<u>**Fragmentation and the Formless Center**</u>

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> • **We begin at the center**
>
> **where conflict is --**
>
> **(Mary Caroline Richards)**

> • **Every technology contrived and outered by man has the power to numb human**
>
> **awareness**
>
> **during the period of its first interiorization.**
>
> **(Marshall McLuhan)**[1]

Centers have been out of intellectual and political fashion, because they have been often oppressive. We both celebrate and worry about postmodern fragmentation as we enact it in our technology, while fearing hidden centralization. But centering is important. I would like to mull over some issues concerning centers and criticism.

In his posted statement to the King Ludd conference, Gregory Ulmer made a significant point that invites further thought and questioning.

> Critical thinking, casting thought into the structure of problem and solution,
> reasoning in the form of argumentation--all these are literate practices, developed
> within school as an institutionalization of writing. Critical thinking is to byteracy
> what memory theaters were to the scientific treatise.

Is this quite fair? Memory theaters, those wondrously complex mental imaged spaces for remembrance, were both a culmination of orality and a beginning of literate permanence, but they have not themselves survived except as curios or as lessons in mail-order memory courses. Scientific treatises do not follow the structure of memory theaters. Will the forms of critical thinking similarly fade away? I want to disagree with Ulmer and argue that criticism by argumentative form will continue to be important. But I want to agree with him and claim that such argumentative critical thinking is not enough for dealing with our technologized hyper-experience. Then I will discuss an underlying issue: centered subjectivity and critical stances within the mediazed world.

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[1] . The first epigraph is from Mary Caroline Richards, *The Crossing Point* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 99. The second epigraph is from Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (University of Toronto Press, 1962), 153.

Criticism and critical dialogue remain important in our pluralizing world. Plato was right that there should be ways to make distinctions among acceptable and non-acceptable ways of influencing people, and among the many ways of world-building and seduction. Critical thinking as argumentation developed out of Socrates's and Plato's attempts to criticize accepted values and beliefs and to search for better ones. They feared that without some sort of rigorous criticism loose language and imagery would carry people into harmful actions and habits, as happened in the politics of their times. In their case, criticism meant a search for tight connections and unshakable intuitive foundations for beliefs. But such foundationalism is not a necessary feature of argumentative criticism. What argumentative structure does is *connect beliefs* (that is, a good argument shows that if we believe such and such premises then we must also believe their conclusion). These connections hold even if there is no ultimate foundation, so we can practice a mode of criticism using argumentative structure whose aim is coherent and consistent connection rather than grounded foundations.[2]

Criticism has use for argumentative form. The "reasoning in the form of argumentation" that Ulmer speaks of often spells out implicit inferences that we make all the time (for instance: "I want to sit down, to sit I need something to support me, this chair will support me, so I will sit in this chair;" or "the politician said he was for A and against B, but A implies B, so there is something wrong with that politician's views."). This form is not purely an artifact of the schools, nor can we stop making such inferences. Sometimes we will want to explicitate and criticize those inferences, and argumentative form is useful for that purpose. We might be hunter-gatherers discussing why we persisted in searching an unproductive area, or we might be citizens challenging the presuppositions behind a statement of prejudice, or programmers trying to eliminate a bug. Such "casting thought into the structure of problem and solution, reasoning in the form of argumentation" is not likely to go away, because it is too tightly linked to the notion of directed action.

But Ulmer seems to be referring as well to critical thinking as a specifically taught skill akin to memory palaces as a conscious artifice. Perhaps he is referring to what is taught in the philosophy or rhetoric courses that often include in their title the words "Logic" or "Critical Thinking." As a philosophy professor I am pelted by textbooks for such courses, for which there is a large market. The courses owe their popularity to their promise to make students into effective citizens by teaching them ways to criticize beliefs. They teach how to extract from passages of prose standard patterns of argument and how to evaluate those arguments. They usually discuss some of the classic argumentative fallacies, and often include a small dose of formal symbolic logic. These are useful skills and such courses do help students. However, Ulmer is right that such techniques scarcely exhaust what it might mean to be "critical." They may survive but they will not be enough for the new forms of life.

