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Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies

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POINTS OF REFERENCE:
HUMANITIES CONTENT FOR MEDIA STUDIES
by
CAROLYN A. McDONOUGH

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2021

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies

by

Carolyn A. McDonough

Advisor: Dr. Stephen Brier

Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies is a proposed research method designed for students to help them analyze humanities content encountered in undergraduate media studies courses, specifically within commercial advertising. The project is informed by Critical Theory developed by The Frankfurt School as well as by contemporary digital humanities scholars. *Points of Reference* theorizes a digital pedagogical training tool as a browsing gallery that helps student separate humanities references embedded into media, and to contravene the dominance of Google Search.

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Digital Manifest

Carolyn A McDonough Capstone MA in DH Points of Reference Revision 2 May 2021.pdf

<file://PointsOfReference.warc> (website archive)

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Points of Reference is a website located on the CUNY Academic Commons with an embedded timeline drafted with Knightlab Timeline JS. The content featured is audio visual entries of humanities art references uploaded via a Google sheet and published to the web.

pointsofreference.commons.gc.cuny.edu [please note: you must log in to the CUNY AC]

Knight Lab JS3 Timeline code is generated via:

https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1mk7HTnX1qxExs-7UYSt2IK0MNEz2MX4jr8I5ujdvZNg&font=Default&lang=en&initial_zoom=2&height=650

Introduction

A foundation in humanities content and the media literacy skills to de-code media messages in undergraduate media studies is often scant, hinting that there is no specific research method dedicated to analyzing humanities content that arises during such interdisciplinary study. The exploration of the myth of the "digital native" has also revealed to educators that digital media technology and media content analysis are not a given in students, often creating a double hurdle for undergraduates. The voids are filled by students defaulting to Google Search and Wikipedia for instant information, often conducting searches in the classroom, in "real time". The subsequent result is that the process of unlocking humanities content encoded in media texts in order to understand their mediated provenance, is bypassed or short-circuited, and the undergraduate student often comes up short in being able to understand both the humanities and media content. Therefore, humanities content encountered in media studies would benefit from a bridge to connect the two, because media studies is a field that focuses heavily on the theory, production, and analysis of media content, which can obscure meaning which is communicated symbolically, inferred through context, and subject/object positionality. The natural *locus* for the proposal of such a resource is a scholarly field that operates through relation, one that informs and is informed by allied disciplines¹ -- digital humanities (DH) -- especially as media studies precedes the development of DH by approximately thirty years and is itself a related, interdisciplinary meta-discipline of digital humanities. Prof. Ryan Cordell states that "'digital humanities will only remain a vital interdisciplinary movement' if it speaks self-consciously back to the legacy fields to which its practitioners also belong."²

¹ Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, "Introduction" *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), xii.

² Ryan Cordell, "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities" in *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 472.

For the purposes of this examination, humanities content is focused on visual art: painting, sculpture, and the visual popular culture of advertising images, memes, and viral video(s). In a broader context, humanities content also encompasses architecture, literary works, photography, film, music, and sound.

Points of Reference seeks to address "foundational" humanities content encountered in undergraduate media studies courses, through a digital development of a pedagogical tool template: a prototype "browsing gallery" of selected content examples, particularly "canonical" visual references deployed in the meta-medium of advertising. Accessible through open-source platform/s, such as academic repository applications like the CUNY Academic Commons, this browse gallery could serve as a training tool and/or "lesson plan" site for students and teachers respectively. Situating *Points of Reference* within the digital humanities' "community of practice"³ in which collaboration, experimentation, and exchange are at its core, is in keeping with the "DH" ethos.

A Proposed Undergraduate Research Method

In the philosophy of the historic educational reformer John Dewey, and as espoused by contemporary scholar Randy Bass, "one of the key elements in [Dewey's] pedagogy is the importance of student discussion and interaction with the instructor and with each other, which provides opportunities for students to articulate, exchange, and deepen their learning."⁴ Media scholars Press and Williams also refer to Dewey's century-old ideas that still resonate today: "The emergence of a modern mass media had the potential to improve the conditions and operations of American democracy, if structured with those ends in mind, but [Dewey] worried

³ Stephen Ramsay, "The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books." *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 115.

⁴ Randy Bass, "Engines of Inquiry: Teaching, Technology, and Learner-Centered Approaches to Culture and History." *Introduction to Engines of Inquiry: A Practical Guide for Using Technology in Teaching American Culture*. (Washington, D.C.: American Studies Crossroads Project, American Studies Association, 1997), p. 9.

that the particular shape of the American media system, governed primarily by commercial interests, would have a much more negative influence."⁵ I agree that Dewey's concerns about commercialism are accurate to today's media culture and propose that an undergraduate media studies resource with a digital pedagogical focus could provide an alternative to commercialized yields of Google searching in critical moments of encounter with humanities content.

