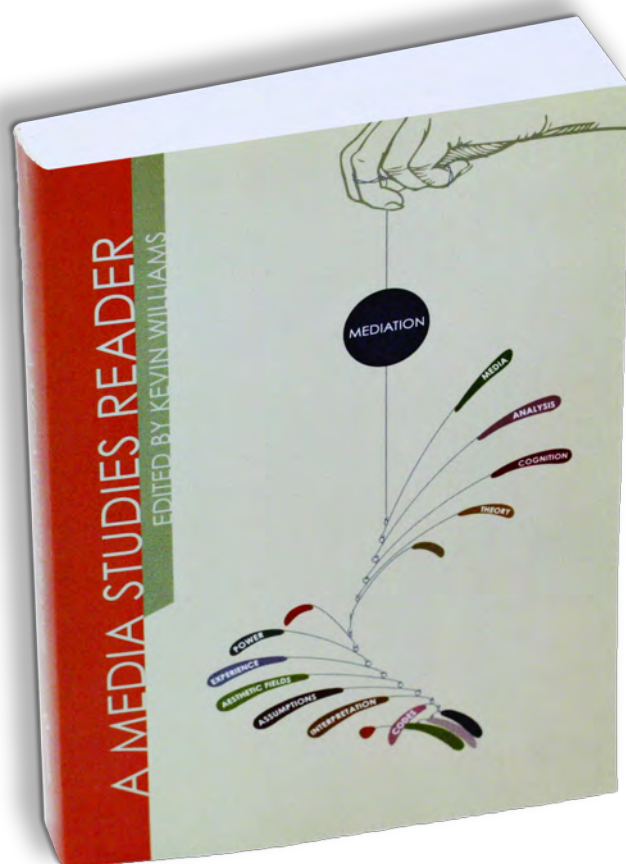




A MEDIA STUDIES READER

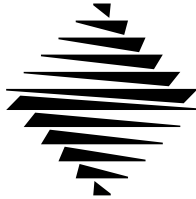
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- Copyright Page
- Table of Contents
- Excerpt of Chapter 1

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A Media Studies Reader



Edited by Kevin Williams

Shepherd College

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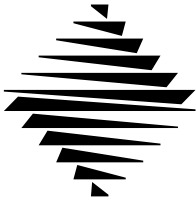
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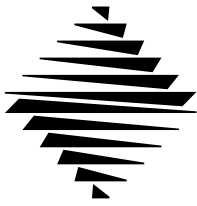


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Fragments: An Introductory Guide to Understanding Some Assumptions and Interests of Media Studies

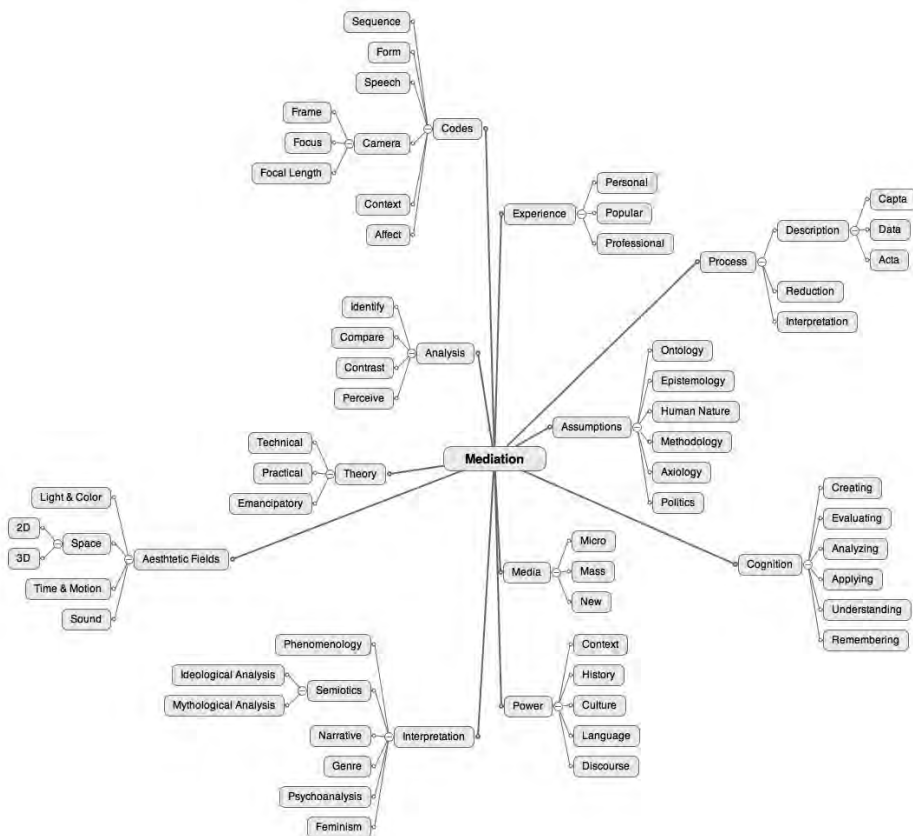
By Kevin Williams

A FRAGMENT ON FRAGMENTS

THE PURPOSE OF this book is to collect, in one volume, many of the essays, research papers, and articles that define media studies. Emphasis is placed on media literacy, the impact of new technologies on everyday life, and considerations for social action. Some of the papers in this collection are seminal texts that define the field. Others are less known, but no less important. The purpose of this introduction is to collect fragments, bits of the philosophy of communication, theories, and methods that media students and practitioners can use and refer to when reading the texts that define this field of inquiry. Think of this introduction as a map. This map, like any, does not reproduce the territory, but rather creates a way of seeing the territory symbolically and iconically. I've written this introduction in a fragmented manner focusing on models and visual devices that are interrelated and overlapping. Hopefully this will provide the reader with reference guides to be used when seeking to understand the deep-seated issues on which the collected essays are grounded.¹

¹ Fields of interest, like media studies, appear within an oral as well as literary tradition. I studied media criticism with Jenny Nelson, who had studied with Richard Lanigan. I studied the philosophy of communication with Algis Mickunas. David Descutner taught rhetoric with a keen sense for media studies issues. Bill Miller was always interested in discussing current trends in contemporary thought. If this book leans toward criticism and away from the discussion of institutional and organizational structures (as many media studies will focus on), it is because these people convinced me that this approach to media studies will have the most direct impact on the political world. Of course, they are not to blame for my failings at any level of this discussion. My personal bias, which shows itself in the second half of this essay, is an emphasis on "critical production," or the idea that our academic media studies must, in the spirit of Marxist and feminist studies, be oriented toward social action.

