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Felicia Hughes-Freeland

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Switching codes

Thinking through digital technology in the humanities and the arts

Bartscherer, Thomas and Coover, Roderick eds

Chicago and London University of Chicago Press, 2011. Cloth, paperback, e-book 333 pp. Cloth £63.50, \$91.00; paper £21.00, \$32.00; e-book £17.74, \$7.00-\$30.00.

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The editors of this volume are Rod Coover, an internationally renowned visual anthropologist and digital artist based at Temple University, and Thomas Bartscherer, who is well-known for his research at Bard and CNRS into digital infrastructures to support the humanities. This collaboration has produced a fascinating series of experimental interdisciplinary conversations about many aspects of computerization, from factors involved in creating searchable online research databases through to digital art. The short introduction explains that the key themes -- authenticity, learning and creativity, the semantic web, and ontologies -- will be addressed through dialogues between computer science and the humanities.

This is an important and ambitiously Borgesian project, with an emphasis on emergence and transformation: 'Time itself is the central paradox in this attempt to articulate the rhetoric of an electronic linguistic. Flux cannot be recorded; it can only be pointed to *in media res*.' (Coover, p. 8). The topic may be 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, but the approach is a perennial concern with epistemology; the introduction refers specifically to Pascal's complementary concepts of mathematical (*l'esprit de géométrie*) and intuitive thinking (*l'esprit de finesse*) (p. 9). As Coover notes, 'In computing, all works are multimedia and we are all multimodal; makers and users move fluidly among concepts, cultures and forms of expression' (p. 216). The entire book engages in debates which will benefit *any* anthropologist because, as Coover notes, 'we are all multimedia makers now' (p. 9). The panorama-like subversion of authority is evident in the polemical structure of the book itself. The contributions are structured into four thematic sections: Research, Sense, Structure; Ontology, Semantic Web, Creativity; Panorama, Interactivity, Embodiment; and Re/presentations, Language and Facsimile. There is also an interlude, and an epilogue. Most sections include two critical responses, and in the case of Borgmann's four page response to section two on code (pp 184-8), *highly* critical. Sorensen's response to section three is political. She reminds us crucially that '75-90% of the world's population remains *not* connected' and notes that 'Culture, as in previous eras is still a site of warfare, and our media technologies actively participate in its production', (p. 242-3). In these terms, the universalizing 'we' in Coover's earlier statement might require qualification.

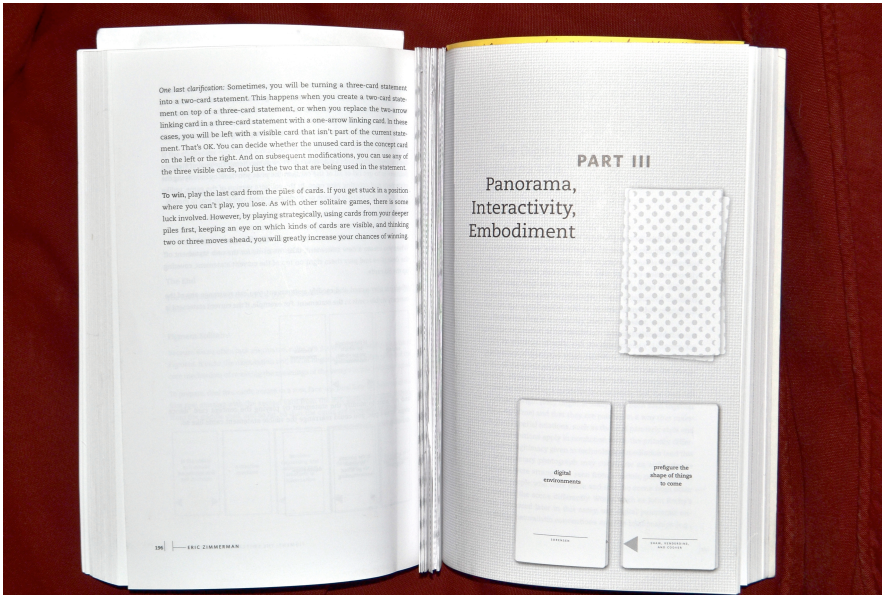
Despite the philosophical orientation, 'humanities' people may struggle with some of the 'mathematical' discourse in the first two sections. For example, the precise sense of 'ontology' remains unclear until D'Iorio and Barbera's Skype dialogue between a philosopher and a computer scientist, where it is discussed as a 'general structure' and as 'domain source ontologies' (p. 75). Later it is defined as 'a hierarchically organized classification system (Ceusters and Smith, p.103), which will make social scientists feel more at home. Anyone who finds these technicalities too mind-boggling can take a short cut by inspecting the list of contributors; this in itself provides an instant education in the contemporary potential for interdisciplinarity and gives a sense of how much is at stake here. But I would recommend readers to persist with the first sections, as part of the salutary process of breaking boundaries and discovering the limits of one's own disciplinary assumptions which is a core achievement of this volume. And in the future, perhaps someone will develop a conversation about the uses 'ontology' to explore further potential source of friction between the two poles of thinking.

There is also scope to consider the implications of knowledge in cyber 'reality' having an accuracy rate of 55% in other epistemological domains.

