumulatively present a broad survey of prominent debates and theories relating to digital creativity. This makes *The Digital Imaginary* an excellent resource for any student seeking an entry point into discussions about digital media practice and electronic literature.

As a whole, *The Digital Imaginary* seeks to both demonstrate and interrogate the co-constitution of media theory and practice. In his introduction, Coover uses the term 'digital imaginary' to name 'how computers are transforming ways of imagining the world and making stories about it' (1). The overarching idea of the collection is therefore that regular use of digital technologies has produced a broad cultural imaginary. This digital imaginary is further intensified and complicated by artists' experiments with the new methods that these technologies afford. This is therefore not a case of straightforward technological determinism. As Coover emphasises, the digital imaginary does not make the mind resemble a computer but rather resides in 'those gaps between human cognition and its digital manifestations' (1). Starting from this concept, *The Digital Imaginary* embarks on an exploration into how contemporary artists navigate what Ed Finn elsewhere terms the 'implementation gap' between computational models and messy socio-political realities (10). In approaching digital media as not primarily defined by their technical development but rather by the way they resonate with and reconfigure cultural attitudes and processes, the interviews and commentaries in this book link up in productive ways with broader debates in the humanities. However, an apparent lack of interest in the technicalities of digital artistic practices in the interviews becomes a point of contention in the later commentaries and metacommentaries.

Part One, 'Database', examines the ways that digital artworks allow readers to interface with databases in non-linear ways that challenge a persistent cultural emphasis on narrative plot. In the opening interview, David Clark discusses how he builds interactive works around the loose associative structure of what Gregory Ulmer calls 'puncepts'. Clark's work *The End: Death in Seven Colors* encourages viewers to navigate between images and infer meaning primarily through their interconnection rather than their referential content. In the following interview, Sharon Daniel suggests that the non-linearity of interactive media can address 'institutional, political, and structural issues' in ways that character-driven narratives cannot (40). Her interactive film *Inside the Distance* re-enacts the mediation processes from a Belgian restorative justice program, allowing viewers to move between the stories of the different actors involved. Bringing these two interviews into dialogue with game studies, Stuart Moulthorp's commentary suggests that these artists' works push for a move from logocentrism of written narratives towards 'an entry into story space, the composition of statements but of maps and territories.' This shift is 'not re-centering but de-centering […] not a move to a new empire of signs but rather to a place of potentiality' (45). In the second commentary, Judith Aston similarly emphasises the sense of spatial exploration involved in interactive film and further argues that such works allow us to develop a nuanced computer literacy detached from 'dependence on linear causality', essential for navigating an increasingly complex world. In this section, the digital imaginary is a condition of a troubling digital world, yet also a new ground on which new, desirable avenues of thought might be produced.

Part Two, 'Archive', concerns texts that explore how the past is stored in databases. The interviews explore the relationships between personal, cultural and computational memory. Samantha Gorman discusses her 'cinematic novel' *Pry*, which allows users to literally use their fingers to pry open spaces between lines of text and watch videos exploring a war veteran's experience of PTSD. The conversation raises questions about the different reading practices involved in different media, especially as these practices come to overlap in a media object like *Pry*. In the next interview, Håkan Jonson and Johannes Helden describe the creation of their work *Encyclopaedia*, which uses data from *The Encyclopaedia of Life* (https://eol.org/) to generate a catalogue of fictional animals from the past, present and future. Against the context of the Anthropocene, the work considers the lifespan of cultural archives and the gaps between human narrative capacity and that of computational storage. The commentaries that follow foreground the aspects of these works that push us to reconsider how we categorise the world. Lisa

Swanstrom argues that, in the 'elegant' imprecision of these works' taxonomies, 'the digital imaginary elides the difference between form and content', challenging the notion that the mind and the world can simply be stored in 'a container or receptacle of content' (91). Meanwhile, Geoffrey C. Bowker suggests that these digital archives demonstrate the necessity for developing a material infrastructure that can support a 'process ontology', which would capture the changing being of entities over time, a necessary way of thinking for the Anthropocene (97). Part Two therefore adds to the conclusions of Part One: digital media might be used to develop archives around a preferable ontology; however, such a shift would require educational and institutional support to develop the use of these new tools.

