

Manuel Portela. *Scripting Reading Motions: The Codex and the Computer as Self-Reflexive Machines*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 2013, ISBN: 9780262019460.

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Scripting Reading Motions provides a comprehensive and engaging examination of the recent evolution of reading practices spanning the codex through to new media formats. Portela offers insight into the complex operations required by readers to engage with various modes of, as he puts it, “bibliographic and computational inscription” (364). By interrogating a number of literary practices—spanning art books, book modification, the digitization of codex works, and hypertextual literature—Portela provides an overview of the ways in which readers experience meaning as a manifested, or embodied, element of the reading process in a given medium. *Scripting Reading Motions* proves a valuable contribution to a body of literature largely dominated by analyses of monomedial textual engagements.

Scripting Reading Motion’s premise is that “reading [is a neurophysical activity that] implies a complex bodily engagement with the materiality of signs and inscriptional spaces” (1). Portela asserts that this engage-

ment results in the ontological subject's release from the constraints of individuality. He contends that the subject is instead opened up "to the articulation of codes" (1). To demonstrate this proliferation of meanings contained in codes, Portela provides contrasting examples of how readers can explore their self-reflexivity in relation to a number of artistic and literary innovations, and then explores how that reflexivity interpolates the reader into the text.

The seven chapters of this book guide the reader through a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Portela's research is positioned at the intersection of studies in literature, digital media and book histories (78), and his case studies span codex texts such as Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), Tom Phillip's *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1970) through to hypertextual poetry, including works by Augusto de Campos ("Código" [1973], "Tudo está dito" [1974], "SOS" [1994], *Despoesia* [1994], *Não poemas* [2003]), Rui Torres (*Amor de Clarice* [2005], *Mar de Sophia* [2005], *Húmus poema contínuo* [2008]) Jason Nelson (*Hymns of the Drowning Swimmer* [2004]), and Jim Andrews (*Enigma* [1998]). The focus on poetics throughout these differing literary practices also draws readers' attention to the functional aspects of reading, highlighting the literary objects as "self reflexively constructed by interactions between their material feature and interpretative processing of those features" (362). This approach to understanding how reading works benefits examinations of narrational practices outside of literary forms, such as performance, and also has particular import for transmedial reading practices. More than this, such an understanding of reading as textually interpolative has transdisciplinary applications that could reinvigorate reading practices of non-narrative texts.

Perhaps most interestingly, Portela incorporates Johanna Drucker's critical and artistic works—*From A to Z* (1977), *Through Light and the Alphabet* (1986), *The Word Made Flesh* (1989), *The History of the/My Wor(l)d* (1990), "Experimental Narrative and Artists' Books" (1999), and "Graphical Readings and the Visual Aesthetics of Textuality" (2006), among others—to argue for e-space that draws on "the dynamics of book structure" (92) in order to more fully utilise the potential reading spaces offered by online and digital environments. Portela considers the manner in which Drucker's codex works enable readers to partake in reading as a temporal and spatial experience as they "shift back and forth between a self-enclosed constellated page and a continuing typographic

narrative” (87) and contrasts this with Drucker’s digital and hypertextual works in order to demonstrate how facsimile copies of codex books emulate the original text’s “bookness,” but still lack the sensory experience of reading a codex book, instead “reducing visual-tactile and visual-kinetic perceptions to merely visual perceptions” (106). This aporia between the codex and digital reading experiences is, for Portela, a “decisive critical contribution” (111) to understanding how readers make, and read, books.

