

perceives life writing as an antidote to death. In his chapter on *vernacular comparatism*, Baidik Bhattacharya postulates the College at Fort William, Calcutta, to be the first institutionalized pedagogic implementation of comparative literature. Founded in 1800, the academy was meant to train colonial officials and clerks in the living vernaculars and the local “customs and manners”; thereby, what emerged from the colonial necessities of governance became a paradigm for decolonizing the discipline of comparative literature through the eclectic subaltern practices of the Indian subcontinent. César Domínguez interposes the subfield of *environmental comparative literature* at the juncture of biocultural diversity and comparative literature to address the *urgency* of language extinction. He cautions against the risk of reification of languages and literatures, whereas they are but processes of social and environmental interaction that are threatened in similar ways to nature. In his examination of two modern poets in the Middle Eastern tradition, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Nima Yushij, Levi Thompson expounds a South-South literary comparison of poetic forms dodges Euro-American influences as they are typical to the Arabic, Persian, and other contact languages of the Islamicate world, which does not extend to the modernist West. Lital Levy presents the case of “diasporic difference” in world literature through the Jewish-language journey of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, reflecting on the divergent “Jewishness” in global Jewish reading cultures. Jewish readers had their earliest access to *Crusoe* via the German translation *Robinson der Jungere* (1779), then through Hebrew adaptations like *Sefer kur ‘oni* (1861), which was again retranslated in 1849 and 1861 before Sitruk’s Judeo-Arabic *fin-de-siècle*. Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih peruses Afro-Arab circulations within the framework of a voyage where their intermingling had brought about the vernacularization of Arabic literature and métissage of African literature, establishing a decentralized approach in world literature. Historiography, an eminent discipline in nineteenth century Europe, degenerated in the twentieth century primarily due to the postmodern criticism of the “grand narrative”. The volume editor Zhang Longxi contends that this cannot result in historical nihilism, even if the historian’s value judgement carries its own biases and blind spots, but in what language should a history of world literature be written? Longxi opines that resisting the “hegemony” of the *lingua franca* English in today’s world will keep the major Western literary traditions as the only canon of world literature.

We witness comparative literature’s inclusive and pluralistic nature in a transcultural, transnational world facilitated by the institutional changes in research, publication, and pedagogy. This volume marks a paradigm shift in decentering not only Eurocentrism but also other forms of Ethnocentrism. Part III and Part IV of the book contest each other’s claims of inadequate representation of non-European literatures, especially from the Asian and African traditions. In all honesty, this collection would not serve readers looking to initiate themselves into comparative literature but is specifically meant for those familiar with the evolution of the discipline. I reckon the book could have had a better thematic assembly of chapters, as oftentimes they are clubbed together in non-aligning sections with disparate over-arching themes.

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THINKING THROUGH DATA: HOW OUTLIERS, AGGREGATES, AND PATTERNS SHAPE PERCEPTION. By Maja Bak Herrie. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2025. 154 pp.

Aesthetics and digitality are much more strongly connected than what appears at first sight. Data, the bedrock of the digital sphere in many ways, inform algorithms, language models, research and information disorders, to name just a few areas of its influence. But data also have immense

cultural and aesthetic significance, especially in digital literature, visual art, and algorithmic aesthetics. To this discourse of the intersection between culture and data, Maja Bak Herrie's *Thinking Through Data: How Outliers, Aggregates, and Patterns Shape Perception* offers an interesting take: it suggests that data are not merely information but a subject of aesthetic and phenomenological inquiry. Data demand new forms of thinking and they are easier to access through visual means. With data, knowledge is not abstract; it becomes perceived through the senses, especially the visual. Identifying these sensory ways of arriving at knowledge reveal something about new ways of thinking is critical for the scholars of aesthetics because these challenge the way digital texts are read. It suggests the different possibilities whereby the category of 'data-driven' aesthetic becomes new at the intersection of computational studies and critical/cultural theory. Herrie memorably asks what it means to see the world through visual ideas such as the bell curve.

Herrie shows that data are visualised or made concrete in three concepts: outliers, aggregates, and patterns. The three core chapters dedicated to the concepts work with art projects that are relevant to the discussions of these concepts. She uses the art projects to unpack the artists' critique of these three concepts while also connecting them with larger intellectual positions these occupy in socio-cultural settings today. Statistics is advanced as a subject that helps make sense of isolated individual cases bringing them together. But the processes of making them comprehensible are not without their dangers. To look for order in chaos is not without its violence. The outlier is an interesting concept: it stands for the "other" or the "miscellaneous" category that does not fit within the usual or the normal category. Thus, it is the category of the excluded and the marginalized. Outliers need to be identified and named as such because they interfere with the order-making or order-enforcing imperative of knowledge. Without being named as outliers, they become dangerous as they can call into question the very idea of a stable concept.

