The purpose of *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* by Virginia Pignagnoli is to introduce a revision of Gérard Genette’s work on paratext (*Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* [1997, originally published in French in 1987]) in an exploration of post-postmodernist novels. Two things become immediately clear. One is that Pignagnoli’s revision is not an acceptable substitute for Genette’s theory, and the second is that nonetheless Pignagnoli has marked off an area of research that is compelling and should be highly fruitful.

Let’s start with some definitions. “Paratext = Peritext + Epitext.”[1] Peritexts are elements that are included in the presentation of a work but are not part of the work itself. Peritext may include material provided by the author or others, such as the publisher, translator, or indexer. Examples of peritext can generally be found in the front and back matter of a book, although works presented in other media (films, CDs and DVDs, web pages, games, research papers, etc.) also use peritext. Some common instances of peritext elements include dedication, table of contents, copyright page, foreword, afterword, and bibliography.

On the other hand, epitext describes an almost infinite number of sources that are not included with a work but refer to it in some way. Epitext can be found in a variety of media. Examples include author interviews, author correspondence and journals, storyboards, outlines, drafts, honors and awards, and more. In fact, this review is an instance of epitext.

In the more than twenty-five years since Genette published his work on paratext, interest in paratext remains strong. Paratext is a staple of literary analysis and digital media scholarship as well as a subject of interest in communication, information, and education. Paratext is a very broad topic, and most authors working on paratext either focus on a part of the theory or work to identify and fill gaps. For example, many authors’ work centers on the functions of peritext, which Genette never fully conceptualized.
Pignagnoli’s interests are much narrower than Genette’s. She is not drawn to the whole of paratext. Her research concerns communications made in social media about novels (especially messages from authors) and the influence of these messages on how readers understand the author’s work. She is also interested in post-postmodern fiction and expounds on her ideas about digital epitext using five interesting novels in five interesting studies. First, in the introduction, she discusses post-postmodernist literature with a focus on earnestness, sincerity, materiality, and intersubjectivity alongside a discussion of the proliferation of digital media. The introduction also presents the concept of “extratextual author-audience interactions,” otherwise known as epitext (p. 1). Further, Pignagnoli tells us that she wishes to connect her view of paratext to the “emerging poetics succeeding postmodernism” in an effort to determine “whether, why, and how” digital communications from authors augment what they have to say in their novels (p. 3).

In chapter 1, Pignagnoli presents her rhetorical theory of paratextuality, in which she posits that all paratext can be described as primarily communicative (author/reader oriented regarding a text) or epistemic (information about a text) messages and seeks to revise Genette’s theory to reflect this dichotomy. Pignagnoli assumes that the audience for fiction will encounter authorial messages before, during, or after engaging with a novel. However, we know from Genette, if not our own experience, that the consumption of epitext, like any paratext, is an option that the reader may exercise at their own discretion. Pignagnoli’s theory assumes that digital authorial messages will inevitably affect how readers co-construct a story world, when in fact, there are readers who are more interested in the story than they are in the author, or what the author has to say about the work.

Another shortcoming of Pignagnoli’s theory is that it does not acknowledge the marketing function of paratext. Much paratext exists in order to boost sales by raising awareness of a work’s existence and attributes. This is true of many epitexts, such as book reviews and author interviews, and it is not completely wrong to assume that authors engage in communications related to their works in blogs, author websites, social media posts, and such in an effort to sell books.

To illustrate the difference between Genette’s thinking and her own, Pignagnoli provides a diagram by Genette (with missing citation information) that outlines the main criteria and sub-criteria for paratext. She reworks the scheme by removing concepts that do not serve her purpose and transforming the diagram from a hierarchal collection of criteria to a flow chart in which she asks readers to determine if the paratext under consideration is primarily communicative or epistemic before considering anything else. Several items from Genette’s list of criteria are removed, and new items are added to her flow chart, such as distinctions between works that are digital and those that are not, co-constructive dynamics, and rhetorical purposes. Pignagnoli spends little time explaining Genette’s theory of paratext and the ways others before her have sought to amend or augment his thinking. The majority of Genette’s book focuses on peritext. Only two chapters talk about epitext, which he discussed in terms of its public versus private nature.

