

The Psychoparatextuality of Everyday Life

Kenneth Goldsmith

A funny thing happened when I was flipping through my PDF of Genette's *Paratexts*. I was scrolling through the "pages" when suddenly, around page 160, the PDF stopped displaying text. The next three hundred pages were blank. It's hard to imagine this happening to Genette during the period when he was writing his book. If electronic glitches eradicated texts, only a few geeks knew about it; PDFs didn't even exist. Textual presence was something Genette took for granted: the simple fact that when you opened a book, the text would be there. That stability enabled his theory of paratexts. But what happens when the text vanishes? While paratexts can exist without text, a book without text was beyond Genette's purview. But I might be wrong—he might have discussed this in the last three hundred pages of his book. I'll never know. So in a sense, a big chunk of Genette's text has become paratextual to my experience of it. This condition turns out to be unintentionally prescient, for in the twenty-first century, text and its consumption might be the last thing we care about. Instead, the whole notion of textuality has itself become paratextual.

Then there is quantity. Perhaps Genette couldn't have imagined that we would possess great amount of texts without ever having read them on the scale we find ourselves in the digital age. While his purview was vast and scholarly, it was, understandably, limited, appearing to examine what his bookshelves could hold. Today, we find ourselves overwhelmed by vast amount of texts that we'll never read, creating a condition whereby reading itself is paratextual to the factualness of the artifact. Gazillions of unread PDFs and ePubs are strewn about my hard drive, downloaded because file-sharing offered them to me for free. I can't believe that they are there—things that I would've a decade or two ago paid dearly for—now available for nothing more than a click. Are they the best copies? Nope. Like my Genette PDF, they're flawed, but because they're free, I'll take them. The glitch is part of the free-culture ecosystem, one that implies use and indicates history. The marks of technology are marks of humanity,

paratextual elements appended to cultural artifacts. I might not be able to read my PDF but I am able to possess a version of it—flawed as it might be—thereby rendering reading (textuality) paratextual to the experience of downloading it.

Right now I'm listening to a Django Reinhardt track called "Improvisation" from LP rip called *Swing From Paris*. A search leads me to the paratextual discographical information, which tells me that the rip I've got is from a little 10" LP released on London Records in 1954, that some kind soul ripped to MP3 and uploaded to file-sharing. My recording is laced with glitches—crackles, skips, and pops. While they don't disappear the music in the same way Genette's PDF did, they do eradicate part of it (a skip will literally skip over part of the music) while the crackles and pops are a sonic layer underlying the entire recording, artifacts that Reinhardt didn't intend to be there. The 10" LP, in its original format, was loaded with paratextuality material—the record label that put it out, the cover art, the liner notes, and so forth—but all of those have vanished since I downloaded it as an MP3. "Improvisation" then, is a free-floating artifact, something that I've termed "nude media," bereft of provenance, ripped from its original context—that is to say, bereft of paratexts—which is the way that most of our cultural artifact arrives these days on our drives. But in those traditional paratextual absences, new paratexts emerge, those of the apparatus—networks, servers, distribution systems, and software.

When that artifact arrives on my desktop, it's inscribed with someone else's history. Every scratch and skip bespeaks of a spilled glass of wine or a fingernail running across the grooves while clumsily trying to hoist the LP onto a spindle. I can psychogeographically attempt reconstruct the history of this MP3—how it got scratched—but it's all fancy. I truly haven't a clue. My romantic reconstruction, and the memory rabbit holes I fall into as a result are psychoparatexts. In time, like psychogeography, those psychoparatextual elements have merged with my own life. In time, the scratches on my copy of "Improvisation" have become my scratches. As Django's song has worked its way into my life—as a soundtrack for long bus rides or behind the conversation at a dinner party—those skips and scratches have become *my* skips and scratches, as if they had been created by circumstances in my own life. Those paratexts are now the soundtrack—front and center—for my own life. Since an MP3, once downloaded, is untamperable—I'm most likely not going to attempt to clean it up—those flaws are permanent features.

To take it a step further, those scratches are psychoparatextual portals to my own history, the sounds of my youth. When I was young, audio was never "clean"; cassette tapes melted on car dashboards on hot summer days, warping *Led Zeppelin IV* into Stockhausen-like polyphonies. AM radio blaring out the Ronettes was persistently filled with static; when I'd drive beneath a highway underpass, I'd lose the sound entirely as I did the remainder of the Genette PDF. I'd stack my Beatles LPs upon one another on the turntable's spindle, causing them to destroy one another when they dropped the way Debord and Jorn's *Mémoires* destroyed the books next to them on the bookshelf. When *Revolver* fell on top of *Sgt. Pepper's*, the meeting of those two surfaces resulted in mutually assured destruction, almost like S&M, each happily bearing the scars of their consensual encounter. Were I to make my own MP3 versions of those records, their particular set of scratches would make them completely unique. When

official versions of *Revolver* are sold as MP3s, they are identically clean copies, lacking those rich paratextual ecosystems. The individual file-sharer's hand reinscribes paratextuality to the artifact through its flaws.