Although the book is not aimed specifically at visual anthropologists, the lavishly illustrated third and fourth sections will be of considerable interest. Coover's complex but lucid account of digital panoramas such as Works such as *Mysteries and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy* and his own *Something that only Happened Once* and *The Unknown Territories* (<http://www.unknownterritories.org>) show how these disrupt a fixed objective and authorial stance, and mark a shift from product to praxis. He engages in collaborative dialogues with Jeffrey Shaw, 'pioneer of interactive cinema and haptic digital and his curator Sarah Kenderdine, discussing nine of Shaw's works, from *Legible City* to *Place-Hampi*. This is a new field for me, but having attempted to achieve the haptic in documentary cinema in the 1980s, I found this chapter extremely thought provoking and enlightening about digital art, Coover's own practice, and the potential for other forms of ethnographic representation; I will certainly look for Shaw's co-edited book, *The Cinematic Imaginary after Film* for further elucidation of his claim that 'The social operation of the digital artwork... [is]...essentially performative' (p. 230). This section will remind many readers of Latour's writings on technology, and they will be pleased to find his chapter with Lowe on the subject of aura a facsimiles in the final section, paired with Quasha's dialogue with the artist Gary Hill. Apart from Latour, though, much of the fourth section was prefigured in the works of Nelson Goodman (*Language of Art, Ways of Worldmaking*), and I missed any explicit recognition of his ideas.

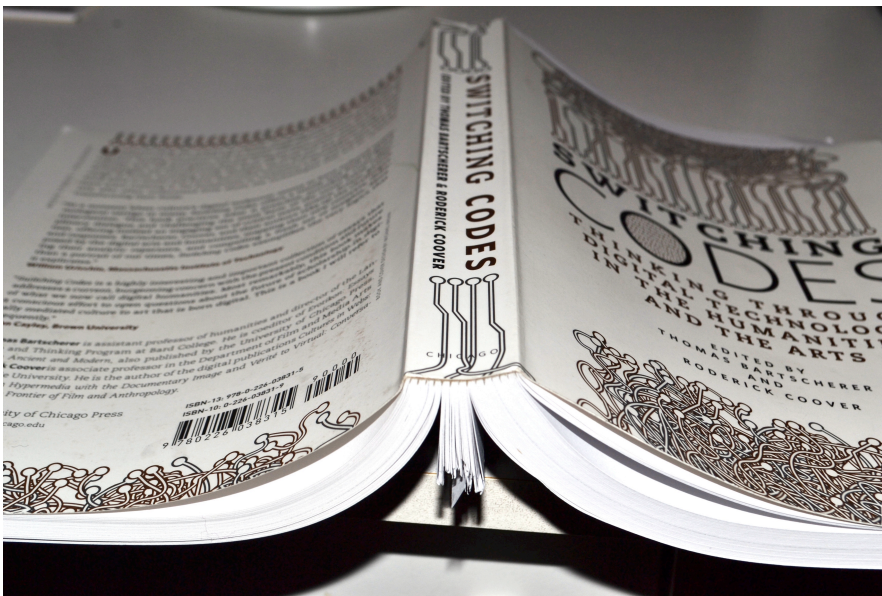
Given that central arguments concern dematerialisation, virtual networks and ontologies, the question arises as to why these debates are presented as a material book and not in a virtual format. This question is answered in the introduction, and throughout the book, in the interplay between physical substance, ideas, and networks is conceptually and performatively foundational. There is close attention to the visual impact of design and concept: each section has a visual summary. This visual technique references the book's most surprising element, the 'interlude' at its physical centre is around 100 pages, each one consisting of four cards, consisting of words or phrases from the book. These are for playing 'Figments', 'not an argument to be analysed but a game to be played' (p. 3), created by game designer and theorist Eric Zimmerman. The reader has to commit an act of dismemberment (unless the pages are photocopied), cutting out the pages using of a tool such as a Stanley knife to make the cards. This unique element for an academic book is part of its rupturing of predictable engagements and interdisciplinary, multi-media concern. Having the reader prepare the material means to play the game enacts a core concern about materiality and conceptualization. The game directions emphasise the process of challenges between players who are required justify their phrase-making, and the game would appear to work best with four or more players. There is a solitaire form of the game for people without playmates – an odd anachronism, given the book's exploration of virtual encounters. Lacking first life playmates, I made a Skype date to play the game with a friend, which was more in keeping with the spirit of *Switching Codes* than solitaire. But we agreed that to enliven a game for two players, each player should have ten cards instead of seven, and make two statements instead of one.

**Fig 1 The book design**



From the book *Switching Codes*  
Photo Felicia Hughes-Freeland

Fig 2 After the cards are cut out



From the book *Switching Codes*  
Photo Felicia Hughes-Freeland

Fig 3 A modified statement from a game of Figments



From the book *Switching Codes*  
Photo Felicia Hughes-Freeland

The book takes an open, processual and dialogic approach, and the epilogue leaves us in the domain of philosophy and epistemology. This takes the form of a short story by the writer Richard Powers about the loss of a boy's personhood by the proliferation of virtual selves which leaves him feeling 'the infinite odds against any existence at all'. So although the book invites us to play, this is play at its most serious, and addresses the moral crisis facing the emerging cyborg humanity. And the role of the visual in new epistemologies is at the heart of this challenge.