

**SARAH KEMBER AND JOANNA ZYLINSKA (2012)
*LIFE AFTER NEW MEDIA: MEDIATION AS A VITAL
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While, normally, Walter Murch's work tends to remain invisible, subliminal even, I still remember the first time I read about his mastery of the art of editing film. It was in an unlikely book by Michael Ondaatje, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. Murch and Ondaatje met on the film set of *The English Patient*. While Ondaatje was there to consult on the script, as it was based on his novel of the same title, he met the somewhat eccentric Murch and his coterie of arcane interests: the theories of the eighteenth-century astronomer Johannes Bode, the work of the Italian playwright and novelist Curzio Malaparte. As a practitioner of the art of sound and image editing, Murch has worked on such films as *American Graffiti*, *The Godfather (Parts I, II, and III)*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and *Ghost*. Ondaatje was fascinated by the kind of subtle, nearly imperceptible manipulations that Murch would make to a particular scene by, for instance, adding the sound of a distant bell to signal the transition from that scene to a different locale, or how he would cut from an actor's face in a particular shot at a precise moment to allow the audience to know if the character was lying or not. The book is largely comprised of five conversations that took place starting in July of 2000, and much of their dialogue revolves around the fundamentals of how to cut a scene; how to bring hundreds of minutes of footage, across multiple cameras and takes focusing on different details, down to a scene of three minutes. It's a book about how to cut well.

In communication and media studies the figure of the editor as a figuration rarely gets much play. The work of the editor, at first glance, seems to be limited to the non-figurative medium-specificity of film

taking place in all those ‘dark places’ the world over, parsing mediated time, recreating usually non-linear narratives and production schedules, and doing the subtle work of ordering a story in an increasingly consumable here and now. Yet ‘the editor,’ as a more generalizable figuration, could also be taken as a sort of prime mediator, and not necessarily a singularly human one, who determines, across many media, how we relate to the real through a host of mediating artefacts. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska note in *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, the crucial aspect of figurations, such as Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ or Braidotti’s ‘nomadic subject,’ is their ‘*true relationality* [italics in original]’ (125); in other words, their ability to challenge established paradigms such as the subject-object dualism or, more recently, the stable components of an emergent neoliberal subjectivity. The contested relationalities that figurations both open up and onto more often than not relate back to the messy entanglements that we experience as life in its living. You might give pause over the ‘trueness’ of this relationality, pausing over its possible intimations of an unstable essentialism. However, for Kember and Zylińska, following Bergson, ‘true relationality’ is a “‘true problem,’ which, for Bergson, means “‘living” and “‘concrete””: something that can first of all be experienced from amid things, rather than analyzed by a detached observer’ (125). This is, in a way, the evolving and mobile stake that Kember and Zylińska have claimed in media, communications, and cultural studies with *Life after New Media*. Rather than writing ‘against’ a collection of media-related scholarship that derives from sociology, political science, and mass communications theory, Kember and Zylińska want to break up the object-centred view of media scholarship in order to reinsert these co-constitutive technologies into processes of mediation that enframe, follow, and evolve along with discrete media objects. ‘This co-constitutive aspect of mediation,’ they write, alluding to the work of Karen Barad, ‘opens it to a different ethical framework: that of intra-action and mutual becoming’ (155). Drawing on the immanentist tradition of Bergson and Deleuze, and the transcendence of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, they stage an encounter between ‘creative evolution’ and ‘différance’ that can interrupt the incessant flow of mediation by enabling decisively ethical and multi-agential cuts to be made to such ‘true’ new media problems. As such, events and their mediation, from the launch of the Large Hadron Collider to the ongoing evental phenomenon of Facebook, are the staging ground for their non-representationalist, performative theoretical interventions.

