book review

Luke Robinson

What is digital modernity and how is Asia a part of it? These questions, posed by Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar in their introduction to *Asian Video Cultures*, are a point of departure for the volume as a whole. As the editors note, many of the foundational texts in new media studies theorize the digital based on "idealized […] experiences in northern metropolitan cultures" (2017, 6). Consequently, the explanatory frameworks these texts advance rarely speak to emerging digital cultures in the Global South. Key concepts such as "speed, reliability, ubiquity, access, participation, innovation, and convergence" (6) fail to capture the improvisational interplay of high- and low-tech distinguishing digital infrastructure and practice throughout much of Asia and Africa. As a result, both continents have historically been something of a blind spot for new media studies, framed through narratives of backwardness, belatedness, piracy, and as the derivative, casting it as the dark side of global (read Western) digital modernity—one take on this volume's subtitle. Yet, if *shanzhai* and *jugaad* innovation are more characteristic of digital culture worldwide than Silicon Valley—indeed, if they are not also increasingly typical of such culture within parts of the so-called developed world—then both understanding the particularities of these practices, and recalibrating how we theorize them, is critical. This is the goal of *Asian Video Cultures*.

Critically, then, Neves and Sarkar emphasize that the volume does not assume the transparency of its title, but tries to reflect on its three central terms. Although 'Asia' signifies a geopolitical space, chapters on Singaporean video art in Germany, Bollywood in Nigeria, and the overseas response to Psy's *Gangnam Style*, challenge us to think where the borders of that space might be redrawn in a world of media flows. At the same time, Asia's contradictions are also foregrounded. Moving away from techno-orientalist images of megacities and neon skyscrapers, the discussion of media use by non-normative groups—rural communities, sexual and ethnic minorities, drug users—highlights the internal heterogeneity of China and India, while also asking on what terms such people can be written into narratives of global digital modernity. 'Video', in turn, is understood not simply as a technology or a platform, but as a largely informal material practice that often conflicts with the interests of both state and national elites. This requires attention to the medium's politics: the subjectivities and affects it produces, as well as the networks it facilitates. Finally, 'culture' is considered a question of popular, everyday creativity. Since this emphasis entails particular methodologies, many of the chapters combine both interpretative analysis and observations drawn from long-term fieldwork. Taken together, then, these chapters not

only seek to expand our ways of understanding contemporary digital culture globally, but also to challenge existing preconceptions of what 'Asian video cultures' may look like.

Structurally, the collection is divided into three sections: 'Infrastructures', 'Intimacies', and 'Speculations'. Each contains chapters covering a different geopolitical space, but also—in keeping with the interdisciplinary thrust of the book more generally—a variety of theoretical debates. While 'Infrastructures' is thus about platforms and technology use, it is not limited to these issues. Each chapter revolves around a critical term or terms, sometimes drawn from English-language literature, but sometimes from local media discourse. Marc Steinberg's chapter, on the Japanese video-sharing platform Niconico, is one most explicitly focused on the question of infrastructure. Exploring Niconico's (in)famous interface, which allows users to overlay comments on video streams, in a manner quite different from its American competitors, Steinberg makes a case for the site as a "counterplatform" (93): an example of a regional infrastructure, with a distinct aesthetic arising from the particularities of the Japanese media ecosystem (or mediamix), which can implicitly function as a site of resistance to the "platform imperialism" (97) of Google, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook. Niconico forces us to reconsider what a platform might be, but also demonstrates how, under the right conditions, it can be imagined otherwise.

Similarly, Patricia Zimmerman explores the Indonesian-based activist platform EngageMedia, to consider how 'participation' might be retooled outside commercial, Western media ecologies. She argues that the Bahasa term *gado gado*, or 'medley', might better describe both the strategies used by EngageMedia to encourage the regional permeation of human rights-oriented social media as well as their polyphonic approach to the 'voice' of their video product. The latter aims to counter the hegemonic production of national identity in Indonesian state media. Nishant Shah's focuses on 'access'. Using two examples from India, both revolving around questions of sexuality and mobile media, Shah argues that reconceptualising digital access as a question of condition rather than of action allows us to see how issues of infrastructural design, regulation, and circulation

all produce individuals as subjects of technology, rather than as just its users.

Finally, Chia-chi Wu and Jenny Chio turn to video forms in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) respectively. Wu explores the proliferation of *wei dianying* discourse— or literally, 'micro film', a concept which has come to relate to all types of short-form video productions in the Sinophone world,as in Taiwan. Spread through Japanese TV dramas, the idea of *xiao quexing*— "small, everyday delights of which we are sure and simple things that are supposed to sustain our lives" (84)—Wu ties back to *wei dianying,* suggesting it is a medium of neoliberal self-regulation that responds to Taiwan's current position within the regional and global economy. Chio looks at ethnic video culture in the Guizhou province of Southwest China. Here, ethnic minority communities use digital video to capture local festivals and practices in ways that both draw on and contest their representation in state media. The result is a form of rural public culture that is distinct from that of China's urban enclaves, but which nevertheless insists on positioning its subjects as modern, on their own terms.

