

POINTS OF REFERENCE:  
HUMANITIES CONTENT FOR MEDIA STUDIES  
by  
CAROLYN A. McDONOUGH

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2021

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**Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies**

by

Carolyn A. McDonough

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Matthew K. Gold  
Capstone Project Advisor

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Date

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Matthew K. Gold  
Program Director

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## ABSTRACT

Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies

by

Carolyn A. McDonough

Advisor: Dr. Stephen Brier

Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies is a proposed research method designed for students to help them analyze humanities content encountered in undergraduate media studies courses, specifically within commercial advertising. The project is informed by Critical Theory developed by The Frankfurt School as well as by contemporary digital humanities scholars. *Points of Reference* theorizes a digital pedagogical training tool as a browsing gallery that helps student separate humanities references embedded into media, and to contravene the dominance of Google Search.

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**Digital Manifest**

Carolyn A McDonough Capstone MA in DH Points of Reference Revision 2 May 2021.pdf

<file://PointsOfReference.warc> (website archive)

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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Points of Reference is a website located on the CUNY Academic Commons with an embedded timeline drafted with Knightlab Timeline JS. The content featured is audio visual entries of humanities art references uploaded via a Google sheet and published to the web.

[pointsofreference.commons.gc.cuny.edu](http://pointsofreference.commons.gc.cuny.edu) [please note: you must log in to the CUNY AC]

Knight Lab JS3 Timeline code is generated via:

[https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1mk7HTnX1qxExs-7UYSt2IK0MNEz2MX4jr8I5ujdvZNg&font=Default&lang=en&initial\\_zoom=2&height=650](https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1mk7HTnX1qxExs-7UYSt2IK0MNEz2MX4jr8I5ujdvZNg&font=Default&lang=en&initial_zoom=2&height=650)

## Introduction

A foundation in humanities content and the media literacy skills to de-code media messages in undergraduate media studies is often scant, hinting that there is no specific research method dedicated to analyzing humanities content that arises during such interdisciplinary study. The exploration of the myth of the "digital native" has also revealed to educators that digital media technology and media content analysis are not a given in students, often creating a double hurdle for undergraduates. The voids are filled by students defaulting to Google Search and Wikipedia for instant information, often conducting searches in the classroom, in "real time". The subsequent result is that the process of unlocking humanities content encoded in media texts in order to understand their mediated provenance, is bypassed or short-circuited, and the undergraduate student often comes up short in being able to understand both the humanities and media content. Therefore, humanities content encountered in media studies would benefit from a bridge to connect the two, because media studies is a field that focuses heavily on the theory, production, and analysis of media content, which can obscure meaning which is communicated symbolically, inferred through context, and subject/object positionality. The natural *locus* for the proposal of such a resource is a scholarly field that operates through relation, one that informs and is informed by allied disciplines<sup>1</sup> -- digital humanities (DH) -- especially as media studies precedes the development of DH by approximately thirty years and is itself a related, interdisciplinary meta-discipline of digital humanities. Prof. Ryan Cordell states that "'digital humanities will only remain a vital interdisciplinary movement' if it speaks self-consciously back to the legacy fields to which its practitioners also belong."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, "Introduction" *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Cordell, "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities" in *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 472.

For the purposes of this examination, humanities content is focused on visual art: painting, sculpture, and the visual arts, notably, visual popular culture of advertising images, memes, and viral video(s). In a broader context, the content of "traditional humanities" also encompasses architecture, literary works, photography, film, music, the performing arts (theater, opera, dance), and history. In the multi-media, interactive digital culture of the 2020's, traditional humanities content is often referenced and emerges as visual mashups, screen grabs, digital art, such as NFTs (non-fungible tokens), glitch art, street art and graffiti, social media audio/visual content, performance art, vocal/sound/audio and video "capture" or recording, sound design/art, as well as the digitization of traditional humanities content vis à vis virtual galleries, online museum collections, catalogues, and exhibitions (both "current" and archived), and AR (augmented reality) "experiences" that employ visual content.

*Points of Reference* seeks to address "foundational" humanities content encountered in undergraduate media studies courses, through a digital development of a pedagogical tool template: a prototype "browsing gallery" of selected content examples, particularly "canonical" visual references deployed in the meta-medium of advertising. Accessible through open-source platform/s, such as academic repository applications like the CUNY Academic Commons, this browse gallery could serve as a training tool and/or "lesson plan" site for students and teachers respectively. Situating *Points of Reference* within the digital humanities' "community of practice"<sup>3</sup> in which collaboration, experimentation, and exchange are at the core, is in keeping with the "DH" ethos.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Ramsay, "The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books." *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 115.

## A Proposed Undergraduate Research Method

In the philosophy of the historic educational reformer John Dewey, and as espoused by contemporary scholar Randy Bass, "one of the key elements in [Dewey's] pedagogy is the importance of student discussion and interaction with the instructor and with each other, which provides opportunities for students to articulate, exchange, and deepen their learning."<sup>4</sup> Media scholars Press and Williams also refer to Dewey's century-old ideas that still resonate today: "The emergence of a modern mass media had the potential to improve the conditions and operations of American democracy, if structured with those ends in mind, but [Dewey] worried that the particular shape of the American media system, governed primarily by commercial interests, would have a much more negative influence."<sup>5</sup> I agree that Dewey's concerns about commercialism are accurate to today's media culture and propose that an undergraduate media studies resource with a digital pedagogical focus could provide an alternative to commercialized yields of Google searching in critical moments of encounter with humanities content.

As digital humanities afford academic opportunities to build/make/create/produce as a form of scholarship in both teaching and learning, the thinking behind the development of the *Points of Reference* digital pedagogical tool is that of creating a resource to supplement students' standard default to using Google Search. While I realize that even attempting to provide an alternative to Google's voluminous (though uncurated and unvetted) algorithmic search yields is a very tall order, such a resource is worth proposing, especially as Google is now known to produce biased search yields that are among the more problematic data being generated today. Scholars such as Safiya Noble author of *Algorithms of Oppression*, have "raised critiques of

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<sup>4</sup> Randy Bass, "Engines of Inquiry: Teaching, Technology, and Learner-Centered Approaches to Culture and History." *Introduction to Engines of Inquiry: A Practical Guide for Using Technology in Teaching American Culture*. (Washington, D.C.: American Studies Crossroads Project, American Studies Association, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Press and Williams in McDougall, p.73.