Kember and Zylinska play across Bergson's 'intuitive method,' with seven chapters and an 'Interlude' crossing and re-crossing the artificial, segmenting lines between media, media representations, and the world at large, that are all evolving under the sign of duration. They open by laying bare the concept of 'mediation' as a 'media becoming' (27), and make of the concept the 'originary logic' (22) of the media. This logic, following Bernard Stiegler, is predicated on the always already technical composition of human becoming. In this view, discrete media technologies, for instance, do not inhabit a space-time outside of human agency, rather they co-emerge along with human praxis, co-shaping both agencies in the process. It is through this co-emergence that "mediation" can be a vital process that is proximate to 'life' itself (23). Their six subsequent chapters seek to, if I must rely on an inadequate representationalist metaphor, still and zoom in on a diverse sequence of media events. Each enacts what could be thought of as a structuring agential cut in the flow of mediation. Their contribution to object-oriented ontologies, adding a media studies component to this growing body of theory, rests on the generative capabilities of media events that rely on processes of mediation that quite literally 'make them' in material and epistemological terms. Arguing against Baudrillard's account of media illusionism, Kember and Zylinska posit the force of media events that do Cartesian things with our understandings of them that, in turn, a privileged Bergsonian 'intuition' can begin to take apart by living critically with them in the moment of their becoming. This is a forceful argument of theirs in favour of a malleable creative awareness that mediating practitioners (from academics to film directors to scientists) of all kinds have to enact to go beyond more conventional modes of media analysis. Following Van Loon, they state that '[m]ediation is disclosed in media events that open up "existential moments" of awareness, of our awareness of being in the world. Media events are thus able to disclose "being-as-mediated" by virtue of anomaly, of "standing out in time"' (40).

This creative awareness both of what media can do and the processes through which they co-emerge with diverse human and non-human agencies also allows for Kember and Zylinska's own performative theorizing to take place. Working through such cogent examples as the technocapitalism of the smart home (Chapter 4), the ethical becoming of the mediated body through face transplant surgery and cosmetic surgery (Chapter 5), and a nonnormative ethics of mediation that questions the neurological 'effects' model of contemporary technological affordances such as the Internet (Chapter 6), allows them to establish a broad plane of multi-

dimensional becoming for hitherto one-dimensional media objects. One of their broader aims is also to shift the notion of 'creativity' out of the realm of cultural industries in order to take the evolving imperatives of creativity as critique seriously (Chapter 7). Picking up and reorienting Foucault's understanding of the practice of a 'critical attitude,' Kember and Zylinska 'propose a somewhat modulated term, "critical attention," which stands not only for an ethical opening and an injunction to both receive well and produce well but also for a mindful corporeal disposition' (185). It is a call to be mindful of the inevitable back and forth between emerging agencies that, for the authors, is particularly timely because, as they state in their conclusion, there is a necessity 'to stage a new paradigm not only for *doing media critique as media analysis* but also for *inventing (new) media* [italics in original]' (203). Their 'creative media project' enacts this through interventions that are summarized in their concluding 'Creative Media Manifesto'. This manifesto asks us to take in three points: to both acknowledge and question our relational 'becoming-with-media' (204); to own up to the 'cuts' that we inevitably make in the media flow and to learn to welcome the fact, following Barad, that 'agential cuts [...] cut both ways' (204); and, finally, to take the matter of creative experimentation as indeterminate and unknowable, and, in the face of this, to experiment ethically nonetheless.

In light of Kember and Zylinska's emphasis on the intuitive experience of duration and the, to some extent, concomitant necessity of enacting agential cuts into its expansive evolution, many of the chapters, taken figuratively, can be read as temporary stills in ongoing debates surrounding media agencies and mediating agential boundaries. As they acknowledge, the end result of their collaboration is a "live essay" (187), a final, stabilized medium that consolidates a history of variously mediated exchange. It perhaps would have been fitting to make a few more editorial/agential cuts into the medium of the monograph itself in order to emphasize what sorts of new media(tions) the agencies of language (across form informing content) can create. Moreover, their performative work also invokes 'the status of theory as theater' (202) that relies on what could be thought of as more or less 'conventional' contemporary media objects (photography, televisual events, internet platforms, etc.) as their points of departure. A reading of past, multi-scalar, and what could be thought of as more 'unconventional' structuring forms of communicative media, such as the case of plastic surgery and its historical links to the 'restoration work' (136) of the early days of the surgical practice that took root during the First World War, that

