



Some Questions Regarding the Nature of Experience and Interaction in Media

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Abstract. Our relationship to and use of media is predicated on it helping us develop a sense of self within the context of our society. This is both a technological and ontological issue. If we turn to media theory, we can start to understand how the development of various media leads us to different types of engagement. Some are more intellectual; some merely diversion and others are deeply personal. What is not looked at is how does the form of the medium contribute to a more resonant and personal media experience.

In order to answer this question, we need to look at our relationship with media through the filters of media form and how it determines personal experience. With the understanding that a mediated experience has the potential to be as formative as a lived experience. Primarily through creating a relationship to the world through otherness. Different media will present such an experience to greater or lesser extent. Here I would like to look at various media from photography through to gaming and mixed-reality and analyze them through a framework defined by Roland Barthes stadium and punctum as well as Marshall McLuhan's idea of hi and low-definition media (hot and cold). By doing this we will be looking at the idea of interaction in a different manner, moving away from reaction as a definition of interaction to one where the work becomes a space of personal memory or emotion.

Keywords: Media theory · User experience · Interaction · Memory

1 Introduction

In *The Cult of Information*, Theodore Roszak tells us about the importance of the relationship of memory and physical space [1]. How we tend to remember things, facts, personal experiences, etc., by associating them with a physical space. So, that when we read a text, we remember a quote as being halfway through the text on the lower half of a right-hand page. His point was that when we receive all our information from a singular space, a television screen or computer monitor, we tend to not remember the information as well. He says that this explains why even as a public may be better informed through the content of television news, they seem to not retain the information presented. This idea of the specialization of memory relates both to Francis Yates' work on memory palaces and other memory systems [2], as well as Marshall McLuhan's contention that

the written word has to first be seen as existing in visual space [3]. In both cases memory is linked to the visual. Yet the critical language developed to address memory and technology has been one that valorises the word over the image and programmed meaning over experience.

According to Eric McLuhan his father Marshall's thinking was influenced by Practical Criticism, a methodology of literary analysis based on traditional rhetoric. Rhetoric itself is an exercise in how argumentation is created in the form of content [4]. It is about how to manage affect, how the rhetorical arts convince a public. It is based on a relationship with an audience that separates the speaker from the public. One of planned manipulation and at the end of the day based on the supremacy of the speaker's will over their opponent and the public. This methodology is not one of conversation, but of oration. Speech over talking.

We find a very similar focus with the semioticians. If we look at Roland Barthes' essay *The Rhetoric of the Image*, the idea of understanding or reading the visual image, in his case an advertisement, is clearly centred on an idea of oral argumentation [5]. The key is to convince people, to persuade them of the correctness of one's point of view. In this formula we find that the idea of mass communication, speech addressed to an amorphous mass that is identified as those who are affected. For Barthes, the role of the photographer is, like an orator, to make a convincing image. In *The Photographic Message*, Barthes focuses on journalistic photography in the same way he looks at advertising photography in *The Rhetoric of the Image*. In both cases we are expected to read, not see images with a goal of finding the programmed meaning [5]. The important function of the systems, news and advertising, is to limit the meaning of the image to a specific message. While it can utilize our emotions, it is made with a very specific message in mind. In Barthes analyses, visual media in a systematic way where meaning, the sign, is transmitted to only allow for specific readings. The idea of readings assumes not only specific programmed messaging, but also a structure where the receiver is distanced from the sender. Very much like cybernetics, these are information-based theories where the system is built as an information delivery system and the resulting analysis focuses on the efficiency of that delivery. How an individual responds to the information contained in the system is only important in relation to a predetermined and expected response. This is why advertising was used as a model of how visual media works. It is very confined in its intent and very controlled in its creation and delivery. So, arguments are made by reducing the variables and then the results are abstracted back out into a world where the variables exist.

By contrast, Roszak was looking at memory as a personal activity that affects each individual in a unique way. This was done in a work that was critical of the development of information technology and cybernetic theory. As much as his warnings are prescient, they have not been developed into a form of critical theory from which we can develop a new way to talk about media and how it affects personal memory.

As we develop our questions, we will use McLuhan and Barthes writings as a framework to try to develop a new way of talking about how we experience media and how media creates our experiences. This will be done by asking a series of questions and from there we will try to parse out a relationship of media and its forms to individual memory as well as what is the difference of interaction as reaction to that of the creation

of experiences which generate memory. This essay is in the form of a series of questions as the ideas here are open ended and intended to provoke further investigation.

