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Media and extraction: A brief research manifesto

ABSTRACT

This short essay is a polemical exploration of recent scholarship on media and resource extraction, with remarks on the necessary revisions this work entails to the purview and practice of studying cinema and media. Drawing on emergent works that elucidate the significance of media's embeddedness in extractivist logics, we reflect on the ideas that propel them and the future conversations we hope they will provoke. As old disciplinary configurations no longer fit the task of understanding the technological instrumentalization of life in the face of climate breakdown, we consider the ways in which reckoning with modernity's dependence on extractive industries and modes of labour reformulate media histories, the disciplinary study of media objects, our horizons of thought and our ways of being.

KEYWORDS

extractivism
racial capitalism
materiality
conviviality
data
labour
Global South

Colonial, settler and industrial extractions have terraformed the earth and carbonized its atmosphere in pursuit of building civilizations powered by fossil fuels, producing the unequal geographies of/within a Global North and South. Broadly, the study of media and extraction focuses on the ways in which resource extraction underpins and shapes this modernity, as manifested in media technologies, conduits, cultures and forms. Indigenous peoples and resource-rich regions experienced the first impacts of 'extractivism', a term coined by Latin Americanists to define the socio-economic, political and

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everyday repercussions of labour and resource extraction (Gudynas 2010; Gómez-Barris 2017; Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson 2017; Riofrancos 2017; Szeman and Wenzel 2021). Research focusing on media's relation to the extraction of materials, labour and information opens an area of inquiry marking belated acknowledgement that the conflict-ridden pursuit of carbon fuels, base elements, rare minerals, metals and labour have been structural to media's material objects, circuits, imaginations and consumption. Reckoning with media's extractive basis confronts realities that have long been familiar to populations and environments most profoundly impacted by exploitative industrial practices. Consequently, the analysis of media's extractive substructures is impelled both by a look ahead to accelerating climate breakdown, and a reparatory turn to the past in cognition of the high human and ecological costs of carbon-based Eurocentric globalization.

The question that haunts this mode of interrogation is: what good does it do to think about the ways in which extractive practices underlie media objects, technological circuits, financial structures and aesthetic expressions now? Why write about the ways in which media extend, activate or neutralize our critical abilities to perceive the material, resource and labour extractions securing life's needs and comforts? Our short essay draws on the insights of emergent works to clarify the imperatives of focusing on media's embeddedness in extractivist logics. We refer to ideas that inspire this work and conversations we hope to further engender. Principally, we find that attending to pressing questions of media and extraction shift the kinds of the histories we write, perspectives we explore and futures that we can collectively enable.

A DISCIPLINARY UNSETTLING

Thinking through the past and present of media's links to human and planetary resource-harvesting calls for learning from pioneering work in multiple fields (such as Bozak 2011; Cubitt 2005; Cubitt 2017; Fay 2018; Grieveson and McCabe 2011a; Maxwell and Miller 2012; Maxwell et al. 2015; Peters 2015; Parikka 2015; Shiva 2015; Szeman and Boyer 2017; Wolfe 1999; Wynter 2015). It reminds us that traditional disciplinary configurations separating the humanities from the natural or social sciences break down when we try to understand how the technological rationalization of life has exacerbated environmental destruction (see e.g. Alaimo and Starosieski's *Elements* book series with Duke University Press; Chakrabarty 2021; Huhtamo and Parikka 2011; Malm 2016; Mitchell 2011; Moore 2016; Shulman 2015). Consequently, emergent environmental media studies focusing on extraction can draw inspiration from inter-and-multi disciplinary formations produced by the enmeshing of science and technology studies with imperial, decolonial and refugee studies. It is poised to foster potential dialogues between the elemental humanities and histories of racial capitalism, Indigenous, feminist, queer and critical caste studies (Ayyathurai 2021; Collectif Argos 2010; Estes 2019; Ghosh 2016; Green 2020; Hendriks 2022; Kumar and Mishra 2022; Prasad 2022; Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016; Shah 2010; Sharma 2017; Sunder 2016; Yéndge 2019; Yúsoff 2015, 2018).

Work in media and extraction should be compelled to question western epistemological frameworks that remain culpable in enabling and sustaining the planet's instrumentalization. The field promises an investigation into media's place within the consolidation of racialized capitalism as a

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worldmaking and environmental force, formed through the elemental separation of the 'human' from all that was/is considered 'natural' and 'less than' human. It commits to world views that lie beyond instrumental thought, outside constructions of land, animals and people as resource or property (Cahill 2019; Cahill et al. 2022; Chang et al. 2019; de la Cadena 2015; Fujikane 2021; Furuhashi 2022; Greenough and Tsing 2003; Jue and Ruiz 2021; Mani 2022; Muehlmann 2013; Past 2015; Porselvi 2019; Povinelli 2016; Riofrancos 2020; Sharpe 2016; Tsing 2015). In addition to raising foundational questions about who we are and what we know (i.e. about being and knowledge), the study of media and extraction reframes analytic objects and methods in cinema and media studies through the focus on materiality, reorientation of history and emphasis on media's environmental impacts.

A FOCUS ON MATERIALITY

Scholarship on the kinds of extraction that have been ontological to media technology and culture underscores the materiality of media. The goal is not to neglect the aesthetic and experiential dimensions of cinematic images or digital screens but to also heed to the geological and material histories that bring them to us. As is well known, the conversion of thermal and then fossil energy into mechanical energy across the long nineteenth century generated a technological and economic revolution. In the late nineteenth century, the discovery and harnessing of electricity alongside new developments in chemistry produced a second-stage industrial revolution. Cinema, radio and television developed from complex amalgams of metals, plastics, wood pulp, oil, silver and phosphorous, to be animated by electricity. In other words, the history of media is also a history of copper, rubber, cotton, silicon, lithium, coltan and more. It is a narrative of the energy sources and infrastructures that power media technologies; it is a story of the labour extracted to produce this materiality.

