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Open Theory

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Listen to the likes of David Bowie, Andy Warhol and Bono!

I still recall the new cohort settling themselves in the large lecture theatre for their first taste of Media 101. What could be more banal? I abandoned the usual script and put on *Zoo TV*. And I couldn't resist the invitation of a table just beneath the large projector screen. I climbed up just in time to meet with Bono (our hands touching) as he arrived on screen, his ironic goose-step rather more eloquent than my clambering. 'This is media,' I announced over the bang and the clatter, as the stadium-composed spectacle spluttered into action across dozens of flickering screens: 'Even better than the real thing'. *Zoo TV* does not give us 'theory', it doesn't give us very much, but it gets us faster to what we already know.

Resist Work.

Roland Barthes was part way right when he told us to abandon *the* Work ('for long – and still – conceived of in a, so to speak, Newtonian way') and urged us instead to consider 'a new object, obtained by the sliding or overturning of former categories'. The Theory of the Text he told us (for which we might also think of the Media) 'cannot be satisfied by a metalinguistic exposition', instead it should be 'nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder. The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing'. It is not just the Work, but work in general (when theory

becomes ‘work’) that we need to stop. Of course, as Barthes also reminds us, the writer never takes a holiday – any such notion is constructed as an Establishment myth to enslave the writer. We resist, then, the work of writing, in order that writing may still continue to *circulate*.

Do not submit your writing, produce it!

In submitting work to a journal, we are ever positioning ourselves (or the argument of the text) *vis-à-vis* the means of production in our time. Yet, in fact, we ought to be considering its position *within* these forces. The journal is no different to the forces to which we speak. The crucial point, as Walter Benjamin once reminded us, ‘is that a writer’s production must have the character of a model: it must be able to instruct other writers in their production and, secondly, it must be able to place an improved apparatus at their disposal’.

Read where you write.

The critical task of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the seizing of the means of production. The *Communist Manifesto* was originally published anonymously in 1848. And while released with the announcement ‘to be published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages’, its initial printing was only in German. The pamphlet was reprinted three times and serialised in the *Deutsche Londoner Zeitung*. The day after its serialisation Marx was expelled by Belgian police. By its 150th anniversary, it was reasonable for the philosopher Peter Osborne to state it was ‘the single most influential text written in the nineteenth century’. Today, the difficulty is not one of getting published. The difficulty is being read. We lack a shared discourse. In part this is testament to pluralism (and the democratic forces of Marxism), but what does it mean to write more than we can read? If there can be no moratorium on writing, at least our task today can be to read more than we write. In the spirit of the *Manifesto*, the formation of any new readership – such as imagined with *Media Theory* – should be as much about ‘reproduction’ as it is production. We need to take more care. We need to be habitual in reading and re-reading others and to expect more when others read us!

Join a group, not the crowd.

When Barthes wrote ‘the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*’, it was just that: a metaphor. The post-structuralist gesture is now a lived (virtual) reality. However, dissemination through the ‘net’ is not simply about moving (the) Text around. It is also intimately linked to performance. Walter Ong considered the shift from print-based culture to radio and TV as a ‘secondary orality’ (to suggest a return to an oral, performance-based culture associated with Ancient Greece). Similarly, the Internet – and particularly social media – is often considered in terms of oral culture, as being conversational, social and with shifting, informal tones and registers akin to everyday speech. Yet, the performance is arguably more about audience. As David Weinberger suggested, on the Internet everyone is famous for fifteen people. The social graph has come to dominate our every action online. Jodi Dean brings to our attention both the sense of scale and the tonality of the net when referring to ‘whatever blogging’, in which she plays on the vernacular use of ‘whatever’ as ‘an affective, verbal response that deflects another’s comment’. She relates this further to Agamben’s ‘whatever being’ to highlight the a-political notion of community not as a condition of belonging, but belonging in and of itself. This belonging is the crowd (as in crowd-sourcing). In his late writings, Barthes turned to the question of *how to live together*, how to allow for our ‘idiorrhymy’. If large communities are based on an architecture of power, we should turn instead to small groups: ‘I personally think the optimal number should be under ten,’ Barthes suggests, ‘or under eight even’. This is surely a good number for a reading group or seminar.

Be more than content.

