

Schäfer, Mirko Tobias. *Bastard Culture!: How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2011. 249 pp. \$35.00.

In the provocatively titled, *Bastard Culture!*, Mirko Tobias Schäfer provides a critical investigation into cultural production and participatory culture in the Web 2.0 era. Because of technological advances and design, the user or consumer has become the “prosumer” or “produser.” While the sub-title of the book would suggest that such a shift in power relations has happened or in is progress, Schäfer’s central argument is not only more cautious but also more murky. One of the strengths of the book is his well-developed and sustained critique of the more celebratory accounts of participatory culture. Drawing on Foucault’s lesser-known concept of *dispositif* (apparatus), Schäfer problematizes the underlying discourses of progress, participation, and democracy. In addition, he successfully demonstrates how the ideologies that informed the technologies of the Internet/World Wide Web continue to inform those of Web 2.0, suggesting less of a transformation than a gradual evolution.

Yet in the end, his thesis does not fully deliver on the title's promise of reconceptualizing participatory culture as bastard culture. Instead, readers are presented with detailed descriptions of actor-network relations (producer/user/technology/law) in a few case studies. We are told that these relations are heterogeneous and that user participation can either be explicit or implicit. While Schäfer does not rely on an overt binary logic, his analysis does suggest that the first form is positive because it challenges powerful corporations like Microsoft and creates user communities; the second, on the other hand, is seen as vaguely exploitative, given that the unpaid labor of users directly benefits the owners of social media platforms. His main argument, that participatory culture is an extension of the cultural industries, is not particularly persuasive. Most problematic in my opinion is the lack of attention to gender relations. Feminist scholars of technology such as Judy Wacjman have criticized Actor Network Theory (ANT) for its gender-blind approach. While it does an excellent job of positioning technology as an actor instead of a neutral artifact, it ends up obscuring, or worse, contributing to the marginalization and/or exclusion of women. Although Schäfer states that gender relations are beyond the scope of his work, this omission is unfortunate, since gender lies at the heart of the social construction of technology.

The book is divided into six chapters and an introduction. The first chapter begins by drawing a clear parallel between the narratives of participation in the Internet/World Wide Web and Web 2.0 eras, illustrated by a comparison of the 1995 and 2008 advertising campaigns for Cisco Systems. Schäfer rightly questions the media coverage of the supposed revolutionary use of social media by the 2008 Obama campaign and by Iranian students and protesters in 2009. He points out that the former still relied primarily on television advertising and that the technology that enabled the protesters in Iran to communicate and organize also enabled the authorities to track and arrest them.

By the end of Chapter 1 it is clear that Schäfer has a fondness for three-concept typologies. He fleshes out Foucault’s rather slim concept of *dispositif* as being constituted by social uses, discourses, and technology. He explains the active role of technology in a network, breaking down the different aspects into three “procedures”: affordance, design, and appropriation. The Cisco campaigns mentioned above had three themes; Cisco Systems shaped the information age in three ways; and social media is framed in popular discourse in three ways. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such triads, they indicate an unstated and perhaps

even unconscious methodology that can lead to the exclusion or distortion of ideas that cannot be broken down neatly into three categories, as happens in later chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview and interrogation of "participatory culture." Shäfer credits media and fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins for coining the term, although a more accurate and thorough discussion would begin with Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), not *Convergence Culture* (2006). Next, Schäfer elaborates on the differences between explicit and implicit participation, the latter being associated with Web 2.0 platforms such as *Flickr* and *YouTube*. While such participation seems to come out of nowhere, it is in fact attributable to the software design and depends on the involvement of large numbers of users who do not necessarily have any direct interaction with each other.

While it is understandable that Shäfer does not want to cover the most familiar and researched area of participatory culture, which involves media fans, his classification of user participation as *accumulation*, *archiving*, and *construction* marginalizes and devalues such participation. Fan discussion and production are all lumped together in the first. The choice of terms positions fans as collectors rather than as creators. While Shäfer admits that the categories are not mutually exclusive, he makes no mention of fan participation for archiving and construction. While fans clearly do both, the activities of hacking/cracking and DIY software cultures are foregrounded instead. Indeed, the book's Figure 3 has "remix" in brackets beside "Accumulation" and "create" beside "Construction." Such marginalization is even more problematic when gender is considered. Research clearly shows females comprise the majority of media fans involved in online communities and culture, whereas males dominate hacking and open-source software cultures.

Chapter 3 focuses on foregrounding the role of technology in participatory culture, a role that he argues has been downplayed or ignored in other accounts. Here the typology used to examine this role in terms of computer hardware, software, and the internet is effective. The most interesting discussion concerns the development of the Web and html--the now ubiquitous mark-up language that Tim Berners-Lee refused to patent.

Chapter 4, itself entitled "Bastard Culture," forms the heart of the book by presenting case studies of explicit and implicit participation. Oddly, however, Schäfer never actually defines or employs that eponymous term in his analysis. Although he claims to have done interviews, I found no evidence of interview data being explicitly presented. The endnotes suggest the case studies are based on texts found on websites or on discussion boards. The ones on explicit participation, namely the hacking of the Xbox by two different sets of users for gaming and open source software development respectively, as well as the hacking of Sony's robotic dog AIBO, are the most detailed, probably because the actor-network relations were the easiest to trace. Unfortunately, the examples presented to discuss implicit participation are not really detailed enough to be labeled case studies. While Shäfer makes some important points about the downloading of labor onto users while maintaining corporate control of data and user-generated content, his concerns may be overblown. After all, North American television viewers have been "sold" to advertisers by the networks for over fifty years in exchange for "free" programming, and most of us recognize that there will be a hidden price to have an easy way to archive and share our photos digitally, for example. His account also ignores the pleasures of such labor. Moreover, the bulk of this discussion about implicit participation is devoted to relatively minor social media platforms such as *Flickr* and *Delicious* or to platforms that are now defunct, such as *Napster*. Even *Wikipedia*, modeled on free/hacker culture ideals, is given short

shrift. *Facebook*, arguably the most popular platform by far, is barely mentioned, perhaps because it does not fit neatly into the author's typologies. Indeed, privacy in relation to *Facebook* settings seems a far more pressing concern than the mining of user tags and descriptions to refine search engines.

Chapter 5 on the extension of culture industries is the weakest. It repeats many of the same claims covered in Chapters 3 and 4 and discusses some of the same case studies, albeit using yet another three-part typology, that of confrontation, implementation, and integration. The argument that user participation is an extension of the cultural industries is problematic for several reasons. First, the author never really defines the concept beyond saying that it comes from Adorno and the Frankfurt school but that he is using it without the "Marxist understanding of participation" (125). Second, Schäfer does not distinguish between old media producers of film and television content and new media platform or software developers. Finally, although he does give an example of fan participation, it is one that fits his argument, namely the site and content provided by Lucas Films to allow *Star Wars* fans to remix original content under controlled conditions. Interestingly this is also a fandom that is dominated by men.

In light of the above, *Bastard Culture!* does not exactly deserve the exclamation mark that graces the cover. That said, it has enough going for it to recommend it to readers interested in the historical and discursive shaping of information and communication technologies, as well as applications of ANT and/or hacking and DIY participatory culture. Those interested in media and fan cultures, spreadable media, and transmedia storytelling should stick with Henry Jenkins. Feminist scholars will most certainly concur that the book might be better named *Masculinist Culture!*

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