

15

Media Literacy Goes Outside

A Case for Speculative Realism and Environmental Activism in the Media Arts Classroom

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The Forces at Work in the World

When I began writing this chapter in 2020, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed—an experience that many readers might relate to. We were (and in many ways, still are) witnessing a compelling exhibition of the many, radically diverse forces at work in the world, including: the coronavirus, wildfires, bats, pepper spray, protesters, handguns, hashtags, lockdowns, masks, monuments, mail-in ballots, ammonium nitrate, TikTok, tweets, executive orders, and so on. This experience encouraged me to pursue the argument I make in this chapter: that in order for media education to account for the complex circuits of power in our world and to effectively address challenges like white supremacy, police brutality, in particular climate change, we may benefit from revisiting some of the fundamental perspectives and practices in our field. I argue that current issues like ecological crisis (but also pandemics, racial injustice, and political division) have clarified certain limitations in media literacy practice—specifically, that our approaches have privileged discussing *ideas in classrooms* instead of *going outside and engaging with the world of things*.

In recent years, critical media literacy has expanded its influence, and educators, scholars, and creators are exploring how our engagement with media can connect with our efforts to improve the world around us. For example, scholars like Antonio López, Theresa Redmond, Jeff Share, and others have initiated conversations about and pioneered practices for *ecomedia literacy education*, which seeks to connect our analysis and creation of media with environmental activism.¹ These efforts are worthy of praise, and yet I believe that in order for media education to most effectively address social and environmental

DOI: 10.4324/9781003175599-19

justice issues, we need to ground our research, teaching, media participation, and activism in an understanding of *all* the forces at work within the world—animal, mineral, technological, viral, ideological, cultural, ethereal, and so on, which may require us to go beyond the cultural studies and constructivist philosophies on which the field is founded.²

A family of related philosophies that has emerged in recent years—including object-oriented ontology, new materialism, and speculative realism—offers a potential way forward in addressing this challenge.³ While each philosopher’s approach varies, this emerging tradition argues that we need to de-center the human from our understanding of the world and recognize the power wielded by non-human forces. For example, Jane Bennett explores how speculative realism can help us practice democracy in a world of things, something that critical and ecomedia literacy advocates may benefit from. In her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett writes:

Theories of democracy that assume a world of active subjects and passive objects begin to appear as thin descriptions at a time when the interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense. If human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontological heterogeneous) “public” coalescing around a problem.

(p. 108)

According to Bennett, if we are to understand—let alone intervene—in political, social, and ecological spheres of which we are a part, we need to understand how both human and non-human things fit into this complex web of power relations.

This chapter explores how we might apply the philosophies of speculative realism—and particularly, the work of Jane Bennett and her analysis of Walt Whitman’s writing—in order to develop an approach to media education that promotes not just the exercise of *reason* (“analyze,” “evaluate”) or *direct action* (“create,” “act”) but also giving *slow attention* to the things and cultivating our *sensitivities* and *sympathies* to the world around us (NAMLE, n.d.). I argue that as we become more aware of all the forces at work in the world, we will have a clearer sense of both our places within the world and the opportunities for positive interventions in it. After a discussion of the theoretical foundations of this approach, I describe what an approach to media education informed by speculative realism and environmental activism may look like, using an undergraduate course I developed.

Walt Whitman, Poet-President

In her 2020 book *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman*, Bennett argues that Whitman's work is an example of what she calls *slow attention*—an awareness of and a consideration for the subtler flows of power within our world. According to Bennett, practicing slow attention allows us to develop increased sensitivity and sympathy that can positively influence our engagement with the world. In response to the (justified) question “Why Whitman?”, Bennett provides two responses: (1) He advocates for poetry's political potential, and (2) his writing models slow attention, demonstrating how the practice can help us recognize and improve our connections with the world around us.

In his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman speaks to the connection between poetry and politics, writing:

Of all nations, the United States, with veins full of poetical stuff, most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall.

