

Actuality of pure surface

Stephen Humphreys  *

#Help: Digital Humanitarianism and the Remaking of International Order is a characteristically rich, intricate, thoughtful and insightful intervention from one of international law's most consistently enlightening contemporary scholars, Fleur Johns. It is a thoroughly enjoyable read and, on its face, a succinct descriptive account, infused throughout with sharp analytical observation, of a specific kind of flourishing contemporary culture, a thicket of light but fast-growing vegetation, whose tendrils seem to touch everything without being at the heart of anything. A good analogy is, perhaps, bindweed: global digital bindweed.

I say 'on its face' purposely—as this is a book that self-consciously foregrounds the *surface*. Most fascinating for me is how Johns remains resolutely surface-oriented throughout, an orientation signalled in the earliest pages, where 'digital humanitarianism' is itself defined in terms of making the world 'accessible . . . in a format that is readable as "a surface of pure actuality"' and 'purports to make that surface actionable'.¹ The latter quote is taken from a remarkable 2013 essay by Antoinette Rouvroy which I think bears recounting at length:

Refining itself in real time, building and re-building itself from within the huge 'numerical memories' where every bit, never mind when and where recorded and stored, floats on the flat surface of pure actuality and pure presence, the statistical body seems to have expurgated every bit of obscurity: everything being always available, it perfectly fits an aesthetics of full light and intemporal or a-chronological transparency.²

* Professor of International Law, LSE. Email: s.j.humphreys@lse.ac.uk.

1 F Johns, *#Help: Digital Humanitarianism and International Ordering* (Oxford University Press 2023) 7.

2 A Rouvroy, 'The End(s) of Critique: Data-Behaviourism vs Due-Process' in M Hildebrandt and K de Vries (eds), *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn: The Philosophy of Law Meets the Philosophy of Technology* (Taylor Francis 2013) 148.

The ‘statistical body’, in Rouvroy’s telling, will be the data basis upon which (digital) government relies and (digital) decisions are made. Rouvroy makes a relatively explicit analogical move from the ‘flat surface’ of technological apparatuses—binary bits arrayed on a chip—to a governance technique that avoids ‘the meaning-making processes of transcription or representation, institutionalization, convention and symbolization’—a technique that does not, in other words, peer under the bonnet.³ For Rouvroy, digital governance does not want or need to know much at all about the governed human subject: it has no interest in their ‘psychological motivations, speeches or narratives’.⁴ The ‘flat surface of pure actuality’, then, is *data as given*, with no interest in, or assumption of, context, motivation, narrative: it is ahistorical, ‘intemporal’, ‘achronological’.⁵ Rouvroy, however, opposes all this. Her essay is an explicit ‘defence’ of ‘all the things which usually appear as the weaknesses of regulation by law’.⁶

My sense is that Johns draws much from Rouvroy’s account—possibly even her concern that the ‘computational turn’ (the 2013 term already feels clunky) may entail the ‘end of critique’⁷—but there is little defence here of alternatives. Johns avoids recourse to context, interpretation, revelation, history (although in fact she does engage in several historical excursions—into humanitarian maps, for example).⁸ Rather she largely chooses, with something of the ethnographer’s discipline, to participate in her surface subject world. In this way, her target and her method align and learn from each other. Johns’ *dwelling* on the surface, if I may be forgiven the pun, is striking and consistent; it is also, I think, a principal methodological contribution of this book. It is a move I find enormously intriguing and productive. Whereas theoretical foregrounding of the surface is not in itself new (I will remember Jean Baudrillard in a moment), I do not believe it has been pursued so rigorously, deliberately, or self-consciously in international legal scholarship. In what follows, I will pick up three instances of this surface-ism—through the framing devices of

3 *ibid* 143.

4 *ibid*.

5 On ‘data’ as ‘given’, S Humphreys, ‘Data: The Given’ in Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (eds), *International Law’s Objects* (Oxford University Press 2018) 191.

6 Rouvroy (n 2) 144 and 157–8.

7 For Rouvroy, the ‘computational turn which, despite its pretences to “objectivity”, appears as a turning away from the ambitions of modern rationality anchored in empirical experiment and deductive—causal—logic’ may signal the ‘end’ of critique because it undoes, at the epistemological level, the conditions that make critique possible—by removing entirely the presumptive value categories whose ‘suspension’ comprises the initial critical gesture. Rouvroy relies on Michel Foucault for her notion of ‘critique’: at 144–5.

