

a e t h e r
the journal of media geography

Affecting and Affective Social/Media Fields

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AS A CHILD, I REMEMBER FIGHTING EXCEEDINGLY HARD to create and maintain an emotional 'locatedness' as I encountered the multitude of moving images (animated and fiction) rushing through me. I grew up a part of the fabled television and blockbuster film generation during the late 1970s and 1980s, where the television stayed on from the wee hours of the day and into late parts of the night—ultimately becoming the altar (and alter) of our shared living space—as important a social contributor and mediator of major familial disputes and resolutions as any of us were. Most meals, birthdays, family and social gatherings, etc. were performed with the TV on. Homework always seemed to be done with one eye on whatever program was on. My brothers and I sometimes fought with one hand on the remote control and the other with a fist clinched or grasping some part of the other's body. Remote controls did not last long in my home. Typically they were thrown at the other person or against a wall when things got really bad. I lost count after remote control number four. Other times, watching television for my brothers and I was more important than the fight at hand. The remote control was then used for defensive purposes, transforming it into a shield (as nobody wanted to hit the person holding the remote and access to the television). In all, the remote control helped materialize the perpetual power struggle my brothers and I were engaged in.

When things got really intense within my family we would just 'tune into' the television and 'tune out' each other and whatever personal, familial, or social problem going on that particular day. Sometimes it was as easy as a commercial break ensuing or a program ending that would move and lessen the intensity just enough to give family and social life another go. Sometimes, however, a Tide or Life cereal commercial or the ending of *Matlock* or *The Jeffersons* didn't have enough mustard to hold our bodies and our emotions captive to move us through into a new space with the relational issues at hand. On those nights, it was not uncommon to wake up in the middle of the night and

see my entire family all passed out in the living room with the television still on. We were all kind of stubborn in that way. Other times, when a program like *All in the Family* was dealing with a similar issue that we were, the fight we thought we moved on from would be reborn anew, gaining in size and power, and boil over into the viewing space itself. Eventually, when we started to fight over what to watch we were all given our own televisions for our bedrooms. Our televisions grew in size and number.

The media field that the television produced was a part of the fabric of my home life and was integral in (re) shaping it. We had other activities and things going on as well (cooking, cleaning, board and video games, Nerf hoop, animals, etc.) However, by 'turning on' the TV, it was like we were 'turning into' our own social field and family issues. We connected ourselves to this affective media field and inside, as we dwelled in and moved through that intense space, we made new connections with each other and were able to move ourselves and whatever family issues that plagued us from one emotional space to another, from one family body to another. In this way, the social production and media production were not two separate and distinct spatial or affective production bodies. Both fields connected to the pulse intensity of the other and were affected as the other one moved.

We can look geographically at the same situation and suggest that both fields (media and social) fold into and affect the perception, substance, and power of the other. Local cable companies, at least as they apply to my family, have been a major force in the creation of both therapeutic and perilous spaces for American families. Such a conceptual movement suggests that the television (if not all media) function as a therapeutic, perilous, contentious, but always productive and intensive force/space.

My parents, divorced when I was five, would set off to work as I awoke. Instead of a babysitter (which could not be afforded), my brother and I were pushed out from the bed and situated in front of the TV, given a kiss goodbye and told to 'plug' ourselves into the set until it was time to either catch the bus to school or wait for them to return from work. Maybe this had to do with the notion that in these early years I grew up in some unsafe neighborhoods, living around some seedy dudes, had issues of tardiness and truancy at school, experimented with cigarettes and chewing tobacco, loved sugar and video arcades, and took a liking to shoplifting at the local supermarkets and music stores. My mom was also not particularly fond of some of my choices in friends and felt that the safest place for me was inside the home and in front of a TV.

Various PBS programs such as *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, and *The Electric Company*, numerous cartoons (*Looney Tunes*, *Transformers*, *G.I. Joe* etc) and rerun television programs from the 1950s (*I Love Lucy*), 1960s (*Star Trek*), and 1970s (*Happy Days*) paralleled and connected to the production of child/parent spaces I had going on at the time. For a long time, I felt that I was being a 'good boy' in the eyes of my mom the longer I stayed 'tuned in' and connected to this particular media field. Besides the sports section of the newspaper the only other book I read with any conviction was

the *TV Guide*. *TV Guide* became the prime social and parental directive for me, as it not only affected what I did (to go outside and play or not), but whom I hung out with (to become friends with people who watched the same programs as me), for how long (was hanging out with friends talking about the programs actually better than watching them?), and when I would go to bed because *Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, and *Dukes of Hazzard* were usually on at 9 or 10 pm). I am not ashamed to say that I may have had some issues of addiction to television by the age of five.

Out of this emerged interesting geographies that actualized a positive evolution between me and the television and the television to my world. For me, watching television was more than escapism from the perilous spaces that surrounded me growing up. It became a space of/for becoming; a productive affective media field that my world grew from with every encounter I had with different people and places my parents could not offer or afford. Such a flowing and folding (actual to virtual and virtual to actual) affective media field pushed me into new spaces. My body became a part of the sensual fabric of the moving imagery (ideas, people, places, and the human imagination) as the television became part of my body as an extension of the social spaces off screen. The notion of an affective media field is a nomadic space where moving imagery and moving viewer flow or fold into these spaces in a multitude of ways and conditions. Both bodies (viewing and image) pass through and take a line of flight through the material/affecting body of the other and are changed.

