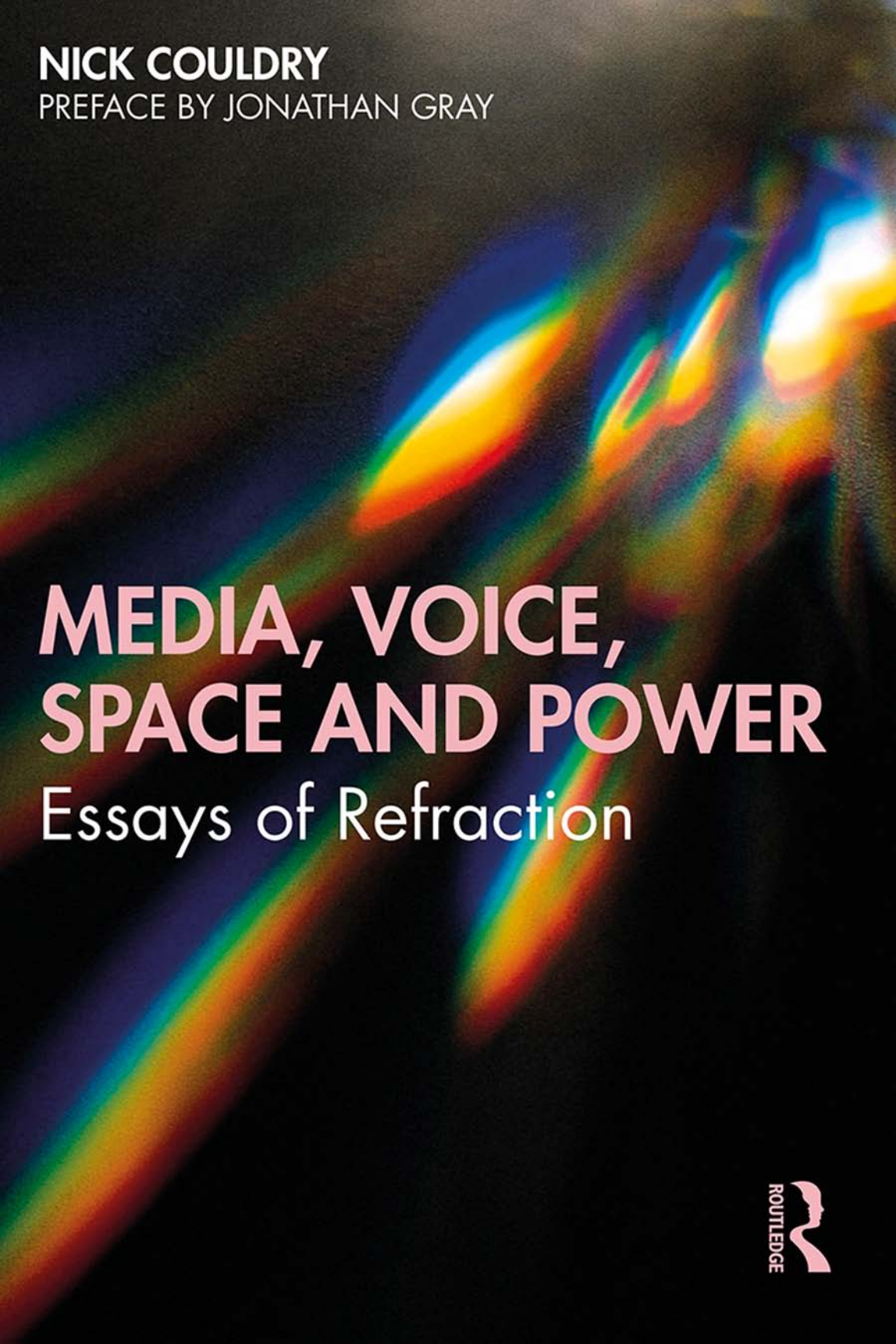
NICK COULDRY
PREFACE BY JONATHAN GRAY



MEDIA, VOICE, SPACE AND POWER

Essays of Refraction

ROUTLEDGE

MEDIA, VOICE, SPACE AND POWER

Nick Couldry is one of the world's leading analysts of media power and voice, and has been publishing widely for 25 years. This volume, published 20 years after *The Place of Media Power*, brings together a rich collection of essays from his earliest to his latest writings, some of them hard to access, plus two previously unpublished chapters.

The book's 15 chapters cover a variety of themes from voice to space, from Big Data to democracy, and from art to reality television. Taken together, they give a unique insight into the range of Couldry's interests and passions. Throughout, Couldry's commitment to connecting media research to wider debates in philosophy and social theory is clear. A substantial Afterword reflects on the common themes that run throughout his work and this volume, and the particular challenges of grasping media's contribution to social order in an age of datafication. A preface by leading US media scholar Jonathan Gray sets these essays in context.

The result is an exciting and clearly written text that will interest students and researchers of media, culture and social theory across the world.

Nick Couldry is Professor of Media Communications and Social Theory at the London School of Economics. He is the author or editor of fourteen books, including *The Costs of Connection* (with Ulises Mejias 2019), *Media: Why It Matters* (2019), *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (with Andreas Hepp, 2016), *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (2003) and *The Place of Media Power* (2000).

Jonathan Gray is Hamel Family Distinguished Chair in Communication Arts at University of Wisconsin – Madison, USA. He is the author of four books (*Television Entertainment*; *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts; Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality;* and *Television Studies* (with Amanda D. Lotz) and the co-editor of seven further books.

MEDIA, VOICE, SPACE AND POWER

Essays of Refraction

Nick Couldry
with a preface by Jonathan Gray

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Jonathan Gray

Analysis without sorting hats

Many academics appear to have gone through, at some unspecified prior time, a ritual akin to the Sorting that occurs in the world of Harry Potter. In that ritual, newly arrived students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry don the Sorting Hat, which then "reads" them to decide to which intramural house they should belong. So too do many academics appear to have a house assignment–a theoretical team for which they work exclusively henceforth and evermore. Nick Couldry's work is exciting precisely because he refused this ritual, working not for team/house supremacy but for better answers, and hence drawing from a broad range of intellectual traditions, theoretical schools, and scholarly disciplines.

This hat-less approach is abundantly evident in the first chapter of this collection, "Speaking Up in a Public Space: The Strange Case of Rachel Whiteread's *House*", written when Couldry was a Master's student (and thus at a point in time when many others are reaching for their Sorting Hats). Rather than lay claim to a singular Answer, and writing strongly against any such Answer being sufficient, he insists on a multi-pronged approach to understanding the titular work of art. In his charting of the various prongs – Art as Text, Distinction, Media Influence and Media Events, De Certeau's Anti-Model, Public and Private Space, Local/Global, Memory, Gender, and more – he announces his ambitious intent to consider complex social, cultural and aesthetic entities precisely as complex. Cultural studies, he insists in that essay, "should attempt to map (even if not model) the complexity of singular events", for "the search for an all-compassing model is misguided".

He is no dilettante, however, for although – as is evident across the range of these collected essays – he'll consult anthropology, geography, sociology, literary studies, cultural studies, or philosophy, Bourdieu, Hannerz, De Certeau, Hall, Massey, Durkheim or many other disciplines or theorists when they are of use, he casts his

buckets deep into their respective wells. Personally, I find this attribute refreshing and inspiring: I cannot predict the substance of Couldry's analyses, and they regularly shine not only fresh light upon a topic but encourage and open up entirely different lines of subsequent analysis. Indeed, as I will later argue, Couldry's macro sociology aims to trouble and to add ways of interpreting our cultural worlds, not to answer, simplify, and hence to subtract ways of interpreting them. This eschewing of Sorting Hats sets an interesting challenge for a reader, encouraging a similarly broad perspective and openness to various lines of inquiry, and to embracing complexity, not simplicity, in one's approach. And, for someone charged with writing a preface to a series of essays by Couldry, it sets the daunting task of denying an easy set of team/house talking points and characteristics and exploring subtler pathways. Instead, then, in what follows, I will attempt to chart some key themes and lines of questioning that I find especially fruitful and generative in Couldry's assembled essays.

Let us start with the subtitle for this collection, *Essays of Refraction*. This alludes to Couldry's fascination both with movement through space and with finding different scholarly angles of approach. Space and place loom large in the work of Couldry, and if De Certeau serves as a launching point in Chapter 1, that is because Couldry is similarly interested in *battles* over space, in the rules applied to various spaces by those claiming (or seeking to claim) ownership and control over such spaces, yet also in the uses and reappropriations of those spaces by others, and in how individuals or communities refract their journeys through those spaces. De Certeau's own schema focuses on the to-and-fro between *strategies* (of those in power) and *tactics* (of everyday users) for controlling space. Couldry does away with the binary and the Manichean duel implied in such division, realising instead the complex matrix of power that exists (as evidenced, for instance, in his analysis of Whiteread's *House*, where he refuses to allow that something so simple as a battle of bourgeois versus working class taste is being enacted). But he also digs deeply into the mechanisms by which spaces are authored, controlled, and hence ascribed rules. A key distinction between his and De Certeau's work, moreover, is that whereas De Certeau's model works with one space and one user at a time, Couldry's models always involve the interaction between various spaces, seeing the rules and hierarchies of power existing most clearly in the organisation of space, and in how one space refracts the rules of engagement with – and impacts upon – other spaces.

Most iconically, this interest can be seen in what Couldry has called "the myth of the mediated centre", which "tells us that society *has* a 'centre' of value, knowledge, and meaning, and that particular institutions, those we call 'media,' have a privileged role in giving us access to that supposed 'centre'" (Chapter 14). Here, then, he draws our attention to how media events and narratives are constructed in ways that reify a distinction between spaces, penning the media as a magical, hyperreal space that floats above mundane existence, connected to all other spaces in the world. Couldry's analysis in Chapter 9 of the *Big Brother* eviction ceremony, for example, shows how Channel Four and associated media's construction of this event ascribed values of transcendence and conversion from mundane existence to "becoming" as

a media personality and celebrity in ways that designate the media as a privileged space. In Chapter 5, he examines how the coverage of Diana's funeral, and of the oft-repeated assertions by reporters that the coverage was speaking for the nation, laid claim to a symbolic power to network and access the nation at large, even when the assertion that more than 60 million peoples' experiences could be reflected by one event and its broadcasting is outrageous.

However, Couldry's analysis of Diana's funeral, alongside his detailed analysis of "the Umbrella Man" in Chapter 7, also shows his interest in how citizens challenge and render clear hierarchies of space. Couldry recounts a particularly important moment in the aftermath of Diana's death when some citizens blamed journalists' hounding of Diana, and when one interlocutor in particular yelled at a camera, "It's YOU. It's you who've killed her". This was a moment, in other words, when citizens insisted that the media was working counter to their interests, not – as was claimed by said journalists – "giving them voice" – and when "a normally hidden threat to the media's authority had been temporarily exposed". For this reason, in Chapter 7, he proposes "a serious question to be researched: how do people in practice contest the boundaries of 'the political'?" and how do they add their voices to the hyperreal counterparts that media outlets present on their behalves?

Indeed, few concepts matter as much to Couldry as that of *voice*, and his interest in contested spaces of enunciation and articulation is an interest in who gets to speak, when, where, and how. Or, more accurately and precisely, his interest lies in who *doesn't* get to speak, when, where, and how. Couldry exhibits a deep cynicism towards centralizing narratives that excitedly proclaim that voice has been achieved within any text, genre, platform, or site. Following his foregrounding of the myth of the mediated centre, Couldry challenges both media-proffered and academic narratives of the media speaking for society or ever giving us access to the social. In the early 2000s, this saw him focus on the naïve declaration that reality television democratically allowed "regular" people into the media (see Chapter 10 in particular), in the mid 2000s it saw him challenge notions of convergence culture offering great scope for "participatory media", and more recently in the '10s, he has challenged the popular and academic faith in "Big Data" speaking the social (see Chapter 14 in particular), tackling romanticized assertions that Big Data can network all relevant opinions and behaviours and decrying that "agency has now been subsumed by 'algorithmic power.'"

A poor reading of Couldry's work might therefore see him as a pessimist. Certainly, his work regularly deconstructs both media and academic narratives of democratisation. The academic challenges can be seen not only in the above-listed demythification of reality television, convergence culture, and Big Data as sites of democratisation but also in his attentiveness to the ethics of cultural studies practice and to discussions of a global public sphere. On the former, Chapters 3 and 6 stand out in particular, as he denies the existence of privileged vantage points from which the academic analyst can see the social or the public in its entirety; if it is foolish to regard the media as able to divine the public, in short, Couldry sees it

as no less foolish to regard any given research project as able to divine the public. Cultural studies, he argues, "should be guided by a scepticism in speaking about others that is loyal to the uncertainties each analyst recognises in the formulations of her or his own identity", for "Speaking for, that is in place of, others is incompatible with claiming for ourselves the right to speak and be heard without interference – inconsistent, therefore, with the underlying ethic of cultural studies as I have formulated it".

On the latter, in Chapter 13, he notes the impossibility of any singular transnationalised global public sphere ever being realised, instead arguing that any such attempt to network global voices will require an interconnection and overlapping of local public spheres, not a doomed end-run to achieve a singular site. "More practical in the immediate term", he writes, "is to consider how the quality of local and national spheres might be transnationalised, influencing *national* decision-processes, and through them, indirectly, international decision-making processes". Yet, as both of these examples show, his work is ultimately in aid of a refreshingly optimistic, hopeful approach to media, space and voice: Couldry may knock down many ladders, but only when he has analysed their construction and realised they do not take would-be climbers to where they wish to go. In these two examples, Couldry seeks to shut down neither cultural studies' desire to add voices to the dialogue nor hopes for global communication, but to enable and enact both projects. His defining move as a theorist is a move of complication, to deny us the false security of an over-easy answer, but always with an eye toward constructing better ladders that still lead upwards. Or, reworded, he is not insisting on darkness, just on observing the refractions that all rays of light take in a complex, globalised world, and on removing myths that block or replace our vision.

Toward this end, I must also note my appreciation for how grounded Couldry's approach is. He is comfortable with high theory hailing from many disciplinary camps, and yearns for more scholars to engage with theory, leading to his postulation that whereas the late 1990s offered "an all-night party of theoretical excess", we now "find ourselves at dawn in a post-theory desert where even the effort of asking *why* we need theory, and *how* we might compare the relative merits of competing theories, seem[s] beyond us" (Chapter 11). But he grounds that theory in specifics, and draws from a wide range of examples to test that theory out. He is, in short, a textual and spatial analyst with purpose, and one who appreciates the inner complexities of texts, events and spaces as fields of action. Those texts, events and spaces range in this collection from Diana's funeral (in Chapter 5) to a tour of *The Sopranos*' New Jersey (in Chapter 8), from *Big Brother* eviction ceremonies (in Chapter 9) to Rachel Whiteread's work of art *House* (in Chapter 1), from close readings of Elsbeth Probyn (in Chapter 3) and Pierre Bourdieu (in Chapter 4) to an in-depth interview with a protester (Chapter 7). If only all theorists were as keen to wiggle their toes around and feel the grass under their feet as much as Couldry.

Indeed, Couldry's work offers us multiple models to emulate of how theory and close reading can feed each other, of how to remain optimistic while kicking

down ladders, of how to eschew the narratives and boundaries around topics and spaces that have been constructed for us and to instead draw new connections and tell new stories. In all this, he shows us how the humanities and social sciences at large can and should operate with an unbroken – if multiply refracted – attention to injustice, agency, myths of voice and representation and the ethics of living well. I hope the reader enjoys and profits from these essays as much as do I.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The three parts of this collection represent three overlapping phases in my career, with Part I including some of my very earliest writings and Part III some of my most recent. The main purpose is to give a sense of the range of topics that have intrigued me over the past 25 years, but I have also taken the opportunity of bringing to light some pieces which are probably little known.

Many thanks to Natalie Foster of Routledge for being open to the idea of bringing together these otherwise scattered essays, and for her usual efficiency. It is a particular pleasure that this collection will see the light of day exactly two decades after my first book was published with Routledge in 2000.

Thanks to my research assistant, João Vieira Magalhães of the London School of Economics for being willing to undertake the task of retyping the text of Chapter 1 in a usable format at a time when I was overwhelmed with other commitments, and his general help in standardizing style across the original versions.