As part of skillful, graceful living, being critical need not be restricted to the form of argumentation about

[2]   . This is true even if we don't want to make Plato's full-blown distinction between philosophy and sophistry, which relies on partly on foundationalism and partly on distinctions among the types of connection to be allowed among beliefs.

networks of belief. There is a kind of critical sensitivity, a knowing how and where to look, realizing how and in what direction to go on (or not), a sense of what might be involved and changed by this or that move in discourse or imagery--the moves involved might be argumentative, but they might also be metaphorizing, or mutating the patterns, or melding or linking different systems and worlds. These sensitivities include more than an awareness of inferential connections. Some of these sensitivities were taught in classical rhetoric and logic, some in literary studies, and some learned by example if at all. Some we are only now discovering.

Plato and Socrates applied their criticism of beliefs to current ideas and politics, but also to Greek mythology, images, and art. Our mythologies and images need criticism today, when we are surrounded by a sea of artifice. But art and images have always presented a problem for argument, since their influence cannot be easily reduced to the conveyance of explicit beliefs.[3]

Criticism of art and imagery that starts by reducing them to implicit arguments or networks of beliefs has never been very successful. Try extracting the propositional content of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Michaelangelo's *David* into argumentative form. Nor does such criticism get close enough to the influence of the media today. For these offer us new connections in networks of unparalleled breadth and depth. These include new kinds of joinings and new kinds of objects to join: for example ironic reuse of images and common topics, or modernist abrupt collage and postmodernist fluid blendings of whole systems of images and archetypes at once. These effects are presented in the mass media, but they also come about spontaneously in the webs of interaction enabled by computer technology, in situations where there are no directors or controlling centers planning the connections and fluidity. We can presume that future cooperative virtual reality situations will enhance these tendencies to collage and fluid joinings. These joinings should not be reduced to or criticized simply in terms of consistent networks of belief, since consistency is one of the effects they play with and around and against. In our world, connection and disconnection can become ways of escaping discipline rather than tools of criticism.

> • **As Joyce expressed it in the Wake, "My consumers are they not my producers?" Consistently, the twentieth century has worked to free itself from the conditions of passivity, which is to say from the Gutenberg heritage itself. (GG 278)**

> • **The influence of unexamined assumptions derived from technology leads quite unnecessarily to a maximal determinism in human life. Emancipation from that trap is the goal of all education. (GG 247)**

However, in an age of imagery run riot, there has been an odd reversal. Much of modernist *art itself* developed strategies for the critical unmasking of centers of cultural power. Often these artistic strategies involved the collaged juxtaposition of abruptly discontinuous fragments of imagery or belief systems or

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[3]   . Plato banished the poets because of their ability to influence us beyond and beneath our networks of belief. Given his psychological categories, Plato conceptualizes this influence as the arousal of undue emotional pressure on our critical faculties. But there is more than this going on, as we can see from later developments of the notion of imagination.

cultural spheres. Disconnection, the heightening of boundaries and coupling across boundaries became critical tools within art. More recent art, turned postmodern, sometimes continues these strategies but often devotes itself to the erasure of boundaries and the merging of the multiple.

It is tempting to carry on the modernist project of unmasking, either by insisting on disconnections or by celebrating fluid multiplicity. In either case the standard critical stances and argumentative tools find themselves surrounded and co-opted. For instance, having the "expert" appear on "the program" does not establish a traditional critical distance and authority. In a virtualized world the distanced critic becomes part of the show rather than outside the frame, for the frame itself becomes an effect within that fluid medium.[4] The expert's arguments become something to be enjoyed, not evaluated. The more passionate the better. The spectators view the game, but their allegiances are not questioned.[5]

Critical distance on the flow of imagery becomes questionable when distance is used for effect within that movement. Do we then adopt a tone of irony or parody? Irony has been a major critical stance, but as it wears down it is accommodated and absorbed.[6] No one really knows yet what moves will be effective. Centered subjectivity and distanced analysis do not seem to work so well in those media.

