Media Education, Spectrality, and Acoustic Space
An Encounter with Derrida and McLuhan

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Introduction

RAYMOND WILLIAMS (1985) tells us a concept of mediation has been part of the English language since at least the fourteenth century. Over time, through inclusion in various systems of modern thought, three distinct uses of the term have emerged, two of which are of interest here.[1]

First, there is the sense in which mediation describes "the interaction of two opposed concepts or forces within the totality to which they are assumed to belong" (Williams, 1985, p. 205). Colloquially (but also in more positivist conceptions), this usage finds its way into unfavourable talk about our relationships with the mass media. The media's impact on our understanding of reality is often cast as an "indirect connection … in a contrast between *real* and *mediated* relations, *mediation* being then one of the essential processes not only of consciousness but of ideology" (Williams, 1985, p. 206, emphasis in original). In this usage, mediation is productive but misleadingly so. The critique of ideology thus becomes a process of revealing the way experience is mistakenly organized by our representational systems. In the field of media education, this sense of the term has found greatest uptake in the privileged role afforded textual decoding in classroom practice (Buckingham, 2003; Morgan, 1998;). Making sense of the social life of signs has generally meant students learn to deconstruct images in order that they might develop critical skills necessary to operate in a highly suspect media environment. Many have sympathy for these ambitions; and yet, there are also reasons to believe these forms of critical practice, like ideology critique more generally, fail to achieve the kinds of transformations educators hope for. This issue has special importance for teachers.

On the one hand, a number of researchers have observed that a "textual fixation" in media literacy tends to privilege the teacher's reading as the correct understanding of any media representation, over and above students' interpretations (Buckingham, 2003; Morgan, 1996, 1998). What is lost in such practices is a willingness to "problematize the 'will to interpretation' of

media teaching itself" (Morgan, 1998, p. 124). I have argued elsewhere (see Poyntz, 2006) that this concern can become debilitating, particularly when it leads educators to refrain from interrogating how domination operates in media representations or when it undercuts educators' willingness to foreground media that represent new forms of democratic life. Nonetheless, neither of these goals can succeed if media education only amounts to the substitution of one authoritative voice (i.e., the teacher) for another (i.e., broadly speaking, mainstream media). On the other hand, a tendency to privilege the power of texts has also discouraged an investigation into the way media operates in specific contexts of use. As a result, the inherent instability of all textual formations has been misunderstood, and the role of *situated* audiences who produce meaning in specific contexts of circulation has remained undertheorized. Because of this, while still in use in some settings, the notion of mediation as productive deception has fallen out of favour as it has increasingly become apparent that access to the real is always a function of social relations that "cannot be reduced to an abstraction of that relationship" (Williams, 1985, p. 206).

Alternatively, then, mediation is also used to describe a kind of interaction that is in itself substantial. It includes "forms of its own, so that it is not the neutral process of the interaction of separate forms, but an active process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated" (Williams, 1985, p. 205). In relation to digital media culture, for instance, this is to say that the dimensions and forms of experience generated within new information environments alter what it is we mean by culture in the first place. In this usage, mediation is productive, creating new practices and newly formed phenomenon specific to that experience. For media educators, this conception poses challenges because the focus now turns to the situated contexts within which media texts are used. Rather than imagining texts to be static objects susceptible to analysis in their own right, they now operate as moving targets. The meaning of these targets, in turn, is determined by the ways they are worked in specific instances of dissemination and appropriation. If attention to this problematic now forms a central part of media literacy research, in what follows, I offer a contribution to this work by examining how mediation operates in Derrida's thinking about *spectrality*, and then secondarily, in McLuhan's heuristic, acoustic space.

In *Spectres of Marx* (1994) and *Echographies of Television* (1996/2002), Derrida's work calls attention to a clarification in the operation of deconstruction. This move coincides with a new and more explicit interest in the role of tele-technologies in Western society. Of interest for media educators is the way Derrida's marking of an injunctive moment within deconstruction distinguishes the notion of spectrality from the simulacrum. To be sure, this "originary performativity" in Derrida's schema is not to be thought of as a new form of presence that stands outside of representation (Derrida, 1994, p. 31). Rather, any emancipatory promise will always already be a function of the way mediation operates in digital media environments. Nonetheless, Derrida's clarification is helpful because it suggests that the potential for critical agency does not depend on anything like the authoritative voice of the teacher; rather, it is a function of the instability inherent in the production of meaning itself. In this way, spectrality offers a valuable contribution to media education by drawing attention to the way iteration calls forth an always available moment of critical performance. At the same time, attention to the spectral—in the form of digital tele-media technologies—also makes clear a limitation in Derrida's system. Mark Hansen (2000) and others (Gumbrech & Pfeiffer, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991) have noted this shortfall and have suggested it has to do with the way Derrida's schema reduces technology to the representational, thereby ensuring that meaning operates as the final "tribunal for evaluating technology" (Hansen, 2000, p. 123). For media educators, this difficulty has to do with the problem of

thinking about the materiality of technology. A turn to McLuhan's work on acoustic space will be useful at this point because his heuristic continues to offer helpful ways to delineate how cultural media constitute contemporary social life. This is to say, an encounter with Derrida and McLuhan offer media educators a way to hold different but related levels of analysis in productive tension. Both thinkers conceive of mediation as productive, and if Derrida helps us to understand how this produces a certain kind of emancipatory promise, McLuhan's work remains vital for locating this promise in relation to the dimensions of technological lifeworlds characteristic of modern society (Stevenson, 2002).