Kember and Zylinska briefly touch on in Chapter 7, would have added a fascinating *longue durée* to their analysis. It is an untold story that I wish they had told, as well as being a difficult enactment of cutting across mediating processes in divergent historical (and durational) fields. This leads to the question of how, or if, Bergson's intuitive method can be performed with a less present-minded experiential horizon? How can we live the life/lives of past media(tions)?

Kember and Zylinska move towards a *life after new media* that does not teleologically get beyond 'new media,' but rather manoeuvres us alongside their co-emergence within our own ongoing lives. They have taken up 'mediation' as a sort of environmental heuristic that can bind together 'liveness' and the '*vitality of media* [*italics in original*]' (xvii). Taking up the challenge of reading and revitalizing our evolving media moment, their mobile analytical 'cuts' instantiate a relational media studies ontology. This challenge also makes of them 'editors' in an inevitably and always processual performance of our mediated and multiple lives—'true problems,' indeed, yet ones that *Life after New Media* equips us to keep thinking about.

In his introduction to *The Conversations*, Ondaatje recounts Murch's work on a particular scene in *The English Patient*. The scene in question has the caught spy Caravaggio (played by Willem Dafoe) being questioned by a German interrogator. Ondaatje recalls the shooting of the scene. There had been multiple takes, with close-ups on a razor opening, the typist taking down the interrogation, a fly crawling on Caravaggio's hand. One shot stayed on Dafoe's face for the duration. Walter Murch, as editor, went to work:

At one point Caravaggio/Dafoe says, before he even sees the razor, 'Don't cut me.' He says it once. Walter has the interrogator pause in his questioning when he hears this, extending the time in his response. He has threatened the spy with the idea of cutting off his thumbs, but only in a casual, not serious, way. When Caravaggio says, 'Don't cut me,' the German pauses for a second, a flicker of disgust on his face. The interrogation continues. Walter found *another* take of Dafoe's line, this one with more quaver in the voice, and decided to put

it in again, a few seconds later. So Dafoe *repeats* his fear. And now time stops.

We see the look on the German. And now we know he has to *do* what he was previously just thinking about. To emphasize this, Murch, at that very moment, pulls all the sounds out of the scene, so there is complete silence. And we, even if we don't realize it as we sit in the theatre, are shocked and the reason is that quietness. Something terrible has been revealed by the spy, about his own nature, and now something terrible is going to happen. To this point, Murch has built numerous layers of sound to give us the feeling of being within that cavelike room; he even provides sounds taking place *outside* the room (a favourite device of his—listen to the street sounds when Michael Corleone commits his first murder in *The Godfather*). In this scene there is the sound of a firing squad somewhere outside, soldiers yelling, while inside there is that continual typing, the fly buzzing, the telephone that keeps ringing, all this behind the tense conversation between the two men. Then, when Dafoe repeats the line—which in reality he did not repeat, which was not even there in the script—Murch makes the response to the line a total and dangerous silence.

Walter has said that the use of silence in movies did not come in until the invention of synchronous sound in 1927. Until then there was the continuous accompaniment of music: live orchestra, organ, or piano. Murch always tries to find a moment in his films when that shock of silence will fill the theatre. And in *The English Patient* it happens now. It feels as if it lasts five minutes but it really lasts only about five seconds, and during that time everything is decided. After that moment all hell breaks loose. This is when members of the audience begin to close their eyes and when some faint. In fact, they faint probably because they close their eyes. We see nothing violent on the screen. But we *hear* the suggestions of it. And the ones with closed eyes are now under

the control of this master editor and so they must
imagine it all. [italics in original] (xx-xxi)

References

Ondaatje, M. (2002) *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. New York: Vintage.