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Wright, D. (2015) review of Beer, D. *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation*, Cultural Trends, 24 (1): 107-108

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Beer, David (2013) *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 190pp, Hardback, £55.00, ISBN 978113727004.

This is a relatively short but dense and ambitious book which attempts to provide some conceptual tools with which to approach the transformations to contemporary cultural life wrought by the inexorable rise of what are still termed 'new media'. Actively and explicitly eschewing, what, in the words of the Science and Technology Studies scholar Steve Woolgar, represents the 'cyber-bole' of some commentary on these processes, and being careful not to fetishize what is or isn't *new* about these media by keeping a close regard to continuities as well as changes, it calmly and carefully lays out how a range of media technologies, and the data generated through either their primary function or as bi-product of their use, operate to illuminate or obscure our understanding of cultural life. 'Popular culture' is the object – but this is popular culture in its broader, routinized, day-to-day, 'way of life' sense, rather than relating to the hierarchical, legitimate or commercial cultural things.

New media technologies, and in particular the production, accumulation and circulation of digital forms of data are, the book argues, transforming this version of popular culture in quite fundamental ways. It is convincing in its claim that these developments, whilst not, as some enthusiasts might argue, spelling the *end* of theory, do require a theoretical response that recognises that the game of culture and of popular culture in particular has been changed by these technologies– and that the established theoretical corpus for understanding culture might need to change too to take account of them.

The book begins with consideration of the 'objects and infrastructures' of the new media/popular cultural world, emphasising that a precursor to any substantive understanding of the role of digital data in social, cultural and political life is an appreciation of the devices that produce it and the extent to which they are not just technologically neutral carriers of information but also objects which elicit emotional attachments and which are, increasingly, engaged in shaping and recording experience and memory. It then considers in turn a series of topics in which the roles of these objects, infrastructures and modes of circulation are evident, beginning with the digital archive. For Beer this has a central, constitutive relation to contemporary forms of cultural production and consumption. What appears to be the banal act of tagging a YouTube clip, or liking a Facebook page for example, generates and reflects new

ways of engaging with culture, beyond the cliché of the (inter)active media audience. This open and accessible 'classificatory imagination', has profound implications for how culture circulates. Following Foucault, the power to classify and the consequences of classification take on greater urgency in contexts where the volume of data being produced is so vast, and where the technologies of classification are so embedded in the practices of everyday life, so sophisticated and so ripe for commercial – and perhaps other - forms of exploitation.

The story continues in a revealing chapter on the social and cultural significance of the algorithm. This draws on research about how algorithms act as hidden decision makers in a range of fields, shaping how we interact with everyday forms of software, but also informing substantive and significant decision-making such as assessing the relative risk of migrants at border crossings or, less significantly perhaps, informing the holy grail of search engine optimisation in academic abstract-writing. These same processes of intelligent and reflexive automated decision-making are applied to a more in-depth consideration of how algorithmically generated data help shape and circulate tastes in powerful new ways, such that in contexts such as iTunes, NetFlix or Amazon we don't so much discover new cultural products as have them discover us.

A brief sojourn through the cultural and democratic possibilities of data 'play', afforded by the diffusion of the means of manipulating and visualising open data, takes us to the final chapter, on the body. This contains some intriguing reflection on the relative absence of the body from theorising of digital culture - an absence surprising given its centrality to social and cultural theory at the dawn of the digital age (e.g. Harraway's 'cyborg manifesto' and its discontents). Mobile media are explored in relation to how the boundaries and territories of bodies are created and managed. This is almost exclusively focussed on iPod/Walkman technologies as representations of developments in the relations between bodies and space and the strategic creation of 'mediated solitude'. Through all these examples, each placed in its own theoretical context, Beer convincingly argues that alongside their technological significance, new media are also cultural constructions – or assemblages- infused and overlain with powerful assumptions, held and enacted by both producers and consumers, about how and for what reasons data can and should be circulated.

There is popular culture present in that other, more restricted and recognisable sense too, though – albeit as occasional empirical example. These draw on and extend Beer's published research into how digital methods of circulation are transforming musical genres or the experience of listening to music. Equally revealing though are the examples of the author's attempts to teach himself to play a Jesus and Mary Chain song on the guitar by using a digital

archive or enjoy the real time TV commentary on a snooker tournament through a portable ear piece worn in the audience of the event itself. From both types of example we get a clear sense of a series of intellectual problems appearing before the author to be productively puzzled over and written through. For some tastes the book might lack a solid, rigorous, empirical basis to the reflection, but there is an openness and scepticism to the claim-making which is also a call to researchers to make sense of the digital not as some add on to existing empirical problems but as constitutive of how these problems might be known in the contemporary period. As a series of informed reflections and as a primer for and synthesis of a range of current cultural theoretical perspectives on the landscapes of digital culture, it is never less than interesting and is more often illuminating and entertaining.

David Wright teaches in the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick. He has research interests in the sociology of taste, popular culture and cultural policy and is currently developing research and writing projects on cultural taste and the politics of cultural participation.