Behind every virtual community is a hidden hashtag: #AreWeContent? We enter like Alice in her adventures in Wonderland, never quite sure of our size and distance in relation to others. We might at times be baffled at the nature of conversations, indeed, who lies behind all the voices we ‘hear’? Like Cheshire Cats they appear to come and go. We can make various adjustments (as Alice might) and, in the event we get bored, we might soon declare how preposterous it all is. Yet, to avoid disenfranchisement we generally accept a place somewhere within this labyrinth. But in resigning herself to a club that might accept her as a member, Alice is never really

content, her adventures being more akin to an anxiety dream. The source of this anxiety is twofold. Firstly, she is aware of being unable to control the dynamics that press upon her. Yet, equally, she is aware everything revolves around her. The anxiety dream is of course the manifest of our latent concerns. We are *the* content, and it leads us to try desperately to become more content or at ease. The danger, as Jodi Dean shows in her book *Blog Theory*, is that the more we share, the more there is to read and respond to. The more, in short, we are at the behest of the content itself. ‘It’s easier to set up a new blog’, she writes, ‘than it is to undertake the ground-level organizational work of building alternatives’; and so it is we become ‘subjectivities that may well be more accustomed to quick satisfaction and bits of enjoyment than to planning, discipline, sacrifice and delay’.

Situate your position.

The enduring lesson of Winston Smith is that there is always a position from which to write. *In small clumsy letters he wrote: April 4th, 1984*. It is certainly not a date he can be sure of, but it is enough to mark a point on from which he is conscious of the enormity of his situation; ‘for whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn?’. In our postmodern condition, as Lyotard ably demonstrated, ‘militant praxis ... has become defensive praxis. We are constantly having to assert the rights of minorities [...] We have to sign petitions, write papers, organise conferences, join committees, take part in polls, and publish books’. Indeed, today the ‘fight for emancipation’ is legitimated by the law itself. Just as for Wintson, nothing is actually illegal, yet for us the regularity of ‘openness’ carries with it the potential for critical collapse. If there is too much openness, the opportunity to make a claim is diminished. This is the paradox of democracy: too much is meaningless.

Remember: Theory is not a thing.

In Jonathan Culler’s playful account of ‘theory’, he shows how even in everyday gossip we can soon spin theories (‘My theory is that Laura was always secretly in love with her father and that Michael could never succeed in becoming the right person’). As he puts it ‘theory must be more than a hypothesis: it can’t be obvious; it involves

complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved'. In short, theory is a form of writing, of making, of thinking, and which only applies each time it is evoked. Its unmasterability has caused many to resist it. Equally the desire to master it has led equally as many to apply theory as if an object or tool. Yet, again, as Culler puts it, 'theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and the assumptions on which they are based'. We must remind ourselves: As a form of readership, theory represents a critical forum, not its lingua franca.

Be Open.

We must resist structures of power: Resist the dead hand of institutions that audit knowledge (without any knowledge of their own); resist the publishers' offerings of indentured labour; and resist our own egos, which too often speak over, not with others. Theory is now an open book. Just as we brought to bear a 'mythological doxa' (whereby we are all critics now), so, more generally, theory is *potentially* open to all. We should look outward to a variety of critical voices (and not be tethered to the usual suspects, as is the case with this text!). We must continue to be open *with* theory, to understand its progressive force. For his inaugural lecture as Professor at the Collège de France, in 1977, Roland Barthes described the institution – with some irony – as a place 'outside the bounds of power', and suggested: 'a professor's sole activity here is research: to speak – I shall even say to dream his research aloud – not to judge, to give preferences, to promote, to submit to controlled scholarship'. It is an ideal we must surely appeal to when setting up any new forum for research. Barthes' comments can be brought up to date with Slavoj Žižek's television programme, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006). Arguably as a perfect example of what can manifest when we seek to dream our research aloud, the opening of the programme uses a clip from the film *Possessed* (1931). A young woman (bored with her life in a small rural town) walks up to a railway crossing-point and stares mesmerized by a train which slides past, inches away from her face. We glimpse all sorts of different scenes through the carriage windows, each effectively an alluring cinematic screen. The train comes to a halt and a man holding a cocktail, leaning out of the train/screen, says to her: 'Looking in? Wrong way, get in and look out' – this

is exactly what the arts and humanities ask of us. Research here is not about results and productivity. It is about ways of seeing, ways of inhabiting the world, to look at (and dream) it from the inside out. As Žižek goes on to explain in his commentary, and with reference to the film *The Matrix* (1999), fictions always already structure our reality. We become uncomfortable when we face up to this, as much as any attempt to deconstruct the notion of ‘research’ in the arts and humanities might make for uncomfortable outcomes. As Žižek puts it (toying with the decision to take either the red or blue pill in *The Matrix*): I WANT A THIRD PILL. The reality is in the illusion. If *Media Theory* is but a remediation of what we think journals are, or ought to be, it is still this very fiction that can provide us with new openings...

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