

Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* Symposium

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On 11–12 April 2003 the editorial board of *Critical Inquiry* gathered in Chicago to discuss the future of the journal and of the interdisciplinary fields of criticism and theory that it addresses. Academic conferences are, as we all know, a dime a dozen; and the board meetings of academic journals are not usually reported (as this one was) in the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe*. There was something different about this meeting, something (if you will forgive a lapse from editorial neutrality) quite special, unique, even extraordinary. For one thing, no papers were delivered, only brief statements and questions. The entire conference consisted of dialogue, with the exception of a couple of ceremonial welcomes and a brief introductory statement by Fred Jameson. All of the written statements for the conference were submitted and circulated weeks in advance of the conference on the *Critical Inquiry* home page.

For another thing, this group had never before convened in the entire thirty-year history of the journal. *CI*'s nine-member editorial collective meets once a month, but its editorial board had never come together before, even though its members are well known to each other and have often made contributions to the journal in the form of advice, essays, and the guest-editing of special issues. This was an event waiting to happen, and thanks to the generosity of the president of the University of Chicago, Don Randel, the director of the Franke Institute for the Humanities, Jim Chandler, and the chair of the Committee on Social Thought, Robert Pippin, we were able to do it. Thanks to the able moderating of John Comaroff it had conversational coherence. Thanks to the intellectual inspiration of Arnold Davidson it had substance. And thanks to the hard work of Jay Williams, Anne Stevens, Jeff Rufo, Sara Ritchev, and, especially, Michael Murphy, it went

off without a hitch, with a nice mixture of improvisation, sensory pleasure, and intellectual excitement.

Thanks go, finally, to a new medium and a new generation engaged in new forms of research, play, sex, and politics on the internet.¹ The wired world made this kind of symposium possible, one in which a months-long process of textual accumulation, a kind of critical-theoretical chain letter, was gathered up and disseminated on the web (our college intern, Amy Biegelsen, gets credit for that). A first layer was provided by the editorial board, with statements in response to a questionnaire on the future of criticism and theory (see below) from Elizabeth Abel, Danielle Allen, Homi Bhabha, Wayne Booth, James Chandler, Lorraine Daston, Teresa de Lauretis, Frances Ferguson, Sander L. Gilman, Miriam Hansen, Harry Harootunian, Jerome McGann, J. Hillis Miller, Robert Morgan, Thomas Pavel, Robert Pippin, Mary Poovey, Catharine Stimpson, and Robert von Hallberg. Then came a second layer of reflections on these responses by my coeditors: Lauren Berlant, Bill Brown, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Elizabeth Helsinger, Françoise Meltzer, Richard Neer, and Joel Snyder. Their interventions, which review the first round of writings, save me the trouble of claiming some Olympian editorial perspective from which to summarize our discussions. I will simply tell you what I thought about the proceedings, as someone who has been involved in this journal for twenty-five years and who has some interest in media, literature, the arts, and the production of knowledge about them in various disciplines.

Everyone arrived in Chicago having already read their colleagues, so there was no need to read papers or to listen to them. The symposium was thus simultaneously a product both of hypermediation and of immediate, face-to-face encounters.² Many of the editorial statements had already engaged in reflections on this new condition of knowledge production and aesthetic experimentation as among the greatest challenges for theory and criticism. At the same time, many of the statements reflected on the need

1. See Andrew Boyd, "The Web Rewires the Movement," *The Nation* 4–11 Aug. 2003, pp. 13–18 for a discussion of web-based political action.

2. The one-way "communication" of the lecture format seems increasingly obsolete, as does its political relative, the speech at a rally. Mass political gatherings organized over the net now rely as much on rituals, silent vigils, and the simple appearance of masses of bodies as they do on rousing speeches.

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for new mediations—between philosophy and history or literature; between the human and natural sciences; between new and old media. If the task of criticism is often one of differentiation and discrimination, the role of theory at this conference seemed to be a mediating one, as if theory itself were in some sense a medium. So questions of media in every sense of the word permeated both the form and the content of the symposium, a matter about which I will have more to say presently.