Google [particularly Google Search] and other forms of information control...in hopes that people will consider alternatives."<sup>6</sup> DH scholar Miriam Posner has observed that "Google maps enshrines a Cartesian model of space that derives directly from a colonialist project of empire building."<sup>7</sup> The 21st century interconnected global community and economy call for more plastic and transparent models. On the authority of these observations, humanities content for media studies research would be served by having an alternative research resource to that of Google Search. Conversely, the exactingly curated individual entries on Wikipedia, while thorough and admirable are edited often, causing the content to be in a state of flux for the repeat visitor who regularly consults Wikipedia as a resource. Therefore, learning how to interact with the Talk pages of Wikipedia, to see and understand the history of an entry, is advisable in consulting Wikipedia. Students should be taught and encouraged to use Wikipedia in this way.

### **Media Studies and Digital Humanities**

Through the dual lens of media studies and digital humanities, therefore, I perceive an absence of and demand for a media studies resource tailored to humanities content, supported by an ancillary digital pedagogical tool, to inform and foster both humanities literacy and media literacy. As Julian McDougall argues, "Media studies has been too focused on 'big media' and not sufficiently concerned with how people attribute meaning to media, re-interpret (and in some cases remix) and 'map' media exchanges and meanings into their everyday lives."<sup>8</sup> This is especially relevant to undergraduates today who are studying in a multi-modal, transmedia environment, which approaches and recognizes media as a convergence of studying and making media, ushering in new literacies. Additionally, scholars/teachers of media studies are as trained

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<sup>6</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Miriam Posner, "What's Next: The Radical Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities in Debates in Digital Humanities" *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Julian McDougall, *Media Studies The Basics*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 155.

in the rhetorical concepts of the Aristotelian Appeals (ethos/pathos/logos) and models of reasoning and persuasion, for de-constructing the media texts of said 'big media' as we are in the theory, practice, and history of media. These methods hone critical thinking skills in quantitative and qualitative analysis and engagement with media texts. Like digital humanities, media studies is a community of praxis.

Within this transmedia "convergence culture" (Jenkins) today's undergraduates are not burdened with meanings in either media studies or humanities content. For example, there is less emphasis on the meaning of works of "high art" such as the Mona Lisa and David than there is on what these works have come to represent. Rather, students are often intuitively skilled in articulating the "meme" which is more relevant to today's cultural climate, but may not be aware of historical and artistic context. Undergraduates must be met where they are in perceiving, decoding, and attributing meaning to such humanities references when they arise in media content.

The specific example of this is my opening query to groups I've presented *Points of Reference* to, of an odd couple: "what do Iago and Plankton have in common?" This question resulted from a student who offered Plankton, a character in the popular cartoon "SpongeBob Square Pants", as a parallel "villain" to Iago in a Media Studies 101 class that I was teaching. While the humanist in me sees the value that an archetypal antagonist such as William Shakespeare's character of Iago should still be "taught", the digital humanist in me recognizes that Iago must now be more appropriately taught in relation to the digital technology environment and information we inhabit and against the backdrop of contemporary cultural references, rather than as an archetype handed down from the uninterrogated literary canon. Scholars Lash and Urry state that "many observers argue that, for a younger generation, media image saturation is now an accepted part of life..." and that, more specifically, we live in a

'semiotic society' or a 'culture society'".<sup>9</sup> *Points of Reference* seeks to integrate these contemporary modes of understanding.

Paradoxically, the myth of the "digital native" gives undergraduates an additional burden: the presumption that they're fully versed in digital technology by virtue of their post-millennial birth dates. Although the "digital native" generation has indeed been exposed to and educated with digital technology, and is immersed in a semiotic culture, the "digital native" label does not guarantee a comprehensive digital skill set among these students. Spotty digital literacy, in combination with little or no foundation in visual anthropology or "pre-existing visual texts"<sup>10</sup> becomes all too real in the classroom when students encounter humanities content in media texts. I experienced this while teaching Media Studies 101, a required critical thinking course for freshman at a large state university. Therefore, in response to Prof. Steve Brier's question posed in his essay in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, "Where's the Pedagogy?"<sup>11</sup> I believe there is pedagogical value in the concept that *Points of Reference* proposes of separating humanities content in media from media. Working with foundational humanities references through inspection in a browsing gallery, such as the Timeline on *Points of Reference*, rather than through algorithmic search, could help to better inform undergraduate students immersed in a semiotic media environment.

### **What is "media"?**

It is important for the purposes of this project to clearly delineate what I mean by media, in which the following two distinctions should be noted: 1) "media" will be used as a singular noun, although it is the plural of "medium", a usage that began in the 1960s with the first entry of "media" in the OED as a plural noun and Marshall McLuhan's influential and still relevant essay

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<sup>9</sup> Lash and Urry 1994, p. 277, in Paul Duncum, "Theorising Everyday Aesthetic Experience with Contemporary Visual Culture" in *Visual Arts Research* 28, no. 2 (2002): 9.

<sup>10</sup> Amir Hetsroni, "The Presentation and Reconstruction of Art in Advertising: A Content Analysis, A Survey of Creatives and a General Public Survey," in *Visual Arts Research* 31, no. 2 (2005): 39.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Brier, "Where's the Pedagogy? The Role of Teaching and Learning in the Digital Humanities," *Debates in the Digital Humanities: 2012*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

titled, "The Medium is the Message" rather than "The Media are the Message"; and

2) media studies takes into account ALL media, which range from the tablet and stylus of antiquity and the printed word, broadcast and wireless streaming, to text-based/audio/visual websites, photography, film, social media, algorithmic advertising, and the production of said media content. It is important to note that a Google search on the terms **media studies research methods** will yield various .edu web pages of resources, but not a stand-alone resource for humanities content encountered in media studies.

### **The Western Canon**

*Points of Reference* seeks to examine humanities content in the Western canon. However, *Points of Reference* is not anti-canonical, nor does it seek to reinforce the Western canon, as this would be counterproductive. Rather *Points of Reference* asks: HOW are we, as digital humanists and citizen scholars, to confront, and hopefully help to improve, temper, and perhaps even quell, at times, the cultural dominance of the Western canon globally, if we do not examine its content? In reflecting on the Western canon, we can, of course, consciously push back and deny its dominance, especially if new content is to be afforded space to be recognized. But can we also study the humanities and digital humanities by acknowledging, de-constructing, and interrogating the West's assertion of its cultural production as "humanity's content"? Furthermore, if one is not familiar with or is consciously shunning the canon, how are we to approach the intentional, provocative use of the Western canon in a contemporary medium as ubiquitous and powerful as advertising? How can we examine why and how the Western canon gets appropriated, if we do not account for its often sordid past/history/provenance?

