

Review Essay

Scott deLahunta

Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts and Distributed Human Being. Brian Rotman. Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2008.

In *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts and Distributed Human Being*, Brian Rotman argues that the post-alphabetic era is upon us. His thinking is based centrally on the proposal that the “writing of speech” has been the West’s dominant “cognitive technology” for over 2500 years. Rotman contends that “alphabeticism” as an “entire logic of representation” has contributed to specific modes of thinking and ways of believing, including all forms of monotheism. He describes the alphabet (particularly the Greek and Hebrew) as having caused a rift between language and the body, cutting wording off from its corporeal sounding place in throat and tongue. Throughout the book he extends these ideas into a discourse on how these “habits of mind” are increasingly at odds with an emergent self, a self that is being shaped culturally and eventually neurologically (based on past evidence of the effect of writing) by computer based digital technologies and network media.

In Part One of *Becoming Beside Ourselves*, Rotman discusses how the body separated from the “gestures of the voice” or prosody by writing will return through a reassertion of gesture in the post-alphabetic era. He isn’t thinking of gesture as only augmenting speech, but is instead going beyond this conventional instrumental connection to see gesture, and the body, as freed from its subordination to language. This requires us to reconsider fundamental assumptions about thinking and the body, particularly that thinking takes place mainly in the mind or the brain. Rotman cites philosopher Merleau-Ponty and linguist George Lakoff to indicate that it is not a new or unique idea that the gestures of the “thinking body” are not confined to “verbally expressed narration.” Going further, Rotman makes a claim for a new “experiential... modality,” the emergence of which is supported by computer-based motion capture technologies which he refers to as a “non-notational medium” capable of “reproducing the kinesis of bodies.”

What I find interesting about Rotman’s book, besides the content of his intriguing text—which is not done justice in these few paragraphs—is how it seems to add to a growing corpus of theoretical material exploring embodiment through an explicit reassertion of movement’s significance. Brian Massumi gave this project a boost with his *Parables for the Virtual* (2002) in which he accused scholars of having left “movement, affect and sensation” out of their consideration of the body as constitutive of identity and locking corporeality into a meaning-making system of signs and textual analysis. To continue to list related research both before and after Massumi would be valuable, but that is not my purpose here. My purpose is to suggest that for those of us who

claim our practice to be movement-related, we might look out for what philosophers, scientists and scholars are producing as they sketch out conceptual scaffolds we might find ourselves resisting as well as slipping into. In other words, who is thinking about thinking, and in which modality? And how might we, from outside writing-dominated practices, participate?

References

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.