in the social impacts at various levels of the global economic system.

Recipes for Disaster is a Finnish documentary that tackles the question of the excessive amounts of anthropogenic CO₂ continuously sent into the atmosphere. Usually, remarks the director, people blame corporations and industries for what is going wrong with the planet—but what about the global mistakes that we daily pursue in a collective commitment to mistaken attitudes?

“We are addicted to oil,” explains John Webster, filming himself, “and it’s going to lead us to destruction.”

The film develops along six sections, whose major concerns are forms of denial (It’s not my problem, psychological denial, rationalizing bad behavior, persistence in error, hang on to what you have and innocently happy). The director likens our behavior to sawing off a branch on which we sit and remaining happy. “Environmental warning lights are flashing like crazy,” he explains, “yet how do we respond? By consuming even more oil.”

Webster and his family decided to experiment with a one-year period of oil detox, living without any fossil-fuel derived tool, like cars or airplanes, and avoiding everything packaged in plastics, such as take-away food, make-up, shampoo, toothpaste, toys, etc. “An oil celibacy,” they call it, while recording the transformation of their habits and evaluating the results in terms of reduced CO₂ emissions.

The film confronts us with the depth of our current oil addiction, revealing acute withdrawal symptoms. We know that excess consumption is not doing us any improvement; rather it is going to destroy everything we hold dear, but it appears as if we just cannot break free. These are the recipes for disaster, Webster concludes—the seemingly innocent daily failures of common people, which lead step by step to destruction.

And destruction can happen. The Axe in the Attic presents a 60-day road trip from New England to Texas in the aftermath of Katrina, the hurricane that struck New Orleans in 2005. Its impact was among the worst ever for the U.S.A. in terms of human lives (at least 1,836 casualties) and economic damage ($81.2 billion US). The film also illustrates the catastrophic failure of protective agencies to deal with the resulting flood. Doubts are raised about the true will of the government to protect the poorest citizens of New Orleans. The title itself refers to the wisely self-consistent attitude of keeping a hatchet in the attic to smash the ceiling and reach, in case of flood, a safer position on the roof.

The two filmmakers, Lucia Small and Ed Pincus, captured along the way stories from people displaced by the disaster. They simply pointed the camera and filmed scenes of wreckage, confusion and hysteria. As the journey approaches the hurricane zone, the mood darkens. A surreal atmosphere of calm prevails as days are spent managing endless government and insurance paperwork. The evacuees allow us to witness loss, dignity and perseverance, but also humor, although they feel like exiles in their own country. Above all, they seek meaning in what has been happening to them since Katrina. Thus,
the breakdown of trust between the government and its citizens dramatically emerges, along with evidence of the scarce social resiliency of modern America. The influence of race and class on the destiny of the evacuees is questioned, as is the ethics of documentary filmmaking itself.

The last work discussed here, *Umbrella*, shows the contemporary results of the economic reforms initiated in China in 1978, aimed at financing the modernization of the nation. Farming is still the basis for the Chinese way of life, but now those sweeping transformations have become plainly visible in a country increasingly divided between its rural and urban regions. Those farmers traditionally engaged in land cultivation continuously migrate toward the cities, where the global economy seems to flourish before spreading through the whole world, like the ubiquitous low-price Chinese umbrella.

Using a purely observational style, with no narration or commentary—one can simply observe labor routines or read written sentences, maxims and exhortations—*Umbrella* is divided into five parts, each corresponding to a social group. The first scene shows the workaday life of young employees of Umbrella Factory in Guangdong Province—a monotonous, endlessly and rapidly repeated routine for which they are paid a meager piece rate. In another part of China, the Yiwu-Zhejiang province, a successful farmer has become an entrepreneur, running an umbrella manufacturing business at a massive shopping mall (Wholesale Market), where the same umbrellas are sold at much higher prices by wholesale merchants, who are among modern China’s most effective social climbers.

The film then shifts to Shanghai and follows students and graduates struggling to find employment through a hyper-competitive higher-education system or undergoing ideological regimentation at a garrison of the People’s Liberation Army. Once again, the recruits come from farms in the countryside, looking for another life. The final scene documents the population in a village of Henan province, consisting mostly of the old and infirm, as younger generations seek their fortunes elsewhere. Those elder farmers struggle specifically to recover a premature harvest of drought-impacted wheat and in general to survive amidst the combined forces of globalization and the new Chinese economy.

Taken together, these documents offer a comprehensive historical and societal portrait of our times—a rather depressing one, unfortunately. Although dissimilar, all capture another view of the scarcely sustainable trends of modernity. We can clearly feel the fickleness and superficial prosperity of several situations along with the rising economic tide, but what emerges as a major obstacle is the difficulty of engaging in a real change of perspectives. “Even in a sinking boat,” we are told by John Webster, “passengers wait for the very last chance before leaving.” It is the same for social behavior and economics: people tend to favor conventional conduct, no matter if in the long term it is the losing choice. Everywhere in the world, whatever the situation, people can overcome almost any problem, but first they must overcome themselves and their societal divisions.

**BOOKS**

**THE SEVEN BEAUTIES OF SCIENCE FICTION**


Reviewed by Eugene Thacker, School of Literature, Communication & Culture, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA, U.S.A. E-mail: <eugene.thacker@techgatech.edu>.

Science fiction (SF) is a tricky genre to talk about. There is an aspect of SF associated with low-brow aesthetics and pop culture—this is the terrain of the fan. But there is also a high-brow, elite-culture aspect to SF, especially as scholarship in literary and film studies has begun to look at SF as a relevant mode of cultural expression—this is the terrain of the scholar. Ideally, the fan is minimally aware of the scholar, at least insofar as one gains a historical appreciation of SF. Likewise, the scholar must be minimally aware of the fan, especially since SF has been, for a large chunk of its history, a “pulp” phenomenon. But this is the ideal situation; the fact is that one rarely sees scholars at fan conventions such as DragonCon, and one rarely sees fans at academic conferences such as the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts.

There are, however, signs that this is changing, and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s book is an indicator of how we might move beyond the gap between the scholar and the fan, the elite and the popular notions of SF. In a way, Csicsery-Ronay’s book signals a third kind of figure beyond the scholar and the fan, which we can, a bit tongue-in-cheek, call the SF “dweller.” Whereas both the scholar and the fan are beholden to the specialized, genre-based status of SF, the dweller is not only the person who lives in SF story worlds but the person who takes it for granted that the actual world must be understood in terms of SF. It is this expansion and diffusion of SF that constitutes the overarching concern of Csicsery-Ronay’s book. Today, the increasing ubiquity of SF in culture stimulates science-fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat SF as purely a genre engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call science-fictionality, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction [2].

