

Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media by Jason Farman. Duluth, MN: Routledge, 2012. 168 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-87891-3.

In *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*, Jason Farman attempts to identify and characterize the cultural shift brought on by the advent of mobile computing. Farman includes in his inquiry such devices as personal electronics, smartphones, tablets, “print texts, subway passes, identification and credit cards, and everyday objects that signify elements of our identities such as keys, notepads, and checkbooks” (p. 1). Refusing a simple reduction to any particular set of characteristics or a reification that might allow his object of study to escape criticism, Farman works inclusively, defining the interface not as an object, but as a “set of cultural relations that serve as the nexus of the embodied production of social space” (p. 68). Throughout the work, the author often emphasizes the comingling of domains perceived as mutually exclusive; he inaugurates this recurring motif by calling on elements of poststructuralism and phenomenology to address the emergence of these technologies and their social dimensions. As a theorist, he hopes to abstract from the particular to develop ideas that will reveal how “experiences of virtual space are dissolving into the practices of our everyday lives” (p. 36). Throughout the work, Farman seeks not to describe the technical specifications of any particular genre or artifact, but to work out how these mobile devices operate “in tandem with bodies and locales in a process of inscribing meaning into our contemporary social and spatial interactions” (p. 1). The scope of the work is deliberately broad and its implications numerous.

Farman's central concerns are the mutually constitutive relationship of space and bodies and the simultaneous inscription and mediation of mobile technologies. For the author, these processes are analytically distinct but always happen together in uses of mobile technology. In successive chapters he looks at mobile technology as it relates to the concept of embodiment, the making of spatial representations such as maps or GIS systems, social networks, locative games, performance art, and site-specific storytelling. Farman's unique theoretical construct, “the sensory-inscribed body,” combines the inscription of meaning in the use of mobile technologies with the various ways that digital worlds interact with the physical world, the “intimate relationship between the production of space and the bodies inhabiting those spaces” (p.4). Citing an esoteric assortment of writers, artists, philosophers, and technologists in highly synthetic and dense prose, Farman acknowledges the materiality of digital networks, defined as another example of embodied space, but also allows that bodies can be created in non-physical spaces: “We are embodied through our perceptive being-in-the-world and simultaneously through our reading of the world and our place as an inscribed body in the world” (p. 33). Farman uses these cases and occasional

summaries of empirical work to embark on a peripatetic and circuitous look at scholarly thought about bodies both symbolic and physical, the making and transmission of meaning through artifacts and associated activities, and various dimensions of proprioception, the ability of a body to determine the relative position of its parts.

Throughout the text, Farman draws attention to the continuous action and performance that use of mobile technology entails. According to the author's analysis, we do not encounter these technologies; rather, we constantly act them out through the making of meaning, the organization of reality into legible spaces (both physical and virtual), and the negotiation of boundaries to demarcate the limits of discrete bodies. In a chapter on social networks, for example, the author highlights the importance of reciprocity in making sense of mobile technology. Users require feedback from both non-human and human agents in order to navigate, comprehend, communicate, and ultimately order reality into what we commonly experience as spaces and bodies: mobile social networks are not merely experienced, but are enacted through proxemics and movement. Increasingly, when we stare into a mobile interface, what we encounter is the trace, the voice, or the image of another person.

Farman's work ambitiously attempts to provide a theoretical framing that extends not only to the broad array of extant mobile technologies identified in the text including all manner of items that are not normally associated with mobile computing (such as electronic house keys), but to technologies that have not yet been invented. In this respect, the book succeeds at providing a way to consider the productive tension between the virtual and the actual, the remote and the proximate, and the technological and the social, as well as their mutual imbrications. But if theory is a set of tools that can be used to do intellectual work, *Mobile Interface Theory* stops short of providing a theory ready for application. When the book identifies two mutually constitutive entities that together enact a unity, it often does so without providing access to ways of understanding how and in what ways these entities might interact. Is one force more powerful in particular circumstances? How do power relations and identities established in one realm play out in its companion realm, particularly given the Internet's reputation for expanding democracy and participation? Often, Farman resorts to suggesting that the interaction of these different realms has changed something fundamental, but such generalizations are desultory. For example, when describing the increasing use of GIS technology interfaces by automobile drivers as a supplement to more traditional navigational interfaces, Farman writes, "The relationship between these interfaces has become so seamless that it has completely altered the way we embody the landscape" (p. 87). Although such examinations of "the interface of everyday life" are vital to understanding the use of mobile technology in the world, pointing out the simultaneity of our analog and

digital modes of existing does not get us very far into understanding any fundamental change, the nature of this dynamism, or anything very particular about the spread of mobile technology into all spheres of public and private life. We are left merely to consider Farman's admonition not to let this relationship escape critique simply because it is common. Although a single volume cannot possibly hope to comprehensively answer such questions, a greater sense of how such inquiry might be made would help move this book into a more productive dialogue with others working on similar issues. Despite this missed opportunity, *Mobile Interface Theory* makes an important step toward a fuller reckoning with the social consequences of mobile technology, one that contributes meaningfully to a greater understanding of the unique moment in the history of computing we have entered.

Reviewer

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