Towards the end of her introduction Jessica Pressman describes her project in these terms: ‘Digital Modernism seeks to build bridges between modernism and digital literature, print textuality and computational technologies, literary criticism and media studies’\(^1\) (22). This idea of building bridges between print and digital literature is a useful starting point when considering the wider critical debates to which this book belongs: the fact that bridges need to be built in the first instance is because the earliest critics of electronic literature sought to burn them. In his 1992 article, ‘The End of Books’, Robert Coover describes print as a ‘doomed and outdated technology’, ‘a mere curiosity of bygone days destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries’\(^2\). In its place Coover sought to erect hypertext, which, he claimed, would usurp the codex ‘in much the same way that relativity not so long ago displaced the falling apple’\(^3\). Coover was not alone in his prognostication. Jay David Bolter’s 1991 *Writing Space* begins by proclaiming we are living in the ‘late age of print’\(^4\) and similarly George Landow writes about hypertext ‘eroding the power of the […] book’\(^5\). Scholars have a habit of declaring the death of things and for critics like Bolter and Landow the scythe was being sharpened for print.

The last decade has witnessed a severe backlash against this kind of apocalyptic thinking and Pressman’s book is the latest in a long line of attempts to dismantle the once commonplace view that print and electronic literature are opposed to one another. Along with

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\(^1\) Pressman, 22.
\(^3\) Ibid.
critics such as Marjorie Perloff, Lev Manovich (from whom Pressman borrows the term ‘digital modernism’), Jerome McGann and Matthew Kirschenbaum, Pressman demonstrates that there exists a recursive relationship between print and electronic literature and that when viewed in terms of continuity, not rupture, the one is able to inform our understanding of the other. This is the critical landscape out of which Pressman’s study emerges: printed literature can and should be understood not in opposition to digital literature, but in light of it.

Thus, Pressman examines a genealogy of contemporary electronic literature in which literary modernism plays a central role by demonstrating, in her words, that there exists a ‘subset of contemporary online electronic literature that remixes literary modernism’. These texts adapt modernist works such as Pound’s *Cantos* or Joyce’s *Ulysses* by reformulating specific techniques in order to, as Pressman puts it, ‘purchase cultural capital from the literary canon in order to validate new aesthetics, promote traditional reading practices, and demand that their work be taken seriously’. This strategy of reformulating modernist aesthetics into new media texts is what Pressman labels ‘digital modernism’. Once these arguments have been succinctly outlined in the introduction, Pressman guides the reader through the various aspects of contemporary digital writing that she aligns with literary modernism, always paying attention to the ways in which a careful examination of those new media texts provides an opportunity to reconsider and recalibrate aspects of modernism. Chapter One, for example, recasts Marshall McLuhan as New Critic by tracing his relationship with IA Richards and FR Leavis and, in doing so, the chapter establishes the need for close reading in the digital age. The point here is that close reading should be reassessed in order to examine not only works of print, but also new media texts. The second chapter continues to investigate McLuhan, honing in on his now famous proclamation that the ‘medium is the message’ by investigating American avant-garde poet Bob Brown’s plan to build a reading machine,

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6 Pressman, 2.
7 Ibid., 3.
which he called ‘The Readies’, next to William Poundstone’s 2005 *Project for the Tachistoscope: {Bottomless Pit}*. The next two chapters consider specific techniques employed by digital modernism, namely speed reading in the work of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) and the use of database as narrative technique in Judd Morrissey’s adaptation of *Ulysses’s ‘Ithica’ chapter, The Jew’s Daughter*. The final two chapters step away slightly from the arguments thus far pursued: Chapter Five examines the idea of universal language from Pound’s use of the ideogram to YHCHI’s, whilst the final chapter, billed as a coda, looks at Mark Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* in order to examine how the strategies of digital modernism inform contemporary print literature.

The strength of this study and why it is worth reading comes from the fact that it does indeed achieve its intended aim of recalibrating the relationship between modernism and electronic literature. It does this through a series of astute and fascinating close readings, which help us to see the complexity in digital literature and also to see modernism anew. The second chapter especially is a *tour de force* of literary analysis as Pressman joins writers like Michael North and Craig Dworkin in reaffirming Bob Brown’s place in the modernist canon. However, the book’s strength is also its weakness. Pressman writes with the presumption that certain members of her audience would not be familiar with parts of her analysis: scholars of modernism are probably not well acquainted with YHCHI just as critics of electronic literature might not know the nuances of New Critical thought. Whilst this presumption is most likely true it does mean that in parts Pressman is rehearsing very familiar territory for the sake of her ‘second’ audience. Those well versed in modernist criticism, for example, might become tired of the lengthy examination of New Critical pedagogy just as the student of electronic literature does not require repeating the distinction between first and second generation digital writing. Still, this is an inevitable outcome for a project that seeks to bring closer two areas of literary scholarship, which, up until now, have been kept quite distinct.
Pressman bills her book as an intervention into both modernist and digital literature criticism, one which will radically alter the way in which literature of that time is both understood and written about. It achieves this aim admirably and for this reason *Digital Modernism* is undeniably an important book and a significant contribution to the ongoing revaluation of modernism and electronic literature.