As digital humanities affords academic opportunities to build/make/create/produce as a form of scholarship in both teaching and learning, the thinking behind the development of the *Points of Reference* digital pedagogical tool is that of creating a resource to supplement students' standard default to using Google Search. While I realize that even attempting to provide an alternative to Google's voluminous (though uncurated and unvetted) algorithmic search yields is a very tall order, such a resource is worth proposing, especially as Google is now known to produce biased search yields that are among the more problematic data being generated today. Scholars such as Safiya Noble author of *Algorithms of Oppression*, have "raised critiques of Google [particularly Google Search] and other forms of information control...in hopes that people will consider alternatives."⁶ DH scholar Miriam Posner has observed that "Google maps enshrines a Cartesian model of space that derives directly from a colonialist project of empire building."⁷ The 21st century interconnected global community and economy call for more plastic and transparent models. On the authority of these observations, humanities content for media studies research would be served by having an alternative research resource to that of Google Search. Conversely, the exactingly curated individual entries on Wikipedia, while thorough and admirable are edited often, causing the content to be in a state of flux for the repeat visitor who

⁵ Press and Williams in McDougall, p.73.

⁶ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

⁷ Miriam Posner, "What's Next: The Radical Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities in Debates in Digital Humanities" *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 33.

regularly consults Wikipedia as a resource. Therefore, learning how to interact with the Talk pages of Wikipedia, to see and understand the history of an entry, is advisable in consulting Wikipedia. Students should be taught and encouraged to use Wikipedia in this way.

Media Studies and Digital Humanities

Through the dual lens of media studies and digital humanities, therefore, I perceive an absence of and demand for a media studies resource tailored to humanities content, supported by an ancillary digital pedagogical tool, to inform and foster both humanities literacy and media literacy. As Julian McDougall argues, "Media studies has been too focused on 'big media' and not sufficiently concerned with how people attribute meaning to media, re-interpret (and in some cases remix) and 'map' media exchanges and meanings into their everyday lives."⁸ This is especially relevant to undergraduates today who are studying in a multi-modal, transmedia environment, which approaches and recognizes media as a convergence of studying and making media, ushering in new literacies. Additionally, scholars/teachers of media studies are as trained in the rhetorical concepts of the Aristotelian Appeals (ethos/pathos/logos) and models of reasoning and persuasion, for de-constructing the media texts of said 'big media' as we are in the theory, practice, and history of media. These methods hone critical thinking skills in quantitative and qualitative analysis and engagement with media texts. Like digital humanities, media studies is a community of praxis.

Within this transmedia "convergence culture" (Jenkins) today's undergraduates are not burdened with meanings in either media studies or humanities content. For example, there is less emphasis on the meaning of works of "high art" such as the Mona Lisa and David than there is on what these works have come to represent. Rather, students are often intuitively skilled in articulating the "meme" which is more relevant to today's cultural climate, but may not be aware

⁸ Julian McDougall, *Media Studies The Basics*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 155.

of historical and artistic context. Undergraduates must be met where they are in perceiving, decoding, and attributing meaning to such humanities references when they arise in media content.

The specific example of this is my opening query to groups I've presented *Points of Reference* to, of an odd couple: "what do Iago and Plankton have in common?" This question resulted from a student who offered Plankton, a character in the popular cartoon "SpongeBob Square Pants", as a parallel "villain" to Iago in a Media Studies 101 class that I was teaching. While the humanist in me sees the value that an archetypal antagonist such as William Shakespeare's character of Iago should still be "taught", the digital humanist in me recognizes that Iago must now be more appropriately taught in relation to the digital technology environment and information we inhabit and against the backdrop of contemporary cultural references, rather than as an archetype handed down from the uninterrogated literary canon. Scholars Lash and Urry state that "many observers argue that, for a younger generation, media image saturation is now an accepted part of life..." and that, more specifically, we live in a 'semiotic society' or a 'culture society'".⁹ *Points of Reference* seeks to integrate these contemporary modes of understanding.

Paradoxically, the myth of the "digital native" gives undergraduates an additional burden: the presumption that they're fully versed in digital technology by virtue of their post-millennial birth dates. Although the "digital native" generation has indeed been exposed to and educated with digital technology, and is immersed in a semiotic culture, the "digital native" label does not guarantee a comprehensive digital skill set among these students. Spotty digital literacy, in combination with little or no foundation in visual anthropology or "pre-existing visual texts"¹⁰ becomes all too real in the classroom when students encounter humanities content in media texts.

⁹ Lash and Urry 1994, p. 277, in Paul Duncum, "Theorising Everyday Aesthetic Experience with Contemporary Visual Culture" in *Visual Arts Research* 28, no. 2 (2002): 9.

¹⁰ Amir Hetsroni, "The Presentation and Reconstruction of Art in Advertising: A Content Analysis, A Survey of Creatives and a General Public Survey," in *Visual Arts Research* 31, no. 2 (2005): 39.