Figure 1



Media(tion)

If we are to study media, we must recognize a few things up front. Media itself is a phenomenon that at once appears self-evident, and then upon reflection, appears to be a multifaceted and multivalent “thing” that is non-localizable at best. We must at the outset set aside presuppositions, set aside the erroneous notion that, because “the media” (seemingly both monolithic and multiple) is/are everywhere and easy to access, we already understand. Indeed, we are well served to begin by rejecting the notions that there is some “the Media” out there, that “we” experience “it” as it is “given,” and that we already understand it—so why study it. There are those who do not consider media studies a viable academic discipline because of the presupposed banality of the subject matter (although I assure you that there is nothing trite about mediation or communication as they found all other disciplines).

Moreover, media scholars have to endure those who think that they are already experts because, after all, they have a 50-inch plasma TV, digital cable, an iPhone, and an HD video camera. It is hard to suggest to somebody who already “knows the truth” that there is more going on than meets the eye and ear. However, that is the situation in which we find ourselves.

Let’s begin, then, with suggesting that there is no “the Media.” That is, there is no singular entity that speaks, that has agency, beyond the thousands of people who go to work each day and shape TV programs, films, advertisements, magazine layouts, newspaper photos, Web-page videos, and the rest. “The Media” is at best a metonym for various means of mediation. For heuristic purposes, we can establish three domains:

1. Mass media are those media in which few people communicate to many (e.g., film and television).
2. Micro media are those media in which a few people communicate to a few (e.g., cable television channels that occupy a niche market, blogs, Web pages, and other directed forms).
3. New media are those that are interactive and reciprocal (two-way—e.g., video games and some Web 2.0 applications).

Thus, while there is no “the Media,” we can accept the idea that mediation is instituted through various channels, takes numerous forms, and is instrumental in disseminating the discourses, ideologies, and mythologies that become the stories we live by.

As for the context in which we find ourselves, electronic media experience is increasingly immersive and interactive. Large-screen plasma display televisions with surround sound deliver home theater. Split screens, Blu-ray features, and other aspects of digital TV take us out of the theater experience and place us in a new multitasked, fragmented experience. Video and computer games seductively call us to turn the lights down and the volume up. And iPods personalize sonic space and create the soundtrack of our lives; if we’re so inclined, we can grab the podcast of the class we missed and listen to it on our way to the next lecture. Wikis allow us to participate in the construction of knowledge—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Blogs allow us all to become writers; in a time when most professors lament the death of writing, more people are writing non-class assignments than perhaps ever before in history (Lunsford, 2009). Learning management software connects students to teachers, each other, and the World Wide Web, creating not only interaction, but (finally) facilitating paperless classes. Facebook and Skype connect us with friends and family—locally, regionally, and worldwide. Cell phones are ubiquitous and allow complete digital information immersion. Digital cameras, including cell phone cameras, lead to the exposition of micro-news, iReports, caught long before news teams could ever be expected to be on the site. Making a film complete with Hollywood-style special effects is relatively easy, and YouTube gives us a built-in worldwide audience. If we have an idea too bold for live action or the abilities of our friends and family, we can use a

game engine, machinima style, to create our own version of the science-fiction video game Halo, for example.² Animation and graphic novel software are increasingly accessible and easy to navigate. We create our own songs using applications like Garage Band and share our expression with other enthusiasts through networks such as iCompositions—“radio” for a community of producer-consumers who spend endless hours discussing each other’s work. When we really hit the mark—remember the hamster dance Web page, the treadmill music video, or that animated faux-iPod ad—our work goes viral and we get our fifteen minutes of fame, and perhaps an acceptance to art school or a shortcut to a career as a media producer.

While broadcasting and traditional one-way media will no doubt be a major part of the media economy for years to come, the age of interaction and participation is well under way. The personal computer is no longer a tool for work, it is a way of life, a portal to self and cultural expression. The cheapest Mac is a full-blown production studio. Higher education, because of the access to technology and expertise that it provides, promises (even if it does not always deliver) to prepare masters of multimedia expression and a shrewd understanding of media literacy—if, and I mean *if*, we can still stop to meditate, to think, to ponder what it means, to think critically and conscientiously.

Considering the Field and Its Interests

Media studies means different things to different people, and is best thought of as a constellation of studies and activities holding a common interest in mediation, especially electronic mediation including television, film, the Internet, games, and new technologies. Media studies—from the media literacy advocated here-- is generally related to the qualitative school of communication research and theory including, but not limited to, phenomenology, semiotics, genre theory, narrative theory, psychoanalysis, Marxian-ideological theories, and feminism. Media studies is also strongly influenced by critical theory and cultural studies. This legacy leads to a politically motivated undertone including:

1. An appeal to a wide notion of rationality;
2. A resistance to all forms of domination;
3. An orientation of praxis; and
4. The importance of emancipation (see, Habermas, 1986).

As Van Manen (1990) notes, critical theory research aims at promoting critical consciousness. It is a conscious attempt to break down institutional structures and arrangements that reproduce oppressive ideologies and social inequalities sustained and produced by those with the power

² Machinima is the process of using video engines to produce animated movies. Game players can now become animators and tell their own stories using the characters, sets, props, and actions from a given game. See, e.g., <http://www.machinima.com/>.

to steer discourse, power and knowledge. While all social endeavors and schools of thought are essentially political (i.e., they influence the ways we know, understand, and experience our everyday lives), media studies, in the traditions of Marxism and feminism, is more often than not overtly political and socially interested. In other words, the study of media, mediation, and communication can—and I believe should—lead us to action, toward personal and social empowerment to make the world a more enlightened place for us all.

Seeing, Subjectivity, and Textuality

What do we assume when we seek to “see” critically? How can we understand the significance of electronic media and the influence and effects of communication technology on everyday life? Of course, there is no single answer because we are confronted not with a univocal thing, but a constellation of expressions emanating through a variety of channels. Created by a wide range of people with varying interests, these expressions become meaningful in the activities of perception and interpretation, and become important within the politics of power. In short, *meaning* appears as a relationship between three variables that have been redefined by media studies as the field deals with the phenomena of electronic mediation. So what do we need to know as we open and read this volume?