That said, _The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction_ is, first and foremost, a book about SF as a genre. Csicsery-Ronay has done something remarkable—he has posed a number of philosophical questions concerning SF itself, while, at the same time, providing a set of conceptual tools for understanding SF as a genre and as a narrative form. Csicsery-Ronay is in a good position to do this; for a number of years he has edited the journal _Science Fiction Studies_, and SF scholars are well aware of his important essays on SF, in which he has consistently tried to think about SF outside the genre itself (his essays on globalization and SF, and on postmodern theory and SF, are noteworthy in this regard). Csicsery-Ronay avoids the more predictable routes of deliberating over the definitions of SF, as well as re-telling the history of SF. Instead, he borrows from classical aesthetic theory to talk not about definitions or history, but about the major figures that together constitute SF—something like the “poetics” of SF.

As its title indicates, _The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction_ is organized along seven core figures. In each chapter, Csicsery-Ronay not only discusses these conceptually but also provides plentiful examples, including a number of insightful close readings of key SF texts or films. Csicsery-Ronay also takes up ideas from thinkers such as Kant or Burke, as well as engaging with SF criti-
ics such as Darko Suvin, Carl Freedman, Frederic Jameson and many others.

Briefly, the “seven beauties” of SF are: (1) “fictive neology” (the signs and language of SF, from the technical jargon and the language of future politics, to futuristic slang and alien linguistics); (2) “fictive novums” (borrowing from Darko Suvin’s use of the term novum to mean the central imaginative novelty in an SF story world, which may at once eschatological and highly rationalized); (3) “future history” (the way that SF often narrates the future in terms of the past—a “future past” tense—that may involve representations of history in SF, representations of the future in the form of a history, or forms of a prophetic or visionary future); (4) “imaginary science” (the poetics of scientific and technological world-building, which invites comparison between science and fiction); (5) “the science-fictional sublime” and (6) “the science-fictional grotesque,” two related affective modes in which science and technology are represented, the former overwhelming in its complexity, the latter overwhelming in its failures or breakdown; and (7) the “technologiacide,” which is the narrative form specific to SF, “the epic of the struggle surrounding the transformation of the cosmos into a technological regime” (p. 217).

Csicsery-Ronay’s book does what good SF criticism should do—it offers clear explanatory models but also invites further speculation. The chapters on the sublime and the grotesque, for instance, raise philosophical issues that directly pertain to “science-fictionality” today. Whereas for Kant the sublime was principally evoked by nature (e.g. vast oceans, tumultuous storms, high mountains), in SF we have a technological sublime, which, in a Kantian vein, exceeds either by power (the “nuclear sublime”) or by complexity (the “informatic sublime”). But Kant’s discussion on the sublime is also about the need to preserve the boundary and the relation between the self and the world. The affect of the sublime is the threat to this distinction, in which self and world threaten to dissolve into each other. These aesthetic modes intertwine poetics and politics. Note that this is also the key aspect of the grotesque in Bakhtin as well—except that in SF the grotesque occurs not through natural monstrosity but through the aberrations of technoscience. As Csicsery-Ronay notes, the sublime and grotesque are two sides of a single page: with the sublime, there is something “out there” that cannot be incorporated into a subject “in here”; with the grotesque, there is something “in here” that cannot be repulsed or pushed away into an object “out there.” SF explores precisely this boundary management between the grotesque and sublime, the “out there” and the “in here,” the self-world relationship that is fundamental to our ability to think the world “out there” at all. Furthermore, SF is replete with examples that do away with this boundary altogether, from the cosmic visions of Camille Flammarion’s Lumen or Olaf Stapledon’s Star Maker to Stanislaw Lem’s Solaris (which Csicsery-Ronay discusses at length) to Brian Aldiss’s Hothouse or Ursula LeGuin’s “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow,” to Greg Bear’s Blood Music, Greg Egan’s Diaspora and Kim Stanley Robinson’s Forty Signs of Rain—this interplay between the sublime and the grotesque dovetails on a problematic that is central not only to philosophy, but to the discourses of, for instance, global climate change.

The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction is a good textbook, yes. However, I would argue that the real impulse of the book is to pose, again, the question of genre—not just as a literary or formalistic question, but also as a cultural and political question. SF, among all genres, seems to be characterized by its propensity to exceed itself. This process is perhaps similar to what philosopher Alain Badiou calls the “generic”:

“Generic” here means something different from its colloquial usage (e.g. banal, typical, unoriginal); it means that which has no specificity, precisely because it is functional, even pragmatic. So, while The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction has many relevant things to say about SF as a genre, the broader question it raises is whether the shift from science fiction to science-fictionality is also a shift from genre to the generic. So, while Csicsery-Ronay does provide a clear discussion of the formal properties of SF that any reader can engage with, he also poses the question of the disappearance of SF when the genre becomes so pervasive that it ceases to be a genre at all, and becomes something like a way of understanding the world.
the 19th century, and later through its discovery by botanist Mary DeDecker in the 20th century. Quotations from desert philosopher John Van Dyke are carefully interwoven to suggest how the desert landscape is at once harsh and filled with solace. This is one of Van Dyke’s succinct comments:

Not in vain these wastes of sand. And this time not because they develop character in desert life, but simply because they are beautiful in themselves and good to look upon whether they be life or death (p. 56).

The study of American wilderness in anthropology, American and cultural studies builds a consciousness of colonial exploits and their impacts on native peoples. Bruce Pavlik skillfully negotiates through this, contextualizing a spread of data and accounts. The ecological and cultural diversity of the California desert bioregion is histori-zed, and this posits culture and ecology as interactive and coextensive with each other. Both are living, fragile and versatile categories. This understanding is crucial, because in the occupation with colonial and consumerist exploitation of cultural landscapes, cultures can often be reified as fixed and determinate categories. Pavlik’s focus on how ecology and culture interact factors in the elements of contingency and inde-terminacy in the constitution of cultural landscapes. The desert landscape is posited as vernacular, layered, and each encounter with it is validated within a wider discourse of rediscovery that is the basis of Pavlik’s study. He states:

Perhaps exploration, exploitation, and understanding are necessary before we can cherish a land. When a society is newly immersed in wilderness, the bravery and cruelty of the pioneer, the necessary emphasis on survival and the strong focus required for scientific inquiry simply forestall contemplation and artistic rediscovery. In California, the final rediscovery began when it was clear that the deserts had been subdued by roads, railroads, and reservations and welcome for all to come (p. 54).

The concluding section of the text examines current threats to the California desert bioregion. These include human incursion, introduction of non-native species and depletion of resources, including water. Though concerned about how the desert landscape can be overwhelmed, Pavlik is not pessimistic as he asserts that deserts are self-healing.

Studies of disturbance, population dynamics, and succession tell us that species have an intrinsic ability to recover and communities to recuperate. Processes of dispersal, colonization, soil formation, and vegetation development impart resilience to biological systems that allows persistence (p. 296).

Bringing together dimensions of ecological study, this book presents an interdisciplinarity necessary for the study of cultural landscapes. Its empirically informed and conversational writing style is complemented with a spread of illustrations and images that enhance the reading experience. References are usefully divided according to the chapters and sections of the manuscript.