One of the reasons we want criticism in the media is because in our world action can have incalculable effects, often far larger (or smaller) than we would have wished. At a time of creativity and uncertainty, we need enthusiasm and directed energy. In a time of potential disaster in many spheres, we need concernful thought not placid acceptance.

In the technological and media-enabled life, critical distance is only one strategy and it is constantly surrounded. Nor can everything we want to criticize be formulated as sets of beliefs to be examined and connected in argumentative form. Yet we do need more criticism than the ability to turn off the tube or modem.

[4]   . This was a problem as long ago as Socrates, who tried and failed have people distinguish him from the Sophists; the spectators, become his jury, saw no difference in the performances. Socrates wanted to have people stop, center themselves, and be open to challenge and questioning at their centers. The Sophists sought to move a distracted audience by appealing to an uncentered multiplicity of desires. We still need the Socratic conversion to taking beliefs and images seriously as something to be investigated, though we may learn from Socrates's oral performance different lessons than from Plato's official written one, though Plato was himself ambivalent enough on matters of writing and orality.

[5]   . It is not impossible to have argumentative criticism in the media, but it is not easy, and the audience is not as centered as Socrates would like. Increasing interactivity may change this, but if chat rooms and newsgroups are any indication the interactivity will encourage multiple roles and fragmentation of the self. I suggest below a notion of the centered self that does not rely on any particularized identity or privilege of one mask among others.

[6]   . See the chapter "Haughty and Humble Ironies," in my *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Ulmer is concerned with these issues. While he questions the sufficiency of argumentative form for present-day criticism, he also works at inventing new forms. His "mystory" attempts to do construction, association, deconstruction, and criticism all together, affirming participation in cultural flow while criticizing it, breaking standard genre barriers and making room for a more spacious critical-constructive writing and imaging.[7]

I want now to explore a presupposition that has emerged in these last paragraphs. Whether in argumentative form or in the study of rhetorical tropes, the tradition of critical thinking has presupposed a centered subjectivity that can survey and govern the forms of its discourse. That tradition acknowledges that not everything can be firmly grounded, and that language got there first with its past already putting us in motion, but nevertheless we are told to assume a watchful position. Ideally everything should be re-viewed, even if not all at once.

In the media-spaced life, however, the self is less centered, and the field is unsurveyable.[8] It is increasingly difficult to pull back and be an critic outside the frame when the frame itself becomes an item in the flow and not an outside border.[9]

Who then is critical? Plato claimed that there must be a ruling part of the self that furthered the interests of the whole by reaching beyond any particular desires toward universal goals.[10] In its modern form the self has become less hierarchical but more particular.[11] The modern individual finds itself already equipped with preferences for various values and actions, and decides rationally about the most efficient ways to realize those preferences. At the center of such a self is "what you really want." In an age where

[7]   . For "mystory" see Gregory Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[8]   . Perhaps when more developed and commercialized virtual experience will be less fragmented than people now expect it will be. Imagine being in the virtual location of the cafe/restaurant Planet Hollywood. The sponsors will want some recognizable style and ambience that they can sell. So there are likely to be uniform 'brand' areas in virtual reality even if the areas may seem fragmented at first impression. Consider the atmosphere that many web sites try to create, or how the fragmented graphics and page layouts of *Wired* or *Mondo 2000* magazines nonetheless create unified brand atmospheres.

[9]   . This has always been true of our relation to language, but the mediazed and virtual life brings this condition to the fore in a dramatic fashion.

[10]   . For Plato our truest desires are not those that set us apart from others as distinct individuals, but those that we share with all: the erotic desires for fullness of reality, for union and grounding.