Spectrality and Absence

Within the field of media literacy, the development of global media cultures alongside the rise of new information technologies has garnered much attention. Broadly speaking, these transformations have brought to the fore a whole set of pressing issues having to do with the nature of young people's media experiences. These include: the rise of global media conglomerates and the ongoing commercialization of youth cultures; the development of interactive media and newly configured relations of production and consumption; ongoing debates about the digital divide; and concerns about the technologizing of schools and the role of ICTs in the development of more democratic pedagogical cultures. In turn, these issues have fed a series of debates about the new configurations of childhood and the extent to which anything like a digital generation has evolved. Questions about the nature of critical agency in an age when media cultures and young people's lives seem constantly in flux are also much debated today. In the midst of this tumult, Derrida's work on spectrality remains salient because it helps to clarify the terms on which an emancipatory critical practice might operate. At the same time, a limitation in Derrida's schema also points to the ways in which McLuhan can help media educators examine the contexts and forms of meaning constitution that operate in information societies.

By the early to mid-90s, with the publication of *Spectres of Marx* and then later, *Echographies of Television*, the work of tele-technologies became a more obvious and sustained focus in the writing of post-structuralism's most significant theorist. Derrida's challenge to the Western philosophical tradition has long drawn effect from the explosion of representational forms and systems of communication, which increasingly allow the spoken word to function "without the presence of the speaking subject" (Derrida, 1974, p. 10). His project largely concerned metaphysics or the search in the Western philosophical tradition for "an absolutely pure, transparent and unequivocal translatability;" however, this changed with the arrival of the above texts (Derrida, 1996, p. 211). In both instances, the media are in the foreground and are understood to be forces of virtualization that produce "spectral effects." Derrida introduces his notion of spectrality in conjunction with an investigation of Marx because this new term is linked with developments in the commodity form. In fact, if spectrality recasts deconstruction in a digital age, it does so, in part, by reconceptualizing materialism in an age of deconstruction.

In the Marxist tradition, materialism operates as a manner of thinking existence whereby matter is always understood to precede and exceed our concepts. It's in this sense that Derrida identifies the logic of materialism with a logic of deconstruction. Both are what he calls, logics of demand (i.e., they refer to an excess that remains an inescapable alterity) that cannot be translated into a new order of presence. Where Derrida rejects an ontological foundationalism in Marx—a foundationalism premised on the primacy afforded notions of social labour, class, and mode of production, etc.—he (1994) also argues: "Deconstruction has never had any sense or

interest … except as a radicalization … of a certain spirit of Marxism" (p. 92). Given this, not surprisingly what distinguishes the spectral is "paradoxical phenomenality …, [a] *non-sensuous sensuous* of which *Capital* speaks with regard to a certain exchange value" (Derrida, 1994, p. 7). At the same time, the spectral is not just another name for reified commodity experience. It "is also … the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh.... [and] this already suffices to distinguish the spectre … from the simple *simulacrum* of something in general" (Derrida, 1994, p. 7).

The importance of the distinction between the spectral and the simulacrum will occupy us below. Here, however, Derrida's attention to television, video, and other modes of visual representation calls attention to the ways in which contemporary media culture shares characteristic features with deconstruction. In fact, the spectral might be thought of as a new kind of ontology, one where "the new speed of apparition … the simulacrum, … the virtual event, cyberspace and surveillance," are shaping a "democratic deficit" in Western democracies (Derrida 1994, p. 54). These developments arise because: "As it has never done before, … techno-mediatic power … *conditions and endangers* democracy" (Derrida, 1994, p. 54; original italics). While not deploying spectrality as a conceptual frame, others (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, Kalantzis, Kress et al., 1996/2000; Sandywell, 2006; Stevenson, 2000) have rehearsed similar themes and concerns. Barry Sandywell (2006), for instance, notes that in a time when tele-technologies mediate life, what results is a "global risk society with its corresponding constellation of ontological insecurities and contradictions" (p. 43). *Time Magazine* may have designated the citizens of the new digital democracy as their "Person of the Year" for 2006, but, as Sandywell (2006) observes:

