**Leonardo Reviews**

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**Film**

**Deadline Every Second: On Assignment with 12 Associated Press Photojournalists** produced by Ken Kobré and John Hewitt. 58 min. Film website:  

Reviewed by Amy Ione, Director, The Diatrope Institute, Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A. Email: <ione@diatrope.com>.

Ken Kobré’s *Deadline Every Second* introduces the viewer to 12 Associated Press (AP) photographers on assignment as they cover breaking news in eight countries. The variety of images is compelling. Sequences show them recording war, political clashes, financial markets, natural disasters, sports and human-interest stories. It is hard to ignore the power of the images of battle zones in Afghanistan, protests in Israel, terrorist attacks in Pakistan, wildfires in California, the Tour de France and the events of 9/11 in New York City. The impact that this work has on AP’s large audience is equally compelling. Over a billion people a day see the photographs that AP generates, which number over a million images a year. The shots are disseminated through 15,000 news outlets throughout the world, and I expect that, like me, viewers will find many of the images in the film familiar.

Part of the success of the film comes from the aesthetic dimension of the work’s overall organization. Photojournalism often brings to mind *On Photography* by Susan Sontag, where she argued that our capacity to respond to images of war and atrocity in our rapaciously media-driven culture was being dulled by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images. Twenty-five years later, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she reversed her position, maintaining that images turned us from spectators of events into witnesses. I found that Kobré’s fast-paced and collage-like presentation somehow seemed to allow for both responses to exist side by side. One reason for this, and for the documentary’s success, is that Kobré not only presents images but also introduces us to the people behind them because he was given access to these 12 photographers while they were actually shooting the stories presented here. As a result, we are able to act as witnesses of more than what a single image conveys. We glimpse them waiting for events to happen, see the risks they take, feel the pressures behind each “perfect shot,” learn how they wrestle with danger in the field, and appreciate the challenge of processing images in unusual environments.

What it means to be in the middle of things is reinforced as each photographer discusses his or her approach to the complex activity that photojournalism is. For example, while many spoke of how they try to focus on the raw events without embellishing, several also mentioned the need to show sensitivity to human suffering in the midst of heart-wrenching events. This is mirrored by the way the more emotional images are artistically compelling yet make powerful statements. Indeed, one of the most effective messages of film is that it offers various vantage points on humanity. We see that the dangers the photographers face when covering war and wildfires are not at all abstract. We also learn of the backstory on many images we know.

For example, Richard Drew, a photographer who produced a number of striking photographs on 9/11, talks at length about how it all happened. He was covering a fashion show that day and received a call from his editor telling him to go down to the World Trade Center; something was going on down there, enabling him to take many of the now iconic pictures of the buildings collapsing and people jumping out of the windows. Speaking about it, Drew conveys that he was able to “find” the incredibly wrenching photographs within the chaos because of his internal impulse to capture the story. One image he speaks about is known as “The Falling Man,” one of a series of images of a man who jumped out of the North Tower that day. The image won a 2001 World Press Photo award and became the subject of a 2006 documentary film.

Ken Kobré, who is a filmmaker, award-winning photojournalist, author and head of the photojournalism program at San Francisco State University, used five episodes to structure his fast-moving and focused presentation. The divisions are: (1) News, From Routine to Extraordinary, (2) Earthquakes and Wildfires, (3) Bicycling and Basketball, (4) Presidents to Pilgrims and (5) Combat and Clashes. The progression reiterated to me the degree to which images have defined our reality in recent years. I liked the way the script conveyed the complex stories behind images. To my mind, we need to have more critical dialogue about how our images impact our world. This kind of production opens the door because it operates on many levels. I was glad to see that the film is often shown in public venues with panel discussions following the screen.
ings. This seems important because when I went to write this review, a few weeks after viewing the movie, I realized that my mind more easily recalled the dangerous and tragic portions of the film. Why was it easier to recall these segments rather than those on sports or the photographs of the wax figure of President Obama being delivered to the San Francisco’s Wax Museum?

This production benefited from having someone who is a photojournalist scripting the project. Kobré traveled three continents to film these outstanding photographers. As a “one-man-band operation” he acted as lighting and sound technician, director, producer and cinematographer all at once. According to Kobré:

When shooting a documentary by yourself, it’s hard to control all the technical activities and ask questions simultaneously. The automatic focus and sound level features on the camera allowed me to shoot but still concentrate on my subjects. On automatic, the camcorder itself made excellent exposure decisions.

All in all, this documentary is perfect for the classroom, and it is the type of work that should appeal to people in all walks of life. Going into the field with the photographers demonstrates that photojournalism is often fast-paced and can be dangerous. I was quite taken with the mixture of compassion and objectivity expressed by many of the photographers. In sum, I highly recommend the movie and strongly recommend seeing it with others so that a conversation can unpack it after the viewing ends.

### Open Access


*Reviewed by Rob Harle, Australia. Email: <harle@roberohle.com>.*

This is a very important book that, I suggest, is a must-read for all scholars and researchers who publish their own work or consult the peer-reviewed published work of others—in other words, virtually all academics. As Suber notes, capturing the attention of overworked, underpaid academics is a difficult task. Understanding the basics of Open Access (OA) publishing is not really a career option anymore but a core requirement. The time taken to read this well-written, rather slim volume will repay the reader many times over.

Open Access is not to be confused with Open-Source software (OSS) or open educational resources. If you do not know the difference between green OA and gold OA, or the difference between gratis OA and libre OA, then it will definitely reward you to find out. This book explains these modes of OA publishing in clear detail.

Peter Suber is a Faculty Fellow at Harvard, Senior Researcher at the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition and Research Professor of Philosophy at Earlham College. He is known as the de facto leader of the worldwide OA movement. The book is divided into 10 sections covering all aspects of OA, including copyright, economics, future scenarios, policies and funding agencies.

One does not need a crystal ball to see that the current laissez-faire capitalist economic model is no longer globally sustainable. Recent global financial disasters and difficulties indicate that a new sustainable model is urgently required. OA and OSS are part of this new model and the rapid expansion and acceptance of these movements and associated practical outcomes is an encouraging sign. Very few would expect a company not to make a profit, but it is the size of the profit that is the contentious issue. It is difficult to justify the outrageous cost of commercial office software suites when OSS applications such as Open Office are totally free, equally as good and completely compatible!

If you doubt the relevance of this obscene profit-making to academic publishing, Suber presents the sobering fact that the largest journal publisher earned higher profits than the world’s largest oil company. “In 2010, Elsevier’s journal division had a profit margin of 35.7 percent while ExxonMobil had only 28.1 percent” (p. 32). If this extreme profiteering is not distasteful enough and damaging for libraries and public knowledge, it is even more so because all authors provide their research papers at no charge to the publisher and generally relinquish copyright as well! As Suber notes, this is the way of the academy and has been so for close on 350 years. Academics write for impact and the advancement of public knowledge, not money.

Open Access, as Suber explains throughout this book, is really a win-win situation when analyzed carefully and without the motivation of greed-driven publishing companies. This greed is holding back knowledge, reducing access by the smaller institutions to research findings and reducing journal subscription rates dramatically. Even Harvard and other top universities have had to clip their library budgets in recent years. With the Internet and electronic access, one would expect the reverse to be true.

