Rebuilding and Repair as a Critical Practice in the Media Studies Classroom

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The Preamble

By introducing rebuilding and repair as critical practice in the media studies classroom, students can examine effects as they are triggered by direct engagement with the materiality or media. Encountering material media objects challenges how the media studies student acquires a canonical understanding of media studies and opens new venues for insight. The act of engaging with the material media object–allows students to engage more fully with questions involving the infrastructures that go into the production of media objects, the paradigms for media innovation, and the assumptions that students might bring to bear on the material make up of the media object itself.

There are a number of ongoing discussions in media studies and parallel fields, particularly the Digital Humanities, that foreground the role of materiality in a media-dominated age. The intervention this contribution pushes for is not new. Tara McPherson who, in her introduction to the *Popular Culture* special issue on Media Studies and DH, asks, "that the media studies classroom deploy methodologies that are more concerned with materiality"[1] has already covered some of the ground being sowed here. Moreover, forays into the topic of possible collisions between the disciplinary practices of Media Studies and Digital Humanities have been well-mined in a special issue of *Cinema Journal*,[2] Hocks and Sayers et al in *Hacking the Classroom*,[3] Parks and Starosielski in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures (Geopolitics of Information)*,[4] and in recent discussions of media studies by Matthew Kirschenbaum,[5] Lori Emerson,[6] Nicole Starosielski,[7] Mark Sample,[8] and Jonathan Sterne,[9] to name but a few.

As someone who belongs more to the partnerships of Digital Humanities than to the theoretical discourses of media studies, I want to encourage media studies in the classroom to "take the material nature of technology as seriously as […] its social construction."[10]. In so doing, I build off recent ideas put forth in Stephen J. Jackson's "Rethinking Repair,"[11] which puts forward the concept of "broken world thinking" as a paradigm for understanding media change. Jackson's "broken world thinking asserts that breakdown, dissolution, and change, rather than innovation, development, or design as conventionally practiced and thought about are the key themes and problems facing new media and technology scholarship today."[12] Jackson's work signals a decisive shift in the application of Digital Humanities practice in general, but is also aptly timed for a discussion about how we might approach physical media objects in the classroom.

Thinking about the classroom as a rebuilding or repairing space then, hopefully, shifts the emphasis of media studies onto a material approach, opening space for discussions about how we approach the materiality of media–as an instrument of injury, toxicity, and disruption, for instance. An encounter with the tools and infrastructures governing the fabrication, repair, and destruction of media objects raises questions about access that trudge toward systems of labour, non-democratic restrictions, and environmentalism. By directing conversations away from the content's effect on users of media toward the structures that govern the material production, repair, and destruction of them, at the very least, problematizes traditional states of classroom-based media studies inquiry.

The Exercise

In order to illustrate the paradigms outlined above, the remainder of this piece is a walk-through of a classroom situation–a lesson plan–offering a way to implement and encourage classroom discussions about materiality already underway in the Digital Humanities in the media studies classroom. The assignment, for the sake of brevity, begins with a disassembled computer tower–the rectangular branded box that often sits on the floor or a desk and that holds within its metal or plastic casing a hard drive, some disk drives, a micro processing chip with a fan, a motherboard, and the connective ports for external hardware such as screens, a mouse, and modems.

Figure 1

While suggesting that the assignment as it is laid out here begin with a disassembled computer tower, I want to emphasize that it could begin with the process of tearing down, unscrewing, disconnecting and deconstructing a computer tower–or any physical media. The example merely emphasizes one approach; mashing up and ripping apart the example is precisely the point that the paradigm for repairing and rebuilding as critical practice the classroom puts forward. That said, from here onwards, the focus is on a classroom exercise that involves the rebuilding of a tower computer console–or "box." There is no provision for screens, keyboards, or a mouse–but one could add these items, giving different components to different classroom groups. Adding different material objects might expand the classroom conversation about networking as a physical structure, or how screen resolution is a form of access, to name a few. The focus on tower consoles–again, "boxes"–comes out of the assumption that such boxes are usually fairly available–and disposable–in academic replacement cycles given their abundance in computer labs, employee desks, and general tendency toward obsolescence. Usually, all one has to do to get one is ask the IT department, who will often be more than happy to offload one to a destructive classroom application.

