The introduction to

Critical Terms for Media Studies

Edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen

Introduction

"Media determine our situation." With these lines, German media scientist Friedrich Kittler begins his influential historical theorization of media, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Packed into Kittler's statement is a crucial claim: that media form the infrastructural basis, the quasi-transcendental condition, for experience and understanding. Like the strata of the seeable and sayable that, in French philosopher Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, make knowledge possible in a given historical moment, media broker the giving of space and time within which concrete experience becomes possible.

This broad claim forms the motivating insight behind this volume of essays devoted to "critical terms" for the study of media. In today's intellectual climate, it would be no exaggeration to cite media as a central topic of research in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences, and for precisely the reason indicated by Kittler. Media can no longer be dismissed as neutral or transparent, subordinate or merely supplemental to the information they convey. Rather, an explosion of work by a diverse group of scholars representing a host of fields, disciplines, and interdisciplines has attested to their social and cultural agency. Not surprisingly, in the wake of this work, "media studies" has emerged as a viable research area, under rubrics like Comparative Media Studies (at MIT) and Literature, Communication, and Culture (at Georgia Tech), and as the focus of an ever-expanding range of research initiatives across the globe.

Despite this process of institutional consolidation, however, media studies remains an amorphous enterprise, more of a loosely associated set of approaches than a unified field. One can

find practitioners who apply statistical methods to analyze audience response to media content and others who focus on the political impact of media consolidation and deregulation. "Media studies" embraces researchers who study virtual reality environments, hypertext fiction, materialist anthropology and culture, the history of information theory, precinematic devices, the institution of print, and word frequency in Greek literature. Indeed, the circle could be expanded to embrace any practice involving material artifacts, which is to say, the vast majority of practices in the humanities and humanistic social sciences. We are, it seems, all practitioners of media studies, whether we recognize it or not.

The question, then, becomes how we delimit media studies and, perhaps more profoundly, what is to be gained by such delimitation. Turning to Wikipedia (why not, given the key role played by new computational technologies in making the inescapability of media, well, inescapable), we find one strategy for dealing with the amorphous state of media studies: minimal definition. "Media Studies," the entry begins, "is the study of the constitution, history, and effects of media." It goes on to divide media studies (usefully, to be sure) into two traditions: on the one hand, "the tradition of empirical sciences like communication studies, sociology and economics," which "generally focus on Mass Media, their political, social, economic and cultural role and impact in creating and distributing content to media audiences"; on the other hand, "the tradition of humanities like literary theory, film/video studies, cultural studies and philosophy," which "focus on the constitution of media and question … [how] they shape what is regarded as knowledge and as communicable." Media studies thus comprises any study of media, within any discipline or interdiscipline, and may be subdivided according to the conventions governing research in those fields. These conventions group into two categories—the empirical and the interpretive—which, though far from homogeneous, designate two broad methodological approaches to media as the content of research.

We do not discount the value of such taxonomies. But we and the authors represented in this volume take a somewhat different tack. Rather than focusing on media as the *content* of this or that

research program, we foreground a range of broader theoretical questions: What is a medium? How does the concept of medium relate to the media? What role does mediation play in the operation of a medium, or of media more generally? How are media distributed across the nexus of technology, aesthetics, and society, and can they serve as points of convergence that facilitate communication among these domains? Expressed schematically, our approach calls on us to exploit the ambiguity of the concept of media—the slippage from plural to singular, from differentiated forms to overarching technical platforms and theoretical vantage points—as a third term capable of bridging, or "mediating," the binaries (empirical versus interpretive, form versus content, etc.) that have structured media studies until now. In a minimal sense, what the emergence of the collective singular *media* betokens is the operation of a deep, technoanthropological universal that has structured the history of humanity from its very origin (the tool-using and inventing primate). In addition to naming individual medium*s* at concrete points within that history, "media," in our view, also names a technical form or formal technics, indeed a general mediality that is constitutive of the human as a "biotechnical" form of life. Media, then, functions as a critical concept in something like the way that the Freudian unconscious, Marxian modes of production, and Derrida's concept of writing have done in their respective domains. Though a distinct innovation, this general concept of mediality that we are proposing reveals thinkers from Aristotle to Walter Benjamin to have been media theorists all along. Sophocles had no concept of the Oedipus complex, but after Freud it becomes difficult to think about Greek tragedy without reference to psychoanalytic categories. Shakespeare had no concept of media, but his plays may be profitably studied as specific syntheses of varied technical, architectural, and literary practices. The very concept of media is thus both a new invention and a tool for excavating the deepest archaeological layers of human forms of life. It is our collective attentiveness to this deep, technoanthropological universal sense of media that allows us to range across divides (characteristically triangulated) that are normally left unbroached in media studies: society-technology-aesthetics, empirical-formal-constitutive, social-historical-experiential.

