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Media History + Theory
Final Paper

In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker J. Palmer asks the reader to identify those characteristics that defined their favorite and least favorite instructors. As a former teacher, I have often thought this exercise was as a way to inform my own practice. In much the same way, the final assignment asks students to critique the class as a means for transforming information into insight- in this case for both teacher and student.

There were only a few assignments and methods that I did not connect with over the course of the semester. For example, I wish there was more class time devoted to the preparation of the following week's reading assignments. This was particularly true of the Eames' Shorts, but is perhaps more applicable to "heavier" readings found in Debord and Benjamin. The McLuhan assignment asked students to read and report on a section of the text (mine was television), but was never followed up completely in class. And while the class *did* allow for a healthy discussion on the design of the Mediawork Pamphlets, I felt there could have been a greater emphasis on their *content*. At certain points the class became a bullshit forum for those classmates who simply did not take the time to read what was inside.

On the other hand, there were a far greater number of elements that I did connect with over the course of the semester. As someone who has secretly dreamed of becoming a standup comic, the in-class humor was greatly appreciated. I recognize that there is a special talent in thoughtfully connecting Leathermen, Oprah and Life Hacking over the course of one lecture. I also appreciated the variety of media sprinkled throughout the semester. Under normal circumstances, I believe watching a movie in class is a clear waste of both the student's time and money. I would often show films when I didn't want to teach- thank you *Lean on Me*. But the choice of films/PowerPoint/music and the discussion that followed was appropriate to the course and its pace (the notable exception being the instructorless Videodrome screening).

Yet for me, the use value from this course will ultimately be measured in those "takeaway phrases" distilled during lecture such as **Find Work That is Meaningful to You** or **What Myths Do We Produce as Designers?** These phrases (Jenny Holzer would

be proud) have challenged me to rethink my role as a media designer. They have “stuck” because they apply directly to my life. What follows is a summary of how these “takeaway phrases” have impacted my thinking to date and how I plan to implement them in the development of my education as I move forward.

The Importance of Understanding Your Tools

The first step in many recovery programs is an acknowledgment of the present situation. As media designers, the importance of understanding our tools begins with a similar acknowledgment of what we are required to know. Unlike other disciplines, Media Design is unapologetic about the different hats its artist must wear. Creative sensibility, business savvy and technical literacy are equally important and similarly varied. Painters, for example, do not worry if the standard method of action scripting will change in the latest and greatest version of Flash. Media Designers do.

And yet like most creative endeavors, media designers are also concerned with developing ideas. One of the lessons gleaned from Brad Bartlett’s Communication Design One class was the importance of developing a methodology in your craft. For me, this was an acknowledgment that my work flourishes through an iterative process.

I was also under the impression that graduate school would be a time to refine an existing skill set. Again, the classes during my first semester have asked me to take a step back in the understanding my tools. On one hand, this meant a deeper experimentation with those mediums that I did not necessarily feel comfortable with, namely typography and interaction design in Communication Design, power tools in Interaction Design. Yet it was in *the physical act of making* that each media revealed certain affordances as a tool for communication. For example, it was only through building an interactive grocery cart that I truly grasped the ergonomic advantages and disadvantages of placing a touch screen on the handle bar. It turns out that this same handle bar is in the area where most children under the age of six sit. Duh. Like the takeaway lesson you shared with the class from your conference this summer, “**made objects are an important part of the process.**”

It is equally important to understand how our tools are viewed through a historic lens. While all of the assigned books touched on this subject, McLuhan's *Understanding Media* struck a particular chord with me because it addressed how the affordances of my tools can affect a larger audience. For example, knowing that radio is a deeply personal medium or that crime and justice shows work well on television because they are methodical in their approach are invaluable insights for a designer.

As I move forward, the decisions I make in developing my thesis will be informed through the affordances, both physical and historical, that my tools provide. I know this as fact because, as promised, McLuhan is popping up everywhere. He was directly referenced during two of the first three thesis presentations.