[11]   . "Pascal indicates that the old [medieval, oral] consciousness was kingly, continuous, 'as on a throne.' The old king had a role, not a job. He was an inclusive centre-without-a-margin. The new consciousness like the new prince is a harassed executive, exercising a job, applying knowledge to problems, and having only momentary contacts with his marginal subjects, who are all ambitious rival segments anyway." (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 249)

marketing works to foist new preferences upon us, it is a legitimate act of criticism to claim some desires and needs are more our own than others.

However, this atomic self with its central catalog of preferences is hardly the last word. Is it even a feasible word as our world dis-integrates? As our desires and preferences multiply and their languages diverge? There is another rhetoric (from Nietzsche and Bataille, from Surrealism and Dada, from Foucault and others) urging criticism through the explosion and fragmentation of that self and the liberation of energy from the constraints of centered authority and fixed preferences. Technology facilitates such disassociation. So we hear a postmodern rhetoric celebrating disjointed or fluid or media-ized selves and worlds as zones of freedom

As a critical stance, this has its dangers. For one thing, it is disturbingly close to the market researchers' desire to fragment us and enlist this or that piece of our selves. As K. Michael Hays points out, the celebration of multiplicity and disassociation is no longer an oppositional stance.

> We, all of us, have been at one time or another guilty of hymning the virtues of schizophrenia and media addiction, the ecstasy of self-liquidation, and the utter loss of boundaries. But have we lost sight of the dialectical fact that intertextuality, ambiguity, indeterminacy often enough themselves lie on the side of dominant ideological discourses?[12]

There are also the internecine conflicts and border wars and the arguments over resources and time among the fragments of the self. It is not enough to preach freedom and tolerance for our many selves, when our resources and time are limited and there will be conflicts where our many parties can not always sit down peaceably at a common table.

Must we choose between centered particularized unity and fragmented polymorphic explosion? Affirming multiplicity is not enough. Do we need centering?

- **Centering: that act which precedes all others on the potter's wheel. The bringing of the clay into a spinning, unwobbling pivot, which will then be free to take innumerable shapes as potter and clay press against each other. The firm, tender, sensitive pressure which yields as much as it asserts.[13]**

- **God is a sphere whose circumference is infinite and whose center is everywhere.**

Variations of the image in this quotation appear often in the medieval and early modern periods. The earliest known attribution is to the medieval thinker Alan of Lille, but the statement may trace back to

[12]   . K. Michael Hays: "Architecture Theory, Media, and the Question of Architecture" (Assemblage 27, Autumn 1995, 45).

[13]   . Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering* (Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 9.

pseudo-Hermetic writings influenced by Neoplatonism. For the Neoplatonists the deepest source of reality, the One, is formless and positively indeterminate in its richness, a center that has no need to be defined or contrasted with anything else. This center of all cannot be located on the maps that differentiate things. As formless the center is everywhere and nowhere. The image of the infinite sphere was later used by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic writers who were influenced by Neoplatonism. Could it descend to us in the digital age? Could this be an image for a different kind of centered self? For the Neoplatonists, there within us we can find or be a presence of the One, again formless and not to be identified with any particular principles or desires or words or images. That center provides no principled platform we can ascend to issue authoritative judgments. When most truly centered we are nowhere, nothing in particular, off any hierarchy, but present. Such a center might be a formless "place" of re-collection, but not around any particular point.

Try this as a possibility: we should be centered, but our self should be a sphere whose center is everywhere. This traditional image suggests a mode of living within our multiplicity that makes space while refusing to be identified with any faction, a letting be that allows interaction and conflict to take place and, because it does not have to be identified with any particular result, is open to what comes. Yet this is still centered in the sense of not being distracted or pulled about by the unfolding, or seized and divided in the ways sought by those that would manipulate and distract. Such a self might be centered but not by resting on any particular content or principle as a base. It would be centered on the spaciousness of the motions of the self and of the content of experience.

