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## Book Reviews

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*What's Wrong With the Internet*, by Mark Poster (2001). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 0-8166-3835-7 (PB).

The question posed by the title of Mark Poster's book understates his intent and accomplishment, for in this small volume (249 pages including index, notes, and bibliography), Poster has provided the reader with a succinct and insightful analysis of the limitations of the Internet and also its strengths, uniqueness, and commonalities with other new media. He poses computer-mediated communications as a ubiquitous harbinger that threatens the stability of the institutions of modernity.

Poster begins with the idea that new media are *underdetermined*. He uses the word as an extension of Althusser's *overdetermined* as inscription and proscription on the modern subject by imbrications of historic past. Although new media subjects are also inscribed by their past, they are not proscribed by it in that there are avenues for new creativity not heretofore available to the Cartesian "couch potato" object, an object who is the malleable recipient of few-to-many subject-constituting media such as print, radio, television, and film. Poster uses the category of new media in an open-ended way to include all forms of human to human-machine interface. Certainly, it includes the Internet and its attendant Web pages, MUDs, MOOs, and notice boards, but one can easily extend the grouping to robots, desktop computers, cell phones, Palm pads, and a whole plethora of high-tech gadgets.

Poster seeks to initiate, at least, a preliminary study of the culture of the Internet. In so doing, he carries the reader through selective, sometimes conflicting, thoughts from Descartes, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. He examines in some detail the relationship between subject and object and our changing understanding of them in the face of an increasingly articulate and intelligent technology. In Poster's view, an underdetermined subject has unparalleled freedom of initiation while at the same time is often bewildered by the loss of the foundational assurance and comfort of identity, values, and morals and is increasingly sensitized by the "other" whose electronic proximity is immediate and strange. In so doing, Poster carefully avoids a technological determinism that too often celebrates new-millennia cyber culture, or the apocalyptic views of technophobes who grieve the post-telegraphic loss of a Cartesian culture.

At the heart of "what's new?" about the Internet is the trenchant differentiation Poster makes between the analogue author of print whose personality is inscribed within his or her selection of words and who is the "owner" of the words, hence the copyrightable author of the work. Single-author works are the analogue of the author and not at all the same as other works that are the gratuitous composite of many contributors, that is, digital authors. A digital author, and the differentiation between them and analogue authors, is only possible in the presence of digital codification that admits electronic memory and widespread access with many-to-many distribution—the stuff of digital technology and the Internet. Where Lyotard and Derrida initiated

postmodern uneasiness by drawing attention to the loss of word referents, digitization permits wholesale alteration to works freely available on the Internet and beyond the control of copyright. After a work has received 20 or more such emendations, the question is not “Who is the author?” but “Who cares?” The value of the article is found only in the eyes of the reader. What is true for print is no less true for anything else that can be digitized: film, radio, television, and networked government and commercial communications systems. Control is reduced to relatively ineffective measures of physical access, “need-to-know,” “clipper chips” (a legislative failure), and the leaking sieve of copyright law.

This is a sea change in how we see ourselves, how business is done, and in how we will wish to be governed. Poster analyses not only the effect on authorship but on capitalism and democracy. Capitalism’s presuppositions of scarce resources, efficient utilization, and market value are all challenged by a computer-mediated world in which many talk to many and ideas are shared. Two examples only: Netscape’s code is on its Web page with an invitation for others to use and reinvent it, and the ease with which Napster was able to quiet copyright complaints about its MP3 music.

Poster’s last chapter is on cyberdemocracy. Predictably, his analysis is more descriptive of the Internet’s contribution as it now is than as it may be. He makes no presumptions about future configurations of commercial or political life. It seems certain that democracy—the system of governance currently most favored—and the current vertically structured form of capitalism, both of which are the distant progeny of the Enlightenment, will undergo radical change. The tectonic rumblings of cultural propaganda and migration, the resistance to globalization so enhanced by the Internet, and the counter movements of corporate social responsibility and of terrorism all auger for systemic change.

*What’s Wrong With the Internet.* The reader will notice that Poster does not put a question mark after the question. It is a statement not a question, and although Poster has illuminated some of the uncertainty surrounding cultural inference, there is much that remains speculative and illusive. For many persons, the Internet is today’s irritant, whereas for others it is a playroom; for some a place of business, for others a clandestine world of intrigue and the hatching of plots. It seems certain that today’s culture somehow expects more than is possible from within the Cartesian dichotomy of inscribed analogue objects and autonomous subjects and is moving toward an environment of digitized subject-objects. It is a movement from control and domination to one of diffused identity and participation. The leading site of this change is the digitized reality of the Internet.

