

An Emphasis in Visual Culture

When I came to Johnston I was really serious about being a fiction writer. Inspired almost exclusively by David Foster Wallace, I spent the summer of 2012 writing an ambitious short story for hopeful publication (rejected quickly and unanimously) and even had the audacity to label a notebook "First Novel".

What I loved most about DFW was how precise his prose could be. I remember, for example, being especially affected by his use of the word "defecatorily" to describe the way athletes sit. When you picture a basketball player on the bench, bent elbows rested on splayed legs, the brilliance of his specificity becomes evident.



"Defecatorily"

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I was attracted to precision because I believed the author's role should always be to articulate moral truths. I thought that human ethical development was a gradual process that began when artists did the labor of thinking through how to be-good; that intelligence directly correlated with righteousness. I recognized that most media seemed to acknowledge a sort of responsibility it had to be morally instructive, to creatively deploy a theme which could, in some way or another, be applied to the audience's life. Being a vehement libertarian and Randian all throughout highschool, it's not surprising that my concept of progress was based on a kind of trickle-down moral economics wherein authors detail (as precisely as possible) what behaviors are and aren't okay to a privileged class of readers-of-difficult-fiction. My politics and my notions regarding history could not have changed more dramatically in the past four years.



This flag has hung in my room for the past two years, the last vestige of my libertarianism.

At the end of my first semester, I wrote a story titled, "Giving Up", my most recent fiction to date.

By the spring of 2013, Leo Murphy and I were spending roughly 18 hours a day together (if you include sleep) and my lifelong dilettantism with regards to film became something more serious. Film studies allowed me to continue to study artists (auteurs instead of authors) while also thinking about other aspects of representation that might produce mass behavioral change. An offhanded remark made in my sophomore contract, "Rhetorical Narratives in Visual Media" now reads as an elementary step towards where my head is at now:

"The D.I.Y tremor of a shaky cam condones democracy in modes of production/consumption, whereas elaborate crane or dolly shots remind audiences of the existence of arguably necessary artistic hierarchies, and the aesthetic reasons these hierarchies exist in the first place. Shooting digital rather than film is nothing short of a political statement."

Is there anything democratic about corporations making their products for as cheaply as possible? Probably not. But at least I was beginning to think about other things besides writing when I thought about media. I wrote a few papers in my sophomore year about what X director was "saying" about Y topic, but my two most ambitious projects were, in their best moments, about more implicit modes of representation. The first paper was about deaf people and whether or not it's fair for them to claim Deafness as a culture, but it should have been more about how the physician explains deafness to the hearing-abled parents of their newborn deaf child (90% of deaf children are born to hearing-abled parents) and how this medical discourse conflicts with

the entertainment made by-and-for deaf people. The second paper proposed a strategy through which the Motion Picture Association of America could make enough money on crowd-sourcing that it could stop fighting file-sharing, but it should have been more about the legislative and rhetorical mechanisms through which one of the most powerful lobbies in America protects its product (movies).



I leaned heavily on Ryan's intelligence when writing both of these papers. Their "best moments" are the product of his intuition, of his pushing me in directions I was initially unwilling to move towards for fear of disassembling my own thesis. I valued his criticality nearly as much as I valued his seriousness, his capacity to be interested, his sensitivity, and his loyalty.

In my Junior year, I occupied two pseudo-leadership roles that helped me realize what an unbelievable privilege it is to participate in Johnston politics.

Ironically, the most edifying aspect of being the 2nd floor Holt CA was the three weeks of training with CAs from the greater university. I developed - when confronted with the condescending attitude of our administrators, their intolerance, their enthusiastic ignorance gilded with a rhetoric of inclusivity, the childlike acquiescence of our peers - a very serious

appreciation for what it means to belong to an institution that trusts 18 year olds to govern themselves, a trust that, among the estimated 14 million undergraduates in the United States, only about 150 of us have the privilege of experiencing. Rarely in politics, but certainly in Johnston, do you have “elected” leaders that can truthfully be described as public servants. If anything, I was a custodian, filing facilities requests and conduct reports, enacting and enforcing the policies which I did not create but merely consented to. Only in relation to the standard U of R experience of having no say in how one’s money is spent, of having one’s partying confined to pens in the middle of the quad, of being embedded in a network of surveillance in which one’s confidantes quantify and record their weekly disposition, could I appreciate my freedom. Never again in my life will I enjoy so much genuine political agency.