The symposium was divided into two sessions: a public “town meeting” on Friday, 11 April and a closed meeting of the board and editors on Saturday, 12 April, which was further subdivided into sessions on theory, politics, and technology. Approximately 550 people from the academic communities of Chicago and beyond came to the public session; the Swift Hall auditorium was filled with a standing-room-only crowd, and the overflow space in Swift Commons also filled up with people watching the discussion on closed-circuit TV. The event was covered by major newspapers, dismissively by the *New York Times* (“Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn’t Matter”) and with a touch of wit by the *Boston Globe* (“Crisis Theory”). The question remains: Why should the convening of an academic journal’s editorial board muster so much interest? What critical or theoretical “crisis” drew together this critical mass?

Part of the answer must lie in the reputations of the members of the *CI* editorial board, who are widely known as leaders in their respective fields. But this hardly seems an adequate explanation by itself. Academic stars are a routine sight at the University of Chicago, and this was not an occasion when any of these figures were going to have very much air time to address the public. The idea was rather to have a town meeting in which questions could be posed by the audience to the editorial board, not to stage a parade of celebrities. The attraction of the occasion seems more a function of the extraordinary critical mass that *CI*’s editorial board collectively represents; the entire range of interdisciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences was there. Philosophy, history, language, literature, art, music, religion, anthropology were all represented, as well as critical movements, emergent fields, and sub- or interdisciplines like women’s and gender studies, feminist and queer theory, African American studies, cultural studies, cinema and media studies, postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis, the medical humanities, and the history and philosophy of science.

This diverse assembly amounted, then, to a kind of interdisciplinary summit on the human sciences, convening scholars from many fields who had in various ways over the last thirty years helped to shape the collective character of critical inquiry, both the journal and the intellectual project in which it participates. But this explanation still leaves out a major compo-

ment and that was the timing of the conference, which occurred at the very same moment that the United States was plunging into an unprecedented preemptive war against Iraq, without the approval of the United Nations and in the face of overwhelming opposition from great multitudes of people around the globe (dismissed as focus groups by the U.S. president). Organized largely by internet communication, massive demonstrations had occurred in all the world's capitals; the world's religions, including the Catholic Church and the United Methodists (the president's own church), had opposed the war; the city councils of over one hundred major cities around the U.S. had voted overwhelmingly against it. The worldwide antiwar movement in the spring of 2003 was much larger than at any point during the Vietnam War, with a greater international reach and a much more diverse economic and ethnic profile. And yet, on 11–12 April 2003, it had to be seen as a failure. The U.S. military and its hastily assembled "coalition of the willing" was in the process of routing the Iraqi army and establishing itself as an occupation force. In the face of the crushing defeat of the peace movement, the questions in the air were, What can criticism and theory do to counteract the forces of militarism, unilateralism, and the perpetual state of emergency that is now the explicit policy of the U.S. government? What good is intellectual work in the face of the deeply anti-intellectual ethos of American public life, not to mention the pervasive sense that a radical faction of the Republican party that is immune to persuasion, argument, reason, or even the flow of accurate information has established a stranglehold on political power? What can the relatively weak power of critical theory do in such a crisis? How can one take Edward Said's advice and speak the truth to power when power refuses to listen, when it actively suppresses and intimidates dissenters, when it systematically lies and exaggerates to mobilize popular support for its agenda, when it uses slogans like the "war on terrorism" to abrogate the civil liberties of its own citizens? There was a temptation to start using the *f* word, and whispering the question, Is it fascism yet? At the *CI* symposium there was a temptation to say, as Stanley Fish, Sander Gilman, and Henry Louis Gates did, that theory (and academic intellectual work more generally) is politically impotent. Gates, paraphrasing a student's question as "What did the theory revolution do to liberate the colonial subject?" answered, "I must have missed that part." "I wish to deny the relative effectiveness of intellectual work," said Fish, "and especially to advise people against going into the academy if they hope to be effective beyond it. . . . If you want to do that, you should in fact *be* beyond it." The most gloomy assessment came from Sander Gilman: "We must be careful in assuming that intellectuals have some kind of insight. . . . The track record indicates that for the last 4000

years intellectuals have not only been wrong almost all of the time, but they have been wrong in corrosive and destructive ways” [amazed laughter from the audience]. These, of course, were the sentiments that made it into the *New York Times* the following week, leading it to summarize the symposium as a gloomy admission that “theory doesn’t matter.”