> Dystopian descriptions of the Web in the popular press frequently appear prefixed by the adjectives 'ungoverned' and 'unregulated'. Promiscuous information flows in cyberspace create an anarchical theatre for antinomian agents with subversive intentions; cyberspace is imagined as a site of dangers perpetrated by disembodied intruders and anonymous agencies. A predominant image of computerized social systems is one of fragile configurations prone to systems failure and periodic 'crashes'. In extreme forms modern technophobia involves a haemorrhaging of trust that results in *cyberparanoia* (for example, the post-human anxiety that the planetary matrix of interconnected computers and allied digital technology are 'thinking for us', 'taking over' our lives, and that 'virtual co-presence' replacing 'real community' is a prelude to totalitarian futures). (p. 47)

The half-life, called the spectral, well describes this new social form because it calls attention to that which makes "the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world—indeed of matter itself—now shimmers like a mirage" (Jameson, 1995, p. 85). Derrida extends his analysis in *Echographies*, suggesting that the growing power of communication systems alter our understanding of the state, immigration, and citizenship. Spectrality thus speaks of a time "out of joint," our own time in which the media system takes "the phenomenal form of a war, a conflictual tension between multiple forces of appropriation, between multiple strategies of control" (Derrida, 1996/2002, p. 37).

As is well known, McLuhan's media theory also traces these kinds of transformations. In his more erratic and fantastical moments, McLuhan's prognostications are unhelpful. Yet, McLuhan's notion of acoustic space helpfully delineates environmental aspects of the new material formations produced by electronic culture. In an electronic and digital age, McLuhan theorized that the dominant category of space changes. The *differential space* of the acoustic replaces the

linear, visual space of print-based cultures (Lefebvre, 1991). What results is an environment characterized by flow, one that "is spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 33). Here, "the invisibilia of electronic communication … constitute[s] the fundamental materiality of contemporary social and cultural production" (Cavell, 2002, p. 24). Such invisibilia resonate with the peculiar ontology described by spectrality because for both Derrida and McLuhan new digital media produce significant consequences in the way subjectivity is structured, not just in relation to cultural content but in regard to perceptual processes (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003). McLuhan (1964/1994) attends to these developments in remarking that electronic and digital media are "'make happen' agents, … not 'make aware' agents" (p. 48). They operate as procedural mapping devices that render the human form discarnate by externalizing, as digital communication, what had previously been embodied forms of human experience. As but one example, the computer and other kinds of information technologies reconstitute the structure of experience by producing "a new sense of time, based on experiences of speed, reversibility, and resumability…; and, arising at the intersection of these time-space reorientations, a gradual habituation to virtual immersion, disembodied identity, and multimedia intensity" (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003, p. 35). Through this, "the discarnate user of electric media bypasses all former spatial restrictions and is present in many places simultaneously as a disembodied intelligence" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 72). To return to Derrida's (1994) notion of the spectral, here, one is made into "the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh" (p. 7).

Spectrality as Language Effect

Where Derrida's attentiveness to the role of media in contemporary culture marks an interesting and important development in his work, this shift also coincides with a clarification "in the way in which deconstruction handles concepts in general" (Jameson, 1995, p. 75).[2] It locates a logic of impact, an intensity that is not knowledge per se but a haunting that constitutes a necessarily inconceivable ground through which we make sense of the world. Deconstruction has always been a performative mode of thinking, which is to say, the logic of *différance* unfolds through the process of evoking the ground on which philosophical (and other sorts of) claims are made. If the spectral also works this territory, it simultaneously calls attention to a clarification in the operation of deconstruction. This is the moment in Derrida's argument, which is perhaps most interesting for media educators.

While attending to the virtual dimensions in contemporary culture, the spectral invokes the possibility of a new formation based on the "disordered plurivocity" that is an inescapable presence necessary to a properly understood deconstruction (Derrida 1994, p. 23). To be sure, this new formation is neither a function of Hegelian Spirit nor ontological knowledge. Rather, the spectral occupies the realm of the performative. It is a kind of figured concept that Jameson (1995) notes,

> is … of a somewhat different type than those that began to proliferate in Derrida's earlier work, beginning most famously with 'writing' itself and moving through a now familiar spectrum of marked terms like dissemination, hymen, along with the inversion of this practice, which consisted in modifying a letter in a word whose sound thereby remained the same (*différance*). (p. 79)

It speaks of a breaking up of the present but in such away that disruption operates at one and the same time as an injunction toward a new presence, one that is in constant movement, "enjoined, ordered, distributed in the two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet" (Derrida, 1994, p. 25). What results from this is a new set of rules around meaning, such that critique as deferral also produces a new and singular movement beyond deferral, delay, postponement.

