JEAN DE GROOTE: IN DE STILTE VAN DE DINGEN (IN THE QUIET OF THINGS)


Reviewed by Robert Maddox-Harle, Australia.

https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_r_02037

This book is a little treasure. It is with considerable difficulty that I have reviewed In de stilte van dingen, mainly because at present it is only published in Dutch. I managed to obtain a PDF file of the manuscript in Dutch via Edith Doove, one of the book's essay contributors and also a Leonardo Reviewer. I then translated this file using Google Translate, which astonishingly did the whole book in one go, just well enough to read and understand. Why did I go to the trouble, I hear you ask? Because De Groote's work is worth any amount of effort.

In our supersaturated global society of images, screens, sensationalized hype, noise and busyness, De Groote's paintings are like silent healing sentinels that take us to a quiet contemplative center where we may experience the true essence of the "thing." De Groote chooses as subject matter commonplace, normally unremarkable objects such as an envelope, a banana, a light switch or a twig. The cover of the book features his Envelop painting, an austere image in grey, off-white textured oil on canvas, this painting stopped me in my tracks with a gasp of "that's it." We do not reproduce images in these reviews; however, you may view many of De Groote's works on his website.

The book has 13 essays discussing De Groote's work; some are long theoretical texts, others short descriptions in poetic form. These are interspersed with well over 70 color images of the paintings. Many of the works were recently shown at De Groote's hometown gallery, with which he has been associated for many years: S&H De Buck, Zuidstationstraat in Ghent. Consequently, the book is part catalogue, part art book, part theoretical discussion of De Groote's work. As Els Vermeersch aptly states on the back cover, "the works must above all make themselves felt. The pictorial representation does not take precedence here, but the process of observation and construction does. Hence Jean De Groote's central theme: 'no observer, no object.'

I found the first essay, by Elias, rather disappointing, as it seems to miss the point of De Groote's work and is basically a theoretical "rave" concerning postmodernism and its glitterati—Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva et al. Perhaps we could think of De Groote as a Platonist, as I believe he does see himself, but if we step outside the Eurocentric philosophical traditions and look into the Eastern approach to existence, as Michiels so beautifully says, "the work of Jean De Groote cannot be explained, it slowly penetrates within you. It is a silent argument, a soft anarchy. It is like pure poetry" (p. 53). Van Haute, in his essay, is in a sense issuing a warning against overintellectualizing and overanalyzing De Groote's work when he says, "giving I would say too much text and explanation detracts from the spell Damme, in his essay, "Op zoek naar de essentie met Jean De Groote" ("In Search of the Essence with Jean De Groote") (pp. 75–81), really understands this, as he states, "The artist (subject) and the twig (object) falls together for a moment and forms one harmonic unity, at least on a mental level." This is the essence of Zen as described in Zen in the Art of Archery, where the archer, the arrow and the target become one, "no correspondence entered into" [1]!

Further along this line of appreciation, as Michiels so beautifully says, "the work of Jean De Groote cannot be explained, it slowly penetrates within you. It is a silent argument, a soft anarchy. It is like pure poetry" (p. 53). Van Haute, in his essay, is in a sense issuing a warning against overintellectualizing and overanalyzing De Groote's work when he says, "giving I would say too much text and explanation detracts from the spell

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of the work” (p. 46). Exactly! As Zen says, be careful not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon herself.

De Groote’s statement concerning his paintings and working approach, “no observer, no object,” may be discussed and analyzed ad infinitum, ad absurdum via different branches of Western philosophy, but using an Eastern approach, nothing at all needs to be discussed; “direct experience” is all there is, both in the case of the painter De Groote when he is creating his masterpieces and again by the viewer when standing speechless (hopefully) before the works, such as I feel before The boot van de Charon (The Boot from Charon) (p. 87); this image is indelibly etched into my mind.

I would very much like to see a second edition of this book published with English text alongside the Dutch, and with at least one additional essay along the lines of Zen understanding and elucidation of De Groote's paintings. As I said in the beginning of this necessarily brief review, his paintings are not only brilliant in their own right but extremely important works to help bring some balance to our contemporary world full of too much of everything—especially noise.

Reference

FROM FINGERS TO DIGITS: AN ARTIFICIAL AESTHETIC


Reviewed by Bronac Ferran.

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It may seem paradoxical given the frequent references in Boden and Edmonds’s coauthored book to “the fine art bubble” cast as seemingly adversarial to generative art practices that, shortly after its publication, an artwork based on “generative adversarial networks” was sold at a fine art auction for almost half a million dollars. A few months later, at Sotheby’s in London, another artwork made in a related way fetched (as the press recounted) a relatively “disappointing” $50,000, despite being described by its curator as “turning a page in art history.” We might speculate on how such events might affect a potential opening chapter of a potential second volume of Boden and Edmonds’s From Fingers to Digits: An Artificial Aesthetics, a book that in many ways backfills aspects of the historical gap such a comment reveals. The book has many other levels of topicality that its eminent coauthors may (or may not) have anticipated. Who indeed might have foreseen today’s global pandemic and our puzzled 2020 mindset, in which the very reality of fingers and artificiality of digits has been thrown into the air for all of us to consider while residing in our ubiquitous bubbles? Yet, in effect, with its significant thematic resonance, the book re-encodes into our “quarantine zero” moment (to cite a prescient term used by Piene) an otherwise endangered memory of iterative and propulsive shifts over the course of the last century, toward our contemporary and generative digital quotidian.

Charting its thematic course, as if working from two different corners of a multilayered map, Boden and Edmonds succeed in drawing contour lines that others will follow and add to further, addressing in so doing some of the gaps that become apparent in this publication. Developed over several years, it reflexively draws on published work by both authors and presents new writing, bringing into focus the need to consider the question of machine intelligence—and its seeming autonomy—in relation to human agency and, indeed, to issues of causality. It asks us to consider the role of generative artificial intelligence as a particular in this relation, as a step even further away from the conventional role of the individual artist or craftsperson, if conceived in Ruskinian terms, according to Boden. In the second part of the book, Edmonds takes the lead on six chapters and is at his lucid best in writing about the emergence of process-led, interactive tendencies alongside the adoption of computers for artistic practices from the late 1960s onward, reflecting an exceptional combination of systems thinking with a visual artist’s sensibility. So too we hear the authentic voice of the artist, drawn out in interviews led by Edmonds, where he reveals an understated ability to ask the right questions empathetically in dialogue with Paul Brown, Harold Cohen, Julie Freeman, Aaron Marcus, Alex May, Alex McLean and Manfred Mohr. These exchanges remind us that one of the leading characteristics of generative art practices is to continually reinvent the associated terminology, to keep it live as in live coding or in software-based art processes generally.

Most importantly, we gain access through the combining of professorial voices in this publication to a sense of the time that it has taken for ideas being sounded in the sixties, as witnessed directly by Boden and Edmonds to enter into mainstream circulation. A 1977 book by Boden, titled Artificial Intelligence and Natural Man, soon became a classic text in related cognitive science literature. Yet Boden’s tendency in terms of contemporary art analysis is to go narrow, focusing intensively on individual artists whose work she admires, notably the late Harold Cohen, while making rather sweeping statements in relation to art historical
developments more generally. While Boden’s analysis of a Ruskinian resistance to machine-led practices might seem old fashioned to Leonardo readers, it becomes clear that this is exactly the turf that is being churned up in the contemporary press coverage of the so-called groundbreaking art auction sales.

My main criticisms? Diagrams, rather than head-spinning acronyms, in Chapter 2’s attempt at a taxonomy of computer related/digital media art practices would have been welcomed. One also regrets a slight error in the title of Georg Nees’s computer graphics exhibition in Stuttgart in February 1965. So, too, the situating of Gustav Metzger among “maverick” artists who were not engaged with computer science—and linking his auto-destructive art practices only to bags of rubbish left in galleries is an oversimplification. But that’s another history.

