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REVIEW: *DIGITAL MEDIA AND TEXTUALITY: FROM CREATION TO ARCHIVING*

***Digital Media and Textuality: From Creation to Archiving.* Edited by Daniela Côrtes Maduro. Media Upheavals Series. Transcript-Verlag. Bielefeld 2017, pp. 274.**

The book begins by evoking Walter Ong's notion of producing text as an act of weaving. This metaphor aptly describes the common research focus of this collection of articles and establishes a platform for various approaches introduced in it – the theme of (de)constructing the textual fabric of various media artifacts. It is primarily a post-conference proceeding, with 13 different texts varying in their scope, theme, and even style of argumentation – from self-reflexive auto-ethnographies of artists, to elaborate academic papers bringing forth a wide array of contexts. The recurring analytical tropes predominantly reference the works of N. Katherine Hayles, who appears to be a key figure in understanding modern works of digital e-literature art, as well as some more elusive theoretical concepts, such as self-translation (Otso Huopaniemi) or the digital grotesque (María Goicoechea de Jorge). Shelley Jackson remains the most popular artist

to work with among the numerous art creators mentioned in the book, although several less well-known examples of digital narratives or on-screen textual communication also appear on the pages of *Digital Media and Textuality*, including the notable presence of video games case studies.

It is an impressive volume. The book is divided into six parts, each of them gathering papers of vastly different scope, all distinctive even in their definitions of digital textuality. To fully grasp the breadth of topics included in this collection, it is necessary to treat each section separately, as the editorial effort seems to have been put into presenting the reader with a comprehensive conceptualization of what can be understood under the notion of textuality in digital media. Thus, I will provide a short description of each chapter, giving special attention to crucial interpretative tropes and general research angles, rather than

providing an overview of each of the papers.

The first section, entitled *Nothing Comes of Nothing*, brings a close reading of *Patchwork Girl* (Dene Grigar) and an attempt to use Italo Calvino's concepts as a theoretical scaffolding for bringing together German Baroque and modern computational methods of text processing (Jörgen Schäfer). Both papers aim to link the past with the present, and to show that the historical theories and approaches to textuality – Homer in the case of Jackson's piece, and Calvino, along with the classical Enlightenment thinkers, in the second text – establish an uncanny connection between the predigital and the computational. Ambitious in their scope, they give the reader a good sense of the style of analysis presented throughout *Digital Media and Textuality*, which can be described as erudite and refined, albeit a bit turbid. A good example of this is Schäfer's text on writing machines and Calvino. It not only attempts to place the famous Italian thinker in line with Leibniz and Lévi-Strauss but also includes references to the works of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Nick Montfort and Katherine Hyles, finally using *The Readers Project* by John Cayley and Daniel Howe to illustrate some of the theoretical analysis of the paper, with the aid of Wolfgang Iser and a couple of ideas borrowed from the Formalists' dictionary of literary theory concepts. This broad range of research focuses is sure to give the reader some interesting points for further reading; nevertheless, it leaves us with the impression of a methodological chaos. That being said, it also makes for a thrilling read, filled

with surprising connections and potential discoveries, even if it is somehow lacking in argumentative conciseness.

There is also an abundance of tropes and theoretical frameworks in the *Where Is Narrative?* section of the book. However, the implementation of literature theory concepts, as well as meta-reflections of perhaps less-known artists (such as a Spanish author Rosa Montero Gayo), gradually enhance the subsequent analysis. While Carlos Reis' paper on character building compromises argumentative stringency for the sake of more philosophical approach, this does not extend to the cohesive and self-aware papers by María Goicoechea de Jorge and Daniela Côrtes Maduro. The latter paper develops the game studies narrative theories of Espen Aarseth, Gordon Calleja and Markku Eskelinen in interesting ways, arguing for the category of *imaginative effort* as a bridge between interactivity and immersion.

Several of the papers in here are based on analysis of personal experiences, whether they are curating efforts (Daniela Côrtes Maduro's *Curating "Shapeshifting Texts"* in *Tracking and Preserving Texts* section), reports from artistic projects (Sandy Baldwin and Gabriel Tremblay-Gaudette's *Pwning Gamers, One Text at a Time*), or teaching endeavors (papers focused mostly on various emergent learning techniques in the networked environments written by María Mencía and Mia Zamora, section *Teaching the Digital*). The insights provided by these digital learning practitioners are valued contributions to the book, and the in-depth accounts of possible difficulties and the challenges of learn-

ing how to critically navigate the modern digital media landscape could not be a timelier topic. In their interpretative endeavors, the authors often venture into the area of digital games, especially those which directly (MUDs) or indirectly problematize the hypertextual narrative as a strategy aimed at inviting the reader/player to engage with the work of art on deeper, often personal levels (p. 113). Some reservations arise from a paper focusing on the *Poems You Should Know* project, where Baldwin and Tremblay-Gaudette attempt to interpret their own performance-driven work in the digital landscape of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. Even though it is hard – and perhaps even unnecessary – to argue against artists providing personalized view of the work they have done, potential readers might have benefited if a few sections of the paper were clarified. This concerns the general lack of context and some basic definitions for concepts like immersion, fourth wall, and magic circle, all of them quite comprehensively discussed in the available game studies literature. As a result, readers are left with at least a few unsolicited and very problematic claims regarding players' agency and game culture as a whole, making for a stark contrast with other articles in *Digital Media and Textuality* which successfully implement various game studies research.