2 Question 1: What is the Difference Between Interaction and Experience?

Our first question regards of how we understand the nature of interaction in media. We need to define what it is and how it is different from other media. For example, do we define a playing Red Dead Redemption 2 as different from call and response in gospel and pop music? What are the defining rules of one as opposed to the other? How do we understand varying forms of participation and what is demanded of the user?

When we look at gaming, we should note the level of identification with characters found in the experience of playing the game. In major genres, like role playing games (RPG) or first-person shooters (FPS) we are involved in the action through the perspective of a specific character, our identification with that character is of a lower level than that found in a novel such as *In Search of Lost Time* or films like *Star Wars*. Here the chief form of engagement is through identifying with the main character. Yet we seem to be more alienated from the characters whose bodies we occupy. The idea of the character having a consciousness that we can connect to is missing. The mechanics of the game, the way that we move around and encounter that world, become a form and conscious part of how we experience the game. The mechanics and the idea of goals that we are tasked with achieving focus our own consciousness towards engaging in reflexive action. Our reflective thought is focused to the mechanics (process) much like Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*). We are caught in a world of process over meaning. We are thrust into a world of which we need to make sense of rules that define how we behave before having space to reflect [6]. If we are more engaged with mechanics than content it would seem that the function of the content would be to provide ever more unique ways to employ the mechanics. In such a situation we should ask what is the nature of the experience we find in such games? Where does it place us and is this action/reaction system something that we should call interactive or just reflexive?

To look at this we can look at works through the lens of McLuhan's idea of media participation. He defines our relationship to media using both the terms hot and cold or high and low definition. Hot and cold has been used to explain a medium in relation to a user's feeling of engagement. This engagement is not necessarily the same as interaction nor need it be experiential on a personal level. So, for McLuhan television is cool because of its liveness. The idea that all views are conscious of the fact that watching (a passive experience) is happening to thousands or millions of other people at the same time is enough for his definition. I would like to use high and low-def to refer to how we act with such works. How much agency does the work give us as users and does it or can it actually change our experiences in the world? We need to ask about how our systems are designed and if it is for impact or reaction.

There are many situations where that call on a person or an audience to participate. Call and response in a concert or religious service is a good example. Here we could say that it is cold in that it has high participation. Feelings of inclusiveness are very temporary, and the enduring quality of the experience tends to be low. What we have

here is a highly conventionalized situation where the “maker” is creating a situation which the viewer completes a prescribed action. The viewer is meant to feel included while still alienated from the creative process. The audience/viewer knows coming in what is expected of them as this is a highly conventionalized action. Roles are clearly proscribed and what is demanded of the participant is very little. When an action becomes conventionalized, it removes any creativity from within the action. This heightens the maker’s control giving us a high-definition work. In this way the user becomes a reactor instead of an actor. The logic of the work is one of cause and effect masked as choice. In games where the effects are known, and the narrative is built around levels or saving points the narrative is giving more of an illusion of choice than allowing for it. It is hoped that the illusion will keep the user engaged, but as Vilém Flusser pointed out all games either end when there are no more unique combinations or the action is repetitive and the user is bored [7]. This way of understanding how we relate to media identifies how alienation plays into the game. By contrast, works that allow for an intimate relationship between users either through or with the work would be low-def. Amateur photography and smartphone-based video would be examples of this. Here we are interacting with the recording device according to a set of rules that define our play. We can also engage with others through the act of recording in a similar low-definition way.

For Barthes the Maker and the Reader are in a struggle for supremacy over the image. He sees the ability to create meaning as being possessed by the image maker or the reader as interpreter. He tends to side with the reader as this is where he identifies. Meanwhile, those of us depicted in the image (the subject) are supposed to passively accept our fate of being transformed from a subject into an object [8]. But his way of understanding communication maintains a power relationship within a zero-sum game.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defines how we interpret images as either learned, the *studium*, or that which is has meaning only to the individual, the *punctum*. These are forms of experiencing a photograph are only available to the reader of the image. It is closed to the maker and the subject [8]. In the book he seems to struggle with how to explain how the *punctum* exists because it only exists for the reader. He sees it as activated by seeing, but not understood until one is removed from the work. It exists best where the being with that which is in excess of the Self, the Other, is relegated to just a memory. He sees the *punctum* as a device that reaches out to Otherness, but only as a reflecting back on to the Self. That which is other than the reader may be objectified but is not allowed active agency in creating either meaning or experience. Understanding media this way expects interactive works as we know them to only exist in the realm of being reactive. We can only be given choices that are either right or wrong as determined by the Maker. While the impact from these choices is given to the reader in retrospect.

