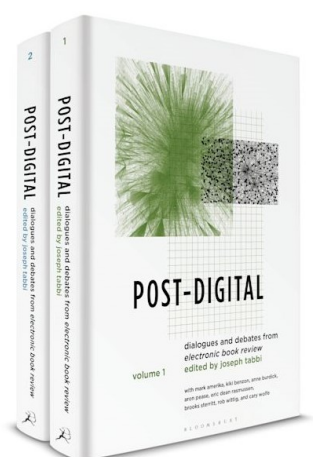


# ***ebr* online open access journal: the born-digital reaches its print adulthood**

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Joseph Tabbi (ed.), *Post-Digital: Dialogues and Debates from electronic book review*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020 (2 volumes). ISBN 978-1474292504

These are two volumes that represent, in a bound print publication, the now 25 year old *ebr* (electronic book review) online, open access, peer-reviewed journal of critical writing produced and published by the emergent digital literary network. One thing we come to know by reading the first volume (that wouldn't be so easy to grasp by navigating the online site) is the journey, the spirit and the people that led to its existence and persistence. *ebr* was one of the first open access journals in the fields of literature and digital culture. It was kickstarted by Joseph Tabbi and Mark Amerika with the intention, in Tabbi's own words, "of developing an online laboratorial practice concerning the ways in which we can interpret and discuss literature and digital culture" (2). There was the need to explore different approaches to the literary other than those provided by the established academic journals and, hopefully, gain traction and update the field. Built around these ideas, *ebr* developed as an ongoing, experimental scholarship,

in which unplanned brainstorming sessions were an elected process of production as well as unexpected collaborations, bringing together academic scholars, creative writers, visual and graphic artists, sound artists, etc.

The content and process of creating these two volumes emulate *ebr*'s own editorial organization (from 2007 onwards, when the model of publishing changed to include the 'gatherings' compilations). This means that the printed volumes also present a major part of their content in 'gatherings', selected by a variety of co-editors (thus, emulating the functioning of *ebr*). As Joseph Tabbi cared to say during the Zoom book launch presented by Scott Rettberg in September of 2020 (available at <http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/post-digital-debates-and-dialogues-from-the-electronic-book-review/>), "it's what I tried to do with these books, as well: collect not my own selections only, but invite a 'gathering' of co-editors who each made selections of their own".

For the most part, the sections and themes on both volumes match those on the online journal. Some formal differences worthy of our attention are: the *ebr* site allows you to access both the list of individual essays and the themed gatherings constituted by a selection of those same essays; the printed volumes have important sections 'before' and 'after' the gatherings – "Openings" and "Enclosures" in volume one and "Overture", "Continuings" and "A Selective Annotated Bibliography for Further Reading" in volume two. Of relevance here, though many can say the topic has been exhausted, is the fact that the first four sections mentioned provide a diverse contribution towards a retrospective critical account ("Openings" and "Enclosures") of digital literature and a prospective analysis ("Overture" and "Continuings") on the future of digital literature. Perhaps not surprisingly, we find divergent points of view, some highlighting the accomplishments of the field while others point out shortcomings of digital literature. Those entering the field can find it helpful to understand the concerns and fundamental questions of the present, but also to know how the future is envisioned for digital literature.

As said before, the two volumes and the online *ebr* show many similarities in terms of content. One can say that the book is contained in *ebr* and its sampling character provides a certain finitude and tangibility to the journal itself. We have a re-gathering of editors each of whom re-gathers or re-assembles *ebr* essays into an existing thread of *ebr* (critical ecologies, image+narrative, electropetics, technocapitalism, music/sound/noise, etc.) with the exception of the "The Time of Telling" gathering. Perhaps a comparative analysis of the two versions of each gathering would be interesting. Scott Rettberg says, in the recording of the Zoom launch, that "I wouldn't

say it's the 'best of' the *ebr*, exactly, but it's a selection of texts from *ebr* from the past 25 years that the journal has been published".

What can be the motivation to publish a book of this nature? A first thought that comes to mind is that, even though two volumes are a lengthy reading, it seems more real or probable that we read those as opposed to the entire content available on *ebr*. So, in fact, the tangibility given by print materiality still has an effect of efficacy. And maybe this efficacy has also an emotional, less rational dimension, even for those of us working and investing in digital practices, content, innovation. In the "Openings" section, Tabbi recalls the following statement when *ebr* completed a decade: "there has never been a best-of of the *ebr* on a print collection. I suppose we'll do one, one day, but with so many possible trajectories through so much content (a full decade of *ebr*), I wanted to try other ways of marking time, using techniques available in the same electronic media where the work first appeared". Yet, another 15 years passed by and the print medium wins and is chosen over the digital medium and its realm of possibilities to mark time, to put forward evidence of the work that was done and to signal a different kind of scholarship on digital literature and culture. Tabbi puts it like this – "the idea of structuring the volumes this way was to give readers a sense of the cross-section of work in *ebr* over the decades from a range of perspectives". The engagement of the reader with the two materialities – digital and print – must have its fundamental (or ontological) divergences. Or, at least, one can expect it to be different given the knowledge about the reading experience in these two modalities.

It is safe to say we are not dealing with a print duplicate of *ebr*. The opening and closing sections are relevant contributions to understanding the field as a whole and navigating its critical discussions. And one should not forget the annotated bibliography section that can be a helpful resource for those wanting a guide for further readings. At the same time, certain questions emerge from these volumes. Will we always feel the appeal for the conventional materialization of the book? Has it become stronger? Perhaps the digital produced a heightened effect of the printed, physical object, making us feel a growing need to touch, hold, see, gaze. To these thoughts we must add yet another topic. In terms of scholarship, are we still dealing with the hierarchical domination of the printed discourse? Do we look down on the digital scholarship or do these 25 years of *ebr* seem to slip away if kept in their digital existence? Whether for our own reassurance or for the health of the shelf, we can say that (borrowing from Jessica Pressman) we all share a case of "bookishness".