I experienced this while teaching Media Studies 101, a required critical thinking course for freshman at a large state university. Therefore, in response to Prof. Steve Brier's question posed in his essay in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, "Where's the Pedagogy?"¹¹ I believe there is pedagogical value in the concept that *Points of Reference* proposes of separating humanities content in media from media. By working with foundational humanities references through inspection in a browsing gallery, such as the Timeline on *Points of Reference*, rather than through algorithmic search, could help to better inform undergraduate students immersed in a semiotic media environment.

What is "media"?

It is important for the purposes of this project to clearly delineate what I mean by media, in which the following two distinctions should be noted: 1) "media" will be used as a singular noun, although it is the plural of "medium", a usage that began in the 1960s with the first entry of "media" in the OED as a plural noun and Marshall McLuhan's influential essay titled, "The Medium is the Message" rather than "The Media are the Message"; and 2) media studies takes into account ALL media, which range from the tablets of antiquity and the printed word, broadcast and wireless streaming, to text-based/audio/visual websites, photography, film, social media, algorithmic advertising, and the production of media content. It is important to note that a Google search on the terms **media studies research methods** will yield various .edu web pages of resources, but not a stand-alone resource for humanities content encountered in media studies.

The Western Canon

Points of Reference seeks to examine humanities content in the Western canon. However, *Points of Reference* is not anti-canonical, nor does it seek to reinforce the Western canon, as this would be counter-productive. Rather *Points of Reference* asks: HOW are we, as digital

¹¹ Steve Brier, "Where's the Pedagogy? The Role of Teaching and Learning in the Digital Humanities," *Debates in the Digital Humanities: 2012*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

humanists and citizen scholars, to confront, and hopefully help to improve, temper, and even quell the cultural dominance of the Western canon globally, if we do not examine its content? In reflecting on the Western canon, we can, of course, consciously push back and deny its dominance, especially if new content is to be afforded space to be recognized. But can we also study the humanities and digital humanities by acknowledging, de-constructing, and interrogating the West's assertion of its cultural production as "humanity's content"? Furthermore, if one is not familiar with or is consciously shunning the canon, how are we to approach the intentional, provocative use of the Western canon in a contemporary medium as ubiquitous and powerful as advertising? How can we examine why and how the canon gets appropriated, if we do not account for its often sordid past/history/provenance?

I want to ponder the question posed by noted scholar Alan Liu when he spoke at the CUNY Graduate Center in February 2019: "Where is the cultural criticism in the digital humanities?" Humanities content encountered in media studies, particularly that which is disseminated through one of its major limbs, advertising, creates a unique opportunity to engage in such cultural criticism, through which we may be able to begin to interrogate the Western canon. Herein lies the nexus between the application of my supporting theories and my proposal for a humanities content research method to intervene and consider critically the dominance of Google Search as a primary research method for undergraduates. "Google Search is an advertising company, not a reliable information company" as Safiya Noble observes, not scholarship. As perhaps one of the greatest arms of capitalism to manifest in modern times, and one of the digital age's greatest venues of advertising, Google is itself a product of advertising, making it a prime tool in the culture industry.¹²

¹²Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

The Frankfurt School and *Points of Reference*

What would happen, however, if we apply Adorno and Horkheimer and Benjamin's theories to Google is an example in action of *The Culture Industry* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*? "Like art, advertising disseminates didactic codes of culture"¹³ and acts as a snapshot of any given culture's "points of reference" within a particular time. Presently, advertising now includes algorithmically derived, customized, and "targeted" advertising, and nascent formats for advertisers, offering digital media technologists, programming humanists, and activist scholars a venue to examine the uses and effects of all of these methods.

In *Critical Theory and the Mangle of Digital Humanities* Todd Presner states:

We can situate the flourishing of critical theory in the 1930's and 1940's with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research... Horkheimer and Adorno privileged notions of "negation" or "negative dialectics", because it is here that [they see] the power to interrogate and undo totalizing systems... Particularly for [Ernest] Bloch, Adorno, and Benjamin, the notion of futurity, especially the utopian or messianic idea, was a crucial part of the transformative possibilities that they imagined for critical theory.¹⁴

I contend, that, the Western canon is systemized via advertising which is laden, as Hetsroni concludes "with psychosocial significance [through which] advertisements construct cultural conceptions."¹⁵ While simultaneously recording and commenting upon the culture it is occurring within, advertising is also created by "the culture industry", disseminated via ever increasing media, and analyzed as a manifestation of both media and culture. Yet, as Horkheimer and Adorno conclude "culture is a paradoxical commodity. So completely is it subject to the law of exchange, that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used. Therefore, it amalgamates with advertising... Advertising is its elixir of life."¹⁶

¹³ Paul Duncum, "Theorising Everyday Aesthetic Experience with Contemporary Visual Culture," in Hetsroni, "The Presentation and Reconstruction of Art in Advertising: A Content Analysis, A Survey of Creatives and a General Public Survey," *Visual Arts Research* 31, no. 2 (2005): 39.