Beginning in the 1940s, a new 'digital' electronic information industry emerged using common and rare-earth elements, minerals, and metalloids. Old mining practices paved the way to new information economies. Today, computational technologies are reliant on the generation of electricity and built from rare-earth minerals on the backs of exploited labour in Africa and China. Digital and 'social media' produce trails of data that are manipulated by states, corporations and wealthy oligarchs, and the mining of information about people in service of commercial and political interests further degrade environments as property in the name of growth. 'Electronic waste' from consumer electronics and digital cultures multiply and are offshored to the Global South. In brief, attention to media and extraction highlights the materials, energy, labour, infrastructures, data and waste that make up media. (On some aspects of these histories, see: Alaimo 2016; Bennett 2010; Brodie 2020; Foster and McChesney 2014; Galili 2020; Grieveson 2018, 2021; Hockenberry 2018; Lovejoy 2019; Mukherjee 2020; Parks and Starosieski 2015; Pringle 2022; Qiu 2016; Redrobe and Scheible 2020; Starosielski 2015; Vaughan 2019; Zuboff 2019).

STILL UNLEARNING EUROCENTRISM

Recognizing media's links to the extraction of carbon energy reformulates global media studies. It forces a reckoning with the racial capitalism that underpinned the emergence of modernity, media and its energy sources and

raw materials. Media's relation to extraction consequently highlights genealogies frequently left out of world histories centred on Europe and the United States. It emphasizes once again the need for multi-sited frameworks of cultural, economic and spatial analysis, and the centrality of critical templates of global media originating from the Global South (Arboleda 2020; Ghosh 2019; Grosfoguel 2007; Jaikumar 2006; Jaikumar 2019; Mignolo and Escobar 2013; Neves and Sarkar 2017; Omer 2021).

The complex developmental histories of industrialization in China and India as recent energy societies remind us as well that we cannot reinstate the primacy of first extractors as the principal historical actors of consequence, eternally rendering the South into an object of extraction or end-consumer of West-centric globalization. Private, corporate and elite state actors in China, India, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Venezuela, Iran, Qatar and Russia join Euro-American hegemons of dirty energy, extracting coal, migrant and slave labour on the muscle of neo-fascist policies and nationalist populism. Attending to media's complicity in extractivist practices in this context means reframing our historiography in planetary terms. It means recognizing that if *any* nation's energy calculus and media interests are controlled by promoters of fossil fuels, then *all* are impacted sooner or later (see Hausfather and Friedlingstein 2022 for current global carbon emission levels). Modes of writing spatially decentred global media histories that trace our planet's mutually entangled energy stories are still being invented.

PREVALENCE OF 'PETROCULTURES'

Among the fossil fuels propelling modernization, oil's role in defining global and local economies, politics, public opinion, discourses and art since the late nineteenth century overlapped almost precisely with cinema's origins and international expansion (Jacobson 2020; Jacobson 2021; Szeman 2019; Szeman and Diamanti 2019; Szeman and Wilson 2011). Media as 'petroculture' has been handmaiden of the fossil fuel industries. Nascent scholarly work reckoning with the intertwined histories of extraction, energy, media and visibility underscores the pivotal role of sponsored and nontheatrical film and media, produced by extractive corporations imagining and shaping public and private infrastructures. (Dahlquist and Vonderau 2021; Damluji 2015; Grieveson 2018; Jekanowski 2018; LeMenager 2014; Polack and Farquharson 2022; Vasudevan 2021). As this scholarship shows us, boundaries between corporate films, state-sponsored documentaries and commercial entertainment blur when we follow their overlapping creative and administrative personnel, media technologies, visual images, affects and themes. Across formats, platforms and eras, cinema and mass media have sought to foster an extractive imagination or naturalize extraction as the presumptive backdrop of modern life (Grieveson and McCabe 2011a, 2011b; Peterson 2019, 2020; Peterson and Uhlin 2019).

Today, media's cultural framing of civilizational attitudes towards natural resources, technologies and environments is ubiquitous to the point of invisibility. Communicative technologies, digital platforms, discursive tropes, images, texts and sounds are the very matrix through which competing publics invest in or dismiss issues of energy use and environmentalism. Attention to media and extraction is not merely urgent but comes too late. It comes within sight of humanity crossing the precarious 1.5 degrees celsius threshold of global warming above pre-industrial levels.

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EXTRACTION AND THE END GAME

The end game for this field of inquiry is not simply to castigate media as an extension of technological and social modernity, nor bemoan the ills of industrialization and decry economic development as an unmitigated evil. Unequal access to electricity contributes profoundly to social inequities, so calling a stop to our rate of energy-dependent development is not a simple proposal. As the last few generations of humans whose actions in creating environmentally conscious modes of living could still tip a fragile balance in favour of our planet's geo- and biodiverse habitat, the rationale for thinking, researching and talking about media's extractive foundations and imaginaries is to construct an Otherwise. The world we have made can only be unmade and remade while we still have a chance.

Alternatives to an extractive lifestyle lie not merely in a fantastical future. There have always been, and continue to be, parallel and convivial ways of fostering a multi-species, shared and liveable environment. Our scholarship and pedagogy on extraction's role in film and media must ally itself with this collective endeavour, in resisting the depredations of global racial capitalism, state totalitarianism, and 'market socialism', which have pursued profit and power without regard to the planet, to other humans, and to humanity's fellow species. Beginnings in this horizon are made by those educating us on the extractive pasts of media and modernity, which must be written in order to enable different futures. Understanding this demands a radical revision not only of our scholarship and teaching but also of our everyday lives.

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