Defying the News: New Aesthetics of “Truth” in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT Aesthetics manifest a rationally ambiguous category of meaning that encompasses both relational and representational dimensions of communication. In this paper, I argue that (1) truth-claims have ontological consequences bound in the social commitments and obligations generated through expressive choices and interpellated audiences; (2) ontological implications entangle discourses of “truth” in the constitution of knowledge in ways that extend beyond rational argumentation into aesthetic experience; and (3) a reinterpretation of Kantian aesthetics offers a framework for understanding how aesthetic experiences influence the organization of relations of power.

KEYWORDS Aesthetics, Discourse analysis, Journalism, Philosophy

Introduction

The enigma of aesthetics is surprisingly under-examined in the field of communication studies. Broadly speaking, aesthetic experience encompasses the non-rational and yet meaningful attributes of cultural expression. It is, in a sense, our first encounter in culture, the experience before we make experience into meaning with systems of understanding and rationality. But aesthetic experience is not, as some suggest, the antithesis of knowledge. The fine and performing arts have rich traditions that are not (at least, not usually) considered insane or false. We may be less comfortable speaking in aesthetic terms when it comes to discourses like journalism or science—which may themselves view aesthetics as a contaminant—but this is an oversight rooted in genealogical near-sightedness.

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My interest in aesthetics stems from the political tension generated by truth’s inseparability from power. What has been obscured in the careful segregation of discourses of “truth” are the aesthetics at work in producing epistemic legitimacy, and these in turn I suggest offer a way to encounter the genealogical distress of having to resist “truth” in order to challenge relations of domination.

In the networked and spectacular condition of late-stage capitalism—or whatever stage we might be in—increasingly dense and ubiquitous flows of cultural materials manifest in a communicative milieu where pre-cognitive states of perception appear to be growing in importance within procedures and “technologies” of public knowledge and perceptions of social reality (Massumi, 2002). There is, some suggest, an “aesthetic turn” to be accounted for that has coincided with the erosion of unmitigated faith in absolute forms of “truth” in Western thinking (Shusterman, 1989). But even with these undeniable shifts in orientation, there remain certain deeply rooted divisions between questions of truth, power, and communication on the one hand, and questions of aesthetics, emotion, and enigma on the other. My argument in this paper addresses this tension in two ways: first, by asserting that the pre-cognitive event of aesthetic experience extends well beyond traditional notions of beauty and emotion to encompass rationally ambiguous categories of experience that emerge from both the relational and symbolic dimensions of communication; and, second, in making the claim that by overlooking these categories of meaningfulness, we overlook an important opportunity for understanding in clearer terms how power moves through, organizes, and is organized by communicative acts.

I should clarify at the outset that when I refer to “truth” what I mean is a truth-claim: an intention on the part of an author/creator to represent what they believe to be “indexical and referential presentations of the world” (Zelizer, 2004a, p. 187). My inquiry is not concerned with the fidelity of that representation to an extant “real” world, but rather with how these intentions are realized through communicative acts, and in particular, the ways in which certain kinds of rationally ambiguous experiences fundamentally inform textual outcomes intended to be true. As such, my analysis is primarily concerned with understanding strategies engaged in the creation of truth-claims (that is, and not with their effects), and more specifically, truth-claims within the family of texts and textual practices in the genre journalism—generally speaking, discourses in popular culture for both producing (through professional practices and procedures) and for recognizing public “truth” (for example, by vigorously differentiating between news genres and entertainment).

Journalism is regularly described as being in a state of crisis in Western economies. Sometimes overlooked in these accounts is that changes are not only reshaping media economies and professional conventions, but they are influencing public perceptions and expectations of “truth” in popular media. John Hartley (2000) calls it a shift towards a “redactional society,” where collective understanding of public knowledge increasingly allows for the ongoing critical evolution of truths in iterative rather than finite cultural procedures (Jones 2009). Within this increasingly decentralized environment of cultural production, some kinds of traditional boundaries are softening, for example, between news and entertainment, documen-
tary and fiction, truth and rhetoric, science and art, etc. (Bird, 2009; Lanham, 2006; Shields, 2010). What is at stake in the perception of “crisis” is the future of public knowledge and implications of its demise for democratic accountabilities. A better understanding of how aesthetic experiences influence truth-claims helps to explain why some of these changes can occur (for example, why the categorical distinctions between fact/fiction and news/entertainment can be blurred) without precipitating intellectual and political collapse.

In this article, I hope to rekindle the conversation about aesthetics among communication and journalism scholars. My discussion is organized around three main points. First, I take the position that traditional journalism’s quasi-monopoly over truth in popular culture has generally ignored the ontological implications of its own engagement and in particular the ways language and communication instantiate social identities and social relations. These categories of experience are not easily accounted for within the rational, provable domain of epistemic legitimacy, and yet they fundamentally inform the “epistemic rituals” delineating knowledge from its other; i.e., folly, falseness, madness, or what Foucault (1986) called “subjugated knowledges” (see also White 1973). As meaningful and yet extra-rational experiences, I argue that they reflect a relational aesthetics at work in the communication of truth-claims, and further, that they can be accounted for within a larger aesthetic framework (based on a reinterpretation of Kantian aesthetics) that also encompasses paradoxical modes of apprehension and conceptual indeterminacy.

Within the meaning structures journalists use to describe the world, journalists embed notions of integrity and with them they and their audiences have opportunities to understand who they are and how they belong. Shared identities reflect the exemplary conditions of relationality that authors/creators embed into texts and that audiences accept through practices of understanding. These identities represent a fundamental paradox at work in human experience: that “being” is derived from two contradictory states-of-affair; (1) an absolute distinction between self and other, and (2) the immediate and contrary elimination of such a distinction through the shared event/performance of understanding. It is not a question of the fidelity of meaning, but rather an expectation of understanding, or a belief that it has occurred. These contrary elements of communication can be understood as aesthetic experience. Aesthetics is the structure (at least one of the structures) of meaning through which legitimacy of experience and eventualization occurs.³

