Only Idiots Do Cultural Studies

ROLIEN HOYNG

As an advisor, Larry has guided me by giving me a lot of freedom—that is, by telling me to feel free to study anything that seemed important to me as a site of power and transformative potential, regardless of disciplinary boundaries and enclosures. That is how the focus on popular culture had come about in cultural studies, he said, and otherwise we would not "give a damn." Larry often likened cultural studies to a garbage bin: you can study anything that you can't study elsewhere because it falls beyond the scope of the field, and they don't want you to do it. I remember him provoking us, Ph.D. students around 2010, to hand him a study of refrigerators or air conditioners. Without these machines humming quietly and controlling the climate, life where we were in North Carolina would not be possible, or at least it would not be very pleasant.

I want to evoke Isabelle Stengers' (2005) notion of the idiot as a research position that personifies what I take to be Larry's lesson. In Stengers' usage, idiocy describes a position of refusal to accept common views and practices. This refusal is not expressed in a fierce way and does not bravely proclaim an alternative vision or conduct. Nonetheless, the idiot disrupts or interrupts by producing an interstice. Through rejecting conventions and shrugging off interpellations into comprehensible positions ("Hey, economist!", "Hey, social scientist!"), the idiot's presence calls into question those whose knowledge and ways are not usually questioned, especially experts and technocratic institutions and authorities. The idiot's actions (or non-actions) prompt those who are supposed to be "in the know" to stop their business and explain themselves: "But what are you doing?"

Executing an idiotic inquiry means sticking one's nose "into what should be nobody's business" (Stengers 2005, 999). It means pursuing an inquiry deriving from the lack of knowledge yet not driven by the moti-

vation to make up for it; and bringing to bear "improper" knowledges, other angles, or concerns that are usually brushed away. Perhaps taking Larry's garbage bin metaphor literally, I started studying waste a few years back. In this research, I am not as much interested in the scandals of waste dumping and smuggling. Rather, I am interested in what counts as "best practices," exemplifying the way forward and normalizing both our approach to ecological crisis and this crisis itself. Focusing on technological applications in environmental management, I have read many technical papers in computer engineering or this or that professional publication with nothing but my training in comparative literature and cultural studies to guide me (there's heteroglossia in a patent application!). And I have started many interviews with professionals in this or that area of "smart" innovation with "I have been trained in cultural studies, now would you please be so kind to explain to me . . ." (a feminized idiot surely starts out on a polite note).

The social study of science and technology, STS, has often contemplated the challenges of studying expert domains as a non-expert. Authors such as Nick Seaver (2017) have discussed the question of whether one needs to know the technological object—for instance, algorithmic code—to be able to analyze its social implications. Seaver's answer is that having a degree of understanding of expert domains such as computer engineering or data science is helpful, but ultimately it is about underscoring the algorithm's own multiplicity and, to use an apparent "Larry term," its various articulations. So, in a way, STS already offers a position from which to study the humming choir of machines that operate in the background of our societies, from air conditioners to datacenters.

But what has this to do with cultural studies? Have I been "set free" just to join the next flock and land in the next colony? Though I often draw on STS research, studying science and technology on and in terms of Larry's radical contextualism leads to questions that STS' understandings of the socio-technical, specifically if following actor-network-theory, do not easily afford. Foremost, STS often reduces context to context of practice and situated locus. Its domain of study remains derived from, and constituted by, expert domains populated with professionals and users. The latter are often primarily understood in terms of their degree of conformity to, or deviation from, the subject or ideal user that is imagined by the former.

An idiotic inquiry into science and technology à la Larry means disassembling machines as objects and reassembling them as part of the kinds of machines that Larry sees everywhere: stratifying, coding, and territorializing machines that are responsible for actualizations of the virtual and, therewith, the production of actual reality. Jennifer Slack and Greg Wise (2005), whose book *Technology and Culture: A Primer* I have used a lot in my classes, have made the point so forcefully and persuasively: technology exists "only in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 qtd. in Slack and Wise 2005, 113). Here, analysis brings into focus more than the situated context of practice, namely context as a constellation of milieus that amounts to a connective territory, amidst other territorializations, and performs a diagram. Articulations of technology into context rather than the technology itself, or its embedding in a situated context of practice only, are what is important in that this generates realities. Given that Larry's machines are sputtering engines of multiplicity and complexity, it should not surprise that whenever he bothers to comment on technology in the narrow sense, he denounces reductions, for instance that a singular form of algorithmic control effectively replaces all other forces. To further appreciate how studying technology à la Larry could extend and reorient the endeavor, one (someone who likes to "wrestle with angels," not that blasé idiot) could trace the lines of creative adaptations between Larry, Deleuze, and Simondon, the French philosopher of technology. Larry's scheme for mixed enunciations (Grossberg 2010; Grossberg and Behrenshausen 2016), which elaborates relations between form, substance, expression, and content, underscores the contingency of such relations and could help extend the analysis of the materiality of technology in a way that places uncertainty front and center. Take data-centric and algorithmic "smart" governance: at stake is not just the form of expression—the android's dream—but also the substance of expression as well as content. This perspective renders such assemblages unstable in a productive and generative manner. In Wiener's account, uncertainty is associated with the external reality that needs to be controlled via data and information in a fight for existence and against entropy. Contingency is what we will suppress with our machines. But for Simondon, the adaptation of technology introduces new kinds of uncertainties or contingencies and technocultural emergences in moments of transduction that knit together disjunctive realities. Studying these dynamics à la Larry means under-