THE BIRTH OF THE IDEA OF PHOTOGRAPHY


Reviewed by Stephen Petersen.

When Andy Warhol was asked about his photographic work in a 1985 interview, he gave a characteristically self-effacing answer: “Anyone,” he said, “can take a good picture. Anyone can take a picture.” Made in the context of the “point-and-shoot” camera revolution of the 1980s, Warhol’s comments reflect the notion that photography is a quintessentially popular art, available to all. As with many of Warhol’s seemingly commonplace pronouncements, however, this one elicits a number of questions: What does it mean that “anyone” can take a (good) picture? How does this speak to our understanding of photography as a medium? These same questions animate François Brunet’s rich study of photography’s first century. Indeed, argues Brunet, the paradox of an art that anybody can do is formative to the very concept of photography, starting with its public announcement in 1839 and leading into the modern era of the snapshot on the one hand and fine-art photography on the other.

As suggested by his title, Brunet’s subject is not so much photography as medium as it is photography as discursive entity or cultural object. Whereas historians typically look at the convergence of preexisting factors (aesthetic, scientific, technological) that led almost inevitably to the invention of photography between the mid-1820s and the late 1830s, Brunet insists that the idea of photography followed—rather than preceded—its invention. For Brunet the idea of photography, first articulated in François Arago’s 1839 announcement of the Daguerreotype process before the French Academy and developed through the successive social and technical evolution of the medium, can be summarized as “art without art, hence art for all” (p. xiii). Because the photographic image formed as it were naturally, through a physical and chemical process, it was within the reach of everyone. As Brunet knows, this idea is both naive and idealistic: naïve insofar as an elaborate and culturally determined set of techniques made the “natural” image possible and idealistic insofar as producing photographs was out of reach for all but a few specialist professionals (and dedicated amateurs) for most of the nineteenth century. Despite its paradoxes, this utopian notion of photography as democratic art form within everyone’s grasp would persist and, in effect, ultimately be realized in a later cultural context.

The book is organized around two “moments” in the history of photography: the “Daguerre moment” marking the public announcement of photography in 1839 and the “Kodak moment” a half-century later. Both moments involve an array of currents and countercurrents that Brunet fleshes out through detailed structural analysis, looking less at the specific technical innovations than at the broad cultural shifts brought about under the name of photography.

In January 1839, Arago, a mathematician, scientist and politician, announced the Daguerreotype process invented by Nicéphore Niépce, a scientist and inventor, and Louis Daguerre, an artist and showman, before the Académie des Sciences. Over the ensuing months an arrangement was made so that the French state purchased and made public the specifics of the invention, which was often termed a “discovery,” i.e. a natural fact that could, therefore, not practically be patented or licensed. A central paradox emerges: namely, that this technical and historical process is given an “atechnical and ahistorical definition . . . as natural image;” effacing its cultural basis (p. 21). Arago argued that the “discovery” would find myriad applications. He lauded the consummate exactitude, efficiency and ease afforded by the technique, which would benefit “everyone.”

The “Daguerre law,” authorizing the purchase and public dissemination of the technique by the French state and articulating its potential usefulness, is critical to the formulation of the idea of photography as Brunet sees it, constituting “the birth record of a logical and political entity, photography, understood in its generality” (p. 114). Whereas the daguerreotype—a unique image on a silver-coated copper plate developed in mercury vapors—was a specific invention, the larger significance of the moment was the articulation of photography as a generic idea. While making a daguerreotype was a technologically complex task, photography as an idea paradoxically signified “a new order of representation from which know-how is axiomatically excluded” (p. 87). Brunet points to the “contradiction between the complexity or opacity of the operations and the ideological theme of universal access to photography,” noting the consistent way Arago effaces the technical and material exigencies of the daguerreotype technique in favor of a mythology that everyone can do it (p. 112). Politically, this notion of an art for all resonated with egalitarian...
ideals. “The idea of photography was thus assigned a republican valence” (p. 115).

It was not until Arago’s initial announcement that other researchers into light-sensitive chemicals and optical apparatus, notably William Henry Fox Talbot and John Herschel in England, “experienced the idea of photography” and brought their own investigations to a new level of perfection. Talbot’s calotype technique, involving a paper negative and positive print, “fashioned an ‘English’ invention of photography” alongside the French and, in many ways, in tension with it (p. 30).

The very public nature of the daguerreotype contrasts with the rather more private calotype—private in the sense of individual and aristocratic, as well as in the sense of personal and subjective. Talbot’s technique remained largely proprietary, whereas Daguerre’s was freely available (except in England, where Daguerre had taken a patent). Talbot frequently photographed his own possessions and his property. But his photography also was private in the sense that it reflected a personal vision, what would later become enshrined in the modernist notion of the “photographer’s eye.” As such it laid the basis for fine-art photography. Brunet contrasts Arago’s “institutional formulation” with Talbot’s “subjectivist translation” of photography (p. 17). Daguerre’s technique lent itself to commerce, Talbot’s to amusement or play, establishing a sort of structural opposition within what Brunet calls a “shared pleasure in photography” (p. 115).

In a historical irony, the daguerreotype technique would reach its apotheosis not in France but in the United States, where love of new technologies converged with the peculiarly American mix of populism and individualism. Professional portrait operations flourished, and the technique came to define mid-nineteenth-century visual culture. Central to its appeal was the idea that photography, and the minutely detailed daguerreotype in particular, was a uniquely direct, immediate and truthful form of representation. As Ralph Waldo Emerson phrased it: “Tis certain that the Daguerreotype is the true Republican style of painting. The artist stands aside and lets you paint yourself” (p. 216). As construed by the American public, photography was at once nonelitist and individualist, which for Brunet reflects the two poles of the medium in Europe: the public daguerreotype and the private calotype. It offered a “synthesis of equality and uniqueness, and thus, in a certain way, of the French and English processes” (p. 224). As direct transcriptions of the individual, photographs were perceived to be authentic in a way that other images were not.

Photography remained, for much of the nineteenth century, divided between producers, who were almost exclusively professionals with “esoteric” skills, and consumers, whose avid appetite for gazing at photographic images fueled the rise of the stereograph and carte de visite formats. The wet-collodion process that supplanted both the daguerreotype and the calotype in the 1850s afforded virtually endless high-quality reproductions but required extensive skill and cumbersome materials to produce. The highly technical process on the one hand and the ubiquitous presence of the results on the other combined to obscure the artistry involved in making photographs. “Figures of evidence” characterized by exactness and mimesis, photographs existed outside of discourse as if natural facts, autonomous images, painted by the sun.

The second historical “moment” in Brunet’s analysis occurred at the end of the 1880s with the introduction of George Eastman’s Kodak system, which offered “photography without effort, without technique, and therefore open to practically everyone” (p. 230). At once a “great transformation,” it in essence realized the idea, articulated by Arago a half-century before, that photography would offer something that “everyone will be able to use.”