Making (up) the news: Journalism’s ontological performances
Journalism wants to tell the “truth.” It is the genre in popular culture—and has been for hundreds of years—for making claims whose relevance is based on an assertion of accurately representing states-of-affair in the world (Zelizer, 2004a). But the “truth” is not what it once was; and while many or even most communications and cultural studies scholars have embraced frameworks that reject positivist underpinnings for “truth,” few have directed such critical inquiries at the discourses of journalism themselves. This is an oversight Barbie Zelizer (2004a) attributes to exactly the epistemic tensions that arise between absolute and contingent understandings of knowledge.
It is, fortunately, a lacuna for which a resolution is in sight:

Recognizing that there is a reality out there and that, in certain quarters, truth and facts have currency does not mean letting go of relativity, subjectivity and construction. It merely suggests yoking a regard for them with some cognizance of the outside world. And surely cultural studies is strong enough these days to do that. (Zelizer, 2004b, p. 114)

Just such a reconciliation has been proposed, at least pedagogically, in a Canadian context by Skinner et al., who suggest an approach to journalistic “truth” that focuses on “the methodologies, languages, technologies, cultural assumptions, economic imperatives, and literacy systems through which it is sought and represented” (2001, p. 346). In other words, the suggestion is that reconciliation between absolute and contingent forms of truth in a journalism context is to be found in the procedures and practices of “truth.” Aesthetics—or perhaps more accurately stated, the handling of aesthetic experience—I suggest, is one of those practices.

In The Order of Things, Foucault (1966/2008) described what Hayden White (1973) calls “epistemic rituals,” changes in orientation in the collective impulse toward meaning in Western thought that have epistemic consequences. These transformations emerge through discourse—the changing social, cultural, economic, and intellectual criteria and events wherein the conditions of possibility for knowledge are considered, established, and played out. It is within these discursive formations that the boundaries and controversies of public knowledge are negotiated through relations of power, with some experiences meeting the criteria for knowledge and others being relegated to the non-knowledge categories of folly, falseness, or madness. The rendering of knowledge—its visibility and recognition as such—depends on excluding something else. “Speaking,” as White puts it, “is a repressive act, identifiable as a specific form of repression by the area of experience that it consigns to silence” (1973, p. 32). Discourse formation produces two realms: that which can be known—knowledge, truth, et cetera—and that which lacks the requisite criteria to be called meaningful, or what Foucault called “subjugated knowledges” (1980, p. 82).

The historical contingency of these categories is all but a banal observation. There are at work, in Foucault’s account, “in every society” overarching procedures of control, selection, organization, and distribution of knowledge—modalities of inclusion/exclusion, on the one hand, and internal modalities of classification, order, and distribution on the other (1986, p. 149). Within the categories of inclusion, there are two overarching principles in Western terms: reason and truth, along with their limiting conditions of folly and falseness (Foucault, 1986). It is my contention that aesthetic experience rests on the threshold of the rational through procedures of definition, criteria, and rituals of prohibition, or in other words, that aesthetic experience plays a foundational role in the determination of what does and does not count as knowledge.

With this in mind, I return to the question of truth-claims in journalism. Even today and despite its controversies, a central mode of apprehension at work in professional journalism is the notion of objective truth in news-making. The advent of modern professional forms of news in the late 19th and early 20th centuries linked objective credibility with a “unity of method rather than aim,” in the words of Walter Lippman
(quoted in Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 83; see also Tuchman, 1978), an approach that emphasized a discipline of verification and organization of evidence in the pursuit of positivist fact and which encouraged a profession of scientists rather than publicists. As Stephen Ward (2004) points out, the “kind” of truth sought is inseparable from the methods of its inquiry because its qualities are the presuppositions to which certain avenues of investigation will necessarily proceed. In this sense, objective truth “regulates” its methods of inquiry because it necessitates (and dictates) them. The goal of objectivity “serves as a real-world constraint on our other goals” in the pursuit of journalistic truth (Ward, 2004, p. 272).

Objectivity in journalism can have two very different orientations: (1) factuality, and (2) impartiality, each with its own procedural emphases (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Hackett, 1984; Westerstahl, 1983). The difficulty in extracting either goal from the work flows and conventions that produce them has prompted some observers to describe journalism in performative terms: an attempt to “persuade readers that what it describes is real,” and in successfully doing so, transform interpretations into truth and “into a reality the public can act upon” (Broersma, 2010, p. 26). These “performances” work in part to conceal epistemological shortcomings through conventions, such as through the use of genre (to suggest mimetic accuracy), framing, and assumed facts (Broersma, 2010; Tuchman, 1978). Gaye Tuchman calls the use of objectivity in the newsroom a “strategic ritual” designed to protect work against criticisms and stoppages in work flow (Tuchman, 1972). Conventions and styles present structures for describing reality that transcend the individuals involved and the stories told to the extent that they translate from one person to the next as part of the experience of “truth.” The commonly employed analytical concept of media frames, for example, only makes sense if what is communicated provides recognizable cognitive resources for an audience to help them retrieve information from texts (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). The importance of the relationship between news-maker and audience manifested in the intended to-be-shared discursive space is not to be underestimated. Objectivity, Ward claims, was “a rhetorical invention that emerged in response to a new journalism audience relationship—the journalist as impartial mass informer” (2004, p. 33). The relationship was central to the method, a relationship based on trust that helped to overcome epistemic shortfalls (Ward, 2004). Frames, again as an example, are a way of organizing shared values, but they do it in such a way that preferred readings (while recognizing the potential for resistant decodings) more often than not are the ones adopted by audiences (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Even Fiske (1987), who argues that the audience’s disruptive powers of interpretation make television something of a “semiotic democracy” (p. 236), acknowledges what he calls strategies of “constraint” (p. 296) used by news-makers to interrupt and guide their viewers perceptions. “News controls the multivocality of the real,” he writes, “by narrative structure and a careful selection of which voices are accessed” (1987, p. 295).

One might rightly wonder which comes first, the journalist’s frame or its meaningful reception on the part of audiences, and herein lies one of the enigmas of “truth” in mediated forms. The participative quality of an audience’s interpretive experience
shapes both content and relational attributes of a journalist’s work in (at least) two ways: first, in that the journalist addresses someone, an audience; and second, in that the composition of the text holds within it traces of this consideration (frames, for example). The news story in whatever form (print, radio, televisual, et cetera) is an event—a performance—that arises when authorial expression encounters audience reception, not unlike the interpretive performance described by Hans Gadamer (1975/1989). In this encounter, the distinction between object (news/art) and subject (audience) necessarily disappears. The structures and traces of whom an author thinks she is addressing in a cultural text point to a middle ground or horizon where she, as news-maker, intends and expects the event of understanding to occur.

