Jay David Bolter, *The Digital Plenitude: The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of Digital Media*. MIT P, 2019, pp. 232.

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Jay David Bolter's wide-ranging assessment of contemporary media culture covers a lot of ground, both historically and with regard to technological diversity, but it finds a largely appropriate mode of abstraction that provides a useful heuristic framework for considering both the general and the particular. Bolter's main argument in this study is that the division along the lines of elite/high culture and popular/mass culture is now thoroughly dissolved, and that digital media, in recent decades, have intensified and indeed completed this process that has its roots in the various avant-gardes of modernism. Based on this well-founded premise that elite Culture with a capital C no longer exists as a unifying (if problematic) social force, Bolter then proceeds to describe today's media-cultural moment in terms of four dichotomies that loosely mark the cornerstones of its spectrum: catharsis and flow, originality and remix, organic and procedural, and, finally, history and simulation. This splits the study in two connected halves, a historical-theoretical one and a more specific set of particular analyses that range from social media to quantified selves, and which close with a view to their distinctly political implications.[1]

Bolter's study is very explicit about its own current moment and context, as it starts out with a preface commenting on the Trump presidency and closes with a consideration of how his anti-elitist populist platform parallels the fragmentation of cultural realms in a public sphere that no longer is one. Yet, this concrete embeddedness goes hand in hand with a keen historical sense, and Bolter's analysis is all the more convincing because it not only describes where we are but also how we got here (and the pronoun is appropriate because Bolter's study, despite its local focus on the US, is at least transnational in scope and potentially global in outlook, as the technological regime of the digital as a whole knows no outside despite its significant internal differences). The first two chapters, "The Great Divide" and "Popular Modernism," proffer a dense, rich history of how, in the twentieth century in the US, the "collective belief" in Culture was first undermined by the increasing elevation and acceptance of popular culture vis-à-vis this elite culture, and then shattered into fragments that now constitute a diversity of cultural practices and communities operating beyond the dichotomy of high and popular culture. None of these cultural microspheres claim or desire the general validity "Culture" once had, and they no longer measure their value according to a normative yardstick but are quite content in their immanence. "The knowledge that defines each community is canonical only within that community" (50), and there is no more mainstream—not the mainstream of a mass culture everyone knows about, and not the mainstream of an elite high culture everyone *should* know about and knows they should even if they don't.

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[1] The publication is supplemented by a useful companion website (www.digitalplenitude.net/) that contains additional material that could not be adequately represented in print or e-book form.

This shift is a profoundly anti-elitist movement away from the various institutional and personal arbiters of Culture toward a much more distributed set without a center, and Bolter is adamant that this is not a loss to be mourned. If there now "is no single standard, and no community's creative practice is central to all of our culture" (51), then this is a progressive shift in power dynamics away from those who once got to define what literature and art are, while making them the standards of culture in a highly political gesture of synecdoche. The condition of media culture today as a highly diverse "plenitude" (7) surely does not call for nostalgia for such times, but it should not be romanticized either. Although Bolter does describe the participatory qualities of these new media forms as a less hierarchical and indeed more democratic kind of culture that also transcend the dystopia of the mass culture industry, he also repeatedly cautions against their inherent dangers, especially when it comes to the fragmentation of politics itself along similar lines (but also with regard to paradigms of self-optimization and the public performance of identities). This is the ambiguity inherent to the term "popular modernism" he introduces to great effect: like modernism proper, the concept combines both liberating and totalitarian aspects, and it exhibits the democratic along with the fascist.

Popular modernism is the continuation of modernism by other means, and it is marked by the "importance of the new," "the breakdown of hierarchy," a "fascination with technology," and a "preoccupation with style" (80). Bolter uses the term to describe a peculiar kind of cultural paradigm shift that has ended the notion of paradigms: When the status of elite culture changed and the barriers between elite and popular culture became increasingly porous, the dominant cultural paradigm happened to be modernism. Aesthetic and intellectual principles of modernism then filtered "down" into popular culture and were adopted by jazz and rock musicians, filmmakers, designers, and most recently digital media producers. A dialogue between elite modernism and popular culture had been going on throughout the twentieth century, but it became more productive in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, when modernism was being superseded in the art community itself, a kind of "popular modernism" began to thrive in the larger media culture. (20)