As an illustration of the approach to media we are proposing, consider the case of Arnold Schwarzenegger's election in 2003 to the governorship of California. Schwarzenegger's victory has often been attributed to his status as a Hollywood star, as if that somehow guaranteed success. But this explanation, in our view, falls far short. If it were adequate, we would have to explain the fact that the vast majority of governors and other political officeholders in this country are not actors or other media celebrities, but practitioners of that arcane and tedious profession known as the law (see Peter Goodrich's essay on this topic in the book). If Hollywood stardom were a sufficient condition to attain political office, Congress would be populated by Susan Sarandons and Sylvester Stallones, not Michele Bachmanns and Ed Markeys. Something other than media stardom was clearly required. And that something was the nature of the legal and political systems that give California such a volatile and populist political culture, namely the rules that allow for popular referendums and, more specifically, make it relatively easy to recall an unpopular governor. California has, in other words, a distinctive set of political mediations in place that promote *immediacy* in the form of direct democracy and rapid interventions by the electorate. It is difficult to imagine the Schwarzenegger episode occurring in any other state.

But there is more to this particular media event. Schwarzenegger was not just any Hollywood star but an internationally known "action hero." He had attained iconic status first as a prize-winning bodybuilder whose sculpted physique reminds us that one of the earliest media of human expression is the malleable physical body itself. Schwarzenegger's standing as an icon of power and action gave him a decisive advantage over an incumbent who was widely perceived as weak and passive in the face of the various crises California was facing. This perception was reinforced—"re-mediated," as it were—by the mass media themselves. In one notable layout in the *New York Times,* just weeks before the recall vote, Schwarzenegger was shown above the fold surrounded by adoring fans, while Gray Davis appeared in a smaller photo below the fold playing bingo with a senior citizen. If ever a photo layout telegraphed (and arguably helped to produce) the ultimate result of an election this was it. One wonders if a similar layout in the January 28, 2008, *Times,* which

juxtaposed Barack Obama, engulfed in an adoring crowd, with Hillary Clinton, alone on a stage, addressing a distant audience, had a similar predictive and productive effect.

The California recall election illustrates the need for a multidimensional, "triangulated" approach to media events and phenomena. This one involved a "perfect storm" of political, technical, and aesthetic forms of mediation: the international circulation of cultural icons converged with the aesthetics of masculine body images at a specific historical moment in a regional political culture with particular electoral conventions. A simple appeal to Schwarzenegger's celebrity status will not do.

· · ·

"The treatment of *media* as a singular noun … is spreading into the upper cultural strata," Kingsley Amis observed in 1966. And at or around that moment, when it becomes possible to speak of media in the singular—as something other and indeed more than a simple accumulation of individual mediums—media studies emerges as a quasi-autonomous enterprise. The passage from content to medium, from a plurality of divergent contents to the collective singular, lies at the heart of what is arguably the first and still most influential effort to articulate a comprehensive theory of media. In *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan famously identified the medium and the message, or rather, he defined the message as the medium itself. From McLuhan's standpoint, a medium impacts human experience and society not primarily through the content that it mediates but through its formal, technical properties as a medium. The example he proffers in a central section of *Understanding Media* is the lightbulb, which, despite having no content of its own, profoundly impacts social life, literally illuminating the darkness and thereby extending the time of human social interaction. "Understanding media," then, does not mean just (or primarily) understanding individual mediums—electricity, the automobile, the typewriter, clothing—but rather something like understanding *from the perspective of media*. Media, become singular, forms an abstraction that denotes an attentiveness to the agency of the medium in the analysis of social change.

