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Thinking Media Aesthetics

Media Studies, Film Studies and the Arts



Foreword

Media Aesthetics

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For those of us who like to think with our ears (as Adorno once put it), the phrase “media aesthetics” has a slightly jarring quality.¹ It is not just the awkward conjunction of Latin and Greek; it is the forcing together of modern and ancient concepts, a term associated on the one hand with mass society and information theory, while the other evokes the world of elite taste and fine art. As McLuhan would have put it, medium implies “message,” while aesthetics is about the *massage* of the body, its extensions, and its senses. Of course McLuhan went on to write and design a graphically experimental book entitled *The Medium is the Massage*.² He was not bothered by the shocking little pun; in fact puns, with their foregrounding of the nonsensical and hypersensuous character of speech itself, may well have been his favorite figure of speech. So aesthetics, the study of the senses and the arts that massage them, constituted the central hub around which issues such as communication, technology, and social forms circulated in his unified field theory of media. He thought that the only people who could really comprehend the impact of a new medium would be artists who were willing to play with and upon its sensory capabilities – to think with their ears, their fingers and toes. Those concerned primarily with content or messages, by contrast, would never be able to see (or hear or feel) how the medium was altering the ratio of their senses. And feeling, for McLuhan, was never merely a matter of sensuous apprehension, but of emotional and affective *comprehension*, of a body bathed in hot and cool media. Never mind which medium (television, radio, newspapers) is to be labeled hot or cool: the point is to take the temperature of a medium, which is to say the temperature of a body – individual or collective – in a world of sensory ratios.

McLuhan’s visionary legacy was, I think, largely forgotten in the decades after his death. McLuhan himself was debunked as a crank who had been seduced into nonsensical proclamations by his rise as a media celebrity who could upstage the likes of Truman Capote on the Dick Cavett show. Filmmaker David Cronenberg, who had been in McLuhan’s classes at the University of Toronto, pronounced the epitaph for the father of media studies in his classic horror film,

1 This was the opening observation of Adorno’s essay, “Cultural Criticism,” and of course he was much more emphatic, describing this phrase as a barbarism.

2 Co-authored and designed with Quentin Fiore (1967).

Videodrome. The great media theorist, Dr. Brian Oblivion, a transparent caricature of McLuhan, is portrayed as the only person in the world who truly understands what media are doing to the human sensorium (“the television screen has become the retina of the mind’s eye; therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television”). Dr. Oblivion is therefore singled out by the evil *Videodrome* corporation as “its first victim.”

After McLuhan, media studies were quickly balkanized into academic specialties that had little awareness of or interest in each other. Schools of communication, ruled by quantitative sociological discourse, paradigms of mass media advertising and journalism and technical gadgetry did not talk to departments of art history; art history turned its back on philosophical aesthetics in favor of historicism, and only grudgingly came to acknowledge its constitutive relation to language and literature; and literary studies, driven to distraction by overly literal readings of Derridean sayings such as “there is nothing outside the text,” settled into a linguistically centered semiotics that began to rival Renaissance rhetoric in its proliferation of technical terms and distinctions. Meanwhile, McLuhan was eclipsed by the rising star of Walter Benjamin, whose concept of “mechanical reproduction” took over the humanities at precisely the moment that mechanistic paradigms were being replaced (as McLuhan foresaw) by electronic and biocybernetic models. One could say of media studies in the wake of McLuhan what the evil prison warden says of the stubborn inmate played by Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*: “what we have here is a failure to communicate.”

A new synthesis in media studies seemed to be offered, however, in the 1990s by the appearance of Friedrich Kittler’s magnum opus, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, a lively, experimental collage of stories, jokes, songs, and gadgets, woven into a dark narrative of the end of humanity and the rise of the computer (Kittler 1999 [1986]). Kittler offered media theory as Gothic romance, a tale of media history driven by war, “the mother of invention,” of “situation rooms” in which Dr. Strangeloves ponder the calculus of destruction, and McLuhan’s sensory ratios are wired up to keyboard interfaces, headphones, and optical scanners.