What we once called *senders*, *messages*, and *receivers* are terms which must be revisited and revised for media studies. While the notion of a sender, message, and receiver may be adequate when considering speech communication, they are not adequate for mass, micro, and new media. First, the sender of a television program, film, video game, or other form of electronic communication is rarely, if ever, univocal. Electronic media is produced by groups of people, all of whom have a hand in creating the signifiers of the aesthetic field (see Zettl, below); watch the credits roll at the end of a movie to get a feeling for the amount of people it takes to create a viable, commercial act of electronic media. The receiver may be singular in appearance, but is better thought of in terms of audiences. Moreover, the individual viewer is also more complex, more socially constructed by *subjectivity* which is, as Husserl taught, *intersubjectivity* and as cultural studies suggest, *social subjectivity*:

- *Intersubjectivity* signifies that your subjectivity, or agency, does not appear in a vacuum, but is colored by your experiences with others’ cultures and civilization. We find from Husserl’s phenomenological investigations that our everyday experience, including the practice of the physical and humanistic sciences, is necessarily subjective, relative to our place in the world. The point of departure for the study of the things of this world is, then, the subjective consciousness that takes in this world (Abram, 1996, 38). This also means that so considered “objective” phenomena are essentially “intersubjective” and their “objective” being resides not in some material objectivity, but in the political webs of discourse.

- *Social subjectivities* are those phenomena which define you beyond your control. The phrase indicates that you are a) a subject with active agency, as in the subject of a sentence, but that b) you are subject to cultural bias, language, and discursive power, as in the subject of a king. The main social subjectivities are age, class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation (and others). These are phenomena by which others will judge you and over which you have agency but not control.

Finally, the term, *message*, is inadequate. The word message implies both a singular phenomenon of communication, as in “the message meant ...” and a double phenomenon or hidden implication, as in “what the message really meant was ...” For media studies both of these ideas are replaced with the notion of *text*:

- Any object becomes a *text* in the act of reading. For example, a book is just a book until we read and interpret it. Likewise, a chair is an object until we “read” and consider it as a meaningful object—a sign. For example, a reading of a common school room chair reveals that the chair is not a neutral object for sitting upon, but is also a device to keep the student awake during a lecture by making them slightly uncomfortable. Thus, a text is a manifold phenomenon, the significance of which is revealed in the act of reading.

Reading and Writing Textually

Considering the objects of serious study as subjective or textual (and hence open for interpretation) is a break from much of the academic tradition in which we were raised. It is important to note that in all fields of academic venture, assumptions are being made. Considering things as texts indicates that we are reading the things of the world. Semiotics is a way of studying communication by examining the ways in which things point beyond themselves to reveal denotative, connotative, ideological, and mythological significance. In short, semiotics studies things considered signs (pointers) that point in accordance with cultural conventions (or codes) that reveal the mythologies and ideologies informing culture through the stories we tell. At its most basic level, a sign is composed of a signifier and the signified: The signifier is material, sensual, and transcendent (e.g., the “thing” that exists in the material world), while the signified is ideal, mental, and immanent (e.g., an “idea” to which the thing points). Signs are generated or oriented by codes (e.g., dress codes, culinary codes, religious codes, codes of ethics, morals, etc.). Codes are cultural conventions or sign systems tacitly agreed upon by a culture within a tradition. Ideologies and mythologies are ways of speech and communication that establish for us patterns of predigested meanings, values, and beliefs. While ideology invokes the social, more hegemonic side of the equation and mythology invokes the cultural, more spiritual side of the equation, both lead us to naturalize culture.

Lanigan (1988; 1992) provides us with insight into the reading process that accounts for the assumptions made by media studies and similar endeavors and at the same time provides us with methodological considerations for both reading and writing.

1. We begin with a *description* of the text. Here we can examine another essential difference between the human-critical and physical sciences.
 - a. Lanigan (1988) notes that growing up in an educational system favoring the traditional scientific method, we have inherited an approach to knowledge founded primarily on hypothetical constructs or *data*. The human sciences, in the tradition founded by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, William James, and Charles Saunders Pierce recognize that the seemingly obvious “that which is given” or *data*, Q.E.D., *quod erat demonstrandum*, is actually not at all given, obvious or factual, but is that which is literally and actually “taken,” or *capta*, Q.E.I., *quod erat inveniendum* (interpreted). In other words, *capta* represents that which is to be found out, is interpreted, captured. Where the physical sciences study *data*, the human sciences study *capta*. The human science of communication is able to recognize the political intentions and historical conventions of the *capta/data* continuum and thus enters into *analysis* or *acta* (that which is done) in a systematic and methodological approach that sets aside prejudice and presuppositions, the naive acceptance of *capta* for *data*, and focuses on the interpretation of conscious experience. Following Husserlian phenomenology, the methodological movement of the study of communication is a movement from *capta* (that which is taken) to *data* (that which is demonstrated via observation and interpretation) to *acta* (that which is to be done), the process of analysis.³
 - b. Watts Pailliotet (1999) suggests that, from a practical perspective, we observe, identify, and describe the signs that constitute a text. At this level, observation must be grounded in the text. If it does not appear, we cannot put it there; there will be time for interpretation and the extension of meaning later. Description must reveal only what is sensed, usually seen and heard. Judgment and evaluation must be bracketed at this time. Take notes. Draw pictures. Jot down questions. Note presuppositions: Don’t ignore your tastes, but recognize that they cannot come into play at this time. Writing down personal opinions, values, and tastes helps bracket judgment and helps us become aware of prejudgment. This bracketing is called the *epoche* by Husserl. Its purpose is not to keep experience “in” brackets, but rather to keep presuppositions “out” of the description. Here we recognize assumptions and separate them from the text.

³ As one seeks greater study and understanding, Lanigan’s (1988) three-phase semiotic phenomenology will add greater depth and discipline to your studies.

2. Interpretation (Watts Pailliotet, 1999): Respond to and interpret the text. Summarize. Question. Seek the essence of expression (free imaginative variation). Form hypotheses. Consider judgment, but do not pass it yet. Explore the meanings of key words and ideas. Develop imagery (remembering that *image* does not mean visual; sounds and smells can evoke images just as clearly, if not more so, than pictures). Locate the text and ideas historically and culturally; consider voice (who speaks and who does not). What audience was meant to experience this text? Engage with all known theories of reading (semiotics, genre theory, narrative theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, postmodernism, etc.).
3. Evaluate and apply findings: Here we must make sure that the balances are correct, that we are ready to make a judgment and/or propose an action. It is good to first clear the air by stating personal tastes, likes and dislikes, presuppositions, beliefs, opinions, and values so you can consider the context of personal experience as it is existentially and politically experienced. Say “I” when speaking to account for (and take responsibility for) your agency in this process. Say “the text” when referring to the material at hand and what it “says” as interpreted (Watts Pailliotet, 1999). If media studies are knowingly political, we must begin by taking responsibility for our actions and make apparent our assumptions.

