



## “Media Studies, Bodies and Technologies: Media Studies for a Living World”

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### Abstract

*The field of Media Studies, emerging within the instrumental vision of modernity, has, for the most part, not confronted its unspoken modernist assumptions. In this article we argue the time has come to fully engage an embodied view of media from an evolutionary, ecological perspective. This is what we might call an ecological modernism: A perspective that views media as evolving mediations between the body and the biological and cultural environment through various material/technological practices. In this view, body knowledge, rather than some idea of objective reality, is understood as the empirical ground for how we come to make sense of ourselves and the world.*

*Keywords: media education, media literacy, technology, body, aesthetics, ecology*

### 1. Introduction

The field of Media Studies, emerging within the instrumental vision of modernity, has, for the most part, not confronted its unspoken modernist assumptions. Three of the most crucial noted by Bruno Latour are: (1) knowledge is discovered in the fragmentation of things, (2) the deep belief that the world can be divided into the living and the non-living, and (3) the related postulate that humans are separate from nature [1].

This instrumental vision of modernity has allowed us to “knowingly,” in an objectivist sense, celebrate the information/digital age without really paying all that much attention to what is “technology” or the role played by communication in the work of what we might call ecological “knowing.”

The instrumental vision of modernity has allowed us to view technology as a collection of things that stand apart from humans and the environment. It has allowed us to view humans as standing apart from both technology and nature. And it has permitted us to be captivated by the spectacle of communication machines, while concealing the relationship between these machines, technologies, our bodies, and the rest of the living world.

Certainly there have been critical efforts to rethink Media Studies and its relationship to technology, ranging from the Frankfurt School’s concept of instrumental rationality to the McLuhanesque Toronto School’s extensions of man to Kittler’s technological determinism to Stiegler’s technics [2].

However, for the most part these efforts have ignored or failed to fully engage an embodied view of Media Studies from an evolutionary ecological perspective. That is, a perspective that views media as evolving mediations between the body and the biological and cultural environment.

Why is this important? In addition to providing a way to see a deep connection between Media Studies and the planet, it also provides us with a new means for understanding *what is called* the empirical/material, allowing for the re-conceptualization of our relationship to technology, the environment, and the experiential quality of human flourishing.

This paper, informed by Bruno Latour’s Science and Technology Studies, Fritjof Capra’s systems theory, John Dewey’s embodied cognition and philosophies of technology and aesthetics, and Carolyn Merchant’s ecofeminism, explores how media education can be reimagined to provide a framework for understanding and moral action for students and citizens alike in a world marked by proliferating yet misunderstood interacting technological,

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economic, ecological and cultural networks. And it points to a collection of promising grounded efforts in an emerging Media Studies for a Living World [3].

## 2. From media objects to organisms in an environment

The argument is that the fragmenting narrative of instrumental modernism can be challenged with an ecological modernism, an ecological modernism which focuses on the integral relationship between living creatures and the living planet and that understands our humanness and our culture as the emergent achievements of bodies living in relationship to their environment.

One means to achieve this is to shift from what we would call the disembodied perspective of instrumental/mechanistic modernism, which encourages us to see the world from the objectivist perspective of nowhere, where science is narrowly understood as a kind of knowing that attends to a pre-existing hard reality and considers the messy problems of human experience as belonging to a non-empirical, separate world of feeling, values and qualities.

The shift we are proposing is to the perspective of people living in fleshy bodies, with sensations, feelings and emotions, that depend on one another as well as the and living world: what has been increasingly called an embodied perspective. This can be seen as an [epistemological] shift which grounds knowing in bodily experience rather than merely in some floating, linguistically constructed world or some out-there "objective" reality. It breaks down the body-mind dualism of a reductionist empiricism and opens the door to understanding "knowing" as an integration of environmental, biological, cognitive, and social experience and qualities.

If this sounds like we are proposing a re-encounter with phenomenology, that's because we are. In what we might call the new phenomenology, we are seeing a re-engagement with the primary of the experience of bodies. And instead of the new phenomenology making some claim for the superiority of disembodied mind as a means to make sense of our living experience in the world, we see instead a movement to put biology and cognition back together again in terms of embodied cognition. We can see this in the work of American Pragmatism and the re-encounter with early phenomenologists like Husserl and second generation phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty. The work of Mark Johnson in his *The Meaning of the Body* and Richard Shusterman's *Body Consciousness* are illustrative [4].

At the same time and in a related move the new phenomenology is also placing the experience of the body back into relationship with nature. For instance see Bannon's *Nature and Experience: Phenomenology and the Environment* and Sallis' *The Return of Nature* [5].

In our view the task of connecting the world of media studies to the living world cannot be undertaken merely by invoking abstract conceptual ideas. The task, in our view, in order to achieve the highest level of credibility and cultural/policy buy-in, must be a fully empirical account of meaning-making/value-making based on body/environment transactions. Not empirical in the objectivist sense of belief in a pre-existing reality. But empirical in its most radical, Jamesian sense: that is, based on the constantly emerging and changing qualities of human experience [6].

## 3. What do we get by a turn to the body?

We believe that the turn to the body, to embodied cognition, puts us in touch with what Johnson called the "aesthetics of human meaning [7]." That is, a way of making sense of the world which recognizes and values feeling qualities of human experience. As he writes "people want their lives to be meaningful," but unless feeling is taken as a central quality of meaning, we are left with mechanical descriptions of the world and our place in it, which lead to the construction of institutions and cultural forms and to relations to the environment, which leave us feeling as if we were aliens/strangers in our own world.

The turn to the body, we suggest, gives us access to at least four important new dimensions of sense-making: experience, qualities, the relational sense of meaning through communication, and an understanding of morality as an emergent guide to action.

Briefly, the turn to experience instead of objects, helps us ground our understanding of knowing in our felt relationship to the living world. The turn to qualities recognizes that what we value in the world is our felt sense of the world and that felt sense inevitably runs through



all of our sense-making, including what we have called abstract mind and abstract thought. This doesn't deny the value of abstraction, only the belief that abstraction has nothing to do with our bodies and their interactions with the world.

The turn to meaning as a relational, offers up a richer way to understand and value how we come into our sense of humanness through our increased awareness of our interdependence with each other and the living world. No relationships, no meaning. It also directs our attention to the material and profound work of communication as the means for this growing awareness of this interdependence and the means for action guided by what we are able to achieve in shared understanding and reflection on our encounters with each other and the world. The relational quality of meaning also offers up a different way of understanding the individual/community and human/nature relationships. In both cases we are offered a way of understanding the uniqueness of our capacities as individuals not as separate or opposed to community or nature, but as made possible by those relationships.

Finally, in this view, as Johnson puts it, "moral deliberation is a process of interwoven imagination, emotion, and reasoning [8]." The feeling body, the growing capacity for reflection and imagination stimulated by relational knowledge situated in an interdependent human/nature environment gives rise to the capacity for valuing, and valuing in such a way as preserve the capacity of the organism/environment to flourish.

In all of these senses we can see the articulation of what we might call an ecological modernism, feet on the ground, toes in the dirt, evolutionary, where to be human is to be of, for and with the world, and where to be human is the growing achievement of the means to conceptualize, experience, appreciate and nurture this interdependent/integral quality of living.

#### 4. What happened to technology?

This is perhaps one of the greatest advantages of the turn to the body. Technology is no longer a collection of potentially overpowering machines that we need to reconcile our fleshy lives to. Rather technologies are understood as a collection of means, given material embodiment, by which we have mediated our relationship to the world. They can be seen as material embodiments of human desires and interests, not always well-formed or well-articulated or even well-understood, but means, nevertheless, by which we have transacted our relationship to the environment and to one another. The And then, once set in material motion, we and the planet need to grapple with their ongoing and transformative consequences. The comforting illusion of the separation of subject and object vanishes.

This is of course the emergent, empirical/material view that guides Science and Technology Studies. Science and its application through technologies can no longer be regarded as a value-free enterprise, but rather values and cultural orientations lie at the heart of the mediations we choose to make. It is the reason, Latour issues his injunction to "love your monsters," with its provocative subtitle, "why we must care for technologies as we do for our children [9]." Separation is not an option. Taking the fullest responsibility for our creations and clarifying our intentions in their design, become urgent tasks in the effort to, as Latour and Beck write, modernize modernization [10]. In our terms, to move from an instrumental to an ecological modernism. In this sense the turn to the body puts our bodies back into relationship with the living world and with our tools and technologies.

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