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not thematically identical, each text
Reviewed by Maureen Nappi, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY, U.S.A. E-mail: <maureen.nappi@liu.edu>.

Digital Apollo: Human and Machine in Spaceflight, by the historian David A. Mindell, is the third book in what
the author describes as “an unplanned trilogy” (p. xi) or trajectory of historical scholarly pursuits. Although not thematically identical, each text in the series uniquely revolves around another triad of concerns: technological invention; associative human identity, control and experience; and war—ranging from the very hot to the very cold. As such, this quintessentially American trilogy follows a chronological timeline with increasing technological complexity. The first in the series is War, Technology, and Experience aboard the USS Monitor (2000), a fascinating study of the Union’s USS Monitor, a seafaring war vessel fatally utilized during the American Civil War; the second, Between Human and Machine: Feedback, Control, and Computing before Cybernetics (2002), is a historical recalibration of the pre-existence and utility of control systems theory before and during World War II, several years prior to its nominal invention by Norbert Weiner. The third is Digital Apollo, an engaging overview of the digital computer system in the Apollo space expeditions, considered so intrinsic to the missions that it was named by some to be the “fourth crew member.”

For Digital Apollo, Mindell received the Eugene M. Emme Astronautical Literature Award, named after the first NASA historian, Eugene M. Emme, and granted by the American Astronautical Society. AAS dualistically acronyms the organization’s mission statement, Advancing All Space, and as such honors AAS Fellows, including the founder of our beloved journal Leonardo, Frank Malina, for his pioneering contributions to space flight. However, this Rocketman, one of the original three, is disappointingly not cited in Digital Apollo, despite the use of his patented hydrazine-nitric acid mixture to propel the engines of the Apollo Service and Lunar Excursion Modules.

Mindell’s account places particular emphasis on the Automatic Guidance System (AGS) contracted to the MIT Instrumentation Laboratory, which has since been renamed the Draper Laboratory after its founder, Charles Stark Draper, and has left the auspices of the MIT, although the Draper Laboratory remains in close proximity to MIT’s main campus in Kendall Square. Nonetheless, the historical connections to MIT remain strong, as the author is not only the Frances and David Dibner Professor of the History of Engineering and Manufacturing, the director of the STS Program as well as a professor of aeronautics and astronautics but is also a historian of MIT.

With expert agility, Mindell dives into the mass of data surrounding the Apollo missions and homes in on and skillfully draws out the main plotline of the drama: the primordial struggle for control—man versus machine (as the astronauts were, by requirement, all male military test pilots). Since the Apollo missions were interestingly synchronous with the launch of the women’s liberation movement, spanning a time when job descriptions were rigidly codified and classified by gender, they thus were severely limiting in terms of what women could even conceive of doing or being. I sincerely appreciate and applaud the author’s use of the term Human in the subtitle of the book, as “Human and Machine in Spaceflight,” and would be offended were he to write otherwise; still it seems, unfortunately, to retrofit history while reminding those who remember the Apollo missions that the exclusion of women


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in spaceflight was then considered a priori. No fault of the author here; however, this clearly remains a historian’s dilemma.

Regardless, Mindell deftly builds upon the technological tug-of-war drama between the astronauts and the design engineers, or, more precisely, the amount of control and flying power the astronauts were to have in the Apollo missions versus the design engineers’ more automatized vision of their role. The strongest proponent of automation was none other than Werner von Braun, of Operation Paperclip fame, a fact that the author nimbly evades but that remains vestigially reminiscent of more fascistic control.

Mindell, however, gives voice to the astronauts, as Digital Apollo echoes its origins as a collaborative oral history endeavor entitled the “Apollo Guidance Computer History Project,” funded by the Sloan Foundation and the former Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at MIT, which assembled many of the still living participants in the Apollo missions. And as it turned out, the astronauts triumphantly ascended to being more than what they derivisely termed “Spam in the Can.” In each of the six Apollo lunar landings, the commanding astronaut “took control from the computer and landed with his hand on the stick,” thus not only asserting [hu]man power over machine but making for a great read as well.

PREMEDIATION: AFFECT AND MEDIAILITY AFTER 9/11


Reviewed by Jussi Parikka, Anglia Ruskin University and CoDE-Institute, Cambridge, U.K. E-mail: <jussi.parikka@anglia.ac.uk>.

Richard Grusin’s Remediation (co-authored with Jay David Bolter) has become core reading in media studies and cognate disciplines’ curricula, and with a new book out called Premediation, there is a temptation to read it as a mere updating of the remediation thesis introduced some 10 years earlier. Remediation came out at a good moment in the midst of an interest in drawing theoretical concepts and methodology from old media and new media in parallel lines and added to that theoretical context its own input. Understanding new media from computer games to the World Wide Web through the very McLuhanesque theoretical idea of remediation was further elaborated in the book through the double logic of mediation in new media cultures. It was not solely an idea stating that new media circulates old media (even if articulating that the novel inventions had strong repercussions in understanding the prolonged lifetime of old media, with resonances to such work as Erkki Huhtamo’s on the recurring topos of media culture), but an elaboration of the constant tension between discursive immediacy and hypermediacy as aesthetic strategies. In the words of that earlier book, “Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (p. 5). Actually, Grusin himself is keen to establish continuities between Remediation and Premediation. He describes this new research concept and the book as a continuation or a counterpart to the earlier project, a new form of a media logic that is especially visible after 9/11, which is for Grusin the key turning point. However, I would argue that these books are quite different in their take and style, and that Premediation is not only a complementary project to the earlier one; the clear-cut “adaptability,” to use a word that of course does not entirely catch the full breadth of Remediation, is in Premediation applied toward a more refined conceptual arsenal that articulates premediation more clearly as non-representational, material and affect-based logic of media.

Grusin outlines his new interest in media logic that tries to come to grips with futurity as the new horizon for politics of media cultures. Indeed, smoothly written and mapping his interests as part of the wider development of post-9/11 culture, he articulates the shift from the more screen-based emphasis of Remediation to his current interests in social networking and software-based cultural production. A key current concept is “affect,” which both resonates with some recent trends in cultural theory even branded as the “affective turn” and acts for Grusin as a way to understand the embodied nature of our behavior in network environments—behavior that is fully embedded in a politics of anticipation that he sees as a new version or perhaps as a replacement of what such writers as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer articulated as the emblematic distraction inherent in cinematic modernity.

