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*Annotation* by Remi Kalir and Antero Garcia (review)

Jan Baetens

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nifying glass of the present.” In this chapter, as in many others, the notion of scale comes to the fore as a particular theme that underpins “envi-roning media”: that they jump across different scales, and not only scales understood in the measured sense of spatio-temporal points across a predefined matrix but as diffractive lenses. The in-mixing of different types, classes, and scales of agency, which the Afterword by Bernard Geoghegan also seems to be pointing at, is a case in point.

As already mentioned, *Environing Media* is an enjoyable read, with several case studies but also methodological cues that are of interest; to read models, graphs, deep sea cores, autonomous floats (the Argo program), and other scientific examples as media is among those. Similarly, it is always refreshing to read examples beyond the usual Anglo-American world—in this case from Mexico to Sweden—that are treated not merely as exceptions to the rule but as integral components in the planetary histories of environmental data. Indeed, at least for this reader, “envi-roning media” helps in figuring out how to read environmental data as a recursive concept that both defines a particular process of datafication while itself participating in the transformation of its own referent in that process.

#### ANNOTATION

by Remi Kalir and Antero Garcia. MIT Press, Essential Knowledge Series, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A. 2021. 232 pp. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-262-53992-0.

*Reviewed by Jan Baetens.*

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One cannot praise enough the MIT Press’s *Essential Knowledge* series, which offers “accessible, concise, beautifully produced pocket-size books on topics of current interest.” *Annotation* is an outstanding example of the relevance of this type of publication, which helps in understanding the hidden mechanisms and larger cultural stakes of ubiquitous but often unnoticed concepts, actions, objects, ideas, and technologies, and, above all, the links between all these elements.

The authors of this book start by making a sharp distinction between annotations as *concrete marks* made by users and annotation as a *genre*. Given the relative wealth of material already available on specific types of annotations (Kalir and Garcia pay thus a well-deserved tribute to, for instance, H.J. Jackson’s *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* [Yale Univ. Press, 2001]), it is the latter that is here at the heart of the analysis, conceptually as well as functionally. The authors first explain annotation by defining it in itself, regardless of its functions, as “a note added to a text”, a definition that gives them the opportunity to further detail what they mean by “note” (here enlarged to various kinds of multimodal inscriptions), “adding” (supposing a certain agency, contrary to certain forms of paratext and meta-data, which can be annotations but which in certain cases lack the specific kind of agency that transforms a mark into a real note), and eventually “text” (here defined with the help of three main features: author, message, and structure). This definition is followed by a discussion of what Kalir and Garcia consider the five main functions of annotation: providing information, sharing commentary, sparking conversation, expressing power, and aiding learning. Their conceptual and functional analysis is at the same time precise and open. Kalir and Garcia give clear descriptions, with excellent contemporary and historical examples and great suggestions for further reading. However, they systematically insist on the difficulty of neatly distinguishing annotation from other practices while also stressing the complex underpinnings of the genre’s functions, which cannot fully examine outside the material and cultural contacts that may twist its various forms and meanings. The editorial history of this book, whose draft versions have been collectively discussed on a public review platform (MIT’s PubPub forum) but also the authors’ final invitation to annotate their work and to constructively change it are two proofs of the radical openness of their approach, which is part of the achievement of *Annotation*.

In this spirit, I would like to add three small observations or questions, which I hope will prove helpful to the public afterlife of a truly inspiring work.

One: What about the *negative* aspects of annotation? The authors rightly emphasize the value and importance of constructive annotation, and this is obviously the logical counterpart of their overall positive approach to the genre’s functions. Kalir and Garcia are however not blind to the issues of power that underlie annotation, although rhetorically speaking it is not a coincidence that the chapter on “power,” where some darker elements of disciplinarization appear, comes before that on “aiding learning,” where the brightness of the world of annotation must come for some readers as a relief. Yet we all know that annotation can also be a practice of vandalizing texts, of shattering a text’s meaning and structure and of destroying an authorial effort and position, certainly in the case of digital texts, even more vulnerable to dismemberment than texts in print or, why not, in stone. Annotation then comes close to the dangers of superficial reading and perhaps even nonreading, as diagnosed by Lindsay Waters’s *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004). Granted, annotation can be a tool to better grasp the meaning of a text, but it can also be a way of radically dissolving it. This flipside of annotation is alas hardly taken into consideration here.

Two: What about *non-annotation*, which also deserves close as well as distant reading? What does it mean to avoid adding notes to a text? Does this gesture, for it is one after all, disclose a cultural habit or constraint or something else? In some countries and traditions, annotating a book is “not done.” I am thinking for instance of the reading of literary works in French culture, where some scholars continue to buy two copies of a book, one meant to be annotated and the other one to be kept as the real thing (and if one only buys one copy, notes will be taken in a separate notebook).

But what is the meaning of such a tradition? Is it a sign of respect? A legal constraint, stating for instance that it is forbidden to write in the margins of a book that one does not own oneself, as in the case of a library book? Or is it a sign of approval, a symptom of the fact that one agrees with the text and fully understands it?