If this is the case, can we say that nostalgia itself is paratextual to any experience? I'm driving on Long Island, flipping through the radio dial and suddenly, out of nowhere, The Beach Boys' "Wendy" comes on. I'm instantly thrown from the text of 2016 back into my paratextuality of the summer of 1976. I'm still driving a car in 2016, but that has become paratextual / peripheral to the wave of nostalgia that this song has triggered, which is now front and center. Thoughts are racing through my mind, from the girl I was dating that summer to the saga of Brian Wilson to a recent interview I read with Mike Love that I found on Facebook. Two minutes and sixteen seconds later, I'm sort of back in the present with my eyes on the road and at the same time with "Wendy" still paratextually echoing through my head.

Could we say then that we are post-paratextual? We've ingested everything Genette has taught us—and yet still, we suspend our disbelief, and fall into the transparency of great art, while swooning to memory and nostalgia. A few weeks ago, I impulsively grabbed a hardback edition of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* off my shelf. I dove into it and haven't been able to put it down. But in spite of years of digital immersion and meta-critical commentary, I got lost in the book as if it were 1955. Sure, I kept my phone near me and glanced at my Twitter feed from time to time, but a century-and-a-half later, in spite of waves of critical theory and technological revolutions—most of which I've lived my life by—Henry James still knocks me out. In spite of all my critical skepticism, I still swoon in the face of great art. While any book can be deconstructed, certain works resist that kind of treatment. Once, with a group of students, we tried to destroy William Carlos Williams's "Red Wheelbarrow" by using online textual mangling engines. No matter how atomized we made the text, it still sang as Williams intended it to. While we could deconstruct it, we couldn't destroy it. Some works are simply resistant. Sometimes content is still content.

It reminds me of when my wife and I had our first child. In spite of my many years of feminism, when it came down to it, the essential differences in the sexes became apparent when you had a baby. All of that stuff, temporarily at least, got swept away and very traditional gender roles went into effect. We never forgot our feminism, and came back to it later when we could catch our breath, but for at least two years, we suspended our disbelief. While I could deny readability and context till I'm blue in the face, when it comes down to it, there are times when all of that dissolves. Can we say that we're not all one way or the other, but instead a mix of radically contradictory impulses? In spite of the tangle of delivery systems, technologies, and interfaces, Django Reinhardt's guitar and Henry James's words still hit us between the eyes, cutting through all the walls I've built up around it. Like Cage or Duchamp, Genette was essential in rendering that which was previously invisible visible. Yet like Cage or Duchamp, we can modulate the experiences of our cultural consumption, adjusting the dial as each experience requires. For all we know about Duchamp, we still piss in urinals; for all we know about Cage, we still fall in love with pop songs; for all we know about Genette, we still get lost in books. If my MP3 has been flattened of paratexts, can we say that the digital flattens palimpsests in favor of compression? Is memory a paratext of the artifact? (Perhaps it's always been so.)

Let's take this one step further and say that mobile technology renders meatspace into a paratext. The world recedes into the background, a humming engine, ancillary to the point where meatspace becomes an apparatus in service of the digital. What shows up on my screen is content and everything else—including the person beside me who is also lost in their smartphone—becomes paratextual. I'm much more interested in the person I'm texting with than I am in the person beside me, who has also paratexted me in favor of someone physically far-flung. Can we say then, that because of smartphones, three-dimensional space has become paratextual to two-dimensional space? In an unexpected victory for Greenbergian modernism, the flatness of the screen has become more real and more truthful than geography. The map has indeed become the territory. Information has displaced physicality.

I want to find a word to describe in meatspace the play between foreground (subject) and background (paratext) that happens in photography. There are certain lenses or filters that render the subject in sharp focus, while blurring the entire background which I think is a good metaphor for paratextuality beyond the page. The ability to modulate focus, between foreground and background, is moveable paratextuality. We're here, straddling the line between the informational and the physical. Right now I'm sitting in an airport lounge typing this essay on my laptop. The laptop, brightly illuminated, is the full focus of my attention, visually, physically, and intellectually. Yet this space is full of paratextual elements: the group of men chatting quietly next to me, the ambient sounds of the airport, the architecture of this space, the various decorative and lighting elements surrounding me and so forth, all the way down to the WiFi I'm connected to; even the chair I'm sitting on are paratextual to this essay. We live in an M.C. Escher drawing, inhabiting a fourth-dimensional cube which is folding in on itself while at the same time expanding. The play of signifiers and signifieds is ever-shifting, restlessly morphing from text to paratext, which leads us back to the flaw with Genette's theory, that is to presume the existence of stability of any sort. Instead, grounds are shifting beneath our feet and above our heads, as paratexts becomes texts, and texts transform into paratexts.

KEYWORDS

psychoparatextuality

ABSTRACT:

The article describes the experience of psychoparatextuality in contemporary everyday life. Using selected examples, the author shows how numerous individualized, often accidental supplements to works and texts that occur in copies become texts in themselves for someone else's life world. This allows us to make the further claim that in the contemporary media context the paratextual has become an entire reality vis-a-vis texts that appear on laptop and smartphone screens.

paratext

everyday life

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Kenneth Goldsmith is the author of thirteen books of poetry. He teaches writing at The University of Pennsylvania. In May 2011, he was invited to read at President Obama's "A Celebration of American Poetry" at The White House, where he also held a poetry workshop with First Lady Michelle Obama. In 2013, he was named as the inaugural Poet Laureate of The Museum of Modern Art in New York. His most recent book is "Wasting Time on the Internet," a meditation on digital culture. |