

Review / Reseña

Ledesma, Eduardo. *Radical Poetry: Aesthetics, Politics, Technology, and the Ibero-American Avant Gardes, 1900-2015*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016.

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Buoyed by fresh, multi-valent readings of poetic texts from across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Eduardo Ledesma's *Radical Poetry: Aesthetics, Politics, Technology, and the Ibero-American Avant Gardes, 1900-2015* offers a "genealogy" (3) of experimental poetry in Ibero-America, which is sorely lacking in much previous scholarship. The radical politics of the second half of the twentieth century and the possibilities presented by digital and new media technologies are often assumed to be the sources of contemporary experimental poetry's most salient gestures. Ledesma presents a corrective to this partial and historically shallow view in his eclectic and ambitious book. He shows how the experimentation of the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, as a stance towards politics, technology, and art, informs the practice of contemporary poets across Ibero-America. The neo-avant-garde, newer digital technologies, and radical post-WWII politics, in this account, are the filters through which the poetic experimentation of the historical avant-garde is reanimated and retooled.

Ledesma organizes the book in three sections, each of which contains three chapters. The first section is dedicated to the analysis of metaphor in experimental poetry in Ibero-America. Chapter 1 deals with the historical avant-gardes' search for abstract expression in language, a search that experimented with form to erase the

boundaries between different media and semiotic systems. Metaphor was the central focus of these poets. Ledesma shows how metaphor can activate a pluridirectional correspondence between two (or more) elements, as in the Mexican poet José Juan Tablada's experimentation with metaphor, haiku, and visual imagery in "El chirimoyo" (1919). "For Tablada," Ledesma writes, the "sudden apprehension [of a metaphorical correspondence] was the essence of the poetic instant, and its achievement tantamount to a small miracle, a moment of quiet transcendence" (45). In Chapter 2, Ledesma details a shift away from metaphor among experimental poets in the 1960's; these poets sought direct avenues of meaning, rather than oblique channels like metaphor, as a way to combat the semantic manipulation perpetrated by dictatorial regimes. The final chapter in this section on metaphor examines the resurgence of metaphor as a central practice of contemporary digital poetry. Spurred by the digital realm's encouragement of meaning-making across media, metaphor, as a method of semantic metamorphosis, is at home among our contemporary "hybridization of semiotic systems" (12). In support of the book's driving thesis of the genealogical link between the historical avant-gardes and contemporary experimental poetry, Ledesma makes clear how a poet like Olga Delgado, who produces dynamic digital works in Catalan, builds on and wrestles with the work of José Ortega y Gasset, Ezra Pound, and Guillaume Apollinaire to explore the relationship between metaphor, cognition, and affect.

The second section treats the idea of the "kinetic." Drawing on Catalan Futurist Joan Salvat-Papasseit's experimentation with printed text, Chapter 4 takes an "archeological" (109) approach to textual movement, so central to recent and current digital poetry. Following incisive readings of Salvat's Catalan poetry, in Chapter 5 Ledesma demonstrates how neo-avant-garde poets like Joan Brossa and Antoni Tàpies deployed linguistic signs as tangible, material objects in the middle of the century. Castilian-language writers like the Spaniard Fernando Millán and the Uruguayan Julio Campal round out Chapter 5. In their work, Ledesma detects subtle challenges to Spanish state censorship under Franco and beguiling experiments with legibility and silence. In Chapter 6, Ledesma shows how the digital poetry that followed from this work fulfills the avant-garde dream of text that could suggest through movement and perform, with the reader, its own drama of deconstruction. These analyses set the stage for a poet like the Argentine Ana María Uribe, whose turn-of-the-millennium work in print and on screen synthesizes the cosmopolitanism and playful ambiguity, including challenging hints at politics, that contemporary digital poets derive from previous avant-garde practice. Uribe's digital poem "Disciplina" (2002), for example, is both

highly figurative and highly metaphorical, echoing the beguiling and even semantically frustrating gestures of Joan Brossa or, earlier, Dada. An experiment with text and movement in which a group of capital H's marches across the screen, the poem also conjures various meanings of "discipline" and suggests that dictatorial regimes (the capital H may make the reader/viewer think of Hitler; the letter's silence in Spanish may evoke censorship and the threat of violence) control, deploy, and indeed are constituted by language (179-181). Ledesma explores these questions with verve and precise attention.

The final three-chapter unit focuses on works from Brazil, a country whose poetry, Ledesma argues, has largely been neglected by scholars of Ibero-American literature. The section offers a Brazil-specific deployment of the thesis developed through the rest of the book, namely that digital poets of the late twentieth century "were keen on magnifying, intensifying, indeed 'electrifying' the visual poetry of the historical avant-gardes by incorporating motion, sound, and video elements" (198) and by building on the work of mid-century poets and artists who likewise derived some of their central concerns from the historical avant-garde. In these final chapters on Brazilian poetry, Ledesma introduces two key ideas for reading the heirs to avant-garde typographical experimentation and mid-century concrete poetry: Murray Krieger's "ekphrastic principle" (199-200), an expansion of the classical scope of ekphrasis to include all manner of ways in which poetry approximates visual art; and the question of "recursivity" between text and observer/reader/participant (201). Chapter 7 shows how Brazilian painters introduced European avant-garde art to Brazil during the *Semana de Arte Moderna* in São Paulo in 1922. In poetry, this burgeoning avant-garde came to manifest itself strikingly in the magazine *Klaxon*, in which Ledesma finds touchstones for Brazil's particular brand of *modernismo*. While the poets of *modernismo brasileiro* followed cues from the European avant-gardes and experimented with transgressions to syntax and linear reading patterns, their aesthetics was implicated in a broad project of national modernization. Thus, a poem-advertisement like Guilherme de Almeida's "Coma Lacta" (1922), an ad for chocolate which appeared in *Klaxon*, could serve more than an aesthetic purpose. It is a commercial text as much as a poetic one, a complex and jubilant icon for accelerated industrialization.

