

***On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres*, by Simon O’Sullivan, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, pp. xiii+157, €29,95 (ebook), ISBN: 9783031650727.**

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Simon O’Sullivan’s *On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres* (2024) is published as part of the Palgrave Pivot series. This book provides a concise yet challenging look at the emerging hybrid landscape in contemporary critical humanities. As the Professor of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, O’Sullivan explores how philosophy, fiction, and art practice intersect. Additionally, he examines how the “new” genres, specifically theory-fiction, autofiction/autotheory, and art writing, are transforming knowledge production. This work serves two main purposes: first, as a critical survey of these emerging forms; and second, as a series of interventions that emphasize the performative power of writing in an era marked by social, political, and ecological crises.

The purpose of this book is to identify, define, and analyze the functional mechanics of “hybrid genres” that blur the boundaries between academic theory and literary fiction. O’Sullivan places these practices within the margins of traditional academia. He explains how the hybrid writing practices, specifically theory-fiction, autofiction/autotheory, and art writing, operate within the “margins” or “borderlands” of conventional academic discourse (4). He argues that, by positioning themselves outside typical gatekeepers and the rigors of “Philosophy with a capital ‘P,’” these genres promote the democratization of theory (9). O’Sullivan is known for his collaborative works with David Burrows, *Fictioning* (2019), and *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari* (2006). *On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres* is described as an examination of writing as an optical device, using lenses, mirrors, and prisms to view the world and oneself in different ways.

This book is published in the Palgrave Pivot series, and O'Sullivan openly acknowledges the subjective nature of his views, which are also shaped by his environment, his association with Goldsmiths, and the heritage of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, where he previously worked. He emphasizes that his work is especially relevant to the critical eco-humanities and decolonization efforts. He contends that these hybrid genres are crucial for addressing the urgent crises of the Anthropocene and the rise of artificial intelligence because they offer the necessary "devices" to experiment with subjectivity and reality in a world where traditional, detached academic knowledge is no longer sufficient.

Physically, this monograph is a compact scholarly volume typical of the Palgrave Pivot format. It is divided into six main sections: an introduction; three core essays focused on theory-fiction, autowriting (autofiction and autotheory), and art writing; a concluding summary of four propositions; and a postscript on machine writing. The book includes a detailed index and extensive bibliographies at the end of each chapter. While it lacks traditional data tables, it features several diagrammatic and narrative "Preludes," which serve as openings, and "Codas," positioned at the end of chapters to provide a grounded perspective on personal investment that connects the preceding abstract theory to lived experience. These elements illustrate the book's thesis on the performativity of text.

In the "On Theory-Fiction" chapter, Simon O'Sullivan argues that theory-fiction functions as a theatrical tool that enables philosophical ideas to move beyond traditional academic formats. This genre makes philosophical language more experimental by "dramatizing" conceptual resources and shifting the tone from abstract explanation to lived experience. Furthermore, theory-fiction diverges from conventional philosophical forms by using specific mechanisms to destabilize standard expression, such as undermining the perceived authority of high Philosophy through a flattening process that removes hierarchical notions of truth and objective certainty. It serves as a minor theory that deterritorializes dominant philosophical language, moving away from institutional gatekeepers to occupy the "borderlands," where it can employ fictioning to create a doubling of registers and utilize non-standard media such as diagrams and performance. These experimental shifts serve urgent ethical and functional purposes, especially the creation of "hyperstitutions," fictions that realize themselves through recursive feedback loops to actively influence the world (13). In the context of the Anthropocene, this method offers a necessary means for multi-species storytelling to challenge extractive knowledge systems (16), while also serving as a survival strategy for marginalized bodies by grounding abstract theory in lived experience and striving for a radical democratization of the field through the invention of a shared conceptual device (20).

Furthermore, O'Sullivan expands the idea of theory-fiction by linking it to ethopoetics, which is closely connected to theory-fiction and can be understood as a form of anthropological fictions that foreground a different perspective on reality (or even a

perspective on different realities). It operates on the epistemological premise that disciplines like anthropology have “no more claim to truth than the cultures it writes about,” thereby necessitating a different style of writing than traditional social science methodologies. This approach challenges academic authority by subverting what anthropologist Michael Taussig terms “agribusiness writing,” a conventional, “extractive writing practice” ubiquitous “throughout the university,” that explicitly “wants mastery” over its subjects. Instead, ethnopoetics embraces “Nervous System writing,” which is actively concerned with as-ifs taken as real. By employing this method, ethnopoetics serves as a mechanism for disabling a certain kind of authority and dismantling any supposed mastery. Therefore, it forces a dropping down of perspective, establishing a horizontal writing practice that is situated on the same level as the material being looked at, effectively eradicating the traditional hierarchical divide between the academic observer and the observed (O’Sullivan 15).

Reza Negaraestani’s *Cyclonopedia*, conceptually connected to “the outside,” a radical, nonhuman alterity beyond standard socio-political reality, treats oil as a nonhuman agent that draws this “outside” into the human sphere. The book further explores theory-horror fiction as a subgenre that uses cosmic-horror tropes to examine the relationship between human beings and an indifferent universe. He then thoroughly defines “On Theory-Fiction” as a dramatizing of conceptual resources that enables theory to be experienced, and art writing as a staged, self-aware practice that treats language as physical material. He presents autofiction as writing where the author appears as a character to reflect on the self as a fiction, and autotheory as writing situated between the self and theory; both connect by grounding abstract ideas in tangible bodies as a survival strategy. Furthermore, O’Sullivan identifies this practice as a vital survival strategy specifically for individuals with “marked bodies,” such as trans writers or those living with chronic illness. By placing themselves at the center of their texts, the marginalized authors can make their historically obscured lives visible and enact a profound form of self-care. This autofiction then empowers these writers to reclaim their own narratives and resist the exclusionary, proprietorial structures of traditional literature and academia. Finally, whether invoking the nonhuman agents of theory-fiction or centering marked bodies of autofiction, these experimental genres function as transformative tools that dismantle dominant narratives and reimagine the boundaries of traditional literature.

