

Review

Nancy Thumim, *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-230-22966-2. 205pp.

In *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*, Nancy Thumim (University of Leeds, UK) offers a theoretically rich, yet accessible account of the tensions at the intersection of self-representation and digital culture and provides a welcome addition to the growing number of academic texts that highlight the processes influencing how individuals actively construct and represent themselves in mediated arenas.

Specifically, Thumim investigates how individuals engage with self-representation in three different sites (broadcast platforms, museums, and online spaces) while simultaneously demonstrating how cultural, institutional, and textual mediations influence the inspiration, construction, and reading of such self-representations. She writes: “the existence of a diverse range of sites offering what looks like self-representation calls for critical analysis. Self-representations are not the same kind of thing and they are not all serving the same purpose. Self-representations do not construct the ‘ordinary people’ they feature in the same way and they do not all take the same textual form. They do not all use digital technology in the same way, if they use it at all, but they do all exist in the digital culture” (p. 3).

A point of emphasis in this text is the construction, understanding, and representation of “ordinary” and “community”. Thumim reveals how the principal examples under investigation incorporate these complex terms into their self-representational platforms. However, Thumim notes that terms such as “ordinary” and “community” are rather noticeably loaded and require critical dissection. Drawing on many modern writers in the field, Thumim also successfully incorporates ideas from Hall and Williams to understand the multiple contexts of “ordinary” and “community”. Thumim advocates for the concept of mediation to make sense of how notions of “ordinary” and “community” manifest in active self-representations, declaring that “the debate about a Media Studies 2.0 revolves in part around the idea that unmediated self-representation is, if not actually possible, at least a commonly held ideal, that is that it should be possible to ‘speak for oneself’ without being mediated by media producers, museum curators, academic researchers or other professionals” (p. 50). Ultimately, Thumim rejects this notion and aligns herself with Livingstone (2009) and writes that “self-representation is taking place

across all kinds of media and cultural spaces at a time when it is widely acknowledged that there can be no self without mediation” (p. 51). To fully grasp self-representation (in whatever arena), Thumim writes that “understanding self-representation...requires us to use concepts emphasizing the sense of process and movement between sites of production, text and reception” (p. 13).

Utilizing mediation as a means of methodological exploration provides Thumim with the ability to not only contextualize but also bridge the different mediated forms (such as the cultural, institutional, and textual) together in ways that simultaneously validate, yet undermine the possible intentions and interpretation depending on a given person’s perspective. For instance, Chapter 4 focuses on the BBC’s *Capture Wales* program and shows how the show’s creative directors wished to showcase ordinary people (in the citizenry and celebratory interpretation). Such a strategy leads Thumim to ask: “where does the power lie? In the case of *Capture Wales*’ invitation to members of the public to represent themselves, because people are invited to participate in a project that is devised by the professionals, “they must fit their story into a shape that has ultimately been decided by the professionals” (p. 88). Additionally, Thumim examines the political motivations for the project and reveals that the original proposal for the project was linked to the BBC Connecting Communities strategy (an interpretation of community linked to the national and local level). For Thumim, this political interpretation of community hints that “community is understood as being problematically *absent*, so that *Capture Wales* was regarded by members of the production team as a project which was about community building and the intention was that community would be build across groups, across difference” (p. 89). This is a crucial determinant in how the self-representations unfold because, politically, the BBC has obligations to fulfil and, as Thumim notes, “must meet both the standards of the institution and the expectations of its audience for a certain quality of text” (p. 90). The political intentions of the BBC and the production team cannot be ignored, as such intentionality inevitably influences and shapes how the text is constructed, broadcast, and interpreted. While the BBC ultimately framed this project as a democratic initiative, she notes: “while self-representations in reality TV or other broadcast spaces reach a far wider audience than do digital stories, if the representations are limited and constrained in particular and repeated ways, then we have to say that self-representation is, mostly, not being used to democratic ends at all” (p. 102).

Perhaps the strongest aspect about the book is that Thumim never resorts to aggressive, dogmatic or generalized theoretical prose. Rather, she utilizes her approach to encourage readers to employ a mediation template for further investigation into what she coins the genre of self-representation. Thumim writes that “a critical exploration of self-representation must address theories of representation, but it must go beyond the analysis of texts to explore both the production of self-representation and the cultural contexts of the participants. In the case of self-representation, accounting for production and cultural contexts as well as paying attention to texts enables us to distinguish between examples of self-representation that may look alike at a textual level but that arise in entirely different

production contests, for different purposes, involving different process of production and engaging different ordinary people” (p. 157). With this methodology, Thumim suggests that the mediation process enables investigators to “address how the genre of self-representation is being used – what work it is doing and in whose interests” (p. 157).

To conclude, I found this book to be a fascinating and insightful read, enjoying its clear emphasis on the mediated contexts in which people practice self-representations. Particularly, I want to praise Thumim for her genuine compassion and empathy for the case studies, allowing each to share their own intimate experiences and perceptions. Thumim’s book is a vivid example of how self-representations can be analysed with a prominent focus on those who are uniquely utilizing media technologies while simultaneously avoiding generalized abstract conceptualizations. In short, the book is personal, well researched, and successfully synthesizes a number of different humanities-based approaches to explore a relevant and universally significant topic.

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Biographical note:

Justin Battin is pursuing a PhD in the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies, at the University of Sunderland. His research focuses on non-representational theory, phenomenology, and related disciplines that emphasize practice, particularly media-centric projects that uniquely synthesize approaches from the fields of cultural geography, sociology, anthropology, and continental philosophy. Email: justin.michael.battin@gmail.com.