Chio's and Wu's chapters provide a bridge to the collection's second section. While 'Intimacies' does not neglect infrastructure, its chapters foreground questions of affect and public culture. Rahul Mukherjee and Abhigyan Singh's study of the popular music video form in the Indian region of Mewat maps how these videos are produced for and circulate through a media network that incorporates YouTube, microSD cards, CDs, and the cinema. However, the chapter also highlights how the videos combine old and new aesthetic forms in their address to an emerging local public. As a result, they simultaneously articulate a Mewati identity distinct from India's metropolitan middle classes, and draw on the latter's symbolic resources. Tzu-hui Celina Hung addresses contemporary critical assessments of Taiwan's mainstream documentary production head-on as sentimental and apolitical. Using a made-for-TV video documentary trilogy on immigrant women from Southeast Asia, she demonstrates how, in this particular instance, such sentimentality can be seen as a product both of Taiwan's public television system, and of broader policies meshing official multiculturalism with

neoliberal labour laws. The inability of this trilogy to adequately analyse its subject matter, and its lapses into sentiment, must therefore be seen as an expression of the structural and discursive limits in Taiwan's mediated discussion of immigration, not solely based on a undiagnosed individual or cultural failing. Conerly Casey's chapter on Bollywood videos in northern Nigeria explores how religious context and intermedial framing can position this cinema as a site of sensory overload for its viewers. Finally, Feng-Mei Heberer considers the work of Singapore-born, Berlin-based video artist Ming Wong. She argues that, through his drag restaging of classic sequences from films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wong creates a repository—an 'archive of feeling', as per Ann Cvetkovich—that is the basis for an Asian German public culture. What Heberer calls the "discursive openness" (208) of Wong's performance, combined with the mutability of video as a medium, opens up points of connection across the Asian diaspora through which such a public might emerge.

'Speculations' contains the most wide-ranging set of essays in the volume. Stretching geographically from Syria to China, and from K-pop reaction videos to artists' moving image work, two broad themes emerge: video as embodied experience, and its entanglement with other pre-existing, artistic traditions. Thus, S. V. Srivinas's chapter on YouTube, India, and political participation highlights the significance of Telugu folk songs, uploaded and remixed online, in the articulation of a distinct Telugu cultural identity, and the concomitant marshalling of desire for a separate Telangana state in the early 2000s. Kay Dickinson's discussion of video copying and appropriation in the Levant demonstrates how poetry, as a cultural form, can help us understand both Beirut-based artists' use of found video footage within work addressing the Syrian uprising, as well as West Bank appropriations of *Avatar* as political performance. Indirectly invoking Jane Gaines, Dickinson argues that these practices all assume an embodied response that prepares us, performatively, for the act of revolution. This interest connects her chapter to those of Michelle Cho, Joshua Neves, and Bishnupriya Ghosh. Cho explores questions of cosmopolitics and performativity in her analysis of online reaction videos to Psy's famous viral hit, *Gangnam Style*.

Neves considers what the famous 'iPhone girl'—the Chinese factory worker whose images were found on a new iPhone handset in 2008—can tell us about the embodied intimacies of factory production in the Global South, and the "floating" (278) quality of video as a medium. Finally, Ghosh outlines the vibrant, informal video culture around living with AIDS in Manipur, India. Arguing that this culture is built on networks that encourage an "immunologic of affection" rather than of antagonism (294), she focuses on Haoban Paban Khumar's low-budget video documentary, *Mr. India*, and how its formal qualities capture this biomedical praxis. She argues that the film's ritualistic, day-to-day rhythm suggests a phenomenological experience of living with, rather than trying to eliminate, the virus, demonstrating how these videos are part and parcel of an emerging, low-tech healthcare culture supporting those living in fear of state persecution for medical reasons.

Asian Video Cultures both expands and challenges the parameters of Anglophone media studies. It draws detailed studies of non-Western media practice into dialogue with a variety of disciplinary concepts, while pressing the reader to reflect on what those concepts mean. At its best, the collection brings this off lucidly, in a style that should be accessible—with appropriate effort—to upper level undergraduates. But at the same time, the volume also indicates where there is work still to be done. It is noticeable, for example, that despite the editors' best efforts to decentre our understandings of 'Asia', the chapters on South and West Asia skew overwhelmingly to India and Indian media overseas; elsewhere, Sinophone Asia dominates at the expense of the continental southeast. Despite the breadth of the research here, the unfortunate effect is to reinforce the already prevalent tendency to equate 'Asia' with 'India and China'. Without advocating a return to the nation as a basic analytical unit, and recognising that any collection has its limits, it would have been wonderful to read the same sort of theoretically- and ethnographically-informed work on Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or Pakistan; on Persian or Turkic West Asia; on Myanmar or Thailand. There is clearly space for such writing to be published: I look forward to reading it.