In Robert Hackett’s widely cited critique of objectivity and the problems with balance and distortion as regulating principles in journalism, he argues for an ideological understanding of news as epistemologically incapable of objectivity but well-suited for expressing “concrete social relations” (1984, p. 238). Content analysis in this account suffers from an inability to identify underlying structures of relations between denoted symbols and how they come to be shared between news-makers and audiences, a weakness addressed in part, for example, by a framing analysis that looks for ideological foundations for understanding. Hackett argues that ideology in news acts to naturalize social relations into “common sense” about the world we live in. It is through the rules of impartiality and balance that these naturalizations take place, and not, as is traditionally thought, in their lapse and absence. Interpellation invites the viewer “to accept a certain position in order to read or decode the message” (Hackett, 1984, p. 250). Together with realism—the performance of the real that is essential to news legitimacy—interpellation transforms social relations of power into de facto forms of “truth.” We are confronted by a discursive process that seems to have more in common with magic than empiricism, and black magic at that, if we adhere to the belief that the news should not manufacture truth. But such a fear overlooks in critical ways the nature of language itself and how social identities and relations are instantiated in its very make-up. Part of journalism’s naïveté is its refusal to acknowledge the ontological implications of its communicative tasks.

Beneath the surface challenges of making “truthful” representations about the world is a relationship between language and consciousness that is foundational to human experience. “Intention” is the property of directing mental states at states-of-affair in the world; i.e., events of the mind that depend on an orientation toward objects or events in the world (Searle, 1980). “All intentional states consist of a representative content in a psychological mode,” writes Searle (1980, p. 43). That is, they are mental states that allude to conditions of satisfaction oriented toward the world. Intentionality and intentional relations are arguably at the root of all human behaviour (Anton, 1999; Heidegger, 1982). Which is not to say—and this is the salient point for present purposes—that meaning is derived solely from a process of internal perception of the world, then translated through external language. Intentionality vis-à-vis Heidegger describes human experience as recognizable only through the temporalizing necessities and constituting properties of language (Anton, 1998, 1999; Moran, 2000). “Being” in the world emerges through language; it is a tool found external to
“being” used to disclose the world, but also that which constitutes the disclosure of “being.” “Said most simply, we only make assertions about phenomena already forehad in some way” (Anton, 1999, p. 44). We do not encounter objects isolated and on their own, but rather we encounter objects always in relationality and within contextual wholes. Language is the medium through which we encounter a world in which we already exist and that is transformed by our presence.

To break this down still further, the foundations of human meaning and communication are rooted in representations of conditions of satisfaction; that is, in communicating belief, intention, and/or desire (Searle, 2008, 2010). In its most basic form, an uttered sound meets the conditions of satisfaction for the intention to make the sound; i.e., the word’s meaning is the condition of satisfaction imposed on the sound—for example, a sublingual grunt made to alert a friend of impending danger. But as a symbol, this condition can only be met if my audience shares this intention. These are “conventions,” justifiable linguistic and communicative expectations based on what Searle (vis-à-vis Kant) describes as fundamental categories of human cognition such as time, space, causation, et cetera, the particulars of which need not concern us, other than to appreciate that they give rise to an expectation of understanding. What is pertinent to an aesthetic interrogation of journalism is what happens when we use language to make public utterances intended to be true. We invest language with commitments that Searle calls “deontologies” (from the Greek word for duty, deon); that is, special reasons for action, such as rights, obligations, responsibilities, authorizations, permissions, and entitlements that at their most basic reflect the three orientations to reality (i.e. belief, intention, and desire), but which, through layering, can and do become much more complex (Searle, 2008). Collective intentionality expressed through language accumulates deontologic commitments and, in doing so, reflects beliefs in states-of-affair of the world: when people (collective intention) assign a function (make commitments to special reasons for action) to a person or object, they are creating social facts through the obligations, rights, responsibilities, duties, entitlements, authorizations, requirements, and so on, invested through the language choices made. Friendships, for example, reflect the assignment of particular status functions to a person (Searle, 2006, 2010). The political implications of this are readily apparent. How we relate to one another arises at least in part through collective intentionality and assignment of functions expressed through our linguistic choices. A brief comment in passing from Searle acknowledges this:

One sees the role of vocabulary in the activities of revolutionary and reformist movements. They must try to get hold of the vocabulary in order to alter the system of status functions. (2008, p. 454)

It is the use of language, a system of symbols used to represent collective intentionality, that creates certain kinds of social commitments, obligations, and expectations that implicate speakers and listeners in particular social realities.

Thinking back to the “middle-ground” where meaning is intended to be located in the interaction of audience and text, and with a renewed appreciation for the importance of collective intention in the use of language and consequent implications for commitments and relations, we can begin to articulate some of the ontological im-
plications of choices made by journalists, based on whom the journalist intends to address. To be clear, it is not a question about an extant audience and how they actually respond, but rather a question about how audiences might respond, how this influences decisions in the production process, and how these in turn play a role in the constitution of relationships and identities.

Communication research has tended to focus on systems of symbols and their content, but there are important constitutive dynamics at work in the relational dimensions of communicative events (Condit, 2005). Wittgenstein’s (2009, p. 185) notion of “language games” is useful here for its suggestion that language derives meanings from use and practices, that uses are always learned and engaged in particular contexts, and the particulars of context will suggest conventions of use. Language is used differently in different situations—to give orders, to debate, to play sports, storytelling, riddles, et cetera—and each situation presents a language game with its own rules and expectations. One of language’s essential, if not primary, functions is arguably in the maintenance of the relationships involved in the circumstances of its use (Canefield, 1981; Condit, 2005; Stewart, 1995; Wittgenstein, 2009).

