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Installing Digital Culture in Humanities and Social Sciences

Bollmer, Grant. Theorizing Digital Cultures. SAGE Publications Ltd., 2018. pp. 252.

In an age when social media dominate everyday lives of many people across the globe and with the rise of VR games, Netflix, fake news, and 3D printers, it is evident that (digital) technology has become an integral part of everyday life. Online games make new spaces of communication and cooperation that cross the seemingly established borders of nation-states, discussions about online and offline communities gain more prominence each year, and social networks have brought to the fore many scholarly works dealing with various questions about identity, culture, and identification.

In this context, a comprehensive guide on or overview of how we could approach these issues in the academic context was scarce. Grant Bollmer's book titled Theorizing Digital Cultures provides a way of approaching these, somewhat new issues, providing specific tools, i.e. terms and concepts that could help many future researchers of digital culture. What makes this work even more important is the fact that it is made and planned to be used primarily in the field of humanities and social sciences.

That becomes evident from the beginning, with the author relying on some seminal works in cultural theory (such as Raymond Williams' and Walter Benjamin's works, as well Marshall McLuhan, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and many others) to establish a clear foreground in the further development of digital culture theories. Bollmer extrapolates on well-known conceptualizations of fluid identities, essentialism and anti-essentialism, art, culture, interpellation, imaginary and liberal humanism (among others) and joins them with some new topics relevant to

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theorizing digital cultures such as cybernetics, glitch, lag, web 2.0, net neutrality, and platform capitalism. Applying examples from online games, Wikipedia, popular culture, Uber, Airbnb, and many others, Bollmer brings various themes and problems onto the surface, providing some needed information and contexts for many who are beginning or continuing their work in the field of digital cultures and theories that could surround /are surrounding it. In doing so, the author makes various social and cultural processes understandable to broader public, especially the ones that deal with technological supplements in the context of bodily extensions, cybernetics, and moral and cultural implications connected to it.

Theorizing Digital Cultures consists of two main parts. The first is Defining Digital Cultures, with chapters “What are Digital Cultures?,” “Culture and Technique,” and “Digital and Analogue.” The second part is titled Histories, Concepts and Debates, and it contains chapters “Cybernetics and Posthumanism,” “Identities and Performances,” “Bodies and Extensions,” “Aesthetics and Affects,” “Forms and Judgements,” “Infrastructures and Ecologies.” Every chapter begins with a special overview, introduction to the subject, list of key terms mentioned in the chapter, theorists used in constructing the arguments, and the list of examples to explain the arguments and provide their usefulness in the contemporary context of the digital age. Bollmer does not ignore previous work in the domain of digital cultures (or in cultural theory, for that matter); he is rather using some of the preestablished concepts to evaluate the position of humanities in the digital culture era. He does that throughout the book, by meticulously presenting and covering the foundations in cultural theory, such as identity, Anthropocene, and culture.

The first part, Defining Digital Cultures, reminds the reader of some of the main aspects and terms in cultural theory and humanities in general. Although some of these aspects are already known to many scholars, the book is useful in providing additional sources and a fresh take with contemporary examples from digital culture. The discussion on culture, technological and cultural determinism, the history of print and oral culture, and materiality leads to topics that Bollmer regards as important in understanding his position with regard to the convergence of divergent models of positioning digital culture. This is primarily done by complementing narratives about the media, bodies and communication, among others. For Bollmer, all these aspects constitute a way of reading digital culture(s) today (35).

