# That's "Post-Bibliocentric" to You

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An important contribution to the scholarship linking literature and technology, *Reading Matters* offers a sweeping overview of the myriad ways machinery has affected the creation and interpretation of narrative. With topics ranging from how the advent of typewriting divorced the hand from the pen (and so the body from the text) to the appropriation of the conventions of high modernism in the bestselling techno-thriller, this compilation of twelve original essays and a newly translated one examines the authors and the theoretical concerns that have both helped to make prose fiction a marginalized genre *and* guaranteed its indispensability in our arguably post-chronic cyber age.

Given the emphasis of the volume on new, more mechanical media and how they influence literature, the repeated citing of certain theorists—including Walter Benjamin, Paul Virilio and Friedrich Kittler (who also has an essay in the collection)—is unsurprising. But their ideas—along with a healthy smattering of Deleuze and Guattari's—are used in widely different ways by the various authors, demonstrating the vast applicability of technological tropes to literary study (as well as making difficult any effort to write a focused review of the book as a whole).

Editors Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz provide a generous introductory essay covering much of the history of the presence of the machine in the garden of fiction. They recount how the "turn toward the spatial in literary modernism is clearly enmeshed in the growing awareness of the matter of letters at the turn of the century"; their essay examines how the very nature of the book itself and of the narratives contained therein is ultimately threatened with annihilation by the newer media that at first merely cause the genre to transform itself in a search for greater pictorial and spatial realism. The influence of differently sensual and potentially more engaging technologies makes anxious not only the creators of literary texts, but those of us who love them. For this reason, *Reading Matters* collectively manifests nostalgia for the book in all its glorious materiality.

At the same time, upon finishing the entire work, one cannot help but feel that print technologies and narrative fiction as we know it are not actually vulnerable to the ravishment of more virile media. The traditional book "machine" per se seems instead the wise old bawd, influencing such new phenomena as hypertext rather than being subsumed by them. Lynn Wells makes this point most convincingly in "Virtual Textuality," arguing that hypertext programs do not overturn the perceived imperiousness of the reading process. The dynamics of reading remain intact to some degree, and even if we are yet unsure where this tradition is headed, new technologies still must offer pre-arranged, and hence confining, parameters.

Yes, as Stuart Moulthrop suggests, "print is undead," and many of the essays in this collection show just how vital the culture of the novel and its relation with literary criticism can still be, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the willing accommodation of new technologies by writers and critics alike. Indeed, Jo Alyson Parker makes a valuable contribution to Faulkner scholarship by interpreting *Absalom, Absalom!* through the paradigm of the strange attractor, a concept that comes out of chaos theory—or dynamical systems theory, as she prefers to term it. By using scientific formulae, Parker can push past the "empty center" quagmire in which so many critics of the novel have become mired. Similarly, John Johnston offers a reading of *Vineland* that accounts for "the burgeoning multiplicity of subliminal events" on the margins of that novel's narrative. However, since he fails to document the extant scholarship on Pynchon's book, we must take on faith the article's claim that it offers fresh analysis.

Piotr Siemion's "No More Heroes: The Routinization of the Epic in Techno-Thrillers" provides an eminently convincing and chilling interpretation of Tom Clancy's wildly popular novels. Siemion argues that Clancy's *Hunt for Red October*, Payne Harrison's *Storming Intrepid* and Larry Bond's *Cauldron* manifest a faith in the liberatory glory of bureaucracy, if you can believe it, making modern men feel good about their minute and anonymous role in the military-industrial complex. By mixing the conventions of the epic with jingoistic ludicrosities, these authors manipulate "the aesthetic of interruption" so that it now "obeys the grander logic of consumerism." Siemion offers a clearly written and enjoyable read, an amazing feat considering the depressing information he imparts about these popular novels (and the movies and games they spawn). Some books in this "late age of print" we could do without.

Rounding out the volume are fresh essays on *The Magic Mountain*, Malcolm Lowry, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, canonicity, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the French experimental school of Oulipian writing. While each

contribution to *Reading Matters* stands alone as readable scholarship, one strain unites many of the articles: a fear of death underlies our attempts at technological mastery. From *Vineland*'s Thanatoids to the death at the center of Oulipian novels by Perec and Roubaud, intimations of mortality seem to weigh heavily on the minds of modern authors and act as an impetus to create art. But whether scrawled in crayon, pecked out on a typewriter or tapped on a keyboard, narrative ultimately appears lacking in the face of the vast and final mystery. In the meanwhile, though, *Reading Matters* seems a good use of our time.

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