Body Politics in an Age of Ubiquitous Media

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Introduction: Retro is Always Cool

Many theorists have argued that flows of capital, information, bodies and media place the majority of Euro-America in a condition of hyper- (according to Jean-Joseph Goux) or post- modernity (according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, David Harvey and Arjun Appadurai). If this is the case then certain concepts and categories used to analyse modernity cannot always easily apply, such as Foucault's body of disciplinarity whose productive docility is reproduced by institutions and accounted for discourses that produce the relations of power/knowledge to which they refer and, in some place, by an explanation of power as biopower. If we have a different and generalisable post – or hyper – modern conjuncture of these flows called body, then, as media researchers interested in how this generalisable experience is imbricated with media, we would like to turn to a media theory account of modernity to gain purchase on the present - and suggest that the work of Friedrich Kittler on literature, together with theories of the pre-modern, gothic body, provide an opportunity to outline a generalisable mediatised body of the present.

Facebook

It might seem retro to bring up the body in a decade where it seems passé in preference to information, cybernetics, networks or code. It has been some time since *Bodies that Matter* (1993). However the recent explosion of social networking was not occuring when bodies mattered (and so was not mined) and 2.0 social media now offer an opportunity to re-visit this site and assess work that is re-defining a contemporary generalisable experience (given that roughly one in ten people or groups now have profiles on Facebook) in relation to historical notions of the body as always already in conjuncture with media.

Given the variability of uses of the social networking service, we start from the assumption that Facebook is a an interstitial, multivalent or multistable technology - an in between different states or options that is capable of realising radically different political values. Facebook has now famously been implicated in protests in North Africa. However it is also used to organise annual, International Pillow Fight day and a veritable plethora of other gatherings. A generalised experience of imbrication in ubiquitously socially networked practices, profiles and personae, fits the general remit of post-disciplinarity that is only intimated by Deleuze in 'Post-script on Control Societies', as what would emerge after the dissolution of distinctly modern, or post late eighteenth century, institutional walls and divisions. Within these conditions, we would like to explore Facebook's multistability as a medium – or its position between what can be viewed as progressive and regressive political possibilities of its practice. Facebook provides us with an opportunity to explore and assess available historico-theoretico accounts of the body, in its relation to media, and to explore the possibility of an account of this body that is apposite to current conditions of post-disciplinarity.

Facebook: An Architecture of Conviviality

In one article, a version of which appeared in *2010 in First Monday* , we argue that Facebook's platform produces and re-deploys an architecture of conviviality. We would like to reiterate a few examples of this conviviality for it sparked our current research. Users of Facebook surely have been struck by the varied ways that the site cultivates gregarity and interaction and the manner in which the service faithfully structures and supports sociality and connection. The the main imperative of commercial social media must be promotional in order to keep their sites up, commercial imperatives also, we suggest, produce a structure of knowledge in a particular form: user interaction based on agreement and 'liking' and distinctly adverse to disagreement and debate.

Facebook exemplifies a method of generating and circulating information that encourages the expansion of interconnections between users (rather than discretion and selectivity), that fosters the disclosure of concerns of favourable interest to those already in relation (rather than the articulation of internal dissent and difference), that facilitates the expression of likes and invitations (but not dislikes and disinclinations), and that foregrounds every new friendship and connection (while suppressing news of severance and deletion). Facebook is in this sense above all *convivial.*. 'Convivial' is a term whose meaning and etymology suggest a celebration of togetherness.

When practising social networking within a platform based on conviviality, expressions of reservation, nuance and qualification are made difficult if not impossible; and negativity, in both its everyday and dialectical senses is avoided. There are few if any invitations to express dislike or disinclination to the items appearing on one's homepage and there are even fewer ways to note that which is "not" (to register an absence, to observe an omission or to be faced with exclusion in general). Negation can be expressed in language but Facebook, even though it it largely verbally based, systematically curbs full expression by enforcing conviviality through a myriad of careful design decisions. All of these processes of selection, identification and foregrounding necessarily involve exclusion, suppression and elimination of other possibilities. However, these "negative" processes are relegated to the software behind the system, and are not readily accessible to users. Instead, the user only sees more and more potential friends and ongoing opportunities for conviviality.

