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Queering Media Archaeology

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Abstract

This contribution outlines a theory of the performative nature of queer media agency. Drawing on key concepts in the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, it looks at how media themselves can be queer and act subversively in relation to a historically contingent discursive order as well as on the impact of the continuum between material bodies and media as they are reconfigured in the digital. It highlights repetition and reproducibility as shared core concerns of queer theory and media archaeology and seeks to show that the former has a lot of bearing on the latter. Queer theory also allows for a more radical understanding of the body as medium, an understanding with implications for where we draw the line between body and medium, between organic and inorganic matter. The construction of bodies and their coming into being through a discursive configuration is deeply intertwined with media in several ways. Media are performative in the sense that they enable technical repetition – creating habits, orientations, expectations and rules – that produces discourse. The quantitative intensification allowed by digital media draws this performative aspect to the front. Finally, the article offers new perspectives on the issue of sensory perception in the medianaturalcultural continuum.

Keywords

Media Archaeology; Queer Theory, Performativity, Materiality, Gender, Embodiment, New Materialism, Feminism, Judith Butler, Perception, Digital

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Introduction

The historically contingent discursive configurations of media and their non-human agency are a core concern in Media Archaeology, yet Judith Butler's foundational work on discursive agency and the performative has hitherto oddly been left out of virtually all discussions in the field. Even those who do address performativity and media manage to skip Butler's work and only refer to Austin's theory of speech acts.¹

Being the founding figure of queer theory, it would be hard to overestimate the impact and influence of the critical work of Butler. Often mentioned as one of the most influential and most cited in humanities and social sciences, Butler also stands out by the impact she has arguably had outside of academic walls.² The way in which gender and sexuality is understood today can hardly be separated from the insights of Butler's thinking. Not only the understanding of gender, but also the social behavior and discursive practices relating to gender and sexuality have rapidly changed over the past decades.³

While media archaeology does not easily lend itself to an exhaustive definition, it is often understood as a way of digging out forgotten, neglected and suppressed histories. According to Jussi Parikka it is "a way to multiply and bend traditional media historical methods to incorporate new ways of grasping the history of oddities, losers, and, more generally, conditions of media culture."⁴ Particularly relevant for the following discussion are those versions concerned with rethinking temporality and embodiment, and pursuing an alternative historiography of digital culture as genealogy of the present. At their core, these concerns are epistemological and ontological, or ethico-onto-epistemological in Karen Barad's sense.⁵ In this version, which resonates with feminist new materialism, media archaeology can be understood as a materialist epistemology of knowledge, reflecting awareness that all knowledge is technologically mediated in the broadest sense, as meaning and matter is entangled. For Thomas Elsasser, media archaeology engages with "the epistemological bases of how we know what we know, of what is

¹ Sibylle Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015).

² Nicola J. Smith and Donna Lee, "What's Queer about Political Science?", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17, no 1 (2014), 49-63.

³ GLAAD /HarrisPoll, "Accelerating acceptance 2017: A HarrisPoll survey of American's acceptance LGBTQ people", https://www.glaad.org/files/aa/2017_GLAAD_Accelerating_Acceptance.pdf (2018-04-01).

⁴ Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2015), 7.

⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press 2007).

evidence and what is presence, of what is material and what is embodied, of what is dead and what is alive – all these (ultimately ‘ontological’) questions must be put to the media technologies that surround us.”⁶

As both media archaeology and queer theory explicitly draw on the work of Michel Foucault and particularly his method of genealogy, common philosophical ground is not hard to find. Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and culture has provided a methodology for excavating the conditions of existence of both gendered bodies and media technologies. But how come these strands of thought are still mainly kept separate when they seem to share a lot of core concerns, methodology and ontology? For instance, Butler’s radical rendering of agency not as the product of human intentionality but conditioned by discourse and performativity brings a lot to the historical understanding of non-human agency.⁷ Butler’s ontology of discourse-performativity-materiality has already informed this issue in feminist new materialism and posthumanism, as can be seen in the work of Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti among others.⁸

This article attempts to develop a theory of the performative nature of queer media agency. Drawing on key concepts in the work of Butler and Foucault, it looks at how media themselves can be queer and act subversively in relation to a historically contingent discursive order as well as the impact of the continuum between material bodies and media as they are reconfigured in the digital. It highlights repetition and reproducibility as shared core concerns of queer theory and media archaeology and seeks to show that the former has a lot of bearing on the latter.

