

# On Inventing (the) Experimental Humanities

Review by Sergio C. Figueiredo  
Kennesaw State University

---

Ulmer, Gregory L. *Electracy: Gregory L. Ulmer's Textshop Experiments*. Eds., Craig Saper, Gregory L. Ulmer, and Victor Vitanza. The Davies Group, 2015. Print.

It will have taken me almost five years to write this review of *Electracy: Gregory L. Ulmer's Textshop Experiments*, edited by Ulmer, Craig Saper, and Victor J. Vitanza. My first attempt at writing this review was replaced by an interview I conducted over email with Ulmer in 2016. In 2018, when I started my second attempt at writing this review, I began by situating Ulmer's work building a series of textshop experiments as a part of an avant-garde movement. This last attempt rested on a claim that Ulmer's work merited a spot alongside *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Allan Kaprow's *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Dick Higgins's *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Toward a Theory of New Arts*, Jerzy Ludwiński's *Notes from the Future of Art* and Hannah Higgins's *Fluxus Experience*. However, as I started the review, I paused to explore the histories of the literary-artistic avant-garde, wondering when and where the term had originated. Perusing Wikipedia, I discovered that the modern meaning of the *avant-garde* was grounded in an 1825 essay by Henri Saint-Simon (et al.), titled, "L'Artiste, Le Savant, et L'Industriel." To be sure that this review would accurately represent this collection of Ulmer's work, I found an original copy of the essay, transcribed and translated it, and conducted a year's worth of research into Saint-Simon's work, both in primary and second texts. These efforts not only further justified my initial tendency to position Ulmer's work as a contribution to the historical avant-garde but also shed light on how Ulmer's work is perhaps the most *avant-garde* of all the works noted above.

The textshop, Ulmer writes in "Textshop for an Experimental Humanities" (1990, not included in *Electracy*), is "designed to supplement (not replace entirely) the readerly classroom, where reading and writing are taught as a specialized knowledge, with a writerly laboratory, where our materials are approached with the pleasure of *amateurs*" (114). In Ulmer's textshop, students are given opportunities "to discover the epistemological assumptions at work in culture and in one's own thinking [and to see] that culture (or society) is not natural, given, but is made, invented, and hence changeable" ("Textshop for an Experimental Humanities" 117). If there is a critique to be leveraged of Ulmer's work, it would be that the grounding for the textshop begins too late, beginning with theorists like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Derrida. Marx himself, for example, cites Saint-Simon's work as a primary influence in his *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*. Even so, the spirit of Ulmer's work is more reflective of the charge Saint-Simon gives the arts, letters, and humanities: to serve as the social institution whose mission it is to direct the social and ethical well-being of (post-) industrial societies. Ulmer's work, perhaps more than any other avant-garde movement from the late-nineteenth century to the present, adopts this charge as its primary objective. To adapt Bruno Latour's claim, we might say that before Ulmer begins developing a textshop curriculum and building the theoretical foundations of *electracy*, we have never seen a literary-artistic avant-garde movement.

For Ulmer, as for Saint-Simon, an avant-garde is grounded in the histories of the arts and humanities, with the histories of rhetoric as a primary starting point. In chapter three, “Teletheory: A Mystery” (originally published in 1987), Ulmer explains the need for a textshop-model of humanities education, writing that the “failure of the humanities disciplines to communicate with the public may be due in part to the fact that what separates specialized humanists from laymen is not only our conceptual apparatus and the discourses in which it is expressed,” but also that the very medium we use fails to account for the media most accessible to those publics (53). Saint-Simon (et al.) makes a similar claim in “L’Artiste,” arguing that to spread an ethic of well-being through (post-)industrial and global societies, artists and poets of all stripes should work in the media of the popular arts and with the common impulse of promoting ever-greater social, cultural, and economic justice for the general public (Calinescu 103).