The extent to which the spectral amounts to a modification in the way deconstruction operates is perhaps most apparent when Derrida turns his attention to a notion of the just: the inescapable moment underlying the possibility of deconstruction. For Derrida, a remnant of justice lies at the jointure of the present in all its alterity. He invokes the original performativity at the heart of deconstruction as a political injunction, in other words, and links this injunctive moment with Marx's legacy. It is that which

> remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come.... Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, [*différance*] is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, … even if it moves toward what remains to come, there is the pledge. (Derrida, 1994, p. 31)

This pledge is what allows deconstruction to escape a "critical neoidealism" or nihilism (Derrida, 1996/2002, p. 5), "precisely because it cannot be either narrowed-down or fixed to a single part of both of its meanings" (Trifonas, 2003, p. 227; see also Derrida, 1982; Lather, 2003; Peters, 2003). In *Echographies*, Derrida (1996/2002) argues further that this moment is premised on "the experience of the other as other, the fact that I let the other be other, which presupposes a gift of restitution, without reappropriation and without jurisdiction" (p. 21). Such a formation is never guaranteed, but as an indicative force for a future where plurality flourishes, it is an injunction of possibility, a sense of weak messianic hope that Derrida links with the work of Walter Benjamin. It is an "experience of the emancipatory promise," and, as with Benjamin, it speaks in its virtual dimensions to the "spectral effects" characteristic of information technologies (Derrida, 1994, p. 59).

McLuhan's understanding of the space of critique was not conceived in relation to the operation of language, but it's interesting to note, if only in preliminary fashion at this point, the similarities between what Derrida proposes as a critical, if singular, act, and what McLuhan outlines as an embryonic strategy of critique in his 1951 text, *The Mechanical Bride*.

This text is a remarkable, if now dated examination of advertising and other kinds of "folklore" in the age of industrial man. For Stevenson (2002), it represents an early moment in McLuhan's work, where he seems fixated on media content as opposed to the constitutive force of media culture as forms of communication. And yet, even here, to examine the "whirling phantasmagoria" of media culture (McLuhan, 1951/2002, p. v), McLuhan seemed suspicious of moral indignation and instead thought it necessary to stand in the middle of the media vortex to develop an "unprecedented self-awareness" of the movements happening around us (p. 45). He outlines this strategy in the preface to the text as a method learned from Edgar Allan Poe's "A Descent Into the Maelstom." In the story, Poe's sailor "saved himself by studying the actions of the whirlpool and by co-operating with it" (McLuhan, 1951/2002, p. v). This method allowed McLuhan to theorize the possibility for temporary disjunctures within the movements of consumer culture. Such disjunctures arise when threads of discontinuity in the phantasmagoria become apparent (McLuhan, 1951/2002, p. v). Below, I will address how this initial strategy is

turned into a more fully developed understanding of the space of critique in electronic and digital culture; the point I want to emphasize here is the way McLuhan's method for locating a critical distance inside the movements of consumer culture has a common logic with the search in deconstruction for alterity within the structures of textuality. The deconstructive moment alludes to both a past and a future and, like Poe's sailor trapped in the vortex, it can be configured as a search for "the experience of the impossible," which, in its most promising moments, is also "a radical experience of the perhaps" (Derrida, 1994, p. 35).

The way in which Derrida has fashioned deconstruction as spectrality seems of special significance for media educators. The logic of *différance* now appears complicit in interesting ways with how meaning is produced in an expansive tele-technological system. The media's ability to manifest "virtual events whose movements and speed prohibit us more than ever … from opposing presence to its representation" produces a kind of victory for the simulacrum (Derrida, 1994, p. 169). As Irit Rogoff (1998) argues, what results is a media culture increasingly characterized by a field of vision similar in kind to *différance*.

> Derrida's conceptualization of *différance* takes the form of a critique of the binary logic in which every element of meaning constitution is locked into signification in relation to the other.... [This corresponds with recent media where] we have begun to uncover the free play of the signifier, a freedom to understand meaning in relation to images, sounds or spaces not necessarily perceived to operate in a direct, causal or epistemic relation to either their context or to one another. (p. 25)

Instead, contemporary visual culture increasingly operates through "the continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible" (Rogoff, 1998, p. 25). *Différance* is thus a characteristic feature. As examples, Rogoff (1998) notes the relentlessly intertextual nature of contemporary perception:

> In the arena of visual culture the scrap of an image connects with a sequence of a film and with the corner of a billboard or the window display of a shop we have passed by, to produce a new narrative formed out of both our experienced journey and our unconscious. Images do not stay within discrete disciplinary fields such as 'documentary film' or 'Renaissance painting,' [in other words,] since neither the eye nor the psyche operates along or recognizes such divisions. (p. 26)

One way to interpret Rogoff's description is to say it helps to clarify how tentative meaning production is in regard to cultural artifacts today. It is a function of the spaces and communities within which an artifact (or text) is used, rather than something that exists only within the object itself or within a particular discursive frame—like art history, media studies, or film studies. Derrida doesn't make reference to the same developments, and yet he is certainly clear that spectrality identifies the differential movements of virtual communication.

At the same time, the spectral locates possibilities through which new formations might result by these movements. It's in this latter sense that Derrida's talk of spectrality is so important for the field of media education. The spectral locates an *aporia*, a condition in the production of meaning that is not transcendable but which expresses contradictions within our material culture. The productiveness of this *aporia* lies in the way spectrality makes clear both the shifting nature of a reified commodity world and also the way these shifts call to the forefront a powerful new

critical force within deconstruction.[3] Where spectrality speaks to a weak messianic hope, a promise of the just, it attends to the possibility of what is not yet, of what might be in our imaginings of more equitable futures.