(1855/2005, p. 9)

The American exceptionalism here is problematic, but Whitman's idea that poetry—and, by extension, art, culture, and media—have become among the most important players in today's political arena is undeniable. Whitman is aware of this role as “poet-president” and embraces the opportunity to use his words to influence his readers' understanding and practice of democracy. His poetry is filled with his politics (for good and for ill), and he used his work to advocate for causes and to celebrate the country he loved.

Next, Bennett argues that, even more than the content of his writing, the intent and aesthetic of Whitman's work invites readers to become more sensitive to the forces exerted by every *thing* around us. For those who feel that awareness and sympathy seem too soft or abstract to create the immediate, concrete changes we need in order to confront the many pressing issues we face, Bennett responds that rather than replace direct action, slow attention can fill in the gaps in our understanding and practice.

A more egalitarian, less hateful, more pluralistic, more forward-seeing version of American democracy, for example, will depend not only upon demystification of structures of domination, not only upon militant demands for good government and just laws, but also upon the “radical possession and habit of good heart,” upon, that is to say, a “sympathetic” cast to the way people perceive and encounter the world. Such a disposition cannot be legislated or produced by demand, but requires

inducements that are slow, subtle, indirect, persistent, and often more poetic than polemical.

(2020, p. 71)

This increase of sensitivity and sympathy—our “radical possession and habit of good heart”—is most likely to be facilitated by a radically new pedagogy. We need to teach and learn in ways that emphasize not just analyzing, evaluating, creating, and acting but also stillness, observation, expression, reflection, and caring.

Practicing Slow Attention

As Bennett suggests, cultivating sensitivity and sympathy is a process, and one best achieved through a gradual, subtle, patient pedagogy that prompts learners to practice what she calls slow attention to the things around them. She notes how, throughout Whitman’s work, he engages in “a cultivated practice of perception” (2020, p. 65), “a stylized mode of encounter, in real time and face-to-face with things” (p. 64), in which he observes how ordinary “things ‘speak’ ... ‘sting’ ... ‘seize and affect’ ... ‘impress’” (p. 67) and so on. Bennett suggests that as we practice slow attention, we become aware of the subtle flows of power between human and non-human things—what she calls *influx* and *efflux*. Bennett borrows these terms from Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” which reads:

Sea of stretch’d groundswells,
 Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,
 Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell’d yet always-ready graves,
 Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,
 I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases.
 Partaker of influx and efflux.

(1855/2005, p. 51)

What might this look like? How might we, as media literacy scholars and educators, learn to—and more importantly, teach others—to practice slow attention and develop a more meaningful and motivated relationship with all the things (human and non-human) in our world?

Some media scholars and educators have already begun to make these connections between changing hearts and changing the world. For example, Meg Fromm and Paul Mihailidis (2019) explore how media literacy practice founded on “caring ethics” may prove beneficial. Drawing upon the work of feminist educational philosopher Nel Noddings, they note that—while media literacy education often assumes that students will learn to be more sympathetic to each other and invested in improving the world around

them—caring ethics are not often explicitly acknowledged in its pedagogy or practice.⁴ Fromm and Mihailidis argue that positioning the ethics of care as foundational to media education “allow[s] us to focus on the relational aspects of media literacy, shifting the locus of inquiry from critical analysis to critical consciousness, and the processes of media that put us in the world with others” (p. 364). They advocate for media literacy practice “where critiquing and creating media supports a sense of personal and collective responsibility to act in relation to the betterment of others” (p. 364). Instead of simply assuming that developing media literacy also results in a more caring attitude, we should approach our pedagogy in a way that helps cultivate sensitivity and sympathy.

Space, Place, and Media Arts: A Case Study

A course I developed provides an example of how speculative realism—and in particular, Bennett’s discussion of slow attention—might have application in integrating media education and environmental activism. Called “Space, Place, and Media Arts,” the class is designed to prepare students to become more media literate as well as ecologically informed and engaged. My intention is to help students recognize the various connections between media, the arts, and the spaces, places, and in particular the “natural environment” that they inhabit and are a part of. The class includes reading poetry, literature, history, and scholarship about the state of Utah (where the university is located) as well as viewing painting, photography, and film that represents the state. We host artists, authors, and activists from the area as guest speakers, each of whom addresses issues of space and place in their work. And we go on a lot of field trips—to the Bonneville Salt Flats, the Topaz Internment Camp site and museum, to Arches National Park, Monument Valley on the Navajo Nation, and more.