McLuhan urges us to focus on media independent of its ties with content, and in the process redefines media itself as content, not just a vehicle or channel. Though some, perhaps many, practitioners of media studies find this deeply problematic, McLuhan's redirection is foundational for "media studies" in the sense in which we employ it here. For precisely this reason, his approach has a capaciousness that can encompass the multiple and historically disjunctive origins of the term *media* as well as related terms like *medium* and *mediation*. Etymologically, our term *media* is not just the plural of *medium*. According to its first entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it derives from the postclassical Latin *media*, which, centuries before its modern singular use, denoted the voiced stops *b*, *g*, and *d* in Latin and Greek grammar. In this first entry, *media* carries several definitions: in addition to "a voiced stop in ancient Greek," or more generally "a (voiced) unaspirated stop," it refers to "the middle layer of the wall of a blood vessel or lymphatic vessel" and "a principal vein … in the basic pattern of insect wing venation." It is only in the etymology of a second entry that *media* as the plural of *medium* is mentioned. Definitions of the modern *medium*, derived from the Latin for "middle, centre, midst, intermediate course, intermediary," are broken into two categories: (1) "something that is intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes," and (2) "a person or thing which acts as an intermediary," whether a token of exchange, a material used in artistic expression, a "channel of mass communication," the "physical material … used for recording or reproducing data, images, or sound," a "substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses" (including "the substance in which an organism lives"), or a spiritualist who communicates with the dead. From the sense involving mass communication, the dictionary notes, "a new singular has arisen."

It seems clear that *media* as a collective singular noun is somehow tied to the emergence of the mass media—from the eighteenth century's investment in paper as the medium of circulation and sociality, to the nineteenth century's invention of electricity as the medium of phenomenality, to the newspapers of the later nineteenth century and the television of the twentieth,

forms through which information itself is mediated. In all of these cases, what is at stake is something more than the form of a specific content, and thus something that exceeds the pluralization of the term *medium*. Something that opens onto the notion of a form of life, of a general environment for living—for thinking, perceiving, sensing, feeling—as such. With this, the early modern meaning of medium as intervening substance seems not only to make a disguised reappearance but to do so in a manner—which is to say, with a generality—capable of sustaining the integrity of the term *media* across its various disjunctions and periodic reinventions. As a term denoting the "pervading or enveloping substance" in which human organisms live, *medium* designates a minimal relationality, a minimal openness to alterity, a minimal environmental coupling (in the terminology of contemporary ethological cognitive science), that appears somehow central to our understanding of ourselves as "essentially" prosthetic beings. Following the morphing of *medium* into the collective singular *media,* this minimal relationality comes into focus for itself: thus media studies can and should designate the study of our fundamental relationality, of the irreducible role of mediation in the history of human being.

Indeed, this generalized sense of media is at the heart of McLuhan's conceptualization of media as "extensions of man." By linking media—and the operation of mediation as such—to the historically changing sensory and perceptual "ratios" of human experience, McLuhan underscores the fundamental correlation of the human and the technical. Though never an explicit theme, this correlation animates his conception of media as a prosthesis of human agency, and it implicates the logic of human embodiment in media history in a way that makes common cause with some important contemporary media theorists and philosophers of technics. It anticipates, for example, the work of cultural critic N. Katherine Hayles, for whom disembodiment is an ideology that facilitates all-too-easy circulations of information without regard to cultural and material realities. In Hayles's view, information always operates in conjunction with bodies, whether these be computational embeddings or phenomenological embodiments, and careful

study of the imbrications of bodies and machines serves to underscore our fundamentally prosthetic mode of being.

In a slightly different register, McLuhan is the recognized source for Friedrich Kittler's media science, which as Kittler suggests, can be understood as a working out of the impossibility of understanding media, where media forms the infrastructural condition of possibility for understanding itself. Indeed, we propose that McLuhan cuts a path between these two positions: for him, in contrast to both Hayles and Kittler, it is the coupling of the human and the technological that holds primacy; while imbricated in myriad, complex ways, human enaction and technological materiality remain two distinct forms of informatic embodiment, two distinct processes of materialization that, no matter how much they may converge, retain their respective autonomy. For McLuhan, the human body can neither be understood as a first or primary medium, as some posthumanist critics propose, nor relegated to the status of merely optional receiver of technically mediated information, as Kittler proposes. Rather, the body for McLuhan comprises the non–self-sufficient "ground" for all acts of mediation, including those (the vast majority of mediations) that expand its agency beyond the "skin." The body, in sum, is a capacity for relationality that literally requires mediation and that, in a sense, cannot be conceptualized without it.