¹⁴ Todd Presner, "Critical Theory and the Mangle of Digital Humanities", ed. Patrik Svensson, *Between Humanities and the Digital*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 57.

¹⁵ Hetsroni, 39.

¹⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham, *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2001): 97.

The application of Benjamin's theory is quite literal: mechanical reproduction, i.e., capitalist mechanistic reproduction of art (primarily via photography and film media) decays its "aura". Benjamin elaborates: "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space... [the aforementioned aura which he defines as] "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction."¹⁷ **Flowerbomb** perfume launched in 2005 by Dutch fashion designers Viktor & Rolf (the ad for which is on the following page) is the personification of Benjamin's essay's very disturbing *Epilogue* apotheosis: "War is beautiful". Benjamin adds, "through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way". Benjamin also invokes the Fascist motto "*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*" (translation: let art be created though the world perish" the nihilistic Fascist corruption of "*l'art pour l'art*" (art for art's sake).

The **Flowerbomb** ad is an example from recent global culture of Benjamin's disturbing conclusion on the function of war in the age of mechanical reproduction: "war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense of perception that has been changed by technology". In the coded language of advertising media texts, and the "grenade" design of the perfume bottle, one could take the Flowerbomb ad to mean: wear this scent and flirt with the ultimate, beautiful danger.

¹⁷ Ibid, 51.



Figure 1: Viktor & Rolf, Flowerbomb fragrance ad (Inez & Vinoodh, 2006)

Benjamin's theory's relevance here is raised exponentially with post-millennial digital media – the internet and world wide web – which are based on the very act of copying, which also drives and fuels advertising, and is required for an ad's success.

Humanities content vs. humanity's content

Humanities content is fraught (as in, psychologically and culturally) with the best and worst of humanity's production, the "best" being the qualities of excellence, strength, power, brilliance, harmony (in the Platonic sense), and beauty. These qualities are also Renaissance humanist ideals, as the Middle Ages gave way to the Greco-Roman aesthetic. Humanities content also bears the weight of responsibility for the "worst": wars, slavery, racism, power struggles, dominance, colonialism, racism, and the shifting sands of cultural moods and mores due to privilege, oppression, and "othering".

With the dual goal in mind of assisting humanities and media literacy, the leading voices of The Frankfurt School -- Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin -- are the theoretical underpinnings for *Points of Reference*. Their theories, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical*

Reproduction (1933) respectively, were eerily prescient in their day and newly relevant today, as exemplified by recent advertisements such as the Flowerbomb perfume ad. Indeed, in the preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, Horkheimer and Adorno state that "as a critique of philosophy, [*Dialectic*] does not seek to abandon philosophy itself."¹⁸ Learning about and understanding the provenance of humanities content is essential in interrogating the presumed meanings that underlay humanities content. Like the Western canon, its advertising similarly contains "psychosocial significance [through which] advertisements construct cultural conceptions."¹⁹ While simultaneously recording and commenting upon the culture it is occurring within, advertising is also created by "the culture industry", disseminated via its media, and analyzed as a manifestation of both media and culture.

Culture / Commodity: Classic / Modern in Advertising

As Hetsroni has argued,

For many people, the most consistently recurring encounter with art is through...advertising (Duncum in Hetsroni) [and] while the typical school curriculum deals mostly with works that hang in museums, churches and reputed galleries, it is the popular commercial adaptation of these works to which most of the students are frequently exposed, and therefore, recognizing the way art is presented in advertisements can provide us [educators] with a way to reach out to students.²⁰

As an avatar for the culture industry, media, and capitalism, advertising as a force, not only exerting itself on the consumer, but also on its own creative individuals, ad campaigns, and the products and brands it publicizes. "For a particular firm to phase out a current advertising practice constitutes a loss of prestige... Because the [capitalist] system obliges every product to use advertising [and as such] it has permeated the idiom – the 'style'" – of the culture industry. The assembly line character of the culture industry...is very suited to advertising."²¹

¹⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Preface to the New Edition (1969)" *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments* ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xii.

¹⁹ Hetsroni, 39.

²⁰ Hetsroni, 53.

²¹ Ibid, 98.

