FACEBOOK SOCIETY: LOSING OURSELVES IN SHARING OURSELVES

Reviewed by Amy Ione, Director, The Diatrope Institute, Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A. Email: ione@diatrope.com.
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According to Roberto Simanowski, the author of Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves, this volume isn’t a book about Facebook. Rather his concern is what he calls Facebook society. His starting point is Facebook’s claim that it is building a “global community,” and his underlying assumption is that social media platforms have altered social interaction, political life and outlooks on the world, even for people who do not regularly use them. Bringing boundless enthusiasm to how Facebook and other social apps create community, this cultural studies perspective both celebrates networked society and offers a critique of problematic elements derived from digital communities, with a particular focus on our concept of the self.

Simanowski articulates a number of rationales for why people get involved in these communities within a world where people are frequently immersed in their multiple devices. His driving idea is that it is too late to dismiss Facebook as a fraud even if Facebook society is a society of immediacy, impatience and immersion. This brings him to ask why and how Facebook persuades its users to publicize their private lives. He concludes that there are several answers: It is cool, it offers the feeling of being a public person, one can communicate with minimal interaction, one can engage with different groups on different themes, and users can gain a broad sense of being connected to many communities. Nonetheless, as he explains,

we need to understand Facebook as the answer to a problem that perturbs the (post)modern subject more or less consciously. It must be understood as the symptom of a cultural evolution that should be thought through the lens of a philosophy of history and should not be too quickly reduced to scenarios of political oppression or economic exploitation. The political-economic consequences of the Facebook system lie deeper. For one thing, through the accumulation and analysis of personal data, Facebook generates knowledge as a tool of domination; in this way, it advances the process of commercialization. For another thing, through its invitation to a kind of experience of the self that is reflexively impoverished, it produces the very subjects who are no longer dismayed by this process (p. xiv).

Despite the mention of commercialization, Simanowski is more focused on how social tools remake our self-image, emphasizing social networks and diary apps. He frames this in a number of ways. First, he sees sharing on Facebook as a stop-gap that gives us a decent option for delegating our own experiences to others. He also claims that self-representation on Facebook happens less in a way that is narratively reflective than as a spontaneously episodic and documentary event. One outcome is that the autobiographic narrative Facebook produces as one engages is essentially a narrative in which the authority is the network’s algorithms. Simanowski characterizes this type of self-image narrative as pointillist, postmodern and posthuman. Finally, he claims that information management on Facebook and on the Internet suppresses collective memory. A point that comes up often is how our new “tools” encourage users to engage in more or less unconscious and unreflective self-narration, a modality that favors implicit over explicit self-revelation. The medium is the message!

This type of behavior, we learn, prefers mechanical presentation, via photography or automated sharing, to mindful representations via textual statements and narrative structure. Because exchange is spontaneous, episodic and documentary,
it is typically not characterized as deliberate and coherent. Similarly, what the author calls an automatic autobiography or posthuman self-description is not a form in which the subject is authoring their own story. Instead, given the technology, the actual narrators are the network and its algorithms. This works well for a company (Facebook) whose only product is the data it collects to sell to others.

Admittedly, I found the book a somewhat bumpy ride. While the excursions into cultural history were excellent, the litany of software apps discussed didn't grab me since, despite being my own IT specialist, I've never used many of them. Readers who are really wired in will no doubt like the riffs on Second Life, MySpace, Snapchat, Weibo, etc. Sections on Facebook's back end and hypocrisy were useful, because it was my concerns about Facebook's data collection that brought me to the book in the first place. Perhaps this is why, admittedly, I found the author's view of Facebook addiction as disheartening as I did his assumptions about Facebook society as a new social reality.

In concrete terms, the thesis that Facebook only provides the technical realization of new social norms is not defensible, considering that Facebook has repeatedly imposed or attempted to impose innovations without any need on the part of its users, and partially against their will (p. 19).

The book does ask good, critical questions about Facebook's role in our lives and offers a critical point of view that is nicely interwoven with Foucault's idea of dispositif (or how discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions are connected). He also integrates Siegfried Kracauer's (1889–1966) theories on memory and the idea that memory is under threat and challenged by modern forms of technology. Other thinkers he draws on include Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Given how quickly things change, readers may want to start with the epilogue to the English edition to place the argument. The book was originally released in Germany in 2016, with the English edition coming out in 2018. The epilogue is an effort to speak about how the volume fits within a world where our relationship to technology is as fast-moving as the technology itself. About the time the book's English edition was released, Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg had just released "the next big thing," Facebook Live. Simanowski sees it as a benefit, a logical step in Facebook development. The product was promoted as allowing for the sharing of raw and visceral content:

Spontaneity and immediacy function here as synonyms for authenticity; they are the counterpart to frictionless sharing. . . . These new features confirm the prognosis of this book that the type of self-representation to which social networks increasingly seduce us provides less and less content for our own self-reflection and self-understanding and more and more reliable material for the algorithms at the back end of the interface. . . . In essence, we increasingly cease to be the authors of our own autobiographies (p. 162).

This commentary struck me as somewhat weird because, as I write, Facebook is reexamining the livestream system in light of how the grisly 15 March 2019 Christchurch shooting in two mosques took advantage of this distribution option. Even more unnerving is how Facebook's systems worked when it landed there. The first removal of the terrorist attack clocked in 29 minutes after the broadcast began and 12 minutes after the massacre ended. This was because it wasn't flagged immediately. According to Facebook, had it been flagged while the feed was live, they might have moved faster to remove it. Equally unsettling is that Facebook said it removed 1.5 million videos of footage from the shooting rampage within 24 hours of the attack, underscoring the massive game of whack-a-mole social media giants have to play when questionable content hits their platforms [1]. All of this only underscores a larger problem. Since being introduced, the live feature has recorded multiple crimes, deaths and violent incidents, all bringing significant media attention to the complexities social networking has added to community interfaces.

Additionally, as someone who deleted a barely used Facebook account in 2018, after the Cambridge Analytica data mining scandal was revealed, I clearly am not a part of the cohort this book is representing. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, just one of many recent Facebook scandals, also broke about the time the English edition of this book was released. Essentially, the problem was that Facebook allowed Cambridge Analytica to harvest data of an estimated 87 million users [2]. So, while this book's assumption is that hardly anyone escapes from Facebook, recent reports show many deleted Facebook accounts affected by the Cambridge Analytica incident [3].

Aspects of this event highlight that Facebook society is a part of a technological confluence; a number of technology platforms mine our data. I see the Facebook model as one of the most egregious because its only product is really our data. I wish the book had paired Facebook's business model with those of other technology options that seem of more value to me, like Google Search and Wikipedia. Suffice it to say, this book's Facebook focus didn't change my thinking on the problems I associate with its core mission. Rather, the volume underscored the platform's popularity without fully inscribing its problems within the larger technological space.

