Book Review


Reviewed by Mark Finn lecturer in Media and Communications at Swinburne University of Technology

Like all rapidly evolving academic disciplines, media and cultural studies is characterised by a continually churning vernacular, with terms coming into and falling out of favour at a furious rate. The last years of the 1990s evidenced an apparent scholarly obsession with “techno”, occasionally paired or interchanged with “cyber.” Similarly the first years of this decade saw these terms fade from view to some extent, replaced by the almost ubiquitous (and often misunderstood) “digital”. Fuller’s book can be seen as continuing this trend, with the “media ecologies” of the title representing a relatively new but already popular way of understanding contemporary media dynamics. Indeed, the author himself alludes to this in his introduction, noting that the term is “highly susceptible to interpretation as part of the jargon effluvia of the twenty-first century”.

The central thesis of Fuller’s book is that the contemporary media cannot be examined in isolation, but instead must be explored in terms of the complex interactions between a variety of media forms and organizations. The beauty of this approach is that it enables the author to traverse a huge amount of theoretical territory, drawing the seemingly disparate threads together through their take on particular media entities. While strongly influenced by the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Fuller’s analysis makes use of a range of other key theoreticians, including Stuart Hall, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marshall McLuhan, Donna Haraway, Friedrich Kittler. This gives the book a sweeping theoretical perspective, and probably represents its strongest feature.

The book is organised into four distinct chapters, although given the subject matter there does tend to be some bleed between them. The first chapter focuses on pirate radio in the United Kingdom, and serves as something of a template for what is to follow. In exploring pirate radio, Fuller concentrates primarily on the aesthetic dimension, utilising Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a “machinic phylum” to describe the relationship between form and practice. Interestingly, Fuller extends this concept to incorporate a range of technologies and practices not normally addressed in discussions of pirate radio, including the cultural context of clubs and parties that are intrinsically part of pirate radio practice.

The second chapter takes photography as its nominal subject, using it as a way of engaging with a series of debates about the materiality of media process. Using Hilliard’s 1971 work “A Camera Recording its Own Condition” as his starting point, Fuller explores the relationship between the material production of media artefacts and the way they are integrated into cultural life, including the way scientific and mathematical discourses affect our interpretation. In doing so, the author weaves a complex argument that combines Antonio Negri’s reading of Marx with key insights from Foucault, Nietzsche and Kittler, proposing a model of media which he refers to as the “medial will to power”.

Like the first chapter, the third also deals with what could broadly be termed media “disruptions”, focusing on three case studies where “normal” media operations have been subverted to produce new and in some cases unexpected results. Of these, perhaps the most interesting is the discussion of Jacob Jakobson’s “The Switch”, an installation in which an on/off switch was installed to control the streetlights of a residential neighbourhood. The
installation demonstrated how different residents viewed the potential of the switch according to a range of cultural expectations. As Fuller explains:

Nothing could be more plain and obvious than a streetlight, yet the range of interpretations of the switch and its functions reveals the massive array of connections made by the introduction of a simple piece of Boolean logic in an “understood” piece of urban technology (Fuller, 2005: 89)

This example, as well as the others discussed in this chapter, is used to problematise the notion of a “standard object”, postulating that standardisation itself is a particular discursive tactic. This idea is encapsulated in the author’s discussion of “misplaced concreteness”, whereby an object is essentially codified into existence through knowledge of its purpose in particular circumstances. Artistic endeavours such as that described in this chapter deliberately complicate this notion, by demonstrating that standardisation simultaneously allows us to know an object but also limits our understanding of its potential.

The final chapter attempts to draw together the various theoretical strands covered in the book, while also extending them through a particular application of mimetics. According to Fuller, memes offer an especially appropriate theoretical tool for examining media ecologies because the drive for replication that lies at the centre of mimetics resonates well with the lived reality of media consumption:

Memes, complexes of memes and the humans that carry them, hunger for them, and are composed of them, favour those medical devices that work with these drives. Consequently, these are the media that thrive (Fuller, 2005: 112).

Fuller explores these concepts through an examination of an art website, Cctv, which effectively re-mediates images taken from live webcams. Importantly, the website also incorporates cease and desist letters from the original operators of the webcams, a technique that works to demonstrate the media’s reliance on replication and reinterpretation.

From this initial discussion, Fuller moves to a more extensive discussion of the implications of surveillance technologies for the media ecology, noting that such technologies engage and produce subjects. According to Fuller, we engage with surveillance systems in three general modes, which he refers to as Evasion, Overload and Noncompressability, and websites such as Cctv allow us to explore all three through the interpretation of the viewer.

It is impossible in a review to give an adequate impression of the scope covered by Fuller’s book; it takes some of the key elements of literary and cultural theory and combines them to offer a fresh take on the modern media environment. At the same time, it provides a valuable “state-of-play” for contemporary media theory, touching on many of the current debates that are redefining research in this area.

Having said this, it is also not a book that could be recommended for a general audience. Like many works in this area, the prose style is unnecessarily obtuse and the arguments are frequently circular. More critically, Fuller assumes that his reader is already intimately familiar with recent cultural theory, thereby dramatically reducing the potential audience for the book. In essence, it is a book by a cultural theorist for cultural theorists, and as such has little to offer for a non-specialist reader.