As a "classic" work of art, the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci (ca. 1503) is rare in that it is one among a very few da Vinci paintings (approximately two dozen paintings exist attributed to the artist). By contrast, the image of the Mona Lisa visage is not rare; rather it is ubiquitous. Her hallmark mysterious smile has been repeatedly interpreted since the painting was completed. She is believed to be a woman named Lisa, the wife of a Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo, who commissioned da Vinci to paint the portrait. Its prestige is largely due to the artist having been in service at the end of his life to the court of Francis I, King of France, and bequeathing the Mona Lisa to the King, which is how the painting eventually became part of the Louvre museum's collection in 1815. The painting is often referred to as *La Gioconda* (*La Joconde* in French) or the serene one, a feeling or "aura" which it has come to symbolize. Only when it was stolen and returned in 1911, however, did it become internationally recognized, launching its fame beyond the art world through the use of reproductions of the original to aid in the search for its recovery. This French newspaper headline touts that the painting was found:



Figure 2: *Le Petite Parisienne*, newspaper front page (1911)

Once images of the Mona Lisa were unleashed to the public, it became recognized as a "classic"

and canonical work of art, as well as an overly referenced visual tool. It was mimicked in 1919 most notably by the Dada-ist Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* in which he painted a mustache on a facsimile of the Mona Lisa. But most undergraduate students may not know the provenance, history, and anecdotes associated with the painting, and may only understand and interpret the image from their own contemporary perspective. *Points of Reference* could be used to demonstrate the painting's overuse as a humanities reference in media studies content through the multitudinous examples of its use in advertising.

For example, the Mona Lisa serenely and bi-lingually sells "classic" marble tiles in both English and Hebrew (below left) and a McDonald's "classic" sandwich through bacon draped on her shoulder. In two additional examples, the Mona Lisa is emblazoned on a luxury handbag while monumentally gazing down (while her left eye coyly winks intermittently) and stylized with fuller, "younger" hair by the Pantene brand of hair care and its "Time Renewal" product.

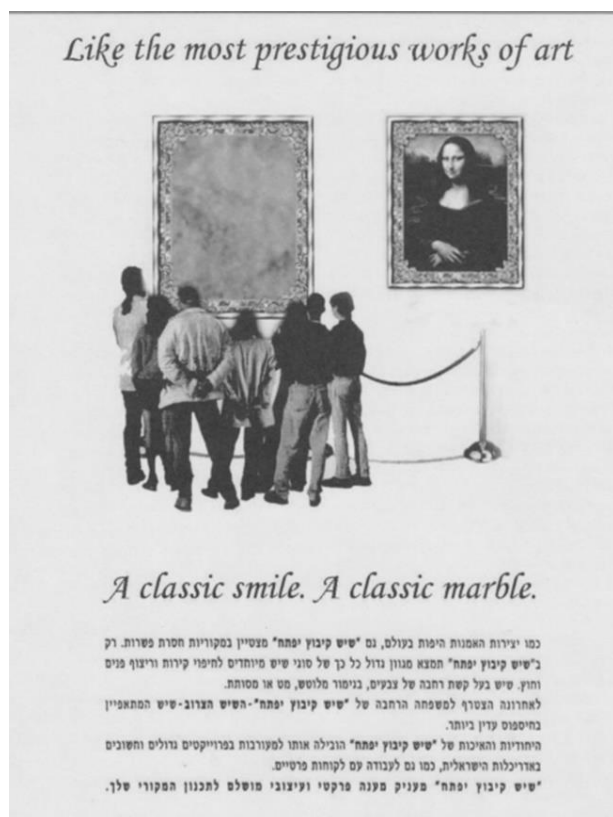


Figure 3: "A Classic Smile. A Classic Marble." tile ad (with ad copy in English and Hebrew)



Figure 4: McDonald's Big Mac Bacon "A Classic. With bacon." ad, Nord DDB (2019)



Figure 5: Mona Lisa Louis Vuitton storefront The Masters Line Collection, NYC (2017)

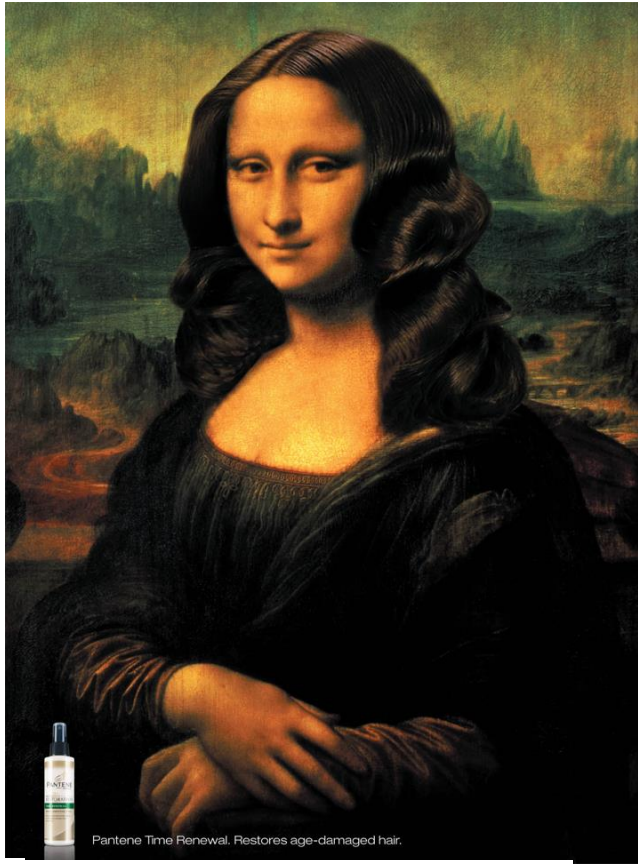


Figure 6: Pantene "Timeless Renewal" ad Grey, Melbourne AUS (2007)

