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THEORY BEYOND THE CODES

Theorizing New Media in a Global Context;

or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love New Media

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Advanced computational and communications technologies play a definitive role in today's global economic, social, cultural, political, and even ecological orders. Evidence of this exists in technologies used to implement the internationalization of management, in globally shifting labor pools, in transnational banking, and in other such signs of economic globalization. It lives as well in social, political, and cultural manifestations of globalization such as WikiLeaks and the social media-fueled Arab uprisings. New media art works that use these kinds of technologies stretch conventional definitions of art and present challenges for art history and criticism, owing largely to these technologies' military and industrial origins.

While the tools that shape new media practices can have transnational impacts and profoundly influence globalization, little critical consciousness of globalization's attendant issues arises within discussions of new media studies. New media tools provide contexts for potentially global-scale interaction, yet theorization around new media rarely intersects with discourses of globalization. What is the disconnect between the global impacts of new media and the discourses of new media, which maintain little engagement with theorizations of larger social and ethical concerns? In the context of rapid technological evolution, should the study of digital and electronic culture mirror ethical concerns, given the urgent social and political work that needs doing in the world? More specifically, when new media technologies are used for creative and other non-commercial purposes, to what degree should makers be asked to take theoretical or ethical contemplation into account?

One of the persisting challenges of a theory/practice-based new media

programs is with how to integrate theory well into their curriculums. As someone occupying a leadership position in one such creative program, I regularly contemplate what roles philosophical and ethical inquiry plays in innovation. For example, since computational and communications technologies have increased the fluidity with which subjects move across traditional nation-state borders, universal rights discourses might be one key area of attention; considering the rights of diasporic, transnational, and migrant subjects requires greater attention as their global numbers increase. New media practitioners, to some degree, set the terms for these kinds of important interchanges. To that extent, they hold considerable power over the terms of engagement. If the selection and implementation of technologies shape the terms of flowing exchanges, then it follows that the providers of these tools and contexts should possess a sophisticated understanding of what such exchanges might mean.

This essay is part of a larger consideration of the influence of advanced technology on contemporary artistic production, as well as how scholars and critics assimilate it into a cogent intellectual history. Specifically, this essay examines the intersection of digital media's creative practices and criticalities, and moves away from theories of form and procedure to situate scholarship in a global ethical context. How can these and other globally framed issues of social uplift extend to an area that is fundamentally concerned with perpetual innovation, and which is often situated in a profit-oriented context? If electronic and communication technology-based art establishes a self-critical apparatus for contemplating its cultural impacts, then what critical tools can be implemented to greatest effect? Moreover, is the discourse of new media the place to advance these and other theoretical concerns?

I should make clear that there are many individual artists whose work does consistently address important questions of today; it is, rather, towards the meta-level of the canonical or disciplinary configurations of new media that I aim my critique. New media studies is a truly interdisciplinary undertaking that has no fixed academic home and, by extension, no organized intra-disciplinary, self-regulating value system or ethics -- in other words, it has no cohesive philosophical discourse. Three examples of scholarly interventions into philosophical engagement with new media are D.N. Rodowick's *Reading the Figural* [1], Mark Hansen's *New Philosophy for New Media* [2], and the interventions collected in *CTheory.net* form, but these are atypical of the more dominant, practice-oriented sector of new media scholarship. New media studies, however, as an 'area' or 'movement' in scholarship, does possess a kind of centripetal pull of ideas that requires careful consideration as though it were a 'discipline.' This discussion is aimed squarely at the level of discipline, particularly in regard to how new media practices and its 'object of study' are historicized, studies, and theoretically understood. Innovation and profit perpetually beckon to creatively-oriented programs to act as 'think-tanks' of commercial development, but do not assure lasting significance, and in this regard, our fledgling movement has serious problems.

In 2008, Ian Bogost and Jay David Bolter explored the worth of theory for

digital media in a public discussion at the Georgia Institute of Technology. During this debate, entitled, "The Value of Theory in Digital Media Studies," both scholars pointed to the fundamental tension between what Bolter identified as the "procedural" side of digital media and the "culturalist" or critical theoretical side. Bolter asserted that critical theory is not designed to help make things; it is not, in effect, "productive" in the sense of resulting in a product. Critical theory, rather, is there to make an intervention in the form of critique. On this point, there was no dissent from Bogost, who likewise indicated that, "theory's purpose is to change perspective, not create output" [3]. And from the standpoint of measurable outcomes, they were absolutely correct in this assertion: the critique theoretical studies offer could be characterized as a drag on productivity -- a kind of noise that disrupts the flow of creative efficiency. This is because its concerns are not with production, but with honing a set of critical tools that vigorously assess the products of a given society for their underlying meanings and ramifications. In its questioning and self-reflection, critical theory can be viewed as slowing immediate results.

