Michel S. Laguerre, *The Digital City: The American Metropolis and Information Technology* (Berkeley, CA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 211 pp., ISBN 1-4039-9710-1 (hbk), £76.00.

This is a small and innocuous book in appearance only. Something one would assume readable in one go and with little concern. The cover is very unassuming, the design beyond plain. The reading starts with a series of analyses of the contemporary digital layers over the city: real, mixed reality, augmented reality, immersive reality, carrying through the complexities of the contemporary realities and virtualities with a feather-light approach.

The book is about digital globalisation, the layering of strata upon strata of digital interfaces and interferences shaping the real, which, by altering human behaviour and interaction, have already created digital cities and digital societies with successes and failures. It is a book about contradictions and opportunities as well as an attentive and academically pedantic source of information and data. I do not personally know the author but it has been a pleasure to review a book that seems to offer to the reader, as a matter of course, the solidity of facts, data and references. This has been achieved without boring the reader and by grasping the attention of both the specialist academic reader and the proud ignoramus. I offered chapters of this book to review to people who make a point of not reading ‘academic stuff’. I had positive feedback from all. Although too little to make a statistical case, the five casual reviewers came back with questions and wanted to know more. In particular, how to strategise in order to ensure their personal success within the digital city.

Laguerre has been able to analyse the contradiction of contemporary digital cities and the interactions of the various human components without waging a war and taking sides. The dispassionate and compassionate analyses of the contemporary contradictions are such that they reveal the dramatic issue of ‘human evolution conditioned by the digital’ without pronouncing moral judgements but rather with ethical expectations. The failures and successes of the global phenomenon and of the digital city in addressing the social divide are analysed and presented as a result of the digitisation processes of the ‘virtual embodiment of the global city’.

The book analyses these embodiments beyond the mere theoretical approaches. With the support of human case studies it offers the insight of
an evolutionary panorama, dictated by the algorithms of contemporary databases.

The analyses are embedded in the tradition of digital media, IT processes and their social implications: Castells, Negroponte, Croucher, Cubitt and Virilio are all present and brilliantly condensed in the contemporary space of the digital city and its human presence.

The author achieves fully and successfully his intent. The digital city presented in this book is a dramatic representation of the causal blending effects of real and virtual. The virtual disappears, presenting to the readers the reality of a city and consequently of a citizen, digitally embedded or digitally excluded.

I would like to conclude the review of this ‘small book’ with an Italian proverb that states: ‘nelle botti piccole, il vino buono’ (in small barrels is found good wine). More of these small barrels please.

Lanfranco Aceti
© 2007 Lanfranco Aceti

Lanfranco Aceti is a Consultant for Research and Development and an Honorary Research Fellow at the Slade School of Fine Art. He is also a Leverhulme Artist in Residence and Researcher at the Department of Computer Science, Virtual Reality Environments, University College London. Dr Aceti was awarded his Ph.D., which analysed the avant-garde and new media representations in contemporary society, by Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. His research focuses on the role and impact of globalised new media technologies on contemporary society and fine arts. He is currently working on a book on art, religion and digital media. Address: The Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK. [email: Lanfranco@communart.com]

Monica Whitty & Adrian N. Carr, Cyberspace Romance: The Psychology of Online Relationships (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 209 pp., ISBN 1-4039-4514-4, £18.99 (pbk).

The rapid and widespread inclusion of ‘cyberspace’ as part of people’s everyday social interactions has raised questions about the consequences this has for users’ social relationships and societal actions. In the book Cyberspace Romance the authors present the ‘relational implications’ for relationships in cyberspace, as well as an analysis of how cyberspace has affected the social practices and identity involved in initiating and developing relationships online. A useful, albeit predominantly psychological, introduction to the research literature on the negotiation of online lives is provided in an overview and contextualization of past theoretical standpoints. The focus of the book is on how relationships and interactions are at ‘play’ and are informed...
by an ever-increasing accentuation on physicality and bodily self that is ‘present’ within these spaces. The authors describe how cyberspace has psychosocial consequences for relationships that encourage ‘new’ rules for social interaction, romantic connections, as well as the representation and development of the self both on and offline.

The book draws on studies that concentrate on the psychological implications for social action and the ways in which people may initiate and then go on to develop and maintain online personal connections. What is unclear and perhaps most misleading from the *trendy* title is how the conceptualization of ‘romance’ fits with the discussion and analysis of cyberspace relationships. This is made more conspicuous by the absence of the term from the subject index, which leads one to consider that perhaps it is the author’s own ‘romance’ with cyberspace and related research to which they refer. Chapter 2 hints at the appropriateness of ‘romance’ that is viewed as a contemporary and chiefly Western cultural ideal. Here Whitty & Carr usefully link romance to past forms of courtly love and traditional courtship practices. However, they miss the opportunity to explore the possibilities for a modification of meaning(s) that are available as part of their discussion of what is understood as a (dis)embodied social space. Cultural production and ‘rule-following’ behaviour is taken as a precursor and signifier for romantic love that within the research parameters promotes heterosexuality and polarization of gender roles. Here analysis would have benefited from further enquiry into the different types of relationships that can be sought, as well as the possible influence of diverse personal variables, such as sexuality, that shape how cyberspace intimacies are related to and experienced.

