

**Paul Majkut.** *Titivillus' Bag of Tricks: Media Ontology, Epistemology, and Aesthetics.* Brill 2025. 145 pp. \$109.00 USD (Paperback 9783770569267); \$109.00 USD (eBook 9783846769263).

Defacement is a limitlessly interesting concept. In some poetic fashion, with the birth of the medium comes the ability to deface the medium (since no medium is perfect; and is always with error) and change it forever, in turn serving a certain socio-cultural purpose. I am enticed now to deface the rules of the medium of a book review to further some bigger point, but neither am I capable of such defacement nor do I believe I have a big point to make. If the book review isn't well received, I should be allowed to say that the *patron devil of scribes*, Titivillus, made me do it.

Drawing on the 13th century literature myth of the patron demon Titivillus, who is responsible for all kinds of flaws and weaknesses in structure and design of work done by scribes, Paul Majkut brings our attention to the phenomenon of defacement. Defacement is a deliberate modification or alteration of a medium of representation. This modification has the potentiality to lead to a completely new medium of representation which serves a purpose different from the former one. Titivillus is used as a metaphor by Majkut to better understand media, technology and culture.

Majkut spends a good part of the book explaining the shift from the spoken word to the written word, which led to many nuances of the spoken word being lost as it shifted or defaced mediums. Colour has played an undeniable role in defacement of books as a medium as well as film. Books were colourised through hand-painting when they were scarce and belonged only to the wealthy. As mass production of books rolled in, they saw the loss of colour. Colour, then, had become a commodity of conspicuous consumption for the rich (10). The advent of colour played less of a political and more technical role when it comes to films. The movement from black and white films to colour films wasn't as simple as infusing red, blue and green into the black and white. The colours held their own, independent importance in narrative, emotion and feel. Özlem Uzun Hazneci in his paper titled *Examining Akira Kurosawa's use of color as a director and painter*, talks of how in the film *Ran*, Kurosawa paid immense attention to the use of colour. His use of the element of colour was not only versatile and conscious but also functional thus illustrating that, the shift from black and white to colour films too was a defacement of the medium of film.

Throughout the book, Majkut criticizes Vilém Flusser's theories regarding text, its invention and propagation. At one place, Majkut wishes to do away with the notion that writing as an invention was a result of symbols being aligned in rows or lines. Rather, oral performance is stated as the origin for writing. The transition from *transcripts* of oral performances as they were done in antiquity and even during Shakesporean times to *scripts* as written for performances and lastly, scripts turned into *scripture* which was the complete and final stage of written text (22). This last-stage scripture is what Majkut claims to be the dead word—which is no longer dynamic—as the dynamicity was supplied by improvisations in performance. It is crucial to critique this false notion regarding the invention of writing which ignored the phonetic and alphabetical representations if one must recognise the true media revolution in this defacement of medium.

The most surprising element to read about in this book were the instances of connection between ideology and *praxis* in the theory of media defacement. Hitler expressed his disdain for



the [Fraktur](#) family of font, which was until his speech in 1934 seen as a German font (31). Within a few years, Fraktur was officially banned as *Juddenlettern* (Jewish font) with its ornate gothic look and the [Antiqua](#) letter, being seen as more sophisticated, was adopted as the official German font in 1941. Hitler's hatred for Jewish people transcended ideology and jumped into something as tangible as text on paper.

The concept of defacement of text as we move from script to transcript to scripture is mentioned throughout the book. One section which I consider quite important to the entire context of the book is about the loss of elements with this defacement. It is composed so concisely and beautifully that I cannot go without a mention. Majkut draws from the ideas of line and length and extends it to narrative. He critiques theorists like Marshall McLuhan for reducing residual orality to "incomplete interiorization of the new technology" since the defacement from verbal performances to written literature (44). Residual orality refers to habits from oral cultures lingering even after the adoption of literacy and writing. With oral accounts, memories were supposed to be dynamical reconstructions at every consequent utterance, which transforms into newer and different versions, finally leading to only imaging. The interiorization of reading that came with the written text has had quite a few sociological changes as well. The texts are no more authoritarian but subjective and solipsistic. The focus shifts from the orator to the listener (or rather, reader).

Majkut's work also resonates with the unfair representation of every concept through the Occidental perspective. For example, when he talks of how straight linearity is seen as the most popular manner of representation, it is primarily an Occidental viewpoint. Majkut argues that non-Western resources have been overlooked because they take on linear formats other than straight linearity. He goes further on to derive the different conceptions of the nature of time as accepted by different cultures like the Mayan, Incan, Hindu etc. from their curvilinear written history (47). Antithetical to Aristotelian linear progression where there is no scope for return or repetition, those cultures often represent time as something circular through round, calendar discs. Such examples broaden the readers' perspective which has, by default, been quite narrow with media and literature being heavily focused on western narratives.

However, the book is not without its limitations. Understanding that the book draws more from historical mediums of representation to make sense of defacement, but limited parallels to the contemporary world of communication and existence can make it a less satisfying read. Even though I think much of that could be done by the readers at an individual level (since reading is a private, solipsistic activity). Moreover, the book can lose non-specialised readers as often technical terms are used without prior introduction or explanation of the concept. Phrases like *mediated determinism*, *typographical manipulation*, *historical presentism* among others drop in without proper definitions, and makes the task of looking them up repeatedly and coming back to the text a tedious one.

The text's authenticity lies in being able to bring forth perspectives that will always remain absent from the mainstream discussions. At one point, Majkut mentions how Flusser claims that historical thought is a result of the written word. Intertextual reading or, *reading between the lines*, he says, goes against this claim (58). This is because the references for intertextual or extratextual

reading do not exist anywhere on the page, nor does it exist in a linear manner. Flusser's claim also emerges from the premise that perception is always continuous, and never discrete. Majkut is adamant on pushing the reader towards greater imagination (with evidence though) which could help make sense of concepts better. These insights are often absent in previous traditional works on history of the written word. Majkut brings in plurality in understanding. While authors before him like McLuhan or Flusser have focused their attention to a singular manner of understanding and interpreting history, Majkut defies that.

A very keen point made in the book is about interactivity and intersubjectivity with respect to digital media (61). While digital media can be interactive in that it can talk to you, it cannot be intersubjective due to a lack of subjectivity which can only be provided by human consciousness. Even though Majkut never mentions it in the text, we can trace the importance of this line of reasoning when we think of the current use of AI and AI consciousness debate. The reason AI could not contribute to human knowledge in any meaningful capacity whatsoever, is because it cannot make sense of irrelevant and imaginative questions. These questions are what progresses human knowledge.

Paul Majkut's *Titivillus' Bag of Tricks: Media Ontology, Epistemology and Ethics* is an important work which evaluates the history of text in a manner which can help make sense of our ever-changing, rapid and dynamically communicative world. He challenges the standard of epistemic realities being stagnant and pushes the idea of highly volatile and transposing realities of knowledge through the concept of defacement. Majkut has been successful in diminishing certain confusions and distortions caused by earlier works on the history of changing mediums of communication.

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