**THE ORIGIN OF HUMANNESS IN THE BIOLOGY OF LOVE**


Reviewed by Martha Blassnigg, University of Plymouth, U.K. E-mail: <martha.blassnigg@gmail.com>.

The Origin of Humanness, written in the early 1990s, brings together two strands of research: Maturana Römesin’s research into the origin of humanness and Verden-Zöller’s research into the rise of self-consciousness in the child during early mother-child play relations. The authors’ core claim is that the human species has evolved by con-servning love as a fundamental domain of cooperation expressed through the basic emotions or moods of mutual respect, care, acceptance and trust (Homo sapiens-amans) rather than competition and aggression (Homo sapiens aggressans or arrogance). In this, they do not declare an ethical imperative, but rather situate ethics in biology, since, in their view, a responsible concern for the well-being of the other (human, species, biosphere, etc.) arises naturally from a manner of living in the biology of love. This is what they propose as a way for conserving the existence of social human beings (and what they call “social consciousness”) and for countering the dominant culture of domination, submission or indifference in Western society. Ethics, in this sense, is a choice of emotioning on an individual basis that in relation to a social community defines how a particular manner of living is to be conserved over the coming generations. In this way, the book opens up burning questions around the dimension of humanness in relation to contemporary developments in the sciences and the applications of technologies (genetic engineering, organ transplants, cloning, robotics, virtual reality, etc.), which the authors touch upon briefly as referential contexts, and Maturana Römesin has developed more fully elsewhere [1]. The Origin of Humanness is a testimony of hope, which calls for the integration of systemic and linear rational thinking through a change in attitude if we release our desire for control, and in doing so we could conserve loving humanness in awareness that the biology of love and intimacy is our fundament. That, indeed, would be a cultural change of no little magnitude (p. 129).

The fact that the editor, Pille Bun-nell, decided to separate a scientific appendix from the main argument (thus dividing the book into two halves) is crucial to understanding the authors’ argument in its self-conscious presentation as an explanatory system. This reveals that if, for example, the argument were to be read from an intellectual position that separated the explanatory system and the position of the observer from life as an independent reality, it could be misunder-stood as carrying a certain essentialist bias. Such a misdirection completely dissolves once it is understood (and the scientific appendix makes this method very clear) that from a systemic approach, scientific explanations are operational and conceptual instruments that permit us to “explain and understand what we do as human
and, in combination with self-reflection, environment, which is based in the way we engage in our current cultural

Most significantly, reason “may help to shift our psychic milieu” (p. 139). What systems theory, used in this way, reveals is not a new explanatory theory of all and everything, but a modus operandi of how to situate and understand scientific explanatory systems that necessarily always include the position of the observer while their reflections abstract from life experiences. The insightful reflections in the appendix appear almost as a philosophy of science, and the “in the book” format presents a very complex system of thought and makes it accessible despite asking some forbearance from the reader or, alternatively, a disciplined interactive reading between the separate sections.

Maturana Romesin and Verden-Zöller’s intervention provides us with an innovative way to think forward by reflecting on the past, situated in very familiar contexts of the present. Given the book’s relevant topic, which occupies us all in some way or other, this leads us to ask more questions. It not only opens a way to address the topic of “love” in the sciences and related disciplines, but it also will have to be seen if the book might offer a new starting point from which to resolve the prevailing dualism that is used to describe the human condition. In a manner similar to the philosopher Henri Bergson’s in addressing the cooperation between the intellect and intuition in Creative Evolution [2], the authors propose that reason “may help to shift our psychic identity if it guides our emotioning, but does not do so by itself” (p. 106). Most significantly, The Origin of Human-ness introduces an ethics to the way we engage in our current cultural environment, which is based in the fundamentals of human emotioning and, in combination with self-reflection, calls for responsibility for our desires as a choice for future directions in the human creative evolution.

References and Notes
1. Humberto Maturana Romesin has more fully developed a discussion with regard to technology in a 1997 article entitled “Metadesign,” where the artist and artistic, creative dimension in human being arises as a most significant interventionist potential for change through aesthetics linked to the emotional domain. The article can be found online at <www.inteco.cl/articulos/metadesign>.


A SMALL WORLD: SMART HOUSES AND THE DREAM OF THE PERFECT DAY

Reviewed by Anthony Enns, Department of English, Dalhousie University, Canada. E-mail: <anthony.ens@dal.ca>.

Davin Heckman’s A Small World: Smart Houses and the Dream of the Perfect Day examines the history of smart homes and the utopian fantasies that informed their design. By focusing on both the history of technology and the representation of technology in literature, film and television, Heckman’s book effectively analyzes the cultural discourse surrounding the very concept of "smartness" and offers a vehement critique of the incorporation of technology into everyday life.

The first chapter examines the rise of home economics and scientific management, which introduced new time-saving labor practices that linked the comfort of the home to notions of temporal and spatial efficiency. This call for greater efficiency eventually led to the development of electrical appliances, automated kitchens and domestic robots. The second chapter focuses on the introduction of new media technologies, such as televisions and computers, into the home, which gradually transformed the home into “a communications and processing center” and its inhabitants into passive spectators and consumers (p. 42). In the third chapter, Heckman more closely examines this shift from futuristic visions of the home to contemporary smart homes, and he outlines two competing discourses concerning the fully integrated home. On the one hand, the smart home represents a new image of freedom that is closely linked to consumerism, which is best exemplified by reality television programs whose purpose is to promote certain lifestyles. On the other hand, haunted-house narratives provide a counter-discourse that illustrates the repressive controls lurking behind such consumerist fantasies. Reality television and haunted houses thus represent “opposite sides of the same coin of universal freedom under neoliberal capitalism: one story celebrates the freedom that comes with integrating oneself wholly into the system of commerce, the other warns that living inside the system forces one to become subject to its whims” (p. 139).

In the fourth and final chapter Heckman focuses on what he calls “the dream of the Perfect Day,” which represents both the notion of everyday life as the ultimate consumer practice and the fantasy that every problem can be solved by modern technology. Heckman argues that smart homes are fundamentally based on this belief that technology can transform the world into a perfect place: “The smart home . . . edits the world and makes it perfect as we experience it so that we may be given the impression that the world is indeed perfect” (p. 164). The “Perfect Day” thus resolves ethical dilemmas by “only displaying those things which the subject would like to see” (p. 141) and by avoiding “the ethical dilemmas posed by this system” it effectively represents “a refusal to engage with ethics” (p. 142).

Heckman employs this argument to intervene in contemporary debates concerning posthumanism and posthuman

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that smart homes pose to the humanist, or under—Communism, then having watched it crumble from North American exile in his middle years, Codrescu cannot help but also be fascinates by the figure of Lenin. The author seems to feel an affinity with Tzara on many levels, whereas Lenin may embody socially minded censors, editors and college deans who have policed him throughout his lifetime. Consequently, Codrescu celebrates dadaists, who meant to induce collective delirium, joy, hopefully, but rage if there was no choice, and to drive the maddened collective to either an orgy or arbitrary destruction, “arbitrary” being the operative word. “Nonarbitrary” destruction was what the political mobs had been doing forever and what, unbeknownst to the dadas of 1916, they were going to do to much more sinister effect in the coming decades (p. 91).