Combining Barthes definitions of the parties involved in the semiotic process with McLuhan’s idea of interactivity within this process we expand the relationship of the Maker and the Reader to the include the possibility of a User. Where Barthes doesn’t allow for the possibility of an active participant in his media world, by adding in the idea of the user/participant as separate from the reader we can develop a way of opening up the very emotional reaction to media works that he was trying to define through the *punctum*. By incorporating McLuhan’s Participant with Barthes’ Reader, we come to a way of being able to speak of how an individual work affects an individual, not

just how a structure allows for communication. It reshapes the relationship away from a cause-and-effect model of communication exemplified by the advertising model and allows for the experiential to have impact. It is of significance that McLuhan's model of the most low-def form of media is the telephone. This is one where the awareness of the structure of the medium becomes the most invisible as the two users are in direct connection and the role of the medium as mediator is minimal.

In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot speaks of the relationship of the work to the audience as a coming together. He places the author outside this formulation [9]. This is not to deny the influence of the maker or McLuhan's dictum about medium and content, rather it acknowledges that the relationship between the work and the user/reader is more intimate and personal. He speaks of meaning as created in a space, an interval, in between the work and the user. It is in this space that each party brings their knowledge and experiences together to negotiate a meaning. This meaning adds experience and richness to each party after the fact. This presumes that although intended meaning can be put into the work, the experience of it carries an excess beyond what can be programmed by the Maker. This moves an interaction between a work and a user away from base action/reaction. McLuhan talks about how a medium frames how information as it is presented, here we are talking about how meaning is created by the active event of interacting with a work within said medium. It central to and beyond the function of the medium. The idea of high and low definition can be seen as an expression of this and as such helps us in conceptualizing a language to talk about how works affect us. Further we could redefine the studium as what is brought to us by the work, be it information or a set of determined actions, and that the punctum is our finding meaning through an excess created in the act of encountering the work. This way of looking at the punctum moves it was from a detached reading found after the experience and makes it an active part of developing meaning through experience. Expanding from Barthes, the punctum becomes not just a point that we hang an experience onto as much as the acknowledgment of the experience itself as a defining act. One that changes how we see and interact with the world. This was what Victor Burgin was moving towards, but stopped short of in his essay *The Remembered Film* [10]. Burgin expanded the idea of the punctum by using it as a tool to understand cinematic experience. His work tries to understand the effects of memory on the psyche through a Freudian analysis. What is significant in his work is the idea that what we remember is detached from the narrative of the film, leaving the linkage of meaning to experience to scenes and fragments of the work. It acknowledges that the impact of a work is a fragmentary image and feeling invoked by the viewer, rather than the story as a whole. Here the punctum defines both the act of an experience creating a memory and as well as the object that is linked to that memory. It is through how we take on the image and its feeling that creates a meaning and knowledge that we incorporate into our lives.

3 Question 2: What is the Relationship of Experience to Knowledge?

In discussing how memory works Henri Bergson lays out two forms of memory, what we can call active memory and habitual or muscle memory. Both are learned, but one is

based on reaction instead of reflection and thought. This is habitual memory; it is learned, but bypasses knowledge. While pure memory is where events from the past are activated into conscious thought [11]. This division of memory allows us to distinguish between reflex memory and memory as thought. Since the habitual specifically works through bypassing thought, it may be learned, but we cannot call what is learned knowledge. While we do learn habitual memory through repeated experience as seen in learning a sport, the distinction between these forms of memory is that the habitual operates without awareness of memory, while pure memory is conscious of the fact that memory is actively invoked in thought. It draws us into experience through time.

When look at the punctum as a phenomenon it is an act derived from pure memory. It is the activation of memory as the framework to understand the present through experience. What makes it different from the studium as pure memory is that it is not about the practicality of knowledge. But on a certain level both are pure memory. While Bergson used cinema as an analogy in his work, he wasn't concerned with relation of media to memory in a specific way.

