

Torsa Ghosal

On the Significance of Digital Epitexts

Virginia Pignagnoli Examines how Digital Epitexts Shape Post-Postmodernist Narrative Poetics

Virginia Pignagnoli: *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2023 (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series) 158 pp. USD 79.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1542-5

The ‘Dominant’ in Post-Postmodernist Fiction

Digital media impacts all aspects of today’s literary culture, ranging from how texts are acquired and structured to how they are publicized and where potential readers find them. Authors take to social media to announce their writing goals, agents, post screenshots of their book deal reports published in sites like Publishers Marketplace, reveal book covers, and so on. Contemporary readers interact with authors’ social media profiles, post photos and reviews of books using relevant hashtags like bookstagram and booktok, log their reading experiences on book recommendation sites, and communicate with other readers on digital forums. Virginia Pignagnoli’s *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* studies this evolving literary culture by charting the relations of digital author-audience interactions with the poetics of contemporary literary narratives. Pignagnoli is specifically interested in how digital epitexts – that is, paratextual material not found within the text but circulating on websites, book recommendation and cataloging sites, and social media – liaison these interactions. The power of digital author-audience encounters to reshape literature has been the subject of other scholarly works at the intersection of literary and media studies, such as Simone Murray’s *The Digital Literary Sphere. Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (2018). However, Pignagnoli’s focus on narrative poetics combined with her adoption of a rhetorical approach to narratives allows her to uniquely tease out the connections between author-audience communication and the dominant sensibilities observed in post-postmodernist fiction, including the qualities of earnestness, intimacy, and a turn toward materiality.

While paratexts are not new, their significance has intensified and renewed in the digital era according to Pignagnoli. Taking a cue from Brian McHale, who used Roman Jakobson’s notion of the ‘dominant’ to point out postmodernist fiction’s overriding interest in ontological questions, Pignagnoli argues that questions around the possibility of earnest communication emerge as the dominant

in post-postmodernist fictions. These questions include, “What is it to communicate? What is it to communicate earnestly through a text? Does earnestness help to convey the ethical and political issues presented in a text?” (p. 5) The popularity of genres that blur fiction and nonfiction like memoir, personal essays, and autofiction further underlines the desire for sincere author-audience exchanges on critical issues. While postmodernist fictions used self-reflexivity to destabilize storyworlds, the same strategy serves a different purpose in post-postmodernist fictions. Even the foregrounding of multiple semiotic devices in contemporary literature strengthens rather than disrupts mimesis. While Lee Konstantinou has argued that autofictions (such as Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* [2012]) explore the problems of intersubjectivity and Arnaud Schmitt and Stefan Kjerkegaard have noted that the force of author-audience intimacy forged in autofictions (like Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* [2009– 2011]) make it impossible for readers to remain neutral, Pignagnoli avoids taking a deterministic stance on the success or failure of intersubjective relations in post-postmodernist fictions. Instead, she stresses the longing for intersubjectivity and intimacy, also proved in the rise of digital epitexts, as a distinctive feature of the current literary historical moment.

Changing Classification of Paratexts

In Chapter One, Pignagnoli challenges Gérard Genette’s subordination of epitexts to peritexts – paratexts materially appended to a text, such as a critic’s note prefacing a narrative in a book – in the theory of paratextuality. Werner Wolf, Paul Dawson, Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ, among others, have previously addressed some of the limitations in Genette’s model. But Pignagnoli says that when viewed through the framework of author-audience interactions happening across digital media and with a focus on new online practices, the primary distinction among paratexts would have to do with their rhetorical purposes rather than *where* readers encounter them (within a text or outside it). Other forms of classification prove inadequate. So, communicative paratexts – that is, author-generated paratextual materials related to a specific literary narrative – need to be distinguished from epistemic paratexts – the broader corpus of knowledge that bears upon the audience’s reading experience. Whereas Genette included non-authorial supplementary materials provided within a book among paratexts, Pignagnoli maintains that these cannot be considered rhetorical resources. This is because, while non-authorial materials do impact narrative communication, they are not explicitly employed to that end and do not serve the same function as authorial materials that may be found outside a text (p. 22–23). Alongside emphasizing the centrality of epitexts, contrasting their communicative and epistemic varieties, Pignagnoli also calls attention to how communicative paratexts “stretch the narrative time by multiplying the occasions of narration before and after the actual occasion of reading” (p. 26).