Obviously, this book couldn't possibly address events that began after its publication, a problem long associated with offline publishing.
as someone who is less enthusiastic about social networking than many, recent events have left me wondering if there is a real and compelling need for many of the options promoted to collect the data gathered from us to resell. This book did not sufficiently address this reality. Rather it speaks more about a Facebook that serves as social glue for untold millions. This is the platform that connects people with shared interests globally as it offers connectivity to dispersed family groups, lonely old people, young flibbertigibbets and individuals within marginalized groups. Remote islanders and those working in distant locations are also among those who find community through their screens. So, whereas the social networking features and the type of biographical or narrative information Facebook offers has always seemed limited to me, here it is more or less broadly presented as who we are now. Finally, the title of this book, Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves, brings to mind one of my favorite books: Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death. Originally published in 1985, Postman's groundbreaking polemic spoke about the corrosive effects of television on politics and the public discourse. Even before social networking and the Internet, Postman clearly brings some critical commentary to the place of humanities in our era. It is also worth noting the excellent translation. This book is superbly written, and I'm sure Susan H. Gillespie, the translator, deserves great credit for conveying this in English.

References

HOW TO FALL SLOWER THAN GRAVITY: AND OTHER EVERYDAY (AND NOT SO EVERYDAY) USES OF MATHEMATICS AND PHYSICAL REASONING

Reviewed by Phil Dyke.
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The first thing to clear up is the title. As Paul Nahin would know, gravity is an acceleration and not a speed, so strictly one cannot fall slower than gravity, as the adjective “slow” refers to speed and not the rate of change of speed. Now, catchy titles are there to sell books, of course, and accuracy takes second place, so “How to fall at a slower speed than one would under gravity,” although more precise, is obviously a clumsy title. However, the book is not all about falling objects. The title springs from one problem about the accretion of a falling mass through moisture that does so with decreased acceleration due to its mass increasing. The author is very surprised at this, but this reviewer thinks it follows that if the mass increases by taking on motionless water it will, by the conservation of momentum, accelerate less. The acceleration is even less substantial if drag is taken into account. Here, the conservation of momentum is another way of saying Newton's second law of motion, not the kind of momentum conservation found in the collision of balls, as here the momentum changes continuously and not through impulse.

Normally, a reviewer will now address the contents and order of the book, but this cannot be done here. The whole book is a rather randomly organized sequence of problems in mathematics and physics. It is a follow-up to the book In Praise of Simple Physics by the same author that has a similar format. In days of yore, books of mathematical puzzles were very popular and some, such as The Canterbury Puzzles by Henry Ernest Dudeney published in 1907 or one of the many books by Martin Gardner like Fads and Fallacies in the Mathematical Sciences.
Paul Nahin seems to have been stung into action by a *Boston Globe* newspaper article that said “knowing how to solve quadratic equations has no practical value,” arguing it was a waste of a child’s time to learn such stuff. References refuting this occur throughout the book; in fact, one could say that the whole book is a successful campaign for the usefulness of all kinds of different mathematics.

Now a word about the writing style. This sometimes lapses into the first person—which is poor and always assumes that the reader is keen to trot along with the train of thought, a train can be long and tortuous and sometimes difficult. This reviewer sometimes found this annoying and over-presumptuous. One has to conclude that the book is targeted at the undergraduate physics, mathematics or engineering student who likes solving practical problems, the solution of which involve the usually surprising use of mathematics, and who in some sense is happy to be herded along the path dictated by the author. Having said this, no doubt Paul Nahin has put a lot of hard work into this book. Some of the problems are difficult, yet the solutions are always meticulously derived and clearly presented.

In summary, this is a collection of problems with commentary and detailed solution provided in every case. This reviewer is still not clear what the target audience is for this book, which, as it does in a few places, comes across as a little self-indulgent. Obviously, the problems here are those enjoyed by the author; perhaps there are enough like-minded individuals out there to enjoy them too. On balance, this reviewer counts himself among them.

ANTHROPOCENE POETICS: DEEP TIME, SACRIFICE ZONES, AND EXTINCTION


Reviewed by Robert Maddox-Harle. https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_r_01866

This book is an in-depth scholarly investigation into the relevance and efficacy of poetry, understood in its broadest sense, in this period of history we find ourselves in, called by some the Anthropocene. As Catherine Rigby notes, “This is not just a work about poetry; it is an exquisitely poetic work of scholarship.”

So just what is the Anthropocene? It is the current era in which human impact on the planet as a whole is taking place. Human activities such as fossil fuel extraction, massive-scale monocultural farming practices, large-scale deforestation activities and pollution of the atmosphere and waterways are causing actual geological changes. Although various authorities argue about when this period started, the most popular agreed-upon time is around the middle of the twentieth century. At this time massive expansion in all human activities took place, including population growth, and on a larger global scale than ever before.

David Farrier is a senior lecturer in modern and contemporary literature at the University of Edinburgh. In this highly readable—although complex, theoretical and detailed—investigation, he “puts deep time at the center, defining a new poetics for thinking through humanity’s role as a geological agent, the devastation caused by resource extraction, and the looming extinction crisis” (rear cover).

The book has five sections:

Introduction:
Life Enfolding in Deep Time

Chapter 1. Intimacy:
The Poetics of Thick Time

Chapter 2. Entangled:
The Poetics of Sacrificial Zones

Chapter 3. Swerve:
The Poetics of Kin-Making

Coda: Knots in Time

A smattering of black-and-white illustrations and an extensive Notes section are extremely valuable for future research.

Chapter 1 looks “at the “geological intimacy” presaged by the Anthropocene in terms of the “thickened time” of lyric poetry. It explores the intimacy that inheres within the deep time of geological and evolutionary processes. Thick time is discussed in detail and is defined as the way lyrics can put many different timescales into one frame to bring about an awareness of these other times. Farrier discusses the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus Heaney.

Chapter 2 explores the “extractive economies and depleted environments of the Plantationocene” in the context of what Evelyn Reilly calls “relational poetics.” The experimental poetry of Reilly and Peter Larkin is discussed to show how “avant-garde writing can reveal the density
of entanglements that lie behind ostensibly homogenized or ‘smooth’ spaces and surfaces of plastics and plantations” (p. 11). This chapter also “proposes a diffractive poetics of entangled spaces” (p. 12).

Chapter 3 “applies the work of [Donna] Haraway and Deborah Bird Rose on multispecies kin-making to poetry concerned with a less biodiverse future” (p. 9). Farrier introduces the figure of the clinamen in this chapter, which defines a poetics of kin-making and “also stands for a range of literary figures that can provide us with shapes for thinking about what a poetics of kin-making might look like” (p. 12).

In the coda Farrier introduces Singapore’s “super trees.” These are an “ingenious combination of giant solar panels and vents for the heat generated from creating electricity from the city’s waste biomass” (p. 125). They exemplify the notion that technology will offer a way out of our ecological disaster. Singapore, the Garden City, is paradoxically a combination of vast amounts of concrete and gardens. Farrier sums up briefly the various poets discussed throughout the book and ends by saying that he does not want to overstate the case for poetry.

The real question the coda raises is just how efficacious poetry is in bringing about significant global change for the better. My great-grandmother wrote “activist” poetry in London in the late 1890s. I have written essays discussing poets as visionaries, often quoting Shelley’s famous lines that “poets are the legislators of the world.” Some of my own contemporary poetry exposes the dangers of disastrous practices such as coal seam gas extraction. None of these has changed a single thing. As W.H. Auden once said, “Poetry makes nothing happen” (p. 128).

