new
media

culture and image
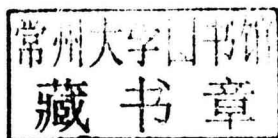
kelli fuery

New Media

Culture and Image

KELLI FUERY

palgrave
macmillan

For my happy family – my three boys
Morgan, Noah and Joshua

And for Patrick, *vous remplissez mon coeur,*
vous êtes mon bonheur

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

The principal aim of this book is to engage in the key issues of new media/ digital media through some of the fundamental debates of critical and cultural studies. For this reason the book has an inflection that encompasses a range of philosophical and cultural theories and issues, as well as a diverse set of textual forms and examples. 'New media' is, after all, a catch-all phrase that takes in the internet; digital technologies such as cinema, television, and sound; transgenic art; digital photography; body modification; installations, and so on. The strategy here is to engage in the analysis of new media through theoretical approaches and issues so that something approaching mutual illumination can take place. Given the fluidity of both 'camps' this may appear to be a dream of some tall order. And yet it is precisely the fluidity, the bleeding of edges that can work to our advantage here. Because so much of new media has yet to be established – by its very nature it is something that, on the surface, is continually being reinvented, continually in a state of flux – and because the domain of cultural theory is still being developed in terms of a theoretical paradigm and methodology, then the convergence of the two has great potential to reveal ideas about each other. In this way one of the strategies here has been to utilize new media to explore certain aspects of cultural theory, and vice versa. This has often led to the abandonment of the 'classic' process of analysis, where we might be looking to apply a theoretical model/idea to a textual form.

That said, a great deal of the analysis in this book is based around the principle that certain aspects of cultural theory are useful, perhaps even essential, in coming to terms with some of the most challenging facets of new media. This is particularly true here because one of the key ideas is that new media is ultimately a cultural phenomenon, and its processes must always be tracked back to its socio-cultural status and interventions. Such a guiding stance leads us to consider new media not as a technological format, or even the digitalization of the old media. By seeing new media as a cultural superstructure – that is, informing and influencing processes and relationships beyond itself and across heterogeneous forums – it becomes necessary to consider its consequences in a range of areas, many of which have formed the basis of cultural theory.

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The book is divided into six chapters, each taking up specific issues in cultural theory and new media. The combinination of the two allows us to consider how some of the projects can be seen to have similar areas of concern. The overall 'map' includes subjectivity, power, pleasure, ideology, cultural formations and relations, and the body. Chapter 1 takes up the idea of 'the new' and how 'New Media' as cultural phenomena are formed within a philosophical context. It examines the new within the context of Michel Foucault's analysis of cultural formations and constructions of meaning. The idea here is that we are not so much interested in the newness of new media, but in how such a status has been created and sustained. Chapter 2 looks at some of the key writing on the idea of interactivity, considering both the theorizing of the concept and how it is a crucial idea in defining new media texts. The chapter closes with a consideration of Louis Althusser's theories of subjectivity and ideology, arguing that interactivity has direct links to formations of the subject and power. Chapter 3 approaches the idea of the subject and new media from a related perspective – that of surveillance and paranoia. The concern here is how surveillance technologies, so heavily embedded in interactivity, can be read through the theories of Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and psychoanalysis. Once more, the concern here is to better understand the position of new media in a cultural context, and in doing so to reveal how these influential ideas and theories can be understood. Chapter 4 examines the digitalization of the body (particularly through Jacques Derrida) and some of its ethical dimensions. This is done in terms of the body's own digitalization, and of the body of the user of new technology as a type of interaction. Chapter 5 argues for the invention of the 'browserly' – the gaze of new media tracked through some of the ideas of Roland Barthes – and the issues of pleasure, largely from a psychoanalytic angle. Chapter 6 functions as a summary chapter and outlines how many of these issues from both new media and cultural theory can be seen to engage in a common ground of the subject and culture in the 21st century. A glossary of terms provides a quick reference and explanations for the key concepts that appear in this book. The first reference in the text to each of these key terms is emboldened.

This book names some of the main theorists and the terminologies they use, but continues to employ the broader term 'new media'. The strategy throughout the book has been to refer to a large number of examples of new media, offering sustained analysis of a few. The reasoning behind this is premised on a number of concerns:

- New media is not homogeneous, and its textual variants are immense.
- To privilege a few in a field that continues to expand in diversity would be to limit and impoverish the discussion. It is important to be aware

that this is not a book of close textual analysis, and the range of examples has been chosen to show how the textualities of new media continue to challenge its own forms.

