Readers are invited to contact Greg S. Loeben in writing at Midwestern University, Glendale Campus, Bioethics Program, 19555 N. 59th Ave., Glendale, AZ 85308 (gloebe@midwestern.edu) regarding books they would like to see reviewed or books they are interested in reviewing.

Bioethics in the Age of New Media, by Joanna Zylinska. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; 2009. 240 pages. $32.00.

Bioethics has been interdisciplinary since its inception, incorporating philosophy and the healthcare professions as well as law, sociology, and anthropology. Yet despite its interdisciplinarity, the field has so far failed to produce any sustained engagement with that area of the academy known as media and cultural studies. Nor, until recently, has there been much effort within media and cultural studies to theorize bioethics. In *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, Joanna Zylinska aims to bridge the divide between these two interdisciplinary fields by exploring how ethical perspectives on life, health, and the body get articulated in the public domain, particularly in a new media context. Her insightful and provocative examination ranges from the ethics of blogging and online social networking to the biopolitical implications of extreme makeover shows on television, the rhetorical positioning of gene mapping as "cracking the secret of life," and the public moralizing that often erupts over so-called bioart. But Zylinska's project extends beyond simply bringing media and cultural studies into the existent bioethical framework. The book's more far-reaching goal is to suggest an altogether different way of conceptualizing bioethics, one that draws on work by theorists of culture, technology, and new media and connects their insights to ideas about ethics developed from within continental philosophy.

Zylinska, a reader in new media and communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, has explored the intersections between ethics, media, technology, and life in previous work, including two books, *On Spiders, Cyborgs, and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* (2001) and *The Ethics of Cultural Studies* (2005), and in an edited collection, *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age* (2002). This book is her most comprehensive attempt to engage directly with bioethics and seems designed to stimulate bioethics scholars to think differently about their discipline's history and current preoccupations and to envision what Zylinska calls an "expanded bioethics" for the digital age.

The book is divided into two parts, respectively titled "Theorizing Bioethics" and "Bioethics in Action." Part one, comprised of three chapters, provides a critical overview of what Zylinska terms traditional or conventional bioethics, describing how certain methods and perspectives have become dominant within the field and others marginalized. Drawing heavily on Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer's *Bioethics: An Anthology* (1999), Zylinska concludes that mainstream bioethics is a form of applied ethics that is narrowly focused on the

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biological and medical sciences, usually employs deontological perspectives, assumes a rational human subject is the source of decisions, and aims for universalizable judgments. Zylinska finds all of these characteristics problematic, but she is most troubled by the field's "inherent humanism" (p. 36). Bioethics, she writes, "has been mobilized to arbitrate over life, death, and the nature and role of the human in the age of digital technologies in a number of different forums: in the media, in scientific research committees, in hospitals, and in biotech companies." She adds:

> At the risk of overgeneralization, I want to suggest that its response to this task has so far been rather conservative, in the sense that the foundational humanism of the theories and practices that traditional bioethics discourses have been based on, be it in their religious or secular guises, have remained intact in a great number of bioethical debates—and this, in spite of the fact that genetic patenting, cloning, xenotransplantation, cochlear and corneal implants, and organ printing have radically called into question not only humans' ontological status as skin-bound, sovereign beings but also their kinship with, and dependency on, other species and material forms. (pp. 35–36)

Zylinska proposes instead "a new, alternative bioethics, whereby the human is not being posited as a central value or datum point but is rather considered *in-relation-to* and *in-difference-with* other life forms" (p. 36). In an interesting reexamination of bioethics history, Zylinska links her argument for a nonhumanist bioethics to the cybernetic model of bioethics that was originally proposed by Van Rensselaer Potter. Zylinska reminds the reader that Potter, who coined the term "bioethics" in 1970, envisioned it as an ethics of obligation to the biosphere as a whole, not simply as the application of normative ethics to medical dilemmas.