This book's contents have all been previously published, with the exception of Chapter 2 (which first took the form of a speech delivered to the International Artists Symposium at the Fukuoka Arts Festival, August 1995), my afterword, and the preface to the collection that Jonathan Gray has generously written. Permission by the original publishers to reproduce this material here is gratefully acknowledged, with the original sources and publishers listed below:

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Chapter 7 in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(2): 131–152 (2001). Sage.

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Nick Couldry
Islip, Oxfordshire, July 2019.

PART I

Speaking up and speaking out

1

SPEAKING UP IN A PUBLIC SPACE

The strange case of Rachel Whiteread's *House*

Introduction

Competing theories of social interaction have privileged either its textual aspects or its nature as practice (recent theories of "media events" being a hybrid case). But how do we understand what happens when multiple textual and other practices confront each other in a public space that is also a site in media narratives? What gives rise, suddenly, to the "sense of an event"? When media space and public space overlap, the answers must lie beyond media-centred theories – but where? These questions, not readily answered yet, are fundamental to an account of the media's role in society. Recent practice in public art offers an important and insufficiently studied means of approaching these questions. This chapter seeks to open up this territory by examining the controversy that raged around *House*, a public sculpture displayed in London's East End, late in 1993.

Rachel Whiteread's *House* was in Bow: the concrete cast of a house's inside, left exposed when the last of a Victorian terrace was demolished to extend parkland. *House* was also an event – or rather, many events (private and public), focused, through the media, on the sculpture, its reception, and ultimate demolition. I attempt to make sense of those events.

I am not trying to expound *House*'s meaning nor to judge its value as art. By "making sense", I intend more the unravelling of the different processes which generated meanings in relation to *House*. A broad canvas is necessary, stretching beyond art discourse. Here, Sharon Zukin's work is exemplary – especially her book-length study of the New York loft scene.[1] Zukin's insistence on grasping the loft scene as "a space, a symbol, and a site under contention by major social forces" remains an essential guide.[2] Her analysis, however, tends to reduce the intentions and messages of artists to underlying social patterns of appropriation. This closes off a possibility which I will leave open: that art itself is a strand in debates about those very social conditions.

Another broad context of this chapter is the continuing debate on the public sphere which has evolved from Habermas' original critique of liberal models to a notion of the public sphere as one or more spaces in which identities and values are developed in a process of "discursive will formation".[3] In its wake has come fascinating work on the "new social movements", which have recently developed in the face of the "information society".[4] These movements, while largely submerged in civil society, are capable of "temporary mobilisations" in the public sphere.[5] Their mode of action fuses "public and private roles . . . instrumental and expressive behaviour".[6] Indeed, through "the defining power of media publicity", the media emerges as a central "site" for this new "sub-politics".[7] This is useful background for understanding *House* (with its strange alchemy of public and private space, its structure as media event, and latent political content).

There is, however, little specific precedent for investigating a work such as *House*. Dick Hebdige's recent pioneering study of Krystof Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicle Project is therefore this chapter's third and indispensable context.[8] Hebdige, through an impassioned analysis of how Wodiczko's work addresses its viewers, develops the important notion of "witnessing" as a form of social awareness. A weakness is that Hebdige conceives "witnessing" entirely within the frame of the act of reading the artwork itself. In a typical passage, he comments: "What makes it so difficult to dismiss this project out of hand is the challenge it issues to all those who enter into dialogue with it to improve upon Wodiczko's own 'modest proposals' 'to help the homeless'".[9] The qualification is crucial. For it is precisely behind the cover of that qualification that we must investigate: who enters into dialogue, how, in what context, and on whose terms?

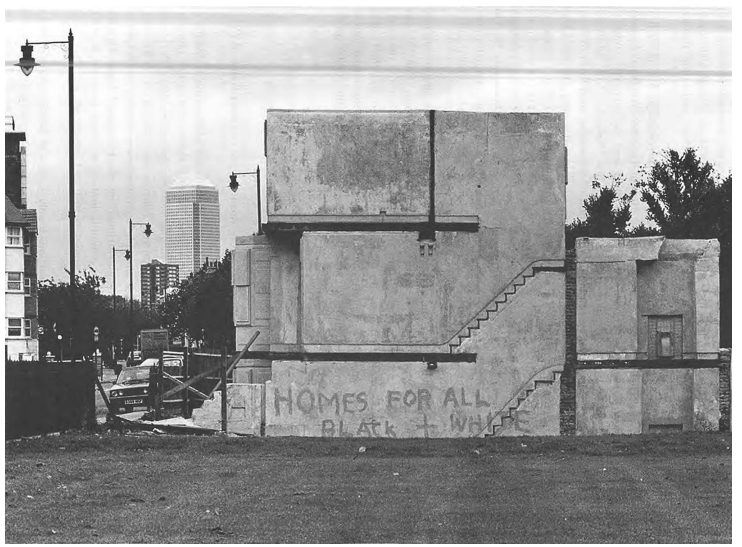

FIGURE 1.1 Rachel Whiteread's *House* seen against the background of London's Docklands

A certain scepticism is necessary. Like Baudrillard, we should question whether a work of art "speaks to us" directly, let alone "confronts reality".[10] I aim to be less a "witness" of what *House* "revealed", still less an explicator of the work's "inside", more an investigator of its outside(s), conceiving art, like the book in Deleuze and Guattari's formulation, to "exist only through the outside and on the outside", the outside(s), that is, of public space and the public sphere themselves.[11]

House and its reception

Background

Like most houses in Bow, 193 Grove Road, the site or rather frame of *House*, was terraced.

Bow is a "neighbourhood" of Tower Hamlets (an administrative division of the Borough introduced in the 1980s). Tower Hamlets (due east of London's financial centre, "The City" and having as its southernmost region Docklands, where a new business centre famously failed in the 1980s) is one of London's poorest boroughs, with high unemployment and severe housing problems. Bow is not one of the poorest neighbourhoods but shares many of Tower Hamlets' general characteristics: 57 per cent of its housing is council provided, less than one per cent. is detached or semi-detached and almost 60 per cent. of its households lack a car.[12]

Housing is a central political issue locally. Claims of "bias" in favour of ethnic minorities in the Council home waiting list characterised the campaign of a British National Party candidate elected in Docklands in September 1993. Nor is the public environment a neutral issue: the extension of the park which required 193 Grove Road's demolition conformed to a general Council policy of improving the look of the area: "old-style" lampposts, ornamental park gates, plaques marking the "Bow Heritage Trail". Some councillors hoped a bold, new public sculpture would benefit the neighbourhood's image.

What was the background to the artistic conception of *House*? The history of art in public spaces is complex, but two points are crucial. First, in the 20th century, many ideas influenced public art apart from its long-term antecedents in monuments and architecture: the search for art's wider public function; increasing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the painting frame and gallery space; and a critique through artistic intervention of conventions of public space and architecture.[13]

Secondly, a break in this history occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s when new questions about how art interacts with its public became central. Many factors came together: feminist critiques of art institutions, Joseph Beuys' notion of "social sculpture", the practice of art in community programmes, critiques of the implication of earlier public art with corporate interests. This new public art emphasised not just process but the particular active process of making art with the public. It could envisage public art as a discursive space, "a community meeting place" (Vito Acconci).[14] It often favoured public sculpture, which avoided claims to permanence, yet was politically engaged.[15]

House was intended as temporary and to have relevance to issues of local significance. It belongs therefore to this new phase of public art.

The sequence of events

Early in 1993, Artangel (who commissioned *House*) agreed with Bow Neighbourhood to sign a temporary lease of 193 Grove Road after researching widely for a suitable location for Rachel Whiteread's projected piece. Substantial audiences and media coverage for *House* were expected; the proposal was endorsed by prominent art bodies and sponsored by Beck's Beer.

Delays in starting the casting process meant the sculpture was not unveiled until 25 October (leaving less time than planned for viewing before the lease expired at the end of November). Sidney Gale, the house's occupant, was rehoused by the Council over the summer. After the opening, there was an explosion of praise from the national broadsheets. Opposition to the sculpture (from local people and critics) was already newsworthy.[16] Soon people were reported as travelling long distances to see *House*.[17]

A crucial factor in this public and media interest was the context of the Turner Prize, given annually by the Tate Gallery to a young British artist for an outstanding exhibition in the last 12 months. The prize's alleged "bias" toward "neoconceptual art" had been controversial for years, but with Whiteread as one of the four prize nominees, *House* became a principal focus of attention in the often-hostile coverage of the Prize. Interest was intensified by the K Foundation (a front of the former pop group the KLF), who advertised an award of double the Turner Prize money for the "worst" artist, to be nominated by the public from the Turner nominees.

On Tuesday, 23 November, the Turner Prizegiving was to be televised live on Channel 4. The K Foundation had booked an advertising slot in the programme to announce the result of their counter-prize. Earlier that evening, a Councillors' meeting to consider Artangel's request for extension of the lease (already publicly rejected by Eric Flounders, Bow Neighbourhood's Chair) was scheduled.

Within a few hours, Whiteread was awarded the Turner Prize and the K Foundation's prize (in the form of almost £40,000 in cash nailed to a frame and chained to the Tate Gallery's railings) and the Neighbourhood (on a split vote) rejected extension. Debate about *House* intensified. The Neighbourhood received more than a hundred letters overwhelmingly supporting extension, the Bow Neighbourhood Forum voted similarly, and the local Labour MP obtained House of Commons support to put down a motion calling for a local referendum on *House*'s life. The next weekend, the surrounding parkland was full of people viewing, arguing, and being lobbied by different sides. Substantial petitions for and against *House*'s removal were collected.

Delays in arranging demolition ensured that *House* survived beyond 30 November, the reprieve becoming official when "benefactors" including Channel 4 and Beck's paid to extend the lease until the New Year.

By the eventual demolition on 11 January 1994, Artangel claimed 100,000 visitors to the site. Demolition occurred in front of television cameras, Rachel Whiteread and Sidney Gale looking on. By then, the press had already billed the episode as an example of "the eternal struggle between art and authority", a dispute "In the *House* of the Philistines", or "one of the most enjoyable cultural squabbles for years".[18]

Media coverage

UK media attention was extensive: 20 reviews, 3 editorials, almost 50 news and comment items, 32 items in letter columns and more than 10 cartoons and other humorous references. There was regular coverage in the *East London Advertiser* and, at key points, coverage in many regional newspapers across Britain. There was also considerable interest in weekly magazines in addition to television and the international press coverage.

The storyline *House* emerged against the background of well-established storylines about modern *art* and the "follies" of the Turner Prize in particular. In addition, *House* quickly became a convenient reference point for other issues: the standing of a controversial critic who opposed *House* (Brian Sewell), the adequacy of government arts funding and the value of business sponsorship.

Clear patterns emerge. There was universal and exceptional acclaim for *House* from the arts correspondents in the broadsheets. *House* was typically read as some kind of statement: for example, "a stark comment on social realities" or "as commemorating a century of domestic life even as it insists on the impossibility of recovering the lost lives spent within it".[19] As the controversy heightened, positions became increasingly rhetorical, with calls (more appropriate to debates on earlier *permanent* public art) for *House* to be preserved.[20]

Hostility to *House* took three forms: (i) reviews by arts correspondents of some conservative tabloids; (ii) comments by non-art columnists in both those tabloids and also some broadsheets (in the latter case, conflicting with those papers' own arts correspondents); and (iii) indirectly, through news items about the sculpture which emphasised negative local reaction. *House* was criticised not for failing in its artistic aims but more fundamentally, for not being art: it was "junk", "facile and fleeting", "ultimately boring".[21]

Positions taken on *House* itself and on the Turner Prize were generally matched. Writers hostile to *House* connected it with a wider malaise represented by a Turner Prize under the control of a new "arts establishment" or "arts elite", generally described as "rich", always as unrepresentative of popular taste.[22] *House*'s supporters generally supported the Prize, although some qualified their position.

Both "sides" of the debate sought to represent popular opinion on the sculpture, in news stories about reactions, "vox pops", and in references to popular support in the course of review and comment.[23]

Many arts figures contacted Bow calling for *House*'s reprieve. Within the media, *House* became a controversy in which "it was important to know which side you're on".[24]

Popular reaction

Aside from media representations, what was the actual balance of popular opinion?

The majority of views *recorded* were expressed in the context of *interest* in whether *House*'s life should be extended. Sources available to me were as follows: letters to national and local newspapers (both for and against extension), the petition against

extension (containing little explicit comment), "vox pops" and scattered references in media coverage, and unpublished letters written to Bow. In the last category, I saw 129 letters, of which three opposed and the rest supported extension (32 were identifiably from arts professionals and 10 from pupils at a local school). Unfortunately, the letters written to Whiteread were unavailable to me. The views of those *indifferent* or *hostile* to the sculpture are likely to be underrepresented in these written records. Beyond that lies the largely irrecoverable territory of the discussions on- and off-site. Any conclusions must therefore be tentative.

It is clear, however, that local opinion was split. Those lobbying for *House*'s removal claimed 90 per cent. support in the immediate neighbourhood, although their petition is consistent with a lower level of support. It was this position that Councillor Flounders sought to represent, but a significant local minority liked the sculpture – or at least were interested in it. This was reflected in letters to the Council and the press, in anecdotal references from the site, and most strikingly, in the political disagreements (among Councillors and between the Council and the local MP). There was also wide interest in *House* across London and Britain; many letters mention long journeys to visit it; others refer to frequent return visits.

Recorded views expressed against *House* fell into three categories. First, the view that the sculpture was "rubbish", just "concrete", a refusal to "read" the work in any way at all. Here, there was partial overlap with media hostility in spite of a difference in language. Secondly, the view (normally combined with the first) of *House* as an unwelcome interference by (rich, successful) "outsiders" in the affairs of "locals".[25] A related complaint was that the sculpture's funding would have been better spent on actual housing. Finally, a few connected with the arts world argued that *House* failed as *public art* as it ignored local issues, recalling old debates within public art.[26]

Recorded views in favour of *House* were more varied. Among "public" reasons were: the economic benefit accruing from *House* in terms of tourism; "*House*" as civic asset giving pleasure to local people (many suggested landscaping the park to accommodate it); *House* as bringing international attention to the neighbourhood. There were more personal reasons: *House*'s value as a statement (whether on housing policy or simply on "how things were"); the issue of democracy (the *right* of people to see the sculpture and participate in the debate); and finally, an anxiety to be among "those who will have seen" *House*.[27]

Whatever the actual balance of opinion, *House* acquired national notoriety as stock material for press cartoons and end-of-year quizzes.

Preliminary comments

We should not dismiss these events as a media-enhanced version of an old battle: "modern art" against an uncomprehending public. That would be too simple as can easily be shown.

Although *House* provoked a split in opinion, both "sides" shared one thing: they misrepresented each other. *Opponents* of *House* who accused it of being a sport "for

the gallery-going classes of Hampstead" (Flounders) or the Turner Prize of being a "freak show" representing "a clique of rich and silly people" (Sewell) completely ignored the considerable public interest in both, stretching beyond one locality or socio-economic group. *Supporters* of *House* frequently referred to their opponents as the "tabloid" press who prevented the "people" appreciating *House* fully. Yet on the contrary, the largest circulation tabloids made nothing of the story and a number of writers in the broadsheets attacked *House*. Nor were all the opponents of *House* "philistines" (as its supporters' rhetoric often suggested); many of its media opponents (often themselves articulate commentators on art or other matters) including the KLF supported a *different kind* of art, rather than rejecting art as such.

These misrepresentations were convenient for both sides' claims that they (not their opponents) represented popular opinion. In *House* (a space where "the people" actually gathered together and could be "consulted"), "representing" what the people thought acquired a charged significance. But *what was it* on which people were being represented? Certainly *not* the issues which Whiteread sought to raise: there was little debate about housing during the controversy. Certainly not either the issue of what form public art should take, which while raised implicitly by *House*'s supporters was ignored by virtually all its opponents. Certainly *not merely* the value of *House* as individual work. Throughout, there was at stake the issue: what is art ("Is it art?") and, underlying that, who is qualified to define what art is? *House* was not only an individual statement on public issues but also a token in a quite different, long-standing dispute about the capital (in Bourdieu's extended sense) at stake in the visual arts, a dispute dramatised in the heightened rhetoric of the Turner Prize ceremony.

