

Close Rereading: A review of Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014)

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Abstract

This review of Jessica Pressman's *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (2014) emphasizes the field-building significance of Pressman's innovative approach to analyzing electronic literature, an approach that reinvigorates the dated methods of New Criticism for use in the digital humanities. Pressman identifies a genre of contemporary electronic literature, "digital modernism," and uncovers continuities linking it with early twentieth-century modernism. In spite of an uneven style that oscillates between belabored scholasticism and brilliant description, *Digital Modernism* rigorously wrangles a wide array of data points — historical, literary, and technological — to create an account of contemporary electronic literature relevant for digital humanists, literary scholars, and New Media scholars. This review contextualizes the work within new currents in modernist scholarship, reflects on the modernism and digital modernist "canon" Pressman assembles, and then provides chapter summaries, with an emphasis on *Digital Modernism's* reinvention of close reading for the twenty-first century.

Jessica Pressman's *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* is an innovative, indispensable, and far-ranging work that contextualizes a compact canon of contemporary digital literature within the broader twentieth-century modernist tradition of artistic engagement with new media. Boggled down by a plodding scholarly proceduralism, the book's conscientious tone nearly muffles a series of lively readings of digital literature. *Digital Modernism's* impressive interdisciplinarity, which combines principles from a variety of "new" fields — New Media Studies, New Modernist Studies, and New Criticism — is brought to bear on works by William Poundstone, Young-Hae Change Heavy Industries (YHCHI), Erik Loyer, Talan Memmott, Judd Morrissey, and Mark Z. Danielewski. Pressman argues that these works not only contain "immanent critiques of their technocultural context" [Pressman 2014, 156], but also enable us "to see more clearly the world of print" [Pressman 2014, 54]. Refashioning Marshall McLuhan, father of New Media Studies, as a midcentury axis or conceptual medium capable of reaching backward to modernism and forward to digital culture, Pressman achieves nothing less than a new vision of the intellectual and artistic history of new media and technology. "What is at stake," she boldly claims, "is nothing short of a better understanding of the significance of literary art, critical reading practices, and humanistic culture in a our networked age" [Pressman 2014, 27]. Due to Pressman's fierce advocacy of close reading, *Digital Modernism's* conceptual eclecticism does not impede the clarity of her vision, but it comes at the cost of a narrowness in the scope of literary works she investigates — in ways she sometimes compensates for and, at other times, does not.

Digital Modernism's opening salvo, Mark Wollaeger and Kevin J. Dettmar's remarkably sassy Series Editors' Foreword, is structured as a FAQ. Anticipating knee-jerk rejections of Pressman's choice of modernism rather than postmodernism as the appropriate period concept for digital literature, the foreword reminds us that only a now-defunct distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" art buoyed up theories separating modernism from postmodernism. "This isn't the 1980s anymore" [Pressman 2014, x], they only half-jokingly growl, in a way that is likely puzzling to those without disciplinary training in modernism. Behind this impatience is New Modernist Studies, an interdisciplinary, cultural studies-inflected approach to modernist literature dating from 1994 with the founding of the journal *Modernism/modernity* and the inaugural Modernist Studies Association (MSA) Conference in 1999. The journal's inaugural issue announces an interdisciplinary editorial approach grounded in modernists' insistence that "changes in

the arts be viewed in conjunction with changes in philosophy, historiography, and social theory, to say nothing of the scientific shifts that they claimed as part of their moment's cultural revolution" [Raine and von Hallberg 1994, 1]. The MSA Conference crystallized this approach by expanding the canon, addressing issues of class, gender, sexuality, race, and empire, and emphasizing technology and new media. Pressman's book seems to fit in because it reshapes modernism in light of digital culture and dovetails with the latest New Modernist criticism, which has expanded the traditional historical and geographical boundaries of what is considered to be "modernist."^[1] Ultimately, the Foreword's feisty pugilism, like Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*, dares you to make their day by claiming that Pressman does not subscribe to the policies of canonical, temporal, and spatial expansionism under two decades of New Modernist Studies.

