

Coda

Shannon Mattern

A few weeks ago I participated in a panel discussion with Michael Schudson of Columbia and Helga Tawil Souri of NYU, as part of the Communications Colloquium at Columbia University. We all were asked to address how we introduce the field of “communication studies” or “media studies” to our graduate students through our introductory graduate courses. Rasmus Klein Nielsen blogged about the discussion [here](#). Let me tell you: it was *riveting*.¹

We were addressing a question that has stumped the heavyweights in our field for decades. You might remember from our second lecture, when we discussed the “archaeology” of the field and situated our own program within that terrain, that media theorist Douglas Kellner

offered this rather disorienting, and discouraging, position statement:



The **boundaries of the field of communications** have been unclear from the beginning. Somewhere between the liberal arts/humanities and the social sciences, communications exists in a contested space where advocates of different methods and positions have attempted to define the field and police intruders and trespassers. Despite several decades of attempts to define and institutionalize the field of communications, there seems to be no general agreement concerning its subject-matter, method, or institutional home. In different universities, communications is sometimes placed in humanities departments, sometimes in the social sciences, and generally in schools of

communications. But the boundaries of the various departments within schools of communications are drawn differently, with the study of mass-mediated communications and culture, sometimes housed in Departments of Communication, Radio/Television/Film, Speech Communication, Theatre Arts, or Journalism departments. Many of these departments combine study of mass-mediated communication and culture with courses in production, thus further bifurcating the field between academic study and professional training, between theory and practice (Kellner 1995). <<Image: Constant Nieuwenhuys Symbolische Voorstelling van New Babylon, 1969>>

¹ Your sarcasm alert should be beeping.

Others take hope in our “placelessness,” relish our unclassifiability. John Durham Peters, author of the oft-cited and fabulous *Speaking Into the Air*, argues that, rather than lamenting that we’re not one of the social sciences, we should regard communications and media studies as a “newer, nascent way of organizing inquiry” (Peters 132). Robert McChesney agrees: “[W]e cannot succeed in academia by imitating the established fields. We have to boldly strike out in a popular and interdisciplinary manner that runs directly counter to the dominant trends in the academy” (100). Renegade scholarship: I like it. We can choose to define our field not by the “professional passport we bear,” but by the “**literatures we read, teach, and contribute to**,” Peters says (133). And, if I may, I’ll suggest that Peters is using “literatures” as shorthand for a body of work in myriad media formats – print, film, video, audio, web-based, multimedia, etc. In other words, our field is defined by those who *practice* it.

This idea – that **a field is what you make it** – commonly informs the curriculum design and pedagogy for introductory graduate courses. While my colleagues at Columbia and NYU agree with me that there are certain texts, films, theories, methods, etc., that every student who plans to someday call him- or herself a *Master* of Media Studies should have seen or be familiar with by the time he or she graduates, we all also tend to present the field to our students by demonstrating how *we*, the faculty, *do* it. Other programs are a bit less multidimensional than ours, so their faculty tend to focus on *either* theory or production. Yet this semester we introduced you to Kit Laybourne, an accomplished illustrator and producer and one of the founding faculty in this program; Paolo Carpignano, a sociologist who studies television as a social phenomenon; Carol Wilder, a rhetorician who’s currently investigating how to introduce media studies into international contexts; Elizabeth Ellsworth, an activist-scholar who focuses on how media can be used to create social change; Barry Salmon, a musician and audio producer whose work is informed by his study of philosophy, and vice versa; Vlad Nikolic, an award-winning filmmaker; Peter Haratonik, a pragmatist historian-slash-political scientist scholar and *another* of our founding faculty members; and me, a media and design critic and theorist.

It is my hope, though, that this show-and-tell served not only to show you “how it’s done,” but also to invite you to join us in **shaping the field’s future**. At all of our Media Studies recruitment events and Orientations, Peter likes to say that the two qualities that distinguish graduate students from undergraduate students are (1) **commitment** and (2) **engagement**. Your degree of engagement is, in large part, a *choice*. Some programs *force* this engagement by requiring comprehensive exams and making theses mandatory. We instead *invite* all of you to be engaged by sharing with you the ways you *can* be. But of course not all of you will accept that invitation.² Or perhaps not *yet*. Still, the invitation stands, and you’re welcome to RSVP when you’re ready.

² I didn’t want to waste class time to talk about particular “engagement” issues – but I do want to mention a few instances that raised some eyebrows. Several of our faculty guests expressed concern and disappointment to see some students *leaving the lecture* in the middle of their presentations. The faculty dedicated significant time to the preparation of their lectures, and they and I were quite disappointed by these students’ disrespect. Some other guests were similarly surprised to see students updating their Facebook pages, or IM’ing, for the entire duration of the class. We realize that many students use technology in *constructive* ways that support learning – which is why we don’t simply ban computers from classes. But we do want everyone to be conscious of when their technology use distracts their neighbors.

Traditions in the Theory Universe: A map but not genealogical table				
Media, Communication, and Information Theory since 1950s (McLuhan, Goody, Innis, Havelok)	Structuralism and Linguistics since 1960 (de Saussure, Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Chomsky)	European-French neo-Marxism and Critical Theory (Benjamin, Debord, Adorno, Althusser)	European Philosophy, "grand tradition" including hermeneutics (Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Gadamer, Heidegger)	
Sociology of media (Hall, Fiske)	Semiology/ Semiotics [signs and meaning; intertextuality, interpretation] (de Saussure, Peirce, Lotman, Barthes, Eco)	Received Academic and Professional Disciplinary boundary assumptions (and differences between US and French/European disciplines) (US academic disciplinary tribes; "human sciences" vs. science and technology)	Modern French philosophical and intellectual traditions (Sartre, Bergson, Bachelard, Derrida)	US-UK Cultural Studies: cultural analyses of gender, race, class, ethnicity, identities (Hall, Jameson and followers)
Reception Theory: history of cultural reception, interpretive communities (Jauss, Iser, Fish, Roger Chartier, etc.)	Post-Structuralism, Discourse Theory, Deconstruction (Derrida, Foucault, Lacan)	Post-Structuralist Sociology (Bourdieu)	Anglo-American Philosophy of Language (Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle)	US feminist and gender studies
Materialist Social History (Braudel, Foucault)	Media Studies New Media Studies (post-digital) Visual Culture Studies	Recent Marxian theory, 1980s-present (Jameson, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Virilio, French po-mo, Zizek)	US Pragmatism and Critique of Theory (Rorty, Fish)	Political-Economy and quantitative methodology for the study of media and communications
I				
Mediology (Debray and the mediology group in France) Mediology as a metatheory and point of view for analyzing media and institutions: A method for recombinant theory and practice in media and communication research				

In 2003 a group of graduate students who were discouraged by their sense of exclusion from their field of study wrote an inspiring paper that appeared in the journal *Pedagogy*, published by Duke University Press. They called for an introductory graduate course that “prepare[s] graduate students for **taking an active role in shaping the future of the discipline**” (Crisco et al. 372). This course would (1)

