

Speaking the Multimedia Culture
Art, Pedagogy, and New Technologies
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We no longer live in a society that can be described in text, images, or sound alone. The media society of the turn of the millenium is one of commingling informational structures coming at us from all directions. We are bombarded with sensory information than ever before from sources such as the Internet, Cable TV, the proliferation of texts, as well as the various digital media. How can we speak the multimedia culture in an age where no one medium alone can contain the fast-paced, visceral nature of postmodern media society?

This is the focus of a branch of my critical work over the past decade. In the development of critically based materials for the study of media culture, there is a need to find a methodology that creates a more immediate experience to the viewer for the communication of the abstract concepts associated with postmodern social theory. In this presentation, I will discuss the theoretical foundations of this conceptual work, some of the practical issues that arose, and the implications for the production of such media texts. The first clip that will be offered is an excerpt from a late 1996 work, the MACHINE Video Trilogy.

(During this part of the presentation, MACHINE II: ACCESS DENIED was shown. Themes illustrated within the video are plutocratic narratives of the technoculture, the absurdities of Cable TV, the construction of cultural perceptions of truth by the media, and the nature of war in the video-game era.)

Since the late 1980's, Dr. Jonathon Epstein and I have been exploring the use of media metaphor as conceptual and communications tool for the investigation of selected concepts in postmodern social theory as it relates to youth and digital culture. Our research began from discussions of poststructuralist thought, mainly concerning the writings of Baudrillard, Virilio, and Deleuze. One day, upon reviewing Baudrillard's Simulations and Simulacra(1), the question of the simulated culture of the digital image (image as media trope, image as graphic, image as societal construct), arose. How can we express the experiential nature of these virtual, online and media spaces? What is their relevance to the society of the image? What does hyperreality *feel* like, Epstein asked.. I felt that the answer presented itself on our computer monitors as I, then we, manipulated the visual stuff of media reality through digital techniques. With the fairly primitive imaging tools by today's standards, it seemed that the technologies of simulation culture and the hyperreal society had made their way into our homes and studios.

The initial concept that became the foundation for this series of works was to produce a critical work that was aimed at defining a narrative strategy that applied to the emerging culture of media simultaneity within a more immediate, visceral framework (2). Such a presentation concurrently engages the viewer in textual, sonic, and visual ways, creating a discursive space much like that of the Baudrillardian mediascape that enfolds Epstein's students. In assembling media texts utilizing the technologies and iconography from the media culture, we construct a Foucauldian "genealogy of knowledge" (3), allowing for the inclusion of a wider contextual framework within which these multimediated texts would reside.

The first work in this ongoing project was "Americans Have No Identity, but they Do Have Wonderful Teeth: The Sociology of Jean Baudrillard": a fairly simplistic multimedia slideshow with sound and graphics. The user's interactivity with the piece limited itself to the control of the advancement of the digital slides, or to advance them at all. The presentation drew on key ideas of Baudrillard's work, and expounded on them in sound and graphics. To this day, a hypertext version of the presentation is on Arthur and Marilouise Kroker's CTHEORY.COM site (4).. Even though we felt that this work could possibly be viewed as a lark, high marks from Baudrillard himself, along with the general audience, felt that significant issues within media society had been touched upon, indicating the need for further exploration of these methodologies.

But after the production of this particular work, several questions arose regarding other cultural constructs, such as video culture (MTV), online media, and the emerging Internet. It was obvious that works such as "Americans" could not sufficiently contextualize a media critique of a society awash in moving images, jump-cut sequences, and simultaneous information streams. This concurs with Zimmel's (5) assertion that using the methods that create specific cultural sites of engagement best facilitates an analysis of those constructs. Creating discursive spaces that address the issues of the technological mediascape requires the adoption of the media themselves as part of the methodology of communicating these critical ideas. One may assert that by using the media constructs through which the technoculture is defining increasingly symbolic and multivalent literacies, we can study the epistemological shifts occurring on the airwaves, cable and screen.

There is more corroborating evidence than Zimmel's work from which we may infer the necessity of creating

what I call "concurrent texts" to describe the media society. Paul Virilio, in both *The Art of the Motor* and *Aesthetics of Disappearance* (6: Virilio) writes of the impact of the increasing societal acceleration imposed by inventions such as cinema, electronic technologies, and the computer. These devices, among others, have caused the implosion of space through the immediacy of communication, travel, and delivery of serial imagery (video, cinema). The pervasiveness of the implosion of cultural space through technological acceleration in all aspects of the technological society demanded the use of motion, creating the need for video and animation such as Haymarket Riot's MACHINE. Deleuze's essay *Rhizome Versus Trees* (7: Deleuze) posits that communications and even the way we negotiate our everyday milieu has taken on a weblike, or *rhizomatic*, quality that resembles the structure of a strawberry patch – decentralized, robustly interconnected, and expansionary. This heralded the coming of hypertextual nets of representations, and defined that the Internet would also become a site of engagement for our work.