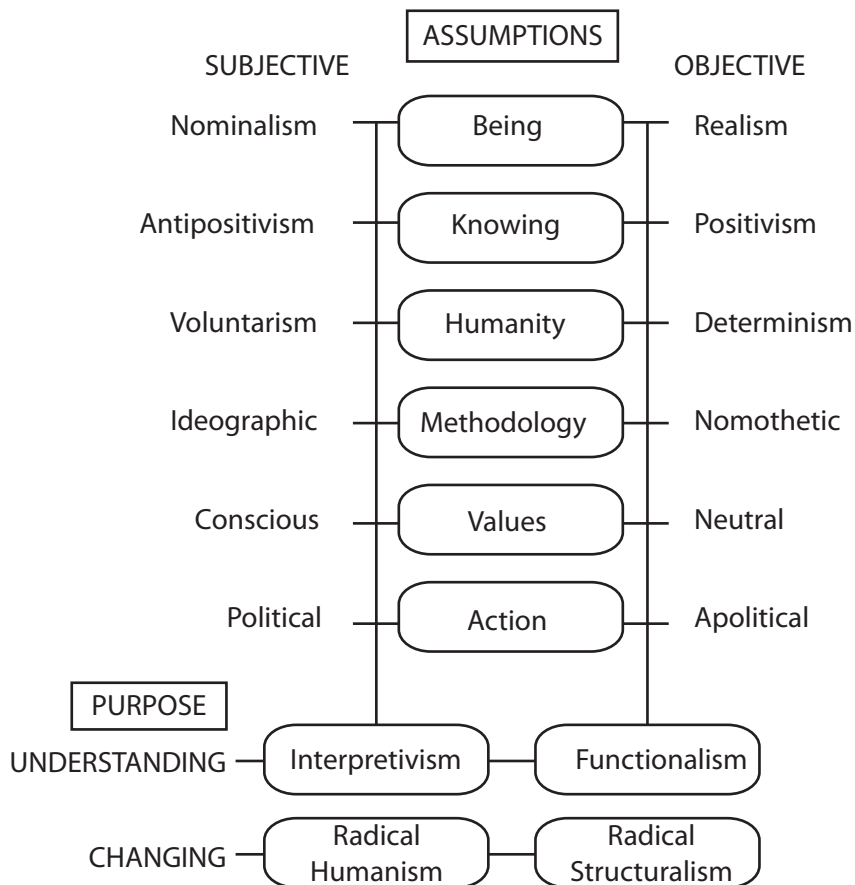
Assumptions and Purposes

As Lanigan (1988) notes, the human sciences (including critical inquiry) and the physical sciences are not just methodologically different. They are *essentially* different. This is because they are founded on sets of philosophical and sociological assumptions. While rarely articulated, these assumptions form the conceptual grounds that found research and practice. Understanding these assumptions allows us to realize the differences between the physical sciences, the human sciences, and critical inquiry. Research is, after all, a sociocultural endeavor that takes place within a philosophy of science and a theory of society (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Fundamental issues in the philosophy of science, detailed below, include *ontology* (being), *epistemology* (knowledge), assumptions about *human nature*, *methodology*, *axiology* (values) and, goals or purposes.

When dealing with philosophical assumptions, two polar extremes appear—objectivism and subjectivism:

- Objectivism considers the world as an external, tangible object, a thing to be studied.
- Subjectivism considers the world as a product of human immanence and thought, a product of human action.

Figure 2



If we recall the old adage about a tree falling in the forest with nobody there to hear it, the objectivist would say that it made a noise no matter what; the subjectivist would say that any noise was insignificant because there was no one there to hear it. These assumptions are outlined here; detailed explications can be found in Burrell and Morgan (1979), Lanigan (1988 and 1992), Polkinghorne (1983), Agger (1989), Van Manen (1990), Gamble (2000), Littlejohn and Foss (2004). Indeed, the material below is directly attributable to these insightful sources. Note at the outset that the physical and social sciences tend toward an objectivist polarity while the human sciences and critical inquiry, including media studies, move toward a subjectivist polarity.

- I. Ontology is concerned with the question of *Being*: We ask, what is the nature of the subject matter? What is the nature of *reality*?

- A. Objectivism's position is realism. For the objectivist, things are seen as tangible. There is a *hard reality out there*, just waiting to be understood by science. The social world is seen as a tangible thing—like the natural world. For example, a government is a *thing* to be studied. Things are assumed to exist even if we are not aware of them or do not name them.
 - B. The subjective pole is called nominalism (meaning “to name”). The nominalist social fabric is seen as *softer*, more *internal*, *immanent*, socially informed through language and human action. This position is derived from the tradition of German idealism. From this vantage, social structures are seen as changing all the time—a kaleidoscopic continuum. We create and are created by the world through language and other human actions. Thus, the social world is seen as conventionally understood.
- II. Epistemology questions knowing. It asks, how do we know? What can we know? How do we know what we claim to know?
 - A. Objectivism's position is called positivism (not to be confused with empiricism). Positivism can be characterized by a desire to explain and predict what happens in the social world by examining regularities and causal relationships.
 - B. Subjectivism's position is called anti-positivism. Anti-positivism, as the name suggests, is firmly set against establishing a set of rules, laws, hypotheses, or any kind of underlying regularity in the social world. This is because of the assumption that the social world can only be understood from the point of view of those involved.
- III. The human nature debate asks questions about the relations between humans and their environment.
 - A. Objectivism's position is *determinism*. Persons are seen as products of their environments; our humanity is determined by the environment or nature.
 - B. Subjectivism's position is *voluntarism*. This is the notion that individuals have free will; we create ourselves through nurture and education.
- IV. Methodological assumptions are based on and extend the first three.
 - A. Objective methodologies are *nomothetic*. Nomothetic methods are based on systematic inquiry. The researcher formulates research questions, hypotheses, and tests to find the outcome of experiments. Ultimately, one answer is sought. Such methods are based on practices of the natural sciences. Nomothetic inquiry claims to be objective. It claims to explore what is general and universal-natural. It is, in short, the scientific method.
 - B. Subjective methodologies are *ideographic*. These are roughly the approaches and methods of the humanities, human sciences, and critical inquiry. Ideographic inquiry is more subjective and draws on personal experience. It claims to explore what is unique, personal, and sometimes relativistic. Multiple perspectives are

accepted. Multiple answers to a single question are seen as possible. Ideographic methods are, in short, interpretive methods.

- V. Axiology deals with the nature of *values* and poses the question: Can research be value free?
 - A. An objectivist axiology sees research as an endeavor free of values. Research is objective.
 - B. A subjectivist axiology sees research as value laden because doing research itself is a cultural value. Moreover, what is observed and deemed worthy of study is a cultural decision.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) correlate these five sets of assumptions with considerations of fundamental issues and goals of social theory.