8 Johns (n 1) 38–57.

interface, infrastructure, and emergency—to join Johns on what is an enthralling intellectual kitesurf.

INTERFACING

Johns does not defend ‘regulation by law’. Rather, she writes, ‘[t]o choose interfaces is to choose not to study—or to study only obliquely—that with which much international legal scholarship is concerned.’⁹ In chapter one of *#Help*, she dismisses several familiar methodological frames she has chosen ‘not to study’: doctrines, institutions, platforms, algorithms and ‘ideas’. Most interesting to me, in this deliberately eclectic bag of classic international law and contemporary data-governance entry-points, is the rejection of ‘ideas’, by means of which Johns appears to face away from the (no longer recent) ‘historical turn’ in international law. She distinguishes the ‘investigation of interfaces’ from ‘intellectual history’ by dint of the former’s emphasis on ‘discrete, discontinuous elements that are, in their own right, senseless.’¹⁰ ‘Being concerned with . . . “making sense of it all”’, she writes, ‘intellectual history cannot tell a story built around data fragments that make no sense: satellite image data and mobile phone metadata, for instance.’¹¹ This is a fascinating claim: that the work of extracting ‘sense’ from ‘texts’ will not serve her topic well, as the ‘texts’ in question lack ‘sense’. There is almost—though I am extrapolating here—a worry that the kind of exegetical work that marks so much legal (and other) scholarship might, in the case of ‘digital humanitarianism’, superimpose a false, artificial or misleading ‘sense’ onto the ‘senselessness’ of contemporary digital activity.

Johns’s explanatory account, in this instance, is exceedingly short for such a sizeable assertion—but the originality of the claim, and the punctiliousness with which she pursues it through the book, merit attention. Johns does not adopt the irony of a Dadaist or Situationist: she does not meet the nonsense of the datasphere with condign nonsense. Rather, as she points out, she ‘devotes considerable attention to close reading of texts in use’.¹² The point is that the material that Johns investigates—the data that drives digital humanitarianism, the platforms, the interfaces—are not ordered or arranged in a planned fashion: the material is vast and incidental and ad hoc—and, when turned toward ‘governance’, it is self-referential. The portal she wishes to open

9 *ibid* 11.

10 *ibid*.

11 *ibid* 18.

12 *ibid*.

for us here is, I believe, one in which things do not, at a fundamental level, make sense: they do not conform to overarching goals or objectives or to some masterplan. From this perspective, Johns takes Rouvroy's critique to heart, even if she departs from Rouvroy's response.

Johns takes the device of the interface from Alexander Galloway, whose brilliant intervention, *The Interface Effect*, has not to my knowledge received the attention it deserves in the legal field (though from Galloway too she will depart).¹³ Galloway defines his object of study as follows: '[i]nterfaces are not things, but rather processes that effect a result', they are 'thresholds, those mysterious zones of interaction that mediate between different realities'.¹⁴ His initial examples are 'windows, screens, keyboards, kiosks, channels, sockets, and holes'¹⁵—processes, then, which look a lot like 'things'—but which, he maintains, are 'not media but mediation'.¹⁶ Such an understanding of 'interface' is almost limitlessly broad, and Galloway enjoys exploring its farther reaches. Indeed, in a principal passage from which Johns quotes—'[i]nterface effects involve "local relationships . . . creat[ing] an externalization . . . an edging or a framing" for mediation or interaction'—he is not in fact discussing digital media at all, but rather the visual arts, specifically a Norman Rockwell self-portrait.¹⁷ One might argue that Johns's incision into Galloway's text creates just such an 'edging or framing', treating text as data, excisable for recombination.

For Johns—this time citing Wendy Hui Kyong Chun—interfaces 'provide "simulated visibility" while "obfuscating the machine" and its buried commands'.¹⁸ Her text again itself works as a sort of interface: Chun is, in the passage in question (dating from 2005), speaking specifically about software—the GUI (graphic user interface—to which she returns), and the delightfully mis-named WYSIWYG ('what you see is what you get') interface.¹⁹ For Chun

13 A Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Polity 2012).

14 *ibid* vii.

15 *ibid*.

16 *ibid* 36.

17 Johns (n 1) 10. The full quote is as follows: '[o]ne must look at local relationships within the image and ask how such relationships create an externalization, an incoherence, an edging, or a framing? Or in reverse: how does this other specific local relationship within the apparatus succeed in creating a coherence, a centering, a localization?', Galloway (n 13) 36. That the effect be 'externalization', 'edging' or 'framing' is on this account, incidental; it may equally be the opposite: 'coherence', 'centering', 'localization'; though Johns' appropriation of the text is, I believe, quite appropriate.