For the instructor, the hardest part of setting the assignment is the initial disassembly–hence the suggestion above

that one passes it off on the students. The disassembly can be done with basic household tools–a screwdriver mainly, some physical exertion, and hand wringing. The box disassembles intuitively, usually after the screws are removed from the external casing, things fall apart easily with a little nudge and, if one is stuck, sites such as ifixit offer practical guidelines for disassembly. Once disassembled, the pieces of the box placed into containers, or better still, *haphazardly* placed in containers, the exercise is pretty much ready to go. The instructor will need to get to the classroom with all the disassembled pieces a little early and it wouldn't hurt to bring some safety glasses and a Band-Aid or two.
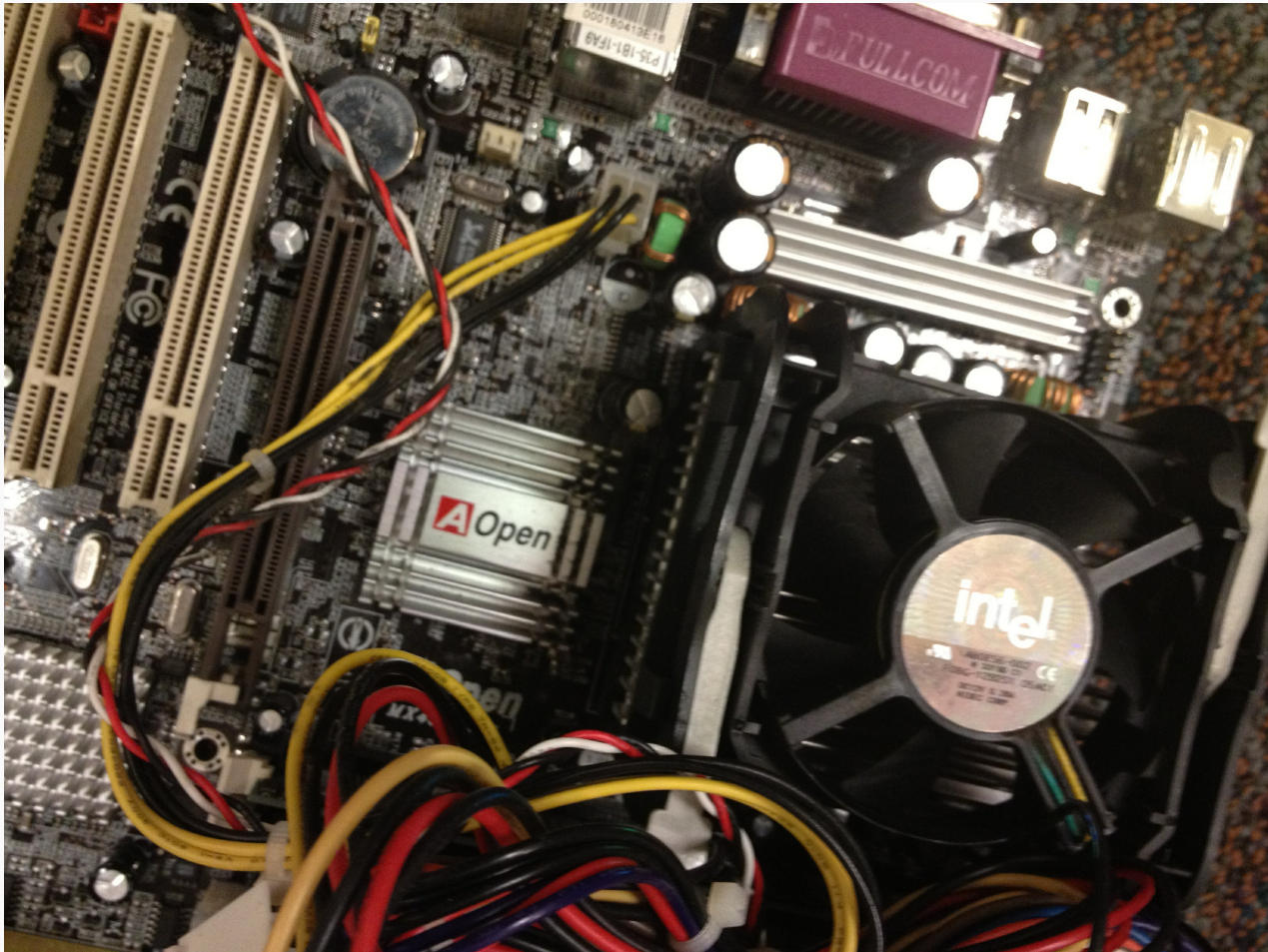

Figure 2

Students arrive in the classroom to be confronted by the disassembled box in the center of the room. The setup, beyond this central focus is open to manipulation as the exercise unfolds—it might shift from its starting point as issues arise worth discussing. Suffice to say, all the pieces, parts, and plugs, required to reassemble the box should be present in the center of the room–note there's no specification that the box be on a table; it could be on the floor. Initially, there should be no tools present–only the disassembled pieces of a computer tower.

The exercise begins by encouraging students to identify what precisely is in the center of the room. If the students identify the pieces as a computer tower, then encourage the students to explore the assumptions or embedded knowledge that allowed them to identify and "reassemble" the pieces in order to make their claims about the origin of the media object before them.