- VI. Teleology deals with issues of *goals* or ends. Do we seek to understand or explain? Do we seek to know the status quo? Or do we propose change?⁴
 - A. Objectivism here gives us a sociology of regulation. The goal of research is to explain the status quo. It asks, why does a society tends to hold together rather than fall apart? It seeks to understand the social forces that prevent chaos.
 - B. A subjectivist sociology of radical change, on the other hand, studies deep-seated structural conflict. It seeks to understand codes of domination that operate in society. It is interested in people's emancipation from oppressive social structures, material, and psychic deprivation.

When we correlate the two poles of objectivism and subjectivism with the two poles of regulation and radical change, we can look at how social science theory can be considered as four paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979):

1. The functionalist, or positivist, paradigm seeks rational explanations to effect highly pragmatic knowledge. Functionalism tends to be problem/solution oriented. It asks how we can maintain stability and order in a society. This paradigm is interested in explaining the status quo, social order, integration, solidarity, and need satisfaction based on insights derived from the physical sciences. This position is generally rejected by media studies because the fundamental assumptions do not account for a fundamental condition of communication and mediation by which material or aesthetic, sensible objects (or signifiers) are rhetorically and conventionally tied to immaterial, immanent, ideas (or signifieds). In short, communication and signification are presupposed, but not accounted for.
2. The interpretive or ethnographic paradigm seeks to know from the frame of reference of those involved in a situation rather than from the observer. The interpretivist sees the

4 The map (Figure N) includes the issue of purpose as integrated into its primary matrix.

social world as an emergent process; there is great interest in the essence and experience of daily life. “That we understand each other at all is amazing,” as my teacher (Jenny Nelson) liked to put it. The interests of this paradigm lie more in how daily life is achieved, not in promoting change and conflict. The interpretivist is concerned with the way individuals negotiate, regulate, and live lives within the status quo. Media studies that are descriptive and interpretative appear within this paradigm.

3. Radical humanism makes many of the same assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, but there is an emphasis on radical change, not the status quo. There is an interest in how ideology and hegemony split consciousness:⁵ Consciousness and the being of humans are considered to be determined by oppressive social structures. People are asked to identify the means by which their lives are limited. This is thus a critique of the status quo and a search for a way out, a seeking of release from dominating social structures, and a commitment to change. Media studies, influenced by the Frankfurt school, Marxism, and feminism appear within this paradigm.
4. Radical structuralism has a deep-seated concern with economic and political structures. Whereas radical humanism is interested in consciousness, radical structuralism is interested in the hard, tangible, *out-there* structures of society. It shares many similarities with natural science but to a different end, notably change, potentiality, structural conflict, and so on. Just as functionalism is generally rejected by media studies, radical structuralism is as well because of the objectivist assumptions that underlie its theories.

As you consider these paradigms, relate them to the work you read and your goals as a scholar and producer, note that the political climate will influence operative paradigms. Founders of communication studies were mostly functionalists, as the field grew out of the physical and social sciences. There will also be schools of thought in each paradigm. American cultural studies often fall into the interpretive paradigm, while British cultural studies fall more often into the radical humanist paradigm. The essays collected here are both interpretative and radical humanist. Refer to these notes when considering the deep-seated assumptions that guide this field of thought and keep them in mind as you develop a professional career.

Working Notes Toward a Theory of Critical Production

In *Intermediality*, a handbook of critical media literacy that emphasizes the interrelationships of computer-mediated communication and the importance of educating media professionals with a critical eye, Semali and Watts Pailliotet (1999) note that media studies research rarely bridges the gap between theory and practice in a single work (19). There are many books and papers

⁵ Hegemony is the dominance of one group over another without the recourse of force so that the dominant party dictates the structure (patterning) of society to its advantage. Culture itself favors the dominant group and its beliefs. Hegemony, then, controls the ways that ideas become naturalized in a process that informs notions of common sense.

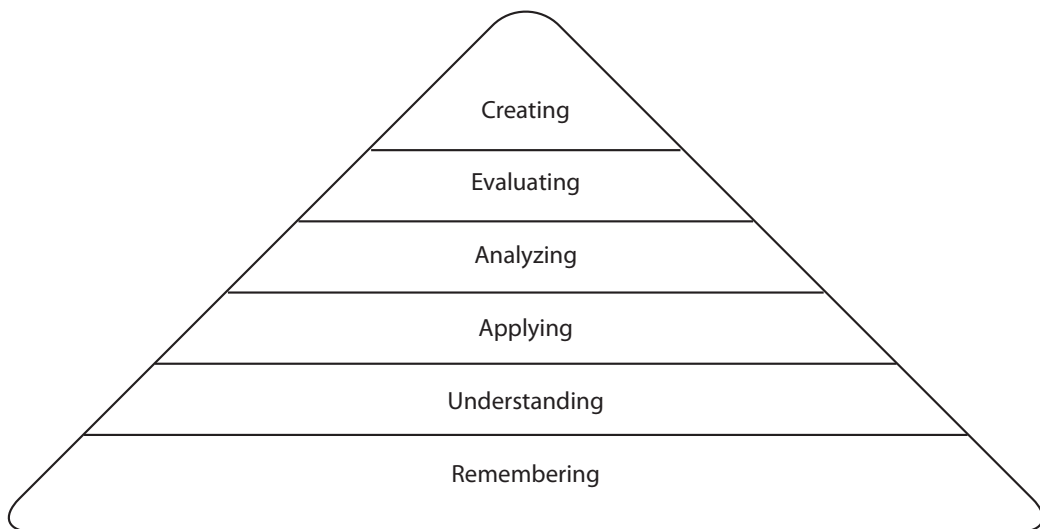
devoted to media criticism. Few of these are written from a pedagogical perspective, and fewer still deal with teaching the creation of critical digital media—important for the undergraduate seeking viable employment in a changing and unstable market. Most students taking courses in media studies, for example, are not taking these courses to prepare for a career in higher education; they are preparing for careers as media producers. However, intellectual and practical skills are not necessarily two different things: we do not need to posit a false dichotomy. Media production is a political and ideological activity (Althusser, 1986; Higgins, 1991; Sholle and Denski, 1993) and if we separate production from intellection in school, how can we expect students to be intellectual producers after graduation? My interest in creating this volume and this introduction thus lies in part in empowering participants in society who are critically engaged producers of culture, who are aware they are producing culture. A third path that integrates critical-intellectual skills with technological-aesthetic skills is needed. An integral approach is contemporary and from a very practical perspective, it is engaging and entertaining. The need for critical “thinking” is well documented. The need for critical “production” is rarely considered (Semali and Watts Pailliotet, 1999). According to a recent study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, college graduates are increasingly less prepared to compete in the global marketplace, often lacking skills such as critical thinking and problem solving (Vance, 2007). Employers are more likely to mention deficits in critical, communication, creative, and teamwork skills than insufficiency of technical expertise among new employees. More importantly, a review of academic literature suggests that critical thinking is a valued cultural capital though which U.S. higher education has traditionally contributed to reproducing social inequality, in particular through its differential development of critical thinking skills in students of prestigious and selective institutions (Tsui, 2003). Therefore, we need to define and practice critical thinking in the context of critical production. The second half of this paper explicates theories and methodologies for educating critical production as well as critical thought.