The rhetorical model of paratextuality is applied to Michael Chabon's 2016 novel *Moonglow* in Chapter Two. Chabon's novel blurs fact and fiction, and Pignagnoli connects the narrative strategies used to do so with Chabon's authorial voice developed over thirty or so Instagram posts related to the composition of *Moonglow*. Beside the digital communicative epitexts, *Moonglow* also comes with an authorial peritext – an “Author’s Note” – that emphasizes the novel’s non-fictional referentiality and plays with generic expectations around its framing as a novel and a work of fiction on the book cover. *Moonglow* features multiple narratorial positions, ranging from heterodiegetic and omniscient to a homodiegetic one, and each of these positions signals a different degree of fictionality and alters the narrative’s relation with real world referents. But even when the narrative explicitly engages in fictive construction of the narrator’s family history, the narrative’s authenticity and sincerity are not undermined. Indeed, the ambiguities between what is factual and what is fictional are exploited to earnestly probe ethical issues concerning accuracy in storytelling: “How can we know who we are if it is not possible to be sure about our past, as memories and the memories we pass on generation after generation are not fixed entities and inevitably contain so many inaccuracies?” (p. 42). Chabon’s Instagram posts that record and archive processes and materials specific to *Moonglow* conjure a behind-the-scenes intimacy that primes his readers, potentially impacting their worldbuilding while reading, and at the same time confirms the ‘real world’ referentiality of the various elements appearing in the novel. In other words, the digital epitexts situate the narrative’s playful and sometimes ironic distortions of boundaries between fact and fiction within the author’s earnest contemplations about collective trauma, identity, and family history.

Chapter Three traces how Jennifer Egan’s communicative peritexts and digital epitexts highlight the thematic preoccupations of *A Visit from the Good Squad* (2010). Analyzing the self-reflexive uses and remediation of various media devices in the printed narrative, Egan’s “unconventional peritexts” (p. 59) such as the two title pages included in the book and the black-and-white prints of PowerPoint slides, Pignagnoli highlights *Good Squad*’s refusal to adopt a decisive ethical position on emerging digital technologies. While certain sections of the narrative seem to critique technological changes, the peritextual choices that creatively incorporate the affordances of digital and analog media reflect a more ambivalent stance. Egan also provides a full-color version of the slides with embedded music on her website. A reader who comes across these slides before reading the narrative starts “reconstructing the storyworld from a different starting point” (p. 63), perhaps with a heightened focus on the narrative’s media-oriented concerns. In addition, like Chabon, Egan too offers glimpses into her writing process through other digital epitexts: these extend the narrative of *Good Squad* by hinting at the usefulness of digital technologies to advance author-audience communication, further interweaving the printed narrative with digital materials.

Pignagnoli turns to author-generated epistemic digital epitexts in Chapter Four, offering a close reading of the intersubjective dynamics in Catherine Lacey’s 2017 novel *The Answers*. Lacey’s novel takes an interest in intersubjective

communication, which Pignagnoli contextualizes within a more widespread return to character and existential matters in post-postmodernist fictions as opposed to the treatment of characters as primarily artificial constructs in post-modernist writings. The character narrator of *The Answers* directly addresses the narratee using the deictic second-person pronoun while articulating her existential dilemmas: “There are so many ways to live and die, so many ways to tell the same story over and over [...] *I am alive like you, was born without my consent like you, will someday die and be dead in the same way you’ll be dead*” (quoted in Pignagnoli, p. 76). The narrator’s longing for interhuman intimacy is echoed and amplified by the epistemic epitexts generated by the author. In her social media posts, Lacey uses the same rhetorical devices as her narrator. Employing direct questions and addresses even in posts that are not explicitly about her novel, Lacey develops a sincere self-portrait and a sense of intimacy with her audience. Here Pignagnoli admits that when the author is the producer of epitexts, it becomes harder to distinguish between the epistemic and communicative varieties. She signals a hierarchy between the two nonetheless: in contrast to communicative epitexts, the illocutionary force of epistemic materials is auxiliary rather than central to the narrative communication. Not encountering epistemic epitexts “does not take anything away from the narrative communication” (p. 81) and it is the communicative digital epitexts that “are the actual novelty of narrative fiction in the twenty-first century” (p. 82).

While this claim seems reasonable on the surface, a problem arises when we take into account the possibly random and sporadic reach of epitexts in general. Whether a reader chooses to follow Chabon or Lacey on Instagram, before or after reading their work, and whether a reader gets exposed to their posts directly or tangentially connected to the narratives, determine the extent of their influence on the reading experience. Communicative epitexts are thus, in a sense, as supplemental as epistemic ones, and Pignagnoli never quite tries to suggest that communicative epitexts are indispensable to meaning making until she tries to distinguish them from the author-generated epistemic ones. This thus raises questions about the pragmatics of distinguishing the different kinds of author-generated epitexts.

