

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

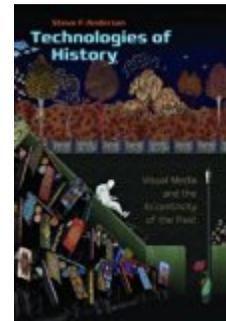


Steve F. Anderson. *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011. 200 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-901-3; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-003-4.

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As more of our lives are lived “online,” more of our memories, in turn, are found and formed in unexpected digital spaces, including social media, video games, television, and movies. This is what Steve F. Anderson, the director of the PhD program in media arts and practices at the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts, argues in his purposely eclectic “metahistory of media histories” (p. 15). Advocating for the constructive role that mediating images, or visual history, has on the “world of the past,” Anderson explores how digital media in particular help to create society’s collective cultural memories. These digital media function as “technologies of history” by actively revising and disrupting traditional, linear ideas of what safely organizes conceptions of the past. Indeed, Anderson argues that we should constantly reimagine how we envision that past and navigate our relationship to it. He sees the current “collision of digital media/technology and history” as an opportunity to shake up assumptions about how to present and organize history (p. 161).

That re-imagination serves as one of the centering themes for his study, and forms the crucial focus of his first two chapters. For it is the “fantastic history” of the counterfactual and the alternative, Anderson insists, that possesses some of the best pedagogical potential for pulling apart and even critiquing history as it is traditionally assembled. Such TV shows as *Star Trek*, *Sliders*, and *Quantum Leap*, or such films as *Forest Gump* and the *Back to the Future* series create fictionalized histories that can reveal what is “missing or repressed within conventional history writing” (p. 23). And if, as Anderson claims, “the writing of history—the conception and reconstruction of the past—is a process that is subject at every level

to the forces of politics and ideology,” then these alternative media subvert the conventions of orthodox historiography by cleverly serving as vehicles for “politicizing the past” (pp. 25, 43). Anderson is not a Pollyanna, however. There are problems with white characters, for example, acting as “helpers in moments of black liberation, symbolically solving complex race problems through a single paternalistic gesture,” as in one particularly problematic episode of *Quantum Leap* (pp. 32-33). Anderson also discusses how independent and experimental films have worked to subvert the historical genre, as with the multiple (and sometimes controversial) retellings (or replays, rather) of the John F. Kennedy assassination in video games, TV, and movies.

Anderson believes that the mainstream movie industry produces simplistic renditions of historical events that reify institutional memories. Still, cultural memory is not wholly defined by such motion pictures; for Anderson, it is conflicted space, the study of which involves a process that “may best be described as an archeology”—an excavation through the layers of our media environment (p. 51). Instead of viewing TV as an antihistorical force in most Americans’ lives, for instance, Anderson posits that it serves as a productive source of popular-memory curation and experimentation. Of course, “memory” for Anderson is another contested concept. He uses case studies of alternative documentaries, including Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991) (which includes a creative reconstruction of the internment experiences of Tajiri’s family during World War Two), to delve into this process, showing how memory is constructed, rather than simply produced and received.

In chapters 3 and 4, Anderson discusses “found footage” (bits of film repurposed for other cinematic projects) and home movies, respectively, and their similar impact on conceptions of “history” (which he places in quotations). He says that in both cases, history writ large is complex, and emerges from many places and people. Furthermore, Anderson posits that non-scholars can (and should) become more aware of their role in creating and managing that meaning of history. The technical capability to build a “present-tense historiography” has led to what Anderson calls “recombinant or ‘database histories,’” in which historical data is not arranged in the consensus narratives once found in printed tomes but accessed online in interactive archives (pp. 101, 122). He does tend to jump from medium to medium within each chapter, and is comfortable mixing up these media (TV, movies, and video games) to make his point that our media, far from making society ahistorical, help to historicize our present.

But what is the historian’s role in all this, especially the media historian? Even if that same professional historian does not believe that positivistic, rational historical narratives should be avoided, as Anderson advocates, it is helpful to think of the historian as a kind of hacker, using such tools as Twitter or Google Earth to produce historical data (some of it user-generated). This can create a richness of temporal understanding for our urban spaces, for example. Anderson finishes by examining the presentation of history in digital game spaces.

Throughout the book, Anderson reinforces the idea that the organization of information is a worthy subject for the historian. But the media historian must also resist the steady, “polite processes by which our own present is textualized and readied for digestion into familiar and reassuring historical narratives” (p. 168). The media his-

torian, as one of many forces that act on the creation of history, must instead seek a more holistic understanding of how our culture’s media systems equip ordinary people to create their own histories.

Anderson’s book was released under a Creative Commons license, freeing it (and its ideas) for a more “hacked” interpretation. It is a great example of his ethos, but not every historian will appreciate his more provocative elements, including the notion that “history is really historiography,” and that “the separation of the object from its process of production obfuscates the ideological dimensions implicit in any treatment of the past” (p. 3). This is not a social history, or an economic one, and approaching his ideas of what history has been or can be requires some patience. Anderson reads carefully into independent filmmakers’ intentions, for example, and does not dwell on the often symbiotic relationships that exist between the movie “industry” and artists. It is not always true that they are in direct opposition, or that “conventional histories” always ignore minority voices. Some good histories are traditional and linear, and do include diverse perspectives. Anderson, to be fair, does not suggest that they are incapable of doing so.

His study also asks good questions at this juncture in space and time, when the National Archives is collecting tweets and people are wondering whether their Facebook profiles might be given to historians after they pass away. Anderson’s extended essay provides a useful starting point to consider these issues (of our digital legacies) and our role as media historians in the early twenty-first century. Ultimately, he is right in suggesting that new media technology can help, and not hinder, how historians shape and share their inquiries into the past (and thus into the present).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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