Contemporary Ecological Perspectives and Media Education

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Recent developments in universities have led to high profile cases of academics clashing with institutions and student bodies across the world protesting and occupying their campuses. These moves signal opposition to the policies and governance in contemporary universities that are in line with broader neoliberal agendas—those characterised by the implementation of corporate conditions, managerialism, extensive performance measurement, and emphasis on producing research impacts. With regards to the fostering of innovative and critical thinking, this application of market logics is pernicious. Intersections between higher education and wider economic forces are complex; research and education have value that is not directly or causally linked to such factors. Nevertheless, in times of poor economic performance, the university's role in society is challenged, with humanities disciplines often the first to be targeted. We in the humanities need to respond. Such a challenge has to be met with strong and active opposition from within the spaces of the university. In this short piece, I would like to briefly suggest how media-ecological perspectives offer one path of resistance.

Contemporary Ecological Perspectives

Ecological perspectives have become a popular current in media and cultural research since Matthew Fuller's 2005 book Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture. This speculative set of approaches draws on expanded notions of media and technology in order to rethink the conditions, relations, and practices involved in the process of mediation. This is not simply a theory or theorisation of transformations in society due to novel forms of media. It also attempts to move beyond dominant human-centric approaches to media study by (1) arguing that technical mediation is a basic condition of life, and (2) conceptualising the ontological field as an entangled bundle of immanent processes that operate at multiple, indeterminate scales. No longer is there any value, supposedly, in imagining the world as one of separate monads, individual organisms. This critical landscape concerns not only human agency, but also other organic life forms, the inhuman, the non-living, the technical and technological. In sum, previous separations of nature and culture are untenable. What emerges from these perspectives is a heterogeneous media-ontological system of entangled material agencies.

For media and cultural studies scholars, these arguments are seductive. They rely on some heavyweight philosophical concepts, invoking numerous instances of recent radical and experimental thought, including various post-humanisms, new materialisms, and speculative realisms. This thereby enables media and cultural theorists to situate their research at the vanguard of the field. The claims being made assert media as decisive forces in society: everything is filtered through processes of mediation; studying media can thus teach us about important aspects of the contemporary conjuncture. What is more, such theorists assume that these perspectives have not coalesced or been institutionalised in any significant way; rather, they can be found in a speculative state across several disciplines, publications, and research approaches.

We should caution, however, against wholesale and uncritical adoption of these perspectives. We should bear in mind the critique of related concepts that these perspectives draw upon. Two brief examples: first, there is a type of systems or network thinking, a generalist theoretical approach whose subject matter is the structure and entanglements of dynamic networks. This approach tends towards forming metanarratives, despite pushing against this type of critical structure in principle (Galloway 2014). Second, separating individual objects and their relations is likewise exposed as a counterproductive step. We should instead attempt to forge a less exclusive conceptualisation of the ontological field, recognising the co-existence and co-emergence of things and their relations (Bennett 2012). Whether these critiques and limitations will be taken into account and re-worked over the course of debates on media-ecological perspectives remains to be seen.

Case Study: 'Media Ecologies I'

In the classroom, as well as in research practices, various features of media-ecological perspectives challenge disciplinary orthodoxies. I witnessed this while participating in an MA module on the topic at Lincoln School of Film & Media (University of Lincoln). Media Ecologies I (module guide) offers a transversal approach to media study that embraces the imperative to think media beyond its established conceptual and disciplinary bounds. According to the module guide, 'a more satisfactory engagement with twenty-first century media demands an ecological conception of processes of mediation, moving beyond relatively static and compartmentalizing models and challenging traditional concepts of subjectivity, textuality, media power, production and reception.' This module is offered to students from a range of postgraduate programmes on media theory, production, and practice. They encounter a range of topics through the lens of an expanded media studies, including technology, power and politics, affect theory, and various challenges to humanist philosophical grounds. This is familiar classroom territory: the module's thematic concern is brought to bear on a number of current and more well established topics in the field of study.

The module design recognises the potential risk of pedagogical form becoming stagnant, and in response it offers creative and reflexive approaches to the issues at hand.

There are weekly presentations of students' work-in-progress. Students receive immediate feedback from their peers. This collaborative exchange departs from the individual and isolated scene of student essay writing. Delivery of the module is based on an ethos of ongoing research and practical learning that begins with each student. This purposeful learning initiative attempts to uproot the traditional pedagogical focus on instruction—a hierarchical model in which students are passive recipients—and reframe students as active producers of knowledge. Research is enacted here as an ongoing process rather than simply as an end product.