Connecting my body to this affective and affecting, intensive, or sensual surface (media body/space/field) was something I experimented with during my childhood. I used to see how close I could put my face to the television screen and still be able to see and perceive the moving images and when I would go to the movies as a kid I would sit in the first row. Most of the time, I had to turn down the volume and be mindful about static electricity. At best, I could watch a half hour program this way before my eyes were burning and my neck hurt. While not my intent, what I was actually doing was experimenting with various media(ted) geographies of perception and affect. What I did not realize was that this was more of a Cartesian exercise than a Deleuzian one. This scared the crap out of my dad. If I could have entered the television as a virtual body and left my 'real' life behind I surely would have given it a go. In many ways the Internet (chat rooms, online gaming, search engines, pornography, and MySpace) and digital media sources (DVDs) now allow us to dwell: we can belong to virtual social networks. We can navigate our bodies in virtual spaces.

My father was a force with my evolving life as television body. He quickly became worried not so much by the amount of time I spent watching television but with regards to how 'close' I sat to the television. The old adage of protecting young boys from the electromagnetic energy being emitted by the television was something I guess my dad had heard or read somewhere. This old adage later morphed into a much more profound message my dad was imparting to me as a young boy: not to allow

the connections (emotions, body, and mind) I made with the various stories, places, and characters embedded in the sensual spaces of television and movies to have lasting affects on me in my life. It was as if he believed I could connect to the intensive flow of moving images and not be moved by them. I used to ask him if he was human.

For example, my father would always say, “we watch television and go to the movies to be entertained, escape from our worries, and relax, not to come out of that engagement all worked up, in tears, distraught, and overjoyed.” His position was that if I couldn’t watch television or movies without expressing extreme emotion (cf. Thrift 2004 and his notion of universal emotions) then I was not allowed to watch television or go to the movies, at least not with him. Thinking back, maybe this is why he always took me to see comedy films like *Caddyshack* (1980) or feel-good dramas like *Rocky* (1976) instead of feature films such as *Platoon* (1986) or *Blue Velvet* (1985) that took on socially and politically charged issues dealing with gender, war, addiction, sexuality, disability/mental health, and racism.

And so I learned at a very young age that being moved and expressing emotions from a film or a television program were the sorts of things young boys just don’t do. For years, my dad had me believe that it was I, the viewer and consumer of media, who held the power over images in terms of dissecting their meaning (structural semiotics), directing how they moved through me, connected to my world and the spaces from which I dwell (home, work, school to name a few), and ultimately registered with me emotionally. I guess he did not realize, as I did later, that there is an intensive geography that is created when viewing movies and television for its productive tendencies, as both art and force. The sensual surface of the screen is something that we as viewers become one with, shape, and are shaped by. Emotions connect us to this space: as we move with the images, we are affected in such a way that our bodies and the spaces they are partially connected to change and produce.

In this way, media expressions, in the same way as maps, art, or cinema, are always coming to be when they connect with users/consumers. We take the images, messages, and feelings we get and ingest those images, message, and feelings into our bodies and lives in such a way that they travel and morph way beyond the initial intentions of their makers. It is true that media produces things and invents new space-time social-cultural worlds. The media geography I imagine is forever flowing, sometimes redirected, but always doing something. One direction I take in my own research is conceptualizing and creating new geographies: mapping the productive tendencies of media, the interrelations that connect image and society, and the affective processes that bind media and social production together.

Interestingly, there are some parallels between the evolution of geographic thought and that production of different forms of media itself when they are seen for their productive tendencies. For example, we have continuous innovations in cinematic production technologies and techniques (camera work, special effects,

improved audio systems, editing, and a movement from analog to digital to name a few). In geography, new theories, geographers, concepts, visualizations, social and spatial problems, technologies, and domains of study likewise have given rise to new ways of imagining, doing, and creating geography. *Aether* is in many ways a reflection of this very process. What started out as film geography in the mid 1990s has evolved into geographies of journalism, marketing, newspapers, photography, video, internet, gaming, geovisualization, music, and television. And as we have seen in the journals in which this work is published and the various conference at which this work has been presented, these innovations in media production and media geography affect the production of society and space.

It is my hope that in keeping with a continuous 'processual production' in the creation of a media geography that takes on the notion of an affective and affecting media/social fields, we will be able to look to the affects of media and to what society is actually doing with its connections to the various media fields. How do media move us in our lives? What kinds of things do media produce? Compassion or empathy, political action, controversy, social change? What do we produce with the emotional spaces from which we emerge in this media(ted) relationship? How do media actualize a particular form of society and space that are different from other forces operating? In this way, media geography has the potential to explore the multiplicities of media as desiring machines, not only as a creative art, but also as a social force that affects the formation and becomings of society and space.

So what might this work look like? Currently there has been a rush of interesting work going on in geography exploring the affective and emotional geographies of media (cf. Aitken 2007a, 2007b, Aitken and Dixon 2006, Doel and Clarke 2007, Craine 2006). Other work I find of interest is the conceptualization of what Mark Hansen (2006) and other new media theorists call the transcendental conditions of media experience, the work of Katherine Hayles (2004) and her post-human discussions of bio-mediated bodies, and other projects exploring various social geographies of media production and consumption. I am also intrigued with the creation of a geography of media where geographers produce media fields through video, the internet, photography, music and *Aether* will certainly provide a venue for this type of research. I am hopeful that *Aether* will bring about new and exciting forms in the expression and legitimacy of this burgeoning field of media to geography and geography to media. Massumi (2002,13) says, "Media producers use techniques which embrace their own inventiveness and are not afraid to own up to the fact that they add to reality." Similarly, the creation and evolution of media geography has the potential to add something to the reality of the body geographic. And so I am excited about this burgeoning field in geography—for its productivity.

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