Media Archaeology and Performativity

Media archaeology has to a certain extent been dominated by the legacy of Friedrich Kittler’s work and has often built on a critique of the narrative forms of cultural history and favored a materialistic and entity driven approach.⁹ Media archaeologists have often insisted on the non-discursive aspect of technical media and been

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, “Media archaeology as symptom”, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, (2016)14:2, 207.

⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 57.

⁸ *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, ed. Iris Van Der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn (London: Open Humanities Press 2012), Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (London: Polity Press 2013).

⁹ Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (London: Polity Press 2012), 67-9.

interested in non-human agency in media, particularly for the understanding of temporality.¹⁰ This focus on hardware and the explicit avoidance of anything that could be understood as outside or posterior to a rather static material object has received criticism for denying and naturalizing implicit political aspects of media theory.¹¹

Other media archaeologists, notably Wendy Chun and Thomas Elsaesser, have focused on embodiment and the continuum from media to sensory perception as well as the relation between technological artifacts and cultural formations.¹² Johanna Drucker has argued for a more nuanced understanding of materiality in media as a state of flux rather than a fixed entity, and in doing so proposed the concept of performative materiality. Her view is that the traditional hardware focus in digital humanities and media archaeology of the kind exemplified by Wolfgang Ernst should be complemented by a more dynamic approach: “We can shift from an entity-based to an event-based conception of media and demonstrate the radically constitutive, co-dependent relations of complexity we overlook when we take a web of contingencies for a static, fixed, object of intellectual thought.”¹³ For Drucker, in their attempt to counteract the model of immateriality, the hardware focus on literal materiality in certain versions of media archaeology overestimates the value of cataloging and describing technical objects. Gary Hall engages with Drucker’s discussion and highlights how media archaeology sometimes seem to repeat what Tim Ingold has identified in studies of material culture; that they take as their starting point fixed material objects and tend to reinforce the dualism of material and immaterial, nature and culture.¹⁴

Wendy Chun has developed a critical theory for understanding how software intersects with culture, and her discussion of race and technology resonates with my understanding of how queer media operate: “by reframing race as technology, not only can we theoretically and historically better understand the forces of race and technology and their relation to racism, we can also better respond to contemporary

¹⁰ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press 2012).

¹¹ Sheenagh Pietrobruno, “Medianatures”, in *Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Gender: Nature*, vol. 2, ed. Iris van der Tuin, 103-116. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Cengage Learning, 2016.

¹² Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge., Mass: MIT Press 2016), Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2016), Pasi Väliäho, *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought and Cinema circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2011).

¹³ Johanna Drucker, “Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface”, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, (2013) 7:1.

¹⁴ Gary Hall, *Pirate Philosophy: For a Digital Posthumanities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2016), 111.

changes in the relationships between human and machine, human and animal, media and environment, mediation and embodiment, nature and culture, visibility and invisibility, privacy and publicity.”¹⁵

To understand the agency of media, it might be useful to take account of the constitutive nature of practices as developed in Butler’s notion of performativity. That is, the ontology of the gendering of sexed bodies can help explicate the relation between discourse and materiality that recent versions of media archaeology and cultural techniques seek to highlight. Karen Barad’s concept of posthumanist performativity also offers, through Butler, an assessment of the entanglement of discourse and materiality which overcomes the dualisms that haunts some versions of materially oriented science studies and, we should add, media archaeology. Barad seeks to account for the materialization of all bodies – human and non-human – and their agency.¹⁶

Foucault’s concept of “apparatus”, which informs both Butler and Barad, is also in line with this argument. He understands it as a heterogeneous ensemble of elements like discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions and the apparatus is “the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”¹⁷ Drawing on Foucault, a particular discourse can assume various positions within the apparatus, which can be understood as positions of subversive or affirmative queer bodies. Foucault stresses the possibility of shifts of position and modifications over time, and also points out that the apparatus responds to historically particular needs and has a dominant strategic function for power, and thereby draws attention to the power affirming aspect of it.