In this respect, McLuhan's work converges with the position of another important media critic, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler. Following the work of his compatriot, paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan, Stiegler advances a complex argument for the "co-originarity" of technics and the human; the break that gave rise to the human as a distinct species, that is, was the invention of technics (or the technics of invention)—the use of objects not simply as tools but as tools to make other tools. The contemporaneity in the fossil record of protohuman remains and primitive flint tools supports Stiegler's theorization of the human as, from the start, a prosthetic being. Human beings, he claims, evolve by passing on their knowledge through culture. Technics, then, is of the essence, the medium for human life. The human and the technical coevolve, and media, in both its singular form, as a quasi-autonomous giving of the sensible, and its plural form,

as a constantly evolving set of concrete exteriorizations of the human, designates something of their relation. And it does so in two distinct yet tightly correlated registers: as an always concrete articulation of the conjunction of human sensory and perceptual ratios with the technical processes that broker or mediate the givenness of space and time for human experience, and as a general condition for human life at any moment of its evolution.

It is important that we stress just how much this conceptualization of media as an environment for the living differs from conceptions of the medium/media as a narrowly technical entity or system. Before it becomes available to designate any technically specific form of mediation, linked to a concrete medium, *media* names an ontological condition of humanization—the constitutive operation of exteriorization and invention. The multitude of contemporary media critics who focus on the medium—and media in the plural—without regard to this ontological dimension run the risk of positivizing the medium and thus trivializing the operation of mediation. Whether this leads toward an antihumanist technological determinism (Kittler) or the unending media-semiosis of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's "remediation" (itself, fundamentally, a remediation of McLuhan), what is lost in the process is a broader sense of the existential stakes, of how these operations of mediation tie in with the form of life that is the human.

We should also emphasize that our invocation of "the human" is not an attempt to resuscitate some ahistorical human essence, much less a traditional humanism. One of the key implications of thinking of media (tools, artifacts, codes, etc.) rather than language as constitutive of human life is that the assumption that the human is metaphysically distinct from other forms of life is called into question. Birds, bees, and beavers produce a kind of natural architecture; animals communicate with one another and with us. A more exact sense of what we mean by "the human" would emphasize the sense in which humanity is a work in progress, a radically historical form of life distinguished not simply by "media" but by cycles of media innovation, invention, and obsolescence. For in media, to paraphrase the Bible only slightly, we live and move and have our being. And they do not remain static, but constitute a dynamic, historically evolving

environment or ecosystem that may or may not sustain a recognizable form of human life indefinitely. The most obvious medium in which the human species dwells is the earth's atmosphere, and that, we know, is undergoing drastic, man-made modifications. Human beings now have a greater impact on the environment than rain. It would not be too far-fetched to think, then, of the present project as emulating meteorology's study of dynamic interactive weather patterns, as an effort toward a "mediarology" that would track the pressure systems and storm fronts that crisscross the man-made world of symbols we have created.

• • •

Though written by authors with differing commitments to "media," not to mention highly diverse scholarly investments, the essays in this volume all share some minimal commitment to the broader context of the operation of media and mediation. Each evaluates the role played by media and its cognates within certain conceptual frameworks and lineages, again of markedly diverse scale, that have been and remain central to research in the humanities and humanistic social sciences. The authors represented here take seriously the "middleness" evinced by the term *media* and seek to position media studies as an intermediary or mediator not simply within extant disciplinary formations but across and between disciplines. Without necessarily mandating a concrete shift in emphasis from media as artifactuality to media as process of mediation, these essays exemplify that work of mediation.