On the basis of the psychological data considered by Whitty & Carr, technology and the experience of online interactions are shown to provide space for what they see as ‘new’ intimacies that are mediated outside preconceived or those more ‘usual’ and traditional social contexts. These new intimacies signify an interrelationship between an individual’s physical self and his/her online social connections. These are connections at ‘play’ and conducted within the ‘uncharted’ territory of cyberspace before possibly moving offline. In this respect Whitty & Carr are careful to note the possible negative and positive impacts that these interactions and relationships may have. Informed by their own previous research they outline the possible problems of not only the practicalities of coordination and synchronization of cyberspace intimacies but also possible implications for risk, trust and desire. The sharing of past histories and an overt awareness of relationship development mean that these online connections and intimacies are formed at a rapid pace. Whilst Whitty & Carr describe what has been referred to elsewhere as a ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens 1991), arguments are centred on how social action within cyberspace is informed by more
traditional cultural practices and roles that shape romantic connections. Within this context social diversity and global variations in access to the Internet are neglected.

One of the most illuminating discussions in the book is the possible inter-relationship between users and what the authors refer to as the ‘psychodynamics’ of an individual’s ‘object engagement’ (p. 73), referring to how people may access cyberspace (in this case it is assumed for the most part that this is through their computers). From a feminist standpoint, in-depth analysis of the masculinization of ‘hardware’ and contrast between the more sexualized and fetishized relationships, compared with romantic connections, would have been welcome, especially where the make-up of these cyberspace relations is drawn heavily from Freud’s construction of identity, the ego, fetishism, libido and sexuality. In addition, regressive behavioural constructs are shown to be linked to childhood social experiences that are used to explain different online actions such as flaming, group connections and one-on-one communications. The multiplicity of such online interactions is contextualized as part of embodied meaning that is shown to have numerous possibilities for social action where users can interact with more than one person at more than one time, e.g. MUDs, chatroom, email, IM, and through an array of devices. These debates concerning the diversity of cyberspace contact and intimacies show how the scope for social connectivity has never before been so diverse, or so mobile. Indeed some of the most recent studies have drawn attention to how individuals are informed and potentially ‘situated’ by the technologies that they use, which can displace online identifications and signifiers. With the inclusion of primary sources including the experiences and stories of users as well as secondary data analysis Whitty & Carr deal engagingly with complex relations between representation, relational subjectivities and identities that occur in cyberspace. Where there may be room for expansion of these debates the authors connect in an accessible and entertaining way with their analysis and offer possibilities for the future of cyberspace intimacies that will serve to enlighten and encourage further research within this rapidly changing and dynamic topic.

Mariann Hardey
© 2007 Mariann Hardey

Reference

Giddens, A. (1991) Modernity and Self-Identity, Polity Press, Cambridge.
Mariann Hardey is currently researching social mediation for the iGeneration for her Ph.D. thesis, supported by the ESRC with the Centre for Women's Studies and Department of Sociology and SIRU at the University of York. She completed her Master's dissertation with Distinction on eDating and has a degree in English Literature from the School of English and American Studies at the University of Sussex. Address: Department of Sociology, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, UK. [email: mh514@york.ac.uk]; webpage: http://mazphd.googlepages.com/home

Orlin Spassov & Christo Todorov (eds), New Media in Southeast Europe (Sofia: Southeast European Media Centre [SOEMZ], 2003), ISBN 954-91295-1-9.

New Media in Southeast Europe presents a collection of essays on countries of that region, including Greece and Turkey. It fuses two realms of academic investigation that have been among the most proliferating (and recent) ones. On the one hand, the growth of the World Wide Web has excited people’s imagination, due to the fact that its technological foundation allows for a relatively free exchange of news and information, marked by a flatter hierarchy than is typical of the so-called ‘old’ media. On the other hand, social and political transitions attributed with comparable importance occurred in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after they escaped the suffocating connection to the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, respectively. But not only did they gain their political independence, they also went through a time of inner conflict. In the country that was once known as Yugoslavia this culminated in a full-scale war and the eventual break-up of that country into a number of independent states. Surely, when changes of such scale occur in different realms such as media and politics, analysing a synthesis of the two should prove fruitful.

