

Escape from dystopia

The Twittering Machine by Richard Seymour (Review)

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Twitter, texts, email ... the psychological needs driving today's vast and risky digital 'writing experiment'

The notoriety of “postmodernism” has waxed and waned over the past 40 years. While a frequent reference point in the [cultural criticism of the 1990s](#), the term was falling out of use during the first decade of the 21st century. Today, however, in the context of Brexit, Donald Trump, re-energised [identity politics](#) and the chaos of [social media](#), it has reappeared as a diagnostic category for rationalists seeking to understand what ails the west.

For intellectuals such as [Steven Pinker](#) and a cluster of neoconservatives associated with the online magazine Quillette, the “postmodern left” has injected relativism and self-pity into liberal democracies, with all of the results we see around us today. Few appear to have any clue what [postmodernism ever referred to](#), nor any desire to find out. As [Richard Seymour](#) writes in one typically excoriating aside, “their ‘postmodernism’ is a straw figure, the bogey-scapegoat of anglophone centrists losing an argument”.

Before it was seized in this way, postmodernism typically denoted something about language, specifically the idea that our experience of the world is coded in certain ways that we can't escape. Everything we see, do and create has already been configured by a system of interlocking signs and symbols. Reality can therefore be read like a text. This perspective creates space for playfulness and pastiche, but casts doubt on the possibility of radical novelty or progress, hence its postmodern quality.

The Twittering Machine takes its title from a horrific [Paul Klee painting](#), depicting mechanical birds whose song is manufactured to lure victims towards a pit. Superficially speaking, the book is a critique of digital platforms, screens, algorithms and the addictive, hateful, potentially violent consequences they have for their users. But it is built on an insight that is fresh and hugely illuminating in its application: that, as our lives become digitised, we are all constantly writing and being written. All the time we spend immersed in screens (11 hours per day for the average American) we are adding to a vast “collective writing experiment”. We email, search, tweet, “like” and text. Even when we're not typing, [a record is being made of our scrolls, clicks, movements and moods](#). Reading blurs into writing, happening “less for edification than to be productive: scanning and scavenging material from a flow of messages and notifications”. Something has fundamentally changed in our relation to each other and the world that cannot be grasped simply by studying the technology itself. Seymour means to horrify us, and he succeeds.

Like the bomb in the 1950s or carbon dioxide emissions today, the scale of what human ingenuity has unleashed with the digital computer is such that it can be hard to confront or comprehend – hard, indeed, to write about. Numerous books have pointed to some particular feature of liberal democracy that is under threat from the internet, and which needs rescuing. These often paint social

media as some foreign and malign force to be pushed back, whether through privacy regulations or digital detoxes, rather like the tide of populism that exploits the technology so effectively.

Seymour adopts a different critical stance that is bleaker but immediately more arresting. *The Twittering Machine* is organised by a clever device, whereby each chapter heading names a pathology that afflicts all of us: “We are all addicts”, “We are all celebrities”, “We are all trolls”, “We are all liars”, and so on. This is not an argument for conventional moral panic or the perpetual othering that takes place online. And while Seymour’s Marxism can occasionally be discerned, nor is it simply a denunciation of the business model that fuels this nightmare, as crucial as that is. What’s offered is less [class analysis than psychoanalysis](#).

It is the psychoanalytic inflections that elevate this book above so much recent [“techlash” literature](#). Seymour sidesteps and occasionally demolishes the more familiar tropes with which we understand smartphone addiction and “online mobs”, instead searching for the underlying psychic and social roots of these malaises, which are being obscured by this vast “writing experiment”. Each of us keeps our phone close, he observes, “charged at all times. It is as though, one day, it’s going to bring us the message we’ve been waiting for.”

Seymour’s insights into trolling are as good as you will read on the topic. Combining base forms of sadism, a mask of ironic detachment and writing tools that seem to destroy all norms of accountability, trolling is central to this horror story, where human frailty becomes toyed with for entertainment. This isn’t going on somewhere else, he reminds us; we can all do it. Every time we take to social media, to cast someone’s else’s words or deeds in an unforgiving light, we are trolling.

Again, the question we need to confront is psychoanalytic, not technological. What do we really want when we waste our time poking fun at people online? “The core of irony is almost always a passionate commitment which can’t be expressed in any other way.” Politics and hope are being blocked by endless, pointless, fruitless writing. Just think of what we might be doing instead.

He provides no predictions, only warnings. Violence belongs to human beings, not machines, and we are all capable of it. But what if these writing machines lend particular aid to a certain kind of glorified violence, namely fascism? The book is littered with examples of how [online hatred has consequences offline \(in “meatspace”](#), in geek vernacular), and of how individual responsibility seems to evaporate as we sink deeper into the “stream” of text, where the real and the virtual dissolve into each other.

Still, the game is not yet up. “The armed shitstorm, a material possibility of the medium every bit as much as the meatspace troll, has yet to materialise. But these are early days for the networked fascism of the 21st century.” One thing is sure: the commercial platforms that enable this won’t do anything to prevent it. All they care about is that we remain connected and attentive. And in contrast to the recent fantasy conception of postmodernists, clutching French philosophy texts while gleefully attacking truth, Seymour shows us actually existing postmodernism, and we’re all caught in it. The internet is also a metaphorical net, which traps us in a suffocating regime of endless writing, reading and data capture, where there is nothing outside of the text. We become overwhelmed with individual bits of information, to the point where none of it makes any sense: “The Twittering Machine is a furnace of meaning.”

Only by recognising that we’re all inside this dark story might we acquire the power and urgency to get out – at least, that seems to be Seymour’s hope. Books this striking aren’t obliged to conclude with the typical “so what do we do?” chapter, and *The Twittering Machine* doesn’t. We must rediscover the emancipatory aspect of writing, he argues, in defiance of the suffocating, regimented dystopia being forced on us. The book is a thrilling demonstration of what such resistance can look

like, by one of the most clear-sighted and unyielding critics writing today. We should all read it.

- *The Twittering Machine* by Richard Seymour is published by Indigo (£12.99). [To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com](https://www.guardianbookshop.com) or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

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