



The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age

Sven Birkerts

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A reissue of the book that first examined the future of reading and literature in the electronic age, now with a new introduction and Afterword

In our zeal to embrace the wonders of the electronic age, are we sacrificing our literary culture? Renowned critic Sven Birkerts believes the answer is an alarming yes. In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, he explores the impact of technology on the experience of reading. Drawing on his own passionate, lifelong love of books, Birkerts examines how literature intimately shapes and nourishes the inner life. What does it mean to "hear" a book on audiotape or decipher its words in electronic form on a laptop screen? Can the world created by Henry James exist in an era defined by the work of Bill Gates? Are books as we know them—volumes printed in ink on paper, with pages to be turned as the reading of each page is completed—dead?

At once a celebration of the complex pleasures of reading and a bold challenge to the information technologies of today and tomorrow, *The Gutenberg Elegies* is an essential volume for anyone who cares about the past and the future of books.

The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age Details

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Author : Sven Birkerts

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From Reader Review The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age for online ebook

Charlie says

(Note: apparently this book, which extensively denounces and condemns twenty-first century technology, is available on Kindle and as an eBook. That's almost painfully ironic, and also hilarious.)

I read "The Owl Has Flown" for a class about four years ago, and had been wanting to read more of Birkerts' work since then. It took me a while to track down this copy, and even longer to finally read it. When I did, it was disappointing. Sven Birkerts is pretentious and pedantic, and often very ignorant. There's a section in which he talks about how his experiences reading the works of various black authors has affected his interactions with black people he meets face to face, and it was cringe inducing. I wrote a note in one of the margins that it seemed like Birkerts was saying, "I understand black people! I've read about them in books."

There's a lot of name-dropping, both of authors and of "good literature", and that grew obnoxious quickly, especially since it'd often happen more than once per page. Birkerts also seems to only be aware of people within his own demographic, taking it for granted that everyone has access to such demonic devices as a telephone and a computer, and that everyone lives in a suburban house and drives a car. These assumptions were sometimes jarring for me. He also makes oral traditions out to be a "primitive" precursor to the evolutionary superior written word, and basically equates illiteracy with stupidity or laziness. These things are classist and racist, and potentially ableist as well.

I started getting disgruntled partway through the book and took to mocking the author in the margins, hating his arrogance but feeling like I couldn't stop reading. I felt like since I'd put so much effort in, I had to finish, if only to add another book toward my yearly Goodreads challenge. There'd also occasionally be an interesting idea or phrase, and I'd keep going to see if any more interesting things would happen. I probably would have given up, but then I happened across a message from a previous reader. In a section where Birkerts was talking about how there's a greater sense of connectedness because of technology, I discovered a few words in cursive which read, "But I feel isolated !"

I think it's Billy Collins who has a poem about how marginal notes from previous readers in books can change the way the current reader sees/understands the work. I've definitely enjoyed reading the notes and underlinings I've come across in used books, but I've never before had an experience quite like I did when I read that message. There was this ache, the "suffering together" that compassion literally translates to. I wanted to meet the person who wrote of their isolation and tell them that I feel isolated, too. It took me minutes to get back to my reading, after that, just thinking about who this person could be and what was going on in their life when they wrote that. I wonder how they're doing now.

I also wonder if Sven Birkerts now has a computer, twenty years after writing "The Gutenberg Elegies" on his typewriter, staunchly avoiding as much tech as possible and worrying that children who grow up around Walkmen and answering machines will lose all their compassion and ability to think deeply.

Rochelle says

The author of this book might sound a little nuts because of his conservative views on technology, reading, and the future of the printed word. I laughed at his thinly veiled disdain towards any attempts to revise and open up the canon.

However, I was struck by the core argument of his book of essays: something is being lost (depth, perhaps) in this noisy, laterally expanding, technologically dependent world that we now live in. Birkerts laments that the destabilization of the author and the rise of more democratic literary forms is not necessarily an improvement because quality is lost along the way.

Parts of this book were phenomenally interesting and others were tedious and self-aggrandizing. However, if the topic of technology and its implications on the printed word interest you, then this book is certainly worth a read as it rigorously examines what the end of books(!) could mean for our world.