Strong contributions include Anna Nacher's reading of Shelley Jackson's *Snow*, especially given the analysis of social media influence on modern circulation of works connected with digital textuality. The section of the book subtitled *The Medium* in which the paper is located, gives readers an important in-

sight into the significance of the platform and the material aspect in the studies of digital media. Reflection on materiality inevitably leads to the figure of archive. This is explored in Devon Schiller's paper, which provides analysis of lexical strategies of navigating the institutionalized archives and image repositories. This paper is the lengthiest one of all the contributions, referencing numerous German and Dutch works of art and providing many philological contexts. It is a demanding read because of numerous inclusions of original and translated versions of titles, concepts, and abbreviations.

From *rhapsodic textuality* (Dene Grigar) to *practice-based research* (María Mencía) and *transmedia narratives* (María Teresa Vilariño Picos), the articles in this collection offer a wide variety of both theoretical concepts and accounts of practical experiments, often intertwining the two. This is a substantial merit of this publication in general. The theorists disclose themselves as being involved in activities outside the traditionally conceptualized academic research (i.e. field recording [p. 18]), and artists aim to unpack the premises and theoretical underpinning of their works (i.e. problematizing *performance* as suspension of rule-based imperatives in video game [p. 62]). The results do not always meet the standards of the traditional academic discourse, but they remain faithful to the goal set in the book's preface: to bring together the interpretative meaning-making and the act of engagement – playing with the source material (p. 9). Sometimes the structural cohesion is compromised in favor of involving more

interesting contexts, or even to re-frame the research question itself (p. 50). Some traits, such as a potentially fascinating connection between the discourses of nationalism, technology, and art in the case of German computation and the works of Konrad Zuse (p. 29) remain unexplored. Some general questions concerning the status of modern digital humanities (paper *Narrative Across Media: Trans-Stories In-Betweenness*) cannot be fully developed due to the broad scope of the research questions posed. However, that should not be a problem for readers who are looking for signposts rather than exhaustive analysis.

The book is closer to an analogue map than to a modern GPS device – it helps to orientate in the general digital media landscape, but those expecting methodological precision and fire-proof argumentative logic are better off searching for other, preferably more narrowly focused publications.

The anthology is a mixture of very classical and critical thinking about the potentiality of new media. When Carlos Reis states that “digital narrative, enunciated in the electronic environment, has overcome certain principles and routines that were (and still are) dominant in verbal narrative” (p. 81), or when Mia Zamora in a manifest-like fashion expresses that “the world is indeed at our fingertips” and “networked knowledge and combinatorial creativity should be a cornerstone resource for nurturing our growing capacity to imagine together” (p. 152), the reader can inevitably sense the call to action for digital media users. They are often portrayed throughout the book as *bricoleurs*, Lévi-Straussian

figures of creative individuals posed between the realms of art and science, confronted with the overwhelming possibilities to transform and shape the digital world. On the other hand, we are reminded of a figure of the posthuman, as in the last chapters of Anna Nacher’s text on Shelley Jackson’s *Snow*. Here, the discourse of arts and sciences remains intertwined, but not without a consequence. The actors in the actor-network theory must be aware of possible repercussions of their deeds, and subtle signs in the works of art point to the importance of weather, climate change, and (often brutally rejecting the human-imposed meditation) sheer materiality of the actual art piece. Some authors of the anthology prefer to resort to metaphors when explaining their methodological stance, like Baldwin and Tremblay-Gaudette do when discussing the nature of trolling (p. 67). It is up to the reader to decide whether such rhetorical strategies are convincing. The wide spectrum of approaches presented in the book allows to make an informed decision and juxtapose various ways in which the digital landscapes are constructed, perceived and analyzed.

Most of the papers gathered in the *Digital Media and Textuality* struggle with the question of borders between the text and the image. Whether the authors focus on a close analysis of a particular work of art, or they aim for a meta-reflection on some major phenomena, concerning the circulation of text-based elements of the modern digital media landscape, another inflammatory line appears between the analog and the digital.

The book shows contemporaneity of questions posed by the classics – and in

this context we mean Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as well as Marie-Laure Ryan – proving that the movement between the old and the new is far from linear. Translation, transition, performance, and technology remain key topics of interest in this highly informative, yet very diversified collection of essays and academic papers. The anthology ends with a post-script essay by the artist Frieder Nake. It is kept in a light, anecdotal tone, but the issues raised are by no means trivial.

Nake indirectly asks about the future of AI in the context of both art and sciences. The cognitive potential seems to rely on answering a deceptively easy question: “how?”. Investigating how something is built or how computational processes develop and come into actualization in digital arts, everyday technology and media artifacts is something constantly worth exploring – and *Digital Media and Textuality: From Creation to Archiving* may greatly help in that regard.