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Introduction: Materia Media

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C A N N O N S C H M I T T

Introduction: Materia Media

THE ESSAYS IN THIS special issue of *Criticism* undertake various projects, not all of which are similar or even compatible. But a common thread runs throughout: whether elaborating on contemporary media practices or post-modern emotions, early modern horses, fin de siècle human anomalies, or Henry James, these essays broach the possibility of a new materialism. Such a materialism proposes that neither media nor mediation should be thought as insubstantial or passive relays between some “real” and our sensorium. Rather, both media and mediation incarnate their own materiality, and both must be analyzed with an eye to their specific and as yet insufficiently characterized effectivity or reality.¹ The coinage “materia media” aims to express in small compass some of the manifold complexities and consequences of that analysis. Modeled on the *materia medica*, “the remedial substances and preparations used in the practice of medicine” (*OED*), *materia media* names something we might call “medial substances” or “the substances used in media practice.” The two kinds of substances are in some sense the same: mass communication as well as means, instruments, materials, and techniques more broadly are medial in that they mediate or stand between (between, for instance, humans and other animals, writers and readers, war and its spectators). The internet, cable news networks, film, equine portraiture, medical and forensic photography, narrative fiction, the tape recorder—for the contributors to this special issue, these and other media are mediations that do not reflect or translate materiality so much as constitute it in their own right. Put starkly, and to adapt a slogan from Marshall McLuhan, these essays demonstrate that the media are the material.²

In the first essay, “Premediation,” Richard Grusin revisits the argument he and Jay Bolter put forward in *Remediation* (1999), adding to their earlier claims about the mediation of the past by positing the mediation of the future as well. Remediation proper refers to a dialectic between past and present in which new media forms incorporate the old, and older media forms respond by incorporating the new: some video games, for instance, derive their overriding logic

from film noir or cinematic science fiction; a film like *Run, Lola, Run* works like a video game. Premediation, on the other hand, may be understood as proleptic, anticipatory mediation. Quite different from what might initially appear to be synonyms (prediction, prophecy, premeditation), premediation does not predict a future event so much as saturate futurity by rehearsing, ahead of time, multiple possibilities. The Weather Channel deals in prediction: “Heavy snow in the Midwest tomorrow.” The news media covering the so-called War on Terror premediate: a dirty bomb may be exploded in a population center; planes may be hijacked again; the internet may be disrupted; biological weapons may contaminate the food supply; etc., etc., etc. If or when any one of these events comes to pass, it will have been premediated but not exactly predicted. And this has implications for the now, the quotidian: while prediction with its accuracy or failure of accuracy has specific future results (in the case of heavy snow, say, school closings), premediation smuggles the future into the present by forcing the present to reshape itself around a proliferation of possible futures. Under a regime of premediation, the present is a paradoxical time, a “now” deformed by a future against which it seeks to immunize itself.³

At one moment in his essay, Grusin brings to bear Bruno Latour’s refusal of the subject-object dichotomy⁴ in the process of declaring the materiality of the medial: “Just as one of the three corollaries of remediation insists on the inseparability of reality and mediation, the reality of media, their materiality as objects of circulation within the world of humans and non-humans, of society and of things, so the concept of premediation insists on the reality of the premediated future” (28). Donna Landry, as if in response to an odd oversight of such Latourian thought, makes room in the “world . . . of society and things” for animals, and specifically for a horse: the Bloody Shouldered Arabian of her title. She sets out by placing animal studies in illuminating relation to the history of English nationality: “If examined with an eye towards the newer, ‘distributed’ stories of domestication and human-animal relations, . . . the verbal and visual record reveals how crucial horses were to what emerged as distinctively ‘English’ culture in early modern England” (41).⁵ That initial focus expands as Landry works through, as it were, each node of Latour’s compound “object-discourse-nature-society.”⁶ Documenting the emergence of the genre of the horse portrait as well as a “new language of free forward movement and equine initiative [that] entered the discourse of horsemanship” and of Englishness, she understands such novelties—and Swift’s Houyhnhnms, too—as evidence of the complex legacy of the Bloody Shouldered Arabian and other Eastern blood horses (42). “The influence of the Bloody Shouldered Arabian and his kind on perception, representation, and social practice,” Landry concludes, “should not . . . be underestimated. This kind of highly mediated exchange between horses and humans—might we dare to call it a trace of

equine agency?—should surely figure in any history of animals in which their effects upon human society and culture are registered" (63).⁷

In "Queer Physiognomies," Dana Seitler scrutinizes not equine portraiture but another visual genre: the scientific illustration or photograph. John Berger, characterizing the widespread influence of photography in particular, notes that "[w]ithin a mere 30 years of its invention [in 1839] . . . , photography was being used for police filing, war reporting, military reconnaissance, pornography, encyclopedic documentation, family albums, postcards, anthropological records. . . ." ⁸ It is no accident that most of the uses to which Berger finds photography being put coincide with institutional knowledge-projects. As Seitler outlines, the photograph took its place among a host of technologies of visibility crucial to the nascent human sciences. Michel Foucault, among others, has attended closely to the role of the visual in what he names the late-nineteenth-century medico-scientific invention of "the homosexual."⁹ But Seitler explodes the singularity implied by that "the," repeatedly pointing to "inconsistent renditions within the human sciences of a legible sexual identity evidenced on the body" (74, my emphasis). If medical and scientific photography aspired to codify physical markers of deviance that would allow the taxonomizing of sets of discrete "types," the visual remainders of that attempt attest to nothing so much as a labyrinthine crossing of sexualities, genders, races, ages, and dispositions, what Seitler names a "queer physiognomy" (80, 86). The documents of the turn-of-the-century human sciences reveal efforts to isolate and categorize, to be sure, but also, together with and constitutive of those practices, shifting metonymies and unpredictable entanglements.

Seitler characterizes the cultural moment she investigates as "preoccupied with observation, supervision, and the intrigues of a new technology" (71). The same moment concerns Jonathan Flatley, for whom the new promise of visibility is less important for what or who is known than for its implication in a will to knowledge the varied effects of which he approaches via the figure of Henry James. In "Reading into Henry James," Flatley begins with loss: specifically, James's loss of an audience in the final decade of the nineteenth century. That individualized loss corresponds to a wider experience of loss characteristic of modernity as such: the loss of the ability to address only one's own problems; the inevitability, in the ever more interimplicated world of late capitalism, that the difficulties one faces (James's disappearing audience, for instance) derive from outside one's own sphere (in James's case, from the shifting relations among periodical publication, advertising, and the "literary").¹⁰ Out of such losses, in Flatley's account, comes *The Turn of the Screw*, a text in which "James is not only historicizing his own emotional life but . . . providing his audience with the materials to do so as well" (109). The reading of James's novella that follows takes on the contours of a case study in the affective

politics of spectrality,¹¹ for Flatley demonstrates that for James—and perhaps for everyone else as well—our attachment to the world of society and of things is possible “only as ghosts (when we are possessed by an emotion from our past) and with ghosts (the people who are stand-ins for lost objects from our past)” (120).

A certain spectrality also figures prominently in Steven Shaviro’s essay on postmodern emotions as the living dead. For Shaviro, Andy Warhol occupies a position similar to the one James occupies for Flatley insofar as Warhol has an “exemplary status, even a privileged one, when it comes to looking at the changes American culture underwent during the second half of the twentieth century” (125). And Shaviro, too, begins with what looks like a loss: the death of emotion, a death Warhol himself blamed on TV and the tape recorder. Placing these “cool” media in connection with what he views as other emotion-killing developments (such as the movement of camp sensibility into the mainstream), Shaviro encapsulates the condition of affect under postmodernity in a striking aphorism: “A self without emotions contemplates emotions without a self” (136). But the situation is not exactly one of loss—or at least not of an unmitigated one. The ghost of emotion remains: if not passion, then interest; if not love, then fascination. So the question becomes, for Shaviro as much as for Warhol, how to embrace this situation, how to celebrate it—or, since the loss of the capacity for celebration is an aspect of the very situation at issue, how at least to find it interesting.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Donna Landry for suggesting that a new sort of materialism circulates in these essays, and to Dana Seitler for pointing out that the term “material media” could capture something of that novelty.
2. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967).
3. In the context of the examples Grusin provides—notably, the second Iraq war, the “War on Terror,” and *Minority Report* with its “PreCrime” unit—it perhaps goes without saying that such deformation cannot be ideologically neutral.
4. See, for instance, the “1st guarantee” of the “Nonmodern Constitution”: “non-separability of the common production of societies and natures.” Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 141.
5. Donna Haraway characterizes such “‘distributed’ stories” as “metaplasmic, remodeled versions that give dogs (and other species) the first moves in domestication and then choreograph an unending dance of distributed and heterogeneous agencies.” *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 28.

6. Latour, *Modern*, 144.
7. Compare Bernard Stiegler on "epiphylogenesis," the development or evolution of life by means other than life, specifically by tools: "If the individual is organic organized matter, then its relation to its environment (to matter in general, organic or inorganic), when it is a question of a who, is mediated by the organized but inorganic matter of the organon, the tool with its instructive role (its role as instrument), the what. It is in this sense that the what invents the who just as much as it is invented by it." *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 185. But this formulation elides what is for Landry a key question: what gets to count as a who?
8. John Berger, *About Looking* (1980; New York: Vintage, 1991), 52.
9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.
10. See the formulation Flatley cites from Niklas Luhmann: "autonomy without autarchy." *The Differentiation of Society*, trans. Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
11. "If . . . 'ontology'—full reconciliation—is not achievable, time is constitutively 'out of joint,' and the ghost is the condition of possibility of any present, politics too becomes constitutive of the social link." Ernesto Laclau, "The Time Is Out of Joint," *Diacritics* 25 (Summer 1995): 88.

