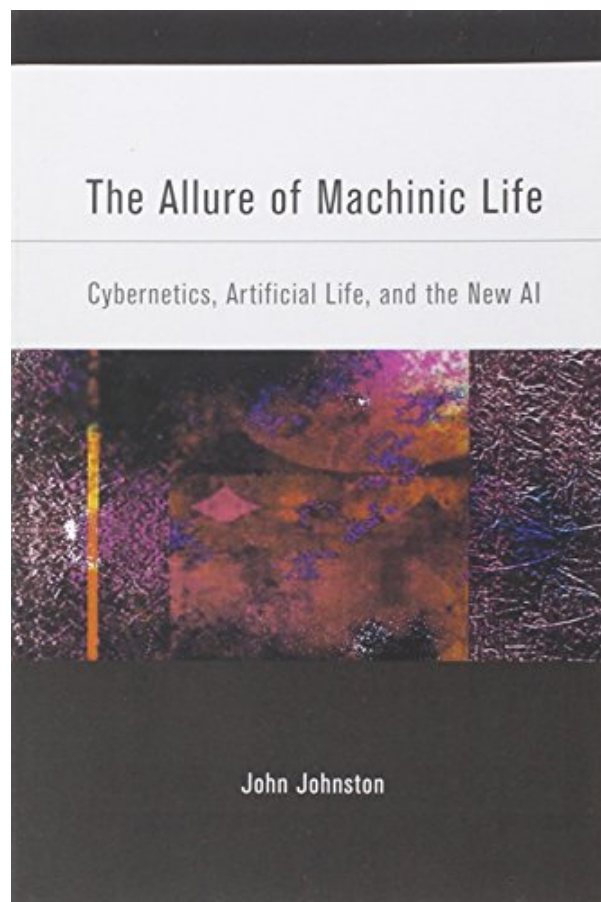


**THE ALLURE OF MACHINIC LIFE:
CYBERNETICS, ARTIFICIAL LIFE, AND THE
NEW AI (MIT PRESS) BY JOHN JOHNSTON**



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The Allure of Machinic Life

Cybernetics, Artificial Life, and the New AI



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Review

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"As a young researcher in the area of artificial intelligence (AI), I have enjoyed reading this book to better understand the roadmap of 'machinic life' and AI." -- I-Hsien Ting, *Emerald Insight*

About the Author

John Johnston is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Emory University in Atlanta. He is the author of *Carnival of Repetition and Information Multiplicity*.

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In *The Allure of Machinic Life*, John Johnston examines new forms of nascent life that emerge through technical interactions within human-constructed environments -- "machinic life" -- in the sciences of cybernetics, artificial life, and artificial intelligence. With the development of such research initiatives as the evolution of digital organisms, computer immune systems, artificial protocells, evolutionary robotics, and swarm systems, Johnston argues, machinic life has achieved a complexity and autonomy worthy of study in its own right. Drawing on the publications of scientists as well as a range of work in contemporary philosophy and cultural theory, but always with the primary focus on the "objects at hand" -- the machines, programs, and processes that constitute machinic life -- Johnston shows how they come about, how they operate, and how they are already changing. This understanding is a necessary first step, he further argues, that must precede speculation about the meaning and cultural implications of these new forms of life.

Developing the concept of the "computational assemblage" (a machine and its associated discourse) as a framework to identify both resemblances and differences in form and function, Johnston offers a conceptual history of each of the three sciences. He considers the new theory of machines proposed by cybernetics from several perspectives, including Lacanian psychoanalysis and "machinic philosophy." He examines the history of the new science of artificial life and its relation to theories of evolution, emergence, and complex adaptive systems (as illustrated by a series of experiments carried out on various software platforms). He describes the history of artificial intelligence as a series of unfolding conceptual conflicts -- decodings and recodings -- leading to a "new AI" that is strongly influenced by artificial life. Finally, in examining the role played by neuroscience in several contemporary research initiatives, he shows how further success in the building of intelligent machines will most likely result from progress in our understanding of how the human brain actually works.

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19 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

the allure of information science

By Ben Miller

It feels a little wrong to call this a damn fun read, but I'm an ex-EECS geek and love when people write really good histories of (information) science. The intro and first chapter should be required reading for any course on organized and self-organized information systems. They really nicely frame the development and arguments of cybernetics around its key people (Shannon, Ashby, Walter, von Foerster), key concepts (complexity, automata, logical machines, information), and best of all, key objects (Walter's homeostat, von Foerster's Tortoises). It's just a clear, impressive delivery of a broadening field.

Allure offers some real gems, like when it demonstrates convergences of AI/AL, and humanistic theory. I'd never expected the frightening similarity between Lacan's drawings of psychic processes, and Hopcroft's state/transition diagrams of finite automata, but I love how similarities like that become building blocks for the book's really clear expositions of later AI/AL experiments. The rest of the book feels like it's drawing together all the contemporary events in AI/AL so that it can explain why those developments are important, how they came about, and how they change the way we understand basic ideas like ecology, evolution, the mind. Like I said, damn fun.

Would have been nice to have a collected work cited page, for easy reference.

0 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

tough read

By fitzalling

I wish I could give a better review because Professor Johnston has read widely and thought deeply about his topic. Unfortunately, with occasional exceptions (the last two chapters read fairly well), he has an academic writing style. I recognize that what is "life" and what is "intelligence" are not simple matters, but it took me a serious level of commitment to get through the book.

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