This may explain the "alliance" between (i) art correspondents of conservative newspapers and some non-art columnists (together representing an earlier arts establishment with a rival form of capital to that represented by *House*), (ii) local people hostile to *House* (who often lacked cultural capital), and (iii) the K Foundation (who claimed to despise capital).

We should not assume that popular opinion simply *reproduced* the polarisation in media coverage of *House*. As the letters to Bow in particular make clear, some people began hostile and became supporters of *House*, others remained sceptical, but argued for an extension in the interests of debate; still others expressed limited interest in *House* itself, but supported its permanent installation on economic grounds.

"Popular" reaction may have operated in part *beyond* the confines of the media debate.

Models

In this Section, I will consider various possible models for understanding *House* and reactions to it. I aim to show not only that each model is inadequate but also that the search for an all-encompassing model is misguided.

Art as text

House was a non-verbal physical structure. Yet there is plenty of precedent for understanding its reception on a model developed primarily in the context of *verbal* communication (on conceiving the non-verbal as "text"): from the implicit textualism of ideological theories of art (Janet Wolff)[28] to explicitly textual interpretations developed from semiotics (Barthes, Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model of television, John Fiske's interpretation of the beach as "text").[29] A theory of visual art based on Halliday's "social semiotics" has recently been developed by Michael O'Toole.[30]

There is initial plausibility in applying a textual model to *House*. Supportive critics *did* regard it as a communication whose content could be analysed. We might also analyse the Turner Prize process as a "text" of which the K Foundation's counter-prize was an "oppositional reading".[31]

But *any* textual model must at least identify a "communication" which is the "text" to be interpreted. A fundamental difficulty with *House* is that the differences between its supporters and opponents were precisely not differences about *how* to interpret it, operating on the shared ground that it was something-to-be-interpreted. Rather, opponents *refused* the act of interpretation, and thereby *House*'s status as "text", rejecting in principle the textual claims of many of *House*'s supporters. As Flounders wrote, "*House* is not a statement about housing under Thatcher or anything else. It is rubbish". (Nor should we simply assume that *House*'s supporters liked it *only because* they interpreted it in certain ways: they may have liked it partly because it was a space which enabled *other* discursive practices *not* directed at *House*, such as memory.)

Any model of *House* which privileges its "textuality" thereby neglects the extent to which its status as text was contested. The virtue which O'Toole claims for his theory of art (that "it *starts* with the text of the art work itself") is precisely its limitation.[32] The same limitation is disguised in practice beneath unexamined claims of the "statements" art works "make". I clarify below *what* role "textuality" should play in any account of *House*.

Distinction

Once we acknowledge that *House*'s status as "text" was contested, we require some grasp of the social practices in which related meaning claims were made, received, and rejected. The most developed such thesis is Pierre Bourdieu's class-based theory of "taste", which interprets individuals' artistic taste in terms of strategies to maximise their (symbolic and economic) capital, strategies which themselves reflect the "habitus" or "system of dispositions" shaped by common experiences of the classes to which those individuals belong.[33]

Without full empirical evidence (of class status, educational history, etc.), we cannot determine whether Bourdieu's theory was exemplified by reactions to *House* – but is his theory a plausible starting-point for understanding *House*? In particular, are the two fundamental divisions that result from the theory helpful:

(i) between the "aesthetic code" (of the dominant, capital-holding class) and the "non-aesthetic", purely functional attitude to art of the dominated, working class who lack capital and whose early experiences are shaped by "necessity"; and (ii) (within the dominant class) between the aesthetic attitude of the dominant fraction (the bourgeoisie, with predominantly economic capital) requiring from art "emblems of distinction" and that of the "dominated" fraction (the intellectuals, with predominantly symbolic capital) requiring from art "a symbolic challenging of social reality".[34]

House was ideally suited to demonstrate both divisions: (i) as a conversion of a functional object (a home) into a non-functional object situated in functional spaces (park and street); and (ii) as an art object which expended economic capital, yet had no apparent economic worth and was viewable by anyone *whatever* their capital. *House* should have provided living proof of these divisions in open public space beyond the museum (whose audience is preselected to reflect those divisions).[35]

Media views of *House* can be seen partly in terms of a dispute about "capital" within the "aesthetic field": Section I. Bourdieu's theory of distinction cannot, however, provide a total explanatory model of reactions, as becomes clear when we examine its underlying principles.

First, Bourdieu's account of capital-maximising strategies gets purchase *only* relative to "fields" where specific types of capital are already agreed to be at stake.[36] What if there is no such agreement? Bourdieu's theory contains no criteria to resolve *which* field action belongs to. Nor, therefore, can it explain situations where the question "Which field?" is itself contested by the agents. Yet some hostile reactions judged *House not* in terms of its aesthetic status but in terms of other forms of capital: for instance, the "field" of professional skills (implicit in local portrayals of Whiteread as a "top" artist intervening in an "ordinary" house in the locality).[37]

Second, Bourdieu's theory has, as its building blocks, clearly distinguishable class aesthetics: it cannot adequately explain why, in the case of *House,* their divisions were (angrily contested) *within* the local, predominantly working- and lower-middle-class population, let alone why individuals who began prejudiced against art *changed their opinions*. If letters by art professionals and children are excluded, 10 per cent of the unpublished letters on *House* claim such a change.

From which follows the third difficulty. Bourdieu depicts habitus as an "objective intention . . . which *always outruns* his the agent's conscious intentions" and in only one way: "in a class society, all the products of a given agent . . . speak *inseparably and simultaneously* of his class".[38] By excluding individual reaction and adjustment, Bourdieu's theory is silent on his may be articulated together in a shared situation (the Foucauldian question of how discourses *form* the objects of which they speak). It omits perhaps the most important aspect of *House*.

Some theory of "distinction" may still be useful here. Paul Dimaggio's rather different theory proposes that the arts (and media generally) provide society's *shared* material in terms of which various strategies of social differentiation can be pursued. It follows that groups with different educational and social histories may differ less in their orientation to cultural objects and more in their facility to *range across*

the cultural terrain.[39] This theory is open to the possibility that social groups may be "exposed" to *each other* through the mediation of art, especially art which becomes a media event. We need now to address *House*'s status as a broadcast event.

Media influence and media events

We can hardly make sense of *House* as an *event* except within the dramaturgical structure it acquired through its media coverage (especially the coincidence of its display and the Turner Prize build-up).

The polarisation of media coverage turned on depicting *House* as a token for "the state of modern art" around which rival definitions of aesthetic capital could compete. Depicting Whiteread as an individual battling against uncomprehending authority was no less conventionally dramatised in the storyline of *House*'s demolition. The principal sources for this presentation were standard: critics, organisers, and journalists with a general interest in art or national affairs. Other opinion was filtered through vox pops or confined to letters and pages. *Policing the Crisis* remains useful in explaining how production time pressures dictate reliance on standard story repertoire and a limited range of "official" sources, so that more complex patterns of non-official discourse are systematically ignored.[40] Less plausible is applying that book's wider thesis to argue that media coverage served the interests of a dominant group. What set of interests united the government, Bow Councillors, Beck's Beer, Artangel and the Tate Gallery?

The work of Dayan and Katz on "media events", although concentrated on the live presentation of national ceremonials, establishes important principles here.[41] They explain how national media coverage of a flow of events may be "performative" in J.L. Austin's sense, creating a media event in the act of performing it.[42] The event so "performed" will have a narrative structure suitable for its media presentation: for example, the "Contest", fulfilled at various levels in *House*.[43] By "retextualising" social action, the media may reformulate it in a "subjunctive", "as-if" mode, so that its unfolding foregrounds different issues from those relevant to the actions comprising its "raw material".[44]

Dayan and Katz's recognition of the transformative power of media events allows us to reintegrate the textual aspects of *House*. We need not a formal textual model but to focus on "textualising" as a *process* which is contingent, multiple, and contestable. This entails relativising the term "text" to mean what is framed when a relative stability of context enables one or more structures for interpretation. An event such as *House* may "contain" many "virtual texts" sustained for different periods by different sources and for different "readers".[45] The media has a privileged (but not exclusive) role in generating such virtual texts.

De Certeau's anti-model

Michel De Certeau, however, posed an important challenge to each of the preceding types of model by arguing that *within* whatever "strategies" or structures we

identify (textual, practical, media-centred), there is always space in which heterogeneous other "tactics" subsist unacknowledged, unarticulated practices: "the trajectories of which trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop".[46] In particular, De Certeau draws attention to "anti-texts", which "found spaces" by juxtaposing elements of existing texts: for example, the private, barely unacknowledged "stories" which people tell about places or enact by walking through them.[47] Because the tactics of "the weak" are precisely those regularities which are *not* articulated within formal discourse, no discourse on his view is adequate to model the totality of strategies and tactics. In that sense, his position is an anti-model.

Is this a way of holding in suspense each of the different elements (textuality, practice, media effects) so far considered without arbitrating between them (a tempting "solution")? Certainly, many aspects of *House* can be seen as tactics: the graffiti, the discussions on site, the joke estate agent's board erected outside. De Certeau's observations on the generation of anti-texts have an affinity with the process of reappropriation in recent visual art of which *House* is just one example.[48] Indeed, in his observations on how private memory inheres in houses, he wrote what is virtually *House*'s epitaph: "It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: 'you see, here there used to be. . .', but it can no longer be seen".[49]

We cannot assume, however (as John Fiske in his adaptations of De Certeau appears to imply), that "tactics" *as such* automatically comprise "resistance" by the "people" (in some positive sense) and are "opposed" to "strategies" (associated with "power", in some pejorative sense).[50] Although we know very little of individual viewers' experiences on site, it seems plausible that "tactics" (reminiscing, the recontextualising involved in walking around the site) were practised as much by those *with* discursive power as by those *without* and that even the latter adopted "strategies" aimed at closing off the "tactical" space which *House* had become. We should concentrate less on the distinction between "strategy" and "tactics" in itself and more on how *both* strategic power *and* tactical freedom are distributed unevenly. I return to the issue(s) of power below.

Beyond models

House was not only an object in art or media discourse, it was also as a physical object in shared space. Many theorists recently have emphasised the centrality of spatial practice to understanding social phenomena.[51]

Consider the physical situation of *House*. When first displayed, numbers visiting it were limited: you could view it alone (as I did). If we remember Goffman's observations on the embarrassment of lacking a "screen" between oneself and other interactions in the same place, we can see that viewing *House* alone (in view of passing cars or pedestrians) may have involved the embarrassment of *being looked at while looking*, an embarrassment perhaps all the more acute for anyone self-conscious about not knowing how to *look like* someone who knew how to *look at art*![52]

Consider how the space around *House* changed as audiences increased and (as a televised site) it became charged with media significance. At one moment, it was the focus of multiple social situations, chance interactions, and then became perhaps what Amos Rapoport has called a "critical" space where spatial and other meanings are intensified.[53]

Rapoport's work has explored how buildings bear meaning, especially "users" meaning, which may differ from constructors' or planners' meanings. *House* potentially bore *users*' meanings in a number of ways: as a quasi-domestic structure, as an alteration of the wider environment (street and park), or as the focus of a public social space. Yet its meanings were certainly not clear. While lacking the normal external features of a house, its outside bore the traces of normally unseen inner space; it was an addition to public space that was in some senses private. Even its graffiti had meaning, suggesting a possible deterioration of the public environment – a fall in property values (as some living opposite feared).[54]

Consider also the wider spatial context: how the "time-space lines" (Hagerstrand) of "locals" (who saw *House* on their way to somewhere else) differed sharply from those of visitors (who came to view it and then returned to somewhere else). This had real practical significance – the traffic congestion as taxis and cars unloaded visitors at the site.

In all these ways, space mattered – continuously, variously (although the details are largely lost to us).

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We need to connect these insights with the theories discussed earlier in this Section. Paradoxically, I would argue, we can only do so if we recognise that *no single model* (however complex) can make the necessary connections. We can focus this issue by considering aspects of the spatial itself.

Doreen Massey's comments are important here.[55] Avoiding any metaphorical characterisation of "spatiality", she emphasises the "spatial" as *literally* "the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local to the most global".[56] Here, "simultaneous coexistence" implies *not* the possibility of being understood together but rather, the radical complexity of space-time as the frame for events which *cannot* be reduced to a single coherent "reading". Thus, although in *House,* many actions and many texts "came together" in one spatio-temporal frame, this "coming together" bore no promise of a unified explanatory model.

Grasping that complexity should not lead us to underestimate those processes (including media narrative and art discourse) by which the heterogeneous may *appear to be* focused in an "event". This appearance is "transformative" (in Dayan and Katz's term)[57]; transforming one or more levels of social action into an event, but transformative within theory also, inducing in theory a sense of "falling" (*between* levels, *between and beyond* models).

My Conclusion will explore these thoughts further.

Contexts

Before that, I want to briefly sketch other contexts in which *House* (as work and event) can be understood. I intend to imply no hierarchy among these contexts or the "virtual texts" available within them.

Public and private space

House was not just a monument. It was an issue in the official ordering of public space, affecting traffic flows and long-term planning decisions. It was also a space through which the public moved, where people stayed to argue and reflect. A discursive space, broadcast nationally, whose physical preservation became a democratic issue as shown in people's concern that the sculpture should be reprieved so that others could have the chance to "make up their minds" (there are 20 examples of this in the unpublished letters, and compare letters in *The Independent* 20 November and 1 December 1993). A counter-example perhaps to theories that public space has been destroyed by the speed of communications.[58]

House was also at least two private spaces: the former home of Sidney Gale and the neighbourhood of those who lived close by. Sidney Gale's opposition to *House* was understandable, yet, when it was demolished, he talked as if it actually *was* his home coming down, confirming indirectly the sculpture's symbolic power ("they're pulling down my bedroom now").[59]

House could stand in for other domestic spaces too: for home as the place where humans face death[60]; home as "site of resistance" against authority.[61] One woman (about to lose her home to make way for the M11 motorway) wrote to Bow that *House* was "extremely relevant to the predicament facing a great many East Londoners". Beyond that, *House* by dramatising the loss of a single home provoked many different perspectives of "loss": the loss of an era (perhaps mythical?) of comfortable public housing or the loss of the East End "as it was". And while housing issues figured little in public discussion explicitly, they were present obliquely in the text painted on *House*'s side: HOUSES FOR ALL BLACK AND WHITE.

Local/global

We saw earlier how an opposition between "locals" and (rich, privileged) "outsiders" underlay much local hostility to *House*. Wider issues are at stake.

First, *House* (the transformation into art of a domestic space) might, however unfairly, be interpreted as a "colonisation", connecting with old attacks on public art,[62] as well as the process of "gentrification".[63] Gentrification crucially involves raising the economic value of the gentrified properties and "improving" their immediate environment: hence the importance of "preservation" and "aesthetic selection", a process whereby elites transform "the vernacular" into "a new landscape of power".[64] *House*'s construction was *not*, of course, a direct example of gentrification; instead it prolonged temporarily a house that was already condemned.

Yet debates about *House* were certainly *marked* by that wider issue (e.g., Councillor Flounders claimed those supporting *House*'s reprieve were mainly "gentrifiers").[65] As Zukin reminds us, artistic practice is rarely innocent of actual spatial claims.

Secondly, *House*, which required coordination of information, funding, and skills from beyond the locality, was an operation in what Lefebvre analysed as the abstract space in which capital and information are circulated and what Castells has called the "space of information flows".[66] Yet as an object inserted in a specific locality, *House* was also part of a different process whereby local meaning was contested. It therefore illustrated Castells' thesis that increasingly intense disputes about the uses of local space (fought often *at the expense of and in opposition to* wider communicative connections) are the counterpart to the increasingly powerful flow of capital and information beyond and largely without reference to localities.[67]

It does not follow that local matters are of no interest to capital; on the contrary, as Harvey has argued, "local colour" (whether architecture or festivals) is economically advantageous on a larger scale by distinguishing metropolitan areas from each other as attractive sites for capital.[68] Accordingly, arguments based exclusively on local *use* may conflict with arguments based on the possibility of attracting spending from outside the locality. Bow Neighbourhood (arguing for more parkland) and locals (arguing for *House* as tourist attraction) were on opposite sides of such a conflict.