In each of the assignments and activities I include in the course, I make an effort to help the students practice slow attention, thereby providing them with an opportunity to reflect on and, ideally, improve their relationship with the place in which they live, with the communities that they’re a part of, and with the “natural world.” For example, early in the semester, students read examples of writing that pay attention to place including Annie Dillard, Henry Thoreau, Terry Tempest Williams, and Walt Whitman. Then, I invite students to go outside, to choose a place to visit and observe, take notes, draw, think, collect artifacts, take photos, reflect, and so on. For the assignment, students visit nearby canyons and forests, Utah Lake and the surrounding high desert lands, as well as developed spaces including parks, farms, gardens, and even shopping centers. After their visit, they use their notes to write a Thick Description of that place. In class, the students share how the assignment encouraged them to pay more attention to place and to apply their analytical and creative skills in their Thick Description.

Next, students are asked to return to the site and create a series of Not-So-Still Lives consisting of 8–10 short, looped videos (called *cinemagraphs*, which are similar to animated GIFs) that capture the flows of energy in their chosen place. Their cinemagraphs often document ripples of water, litter fluttering in the breeze, vehicles driving remote country roads, various animals, and, every once in a while, some people. In the artist statements that accompany their Not-So-Still Lives, the students write about how creating these moving images made them more aware of the sometimes subtle, but often dynamic, forces at work in the world.

Near the conclusion of the semester, students complete a final Place-Based Art project in which they create a site-specific work like a performance, ephemeral sculpture, or process-based piece that reflects their interest in and perspective on an issue facing the places, people, and non-human things in Utah. Students get outside, express themselves, and communicate their messages using the elements within their chosen spaces—including water, rocks, garbage, plant life, and even their own bodies. Their projects address issues including air pollution, overdevelopment, the erasure of indigenous cultures and lands, and so on. And in their artist statements, they reflect on the opportunity to make connections between their citizenship, creative work, and their relationship to the world around them. In the course evaluations, students frequently reference how the class—and especially their experiences connecting with the land through observing and art-making—motivated them to become more mindful of their relationship with the natural world and to engage with ecological issues.

The Efficacy of Slow Attention: A Final Thought

Bennett writes that, since the Enlightenment, humanity’s dominant way of thinking and acting has been reminiscent of a Zeusian bolt of lightning “which ignores emergent causality and presumes that the most effective act will be the most explosive and direct” (2020, p. 116). Despite so much evidence of the limitations of this approach, we continue to use it to engage with the world around us—in education, mass communication, citizenship, activism, and so on. I believe that, even given the earnest and innovative efforts of teachers and scholars, there are clear limitations to our media literacy practice. Too often, we double down on the principles of *analyze*, *evaluate*, *create*, and *act*, without considering how we might supplement or improve upon our approach. Bennet’s discussion of the purpose of her book might helpfully inform our efforts to improve media literacy practices.

Work gets done, a difference is made, not only by direct means but also by persistent spark and pervasive seep ... *Influx & Efflux* has sought to sketch another mode of subjectivity and action, wherein the forces of nonhuman agencies and the ubiquity of stupendous, ethereal influences

are acknowledged, become more felt, and, given more of their due, become slightly more susceptible to being inflected, for example, toward an egalitarian politics.

(pp. 115–116)

While these ideas are new, and I am still determining how best to implement them within the context of media education, I believe that they are worth exploring. Because with all the incredible challenges facing us today, with all the forces working around us, on us, and (a lot of the time) against us in the world, I believe we benefit from making use of every perspective and approach that could lead to positive change.

Notes

- 1 See Hagan & Redmond 2019; Kellner & Share 2019; López 2014, 2021.
- 2 See Thevenin 2020, 2022.
- 3 See Bennett 2010; Bogost 2012; Bryant 2014; Harman 2010.
- 4 See also Mihailidis et al. 2021.

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