News discourses have their audiences, and the assumptions that journalists have about them will influence the intentions, commitments, and obligations expressed within a text. It may in fact be impossible to conceive of persuasion of any kind (including persuasion in the believability of a truth-claim) without taking account of its intended audiences and their historically and socially contingent predispositions (Charland, 1995; Condit, 1990; Gross, 1999). Texts enable experiences for some and not for others based on shared histories, knowledge, and cultural values (Condit, 1990). Rhetorical failure, for example, often describes the ways in which universal assumptions fall short of the experiential and cultural variation in actual audiences. In this sense, truth-claims in journalism are a kind of dialectic where the writer anticipates an audience, anticipates that audience’s response, and then structures the writing accordingly in that direction. What makes this imaginary scenario more than just an interesting attribute of writerly technique are the ways in which trust is bound up in these anticipations:

Being able to talk with those around one with an expectation of, say, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth, and to have one’s expectations in large part satisfied, is a part of what it is, as I have already mentioned above, to trust those around one. [emphasis in the original] (Shotter, 2009, p. 30)

Beliefs about the audience, about the relationship with the audience, and about how they will respond are embedded in language and communication; they are the contextual expectations within which a particular communication exists. They are of the language and yet transcend the specifics of utterance, suggesting that a dimension of the journalist’s task is bound in relational expectations structured by belief and intention—an understructure of beliefs, expectations, and desires, established through the acts of utterance themselves and without which the communication would either be meaningless or would mean something else altogether.

Bruce McKinzie (1994) calls this dimension of communication “integrity,” or the ways in which our expectations about trust in relationships structure and are structured...
through our use of language. McKinzie found that among authors of letters to a Florida newspaper, “truth” manifested in two irreconcilable ways: (1) truth as contingent, which emerged in discussions about values; and (2) absolute forms of truth, which emerged in stories about personal histories and experience. McKinzie’s respondents, like most of us, unanimously believed that it is possible for people to act truthfully, that is, to say what they mean, to do what they say they will, and to have done what they say they have done. In other words, they believed it was possible to act with integrity, and these expectations were “sedimented” in the personal experiences, histories, and narratives that shaped their individual social understanding. A foundation of integrity is the foundation of social life: “Without this realism and objectivism informing our social expectation, collective life becomes untenable” (McKinzie, 1994, p. 119). There is always honour, McKinzie suggests, because even among thieves, human existence is social, and this involves expectations and obligations of trust. What trust provides, through notions of integrity, is the basis for an expectation of understanding.

The absolute forms of truth, “sedimented” in experience and expectations of integrity, reflect what Heidegger (1962, p. 98) called a “primordial” relationship with the world. Primordial “being” transcends the subject/object divide in that there is no divide between the subject and those elements of the world that are submerged in primordial truth. The example Heidegger uses is an expert carpenter wielding a hammer, which is not thought about in the act (quoted in McKinzie, 1994, p. 108-9; Heidegger, 1962). When a primordial truth stops working and is thus brought from a state of unconscious assumption to attention, it must then endure a dialectic justification to be reintegrated into understanding (McKinzie, 1994). Our desire for integrity—that is, for coherence and consistency with past and current expectations and obligations of trust—is the foundation for understanding, and understanding (grounded in notions of trust) is the foundation for expectations of understandability. In the publicly mediated contexts of popular culture, where “truths” play out their expectations and obligations of trust within discourses of journalism, the circle of inquiry will also include regulatory desires and economic interests—a confluence of desires, identities, and governmentality that Toby Miller (1998, p. 4) describes as “technologies of truth.”

Miller’s (1998) “technologies of truth” emerge from popular culture organized through the relations of power among audiences, regulators, and markets. At stake is the subjectivity of citizens, in that popular cultures reflect negotiations over membership, meaning, and governance as they emerge through the “cultural citizenships” of a time and place (Miller, 1998). News is as much a resource for social identity as it is an opportunity for understanding or governance. Journalists encounter meaning along the event horizons of fictional intended audiences, and in doing so, extemporize their expectations and experiences of social integrity. These expectations and assumptions, whether explicit or implicit, constitute relations to the extent that audiences agree to be interpellated by them in events of understanding—or better, they offer resources for audiences in the production of identities, relations, and understanding. Harriman and Lucaites (2007) have described how photographs in American news journalism come to be iconic in large part because of the meaningful resources they offer for audiences encountering the tension between liberal individualism and democratic col-
lectivism in the American polity. Although Harriman and Lucaites do not make the point (theirs is a larger argument for the legitimacy and importance of visual communication as rhetoric), their iconicity is to some extent a reflection of the degree to which the photographs have “knowledge effects” in the constitution of identity and relations.

In summary, the communicative procedures at work in traditional forms of journalism have embedded in them constituting functions of social relationality; that is, in their performances of “truth,” there is to be found a constitutional expression of social reality within a dialectics with a fictional intended audience that instantiates social expectations, obligations, and commitments based on exemplary states of relationality. These elements emerge from perceptions of trust and integrity at work in creators/authors who organize their integrities in part through the social identities of their intended fictional audiences. Together, exemplary relationalities and social identities provide the ground of sensibility on which the expectations of understanding and shared meaning necessary for communication are based.

**Between power and knowledge**

The categories of social identity and exemplary ethics described above express relational aspects of truth-claims that are difficult to “prove” in purely rational and empirical terms; i.e., how do you “prove” a sense of belonging or a sense of integrity? These reflect sensibilities that generally influence understanding through extra-cognitive states, such as feeling, emotion, and affect (patriotism and rebellion, for example). I would like to situate these aspects of communication into a larger aesthetic framework based on a reinterpretation of Kantian aesthetics that helps to explain how non-rational attributes of communication influence relations of power.

Aesthetics is a decidedly troubled, contested, and deeply ambiguous term (Schusterman, 2006). And while this is not the place to rehearse the variegated history of aesthetic philosophy, there are a few important clarifications to be made before embarking on a more detailed discussion of an aesthetics of “truth.”

