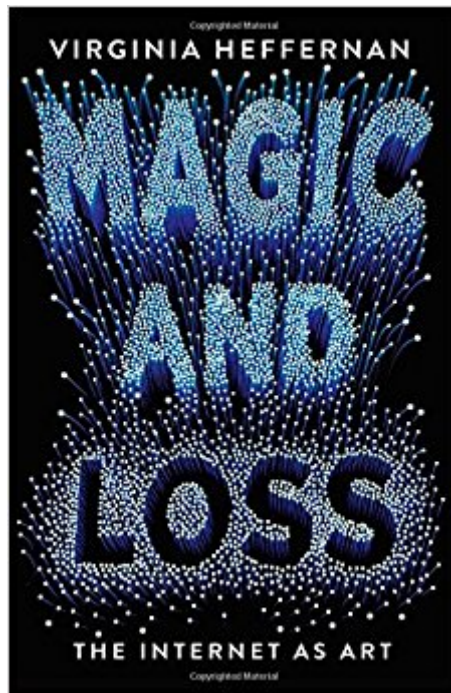


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Magic And Loss: The Internet As Art



Synopsis

Just as Susan Sontag did for photography and Marshall McLuhan did for television, Virginia Heffernan (called one of the "best living writers of English prose") reveals the logic and aesthetics behind the Internet. Since its inception, the Internet has morphed from merely an extension of traditional media into its own full-fledged civilization. It is among mankind's great masterpieces—a massive work of art. As an idea, it rivals monotheism. We all inhabit this fascinating place. But its deep logic, its cultural potential, and its societal impact often elude us. In this deep and thoughtful book, Virginia Heffernan presents an original and far-reaching analysis of what the Internet is and does. Life online, in the highly visual, social, portable, and global incarnation rewards certain virtues. The new medium favors speed, accuracy, wit, prolificacy, and versatility, and its form and functions are changing how we perceive, experience, and understand the world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Virginia Heffernan's *Magic and Loss* (Simon & Schuster, release date June 7, 2016) simply defies categorization. When selecting it as their #1 New Release for this week, Amazon's curators classified it as "Philosophy Aesthetics", in dizzying company with the late Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty*. As Professor of Semiotics at Bologna University, Eco taught and wrote about signs, symbols and syntax, which it turns out has a lot to do with aesthetics. While aesthetics is principally about apprehending taste and beauty, the discipline also explores light and shadow, discerning edges, texture and color. Heffernan appears to move effortlessly from discussing with

childlike wonder her first email address, to witnessing her first online video, the iconic Funtwo upload titled guitar, to the transition from what she terms parataxis “œall that black space” to hypotaxis, the Internet screen that is completely filled out and planned for us, the users. When we consider that Funtwo posted that video only ten years ago, on January 25, 2006, and that at the time YouTube was only three months old, it is understandable that we might not have yet looked back upon the immersive experience, to consider what exactly it was we were experiencing. It turns out that along with being an entertainment venue, job market, soap box and coffee klatsch, the Internet is also a giant work of art in progress. The concept was so odd to me that I did not at first understand it. I was distracted by Heffernan’s prose, at once both careful and exuberant. More than once I was reminded of Marilynne Robinson, and was not surprised to find a reference to her on the next to last page of *Magic and Loss*. There are differences, to be sure. The city technology writer and the Iowa novelist.

The cyber-world is a close approximation of the divine for Heffernan, containing as it does the whole wayward world of human foible and folly--and a little bit of heaven too, aptly dubbed "the Cloud". A democratic dumpster of all that is human, from every conceivable demographic mindset, it constantly reminds us to stop being too elitist and academic in our cyber-exchanges--not everybody is that smart. But this, if it is nothing else, is a smart book, for English Literature majors like myself, who seek the deus ex machina, the god in the machine, whenever we tap into the inchoate collective universal unconscious of cyber-space. The miracle of reciprocity, the lightspeed data collection and consolidation, the enchanting immediacy and cutting-edge fidelity of sound piped right into the cochlea--all in their turn have been hypnotically numinous to our generation, the generation that had to puddle-jump willy-nilly from analog to digital in nine nanoseconds. Heffernan recounts her early days deciphering code in a closet while keeping up an old-school academically-analog facade for the hallowed elitist halls of haughty Harvard. A financial-aid recipient, the onus on her was to excell twice as fast as East Coast silver-spooned heirs of automatic fellowships, only to become one of the suspicious few to perceive the poetic possibility, the aesthetic potential, and the grassroots people’s revolution that the internet inherently is. To the degree of not even correcting anyone’s bad grammer because authenticity is the whole point. Heffernan paints a picture of the new media--chatrooms, blogs, tweets, youtube, gaming, kindle, virtual reality--that is surprisingly full of hope for the literary among us.

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