Since gregarious behaviour is rewarded on Facebook, seeing others' approval of a resource will draw ever more attention to it. A hypothetical Dislike button has none of these advantages. Such a feature would only lead, according to Cashmore (2010),

> [to] significant tension between Facebook, brands, and web publishers. [For,] [i[magine if Facebook users could not only choose to "Like" Coca-Cola, but were also provided the option to "Dislike" the brand. Would Facebook become a more appealing place for brands to spend their marketing budgets and ad dollars ... or a less appealing one? Now imagine that websites could add "Dislike" buttons to their pages. Would web publishers rush to add this option, desperate for the negative feedback from their visitors? (Cashmore, 2010, n.p.)

To provide the option of expressing dislike for a brand like Coca-Cola is contrary to Facebook's business interests. As a result, users are deprived of even the most rudimentary affordance for expressing negation, disapproval or dissent.

Facebook's relentless conviviality puts into question its potential for adaptation to educational purposes, for example, or as a medium for communication that might be a part of something like a public sphere. Some have seen Facebook, and its widespread use by students, as presenting a challenge which schools and universities urgently need to address. Their argument is that youth have been socialized to interact, to use language and even to think and learn through Facebook, texting, and their idiosyncratic geniality and thereby schools must address them on these terms. Some further suggest that knowledge itself can be seen as embodied in ever growing networks of connection and affiliation, and as being constructed through processes of building and traversing these proliferating nodes and links.

However, dialogical and collaborative models of education from John Dewey to recent research in "Computer Supported Collaborative Learning" emphasize the role disagreement, dissent and differentiation at least as much as commonality, conviviality and consensus. A similar argument could be made in the case of the type of "public" participation and communication that is associated with the public sphere. Defined as "an arena of... discursive relations" mediating between the state and the private realm, Habermas describes the public sphere as a place where citizens could be engaged "in a debate over the...rules governing relations in the...privatized sphere of commodity exchange and social labor." In this context Facebook again appears multivalent; its commercial underpinnings make the role of commodity exchange and social labour indispensable to its operations and design. Despite its widespread or public availability, Facebook is clearly not a place marked by a public debate about state regulation of the privatized sphere of property, commodity and labour.

Facebook: A Tool in North Africa

However, when we turn to the footage and stills of Tahrir square in February or earlier developments in Tunisia, we see the platform being hailed by some activists leaders as an emancipatory technology. Facebook's use, possibly as a tool for agreeing rapidly, seems to have helped protests against governments in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. Its role in these events could constitute an extensive study but international media commonly reported that once gathering in Tahrir square, Egyptian authorities shut off the internet so that people could no longer organise via it. In addition, the government in Tunisia is reported to have blocked some internet addresses and uers and to have created others for the purposes of manipulation and entrapment. Signs thanking Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder, appearing in both Egypt and Tunisia, are some very, very prelimiary evidence that social networking was playing a role. After a few days offline, some protestors reported that they were able to organise without the internet and social networking, because they were a 'living facebook' and, we would hasten to say, virtual social networking *had* provided a frame of reference through which related activities in the "real" world were and continue to be described and understood.

Given our completed research about the restrictions of an architecture on conviviality for formal education, as well as the variability of Facebook's use - the ability for it to be taken in the direction of arranging an internatioanl pillow fight, annually, or a pro-democracy national demonstration, our initial assessment of Facebook's limitations for learning due to conviviality warrants some revision in the face of its polyvalence of use. Facebook offers us an opportunity to explore the generalised user - nearly one in ten if some accounts are correct, as a way of assessing available historico-theoretico accounts of a specifically *socially* mediatised body and what its body politics, due to its historical constitution,

might be.

Facebook: User Profiling

For many digital media theorists, including Henry Jenkins, the avatar in gaming and other virtual environments, as a construction unique to an online era, has influenced theories of somatic experience since the mid-nineties and updated notions of the cyborg as never unplugged from its gaming, entertainment and now socialising. Briefly put for social networking, Facebook users have the freedom to create an online profile connecting with old friends and making new ones by volunteering information, that they may creatively construct, on their age, gender, marital status, workplace, home and more. In return, Facebook uses this information to define, with great precision, advertising targeted individually to each user. In exchange for this 'free use', users have the freedom to use the technology to arrange the largest pro-democracy demonstration in recent Egyptian history or to stage international pillow fight day, annually. Facebook users configure themselves in their profile information, and use that profile, so variously that perhaps the only common classification could be, that users commonly create avatars of themselves in accordance with the limited freedoms of the site. In the wake of the dissolving walls of the institutions of the school, the asylum and the clinic, what sort of body is this that is not institutionally confined - yet ever-connected to its possibility for frivolity and democracy?

