Working Notes on Sterne's reformulation of Bourdieu

Sterne, Jonathan. "Bourdieu, Technique and Technology." _Cultural Studies_ 17.3/4 (2003): 367–89.

Sterne begins his article by framing the critical study of technology within the humanities and then responding to what he viewed as a critical lack of nuance and specificity about technology in critical study.(("For instance, consider the use and non-use of the word 'digital' as a modifier to the word 'technology' in academic discourse. Academic job descriptions, grant announcements and journal articles joyfully collapse the historically specific instance of digital technology with the category of 'technology' itself. **In this logic, if you are to care about technology, then your work is supposed to be driven by an interest in that which is new and digital.** Alternatively, take the example of the phrase 'new technologies'. Most of the so-called 'new' technologies have been around for decades." (368)) The issue, per Sterne, is that the technological turn has led to a focus on technology as a mere modifier of social and cultural practice, and impelled by a neophilic exhortation within the academy "steer[ing] the study of technology toward topics and approaches particularly amenable to business, military, and other applied administrative purposes" (368). Techology is considered insofar as its applications are understood to be valuable "to business, scholarly or pedagogical enterprises" (368).(("Bourdieu's ideal of the relatively independent intellectual is far from the reality of how technology is studied today. Instead of outlining a coherent area of intellectual inquiry, scholars' affective and intellectual investments in technology have become part of what he called the illusio, the investment in the game, of the academic field itself. To put it more plainly, there are often more mercenary (and unrecognized) forces at work than intellectual interest or political philosophy in scholars' choices of – and approaches to – 'technology' as an object of study." (369)) This technological turn is also an unintentionally ironic turn, in which universities have tried to match corporate

logic, while industry has apparently tried to capture academic discourse.((“Critical scholars have shown wide interest in the problem of ‘community’ online: what it is, how it works, and so forth. Yet, as Steve Jones and David Silver have pointed out, these same concepts of community have been widely adapted by dotcoms in an effort to market their product. Amazon.com and ebay.com are now just as likely to market themselves to advertisers and investors on the basis of their own branded ‘communities’ of users as they are to market themselves on the basis of the products and services they offer (Jones, 1999; Silver, 2001). One could probably tell a similar story about the concept of ‘online identity’.” (368)) To escape this orobouric, tail-wagging-the-dog-chasing-its-tail paradigm, Sterne advocates the use of Bourdieu’s theories as a means to better study technology: “I hope this essay has shown how his distinctive approach to social thought, what Loïc Wacquant has called ‘social praxeology’ has much to offer technological scholars as a set of working principles and intellectual orientations” (384).((“A social praxeology of technology is really just a subset of social praxeology, just as technologies are just particularly visible sets of crystallized subsets of practices, positions and dispositions in the habitus. They are merely one sort of ‘sedimented history’. Technologies may indeed ‘influence’ us, but only because all of our actions influence our future actions.” (385)) The question for Sterne thus becomes how Bourdieu’s theories help us better study technology.

For Bourdieu, the social frame is more important than the technology in shaping, “enabling and constaining conventions” (373). Indeed, some histories of technological use do not make sense if driven by a consideration on the technology itself outside of the various fields in which it is produced and used. For example, Sterne asks, “At what point is the phonograph a playback device and at what point is it a musical instrument? These are not questions that can be answered ‘scientifically’ or through *a priori* reasoning. Rather, the analytical categories of ‘instrument’, ‘playback device’, and even ‘use’, ‘function’, or ‘role’ are derived in reaction to

the practices" (373).

The technical aspect of a technology enters the discussion for Bourdieu only as a means of discussing the habitus.(("[T]o understand how a technology becomes a technology through social practice (rather than through logical deduction), we must turn to Bourdieu's approach to practical reason and his widely-cited concept of habitus" (375).)) Bourdieu's theorization, per Sterne, eschews the black-boxing, substantializing, essentializing categorization of technology as a pre-given philosophical concept:

> *"The answer is so simple it is easy to miss: to substantialize 'technology' as an abstract philosophical category is to bracket the very questions that are supposed to be asked when we do a sociology of technology (see Bourdieu, 1998: 4). We can see this in Bourdieu's approach to photography: technology is not simply a 'thing' that 'fills' a predetermined social purpose.* ***Technologies are socially shaped along with their meanings, functions, and domains and use. Thus, they cannot come into existence simply to fill a pre-existing role, since the role itself is co-created with the technology by its makers and users. More importantly, this role is not a static function but something that can change over time for groups of people.*** *" (373, emphasis mine)*

Sterne links habitus to a social praxeology of technology.(("habitus – in its relation to field and capital – can be the methodological cornerstone of a social 'praxeology' of technology" (376).)) Sterne outlines three principles to this social praxeology:((Social praxeology, as the deductive study of human behaviour based on the axiom of free will, studies consequence and emergence of choices))

1. "To be intellectually effective, technology scholars must willfully construct their objects of study, and not

accept ‘pregiven’ objects or **‘prenotions’. This requires us to try and make an epistemological break from the objects we study, so that we do not simply describe them in their own terms.**” (384)

2. “We cannot substantialize, ahead of time, ‘technology’ or ‘kinds of technology’. Rather, our concepts of technology must be fashioned in response to the specificity of the practices we study” (384).((“At the level of actual practice, technologies are always organized through (and as) techniques of the body; and so the ‘form’, ‘use’ and ‘function’ of a technology cannot be separated from the practices with which it is bundled.” (385); “Technologies are always already social and always already connected to other technologies – they exist within the always-shifting totality of a technological field (this is a parallel argument to Bourdieu, 1988: 153)” (385).))
3. “Because technologies do not have an existence independent of social practice, they cannot be studied in isolation from society or from one another.” (385)

