

Deform, Destroy, Erase: On the Residue of Cultural Techniques

I find myself pondering over probing as an analytical exercise in which things—here, ideas, texts, media objects, to name a few—are handled and investigated, gently quite gently, in hopes that they offer something back in substance, whether it's answers or questions. And I can't help but turn to a book of probes for an example of how to structure this: Marshall McLuhan's Book of Probes (2003), in fact—a text that could belong in any media classroom as well as on top of any coffee table for its probey photographs (often featuring pointy probe-like items like cactuses that look like fingers) and single, grandiose aphorisms-per-page. His observations about media, literacy, and culture probe and puncture, not at all gently, but like someone shaking you.

He used to say that the house was already on fire and that he was just trying to let you know.

The aphorisms, McLuhan's probes, lift you from the "ground" up into what he called the "anti-environment." The ground was water, the figure was a fish, he said. You have to get out to see the bowl. Suspended with an Archimedean vantage point, seeing the system from above: this is a great place to start probing cultural techniques, since we're often too caught in the weeds (little plastic figurines in a tank?) to see them.

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Maybe I'll start by saying: I have to present a conference paper on Sunday on the failure of critique. I'll be focusing on the rise of methodological performativity in the worst neoliberal sense of the word and will be moving toward critical performance through methods of deformance, and I mean

this in the way that Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels (1999) describe it: deliberately misreading in order to reveal what otherwise might be missed or even “not text” proper.

As I read Bernhard Siegert’s “Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory” (2013), translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, I thought about what might be revealed in the process of thinking about cultural techniques and how they might undergo their own kind of deformance or deformative reading to reveal their presence. With cultural techniques, as I’ll explain, there’s not just a move from ontological reason to post-hermeneutic ontic analysis. There also seems to be—at least in the way Siegert proposes through his described third, fourth, and fifth theoretical profilings of cultural techniques—the intention to shine light not into dark spaces but on cultural techniques to reveal darkness itself: the fact that they are structural media(tors) that *are* inconspicuous, the “abyss of non-meaning in and from which media operate” (Siegert 4). In their shadowy-ness but ever-presence, I want to read into this abyss, this warzone, for the residue left behind in and as cultural objects and structures, including urban spaces, annotations, the visual image, content management systems, archival inscription, and mass-produced quotidian objects like Ikea tables about which we care so little as tables that we’re modding them into arcade emulators.

First, and don’t worry, I won’t mention any of this in my talk, I’ll go over why German and Anglo-American approaches to media have been divided, as Siegert notes, through their separate arguments that the critique of reason has become a critique of media and of culture, respectively. I don’t have the space (nor your blog-based attention, perhaps) to get into the specifics, so here’s some background info and a summary:

- as part of his description of the critique of pure reason, Immanuel Kant distinguishes between noumena (things as they are in reality) and phenomena (things as

- they are received and experienced by the human subject);
- Siegert describes a shift in focus in German media theory from the ontological to the ontic, meaning *not* the phenomenological, but the noumenal (the object) (Siegert 11)
 - in German media theory, the subjectivity implied in a phenomenological approach gives way to a focus on materiality. Concurrently, this critical shift away from the human as central paves the way for the posthuman (away from anthropocentrism) and post-structuralism (towards difference and multiplicity).

So why are cultural techniques residual? From the anti-hermeneutic approach of early 80s to late 90s, German media theory amplifies its focus on “those insignificant, unprepossessing technologies that underlie the constitution of meaning and tend to escape our usual methods of understanding” (Siegert 4), adopting a post-hermeneutic approach in the late 90s to present that thinks about the “abyss of non-meaning in and from which media operate” (4). This post-hermeneutical approach still branches away from Habermasian public spheres (some mountain to the German abyss).

This post-hermeneutic approach is adapted from agricultural considerations of factors that are not always obvious but that come to shape structures of farming:

The corrals, pens and enclosures that separate hunter from prey (and that in the course of co-evolutionary domestication accentuate the anthropological difference between humans and animals), the line the plough draws across the soil, and the calendar that informs sowing, harvesting and associated rituals, are all archaic cultural techniques of hominization, time and space. (Siegert 9)

In the same vein, for a post-hermeneutic, post-war German media theory, cultural techniques are those underpinning

structures of regulation and mediation that are foundational to cultural operation, including:

inconspicuous technologies of knowledge (e.g., index cards, writing tools and typewriters), discourse operators (e.g., quotation marks), pedagogical media (e.g. blackboards), unclassifiable media such as phonographs or stamps, instruments like the piano, and disciplining techniques (e.g. language acquisition and alphabetization. (Siegert 3)

I've been thinking for some time about the lack of transparency of material contexts, conditions, and politics at the stage of content reception in media. My dissertation argued that by reading for what is erased, you can reveal what is unwanted: not just materials, but also non-dominant histories and the systems of power that keep them invisible. What continues to matter to me, then, is the question of residue and residual media:

Q: What leaves residue in media?

A: What is not seen. What is not legible as "text." But also what has been tampered with (but not always in a way that calls attention).