“survey the historical development of the field”; (2) “critically examine some of the key terms presently at the center of debates concerning the defining goals and purposes of the work” in the field; (3) “create a collaborative, explicitly intradisciplinary space within the department to explore the often competing commitments of our discipline and to articulate the stakes (individual, fieldwide, institutional, cultural) of the various approaches to reforming” the field; and (4) “provide students with opportunities to locate themselves and their professional commitments in relationship to the field” (ibid. 369). <<Image: Mark Irvine, Georgetown University, A Theory Map for Media Studies and Mediology: <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/CCTP748/mediology-map.html>>>

These proposed course objectives map remarkably well onto those for UMS: we began the semester by reviewing the history of the field and some of its defining goals and, by introducing you to many of the research resources in our field, prepared you to seek out on your own more of the field’s historical and contemporary debates. Through our guests’ presentations, we addressed some of the key terms, defining goals, and stakes of their work, and the competing (or complimentary) commitments they represent. Then, through the assignments – the intellectual autobiography, the abstracts, the literature review, and the academic plan – we hoped to give *you* an opportunity to “locate [yourself] and [your] professional commitments in relationship to the field.” In the process, we gave you a sense of what is expected in graduate-level reading and writing, and we introduced you to the Graduate Writing Center and a representative from the library – both valuable resources, as many of you have discovered this semester.

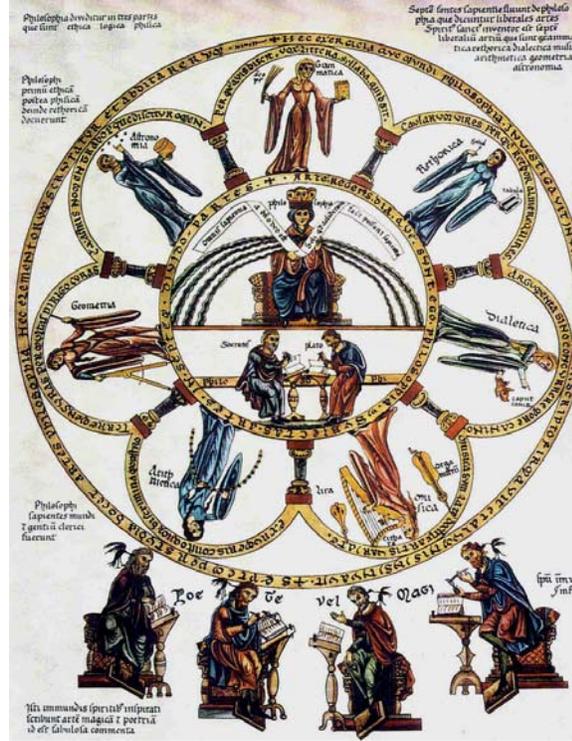
Studying how “the profession’ and ‘the discipline’ (macro-level concepts) are manifested in local (micro-level) institutional or discursive sites” – how the field’s history and general goals map onto the work of the field’s practitioners – “would perform a professionalizing function,” Crisco et al. suggested, by “familiariz[ing students] with the **rules, conventions, folkways, and habits of mind that inform the profession and the discipline**” (363). Yet it also presents the field of media studies, and the various professions it represents (scholar, producer, activist, educator, manager, etc.), “as sites for **institutional critique**, not as

idealized future spaces wherein fully realized and credentialized professionals do their work” (ibid.)³

THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND CARTOGRAPHY OF OUR FIELD

Regardless of what kind of professional credentials you want, critiquing the institution requires that you first be familiar with it. Which, again, is why we started – and ended – with history. In our next-to-last class Peter Haratonik reminded us of the various approaches to writing histories – military histories, cultural histories, media histories, even the **histories of our own field**. Those disciplinary histories were the subject of our second lecture. We reviewed the history of liberal education, the history of the social sciences, and the history of professional education – and their larger cultural histories. And we situated media studies at the intersection of those traditions. We looked briefly at the evolution of the liberal arts, heeding Aristotle’s reminder that “the amount of ‘useful’ knowledge imparted [to students]...should ‘never be large enough to make them mechanically minded’” (quoted in Roosevelt 3).

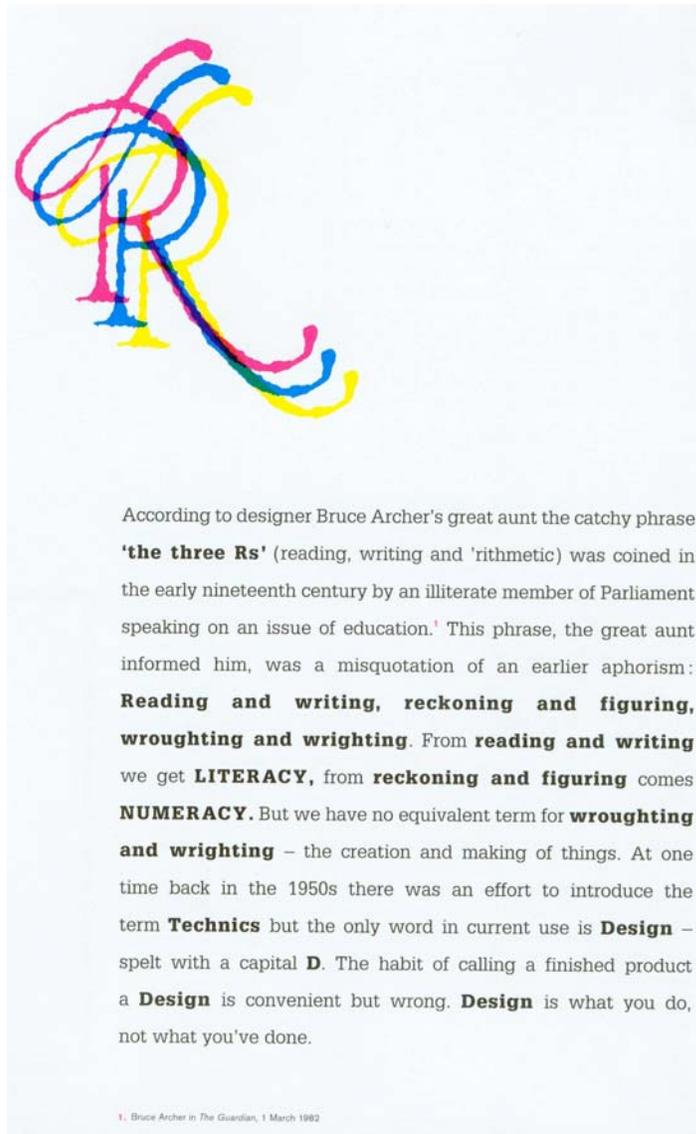
<<Image: The Seven Liberal Arts: http://www.rgle.org.uk/RGLE_Liberal_arts.htm>>