The quotation below was included in an email I recently received from the *International Journal of Medicine and Medical Sciences* (IJMMS) for a Call For Papers (CFP). It illustrates Suber’s thesis perfectly and indicates that the “writing is on the wall,” so to speak, for academic publishers who refuse to accommodate OA in their business plans.

IJMMS is an Open Access Journal. One key request of researchers across the world is unrestricted access to research publications. Open access gives a worldwide audience larger than that of any subscription-based journal and thus increases the visibility and impact of published works. It also enhances indexing, retrieval power and eliminates the need for permissions to reproduce and distribute content. IJMMS is fully committed to the Open Access Initiative and will provide free access to all articles as soon as they are published.

It is interesting to consider that virtually everyone in society is hurt by unnecessary fiscal restriction to research papers and data. Advances in medicine may be held back because of lack of access; this affects those
ALIEN PHENOMENOLOGY: OR, WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE A THING


Reviewed by Brian Reffin Smith, U.K. Email: brianreffinsmith@aol.com.

Well, the things they say! Do we attend enough to things? Or, to change the emphasis, do we pay enough attention to THINGS? No, it still doesn’t really work. In normal discourse, we are so used to dealing with things as just stuff that the title of Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like To Be A Thing comes as an almost transgressive shock. It goes skipping over living graveyards, shorn of the dead, bats on past the philosopher’s Fledermäusen and past post-humanism.

Connected to the pleasingly named OOO or Object Oriented Ontology, Ian Bogost’s book makes us reexamine our philosophical relationship to that part of the universe that is not the minuscule “us.” For those who thought it was a bit of a stretch to include (just some?) animals, systems and artificial intelligences, it may seem absurd—or in this reviewer’s case delightful—to happen again and again in this text upon lists of things that demand, Bogost argues, to be seen as perceiving and interacting, even if he has to use metaphor to do so. But as Gregory Bateson used to argue, we need to see computers as metaphor machines, able to handle syllogisms such as “Men die, grass dies, so men are grass.” He told me he wanted a “computing Greek, not Latin,” the latter being perhaps too pornographically meticulous. As professor of digital media at Georgia Institute of Technology and as a video game designer, Bogost may naturally want his ideas to be seen in virtual worlds. But it goes beyond that, beyond “mind and nature,” so to say, back into—I was going to say “our world”—the world of things. And that “back into” is just me being human about it, because of course logically there would be no such distinction, although some things are more equal than others.

If we read just a few of his randomly or carefully chosen names of things, we are forced, again rather joyfully I find, to consider plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players and sandstone, or the unicorn, combine harvester, the color red, methyl alcohol, quarks, corrugated iron; bats (of Nagel’s “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?”) are “both ordinary and weird, but so is everything else: toilet seats, absinthe louches, seagulls, trampolines.” Especially when you read this book.

Just as the word heterological (words that cannot refer to themselves are heterological: is heterological heterological?) looks more and more alien the more you consider it as a thing in itself, this text alienates every thing, in a good way.

He also wants us to do and make things, to become practicing philosophers in the sense that a doctor would be no good if she just read textbooks. I am dusting off my old Meccano (erector set) collections and seeking exploded diagrams of anything, or any thing, not to understand how a submarine or iPad works, but to marvel at the thingness. But does part A27 love, or do harm to, or appreciate part C7? Is it ethical to screw in a screw? Anyway, ethics is itself a “hyperobject,” “exploded to infinity.” There is no panpsychism here, for it all comes down to nothing/everything, unless you want to postulate the Higgs boson as a unit of consciousness, and let’s not.

Of course, we are not really insulated from the idea that things have things to say and do—see 18th- and 19th-century stories told by household objects [1] (“I am a camera” etc.)—but such stories are really saying that things are “like” other things. This book is different, for it asserts that everything, perhaps even that which does not exist, and certainly including us, is alien and metaphorical. As he proposes, it is not turtles but metaphors all the way down.

You might like or loathe Bogost’s possibly overheated but apparently necessary use of metaphor and simile in his argument—roasted chilies lose their skins and are like the wounds of Christ, gypsum dunes resembling a white shoreline in a Žižek daydream never reach the sea—is the Baroque elaboration making up for the absence of a tune?—but if you want to see what the OOO zeitgeist is about, and be jolted out of human-centered complacency, this might well be the book to read. The pilot of a crashing aircraft is encouraged by air traffic control to “say your souls, say your souls” (i.e. how many on board?). Well, the things they say! Perhaps we should say our things.

There are useful notes, a bibliography and, for once, a good index.

Note
1. They are called “it-narratives”: The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat (1751); A Month’s Adventures of a Base Shilling (c. 1820); The Life and Adventures of a Scotch Guiness Note (1826)—it was almost always “adventures.”

THE FUTURE WAS HERE: THE COMMODORE AMIGA


Reviewed by John F. Barber, The Creative Media & Digital Culture Program, Washington State University Vancouver, U.S.A. Email: <jbarber@wсу.ε>. The Platform Series from the MIT Press, edited by Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, seeks to investigate computing
Maher’s central claim is that the Commodore Amiga 1000 was the world’s first multimedia personal computer. With its palette of 4,096 colors, capacity to store and manipulate color photographs, unprecedented animation capabilities, access to professional tools for video manipulation, four-channel stereo and the ability to utilize recordings of real-world sounds, and the capacity to run multiple applications simultaneously, the Amiga was not only the first computer to provide a bridge between the bifurcated world of business and game computers, but the harbinger of present-day digital media such as digital cameras, Photoshop, MP3 players, YouTube, Flickr and the blogosphere.

Maher backs these bold claims with individual chapters detailing how the Amiga community of practice brought features and developments from evolving institutional computers to personal computers. For example, the chapter “Deluxe Paint” provides a deep and rich background discussion of the development of features and affordances for the creation and manipulation of digital images now taken for granted when using programs such as Photoshop or GIMP. “SSG and Sculpt-Animate” discusses vector drawing and animation. “New Tex” focuses on the successful efforts to bring desktop video manipulation to the Amiga. “Cinemaware and Psygnosis” details how the Amiga’s power, resolution, animation and stereo sound capabilities and custom chip processing all contributed to the development of realistic, immersive game environments and experiences.

Along the way, Maher is careful, and successful, in realizing another goal: to credit and properly document the work of the visionary engineers, developers and designers who played roles in the success of the Amiga and therefore influenced our current-day technologically world. Additionally, Maher provides insights into the technical, cultural and economic factors that influenced the Amiga’s development and lifecycle.

In the end, the future of the Amiga was hampered by its lack of support from Commodore management, as well as its closed, and limited, hardware configuration and operating system. Both prevented the revolutionary computer from competing successfully in a technological environment turned to modularization and adaptation. But the beloved underdog computer still attracts a loyal following. The Amiga network repository of public domain and freeware attracts a loyal following. The Aminet project continues to modularize and adapt. But the beloved underdog computer still attracts a loyal following. The Amiga network repository of public domain and freeware continues to attract a loyal following.