Tzara was born Sammy Rosenstock, while Lenin was born V.I. Ulyanov. Codrescu reveals how names are a slippery thing, as are many of the concepts, tropes and personalities whirling in the historical constellation of dada, whose parts he seizes and fishes out from the maelstrom for examination. The alphabetical organization of this book serves this process, though at times (when so much is packed in under several dates in 1915), it seems like a slightly lazy one. As a creative artist, Codrescu witnessed many of the most radical aes-

Andrei Codrescu is a poet who early in his career was recommended to us teenage dadapuppies by one of our hippest high school teachers. More recently, Codrescu is known as an intelligent National Public Radio commentator, a sage with an accent reflecting Romanian roots similar to those of his countryman Tristan Tzara. Being of the generation that grew up with the posthuman dada, whose historical constellation of dada, whose parts he seizes and fishes out from the maelstrom for examination. The alphabetical organization of this book serves this process, though at times (when so much is packed in under several dates in 1915), it seems like a slightly lazy one. As a creative artist, Codrescu witnessed many of the most radical aes-

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**The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara & Lenin Play Chess**


**Reviewed by Michael R. (Mike) Mosher, Saginaw Valley State University. E-mail: <mosher@svsu.edu>**

When I was in high school, my art gang and I swore by Hans Richter’s Dada: Art & Anti-Art. This tome was full of tales, a swashbuckling old artist spinning anecdotes—yet in a scholarly way—about fascinating characters. My classmate was inspired by it to make a short Super-8mm film biography of prizefighter Arthur Cravan, that (in his movie’s title) “Dada Bantamweight Rascal.” The Posthuman Dada Guide makes for a similarly useful handbook on dadaism for a student’s backpack, thin enough to poke out of a jeans pocket like a travel guide.

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thetic ideas of the century tamed into fashion and commodity and academic curricula.

Today, almost everything you’re wearing or thinking that gives you the slightest bit of subversive pleasure comes from a dead dadaist. Janco’s costumes for Huenbeck, for instance, have been recycled by fashion so many times, there are now real bishops wearing them (p. 95).

There is wit here, which is essential for dada (though too often not for the humorless surrealists). There are some nice passages of poetic imagery-hurling, which would only look precious if quoted out of context but enliven the chapters in which they appear, often at their conclusive and climactic endings. And, in the spirit of the dandy gossipmonger Hans Richter, Codrescu tosses out parenthetical asides that maddeningly cry for unpacking over a pitcher of mojitos: a linkage of dadaism and vampirism elicits “Wherever there is cable, there I am,” Grampa Munster [Al Lewis] said to me in Havana, 1996.” Was Cuban dadaist Francis Picabia also at the table, André? Lily Munster on Fidel’s arm?

Any reviewer in Michigan takes pleasure, although reservedly, in Codrescu’s references to dada in our rustbelt. He conflates two years worth of events that include a Living Theater university performance, an urban anarchists’ disinformation project an hour away, and a student reviewer’s opportune, zeitgeist-grabbing “Paul is Dead” college newspaper hoax . . . but Codrescu’s seamless fabric does weave it—normalize it—all into a jolly, fast-moving story.

Because (snicker) after all, Dada is Normal, and Normal is Nice.

WHITE HEAT COLD LOGIC: BRITISH COMPUTER ART 1960–1980


Reviewed by Jon Bedworth, Brighton, U.K. E-mail: <jon.bedworth@gmail.com>.

This book has been an inspirational read. This is particularly so because, along with the well-researched academic chapters, there are many chapters in which various practitioners from the period recall their own experiences. These chapters really bring the subject alive, providing a personal dimension to the broader historical analyses of the period made by authors who were not directly involved.

It has been instructive to read about how these practitioners overcame technological limitation and institutional resistance in order to create work that remains inspiring today. From the various personal recollections, one gets a sense of how early computer art was created through a painstakingly laborious, time-consuming process. Examples include Harold Cohen’s description of learning to program FORTRAN and Malcolm Le Grice’s account of how it took him 9 months to create 8 seconds of computer-generated film.

The results of such efforts have a continued, or perhaps rediscovered, contemporary relevance beyond the world of “computer art.” For example, Gordon Pask’s Colloquy of Mobiles dealt with themes of sexual selection and signaling behavior explored more recently in situated robotics, while Edward Ihnatowicz’s Senster is an early example of the type of bottom-up approach to engineering later exemplified in the mid-1980s by Rodney Brooks’s behavior-based robotics. Paul Brown recalls how, during the 1970s, he and others at the Slade School of Fine Art were dealing with certain themes associated with “artificial life” before the term was coined. Similarly, Stephen Willats’s conceptual drawing Virtual Reality Booth was created in the mid-1960s, many years before Jaron Lanier popularized the term.

Overall, the ambitions of these early projects left the impression that much current work is something of a reinvention of the wheel or, more charitably, that much current work is following in the footsteps of these early pioneers. Tantalizingly, there may be much more to draw on, as Brian Reffin Smith writes: “There is a mine, a treasure trove, a hoard—I cannot emphasize this too strongly—of art ideas that emerged in the early decades of computers that still have not remotely been explored” (p. 388).

This period in the development of computer art is marked by a symbiosis of art ideas that occurred between artists, engineers and scientists working together, blurring the boundaries between art and other disciplines. In pursuit of their goals several of these artists were also in effect engineers, willing to learn to use technology rather than get others to do it for them. An example being Ihnatowicz, whose approach, according to Aleksander Zivanovic, “was closer to engineering than to conventional art” (p. 108). There could also be two-way traffic, as computer programmers became artists (for example, John Vince at Middlesex Polytechnic).

This book also provides a wider context for understanding computer art during this period, both in terms of its relation to broader artistic concerns, such as constructivism, and as a demonstration of how progress in the arts does not exist in isolation from the wider cultural opinion of the time. Government and industry provided much of the funding and technical means, making the title of this book, with its reference to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s “white heat of technology” speech, especially apt. In particular, government support for the creation of polytechnics seemed a pivotal development that led to much multi-disciplinary research because of a “collaborative research-based culture” (Mason, p. 254). Then there was the military, for, as Gustav Metzger said in 1971, “the true avant-garde is the army” (cited by Ford on p. 171).

In conclusion, this book is about considerably more than an academic history of the computer arts. It is also a record of the passion, difficulties and relationships that made this period of experimentation and advancement possible, a period that seems to define our own in many ways. It is hoped, therefore, that this book finds a wide audience beyond artists interested particularly in the computer arts.
Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice


Reviewed by Rob Harle, Australia. E-mail: <harle@dodo.com.au>.

This book is a scholarly investigation into the nature and state of contemporary aesthetics. There are 18 contributors, mostly academics, who approach the notoriously slippery subject of aesthetics from three broadly different disciplines—art history, philosophy and art practice.

The contributors to this volume do not adopt a coherent and agreed line. This is to be expected as they come from different theoretical and practical backgrounds whose presuppositions and practices are being reshaped in significant ways as interpretations and debate emerge (p. 11).

Rediscovering Aesthetics is not a popular style book for the general reader. It is deeply philosophical, highly theoretical and at times abstruse. This is not a criticism per se—the subject matter, aesthetics as differentiated from art, warrants such deep investigation and discussion. The book is directed toward students, cultural theorists, philosophers and possibly artists who are grappling with the present volatility, constant changeability and, some would argue, fundamental vacuity of contemporary art. As the editors suggest, contemporary aesthetics is a discipline under construction (p. 11).

Following a period in which theories and histories of art, art criticism, and artistic practice seemed to focus exclusively on political, social or empirical interpretations of art, aesthetics is being discovered as both a vital arena for discussion and as a valid interpretive approach outside its traditional philosophical domain (back cover).

Without boring the reader with details, I will insert a reminder that aesthetics, beauty (a term often used in defining aesthetics) and art are not synonymous or necessarily interchangeable terms. Technically, aesthetics is the philosophical study of art, as originated in Greek times and then further expanded by Baumgarten in the 18th century and then even further by many of the great philosophers, especially Kant, Schiller and Hegel. Part one of the book addresses some of these issues from the perspective of art history, discussing the contribution of many of these philosophers.

This book, I am sure, will have the effect of awaking aesthetics from its present coma. Aesthetics was already stale and slumbering when the anti-aesthetic postmodernist movement put it into this coma. Darmuid Costello’s essay, “Retrieving Kant’s Aesthetics for Art Theory after Greenberg,” is a brilliant piece of work and shows just how much influence some critics have—for good or ill. “I take it uncontroversially—that the widespread marginalization of aesthetics in postmodern art theory may be attributed to the success of the art critic and theorist Clement Greenberg” (p. 117) [my italics].

It is my contention that any discussion regarding deep-seated human concerns such as aesthetics and linguistics that ignores biological underpinnings is doomed to be inadequate from the start. Like most other works on aesthetics, this book does not consider in any detail such biological traits as especially relevant to the discussion. Why humans need to make art, why beauty is such a perennial issue, needs to be considered in depth alongside the philosophical issues. I have made such a contribution to this side of the debate in a recently published paper—“Biobehavioral Basis of Art” [1]—that synthesizes the theories of Dissanayake and Joyce.

This criticism aside, I am sure this book will infuriate and challenge many readers, engage them at a deep intellectual level, pave the way for a new understanding of aesthetics and become a core text for many cultural theory, philosophy and art history courses.

Reference

FROM PAPYRUS TO HYPERTEXT: TOWARD THE UNIVERSAL DIGITAL LIBRARY


Reviewed by Kathrine Elizabeth Anker (Nærum, Denmark). E-mail: <keanker@get2net.dk>.

The book places itself within the central debate of the late 1990s concerning the status and future of print books and hypertext. It is written in an essayist style, with 40 short nodes, each relating to central topics of the debate. Vandendorpe relates contemporary and future concerns to relevant historical themes. He thereby integrates relevant observations of ancient writing cultures, from the Renaissance to our time, with present hypertext problematics. The essayist style and the small nodes allow him to place his historical observations...
in a non-linear, thematic organization, which makes the book less heavy and more in tune with present hypertext writing style. In this way he treats central, concrete cultural and philosophical issues that all seem to be affected by the shift from the centrality of print to the computer as the primary text organiser and comes up with many relevant reflections. From *Papyrus to Hypertext* places itself in a line of hypertext theory that can be seen as commencing with Jay David Bolter’s (1991) *Writing Space*, George Landow’s (1992) *Hypertext 2.0* and Espen Aarseth’s (1997) *Cybertext*. Whereas Bolter and Landow had an evolutionary, text-philosophical perspective, Aarseth was more pragmatic in trying to create an overall concept of text that could refer to both print and computer generated text.

Günther Kress in *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003) and Christiane Heibach in *Litteratur im elektronischen Raum* (2003) continue this aim and attempt to create new concepts and a new vocabulary, one that can embrace the characteristics of multisensoric multimedia text and make the importance of medium explicit. In this context Vandendorpe’s philosophical, essayist style seems more related to the first line of hypertext theoretics. However, at a text-philosophical level, he does engage in questions concerning the future of the novel and the academic thesis, which must be seen as questions that are still unresolved and thus relevant.

In relation to a contemporary English-speaking audience within the field of hypertext theory, one has to regret that the translation was not made earlier. New media develop fast, and people adapt to new habits just as fast. In the 1990s the web page was still a new phenomenon for the broad public. Today it is so common that one hardly thinks about it. The debate on hypertext culture versus the traditions of print culture already seems ancient, and the main messages of the book are neither as new nor as relevant as a computer generated text.

Between Earth and Sky is a wonderful study on trees by a world-renowned canopy biologist, weaving personal stories, scientific knowledge, poetry and—although to a much lesser extent—photography into a very readable companion to all one may want to know about trees (this is the point of view of the reader) as well as to all one should know about them (this would be the point of view of the author, who does much more than just love the object of her research). In the first place, however, this is a feel-good book with a clear message: Trees are not just a fascinating part of nature, they are also immensely profitable for humans.

Having received a Guggenheim Fellowship to support the public dissemination of her work, Nadkarni knows how to raise interest in her passion for trees among a wide range of audiences, including those who never go to science museums or read books. The author’s strong commitment as well as her ability to entertain—in the good sense of the word—are well illustrated in *Between Earth and Sky*, which does tackle the issue from a very singular perspective, namely the way trees help us to be(come) more human. It explains what trees are, how they are built, how they function in their environment and how they form forests, but not why cultures have selected this or that “idea” of a tree (why we want trees to resemble human bodies, or vice versa, for instance), nor why certain ideas of trees are being challenged or chased by other ones (what does Deleuze’s plea for the rhizome, which brings him explicitly to make a case against trees, mean for the cultural paradigm we are living in?). In short, Nadkarni’s science is real science (and one really learns a lot) but it remains light science (and after reading this book one understands why Nadkarni receives so many invitations to speak to all kind of audiences, from political lobby groups to churchgoers). As a corollary, the environmentalist issues are of course present throughout the book—and one can only admire the author’s acute sense of an ethics of care—but the level on which Nadkarni discusses them is always the strictly personal one: People first have to understand what trees can mean for them; then they will behave differently and life will become nicer and brighter. Her proposal to reduce the recidivism rate in state prison through gardening can be a good example of this attitude. A dendrophile myself, I will not contest these benefits, but the author’s innate optimism and good temper are sometimes a little one-dimensional. Therefore, the reader will have to complement this study with darker ones, such as Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), a cultural and literary history of the “deforestation” of the Western imagination (usefully included by the author herself in the final list of recommended readings).

The basic structure of the book obeys two different logics. First of all, Nadkarni follows Abraham Maslow’s well-known schema of human needs (cf. his 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation”) and expands it in a personal version that resembles—yes—a kind of Christmas tree with eight layers: physical needs, security, health, play and imagination, time and history, symbols and language, spirituality, and mindfulness. Each of the chapters (after an introductory chapter offering some very interesting basic information on the definition of trees and forests, with amazing insights on the study of canopy life) gives a global overview of what trees have to offer in all these respects—always with a very
strong emphasis on the positive aspects of trees. In Nadkarni’s worldview, trees only give shelter; they never kill people when they fall upon them, so to speak. In spite of these restrictions, one can only say that the story told is very convincing. The second major aspect of the book’s structure is its transcultural dimension: Nadkarni reconciles the viewpoints of many different people—peasants and city-dwellers, canopy scholars and Inuit who have never seen a tree in their lives, artists and prison inmates—as well as she manages to seamlessly gather Western and non-Western or contemporary and less-modern voices. This is a great achievement, and the resulting homogenization cleverly underlines the very holistic approach of man and tree in the book.

Targeting a very broad audience, the author has nevertheless managed to present here an amazing wealth of scientific data on trees. Yet the presentation of these data is always extremely user friendly and constantly highlighted by the use of a kind of material that is usually missing in scientific prose, even if it belongs to the subfield of scientific vulgarization: poetry. Nadkarni’s book is also a personal anthology of poetry on trees, and this is a refreshing decision.

RACING THE BEAM: THE ATARI VIDEO COMPUTER SYSTEM


Reviewed by Robert Jackson, U.K. E-mail: <robert.jackson@plymouth.ac.uk>.

Racing the Beam is the first of a new publication series entitled “Platform Studies.” The authors, Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (who are also the editors of the series), are highly established videogame researchers and theorists themselves, so it seems only fitting that they wish to start the proceedings with a detailed analysis of the Atari Video Computer System 2600 (or VCS for short).

Although digital media researchers are beginning to investigate how software and code provide useful insights into the cultural use of computers and digital objects, Montfort and Bogost argue that few media theorists actually analyze the platform systems themselves, where the code is programmed and executed. Studies in computer science and engineering have addressed the question of how platforms are best developed and what is best encapsulated in the platform. Studies in digital media have addressed the cultural relevance of particular software of platforms. But little work has been done on how the hardware and software of platforms influences, facilitates, or constrains particular forms of computational expression (p. 3).

Racing the Beam is an attempt to do this, and credit goes to the authors, for what makes this book such an appealing read is the unwavering focus on a remarkable piece of limited technology. If one were to compare a platform study of the VCS with its contemporaries, namely, the early microcomputers (Commodore 64, BBC Micro, TRS 80) fitted with BASIC, a microcomputer platform study would require a greater level of complexity (for example the interaction between its hardware components and operating system). For the purposes of a short and engaging read, a platform study into a narrow, restrictive piece of technology such as the VCS (which never even had an operating system) is for the reader an accommodating move.

The book is split into eight chapters, six of which cover seminal games and arcade conversions for the platform: Combat, Adventure, Pac-Man, Yars’ Revenge, Pitfall! and Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. Detailed analyses into these retro-emblematic pieces of game culture are actually prisms that shed light onto the creativity of the respective game developers. The two remaining chapters offer a brief introduction and an extensive conclusion on the VCS’s influence on contemporary videogame culture.

The title, Racing the Beam, refers to the centerpiece of the Atari VCS; “The processor is always called the ‘brain’ of a computer, and indeed, the MOS Technology 6507 is the Atari VCS’s brain. But the custom Television Adapter (TIA) is its heart” (p. 27). The authors do a commendable job of elucidating the components of the VCS in an engaging style without compromising on technicality. This also serves to clarify the historical and economic conditions in which the VCS technology was developed, and it is this rigorous, thorough contextualization that stops the reader from over-scanning through the VCS’s technical details. The authors elaborate on specific relationships between all the platform’s components in a relatively lucid manner. For instance, the authors dedicate a large portion of the book to the VCS’s low memory constraints—a result of the huge manufacturing costs of memory in the late 1970s. The VCS shipped with 128 bytes of RAM and no disk storage; its interchangeable ROM game cartridges shipped with typically 4K of memory (or in some cases, such as the included game Combat, only 2K). Such monumental technological constraints forced developers to wring every last drop of processing space out of the VCS in order to develop games that had some chance of industry success. In this sense, Racing the Beam recounts the ingenuity of designers in coming to terms with the weakness of the platform.

The previously mentioned TIA chip is an early highlight in this regard. Atari developed the TIA, code-named Stella, to power the VCS’s sound and graphics, but in reality it actually had to do much more. The VCS had to be able to output universal and representable graphics on all cathode ray tube televisions (CRT) at that time. CRT televisions work by firing patterns of electrons at glass layered with phosphors from one corner of the screen to the other and then refreshing the process. Then-current computer systems and arcade cabinets could manipulate the electron gun in accordance with the computer’s hardware, but the Atari VCS was extremely limited in comparison.

The machine is not equipped with enough memory to store an entire screen’s worth of data in a frame buffer. The 128 bytes of RAM in the system are
not even enough to store one eight-bit color value for every line of the 192-line visible display (p. 27).

Subsequent chapters reveal the creative lengths to which VCS programmers needed to go in order to create just a simple working videogame. Each cartridge had to be written manually, line by line, so that it worked in harmony with the television’s electron gun. Through such examples, the authors reveal again and again how severe limitations can force new artistic processes. A particular highlight is how designers of Pitfall! managed to procedurally generate 255 explorative “screens” using hardly any ROM space.

For those who have an interest in the culture and history of retro gaming, Racing the Beam is an obvious choice. But this book may also be a less obvious choice for those interested in how artistic expression can be affected by material limitations. Furthermore, there is a hint in Racing the Beam that the very objects we create seemingly have their own agenda. Perhaps this book can be seen as an attempt to re-establish digital media as equally participating objects (or actors) in their own right, rather than privileging the digital realm as a means to facilitate human communication and exchange. It can be said (and the authors insinuate this in an intriguing manner) that Racing the Beam transforms a historical piece of videogame culture into an object with curious agency.

**The Poetics of DNA**


Reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg, U.S.A.
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With DNA, abracadabra’s triangle is reduced to three letters (note 7, p. 232).

Genes act like we think we do (p. 119).

The Poetics of DNA, an elegant intellectual adventure, could have been more accurately titled The Politics of DNA Discourse. It proposes that the process of identifying and describing the “DNA gene” has served as a means for allaying fear of change and for rewriting “the truth of humanity in safe and conservative terms” (p. 27). An important book for science and social science, being one that provides fascinating critical thinking on singularly important issues of our time, it might well invoke consternation from scientists. Why? Judith Roof argues throughout that the idea of DNA and the gene are ideological constructions rather than scientific facts and that they serve as vectors for promoting homophobic, sexist and racist discourses.

Roof writes that the humanities can show science “how the relation between science and representation produces a paradox that is self-contained in the figure of DNA’s double helix” (p. 22). In arguing against the use of linguistic and structuralist models and analogies in science, the following sentences are paradigmatic of the whole, synecdochal if you will:

> The gene is the imaginary embodiment of a binary principle never detached from ideas of gender, the logic of heterosexual reproduction, or the structure of kinship . . . . The DNA gene is the perfect synthesis . . . the signer par excellence, whose significance reflects all other significance and whose imagined operation enacts the structuralist principle by which it is situated as a reduction of all (p. 48).

In all this, DNA and genes are imagined as surreptitious narrative double agents that serve to reproduce dominant misogynistic ideologies.

As a consequence of the seriousness of Roof’s postmodernist political critiques of one of the most important areas of scientific research of the 20th century, this study should perhaps be debated first and foremost by scientists, who might be interested in reflecting on the consequences it could have for their own work, conceptually speaking. While that is relatively unlikely, this book will certainly provide for lively debate in graduate seminars on the history of science. Ideally, it will impel students to return to Watson’s epiphany and the importance Erwin Schrödinger’s text What Is Life? (1946) played in eventually involving that epic discovery.

Although the author is careful to state that the book is not ultimately about the “truth”-value of DNA or the complexities of molecular biology, my reaction as a reader with an undergraduate degree in molecular biology and a doctorate in symbolic anthropology is that ultimately that is exactly what is at stake here. Herein the value of a study such as this goes far beyond a better public understanding of the debate over the nature of DNA and the gene and the implications. Its value should finally be judged in terms of what all of this means in the end for the field of molecular biology itself. It is no doubt fascinating to read how DNA serves as a cultural form, as a vehicle for chauvinist patriarchal hegemony, but in the end, deoxyribonucleic acid exists and its structure and basic biochemical function is certainly not the height of the imagination. That is the fact of the matter, and as science advances, we progressively learn more and more about the complexities of the system and especially the role mRNA plays, and therein lies the poetry of it all. As I see it, then, the most important question to ask must remain how this study might or might not inform the thinking of molecular biologists with a broad enough interest in the humanities to seriously consider the arguments made here. Will The Poetics of DNA have any influence on future scientific investigation and insight into the nature and function of DNA itself?

While Roof is careful to note that she is referring to the use of figurative speech referring to genes and DNA, of the consequences of imagining them in terms of texts, codes, ciphers, metaphors and metonyms, the discussion consistently refers back directly to DNA or the gene, or the DNA gene, such that it can be argued that contrary to the argument that the subject is how DNA has been imagined and how that knowledge has been used, in the end we are still struggling to better understand and describe molecular chemistry, if it is even possible do to so without figurative language and dynamic structuralist models. To reiterate the essence of this review, we must simply ask: If the arguments made here are significant enough to give scientists cause for concern, then how might this book allow us to both better understand and advance molecular biology, the indisputable progress in understanding the structure and operation of DNA and mRNA and the awe-inpiring complexity of biochemical processes relating to genetics specifically and biological systems in general?

As regards the underlying logic in The Poetics of DNA, Roof understands DNA as a metaphor and the structure of DNA as metonymic. From this conceptual template she develops the very interesting notions of the metaphorical and synecdochal gene and narrative “gene DNA.” In this, according to Roof, DNA “stands for the gene as its synecdochic” (p. 6), meaning simply that it encompasses a general causal explanation for heredity and everything connected to inheritance. From there, she advances...
an argument for the role of the analogical figure in sustaining dominant Western patriarchal cultural hierarchies. Keeping such brief detail in mind, one can imagine the significant challenge this study will present to scientists not well enough versed in social science to be able to challenge the logic of her arguments on their own terms.

What The Poetics of DNA does is to very effectively bring together an intriguing range of the popular, scientific and philosophical literature on DNA to bear on the evolution of analogies, on the shifting metaphorical imperatives describing DNA—first so grandly as the “secret of life,” then the “book of life” and finally the less-magnificent “parts list” as hybrid metaphor. In doing so, Roof is able to explore fascinating and important issues concerning genetics, language, ideology and gender politics, as well as those of copyright and commodification and the implications all this has for the future. Apparently the crux of the matter is a clash of Enlightenment values, in which scientists seek explanatory factors, structures and mechanisms that humanistic social scientists necessarily reject as mere metaphoric vehicles for symbolic domination. Therein representations are always language- and culture-bound such that science is in effect ultimately a form of social science and not a separate realm with any specific claims to “truth” value.

It goes without saying that this book is avowedly political, that it has a very specific postmodernist agenda. Such arguments about the political uses of science and the misuse of science by pseudoscience are of immense importance in this age of the commodification of the gene. And yet all this critical insight also needs to be assessed in the tragic or stark comic light of the remarkable discovery of DNA and mRNA and the intricacies of these fields of investigation within molecular biology and biochemistry? And there, recognizing the majestic power of epiphany and the creative urge to determine structures, processes and principles of relations that drive science is of the essence. Thus take for instance the “uncanny description of the status of DNA at the identification of its structure” (note 7, p. 223) as Roof herself quotes from James Joyce:

"This is the moment that I call epiphany. First we recognize that the object is one integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is the thing which it is. Its soul, its whiteness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul is the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany."

And in this indeed, the discovery of DNA was as much art as science in terms of the style and suddenness in which it finally revealed itself (was revealed) through the workings of the engaged individual and collective scientific mind. (A fuller version of this review can be found at www.leonardo.info/ldr.)

FRENCH THEORY: HOW FOUCALUT, DERRIDA, DELEUZE, & CO. TRANSFORMED THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF THE UNITED STATES


Reviewed by Jennifer Ferng, Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, U.S.A. E-mail: <jferng@mit.edu>.

Artist and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel, who had imported beat poetry into France from the United States, once invited Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to a 1975 concert held in Massachusetts, where the two had the opportunity to meet Bob Dylan and Joan Baez backstage. Somewhat unimpressed with the two French philosophers, the folk singers had not bothered to read Anti-Oedipus, and likewise the two theorists were unfortunately not interested in smoking marijuana: an inadvertent misalignment of social interests, creating a somewhat awkward encounter for all parties involved. This anecdote of an ill-conceived compatibility epitomizes the spirit of comprehending the objectives of French theory and prompts an inevitable query: have we on the U.S. side of the Atlantic been able to come to terms with the French, their traditions of intellectual thought and their philosophical legacy?