The interest within media archaeology for the lost, forgotten, dead or weird also seem to resonate with the core notions of Judith Butler’s queer theory, though she is rarely, if ever, cited (she appears as a reference in Drucker’s article and is cited by Chun). As Karen Barad has shown, the same holds true for much work in Actor Network Theory and Science Studies, where she similarly sees a surprising neglect of

¹⁵ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Race and/ as technology; Or how to do things to race”, *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, (New York: Routledge 2012),

¹⁶ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist performativity: Towards an understanding of how matter comes to matter” *Signs* (2003), vol. 28 no. 3, 811. For a similar discussion of the speculative in feminist new materialism and Object Oriented Ontology, see Cecilia Åsberg, Iris van der Tuin and Kathrin Thiele, “Speculative Before the Turn: Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity”, *Cultural Studies Review* 21, no. 2, (2015).

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Writings and Interviews 1972-1977* (New York: Harvester press 1980), 194.

an influential work that clearly has bearing on the core concerns of these fields.¹⁸ Jussi Parikka has addressed the issue of media archaeology's gender bias and admitted that the critique of the field being a "boys club" is correct in many ways.¹⁹ But rather than enumerating scholars who identify as women, like Parikka does, the more relevant concern is the neglect of important and groundbreaking feminist theorization of aspects central to media archaeologies. In spite of the hope expressed by Parikka that future media archaeology would be informed by the cartographical ethos of connections between fields developed by Rosi Braidotti in following Deleuze, the foundational work of understanding the interplay of materiality and discourse that has occupied feminist materialist scholarship in recent decades is rarely, if ever, cited.²⁰ But does that mean that it has not been taken into account? Or is it rather an example of the very power structures that regulates discourse, and makes it possible to appropriate intellectual goods without acknowledging its source?²¹ Barad points out that the neglect of Butler's work she detects in ANT and STS is not a matter of complementary additions, but "Science studies approaches that fail to take these insights into account are not simply setting aside a variable or two that can easily be added into analyses at a later date; rather, they make the same kind of mistake as the representationalist approaches they reject – they fail to take account of the constitutive nature of practices."²²

Braidotti has recently called for "monistic affirmative politics grounded on immanent interconnections; ...embedded and embodied, relational and affective cartographies of the new power relations that are emerging from the current geopolitical, postanthropocentric, and 'medianaturecultural' world order"²³ What Braidotti draws attention to is the fact that the new world order emerging in the 21st century requires a new onto-epistemology that can account for the connections and messy interplay which modernist epistemology based on Cartesian and Kantian conceptions often fail to grasp. The medianaturalcultural world order she describes can also be assessed by the queer media archaeology proposed here.

¹⁸ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 57.

¹⁹ Jussi Parikka, "Gender in Media Archaeology: Only a boys club?" *Cartographies of Media Archaeology*, blog post, (2013-07-10) <http://mediacartographies.blogspot.se/2013/07/women-and-media-archaeology.html>

²⁰ Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Polity Press: 2012), 163.

²¹ *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1997).

²² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 57.

²³ Rosi Braidotti, "The critical posthumanities: or is medianatures to naturecultures as zoe is to bios" *Cultural Politics* 12, no.3 (2017), 388.