Kittler’s brilliant intervention in media studies had the effect of opening up a whole new media archaeology for historical investigation, and re-oriented attention to computer software and hardware, and (to a lesser extent) to the new networks of interactive machines. Arriving along with the rise of the internet, it provoked a wave of studies in so-called “new media” (led by Peter Lunenfeld and Lev Manovich, among others) that announced a “digital turn” in which the old analog-based “mechanical” media (especially photography and cinema) were to be replaced by binary codes, data bases, and self-executing algorithms. Reality, especially the kind delivered by analog photography with its supposedly “indexical” relation to the referent, along with notions of representation and mimesis,

were all to be consigned to the dustbin of history.³ As Kittler put it, the sensory outputs provided by computers were to be regarded merely as “eyewash” and “entertainment” for the stunned survivors of humanity, something to keep them distracted “in the meantime” as they approach their final replacement by the machines they had built.



Ill 1: Still from *The Matrix*, 1999, d. Andy and Lana Wachoski.

While this story, popularized by films like *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, was beguiling, one can see immediately how it tended to minimize the question of aesthetics as a merely superficial matter that conceals the Real (understood in the Lacanian sense as trauma) of ones and zeros, of alphanumeric code. The return of something called “media aesthetics” to our attention, might be understood, then, as a re-focussing on the superficial “eyewash” that was so central to McLuhan’s

3 For an argument that digital photography has lost the indexical relation with the real offered by chemical-based photography, see William J. Mitchell (no relation) (1992), *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. For a critique of this view, see my essay, “Realism and the Digital Image,” in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art around Alan Sekula’s Photography*, Jan Baetens and Hilde van Gelder (2006) (eds.).

vision of media. One could already see this return coming in the key moment of *The Matrix*, when Neo (“The One” sent to save us from the Matrix) sees through the eyewash into the Real world of streaming alphanumeric code. As the still from this moment reveals, however, this revelation is simultaneously a return to the analog. The agents of the Matrix are *not* merely programs or amorphous clusters of digits: they have recognizable human forms.

The digital turn will never be properly understood if it is not placed in a dialectic with the analog, and with what Brian Massumi has called “the superiority of the analog.”⁴ The digital is NOT an invention of the 20th century, nor is it equivalent to computer codes. The digital has always been with us in the form of finite sets of discrete characters (e.g., alphabets and number systems) and in the graphic media, in everything from the Ben Day dots of newspaper photos, to the medium of mosaic tile, to the material equivalent of pixels in Australian sand painting. Eyewashing and brainwashing have to be understood in their mutual interactivity. Every turn toward new media is simultaneously a turn toward a new form of *immediacy*. The obscure, unreadable ciphers of code are most often mobilized, not to encrypt a secret, but to produce a new form of transparency.

Another problem with Kittler’s narrative is launched in the opening sentence of his book: “*Media determine our situation.*” This is followed by a detour into the “situation room” of the German high command in World War II, plotting the trajectories of air strikes in the battle of Britain. When Mark Hansen and I were writing the introduction to *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, we immediately thought of using Kittler’s sentence as the opening epigraph (2010). But our first *second* thought was to introduce a strategic revision, and to insist that “media *are* our situation.” The implicit aim of this revision was to put into question the seductive rhetoric of media as outside agencies that cause things, the language of determinism and determination. Are media really the “determining instance” of a situation? Or are they better pictured as themselves the situation, an environment in which human experience and (inter)action take place? Would it not be better to see media, rather than as the determining factor in a cause and effect scenario, as an ecosystem in which processes may or may not take place? Like the old notion of God as the element “in which we live and move and have our being,” media surround us on every side. But it is a “we” that inhabits them, a “we” that experiences every medium as the vehicle of some form of immediacy or opacity.

I would want to qualify the notion of medium-as-situation or environment even further by suggesting that it is never *all* of a situation. One of the deepest temptations of the concept of media is its tendency toward totalization. Even the old model of media as communication device had this as a built-in tendency.

4 See the chapter with this title in Massumi (2002).

Like an accordion, the model of sender-medium-receiver (call this the “telephonic” image) immediately expanded to include the sender/receiver function as components of the medium.⁵ Pretty soon everything is a medium, the old Derridean mantra comes back to haunt us, and there is nothing outside the media. I would prefer to say that there is *always* something outside the medium, namely, the zone of immediacy and the unmediated that it both produces and encounters. McLuhan, again, was a wise guide to this aspect of media, noting that the new media of his time, television especially, were arriving in a wide variety of cultural, political, and social situations. Television in Africa, he noted, did not produce or encounter the same situation that it did in the United States in the 1960s (for one thing, collective viewing situations were much more common, as distinct from the private domestic sphere of American households). Today the internet encounters quite a different set of circumstances as it crosses national borders, at the same time that it facilitates McLuhan’s long anticipated “global village.” What people failed to understand in McLuhan’s time (and our own) is that a village is not necessarily a utopia. Real villages, as those of us who grew up in rural America can testify, can be very nasty places.