I want to ponder the question posed by noted scholar Alan Liu when he spoke at the CUNY Graduate Center in February 2019: "Where is the cultural criticism in the digital humanities?" Humanities content encountered in media studies, particularly that which is disseminated through one of its major limbs, advertising, creates a unique opportunity to engage



in such cultural criticism, through which we may be able to begin to interrogate the Western canon. Herein lies the nexus between the application of my supporting theories and my proposal for a humanities content research method to intervene and consider critically the dominance of Google Search as a primary research method for undergraduates. "Google Search is an advertising company, not a reliable information company" Safiya Noble observes, not scholarship. As perhaps one of the greatest arms of capitalism to manifest in modern times, and one of the digital age's greatest venues of advertising, Google is itself a product of advertising, making it a prime tool in the culture industry.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Frankfurt School and *Points of Reference***

What would happen if we apply Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin's theories to Google as an example in action of *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1933) "Like art, advertising disseminates didactic codes of culture"<sup>13</sup> and acts as a snapshot of any given culture's "points of reference" within a given time. Presently, advertising now includes algorithmically derived, customized, and "targeted" advertising, and nascent formats for advertisers, offering digital media technologists, programming humanists, and activist scholars a venue to examine the uses and effects of these methods.

In *Critical Theory and the Mangle of Digital Humanities* Todd Presner states:

We can situate the flourishing of critical theory in the 1930's and 1940's with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research... Horkheimer and Adorno privileged notions of "negation" or "negative dialectics", because it is here that [they see] the power to interrogate and undo totalizing systems... Particularly for [Ernest] Bloch, Adorno, and Benjamin, the notion of futurity, especially the utopian or messianic idea, was a crucial part of the transformative possibilities that they imagined for critical theory.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Duncum, "Theorising Everyday Aesthetic Experience with Contemporary Visual Culture," in Hetsroni, "The Presentation and Reconstruction of Art in Advertising: A Content Analysis, A Survey of Creatives and a General Public Survey," *Visual Arts Research* 31, no. 2 (2005): 39.

<sup>14</sup> Todd Presner, "Critical Theory and the Mangle of Digital Humanities", ed. Patrik Svensson, *Between Humanities and the Digital*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 57.

I contend, then, that the Western canon is systemized via advertising which is laden, as Hetsroni concludes, "with psychosocial significance [through which] advertisements construct cultural conceptions."<sup>15</sup> While simultaneously recording and commenting upon the culture it is occurring within, advertising is also created by "the culture industry", disseminated via ever increasing media, and analyzed as a manifestation of both media and culture. Yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer conclude "culture is a paradoxical commodity. So completely is it subject to the law of exchange, that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used. Therefore, it amalgamates with advertising...Advertising is its [culture's] elixir of life."<sup>16</sup>

The application of Benjamin's theory is quite literal: mechanical reproduction, i.e., capitalist mechanistic reproduction of art (primarily via photography and film media) decays a work of art's "aura". Benjamin elaborates: "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space... [its 'aura' or] "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction."<sup>17</sup> **Flowerbomb** fragrance, launched in 2005 by Dutch fashion designers Viktor & Rolf (see p. 10) and its 2006 print advertisement campaign is the personification of Benjamin's essay's disturbing *Epilogue*:

"All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war [which Benjamin amplifies via the fascist apotheosis of war, citing Italian fascist Filippo Thomas Marinetti] 'War is beautiful'...and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way [as Benjamin again invokes the Fascist motto:] '*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*' ('let art be created though the world perish') which is the consummation [or, I would add, the corruption] of '*l'art pour l'art*' ('art for art's sake') [concluding his essay with the dire observation that humankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree...[that] it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hetsroni, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham, *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2001): 97.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham, *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2001): 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63-64.

In the coded language of advertising media text, a stunning fuchsia-violet-black ombre chiffon scarf hovers over the model's head and veils her face as she holds its signature grenade design **Flowerbomb** bottle at an angle near her nose and mouth while making direct eye contact with the viewer. It's as if the model is deciding in that moment whether to pull the "grenade bottle" pin out with her teeth and hurl it at the viewing audience. These visual design elements combine to convey the message of this luxury fragrance product as: buy and wear this scent to flirt with the ultimate, beautiful danger – even if it kills. Thus, a new motto, vis à vis, Benjamin rises out of the diaphanous visual message: **Aura destroyed, Art and War accomplished.**



Figure 1: Viktor & Rolf, **Flowerbomb** fragrance ad (Inez & Vinoodh, 2006)

With its aura destroyed, due to the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, no one work of art can any longer be heralded as a "masterpiece" within the "canon" of a culture (the Western hemisphere's or elsewhere) because culture itself is now also an "industry". Digital mechanical reproduction, such as the act of copy which serves as the basis for the Internet, therefore, annihilates the aura of every heretofore "canonized" work of art. Ultimately, a DE-reifying process of the Western canon is realized as the Benjamin-ian aura is damaged beyond repair by the work of art's exponential, digital reproduction.

Critical Theory, therefore, through its critique of the Western canon and Western culture's "cultural capital", is also a critique of capitalism and advertising as one of its most reliable engines. Advertising is indeed "critical" and essential for a product's capitalistic success and Critical Theory raises Benjamin's theory's relevance exponentially in the context of the global, digital media-scape.

### **Humanities content vs. humanity's content**

Humanities content is "charged" with stored narratives and fraught (as in, psychologically) with the best and worst of humanity's production. The "best" being the qualities of excellence, strength, power, brilliance, harmony (in the Platonic sense), and beauty. These qualities are also Renaissance humanist ideals, as the Middle Ages gave way to the 15th century re-birth of the Greco-Roman aesthetic. Equally, humanities content bears the weight of responsibility for the "worst": wars, slavery, racism, power struggles, dominance, colonialism, racism, and the shifting sands of cultural moods and mores due to privilege, oppression, and "othering".