As pure memory how does the studium and punctum relate back to the idea of hi-def and low-def media? This leads us to ask what McLuhan meant by hi-def and low-def. Should we only read it as a way of understanding a mechanical function or as a way of being able to talk about how it affects us as individuals. How can media have the capacity to create memory and help create our sense of self? For McLuhan low-def is an indication of openness in meaning, the ability of one to create meaning within or through a work. This is why he writes so much about art and how to understand it. Art is inherently low-def since it must carry meaning beyond what is inscribed on the surface. And when he said, "Art is anything you can get away with" [12] he is indicating the importance of how an event can be communicate through a medium which can change us. This return to art is his way of trying to approach something akin to the punctum. His grounding in Practical Criticism tended to move him away from a psychological reading of how media works. Just as much as Barthes' work was moving in a Lacanian direction. In both cases they are trying to find a way of understanding how we can gain experience which can be transformed into knowledge that will change how we act in the world.

Key to either reading of media is that we learn from experience and incorporate it into our psyche as personal experience. Knowledge and creativity are then drawn from that. As an event this is both personal and ambiguous. Both writers seem to find it difficult to speak of experience in way that may appear to be systematic. Both come from a perspective of being readers, not creators and this does limit how they can conceive of how media can be understood. They see readers as separated from the work as an event. Readers may feel that they experience the events of a novel, but is always at a remove, essentially after the fact. Just as Josef K is moving through events, but remaining detached from them, so are Barthes and McLuhan's readers. For both, creation is done elsewhere, and we just react and analyse what is before us. Distance is required in order for meaning to occur and the effects of meaning are deferred to a future date. The idea that the user can be participatory in the creation of meaning in an active way is not really addressed. McLuhan does allow for a conversational aspect to media and it does help define hi and low-def, but not in a prescriptive way. So, the fact that like the telephone it

can help define its function, but how that can affect the medium is not of interest to him. Barthes on the other hand can only see a participant's role in a struggle for control of meaning with the author/creator. In both cases the idea of cooperative systems or viewing the encounter with the work as facing Otherness is not possible. Yet, in both cases, by opening up to the excess found in art or the image in general, they as acknowledging the need for this type of view.

4 Question 3: Should We Be Treating Our Experiences with Media as a Being-With-Otherness?

Our question is how do we use media is to create situations of low definition where moments of significance can be made such as alleviating PTSD via gaming? As opposed to when each of us link media events to ourselves as a punctum. Should we see the punctum as a subset of low def, as a way of explaining how it works and can it be programmed? How can we understand the underlying functions that allows this to operate and in understanding this where can we go in developing new media?

To understand how media objects can have meaning beyond the work we need to see how we relate to media in a different way. We have to understand that we actually interact with it as we do other people. We face it in as real in a way as we face each other. It is the act of encountering the media work as a living experience that defines this. It is not that we confuse it with reality in the act, rather that we are open to the reality of the experience that it presents us. In this way we treat the media experience as a life experience, and this opens us up to this event as an encountering of the Other. How is this possible?

In order to see how media and memory do interact, let's look at Bergson's concept of thought and memory. For Bergson all stimulus that can be perceived are images. All of existence including our body are images. "All these images act and react upon one another in all their elementary parts" [11]. We take in images not to reduce them to a symbolic language, but to interact and make sense of the world. Memory is a function where we link the image or event before us to previous images in order to make sense of the present. So that we live in a world where past and present are always in active conversation with each other. It is through how we interact with and understand these images that memory is created. It opens up a new way of understanding ontology and from there our relationship to media.

According to Emmanuel Lévinas, we have to understand that our understanding of self has to be grounded in our relationship to Otherness. For him the idea of Being (Dasein) as separate individuals who manage their way through the world is a fallacy. Where Heidegger places Dasein in the world, it still sees the conflict between one's will and being-in-the-world as a struggle for authenticity. He sees anything that alters or modifies the will as inauthentic. In such a structure modern media as a system is a battle ground for authenticity. Media is to be is a ground for resistance. While Lévinas redefines ontology as the study of, "all knowledge of relations connecting or opposing beings to one another implies an understanding of the fact that these beings and relations exist" [13]. He squarely places the concept of being in relationship to the other as central of our understanding of the world. Because we live in a world of relatedness and relationships,