We have divided the essays into clusters, premised on three general approaches to media: in the first part of the book, the authors come at the question of media by way of *aesthetics*, which concerns the realm of the senses, the body, and the arts, and places individual human experience at the center; in the final part, with reference to *society*, emphasizing the place of media in making communication and collective relationships possible; and in the middle section, via *technology*, with a focus on the mechanical aspects of media and the way that innovations and inventions transform the condition of both individual and social experience. These categories are to some extent arbitrary, and

many of the terms that appear under one rubric could easily be transferred to another. Our point is not that these approaches are sealed off from one another but just the reverse. We want to foster an integrated approach that overcomes the balkanization of the field of media studies, which makes it difficult for scholars interested in, say, politics and mass media to find common ground with the aesthetes who are concerned with the place of affect and perception.

We also want to overcome the notion that any one of these rubrics provides the "determining instance" that governs the other two. This is especially important with regard to technology, which is so often placed in the role of cause, with the other domains cast as effects. When Kittler writes, "Media determine our situation," we know that he means media technology: computers, typewriters, fiber-optic cables, phonographs, printing presses, and so on. We instead start from the premise that media are themselves mediated—constituted, that is, by a three-way set of exchanges among the dimensions of individual subjectivity, collective activity, and technical capability. This premise allows us to resist the seductive fallacy of technical determinism, which has haunted media studies from the outset. "The French Revolution," declared William Hazlitt, "might be described as a remote but inevitable result of the art of printing." Our aim is to slow down the drawing of conclusions from a dazzling observation of this sort. Why, we would ask, is this "result" *both* "inevitable" and "remote"? If the printing press leads inescapably to revolution, why did it do so only in France, when the "art of printing" was also highly developed in the Netherlands and England? What sort of causal chain has been compressed into the word "result"? Is the printing press a necessary or sufficient condition for modern revolutions? Probably the former, certainly not the latter. Other conditions must be in place: an educated, literate public capable of consuming the products of the art of printing, as well as a taste for the pleasures of reading. Political and institutional arrangements—the licensing of print shops, regulation of the press, constraints on the ownership of printing houses—can vary considerably across political and cultural traditions. One might even reverse Hazlitt's formula, noting that "the repression of press freedom in the 1790s was a transatlantic development in

the aftermath of the French Revolution." Similarly, the utopian speculations about cybercommunities during the rise of the Internet in the 1990s have since been moderated considerably by recognition that cyberspace, like any other media landscape, does not simply dictate the nature of individual experiences or social relationships but is itself subject to legal and political manipulation, economic exploitation, and individual variability of usage.

At the same time, though, we want to acknowledge that technology and science are prime movers in the history of media innovation, even when they encounter resistance from individuals and social formations. New ways of communicating, of fabricating forms and images, and of expressing ideas are largely driven, or made possible, by new gadgets and gizmos. Insofar as media studies is a historical discipline, it is driven by an obsession with invention and innovation: How did the invention of metal casting transform Roman sculpture and Chinese bell temples? How did the invention of mechanically imprinted coins affect ancient economies? How did the movement from stone inscriptions to papyrus, or from pictographic to alphabetic writing, change the conditions of communication across large distances and the administration of colonial regimes? What difference has the invention of television made to the American judicial system and the venerable theatrical traditions of the courtroom?

These questions suggest some of the complexity of thinking across the fields of media studies, regarded here as encompassing the domains of human perception, social, political, and economic arrangements, and technoscientific inventions. Rather than impose a language of cause and effect, we propose a language of necessary (but not sufficient) conditions, a vocabulary of catalytic effects and conflicted situations rather than determining forces. This seems appropriate, if only because one of the most conspicuous features of media studies, considered as a singular field, has been its failure to communicate across the borders that divide the technophiles, the aesthetes, and the sociopolitical theorists. Paul Starr's magisterial history of the mass media in nineteenth-century America betrays nothing but disdain for the "culture industry" models of the Frankfurt school, and it contains

not a single reference to the work of Noam Chomsky, Marshall McLuhan, or Robert McChesney. Rosalind Krauss's work on the "post-medium condition" of recent artistic practices has little to say about the transformed state of communicative technologies in the period in question. And Chomsky's "propaganda thesis," which takes American mass media as the hegemonic instruments of corporate capitalist elites, shows little interest in the aesthetic and symbolic features of these media, reducing them to machines for "manufacturing consent."

