

**CREATIVE MEDIA BETWEEN INVENTION AND  
CRITIQUE, OR WHAT'S STILL AT STAKE IN  
PERFORMATIVITY?**

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This special issue of *Culture Machine* on Creative Media emerges out of a call-for-papers which was at the same time a call-to-arms and a call-to-arts. It was aimed at intellectuals, writers, philosophers, artists, analysts, scientists, journalists and media professionals who were prepared to say something about the media that extended beyond the conventional forms of media analysis. Our initial search for creative media projects was thus also an invitation to enact a different mode of doing media studies. Taking seriously both the philosophical legacy of what the Kantian and Foucauldian tradition calls 'critique' and the transformative and interventionist energy of the creative arts, we were looking for playful, experimental yet rigorous cross-disciplinary interventions and inventions that would be equally at home with critical theory and media practice, and that would be prepared and able to make a difference – academically, institutionally, politically, ethically and aesthetically.

One of the main driving forces behind this undertaking was our shared dissatisfaction with the current state of the discipline of 'media studies' within which, or rather perhaps on the margins of which, we are both professionally situated. As many of our readers will no doubt know, in its more orthodox incarnation as developed from sociology, politics and communications theory, media studies typically offers analyses of media as objects 'out there' – radio, TV, the internet. Mobilising the serious scientific apparatus of 'qualitative and quantitative methodologies', it studies the social, political and economic impact of these objects on allegedly separable entities such as 'society', 'the individual' and, more recently, 'the globalised world'. What is, however, lacking from many such analyses for us is a second-level reflection on the complex processes of mediation that are instantiated as soon as the media scholar begins to think about conducting an analysis – and long

before she switches on her TV or iPod. This is why we want to make a case for a significant shift in the way media are being perceived and understood: from thinking about 'media' as a set of discrete objects (the computer, the iPod, the e-book reader) to understanding media predominantly in terms of processes of mediation.<sup>1</sup>

Mediation, we suggest, is all-encompassing and indivisible. This is why 'we' have never been separate from 'it'. Yet even if this indeed is the case – as various branches of both humanities and sciences are instructing us – our relationality and our entanglement with other human and non-human entities continues to intensify with the ever more corporeal, ever more intimate dispersal of media and technologies into our biological and social lives. Mediation therefore becomes for us a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in the technological world, our emergence and ways of intra-acting with it, but also the acts and processes of temporarily stabilising the world into media, agents, relations and networks.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between 'media' and 'mediation' is of course primarily heuristic, i.e. provisional and tentative, and the purpose of separating the two is to clarify the relation between them. Mediation does not serve as a translational or transparent layer, or intermediary, between independently existing entities (say, between the producer and consumer of a film or TV programme). It is a complex and hybrid process, which can be both constraining and productive – often at the same time.

This creative media project is also connected with our shared efforts to work through and reconcile, in a manner that would be satisfactory on both an intellectual and artistic level, academic writing and creative practice. This effort has to do with more than just the usual anxieties associated with attempts to breach the 'theory-practice' divide and negotiate the associated issues of rigour, skill, technical competence and aesthetic judgement. Working in and with creative media is for us first and foremost an epistemological question of how we can perform knowledge differently through a set of practices that also 'produce things'. In other words, creative media is for us a way of enacting knowledge about and of the media, by creating conditions for the emergence of such media. Of course, there is something rather difficult and hence also frustrating about this self-reflexive process, whereby it is supposed to produce the thing of which it speaks (creative media), while drawing on this very thing (creative media) as its source of inspiration – or, to put it in cybernetic terms, feedback.

But this circularity is precisely what is most interesting for us about the theory of performativity and the way it has made inroads into the arts and humanities over the last two decades. Drawing on the concept of performativity taken from J. L. Austin's speech-act theory as outlined in his *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (1988) and Judith Butler (1997) have extended the use of the term from being limited to only exceptional phrases that create an effect of which they speak (such as 'I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth*' or 'I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife') to encapsulating the whole of language. In other words, any bit of language, any code, or any set of meaningful practices has the potential to enact effects in the world, something Butler has illustrated with her discussion of the fossilisation of gender roles and positions through their repeated and closely monitored performance. Performativity is an empowering concept, politically and artistically, because it not only explains how norms take place but also shows that change and invention are always possible. 'Performative repetitions with a difference' enable a gradual shift within the ideas, practices and values even when we are functioning within the most constraining and oppressive socio-cultural formations (we can cite the Stonewall riots of 1969, the emergence of the discipline of performing arts, or the birth of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980 as examples of such performative inventions). With this project, we are thus hoping to stage a new paradigm not only for *doing media critique-as-media analysis* but also for *inventing (new) media*.