I could have written this entire narrative about my relationship with Devin. Whether it was dealing with the burden of my crush (my entire first year), being in a two-year relationship and all the ebbs and flows that entails, being on C-staff with her, or coming to accept her graduation and her absence, my entire Johnston experience is in some way related to her. Devin was incredibly influential to my development as a learner and as a person, and, through the strict intentionality through which she lives her life, helped me to realize that these categories are not, in fact, distinct.

Another irony: the most edifying aspect of the class I co-taught with Tim Seiber, “Society, Technology, Aesthetics” was the summer we spent planning it. By the end of my sophomore year I had begun to realize that I was more interested in teaching than producing; more interested in thinking about media than making it. Tim, in a gesture of trust I still cannot entirely fathom, allowed me the chance to try teaching out to see if I liked it. That summer I lived in Redlands, jobless, and devoted all my waking hours to producing a syllabus I hoped would be worthy of the opportunity. During this process, I realized definitively that I could be galvanized by histories and theories of media even more than I could be by its particular content. From syllabus construction to teaching to evaluating, Tim consistently assuaged my fears of inadequacy, confirming my aptitude and instilling a confidence that made it possible for me to come into my potential as a critical thinker. There was never a moment in the semester where I didn’t feel like a bonafide collaborator, and, as much as I loved the egalitarianism of the Johnston classroom, I placed an even higher value on the significance of having faculty who truly consider themselves to be peers.



Tim and Leo: the two most impactful educators I had in Johnston.

I discovered the visual culture discipline in Tim's "Theories of Visual Media" class at the end of that year. As Nicholas Mirzoeff, editor of "The Visual Culture Reader" defines it, the discipline is unique in its specificity, limiting itself to a pointed question about a particular historical period: "How was the visual subject constituted in modernity and how is it now being refashioned?". Rather than imagine history as the progressive development of media technologies ("the printing press made us freer, and so are computers"), visual culture scholars limit themselves to the "long shadow" of the 19th century in order to posit more complex theories about how a convergence of diverse factors might produce the different ways people look at things. Through their knowledge of a variety of characteristics of modernity, they get to more creatively theorize how change happens; treating history more like fiction-with-rules than a hard science. What if film's closest ancestor is the diorama or the Ferris wheel, and not photography? What if the way we look through cameras originated in the way military generals look at battlefields? I was immediately attracted to this scholarly attitude, to this idea that treating any story about the past like a verifiable physical law was akin to taking your ball and going home.

Whether or not I want to think about "modernity" for the rest of my life is definitely up for debate, but I found in visual culture's methodological basis the same things that had once attracted me to David Foster Wallace's writing. In this past year, as I've begun to experiment with my own alternative histories of the media, I feel like I'm writing fiction again. Specificity (historical rather than lexiconical) remains the primary mechanism through which I think about the relation between people and art. This time around, however, rather than purport my participation in this top-down relation by writing stories that intend to unilaterally change people, I'm writing stories that try to do service to the true complexity of change. I can't help but find similarities in the ways I used to think (of intelligence as innately moral and of progress as the

product of individual endeavor) and the standard media histories which I'm currently devoted to rejecting (of innovation as innately moral and of progress as the product of individual and corporate endeavor). It is a testament to the Johnston process that my most fundamental notions regarding media could literally become their opposite, while at the same time, whether or not I always recognized it, I was given the agency to continue to orbit the very same concepts that fascinated me four long years ago.



First day of school