Could the non-human agency of media, animals, or plants have a subversive effect through a kind of destabilizing queer performativity? The recent development of environmental personhood and related legal concepts that give rivers and mountains the same legal rights as humans would certainly suggest such a process. The shift of the status of environmental entities from property to subject in law entails the emergence of a new epistemology, with which our concepts may yet have to catch up. Given examples of such legal agency, how can media be understood as actors in subversive repetitions of performativity? Cornelia Vismann has described how the grammatical concept of the medium, standing in between active and passive, is used to solve the legal problem of agency and accountability in juridical discourse. As she explains, “operations can also be executed by non-personal agents that do not act in a syntactical-juridical sense. Certain actions cannot be attributed to a person; and yet, they are somehow still performed.”²⁴ Regardless of the intention of humans, media and cultural techniques prescribe their own usage and orientations, as both Vismann and Sara Ahmed have convincingly argued from their respective vantage points.²⁵

How can we understand performativity and repetition in and through digital interfaces where they are now often carried out? How does the configuration of a given medium come to affect the performativity and constructions of gender? If the performative repetition seen on a social medium like Instagram become standardized and quantified in millions, it must arguably change the way the doing of gender works. At the same time, the technical reproducibility of digital media highlights their performative aspect.

Affirmative/ Subversive: The Troubling Agency of Queer Media

According to Butler, “construction” is the necessary platform for agency, and perhaps the sometimes-misunderstood analogy can be better understood in line with a “construction site” than a mental/social construction. As architect and writer Keller Easterling discusses the agency of space and infrastructure as media, she touches upon this issue: “while we also do not typically think of static objects and volumes in urban space as having agency, infrastructure space is doing something. Like an operating system, the medium of infrastructure space makes certain things

²⁴ Cornelia Vismann, “Cultural techniques and Sovereignty”, *Theory, Culture, Society* 30, no. 6 (2013), 84-85.

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations matter”, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press 2010), 234-258.

possible and other things impossible.”²⁶ In line with Easterling’s argument, the presence of a queer subject in a digital or physical space can have an immediate effect on what is conceivable. The philosophical concept of presence can be used to understand the ontological contingency of how bodies of flesh, machines or objects can produce a queer effect through its existence in a room, whether physical or digital.²⁷ This queer effect can be produced at all levels of the digital ranging from the materiality of hardware, via the configuration of a particular software and development of certain algorithms to social media content.²⁸ Favorite subjects of media archaeology like abject, ugly, failed or repressed media technologies can be picked up and contribute to discursive rupture. Their construction can queer or conform to power structures and possess an agency that can be difficult to assess. Queering media archaeology can thus add a crucial conception of political power, the lack of which has sometimes been a subject of critique of the field.²⁹

How can we understand the process by which a subject can at a given point in time appear as queer, threatening and more or less beyond grasp, only to become accepted and institutionalized over relatively short spans of time? As if the queer subject had moved from the outskirts of a discursive landscape into its center. With subject, I do not only or primarily refer to humans, but also to machines, plants, animals or any other non-human agency.

Technical media can be defined and understood through reproduction and repetition. Often, as in the case of networked digital computers, they may not originally have been construed for its subsequent use.³⁰ Military needs in particular seem to be a potent driver of technological invention.³¹ Nevertheless, as its coming into being is historically contingent on a particular discursive order, it may affirm or subvert this order as practices are formed. The discursive rupture produced by the

²⁶ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso books, 2014), 19.

²⁷ I take the concept of “presence” from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²⁸ See Johanna Drucker, “Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface”, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2013).

²⁹ Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, 133, Jussi Parikka, “Operative Media Archaeology: Wolfgang Ernst’s Materialist Media Diagrammatics,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 28, no. 5, 57.

³⁰ Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 29.