Premediation is defined in the book in various but converging ways that all seem to contextualize it as a regime of security, temporality and processes of mediation after 9/11. Hence, as Grusin admits, it is primarily a book about America, even if post-9/11 culture has had its global wakes. Premediation is about such futures that are already present—the idea or feeling that “the future has already been pre-mediated before it turns into the present (or the past),” hence the need for a kind of a remediation of the future in order to “maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11” (p. 4).

Premediation works through the idea of media as objects and “mediation itself as an object” (p. 5) through which to investigate the mobilization of bodies in this security regime. Hence Premediation takes much of its theoretical background from Foucault, especially the idea of governmentality—how to govern people and things, with the emphasis in Premediation heavily on things, as Grusin wants to steer clear of too human-focused perspectives. Whereas Grusin would have benefited from a more in-depth engagement of Foucault’s texts on security as a post-disciplinary logic of governing, he does however present a mostly convincing case in terms of how we should rethink media as a material translation, a
meditation process that escapes representational frameworks. Indeed, the book is not only about Foucault but draws heavily from Latour as well—and Deleuze, when Grusin argues that premediation is not only a creation of possible futures in a videogame logic of algorithmic possibilities (if this choice is made, then this and that happens). Instead, premediation works through the virtual as understood by the Bergsonian Deleuze, that is, a governing of the future present as a multiplicity that is brought about. Grusin writes: “While premediation often takes the form (as in the run-up to the Iraq War) of the proliferation of specific possibilities, or particular scenarios, the generation of these specific possibilities entails the remediation of potentialities or virtualities out of which future actions, decisions, or events might (or might not) emerge” (p. 59). This theoretical move is to be welcomed as it adds complexity to the logic of premediation but would have benefited from more discussion, as there is a constant danger of pulling the radically open-ended ontogenetic concept of virtuality into the regime of possibility and rationalization of the future. In any case, his discussion has a clear context in contemporary cultural theory with Brian Massumi’s interest in futurity and security, and Greg Ulmer and Andy Opel’s project and little book Preempting Dissent.

For a short book that tries to emphasize the importance of software cultures and social media, there is relatively a lot of emphasis in terms of page count on such case studies as Don DeLillo’s novel The Falling Man (2007) and especially Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel series In the Shadow of No Towers (2004). Grusin does, however, also engage with such social media phenomena as the Abu Ghraib photos in their medial logic. What could have been perhaps further elaborated is the logic of anticipation and its relation to distraction. Grusin’s reading might have actually benefited from a further historical insight offered by Jonathan Crary, whose reading of the concepts of distraction/attention as part of the creation of modern media culture would have offered a further complexity to the suggested newness of anticipation as part of social media cultures—in short, for Crary even cinematic modernity is not only one of distraction but also a continuous drilling for a temporal, fluctuating and attention-demanding physiological state of being, which in itself is closely related to “anticipation.” As always, any good book is a starting point for further thoughts and elaborations, and Grusin’s intervention into the politics of affect and security is an extremely important one.

**Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture**


 Reviewed by Jan Baetens. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.ac.be>.

One of the most widespread cultural stereotypes of our postmodern times is undoubtedly the supposed incompatibility of books and electronic media. Just as video killed the radio star (but did it, really?), the Internet, the e-book and Kindle are killing the book, hardback or paperback. The countless official reports on the erosion of reading habits and the alarming shrinking of time spent with a book in our hands are all based on that same hypothesis: as soon as other media pop up (yesterday, film and television; today, games and other digital media), the position of the book is in clear danger; certainly this is the case for the groups of readers who are insufficiently educated or lack the cultural capital to resist the temptations of the non-book forces.

The starting point of Jim Collins’s timely book (also available as an e-book, I imagine) is that this opposition is not what can be observed when we look around. On the contrary: Books are everywhere now, including places where they had been completely absent until now (small-town America, for instance, thanks to the spread of chain stores such as Barnes and Noble and Borders). They are heavily promoted (as sexy, seductive objects), and they are also massively sold and marketed (mainly through the Internet, but not without the help of very “physical” groupings of people such as book clubs or reading groups). In the book business, sales figures are not shrinking, even if the types of books that are sold may no longer be the same as the ones academic gatekeepers have always dreamed of selling.

The ambition of Collins’s study is not just to describe this phenomenon, although this is what the author is doing as well, often in very unexpected and refreshing ways, but to try to understand it, without condemning or defending the new forms of popular reading such as. In both cases, Collins manages with great acuteness and with a great sense of humor and (self-)irony to make us think differently on matters that will not leave any reader indifferent.

For Collins the most striking features of the recent evolutions of reading in popular culture (the title of the book is an allusion to a ritual sentence that punctuates Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club shows) are more complex than it is often assumed. First of all, he underlines the fact that popular reading has dramatically changed in the last two or three decades (actually, since the emergence of the personal computer and the subsequent restructuring of social interaction). Popular reading is no longer a middle-brow attempt to catch up with something that is “missing” (mainly education, as formerly dispensed by qualified institutions) and whose “lack” is considered a major problem. Rather, it is a way of self-development. Second, this reading as self-development approach is no longer governed or determined by the authoritative voice of specialists (professors, national critics and so on). Instead, it is organized by the readers themselves, not in a purely individual way (that would be the populist option of the newly discovered readers’ agency: I decide all by myself what is good or bad, and my taste is as good as yours) but via an intense dialogue with peer readers (one might call this the interactivist model: readers refuse to rely on the traditional gatekeepers; at the same time, however, they eagerly team up with others in all kinds of new social networks to try to find out what is good and what is bad).

For Collins this shift from “old” to “new” popular reading, that is, from reading “guided” by prestigious others to reading in which the readers themselves are taking the initiative, is not simply a shift from one type of reading to another. If today’s popular readers have achieved agency, it is because the traditional system has collapsed. There is now, in wide circles of non-specialized and non-professional readers, an awareness that the system has failed, mainly because an excess of theory and formalism has separated reading from life. Therefore, university professors and great critics are no longer taken seriously, their advice is no longer followed, and readers turn toward books.
with completely different expectations and in a totally different spirit. What popular readers are interested in is not what books mean in them, but what books can mean for them, what they can bring to their life. It is only this crucial shift that explains why people continue to read, and even do it more often and more passionately than before: Reading has remained or become so important for non-professional readers because they find in books something that cannot be given by other media, and this “something” is socially organized and networked self-help and development of personal taste.