Media aesthetics, then, promises to provide a salutary resistance to the all-or-nothing tendencies of media theory, and of that form of media history that treats everything as a consequence of some media invention. My version of media aesthetics would not treat the widely heralded “digital turn,” for instance, as a jettisoning of the analog, or a reduction to dematerialized and disembodied experiences. The digital is experienced in the ten fingers tapping on a QWERTY keyboard interface and moving a mouse, or brushing across a touch-pad or touch-screen. The computer introduces a new form of tactility, accompanied by new maladies such as carpal tunnel syndrome. The codes and algorithms of informatics are also encoded in the molecular structure of living organisms, so that the cybernetic model of “control” and the figure of the cyber as “steersman” is resisted by the stormy seas of life itself. The technical revolution of our time is not merely cybernetic, but biocybernetic, producing a world of machines infected with viruses, and engineered life forms tethered to increasingly complex prostheses.⁶ Smart bombs and suicide bombers, drones and clones populate our imaginary universe of “extensions of man,” and of highly ambiguous models of “agency.” What counts as a “free agent” in the age of biocybernetics? Consider, for instance, that one of the dominant espionage narratives of our time portrays the secret agent as

5 For a further account of the accordion effect in media theory, see my chapter, “Addressing Media,” in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005).

6 For further development of this idea, see my chapter, “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetics,” in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*.

an orphan (James Bond in *Skyfall*) or as an amnesiac (and “rogue agent”) who has escaped the control of his agency as in Matt Damon’s *Bourne* series. Or that the Cold War figure of the brain-washed automaton who has been turned into an assassin (Laurence Harvey in *the Manchurian Candidate*), has been replaced in the War on Terror by the religious convert (Sergeant Brody in *Homeland*) who is motivated by moral outrage and true blue patriotism (his suicide video shows him affirming his identity as a U.S. Marine, festooned with all his decorations). *Homeland* transfers the position of madness to the prescient, Cassandra-like CIA agent, whose bipolar paranoia and mania allow her to see impending threats that are invisible to everyone else. She is herself a medium, in the old sense of the seer at a séance, in the grip of intuitions that she cannot prove, but that hold her with obsessive certainty.

The model of the free agent versus the agent of a higher power, free will versus determinism, shimmers with ambiguity in the environment of contemporary media systems, which is why it is so difficult to settle the question of whether (to re-cite Kittler) “media determine our situation,” or whether they serve as a passive, neutral background of potentials, as Niklas Luhmann (2000) would argue. But perhaps contemporary media, the “extended sensorium” or global nervous system that McLuhan predicted, is simply the latest version of that image of the divinity in which “we live and move and have our being.” Perhaps that is why the rhetoric of religion is so deeply woven into the discourse on media, why concepts like media and mediation so easily turn into god-terms even in secular, technical contexts, why the concrete materiality of a medium is so easily abstracted and spiritualized by the terminology of media and mediation.

Media aesthetics, finally, produces an interesting convergence of the problem of singularity and multiplicity. We see this in everyday parlance in our tendency to describe “the media” as if they were a kind of collective body, like Hobbes’s image of the sovereign as a single monstrous body containing multitudes. In mass media, the figures of “talking heads” speak as agents of radically heterogeneous interests – corporate sponsors, administrative hierarchies, journalistic canons, market shares. All this condenses into something called “the media,” or (more prejudicially) the “Liberal Media.” Meanwhile, each medium is spoken of as if it were a unique, essential constellation of materials, techniques, and practices – its “medium specificity.” This singular concept of the medium, a central feature of modernist aesthetics from Clement Greenberg to Michael Fried, is widely regarded now as a relic of the time when media aesthetics was a quest for purity – pure painting, music, poetry – and a rigorous avoidance of hybridity and multi-media interplay among the arts. “What lies between the arts is theater,” insisted Fried (1998 [1967]), and that sort of theatricality is the enemy of any art form that aims to remain faithful to and compete with the great aesthetic