Questions that arise that arise for me as a media archaeology interloper:

1. What is the benefit to such an approach? I would have expected that it flips the prevailing tendency in humanities to treat technology as a discursive and theoretical epiphenomenon, but Sterne seems to claim otherwise: “As a concept, habitus helps us to approach the sociology of technology as sociology first, and technology second” (383). Or is the side-stepping of technology less of a problem than I might think?
2. Sterne argues that “[t]o be intellectually effective, technology scholars must willfully construct their objects of study, and not accept ‘pregiven’ objects or **‘prenotions’. This**

requires us to try and make an epistemological break from the objects we study, so that we do not simply describe them in their own terms." (384)

- What terms should we be using? What fields should they be drawn from? Isn't any field, and any language within that field, implicitly loaded with its own biases?
  - This is an issue that is foundational to the new historicist break that led to "the new cultural history" (("H. Aram Veeser aptly summarized its 'key assumptions' by stating '1) that every expressive act is **embedded** in a network of material practices; 2) that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes; 3) that literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably; 4) that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths or expresses inalterable human nature; 5) finally . . . that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.'" (Huhtamo and Parikka 9))

3. Sterne suggests that Bourdieu's reflexive sociology eschews a fixed or stable concept of technology:

"Bourdieu's unwillingness to constitute 'technology' as a stable concept for social theory is instructive for technology scholars. It allows us to consider the domain of

> *struggle over what is and is not 'technological'. It forces us to wrestle with the messy process of constructing technology as an object of study each time we ask a new intellectual question. In other words, the lack of a well defined, governing concept of 'technology' forces us out of the realm of philosophy and into the realm of sociology, as Bourdieu saw it." (370)*

What might such an unstable conception of technology resemble conceptually? (see appendix for my working exploration of this question provided by Sterne's article). How can these aspects of reflexive sociology be adapted within a framework of media archaeology?

- Perhaps topoi are one possibility? (See Huhtamo, Erkki. "Dismantling the Fairy Engine: Media Archaeology as Topos Study" in *Media Archaeology* edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka. Berkeley: University of California Press.)

How this relates to my own interests:

I'm interested in the collision of desires and the collusion of operations conducted using technology. I'm particularly interested in the (mis)use of media for gay dating practices. That is to say, I'm interested in the ways men use technology as a way to 'get it on', as John Edward Campbell so indecorously put things in the title to his 2004 study (*Getting it On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality and Embodied Identity.* London: Harrington Park Press. 2004). This is part of my larger aim to further queer media studies following Nina Wakeford's foundational exploration of 'cyberqueer' two decades ago((see *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. A. Medhurst and S. R. Hunt (London: Cassell, 1997).)). In my initial formulation for my

project (and ultimately what I hope will become some portion of my dissertation; see my working notes), I was focused predominantly on the technology of Grindr as a site of discursive and cultural practice, perhaps indulging in that same neophilic exploration of technology as epiphenomenal appendage that Sterne warns about. In my conversations with Dr. Wershler however, I've come to think about how I might explore the cultural and technical development of media that get us to a platform like grindr; like cabinet cards in the late 19th century, party lines, personal ads and especially the Minitel terminal. Dr. Wershler has pointed me towards some great gay videotec-based chat groups that sprung up in France on the Minitel terminal. At least in the context of what I want to explore, I don't think it's a medium or a technology itself that is important, but rather the progress of cultural techniques in tandem with media development. It's not so much that Minitel exists, or even Grindr exists, it's that usage points towards a confluence of desire, culture and technics that permit a communications infrastructure to thrive. Grindr facilitates, as videotex did before, cultural practices through media that counter normative regimes of capitalist use. That is to say, party lines were not actually intended to facilitate conversation *between parties sharing the line*, but as Rock Hudson's deviancy in *Pillow Talk* demonstrates, anything is possible when cultural norms are eschewed. Cabinet cards were not intended as erotic material, but it is widely known that Eugene Sandow's pictures served as early photographic representations for a muscular and virile masculine aesthetic (and served as a calling card of sorts between closeted homosexual men in the day). I'm interested in how this surplus of desire eventually concresces into modern day dating apps.

Appendix

- What is a technology?
    - Sterne describes technology in a manner analogous to an archive, inscription mechanisms and "crystallized parts of habitus" (376)
        - See, for instance, such remarks as:
            - "Understood socially, technologies are little crystallized parts of habitus. At a basic level, a **technology is a repeatable social, cultural and material process** (which is to say that it is all three at once) **crystallized into a mechanism or set of related mechanisms.** A technology may perform labour once done by a person, which is to say that people design and use technologies to enhance or promote certain activities and discourage others." (376)
            - "Technologies are associated with habits and practices, sometimes crystallizing them and sometimes promoting them. They are structured by human practices so that they may in turn structure human practices. They embody in physical form particular dispositions and tendencies – particular ways of doing things." (377)
        - Would a fractal be an appropriate analogy here?
    - What can a technology do?
        - "Technologies are of particular social-theoretical interest because of the ways in which they tend to 'sediment' social

relationships” (382)

- Yet Sterne also claims that technology are themselves “socially stratified” (383)
    - “Like all bodily practices according to Bourdieu, technological practices are socially stratified” (383)
- As a result of these co-constitutive dimensions, “A technology is always, at any given moment, socially located” (383).