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Endings, beginnings, and transformations

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Certainly, this is not the world we expected it to be, at least not for my generation. As I grew up in Chile in the 1990s, it seemed that the world's future was bright, that certain fights were already won, and that we could only aspire to more. In a way, we trusted humanity, and we believed in people's abilities to learn from their own mistakes. Even if we could be cynical at times, we hoped certain things had been left behind or that we could overcome them at some point: fascism, racism, sexism, world poverty, environmental disasters. Surely, the world wasn't perfect, but it could only get better, right? We already had learned.

I was born in a country amid a dictatorship, where truth was silenced or half-said, where the military appeared every day speaking on television, and where filmmakers needed to film mainly 'the urgent', out of duty. By the time I was at the university, with the dictatorship (relatively) long gone, the field was torn between that political duty of committed cinema and a new feeling of freedom that allowed for film and research, primarily for pleasure, knowledge, and beauty. But time passed, and not only that the truth of Pinochet's dictatorship was never fully exposed, but the efforts to unearth it ran into new forms of denialism. The media, which we expected to free us and help democracy, concentrated in fewer hands. And social media, with their enormous possibilities to connect and unite the globe, showed a disturbing potential to multiply lies and fake news and refloat forms of hatred and violence.

We find ourselves in a world that is radically transformed. Terms such as 'Anthropocene' and 'climate change' are now an inescapable part of our academic discourses and daily lives. The pressure on our material living conditions is increasing. Global inequality has deepened, and a pandemic has

shown us that what we considered long standing achievements of expanding public health, science, and education, are pretty fragile. In political terms, the emergence of new forms of fascism, nationalism, and xenophobia have intruded into the public sphere in different parts of the planet. It seems that the world is shifting towards dystopias that we once thought fascinating but fanciful – a metaphorical, critical, *Mad Max*, *1984*, or *Soylent Green*, which comfortably remained in the realm of fiction. Now reality seems strangely fictional, to the point where the very distinctions between fact and fiction seem spurious.

We live in strange times, which have brought new fears and disappointment. But also (and because humans are human), they also have brought new forms of hope. 'La esperanza es lo último que se pierde' (hope is the last thing we lose), as they say. The sense of urgency activates the desire to positively influence our environment, and there are fair reasons to keep hope. The resurgence of feminism has empowered us in our masculine-centred societies. The popularisation of environmentalism has put the Earth's future on our agenda. In such an unequal world, expressing solidarity with others has fostered our international sense of community. There is hope in cultivating the ability to converse and discuss with colleagues across the planet and promote critical thinking in our students. There is hope when, after all, we have been able to connect and collaborate through and thanks to media, overcoming the several symbolic, cultural, and political borders that mean to divide us.

So what does this mean for media studies? I think we can look again at old classic problems in the light of new transformations. The issue of 'truth', for example, both concerning the construction of historical truths and our shared responsibility in legitimising what we consider to be true. In this age of post-truth, post-factual politics, and fake news, it seems relevant to go back to seemingly old ideals of seeking to discover true meanings, build truthful explanations, and unveil what is concealed. However, it is not an easy task when at the same time media and film epistemologies have been developing – and rightly so – a critical perspective on those same ideals. Post-modern sensitivities have installed truth as a matter of perspective and context rather than something universal. Along those lines, modern discourses on 'objectivity' and 'reality', and absolute distinctions between the fictional and the real, are also questioned. Most documentary theories have brought up different ways reality is constructed and how truth claims of documentary and media images have often served those in power, legitimising their position.

Nonetheless, it has become increasingly apparent that there is now a need to reconcile these theories with our renewed need for facts and truthful texts. We also need to face how these critical discourses may have been absorbed and distorted by both factual and political powers, disguising anti-intellectualism as cultural critique. This is a moment to keep uncovering unpopular truths, listening to other versions of the truth, respecting what we deem true. We need to discuss our political position as academics or researchers, our degree of involvement, and our role in society beyond our institutions' 'impact' reports. We need to keep asking ourselves what we should do and to what extent. And, with the help of each other, we need to stop conforming to educational systems that are less concerned with building and disseminating knowledge and far too much in everything else.

