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Book Review: David Silver and Adrienne Massanari (eds), *Critical Cyberculture Studies*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. xvii + 323 pp. ISBN 0814740243, \$70 (hbk), \$23 (pbk)

Stephanie Boluk

New Media Society 2007; 9; 1037

DOI: 10.1177/1461444807082699

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new media & society

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Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore
Vol9(6):1037–1044 [DOI: 10.1177/1461444807082699]

BOOK REVIEWS

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Reviewed by STEPHANIE BOLUK
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Whether one uses the term **cyberculture**, **internet**, digital or new media studies, David Silver and Adrienne Massanari's anthology *Critical Cyberculture Studies* provides a framework for discussion of these fields and an eclectic series of exemplars showing what sort of work is being done in this nebulously classified territory of research.

Silver (2000) published an essay that put forward an influential historiography of cyberculture. In this essay, he divided cyberculture's development into three stages: popular cyberculture, cyberculture studies and critical cyberculture studies. Silver characterizes the writings of popular cyberculture as mainly journalistic with opinions tending to fall either on the side of technophilia or luddism. In this phase, popular magazines such as *Wired* played a significant role in shaping the discourse and establishing the identity of a generation of technology consumers. The second phase Silver defines as cyberculture studies and is marked by the emergence of scholarship on technology and virtuality that still carried with it much of the idealism of the early enthusiasts of popular cyberculture.

The third moment in this periodization, critical cyberculture, broadens the scope of subjects under consideration, contextualizing and problematizing much of the prior research from the second phase which was done by scholars such as Howard Rheingold and Sherry Turkle. Silver and Massanari's *Critical Cyberculture Studies* situates itself in this third wave of cyberculture scholarship. The techno-romantic utopian rhetoric that was so pervasive in the nineties and which saturates the two prior moments of cyberculture is a perspective with which the contributors continue to grapple throughout the four sections of the anthology: 'Fielding the Field', 'Critical Approaches and Methods', 'Cultural Difference in/and Cyberculture' and 'Critical Histories of the Recent Past'.

The book presents an impressive collection of scholars, many of whom are still in the early stages of their academic careers, writing brief, weighty essays. Generally, the contributors' essays gesture toward areas that are in need of greater

research or they display strategies and useful models for conducting future work. The anthology takes on timely subjects from a variety of disciplinary (and in the case of McKenzie Wark, anti-disciplinary) perspectives. Ethnographic studies of digitally-mediated identity, examinations of the porousness between virtual online existence and offline realities, the relationship of corporate business practice to internet infrastructure, issues of access and dissemination of internet technology within developing areas and the establishment of histories and methodologies within cyberculture studies are addressed in an effort to both demonstrate and secure cyberculture studies as a viable and flourishing scholarly field.

The articles in the first section of the book, 'Fielding the Field', collectively attempt to theorize cyberculture. In 'Catching the Waves: Considering Cyberculture, Technoculture and Electronic Consumption', Wendy Robinson examines the different eras through which cyberculture has passed in an effort to chart where it is heading. Jonathan Sterne's pithy essay points to the alliance that digital media has made with visual studies, resulting in research gaps – his own interest in sound studies serving as an excellent example of a kind of cyberculture that can fall between the cracks of scholarly scrutiny.

While one task of the anthology is to establish the parameters of cyberculture as an academic field, there are dissonant voices emerging from within the collection that dialectically resist this movement. Espen Aarseth does not reject as much as refocus cyberculture studies through game studies, arguing that this field offers greater promise of longevity and durability. McKenzie Wark takes up a position in opposition to the very structure of disciplinarity, offering a Benjaminian series of theses in which he reworks Foucault's concept of knowledge/power to knowledge/media. Like Aarseth, Wark is pessimistic about cyberculture's academic future. But whereas Aarseth looks to game studies, Wark advocates a future based on the sentiment that 'cyberculture studies requires a certain courage in living without identity' (p. 73).

The quixotic energy of Wark's antidisciplinary essay concludes the first section of the anthology and is followed by Nancy Baym's sensible and highly practical advice on how to establish the standards for meaningful qualitative internet research. Baym's essay introduces the section 'Critical Approaches and Methods' which offers a variety of approaches ranging from Blanca Gordo and Stine Gotved's structural sociological analyses to Kirsten Foot's presentation of a new kind of method she terms 'web sphere' analysis to applied case studies as in Anthony Fung's study of the interconnected online and offline social relations of Hong Kong students playing the MMORPG Online Jinyong.

The notion that issues of 'race', gender and class are negligible aspects of virtual environments has long passed along with the utopian expectations of the nineties and the third section of the anthology demonstrates the various strategies that scholars are using to explore issues of cultural difference. Madhavi Mallapragada, Emily Noelle Ignacio and Bharat Mehra's essays aim to redress the lack of attention that has been paid to issues of race in relation to digital media. Essays from David J. Phillips, Frank Schaap and Kate O'Riordan examine visual

rhetoric and the politics of visibility in relation to issues of sexual orientation and gender across multiple online and virtual spaces.

The final section, 'Critical Histories of the Recent Past', offers a selection of micro-histories that assist in understanding how cyberculture has emerged and is in the continual process of shaping global culture(s). Fred Turner provides an anecdotal overview of the origins of hacker culture and the figure of the hacker (who is really a composite of a larger collaborative effort made up of different groups of people) in an effort to situate the cyberlibertarian strains that continue to dominate certain aspects of the field today. Shanthi Kalathil looks at the history, difficulties and benefits of instituting e-governance in various Asian countries. Gina Neff and Adrienne Massanarri explore the history of dot-coms, the former by providing the history of the influential, yet often overlooked Silicon Alley and the latter through a rhetorical analysis of the progression of amazon.com's founder Jeff Bezos's annual letters to the company's shareholders.

As Christian Sandvig's essay makes clear, internet infrastructure could easily be designed so that freedom of expression is removed from the system to the benefit of corporate monoculture. Without a group of talented individuals to research, monitor and critique the many facets of cyberculture's development, the existence of a flourishing cyberculture could become severely attenuated if it yields to such forces. Some of those experts can be found within the pages of this book and such a gathering is extremely important for the formation of academic discourse that influences how technology shapes and is shaped by culture.

Reference

Silver, David (2000) 'Looking Backwards, Looking forwards: Cyberculture Studies 1990–2000', in David Gauntlett (ed.) *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*, pp. 19–30. London: Arnold.

Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. xv + 243 pp. ISBN 026202599X, \$35 (hbk)

Reviewed by KEN S. MCALLISTER
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If you count yourself as a member of the emerging field of computer game studies, this review should have no impact on whether or not you decide to read