

A Beautiful Look at Modern Digital Humanities: A review of Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

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Abstract

A review of Mark Goble's *Beautiful Circuits*

In his book *Beautiful Circuits*, Mark Goble explores an exceptional connection between modernism and media studies, particularly in the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Second World War. The period, often unexplored in terms of media studies, considers modernism's media innovations at the beginning of the last century. Goble's historical perspective is often juxtaposed with current theories of media reading back into the serious formalist works of the modernists, which — by Goble's careful observation — “nobody has much championed for years” [Goble 2010, 10]. The difference in perspectives on media looking backward, as opposed to the excitement of looking forward to the next killer app, reflects something that affected the modernist period of arts, literature, and music through the lens of contemporary theories of media. Instead of new media, we get what-was-once-new media and how it influenced the works of major modernist figures including Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, among others whom you might expect. Although some figures appear whom you may not expect, as Goble shifts into different media, considering, for example, the theoretical work of art critic, Clement Greenberg. Goble's critical work here feels like a nostalgic perspective on early developments of digital humanities, as we ourselves currently facing a fierce obligation to study the impact of new media innovations on our culture, and on past cultures.

1

The Barthean erotic pleasure of reading different media is a major expediency for Goble's book. The content emphasizes connection, love, romance, communication, intimacy, and social connections that are available through media as humans use them. I only offer this last qualifier because of the strong movement in media studies of late to return to sheer materiality, to media as a privileged object. Goble's book resists this reduction of the field of media studies and raises up the influence on the aesthetics and culture developed through the use of particular media during the particular period of the early 1900s.

2

Goble directs us as readers: “This is a book about relationships made possible *by* technology that are experienced as equally satisfying, if not more intense and affecting, as relationships *with* technology. In modernism, these relationships depend on the materiality of mediums” [Goble 2010, 12]. With this enthusiasm, Goble offers a healthy awareness of his own subject's seemingly dated nature, and not simply of what seems arcane now about modernism; as he puts it, “The very notion of the ‘medium’ and its aesthetic epistemology is no more bleeding edge than Betamax” [Goble 2010, 9]. To this, he adds later: “though I am wary of the nostalgia for bygone avant-gardes of the McLuhanist devotion to whatever once was new, I would hope this book pays tribute to some of the better forms of thinking about — and thinking in — mediums from the first decades of the twentieth century” [Goble 2010, 17]. The approach has an acute sense of the historic, and Goble dances through the minefields of new historicism as an impressive scholar of modernism by comparing periods, suggesting, “mediated life, which this book explores as a historical phenomenon, as central to the early twentieth century as to a later culture of new media” [Goble 2010, 11]. One then wonders how our relationship to mediated life will be read nostalgically by future scholars of the humanities in particular, surprised at certain authors' use of certain technologies. One experimental sampling of such fiction-on-the-edge may be found in the collection *We Tell*

3

Stories by Penguin: the publication of six narratives, remediated into various forms, such as *The 39 Steps* being rewritten into Google Maps.

The first chapter of Goble's work opens with Henry James sending a telegraph. Goble focuses on James's later novels to emphasize the influence of technologies like the telegraph on James's writing. Goble seems to expose a secret influence upon James's quintessential indirect style, and how he communicated passion and emotion exquisitely. The connection between James's perfect unwillingness to come out and say the matter of his writing plainly and the telegram's inability to do so as well is a brilliant theoretical connection between medium and writing process. The telegram necessarily condenses the message, and, of course, many telegrams perfectly and directly say what they need to say, but the conceptual framework is what grounds this text and reifies the modernist literary sensibility. Goble asks, "How does James incorporate the telegram — short, direct, and shockingly imperative — into a world where communication is imagined as prodigious, convoluted, and decidedly circuitous?" [Goble 2010, 75]. While Goble's choices lean toward the unexpected and are almost sentimental, certainly questions like this may be asked of still other writers. It has been suggested to me that we may now consider current writers cleverly using Twitter. Or, albeit in a footnote, Goble considers the work of the contemporary science fiction writer, Cory Doctorow, who has published his work online for free using an open publishing model in the form of downloadable PDFs, and maintained a degree of success as an author.