We cannot promise that we have overcome, in this volume, all of these failures to communicate, but we have tried to assemble an array of topics and scholarly interventions that make these failures more visible and perhaps set the stage for further discussion. In this sense, we hope that these essays remain faithful to the thought of some of the founders of media studies, especially Marshall McLuhan (explicitly) and Walter Benjamin (implicitly). For McLuhan, the concept of media embraced the totality of technical, social, and aesthetic reality. Because he portrayed the media as technical devices that interacted with the human sensorium, the physical world, and the sphere of social life, he has often been accused of being a "technical determinist," but in truth his more common strategy was to examine the complex dialectics of technical inventions. McLuhan's famous thesis about media as "extensions" of the senses is coupled with a recognition that they are simultaneously "amputations" of the organs they extend. Writing (as Plato first noted) must be understood both as an "aid to memory" and as a tool that may cause oral memory to atrophy. Similarly, the computer (as Bernard Stiegler argues in chapter 5) is the most powerful exteriorization of memory technology in the history of media, but it may be transforming the nature of "natural" human memory in far-reaching ways.

This is one reason that we take *memory* to be a keyword in media studies. It is one of those terms that reveal vividly the need for a theory of media as a collective singularity, a convergence of psychological, social, and technical domains. Memory, which is usually understood as an interiorized and innate psychological faculty, has, from the standpoint of media studies, been understood as a crossroads of aesthetics, technology, and society

since ancient times. Mnemosyne was, for the Greeks, the muse of all the temporal arts—poetry, music, and history—and of the human power that assured the remembrance of famous men and magnificent deeds. Mnemotechnics, the training of memory as a psychological faculty, is also a technology of the eloquent speaking body in performance, hence the medium for producing cultural continuities, tradition, myth, and collective identity. Interior memory technologies, then, were understood as constellations of externalmedia: words and images, tastes and sounds, cabinets and retrieval systems, marks on objects and bodies, buildings and statues, computers and clocks, coins and credit lines. All were vehicles for memory, and all move (or remain in place) in radically uneven, unpredictable ways depending on the situations into which they are inserted and the exteriorizations that enable their functioning. Media studies, therefore, is as concerned with subjective, mental life as it is with machines, codes, and communities. It deals, not only with extensions of the human sensorium, but with their introjections into the structures of feeling and forms of life that constitute human subjectivity and collectivity.

Within this volume, each essay addresses a "critical term." These, as previously noted, we have grouped under the rubrics of aesthetics, technology, and society, as shown in the table below.

Aesthetics	Technology	Society
Art	Biomedia	Exchange
Body	Communication	Language
Image	Cybernetics	Law
Materiality	Information	Mass Media
Memory	New Media	Networks
Senses	Hardware/Software/Wetware	Systems
Time and Space	Technology	Writing

The alert reader will object that many terms are missing from this list: structure, sign, spectacle, surveillance, screen, site, surface, style, simulation—just to take the S's. Our aim, however, was not to construct an exhaustive glossary, but to commission in-depth essays on a limited set of terms that seem crucial to the current state of discussion in media studies. The authors were urged to

reflect on the historical trajectory of the terms while at the same time engaging with their contemporary inflections. Some of the terms (Law, Communication, the Body) have ancient pedigrees. Others (Mass Media, Cybernetics, Biomedia) are relatively young. And one (New Media) explicitly emphasizes contemporary innovation, while acknowledging that (from a technical standpoint) media have always been entangled in cycles of innovation and obsolescence, innovation and renovation—from the invention of writing, printing, and artificial perspective to the invention of photography, television, and the Internet.

It bears repeating that most of these terms could have been placed under more than one heading. Writing, for instance, could be moved from Society to Technology with little trouble, while Communication could be switched from Technology to Society. Other terms seem obviously to fit one category. Art, for instance, might resist a transfer from Aesthetics to Technology. Nonetheless, artists have, since time immemorial, used, abused, and manipulated technology, though that contact has often been seen as lowering of the status of both art and artist. The terms gathered under Aesthetics, in fact, seem particularly conservative and tied to abiding traditions, while those under Technology involve concepts that seem relatively new (including, with perhaps astonishing redundancy, the term Technology itself). Again, our goal is not to produce a fixed framework for thinking about media, but to erect a house of cards that can be (and is always necessarily being) reshuffled into an indefinite number of combinations. The point is really to suggest three entryways into the labyrinth of media, with the understanding that each will sooner or later lead to the other two.

