

Book Review

David Kergel, *Digital Cultures: Postmodern Media Bildung, Subversive Diversity and Neoliberal Subjectivization*.

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The English translation of David Kergel's latest work, *Digital Cultures: Postmodern Media Bildung, Subversive Diversity and Neoliberal Subjectivization*, offers a broad and historically aware analysis of digital spaces and their various ambiguous relationships with political resistance, social theory, epistemology, and the pedagogical mission of the university. Beginning with the question 'How free and self-determined are we in the digital age?' (p. xi), Kergel embarks upon a programme to evaluate the need for a 'postmodern media *Bildung*', and the politically creative and (re)creative potential of digital technology and social platforming in the global cultural sphere. 'The cultures of the digital exhibit a range between postmodern narratives of freedom and neoliberal self-optimization' (p. xi); from this realisation, *Digital Cultures* establishes the image of the Internet as a political nexus or crossroads between neoliberal capitalist subjectivities and emancipatory postmodern pluralism on the route to a transformative interaction with the university institution. The first three chapters are devoted to a historical and theoretical analysis of the changing discourse of modern digital media since the late-twentieth century, and selective engagement with earlier cultural epochs. The fourth and final chapter applies the created framework to a specifically pedagogical content and raises the possibility of the university becoming, or maintaining its status as, a place for fostering 'postmodern media *Bildung*'.



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Chapter 1 'Digital Cultures' outlines the primary field of theoretical and historical discourse surrounding contemporary conceptualisations of modern media, digital technology and their interaction with the idea of culture. Beginning with a brief history of the Internet – from its inauguration under the US Department of Defence's Advanced Research Products Agency in 1958 to the development of a consumer focussed mass-market network – Kergel unpacks various socio-political approaches to the culture of 'Web 2.0'. Beginning by demonstrating how the Internet was, from the outset, open to interpretation as 'a place for different cultural practices or a projection surface for future possibilities of use', Kergel's focus shifts to the broader attempt to redefine the idea of culture in a contemporary technologized world where the resources of Web 2.0 transform the ontological horizons of the 'postmodern' subject (p. 4). Drawing upon a variety of theoretical models and resources, such as Herder, Simmel, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as specialist concepts including 'trans-culture' and 'hyper-culture', the chapter ultimately situates the Internet as a 'foreign' element (a cultural 'alien') continually reframed by historical discourse which seeks to reconcile a 'logic of demarcation' (Herder/Simmel) with imagined possibilities for self-(re)creation by the postmodern political subject (p. 33).

Chapter 2 'Postmodern Cyberspace' interrogates the conceptual significance of Web 2.0 in reference to a thoroughly historicised form of 'postmodern' epistemology and political emancipation. The argument is illustrated by historical case studies of protest movements, digital platforms, and online hackers, such as the Sponti group, Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, and the cyber collective Anonymous. They reveal, in various ways, how 'the decentralized structure of the Internet seems to accommodate irony as a form of postmodern protest and knowledge' via collective authorship (p. 53). Although the analysis employs some of the more dubious notions from postmodern theory (such as Lyotard's concept of 'meta-narratives'), such ideas are primarily used to frame more convincing and original approaches, such as the concept of 'petits récits', or a form of multiple, self-doubting knowledge structure imposed upon the objective world via a process of dialogic interaction (p. 40). One of the more effective elements in this debate results from the fact that Kergel's interpretation of postmodernism sits within a larger 'modernity', allowing room for conceptual dichotomies such as 'order and disorder' to be understood as derivations of Romantic epistemology, framing the broader significance of materiality in media production culture with an extra degree of historical awareness. In comparative terms, Kergel's approach to 'postmodern' knowledge benefits from drawing upon Popper's critical rationalism and Schlegel's concept of 'irony'.

Chapter 3 'The SNS Universe of the Control Society' begins by providing an overview of neoliberal capitalism following the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s, and the rise of a new culture of precarity and entrepreneurial fluidity. This overview frames the way neoliberalism absorbs 'postmodern' (or, from a different rhetorical perspective, 'Romantic') epistemic and discursive tropes. Kergel explores how innovative business

concepts like the ‘start-up’ and the ‘sharing economy’ appropriate a quasi-revolutionary spirit to challenge traditional rigid organisational models, but ‘what is lost sight of is that the digital sharing economy’s alternative business culture is shaped by an ethic of profit maximization and efficiency’ (p. 138) and displays a tendency to increase harmful economic tendencies such as employment precarity. Digital technology within the ‘SNS universe’ allows for corporations to establish highly sophisticated feedback mechanisms to maximise the traditional values of economic output by destabilising the boundary between public and private experience.

