
An illustration in the newly edited collection Rethinking Media Change pictures a man from the turn of the nineteenth century. Cane in hand, he is going for a walk while listening to a transportable phonograph system eerily similar to a modern walkman. This fictional image launches a discussion by Priscilla Murphy, who reminds us that the death of the book has long been heralded. Nonetheless, the walkman, for all its flexibility and convenience has not replaced reading.

This scenario picks up a central theme addressed in this book as a whole: the idea that media, and discourses about the media, repeat themselves over time. Following on the heels of books such as Bolter and Grusin’s Remediation (1999), this collection likewise probes the multiple ways in which media are adapted to particular contexts of use—from books, TV, and film to less common forms such as personal video recorders, theme parks, and museum displays. The book’s brief introduction leaves the aim of the collection very much open to interpretation, rather distinctive in its absence of direct commentary on the twenty-one essays within its fold (possibly too numerous?). In spite of this, there is a certain continuity to the approach taken and to some of the patterns uncovered in relation to media transitions.

The introduction opens with a somewhat tired denunciation of utopic and dystopic views of new media, and calls for attention to the detail of media change, as a process of accretion rather than overhaul or revolution. However, editors David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins go on to suggest a more useful insight into media change. This is the concern addressed by Priscilla Murphy: how media technologies tend to replay problems which were just as important in the past. Thorburn starts off the first of the book’s three sections with a short piece arguing that the questions about reality, presence, and identity we see as fundamentally new to the Internet are characteristic of previous kinds of visual media, including television and books. Gregory Crane suggests in his contribution that current arguments about electronic media continue discussions first begun in ancient Greece; defenders of the codex form of book only undermine their own project by asking others to respect the past but forget print culture’s early origins in Greco-Roman literature recorded on scrolls.

This theme is also strongly present in the concluding section on visual culture. Alison Griffiths showcases the surge of worries concerning the spectacularization of museum displays at the turn of the last century, worries which have resurfaced due to the introduction of virtual and interactive museum attractions. Angela Ndalianis describes this kind of contemporary spectacularization, also typical of theme parks and the visual coding of certain recent films, as reflecting a similarity to Baroque art of the seventeenth century. In an interesting counter-argument, Constance Balides suggests that the conditions of work and everyday life within a culture give rise to a particular aesthetic that cannot be translated into another context.

A second theme is that the opening stage of any new media technology is a time of significant possibility and novelty, before production methods become firmed up and people put on their blinkers and start viewing the technology according to custom and habit. This idea is developed in Tom Gunning’s essay “Re-Newing Old Technologies” where he unpacks the reasons for the unstable nature of our astonishment at new technology, which fades over time. He suggests that wonder in any new technology, dulled as it sinks into an established and second nature, can and should be re-instilled in order for us to re-awaken the utopic visions which once accompanied it—certainly an insight of sharp relevance to current debates about the possibilities of the Internet. The emergence of a variety of forms of new media is explored in the second section of the book, particularly in relation to online
In an original contribution, Henry Jenkins departs from his previous work on fan fiction and looks at the emerging use of amateur digital video as a zone of expanding creative possibilities.

Due to the strong historical approach taken throughout, there is a slight tendency toward expositing endless detail in order to deliver the same old punch-line: that new media are adapted and used in different contexts due to a variety of competing factors. The insights offered in the essays are sharper and more relevant when they distinguish broader patterns of media change. This criticism will be familiar to those acquainted with debates in technology studies around the usefulness of continual speculation on the “social construction of technology.” Certainly it is helpful to identify problems with technological determinism, whereby specific characteristics of technologies are thought to determine the way these will be used. However, as J. McGregor Wise (1997) argues, this focus leads to a privileging of time and causality in technological change, and an endless debate as to whether technological features or cultural, economic, and political factors are the driving force behind technological adaptation. At times, the essays would have benefited by recognizing media transitions as particular examples of technological change, and brought to bear the new insights that are revitalizing this field.

Nevertheless, many of the articles in Rethinking Media Change demonstrate the first step toward such a recognition, as the third broad theme which emerges is that an understanding of the history of any particular medium needs also to include an eye to developments of related media. This argument is triggered by two contemporary trends: media tendencies toward convergence and academic tendencies toward interdisciplinarity. So, for example, William Uricchio advocates that the study of cinema and changes to the medium of film be integrated with insights garnered from media studies more generally. Similarly, Paul Erickson argues that for book historians to remain relevant to contemporary experiences of electronic reading, they need to directly acknowledge that reading encompasses a great deal more than engagement with the particular object we have come to know as the book—which in turn requires working with historians of other media.

The articles assembled in Rethinking Media Change meet a high standard of scholarship and engage the reader’s interest. Perhaps because of the nature of the edited collection, the book’s main contribution to rethinking media change is of a wealth of examples and historical detail concerning various historical and contemporary media technologies and uses, and the continuities and disjunctures among these. Nevertheless, the engaged reader can pull together a number of patterns of media change which signal interesting insights, and could lead on to further consideration of media change more broadly.

References

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