Connective Bodies

The practices of the socially mediatised body appear diffuse and distinctly unlike the docile body of modernity and disciplinarity. According to Foucault this body was the result, in large part, of new practices of anatomy and autopsy of the late eighteenth century in Europe that inscribed a dense body with organs where disease and illness resided rather than one always subjected to influence by movements of the soul and outside movements of spirits. He outlines how new anatomical knowledge eclipsed a prior experience of the body as one composed of diffuse movements of humours, vapours and spirits and that rendered 'the body' always connected to and influenced by an outside, its other or its madness. In *Madness and Civilisation* the pre-modern body's relation to its outside was the site of its relation to its own madness (or its otherness that it wrestled with), in being so close to and influenced by movements of otherness beyond the strict bodily boundaries. And the establishment of the institution of the asylum was tantamount to an effort to destroy Man's mad other within itself, in the effort to get to know the site of its origins within the body, to isolate the rest from the proximate causes of its torments, and eventually, with implements to discover a greater depth of interiority, to dissolve the threat of madness entirely. In fact in this description of the pre-modern body, we find a fruitful place to turn.

Facebook and the Technological Inscription of the Body

Friedrich Kittler famously made the transformation from literary studies to media history as is evident in his early essay, 'Dracula's Legacy' in *Literature, Media, Information Systems* (1997). For Kittler, literature is to be understood as a component in a broader inscriptive or discourse network, whose form is determined by changing configurations of technologies, media and their materiality. The body is

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intimately connected to these material networks. As David Welbery explains in his introduction to *Discourse Networks*,

> The body is the site upon which the various technologies of our culture inscribe themselves, the connecting link to which and from which our medial means of processing, storage, and transmission run. Indeed, in its nervous system, the body itself is a medial apparatus and an elaborate technology. But it is also radically historical in the sense that it is shaped and reshaped by the networks to which it is conjoined. (Welbery, 1992)

Literature performs and is a by-product of this shaping and inscription (Ostrow, 1997). In 'Dracula's Legacy' (1997), for example, Kittler comes to the surprising conclusion that "Stoker's Dracula is no vampire novel, but rather the written account of our bureaucratization. "The Count's undoing, as Gill Partington explains, does not occur through a vampire-slaying wooden stake in the heart, but

> the typewriter belonging to the hero's unassuming fiancé, Mina Harker, who tirelessly collates, transcribes, and relays the newspaper reports, journals, shorthand diary entries, and phonograph recordings necessary to track down the vampire. (Partington, 2006: 53)

It is a new system of information that apparently undoes him. As Winthrop-Young states, the vampire is brought down by an early version of Interpol in, as Kittler writes, a 'heroic epic of the final victory of technological media over the blood-sucking despots of old Europe' (Kittler, 1999: 86). 'Dracula is aware of the danger he is in [Winthrop-Young reminds] and at one point destroys all the manuscripts and Seward's phonograph cylinders, but he does not realise that there are copies in the safe. The undead stand no chance against the power of mechanical reproduction' (Winthrop-Young, 2011: 69-70), but are they so effectively repelled by digital reproduction?

As Partington states, 'Kittler's interest lies not primarily in the novel's *fin-de-siecle* Gothic horror tropes' but to 'flows of information afforded by new media storage technologies' (Partington, 2006: 53). This is true, but we would like to argue that it is precisely in its gothic horror tropes, and their unavoidable inclusion in Kittler's analysis *that* our interests lies. For in these descriptions/references, we believe, lurks a diffuse figuration of the body most relevant to our contemporary concerns.