For taste, besides the ideology of self-help, is the second key term of contemporary popular reading. Here, the author also stresses the link between the vanishing of classic taste standards (the ones offered by a classic college education) and the appearance of new attempts to discover, through dialogue and debate with peers in new social networks, what might be the standards that should be followed. Once again, this is quite different from the populist version of mass culture, which reduces discussions on taste to individual preferences or, rather, sees these discussions as frequently biased and a manipulation by the mass media. The aspect of taste is decisive when it comes to book culture: If reading is so important in an age in which nobody is supposed to read anymore, and certainly not in those social groups accused of being narcotized by television and other visual media, it is because of the capacity of books to play a role in the shaping and organization of one’s own life style—an issue whose importance has not been repeated.

As Collins argues, it is perfectly possible to consider these new forms of reading, in which books may seem a pure alibi for something else, as “the end of civilized reading” (as reads the title of his first chapter). Yet this viewpoint is too elitist and it certainly despises the vitality of popular culture and its manifold interactions with mass media. Without Amazon, Google, Kindle and the social interaction enabled by new media, the new reading culture would have been unthinkable. But this reading culture not only destroys old forms of book culture (the independent bookshop or the independent publisher, as demonstrated by critical voices such as André Schiffrin, whose theses are not discarded as elite or old-fashioned by Collins), it also merges with them and changes them in totally unexpected forms (for instance, a Barnes and Noble bookshop is now functioning as a library, yet it is a library without well-informed librarians, since the policy of the company is to hire people with no special knowledge of books, in order to avoid any social connection between the sellers and customers!). Deconstructionist interpretations of the digital revolution in literature have been prophesying for many years the progressive blurring of boundaries between reading and writing: This is clearly not what is happening in serious fiction or scholarship (dear reader, have you ever tried to modify just one single character in an essay by a major representative of French Theory and to publish it as “your” text?), but it happens daily in these new forms of popular reading, where readers really can write—because what is at stake is no longer the “text” but the way one absorbs it into one’s own life.

Since the frontiers between texts and life tend to vanish, it is only normal that literature (in the sense of fiction) is no longer restricted to books only. Literature becomes an experience that can and must migrate from one medium to another. It is another word for “something that changes” your life and that can therefore be perfectly found and realized through, for instance, film but also through a wide range of practices (cooking, wine connoisseurship, interior design, dating, lovemaking, etc.) that are covered by the notion of lifestyle. In this regard, Collins’s book proposes crucial and field-expanding analyses of “cineliterature,” more specifically of the particular forms that are taken by the age-old phenomenon of filmic adaptation of literary materials. Following the defense of a more sociological approach to adaptation made by scholars such as Robert Stam, he argues, very convincingly, first that adaptation has become a major force in post-classic Hollywood and second that adaptation today obeys the same rules as the popular book culture that he analyzes here. Indeed, the books that are being adapted are those that belong to the same universe as the “typical” books that circulate in the books clubs and reading groups (i.e. books that we can discuss with our communities rather than books that we read, in the old, “civilized” meaning of the word) and that in addition to this can be perfectly integrated in the merger of book culture and lifestyle culture. For Collins, the Merchant-Ivory productions have been paramount in this regard: Furniture is the leading actor here, and discussions on good taste fill the screen. The author goes even further, his final chapter suggesting that the exchanges between film and literature cannot be limited to the reuse of literature by Hollywood. They go the other way round as well. The contemporary hype of “lit lit” (a notion ironically coined after “chick lit” and referring to the obsessive presence in modern fiction of writers, preferably of writers with a strong interest in lifestyle and reading, preferably of reading of the same kind as the one practiced by passionate book-clubbers) is for Collins one of the literary answers to the spread of the new popular book culture in which the reading of books is presented as something that can change one’s life and that one should therefore crave at each moment of the day.

Despite his visible sympathy for the phenomenon that he scrutinizes and his overall optimism concerning the future of reading, Jim Collins is far from a naïve defender of popular culture. The stances he takes in his book are not at all populist, but an honest and inspiring attempt to understand new forms of culture that may rightly horrify us (Collins is quite critical of Oprah, as he is of the Miramax adaptations that ruled Hollywood in the 1990s), but that it would be a pity to discard as vulgar and stupid. Collins strikes the right chord between the left-wing catastrophe of the culture industry and the right-wing praise of “the people’s preferences.” He offers an important mapping with great...
HOW TO CATCH A ROBOT RAT: WHEN BIOLOGY INSPIRES INNOVATION


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

As this highly informative book shows through numerous examples, it is not quite as easy as it seems to catch rats, robotic or otherwise. The authors use the concept of the rat (as a clever, cunning and highly intelligent natural entity) metaphorically, to show that nature does not give up her “design” secrets easily. Many researchers, especially those working in artificial intelligence, have found this out the hard way.

How to Catch a Robot Rat: When Biology Inspires Innovation was first published in 2008 in French as La bionique: Quand la science mime la Nature. Susan Emanuel has translated this edition published in 2010. Even though some of the details are quite scientific, the text flows beautifully and is suitable for the general reader as well as specialists. The book provides a thorough though brief grounding in the history of technological objects and systems, the current state of research and possible future developments.

The book (which is devoted to the new bionics) has three sections followed by a conclusion, bibliography, notes and index. There are numerous quality black-and-white illustrations, together with a glossy central color plate section.

Part 1, “Structures, Processes, Materials,” describes some of the many technological achievements inspired by natural structures, processes and materials. The discussion moves effortlessly back and forth through the history of biomimetic inventions from the earliest times to the present.

Part 2, “Behaviors,” explains, “one field of research (that is of ancient inspiration but has been prospering for a few years): the concept of autonomous robots inspired by animals and their behavior—what is commonly called ‘bioinspired robotics’” (p. xii).

Part 3, “Hybrids,” examines work whose goal is to hybridize natural and artificial systems. It looks at neuroprostheses and endoprostheses. The combination of these systems is meant to help, for example, quadriplegic persons to control machines such as wheelchairs.

This book is literally jam-packed with information; there is no long-winded superfluous padding, as the book moves along at a rapid pace similar to that of current global research in the field of robotics and bionics. The issue of ethics is briefly touched on, more as a caution as to the way we should proceed rather than an in-depth discussion as to the full development of ethical guidelines.

Although it is certainly not the purpose of this book, the area of ethics research is in need of urgent attention and development so as to keep up with the speed of inventions by companies whose motives are not necessarily or always for the “good of the many”!

There have been some tentative moves in producing guidelines for research and “Rights of Robots” by countries such as Japan and Korea. The authors quip about the current debate over same-sex marriages becoming insignificant compared to when a human wants to marry a humanoid robot. The humanoid robots RepliQ2 and the Clone of Professor Hiroshi Ishiguro—both developed by Ishiguro at Osaka University—have silicone skin, multiple sensors, respiratory movement, facial expressions and hand and arm movements and can converse with a human. Ishiguro made his clone so as to occupy his office when he traveled overseas! (p. 136).

