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Judging Ted Striphas's book *Algorithmic Culture before the Internet* by its title alone would suggest that inside lies a media history or object history of the term “algorithmic culture” and how it came to be—but this book isn’t about “algorithmic culture” per se. This book is about reconstructing the contexts from which the words “algorithm” and “culture” emerged. So, what is “algorithmic culture”? Striphas adapts the term from the subtitle of Alexander Galloway’s book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2007); however, Striphas notes that “curiously, Galloway never defines it” (p. 248). In Striphas’s own effort to define the term, he cautions that “algorithmic culture” begins as a “provisional” term, implying that readers might be able to point to this culture but not readily pin it down (p. 5). Striphas, as he shows in this book, considers algorithmic culture as an emergent property. And as an emergent term, it makes sense that Striphas builds upon Raymond Williams’s keyword methodology (*Keywords*, 1976) to determine the contexts and conditions in place that defined how we now understand the words “culture,” “algorithm,” and “algorithmic culture.”

In his introduction, Striphas begins by recalling Walt Disney Animation Studios’ personification of “the algorithm” in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). *Algorithmic Culture before the Internet* is rife with these unexpected anecdotes. In fact, the “anecdote” itself as a term later figures in Striphas’s analysis in chapter 2. Nevertheless, Striphas uses this anecdote to paint a picture of our contemporary algorithmic culture. He defines the titular term as “the use of computational process to sort, classify, and prioritize people, places, objects, and ideas; and second, as the repertoires of thought, conduct, expression, and feeling that flow from and back into those processes” (p. 5). Pinning down “algorithmic culture” as his keyword reflects a preference over similar terms other scholars have advanced, such as Safiya Noble’s and Mike Ananny’s “algorithmic bias,” “machine bias,” and Cathy O’Neil’s “weapons of math destruction” (p. 17).[1] Though these terms reflect the media theorists with whom Striphas’s
interdisciplinary work converses, his audience is not necessarily these scholars. Instead, Striphas’s “orientation is cultural studies,” and Algorithmic Culture before the Internet is written for other cultural studies theorists (p. 25).

Chapter 1 properly introduces us to Striphas’s central methodology of keywords. The chapter serves as the history of the term and its confusions. “Keywords is,” to Striphas, “a methodology for centering questions of power, politics, mediality, experience, and conditions of existence with respect to the movements of words through time” (p. 37). At the end of this chapter, he distills keywords further to convey his methodological goal to “reconstruct the diffuse experiential atmospheres within which particular speaking subjects dwelled and, more to the point, to explore the processes by which those atmospheres are ‘completed’ in and through keywords” (p. 64). Keywords is not a data-first approach that employs tool-based analysis. It is a reconstruction of the socio-intellectual complexities from which the keyword originates, accomplished through the scholar’s survey of a wide array of archival materials.

Throughout his book, Striphas conceives of algorithmic culture as a computational process—but not necessarily a digital process. He employs the keyword methodology to conceive of the terrain from which “algorithm” and “culture” emerge respectively in chapter 2 and chapter 3. In chapter 2, Striphas asks, “What are the historical and political entailments of conceiving algorithms as instances, expressions, or manifestations of culture?” in order to shift conceptions away from algorithms as mathematics and toward algorithms as manifestations of culture (p. 79). Striphas asserts that the mathematization of “algorithm” has papered over displaced people (p. 71). In order to validate his assertion, he reads the nineteenth-century discourse that centered the story of Abbasid polymath Mohammed ibn-Musa al-Khwarizmi as the human origin for the term “algorithm,” as well as briefly reading facsimiles of al-Khwarizmi’s ninth-century mathematical manuscripts.

Chapter 3’s investigation of “algorithm” uses Raymond Williams as an anchor to operate across similarly wide temporal and geographical spectrums. Analysis jumps from Germany in the late early modern period to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Romantic period to Matthew Arnold in the late nineteenth century to Cambridge University’s English department in the early twentieth century.

The final chapter, chapter 4, takes up “algorithmic culture” as its keyword. This long-awaited chapter on the eponymous algorithmic culture presents an unexpected foray into Cold War intrigue at Harvard University in the twentieth century. Critically, Striphas observes that this moment serves as a paradigm shift “from political to technical” in how theorists talk about culture (p. 218). This observation is made tangible by re-embedding language in the “actualities of the everyday/everynight world” by “surfacing ‘grey literature’ and ‘hidden transcripts,’” that is, memos and other ephemeral documents (p. 177). In the process of demonstrating this paradigm shift, Striphas gestures toward several disciplinary fields and topics, including queer historiography, indigenous studies, feminist approaches to the history of computing, and questions of universal language.

Despite the book’s title, “algorithm” and “algorithmic culture” are largely missing from this book. I reiterate, however, that this book is not about these terms and how they have been used, employed, processed, defined, computed, and so on as a typical media history might present them. The book is a work of cultural history where Striphas recovers the wide contexts in which these terms later come to organize these contexts retrospectively. A potential reader should understand that the goal of Striphas’s book is not a media history that examines “algorithmic culture” before its chokehold on our digital present. This book instead constitutes a reconstruction of the historic-
ally specific circumstances that result in “algorithm” and “culture” becoming the key terms that organize these episodes into disciplinary frameworks. Because of this goal and Striphas’s methodology, *Algorithmic Culture before the Internet* would appeal especially to those readers with an interest in intellectual history following the 1960s.

Note


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