

What is Media Study and Where is It?

In our last issue, inadvertently referred to the Department of Media Study as the "Department of Media Studies." Upon realizing our error, we apologized to the department and offered its founder, Gerald O'Grady, the opportunity to explain why the distinction is important. What follows is his response and his comments on the proposed restructuring of Arts and Letters.

I am pleased to respond to *The Graduate Quill's* invitation to explain why I chose the word "study" rather than "studies" and why "media" when I founded the Center for (now Department of) Media Study twenty years ago. Some of our concerns were both like and unlike other academic organizations which emerged in the first quarter century of the post-war university—Women's Studies, African American Studies, Eastern European Studies, American Studies, Asian Studies, to name a few. One immediately notes that these are defined by gender, race or geography, and that they are all interdisciplinary, typically involving a number of different "approaches" to their subjects and engaging a variety of "methods" to explore them.

The interpretation classes in the Media Study curriculum (history, theory, analysis, social impact, etc.) also examined phenomenological, psychoanalytical, ideological, semiological, and materialistic methodologies as these developed during these same years, but just because these curricula seemed so centrifugal, I thought it important to sound a centripetal impulse. During the previous twenty years, I myself had been engaged in a careful study of the most difficult poem of the English Middle Ages, *Piers the Plowman*, and had especially concerned myself with the meaning and function of a character named Dame Study, in the personification allegorical style of that period. Study was "the condition of being deeply absorbed in thought" and it was just that condition, which characterized the intensity and seriousness of our very diverse efforts, mostly quite ratiocinative, that gave them a unity, and, at the same time, sounded an affective impulse that conveyed that we cared deeply about the problems which we were committed to resolve, those that required our "study."

Media Study differed from other "studies" in that it concentrated on creative production as well as theoretical and scholarly work, and I was aware of the etymology and the evolution of the derivative word, "studio"—my minor field as a graduate student was in the history of language and in linguistics, itself a newly developing field at that time. A studio was originally "the working place of a painter or sculptor and a place for the study of art." It became "a place where motion pictures were made" and then "a place maintained and equipped for the transmission of radio and television programs." Media Study "students" were also deeply engaged in the creative process.

I worried about using the word "media" because it was usually understood to refer to the mass media of newspaper, television, advertisements, etc., while, to me, media referred to the expressive and communicative codes of a culture, the very materials involved in the act of making—what art critics called "the medium" and what Marshall McLuhan meant when he proclaimed, however hyperbolically that "the medium was the message." Of these codes, Media Study concentrated on those of the moving image (better described as a changing or metamorphic image), and explored the chemically-constituted materiality of film, the electronic base of video which could be modified or synthesized at will, and the digital image. Following upon the pioneering work of Lejaren Hiller in computer music, Media Study introduced the study of the computer image in our Digital Arts Laboratory which was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. At that time, I wrote: "Unlike film or video, digital image-making permits a separation between primary image formation and the syntactical features that modify and inflect the image. We may save and retrieve image information (data) and reprocess that information in whatever way we will, using a 'program' that may itself be saved, recalled and modified."

Because of our absorption in practice, we were well aware that all of these images (film, video, digital) are continually being transformed into each other. It was just this absorption or "study" that enabled us to accomplish two important things (1) to escape the disastrously reductive and quite wrong-headed linguistic models, usually put forward by theorists in the humanities, with no practical experience in media, which dominated the cinema and television programs established at other universities; and (2) to understand early on there would be a convergence of the telephone, television and computer that would eventu-

ally provide a multiplicity of channels, low-cost equipment for individual access, and an information revolution. This enabled us to abandon the outdated models of commercial and industrial film and television schools, and to champion low-cost media production as well as to engage ourselves, from the outset, in thinking of this technology-transfer to the K-12 schools, thus pioneering in media pedagogy. That this was also a wise marketing decision is indicated by recent studies which show that the market for electronic media in schools is expected to grow by about 24% a year in the next five years.

