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Media Theory 2017

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Once upon a time

This year marks half a century since the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* – arguably one of the key texts for 21st century media theory. Here I want to briefly substantiate this claim, and, in the process, mark out the urgency for new work in this domain. A journal such as *Media Theory* would seem an ideal space for developing this trajectory.

Among other things, the first part of *Of Grammatology* announces 'grammatology' as a theoretical matrix for the study of 'writing' conceptualized in a radically non-traditional sense. As is perhaps better understood today than when he first proposed the analysis, Derrida demonstrates that Western thought has been organized over a long period by a complex privileging of 'speech' over 'writing'. Within what he terms the *epistémè* of logocentrism, the spoken voice (*phonè*) has consistently been granted "a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind" (Derrida, 1976: 11). Aristotle's determination that spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, and written words are the symbols of spoken words, recurs in different forms and formulations across history, obeying a deeper continuity according to which writing is determined as the 'mediation of a mediation' (Derrida, 1976: 12). Within this epoch, "reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness" (Derrida, 1976: 14). The text is positioned as secondary in relation to an element – speech, thought, consciousness, etc – that assumes greater presence. As such, this element constitutes an originary moment or locus of meaning against which 'writing'

is inevitably parasitic. Derrida argues this same logic even persists into the modern structural linguistics of Saussure and Jakobson, despite its claim to put many traditional assumptions about language into question, through its definition of the sign in terms of the constitutive split between the sensible and the intelligible, the signifier and the signified. Such a binary division assumes, as a condition of its own functioning, the possibility of a pure signified; the originary presence of a meaning independent of any signifier which is thereby necessarily understood as 'technical and representative' (Derrida, 1976: 11).

The secondariness of 'writing' is not a minor determination, nor one possible configuration among many, but belongs to a conceptual chain that establishes and supports a certain understanding of truth, temporality, subjectivity and being. Derrida anticipates his argument:

We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the sub-determinations that depend on this general form and which organize within it their system, and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth) (Derrida, 1976: 12).

In short, in the era that Derrida characterizes in terms of *logocentrism*, 'writing' has generally been thought according to a mode of what can only be called idealism. Writing exists in a relation of perpetual secondariness to the ideality of some originary experience; a thought, speech, action or 'event' that is subsequently re-presented (narrated, recorded, performed), but which, at its presumed moment or point of origin, remains free from any dependence on a material signifier. Insisting on materiality, for instance on the way that specific attributes and affordances of media technology indelibly shape the construction of meaning and the process of communication, can undoubtedly challenge this idealism in some respects. But this

will only work to a certain extent, and is endlessly at risk of reaffirming the old logic by repeating the structure of opposition from the other side (as ‘technological determinism’, for instance. Here we might find the kind of broad distinctions between ‘oral’ and ‘written’ culture on which those such as McLuhan (1962) and Ong (1982) depend, in which a medium is positioned as constitutive of a certain type of consciousness).

Fast forward

Summarizing Derrida’s complex argument is not simply difficult but hugely risky. The brevity of my exposition demands that I jettison much of his patient demonstration, including his careful attention to crucial contradictions, such as the relation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ writing, between phonetic and non-phonetic alphabets, between ideogram and pictogram, that have been integral to this era. My justification for taking this risk is not to offer a substitute for Derrida’s text, which should be carefully read and re-read, but to use it to situate a contemporary problematic; namely, the way that what Derrida analyzes in terms of the traditional concept of ‘writing’ still governs much contemporary thinking of ‘media’. The problem extends much further than ‘medium theory’. It demands we address what is still a general understanding of ‘media’ and ‘mediation’ as production of ‘signs’ that have a derivative or parasitical relation to a plenitude apparently found elsewhere, most notably in the still inadequately analyzed domains indicated by voice, experience or event.

Before developing this point concerning the need for *media theory*, I want to show why it has assumed greater urgency in the present. This requires making two more brief points about Derrida’s grammatological project.