Non-Linguistic Materiality

If these developments indicate an exciting and compelling clarification in the operation of deconstruction, developments that have particular force for the work of media educators, I suggest they also draw attention to a crucial limitation in Derrida's work. This has to do with the critical role iteration is meant to play in his system. For our purposes, identifying this shortfall will also mark the point at which Derrida's schema must be supplemented by a level of analysis that attends to non-linguistic forms of mediation.

The gist of the problem is: The value of iteration as a critical operation in Derrida's work would seem to unwind as the tele-technological system itself expands. As a force of critique, the work of iteration—what Hansen (2000) calls, the "constitutive technical contamination" (p. 124) in language—is premised on Derrida's understanding that speech invokes the realm of the ontological by positing a self-presence which is at the heart of metaphysics. Deconstruction, in turn, seeks to dismantle all forms of such presence. But if digital technologies increasingly transform the way meaning is constituted, or, said otherwise, if speech is increasingly electrified—as McLuhan, (1964/1994) long argued—then the presence of a speaker, understood as one who summons presence through the use of textual forms, is no longer invoked in the same way. Rather, as the movement of technology reconfigures the nature of meaning constitution—including the subjectivity produced by this process—the lure of presence in language dissipates, and thus so too does the force of iterability as a locus of critique.[4]

Derrida (1974, 1986) himself recognized this tension long ago and proposed a generalization of deconstruction and "an extension of *différance* to objects other than philosophical and literary texts" (Hansen, 2000, p. 122), to what he called the "'totality of our relation to the world'" (Derrida, quoted in Hansen, 2000, p. 122). Gumbrecht (1994) suggests Derrida is able to do this by conceiving of exteriority—that is, our material relations to the world beyond texts—in terms of a kind of concreteness that inhabits language. Thus, to the extent that writing (or *écriture*) displaces presence in language by referring to an always excessive mark, a similar mode of intimation allows for the application of *différance* to the "relative exteriority" of all our material relations to the world (Gumbrecht, 1994, pp. 394−395). Or does it? The problem this move poses is the concept of matter has been textualized through the figural work of language. Others (Eagleton, 1988; Gleenblatt, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991) have noted this tendency within deconstruction, but the particular direction of Hansen's (2000) critique is important in relation to what I see as the ongoing relevance of McLuhan's work for media educators and others.

Hansen argues that in order for Derrida to extend *différance* to non-textual objects, he must deploy a notion of incompatibility in a way that circumscribes the 'totality of our relation to the world.' But to do this Derrida must also reduce technology to representational technology. Beginning in *Of Grammatology* (1974), he does this by conceiving of exteriority in terms of the technology of writing.

> If the trace, arche-phenomenon of 'memory,' which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity, etc., belongs to the very movement of signification, then signification is *a priori* written, whether inscribed or not, in one form

or another, in a 'sensible' and 'spatial' element that is called 'exterior.' Arche-writing, at first the possibility of the spoken word, then of the '*graphie'* in the narrow sense, the birthplace of 'usurpation,' denounced from Plato to Saussure, this trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside.... (p. 70)

In this formulation, Derrida defines exteriority as "'the exteriority of *meaning*,'" which is to say, that which is outside is understood to be such in terms of the logic of signification (Derrida, quoted in Hansen, 2000, p. 126). The outside does not have any independent relationship because it is conceived of in relation to the work of the *graf*, the technical contamination that is a necessary materiality within language itself. But in submitting this manner for thinking the technological—and by this, attempting to extend *différance* to objects other than texts—Derrida has also left thought as "the tribunal for evaluating technology" (Hansen, 2000, p. 123). By this, the representational becomes the foci of analysis because technology itself has been recast as "*artificial* memory" (Hansen, 2000, p. 123). As Hansen goes on to argue:

by taking the being of what *is* [*physis*] and making it thoroughly dependent on the metaphysics of the text (and thus on the operation of *techne*), Derrida simply effaces the very category of radical exteriority and, along with it, all traces of materiality outside the space governed by textuality. (p. 125)

The difficulty this creates is technology is then conceivable only in relation to meaning-creation as opposed to meaning-constitution (Gumbrecht, 1994). Through this framework, however, the exteriority of technology has been domesticated within thought, and if this seems unsatisfying, it's because at some level technology is a set of material forces constitutive of a non-linguistic exteriority.

We might reframe this problem for media education in the following way: While Derrida's work with spectrality offers a compelling case for imagining the terms on which a critical agency can operate today, his schema doesn't escape a limitation that afflicts all critical projects which attend to texts as the central instantiation in meaning production. Derrida makes us aware of how tentative these instantiations are; but his schema offers no way to delineate the specific dimensions of these conditions, what we might call the materialities of situated life. The shift Hansen draws our attention to, in other words, amounts to a delinguistification in how we imagine technology in relation to the social.