The success of Maher’s narrative is not necessarily to provide a study of the technology and/or sociology associated with the Commodore Amiga computer platform, although he does so quite compellingly. The original technology of the Amiga is no longer viable, and the community of developers, artists, hackers and gamers has moved on. While nostalgia might be an easy mark for such a book, Maher’s study aims higher, situating the original vision of the Commodore Amiga as a computer to make multimedia and multitasking possible. The success of _The Future Was Here_ is to reveal how the Amiga computer contributed so significantly to the development of today’s digital, multimedia-rich personal computers.

At once challenging, rewarding, emotional and insightful, _The Future Was Here_ is a compelling read for those interested in the Amiga platform, as well as those interested to learn more about the culture of computing.

**Under Blue Cup**


Reviewed by Jan Baetens, Belgium. Email: <Jan.Baetens@arts.kuleuven.be>.

Although the starting point of this book, the author’s efforts to recover short-term memory after the temporary brain damage caused by a ruptured aneurysm, may seem very highly anecdotal, _Under Blue Cup_ is without any doubt one of the most important publications on media theory since Krauss’s own (and very critical) study on the “post-medium condition” [1]. The therapy used to help the author recover her washed-out memory made her aware of the fundamental relationship between medium, materiality, time and self—a relationship that she considers basically lost in the kind of art that came after Modernism, i.e. the art symbolized by the _white cube_ paradigm of museum presentation and display, focused on the materiality of the medium-specific object. Postmodernism and beyond, which Krauss refers to with the help of the _black cube_ model, focuses instead on the experience of a dynamic subject, and its primary form of existence is post-medium installation art.

The notion of medium is key in any understanding of Modern art, whatever the meaning and scope one may give to this notion. It is based on the conviction that real art (for there are also non-artistic uses of a medium that are called kitsch, a term coined by Clement Greenberg) is a particular way of interacting with the specific properties of a certain material support and a certain number of material devices (oil on canvas, for instance). Yet the problem of medium, one which any serious artist has to cope with, has been jeopardized by its narrow-minded, simplistically materialist use by the very critic who has been paramount in the momentary success of medium-specific theory, namely Clement Greenberg, both Krauss’s model and anti-model: her model, given Greenberg’s rejection of all non-
medium-specific art or kitsch; her anti-model, given Greenberg’s craving for a purely formalist definition of specificity according to the material parameters of support and devices.

To this view of medium and medium-specificity, Krauss opposes a more complex vision, less teleological (contrary to Greenberg, she does not believe that the goal of an artistic medium is to discover its own specificity, i.e. to progressively abandon all non-medium-specific aspects) and more complex. In this regard, Krauss’s basic reference is the work by the philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose work on cinema (The World Viewed, Cambridge University Press, 1979) introduced an approach to medium as automatism.

For Cavell this notion replaces the worn-out notion of medium and perhaps also that of genre. But what is an automatism? Mainly the attempt (and, if successful, the achievement) at inventing a new rule for the use of a certain “technical support” (in Krauss’s terminology, since Cavell circumscribes the automatism in terms of automatic coupling of sign type, support and content, but the basic idea remains of course the same). However, the major revolution of the shift from medium to automatism is not just a terminological but also a conceptual one. Contrary to Greenberg et al., Cavell’s reinterpretation of medium-specificity as automatism surpasses any essentialist or transhistorical fixation. The rule(s) that define(s) an automatism are open to reinterpretation: A real artist is capable of redefining the automatism, either by inventing a new use of a given “technical support” (this is for instance what happens when painters shift from figuration to abstraction) or by using a new one (new types of paint or canvas can give birth to new ways of painting, for example) [2].

In Krauss’s rereading of Cavell, it is the temporal dimension of medium, automatism and art that comes to the fore, more particularly the dialectic relationship between memory and forgetting. Here, the main antagonist is McLuhan’s media theory, with its strong teleological and nonmaterialist undertones, and the main innovation (and this is, in my eyes, a real Copernican revolution) put forward by Krauss in this regard is not only the emphasis on the medium’s materiality (which cannot be freely or seamlessly remediated by newer and stronger media, as in McLuhan’s view), but also and most importantly her radically structuralist reinterpretation of the tension between old and new.

For Krauss, the temporal dimension of a medium (or an automatism, or a genre, or art tout court: after all, it is not the terminology that matters most) cannot be reduced to the eternal chain of old and new, of old becoming new, new becoming old, etc., but should take into account that the rules at the heart of any medium use are always at the crossroads of memory and forgetting: memory, because a rule must bear witness to previous ways of using a medium; forgetting, because a rule can fall prey to fossilization and must therefore be open to medium innovation and invention, yet always within the limits of the medium’s materiality (if not, it is no longer possible to set up new rules). The definition of a medium in terms of memory versus forgetting is a real paradigm shift in our thinking of what a medium is and can be compared with Krauss’s seminal article on “Sculpture in the expanded field” [3], where she had managed to reconceptualize the dizzying chaos of artistic practices that were no longer recognizable as sculpture with the help of the basic opposition, further elaborated in the form of a semiotic square, between “architecture” versus “landscape” (sculpture, in such a perspective, is then defined as non-architecture + non-landscape). Moreover, this relationship of memory and forgetting is not simply a matter of juxtaposition, of adding-up the old and the new: each artist must permanently reenact (i.e. confirm) and invent (i.e. supersede, reject, transform) the medium, yet not in the linear perspective that may be mechanically inferred from the terms old and new. In art, it can be revolutionary to go back, if this allows for the invention of new rules, new automatisms, new mediums. By the same token, it can prove profoundly reactionary and meaningless to leap into the so-called new and the so-called future, if the new and the future forsake the fundamental tension between memory and forgetting.

This “forgetting” is what characterizes for Krauss the regime of post-medium art, which she had already identified in previous publications as the new art regime produced by “three things”: the postminimalist dematerialization of the art object, the conceptualist emphasis on the verbal definition of the art object, the worldwide success of Duchamp’s readymade (the common feature of these “three things” being the war against materiality in art). In Under Blue Cup she adds other nemeses: deconstruction, whose critique of identity is broadened into a critique of medium-specificity, and the whole range of artistic practices that foreground no longer the object but the subject’s free-floating experience of situations (Nicolás Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, Catherine David’s anti-white cube curatorship of Documenta X, political moralism killing the pleasure of the object, and installation art in general are here the main enemies). For Krauss, post-medium art, which forsakes the work with the object’s materiality and the history that goes along, no longer engages with a medium’s history. It is therefore no longer a real medium and proves incapable of building new rules, new automatisms and new forms of art.

Just as in A Voyage on the North Sea, where she succeeded in proposing an anticonceptualist (i.e. anti-post-medium) reinterpretation of one of the major figures of conceptual art, Marcel Broodthaers, Rosalind Krauss offers in Under Blue Cup typically Modernist, i.e. medium-specific, rereadings of works and authors that critical peer pressure may partially label as post-medium artists but whose basic attitude is, according to Krauss, deeply committed to the medium’s materiality as well as to the medium’s automatisms and rules (which are not essential or transhistorical features, but aspects and uses to be discovered through the hands-on experiments of the artist). The most striking example of those studied by Krauss may be Ed Ruscha, whose work is analyzed as the medium-specific “figuring forth” of a new technical
support, the car. Ruscha’s work exposes what it can mean today to “drive” and to make sense of being an artist who produces his work not just while driving but also by driving and inventing thus totally new ways of seeing totally new objects. Other major examples in the book are William Kentridge and James Coleman and, to a lesser extent, Sophie Calle and Harun Farocki.