In Chapter Five, Pignagnoli examines Meg Wolitzer’s novel *The Female Persuasion* (2018) and readers’ attitude to the protagonist’s moral complications expressed through reviews, tweets, and other modes of digital commentary. The narrator of *The Female Persuasion* seems to suspend judgement on actions that come across as ‘problematic’ in the current social milieu, which then raises questions about the narrative’s ethical axes, which can have an estranging effect on readers. The narrator focalizes through the main character, Greer, and as Pignagnoli notes, Greer’s “mimetic dimension is emphasized, yet she is the protagonist of a feminist coming of age, whose feminism the narrative often calls into question” (p. 95). While this could seem to be at odds with the general inclination toward sincerity in post-postmodernist fictions, Pignagnoli observes that the narrative suggests a sincere authorial engagement with urgent cultural and political concerns, particularly around gender (p. 99). To analyze readers’

reception of the novel, Pignagnoli considered Goodreads reviews as well as Instagram and Twitter posts hashtagged after the novel. Some common themes emerge from these epitexts: Greer's unlikability, readers' disappointment or approval of the ways in which the narrative treats feminist topics, its lack of intersectionality, and so on. Whether the reader-generated epitext is positive or negative, encountering such an epitext influences a new reader's expectations of the narrative; in addition, it potentially affects or modifies the judgement of a reader who reaches these epitexts after reading the narrative. Given the rise of such epitexts, contemporary readers necessarily have different starting points for co-constructing literary narratives.

In the coda, Pignagnoli analyzes Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), a dystopian novel concerned with digital technologies. There is a conspicuous absence of author-generated digital epitexts around the novel. The absence of digital epitexts communicates something, Pignagnoli argues: a suspicion of digital technology and its corporatization. Eggers' novel critiques surveillance systems and the loss of privacy in the age of social media. His narrative deploys a tone of irony. However, by avoiding digital means of communicating with an audience, Eggers confirms the sincerity of his narrative project. His absence from social media strengthens his image of being a "socially engaged, committed writer" (p. 118). In analyzing Eggers' social media abstinence, Pignagnoli makes a crucial point about how such a stance signals not only a certain aesthetic and political approach but also the stage of an author's career. Eggers is absent from social media because he can afford to, unlike many other newer authors in search of an audience.

Conclusion

While shifts in the literary culture brought about by digital media have been hitherto examined through the lenses of media and multimodality studies as well as narrative theory, Pignagnoli's monograph fulfills a vital need of linking trends in the digital literary sphere with formal and thematic obsessions of today's literary fictions. A strength of this book is that Pignagnoli close reads particular narratives with reference to the material realities and practical concerns of the digital culture surrounding them instead of adopting a sweeping, philosophical view of literature in the age of digital media. However, the scope of a book like this also greatly depends on the choice of case studies. Pignagnoli has chosen to study narratives where there is a more or less resonant rather than dissonant relation between text and epitext. But in the current cultural climate that is only one side of the picture: online chatter that supposedly 'cancels' authors are examples of reader-generated epistemic epitexts actively working against the formal and thematic claims made in the same author's narratives. Take for instance the case of Junot Díaz, whose fiction and social media presence developed the image of a socially conscious author with progressive politics. In the wake of

#metoo, however, Díaz was the subject of epistemic epitexts that called into question his politics and that of his fiction. How might this tension between text and epitext connect to issues of narrative poetics? Are dissonant epistemic epitexts ignored by readers? Or, is Díaz's narrator Yuniors read differently in the aftermath of the social controversy? Similarly, the issue of sincerity as a dominant mode emerges as a more complicated, thrust-upon political responsibility when we take into account the pressure on authors from marginalized communities to be representatives of those communities (an expectation that Chabon or Egan need not contend with) and to tell stories in their #ownvoices. Established BIPOC authors, like Zadie Smith and Viet Thanh Nguyen, therefore, often talk about and write fictions that register their struggles against the expectation of continually performing their identities. This is all to say that questions of power, race, gender, class, and other markers of social difference substantially affect the manner and degree to which digital epitexts end up bearing upon narrative poetics. Pignagnoli's book is a valuable starting point for a future study that would take the social context more fully into consideration.

Torsa Ghosal
 Associate Professor of English
 California State University, Sacramento
 E-mail: torsa.ghosal@csus.edu
 URL: torsaghosal.com

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