

## Cycles and Continuities.

### Understanding Media Convergence through Media History

Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (eds.), *Convergence Media History*.

London: Routledge 2009, 211 pp.

Convergence studies, with its emphasis on the impact of digital technologies on industrial strategies, audiences, and new narrative forms has in the last ten years become an umbrella topic for film, television, and media scholars. Adapted from a 2007 conference, *Convergence Media History* forms part of an increasingly valuable sub-field within convergence studies that promotes research into the relationships between old and new media through extensive focus on historical precedent, while also cautioning against zeitgeist-led accounts.<sup>1)</sup> As well as reasserting a general need for comprehensive media history methodologies not unlike those advanced in earlier film historiographical work,<sup>2)</sup> Staiger and Hake's collection builds from positions advocated in studies of long-term interactions between the media industries in the twentieth century.<sup>3)</sup>

Taking into account the broad definition of convergence and its updating of older forms of media interaction, the collection is divided into four sections. A section entitled "New Methods" considers how recent forms of technological convergence affect broader theoretical questions of interest for media scholars. It contains chap-

ters by Hamid Naficy on convergence and Third Cinema, by Derek Johnson on the history of Marvel and the *X-Men* franchise, by Chris Cagle on RKO and Leftist politics, by Marsha F. Cassidy on synthaesthesia and cigarette advertising, and by Mark Williams on intermediality. "New Subjects" features case-studies of overlooked interactions between old and new media. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley and Laura Isabel Serna examine respectively the roles of film exhibition in early American and Mexican cinema, Kyle S. Barnett and Richard Butsch explore the history of the recording industry and the history of political broadcasting, and Harper Cossar focuses on a series of short films about golf released by Warner Bros. "New Approaches" revises previously examined topics. It includes chapters by Sue Collins on liveness and silent film stardom, Karl Schnoover on neo-realism, Ken Feil on camp, Dan Leopard on avant-garde cinema, and Alisa Perren on television movies-of-the-week. Finally, "Research Methods" discusses the problems and limitations of researching convergence media history. Elana Levine suggests some problems in studying soap operas, Pamela Wilson provides an overview of the current state of

- 1) See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (London: MIT, 2000); Dan Harries (ed), *The New Media Book* (London: BFI, 2002); Anna Everett and John Caldwell (eds.), *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality* (London: Routledge, 2003); Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (eds.), *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).
- 2) See Robert C. Allen & Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1985); James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper (eds), *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 3) See Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana, Il: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation* (London: Routledge, 2004).

media archives, and Megan Sapnar Ankerson proposes new research into web design.

Range is not a problem for the collection, with convergence being a sufficiently broad term to cover a range of media interactions. There is, however, some discrepancy between the collection's overall methodology, the individual case studies it presents, and some chapters in which broader theoretical areas are broached. The majority of the chapters in "Methods", in "Subjects", and in "Approaches" make persuasive cases for grounding examinations of new media change in examples from older eras and case studies from media history. This includes a set of chapters that explore early institutional practices to better explain current industrial strategies. Derek Johnson's history of the influence on contemporary film franchise strategies of Marvel Comics' *X-Men* series promotes a comprehensive approach to media history wherein "a multiplicity of texts, institutions, practices, and historical contexts collide, leading to uneven experimentation, challenge, and failure".<sup>4)</sup> Johnson's chronological history is complemented by Kyle Barnett's analysis of specialist record label Gennett in the 1920s and 1930s. Considering how the label established a niche for commercial jazz music, Barnett argues that the form evolved from a nexus of specific industrial, institutional, and technological conditions. Also noting how the recording industry provides crucial precedents for other media, Barnett uses the period to identify what he dubs "cyclical battles over technological formats and what we would now call intellectual property".<sup>5)</sup> A similar approach is

taken by Richard Butsch, who examines negotiations between early American radio as a public service and as a commercial interest, outlining how key policy decisions and their embodiment in social processes were instrumental to the formative stages of US broadcasting.<sup>6)</sup>