Brunet notes that the Kodak Revolution was uncannily anticipated in 1866 by French photographer Léon Vidal, who presciently hoped for a way to put the means of making photographs in the hands of nonspecialists:

It is our wish that photography, which is of such help in every branch of knowledge, should become the domain of everyone; that everyone should have a share of its benefits, that one should use the lens like a pencil, like a [quill] pen that one could buy, fully sharpened, and that one only need dip into an ink that is sold ready for use. The easy reproductions of images of nature outside would be, like any art of writing, one of the powerful auxiliaries of thought. [p. 241]

This notion of a casual, spontaneous, individual practice of photography would be enabled by certain technical innovations seized upon by Eastman, above all the box camera with gelatin roll-film that could hold a hundred latent images for later processing and printing. But the success of the Kodak had more to do with Eastman’s relentless marketing campaign and his vision of the Kodak as an integral part of middle-class life. “More a system than a device, more a service than a system, more a concept and a word than a service, the Kodak was perhaps above all an image, one aimed at the wealthy but more broadly at non-photographers, readers of the popular illustrated magazines in which Eastman published his ads” (p. 253). As a business model the Kodak sought to tap into the bulk of photography’s consumers, turning them into its producers. The result was a new cultural landscape characterized by the proliferation of personal photography. Eastman’s “ambition precipitated a social and cultural revolution of vast proportions: the transformation of photography into a mass practice and its refounding as an instrument
of ordinary, everyday memory and fantasy” (p. 255). The photographic image thus became integral to all aspects of human life; private imagery became, ironically, a form of public participation. “You press the button—we do the rest’ became a formula for sociability, politics, and even American values” (p. 259). Kodak truly represented “photography for everyone.”

Emerging alongside the seemingly mindless ease of the Kodak Revolution and in reaction to it, Alfred Stieglitz’s Pictorialism was characterized by self-conscious artistry and complexity of technique. The “logic of distinction” between high and low uses of the medium became one of the “structuring principles” of photography at the end of the nineteenth century, centered on the “division between artistic or serious practice and ritual or ludic practice” (p. 266). For Brunet, popularizing trends have their corresponding de-popularizing movements.

Throughout, Brunet’s nuanced argument teases out the links between seemingly diametrical oppositions: daguerreotype and calotype, Kodak and Stieglitz. Taking the full measure of the “idea” of the medium requires accounting for such apparent contradictions. Put another way, the Daguerre moment is also the Talbot moment; the Kodak moment is, for different (but not entirely different) reasons, also the Stieglitz moment, even though Stieglitz defined his practice in opposition to the Kodak.

Along with the Kodak and Stieglitz's Pictorialism, the 1890s saw the development of pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory at the end of the nineteenth century, centered on the “division between artistic or serious practice and ritual or ludic practice” (p. 266). For Brunet, popularizing trends have their corresponding de-popularizing movements.

Brunet ends his genealogical analysis of the “theoretical object photography” with Stieglitz’s well-known series of cloud photographs, the “Equivalents,” begun in 1922. These are at once a continuation of Stieglitz’s self-consciously aesthetic photography and a departure from it. Famed for his expressive photographic portraits, Stieglitz had been accused by a critic of achieving his results by hypnotic power over his sitters. In response, he began to turn his camera toward the clouds, framing quasi-abstract compositions. These, he argued, required no special access, no privileged influence; views of the sky were available to anyone.

In this most esoteric and rarified photographic practice, Brunet sees reinstated the core “idea of photography” and, indeed, the republican values ascribed to the medium from its initial publication: “At the very heart of the cut that establishes the photographic gaze as a creative act, there remains an imprint of the disavowal of a photographer who designs this gaze as an ordinary human ability” (p. 363). If this brings us back to the received notion that “Anyone can take a good picture” (as Warhol would later put it), Brunet’s study succeeds in tracing the complex genealogy of this idea from Arago through Eastman, Stieglitz and, by implication, beyond. He shows how photographic modernism constituted a sort of rebirth of the idea of photography, concluding that “the transformation of photography during the Kodak moment precipitated a cultural, institutional, and philosophical change: once an invention, photography became a sign” (p. 364).

The notion of photography as an “art without art” remained a constant yet was constantly changing.

**DES OPÉRATIONS D’ÉCRITURE QUI NE DISENT PAS LEUR NOM**


Reviewed by Jan Bactens.

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Frank Leibovici is a French artist and theoretician whose work radically questions the use of the conjunctive word “and” in this field. His creative interventions cannot be separated from their theoretical program and vice versa. His often-collaborative work perfectly exemplifies the notion and multiple domains of practice-based research or theory-led creation. Besides, as artist who is also writer, critic, teacher, philosopher and activist, he also pushes the boundaries of what is generally considered to be “art.” Although participating in the “uncreative writing” movement and strongly focusing on the deconstruction of life and art (for example, via his use of the various types of the documentary form), his work goes beyond most recent explorations of footage, remix or sampling aesthetics, since it combines and activates the anthropological stance of objective description and the highly politicized stance of subjective—yet more collective than purely individual—reaction against deeply rooted approaches to both life and art.

In spite of being a multimedia and cross-media artist, he is far from opposed to relying also on the allegedly old medium of works in print. Thus, he recently published two new books that offer different yet complementary takes on his work. Released by avant-garde publisher JBE Editions, _De l’amour (“On Love,” a not-so-ironic nod to the famous_
early nineteenth-century treatise on the topic by Stendhal) gathers four real-life examples of modern discourses about love in an online, international context: an online chat room, talks on the tinder app, the “phonetical” transcription of a sex scene and a multiple-participant love correspondence. The other work, Des opérations d’écriture qui ne disent pas leur nom (“Forms of Writing that Go Unnoticed”) has a more theoretical scope, for it tackles the impact of “hidden” writing mechanisms on “what” is actually being produced. Not regardless of its content, as would be, for instance, the publisher’s choice of a typeface or the decision to offer the work not in print but as ePUB only, but as a vital part of the production of meaning during the writing process itself. What makes Leibovici’s argument so compelling is not only the shift in focus (what is generally seen as purely instrumental comes here to the fore, at the expense of what is normally seen as what writing is all about) but also the fact that the techniques and mechanisms he studies are not typical of certain types of experimental writing but actually define any form of writing whatsoever.

A brief overview of these operations immediately makes it clear that what Leibovici has in mind is less an emphasis on new or avant-garde forms of writing than a broadening of the concept of writing in order to reshape it in terms of writing in the expanded space: recopying, copy-pasting, compiling, sampling, subcontracting (for instance via so-called digital microlabor), indexing, liking, clicking through, retrieving, searching, translating, republishing, displacing, selecting and rearranging, tagging, aggregating, etc. (the list is all the more inexhaustive since technological innovations permanently open new possibilities). In all these clearly described and well-illustrated cases, Leibovici singles out the performative character of these operations, not simply as accompanying or supporting writing but that which proves to raise fundamental questions that go often overlooked or have consequences we still tend to link with the final writing output, rather than with the material and presently mechanized and robotized actions that actually perform them but never go without social, political, aesthetic and ideological effects.

The relationship between these various elements is then deepened in the last chapters of the book, where Leibovici close-reads some famous examples of these writing operations that go unnoticed. One of his examples is Kenneth Goldsmith’s public reading (which is also a writing operation, one of the many that structure the author’s creative reuse of a kind of readymade works) of Michael Brown’s autopsy report, which made Goldsmith the center of a still ongoing discussion on the ethical dimension of copy-paste writing. Leibovici’s very nuanced reading of the polemic rightly avoids addressing the debate at the level of the reported content (if he would have done so, he would have contradicted his major claim that before reading the content of a written utterance one has to examine the underlying writing operations). Instead, his reading foregrounds aspects of the textual performance that Goldsmith may have taken insufficiently into account, thus making room for a larger vision of “uncreative writing” than the one used by Goldsmith himself. Another set of examples is borrowed from the legal and jurisprudential field. Here Leibovici develops a matrix system in order to map the way documents of this type, which are always processed following endless paths of rephrasing, summarizing, commenting, etc., are actually produced and how these writing transformations tend to influence the final decisions as much as questions of material evidence, for instance. Finally, the reading of these cases—and this is also the reason why I presented here the clearly (sic) literary example of Kenneth Goldsmith together with the apparently nonliterary example of the lawsuit documents—gives Leibovici the opportunity to make a plea for art as a way of connecting separate fields and types of discourses, a way of building bridges in a world of increasingly separated fields of life and experience.

MODERNIST Magazines AND THE SOCIAliDeAl

Reviewed by Jan Baetens.