_Under Blue Cup_ is a book whose importance cannot be overstated. A synthesis of Krauss’s lifelong commitment to media theory, it is both a thorough discussion with other voices and tendencies in the field and a passionate struggle with contemporary art in the making (yet not from the viewpoint of what is fashionable today; postcolonial studies and institutional critique). Both elements, theory and practice, are, however, inextricably intertwined: Krauss judges the art being made today in light of her medium theory, while rethinking this theory under the creative pressure of the best that is being made today. _Under Blue Cup_ offers a welcome break with both the political rigor of most critical theory and the theoretical indifference of many cultural industries’ oriented studies of participatory and convergent media practices. Its exceptionally challenging stances and hypotheses must now be confronted with parallel but not necessarily similar views, such as for instance W.J.T. Mitchell’s attempts to reread McLuhan in a more medium-specific way [4] or Diarmuid Costello’s reflections on the ongoing dialogue between Stanley Cavell and Michael Fried [5]. What tomorrow’s media theory will be is of course impossible to foresee in detail, but it is impossible to imagine that _Under Blue Cup_ will not play a key role in it.

**References and Notes**

1. Rosalind Krauss, _A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition_ (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999). For a more detailed discussion of Cavell’s ideas on automatism, see my article “Le roman-photo: média singulier, média au singulier?”, in Sociétés et représentation (“La croisée des médias”), No. 10, 2000, pp. 51–59. Similar ideas are defended by my Belgian colleague Philippe Marion, who has coined the notion of _medium genius_ (“médagénie”), whose actual meaning is very close to what Cavell signifies by automatism.


**BEYOND THE DREAM SYNDICATE: TONY CONRAD AND THE ARTS AFTER CAGE**


Reviewed by Stephen Petersen, U.S.A. Email: <stephen_petersen@corcoran.edu>.

By the time we arrive at La Monte Young, Robert Morris, etc., the boundaries between the mediums become unimportant. There was a milieu which may have consisted only of Young, Morris, myself, and one or two others, and which was never chronicled in art history. This milieu regarded the mystique of the separate arts—painting, sculpture, music, poetry, drama, ballet, opera—as “uptown,” as corny. Methods (e.g. minimalism) were freely transferred from one medium to another.


Looking back more than three decades after his 1961 invention of the mathematical-musical-linguistic-artistic hybrid that he called “Concept Art,” Henry Flynt placed it within the activities of a small group of downtown New York composers and artists, a milieu that he noted was “never chronicled in art history.” The reasons for this oversight, he suggested, have much to do with the fierce defense of medium specificity within historical studies of the avant-garde. A conservative discipline, art history has failed to deal adequately with work that falls between media and methods that “were freely transferred from one medium to another.”

This previously uninhabited (art) historical space is precisely the territory covered by Branden Joseph’s illuminating study of the composer and filmmaker Tony Conrad, originally published in 2008 and now reissued in paperback. Joseph’s approach is decidedly non-monographic; he spends as much or more time on figures such as Fl, whose work intersects in different ways with Conrad as with Conrad himself. Nor is it yet a contextual study that would seek to re-create the ambiance of a time and place (although it does so to a considerable degree). Borrowing a term from the late artist Mike Kelley, Joseph calls his project a “minor history,” _minor_ in the sense in which the word has been used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to designate a heterogeneous cultural field, irreducibly different from—yet in Kelley’s formulation “parasitical” to—the “major,” understood as sovereign and hierarchical. If “minimalism” is a stable (i.e. major) category in the histories of art, dance, music and film, a “constant against which, whether explicitly or implicitly, other phenomena are measured,” Joseph looks rather at those “minor” figures, Conrad foremost among them, who elude categorizing and whose place in the narrative of minimalism has been largely overlooked. “Minor” as used here does not mean less significant but rather outside the dominant discourses and shifty with respect to linear narratives and object-based histories. And, echoing Fl’s dismissal of the “uptown,” it remains “fringe” or “low” with respect to official culture.

The book’s subtitle points to the critical importance of John Cage, whose compositional and performance strategies were based on a withdrawal from cultural authority and authorship and a new relation of work to audience in real time and space, what the critic Michael Fried would famously call “theatricality.” The “arts after Cage” are characterized by heterogeneity and hybridity of means, an emphasis on materiality and direct experience and an implicit
The five main chapters of the book cover little more than a half-decade, charting Conrad’s trajectory from Harvard mathematics major and violin player to “structural” filmmaker through a series of collaborations and friendships, what Joseph calls a “network of intersecting positions” (p. 74). In 1959 Conrad met experimental composer La Monte Young in Berkeley and soon thereafter immersed himself in musical composition, influenced by Stockhausen and Cage. Although drawing different lessons from Cage, Conrad and Young would closely collaborate in the ambient performances of the avant-garde enterprise known as the Theater of Eternal Music or what Conrad would come to redefine as the “Dream Syndicate.” Where they differed was on the ideological import of their sonic experiments (Young tending toward mysticism and idealism and, along with sculptor Robert Morris, toward restoring a sense of control, power and form to the anarchic Cagean project). Joseph then turns to the philosophical “concept art” of Henry Flynt (a classmate of Conrad’s) but also to Flynt’s quasi-political ideology of “creepism”—cultural deviance (in multiple senses of the term)—and his embrace of “acognitive culture,” namely the realm of wholly unofficial or “uncodified” actions. This leads into a discussion of the short-lived protoalternative rock group The Primatives (featuring Conrad along with John Cale, Lou Reed and Walter de Maria) and the sexually transgressive underground film Flaming Creatures (1962–1963) by Conrad’s friend and collaborator Jack Smith. The book’s final chapter considers Conrad’s abstract stroboscopic film The Flicker (1965–1966) in relation to his “investigation into techniques of perceptual and neurological stimulation” (p. 301) and alongside Brion Gysin’s “dream machine” as a work that acted directly upon its viewer’s nervous system. By trying ultimately to shift the viewer’s mode of attention and thereby to afford “new types of thinking” (p. 349), Conrad’s work exemplifies and develops the radical legacy of Cage.

Beyond the fascinating and heretofore untold story recounted here, this book is important for the way its method mirrors his subject. Joseph moves across and between disciplinary genres of scholarship and thereby challenges the reader’s capacity to think outside familiar categories. This study sits at the fringes of several academic disciplines and, to its credit, fits squarely within none. To paraphrase Conrad, by shifting our mode of attention it prompts us both to renew and to alter our thinking.

High Society: Mind-Altering Drugs in History and Culture

Reviewed by Jan Baetens, Belgium. Email: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.be>.