Farrier does note, quite correctly, I believe, “an Anthropocene poetics—of relations thickened in deep time, of our entanglement with sacrificial zones, and of the inexorable drive of kin-making—can help frame the ground we stand on as we consider which way to turn” (p. 128). Like the poets discussed throughout this book, Farrier has his heart in the right place. If only this book, and all Anthropocene poetry, could be read, assimilated and acted upon in “present” time as we turn toward the future.

CHROMOGRAPHIA: AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE MODERNIZATION OF COLOR


Reviewed by Jan Baetens.
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Certain cultural artifacts have become so ubiquitous that we don’t pay any special attention to them any longer. Color is a good example of such a phenomenon: It is anything but invisible, no pun intended, but in spite of our permanent awareness of chromatic aspects, features, fashions and, in short, the dramatic power of color in our daily lives, academic research in the field is not really flourishing, except in very specialized areas such as interior design or art history. In comparison with the color craze in what Nicholas Gaskill calls the “mauve era” (1880–1930), when virtually everybody, from philosophers to consumers and from artists to businessmen seemed obsessed with debates on color, general studies on color are quite rare today. Chromographia is therefore a more than welcome publication. It is a fascinating and very broad rereading (the subtitle of the book should not make you think that Gaskill is only interested in the use of color words in literary texts) of a cultural phenomenon that will hopefully contribute to a rediscovery of the seminal role of color in modernism and, why not, beyond, for the current lack of attention for color in contemporary culture hints definitely at a great lack in cultural theory and criticism.

Color for Gaskill is modern in two senses of the word. First of all, it is modern because it is the result of new technological inventions: During the nineteenth century, the advances of chemistry gave birth to new colors, often never thought of but now easy and cheap to produce. A key moment was 1856, the year of the discovery of a special aniline, “mauveine,” which its inventor, William Henry Perkin, took to industry in order to produce the first commercial synthetic dye. Very soon, countless others were to appear, all showing new colors and all in need of new words or, better, new formalized methods of description and classification. But color is also modern because the technological broadening of the traditional spectrum had a dramatic impact on our ways of seeing, feeling, experiencing and, more generally, thinking and living.

This is also the double story that Gaskill tells in Chromographia, with literature serving as the main thread of his argumentation that actually leads the reader from optical and chemical experiments in the late nineteenth century to broad philosophical and political issues—the issue of color raising questions that have as much to do with ideology as with aesthetics and perception theory. In that sense, Gaskill’s very convincing line of thinking brings to the fore the fundamental relationship between two elements: on the one
hand the material observation that
the meaning of color is “relative” (that is, dependent on more than just the
dye of a given item), and on the other hand the social and democratic claim
for “democracy” (that is, the permanent negotiation of the way we accept
to live not just next to other people but really with them). The both moral
and political lesson of the book, which contains an explicit praise of
John Dewey, one of the masterminds behind instruction at Black Mountain
College, where Joseph Albers was to develop his color pedagogy (see
his book Interaction of Color, 1963), is then summarized in the following
quote: “Thinking in situations is a way of reading relativity without falling into mere relativism. This is a hard task—sometimes I think it is the hard task, the one that postmodernism got wrong and pragmatism gets right” (p. 246).

Gaskill develops his historical reconstruction of the “meaning” of
color in American culture and literature (in that order, for literature is
more a testing ground than a starting point) around five major moments
and works, starting in the 1880s and ending in the 1930s: (1) the attempts
of authors such as Hamlin Garland, these days incorrectly discarded as an example of regionalism, to transfer Impressionist ideas on color to the
domain of writing—or more precisely to invent new ways of writing inspired by impressionist techniques of manipulating colors in order
to obtain a sharper and increased perception of “local colors,” that is, of colors localized on specific parts of the canvas; (2) the color descriptions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman that explored the value and impact of tones and dyes regardless of the objects that made them appear and the subsequent tension between figuration and abstraction as well as the growing awareness of the importance of the perceiving body; (3) the spread of colorfully printed children’s books, such as Frank Baum’s 1903 Wonderful Wizard of Oz (with illustrations by Denslow), with their contradictory mix of liberation of the child’s imagination and heavily racialized representations of savages and primitives; (4) the nonrepresentative use of chromatic vocabularies to artificially produce chromatic feelings and experiences that further distinguish between colors as abstract qualities (as “firsts,” in the terminology of C.S. Peirce) capable of being manipulated outside their materialization in specific objects (in “seconds”), in realist as well as radically avant-garde texts (the respective examples being Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage and Gertrude Stein’s Three Lives and other writings); and finally (5) the Harlem Renaissance writers blurring the boundaries between color and body, perception and experience, sight and movement, and even more generally art and life.

The fundamental idea that unifies all these often remarkable and always very clever analyses is the belief in and progressive critique of the teleological relationship between color perception and sensibility on the one hand and the growth and construction of the modern subject on the other hand (Gaskill also develops the Darwinist aspects, pro and contra, that contemporary thinkers used to link with this kind of belief). Color does not have the same meaning for children and adults, and whatever one’s color preferences may be (I will come back to the controversy on “primitivism”), it is generally accepted that the color-sense has to be trained in order to achieve a better use of color in all phases of life. Gaskill scrupulously examines the explicit and implicit aspects of this conviction as well as its impact on education, business, culture and art, while reading no less carefully first the growing unease with the ideological underpinnings of this belief and second the emergence of models of thinking of color that explicitly rejected the refusal of less rational aspects of the color experience such as the body, emotion, affect and more in general the preference given to chromatic and existential “riot” (a metaphor of the blending of what traditional Western thinking tries to keep apart).

Chromographia is an essential publication, which I think will have a lasting impact on the cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature. It is an exceptionally well-crafted study that demonstrates the possibility of a merger between literary studies and cultural studies. It contains important rereadings of classic topics such as primitivism (Gaskill clearly shows, for instance, that the leap into abstraction is not necessarily a praise of primitivism, but on the contrary the proof of the capacity of “advanced” practitioners and viewers to enjoy colors in themselves, a capacity they simultaneously deny to “savages”). The book proposes extremely stimulating interpretations of many forgotten or somewhat neglected works such as The Red Badge of Courage. Finally, it also offers an overarching interpretative scheme that should encourage new readers to pick up the story where Chromographia ends.

THE NEW MIND READERS:
WHAT NEUROIMAGING CAN
AND CANNOT REVEAL ABOUT
OUR THOUGHTS
by Russell A. Poldrack, Princeton
University Press, Princeton and Oxford,
Reviewed by George K. Shortess,
Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA.
Email: george.shortess@lehigh.edu.
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This book provides a good introduction to functional magnetic resonance
imaging (fMRI). It provides a basic understanding of what fMRI is and what it has been able to accomplish. fMRI is certainly a valuable tool in
the quest to understand the functioning brain. What it can do is identify neural structures that are involved in certain mental activities, a necessary first step.