One of the key distinctions to be made for present purposes is between aesthetic experience, emotion, and affect. Following the work of Brian Massumi (2002, p. 25), “affect”—which I suggest is the raw ingredient of aesthetic experience—describes the physiological “noise” of potential and “intensity” produced most immediately in the experience of perception that arises but remains outside linguistic and cognitive feedback loops. Affect taps into immanent self-organizing impulses that precede (apparently, by about half a second) “positioning oneself in a line of narrative continuity” with language, logic, reason, et cetera (Massumi, 2002, p. 25). It is, in Massumi’s terms, the delocalized autonomic responses to the impingement of cultural encounter—the infolding and contraction of potential interactions before intention unfolds through expression in three-dimensional space. I propose aesthetic experience as a way to help to explain how architectures of meaning, memory, and identity (in the event of impingement) give rise to the autonomous physiological attributes of affect, such as changing frequencies of galvanic skin response, heart rates, body temperature, and breathing. Affect describes responses outside of the regulating influences of meaningfulness and understanding (Massumi, 2002), and yet which necessarily arise from within architectures of memory, meaning, and identity (for example, what exacer-
bates one art patron’s shock might just as readily be considered banal by another). Emotion is affect’s first positioning and limitation within cognitive structures (Massumi, 2002). Aesthetic experience, as intended here, is comprised of affect in Massumi’s sense of the word, but accounts for it from within the grounds of identity, memory, and meaning, from which the affective potentials (in the form of autonomic responses) emerge.

There is also an important distinction to be made between aesthetic analysis and aesthetic experience (Fenner, 2003). The former describes an approach to understanding expression—a mode of apprehension—that focuses on formal sensory attributes alone and that decontextualizes cultural expression to engage in formal “aesthetic” analysis. This is a use of aesthetics as an analytic approach in connection with fine arts such as cinema, photography, painting, et cetera. David Fenner’s (2003) larger point is to argue against this overly reductive understanding of aesthetics. Our most immediate aesthetic responses, he argues—and I agree—arise from associations involving memory, meaning, and understanding, qualities that in turn are responsive to social, moral, and taste contexts. Aesthetic experience meant in this way describes the complexities of experience in excess of the conceptual, and yet in relation to contextualizing influences.

Having settled out my use of the term from some of its more common variants, I want to now turn to the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant whose Critique of Judgment (1793/2001) is still considered one of the most comprehensive attempts to articulate a philosophy of aesthetics and the limits of knowledge through judgment. Kant claimed that knowledge arises through the experience of sensory perception organized through a priori structures of the mind, including attribution to a unified consciousness and fundamental categories, meaning time, space, and causality. Knowing, he speculated, was the product of both empirical and transcendental phenomena. Kant understood knowledge as arising in the perception and apprehension of the mechanical functioning of nature (in accordance with the rules of time, space, and causality); morality, as arising through human agency that exists of this world and yet operates independent of its mechanical rules through the power of reason; and finally, judgment as arising in the awareness of the universality of the cognitive assonance of the free play of imagination and understanding and its harmony with the structure of the universe (Hughes, 2006, 2007). Through judgment (i.e., aesthetic experience), we are able to translate the conditions of possibility for knowing into freedom (Kant, 1793/2001, p. 278-9).

Kant proposed that aesthetic experience arises in the event of four “moments,” which, in the interests of brevity, are a disinterested form of pleasure, grounded in the absence of conceptual closure, with an awareness of the universal capacity for such pleasure, and a feeling of necessity grounded in the expectation that everyone ought to share in the pleasure (Hughes, 2006, 2007; Kant, 2007; Wenzel, 2005). These moments, as I hope to make clear in the ensuing analysis, can be reinterpreted as a way of categorizing attributes of aesthetic experience. Together, they offer a resilient framework for understanding how non-rational attributes of truth-claims can be used to mobilize relations of power in both relational and representational terms.

To be clear, unlike Kant’s model, as categories of attribution, these are not “moments” which must all be in play in order for aesthetic experience to occur. Rather, I
am arguing that they provide a helpful analytic framework for categorizing experiences that can be described as aesthetic and that influence the eventualization of truth and power. Restated then (from Kant), the first moment references a disinterested mode of apprehension, arguably one of the most controversial of the claims because of how “disinterest” can be used politically. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) saw in Kant’s disinterested mode procedures of class “distinction” that privileged an ability to ignore and to withdraw from economic realities. He likened it to maintaining a “child’s relation to the world” that responds to surfaces and ignores political context (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 54). Bourdieu’s sociological critique of Kant reveals the limitations of Kant’s universal interpretation of human experience, what Bourdieu labelled as “nothing less than the monopoly of humanity” (1984, p. 491).

Even accepting this critique, there remains the aesthetic experience itself; i.e., the extra-rational and pre-linguistic dimensions of communication and cultural experience that, despite these epistemic shortcomings, remain meaningful, such as the ways we assimilate meaning intuitively and emotionally before we rationalize them into experience. A disinterested mode of apprehension can be understood as a framework for understanding. Jonathon Loesberg calls it “symbolic embodiment,” a mental construct which assumes absolute independence from the bases of the object observed, its causes or intended purposes: “symbolic embodiment does not describe the real features of artworks; it describes how we interpret an object when we construe it as artwork” (2005, p. 7). Even sociological critiques of aesthetic experience like Bourdieu’s do not address all aspects of the experience. For example, aesthetic experience cannot be forced in the sense that the experience of beauty cannot be forced or rationally produced, nor can our pre-cognitive states be forced upon us. Our intuitive, affective, emotional, immediate, prelinguistic, and embodied responses manifest independent of coercion, although, as Bourdieu argued, the responses themselves can be put to political use. Loesberg (2005) convincingly argues that Bourdieu himself engages in an aesthetic mode of analysis in his notion of *habitus*—his disinterested approach to fieldwork. By reading the field in terms of its surface indicators and seeking insight in their rearrangement rather than through some kind of hermeneutics, Loesberg (2005) argues that Bourdieu’s *habitus* depends on a mode of disinterest, the attempt to sever all ties between subject and object, and the perception of the object as existing for its own sake.

Paradoxically, recognition of disinterest as a mode of apprehension makes it possible to also consider its opposite mode of apprehension that deracines the distance between subject and object altogether. “[I]t is esthetic to the degree in which organism and environment,” John Dewey wrote, “cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears” (quoted in Jay, 2003, p. 20). In similar fashion, Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) argues for an understanding of art as that which occurs in the interaction between artist and audience, or what he called “relational aesthetics.” And Grant Kester (2004) describes politically engaged art as “dialectical aesthetics” and the inter-subjective production of relationships and social reality. It is hard to deny that something happens in the encounter of audience with art. Gadamer (1975/1989) describes it as the simultaneous events of expression (object)
and reception (subject), which cannot be compared independently (see also Vattimo, 2008). As described earlier, in this sense, the meaning of art resides in this “interpretive performance” where the distinctions are erased between subject and object, “for an encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 85).