18 Johns (n 1) 10.

19 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge' (2005) 18 *Grey Room* 26, 40.

the systematicity with which software conceals its material construction—its hardware (we do not see ‘transistors but rather desktops and recycling bins’)—reveals its ‘ideological’ (in classic Marxist terms) function. Indeed, software ‘fulfil[s] almost every formal definition of ideology we have’.²⁰ Johns’s insertion of Chun’s text within the broad canvas of Galloway’s generous frame brings other resonances to the ‘obfuscated machine’ and its ‘buried commands’—the machine of the state, of the UN, of ‘humanitarianism’, of the economy, of law.

And yet Johns is clearly more interested in the ‘simulated visibility’ than the ‘obfuscated machine’. This is in contrast to both Chun and Galloway, as well as Rouvroy, all of whom are engaged in the age-old academic exercise of exegesis: digging, revealing, unveiling, producing sense out of nonsense—out of the WYSIWIG, recycling bins and even the ‘middlebrow kitsch of which Rockwell is a master’.²¹ Galloway, for example, ‘will not be satisfied just to say an interface is defined in such and such a way, but to show how it exists that way *for specific social and historical reasons*’.²² This is because ‘interfaces are themselves the effects of other things, and thus tell the story of the larger forces that engender them’.²³ Screens—to choose an archetypal interface—conceal, or efface, even as they make visible: they efface by making visible. But is it possible to efface the effaced, so to speak, and engage entirely (or even just primarily) at the level of the rendered? The ‘simulated visible’? The effect? This, in a way, is Johns’s gambit.

INFRASTRUCTURALISM

There is of course a case to be made that the very implication of something ‘concealed’ is itself an effect of the interface—that there is no more ‘sense’ or ‘depth’ *beneath* the surface than ‘on’ it. That there is no ‘beneath the surface’; nothing is effaced other than the reality that there is nothing to efface (this would be ‘the desert of the real’, in Baudrillard’s famous quip).²⁴ Johns turns not to Baudrillard but to his nemesis (of sorts), Michel Foucault.²⁵ Digital interfaces do not, she says, comprise ‘a “furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but rather a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the

20 *ibid* 43.

21 Galloway (n 11) 35.

22 *ibid* vii (emphasis added).

23 *ibid*.

24 J Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Semiotext(e) 1983).

25 J Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (Semiotext(e) 1977).

intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances are linked to one another”.²⁶ Johns is once again innovating—grafting texts between contexts—here it is the Foucault of the *History of Sexuality*—and again, in doing so, she mediates both her source and her topic, allowing each to ‘pass outside of itself’, as she puts it.²⁷ (In citing Johns citing Foucault, I almost excised ‘the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures’—only to realise how significant is its inclusion).²⁸ But at issue here is the generative movement: sideways, metonymic, along an edge, frame, chain or rhizome.

As her chapter on interfaces closes, Johns opens up another methodological thread, to do with infrastructure (as well as infra-law and infra-legality—terms she will distinguish between).²⁹ ‘Infrastructure’ she defines as ‘compris[ing] any structural element that has sunk into or receded from view within, operative practices, arrangements and technologies’.³⁰ It may seem, then, that we are again faced with an inquiry into the underneath—that which has ‘sunk into’ or ‘receded from view’. But we are not. Rather, she clarifies, ‘the infrastructures investigated [in the book] do not lie *behind* the differential relations configured by digital interfaces’.³¹ The latter, to repeat (that is: I am repeating Johns repeating Foucault), comprise ‘a great surface network’.³² What, then, is the infrastructural doing here? Johns responds:

Investigations of infrastructure relate to structuralist and post-structuralist analysis of structure as investigations of infra-law ... or infra-legality ... relate to most doctrinal, sociological or normative analyses of law. They illuminate how law ‘passes outside itself’ and gets transmitted and shaped through a great miscellany of practices and materials.³³

Infrastructural analysis, if that is the right term, is, then, threaded neatly alongside structuralist and post-structuralist theory, a move which—I believe—is

26 Johns (n 1) 17–8.

27 See note 33 below.

28 Indeed Johns declines this elision on three occasions: *ibid* 17–8, 176, 204. But whose bodies? Whose pleasures?

29 *ibid* 19–25; 169–78. On the distinction between ‘infra-law’ and ‘infra-legality’, see at 21.

30 *ibid* 169.