We discussed the rise of mass society in the late 19th century; the birth of the mass press, film, and radio; the rise of the social sciences and new statistically-based research methodologies – and the concurrent rise of communication studies in the early 20th century. We traced the field’s evolution from “direct effects” theories – the “magic bullet” theories of media determinism – to more “limited effects” theories, like the two-step flow, and on through the arrival of new approaches to historiography, cultural studies, globalization, etc. These are the theories you’re addressing in your “Media Studies: Ideas” courses. <<Image: Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, 1942-5: <http://www.hclib.org/pub/search/WWIIPosters/Action.cfm?subject=Jews>>>

³ Institutional critique is often associated with art practice that interrogates the bureaucracies of the art world – museums, galleries, dealers, etc; representative artists include Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Fred Wilson. Yet Porter et al. regard institutional critique as a methodology for “rewrit[ing] institutions through rhetorical action” (613). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Henry Giroux, and Vincent Leitch, they regard institutions as discursive or rhetorical constructions. Leitch writes: “...through various discursive and technical means, institutions constitute and disseminate systems of rules, conventions, and practices that condition the creation, circulation, and use of resources, information, knowledge, and belief. Institutions include, therefore, both material forms and mechanisms of production, distribution, and consumption and ideological norms and protocols shaping the reception, comprehension, and application of discourse” (127-8). Institutional critique then maps “the conflicted frameworks in these heterogeneous and contested spaces, articulating the hidden and seemingly violent voices of those marginalized by the powerful, and observing how power operates within institutional space – in order to expose and interrogate possibilities for institutional change through the practice of rhetoric” (Porter et al. 631).

Media historian William Uricchio highlights a moment in *film studies* history when media studies seemed to come into its own. He claims that at the 1979 International Federation of Film Archives conference in Brighton, England, film historians began to resituate the study of film “as the culmination of various nineteenth-century representational efforts, and as a catalogue of unexpected possibilities of a yet-to-be disciplined medium” (28-9). Film was not a spontaneous discovery; it grew out of “representational systems with longer histories, . . . such as the theater, the magic lantern and photography” (ibid. 29). With this realization that film must be “positioned within [its] intertextual and intermedial networks,” Uricchio notes a “shift from *medium-specific* histories – film’s history in particular – to *media history*,” in which various media formats are cast “in the light of an array of precedent technologies, practices, and notions of mediation” (ibid. 23; italics mine).



<< Alan Fletcher, *The Art of Looking Sideways*, 2001>>⁴

⁴ All following images, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from Fletcher (2001).

Media studies lies somewhere at the intersection of these various traditions: taking a ***cross-platform approach***, it draws on the liberal arts and the social sciences, while also imparting some “useful” knowledge that stops short of making its practitioners “mechanically minded.” Syracuse’s Pamela Shoemaker argues against those professional communications curricula that are “designed specifically to train students in each sequence to fill particular job slots in the working world,” which is “not unlike the process of training workers to fill slots on an assembly line” (150). Liberal education, we’ll remember, “was conceived of as having an ethos that contrasted with and in some ways *counteracted the ethos of the marketplace*” (Roosevelt 3; italics mine). Shoemaker continues:

Flexibility must be a valued characteristic of communication workers, and generating flexibility requires a **different sort of education than that needed to train somebody to fill a slot**. The need for **increased critical thinking skills** cannot be underestimated... It is the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information that will allow communicators to train themselves to take on future jobs... We must give our students a general communication education with a large conceptually based core of classes. There will still be a place for classes that give students **technical skills** for entry-level jobs, but these must be **subordinate to classes that teach critical thinking, law, history, mass media and society, international communication**, and so on (Shoemaker 150-1).⁵

Our program takes Shoemaker’s advice to heart. We aim not to promote what Elizabeth Ellsworth would call “compliant learning.”

Henry Jenkins, who’s currently at MIT but soon moving on to USC, agrees that media studies is not about *training*. He reminds us that our field is rooted in the liberal arts – the old and the new:

New media literacies include the traditional literacy that evolved with print culture as well as the newer forms of literacy within mass and digital media.... [We] must expand [our] required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new.

Beyond core literacy, students need **research skills**.... Students also need to develop **technical skills**.... Yet, to reduce the new media literacies to technical skills would be a mistake on the order of confusing penmanship with composition....

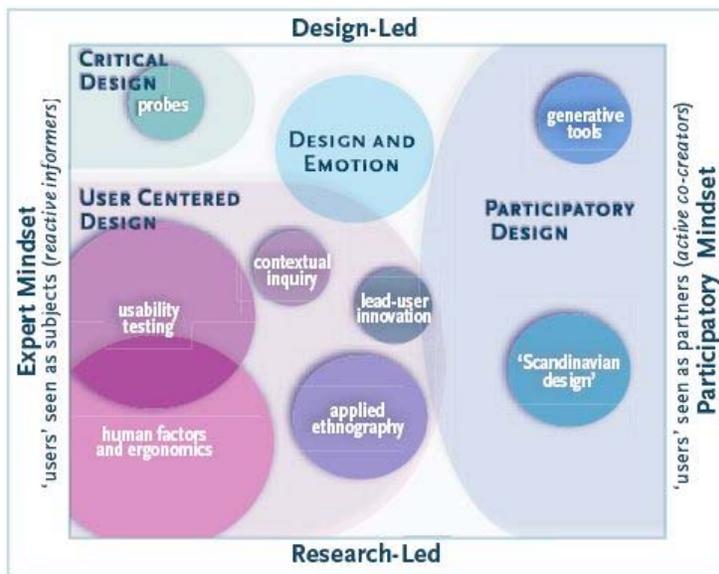
As media literacy advocates have claimed during the past several decades, students must also acquire a basic understanding of the ways media representations structure our perceptions of the world; the economic and cultural contexts within which mass media is produced and circulated; the motives and goals that shape the media they consume; and alternative practices that operate outside the commercial mainstream” (Jenkins 19-20)

Gerald O’Grady, founder of the University of Buffalo Department of Media Study, describes his program’s work as “the exploration of the creation, the aesthetics, and the psychological, social, and environmental impact of the art forms of photography, cinematography, videography, radio, recordings, and tapes within the **broad framework of**

⁵ Sennett suggests that those who approach their work as a *craft* can easily retrain themselves to fit into different contexts; their discipline, their ethic, and their “focus on concrete problems” serve them well in different contexts (266).

general education in the humanities” (O’Grady 116-7). The founder of our own program, John Culkin, agrees: he says that “media studies represents the arts and humanities in a new key.”

As Peter Haratonik explains it, our program’s approach to teaching production is based on the premise that “just as one learns reading through writing, one learns how to teach media literacy and criticism by learning how to *make* media” (September 10, 2008). We learn production to *support* or *enact* our critical and theoretical work. And we have to learn to cultivate this criticality – in the same way that Simon Critchley, as Barry explained, calls for us to approach music, which can easily be consumed in a state of distraction, with “cognition, reflection, and judgment.” Any of our faculty advisors can help you determine how to approach your work from a critical distance, **root your technical and creative interests in a theoretical foundation**, and find a **research basis for your production**.