- To demonstrate how different textual forms can be examined through the theoretical issues.

The citing of many examples is done in the spirit of excess. The reader is encouraged to explore the examples for him/herself; and also to consider how the explosion of new texts (and even new technological forms) might be drawn into the discussion.

Chapter 1

The Discursive Practice of the New

Key concepts

Most textbooks on new media begin with a chapter that compares 'old' and 'new' media. Whilst this provides a clear chart of technological development, I would like to approach the topic somewhat differently. What follows is the presentation of the 'new' in new media in a theoretical way. This notion of newness is explored through some key concepts of critical and cultural studies, such as discourse and power, and aims to establish the centrality of the subject in the study of new media culture. Some terms may be unfamiliar to you so there is a glossary of select terms at the end of the book that offers brief guidelines to the concepts presented in this and following chapters.

The idea of the new

The idea of the new tends to be dominated by its status rather than its function or even its actual moment of conception. Or, put another way, 'newness' is usually defined as something that has recently appeared. However a more interesting aspect is how it presents itself as being 'new' independently of the actual chronology, and how this presentation affects its position in the cultural order of things. In this chapter, it is the idea of the new – as well as how and why we use it – that is the focus. Quite often, the label of 'new' exceeds either the chronological aspects or its topicality, and sometimes both. When 'new' is attached to an idea, a concept or in this case technological innovation, its interpretative values are altered. We read it differently and it begins to adopt different cultural positions. This means

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that in many ways the term or concept that follows the 'new' is immediately qualified, not simply as something of recent invention or appearance, but as something that needs to be considered in a different manner. Approached in this way, what constitutes the new becomes more problematic and ideologically charged. It is something that potentially contains the full range of qualities associated with the new, from the desirous to the troublesome, the unique to the portentous, and the essential to the threatening.

Already we witness one of the difficulties of the term 'new media'. For example, for how long can it be declared as the 'new'? How long can it retain such a status? Is the term permitted to continually claim and reclaim media as they come along, so that its definitional sense collapses? What happens to the 'old' new media when they are technologically superseded? Does the fact that the technology has changed make the media themselves old? It is important to recognize the danger of using such terms and qualifying analysis when the technology may well be redundant by the time the analysis appears in print or even on the web.

What of preservation and presentation? How can digital installations or examples of new media art be stored and redisplayed once their technologies have become outdated? What happens if the technology remains constant but new uses are created for it; the transformation of computers into tools of artistic production, for example? Where does the emphasis of the new operate in such examples? The challenge is to understand how the function of 'new' operates, not just to explain and qualify but also to categorize and clarify; and to appreciate how this happens within a cultural sensibility.

Such issues are in themselves not new, and the function of describing and claiming something as new has been essential to many artistic and cultural processes. The fact that New Media has the term 'new' in its title does add a further dimension however. This chapter focuses on the relationship of new media to the arts and notions of aesthetic value to look more closely at these sorts of questions. There are many other ways in which the idea of the 'new' of 'new media' can be discussed, but the approach used here has the advantage that it allows us to explore the definitional aspects of what new media is, as well as discussing the complex idea of newness. Furthermore, it also reveals how attitudes change and politics are formed and negotiated.

Discourse: how and why we use the term 'new'

To think about how we use the idea of 'new' we need to think about why we use such a phrase, especially when we are trying to separate similar technologies. For example, our watching of television has not changed a great

deal in the wake of new media. What we watch and when we watch have become variables – we can record and watch different programmes at our convenience but ultimately we still sit down in front of a screen to view a programme. One way we can view the impact of the term 'new' and assess its importance in connection with new media is to look at Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Michel Foucault is not a media theorist but his ideas challenge us to look at parts of our culture that we usually don't – such as why 'new' in 'new media'. It is because Foucault's work concentrates so strongly on thinking through and analyzing some of our most hidden cultural practices and beliefs that it is of importance here.

Discourse

One of Foucault's most significant and well-discussed concepts is **discourse**. It is a complex term because it draws on other ideas such as power and subjectivity. One way to think about discourse is to understand it as a network formation. There are many discourses that link and connect with each other which are used by different people for different processes, social situations, interpersonal relationships and even technologies. Discourse can be a system of knowledge, thought, ideas, belief, **cultural practice**, habit or action that forms social subjects and cultures to which they belong. Whilst the perspectives that approach, discuss and analyze discourse range from the basic to the highly complex, there are four fundamental interacting positions through which we can understand discourse and why it is important for our investigation of the 'new' in new media. Firstly, discourse can be understood as a set of truths or meanings that are associated with a specific institution – the systems of knowledge that we identified earlier; for example, the discourse of technology, medicine, mathematics and so on. Secondly, we could view discourse as forming a distinct set of meanings that are centred on clear issues or themes – the discourse of love, the discourse of new, or the discourse of communication. Thirdly, and arguably one of the most important aspects in getting to grips with Foucault's idea of discourse and how it works, discourse always points to a relationship of power and how it shapes the actions of individuals and their society. Lastly, we can understand discourse by recognizing it as a type of power in itself.

