Interview

Dr. Laura U. Marks, Simon Fraser University

Dr. Laura U. Marks is Grant State Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

In your recent research, you've been doing some interesting work with Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy in conjunction with cinema studies. Could you explain how you read his theories and process philosophy more generally?

Many of the philosophers that I have been the most inspired by, including Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Charles Sanders Peirce, Gilbert Simondon, and more recently Abu 'Ali al-Husayn ibn Sînâ and Sadr al-Dîn al-Shîrâzî, are process philosophers. Each gives us methods to think about images; note that for Bergson that means everything, the universe is a flow of images. These philosophers are quite useful for letting us think about how our world consists of a flow of things that are always changing. In distinction, Whitehead has an atomistic approach to process philosophy. He asks us to break the universe down, rather than to posit it as a smooth flow as do other philosophers, such as Simondon. For Whitehead, every entity in the universe, which he calls either an actual entity or an actual occasion, is engaged within an atomistic process. Each of them comes into being through a process that has an endpoint. They achieve "satisfaction" by absorbing all of the information from their vicinity in the way that they think best. When that process is finished, this actual entity is complete and shows itself to the rest of the world. Interestingly, that coming out is also the moment of the actual entity's death, and it becomes immortal. So this is the kind of atomistic universe that Whitehead makes us think of, that things are always com-

ing to the end of themselves, which marks the moment they become available to others.

Why do you think Whitehead's approach is important to emphasize in today's digital media climate?

Process philosophy helps us think about the relationship between audiences and media: we can use it to study reception. It allows us to consider how the film, game, or Instagram post changes each time as it encounters different audiences. This approach emphasizes that each encounter will produce something new. (I think this approach, like many things people attribute to Whitehead, originated with Peirce). In this way, as media circulate in the world, every encounter populates the world with more entities. A Whiteheadian approach is an effective way to analyze a media work as a series of atomistic occasions that achieve satisfaction. By following this methodology, all of the elements that enter the work can be included in the analysis, and not filtered in the way that they would be with apparatus theory, for example.

This emphasis of process philosophy on relationality and the connectivity between all entities seems to be at the core of a lot of your writing. Is this focus on interconnection utopic?

Yes, it is utopic; it's an ecological theory. The theories I make and the ones that I bring together all, in some way, deal with revealing interconnections. I think my understanding is growing more complex and historically richer. For example, I've recently found that at least half of the philosophies that I'm interested in are inspired by Islamic Neoplatonism, a philosophy of an interconnected cosmos. However, I don't think that the simple conclusion that everything is connected is all that useful. Whether drawing on a concept from Deleuze, Whitehead, Avicenna, or Mulla Sadra, I think what's important to do is to choose carefully which path to unfold and which connection to demonstrate. So one criterion for doing this kind of work is to choose the surprising connections. Most modern people don't want to believe that the universe is a closed whole whose contents are known by God, because that makes us feel unfree. A more modern version of this open universe is in thinking of all these interconnections as unknown, opening to the future in ways that are not known to anybody. It means that we have to choose a series of connections that is important and meaningful for a specific reason (say, a political or aesthetic one) and follow it carefully, not knowing what the results may be. Philosophically, it's very exciting. A lot of ecological thinking nowadays is working on exactly this idea, grappling with how we can point out the interconnections among things

in the world in a way that helps prevent further damage to people and the planet. We're in a very good time for this work, when the political, aesthetic, and maybe even spiritual importance of recognizing interconnections in the world or the universe is becoming more recognized.

This global climate also allows a greater degree of cross-pollination of theoretical work. Do you think there are finally new avenues for non-Western philosophies to enter into our traditionally Western-centric media studies discourse?

Yes. There are a couple of different ways to go about it. One is to identify and deepen the non-Western roots of Western philosophy, especially regarding cinema and media. Another is to do comparative philosophy, bringing non-Western philosophy into contact with contemporary media regardless of historical connection. For example, using Chinese traditional aesthetics, or Indian *rasa* theory, to develop a theory of embodied reception in cinema (see for example the recent issue of *Film-Philosophy*, "A World of Cinemas"). It's a healthy climate for intercultural media studies now, because there are many scholars who are interested in deepening these roots due to their own cultural backgrounds, and there are people of European extraction, like me, who do it because we're tired of the same old Western names reappearing again and again.

Could you explain more about your approach to uncovering those non-Western influences within Western thought?

First, it's definitely the case that there are fundamental roots of Islamic thought in European philosophy. At one point, from the 12th to 14th centuries, these influences were acknowledged, but then they gradually were forgotten or whitewashed. For contemporary scholars, part of the work is simply uncovering connections that are already there. I'm currently working on a project to find the through-line that connects Shi'a philosophy to early Renaissance alchemy and natural philosophy, and all the way to process philosophers like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Deleuze. The second part of my method, after the historical links are exhausted (to my ability, anyway) is to do fabulative philosophy, asking, "What if there hadn't been this great split between Europe and the Muslim world?" For example, if Leibniz (1646-1716) had read Sadrâ (1571-1636), we would have a different history of philosophy. Since their ideas have so many similarities and they share Avicenna as a common root, they could have chatted—for example, to compare Leibniz's theory that unity creates through differentiation and Sadrâ's theory that it creates through modulation—and we would be much further advanced by now. One

consequence of ethnic cleansing and racist division is a damper on the progress of knowledge. Of course, scholars doing this kind of work must be careful not to blur the differences between concepts, because it's really important to understand how ideas were cultivated in their original context. This allows us to assess how we can use them today—for example, how we might import concepts from a religious philosophy to a secular context.