Part Three, 'Multimodality', focuses on the particular affordances that digital media offer for making meaning. In her interview, Kate Pullinger describes incorporating aspects of literature, cinema and videogames into her work *Inanimate Alice*. She also talks about *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*, which invites the public to send in imagined letters from the soldier depicted in the statue *Letters from Home* located at Paddington Station in London. In the next interview, Donna Leishman talks her use of internet platforms such as Twitter and Soundcloud for electronic literature, which raises questions about the power such platforms exert over creative work. Her piece *Front* tells the story of a young woman through her Facebook profile, yet it eschews using Facebook directly, instead reproducing its interfaces using HTML5. Not only does this decision allow the work to escape Facebook's content control, but it provides its own affordances for cueing certain interventions in its interactive narrative. The commentaries in this section use these interviews consider the role of authorship in digital fictions. Anastasia Salter discusses how Pullinger not only fuses modes of literary authorship and collaborative new media practice, but also draws on 'the techniques for establishing the consistent voice of characters in a television show where multiple authors will contribute over months (or years)' (134). Mark C. Marino, meanwhile, uses as his jumping off point a remark Leishman makes about feeling like an 'interloper' in the electronic literature scene. Marino reviews the history and status of 'electronic literature', testing various definitions before concluding that 'it is probably the simultaneous engagement with nonhuman or even posthuman aspects of being that bring works squarely into the realm of electronic literature' (143). This section thereby emphasises multimodality as a set of novel possibilities for the digital imaginary while also demonstrating the particular constraints that the corporate and academic institutions of capitalist societies place on creative practice.

The format shifts in the final section, 'Metacommentary'. Here, we are offered two relatively dense essays that bring together themes from across the interviews and commentaries. In her metacommentary, Illya Szilak draws on a wide range of theorists from Donald McKay to Henri Bergson in order to place interactivity at the centre of the digital imaginary. In particular, she draws out themes throughout the previous sections relating to materiality and embodiment, describing the interactive dimensions of the imaginary as 'an intrinsically political space' where 'human and machine, truth and fiction, content and form' are all set into motion (147). Szilak's metacommentary applies critical theory to add nuance to some of the interviewees inevitably relaxed and conversational deployment of terms such as 'interactive' and 'immersive'. Nick Monfort's essay which follows that of Szilak, also supplements these discussions. Although Coover's Introduction foregrounds the fact that many of the collection's contributors are both theorists and practitioners, this emphasis somewhat misrepresents the chapters that follow. As Montfort observes, 'the people interviewed, however much they discussed their processes, avoided discussing many specifics of code and programming' (162). This may be symptomatic of the book's structure. Although the initial interviews often challenge the notion of a single author and emphasise collaboration, positioning the perspectives of individual creators as the foundations for further discussion often has the effect of reaffirming more traditional notions of authorship. Most of these creators, although exhibiting familiarity with code, describe working with programmers on their artworks. Yet these collaborators are not given a voice in *The Digital Imaginary*; often, they are not even named, framed as hired hands who help carry out a creator's singular vision. Moreover, the absence of any discussion about code the interview stage offers little material for contributors like Marino and Monfort, leading voices in the field of critical code studies, to develop into rigorous analyses.

However, this de-emphasising of programming does not go unobserved by prior contributors. In fact, the absence of this technical discussion contributes to the collection's approachability and to its understanding of the digital imaginary. Scilak implies that such an omission is integral to the everyday experience of the digital imaginary, which finds itself shaped by the constraints of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. She quotes an interview with Lev Manovich in which he suggests that '[e]ven when the code is available, it can be too big to analyze it and discuss its "politics" in any meaningful way' (153). Meanwhile, in her commentary, Salter suggests that Pullinger's 'refusal to see digital writing as requiring code is

itself a political as well as an aesthetic choice, and it becomes particularly significant in the context of electronic literature as a field that typically emphasizes code-centric (and traditionally male-coded labor)' (133). Here, she references her 2017 article on 'Brogrammer Culture' and the persistent underrepresentation of women in electronic literature, however in this commentary the point is pursued no further (n. pag.). Salter's previous work identifies the sexist, ableist and racist barriers to access that maintain electronic literature and coding as male-dominated spaces. Unfortunately, in the context of a broader lack of engagement in *The Digital Imaginary*, her quick dismissal of code as a masculine concern inadvertently implies that this gendering is inherent to the practice, a notion her previous research painstakingly deconstructs.

This is not to suggest that a particular emphasis on code would reveal a 'deeper' significance of digital media at work behind 'surface' representations. As Audrey Anabel has recently argued in the context of 'proceduralism' in game studies,

> the computation/representation binary, dependent as it is on spatial metaphors of surface and depth, reestablishes the gendered spatial imaginary that Laura Mulvey identified in film more than thirty years ago. In game studies, the screen is arresting and distracting feminine surface that obscures the space of action and the masculine probing of code (52–3).