With the dual goal in mind of assisting both humanities and media literacy, the leading voices of The Frankfurt School – Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin – are the theoretical underpinnings for *Points of Reference*. Their theories were eerily prescient in their day and are newly relevant today, as shown by the **Flowerbomb** ad. Indeed, in the preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, Horkheimer and Adorno state that "as a critique of philosophy, [*Dialectic*] does not seek to abandon philosophy itself." <sup>19</sup> Learning about and understanding the provenance of humanities content, particularly misattributions, is essential in interrogating the presumed meanings that underlay humanities content. Like the Western canon, advertising similarly contains "psychosocial significance [through which] advertisements

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<sup>19</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Preface to the New Edition (1969)" *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments* ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xii.

construct cultural conceptions."<sup>20</sup> While simultaneously recording and commenting upon the culture it is occurring within, advertising is also created by "the culture industry", disseminated via its media and analyzed as a manifestation of both media and culture.

### **Culture / Commodity: Classic / Modern in Advertising**

As Hetsroni has argued,

For many people, the most consistently recurring encounter with art is through...advertising (Duncum in Hetsroni) [and] while the typical school curriculum deals mostly with works that hang in museums, churches and reputed galleries, it is the popular commercial adaptation of these works to which most of the students are frequently exposed, and therefore, recognizing the way art is presented in advertisements can provide us [educators] with a way to reach out to students.<sup>21</sup>

As an avatar for the culture industry, media, and capitalism, advertising as a force, not only exerts itself on the consumer, but also on its own creative individuals, ad campaigns, and the products and brands it publicizes. "For a particular firm to phase out a current advertising practice constitutes a loss of prestige... Because the [capitalist] system obliges every product to use advertising [and as such] it has permeated the idiom – the 'style'" – of the culture industry. The assembly line character of the culture industry...is very suited to advertising."<sup>22</sup>

As a "classic" work of art, the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo da Vinci (ca. 1503) is rare in that it is one among a very few da Vinci paintings (approximately two dozen paintings exist attributed to the artist). By contrast, the image of her visage is not rare; rather, it is ubiquitous. As a collective society and global culture, we've grown accustomed to seeing her used worldwide in the "assembly line" way, touting everything from Italian restaurants, to beauty / dental products, and even the foremost American branded product, the beverage Coca-Cola. The hallmark mysterious smile has been repeatedly interpreted since the painting was completed. She is believed to be a woman named Lisa, the wife of a Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo,

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<sup>20</sup> Hetsroni, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Hetsroni, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 98.

who commissioned da Vinci to paint the portrait. Its prestige is largely due to the artist having been in service at the end of his life, during which he painted this work, to the court of Francis I, King of France. Bequeathing the *Mona Lisa* to the King, the painting eventually became part of the Louvre museum's collection in 1815 and is often referred to as *La Gioconda* (*La Joconde* in French) or the serene one, which is the feeling, or "aura" it has come to symbolize. Only when it was stolen and returned in 1911, however, did it become internationally recognized, launching its fame beyond the art world through the use of reproductions of the original to aid in the search for its recovery. This French newspaper headline touts that the painting was found:



Figure 2: *Le Petite Parisienne*, newspaper front page (1911)

Once images of the Mona Lisa were unleashed to the public, it became recognized as a "classic" and canonical work of art, as well as an overly referenced visual tool. It was mimicked in 1919 most notably by the Dada-ist Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* in which he painted a mustache on a facsimile of the *Mona Lisa*. Most undergraduate students, however, may not know the provenance, history, and anecdotes associated with the painting, and may only understand and interpret the image from their own contemporary perspective. *Points of Reference* could be consulted, therefore, to demonstrate the painting's overuse as a humanities reference in media

studies content, through the multitudinous examples of its use in advertising.

For example, the *Mona Lisa* serenely sells "classic" marble tiles in both English and Hebrew and McDonald's "classic" Big Mac sandwich through bacon draped on her shoulder. Two print ads on the next page show her 1) emblazoned on a luxury handbag in a window dressing, while a large-scale reproduction of her behind the handbags gazes down at the pricey items as her left eye coyly winks intermittently at us, and 2) stylized with fuller, "younger" hair courtesy of the Pantene brand of hair care and its "Timeless Renewal" product line.

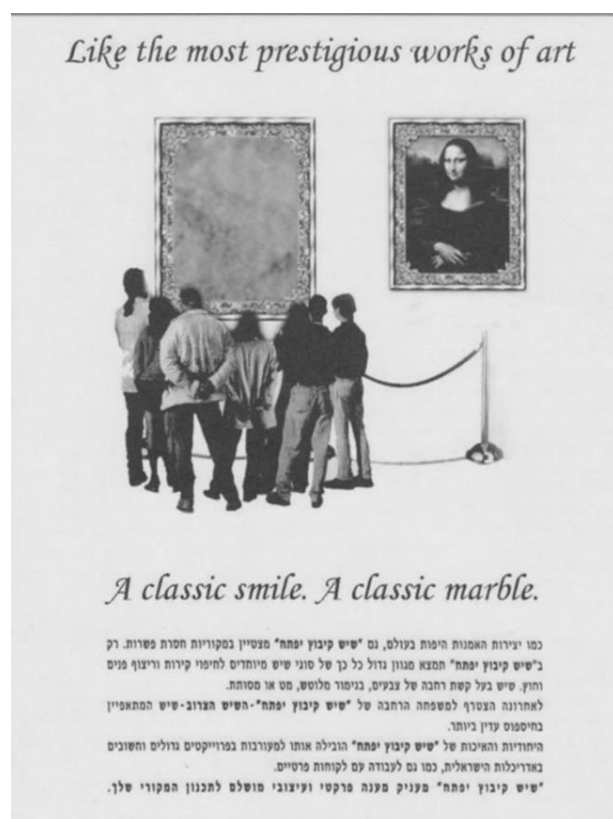


Figure 3: "A Classic Smile. A Classic Marble."  
Print ad (with ad copy in English and Hebrew)



Figure 4: McDonald's "A Classic. With bacon."  
Print ad, Nord DDB (2019)



Figure 5: Louis Vuitton store window, NYC, DA VINCI, The Masters Line Collection, designed by artist Jeff Koons for LVMH (2017)