³¹ Friedrich Kittler, “No such agency” and Jussi Parikka & Paul Feigelfeld, “Kittler on the NSA” *Theory, Culture, Society* (2014) <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/kittler-on-the-nsa/>

performativity of media bodies can appear as queer and subversive or as affirmative to a given order.³²

Drawing on Monique Wittig's materialist feminism, Butler discusses the issue of agency and the ontological confusion at stake between cause and effect in determining the mark of gender on bodies: "Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within a society...While Wittig's humanism clearly presupposes that there is a doer behind the deed, her theory nevertheless delineates the performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture, disputing the temporality of those explanations that would confuse cause with result."³³

In accordance with Butler's ontological argument about the confusion of the relation between cause and effect, the point of convergence between media and subject is often unclear, in theory and in practice. In the end, it is not a given that media mediates anything. A medium can be an object with an unmediated presence in itself, a material object with its own specific existence outside the medial function to which it is often ascribed.³⁴ When in contact with a technological medium we are often uncertain of where the medium ends and where our subject begins. And more than that, it enters us in so many ways that it is no longer a question of a beginning and an end, or of cause and an effect. As Sara Ahmed points out regarding the orienting effect of material objects, "the table is assembled around the support it gives. The 'in order to' structure of the table, in other words, means that those who are 'at' the table are also part of what makes the table itself. Doing things 'at' the table is what makes the table what it is and not some other thing. So while bodies do things, things might also do bodies."³⁵ And this, of course, goes for technological media as well, a silent or turned off smart phone carries the sounds it is programmed to make as an expectation, it contains its software practices as an expectation that is inherent to the material object itself. Technological material objects (and the

³² The nostalgic longing for a bright past that currently runs through Western politics on both sides of the Atlantic is discursively made possible by the presence of and access to a content that media no longer produce. This may exemplify the other pole of media agency, which serve to reinforce hegemonic structures by a temporal feedback loop. The media technological projection backwards in time provide the conditions of existence of certain recycling of cultural values and practices. Media can act as queer bodies and have a subversive or affirmative agency, a process which tends to become heavily politicized. This queer performativity of media is closely alligned with the problem of nonhuman agency.

³³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

³⁴ Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*.

³⁵ Ahmed, "Orientations matter" 244-5.

expectations inherent to them) can have a queering presence in the physical or digital room, as well as a power affirming presence, more often than not it will have both.

Law and Repetition: from body to media

Queer theory also allows for a more radical understanding of the body as medium, an understanding with implications for where we draw the line between body and medium, between organic and inorganic matter. If all bodies are discursive and constructed in accordance with the law as Butler claims, then even our diseases can be understood as an expression of this program. This understanding of the discursive body resonates with a media archeological notion of technology, and the idea of the entanglement between body and technology present in the works of Walter Benjamin and onward.³⁶

Butler's use of the concept of construction as the platform for agency within discourse has often been misunderstood as a non-materialist approach to the body, as Karen Barad points out.³⁷ But the notion of construction helps underline the affinities between human and non-human agency within a discursive order. Without Butler's foundational work in establishing the discursive conditions of human agency it is hard to grasp non-human agency as understood in new materialism, post-humanism and media archaeology. Could it be that Butler's theory is historically conditioned according to a principle often adopted in media archaeology, namely that a misunderstanding of one of its components (the concept of construction) has created invisibility in relation to its theoretical impact on other fields of study where agency is at the center?

³⁶ The notion of an entanglement of body and medium is present already in Walter Benjamin's "The work of Art in the age of technological reproduction", through the works of Marshal McLuhan and Harold Innis, over Friedrich Kittler and the practitioners of media archaeology following him like Thomas Elsaesser and Pasi Väliäho. In spite of this, the body is often taken for granted and not theorized as a medium.

³⁷ "Indeed, Butler is not out to deny the materiality of the body whatsoever. On the contrary, she proposes 'a return to the notion of matter' as we will see hereafter. This return to matter is not a simple going back to the notion that matter is a given, that which is already there. It is, however, crucial to Butler's project, for what is at stake is the very nature of change. Butler's intervention calls into question ... the nature of agency that is entailed in the inscription model of construction." Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 62.