we have a fundamental responsibility to the other that exceeds our individuality and also defines it. This goes beyond an intellectual concept of the world and acts out in our daily life. Being-in-the-world is living within this system of desires and responsibilities. This means that to face the other we cannot reduce our relationships to it to our reading a series of images in a symbolic language. We have to face them in their reality, not as extensions of ourselves. It is the facing of the other as beyond systems of meaning that places us in-the-world. Subjectivity can only exist through our interrelationship with the world. We move from a world understood through the studium and the punctum as reflective acts of reading to one where we see the punctum as an act of being-in-the-world. This facing of the other calls for us to be responsible to the other through the media experience. We place ourselves in a position of where the significance of the interaction is to create a space of otherness, where it has the ability to be in dialogue with us. We find such a relationship in the act of amateur photography. When we hand a camera over to another person and ask them, “can you take a picture of me?” In this act we are handing over a responsibility towards to another through the media device [14]. In this way of experiencing the world through media, it is the act of photography rather than the image produced where the true interaction is produced. Where experience becomes more important than artifact. Where the artefact can be read, the experience is not found in the object. Although this may produce a highly conventionalized image, it is not the image but rather the act of creating the image that has significance. By turning a camera over to another to hand responsibility for a the creatin of a sense of self to another without reservation or dictates. S/he must be willing to take on this responsibility for the event to occur. This is an event, a moment of the self and the other in a direct face-to-face beyond meaning specifically created through the media technology. This connects with the idea of the punctum as experience and the image as record of that experience. We try to make sense of the connection between the remembered scene and the individual not as reading, but as memory. We have created a system that moves beyond understanding as an act that happened in the future to the act as presence having meaning. The experience moves beyond symbolic meaning into affective memory.

This is why we see games being used and developed as medical therapy. As an example, EndeavorRx is a new game that has been approved by the FDA in the US as a way of helping people manage ADHD. It recognises that focus and attention, not just repetition should be central to a gaming experience for it to be effective. There is the act of presence within the situation, the reality of the act. Such games move away from an alienated reactive world into one that demand our being present with in it.

This understanding brings images into the world as having impact beyond the symbolic and grounds our ethical relationship to the other as fundamental to being. Within this function we take on responsibility for the world before us as we incorporate the world into us to create our consciousness. This places our consciousness, thought and memory, into the world demanding that we have an ethical responsibility to it.

Along with these medical developments that recognise the importance of presence as a factor in creating punctum like media experiences, there have also been artists such as Shimon Attie who use the idea of presence as a way of creating this face-to-face between a media work and a viewer. His *Writing on the Wall* (1992), was a series of images of the pre-War Jewish community in Berlin, projected back into the neighbourhood that

they were first taken. As often as possible they were projected onto the specific location of the original image. Attie is creating media images that demands a relationship of the viewer to the image that is one of a face-to-face. We cannot see these images among the ruined buildings without confronting the history giving them their context [14]. Because it demands such a direct emotional reaction from the viewer, we can say that it creates a punctum in the city space. We are put in a situation that places us into an ontological act of *being-in-the-world*. It places us in a here and now that demands us to be present. We can also see how this can be defined as a low-def work in the McLuhan sense. While such works can seem to be outliers compared to the vast majority of gaming and other environments, we are finding more and more development of media work.

5 Conclusion

If we are to look at how media and especially the new developing technologies can have a fundamental effect on our lives, we need to find a language to about what these effects are and how we incorporate them into media development. Structuralist and the McLuhan analysis leaves off at the level effect on a society and ignores the individual. It mechanizes us as parts in a system that appears to be more about power and control than communication. While it warns us to the dangers and possibilities of that system it still sees us as powerless cogs. Understanding the hopelessness of this view of the world they both look to art as the escape valve. They see it as carrying an unspecified excess that exceeds the structure of mechanism of meaning and control. What is missing in this interpretation of media is our individual relationship to an individual media work/object. An ontological view of our interaction as one of being-with the work/object as a facing of otherness that allows for a true interaction instead of a programmed communication. By facing the understanding of how media works, be it a film, podcast, game installations or multimedia performances, are experienced by us as if they were others in the world, we can find ways of developing interactions and works that where the focus is on meaning through a different set of standards or ideology.

In order to accomplish this, we need to find a way to talk about such issues in relation to media critique and development. This is where joining of Barthes' *studium* and *punctum* to McLuhan's hi-def and low-def can start to move us into that direction. Not to find a way to create cleverer and cleverer ways of engaging our time in reactive models of use, but rather to centre meaning and the individual in developing media works. To begin to conceptualize a language and perspective of critique is just a step in that direction.

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