

First We Take Manhattan!

The 16th Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research

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To arrange a media studies conference is to get a chance to think about the status of the field. It provides a chance to think about what has been accomplished and what is in need of further development. When the conference started 20 years ago it was predominantly a communication research conference attended by social scientists. The present form of media studies, which comprises both social science and humanities oriented approaches, was initiated some five years later, but only partly implemented across the Nordic countries. Herein lies not only a key challenge for the conference, but also for media studies more generally. Can the conference and can media studies as a field overcome its initial institutionalization as a social scientific endeavor and become a truly interdisciplinary field comprising approaches from the humanities as much as from the social sciences?

Bare facts suggest that many humanities scholars working on film, photography, television and digital media across the Nordic countries consistently do not attend the conference. The question then becomes whether we should just proceed with business as usual, or try to do something about this. We decided to do something. We tried to make a conference which could provide a common space for reflection and thought for *all* media scholars. As a further goal, we conceived of a conference which could be developed into a viable forum for interdisciplinary reflection, a forum where anthropologist, literary scholars, computer scientists, art historians, criminologists and democracy theorists (to name a few) would visit and meet up with media scholars when their work involve media issues, which it increasingly seem to do.

In the 1999 conference, Klaus Bruhn Jensen suggested that “media and communication research should become neither a field, nor a discipline, nor a department, but a faculty with a number of departments and other constituents,” covering “the phenomena of culture and communication across disciplines from literary theory and linguistics to sociology, anthropology, and geography” (2000: 28). “Among the benefits of a Faculty of Media, Communication, and Culture”, he noted, “could be a more thoroughly modernized approach to the study of human cultures, a more differentiated training of a central, expanding profession, and a reconsideration of what forms of culture and communication should be preserved for the future in museums and archives” (29). If this reconfiguration of the academy seems bold and hard to accomplish, the spirit of Bruhn Jensen’s vision could at least be realized in a more deliberate attempt to develop the conference into an interdisciplinary forum for media studies across a variety of disciplines. However, we felt that the task of developing such an interdisciplinary forum must come second to the

more primary task of making the conference a venue for all media scholars. This first task was implicitly called for in a plenary address to the 1997 conference.

In his reflections after ten years in the field Jostein Gripsrud noted that “social scientific approaches in a broader sense...dominate the field”, to the detriment of other lines of inquiry (1998: 21). “The areas I am most concerned about,” he said, “are what we might call History, Philosophy and Aesthetics – that is to say, the key constitutive subjects of the humanities, which for that matter are also fundamental to any theory of society worthy of the name” (22). His vision of how we need to address this was one in which we should make room – much more than we have to date – for theories of aesthetics and in-depth analysis of texts and their features. This also implies including the “meaning-less” (the non-meaning-laden) aspects of texts – from “dance numbers” in musicals to the fascination of rhythms in verbal, audiovisual and musical texts. To paraphrase Susan Sontag: Not only do we need a media-hermeneutics, we need a “media-erotics”, as well. (24-5)

A key idea behind the development of the 2003 conference program was to move one step towards rectifying some of these in-balances. We wanted to make a program which could signal to humanities scholars that the conference was for them too, while at the same time making it relevant for social scientists. The attempt to develop our field came together with a couple of other major challenges. One was to address some of the changes linked to what has broadly been associated with the term digitalization. Another challenge came from the culture and time in which we found ourselves in 2002. This was a time when the aggressive rhetoric of George W. Bush’s “war on terrorism,” and the naturalization of deceptive talk from politicians through the euphemism “spin,” called on us to bring our insights to bear upon a political situation which seemed increasingly volatile and dangerous. In hindsight, our fears about the aggressive rhetoric and what it could entail have sadly proven to be warranted. It now seems apparent that the “war on terrorism” has been more effective in fostering than in eradicating the threat it allegedly was devised to address. In short, Bush has given Bin Laden what he wanted, as several commentators have noted. This is truly an ironic twist to a 30 year collaborative business relationship between the Bush and the Bin Laden families, a relationship detailed in Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2003), newly awarded the The Palme d’Or in the 2004 Cannes festival.

These remarks suggest some of the thinking which went into the conception of the plenary sessions in the 2003 conference. This thinking led us to have a film scholar address the issue of movie rhetoric and international politics, and to have that talk commented on from a journalism perspective more aligned with social science traditions. It led us to focus on digital aesthetics in an attempt to show the relevance of aesthetical perspectives in the analysis of “digitalization”, which has tended to be construed as a matter of convergence from a social science perspective. It also prompted us to put globalization on the agenda, comprising both aesthetical and political perspectives, and to explore more closely the relationship between a key discipline which exists both as a part of and separated from media studies – a discipline through which it can even be claimed that media studies began more than 2000 years ago – namely rhetoric.

We can only hope that the reader will be inspired and provoked by some of the thoughts offered, and that they will foster further reflections and contribute to the development of the field. Hopefully, the opening exchange might foster continued exchange and a broadened view of the connections between film and current political developments. Maybe a susceptible reader will detect some of the “media-erotics” Gripsrud called for in the sensual analysis and pondering reflections on quick time movies and

digital photography? Perhaps further links between the realms of aesthetics, politics and journalism also will be opened through the exchange on globalization? And perhaps even the broader ambition to include humanities scholars, and also to develop a forum for productive exchange between scholars of media and related disciplines can be found in the session on rhetoric?

If there is a broader message here to be passed on it might be the following. Bruhn Jensen cited the following lyrics from Leonard Cohen (1988) in his ambitious 1999 address:

They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom
for trying to change the system from within.
I'm coming now
I'm coming to reward them.
First we take Manhattan,
then we take Berlin.

After citing this, Bruhn Jensen went on to say that “First we took a Department, then we take a Faculty. Ladies and gentlemen.... Let’s ‘take Berlin’ ” (2000: 29). Now, the conference might in fact prove an even better vehicle than the Faculty, in the attempt to take Berlin. However that may be, with Gripsrud, it must be noted that as long as we have a “social science hegemony” (1998: 22) in media studies as well as in the conference – which is all too evident in the “working groups” – we have not really taken the “Department”. Thus, let’s take Berlin, but, first we take Manhattan!

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