



Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945 (Experimental Futures)

By Orit Halpern

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Beautiful Data is both a history of big data and interactivity, and a sophisticated meditation on ideas about vision and cognition in the second half of the twentieth century. Contending that our forms of attention, observation, and truth are contingent and contested, Orit Halpern historicizes the ways that we are trained, and train ourselves, to observe and analyze the world. Tracing the postwar impact of cybernetics and the communication sciences on the social and human sciences, design, arts, and urban planning, she finds a radical shift in attitudes toward recording and displaying information. These changed attitudes produced what she calls communicative objectivity: new forms of observation, rationality, and economy based on the management and analysis of data. Halpern complicates assumptions about the value of data and visualization, arguing that changes in how we manage and train perception, and define reason and intelligence, are also transformations in governmentality. She also challenges the paradoxical belief that we are experiencing a crisis of attention caused by digital media, a crisis that can be resolved only through intensified media consumption.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Beautiful Data* is a wonderful book, deeply engaging and full of compelling insights. Reading across fields, disciplines, borders, and issues, Orit Halpern chronicles the emergence of a new way of thinking about the world for the digital moment. It is crucial reading for anyone interested in the new directions in which the humanities, the arts, and education are moving."

(Priscilla Wald, author of *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*)

"From the title to the last page, Orit Halpern experiments with a heady mix of memory, speculation, and the physical world. *Beautiful Data* starts with the early days of cybernetics, back when the nascent discipline was undisciplined, roaming through the world, as much about architecture and design as it was about mathematics, physics and the functioning of the brain and body. Halpern then pushes on that openness, exploring design in the work of Kepes and Corbusier, up on through the vast new Korean smart-city Songdo, always returning to the control of data as it restructures our archival past and sketches our possible futures. An ambitious book, *Beautiful Data* is like a light pipe, pumping an ever-changing flow of new ideas about data and feedback in sudden and productive combination."

(Peter Galison, author of *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Maps: Empires of Time*)

"Overall... this is quite an interesting read, illustrating how a single idea (cybernetics) can permeate all walks of life, at least for a time."

(Alexander von Lünen *The British Journal for the History of Science* 2016-03-01)

"...Halpern's brilliant and blow-by-blow exposition on the transformation of our sense and reason in *Beautiful Data* certainly enriches our critical and historical understanding of important parts of contemporary society. This book contributes to the fields of communication studies, media studies, and science, technology and society (STS), as well as the history of science."

(Yasuhito Abe *International Journal of Communication* 2016-06-01)

"Bringing together the history of science with studies of media, affect, and aesthetics, *Beautiful Data* offers a compelling account of the epistemological infrastructures of the digital that have, since 1945, radically changed the ways we see, interpret, and think."

(Jessica Hurley *American Literature* 2016-09-03)

"*Beautiful Data* is an innovative, informative and highly enjoyable read for those who often find themselves hovering between disciplinary fields, offering a reflective history of early cybernetics, art, design, psychology and political science. Halpern guides her readers gracefully through a history of interactivity between humans and machines, the archive and the interface."

(Amanda Tully *Science & Technology Studies* 2015-03-01)

"*Beautiful Data* will no doubt comprise a critical touchstone for future reflections on 'big data' and where it is taking us."

(Hallam Stevens *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 2016-04-01)

About the Author

Orit Halpern is Assistant Professor of History at the New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College.

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Helen Palmer:

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