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The literature on the use of photography in interwar mass media magazines, in Europe as well as in the United States, is huge and still very thriving, but there are many good reasons to warmly welcome this excellent new contribution to the field. Unfortunately (and I apologize for this harsh opening, which will be the only negative observation of this review), one of these reasons cannot be the quality of its numerous reproductions. In spite of the quality of the paper (a strong and coated type of paper), most of the illustrations are difficult to read, due to both their small size and the poor quality of their reproduction. This is all the more unfortunate since most of these often-spectacular images are less known to the nonspecialist and will probably not be the subject of a new monograph in the years to come. One can only hope that the paperback reprint in one or two years will not make things worse.

The good news on the book is that it constitutes a real enrichment of our current knowledge on the field. Two aspects deserve to be highlighted in this regard.

First of all, Tim Satterthwaite has important things to say on the methodology of photo analysis in mass media. Any researcher will confirm the crucial importance of these two aspects: on the one hand, the large amount of the images available (certainly in the case of weeklies and monthlies that take the challenge to move from written to visual

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large quantities of images, namely the “pattern” approach inspired by Gestalt psychology, which looks for recurring visual structures based on the acknowledgment of broad general organization principles that can easily identified even after a quick scan of the images. Key in this regard is the use of very broad patterns, here even further reduced to two basic categories: first, distributive patterns, defined as “irregular visual groupings” (p. 43), that is, the unifying configuration of dissimilar elements (that of a human crowd, for instance); and second, geometric groupings, which depend on an already unified structure (that of organic or mineral life, for instance). Both structures eventually culminate in “grids,” which will prove the leading visual lens and device of the visual analysis. Patterns, preferably grid-like patterns, are however not the endpoint but the starting point of the analysis, since their successful or unsuccessful treatment helps verify the fundamental hypothesis of the book: the idea that the new magazines under scrutiny both defend, each in its way, a certain type of modernity as the technologically enhanced streamlining of postwar society—not as a scarecrow hinting at some kind of Big Brother society or bureaucratic standardization but as the perfect instrument to overcome human conflicts at an individual as well as a collective level. Technology and social organization are presented as the perfect pathway toward a more harmonious and happy society, at the microlevel of the family as well as the macrolevel of the nation. The study of the photographic language of the two magazines is then carried out in such a way that the progressive decline of this ideal becomes visible not only in the patterns of the images themselves but also in those of the magazine’s layout and global composition, initially very harmoniously patterned but eventually degenerating into more shattered structures with an often very gloomy content.

The second major achievement of the book, next to its sound and matter-of-fact methodology that is not afraid of reusing supposedly old-fashioned Gestalt models, is its new reading of the corpus. The innovation here is twofold. For one, Satterthwaite compares two magazines that are definitely very close to each other but are rarely compared, not only because the German monthly UHU (1924–1934) has been less studied than the French weekly VU (1928–1940) but also because comparisons in this field often involve other publications such as, somewhat stereotypically, the Berliner Illustrierter Zeitung, Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal not only discloses similarities between UHU and VU but also differences, for instance in time (the German magazine is hit more rapidly by the economic crisis than the French magazine, and its resistance to the spread of the fascist ideology is swifter yet tragically even more powerless than what can be observed in the French magazine) and also in ideology. On this last point, Satterthwaite’s study dramatically revises current scholarship. Not necessarily on UHU, which he analyzes as a good example of the new but eventually crashed optimism of the Weimar Republic, but certainly on VU, visually undeniably more progressive than UHU but whose left-leaning sympathies are here somewhat nuanced: Satterthwaite not only emphasizes the nonpolitical stance of many essays, he also makes visible the very positive framing of Mussolini, clearly not put on the same line as Hitler.

Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal is a topical and very useful book. Its modest but clever and efficient methodological choices, which it may be very interesting to apply to other types of mass publications as well, prove capable of treating a huge amount of documents in a way that combines broad general patterning and close reading, and eventually of producing a revision of existing scholarship on the links between visual culture and social ideals in a way that is not narrowly illustrative or pedagogical. What Satterthwaite shows may be visible in all the images
and page layouts of the era in themselves, but it is only through the methodological edging, here done single-handedly though certainly compatible with newly emerging big data methods based on pattern recognition, that the very form, content and meaning of these images come to the surface.

CURATING AS ETHICS


Reviewed by Edith Doove. Transmedia and Technology Research, University of Plymouth. Email: edith.doove@plymouth.ac.uk.

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The problem with Curating as Ethics starts right at the beginning. Initially I was led to believe that this is yet another historical overview of curating, starting with its origins, as the image on the cover shows a fragment of someone opening a door toward a Wunderkammer. Reading the introduction, however, it becomes clear that Jean-Paul Martinon questions the current state of affairs of curating, surprisingly stating that it is “now a practice without any form of institutional anchoring” (p. vii, my emphasis) due to the advent of the so-called content or aggregator curator. The old-school curator is defined by Martinon as selecting artists or artworks following specific institutional aesthetics, whereas the content curator is mainly interested in images, videos or sounds with a quasi-immediate return in terms of finance or viewer numbers.

To attempt to criticize or at least critically study this evolution and to try and develop an ethics for curating is in itself praiseworthy. It’s mainly the way in which this is done that I have a problem with. Although Martinon has been teaching the curatorial course at Goldsmiths since 2015, he has, as far as I could find, no actual experience in curating (exhibitions) as such, and that shows. Of course, it can be argued that this is, in principle, not necessary for teaching on this subject, which could be briefly (and too quickly) be explained as everything surrounding curating except for the actual making of an exhibition. But in this case, Martinon develops such an otherworldly view on the practice, losing all possible connection with it, that it becomes indeed problematic.

In the introduction he extensively positions the problems himself. His strategy for inconvenient incongruities consists however mainly out of perverting them—yes, it’s awkward to choose Heidegger and his “polylogical” concept of the fourfold (gods, mortals, earths, skies) for the basis for a book on ethics, let alone curating, but let’s just take the fourfold in itself. Yes, it’s explicitly awkward to discuss gods as part of this fourfold, but let’s just equate them with mortals because “mortal exceed themselves beyond death throughout their lives, and this is why . . . they also happen to be gods. The crucial thing about this excess is therefore the never-ceasing supplementary process that always occurs in thought” (p. xvii). Referring to Jean-Luc Nancy, Martinon finally equates the ability to exceed thought with the name “gods” (p. xvii). And that’s that issue solved. Only that it remains, as Martinon admits himself, a problematic statement to which he dedicates a considerable part of his introduction. Instead of at least briefly presenting Heidegger’s own intent with the fourfold, Martinon instead points to other literature on the matter, leaving the reader fairly empty-handed. To explain his inside-outside way of argumentation, using a relatively random concept to start with, Martinon then introduces the idea of curating philosophy, although I would argue that this is a fancy way of indicating what practicing philosophy actually means. It’s maybe because I am an actual curator that I’m not particularly shocked by it. Martinon however indicates that his approach to philosophy doesn’t follow a conventional structure but instead reads authors’ texts explicitly outside of their domains: Spinoza outside Spinozism, Heidegger clearly outside of Heideggerianism, etc. He then explains he takes this approach even a step further by “push[ing] the argument in a completely new direction. For example, the most antitranscendentalist philosopher imaginable, Quentin Meillassoux, is placed in dialogue with the least materialist thinker conceivable, Emmanuel Levinas” (p. xxi), which is in itself commendable and again not overly shocking as far as I am concerned. I am certainly not in favor of “reactionary pseudo- or postdisciplinary distinctions” where “curating is an indeterminable activity with diverse disciplinary heritages and little scholarly impact” and “philosophy is too dry, textual, and abstract for curating” (p. xxi). I frankly wouldn’t even know why this would be the case.