Kittler's argument in "Dracula's Legacy," as in his book, *Discourse Networks*, pivots on the epochal distinction between the mediatic configurations of 1800 and of 1900. For 1800, the body (insofar as it is important in this era) is the site of a reflective interiority and spirit, of meaning which is organically integrated into the mediatic system through the authorial hand and its "flowing, cursive" writing. It would be exemplified in the neoclassical portraits of the young Goethe or Schiller. In 1900, physiology is absolutely central. The body is "the human information machine" whose "subroutines" can be specified and interfaced to other information machines in anatomically precise ways. By 1900, 'the difference is that livers, spleens, and kidneys were seen as separate organs, whereas speaking, writing, hearing or reading were traditionally subsumed under grandiose headings such as *Geist* or *Bewusstein* (spirit of consciousness)' (Winthrop-Young, 2011, 61). The perceptual contingencies of persistence of vision, for example, become the interface for film and televisual media, while similar capacities and limitations in human aural perception become leverage points for telephone and radio compression and transmission.

The gothic or neo-gothic body is neither of these. In its hybridity, it incorporates elements of both: For example, it partakes in the world of spirit associated with the discourse network of 1800. But for the gothic body, this world of spirits is one much closer to the furies pursuing Foucault's tormented mad people, and all late eighteenth century citizens who were in closer proximity to the otherness of their own madness, than their brethren who confined madness, as well as the spirit of, say, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. And for Botting (2008), the world of spirits often makes its appearance through vampires. Dracula, marked 'the end of gothic' (Botting, 2008: 1), according to Botting, where the gothic 'body' characteristically experiences excesses or non-organistic energies. These causal energies are often enacted by monsters or vampires because they are 'as associated with instinctual, primitive and animalistic energies' (Botting, 2008: 4). And at the end of the gothic period, booked-ended by Dracula, 'monsters...find themselves increasingly humanised' (Botting, 2008: 1) as the fright goes in to, since quelled by, the machine.

The gothic body is also one that is intimately connected with technology. Writing of new technologies and post-human possibilities, Mark Poster has recently noted 'that the dark tale of technology as being from the dark lagoon is, perhaps then, narrativized as a romance with an alien cyborg, a monster who is always already none other than ourselves' (Poster, 2002). Increasingly uneven, insecure borders or boundaries between beings, otherness, and the otherness of ourselves re-occurs in our current technological and mediatic condition.

It is a pre-modern body that exists in relation to media in a manner that is more diffuse than the anatomical-physical body that is defined by the institutions and disciplines of Foucault, or of the analog media and experimental apparatuses of Kittler. Hogle (1998) Hurley (1996) and others have also suggested that a pre-modern, gothic 'body' or diffuse somatic experience in *medias res* with media appears now more than Foucault's account of docility and biopower of modernity. Kittler notes *perceptively* in Dracula's Legacy that "the killing of the count is not effective according to the novel's own standards: he is dispatched with a knife, rather than the prescribed stake to the heart, and that as a consequence, "it necessarily follows that Dracula is still lurking somewhere". He writes,

> Regardless of whether Vlad the Impaler once ruled with gruesomely precise commands, his *shadow* Dracula - as he alone survives under technological conditions - has become nothing more than the stochastic noise of the information channels. (Kittler, 1997, *emphasis added*)

Given that we have many more information channels than the time of Kittler's essay writing, it would be little wonder if this noise was now a roar that signalled a lurking shadow taking increasingly figurative form. We are making the case that current technological conditions are particularly accommodating for Dracula, vampires, and by extension, the gothic 'body' –much more so than under the conditions of mechanical reproduction which are nearly Dracula' undoing in Bram Stoker's novel. However, in our digital age of information processing and excessing, vampirism survives in the form of the at once meaningful and meaningless (since created but endlessly copied), profiles and avatars that are our virtual online doppelgangers. We are in constant contact with our otherness.

In drawing this paper to a close, what is important about the neo-gothic body is that it, too, has a liminality akin to the medium we have studied. Neither entirely animal, spiritual or technological, its actions share the capability and multistability of the social medium that is the object of our study: it can amass a quadrangle for a pillowfight or be mobilized in a city square to effectively delegitimize government. Its apparent characteristics can serve as the basis for target marketing with pinpoint

precision, or to enable new alignments and alliances for social action. It is a condition in which its user is neither fully determined or determining but haunted by channels of filiation, association, including oneself, and materializing at most unexpected junctures.

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