1. The traditional determination of ‘writing’ should not be regarded simply as an ‘accident’, nor can it be dismissed as inadequate in the sense of a mere ‘error’. This is something that Derrida takes great pains to insist on: the conceptual armature that treats ‘writing’ as derivative in relation to voice, experience, consciousness and so on, has been

essential to, and indeed constitutive of, a certain history. This includes authorizing a certain concept of history according to a particular mode of distinguishing between ‘oral’ and ‘written’ cultures, which, among other things, has produced highly ethnocentric accounts of all peoples seen to be ‘without the book’.

2. For the same reason, one cannot simply step beyond this history. Instead of ‘moving on’ to a new ‘truth’, what is needed is patient and perilous analysis that seeks to mark out the limits and tensions of the conceptual system, while negotiating the constant risk of “falling back into what is being deconstructed” (Derrida, 1976: 14). As Derrida (1976: 13-14) puts it: ‘Of course it is not a question of “rejecting” these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them. It’s a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes can be innocently separated’.

It is from this perspective that Derrida identifies problems in the traditional concept of writing which allow us to begin to think the ‘closure’ of the *epistémè* (as distinct from its *end*). These include, first of all, various forms of ‘scientific writing’, especially mathematics, which challenge certain idealizations concerning phonetic writing. More importantly for my argument here, Derrida (1976: 10) suggests another trajectory enabling us to perceive the closure of the *epistémè* is “the development of practical methods of information retrieval”, such as “the extension of phonography and of all the means of conserving the spoken language, of making it function without the presence of the speaking subject”. Here the problematic that he announces under the name of ‘writing’ converges with the problematic of modern media. As Derrida gives us to think, when he proposes to retain the name of ‘writing’, while expanding the concept to embrace a deeper logic:

And thus we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space

is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing’ (Derrida, 1976: 9).

‘Writing’ would thus name any mark or trace capable of differentiation and repetition. How might such a conceptualization help us to better understand modern and contemporary media?

Now is the time, the time is now

The new forms of writing that emerge at the threshold of modern media – photography, cinematography – assumed a relation to things, appearances and events that disturbed customary thought. The strange *immediacy* of photography was evidenced by its frequent acclamation as signified without signifier; a kind of ‘natural’ writing in which the world revealed itself without apparent human intervention. Nevertheless, as this initial disturbance lessened, the new media was generally accommodated in the existing system, in which media exist in relation to the traditional primacy of an assumed ‘presence’, such as the ‘actual moment’ that had been photographed or filmed. This set in train a complex system of discourses relating to problems of context and meaning that has never fully stabilized. As Benjamin (2003) recognized in his famous meditation on technological images, cinema exposes tensions in correspondence based theories, as montage initiates a form of visual experience in which sequences of images assemble a point of view that was never simply ‘present’.¹

Similarly, one might note that broadcast media such as radio and television open these cracks of time even wider, as ‘experience’ comes to include the uncanny experiences of remote listening or witnessing of ‘live’ events distributed across multiple sites of production and reception. How should we understand the space-time of such events? The dominant response has sought to remain faithful to the metaphysics of presence by positioning media as *supplement* to the event. This response now stretches across a spectrum from seeing media as enabling a mode of ‘being there’ for those who are absent to more recent valorizations of media as *better than being there*. The progressive integration of screen technologies into live events

such as sports, entertainment and politics, where live audiences are also able to enjoy close-ups and replays as part of the ongoing event, is evidence of the way this logic has been reconstructing the terrain of embodied experience. In contrast, the dominant critical response has been to brand all ‘media events’ as more or less false, insofar as they are seen as fatally disconnected from ‘reality’, from ‘real events’ that exist outside mediation.

Both responses are becoming less and less tenable in the present, particularly as the kind of social experiences of simultaneity that broadcast media first orchestrated – what Dayan and Katz (1992) influentially termed ‘media events’ – has assumed a new valence. As media devices have become digital, mobile and increasingly ubiquitous, and pervasive networks have enabled low-cost, distributed communication between multiple actors, media have become part of everyday life in a new sense. As more and more social interactions are inflected by and through media, it is much harder to oppose a domain of ‘media’ to the presumed ‘immediacy’ of the domain of face-to-face, embodied relations. In the context of differentiated practices of continual and iterative realtime feedback connecting people and platforms, media increasingly becomes co-constitutive of manifold social situations – of events at large – with all the uncertainty and ambiguity that this formulation carries. As more and more aspects of social life are ‘mediatized’, they become subject to the spatio-temporal affordances and commercial logics of complex socio-technical systems. While this raises huge and ongoing concerns around issues such as data ownership, privacy and surveillance relating to the political economy of global digital platforms, it also demands a new understanding of the relation between media and experience, consciousness and event.

