Jason Farman, **Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media**, New York: Routledge, 2011, 184 pp., $34.95 (paperback).

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In the conclusion to *Mobile Interface Theory*, Jason Farman quotes computer scientist Alan Kay's suggestion that "technology is anything that was invented after you were born" (p. 133). Media and communications scholars (most of whom we can safely assume were born before the beginning of the digital revolution) have spent much of the last two decades confirming Kay's hypothesis, sparking important (if not historically unprecedented) debate about how new media are changing how we see our environment, our peers, and ourselves. Taking our growing attachments to mobile GPS-enabled devices as its primary focus, Farman's new book continues this discourse by arguing that mobile communication devices change the way we conceptualize and experience space. Some evidentiary issues aside, I believe that Farman's text represents an ambitiously thoughtful and well-written attempt to understand locative media in terms of embodied experience.

Farman does most of his theoretical grunt work in the first chapter, blending concepts from phenomenological and poststructuralist thought into a theory of the "sensory-inscribed body" (p. 19). His main suppositions can be summarized in three points. First, drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he proposes that embodiment and space are co-constitutive. One can never "inhabit" space because it implies entering a preexisting field that our bodies simply fill. Rather, space is always "constructed simultaneously with our sense of embodiment" (p. 18). Part of this, he argues, is cultural, but part is also biological in that space arises from the interplay between our conscious mind and its surrounding structures. Second, drawing from Jacques Derrida, Farman argues that embodiment is relational. We construct our sense of space by tuning-in and tuning-out different parts of the world, similar to how we perceive our body by focusing on select sensations or areas instead of "taking everything in" (p. 27) at once. As such, the way we read our bodies and the world is always selective and never complete: "full, embodied presence is always being deferred" (p. 30). Third, Farman contends that mobile technologies reconfigure the ways their users can embody space, specifically in how they allow the Internet to dislodge itself from the PC and move into everyday environments. In this new embodied environment, subjects locate themselves in digital space and material space simultaneously, with each shaping perceptions of the other. Ideally, the actual device becomes invisible in these interactions: insofar as the technology works correctly, we interact with it intuitively. Like space itself, the medium becomes a seemingly natural part of the field outside oneself.

In the chapters that follow, Farman expands his theory in relation to several contexts and phenomena, including mapping, social media, gaming, and site-specific storytelling. He conducts most of his discussion through numerous case studies illustrating how individuals and groups have used mobile
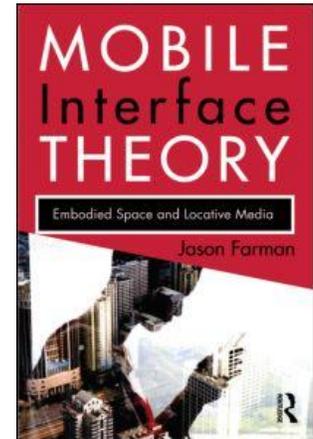
media to toy with or alter their physical surroundings. Farman chooses his examples carefully, and as one who was previously unfamiliar with many of them, I found most to be fascinating. For example, Farman begins his chapter on locative gaming by describing *Momentum*, a 2006 live action role-playing game based in Stockholm that invited players to move through their own city as a playable game space. Armed with specially activated mobile phones, users navigated the cityscape and accomplished missions, using digitally generated clues to identify key locations and people within the game. For Farman, interactive games like this signal a new form of embodiment as subjects construct their space through a feedback loop written both by online cues and by their immediate physical surroundings, thereby creating contexts where game space and everyday life converge. Farman's examples are primarily heuristics for his larger arguments about embodiment, but he does make occasional reference to how mobile technologies have been deployed toward social or political critique. He notes that with interesting counter-games such as Paula Levine's *San Francisco <–> Baghdad*, these new devices can use space to critique military-industrial surveillance just as much as they enable it.

Farman also uses his examples as a starting point for modifying or responding to previous writings on new media by authors as diverse as Elizabeth Grosz, Lev Manovich, Douglas Rushkoff, Alexander Galloway, and Adriana de Souza e Silva. His critique of Rich Ling's influential book *New Tech, New Ties* strikes me as particularly interesting and reveals several of the strengths and weaknesses of Farman's phenomenological approach. Ling makes the point that mobile phones reconfigure how people prioritize face-to-face, copresent interactions. When we receive a call, he argues, we always weigh whether our copresent interaction or the incoming mediated interaction is more important, and when on the phone, we abide by the implicit rules that govern conduct in our physical locations (such as leaving the room to take a call or being careful not to discuss overly personal matters when within earshot of others) (Ling, 2008).

Farman criticizes Ling's distinction between copresent and mediated experience as too simplistic: by always writing of mobile communication as contrary to physically immediate interactions, Ling implies the latter always intrudes upon the former. The primacy of the physically copresent communication is never challenged. In contrast, Farman asserts that the embodied nature of mobile devices renders old binaries of real/virtual obsolete. Furthermore, under mediated communication the very idea of copresence has been transformed to such a degree that media connections can feel as "live" as physically present ones: "our cultural understanding of what 'co-present' means has been so vastly overhauled to the point that even the categories themselves become problematic" (p. 99).

Farman is certainly correct that media scholars such as Ling tend to undertheorize presence, especially when certain communities now make digital interaction their primary mode of communication. However, his alternative—to erase the hierarchy between present/mediated interactions and treat mobile communication as symptomatic of a new digital embodiment—also lacks some necessary nuance. Farman never makes clear exactly which media users he is describing, and this lack of specificity causes him problems. If he is treating all mobile embodiments as the same, he runs the risk of unduly universalizing all mediated experience into one model. If, on the other hand, he is only describing the experience of a select group of mobile media users, he ignores the perspectives of many who would not consider mediated communications preferable to (or even comparable with) copresent ones. It is premature to make claims

about how interactions are prioritized without examining the in-group dynamics and sociocultural mores at play in any given communication (which is actually a point that Ling tries to make).

Farman could counter this objection by examining disparate mobile media usages, showing how they all illustrate a similar tendency toward prioritizing mediated interaction. However—unlike Ling, who observed everyday mobile phone use in public and private spaces—Farman's analyses are overly reliant on art installations and special projects, whose notability arises from the fact that they are *not* regular interactions. While these examples are interesting case studies, they are not necessarily accurate contexts for studying quotidian uses of mobile devices or for extrapolating truths about media-using cultures at large. Further ethnographic studies of mobile phone users themselves may provide perspective to either refute or substantiate Farman's claims.

Although highly readable and concisely argued, *Mobile Interface Theory* occasionally suffers from detours down strange theoretical pathways. At times, Farman is too eager to make associations with as many marquee-name thinkers as he can, resulting in odd bricolages where Brecht, Derrida, Debord, Deleuze, and Lacan join hands. These are the exceptions, however, and most of Farman's text remains observant and carefully argued. Weaknesses aside, the book is recommended for scholars curious about developments in mobile media theory and is a worthy, thought-provoking read for anyone interested in new media practice. Let the debates continue.

References

Ling, R. (2008). *New tech, new ties: How mobile communication is reshaping social cohesion.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.