In the chapter titled “On Autofiction and Autotheory,” Simon O’Sullivan explores the subtle boundary between autofiction and autotheory, framing both as complex optical tools that emphasize the fictionality of the self. He tentatively defines autofiction as a type of writing where the author appears as a character to examine how the self is constructed as fiction, while autotheory is writing that intentionally exists between the self and theoretical discourse, treating conceptual pursuits as visceral survival techniques rather than solely abstract institutional creations. A key strength of this chapter is O’Sullivan’s focus on marked bodies—subjects marginalized by gender, sexuality, race, or illness—who use these genres to narratively survive historical obscurity imposed by grand

narratives and to challenge dominant master discourses with lived knowledge. The chapter is further strengthened by well-explained examples, such as Chris Kraus's (1955–...) *I Love Dick* (1997), identified as a foundational work that uses the “I” to connect personal desire with theoretical inquiry (O'Sullivan 48), and Paul Preciado's (1970–...) *Testo Junkie* (2008; O'Sullivan 53), a somatopolitical fiction and theory of the self that uses a testosterone-based intoxication protocol to link individual life to global biopolitical circuits (O'Sullivan 66). Additionally, O'Sullivan highlights Maggie Nelson's (1973–...) *The Argonauts* (2015) for its innovative side notes that seamlessly blend high theory with deeply personal narrative (53, 65), as well as Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and *Lose Your Mother* (56), which employ critical fabulation to explore archives of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, showing how personal storytelling can serve as an effective way to address historical trauma. Ultimately, O'Sullivan argues that these practices serve both as reflective mirrors, revealing the reader's own position, and as prisms that scatter perspective into the diversity of other lives, making autowriting a performative tool for self-transformation and the development of new communities.

In the next chapter titled “On Art Writing,” Simon O'Sullivan contends that this self-aware, performative practice functions as part of contemporary art rather than just literature, highlighting its performative qualities through pitch, scripts, and spells. He examines examples such as Linda Stupart's *Virus*, which uses various typefaces and magical instructions to critique patriarchal art institutions (77), and the “Artist's novel,” in which figures like Goldin+Senneby explore offshore finance by treating the physical book as a social object (86). The main theme emphasizes art writing's ability to conjure alternative space-times and subjectivities through the fictionalization of materials, thus emphasizing its own method as an affirmative mode. Independent publishers like Book Works and small bookstores like X Marks the Bökship play a significant role because their “para-academic” position on the margins permits radical experimentation with format and the amplification of marginalized, marked bodies—those excluded by mainstream middle-class literary culture. Through this connection, O'Sullivan aims to suggest that art writing is a minor genre that democratizes theory by nurturing diverse discursive communities and promoting care and repair for future communities. In the postscripts, O'Sullivan also discusses the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence, exemplified by programs like ChatGPT. He advocates for a nuanced approach to AI that moves beyond simple reactions of fear or blind optimism. He views the rise of Large Language Models as a moment of mythotechnesis, in which the “machine” serves as a technical partner in creating new fictions (126). By proposing we use this as an opportunity to rethink authenticity and creativity, he aligns AI with the broader thesis of the book: that writing is always a tool used to construct the self and intervene, whether that tool is a human pen or a digital algorithm.

O'Sullivan's work demonstrates a more integrative approach than Lauren Fournier's foundational *Autotheory*, broadening its scope beyond a feminist-centric lineage to include cybernetic theory-fiction, and art writing, thus creating a wider

“typology of hybrid genres.” While Fournier is recognized for historicizing autotheory as a feminist practice, O’Sullivan views her contribution as a springboard for his more expansive prism metaphor: Whereas a mirror simply reflects a single subject, O’Sullivan’s prism effectively disperses a single beam of theory into diverse lives and multi-species perspectives. This conceptual development effectively shows how writing can shift from the individual “I” to a collective, planetary level, linking the author’s marked body to the broader crises of the Anthropocene.

The book’s value also lies in its reconstruction of overlooked intellectual histories. O’Sullivan connects academic philosophy (Deleuze, Haraway) with subcultural formations such as rave scenes, fanzines, and independent publishing. He draws on Black Studies, trans theory, and ecofeminism to show how art writing and autotheory can serve decolonial and political goals. However, the book’s limitations are recognized. Its focus on London, the UK, and nearby Western networks may distance readers from the Global South. Additionally, O’Sullivan’s densely intertextual style, filled with Deleuzian terminology, might challenge readers without prior training in continental philosophy.

On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres is a critical guide to contemporary writing. In addition to theorizing hybrid genres, this monograph also functions as an active bibliography, guiding readers to works, writers, and artists outside the mainstream. The book is a valuable resource for scholars and professionals in Visual Culture, Continental Philosophy, Literary Studies, and Fine Arts. Its methodology is especially useful in practice-based research. Its knowledge of art writing and community building provides helpful tips for curatorial and cultural work. This book might not be suitable for general readers seeking a beginner’s guide to writing fiction. Nevertheless, it offers a stimulating challenge to view writing not just as representation, but as a collaborative effort of speculative imagination, nonhuman beings, and machines to create new worlds.

Work Cited

O’Sullivan, Simon. *On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2024.

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