It is important to clarify aspects of my argument. Of course, as my reference to Derrida’s argument should make clear, the problem is not simply one ‘introduced’ by technology. Accounting for the functioning of memory, or, equally, for the status of ‘fiction’, has always been difficult for a philosophy of consciousness. What I am suggesting here is that the present conjuncture exposes these contradictions more clearly and challenges us to give better expression to heterogeneous experiences of presencing and temporality. I should also explicitly add that I don’t think Derrida is arguing that there is no distinctiveness to speech, consciousness or to realms such as

face-to-face experience or embodiment – on the contrary – but rather that this distinctiveness can't be adequately thought on the basis of a binary distinction that ascribes 'presence' to one domain and understands mediation as a modified, derivative or supplementary relation to this presence. Nor, finally, am I suggesting there has been no attempt to problematize the 'secondary' status of media. In fact, there is a growing body of work, evident, for example, in the frequent neologisms describing different forms of 'present absence' and 'absent presence' that have been proposed in the last decade, particularly in mobile media research. I think the need for a more differentiated conceptualization of relations of presence and absence has also appeared in various other areas, such as HCI (Human-computer interaction) and memory studies. Nevertheless, I would argue that, so far, this endeavor has been uneven and often *ad hoc*, largely lacking explicit recognition of the deeper historical problematic. In particular, within media studies, questioning of the characterization of media as secondary has not been systematically related to a critique of the presumed plenitude of consciousness, speech, face-to-face experience, the event, and so on. For this reason, attempts to recalibrate how we understand the new entanglements of bodies and technology, of media and face-to-face social encounters in the present, has been hampered by a lack of appropriately subtle terminology and rigorous concepts.

While addressing the problematic seems urgent to me, it is not one that can be accomplished in haste. As Friedrich Kittler (2009: 24) noted, part of this history is the pervasive denial by Western philosophy of its own reliance on 'media'. And, as Derrida has given us to think, this idealism is not a heritage that can be overturned easily. One of the acknowledged progenitors of Derrida's thinking of grammatology was Freud. Putting aside all the contradictions of the Freudian text, its most radical contribution was undoubtedly to question the entrenched model of consciousness, particularly as it had been inscribed in Western thought since the Enlightenment. In place of the plenitude of Cartesian self-consciousness, Freud proposed the manifold temporality of the 'deferred effect' [*nachträglichkeit*] of the unconscious. While unpicking the complex origins of the Freudian text is well beyond the scope of this article, one point of reference for its emergence was clearly a new register of

experience, including the experience of trauma relating to capitalist industrialization and the waging of industrial warfare.

Is it too much of a stretch to argue that, in the present, the profound changes in all that we have understood as media – in terms of scale, integration with everyday life, transformation of the archive, and the growing convergence of media platforms with other domains such as transport, logistics, finance, health, and e-commerce – is producing a similar kind of shaking of experience? One that requires a radical rethinking of assumed relations of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, similar in magnitude to Freud’s intervention? Derrida’s grammatology seems to offer a useful starting point for this kind of inquiry, as philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler (1998) have well understood. This is a trajectory I would like to see more media scholars take up.

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Notes

¹ “The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, offers a hitherto unimaginable spectacle. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign a spectator a single viewpoint which would exclude from his or her field of vision the equipment not directly involved in the action being filmed — the camera, the lighting units, the technical crew, and so forth (unless the alignment of the spectator’s pupil coincided with that of the camera). This circumstance, more than any other, makes any resemblance between a scene in a film studio and one onstage superficial and irrelevant. In principle, the theatre includes a position from which the action on the stage cannot easily be detected as an illusion. There is no such position where a film is being shot. The illusionary nature of film is of the second degree; it is the result of editing. That is to say: *In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind.* The equipment-free aspect of reality has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become the Blue Flower in the land of technology” (Benjamin 2003: 263).

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