

Book review New Media and Society

Darren Wershler, Lori Emerson, and Jussi Parikka, *The Lab Book: Situated Practice in Media Studies*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2022; 328 pp.; ISBN 9781517902186, \$30.00 (pbk)

The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies provides a media archaeological investigation of the laboratory as a space for situated practices in media studies. A constellation of case studies presents a historical overview of the laboratory space constitution, expands to what the authors define as an extended laboratory model heuristic. In addition, the book offers a space for ongoing research beyond the printed support, providing additional material such as interviews and case studies at <https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/the-lab-book>. The aim is to propose a model of investigation based on a comparative – and media-archaeological – approach to the labs using a series of categories as research instruments.

For Darren Wershler, Lori Emerson and Jussi Parikka, the laboratory is a discursive activity that delimits the spaces of knowledge production. So, to acknowledge the lab is also a way to understand recurring forms of power and experimentation, not only as a part of the history of science but also as ‘a set of tropes that appear in contemporary discourses about labs and art, humanities, and culture at large’ (p. 7). The discursive locus of the laboratory is understood here as an assemblage capable of expressing and embodying new forces and realities in cultural and media (studies) activities. The laboratory and its practices are dismantled and reassembled into their infrastructural, structural, ideological and material, institutional and insurrectional components, providing a critical and informed reading of the interstices between these possible oppositions. In order to question the laboratory as an assemblage, the extended laboratory heuristic is investigated through entangled categories, which also serve to name the chapters: space, apparatus, infrastructure, people, imaginaries and techniques.

The laboratory is a variable, permeable and hybrid discursive place that can encompass very different normative and experimental forms. The Lab Space corresponds to the performative quality of the laboratory’s spatial denomination and existence. Here, the threshold between the inside and the outside, between control and access to scientific production, is articulated by developing the material tension of the cases studies: traversing the spaces of 16th-century monasteries to the structure of the Menlo Park laboratory, walking outside the Massachusetts Institute of Technology buildings and finally opening the door on the retro-futuristic experimental table of Wolfgang Ernst’s Media Archaeological Fundus (MAF) collection. The materials of the lab are flowed into the Lab Apparatus in their historical and temporal complexity, addressing the different epistemologies of media situated practices as they arise from the agentive relationship between the apparatuses of knowledge and humans. Besides, the Lab Infrastructure analysis displays the protocols governing the activities, from grey literature to the social aims of the labs, such as the ‘movable school of agriculture’ operation (p. 129). From this perspective, the extended hybrid laboratory model, described as a ‘non perfect precise thing’ (p. 145), can help to reconstruct different epistemologies – those linked to situated practices and local knowledge – and oppose those treated as dominant. Where MIT seems to materialise the effects of discursive construction by treating ‘humans and tech-

nologies as abstractions, grant[ing] agency to some humans over others, and thus grant[ing] agency over technology to some humans over others' (p. 171), ACTLabs appears as a strategy of resistance. In *Lab People*, the operative figure of the 'codeswitch umbrella' of the ACTLab founded by Allucquère Rosanne Sandy Stone emerges as an example of resistance to the power structures, capable of undermining the disciplinary desert of the conventional laboratory. Lab Imaginaries are presented as spaces of speculation in which activism can flourish and are also addressed in their ambivalence. *Immaginaries*, intended as 'the different set of connotations, fantasies and beliefs that have characterized laboratories over years' (p. 187), and analysed in terms of techniques of production and maintenance of reality, in a Foucaultian sense. Thus, it is possible to reconstruct the temporal and cultural specificity of lab imaginaries and how they can persist and spill over into both the material infrastructure and possible values to achieve. The *Lab Book* also presents an expandable glossary of Lab Techniques, such as 3D printing, collaborating, collecting, dis/assembling, experimenting, failing, testing, living labs and prototyping. Here, the techniques are understood as the organisation of objects and practices in the production of knowledge, as a 'combination of embodiment with particular technological object and specific practices' (p. 215).

The *Lab book* can be read in many ways, not only as a methodological handbook for the researcher but also as a reflection on the interdisciplinary approach towards practices in media studies. It constitutes a methodological guide to the topoi that permeate and connote the assemblages defined as laboratories: a delimitation that helps the researcher acknowledge the laboratory's spaces, and specifically media labs, even where they are denied the right to exist. The book invites reflection on the past, present and future of practices in media studies. In the panorama that sees the overlap between science lab and arts & humanities, this book dismantles any naive reference to the media lab by overturning that process of trademark vulgarisation that has associated the media lab with the acronym MIT. A process whereby the public – academic and non-academic – could no longer distinguish between the trademark and its owner and where a single type of object, service or place, became the unconscious measure of everything that could be linked to it.

To conclude, this book is both comprehensive research and methodological guide, offering a non-linear historical reconstruction from which to understand the practices of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation within the production of knowledge. As such, the book's focus on hybrid labs offers a perspective for resisting the standardisation of practices subjected to the tyranny of the production of a 'tradable future', a process that is shaping universities and cultural institutions causing the expulsion of liminal and chrono-divergent practices.