Bloom’s Taxonomy

Critical thinking can be defined as:

the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or

Figure 3



generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action (Scriven, 2004).⁶

Essential in the proactive development of critical thinking skills is a pedagogical approach that regards knowledge and comprehension in terms and facts as merely points of departure in a process that extends to more meaningful cognitive practices. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy is frequently used to refine and practice critical thought. Anderson (1990) revised the model to exclude mind/body, thinking/doing binary oppositions, and in so doing revised the model as a critical-thinking, critical-producing model.

1. The base of the pyramid (or lowest level as presented here) is *remembering*: Can you recall or remember information? To do this we define, duplicate, list, memorize, recall, repeat, reproduce, and state.

⁶ In order to facilitate critical thinking and producing across the curriculum, our communication department at Shepherd University adopted a model that we could agree upon and share. That model was compiled and penned by Jason McKahan, Assistant Professor of Communication and Videography. The levels of cognitive activity are derived from Bloom's taxonomy of the cognitive domain, comprising of Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. McKahan's work, paraphrased here, draws on, Bloom, B., Englehart, M., Furst, E., Hill, W., and Krathwohl, D. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green.

2. The second plane is *understanding*: Can you explain ideas or concepts to others? This skill is marked by classifying, describing, discussing, explaining, identifying, locating, recognizing, reporting, selecting, translating, and paraphrasing.
3. From understanding we move to *applying*: Can you use the information in a new way? Here we must choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch, solve, use, and write.
4. While we might assume that applying, a metaphor for working, is the desired end of education, Bloom and others suggest that those who really excel in a given field of endeavor go to higher levels such as *analyzing*: Can you distinguish the parts of a system (be it a television studio, the World Wide Web, a video game, or a movie script)? Can you appraise, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test?
5. If so, you can move on to evaluation. *Evaluating* was the tip of Bloom's model, but in the revised model it is second from the top: Evaluating asks, "Can you justify a stand or decision? Can you appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, evaluate?" These are skills that editors, managers, directors, and producers must navigate.
6. At the peak of the revised taxonomy is *creating*: Can you not only produce but create a new product or point of view? Can you assemble, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, and write on a level that is novel and gains attention for breaking older existing paradigms?

Critical Creating

Critical thinking and critical producing sound easy enough, but even with the rubrics outlined above, where do we begin? How do we proceed? What do we observe? Watts Pailliotet's (1999, 31–51) theory of "deep viewing" provides us with six codes to observe, analyze, interpret, and act upon when analyzing an existing text or when creating a new one.⁷

1. Consider conventions of *action and sequence*: Note and consider events, patterns, sequences, order, and relationships of *time* in scripts, storyboards, and presentations. Consider what occurs, when and how long, while regarding: What happens? In what order? How long do events last? Time is, following Eisenstein, fundamental to montage (Wollen, 1969, 48), and the logic of montage still teaches us much about the phenomenon of electronic media.⁸

7 Of course analysis is not limited to six codes. These represent only a place to begin and are relevant for media production. For more insight into developing a semiotic sensibility, I recommend Daniel Chandler's *Semiotics for Beginners*, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html>.

8 Montage is a logic of editing film and video that runs contrary to continuity editing, the style favored by Hollywood. Montage considers the way shots collide in the editing process to produce significance. The shot, edit, next shot is a dialectical process (and thus related to Marxian and Hegelian philosophy). We can consider

2. Consider conventions of *semes and forms*: Observe units of visual or *aesthetic meaning*. Ponder the significance of characters and objects. Look at symbols, colors, repeated images, dress codes, culinary codes, and so on. Ask: What is seen? What signifiers appear? Which codes give them meaning?
3. Consider characters and discourse: Regard what characters and actors say. Consider the weight of words and phrases. Summarize main ideas, repeated language, terminology and paralinguage. Consider issues of *power*: Who speaks? Who is silenced? What is said? How is it perceived? By whom or what entities?
4. Consider codes of proximity and movement, *space* and *time*: Turn to storyboards, diagrams, sketches, and drafts to consider space, time, and movement. What sorts of movement occur? How is space used? Consider the camera's *frame*, *focus*, and *focal length* (I call these the three F's). When learning to read and write for electronic media, it helps to see the presentation of the screen itself in terms of signification. For example, the frame of the television is a signifier. What is within the frame is visible and important. What is outside of the frame is not simply invisible, it does not exist; one must take care to consider what has been left out—especially when considering the indexical signs of the news, for example. What is in and out of focus is also significant, and a director will direct your attention just as a magician will practice sleight-of-hand. Focal length changes signification in many ways. A 20 mm or wide angle lens will expand content, create faster lines of action, and stretch faces in such a way that you, as a videographer, can cast doubt or suspicion on a character. A 200 mm lens, on the other hand, flattens and compresses space, shrinks distances and fills out the face. This lens can be used, then, to show the stability of a person's psyche or wrongly indicate such consideration to mislead the viewers and keep them in suspense. Mastering the material signifiers (see Zettl below) is thus important for both good reading and writing skills.
5. Consider culture and context codes: These codes deal with the human construction and organization of ideas. References to science, art, educational practices or popular cultural tropes should be noted. Ask the classic questions: Who, what, where, when, why, and how? What social knowledge is referred to and/or assumed? What does the appearance of these tropes imply? Ignore? What is missing? Where are the creators and actors situated historically and culturally?
6. Consider effects and processes: Examine artistic, *aesthetic*, and production devices. Regard, for example, the types of shots and meaning. A close up (CU), for example, is a signifier defined by the inclusion of the head and shoulders; what is signified is reality (as in the news) and intimacy. A medium shot (MS) signifies personal relationship, and

montage in an existentialist sense as a description of our experience with imagery: We listen to music while driving, glance at a billboard, observe the cars we pass, witness the stores and so on. Taken together these appearances constitute a mediascape, a sensual, multimedia experience (Williams, 2002).

