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Chris Peters

'Review of Trend's *Worlding: Identity, Media, and Imagination in a Digital Age*'

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David Trend, *Worlding: Identity, Media, and Imagination in a Digital Age*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-61205-230-4, \$35.95, £22.20 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Chris Peters, *University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

David Trend's recent book, *Worlding*, is an engaging and provocative read about the blending of "real" and "virtual" worlds in a digital age. It considers the ways we envision ourselves and others – increasingly through media – and how this intertwining and intermingling of the virtual/real offers possibilities for utopian thinking in an era oftentimes marked by pessimism and very tangible issues surrounding consumerism, economic uncertainty, and global inequality. Trend's idea of "worlding" is highly ambitious, as is the scope of the book itself. Over its course, Trend weaves back-and-forth between big topics, famed thinkers, and grand ideas, effectively relating these back to contemporary society. He notes from the outset that *Worlding* is a broad vision, and the term stretches back to Heidegger who employed it to mean "being-in-the-world" (p. vii). When Trend invokes it, worlding is a "word, an argument, and a possibility" (p. vii), though this flexibility should not be misconstrued as apolitical. Its "undetermined character hardly makes 'worlding' innocent, deriving as it does from a noun referencing concepts of origins, boundaries, ethnicities, governance, and even consciousness itself" (p. viii). Trend elaborates further on this idea of "worlding" over the first two chapters and we are told it encompasses many theories and is many things, such that if we tried to reverse the process, it would be interesting to see what Trend says "worlding" isn't.

In chapters 3 through 8 the notion becomes more concrete, and the many examples offered in these chapters to illustrate and substantiate complex ideas are the book's greatest strength. Chapter 3, "Consuming Desires", outlines the preeminent debates on consumption and capitalism, elaborating on the rise of consumer culture as "money brings real and virtual worlds together like nothing else" (p. 37). It incorporates contemporary questions on the influence of concentrated spaces of consumption and e-commerce noting that the rise of internet shopping and banking means "the need to read details or think about shopping is minimized—making the process easier and, many would say, more efficient. But the ease of Internet shopping also represents yet another way that reading and thinking are diminished in the digital era" (p. 52). Chapter 4, "Mapping Media", looks at how real and virtual territories are demarcated, "exploring it as a continuum rather than a clear boundary" (p. 54). Discussing how technology extends our worlds and creates new ones, and how this relates to issues such as globalization and storytelling, Trend looks at "what goes on inside our minds as we see and inhabit a world of images" (p. 78). Chapter 5, "Destination America", focuses on the American Dream and a case study of the "Americana" shopping and lifestyle enterprise in Glendale, California. The emphasis here is on how the "worlds" we traverse are increasingly commercialized and "scripted" (p. 85). Chapter 6, "Virtual Culture" outlines the emergence of online communities via social media, the ubiquity of new media forms, and the rise of immersive videogames. Its aim is "to recognize how real and imaginary worlds coexist and mutually reinforce each other" (p. 108). Chapter 7, "The Mean World", departs from ideas of social anxiety, fear, and conflict to investigate the mediation of violence, asserting that "people take pleasure in media violence because it seems to take place in another world. It can be made aesthetically dazzling or even beautiful" (142). The closing chapter, "Globalization", looks to the challenges surrounding petroleum resources, water, starvation, climate change, and religion, and how the "increasingly vivid and more and more intense and immersive" ways of "travel[ing] in the mind" (p. 153) can be cause for optimism. Trend ends the book by calling upon this potential, noting that while the rise of new "ways to imagine and build new worlds" is expanding, "life does not advance with a mouse click or the push of a button. A person needs to act [...]" (p. 171).

These chapters' grounded illustrations stand in contrast to the preface and first two chapters, in which Trend sketches out the conceptual notion and philosophical underpinnings of "worlding". These sections suffer somewhat from trying to overreach with the concept; it is not entirely clear at the end of them exactly how "worlding" synthesizes a host of debates, concepts, and issues – tantamount to the history of modern thought – nor is it clear what "worlding" brings to the table that other established frameworks and concepts don't already explain with greater precision. Understanding how we could marshal Trend's idea for theoretical purchase thus becomes demanding. The worlds he tries to explain and encompass with the idea stretch from the universe down to the *World of Warcraft*, although the book has a predominantly American focus. Yet arguably, there are important conceptual reasons for distinguishing the virtual "world" of videogames from say the "world" of suburban immigrants (although indeed, these worlds aren't mutually exclusive). A potential critique is that trying to explain both with the totalizing idea of "worlding" covers up some important conceptual distinctions. There are reasons that "online gaming" – pointing to virtual play, changing technological frameworks and affordances to connect, etcetera – and "social exclusion" – pointing to integration in civic culture, structural inequalities, marginalization, and so forth – are terms which seem to "fit" these situations a bit more closely. This possible issue of terminological imprecision would be less damning if Trend didn't make such charges about other academic approaches himself, such as: "An entire theoretical literature has tried to explain how sign systems, language, and media influence or fail to influence the way people see their worlds and treat each other. But most of that literature has failed to explain these processes adequately" (p. 5); "Globalization" is that often abstract term for our larger world and its systems" (p. 7); and thinking about a better world, "means looking beyond the abstract theories of intellectuals lost in time to the concrete ideas undergirding much of what we think and do" (p. 10).

That being said, over these initial chapters Trend does pull off the ambitious task of linking the intellectual trajectory of many noteworthy names and weighty theories, connecting these discussions to his "worlding" heuristic device to foreground prominent academic debates in media and cultural studies, sociology and philosophy. Such ambition and clear writing should be applauded, and one can certainly imagine university students finding this a helpful overview of different traditions to conceptualize, and approaches to delineate, the "world" or "worlds". Academics may also find it useful to spark associative thinking on questions of identity, media, and experience that cross paradigms and fields. In a scholarly era where interdisciplinarity is increasingly lauded and encouraged (discursively as well as materially through funding agencies), looking to such common questions and concerns is certainly a worthwhile endeavour. In this respect, as well as in the clear examples he raises later in the book, Trend certainly takes us on such a journey.