Possibly more than at any time in history, the technological society is constantly cross-referencing the information it takes in and reprocesses it in the form of media texts. For example, as the words I speak trigger off mental images or sounds from past experience, they are reassembled into new configurations, frequently shaped by mass media architectures. This is not to say that this particular effect is new in itself, but the unprecedented amounts of data that the citizen of the mediascape is required to assimilate creates these ontological shifts. Forms of hyperlinked media will be necessary to speak with immediacy to the now-extant technoculture. To create the critical texts of postmodern cultural analysis, we surmised that forms of "Media Equivalence" should be used in the respect of using concurrent multiple media in the form of image, sound, and text. When creating these texts, one media will tend to dominate, such as video in the study of televised culture, but this is still in keeping with Zimmel's concepts of cultural forms.

The question as to how the preceding concepts converge returns once again to Baudrillard. *The Transparency of Evil*, (8) expounds upon the concept of cultural transparency in the light of ubiquitous communications technologies. In the millennial media technoculture, all cultural forms permeate all others to one extent or another. Sports become regional politics, advertising becomes sex, economics becomes fetishism, warfare becomes video games, politics becomes entertainment, and so on. Americans scream for integrity in journalism when the pornographic details of politicians' lives are televised on global satellite broadcasts. And the ratings soar! We build identity as being part of any said fashion tribe by draping ourselves in the same T-shirt, but printed with names such as Hilfiger, Nike, or Calvin Klein, an America supposedly so obsessed with individuality becomes a series of monolithic corporate fashion armies. So, in describing the transparent nature of digital society, Epstein and I allow the media in our critical works to acquire that same nature of transparency. Text, sound, video, Internet installations, news, sitcoms, and pornographic violence saturate one another as they do in the very society from which we draw our referents.

(WEB I : The Voice of World Control was shown at this juncture. Topics covered in this video include corporate imperatives in the obfuscation of information/control issues in the electronic society, technological determinism.)

In the first half of this discussion we discussed the theoretical foundations of the works, but few of the pedagogical implications that media texts like Machine and Web impose in the institution. At this point, I would like to touch on regarding literacy in the digital age, and then discuss some of the experiences we have had with this body of work. Reactions to concurrent texts like Machine and WEB, although they only address the cultural form of video media and possibly that of animated content vary widely. Among them are those who question whether these works posit an exit from textual literacy. Works like MACHINE and WEB are the primary source texts for our cultural studies, but as the written text is necessary for an establishment of a greater contextual framework, we do not want to infer the invalidation of the written text.

The psychedelic visionary Terrence McKenna, speaking on the CD *Virtual Heaven*, suggested that the emergent communications technologies such as virtual reality will create a post-symbolic literacy. The concept is that in future VR environments we will have systems that will recognize our syntactical structures, and create living cognitive sculptures of pure thought (9). The forms that represent our thought patterns would then be there for us to manipulate and to share, so that others can "see what we mean"(N: McKenna). Although limitations in the development of such technologies and the necessity of being encumbered with bulky sensory augmentation devices have caused these expectations to fall short. However there seems to be an increasing dependence on a symbolic (or metaphorical) literacy. This stems from many sources, including that of mass popular culture.

An excellent story from popular culture illustrating this point is the Star Trek: Next Generation episode entitled Darmok (10). At the edge of the Federation, the Enterprise encounters an enigmatic spacefaring race that defies decryption by the universal translator. Their speech is clear, but their meaning is

indecipherable. It is discovered that the society's communications patterns are derived from cultural metaphors from their mythology. After Captain Picard grasps the ability to interpret the use of metaphor through cultural experiences, he is then able to communicate with the alien commander.

This particular metaphor in itself illustrates instances I have observed in American culture, but also the drawbacks. Walk into a McDonald's. The control panel on the cash register will reveal that in many locations, the text for the burger in question has been replaced by an icon. In the instance where First World materialist culture wraps its inhabitants in symbols from Nike, Hilfiger and Calvin Klein, we take on the cultural form of those icons and become symbolically objectified ourselves. The use of metaphor in mass media culture can be likened to the Darmok simile in which I recently saw Starbucks' partners paraphrasing the actions of the Soup Nazi from the classic Seinfeld episode, with perfect understanding. Media society increasing utilizes multimedia metaphor as communications tool, often before we even realize the effects.

Of course the crash site of the multimedia society is that one can argue that this form of syntax is limited to a localized set of the media culture. This is true, but this can also be said for language itself, in that it began as a local grammar for communication in various geographic regions. American media proliferation has reached a state of transience in Western society by the virtue of its ubiquity in world markets. Students, when shown works like *Americans Have No Identity* or MACHINE, exhibit a degree of media literacy that is sufficient to validate this methodology as one of many viable solutions. The temporal nature of these works is also evident, as Western media society accelerates popular culture as more data is pushed through our screens, speakers, and magazines. It isn't surprising that Beavis and Butt-head are now passe. This is merely part of the accelerated nature of millennial popular culture, and is an added challenge.

