
In this dense and broad-ranging philosophical volume, Francis Dyson (Assistant Professor of Technocultural Studies at the University of California, Davis) proceeds from a discussion of quattrocento depictions of the Immaculate Conception, through Edison, Artaud, musique concrète, Cage, Heidegger, and into the realm of virtual reality as it figures in the work of artists such as Char Davies, Jon McCormack, and Catherine Richards. Underlying all of this is the idea that hearing and the auditory, rather than seeing and the visual, have been the templates upon which “new media” have been built.

While discourse on new media is hardly new, this work stands apart in its successful synthesis of a wide range of disciplines: philosophy, sound studies, the history and study of technology, and critical theory. Such an undertaking might be undermined by its sheer scope, but Dyson demonstrates a remarkable ability to explicate the very nearly inexplicable and to relate the defiantly idiosyncratic. For instance, the philosophical state of the Dasein described in Heidegger’s Being and Time is elucidated as an analog to John Cage’s body: both seeking a pure contemplative silence in the midst of universal sound.

Such philosophical connections then lead to case studies which demonstrate different perspectives of virtual reality as an artistic medium. In these studies, Dyson concentrates on artists who are “deeply engaged with science and technology, but [who] maintain(s) a critical distance from it.” (p. 151) The work of Char Davies is discussed in terms of immersion within an environment, and indeed is particularly noteworthy in that the results of the artist’s virtual experiences seem to be a greater appreciation and awareness of her immersion in reality proper. Theories of post-humanism are introduced through a discussion of Australian Jon McCormack’s artificial life work Eden (2000). Catherine Richards’ work is presented as a dual process of scientific investigation and artistic creation which brings one to a different appreciation of what it means to exist in corporeal form.

Of the eight illustrations in the book, those of Char Davies’ pencil drawings are perhaps too subtle for the quality of paper and book format, however this does not detract from the points that the author is making. The bibliography and notes are excellent, and the index serviceable.

The audience for this volume is advanced undergraduate through professional. It is essential for collections supporting the teaching of technology and the arts, and highly recommended for other interdisciplinary arts collections – particularly ones that include music.

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