In addition to being nonhumanist, Zylinska's alternative bioethics is rooted in a "philosophy of alterity" inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's notion of ethics as the recognition of, and response to, the infinite alterity (difference) of the other. She also envisions bioethics extending itself into areas of everyday life where new technologies and new media are redefining human and nonhuman life, aligning herself with thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Rosalyn Diprose, Carl Elliott, and Donna Haraway "who have remained attentive to technological processes at all levels of life" (p. 6). In the third chapter, Zylinska turns to the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to argue that bioethics operates in a biopolitical context or, in other words, "within a political regime under which bodies and minds of citizens are administered and under which life is 'managed'" (p. 66). The concepts of biopower and biopolitics have become increasingly important ideas for cultural theorists, and indeed they play a central role in Zylinska's discussion of bioethics. In this chapter, she presents a reframing of biopolitics that acknowledges the possibilities for resistance and ethical transformation through "technologies of the self" such as blogging and online social networking.

In part two, "Bioethics in Action," each chapter presents a case study that illustrates how ideas about human and nonhuman life are being redefined in contemporary media culture.

Chapter four explores the ethical stakes involved in an extreme makeover show called *The Swan*, which aired on the FOX network in 2004; it showed contestants undergoing radical cosmetic surgery, weight loss, and personality training, all with the goal of achieving "total transformation." Using Foucault and Agamben's notion of biopolitics, Zylinska argues that shows such as *The Swan* are "attempts to

exercise . . . biopolitical domination and to subject the participants' bodies and lives to disciplinary techniques" (p. 102). In chapter five, she considers how the phrase "cracking the secret of life" has functioned as a powerful trope, shaping public perceptions about the discovery of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and deciphering the genetic code.

The book's final chapter examines the ethical and political implications of art that uses biomaterial such as blood, tissue, and genes as its medium. The chapter focuses on two recent examples of so-called bioart. One is Eduardo Kac's GFP Bunny project, which used an enhanced version of the green florescent gene found in the jellyfish *Aequorea victoria* to create a transgenic albino rabbit that glowed when illuminated with ultraviolet light. The other is the *Extra Ear: Ear on Arm* project, in which performance artist Stelarc had a cell-cultivated ear surgically attached to his left arm. Zylinska observes that audience responses to art projects such as these are often either excessively moralizing or "uncritically fascinated" with the technological processes they entail. Nevertheless, she asserts that bioart is an important alternative discourse whose purpose is "to challenge many of the dogmatically grounded, moralist positions on bioethics and life, in which the power of certain political convictions and economic interests is obscured by the rhetoric of universal values or by particularist assumptions" (p. 156).

The appeal of Zylinska's invitation to "rethink bioethics" is likely to vary among readers depending on their satisfaction with bioethics as it is today, their perception of media studies and cultural theory, and their openness to new conceptual frameworks and perspectives. The book may be an especially challenging read for those who do not already have some familiarity with cultural theory and continental philosophy. But for those who are interested in alternative paradigms for thinking about ethics, particularly in a new media context, this book offers a potential pathway that is both ambitious and insightful. Alternatively, for scholars of new media and cultural studies, the book may serve as a useful entry point to bioethics.

As a new media scholar crossing disciplinary boundaries to engage with bioethics, Zylinska no doubt recognizes that by seeking to challenge and even transform bioethics she risks being viewed by scholars in the field as the uninvited Other. In her conclusion, Zylinska attempts to reassure readers that her book "does not by any means advocate a total rejection of the existent bioethical tradition, developed by moral philosophers and clinicians and applied in hospitals and medical research institutes" (p. 176). Instead, she writes, her intention is to suggest a bioethics that is open, quoting Derrida, "*to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, . . . whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female."[1] Or, one might add, even if the new arrival on the doorstep of bioethics is in the form of media and cultural studies.

——Amy Snow Landa

Note

1. Derrida J. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond.* trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press; 2000:77; quoted in Zylinska, p. 176.