High Society is both the title of an exhibition presented at Wellcome Collection (London, 2010) and a book derived from the curatorial work of Mike Jay, a well-known scholar specializing in the cultural history of drugs. As such, it is a wonderful accomplishment of the infrequent encounter of scholarly and popularizing efforts seamlessly meeting in a lavishly illustrated publication that will be of great interest to both scholars and a general audience (the latter will appreciate the fact that the very readable text presents itself without footnotes, the former will find in the final advanced reading section helpful tools for further research; both groups will appreciate the well-made index).

Jay’s book is divided into three parts. In the section “A Universal Impulse,” he gives a very clear overview of the presence of drugs in all human civilizations as well as of the very different forms and meanings that the use of certain kinds of drugs has taken in a wide range of societies, Western and non-Western, natural (or allegedly so) and technologically enhanced, in the present but also in the past. This section helps the reader understand the dramatically multilayered but always thoroughly cultural value of drugs, be it pent drugs (like mushrooms) or laboratory-based drugs (like ecstasy). Jay emphasizes the role of drugs in the construction of human societies and reflects upon their role in the development of the human brain, always insisting on the collective and socially constructed dimension of drugs and taking advantage of the notion of drugs to ask questions on the relationships between the human and the animal. By focusing on the universal character of drugs, Jay not only foregrounds the fact that drugs are found everywhere but that all social groups are to a certain extent dependent, among many other things of course, on drugs, even if not all societies use or forbid the same kind of drugs. In spite of their wildly diverging forms and practices, the drug pattern, which is a cultural pattern of linking the individual and the social, seems to remain the same.

In “From Apothecary to Laboratory,” Jay further problematizes the definition of drugs, blurring the boundaries between licit and illicit, drugs and non-drugs, positive and negative. The perspective shifts here from the spatial (as in Section I, where the idea is to study the drug phenomenon all over the world) to the historical, more particularly to the ongoing experiments in Western culture, from the Antiquity to the Renaissance, from the Enlightenment to the drugs of the future and the discussions on human enhancement. Here as well, the very well-informed study of the ceaselessly growing assortment of possible drugs and their various contributions to often clandestine subcultures goes along with the emphasis on what is persistent through all changes: the link between the techniques to heighten human consciousness and the construction of human behavior and social groups. The examples of opium, cocaine, laudanum, LSD and other drugs all confirm the basic knowledge already put forward in ancient medicine: “Whether a drug is medicine or poison is a question of dosage” (p. 107).

Section 3, “The Drug Trade,” focuses very cleverly on “older drugs,” such as tobacco, opium and alcohol, and makes clear that the so-called “war on drugs” is an immensely complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the dichotomy of “bad” drugs and “good” crime-fighters. Here again, Jay’s approach discusses the many hidden aspects of laisser-aller and prohibitionist politics and the many permanently shifting nuances one has to acknowledge between the many ways of coping with drugs. The final part of this section is devoted to a discussion of the ban on tobacco in the wealthy classes of the Western world, which is analyzed in terms of changing cultural attitudes (and not just in terms of health care considerations and economics of insurance systems: after all, as Jay astutely observes: smokers do make a positive contribution to the finances of our care systems, for they die sooner and thus help keep under control the exploding costs of an aging population).

There is much to recommend in
Mike Jay’s book. He offers a well-balanced, historically very rich and culturally very diverse presentation of drugs. His writing can be cited as an example to all those who want to popularize science. The book is illustrated in a highly didactic yet always very attractive way. Last, but not least, one may hope as well that this study makes a positive contribution to the ongoing discussion on drugs that clearly does not currently follow the careful and open approach that such a complex phenomenon needs.

DEBATES IN THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES


Just as its title suggests, Debates in the Digital Humanities explores the various issues in contention among scholars of the digital humanities (or “DH”). Those of us paying attention to The Chronicle of Higher Education or the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) Job Information List are probably aware that DH has been touted as the hot new “Thing” (p. ix). But as Luke Waltzer reminds us, “The digital humanities is not new but rather the latest stage of inquiry at the intersection of digits and the humanities that stretches back to the 1940s” (p. 338).

What the digital humanities is emerges as the first of six issues under debate. For Matthew Kirschenbaum, it is “scholarship and pedagogy” that is “public,” deeply connected to “infrastructure,” “collaborative,” “depend[ent] on networks of people” who live “online” (p. 9). For Kathleen Kirschenhame, it can be “understood as a nexus of fields within which scholars use computing technologies to investigate the kinds of questions that are traditional to the humanities, and as is more true of [her] own work, ask traditional kinds of humanities-oriented questions about computer technologies” (p. 12). Lisa Spiro tells us it is a field whose core values include “openness,” “collaboration,” “collegiality and connectedness,” “diversity,” and “experimentation” (pp. 24–30). Rafael C. Alvarado argues that “digital humanists are simply humanists (or interpretative social scientists) by training who have embraced digital media and who have a more or less deep conviction that digital media can play a crucial, indeed, transformative, role in the work of interpretation, broadly conceived” (p. 52). Tom Scheinfeldt likens DH’s “heavy reliance on instruments, on tools” to that of scientists (p. 57) and tells us that scholars involved in DH are “more concerned with method than . . . theory” (p. 59). Others, not mentioned here, weigh in with many more articles and blog posts that further describe the field. The points I am making are twofold: First, the book’s approach to scholarship involves a lived practice, with each author providing his or her own perspective that may or may not conflict with the other authors’ take on DH—and in a way that does not denigrate but rather broadens understanding; second, this is the same approach used in the five sections that follow, and so the book makes for a lively and welcoming read.

Following the first section, Defining the Digital Humanities, comes Theorizing the Digital Humanities, Critiquing the Digital Humanities, Practicing the Digital Humanities, Teaching the Digital Humanities, and Envisioning the Digital Humanities. The repetition of the verb form reflects the sentiment of progressivism currently associated with the field. A forward-thinking approach underpins the way in which the book was produced (“three different versions” [p. xiv]). Though the final product is “an online, expanded, open-access webtext,” p. xiv). Though Debates in the Digital Humanities is well over 500 pages in length, there is no fat in it; all essays contain important information and concepts relating to DH. Taken together, the book as a whole and every essay in it is a must-read for anyone who claims to be a digital humanist whether she or he works in theory, pedagogy or practice.

As one can imagine, a book of this length, organized into six sections of 29 essays and 20 blog posts, and penned by 43 leading DH scholars, covers a lot of territory; more would have made the book unwieldy. So, my next comments speak to ideas touched on in the book but ripe for future development of other publishable studies.

First, I would like to see more information about tenure and promotion issues. David Greetham’s essay, “The Resistance to Digital Humanities,” details the challenges DH scholars face in regards to work counting as scholarship and not service (pp. 438–451). Examples of adaptable tenure and promotion guidelines that others could use would also be helpful.

Second, the book also leaves me wanting to learn more about projects undertaken by DH scholars, especially those outside the U.S., Canada and the U.K. Waltzer provides information on several: Hypercities, UM Blogs and “A Living Laboratory” (p. 343). In other words, what is the breadth of “experimentation” (pp. 28–29) valued in DH?