Guillot and Meyer not only discuss metaphoric rats but also have developed a real robotic rat, Psikharpax, in their own laboratories. They are attempting to answer a question neurobiologists have not yet been able to answer, which concerns the exact mechanisms (of a neuronal nature) that enable the selection by rodents of different navigational strategies (p. 124).

As a whimsical aside, and because we are trying to catch rats, it is interesting that many laboratories use rats for research and the spelling encodes this—labo_rat_ories!

One of this book’s greatest virtues is the balanced approach taken by the authors. Rather than “values” laden commentary, the approach is more objective reporting, leaving it to the reader to judge the many complex issues this research raises. The book will therefore be useful as a comprehensive introduction to bio-robotics for students, the general public and perhaps those scholars in the humanities dealing with ethics, law and public health.

PHOTO-TEXTS: CONTEMPORARY FRENCH WRITING OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE


Reviewed by Jan Baetens. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.ac.be>.

Andy Stafford’s book is a welcome and attractive publication in the fast-growing field of intermediarity studies and an exciting enrichment of a series that opens new ways in the study of postcolonial francophone literature. The qualities of the book, which should concern more readers than only those interested in contemporary French and francophone culture, can be situated at three levels: the subject in itself, obviously, but also the dialogue that it tries to establish between anglophone and francophone scholarship, as well as the specific accents that are proposed by the author. I will discuss these points in that order.

As far as the subject is concerned, the task of any author writing on the domain of photo-textuality has become a rather difficult one, such has been the almost chaotic development of literature-and-photography interaction in the last decades. Stafford pays, therefore,
a lot of attention to circumscribing his corpus, not always in the most convincing ways, for throughout the book one feels a permanent struggle with the many possibilities of organizing the material. Nevertheless, since the author presents and discusses his own doubts and biases in a very open and self-conscious way, the reader can feel sympathy for his efforts, even if, until the end of the book, one is left with the impression that other types of classification might have been possible. Nevertheless, the global structure, which leads us from a text inspired by just one picture to a work focused on captioning, is clear and coherent and certainly does not prevent the author from doing what he wants to do. The notion of phototext is mainly defined by Stafford in terms of “photo-essayism,” a term that is both exclusive and inclusive: It excludes the whole field of the photonovel, while it includes all kinds of textual productions (essays in the traditional sense of the word but also prose fiction, poetry, captions, etc.) that establish a dialogue not just with photography but with specific photographs on the page. This both very narrow and very open definition allows Stafford to propose a very broad and diverse corpus of nine works, some of them very well known (such as Errance by Raymond Depardon), others less known or rarely introduced in discussions on photo-textuality (such as some works written by Tahar Ben Jelloun). What matters here is less the fact that some usual suspects may be missing (there is for instance no chapter on Sophie Calle) than the fact that the selection made by Stafford really innovates the field: The overall impression one gets from his view on photo-textuality is really different from the one that is offered by most French studies on the subject, the main difference being the emphasis on postcolonialism.

The difference and usefulness of this book is also explained by its eagerness to establish a cross-fertilization of anglophone and francophone scholarship. One of the most paradoxical and painful aspects of globalization is indeed the growing gap between humanist scholarship in these two traditions: Anglophone readers, even very specialized ones, only know of “French Theory” what is available in translation, whereas francophone scholars like to stress their “cultural exception” to avoid or misread work being done in English (a good example is the longstanding refusal to a work focused on captioning, is clear and coherent and certainly does not prevent the author from doing what

The relationship between words and images in this kind of cultural product cannot be separated from certain material conditions such as the book market, to name just one example, and Stafford proposes very astute and illuminating readings on the importance of this context, not only for the production of the works but also for their reception (how for instance can one do critical photo-textuality if the work produced is a coffee-table book?). Finally, and this might be considered a really important innovation in our thinking on the field, Stafford defends the idea that the relationship between text and image should never be ecumenical but remain as critical as possible. The word critical has to be understood here in its etymological sense of “crisis”: Words and images not only need each other, they also question each other, they break each other open, and in that critical dialogue emerges a third dimension, which Stafford calls “orality,” a dimension that he carefully demonstrates the interest in the work by W.J.T. Mitchell as well as Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, while at the same time underlines also the limits of their respective approaches. On the other hand, he gives a very sympathetic presentation of authors such as Jacques Rancière, André Rouillé and Hubert Damisch, whose names may be (very) familiar to Anglophone readers but whose writings on photography have not yet received the critical attention they certainly deserve. Here as well the global sympathy of Stafford’s tone does not deter him from making critical remarks, which are dramatically discerning, even for Francophone readers.

The most fascinating aspect of the book, however, is the personal view of photo-textuality defended by the author. Four aspects should be stressed here. First of all, Stafford claims that photo-textuality has changed in the 1990s, and he links these changes in a very convincing way to the end of the “short 20th Century” (i.e., 1914–1989). Photography changed after 1989 (and will do so even more after 9/11, but the main focus of the book is on the 1990s), and the new relationship between word and image is one of the revealing traces of a change that shatters traditional photographic truth claims. Second, the author underlines in an even more persuasive manner how photo-textuality has become part of postcolonial culture, a point insufficiently made in French scholarship, although Stafford—and I think this is a great quality as well—does not accept the gap between metropolitan and francophone culture. Third, the political turn that underlies the two previous points is strongly linked with the material culture in which photo-textuality appears.

**Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive**


Reviewed by Jussi Parikka, Anglia Ruskin University and CoDE-Institute, Cambridge, U.K. E-mail: <jussi.parikka@anglia.ac.uk>.
Jodi Dean’s new book has a great title—Blog Theory—but it is the subtitle that clarifies what the book is about: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive. Less a detailed software analysis of politics of blog software as platforms of communication, and more a Žižekian take on the affect worlds of repetitious, circularly desire in network culture. Blog Theory uses “blogging” to dig into fundamental political concepts such as crowds, action/passivity and reflection as well as enjoyment. What Blog Theory is about is the culture of the digital everyday—also in the most banal sense—that makes up network culture through its actors and the binds between social actions; as such, Dean is more accurately after the critique of social network and participatory culture, beyond just blogging—and using “blogs” as a gateway to this wider field of “communicative capitalism.”

Using psychoanalytic methodology, and drawing much from Žižek, Dean claims that much of the seeming activity of network culture—from participation to discourse/response, action and activism—is more or less either illusory, more about interpassivity, or actually contributing to the flow of capitalism. Participation is far from subversive.

