

The Subject Supposed to Read: The Case against the E-reader

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THIS ARTICLE HAS GROWN OUT OF A DEBATE GENERATED BY THE PUBLICATION OF MY essay titled 'The Obscure Object of E-reading Desire' as a blog entry on the literary journal *Overland's* website on 31 October 2011 (Alizadeh). The essay proposed that, far from enhancing readerships and reading practices, the e-reader and other e-reading devices manufactured by a range of IT companies may in fact result in a decline in reading and could, in the words of my essay, 'turn us into worse readers'. Following the publication of the essay, and in addition to receiving a number of replies in the blog's comment thread, the theses of my essay were countered by Dr Jennifer Mitchell in her piece, 'Writing and Reading in the Age of the Thrilling Unknown', in which she depicted my proposal as one characterised by a 'fear' of technological progress, apparently similar to a nineteenth-century Romantic's fear of the railways (Mitchell).

In what follows, I argue that portraying the opponents of prevalent ideological notions about digital culture as simply 'fearful' is inadequate and such an approach ignores the very real concerns regarding the dynamics and consequences of the digital milieu raised by a number of critics, theorists and working writers. I present a rebuttal to Mitchell's antithesis in order to emphasise the need for discussion of the impact of e-readers to include a critical perspective on recent technological developments and their concrete or potential impacts on reading, writing and publishing that recognises the

complex, transnational and local, chains of production, distribution and use of e-readers, and their relationship with aesthetics and ideology.

‘The obscure object of e-reading desire’

I begin this article by summarising the key points made in my original *Overland* essay, both to inform readers unfamiliar with that essay and to establish the parameters of my discussion and Mitchell’s counterargument. To my mind, the points of contention between our positions are instructive because they demonstrate the question of what weight is given to ideological critique in contemporary discussions of reading practices and digital culture.

My original essay was commissioned as part of my work for the Meanland Project, a collaboration between the literary journals *Overland*, *Meanjin* and the cultural organisation if:book Australia, a project which, according to its website, has produced articles and events ‘that tackle the impact of digital media, shifting intellectual property rights and economic change on publishers, writers and readers’ (*Meanland*). My particular essay appeared online alongside my other Meanland Project essays on topics such as poetry blogging and the impact of the internet on small magazines.

‘The Obscure Object of E-reading Desire’, written and published not long after the death of the Apple CEO Steve Jobs, begins with questioning ‘the businessman’s glorification as a “visionary” and a “creative genius”’ (Alizadeh). As Benjamin Laird, another Meanland Project essayist has written, Jobs’ death on 6 October 2011 resulted in 6,049 tweets per second ‘praising Jobs’ life and impact’, as ‘hagiographies of Jobs accumulated, assuring fans of his everlasting place in the technological canon’ (Laird). My essay draws on the *Guardian* journalist and social commentator Tanya Gold’s view—that Apple’s popular products have made their users less socially connected and more isolated (Gold)—to critique Jobs’ eulogistic posthumous representations.

The essay explores the possibility that Apple’s iPads and other e-readers might make their users less engaged and more apathetic readers. By drawing on the notion of *interpassivity* as developed by the contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek, I propose that an object such as the e-reader may embody and neutralise, as Žižek would have it, ‘the ideal customer’s reaction [or satisfaction] in advance’ since the machine or medium may stand here for ‘the medium of symbolic registration’ (*The Plague of Fantasies* 112). In the essay, I paraphrased one of Jacques Lacan’s notions *à la* Žižek, and proposed that the electronic gadget itself could be subjectivised—as ‘*the subject supposed to read*’—and it could therefore diminish the user’s subjective experience of reading and ‘make the owner of an e-reader read fewer books’ (Alizadeh).

While I acknowledge that, due to a number of factors such as many e-reader manufacturers' reluctance to release sales data,¹ it is very difficult to cite quantitative and statistical surveys to either 'confirm or negate a correlation between a rise in e-reader consumption and a decline in reading among e-reader users', the essay refers to one report, produced by the United Business Media, which fails either to convince this writer that e-readers have enhanced readerships or to refute the possibility of the gadgets harming existing readerships. (This report has sadly been removed from United Business Media's website since my writing the original 2011 essay.) According to my reading of this report, '62 per cent of the e-reader users surveyed believed that the gadget had not compelled them to read more than before; and of these, 19 per cent answered that they read less than before [owning the gadget] or not as readily as before'. The essay concludes, somewhat dramatically, by speculating on the possibility of the proliferation of e-readers resulting in 'people reading less and our societies becoming less literate, less sophisticated and less civilised'.