Third, I would like to know more about the relationship between the DH and other computer-oriented academic communities so that we can tease out the unique qualities of DH and get a sense of overlaps. How is DH different from media art or film and video studies where practitioners also utilize computing devices for their work, often collaborate in teams, and struggle to explain how their work counts as scholarship? Since the late 1980s the Computers and Writing Community, for example, has been extremely active in theorizing and developing sound pedagogies for using computers for scholarship and teaching—and have already worked through many issues, such as gaining support for digital-based projects for tenure and promotions, engaging in cultural critique, and collaborating in teams, to name a few.

Two important scholars of Computers and Writing, Cynthia Selfe and Doug Eyman, are referenced in Elizabeth
Losh’s “Hacktivism and the Humanities” (pp. 179–180), but there are literally hundreds of others working at U.S. universities and colleges. What lessons can we learn from them and the projects they have undertaken?

My final two comments add my own perspective to the digital humanities. Lisa Sprio asserts in “This Is Why We Fight” that the DH needs to “produce a values statement” in order to “provide the foundation for the digital humanities,” listing those associated with the “aesthetics and values” of the humanities (inquiry, critical thinking, debate, pluralism, balancing innovation and tradition, and exploration and critique,” p. 19). She goes on to propose new ones mentioned previously in this review (“openness,” “collaboration,” “colligability and connectedness,” “diversity,” and “experimentation”). It seems to me that, with the growing lack of support for the humanities in and outside of the academy, one additional value that may help scholars bridge the gap between academia and the world beyond—and, so, demonstrate to our various stakeholders why studying the humanities is so needed—is “problem-solving.” Perhaps we need to go beyond questioning and critiquing established norms, authority, policy, theory, approaches, etc., and lead the way in finding answers to those questions and solutions to those critical problems our communities face. Bryan Alexander and Rebecca Frost Davis hint to this concept in their essay, “Should the Liberal Arts Campuses Do Digital Humanities?” when they stress the need for “community engagement” (p. 384).

Finally, many of the book’s authors allude to computer technology as a tool. In an age when mobile devices are, for many of us, an extension of our hands and extend our online lives—as Kirschenbaum suggests—to “24-7,” and computer technology is so ubiquitous that communicating, driving, telling time, paying for groceries, etc. are dependent upon them, it is time to rethink our relationship with computers. If we are makers of things such as a digital archive of a literary writer like John Barber’s Brautigan.net project or a mobile app for teaching about a historical site such as Brett Oppegaard’s Fort Vancouver Mobile project, or a 2D animated poem like Thom Swiss’s “Shy Boy,” then computers are not tools that help us do what it is we do, but rather the medium in which we work. It is a fundamental shift in thinking about our relationship with digital technology that can help to delineate the difference between the humanities and the digital humanities.

**When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity**

Reviewed by Hannah Drayson, University of Plymouth, TransTechnology Research, U.K. Email: <h.dragson@plymouth.ac.uk>.

Biometric technologies used for the confirmation of individual human identity are a persistent example of a technological vaporware, probably more familiar to most of us from science fiction than from their slow increase in use in personal travel documents, such as passports and fingerprint locks on cars and laptops. However, particularly in the post-9/11 United States, the biometrics industry is currently expanding, landing multibillion dollar contracts in border control, adding to its existing footholds in law-enforcement, welfare and prison management. Focusing on five main themes surrounding the technology, *When Biometrics Fail* provides an historical overview of the growth of the industry since the 1970s. Using evidence from a range of contemporary sources, journalism, media and recent research published on biometric technologies, Magnet demonstrates rather compellingly how these technologies fail to live up to Daston and Galison’s [1,2] concept of “mechanical objectivity,” the idea that machines are capable of making unbiased judgments owing to the privileged link to the physical world (and lack of subjectivity) with which they are associated by marketers, computer scientists, politicians and the media.

In making this point, *When Biometrics Fail* offers a damning analysis of the technical problems that dog biometric identification, many of which stem from the premises on which individual difference is defined. Magnet explores the implications of these limitations with reference to the range of sites in which biometric technology has been implemented, exploring the social problems that it is posited to be able to solve and showing that in many cases its effect is only to hide, or exacerbate, these problems. As Magnet argues, biometrics fails because it is discriminatory both in the methodology used to identify individuals and also in the social implications of the manner and sites in which it is implemented (prisons, welfare, border control). Further, there is a wider and deeper problem throughout that cannot be separated from the bias of the users of the technology. This is that the whole enterprise is based on a false premise: the idea that the biological body can be fixed upon as an enduring, digitizable and recoverable document. This premise/idea has been challenged in the scholarship of thinkers like Donna Haraway and Judith Butler with the critical concept of “corporeal fetishism.” This model of biological identity as an essential and fixed quality both is out of date insofar as the humanities have understood the body for a considerable time (notions such as gender are no longer considered only biological rather than performed) and also positions the body as a commodity.

In four short chapters Magnet makes clear the practical impact of these assumptions and introduces faulty models of biological identity that are both dated and troublingly linked to discredited scientific ideas of biological race and practices of profiling and reading the body, such as physiognomy. By discussing these assumptions as they manifest in the way in which biometrics are applied, Magnet identifies a range of cultural problems that stem from the acceptance of the technology as a cure-all. She is also not slow in pointing out that the research in this area is painfully unaware of how out of date its approach is; the concepts that she draws upon to question it are now basic to the canon of gender and technology studies. In addition to this, the models of objectivity that these technologies invoke in order to state their authority are long discredited and highly simplistic in scientific terms.

The opening chapter analyzes what can be seen as broadly discriminatory aspects of how biometric recognition is achieved. One example, retinal scanning, is only effective on light-colored eyes because of light reflections in darker corneas that interfere with the camera’s view of the veins in the retina, making the technology as it has been developed in Western laboratories biased in favor of a particular population. Magnet very effectively places a number of these problems that seem to constitute in-built biases in the technologies in contrast with the arguments of industry professionals and law.
enforcement officers who argue that automated biometric systems are superior to humans because they are unable to discriminate. Technical limitations that are easily brushed under the carpet in a scientific lab or paper take on a life of their own when the technologies are implemented and the assumptions that underlie them are played out in the real world. In an analysis of the techniques of biometric identification, the apparent naïveté of current research and biometric identification techniques shows the extent to which cultural assumptions and essentialist paradigms underlie the methods by which researchers identify and train systems to make identifications. For example, the use of “soft” biometric differentiators, i.e. sex and race, invoke what appear to be extremely limited ideas about which detectable characteristics might offer evidence of male or feminality, such as hair length, and signifiers related to dress and other markers of gender (such as an individual’s décolletage, amount of skin shown or wearing of a tie).

Magnet also discusses the industries’ exploitation of U.S. prisons as a testing site for the implementation of technologies such as hand geometry scanning. In a chapter titled “Acres of Skin” (after Allan Hornblum’s [3] 1999 text on the exploitation of American prisoners as medical research subjects from the 1940s to 1970s), she discusses how this method of counting prisoners (an activity undoubtedly carried out for their own safety as well as keeping track of their whereabouts) interferes with a prisoner’s rights to refuse to give biometric data but also results in prison spaces where the watcher is no longer human and no longer able to infer that prisoners are protesting, hunger striking, depressed, or sick, or even (as familiar from science fiction, and as Magnet tells us, in recent crimes) still attached to the body part being scanned.