Gadamer also employs the metaphor of “play” in describing this encounter in the way that a player playing a game plays something. Within that necessarily voluntary and improvised gesture lies the experience of encounter. It is a mode of apprehension and way of knowing that challenges dominant epistemological assumptions. Feminist scholars, for example, have strived to illuminate relations of power that systematically and strategically ignore attributes of knowledge that are both objective and subjective, such as the way we know people and how our knowledge of them is both necessarily incomplete—even though we still know them—and dependent on who the knower is (or in other words, that objective qualities of reality can be open to social structuring depending on who is experiencing them) (Code, 1991).  

A disinterested mode of apprehension emphasizes the distinction between subject and object, a distance imagined to its extreme limit; and the elimination of the gap between subject and object emphasizes the inter-subjective foundation of experience. It is a paradox, but it is not incomprehensible. On the one hand, the aesthetic mode grounds its critique in a self-reflexivity that measures possibility against the preconditions of knowing: what is it possible to know without preconditions? On the other hand, it is a mode grounded in the loss of subjectivity altogether (and objectivity) and privileging of a co-relational alternative. Each is dependent on the possibility of the other: there must be a space of dissension and the possibility of reversibility and rearrangement in order for an alternative to emerge (in the same way that freedom is the condition of possibility for power).

To put this in more practical terms, the less than rational and yet still meaningful category of a disinterested mode of apprehension has contemporary allegiances within discourses of traditional journalism, science, and jurisprudence, among others. Objectivity, positivity, and justice trade in speculation of the possibility of subject and object severability. And within contemporary art discourses meaning is understood as emerging through the elimination of subject and object through performance and encounter. But there are new and emerging forms of commentary on social reality that paradoxically encompass both modes simultaneously. For example, participatory forms of journalism (i.e., alternative media that report from within communities whose events also comprise objects of reportage) often strive to replicate traditional methods of verification that rely on objective forms of truth, but they do this by structurally conflating subject/object categories through conventions of reporters writing about themselves and their own communities. This gesture eliminates what Kevin Howley (2005, p. 3) calls the “convenient fiction” of an assumed gap between media producers and media consumers and renders “disinterested” reports sensible only within deeply interested contexts.

Disinterest in this sense is not a point of view that needs to be adopted by news audiences, but rather, is a structure for understanding adopted by some news produc-
ers and understood as a structure of understanding by their audiences. It is a mode of apprehension altogether different from that brought to bear on a theatre performance, a conundrum made even more readily absurd by imagining theatrical expectations of knowing brought to bare on a scientific report. The sensibilities would be scrambled—perhaps, not without some interesting outcomes—but their intended meanings and territories of sensibility would for the most part be hopelessly disordered.

These paradoxical qualities of contrary modes of apprehension touch on a more encompassing (and more recognizable, at least in terms of contemporary arts practices) representational category of aesthetic experience, one derived from Kant's second moment, i.e., conceptual indeterminancy, or ambiguity. Aesthetic experience is experience that resists easy rational organization and whose sensibility—for example, through affect and emotion—is in terms other than rationality. Extra-linguistic, non-conceptual, extra-logical, affective, and emotional are all, in a sense, qualities of meaningfulness that defy reason. And yet, ambiguity is arguably one of the most “truthful” states; i.e., the impossibility of knowing. Methods of understanding are as much concerned with limiting ambiguity as they are with clarifying “reality.” Objectivity, in this sense, and traditional methods of journalism, are ways of reducing reality to a knowable fragment of reality (Cramerotti, 2009). Introducing ambiguity, then, suggests a means of challenging some of the relations on which dominant forms of knowledge rest.

The deep ambiguity at work in aesthetic experience is also apparent in Kant’s third moment: the necessary shareability of aesthetic experience (the ought of an encounter with beauty, what Kant described as an awareness that everyone can recognize beauty and, in the right circumstances, ought to experience it) that gives rise to a necessarily indeterminate state of meaning, grounded in future terms; i.e., an exemplary state of meaningfulness. The expectation of communicability and meaning is comparable to the trust conditions necessary for the linguistic integrities described in the previous section. Kant’s universal is grounded in part on the a priori intuitions that organize fundamental categories of knowing; i.e., categories of meaning without which there can be no experience, including time, space, causality, quality, quantity, modality, and relation. But what is at stake here is the necessity of communicability, an expectation of communicability that grounds aesthetic experience in the possibility of shared sensibility. This is an orientation of affect (in Massumi’s sense of the term) that comes from within structures of both past experience and future expectation of common sense. What this does in part is relocate conceptual certainty into future, and therefore indeterminate, terms, while allowing for the constitution of social reality within the event of communication itself through commitment, obligation, and expectation, as described above. Exemplary conditions necessitate extant realities, the instantiation of which manifests aesthetically through communication. The effects of power mobilize relations in the interests of power as a “structure of actions brought to bear on possible actions,” with the goal of “guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). Put differently, power is largely about limiting and ordering future outcomes. Aesthetic experience’s ambiguous and exemplary sensibilities suggest at the very least the possibility of meaningfulness independent of relations of domination.
Which is not to deny, it should be said, the worst manifestations of politics and aesthetics. As Walter Benjamin (1968) pointed out, aestheticized politics can be the logical outcome of fascism, a politics of seductive spectacle engendered through the use of symbols, myths, and rites rather than reason and which can transform even human suffering into decontextualized forms of aesthetic pleasure (see also Jay, 2003). The manifestations of aestheticized politics (in Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and communist Russia, for example) have significantly undermined utopic expectations for the alchemy of radical politics and art.

But a “post-utopic” interest in the emancipatory potential of aesthetic experience (albeit divorced from radical politics per se) has persisted under the rubric of the avant-garde (Rancière, 2004). Rancière (2004, 2008) describes both strategic gestures in the art world that reflect political intelligence in the sense of military-strategic—i.e., shock value, outrage, rupture—and future-oriented gestures that attempt to present preferred and unprecedented relations for public consideration. In the latter, conceptual stability is rerouted to some future undetermined condition, in a sense, an ambiguous exemplary rooted in modes of participation and playfulness. Krzysztof Ziarek (2004) argues that avant-garde aesthetics do not resist the effects of power, but rather deny them and constitute a time and space configuration without power as its grounding orientation. Ziarek argues that it is the conditions of possibility of “being” that are rearranged. Art’s most radical potential instantiates a ground of “being” before power, an opening of relations before their differentiation into power and powerless, creating rupture and the possibility for radically unprecedented relations. Aesthetic experience, and its indeterminacy, can alter the conditions of possibility for the object of power itself.

