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**Medium Specificity in the Digital Age: Synthesizing the Perspectives of Henry
Jenkins, Jane Feuer, Raymond Williams and Friedrich A. Kittler**

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“Stories are basic to all human cultures, [they are] the primary means by which we structure, share and make sense of our common experiences” (Jenkins:118).

Throughout history, technologies such as the printing press, the gramophone and the kinoscope have been developed to provide different ways in which people can engage with and consume stories. For example, we listen to stories on the radio, watch them on television, see them in plays, read them in books and experience them as we play games. The fact that each medium tells stories in a different way is referred to by Noel Carroll as the medium specificity thesis. Its basic argument is that each medium possesses characteristics which are inherently tied to the nature of its origin.

As we enter the digital age and more and more people have access to personal computers and high-speed internet, media convergence has the potential to alter the way that we engage with stories like never before. Many media scholars have speculated on how our vast mediascape is poised to change in the future. For example, Henry Jenkins’ discussion of transmedia storytelling in his book *Convergence Culture*, indicates that each medium still holds a special set of characteristics which no other medium could, or should, try to sufficiently duplicate. Other media scholars, like Jane Feuer (in *The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology*) and Raymond Williams (in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*), break down the characteristics of a specific form of media, namely television, explaining what it is about TV that makes it different from film. Still others, like Fredrick A. Kittler, see new technologies having a more far-

reaching impact. He thinks that computers and fiber optic networking will enable all media forms to become one and the same. As we navigate the arguments provided by these authors, I will sort out their views on how new technologies differ from old technologies and how spectators' subjectivities are impacted by these changes. Finally, I aim to draw these views back to a larger question of whether medium specificity exists or will exist in the digital age.

What is Medium Specificity?

Medium specific analysis is a topic, according to Katherine Hayles, that has been unnecessary or at least disregarded for the past five hundred years due to the dominance of print and literary analysis. Repositioning critical inquiry so that it can include the specificity of the medium allows for a more well-rounded concept of materiality. Materiality is the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies. This allows text to be seen as embodied while still focusing mainly on interpretation (Hayles: 67).

The temptation to think of text on screen as essentially identical to text on a printed page, simply because the words are the same, is all the more seductive because the computer is the most successful simulation machine ever created. It is crucially important, however, to recognize that the computer can simulate so successfully only because it differs profoundly from print in its physical properties.... (Hayles: 71)

As indicated by this quote from Kathrine Hayles, overlap can occur between different media. An example of this is the sticky note function on Macintosh computers which allows the user to "post" visual representations of sticky notes around her computer screen in the same way a person would use physical sticky notes to remind

herself to balance the checkbook or pick up the kids from the babysitter. Within this overlap, it is evident that the evolution of the medium depends on the purposes we find for it. “The medium has no secret purpose of its own” (Carroll: 9). Medium specific analysis will prove to be beneficial as we examine the impacts of the physical origin and aesthetics of specific media on our subjectivities as we talk more about media convergence in the digital age.

New Technology vs. Old Technology- What are the Differences?

Many of the communication technologies developed over the past fifty years have enabled art and culture to be accessed by a wider group of people than was previously possible. Television sets are now (oftentimes very important) pieces of furniture within the home that can be switched on at anytime connecting a person to the world around him. TV viewing sessions are often designed to be social experiences lasting an entire evening. In fact, when personal computers are added to the technological mix, television spectators can participate in online communities which are made up of people who come together to discuss a central topic related to a television show. Loyal viewers utilize these environments to speculate about and discuss characters, set locations and plots. Resulting from this, message boards, blogs and provide a hot-bed for collective intelligence to grow and inform, and engage individual viewers in way that weren't possible before. Viewers also have more control over their viewing experiences due to Digital Video Recorders (DVR) and Video On Demand (VOD) technologies. Furthermore, people are now watching television shows and movies on their personal computers while some videos are created for the sole purpose of viewing online. While engagement with media is certainly

being transformed, it might be short-sighted to assume that this transformation is due only to technological changes.

In the face of debates about media specificity and media convergence, one view is that each medium will and, in fact, should retain its inherent characteristics based on its cultural purpose *and* physical apparatus despite media convergence. Henry Jenkins offers an example of this argument which he supports as he discusses transmedia storytelling in his book *Convergence Culture*. He discusses various media franchises, such as *The Matrix*, *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*, which he says “are entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it can’t be contained by a single narrative” (Jenkins: 95). He describes a transmedia story as one that unfolds across multiple media with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole media franchise.

