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Review - Jessica Bradley, University of Sheffield, jessica.bradley@sheffield.ac.uk

Jennifer Rowsell, with contributions by Samuel Sandor. (2025) *The Comfort of Screens*. Cambridge University Press.

It is now over six years since the Covid19 pandemic caused dramatic changes to so much of daily life. In education, the effects of UK lockdowns were abrupt and seismic: schools closed their doors to all but the children of key workers, university teaching pivoted online, SATS tests and GCSE/A Level exams were cancelled. Writing in 2026, the pandemic feels simultaneously a long time ago and incredibly recent. We are still, collectively, processing the effects of this strange and disruptive period of time. Meanwhile, the digital shifts in our ways of working and, of course, *being*, since the pandemic have been extensive and wide-ranging. Perhaps these changes would have happened anyway, with advances in digital technologies increasingly enabling and normalising online and hybrid working. But, undoubtedly, lockdowns caused a rapid acceleration in these changes.

Digital literacies scholar Jennifer Rowsell transports us back to these unsettled times in her illustrated monograph, *The Comfort of Screens: Literacy in Postdigital Times*. Taking inspiration from, and openly in homage to, Daniel Miller's (2008) *The Comfort of Things*, which offers 30 portraits of people living in a single street in South London, Rowsell pulls open the curtains for us on the everyday postdigital practices of 17 residents living in a crescent in Bath. These people make up the 'crescent voices', with their lives illustrating the different lived experiences of and entanglements with the digital across these spaces. Just as Miller sought to explore how possessions offer ways to 'read people', Rowsell examines how screens and our relationships with them offer insights into the ever-changing communicative landscape of our lives.

The book asks us to think about how we might imagine (and reimagine) literacy in postdigital times. In framing as postdigital (see also Bhatt 2024), Rowsell recognises the simultaneity and complexity of the ways in which the digital weaves in and out of our physical, embodied and emplaced everyday. Writing this review on my MacBook, various tabs on Safari alert me to my Google Mail, to my Google Drive, to JSTOR, Scopus, and

Google Scholar for publications I am skimming (I should note, I work at a Google-suite University). On one tab is the editor dashboard for the journal I co-edit. My phone sits on the desk to the right of my laptop, a clock timer ticking away on the screen as I strive for ways to focus on one task (this book review) without checking other communications. If I were to open WhatsApp, I would find messages from my family, alerting me on their progress traveling home from school, as well as an ongoing dialogue with a colleague whose institution I will visit next week to examine a PhD. If I cave and open Instagram, I would come across a funny video a colleague has sent me about parenting teenagers, meanwhile a different friend and I have been sporadically discussing the Chanel advert featuring Margot Robbie and Kylie Minogue, an homage to a different text (Michel Gondry's 'Come into my World' 2002 music video), while a colleague in Finland sends me a cartoon about the Finnish language being difficult (I am learning Finnish, remotely, in an online class). These conversations span place and time - some are occasional pings, every few days. They ebb and flow. To the left hand side of my laptop I have Rowsell's book, to which I refer while I type, as well as Miller's book, to which *The Comfort of Screens* compels me to return. So far, so normal, so mundane. For an academic, this postdigital set up is unremarkable. Why even describe it? But what Rowsell does is show us a way to appreciate the details of this and to examine with 'wonder' (from Ahmed, 2004). She gives us permission to give space and thought to the small things and practices we don't necessarily notice.

The book reflects a collaborative ethos. Rowsell invites writer Samuel Sandor, a contemporary of her daughter, to offer thoughts and reflections on themes arising, which he does with poignancy and gravitas, his insights including his favourite poem (T S Eliot's Prufrock) and experiences of lockdown as a university student. Woodcut-style illustrations pepper the book, created by illustrators Tongtong Wang (a former MA student of Rowsell's) and Callum Tomlinson. A book, particularly an academic monograph, is something of a restricted medium, but these alternative voices add to the reading, enabling a polyvocality, albeit constrained.