Three: Is annotation really a *single* genre or is it a practice that cannot be separated from the various genres it may accompany? Kalir and Garcia are working in the field of education, and they have a strong and perfectly understandable interest in journalism in the age of fake news. But not all their analyses fully apply to what happens in the field of literature, where the notion of authorship, for example, definitely functions in other ways. How can an “author” be accountable for what they are saying in a word of fiction? What about ideas on the “death of the author”? Similar remarks could be made on the way one defines “message” and “structure” (the two other features, with that of the “author,” of *Annotation’s* definition of what a text is supposed to have or to be). Author, message, and structure are less self-evident than in certain types of nonliterary writing.

The collaborative and open structure of this book, which is also a work in progress, will certainly bring many other questions to the fore, and it is the great merit of Kalir and Garcia to have written a book that will be actively annotated and creatively superseded by many readers.

**ACEVEDO IN CONTEXT:  
ANALOG MEDIA 1977–1987 •  
DIGITAL MEDIA 1983–2020**

by Peter Frank, Charlotte Frost, Thomas Miller, Michael J. Masucci, and Victor Acevedo. AcevedoMedia, Los Angeles, CA, U.S.A., 2021. 400 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-1-73-527110-1.

Reviewed by Amy Ione, the Diatropé Institute. Email: [ione@diatropé.com](mailto:ione@diatropé.com).

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*ACEVEDO in Context* offers a striking introduction to the groundbreaking career of Victor Acevedo. The narrative, supplemented with color

plates, helps the reader position his pioneering work. Four essays by Peter Frank, Charlotte Frost, Thomas Miller, and Michael J. Masucci further enhance our understanding of his art, as do quotations and notes by the artist himself. The book also includes transcriptions from previously unpublished writings and interviews with art historian Patric Prince and scientist-crystallographer Arthur L. Loeb. One particularly compelling aspect of the survey is how Acevedo developed his unique voice in conversation with other artists. These forays demonstrate Acevedo’s talent for incorporating different schools of art as he developed his unique style. The influences of M.C. Escher, Salvador Dalí’s surrealism, and R. Buckminster Fuller stand out. Cubism and Futurism are also woven into his work from his earliest days.

Escher passed away in 1972, and seven years later Acevedo was fortunate enough to gain access to the M.C. Escher Foundation in the Hague, Netherlands. There he got special permission to make hand transcriptions of Escher’s personal tessellation study notebooks over a week’s time, years before they were published publicly. This gave him insight into how they were built up on graph paper and allowed Acevedo to unlock the techniques of the zomorphic tessellations. This exciting opportunity, particularly for an artist at the beginning of his career, is visually documented by a photograph in the book showing the young artist at the M.C. Escher Foundation holding one of the wood blocks for the Escher print *Smaller and Smaller*.

Another photograph, a head shot of Salvador Dalí, is equally awe inspiring, once again making one think about how the young artist must have felt at the time of this encounter. From the text we learn that they shook hands in Figueres, Spain, in 1977. Acevedo took that moment to show Dalí one of his recent student drawings.

*ACEVEDO in Context* also includes a photograph with R. Buckminster Fuller, taken while the two of them were chatting backstage at Fuller’s

Integrity Day lecture at the Los Angeles Convention Center, 26 February 1983. Acevedo spent a good deal of time with Fuller during the last six months of Fuller’s life. The artist saw this as life-changing.

The 1998 interview with Dutch scientist and crystallographer Arthur L. Loeb is quite illuminating in terms of both the M.C. Escher connection and in terms of how Acevedo’s work builds on the geometry of Buckminster Fuller’s *Synergetics*. This interview mentions Fuller’s book called *Synergetics: Explorations in the Geometry of Thinking*, a book that later inspired many of Acevedo’s various geometrical structures. The Fuller geometry seemed complicated to me and I, admittedly, was unable to follow all the details. Those interested in Fuller’s work will want to look at the appendices section at the end of this volume. One of the three included presents the artist’s 2006–2016 collaboration with geometer Thomas Miller and details how they have further developed Fuller’s ideas. We also learn that Acevedo saw Fuller’s geometry as a metaphor for ideas such as the void and the void matrix that he became interested in after reading Fritjof Capra’s book *The Tao of Physics* in 1979.

*The Tao of Physics* exposed Acevedo to parallels between modern physics and “Eastern mysticism.” Capra depicts the void as a domain that is totally empty yet simultaneously full and brimming over with the potentiality of being. After his having read the book, Capra’s ideas began to take form in the artist’s imagery. Acevedo conceptualized it in terms of both periodic geometrical structure and as a device he could use metaphorically for his figurative subjects.

A second important reason to look at *ACEVEDO in Context* is that Acevedo’s biographical narrative serves as a reminder that many of the media pioneers worked with analog tools before technological art was ubiquitous. Books like this one document the roots of media arts and connect it with the work of participants who forged the revolution. In this case, the volume helps us see how Acevedo, as an innovative pioneer, transformed predigital