After presenting her theory, Pignagnoli applies her idea in several studies that use digital epitext to illustrate how communicative and epistemic messages may affect how readers understand a text and to explore some post-postmodernist devices outlined in the introduction. In chapter 2, earnestness is discussed as a device in a study of *Moonglow* (2016) by Michael Chabon and Chabon’s posts on Instagram before, during, and after the publication of the book. The main discussion in the chapter quickly becomes the blurring of fiction with nonfiction and an investigation of the novel and the author’s Instagram texts to inform
the reader about which aspects of the story might have an autobiographical connection.

In chapter 3, materiality is one focus in an analysis of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011) by Jennifer Egan. Chapter 12 of Egan’s novel is composed of PowerPoint slides that we learn earlier in the book are the personal journal of a teenager named Alison. Because these PowerPoint slides are part of the body of the work, I do not agree with Pignagnoli that they can be considered peritext. However, when these slides are posted to the author’s website they do enter the world of paratext, and it makes sense to consider the function they serve outside the text. The remainder of this chapter provides additional details about the substance of Egan’s book and the writer’s creative process as presented on her website.

In chapter 4, intersubjectivity is explored using *The Answers* (2017) by Catherine Lacey and epistemic texts produced by the author on her website, Instagram posts, and tweets. Pignagnoli’s thesis in this chapter is that digital material provided by the author serves the function of building a connection with readers.

In chapter 5, co-construction is explored to describe how readers potentially reconstruct narratives when exposed to digital epistemic texts produced by other readers. The focus of this discussion is *The Female Persuasion* (2018) by Meg Wolitzer and content analyses of reader posts to GoodReads, Instagram, and Twitter.

The last chapter of the book, “Coda,” summarizes the author’s arguments and introduces *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Egger. Pignagnoli’s discussion of *The Circle* rounds out her book by revealing an instance where there is no digital authorial content available, which is consistent with the theme of the book. What’s missing in this array of studies is an investigation of what readers themselves have to say about their use of digital epitext and its relationship, if any, to their co-construction of story worlds.

It is not obvious why Pignagnoli’s recasting of Genette’s ideas would be preferable to his original theory, which has been applied to multiple media types in both theoretical and empirical studies. Her communicative versus epistemic distinction is interesting and is worth exploring as an additional lens that can be applied in paratextual and literary analysis, rather than a first, most primary one for people using Genette’s theory for research not aligned with Pignagnoli’s interests. There are many concepts in Genette’s work that may not be useful to Pignagnoli and that she discards but are useful for thinking about paratext, including the public/private distinction for thinking about epitext, the ways the impact of epitext messages may depend on when they are uncovered in terms of the lifetime of the author, and recognition of various anomalies that can affect theory building. For instance, paratext can exist and affect reader response to an author’s work in situations where there is no text, such as when a book project is aborted for some reason.

Pignagnoli limits her scope to her own concerns, which are exploring authors’ digital posts and author-audience communication about a text and connecting epitext to poetics. The scope of her interests is reasonable as epitext represents an extremely broad range of communication types and even this small corner of paratextual interest offers a lifetime of potential research.

For fans of Genette, or lovers of literary theory, this book will make an interesting read. For researchers and students, there are many aspects of this work that provide research questions and a potential lens for future research studies. The author has done an excellent job in choosing novels for discussion that are interesting in and of themselves for her analyses but that also have digital epitext that work well to illustrate her points. However, Pignagnoli does not spend much time on the details of Genette’s thinking or explaining all the changes she makes to his theory. Potential readers who are unfamiliar with paratext will
want to read the original work as preparation for assessing this text.

Note


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