'Writing and reading in the age of the thrilling unknown'

Jennifer Mitchell's riposte to my essay appeared less than two months after the publication of my piece, as part of her review of the Soft Skull Press anthology, *The Late American Novel: Writers on the Future of Books*. She describes an aspect of my thesis—rather adequately, in my view—as a concern 'that the limitless potential of devices to contain one's library, and to add to it with such ease, may in fact divest the reader of his or her agency as reader' (Mitchell). For Mitchell, however, this concern is an indication of my 'fear' of change and progress. She writes:

I'm not sure that there isn't an effort here to transfer the fear of loss of control brought by a new fluidity around publishing to the inanimate consumable. It's easier to identify an object as an emblem of subversion, than to more deeply consider how to engage in a changing culture and turn it to your advantage. There are some positive stories emerging from these changing times too, such as a vibrant and fast growing online publishing model in China known as Freemium, which serialises literary fiction from contributors, the best of whom are moved to a pay for access level.

Before discussing the problem with models such as Freemium and defending my thesis against its above depiction, I'd like to summarise Mitchell's other

¹ See, for example, Golijan, Rosa, 'Amazon Says It Beat Kindle Sales Record, But Won't Share Numbers.' *NBC News*, 27 November 2012. <<http://www.nbcnews.com/technology/technology/amazon-says-it-beat-kindle-sales-records-wont-share-numbers-1C7275558>>. 26 Feb.2014.

objections to my original essay. According to her, my concerns with the effect of e-readers on reading habits signal a conservative and/or elitist anxiety apropos of the effect of the digital push on literary aesthetics, similar to conservative Romantic poet Wordsworth's contempt for progressive technological advances of the early-mid nineteenth century. Furthermore, according to Mitchell, my 'fears' are overly 'political'—due to my use of the ideas of the Marxist thinker Žižek and my critique of capitalism—which implies that, from Mitchell's perspective, the issue of the advent and proliferation of reading technologies is not an inherently political issue. She concludes her piece by implying that my essay belongs to 'the panicked, nostalgic and alarmist rhetoric of the death of the book', unlike 'the voices of invention, expansion, and evolution' such as her own.

I was delighted to read Mitchell's counterargument, and I believe the fact that online publications such as my essay could be read widely and receive thoughtful responses so soon after their publication is one of the most positive aspects of the so-called digital revolution. I am not a dogmatic opponent of the digital milieu and, as such, I believe that Mitchell's final characterisation of my piece as 'panicked' and 'alarmist' is unnecessarily combative. I do, however, feel that she has presented a number of important and pertinent points which represent some of the key tenets of today's dominant ideology, and for the remainder of this article I would like to refute her arguments.

The case against the e-reader

I must admit that, as a writer of literary fiction and poetry, I have no personal objection to Mitchell's portrayal of me as a defender of literary aesthetics. As demonstrated by many philosophers of the Left—from Theodor Adorno to Jacques Rancière—an active interest in aesthetic constructs in general and art in particular is neither elitist nor conservative. Nevertheless, in the context of the debate under discussion, it is clear that my being presented as a defender of literary aesthetics is intended to indicate the (supposed) stifling backwardness and traditionalism of my opposition to 'invention', 'expansion' and the like.

But can one reasonably describe the kinds of writing and publishing that have emerged as a consequence of e-reader usage—such as the extremely commercially successful novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*—as 'inventive' and 'expansive'? That the only type of writing that is proving financially attractive to e-publishers and manufacturers of e-readers is mass-marketed, highly commodified 'blockbuster fiction, romance, sci-fi and fantasy' (Coronel) does not in itself discount the possibility of e-readers being used by readers for reading other, more literary works; yet, should the projected growth in e-reader usage result in further expansion of the sort of writing most favourable to e-reading and e-publishing—the kinds of writing described by one commentator as works

of 'well-established popular genres'(Lee)—we may well wonder if the technology could benefit the publication and readership of poetry, literary fiction, literary non-fiction, philosophy, short fiction and literary criticism in a significant way.

I am not making an argument against genre fiction, and I have no hesitation to state that some of the best literary works of recent times have resulted from inventive applications of popular genres such as historical fiction or futuristic fiction, works by authors such as Hilary Mantel, China Miéville, Neil Gaiman and Margaret Atwood, among others. The production, publication and success of none of these works, however, can be in any way seen as a consequence of the advent of the e-reader or of e-publishing. The works of genre fiction which are directly associated with e-reading and e-publishing phenomena are blatantly derivative and, according to most reviewers, poorly written. The aforementioned *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, began life as so-called fan fiction modelled on the teenage romance novel *Twilight*, and has been described in *London Review of Books* as a contribution 'to the art of terrible writing about sex' which 'deploys every blockbuster cliché in existence' (O'Hagan).