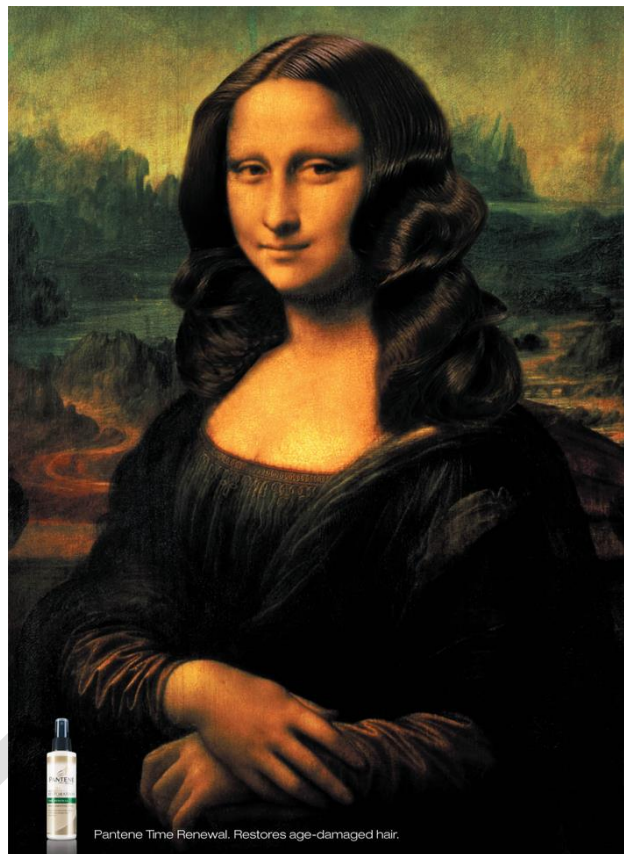


Figure 6: Pantene "Timeless Renewal" Print ad Grey, Melbourne AUS (2007)

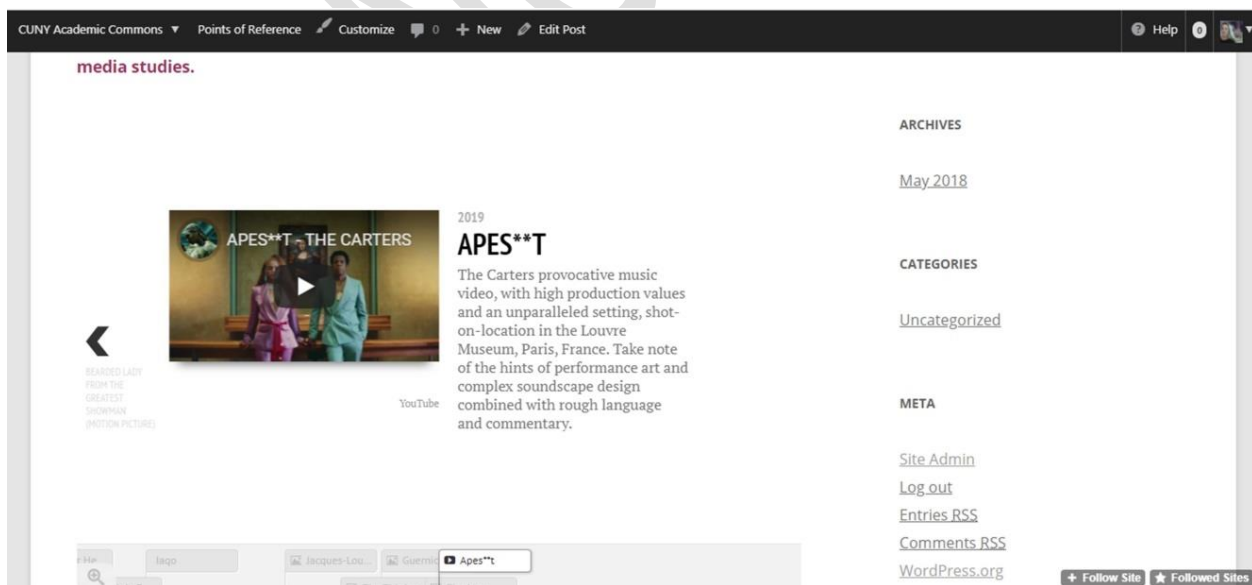


Figure 7: Screen shot from *Points of Reference* timeline, **Apesh\*\*t** video, the carters (2019)



Advertising and media content in the 2020's are situated in and synonymous with "the culture industry" and are also increasingly geared toward creating an "experience" even more than their former allegiance to branding. Given this fact, music videos (while not advertising, per se) have become another fertile ground for "experience making", disseminating political statements, and product placement. A notable example of contemporary visual culture that references the canon via the *Mona Lisa* is the Carters' (Jay-Z and Beyoncé) music video titled **Apesh\*\*t** from 2019 (see above screen shot). Flanking the painting, the Carters align themselves not only with the rarity of this work (in the context of da Vinci's *oeuvre*), but also with its universally recognized image. They assert their power and influence in having obtained a private audience with the painting while associating their creative work with the "aura" of the *Mona Lisa*, or perhaps seeking to erode it, à la Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction" anti-aesthetic. Equating their own iconic status with the Louvre's collection, the Carters perform among its renowned works of art throughout the video. *The Music Issue* of *The New York Times* weekly magazine noted that, "Beyoncé and Jay-Z know whose work has long been left out of the canon, and they won't let it happen to theirs" musically or visually, with the *Mona Lisa* in tow. In media studies terms, The carters' **Apesh\*\*t** video is, to quote Jenna Wortham, a "mixing up of codes and numerous unchained signifiers."<sup>23</sup> The effect on this work of art's aura is at once both reifying and de-reifying. The Carters acknowledge the *Mona Lisa*'s perceived worth and cultural value, her aura. The lyrics celebrate the couple's success in the music industry, with reference to other expensive status symbols, such as a Lamborghini Italian sports car. But the couple's appearance with the "her", reproduced on film/video and for replay by the media industry and its fans, erodes the aura.