The general finding is that a mental function typically involves different
areas of the brain, interacting in various unknown ways. As a result, fMRI is a useful tool for mapping connections between structures and understanding the functional connectivity.
of areas of the brain. It is not possible to infer a one-to-one correspondence between activity in one brain area and a mental function. The author clearly recognizes this and describes very fully the problem of these kinds of false inferences from fMRI readings. In addition, he is justifiably critical of various simplified attempts to make commercial use of fMRI in lie detection and predicting rearrests of criminals. He also has a good discussion of the statistical power of experimental methods and its effect on finding significant effects, although he spends too much space presenting the problem in a social psychology context. While the author talks about statistical power in some fMRI studies, it could have been discussed more fully, when considering experimental fMRI results.

However, fMRI researchers have been able to predict, with better than chance accuracy, what a person is thinking about when the researchers have limited the possible thoughts the person can have, though still not perfectly and still not when there is an unlimited number of thoughts possible. They are also beginning to decode the fMRI data to reconstruct images, intents and other thoughts. However, there is still a long way to go. Therefore, fMRI researchers are not yet able to read minds in general. Whether the fMRI or its future refinements will provide the tools necessary to overcome these limitations is still far from clear. For me it would be better to emphasize mapping the brain rather than mind reading in the book title.

The book is written in a very personal style. Using this personal style, the author seems to be overly concerned with image—both his own and the field’s. There is a kind of cheerleading tone to much of the writing. For example, he describes an experiment in which the intention of subjects to add or subtract a set of numbers was predicted using fMRI data. The author reports that they were able to predict what the subjects were going to do with 70% accuracy—certainly better than chance at 50%. However, the author describes it as “powerful” (pp. 69–70). I do not dispute the result, but some humility would appear to me to be in order. He seems to mention Harvard, MIT and similar prestigious institutions as well as papers appearing in journals such as Science and Nature more often than necessary. He even suggested that one researcher was sure to win a Nobel Prize. The author may feel that this cheerleading is necessary given the major statistical error that fMRI researchers, early on, made (now apparently corrected) where they failed to correct for the use of multiple correlations in the data analysis, which resulted in exaggerated effect size.

In Chapter 1 the author provides an overview of how neurons function. However, in this description he talks only about excitation and does not mention that the output impulse pattern of neurons, in general, results from the interaction of excitatory and inhibitory inputs, by means of different synaptic transmitters from different input nerve cells. Even though fMRI data do not seem to be able to decode this distinction between excitatory and inhibitory influences, mentioning these influences would help the reader appreciate the complexities involved in understanding brain functions and the limitations of fMRI.

Overall this is a useful book, for someone who wants a good introduction to fMRI.

THE DISCRETE CHARM OF THE MACHINE: WHY THE WORLD BECAME DIGITAL


Reviewed by Cecilia Wong, Los Angeles. Email: ccsouk@yahoo.co.uk. Web: eyes-wide.com.

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A theater critic is said to have described the performance of an English stage actor this way: “Each word is sent individually gift packed.” The human voice is analog (a continuous sound wave), and speech is discrete, as opposed to a grunt. Shakespearean words carry far more information than most, and so it is critical that actors deliver them with great clarity. But like any delivery, the trip can be full of potential noisy disruptions: the theater's acoustics, air conditioning or outside traffic—and if it is a recording, static and other noises that are inherent in the equipment. Such analog recording will eventually be unreadable if transferred or edited repeatedly.

The Discrete Charm of the Machine addresses the history of “discretization” that led to faster and safer delivery of information, resulting in, among other things, the Internet today. Along the way, the ability to package information also allowed that information to be modified or enhanced. And more importantly, such “bits” can be recombined to perform computations. Steiglitz traces the first analog computer to the 70 BCE Antikythera mechanism, pieces of which were discovered by divers in the Aegean Sea in 1900. “The device consists of a clockwork of at least 30 intermeshing gears with different numbers of teeth . . . connected to dials [that] . . . show the movement of the sun, moon, and probably the five then-known planets” as the crank is turned (p. 109). The “program” here is determined by how different size gear teeth mesh with others—it is inherent in the machine and not separable.

The first device to successfully store a program independent of
the machine that executed it is the Jacquard loom (1804), which made intricate Jacquard weave fabrics. Joseph Marie Jacquard (France, 1752–1834) used punch cards to control the needles that made the design. But each set of cards could make only a single pattern. It took well over a century before Alan Turing (Britain, 1912–1954), whose Turing machine extended this punched-card idea to a theoretical infinite tape consisting of cells with either “0” or “1” and a control head to read or change those cells. He also used the idea of a computer’s “state,” which determines the next step. This idea of “conditional execution” originated with Charles Babbage (Britain, 1791–1871), a mathematician and inventor who first conceived the idea of machine calculation.

Here, Steiglitz, a computer scientist, brings up the idea of scale: Humans occupy the middle scale, between the subatomic and the astronomical. He uses terms like Planck’s constant and Heisenberg’s uncertainty to illustrate his point, leading to speculation on a superfast quantum computer. However, he does not provide a human perspective: The human body-brain can only receive signals in this middle scale. For example, we have no receptors for ultraviolet light and cannot perceive sunburn—the pain the next day is from tissue damage. How far should we search—and make use of—scales and calculations outside of our perceptual and cognitive capabilities? If a computer returns an answer we don’t understand, how do we know if it is an insight or a short-circuit (like a seizure in humans)? If information is the removal of uncertainty, as the author asserts, how much can we trust this certainty if it cannot be explained to us? For example, a current intractable problem for Google and the U.S. Army alike is the case of adversarial examples in deep learning: Scientists, by changing a few pixels, can make a machine call a dog a rifle, for example.

For the moment, happily, Steiglitz does not see artificial intelligence overtaking humans soon. But he claims there is no “analog magic” in the brain: Neurons are simply valves—excitatory or inhibitory. The Halle-Berry neuron, however, suggests otherwise. In experiments in the brains of patients undergoing open brain surgery (with consent), one monitored hippocampus neuron repeatedly fired when an image of the actress was flashed on the screen. Said coauthor Christof Koch, then of Caltech, “Conventional wisdom views individual brain cells as simple switches or relays. In fact, we are finding that neurons are able to function more like a sophisticated computer” [1]. Just think: There are over 100 billion neurons in the human brain—multiple instances of parallel processing are occurring in your brain right now as you read this page. It is not magic—this “machine” constantly generates new programs in response to the environment, through sensors all over the body, including the guts, which (unconsciously) receive information via food intake. Artificial intelligence has not addressed this sentient body and the unconscious. According to Eric Kandel, the Nobel neurobiologist from Columbia University, our free will is unconscious. Do machines have an unconscious?

It is very important that this book gives the general reader a glimpse of what ultimately should concern us all. But there’s no mistaking the author’s enthusiasm for the “super brain” and how we got here. The “why” part in the book is less convincing: Are speed and efficiency all that matter? Technical progress, too? According to Steiglitz: “Computers are too useful, people are too dependent on them, and there is too much money to be made” (p. 74, reviewer’s emphasis). It sounds like a habit.