Bill says

Birkerts is on to something here. While he's certainly not the first to realize electronic gadgetry addiction is dumbing us down, he writes some compelling essays that illustrate his point very well. I enjoyed reading this book. Why "only" 3 stars? Not all of his essays are approachable. His erudition shows through sharply and he enjoys showing off with muscular prose; overselling his point. Had he simplified it a bit, written "down market", if you will, to a more plebeian readership, he would have widened the scope of his potential audience. In any case, those of you who choose to read this book: You may be immune to the pull of video games, Facebook, and television as your sole *raison d'être*.

Jessica Watson says

he made some points but he was super negative and kinda elitist at times tbh

Laura says

I have grown up almost entirely in the world Sven Birkerts anticipates with fear and trembling. Written in 1994, *The Gutenberg Elegies* mourns what he views as the loss of a world in which printed and published texts were treated with respect and assumed to have authority. This is not a precise logical argument in defense of reading, it is what it says it is: a series of elegies, deeply personal and sorrowful reflections on the value of reading and the decline of the authority given to written texts.

Birkerts looks at the students in his classes--unable and unwilling to engage with difficult texts--and wonders how our culture's vast project to connect ourselves to one another and to create a hypertext world is affecting the next generation. And he questions whether this is actually technology we need or have even asked for, or whether it is simply the inevitable next step. Do we want this, or do we simply see what the technology can do and realize that the microchip has made us offers that are very hard to refuse (193). Indeed.

I was continually fascinated by Birkerts' theories about how technology created postmodernism both in thinking and in art. Two ideas stood out especially to me:

First, I was reminded of Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There* and his depiction of postmodernism when Birkerts concludes that "Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture. Instead of carrying on the ancient project of philosophy...we direct our energies to managing information. The computer, our high-speed, accessing, storing, and sorting tool, appears as a godsend" (75). In an age of information, we no longer seek meaning or believe it possible to find but we still long for it.

Second, after reading Nancy Pearcey Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, and Meaning, I understood and agreed with his conclusion that "The entire movement of postmodernism in the arts is a consequence of this same macroscopic shift. For what is postmodernism at root but an aesthetic that rebukes the idea of an historical time line, as well as previously uncontested assumptions of cultural hierarchy. The postmodern artifact manipulates its stylistic signatures like Lego blocks and makes free with combinations from the formerly sequestered spheres of high and popular art. Its combinatory momentum and relentless referencing of the surrounding culture mirror perfectly the associative dynamics of electronic media" (123).

Birkerts declares that the reading we do voluntarily demonstrates our desire to transform ourselves. I hope I am the kind of reader Birkerts valued and mourned the loss of, a culturally engaged reader at least familiar enough with the important cultural touchstones of literature to appreciate the allusions who still maintains enough discipline to get lost in the flow of a book. I hope my little reading side hobby proves that the world he mourns as lost is not lost entirely.

I don't have time to put together the elegant review I'd like to write, but I do also want to mention that this book made me think frequently of three other books I've read recently: The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, and The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction.

I am looking forward to synthesizing all these ideas over the next few days...

Sam Berner says

Sad indeed that someone as gifted as Sven would also be this damaged - I mean, the guy did nothing throughout the whole book but stared dejectedly into his intellectual navel. Lots of Freudian slips there that indicate why.. And the book world has still not come to an end, not as long as we live, and after we are gone, who cares. I am Sven's generation, and I read comfortably books not just off my laptop, but of Kindle and my HTC. Books. The same way I read them on paper. Not sure if I understand the fixation with dead trees, really. Especially if you think that most of what is being printed is not worth the ink it was printed with.

Wondering, too, how his daughter turned out. She would be in her twenties now. Does she use Kindle? Does she read?

Tim says

The story of this book is all about how personally Sven Birkerts feels about reading and how electronic media is destroying this. He is trying to give a passionate defense of reading and print culture while constantly attacking electronic media.

"What is the place of reading, and of the reading sensibility, in our culture as it has become?"

This is the question which is asked by author in this book. That place is shrinking, he thinks and only because of saturation of electronic media. In the last parts of book, he says that he is out to defend the literary culture and literary values that we have given high importance for so many ages from electronic media. He believes that literary culture is endangered species.

However, there is one problem with this book. While Birkerts's description of the state of reading shows that he has reflected long and deeply about it, his description of electronic media is impersonal and leans heavily on the thoughts of others.

"I won't tire the reader with an extended rehash of the differences between the print orientation and that of electronic systems. Media theorists from Marshall McLuhan to Walter Ong to Neil Postman have discoursed upon these at length. What's more, they are reasonably commonsensical. I will therefore abbreviate."

