

Reviewed by Rob van der Blik

Media in Mind

by Daniel Reynolds

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Media in Mind is a stimulating and mostly philosophical exploration of mind-body dualism in the context of films and video games, using John Dewey's concept of transactionism as an analytic thread. The book aims to address what Daniel Reynolds perceives as a shortcoming in media theory—namely, that the prevailing dualist orientation neglects and obfuscates essential aspects of embodiment and agency in perception. A transactionist approach views perception as a continuous whole, erasing or at least subjugating the distinction between subject and object. To quote Reynolds, “Media use is not an interaction in which two discrete things, a medium and a mind, come into contact with and act upon one another, but instead a transaction within a continuous field of matter that produces the intertwined phenomena that we (always contingently) may call ‘media’ and ‘mind.’”¹ Reynolds proceeds to develop this central idea by way of examples of video games and films, supported by numerous references to philosophers and film theorists, including Robert Bresson, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Gilles Deleuze, Germaine Dulac, Mark Johnson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Christian Metz, Hugo Münsterberg, Alva Noë, Alfred North Whitehead, and of course John Dewey. With a cast of characters like this (and others), you would assume that the argument is easily buried in philosophical lingo, but Reynolds keeps the text readable and never loses sight of his original idea.

The book is laid out in six chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion. Reynolds begins with Dewey's concept of transactionism, as expressed in the book he coauthored with Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, and argues for transactionism's relevance in the context of media studies, tying it into more contemporary

1 Daniel Reynolds, *Media in Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

theories about embodied cognition and active perception by philosophers Mark Johnson and Alva Noë.² We are also introduced here to the first video game: *The Unfinished Swan* (Giant Sparrow, 2012), a game Reynolds classifies under the rubric of “first-person shooter” games in which protagonists normally move through their environment while firing away at menacing objects and beings.³ *The Unfinished Swan* upends this activity, however; through the act of throwing paint, the player discovers a world rather than destroys it. Reynolds describes this action as “an allegory of the ways people create perception and knowledge by inhabiting and moving through the world. From birth, we embark on a series of differentiations, dividing light from dark, soft from hard, loud from quiet, object from nonobject, available from off limits, food from nonfood, threat from nonthreat.”⁴ Reynolds extends this idea with an analysis of Robert Bresson’s *L’Argent* (1983), in which “Yvon [the protagonist] and the film itself seem to want to feel something about the world, to touch its material surfaces. Bresson’s camera lingers on details of scenes in unconventional ways, taking in events from uncommon and at times confounding angles, such as a car chase filmed almost entirely in static shots of automobile pedals and a side-view mirror.”⁵

These two examples, a video game and a film, set the tone for the rest of the book. As with any philosophical text, the strength of the argument lies in the supporting examples, and Reynolds has chosen these carefully. The subsequent range of films discussed includes *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Cecil Hepworth, 1900), *La souriante Madame Beudet* (*The Smiling Madam Beudet*, Germaine Dulac, 1923), *Le quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*, François Truffaut, 1959), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), and *Ni na bian ji dian* (*What Time Is It There?*, Tsai Ming-liang, 2001). In addition to *The Unfinished Swan*, video games such as *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984), *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004), and *Don’t Look Back* (distractionware, 2009) are used to expound on what it means to move beyond interaction to the more enveloping sense of transaction.

In ensuing chapters, Reynolds examines the idea of active perception by invoking Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow,” a state of mind that can most easily be characterized as being in the moment. He further characterizes flow as “a feeling of balance between mastery and challenge, a loss of self-consciousness, a transformation of temporal perception, and the merging of action and awareness” and also addresses concepts of mental representation in media theory and the philosophy of mind. Reynolds centers on “radical embodied cognition,” a specifically nonrepresentational view of the mind that goes beyond more traditional notions of embodied cognition anchored in mind-body dualism.⁶ For Reynolds, such cognition “would be understood less as an extending out than an extending across, in which no ‘internal’ aspect of experience or action is discrete from the environment in which it occurs.”⁷

Following this, Reynolds devotes a chapter to platform studies, an area mostly associated with hardware and technological determinism but that, in Reynolds’s view, should be radicalized to include the human body. In line with this idea of radicalizing concepts in digital media studies, Reynolds proposes to expand the idea

2 John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949).

3 Reynolds, *Media in Mind*, 21.

4 Reynolds, 21.

5 Reynolds, 45.

6 Reynolds, 66.

7 Reynolds, 79.

of interface, conceived as a “regulated channel through which users are granted access to the power of the platform,” to fit a more transactionally oriented notion of “intraface” that “acknowledges that actions are not undertaken unilaterally by one thing upon another but always reciprocally and in such a way that they constitute the parameters of the things themselves.”⁸ The final chapter discusses the culture of Nintendo, a company that Reynolds argues has done more than any other game developer to experiment with console formats, control devices, and display technologies with which users fully experience new relationships between their body and game technologies.

Media in Mind is based on Reynolds’s dissertation, but unlike most books that originate as revised dissertations, here there is a significant terminological if not conceptual shift present. The examples have been carried over from the dissertation, but the line of argument has evolved from looking at these examples in terms of interaction to casting them in the framework of transactionism. We might ask ourselves, If one can make a convincing argument with one term, why the need to recast it through another? With this in mind, we could then profitably look at how Dewey originally framed the difference between the two terms *interaction* and *transactionism*. In *Knowing and the Known*, Dewey describes the difference through the history of philosophical thought, beginning with “self-action,” in which things are viewed as acting under their own powers. Self-action is followed by “inter-action,” which balances things against one another through causality, to a final phase of “trans-action,” “where systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements.’”⁹ This quote itself manifests—lexically or metaphorically—the shift in conceptual complexity from interaction to transaction.

Transactionism thus emphasizes wholeness and temporality, in which objects are “continuous with one another, entangled and ultimately never discrete. Ways of knowing are also fundamentally entangled with that which is known.”¹⁰ It may at the outset seem like an idea that is difficult to envision, and just by writing this, I am already falling into the trap of separating out the known from knowing. However, Reynolds keeps the thread of the argument intact throughout the book, continuously illustrating it through different film and video game scenarios. Transactionism as a conceptual model for analysis, notably, does seem more amenable to video games than to film, since participation and agency is more obvious in video games than in film. Film allows for a kind of participation in that it asks us to direct our attention and to think and feel, but the act of viewing a film does not require us to engage physically, which is, to my mind, somewhat at odds with Reynolds’s emphasis on embodied cognition in his analyses.

Media in Mind gathers a diverse and distinctive group of ideas and examples, and following the traces of these ideas and examples is genuinely rewarding. It remains a question whether Reynolds’s call for an acceptance of Dewey’s transactionism as a basis for a new theory of media will be heard, but perhaps more importantly, Reyn-

8 Reynolds, 126, 132.

9 Dewey and Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 108.

10 Reynolds, *Media in Mind*, 13.

olds is, at the very least, bringing contemporary philosophical objections to mind-body dualism into what he sees as a predominantly interactionist body of media theory. Ultimately, he argues for transdisciplinarity, a “thinking across and among the disciplines, for thinking not just about what they could show and tell one another but about what they can say in their polyphonous, entangled collectivity.”¹¹

Rob van der Blik is Music Librarian at York University, Toronto. His interests include jazz, blues, popular music analysis, the literature on meter, rhythm and groove, and philosophy and aesthetics of music as they relate to recorded music. He has published and presented on Thelonious Monk, Jimi Hendrix, blues historiography, and issues related to music collections in libraries.

¹¹ Reynolds, 172.