### "Classic" Art Subsumed

Another example of a "classic" artwork is Michelangelo Buonarroti's statue of *David* (ca. 1501). The hyper-idealized form of the young, male physique, David's counterpoise stance

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<sup>23</sup> Jenna Wortham, "07", *The New York Times Magazine The Music Issue* (March 10, 2019): 29.

conveys a relaxed sense, yet his face is tense, in the moments before his epic battle and victory over Goliath. He holds the stone for his slingshot in his right hand. Michelangelo consciously chose to portray David nude, breaking from precedent, and to embody the moment before, rather than the victorious moment after the legendary battle, departing from the traditional Biblical narrative of David's triumph over Goliath. "The sculpture in fact [was] a highly coercive political object," Jerry Brotton argues. "The republic of Florence commissioned the work as a symbol of political liberty triumphing over tyranny (many Florentines saw David's defeat over Goliath as an allegory to Florence's victory over [its] tyrannical foes.)" <sup>24</sup>

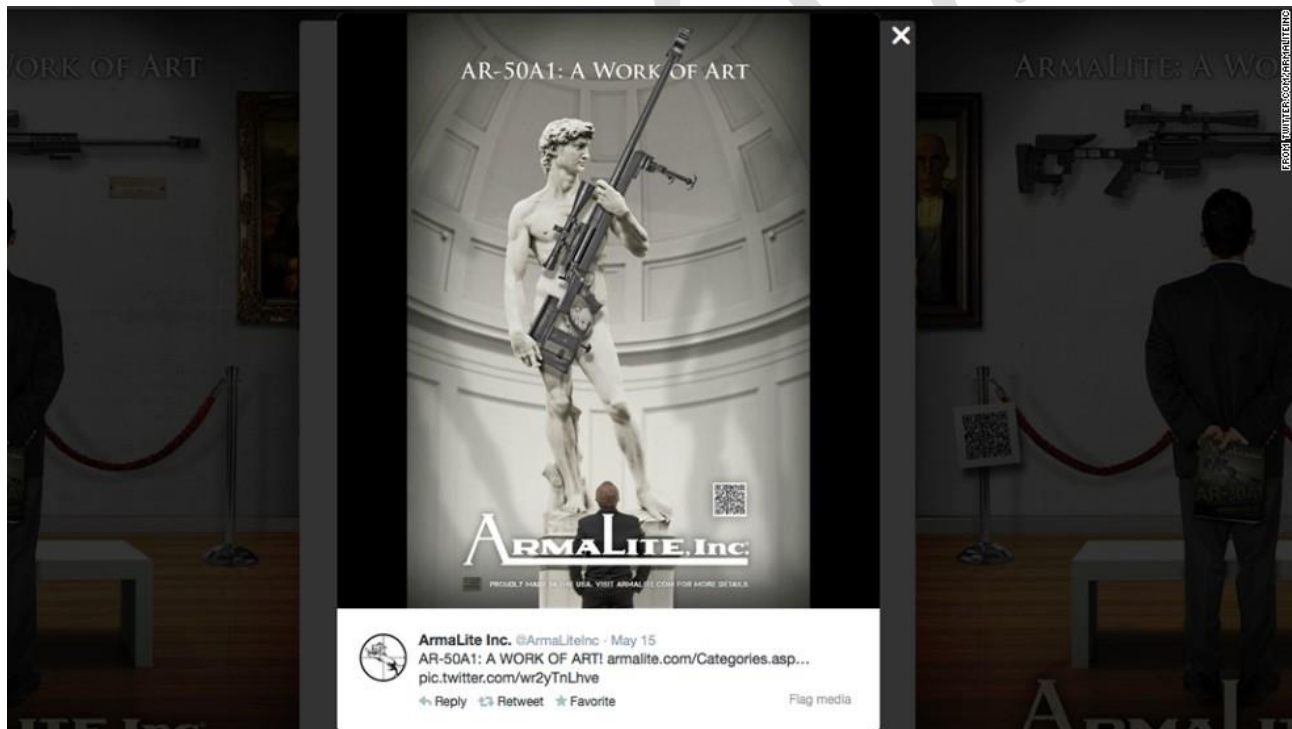


Figure 8: ArmaLite, Inc. "The Work of Art" ad (2014)

In a serious amalgamation of art and advertising, the use of *David* in an ArmaLite ad for an assault rifle touted as "a work of art" was used without permission. When ArmaLite tweeted the visual in March 2014 [Italy's Minister of Culture](#) threatened action. Both the ad and the tweet

<sup>24</sup> Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 18.

were pulled and deleted, but the "damage" was done because images of the tweet continue to exist online. Undergraduate media studies students who may not be familiar with Michelangelo Buonarroti's statue of *David* (ca. 1501) may not realize the enormity of this controversy, especially as gun culture is often romanticized and fetishized in American media culture. To equate David and a highly destructive weaponry as "a work of art" displayed behind velvet ropes was outrageous to many who glimpsed the ad.

Italy's Cultural Minister said at the time, "anyone who wants to use the statue of the David for 'promotional purposes'... has to represent the cultural dignity (of the work of art)."<sup>25</sup> Art critic G. Efrat is in agreement with Benjamin when the former contends that "featuring works of art in a commercial context spoils the pure nature of art."<sup>26</sup> Conversely, the semiotic meme aesthetic of current online culture is one of "deformance" rather than "performance" in art and challenges purist attitudes surrounding narrative perfection. The perceptual is an important aspect in both media studies and digital humanities and is factored into the analysis of content. Literary scholar Stephen Ramsay observes that "the notion of 'deformance' provides the critical framework for a discussion of conventional criticism as an activity dependent upon the notions of constraint [and] procedure..."<sup>27</sup>

Another recent use (or misuse) within the digital art *milieu* and digital art medium, references a work of art by Michelangelo Buonarroti again, specifically, the "sale" of his large medallion painting of the Holy Family, *Doni Tondo* (ca. 1505). Licensing such a work of art for reproduction and/or selling it can be quite lucrative. As the status symbol of the 2020's "culture industry" the "designer" NFT is akin to limited-edition works of art for bid and purchase but exclusively via cryptocurrency. Though limited to the select few who can afford to engage in this elite activity/hobby, NFTs serve as elite social media symbols which "verify" their owners.

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<sup>25</sup> "Italy Furious at Gun-Toting 'David' Statue in U.S. Rifle Ad", Time.com, March 9, 2014, accessed May 20, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> G. Efrat, "The definition of Art", 1976, in Hetsroni, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*, p. xi.

NFTs are not without controversy, however, and have been criticized for the expense in natural resources incurred in making them, as well as for their amateurish "look" reminiscent of the pixel art of Web 1.0. They require many days to render via fast servers that can retain large amounts of data, which, in turn, require enormous reserves of electrical power. They can be expensive to acquire due to these overhead costs, especially when made by a sought-after designer/artist. and perhaps even hypocritical to transact by the many claiming to support sustainable ventures. The priciest have sold for \$91 million in the evolving cryptocurrency marketplace as NFTs are increasingly becoming a type of "investment 'statement' art" [my phrase] while maintaining a cachet as a disruptor within traditional foreign exchanges and global stock markets. They've also unfortunately given rise to new platforms for scam artists.

