

**N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman (eds.).** *Comparative Textual Media. Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era.*

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**Résumé**

Compte rendu de N. Katherine Hayles et Jessica Pressman (eds.). *Comparative Textual Media. Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era.*

**Abstract**

Review of N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman (eds.). *Comparative Textual Media. Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era.*

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Within the larger debates on the future of textual scholarship and humanist studies in the digital era, this important book makes a number of claims that are not dissimilar to some of those made by Peter Lunenfeld *et al.* in another recent key publication, *Digital Humanities*<sup>1</sup>, namely 1) the belief that the digital revolution should not be seen as the end of the print era, but as its expansion (hence the insistence on the notion of post-print, which is an inclusive, not an exclusive term); 2) the conviction that this post-print expansion is not a mere broadening or rebranding of the already existing, but a real paradigm shift that opens totally new possibilities (the fact that print survives, does not involve that it will continue to be as dominant as it used to be for the last five centuries); and 3) the certainty that the new forms of writing and reading will engender also new forms of criticism, both more collaborative (and, logically, more interdisciplinary) and more productive (criticism will no longer be in the first place a matter of destroying the others’ arguments but of producing new work, new methods, new products, new standards). The new critic is no longer one who is specialized in just criticizing, but in making, in direct interaction with others, new forms and new objects.

Although the editors of this volume have both a very strong publication and research in the field of digital humanities (it would be an insult to the reader to give here the list of their landmark publications), the scope of *Comparative Textual Media* (CTM) is not primarily concerned with the development of project work as the basic unit of new scholarly work. Given the didactic horizon of the CTM, whose first aim is to train students rather than to help invent grant deliverables, the main horizon of the book is closer to the conceptual reorganization of the field and the discipline than to the hands-on

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1. See my review of Anne Burdick, Johanna Druker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Pressner, Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital Humanities*, Cambridg, Mass.l MIT 2012, in *Image (&) Narrative* 2012:4, 242-244, available at: <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/286>

elaboration of sustainable business models. Corollarily, CTM also less interested in the discussion of mere print/non-print issues than on a redefinition of what textual studies actually may mean today. In this regard, Hayles and Pressman make two strong claims, which the rest of the collection will brilliantly illustrate.

On the one hand, they make a plea for a mediological revolution in textual studies. Texts, they argue, should be studied in the context of media: “CTM pursues media as objects of study and as methods of study, focusing on the specificities of the technologies as well as the cultural ecologies they support, enable, and illuminate. A focus on media promotes awareness that national, linguistic, and genre categories (typical classifications for text-based disciplines) are always already embedded in particular material and technological practices with broad cultural and social implications” (p. x). The emphasis on mediality rather than on textuality is a real paradigm shift in textual studies, although it does not come as a surprise at a moment where comparable fields are experiencing comparable shifts (one may think here in the very first of film studies, where the medial turn has now become quite mainstream). The current interest for material culture and the material turn in cultural studies in particular can of course only accelerate this move from textuality to mediality.

On the other hand, Hayles and Pressman defend also a comparative stance, whose return may be the real surprise of this collection. For many years, comparative literature has been one of the cornerstones of any general teaching of literature. The rise of theory, but also the decline of foreign (i.e. non-English) languages have put this comparative strand under strong pressure, to put it mildly. By linking the medial reorientation of textual studies with a strong comparative dimension, in all possible senses of the word (comparison is no longer reduced to that of two national literatures, it may involve all kind of synchronic and diachronic comparisons of all kind of medialized textualities), CTM does offer exciting new insights and perspectives for comparative literature, which may eventually produce a complete new design for the field. Comparative literature will then finally cease to be the most parochial and old-fashioned niche of textual studies in order to become part of broader interdisciplinary research and teaching programs.

The twelve studies that compose the three parts of this volume all provide very convincing examples of the new scholarship presented by Hayles and Pressman. The first section on “Theories” brings together four contributions on key aspects of print and non print technologies, with for instance fascinating reflections by Rita Raley on the status of ephemeral textualities in many contemporary interactive environments or Mathew G. Kirschenbaum’s discussion of “mixed” (print and non-print) archives. The second section on “Practices” presents four challenging case studies on both very contemporary and very ancient examples. Key in these readings is the insistence on the cultural context of medialization as a way to supersede naive technodeterminism. Willam A. Johnson’s essay on the Roman book scroll or Lisa Gitelman on “Job printing” (i.e. the use of printing technology for the quantitatively essential but scholarly discarded production of print material outside the book format) should be read by all those interested in the historical and cultural complexity of medial forms that we think we know... The third and last part, “Recursions” gathers four contributions on the reshaping of medial frameworks by internal

feedback: medias change once their users start reflecting on them and feed-back their experiences or questions to the medium. In this sense, this section completes very usefully the well-known, and today much-debated notion of remediation, which we do no longer think of as a linear or teleological phenomenon. Here as well, CTM combines traditional, canonical examples (see Thomas Fulton's essay on the publication of Shakespeare's sonnets) and very recent material (see Mark C. Marino's close-reading of *exquisite\_codes*, a digital variation on the Surrealist exquisite corpse procedure).

The clear theoretical, methodological, didactic, and institutional program of this book and the electrifying qualities of the essays that illustrate it make *Comparative Textual Media* not only a landmark publication, but a sign of hope for textual studies in general.

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