31 *ibid* 176 (emphasis in the original).

32 *ibid*. And Johns will again repeat the Foucault quotation a third time at 204.

33 *ibid*. The quotation is taken from the earlier Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*: *ibid* 21, 176. This ‘passing outside itself’ is a move Johns repeatedly makes herself through her citationary practices—causing the materials she draws upon to ‘pass outside’ themselves, to exceed their context.

distinctively Johns's, and allows her to develop a number of theoretical premises in novel directions. The account of structuralism/poststructuralism (unusually, Johns elides the terms) is highly synoptic, focusing on one primary exponent of the school(s) (if school is the word): Roland Barthes. (I salute in passing the delightful orthographic summoning of another underidentified doyen in the following sentence: '[e]very sign is a setting aside of something derided as peripheral to signification; post-structuralist scholarship has shown this at length.')34 Barthes is, perhaps, ideal to the task: his meticulous semiotics—poised at the interface between structuralism and poststructuralism—is surely the discursive home of *#Help*, a book whose format bears some correspondence to *Mythologies*.

Indeed the specific essay of Barthes's that Johns chooses to cite, 'The Reality Effect' from 1969, itself stands at the threshold of the post-structural, given both its topic and its timing.³⁵ In it, Barthes examines literary elements that had hitherto been set aside, he says, in structural analyses, as being peripheral ('superfluous' or 'indirect') to the core narrative structure. The post-structuralist move will, of course, find that the determination of the core-periphery relationship is itself unstable or untenable. This slippage is already at work in Barthes's essay ('what', he asks, of the recourse to "useless detail" in realist texts 'is the significance of insignificance').³⁶ That Barthes chooses specifically to highlight devices that produce the 'effect of reality' is itself, arguably, both incidental and central to his case. In any case, Johns takes the following from his text:

As Barthes said of the . . . seemingly dispensable, nonpredictive, fragmentary descriptions of 'concrete reality' characteristic of modern realist literature, humanitarian digital interfaces signify 'the real' by purporting to collude directly with referent objects 'in the name of referential plenitude'. Yet they touch that plenitude lightly. They are in other words propagating a 'new verisimilitude'.³⁷

This term too—'new verisimilitude'—is from 'The Reality Effect'; Johns appropriates it, injecting it with wonderful 21st Century resonance. The 'new'

34 *ibid* 171. The Derrida concerned with exegesis as a limitlessly displaced work of 'unveiling' (in for example, J Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche* (University of Chicago Press 1979) might have served Johns well.

35 R Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' [1969] in *The Rustle of Language* (University of California Press 1989) 141, 141–2. The essay was published shortly after Jacques Derrida's publication of three key post-structuralist (not Derrida's term) texts in 1967: *Writing and Difference, On Grammatology and Speech and Phenomena*.

36 *ibid* 143.

37 Johns (n 1) 175.

for Barthes related to moments of verisimilitude in modern realism or history (Flaubert and Michelet are his examples)—in which, he proposed, the function of superfluous ‘concrete details’ in text is to signify the ‘reality’ of the whole (but not, paradoxically, of the specific detail invoked—hence ‘in the name of’). To this, Barthes opposed ‘the ancient mode of verisimilitude’, in which literary and historical texts posit possible realities, but do not assume or assert them as such—the ‘real’ being categorically other than any simulation.³⁸ What is ‘new’ for Johns, however, is the particular form of verisimilitude characteristic of digital, as opposed to analogue, representation.³⁹ Although this reading is clearly not identical to Barthes’s, in practice it maps brilliantly onto his distinction, for it is precisely the conceit of digital representation that it embodies or replaces the *actuality* of the thing represented by reconstructing the represented object from its constituent elements, as against analogue representation, which merely approximates its likeness in another medium.⁴⁰ This distinction, or something like it, will play a significant role in Johns’s own later analysis.

Colluding with Barthes then, Johns’s goal is to look askance at her object, ‘to look . . . aside of that on which most scholars in one’s field focus’.⁴¹ The movement is, again, sideways. Her infra-legal approach, she adds, ‘focuses on elements that are embedded or ubiquitous within a discipline yet cast as inconsequential, marginal, minor, inoperative, dead, banal, alien, “merely” technical or beyond understanding’.⁴² Lawyering in the margins then. Journeying, link by link across the great chain or skein of what is now an immense surface network—a digital humanitarian infrastructure.⁴³

38 Barthes describes the ‘reality effect’ in terms of instances in which the signifier is in ‘collusion’ with the referent to ‘expel the signified’. (The referent being ‘reality itself’: Barthes (n 33) 147–8.) Johns’s language of ‘purporting to collude’ is an interesting twist . . .