In the most interesting developments of the book, Dean argues that the themes of creativity and participation are far from adversarial to the circuits of capitalism and at the core of its logic. This is analyzed as part of the decline of symbolic efficiency: There is no longer a big Other that would offer a horizon for meanings, and hence this lack of stability is, according to Dean, an apt way to understand the circulatory space of the social network culture that in the midst of illusions of communications is actually more emblematically characterized by “crapflooding.” Dean also mobilizes other interesting conceptualizations, such as displaced mediators, when arguing how this capitalism of communications is at its core unstable. Similar to other theorists, such as Terranova, Dean argues that “communicative capitalism is a formation that relies on this imbalance, on the repeated suspension of narratives, patterns, identities, norms, etc.” (p. 31). Hence, again in a Žižekian twist, things are often their opposite, argues Dean; social networks are really not that social, or about friends; communication is less about actually communication than submitting data to the platforms and their databases (even if that political economic side could have been analyzed in more detail), and political activism is actually not that active. Dean paints a bleak picture of the complexity of capture that problematizes the traditional grounding of oppositional politics (democracy, truth, activism); and despite the bleak message, such notions as blogipelago are to me actually quite apt ways of understanding how the imagery of community, or connectedness, is underpinned by a much more fundamental fragmented nature of Internet culture and a good counterforce to celebratory discourses of virtual communities.

Yet, when it comes down to analyzing politics, something more could have been developed. Is it only that media activism and network politics aims to develop “tool and apps” to “get their messages ‘out there’” (p. 125) that constitutes the way politics works—or might we need a more meticulous analysis of various projects creating alternative networks (the first that come to mind are Diaspora and Thimbl) where the point is not only to get the message out but to get people “in”—the mere fact being that such platforms do not contribute to the data-mining economy of proprietary social networks? This is why it seems that differing notions of “affects” in network culture—such as for example Nigel Thrift’s notes on political organization and the pre-cognitive might capture more accurately the stakes in media activist practices—which are as much about the fact of participation, in itself important, as about the communicated, communicative goals. Dean discusses a range of interesting theories and theorists, but some are tackled a bit too quickly, for example Kittler. Dean suggests that Kittler is suggesting a posthuman vision of digital media culture where computers disperse with humans, whereas for Dean computer networks actually demand the existence of human beings as part of their functioning—an apt point in itself, but actually Kittler is more complex than this criticism allows; the notion of the “so-called man” hints already toward the fact that “man,” even before technical and digital media, was only “so-called,” and embedded in such networks of media, even if non-technical. In the digital age, the notion itself is already suggesting elements to which Dean gives a political edge; that the networks feed on human energy and drive. Yet what Kittler’s perspectives afford is what is missing from this book: What are the energies inherent in the other bits of such networks—for example software and the engineered mathematics from which our biopolitics of non-human media circuits derives? In other words, the fact that our computers engage continuously in traffic that we do not see; you just need to have your Ethernet cable plugged in. The drive is not the only inhuman element in societies of technical media.

Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman


Reviewed by Jan Baetens. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.ac.be>.

An art critic and theorician with links to the October group, T.J. Demos proposes an interesting reflection on a perhaps lesser-known work that belongs to the pioneer years of video art: Dara Birnbaum’s Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978/1979), a 5-minute, 50-second color video with stereo sound sampling key fragments of the short-lived television series adapted from the much older and much more successful superhero comic Wonder Woman (the first female equivalent or counterpart of Superman). Demos’s ambition in this exemplary book is twofold. First, he offers a historical contextualization of the work as well as of its amazing reception (Birnbaum’s video is now being read in a very different way than it was at its first release, and even at the moment of its first projection the consensus on its meaning was far from complete). Second, he tries to understand why Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman has been capable of producing such diverging and often incompatible interpretations. In both cases, Demos proves to be an excellent pedagogue, with an in-depth knowledge of the historical framework of the work and its intertext as well as with a profound understanding of the theoretical and cultural underpinnings of what it means to read and interpret this kind of work, which is deeply rooted in both popular culture and cutting-edge critical theory.

At first sight, Birnbaum’s work is typical of what the first pioneers of video art were looking to achieve. On the one hand, a critique of the dominant culture, by which one has to understand
not only the technological critique of the dominant medium of these days, namely television, but also the ideological critique of the dominant cultural messages spread by television and related popular media (such as of course film and comics). Television was considered by avant-garde artists and critical theorists as a medium that had betrayed the possibilities of social interaction, dialogue and critique enabled by the very technology: Broadcasting is indeed not the only way of using television technology, and artists as well as social activists were looking for ways to “talk back” to the medium (David Joselit’s Feedback is a key publication in this regard). And the messages it carried to the public were characterized by a strong ideological subtext that was, among many other things, very woman-unfriendly.

On the other hand, there was an attempt to remediate these flaws, both by exploring video’s medium-specificity and by resisting the ideological meanings of the dominant media. Video was not (only) used as a carrier for other meanings, it was an opportunity to explore, that is, to invent a new visual language, which was used in its turn as a way of criticizing the belief that images, most importantly television images, were transparent windows on the world. Moreover, the new video art also investigated the (in this case sexist) ideology of the messages spread by popular and media culture, which were attacked and deconstructed through the classic avant-garde mechanisms of sampling and collage.

T.J. Demos describes with great clarity the historical context of Birnbaum’s video, stressing very rightly the relationships between the beginnings of video art and the postmodern aesthetics of appropriation art as exemplified by Craig Owens’s work around the landmark Pictures exhibition. He also underlines the strong input of screen-based critical and feminist film theory, as illustrated by theoretically schooled filmmakers such as Mulvey and Wollen.

Yet contrary to other works of the same artistic and ideological movement, Birnbaum’s reworking of the Wonder Woman mythology and television series has never had the same homogeneous and politically streamlined reception as that of most other works by her colleagues and competitors (one of the critical voices in this regard was that of Benjamin Buchloh). From the very beginning, there were doubts on the political “correctness” of this video, and today it is even seen by many spectators, including women, as defending a positive image of a strong, postfeminist woman.