When Martinon argues that he lets curating and philosophy think through each other in a kind of incomplete, fragmentary way, connecting with the inherent disorder of life, this has the potential of becoming interesting. But at that point he has already introduced the cringeworthy terminology of midwifery, stating as one of the key questions whether there can “be a type of ethics for a global contemporary practice such as curating that negotiates, like a midwife, the treacherous waters of the birth of the new in order to keep death and everything that stands for it at bay?” (p. xii) For someone specifically interested in the notion of care within curating, it might be strange to oppose to this, but I really feel no association whatsoever with midwifery when I curate, nor with being a god for that matter, as Martinon suggests in his conclusion.

Following Heidegger’s fourfold, Martinon divides his book in three parts of 10 short chapters: Gods and mortals are combined to discuss the surface. With page layouts of the era in themselves, but it is only through the methodological edging, here done single-handedly though certainly compatible with newly emerging big data methods based on pattern recognition, that the very form, content and meaning of these images come to the surface.

CURATING AS ETHICS


Reviewed by Edith Doove. Transmedia and Technology Research, University of Plymouth. Email: edith.doove@plymouth.ac.uk.

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The problem with Curating as Ethics starts right at the beginning. Initially I was led to believe that this is yet another historical overview of curating, starting with its origins, as the image on the cover shows a fragment of someone opening a door toward a Wunderkammer. Reading the introduction, however, it becomes clear that Jean-Paul Martinon questions the current state of affairs of curating, surprisingly stating that it is “now a practice without any form of institutional anchoring” (p. vii, my emphasis) due to the advent of the so-called content or aggregator curator. The old-school curator is defined by Martinon as selecting artists or artworks following specific institutional aesthetics, whereas the content curator is mainly interested in images, videos or sounds with a quasi-immediate return in terms of finance or viewer numbers.

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Following Heidegger’s fourfold, Martinon divides his book in three parts of 10 short chapters: Gods and mortals are combined to discuss
structure of ethics, Earths and skies as parameters that are more related to curating and finally ethical issues under the heading "Deeds and Ends." Where does this all lead to, and, maybe more importantly, for whom has Martinon written this book? As far as the ethics, these remain extremely unclear and disappointing, mainly described as multidimensional following Heidegger’s fourfold and thus not clearly identifiable. As for its audience, they are certainly not the content curators, as I would guess they couldn’t care less. Asking how this is all related to curating, Martinon pulls again the curator-as-god card and “their fourfolding ability to chide time’s irony” (p. 238). “Curating’s transformative power; its ethical potential” is simply defined as “the acknowledgement of the work of time” (238–239). At this point I wonder whether Martinon actually has any real knowledge of curating. As if there haven’t been and still are curators or their predecessors that are fully aware about the work of time, without the need to be confronted with Heidegger’s fourfold. It does in any case not surprise me that Aby Warburg is nowhere near to be found in his book. Martinon’s denigrating (his terminology) of curators as ultimate fourfold players for whose activity “no minimal knowledge [is] to be had [as] any curator can midwife this good . . . new fourfold” (p. 239) now slowly starts to be irritating, exactly because it has so little connection with actual curating. It makes me despair a bit more about the nature of curatorial schools if this is what is being taught there. If I devote an extensive, but nowhere near long enough review to this book, that’s exactly the reason why. For which Martinon will no doubt shove me into the field of reactionaries, but so be it. In the end, Curating as Ethics is mainly a pleasant exercise in his newfound activity of curating philosophy. Which, by the way, would probably have been a better title.

**GYORGY KEPES: UNDREAMING THE BAUHAUS**


Reviewed by Ian Verstegen, University of Pennsylvania. Email: ianverstegen@yahoo.com.
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John Blakinger’s Gyorgy Kepes: Undreaming the Bauhaus is a welcome reassessment of a major modernist figure. Kepes emigrated first to Germany from his native Hungary and then to the United States. He came to head MIT’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS), seeking deep structural parallels between the sciences and the arts. Giving attention to a later Bauhaus personality requires a reorientation of values, namely, overcoming art history’s deep-seated suspicion of the universalizing modernist movement. Offering a trove of information about Kepes, the author palpably reveals the stress of his interpretive endeavor.

The introduction familiarizes us with Kepes as “technocrat,” an exemplar of Cold War conformity and a “think tank” mentality at MIT’s CAVS. The first chapter, “Camouflage Aesthetics,” explains Kepes’s role in wartime defense strategies in Chicago. The second chapter, “Pattern and Puzzles,” reviews Kepes’s collection of similar images across domains. Chapter 3, “Vision as Value,” reviews the influential series of books Kepes edited with George Braziller that brought together numerous artists and humanists on common themes. In Chapter 4, “Darkness into Light,” the author reviews Kepes’s infatuation with light. A chapter (5) on the military-industrial aesthetic complex outlines the link between Kepes’s aesthetic and organizational realities at MIT and, beyond that, linked art and technological research in the service of warfare. Chapter 6, “Artificial Natures,” finally sums up Kepes’s last efforts, and an afterward (“Afterimages”) reflects on the decline of the humanities in the university.

The book is exhaustive, well documented and attractively published. Perhaps deliberately, this wealth of material leaves us with a conflicted picture of Kepes. Blakinger shows Kepes to be aware of the double-edged blade of modernity, its comforts and terrible power. With nuclear energy, for example, Kepes is said to capture the “halting movement of the dialectic of enlightenment” (p. 220), but his Light project ended in “confusion” (p. 222). Indeed, the book is full of pejoratives (“strange,” “naiveté,” “failure,” “complicity”). The overriding picture is of a hopeful artist victim to his institution, optimism and ambition. Kepes indeed had the “misfortune” of working at MIT, a center of research feeding into military uses. It is not the author’s job to praise the subject of his study. But it is the historian’s task to approach that subject with a knowledge of contingent facts. While the book deals in great detail with the wartime and postwar United States, it does not engage extensively with the fears of World War II bombing (or a Nazi victory), genuine terror of thermonuclear annihilation or the joy (and ethical value) of discovery that Kepes aided by connecting artists and humanists with scientists. All these elements are a closed system upon which we as readers are prompted to pass judgment when perhaps we might also recognize ourselves as participants.

This tension is shown above all by the intriguing quotes that open chapters and sections, all taken from Frankfurt School figures like Adorno and Horkheimer. The effect is a nesting of Kepes’s activities within a more encompassing, critical viewpoint. I believe Kepes was entirely aware of the complexities of his situation; moreover, he probably could have discarded with Adorno about them (indeed, in the early 1940s Rudolf Arnheim was in touch with both Adorno and Kepes in New York). In this sense, even though the book seeks to affirm modernism, it remains in thrall to a critical postmodernism.
IBAUHAUS: THE iPHONE AS THE EMBODIMENT OF BAUHAUS IDEALS AND DESIGN


Reviewed by Mike Mosher. Email: mosher@svst.edu.

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I like this relaxed, essay-like book. I relate because for several years I taught a very Bauhaus foundational design course in our university. I also like it because the author quotes Hannes Beckmann (1909–1977), my own Beginning Design professor at Dartmouth College. Cheerful in the classroom (although he’d been imprisoned by both the Nazis and the Soviets on his way to the United States), he exhorted us to “seek ze elegant zo-LOOshun!” as we worked on our projects. He’d often say he was heading off to weekend with his friends the Albers. The couple feature prominently here, as the author Nicholas Fox Weber is longtime director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation and has written about them previously. For him, they embody Bauhaus ideals.

