

Content/Content

“Media” is anything once communicated. Media is sculpted and consumed using inherited signifiers floating atop a restless slurry of identity slip.

“Identity,” this subservient slip, consists of deep, opaque experiences of spaces and time, too dilute to reclaim, but buoyant.

“Comprehension” of media, signifiers, and identity is never complete, it’s processual. Artists and audiences sense signifiers emanating from media and rapidly attempt to discern their familiarity. Comprehension requires that signifiers, these sensory qualities - eventual percepts - be differentiable from each other. They scoop out any common signifiers they can spot, using them as material, building bridges, working towards a comprehension of the external identity these signifiers, and the media they compose, float upon, a comprehension of the “other” - communication.

“Content” is the satisfying feeling of approaching identity comprehension. Clarifying it as the “approach” is necessary, as pure contentment would necessitate a completely stable, transparent identity supporting the creation/perception of the media object and its signifiers - an unchanging form, undoing the natural fluidity and opacity of the slip. Such stability is impossible. A purveyor of this concept of an impossible stability of identity was French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who famously critiqued the binaristic hierarchy between the written and spoken word within the western philosophical tradition. The western tradition, steeped in what he coined as logocentrism, was oriented around speech (logos) being the divine summit in the “order of pure intelligibility” (Glendinning, p. 47) - the purest form of linguistic, identity-signification. The attempt to contest logocentrism required dismantling the idea that

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speech, writing, and any mode of linguistic signification, could represent a stable identity. In Simon Glendinning's book "Derrida - A Very Short Introduction," the author simplifies Derrida's critique of a persistent, stable identity:

"So the basic effort is an attempt to shift us away from thinking... that this [identity] can be construed in terms of the discrimination (by the ear or eye or by the mind's ear or eye) of a persisting presence... that it [identity] can persist as the same in and through repetitions' that involve different interpretive contexts." (p. 65)

Indeed, any stability, persistence, affect, or aura is immediately degraded at conscious conception (once signified), then further homogenized once corporealized (mediated). Media is nothing more than (3) a communicable, sculpted reproduction of (2) simplified signifiers representing (1) a fluid identity, altered by every drop of experience while traversing through spaces and time. Because of this instability, pure comprehension or subsequent contentment is impossible.

"Content" is media whose composite signifiers are so viciously homogenized that they become significantly challenging to differentiate. This signifier homogenization, a physical loss of information, allows for resultant media to be more conveniently packaged and communicated - granting it immediacy. Additionally, obfuscating these signifiers mystifies the media (form of reproduction) which they construct. The mystification of the mediator is a necessary process for success under capitalism, especially apparent in contemporary digital capitalism. In *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, author and English professor Anna Kornbluh lamented the loss of the middleman as a central characteristic of contemporary, digital media styles - like content:

“We have studied immediacy as fundamentally negating mediation: cutting out the middleman for instant relay of emanative intensity in continuous flow... the circulation-forward economy of algorithmic discretization begets in culture a waning symbolic” (p. 115)

Here, Kornbluh utilized digital media, which is sculpted from a widely misunderstood or unfamiliar language of signification - code - to reference the destructive cultural effects of media immediacy resultant from homogenization. Because contemporary consumption is mediated through often mystical, hidden digital languages, we lose comprehension of the “symbolic.” Kornbluh clarified the effect of this loss previously in her novel, “the symbolic is in decline or disarray is thus to mark the loss of this effective common, to find that the authority backing the use of signifiers and grounding their felicitous signification across differences in context and groups has dissipated.” (p. 58) In this passage, Kornbluh reaffirms that not only is the ability to parse the commonality of signifiers necessary approaching comprehension of identity (of the “other”) but that this ability is declining in our contemporary culture fetishizing immediacy - a culture of convenient communication via homogenization - a culture of content, where none are content.

These words content/content appear the same, and perhaps the past two paragraphs combined as you read. While writing, I knew these words to be different. Indeed, the differentiating features I recognize are discernable only when spoken and heard, not when written or seen. These words are, themselves, representations of technology homogenizing differentiating qualities of media, preventing the ability to reach comprehension and contentment. It would be impossible to distinguish content (“CON-tent” - approaching

comprehension) and content (“con-TENT” - media homogenized) without clarification provided by surrounding signifiers, whose distinguishability is luckily less destroyed in this typed text.

Indeed, when all is content, humans are forcefully withheld contentment. They’re marred by emotional oscillations - “bi-polar” (Fischer, p. 3) fits of apathetic and anxious interaction, emanating from a base confusion. Journeying across an entertaining bridge approaching the “other,” shaped into peaks and dips can masquerade as comprehensible - its inconsistency is repetitive, predictable, ensured. However, this journey is not content. We are not the ones building the bridge anymore. We often choose not to comprehend the identity of the faceless engineer linking us to the external.

I’ll be the engineer, the mediator, the content, for a moment:

I selflessly present to you my tool of reproduction, so optimized for efficient communication. It’ll reward your life with less absence, giving you a higher quantity of exciting, seemingly solvable social puzzles. You can use your money to buy it. You probably understand the hours and/or space you travelled to earn your money - it functions as a quasi-stable object - so use it as a palliative for your lack of comprehension of how my tool works. I’ll even give it buttons, swiping, some primate-grade immersivity, so you can *feel* as if you’re making it work. These immersive, monetized features grant an experience perceptually indiscriminable to feeling content. It’s YOU who’s communicating, YOU’RE comprehending the identity on the other line.

What is the point of these definitions, skits, or the content/content concept? What is the realization or actionable shape of such generalized ramblings?

We are hindering contentment, and accelerating towards an apathetic, anxious futurelessness by welcoming reproductive technologies which reduce the comprehension of identity through homogenization, limiting the discernability of its representative media's signifiers - content creation. We need to reassess our modes of experiencing media as producers, consumers, or any contemporary, prosumer-ish collage of the two, considering the implication of our chosen technological mediators - which do they favor: the flow of identity or the flow of capital? Content/Content?

“Plate the dinner, frame the photo, upload it to the hash-tag, bank your brand... lead individuals to misperceive digital architectures as their own self-expression... processing occludes the technological and social conditions, and an illusory transparency obliterates any internal opacity.” (Kornbluh, p. 55)



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