Jenkins’ concept of media convergence is based on the fact that each medium is better at doing at least one thing than the others; and if the creators’ purpose requires it, as in the case of large media franchises, each medium should be put to work doing what it does best. For *The Matrix*, it was to create an over arching, highly-profitable narrative that unfolded across a variety of media. “The media mix strategy, disperses content across broadcast media, portable devices, collectibles, and location-based amusement parks or arcades.(Jenkins: 110)” As the Wachowski brothers (creators of *the Matrix* franchise) crafted their transmedia narrative, it was important to them to collaborate with artists that were well qualified based on their experiences with a single medium. Each of the collaborators, then, worked within the world of *the Matrix*, but created a separate place which spectators could further engage with the story. It was important to make sure

each piece of the puzzle functioned as a stand alone product; though each one must offer consumers a little something more. Playing *The Matrix* video game, for example, allows the user to navigate around a physical space in a way that she cannot do while watching the movie or reading the comic book. The comic book might extend the storyline from the movie in a way that a smaller more dedicated audience would appreciate.

In short, Jenkins' perception of new and old technologies has become evident as we discuss transmedia storytelling. He sees all of the pieces of technology that exist coming together to aid in a massive storytelling mission so that the different technologies are pieces of the over-arching narrative puzzle. Unlike a puzzle, however, Jenkins notes that each technological piece can, and indeed should, stand alone. Most importantly for Jenkins, then, is the idea that each of the technologies used in the narrative scheme exists on its own while also playing a specific role in the overall narrative scheme.

Not surprisingly, other media scholars approach the issue of medium specificity from a different angle. Instead of focusing on many types of technologies, they aim their lenses at just one in order to explore its inherent characteristics, its historical journey and its own potential as a nexus for media convergence. Both Jane Feuer (in *The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology*) and Raymond Williams (in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*) have done just this. They discuss television and the aesthetics which they feel are indicative of television's essence as they compare it to film and other types of live media. Feuer asks the question regarding aesthetics, "Is television a thing-in-itself? Or is it merely a means of transmission for other processes of signification (cinema, news, "live" events)?" (12). And related to this: Should the aesthetics of television be historical and descriptive or an assumed essence of the

medium? (Feuer:12) Perhaps looking at how television differs from other types of media will help us better understand why the history and network practice of television is important to our larger discussion.

Raymond Williams provides a noteworthy description of how early television programming took shape:

Until the coming of broadcasting, the normal expectation was still of a discrete event or of a succession of discrete events. People took a book or a pamphlet or a newspaper, went out to a play or a concert or a meeting or a match, with a single predominant expectation and attitude. The social relationships set up in these various cultural events were specific and in some degree temporary. (88)

Early on, television worked within these traditions. Then, as the service extended, these items, still considered as discrete units were assembled into programmes. (88)

Eventually though, a problem of “mix and proportion” arose due to varying demographics among (English) viewers. The concept of “mix and proportion” refers to a desire on the part of the viewers for varied content. This desire arose due to the differences in social and educational backgrounds. Because of this, alternative programming was introduced. As niche markets continued to splinter and increase in number a need for more specialized content began to swell and multi-channel television programming as we know it today was conceived. Moreover, in discussing the historical development of TV, Williams points to a recent shift from the concept of sequence to the concept of sequence as *flow*. (Because this concept of *flow* is more an issue of aesthetics and subjectivity, it will be discussed in more detail in the second half of this essay). *Flow* is a series of planned programming units, shows, advertising, sound, etc. which together create a new communication phenomenon that is unique to television.

Feuer and Williams discuss the medium specificity of television describing its essence as one which is primarily aesthetic. However, they also show that television, as an early technology, unified previously discrete mediated experiences such as variety shows, plays, newspapers, magazines, lectures and football matches. This unification has created changes in people's engagement, essentially morphing them into cultural omnivores. In the second part of this essay, more detail about Feuer and Williams' specific aesthetic considerations will be provided.

Feuer's and Williams' discussion of TV as a medium that brings together different mediated experiences begs the question of whether or not we can apply the same theory of unification to the state of today's and the future's digital media environment. Friedrich A. Kittler does just this as he provides an emphatic discussion of technological convergence in his essay, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Kittler predicts that the development and wide-spread use of fiber optic networking will allow all distinct media forms to gel into a single, standardized medium. He says that the human senses, to which media plays, will be reduced to numbers: "imageless, soundless and wordless quantity" (Kittler: 2nd page of text). With numbers, anything is possible, he says, "Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, memory, transposition; scrambling, mapping – a total connection of all media on a digital base erases the notion of the medium itself" (Kittler: 2nd page of text).