Apple cofounder Steve Jobs’s 1983 speech at the Aspen Design Conference launches a narrative of people, ideas and money. It was held at the Aspen Institute, a well-appointed think tank founded in Colorado in 1949 by Herbert Bayer, formerly of the Bauhaus and bankrolled by Chicagoans Walter and Pussy Paepke. Today Paepke’s daughter laments the end of an Apple Corporation “where every millimeter counts” in the design process, absent the late Jobs. In the 1983 speech Jobs described computers as “adaptive,” “simple,” even “mundane”. . . but conceded to the audience of designers and design aficionados that computers generally “look like shit,” despite the fact that “computer people are closer to artists than anyone else.”

And by page 80 I wondered . . . where is the iPhone?

Steve Jobs’s origin story, resulting from the union of a Syrian grad student and a Midwestern girl, is oddly evocative of another Midwestern girl’s union six years later, hers with a Kenyan student, that produced President Barack Obama. In Weber’s conversational style, the tale of Jobs’s boyhood home and background leads to discussion of influential California architect-developer Joseph Eichler’s progressive policies. This dovetails into Josef Albers not inviting his prejudiced family to his wedding to Jewish Anni (née Fleischmann), then to his Bauhaus colleague Vassily Kandinsky’s anti-semitism and a topical dig at Fred Trump’s racism.

Propertius asserted that “ten apples can seduce a girl,” a fact which may have convinced Steve Jobs to labor picking them at All One Farm near Reed College. Weber advances a wild claim: “For Steve Jobs the Apple orchard was more important to his inner formation than was any educational institution.” Was this the verdict of Jobs’s biographer Walter Isaacson or this writer? Weber launches into a meditation on the Apple logo, whose “smirking little leaf on top is insufferable.” He disses the version of the logo in “striped pyjamas,” and though referencing something festive, the phrase conveys prisoners’ uniforms in the concentration camps the Albers were spared by escape into Connecticut exile . . . while morally compromised Bauhaus colleague Herbert Bayer did design work for the Third Reich. Weber touches on cryptographer Alan Turing’s morbid end with a poison apple, but it’s interesting there’s no reference to the other symbolic use of rainbow stripes: among gay activists of the 1970s and 1980s, to whom Apple provided a friendly workplace in which a partner of any sex could share the employee’s medical insurance. Then-Vice President of Apple Products Jean-Louis Gassée used the simile that Apple Computer Inc. in 1989 was like a fine French sausage factory—an exquisite finished product after a grisly process and awful smells—yet added that it was a more humane company than it had been five years before (under Steve Jobs, whom Gassée helped eject). I designed onscreen animated training graphics at Apple 1987–1990, a couple years after Jobs’s exile from the company he cofounded and six years before his triumphant return, in the days of 72-dots-per-inch black-and-white Macs, probably more cyberpunk than Bauhaus in aesthetics.

The author turns his attention to swashbuckling Jony Ive, chief design officer at Apple in the iPhone era. Ive’s father was a silversmith and Bauhaus-influenced design education bureaucrat; Ive the son has great drawing skills and won industry awards for student designs when he attended Newcastle Polytechnic. That school’s foundation year was very much like that of the Bauhaus, emphasizing infinite possibilities from minimal structural elements, which Ive manipulated with “a stupendous skill.” “The link from Weimar and Dessau to Cupertino was direct,” declares Weber. For better or for worse, for the Macbooks that appeared under Ive’s directives had and have hard cold (on Michigan mornings) metal, versus those of the early-2000s, which includes the white plastic (soon stained from sweaty hands) machine upon which I’m writing this review now. Ive left Apple in 2019 to launch the design firm LoveFrom.

There is design criticism in iBau-
Leonardo Reviews

From Bauhaus to Our House

elegantly delightful high-quality design. Weber compares the new coinage of "Bauhaus" with Apple's "iPhone" and "iMac." The Jobs family's garage where Steve and friend Steve Wozniak invented the Apple II is like the Bauhaus workshops (or maybe like that of previous California techies Hewlett and Packard). Tina Redse, a girlfriend of Steve Jobs, once described him as "too influenced by the Bauhaus" when he pedantically tried to educate her taste.

Even when shaggy, lurching from subject to subject, arguments not quite jelling, it's all stuff I like to read about. Weber marvels at the iPhone, this Internet-enabled communicator in his pocket, which for him encapsulates Bauhaus goals and values: attractive ergonomics, smooth to the touch, no gratuitous ornament. He acknowledges the unfortunate social results of isolation in public, ubiquitous distraction. That Weber constantly wonders what Josef Albers would have thought of the iPhone is the sand-irritant that became this pearl of a book.

Late in their lives Josef and Anni Albers were not nostalgic but focused on their current work, still committed to make "the visible embody an attitude of honesty and integrity and guilelessness" geared to the universal. Anni was excited about new polyester fabric and worked its black and white threads into her weaving. They both disliked messy art: "Appearance is triumphant." The Albers lived in a mostly white, efficient Connecticut house, sparse but equipped with an SX 70 Polaroid camera, a Chemex coffeemaker and a yogurt maker.

Their valuable personal collection of artworks was kept in storage, and they didn't realize they needed a color TV to see their own artwork in a TV documentary on it in full color. The author enjoys old Josef's enthusiasm for a nearby beloved restaurant's salad bar; similarly inspired by a Howard Johnson's restaurant's salad bar on a 2002 trip to Michigan, San Francisco underground filmmaker Craig Baldwin exclaimed, "This! This is the bounty of America!"

Weber endeavors to compare subtleties of color in Albers's Homage to the Square to the UX of the iPhone, a "similarly lean and Spartan object that generates infinite events." (p. 156) In 1919, after "the war to end all wars" was followed by a flu pandemic, young designers in defeated and bedraggled Germany were optimistic, valuing efficiency and experimentation for a new, clean unencumbered everyday life. Weber was a young man when he got to know Josef and Anni Albers in their New England home in the final act of their lives. Like John Berger's books, Bauhaus: The iPhone as the Embodiment of Bauhaus Ideals and Design is a heartfelt polemical essay, a long walk past much scenery to thoughtfully prove a point. Or maybe a handful of small ones. It's a septuagenarian's summing-up, housed in new technology, a megapixel camera full of images from lifelong enthusiasms, sent from his pocket to ours.

KRÖYER: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE


IN THE LIGHT OF ITALY:
A DANISH-NORWEGIAN ARTIST COMMUNITY 1879-1886


Reviewed by Giovanna L. Costantini.

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As Scandinavian art has become more widely known outside the Nordic region with publications that accompany international exhibitions, two catalogs merit renewed interest for their transnational perspectives. In particular, Marianne Saabye's Krøyer: An International Perspective is an exceptional work of art-historical scholarship of far-reaching interdisciplinary import. The Danish painter Peter Severin Krøyer (1851–1909),
who was trained at both the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen and studios of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris during the 1870s, is considered Denmark's most distinctive modern artist, known especially for his sensitive characterization and vigorous figuration, often of fishermen engaged in strenuous endeavor against the forces of nature. As a plein-air artist, he is identified closely with strains of Naturalism to emerge on the eve of French Impressionism through which effects of luminosity enhance the humble authenticity of regional subjects painted throughout Denmark, France, Italy and Spain. Krøyer's renown rests especially on brilliant effects of light and twilight tonalities that envelop elegant evening strollers on the shores of Skagen, an art colony on the northernmost coast of Jutland where he regularly spent summers. Recognized during his lifetime in numerous exhibitions throughout Europe and Scandinavia, he was a recipient of many prestigious awards as well as the French Legion of Honor. The aim of the Krøyer catalog is to approach the artist from a new angle within the wider European context of international engagement.