In other words—and here I really owe much to Alan Liu's (2004) description of the lack of historical consciousness as a kind of shadow of post-industrial and informatic "knowledge work" (7; 72)—the residual exists as a kind of eclipse or shadow that marks a structure (it gestures at and molds it) but that is not necessarily to be seen. I go into this shadow metaphor a lot more elsewhere (see Fan 2014). Thinking of points on one structural node to another, we might bud out and branch off from one node in a line of flight in order to etch out a picture, awareness, and understanding of cultural techniques. What I mean to suggest is that this shadow, this residual haunt, is always already a position of difference, an anti-environment from which it is possible to (maybe we must)

engage in cultural techniques' "potential self-reference or 'pragmatics of recursion'" (theoretical profiling #3), question a "real, 'natural' order of things" (#4), and "destabilize cultural codes, erase signs and deterritorialize sounds and images" (#5) (Siegert 12, 14, 15).

The residual is already there in the inconspicuousness or invisibility of cultural techniques. Its appearing and critical value arise from a recursivity with and reflection upon cultural techniques in order to reveal their technicities—including why and how they are residual in the first place.

Anyway, let's see what this looks like in real cultural techniques as structural media(tors) against which I will identify acts to reveal the residual or objects in which residue appears through a sort of anarchic mantra: deform, destroy, erase.

1. Act/object: Graffiti



CT: streets, urban spaces, buildings, walls

Style: vandalism and the defamiliarization of everyday spaces as a way to tamper with their authority, homogeneity, and sterilization

2. Act/object: Writing *sous rature*

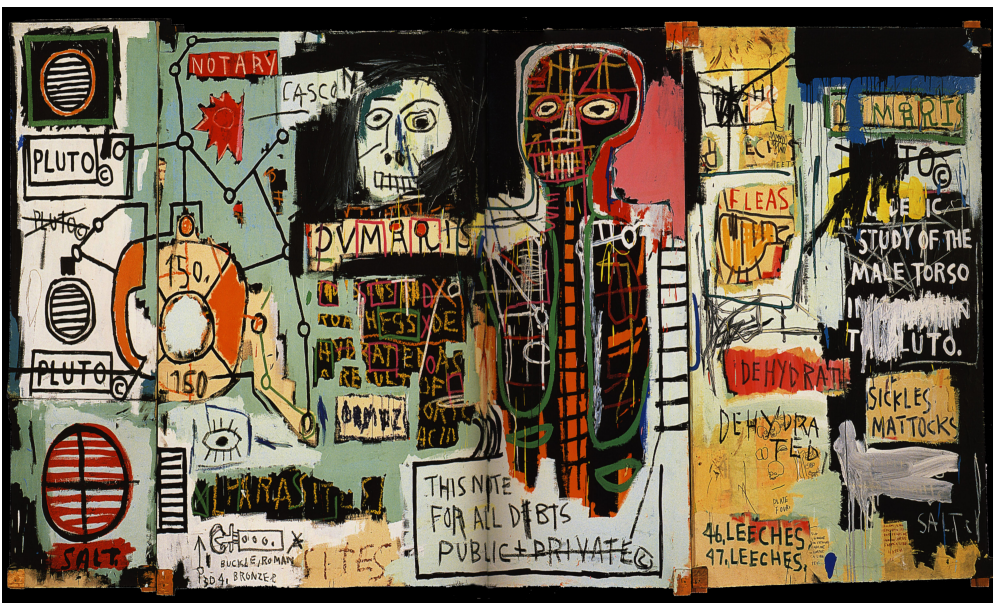
~~Being~~

“Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it is left legible.” Martin Heidegger, in a letter to Ernst Junger, 1956

CT: diction, annotation, editing, typography

Style: writing “sous rature” (under erasure), also known as the Heideggerian X, crosses out a word but leaves it as a way to say that it’s not quite the right word but it’ll have to do (see: Derrida 1967)

3. Act/object: Jean-Michel Basquiat strike-through or box



CT: hegemony of the visual image, editing, error

Style: writes a word in a painting, then crosses it out or puts it in a box in order to draw attention to what would otherwise be missed (the non-image)

4. Act/object: Hacktivism



CT: computer content management systems, databases, data, information, markup schema

Style: hacking into a system and erasing information as a form of reclaiming

5. Act/object: Deformance



CT: inscription as event-making

Style: in relation to how inscriptions actualize history into historical “events,” deformance at a minor level as a sign-based undoing of the power of inscription. At an extreme, deformance in making an object and then destroying it to maintain singularity and prevent its archival (re-inscription as a part of history).

6. Act/object: Repurposing



CT: varies according to cultural object

Style: I was thinking about Marcel Duchamp's *The Fountain*, but also considered the collaborative project in which my group (Bo, Jason, and I) are turning an Ikea coffee table into an arcade emulator.

Questions to get the ball rolling

Q. Who is implicated in the invisibility of cultural techniques?

Q. How else might cultural techniques be revealed?

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