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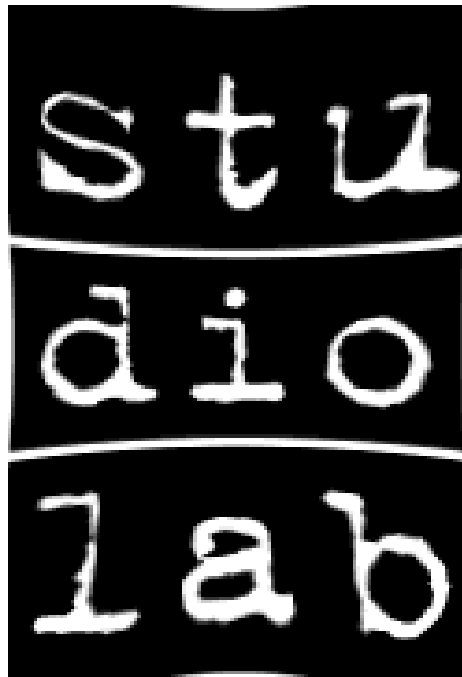
conceptual

Ulmer: who (or what) else?

One day in the mid 80's, Ulmer and I set out across the University of Florida campus, headed for lunch. We walked along the Plaza of the Americas, then past Library West, talking theory and life as we did. Pretty soon all that lay between us and Burger King (his choice, as I recall) was University Avenue, one of the busiest streets in Gainesville (which also happens to be my hometown). Before us, traffic whizzed by left and right, but Ulmer stepped right out into it, and I followed, incredulously.

Suddenly, I'd become Dustin Hoffman's title character in ***Little Big Man***, the 1970 post-Western film epic by director Arthur Penn. One scene is based on General George Custer's infamous 1868 surprise attack on a Cheyenne winter camp located on the banks of the Washita River. As the attack unfolds, Little Big Man sits in a tipi with Old Lodge Skins (played by Chief Dan George), his adopted Cheyenne grandfather, now blind from old age. With soldiers massacring men, women, and children all around them, Old Lodge Skins calmly states that they'll escape by simply walking down to the river. 'But Grandfather,' I say, 'they'll shoot us!' 'It's okay,' he responds, 'I'm blind, so they won't be able to see us.'

Somehow, we made it. Ulmer ordered a Whopper. 'Make it two.'



My_story? StudioLab.

I first encountered Ulmer as an undergrad painting student in 1983 or so. I'd heard about these "theory" courses over in the English Department and signed up for a film class with Robert Ray. It was full, so by chance the registrar's computer placed me in Ulmer's section. This class changed my life. I'd studied the avant-garde "art historically" (effectively, from a formalist perspective) but never as cases of experimental research informed by theories of relativity, psychoanalysis, Marxism, etc. Soon I was immersed in Barthes, Lacan, and most importantly, the deconstructive and grammatological projects of Derrida. An MA in English soon followed.

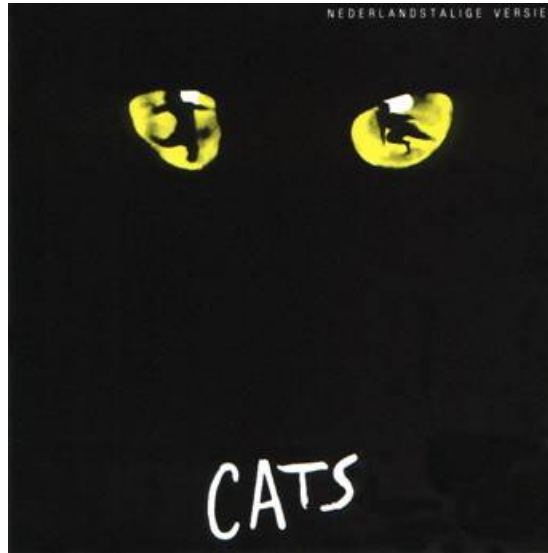
What I didn't know at the time was how unique this Floridian immersion would be: I later realized that elsewhere, most folks studied theory as exclusively concerned with critique, whereas I was also taught to approach theory creatively. One of the first "lessons" Ulmer taught me was that even the most critical of theories must first be invented: Marx, Freud, de Beauvoir – all had to first create their critical, analytical theories. Theory has thus become, for me, a form of applied conceptual art: theory creates concepts applicable to the critical problems of our time. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari: if you're not creating concepts, you're not doing theory. And to paraphrase Marx: theorists have thus far critiqued the world, the point is to change it – to create something else.