*Electracy* is organized in mostly chronological order, beginning with a 1981 essay (chapter one, “Barthes’s Body of Knowledge”) and ending with a 2000 lecture (chapter thirteen, “Emergent Ontologies”) at the European Graduate School, where Ulmer serves as Joseph Beuys Chair (2000-present). The only exceptions to the chronological order are chapters eight (“The Object of Post-Criticism,” originally published in 1983) and twelve (“Handbook for a Theory Hobby,” originally published in 1987). The chronological order of the collection offers readers a view of a career-long project, a legacy in the making. Together, the essays in this collection range from the theoretical grounding of *electracy* (“Barthes’s Body of Knowledge” and “Textshop for Post(e)pedagogy”) to practical and creative applications of that grounding (“Choramancy: A User’s Guide” and “Handbook for a Theory Hobby”). As Craig Saper and Victor Vitanza describe it in the preface, this collection reflects the significance and importance of Ulmer’s work in resituating “theory and disciplinary knowledge production within the crucial and formative personal narratives, cultural contexts, and poetic rhetorics involved in all” (xiii). In other words, *Electracy* offers a compendium of sorts to Ulmer’s other major works: *Applied Grammatology* (1985), *Teletheory* (1989), *Internet Invention* (2003), *Electronic Monuments* (2005), *Miami Virtue & the Ulmer Tapes* (2012), *Avatar Emergency* (2012), and the recently published *Konsult* (2019).

What we see in these essays are the sprawling effects of Ulmer’s work. The collection certainly works at the level of *theopraxis* (thinking-making-doing and knowledge-purpose-affect all at once). This kind of multidimensional thinking is best understood in the keyword guiding Ulmer’s work: *apparatus*, a term that refers both to the technological organization of language and “to the institutional formations of that technology, the experience of identity, the formation of subjects within that apparatus, all in a matrix, interrelated, not causing one another, but a kind of mutual interdependence” (*Electracy* 302). As with any project of such magnitude, it would be a mistake to treat an essay, a collection of essays, or a monograph as a complete work. To do so would be to subvert the guiding maxim of Ulmer’s project (adopted from the poet Basho): *not to follow in the footsteps of the masters, but to see what they sought*.

*Electracy* accomplishes this task and more. It brings together the philosophical (thinking/knowledge), practical (making/purpose), and aesthetic (doing/affect) dimensions of arts and humanities traditions together and directs them toward a singular aim. Anyone working in the experimental arts and humanities today, particularly with respect to digital technologies, will find food for thought in every essay in this collection. However, to merely read, teach, or employ the methods, practices, strategies, etc. Ulmer offers up in these essays would be to miss the point of the author’s project. To take Ulmer’s work seriously, we cannot only do what Ulmer has done. No. Readers of the essays in this collection and the books that have come out of the thought-experiments found in these

essays should take seriously the guiding motto of Ulmer's project. The aim for these readers, and this reviewer, should not be to follow in Ulmer's footsteps, but to seek what Ulmer has sought. Our aim, in brief, should be to re-invent the arts and humanities, to test and experiment with the traditions of those disciplines, and to re-affirm our commitment to bring our disciplinary works to bear on public policy and social life as it relates to promoting an ever-more equitable society.

Readers of this collection should not be surprised to find that the essays in this book are meant to be read and re-read. In the concluding essay, "Emergent Ontologies," a transcribed lecture given in 2000 at the European Graduate School in Saas Fee, Switzerland, Ulmer reminds us that "the public sphere as we knew it within literacy" is becoming undone, if we understand the public sphere "to mean that process of monumentality by which a collectivity imagines itself" (302). The essays in this collection offer a snapshot of Ulmer's attempts to imagine how national and global collectivities imagine themselves within the era of electracy and the very real effects of digital automation on remaking the public sphere.

Gregory Ulmer has given us all a gift in this collection, a gift not unlike the ones offered to us by avant-garde artists and poets of old. It is a gift that keeps on giving for those readers willing to dive into the histories of the arts and humanities with an eye toward experimenting with and re-inventing their experimental traditions for the contemporary and future world. When readers open *Electracy: Gregory L. Ulmer's Textshop Experiments*, they find the gift that Saint-Simon et al., almost two hundred years ago, believed the arts and humanities needed in order to take their central place in (post-)industrial societies, the gift of a common drive—to support individual and collective well-being and the pursuit of ever-greater social justice—designed to guide our respective works in meeting the challenges brought about by electronic civilization.

---

## Works Cited

Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Duke University Press, 2006.

Ulmer, Gregory L. "Textshop for an Experimental Humanities." In *Reorientations: Critical Theories and Pedagogies*. Eds. Bruce Henricksen and Thais E. Morgan. University of Illinois Press, 1990. Print.

---

## Cite this Review

Figueiredo, Sergio C. "On Inventing (the) Experimental Humanities." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 36, 2020, doi:10.20415/rhiz/036.r05