



BOOK REVIEW:

*Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction*

*Cristina Arbués Caballé*

Harrison, Jaime. *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2024. ISBN: 9781802074710.

Given the increasing use of advanced technologies, improved data processing, and the growing role of algorithms in controlling human behavior, Jaime Harrison's *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction* seems an essential work. Harrison recognizes that current human interactions with technology are impacting individual identities and asserts that fictional works can subvert power structures and alter algorithms. In his view, the texts he analyzes in the book serve to challenge the structures which shape human identity, by attempting to define these structures and questioning how they operate. Harrison argues that digital culture induces a reframing of the subject and subjectivity which can prompt reader self-assessment when the logical code where algorithms are inscribed is interrogated. Through the analyzed works, Harrison examines these sociocultural patterns and studies how the systems which support digital culture also encourage readers to consider how these same systems are built. Moreover, Harrison suggests that the texts he has chosen are especially effective because they do not alienate a non-tech literate reader.

The theoretical framework Harrison employs is multidisciplinary, and while it is rooted in digital culture studies, it deliberately incorporates philosophy, sociology, and linguistics, reflecting the need for broader frameworks to understand how new technologies affect identity. The monograph consists of seven sections where Harrison analyzes two novels, Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* and Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY*, a graphic novel, Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*, and a video game, Grasshopper Manufacture's *The 25th Ward: The Silver Case*. The two opening chapters of the monograph, titled "Fiction and Algorithms" and "Towards a

definition of contemporary digital culture” work as an introduction which outlines the employed theoretical framework. These sections also delineate the book’s aim to consider technology’s transformative potential, as well as its latent negative effects on individual and collective identities. In the introductory sections, Harrison also provides an ethnography of key events that have significantly altered identity formation since the internet’s inception, arguing that while the interplay between human subjects and digital technologies is certainly not new, the current shift in data usage has a greater impact than earlier events. Notably, he locates Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations on governmental data use as pivotal in the shift towards the public’s understanding of the purposes for which data is utilized.

The two theoretical concepts Harrison draws from the most to understand how algorithms shape human individual identities are Tom LeClair’s notion of the systems novel (1980s) and Shoshana Zuboff’s “surveillance capitalism” (2019). To define data use, he then uses the works of William Davies, Bonnie A. Nardi, and Michel Foucault. Furthermore, Harrison repeatedly utilizes Antoinette Rouvray and Nick Seaver’s anthropological approach to algorithms, which seems a particularly useful way to consider how individuals can understand them as a cultural concern. During the introductory chapters and throughout the entire monograph, Harrison frames algorithms as narrative processes that are similar to fiction: in this way, he likens data analysis to narratological analysis, an idea reinforced by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. As such, the first two chapters begin the discussion of Harrison’s key theme in the book: the radicalized individualization that is enforced by digital culture. Each following chapter, then, addresses the need for collectivity against a heterogeneous individualization that erases uniqueness, given that data aggregation, according to Harrison, causes plurality to be lost within the confines of algorithmic systems.

Chapters two and three, “It’s time that writing took something back from the internet’: Joshua Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*,” and “The dystopian social network: Nicola Barker’s *H(A)PPY*,” examine how digital culture is used to enhance society’s inclination towards conformity and complicity. One of the main aims of both chapters – and arguably, of the entire monograph – is to study how the “semantic logic of programming languages, the instructions that each algorithm executes, and the data structures in which data are stored and manipulated can shape the subject and subjective experience” (49). Therefore, Harrison focuses on algorithm creation and narrativization, arguing that the novels’ focus on algorithms is a critique of the subject’s displacement in a society which denies that subject their individuality and authority. Harrison’s argument is that understanding the narrativization of algorithms proves them to be fictional byproducts of subjectivity which propagate a massification of choices in behavior. This massification not only reinforces social marginalization but it also implies a rise in the strengthening of hierarchical structures. The rise of hierarchies, Harrison argues, happens when algorithm-produced narratives are favored over subject-built ones. Harrison sees Cohen’s *Book of Numbers* as showing the process of creating the algorithm itself, while in Barker’s *H(A)PPY* he suggests it is done by presenting how social networks attempt to control (and forcibly impose) happiness. Thus, Harrison contends that both novels critique how algorithms act as normative devices that disallow deviation from the norm and show how individuals are manipulated into

behaving *and* feeling in specific ways. Harrison also notes how the novels reinforce the exploration of this manipulation by highlighting the way in which the inherent binary nature of algorithmic language paves the way for a simplification of language, which inevitably affects individual identities and how they are built in our current societies.