While each chapter provides insight into different aspects of the reading process using different literary engagements, individual chapters offer particularly clear insights into the complexities of this ever-developing field. The third chapter, “Digital Transcreations: Transcoding a Poetics of Reading,” offers salient reflections on the emergence of digital literature, in particular the performative elements of transcription between codex and digital texts. Portela draws on a number of digital artists, and digital and concrete poets in order to demonstrate that “intermediality, visuality, permutation, and algorithms, and . . . technocultural self-reflexivity in general are common features across those literary practices” (113). By illuminating these features Portela is able to mount a convincing analysis of the literary topography that is manifested across print and electronic works. His analysis of António Aragão’s 1964 collection “Poemas Encontrados” (poetry that uses newspaper headlines as a means of resignifying meaning) positions the text in the intersection between significations, acknowledging the tension that resonates between the words and phrases as they were used in the newspapers, and how that meaning has been shifted with their incorporation into a poetical practice. Portela asks readers to consider the layers of resignification that have to occur in order to engage with the digitised versions of this work. Portela offers two strategies for critically understanding the translation of hardcopy to digital works, the first being “the performance of inscriptions through kinetic translations” (166) and the second is “algorithmic permutations” (166).

These kinetic translations and algorithmic permutations are explored in the following chapter that focuses on electronic literature and other hypertexts. Portela considers the critical work of Philippe Bootz—a founding member of the European group of electronic literature, L.A.I.R.E (Lecture, Art, Innovation, Recherche, Écriture)—in order to frame his interrogation of interactive scripts. Portela asserts, correctly in my estimation, that “[electronic] media requires the consideration of both programmability and the material instantiation of code in a given form” (167). He then

draws on Bootz to demonstrate a “poetics of programming” (168) where the program is not “considered as an ensemble of lines of text or a well-formed code, not the event produced by the execution as audiovisual reality, but the relation between this event to, on the one hand, the algorithmic reality of the code, and, on the other, the pragmatics of reading” (167–68). This perspective offers a number of exciting possibilities that permeate the layers of digital works, and would be especially interesting in the context of games design and critical engagement with the game-based texts, as well as with other manifestations of digital literacy.

Portela’s selection of case studies is exciting, but he comes into his strength with a close reading of Mark Z. Danielewski’s poetic novel *Only Revolutions* (2006). He asserts that the bibliographic codes—such as page layout, page numbering, and formatting—“socialize the text,” insofar as the text relies on “a mode of production and a set of writing protocols [that are] established by its specific bibliographic condition” (239). Portela conducts a rigorous analysis of the text’s typographic and bibliographical construction thereby elucidating the manner in which Danielewski “blends numerical and algorithmic logic” (234) in order to extrapolate on the plurality of potential meanings that a text can offer its readers. He positions the text within both literary and mathematical traditions, and frames the book within the Joycean and Oulipian traditions of poetry and stream-of-consciousness writing. He draws on N. Katherine Hayles’ assertion that “literary works that strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate open a window on the larger connections that unite literature as a verbal art with its material forms.”¹

While Portela’s work is brimming with weighty ideas and observations about how readers’ (and writers’) bodies relate to their texts, this information is often obscured by his investment in academic language. The book itself functions as a commentary on the difficulties of making critical theory and academic research accessible to non-academic readers. This results in much of the important content being lost in the text’s murky, and often cloying, depths. It requires an active reader; one who must not only decode the semantics on the page, but must then translate this understanding into recognition of Portela’s revelations regarding writing, reading, performance, and text. This limits the text’s accessibility, and ensures that readers must revisit the book multiple times in order to fully comprehend how it resolves its argument and itself. The inclusion of images drawn from digital engagements with case studies, including coding,

is useful in terms of helping readers visualise Portela's descriptions of each work, however it strikes me that this is perhaps an instance where the codex book would function more successfully as a hypertext. I recognise, however, that there are a number of legal impediments to this possibility.

This book is, without a doubt, an important contribution to the discussion about readers, changing texts, and embodiment, and it is comprehensive and thoroughly researched. Portela successfully argues that "the analysis of reflective uses of codes in codex and digital forms illuminates the performativity of reading acts in the constitution of the signifying fields within each medium and also across media" (73). Overall, *Reading Scripting Motions* provides a discerning exploration of embodied and performative potentialities of reading, and offers some brilliant insights into the relationship between creators, readers and texts.

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NOTES

¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 25.