For T.J. Demos, this persistent ambivalence is not a flaw of Birnbaum’s work but one of its major strengths, and the fact that after three decades the Wonder Woman video is still producing such divergent interpretations should be the core question of any analysis of the work. Demos rejects, and I think he is right in doing so, the easy hypothesis of the multiple audiences: If Birnbaum’s work engenders various readings, it is not only because the public is different, both synchronically and diachronically, but also and foremost, and this is a much more courageous hypothesis, because Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman takes very seriously the strength of popular culture and dominant media and does not discard automatically the positive aspects of our fascination with this kind of culture. Birnbaum’s work is a highbrow critique of lowbrow culture, but one that does not take as its starting point the unbridgeable gap between both. How this complex relationship between distance and fascination works is discussed in the final sections of Demos’s analysis in reference to notions such as experience, interaction and affect (and, not unsurprisingly, the names of Bourriaud and Massumi are mentioned more than once). The aim of the One World series, which focuses on specific works, is of course not to give definitive answers to very general questions, but T.J. Demos’s discussion of Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman is a valuable contribution to a better, that is, a less a priori negative understanding of our long-standing oscillation between involvement and critical distance in contemporary mass culture.

**Mapping Intermediality in Performance**


Reviews by Dene Grigar, The Creative Media & Digital Culture Program, Washington State University, Vancouver. E-mail: <dggrigar@vancouver.wsu.edu>.

When I defended my dissertation in LinguaMOO in 1995, I was very aware that there was significant space between the room where I was physically inputting my responses to questions posed to me by my committee, who were physically present, and the virtual auditorium where I watched my thoughts become instantiated as posts (that each began with “Dene says”) for the 50-plus members of the on-line audience. I was, likewise, acutely aware that the performance required for each room was different—different in a way that had nothing to do with the research findings I typed for my responses but, rather, how I put forward those findings in each. Somewhere in that space between here and there I had to make a significant shift in my personae in order to reach the audience in both rooms effectively. Yes, William Gibson had, close to 10 years before, provided the metaphorical notion of “jacking in” and described the experience of moving from the real-world “Sprawl” to the on-line “Matrix,” and Sherry Turkle had already described the experience of The Second Self and had just told us what happens when we live Life on the Screen, but the theoretical language for making sense of the space and the performances that it mediated had not fully been realized in 1995.

Some years and a Second Life later, a cogent theory of what I had wondered about emerged: Intermediality. While Bay-Cheng et al.’s Mapping Intermediality in Performance is certainly not the first book to discuss intermediality directly—that honor may go to Intermediality: The Teachers’ Handbook of Critical Media Literacy, published in 1999—it is...
perhaps the best one for making sense of it theoretically, from a performance focus.

Mapping Intermediality is a collection of essays written by 30 international artists and scholars working in the areas of art history, theater, film studies, media art, music, literature and performance studies and so provides a broad yet detailed perspective on intermediality and performance, specifically in digital culture. Organized into five portals, or “gates” into the network which afford a range of situated perspectives,” four nodes composing a “cluster of terms” and instances that offer “dialogic engagement” and a general fleshing out of ideas, the book itself reflects the act of mapping out space. Throughout the book the reader will find arrows pointing to “links” in the book’s “system” (p. 9), a strategy of remediating hypertextuality in print form that makes good sense for a book about intermediality in digital culture.

Intermediality, the book suggests, is concerned with “co-relations . . . that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, which in turn leads to a fresh perception.” It is, as Robin Nelson writes in the opening essay, “a bridge between mediums” (p. 14) and, so, constitutes a “both-and approach” to understanding information rather than an either-or perspective (p. 17). Citing the International Encyclopedia of Communication, Nelson points out three basic perspectives accepted for understanding intermediality:

First . . . [it] is the combination and adaptation of separate material vehicles of representation and reproduction, sometimes called multimedia. . . . Second, the term denotes communication through several sensory modalities at once. . . . Third, [it] concerns the interrelations between media as institutions in society, as addressed in technological and economic terms such as convergence and conglomerator [1].

Out of this broad understanding of object and experience emerge basic qualities associated with intermediality, such as interconnectedness, syncretism, interactivity and playfulness, and dislocation, to name a few that figure largely (pp. 19–21). One of the pervasive characteristics of digital culture is the way in which media work together in a system to accomplish “communicative strategies” (p. 15). In fact, the term intermediality suggests “the interconnectedness of modern media of communication [my emphasis]” [1]. Video games that incorporate sound and image are but one example of the way in which elements of media objects connect with one another in order to present a unified vision—in this case for creating gaming experiences. But this relationship extends beyond the connection among elements to that between user and object.

The essays that follow build on these concepts from the perspectives of “performativity and corporeal literacy,” “time and space,” “digital culture and posthumanism,” “networking,” and “pedagogic praxis.” In sum, the book covers intermediality from practice to theory to teaching. While rhetorical, communications and linguistic theories offer insights into the relationship between viewers and information, they do not address the complexities that arise when linking analog objects, such as those represented by the physical body of viewers, visual art and the like, to digital media such as sound, images, video, and words found on the web. Moreover, intermediality stands in stark contrast to the separation of human and objects so prevalent in Western epistemologies. Thus, Andy Lavender’s essay on “Digital Culture,” which he says has been “shaped” by intermediality (p. 125), and Ralf Remshaft’s essay on “posthumanism,” which he tells us is a “matrix” and not a “condition” (p. 135), provide good foundations for understanding this change in perspective. Additionally, Remshaft’s take on the audience “becoming cyborg” also explains the way immersive technologies are “shaping [a] new communal posthuman sense of performance experience” (p. 138).

The final section traces intermediality in “earlier encounters” (p. 248), beginning with, as Klemens Gruber points out in his essay “Early Intermediality: Archaeological Glimpses,” the use of the term for “spiritist séances” (p. 247), through the “crisis in art” brought about by the “verisimilitude” of photography (p. 247) to the “radical experimentation of film” (p. 253). Thus, intermediality is not new, but we are made more readily aware of it through the “convergence of digital technologies.” Certainly, “the process of encoding in 0:1:4 all things: ‘visual, verbal, sonic, and gestural’” (p. 16)—as I learned by watching my own line self interacting with the virtual slides in LinguaMOO’s auditorium during my defense—drives a need to reexamine intermediality, as the authors so aptly do in this book. For the fundamental shift in the relationship between humans and the digital technologies they engage with lays bare our potential to connect and become part of a feedback loop, influencing and being influenced by information—in fact, becoming expressed as information ourselves as another media in the multimedia. And while it is understood that “all discourse [is] ‘mediated’” (p. 15), it is, I have come to see, equally realized when connecting via and to digital media that the membranes that seemingly contain the elements as unique, discrete units are actually exceptionally thinned and extraordinarily permeable in this flux of information exchange.

Needless to day, Mapping Intermediality is well worth the read and will be useful in undergraduate and graduate-level courses in digital media where performance is a topic under study.

