



Alexander Starre. *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*



Alexander Starre. *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. 310p., ill. ISBN 9781609383596. US\$ 55.00.

*Metamedia* is part of the University of Iowa Press series *Impressions: Studies in the Art, Culture, and Future of Books*, edited by Mathew P. Brown. Starre, a German-based American literary scholar, concerns himself with American literature and the dawn of the ebook at the turn of the millennium. “The complex phenomenon of metamediality exhibits the irritations that media change initiated in recent American literature” (29), Starre argues, justifying his particular emphasis on American literature.

The work discusses metamedia (a self-reflective concern for the medial) and the materiality of texts. Fittingly, it is a book concerned with itself as an object; it evidences great care taken for design and typography and also acknowledges all of the heads and hands involved with the creation of the book. The epigraph (from Montaigne’s *Essais*) reads, “I have no more made my book than my book has made me.”

The introduction and the initial chapter, “Reading Metamedia,” survey previous scholarship related to the convergence of materiality and literary interpretation, including the work of Jacques Derrida, Roger Chartier, Megan Benton, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Anne Burdick, Marshall McLuhan, William Gass, Jerome McGann, and Johanna Drucker. This initial chapter and the background provided sets up the chapters to come and the ways we will be interacting with the contemporary American literary landscape. Starre argues (and does a fine job exemplifying this in the chapters that follow) that “the materialities underlying contemporary literature in no way require us to forsake hermeneutics. Making sense of the aesthetic experience of metamedial texts will instead necessitate an extension of hermeneutics to the carrier medium of the printed page” (32).

Chapter 2 considers what Starre calls “The McSweeney’s Universe,” and it contains the crux of the book. As Starre argues, “McSweeney’s publications figure as embodied artifacts that



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contain self-descriptions and running metacommentary on literature and bookmaking in digital society” (70). McSweeney’s publications, and particularly the serials, are representative of metamedia and of Starre’s project overall. Chapter 3 offers a close examination of Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and the impact of the reader community on the work itself. Chapter 4 is an examination of “convergences” of design and literature (or “literary bibliographers” in Starre’s term) in the works of Chip Kidd, Salvador Plascencia, and Reif Larsen. Chapter 5 contains compelling readings of works by Jonathan Safran Foer, including *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. These are perhaps the most widely read among the literature surveyed in *Metamedia*, but it is Starre’s layering of Foer’s texts that makes this chapter so captivating. For example, Starre’s reading of Foer’s article “About Typefaces” as a companion to *Everything Is Illuminated* makes great sense and offers another fine example of the cultural context, hermeneutics, and materiality of the works converging.

Scholars in the areas of contemporary American literature, media studies, book history, and book design will find this work relevant. *Metamedia* capably illuminates how meaning must be explored in conjunction with and at times in tension with the current cultural and media landscape. However, Starre discusses the works of male authors only. He explicitly discusses this choice: “By focusing on some of the most explicit examples of metamediality in recent American literature, this book presents a very male-dominated picture” (169). He adds that most studies of “medially innovative American literature,” including those by female critics, do the same. This leaves plenty of new ground for subsequent scholars: What contemporary American literature authored by women has metamedial qualities? If there are no examples to be found, what could be said about the cultural space in which metamedial literature is created?

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