

# Three Moments on Mediation

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2007: Lexus airs a series of ads featuring famous musicians as figureheads for the digital sound imaging feature of their Mark Levinson sound system. In one of these ads, jazz musician Diana Krall sits in the driver's seat of a Lexus, discussing the transformative experience of hearing pianist Oscar Peterson perform when she was a teenager in Vancouver.

As Peterson's version of the classic blues "Night Train" plays, somewhere between diegetic and nondiegetic sound, the ad's onscreen text describes the Levinson system as "music you can see," and Krall recalls how she was "completely blown away," moved by the song to this day "to the point where [she] can't express it, except on the piano."

There's a great deal to be said about this ad as an object of media study, about how it interweaves questions of art, technology, gender, and capitalism. Yet, since I first saw it air, I have been drawn to it more for the theory of media study it advances in both its onscreen text and Krall's reflections, a theory based on uneven mediations and productive incompatibilities. At stake in such an approach is not just the question of remediation as theorized by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, foundational as that theory may be, but rather a question of what happens to remediation when it becomes marked by excess. What does it mean to *see* music,

especially music produced through a high-end digital sound system? What might we glean from the incompatibility of such an interpretive approach? What does it mean to be so overloaded—by emotion, by music, by information—that one can only express oneself nonverbally? And what possibilities—if any—are there for expressing such an overload through the verbal and the textual registers of scholarly media study?

2003: In *Dark Fiber*, Geert Lovink writes, “‘Media’ still refers to information, communication, and black boxes, not to pure mediation straight into the body. Media, almost by definition, are about filters, switches, technical limitations, silly simulations, and heartless representations” (23). Lovink’s conception of media raises another series of generative questions for media study: how might scholars represent media’s “heartless representations?” What are the moments where our critical ability to discuss media technologies bends and breaks, and what productive moments and modes of critical engagement might we find in those bendings and breakings? Where might we see common ground between the interpretive practices of media poetics and the anti-hermeneutics of media archaeology, between human and posthuman materialities? Lovink asks us to reach into the black box of mediation, to attempt an interpretive reckoning with archives, artifacts, and processes that we already know we cannot fathom.

Jorge Luis Borges stands as a productive avatar for this theoretical work. But not the Borges of “The Garden of Forking Paths,” so often cited as a forerunner of hypertextuality and nonlinear digital narrative—rather, the Borges of “The Library of Babel” and “Funes the Memorious,” wrestling with archival excess and the complex ways in which information and inscription have always already had posthuman dimensions. These dimensions are increasingly urgent in our current moment of global mediation and information overload: where does our

media—posts, streams, vibrations, devices, metals—come from, and where does it go? At one level, this is a question of discursive and material sourcing, of network circulation and supply chain analysis, of geopolitical and ecological ethics. But when we approach those questions at scale, they also become ontological and existential: how do we open up the black box once we realize we are inside of it, when the map has become the territory?

1998: The electronic music group Boards of Canada releases their first full-length album, *Music Has the Right to Children*. A foundational work in the genre, *Music* is deeply concerned with media history and analog technology in both its modes of production and its thematic content. Track four, “Telephasic Workshop,” is for me what Peterson’s “Night Train” is for Krall.

With almost no actual words, “Telephasic Workshop” says almost everything about media and media study that I work to say in my research, asking questions that I can only answer at a slant, by taking up other texts, technologies, artifacts. If you listen closely, you can hear the lost histories of media threaded through the track—not just the analog sound production and the 1970s filmstrip aesthetic often cited as touchpoints for group’s work, but also the record-scratching, proto-hip-hop robotics of Herbie Hancock’s “Rockit,” the out-of-time body segmentation of early breakdancing, the cyberpunk elegy of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. Its voices—chopped, manipulated, and looped in and out of phase—are somehow nonvocal, indexical, geometric, interlocking with one another and with the song’s synthesized rhythm and melody. It frames sonic poetics as media archaeology, the sound of what happens when machines and bodies talk to one another in a kind of shared, kludged language, intermingling and taking each other’s places in space and time.

I approach media study not as an attempt to describe indescribable media, but rather as an attempt to describe the indescribability of media: to articulate texts, operations, and archives that are (or at least seem) outside of the human, but that nonetheless bear deeply upon the shape of the human in the early twenty-first century. Media study maps the blank space of the black box we find ourselves in.

### Works Cited

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