

The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory
Volume 1, Issue 1, 2020
Mapping Media Studies
mast-journal.org

The Undisciplined “Discipline” of the In-between

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Writing a short essay for the *MAST* journal was a pleasure and an honor, especially the editors’ wish that we impart a personal touch to our contributions. I tried to identify when exactly I began to be interested in media, art and communication. As a child, I was already fascinated by photography, learning in school about how to develop pictures or how to access alternative perspectives of reality through media. For one exercise, we were instructed to take the camera and try to give visibility to things that most people do not pay attention to—which is still my favorite school experience. Before starting university, we were also assigned an essay written by Paul Watzlawick in a literature course and I believed that this could help me have a better understanding of myself and of the people communicating around me—which, of course, did not work as I expected. Still, Watzlawick’s essay provided me with a language to describe what had intrigued me in childhood: Why do people not talk the same way when they use a phone? Why do we keep photographs in albums? After having received my high-school diploma, I decided to apply for the Master of Arts program in “European Media Culture” at the Bauhaus University in Weimar (Germany). A few months later, in 1999, I attended my first seminars and lectures on

media philosophy, media theory, media archaeology (it did not have this name twenty years ago), film theory and semiotics, as well as media art. We were invited to read texts from different scholarly or philosophical backgrounds (Jean Baudrillard, Vilém Flusser, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Harold Innis, Friedrich Kittler, Niklas Luhmann, Susan Sontag) but at that time I was very intrigued by a text written in 1921: Fritz Heider's "Ding und Medium" (*Thing and Medium*). This work has influenced many German media philosophers such as Sybille Krämer, for example. Considering waves, sounds, matter and the four elements within their media theory, the question of materiality and the relation to 'natural' elements is one of the essential nodes in "German" media philosophy (Pias; Roesler and Sandbothe), but also in French *mediology* (Merzeau). Media historian John Durham Peters takes similar directions by considering media as environments and environments as media.

To sum it up here, the most important preoccupation during these "Weimar years" was to defend the idea that media cannot be reduced to television or the printed press (as devices or institutions). Also, media theory is not at all uninterested in communication studies (I do not have enough space to develop on the distinctions and important relations between both that are of historical, epistemological and cultural order), but enlarging the definition what media are or could (not) be can foster alternative and forgotten (historical) perspectives on how we are interwoven with the material world, which power relations are taking shape and how we can critically break hegemonic patterns or communicative habits, schemes or interpretation (Wentz). I am not sure that I want to call what we do a "discipline" (some of us defend the idea; others do not). I think that we are an "undisciplined discipline"—and if that makes it a discipline, then why not...

What I am sure of, however, is that the study of media (and media and art, and media-art)—in the form of “classical” research or research-creation (Paquin and Noury) as we say at the *University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada* (École des médias)—is a way to engage with the critical analysis of and views on how media are interwoven with our senses, bodies and social realities—how they shape us, and how we shape them. Political dimensions are particularly important here as technological inventions (which, as we know, are never really “new”), as well as their production and use, are our objects of analysis, our sources and our tools of creation. Teaching media theory and engaging students who work on their creations and research in this field is not only a pleasure, it is also, and maybe more importantly, a way of approaching and examining our current society, with all the difficulties that arise from adopting different perspectives. Indeed, perpetually interwoven within specific power relations, media cannot be understood without a rigorous critical reflection on the economic, political, technical and historical dimensions—including, of course, gender, race, culture and materiality on a broad level. This is, at least, how I approach the pedagogy of media theory and media studies: the students’ contributions, theses or artworks are not merely concerned with producing results or triggering effects, but rather they have a point to make about how and why we think as we do - *with* media. Beyond the epistemological level, I invite them to follow their intuitions and passions and to share their views and their voices on argumentative and creative bases. What makes our undisciplined “discipline” so complex, fascinating and sometimes difficult to deal with is the variety of approaches, topics and interests that can be developed. Leona Nikolić (experimental media program, UQAM), for example, is currently working on an interactive installation about the commodification of digital beliefs, rituals and spirituality in order to question our relationship with our smartphones from a media-archeological perspective.

As a media theorist with background in media philosophy and semiotics, it is precisely this “in-between more than two” that makes me passionate about what we do. Similar to research in particle physics, we observe it, we get closer to it and sometimes create it—but luckily, we can never completely grasp it.

For the future of media theory and (media) art, we have to continue to be undisciplined and we need to keep on decolonizing our perspectives, cultural bias, minds and research, we need to keep on translating (Steinberg and Zahlten), rebelling against uniformization of research and thinking and we need to keep on exploring alternative ways of approaching and doing (media-)-theory.

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