The "global/local" issue was not just economic. *House* also seemed to connect Bow as "ordinary" locality to the "international" arts world which *House* represented. Many letters expressed satisfaction that *House* had, as one put it, "put Bow on the international contemporary arts map".[69] This local interest directed at the "centre" was matched by the "centre's" disdain for the "merely local", epitomised in critics' formulaic references to the "dog toilet" of a park which would, supposedly, replace *House*.[70]

There are historical resonances here too. It was only four or five generations ago that a desperately poor East End attracted evangelists' zeal: the period (from the 1880s until the Second World War) of extensive church building and the "Settlements" by Oxford University ministers and undergraduates. Then "men fresh from the studies and sports of the Universities went and lived among the poor and made friends with them" and a prominent vicar aimed to remove the Eastenders' "poverty of life" "by contact with those who possessed the means of higher life".[71] Here perhaps lies part of the submerged context for some Eastenders' "resistance" to *House*, at least in the canonized form in which some supporters presented it.

Memory

House dramatised the demise of an earlier era of class-homogeneous housing: the terraced house that in 1911 comprised around 87 per cent. of English homes, but by 1971 only 30 per cent.[72] In this respect (as well as in its construction), *House*'s role of monument might seem obvious and effective (it was a commonplace of critics' comments). Was this commemorative association more widely shared?

Whiteread and Artangel emphasised the importance of "memory" in reactions to *House* they received,[73] yet this was true of only a *small minority* of the letters sent to Bow. We should beware of reading back into the gaps in the evidence the effect we assume *House should* have had.

Yet *House* as representation of home was surely connected with wider processes: the growing obsession with "preservation" and "heritage"[74]; and the increasing role of the house as refuge from public space, as "private museum".[75]

House was intended as temporary, yet (unlike the recent "Counter-monuments" of German sculptors commissioned to mark aspects of Nazism or the Holocaust), its temporariness was not intended to be dramatised.[76] Yet Bow's intervention transformed it from the merely temporary into the potentially permanent but to-be-destroyed: becoming precisely a *counter*-monument, a monument to forgetting, whose destruction played out the memory erasure that it had been aimed (mutely) to resist.

Gender

As a public monument under a woman's direction, *House* ran counter to important stereotypes: the gendering of the public /private distinction[77]; the historical exclusion of women from "monumental" art and their confinement to "domestic" art[78]; and the regulation of women's circulation in public space.[79] While suggesting another stereotype (woman as "defender of the home"), *House* (a home filled in to become unliveable) negated Ruskin's classic image of home as "place of Peace". Indeed, its embodied Ruskin's suspicion that "so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it . . . it 'the house' ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over".[80]

House also reversed the cultural pattern which Bourdieu analysed in detail in Morocco in the 1960s, yet which may still have importance: the house as closed private space, hidden from public view except in the perspective of the (male) controller of the house (entering from the surrounding public space).[81] *House* exposed the form of a house's inside by displaying a structure that could no longer be entered.[82]

Yet although Whiteread was the first woman to win the Turner Prize, gender issues received little explicit comment, nor do the letters written to Bow show significantly more women than men among *House*'s supporters – although, strikingly, no woman attacked it publicly.

More eloquent perhaps (but to whom?) were the photos of Whiteread on site in overalls and hard hat, surrounded by the signs of stereotypically "man's work".

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Such contexts and virtual texts could be multiplied further. We cannot be exhaustive. We know only a small percentage of reactions at the time and indifference can be expected to leave few traces. Even an ethnographic study conducted today would tell us little of how *House* may by now variously have been forgotten.

Conclusion

I began by questioning any easy notion that art "speaks to us directly". I have been equally sceptical about whether the aspects of *House* can be reduced to a single model. I seem to have answered scepticism by scepticism. Yet any scepticism (especially such a *double* scepticism) must earn its keep by suggesting a wider space of connection and enquiry. I must now turn to the reverse, positive side of the earlier sceptical arguments. In particular, I must defend the assumption, implicit throughout, that cultural studies should attempt to map (even if not model) the complexity of singular events. I will have to deal with the many issues arising rather schematically.

1 So ingrained is the temptation to seek textual objects as a sure starting point for interpretation, that (deconstruction notwithstanding) it remains useful to emphasise that general cultural analysis begins *not* from this or that text, but from textualising as a *process*; a process which analysis finds at work each time in particular complex circumstances (I am ignoring here the special case of the literary text). *House* was no exception. We should see textualising as the open-ended process producing the "spaces" across which connections, differences and negations (in short discursive processes) operate. This process endlessly repeats itself across events and the (relatively) stable objects we call "texts". Both events and texts may therefore focus collections of "virtual texts".

2 How are virtual texts connected to social context? First, if textualising is open-ended, the meaning of a text cannot be fixed by the social context where it was originally formed. As Paul Willis has argued, many messages are "made messages"; they are "made" (at least partly) "in reception".[83] The temporary alliances (Willis calls them "proto-communities") that enable these messages to pass are contingent and their members may be unknown to each other. *House* surely generated a "proto-community".

   Yet, textualising is performed by agents with determinate resources that set *some* limits on their actions. Bourdieu's theoretical position rightly insists upon the effectiveness of those limits beyond conscious planning; its weakness is to ignore how practice is a continual adjustment of resources and habits to *context* and "context" is established at least in part by a *reflexive* process open to conscious correction.[84]

   Not least surely among the sources of "context" is the process of "media significance" whereby media production sustains a shared general framework of significance against which more specific frameworks develop. This is not to supplant the process of social distinction entirely but rather to acknowledge the force of those media processes whereby s, tastes, and texts generally kept apart are brought together arbitrarily and with arbitrary speed[85]; producing the *slippage* that is more than just decontextualisation, the shared sense of "falling", the "gravity" of an "event".

3 *House* was precisely such a slippage: a breach or discontinuity which brought together in public conflicting practices, thereby stimulating new discourse.[86]

Slippage, I would suggest, occurs when agents within one practice have to adjust to other practices (which may be represented by "texts"). Thus, in *House*, different practices in relation to art and public space (a local spatial practice and a global discursive practice) confronted and adjusted to each other.

In the "gravity" of an "event", the "as-if" is lived for real, and the event's participants are the "witnesses" (recalling Hebdige's term) of a conflict and resolution without precedent, which *only then* are being textualised. Such a "confrontation" may occur either through the constructed simultaneity of a "media event" or in the proximity of public space. In *House*, remarkably, these circumstances were combined. *House* was both a spatial and a media frame in which many heterogeneous elements (art discourse, local politics, national issues, private memories) intersected, within and beyond available media narratives.

4 Alongside every such event runs the power of definition – and its contestation. Access to such power may itself be part of the capital on which strategies of distinction focus.[87] Public space (the overlapping nexus of many private spaces and public appropriations)[88] is a rich site for contesting such power, especially when (as with *House*) it is integrated into media narratives. Here, perhaps, we come close to the "systematic dimension" according to which the "gesture" of public art "is organised" in the media age.[89]

5 I have talked of "media events", the sense of an event and of "events" in general. Yet the term "event" itself may raise difficulties. Any event is a multi-dimensional intersection of discursive and non-discursive practices – each of them irreducible to each other. An event, therefore, will not be reducible to a single model. But if we cannot in principle satisfactorily model an event, should we conclude that events are mere chimaeras and unworthy of study?

The answer is *no* provided we maintain Donald Davidson's distinction between an event (as such) and an event under description.[90] *Whether* an event occurred is, he argues, quite independent from *how* it may be described. It follows that an event may exist under an infinite number of descriptions (some inconsistent with each other and all incomplete) *without* that calling into question whether the event occurred. Moreover (and this is the other aspect of his argument), *that* events exist is an irreducible presupposition of our language of action and explanation.[91] The most circumspect account of the play of discourses must assume that *this* was spoken/written *then* and *there* (extradiscursive fact).

6 Indeed, far from being problematic, events may be central to cultural analysis precisely because, as events (occurrences in *specific spatio-temporal locations*), they reveal how the discursive and the extradiscursive – text and practice intersect.[92] Moreover, as just argued, the *spatial* aspects of *House* were crucial, not marginal, to its particular power as "event". Recalling Doreen Massey's insight, we can see that the "spatiality" of events is the guarantee *both* of their radical complexity and their theoretical importance.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The attempt to understand what happens when art intervenes in public space can, then, help us understand those other textualising processes (the media in general) which offer accounts of "the world".[93] We cannot, however, assume we know the "space" where art speaks, still less "what", "to whom" and "in the name of whom" it speaks.

We are all, unavoidably, "readers" of events in public space, all potential "witnesses at the scene". All readings, as Hebdige stresses, are necessarily partial yet in the *shared* and radically uncertain terrain of public space and the public sphere, to rest on individual partiality is not enough. Lacking the (only ever imagined) privilege of an Archimedean point from which to picture the whole, we must seek such perspective as we can. Here we need scepticism as much, perhaps more, than our personal loyalties, if we hope to make sense of what happens when someone (always more than one) speaks up in a public place.

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2

GLOBAL MAGICS, LOCAL DISCRETION

I

Where lies the future of art and of the city? Is this one global question, or many local questions? Is it a single issue for public discussion, or many issues to be confronted and resolved by each of us, separately, in the privacy of our homes? All of these perhaps – and our sense of how these questions fit together, is continually being transformed by the presence of the global electronic media. But I will suggest that it is the *place from where* we ask these questions that is as important as the direction of our answers. I am very grateful to the organisers of the Fukuoka Arts Festival and this International Artists Symposium for the opportunity to offer, from my personal perspective, some thoughts on these questions.

Let me begin with a quotation:

> the dynamic State can merely make society possible, by letting one nature be curbed by another; the ethical State can merely make it (morally) necessary, by subjecting the individual will to the general; the aesthetic State alone can make [society] real, because it consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual.

This was how, 200 years ago (the text was published in June 1795), the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller expressed the relation of art to the new visions of autonomous states that were then developing.[1] By the "aesthetic State", he meant not the outward features of public order but the power of the individual artist to *focus* a vision, which can transform all the contradictory features of a living community into a single whole. But the concept of an individual artistic vision which could focus a whole society, or even a single city, is barely tenable for us now.

At one end of the problem, urban theorists have accustomed us to the paradox that after more than a century of urban planning and millennia of urban living, we can no longer imagine one place from where the city can be grasped as a meaningful whole.[2] It is not just, as the powerful photos of Ryuji Miyamoto of the buildings being demolished suggest,[3] that we are fascinated as much by the city in ruins as by the city in strength. For, if as one writer puts it, there is a "crisis of the city in [the] imaginary dimension",[4] it is a crisis of measurement: an inability to measure ourselves, and the buildings which until recently have stood in for us as measures of the city's strength, against the abstract nature of the power which the city now concentrates. As Jurgen Habermas has said, "the city became the intersection point of a different kind of functional relationship. It was embedded in abstract systems, which could no longer be captured aesthetically in an intelligible presence".[5] As a result, our sense of public space, perhaps even our "sense of place" itself, is disorientated, awaiting a new cognitive mapping which perhaps may never come.[6]

(Postmodernist architecture has, of course, attempted to respond to this sense of disorientation by offering a philosophy of architecture, which accepts its public responsibilities but refuses to offer a single vision. The postmodern architect, according to Charles Jencks, should negotiate a compromise between the range of stylistic visions that he or she can supply and the visual codes of the building's users.)[7]

At the other end of the problem, our sense of the place from where art speaks is no clearer. From one perspective, the whole history of art in the last two centuries might be seen as a process in which one uncomfortable truth has been evaded, disguised, and, only perhaps now, finally, accepted: the truth that there is *no* privileged place from which any person, any particular practice can view society and transform it; that the transcendental space of contemplation which Romantic ideals of art and society in Europe at least required is simply *not there* to be occupied – whether by the artist or by anyone else.[8] Art's endless attempts to reimagine how it relates to society (expanding the painted object beyond the frame, expanding the notion of sculpture beyond the walls of the gallery, or diffusing artistic action among the rituals of "everyday life") – all of these have only confirmed this uncomfortable fact.[9] The end-point of this process was clearly expressed in 1982 by the American artist Sherrie Levine: "A "painting's meaning", she wrote, "is not in its origin, but in its destination".[10]

But, in a curious way, discourse about art continues to resist this realisation. For even those weighty proclamations we read of art's *impossibility* are, in fact, silent claims for art as a privileged place from which to be heard. To proclaim that art *must fail* to speak, *must fail* to "respond" to the challenges which modern society sets it, even this involves the assumption that "art" is place from where, if only things had worked out better, we might have been able to hold up the measuring-rod to "society": so that the supposed failure of art to speak comes to seem a failure of society as a whole.[11]

These silent claims on art's behalf are not made because artists are arrogant – they are surely related to wider cultural forces. Their form (an explicit denial of

the possibility of addressing society in general, while silently claiming the right to be listened to when doing just that) is matched in other fields: in sociology and philosophy, for instance. For example, that version of social thought (in particular Jean Baudrillard) which denies that "society" exists as a coherent object and the next moment proposes that our social existence in general is characterised by the "spectacular" – the false syndrome of belief and ritual which encourages us to believe that there is a social unity of which we are a part. But, if we are deceived in this, then Baudrillard must be wrong to claim that we are (as general social fact)![12] This pattern is also at work in a whole style of philosophically influenced art-discourse, which focusses on the exposures of modernist "fictions" that postmodernist thought has achieved. For if "postmodernism" is the collapse of "grand narratives" (those large stories of the framework in which all our smaller stories about art and society can be told),[13] where is the place from which we can claim postmodernism's own salvationist role? Without a "grand narrative", we cannot claim to be in an era for which postmodernism's sceptical discourse has a privileged importance. We are, simply, nowhere in particular.

But art's compulsion to go on secretly claiming (against its intellectual conscience) a position from which it can achieve a social transformation is also more than an accident of intellectual fashion. For even if art became exclusively a matter of local particulars, it would still need to *represent* itself to the world. And representation must pass through the electronic media which, whether at a global or a local level, take it on themselves to represent the world "as it is" and "how it should be". The self-effacement of the individual artist cannot be preserved at this level – and this is not a failure of art; it is a necessary condition of there being any wider communication about art at all.

So, art, however local and modest, faces a real conflict: between the way it would like to understand itself and the way it must project itself, if it is to have the resources to exist. Is this one reason why so much recent art has concentrated its energies on working in specific historical places and buildings – because these are spaces whose "stories" could never be translated fully by the artist or by the critic? They are spaces which have been frames for an infinite variety of interpretations over time, they are frames with *historical*, as well as spatial depth. So, although the *representation* of art in these spaces must always omit something, we know as soon as we walk into them and look around that their stories have not been exhausted. How could an old factory, a railway station, a house, a disused hospital, how could they, as present tokens of so many *past* lives, ever be exhausted of their meaning by us now – unless, of course, we destroy them?

By engaging more and more with sites of narratives *other* than art's own, art is perhaps beginning to accommodate the contradictions of its position in the media age. New conceptions of public art have developed (of art as "community process", as open-ended social alliance focused around historical spaces and the memories that they contain).[14] Installation art seems more and more central, whether it uses historical spaces that once resonated beyond art or whether it creates the illusion of being in such a space.[15] Perhaps we even have a new concept of the temporary,

barely defined spaces from which such work emerges: the space of the "witness", what Dick Hebdige, in a very resonant meditation on Krysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicle Project has expressed as: "the value of witness as positional testimony in, rather than (un)positioned knowledge of, a[n art work's] field".[16] A new way is being lived out of how art can be accommodated in the city: art perhaps is coming to function quite explicitly as a response to our difficulties of finding meaning in the urban spaces we move and dream in.

But in this historical speculation, perhaps I am starting to claim back the space from where art can figure out "society a whole", the very thing I have criticised. I need to focus instead on the space from where I, as an individual artist, am speaking.

