

## “A MANIFESTO FOR CRITICAL MEDIA”

by: Eric S. Faden

### INTRODUCTION

The works in this issue were first shown at UCLA’s Critical Media Film Festival in April, 2007, and programmed by UCLA graduate students Adam Fish and Jason Skonieczny. The festival called for “theorized, historical, impractical, and experimental approaches to film production.” Given this wide call, there was an astonishing coherence to the films screened and they demonstrated what I think is a new and important type of scholarly communication.

I’m so convinced by this new form’s advantages that I, Eric Faden, hereby renounce my earthly, traditional, literary-bound scholarly practices. I vow to abstain from that most sacred but restricted of intellectual practices—the literary academic essay—no matter the temptation. From here forward I put my faith in media over text, screen over paper.

Thus, this is the last essay I’ll ever write.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

In 1998, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of French critic and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc’s inspiring essay “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Caméra Stylo,” I began making short films and videos in lieu of academic conference papers.<sup>1</sup> Astruc’s essay called for a new film practice that moved beyond both avant-garde abstraction *and* narrative story telling and embraced a full range of intellectual practices from filming philosophy to emulating the 17<sup>th</sup> century literary essay. My work imagined how traditional scholarship might appear as a moving image, and since it combined film, video, voice, text, music, sound, and computer animation, I updated Astruc’s phrase and called my work “media stylos.”

I embraced this practice because I felt film and media studies scholarship formally conflicted with the discipline’s subject matter. To explain, let me cite Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*.<sup>2</sup> In this seminal book, Ong locates two historical shifts in human communication: the move from an oral culture to an alphabetic culture (with Sumerian cuneiform script around 3500 BC) and then, with film, television, video, and new media’s invention, from an alphabetic culture to an electronic culture (which Ong calls “secondary orality”). Our discipline, caught in the swift current of the traditional academy’s literary river, swims upstream against Ong’s historical trajectory. For example, we are interested in film, video, and new media (electronic culture) but publish essays (alphabetic culture) and, even worse, we take these essays to conferences and *read them aloud* (oral culture).

Formally, we are going backwards. Critical media moves forward.

My first media stylos invaded the academy stealthily and subversively. In 1998, as a graduate student, I discovered that proposing a film or video to an academic film studies conference

resulted in immediate rejection (it still does nearly 10 years later). So, instead, using a sophisticated surrealist technique for generating proposals, I submitted the most conservative and traditional of paper proposals.<sup>3</sup> This technique guaranteed my acceptance to every conference I applied to. Once at the conference, I presented my media stylo (often on a topic entirely different than the panel at hand) instead of the randomly generated paper topic. This practice immediately injected some life into the conference proceedings while having the additional advantage of alienating my panel colleagues who chose to read their papers aloud. At the very least, my practice raised questions of how we conduct and present scholarship and I recommend this procedure for all graduate students approaching the job market.

### **CRITICAL MEDIA/THE MEDIA STYLO**

What is a media stylo or critical media (I use the terms interchangeably)? In short, it is using moving images to engage and critique themselves; moving images illustrating theory; or even moving images revealing the labor of their own construction. Of course, this practice has a long history called “the essay film” and a list of illustrious directors who have embraced this genre: Dziga Vertov, Harun Farocki, Chris Marker (the genre’s premiere auteur), Orson Welles, Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders, Ross McElwee, Michael Moore (arguably), and Jean-Luc Godard, among others. Indeed, it is Godard who most succinctly defined the genre as “research in the form of spectacle.”<sup>4</sup>

Two things distinguish the media stylo from the essay film: the practitioners and the exhibition setting. First, the above list of directors consists primarily of *filmmakers* who engaged scholarly or intellectual topics. Critical media, by contrast, is practiced by scholars who become filmmakers. I am by no means the first scholar to stumble upon the practice—think of Noël Burch, Thom Anderson, Trinh T. Min-ha, or Peter Wollen—but the practice has become much more accessible to scholars in the last decade with digital video; a multitude of films available for viewing and *re-viewing*; critical commentary on VHS and DVD; and computer-based non-linear editing workstations.

In essence, just as word processing comes standard with a computer to compose essays, Final Cut Pro, iMovie, or Avid (or whatever the software platform du jour) will become the standard for creating media stylos. Indeed, our students increasingly arrive in the classroom having already experimented with moving images to create or critique meaning (imagine saying that 10 years ago). Of course, talent and creativity are still necessary but, unfortunately, not essential skills. Knowing how to technically use Microsoft Word doesn’t necessarily make for a good writer and the same goes for filmmaking. Especially for creating media, more people are learning the technical ability to create works but fewer are learning the aesthetic sensibilities to create *interesting* works. This gap between technique and aesthetics presents a crucial opportunity for critical media. Indeed, this is why Lars Von Trier warned in the Dogme ’95 manifesto that the avant-garde must take on an educating function particularly during times of technological democratization.<sup>5</sup> Just because anyone *can* make a movie doesn’t mean they *should*. Our job as educators now turns on the teaching of critical innovation over technical skills.