This raises an even more basic question about our approach to media and media studies. Why "triangulate" at all? And is this particular triangulation—Society, Technology, Aesthetics—the only conceivable way of organizing a set of articles on basic concepts in the field? Part of the answer is that we want to avoid the seductions of binarism, the prevalent rhetorical fallback in polemical and preanalytical discourse: past and present, new and old, art and technology, society and the individual, subject and object, space and time, nature and culture, ancient and modern.

We especially want to avoid the presentism that plagues so much of "new media" studies today. Our aim is to take the field back beyond the "digital revolution" of the last twenty years to its deeper origins in antiquity and early modernity, and to think of media history as highly differentiated both spatially and temporally. Thus, Alex Galloway's article on Networks begins, not with the Internet, but with the net that Clytemnestra throws over Agamemnon.

A more elusive reason for triangulating the topic of media has been our intuitive sense that media themselves are always and everywhere understood by way of tripartite models. Consider, to list just the obvious examples: sender-channel-receiver (in communication theory), symbol-index-icon (in semiotics), image-music-text (in Roland Barthes's aesthetics), opsis-melos-lexis (in Aristotle's analysis of mimesis), and symbolic-imaginary-real (in Lacan's analysis of psychic "registers"). Think also of the structure of a syllogism, where the "middle term" is called the medium.

But beyond these abstractions, our search for what Roland Barthes termed the "third meaning" is driven by the practical reality of media events, operations, and environments. The triangulation of our topic, then, is a way of emphasizing the "middleness" of media studies, its role as a go-between, a mediator, in relation to the numerous other disciplines where it has had an impact, from ancient mosaics to digital images, from the code of human law to the code of life itself. Among these triangulations is, of course, the idea of media and the medium itself. Are "the media" one thing or many? Singular or plural? What are the relations between the singular, specific "medium" and the constellation of things known as "the media"? To grasp the horns of this dilemma, we broach the venerable concept of "mediation" as such, with its pedigree in Hegelian philosophy, dialectics, and critical theory. If, to this point, we have focused on the opening out of *media* (as the plural of *medium*) through the historical and semantic operation of its singularization, we must now devote ourselves to exploring how the third term, *mediation*, itself mediates—and multiplies levels of mediation between—the separate processes designated by media in the singular and media as a plurality of mediums.

• • •

Though it stretches back to ancient times, where it denoted a means of dispute resolution in matters of commerce, mediation acquires the value on which we are here drawing with the development of German Idealism (Hegel) and dialectical materialism (Marx and Engels). For Hegel, mediation was the abstract operation through which the dialectic pursued its forward march. Proceeding through the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of individual contradictions (pairings of thesis and antithesis), the dialectic of reason or spirit (to cite *The Phenomenology of Mind*) itself comprises the ongoing and processural operation of mediation necessary for Absolute Knowledge to emerge triumphant as the culminating product both of philosophical logic and world history. If Marx and Engels do not actually turn this operation on its head, they do correlate it with actual reality in a manner unimaginable for Hegel: in their work, mediation designates the primary form of relation and reconciliation between contradictory forces in a society, between the material domain and culture, base and superstructure. This analysis, found in the mature work of Marx and Engels, emerges from Marx's early understanding of mediation as labor, where labor mediates between a worker's body and nature and, more generally, between the human realm and natural world. Following the expropriation and reification of labor power, it is capital itself which becomes the agent of mediation: the capitalist determines the exchange value of labor, thus transforming labor power into a commodity.