This is very low part of the book and which makes me feel like it does not deserve a high rating. When he discusses reading he explicitly states he is not concerned with all written media, nor even just books, nor even just literary works, but only literary fiction. But when he considers electronic media he excludes nothing, throwing into the mix computers, fax machines, books on tape, email, CD-ROM, television, camcorders, telephone answering machines, and more. This won't do. To fail to distinguish between different kinds of electronic media, because they all are based on manipulating electrons, is as fundamental a mistake as failing to distinguish between tax forms and novels, because they are both printed on paper.

A bit boring book i rather say and full of personal views and not an unbiased judgement of an issue.

Sarah Pascarella says

A strong argument for why reading literature in book form is so important, exactly at the time when readers are abandoning books for newer modes and technologies (Kindle, electronic downloads, etc.)--or, sadly, not reading at all. Birkerts also makes a compelling case for solitary contemplation, facilitated through books, in an age where everything is becoming connected on all fronts. The reader can tell Birkerts is partially in awe of the new technologies, but mostly heartbroken as he realizes how the culture has shifted seismically away from his beloved books over the past quarter-century. If we avoid the traps Birkerts warns against, "The Gutenberg Elegies" just may become a modern classic, a "Walden" for the readers of this century.

bookthump says

When Sven Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies* was published in 1994, the Internet was an infant. The primary purpose of a cell phone was to make phone calls. Texting was barely a thing. It wasn't until three years later that you could order a DVD in the mail through Netflix. Youtube was a decade away. iDevices didn't exist yet, nor did e-readers. Amazon had just been founded and wouldn't release their popular Kindle device until 2007, a year after Birkerts released an updated 2006 edition of *The Gutenberg Elegies*. The point is that our world has recently been flooded with new technologies all designed to make our lives simpler, more fun, more efficient. Birkerts is afraid that books and literary culture as he knew it as a young man will disappear, occluded by electronic noise of the modern world.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Birkerts expresses concern that the onslaught of electronic technologies will convert humanity into a species of automatons and that we will "lose the ability to confer meaning on the human experience". My initial reaction was to dismiss this concern, to think that humanity will be just fine. But I look around and see an increasing number of faces buried in glowing screens. I was at a baseball game a few weeks ago and hundreds of people around me spent the game staring at their iPad or cell phone screens, browsing the Internet or texting people. Only when those of us actually watching the game cheered or booed would their heads snap up and they'd look around frantically asking those of us around them what had happened. The next time you go to a restaurant, take a look around at how many people have their

smartphones in their hands, not talking to each other. Birkerts may be on to something, though I do not want to admit it. Maybe it is not too late.

Most of the notes I took while reading this book are counter-arguments to the points of view Birkerts shares. As I read those notes now though, having had a couple of weeks to mull them over and observe the world around me with Birkerts's perspective, I find myself agreeing more often. There are bright spots though. Thanks to the Internet, we now have the ability to connect with like-minded individuals from around the world whereas in the pre-Internet age, one would need to meet up with book club members at the local library to discuss a book. I think we should still do that because nothing beats a face-to-face conversation, but outlets like goodreads.com and the book blogosphere (into which I hope bookthump.com will be accepted soon) offer thriving communities full of intelligent people yearning to have thoughtful discussions and debates.

Sven Birkerts displayed an eerie prescience in 1994 about the effect modern technology has had on literary culture. Many readers are converting to e-readers and downloading their reading material. Brick-and-mortar stores are closing by the hundreds, unable to compete with the wholesale prices offered online. Personally, I love the physicality of a book, particularly a nice hardback. I even named this website after the sound a thick hardcover makes when you snap it shut. I enjoy collecting books, browsing bookshops. I enjoy the experience of holding a book in my lap and reading. In this, Birkerts and I agree. I am not sure I am ready to believe mankind is losing its humanity as a result of technology, but the more I read Internet forum comments (pick any news outlet and prepare to recoil at the magnitude of vitriol and hatred expressed by commenters hiding behind anonymity), the more I wonder if we may realize his prescience about our loss of humanity in another decade. It may already be happening, but we are too busy with our noses glued to tiny glowing screens to notice... or care. Oh, and Birkerts is on Twitter so his journey toward the Dark Side is complete.

Lauren says

I appreciate the points Birkerts is trying to make about reading, but I was prevented from really getting into it because I was put off by the language. It's too flowery for my taste - the subject doesn't lend itself well to lush prose. Ironically, he was inspired to write about this after students in one of his short story classes felt the same way about a Henry James story.