Bogost and Bolter debated how the procedural and critical culturalist aspects might better dovetail, a question that particularly hounds new media theory/practice programs. Bogost suggested that the two elements mesh well in digital art production, while others argue that this convergence is demonstrated in design, or that the role of scholarship may be to integrate the two. These views seem to configure the coming together of theory and practice as the purview of artists, and to relegate it to the aesthetic or the academic, as opposed to centralizing its importance for the procedural.

This question, with its attendant procedural/culturalist tension, is connected to a larger contemporary crisis of higher education, and particularly to the conflict between two incompatible understandings of the university: the classical understanding of the university as cultivating intellectual acuity, versus the neoliberal iteration of the university as training ground for capitalist enterprise. Gregory Jay characterized this crisis of academia as follows:

> A fundamental tension arises between the academic mission of preparing students to be critical citizens and neoliberalism's demand that they subordinate themselves to the dictates of the market. Obviously, neoliberalism has no need or desire for academic research that questions its operation, as such criticism creates "inefficiency" in the market. [4]

Even the tools of new media themselves beg not to be analyzed. The clean, abstract shapes of laptops and mobile devices, inscrutable and minimalist, disguise their origins and value systems. Indeed, there are many ways in which theoretical contemplation seems not to mesh well with production. Consider, too, that Bolter and Bogost's conversation, though urgent in its acknowledgement of an ongoing tension around procedural and culturalist considerations, foundationally posits them as binary. The

framing of the argument suggests that culturalist considerations are naturally outside proceduralism, whereas I argue that makers are always already creating and imposing value systems through decisions they make in the processes of development and production.

Even further, I would argue that theory's presence in new media scholarship chafes at sensitivities that arise from an overarching shortcoming in the area: new media studies' lack of a unified ethos. That is to say, we may refer to ethical theory in our products, but that is very different from having an ethical grounding that guides, provides purpose, and articulates a code for the movement. Theory provides the tools for ethical debate and self-critical reflection, and it surely serves to articulate concerns that have ethical ramifications. Yet theory is often seen by producers as an external, punitive force, and hence it is sidestepped. However, rejecting the influence of theory as secondary to production does not displace the central importance of ethics. Ethics, in the disciplinary methodologies of new media, should and does precede theorization; ethics should act through agreed-upon, fair, and honest practices, in advance of whatever diverse disciplinary outcomes may emerge.

The aim of my inquiry here, however, is not merely to advocate for a cultural studies-based critique of technology. In a larger sense, new media theorists, as members of a common set of interests, must ask ourselves: what is important about what we do? What is so consequential that intellectuals from other fields would look to our studies to identify key ethical concerns related to technology in the global context and, more importantly, to derive useful reasoning that can have resonant impacts outside the hermeneutic specialty of new media studies? What does new media studies produce that is different from what Silicon Valley does? How can our field of collective interests have global relevance? Further, we might ask how our field, lacking core values, can even sustain itself? What can we hope to achieve if we do not have ethics?

Consider one lynchpin of internal ethical conflict at play in new media: the imperative to constantly innovate drives technology forward. This drive is embodied by both those who undertake the challenge of developing new technologies and by those who intercede, such as hackers and other interventionists. New media theorist and programmer Alexander Galloway describes this imperative as a part of a larger discussion on the political dimensions of network architecture. "Hackers," Galloway explains, "don't care about rules, feelings, or opinions. They care about what is true and what is possible. And in the logical world of computers, if it is possible then it is real. *Can* you break into a computer, not *should* you or is it *right* to... In fact, possibility often erases the unethical in the mind of the hacker" [5]. Galloway refers to hackers and their relationship to code, and specifically to protocols, but the paradigm of "possibility eras[ing] the unethical" is quite apropos to other areas of technological development, where the pursuit of innovation demarks a frontier of future discovery as the inevitable form of progress. Technological innovation races toward a horizon of promise, where the better, more modern, more efficient, and more functional purportedly hold liberatory potential for culture. As a result, technological

