

Pas de chemin, pas de ligne

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The question of what it means to study media—what this undisciplined field can do—is, for me, bound up with questions of history, including my *own* history. I did not begin as a student of media, and I did not receive a degree in it. (There were not many places to get a degree in it.) As an undergraduate, I studied comparative literature in a department profoundly influenced by debates in post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and trauma studies. Of course, I did not know *all that* then, could not name the frameworks that worked upon me and shaped the syllabi I studied, and did not quite grasp how my training was embedded—and would embed me—in certain histories of thought that continue to inform how I encounter and interpret texts and images.

Back then, I remember reading Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant (The Lover)*, a story about a life that “does not exist,” in part, because a photograph was never taken. The image is missing and yet it persists. Duras writes: “So, I’m fifteen and a half. It’s on a ferry crossing the Mekong River. The image lasts all the way across” (5). The crossing is experienced as a photograph and yet no evidence of the experience remains. It is a traumatic structure and a photographic one: a missed encounter, a moment that irreparably splits in two (what was and

what could have been). Duras pursues the absence, fills it in with language. She writes the photograph that was never taken, remembers it as best she can in words. But the untaken photograph she remembers—the image that she writes—is really a *film*. After all, if the image had been taken, it would have lasted “all the way across” the river.

In this way, as a student of literature many years ago, the boundaries of writing immediately gave way to other modes of representation (photography, cinema) and to a comparative thinking about media as much as about languages. I followed Duras from *L'Amant* to her other novels, her works of theater, her enigmatic short essays and photographic albums, and her expansive, durational cinema. The compulsive effort to re-present—to recall a childhood and mark the phenomenon of forgetting it—extends across her entire body of work. Images appear and re-appear, over and over again, in different textual and visual formations. I came to understand photomechanical technology not only as a part of how time and memory are structured in her works but also as foundational to her own iterative process of rewritings, adaptations, and resuscitations. Each medium seemed to preserve and annihilate in its own distinct way. Looking back, Duras was the first media theorist I ever read.

Like any origin story, this one likely cannot be trusted. From time to time, I remember passages from Duras's books, and scenes from her films. I am sure that I misremember them too, and what they really meant for me at the moment of our first encounter.

But the question of what media communicates to us about history—how it structures our relationship to history, both what we remember and what we necessarily forget—continues to underpin my research and my relationship to the field. In my own work, media studies is the interstitial space for thinking comparatively about the historicity of representational technologies, their particular indexical and deictic structures, the archives that they make

possible, and the historical methodologies that they constitute and destabilize. In keeping with certain of my post-structural inheritances, I am interested in how technology always exceeds the secondary or seemingly passive processes of preservation and storage; I am concerned with how particular media formations *act* upon history, determine our experiences of it in the first instance. Each technology has its own historical epistemology.

I used to think that Derrida's insistence that "portable tape recorders, computers, printers, faxes, televisions, teleconferences, and above all E-mail" would have radically transformed psychoanalysis had the technology been around for Freud was a wonderfully unintentional accounting of media obsolescence and a wild misreading of the powers of email. And then, a few weeks ago, I was searching for an innocuous word among my thousands of emails and twelve forgotten messages from my dead father returned to me. Technology forgets and remembers, archives and acts and makes you grieve. In any case, I wrote him back.

I am at the beginning of a new project now, less film-centric than the last. I am thinking about the ways that contemporary visual media, from drone images of climate change to the reanimating visions of artificial neural networks, function as historical artifacts despite their seeming lack of artifactual authority. Arguments about what the digital is and how it means have long emphasized its separation from the historical privileges, physical "thereness," and evidentiary seriousness of the analog image. This distinction no longer seems to hold. What is perhaps most puzzling about these images is that they mimic the *affective structures* (e.g., melancholy, mourning, spectrality, loss) that we have tended to associate with the analog index. In turn, I wonder how these digital images might compel us to imagine histories and catastrophes to come, how they might engage us in a work of mourning for a species or a planet (rather than, say, a family member), and, most importantly, how these images might

reshape the definitions that define twentieth-century visuality. What, in the end, separates analog and digital images if they generate the same phenomenal experience of history?

That academic research is always personal is something of a psychoanalytic cliché. The cliché holds for me if we accept that personal histories are always contingent, like a book assigned in a class you were never meant to take, and a death that arrived without warning at the end of a wondrous summer. For me, Media Studies is the field that helps make sense of the ways that we experience those contingencies, how we are forced to remember, and forget them.

For SBG

Works Cited

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