The exhibition setting provides the second difference between an essay film and a media stylo. Traditionally an essay film has been made, however humbly, for theatrical exhibition perhaps in

limited release for major cities, an occasional film festival, then to museums and film societies, and eventually onto VHS or DVD often as part of a university collection. The media stylo, by contrast, is designed initially to move across a series of potential platforms from classroom to conference presentation to web streaming. The media stylo increasingly does not have a physical form (film, DVD or VHS) but exists only as a media file (Quicktime, Flash, MPEG) to facilitate its viral transmission. Initially, my works replaced conference presentations but with the electronic journal's invention the media stylo increasingly equates to the scholarly journal article.

Yet, I should qualify what I mean by electronic journal. Many electronic journals exist as the most insipid of scholarly creatures—merely old technology disguised as the new. This situation reminds me of Marx's remark that the first trains looked like horses.<sup>6</sup> In some ways, it should come as no surprise then that with the Internet's amazing infrastructure of global computers and the extraordinary multimedia possibilities for electrifying scholarship, that the electronic journal initially replicates the traditional text-based scholarly journal but on a computer screen—same dense content now only more difficult to read and use! Like the threat of digital projection in cinemas, the advantages all go to the distributor in terms of cost and time savings while the audience begrudgingly accepts the same old form dressed up in new but ill-fitting technological clothes. The media stylo remedies this situation by critically engaging film, video, and new media on their own ground and with new media's own tools, techniques, and technologies.

### **DIFFERENCES AND ADVANTAGES**

Importantly, the media stylo does not *replace* traditional scholarship. This is a *new* practice *beyond* traditional scholarship. So how does critical media differ from traditional scholarship and what advantages does it offer? First, as you will see with the works in this issue, critical media demonstrates a shift in rhetorical mode. The traditional essay is argumentative—thesis, evidence, conclusion. Traditional scholarship aspires to exhaustion, to be the definitive, end-all-be-all, last word on a particular subject. The media stylo, by contrast, suggests possibilities—it is not the end of scholarly inquiry; it is the beginning. It explores and experiments and is designed just as much to inspire as to convince.

Indeed, this situation mirrors Ong's argument on how poetry changed from oral to alphabetic culture. Initially, poetry—as an oral medium—had an important mnemonic function: rhyming, verse structure, and formula patterns aided memorization and recall. Thus poetry was an oral medium for storing information, traditions, and history. Yet, with the alphabet's invention, a new storage medium arrived. Suddenly, poetry no longer had to store information because we could write things down. Thus, poetry for the first time could work differently. It took on an aesthetic rather than mnemonic function. And importantly, one communication culture did not trump another—we did not stop speaking when the alphabet was invented; we just spoke differently. So, poetry did not end with the alphabet's invention but it did change.

Similarly, scholarship in an electronic culture does not abandon the tools and techniques of oral or alphabetic culture; it simply can use them in new ways. In a key difference, the media stylo moves scholarship beyond just creating knowledge and takes on an aesthetic, poetic function. Critical media, unlike say the traditional journal article, should evoke the same pleasure, mystery, allure, and seduction as the very movies that initiated our scholarly inquiry.

Given the variety of media it incorporates (image, sound, text), the media stylo illustrates ideas and concepts difficult to convey through text alone (and hence its special affinity toward film and media studies). At the very least, the media stylo's most basic advantage is presenting media (let us say a film clip) rather than describing it textually. Moreover, this mixture of media allows for mixing rhetorical modes—from scholarly analysis, to hypothetical scenarios, outright fictions (like claiming an essay to be your last), expository information, narrative storytelling, and even, perhaps most importantly, poetics. Indeed, in a second advantage, mixing rhetorical modes initiates a critical function in the spectator—they no longer just think about the media stylo's content but also its *form*.

Thus, the successful media stylo creator must consider formal issues in addition to content. Prior to the media stylo, scholars gave very little attention to form because it more or less had already been decided for them. Journal articles had a fixed rhetorical mode (argumentation) and a fixed formal look—sentences that formed paragraphs flowing top-to-bottom and left-to-right on the page with an inch or so margin. Similarly, conference presentations usually start with a bad joke, followed by a pre-emptive, apologetic plea that the paper is “part of a larger project,” followed by a 20+ minute monotone paper reading. To paraphrase Andre Bazin, we—as critical media creators—now have to think about what we present and *how we present*.<sup>7</sup> The scholar must consider ideas of image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm, etc. In effect, we have to deal with the very same problems that our subjects deal with. And by grappling with these problems first hand, scholars instantly improve their critical and teaching skills. Quite simply, once you make a movie (or attempt to do so), you never look at another film the same way again.