Jean-François Lyotard found in Kant’s aesthetics the idea that affect as emotion and sentiment manifests outside the bounds of domination, and that affect is a sign of freedom (Gearhart, 1999).

[It] is in his reading of the Second Critique that the connection between feeling and freedom emerges clearly—when Lyotard stresses that the sense of obligation is a feeling, and that that feeling is for Kant the sign of human freedom. (Gearhart, 1999, pp. 104-105)

The link between feeling and obligation is important. The bonds of social expectation, obligation, and commitment manifest within truth-claims depend in part on affective dimensions of experience, including emotion but also in Massumi’s sense of pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive responses that emerge from and merge with the localizing structures of reason, memory and meaning. Lyotard (as cited in Gearhart, 1999) was trying to understand colonial reality in Algeria and its subsequent and seemingly sudden rupture through violent revolution in 1954. Lyotard believed that such sudden violent upheaval pointed to a social reality constituted by emotion and feeling, and that just as the emotional bonds of colonial reality “on some level [were] freely made” by Algerians, “the links connecting them with that society could be broken freely and virtually overnight” (Gearhart 1999, p. 104). Just as no one can be forced to play, no one can be forced to feel an obligation to society, only made to behave in certain ways. Aesthetic experience presents the possibility of a feral way of knowing.
Foucault argued near the end of his life that we must “create ourselves as a work of art” (1984, p. 351). It is an aspirational ethics, rooted in future indetermination rather than past prescription, a sense of creation rather than discovery. Foucault’s path to freedom—or at least the possibility of transcending conditions of possibility for subjectivity—lay in self-review and self-making, with a sense of “truth” not defined by correspondence to reality, but rather “as a force inherent to principles and which has to be developed in a discourse”; not a hermeneutical “truth,” but rather “something which is in front of the individual as a point of attraction, a kind of magnetic force that attracts him towards a goal”; “truth” that emerges from the desire to constitute the self rather than discover it (2007, pp. 163-164). The aesthetic self is a perpetually incomplete project of plurality, a strategy rather than a prescription, a “style of existence” that resists preconditions of possibility in the way that style and form resist narrative determination (Ferguson, 1999, p. 130). Foucault’s aesthetic self exists without a determined end, without a defined narrative, but with possibility for action in the present, arrived at through consideration of past experience and undetermined future possibility. It is a rerouting of relations of power through the manifestation of exemplary meanings and validities.

Finally, from Kant’s fourth moment, we get the idea of sensus communis, which emphasizes the sense of belonging at work in shared sensibilities; that is, common sensibilities into which we subjugate individual identities into collective ones within the structures of integrity that regulate our relationships with society. There is in the idea of communicability the necessity of shared sensibility, or what Kennan Ferguson calls an “aesthetic conception of identity” (1999, p. 13). “We do not, in other words, make judgments; judgments make us,” and through them we constitute human society (Ferguson, 1999, p. 13). What Kant proposed as a universal category of aesthetic moral agreement can be more sensibly recognized as an historical circumstance of shared values, preferences, and orientations through which aspects of social identity and a sense of belonging are established. Who we think we are, and with whom we think we are communicating, as discussed at length in the previous section, is of central importance in mediated experiences of “truth.”

What makes this theoretical maze worth navigating is the insight that such an admittedly awkward initial framework offers into how extra-rational attributes influence discourse. To recap, my approach to aesthetics (specifically, an aesthetics of truth-claims) takes as its starting orientation Kant’s aesthetic moments as a sketch of the limits of knowing through judgment. We find in these limits a tentative framework and four categories of aesthetic experience: social identity, ambiguity, exemplary meaningfulness, and paradoxical modes of apprehension. Aesthetic experience, unlike knowledge, is rooted in the conceptually indeterminate, in excess of rationality, where affect encounters but is not yet positioned into the narratives and logics of understanding. Affect emerges autonomously in association with and within a base network of memories, experiences, expectations, identities, and contexts that offer the promise of meaning, or, a feeling that ought to be sharable and a capacity for judgment that presupposes the possibility of common sense. Even if consensus, as Foucault (1984) suggests, is empirically unachievable, the expectation of common sense is the necessity
of language. Aesthetic experience, as (re)distribution of sensibility, can, as it has in various avant-garde art settings, create possibilities for unprecedented world space and futures that only instantiate where meaning is voluntarily engaged (like play). In such an arrangement of relations, sensibility depends on the absence of domination, where subject and object correlate meaning, and conceptual closure and understanding lie off in the future. Aesthetic experience encompasses paradoxical modes of apprehension that regulate how the dynamic between subject and object—audience and performance, public and art, citizen and news—unfolds. On the one hand, it suggests a self-reflexive concern with a rearrangement of elements rather than their causes and purposes. It is, to overstate it, an anti-hermeneutical approach grounded in the idea of disinterest. A disinterested mode of observation is rooted in speculation about the possibility of reversibility, of absolute unrelatedness between subject and object, but also, and coincidently, in the reversibility of relations of power, a fact emphasized by its obverse mode of apprehension, which encounters subject and object as merged in a performative and mutually constituting experience. To the extent that power needs to predetermine outcomes of conduct, aesthetic experiences appear to describe categories of meaningfulness through which the expectations of power, including its truths, can be disordered.

Conclusion

The changes percolating in popular cultures concerning “truth” are reflected in and reflective of changes taking place in more scholarly conversations, including within the field of communication studies. Basic tenets of traditional communications research, such as assumptions around representational meaning and fidelity characteristics of messages, are being uprooted in the wake of post-structuralist and post-modern critiques (Motley, 1990). The assumed distinctions between fact and value, the integrity of the sovereign subject, and the primacy of a representational epistemology can no longer be assumed (Stewart, 1991). Possibilities for understanding communication are being considered through a rubric of ritual rather than exchange, a shift that emphasizes language’s improvisational role in the creation of subjectivities, relationships, identities, and knowledge (Carey, 1989; Craig, 1999). Robert Craig has suggested an as yet unrecognized “aesthetic tradition” in communication studies, awaiting articulation, that would emphasize the embodied and performative aspects of communicative events (Craig, 1999).