The stable concept is that of the aggregate, as visualised by graphs, diagrams, and charts. Seeing individuals not as self-consistent individuals, but as "dividuals," that is, as data points that are seen in relation to specific desires or tastes, makes them malleable and adds to the order-making agenda of knowledge. Aggregates look like networks but they have their own hierarchies. They do not reveal anything universal about a phenomenon. Aggregation "nullifies the potentially distorting influence of individual cases in the broader context. However, the aggregation is also precisely what removes, reduces, simplifies, and combines: the individuals' ability to express themselves – religiously, politically, culturally, or sexually – is suppressed in favor of a statistical model" (67). To see an aggregate is not to see an entity but a product of an operation. In other words, "the average . . . does not exist in the usual sense of the word but is produced with the purpose and the intention of seeing a connection that would otherwise not be visible" (78).

Patterns are a similar idea. These emerge out of the proximity that various items or dividuals are thrown in. There is nothing intrinsic to the items that allows for a pattern to emerge; it is the process or the framework of comparison that makes them appear in a certain fashion or as showing a pattern. The pattern, to a great extent like the aggregate, dissolves the individuality of a unit and makes things appear to be more alike than different. The statistical methods are obsessed with similarities and do not allow for differences and individualities.

Aesthetics is not just about art and pleasure; it "describes a certain way of knowing a particular attitude," a disposability for a critical, aesthetic way of obtaining knowledge" (3). Herrie concludes: "lines of sight . . . create meaning at a far more profound level than just the visual, much like the knowledge development – whether theoretical or data-driven – must be thought of as a fundamental aesthetic concern; the symbolic, as constantly intertwined and interconnected with the iconic" (119).

Herrie uses art examples such as Rossella Biscotti's *Other*, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Spirit Is a Bone*, and Stéphanie Solinas's *Dominique Lambert* to show that the three concepts have been imagined as objects of aesthetic inquiry. Thus, the book is partly a gesture towards art criticism but its larger mission of offering a new critical lens of digital object – after all the three concepts have

become ubiquitous thanks to the use of spreadsheets in every aspect of life from personal budget to Big Data – is the greatest takeaway for the readers. Scholars interested in digital humanities, media studies, media aesthetics, philosophy of knowledge, and aesthetics will find the art-knowledge connection very compelling. It will provoke other scholars to explore the relationship between data and art, and suggest newer, more imaginative ways of practising art. It might also provoke inquiries into what kinds of critiques of data and statistics can be grounded in scholarship and aesthetics rooted in the Global South. What have been the models of knowledge production in these regions? Do these models lend themselves to critique and praxis of art? How do the regions in the Global South engage with the Western notions of data as knowledge in themselves and as art? The legacy of the book lies in the opening up of such questions.

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THE CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO JACQUES LACAN. By Todd McGowan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. 176 pp.

The book offers four interesting chapters that explore Lacan's theories, how he was received in critical theory circles, and a brief biography. McGowan makes sure to distinguish Lacan from the post-structuralist group, including Kristeva, Foucault, and Derrida, in all of his chapters. While these theorists share a critique of subjectivity as a dead end, the author argues that Lacan's novel contribution to theory lies in his integration of "the unconscious into [subjectivity] without eliminating the subject's freedom" (p. xiii). The book begins by contextualising Lacan in literary theory, followed by a short biography. The third chapter explores Lacan's work among his peers in theory, while the fourth chapter systematically explores Lacanian concepts, such as *Jouissance*, Drive, and the *Big Other*. The concluding chapter summarises what the author has debated throughout the book, and he restates his hypothesis at the beginning of the book: Lacan is distinguished from the post-structuralists since his theoretical discussions do not reduce or exclude the subject but rather allow us to articulate alternative understandings of it/ the subject (p. 162).

Chapter One, "Context," contextualises Lacan's theoretical discourses and debates by exploring the foundational influences on his thought, with special emphasis on Freud's psychoanalytic theories. It also puts Lacan on one side in conversation with Hegel, Kant, and Freud on the other, where psychoanalysis and subjectivity are the grey areas these theorists share (p. 14). The author argues that building on Freud's discovery of the unconscious, Lacan sought to develop and preserve its radical implications by stressing the unconscious as an agency that operates beyond conscious control. This distinctive contribution to literary theory offers an alternative rationale that cannot be fully integrated into conscious thought, according to McGowan's understanding of Lacan (p. 10). He adds that Lacan's work emerged as a response to the influences of psychoanalysis during the 1920s, when Freud introduced the structural model of the psyche (id, ego, and superego) to supplement the topographical model (conscious, preconscious, and unconscious). However, Lacan has accomplished an unprecedented achievement by "bringing the unconscious to the philosophy of the subject, Lacan accomplishes an advance in the understanding of subjectivity" (p.14).

In the second chapter, "Life," the author presents a narrative of Lacan's progress into the world of literary theory, specifically, the schools of psychoanalysis. The 1930s mark the birth of Lacan, the psychoanalytic theorist, after his critical analysis of the Papin Sisters' crime in his renowned work, "Motives of Paranoiac Crime: The Crime of the Papin Sisters," first published in *Le Minotaure* in 1933 (p. 24). Compared to the active resistance exemplified by Sartre, Lacan stands as a figure who