

book review

Convergence or Diffusion?

The Spread of Media History

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Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (eds)

Convergence Media History

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Any attempt to assess the variety and diversity of media change tends to get overwhelmed by the blooming, buzzing confusion of the present: the technological boosterism that floods a sector soaked in the mendacity of public relations; the claims made for an apparently rapid evolution in consumption practices or, by contrast, those made for their stability and continuity; the palpable panic of some media studies scholars as they try to align themselves with this or that trend. Beyond tracking continuity and change, there is the debate about whether ‘convergence’ is an accurate descriptor of the process in motion, suggesting the gravitational pull toward a common point or instead a diffusion and dispersal of media practice, modes of address and forms of attention and interaction—a promiscuous intermingling of media technology, forms and aesthetics. In the rush to

describe The Now, the result is often a blurred picture, and we need to learn to wait in order to allow things to live in and play out before beginning our analyses.

This collection takes the fact of contemporary digital convergence as a given and that this forces us to rethink media history in terms of a relational framework. The argument is that, since convergence is about the connections and contextual intercourse of contemporary media, we ought to project a similar mode of thinking back toward what has hitherto been the history of individual media; as the editors put it, 'print, movies, radio, television and new media should never have been thought of as separate histories'. (ix) Nonetheless, the eighteen essays here mostly concentrate on a single medium—cinema, television, radio, the internet—but in keeping with the relational aspirations of the book all of them consider the ways in which their medium, to a greater or lesser extent, draws on or is inflected by its position in an overall constellation of cultural production and consumption. Part of the problem then is between part and whole: one can grasp at a suitable distance the overall shape of convergence as a whole in any one historical formation; but working out the mediating connections between the whole and the parts requires a considerable depth of historical background that is really beyond the reach of the essay format.

However, this is a pretty good effort. The collection arises out of issues raised at the 'What is Media?' conference held at the University of Texas in 2007, and the editors have done a fine job of selecting work that stands alone as well as speaking to the wider themes raised there. As is usual with conferences that are framed around questions ('what are the issues today in writing media history and histories?') (ix) it is concerned to grasp the contemporary scholarly zeitgeist and is divided into four parts: New Methods, New Subjects, New Approaches and Research Issues.

While the assertion of 'new' somewhat overstates things, there is no doubt the research presented strives toward shifting (however modestly in some cases) the familiar terms of historical media research toward a recognition of the wider connectedness of the mediums considered. Hamid Naficy's contribution attempts to reclaim the word 'multiplex' in his account of the global emergence of a kind of cinema which incorporates multilingual dialogues, multicultural characters, multi-sited diegeses—and so on. The problem is that this idea is pitched at such a level of

generality, applicable across such a vast range of output—from the work of Chilean director Raúl Ruiz, to Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There*, to YouTube uploads, activist videos, and multicultural ensemble shows such as *Lost*—that its grip on the particular becomes obscured. The collection does not itself converge into a coherent, overall approach. The dominant sense of it is rather a diffusion of approaches, each consistent in itself, but none of which has the theoretical heft to claim authority over the others.

The importance of the book consists not in its overall range, however, but in the utility of individual essays. Those wanting to deepen their thinking or teaching about, say the industrial history of comics and their adaptation, might well consult Derek Johnson's account of the X-Men franchise and Marvel's fraught attempts to gain traction in the market; or those interested in the rationality of Hollywood studio investment in particular genres might turn to Chris Cagle's, 'When Pierre Bourdieu Meets the Political Economists', a study of the social problem features that RKO produced in the late 1940s. Like many of the contributors, Cagle introduces a congealed theoretical niggler to work through, in this case his assertion that Bourdieu's notion of the social field offers a way between thinking about the films as either products or industrial determinants and/or emblems of ideology.

Other essays extend quite established theoretical approaches. Marsha F. Cassidy's 'Touch, Taste, Breath: Synaesthesia, Sense Memory, and the Selling of Cigarettes on Television, 1948–1971', draws on the film phenomenology and the work of Vivian Sobchack in showing how cigarette advertising on television foregrounded the sense of touch, especially in the way that certain products, like Virginia Slims, were marketed for women. She uses close analysis of advertisements to make her case: there is the 'light up ceremony' where, '[the actress] withdraws the longest cigarette in a refined sweep and carries it to her lips. His touch shifts to the lighter as he clicks the flame against the tip of her cigarette. She may or may not touch his hand briefly (and intimately to steady it)'. She concludes that the visual explicitness of such moments 'imposes a gendered tactility upon the hands and mouth of the smoker'. (38–9) For Cassidy, such analysis points to the possibility of (following Sobchack's postulation of the 'cinesthetic') the 'telesthetic' subject and historian.