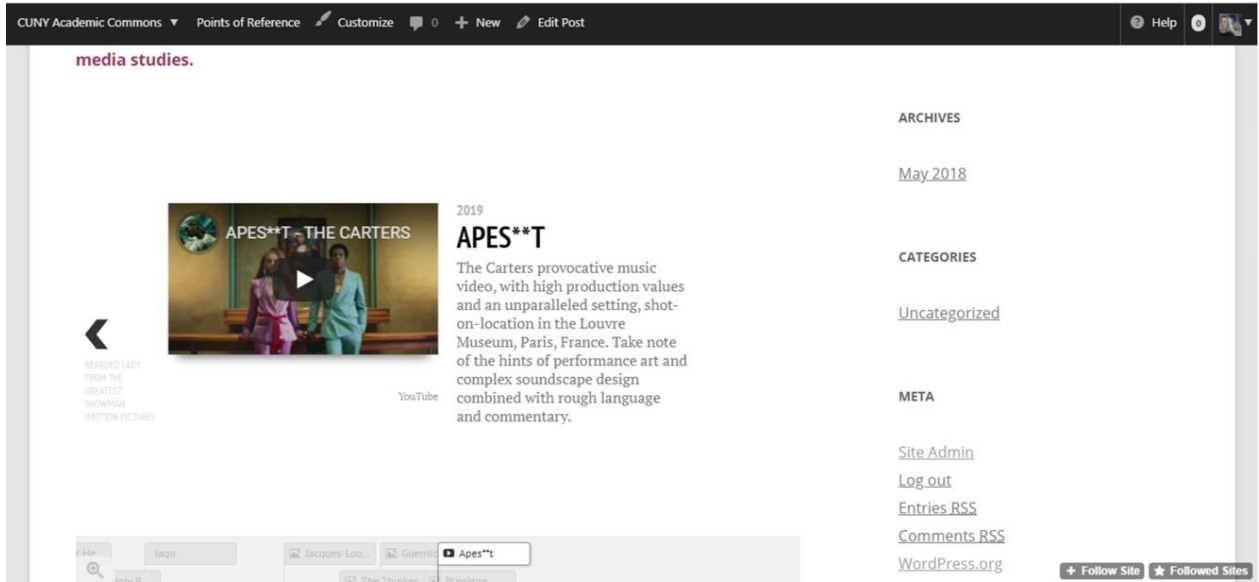


Figure 7: Screen shot from Points of Reference timeline, "Apesh**t" video, the carters (2019)

Advertising and media content in the 2020's are situated in and synonymous with "the culture industry" and are also increasingly geared toward creating an "experience" even more than their former allegiance to branding. Given this fact, music videos (while not advertising, per se) have become another fertile ground for "experience making", political statements, and product placement. A notable example of contemporary visual culture that references the canon via the Mona Lisa is the Carters' (Jay-Z and Beyoncé) music video titled *Apesh**t* from 2019 (screen shot above). Flanking the painting, the Carters align themselves not only with the rarity of this work (in the context of da Vinci's *oeuvre*), but also with its universally recognized image. They assert their power and influence in having obtained a private audience with the painting while associating their creative work with the "aura" of the Mona Lisa. Equating their own iconic status with the Louvre's collection, the Carters they perform among its renowned works of art throughout the video. *The Music Issue* of the New York Times weekly magazine noted that, "Beyoncé and Jay-Z know whose work has long been left out of the canon, and they won't let it happen to theirs" musically or visually, with the Mona Lisa in tow. In media studies terms, The carters' *Apesh**t* video is, to quote Jenna Wortham, a "mixing up of codes and numerous unchained signifiers."²²

"Classic" Art Subsumed

Another example of a "classic" artwork is Michelangelo Buonarroti's statue of *David* (ca. 1501). The hyper-idealized form of the young, male physique, David's counterpoise stance conveys a relaxed sense, yet his face is tense, in the moments before his epic battle and victory over Goliath. He holds the stone for his slingshot in his right hand. Michelangelo consciously chose to portray David nude, breaking from precedent, and to embody the moment before rather than the victorious moment after the legendary battle, departing from the traditional Biblical narrative of David's triumph over Goliath. "The sculpture in fact [was] a highly coercive political

²² Jenna Wortham, "07", *The New York Times Magazine The Music Issue* (March 10, 2019): 29.

object," Jerry Brotton argues. "The republic of Florence commissioned the work as a symbol of political liberty triumphing over tyranny (many Florentines saw David's defeat over Goliath as an allegory to Florence's victory over [its] tyrannical foes.)"²³