The only reason why this is not simply called "postmodernism" is that, Bolter argues, postmodernism still reacted to modernism and thus sufficiently acknowledged its elitist premises, even if as a negative foil. This argument is convincing up to a point, and yet this section remains short enough to invite further complication: postmodernism's alleged breakdown of the binary between high and popular culture was surely more of an agenda than an actual fact, and yet many forms of postmodernism did contribute so strongly to the effect Bolter describes that they would deserve a closer look than the much more aggressively elitist modernism that preceded it. Furthermore, the convincing argument that the dissolution of normative cultural standards is the reason why it makes no sense to find a general label to describe "post-postmodernism" is one that has been proffered with regard to postmodernism itself, and so this discourse seems unduly marginalized here, especially as it actually affirms the initial hypotheses.[2]

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[2] Ted Underwood's 2013 study *Why Literary Periods Mattered* is a fruitful complementary text in this regard despite its more narrow focus on English literary studies since the nineteenth century. He argues that "the authority of historical contrast has in recent years been declining" (3) so that the paradigmatic thought of one "era" following another is undermined as a whole, and not least because "one of the most salient lessons of postmodernism was to

Most importantly, however, I would contend that the breakdown of a normative cultural center Bolter describes has not (yet?) led to the flat distribution of different cultural communities he suggests have taken its place, a situation in which these cultural "communities today live in peaceful coexistence or mutual ignorance" and where, "in the absence of an agreed paradigm, choices have necessarily become matters of taste and community" (78). For one, taste is already a function of social contexts that preclude such an individualist approach. More importantly, these communities themselves are often heavily marked by the very same dichotomies of elitist versus mass culture that used to describe culture as a whole, and it is important that these dynamics have not vanished but shifted onto a micro level: canonicity, selectivity, authority, cultural capital, recognition, and indeed the power networks of elitist arbiters of culture are all to be found within and between these communities, so that, for example, the discourse of *Harry Potter* fanfiction may be policed just as heavily as that of poetry in New Criticism. Bolter acknowledges as much when he draws attention to various best-of-lists "to distinguish all sorts of media" and to "reassure members of their community that a hierarchy still exists" (139), and while these are different and varied ways of cultivating canonicity, this is still precisely what they do, and this does have an effect outside their particular community.

Furthermore, it remains important to see how high and popular culture are still operationalized as concepts and terms today in whatever limited context, regardless of how devoid they are of content; in fact, they have always been devoid of content, just like "literature" or "art," but as long as they are being *filled* with content for different purposes, they are not to be dismissed, if only to ensure that these contentious, highly problematic terms are not restored to their prior hegemony. These notions, like the "culture of communities" (79) that allegedly overrides them, still function as markers of distinction and class (with Pierre Bourdieu), and even though this function is no longer as clear-cut as it once seemed (but perhaps never was), it still serves its purposes, especially in a thoroughly commodified cultural marketplace. For example, many pop-cultural communities still seek validation in reference to perceived high-cultural spheres, and so does their academic analysis, as enough pointless attempts to prove that video games are art show (or the cheap trick of legitimizing the enjoyment and study of comics by calling them "graphic novels"). Even more importantly with regard to Bolter's own political take, constructions of popular culture are still as integral as ever to an imagination of "the people" in many different ways and to very different ends, just like the construction of an elite/high culture still serves a similar function with regard to the imagination of a national community. Bolter has very good reasons to no longer believe in high or popular culture as ways of understanding our current cultural moment, but as long as these discursive fields continue to overlap and feed each other, and as long as they serve such problematic political functions if not due to their content but to their being mobilized as concepts, we cannot really afford to let these notions go just yet as cultural critics, and at least their persistence still warrants attention and critique.[3]

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be wary of narrativizations of the past, especially those involving a linear or chronological account of it" (Rudrum and Stavris xvi).

[3] These are some of the issues explored by the contributors to the volume *Unpopular Culture* (2016), co-edited by Martin Lüthe and myself. The intersection of populism, popular culture, and capital-C Culture is fruitfully explored from very different angles in Jim McGuigan's *Cultural Populism* (1992) and Cher Krause Knight's *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* (2011).

