Comments on Tom Gunning's
and Vivian Sobchack's presentations

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> A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media.[1]

My assignment here is to comment on two articles which at face value appear marginal to what is generally included in media studies in the Nordic countries. The media which Gunning and Sobchak each address in their work, the construction of the realist aesthetic in film and photography in Gunning's case, and the provocative parallels Sobchak locates between small "Quick time" digital movies and the memory boxes made by the American artist Joseph Cornell, can hardly be described as central to the theory and research of media in the our part of the globe. Including Gunning's and Sobchak's contributions here, following their presentation at a plenary session on "Digital Aesthetics" provokes the following question: What can these objects – an artist's memory boxes, the already nearly obsolete Quick time movie – and the old question of the photograph´s indexicality, tell us about contemporary media? Why should we pay attention to them? I wish to frame my answer to this question first by addressing briefly the importance a serious study of visuality carries for our field. I then consider several propositions that arise out of the nexus that ties these two otherwise quite diverse papers together: namely a joining of history, nostalgia and memory. I consider this particular nexus as supporting a perspective that while certainly not new in itself, can provoke questions and offer insights highly relevant to the development of media studies. I close with a few critical comments on the ideal of the "totality" as a trope to be critically examined for the consequences it bears both for the development of media and how we study them.

The concept of visual culture has been used so widely and to cover such a diverse range of practices and phenomena that it is on the verge of losing whatever critical insights it may have once offered. In its most common construction, the study of visual culture is construed as introducing a continually expanding range of new *objects* to the field of media inquiry. In direct contradiction to this perspective, many scholars now argue that the study of visual objects and artefacts is based in a problematic essentialization of the visual as involving a distinct set of practices and phenomena (Bal 2003). Instead of examining objects and artefacts as essentially or primarily "visual", we need to be considering what makes them interesting. This involves examining how vision is

historically and culturally constructed, in close and dynamic relationship with other sensory-based information. The focus of inquiry shifts from visual objects to questions of how people see, the forms of knowledge that arise in the practices of looking, and how these are interwoven in discourses of power and knowledge (Sturken & Cartwright 2001).

Gunning's interrogation of the photograph offers an ideal example of this shift. We can understand the "truth claims" made for the photograph only if we examine the historically and institutionally based series of discourses that support the photograph as a statement that can be true – or false. Underlying the claim of visual accuracy – based on photography's combination of indexicality and iconicity- Gunning finds apparatuses that claim the opposite, in legal as well as more informal and interpersonal discourses. In order to be seen as true, the photograph must contain the possibility of the lie. Gunning then pursues this in an attempt to understand what he describes as the "phenomenological fascination with photography" which he claims cannot be fully accounted for by the semiotic postulate of the photograph's indexicality. We do not lose interest in an image that has been proven false. A photograph that has lost its truth claim, through digitization for example, can and does still fascinate. The knowledge that deceptive practices have been involved in producing the photograph can in fact make it even more intriguing to look at.

Gunning does not examine any particular photograph or selection of photographs, but the *idea* of the photographic image as an ontological construction. This interrogation of the relationship between knowledge, visuality and desire does not preclude, however, an examination of objects that one finds visually fascinating. On the contrary, as Sobchak argues, visual culture study depends upon close scrutiny of the "specificity of forms". In her article we find in fact a method whereby the attraction she finds in one particular media form can be understood at least in part, when the medium is subjected to a close analysis and comparison with other visual forms, drawn from what would appear to be quite disparate fields.

Media constantly refer to other media, not only in their content, but more relevant in the present context, in the ways people encounter and use media. Sobchak's model of media analysis, if I may call it that, is not idiosyncratic. The connotations raised by the Quick time movies, reminding her of an experience from other media and other spheres of visual experience, can serve as an example of how people interpret media form and content. Such intermedial encounters between different technologies and texts are integral to contemporary media experience, an intrinsic aspect of everyday life (Lehtonen 2000, Fornäs 2001). The concept of intermediality refers in the first instance to relationships between different media or to two or more instances of the same medium. In the complex cross referencing between media genres and forms, intertextuality emerges as a deeper interpenetration between media texts. Sobchak's example illustrates the more general difficulty of maintaining meaningful distinctions between content and form in her interpretations of these visual texts. She describes an experience of the text where the content and form of two different media interpenetrate each other, first in her encounter with the two media forms and then in her intertextual analysis of the dynamic relationship between them.