A second "lesson" Ulmer taught me was to approach the classroom as a performance space, a site where materials (bodies, ideas, media) can mix to create pedagogical events, events registered by 'ah-hah...', 'wow!' and sometimes a shrug or 'what the - ?' (Experiments, after all, entail risks: they sometimes fail.) After receiving my doctorate in performance studies at New York University, Una Chaudhuri invited me to teach an electronic performance course in undergraduate drama. It was here that I began to formally articulate my own pedagogy, trying out things I'd learned at both Florida and NYU. I've come to call this pedagogy "StudioLab."

As the name suggests, StudioLab is designed to take place in both studio and computer lab environments, allowing students to develop critico-creative projects and digital skills using models drawn from cultural performance: theater, performance art, ritual, and practices of everyday life. Here's how it works: In studio, students work in "bands" to collaboratively conceive and develop the performative aspects of their projects. Like rock bands composed of drummer, bassist, and guitarist, StudioLab bands contain specialized players; one student might focus on imagery, another on text, another on interactive elements. In the lab, however, the same students work in different groupings called "guilds" to develop the electronic elements needed by the bands. Guilds are technically monochromatic, as it were, composed of similarly specialized players, such as Photoshoppers, Hypertextualists, and Interactivists. Here specialists work together to hone their respective trades

(much as drummers, bassists, or guitarists of different rock groups might get together to share licks and tricks). Individual guild members then bring their skills back to their bands in studio, integrating them into the projects. Moving between studio and lab, band and guild, these projects unfold through the interlacing of bodies, ideas, and media.

In sum: StudioLab is characterized by the circulation between studio and lab environments, by collaborative learning in different sociotechnical groupings, and by the mixing and fine-tuning of physical, conceptual, and multimedia elements.



Brecht and CATTs Forever

In an early Electronic Performance course (1996), I combined Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theater* with Ulmer's *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*. The challenge for my undergraduate theater students: invent and embody a poetics of electronic performance by replacing Laurel's guiding theorist (Aristotle) with a modern or contemporary theater director. I assigned each band of students one of six directors: Artaud, Boal, Brecht, le Compte, Novarina, and Schechner. For further guidance, we used Ulmer's CATTt, his metapoetics for generating new manifestos or analyzing old ones. Briefly put, the acronym runs:

C (contrast), A (analogy), T (theory), T (target), t (tale)

One band astutely took as their Contrast the premiere Broadway show of the time, *Cats*. It was already a long-running hit, and New York was plastered with advertisements that proclaimed 'Cats Forever.' Needless to say, these students had other ideas and fattened their CATTt with Brecht's theory of epic theater. To embody Brecht's contention that scenes could function on their own, as if cut up and performed in any order, they had the audience pull letters out of a hat, letters corresponding to a sign strung across the performance space which spelled 'Cats Forever' on individual sheets of paper. When a letter was called, a student would grab the corresponding piece of paper, on the back of which was the title of a short scene they'd written. The student would read out the title, and then the group immediately performed it. 'O!' 'T!' 'C!' 'V!' The pace was frantic, as the students bounced around the space recalling and performing scenes on the fly. A mainstream musical made epic.