—Walter Henry

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*Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World*, by Robert Nozick (2001). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-00631-3.

The late Robert Nozick, Harvard professor of philosophy, who died in January 2002, worked in a wide range of issues, but his primary focus was on the individual as a social agent involved in interactions with other individuals and a community. His first and most famous book, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), explored the individual and the state. This relationship, identifying the nature of each and their interaction, was a critique of the philosophical grounds of the bureaucratic welfare state, an

argument against the necessity of the state redistributing wealth to nonparticipants in the economy. Nozick focused on the definition and rights of the individual as primary and moved the state to a minimal role to enable individual actions. His next books, *Philosophical Explanations* (1981), *The Examined Life* (1989), *The Nature of Rationality* (1995), and *Socratic Puzzles* (1997), continued this examination of the individual experience within diverse topics that were all argued within a colloquial and almost nonacademic style, setting up contrary viewpoints in a binary architecture, such as free will versus determinism and subjective versus objective experience, examining their variables and coming to a conclusion that usually took a connected rather than unilateral perspective.

His last book continues this exploration of the individual and the collective and moves the analysis into the nature of knowledge. Is the knowledge of an individual grounded in individual perception or external reality? Nozick attempts to ground the individual experience in an expansive "invariance" that is not a political, that is, state structure, but is instead a cognitive structure, examining the individual as an informed and informing participant in a collective continuity of knowledge. This knowledge operates as a cohesive set of axioms about reality, and these axioms have a dynamic adaptability that is characteristic of the human capacity to interact in a rational, objective, and empirical manner with reality. To find and examine the operational grounds of knowledge invariance, Nozick uses his regular binary framework as well as introducing various themes from modern science.

To begin with, in his search for the cognitive grounds by which an individual lives as both a self-experiencing and a social entity, Nozick explores two extremes about how we access and define knowledge. In a long and rambling argument about the nature of both relativism and determinism, he abandons the former for its instability and the latter for its absolutism. As examples of both determinism and relativism, Nozick refers to philosophical and scientific paradigms. The quantum determinism of David Bohm's hidden variables gradual unfolding is opposed to the quantum relativism and the wave-collapse derived from the subjective perception of the individual observer of Niels Bohr's Copenhagen school. A problem with the treatment of both of these paradigms is a superficial and inadequate comprehension of both classical and quantum physics and an invalid mixture of the two. Along with this merger of quantum and classical processes, Nozick reduces the scientific models to perspectives, akin to relativism and absolutism, as held by an external observer. That is, he ignores that these physical theories, the classical and the quantum (whether indeterminist or determinist quantum), are not simply ideological perspectives but are models of physical processes and that these models, operative within mathematical logic, can be empirically verified. He provides examples of quantum mechanics, for example, the two-slit experiment, but discusses its actions within a classical mechanical perspective, that is, of two particles referenced to Newtonian absolute time rather than a wave in global time. Equally, his other examples, the delayed choice, merging streams, and erased measurement experiments confuse external classical, and internal quantum processes. This means that he is unable to thoroughly examine the objective energy/mass dynamics within the two models of quantum mechanics that he provides, and he makes his conclusions about their validity only on the nature of the role of the external observer within their operations, that is, as either a noninterfering objective observer versus a subjective interfering role.

The philosophical paradigms he presents in this binary architecture are the traditional Platonic/Kantian a priori categories versus, astonishingly, Aristotle (1941), who

is viewed as a relativist because of his famed law of noncontradiction. That is, Nozick focuses on Aristotle's examination of actual reality, with its noncontradictory contextualized attributes operating within a logic of diversity, and ignores Aristotle's examination of potential reality, the noncontextualized universals operating within a logic of identity. He ignores Aristotle's long arguments about the difference between primary premises that are incapable of demonstration and the demonstrated facts (*Posterior Analytics*, bk. 1, chaps. 1-13). Nozick's view of absolutist truth as Platonist is a valid conclusion (although this ignores the Platonic emphasis on dialectics), but his confinement of Aristotle to a relativist perspective, ignoring Aristotle's great works on the physical and metaphysical universals and Nozick's fusion of different types of knowledge—local and global, situational/contextual and general—is unfortunate. His conclusion that quantum mechanics has led us to a situation where truth is relative to a time and space is an unfair conclusion, for this is not a result of quantum mechanics as a physical process but is a result of the physical relations of localization and contextualization, which are valid relations regardless of whether they are classical or quantum processes. Peirce (1931-1935) would call this local relation an indexical state of information; it has nothing microscopic or quantum or relativist about it; it is a mechanical Newtonian relation of inert mass linked to inert mass. Nozick's binarism leads him to an analytic architecture that requires polar opposites, and this framework leads him into factual and conceptual problems.