Arguably, Derrida's concern for the spectral nature of tele-technologies begins to point in this direction. In fact, all I (and Hansen) have done is bring the real implications of Derridean thinking to the foreground: that is, as in other poststructuralist work, Derrida marks the transition away from the linguistic as a sufficient mode for conceiving of the materiality of our time. In registering this development, however, Derrida cannot go beyond the eclipse of language. McLuhan, on the other hand, is useful at this stage because he offers us a way to think about speech as electronic mediation (McLuhan, 1964/1994, pp. 57−60). McLuhan too was concerned with the discontinuous, fragmented nature of contemporary culture. But his attention to the acoustic as a heuristic for describing this environment draws attention to a significant level of analysis for media educators today: that is, the way in which cultural media act as forces that make certain kinds of situated life possible. Where a deconstructed notion of mediation continues

to have value then, it needs to be complemented by attention to the non-linguistic materiality McLuhan addresses as acoustic space.

Mediation in Acoustic Space

There is not room to review McLuhan's theory in detail, but crucially this now unfashionable media scholar was not concerned with the way modern forms of communication act as forces of alienation because he theorized that all media are best understood as extensions of the body. This focus lead to forms of technological determinism in McLuhan's writings. Nonetheless, his texts remain instructive because unlike so much work on technology, McLuhan helps us to understand that media are more than systems of representation; they constitute forces that facilitate our ability to have specific kinds of experiences at all.

While motivated by different concerns and drawing from different intellectual traditions, the anti-humanist strain in McLuhan's work echoes with a similar tendency in Derrida's project. Media, McLuhan (1964/1994) argued, translate "experience into new forms. [For instance,] the spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way" (p. 57). The invention of the alphabet, he argued, accelerates this process. The alphabet translates and reduces "a complex, organic interplay of spaces into a single space. The phonetic alphabet reduce[s] the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code" (McLuhan, 1962/1997, p. 45). This code, in turn, is crucial to the formation of societies and empires, which depend on the presence of a system of coded communication to form and translate directives, laws and organizational structures across space, in a way that speech on its own cannot. In other words, like other more obvious kinds of technology the alphabet constitutes certain cultural possibilities. For McLuhan, the rise of print culture extends these possibilities because print facilitates the formation of compartmentalized and specialized sensory perceptions. "Whereas oral cultures allowed the rich interplay of all the senses, print culture abstract[s] writing from speech and promote[s] the visual component of the human organism" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 123). This leads to the development of portable (books, manuscripts), rational (laws and regulations), and calculable (legers, train schedules, etc.) forms of communication that, historically, have been crucial to the formation of the nation state. McLuhan argued further that print facilitates the hegemony of individualism in Western culture because book culture requires that "reading practices are silent and attentive, that the text have an author, and that the translation of a shared collective culture is converted into one dependent upon individual forms of expression" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 123). As extensions of the senses, then, McLuhan's concern was always how technological mediation facilitates certain developments while restricting others. In this way, where Derrida aides us in identifying the instability of given meaning-structures, McLuhan is helpful for locating how media constitute meaning in the first instance.

To make sense of how technologies operate as cultural mediums, McLuhan also draws on a dynamic theory of space. For instance, he argued that the problem of the print epoch—that is, the age between the Renaissance and, roughly, the early decades of the twentieth century—is that it privileges one sense—the visual—to the exclusion of all others. Because of this, as much as print culture allows for certain developments to occur, it is also biased toward static, structured forms of perception, ways of seeing that foreground linearity, distance, and analytic understanding to the exclusion of concerns for context and perspective. What results is a culture of visual space in which "abstract figure minus ground" is privileged (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 33). As in

Newtonian physics, space is conceived as "an infinite container, linear and continuous, homogeneous and uniform" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 33). McLuhan argued these developments cause the other senses to atrophy, leading, for instance, to the sterile forms of rationalism and universalism that fed various destructive examples of imperialism and nationalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In contrast, the space of electric and digital culture diminishes the hegemony of visual space. Contemporary media produce an environment that emphasizes context, multiplicity, and the interplay of form and content through the re-immersion of the visual faculty with the other senses. More perceptually involving, the space of the acoustic privileges intertextual relations in which cultural forms "pour upon us instantly and constantly" (McLuhan & Firore, 1967, p. 61).

Where early modern visual space is Newtonian in form, acoustic space resembles the spacetime formations of Einstein's theory of relativity. Electronic culture shortens time and compresses space because we are constantly involved, connected, and attached to information and therefore each other. In this sense, technology seems to make time bend. It also changes the relations between borders. Whether at the level of national, local, or personal interconnections, borders become more porous and mutable (Sandywell, 2006). If one wanted an example of this process, the experience of identify theft is instructive.