Seeing 'new' in the context of discourse, or as a discursive practice, is significant for our interests concerning new media, and the reasons why and how we use the term 'new', because culture uses discourse to bring together a series of ideas and statements to make sense of things. 'New' used in this way is therefore as much about how we position new media technologies culturally and politically as it is about their production. By identifying

mobile phones as 'new media' – there is something more at work than simply acknowledging their digital status. We need to take into account other considerations that are linked with the status of New Media – consumerism, bias and trend, for example. Another example is that of 'new media art'. Viewed as a genre of fine art, the term concurrently identifies its genesis and prescribes its audience reception. The discursive practice of the new in new media, then, is at once a challenge to how we understand 'new' as a textual or mediated form, and an attempt to bring together a range of changes in media under an umbrella term. The term 'new' involves relationships of power between other subjects in the field of new media.

Before we can continue with our investigation of the term 'new', it is necessary to briefly outline how Foucault theorizes the term 'power' and how it connects with discourse. Sketching out the relationship between power and discourse helps us to identify how New Media has become utilized in society, not simply as a label to distinguish recent technology from old, but also to look at the concealed implications of such a label: the ideology behind the promotion of the term 'new media'.

Power

There are many works about Michel Foucault's concept of power and how it is placed in the wider landscape of his work. Here we are interested in a concise explanation of what Foucault means when he uses the word 'power', and why it is different from other more general uses of the word. Power is commonly used in society as a notion that implies force or coercion and the interpretation of this force as something that a person yields, bears, *holds* over something or someone. Foucault views power differently. For him, power is connected to knowledge but, more than that, it cannot be separated from knowledge. This relationship of **power/knowledge** exists both within and between discourses and flows between individuals and different areas and groups of society. One of the main differences between the more common use of the word 'power' and Foucault's is that Foucauldian power is not a repressive concept but a productive one. Power in the Foucauldian sense influences what we are (how our subjectivities are formed), how we makes sense of our worlds, our lives, our friends (knowledge), and what we are able to do (ability). Foucault was interested in bringing to light the relations of power that operate in society but which we are not usually aware of in day-to-day life.[1]

The relationship between discourse and power is one that concentrates on servitude. Who speaks for whom? Who is New Media 'new' for? Invested in these questions is the search for the means by which we, as subjects, are

managed and controlled by power relations – for truth. Foucault believes that discourses are transparent:

> they need no interpretation, no one to assign them a meaning. If one reads 'texts' in a certain way, one perceives that they speak clearly to us and require no further supplementary sense or interpretation.   (Foucault, 2002: 117)

He argues that it is the power relations which are intertwined with discourse that authorize the sets of beliefs, actions and ideas that they help to create, justify and legitimize. The discourse of formal written communication carries with it specific expectations and influences the behaviour of the subject (sender or receiver). This behaviour is self-regulated and the ways in which we as a society value and locate formal written communication is a good example of how power relations operate at a hidden level. Think about how, depending on your intended recipient, you form a letter, or an email. The whole process of intentionality is invested with both visible and invisible forms of power. In terms of new media and power, there is a shift from old communication models built around concepts of noise. How we value the term 'new' in 'new media' is equally loaded with power relations as Foucault conceives them. We could even go so far as to say that the less we question relationships such as 'new' + 'media' the more likely it is that the politics and managing techniques of power relations are at work.

Positioning 'new media'

For Foucault, it is the gaps and the ruptures between discourses – established systems of knowledge and orders of classification – that offer 'new' ideas, and 'new' concepts. To give an example, and place the notion of the 'new' in some context, consider the following:

> The use of concepts of discontinuities, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation present all historical analysis not only with questions of procedure, but with theoretical problems.   (Foucault 1986: 21)

This notion of rupture is positioned within Foucault's broader concerns with discontinuity, mutation, interruption, gap, and so on. The newness in 'new media' is embedded in the same qualification of rupture that Foucault so deftly articulates in his work. By positioning new technological development as 'new' there is a break, a rupture with existing and prior technology. 'New' assumes a political, ideological site as a prefix to 'media' and disrupts the history of media development with a theoretical problem. Not only do we need to understand and link 'old' media with 'new' media, but we also need to address issues of ephemerality within such labels, as well as

the technology itself. In the same way that discourse is transparent, can we say that media is transparent? By employing the prefix 'new' do we begin to invest recent technologies with power precisely because of this term?