II

I cannot imagine my creative work as more or less than a local magic. I try to face the countless ways in which society, the media address me, and to speak back in a voice I can call mine. To speak, I must transform those materials around me that I can reach: in a world in which there are few objects about which something has not been said and left a trace, I always expect to have the sense that, when I speak, I am merely transforming material that was there first. ("Originality" is a dead metaphor.) Of course, I am not the only one to use the different metaphors of "transformation" and "magic" in talking about my work.[17]

Adam Bohman and I have worked together for 10 years. Adam's work starts out from the strings of a violin, but through amplification the violin becomes merely a stage for hundreds of other objects, fragments of everyday life, forgotten remnants which were never respected or valued for their *sound*. In our group *Conspiracy*, we've tried to develop a sound world in which conventional instruments (piano, guitar, saxophone) can make sense alongside sounds that most people unconsciously reject as just noise. In this we're not just inspired by John Cage's famous aesthetic of noise but also by the "free improvisation" tradition that has grown in Britain and elsewhere since the early 1960s. If you can say this tradition has a philosophy, it was perhaps best expressed by the composer and member of the group AMM, Cornelius Cardew, when 30 years ago he wrote: "We are *searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment".[18]

Adam and I have extended this search in the past two years by working closely with the British visual artist CROW. His work interrogates the *rejected*: everything from fragments of clothing, furniture, flowers, the discarded records of forgotten social orders to the food left on our plate if left to rot, turning a natural magic upon itself. He produces work over long periods, constructing new orders from these rejections. In work together at CROW's London house (which is also his museum – "The Institution of Rot") and elsewhere, we try to extend this principle of transformation to actions, lecture forms, text: using our local magics to suggest

an imaginary order, the "institutions" of a secret theatre; exploring the "edges" of urban space that gape open in every private space.

III

At the beginnings of modern Europe,, magic or "superstition" was gradually but systematically excluded from official religion by defining it as "us[ing] consecrated objects for purposes other than those for which they were intended".[19] But a lot of art and music now, and a great deal of the cultures by which people absorb the media, are ways of using existing objects of purpose other than those for which they were intended'.[20] Magic is almost a prevailing condition – art is not an exclusive magical zone.

Even general statement comes back to a personal one, but we cannot stop there. As Suzy Gablik argued in *The Reenchantment of Art*, "art is *social process*". It requires material resources and also the social resource of a context if it is to exist at all – the "myth of pure creativity" which ignores those dependencies is not liberating but disabling.[21] But looking outwards to the social from my local perspective does not involve claiming yet again a privileged, transcendental space from which as an artist I can grasp the "whole". The social process that will arise from art and sound made now is simply a process of *building*, which everyone, not just artists, contributes to – it is not a truth to be stated by any one, it is an unknown which we (all of us) have yet to construct.

What type of social process can art in the city be now – in the age of global electronic media and computer networks? Le Corbusier once imagined the city as a machine, but it is more like a vast ecological system in which different forces that once worked together now work against each other – with uncertain results. The more technology enables us to live our domestic and official lives in separate sub-worlds (from where we have all the access we need to the financial, informational and physical support systems), the more our journeys between these sub-worlds become mere "obstruction", mere "delay".[22] "Public space", that is really valued *as space*, becomes exceptional. Most space is "space on the run" as Vito Acconci called it; as he said, we "come to visit not to stay".[23] And where we stay needs protecting (physically, and by the constructions of our imagination) *against* the forces that characterize public space. For every single public space that is temporarily charged with new meaning by art, there are many more private spaces that have been protected more securely against a public world they fear to know: think of the "Common Interest Developments" that are growing so fast in America, self-sufficient residential areas, with their own security, leisure space, corporate identity, virtual constitutions – private spaces that are firmly closed against the wider "public" even though they take on the trappings of public space.[24] Some people hope (but who can know yet?) that global computer networks (the "Net") will become public spaces where people travel to open themselves to others they don't yet know, to discover histories they don't yet share, and to hear messages they don't ever want to hear – in other words, genuine public spaces. Or will they merely be a shadow

sphere where we retreat when we choose to imagine the walls of our private rooms more distant, more exotic, than they really are?

We cannot think about the problem of public art without thinking also about the vast spaces where its writ can never run. The larger empire of art's local magics spreads across myriad public *and private* spaces – it will always be largely unknown from any public standpoint. A hidden empire which is not really an *empire* at all; rather an infinite network, only of whose connecting points shine bright enough to be seen from a distance. More than we need "taste", we simply need more connections, on every level, for making and for receiving signals.

IV

Are there *any* concepts left which can guide us in contemplating the future, without misleading us by claiming they guarantee for us and for art "the truth"? I have no answers – I can only point in one direction where I find inspiration.

A year or two ago I read an article by the music scholar Eishi Kikkawa about classical Japanese music.[25] I remember it because of the way it brought together two things: first, his argument (I don't know how many would agree with it) that Japanese music (unlike European music) has always lacked a strict separation or value hierarchy between the sounds of nature and the sounds produced by man-made instruments; and second his explanation of the philosophical concept from Zen Buddhism of "fusoku-furi", the possibility of achieving balance between elements that are neither connected ("fusoku") nor separate ("furi"), the possibility in musical terms of an improvisatory practice of discretion and intuition to balance these elements as they unfold. There are two inspirations in fact here: the rejection of any idea of a privileged *centre* from where we could judge natural sound or music, God-made or man-made sound, to be better or worse than each other; and, secondly, the continual practice of balance which *respects* difference as strongly as it recognises the need for accommodating it.

I claim no authority to speak on classical Japanese music or art, even less to lay out general concepts as guidelines for where art will go – so if my ending is inspired by these thoughts, its form is only a question.

Consider two traditions – an old tradition (at least two centuries old) of imagining art in opposition to the City, to modernity, even in some case "against Nature" itself ("Art" in opposition to, and as imaginary transformation of, the whole). There is a more recent tradition of thinking about the relation between human development and nature: ecological thinking which starts from *acceptance* of the need for a balance between human needs and the natural environment.

What would we lose, if, as artists and as potential citizens of the global community that will go on forming for a long time to come, what perhaps might we gain, if, instead of conceiving art as a *counter*-image of "society", instead of lamenting so often a terrorised and impoverished "present" against the background of an imaginary but ethically more "immediate" past, we imagined the future of art in a different way?

What if we accepted the crowded and immeasurably dense space of contemporary culture as our "nature" (not our anti-nature), what if we understood our battles for attention within that space as *ecological* questions to be addressed with the same discretion we expect in resolving the conflicts that arise between human development and the natural world?[26] What if we thought of the "city", for a moment, not as some specific vision whose failures or successes can be measured but simply as the wider frame in which all our local magics become possible?

If we imagined these things in our discussions about the future of art and the city, would this, perhaps, be to imagine a new beginning?

Notes

1 F. Von Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, XXVII, 10. See Appendix I of the edition by Elizabeth Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), for the history of its publication.
2 For a useful summary of theoretical work on this issue, see Kevin Robins, "Prisoners of the City", in Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires (eds.), *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993).
3 See the photos from his book *Architectural Apocalypse*, reproduced in Mark Holborn, *Beyond Japan – A Photo Theatre* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), Chapter 1.
4 Robins, "Prisoners", 315.
5 Jurgen Habermas, "Modern and Postmodern Architecture", in John Forrester (ed.), *Critical Theory and Public Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 326. Cf. Paul Virilio, "The Overexposed City", in Jonathan Crary et al. (eds.), *Zone 1 and 2* (New York: Urzone, Inc., 1987), 15–31, esp. 25.
6 On the dissolution of public space and the public sphere, see Martha Rosier and Krzystof Wodiczko's essays in Hal Foster (ed.), *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (San Francisco: Bay Press, 1987). On the dissolution of our sense of place in general, see John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Sense of Time, a Sense of Place* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990). The point is summed up by W. Sharpe and L. Wallock, quoted by Robins, "Prisoners", 314: "The waning sense of city as place is intimately linked to the inability to say what the city might mean".
7 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, 6th edition (London: Academy, 1991). For description of specific architects developing an architectural understanding with the communities for which they build, see his *Heteropolis – Los Angeles, the Riots and the Strange Beauty of Hetero-Architecture* (London: Academy, 1993), 39–40, 114.
8 The myth of the "flaneur", particularly associated with Baudelaire and other French writers and artists, was, from this point of view, an attempt to walk that truth out of existence. For a recent collection of essays on the history and continued relevance of this strategy, see Keith Tester ed., *The Flaneur* (London: Routledge, 1994).
9 This is analogous to the argument at Habermas in "Modernity: An Incomplete Project", in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985). But Habermas in dismissing so much of modem art as "nonsense experiments" grossly underestimates the extent to which those experiments made good sense at the time and still carry resonance today.
10 Sherrie Levine, "Statement", in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory – 1900–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 1067.
11 I would argue that these outdated claims can found lurking even in art discourse about work that by its very practice has gone beyond them. For example, the authors of a superb and historic new book on installation art, proclaim in their introduction that the growth of site-specific installation should be understood in connection "with the

continual rapprochement, or even fusion, of art and life". Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, *Installation Art* (London: Thames & Hudson 1994), 7.

12 This buckled logic is at work, for instance, in Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, the End of the Social* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) (e.g. his claim. surely undermined by his rejection of the social as an object of enquiry, that "we are only episodic conductors of meaning . . . we form a mass, living most of the time in panic or haphazardly, above and beyond meaning": Baudrillard, *End of the Social*, 11). For this criticism, cf. Peter Burger, "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics", in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds.), *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics* (London: ICA, 1991), 5–6.

13 "Incredulity towards meta-narratives" is Lyotard's definition of the postmodern: Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), xxiv.

14 See most recently Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place, Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). Cf. for example, Arlene Raven (ed.), *Art in the Public Interest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).

15 For me the recent work of Rose Finn-Kelcey is particularly successful in creating spaces which suggest a history of industrial use even within the four walls of the gallery: see for example her untitled work pictured in De Oliveira et al., *Installation*, 73.

16 Dick Hebdige, "Redeeming Witness: In the Tracks of the Homeless Vehicle Project", *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 173–223, at 207.

17 "Transformation" runs from Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Picador, 1980), 24; ("New myths spring up beneath each step we take. Legend begins where man has lived, where he lives. All that I intend to think about from now on is these despised transformations") to the concept of "detournement" in Situationism ("the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble") to more recent philosophies of art as a critical practice in relation to material objects (Neil Cummings, "Reading Things: The Alibi of Use", in Neil Cummings (ed.), *Reading Texts* (London: Chance Books, 1993)); Nicholas De Ville, "The Noumenal and the Everyday", in *Refusing to Surface: Art and the Transfiguration of the Ordinary* (Birmingham and South London: John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton, Ikon Gallery, 1993). Compare "reappropriation", Robert Hewison's category to cover a great deal of art in the 1980s, in *Future Tense: A New Art for the Nineties* (London: Methuen, 1990). For magic and related metaphors, see e.g. the writings of Germano Celent on behalf of the Art Povera movement ("the artist-alchemist organizes living and vegetable matter into magic things . . . in order to re-find them", in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 886) or more recently the pronouncements of anarchist art theorist Hakim Bey ("provided we can escape from the museums we carry around with us [in our heads] . . . we can begin to contemplate as art which re-creates the goal of the sorcerer: changing the structure of reality by the manipulation of living symbols" – *T. A. Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 1985), 39).

18 Cornelius Cardew, "Towards an Ethic of Improvisation", in his *Treatise Handbook* (Leipzig: Edition Peters), xviii.

19 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 55.

20 The list would be endless: sampling in rap music (for discussion, see e.g. David Toop, *Rap Attack 2 – African Rap to Global Hiphop* (London. Serpent's Tail, 1991), the "filking" of science-fiction fans described by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (London: Routledge, 1992), and so on.

21 Susy Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 174, 139.

22 Cf. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 12–15: "the street level is dead space. . . . It is only a means of passage to the interior".

23 Vito Acconci, "Public Space in a Private Time", in W. Mitchell (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 158–176, at 169.

24 For a summary of recent research, see Dennis Judd, "The Rise of the Walled Cities", in Helen Liggett and David Perry (eds.), *Spatial Practices: Cultural Explorations in Social/*

Spatial Theory (London: Sage, 1995). For a detailed study, see E. McKenzie, *Privatopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

25 Eishi Kikkawa, "The Musical Sense of the Japanese", *Contemporary Music Review* 1 (1987): 85–94.

26 I realise that a connection between art and ecology has already been made by Susan Sontag, in her call (at the end of *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 180) for "an ecology not only of real things but of images as well". I don't disagree, but my point is different: I am suggesting the usefulness of an ecological model of thinking to grasp the moral claims which different cultural groups make of and about each other and, in particular, to grasp in a new way how artists figure out the general nature of their "role" in "society". Its source and inspiration lie closer to Nietzsche's call for us "to "naturalize" humanity" (*The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), 169).

3

SPEAKING ABOUT OTHERS AND SPEAKING PERSONALLY

Reflections after Elspeth Probyn's *Sexing the Self*

Introduction

How can we best describe the skills central to cultural studies' practice? I will try to show that this is more than a matter for idle speculation. It is precisely reformulating cultural studies' practice in terms of the general skills it involves (rather than particular objects of study with which it may have an affinity) that offers the best route to confronting the ethical and epistemological doubts that have beset social enquiry in the past two decades. I offer a pragmatic reformulation, and one of a particular kind, in which how we "speak about others" and how we "speak personally" are inextricably linked.

I am not aiming to redefine where cultural studies *should* be going, with a revisionary history attached. A more modest aim – giving a better account of what cultural studies is already doing – is, I believe, sufficient to illuminate what now might be involved in fulfilling the promise inherent in cultural studies' project from its inception: the promise expressed first by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* of going beyond "the long dominative mode" of thinking about communication and about others (Williams, 1961, p. 321). To do that might be to address also what Foucault in a quite different context defined as "the essential problem for the intellectuals", p. "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault, 1980, p. 133).

A stimulus to attempting such a reformulation is provided by a recent article of Nicholas Garnham (Garnham, 1995). He tries to reinstate "political economy" as a necessary foundation for any cultural studies that is true to its roots and adequate to the world. Quite apart from the very narrow conceptions of both political economy and cultural studies upon which Garnham's argument relies (see Grossberg, 1995), there is something else a little odd about the structure of his argument. Instead of

simply claiming that cultural studies are incorrect in the account it gives of how cultural production relates to the economic and social structures of capitalism, he argues that it is *disloyal*, "cultural studies having come out of a set of *assumptions* about political economy" (Garnham, 1995, p. 62, my italics). It is strange to define a field of academic enquiry by stipulating that the only true instances of it are those which repeat a certain type of answer to the problems that originally gave rise to it – an answer which incidentally (on Garnham's account) always works by dividing up the world in advance into a subordinated "them" and an untheorized (but assumed to be unsubordinated) "us", the "analysts" (cf. De Certeau, 1988, pp. 2–3). The result is a vision of the possible politics of cultural studies, which is undernourished by evidence about, or even interest in, the actual complexities of cultural production and consumption: a politics which appears to be imposed upon critical cultural reflection, rather than genuinely developed out of it. One way out of this unsatisfying structure of repetition is to ask: what skills does cultural studies involve and how do those skills (rather than a particular set of answers) relate to the wider social context?

The route to my proposed "reformulation" lies through the "personal". Here I will draw upon Elspeth Probyn's searching and inspiring recent work, *Sexing the Self* (Probyn, 1993). One of its strengths lies in making clear that a personal turn in cultural studies is *not* a license for a subjective, over personalized form of writing; it should, rather, incite a re-examination of critical vocabulary, a new approach to the issues underlying enquiry about the individual's implication with the world of "others". Reinvigorating its hold on the personal should strengthen, not weaken, cultural studies' grasp on the transpersonal. I wish to push this connection of the personal to the transpersonal still further by arguing that the skills a practitioner of cultural studies must develop in finding a "voice" are best seen as aspects of wider skills "for living" whose expression (and repression) stretch far beyond the academic sphere.[1] Once this is grasped, we will have a clearer perspective on the disabling theoretical doubts which have afflicted much postmodernist thought about the social.

By "skills for living" I do not mean matters of diet, health or personal time-management! I mean those long-term patterns of "resistance" (barely recognizable as particular skills but registrable at some point in a complete redirection of the narratives through which "I" recognise "myself" against the definitions of others and against earlier selves). These processes of redefinition are a feature of very many lives, they have certainly shaped mine as I have tried to reject and replace the professional roles for which my educational history seemed to have prepared me. Part of that process of redefinition for me lay in the experience of music-making outside (or on the distant edges of) the commercial music scene. Part of it lay in encountering cultural and media studies in the early 1990s as an intellectual space where a rigorous scepticism could be maintained alongside a wider interrogation of social inequality and imagining of social change.