Digital Modernism's central insight — that a new genre, "digital modernism," remixes older works of literary modernism to flout expectations of contemporary electronic literature — supports these diversifying efforts. But Pressman's modernist canon privileges the usual suspects of Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot, hearkening back to the "bad modernism" of pre-1994 scholarship.^[2] The same can be said about Pressman's digital canon, which features authors who have already attracted scholarly attention (the fêted YHCHI appears in two chapters) and whose conscious literariness makes them legible to traditional scholarship. With this caveat, we can answer their parting question, "Should I not only read this book but also assign it in classes and give it to all my friends and family?" [Pressman 2014, x], in the affirmative answer (though it certainly depends on one's family).

The foreword's cheekiness does not offset the stiffness that calcifies much of the book inside its stringently cultivated framework of signposts, justifications, and qualifications. This is particularly true of the dauntingly learned Introduction, which, with its fifteen-page section "Defining My Terms" (itself divided into five subsections) prefacing sections on "The Stakes of My Argument," "Critical Influences," and "Chapter Summaries," reads like a book prospectus and distances readers from the clear, dynamic, and ingenious close readings yet to come. That the Introduction skips from "Part II" straight to "Part IV" suggests that even an Oxford University Press copyeditor cannot keep this structural rabbit warren straight. Of course, the micromanaging Introduction has a serious purpose: to convince serious readers that electronic literature is serious stuff. Pressman explains,

There is a countermovement underway, this book argues, a serious effort to encourage digital literature to be taken seriously.... [T]he majority of this book focuses on Internet-based literature in order to show how and why one of the most maligned of literary spaces, the web — one accused of fostering reading habits that destroy deep attention and devalue hermeneutic analysis — is actually the place where serious literature stages its rebellion and renaissance. [Pressman 2014, 8–9]

This is indeed an important task, and Pressman is equal to it. Her close readings of digital literature do "reward" (one of her key terms) her attention, and they do "renovate" (another key term) modernism by revealing its imbrication in contemporary digital culture. "Remediate" completes the core lexicon of *Digital Modernism*, which adds to Bolter and Grusin's concept [Bolter and Grusin 2000] a new affordance: close reading. Pressman's comparison of early twentieth-century modernism and contemporary digital modernism reveals that remediation is both a product of and an invitation to close reading, which "rewards" critical attention by "renovating" texts and technologies. In doing so, *Digital Modernism* effectively remediates not just modernist new media, but indeed close reading itself — hence this review's title.

The Introduction responsibly, if ponderously, hits its required disciplinary beats by defining modernism, electronic literature, digital modernism, close reading, and New Criticism. Readers from a variety of fields are swiftly caught up to speed, ensuring the book's accessibility to a broad audience. In defining close reading as a "careful application of focused attention to the formal operations in a literary text" [Pressman 2014, 11], Pressman strikes a strong blow in the battle quantitative formalism now wages against close reading.^[3] A close reading-positive critic, she claims that her texts inherently contain complexity: they "suggest," "invite," "encourage," "push," even "propel" [Pressman 2014, 76] all sorts of readings. Assuredly, *readers* are rewarded by attending to Pressman's close readings, but the degree to which we owe this brilliance to the text or to the critic's ingenuity remains an open question.

Pressman's most controversial definitions cover electronic literature and New Criticism. She defines electronic literature

through aesthetic and material criteria — “born-digital” works that are “computational and processural, dependent upon the operations of the machine for its aesthetic effects” [Pressman 2014, 1] — an austere characterization that makes no reference to the Internet, networks, or multimedia. Pressman restricts her gaze further by focusing on digital modernism, a subgenre that rejects mainstream electronic literature’s investment in hyperlinks, interactivity, and multimedia. As a result, when she deprecates the “small but certain canon” [Pressman 2014, 6] of first-generation electronic literature, we could retort that she simply replaces it with a *different* small but certain canon. Still, *Digital Modernism’s* canon hangs together by other means than the rubber stamping of an expert’s approval: digital modernism “renovates” and “remixes literary modernism” by being “text based, aesthetically difficult, and ambivalent in [its] relationship to mass media and popular culture” [Pressman 2014, 2]. Like the earlier modernism it remediates, digital modernism “challenges traditional expectations about what art is and does. It illuminates and interrogates the cultural infrastructures, technological networks, and critical practices that support and enable these judgments” [Pressman 2014, 10].

