

Journeys of the self: Marion's partial 'mediagenius' and the motive reader in comparative theories of intersubjectivity.

SLIDE 1: TITLE AND DESIGNATION

Over 20 years ago (1993), Phillipe Marion invented the neologism 'mediagenius' to describe the way in which stories specify themselves through the systematic, discursive relationships that constitute communications registers, by means of what Jan Baetens calls 'style', 'storytelling' and 'medium' (2001).

SLIDE 2: MEDIAGENIUS: STYLE, STORYTELLING AND MEDIUM

In Marion's sense, comic strips have a specific mediagenius that is quite distinct from the mediagenius (the 'style', 'storytelling' and 'medium') of other narrative registers, such as movie or writing.

SLIDE 3: GRAPHIATION IS UTTERANCE REMEDIATED

Perhaps the most discussed element of comics' mediagenius is the idea of 'graphiation', a term that Marion uses as a drawn equivalent for the idea of 'utterance' in linguistic narratology. 'Graphiation' is 'utterance' theoretically remediated. However, graphiation fulfills only one function in the mediagenius of comics proposed by Marion, outside which the term, 'graphiation', is in danger of closing itself down, by simply being employed as nothing more than a proposition of authorial intention in the form of drawing style.

Rather, the identification of systemic generative relationships between the act and the object of drawing, reading and story in comics mediagenius was unusual, and remains noteworthy, in that it raised and raises questions about narrative systems often confounded by register-specificity in the theorising of drawing, verbal and non-verbal communication.

Most insightfully, in theorising aspects of visual communication as utterance, mediagenius attempts to systematise a set of relationships encompassing the discursive as well as the formal functions of visual narration and, as a result, it suggests theorisations of visual style other than those derived from verbal syntax and diction, and para-semiotic theorisations of depiction, for example.

SLIDE 4: A SYSTEMATISATION OF DISCOURSE?

I take seriously the possibility that mediagenius constitutes a systematisation of discourse and, as such, this paper will highlight the implications of this possibility by calibrating mediagenius as a system of intersubjects that can be compared to other intersubjective systems, pointing to its internal contradictions, and taking it far from its narratological base.

SLIDE 5: COMICS MEDIAGENIUS – A SUMMARY

Marion proposes that all of the specifically visual elements of comics are indivisible. These visual elements constitute an objectified comic strip, rather than the whole situation in which a comic is produced and read, which Jan Baetens describes as a "... 'trace', that is, a reflection, a symptom, an index, of the subjectivity of a narrator,..." who can only be known as a subject relative to a reader, through the physical trace itself (2001:146).

This group of comics-specific elements is underwritten by formal elements, which are shared with other media. These contribute to the specific trace of comic strips, although the comic strip register is not reducible to them.

Mediagenius describes this combination of media specific and shared elements. In comics, as in other registers, unique forms of expression produce the register itself, in this case involving a technical mix of language, drawing and writing. Marion further proposes that physical trace is the emanation of a particular type of narrating subject. In comics, this subject makes utterances as both draughtsperson and calligrapher. Hence 'graphiateur', the 'visual utterer', a second neologism indicating this subjective narrator-in-drawing and the function of narration-in-drawing: 'graphiation'. This narrator isn't directly observable in trace, but is rather a causal pre-requisite of comics mediagenius: the epistemological presumption that a producer is necessary for the trace.

SLIDE 6: MEDIAGENIUS – A GRAPHIATEUR IS NOT AN AUTHOR

According to this model, the style of facture of a comic strip communicates intentionality. Although the graphiateur is not directly observable in the physical trace of drawing and writing, the model proposes that the graphiateur's intention is perceived more clearly by a reader in types of drawing that are immediate, spontaneous and unmediated by revision. Thus, graphiation traces the performance of an active subject, with more rather than less spontaneity in the performance of drawing being equal to less mediation between reader and the subject graphiateur.

Finalising the model, a reader is instrumental, although the role is relative to mediagenius rather than a constitutive function of it. The model proposes that, reflecting the action of the motivating graphiateur, the reader's perception of the narrating subject in trace mirrors the subjects' performance in tracing. Readers, then, only engage with mediagenius relative to the intentionality of the graphiateur, whose performance is traced, although they are not described as intentioned themselves.

SLIDE 7: MEDIAGENIUS AND PSYCHIC IDENTIFICATION

Rather, in this model, the reader is defined in an innate identification with the productive moves of the graphiateur, achieved by recalling memories of childhood experiences shared by social convention with an otherwise unknown author and embedded in the psyche (Baetens 2001:150).

Today, I shall set aside discussion of important issues of author biography, the significance or insignificance of levels of productive spontaneity of trace and of identification, to focus on trace as what Baetens calls mediagenius' 'socialised act'.

SLIDE 8: THREE MODELS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY **Crossley, Volo, Barker**

A theorisation of trace is foundational to both comics mediagenius and to the three descriptions of intersubjectivity to which I will now refer. In sociologist Nick Crossley's 1996 conditions of radical intersubjectivity, in Formalist literary theorist Valentin Vološinov's 1924 analytical method for "...tracing the social life of the...sign" and in media scholar Martin Barker's principles for the "...application of the dialogical approach to cultural forms...", we find a continual insistence upon the heuristic epistemological status of trace.

SLIDE 9: CROSSLEY'S CONDITIONS OF RADICAL INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Nick Crossley argues that communication only occurs by means of corporeal and environmental transformations effected and perceived by people in relation to each other, such that:

- a) "...human subjectivity is not... a private inner world; which is divorced from the outer (material) world; that it consists in the worldly praxes of sensuous, embodied beings and that it is therefore public..."
- b) "...that subjectivity consists in a pre-reflexive... engagement with alterity, rather than in an... objectification of it..."
- c) "...that human action,.. necessarily assumes a socially instituted form and that this form is essential to its meaningfulness..."
- d) "...human action... arises out of dialogical situations... that are irreducible to individual human subjects." (Crossley 1996:26).

