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## Shifting Horizons of Possibility

Susanna Paasonen

When I was a sharply green first year student of film and television, an art school friend of mine told of her teacher, an award-winning animation filmmaker who had once been part of Andrey Tarkovsky's crew, explaining that the reason that this renown auteur used so much silence in his work – think *Stalker* – owed to his privileged access to Kodak film. Being able to use imported Western rather than Soviet film stock, it was explained, Tarkovsky did not need to fill up his soundtracks in order to distract the audience from unwanted noise: this possibility then opened up the possibility to think of the sonics otherwise.

Many have since snorted at this anecdote, labelling it an urban myth disrespectful of artistic vision. For some three decades now, I have nevertheless wondered, 'why not'? If technology presents a material, ever-shifting horizon of possibility for what can or cannot be done at any given point in time, as is fairly standard a view in media studies, how would not such technological horizons directly impact the aesthetic choices made? And, furthermore, why should the ability to consider available forms of expression in tandem with the technological tools at hand eat away at the value of the work produced? Is this not a standard issue of professional skill? And is not film history the stuff of such shifting technological horizons – from film formats, sound and colour to transformations in camera technology from the fixed to the very much portable, or from analogue to digital post-production practices, special effect techniques, storage and distribution formats?

It is not a controversial claim to make that materiality has always been key to media, whether this be the case of production practices (not limited to Tarkovsky's), storage, retail and

distribution formats, networks and platforms, or the cultures of consumption, from the mundane-casual to the aficionado-committed. As the chapters in this book illustrate with great nuance and contextual care, media becomes perceivable – and in this sense materialises (Paasonen 2011: 100–105) – through objects that are both mass-produced and unique in how we relate to them. We live with devices and media objects marked by signs of their use so that the abstract question of form versus content fails to operate as a binary in how we make sense of the mediated everyday. To deploy analytical insights from science and technology studies, and from actor-network theory in particular, as nonhuman actors, media devices and media objects impact that which we can record, depict, revisit and do, and how. This was the case with the qualities of film stock that Tarkovsky could operate with, just as it is the case with aspiring TikTok influencers and the videos they can craft, or with the mediated forms of remembrance that are available through slides, digital files, 8mm films or VHS tapes dependent on the necessary playback devices (that one may or may not have access to).

*Media Materialities* makes strikingly clear the gap that exists between haptic interactions with media and the relatively lukewarm interest with which questions of materiality have generally been received in media studies to date. This gap, which this book sets out to bridge, presents nothing less than a paradox in terms of understanding lives lived in and transformations occurring in mundane media environments: in how music is made and listened to, in what kinds of games we have played and continue to play, or in the importance of the technologies of writing and reading to how we focus, think and make sense of the world. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 17–19) points out, the term ‘feeling’ entails the sense of proximity, contact and touch so that the haptic and the affective come entangled. Following this line of thought, media formats and devices need to be thought of not merely in terms of what they store or mediate but also in terms of how this happens: a swipe on the

smart phone's streaming playlist; the press of 'play' button on a cassette player; the careful placement of a record needle on an LP and the personal histories involving the devices, tapes and records. Listening to Sex Pistols track on Spotify may not sound too different to listening the same song on a C-tape bootlegged as a teenager. But does it feel the same, or matter in the same way?

The relatively scarce interest towards such material attachments presents a paradox also given the importance of technology within both historical and contemporary media research, and the extent to which any historical research is directly dependent on storage formats and archival access that directly impact, and even condition the forms of analytical inquiry available. This is not to say that such interests do not exist – considering, for example, strands of media ecology and media archaeology, studies of media collecting, the field of platform studies and, of course, the width of scholarship both cited in and developed in the edited collection at hand (see also e.g., Bogost and Montfort 2007; Parikka 2012; Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot 2014). Some scholarship on media formats and platforms has in fact turned the emphasis on content over form inside-out, or upside-down. For media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1999: xl), for example, what 'remains of people is what media can store and communicate'. Furthermore, what 'counts are not the messages or the content with which they equip so-called souls for the duration of a technological era, but rather ... their circuits, the very schematism of perceptibility' (Kittler 1999: xl–xli). Kittler's argument is for the primacy of media and storage formats over that which is being mediated, and what one might subsequently make sense of.

To make an argument for the centrality of materialities in media research however by no means necessitates such prioritisation or boundary work between that which is considered

essential or trivial. Rather, a focus on media's materialities as issues of infrastructure, manufacture and production, transmission, consumption and archiving helps to make evident the possibilities and constraints that exist in any given time and place. It also makes it possible to expand reflections on the fundamental 'worldliness' of cultural inquiry from semiotic messiness to the material – plastic, metal, carnal, pulpy – mess that makes the mediated everyday (Hall 1992). This further helps in mapping out the ecological toll of this everyday – a quest that has grown increasingly acute with the energy demands of server farms and the extraction of natural resources necessary for the manufacture of devices in our so-called 'immaterial' digital culture. Here, the foci of media ecology extends beyond mundane environments and object-worlds to the circuits of production and waste preceding and following our lives with media devices (Jucan, Parikka and Schneider 2019).

There is nothing simple to the questions of how materiality matters, how media matters, how media materializes or, indeed, to how the materialities of media matter. Yet none of this is trivial. What was the case again for that Sex Pistols C-tape?

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