Martin Rees, physicist and cosmologist, in his book On the Future of Humanity (2019), says of DeepMind’s AlphaGo, which used neural network learning to beat the Korean Go master Lee Sedol in 2016: “The hardware underlying AlphaGo used hundreds of kilowatts of power. In contrast, the brain of Lee Sedol . . . consumes about thirty watts (like a lightbulb) and can do many other things apart from play board games” (p. 88).

Essentially, “successful aircraft do not flap their wings,” as Steiglitz aptly points out. But technology can be a one-track bully—should we be equally committed to educating those 7.5 billion brains on this Earth, each with its 100 billion neurons, even though they may not be as obedient?

Reference

DESIGNING AN INTERNET

Reviewed by Jan Bactens.
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David D. Clark is one of the key scientists helping build and reshape the Internet almost from its very inception (the first nodes of ARPA-net became functional in 1969). His book is a powerful reflection on the way the network has evolved from its very start in the early 1960s until today. The focus of Clark’s book is not on the Internet as we use it 24–7 or on the countless applications that continue to be added to the system, but on the very heart of the Internet, that is, the way its fundamental architecture is designed to become what it was meant to be and what it actually is today: an information packet transport system using specific electronic protocols to transfer information from a sender to a receiver. (The analogy with the postal system is not false, in spite of all the technological differences between the two systems.) Clark stresses how wonderfully robust this fundamental structure has proven to be, for after so many years and often radical reorientations, all essential aspects, structures and functions of the first Internet are still in place. Moreover, there does not seem
to exist a strong demand for a radically different Internet today. Despite all the issues that the dizzying expansion of the network has inevitably laid bare, and the many problems of which we are now all perfectly aware, the basic design is still considered, for good or bad reasons, “good enough” to be continued.

Designing an Internet—“an” Internet, not “the” Internet—is thus an attempt to identify, understand, analyze and if possible remediate, albeit in very speculative ways, the progressively disclosed problems of the fundamental design (for instance problems with “naming” the packets that are transferred over the system). Clark does so by emphasizing the advantages of a minimalist design, a design philosophy that sticks to the “better done than perfect” principle, while also believing that good design should only care about the fundamental aspects of the system rather than trying to implement new or other functionalities. Such a minimalist approach not only creates more robust systems, it is also imperative when one wants to cope with problems that the first generations of Internet engineers did not—that is, could not—take into account, such as security, sustainability, social demands and, yes, profit.

By the way, according to Clark, one of the major reasons why the Internet proves so curiously stable is the fact that the private sector, which came to take over from the public sector in the 1980s, does not have sufficient incentives to massively invest in the fundamental design of the system (built with public money in the years before). Technology is risky business, and the risks are lower at the level atop the fundamental architecture. In other words, private enterprises are more interested in applications than in the foundational layer of packet-sending structures.

Clark is a wise man. It suffices to notice his sense of humor. He is also a brilliant scientist, as shown by his capacity to make the Internet understandable to laypersons, who are no less than his colleagues and other specialists in the field the intended audience of this book. But he is also a great writer, not only because of his stimulating didactic style but also because of his perfect sense of timely delivery. Nothing comes too early, nothing is said with delay; the author does not shy away from useful repetitions, just as he always uses the exact number of words and sentences to express his ideas—never too little or not enough—whereas the words he uses are always the right ones, with helpful indexes, definitions and acronyms at the end of the book. In short, at any page of the book the reader has the impression that they maintain a good overview of the full argument, even if certain technical details may not always be very easy to grasp.

It is the mix of great wisdom, visionary thinking and exemplary writing that makes Designing an Internet a thrilling experience. Here are some lessons I draw from this book.

First, this is a book that succeeds in radically going beyond the old two-cultures debate, not by proposing a hybrid merger of alpha and beta sciences but by the deep attention a “hard” scientist gives to “soft” social, cultural and historical factors, such as the observation that freedom of information, which we tend to take for granted as a universal and self-evident human right, is not always a top priority in certain traditions. This leads Clark to fundamental questions on how to make sure that something like the Internet can function in a world that is divided by irreducible political and ideological tensions. As one easily imagines, these questions are harder to answer than metaphysical questions on who is right and who is wrong when it comes down to freedom with capital $F$.

Second, this is also a book that displays the fundamental modesty of scientists, a social group often discarded—and not only by those who do not really understand what scientists are actually doing—as valets of capitalism, indifferent to the human and social impact of their work as well as incapable of looking through the golden walls of their laboratories. Clark’s book gives a completely different view of the scientist’s work, not by proclaiming in either abstract or purely financial terms the benefits of this work but by permanently looking back on the job done and looking forward to the job to be done. Clark tries to understand why Internet engineers did not always make the right decisions (or in certain cases did not make any decision at all), while asking no less whether we should really think that the decisions that are currently under scrutiny are the good ones. This open attitude, which has nothing to do with politically correct self-flagellation, makes Designing an Internet a deeply human book and its reading a very sobering experience.

Third, this is also a book on “how to write,” and I strongly recommend it in place of all the creative writing manuals of the whole world. During all 420 pages of the book, Clark really shows how one should write, not only on this kind of difficult topic, but in general, on any topic whatsoever. Not by telling, but by doing and thus showing: a simple, plain style, perfectly fit to what readers need: lively but never flashy or ostentatious, eager to discuss hard matters with technical details if necessary but always with an open eye and ear to ordinary language and daily conversation as well as to the diversity of human nature, as suggested by the repeated invitation to stop reading the book and continue with some science.

THE FILM PHOTONOVEL: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FORGOTTEN ADAPTATIONS


Reviewed by Will Luers, The Creative Media & Digital Culture Program, Washington State University Vancouver. Email: wluers@gmail.com. https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_r_01871

Jan Baetens’s new book, The Film Photonovel: A Cultural History of Forgotten Adaptations, examines a little-known genre in great historical
depth and uncovers fascinating new practices of text and image arrangements that came out of certain economic, material and cultural constraints. Dismissed as both aesthetically and historically insignificant by many scholars, the “film photonovel” emerged during the 1950s, mostly in Europe and Latin America, when magazines sought to capitalize on the glamour of movie stars by including in their issues text and photo adaptations of popular movies. Baetens frames the film photonovel as an interim genre between the comic-like photonovels that appeared in women’s magazines in the 1950s and later film novelizations that came on the market in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Baetens’s primary focus is on aesthetics and the many ways text-image arrangements escape from conventions to become something “other” under historical and material constraints.