It would be a mode of "being in" the mediazed or virtual world that refused to be "taken in" by any item, and so refused to be simply "in" any world or mix of worlds. Yet it would do this without establishing a principled self-reflective distance. It would create a flowing space for interaction and musing that was not structured hierarchically.

The Buddhists have a word for this: non-attachment. They have another word for its effect: compassion. But could that make criticism? It may sound too accepting, and this impression could be reinforced by the Buddhist overtones.[14]

Perhaps this: a criticism of attempts to clutch and hold, or to be clutched and to be held, a criticism of desires for permanent victory or fulfilled vision, of dividing and excluding while holding on, a criticism of forced separations and equally of forced integrations. Criticism without position, resistance without aversion.

Such non-attachment would mean letting virtualities and experiences be, but not letting borders become oppositional. Much "critique" is an exclusion that draws lines and borders: "thus far is acceptable, but no further. Beyond that line one should not go (nor develop the plot, or exhibit the image, or parody or

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[14]   . It is beyond my task here to discuss Buddhist concepts and how they might or might not be adequate to these challenges to the historical Buddhist pattern of accommodation with ruling hegemonies.

combine or mutate)."

What I am wondering about would be a stance that let what borders or connections and flows there were be as in-between, and so allow interaction. Imagine a letting-be that refused to be drawn along but did not hang back. There would be no avoiding interaction, infection, interpenetration. The attempts of one virtuality or another to define itself as essential or primary or separate would be taken as just that, attempts, to be noted rather than held to or rejected.

This self may not seem active enough, for it does not seem to be examining or judging anything. Still, let me pursue further this idea of letting content be, as a mode of criticism. The "content" might be a media presentation, or a virtual world, or a set of symbols and links on the Web, or a chat room with a distinctive atmosphere, or a presented self avatar, or a constellation of mini-worlds, or a performance work. The content, its symbols and associated feelings, its constructions and internal multiplicity, all have their own autonomy, and their own over-reaching. The borders do not fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but they are what they are. If they confront each other across a collage border, or if they flow together without a border, then they do, and that is a new inner tension within the flow, a new intersection of forces and forms. A centered but non-attached letting these be does not mean indifference, but rather a watchful seeing where they go and where they end, and where the content clutches and clings and rejects and tries to be more than it is.

I've been talking as if this were a matter of edges, but borders run all through. There are internal multiplicities. Letting them be means allowing tensions and transformations. The content may have its own transformational dynamics and self-criticisms; It is not passively lying before the critical eye. Despite its emphasis on the active self, argumentative criticism already understands that there are links we do not control. I am suggesting we think of other kinds of links and other kinds of movements.[15]

I'm not suggesting that what I have been describing is the only mode of criticism. For one thing, it's not argumentative when that is needed. Also, there would still be contents among which one would have to choose in a more active mode, but I am claiming that it is misleading to envision all criticism on the model of an argumentative decision, or on the model of a judicial examination.

We already know a good deal about deciding, but we do not always stand as detached decision-making calculators. Indeed we stand that way less often than we imagine since most of our daily choices are indifferent options among brands or programs, (which could be intellectual and other fashions not just soaps). Note too that in the mediazed world it is decision that is showy (the firing line) and simulated. The criticism I have been suggesting is different, quieter, but refusing to be swept along.

This mode of centering and criticism I have been describing is an idealization, for we live more complexly

[15]   . What I am suggesting can begin to sound more like Hegelian critique. Hegel would say: let them show their dialectical transformations and loss of self-certainty. (For a brief discussion of this idea of letting the content judge or transform itself, see my brief discussion of architectural judgment, "Identity and Judgment: Five Theses and a Program," (*Nordisk Arkitekturforskning*) Fall 1994, 37-40.)

than that. Though that complexity too we can let be and transform itself, without trying to reduce it to one core subject position structured by reflective distancing.