

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

Media Philosophy

Timothy Barker

University of Glasgow

At the start of 2012, I moved to Glasgow. I had been working as a post-doc at the University of New South Wales in the iCinema Research Centre, writing *Time and the Digital* and helping out on various research projects that the Centre was working on. Like most research positions, this one was extraordinarily enriching, challenging and ultimately, time-limited. In 2012, as my contract was coming to an end, I moved from Sydney to Glasgow to take up a permanent lecturing post at the University of Glasgow. Now, I'm not delusional enough to think that readers of this short essay, looking to get an idea of my own framing of media studies, are completely interested in the biographical details of these early stages in my career. But I mention my relocation because it had a significant impact on my intellectual work. I had always been interested in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (a product of an Australian tertiary education in the Arts), particularly in the opportunities that he offered to think about process philosophy and the way that he could be used to re-vitalise the work of A.N. Whitehead. This was my first book, a synthesis of Whitehead and Deleuze that offered me new ways to talk about interactive media and digital aesthetics. To my mind, two particular contributions came from the book. One was the concept of *multi-temporality* and one was the concept of *the condition of userness*. The process that I was most interested in describing in the

book was the process of interaction between a user and an image-making machine. This book was still very much focussed on aesthetics and experiences of interaction.

After moving to Glasgow and taking up a post in the Film and Television Studies department, something changed. I was still interested in process philosophy but I became much more interested in the actual workings of the technical apparatus than Deleuze's transcendental empiricism (one might say this was natural, with Glasgow being the home of the *Screen* journal, which has of course made massive contributions to apparatus theory).

This began to signal a shift in my work towards media archaeology, whilst still retaining the style of thought needed to do process philosophy. Of course, I was unusual in the department, a type of 'joker in the pack'. After all, I was hired for a new post as a lecturer in digital media, not in film and television studies, and I was repeatedly told that my role was to 'shake things up'. While my colleagues at Glasgow remained interested in close textual analysis and to some degree hermeneutics, producing what in my eyes were brilliant readings of films and television programmes that were nonetheless beyond me, I was given free reign to try and look at different ways to study technical images, focusing on the actual workings of media and, in full accord with my background in Whitehead, Deleuze and process philosophy, trying to explore the way that technical processes might be seen to provide the *conditions for the possibility of experience*. This trajectory found its resolution in my second book *Against Transmission*.

The concept of the condition of userness is one that underpins most of the work that I have done in media studies. It represents a way of thinking about the 'user' or the subject in a way that focuses on the condition for their emergence, rather than the figure of 'the user' or 'the subject' as an already constituted thing. The formulation of this concept largely comes

from my explorations of Deleuze's work, which gave me a way of talking about process and experience without recourse to a subject or a consciousness that is at the centre of experience. Instead, the condition of userness is a way to talk about the conditions for possibility that are set up in the interactive encounter for the *expression* of a user, as an identity that is produced by the encounter, rather than a figure whose identity is exterior or prior to a process of mediation. This follows fairly closely Deleuze's ideas of actualization, where 'bodies' (in this case the 'user') are like the solution to a problem: they emerge from the plane of the virtual, which could be thought of as ideal events embedded in the conditions for the problem (Deleuze 237). This idea also took form because of my interpretation of Whitehead's (1985) thoughts on prehension, his arguments about the subject-superject and the becoming of actual entities, which again offers a way, like Deleuze, to avoid the phenomenological recourse to an experiencing subject at the centre of the world of process. Instead, in this model, it is the conditions for interaction that are at the center. This then offers a new way to think about media studies and indeed the philosophy of technology by focusing on the conditions of possibility, without reifying technology itself.

Likewise the concept of multi-temporality has framed my approach to media studies. We have known at least since Harold A. Innis and then Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler that media are designed not only to overcome time, but also to produce temporalities. Print, as McLuhan (1962) argued, structured a particular linear version of time, as events appeared as though words on a page, read from start to end. Television and what McLuhan called the new electronic environments produced a different type of time, expressed as aural rather than visual information, coming from different locations all at once. This was a space thick with information, rather than that expressed by a line. Kittler then extends McLuhan,

opening up new avenues for media philosophy with his work in *Discourse Networks* and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* where the conditions for the possibility of discourse were linked to technical realities. And of course since then, with the emergence of faster and faster computing power, networked international markets and the everydayness of computing, many people have argued that the time of the contemporary moment is accelerating, as though we are all locked in one type of computationally effected temporality. One of the drivers behind my research has been an unease that I have felt with this description of a mono-temporality that is meant to pervade global society. The concept of multi-temporalities was my attempt at providing a way to get around this. Mostly adapted from Michel Serres's philosophy, this concept allowed me to look at the multiple times produced by media as a type of scalar version of the present moment (Serres 1995; 1983/2015), rather than one focused on one, homogenous time that is thought to define 'digital culture'. In short, the concept of multi-temporalities allows me to explore the way that people might live in multiple types of time simultaneously, to explore how the contemporary moment is made up of multiple, often conflicting histories, and to examine the way media produces the multiple through their technical operation of transmission and storage routines.

What then is media philosophy (the title of this essay but something that I have yet to mention). Rather than delivering a theory of the media, media philosophy establishes the conditions for reflection on the technology of media. Media philosophy finds its place beyond media theory by conducting an exploration of media that asks: what are the fundamental concepts and experiences produced by the technical infrastructure of the media apparatus? What are the epistemological effects of transduction, transmission and storage? What are the conditions in-between human subjects and technical media that give form to both objects and

experiences? Just as philosophers of language argue for a rigorous investigation into the conditions for meaning and the relationship between language and reality, a philosophy of media, looks to the medial conditions for life in describing experience in this in-between constantly mediated and technical universe. Instead of language and semiotics, which proved so valuable both to structuralist visions of the world and its reformulation in post-structuralism, media philosophy looks to technical codes, operability and data processing and storage routines. Media philosophy thus makes the transition from semiotics to the ‘media-technical time event’ (Ernst 173).

Works Cited

Barker, Timothy. *Against Transmission: Media Philosophy and the Engineering of Time*.

London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018.

Barker, Timothy. *Time and the Digital: Connecting Technology, Aesthetics and a Process*

Philosophy of Time. New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2012.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. New York: The Free

Press, 1978.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia

University Press, 1994.

Ernst, Wolfgang. *Chronopoetics: The Temporal Being in Operativity of Technological Media*,

London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

Smith, Dominic. *Exceptional Technologies: A Continental Philosophy of Technology*. London:

Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Serres, Michel. *Rome*. Trans. Rudolph Burks, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Serres, Michel. *Angels: A Modern Myth*. Trans. Francis Cowper, Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1995.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

Kittler, Friedrich. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Serres, Michel with Latour, Bruno. *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*. Trans. Roxanne Lapidus. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.