Deleuze stated in Cinema I: The Movement Image that “Theory is itself a practice, no less than its object is. It is a conceptual practice, and it must be judged in terms of the other practices with which it interacts” (in an epigraph before French Theory’s preface), and if this inaugural quotation is an evocative portent, the book unfolds as a meta-narration of the historical misunderstandings, mistranslations and misappropriations that emerge from within the differing internal organizations of France and the United States, leading French theory into formidable political situations—involving Western capitalism, multiculturalism and post-colonialism, to list a few—and to all-star personalities such as Judith Butler, Edward Said and Frederic Jameson.

“The still unidentified flying object” known as French theory, a general term applied by Cusset himself throughout the book, which refers to the body of...
works originating in the 1960s and 1970s by theorists ranging from Deleuze to Virilio, remains an influential and preeminent set of academic methodologies, and there has not been a single discipline or field, including art, cultural studies, film, gender studies, history or literature, that has remained untouched by its pedagogical impetus.

Densely written, highly informed and comprehensive in its scope, connecting theory to the far-flung reaches of politics and social action both inside and outside the university setting, Cusset’s book, as translated from the original French, sets out in a cultivated, distinctive fashion to rediscover why American academics became so enamored with the ideas of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others such as Baudrillard. In his intricate descriptions of how these concepts were appropriated, skewed, then deployed in the service of politicized agendas that ranged from affirmative action to neocorporative crusades for counter-intelligence to deconstruction and postmodern architecture, the multifarious episodes and numerous examples are well-contextualized and historicized, expatiating how these reactionary thoughts were transmitted from French institutions and intellectual figures to those corresponding in the United States. What the French call “thought” is what Americans know as “theory,” or so claims Sylvère Lotringer, who edited an older volume of articles with Sande Cohen, similarly entitled French Theory in America (2001), and views the first book of French theory as John Cage’s For the Birds. For those not well versed in French philosophy, post-structuralism and Marxism, this book may prove to be a fairly difficult task, since Cusset assumes that the reader is familiar with the suppositions associated with Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze and is capable of seeing beyond the popularized associations of power, discipline, difference, and schizophrenia to some of the more sophisticated philosophical consequences of these arguments.

Three moments of cultural contact between France and the United States—the artistic and intellectual exiles who traveled from the U.S. between 1940 and 1945; the exportation of Surrealism, Sartrean existentialism and the ideas of the Annales group; and the October 1966 conference held at Johns Hopkins University—mark what Cusset views as integral, prolonged exchanges that revolutionized viewpoints for those in both countries. Alan Sokal’s notorious hoax article of 1996, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in the cultural studies journal Social Text, performs as a crux of vexation and controversy, launching debates about the merits of these theorists’ ideas, printed through underground publishing houses such as Semiotext(e) and communicated to an American audience in the 1970s, who, in turn, disseminated French theory through many seminars, conferences and artistic movements.

Cusset assembles his book around three central themes, although there are, in fact, many more that could be recognized: the French issue of writing that becomes the American issue of reading, how capitalism was transformed into the enigma of cultural identity, and how micropolitics turned into a different question of symbolic conflicts (the “denationalizing” of texts in a global market). French theorists cast representation and language as problems in specifying any goal, pressuring existentialists, structuralists, Marxists and feminists to surpass their critiques. While the entirety of the book is engaging but concentrated, two sections are rather compelling: Chapter 6, “The Politics of Identity,” and Chapter 12, “Theory as Norm: A Lasting Influence.” Intellectuals from the third world, as Cusset indicates, are forced to use the “arms of the adversary,” such as terms taken from the Enlightenment and rational progressivism, and the subaltern is often taken as the “blind spot of the historical process” (p. 147). French academics are set apart from the international networks set up by American universities, theorizing exile and miscegenation as a political condition of the contemporary subject (p. 296). How Foucault and Derrida are read directly in Mexico and Brazil, for example, produced entirely different readings than those generated from within the United States.

Stanley Fish, a literary critic who pokes at the uselessness of academics and who has also reviewed this book, does not believe that such intellectuals need be essential, stating, “Although the ‘textual’ or the ‘discursive’ is . . . a crucial site of social contestation, the people who study that site are not crucial players in the contest” (p. 157). Theory should be given a place in contemporary times and a global destiny to fulfill, as Cusset intimates; along these lines, what is the expected responsibility of a public intellectual in the United States, and how can academic encounters foster the adoption of given ideological policies related to the present global recession, climate change and the environment, or the crisis of the humanities in education? French society, Cusset insists, is just beginning to grasp the multiple subject and the consequences of intellectual isolation, where, in the words of Walter Benjamin, their drive for knowledge derives entirely from “a feeling of obligation, not to revolution but to traditional culture” (p. 323). By exploring social critique beyond Marx and continuing to exercise political vigilance (p. 330), French theory may bring about the convergence of opposing philosophical ideologies. It not only produced “intensive hypotheses, general and specific at the same time . . . on communitarian apparatuses, discursive regimes, or the machineries of capitalist desire,” but if it could reestablish opposition to polarized representations and binary discourses such as German Marxism and French Nietzscheanism and join such apparently disparate camps (p. 334), theory could coincide with forms of activism today (even in 1978, when Foucault was arrested for visiting both sides of Berlin). Oswald Spengler, in The Decline of the West, acknowledged the importance of the “art of deliberate misunderstanding” or “felicitous misreading,” which was indissociable from a culture’s pure essence, and this very act is what Cusset conjures for us and demands that we owe to the life of texts—or “the interval between the emergence of writing and its canonical normalization, between the logics of the intellectual field and the unpredictable dictabilities of posterity” (p. 338)—and to an existence of devoted political engagement, either at home or abroad, that will help us fathom the conditions of our changing world.

Leonardo Reviews On-Line

November 2009


Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology, edited by Marianne van den Boomen, Sybille Lammes, Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Joost
Raessens and Mirko Tobias Schäfer. Reviewed by Jan Baetens.


_Lucanamarca_ by Carlos Cárdenas and Héctor Gálvez. Reviewed by Mike Leggett.


_October 2009_


_Ars Electronica 2009_, Linz, Austria, 3–8 September, 2009. Reviewed by Yvonne Spielmann.

_Bioethics in the Age of New Media_ by Joanna Zylinska. Reviewed by Jussi Parikka.

_Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology_, edited by Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke. Reviewed by Maureen Nappi.


_Cracked Media—The Sound of Malfunction_ by Caleb Kelly. Reviewed by Giuseppe Pennisi.


_Sepetember 2009_


_Christ Marker: La Jetée_ by Janet Harbord. Reviewed by Mike Leggett.


_Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science_ by Hermann Weyl; Olaf Helmer, trans. Reviewed by Giuseppe Pennisi.


_The Theatre of Insects: Photographs by Jo Whaley_ by Jo Whaley, Linda Wiener and Deborah Klochko. Reviewed by Peter Smithers.

_The Hidden Face of Fear_ by Enrico Cerisuolo and Sergio Fergnachino, directors. Reviewed by Giuseppe Pennisi.