In line with this thought, one of Bollmer's most vivid examples: ''Liking'' as a cultural technique, presented here through the works of Siegert, Williams, Maus and Butler (among others), points out to this convergence. As Bollmer notes, things that many people take for granted, such as reacting to a certain information, post, or meme on social media, especially Facebook, are presented here in a more realistic sense, with specific implications that talk not only about capitalism but also identity, personality, information, and technology. To explain this in more detail, Bollmer uses the example of one of the newer changes in Facebook, where liking and its newer adaptation in the form of ''reactions'' construe not only an emotional response (to something) but they pivot a response as such, the feedback that goes beyond mere instant communication between a human and technology: ''Clicking like is an act of differentiation – not between 'like' and 'dislike', however, but between and of connection and disconnection. Clicking 'like' symbolically links you with whatever it is you've liked.'' (53) Bollmer posits this as a way of documenting culture, documenting trends, but also aggregating commercial aspect, market, and aiming specific products at people, as well as the content that can form and enforce certain political action.

Later, he extrapolates on the notion of identity and body and how this coexistence changes the way of looking at society, life, and technology. Problematizing online presence and identity, he talks about performing identity, especially with his example of multiplayer survival game Rust, which forces an avatar upon players, a unique randomly generated body with specific proportions, gender and race, thus making every player distinguishable, even though the player did not have the option to choose those specific aspects of their avatar – they got ''the forced identity categories,'' as in many other games (131):

> *On the one hand, Rust's designers affirm that an avatar is not particularly anchored to the 'real' body of the player. It is, nonetheless, something that can be used for purposes of identification. Ideally, these identities will not be defined in terms of biological identities or generic classes, but in terms of a wide range of diverse bodies that are completely unique and differentiated … Being able to choose identities has actually reduced the different ways that identities are performed online. The avatar becomes something that players must "see" as similar to themselves, or at least "see" as something over which they have control – or else they may get exceptionally angry, as many Rust players did in reaction to the forced identity categories they were required to use. (130-31)*

The reactions from many players were negative, as the imposed race on your avatar forced players to play in new ways and experience some new interactions (mainly racist and sexist slurs from other players) aimed at their avatar, their virtual body. In this way, unintentionally or intentionally, this case brought up various questions about online identity and the function that avatar may have in playing online video games.

The use of holograms, extensions and amputations of human body, and the issue of collective mind or collective playing (like in the example of playing one of the classic Pokémon games on Twitch, where everyone can control the character and wreak a specific kind of chaos are topics of the chapter titled "Bodies and Extensions." Here, through refreshing and interesting cases and examples, ranging from popular music to streaming services and video games, Bollmer points out that today our bodies are embedded in technology in various ways and by various methods (138-53). Codependence or, to put it more precisely, humans' dependence on technology, makes us think not only about some technological, mechanical extensions that are a necessity, but also about mobile phones, screens, and information that people rely upon in their everyday bases as something that is part of their identity, their body, their performance.

But, in doing so, we often ignore the fact that some other bodies and identities are excluded in this kind of technological dialectics, as Bollmer points out:

> *I am wary of the suggestion that our bodies actually become "collective" with digital, networked technologies. Accepting this "collective body" as fact has a tendency to cover over political investments involved in these collective projects, for instance. Wikipedia is often named as one of the great successes of collective intelligence – a collaborative environment that produces "truth" out of the input of a vast range of diverse individuals. Yet, in spite of its rhetoric otherwise, Wikipedia is not truly "open" or "collaborative" environment, and it has long had a tendency of veiling many of its discriminatory practices. Wikipedia's editors are almost entirely male, many of whom work hard to silence the few women who do contribute to Wikipedia (152)*

This kind of approach conveys the author's acknowledgment of his position, as well as that of many other content creators, as being a position of privilege in establishing various powerful

discourses, and in that way, this book consciously opens some new important topics for further research that have not been so closely covered.

In conclusion, Theorizing Digital Culture stands out as one of the most valuable resources for starting scholarly work in digital humanities. Even though it is not the only one that provides this, its approach, detailed by examples, discussion questions, and sources that fill the gaps in the first steps of approaching specific topics, offers a valuable insight into many other issues, scholarly work and studies. In its structure, with detailed overviews and introductions to every chapter, as well as with a detailed contextualization of theories and concepts such as culture and identity, it provides a valuable tool for many students in the humanities, concerned not only with digital culture but also analysis of culture in a broader sense.



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