Kittler nicely sums up his own view of technology by writing, "Instead of hooking up technologies to people, absolute knowledge can run as an endless loop" (2nd page of text). Because Kittler removes people from his discussion of technology in this way, I don't find his argument to be one that can be taken at face value. As we will see

later on, he argues that new technologies will create the potential for human consciousness to be “liberated” or unnecessary. He states that art is a means of storing time, “What was new about the storage capability of the phonograph and cinematograph, was their ability to store time.... Time is what determines the limits of all art” (Kittler 4th page of text). If Kittler is right, and art is stored time, the medium of delivery becomes unimportant. Kittler seems to be reducing the content of art to a value-neutral variable: time. If we consider his earlier statement that all information will be reduced to numbers in the age of media convergence, we start to note some similarities. Although I find merit in parts of Kittler’s argument, I also think that he contradicts himself when discussing the semantic differences between handwriting and typewriting. He notes that each of these types of writing hold different meanings. In a way, he’s illustrating exactly the opposite of his claim that all media can be combined into a single medium, and instead seems to be supporting Jenkins’ notion that each medium has its own specific purposes.

In sum, we have seen that there are different views regarding the way in which old and new technologies relate to one another. Henry Jenkins’ perspectives illustrate his belief that media forms will and should stay separate because they each have distinctive strengths that can be utilized and capitalized upon. Jane Feuer and Raymond Williams offer studies of a specific medium, in this case television, as an example of how media are born based on previously existing media conventions and morph into new entities complete with important technological and aesthetic elements. Television provides a unique example of this because in its early years it was also a unifying medium that allowed people to witness other forms of media (sports events, plays, town hall meetings, etc). We could argue, as Kittler’s argument seems to suggest, that TV might present an

historical model of media convergence to which we can compare our current media situation.

How do these differences in technologies impact the subjectivities of their users?

As media technologies change over time, so must our engagements with these technologies. Perhaps this is why our discussion of medium specificity is so important. If we can't locate one specific medium, how do we know when convergence is actually occurring? And, more importantly, what does media convergence mean for our future engagements with stories, art, educational material, entertainment, etc.? Whether our engagements could be considered the result or the cause of the change in media technologies is a question that, while interesting, might halt this discussion before it even gets started. Instead, it is useful to examine the quality of our engagements with forms of media as they correspond to new, changing and old technologies. Again, I will employ the perspectives of Henry Jenkins, Jane Feuer, Raymond Williams and Friedrich A. Kittler.

As Jenkins discusses transmedia storytelling he notes that stories have always intrigued humans and that new technologies allow for the emergence of new story structures. New story structures create complexity by expanding the range of narrative rather than pursuing a path with a beginning, a middle and an end. Transmedia texts have an inherent aspect of "addictive comprehension." It is almost a game in itself to locate information on certain topics. Going back to the example of *The Matrix*, the creators built the story across multiple forms of media on purpose. They did not, however, hand out a program with all of the secrets and the locations of the secrets listed for people to go find

as soon as they got home from the theater. Instead, people had to go out searching for more information. When they found it, they felt a sense of accomplishment and searched for more. Jenkins also says that, besides depending on technology, media mix strategies require participation on the part of consumers and that the distinction between authors, readers and interpreters of a text are blending into one circuit of expression. Each participant in the circuit is working to sustain the activity of others. The goal is to create common ground between diverse communities. Oftentimes, this takes form through the creation of semi-affiliated spinoffs, blogs, game modifications, etc. Finally, though, the underlying message behind transmedia storytelling is the ability for media franchises to increase their bottom line.

As we look back to the specific engagement of viewers with television, we discover that television is largely understood through our engagement with the content and not with the technology of video imaging media. In comparing TV with film, Feuer notes that the ontology of the television image consists of movement, process, “liveness” and presence. In contrast to film, television looks more “real” to us. Television is often presented as “live” even though in most cases it is not actually broadcast live. It is ever-present; we can turn it on at anytime. It feels more immediate, close, direct and spontaneous than film. Watching a film requires careful planning; we must either go out to a theater, go to the video store, or order a video from a DVD delivery service. The film is intended to be watched in one singular sitting requiring our full attention the whole time.