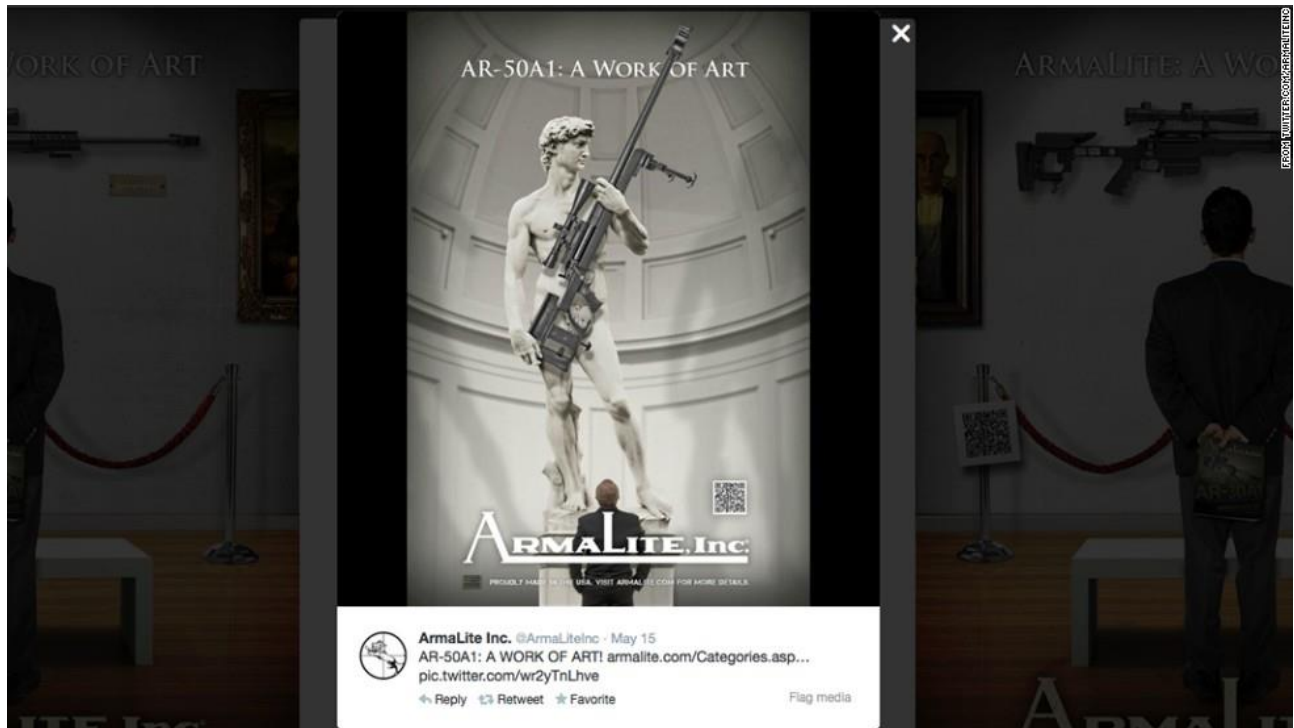


Figure 8: ArmaLite, Inc. "The Work of Art" ad (2014)

In a serious amalgamation of art and advertising, the use of David in an ArmaLite ad was used without permission for a particular assault weapon as "a work of art". When ArmaLite tweeted this ad in March 2014 [Italy's Minister of Culture](#) threatened action. Both the ad and the tweet were pulled and deleted, but the cultural damage was already done because images of the tweet still continue to exist. Undergraduate media studies students who may not be familiar with Michelangelo Buonarroti's statue of *David* (ca. 1501) may not realize the enormity of this controversy, especially as gun culture is often romanticized and fetishized in American media culture. To equate David and such destructive weaponry as "works of art" displayed behind velvet ropes is/was outrageous to many who glimpsed the ad.

²³ Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 18.

Italy's Cultural Minister said at the time, "anyone who wants to use the statue of the David for 'promotional purposes... has to represent the cultural dignity (of the work of art)."²⁴ Art critic G. Efrat is in agreement with Benjamin when the former contends that "featuring works of art in a commercial context spoils the pure nature of art."²⁵ Conversely, the semiotic meme aesthetic of current culture is one of "deformance" rather than "performance" in art and challenges purist attitudes surrounding narrative perfection. The perceptual is an important aspect in both media studies and digital humanities and is factored into the analysis of content. Literary scholar Stephen Ramsay observes that "the notion of 'deformance' provides the critical framework for a discussion of conventional criticism as an activity dependent upon the notions of constraint [and] procedure..."²⁶

It is worth noting that art critic Philippe Daverio compared the US ArmaLite ad to "tongue-in-cheek images of the Mona Lisa with a moustache [as in artist Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919]. Certain cultural icons belong to everyone and no one; to humanity in general."²⁷ When teaching such multi-layered content, humanities and media studies content, and cultural/societal issues arise, the ArmaLite case could serve as lesson plan in and of itself. For example, David and his skill with the slingshot embody the ultimate "weapon" already. This begs the questions: Why would he need to tote additional weaponry? Does the ArmaLite ad really suit the allegory? One can perceive that David's skill is still supreme or that modern times demand increasing fire power to be victorious. Either position invites a fuller discussion among teacher and students and could encourage deeper inspection of over-simplification in media. This is the kind of proposed "lesson plan" that could evolve from *Points of Reference's* foundational humanities used in media content.

