

Review

Switching codes: Thinking through digital technology in the humanities and the arts

edited by Thomas Bartscherer and Roderick Coover
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 333 pages
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Reviewed by Maria Victoria Guglietti, Mount Royal University

What happens when academics invite artists, scholars and technology specialists to discuss the potential and limitations of digital technologies for research and practice in the humanities and the arts? This is the question addressed by Thomas Bartscherer and Roderick Coover's *Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology in The Humanities and the Arts*, an edited volume that explores the effects of digital media on various areas of scholarly and artistic practise such as knowledge classification and distribution, creativity, modes of visual representation and reproduction of artworks.

The idea of the collection is certainly not unheard of in new media studies. What is original in *Switching Codes* is the *performance* of this dialogue, which blends essays, interviews, fictional pieces and a game. The result is a multimodal discourse that evokes the experience of navigating online data.

The collection is divided in four sections, an 'interlude' which introduces the game 'Figment' by Eric Zimmerman, and an epilogue by novelist Richard Powers, which is a fictional account of the present and future impact of digital technologies on everyday life. To foster the exchange between authors, the editors included two responses per section, where scholars and artists evaluate and challenge IT specialists' contributions and vice versa.

Part I 'Research, Sense, Structure' introduces IT specialists' views on present challenges in the digital management of data. The focus is on the obstacles of current automated systems to develop appropriate semantics for the management of information relevant to the humanities and the arts. The essays highlight the potential of emerging modes of online collaboration, which could complement the limited capacity of interpretation of automated systems of classification. However, as Paolo D'Iorio and Michele Barbera point out in their contribution, an important obstacle often

overlooked by those engaged in the development of digital semantics is a full understanding of what counts as knowledge in academic culture. Traditional academic practices of knowledge production and distribution are slow in comparison to online knowledge sharing and, most importantly, are still structured around notions of expertise, permanence and copyright. Is a wiki model an option for traditional academic peer-review processes?

Part II 'Ontology, Semantic Web, Creativity' also discusses digital management of information. The focus this time is on the capacity of artificial intelligence to produce knowledge from multimedia data. Werner Ceusters's and Barry Smith's contribution, for example, examines the difficulties in designing automated systems of classification of visual information, which demands interpretation and contextualisation. As William Clancey observes in his response, the essays in this section reveal the ongoing disparity between scholarly knowledge production, often non-linear and ambiguous, and technological understandings of intelligence.

The last two sections, 'Panorama, Interactivity, Embodiment' and 'Re/Presentations: Language and Facsimile', explore the meeting of digital technologies and visual and artistic practices. The discussion is led by art scholars and artists, which is a refreshing detour from the technological determinism of some of the earlier contributions. Roderick Coover, for example, proposes that digital interactive panoramas and cinemascesapes disrupt the assumed linearity and objectivity of their nineteenth-century predecessors by allowing viewers to choose how they navigate the works. The implications of enhanced interactivity are also explored in Coover's interview with digital and haptic artist Jeffrey Shaw. According to Shaw digital art not only produces 'a fluid indeterminate arena of shared experience' but complicates the weak though still existent association between art and craftsmanship. Digital art making is a 'machine building' process that involves collaboration between artists and technicians.

Digital reproduction of artworks is the focus of Bruno Latour's contribution to the collection. His argument is that high quality digital reproduction not only produces a sophisticated copy but adds to the original's 'trajectory'. For Latour, only a Western 'obsession' with originality and a poor understanding of digital

reproduction techniques explain the reluctance to accept reproductions as integral to the original.

While *Switching Codes* is an original addition to the ongoing dialogue between IT specialists, academics and artists, the book would have benefitted from a stronger editorial intervention that provided some argumentative

continuity throughout the sections. My impression is that the volume privileges the performance of an interdisciplinary conversation and leaves the reader the challenging task of navigating the flow of arguments in search of a conclusion.

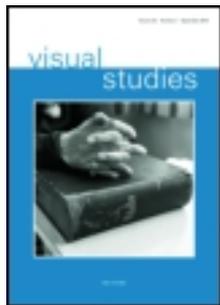
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Maria Victoria Guglietti ^a

^a Mount Royal University

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