I really did want to like this. Especially because, like me, Birkerts spent his formidable years working in a bookstore, in fact the same chain bookstore where I used to work. He even spent part of his career there working with the remainders, which was my main focus for about a year. But the disconnect between the parts I could identify with and get into and the parts that were too esoteric for me was too great for me to really like this book as a whole.

anaïs says

this book goes over and over the fact that technology has been killing reading and art softly since more or less the 50s. during the almost 300 hundred pages, the author keeps on showing his discontent about the fact that things weren't like they were before. it's a constant whine about how tv and especially computers are turning people into stupid entities without the sensitivity enough to care about literature. the author writes from a moral superiority very irritating, and the book only charges against progress from a very pessimistic point of view. all in all, i really hated it and i don't recommend this book at all.

Gaylord Dold says

Second Look Books: The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age by Sven Birkerts (Faber and Faber, \$22.95). This book review was first published in February 1995. It includes a discussion of "Out of Control" by Kevin Kelly.

Sven Birkerts is one of those rarest of rare birds, an essayist and critic with something to say. He is the author of three books of criticism, most recently "American Energies: Essays on Fiction," and he has won the coveted National Book Critics Circle Citation for Excellence. Although some of the pieces in "The Gutenberg Elegies" were previously published in various critical literary journals, and some were given as addresses to scholarly and political groups, they fit together in a brilliantly seamless string.

And though Birkerts goes astray slightly in one long chapter devoted to a reminiscence about the early days of his writing career, "Elegies" is must reading for any civilized person struggling with the current dilemmas and problems of American cultural life. Birkerts' collection is a powerful call to intellectual arms for those of us concerned with the fate of the book, with the future of reading in America, and with the direction and tendencies of American publishing.

Birkerts argues powerfully that there is currently a state of emergency that, as we shift from print to screen, threatens to overturn one of the core premises of humanism in our time. It seems that in the blink of an eye our culture has begun to transform itself in its entirety. The stable and authoritative hierarchy of the printed page, heretofore one of the givens of knowledge in the world, threatens to collapse and disappear in the face of freshly minted circuits, sound bites, fax machines, car phones, TV screen, E-mail, and a web of internets that makes simultaneity and impermanence primary physical and mental realities. While the displacement of the book by the screen is not as yet total, and may never be total, the large-scale tendency is apparent to anyone who cares to look.

And it just isn't a theoretical change. Children sit huddled in a corner playing their video games, businessmen and women ride to work with the buzz of faxes in their ears and as whirr from the car phone. Families, communities, individuals and civic groups are replaced by interest groups, opinion polls, victims and consumers.

The plus and minus of postmodernism

Birkerts tries hard to include a few "plusses" in his evaluation of the postmodern condition. He cites, as advantages of all this screen information and sound bite, an increased awareness of the "big picture", a global context made up of extraordinary interrelations and complexity. In addition, he refers to our seeming new ability to hold and entertain serial and simultaneous neural stimuli, which often makes for an erosion of old biases, both cultural and racial.

In the loss column, Birkerts cites the undoubted sense of the fragmentation of time, or the wearing away of the so-called durational experience, a depth phenomenon we know as reverie or contemplation. In common-sense terms, he means good old-fashioned wonder and awe, the deep, abiding sense of self and world that is the springboard and soul of Western philosophy. How many of us have time to watch sunsets, spend a week in the woods with our kids, or even think for an hour or so? AS a related phenomenon, Birkerts mentions reduced attention spans and a general lack of faith in sustained and rational inquiry. It wasn't just a Willy Horton sound bite that got Gorge Bush in the White House. Before that it was "Where's the Beef?"

Deeply related, although different, is our current lack of faith in institutions and the historical narratives that give our lives coherence and shape. As history fades away from us in favor of images and products, what we share with our fellow human beings becomes no more than current fashion.

Although much of this sounds abstract, it is not. More and more books are sold in the marketplace, but fewer and fewer of them are serious, being mostly diet, self-help, astrology, smut or celebrity bios. There are no public forms for sustained and rational debate. And Birkerts argues that the situation is getting bleaker. Everyone in publishing, editing, or teaching agrees that it is harder than ever to get something good or decent published or read.

