



Know-Show: Lisa Gitelman's *Paper Knowledge*

Lisa Gitelman. *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 224 pages.

Book review by Alex Lussier-Craig

Lisa Gitelman's work explores the contingent positions of old and new media as simultaneous subjects and instruments of history. She is the author of *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (2006, MIT Press) and the editor of the collection "*Raw Data*" is an Oxymoron (2013, MIT Press). Interest in the patterns of meaning-making that emerge out of reading the new against the grain of the old is very much present in her latest book, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (2014, Duke University Press).

Paper Knowledge offers a glimpse at the ways in which the broad category of print culture may be rethought in light of contemporary digital texts. In order to do this, Gitelman constructs a selective media history of the document. At the outset the document is identified as a genre recognizable by its "know-show" function: a function that binds knowledge to its demonstration in a dialectic of printed pages (Gitelman 1-2). An object may only become a document once it is mobilized as evidence - knowledge is confirmed as such by documentary evidence, and documentary evidence is then confirmed by the "known facts" to which it refers (3). According to Gitelman's argument, the mobilization of documentary evidence is linked to the reproduction of the object-document. Indeed, duplication and circulation of documents is central to Gitelman's discussion as she describes "a confusion of mobilities" (22). These are mobilities and movements confused, in part, by a simultaneous inertia. While documents themselves move and record the movements of people and things through time and space, they are at the same time preservative and often kept as part of "permanent" records designed to be consulted in an imagined future (22).

While Gitelman does not make it explicit, it seems that the method outlined in *Paper*

Knowledge is closely linked to media archaeology. This is particularly apparent in the selection of unconventional uses of documentary media in order to bring their attendant protocols under scrutiny. Media archaeology has been loosely defined by scholars such as Wolfgang Ernst, Jussi Parikka and Erkki Huhtamo as both a method and analytic tool used to reclaim aspects of media technologies and cultures that would have otherwise been forgotten or excluded from cultural histories.¹ While there is agreement on this cursory definition, Ernst and Parikka each engage distinct approaches to the work of media archaeology. Ernst, in the German tradition, focuses much more on the technology itself, while Parikka, in a more American fashion, is more concerned with the cultural influences on and implications of media technology. Gitelman's work is most closely related to the American form of media archaeology. As Huhtamo and Parikka note in their introduction to the influential anthology, *Media Archaeology*, “[d]ead ends, losers, and inventions that never made it into a material product have important stories to tell” (Huhtamo and Parikka 3). Although Gitelman engages with enormously popular technologies such as the Xerox machine and the PDF file format, her focus on their unconventional uses places *Paper Knowledge* within a media archaeological mode.

The document in *Paper Knowledge* is described as self-evident and familiar. As Gitelman argues, the identification of a document as such “is collective, spontaneous, and dynamic”—a document should be instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with North American bureaucracy (Gitelman 2). The document in this sense is unremarkable and overlooked because its formal properties have been naturalized. It is this familiarity that Gitelman seeks to address in the comparative readings of her four case studies - blank books and job printing, the typescript book, xerography, and the PDF. Though the case studies are arranged chronologically, they do not participate in a teleological narrative of media progress. Rather the case studies in all their specificity are juxtaposed in order to call attention to the “ruptures in media historical narration” (19). To that end, Gitelman organizes her chapters around the activities of eccentric subjects, subjects who represent irregularities in media history. These juxtapositions and offbeat

¹ For more detailed explanation of Media Archaeology see Ernst's *Media Archaeology* (2011), Parikka's *What is Media Archaeology?* (2012), and Parikka and Huhtamo's introduction to *Media Archaeology* (2011).

characters make the document as a genre just strange enough to be newly intelligible. Elsewhere Gitelman has commented that focusing on anomaly reveals the frustrated assumptions of the norm (*Always Already New*, 130). In juxtaposing selective histories and using eccentric characters as the framing device for each case study, Gitelman makes the familiar strange in order to better understand the naturalized meanings and assumptions that are bound up in the reproduction and circulation of documents.

Paper Knowledge does a good job of exploring the workings of paper documents, but leaves something to be desired in its discussion of digital texts and documents. Gitelman makes many gestures throughout the book towards a rethinking of digital texts, but these never seem to land. There is no sustained analysis of digital documents as such, and even the discussion of PDF files only engages the digital inasmuch as it reproduces or resists the assumptions of printed paper documents. The protocols and assumptions about the functioning of PDFs and digital texts are read against the grain of the older documentary media in order to better understand the latter. This seems to be an extension of the media archaeological approach of Gitelman's earlier book, *Always Already New*, and is quite revealing of the ways that paper documents operate, but leaves digital texts behind.

One of the more interesting threads throughout the book is the equation of reproduction to access. The decentralization of records and the consequent increase in access is central to Gitelman's discussion of the debates over how best to reproduce research materials in bulk, and the transformation of office records with Xerox and PDF technologies. It is perhaps an extension of Gitelman's present argument, but it seems important to note that the logics of digital databases and archives recall the logic of reproduction and access at work in the creation of indexes of research materials as discussed in the second chapter. The creation of these indexes involved the re-collection of records and lists of holdings into a single volume to be reproduced and redistributed. Similarly, online databases such as Google Books collect together endlessly reproducible materials in order that they may be more widely accessible.

It is also worth noting that documents and records are the stuff of archives and that the “know-show” function that Gitelman describes is very much the way archival records get taken up as evidence in the writing of histories. Records may be used as evidence of history because they are found in archives, and records are kept in archives because they are evidence. Though as the work of historians such as Ann Laura Stoler (*Along the Archival Grain* 2009), Luise White (*Speaking with Vampires* 2000), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (*Silencing the Past* 1995) has demonstrated, there is nothing self-evident about the evidence found in archival records. Gitelman briefly touches on this issue in her discussion of the nature of the research materials to be documented and disseminated that is part of the larger discussion of the typescript book (*Paper Knowledge*, 58). This goes beyond the scope of *Paper Knowledge*, but is a thread perhaps worth taking up in later projects. In calling attention to and historicizing the intuitive self-evidence of the document, Gitelman’s *Paper Knowledge* provides a good basis for further investigation of the ontological assumptions bound up in historical and archival documentary evidence.

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Works Cited

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