Finding Models of Other People Doing Good Work

What **designers and magpies** share in common is that they often steal to create. In his book *Rhythm Science*, DJ Spooky states that, "Dj-ing lets you take the best of what's out there and give your own take on it" (17). Here, DJ Spooky correctly places the emphasis on the individual to identify **who has done what well**. Because these takeaway phrases also serve as a means for self-reflection, I have **identified three** such influences in my work to make my point

This includes but is not limited to:

- *This American Life* produced by Ira Glass, has influenced my work as both a media designer and filmmaker. Glass' approach to storytelling, which employs a three-part rhythm of action, action, action followed by a moment of reflection every 45 seconds, creates an irresistible momentum to his shows.
- Although the music of Phish has not directly affected my art per se, their performances did. Particularly inspirational was watching 100,000 people interact with the **large-scale sculpture** and **art instillations** found at their summer music festivals. These projects have influenced me to take more risks and engage a larger community with my own work.

- *The Believer's* appropriation and self-parody of the design elements of typography and layout can be found in the almost all of my projects.¹

And while many of these works are unknown to the general public, they have garnered enough attention to be cited in this class. I mention this because I think that *finding models* speaks to a larger context of what is sticky. At its most basic level, the ability to site others reflects a command of the material.²

Yet from another perspective, it also demonstrates that what is sticky is often personal. As a binding term for the Mediawork Projects, each author was required to include an autobiographical element to their work- DJ Spooky and the story of how he obtained his father's record collection, "Kaye" educational journey and Dani's influence on Brenda Laurel's understanding of life experience and cultural context. Knowing that the **autobiography is central to our time** was an important choice in making the Mediawork Projects memorable.

What kind of line can be drawn through your work?

As a student, I am conscious that these autobiographical facts resonate with me. As a designer, I am also aware that an interest in personal histories drives much of my art. Before arriving at Art Center, I completed what I would consider three major projects: an interactive DVD Storybook modeled after the Choose Your Own Book Series, a Kiosk design displaying the "human side" of a design firm, and a multimedia tribute to my father and his facial hair.

In all three of projects I have decided to work with groups of people. Whether they are childhood friends, coworkers or family, each film is a direct reflection of the time and energy necessary in building a relationship of trust. In retrospect, these understanding "clients" complement an artist who works best through iteration.

Moreover, from these intimate relationships **stems a philosophy** of design that upholds sincerity in the face of cynicism and ironic kitsch- two forms of expression

¹ Although the instructor referred to the magazine's style as "Twee," I believe *The Believer*, like the before mentioned examples, reflects a trend in design that upholds an aesthetic of sincerity. See: http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_importance_of_being_earnest/

² The name-dropping of artists and their work by the instructor reminded me of another such person who used this method of teaching effectively. See: <http://espn.go.com/abcsports/mnf/s/annotatedmiller/010827.html>

prevalent in today's cultural landscape. Rather than embracing irrelevance, it is my intention to present my subjects with universal appeal.

Finally, I believe that I have a firm grasp on effectively expressing cultural references as demonstrated in Communication Design projects. Suited to perception and discovery, my work rewards those willing to explore the unexpected relationships that form among seemingly unexpected lines. Again, this requires a conscious understanding of the power of reference

“The future is already here, it's just unevenly distributed.” William Gibson

As mentioned earlier, I came to Art Center with two visions of a potential thesis. The first employed the methodologies of design research to create a new form of personal portraiture. The second focuses on the development of an interactive educational tool (a la Choose Your Own Adventure book series) that promotes self-reflective behavior in teens. Again, the “takeaway phrases” found throughout this course prompt me to ask deeper questions of my work.

- Knowing that the **autobiography is central to our moment**, how can I use the affordances of my tools to create an independent vision of portraiture?
- How have **other artists failed and succeed throughout history** in the creation of portraiture or game design?
- As a utopian entrepreneur, how can do I **create equity stakes** in what I produce or is the collateral in the **creation of meaning**?
- How can I create work that **empowers the user to change and add** to what I have created- themes found in this class as well as Phil's Interactive Design class?

I would like to end by thanking you for empowering the craft of design. Having to tell my parents that I would be attending art school rather than medical school marked a decisive turning point in my life because it signified that a decision to follow my passion. Artists **do not have to go hat-in-hand** to other professions with their skill set. Rather

designers in the present moment, as Bruce Sterling notes, have an opportunity to change the world.