This account savors somewhat of Theodor Adorno’s immanent critique and Frankfurt School social criticism,^[4] but Pressman submerges the Adornian themes in favor of the New Criticism she so passionately champions. Paradoxically, it is precisely this championing of “old” methods that makes *Digital Modernism* so refreshing in debates over the fate of close reading in the face of new methods from the digital humanities (DH). She positions Marshall McLuhan as a central figure in the scholarly uptake of the New Critical principles first espoused by I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. As *Digital Modernism* uncovers layers of technological and aesthetic histories contributing to electronic literature, its reuptake of close reading can be seen as anticipating Matthew Kirschenbaum’s recent essay “What Is ‘Digital Humanities,’ and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?” [Kirschenbaum 2014]. This essay calls for DH to turn its analysis on itself, praising Alan Liu’s “The Meaning of the Digital Humanities” [Liu 2013] for its Science Studies-style analysis of a single DH project. Kirschenbaum exhorts us to “detail the material conditions of knowledge production,” including “usage patterns” and “citation networks” [Kirschenbaum 2014, 60] — to do, in other words, what Pressman does for New Criticism.

Recuperating the New Critical heritage in foundational texts of New Media Studies — chiefly *The Mechanical Bride* [McLuhan 1951], *The Gutenberg Galaxy* [McLuhan 1962], and *Understanding Media* [McLuhan 1964] — takes up Chapter One. Pressman moves far beyond hoary chestnuts about the global village and the medium being the message, revealing that his method “was always approaching the broader category of the literary *within* complex media ecologies” [Pressman 2014, 29]. Advocating a “slow, focused attention and rigorous consideration” of texts [Pressman 2014, 13], Pressman echoes recent reevaluations of New Criticism that cut through the stale, straw-men stereotypes that often compromise critiques of close reading.^[5] Though she supports the efforts of Critical Code Studies to analyze code regardless of its output, it “should not replace rigorous analysis of the aesthetic ambitions and results of technopoetic pursuits” [Pressman 2014, 20]. Close reading, as an avant-garde critical response that respects aesthetic complexity, provides this rigor — and pleasure:

For anyone who has read a good close reading, one that takes you through a journey in a text that you’ve read before and teaches you to see it anew, you know how transformative the experience can be. A good close reading can change your mind. It can make you reread and reconsider. Close reading can be not only about art but can become art, and for the New Critics, this was part of the point. [Pressman 2014, 14]

By claiming that close readings are themselves cultural artifacts, Pressman elegantly sidesteps arguments that close reading demands a single “correct” interpretation. Although some of the stronger claims about McLuhan’s digital hipness force the issue through diction — he apparently knows “how different data sources and circuits of flow constitute a literary experience” [Pressman 2014, 35] — her genealogy joining modernism and digital modernism through McLuhan is otherwise solid.

Chapter Two, “Reading Machines: MACHINE POETRY AND EXCAVATORY READING in William Poundstone’s electronic literature and Bob Brown’s Readies,” surveys early reading technologies, both real (the tachistoscope, subliminal advertising) and imagined (the hypothetical “Readies” machine dreamed up by American modernist Bob

Brown). This survey demonstrates “that technologies of reading, not just writing, are an integral part of American literary history” [Pressman 2014, 57] and that “our reading practices [are] always shaped by historical contexts and media formats” [Pressman 2014, 60]. Although the stories of these technologies have been told elsewhere — the chapter relies heavily on *Swift Viewing* [Acland 2013] and *Suspensions of Perception* [Crary 1999] — what Pressman adds to these media-archaeological accounts is, as one should expect, excellent close readings, particularly of William Poundstone’s *Project for the Tachistoscope {Bottomless Pit}*. For me, this reading of *Project* is incomplete: in calling the text a “parable about reading in the midst of medial shift,” Pressman empties Poundstone’s Flash narrative of its critical charge. Is the bottomless pit, whose sudden and troubling appearance constitutes *Project*’s plot, really only “a symbolic entity: a thing to read” [Pressman 2014, 62], or is it also something very literal — perhaps a timely representation of fracking, which has caused all-too-real collapsing sinkhole pits to appear all across the United States, from New Mexico to Pennsylvania?