Ledesma argues that the industrial-political-poetic symbiosis that characterizes *Klaxon* is also central to Concrete art in Brazil. Chapter 8 analyzes Concrete poetry as an heir to Brazilian *modernismo*'s dynamic engagement with commercial discourses and international Op Art's interest in simulating movement. While Ledesma's treatment of

Concrete poetry is nimble and historically well-informed, it remains somewhat puzzling, in this section on Brazilian literature, that only one of the three poems he treats in-depth is by a Brazilian writer. In fact, the work to which he dedicates most space and which most crisply illustrates his points about representation, isomorphism, and metaphor is “silencio” (1953), a poem by the Bolivian-Swiss writer Eugen Gomringer. The book’s final chapter discusses Brazilian “e-poetry and performance,” taking up work by Arnaldo Antunes and Eduardo Kac. While the scriptural cedes space to movement, color, sound, and the corporeal, Ledesma argues convincingly that the immediacy of perception that characterizes digital poetry does not necessarily result in an immediacy of interpretation. For example, in Ledesma’s discussion of Antunes’s *Errática* (2008), recitation, music, noise, bodily performance, and digital projection converge in complex ways. The verbal signs (and other elements of the performance) may be immediately apprehensible, but the interpretive possibilities of their abundant interactions certainly demand more than an instant appraisal.

Ambitious and broad in scope, Ledesma’s book offers sharp analysis of key texts in the corpuses he proposes to study, some likely well known to most interested readers and some likely unfamiliar. His main point is the avant-garde’s centrality to later poetic practice in Ibero-America, adapted and reworked through shifts in politics and technology even up to the digital practice of poets today. The greatest synthesis comes at the end, in the section on Brazilian poetry. This is somewhat unfortunate, because a clearer outline of the path to be traced by the book’s overall progression might have helped the reader to engage in more complex ways with the texts studied in the first two thirds of the work. The notions of Krieger’s “ekphrastic principle” and reader/text “recursivity” appear throughout the book, but only receive their clearest articulation in this final section.

The readings Ledesma performs on poems and works of plastic and performance art throughout are often quite innovative and very thorough. He is careful to provide nuanced challenges to any final resolution of meaning, even to the products of his own insight. His readings are decidedly polyvalent, and he demonstrates a healthy level of comfort with ambiguity and even paradox. That is not to say that he does not provide clear analyses or derive useful conclusions from the works he studies, as evidenced, for example, by his treatment of Uribe’s “Disciplina,” mentioned above.

Despite excellent appraisals of individual works, and the general soundness of his broader conclusions, Ledesma’s book does at times elide some important considerations: Are we to consider that the contemporary writers he discusses are aware

of the earlier writers he analyzes? Is his “genealogy” of avant-garde poetic practice a metaphor for shared and continuing priorities or a declaration of influence? In a few cases, Ledesma is able to give a clear account of these concerns, as with Brazilian Concrete Art’s explicit recognition of its debts to Mondrian and Malevich (229) or Delgado’s likely references to poems by Pound and Apollinaire (98-100). But the answers to these questions are more often “yes/no/both/it depends.” Ledesma wisely does not offer these conclusions explicitly, but the premise of the book does seem to promise them. The book, then, is an important preliminary contribution to the scholarship of digital poetry’s filiation to the historical avant-garde. It is certainly the case that there is a genealogical progression from the historical avant-garde to current digital poetry in Ibero-America, but it is also true that some contemporary artists are more aware of and more interested in that genealogy than others. The implications of Ledesma’s thesis are extremely broad and his analyses are extremely focused, thus his book cannot be considered a history of “radical poetry” in Ibero-America from the avant-gardes to today, but rather a general outline structured around the themes of “metaphor,” “the kinetic,” and the digital as evinced in a rich but limited canon, a strange and beautiful constellation that, inevitably, cannot illuminate the entire sky.

Many of the writers and poems he treats will be relatively familiar to students of the historical avant-garde or the neo-avant-gardes of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is however likely that at least some of the writers Ledesma treats would be new to nearly any reader, as I stated above. He takes a salutary interest in works in Catalan, Spanish, and Portuguese and from writers of a number of nationalities. Thus, Ledesma presents a broad panorama of the avant-garde’s long-term ramifications, punctuated by quite disparate names, works, and places. To completely fill the bounds of this panorama would be a monumental task indeed; Ledesma’s book gives some very helpful coordinates and general course settings for such future scholarship.