One does not have to be an elitist proponent of the literary canon or a conservative aesthete to find the overtly unoriginal and fundamentally commercial dimensions of the creation and propagation of a work such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* problematic. According to the radical Leftist philosopher, Alain Badiou, the aesthetic quality of a primarily commercial cultural object produced by an 'imitator'—in this case, by an author imitating *Twilight*—is dependent entirely upon the object's use-value as determined by the object's consumer, and therefore the imitating producer:

will have neither true knowledge nor an informed opinion of the beauty or defects of the object he's copying. His mimetic competence is reduced to this double lack. He'll nonetheless go on copying objects in spite of his not being able to discern their qualities and defects at all. In imitating his guide, for sure, will be that purely apparent—and I'd even say commercial—'beauty' that servile public opinion and those who have no knowledge whatsoever chase after. (325-6)

The success of e-published bestsellers will not, in other words, advance the cause of literary 'invention' and 'evolution', but it will further entrench hegemonic, normative, commercial conceptions of 'beauty'. I believe one should feel concerned about the possibility of such writing dominating the literary landscape, perhaps at the expense of truly inventive, expansive takes on genre fiction, such as Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, Gaiman's *American Gods* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*.

One of Mitchell's other objections to my essay concerns the apparently overt political nature of my critique. She is right, in my view, to depict the politics of my methodology as oppositional to 'commercialism, or more simply capitalism' (Mitchell); but her assumption that one could have a discourse on the e-reader without engaging with politics is deeply problematic. It would be rather naive, in my view, to assume that electronic gadgets that affect and manipulate our social interactions and relations directly are not involved in either enforcing or opposing existing cultural or cognitive values and superstructures. According to Žižek, for example, the recently invented gestural interface gadget called SixthSense—a piece of computer hardware to be worn around the neck of its users, developed by a Samsung Electronics computer scientist—'presents us with another case of ideology at work in technology: the device imitates and materialises the ideological mechanism of (mis)recognition which overdetermines our everyday perceptions and interactions' in a capitalist society (*Living in the End Times* 338).

In the case of SixthSense, the gadget enables its user to project upon an actual, physical object, by way of pointing at that object, assumed, virtual information and views from the Internet. The user may, for example, point at a statue and have that statue *recognised* by the gadget and then have words and other signifiers associated with that statue (e.g. a Wikipedia entry) *projected* upon the object. In Žižek's Lacanian parlance, this operation produces a purely *imaginary* or fantasy dimension: it simplifies, transcends, occludes and negates the *real*—the complex physicality of an actual object, a thing outside of the viewing subject's existing field of knowledge—and therefore enables immediate perceptual symbolisation or reification. In the case of an e-reader, the gadget *imaginatively* overcomes the challenges of the *objective* condition of the physical book by enabling the gadget's user to carry and have immediate access to countless books through a rather light electronic contraption, to also obviate the cost of buying actual books by purchasing much cheaper e-books, and so on.

The key problem for Žižek is not that these gadgets promote *false* perceptions—which radically ignore and annul the real of, for example, literary production, the physicality of a statue and so on—but that, at an ideological level, 'we cannot bypass [the imaginary/illusory] and reach directly for the Truth: the Truth itself is constituted *through* the illusion proper to transference—the Truth arises from misrecognition' (Lacan)' (*The Sublime Object* 59-60). The constitutive or (over)determining impact of the *imaginative possibilities* afforded to users by digital gadgets prevents these users from changing or breaking with existing dominant ideals; the user, irrespective of his desire 'to change, to meddle with, to intervene in' established cultural forms through new technology, is capable of only reaching a Truth constituted by the specific mode/s of digital ideation,

resulting in the discovery that ‘his intervention was from the beginning compromised, included’ (60). Put more simply, the user of the e-reader will not discern or apprehend radical new ideas or truths based on the content or perspectives of the e-books which she may have downloaded onto her gadget; the ideas produced by the experience of using the gadget are compromised and constituted by the illusion of the e-book reader’s (supposed) power to subsume the use-value of physical books. Hence the Truth of reading on an e-reader will have nothing whatsoever to do with the text one is actually reading, and it will instead reveal the rather compromising notion that our interest in books is fundamentality determined by their physical weight and the labour of carrying them, by their cost and exchange-value, and by our fetishistic, ideological pleasure of owning innumerable books at a low price and by so doing accumulating cultural capital as individuals.

