

GRAEME KIRKPATRICK (2011) *AESTHETIC THEORY AND THE VIDEO GAME*. MANCHESTER: MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN 978-0-7190-7718-0.

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The art of the aesthetic age has never stopped playing on the possibility that each medium could offer to blend its affects with those of others, to assume their role and thereby create new figures, reawakening sensible possibilities which they had exhausted. The new technologies and aids supply these metamorphoses with unprecedented possibilities. (Ranciere, 2011: 131-2)

So concludes Ranciere's *Emancipated Spectator*. It is a proposition that guides Graeme Kirkpatrick in his understanding of gameplay as such a metamorphosis and theorization of it as aesthetic.

If his billing as keynote speaker at the recent Crossroads conference in Paris is indicative (not to mention the panels on his work), Ranciere's ideas would appear to have currency for cultural studies. Foregrounding aesthetic theories as a lens through which to explore the status of videogames as 'awkward objects', Kirkpatrick turns to Ranciere (2009) to work with his 'texture of communal existence' for games. Understanding games in the context of art and aesthetic theory over the last two decades, Kirkpatrick proposes that 'what we find in video games is something like the raw material of art surfacing in another dimension of culture' (37).

Ranciere is one of a plethora of writers with whom Kirkpatrick artfully weaves propositions and readings of games to accumulate a coherently 'mapped' theory of gaming as an aesthetic cultural practice. Foucault's reading of Magritte is put into play with the Wii remote as 'calligram'. Badiou's writing on dance (as metaphor for the 'unfixed') is challenged by the emergence of videogames as 'undecided' – for Kirkpatrick, this cannot be accommodated in Badiou's four conditions. Videogames are situated here as central to

Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling' of today. These three examples are mere illustrations of the comprehensive and dazzling array of critical, cultural and aesthetic theorists and videogames Kirkpatrick engages with. At times, this makes it necessary to return to the central proposition laid forth in the introduction – that gaming can be understood as an experience of form, hence the drawing of a line from Kant through Adorno to Ranciere. Crucially, though, the author sets up games as awkward for this theoretical lineage: as disruptive to some of the boundaries (or 'adequations') placed between categories such as aesthetic and formal – in this sense Kirkpatrick shares the view often expressed in the emerging field of games studies that this form of cultural practice demands new conceptual frameworks – neither ludic nor narrative, both aesthetic and political. This is most powerfully argued in relation to a re-reading of the 'culture industry': 'The inner logic of the form is such that it invites people to play and in so doing opens up a form of experience that is resistant, but not oppositional, in relation to the dominant societal logic (42)'.

There can be observed, then, a more or less cynical and humorous – perhaps even 'frivolous' – interplay between simulation and activity. This is, for Kirkpatrick, primarily 'the locus of a peculiar experience of aesthetic form' (44). It is this attempt to theorise the aesthetic realm of gameplay in a sustained manner, as opposed to the social focus on 'game cultures' alone, that enables Kirkpatrick to look at the relationship between gaming as commodified art and playful commodity. In this way, games are seen as 'excessive', beyond representation or simulation. This argument is developed out of Ian Bogost's work on unit operations of equivalence and then back to Ranciere's on form and semblance.

There is no doubt that this book is important: for the academic theorization of gameplay, aesthetic theory, and cultural studies in its broadest, interdisciplinary or 'indisciplined' manifestations. Whilst Kirkpatrick works hard to avoid selecting only games that 'fit' the model – a mistake made by many texts that approach 'game literacy' only in relation to games derived from literature or highly novelistic games – still Kirkpatrick seems to give some games more attention than others for such reasons (he considers games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Elektroplankton*, which are perhaps easier to read as aesthetic than, for example, *Mario*). That said, *Worms*, *Mario Smash Football*, *Pong*, *Tetris* and *Cluedo Reinvention* are all analysed in relation to broader socio-cultural ideas or institutional facts – *Mario Smash Football* as exemplifying how the Wii console is mis-read as a

hub for simulation; *Worms* discussed through Lefebvre on time and space; and *Pong* is considered for its primordial structure of emergence. It is a pedantic point when Kirkpatrick's book is so prolific in terms of both theory and examples, but we should note that the more 'serious' games (emerging canons exist in both academic and 'popular' discourses as well as in communities of gaming practice) are connected to the likes of Ranciere at the more 'micro' textual level whereas the 'family game' is viewed as more straightforwardly 'knowable' (for example, the distinction between playing *Guitar Hero* and a real guitar). In other words, there appear to be two – perhaps overly insulated – theoretical approaches in the book – a more sociological reading of some games and a more 'purely' aesthetic study of others. These differences in approach don't, however, detract from the overarching project.

The development of a coherent argument in Kirkpatrick's book impresses most. Many books and readers cherry-pick and meander in their attempts to connect game culture to theory, too often bogged down in their own internal quests for more or less 'disciplinarity' in the developing field. Kirkpatrick has little interest in this and instead sets up and then brilliantly exemplifies a notion of 'awkwardness' as being at once what sets games apart and a starting point for their 'proper analysis'. Most importantly, understanding the relationships between art, politics, dance and so forth and games will, this book shows, tell us as much about the former as the latter. In this sense games are of interest in a proximal relation to these 'others', but it is a relation of 'awkwardness'. This is a similar position to that taken by Ranciere, hence his centrality in this book. In simple terms, the way that games feel to players is profoundly aesthetic, so Kirkpatrick is working through Ranciere's 'lost adequation'. As someone coming to Ranciere through an interest in pedagogy, I was impressed with the way Kirkpatrick made connections absent in *The Emancipated Spectator* or more abstract readings of Ranciere.

I don't agree with Kirkpatrick when he argues that privileging form and aesthetics in the study of games necessitates 'giving up some of the available positions within cultural and media theory, especially those that are associated with the analysis of discourse' (1). Surely Ranciere is drawing attention to discursive operations that delimit 'adequations'; Kirkpatrick appears to do the same. Nevertheless, as a reader with an interest in games studies within the broader fields of cultural and educational enquiry (see McDougall and O'Brien, 2009), I have yet to encounter a book as extensive and thought-provoking as *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*.

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