This sense of the necessity of holding on to a sense of the specificity or at least the distinctiveness of the medium even as one makes connections with other ones occupies Mark Williams's account of the adaptation of one of the first live media events—the televised rescue in 1949 of Kathy Fiscus, a three year old who had fallen into a well, and its adaptation in Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) and the independent film *The Well*. Drawing on Mary Ann Doane's work on medium specificity he uses the notion of intermediality to posit a reading of the national unconscious describing the 'anxious lure of representation that had emerged at the intermedial borders between newspapers, radio, television and cinema'. (55)

'New Subjects' continues the lively alternation between topics, with Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley's account of the insinuation of modernity via the exhibition of two films, *Pocahontas: Child of the Forest* and *Scenes in Colonial Virginia* (both Porter 1907), at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition. This essay exemplifies the maturity of cinema exhibition studies in the way it confidently presents an industrially informed cultural history; this is true of Laura Isabel Serna's equally fascinating account of film exhibition in Mexico in the 1920s. What might have been a depressingly familiar story of cultural nationalism versus the might of Hollywood export is instead rendered through a detailed account of the wages, conditions and life of cinema workers in the Cicuito Olimpa chain during the rapid expansion of cinema seats in Mexico City. Both chapters are underpinned by an impeccable deployment of primary and secondary sources. The freshness of this scholarly attention is matched by a genuine sense of the new when Kyle S. Barnett offers an account of the little-researched recording industry in his essay, 'The Recording Industry's Role in Media History'. He uses the case study of Gennett records to offer a fascinating snapshot of the period of growth from the late 1910s to the bust in the 1930s as consumers chose radio over recordings. Richard Butsch is also working on fresh land in his account of how citizens were 'represented in discourse and constructed by institutions and practices' (91) in discourses of American radio broadcasting from the 1920s to the 1940s. He offers an important reminder of the publicness of US airwaves at that time, drawing on the figuring of citizenship in magazines such as *Wireless Age*, and the way radio was imbued, at least discursively, with this sense of public responsibility, a public sphere-ness that television, cinema and other media did not share.

In addition to their theoretical and historical richness many of the contributions are brilliantly entertaining. Harper Cossar's compelling account 'Bobby Jones, Warner Bros., and the Short Instructional Film' explores the career of the amateur golfer who won thirteen national golf championships including the Grand Slam in same year (a feat only matched by Tiger Woods). Jones had degrees in engineering and English literature as well as being a lawyer, but his successful amateur golfing career ended when in 1930 Warner Bros offered Jones an exclusive multi-picture deal; he went on to make a series of phenomenally successful instructional shorts, often featuring a Hollywood celebrity looking to Jones for golfing tips. Cossar explores the industrial significance of these short films for the studio as a means of using up slack time for staff in between major productions, as well as a test lab for new technology (a trend continued by studios like Pixar) and as a site to grow and develop new talent. I went straight to YouTube to watch some of these shorts which deploy slow-motion, optical printing and freeze frame as part of their spectacular pedagogy; the essay brilliantly illuminates the industrial and aesthetic underpinning of its topic.

Indeed, many of the most successful chapters display effortless mastery over the materials presented alongside the evident enthusiasm of the author for their topic. Using *What's New Pussycat?* (Donner, 1965) as a case study, Ken Feil tracks the mainstreaming of camp, and Alisa Perren presents a solid history of the rise and fall of the made-for-TV movie. Sue Collins looks at the way silent film stars Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were used by the government and the industry in the Liberty Loan Bond drives of 1917–19. She demonstrates the ways in which Hollywood had to manage and ration the public appearances of its stars, and how celebrities themselves used live performances in way that granted them political authority: 'the stars modelled ideal citizenship and normalised modes of patriotism as they contributed to the suppression of anti-interventionist dissent'. (124) Extending David Marshall's account of the history of celebrity it offers a fine analysis of trade papers and the development of industry public relations, constituting a fresh approach to understanding film stardom in the public sphere. Karl Schoonover's history of the promotion of Italian neorealism in American is similarly attentive to the varying accounts of audience reaction in relation to the success of films such as *Open City* (Rossellini, 1946) and *Bicycle Thief* (De Sica,

1949). His theoretical beef is with unrealistic accounts of spectatorship, especially the emphatic pluralism and diversity of response that is often projected onto them. He uses detailed analyses of the reviews of Manny Farber and James Agee in order to claim that the discursive contexts of neorealism in American posited the spectator as bystander where the texts offered a 'compromised mode of engaging in the world [which] proposed an active involvement that came at little cost'. (137)

The three essays in the final section of the collection are concerned with archiving in the digital age. Elana Levine correctly argues that soap opera studies have tended to operate in the present tense, in part because the low cultural status of the form means preservation and curation is at best patchy. The storage and retrieval of ephemera for study is an issue that occupies Pamela Wilson in her excellent survey of archives, 'Stalking the Wild Evidence: Capturing Media History Through Elusive and Ephemeral Archives' where she points to the huge range of material becoming available—such as home movies, private collections that are 'ripe for study'. This once again raises the issue of authority: to what end would we study them? I share the vague sense that these things are valuable as emblems of cultural history, but we also need an organising, orientating sense of the ranges of significance and reasons as to *why* they are important. The final essay in the collection Megan Sappan Ankerson, 'Historicizing Web Design: Software, Style, and the Look of the Web' raises the issue of the history of the web, a medium which like television is ephemeral, and its early 'primitive' efforts may be lost forever. Ankerson posits the study of software and software histories as a means to grasp what will clearly become an important area in the future: 'software leaves traces when individual websites may not'. (195) As with many of the other contributors, Ankerson's thinking is fleshed out using an excellent case study, in her case the history of Flash, from its beginnings as solution to browser compatibility, to a spectacle in itself (David Gary Studio's 'Full Throttle'), to its ubiquity as the foundational technology for YouTube and Flickr.

As the final contribution Ankerson's essay is appropriately about the history closest to the present but it raises questions that, as the rest of the collection demonstrates, have continued to be relevant to our understanding of the convergence and diffusion of media throughout the past century.

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