39 Johns (n 1) 33–5.

40 See too Humphreys (n 5) 192. ‘Digital’ representation reconstitutes things from constituent elements (sounds, colours) which have been abstracted, quantified, and remade from those primary elements. It thus arguably, in Barthes’s terms, ‘colludes with the referent’ and ‘expels’ the signified. The result is, of course, an entirely confected entity not a replica—a new ‘real’.

41 Johns (n 1) 21.

42 *ibid.* 22. ‘All the interfaces and infrastructures canvassed in this book require routine maintenance, care and validation; they must continually enroll a labour force in that affirming work’: at 176.

43 See *ibid.* 24.

EMERGENCE OF EMERGENCY

At the heart of the humanitarian is the emergency: this is a discursive field that presupposes that things emerge—they ‘surface’ (as Johns points out).⁴⁴ A humanitarian infrastructure is not, paradoxically, constructed to prevent misfortune, but to expect it, to manage it; this is presumably true regardless of whether it is ‘digital’ or not. But Johns’s intuition or presupposition—which I believe is correct—is that the rise of digital humanitarianism coincides with a significant alteration and extension of the general political economy (or ‘register’) of emergency.⁴⁵ It is not clear from her account whether this emergence of emergency reflects a changing circumstance in the world, or whether it too is a reality effect of a certain kind: ‘humanitarian emergencies’ mediation by digital interfaces,’ she writes, ‘renders humanitarian emergencies incessant’.⁴⁶ But digital humanitarianism also has/is a response: it ‘turns [emergencies] from sites of potential unrest into tractable problems of data deficiency’ (one might also have expected ‘data plenitude’). It renders them ‘actionable’.⁴⁷ Emergencies—wars, floods, storms, droughts—trigger digital reflexes. ‘Hunger’, Johns notes at one point, ‘implies data hunger.’⁴⁸

Emergency—as a mode of governance—already shares some elective affinities with ‘digital humanitarianism’ as Johns describes and approaches it. They both ‘typically address the now, the very recent past, and the near future’—that is, they tend to occlude the context or history from whence they emerge, ‘and they do so in the imperative tense’—that is, they discourage discursivity.⁴⁹ Johns spends little time on the *causes* of the various emergencies canvassed through the portals (interfaces) of digital platforms. But if these are effaced, it is not by Johns. Many of the platforms created to manage emergencies—FIVIMS, MMP, MIND, HungerMap LIVE—are discussed, and discussable, with practically no reference to any specific emergency.⁵⁰ Even where Johns canvasses specific emergencies at some length—floods in Bangladesh, for

44 *ibid* 102. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, ‘[t]he notion is of rising from a liquid by virtue of buoyancy’ (online: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/Emergency>, last visited 25 November 2023).

45 Johns (n 1) 102.

46 *ibid* 103.

47 *ibid*.

48 *ibid* 209.

49 *ibid* 102.

50 On FIVIMS (Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping Systems), see *ibid* 54–7; MMP (Missing Maps Project) at 57–67; MIND (Managing Information in Natural Disaster) at 77–93; Hunger Map LIVE at 122–9.

example, or smog (Haze Gazer) and food insecurity (VAMPIRE) in Indonesia⁵¹—there is relatively little to report about what are referred to at one point as their ‘underlying causes’.⁵² This is in keeping with Johns’s methodological commitment, but more than that, it remains faithful to (colludes with?) the spirit of the object of her study and provides—as promised—an oblique view of the pathways, worldviews, and consequences that digital humanitarianism instigates. This is not simply a case of the ‘medium [being] the message’, it is rather ‘seeing like a state’, reminding us that if what is at stake is ‘governance’, we need to know what its object is:⁵³ what is seen, what is ‘made perceptible’, what is removed from view and what is allowed ‘to pass’.⁵⁴ What has been removed from view is complex and enormous: it cannot be made to fit. By letting it pass, Johns poses a question of the reach and limits of immanent critique.