Another case study shows how the industry has targeted another state apparatus to which another large population is subject, the U.S. welfare system, with the implementation of mandatory fingerprint scanning in a number of states. Superficially the goal of this has been to reduce the number of individuals making multiple claims for assistance; on the surface it appears to have been successful in this regard. Enrollment in the benefit system has dropped. However, as Magnet points out, some argue that this change is a result of the discrimination against immigrant populations who are unwilling to submit for fingerprinting because of fears that this will interfere with their applications for permanent U.S. residency (p. 88). Therefore, the apparently unintended side effects of implementing these technologies appear to have far less “objective” and non-discriminatory consequences than their supporters argue.

As Magnet describes it, mechanical objectivity is “a visual trick to hide subjectivity from view”—a subjectivity that is associated with discriminatory bias (a bias that, she points out, appears with the introduction of new anti-terrorism laws post-9/11 to have become more and more clearly detectable in the attitudes and behavior of both U.K. and U.S. police). The ideal of a machine system that can identify both individuals and specific traits without the involvement of a potentially biased human observer is one that, as Daston and Galison [4] tell us, was historically short lived in much of the sciences. This is an observation often made by those studying a range of imaging technologies focused on the body [3,6,7]. Moreover, developers, users and salespeople regularly invoke this ideal of objective machines.

Some aspects of this critique could be explored further, and the text offers much evidence that would support further meta-analysis, particularly in terms of how the technological functions of biometrics are understood. While we might accept that subjectivity invading the process of identification is a failure of the technology, an anti-essentialist position would question the legitimacy of any technological system of categorization that makes a claim to truth. In the case of biometrics, identification technologies offer a trade-off between what is affordable, possible and pragmatic, which can be enriched or limited by ideas of what can be mapped onto or discovered as manifest in the body. In particular, the concepts of power and institutional control—concepts that themselves impact the way in which these systems are understood, interacted with or resisted by their users—seem central to this discussion yet are not invoked as often as they might be.

The synthesis offered by How Biometrics Fail suggests a further reappraisal on philosophical terms of what these technologies actually are, how they factor into human action and experience as well as being themselves expressions of a particular way of seeing. The book, therefore, offers further compelling evidence of the entanglement between the social, ideological and imaginary functions of technical systems and their purported use. Still, apart from its discussion of the transformation of the concept of the international border, the book generally does not offer an alternative understanding of biometrics, taking them only at face value, as technical devices, and not repositioning them as the manifestations of particular sets of ideas or desires on the part of their makers and users.

Magnet argues in her final pages that biometric technology does not need to be perfected, because it cannot ever achieve what it claims, i.e. to map a range of cultural ideas onto a biological, but ever changing, body. This is where the thrust of the book and its intervention lies, not in discussing the technical failures of biometrics but in identifying some of the key and catastrophic problems caused by a partially fictional technology that claims to do the impossible. The result is a useful synthesis of the activities of the contemporary biometric industry, providing a compelling dissection of how the idea of a science of biometrics fails and a timely critique of an industry and its claims that exploit a misconception about the human body and use technological fetishism to posit the solution as a high tech—and therefore ethically unproblematic—solution to a range of problems that have serious political and humanitarian consequences.
References
4. Daston and Galison [1].
7. Dumit [2].

disciplines and interest by identifying them as exceptions, anti-narrative constructs, or idiosyncratic items that do not have any place in any taxonomy, whatsoever. Issues and aspects such as simulation (versus narrative) or the multi-layeredness of time and space (not just as parameters of fictional representations, but as basic features of textual production and reception) play here, of course, an essential role.

Second, and this is no longer an observation but a theoretical claim, there is the conviction that the solution to the above-mentioned problem is not to split the field of literary studies into two subfields; print culture on the one hand and digital-born culture on the other hand. Although this is still the default option of most literary scholars, many of whom defend the incompatibility between print modus and digital modus, Eskelinen takes a different, much more homogenizing stance. For him, both print and digital-born texts should be studied with the help of the same (but expanded) conceptual and analytical devices. Thus, the whole book is an attempt (a convincing attempt) to demonstrate the usefulness, if not the necessity, of this overall approach. The refusal to draw a strong line between both domains does not imply, however, that Eskelinen is obsessed with creating a new general and all-encompassing theory. His goal, which is both more modest and more ambitious, has to do with the elaboration of a toolkit, i.e. of a list of aspects and dimensions as well as a certain number of proposals and hypotheses concerning their concrete use. Interpretation of specific works is something that falls outside the scope of this book, which must be read as what it is: a theoretical inquiry into the parameters of what we mean by a literary text today (and even within this field Eskelinen is mainly concerned with narrative literary texts).

The study of narrative is boundless, and the exceptional dynamics of the field make it very difficult to keep a reasonable overview of everything that is being done, undone and redone, often simultaneously. The first impression that one takes from Eskelinen’s book is that the author has an extremely clear view of his material. Not only does he know the basic and less-basic discussions on most key aspects of (formal) narratology well, he also succeeds in establishing an always-lucid hierarchy between the authors and theories he considers essential for the construction of his own model. He introduces authors and theories mainly to test and challenge the consistency of his proposals.

Eskelinen relies on two major references: Gérard Genette (and to a lesser extent Gerald Prince), as far as classic narratology is concerned, and Espen Aarseth, as far as cybertextuality is concerned. The foregrounding of Genette, a classic structuralist whose work has often been criticized as too rigid and narrow by representatives of post-classical narratology (a less formalist, more culturally and contextually oriented update of formalist narratology), comes as a big surprise. Eskelinen, however, quickly convinces his reader that the general framework outlined by Genette is actually more open and flexible than that of most post-classic narratologists (whose ideas are often discussed in a polemical way), so that the merger with unforeseen categories and realizations is easier in his case than in the case of those post-classic narratologists whose models are, according to Eskelinen, less inspiring when it comes to opening print-based theory to newer forms of textual thinking. Eskelinen’s second major reference is Aarseth’s cybertext theory on “ergodic” (or if one prefers: interactive) literature, as developed since the mid-1990s, which remains for him the best possible way to understand what new textual practices, such as for instance hypertext fiction or games, can bring to our definition of text and narrative.

The merger of Genette and Aarseth, like the plea for a unified theoretical approach, is undoubtedly a fine achievement of this publication. The implementation in textual theory of many new concepts and insights made possible by experiments or discoveries in digital literature and games is generally stimulating, although not always easy to read, for Eskelinen’s concern with typologies and their combinatorics confronts the reader with an endless and sometimes quite boring number of criteria, aspects, parameters, dimensions, levels and all their combinatorial rules. The relevance of all these lists can of course only be made “acceptable” by the analysis of concrete and specific works, but the purely theoretical program of *Cybertext Poetics* explicitly refrains from doing so. Moreover, Eskelinen proposes a convincing and healthy discussion of the misunderstandings and prejudices that surround the notion of ludology, the new discipline.
that is often seen as an anti-narrative or anti-literary methodology and theory. What Eskelinen clearly shows is that this debate is a false quarrel: Narratologists do not have to fear ludologists, and ludologists should not see narratologists as their institutional adversaries. Both should work towards the elaboration of a broader conceptualization of what a text is and how narrative can be thought of in a technologically enhanced society.