In this article, I have argued that aesthetic experience offers an approach to understanding both relational and representational aspects of truth-claims not easily accounted for within rational and empirical frameworks. On the one hand, the aesthetic experiences of ambiguity and our modes of apprehension address the symbol systems at play in cultural texts and shape how understanding is intended and can occur in the encounter between audience and text. The regulation of ambiguities delimits, or intends to delimit, the degree to which audiences can participate in the production of understanding. It is a way of instructing understanding, or inviting understanding, or even at times intentionally prohibiting understanding. The regulation of ambiguity is often how authors/creators try to create middle grounds for preferred horizons of interpretation. Similarly, the intended modes of apprehension at work among
authors/creators will have an impact on the meanings of symbols in question. An objective approach to knowledge imagines the reversibility of what is represented, that a subjective position can exist absolutely severed from the objects of its encounter. Science engages an objective mode of apprehension, as do traditional forms of professional journalism. Yet, to approach a scientific study in terms of its poetics, or to approach a ballet in terms of the objective knowledge being produced, is an entirely different kind of encounter that tests the boundaries of sensibility. Systems of symbols have their rules, and the modes of their apprehension engaged will influence fundamentally how the rules should be employed to make sense of the encounter.

On the other hand, communicative events take place in relational contexts. The aesthetic experiences of sensus communis and exemplary understandings are rooted in the relational dimensions of language—the conditions and terms under which we subsume our individual subjectivities into senses of belonging (or not), and our expectations of integrity (our own integrities and the integrities of others). From the expectations, obligations, and commitments inherent in truth-claims, we instantiate social realities. What makes this confounding, but also what draws us through our communicative acts into the constituting origins of relations of power, is that we have made up elements of the terms of social reality that ground meaning in our communication. It is as complicated and as simple as our ability to do what we say we will do. The diverse arrays of status, expectation, obligation, and commitment that make up relations of power are constituted, at least in part, through our own relational engagements when we make truth-claims.

By emphasizing what is a neglected area in communications thought, my hope is to perhaps (re)kindle scepticism about how, in particular, the genre of journalism regulates the aesthetics of “truth” in popular culture. News conventions and styles today, under siege though they may be, are linked to objective, empirical, and positivist notions that emerged in late 19th and early 20th century conversations about science and propaganda. It is not the sociological or political value of “truth” that is in question, I suggest, but rather an aesthetic blindness. In the rush to squeeze out falsity, inaccuracy, ideology, and propaganda that formed the ground from which our contemporary visions of professional journalism emerged, the aesthetic dimensions—what I argue are part and parcel of all truth-claims—were intentionally or inadvertently swept under the empirical rug. The error in this is to conflate a convention of style with the social value of indexically referential symbolic meaning, and to confine public communication of “truth” to an overly narrow aesthetic range. Once we can identify conventional journalism’s aesthetic “habits,” it may be possible to admit a greater diversity of styles of “truth” into the hallowed houses of news.

If, that is, this still matters, since many of these changes are happening outside of journalism’s careful regulation. The unbridled proliferation of aesthetic strategies acceptable to audiences as forms of information about the states-of-affair of the world (such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, graphic novels, blogs, art installations, et cetera) is at least part of the reason why so many are so worried about a so-called “crisis in journalism.” A better understanding of the dynamic between aesthetics and “truth” in popular culture may help to explain why such shifting sensibilities are not...
only not fundamentally destabilizing in any political, social, or intellectual sense, but rather are a welcome loosening of a form of epistemic monopoly long held by the guilds of news-makers over what counts as “real” in public discourse.

Notes
1. Toby Miller (1998) describes the emergence of public knowledge from within the tension between state interests, market interests, and public desire as “technologies of truth.”

2. I hope to expand the aesthetic boundaries of what can be considered news.

3. “Eventualization” is Michel Foucault’s term for the point at which the legitimacies of power and boundaries of knowledge are made evident in the “connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident” (1991, p. 76).

4. Early textbooks for journalism emphasized practice over philosophy and generally ignored questions of epistemological legitimacy. Their concern focused instead on questions of routine: how to identify a good story (timeliness and emotional appeal); how to collect information (through interviews); the importance of balance; the importance of form (inverted pyramid, descending hierarchy of importance); and the role of journalist as offering a mirror of society—all attributes that have had tremendous longevity and even today continue to shape assumptions about professionalism (Sumpter, 2009).

5. The condition of satisfaction for “belief” is a states-of-affair in the world that matches our belief. The condition of satisfaction for “intention” is creating or carrying out the states-of-affair that was intended. And, the condition of satisfaction for “desire” is the states-of-affair that fulfills that desire (Searle, 2008, 2010).

6. Condit (2005) is criticizing the traditional canon of rhetorically great speeches as being more accurately described as invitations to understanding to a particular group of people, emerging from commonality of culture, race, grammar, educational dispositions, and ideologies (i.e., a canon largely comprised of speeches by white educated men). It is not a political conspiracy (at least not in every case), but rather a necessary condition of rhetoric’s work and a demonstration of how relations of power can be implicated, expressed, and created through authorial intention.

7. Recognition of epistemologies based on different criteria of legitimacy—sometimes called alternative or resistant epistemologies—is an expressly political engagement with ways of knowing that reject the traditional dualism of mind/body and with it the devaluing of embodied experiences of the effects of power in favour of situated and dynamic ways of knowing (Larrabee, 2006).

8. Narratives require closure in the sense that there must be a beginning and end in order to transform “the welter of facts that is historical reality” into meaning (Stone-Mediator, 2003, p. 30). Actions never end in the world in the sense that they continue in perpetuity through reactions that generate more actions, et cetera. Narratives—the ascribing of meaning to experience—necessarily involve choosing endings that link together actions in meaningful ways (Arendt, 1958; Stone-Mediator, 2003).

9. Mitchell agreed to make the change, in part, because of alliances she had made in the local Aboriginal community with an organization called APES (Aboriginal People Excited about Sasquatches). During the exhibition, APES organized a public discussion with Mitchell and others about sasquatches, Aboriginal knowledge, and colonialism.

References