Much of the attention devoted to Marxist theory after Marx and Engels has focused on the mediation between base and superstructure and the degree of agency available to social actors within monopoly capitalism. One lineage, running more or less directly from the later Marx through Lukács to Althusser, emphasizes the role ideology plays in the operation and consolidation of capital. On this account, there is little possibility for agency since consciousness itself is "the imaginary relationship to a lived reality"; if consciousness is perforce "false consciousness," the logic of this position runs, there simply is no possibility for the social actor to gain an understanding of her own repression. In media studies, this lineage finds an

instantiation in the Frankfurt school's conceptualization of the culture industry, which through an account of the one-dimensional ideological function of the mass media likewise diminishes the possibility for social agency.

Another lineage, originating with Antonio Gramsci's innovative conceptualization of hegemony (as an alternative, more flexible account of state power) and branching off in various directions—including the Birmingham school of cultural studies (Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall), the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the work of the Italian school (from Lazzarato to Hardt and Negri), and recent efforts to unite Marxism and media studies—retains a stronger emphasis on mediation, and thus a more robust conceptualization of social agency. For these diverse theorists, mediation names the highly dynamic process through which individual and collective social actors engage with the forces of capital as lived reality; according to these thinkers, the hold of capital cannot be absolute, or (following Althusser) absolutely antihumanist, for the precise reason that it can be maintained (that is, continuously rearticulated) only through its impact on social actors.

To illustrate the value of this dynamic sense of mediation for articulating the range of what media studies is and can be today, let us return to Kittler's proposal that "media determine our situation." Bearing in mind our exploration of the paradoxical double case of media, we can now approach this claim more concretely. By "media," Kittler clearly means a plurality of mediums, an empirical accumulation of things, and by "determine" (*bestimmen*), he seems to mean something more akin to the late Marx's account of determination (the operation of the base on the superstructure, or the infrastructure of capital on the consciousness of the social actor) than to the more dynamic Gramscian conception. For Kittler, that is, media seem to determine our situation (the possibilities for action within a certain technico-historical infrastructure) in a manner not altogether different (notwithstanding a fundamental reversal of values) from the Frankfurt school's account of the culture industry: human experience and agency is, at best, the positive effect of a media system but more likely "mere eyewash," the

"optional output" he envisionsin his introductionto *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.

The essays in this volume engage Kittler's proposal. But when we posit as the inaugural proposition for our media studies that media determines our situation, the shift from media as an empirical collection of artifacts and technologies to media as a perspective for understanding allows us to reassert the crucial and highly dynamic role of mediation—social, aesthetic, technical, and (not least) critical—that appears to be suspended by Kittler. Without jettisoning the crucial finding of Kittler's work (and of much of the archaeological work in contemporary media studies)—that media do have agency and do necessarily constrain experience—we seek to reintegrate the empirico-transcendental agency of media into the larger social domain, the domain of mediation, within which culture and life actually happen. In concert with contemporary Marxist theorists of media like Matthew Fuller, we propose that media studies names something other than an activity performed on a certain kind of object or content. As a mode of understanding, a perspective from which to engage our world, media studies rehabilitates understanding from Kittler's antihermeneutical critique (a critique shared by others, e.g., Gumbrecht) precisely by resituating it. What is to be understood is not media in the plural, but media in the singular; and it is by understanding media in the singular—which is to say, by reconceptualizing understanding from the perspective of media—that we will discover ways to characterize the impact of media in the plural. Whether they can be considered to be modes of understanding in themselves, such characterizations will involve much more than a unidimensional account of the technics of a given medium; indeed, by pursuing a generalization of technics along the lines suggested by Stiegler (as the correlate of human life), such characterizations necessarily involve mediations among the domains we have quite artificially dissociated here: society, aesthetics, technology. That these mediations themselves require yet another kind of mediation—critical mediation—is, in the end, the very burden of this volume and its neo-McLuhanesque injunction to understand from the perspective of media. Rather than *determining* our situation, we might better say that media *are* our situation.

Edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen
Critical Terms for Media Studies
©2010, 376 pages, 4 halftones, 5 line drawings
Cloth $75.00 ISBN: 9780226532547
Paper $27.50 ISBN: 9780226532554

For information on purchasing the book—from bookstores or here online—please go to the webpage for *Critical Terms for Media Studies*.

See also:

- Our catalog of art titles
- Our catalog of reference titles
- Other excerpts and online essays from University of Chicago Press titles
- Sign up for e-mail notification of new books in this and other subjects
- Read the Chicago Blog