Nozick argues for a dynamic invariance, that is, an evolutionary, reflexive knowledge that develops within the rational experience of a number of individuals, from different spatial and temporal points, within empirical objective observation. These two individual actions, the process of logical reason and objectively observed reality, provide the foundation for a valid ground to our experiences of reality. The invariant, a cognitively developed knowledge, "is exactly what constitutes objectiveness" (Nozick, 2001, p. 168). This knowledge, although providing the stability of invariant themes, is open to ongoing reflexive analysis and the introduction of new objective experiences. In other words, knowledge as a dynamic realism is not a product of subjective conceptualism; it is the evolving truth of all of our individual representations of reality. Nozick tends to skirt over the fact that the concept of dynamic objectively grounded axioms functioning as representations of reality, and the exploration of relations between reality and interpretation, is a basic theme since—yes, since—Aristotle. Both Aristotle's and Peirce's nonfoundationalism was an evolutionary metaphysics, a view that objective reality and subjective interaction were coevolving and, within the concept of Aristotelian final cause and Peircean pragmatism, provided a conclusion that we can, over time and within a community, move toward a view that these invariant axioms are truthful representations of reality. The concept of an underlying ground knowledge, which Nozick refers to as the invariant, is better explained by Peirce within his notion of "thirdness" as a "habit of interaction" that coevolves with the singular expressions of its laws. The operation of an evolutionary habit is the rubric of Peirce's theory of continuity, to which he gave the name "synechism." Synechism and thirdness together provide a genuine scientific reflexive analysis, with an insistence on continuity as a basic force, for "continuity is nothing but perfect generality of a law of relationship" (Peirce, Vol. 6, para. 172). It is a force for the development of general habits of knowledge, plus a focus on the impossibility of closure, for "the exact ascertainment of real quantities is too obviously impossible" (Peirce, Vol. 1, para. 172), and a focus on the active participation of a community of individuals within the development of knowledge, for "a true continuum is something whose pos-

sibilities of determination no multitude of individuals can exhaust" (Peirce, Vol. 6, para. 170). Nozick refers frequently to Peirce but only in the most cursory manner; it is an unfortunate flaw in this book, for the analysis and terminology in the Peircean architecture of synechism would greatly enhance Nozick's arguments.

Moving on to the nature and function of consciousness, which would move the reader into an understanding of the relation between the individual and both this ground knowledge and objective reality, Nozick's argument develops problems because, although he acknowledges gradients of consciousness, he views these gradients more as serial stages and views consciousness as a basic functional action carried out by an individual with specific goals rather than as graded scalar states of interaction between the individual and knowledge/reality. This chapter, again long and rambling, concludes that consciousness, which operates, within his scheme, within functions, is based within a common knowledge or what he terms a "common registering," and as such it enables different functional interactions with the environment. Despite his frequent references to Peirce, he ignores the Peircean modal categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, or feeling, experience, and the generation of habits, all of which scalar processes would have greatly helped him in his argumentation about consciousness and enabled a richer analysis.

Moving to his final chapter on ethics, which examines the validity of this relationship of the objective "fact" with the individual "interpretation," again, this relation is an ancient well-argued theme. Whether it provides objective or relative values, ethics supplies a value, a validation, to the principles of operation and the interpretation of the objective realities of a society. Nozick concludes that ethics indeed has a function, and its function is to reject the binary framework that he, from the beginning of his book, has examined and dismissed. That is, ethics exists, but it is not to justify individual behaviour, for this would be a relativist argument; ethics exists, but it is not to promote a correspondence relation to reality, for this would be a determinist argument. Nozick focuses his theme on the relation of the individual with the society and concludes that ethics is a mediating grounding process; it exists to integrate the individual with the community, to promote mutual benefits, within the development of systems of coordination, for "ethical beliefs coordinate our actions, each to each other's, so as to achieve mutually beneficial action" (Nozick, 2001, p. 243). This communal integration is akin to Peirce's dynamic synechism, which, along with his concept of pragmatism, is a means within a community, of developing a coherent "real" relation with reality. Nozick's ethics is also very like Aristotle's mediate normative ethics of "the common good." But again, neither of these analyses are mentioned or examined.