In the module assessment, students are asked to engage with a contemporary media example, process, or phenomenon of their choice. They tend to focus on topics relevant in their daily lives: local art exhibitions, internet cultures and social networks, ongoing transformations in media technologies, and relations between media and contemporary forms of power. On this last topic, class discussion allows students to see how power is organised in contemporary society. The discussions were marked by familiar themes like Google and Facebook's algorithms, UK politics, and personal media devices. All the while, students are encouraged to think in terms of ecological perspectives which stress power relations, and which move beyond linear understandings students may have assimilated from mainstream media sources.What may once have seemed natural is exposed as neoliberal agendas. Students are thus able to make links between critical themes and bring them to bear on aspects of everyday life. These interventions in the learning process are designed to be dynamic exercises of particular problems students have in mind. For their final

projects, students are free to decide what constitutes a valid mediaecological approach, drawing on their own medial practice, rather than having pre-determined methodological conditions dictated to them.

No longer referring to a pre-defined object of study or a particular systematic approach, media-ecological perspectives entail a learning model that lies outside the prescriptions of familiar institutionalised pedagogies.

Students are not taught a specific methodology or pre-defined approach that can subsequently be applied wholesale to any object of study; instead, they respond to the particulars of each issue. In this way, students have the chance to contribute towards delineating the course of media-ecological research due to its relative novelty and limited institutionalisation. This model is speculative and open-ended, never presenting itself as too prescriptive—neither relativist nor essentialist. It takes place in the field, amongst the medial and conceptual phenomena it addresses.

Learning, too, takes place in medias res.

Resisting Economic Rationalisation in the Classroom

Neoliberal agendas disenfranchise students from the right to education and access to university provisions. A pedagogical model sensitive to the material contexts in which knowledge and research are produced provides one path of resistance. Cultural Studies, for instance, offers a self-reflexive disciplinary context in which to reflect on what it means to be in the university (van Mourik Broekman et al. 2014, 93). Drawing on this context and adopting aspects of media-ecological perspectives, which are all too briefly outlined here, is one way to do this. This consists of a rethinking of pedagogical methods—an approach to the teaching of Media as objects and processes as well as a disciplinary formation. In this frame, students are allowed the space to think and to work through problems. Moving from pre-determined methodical operations to unfixed practices prompts an understanding of intellectual rigour at no set scale. It engages a space of complexity and potential resistance to be determined by the students themselves. It switches focus from being a taught and subsequently interpreted pedagogical model to a creative and active one.

Humanities scholars need to return to notions of knowledge-production in terms of process rather than product. This process should emphasise teaching the art of critique—a province of humanist thought that any resistance to neoliberal rationalisation should be built upon.

The promise of media-ecological models of pedagogy lies in their embryonic state as a set of unfixed practices and strategies. Precisely in this way, they play out in contrast to traditional models. This is achieved in one way by encouraging students to determine significant aspects of what constitutes a valid approach on the module's theme themselves. According to the module guide, "[t]he research task has been deliberately formulated to permit a wide range of possible approaches." At the level of both ongoing weekly discussions and final projects, students have the capacity to decide what media ecologies mean to them. Empowering students in this way runs against traditional models of pedagogy. These speculative energies should be embraced without being further formalised. We need to move beyond the limits and fixity of existing disciplines, to deterritorialise disciplinarity, because "[a] pedagogy that does not rely on disciplinary knowledge must employ a different approach to knowledge" (Nadler 2015, 1). Without the comforting scaffolding of disciplines, and the frameworks they presume, what is required is a focus on the practice and process of pedagogy. How to achieve this and put it into effect is the challenge.

These thoughts on creative and resistant pedagogy, in which I offer media-ecological perspectives as one possible model, imagine students as active participants and teachers as interlocutors rather than sermonisers. These strategies clash with the apparatus of institutionalisation preferred by economic rationalities. Herein lies the opportunity to subvert prevailing power dynamics. Such resistance is rooted in the concrete location of classrooms and other university spaces, and thus in the everyday lives and social relations of students. The implications of this approach are significant, as they present a timely opportunity to reconfigure the form of media education. The success of media-ecological pedagogies is relative to the openness and scale of intricacy engaged by student researchers.

It thus gives them agency and responsibility with new impetus. Herein lie engaged student-researchers who can offer action or resistance when needed—this is a necessarily ethical and political subjectivation.

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