While it is true that both television programs and films can be watched now on a computer or by attaching a computer hard drive to a television set, the engagement with

the content might change. Are we more averse to advertising if we watch television programming on our computers? If so, maybe it is because we apply the same expectations we've acquired in dealing with our computers (less advertising), to the experience of television despite the fact that the content is the same. Raymond Williams argues that advertising on television works into the overall essence of television which he regards as *flow*. Williams suggests that “planned *flow*, is perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as technology and cultural form” (86). The *flow* is made up of a set of discrete units: advertising, programming, trailers, public service announcements, weather breaks, etc. Interruptions are the most visible characteristic which define the television experience. As a matter of fact, television is created with *flow* in mind (Williams: 93). You can do other things, while still being able to follow the *flow*. *Flow*, in this sense is used to hook viewers so that they will not change the channel and go to another network.

As we have looked at what makes television unique, we know there are other ways for us to consume video, live video nonetheless. Why is it, then, that we often choose to turn on the television instead of going to our computers to watch exactly the same content with fewer commercials? This discussion of television's essence reveals a specific set of spectatorial tendencies and expectations. While we can't argue that these tendencies and expectations exist for everyone, they certainly shape the way that technologies are employed by networks (who do loads of data collection on how people watch TV). Perhaps this reveals that people's subjectivities are extremely important to how we understand television. Although they have changed over a period of time, the way in which people engage with TV currently seems reluctant to change as we move

into a world where other opportunities exist. Perhaps subjectivities will change again based on increased exposure to current technologies or the advent of newer, even greater technologies. I suppose, the future will have to be the judge.

Kittler's argument that each medium will eventually combine as a result of the internet suggests one such change. If we take him at face value, implies that there will be no difference in how people engage with various forms of art/media. I think, however, that he aims to be understood on another level. Though he never articulates this, I feel that his tone suggests that the world is moving in a dangerous direction and that if all of our media combine into one, we will lose that which makes us human. He states,

Within the spectrum of the general data flow, television and radio, cinema and the postal service function like individual windows for one's sense perception. In contrast to the perfected optoelectronic future, today infrared radiation or radar echoes of approaching missiles are still sent over separate channels. Our systems of connected media can only distribute words, sounds and images as they are sent and received by people. Above all the systems do not compute data. (3rd page of the text)

As he discusses writing as a communication method later on, it becomes clear that he believes that the medium (and perhaps every medium) is unfit for storing anything more than what is presented (written). "Writing stores only the fact of its authorization. It celebrates the storing monopoly of the god who has created it" (7th page of the text). He also states that "as soon as optical and acoustical data can be put into some kind of media storage, people no longer need their memory. Its 'liberation' is its end" (10th page of the text). From these excerpts, it becomes more obvious that he assumes that a media convergence will have a profound impact (and perhaps already has) on our sensibilities. In fact what it is to be human, to have ideas and communicate them, will cease to exist as he understands it. Essentially, he is saying that media convergence will turn humans into

unthinking robots. “Above all, the optoelectronic channel will be immunized against disturbances that might randomize the beautiful patterns of bits behind the images and sounds. Immunized, that is against the bomb. For it is well known that nuclear explosions may...cripple the...computer network” (1st page of the text). His essay has moments of anarchy spattered throughout. It could also be argued that he feels that media convergence will provide the government one dangerously limited and severely unbalanced means of power.

Conclusion

In the previous pages, I have attempted to outline a variety of examples of medium specificity both in previous iterations of media and in today’s environment of media convergence. We have discussed differences in old and new technologies and the way in which these changes impact people’s subjectivities. We started our discussion with this question: Will medium specificity cease to exist in the digital age? While there is still no concrete answer to this question, I feel that we are now better able to provide some insight on this topic. As we have seen with television, it is often times more about the manner in which people engage with the technology that is important. We can say, then, that the essence of a medium might not be concretely linked to its original apparatus. As Jenkins points out, “It is our mind, after all that processes culture, not machines” (Quoting Manuel Castells: 129).

At minimum, this discussion has allowed us to uncover a dichotomy: a medium’s essence can be determined both by its original technological apparatus and by the purpose its users and designers carve out for it. Perhaps only the future can tell if

people's subjectivities are forever altered by media convergence, but I would suggest that changes in technology will arise again and again and that our subjectivities can only truly be categorized through this constant variable: change.

Outside Sources

Carroll, Noël. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 19, No. 4. (Winter, 1985), pp. 5-20.

Hayles, Katherine. *Poetics Today*, Vol. 25, Issue 1. (Spring, 2004), pp. 67-90.