In this context, I think one of the most fruitful theoretical frameworks have been the so-called 'affective turn' and the emergence of 'new materialisms' (c.f. the book with this title by Coole & Frost) as a field of inquiry in media and cultural studies. The new take on 'affect' aims to overcome existing dichotomies between the material and the symbolic world and look into more productive ways to integrate the notions of subjectivity and objectivity. This perspective is linked to the idea of affect as intensity and process embedded in knowledge construction, human perception, and creativity, considering media technologies as significant elements of human and non-human relationships and as forms of new materialism. The emergence of these novel ontologies and epistemologies (in the path of good old philosophical traditions, such as phenomenology) have conveyed new perspectives for looking into contemporary film and media, which bring images close to their materiality, and our analysis closer to the senses.

Among the many lines of research emerging from affect theory, I would like to highlight the possibilities of exploring affect and emotion concerning media production and consumption. Critical media studies' debates have been looking into lived practices and the relationship between media texts, spectatorship, and media production, considering forms of situated knowledge and practices processed through cognition and emotion, which are intertwined with social relationships. The inclusion of affect in social-relational approaches allows for a deeper understanding of cultural experiences, focusing on situational bounds and relationally affective events that unfold underlying logics previously ignored. From this perspective, we might underpin some aspects of media production that have often been neglected or disregarded, such as the role of passion in media work and the

critical role affect plays in the building of professional networks, institutions, and events (film archives, film festivals, media schools, etc.). The emergent concept of 'emotional labour' has enlightened the problematic relationship between caring and power, fuelling precarious working conditions in the cultural field. Thus, this theoretical turn brings together aspects that had previously been considered as separated spheres, i.e. material conditions and structural inequality on the one hand, and emotional commitment and affective relationships on the other.

This way of thinking about social and cultural processes and the impact of affect in different forms of cultural mediation provides new frameworks to understand contemporary media cultures. It also contributes to the long-term commitment of media studies to making social inequalities visible, which seems today more urgent than ever.

While observing audiovisual representations and analysing work conditions in media industries and academia, we need to shed light on feminised, racialised, and marginalised areas. We need to search for new protagonists of our stories, and we might need to ask who has not yet been heard? Whose testimonies are missing? Why were these films previously dismissed from the canon? What were the conditions of production and circulation of these films? For whom were they important? In addressing new forms of inequality, the effort should be directed not only to open or give space to new voices but for them to assume a central position in media discourses – a position which they still cannot achieve. When we talk about 'world cinemas', for example, we might first listen to those who are part of that specific 'world' we are discussing before wanting to make them fit into theories previously created for Europe and/or the US. Global transformations have made it easier to build multi-linguistic academic spaces; let us use them to foster mutual international and cultural recognition in more equal terms.

While facing the world's transformations, media and film history could also find a renewed place. To say that to understand the present and think about the future we must understand the past sounds like a cliché. However, I mentioned that we have not really learned from the past (or not as much as we thought), and perhaps that is an important lesson. History is forgotten, and it tends to be disarticulated from our discourses about the future, as we have not been able to connect it with our present experiences. Academic practices that have divided media's history from its contemporary manifestations have not helped us deconstruct our prejudices and preconceptions

about new phenomena, which appear to be totally different from any previous case. Historicising processes and building more interdisciplinary bridges can be essential to think about the future possibilities of exhibition and media circulation, for example. In audience studies, we could benefit from more comparative research on diverse ways of seeing and relating to film in different historical moments, from silent film to Netflix, that help us understand the effects of new VOD platforms and exhibition ecologies.

Ultimately, one of the impacts of recent years' transformations is the need to stop and look at our practices. To take a break from the maelstrom of academic work and rediscover the value of media research. This pause has a rational component and an affective one, seeking to revalue the beauty and joy of media research that gives a new impetus to the 'affective turn' in the field. Even with the uncertainties, anxieties, and responsibilities that emerge from recent events, I believe we cannot abandon the amazement we experience from other people's great work as well as the pleasure of building new bits and pieces of knowledge that help us understand human communication. Thinking with and through affect allows us to understand the real impact of media on the daily lives of human beings, thus the possible futures of media. For instance, the rescue of oral testimonies and memories, the reconstruction of collaborative histories and forms of collective work, or the rediscovery and reassessment of popular films previously dismissed, from comedies to melodrama. Even revaluing our passion for research can help us think of the implications of future work in the field.

At the moment I am writing, I have a strange feeling that there is a world that is ending. But, if we stop believing in unilinear evolutionary paradigms, endings are always new beginnings. The present might not be what many born in the late 20th century thought it would be, but we can continue opening new paths and expanding our possibilities. There are many futures ahead.

Author

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