

Review of *Material Virtualities*. danah boyd. *New Media and Society*. February 2005.

Jenny Sundén, *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003. xv + 225 pp. ISBN 0820462047, \$29.95 hbk.

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Since the onset of cyberculture studies, researchers have sought to understand how postmodern conceptions of identity emerge online, often through discussions of (dis)embodiment. Much of the early work focused on the utopian visions of what could be, eschewing the social reality of digital experience for the myth of a virtual life free from the constraints of bodies and materiality.

In "Material Virtualities," Sundén challenges the arguments that emerge from this postmodern utopianism while simultaneously problematizing the conceptions stemming from the opposing camp, which espouses realistic determinism ("the online world is a copy of the 'real'"), arguing instead for a viewpoint that is positioned between these two whereby "a text-based virtual world might be an *extension* of the corporeal, as well as the physical a refiguration or perhaps rather an *incarnation* of the textual" (p. 109). In challenging these dichotomous discourses, Sundén seeks to "engage in a discussion of how cyberspace and similar concepts might have been 'embodied' all along – the virtual does not automatically equate disembodiment" (p. 5).

Sundén's arguments are grounded by her two-year ethnographic exploration of WaterMOO, a 1500-person MOO that was originally a text-based version of the San Francisco Bay Area. Transcripts of her interactions with MOO participants are presented

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and analyzed in order to highlight the materiality of textual bodies. In structuring her arguments around these examples, Sundén focuses on the process of writing and reading bodies, place, and sexual desire in the entirely written culture of MOOs. She explores the tensions that emerge when boundaries are not defined because inhabiting a MOO means grappling with being “both outside *and* inside, here *and* there, visible *and* hidden, text *and* body” (p. 99). Emerging from this is a discussion of the importance of materiality and coded culture in the virtual worlds.

The theoretical framework employed in “Material Virtualities” draws heavily from contemporary feminist and queer theory, explicitly examining the approaches of other feminist cyberculture work. First challenging and then building from ideas such as Haraway’s, Sundén argues for a she-borg that is not dependent on a dislocated utopian view of the virtual. Instead, she argues for a “cyborgfeminist perspective that problematizes every separation of the imaginary from the political, and does so in a sense that does not erase the material from the virtual” (p. 188). Sundén properly recognizes the contributions of these utopian views, as well as their weaknesses, and uses both to solidify her approach.

The challenges presented in this book are key for researchers invested in issues of identity, embodiment and mediated sociability in virtual culture. As this book is clearly situated in and reacting to earlier theories of cyberculture, familiarity with those arguments is essential for grasping the significance of this work. By deconstructing the utopian ideals that color canonical texts, Sundén rightfully challenges the authority and

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accuracy of the dominant views espoused by cybercultural studies. In doing so, she breaks down the divide between the theories of cyberspace and the experiences of participants. Her contribution paves the way for new approaches that grapple with the complexities of a virtuality that cannot simply be understood as either mirroring or eliminating the physical and corporeal.

The most significant limitation of this book results from Sundén speaking broadly about textual bodies, but only addressing those in WaterMoo. While WaterMOO makes a great case study, MUDs are a particular and narrow form of digital textual identity production and only a fraction of those engaged in digital textual identity production use them. The reader would benefit from seeing how the theoretical arguments presented here apply to other digital textual environments such as blogs/online journals or to mixed textual/avatar environments such as MMORPGs.

Consider, for example, the performativity differences between MUDs and blogs/online journals. Sundén describes MUDs as an “ongoing, collaboratively written, online performance” (p. 21). While blogs/online journals can certainly be read as textual performance, their writers have a different investment in the textual production than those writing in MUDs, in part because of the intentional persistence of the text. How does the role of the body in textual production shift when the text is expected to stand on its own, separated from the presence of its author? Sundén’s discussion of ‘home sweet home’ suggests the significance of an architecture that provides for ‘private’ spaces (p. 96).

How might this discussion of place apply to blogs/online journals where there are owners

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who are able to post entries and everyone else is relegated to express themselves through the comments? By addressing other forms of digital textual cultures, Sundén could expose the nuances of her arguments, revealing how diverse mediums result in subtle differences in textuality and embodiment.

The tone, argument structure and narrow focus of this book can probably be attributed to its original construction as a doctoral dissertation. The presentation is dense and each section restates and defends the same thesis from different angles using one body of empirical data. In constructing a dissertation, authors are encouraged to strongly ground their arguments in theoretical frameworks and empirical data. As such, the focus is quite narrow, although the supposed application could be quite broad. In translating these findings to a book, the reader would have benefited by seeing the broader application. Hopefully, Sundén will use her theoretical framework to address other digital textual cultures in future journal articles.

“Material Virtualities” is certainly not for the faint of heart, but it is an articulate and necessary critique of previous theoretical approaches to cyberculture. As such, it is a significant and meaningful contribution and definitely relevant for anyone interested in this space.