

David Jhave Johnston, *Aesthetic Animism*

Review by Davin Heckman

David Jhave Johnston. *Aesthetic Animism: Digital Poetry's Ontological Implications*. MIT Press, 2016.

On at least one occasion, Scott Rettberg has claimed that *electronic literature* is the “research and development” wing of the Digital Humanities. In a field that prides itself on expanding the tools and methods of research, electronic literature stands apart as a place where the object itself of research is tested, expanded, and challenged. And while the field of electronic literature has more clearly situated in *avant-garde* practice, it is undeniable that digital writers inevitably do engage in prototyping, experimentation, and speculative design as they tinker with new possibilities, generating works that consistently challenge accepted norms of media production. A perennial “problem” for the field of electronic literature is the specter of obsolescence and the inadequacy of existing frameworks for standard cultural practices like archiving, publication, philology, and, even, criticism.

David Jhave Johnston's *Aesthetic Animism* sits at the intersection of the venerable, deliberate craft of poetry and the “unprofessional” approach of the tinkerer. At times, it reads like an encyclopedia of forms, platforms, and philosophies, rampaging through a series of provocative insights tied to dense review-like passages on works, artists, and practices that have contributed to the development of the artist's own oeuvre. At other times, it reads like a series of prompts that beg further exploration, a speculative explosion of articles that could be. If one is looking for a cohesive, definitive text, this is not it. If one thinks *lines of flight*, then *Aesthetic Animism* will take you somewhere.

But it would be a mistake to see this as mere eclecticism or even a stylistic preference, as it is the result of a key challenge of criticism in the post-digital world: there is no unitary approach to textual analysis when the object itself is spread across several modes of practice. In response to this reality, Johnston offers a useful term, “compositing” as critical to both the creative practice and its subsequent analysis. Or, as Johnston puts it, “theory from previously independent disciplines (cinema, gaming, literature, and music) must also be composited over each other. Thus compositing occurs at practical and theoretical levels” (155). Given his years of work as a “digital poet,” with works that veer from print to cinema, from finite to generative, from linear to indeterminate, its form makes its point—life is messy—not your life or my life—but vitality itself. And the goal of this work is to highlight the fecundity of aesthetic forms in the age of convergence. It's the intermingling of what were once discrete domains of aesthetic production that itself initiates original aesthetic moments—semiotics gone autonomous.

Of course, readers may (as I do) have certain epistemological disagreements with the text. For instance, I have fundamental questions about the obvious impact of *object-oriented ontology* on Johnston's thought, and wrestle with the autonomy he ascribes to objects. To me, the rejection of anthropocentrism is an interesting thought experiment, the conjuring of the posthuman is fascinating (if frightening) to consider against the backdrop of our global state of emergency, the dream of the machine that thinks better than we do tracks to the managerial fantasies of scientific management. I agree with Johnston, that language itself expresses meaning in excess of the efforts of the writer or reader, and that in the age of expanded audiovisual expression and increased automation, this excessiveness is necessarily accelerated. But, if we consider Bernard Stiegler's discussion of primary, secondary, and tertiary retention, we can see that the externalization of memory in the technical system has been a characteristic of “the human” as long as we have been so, and the uncanny emergence of meaning from our symbolic apparatus is itself an externalization of thought. Such an observation is not dissimilar to the author's claim, “Poetry, at its roots, involves a radical openness to the possibility that there is life operating within language and things” (10), though the point of friction is in the *meaning* of “life.” To me, these ambitious claims about language are productive heuristics, tools for thinking through the world otherwise, but in the end, it is the fragility of being and the cognitive propensity for moving out of oneself that defines the condition of consciousness—Levinas discusses this in *Otherwise than Being*.

But the writer, to his credit, seems aware of the fragility of this world, as the arguments are consistently couched in speculative terms, the sprawling trajectories of text resist any kind of authoritarian impulse, and the text continually circles back to reconsider the “ethical” components of this festive of cognition. The litany of works referenced and the careful readings contained lend credence to the writer's call for radical openness to the possibilities of language.

Aesthetic Animism is fairly comprehensive, though by no means definitive. The claims it advances are not ironclad decrees, but rather seeds scattered in the wind. These are not faults, but products of what might be considered a generous recklessness, a quality that breaks through the calculated stupidity of the analytic impulse. In short, Johnston's text is a refreshing contribution to the study of digital culture.

References

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