I shot off the following letter to the *Times*, which of course did not print it:

April 21, 2003

To the Editor, *New York Times*

The *Times* story on the *Critical Inquiries* symposium at the University of Chicago (“The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn’t Matter,” Saturday, April 19, 2003), should have added one word to its title: “immediately.” Theory may not matter right away, in the short run, but over time it matters a great deal. The declarations of irrelevance reported by the *Times* were in response to a question from a student about how theory might intervene in the immediate situation of the war in Iraq. The answer was, quite rightly, not very much. Theories of literature, language, culture, and the arts, like theories in any other field, take time to percolate down to practical application. The very theorists who your reporter quoted as saying that theory doesn’t matter have themselves produced theories that have made considerable difference in the way people read, write, think, and behave. Stanley Fish’s theories have affected both literary and legal interpretation; Sander Gilman’s have influenced the relation of the humanities and medicine; and the theories of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have profoundly re-shaped the discussion of race in this country. Those who think theory doesn’t matter should note that the present war in Iraq is the long-term consequence of political theories (hatched at the University of Chicago, among others) that are now heavily represented by key intellectuals in the Bush administration.

The word that resonates for me now in this embarrassingly earnest letter is *immediately*, with its implication that mediation, middleness, the question of the medium, as well as the *nonimmediate*, the long *durée* of patient, protracted struggle, is what theory must face up to today.

So this conference on crisis theory was itself held in the midst of a crisis, a moment of profound political anxiety. And insofar as criticism and theory in our time have been closely associated with progressive political thought and action, this meant that the *CI* symposium was meeting in a moment of crisis for its own mission, understood as an intellectual, interdisciplinary microcosm of a global crisis, and as a global mission for peace and justice.

Both the critical mass of the symposium and the crowd that gathered to challenge the editorial board were obviously identified with these missions. They were assembled to ask questions, to find answers, to reflect on the present and past, and to plan for the future. If this meeting had, in my experience of it, a special kind of electricity, it grew out of this convergence of immediate world events and the long, very specific history of an intellectual institution. In particular, the uncanny convergence of this web-based symposium and the wired peace movement at this historical juncture seemed to produce a mirroring effect, as if the critical mass assembled in Swift Hall to debate critical theory were a microcosm of what the *New York Times* has called “the other superpower,” the millions of global citizens who turned out to protest Bush’s war in Iraq.³

Whether *Critical Inquiry* is up to the challenges that this symposium raised is for the future to decide. For the moment my task is simply to write a preface to the statements that were written by our editorial board members and the reflections on those statements by the coeditors. This seems more difficult than usual, if only because all the statements that follow are already on the order of prefaces, reviewing the arguments of the board members and giving them some perspective. The statements of the board members themselves, designedly brief, informal, and speculative, are all on the order of prefatory remarks to projects and research agendas to come (see Mary Poovey, Frances Ferguson, and Elizabeth Abel), or prefaces to uncertain futures—of literature, technology, theory, art, the humanities, high culture (see Wayne Booth, Hillis Miller, Jerome McGann, Homi Bhabha—well, now that I think of it, *everyone*, with the possible exceptions of Lauren Berlant and Fred Jameson, seemed to be writing in a mood of anxiety). Consider these remarks, then, a kind of preface to prefatory prefaces, a preface to the third power, a last word by the individual who posed the first words of the symposium in the form of the following invitation:

Critical Inquiry in the Twenty-First Century: A Call for Statements

The aim of this meeting is to set an agenda for critical inquiry, both the intellectual practice and the journal for which it is named, in the coming century. We want our diverse and multitalented editorial board to spend two days brainstorming about the possible, probable, and desirable futures of criticism and theory in the human sciences. What are the crucial topics, themes, and issues that will demand special attention and “special issues” of a wide-ranging interdisciplinary journal in the coming decade and beyond? What transformations in research para-

3. Quoted in Boyd, “The Web Rewires the Movement,” p. 13.

digms are on the horizon? How will technology change the transmission and production of knowledge? What will be the fate of the humanities, of literature, the arts, and philosophy, in what is widely heralded as a posthuman age? How will the very notions of criticism and critique change in the epoch and in the current state of perpetual crisis and emergency? What will be the relation of the coming criticism to politics and public life?