Do you think it's becoming more important to use this approach to de-Westernizing philosophy in today's hybridized and intermedial media climate?

It wouldn't hurt! In fact many cultures have a long history of intermediality. In my research on the deep history of algorithmic media for *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, I saw a great deal of intermediality in classical Islamic art. For example, the same motif would move from book illuminations, to architecture, to textiles. Each time, it would have to change to suit the affordances of a new medium. Similarly, I'm sure that any culture that has a tradition of migrating content among platforms, such as the fractal platforms of domestic architecture, sand divination, and hair braiding that Ron Eglash writes about in *African Fractals*, would have a lot to say about that.

You've developed another theoretical approach that has important implications for studying new digital media—your methodology of enfolding/unfolding aesthetics, which you've used to explain the operations of digital archiving platforms and the aesthetic of the glitch, among other things. How else might one apply this idea? Does it work on all media—virtual reality or video games, for instance?

In 2000, I started working on that idea, and since then I've done a lot of case studies of enfolding/unfolding aesthetics. *Enfoldment and Infinity*'s last five chapters each suggest a different "manners of unfolding": how a source is selected and transformed by an informational filter before it reaches perception. With any medium or artwork, digital or otherwise, you can use this method. For example, you mentioned video games—we could try to detect its sources through our sensory perception. Where has it come from and where is it going? This methodology starts with your perceptions and your body, but it quickly connects you to historical, material, and affective sources. Some media are very generous in the way that they unfold. They unfold completely and show you their histories. Others are very deeply enfolded, almost an-iconic. For instance, in my past work, I've provided examples of complete enfoldment in some classical Islamic

art that corresponds with the Sunni theological idea that you shouldn't try to interpret religious texts. Another example is a smoothly functioning digital hardware-software platform broadcasting a high-quality, non-bootlegged movie stream without any flaws: the movie will appear to be almost completely separate from its material origins. I would argue that this super-visibility is actually a kind of an-iconism, because it doesn't allow you to unfold the image's origin.

How do you feel about the general assumption that new media has largely abandoned a reliance on traditional forms of materiality?

I think it's important to interrogate that idea, because computer-based media are no less material than analog media. Media corporations do a very good job of convincing people that digital technologies are relatively immaterial, for example that digital cinema is less material than celluloid. However, a little examination reveals this not to be true. Arild Fetveit points out that in digital media, it's often the case that the hardware platform exists elsewhere, and so, all we're seeing is the software. For example, when we stream videos at home, we take for granted that this movie appearing on our screen is the medium. In fact, the medium includes the server, which telecommunications companies rely on to stream the movie to us, and servers use enormous amounts of energy. The so-called "cloud" consumes 5% of the world's energy and produces more carbon emissions than the airline industry. When we watch a streaming video, we're burning coal, contributing to the increase in global warming—it's a completely material process! There's also the mined materials that go into computers and mobile phones, whose extraction sustains conflicts and human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries. Our media devices enfold all these destructive and unjust circumstances of their production—and they're also very difficult to recycle. They appear sleek, immaterial, and virtual, but they're very materially imbricated with the globe. (That's why I'm on the waiting list to buy a Fairphone!)
Further, I have never believed that digital media were non-indexical. In 2000, I published an essay called "How

Electrons Remember," where I "prove" that the indexical bond remains in every one of the seven levels of a digital video's production, except for the quantum level. For example, in a digital camera, most of the processes remain physical, analog processes. They illustrate the Peircian concept of strong indexicality, where the object actually causes a change in the sign.

If our media is just as material and as indexical as it always was, then do we need to change the way we talk about the recording and archiving of new media?

There is a notion that all the archived materials that we need are now available online, but that's not true. If you do any amount of archival research on a topic that is not very popular, it will quickly come to a dead end with online sources, because most things in the world have not been digitized. As film archivists know, sometimes only a single copy of a film exists, maybe cobbled together from several sources. There's certainly an enormous volume of audio-visual images created precisely for online circulation, producing new kinds of evanescent, often proprietary archives—but that doesn't mean that everything is up there. In some ways, I think this is a first-world illusion that everything's available. The ideology of immateriality also erases the huge amount of labour that goes into digitization. However, even when media are available online in a coal-fed digital archive, it's possible to discern the traces of the labour that produced them and the paths that they took to arrive to us.

In a lot of current scholarly discourse, the term "new media" is increasingly used—do you think this is a useful term?

I think that "algorithmic media" is more appropriate, because it describes a lot of what computer-based media do, and it also allows us to contextualize computer-based media within older or analog algorithmic media. To get a sense of what this term means you just have to look at the definition of "algorithm," which is a procedure that produces a given result. This term is also more useful because it opens up algorithmic media's wonderfully deep and cross-cultural historical context.