Ray

After having settled for Ulmer in that first film class, I eventually studied with Robert Ray, who was also teaching theory experimentally. Though his first book, ***A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema***, had been an ideological critique of Hollywood cinema, he would later embrace the filmic pleasures he critiqued there, writing ***The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*** and ***How a Film Theory Got Lost***, two books that theorize and practice experimental film theory using techniques drawn from the avant-garde, especially the Surrealists. He readily admitted that Ulmer had influenced this transformation of his work.

Ray's courses were amazing, for he enthralled students with the intensity of his intellect and teaching style, and also because he incorporated music into the curriculum, handing out cassettes with mixes of Erik Satie and the Velvet Underground. He later joined the Vulgar Boatmen, a rock band started by some of my art school friends (Walter Salas-Humara, Carey Crane, John Eder, and Rick Ellis). A professor with a rock band - every college kid's dream.

Ulmer and Ray were a pedagogical tag-team for me and many other students. We'd study with Ulmer one semester and Ray the next, the one cool, the other hot. Ray took things in a different direction: more Marx and Brecht, less Heidegger and McLuhan. Both, however, were mainlining Barthes (who often wrote fragments based on letters of the alphabet) and reflecting on teaching while teaching. Today, it's difficult for me to separate the UlmeRay strands of my own pedagogy.



EPCOT 21

Another StudioLab course (1997), this one taught as a graduate performance studies seminar at NYU, was called 'Performing Bureaucracies.' Here the goal was to actualize ideas about other performance paradigms that I'd begun to research in my dissertation, research I later expanded in my book ***Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance***. All too quickly: in addition to the cultural performances

studied by performance studies scholars, there are organizational performances studied by managers and organizational theorists and technological performances studied by engineers and computer scientists. While cultural performance research concerns activities such as theater and ritual and stresses their efficacy, their potential to maintain or transform social structures, research of organizational performance focuses on such things as the performance reviews of individual workers and improving the performance of entire organizations. Here the guiding value is efficiency, the minimaxing of inputs and outputs. Research of technological performance concerns such things as high performance stereos and missile systems, and its practitioners value effectiveness, the sheer technical capability of a device or system.

Looking back, this multi-paradigmatic research can be seen as following one of Ulmer's suggestions in *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*. That "lesson" is to write using all the meanings of a given term, however contradictory or nonsensical the results might first appear. This directive, based on Derrida's notion of the gram, regularly produces uncanny results: through iteration, arbitrary associations become motivated, nonsense becomes sensible (and vice versa). The Performing Bureaucracy class explored what can happen when cultural, organizational, and technological senses of performance are recombined, when efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness get remixed, when performative *values are reevaluated*.

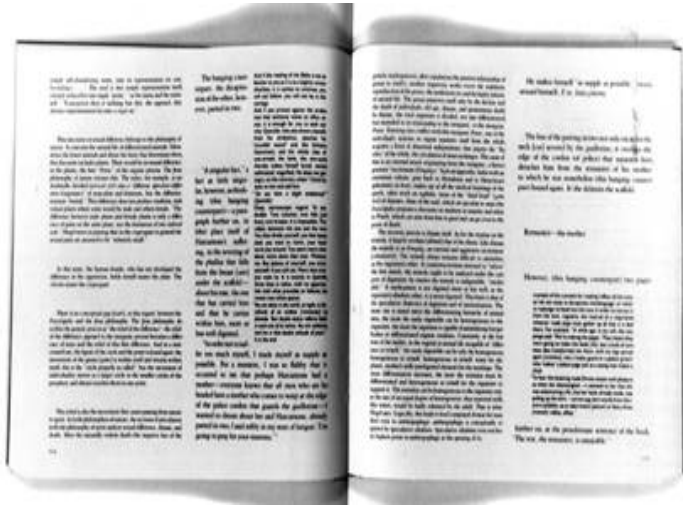


Laurie Anderson

I remember the first time I heard her music: a student of Ray's had created a short film, a close-up of someone turning the pages of a book or newspaper, shot in slow motion. The soundtrack was Anderson's *Born, Never Asked* from *United States Live*. It was mesmerizing.