Film photonovels were typically adaptations up to 50 pages of the full plots of popular movies using multipanel layouts of film stills, narrating captions and speech/thought balloons. One of the surprising features of the genre, emphasized by its detractors, is how much the images are subordinate to the text. The reasons for this are complex, according to Baetens. The economics of postwar magazine publishing, the specific readerships (mostly women) and the desired outcomes of selling products and stories around body-care and beauty determined much of the aesthetic choices of the genre. The photo layouts often used the more glamorous stills and set photos from a movie’s promotional material and not actual (and more costly) frames from the theatrical reels. This limitation of source material meant that the same images were sometimes repeated across panels and spreads, further disrupting the mimetic effect of following sequential shots and downgrading representations of action and movement. Because a true sequential logic of cinematic narration (continuity editing) would require many more images and pages to cover feature-length plots, there is an economy in emphasizing a textual narration that tells what the images merely suggest. The visual result is a dynamic simultaneity in page layouts that breaks from the linear format and acts as both backdrop and scaffolding to the reading experience. The “static” and “banal” quality of the visual design, often presented in conventional three-by-three panel grids, means that the substantial amount of text flowing around the images has to do much of the work of conveying aspects of character development, emotional contexts and plot events. The layouts also have to support a steady “reading rhythm” and not distract with unusual or more visually interesting grid arrangements. The genre “rejects both Baroque and stripped-down compositions while trying to control variation” (p. 85). Paradoxically, these “visual” narratives are intended to be read for the story, while the images are arranged to emphasize the glamour of the stars, “almost like . . . fetish object[s]” to be possessed outside the narrative (p. 30).

Amid the broader historical innovations of multipanel visual storytelling, the lackluster visual design of the film photonovel seems to be a negative quality. However, Baetens’s keen eye and deep scholarly understanding of word and image narrative brings out the gems in this forgotten genre. While the “visual logic of the photonovel is less syntagmatic than paradigmatic (less narrative than illustrative)” (p. 117), the focus on faces and bodies of movie idols creates a unique tension with the linear trajectory of the text. Baetens suggests that the magazine’s remediation acts as an evocation of movies already seen by the reader. It is as if the visual design is mimetic of the lingering memory of a movie rather than a translation of the movie narrative itself. Meanwhile, the narrating text, stripped of action, movement and suspense, is there to trigger the memories of other images seen or not. Image arrangements that neither emphasize a “pregnant moment” nor follow a linear development (“sequential simultaneity or simultaneous sequentiality”) (pp. 115–116) share something with Scott McCloud’s aspect-to-aspect relationship between comics panels (Understanding Comics). But Baetens’s analysis goes deeper. His discussion of specific techniques—the “divergent corner” to indicate the page is part of a larger whole, the broken continuity of layouts to suggest “off-page” events—are valuable to both scholars of visual narrative and contemporary practitioners of word and image arts.

This richly illustrated book, with clear and engaging prose, is both an important contribution to the widening field of adaptation studies and a model of medium-specific analysis that considers a form’s unique historical materiality to be in complex relationship with its remediation of past genres.

**SOUTH SIDE VENUS:**
**THE LEGACY OF MARGARET BURROUGHS**


Reviewed by Kathryn Adams, Australia. Email: kathrynga@bigpond.com.

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Her story is unique in that it was not about a single achievement—not just as an artist, a museum founder, a teacher, or an activist. It was unique in its success at
family in 1922 to escape the racial segregation laws of the southern United States, but with Chicago's own history of racial rioting, growing up as a young African-American working-class girl in Chicago at this time was challenging. Apart from family, the one constant in Burroughs's life was art. She started drawing from a very young age and, encouraged by her mother, understood early on that art was "a means to connect with others." Her schoolteacher and mentor, Mary L. Ryan, also encouraged Burroughs and was instrumental in helping her qualify for teacher's college in 1937, which led to a Bachelor of Arts and later a Master of Arts degree in art education.

This woman, Mary Ryan, realized that I had few opportunities. . . . I would make watercolors and bring them to show her. She would hold raffles to sell them, and then would give me the money. With the money, I could buy books and pay for carfare and have lunch money (p. 23) [1].

The foreword written by Haki Madhubuti is heartfelt and sets the tone for the rest of the book. He first met Margaret Burroughs in her living room in 1962, which was also the original site of today's DuSable Museum (then called the Ebony Museum of Negro History). Margaret and husband Charles Burroughs cofounded the museum and were an inspiration to Madhubuti and many others who not only visited the museum but regularly visited the Burroughs's home for debate and lively conversation. During the 1950s when McCarthyism was at its height, singer and social activist Paul Robeson, who was Margaret Burroughs's inspiration, was also a visitor in her home.

I consider myself fortunate that my acquaintance with Paul Robeson grew into a friendship that withstood the strains and stresses of the McCarthy Witch Hunt period. When few homes were open to him, he was always welcome at our home (p. 109) [2].

There is a real sense of calm in Cain's style of writing, even though much of the content is about turbulent and serious political times. During the McCarthy period, Burroughs was questioned before the board of education about her political views and was denied membership to the art center she founded. South Side Venus details this period of Burroughs's life and her connections to a whole host of like-minded political artists, journalists, actors and poets, such as Pulitzer Prize winner and friend Gwendolyn Brooks.

Given so many strings to Margaret Burroughs's bow and a lifetime of activity into her 90s, Cain has done an impressive job in enabling the spotlight to fall onto so many different aspects of her life. However, considering Burroughs's talent as an artist was so multifaceted—painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture—more about her artworks would have been welcomed. The black-and-white photographs included in the book are a wonderful representation of Burroughs in all her roles, and the close-up of her hands simply captioned "Hands of the artist" is particularly poignant, but it is a pity there isn't a larger representation of her own artwork here.

For anyone interested in art, art history, African-American history/politics, women's studies and biographies in general, South Side Venus: The Legacy of Margaret Burroughs is highly recommended. For a small book, it contains so much information, and given its comprehensive index, educators would find this a useful supportive teaching resource. The real strength of this book is the subject herself, Margaret Burroughs, and how lucky we are that Mary Ann Cain chose to write about her.

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HIGH WEIRDNESS: DRUGS, ESOTERICA AND VISIONARY EXPERIENCE IN THE SEVENTIES

Reviewed by Stephanie Moran.
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Historian of religion Erik Davis excavates subcultural techno-mystical practices as an ingenious inventor of descriptive phrases for such emergent numinous phenomena as the “spiritual cyborg,” the “gnostic infonaut” and the “coming cosmic community.” He coined the underused “technopaganism” (in a 1995 Wired article of the same title), which expression’s claim to fame was its use in a 1997 episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Season 1, Episode 8, “I Robot, You Jane”). High Weirdness could be viewed as an equally cultish sequel to his brilliantly illuminating and thoroughly researched 1997 esoteric history of technology, Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information, and following on from his 2006 The Visionary State: A Journey through California’s Spiritual Landscape. Where Techgnosis documented a long occult history, Davis’s new book is tightly focused on the particular timeframe, location and aesthetic mode contained within three sets of specific experiences: the McKenna brothers’ psychedelic experiment at La Chorrera, Robert Anton Wilson’s Cosmic Trigger experiences and Philip K. Dick’s 2-3-74 complex.

The action of High Weirdness all takes place in California between 1971 and 1974. The three case studies, events well known within ’70s psychonaut lore, exemplify a mode of extraordinary experience peculiar to the 1970s, psychedelic, mystical limit experiences that Davis classes as high weirdness. High weirdness is a dimension of late ’60s/early ’70s underground culture associated with the Freak scene. Davis references a 1988 directory of real and niche-ly weird organizations, Rev. Ivan Stang’s High Weirdness by Mail—A Directory of the Fringe: Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks and True Visionaries. He endeavors to emulate the catalogue’s approach to its subject matter, an “ironic but strangely loving aesthetic . . . a mode of enjoyment, amazed and sometimes perverse” (p. 3), maintaining the agnostic outsider-insider position of Techgnosis. The close readings he performs aim to map influences, resonances and structural dynamics of the experiences and consider how these visionary practitioners, who are all also writers, make sense of and retell their weird encounters.