None of these points relate to actual omissions in Bolter's argument, though, but rather to shifting emphases with regard to an accurate and convincing diagnosis that is backed up by persuasive evidence from a variety of media-cultural practices and phenomena. Bolter retains this method of effortlessly switching between the general and the particular in the second half of the study when he turns to a closer analysis of the situation whose history he has outlined in the first half. Each of the four chapters in this section is built on a dichotomy that is introduced as the framework of a spectrum rather than a binary, and this nuanced approach is heuristically productive even if one may not follow everyone of Bolter's conclusions. While these four binaries cover a massive variety of contemporary digital media and their respective cultural artifacts, such as the remix aesthetics of hip hop or participatory online meme culture, the study finds its richest and most profound material in video games, as they offer the perfect combination of the aspects of flow, remix, procedurality, and simulation that Bolter describes as the "hip new qualities" (85) that are currently in tension with the more established ones of catharsis, originality, organicity, and history.

The following chapters explore these tensions without unduly reducing the complexity of the spectrum bracketed by these poles; at one point, Bolter notably is himself so dissatisfied with the simplicity of the catharsis-flow spectrum that he adds a third term, reflection, to construct a triangular field instead of a linear one. Such expansions do not invalidate the original approach but actually affirm its value as a model, and Bolter is commendably careful to avoid a structuralist rigidity in placing the works he considers (and the exact placement of these artifacts on a linear scale must be taken with a grain of salt). Bolter first discusses catharsis not in the Aristotelian sense but as "a story of conflict and resolution that inspires the viewer to empathize and ultimately identify with the fate of the main character(s)" (88), highlighting especially this element of "emotional identification" (95) and describing it as a mainly *narrative* effect. In contrast, flow, the opposite on that particular spectrum, occurs outside the temporality of narrative: "Catharsis wants to, indeed has to, come to end, whereas flow wants to continue forever" (101). (It would be worth addressing here how the cathartic aesthetic of narrative media such as TV drama seeks to overcome this temporality and approach flow by way of seriality, perhaps the dominant mode of narrative organization today.) Drawing on Mihály Csikszentmihalyi's famous psychological theorization of flow, Bolter argues that it is mainly associated with activities that were dismissed by elite culture as hobbies, sports, or play, and that these activities have now become paradigmatic for the aesthetic experience as established, high-cultural models have waned. While flow may actually not be "the principal attraction in playing" (103), and this particular kind of immersion is not necessarily privileged among other kinds and other ways of engaging a game, it still serves as an apt conceptual metaphor to make a valid point about a "flow culture" that cherishes the dual temporality of the moment and potential open-endedness instead of the opportunity for identification offered through the strong narrative focus of "catharsis culture" (105).

Chapter six picks up the notion of flow again as it sets up a similar spectrum between the poles of remix and originality, although its reference to rap and remix in general as "flow music" is taking the concept too far into the metaphorical, dulling its critical precision. Regardless, Bolter's consideration of remix culture (including music as well as memes and all sorts of user-generated content in participatory media) is pertinent particularly when he considers it as "procedural play" (136) driven by digital technology, an ongoing process without an

authoritative center. This does not put an end to originality but redefines it, and the contrast to remix culture serves as a reminder that this modernist (and indeed romanticist) notion is still very much a relevant cultural factor today, not least in a legal sense. Once again, the dismissal of postmodernism for its quasi-elitist framework seems a bit hasty in this section, and yet the reconsideration of the established academic discourse on remix culture (Eduardo Navas and others) in the light of (popular) modernism is no less successful for it.