What is missing in Eskelinen’s book, however, is a discussion between the positions of ludology and those of “unnatural narratology,” a recent subfield within post-classic narratology that “analyzes and theorizes the aspects of fictional narratives that transcend or violate the boundaries of conventional realism. It affirms the distinctive nature of fiction, identifies nonmimetic aspects of ostensibly realistic texts, and gravitates toward unusual and experimental works that reject the conventions of mimetic and natural narrative” [1]. From an institutional point of view, this absence is a pity, and one can only hope that the publication of this book will reopen this crucial debate.

Reference
1. See Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology <nordisk.au.dk/forskning/forskningscentre/undictionary/>

The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning


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I was initially attracted to this book by way of its title. Discussing the art of cruelty may reveal something about it that I had not thought of or encountered before, whether in real time or virtual performance or as imagined, sounded or written. Of course, cruelty abides with and between us. We cannot escape it. We provoke it, support it, condemn it or shy away from it as we can. It resonates or it does not, it leaves us shaken or numb, or passes through us as simply another incident among all too many we have managed to endure. Being a victimizer or victim, of course, is something else, and there the term “art” loses meaning. When directly inflicting pain or having it inflicted on you, what space is left for you to find significance within it? Little to none. And for those others who may watch, are they anything more than voyeurs? Commanding agents to do your dirty work can open the door to a kind of artistry, however horrifying it might be. But even here the terms bifurcate and ethical considerations come to the fore, as they should.

So this book offers perspective on what makes the representation of cruel acts—and cruelty—artistic, and what does not. That is to say, what gives to such acts the values we attribute to art and the values we attribute to bad faith or simple disgust: from personal revelation, the clarity in embracing something you did not before in just this way, or a revalued ambivalence, for example, about the work and how it plays or culminates or something of both, to an exorcism of, or service to, neurotic, agitprop or other compulsions that might shock but rarely inspire.

In each case for Nelson, attentiveness couples with nuance before the work, and that relationship is primary. That she does not practice what she preaches methodically, lending to her discourse an aleatory character, does not prevent her from making use of it well enough—an aspect, I am sure, that contributes to the notice her book has received. She plays intellectually, her subjects artistically. Shall I mention just a few? There is Sade, Nietzsche, Artaud, Dix, Kafka, Brecht and more currently Abramovic, Fassbinder, Mendieta, Antin, the Yes Men, Holzer and others, a compendium of creators we have encountered in one or another way, balanced on both ends by Bacon and Plath with a tether to Buddhist perspectives that sometimes left me curious, not so much as to why but why not; it’s about time.

Nor does she avoid questioning the rote tradition that “avant-gardes” do violence to what preceded them, the better to gain advantages precise to their momentum. Complicating this, of course, is the need, as expressed by those she admires, with few exceptions, to do just that—to strip away, excoriate, cleanse, subvert and otherwise defenestrate given values and styles; as if such aggression best enabled them. Certainly, it is a phenomenon worth discussing despite the oft-echoed death of the avant-garde. Somehow, ghost or not, it stalks us. And somehow its predicates illuminate and beguile. What else have we less played out here but a kind of compassion that we rarely acknowledge or use, including the deep possibility of humor and irony by way of it, and other riches still largely in the wings?

Most striking for me about this book, though, is its temporality. By that I mean two things: its currency, in terms of the artists, writers and film-makers (with one composer, Cage) Nelson explores and their value over time. While explaining why a work interests her and may interest us, I also came away with a peculiar sense of evaporation, of entering an alternate or parallel scheme whose values slip away. This is not to say that Nelson forgoes her aim. She doesn’t. But, and perhaps this is a sign of the times, it diffuses into a shifting landscape where insights emerge and vanish, and whose overall significance diminishes as a result. If I bring into this consideration the ever-present tides of realpolitik, whose cruelties are immediate or insidious, and the deluge of virtualities that orbit about them, this act of interpretation enervates as much as it enlightens.

To her credit, Nelson also knows that boredom can change or challenge a reader’s perception, as it has my own, and that art, if it seeks something more than a shallow intensity, needs boredom, or the space or lack of space it invokes as counterpoint. Like Nelson, I too look for that intercession or suspension that any work can foil by virtue of its medium or mechanism too rigorously projected. Failure here is thus a kind of triumph. Because, like her, I seek in art the humanity we have all too much lost to acts of cruelty that, on their own, asphyxiate.

This is one reason why her book is important enough. At times it breathes and allows us to breathe with it. At other times its breath dissimulates the communion it seeks. The contradiction is intriguing. I only wish, given her expansive reading and discretion about art, she would use both more intensively. Her concluding chapter, “Rarer and Better Things,” points to this although I’m not quite sure what she means. So, too, her book subtitle, “A Reckoning,” which, for me at least, she has yet to make with cruelty and the art that represents it and us, or some vital part of us that makes us what we are and least or best desire to be.

The book is broken into 16 chapters. I will mention a few of their titles to indicate what Nelson deals with, not without personality, and what you may gain: “Styles of Imprisonment”; “Captive, Catharsis”; “Nobody Said No”; “A
Situation of Meat”; “Precariousness”; “Face”; and so forth. The art of cruelty remains with us, a mirror to who we are, a looking glass to what we might become, given the desire to transform the images that compel us and the actions that sometimes define us.

Leonardo Reviews
ON-LINE

OCTOBER 2012

Boyamba Belgique: Or Why a King Should Not Lose His Sword, directed by Dries Engels and Bart Van Peel; Berlin 1885: The Division of Africa by Joël Calmettes. Reviewed by Mike Mosher.


Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation by Beth Coleman. Reviewed by Ornella Corazza.


Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum by Vince Dziekan. Reviewed by Dene Grigar.

SEPTEMBER 2012

Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance by Hanna Rose Shell. Reviewed by Brian Reffin Smith.


The Universe in Zero Words: The Story of Mathematics as Told through Equations by Dana MacKenzie. Reviewed by Phil Dyke.

Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation by Beth Coleman. Reviewed by Ornella Corazza.


Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum by Vince Dziekan. Reviewed by Dene Grigar.

Art and Atoms

Leonardo Special Section

Guest Editor: Tami I. Spector

The modern world of chemistry is vast and its connection to art strong. From nanocars and extraterrestrial materials to DNA origami and biofuels, chemistry—like art—expresses its transformative, material essence. Chemistry’s unique connection to art—a science simultaneously steeped in abstraction and application, process and product—is the focus of this special section.

We especially seek submissions related to topics on the cutting edge of chemistry, including nanoscience, synthetic biology, fuel cells and neurochemistry. We encourage artists, scientists, engineers and scholars exploring the connection between chemistry and art to send proposals, queries, artist’s statements and/or full-length manuscripts to the Leonardo editorial office: Leonardo/ISAST, 211 Sutter Street, Suite 501, San Francisco, CA 94108, U.S.A. E-mail: <leonardomanuscripts@gmail.com>.

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