It is a long and rambling book, moving from topic to topic in an almost hopscotch manner, collecting a few tried and true themes and carrying them along an exploratory path—such themes as the reality of the objective, its cognitive nature as invariant knowledge developed by the individual within a community of individuals, the requirement that these invariant axioms be transformative and evolutionary, and the ethical nature of the individual in relation to the social. Unfortunately, the discursive and repetitive nature of the argument tends to obscure the basic themes, the refusal to refer to other philosophers in any depth tends to isolate these themes, the introduction of scientific theories is inadequate, and there is little attention given to exactly what constitutes and enables a community. What stands out, and this will be primarily for the already committed, is a strong and passionate rejection of a pure ideal, a rejection of a self-referential subjectivism that leads only to relativism, and an

advocacy of the existence of objective reality and the necessity for the individual to operate, within a community, to develop an adaptive, evolving, dynamic realism as an invariant model of this reality.

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—Edwina Taborsky

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*New Wombs: Electronic Bodies and Architectural Disorders*, by Maria Luisa Palumbo (2000). Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser. ISBN 3-7643-6294-4. 93 pp.

Issues of the cyborg, and the vulnerability of the body's limit, are at the fore in this text. Although, as the subtitle suggests, both the electronic and architecture are discussed, the primary interest of this book is in the intersections of the body and technology (prosethetics, biotechnology, the bioelectronic). These discussions can be securely located within the theoretical traditions of McLuhan (1964) and Haraway (1991).

The title, *New Wombs*, suggests that the book will argue a uterine connection to architecture and the electronic. Such bodily specificity rarely occurs. Wombs or new wombs are not defined in relation to electronic bodies or architectural disorders. Rather, an opening paragraph states that "The belly . . . symbolises a radically new concept of the body, characterised by an unprecedented continuity between exterior and interior because, when the naked eye can go no further, artificial sight takes over" (p. 5). It is this concept of the body, rather than any specific relevance of the uterine symbol, that occupies the book. The body is a generic body—and only occasionally do constituent parts (eyes, brain, skin, legs) affect the discussion. For Palumbo, it is "the possibilities offered by electronics" (p. 65) that seduce architecture into a bodily condition, and her text sits alongside Ingraham's (1997-1998) discussion of animal surrogacy and architecture, which is also interested in biology, electronic technology, and architecture, but in contrast, Ingraham insists that architecture's relationship to the human body is one that is negotiated via the animalian.

The second part of the book is the most extensive and productive section, and it discusses critically popular architecture by exploring the formal resemblance of architecture to bodies (human and animalian) and the possibilities of electronically enabled responsiveness ("communication and dynamic adaption," p. 32). Palumbo locates later architectural interests in movement (described as uprootings) and an exploration of limit (or dismeasurement), where architecture acquires a visceral na-

ture more conventional to biological bodies. Automatic doors, smoke detectors, and occupancy sensors evidence architecture as modeled on the body, now reconstrued as a “model of sensitivity, flexibility, intelligence and communicative capacity” (p. 5). Reference is made here to the Western architectural avant-garde of the 1980s and 1990s, including Peter Eisenmann, Coop Himmelblau, Lebbeus Woods, and Marcos Novak. These are architects whose works comfortably engage forms stereotypically associated with the breaking, blurring, and transgressing of limits.

The intentionally short length of this pocket book (about 15,000 words) has no doubt limited the ability to tease out theoretical issues and has also negatively affected the size of images. There is no index, and the unorthodox referencing undermines the conventional interweaving of footnotes and references, which enables a textual leakage beyond the physical enclosure of a book more akin to Palumbo’s frequent references to unstable margins and liquidity. Quotations and allusions to other texts are not always referenced, and if referenced, these are frequently without page numbers, disabling an ability to make practical connections to the works of other writers.

*New Wombs*’s use is as a summary of well-established ideas that have been connected to a certain architectural practice, but this is somewhat undermined by its unusual and inconsistent referencing systems. Its potentially interesting investigations are not given the space in the work to become convincing as radically important to contemporary architectural or electronic discourse.

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