Figure 4

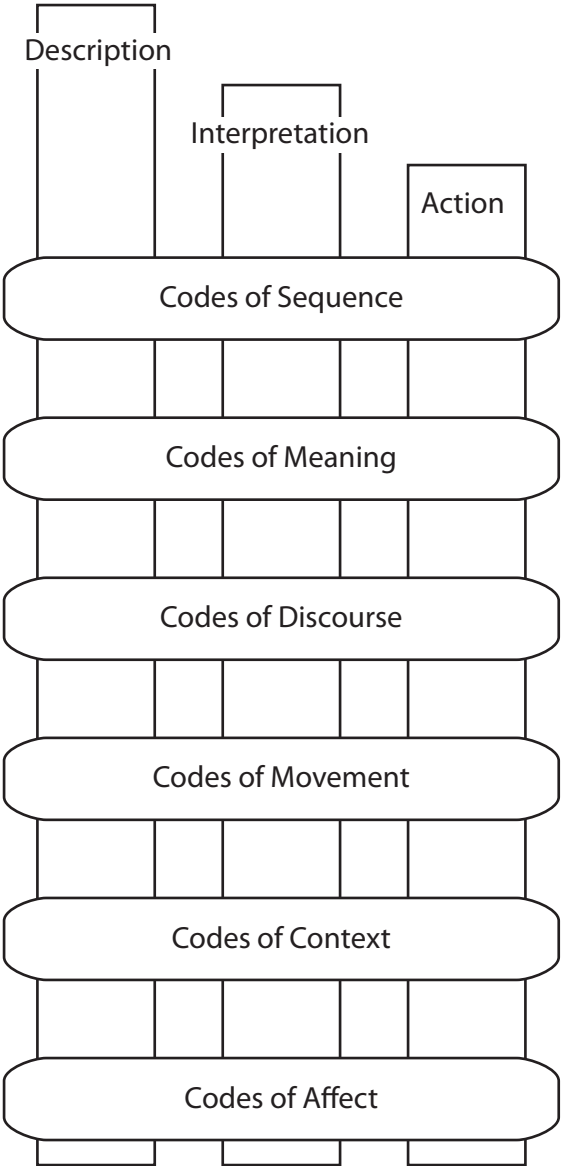
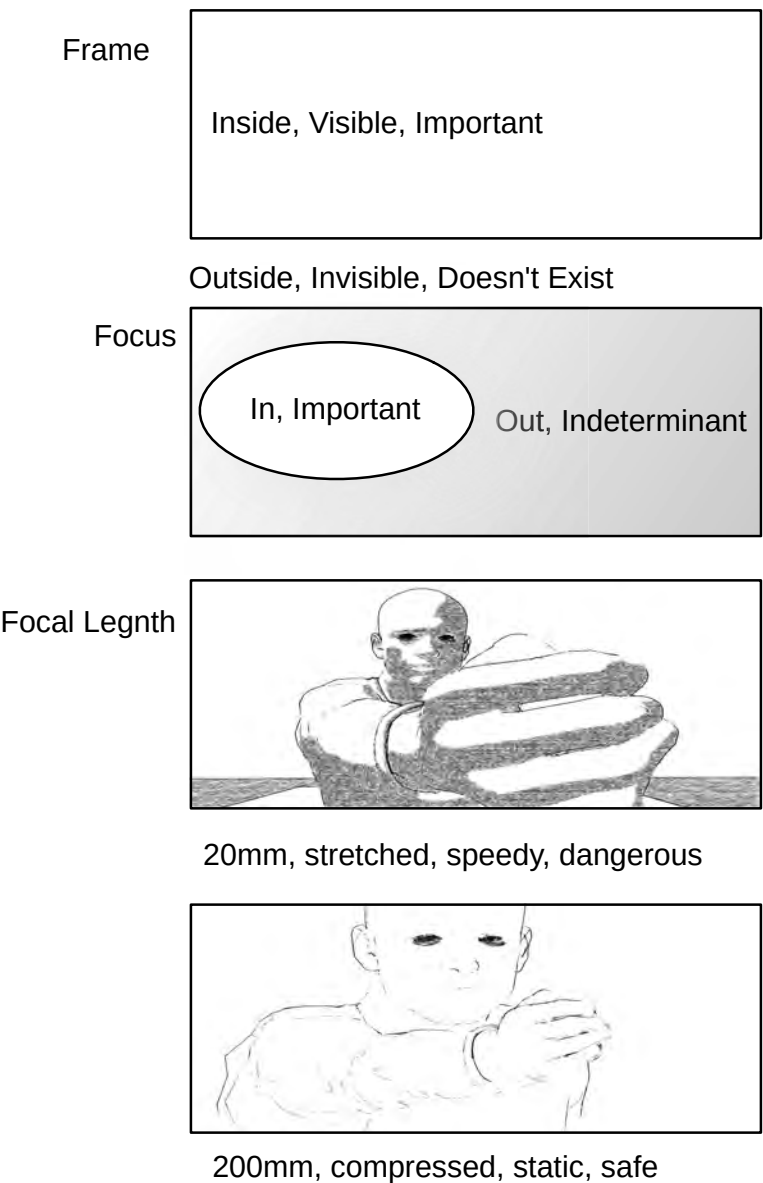


Figure 5



is signified by the inclusion of most of the body within the frame.⁹ Consider music as a sign: Is the music in a major or minor key? Does it conjure a mood? Does the music or art design draw on a historical epoch that would imply meaning? How are special effects used?

Answers to these and other questions help us map the territory. However, because we are working within a discipline (i.e., within a set of assumptions), we need to be certain that our reflections are not arbitrary. Here the methods, theories, and assumptions of semiotic phenomenology are useful.

Critical Production

Critical production is a strategy for combating the erroneous division of theory and practice. Disciplinary and theoretical knowledge is often, even if wrongly, considered abstract, not applicable to life, not “real world” experience. However, theoretical knowledge is a valuable part of a good education and a well-rounded cultural life. Theoretical disciplinary knowledge arises from life experience (*capta*, *data*, *acta*); thus, theory illuminates and does not obscure “street smarts.” The purpose of theory is to “see” the world more clearly and in different ways.

