

Academic Obsolescence – between Metaphor and Reality

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Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2011

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Kathleen Fitzpatrick is professor at Pomona College, and the author of the book *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: the American Novel in the Age of Television* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), also co-editor of *Pearson Custom Library: Introduction to Literature* (Pearson, 2006, 2008, 2010) and author of an impressive number of scientific articles. Her interest concerning the integration of new technologies within scientific research and the enlargement of cooperation in the academic communities are also visible when we think that Kathleen Fitzpatrick is deeply involved in the MediaCommons digital network, a true community for “scholars, students and practitioners in media studies, promoting explorations of new forms of publishing within the field” (Fitzpatrick, Santo 2012). MediaCommons includes many projects, such as In Media Res,

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MediaCommons Press, *The New Everyday*, the main idea being that of developing a “scientific ecosystem”, a sort of “Facebook for researchers”, where free talk, text publication or interpretation stand for valuable practices. Moreover, the goal underlying this network is both difficult and ambitious – to induce a mutation of the understanding of the concept of “publication”, through the transparentization of the process of writing (the author, the editor and the readers are all present), and not only of the product. This transformation is not equivalent with that of a mere textual support change (from print to digital), but it represents the creation of a new form of “digital pedagogy” that would revitalize the academic discourse.

Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy is a substantial analysis of some of the most important topics within the academic community. Thus, themes like peer review (history and future trends), authorship (birth and “death” of the author, transition from the paradigm of intellectual property to that of the gift economy and from text to hypertext etc.), the problem of data base management, the electronic books, the lecture of the digital text, the efforts of cultural preservation are pertinently tackled. Last, but not least, Kathleen Fitzpatrick discusses a few contemporary issues of the university (for instance, its mission nowadays), also its relationship with scientific books publishing and the new forms of cooperation implied by the latter. What attracted me to this book, beyond its up-to-date content, writing style and argumentation, is the history of its writing and publication, as well as the dominant metaphor present in Fitzpatrick's works (“obsolescence”).

Also, I have to mention Fitzpatrick's use of CommentPress (open source) during writing, so that paragraphs, full pages or the whole book could be commented or criticized by the readers. Thus, meaningful insights were integrated in the final text; even though the book was published in print format in 2011, Kathleen Fitzpatrick has blogged at *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* since 2002. Moreover, one of the reviewers – Lisa Spiro – has agreed to publish, on the blog, her comments and corrections pertaining to the traditional

peer review procedure, and the author has been able to openly leave replies, and the readers could now participate in a process that is usually done “behind closed doors”.

As to the idea of the book, things are tightly connected with Fitzpatrick's experience of publishing *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: the American Novel in the Age of Television*, initially refused by a publishing house on the grounds of “crisis in academic publishing”. This argument represented the beginning of a long lasting reflection about “the viability of the book as a form” (Fitzpatrick 2011, 3), especially the genre of academic monograph, and also about the relationship among old media, new media and scientific research. Far from asserting the thesis of the “book extinction”, the author thinks that the publication of academic works is governed by a “zombie logic” and raises a fundamental question: “If the traditional model of academic publishing is not dead, but undead – again, not viable, but still required – how should we approach our work, and the publishing systems that bring it into being?” (Fitzpatrick 2011, 4). In this context, the move towards the digital realm might just be considered a redeemer, but this is a solution that needs further nuances, having in mind the fact that the cultural production is not limited to printing, stocking and distributing texts. In order to actually implement such a move, we need technological, social and, not to be forgotten, institutional changes. These should insure the same status for Internet publication as in the case of classical print at a renowned publishing house, and this situation would represent a real incentive for researchers in terms of being open minded to new forms of doing research: “Until scholars really believe that publishing on the web is as valuable as publishing in print – and more importantly, until they believe that their institutions believe it, too – few will be willing to risk their careers on a new way of working, with the result that that new way of working will remain marginal and undervalued” (Fitzpatrick 2011, 10). In this vein, it is necessary to dedicate time and energy to a deep study of the new forms and structures of authorship that were derived from the use of new media and of the ways people write and review online. In this particular case, the academic community

has to rethink a significant part of its structure and functioning, analyzing “the risks and the benefits” of new media. Kathleen Fitzpatrick claims that the types of intellectual cooperation brought about by new media, the conversation dynamics and the critique, the insertion of the reader in the process of publication are really good examples of added value, and they are even easier to accomplish now than in the traditional fashion.

Also, there are important changes to be made in the case of editors, who might need to modify their business plan and strategies, and the same thing goes for the university which, as a whole, has to rebuild the links among libraries, university presses and centers of information technology. Even if the pressure on author/professor/researcher reaches high levels due to this openness and transparency in the act of writing, it might be that the future of humanistic sciences should depend on it. To support this claim, Fitzpatrick creates a delightful deconstruction of the idea of originality of academic writing, an idea surrounded by stereotypes, “fixations” and myths. In a healthy and lucid manner, the author says: “some of the most important work that we can do as scholars may more closely resemble contemporary editorial or curatorial practices, bringing together, highlighting and remixing significant ideas in existing texts than remaining solely focused on the production of more ostensibly original texts” (Fitzpatrick 2011, 12). Even if (truly) original texts emerge from time to time, the most consistent part of research activities fits the profile done by Fitzpatrick, and this, of course, does not entail that they are of a lesser quality and does not mean that the researchers are not striving to get meaningful results. This leads to a better recognition of the effects that different themes, ways of thinking and writing or interpretation methods have on our own texts or on our own manner of doing research. Following this line (books are made of other books...), the concept of collaboration becomes more “natural” and more salient.

Our constant concern for the outdated, the unfashionable, and the worn-out aspects of our culture cannot be set apart from a certain state of anxiety that the members

of the academic communities strongly feel sometimes. But, Fitzpatrick insists, the association between the concept of obsolescence and the concept of cultural extinction is a simplistic connection, which needs to be overtaken. Materially speaking, this “rustiness” or obsolescence is far from being real, since the books (in their print version), for instance, continue to exist and to be read. Obsolescence, Fitzpatrick warns us, should rather be interpreted as a political or as an institutional one, because “agonized claims of the death of technologies like print and genres like the novel sometimes function to re-create an elite cadre of cultural producers and consumers, ostensibly operating on the margins of contemporary culture and profiting from their claims of marginality by creating a sense that their values, once part of a utopian mainstream and now apparently waning, must be protected” (Fitzpatrick 2011, 2). This idea is present, moreover, in Fitzpatrick's first book, where the theme of obsolescence and the theme of postmodernism are united in the “rhetoric of *post*”, a rhetoric that hides, nevertheless, a crucial part of social reality (Fitzpatrick 2006, 41). Thus, Kathleen Fitzpatrick asserts that the main issue “is not whether print culture is dying at the hands of the media, but rather what purposes announcements of the death of print culture serve, and thus what all this talk about the end of the book tells us about those doing the talking” (Fitzpatrick 2006, 3). In this context, the author has some high hopes for the answers that the academic community will find to the questions raised by the types of obsolescence that this community has to face. An “institutional will”, she adds, is also needed in order to capitalize on the benefits of the new technologies.

Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy is the authorized opinion of a specialist that is both a member of a traditional academic community and a person deeply involved in digital projects and online scientific communities, a specialist that has both the position and the necessary experience to deliver an analysis that is worth reading. Moreover, the conceptual unity given by the key term “obsolescence” – present in many of Fitzpatrick's papers – offers an extra degree of credibility to her study. This

book can be a challenging work not only for specialists or students in the field of communication, not only for editors or librarians, but also for a wider public, a public interested in the present and future of the humanistic sciences.

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