scoring uncertainty, contingency, and instability in a way that explores their contextual significance. Simondon's account of technical objects, associated milieus, and transductions undergoes a makeover to emerge as an analysis of context, power, and political possibility. It is not a matter of just holding on to the premise that machines must fail, or to find comfort in a worldview promising contingency and the possibility of lines of flight (though I admit it often does). Rather, it means seeking the contextual significance and politics of uncertainty associated with such technologies. For instance, my idiotic inquiry of waste (Hoyng 2019, 2023) maps the politics of uncertainty inherent in, and stemming from, the smart circular economy. I am interested in how the potentiality of waste matter is translated into—and substituted for—figures of risk and opportunity, but in ways that leave open, or generate, a host of uncertainties, contingencies, and possibilities. Such uncertainties should be considered in relation to various politics, including the proud proclamations of corporate responsibility, pervasive exploitation of neglect, persistent informality, possible alternatives, etc.

Having become accustomed to acting as an idiot in the face of experts, the issue that remains toughest for me is to perceive the intersections of the "expert" and the "popular." By this I do not just mean the everyday, intimate, or indigenous milieus of particular users, which feature in STS research. What is often missing, alongside a notion of context, is a notion of culture. It is in his regard that I appreciate Ted Striphas' (2023) highly original book that probes the definition of algorithmic culture. Deeply invested in Raymond Williams' approach to culture, the book explores conditions of possibility for the emergence of today's algorithmic culture by focusing on the cultural meanings, connotations, displacements, and erasures of its keywords. Ted provides a pre-history of today's algorithmic imagination, or the ways in which people beyond the tech world become aware of, and self-reflexive about, their relationships to the role of data-centric and algorithmic technology. This encompasses the ways in which people struggle to give expression to the turbulences of daily life as it is increasingly suffused with algorithmic computation and decision-making. Yet carrying forward the task of analyzing the algorithmic imagination is not easy. Awareness tends to ignite at moments of controversy, scandal, and breakdown when, as STS has called this, a "matter of concern" (2015) gives rise to a public. This is when technocratic and infrastructural sub-politics attain publicity and discursive framing, and become subjected

to contestation. But where do the sub-politics of technology meet the undercurrents of culture? In other words, is there another, perhaps more nuanced and richer, way of thinking about popular cultural reflection on, and negotiation of, datafication and algorithmic power? How could we try and comprehend structures of feeling and affective atmospheres that linger and simmer before and beyond the all-too-obvious manifestation of crisis forges a shift toward public politics? And where do we encounter those who do not seek, or do not have, a voice at those moments?

My current research focus considers the data-centric and algorithmic technologies that construct "climate change" as a problem and inform proposed solutions. In recent history, the most ostensive type of cultural expressions reflecting on climate modeling may well have been climate skepticism and denialism. Such expressions have mobilized facets of algorithmic culture to the extent that they extrapolate the uncertainty of computation to a politics of neglect. However, whereas the facts of rising temperatures and climate breakdown, as well as their anthropogenic cause, have become more established over the years, paradoxically, the erasure of the uncertainties of climate modeling and carbon counting can also amount to a form of denialism. Denialism here refers to absolutizing model-derived calculation in such a way that this disavows the unpredictability of planetary agencies, along with the speculative and constructed nature of projections that, time and again, turn out to underestimate the speed of climate breakdown and overestimate the impact of our mitigation measures. Such denialism enables the powers that be. But the kinds of cultural reflections around the algorithmic construction of "the climate" that we should "give a damn about"—in the sense that they may hold the potential for transformative politics—are harder to spot. They contain a larger variety of cultural discourses, affects (including anxiety), and aesthetics, speaking to the intersecting uncertainties of planetary events, algorithmic knowledge, and situated and embodied anticipations of futures. Grappling with climate politics therefore encompasses grappling with popular negotiations of algorithmic knowledge that remains shot through with uncertainty. Attending to this kind of task seems to me to require a great deal of, and from, cultural studies. And clearly only an idiot would undertake it.

REFERENCES

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Grossberg, L. (2010). *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Grossberg, L. and Behrenshausen, B. (2016). Cultural Studies and Deleuze-Guattari, Part 2: From Affect to Conjunctures. *Cultural Studies*, 30(6), pp. 1001-1028.

Hoyng, R. (2019). Aggregations of the Opaque: Rethinking Datafication and E-waste. *First Monday*, 24(4). Available at: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9866/7747 [Accessed 1 May 2023].

Hoyng, R. (2023) Ecological Ethics and the Smart Circular Economy. *Big Data and Society*, 10(1). Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20539517231158996 [Accessed 1 May 2023].

Marres, N. (2015). *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment, and Everyday Publics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seaver, N. (2017). Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic systems. *Big Data and Society*, 4(2). Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053951717738104#body-ref-fn1-2053951717738104 [Accessed 1 May 2023].

Slack, J.D. and Wise, J.M. (2005). *Culture and Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang.

Stengers, I. (2005). The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In: P. Weibel and B. Latour, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 994-1003.

Striphas, T. (2023). *Algorithmic Culture Before the Internet*. New York: Columbia University Press.