
New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality, is a comprehensive collection that attempts to redefine the field of what is commonly referred to as “mass media.” This book includes 17 essays that question and attempt to move beyond traditional discourse on mainstream media to more accurately encompass the impacts of new digital technologies, such as DVDs and MP3 players. The writers attempt to demonstrate that these new forms of digital media are reshaping the theoretical and pedagogical foundations in the range of disciplines that cross over with film and television studies.

In the book’s introduction, Everett & Caldwell discuss the need for new conceptual frameworks that open the theoretical terrains resulting from the incorporation of innovative forms of digital media into our daily lives. According to the authors, these digital media technologies “are revolutionizing our sensory perceptions and cognitive experiences of being in the world” (p. xi) (emphasis in original). This chapter introduces the reader to questions surrounding the transformative nature of digital media technologies, defining a digital “aesthetics,” analyzing the notion of “new media,” and arriving at a more thorough understanding of the multidisciplinarity of digital practice.

This book is organized into four main sections that carry the linkage of digitextuality, namely: Digitextual Deconstructions, Digitextual Aesthetics, Prefiguring Digitextuality, and Digitextual Practices.

Part 1, Digitextual Deconstructions, brings together four essays that attempt to capture the state of the digital revolution along with a call for the rethinking of the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of media studies. In this section, the roots of digitextuality are outlined, along with its theoretical influence. A new cultural dominant is also identified that encompasses digitization in such domains as film, television, and music. Digitextuality is explored in different technological realms, including digital image manipulation in film and the use of digital software tools in television advertisements. The transformative capabilities of digital technologies suggest the possibility of radio as a two-way communication apparatus. As well, emphasis is placed on the need for further study in the area of invisible communication. Included in this notion are the media of military and science, among others, the developments of biological warfare and nanotechnology. This part of the book also explores the complex interrelationships between the two genres of popular science and science fiction.

Part 2, Digitextual Aesthetics, consists of four pieces that capture the various ways in which scholars and other stakeholders speak of a digital aesthetic. Peter Lunenfeld’s writing on “Space Invaders: Thoughts on Technology and the Production of Culture” proposes “a digital theory that resists linear approaches that chart and periodize radical new media practices according to linear teleologies” (p. xvii). The articles in this section cover a wide scope of digitextual aesthetics, theorizing new media practices, such as surveillance in public spaces dubbed by Manovich as “cellspace,” and culture embedded in new-media technologies such as Dreamweaver. In this last piece, by Tarleton Gillespie, what is interesting is that although the theorists noted are referenced in a number of works in the field of technology studies (Feenberg, 1992; Rammert, 1997), the application of their traditional lines of argument to the role and nature of authorship in digital media is a new and innovative approach to media studies. In this last piece, by Tarleton Gillespie, although the theorists noted are referenced in a number of works in the field of technology studies (Feenberg, 1992; Rammert, 1997), the application of their traditional lines of argument to the role and nature of authorship in digital media represents a new and innovative approach to media studies.
Part 3, Prefiguring Digitextuality, assembles four pieces exploring the notion of “new” in the term “new media.” Caldwell begins by succinctly asking “whether film studies can continue to talk productively about texts, aesthetics, ideology and identity in new media...without also talking about the industrial landscape that animates and fuels new-media development on a wide scale” (p. 130). He argues that the delineation between digital media and traditional media is not clear. Stephen Mamber, who analyzes transformations in the field of new media, defines “narrative mapping” as “an attempt to represent visually events that unfold over time” (p. 145). From a methodological stance, Mark Williams returns to a critical look at apparatus theory in the analysis of two films, Fairy Tale: A True Story and AI: Artificial Intelligence. He explores the insights realized by reconsidering that methodology. His primary motive in returning to this line of inquiry is to “suggest the importance of considering media specificity in analytical work about media history” (p. 160). In the final article of this section, Jeffrey Sconce applies the parable of Charles Mackay’s account of “tulipomania” to the NASDAQ/dot.com crash of 2000. The parable of the 2000 crash is then applied to academic practices in university programs in film, television, and other media. With the current subject hype being the study of “digital culture,” Sconce critically analyzes the current and future state of new-media studies, particularly digital media developments. Although the author argues that there is better job marketability for doctoral graduates who have technical abilities in addition to an academic foundation in this emerging field, this improved marketability is not only apparent in media studies, but can also be seen in such interdisciplinary fields as communication and science and technology studies.

Part 4, Digitextual Practices, showcases a variety of case studies that discuss the complexities underlying the use of digital media. For instance, Karen Buzzard’s essay “Net Ratings: Defining a New Medium by the Old, Measuring Internet Audiences” looks at the emerging standardization of Internet ratings. In her analysis, Buzzard also discusses the development of Web tracking, a service that “allows advertisers to put a face as well as age, gender and household income on Internet surfers” (p. 199). Although the author mentions threats to individual privacy as a result of this type of surveillance, from my own research, these threats can have wider societal implications. According to David Lyon, “codes...are the invisible doors that permit access to or exclude from participation in a multitude of events, experiences, and processes” (2003, p. 13).

New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality is a useful collection that represents a wide range of theoretical and empirical discourses on the development of new digital media. What is evident from this book is that it illustrates that there are varying conceptions of new media, reflected in the multidisciplinary mix of authors that have been brought together for this collection from such fields as English literature, history, film and television studies, and science and technology. This is an all-encompassing look at the rapidly emerging field of new digital media. It provides insight into the emerging convergence of new digital media with more traditional forms.

At first glance, New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality seems targeted more to students, researchers, and practitioners in the fields of television and film studies. However, the book’s wide range of articles serves those in other fields that overlap with film and television studies, such as communication and technology studies, as well as sociology and philosophy.

References


Grace Chung
*Simon Fraser University*