

Marta Boni, Adrienne Boutang, Barbara Laborde
and Lucie Merijeau (eds), *Théorème #17, Networking
images. Approches interdisciplinaires des images en
réseau*

Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013, 158 pages

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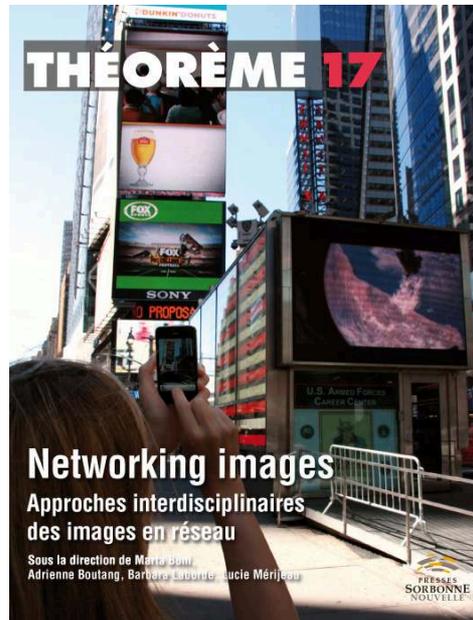
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- 1 Does the existence of new media and networks and (consequently) new practices imply new ways of relating to images and other kinds of representation? This may be the central question that defines the core project in the latest issue of French academic journal *Théorème*. Nevertheless, like all first questions that guide us through a research field or a conceptual elaboration, each word must be considered with critical perspective. The deconstruction of all the concepts presented in this question is probably as important as the answer itself. Can we actually talk of 'new media', or are they only new layouts, classical practices but in another context and in a different shape? What does the word 'network' mean in a contemporary context, is it related to the internet or to people? Does it mean that we are literally immersed in a flow of images, those we see and those we create from other representations, as it is metaphorically depicted on the cover (a picture of someone taking a picture of the ads on Times Square)? Finally, is the way we make sense of images and create our own repertoire of representations really shifted by the emerging process of participation in the digital worlds?
- 2 As I said, most of our conceptual tools and every aspect of these phenomena have to be explored and rearticulated with caution. Two main obstacles must be avoided: the presumption that everything is new so no 'old' paradigm of analysis can be used, and, at the other extreme, that nothing has changed so it becomes hard to explain anything that happened in the mediascape over the last decade.
- 3 Most of the authors of this collective, and above all interdisciplinary, volume try to find a balance between these two extreme positions. Within eleven relatively short articles (one is in two parts), they tackle the challenge of offering an interdisciplinary overview and a transversal conceptualization of both notions of network and images.
- 4 The idea of network brings forth considerations of technology, circulation and audience participation. In their introduction, Laurent Creton and Laurent Jullier elaborate on the many fantasies surrounding the growth of computer networks since the golden age of science fiction in the fifties (7). Such representations are still very potent in our contemporary imagination. That is why they emphasize the human factor at stake in any kind of interpretation of the status of images in a networking environment.
- 5 To embrace each side of the concepts, the book is organized in four main parts, each in correspondence with the others. The first is probably the most theoretical and explores the metaphorical definitions of the word *screen* within a conceptual and historical framework while addressing what is really spread in modern networks. The author of the first text, Francesco Caseti, reminds us that even if the term 'screen' is still used to describe an interface between our minds and media content, it no longer means to passively absorb images but to try intentionally to catch some fragments extracted



from a chaotic flow in a perpetually shifting shape (29). We are eager to make sense of this ensemble of representations through our own interpretations rather than receiving information in a prepackaged and stable structure. This theoretical point has a very deep impact and enlightens every other contribution in this collective essay. The notions of circulation of information and flow resonate on a large scale in the second text of the first part. There, Eric Maigret rearticulates the positions of Henry Jenkins, a leading figure of the last decade in the field of cultural studies. He considers media as a multifaceted flow where a massive amount of micro elements including images, sounds, and texts, from and across many platforms are constantly circulating (39). The audience, every one of us, then builds a hierarchy in the flow and adds their contribution to the flow and therefore becomes an essential cog in the machine. It encourages reaffirming what researchers in media studies have explained for a long time now, that we have to consider cultural objects, and their audience, as the different sides of the same coin. This key point opens the discussion towards the idea that there are multiple flows of multiple elements and that the users of technology and the consumers of media are one of these (41). With the emergence of a participatory culture and digital platforms to express taste (i.e hierarchy) and appropriation (i.e participation from the identity point of view) of images through commentary, sharing, or remix, culture can be seen as an amalgam of bottom-up and top-down processes (36).

