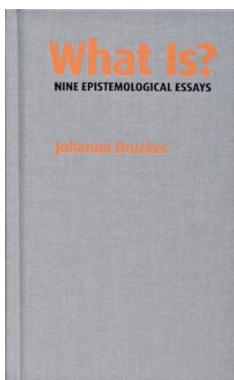


Fashion Trends Always Come Back in Style

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Johanna DRUCKER, *What Is? Nine Epistemological Essays*. Cuneiform Press, 2013, 127 pp.
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During a significant portion of the late-1970's up to the early-1980's, a revolution in both fashion and culture brought about a fresh and unforeseen way of life for millions around the world. Bell-bottomed trousers, heeled shoes, sharp-collar shirts, jive and disco, dancing and Travolta-like moves, mirror balls and discos, all became symbols of an era in which mass culture was magnified almost out of proportion. Of course, things changed mid-way through the 1980's, due to a number of reasons (chiefly political and social), and the "disco pattern" was thrown out the window, sometimes with bitter resentment and a purge-like attitude. About 20 or 25 years later, nostalgia for those days seemed to set in, and for a brief time, bell-bottoms did make a significant comeback, as well as musical trends such as electro-disco and electro-funk, both in some way extensions of disco sound songs and lyrics. Around the time disco was at its peak, literary theory (at least in America) was decidedly at a crossroads. New Criticism was apparently worn out, structuralism didn't seem to have the massive impact it had had in Europe, and the so-called "high theory" was being put under siege by a number of theories spanning from gender studies to cultural studies and post-colonialism.

Perhaps sensing this epistemological turmoil had gone too far, and probably self-conscious of the dangers of a widespread theoretical orphanhood, Professor Paul Hernadi edited, within a 3-year time-span, two important "What Is?" books destined precisely to overcome the literary knowledge stalemate that had set in. The first of these volumes, *What is*

Literature?, came out in 1978, and the second, *What is Criticism?*, in 1981 (both books were published by Indiana University Press). Highly valued theoreticians and scholars like René Wellek, Charles Altieri, Monroe Beardsley, Murray Krieger, Norman D. Holland, Stanley Fish, Hans Robert Jauss, Wayne C. Booth and Cary Nelson, among others, contributed to those two volumes. It may be argued that “What Is?”-type books weren’t very popular at the time, and we may easily imagine that they could be viewed with distrust by many literary theorists, eager to turn the page on the legislative-linguistic trend that had been so successful in previous decades. Nevertheless, Hernadi’s books were timely, as it seems that in every era of epistemological trend change, people feel an inherent need to tackle the consequences of those changes and what, hermeneutically speaking, lies ahead.

The same can be said of Johanna Drucker’s *What Is? Nine Epistemological Essays*, published in 2013 by Cuneiform Press. Drucker’s point of departure is clear from the very onset: only a broad-specter humanistic knowledge will enable us to raise the stakes of the epistemological quest to a higher level in which the typical theoretical and practical problems are swiftly replaced by a twofold dynamics of materiality and interpretation. Applying this model, intent on overcoming what she calls “the fallacy of neutrality” towards interpretable artifacts in the world, to her chosen “objects”, is the strategic aim of the book. And it produces surprising conclusions. Letters, writing, word’s bodies, documents, graphic textualities, graphic features, books, cult futures of books and digital materialities are, thus, described from a post-revolutionary stance that seeks that central intellectual space within the two-way path of knowledge. Unlike the New Critics (who established a new order from a definite point in history), or Paul Hernadi (who aspired to explain how literary theory could progress after the decline of a hegemonic theoretical mode), Drucker doesn’t limit herself to the epistemic revolution of her day. Indeed, the digital outbreak is but an instance, emerging simultaneously with many other historical episodes, in which our ways of perceiving the world was challenged to unprecedented limits.