Other advantages remain more basic. Media stylos are quite simply efficient—imagine presenting a film clip while simultaneously commenting on it. You can convey a tremendous amount of information in a 20-minute media stylo versus 20-minutes of reading a journal article. For conferences, media stylo presentations are now blessedly timed . . . no more going over your allotted 20 minutes. Critical media encourages collaboration—a perfect opportunity to work with colleagues and students. And, to pick up on an earlier point, our students are media producers, like it or not. If we ever hope to fulfill Astruc's vision we need to teach students by becoming producers ourselves and inventing new forms, genres, and techniques. And we need to teach them how to invent so they use media technology's full potential rather than forever emulating what came before.

### **THE FUTURE:**

As I see it, two issues need addressing to institute critical media as a scholarly practice. First, creating new media needs more widespread acceptance by the academy. Some encouraging signs have already appeared. For instance, a recent MLA report on tenure and promotion strongly encouraged institutions to recognize new media as a scholarly practice.<sup>8</sup> In my case, I insisted that film/video work count as scholarship in my contract and I was fortunate that my institution readily agreed (indeed they admitted it was one of the reasons for hiring me). I suggest new faculty make similar demands in their contracts. Our professional organizations (SCMS and UFVA) can help legitimize this practice by recognizing critical media as a practice standing *between* the conference panel and the conference screening at annual meetings.

Second, we need to face the looming specter of copyright and fair use. While the media stylo easily incorporates all media types, until recently, it has been difficult to find legitimate distribution for these works out of fear of copyright litigation. Clearly, scholars need to responsibly differentiate between piracy and fair use and I'm not advocating infringing uses of copyrighted material. At the same time, I adamantly demand scholars defend their right to use copyrighted material lawfully under the fair use provision for educational and critical purposes.

In this area too though, there have been some encouraging signs. First, in an unintended side effect, I think the rampant increase in piracy has put fair use issues on the legal back burner for some copyright holders. In effect, copyright holders are now so technologically overwhelmed by outright theft, that fair use has become a lesser concern. Second, electronic journals are increasingly recognizing fair use as a legitimate practice. Moreover, even some commercial film and DVD distributors are embracing fair use—think of Thom Anderson's *L.A. Plays Itself* or Kirby Dick's *This Film is Not Yet Rated* both of which used extensive amounts of copyrighted film clips under the fair use provision. Indeed my most recent work, *A Fair(y) Use Tale*, expressly pushes fair use's boundaries by exclusively using only copyrighted footage (of Disney films no less) to construct the work.<sup>9</sup> In addition, thanks to the University of Pennsylvania's Peter DeCherney, Katherine Sender, and others, Congress has recently recognized film scholars need to circumvent anti-copying protections on DVD for scholarly purposes.<sup>10</sup> Other institutions like Stanford Law School's Fair Use Project or American University's "Best Practices in Documentary Filmmaking," have raised awareness about copyright plus clarified and supported fair use claims.<sup>11</sup>

I think both of the above issues, though complex and bureaucratic, will inevitably yield to critical media. Thus, contained within this issue of *Mediascape*, is what I hope to be a hint of future film/media scholarship. Enjoy.



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<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Astruc. "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde:Le Caméra-Stylo." Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader. Ed. Timothy Corrigan. Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999. 158-162.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Ong. Orality and Literacy. New York: Routledge, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> The technique randomly assigned an index of academic jargon but required the words "post" "other," and "theory," plus one colon, a word in quotes, and at least two commas in the title. For

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example, one of my favorites: “Post-classical cinema and James Joyce: feminist theory, the spectatorial ‘other,’ and the Asian diaspora.”

<sup>4</sup> Tom Milne, ed. Godard on Godard. New York: Da Capo, 1986. 181.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.dogme95.dk/the\\_vow/index.htm](http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/index.htm)

<sup>6</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss. The Dialectics of Seeing. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989.115.

<sup>7</sup> Andre Bazin. “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.” What is Cinema? Vol. 1. Ed. Hugh Gray. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967. 30.

<sup>8</sup> See [http://www.mla.org/tenure\\_promotion](http://www.mla.org/tenure_promotion)

<sup>9</sup> See <http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/documentary-film-program/a-fair-y-use-tale>

<sup>10</sup> See Katherine Sender and Peter DeCherney. “Defending Fair Use in the Age of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.” International Journal of Communication (1, 2007): 136-142.

<sup>11</sup> See <<http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/node/3136>> and

<[http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/fair\\_use/](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/fair_use/)>.