In the past eight years, the works, from *Americans* to *WEB* have been used in a variety of academic curricula including art theory, sociology, and design classes. (11). In many instances, the use of these media metaphors is reported as being an important cognitive tool for gaining intuitive understanding of these aspects of postmodern media society. Institutions using these materials include Purdue, UCLA, University of Colorado and Kent State. In fact, I find it ironic being an artist whose most (I believe) influential installations are within college curricula. From my reports, the use of such mediated texts such as ours in combination with the associated theoretical texts appears to offer practical understanding of the concepts without being so literal as to singularly dictate meaning to the student.

However, there are challenges to surmount when creating conceptual works such as these. During a lecture, a student asked me if it would be more appropriate if the video work (keep in mind that this is only one medium) was shown split screen, with the text from a concept was derived scrolling down one side, and the video component running on the other(12). This question brought several issues to the fore in my mind. Key to the production of materials such as this is the question of media literacy versus literal intent. It seemed to me that the student wished a literal cross-referential link to the material at hand, which violates the purpose as a cognitive "sparking" tool, to paraphrase Laurie Anderson (13). Pieces such as *WEB* and *Machine* are not merely annotated texts by Virilio, Baudrillard, and others; but new texts in themselves that integrate content into already extant programs of inquiry.

The shift in perception in the "writing" of these concurrent texts is in the way they are constructed and that they begin in the space of the mediascape itself. As stated before, as new critical media texts that issue forth from the synthesis between media technology, postmodern theory, and pop culture, the text is not superceded, but built upon. Texts are not rendered obsolete, but these technologies offer parallel epistemological and pedagogical trajectories that intertwine with existing cultural forms, such as the book. In addition, our methodology of production is inverted in relation to that of traditional multimedia applications. Usually, the text is considered a priori content before the inception of the media creation. In the case of our work and that of Haymarket Riot, the media text is conceived as primary source, and all derivative works such as essays follow. This is not new to disciplines such as conceptual art, but it appears to be relatively novel to the genre of academic content.

The integration of text, media, graphics, music production, and other disciplines forces the practitioner to work in multi- or interdisciplinary modes, which is in full agreement with Baudrillard's assertions of cultural transience. The production team's task boundaries blur as various members are required to take on responsibilities in many simultaneous areas. The interdisciplinary approach requires not only an understanding of the theoretical implications of the materials, but also of the production method. However, this methodology is labor intensive, as expertise is required in numerous sites of engagement and development. The multimediated individual expresses their simultaneous channels of communication not through multiple languages, but through multiple media, issuing forth data simultaneously upon multiple channels of experience, creating a deep, visceral experience for the audience.

America and the First World have been a multimediated culture for some time. I do not want to finish this essay without acknowledging the legacy of McLuhan's work (14) in regards to installations such as MACHINE and WEB. It is also through the ubiquity of his theories of media in mass digital culture that we can then build sites of engagement such as these. By investigating the postmodern milieu that bodies of work such as these occupy, we can examine societal and aesthetic issues intrinsic to our increasingly digital world. The degree of success, taken qualitatively, of works such as Haymarket Riot's also infers that we are becoming peoples who increasingly speak in metaphor through image, both literal and implied. We are a demographic which clearly speaks the multimedia culture.

References

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- 2: Epstein, Jonathon. Wake Forest Interview, 1996
- 3: Museums paper,
- 4: Epstein, Jonathon/ Lichty, Patrick. *Americans Have No Identity, But They Do Have Wonderful Teeth*, 1992-4, CTHEORY, www.ctheory.com, Montreal, Canada
- 5: Simmel, Georg. Tragedy of Modern Culture,
- 6: Virilio, Paul. The Aesthetics of Disappearance
Art of the Motor
- 7: Deleuze, Gilles. Rhizome Versus Tree (from the Deleuze Reader) Trans - Boundas
- 8: Baudrillard, Jean: The Transparency of Evil, 1993, Verso, NYC,
- 9: McKenna, Terrence. This quote is derived from a cassette tape I received labeled "Virtual Heaven". The voice is unmistakably McKenna's but no further information could be found.
- 10: Star Trek: The Next Generation: *Darmok*. Episode 202, Airdate: 9/30/91
- 11: This refers to conversations with colleagues who are using/have used the materials in their curricula. These include, but are not limited to:
 - Sam R. Smith, University of Colorado, Boulder.
 - Jonathon S. Epstein, PhD Wake forest Univ./Kent State Univ./Southern Indiana Univ.
 - Douglas Kellner PhD, Univ of Texas- Austin, UCLA
 - Mathieu Deflem PhD, Purdue University
 - Ralph Harley PhD, Kent State University
 - Bryan Carter PhD, Central Missouri State
- 12: Lichty, Patrick: Postmodernism and Everyday Life, Baudrillard, 1997, Kent State University, March 28th
- 13: National Public Radio – All Things Considered. Interview, 1995 (exact date unknown)
- 14: McLuhan, Marshall: Understanding Media, 1964/1994, *Various*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA