REVIEW ARTICLE

FROM CODE TO THE EVERYDAY

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In his influential essay ‘The Orders of Simulacra’ Jean Baudrillard (1983: 83-159) theorised the digital as a new form of totality. Drawing on the bio-philosophy of Jacques Monod’s Chance and Necessity (1971), which developed the cybernetic paradigm formalised in the 1940s at MIT by Wiener, Shannon and others to promote an informational understanding of DNA as a type of ‘universal code’, Baudrillard styled the digital future as the victory of abstract code over all else. The result would be the emergence of new forms of social control:

This regulation on the model of the genetic code is not at all limited to the laboratory or to the exalted effects of theoreticians. Banal, everyday life is invested by these models. Digitality is with us. It is that which haunts all the messages, all the signs of our societies. The most concrete form you see it in is that of the test, of the question/answer, of the stimulus response. All content is neutralized by a continual procedure of directed interrogation [...]. (Baudrillard, 1983: 115)

Baudrillard’s rather gloomy prognosis was shared by technologist Jacques Ellul (1980: 105) who argued that the binary structure of computer operations would of necessity ‘eliminate dialectical thinking’. A quarter of a century later the giant, centralised computers which informed Ellul’s vision have been displaced by distributed, miniaturised processing, and the image of total control orchestrated by super-computers has been overtaken by the refashioning of the digital as the realm of enhanced personal freedom and choice. When Nicholas Negroponte (founding director of MIT’s Media Lab) wrote his first column for the inaugural Wired magazine in 1993, his slogan was ‘prime time is my time’. The ‘old media’, typified by the broadcast television networks,
were damned as having ‘all the dogma of the analog world’ (1995: 181). In the columns later collected into Being Digital (1995), Negroponte’s dominant theme was individual choice, a digital future in which universal access would be streamlined by effortless computer management of information flows:

My VCR of the future will say to me when I come home, “Nicholas, I looked at five thousand hours of television while you were out and recorded six segments for you which total forty minutes”. […] It will do this by looking at the headers. (1995: 179)

While rosy-hued, Negroponte’s boosterism seems positively level-headed compared to Mondo 2000:

The cybernet is in place. […] The old information elites are crumbling. The kids are at the controls […] We’re talking about Total Possibilities. Radical assaults on the limits of biology, gravity and time. The end of Artificial Scarcity. (Queen Mu and R U Sirius, Mondo 2000 editorial 1989)

This breathless ‘Californian ideology’ now seems as distant as Baudrillard and Ellul’s total code, burnt by the blowtorch of failed internet start-ups and worthless stock options. Yet optimism of the will is not entirely in the past. Like digital phoenixes rising in the wake of the doctom pyre, devices such as 3G mobile phones and MP3 players continue to carry the banner of technological progress as the basis of individual autonomy, first raised in the 1980s by personal computing and in the 1990s by networked communications. Nevertheless, as the millenarian ‘cyber’ narratives which blossomed in the lead-up to the year 2000 give way to something called ‘digital culture’, more sober assessments about where digital technology is taking us are becoming possible. The digital threshold has been both more and less than its boosters and detractors promised. In particular, it has become more ordinary, more prosaic, less easily identifiable. The debates have broadened, speculative theory has been tempered by internecine economic struggle and everyday practice. In the field of media, things are still shifting, although not as fast as they seemed to be a decade ago, and not necessarily in the anticipated directions.

In his magisterial Technics and Civilization (1934: 354), written at the height of the Great Depression, Lewis Mumford had imbibed enough Marx to declare: ‘Whatever the politics of a country may be, the machine is a communist […]’. The assumption was that the collective labour demanded by machine production would necessarily militate towards collective forms of political and social organization. Similarly deterministic assumptions underlay many early assessments of digital media and networked culture, and not only from the usual suspects such as John Perry Barlow and Negroponte. Mark Poster (1995), for example, gave a more scholarly appearance to the rampant technological determinism with his McLuhanesque prophesies about an internet-led digital revival of the public sphere. A decade on this nascent public sphere has, predictably, been heavily colonized by many of the ‘old media’, as well as the governments and corporations that Poster and Negroponte thought they were leaving behind. AOL’s name no longer hangs in front of Time-Warner; for many users the internet has become more like a
broadcast medium, albeit one befitting the satellite era with innumerable global channels. Interactivity is often been reduced to purchasing or what Meikle (2002) aptly calls registration.

Acknowledging these development is not to advocate resignation, nor to occlude the important and diverse ways in which new media networks have contributed to contemporary social and political activism. Rather, it is to recognize the need for more nuanced assessments of the complex process of technological change, particularly the ways in which ‘new media’ are articulated with ‘old media’ and intertwined with broader social, economic, political and cultural trajectories. Four books published in 2004 make different and, at times, significant contributions to this task.

Vincent Mosco’s *The Digital Sublime* offers a critical assessment of the ‘myths’ of cyberspace that he posits as central to the ‘important myths about our time’. For Mosco, the primary function of myth is the evisceration of politics and history: ‘Myth creates the condition for social amnesia about old politics and older myths’ (83). Much of the ground the book covers is familiar: the hype of the dotcom era, the bold claims for the networked transcendence of history and geography, the religious millenarianism of much US internet scholarship in the late 1990s. Mosco’s achievement is, firstly to re-present this material in a condensed and readable form accessible to a wide range of readers, and secondly to locate ‘cyber’ discourse within a broader historical and conceptual framework which links the rhetoric of ‘cyberbole’ to the tradition of the technological sublime analysed by Leo Marx (1965) and David Nye (1994). This framework offers a critical perspective on a series of ‘ends’ he attributes to the myth of cyberspace, particularly the ‘end of history’ and ‘the end of politics’. The former deals less with Francis Fukuyama (1992) than with the media theory of ‘cosmic thinkers’ such as Teilhard de Chardin, Marshall McLuhan, Negroponte, Ray Kurzweil and Douglas Rushkof, who, Mosco argues, contribute to the ‘end-of-history’ fervour by providing the ‘the profane internet with its sacred canopy’ (82). The ‘end of politics’ appraises the triumph of technology over place proclaimed by those such as economists Kenichi Ohmae (*The Borderless World*, 1990) and Frances Cairncross (*The Death of Distance*, 1997) and lobby groups such as the Progress and Freedom Foundation with its transcendent notion of ‘quantum’ politics. Mosco reads these visions of individual empowerment and customized information as symbolic of the demise of traditional public space. Unfortunately, the value of his critique is undermined by his neglect of the ways in which other groups have utilised precisely the same technologies to enact new forms of collective action based in, but not confined to, specific struggles and contexts.

Mosco was once a researcher looking at the promise of ‘interactive’ cable TV for Daniel Bell and this experience is used to good advantage when he compares myths about cyberspace with those surrounding earlier technology, including electricity, radio and television. Perhaps the strongest part of the book is the final chapter dealing with the history of the World Trade Centre as ‘the first material manifestation of the post-industrial society’ (143), where Mosco’s established credentials in political economy come to the fore. His account of the demise of manufacturing in Manhattan, which laid the ground for the post-1960s art boom in vacant warehouse space, is fascinating. Mosco posits the demolition of ‘Radio Row’ as ‘one reason why Silicon Valley sprouted in California and not in the city of AT&T and RCA, the city that gave birth to the
telecommunications and broadcasting industries’ (147). The financial failure of the redevelopment—even in the mid-1990s there were 60 million square feet of vacant office space in the downtown area—only improved with the publicly subsidised emergence of ‘Silicon Alley’ which soon embodied the myth of the digital rebirth of the old industrial city from its ashes. Such a myth is itself taking a new turn as the fate of the WTC site is decided, although a return to the mixed small business economy of ‘Radio Row’ is not one of the reconstruction options.

The editors of Memory Bytes: History, Technology and Digital Culture pitch their book at a similar terrain to that identified by Mosco, positing the need to think historically about the emergence of digital culture, and to question the rhetoric of absolute breaks with the past. The book is an edited collection consisting mostly of papers given at an interdisciplinary seminar at the University of Iowa in mid-2000. This gap between writing and publication is perhaps less of an issue than it might have been, but only because the focus is heavily on the past. Only a few of the dozen essays deal more than fleetingly with contemporary aspects of digital culture, with most leaving the connection between historical examples and current events largely implicit. More disappointing, few of the authors manage to lift their gaze beyond the historical and geographical borders of the United States. Despite these limits, there are rewarding moments in what is a varied collection. David Depew deftly maps rhetorical and conceptual shifts in images of the human body to situate the ideological success of the Human Genome Project in projecting an image of DNA as the ‘code of codes’. Depew’s intimacy with the changing scientific paradigms and his sensitivity to their double life as metaphor and image gives historical backbone to Baudrillard’s speculative theory, leading him across similar terrain to that mapped by Hayles’ (1999) important investigation of cybernetics. Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi’s investigation of the Institute of Creative Technologies established in Los Angeles in 1999 concerns the much-noted convergence between Hollywood and the Pentagon. Importantly, she moves beyond the usual examples, such as the military ‘invention’ of the video camera, the internet or computer games, to explore the details of the policy shift which has seen the US military invest heavily in digital simulation as a training mechanism. In response to the post-cold war environment, where the mooted ‘peace dividend’ meant the military faced significant budget cuts, immersive technologies and narrative-based realism became increasingly important as a replacement for field exercises. Today’s ‘smart soldier’ is not only be kept informed in the field by multimedia packages such as Paramount Digital’s ‘JMEANS computer interface’, but is schooled for the experience through interactive systems such as StoryDrive which simulate complex combat scenarios.

Many of the essays in Memory Bytes display a theoretical modesty in distinct contrast to the wild theory which characterized the first phase of ‘cyber’ theory. Judith Babbitt’s analysis of the use of stereographic images in education, Lisa Gitelman’s investigation of copyright issues in relation to player piano rolls and John Peter’s work on early sound recording are all marked by the preoccupation with historical minutiae characteristic of the research specialisation encouraged within the US academy. The approach is too cautious for my liking, sticking to a past which can be safely known, and leaving its connection to the present, as well consideration of theoretical paradigms, largely undeveloped. The contributions by some of the better known writers in the collection are disappointing. Lauren Rabinowitz’s essay on Hale’s Tours and IMAX adds little to
a well-excavated topic, while Katherine Hayles and Thomas Swiss produce pedestrian accounts of what Swiss calls ‘second phase’ electronic literature.

Where the previous two books were largely concerned with restoring a sense of history to digital culture, Ron Burnett’s *How images think* is primarily concerned with the possibilities of the future. Central to Burnett’s argument is his concept of the image, less a visual artefact or material support but a social relationship activated by what Duchamp long ago termed the ‘audience co-efficient’.

Images are no longer just representations or interpreters of human actions. They have become central to every activity that connects humans to each other and to technology […] I use the term ‘image’ to refer to the complex set of interactions that constitute everyday life within image-worlds. The ubiquitous presence of images far exceeds the conventional notions that images are just objects for consumption, play, or information. Images are points of mediation that allow access to a variety of different experiences (Latour 2000) Images are the interfaces that structure interaction, people, and the environments they share. (Burnett xiv, xviii)

While Burnett is quick to tell us that his provocative title is ‘just a metaphor’, the stated ambition of his book—to bring together scientific and cultural understandings of images—is welcome and much-needed. In particular Burnett wants to use cultural theory as a critical antidote to the current dominance of cognitive science and engineering in the production of digital interfaces. Burnett argues that the models of perception and knowledge that underlie much of this research are reductive in their foreclosure of ambiguity, indeterminacy and multiplicity:

This issue is not merely a difference of opinion between engineers and social scientists. The lack of concern of the social and cultural implications of immersive experiences means that the ways in which they are built and used is conceived of through a limited model of human subjectivity. This depletes the potential richness of interaction and reduces the future potential of VR environments. (113)

While his premise seems well-founded, Burnett’s delivery on it is uneven. Much of the book has a speculative, *ad hoc* quality, almost like an improvised lecture. Key insights flash up as isolated fragments, but are left undeveloped, while critical tensions are resolved by fiat of assertion, without building a case or providing support. On many occasions, Burnett is so keen to find the positive in digital technology that legitimate critiques disappear from view. His voluntarist appraisal of ‘simulated communities’ is a case in point, when he asserts that: ‘Community is defined less by the intimacy of relationships that sustain it than by the connections people make to achieve particular results or satisfy certain needs’ (159). For someone claiming to extol creativity and imagination, this is a very functionalist definition of community. Moreover its corollary that ‘communities only exist as long as they are needed or as long as the members of the community want to keep working and communicating with each other’ (159), begs the question as to whether community can ever be purely ‘optional’. For all these reasons, Burnett is provocative to read. But, if its generalizing optimism is frustrating at times, it at least serves to identify a terrain of vital importance to the future of digital culture.
Like How Images Think, Sean Cubitt’s The Cinema Effect is primarily concerned with the status and function of the contemporary image. By far the most conceptually ambitious of the four books reviewed here, Cubitt’s analysis moves well beyond the recent impact of the digital to plot the transformation of what might be called the social relations of the image across the hundred plus year history of cinema. In a logic more reminiscent of Weimar theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin than he acknowledges (Kracauer in particular is continually and to my mind unjustly dismissed as a somewhat naïve realist), Cubitt argues that the cinematic image has a specific and privileged relation to the forms of domination of our era, but, as importantly, also to their closure.