Although not an entirely new phenomenon, one of the interesting characteristics of identity theft is it is only enacted once our discrete selves have been turned outward and realized in network form. We don't lose our bodies through the crime, we lose the substance of a self in an information age—the tissues of data through which the self is materialized. Today, the remarkable reach of data collection activities and the size of databases[5] produce mediated forms as digital bodies with porous and mutable boundaries subject more than ever to viral disruption (Sandywell, 2006). Accordingly, when identity theft occurs it is our "selves" constituted as information "bodies" in an intertextual, networked universe that is acted upon in ways that extend wildly beyond our control. As such, neither our selves nor our technology exist as discrete objects; rather as McLuhan (1964/1994) observed: "Our private and corporate lives … become information processes" just because we have put ourselves outside of us via electronic and digital technology (p. 52). Importantly, this is not merely a linguistic process nor does it just mimic the structures of textuality. Instead, identity theft is enacted by and symptomatic of new forms of mediation because, while this crime may amount to a deconstruction of the self, what really matters here are the new material conditions constitutive of how our selves are remade via the tissues present in new electronic connections.

Within the new spacetime formations of electronic and digital culture, McLuhan suggested that resonance functions as the dominant mode of operation/motion. As an operative dynamic, resonance is similar to the coming-and-going Derrida describes as the disjunctive/injunctive movement in deconstruction. And yet, resonance also refers to the vibrations of sound waves, an oscillation materialized as a non-linguistic form. In chemistry, resonance is used to describe the property of certain chemical compounds that have characteristics of two or more electronic structures simultaneously. This sense makes clearer McLuhan's understanding. Resonance is that which animates the acoustic; it speaks of the motion necessary for the intertextual experiences characteristic of our cultural forms. As Cavell (2002) argues, resonance "conceptualizes the break in the uniformity and continuity of space as visualized; it is a sign … of the discontinuity of acoustic space, of the fact that it produces meaning through gaps" (p. 23). Near the end of his career, McLuhan referred to the resonant as the "fecund interval" of acoustic space (McLuhan, quoted in Cavell, 2002, p. 23). The work resonance does in a theory of mediation is really as a

non-linguistic materialization of iterability; it draws attention to how media forms blur the boundaries between each other and create new forms of interaction and meaning by this process. The importance of this sense of resonance is evident, particularly when aligned with another dimension of acoustic space: that is, simultaneity and its place in a fractured environment.

Certainly in a digital age, because data reaches us simultaneously from all directions, "acoustic space has the structure of a sphere in which things create their own space and modify and coerce each other. Without visual stress necessary to drive the other senses 'underground' into the subconscious, their interrelatedness is constant" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 35).

Electronic culture is thus experienced as a percept of simultaneity. McLuhan (1988) long argued that artists are the first to understand this because: "As the visual sense moves back into interplay with the other senses, it is natural that rigid chronology becomes fuzzy and uncertain. While these developments occurred in science, … artists were articulating discontinuity and simultaneity for their own publics" (p. 45). McLuhan (1988) was especially affected by the way Joyce explored this dynamic through devices like the double-plot structure in *Ulysses*, but the work of Schoenberg on atonality, Eisenstein on montage, and the cubists on perspective would all be influential.

How McLuhan understood simultaneity to be characteristic of our time is captured nicely in his (1964/1994) aphorism: "In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin" (p. 47). This is not merely a representational experience; rather, the speed of electronic culture pours upon contemporary subjects, "instantaneously and continuously, the concerns of all men" (McLuhan, 1964/1994, pp. 171−172). As a result, "by means of translation of immediate sense experience …, the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant" (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 57). Different from Derrida, in other words, McLuhan conceives of the process of simultaneity in terms of new sense ratios facilitated by the outering or externalization of our selves via non-linguistic forms of mediation. To make clear what this means, an example is helpful.

Think, for instance, of the opening of the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq. It's tempting to talk about this period in terms of the marketing of mass persuasion and the nature of the representational experience this produced (Rutherford, 2004). And of course, this remains vital, not least for media education. But in thinking about these new representational experiences, we also encounter a new form of embodiment or meaning constitution, which, for instance, begins to collapse older dichotomies (between producer/audience, actor/receiver, journalist/soldier). In recalling certain aspects of the way TV and journalism functioned during the initial phase of the war, for instance, Sarah Boxer (2003) writes:

> With the war rolling ahead on television, you the viewer [were] made a part of the invading army, … [and] just as the audience [felt] a part of the army, the army [became] part of the audience. American troops on an aircraft carrier [watched] CNN to see how the war [was] playing and progressing. Soldiers [were] watching other soldiers on television. [Meanwhile,] there [was] general confusion as to who [was] acting and who [was] watching .... At the crux of the confusion [was] the traditional eyewitnesses to war, the journalists, 'embedded' with the troops. [Were] the television cameras the witnesses of war, or [were] they part of the weaponry? Or both? (¶ 15−17)

Of course they were both, and it is in this sense that they, and the troops/audiences watching/acting in the war, mark a change in *both* the representation of conflict and the concurrent sense ratios made possible by video-phones, fractured television screens, and cable news chan-

nels with global reach. If, as McLuhan (1988) offered, we—audiences and soldiers, journalists and troops—all "hear from all directions simultaneously" this is made possible by technological developments which produce new forms of embodiment (p. 35). Images, sounds, and text interact together and engage us as never before, such that resonant, simultaneous movement becomes the ground on which meaning is constituted. But once this happens, it's necessary to address these mediations beyond the terms of representation, if only because this is not merely a language effect. Rather, the wavering of the present is lived through newly embodied forms, including a whole set of reconstituted physiological sensations.

