Charles Soukup, **Exploring Screen Culture via Apple's Mobile Devices: Life Through the Looking Glass,** London, UK: Lexington Books, 2017, 132 pp., $75.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Hanna E. Morris
University of Pennsylvania, USA

We love them and we hate them. We can't live with them and we most certainly can't live without them. Charles Soukup, in ***Exploring Screen Culture via Apple's Mobile Devices: Life Through the Looking Glass,*** offers an extended meditation on the tumultuous affair between Americans and their most constant companions: iPhones, iPads, and iPods. He asks: Why do Americans feel such a strong—and seemingly unbreakable—affinity for their mobile devices?
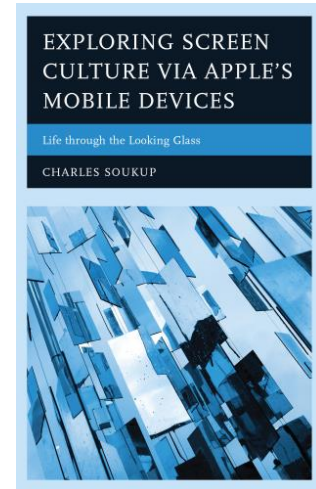
Soukup prefaces his study with a confession:

> I strongly empathize with my friends, family, and colleagues. I feel the same bittersweet emotions about my mobile devices—a strange mixture of pleasure, affection, guilt, and shame. This remarkable ambivalence, these wild swings in individual's feelings about this technology, was a central motivation for writing this book. In other words, why do people habitually use technologies that they are so quick to mercilessly criticize and describe with disgust? (p. 7)

Soukup approaches this question through a conceptual and methodological framework that is deeply invested in postmodern theory. A professor of communication at the University of Northern Colorado, Soukup in his book explores the role of mobile technologies in the "everyday life" of "postmodern culture" (p. 34). He defines "postmodern culture" as "fragmented" and with no clear or "coherent boundaries" (p. 35). In chapters 2 and 3, he describes how postmodern culture is characterized by the dizzying movement of meanings, bodies, and texts across screens. Because of this unbounded, hypermediated flow of meaning and identity, Soukup argues that "traditional ethnography" (p. 35) cannot adequately study the postmodern condition of American culture. He contends that "defining and/or discovering *coherent boundaries* of cultural identity and community have been central issues in the ethnographic project" of late, but that "these previously coherent boundaries of identity and community have been blurred in the everyday life experiences of the hypermediated era" (p. 35). He therefore proposes that "postmodern ethnography" should replace the ethnography of old.

In chapter 3, Soukup delineates three overarching practices fundamental to his "postmodern ethnography," including:

(1) tune to epiphanies in order to make the invisible visible,

(2) maintain self-reflexivity via a perpetual awareness of the contradictory conditions of postmodern culture, and

(3) transform bits and pieces of information into coherent (albeit fragmented) cinematic stories. (p. 34)

Throughout chapter 3, Soukup explains how the flaneur figure—with fluid movement in and out of space and no clear sense of body or border—served as the model in developing these three practices. He contends that the postmodern ethnographer needs to become the flaneur—a "mindful observer of contemporary culture shifting between careful attention to cultural micro-practices and abstract conceptualizations of macro-structures" (p. 42).

In chapter 4, Soukup—as flaneur ethnographer—introduces the core argument of his book: that the reason why Americans feel such affinity for their iPhones, iPads, and iPods is because Apple's mobile operating system (iOS) is, effectively, a variation of Frederic Jameson's (1991) "cognitive map." Omnipresent and omnipotent, mobile devices relocate and reorient the untethered postmodern subject via a standardized, programmatic design. Soukup claims that

by offering simplified answers to the complicated and confusing questions of the postmodern condition, the iOS is a cognitive map for navigating a world in which images are overwhelming and meaningless, identity is groundless and fragmented, and cultural spaces are illusory and indistinct. (p. 67)

Apple's iOS, he argues, is so popular and superior because it is so simple. Moreover, this simplicity is no coincidence—it was the top design priority under the direction of Steve Jobs (p. 80).

In chapter 5, Soukup extends this argument further. He argues that the most popular games designed for iOS are the simplest, with clear sets of rules and numerical, predictable outcomes (e.g. *Angry Birds*, *Candy Crush,* etc.). Games on iOS are the manifestation of control. Soukup calls this form of play a "liminoid" experience—a flow-like sense of comfort through mastery and consistency (p. 77).

In the final chapter, Soukup warns that the cognitive mapping and liminoid play of iOS are not all peaches and cream. He persuasively argues that the reduction of life to mere numerical outcomes will, in fact, further suspend postmodern denizens in a void of placeless disillusion. As a solution, he proposes a riff on Kenneth Burke's (1969, 1973) concept of "equipment for living." Soukup calls for the acquisition of mobile technologies by artists, activists, and citizens in designing alternative visions and aesthetics of everyday life. With this call to action, he advocates a collaborative "rupture" of iOS filtration and numeration (p. 101). He concludes that this rupture will only occur via self-reflexivity, through postmodern ethnography.

The key contribution of Soukup's work is its fundamental concern with agency and resistance in everyday life—a refreshing change of pace from the all-too-common dystopian diagnosis. It does not, however, discuss the interplay between capitalist modes of production and the design of mobile user-

interfaces. Soukup's book should therefore be read in concert with more critical works of political economy for a deeper contextualization of Apple's aggressive production logic and domineering of the market.

Because Soukup does not seriously consider structures of capital or production, he at times falls into the trap of "screen essentialism"—a term first coined by Nick Montfort (2004) and popularly discussed and extended by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (2008). Montfort and Kirschenbaum would argue that the "hypermediated era" is less ephemeral and fluid than Soukup assumes. In other words, things aren't quite so boundless and immaterial as the author proposes. Soukup's discussion of postmodern "screen culture" thus skirts critical questions of materiality as well as of capitalist production. Digital humanists such as Tenen (2017) would contest Soukup's description of screens as flat conduits, void of depth and form. In fact, Tenen and colleagues would question Soukup's entire postmodernist framework, which often fails to consider depth—i.e., the deep structures of power and material embedded within and beneath the visible screens of mobile devices. Soukup's argument, therefore, would also benefit from a more critical discussion of materiality.

Stylisticly, Soukup's auto-ethnographic presentation is curious. Auto-ethnography is meant to contest and de-center the detached, White, cis-gender, male observer. However, even as Soukup adopts this style of presentation, he advances as best model for practice the anonymous/removed flaneur figure—the very embodiment of the detached academic voyeur that auto-ethnographers seek to resist.

Although constrained by the limitations of postmodern theory, Soukup's discussion of "love," "play," and "agency" is compelling and offers key insights into the role of mobile technologies in everyday life. It will strike a chord with media scholars interested in methodological design, digital technology, postmodernism, and resistance. Soukup's book would be a welcome addition to the libraries of scholars concerned with mobile devices and American culture. It should, however, be read in conversation with more critical studies of both capitalist production and material structure.

References

Burke, K. (1969). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1973). *Philosophy of literary form*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kirschenbaum, M. G. (2008). *Mechanisms: New media and the forensic imagination.* Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Montfort, K. (2004, December). *Continuous paper: The early materiality and workings of electronic literature*. Paper presented at 120th Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association of America**,** Philadelphia, PA.

Tenen, D. (2017). *Plain text: The poetics of computation.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.