

Heike Schaefer, *American Literature and Immediacy: Literary Innovation and the Emergence of Photography, Film, and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 311 pp.

Reviewed by **Julia Faisst**, Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt

Heike Schaefer's *American Literature and Immediacy: Literary Innovation and the Emergence of Photography, Film, and Television* is a quest for medial immediacy, or, to be more precise, for immediacy effects in literary and media culture. From a comparative media studies perspective which, as the author rightly claims, has often been neglected in the study of literature and the arts, the book argues that immediacy effects have been "central . . . to the literary imagination since the mid-nineteenth century" (1) up to the present times of digitalization: "The demand for immediacy—the desire to feel directly connected to other people and events, as if there were no intermediary factors bridging the temporal or spatial distance between us—is a defining feature of digital culture" (2). Considering temporal and spatial immediacy—both of which Schaefer treats in meticulous detail—as a desire, even a demand, for direct contact with the world (50), Schaefer posits immediacy as a persistent feature of media cultures. Given the book's intense self-reflexivity, it only stands to reason that the author concedes early on that the kinds of "reality effects" immediacy fosters depend on a "heightened attention to mediatory processes." "Media mediate—that is their purpose and function" (6), as Schaefer pithily states, taking her cue from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). In other words, the interdependency of (audio-)visual media with literature—and the innovations this fosters throughout literary history—expose representational strategies of mediation while seemingly engaging in more immediate representations of reality.

Throughout, Schaefer traces the notion of immediacy by way of various emergent media, including early photography, silent film, and post-war television, to study their impact on literary innovations since the mid-nineteenth century. She distinctly separates romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism, aligning each with the medium that dominates it most. What this structure necessarily omits is a comparative perspective that would attest to the intermedial cross-fertilizations between literature, photography, film, and TV even further. Yet this might only inspire future scholars, on the basis of Schaefer's book, to engage in extended comparisons of the three emergent media (and possibly others) vis-à-vis their specific, time-based takes on immediacy, providing further answers as to where the readers' assumed desire for immediacy stems from and whether this desire accords with changing attitudes toward innovations throughout media and cultural history.

For is it necessarily a book's job to yield to readerly demands for immediacy? Or do experimental literary forms like modernist stream-of-consciousness evolve in opposition

to such popular demands? To be sure, Schaefer opts to make the desire for immediacy the main organizing principle of media emergence and literary innovation, so she submits her main argument to threefold scrutiny in specific cultural moments. While this approach results in a stringent argumentation for the power of immediacy, it does not always do justice to Schaefer's own acknowledgment that immediacy is an effect based on processes of mediation. As she explains, nineteenth-century viewers could only perceive of daguerreotypes, for example, as an immediate, supposedly more objective, medium if they ignored that the unique physical properties of the medium—e.g., the glass cases in which early photographs were frequently presented—reflected their own face in the act of looking, and thereby its own mediation (50).

Indeed, I found Schaefer's book most intriguing when she questions the desire for immediacy most directly: "the 'cinematic' texts of Stein and Dos Passos develop particularly complex forms of immediacy that, paradoxically, depend on the reader's deliberate engagement with the process of mediation that the texts dramatize and enact" (98). Both Stein's verbal portraits and Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* are highly experimental texts that live off their layered characterization and palimpsestic organization of time and space. They disrupt, even outrightly critique, the concept of immediacy. Schaefer's reading of the most famous US modernist urban novel as a critique of mass culture is a case in point: for Schaefer, the larger cultural question *Manhattan Transfer* poses is "how to assert individual experience at a time when the heavy mediation of modern life erodes the distinction between personal narrative and dominant cultural discourse" (154).

One of the strongest points in Schaefer's study is that throughout its chronological chapters she continually explores how immediacy does not always match up with the longings of its recipients. Instead, technological and philosophical discourses surrounding emergent media themselves frequently forestall it. Although the photographic camera, for instance, was considered to be "the most precise and truthful recorder of reality" (22), Civil War photography of battlefields relied on techniques of manipulations (with photographers like Alexander Gardner moving dead bodies of soldiers around for effect). Schaefer is in fact so much attuned to her authors' ambivalent stances toward emergent media that seemingly promise immediacy that the book at times sees to beg the question why the concept of immediacy is embraced so staunchly nonetheless.

The writers and works she meticulously analyzes are both canonical and intuitive ones in the field of intermediality studies: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman (vis-à-vis their relationship to early photography); Gertrude Stein and Dos Passos (against the backdrop of early cinema); Robert Coover, David Foster Wallace, and Don DeLillo (in

light of early television). Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, for instance, is studied for its translations of "photographic aesthetics into poetics" in its attempts to "renew and democratize American poetry" (71); Stein's overly self-referential portraits "Picasso" and "Orta or One Dancing" are read as developing "a cinematic form of serial variation" in order to create "an awareness of the present moment, or 'present immediacy'" (23; 140); and postmodern TV fictions (from the late 1960s to the early 1990s) are read for how they "parody, imitate, and critically refract such central aspects of TV culture as its aesthetics of presentness, the nonlinear flow of the program's sequence, and the blurring of the boundaries between televised and non-televised reality" (176)—ultimately, as Wallace does in his essay "E Unibus Pluram," "[d]ebunking televisual immediacy effects" (198).

It will be interesting to see how future scholars of immediacy might build upon Schaefer's argument by including less familiar, more female, or nonwhite authors who are equally keen on exploring the very topics authors like Whitman or Dos Passos take on: a more democratic outlook onto society and "diversity . . . racism, cultural pluralism, gender politics, and class divisions" (161). They could further investigate the questions Schaefer indirectly hints at throughout: What, in fact, could (and did) disrupt the desire for immediacy on part of the readers? Where did authors intervene in this demand? Should their works even yield to this demand? What would, for instance, a former slave like Frederick Douglass, besides Whitman (as Schaefer states) the most photographed man in the America, who used photography to foster innovation in his multiple biographies—primers on (self-) reflection and never-ending mediation—have to say to immediacy in the context of political progress and freedom, in particular in comparison with Whitman whose poetry also aimed at "inclusiveness" (76)?

On the whole, Schaefer's insistence on the medial strategies of immediacy proves to be a most pertinent one. A year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, during which people have had to mainly rely on audio-visual media in order to mediate their professional and social relations, we yearn for immediacy—maybe just not the kind that is mediated. We crave close physical contact with friends and family, eagerly anticipating the instant and immediate joy of a hug.

Have we reached the end of an age of immediacy as Schaefer posits it in *American Literature and Immediacy*? Are we now searching for immediacy in the direct interaction with people's bodies rather than by way of reading books? In a witty move, Schaefer opens her monograph with Whitman's "So Long!," which concludes *Leaves of Grass*: "Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man" (qtd. on 1). Notwithstanding this direct address to its readers, which promises "an experience of intimate contact," Whitman's book of course keeps (literally) standing in the way of such immediate interrelations. Similarly, in admirable ways and from its very first page on,

Schaefer's book performatively argues for the paradoxes of immediacy, perhaps even for immediacy to be an illusion. While we cannot touch characters in books, books can touch us. Maybe some readers do hold on to actual books because they like to feel the material mediacy of the printed matter in their hands, particularly when this matter seemingly yields to their complex desires for immediacy effects. It reminds them that they can come close to the world the book presents.