- 6 Many of the other articles, presenting concrete field work, deal with this approach. Increasingly, the web has become a site of consumer participation and interactions between authors and an audience whose roles have become much more blurred. Although, in the last essay, Geneviève Sellier shows very accurately in her analysis of readers' letters to a popular French magazine that these phenomena are not entirely new (143), it is undeniable that the internet has changed the scale of consumer involvement and visibility in the public sphere.
- 7 Even what we usually consider as the most secretive of practices, for example watching pornography, has become a shared phenomenon (59). Clarisse Smith explains that pornography offers many ways to participate including uploading homemade movies, commenting, and sharing preferences. This encourages new aesthetics, the pleasure in finding a rare video or the creation of one's own movie from the assemblage of scattered fragments (64). The purpose of such practices is to carve a unique path through the multitude of images at our disposal. It is a way to express our identities and to have both a shared and individualistic experience that changes the way we see our own bodies. Even celebrities' bodies are shaped by the spreading of media content and phenomena such as virality. Lady Gaga, pop icon *par excellence*, is, for instance, becoming less a human being than a cult 'object'. According to Agnese Vallar, who uses the very effective theoretical tools of Umberto Eco, from the cultural economy of stardom emerge some reflexive icons, people who are aware of the participatory culture and of the multiple interpretations and play with it. Lady Gaga would be one of them, like Madonna before her. Furnishing her video clips (which are seen and shared millions of times on Youtube) with many intertextual references to her own work and to others, she creates a huge cultural repertoire that every modern community can relate to. Every micro element can then be interpreted, remixed, and become, through her self-representation and her self-consciousness of her status, a thoroughfare where people can construct collective identities. Afterward, these people enjoy making their own parodies or spreading the videos with a comment emphasizing the micro elements they prefer (53). In return the pop star gives feedback and encourages this special

relationship through her Twitter account, which is one of the most followed in the world. She creates what Jonathan Gray calls a paratext (89), in this case something that is not her music or her video-clips, but something more which has become as important as the rest of the production. According to Gray, who uses the example of the very famous TV show *The Simpsons*, this kind of paratext is a key to understanding the way we interpret cultural objects. This paratext encompasses commentary from the authors, from amateurs, critics, and also toys, video-games, comic-books and so on (92). *The Simpsons*, just like Lady Gaga, are never interpreted without this halo of “complementary” text. Every piece of art is a network and the sense we make of it emerges from our entanglement in this web (98). Even physical devices such as DVDs are becoming much more self-constructed and encourage us to enjoy the paratext surrounding the movie (commentary, director’s cut...) (Leonardo Quaresima, *Valentina Re*, 75). The frontiers between art, culture, media, marketing, grassroots and top down phenomena are becoming less and less well defined. This is of chief importance in cultural industries and has some convergence with the concept of transmedia as used by Jenkins. So like the cult body of Lady Gaga, the cult TV show *The Simpsons* can only be analyzed in studies that embrace simultaneously the way the network of intertextuality is created and produced, and the participation of the audience in these processes (98). From this new kind of encounter emerges the voice of communities that express their collective identity through the circulation, the appropriation and reinterpretation of the media itself. The relationship between creators and consumers has always existed but with the advent of digital networks it has become increasingly visible and transparent and now supports the emergence of communities. Marion Froger and Djema Maazouzi studying a webfilm about exile from post-war Algeria, explain that the author not only creates an online movie but also a sphere of “extimity” (exposed intimacy) where people who recognize themselves in the journey of the hero can reinforce their feelings of being part of a community (115). This shared experience then becomes very fragile and the filmmaker must be aware of the special relationship he is starting and perpetually enhancing while just filming a trip to Algeria (114). The age of networking images is also the age of networking communities through images, more liminal and fluid communities that require some central connection to bind the individual identities together (116). Not everyone is so thrilled about using the notion of community as a tool to analyze every kind of media representation. While recognizing the importance of a specific identity projection in the relationship between audiences and authors in a networking environment, Guillaume Soulez tends to reject the concept, or specifically the now famous notion of interpretive communities, first coined by Stanley Fish. According to Soulez, the scale of this heuristic categorization is too large to understand what is at stake in every interpretive work, particularly in the age of the Web where everyone can be a critic and have multiple flows of data influencing his reception (121). From this perspective and context, the interpretive process on the internet is not something we can enclose in little boxes but a complex social structure (128). It is from a similar kind of statement that Laurent Jullier uses the very powerful tool of ANT (actor-network-theory), a theory designed in the eighties by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour among others (132). The great advantage of this theory is that it rejects all pre-conceived social categories insisting on what actors do and say and the chains of mediations that make them for example express any taste, any judgment on a movie. Jullier uses ANT to show how the movie *Uncle Boonmee* is criticized and the different strategies to interpret this work of art. These strategies and

the movie itself are two networks interacting with each other and the researcher can only search for the point of origin of any kind of discourse (142).

- 8 This collective volume does not address the impact of networks on the way we produce and experience images (Youtube videos, DVD, webfilms, pornography, traditional cinema...); nevertheless, it offers a very rich, contrasted and well documented panorama that could be an ideal introduction to this question as well as a bibliographical goldmine on the subject.

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