Through giving a name to these diverse interventions and inventions – some of which are highlighted in this issue – we are also making a claim for the status of theory as theatre, or for the performativity of all theory: in media, arts and sciences; in written and spoken forms. We are also highlighting the ongoing possibilities of remediation across all media and all forms of communication. The creative impulse behind the project came to us from Bergson, for whom creativity is about how reality produces effects 'in which it expands and transcends its own being' (1914: 59). Yet, of course, not all creative processes and events are equal, and not everything that 'emerges' is good, interesting or valuable. Far from it. In the encounter with Bergson's notion of 'creative evolution', Derrida's notion of 'différance' becomes a kind of interruption or 'cut' to the incessant flow of creation, allowing also for the discussion of the symbolic and cultural significance of this interruption, and of its politico-ethical weighting. We also have to recognise that 'creativity', even if it is not owned, dominated or determined economically, is

heavily influenced by economic forces and interests. This state of events has resulted in the degree of standardisation and homogenisation that we continue to see across the board: witness the regular ‘inventions’ of new mobile phones or new forms of aesthetic surgery. The marketisation of creativity ends up with more and more (choice) of the same – even if some of these ‘inventions of the old’ can at times perhaps be put to singularly transformative uses. And yet most events and inventions are rather conservative or even predictable. In other words, they represent ‘theatre-as-we-know-it’.

Our own investment, in turn, lies in recognising and promoting ‘theatre-as-it-could-be’. This is to say, we are interested in witnessing or even enacting the creative diversification of events as a form of political intervention against this proliferation of difference-as-sameness. We find such ‘non-creative’ diversification everywhere, including in the increasingly market-driven academy which aims to pre-judge and quantify scholars’ and artists’ ‘impact’ on economy and society. One can easily blame ‘performance audits’ such as the Quality Assurance Agency’s inspection visits and the Research Assessment Exercise or the new Research Excellence Framework in the UK, or the compiling of international university league tables for the standardisation and homogenisation of the academic output worldwide. But these ‘quality-enhancement’ procedures are just a means to an end – this end being competition and survival within an overcrowded global market, run on an apparently Darwinian basis whereby size (of institution) and volume (of output) really do matter.

We have thus conceived of the creative media project as a political intervention in part into the technician and industry-led discourse of creative innovation - which, arguably, produces more of the same. This intervention is also aimed at generating inventions in a Derridean and Bergsonian sense – invested in the ‘creative evolution’ of ‘forms ever new’ as much as in making ethical and political decisions about them. The project may be described as anti-technician but it is most certainly *not* anti-technological. Indeed, for any creative media project to be truly inventive, it needs to work through the ontological and epistemological consequences of technologies and media becoming increasingly closer to ‘us’. It also needs to consider what the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler understands as our ‘originary technicity’ (see 1998), where technology is comprehended as an originary condition of our being in the world, not just an external object we all learn to manipulate for

our advantage and benefit. It is in this sense that we have always been media(ted).

Drawing on this critical legacy of continental philosophy as well as the transformative energy of the creative arts, creative media can therefore perhaps be seen as one of the emergent paradigms at the interfaces of performance and performativity that our project is trying to map out. What we have hoped to enact through this process of playful yet rigorous cross-disciplinary intervention is a more dynamic, networked and engaged mode of working on and with 'the media', where critique is always already accompanied by the work of participation and invention.

'Creative media' functions as both a theme and a methodology for us here then. In other words, our aim has been to produce an issue 'about creative media' by means of a variety of creative media. We have therefore included works which are situated across the conventional boundaries of theory and practice, art and activism, social sciences and the humanities. Such works take a variety of forms – essays on, polemics with regard to, and performances of what it means to 'do media' both creatively and critically. They also incorporate a variety of media, from moving (Hall, Birchall & Woodbridge) and still (Penny, Zylinska) images, through to interactive installations (Ikoniadou, Sellars), creative writing (Kember) and more traditional papers (Crogan, Frabetti, Wilken). And yes, language also counts as a medium. But this is of course only a beginning, which is also an open invitation and an injunction - to keep inventing *well*, that is to say, creatively *and critically*, forms ever new.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas and paragraphs that make up this introduction have been borrowed from our article, 'Creative Media: Performance, Invention, Critique' (2009), which provides a much more thorough explication of the concept of 'creative media' and its possible enactments.

<sup>2</sup> This idea of media as a series of processes of mediation informs the argument of our book, *Life after New Media*, which we are currently in the process of writing.

**References**

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