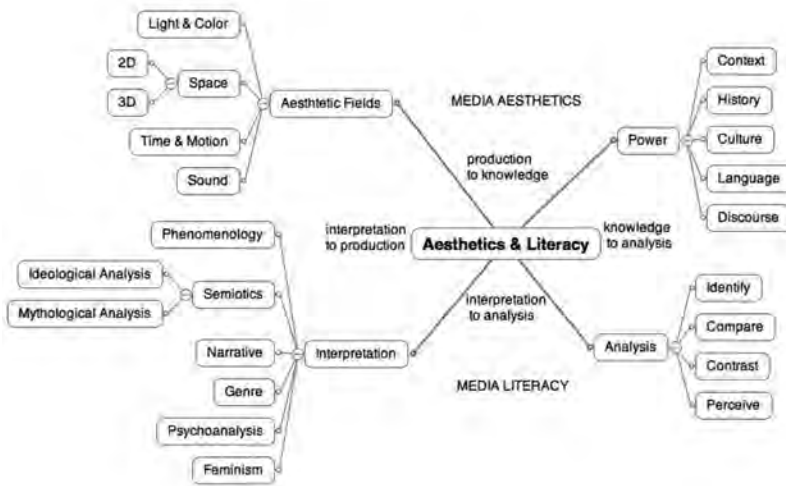
Originally the word “theory” (i.e., *theoria* in Greek) indicated “looking on”: one looked through the *theoros* and “abandoned his or herself to the sacred events” (Habermas, 1986, p. 301). Put in other words, theory mediates expression and perception. That is, theory arises between a perception of the world and an expression of it; between your perception (of themes raised in a movie, for example) and your ability to express that perception (through speech, writing, or electronic means). We can make communication theory “real” by integrating it with our cultural and personal experiences (i.e., with the knowledge we already have).

Zettl’s Media Literacy Model

To consider media literacy as a matter of critical reading and writing, interpreting and producing aesthetics and literacy across the media studies curriculum, Zettl’s (1998) media literacy model is comprehensive and useful. This model allows for the engagement with issues of production and reception that students can use when planning a project or watching television, for example, and for considering critical issues when producing.

The model is circular and can be accessed from any point. If we begin (arbitrarily) with the *aesthetic fields*, we are confronted with the physical “stuff” (e.g., line, color, and sound) that we manipulate when we communicate. It’s worth noting that the word aesthetics comes from

⁹ An exercise for videographers: Create a chart of all camera-based signifiers, their definitions, and what is signified. This technique, as well as the others noted in the essay, will show you how semiotics is a useful, as well as critical, methodology.

Figure 6

the more fundamental *aisthesis*, meaning “sense perception” in ancient Greek. For Husserl, perception is “interested” but not before passing from *aisthesis*, simple sensual awareness, to acting, evaluating, etc.¹⁰ For Heidegger (in Krell, 1993), this straightforward sensuous apprehending is what is “true,” in the Greek sense of the term:

To the extent that an *aisthesis* aims at what is its own—the beings genuinely accessible through it and for it, for example, looking at colors—apprehending is always true. This means that looking always discovers colors, hearing always discovers tones. What is in the purest and most original sense ‘true’ ... is pure *noein*. ... This *noein* can never cover up, can never be false” (p. 79–80).

We find, then, a level of rhetorical “truth” that is the stuff on which ideology is written.

Part of the model’s value lies in its recognition that aesthetics appear in the world and that perception and creation are influenced by issues of *power*. Moving from production to issues of knowledge, it is vital to recognize issues of discursive power. Seemingly pure phenomena such as time, space, and color appear within codes and conventions, within webs of signification. We can recognize that, as Foucault notes, not only is knowledge power, but power and knowledge have a productive yet restrictive relationship: Power is based on, uses, and reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with its intentions. Power recreates its own fields of experience through knowledge (Foucault, 1981; Sholle, 1988). Knowledge of

10 Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*. Revised and edited by Ludwig Langrebe, translated by James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks. Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973. pp. 64–65.

aesthetic construction is thus not only not value neutral, but reproduces ways of seeing and horizons of expectations: media production is cultural reproduction. Arrangements of sights and sounds are laden with a mythological and ideological sense that pervades the aesthetic field and motivates signs to point the way they do (Barthes, 1972; Althusser, 1986). Issues of context, history, culture, language, and discourse are, then, not imposed by an instructor, but educed from our very work with the material world. Teaching specific production techniques (e.g., journalistic objectivity) manifests power-knowledge; we, as teacher/scholar/producers and we as students need to understand these relationships if we are to understand aesthetics.

Understanding that language and history, for example, are manifestations of *power* (the power to name, define, delimit, a power exercised ideologically and hegemonically), as critical theory suggests, can be brought into critical practice by heightening perception through training in *analytical* observation. The third rhizome of Zettl's model indicates that analysis is practiced through being able to identify, compare and contrast, and perceive. Here we focus awareness and perception on the codes and conventions at play (the codes illuminated in the deep viewing model are a good starting point). Here we appraise, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, and test (as considered by Bloom's taxonomy). Analysis allows us to draw relationships between texts and systems. We can become acutely aware of intertextual relationships. However, analysis is always a form of destruction, of taking things apart. It is important to keep in mind a bigger picture and wider critical values.

We thus turn our attention to methodologies and theories of reading, interpreting, and evaluating texts. An explanation of semiotics, genre, narrative, character, psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism as modes of hermeneutic inquiry is clearly beyond the scope of an introductory essay; indeed they are the focus of this volume. What is helpful to realize at this point is that multiple theories of reading exist and each will shed a different light on the same content. Together, these ways of seeing, understanding, and critiquing provide us with a very deep, thorough understanding of textual communication and mediation, both of which are ends in their own right, or a very insightful and inspired beginning for creating new and novel works of expression by taking gained insights into the formation of the aesthetic fields.

In the End-Beginning

In the end, it is important to understand the assumptions and politics of any endeavor. Media studies is still a young and growing field, and it is not yet recognized as a legitimate field of study by some institutions. However, as you study the suppositions considered here and the material contained in this volume, I believe you will find the field is not only intellectually sound, but is a necessary response to the ways media have been studied (or dismissed) in the past. As Ulmer (1989) notes, there are three key domains of experience that are always at play whether we are engaged in academic study, professional work, or taking time to rejuvenate and relax. These are:

1. Personal experience (e.g., experiences with family and friends; also feelings, political beliefs, religious convictions, etc.)
2. Popular culture experience (e.g., television, films, newspapers, magazines, radio programs, records, video games, etc.)
3. Professional or disciplinary experience (e.g., the subject matter of this specific field of study or career)

Learning takes place as new materials, new thoughts and ideas are related to what we already know, feel, and believe through these channels of experience. While you read and study these pages, keep these domains of experience in mind, draw relations between them, and consider the assumptions generally taken for granted. That is a key to greater understanding.

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