
Book review:

Trend, D. (Ed). (2001). *Reading digital culture*.
Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell.

Reviewed by:
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The academic as well as the popular analysis of digital and information technologies often seems to habitually invite overstatement. As David Trend asserts in the introduction to this edited anthology, “discussions in academic circles have fragmented into a myriad of camps that all too frequently privilege hyperbole and polemic over complexity and dialogue”. The sometimes lurid truth claims of digital evangelists and pessimists alike are certainly evident in *Reading Digital Culture*; indeed, the requisite overemphasis is exemplified by Trend’s own offhand description of the Internet as “the most powerful economic force in human history”. To its credit, however, this anthology largely avoids aligning itself with what Trend characterises as “one side or another of ... [a] utopian divide”, and its mix of diverse perspectives amounts to a genuinely open-ended contribution to the discussion of digital culture.

Published as part of Blackwell’s Key Works in Cultural Studies series, the selection of articles is largely orientated towards a humanities and self-consciously ‘critical’ readership. However, anyone either teaching or studying a paper in digital and ICT issues will gain from Trend’s non-partisan selection of readings. What they will emerge with, above all else, is a renewed conviction that the new technologies need be understood with reference to wider questions of social, economic and cultural power, and that they should not be superficially idealised (as they often are) as ‘neutral’ or wholly ‘ahistorical’ phenomena.

The selection of articles is organised around a loose six-part structure. Part One introduces different philosophical perspectives on the

relationship between humans and technology, and includes: a Slavoj Žižek essay on the dangers of “‘virtual’ technology further cushioning our conception of ‘true reality’”; Felix Guattari’s somewhat abstruse reflections on the ontological symbiosis of man and machine; and Donna Haraway’s ‘classic feminist essay’, A Manifesto for Cyborgs. The fact that the ‘revolution’ does indeed have a past is vividly conveyed by Sadie Plant’s snapshot overview of the relationship between Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace, two key figures in the 19th century pre-history of computing.

Part Two is organised around the rather generic title of Knowledge and Communication in a Digital Age, and considers the relationship between digital technology and earlier communicative forms. The importance of Leibniz as a philosophical reference point for many cyberspace theorists is illustrated by the extract from Michael Heim’s *The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace*, which likens cyberspace mediums to idealised Platonic forms. The paradigmatic analogies between non linear computer media and post-structuralist theory are illuminated in the essay from George Landow’s ‘landmark book’, *Hypertext; The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, while Brenda Laurel consider the creation of homologous ‘virtualities’ through theatre and computers. Hakim Bey’s *The Information War* is, in turn, something of a metaphor for the anthology’s overall commitment to moving the discussion beyond ‘tired dualisms’, as it criticises both optimists and pessimists for propagating a ‘mystical’ and ‘reified’ view of information.

Part 3 is given the again somewhat arbitrary title of Living in the Immaterial World, and includes a Stanley Aronowitz article on the future of work and a short overview of Manuel Castells' theory of the informational economy. Shoshana Zuboff gives a particularly lucid overview of the differences between the computer and earlier machine processes, while Herbert Schiller's forewarnings of a new, technology-driven imperialism have an obvious resonance in these days of neo-conservative hubris.

The prolific impact of cyberspace on the performance and construction of identity is the subject of Part 4. Julian Dibbell's 'frequently cited' A Rape in Cyberspace essay is a particular highlight, clearly illustrating both the virtual world's inevitable need for communicative norms and its inextricable bind to the realm of realworld action and effects. Laura Miller confronts the simplistic representation of women as 'net-victims', Steve Silberman affirms the importance of online forums to the embryonic expression of young, and particularly non-metropolitan, gay identity, while Lisa Nakamura dissects the ideological blinkers of a techno-utopianism which seeks to outlaw the online discussion of race.

Part 5 offers various reflections on the possibilities and limits of online communities. Pierre Lévy offers a very benign view of the communitarian potential of the new 'knowledge space', while Howard Rheingold's contribution exudes a similarly excited tone. A far more substantial contribution is Mark Poster's article on the internet and public sphere, which emphasises the interpretative inadequacy of an Enlightenment narrative of democracy in the face of the new technologies.

The final section offers a more focused reflection on the readings and interpretations of the new digital age. (Trend's characterisation of Part 6 as a mix of 'philosophical tracings' and 'more grounded readings' could equally hold for the whole anthology). Robert Markley's piece is a strongly argued antidote to the overblown 'revolutionary' rhetoric of some utopians, while

N. Katherine Hayles questions the crude demarcation of actual from virtual realities. In addition, the simplistic conflation of knowledge and information is critically interrogated by Andrew Ross, while Vivian Sobchack laments the ability of a consumer-driven net utopianism to successfully appeal to the 'worst' in us.

Trend's editorial touch is a light one. His brief introductions to each of the articles seem to be deliberately vague and open-ended; as if the good post-modern in him is wary of imposing a fixed interpretation on any of the readings. Some of the readings are certainly more accessible than others (a satisfying reading of the Guattari chapter, for instance, necessitates a sound familiarity with both Heidegger and Lacan) while some are predictably out-dated. But there is enough here to engage the specialist and the initiate alike. In short, *Reading Digital Culture* is a very helpful reference point for anyone seeking to contextualise, understand, and theoretically explore the emergence of a distinct digital culture.