The future of the book

Mega-mergers in the publishing industry have turned the bottom line into the only line. Acquisitions editors are under the gun to produce “products” which sell, regardless of quality, and regardless of any ethical duty to do otherwise. Most recently Jonathan Yardley in “The Washington Post” has called the trend the “Warnerization” of the fiction industry, referring to the huge deal between Warner Books and Brandon Tartikoff (a television programmer), which was intended to produce “books” that could be turned into films and TV projects. It was, and is, Warner Books that has brought us “Scarlett” and “The Bridges of Madison County”, and which threatens the industry daily with “concept fiction”, work with a skin of plot and character that can be hung on a more profitable skeleton.

And while serious readers still exist, they are a dwindling and aging group. Among the under-30 crowd, book reading and book buying have, demonstrably, fallen off rapidly and precipitously. And as information technologies expand screen techniques, providing us with “hypertext” and “interactive” literature, who could guess how many kids will even learn how to read, much less buy, collect and cherish books and the words they contain?

Certainly the rash of corporate conglomerate takeovers in publishing has accelerated us into a society in which the notion of economics has replaced the notion of culture. Publishers no longer care whether it is James Joyce or Rush Limbaugh they are publishing, so long as the numbers are there. But blame must be adduced in favor of the electronic media as well. Entertainment—MTV, video games, cable television and VCR’s have all diminished audiences for books, and made leisure preferable to the work and concentration required for reading itself. Watching and playing have replaced talking and reading.

Already there is CD-ROM technology on the market that “enhances” the reading experience, shorthand for “glosses and illustrates”, a way to break the perceived tedium of reading by a generation of students unable to concentrate. Don’t worry about “Hamlet”; just pull up the screen and see some famous actors and actresses who’ve played the part, see some clips from the movies, and there you have it—and interactive book.

The Faustian hive

The forces of cultural change are complex and interrelated. We are no longer a society of individuals. One cannot help but see the coming connectedness (at first indicated by connectedness in email, fax, telephone answering devices, computer networks), a state of psychological titillation referred to as being “online”. Already word processing has replaced typewriting, just as typing replaced handwriting before that.

In the words of Kevin Kelly, executive editor of “Wired,” the online Bible, “I live on computer networks. There is no central keeper of knowledge in a network, only curators of particular views. People in a highly connected yet deeply fragmented society can no longer rely on a central canon for guidance. They are forced into the modern existential blackness of creating their own culture, beliefs, markets and identity...”

As far as Kelly is concerned, he can do without the book entirely, relying instead on the elements of electronic writing space, the Internet where the text is conversation with millions of participants. Kelly says that, “many participants prefer the quality of writing on the Net to book writing because Net-writing is of a conversational peer-to-peer style, frank and communicative, rather than precise and overwritten.”

Kelly has even written a recent book extolling the virtues of networked neo-biological technology, a world in which software, animation, programmed trading and screens approximate a biological entity (“Out of Control”, Addison-Wesley, \$28).

The forgetfulness of being

The great German existential philosopher Martin Heidegger postulated that modern man was plagued by a “forgetfulness of being”. He was speaking of that condition of modern life characterized by a lack of spirituality, an unawareness of the depth of experience, the kind of experience characterized by walking fatefully out into a dark night to watch the stars for hours, for signs of meteors. It is the kind of experience emphasizing depth, meaning, inwardness and duration.

Being “online” is the opposite of that kind of experience. Being “online” emphasizes electrical connection and instantaneousness--an inability to be aware of the passing of time. Ours is a world in which it is unthinkable to walk five miles to visit a friend, unthinkable to give ourselves over to the planting of an orchard.

Birkerts asks the question asked by Walker Percy: “Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century—an age in which he has succeeded in satisfying his every material desire?” The answer is that we have, by creating, utilizing and relying on technology, cut ourselves off from the primary things that give meaning and purpose to life. We have cut ourselves off from beauty, love, from true passion, and from the spiritual.

Tiffany Conner says

Sven Birkerts is one of my favorite social commentators. He primarily writes about literature and its place in the current digitally-dominant intellectual landscape, but he is also a man who knows how to coin a worthy phrase. Any who know me know that I have a special weakness for the essayist. I think the essay is one of the most under-appreciated genres in the literary world. Birkerts proves me right. While some of the themes may seem outdated and proven inconsequential as a result of the technological realities and gains of the day, it's still a book worth reading.

Michael says

I probably shouldn't even talk about this book considering I didn't read the entire thing...what would VirJohn think? But, I will have the self-restraint to not give it a star rating. Instead, I'll just respond to it.