industry seems to function largely autonomously from any self-critical apparatus beyond that demanded by capitalism, which guides its aims. Hackers reactions to hierarchal institutional systems certainly tangle with regulatory measures, and are ideologically configured as having an antagonistic relationship with capitalism. But as Galloway points out, this antagonism is distinct from having an ethical framework to guide them. Ultimately, their efforts may inadvertently contribute to the controlling logics of protocols, strengthening them by pointing out the loopholes and backdoors that will eventually be sealed. Certainly, Galloway's perspective generalizes, yet it illustrates this point well. It is this question of the ethical (as opposed to merely the possible) that requires a critical foundation, one built from sound theoretical building blocks.

I have here characterized a series of challenges, each nested inside the next: new media exists within a context of globalization, while its theorization seems not to acknowledge the major ethical concerns of that context. Meanwhile, the field of new media studies is currently driven by its procedural side, while its diminished critical culturalist side seems to contradict the logic of production. However, without critical examination and contextualization, much of what new media does is indiscernible from research and development -- a compromised position in the face of the tech industry and its resources. When subject to the accelerated expectations of technological innovation, such production can only temporarily impress audiences before facing the certain doom of obsolescence. Armed with an ethics and a set of critical tools with which to self-evaluate, new media scholars and producers become social actors with agency to affect global outcomes, whose cultural context is inextricable from their innovation.

One need make few arguments to establish the connectedness between cultural contexts and the tools that form the object of study for new media scholarship. Noted sociologist and scholar of globalization, Saskia Sassen, for example, contests the dominant understanding of the relationship between digital and non-digital spaces. Sassen argues that the dematerialization associated with digital media is largely myth and, in fact, the affairs of the datasphere are deeply bound to the material world.

> The digital is imbedded in the larger societal, cultural, subjective, economic, and imaginary structurations of lived experience and the systems within which we exist and operate. At the same time, through this embeddedness, the digital can act back on the social so that its specific capabilities can engender new concepts of the social and of the possible. [6]

The feedback loops that she describes between the digital, the non-digital, the social and the possible, evidences a mutually influential interplay ; they potentially open up new and fertile territories for conceptualizing our sphere of activity, not as hermetic, but as engaged with contexts and subjectivities. Sassen stops short of prescribing a call to action, or of characterizing producers of digital systems as powerful makers of meaning. However,

implicit in her portrayal of the digital and material, is an assertion of dynamic interconnectedness: we cannot expect to affect one element in a web of relations without exacting real consequences in other areas.

Technological development is ideologically configured as ultimately good, necessary, and fundamental for progress; the moral obligation to pursue innovation outweighs the ensuing sacrifice. Development carries with it promises of social betterment through technology, including, but not limited to, true democratic inclusion, a global web of consciousness, and the outstripping of bodily limitations such as mortality [7]. However, there remain the matters of bodies, and of how advanced technology imposes itself upon subjects in the world. An array of activist-scholars have challenged the ethical neutrality of technology discourses and their visual cultures, including, among others: Lisa Nakamura, María Fernández, Thuy Linh Tu, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Jennifer Gonzalez and Coco Fusco. "For all the celebration of mobility and fluidity," Fusco writes, "digital technology organizes a world economic order that thrives on a global labor pool of poor non-white people -- for whom 'access' to many critical signifying practices -- legal, symbolic, and electronic -- is diminished and even denied" [8]. Fusco along with many others, argue for a more equitable set of relations between a global North and South, and calls into question the duress which technological production inflicts on the bodies of disenfranchised laborers. These scholars are undertaking important work that deconstructs the present-day continuation of imperialist expansion and the rhetoric of technology- as-progress. They tackle the important issues of post-colonialism, hybridity, mobility, migration, and Diaspora as these intersect with new media.