²⁴ "Italy Furious at Gun-Toting 'David' Statue in U.S. Rifle Ad", Time.com, March 9, 2014, accessed May 20, 2019.

²⁵ G. Efrat, "The definition of Art", 1976, in Hetsroni, 39.

²⁶ Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*, p. xi.

²⁷ Lizzy Davies, "Michelangelo's David pictured holding rifle in American advert, to Italy's fury", The Guardian, March 9, 2014, accessed April 16, 2021.

Humanities content also speaks to the materiality of culture, which we cannot and must not ignore. "The more we contest history, the greater the sense to memorialize. There's a territorialization, a staking of MY history rather than a shared past. Revisionism is toxic because it erodes the shared foundation for conversation. This is partly ontological, and we should all beware that the word monument itself, from the Latin *monere* means to warn."²⁸ In this regard, I advocate staring closely at the canon already, with the intention of creating a new paradigm. It may very well be that media is the new canon and therefore, we are staring at it already.

A Proposed Digital Pedagogical Browsing Gallery

Within the mediated environment, I propose a [prototype](#). [Points of Reference](#) exists on the CUNY Academic Commons (AC) as a Wordpress blog (*n.b.* you must be logged in to the AC to access) format with the Knight Lab JS3 plug-in Timeline feature. (Paradoxically, this plug-in requires the use of a Google Sheet template to create and add entries and to build the timeline. I'm aware that, as I critique the use of Google Search in the classroom, the use of another Google product in the prototype, though useful and convenient, is a drawback). The entry content was entered on the spread sheet with digital media and interactive assets such as embed video codes. By publishing the Google sheet to the web, and entering the resulting URL in to a Knight Lab's webpage dedicated to this, a Timeline code is generated which is then entered in the Wordpress editor, and the JS3 Timeline appears with multimedia content.

The images of the *Points of Reference* blog timeline browsing gallery attempt to be a platform tailored to humanities content with a preliminary "sample set" of humanities examples that might be encountered in media studies vis à vis advertising or media content. The proposed digital pedagogical training tool shows often cited content. Beginning with the *Winged Nike* Hellenistic sculpture and concluding with a video journey through a temple of art (the Louvre) in

²⁸ Panelist, "Monuments of the Future: Alternative Approaches," Panel, American Social History Project, the Graduate Center, CUNY, Feb. 6, 2019.

which this statue resides, my hope is that the viewer will take the time to reflect on the image both as a singular object and in the context of a contemporary music video. In a relational, thematic pairing, I propose the Japanese work on paper titled *Cracked Ice* as a supplement to the Renaissance linear perspective diagram. Therefore, *Points of Reference* currently stands as an idea and example of a resource that a professor or student(s) could build together or individually, or build upon per the ArmaLite lesson plan example, as humanities references arise in media studies courses. The advertising that employs such references is encountered actively in class and in the culture at large, while the humanities content itself is static in the canon. *Points of Reference* could be used as a dedicated space separating the former from the Western canon. For this reason, I did not include the advertising content examples from this paper on the *Points of Reference* timeline browsing gallery. The timeline in no way suggests a history of humankind or art. It is an assemblage of images to ponder that anyone can create and expand upon, which I hope can serve as a starting point.

"Art is the fingerprint of a species becoming modern." The Great Human Odyssey, NOVA/PBS

Appendix of Website Content: Links and Knightlab JS3 Timeline

I.

pointsofreference.commons.gc.cuny.edu

Home page: New Media Lab Presentations and Welcome!

New Media Lab Powerpoint presentation, Points of Reference Lab, Fall, 2019

New Media Lab Powerpoint presentation, Points of Reference Lab, Spring, 2019

Humanities Content Sample page

II.

Points of Reference Multimedia Timeline for Humanities Content Encountered in Media Studies Knightlab JS3 Timeline entries:

Nike of Samothrace

The Pantheon (*in situ*)

Castel Sant'Angelo (*in situ*)

Linear Perspective Diagram

David (artist: Michelangelo Buonarotti)

Mona Lisa (artist: Leonardo da Vinci)

Cracked Ice (artist: Maruyama Okyo. Example of a perspective diagram)

The Thinker (artist: August Rodin)

Femme Accroupie (artist: Camille Claudel)

Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps (artist: Kehinde Wiley)

The Carters Apesh**t (embedded video)

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