I have a stake then (which I see no reason to disavow as being "objectively" irrelevant) in seeing cultural studies as a hard-won terrain for sceptical investigation

of "self" and "others", that works against (but also, problematically, with) the forces of cultural definition. Cultural studies must address the field of cultural production, not prejudge it (in the way Garnham seems to want). To suppress the connections between "analysing others" and "speaking in one's own name" is not only bad faith but also (since those connections are themselves productive for analysis) a false economy. It is, perhaps, because it never did suppress those connections that the lucid candour of Raymond Williams' writing (whose influence Probyn emphasises) retains the capacity to shock.

The space we speak from

The challenge from ethnography

In order to work toward a reformulation of cultural studies' skills, it is useful to start at what may be its point of maximum discomfort as a discipline. It could hardly remain unaffected by the crisis of intellectual authority which afflicted ethnography in the 1970s and 1980s, represented vividly by the essays collected together in *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) – not least because of the explicit incorporation into cultural studies of a form of "ethnographic" method, for instance in relation to media audiences (e.g. Morley, 1986; Lull, 1991; Ang, 1991).

The form of this crisis is, of course, well known, but it is useful to summarize its features schematically here as background to the argument that follows. The crisis can be analysed in terms of three aspects. First, a set of epistemological difficulties: about the status of the general concepts involved in historic ethnography's accounts of other societies – the "primitive", the "oriental", "society" as such – and about the status of ethnography's productions as anything more than "texts" written within a historically and culturally limited interpretative horizon. Second, some acute ethical (and also practical) difficulties, related in part to ethnography's institutional association with various colonial projects. In some respects, these problems of ethnography in its traditional field (the study by "the West" of "other" societies) are specific to its history. But underlying them is a third, fundamental ethical issue which affects any form of social analysis: how, and with what authority, can "I" ever speak for "others"?

Probyn makes a penetrating analysis of ethnography's self-criticisms, and the extent to which they are taken to their full conclusion (Probyn, 1993, Chapter 3); cf. Rabinow (1986, p. 251–252). Whatever the judgement on ethnography "proper", it is clear that the problems just summarised become *more*, not less, acute when one applies ethnographic methods to the study of one's own society. The analyst of his or her own society should never evade the issues of: with what resources *of* that society and as the end-result of what process of social distinction *within* that society has the speaking-position of the analyst been produced? These ethical challenges connect with the arguments which Pierre Bourdieu had already made: the need for an adequate social theory to grasp how the "distance" by means of which it speaks of others has *itself* been socially produced; the need, in other words, for

social theory to offer a theory of the social production of the conditions of its own practise (Bourdieu, 1977). It was on the basis of these issues that critical theory sought to mark itself out from "normal", "positivist" science: through claiming that critical theory was able not just to describe the social world but to give a satisfactory account of the social genesis of its own theoretical practice – see Geuss (1981) for a very clear analysis. To consider how cultural studies can best respond to these issues, we need first to change the focus.

Aspects of the argument of Sexing the Self

I believe that Probyn's crucial general achievement is that, through a scrupulous consideration of the shape and place of self-reflexivity in cultural studies, she has shifted *the weight* among the components of the argument on which the social analyst's authority is implicitly based. Drawing on the philosophical work of Michele Le Doeuff (among others), she shows convincingly how the criterion by which the authority and value of cultural studies should be ratified is not the simple question (does it give a "true" picture of "society"?) but the compound question (does it provide an exploration, at a satisfactory "depth", of its own social embeddedness as a voice?). This is no solipsism, for the compound question leads to many empirical and theoretical questions: What is it for a voice to speak about "itself" and about "society"? How do we account for the emergence of that voice?

Probyn's investigation of the productiveness of the personal standpoint is barely thinkable except against the background of feminism's consistent concern with the transformative effect of the "personal" on political and theoretical practice. Probyn in no way represents a break from that tradition. We also risk underestimating the *long-term* historical weight of Probyn's theoretical move unless we reflect on how it can broadly be paralleled in earlier theoretical work carried on wholly or partly without reference to the issues of gender. First of all, there is within the German and French philosophical traditions the long series of critiques of Cartesian and Lockean notions of an atomistic individual consciousness: that critical history began with Kant's argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "internal experience itself is possible only mediately, and through external experience" (Kant in Greene, 1929, p. 141) and continued in various forms through Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida. (An interesting recent example is David Michael Levin's advocacy of "a new form of Subjectivity, a self which recognizes itself as essentially constituted through social relationships of the reciprocity": Levin, 1989). Secondly, within the so-called Anglo-American philosophical tradition, there have in the second half of the 20th century been arguments developed from a number of perspectives to establish the impossibility of severing the personal or theoretical consciousness from the wider social and linguistic context in which it develops. For example: in the philosophy of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein's "private language argument" against solipsism, which builds upon the socially grounded conditions which must be satisfied if there is to be a language-using subject at all (Wittgenstein, 1958; cf. Probyn, 1993, pp. 80–81); in philosophy of science, Michael Polanyi's arguments

for a recognition of the "personal", "fiduciary" element in any claim to "objective" knowledge (Polanyi, 1958); in moral philosophy, Alisdair MacIntyre's arguments for no individual moral claims can be made outside a specific social and historical context (MacIntyre, 1981). From a different direction, Probyn's work can be related to social theory's recent concern with its necessarily *self-reflexive* nature: for example, Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson' theoretical work on ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) and Anthony Giddens' work on social structuration (Giddens, 1984). But here, general social theory is merely adjusting to the notion of "reflection" integral to critical theory and, as Raymond Geuss points out (Geuss, 1981, Introduction), to Marxist and Freudian traditions as a whole: "reflection" as the possibility for each individual to acknowledge a new account of his or her self as part of a wider account of how ideas, desires, selves are socially produced.

Probyn's specific contribution, however, lies not so much in connecting the "personal" to the "social" (for that as we have seen is not new); nor in showing that there is a tension between the desire to speak in one's own name and the necessity to grasp the personal and impersonal context required for any self-speaking (this was implicit and often explicit in critical theory's central concept of "reflection" – a parallel which perhaps Probyn does not sufficiently acknowledge). Her contribution rather lies in clarifying how the tension of speaking "in the first person" is *productive* for contemporary cultural theory. For this tension has a special resonance now in the wake of the challenges to theory from within ethnography and given the vast expansion of cultural production. Clarifying the space from where we speak as "selves" is the best way of reformulating the basis on which we can claim to speak in "the third person". As Probyn puts it (Probyn, 1993, p. 135)

> In bringing together the practices that we live and the problematizations of those practices, the self can provide a place to speak from. We can think of the 'work' of the self; grounded in 'the primacy of the real' the self must also be made to move analytically, revealing the character of the mediations between individuals and social formations. The work of the technologies of the self both describes the location of the self in everyday practices and the capacity of the self as a theoretical articulation, as an analytic tool, to 'cut into that real'. This double articulation of the self then provides the necessary basis for, and the beginning of an elaboration of, an enunciative practice in cultural studies.

The important questions – about social structure, the status of theory, the construction of "others" – remain in view. But, through Probyn's change of emphasis, the friction[2] of the attempt to reflect and speak "in one's own name" has become productive. In its new place, the "self" is not an apologetic aside (a confession or request for indulgence) but the primary site where the collectively necessary question of "why one speaks at all" (ibid, p. 61) can be confronted and perhaps answered. If my aim is to "think the social through myself" (ibid, p. 3), I have shifted weight from the question of what the objects of which cultural studies are speaks to the question of what is the nature of the socially produced *space* from which it is able to speak.

Probyn at the same time clarifies very well what self-reflexivity should not entail. First, it is not a free licence for autobiographical content *as such* in cultural studies: the use of any such material must be informed by theoretical questions about the conditions for emergence of our speaking, remembering, fantasising "selves".[3] In fact, this reflexivity itself requires a "theoretical model of [the conditions of its own] speaking" and the intersubjective space where both individuation and theory emerge.[4] Second, such reflexivity does not presume a "self" which is fixed, stable or fully knowable in advance (ibid, p. 134); for it is precisely the possibility of constructing new types of selves through new discourse that grounds Probyn's political project. Indeed Probyn (and here she is no more than consistent with the tendency of all the different theoretical work just summarised) rejects the simple idea that "the production of a speaking position [can] be understood as the invention of "a 'personal voice' for 'me'" (Probyn, 1993, p. 86), quoting Meaghan Morris, 1988, p. 7). Third, and this is more implicit than explicit (since she does not relate her work to critical theory in any detail), Probyn does not take up critical theory's (or at least Habermas's) formal claim that "reflection" is the basis for a completely new type of social knowledge, which is *intrinsically* transformative. Her approach is essentially pragmatic – wisely in view of the extreme difficulty which critical theory has had in sustaining claims for its special status as theory.

For Probyn the link between the personal and the transpersonal is not just intellectual – her writing surely implies a political project that connects each individual's searching for a voice to a mutually empowering collective practice. As she argues, self-reflexivity in cultural analysis should open "a perspective which allows us to conceive of transforming ourselves *with the aid of others*"; the aim is not merely transforming oneself but to ensure that "in the movement of *other* images of selves alternative speaking positions appear as possible [i.e. for others as well ourselves]" (ibid, p. 169, 172, emphases added).

This is the key point: the main argument of this chapter is that cultural studies makes most sense now exactly as a collective practice which transforms possibilities for speaking in one's own name. The motivations for this argument are, in effect, political: first, a set of values (hardly original, but which at least need to be explicitly acknowledged!) which seek to judge an actual society according to how far it embodies a community or network of communities in which each individual has *effective* rights to speak, to be listened to and taken account of, and to direct his or her life. In the field of cultural studies, these values, perhaps, hardly need to be defended. Second, and maybe more contentious, a belief that the value of intellectual cannot be resolved just on the terms it sets for itself: an academic discipline should be "effective" in a broader social "context" (both "effectiveness" and "context" being here particularly hard to define). This chapter attempts to work toward possible definitions in this area and it is at this point, I believe, that Probyn's argument needs supplementing. It is not enough to ask what shape theory (considered alone) should have; we must ask, what *else has to be in place* if cultural studies' claim of generating new "speaking positions" for others is to be plausible? We need to reformulate not just the "self's" place in cultural studies but also the place which

cultural studies' practice as a whole should have within the social and cultural field.[5] We can approach this from two directions: by a detailed examination of the institutional settings of cultural studies, important but clearly beyond the scope of this chapter; or, more manageably, by figuring out in general terms how cultural studies could differently *imagine* its relation to the social spaces in which it intervenes. This further shift in focus will enable us to return to the epistemological and ethical challenges discussed at the start of this section.

A pragmatic formulation

How cultural studies describes its skills is crucial to how it defines itself as a project. What are the *essential* features of the skills that cultural studies involve? Are they best understood as (1) the skills which enable an "accurate", "academically rigorous" analysis of society and its cultural productions? Or perhaps (2) as a more broadly defined set of discursive skills that, taken together, would enable each individual – within and beyond the "Academy" – to develop over a lifetime a series of convincing accounts of "what" he or she is?

The two formulations are not, of course, incompatible; *both*, obviously, are motivating forces. But the choice between them is not trivial – at stake are wider choices. Under the first formulation, "society" and "culture" are projected exclusively as "objects" of analysis – it is by reflecting on their status as objects of a more or less transparent form of analysis that the "value" (the implicit "politics") of cultural studies is generated. Yet it is not plausible for any of us to make "society" and "culture" the objects of our intellectual project without admitting some personal stake in the continuing processes of definition which "society" and "culture" entail. Given that, why should a coherent account try to *hold apart* the judgements that motivate us to engage with those issues of definition from the more formal, "objective" features of our practice? This is the value of the second, broader formulation. By focussing on those skills which are necessary for anyone to give an account of themselves and others at a certain depth and with a certain freedom, it may offer a new perspective on the totality: the "objects" of analysis, the process of analysis, and the context in which "analysis" is agreed to be something worth doing.

Cultural studies would then have a double relation to certain general discursive skills – both as investigator and as disseminator. What it disseminated would not be an attitude to certain objects of investigation "out there" in a world "beyond" its practice – for part of its investigation would be directed at the possibility of its *own* practice. Such "self"-investigation is not empty or evasive – it is necessary if we do not want to assume in advance a stable position for the analyst in the social field, a vantage-point beyond analysis through whose construction the field has *already* been divided up. The concern to avoid such prejudging is, of course, not new; my point is simply that formulating what cultural studies is and should be in terms of general skills reflects those concerns more closely than a formulation in terms of specific objects of analysis.

There is no question here of cultural studies evading responsibility for empirical investigation: for the new formulation requires confronting directly a general and very difficult empirical question. What *are* the "presences" or "forces" in the shadow of which each "self" must conduct its search for a voice? One force surely is the cultural saturation that comprises part of the "logic" of postmodernism analysed by Fredric Jameson and others. But as Aijaz Ahmad (1992) argued, it is inadequate to ground the orientation of global cultural analysis (if there can be such a thing) exclusively on a diagnosis formulated with reference to cultural production in advanced capitalist economies; that diagnosis ignores the other, all too familiar forces through which voices are silenced – the oppressions based on race, gender, class, sexuality. There are also the no less pervasive forms of cultural definition that work without explicit labels: structural principles such as the compulsory presence of the "centre" against which the "margins" are encouraged to fail to speak. Investigating how any of those forces shapes cultural production involves addressing issues about the unequal distribution of resources – not just economic resources but discursive resources. Clarifying what they might involve in the current cultural and technological context is itself a major question. To put things this way is, of course, to reject the possibility that inequalities of power can be "reduced" to economic structures and the social forms directly associated with them. To discuss these issues as if they only make sense on the basis of the "foundations" of political economy (as Garnham does) is to use a metaphor to block a whole subject from view. It not only involves a "reduction of economics" (see Grossberg, 1995, p. 80), closing off for instance any interesting questions about how discursive and economic resources interact (the issue of "articulation"). It also, in its implicit politics, relies on an emblematic notion of "resistance" whose value is never redeemed in any account of existing cultural practice.

It is a particular model of cultural studies (structured around certain heavily valorised objects rather than skills) that encourages such reductive treatments of the discipline's possibilities (and incidentally also its history). We can imagine cultural studies' project more productively from a broader starting-point. We must acknowledge broad forces of social and cultural definition; leaving aside (without prejudging) how best to express their relation to economic structures, we can also acknowledge that, in their shadow and in a world of unprecedented cultural density, there are *survival strategies* – strategies for the survival of a "self", the construction of a space from which to speak "in one's own name".[6] Cultural studies can be seen as one "survival strategy" among many: the survival strategy which makes possible spaces from which "selves" can speak at a general level and at a certain depth about cultural production and their relationship to it (as producers or consumers or active reproducers); one version of a broad set of discursive skills which enable me (whether I am an academic or not) to articulate what I am, where I speak from and with what means I speak – even in a cultural context (the media) which incessantly addresses me *as if* those questions had already been answered; one version of an open-ended set of *skills for living*, on which the "Academy" has no monopoly.[7]

This is not, of course, to deny the importance of formal "education", of the strategic use of the academic voice in reaching others outside the Academy – a point I return to below. But reformulating cultural studies' practice in this pragmatic and general way makes clear a different point: that cultural studies must not just speak but *listen* – to the survival strategies of others outside the "Academy". It must listen to others because "academic practice" is an artificially limited space from which to speak.[8] Nor can it hide behind the classic but artificial division of "contemplation" from "action". Cultural studies is an art of practice.[9] As such it is broader than theoretical inquiry as usually defined, yet at the same time it makes strategic use of the tools of "science"; it is a specific survival strategy whose trajectory passes through "truth".

By truth here I mean the practice of being accountable to others for the accuracy and coherence of one's statements. A commitment to "truth" and "accountability" is compatible with the highest degree of scepticism.[10] Indeed, the epistemological concerns raised in ethnography (about the difficulties of obtaining from one's own position a satisfactory perspective on the world viewed through the perspective(s) of "others" or "other societies") have their place here – not as disabling doubts but as incitements to continued production. For, as Michael Herzfeld argued, the speaking position of the anthropologist is not undermined by limitations of perspective if they are limitations which it shares with *any* speaking position in social interaction (Herzfeld, 1987, pp. 204–205; cf. Schutz, 1973, p. 259). To start by recognizing that the cultural field (including the space which "analysis" occupies) is an infinity of potential speaking *positions* does not make the commitment to "truth" impossible or senseless. On the contrary, it may be a good way of expressing the vision that such a commitment, in practice, involves.[11]

But what of the overarching ethical issue of how we can speak "for" others? (This was the point at which I left the ethnographic challenge to cultural studies at the beginning of Section II.) Does my reformulation of the skills which cultural studies involves help us to confront this issue? Here again it is the routing of the question through "the personal" that unlocks the difficulties.