Research, after all, bears relevance to *all kinds* of work – not only traditional scholarship.⁶ I was surprised a few summers ago when a student informed me that she’d be dropping my research methods class because she “wanted to make films,” and it had become obvious to her that “research doesn’t apply to filmmaking.” I spoke with another advanced student this semester who struggled to determine what research could possibly contribute to the business plan she wanted to

create. I wonder what kind of work these students can do, in filmmaking or media management, without looking for precedents, or examples to build upon. *That’s* research. Just as a scholar has to know the terrain and tradition in which she is working, a producer or manager needs to know the *market* in which she is operating. *That* requires research. Determining appropriate methodologies – whether to use content analysis or textual analysis for an academic project, how to survey a target market for a new media product, etc. – again requires research. It sounds a little redundant, but you even have to *research* your *research*

⁶ In the recent “Screens” special issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Virginia Heffernan wrote about Virgil Griffith, a protégé hacker and founder of WikiScanner, a data-mining application, who then became a researcher at the Santa Fe Institute. Griffith recently entered the History of Consciousness Program at UC Santa Cruz, precisely for the opportunity to approach his work through a more rigorous, research-based framework. He says: “Hackerdom rewards spontaneity, curiosity and ingenuity.... Science rewards rigor and forging solid bedrock to stand on – which means a lot of carefully dotting *l*s and crossing *l*s. Although scientific questions are harder, more abstract and tend to have less immediate influence in the world, the questions are deeper and the answers so uplifting and transcendently beautiful that contact with them is a genuine spiritual experience.”

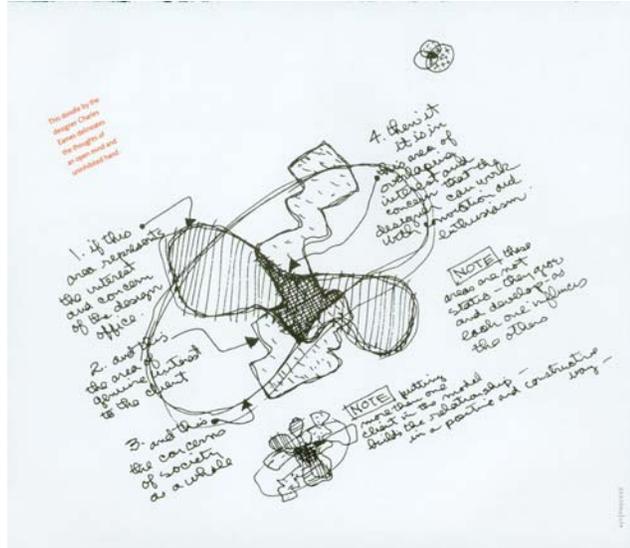
methodologies. In the case of academic work, finding an appropriate *theoretical framework* for your project – even before you dig into the project topic itself – also requires some looking around. <<Image: Design Research: <http://www.masternewmedia.org/images/Liz-sanders-design-research-2006-485.jpg>>>

THEORIES AND METHODS

Many of our faculty presenters identified the **theories that are central to their work**. Peter reminded us that theory, too, has its own history – that it evolves to address evolving social conditions: the new industrial society (John Galbraith), the technological society (Jacques Ellul), the global village (Marshall McLuhan), the neo-technic era (Lewis Mumford), etc. Elizabeth explained how theories of *agency* are central to her work. Barry addressed various philosophies that allow one to examine the critical function of art – music, in particular. Paolo explained how theorists ranging from Cavell to Fiske to Williams have informed the study of television – and how reality TV and other new screen forms might necessitate *new* theories to explain their functioning in the social world. I talked about how various materialist and formalist theories inform my work on media spaces and media as material objects. As you read in the “Plotting Your Course” guide for week 2, “Research is grounded in theory. Theory organizes the way we look at the world, and influences how we see ourselves as researchers or media documentarians or artists or practitioners. Theory informs our choice of research subjects, our choice of research methods, and the way we interpret our data and evaluate our work.”

Even those questions we asked for the abstracting assignment, which may have seemed arbitrary to you at the time, have reappeared in many of our guests’ presentations. Vlad reminded us that abstracting isn’t only an *academic* skill; you need to be able to abstract your work for submission to festivals and grant reviews, too. Anyone who has received funding for a project has had to be able to describe his or her work succinctly and convincingly. Most of our guests identified and synopsised the ideas and texts that have informed their work. Elizabeth and Peter both acknowledged the value of considering the *provenance* of our research resources – an issue we considered in abstracting. Peter reinforced the value of situating a text – say, a “history from below” written in the 1960s, or a “great man” history written by one of history’s “winners” – within its historical and cultural context. Elizabeth also encouraged us to consider texts’ and concepts’ “baggage” and context. McLuhan, for instance, was a “particular guy writing in a particular context, with a particular voice,” she said; we need to keep this – the author’s (or director’s or designer’s) motivation, the provenance of the work, etc. – in mind when evaluating the *contemporary* value of his contribution to the field.

And theory is of course linked to **method**. As McBeath, Lincoln and Sullivan explain in their course on "Approaches to Media Analysis," methods are the link between theory and "facts," as a positivist might say -- or, as a constructivist or critical theorist might say, methods are the link between theory and "understanding" or "meaning." McBeath et al. put it another way: "a method gives us a way of 'interpreting' a theory for the purpose of using that theory to analyze the real world." (Shannon Mattern, "Plotting Your Own Course"). Several faculty addressed the methods they use in their own work. Kit presented his design process – which bore many resemblances to the problem-solving processes that Sennett laid out in *The Craftsman*. Paolo mentioned various approaches to audience research – reception studies, ethnography, etc. Carol shared some of her rhetorical methods for analyzing a museum site in Vietnam. Elizabeth chronicled the methods that have informed her work throughout various stages of her career: in graduate school, radical textual analysis, and now, more experimental constructivist and participatory methods (both of which we addressed in the "Plotting Your Course" reading). In my work, I commonly use discourse analysis to examine how various spaces or institutions are discursively constructed; in the process, I often conduct interviews with various stakeholders and do archival research and textual analyses.



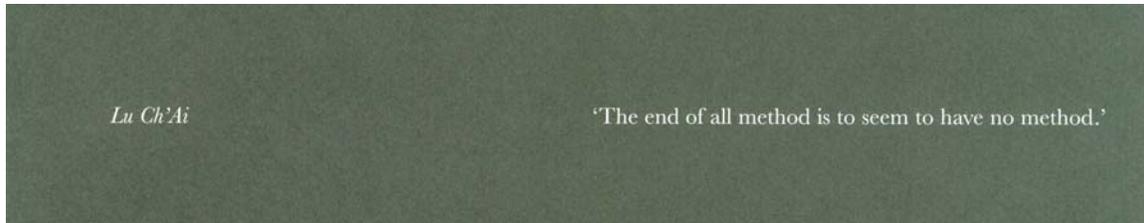
There are opportunities for *you* to test these methods, and see how they might inform *your* work, through our methods courses. All students are required to take a total of three credits in methods coursework, and we encourage students to complete this coursework later in the program, when they have a clear idea of a thesis project or independent study or production they'd like to complete. At this point students can more strategically choose methods courses to support a well-defined project. Most of our methods courses – especially the one- and two-credit interviewing, focus groups, audience research, discourse analysis, etc., classes – are designed to be useful for students with a wide variety of interests and for a variety of applications, whether they be traditionally academic projects, research-based productions, activist campaigns, policy-related projects, etc. Because we certainly don't expect students to determine on their own which methods are most appropriate for their projects, we encourage everyone to consult with the methods course instructors and their academic advisors about their methods course selection.