Even if one were to ignore the ways in which such devices repeat, legitimise and strengthen contemporary capitalist ideology—a genuinely difficult task, at least for this writer—could one ignore the politics of the actual, physical production and disposal of gadgets such as e-readers, considering the widely known controversies regarding the working conditions in factories that produce digital devices for the likes of Apple,² or the conditions in places such as ‘Accra, Ghana where children eke out a living on a scrap heap of discarded computers that The West no longer needs [so that they may] sell the computer parts, but the toxic chemicals in the waste are slowly poisoning the children’ (‘Children of Sodom’)? In my view, far from my critique of the e-reader being too political, Mitchell’s defence of the gadget is excessively, naively and rather insincerely apolitical. My contention is not that her celebration of the e-reader is *immoral* in that it ignores the gadgets’ exploitative production and disposal—it would be rather unreasonable and frankly undesirable for every commentary (on technology or anything else) to include an *ethical* caveat to prove the commentator’s *sensitivity*, *compassion* and so on. What I find objectionable is that Mitchell assumes impartiality—and, by so doing, emphasises my (anti-capitalist) partiality—despite her own rather blatant, *partial* decision to ignore the very well-known facts regarding those who produce and dispose of digital products. Despite claiming to be simply describing the objective benefits of the e-reader, Mitchell, in her willingness to dismiss not only my ‘alarmist’ and ‘anti-capitalist’ discourse but also the political concerns of mainstream human rights and labour rights organisations, as published in very mainstream media outlets, reveals herself as very much biased and politically and ideologically invested.

² See, for example, ‘The Stark Reality of iPod’s Chinese Factories,’ *Mail Online* 18 August 2006. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-401234/The-stark-reality-iPods-Chinese-factories.html>>. 26 Feb. 2014.

Finally, Mitchell's claim that my position is antagonistic towards the 'new publishing opportunities' made available by the e-reading/e-publishing scene ignores the fact that digital publishing models empowered by e-reading are not actually known to enhance professional opportunities for writers. According to the publishing industry specialist Tim Coronel, in online platforms such as Freemium—where most content is available free of charge and only advanced and particularly popular features are sold to readers at a rather low price—there exists a 'massive challenge for [writers] to stand out from the ever-growing crowd' (Coronel). In e-reader-driven publishing, 'there are more opportunities than ever for writers to get their work out there, [but] it will still be just as hard, if not harder, to make it pay' (Coronel). At a recent conversation convened by *Overland* magazine as part of the Meanland Project, the writer and editor Jo Case stated that, due to the expansion of online publishing, 'the amount of money you can get these days [as a writer] is less', and the freelance writer John Weldon observed that, also due to the proliferation of online publishing, 'my rates haven't gone up in twelve years. So, in that sense, there is definitely a squeeze' (Case *et al.*).

Conclusion

In my view, Jennifer Mitchell's objections to my critical evaluation of the potential impacts of e-readers on readers and writers are questionable on aesthetic, political and economic grounds. Beyond the particulars of our the difference in our individual opinions, however, the points of difference between our approaches to an analysis of the impact of the e-reader demonstrate the relevance and need for cultural questions to remain connected to their material and ideological conditions.

That the propagation of e-readers could have a deleterious effect on the value, appreciation and efficacy of literary production is not an elitist aesthete's phobic delusion, but a concern based on the actual aesthetics of the kinds of writing, such as patently clichéd and by most accounts poorly written fan fiction, generated by the e-reading milieu. Furthermore, Mitchell's refusal to acknowledge the role of technologically advanced consumer products in advancing certain ideological and hence political notions denies the materiality of the gadgets and their modes and means of production. Last but not least, her claim that the new digital environment is greatly beneficial to writers is rather problematic; while new digital platforms no doubt provide more space for a non-professional presentation and circulation of written work, these media, far from providing writers with opportunities for receiving payment for their work, could lead to the devaluation and exploitation of writers by the owners of these digital media.

Whether or not the argument and defence presented in this article implicate me as a Luddite or as a person harbouring a fear of change are moot points. What matters is our ability to think critically about the world in which we live and therefore our commitment to not simply accepting the hype and propaganda surrounding the latest products entering consumer markets and impacting our personal and public spaces. That the digital media have affected and altered certain aspects of contemporary life and cultural activity over the last twenty or so years is an irrefutable and rather banal fact; but the extent to which one will participate in advancing the agendas of technocratic classes and IT corporations by uncritically accepting the supposed inevitability of a digital takeover of all aspects of modern life cannot be taken for granted. I take heart in knowing that two-thirds of the student participants at a Princeton University trial, after being provided with free Kindles with all their study materials for the duration of their study, 'said they would not purchase a new e-reader if the one they were using broke' (Fisher 121).

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