Chapter seven picks up on video games again to discuss the general cultural drive toward procedurality, which is based on a parallel movement toward datafication (as described by Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier) and the machines to cope with big data, shifting from the mechanical to the procedural over the course of the twentieth century. This entails "the proceduralization of human beings" (147) as well, in mass bureaucracies as well as in neoliberal fantasies of technological self-optimization. Video games, Bolter suggests, are the "defining examples of the procedurality of contemporary digital media" (148), and thus privileged objects of analysis with regard to these larger cultural processes due to their rule-bound interactivity, as "they train us to take part in the procedural structures of contemporary computer systems" (149). Bolter is rightly skeptical about certain utopian dreams of video games as a transformative social force, and yet his own take on how they enact a shift from history to simulation also seems rather too reductive. In arguing that the paradigm of replayability instills a different, non-linear sense of history in the player, Bolter relies on notions of simulation proffered by Jean Baudrillard and Janet Murray that understand the term too much in relation to "reality" and not enough in relation to interactivity (as for example Gonzalo Frasca does in "Simulation versus Narrative"). This interactivity is not only about "adjusting parameters and trying again" (155-56), as replayability is not as straightforward even in the examples Bolter chooses (the *Civilization* series, *SimCity*, *Life is Strange*), not to mention in numerous other games that explore a broader range of how interaction, repetition, and temporality may intersect in play (permadeath, rogue-likes, online multiplayer games, etc.). In fact, *Life is Strange* is a perfect example of how players do *not* get to start over when their ability to "halt or reverse the arrow of time" (156) is taken from them at a poignant moment in the game, and this would affirm rather than counter the historical sense Bolter sees undermined by video game procedurality. Bolter's core argument about a shift toward the procedural is still a valid one, but the diversity of video games is too complex a foundation to really build on and to argue that there is now a "procedural divide" between "those communities that are still committed to a view of the individual human as part of a historical process" and those that "favor procedural interfaces for social interaction and procedural media for entertainment," and therefore "prefer the weak narratives of contemporary political movements(such as libertarianism), which deemphasize or ignore history altogether" (160-61).

This "new world view" (161) is the focus of the final chapter on social media and the politics of flow, which starts with an assessment of the "collective narcissism" (166) and "performance of identity" (167), enabled and promoted by social media. Flow is the appropriate individualist framework in this digital environment, as the "weak stories" (170) in *Facebook*'s "identity as remix" (169) are all about shuffling around what is there and adding a bit of your own in a never-ending, perpetually incomplete process that even the user's death will not conclude. Bolter links this flow culture to "a new kind of politics" (172) that is also a new and very different form of identity politics: "Trump's own identity politics does not center explicitly on race or history, but

rather on the individual, and indeed one individual, himself" (173), and this lack of ideological coherence allows for the fragmentary, cynical populism that can serve "siloed communities" (175) what they want to hear with no regard for a public sphere in which notions of "truth" or "reality" are constructed through conflict and consensus. Bolter adds that the US never had a unified public sphere to begin with and that digital media "intensify and encourage a trend toward separate information communities that has always existed" (176), but this is a significant and critical step nonetheless. In this situation, Bolter argues, the "distinction between the individual and the group becomes less and less clear" (179), and he uses Anonymous and *4Chan* as examples of that—although his focus on "this new form of hacktivism" (183), unfortunately, by now has to be amended regarding the role *4Chan* and similar messaging boards played in the construction of a digital sphere that have bred and encouraged acts of white-supremacist mass murder around the world in recent years.

Even though it may be too eclectic and fragmented at times, Bolter's argument that a culture of flow has prepared and enabled a politics of flow is largely convincing. It cannot fully explain the rise of populism as an anti-elitist rhetoric and ideology, nor does it claim to, and yet it indicates a crucial convergence of populism and popular culture that does justice to the complexity of how culture, politics, and media intertwine today beyond simple, linear models of influence and hierarchy. His well-written, accessible account of these intersections provides a useful lens through which various phenomena appear in relations that may not have seemed as evident before, and his nuanced take on his own methodology makes it a heuristic tool that can be profitably brought to bear on objects not included in the present study (and one that is open to reconfiguration should the objects demand it). As my supplementary critique above indicates, this book is provocative in the most positive sense, in that its abstractions and generalizations invite and demand a constructive response as much as the particular analyses on which they are based. For all its justified confidence in its argument, Bolter's study is less about a definitive cultural diagnosis than about carefully constructing nodes to enable future work, and it rightly prefers patterns to paradigms in showing that the study of the politics of culture is as relevant as that of Culture, and more so.

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