In 2021, recognizing and seizing upon an irresistible fundraising opportunity, the director of the renowned art museum, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy, sold the rights to reproduce Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* as an NFT. The Uffizi made what art and finance experts consider a meagre profit from the sale after costs (the equivalent of 70,000 Euros). The Italian government responded in summer 2022 by first halting, then banning sales by museums of such works of art for "minting" as NFTs. While a country like Italy vigilantly guards its cultural heritage, it is worth noting that art critic Philippe Daverio compared the US ArmaLite ad featuring *David* to "tongue-in-cheek images of the Mona Lisa with a moustache [as in the aforementioned *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919]. Certain cultural icons belong to everyone and no one; to humanity in general."<sup>28</sup> When teaching the kind of multi-layered content the ArmaLite ad employs, humanities references and media/cultural/societal issues all arise. Therefore, the ArmaLite use case could serve as a "lesson plan". For example, David and his skill with the slingshot embody the ultimate "weapon" already. This begs the questions: Why would he need to tote such

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<sup>28</sup> Lizzy Davies, "Michelangelo's David pictured holding rifle in American advert, to Italy's fury", The Guardian, March 9, 2014, accessed April 16, 2021.

additional weaponry? Does the ArmaLite ad really suit the allegory? One can perceive that David's skill reigns supreme and the demand for "infallible" fire power to ensure "victory" is excessive. Examining either weapon, assault rifle or hand-held sling, invites a fuller teacher/student discussion into the media studies concepts of reading media texts, deconstructing an ad, and "messaging" in media. Here is proposed lesson plan:

<p><b>Media Studies 101</b>  <b><u>Humanities References in</u></b>  <b><u>Media Studies Content</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>Reading Media Texts</u></b>  <b>Deconstructing a Visual Advertisement</b></p>
<p><b>Part I:</b>  <b>Who/What/Where/When/Why</b></p>	<p><b>Name of Ad Campaign: "The Work of Art"</b>  <b>Company: ArmaLite, Inc.</b></p> <p>Who, i.e., the subjects shown in the ad. What is the ad for?  Where is the setting of the ad? When is/are the time period/s?  Why was this ad created? What is the ad's purpose?  For example, is it selling a product, service, lifestyle, "dream" or aspirational quality ("rich", "thin", "powerful", "popular")</p>
<p><b>Art Direction→</b></p>	<p>-What production values are employed? For example:  -Light/shadow? Color? Which colors? <u>How</u> is color used?  -What is the quality of the photography or graphic art? Example: Organic? Polished/Slick? Raw? Youthful? Retro/nostalgic?  -Is there a slogan? Is a work of art or known person used in the ad? If yes, research these and elaborate on your findings.  Is there a logo? How obvious is the ad's branding?</p>
<p><b>Part II:</b>  <b>Analysis</b></p>	<p>-What are some phrases to describe the ad content? Example: "Female-identifying athlete likes fast cars" = a message like "female-identifying athletes like taking risks and therefore invest their hard-earned money with ABC Financial"  -What qualities are being conveyed by this ad? For example: Fear? Safety? Love? Connection? Elitism? Wealth? Mystery?  -How would you interpret the ad's MESSAGE?  -How would you SUMMARIZE the ad's MESSAGE?</p>
<p><b>Objective</b></p>	<p>-Does the ad achieve its MESSAGE through the above?</p>

It should be noted that a recent business headline on the social media companies Instagram and Meta (parent company of the former) may have provided an inadvertent bell weather for the public's interest in the NFT and its Web 3-based technology. In mid-March 2023, after just ten months online, Meta shut down a pilot program to Instagram users through which it offered DIY limited edition NFTs, banking on the loyalty of their users to create "collections" of self-styled NFTs as well as the common adoption of NFTs. Social media giants are now revising such plans.

The above business news speaks to another *Points of Reference* lesson plan: "humanities-content-in-the-news". Two examples are the continuing debate over monuments in public places and the recent accusation of Michelangelo's *David* as "pornography" by parents of a charter school in Tallahassee, Florida, after the statue was shown to a sixth-grade class as part of an approved unit of study. The latter example has Italian nationals, primarily citizens of Florence (the city where *David* is displayed) both shocked and baffled. Today's Florentines would be wise, though, to recognize that the artistic choice of Michelangelo to portray *David* nude was controversial in its day. In reacting to Tallahassee, Florentines could also be reminded of the infamous fig leaf campaign of Pope Innocent X (1644–1655) who ordered all Roman statues *phalli* to be removed, which permanently altered these works of art, which were then "repaired" through the placement of fig leaves over the areas of removal. Even during a papacy as recent as that of Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013) there were calls from him to cover *David*'s anatomy. Not surprising given that the sacred/profane dichotomy of the Vatican's orthodoxy vs. the Italian state's secular humanism is a well-established tension in Italian art and culture.

The Florida charter school's principal was ultimately ousted by the Board and forced to resign her position. Responding to this, the Mayor of Florence @DarioNardella tweeted: "Mistaking art for pornography is simply ridiculous. Art is civilisation." The Tallahassee use case reveals hazy cultural memory among Italian citizens and the blurred lines of Italian cultural values. As one of the oft used humanities references found in media studies, *David*

created a controversy in an American school via a sixth-grade curriculum while also revealing the historically repressed American attitude toward the nude human form. Such events invite undergraduate discussion about nudity/pornography in American culture and global culture, as well as an examination of international journalistic media attention paid to an American news-cycle event infused with moralistic and political overtones, because the two are linked in the U.S.

Humanities content as described above and throughout this analysis also speaks to the materiality of culture, which we cannot and must not ignore. "The more we contest history, the greater the sense to memorialize. There's a territorialization, a staking of MY history rather than a shared past. Revisionism is toxic because it erodes the shared foundation for conversation. This is partly ontological, and we should all beware that the word **monument** itself, from the Latin *monere* which means to warn."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, I advocate staring closely at the Western canon, and any cultural canon that apotheosizes certain works while simultaneously excluding prospects, with the intention of creating a new paradigm. It may very well be that media is the new global canon, and is already staring directly at us in its many visual formats and digital guises.