Foucault's '**archaeology** of knowledge' asks us to look to these types of breaks and seams in discourses, that have occurred throughout history, in order to understand how meaning is generated and sustained. Within such a (Foucauldian) sense, not only is meaning produced through such discontinuities, but it is also invested with complex moments of power. Foucault's purpose is to understand how discourse works in these terms of power and production, and this in turn becomes an interpretation of the cultural order of things. If we were to follow this route we would always be mindful of any term that includes 'new' because such a term is a self-declared, and potentially **self-reflexive**, cultural rupture. (Chapter 3 discusses the idea of paranoia in terms of the new – which is very much in keeping with this Foucauldian line.) The 'archaeology of the new' positions it within a wider concern with cultural discourse, and subsequently as part of the issues of theorizing and interpreting the new. Within the field of New Media we witness cultural positioning in a very forthright manner. Indeed, the critical and cultural commentators on this phenomenon are constantly looking to see what this discourse will do, and how it fits into the existing relationships and processes. This archaeological approach presents the possibility of understanding the notion of New Media in terms of power and its relationship to other cultural moments.

Outside the actual technologies that form what we know new media to be – digital cameras, mobile phones, digital film, digital installation, MP3 players, DVD players/recorders and so on – the positioning of New Media is really a question of how the perception of 'newness' became so closely involved with technological innovation. And we can ask the further question of how this discourse of 'the new' became so fixed and stabilized as a term, and in doing so became invested with power? Answers to these theoretical questions are found in prior movements that have celebrated the idea of the new, where the situation before the discontinuity became a historical movement. Take the example of 'Modernism' and the subsequent reactions and challenges of the 'Post Modernism' movement. Despite the logic of the term, Modernism had a very specific and defined time frame (roughly 1905 to 1939), and yet what came after Modernism was still 'modern' but not Modernist (that is, belonging to the movement of Modernism). The term used here is 'modern' instead of 'new' but it presents a similar rupture. When Post Modernism was declared it was not a sequel to Modernism, but quite the opposite, for it was an attempt to break from Modernism's politics and aesthetics. This passage, or rendering, of the modern to Modernism

appears to have parallels with the developments of the new and New Media. There is, of course, a constant and ever expanding output of new media technologies, but the term 'New Media' as a cultural idea does not necessarily include them. This is partly because culture and society utilize the contexts and products of New Media through political and cultural modes rather than as all-encompassing phenomena. That said, New Media appear to claim that any technological development can indeed be included in their domain.

For example, the original purpose of the Hubble telescope was to produce astronomical images for scientific investigations, but those same images very quickly became seen as aesthetic objects. The scientific attributes of the telescope did not change, but the perception of its products did. A related issue is revealed in this observation. The term 'New Media' signals a very specific set of textualities (the processes concerned with the production and consumption of different interpretations of texts) at a very specific moment in history (one that is perhaps coming to its conclusion). This is significant to the definitional process because the term can *only* be applied in the context of digitality. If this were not the case then we would need to consider prehistoric man's use of new painting materials in the cave paintings in Lascaux, France, the introduction of egg tempera and gold leaf to achieve certain effects in Renaissance painting, and even the use of the perspective machine as illustrated by master painter Albrecht Dürer, as part of the concern of New Media textualities and theory. This is because all of these examples (and there are of course countless more) are versions of a new medium being employed to radically alter the artistic and cultural landscape of the time. 'New Media' is therefore *not* just about the introduction of new technologies, or up-and-coming practice, or emergent technique, style or material. Rather the term 'New Media' has a typological necessity – it creates a **paradigm** of texts, theories, and processes that become a defining and interpretative process. Once something is located within the New Media context it is articulated within a much wider set of issues, occupying a cultural territory that moves outside the specificity of digital production or application.

To understand these matters further we need to address the idea of the new and how it has come to gain a certain currency within this particular discipline of cultural theory and practice. In doing so, we begin to engage with the way our culture and society values something that is new and questions where the celebration of and attention towards new things comes from. Popular media survives on the celebration of the new, this being so clearly exemplified in trashy magazines. However, such celebration and thirst for the status of the new extends to all areas of communication; broadsheet