Harrison makes a poignant observation regarding Barker's complex formatting, revealing an interaction with the visuality of programming. He argues that the author's formatting choices, such as her incorporation of different colors, typefaces, and other embellishments, not only resonate with data visualization but highlight the loss of creativity in binary thinking (both in the virtual and real world). Moreover, these choices make the text difficult to read on anything other than paper, thereby contesting data automation and classification. Later, in chapter five, Harrison circles back to the need to use alternative formatting styles as he discusses how the video game he analyzes uses three different art styles for its three different subplots, which, in his view, emphasizes a societal disconnect. Therefore, Harrison's overall stance on formatting shows how both Barker's novel and Grasshopper Manufacture's video game can help to point out the societal disconnect induced by algorithms and digital culture. As Harrison points out, in addition to representing this disconnect, these works simultaneously try to subvert it, demonstrating the crucial role of format alongside content for reader impact.

In chapters four and five, "The online dreamworld: Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*" and "Crafting a novel from digital culture: Grasshopper Manufacture's *The 25th Ward: The Silver Case*," Harrison turns to a graphic novel and a video game for further analysis. While the choice of different fictional mediums is interesting and the contents of the chapters align with the book's intentions, Harrison's choice of a graphic novel here appears more related to its genre and its author's professional background – that is, to Neal Stephenson's Silicon Valley experience – than to providing significantly new analysis on our reception and treatment of algorithms and data. Similarly, the video game's obscure and technologically obsolete nature – which Harrison explains is now almost inaccessible – also makes the book's cohesion falter. Although it is pertinent to emphasize that sociocultural analysis should not be limited to the novel, the last two case studies become somewhat repetitive, functioning more to exemplify how any kind of fiction can subvert digital culture's social modification, rather than offering fresh perspectives. As a result, the analysis of both texts is less compelling than that of the texts in earlier chapters, lacking similarly effective analysis of the potential societal impact of the analyzed texts and narrowing the reach towards more specific audiences.

Notwithstanding, Harrison uses these chapters to discuss the lack of intimacy induced by digital cultures, examining fake news, or "alternative facts," and the treatment of misinformation within society. This leads to his once more addressing the loss of collective consciousness that is induced by societal conformity, something further explored by Harrison when arguing that the graphic novel makes its readers reflect on how algorithms can shape consciousness. In Harrison's discussion, this also leads to a consideration of how algorithms codify even values and ideologies, which is especially relevant in terms of the often political function of science fiction. The examination of the video game also considers the notion of collective consciousness, as Harrison

discusses how individuals deal with information overload and analyses how the video game explicitly forces players to actively piece together the plot of the text.

The monograph concludes with the section “Fiction, Algorithms, Cognition,” which argues for considering how digital culture and software engineers might benefit from a familiarity with the Humanities that can encourage a certain ethicality which often seems to be missing from digital culture creation. Overall, the texts Harrison has chosen seem to offer a pessimistic depiction of digital culture, and in his discussion they also emphasize the limitations that resistance towards digital culture can offer. However, Harrison’s study also points to how, if its reductive elements can be contested by audiences, digital culture does also have potential to lead to the development of more broad-minded individuals. This is what Harrison seems to work towards: making audiences aware of the potential for reformation, a reformation inherent in the production of works such as the ones analyzed.

In conclusion, drawing from diverse theoretical fields and exploring a range of topics – such as authorship, reader response, postmodernism, affect theory, media culture and posthumanism – Harrison’s book is quite comprehensive and will interest a variety of scholars. At the same time, while its focus is broad, its concise length might be a limitation as some ideas seem to need expansion and others feel underdeveloped. Notwithstanding, Harrison generally offers a commendable interdisciplinary approach to studying the power that fiction holds on understanding digital culture, providing a compelling study on how algorithms and data collection impact individual identities. In fact, Harrison’s bold textual choices, simultaneously addressing contemporary identity, algorithm creation/alteration, and corporate data processing, reveal the rising need to understand fiction’s relation to algorithms and data. *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction* is, therefore, a necessary text, which examines new individual behaviors and fictional forms, as well as their potential to alter societal approaches to digital cultures.

*Biography:* Cristina Arbués Caballé holds an MA and a PhD from the University of Barcelona, where she lectures at both BA and MA levels on postmodernist fiction, contemporary literature, and globalized identities. She specializes in contemporary British fiction and her research focuses in particular on the intersections between trauma studies and the uses of metafiction. She is currently working on vulnerable forms of masculinity in film, as part of the group “Masculinidades vulnerables y normatividad en las narrativas estadounidenses 1783-1929” (PID2022-140375NB-I00).