

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

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The theme of digital aesthetics echos one of the key themes in media studies – questions of how changing media technologies have bearings on the aesthetic and cultural figuration of media expressions. Many have noted the way digital media mimic and remediate forms and figurations of older media. Internet publications model themselves on and rework existing formats and genres from newspapers, magazines and television. The internet also aspires to become a site for the display of movies.

The point at which Vivian Sobchack's intervenes is interesting in several ways. It is an ephemeral moment in the history of a medium's development: before the digital technology is able, with steth smoothness, to mimic the cherished object of the celluloid film perfectly, and render film obsolete chemically speaking. Vivian Sobchack's fascination carries a level of irony, in that the stuttering and not quite successful attempts by the digital technology of *The Quick Time Movies* to mimic cinema becomes an object for aesthetic analysis. Thus, her aesthetic appreciation comes with an ironic foregrounding of the shortcomings of the digital medium in question, especially as compared with cinema. We could maybe question the relevance of an aesthetic analysis of a digital stuttering which reflects as much economic and technological limitations as it does deliberate aesthetic priorities. Yet *The Quick Time Movies* are there to be experienced, and it proves interesting to follow Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological description of this moment in a new mediums development.

I am especially intrigued by the stuttering articulation of a position in-between photography and film – which again echos the wonder of still images portraying live movements – which is the wonder of cinema. *The Quick Time Movies* – in their stuttering disruption of the flow of film, seem to back-track and recall this fascinating moment – before the series of still images had developed fully into a movie and the gaps between the still images were closed, hidden in a flow of motion. A curious tension is articulated in this stuttering moment, as if the *The Quick Time Movie* struggles to decide whether it belongs to the still image culture of the photograph and the painting – an image culture almost as old as mankind – or to the modern culture of the moving image which crowned the industrial development of the 19th century. Vivian Sobchack's observations convinces me that it does not fully belong to neither, but articulates its own intriguing position.

As for Tom Gunning's paper, it was fascinating to follow someone working through issues I have been grappling with myself, and finding myself not only in agreement with the points made, but also overwhelmed by the richness and precision with which they are made. Your points about deception being grounded in a truth value which is still valid, and your emphasis on the institutional warrant which upholds trust in photographic evidence for example, are important.

When it comes to the indexical, however, I have always thought of that as a helpful concept, whereas you seem on the verge of dismissing it. Thus, I will throw out a few ideas in the hope that they might make you see the concept in a more positive light. To start with, I share your interest for photographic images to carry away our faith – an interest which is articulated in related ways by Benjamin, Bazin and Barthes, and which I also believe needs to be explored through rich phenomenological descriptions. So far we agree. But if the concept of indexicality does not in itself suffice to capture our sense of fascination with these images, why don't we just supplement it rather than dismiss it? Second, anthropologists sometimes make the distinction between experience-near and experience-distant concepts. Could the inadequacy of "index" simply be a matter of the term's experience-distant technicality? Third, Barthes left semiology in his *Camera Lucida* (1982) in order to talk about photography from a more phenomenological perspective. But his was a Saussurean semiology based on a conventional relationship between signifier and signified. It did not have the richer options of Peircian semiotics to distinguish, as is most often done, between icon, index and symbol. Thus, Barthes' move away from semiology did not imply an explicit rejection of the index, and many of his key observations (as well as Bazin's and Benjamin's) seem to be easily reconcilable with the concept of the index.

You emphasise the richness in detail as a source of fascination – evoking Bazin's myth of total cinema (which prefigure later ideas of total immersion). I conceive of this richness – full of sparks from incidents, as Benjamin talked about – as grounded in a sign which is both indexical and iconic – as well as symbolic. Søren Kjørup talks in this context of a congruity between the iconic and the indexical. This is surprisingly close to the words of Fox Talbot – one of the inventors of photography – who said that the images are *forced to resemble* what they depict. If the word *forced* invokes the indexical, *resemble* invokes the iconic. Maybe the concept of the index becomes more useful in its application to photography when we do not use it isolated? Could it be possible to see the fascination with photography as in important ways grounded in an iconic-indexical congruity, yet, and at the same time, in need of a thicker and more sensuous description?

It has been said that the digital will change it all. Clearly this is not quite true. Thus we need to foster measured reflections on the changes it entails. I want to thank Vivian Sobchack and Tom Gunning for contributing to this reflection by giving us a richer sense of what quick time movies are, as well as a more measured view of the digital revolution in photography. Exploring such issues can set us on a road to interrogate more closely into what characterizes different media – and on this road media studies can aspire to really become media studies, and not merely mass communication studies.