
A collection of 13 essays edited by Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil, MemoryBytes examines the interaction of technology and digital culture. The book sets itself apart from other anthologies on the topic, which the editors contend rarely “think historically or foreground the relationship of historical perspective to the current discussion [of digital culture]” (p. 3). The essays that comprise Memory Bytes are therefore centrally preoccupied with history. This collection is intended to counteract two linked characteristics of digital culture: the rhetoric of newness, a myopic perspective that effects a rupture with technology’s past; and the rhetoric of amnesia, which erases technology’s material basis in history.

Memory Bytes achieves this goal by bringing together essays on a diverse range of topics and technologies written by an interdisciplinary group of scholars (from disciplines such as History, English, Media and Communication Studies, Film Studies, and American Studies, among others). The collection originates from a research seminar directed by Rabinovitz held at the University of Iowa in the summer of 2000. One of the collection’s strengths is its interdisciplinary perspective, as the essays in Memory Bytes approach digital culture from numerous vantage points. This anthology will thus be of interest to scholars and students working within and across the disciplines listed above.

The essays in Memory Bytes are thematically organized into four sections. In the first section, “Intellectual Histories of the Information Age,” the contributors explore the ideological underpinnings of intellectuals’ formative work on technology. Laura Rigal presents a critical history of electricity through a reading of Benjamin Franklin’s 1751 pamphlet, and David Depew uses the Human Genome Project as a means to exemplify historical shifts in the scientific rhetoric of the body. An essay on advocates and critics of the information age by Ronald E. Day concludes the section. Day draws attention to the careers of often-overlooked information theorists Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet and also re-examines pertinent works by Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin.

The second section, “Visual Culture, Subjectivity, and the Education of the Senses,” deals with “the ongoing historical relationship between technological applications in audio-visual or highly somatic experiences . . . and the production of ideological states of consciousness” (p. 14). In the first essay, Rabinovitz presents a history of somatic visual culture through a discussion of three immersive film experiences: Hale’s Tours (“ride-films” popular in the early 1900s), Imax theatres, and motion simulation rides like those found at Disney theme parks. Judith Babbits then situates the stereograph as a means for the transmission of American national culture at the turn of the twentieth century. The essay by Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi that concludes this section stands out somewhat in its preoccupation with the recent past. Ghamari-Tabrizi analyzes the convergence of the Pentagon and Hollywood in the delivery of military training with “emotional impact,” as exemplified by the founding in 1999 of the Department of Defense-funded Institute of Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California.

In the third section, “Materiality, Time, and the Reproduction of Sound and Motion,” the contributors explore the materialist bases of media technologies. John Durham Peters explores the relationships between physiology and sound history through reference to the works of Thomas Edison and Hermann von Helmholtz. In the second essay, Lisa Gitelman uses legal battles over the status of player piano rolls as a means to explore the social integration of this technology. Finally, Scott Curtis analyzes digital medical imaging techniques such as computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). He argues that there is continuity (rather than rupture) with their analog antecedents in how physicians “read” these images.
The concluding section, “Digital Aesthetics, Social Texts, and Art Objects,” consists of essays that “examine new art objects that are the result of recent digital technologies” (p. 16). It is therefore least congruous with the preceding sections, in that it is more a history of the present than an attempt to demonstrate continuity with the past. Nevertheless, these essays contribute positively to the collection’s overall focus on digital culture. In the first essay, N. Katherine Hayles explores gendered embodiment through a reading of digital texts by Deena Larsen (Disappearing Rain) and Stuart Moulthrop (Reagan Library). In the second essay, poet Thomas Swiss explores debates central to the evolving status of electronic literature. The final essay in the collection is Vivian Sobchak’s nostalgic examination of a current technology, the QuickTime movie, which she compares to Joseph Cornell’s “boxed relics” sculptures from the 1930s and 1940s.

The editors repeatedly state in their introduction that Memory Bytes “foregrounds the very problem of how to draw historical comparisons across different technological and cultural moments” (p. 4). This problem is apparent in the pages of this anthology both as a point of inquiry and as an unintentional byproduct of that same process of investigation. Though rich in diversity, the collection lacks coherence at times, a quality that might be remedied by the inclusion of a concluding chapter. As it stands, the book’s final section is the one least coherent with the collection’s stated focus on historical approaches to digital culture. A concluding chapter would strengthen the collection’s overall argument, which seems to lose focus as one moves progressively through each of the book’s four sections.

Despite the aforementioned weakness in the collection’s overall structure, Memory Bytes is ultimately an innovative contribution to the literature on digital culture. This volume “asks what we can learn from the past that provides a philosophical and historical framework for the sets of issues being framed for the way we live today in contemporary digital culture” (p. 12). Memory Bytes reminds the reader that only through understanding our past can we comprehend our present or imagine our future.

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