This lack of attention to current events is, again, likely a space issue but worth mentioning because critiques of New Criticism single out its ahistoricism. Chapter Three, “Speed Reading: Super-position and Simultaneity in YHCHI’s *Dakota* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*,” shares this blindness. Pressman develops another “excavatory” reading in her analysis of *Dakota*, but it, too, could be literally about excavation, as its South Dakota-to-South Korea setting documents the transformation of a state during a twenty-first century gold rush for the minerals on which *Dakota*’s Flash iterations depend. Space constraints thus leave chinks in *Digital Modernism*’s erudite armor. The last half of Chapter Two, for example, relies on Pressman’s access to a rare text: the 1931 collection of poems Bob Brown commissioned from major modernists, including Gertrude Stein, Filippo Marinetti, and William Carlos Williams, for Brown’s Readies machine. Pressman argues that “these poems are textual acts of programming; they are code” [Pressman 2014, 72]. This parallel is more than a metaphor, and it is one of the most powerful, successful theses in *Digital Reading*. Unfortunately, its corresponding close reading is allotted a single paragraph.

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To be fair, though, when the reader pushes past the forest of scholarly apparatuses, the masterful close readings lying in wait are well worth the price of admission. The sixteen-page close reading of *Dakota* is sheer joy: beautifully written, snappily paced, and filled-to-bursting with ideas. As it layers evidence showing that *Dakota* is a close reading of Pound’s *Cantos*, it argues that *Dakota* elicits both close reading and speed reading. *Dakota*’s “retroaesthetic” [Pressman 2014, 90] therefore challenges assumptions about digital reading practices, revealing that “identity is distributed across and informed by network technologies” [Pressman 2014, 92]. But no more about *Dakota*. Readers of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* are simply exhorted to read this unforgettable section of *Digital Modernism*.

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Chapter Four, “Reading the Database: Narrative, Database, and Stream of Consciousness,” reviews contemporary electronic adaptations of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) to show that “our definitions of ‘novel’...change and adjust under the influence of digital databases” [Pressman 2014, 123]. Without falling into technological determinism, Pressman analyzes Twitter, Flash, and print adaptations to show that they share a “database aesthetic” intended to provide access to human cognition. *Digital Modernism* shows that these iterations are invested in representing cognition by unpacking traces of *Ulysses* in them: a Twitter performance by Ian Bogost and Ian McCarthy, Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley’s *The Jew’s Daughter*, and Talan Memmott’s *My Molly (Departed)*. Pressman’s engaging descriptions reveal that the most famous modernist invention — the “stream of consciousness” developed from William James’s psychology — models cognition as a database-based operation of search and retrieval. This chapter concludes that consciousness is “always mediated and distributed across technologies” [Pressman 2014, 103]. Though the argumentation is generally persuasive, I regret Pressman’s Joyce-centrism. *Digital Modernisms* refers to an outdated canon of modernism that privileges the “men of 1914” (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis). Can Pressman find no electronic renovations of, say, Virginia Woolf, May Sinclair, or Dorothy Richardson to balance the book’s elaborations of Joyce, Pound, and Eliot? And if not, what does that say about digital modernism?

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Though digital modernism does not conform to the expanded modernist canon, it does share modernism’s difficulty. Digital modernism “rejects popular expectations of what it means to play new media objects” [Pressman 2014, 122] and reveals that “what we think to be real and analog about humanness is actually the result of digital production” [Pressman 2014, 124]. It also makes interpretation a “nightmarish task” [Pressman 2014, 108]. About *The Jew’s Daughter*, Pressman shares “a personal confession”:

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[T]he difficulty of deciphering this work compelled me to undertake dramatic non-media-specific efforts. In order to follow the narrative, I resorted to printing out all of the screens and, on each page, highlighting in one color what text had changed and in a different color what text would change. I also kept a detailed list of notes identifying the main characters. But, even with this skeleton key, I hesitate to attribute proper names to the ‘anonymous limbs and parts’ I collected, assembled, and discuss in this chapter. Morrissey’s text is incredibly difficult, and it depends on a disciplined reading practice. [Pressman 2014, 109]

This “confession” is hardly shameful. In this passage Pressman describes not just close reading, but indeed close rereading, thus “making new” traditional techniques of scholarship (note-taking, list-making). Some brave critic may develop different tools for wrangling these resistant electronic texts, perhaps tools *accepting* the fast-paced, hard-to-read, sensory-overloading style, appreciating difficulty as an aesthetic experience rather than *overcoming* it. Until then, Pressman’s strategy of combining close reading and media archaeology is rigorous and effective.