Amid evolving and highly disparate perspectives brought to the writing on art and artists, including art's intersections with history, sociology, cultural studies and many other areas, the art exhibition catalog occupies a hallowed place in art historical epistemology, with wide variation as to content and design. Ranging from catalogs confined to a single artist or collection to stylistic, chronological or thematic approaches, exhibition catalogs can include interpretive essays written by area specialists as well as critical scientific documentation. Data-centered, based exclusively in primary source material to some degree, the Krøyer catalog achieves a level of specificity and analytic rigor required of a catalogue raisonné (yet to be compiled) in addition to substantive exposition through entries written largely by Marianne Saabye augmented by contributions from Jan Gorm Madsen, Katrine Halkier, Mette Børgh Jensen, Anna Schram Vejlby and Lisette Vind Ebbesen in both Danish and English editions. Extensively notated, it includes over 300 full color illustrations, a chronology, expography (exhibition history), list of the artist's sales and gifts abroad, bibliography and index.

The catalog's distinguishing value owes in large part to its rare specificity due to the survival of an unusually high quantity of written records kept by the artist over the course of a lifetime spanning the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, preserved and collected by the Hirschsprung Collection in Copenhagen. The tobacco manufacturer Heinrich Hirschsprung, the museum's founder, was the painter's principal patron throughout his career. Krøyer scrupulously maintained not only travel diaries, journals and ongoing artist sketchbooks but also a collection of clippings, exhibition notices, account books, receipts and contracts that chronicle his day-to-day activity with extraordinary exactitude. Even more revealing is an epistolary archive consisting of hundreds of multilingual letters both sent and received, written in various hands, between the artist and family members, artist friends, collectors, dealers, foreign dignitaries and institutions. Correspondents include nationals from countries throughout Europe and Scandinavia culled from collections in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Saabye's herculean capacity to access, review, compile and assimilate so vast a body of primary data is a remarkable accomplishment in itself. Even more significant is the nuanced acumen she brings to an inquiry as deep as it is sweeping in scope.

The literature contextualizes a highly complex period of artistic development in Europe, corresponding to the onset of modernism in artistic expression and ideology, the progression of the artist's career, comparative art and artists, and an investigation of representative artworks. Through details such as the locations and dates of ever-shifting residences; where artists gathered and with whom; intercontinental travel and ever-changing traveling companions; what was seen, who was encountered; and quips, exchanges, observations and discussions, we are provided uncommon insight into the artist's inner life. Saabye weaves this information into a coherent interpretive narrative, exploring the qualities of each painting in relation to its context unconfined by theoretical or disciplinary strictures, categorical assignations (genre, portraiture, landscape), nationality or stylistic movement, in a manner that is as descriptive as it is cognizant of the porosity of boundaries. She probes in separate essays special questions that merit a more focused inquiry, such as the artist's involvement in Breton art colonies, his participation in official salons and the Paris World Expositions and his relationship to individual artists. At the same time, Saabye investigates problematic questions of provenance, lost artworks and corrections to records.

Why this exactitude is important is that exhibitions such as these point up the concurrency of rising internationalism and the budding formation of national identities during a period of widespread cultural advancement and vast sociological transformation marked by increasing cosmopolitanism, urban and industrial development, and expanding communication networks. This orientation also characterizes a related bilingual catalog, In the Light of Italy, published by the Hirschsprung, Skovgaard and Lillehammer Museums with contributions by Saabye, Jan Kokkin and Anne-Mette Villumsen. It surveys the contemporary artist colony of Sora and Civita d'Antino in southern Italy, which encompasses a wider cross-section of Scandinavian artists.

Through such global perspectives, we gain not only a broader understanding of leading artists but a more holistic appreciation of the universal import of their emblematic pictures. For this reason, the discursive thread that animates Saabye's narrative is one of elusive artistic motivation gleaned.
from subtle phrases expressed among confidants: “floor, chairs, lie small scribbled-on sheets,” Krøyer writes to an unnamed correspondent. “They are not poetry—Lord, no—but they have a little to do with the world of ideas. . . . I have really taken hold of a more idealistic subject, but come to it by a materialistic path.” The path he intimates may have been that of the British materialists John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, whose social consciousness ignited many intellectuals and cultural elites of Paris and Copenhagen, from Emile Zola to Georg Brandes, during the 1880s, with unitary ideals of social integration evident in Krøyer’s earlier depictions of collective labor. They are ideas reflected in the critic Louis Fourné’s observation: “Here & there in the twilight gloaming, the form of a seaman is contoured. It is life captured as it is—the life of men & the life of things—& I know of nothing more alluring.”

FROM MÉLIÈS TO NEW MEDIA: SPECTRAL PROJECTIONS


Reviewed by Amy Ione, Director, The Diatrope Institute. Email: ione@diatrope.com.

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From Méliès to New Media: Spectral Projections is an exploration of the presence and importance of film history in contemporary digital culture. Using a media archaeology approach, the author aims to demonstrate that innovative new media forms are not only indebted to but firmly embedded within the traditions and conventions of early film culture. Throughout the book Haslem presents an array of projects that deftly move through topics like indexicality, semiotics, memory and digital restoration to light, materiality/immateriality, creative experimentation, time and obsolescence. While the overall goal is to introduce a new language of cinema and an alternative approach to historiography, the net result is a good start but falls short. The study is strongest and most original when presenting contemporary projects and examples of spectacle. Haslem tells us,

Many of the films that I explore in this book favour spectacle over realism, some prioritize non-linear, experimental narration over linear, classical narrative form. Many of the older (and some of the newer) films exhibit surfaces etched with markers of time, and as such, they provide a rich surface aesthetic to encounter and explore. My approach to writing on film has always been to try to explore the surface of the film itself. That means prioritizing the aesthetic, looking for moments where details of the spectacle reveal history. My tendency is to zoom into surface details, focusing on the traces of celluloid that remain present within a digital ecology. Material detail, surface, aesthetic and mise-en-scène drive my film analysis.

This is also an approach that prioritizes the senses. [p. 28]

A key emphasis is "spectral projection," as the subtitle indicates, though the term is capable of multifold interpretations. The idea is used to accentuate a tension between materiality/immateriality, a concept that comes up repeatedly throughout the book. In terms of presentation, “spectral projection” references the trope of situating ghostly (spectral) presences from the past in the present to move the narrative. Theoretically, it is associated with the French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic and semiotician Roland Barthes, who used it to refer to abrasions on surfaces. What he means is that there is a double space, so to speak, because one is fascinated by the image and by what surrounds it as well. Haslem extends this concept filmtically to include the slight scratches on an old celluloid print or the intermittent (and extra-diegetic) cue marks within that material that are intended for the projectionist. In other words, digital copies of films today include marks that obviously are not a part of the overall cinematic narrative; these references survive as a reminder of the materiality of celluloid film even after a film’s transfer to the immaterial digital format. Key here is that these “spectral” impressions of the celluloid remain as “reminders of the continuing presence of film history” in digital transfers (p. 17), serving as a reminder that many media products retain the layering of old and new forms.

The impact of the digital is a reinvigoration and extension of film history, visible through an analysis of the intersections of new and old materials, transforming the indice within what has been thought to be an immaterial context. Another way of reanimating the index is by producing spectral impressions of time. [pp. 17–18]

Haslem divides her research into three sections both to show “the endurance of the cinematic image as a living illusion” (p. 29) and to make the point that there is increasing complexity of what she characterizes as indexicality in a post-medium culture. The first section, “Early Cinema: Colour and Spectrality,” includes two chapters that investigate initial film experiments and their influence on digital technologies. The first, on applied color, centers around the restoration of Méliès’s A Trip to the Moon (1902). Here Haslem considers questions about originality in preservation and the ethics of digital transfer. A serpentine dance chapter follows, with Loïe Fuller’s (1862–1928) working as the author’s touchstone. Fuller was an American actress and dancer who pioneered both modern dance and theatrical lighting techniques. While not filmed herself, her form of swirling dance enhanced with color offered mesmerizing spectacles created out of fabric, motion, tinted color and light that had a multimedia type of resonance. Early filmmakers throughout the world quickly recognized that this kind of spectacle would entice audiences. Through juxtaposition with Lana Del Rey’s 2013 music video Shades of Cool,
we see that contemporary tools now create similar works that likewise stimulate our senses.