High Weirdness adopts a more extended and subtle sense of technology than Techgnosis and shifts the perspective to expand on the ways media has infiltrated mystical experience. It demonstrates shared occurrences and experiential similarities in the three accounts, including “alien downloads, pulp-fiction synchronicities, techno-media metaphysics, apoplectic flashbacks, voices in the head” (p. 36). Davis situates these in the debris of post-1960s “identity drift” among occult revital, the plethora of new religions and “consciousness culture,” countercultural publishing, the rise of surveillance technology, paranoia and the sci-fi prefiguring of such coming technologies as the World Wide Web (such as John Lilly’s Solid State Entity and Dick’s VALIS). He attempts to demonstrate the systemic feedback loop between cultural and phenomenological information driving this weirdness. The range of practices he describes are themselves the kinds of arcana the Internet was made to propagate via its long tail, which, as Davis points out, has played its role in the disintegration of consensus reality and mainstreaming of conspiracy theories today.

Davis moves between skepticism and sympathetic acceptance, or at least a willingness to suspend disbelief, a hybrid position shared by his protagonists. He discusses, for example, the way this manifests in the McKenna brothers’ fusion of etic and emic approaches, evidenced in the setup of the La Chorrera experiment as a cross between a scientific investigation and an esoteric ritual, and their treatment of “extraordinary subjective experience as something like observable data” (p. 109). He describes their method as science-fictional in its realist attitude toward speculative ideas. Although only one of the writers discussed, Dick, fits properly into the genre of sci-fi, there are a number of science-fictional threads running through this book. There are recurring topics of extropian consciousness, cybernetic feedback and “bootstrapping.” High Weirdness explores links between the rise of new communication, surveillance and information technological networks, and communication with nonhuman intelligences that possess interspecies motifs: the McKennas’ cosmic mycelium’s “network metaphysics,” Wilson’s messages from the dog-star Sirius and Dick’s religious ichthys (fish symbol)–triggered visions. Sci-fi time is another frequent theme, implicit in Terence McKenna’s eschaton as temporal structure, eschatology in Wilson’s Illuminatus! and the repetition of synchronicity as a resonant event connected to divination, pointing (science-fictionally) to the future. The book itself revolves around the “metamorphic narratives” and fictions that leak into subjective realities it describes, or “the positive feedback loop that bootstraps new realities out of twists in data” (p. 394). These are neatly categorized by Davis as psi-fi.

Some of the more theoretical commentary seems extraneous, such as the scattering of many of Bruno Latour’s complex concepts, although briefly framed in the introduction around Latour’s experimental metaphysics approach. The discussion of how the Enlightenment Great Divide is challenged by the McKennas’ experimental method, for example, would benefit from a more detailed unpacking in relation to another point Davis addresses, the very particular historical context of post-1960s white male Californians and early transhumanism. The narrative is at its best when it sticks to religious mysticism and altered states, Davis’s field of expertise, and contextual the-
ory available at the time of the events (such as by William James, Mircea Eliade, Marshall McLuhan and Lilly), rather than engaging piecemeal with contemporary critical theory and philosophy. The overlong, rambling introduction is made up, at times, of a stream of unedited consciousness of methodological ideas and stuff that presumably wouldn't fit into the main body of the text. It outsources to the reader the cognitive labor of working out how the independently interesting but unconvincingly cobbled-together theoretical underpinnings form a complex systems approach. However, the narrative's contextualization in relation to Michel Foucault's technologies of the self and Peter Sloterdijk's recent discussion of vertical tension is extremely useful.

Otherwise High Weirdness is an informative, flowing and fantastical read that compares, conceptually situates and historicizes the three synchronicitous psychobiographies. It is also, in the house style of Strange Attractor Press, a beautiful volume with appositely weird illustrations; Arik Roper's front cover cleverly synthesizes the main thematic imagery of the three encounters: mushroom-UFOs, a one-eyed pyramid and a Christian fish in a ray of pink light. Davis offers convincing explanations of the ways in which these weird experiences were recursively shaped and interpreted via the contemporary extreme literature available, including newly fashionable Eastern esoteric writings, Carl Jung's alchemical work and Eliade's histories of religion, and how the narratives were grounded in the participants' reflexive awareness of this hermeneutic process.

STAR WARS AFTER LUCAS: A CRITICAL GUIDE TO THE FUTURE OF THE GALAXY


Reviewed by James Sweeting.
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The shadow of George Lucas still reigns across the Star Wars galaxy, despite his having sold off his studio (Lucasfilm) and, with it, ownership of the decades-spanning space opera to the media giant Disney for just over $4 billion in 2012. During the decades in which Lucas controlled his company, the extent to which his influence over the end result that was shown on screen could be debated either way, whether by siding with some form of visionary auteur approach or by arguing that it was one individual acting as a figurehead for the eponymous studio (for the good and the bad times).

By 2012, as far as the general public was concerned, Star Wars was for the most part dormant, aside from a videogame (Star Wars 1313) in long-term development hell (which was canceled as soon as Disney took over) and the mildly successful Clone Wars animated television series. What was not widely known outside of Lucasfilm was that Lucas was already working on ideas for new Star Wars films that would take place after Episode VI (Return of the Jedi). Yet, realizing the sheer amount of work that would be required to take on another trilogy of films, and the sting of negative feedback received from so-called “fans” after the Prequel Trilogy, Lucas eventually took Bob Iger (then and current CEO of Disney) up on his offer to purchase the studio.

The initial assumption, at least as far as Lucas was concerned, was that the new Star Wars films made under Disney’s ownership would take Lucas’s script treatments as the basis for the overarching narrative of the new trilogy. This, however, was not the case, and the result has been a mix of films that took a form that Lucas would unlikely have made himself, while also at times resembling something he once had made.

It has been seven years since Lucas sold to Disney [as of writing –ed.], and already there have been four Star Wars films released (two “Saga” films and two “Anthology” films), with the final episode in the Skywalker Saga out at the end of 2019; meaning Disney has overseen almost as many Star Wars films as Lucas did over the span of around four decades. In this relatively short space of time, then, how has a franchise that was known for pushing the film industry with its expertise in special effects sought to recapture an audience that was supposedly lost during the misunder-stood prequel era?

Dan Golding has taken it upon himself to examine the form that the Star Wars franchise has taken in the absence of Lucas’s leadership in a focused breakdown of The Force Awakens (2015), Rogue One (2016) and, to a lesser extent, The Last Jedi (2017), which neatly brings this aptly titled book to conclusion. Golding has been diligent in writing in a way that both keeps things as clear as possible for those new to the franchise while also avoiding being overly descriptive for those who are not; this also enables the book to concentrate on its other core focus, that of a critical guide to this new era of Star Wars. In addition, Golding is seemingly able to strike a balance between fan and academic. Certainly, those of us who fit into both categories will gain the most out of this, but for those researching the format of franchise films and/or elements such as nostalgia (the significance of which will be mentioned shortly), there is a substantial field of supporting evidence here. The nonacademic Star Wars fan will also find something of interest here, as there are plenty of interesting insights into the development of the franchise and the reactions from around the world. The style of writing...
is also beneficial to all as the ideas Golding argues are clear and supported well, making this a helpful text for those researching within this or related academic fields.