### **A Proposed Digital Pedagogical Browsing Gallery**

Within the mediated environment, I propose a prototype [Points of Reference](#), which exists on the CUNY Academic Commons as a WordPress blog (*n.b.* you must be logged in to the AC to access) format with the Knight Lab JS3 plug-in Timeline feature. (Paradoxically, this plug-in requires the use of a Google Sheet template to create and add entries and to build the timeline. I'm aware that, as I critique the use of Google Search in the classroom, the use of another Google product in the prototype, though useful and convenient, is a drawback). The entry content was entered on the spread sheet with digital media and interactive assets such as embed video codes. By publishing the Google sheet to the web, and entering the resulting URL

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<sup>29</sup> Panelist, "Monuments of the Future: Alternative Approaches," Panel, American Social History Project, the Graduate Center, CUNY, Feb. 6, 2019.

into Knight Lab's dedicated webpage, a Timeline code is generated which is then entered in the WordPress editor, and the JS3 Timeline appears with multimedia content.

The images of the *Points of Reference* blog timeline browsing gallery attempt to be a platform tailored to humanities content with a preliminary "sample set" of humanities examples that might be encountered in media studies vis à vis advertising or media content. This sample set employs relational connections between references, even disparate ones such as the previously cited Iago/Plankton pairing. The proposed digital pedagogical training tool shows often cited content like the *Mona Lisa*. Beginning with *Nike: The Winged Goddess of Victory*, a 2nd century B.C.E. Hellenistic sculpture, and concludes with a video journey through one of the world's most visited museums of art, the Louvre (located in the enormous *Palais du Louvre*) in which this same statue resides. One of the first encounters within the museum's art collection for visitors is indeed this very *Nike*, and my hope is that the viewer will take the time to reflect on the image both as a singular object and in the context of a contemporary music video. In another relational, thematic pairing, I propose the 18th century Japanese work on paper titled *Cracked Ice* as a supplement to the mend-bending Renaissance linear perspective diagram. Therefore, *Points of Reference* currently stands as an idea and example of a resource that a professor or student(s) could build together or individually, or build upon per a lesson plan, as humanities references arise in media studies courses. The advertising that employs such references is encountered actively in the classroom and the culture at large, while the humanities content in the Western canon is static. *Points of Reference* could be used as a dedicated space to separate or distinguish them from each other. For this reason, I didn't include the advertising content examples from this paper on the *Points of Reference* timeline browsing gallery, and the timeline in no way suggests a history of humankind or art. Rather, it is an assemblage of images to ponder that anyone can create and expand upon, and which I hope can serve as a starting point.



On a closing note of reflection, the idea for *Points of Reference* came to me quietly in Spring 2018 during a freeform writing exercise in a course at The Graduate Center CUNY that I was taking for credit toward both the MA in Digital Humanities and Certificate in Interactive Technology and Pedagogy. I was simultaneously immersed in the core readings of the educational theorists and found resonance in Dewey's constructivist theory, and developing a "constructivist" i.e., structural framework for the *Points of Reference* digital component: linear and historiographical. This reflects my undergrad training in History at Vassar College and the academic emphasis on primary sources taught there. However, the entries on the timeline are intended to be read as media texts relationally and not merely comparatively or chronologically. The emerging approach to the imparting of knowledge from the "collections of memory" which house, or, one could say, imprison, the artifacts of Western culture's humanities is contextual, experiential, and relational. Having also studied museology in my Senior Seminar at Vassar and applied that course of study to my post-grad Fellowship to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy, where I eventually came to assist its then Director, Dr. Philip Rylands (colleague to noted curator Fred Licht, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's famed Director Thomas Messer, and the Sistine Chapel's Lead Restorer, Paul Schwartzbaum, all of whom I studied with in Venice) I can attest to the seismic shift occurring in art and cultural institutions worldwide. Museums are shedding the shackles of Enlightenment-era encyclopedic knowledge, cataloguing, and the memorization of "facts" amid and in response to the current calls for the de-colonization of institutions, repatriation of artifacts, and reparations for slavery, the Victorian-era's "cabinet of curiosities" and passive viewing behavior (a mode of being that still persists today even while touring exciting "blockbuster exhibitions") must evolve and yield to an accessible, inclusive, contextual, dynamic, interactive, and relational model quickly, in both theory and practice, in order to stay relevant and alive in the post-pandemic woke era and beyond.

**"Art is the fingerprint of a species becoming modern."** *The Great Human Odyssey*, NOVA/PBS (2016)

## Appendix of Website Content: Links and Knight Lab JS3 Timeline

I.

[pointsofreference.commons.gc.cuny.edu](http://pointsofreference.commons.gc.cuny.edu)

**Home page:** Photo, MA in DH capstone 2021 Iteration 2, New Media Lab Presentations + Capstone and Welcome!

Modernity at the Colosseum, photo by ©Carolyn A. McDonough 2023 All Rights Reserved

Points of Reference: Humanities Content for Media Studies

New Media Lab Powerpoint presentation, Points of Reference Lab, Fall, 2019

New Media Lab Powerpoint presentation, Points of Reference Lab, Spring, 2019

**Humanities Content Sample page**

II.

**Points of Reference Multimedia Timeline for Humanities Content Encountered in Media Studies  
Knight Lab JS3 Timeline entries:**

**Nike: The Winged Goddess of Victory or Nike of Samothrace** ca. 200-190 BCE

**The Pantheon** (*in situ*) ca. 27 BCE - 128

**Castel Sant'Angelo** (*in situ*) ca. 123 - 139

**Linear Perspective Diagram** 20th century rendering

**David** (artist: Michelangelo Buonarotti) ca. 1501-1504

**Mona Lisa** (artist: Leonardo da Vinci) ca. early 1500's

**Cracked Ice** (artist: Maruyama Okyo. Example of a perspective diagram) Late 18th-century

**The Thinker** (artist: August Rodin) 1888/1904

**Femme Accroupie** (artist: Camille Claudel) 1885

**Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps** (artist: Kehinde Wiley) 2005

The Carters **Apesh\*\*t** (embedded video) 2019

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Carolyn A. McDonough is a MA in Digital Humanities graduate of the Graduate Center, CUNY (degree completion June 2021). She holds a first MA in Media Studies from The New School and a BA in Renaissance Studies from Vassar College.

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