The second section, “Luminescence, Montage and Frame Ratios,” looks at the interrelationship of films of different eras, or how classical narrative intertwined works with newer films. The opening chapter, “Memory and Noir,” primarily critiques the Blade Runner films, Memento (2000), Wong Kar-wai’s In the Mood for Love (2000), Drive (2011) and Yang Fudong’s work, particularly The Fifth Night (2010). Light is a key component of the analyses, as are memory, contrast, design and aesthetics. The film choices were excellent, and I was glad the book enticed me to seeking them out. Fritz Lang’s exceptional film M (1931) is also briefly noted here.

Cutting and editing come up next and are used to consider how experimentation in celluloid and digital projects align. In my view, it is the most disappointing chapter in the book despite being interesting on its own terms: Haslem’s decision to pair early cinema with later work undermined her goal to present a new historiography, because it was never clear to me what the study gained by leaving a void in the mid-twentieth century. This chapter jumps from 1929 films (e.g. The Man with a Camera, Vertov, 1929) and Un Chien Andalou, Buñuel and Dalí, 1929) to the 1960s (Eyes without a Face [Les yeux sans visage], Franju, 1960, and Psycho, Hitchcock, 1960), ending with Christian Marclay’s recent, magnificent work.

Clearly, the author missed an opportunity here. Since her stated intention is to prioritize nonlinear, experimental narration over linear, classical narrative form, this section and the study overall would have had more coherence if she had included some of the exciting avant-garde work and film projects that struggled for exposure outside of the studio systems in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. One option would have been to include the paragraph on Joseph Cornell’s movie Rose Hobart in this discussion rather than briefly remarking on it later in the book. Produced in 1936, the reedited film, Haslem notes, was included in a 2006 exhibition, Le Mouvement des Images. Her point when she introduces it is that the film served as a “reminder of the influence of the influence and continual presence of early cinema in gallery exhibition” (p. 160). Putting aside that I do not consider 1936 as “early cinema,” I do think Haslem could have made a more powerful statement if she had used the Cornell work to create a historical bridge in the cutting and editing chapter. In her paragraph, she also tells us that the Cornell film was a part of a surrealist exhibition in 1931. (She doesn’t explain why she dates the film as a 1936 work when it was premiered in 1931.)

I also think this chapter would have benefitted by including the work of someone like Hans Richter (1888–1976) to further bridge the older and newer work. His complex, avant-garde film work spanned the Atlantic Ocean and would have offered the author a way to combine the experimental aspects of early cinema with later digital experimentation. Because Richter’s work is intertwined with art, it would have also buttressed her urge to align art projects with commercial film. By 1929, Richter had done pioneering abstract films such as Rhythm 21 and Rhythm 23 and worked on creative projects with both well-known artists and two of the filmmakers discussed at length in this chapter, Eisenstein and Vertov. (Richter’s extensive body of film work included collaborations with Charlie Chaplin, Alexander Dovzhenko, Marcel Duchamp, Viking Eggeling, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, Germaine Dulac and Walter Ruttmann.) My larger point is that, after leaving Europe, Richter had a tremendous influence on the avant-garde film community and on American art in particular through his directorship of The Institute of Film Techniques in New York in the 1940s and his close involvement with Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery.

Haslem’s discussions of Tacita Dean’s Film (2011) and Charles Boltsanski’s Chance (2011) after the cutting and editing chapter are worth the price of the book. It should be noted that Tacita Dean is generally described as a British visual artist who works primarily in film, so her work falls under a different rubric than that of a commercial auteur filmmaker such as Martin Scorsese. Similarly, although people describe Christian Boltanski as a French filmmaker, this characterization is not in terms of commercial movies. Rather, he, too, is characterized as an artist, known for his work in sculpture, photography, installation and painting.

The third section, “Cinema beyond the Frame,” attempts to bring it all together. Situating her argument in terms of “Expanded Cinema” once again underscored that Haslem’s history leaves a large lacuna in the mid-twentieth century. The term expanded cinema was coined in the mid-1960s by the U.S. filmmaker Stan Van Der Beek. Haslem presents it in a conventional sense to speak of a counter-history to the more established narratives that began to show up more in mainstream film culture in the 1960s. Indeed, when introduced, it was intended to denote that artists and filmmakers were starting to challenge the conventions of spectatorship, creating more participatory roles for the viewer. Yet, and to my point in mentioning Richter’s impact on film history, innovative filmmakers had never stopped experimenting.

I had hoped that the final chapter, “Ephemeral Screens: The Muybridgizer,” would bring the strands together. Instead, it underscored a difficulty this kind of project has in analyzing new technologies in relation to older ones. The Muybridgizer is an app developed by the Tate Gallery in 2010 to allow users to create their own content based on Eadweard Muybridge’s experiments with capturing time and movement on film. Because her presentation of the app didn’t translate well for me, I decided to play with it myself to better conceptualize her ideas. Unfortunately, I discovered the Muybridgizer app is no longer available. This outcome brought to mind artists I know who have projects they can no longer show...
because they will not work on newer versions of either the software or the hardware. Perhaps these become another kind of spectral projection?

Overall, this is an effort to show that the digitalization of celluloid plays an integral role in the development of new networks, new audiences and the facilitation of innovative modes of exhibition for film. It also serves as a reminder that film studies is now an academic field, largely given its current form in the mid- to late-twentieth century by many who started out as cinephiles and turned their passions into a legitimate field of research. In some sense, Haslem's materialist history is an outgrowth of their project to delve into film critically. Indeed, her ideas about viewing practices draw on the work of film luminaries such as Thomas Elsaesser, Laura Mulvey, Laura Marks, Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault. From Méliès to New Media is thus firmly embedded within the academic traditions and conventions of film critiques of aesthetics and technologies. As a modernist historiography, the book was also influenced by Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and the Deleuzian approach.

In closing, Wendy Haslem demonstrates ways in which early cinema's viewing style is now in effect re-created in nontheatrical cinematic spaces and on our mobile screens. Her discussions about how we watch films today led me to think about the disjointed ways we read and what we mean by narration. Because she leaves out nonfictional films and experimental aspects, it is worth noting that the social documentary work of the 1930s and 1940s was innovative, creative and another aspect of film that was not discussed in this book. Initial documentary-type projects bring to mind early cinema actualities as well as nonnarrative works like the serpentine dance. Because many documentaries were made outside of the studio systems, it is easy to fail to see them and how their spontaneity captured moods and feelings in ways studio staging did not. The entry of sound allowed these filmmakers to convey points of view more decisively than actualities had and, more importantly, to offer in-depth stories and portraits of events. These alternatives to studio productions received little play in theaters, and their innovative contributions are underemphasized in the story of academic film studies crafts. Nonetheless, even if not fully comparable to how we view films on a small digital screen, the lack of access to commercial venues frequently resulted in the type of nonlinear viewing we associate with digital products. Indeed, incomplete segments were used to raise money to continue projects. Also, like the serpentine dance tradition, these pioneers documented "live" events. More to the point in terms of historiography, social documentarians technically dispute tenets of how New Wave cinema changed film because these earlier commentators were documenting events using hand-held camera and shooting on location (despite the industry's movement into studio locations).

Finally, although From Méliès to New Media is a fine, well-researched book, I wish Haslem had provided more connective tissue between the experimental nature of early cinema and the film studies canon that began to find academic footing in the 1960s. She does do a superb job in capturing aspects of celluloid cinema, explaining how traces of celluloid remain within the digital ecology, and introducing related contemporary new media. Leonardo readers will no doubt enjoy the element of the book that looks at contemporary work, particularly the many rich details she interjects as she introduces the topic.