

# From Media Literacy to Media Archaeology

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I had the honor of serving as chair of the legendary Department of Media Study at the University at Buffalo for a semester. I remember the thrill of knowing that I was treading in the footsteps of colleagues I had admired, who were, like me, English professors. I remember the excitement of finding a home among artists and media scholars for whom practice and theory were both inseparable and fluid. This was the context in which I came to make even more sense of the urgency of moving from media literacy to media archaeology, i.e. from the in-depth analysis of individual media texts to a technological- and material-based perspective in studying media practices and artifacts, past or present.

In light of my training in English studies, it was not surprising that I arrived at the University at Buffalo with a predilection for media literacy or the practice of reading and evaluating “texts” (including film and media) *critically*. In English studies, critical distance and insight go hand in hand, and often take the shape of critical analyses that are informed by a school of thought or theoretical approach. So I approached media in very much the same way I was tackling cultural and literary documents in my own discipline, by not just reading the text or media object but also by ... close reading it. In other words, my initial reading strategies

constituted my first encounter with perspective distortion: after all, close reading implies examining the text up close, which inevitably leads to transformation and warping due to the relative scale of nearby and distant features. It was not long before I became aware of my own disciplinary framing and limitations and benefited from the alternative approaches that had long been the purview of the work done by UB Media Study scholars and artists.

The first teacher to initiate me in an alternative approach to cultural artifacts was no other than Gerald O'Grady, a man I never got to meet but whose intellectual legacy transcended both his field (Medieval Literature) and his time. I knew of O'Grady as the McLuhanist media scholar who had founded the cutting-edge department that turned arcane art forms like video installation and media art into legitimate disciplines and art practices. I remember how struck I was not just by this pioneer's McLuhanist emphasis on the impact of technology on education, but by how his interest in literacy, the deep understanding of text, which naturally derived from his training in English studies had been transformed by his encounter with media forms and artists.

"Literacy," O'Grady was quoted as saying, "has been with us now since the nineteenth century and is pretty much accepted to be a universal thrust. My own theory is that we should move towards what I call 'mediacy.' It's a political issue: one cannot participate in society unless one can use the channels or codes of communication that are current in the time that one lives" (15). The verb O'Grady deployed fairly early on to define his new theory was *not* "understand" the "channels or codes of communication that are current in the time that one lives" but "use". His focus was already on a hybrid form of practice and scholarly activity that his term *mediacy* would increasingly encompass, an approach that would resonate with the similar work surrounding the medium of language that was happening in the Poetics program

of the English Department at the University at Buffalo, as well as in the experimental practices of the Music Department. These three departments constituted the convergence of like-minded, participatory, revolutionary art and scholarly practices that put the University at Buffalo on the map.

That was then; this is now. The institutional imagination that permitted those departments to flourish is gone. We live in a day and age when institutional memories are either too short or under too much stress to remember the importance of their own innovative traditions. I was amazed, for instance, to discover that international students from the Middle East seemed to know more about the legendary history of Buffalo than local artists or administrators who were operating in its shadow.

At a time when universities strive to justify the reason for their existence by trying to emulate professional schools and their experiential approach, it was deeply ironic to learn that the practice-based contributions of an influential generation of experimental media makers were not regarded highly. Their hands-on practice was apparently not the hands-on practice on demand, never mind that they were first to introduce the concept in relation to literacy and media theory and practice in the first place. In the context of the university's new commitment to vocational training and standardized assessments, the values and esoteric methods of a Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Steina and Woody Vasulka seemed out of place. James Blue, the extraordinary documentary filmmaker who was doing street work in Huston with kids using Super-8 before he arrived at Buffalo, was relegated to the oubliettes by administrators who promoted the exact same kind of learning his work embodied. Many of Tony Conrad's documentary videos had socio-political contents even though they adopted experimental methods to critique the authority relationships. Last but not least, Steina and

Woody Vasulka were interested in manipulating media to create an image. Their art practice was truly media archaeological: they were interested not in content-making but in exploring the material aspect of media.

I remember taking note of these developments, with all their attendant ironies, and wondering why the university was not capitalizing on the uniqueness of legacies that had brought practice and the experiential back in full force at our institution. I just didn't get it. Why were these not evoked and celebrated? Was this yet another form of taking credit for (re)inventing the wheel? Or just a lack of historicized hindsight? For me, the antidote to this atavism had to be in a media archaeology that could educate and enlighten. A new approach would reveal how the very words through which I and others had experienced the world but that we thought of as separate from media were no less saturated and determined by its operations and mechanisms than what we have defined as media historically.

From its onset, O'Grady's department was about bridging the gulf that separated literature and media, high from low culture: he acquired and lent media equipment to novice and accomplished artists alike. Maybe, just maybe, then, we should be able to conceive of the avant-garde and experimental nature of his department's media-making practices as an extension of that democratizing impulse rather than as its opposite? Too many of us today, including in universities, seem to have fallen for the fallacious assumptions of a mainstream and ahistorical discourse that associates all avant-garde practices with an ivory-tower and out-of-touch elite. Nothing could be further from the truth, and that is why we have launched this journal.

We need to understand emerging media technologies through a critical scrutiny of the existing narratives about what constitutes popular, commercial, and avant-garde media. The

focus in higher education may be on hands-on skills, but that no longer seems to include the kind of experimental approaches to media (or language) that necessarily characterized a practice-informed theory, and theory in turn informed by practice. Why was there a necessary imbrication of practice-based, hands-on media making with experimental practices in a department whose founder had made vocational training and instrumental knowledge his mission? Why am I claiming that there is continuity where others see a gulf, troublingly distancing themselves from an institution's most important legacies? Simply because to know how a medium works and gets normalized in a particular social context, taken for granted, used and abused, it takes experimenting with it. It takes the kind of speculative and eye-opening interventions experimental practices have provided and continue to provide. Only then, when we have reshuffled practices and certainties whose obscured workings turn us into passive consumers of ideas and images, can we use the medium in the kind of productive and inspiring ways that move us forward as a society and as a species. The goal isn't going back; that is nostalgia. It is using something lost to move forward. In the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's words, "life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward" (306).

The students who come out of a department whose reason for being is precisely *not* to churn out commercially-minded, assembly-line automatons intent on producing just any film on demand go on, in fact, to create video and clips institutions and corporations would fight to have represent them. New media aesthetics are not at odds with commercial, professional, and bureaucratic discourse. It is the latter whose ethos is often at odds with the democratizing impulses that motivate media artists. It is not that media artists leave the university unable to contribute to commercially-minded media, agendas and positions. It is that media artists

require a commitment to a broader, more humane, and hopeful dynamics before they join particular remunerative agendas.

At the very least, at a time when the legacies, values and methods of pioneers in the field of Media Study seem under duress, we owe it to our students to recognize the very public role these practiced-based approaches played, each in their own way. It may very well be that few will recall the emancipatory, democratic, accessible because practice-based potential of a generation that was once the necessary avant-garde, but it is also true that legacies need not be recognized to persist, and literally matter.

#### Works Cited

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