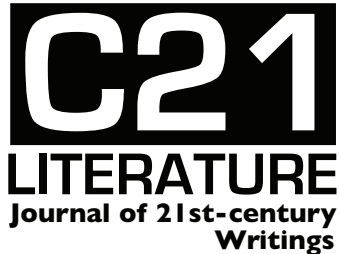




Open Library of Humanities



---

## Review

**How to Cite:** Gregory Fox, R., 2019. "Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 6, pp. 1–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.780>

**Published:** 28 January 2019

---

## Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

## Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## Open Access:

*C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

## Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles.**

## REVIEW

# Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018

Rachel Gregory Fox

Department of English Literature and Creative Writing, Lancaster University, UK  
[r.h.fox@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:r.h.fox@lancaster.ac.uk)

---

**Keywords:** Zara Dinnen; Digital Banal; Mediation; New Media; Digital

---

On an average morning I check Twitter and Facebook on my smartphone; read the news on my laptop; send emails and text messages; and save files to the cloud. A commentary on how Zara Dinnen's *The Digital Banal* is timely or relevant is to understate the encompassing, continual presence of digital media within the everyday operations of our lives.

Dinnen defines the digital banal as "the condition by which we don't notice the affective novelty of becoming-with digital media" (1). Most often, we do not think twice about the digital media we use in our day-to-day lives, in spite of the ways we are conditioned by it. Nor do we recognise the ecological impact of the servers and factories that make such digital media possible (1–2). Dinnen uses literature to discuss the digital banal, arguing that "[n]arrative culture records these stakes in ways that we can critically apprehend" (2). In her comprehensive and clear introduction, Dinnen outlines the key material, mediational, and affective definitions of the digital banal, and sets out to interrogate this banality. *The Digital Banal* is organised into two distinct sections. The first considers the formal properties and mediational surfaces of the digital banal; the second considers its material environments.

The first chapter of *The Digital Banal* argues that David Fincher's films "offer up a visual grammar of code," partly realised through diegetic screens and bodies which represent the act of programming (22). Analysing the programming scenes in *The*

*Social Network* (2010) Dinnen argues that “the performance of the programmer is one of sovereignty: the programmer rewrites the world” (26). Code is therefore constitutional. Dinnen then complicates this programmer = sovereign model, reading Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) “as an ambivalent computational subject through action (the act of programming) and subjugation” via “the passivity of watching the screen” while waiting (44). In Fincher’s films, Dinnen finds the digital banal in the “temporal, routine rhythms” of the programming and procedural networks at play (46).

Chapter Two studies the Creative Commons in relation to digital and social media. Dinnen considers the relationship between public and private in the works of Mark Amerika and Jonathan Lethem. In her analysis of Amerika’s creative process of “[r]euse, plagiarism, and plundering” Dinnen addresses how “[d]igital culture is foundationally reiterative” (55). Similarly, Lethem’s compositional approach reappropriates and reiterates text in order to interrogate the notion of “influence” (56). Lethem’s work contemplates the fluidity and plurality of the authorial “I” and can be read as the digital banal insofar as it “does not easily give up its mediational mode” (61–2). The chapter thoughtfully interrogates the importance of the Commons in the digital age, and considers how the creative process is mediational, both *before* and after new media.

The consideration of social media as “an affective common” that facilitates social participation in Chapter Two is explored more directly in the next chapter, where Dinnen interrogates the ways in which new media, as digital banal, “estranges us from or brings us closer to ourselves, each other, and the nonhuman are elided” (68; 75). Dinnen uses *Catfish* (both the film and television series) to explore “how digital media mediates human engagement” (76). Dinnen then addresses Sheila Heti’s *How Should A Person Be?* (2013), where the focus on communication, email, and script suggests “that it is a novel about the ontology of the social being in conditions of the digital banal” (94). In this critically relevant chapter, Dinnen investigates the sincerity and social capital of communication in the digital age.

While the first three chapters consider the program of the digital banal: coding, creative process, and sociality, the remaining three consider how the digital banal

defines representations of the mediational condition within contemporary American literature. Chapter Four analyses Ellen Ullman's *The Bug* (2003) and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), which are both set in software companies and focus, respectively, on "the work of programming" and "the work of unseeing the program" (99). Dinnen examines these novels with reference to Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's critique of cyber-utopianism in "The Californian Ideology" (1995). Recalling her reading of Lisbeth Salander as programmer, Dinnen discusses how programmers in both novels are "subjects of and subjects to software" (108). Her reading of *The Circle* is particularly poignant, contemplating how the novel "exemplifies the way the digital banal is a condition of nondisturbance or flatness" (110). As we continue through *The Digital Banal* we are continually reminded of how technology remains unseen in our everyday lives.

Chapter Five focuses on the affective modes of distraction, boredom, impatience, and anticipation, which surface as part of the digital banal because "[d]igital media provides us with the appearance of seamless immediacy" (121). Dinnen analyses Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009) and Danica Novgoroff's graphic novel *Refresh Refresh* (2008), observing "the banal ways we are absorbed in the new economies of digital labour" (131). She ends this chapter with an important discussion on 9/11 and its aftermath, which affects the environmental and political landscape of the texts featured in this and the final chapter. She argues that it is reductive to solely focus on just 9/11 as a crucial turning-point, and that doing so ignores the extended political and cultural contexts of digital change in the last American century (136–37).

The final chapter analyses three post-9/11 novels based in New York: Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), and Colson Whitehead's *Zone Out* (2011). Here, Dinnen contemplates the "environmental, temporal, and geopolitical ruptures" fracturing the cityscape in the digital age (142). She considers the mediational condition of digital modernity: the networks, interfaces, and vernacular of digital life. This culminates in her reading of *Zone Out* as a representation of "life after new media": Dinnen explores how, in a post-digital world, the text is "haunted by the digital," a form of *unmediation* (157). This final chapter works well to consolidate earlier discussion on how digital

media is deeply embedded within our lives in the twenty-first century as an implicitly capitalist network.

Dinnen concludes *The Digital Banal* by stating that “we are always digitally mediated” and that we must work to “critically apprehend digital media,” to assess the ways in which it organises our lives in seemingly invisible and inevitable ways (162; 167). The dangers of not doing are represented by the crucial example of the digital conditions of the 2016 US election: tweets, hacks, and emails dominated the election in very visible ways, and yet “[t]he shocks of the election process were soon normalized because they were being registered through the medium of their initial disturbance” (167). This example, a postscript that briefly features in the final paragraph of the Conclusion, cleverly illustrates the stakes of not apprehending the banal ways in which digital media immanently affects our everyday lives.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

**How to cite this article:** Gregory Fox, R., 2019. “Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.” *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 6, pp. 1–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.780>

**Published:** 28 January 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS 