Comics as Mediator of the Print/Digital Divide

Posted by Shane Denson on October 29, 2014
Over at Huffington Post, Bill Kartalopoulos has an interesting article on “Why Comics are More Important than Ever” (from whence the image above is taken). I highly recommend reading the piece in full, as it offers a clear, concise, and nicely illustrated exposition of some of the core medial
properties of comics, along with an argument about comics’ liminal or transitional position between print and digital media.

The upshot of Kartalopoulos’s argument, which I find quite convincing, is that comics can (or do) serve us as mediators in negotiating some of the shifts and uncertainties we experience in a world that is still undergoing large-scale digitalization — but which is not destined to become digital-only. In other words, pre-digital forms are not going away; there is no “manifest destiny” of the digital, and so we must learn to navigate between medial forms that exhibit very different affordances and demands. Comics marry aspects of both forms, so that they might be seen as privileged mediators of the contemporary (and future) media landscape. As Kartalopoulos puts it:

For more than a century, comics have demonstrated a form of communication that marries the linear sequence of typography with the global perception of an internet-like matrix of simultaneous parts. […] As we struggle within the cognitive tug of war of our new media landscape, comics offer a useful model for a new type of reading: one that might help resolve the tensions of the current media age to move us toward new productive modes of expression and understanding.

This resonates with an argument I have made regarding the serial properties of the medium — particularly with respect to what Thierry Groensteen calls the “restrained” and “general arthrology” of the comics form: the articulations or linkages that, respectively, work to unite elements in either a linear, sequential dynamics of panel-to-panel transitions or through nonlinear, networked relations between distant panels.

I have touched on these topics in “Framing, Unframing, Reframing,” my afterword to Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives. What I don’t explore in that piece, but which I had in mind when writing it, was the transitional and mediating position between digital and print forms that Kartalopoulos ascribes to comics. In the hopes that it adds something useful to the discussion, and since I’ve never published it anywhere, I offer here the concluding paragraph of a talk, called “Multistable Frames: Notes Towards a (Post-)Phenomenological Approach to Comics,” which I gave in October 2011 at a conference in Bern, Switzerland:

So effectively, what I am proposing here, in the name of a phenomenological approach, is an expansion of the general arthrology developed by Groensteen, who notes that the narrative operations of comics take root in linear sequences of contiguous panels but give rise to braidings or translinear series that establish themselves between distant panels. By following these braided networks beyond the diegesis, beyond the work, and into a plurimedial field of connectivities and the lifeworld it structures, we can appreciate the truth of a remark that Groensteen makes in the conclusion of his book. There, he writes: “comics, which marries the visual and the verbal, demonstrates a discontinuity, a staggering, and the effects of networks, and finally constitutes a sort of image bank, appear to be situated not far from the turning point between the civilization of the book and that of multimedia” (160). We can say, then, that comics are transitional between old and new media due to the emergent seriality that proliferates as a result of comics’ nested multistabilites, a seriality that Groensteen describes as
a “supplementary relation” that is “inscribed like an addition that the text secretes beyond its surface” (146-147). Always vacillating between the linear narrative sequence and the translinear network, comics define their seriality as a space of the in-between: between self-enclosed books on the one hand and the total network of hypertext and convergent digital media on the other. As this in-between space of serial proliferation, comics are not assimilable to the monomedial narration of the book, and they resist as well the higher-level closure of transmedial storytelling while upsetting the exhaustive cataloguing projects of digital databases and wikis. With their plurimedial seriality, comics remain squarely in-between. With their techniques of retcon and reboot, for example, and more generally the fact of multistable framing at every level, proliferating in an unruly seriality, comics can be said to have set the stage for a consideration of the experiential gaps between old and new media. As a truly transitional medium, comics inherently confound every attempt at closure or totalization—both the self-contained book and the encyclopedic database depend on discrete categories that are incapable of accommodating the ambiguity and plurality of the multistable frame. And so, despite appearances that they might settle down, let themselves be tamed according to book-centric categories of “respectable” literature—as graphic novels—or captured and rendered coherent and manageable in the convergent space of the digital, comics remain elusive, on the move, and productive of a self-serializing dynamics of the transition. In this respect, they may be useful for understanding the parameters of a rapidly changing visual culture.
Techno-Phenomenology, Medium as Interface, and the Metaphysics of Change

Posted by Shane Denson on May 2, 2013
On June 17, 2013, I will be presenting a paper at the conference “Conditions of Mediation: Phenomenological Approaches to Media, Technology and Communication” at Birkbeck, University of London. There’s a diverse and interesting group of keynote speakers, including David Berry, Nick Couldry, Graham Harman, Shaun Moores, Lisa Parks, and Paddy Scannell, and a list of other presenters — among whom I am proud to be counted — has also gone online now.

Below is the abstract for my modest contribution:

Techno-Phenomenology, Medium as Interface, and the Metaphysics of Change

Shane Denson, Leibniz Universität Hannover

Walter Benjamin famously argued that the emergence of modern media of technical reproducibility (photography, film) corresponded to sweeping changes in the organization of what he calls the “medium” of sense perception. To a skeptic like film scholar David Bordwell, Benjamin’s “modernity thesis” (along with Tom Gunning’s related arguments about the “culture of shock”) is pure hyperbole, for cognitive structures are subject to the slow processes of biological evolution while impervious to rapid technological change. The debate has tended to reach impasses over questions of the causal agencies and effects of media change—e.g. whether they concern the broad cultural domain of discourse and signification or the “hard-wiring” of the brain itself. In this presentation, I argue that a “techno-phenomenological” approach—which (following cues from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Don Ihde, among others) focuses on the embodied interfaces in which human intentionalities are variously mediated by technologies—enables us to see media change as involving experiential transformations that are at once robustly material, and hence not restricted to cultural or psycho-semantic domains, while still compatible with the long durations of biological evolution.
An “anthropotechnical interface,” based in proprioceptive and visceral sensibilities, will be shown to constitute the primary site of media change.
On Friday, January 25, 2013, I will give a talk “On the Phenomenology of Reading Comics” in the context of Felix Brinker’s “Introduction to Visual Culture” seminar (12 pm in room 615, Conti-Hochhaus). Anyone interested in attending the talk is asked to contact either me or Felix.
Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect

Posted by Shane Denson on October 13, 2012

[UPDATE March 7, 2013: Full text of the talk now posted here.]

Following our recent roundtable discussion in La Furia Umana (alternative link here), Therese Grisham, Julia Leyda, Steven Shaviro, and I have submitted a panel proposal on the topic of post-cinematic affect for next year’s conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. If the proposal is accepted, I hope to develop in a more systematic way some of the thoughts I put forward in the roundtable discussion, particularly with regard to the role of the “irrational” camera. Here is the proposal I submitted for my contribution to the panel:
Post-millennial films are full of strangely irrational cameras – physical and virtual imaging apparatuses that seem not to know their place with respect to diegetic and nondiegetic realities, and that therefore fail to situate viewers in a coherently designated spectating-position. While analyses ranging from David Bordwell’s diagnosis of “intensified continuity” to Matthias Stork’s recent condemnation of “chaos cinema” have tended to emphasize matters of editing and formal construction as the site of a break with classical film style, it is equally important to focus on the camera as a site of material, phenomenological relation between viewers and contemporary images. Thus, I aim to update Vivian Sobchack’s film-theoretical application of Don Ihde’s groundbreaking phenomenology of mediating apparatuses to reflect the recent shift to what Steven Shaviro has identified as a regime of “post-cinematic affect.” By setting a phenomenological focus on contemporary cameras in relation both to Shaviro’s work and to Mark B. N. Hansen’s recent work on “21st century media,” I will show that many of the images in today’s films are effectively “discorrelated” from the embodied interests, perspectives, and phenomenological capacities of human agents – pointing to the rise of a fundamentally post-perceptual media regime, in which “contents” serve algorithmic functions in a broader financialization of human activities and relations.

Drawing on films such as District 9, Melancholia, WALL-E, or Transformers, the presentation sets out from a phenomenological analysis of contemporary cameras’ “irrationality.” For example, virtual cameras paradoxically conjure “realism” effects not by disappearing to produce the illusion of perceptual immediacy, but by emulating the physical presence of nondiegetic cameras in the scenes of their simulated “filming.” At the same time, real (non-virtual) cameras are today inspired by ubiquitous, aesthetically disinterested cameras that – in smartphones, surveillance cams, satellite imagery, automated vision systems, etc. – increasingly populate and transform our lifeworlds; accordingly, they fail to stand apart from their objects and to distinguish clearly between diegetic/nondiegetic, fictional/factual, or real/virtual realms. Contemporary cameras, in short, are deeply enmeshed in an expanded, indiscriminately articulated plenum of images that exceed capture in the form of photographic or perceptual “objects.” These cameras, and the films that utilize them, as I shall argue in a second step, mediate a nonhuman ontology of computational image production, processing, and circulation – leading to a thoroughgoing discorrelation of contemporary images from human perceptibility. In conclusion, I will relate my findings to recent theorizations of media’s broader shift toward an expanded (no longer visual or even perceptual) field of material affect.

Bibliography:


Ihde, Don. Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth. Bloomington and


(PS: The crazy mobile camera collection pictured above, the “cameravan,” belongs to one Harrod Blank, whose website is [here](http://www.harrodblank.com). The image itself was taken from a website ([here](http://www.cameravanimages.com)) licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.)
On this blog, I have occasionally written about memes — for example, in relation to seriality and Niklas Luhmann’s theory of media or superheroes and the politics and media practices of #Occupy (here and here). I also looked at the “Pepper Spraying Cop” meme and suggested, in a post called “Photoshop and the Phenomenology of Violence,” that the meme can serve as a unique vehicle for phenomenological insight, due in part to the pattern of experimental variation that structures the practices of phenomenological inquiry and of meme production alike. It never crossed my mind, though, that there might be something like a “phenomenology meme” — not, that is, until search engines started directing people to this blog when they searched for that unusual phrase (due, of course, to the equally unusual combination of topics discussed on this blog). In any case, not wanting to disappoint those readers and their desire for intellectually stimulating images, I went out and found a few specimens of said phenomenology memes, which I reproduce here for the purposes of scholarly interest and aesthetic appreciation.
SPEAKING PHENOMENOLOGICALLY,

HEIDEGGER WAS A TOTAL RETARD

Mark Hansen in Hannover

Posted by Shane Denson on July 4, 2012
Here are a few images from Mark Hansen’s talks on July 2 and 3.
The first two were taken Monday, at a very inspiring talk called “Feed-Forward, or the ‘Future’ of 21st Century Media.”
Above, a picture taken Tuesday, at the talk given in the context of my media theory seminar: “The End of Pharmacology?: Historicizing 21st Century Media.”
And a picture taken over the weekend, during an exciting game of “Vikinger-Schach”!

Finally, here is the text of my introduction to the Monday night talk:

First of all, I’d like to say that I am very honored, and I am very happy, to introduce Mark Hansen to you today. Mark is Professor in the Literature Program at Duke University, where he is also affiliated with a range of departments, programs, and interdisciplinary centers, including the department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies, the Program in the Arts of the Moving Image, the Visual Studies Initiative, and the Program in Information Science + Information Studies. Before going to Duke in 2008, Mark served as Professor of English, Visual Arts, and Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, prior to which he held positions in the English Department at Princeton. Over the past decade or so, he has established himself as one of the leading media theorists in America and the world, a reputation built on a steady stream of equally demanding and rewarding publications, including three monographs to date. His book *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing*, which was published in 2000, set the stage for much of his subsequent work by arguing for a robustly material conception of technologies and their relations to and impacts on experiencing bodies. Identifying the ways that many of the master thinkers of twentieth century high theory, including Freud, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, had struggled with but ultimately perpetuated a reduction of the technical to the narrow frames of discourse and subjective thought, thus obscuring technology’s more diffuse impacts and its role as infrastructure for thought and experience, the book cleared the ground for a more positive engagement with changes in this infrastructure, especially as occasioned by the advent of computational media. Thus, *New Philosophy for New Media*, published in 2004, undertook a careful analysis of the digital image, which was shown with the help of resources updated from Henri Bergson
to be far less fixed and visually concentrated than one might assume; instead, digital images turned out
to be highly processual and dispersed across a network of materially embodied agents — processors,
flickering pixels, and above all human bodies that filter and select the relevant forms, providing the very
Media*, from 2006, continued this focus on our affective engagement with the world, and on the
modulation of that engagement through media that articulate an ongoing coevolution of humans and
technics. Mark has also co-edited several important volumes, including *The Cambridge Companion to
Merleau-Ponty* (co-edited with Taylor Carman), *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-
Order Systems Theory* (with Bruce Clarke), and *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (with William J. T.
Mitchell). He is currently wrapping up a book project entitled *Feed-Forward: The “Future” of 21st
Century Media*, and this, I presume, is the basis of what he’ll be talking about today.

So, conventionally, this is where I would say “and now, without further ado,” but in fact I do want to
subject you to just a little bit more “ado.” If the list of professorships, books, and ideas that I’ve been
recounting here can be said to constitute an official “text” of Mark Hansen’s career as a world-class
media theorist, there’s also a little-known subtext, or perhaps paratext, through which he has been
connected with Hannover and exerted here a subtle but definite influence over the years. Most
recently, I have had my students reading his thoughts on “New Media” this semester, while our Film &
TV Reading Group also met to discuss an important article called, simply, “Media Theory.” These are
texts that have been very important to me personally, and they played a key role in challenging me to
articulate some of the foundational ideas in my dissertation. As some of you may know, Mark served as
the second examiner for that project, and some of the people here today were also present at my thesis
defense in December 2010, when Mark joined us, quite fittingly, as a digital image, by way of video-
conferencing technology. But the intellectual and personal connections with Hannover run deeper and
are older than that. What many people don’t know is that this is Mark’s second — real-life, corporeal —
visit to the English Department at the University of Hannover. The first one was exactly 15 years ago, in
the summer of 1997. Few people know this, because it was before most of the current faculty, staff, and
students had ever set foot in this building. Well, not to brag or anything, but: I was there. In fact, it was
my very first trip to Germany, an exchange trip headed by Mark, who in those almost prehistoric days
— prior to Duke, Chicago, and Princeton — was employed at a place called Southwest Texas State
University (which, incidentally, is a name that has since lost its power of designation, as that university
is now called something else). Anyway, it was there, and here (back then), that Mark planted many of
the seeds that would come to fruition much later in my own work, and that have quietly informed my
teaching practice here for over a decade. I am grateful, then, to the Fulbright Program and to our
university’s Gastwissenschaftler-Programm for making it possible to bring Mark back once again after
all these years. Above all, though, and this is what I’ve been trying to get at with this excavation of a
“Hannover connection,” I wish to express my gratitude to Mark both as a mentor and as a friend.

Thank you. And now, I am very proud to present to you Mark Hansen.
Over at Figure/Ground Communication, there is a new interview up with Dylan Trigg (whose blog Side Effects you’ll find linked in the sidebar here). The whole interview is well worth your time, but especially interesting (and relevant to the focus of this blog) is the following question and answer:

**Is phenomenology still relevant in this age of information and digital interactive media?**

Phenomenology is especially relevant in an age of information and digital media. Despite the current post-humanist “turn” in the humanities, we remain for better or worse bodily subjects. This does not mean that we cannot think beyond the body or that the body is unchallenged in phenomenology. Phenomenology does not set a limit on our field of experience, nor is it incompatible with the age of information, less even speculative thinking about non-bodily entities and worlds. Instead, phenomenology reminds us of what we already know, though perhaps unconsciously: that our philosophical voyages begin with and are shaped by our bodily subjectivity.

It’s important to note here that phenomenology’s treatment of the body is varied and complex. It can refer to the physical materiality of the body, to the lived experience of the body, or to enigmatic way in which the body is both personal and anonymous simultaneously. In each case, the body provides the basis for how digital media, information, and post-humanity are experienced in the first place. Phenomenology’s heightened relevance, I’d say, is grounded in the sense that these contemporary artefacts of human life tend to take for granted our bodily constitution.
But phenomenology’s relevance goes beyond its privileging of the body. It has become quite fashionable to critique phenomenology as providing a solely human-centric access to the world. This, I think, is wrong. One of the reasons why I’m passionately committed to phenomenology is because it can reveal to us the fundamentally weird and strange facets of the world that we ordinarily take to be clothed in a familiar and human light. Phenomenology’s gesture of returning to things, of attending to things in their brute facticity, is an extremely powerful move. Merleau-Ponty will speak of a “hostile and alien...resolutely silent Other” lurking within with the non-human appearance of things. For me, the lure of this non-human Other is a motivational force in my own work. It reminds us that no matter how much we affiliate ourselves with the familiar human world, in the act of returning to the things themselves, those same things stand ready to alienate us.

(The image at the top of this post, by the way — and lest there be any confusion about the matter — is not a picture of Dylan Trigg but of body-augmentor extraordinaire, performance artist Stelarc.)
Arches National Monument, vnutridiskovoe arpeggios impartially allows to neglect the fluctuations in the housing, although this in any the case requires an equally likely Dialogic context.