I've read a few of the most applicable chapters from this book, and have adapted it into a lit review, but I might be missing aspects of Birkerts' argument. However, this is what I've picked up from what I read: Birkerts isn't optimistic about what the internets are going to do to teh literature! NOT TEH LITRATURE! AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

Because, you know, once writers can do stuff like randomly link to other texts in the middle of a piece of writing, and redirect you to other texts, the linearity, and to a certain extent, the control of the author is moved increasingly into the hands of the reader. The reading experience is, in Birkerts' opinion, less linear, less challenging (because you can change gears more quickly).

But yo. How many of us read everything straight through? When I'm about halfway through a book, I flip to the end and read the last sentence, and ponder how we'll get to that sentence from here, or what that sentence might reveal. When I'm reading anything academic...like Birkerts' book....I flip around in a self-serving fashion, not especially concerned with taking in everything homeboy says chronologically. THIS IS HOW PEOPLE READ: HOWEVER THEY FLIPPIN WANT TO. So, the distinction Birkerts and many other scholars are making seems entirely superfluous to me.

But, what do I know? I'm such a goddamned anarchist it's not funny. I say, teach the highschoolers Tupac and Snoop Dogg if it can teach them to think critically. Hell, teach them Angelic Upstarts and Cockney Rejects, too. As this website illustrates very clearly, you can think critically about crap, and you can think uncritically about Literature. So, I think of literature as a bit of a myth, generated for simplicity: certain things are worth reading, while others aren't. This makes things much easier for English majors, and it perpetuates the need to print books that are of a higher quality, but don't sell as many copies. Don't get me wrong: this is a good thing. But...where am I going with this. Okay, I was tangential. Back on topic.

The idea that critical thinking comes from viewing certain forms of art and not others is a myth. Kat proves this with her reviews, as does Keely, as do many other people on goodreads. And, it's this same sort of mentality of valuing the familiar over the unfamiliar that perpetuates the myth that you only learn while reading that which is academically approved. Fuck the academy, and fuck anyone who thinks they can point out what really counts as "literature" and what doesn't.

So, yeah, fuck this Birkerts guy.

Edward Watson says

The four stars are really for the first few essays, which focus on the joy of reading and praises deep time, that is the time space one inhabits when reading - slow, peaceful and reflective. "Resonance is a natural phenomenon, the shadow of import alongside the body of fact, and it cannot flourish except in deep time. Where time has been commodified, flattened, turned into yet another thing measured, there is no chance that any piece of information can unfold its potential significance. We are destroying this deep time...No deep time, no resonance; no resonance, no wisdom. The only remaining oases are churches (for those who still worship) and the offices of therapists."

It's greatly persuasive as to why fiction is important and worthwhile, and advocates quality of thought over quantity - seldom experienced with the barrage of info we are subjected to in the digital age (of which Goodreads contributes to as yet another social media feed!). It's persuasive in the completeness of a world that a book can offer and the satisfaction it can offer as an end in itself, rather than the unsatisfying online world, where nothing is an end. So, trying to find oneself in a digital world where popularity, beauty and entertainment is quantified in terms of likes, views, followers etc., is antithetical to how one would find themselves through lit (yes we measure book sales and ratings, but not when engaging with the book itself). I'd go as far to say that any attempt to find oneself via social media is doomed to failure by the internet's inability to satisfy existential questioning (maybe that's me being old mannish).

Birkerts' writing style is a pleasure to read however the second half of the book became frustrating (I didn't

reach the end), I think perhaps in that it is outdated not least i'm sure due to the fact that it was written in 1994, at the turn of the digital age. It reads as snobbish and irrationally sentimental, that is, criticising all that is electronic exactly because it is electronic, without dissecting different mediums, which essential. Radio, video, live TV, the web, social media, email, ebooks impress on us in very different ways and so should not be treated with a broad brush, which Birkerts happily does under the guise of the big bad technological revolution. Snapchat and the Kindle present very different threats to society!

A more salient argument is one that considers how we use technology, and not allowing our minds to be its slave. I hope our generation can teach this to our children as an important skill (maybe this is optimistic!). Switching off and settling down to a good book for a longer period is a perfectly good way to return to depth and to vertical thinking, even if it's not one's default state. Lateral and vertical thinking can co-exist in the same brain (possibly not at the same time)... I reject that there has to be a total generation-wide paradigm shift (to that perhaps Birkerts would argue that i'm straw-manning him and misreading his book, probs due to the fact that i'm a skim-reading lightly thinking Millennial... some of which is true).