In this so-called digital age, intermediality and intertextuality also have a diachronic aspect, as new media continually reproduce and replace other media. This process of *remediation*, to use Bolter and Grusin's term, further complicates any attempts to draw lines between "new" and "old" media. As new media circuits are created, they continually incorporate and appropriate "the techniques, forms and social significance of other media" (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 65). But in what sense is this a new phenomenon?

Haven't media always referred to their predecessors, drawing on the forms, themes and genres of the past? And people, in turn, always make use of the past as they interpret and find new applications for contemporary media. My purpose in pointing to this continual recycling of the past, is not to discredit the concept of remediation, but rather to suggest it as a useful concept for reexamining the history of media and their uses.

The *ur-forms* of media continue to fascinate us. Both the technology and the content and programs of early media are recycled in often ritualized forms. In these new settings (seeing early Disney films on Christmas Eve, watching *I Love Lucy* on a transatlantic plane, looking through old photo albums) the old media do not appear underdeveloped or lacking in meaning. On the contrary, they have become a rich source of history and memory, in many cases bearing a greater authenticity than contemporary media. The meanings experienced in these encounters with "old" media are a significant aspect of cultural history. As Gunning and Sobchak both show in their articles, a return to the phenomenological aspects of prior media can give us new ways of reflecting upon and understanding the significance of media change.

Prior media forms are often experienced as fragments, as incomplete glimpses into the past. There is something missing. The flickering quality of an old film, the static from an old radio broadcast create disruptions and discontinuities that the audience must fill with its own experience. Both Gunning and Sobchak refer to this fragmentary, piecemeal quality of prior media forms as part of the fascination they arouse. The ur-forms of media appeal to memory and nostalgia, as Walter Benjamin noted in his discussions of the optical subconscious (Benjamin 1969, 1979). They contribute to a re-experience of the past that is quite different from the broad scope of historical events. Whereas media are often regarded as a valuable means of recapturing the historical past, they are seldom considered for their value in this alternative respect, that is, for their capacity to elicit the subjective, phenomenological experience of the past.[2]

It is beyond the scope of these brief comments to attempt to characterize more fully the quality and experience of prior media forms, and their intermedial and intertextual relationships to the contemporary media landscape. Even at this stage, however, it is clear that central to that fuller analysis are the ways media consumption engages aesthetic experience. Gunning and Sobchak both point to aesthetics as critical to understanding how people use media.

Finally, I wish to point out an apparent paradox between on the one hand the strong aesthetic appeal of the fragmentary images and sounds of the past and on the other, the persistent ideal of the total media experience. Today we find the ideal of a total experience, for example, in the marketing of the home cinema complete with "surround sound", and in the goal of verisimilitude for virtual reality and computer games. Totality as a measure of completeness permeates the ideals of journalism ("total coverage") and is linked to standards of control (as in "total vision" and "total recall"). Embedded in the development of digital media is the continued striving after a seamless, total representation of the visual, audio and sensory experience. In a narrow sense this can be seen as a technologically driven dream. Yet the trope of totality so deeply imbedded in qualitative assessments of media and their content that it must be seen as transcending the demands of technology. In the total media experience the line between reality and representation is eliminated. Sobchak cites André Bazin's argument from "The Myth of the Total Cinema" to support her claim that the ideal of a seamless illusion of the outside world preceded the technological possibilty of its creation (Bazin 1964). Yet, as the technologies of reproduction improved, cinema itself became the ideal against which other

media of visual movement and sound were measured. Sobchak points to the conflict between two aesthetic values, in the struggle of the condensed fragmentary form of Quick time, which she considers more evocative and far superior to the cinematic ideal of a complete representation. One may disagree with her evaluation of the qualities of the medium she examines in her article. Yet the tension she identifies between these two ideals – that of completeness or totality and the fragment or glimpse – suggests two very different appeals which media exert. Examining these appeals, the contexts in which they arise and when they each have relevance for media producers and their audiences may have profound implications, offering new critical understandings of the ideals of media representation and use.

Notes

1. Bolter & Grusin 1999: 65.
2. Here I am making a broad generalization about the field of media studies, quite aware that there are notable exceptions in the studies of specific media, including photography and film.

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