In Drucker’s narrative, the interpretation of ancient manuscripts, the translation of the Bible, the invention of mobile print-types, the writings of Plato and Euclid, modernism, mathematical theories, the emergence of graphic novels and the work of, for instance, Ed Ruscha are, among other episodes, particular moments in history that pointed out new epistemological trends. Therefore, they are equally valuable and mind-challenging to constitute themselves as the core and focus of the quest for knowledge or for the knowledge of what a paradigm shift within epistemology means. Of course, not all events, authors, works or deeds have benefited from the same amount of historical generosity, but still, in many ways, they represent the change-feature that seems indispensable for epistemology, in Drucker’s terms. Only in this way, it seems, can we deflate the ontological stability of

the key-concepts and operations generally associated with knowledge-acquisition, in order to recognize that, despite some predictions, “no ‘object’ exists outside of cognitive construction” (57). Drucker is careful enough, however, not to jump too far ahead from this premise, and explains her concepts of “materiality” and “interpretation”. It would probably be more comfortable to decree by *fiat* that many epistemological problems derive from an inability to understand what is at stake if we consider that “each instantiation of art has a material value” (24) and, accordingly, that we must rely on a “performative concept of interpretation”. By explaining the terms of this debate, and relying on history and a broad sense of humanistic thought, she is able to make the materiality/interpretation set work.

“Every word in the world is embodied” (125), Drucker proclaims, inserting a holistic stance into our interpretation of the world, for so many centuries thought of as a single-lane road between ontological symbols and detached interpreters, affected by the “fallacy of neutrality”. It would be easy for Drucker to blame it all on the digital revolution of the past two or three decades, but she deliberately refrains from doing so, and that is one of the most refreshing features of this book. Through a series of very enlightening historical narratives, we learn that, after all, minor episodes of epistemic change can provide sets of questions and hermeneutic challenges very similar to major ones. This happens precisely because “texts” – and, we may imagine, all human artifacts – “are social productions” (48), and this means that the performative-interpretive stance is paramount to cognition and to our knowledge of what knowledge really is. “Meaning”, writes Drucker, “is produced, after all, not exhumed” (61): the difference between “neutrality” points of view on epistemology and Drucker’s view on epistemology amounts, apparently, to a choice between describing texts as exquisite cadavers or as material objects and, consequently, between describing interpreters as archaeologists or interactive performers. But although the problem, put this way, may look simple, the epistemological stakes are higher than they seem.

Drucker’s book encourages the reader to challenge familiar assumptions that belong to a large body of Western knowledge. Those assumptions were construed throughout its millennia-long process of formation and settling. I personally didn’t have many doubts about the decisive role of materiality to works of art, about the “fallacy of neutrality” or about the performative side of interpretation, when I started reading this book. Still, I had long resisted considering some minor historical episodes as epistemologically fruitful, or even worth considering at all. Drucker proved me utterly wrong. All of the historical episodes Drucker refers to, in *What is? Nine Epistemological Essays* – the trend-changing moments, as I described them – are, in the end, clear-cut instances of “an experience of the inexhaustible pleasure of knowing” (32), or, to put things plainly, moments that lead to questions. These questions are, however, different in kind from those which arise if we choose to travel the

one-lane knowledge road of neutrality in the passenger's seat: driving in a crowded four-lane highway in the driver's seat is a far greater challenge. It amounts, perhaps, to deciding responsibly what kind of epistemology suits us better, how can we make the best of our knowledge and, in the end, to understand that even the smallest innocuous historical moment can lead to epistemic gain.

Fashion is always changing. When New Critics wrote their decree-like manifestos in the 1930's, 40's and 50's, their rhetoric was fashionable, in a moment when literature and literary studies were struggling for a place within the academia and being forced to legitimate themselves as the exact sciences had done. Although to some extent an anachronism, Paul Hernadi's attempt to recuperate some features of proper humanistic endeavor after the massive attack of a number of fringe theories was also successful, and in its way fashionable. Drucker's book could probably have chosen to address specifically the digital revolution, as the poster-moment for the modern day epistemological cut, and this would certainly make it extremely fashionable. Instead, she opted to show her readers that not only the concept of "revolution" needs to be recast, but that the foundations of our ways of understanding ourselves should be under permanent scrutiny as well. Choosing universality and humanistic good sense over ephemeral trends, Johanna Drucker shows us that she can dance with John Travolta in the morning, a tango in Buenos Aires in the afternoon and a waltz in Vienna by night.