These are only a few of the perspectives already existing in the array of disciplinary approaches associated with critical studies, such as sociology, philosophy, political science, and media studies. Seyla Benhabib, a renowned political theorist, utilizes liberal democratic philosophy to think through the ethical challenges heightened by globalization. Benhabib emphasizes the movement from the rights of citizens, as defined by national identities and borders, to universal human rights, which attempt to acknowledge the increasingly porous nature of borders as a result of global flows of capital, products, and bodies [9]. In *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells, arguably one of the most important sociologists studying the impacts of globalization and advanced communications technologies, ambitiously undertakes to characterize sweeping impacts of both online social media and traditional mass media -- what he calls "mass self-communication" and its reshaping of global power [10]. Castells describes a shift from mass communication to "mass self-communication," a system with persistent, deep interactivity, in which messages are conveyed from many senders to many receivers, and in which the roles of sender and receiver may be fluidly interchanged. As Castells outlined in a 2011 presentation of this research at Cambridge University, this endows the communication subject with "a great deal of autonomy... over the institutions and organizations of communication" [11]. In his thorough sociological assessment of this paradigm shift, he claims that "the

transformation of communication from mass communication to mass self-communication increases the autonomy of social actors and, therefore, the processing of power relationships in society at large." In his articulation of the power relations implicit in this communication shift, he identifies four particular sources of power in relation to the new mass self-communication: the first, which he calls "networking power," is the power to include or exclude entities from the system; the second, "network power," is the power to set the terms of the interactions that take place within the system through protocols; the third, "networked power," is the power of enabled social actors over other social actors within the system; and finally, "network-making power" is the power to shape a system by installing protocols that adhere to particular goals and values.

How can Castells' study of power dynamics in the communications network be applied to an analysis of new media art? Creative practitioners of new media provide frameworks for aesthetic experiences, and sometimes additionally allow users to act as producers, manipulators, and senders of that information. The aesthetic experiences provided by these frameworks or interfaces result from decisions made by the context providers (makers) of those systems. Those decisions are informed by value systems, preferences, biases and subjective experience. Meaning is generated through decisions made to create the work; unselected or unimagined possibilities are foreclosed upon during this process. The end user (participant) experiences the work as a set of protocols, that is, as something already shaped, and decided-upon. Such decisions, once made, also frame the terms of the conversation that may take place, i.e. the language of the conversation and what options or variables will enable communication to exist. Much new media art can be characterized as placing the user/participant in the role of a conduit that completes the circuit of the work. Their interaction makes the work 'happen'; yet that happening occurs within an array of predetermined outcomes. The programmer/maker of the work, in setting the terms of the conversation, can be said to shape the limits of engagement in relation to that work. The user, in turn, also exerts pressure on the system, and strengthens it by using it, but may also potentially usurp its functions for unintended, bellwether purposes. In the case of new media works with little or no interaction, the terms are much more preordained.

To create a technological framework for aesthetic experience is to assert a value system, and thus to engage in a power relationship with the user/participant. This power relationship between makers and users exists in commercial development and is well understood in communications and media studies, but it is less explored in the creative iterations of new media. And while one might argue that, to some degree, all artists (digital or otherwise) delimit the terms of engagement when they publicly present their work, the rule-based qualities of software and the absoluteness of hardware's functioning uniquely lend themselves to rational processes. If these power dynamics are especially pronounced in the case of new media, then it follows that new media makers and scholars pay special attention to the underlying force of value systems to shape and delimit

meaning-making in their object of study.

Clearly, the discourses of advanced technology are inextricable from ethical conversations. Technology implements ethics, whether or not its makers self-consciously select or even recognize their ethical positioning. In fact, I would go so far as to say that forms of technology are ethical philosophy in practice. Hence, within discussions of new media, it is imperative to bring sophisticated language and critical frameworks that enable ethical conversations to take place.

As a relatively young area of interest, new media studies need only look to another recent disciplinary struggle, namely, that between art history and visual studies, for a cautionary and instructive example. Mieke Bal, a celebrated cultural critic and theorist, writes of art history's notorious lack of "methodological self-reflection," which led to a profound crisis concerning its object of study, and of the subsequent formation of alternative approaches to visual and material culture [12].This issue has repeatedly surfaced for art history, as an array of scholars brought the concerns of class struggle, race, feminist revisionism, and postcolonialism to the table. Notably, Bal's 2003 essay, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," and the seven published responses to her work struggle with the function of art history and its connectedness to other critical approaches [13]. Visual culture studies, as an emergent scholarly discipline, promoted analyses that brought rigorous self-criticality to the table. This radically reconfigured the objective of art-historical study, not in terms of a pedigreed object, but through a skeptical relationship to the object in its various webs of relation. Meaning, then, does not issue only from the form, but also from the context -- and the analytical tools possess a kind of 'self-sharpening' feature.

