



Book review

De Vries, I. O. (2013). *Tantalisingly Close: An Archaeology of Communication Desires in Discourses of Mobile Wireless Media.*

Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.

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Without doubt, the desire to communicate is intrinsic to the human condition. As interpersonal communication is inevitably noisy, ambiguous, volatile, and often unsuccessful, the history of media can be seen as what De Vries dubs a "tragicomical quest for communicative fulfilment" (p. 8). De Vries' objective is to uncover the deep mythological roots of communication technologies, showing how contradictory and untenable narratives of progress towards perfect communication continue to play an important and agentive role in the relationship between technology and society. This theoretical investigation, conducted through a media-archeological approach, is inscribed in a branch of media scholarship that, since the 1990s, has tackled the ideological and mythological imaginary of new media, consistently seen as the enabler of paradise or hell (e.g. Mosco 2004, Barbrook 2007).

Part I of the book provides a framework for understanding the discourses of hope and progress that seem to accompany the inception and diffusion of every new communication technology. Such "communication sublime" draws on a version of the technological sublime discussed by media scholars such as Carolyn Marvin and David E. Nye. The origin of human woes would lie in imperfect communication, which technological advances can fix, towards "a final and universally accessible communication space ... where there can be no misunderstanding" (p. 18). In the most fascinating part of the text, De Vries collects and critiques the tensions and contradictions within the discourses focused on the communication sublime. The discussion then moves on to a general account of how paradoxical communication sublime is deployed pragmatically for diverse agendas.

Part II focuses on the role of technological myths, comparing and contrasting the two opposing theoretical families that offer interpretative tools: technological determinism and social constructivism. In an ambitious move, De Vries argues that neither is up to the task, and proposes a synthetic, multiscalar approach based on an evolutionary and media-archeological account of technological history. Promptly acknowledging the limitations

of evolutionary models applied to media history, De Vries claims that his framework can include the agency of recurring communication myths, while accounting for the myriad of historical and cultural contingencies, exposing teleological thinking rather than embracing it. The approach is expounded over two centuries of media history, including the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television. It successfully balances between the macro and micro levels of analysis. Finally, a genealogy of mobile telephony is provided in relation to the communication sublime, uncovering the presence (and agency) of the myths in the development, reception, and use of actual mobile technologies over the last two decades.

This work of scholarship, in its considerable theoretical depth and scope, stresses the importance of technological myths in the current burgeoning mobile communication landscape, a well-argued point that should resonate in mobile media studies, as well as in the emergent social science of mobilities (Urry 2007). One minor criticism would be that, while De Vries' approach appears compelling if applied to hype-fuelling marketing discourses, his case is less convincing when facing the diversity of reception and adoption of mobile media in IT-saturated societies, where the agency of communication myths is harder to discern. The philosophical framing proposed by De Vries' is adequate, but could engage more extensively with influential critical theories of technology (e.g. Feenberg 1999), not only in relation to utopian thinking. These issues notwithstanding, *Tantalisingly Close* is a thought-provoking, balanced work of scholarship that advances our understanding of how and why the timeless and quasi-religious myth of perfect communication crops up in media history so persistently.

## **References**

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- Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.