achievements of the past. Postmodernism in the arts, then, was a movement that renounced the medium as a singular, essential formation in favor of the media understood precisely as the spaces between the arts, and as artistic practices that situated themselves between images and words and music, between concepts and performances, between bodies and spaces. That is why postmodernism was so deeply linked to the rise of interdisciplinarity, the emergence of relations between the disciplines that study the arts and sciences. All the more paradoxical, then, that media studies itself was so balkanized, with so little communication between the study of mass media, artistic media, and technology. When Mark Hansen and I set out to produce a collection of *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, then, one of our central aims was to produce a conversation among the different disciplines that engage with media. We wanted to imagine a universe where Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* would be read alongside Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media* alongside Adorno and Horkheimer on the culture industry alongside David Graeber's analysis of the history of money and exchange alongside Rosalind Krauss's account of the "post-medium" condition in the arts (see Graeber 2010). Media aesthetics would be, we hoped, a catalyst for that conversation.

The concept of media aesthetics has a personal resonance for me as a landmark in my evolution as a scholar. In the early 1990s I began to teach a course entitled "Visual Culture" and to write about this nascent field as a kind of "indiscipline" that would link art history to film, media studies, physical and psychological optics, and anthropology. Starting with a review essay entitled "The Pictorial Turn" (prompted by the publication of Jonathan Crary's (1990) *Techniques of the Observer* at the same time as the first English publication of Erwin Panofsky's classic "Perspective as Symbolic Form") I found myself working directly against the tendency to "linguify" art history led by Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal in the 1980s.⁷ As an alternative to Richard Rorty's "linguistic turn," I turned in exactly the opposite direction, by way of a re-reading of philosophy and theory grounded in an obsession with – and fear of – the image. My ambition for art history was to promote its primary theoretical object, the visual image, from its status as a secondary and subordinate element of culture, always to be explained by reference to language, into a primary datum of the human sciences. Rather than colonize art history with methods derived from the textual disciplines, I wanted to strike back at the empire of language, and insist on the image or icon as a "firstness" (as Charles Sanders Peirce called it) in the production of meaning and emotion.

7 Panofsky's, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* was published by Zone Books in 1991 with an excellent translation by Christopher S. Wood. My review essay, "The Pictorial Turn," appeared in *ArtForum* in March of 1992.

Around 2000 I began to re-orient this initiative around the concepts of media, medium, and mediation, and to teach a course entitled “Theories of Media” that aimed to trace the specific development of media studies from Marshall McLuhan to Friedrich Kittler, with ample representation of earlier key texts on media, from Aristotle and Plato to Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School. Several things motivated this transition. First, it had become increasingly clear to me that the emphasis on *vision* and *visuality* (which I still find very productive for the study of culture) needed to be extended with a consideration of the other senses, particularly hearing and touch. Second, it had struck me that the role of visual culture all along had been to produce a series of mediations among disciplines that would ordinarily not be talking to each other. Since I had come to the study of the visual arts from the sphere of literature and literary theory, spurred on the one hand by a general interest in theory, and on the other by a particular interest in the composite art of painter-poet William Blake, it began to be increasingly obvious to me that the real subject of my work was the relations among different media, art forms, sensory modalities, and codes of signification, as well as the disciplines that addressed them.

As for theory as such, I was mindful of Fredric Jameson’s canny remark that theory was nothing more than a form of philosophy that is conscious of its own embeddedness in language, including rhetoric and poetics. But it quickly dawned on me that one could extend Jameson’s observation by postulating a notion of *medium theory*, a form of philosophical reflection that is conscious of its embeddedness in non-linguistic media, such as music and the graphic arts. Medium theory is not the same as media theory. It does not come at media from outside, as an explanatory meta-language. It is an immanent metalanguage – or more to the point – a set of “metapictures” that show us what pictures are, how they work, what they want. Instead of a “theory of pictures,” medium theory requires a *Picture Theory*,⁸ in which “picture” is ambiguously both an adjective and a verb.

It became clear to a group of my colleagues at the University of Chicago that media, understood in this sort of interdisciplinary framework, were essential to the fabric of a liberal education as well. As a result, around 2005 we set about designing a new “common core” curriculum based precisely in the concept of media aesthetics. The idea of a common core of “great books” has been a fixture of undergraduate education at Chicago for many years, one that has been modified periodically to reflect new movements in the humanities. For instance, during the rise of “cultural studies” in the 1990s, a new freshman core called “Reading Cultures” was developed by a group of young faculty members: it divided the

8 See my 1994 book, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, especially the chapter on “Metapictures.”