It was the early-mid '80s. I'd never heard of performance art, but soon was immersed in it and realized I'd done some already for a video piece. But the complexity and simplicity of Anderson's work fascinated me: small pieces, often composed of a story, some images, and a song, pieces that bit by bit created complex patterns of ideas, emotions, and imagery. The elements were drawn from personal stories, philosophy, pop culture, art and literature.

Under Ulmer's direction, I wrote my master's thesis on Anderson's *United States: Parts I-IV*. Ulmer forgot to tell me that master's theses generally run about 70 pages: I rambled on for over 200, but along the way I explored Anderson's multimedia performance art using Derrida's notion of grammatological, generalized writing, while also trying exploring the relation of experimental performance and the highly normative theory of performativity articulated by Lyotard. This intersection of Anderson and Lyotard forms the Ur-site of *Perform or Else*; of my essay "Laurie Anderson for Dummies," which analyzes Anderson's performance *Stories from the Nerve Bible* and her CD-ROM, *Puppet Motel*; and of my interest in performative pedagogies.



Leavey

Besides Ray, John Leavey was another Florida professor who shaped my pedagogy, though in a very different way. Leavey is a translator of Derrida, having worked on *Glas* and *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry, an Introduction*. Ulmer contributed to Leavey's *Glossary*, a companion text to *Glas*. While Ulmer took great imaginative leaps with Derrida's texts and provided "big pictures," Leavey stressed a certain fidelity to Derrida and close, detailed readings. In some sense, I studied one Derrida with Ulmer (grammatology) and another Derrida with Leavey (deconstruction).

The StudioLab pedagogy probably owes more to the grammatological than the deconstructive (and here I hear Leavey questioning if one can really make such a distinction), and yet Derrida's deconstruction of the university called for an intervention in the concrete practices of the academy, while still respecting certain norms of scholarly rigor and discipline. If one can understand Lyotard's performativity as the postmodern displacement of the modern disciplinarity described by Foucault, then perhaps StudioLab participates in an anticipatory way with emerging norms and rigors of post-disciplinary pedagogical practices.

While it is crucial to invent experimental and resistant practices, one must also resist the simplistic tendency to valorize "transgression" and demonize "norms." One must also recognize that some transgressions are regressive, even reactionary, and that the real challenge lies in articulating new, progressive norms.



Anagrammatology

Late last fall, Ulmer passed through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where I now teach. I'm up here in cold north, where he grew up. He's sweating it out down south, where I'm from. I can't take the heat and humidity any more, he can't take

the snow and the cold. The day after doing a symposium with me, I took him out for breakfast, me wearing a light jacket, he bundled up like Old Lodge Skins. We cross the street from the parking garage and head toward our destiny: bacon and eggs at the Pfister Hotel (I kid him that, despite its name, it's not that kind of place, so he shouldn't get his hopes up).

The years at Florida shaped my approach to theory and life, and Ulmer's teaching in particular left a big thumbprint on my mind, as it did with many of my peers. In some sense, I'll always be in the lab, though it changes as I move from place to place. Different institutions, different disciplines, different student bodies, different resources: what's constant is the experimental approach to theory, the emphasis on generalized writing, multimedia, mixing thing up. Anagrammatology.

One night in the mid 80's, I was hanging out in Gainesville with fellow students Craig Saper and Bonnie Sparling in her second-story apartment on SE 2nd Avenue, drinking, smoking, talking theory and life. At some point, I got up to go to the bathroom, and as I returned, I noticed that on a table in the hallway Bonnie had placed one of those small trays used in the board game Scrabble. On it were eight wooden letters arranged to spell out the word 'UMBRELLA.' I paused a moment, and suddenly there it was: I quickly recombined the letters, spelling out 'ULMER LAB,' and then moved on.

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