"Media" meant something else to me as well. In the 1960's, the Canadian Marshall McLuhan had written a book called *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, and humanities departments were so angered by his comparisons of print to television that the much more fundamental message of his book was almost entirely missed. After seven introductory chapters, McLuhan wrote 26 more on such subjects as roads, games and automobiles, as well as on the radio and the telephone. His intention was to redefine media from

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"mass communications" to the new concept of "cultural environments" which acted upon our senses, and thus our intellects. By his seemingly arbitrary choice of 26, he wished to convey that the cultural analyses of these environments were as important as the study of the 26 letters of our print alphabet. He was the instigator of what came to be called "Cultural Studies" or "Critical Studies," although these had different inflections. This thrust of his work becomes clear in this correspondence with Professor Ray Browne, who at the time was founding the Center for the Study of Popular Culture at Bowling Green University, a correspondence which I recently read in the National Archives in Ottawa, where McLuhan's papers are preserved. I should immediately add that the cultural "environments" of gender, race, class, and sexual preference were critical additions to these fields. McLuhan's importance was that he was the first surfrider in the sea of technology, which humanists had never considered part of culture—he was Director of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, and confronted with newly discovered and overwhelming complexities, he developed a probing heuristic process rather than attempting to put forward a reductive theory, especially one based in the Eurocentric schools of Paris or Frankfurt. His *Gutenberg Galaxy* opens with a comparison of Elizabethan England to Africa.

What I learned then, as I wrote at the time, was that Media Study "involves the study of the sensorium and of society and leads to the holistic study of culture as an aesthetic form, displaying a special awareness of emerging syntheses of knowledge." It was the study of the interaction of culture and consciousness, focussed on the codes of communication, including their technologies. These concerns tilted our program toward cognitive anthropology and placed it in the context of historical evolution in a global or international scope.

Currently, on our own campus, we hear much of interdisciplinary coherence between the Faculties of Social Science and the Faculty of Arts and Letters, but graduate students will find this concept entirely illusory if they will read Donald T. Campbell's "Ethnocentrism of Disciplines and the Fish-Scale Model of Omniscience" which appeared in Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, ed., *Interdisciplinary Relationships in the Social Sciences* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969). I think it important to their intellectual lives that they do so, for they will find that their lives as future researchers and teachers in all fields will be not interdisciplinary but multidisciplinary, and that this multidisciplinary will reside not simply in teams but in individuals—it is for this very reason that we

have had to re-establish a rigorous breadth in undergraduate education.

I shall give a few examples from my own Department and then suggest some additional readings which support my arguments. One of my colleagues, Peter Weibel, was trained in medicine and then did his doctoral dissertation in mathematics; his video/digital documentary on Gödel for Austrian and German television was the kind of innovative alternative work that could not be considered, funded, or shown in this country. The West German Government recently provided him with four million dollars to establish the first European research center in Frankfurt, the Institut für Neue Medien. Another colleague, Woody Vasulka, was trained as a mechanical engineer and then as a scriptwriter, while his wife and partner in their pioneering work in the composition and manipulation of the electronic image had been a violinist in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. Vasulka is currently supported by the Soros Foundation in Hungary to visit each of the Eastern European countries for the purpose of introducing and updating them in the field of electronic media. The Vasulkas are now based in Sante Fe, and they introduced both Weibel and myself to Christopher Langton of The Santa Fe Institute.

While graduate students are no doubt deeply involved in their own professional coursework, teaching duties and specialized dissertation research, I hope that they will find time, as soon as possible, to read two books about the Institute and other matters, Roger Lewin's *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) and *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), edited by W. Mitchell Waldrop. Both exemplify the centripetal and centrifugal impulses involved in "study" and in adapting to both the internal and external environments of a structure, and to the accidents of its process-oriented (not necessarily progressive) development. The analogy to Media Study is that our engagement with the creative act is similar to embryology and that the development of a new discipline, such as our own, involves an embryology of the kind of dynamic interactive and multiactive field of study.

Of our own program at this University, Nancy Boggs of the Ford Foundation wrote: "My personal feeling about the Center is that it is a unique model of what ought to be replicated elsewhere in the country, and that it is a media learning center with wide arms, crossing many disciplines and communications interests. It is, for example, the place I always recommend to Third World people who are interested in the broad spectrum of media studies." It occasioned a letter from me, such as this one, explaining the difference between "study" and "studies."