The first thirty years of *Critical Inquiry* witnessed the emergence of structuralism and poststructuralism, cultural studies, feminist theory and identity politics, media and film studies, speech act theory, new historicism, new pragmatism, visual studies and the new art history, new cognitive and psychoanalytic systems, gender studies, new forms of materialist critique, postcolonial theory, and discourse analysis, queer theory and (more recently) “returns” to formalism and aesthetics, and to new forms of public and politically committed intellectual work. These critical and theoretical movements (and this is only a partial and unsystematic list) have spawned whole new schools of thought, new educational and research institutions, new journals and collectivities of knowledge production. Have we now reached a plateau in which the future is likely to be one of consolidation, refinement, and continuity? Or are we at the threshold of new developments, whether reactive rollbacks to earlier paradigms or dimly foreseen revolutions and emergent innovations?

Just as crucial as cagey predictions are utopian declarations of purpose. What, in your view, would be the desirable future of critical inquiry in the coming century? If you were able to dictate the agenda for theory and criticism in research and educational institutions, and in the public sphere, what would you imagine as the ideal structure of feeling and thought to inform critical practice? And, above all, what steps do you think need to be taken in the present moment to move toward this desirable future? What, in short, is to be done?

Five Suggestions

1. It has been suggested that the great era of theory is now behind us and that we have now entered a period of timidity, backfilling, and (at best) empirical accumulation. True?
2. It has been suggested that theory now has backed off from its earlier sociopolitical engagements and its sense of revolutionary possibility and has undergone a “therapeutic turn” to concerns with ethics, aesthetics, and care of the self, a turn of which Lacan is the major theoretical symptom. True?

3. It has been suggested that the major challenge for the humanities in the coming century will be to determine the fate of literature and to secure some space for the aesthetic in the face of the overwhelming forces of mass culture and commercial entertainment. True?
4. It has been suggested that the rapid transformations in contemporary media (high-speed computing and the internet; the revolution in biotechnology; the latest mutations of speculative and finance capital) are producing new horizons for theoretical investigations in politics, science, the arts, and religion that go well beyond the resources of structuralism, poststructuralism, and the “theory revolution” of the late twentieth century. True?
5. Following on number 4, it has been suggested that the criticism and theory to come may have to explore other media of dissemination besides those of the printed text, the scholarly article or monograph, or even language as such in its prosaic, discursive forms. What is likely to happen or ought to happen to the “arts of transmission” of knowledge in coming century?

In the responses to these questions that follow, I hope our readers will capture a sense of the moment and the event (but a video of the public session is also available on *CI*'s website for those who want to see faces and hear voices). One witnesses here a distillation of what several generations of leading academic intellectuals thought and felt about the prospects of criticism and theory at the historical juncture of spring 2003. Not just anxieties about the fate of literature or art or the aesthetic, but a much broader front opened before us. War, economics, nations, disciplines, political and academic institutions and movements, cultures, citizens, and exiles here collide and collude with poetry, religion, science, media, technology, and philosophy in a heady mixture of interdisciplinary speculation. Amidst this ferment of thought—what Homi Bhabha described as “an Athenian moment”—a powerful current of resistance to “futures” thinking came to the surface, most eloquently stated by Teresa de Lauretis, who refused the gesture of prediction, insisting on the practice of theory in the present. Harry Harootunian, in a similar mood, challenged the symposium to articulate an “ontology of the present” that would take account of its multiple historical currents and strive for a “durational” rather than merely “punctual” criticism—a call, I took it, to a long campaign and commitment rather than a mere reaction to the moment.

I had thought, therefore, of calling this preface “Theory Now” and apologizing for my vulgar insistence on futuristic speculation. But because I can only think of the now in relation to a narrative, or at least a sequence that

places the present in the middle between a past and future, I find myself thinking of theory, as the epic convention puts it, *in medias res*—beginning always in the middle of things. And so I translate de Lauretis’s stirring call for theory now into my more cautious and muted formulation: medium theory.