Reference


DESIGNING THINGS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE CULTURE OF OBJECTS


Reviewed by John Vines, School of Design, Northumbria University, U.K. E-mail: <john.vines@northumbria.ac.uk>.

“With some exceptions, design has traditionally under-theorized the cultural meanings of objects” (p. 12). Designers have, traditionally, been rather uncritical of the objects they create and the wider networks within which their activities are embedded. In Designing Things, Prasad Boradkar attempts to encourage designers to be more critical of the diverse networks that their creations are, and become, embedded within. What Boradkar wishes to highlight is not only the agency of designers of things but also how these things themselves then design those who use and ongoingly interact with them in the objects lifetime. This is embedded in the title of the book, which in one sense “refers to the primary activity of making, i.e. the process of the design of products, buildings, graphics, interiors,
services, [and] systems,” and in a second sense suggests that “things themselves have agency, they afford specific kinds of action, they encourage certain types of behavior and they can elicit particular forms of emotions” (p. 4).

Boadkar alludes to walking the precarious fine line between emphasizing the agency of human beings and the agency of the objects that become embedded into the quotient. In the introductory chapter, Boadkar presents a philosophical backdrop to this argument in “a very brief history of the philosophy of things” (pp. 26–35). Within the space of 9 or 10 pages, Boadkar takes the reader from Anaximander, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle through to Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Heidegger and the contemporary philosophy of Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and Paul Verbeek. In particular, it appears to be Latour who has inspired Boadkar’s book the most, and Latour’s work is given more space than the lineage of thinkers prior and since. The consequence of this concise discussion leads Boadkar to assert that “for this study, things will be treated as inseparable from the networks to which they belong” (p. 35). While Latour appears to be particularly en vogue in contemporary design literature, the manner in which Boadkar discusses Actor Network Theory and then introduces Graham Harman’s work leads the reader to begin thinking about the entanglements between human and non-human agents and actants encapsulated in an emergent network, where “things” exist both on their own terms and in relation to the other. The drawing upon this particular philosophical discussion alludes to a refreshing take on the critical discourse surrounding the design of material objects. In the following sub-section entitled “Disciplining Things” (pp. 35–44), however, this refreshing perspective is somewhat diluted. Continuing the swiftness of the previous section on philosophy, in 8–9 pages Boadkar takes the reader through anthropology, cultural studies, material cultural studies and science and technology studies as examples “of a few disciplines engaged in object studies” (p. 35). The purpose of this section is to highlight how the boundaries between these disciplines are somewhat flexible, and individual research projects belonging to one discipline actually cross over with one another. It might be questioned here, however, whether these boundaries have such flexibility as a result of their inherently similar epistemological basis.

While the first chapter offers a flood of information, the following eight chapters are a steady flow of critical and cultural theory as it relates to Western (mostly North American) industrial design. Chapter 2 explores the concept of value, highlighting how, while value may generally be assumed to be an economic and monetary concept, objects accrue values over their lifetime that have various emotional, symbolic and aesthetic meanings to those who come into various contact with them. Chapter 3 discusses labor and a Marx-informed history of making things, leading into Chapter 4, which takes the reader through Fordism, Taylorism, mass production, and on to contemporary examples of consumers being brought more directly into contact with the production process. Chapter 5 focuses upon aesthetics as it is understood in the design of consumer goods. Boadkar summarizes this concept as residing “neither in the solid materiality of the object nor in the ephemeral mind of the consumer” (p. 158). While style is not inscribed by the designer, it is also not “organically created by the owner in processes of consumption” (p. 158). Boadkar argues here that aesthetic experience is located between the designer and the consumer, in the “external surfaces” and “object skins” of the material goods. Chapter 6 examines how designers have focused upon exploring the “needs” of consumers, appearing to sympathize with Victor Papenek’s [1] argument that designers tend to make up ethically questionable needs and then to design for them. Chapter 7 critically interrogates the issue of “planned obsolescence” in Western industrial design, identifying a number of cultural arguments both for and against designing obsolescence into the end-product. Chapter 8 moves into the realm of semiotics, mostly in terms of Charles Sanders Pierce, Ferdinand de Saussure and subsequently Barthes. Boadkar examines how theories of semiotics have been incorporated into industrial and product design (particularly as it emerged from the Cranbrook School of Art and the influential product semiotics work of Krippendorff and Butter). The discussion of signs and meanings leads into the brief final chapter (9), which discusses certain aspects of the fetishism of certain materials and objects.

As the above synopsis highlights, Boadkar covers a lot of ground in one book. Each individual chapter is easy to follow, and the ideas of other authors are well conveyed. At the same time, each chapter reads as being somewhat discrete from the next, and on many occasions it is not always clear why particular ideas are discussed rather than others. This is perhaps the consequence (and a necessity) of the mass and generality of the terrain that Boadkar (de)limits himself to. This leads to the feeling that on a number of occasions certain ideas are repeated from chapter to chapter without clear acknowledgement of the repetition, and even chapters that feel clear and easy to read are yet somewhat vague in where they are heading.

More problematic than any of the relatively minor writing issues with this book, I have a deep sense of “so what?” after 280 dense pages. While in the opening pages the book comes across as rather dynamic and refreshing, Boadkar loses his own voice during the following chapters and repeats arguments that have been staples of design, marketing and consumer theory for much of the latter 20th century. This leads to the realization (on this reader’s part) that what Boadkar is providing here is a contemporary, postmodern, design undergraduate theory program (spread over three years) condensed into a single book. It is a textbook reframed as scholarship. This is not to be construed as entirely negative: when considered in these terms Designing Things is a useful publication indeed, and would be of much use to a designer...
struggling to identify any critical basis with which to begin reflecting upon his or her own practice. This may have been what the author intended, but much of the introduction and opening chapter alluded to a rather different text than what followed.

Perhaps it does not come as too much of a surprise that an early title for this book was the Marx-inspired “A Very Strange Thing,” which Boradkar argues highlights how “mundane, inanimate objects are repositories of many untold stories” (p. 263). Not only would this title have been rather apt, it might have also provided the unsuspecting reader with the forewarning that what was to follow would be a contemporary Marxist stroll through the history of very contemporary consumer-led industrial design. Similarly, if Boradkar’s book were subtitled “An Introduction to the Culture of Objects” (minus the critical), then perhaps this reviewer would be rather less disappointed. The issue at hand appears to be that, while arguing that an interdisciplinary approach to theorizing design is required, he limits himself to a group of social-science disciplines that are highly cohesive with one another. Beyond this, these are the disciplines that have been the primary basis for design theory in the past. In drawing upon this lineage in a somewhat unquestioned manner, Designing Things feels as if it is repeating ideas and theories about design, consumerism and material culture that have often been said (and repeated) before.