However, to borrow the shape of Moulthorp's formulation of perilocality in Part One, could an edited collection like this have de-centred and de-gendered code without re-centering representation in its place? Is it not possible to consider code and representation as closely bound together? Rejecting the idea that computation is fundamentally more important to the digital imaginary than subjectivity and sociocultural context does not mean ignoring it altogether. For most of *The Digital Imaginary,* code remains held in abeyance as something beyond the intellectual faculties of the consumer and humanities scholar.

Nevertheless, while *The Digital Imaginary* appears uninterested in code, code remains interested in *The Digital Imaginary*. Due, perhaps, to some clash between coded character sets used by his and Coover's word processors, Montfort's list of works cited contains the characters Ò and Ó where quotation marks should be. This glitch both reinforces N. Katherine Hayles's reminder, as paraphrased by Steve Tomasula in his Afterword, that 'all books are now digital if their production and distribution are taken into account' (179). Indeed, *The Digital Imaginary* embodies the often-uncomfortable

interaction between print and digital in contemporary publishing. Rather than availing itself of all the affordances of digital media, it bends the conventions of the printed edited collection to meet the language of interactivity and multimodality, pressing against the material boundaries between media. This attempt to dissolve the boundary between print and digital is most evident in Tomasula's compelling Afterword. Blending the genres of personal and academic essay, Tomasula foregrounds the necropolitics of the digital imaginary. Links and QR codes invite the reader to view the interactive maps produced by Humane Borders, which mark the GPS coordinates of dead bodies found at the Mexican-US border. Fittingly, this dynamic highlighted the barriers that multimodality can erect and the material infrastructure upon which the digital imaginary depends.

Rather than providing a seamless demonstration of multimodality, these URLs and QR codes remind of the affordances of printed books that these gestures to networked technology had replaced. When I first read Tomasula's contribution, I was on a bus and therefore unable to connect to the internet. Later, I found the first QR code produced a 404 error. For this review I read the print edition, although *The Digital Imaginary* is also available as an Open Access e-book on the Bloomsbury Collections website. However, despite originating as a set of files, the book is primarily designed to be published as a print object, one retroactively adapted to be read on screen. While this online version does offer enlargeable colour images and clickable links, further errors appear through this translation back into digitality. One of the hyperlinks put in place of Tomasula's QR codes is missing (176). This QR code does appear if you download the chapter as a PDF file, albeit in a low resolution. Here, the traditions and expectations of academic publishing curtail the digital imaginary. A 'born digital' text might have experimented with internal hyperlinks or scripting to interlace the discussions across the collection in more intricate and generative ways.

Overall, reading *The Digital Imaginary* as a reviewer proved to be an uncanny experience. The book's unique recursive structure offers commentaries and metacommentaries on its Chapters and sections, pre-empting my own summaries and criticisms. As Monfort writes in his metacommentary, 'A future collection would do well to include more code-level discussion' (171). In reviewing such an intriguing and self-reflective book, I found myself forced into reflecting on my own criticism as a product of the digital imaginary. For instance, in the preceding paragraph, what should have been a discussion about a nuanced and affecting essay about managed death at the Mexico-US border devolves into the kind of unfeeling evaluation of operational

functionality offered by the stereotypical videogame reviewers Ian Bogost calls 'Toaster Critics' at the start of *How to Talk About Videogames* (vii). Perhaps this is the exact movement that many of the interviews and commentaries seek to avoid through their caution about unduly elevating the technical substrate of the digital imaginary. As Moulthrop concludes his commentary, 'perhaps it is we who can or must remove ourselves from the way of the machine. Such is life under Disruption, an unceasing series of removals, a perpetual unwind' (49).

Despite its flaws and omissions, *The Digital Imaginary* remains a unique text that takes risks to embody many of the digital affordances discussed within. Its interviews, commentaries and metacommentaries offer fresh insights on familiar concepts from new media studies such as interactivity and immersion while also situating these into debates about identity, trauma, extinction and justice. It is this willingness to bear the unflattering marks of its experiments that makes the book an exhilarating and worthwhile exploration into electronic literature and digital art, one that opens exciting new avenues for academic edited collections. Moreover, in drawing attention to its own omissions, the book shrewdly paves the way for a follow-up, which Bloomsbury's *Electronic Literature* series would do well to publish.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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