Parallel strengths are found in Fuller-Seeley's, Serna's, and Schnoover's discussions of changing film exhibition strategies, which are often overlooked as important sites for negotiating new media change. Fuller-Seeley's chapter is particularly strong in terms of its analysis of how the 1908 Jamestown Exhibition merged cinematic presentation with older theatrical and storytelling traditions to contextualize shifts in the construction of modernity.<sup>7)</sup> Serna's study of early Mexican film exhibition, by comparison, discusses how local theatre owners in the 1910s and 1920s re-packaged US imports for audiences, suggesting further precedent for understanding how globally distributed film converges with national viewing cultures.<sup>8)</sup> Conversely, Schnoover outlines how the reception of European art-films in the US in the post-WWII period was shaped by specific exhibition-led marketing practices which negotiated high art and exploitation appeals.<sup>9)</sup>

In "New Approaches", Sue Collins' overview of anxieties surrounding the "liveness" of 1920s film stars' public appearances identifies some of the overlooked negotiations that took place between the aura of early cinema and its production of celebrity capital.<sup>10)</sup> Shifting attention to television, Alisa Perren surveys the movie-of-the-week's rise and decline as a form, providing

4) Derek Johnson, 'Franchise histories: Marvel, *X-Men*, and the negotiated process of expansion', in Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (eds.), *Convergence Media History* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 14.

5) Kyle S. Barnett, 'The recording industry's role in media history', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, p. 88.

6) Richard Butsch, 'Forging a citizen audience: broadcasting from the 1920s through the 1940s', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 92–101.

7) Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, 'Provincial modernity?: film exhibition at the 1907 Jamestown Exhibition', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 59–68.

8) Laura Isabel Serna, 'Exhibition in Mexico during the early 1920s: nationalist discourse and transnational capital', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History* pp. 69–80.

9) Karl Schnoover, 'The comfort of carnage: neorealism and America's world understanding', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 127–138.

10) Sue Collins, 'Bonding with the crowd: silent film stars, liveness, and the public sphere', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 117–126.

undervalued insight into shifts from an older, mass audience-era of broadcasting to the medium's contemporary era of multi-platform digital programming.<sup>11)</sup> Sharing this approach, Cossar explores how Warner Bros.' 1930s golf films provide examples of early experimentation with ephemeral productions, showcasing new technologies alongside the cross-promotion of Hollywood with other leisure activities. In doing so, Cossar makes important links between classical Hollywood practices and the current deployment across the media industries of extra-textual materials like making-of-featurettes and online content.<sup>12)</sup> This scrutiny extends to Cagle's analysis of the development of the American social problem film, contextualizing a diverse genre within a specific set of production cycles and marketing imperatives for Hollywood during the same historical juncture.<sup>13)</sup>

While these chapters illustrate media convergence's long industrial history, Cassidy's and Ankerson's contributions offer perhaps more eye-catching examples. Cassidy focuses on the ways in which televised cigarette advertisements from the 1960s demonstrate convergence through synaesthesia, whereby the "ads crossed the sensorium, manipulating words, music, visual imagery, and olfactory memories to elicit the gratification of a pleasing taste. Sixty seconds of cross-modal stimuli all converged on the mouth".<sup>14)</sup> Cassidy's is a distinctive approach, teasing out the complexities of the adverts as media texts in order to illustrate more general

tensions over gender and the body. Equally innovative is Ankerson's promotion of the emerging field of game and internet software studies through the development of Flash animation as a response to institutional imperatives and to trial-and-error coding.<sup>15)</sup> Taken together, these chapters provide case studies grounded in rigorous historical research, acting as entry points into broader discussions over the periodization of convergence and cyclical industrial practices.