Johns makes the broader point that the hitherto distinct fields of development and disaster risk-reduction are—and have long been—collapsing into one another⁵⁵—an observation which underlines the shortening of temporal horizons, the removal of causal explanation, and the disappearance of discursive space taking place throughout international policy, in line with the ‘watching and waiting’ that digital humanitarianism ‘encourages’.⁵⁶ In the background, though, the ‘causes’ of the emergent emergencies do not disappear—they signal, obliquely, from the margins. ‘[T]he weather’, as one of her interlocutors observes, ‘is less predictable than it used to be.’⁵⁷ Or consider the question late in the book: ‘how [might] nation states . . . seek to govern the global digital economy in future through increasingly chaotic climactic and informational conditions?’⁵⁸ International policy interest in the unpredictable

51 On the Bangladeshi floods, see *ibid* 48–54; on Haze Gazer at 110–14 (it is in the discussion of Indonesian haze that Johns comes close to referring to ‘underlying causes’: the Haze Gazer ‘interface did [not] represent anyone carrying out legal or illegal logging or draining peatland to make way for palm oil and rubber plantations, or for mining, nor investing in those industries or otherwise deriving benefit from them, despite these being widely recognized as among the most significant causes of haze’); on VAMPIRE at 117–22.

52 *ibid* 111.

53 F Johns, ‘From Planning to Prototype: New Ways of Seeing Like a State’ (2019) 82 *Modern Law Review* 833.

54 Riffing on Foucault, Johns speaks of international humanitarianism as having not a power ‘to make live and let die’, but a power to ‘make perceive and let pass’: Johns (n 1) 26, 76, 86.

55 *ibid* 52.

56 *ibid* 26.

57 *ibid* 122. There is a hint too, in the moment where Kofi Annan is quoted, in 1997, proclaiming that ‘market capitalism has no rival . . . In today’s world the private sector is the dominant engine of growth; the principal source of value and wealth.’: at 143.

58 *ibid* 179.

weather and chaotic climate has not disappeared of course—quite the reverse—but it takes place in a different forum, one better sheltered from the endless concatenation of emergencies. If the emergencies are to proliferate, their sources might best be bracketed, effaced, marginalised.

The ‘great surface network’ upon which we are instead permitted, with Johns, to surf, is disclosed to us through, as it were, its own words and errors. There is an obsession with mapping: ‘not to make maps more definitive, but to make them more responsive, timely and customizable’⁵⁹ and ‘to render complex social and economic conditions actionable’.⁶⁰ In constituting its own terrain, the digitally constructed space becomes the arena of action. And there is the rearticulation of the object of governance, the population itself, which—she notes—must be approached ‘as though’ it were a ‘natural’ or ‘biosocial corpus’, whereas in fact it can only be convened as ‘some holographic digital aggregate . . . an unbonded aggregate that is all process’.⁶¹ Then there is the ‘commitment to engaging local[s] in mapping their own constituencies’ and ‘training and teaching people . . . to take over responsibility’ for their own data-gathering.⁶² For ‘it is in amassing, processing and visualizing digital data that what counts as worthy of attention is determined’.⁶³ These are powerful observations that stand to recalibrate critique within the new verisimilitude of a thoroughly datafied humanitarian register.

Throughout, Johns observes, ‘what it means to be human is significantly transformed in and through the digitization of humanitarian work.’⁶⁴ Where digital humanitarianism leads, then, is ‘a conferral of responsibility: an expectation, an imperative even that all individuals and communities enhance their self-reliance and continually seek out and realise positive opportunities to make “life in the capitalist ruins” with or without state support’.⁶⁵ She takes this last arresting image—life in the capitalist ruins—from Anna Tsing’s 2015

59 *ibid* 26.

60 *ibid* 48.

61 *ibid* 82–3, 90. ‘The immediate concern of such technologies is less that of representing bodies and distributing them on a spectrum of health to death than the goal of producing, voicing and amplifying a summative interlocutor, in real time.’: at 90. ‘[D]igital aggregates overlay the population as a matter of humanitarian concern’: at 93.

62 *ibid* 59. ‘Could it be *this*’, Johns asks, ‘a digital aggregate (not a nation, necessarily) understood to be entitled to its own [digital] knowledge—that is in the process of surmounting the “natural” population as the end of government?’: at 91 (emphasis in original).

63 *ibid* 100. ‘Reproduction of the real is not the concern that animates this domain so much as making new things stand in for the real’: at 101.

64 *ibid* 200.

65 *ibid* 108–9.

book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.⁶⁶ This pockmarked image of rhizomatic rupture seems entirely fitting for a book—*#Help*—that hews so closely and fruitfully to a great web of surface network effects periodically broken by ceaselessly emergent phenomena whose source of propulsion remains obscure—yet vital. (Though the properly rhizomatic metaphor is rather bindweed than fungus.)

66 A Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press 2015).