While Boradkar pronounces that objects within design disciplines at least, are under-theorized, he does not provide much of a critical interrogation of the theories he uses to critique these objects. By emphasizing a reliance on the social sciences and critical and cultural theorists as the primary source of knowledge on human and object culture, Boradkar’s book somewhat lacks the sensitivity to diverse ideas and approaches that he so argued for in the opening chapters. While, with a few exceptions, the design discipline is criminally under-theorized, it is perhaps just as problematic to repeatedly analyze design as a primarily culturally (or economically, or technologically) determined discipline. The textual mass of this book, the ground covered and the broad manner in which critical theory is used make this reviewer wonder whether this book would have benefited from more specificity and detail. A book of the same length, with more focus, would have provided a longer yet shorter analysis, if you will. Perhaps another age-old design reference is required here; less is more.

References

The Object Reader

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The Object Reader provides an extensive compilation of mostly previously published key articles by renowned authors along with original contributions of new works in an accessible anthology. “Objects” are introduced upfront from the original Latin obiecte, referring to the “act of blocking,” “to throw at” or “throw against,” in the sense of disapproval or an objection, alongside the philosophical use of the term as “a thing which is perceived,” external to the subject, as well as the common use of the word for “material thing(s).” It is highlighted that another etymological meaning refers to “that to which action, or thought or feeling is directed, the thing (or person) to which something is done” (p. 2), which does not differentiate between inanimate or conscious “things,” the organic/inorganic or human, as a matter of fact. According to this wide spectrum of definitions and interpretations, the volume treats objects not strictly in the sense of studies of material culture but reflects on their practical uses, phenomenological perceptions, symbolic functions and social meanings. For this reason it draws from a range of fields: anthropology, art history, classical studies, critical theory, cultural studies, digital media, design history, disability studies, feminism, film and television studies, history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, social studies of science and technology, religious studies and visual culture.

Against this background, perhaps not surprisingly, the Reader opens with Marcel Mauss’s famous account of the reciprocity of gift culture, in the sense of the Latin do ut des and Sanskrit dandami se, dehi me, setting out objects’ relations as reciprocal bondage, and it ends with Candlin’s personalized reflections on post-generational haunting by ghostly presences in a continuous shifting and interactive negotiation between the material and immaterial. When taking into account the numerous layers that the volume’s contributions (too many to treat individually in any adequate way in this framework) unfold, wrap and interconnect, it could be observed that the topic of the compilation is very much the virtual (in a Deleuzian/Bergsonian sense) of the addressed objects’ relations and those material interfaces and interactions where they temporarily manifest and actualize. This might also be another way to approach the last section of the book—rather than “object lessons,” as indicated, as well as experimental treatments in the form of short essays—as creative unwinding, recollection, application and further extension of some of the dense entanglements of object encounters throughout this excellent compilation of thoughtful, innovative and rigorous scholarship. A lesson that certainly can be learned from the editorial ambition and realization of The Object Reader is that the fuller the recognition of inherent overlaps, tensions, contradictions and tendencies in the subject matter—in this case in discourses around the conception of objects, which seem to share a profound dissatisfaction with the extremes of materialism and idealism, conceived from the broadest spectrum of approaches—the richer the potential for a critical engagement that might even tentatively broach the sublime as embedded in experience. The Object Reader seems particularly...
timely given the recent revival of “material culture” (continuing the established strand in, among others, cultural anthropology) and the continued interest in the social construction of technology, ANT, the discussions around the “Internet of things” etc., and especially the focused philosophical concerns with object ontology (such as the philosopher Graham Harman’s “object-oriented philosophy” and Ian Bogost’s work in object-oriented-ontology [“ooo”], also the topic of a recent symposium at the Georgia Institute of Technology in April 2010). In this context, the Reader is exemplary for alluding to the significance of addressing the underlying philosophical frameworks on which the great variety of approaches to objects and objectifications are built, addressed and communicated. This exercise, however, is mainly left to the reader and has not been taken up explicitly in the ontology, neither in the introduction nor in the composition of the various sections, which is driven by a distinction of terms such as object or thing or what objects “do” or what we attribute to them, such as agency, experience, images. However, as is common practice with successful anthologies, the philosophically informed and interested reader will extrapolate and move through the Reader, weaving a parallel track of intersections and tensions on a meta level, which provokes important questions that relate back to the very foundations of the implied methods and disciplinary practices. The editors have succeeded in their selection of excellent writing and thinking—this dimension is surfacing through, within, but also beyond the text and topic of some of the investigations. In this sense The Object Reader exceeds and offers much more than the title initially suggests. It also exceeds the usual conception of a reader: It is far more than an assemblage of cognate ideas emerging from, in themselves unique, pearls originated in much larger research and thinking projects.

The Reader as such is an example par excellence of its own topics (there is no “object” as such, hence the plural and the title possibly should be “The Objects Reader”), which it attempts to straddle, seemingly impossible to contain, in all their assemblages and boundless relations. It appears almost as a Utopia at the same time as it provides hands-on reading on a spectrum of ideas on concrete objects and their making and activities on, with and to objects toward the tentative dissolution of the paradigmatic subject-object divide.

The authors’ intention, as expressed in the introduction, not to distinguish between animate and inanimate matter is rather ambitious and difficult to trace in the individual articles and can only be read as a programmatic framework and vision wherein the juxtaposition of sometimes contradictory approaches creates new networks of interconnection in order to open new perspectives that move from an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary adventure into the knowledge transfer of transdisciplinary practices. This would be welcome to be continued in future research and publications. The Object Reader sets a timely example in this direction.

Leonardo Reviews On-Line

January 2011

3D Typography by Jeanette Abbink and Emily C.M. Anderson. Reviewed by Martha Patricia Niño Mojica.


Leo Villareal, edited by the San Jose Museum of Art. Reviewed by Rob Harle.

On Fact and Fraud: Cautionary Tales from the Front Lines of Science by David Goodstein. Reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg.


Perpetual Inventory by Rosalind E. Krauss. Reviewed by Amy Ione.


Surrounded by Waves, directed by Jean-Christophe Ribot. Reviewed by Rob Harle.

We Can Change The Weather—100 Cases of Changeability by Marleen Wynants. Reviewed by Edith Doove.

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Casablanca: Movies and Memory by Marc Auge. Reviewed by Mike Leggett.

Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art by Laura U. Marks. Reviewed by Rob Harle.