We also encourage students to try out multiple methods, to "triangulate" the results yielded from approaching a problem from multiple perspectives. You'll remember Sarah Bicknell's comments from one of our readings from earlier this semester:

I am an unashamed pluralist who uses multiple methodologies as part of an evaluation scenario which has the clear intention of providing answers to the questions my colleagues want answers. I use **multiple methods to give greater rigor, reliability and depth** to the work I do. Each element is designed both to test

and to complement the findings of other elements. The different methods add layers of information but also provide a means of identifying inconsistencies and weaknesses (283-4).

Elizabeth Ellsworth also advocated for “interpretive diversity” in her talk.



We try to provide a yearlong “snapshot” each fall of the methods courses we’ll be offering throughout the year, so students can plan ahead. Here are the offerings for 2008-9:

Fall 2008	Spring 2009	Summer 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary Rsch Methods • Rsch for Media Activism • Ethnography & New Media • Interviewing (online) • Focus Group (online) • Sampling (online) • Discourse Analysis (online) • Grantseeking (online) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary Rsch Methods • Rsch for Media Activism (online) • Methods of Rhetorical Rsch (online) • Market Rsch for Media Managers (online) • Focus Groups & Surveys • Interviewing • Audience Rsch (Sat workshop) • Content Analysis (Sat workshop) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using video as a research tool • Oral History

FORM-GIVING ACTIVITY

All of this theoretical and methodological work, and the work of creating symbols and ideas, is *form-giving* work, which Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, equates with “craft.” We used the metaphor of “craftsmanship” this semester to think about our various roles as researcher-producers, scholar-activists, producer-mangers, etc., because models of craft ask us to think about the **commitment and engagement** that, Peter says, distinguish graduate work. Thinking about our work as craftsmanship, Sennett argues, helps us to get at enduring cognitive models, translatable skills, which, Shoemaker reminds us, are essential in an economy in which many move frequently from job to job. Plus, as we produce material and symbolic forms – films, theories, research papers, etc. – we also produce *ourselves* as subjects and our social relations; we can investigate “what the process of making...things reveals to us about our selves” (Sennett 8). And thinking about our commitment to and engagement in our work promotes “knowing-in-action,” reflexivity, Gray and Malins say (22-3).



<<Image: Ross Coad, The Craftsman: <http://www.lps.org.au/Ross%20Coad/The%20Craftsman.jpg>>>

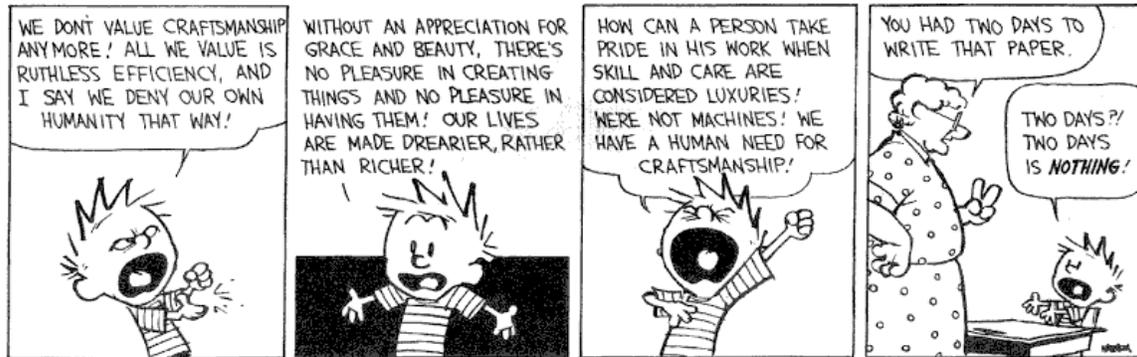
Thinking about work as do political theorist Hannah Arendt, sociologists C. Wright Mills and Richard Sennett, and designer Malcolm McCullough, author of *Abstracting Craft* (we've looked at his work several times this semester), also helps to get us outside the "compliant learning" mode, to appreciate what we're doing as something other than training ourselves "to fill a slot." As we discussed in our third lecture, adopting these thinkers' models can encourage us to reflect on our own methods and ways of learning (and, in particular, remind us that *repetition* – re-doing something you *think* you already know – isn't a bad thing!), to critically consider our criteria for judgment (e.g., how do we determine functional and aesthetic quality, or skill, or effort?) and our motivations for doing the work we do.

Thinking about craft also, importantly, reminds us of the **social nature of our practice**, and the fact that engagement at the graduate level involves a **social contract**. Sennett distinguishes art from craft, perhaps disputably, by contrasting art's inward orientation with craft's outward orientation and its acknowledgement of social responsibility. Regardless of what labels we want to apply to our work, there is much support for the value of the social network of scholarship, for creative communities, etc. Mills addresses the intellectual community:

A widespread, informal interchange of such reviews of 'the state of my problems' among working social scientists is, I suggest, the only basis for an adequate statement of 'the leading problems of social science.' . . . Three kinds of interludes – on problems, methods, theory – ought to come out of the work of social scientists, and lead into it again; they should be shaped by work-in-progress and to some extent guide that work. It is for such interludes that a professional association finds its intellectual reason for being (Mills).

"Only by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working," he says, "can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student." This is a conversation we started this semester, between you and guest presenters, and which we hope will continue in your future classes, in informal conversations with advisors and colleagues, in workshops, at conferences, through *Immediacy*, our online journal, etc.

Kit and Vlad also paid particular attention to the social contract of work at the graduate or professional level. Kit spoke about our responsibility to know the **standards and protocols** – for properly formatting a design brief, for handing rights clearances – in one's field. Vlad reinforced the importance of being able to *abstract* your work for submission to festivals – and I attempted to convey the value of abstracting in submitting your work for publication and for presentation at conferences. As Kit and Vlad and I all advised, you must be able to describe your work – what it proposes to *do*, your methods, your key concepts, the traditions in which you're working, the potential value of your work, etc. – succinctly and clearly for those who are in the position to help you get that work *out there*.



<<Image: Bill Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes*: <http://www.cooperativeindividualism.org/political-economy-of-calvin-and-hobbes-2.html>>>

Part of your responsibility, once you become *engaged* with the field on a graduate level, is to contribute *to* the field. The faculty who joined us this semester have become engaged in different ways: Carol earned a Fulbright to share the work of our field with a country that has no media studies tradition; Kit has worked with the non-profit Center for Understanding Media, out of which our MA program grew, helped to evolve the industry through his commercial work, and has shared his production skills through various publications; while Elizabeth has published traditional scholarship and now, increasingly, seeks to disseminate her work through creative platforms and more accessible web-based work. Vlad spoke at length about the processes for seeking funding and distribution for creative and production work – and much of the advice he offered applies well, with some modification, to the submission of academic work for **presentation and publication**. I offered some tips for presenting your work at conferences, and I encourage all of you who are interested in publication to speak with faculty who have a track record in publication, and who publish in areas in which you have interest.⁷

Finally, the **Masters thesis** is another means for you to make a contribution to the field. It allows you to develop the habits of good scholarship, or research-based production or creative work, under the supervision of an advisor who has some expertise in your field. If you're interested in completing a thesis, I encourage you to attend the Thesis Information Session that's held at the beginning of each semester, review the Thesis Handbook, and speak to your advisor.

TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS

Theories and methods, which we addressed earlier, are of course symbolic and intellectual tools that we use to “give form” to ideas. But of course more material tools – technologies – give form to our vision. And several of our faculty presenters addressed their choice of and work with various technological tools. All agree that even as our program attempts to track the latest development in the media industries and creative fields, we must also situate that newness within historical and cultural contexts. Again, unlike a technical training program, we do not take a fetishistic approach to technologies. “The enlightened way to use a

⁷ See also Daniel P.J. Soule, Lucy Whiteley & Shona McIntosh, *Writing for Scholarly Journals: Publication in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* (eSHarp): <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/otherpublications/ebooks/>

machine,” Sennett says, “is to judge its powers, fashion its uses, in light of our own limits rather than the machine’s potential. We should not compete against the machine.... Against the claim of perfection we can assert our own individuality” (105). Again, we see how the craft metaphor comes in handy: McCullough writes, “As a verb, ‘to craft’ seemingly means to participate skillfully in some small-scale process...[I]t suggests that partnerships with technology are better than autonomous technology. ...[T]o craft implies working at a personal scale – acting locally in reaction to anonymous, globalized, industrial production (McCullough 21-2).

‘The obsidian flake
and the silicon chip
are struck by the light
of the same campfire
that has passed from
hand to hand since the
human mind began.’

I occasionally encounter students who say they’ve come to graduate school to “learn Final Cut,” or how to use a particular camera – but we should remember media artist Amy Alexander’s warning against “**cybertriumphalism**” that generates “an exclusive emphasis on software programs (or models of machinery)”; such an approach, she says, “is extremely problematic, as it leaves out the history of the tools we use, the politics of these very machines and the all permeating social context” (email; qtd in Scholz).

In my lecture on October 13 I presented Sennett’s thoughts on, and many media scholars’ approaches to, **material consciousness**. This theme reappeared *repeatedly* in our guest presenters’ lectures. Elizabeth encouraged us to think about media technologies as tools “to think with.” The design of our own production courses, in which Kit Laybourne and Vlad Nikolic played key roles, and which are informed by material consciousness, take a *cross-platform* approach to enable us to appreciate the capacities and affordances and limitations of different tools. “[E]ach medium,” McCullough says, “is distinguished by particular vocabulary, constructions, and modifiers, and these together establish within it a limited but rich set of possibilities” (230). Similarly, each methodology, or each research resource, has its own particular vocabulary, constructions, modifiers, obligations, and limitations. We need to choose our tools with these potentially enriching, and just as potentially debilitating, idiosyncrasies in mind. And, by extension, we need to choose our *courses*, which introduce us to these tools, with the same concerns in mind.

In 1867 Karl Marx made much of the 500 different kinds of hammer produced in Birmingham, each adapted to fulfil a specific task. He also neatly defined machines as ‘knowledge objectified’. Machines had become an extension of man. Previously we shaped tools, thereafter they shaped us. A profound change which meant that instead of wondering how to breed a better horse there were those, like Henry Ford, imagining a world without the horse.

‘The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.’ Dorothea Lange

Paolo’s research reflects a consciousness of the material and symbolic form of television – and how theory and research methods are racing to keep up with new television genres and technological formats. Vlad addressed very pragmatic concerns with the materiality of film

and video, and how the shift in materiality has dramatically changed the distribution and exhibition landscape. I also talked about different material conceptions of architecture and various theories of “material textuality.”

A few faculty also echoed Sennett’s advice to learn from the breaks, the snafus, the failures of our technologies and our techniques. You might recall film historian Tom Gunning’s suggestion that “It is the breakdown of equipment that allows us to experience it afresh” (45). He continues:

Heidegger’s early discussion of work in terms of the dynamic of the tool shows that we can suddenly gain a new perspective on technology through an **interruption of habitual actions**. His conception of the tool as ‘the ready to hand’ gives us another way to conceive the ‘unconsciousness’ of habit in terms of technology. According to *Being and Time*, it is in the **nature of a tool not to assert itself**, but rather to withdraw in favor of the project it is supposed to accomplish. When a tool works, we pay it no attention; it seems to disappear. However, if the tool breaks down, in some way it doesn’t function, it suddenly becomes conspicuous (Gunning 45).

Several faculty have addressed how they’ve adapted when technology has failed, when their research plans didn’t pan out, etc. Carol had to make do with limited resources in her Hanoi university; these unexpected limitations made her look at her project afresh. Elizabeth decided to explore new theoretical frameworks when the ones she relied on in graduate school no longer satisfied her. Liz actually encourages us to consciously create “interpretive breaks.” Look sideways. Make the familiar strange.

WHERE NEXT

Promiscuous ideas are always auditioning, they never give up. I’m often put out when looking through my old scribbles, or articles on other designers’ work, to see one of them, when I thought I’d only just thought of it.

Fertile ideas are the kind which take root and spread seeds. Their influence is gradual and imperceptible, much as the flutter of a butterfly’s wings in Peking which causes a storm in New York a week later.

Roger Sperry, who is a neurophysiologist, points out that ideas help evolve new ideas. “They interact with each other and with other mental forces in the same brain, in neighboring brains, and, thanks to global communication, in far distant, foreign brains. And they also interact with the external surroundings to produce *in toto* a burstwise advance in evolution that is far beyond anything to hit the evolutionary scene yet, including the emergence of the living cell.”

An article in the December 19, 2008, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* – essentially the trade magazine for academics – Robert Hampel, a professor at the University of Delaware, discusses the importance, and difficulty, of conveying to graduate students the myriad means of defining worthwhile projects. He focuses on *research* projects, but we

could just as easily extend his discussion to include the various kinds of work that our field encompasses. He polls his colleagues about how *they* generate new project ideas: “Surprisingly, no one I spoke with had been taught how to generate topics for future research during their years in graduate school. Several said that since research had pervaded the ethos of their university, they had merely absorbed the spirit of curiosity.” He continues:

If graduate students cannot see how senior scholars generate and manage their ideas, then their induction is incomplete. Our students dutifully take research-methods courses, but every graduate seminar should discuss the wide range of sources of creative work. Otherwise our students will think in terms of the assignments we give them, when they should really be thinking about the assignments they can give themselves: interesting topics for future study.

I'd like to think that throughout this semester we've addressed these very issues and helped you to think about where ideas come from, and how to cultivate them into feasible research-based projects, scholarly or otherwise. Our faculty guests talked about their sources of inspiration. You encountered various project-idea-generating options in the "Plotting Your Course" guide you read for Week 2. We acknowledged the value of drawing on personal experience, "starting where you are" (Robson), taking cues from larger public problems, following the leads – accidental or intentional – within your own research, finding "holes" in the existing work in your field, responding to funding priorities, fishing for inspiration at conferences and festivals, and generating ideas in casual conversations with advisors and colleagues. Hampel, after consulting with his faculty colleagues, identified several similar sources: "Future research arises from current research"; "future research can be autobiographical; "future research often arises from conversations" and "future research can derive from what others want and might pay for."



The intellectual autobiography offered you an opportunity to figure out how your work might "start from where you are," how you might draw on your personal experience or build upon your autobiography. Kit's media inventory was, similarly, a tool to help you figure out "where you are," and where you might go from there – how you might find your "quest," as he calls it. Carol's, Elizabeth's and my lectures all involved the presentation of brief versions of our own intellectual autobiographies. Barry talked about his background as a musician, and how it informed his current work. Mills regards one's personal life as an invaluable resource for the "sociological imagination":

...the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community...do not split their work from their

lives....[T]hey want to use each for the enrichment of the other....

What this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work. To say that you can "have experience," means, for one thing, that your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience.

Yet we do not uncritically translate our autobiography into our scholarly or creative work. Mills continues: "To be able to trust *yet to be skeptical* of your own experience, I have come to believe, is one mark of the mature worker" (*italics mine*).

We also addressed, in your reading for Week 2, some pragmatic concerns that can help you weed through your garden of ideas: the relevance of your interests to the field, the

availability of qualified and interested supervisors in your program, the strength of your interest in the project, your capability of applying the necessary methods to complete the work, and the feasibility of completing the project with the time and resources you have (Chandler). In light of those recommendations, you were encouraged to tie your course assignments to a project that had personal interest and potential for development. Some of you might have discovered, over the course of the semester, that you had a limited tolerance for your chosen topic, or that your proposed project was a bit more ambitious than it initially appeared, or that you weren't interested in applying the methods that your project would have obligated you to apply. These are all valuable realizations. Please remember my advice from the syllabus:

Even if the research you conduct for this class doesn't ultimately make its way into a larger or long-term MA project, it's not for naught! This work will likely shape your interests and methods in ways that will become apparent to you years from now; and it may resurface unexpectedly in a future project. For now, follow your immediate interests, and give yourself the freedom to explore.

Your first semesters in a graduate program are your time to explore – to try out theoretical approaches, methodologies, and, in developing your material consciousness, various approaches to production.

But what do you do with all this exploration? How do you keep track of what's worth remembering – and even what's *not*, so you needn't retread terrain you've already covered or repeat past mistakes? Again, Mills:

As a social scientist, you have to control this rather elaborate interplay, to capture what you experience and sort it out; only in this way can you hope to use it to guide and test your reflection, and in the process shape yourself as an intellectual craftsman. But how can you do this? One answer is: you must set up a file, which is, I suppose, a sociologist's way of saying: - keep a journal...In such a file as I am going to describe, there is joined personal experience and professional activities, studies under way and studies planned. In this file, you, as an intellectual craftsman, will try to get together what you are doing intellectually and what you are experiencing as a person. Here you will not be afraid to use your experience and relate it directly to various works in progress. By serving as a check on repetitious work, your file also enables you to conserve your energy. It also encourages you to capture "fringe-thoughts": various ideas which may be by-products of everyday life, snatched of conversations overheard on the street, or, for that matter, dreams. Once noted, these may lead to more systematic thinking, as well as lend intellectual relevance to more directed experience.

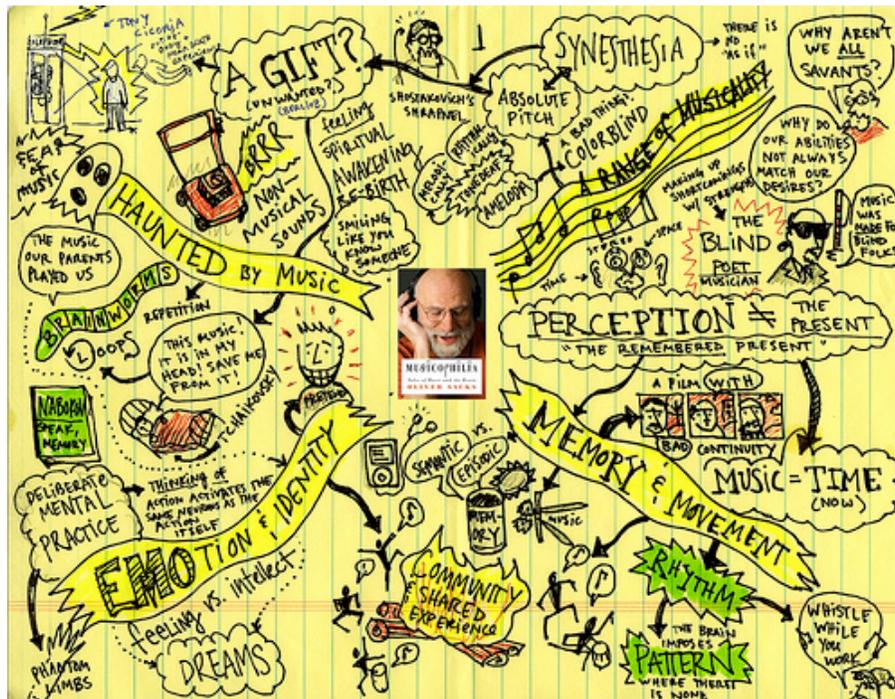
Hampel finds that many of his colleagues have similar strategies: "One used a single folder; another had a separate folder for each idea. Two kept journals — one was strictly about research, the other resembled a personal diary. Three used computer files ranging from the very simple to the elaborate, cross-referenced array with shorthand and symbols throughout. Another had index cards. The only common pattern held for the four people who used no system, preferring to carry the ideas in their heads, confident that they would never run short of topics."



Mills is such an eager proponent of the research file, and so anxious to share, that we'll hear him out for a while longer:

By keeping an adequate file and thus developing self-reflective habits, you learn how to keep your inner world awake. Whether you feel strongly about events or ideas you must try not to let them pass from your mind, but instead to formulate them for your files and in so doing draw out their implications, show yourself either how foolish these feelings or ideas are, or how they might be articulated into productive shape. The file also helps you build up the habit of writing. You cannot 'keep your hand in' if you do not write something at least every week. In developing the file, you can experiment as a writer and thus, as they say, develop your powers of expression. To maintain a file is to engage in the controlled experience. <<Image: Buckminster Fuller's Chronofile: <http://www.bfi.org/images/content/fuller/chronofile.png>>>

...the use of the file encourages expansion of the categories which you use in your thinking. And the way in which these categories change, some being dropped and others being added is an index of your intellectual progress and breadth.



<<Cartoonist Austin Kleon's Mapping of Oliver Sacks' *Musicophilia*; see <http://www.austinkleon.com/2008/07/15/mind-maps-pictures-and-words-in-space/>>>

...You will have to acquire the habit of taking a large volume of notes from any worth-while book you read... The first step in translating experience, either to other people's writing, or of your own life, into the intellectual sphere, is to give it form....

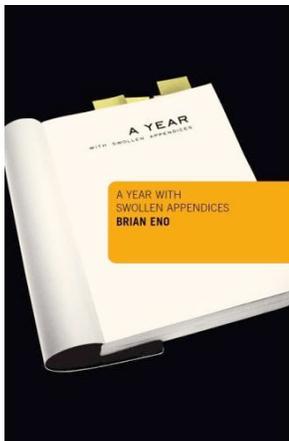
Your notes may turn out, as mine do, to be of two sorts: in reading certain very important books you try to grasp the structure of the writer's argument, and take notes accordingly; but more frequently, and after a few years of independent work, rather than read entire books, you will very often read parts of many books from the point of view of some particular theme or topic in which you are interested and concerning which you have plans in your file. Therefore, you will take notes

which do not fairly represent the books you read. You are using this particular idea, this particular fact, for the realization of your own projects. [[Author's note: This is when the abstracting process becomes second nature; you know *how* to accurately synopsise and do justice to an author's thesis, motivations, methods, key concepts, etc. – but you trust that that understanding will reside safely in your head. You instead use your notes more purposively and for a targeted end.]]

[In outlining a project] the idea and the plan came out of my files... After making my crude outline I examined my entire file, not only those parts of it that obviously bore on my topic, but also those which seemed to have no relevance whatsoever. Imagination is often successfully invited by putting together hitherto isolated items, by finding unsuspected connections.... It is a sort of logic of combination, and “chance” sometimes plays a curiously large part in it. In a relaxed way, you try to engage your intellectual resources, as exemplified in the file, with the new theme.

...One of the very worst things that happens to social scientists is that they feel the need to write of their “plans” on only one occasion: when they are going to ask for money for a specific piece of research or “a project.”... It is bound in some degree to be salesmanship....[T]he project is likely to be “presented,” rounded out in some arbitrary manner long before it ought to be... A practicing social scientist ought periodically to review “the state of my problems and plans”....

Mills' words of advice obviously apply to people other than social scientists.



You may remember from our very first class that I briefly introduced Brian Eno's *A Year With Swollen Appendices* – a chronicle of a year of his life's work. When presenting the Turner prize to Damien Hirst in 1995, Eno chided the creative community for its failure to explain itself to the general public:

“the lack of a clear connection between all that creative activity and the intellectual life of the society leaves the whole (creative) project poorly understood, poorly supported and poorly exploited.

If we're going to expect people to help fund the arts, whether through taxation or lotteries, then

surely we owe them an attempt at an explanation of what value we think the arts might be to them.”

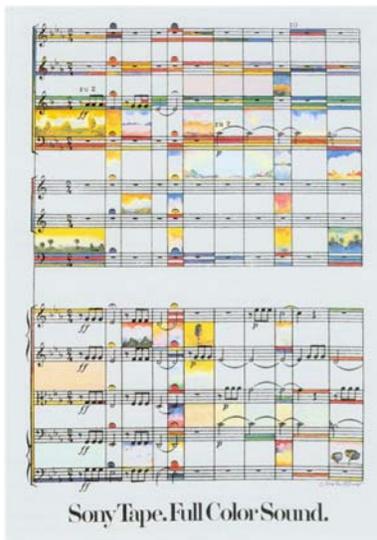
Whether we agree with Sennett's terminology or not, we are reminded of his distinction between the inward orientation of the artist and the outward orientation, the sense of social obligation, of the craftsman. Eno's *A Year With Swollen Appendices* is his gesture *outward*, his attempt to explain himself to society.

Your personal websites are obviously one forum through which you can connect your work to the “intellectual life” – and the cultural, political, aesthetic, affective life – of the overlapping publics within which we work and to whom we speak. Whether you've found your voice yet or not, I hope you all remember that social contract – that obligation to

participate in and contribute to our intellectual, creative, and professional communities. I hope you also always keep in sight the other principles at the heart of our field and our program – or, as Crisco et al. say, the “rules, conventions, folkways, and habits of mind that inform the profession and the discipline” (363). In particular, please remember media studies’ grounding in the liberal arts – its basis in *research* – and our understanding of production as a *support*, or tool, for the critical and theoretical work we do in the field.

‘One paints with one’s head, not one’s hands.’ MICHELANGELO

Media Studies, at least as we practice it here, has set for itself the challenging task of balancing theory and practice and articulating what, precisely, their relationship should be to one another. This is part of the critical work that Crisco and her co-authors desired: they wanted a “space within the department to explore the often competing commitments of our discipline and to articulate the stakes (individual, fieldwide (sic), institutional, cultural) of the various approaches to reforming” the field (369). This program is such a space, and this class offered you a microcosmic view of it. How can we, individually and collectively, think *across media platforms* about the relationships between traditional and new literacies? How can we regard media technologies as *tools* for research, and how can we use those same tools as new means of disseminating our research findings to wider audiences? How can we make sure these new tools for expression and argumentation are held to the same rigorous standards to which we hold more traditional forms of presentation, like scholarly writing? Joanne Hershfield and Anna McCarthy argue that “if we continue to view ‘making’ and ‘analyzing’ as mutually exclusive categories, then our students will never receive the full benefits of what media studies as a field of practices and knowledges has to offer” (112). How can we make sure our making is inherently analytical, and our analysis is generative?



How can we, through our own practices, “reform” the field so that it is defined just as much by its “views of being,” its ontology, as by its “cores of knowledge,” its epistemologies? Gregory Shepherd, Dean of the Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University, advocates for this ontological definition: “it is precisely the nature and purpose of disciplines and their disciples to forward a unique view of Being among all the alternatives and say, ‘there is something primary, or essential, about this particular view’” (84). What “view of being” can media studies’ mix of “practices and knowledges,” of old and new literacies, of theories and praxes, promote? How can our field contribute to a new conception of scholarship, new ways of knowing the world and sharing that knowledge? Not, many argue (and I agree), by training students to fit a market-defined role, or by cultivating “mechanically

minded” instrumental rationality. We need to ask the bigger questions. Like how we can play the “arts and humanities in a new key.”

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