By this I mean to suggest a picture of theory in the middle instead of on top. I locate theory somewhere between the general and the particular, what Peter Galison calls “specific theory,” echoing Foucault’s call for a “specific intellectual” to displace the overinflated figure of the Sartrean “general intellectual” (p. 379). Jameson (ever the Sartrean) argues that “theory begins to supplant philosophy . . . at the moment it is realized that thought is linguistic or material, and that concepts cannot exist independently of their linguistic expression” (p. 403). It is a small step, one I’m sure Fred would assent to, to note that thought is not just “linguistic or material” but *mediated* by what Raymond Williams calls material practices. So by *medium theory* I mean to suggest something rather different from media theory, which soars above the specific media in search of a universal metalanguage, a general theory of the media, that paradoxical singular-plurality that has acquired such a magnified, reified sense of agency in our time. Is it not “the media” now whom we ritually personify and then blame for our condition? *Medium* theory would, in contrast to media theory, understand that every theory of media has to be expressed in some medium, and it would not assume that this medium must be linguistic. Medium theory would thus stand in contrast to what has been called high theory, the aspiration to total mastery, coherence, explanatory power associated with metaphysics and (in the twentieth century) most notably with structuralism. Medium theory might also lead to a rereading of high theory, noting for instance that the fountainhead of structuralism in Saussure’s linguistics was a resolutely limited form of specific theory, a theory that deliberately renounced the totality of explanation in favor of totalizing the synchronic features of speech (not writing) and langue (not parole). Medium theory would have to be seen then as a combination of negation or exclusion (see Robert Pippin’s reflections on this matter below) and the *positing* of a specific object of research. It would thus also contrast with low theory, the realm of “futures” speculation—of market theories, opinion, belief, conviction, hunches, lucky guesses, and premature generalizations, best exemplified by the Bush administration’s confidence in “murky intelligence.”

Jim Chandler notes that *Critical Inquiry* was not founded as a journal of pure or high theory of the sort that the famous 1968 Johns Hopkins symposium explored, but as something far less fashionable, “something more, well, Aristotelian than that, a methodological self-consciousness about

critical practice that might better be described as a sense of where one is in the disciplinary scheme of things” (pp. 356–57). *Critical Inquiry* was born, in short, as a mediating institution, a place for debate and dialogue among the human sciences. And its birth was accompanied, as Chandler points out, by the arrival in the U.S. not only of French theory but of international cinema, a generation of directors “who were helping to install film discourse as a lingua franca for politics, philosophy, anthropology, aesthetics, and ethics.” Theory was, in those days as now, not just a preoccupation of academic journals but a key component of *critical experience*, as well as the experience of crisis. The founding moment for this journal coincides, Chandler concludes, with “Haskell Wexler’s attempt to bring Godard and Truffaut together with Sartrean existentialism and the still incipient project in media theory to produce his fascinating documentary-fiction film about the Democratic Convention, *Medium Cool*—a film almost as much about the policing of race politics on the South Side of Chicago as it was about the policing of national media politics” (p. 355).

I find variations on this concern for media and mediation everywhere in the statements that follow: in Miriam Hansen’s urging that cinema and other media be regarded as a vernacular modernism in which new theoretical propositions might be articulated while the senses are being reeducated; in Joel Snyder’s insistence on the *lack* of futuristic planning that characterizes the journal and its tendency to work in the middle of things; in Bill Brown’s and Richard Neer’s insistence on thingness, materiality, and embodiment as forms of cognitive exploration. (My candidate for the funniest line in this symposium is Brown’s nonredundant remark in a statement with the title “All Thumbs”: “the digital age [is] a digital age”) (p. 453). I locate the medium in Bhabha’s search for a “precarious balance” between “indigeneity and internationalism” and his resistance to the “metaphoric” (and thus dematerialized) concepts of global “flows” and “markets” instead of the obdurate literalness of “taxation” and “monetary policy” (p. 347). Or in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s reminder that the very nature of political mediations, of representative institutions, of democracy itself, is far from settled within the domain of “Western” political theory and that “it is not, therefore, a question of *Critical Inquiry* finding a politics that corresponds to its time,” but of coming to terms with new hybrid forms of “excessive democracy” and “political religion” (p. 462). Or in Lauren Berlant’s project of a feel tank (as opposed to a think tank) in which collective explorations of affect “welcome the risk of formlessness”—the very moment when (in the oft-invoked Niklas Luhmann’s terms), the medium as such with its welter of potentialities emerges as a site of hazardous play and improvisation (p. 447).