This last point brings us to a final dimension of McLuhan's understanding of acoustic space; that is, the space of critique afforded within this environment. McLuhan spoke of a *space* of critique in relation to the acoustic because, like Derrida, he understood that the possibility for critical acts could not rest on the shoulders of a humanist subject. Where Derrida helps us to locate a critical agency in a post humanist world, McLuhan's concern for technological mediation focuses attention on where moments of crisis and change are likely to occur.

McLuhan located possibilities for the critique of new media by attending to the way these cultural forms alter the ratios of older media. He captures this idea when he (1964/1994) notes: "The effect of radio is visual, the effect of the photo is auditory. Each new impact shifts the ratios among all the senses" (p. 64). Because of this:

> The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-Narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed … on our senses. (McLuhan, 1994/1964, p. 55)

What McLuhan's getting at here is that where the development of new technologies tends to numb users/audiences, if only because of the novelty and possibility offered by new experiences, these changes simultaneously create moments of crisis and opportunity in relation to older media experiences. As a result, affordances are created for new forms of critical practice. Interestingly, of late, media education researchers (see Burn, Brindley, Durran, Kelsall, Sweetlove, & Tuohey, 2001; Burn & Durran, 2006; Burn & Parker, 2003) have turned their attention to the way new, digital media change young people's relation to older media like film and television. What they are finding is that technologies like digital video editing software allow young people to anatomize filmic and televisual language. By this, youth are able to experience the provisional nature of meaning production because the display of an edit in a editing software's interface is governed by what Manovich (2001) calls the principle of variability: that is, "media objects in a database [are only ever] held in a temporary configuration by algorithmic instructions" (Burn & Durran, 2006, p. 281). This variability in turn makes clearer the opportunities students have to express forms of pleasure and notions of critique in relation to their own socio-cultural context. In this way, film and television turn more than ever from fixed texts to provisional and variable resources for meaning production, resources that can be constantly reframed to address one's needs, desires, and commitments.

Of course McLuhan's communication theory is not without significant problems.[6] Where I have avoided a discussion of these, it is because my intent has been to suggest ways in which media education can benefit from an encounter with McLuhan and Derrida. Today, media literacy is concerned with how to conceive of critical agency without privileging the authorita-

tive voice of the teacher. Researchers are also concerned with how to delineate the characteristics of new digital media as specific forms of mediation. While certainly not exhausting these issues, I suggest an encounter with Derrida and McLuhan offers significant resources that affords media educators ways of putting levels of analysis in productive tension. In the end, this provides us with the kinds of cognitive maps appropriate to the complex nature of contemporary culture.

NOTES

1. Mediation can also mean: "finding a central point between two opposites, as in many political uses" (Williams, 1985, p. 205). I am not concerned with this use of the term for reasons that will become obvious below.

2. *Spectres of Marx* offers the most detailed analysis in this regard; however it is interesting to note how often *Echographies of Television* draws on this modification and clarification of *différance* in discussing tele-technologies. For instance see pages. 6, 10, 11−13, and 21 in *Echographies*.

3. In regard to this argument, Derrida's (1994) particular reading (pp. 151−161) of the relationship between use value and exchange value in Marx is significant. Derrida's central point here is that use value and exchange value are inseparable from each other. Simultaneity is a characteristic of their becoming because use value cannot forge the sociality that is essential to the commodity form on its own. But if this is so, Derrida suggests, use value cannot exist as a pure form. Rather, in order for the phantasmagoria characteristic of the commodity form to exist, it must have begun

> before … exchange value, at the threshold of the value of value in general … The said use value of the … ordinary sensuous thing, … the wood of the wooden table concerning which Marx supposes that it has not yet begun to 'dance,' … must indeed have at least [been] promised … to iterability, to substitution, to exchange, to value; it must have made a start, however minimal it may have been, on an idealization that permits one to identify it as the same through possible repetitions. (Derrida, 1994, p. 160)

4. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Cavell for helping me to see the force of this argument.

5. For instance, while it is often claimed that the Internet is "'the largest artifact in the known universe'" (Sandy-well, 2006, p. 43), Wal-Mart has such vast collections of demographic information on its customers that their databases are understood to be equivalent in size to three times all the information circulating on the Internet (Hays, 2004).

6. On this see Stevenson (2002) for a helpful and judicious examination of the weaknesses in McLuhan's theory.

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