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The fifth chapter, “Reading Code: The Hallucination of Universal Language from Modernism to Cyberspace,” is by far the longest, perhaps because it performs the kind of political critique that I found lacking in the second and third chapters. Pressman takes over a hundred pages to explore the insights that emerge “when computing and literature are approached as sharing a historical and ideological core” [Pressman 2014, 137]. Interpreting Eric Loyer’s digital novel *Chroma* within the broader Western tradition seeking universal language, Pressman demythologizes the “belief that universal language is possible with the right textual code. This belief undergirds ideologies that code is universal and that cyberspace (or even digital culture more broadly) is natural or inevitable” [Pressman 2014, 129]. After *Chroma*, Pressman analyzes YHCHI’s *Nippon* as “as a critique of the homogenizing influence of the English-based and Western-focused web” [Pressman 2014, 154] and of “poets and philosophers [who] have fantasized about Chinese as universal code” [Pressman 2014, 143]. *Nippon*’s difficulty dramatizes how computers work by translation and approximation, thereby “disabl[ing] contemporary hallucinations about universal language” [Pressman 2014, 151]. In persuading us to resist “imaginative narratives, theories, and mythologies about the natural and universal power of digital code” [Pressman 2014, 137], Pressman demonstrates why cultural and political critique is still relevant.

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Half the length of Chapter Five, the brisk concluding chapter, “CODA — Rereading: Digital Modernism in Print, Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions*,” incorporates this print novel to show “all literature...is impacted by digitality” [Pressman 2014, 158]. In this case, even non-electronic literature “demands that the reader reread in order to close read” [Pressman 2014, 161]. This 2006 epic of a pair of doomed but free-spirited road-trippers, from which Danielewski consciously jettisoned references to media, might seem an unlikely specimen. But if “the strategy of digital modernism” involves “making it new” by “a recursive act of engaging with a literary past through media” [Pressman 2014, 158], then *Only Revolutions* belongs. As a conclusion, the Coda cleverly uses *Only Revolutions* to review the broader argument that digital modernism illuminates both modernism and the history of New Media. Here Pressman finally relaxes — the Coda fancifully describes *Only Revolutions*’s included bookmarks as “meeting in the middle” and “kissing” [Pressman 2014, 173] and disarmingly identifies which of Danielewski’s crowd-sourced data points was her personal submission [Pressman 2014, 170] — and makes rewarding read out of what could have been a banal reread. This tonal anomaly, when considered as a performative extension of her argument, has a purpose: *Digital Modernism* remediates scholarship itself as it reveals close reading to be immanent to digital culture, so Pressman is rereading herself. Only one difficulty remains. If the dream of universal language is, as Pressman argues, a dangerous hallucination, and if close reading can be applied to any text, is close reading the scholar’s final hallucination?

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Notes

[1] I refer here to the recent trend of approaching modernism through a transnational approach. For more about this temporal and geographic expansion, see “The New Modernist Studies” [Mao and Walkowitz 2008].

[2] To learn more about “bad modernism,” see the edited collection of the same name, *Bad Modernism* [Mao and Walkowitz 2006].

[3] For a discussion of the debate over the future of close reading in literary studies, see “In Praise of Overstating the Case: A Review of Franco Moretti’s *Close Reading*” [Ross 2014].

[4] The Frankfurt School refers, of course, to the group of Marxist thinkers originally based out of the Frankfurt School for Social Research. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas are generally considered among its practitioners. Immanent critique refers to Adorno's revision of Hegelian dialectics. For more on "immanent critique," see his *Negative Dialectics* [Adorno 1966]; for a general introduction to Frankfurt School theory and method, see *The Dialectical Imagination* [Jay 1996].

[5] For other scholarly accounts that advocate New Criticism, see *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism* [Davis 2008] and Miranda Hickman and John McIntyre's *Rereading the New Criticism* [Hickman and McIntyre 2012].

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