If there is one strand that ties most of this book together and exemplifies Golding’s main focus, it is nostalgia. It permeates almost everything when discussing Star Wars during the Disney era and is seemingly core to much of the approach in creating and marketing these newer films. While Lucas himself has been critical of The Force Awakens as being a “retro film” due to its adherence to A New Hope as a key source of inspiration, Golding is apt at making it clear that Lucas himself is not immune from indulging his own nostalgia in the past; the difference though is the way in which nostalgia is utilized differently. Golding notes that it is very clear in Lucas’s Star Wars films where Lucas has been inspired by the serials of his youth, along with Westerns and Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films. The latter influence came to Lucas during his time at film school, but it is the serials that are of particular interest here. Serials such as Flash Gordon were already outdated by the time they aired on television during Lucas’s childhood, and this type of filmic aesthetic was no longer prevalent amongst the current generation of children by the mid-1970s. In part, Lucas wanted to create something akin to what he enjoyed as a child for a new generation by reintroducing “fairy tales” to popular media and, as Golding states, “rejecting the trend of cynical, ‘social realist’ filmmaking that was popular at the time.” Lucas himself reaffirmed this, saying “Once I got into Star Wars, it struck me that we had lost all that—a whole generation has grown up without fairy tales.” Therefore Lucas provided what he thought this generation was missing, sowing the seeds for a time when this generation would be nostalgic for this type of film when, in the decades that followed, no one else was quite satiating the absence of such tales—Lucas himself included as far as the generation that grew up with the Original Trilogy were concerned.

With this being the perceived understanding in response to Lucas’s prequel era (justified or not), a desire from the fans was a return of something that more closely resembled the Original Trilogy, the absence of the aesthetic found in those three films creating a sense of loss in older “fans.” This desire was keenly noticed by Disney, which largely ignored Lucas’s ideas for a Sequel Trilogy and created and marketed its new Star Wars in a way that “carefully pitched nostalgia” to “give the sensation of returning to where we have never been” while also facilitating a sense of coming home, the very deliberate use of which Golding keenly points out in one of the early trailers for The Force Awakens. There Han Solo and Chewbacca are seen for the first time back in the Millennium Falcon, where Solo proclaims, “Chewie, we’re home”—a not-so-subtle indication to older fans that this new film will provide them with a return to the very nostalgic experience of the version of Star Wars they grew up with.

Golding carefully examines the extent to which nostalgia seemingly provides the backbone to this new post-Lucas Star Wars. As mentioned, the focus of this book is predominantly on The Force Awakens and Rogue One, two films that both rely heavily on nostalgia for their very existence; however, the way in which this is executed differs both in execution and how they were received. In short, The Force Awakens was criticized for being too nostalgic due to its narrative structure seemingly staying too close to that of A New Hope (the first Star Wars film created) and its general aesthetic also being too similar to the Original Trilogy as a whole. The latter is ironic as this is exactly what “fans” said they wanted and which Disney happily provided for them. The difference here is that, unlike the Lucas films, in which he “looked everywhere for ideas for Star Wars,” resulting in what Fredric Jameson referred to as the “nostalgia film”—due to reclaiming cultural experiences of the past into the present—The Force Awakens took its inspiration from past Star Wars films as reference points. Although it would be reductive to claim that it solely did so, the result was a very different kind of nostalgia film to the one Jameson described, one that is self-reflective.

Rogue One, on the other hand, navigates nostalgia in a different way, one that allowed it to escape the same level of criticism that befell The Force Awakens. Rogue One was not just a film for the “fans”; it could also be considered a fan film itself (albeit with a substantial budget), given the passion for the franchise possessed by the film’s director, Gareth Edwards. Plus, due to the narrative proximity of Rogue One to A New Hope (the former leads directly into the latter), the design of the two films—which were created decades apart—would need to resemble one another. Yet, as Golding highlights, even though “nostalgia makes an appeal to the past being at least partly better than the present,” Rogue One would fail as a nostalgic project if it were to faithfully recreate the sets and costumes of A New Hope, because of the desire to return to the past as it was remembered, not as it actually was. Therefore, “Rogue One didn’t just re-create the past; it improved on it.”

This action of bringing back the past and improving on it is not isolated to Star Wars, present also in what has been referred to as the Legacy Film. Golding explores how this helps provide authority to films—not just Star Wars—that have transferred from one era to another. This provides multiple perceived benefits in that it avoids the “sharp break of a traditional reboot” and gives older audiences a chance to remember while also enabling newer audiences to claim some cultural capital of this version for themselves. These benefits of the legacy film are similar in practice to those that Ryan Lizardi attribute to the approach used by companies such as Disney of focusing on transgenerational appeal, the aim of which is to “create a pre-
dictable dual audience of nostalgics and youths” [1].

This dual audience is deemed to be crucial for Star Wars in the post-Lucas era, and is a recognition that there is indeed a limit to nostalgia in terms of engaging an audience, even if it does help to provide a narrative (and, as with The Force Awakens, a structure) to build from, that there is a sizable audience that has not grown up with Star Wars and is unfamiliar with it. This is not just a consideration for the American/European/Japanese audience, as the Chinese film market continues to grow and will soon rival that of the United States—except, the difference is China does not have a nostalgia for the franchise. The Chinese audience is coming to the galaxy far far away as new visitors, meaning that the films still need to stand on their own, or in the case of Rogue One, given a bit of additional support from high-profile Chinese stars such as Donnie Yen and Jian Wen. Because of this unfamiliarity for Star Wars in such a lucrative market, having The Force Awakens adopt a “requel” [2] approach—that being a sequel that can be seen to act as a soft reboot—helps to ease Chinese audiences into the franchise in readiness for later entries as well as potentially encouraging them to watch previous entries as well. However, despite these approaches, Star Wars—while successful—has not been the cultural juggernaut in China that it continues to be in the West, much to Disney’s disappointment.

Golding has managed to provide a book that is clear in its intentions of examining the Star Wars franchise in the years since it made the transition to a giant media conglomerate. The significance of nostalgia is interwoven throughout and provides a detailed yet broad exploration into how it has both impacted and been implemented into the long-running franchise. If there is one complaint it is that perhaps this book came out too soon, with Golding not having enough time to explore The Last Jedi further—although it did act as a helpful conclusionary chapter—and the final part of the Skywalker Saga coming out at the end of 2019 likely providing additional insight worthy of exploration. This book will greatly benefit from a sequel (maybe even a prequel), or perhaps Golding will provide a befitting “special edition” that will round off the conclusion of the saga and truly examine the extent of nostalgia in a post-Lucas galaxy far, far away.

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2 Lizardi [1].

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NOVEMBER 2019


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