'The body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings is only externally related. But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects.³⁸

The construction of bodies and their coming into being through a discursive configuration is deeply intertwined with media in several ways. Media are performative in the sense that they enable technical repetition – creating habits, orientations, expectations and rules – that produce discourse. The quantitative intensification allowed by digital media draws this performative aspect to the front. The problem of understanding human bodies as passive and prior to discourse can be extended to the entanglement of bodies and media. Following Butler, Sara Ahmed points out that “bodies materialize; they acquire certain tendencies through proximity to objects whose nearness we have already inherited (the family background). The materialization of subjects is hence inseparable from objects, which circulate as things to do things with.”³⁹ This holds true for how our expectations of media are built into them and are entangled with our bodies. Wendy Chun also points to the crucial part played by repetition in forming habits which she understands as the connecting basis of networks: “Habits are creative anticipations based on past repetitions that make network maps the historical future. Through habits, networks are scaled, for individual tics become indications of collective inclinations. Through the analytic of habits, individual actions coalesce bodies into a monstrously connected chimera.”⁴⁰

The interface of the performativity of human bodies is increasingly less a stage or a physical room than a digital platform that reproduces its own repetition.⁴¹ Technologically reproducible media always entail repetition, and the varying quantities of reproduction and repetition is a determining factor in our movement within the digital. As the struggle over attention is marked by clickability and likeability, economic power alone no longer guarantees attention, though it certainly helps. At the same time, a subversive element may go viral and reach

³⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.

³⁹ Ahmed, 249.

⁴⁰ Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 3.

⁴¹ Drucker, “Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface.”

millions overnight. This element can then be quickly spread, imitated and repeated by various human and non-human actors. This means that a given element can quickly move from being subversive to being accepted in brief spans of time through its digital movement. For instance, the influence of queer theory on the doings of gender in the 21st century may well have profited on changing medial conditions of existence for discursive practices.⁴² Simultaneously, conservative and opposed notions of gender that have already been deserted by legislation and political discourse can rapidly gain new life through the same mechanism.⁴³

A social media post generally acquires importance by being liked in six figures, which means that the value is determined by reach in this economy. The quantitative nature of this development has quickly changed discursive practices and given rise to notions like “post-truth”. The spread of fake news through social networks around times of democratic elections in fact bears likeness to the evolution and transmission of infectious disease.⁴⁴ Supposedly stable phenomena like gender roles can thereby quickly be destabilized and queered through the performative agency of digital media that produces large-scale repetitions. Even practices that are meant to be affirmative to a normative gender order can become queer through virtually endless repetitions that come to change its meaning, what Foucault describes as entering into resonance or contradiction with the other elements of the apparatus. The demand for naturalness and spontaneity that has long marked gender norms loses credibility in social media where every act appears as performative in relation to the media technological configuration (like image filters) that forms an ever more vital part of the apparatus.⁴⁵ Vismann’s cultural techniques of law offer a complementary perspective on discursive reproducibility that comes close to Butler’s:

Acting independently from individual performers, and thus maintaining their potential reproducibility, they steer processes into different directions, towards different opportunities, and different persons. Such operations are sustained by a certain operational

⁴² GLAAD

⁴³ Populism and the Web: Communicative Practices of Parties and Movements in Europe, eds. Mojca Pajnik & Birgit Sauer, (London: Routledge 2017).

⁴⁴ Adam Kucharski, “Post-truth: Study epidemiology of fake news”, *Nature* 540 (22 dec 2016). See also, Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (Berlin: Peter Lang 2007).

⁴⁵ Foucault points out that an *apparatus* is often marked by “a process of functional overdetermination, because each effect – positive or negative, intentional or unintentional – enters into resonance or contradiction with the others and thereby calls for a re-adjustment or a reworking of the heterogeneous elements that surface at various points.” Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 195.

know-how, which can be learned and passed on to others. Reproducibility and learnability are among the key features of cultural techniques.⁴⁶

This intra-action of bodies and media can also be posed as physical orientations, which is how Sara Ahmed conceptualizes the issue of repetition and materiality:

Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary but are effects of the repetition of the 'tending toward.' Over time, we acquire our tendencies, as the acquisition of what is given. Bodies could be described as 'becoming given.'⁴⁷

The repetitive and reiterative performativity that has come to define the gendering of bodies in relation to discourse can thus explain a critical dimension of "medianaturecultures".