In time, the academy has seen the melding of art history with visual studies; many departments now bear both names and support both approaches as a means of ensuring the contemporary relevance of art history, while also grounding visual culture in the object to some degree. Beginning in the late 1990s, most notably with the contemporary mega-exhibition, *Documenta X*, curated by Catherine David in 1997, the art world, and by extension, art history, has been forced to contend with the role of globalization in reshaping the cultural terrain. Serious considerations of art and globality have been initiated by the phenomena of global biennials, by an increasing presence of artists whose experience is marked by globalization, and by the critical inroads of scholars, all of which call attention to comparative modernisms, rather than one Euro-modernist moment. In light of the profound economic, cultural, and political impacts of globalization, the attention to shifting context could only be deferred for so long.

How can we, by problematizing our relationship to our own material, continue to evolve what we do as new media experts? Now that we are finally moving beyond the problem of defining what new media is or isn't, we are free to move on to possible tasks, such as probing technological essentialism in its many forms, unveiling the workings and political

urgencies of advanced technology in context, and advancing a commitment to new internationalism as constitutive of technological experience.

I would like to return once more to the conflicts of the "procedural" versus the "critical cultural," a dualism that falsely divides the intellectual labor around technology, and that needles the anxieties of both theorists and technologists, particularly those occupying the academy. Theorists are anxious that they aren't understood to be 'making' anything, that they aren't productive per se, and that they are more likely slow the process of production. Further, in the cases where theorists are not also 'makers,' their contribution may be dismissed as navel-gazing and interloping into a conversation occurring between producers. However, contrary to the idea that critical theory produces nothing, the intellectual discernment and criticality developed throughtraining in critical methods is measurable as well; however, such measurement proceeds along much longer timeframes and long-tail effects. The rigorous resistance that critique provides refines the procedural dimension, but also introduces theoretical and ethical self-regulation into new media operations. One senses, in kind, the angst of technological producers who are constantly anxious that they don't make anything important or lasting. Each innovation is always overtaken by the subsequent innovations, seemingly without end. The solution to this quandary lies in the development and valuing of a theoretical feedback loop regulated by an ethical framework that takes into account the context and players through which technological progress is made possible, and through which it enacts itself. This should be a rigorous, systemic part of the scholarship that influences the outcomes of production. The digital media we use are not neutral tools, but enact social, ethical and moral worldviews. Theorists and producers needn't worry; the work we do is relevant. But before we study digital materiality, presentation, aesthetics or evolution, and before we theorize the algorithmic or the informational, we need core ethics, for a disciplinary sense of self-assuredness that can enable new media theory and production to do good work in intellectual culture and in the world requires a strong ethical philosophy.

Notes

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[1] D. N. Rodowick. *Reading the Figural* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[2] Mark B. N. Hansen. *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[3] Jay Bolter and Ian Bogost, "The Value of Theory in Digital Media Studies," GVU Brown Bag Series, 10/02/2008, http://gvu.cc.gatech.edu/node/4950 (accessed 1 June 2011).

[4] Gregory Jay, "Hire Ed! Deconstructing the Crises in Academe," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (March 2011): 163-178, 169.

[5] Alexander Galloway. *Protocol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[6] Saskia Sassen. *Territory, Authority, Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 344.

[7] See Steve Dietz, "Ten Dreams of Technology," *Leonardo* 35, no. 5, (2002): 509- 513, 515-522.

[8] Coco Fusco. *The Bodies That Were Not Ours* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 194.

[9] See especially Seyla Benhabib. *The Rights of Others* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[10] Manuel Castells. *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[11] Manuel Castells, "Communication, Power and the State in the Network Society", Cambridge University Humanitas Visiting Professor in Media 2011, 16 November 2011, http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1189139 (accessed on 1 August 2012).

[12] Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no.1 (April 2003): 5-32.

[13] Mieke Bal's essay fostered a lively debate and garnered published responses by James Elkins, Michael Ann Holly, Peter Leech, Nicholas Mirzoeff, W. J.T. Mitchell, Griselda Pollock, Responses to Mieke Bal's "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture" (August 2003): 232-268.

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