The closing chapter, ‘The University in the Digital Age as the Place of Postmodern Media *Bildung*’, adopts a more explicitly pedagogical perspective. Building upon Jacques Derrida’s concept of the ‘unconditional university’ and Popper’s critical rationalism, Kergel explores the potential for the institutional framework of higher education to become ‘a historically evolved site for critically questioning social practices and transformation processes such as digitalization’, encouraging ‘postmodern’ forms of epistemological resistance and transformation (p. 165). The concept of *Bildung* (familiar from the cultural contexts of German Idealism, and, more specifically, the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt) is applied to contemporary themes in digital media, pedagogy and the formation of political subjectivity. Articulated within the technological and social framework of a contested digital habitus, media *Bildung* aims to foster a behavioural pattern of self-regulated, reflexive and curiosity-led learning against the conflicting ideologies of neoliberal capitalism: ‘postmodern media *Bildung* can be understood as a socially feedback process of perceiving media, dealing with media, and critically reflecting on media and the media-infrastructure of the world’ (p. 185). The challenge is to exploit this opening of the pedagogic field whilst acknowledging that the resultant realisation of ‘self-efficacy’ also has the potential to lead the ‘emancipated’ subject back to explicitly economic and exploitative practices (p. 178).

Digital Cultures is a broad and engaging analysis of how modern digital phenomena ‘exhibit a range between postmodern narratives of freedom and neoliberal self-optimization’ and how they ‘are fighting a battle over the symbolic order of the Internet’ (p. 163). The central concept of ‘postmodern media *Bildung*’ emerges as a means of interrogating the individual’s role as ‘the vanishing point of cultural practices in the digital age [where] the challenge is to gain a reflexive approach to the Internet’s complexity as a space of cultural practices’ within the context of higher education (p. 163). Much like other recent scholarship (Kompridis, 2011; Kitchen, 2023), Kergel’s project is invested in a broader historical interpretation of modernism, dating back at least as far as “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” (1687) (p. 36) and engaging with a form of ‘postmodern’ critical epistemology which subsumes elements of Romanticism. The detailed discussions of postmodernist theory (Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari) are effectively bolstered by an awareness of how their arguments have been prefaced by those poets and writers who were instrumental in shaping the original culture of *Bildung*, such as Hegel, Schelling and

Schlegel. Kergel's analysis of 'postmodern' neoliberal practices in the digital sphere also provides an interesting complement to the work of Sennett on the 'new capitalism', for example (2006). Kergel's ideal of decentralised and collective research structures also gestures toward a variety of relevant themes in critical pedagogy and the philosophy of science, such as Popper's 'three worlds' or 'objective knowledge' theory (1972), which still has a great deal to tell us about the properties and dynamics of digital technology and its relationship with political epistemologies of cultural production.

Although the international perspective offered by Kergel allows the debate to be expanded by some valuable primary and secondary resources, aspects of language might also present problems for some readers. The use of specialist terminology combines with the German–English translation to occasionally offer sentences which require a second reading, such as: 'It can be stated that the Internet, as a media stranger, is increasingly being transformed into an own' (sic, p. 22); or 'By ironically breaking with truth claims, by strategically questioning any ultimate justification, a postmodern dynamic performed' (sic, p. 51). Some less-sympathetic readers might also object to the reliance on jargon relating to digital culture and postmodernism (e.g., terms such as 'struc-tangle', i.e., 'tangle-as-structure'), although the conceptual application within the argument is always relevant and productive. Perhaps most significantly, Kergel's book paints a very optimistic view of the university as an institution capable of fostering the development of emancipated and socially critical subjectivities through the process of media *Bildung*. What is lacking from *Digital Cultures*, at least in the final chapter, is a more sustained engagement with the possibility that the ideal of development, freedom and autonomy is hampered by current tendencies and practices within higher education specifically. The attempt to develop, through a process of self-reflexive *Bildung*, a university culture capable of sustaining an effective framework of socially critical engagement amongst young and politically active subjects, is easily obscured by the wider economic tendency to articulate such processes of self-formation as complementary aspects of the culture of capitalist neoliberalism which drives graduate employability. Kergel's brief illustration of the interactive corporate history of Stanford University and Silicon Valley, therefore, is very much to the point (p. 187). As much as the ideal of a 'postmodern' media *Bildung* allies with the overall technological and political climate of higher education culture and critical pedagogy, additional work will need to be done in order to articulate the role and capacity of the university to meet the challenges presented by the 'rhizomatic' culture by which it is sustained and invigorated. This will be necessary if the university is to become a space capable of sustaining a fluid and emancipating dialogue with the cultural and epistemological metaphysics (or 'struc-tangles') which proliferate around us in the contemporary digital world and which define the horizons of possibility which shape our lives.

References

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