The title of Goble's book, he tells us in the deft introduction, comes from James who had something to say about circuits — to one's surprise — in his preface to *The American*. The careful consideration of James's writing style reminds me of scenes of James reading out his novels to a transcriptionist in Colm Tóibín's biographic novel *The Master*. Again, Goble's surreptitious connection between these early Modernist writers and their influences from particularly specific technologies is eye opening.

Goble then shifts into the second chapter with a second medium, the telephone, and a second key modernist: Gertrude Stein. Here, again, the artifacts and connections that Goble makes from the period are impressive. While setting up the telephone as the medium for the chapter, Goble then moves into a comparison of telephonic appearance in Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* and Greta Garbo's seductive handling of a phone in *Grand Hotel* (1932). The shifts are alluring for those interested in these cacophonous formalisms, which begin the book as "constellated in turn around the telegraph and the telephone" [Goble 2010, 19]. The constellation of media networks affecting the poetics of the early 20th century in peculiar ways are only reverberating, Goble seems to insinuate, but in ever-shifting ways.

In the second half of the book, *Records*, Goble looks at how different media have carried and affected racial, class, gender issues beginning with a look at music, namely jazz, and its effect on literature and culture of the early 20th century as a formal medium. Goble's jumps from F. Scott Fitzgerald, to Louis Armstrong, to Ralph Ellison, to George Gershwin, to James Weldon Johnson... to Thomas Edison and Theodore Adorno, performing for us the jazz exploration of media. Goble's logic comes across as a riffing on harmonies among modernist works, as objects and artifacts to consider playfully interconnected. The quick jumps and linkages remind one of the discursive thinking suggested by conductive logics that Gregory Ulmer offers in *Applied Grammatology* or the relations found in Michael Jarrat's *Drifting on a Read*, particularly because of the connections to early jazz reason. Jazz reason, or jazz logic, perhaps offers a potential means of navigating the noisy cultural apparatuses of modernism, and later the noisier wake of postmodernity. By the freeform illogic of jazz, one may be able to negotiate the blurring rules that new media expect from us as both readers and writers.

The second half of Goble's book then takes up photography and questions of the archive from the beginning of the twentieth century and different fetishes with materiality and physical mementos. The modernist works that Goble explores "manifest a shared commitment to the more sensuous and visceral experiences of other mediums that communicate somehow outside the competence of verbal expression, or, in more contemporary terms, in excess of its narrow bandwidth" [Goble 2010, 16]. What Goble truly gives us is a keen reader's eye, one that pays particular attention to the materiality of text.

The choices for both the media and the personalities that comprise the subject here are very particular, and seem to

represent Goble's own interests and strengths. Still, this kind of book offers an approach to thinking through media scholarship that might be expanded to still others working within the field. The logic is focused by a kind of close reading of both subject matter and form itself, and offers this analysis to artifacts that might be otherwise ignored, such as old phonograph print advertisements. In this way, Goble manages to analyze media within other media, contexts on contexts — nicely layering his thesis as it may be situated within several different places. One version of the thesis may be that “Modernism encouraged a unique structure of feeling toward the technologies of art and literature — in all the specificity of their material aesthetics” [Goble 2010, 25], but also, “If media now are love, we should know why” [Goble 2010, 25]. And after reading Goble's book, we begin to have a sense of the relationship between media and love, communicability and the careful formalism of modernism.

The book is also a testament to the willingness of Berkeley's English department — where Goble may be found — to become more interdisciplinary. After all, connecting Henry James to Friedrich Kittler is no small feat. However, I expect we'll find this kind of methodology increasingly prominent as English scholars learn to think within the context of media themselves. The containers of meaning, alongside content, offer an area of study which a select few — notably Katherine Hayles — have been helping to lead the charge on for some years now.

10

Goble closes by prophesying, “Modernism as we know it is not going to return. But the digital technologies that are the future also look a lot like history, and maybe there is still modernism enough to hunt us back to mediums that we have left behind. What we do with them next is another matter” [Goble 2010, 318]. Goble's book is itself beautiful — the symmetry of thought and organization in *Beautiful Circuits* has an alluring aesthetic that is carefully tied to the book's shimmering criticism. In its subject matter, a heightened sense of glamour saturates the decadence with which Goble envisions communication occurring — there is no plain, everyday talk here — this is modernism and form explored with *jouissance*, not just pleasure.

11

Works Cited

Goble 2010 Goble, Mark. *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.



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