SLIDE 10: VOLOŠINOV'S METHOD FOR TRACING THE SOCIAL LIFE OF A SIGN

Vološinov's method for "tracing the social life of the...sign" has three prerequisites:

1. Ideology may not be divorced from the material reality of the sign (i.e. by locating it in the "consciousness" or other vague and elusive region),
2. The sign may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse (seeing that the sign is part of organised social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artefact),
3. Communication and the forms of communication may not be divorced from the material basis." (Vološinov 1973:21).

In this context we must be careful to define Vološinov's word 'sign' as 'meaning' or even 'phenomenon', which, unlike the semiotic 'sign' is not produced in relation to an object 'signified'. Vološinov doesn't explain his use of the word and his sense may be tautological, particularly as he insists that meaning is solely generated in social interactions (Vološinov 1973:21).

SLIDE 11: BARKER'S PRINCIPALS FOR THE APPLICATION OF THE IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CULTURAL FORMS

Finally, Barker's principles for the "...application of the dialogical approach to cultural forms..." state:

1. Form in a cultural object is understood as a proposal to a typical kind of imaginative projection.
2. Any such form sediments within itself some typified social experience...
3. All forms are produced out of determinate production histories...
4. In investigating form,.. we need to investigate... regularities of transformation; and the ways in which such regularities constrain what actual characters, settings problems etc can appear,...
5. To study readers,.. (we) have to discover both who are likely to be willing and able to orient themselves to the dialogue proposed, and what transformations they are thereby involved in.
6. Responses other than those of the 'natural' readers themselves represent socially-typified orientations." (Barker 1989:275)

SLIDE 12: A PROBLEM

My elision of mediagenius' 'trace' with Crossley's 'worldly praxis', Vološinov's 'sign' and Barker's 'cultural forms' poses an immediate problem and threatens to prefigure

comparisons. On what basis can I propose that these terms perform the same functions or accrue the same status in these 4 systems? In answer, we immediately see functional similarities. First, all of the theorised relationships producing intersubjects are found in 'material'. Second, this material is described as being meaningful as the focus of series of types of knowledge relationships themselves producing participating subjects through transformation and, third, that due to this, the psyche is also produced by these relationships rather than either functioning outside them or contradicting them.

SLIDE 13: CROSSLEY AND COMICS MEDIAGENIUS

In Crossley's terms, however, mediagenius does not fully describe the intersubjective relationships produced in communication. Mediagenius' objectification of trace reveals a fundamental disengagement from alterity. Similarly, the possible conflation of biography and physical trace in mediagenius conjures an objectified author out of a situation of relative subjects. The media-specificity of Baeten's 'external' elements (2001:146) is in this case synonymous with the 'socially instituted form... essential to meaningfulness' that Crossley cites. Even disregarding the location of the reader in mediagenius in a purely private realm, the subjects in mediagenius are not fully subjects in Crossley's terms. Their relative status lies in an imposed series of subject/object dualisms, which Crossley's embodied intersubjects specifically disallow.

SLIDE 14: VOLOSINOV AND COMICS MEDIAGENIUS

Vološinov's method frames the types of subjective relationships in mediagenius in ways that are very similar to Crossley's, with broadly similar points of dissimilarity. They are congruent in terms of identifying trace alone as meaningful: mediagenius connects physical trace to the history of production, although of course not the biography of an author, in the function of the graphiateur.

However, although physical trace is defined in mediagenius as the entire work, this does not encompass a subject reader and hence, in comparison to Vološinov's model, is "...divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse..." (Vološinov 1973:86). According to Vološinov, the reader is a constituent part of the 'entire work'. In this sense, Vološinov's communicative subjects are intersubjects, whereas those produced by mediagenius are not. Vološinov's subjects are formed only in relation to others, even as they are formed in the situation in which reading takes place as relative readers, so that the subject "..., taken from within, so to speak, turns out to be wholly a product of social interrelations. Not only its outward expression but also its inner experience are social territory." (Vološinov 1929/1973:86).

SLIDE 15: BARKER AND COMICS MEDIAGENIUS

Barker's model is more explicit about the specific relationship between reading and narrating subjects, authors and trace than either Crossley or Vološinov. Barker's principles number 5 and 6 add detail to Crossley's "...socially instituted form..." and Vološinov's "...forms of social intercourse..." Barker writes that the reader orients him or herself towards trace through the function of one or other sets of social conventions – that is, through habituation. These could be said to equate to, but are not included in the physical trace described in mediagenius, although they contribute to the 'external' elements later identified by Baetens.

According to Barker, the 'proposition' that trace makes to the reader is one in which the reader finds meaning through subjective self-transformation. For Barker, readers might or might not be the 'natural' audience for a type of expression, but they are transformed

nonetheless. They may or may not respond to a particular trace in a single typical way, but instead might reform their subjectivity through dissent, rejection or avoidance. All of these positions constitute 'reading' for Barker. Intentionality on the part of readers constitutes both an ability and willingness to orient themselves to situations in which trace makes a proposition.

SLIDE 16: AN INCOMPLETE PROJECT: A SYSTEMATISATION OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE...

Comics mediagenius proposes that trace produces a specific absent subject. However, according to Crossley's, Volosinov's, and Barker's related models, this proposition extends to the experience of a subject reader, being a constituent part of a system of relationships in which communications are affected as present-time transformations, both corporeal and environmental.

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