Do screens have souls? This is the central premise for the exploration which ensues. The book starts by considering 'why screens?' and 'why comfort?', as well as the story of the location in which the research took place and the methodological approach. The project

took place in what Rowsell describes as 'the corner of my life' (p.10), an inquiry squeezed in and among the many jobs an academic must do. Short pen portraits of the crescent voices are provided, as well as the broad theoretical underpinnings. Rowsell is able to draw from diverse theories and ideas, in a way which feels appropriate for a discussion of postdigital everyday.

In chapter 2, the focus is on literacy in postdigital times, with examples drawn from the analysis of interview transcripts. As the chapters go on, each one begins with a few lines from a song, which we are encouraged to listen to if we can. Chapter 3 starts with the app BeReal, before moving on to the 'insistent tussle' between 'meanings in form and matter' and 'meanings on screens' (p.49) and digital-materiality. In Chapter 4 we learn of AI technologies developed to help filter out offensive comments on sport broadcasting, before an exploration of affect and affective digital encounters.

The 'Find my iPhone' app begins chapter 5, followed by insights into screens and place, a community WhatsApp or Facebook group, and ways which these might operate to 'create' some kind of community, in particular in times of lockdown and immobility. I mentioned before the tricks I play on myself in order to 'focus', and in chapter 6 we learn of an app called 'Forest' which helps you to stay on task by growing trees while you remain 'undistracted'. Time is then foregrounded, along with its relationship to place. We develop digital place attachments and bonds, depending where we spend our time. Bergson's notions of durational and clock time ground the discussion, with examples from the interviews offering a poignant reminder of time and screens during and shortly after the pandemic. Chapter 7 starts with the movement of 'Twitter' to 'X', and what this both symbolised and meant in practice. Sandor comments on the changes to his 'feed' to something he did not recognise. Here also, Rowsell reflects on the increasing focus on metrics and clicks in academic lives - the data- and impact- driven individual and collective repertoires which characterise scholarly life in a postdigital age. Although published only in 2025, it feels already that AI has changed the landscape even in a few short months.

AI software called 'Midjourney' is described in chapter 8, alongside a call for criticality and caution around ownership, appropriation and theft. Here the crescent voices describe rabbit

hole experiences with algorithms, including actions they have taken to remove themselves from situations in which they get sucked into watching more and more videos on Instagram.

Finally, in chapter 9, we start with Pinterest, the participatory digital collaging app. What might it mean, Rowsell asks, to think about the postdigital higher grounds? To wonder? Wonder is less about utopia, and more about 'understanding the smallness of daily rites and practices, and being okay with the comfort you find in screen life' (p.164). Here are also Samuel's own lessons, a synthesis of his commentaries across the book, another example of the layering that the different voices and multimodalities affords. We learn that Rowsell cannot tell us whether or not screens do, in fact, have souls. Instead we might think about what she describes as 'the importance of looking for soul and for human connections on/with/at/against screens' (p.175).

The book is written in a style that is deceptively simple and easy to engage with, and yet also communicates a depth of theory and, importantly, literacies history. That this can be achieved with such lightness is testament to the clarity of writing and the personal reflections on the lived and breathed experience of the everyday postdigital academic realities which also appear throughout the book. We learn not just about postdigital literacies in the lives of the 17 crescent voices, but about Rowsell's own grappling with screens, in her academic and personal life, including her commentary on UK higher education, in which she was working at the time of writing. In this way, the book reminded me of Les Back's writing, and in particular 'Academic Diary' (2016). Like Back, Rowsell manages to remind us why scholarship is important and why what we do matters. The everyday, the small, the mundane, is always worth noticing, and noticing with 'wonder'.

Ahmed, S (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Back, L (2016) *Academic Diary: Or Why Higher Education Still Matters*. London: Goldsmith's Press.

Bhatt, I (2024) Postdigital Possibilities in Applied Linguistics. *Postdigital science and education* 6(3): 743–755. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-023-00427-3>.

Miller, D. (2008) *The Comfort of Screens*. Cambridge: Polity.