You will say, of course, that I am just looking for the theme of the medium, and inevitably finding it everywhere. And you would be right, for it is everywhere, just as it was in 1968 when critical theory first began to wash up on the shores of Lake Michigan as well as Long Island Sound and Chesapeake Bay (Boston Harbor was evidently closed). The difference is that now we are in the midst of a media revolution that exceeds the categories of cinema, television, and the mass media, exceeds the categories of Walter Benjamin's vernacular modernism, exceeds the criteria of political and cultural mediation we have been accustomed to relying on. Our theory crisis demands a crisis theory that can maintain its equilibrium over the long haul, neither euphoric nor dystopic about the prospects of new media, or perhaps both at the same time. The new communities of the net are shadowed by the surveillance society and distracted by the society of the spectacle, the plague of images. That is why I have supported hybrid disciplinary formations such as visual culture and iconology to address the widely reported phenomenon of a pictorial turn in culture and in the critical study of culture. We have needed, in my view, to think across the media and the arts, not in order to forsake their specificity but to locate and define that specificity in relation to a plethora of unique material practices and thus to trace their braidings (mixed media) and nestings (the appearance of one medium inside another). We have needed theories, not just of and in language and materiality, but in the domain of images and specularity, the fantasmatic world of representation that creates affect, sentiment, desire, and passion. We have, perhaps without knowing it or wanting to admit it, been practicing medium theory for some time now, even when most convinced that we have arrived at the high or pure theory that will provide total explanation.

Is medium theory nothing more than a middling compromise, a middle-class meliorism, a bourgeois bromide? In one sense I want to say emphatically, yes, to fess up and sober up about the expectations critical theory can realistically envision today. My ontology of the present does not hold out much prospect of revolutionary change, except perhaps on the right, where radical theory and politics hold the world in its grip. We could well be in the midst of several fascist revolutions at the same time, waged in the names of Islam and Christianity, ethnicities and holy lands, the fundamentalisms of unbridled capitalism and jihad. The peace movement of today, in contrast to that of the sixties, is not a radical cause in the service of national liberation struggles. No one thinks of al-Qaeda or Saddam Hussein as heroes of the Left. Today's peace movement is a thoroughly bourgeois coalition, dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of something like ordinary life, the mundane virtues of a decent standard of living, freedom from violence and coercion, and the defense of the environment. The great

rhetorical liability of the would-be radical Left today is that most of the language of wars of liberation, emancipatory struggle, freedom, and democratization have been appropriated by the Right.⁴ We (the peace movement, that is) need to face our own guilty consciousness that, if things go well for the people of Iraq in the coming year, if the situation stabilizes and a democratic government is elected, we will not just be surprised but disappointed.

So medium theory is not going to be quite radical enough for some and probably too radical for others. I like to think of it as a Hazlittian independence of faction or party, a principled resistance to ideological clichés, a search for the “radical center” to use Karel Capek’s phrase. If it offers a revolutionary program, it had better be a long one, with a strong sense of the relation between immediate and longer term objectives and an even stronger grip on mediating tactics—the hybrid formations of political ethics. If it is going to offer an ontology of the present, it had better frame it within a *paleontology* of the present, a deep ecology (including a media ecology) that frames political choices in the context of species survival.

The search for this radical center, I now realize, has been the practical situation of *Critical Inquiry* since its founding, occupied with more or less discomfort by the many talented people who have contributed to it over the last thirty years. It is perhaps appropriate that on the Third Coast, the capital of the American heartland, the setting of *Medium Cool* would also be the home of medium theory.

4. I am echoing here some of the points made by Moishe Postone in his unpublished paper written for a Chicago symposium on violence in the winter of 2003.