Discursive Perception: How Media Politicizes Senses

The performative agency of media raises another issue concerning the continuum between humans and non-humans, that of perception. The notion that sensory perception and the body itself are prior to discourse stems from latent Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Butler addresses the problem along the following lines: "In a sense, for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page; in order for this inscription to signify, however, that medium must itself be destroyed—that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values. Within the metaphors of this notion of cultural values is the figure of history as a relentless writing instrument, and the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for 'culture' to emerge. By maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, Foucault appears to assume a materiality prior to signification and form."⁴⁸ In her critique of Foucault, Butler points out that there is no body before discourse, and in line with this view we can readdress the issue of the politicization of media and sensory perception raised almost a century ago by Walter Benjamin.

The neologism "sensical" – as opposed to non-sensical – highlights the relationship between sensory perception and what is deemed possible to

⁴⁶ Vismann, "Cultural techniques and sovereignty," 87.

⁴⁷ Sara Ahmed, "Orientations matter," 247.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 166.

comprehend. In order for something to become culturally sensical it has to be sensory sensical, and in order for that to happen it needs to abide to a historically specific regulation of the body. This historical contingency shows that our sensory perception is always discursive. There is no such thing as a "pure sensory impression". As media are configured in accordance with such sensory sensicality, they tend to prefigure changes of patterns of perception. The performative agency of queer media thereby comes to have bearing on a bodily level of discourse.

Here we reach a point where media archaeology could be useful in understanding historical cultural configurations of the contingent construction of the body. This could be exemplified by a concept like synaesthesia, cross-sensory perception, which began in clinical discourse and was soon picked up by multiple European artists that had become convinced of the power of sensory perception. Actors like Wassily Kandinsky, Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Eisenstein developed media practices with a sensory a priori that often failed because of the difficulty in repeating and reproducing it technically. But the insight of the power of a sensorily attuned media apparatus came to occupy other actors like Leni Riefenstahl in her staging of propaganda. The key to this insight, which arguably still affects media habits, lies in the focus on sensory perception and affect. In other words, for a content to become discursively sensical it has to be sensorily sensical. Therein lies the performative agency of media to act as subversive or affirmative depending on historical circumstances. Thus, the conditions of possibility so essential to discourse are also produced through sensory embodiment. This theoretical argument can also explain how things can appear "out of nowhere", as it were, because of a media technological latency which is integral to its temporality.⁴⁹ The regulation of sensory impressions is guided by factors like temporality, repetition and memory. Drawing on Butler's thought, sensory perception can be understood as a construction. As Butler reminds us, "construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration."⁵⁰ The same holds true for sensory perception, and it is precisely the quantification of this construction that media technologies bring in. The possibility of a queer agency in this should be understood as an entanglement of humans and non-humans. This sensory/ discursive dimension of media and bodies as subversive/ affirmative has a

⁴⁹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press 2014).

⁵⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10.

long history reaching back to early Christian multi sensory practices of music, visual art, incense, and space which touches the body of a subject in a specific manner, which is reiterated as tradition and relates to cultural memory. Drawing on Donna Haraway, we can posit this continuum of performative repetitions taking place among humans and non-humans as medianaturecultures.⁵¹

Media history is full of examples of how a particular medium can at first produce affects like fear and appear to threaten a certain normative order. The well known examples of the printing press, photography, cinema, as well as the internet and digital computers have all carried utopian hopes of change for those acting in resistance to power, only to at a given moment become affirmative to the discursive order. The shifting agency of media seems to be contingent on the apparatus of which it forms part. And as stated earlier, the configurations of technological media devices are always discursive and often power affirming, but not always used as primarily intended, and this latency can in itself have a subversive effect, thus creating what can be defined as queer media.

⁵¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press 2016); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 2013).

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