While nevertheless significant in their own right, some other chapters do fall short of this high standard, reproducing familiar contingencies of art, technology, and commerce. This is particularly apparent in Feil's take on the reception of cinematic camp in the 1960s, and Leopard's analysis of avant-garde production. Feil views camp as a form of subversive pleasure defined by the mainstream reception and categorization of landmark films like *What's New, Pussycat?* (1965). Detailing a process of converged cultural tastes, Feil points to opportunities for rupture between the "social constituencies of mainstream and subculture".<sup>16)</sup> While the point is valid and the case study well-drawn, as an example of social convergence it lacks the broader industrial considerations of other chapters. The same is true of Leopard's consideration of how filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol experimented with new video technologies, in a chapter reproducing well worn themes of artistic struggle within institutional constraints.<sup>17)</sup>

11) Alisa Perren, 'Whatever happened to the movie-of-the-week? (the shocking true story of how made-for-TV-movies disappeared from the broadcast networks)', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 161-170.

12) Harper Cossar, 'Bobby Jones, Warner Bros., and the short instructional film', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 102-113.

13) Chris Cagle, 'When Pierre Bourdieu meets the political economists: RKO and the Leftist in Hollywood problematic', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 24-33.

14) Marsha F. Cassidy, 'Touch, taste, breath: synaesthesia, sense memory, and the selling of cigarettes on television, 1948-1971', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, p. 40.

15) Megan Sapnar Ankerson, 'Historicizing web design: software, style, and the look of the web', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 200-201.

16) Ken Feil, "Talk about bad taste": camp, cult, and the reception of *What's New Pussycat?*, in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, p. 148.

17) Dan Leopard, 'Selling out, buying in: Brakhage, Warhol, and BAVC', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 151-160.

Problems with this approach's recycling of tensions between film art and institutional constraints become clearer in chapters dealing with more theoretical questions of converged media. Hamid Naficy examines the effect of technological convergence through a dialogue between digitally-enhanced, oppositional Third Cinema and Hollywood as a form of "textual multiplexing".<sup>18)</sup> Considering how technology has enabled diverse production while rejuvenating Hollywood imperialism, Naficy again criticizes ideologically-mediated technology without providing clearly-defined case studies.<sup>19)</sup> Mark Williams repeats some of these shortcomings, analyzing intermediality through variations on realism within televisual and cinematic representations of a US crisis.<sup>20)</sup> However, the collection's general format, with chapters on average running at just over ten pages, compresses the scope of Williams' argument.

Difficulties over the scale of historical research underpin *Convergence Media History's* final section. Elana Levine explains how her work on soap operas encountered multiple problems over academic legitimacy due to the ephemeral nature of the format.<sup>21)</sup> She instead proposes an inclusive approach to genre and media history that dismantles "universalist claims so common to genre criticism".<sup>22)</sup> Challenges over legitimacy are also taken up by Pamela Wilson, who examines the archive more generally as a resource that, while expanding, continues to be complicated by copyright restrictions and narrow definitions of cultural value.<sup>23)</sup>

Taken together, *Convergence Media History* is an important collection, providing multiple entry-points into understanding histories of old and new media interaction as ones shaped by

cyclical industrial processes, trial and error, and continuities in social practice. However, some of the shifts in scope demonstrate the collection's conference origins, generating a disconnect in terms of the short individual chapters and the collection's convincingly expressed call for a rigorous form of media history. At its best, though, *Convergence Media History* promotes a much-needed return to the archive, particularly for ephemeral media objects, and provides ambitious scope for future research.

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18) Hamid Naficy, 'From accented cinema to multiplex cinema', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, p. 3.

19) Ibid., p. 11.

20) Mark Williams, 'Rewiring media history: intermedial borders', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, pp. 46–56.

21) Elana Levine, 'Doing soap opera history: challenges and triumphs', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, p. 173.

22) Ibid., p. 180.

23) Pamela Wilson, 'Stalking the wild evidence: capturing media history through elusive and ephemeral archives', in Staiger and Hake, *Convergence Media History*, p. 182.