Film is uniquely situated to reveal the inner workings of the commodity, since it was for most of the last century the most popular, as it is now still the most strategic medium. […] Discovering the temporalities of film is as close as we get to understanding the why and wherefore of commodity fetishism as it has developed over the last hundred years. (2-3, 7)

Cubitt sketches his thesis across three ‘moments’ of cinema: the ‘pioneer cinema’ of France in the decade between 1895 and 1905, the ‘normative cinema’ which emerged as synchronized sound enabled the stabilization of cinema as a commodity form in the 1930s, and contemporary ‘post-cinema’ in which the temporality and causality of earlier narrative form has become increasingly problematic. This periodization cuts across Deleuze’s division between the movement-image of early film and the time-image of the post-world war two avant-garde (Resnais, Antonioni, etc), suggesting instead that certain aspects of the time-image appeared in the first decade of film, while contemporary ‘digital temporality’ is manifested by a spatialization of time. Cubitt also explicitly announces his aim of challenging both the ‘film as language’ metaphor proposed by Metz in the 1970s, and the formalist psychological analysis popularized by Bordwell in the 1980s. Such ambitions ensure this is not a light read —some familiarity with debates in film theory, semiotics and psychoanalysis, social theory and postcolonialism are preconditions for navigating what is a dense and thought-provoking work.

Cubitt’s method is to combine close analysis of specific films with an exploration of broader theses about the transformation of image and society: thus the different varieties of ‘normative cinema’ are focused through the lens offered by the ‘total film’ of Eisenstein’s Alexander Nevsky (1938), the ‘realist film’ of Renoir’s Rules of the Game (1939), and the ‘classicism’ of several RKO sound films including Flying Down to Rio (1933), King Kong (1933) and Gunga Din (1939). This method enables the insights generated by poetic leaps from details of cinematic style to more abstract concepts, but inevitably risks the occasional crash when an example is overburdened by the weight it is asked to carry.

The ‘post-cinema’ section of the book describes an increasingly self-reflexive cinema which ‘offers itself to a double audience, one that succumbs to the spectacle and one that appreciates it’ (222). This reflexivity modifies classical cinema’s narrative realism, as temporal unfolding gives way to spatial orchestration in the ‘neo-baroque’ cinema of Tim Burton’s Batman or the digital ‘database narrative’ of Alex Proyas’ Dark City:
Space succeeds time as organizing principle synchronously with neobaroque narratives’ turn to the database form, a spectacularization of plot in an ironic mode in which mere coincidence satirizes the classical working-through of causes and their effects. As the lifeworld appears consistently more random, so the mediascape becomes more scathing at any pretence at order, mocking the revelations and resolutions that once passed as realistic […] In the process, pattern is divorced from its old task of establishing morality. (249)

For Cubitt, the critical task for cinema is to open up possibilities for communicative dialogue. Such hope is invested not in ‘cosmopolitan’ films such as The Matrix or Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon which, to Cubitt, exemplify the commodification of the audience on a global basis, but rather in what he calls ‘oneiric’ and ‘revisionary’ film. Where the former refers to the European sci-fi of Jeunet and Caro, and Luc Besson, the latter includes diverse ‘history’ films such as Wings of Honneamise, 1942: A Love Story and The Navigator. But more than entire films, it is in certain sequences or moments that Cubitt looks for the emergence of new forms of dialogue predicated on a conception of the human as ‘naturally’ mediated, an understanding of nature as hybrid, mobile, and disturbed, and a future vision of ‘panspecies connectivity’ in which the communicative relation between human–machine sheds the constraints of anthropocentric interface. For Cubitt, such ‘big’ questions properly belong to cinema:

Where art took over the tasks of philosophy in the late 19th and early 20th C, cinema has stolen the tasks of art in the late 20th and early 21st. As art abandons its research into perception, form and meaning to inquire into its own boundary conditions, the task of inquiry into being in the world falls to the moving image media. (356)

The Cinema Effect is an important book and a welcome counter-weight to the theoretical abstinence of a book like Memory Bytes. Interestingly, it provides a conceptual grounding for the ‘digital’ to which more conventional history texts can only aspire.

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References