Whether or not we are academics, we cannot avoid speaking "about" others: indeed, if you take it as axiomatic that discursive resources are unequally distributed, then for academics to use their discursive resources to reveal the places where others are speaking may sometimes help those others to be heard. We must, however, somehow preserve a difference between speaking "*about*" others and speaking "*for*" others. Speaking for, that is in place of, others is incompatible with claiming for ourselves the right to speak and be heard without interference – inconsistent, therefore, with the underlying ethic of cultural studies as I have formulated it. On the other hand, to deny ourselves the possibility of speaking *about* others leads to incoherence on an epistemological level: for there is no possibility of making interesting claims about myself, which does not at some level entail claims about "others" as well.

The ethical and epistemological issues are inextricably linked both as problems and in their solution: a solution best brought into focus at the point where the

individual analyst reflects on his or her own of analysing "others". We need, simply, a scepticism that seeks at all times to keep the voice that describes "others" *loyal* to the questioning of the voice that seeks to figure out its "self". Such a sustained practise of scepticism (cf. Couldry, 1995) is the only thing that licences "us" to speak "about" others.

This scepticism is based not just, perhaps not even mainly, on epistemological doubts. The reasons for scepticism are, in effect, pragmatic. In speaking "about others" I must rely on the discursive authority of the academic sphere, recognizing that the academic voice is after all part of the process whereby discursive authority in general (and the exclusions it legitimates) is socially reproduced (see Gripsrud, 1989). The academic voice should therefore be used strategically, just as Probyn advocates a "strategic" use of the "self" – an academic discourse that knows that it is in a sense "marginal with respect to the phenomena studied" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 41) yet accepts this within a wider strategy of exchange. In exchanging, however sceptically, its accounts of the forces in whose shadow people speak or are silent, cultural studies can displace other accounts, which may have initially greater authority or prevalence. By "cutting" into other accounts (cf. Probyn, 1993, p. 135), Foucault (1977, p. 154) it may create space for others to speak, far beyond the contemplation of the academic sphere itself.

Implications

I want now to draw out some implications of my argument so far.

1 If the practice and values of cultural studies are, as I have been arguing, best formulated pragmatically, it follows that the principal *political* project of cultural studies must lie not so much in its choice of particular cultural "objects of study" (for cultural studies, like any set of skills, must simply be practised as widely as possible) but rather in the strategic vision with which it seeks to apply and share those skills. Not content with vicarious empowerment through the analyst's eye, the practice practise of analysis itself must *actively seek to empower* (cf. Grossberg, 1992, pp. 94–95). (Which is not to say that the specific forms of "empowerment" can be defined from the place of theory, only that if cultural studies are worth doing at all, it must believe that it harnesses skills which contribute to that empowerment in some or other form.)

   So, even if there is a special value in us studying "marginal" or "popular" sites of cultural production, this is a purely practical matter (necessary to the extent that they would otherwise be neglected), not the result of any special affinity of cultural studies has with particular "objects" (the "marginal" rather than the "central", or "popular" rather than "high" culture). Cultural studies have no special "objects" and pretending it does can obscure important aspects of the cultural field. What "high" culture has *in common* with "popular" culture, for instance, is a subject of great interest, whose frequent neglect unwittingly helps reproduce the myths of "high" culture itself. From this standpoint, debates in

the 1980s about what is cultural studies" proper relation with the "popular" (for example, Chambers, 1986) seem outdated.

2 The reformulation of cultural studies as an inflection of a broader set of skills may encourage us to be more aware of the sheer *multiplicity* of cultural production. Acknowledging more explicitly the nature and difficulties of our own form of cultural production, we naturally search for affinities with other forms. Michel de Certeau's distinction (De Certeau, 1984) between the "strategies" (of cultural power) and the "tactics" that develop within them but lack the discursive resources to identify themselves as s, is vital in illuminating that search.

Cultural studies have, of course, already begun to recognise such "tactics" as primary data: the work on the cultural production of "fans" is a prime example (Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1993; Stacey, 1994). The discursive position of Henry Jenkins is interesting: he is explicitly both an analyst and a fan (of the type he analyses). He is therefore required to recognise that the fan and the analyst have skills in common, even though earlier analytic would not have recognised the significance of fans' work; Jenkins' writing automatically admits its "marginality" in relation to the "phenomena studied". But it is surely not necessary that every critic is a fan of what he or she describes. We must therefore preserve for other cases the strategic *tact* that is built into Jenkins' particular discursive position as fan-analyst. This is exactly what I have tried to do.

Jenkins' work is not just an interesting formal strategy. As a cultural intervention that crosses the divide between producers and consumers, it shows explicitly how cultural studies can (should) have a practical stake in issues of cultural definition.

3 The formulation I have developed in this essay also has implications at the level of the language which theory uses. Self-reflexivity does not displace – in fact its logic is built upon – an insistence on the material nature of social practice (see Probyn, 1993, p. 21–22) and Grossberg (cf. 1988, 1992). But the situation is not without tension. For, as Probyn puts it quoting Stuart Hall, "the self carries with it a doubled movement, it expresses 'a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being"'" (Probyn, 1993, p. 167, quoting Hall, 1990, p. 275) – a version of the tension I characterized earlier as central to a sceptical position: the tension between the voice we use to describe others and the questioning of the individual voices that seeks to figure out "ourselves".

How can we understand the relationship between, on the one hand, the language we as analysts use to describe the social structure within which the self has its "being" and, on the other hand, the "becoming", the discursive movement of the self *as self*? The relationship cannot be a simple one since the latter is part of the evidence for the existence of the former. To illustrate the difficulties that arise, I will look briefly at the language of an article by Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (Ang & Hermes, 1991) – a useful example since it is formulated explicitly within a theoretically highly developed "postmodern" conception of the self as irreducibly unstable and complex. Ang and Hermes define one object of their work as

"problematizing and investigating *in which concrete situations which* gender positions are taken up *by which* men and women, *with what* identificatory investments and *as a result of what* specific articulations" (ibid, p. 321, emphasis added). But, given that the movement(s) of the selves of each man and woman investigated can only ever be "captured" *in the course of* their movement only part of which will be in view, is there any reason to be confident that investigation can establish a definitive causality here? If not, the language in which Ang and Hermes describe the investigation claims too much. The same difficulty arises in relation to their description of the self: Ang and Hermes argue that "a person's subjectivity can thus be described in terms of the multiplicity of *subject positions* taken up by the person in question' (ibid, p. 315, emphasis added). But are we sure that the language of "subject *positions*" – implying stable, mappable coordinates in space – is the right language to formulate at the level of "being" the complex evidence of "becoming" that a particular speaking self may provide us with? Is there a risk, in trying to describe the detailed mobility of self, of importing the language of a static model which at the level of the "self" as a "whole" we would want to reject? (In which case, the gaps in the evidence for how people come to occupy specific "positions", of which writers from time to time complain,[12] may simply be the absences over which the language of "positions" illegitimately projects.)

My point is not that these issues of language cannot be resolved (Allan Pred's work in structuration theory addresses precisely these issues: Pred, 1985). I simply want to emphasise that, if we are serious in acknowledging the multiplicity of the sites from which effective speech about the "social" is possible, then we must be equally serious in reexamining the language of social description which we ourselves draw upon. That will involve not just a criticism of the usual targets – the macro-metaphors deriving from a notion of social "integration", even the notion of a single thing called "the everyday" – but also vigilance against carrying over a "panopticism" into the details of our language which we have tried to expel at a methodological level[13]

Conclusion

I have argued in favour of the need for theory to "pass through the personal", following and seeking to amplify Elspeth Probyn's work and emphasising its consistency with wider intellectual currents, in particular the notion of reflection in critical theory. My argument has drawn on a certain broad view of our situation of "cultural saturation" and the individual's need to "answer back". It might perhaps be argued that this view of the cultural situation to which cultural studies "responds" gratuitously confuses "facts" and "values".

But the criticism only has force if you assume that the values implicit in any practice can be formulated without, precisely, mixing fact and value. A pragmatic approach denies this: our values are integrally related to action and our actions intervene in the terrain of (more or less disputed) "facts". The central issue is, as Donna Haraway has put it, how we can "act potently" (Haraway, 1991a, p. 181) and

the issue is not an abstract one. If we take seriously a situation where intellectual authority has been "dispersed" (Clifford, 1983, p. 120), and our era is characterized by a "deep-down realisation that the ambitions which grounded the validity of intellectual life have failed" (Bauman, 1987, p. 148), then the question of how intellectual activity can be justified needs a pragmatic, not an abstract, response. But if there is no Archimedean point from which any set of values (in this or any other activity) can be judged to be generally valid, there is no reason to think that the disputes between different value-choices underlying different epistemic practices can, or should, ever be resolved. (In that sense, Donna Haraway's vision of multiple "knowledges" that are "local" and "situated" is surely necessary: Haraway, 1991b)

Does that mean that cultural studies are just a free-floating option, which cannot be justified except in the terms which it generates for itself? My point is not whether it is legitimate to seek to ground intellectual activity in certain values. (I do not believe that the difficulties that beset, for instance, Foucault's attempt to sustain a radical critique of *all* values can be overcome (see Taylor, 1985). In any event, we need explicit allegiance to some values if we are to answer Habermas' rhetorical question (directed at Foucault's work but of general relevance: Habermas (1987, pp. 283–284): "Why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power circulating in the bloodstream of modern society, instead of just adapting ourselves to it?") The question rather is: *what* values might be persuasive and how broadly would they *connect beyond* the academic practice of cultural studies itself? The general political values (of "community" and self-determination which I mentioned before) will not be enough in themselves because we are looking to defend cultural studies specifically as an *intellectual* activity. Can we begin to formulate a notion of (intellectual) "community" that is persuasive even when earlier structures of intellectual authority have been dispersed? Let me end by suggesting one possibility.

To continue the attempt to give an account of myself while accepting that any account is already crossed many times over by others not "my own" – this is to accept a sense of self that is necessarily suspended "in tension", internally inadequate and unstable (as Probyn evokes throughout her book). To go on speaking *in spite of this*, in this "knowledge", is surely to rely on the existence of a "community" of other reflective agents, among whom alone the individual voice can achieve any sense of "completion". By still trying to speak myself in the midst of irreducible complexity, I appeal implicitly to the reflections of others. Here we return to Probyn's insistence that self-reflexivity should open a "perspective which allows us to conceive of transforming ourselves with the help of others" (Probyn, 1993, p. 169). As Levinas has vividly put it: "I am "in myself" through the others" (Levinas, 1989, p. 102).

Integral to this particular notion of "community" would be an intellectual commitment that is sustained not by a confidence in "completion" but by a sense of necessary *incompleteness* (of any statement or theory as much as of any formulation of identity).[14] It is this that gives each voice its lasting stake in the possibility of others speaking, in the collective of questioning that sustains every possible voice.

Questioning involves addressing in its full complexity the social space that separates us from each other (the space of media and cultural production in which "we" are addressed, yet other "selves" continually emerge). (A reductive approach may imagine away the very spaces from which we as "analysts" speak.)

There is no doubt many ways of formulating these issues. Doing so by turning theory back through the personal (to adapt Nancy Miller's phrase) is, I believe, necessary (this, ultimately, is how each of us will judge what we have achieved) and salutary (it displays vividly how personal "completion" can only ever be an achievement of a collective practice of reflection). Far from turning our backs on the possibility for a "critical" theory, we are here only applying a point made by Adorno himself: "in sharp contrast to the usual ideal of science, the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs not less subjectivity, but more" (Adorno, 1973, p. 40).

Continuing to speak in one's own name in spite of but with full awareness of necessary incompleteness is a commitment and a risk – by acknowledging this risk as their own, cultural and media studies effectively link themselves to cultural production in general. This link should be emphasised, not suppressed as "objectively" illegitimate. By attempting to give shape to that commitment through detailed studies of cultural production, we are, in the process, helping to form values whose place an earlier, now disintegrating, intellectual authority usurped. We are staking out a space for a fully sceptical form of enquiry in which every attempt to speak in one's own voice (inside and outside formal academic practice) is *meshed* with an obligation to listen to the voices of others. We are, perhaps, giving body to a way of "thinking the social" that can remain in place long after the "dominative mode" of thinking has gone.

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Notes

1 By developing Probyn's arguments towards such a general formulation, I put on one side her specific concern with the issues of gendered subjectivity. This is not, of course, to deny the importance of those issues, merely to argue there is value in developing a general formulation of what cultural studies does which is not (initially at least) formulated by reference to gender issues.
2 The image I have in mind is Wittgenstein's: "We want to walk, so we need friction" (Wittgenstein, 1958, para. 107).
3 As Probyn puts it (1993, p. 11): "I consider the possibilities of speaking selves to be great, and the liabilities of an untheorized return to the "I" to be even greater".
4 Probyn (1993, pp. 135–136). Cf. Nancy Miller's argument that "the case for personal writing entails the reclaiming of theory back on itself" (Miller, 1991, p. 5). I am not suggesting however that Miller's and Probyn's conceptions of the "personal" are necessarily the same.
5 Compare McRobbie (1987) on the question of how, in the context of feminist research, one can overcome "those relations which characteristically divide thinking from acting", how to bridge the gap between those who write and those who don't.

6 On "survival", compare e.g.: Donna Haraway's reference to "the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [us] as other" (Haraway, 1991a, p. 175); Adorno's characterisation of critical philosophy as a means of "surviving" in the face of and in resistance to ideology (Adorno, 1973, p. 17); and more generally, Simmel's analysis of metropolitan life a struggle of the individual in the midst of overwhelming social and cultural density "to remain audible to himself" (Simmel, 1950, p. 422).

7 Compare Alain Touraine's conception of "the Subject" as "the individual's will to produce and not simply to consume an individual experience and a social environment" (Touraine, 1993, p. 232): this subject is not an isolated individual, since her or his "resistance" is for Touraine a pervasive feature of social action in general and cannot be separated from that wider context. "The subject exists only in the form of a social movement", which in turn is "at once a social conflict and a cultural project" (ibid, pp. 235, 240).

8 And, of course, "academic practice" is an artificially limited notion of the spaces from which academics speak. Here as elsewhere the point was already made by Raymond Williams: see Williams (1961, p. 320) on listening "to others who started from a different position [from academics]".

9 Again the inadequacy of the academic pretence of separation of its discourse from issues of what we "live by" is central theme of Williams: see e.g. Williams (1979, pp. 14–15). Compare some strains in recent "humanist" geography: the essays by Relph, Kobayashi, Cosgrove and Sayer in Kobayashi and Mackenzie (1989).

10 "Reading is an argument . . . this does not mean that there can be a true reading, but that no reading is conceivable in which the question of its truth and falsehood is not primarily involved" (Paul De Man, quoted in Norris, 1988, p. 154).

11 This opens onto a very large and difficult topic, which I cannot claim to be able to deal with here: the "ethics of truth" and the question of whether those "ethics" might be changing now. Emmanuel Levinas has developed a vision of truth at odds with traditional philosophical ideas of the relation between knowledge and ontology: "the idea that truth can signify a witness given of the infinite" (Levinas, 1989, p. 109). Perhaps this can be connected with the sense many writers have a cultural density that is effectively infinite. Perhaps too it connects with Dick Hebdige's recent thoughts on the epistemological resonances of the concept of "witnessing" as "unpositioned testimony in rather than (un)positioned knowledge of a field" (Hebdige, 1993, p. 207, italics removed). Cf. generally Bauman (1993).

12 E.g. Ang and Hermes (1991, p. 316) on lack of evidence for the *process* of gender identification; Valerie Walkerdine (1986, p. 188) on the lack of evidence in relation to the formation of subjectivity; and much earlier Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 207) on the lack of a "connecting" element between ideology and its effects on actual individuals.

13 Cf. De Certeau's ironic criticism of Foucault for the "panopticism" of his theory of power: De Certeau (1984, pp. 45–49).

14 I wrote this before reading Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* whose conclusion eloquently expresses an idea of community that is perhaps analogous (Butler, 1993, p. 242): "a difficult future terrain of community, one in which the hope of ever fully recognizing oneself in the terms by which one signifies is sure to be disappointed".

