Review of Sean Cubitt's *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*

Richard Snyder <richard_dot_snyder_at_wsu_dot_edu>, Washington State University

Abstract

In *Finite Media*, Sean Cubitt first examines a myriad of situations in which our media have material consequences for the earth and its inhabitants, clearly laying out the need for change on a massive scale. Thorough, complex, and effective, Cubitt's book makes its largest contribution to ongoing discussions of digital humanities in the Anthropocene in arguing that humanity must change its relationship to media by embracing a new eco-political aesthetic.

In the midst of what may now certainly be termed a climate crisis, Sean Cubitt's conclusions in *Finite Media* remind digital humanists once again that all DH must be Eco-critical DH, because each film strip, each Tweet, and each transmission sent within our network have material consequences for this planet Earth. Backing his analyses of this current state of affairs with myriad examples of the material impact of digital technologies, the author argues that this appreciation of media materiality must come to the forefront if we are to overcome a worldwide ecological disaster which refuses a traditional political or economic solution. Cubitt contends that today's "environmental criticism requires an elaborated theory of mediation, a concept that *Finite Media* attempts to refine by testing it against the story of the materials that media are made of" [Cubitt 2016, 11]. *Finite Media* is Sean Cubitt's latest book, following projects like *Ecomedia*, *Digital Aesthetics*, and *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels*, in which he has previously explored questions of media, ecology, technology, and culture. [1]

Cubitt illustrates that media are finite in their ties to material resources which are themselves finite; recognition of this fact and its implications for the planet and its inhabitants then serves as a foundation for a new eco-political aesthetic, a "revolution in communications" [Cubitt 2016, 11]. To this end, in the first half of the book, the chapters "Energy" and "Matter" greet the reader with a deluge of thorough examples of how our media is affecting our world and its ecological resources, as well as those Native and Indigenous peoples and communities in the Global South who are most immediately, tragically, and too often quietly impacted by the material aspects of our media consumption. Cubitt approaches such various topics as the mining and refining of heavy metals and the creation of the Green Mpeg video codec primarily through the lens of political economy, and in a pattern which continues for the length of the book, his argument fluctuates deftly between highly complex theoretical work to concrete case studies. Upon concluding "Matter", the reader is left with a distinct impression not only of our urgent ecological crisis and its ties to our media environment, but also of the inadequacy of the technological, economic, and political solutions with which humans have thus far reassured themselves that things will improve. In the latter two chapters, "Eco-Political Aesthetics" and "Ecological Communication as Politics", case studies recede in favor of a complex work of criticism which begins by asserting that "the usual levers we pull are not going to work" [Cubitt 2016, 215]. In this second half of the book, Cubitt steadily builds momentum, relying upon the previous stories of our media and their materiality in "Energy" and "Matter" to suggest that real change can only come from "a politics rebuilt on aesthetic principles" [Cubitt 2016, 151]. For Cubitt, this means a new appreciation for "the unimagined beauty of a processual artifact in which the human encounters and engages with ungoverned technological and natural process" [Cubitt 2016, 191]. [2]

Far from a work which espouses and explores a single point of view, *Finite Media* instead embraces the truly complex nature of a difficult problem — one which defies an easy answer. Cubitt weaves together not only insights from political [3]

economy and the study of media as material, but aesthetics, environmental science, and postcolonialism as well. His success in doing so is paralleled by an extreme attention to detail. Few will be able to finish the first half of this book without feeling as though Cubitt has thoroughly done his homework, and that lends his arguments in the second half — which would otherwise at times appear quite abstract — clarity, immediacy, and tangibility.

The book's writing and structure itself occasionally distracts from this admirable accomplishment, however, as many readers — especially those unfamiliar with Cubitt's theoretical foundations in political economy and materialism — may find that they must retrace the argument's steps. This is not to say that the book is not well-written; on the contrary, Cubitt's command of language makes itself evident in a concise and eloquent prose, one that encourages deep reading and reflection. The problem for many readers will instead lie in the sense that ideas often seem simply disconnected. Readers face this particularly in the first two chapters, "Energy" and "Matter", where the core ideas that drive them may be lost amid a sea of case studies and subheadings which too often fail to declare their intentions or connections with each other, and the goals of the chapter. Fortunately, Chapter Three, "Eco-political Aesthetics", and Four, "Ecological Communication as Politics", are more clearly focused, tying all of the book's constituent elements and examples together skillfully in its concluding pages. 4

In 2014, having stated the current and future impacts of human activity on the planet and its nonhuman inhabitants with shocking clarity, Bethany Nowviskie asked, "what is a digital humanities practice that grapples constantly with little extinctions and can look clear-eyed on a Big One?" [Nowviskie 2014]. Cubitt's take on media in the anthropocene contributes to ongoing conversations within the digital humanities which seek to address this question. Cubitt sees his work in *Finite Media* following that of Grossman (2007), Feilhauer and Zehle (2009), Gabrys (2010), Maxwell and Miller (2012), and Parikka (2015). Parikka's *A Geology of Media* pairs particularly well with *Finite Media* due not only due to timing, but due to a shared sense of scope and magnitude of humanity's influence on the planet, past and present. Where Cubitt stays focused on the Anthropocene in its present reality as he tells the "story of the materials that media are made of" — the impact of matter and energy on people and environments today — Parikka tells similar stories in long-form by zooming out to the scale of deep geological time, much like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen does with a singular focus in *Stone*. Nicole Starosielski's *The Undersea Network*, also published in 2015, focuses intensely on one aspect of the vast media architecture laid out by books like *Finite Media* and Parikka's *Geology*, that of the political and ecological consequences of our reliance upon large fiber cables for high-speed internet. Like Cubitt, Starosielski considers the political, economic, and ecological impacts of our desire for swift communication — one sees the potential for treatments of each of the topics that Cubitt investigates in his chapters "Energy" and "Matter" in similar detail. Ultimately, and in conjunction with works such as these, *Finite Media*'s most stirring contribution to digital humanities in the Anthropocene is the idea of an eco-political solution which involves revising our aesthetic relationships to media. 5

In endeavoring to prove and define a colossal, looming problem for humanity and offer a real solution, *Finite Media* attempts a great task in exactly 200 pages — and it ultimately succeeds. Cubitt's accomplished project will provide a new perspective and inform the work of scholars across the Digital Humanities, and in disciplines as varied as media studies, political economy, eco-criticism, critical theory, and postcolonialism. Moreover, in its focus on an aesthetic solution, it will inform and empower artists and media scholars who seek tangible ways to engage with the current ecological crisis. 6

Works Cited

Cubitt 2016 Cubitt, Sean. *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Nowviskie 2014 Nowviskie, Bethany. "Digital Humanities in the Anthropocene". 10 July 2014. Accessible at: http://nowviskie.org/2014/anthropocene.