Presenting fifteen chapters on no less than ten different countries, New Media in Southeast Europe aims at answering two questions. Its first aim is to reveal the manner in which the Internet is manifested at a regional level, its second objective to analyse ‘the political and cultural effects of the intersection of the global and the local on the territory of an in itself ambiguous and difficult to define political and cultural geography’ (p. 11). Unfortunately for the reader the book is not designed in a strictly comparative manner but to be fair to the authors the collection of essays is not supposed to fulfil that purpose. What the reader does obtain, though, is a broad overview and useful introductory insight into the structural circumstances in which the Internet slowly emerges as a means of communication.

The following may be taken as an example to illustrate the essence of the collection. Considering the recent history of a full-scale war it is does not come as much of a surprise that, despite the proximity to the economically
healthy and democratically more experienced countries of the European Union, a number of factors still limit people’s access to the Net. However, at the same time the potential for development is an aspect that allows for a certain amount of hope that the medium will make a positive contribution to the level of democratic maturity of the respective countries. Yet, until the general standard of living has improved, cultural and economic differences will prevail regarding the potential range of users. Currently, users are predominantly male and young, although older users can be identified, given a favourable economic situation. Furthermore, aspects of materiality can be extracted from the essays, showing the link between the technological infrastructure, aspects of ownership and market deregulation without which the potential use as a tool for e-government, and thus a strong public sphere, would not be possible. Yet as the case of Albania shows, there is no rainbow without rain: During the Kosovo conflict Serbian and Albanian users were engaged in a cyber war, trying to win the upper hand on propaganda issues.

To conclude, then, New Media in Southeast Europe provides a useful starting point for more detailed studies of media effects, especially on comparatively young political units. It is intended as the beginning of a series of books analysing the development of mass media in progress while the respective countries undergo a process of integration with their European neighbours. Further publications in the series should be eagerly anticipated; meanwhile texts can be downloaded from the institute’s website: http://soemz.euv-frankfurt-o.de/index.php.

Hannes Hansen-Magnusson

(©) 2007 Hannes Hansen-Magnusson

R. K. Bagga, Kenneth Keniston & Rohit Raj Mathur (eds) The State, IT and Development (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 325 pp., ISBN 0-7619-3399-9, £14.99 (pbk).

The question of whether information technology can really revolutionize the way society conducts itself remains a vexed topic even in developed nations. Critics note problems such as expense, lack of universal access, and inequity for the illiterate or technophobic. These problems are both multiplied and complicated in developing nations, particularly India. On the one hand, the digital revolution seems to have benefited India in previously unimaginable ways. Global demand for Indian-trained high-tech workers shows no sign of waning, and information and communication technology (ICT) is being
hailed enthusiastically as a way to make the Indian economy, and Indian governance, more efficient and competitive. To their credit, many academics, high-ranking policy-makers and consultants recognize why moderation is in order, and some of these individuals are found explaining their position in the topical collection, The State, IT and Development. Edited by R. K. Bagga, of the International Institute of Information Technology, Kenneth Keniston, Director of the MIT India Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Rohit Raj Mathur, at the Administrative Staff College of India, this book offers a wide-ranging collection of essays that touch on topics as varied as protecting the privacy of citizens’ information, the difference between centralized and decentralized systems of government when implementing IT, the spread of telephone services, and cyber law.

While individual chapters may draw on seemingly different examples, a number of themes are reasserted throughout the book. All of the authors acknowledge in their various ways that IT can be a powerful source for change in India, but only if handled with sensitivity towards the population’s real needs. On the face of it, in a country whose population demonstrates high rates of illiteracy and often lacks basic services, IT is an unnecessary luxury, and can only contribute to widening the divide between information haves and have-nots. Steering away from a technological determinist point of view, the authors in this collection mainly concede, and even build upon, the point that the implementation of IT faces serious challenges, such as urban/rural access issues, the challenges of catering to a multilingual constituency and the persistence of gender inequity.

And yet, as these contributors suggest, ICT may be needed even more urgently in countries such as India than it is elsewhere. A recurring theme of this book is that ICT, used effectively, may reduce corruption by increasing transparency of political operations, thus raising the standards for governance. The essays in this book provide concrete examples, from the most mundane to the more complex, of how ICT can offer information on real estate, finances and agriculture. The essays vary in subject matter, depth and length but, taken together, they provide a wealth of detail for serious policy-makers or development workers who seek information regarding concrete case studies. Though elaboration of India-specific IT policy may be the book’s most useful function, it can also – particularly in the first section – benefit the reader who simply wants to know more about the immense challenges of implementing IT in developing countries.

Faiza Hirji Kassam  
© 2007 Faiza Hirji Kassam
Faiza Hirji Kassam is a doctoral candidate in the School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University. She is currently completing a dissertation on themes of nationalism and religion in popular Indian cinema, and how these may be interpreted and used by young Canadians of South Asian origin in the construction of identity. Address: School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6, Canada. [email: fhirji@connect.carleton.ca]