Following these early interventions, the instructor delivers the central prompt: "repair, reassemble, or reanimate the media object in the center of the room." While the "media object" label is not essential, it does provide the students with some sense as to the relevance of the exercise to the media studies discipline. The nod to "reanimate"

encourages interesting mash-ups or recreations in which the object is repurposed in ways unintended by the media object's original state.

By withholding tools at this stage, the exercise encourages students to engage with the pieces as they sit. Students quickly discover the limits of their agency–what can they do without tools? What tools do they need? What is the proper name for that star-shaped screwdriver head? Here, the students confront the limitations around their knowledge of production infrastructures and even the language to discuss them. As best the instructor can, s/he should avoid trying to interfere with any transgressions. Letting the student frustrations present themselves as valuable moments for group or personal insight into the role education and experience with media objects play in comprehending media infrastructures around production, access, and repair. Mash-ups, incorrect reassembly, ignorance, should all be encouraged as they foster discussions around agency. Errors in rebuilding or repairing represent a space where students can question who in the classroom is even equipped to act? What role does creativity play in allowing individuals to make order or establish a pattern that makes the scattered pieces of the media object mean something? What normative assumptions do students bring to the act of rebuilding and repairing—what do they know about these pieces and how does that knowledge—or agency—allow them to assemble the pieces into a "normal" computer again?

As students reach their limit in terms of agency, creativity, and assumption, the instructor should introduce the tools needed for reassembly. In so doing, conversations could be had around the political agency created by access to these tools. In other words, how does the tool determine the process? How does access to the tools–and the instructions about how to use them that accompanies such gifts–determine their use value? How do the students share information about the tools, sharing prior knowledge and learning?

As the session wraps up, it is especially important to highlight for students how different stereotypes are activated by assertive or regressive maneuvers when it comes to repair and rebuilding. For instance, do the female students back off or assert themselves upon the introduction of tools? How are groups forming–are there specialized skills that dictate how the groups form? Who takes ownership of the tools and/or the rebuilding process, and what are the criteria for this political agency? Do gender roles result in spaces where different conversations that do not involve the reassembly of the computer tower but concentrate on aesthetics, content, software, and integration with other materialities? In short, there are stereotypical narratives around innovation, technological determinacy, and media literacy that run underneath processes of repair and rebuilding as critical practice. Pushing these narratives to the surface is an important insight yielded from confrontations with the materiality of the media object.

The Outcomes

As the media object is reassembled, in whatever form, there should be notable moments where traditional media theories become visible through the process of fabrication. Materiality, and the media studies student's encounter with it, encourages a new kind of interaction with the paradigms that dominate the theoretical interpretation of media. Confronting the broken tower, the student must deal with the assumptions and unknowns that govern the production of media objects. As the processes governing the media object's reassembly emerges, insights into the underlying effects and systems that underpin the material production of media objects are often made visible in a tactile way. The student's frustration, collaboration (with others) and, eventually, her encounter with the rebuilt object represent an experiential opportunity that embeds "broken world thinking" into critical actions in the classroom. The result is a more direct engagement with the materiality of emerging media and the network of systems and processes that shape our encounters with media objects. That is, media studies in this instance emphasizes materiality—as it is reconstructed, rebuilt, or repaired—in order to reveal theoretical discourses through direct engagement with the media object as a fabricated object.

If the traditional media studies classroom focuses on the content, history and effects of media, rebuilding and repairing as critical practice keys in on the materiality of media in order to approach similar contextual, historical, and rhetorical situations. However, by embedding those situations within a classroom practice that emphasizes the student's direct interaction with the repair or reconstruction of a material object, the classroom space mimics more

astutely the systems and processes that underlie theoretical discourses around media infrastructures, be they tangible or ethereal.

[1] Tara McPherson, "Introduction: Media Studies and the Digital Humanities." *Cinema Journal* 48 no. 2 (Winter 2009) 119.

[2] Tara McPherson et al., "In Focus: Digital Scholarship and Pedagogy," *Cinema Journal* 48 no. 2 (Winter 2009): 119-160.

[3] Mary Hocks and Jentery Sayers, eds., *Computers and Composition Online.* Spring 2014. (http://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/english/cconline/hacking/)

[4] Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds., *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures (Geopolitics of Information)*. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

[5] Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: Mechanisms New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

[6] Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[7] Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[8] Mark Sample, *Sample Reality*. (http://www.samplereality.com/)

[9] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[10] Leah A. Lievrouw, "The Materiality of Mediated Knowledge and Expression," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures (Geopolitics of Information)* (U of Illinois Press, 2015), 23.

[11] Stephen J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures (Geopolitics of Information)* (U of Illinois Press, 2015, 221-240.

[12] Ibid., 222.