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4

THE INDIVIDUAL "POINT OF VIEW"

Learning from Bourdieu's *The Weight of the World*

Introduction

The individual's relationship to the wider space of "society" and "culture" remains problematic. While at an abstract level the individual/social dichotomy is an old issue in social science of limited contemporary interest (methodological individualism being generally unacceptable outside the narrow confines of rational choice theory), at the level of explaining specific actions it remains important. It was Robert Merton who highlighted the tension between socially and culturally transmitted aspirations and the actual opportunities that a society holds out for its members (Merton, 1938): such tensions may be even more acute when the disarticulation between official "values" (the culture espoused by society's apparent "centres") and many individuals' perspectives on values and justice is as great as it is now in the war-states of USA and Britain. Such tensions between the individual and the general point of view have been important, if not always resolved, in cultural studies, as Carolyn Steedman (1986) among others has shown.[1] That is a good enough reason to pay close attention to Pierre Bourdieu's attempt in his late work to connect the "space of [individual] points of view" to his wider sociology; for, even if Bourdieu's own view of cultural studies seemed unhelpfully dismissive (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999), there are significant parallels between his work and cultural studies' concern with the individual voice, parallels based in the emphasis that Bourdieu, unlike other major sociologists of the late 20th century, gave to the symbolic dimensions of power and inequality.

I want to explore these questions by looking in detail at what cultural studies can learn from one of Bourdieu's major texts of the 1990s, *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu, 1999). Why is *The Weight of the World* of particular significance? Bourdieu was, especially in his last years, a controversial figure, intellectually and politically, in France and elsewhere, and *La Misère de Monde*, originally published in

1993 and translated into English in 1999, was one of his most controversial books. It is in this book that Bourdieu faced head-on the question of exactly what weight can be given to individual voices in the analysis of the social world, implicitly addressing earlier criticism of his work for neglecting such voices. Notwithstanding some important methodological limitations, Bourdieu in this book goes further than other major social theorists in exploring the complexities of the individual point of view.

There are other, broader, justifications for devoting a whole chapter to this single book. *The Weight of the World* challenges some "postmodern" readings of the social world, which take a positive view of the fracturing of shared frameworks for interpreting social reality. Against this, Bourdieu and his collaborators prioritised themes, which while hardly ignored in contemporary sociology, have rarely been collected together with such force: the experience of poor housing and unemployment, social and symbolic forms of exclusion (as one of Bourdieu's interlocutors puts it, "a poverty that is hidden"),[2] conflicts between generations whether in a work or family context, inter-ethnic conflict, the confrontation between the powerful and the vulnerable in the state systems of education or law enforcement, the everyday anxieties of the gendered workplace, the loneliness of the elderly and sick. This concentration on social suffering was, of course, one reason for the book's controversial status in France, and it raises methodological issues of its own (discussed below), but as an inflection of what sociology should be about in the age of neoliberalism, it surely deserves attention.

Bourdieu's book, however, does much more than prioritise suffering for its own sake; if it did not, it would hardly merit wider theoretical interest. The particular way in which Bourdieu defines social suffering emphasises two symbolic dimensions of conflict which are often neglected: first, the irreconcilable conflict between individual points of view, that Bourdieu takes from Weber but updates for a world of global economic disruption and population movement; and, second, the specific conflict between those who have the authority to enforce *their* representations of the social world and those who lack that power. Bourdieu's position is political, in two distinct ways: he is arguing both that our conception of politics needs to expand to include "all the diffuse expectations and hopes which, because they often touch on the ideas that people have about their own identity and self-respect. . . [are usually] excluded from political debate" (1999, p. 627) *and* that the wider symbolic and material landscapes within which individuals have no choice but to make sense of their lives are always, themselves, political constructions (1999, p. 127), whose uneven effects must be examined. It is reasonable, therefore, to read *The Weight of the World* both as an example of committed sociological scholarship[3] and as a contribution, indirectly, to (not quite yet dead) policy debates about social exclusion and the digital divide.

It is true that Bourdieu's work at all times remains within a social science framework: it never comes close to the autobiographical or to recent auto-ethnographic experiments (on which see, Denzin, 2003). Bourdieu's arguments, however, are developed, undeniably, from a critical perspective which seeks to use the sociological

imagination to challenge neoliberal "common sense" (Bourdieu, 1998b). This is not the time to widen disciplinary differences but rather the time to explore what cultural studies can learn from Bourdieu's own most searching explorations of what the individual voice can contribute to sociological understanding.

The "Proper Place" of the individual in Bourdieu

Bourdieu had a particularly complex notion of social space (cf. Brubaker, 1985, p. 764); unlike Marx, he saw social space in modern societies not as focussed around one organising principle (relations to the means of economic production) but as a space with multiple (if interrelated) fields of competition, where different forms of capital are at stake. In addition, although some critics have suggested otherwise, Bourdieu always acknowledged the complexity of the individual position, at least to the extent that for him individual actions can only be understood by grasping individuals' different structural positions in, and historical trajectories across, social space.

For Bourdieu, individual action is the principal site where social structure can be reproduced, since he rejects any abstract notion of social "structure" as a determining force in itself; by this, however, he means individual action in a very particular sense, namely the locally improvised actions of individuals that are based upon the "dispositions" those individuals have acquired, and whose acquisition is itself structurally determined by the objective conditions in which that individual has lived his or her life (the individual's position in social space, including both inherited capital and actual resources, economic, cultural and symbolic). A person's available set of dispositions (or "habitus") closes off her possibilities for action, by constraining the resources she has to act in the situations she encounters. In the simplest case which Bourdieu imagines, a traditional "closed" society, because individuals' dispositions are structurally determined by the very same unchanging forces that determine the situations they encounter, there is a "natural" fit between people's actions and the contexts in which they act. While it is wrong (as Jeffrey Alexander (1995) does) to dismiss Bourdieu's model as simply deterministic since that ignores the importance he attributes to the improvised details of action, there is certainly a tendency in Bourdieu to *look for* such a natural fit and to see situations where it does not obtain as the exceptions that have to be explained, rather than, perhaps, the norm that might provoke us into developing an alternative theory (cf. Martuccelli, 1999, p. 137).

Implied in Bourdieu's model, as should be clear even from the extremely brief account just given, is a notion of *place*. Bourdieu's basic model of social action implies an identifiable, relatively closed place where the fit (or potential fit) between dispositions and situations is worked out. As a leading French critic of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, put it, this whole concept of practice depends on an "economy of the proper place" (1984, p. 55). That "proper place" is either the specific *field* where an individual seeks to maximise her capital to succeed in that field or the situated *body* by and through which a particular habitus is acquired and sustained.

Where exactly – in what space – does the habitus get formed? Although Bourdieu's account of these issues is complex and multidimensional, it is reasonable to see a gradual shift of emphasis in his work. For traditional societies, as just noted, his answer seems relatively straightforward; social space is not yet broken down into competing fields of action, and so "habitus" emerges without reference to the notion of a field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a), and its acquisition is tied very closely to the uninterrupted spatial context of everyday life, in the home and the village. But in complex societies, much, if not most, social action is impossible to grasp except by reference to the specialised field where, according to Bourdieu, it takes place. This creates an uncertainty, as Danilo Martuccelli has noted, as to which is given causal priority: the particular fields where individuals act, or the spaces (no longer limited to the home but including, for example, the school) where individuals' early lives are shaped (Martuccelli, 1999, pp. 129–132). To be fair, Bourdieu never gives a simple answer to this question. From early on, he recognised the interpenetration of family background and schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979); other later work (*The State Nobility*, 1996) notes the increasing centralisation of the state's power over the categorisation of social existence that operates through France's network of elite schools and colleges.[4] Constant, however, throughout Bourdieu's work is an assumption that there still are *relatively closed* spaces where the determining principles of an individual's practice are internalised. As he says at the opening of *The Weight of the World* the study "is based in the very reality of the social world . . . it is *within* each of these permanent groups (neighbours and co-workers) which *set the lived boundaries of all their experiences*, that the oppositions . . . separating classes, ethnic groups or generations, are perceived and experienced" (1999, p. 4, emphasis added). Yet in today's mediated world, even the private space of the home has its open "window onto the world" (television and increasingly the Internet). This point is of more than passing interest. It represents a major gap in Bourdieu's vast *oeuvre* not to have analysed the implications of this media-generated spatial ambiguity for the "proper place" (if any) of social reproduction. I revisit this point in relation to *The Weight of the World*'s inattention to media and popular culture, but already it should be clear that Bourdieu's neglect of media culture has significant methodological implications for our assessment of his work on the individual voice.

At the same time, in foregrounding, through the spatially inflected concept of habitus, the issue of *where* the individual's dispositions are formed, Bourdieu's approach has advantages over some other sociological frameworks, whether Giddens' structuration theory (1984) or Luhmann's systems approach (1999), neither of which address the tensions between structure and agency so directly at the level of the individual (how agency becomes possible, how it is reflexively experienced). An exception admittedly would be the work of Alain Touraine and those, such as Francois Dubet, who have worked with Touraine at Paris' Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. They have posed and answered the individual/social question in a direct and radical way. Both Touraine (1988, 2000) and Dubet (1994, 1995) highlight the identity crisis of the "de-socialised" individual in a world where "society . . . is incapable of producing and reproducing itself" (Touraine, 2000,

p. 72), leaving sociology's main subject as the individual's struggle to "master and construct their experience" (Dubet, 1995, p. 118). Broadening De Certeau's interest in the consequences of secularisation (Maigret, 2000), Touraine argues for the problematisation of *any* central principle of social order (Touraine, 1988, pp. xxiv, 118), and the focus on individuals' struggle to produce new, possibly shared, values and culture (Touraine, 1988, pp. 8, 12). In Dubet's work in particular, the outcome of this "de-socialisation" is left ambiguous. There is, Dubet argues, *no* necessary hierarchy between a number of competing dimensions of individual experience: first, our sense of social integration, second, the pattern of our rational strategies to acquire capital, and third, our attempt to develop an individual life-project (Dubet, 1995, pp. 113–114). The question of the social is not abolished but problematised, as a space whose t*ensions* are focussed in individual action:

> . . . the social subject is neither the individual in the outside world who only realises his individuality in ascetism, nor the social actor fully defined by his roles. He is the tension between these two elements.
>
> *(Dubet, 1994, pp. 22–23)*

As we review the strengths and weaknesses of Bourdieu's account it is worth asking, therefore, what hold he maintains on such ambiguities, bearing in mind that the tensions around the individual's position in social and cultural space is theoretically important for cultural studies also, because of its concern with the exclusions and power relations within culture (cf. Couldry, 2000, Chapter 3).

The space of points of view

In *the Weight of the World* (hereafter referred to simply as '1999'), the tension between Bourdieu's particular theory of the social world and the irreducible complexity of individual perspectives on that world emerges with particular clarity. Views of this book differ widely, and some have seen in it the closest Bourdieu's sociological model comes to collapsing under its own weight (Martuccelli, 1999, pp. 136–141). I take a more positive view and want to emphasise the book's continuities with the concerns of some Anglo-US cultural sociology, as well as with the rest of Bourdieu's work. I also bring out some methodological difficulties and limitations (particularly its occlusion of the everyday media and cultural landscape).

Individual voices were not unheard in Bourdieu's earlier work: such voices are present in numerous quotations in *Distinction* (1984) and in full interview transcripts elsewhere (for example, Bourdieu et al., 1963). The issue, however, is always: *how much* weight individual voices are given in Bourdieu's overall analysis of the social world? For some commentators, the odds are set too heavily against the individual voice; indeed, one unsympathetic critic argued that Bourdieu, by privileging social reproduction, was blind to individuals' values and ideals (Alexander, 1995, p. 137). That criticism takes little account of Bourdieu's long-term concern with

attacking the fallacy that substitutes the theorist's generalisations for the individual's embodied practice (1977, 1990a, 2000). More subtle critics like Craig Calhoun argue that Bourdieu gives excessive emphasis to the individual's general *strategies* of capital acquisition, compared with other forms of individual agency (for example, individual s of creativity); on the other hand, Calhoun argues, Bourdieu tells us too little about the new structural pressures that expanding information technology and electronic communications pose for individuals (1995, pp. 141–142, 155). In a sense, *The Weight of the World* tries to respond to both crude and subtle lines of critique. Here we *do* hear many individual voices articulating their values and ideals, and space *is* given to their adaptations to their position (whether successful or not) and to their view of the world; and we *do* hear their reflections, if not on the information and communications environment, at least on the new "flexible" world of work that others (McRobbie, 1998; Sennett, 1999) have analysed in detail.

It would be a mistake, however, to see *The Weight of the World* as a retreat from the ambitions of Bourdieu's earlier structural theory. Bourdieu's sociology has always emphasised how individuals are each *differently* constrained by the uneven distribution of symbolic power. As he puts it in one of his last books, the *Pascalian Meditations*: "one of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably, in any case, the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is, of social importance and reasons for living" (2000, p. 241). Indeed, it may be the central task of critical sociology to confront this:

> the social sciences which alone can unmask and counter the completely new strategies of domination which they sometimes help to inspire and to arm, will more than ever have to choose which side they are on: either they place their rational instruments of knowledge at the service of ever more rationalised domination, or they rationally analyse domination and more especially the contribution which rational knowledge can make to *de facto* monopolisation of the profits of universal reason.
>
> *(Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 83–84).*

Or, as he puts it more succinctly elsewhere (1998a, p. 21), "we must work towards universalising the conditions of access to the universal".

This point is essential to understanding the strategy of *The Weight of the World*. As many of its interviews bring out, individuals must live with the consequences of the power that *others' point of view* has over them. So, for example, we hear of the "destiny effect" or "reality principle" (1999, p. 63, 5–7) imposed by schools' symbolic power over students and their families. Differentials in symbolic resources are linked to other inequalities, of course: differences in economic and cultural capital, but also, less obviously, spatial differentiations which solidify social boundaries through unevenly distributing assets within, and connections across, space (1999, pp. 126–127). Social space involves the patterning of social *and symbolic* resources which ensures that speaking from "here" is not the same as speaking from "there".

Turning again to the formulation of the *Pascalian Meditations*, there is no simple level playing field on which social action takes place:

> when powers are unequally distributed, the economic and social world presents itself not as a universe of possibles equally accessible to every possible subject – posts to be occupied, courses to be taken, markets to be won, goods to be consumed, properties to be exchanged – but rather as a signposted universe, full of injunctions and prohibitions, signs of appropriation and exclusion, obligatory routes or impassable barriers, and in a word, profoundly differentiated.
>
> *(Bourdieu, 2000, p. 225, cf. 134, 183)*

It is this insight above all (the insistence on the symbolic dimensions of contemporary social conflict) that makes Bourdieu's work important for cultural studies; and it is this insight that underlies Bourdieu's insistence at the beginning of *The Weight of the World* on understanding the multidimensional "*space* of points of view" (1999, p. 3), in which social actors act and think.

The space of points of view is not the infinite privatised plurality of individual viewpoints that "postmodern" accounts of society's dissolution, whether broadly optimistic or pessimistic, suggest.[5] It is a highly organised space where the mutual incomprehensibility of individual viewpoints stems from underlying differences in structural position, dictated by inequality in economic, social and symbolic resources. Such conflicts stem, in part, from agents' awareness of how their share of resources measures up against others' (the "ordinary suffering" or *la petite misère* (1999, p. 4) that comes from "relative deprivation" (Runciman, 1972), but Bourdieu inflects a Weberian insistence on the incompatibility of perspectives with an emphasis (drawn as much from Durkheim) on conflict over *representations* of the world, and over the resources to make those representations. Such inequality has a symbolic dimension which cannot be mapped in terms of economic measures of poverty but is no less central to grasping how social space is ordered. Specific examples in *The Weight of the World* include the different worldviews of temporary and permanent workers in the same car factory (1999, pp. 257–296, 317–339) where work-based solidarity has been undermined by new forms of work organisation (1999, p. 275, cf. Sennett, 1999), and the tensions between inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods and the media who come to "represent" them (1999, p. 99–105). Such forms of suffering (based in an inequality in "rights over the future": 2000, p. 225) are precisely hidden from the sociologist's abstract "quasi-divine point of view" (1999, p. 3). They *only* emerge at the level of the individual: conflicts between individuals' ideal of work and the "institutional bad faith" of particular working settings (1999, pp. 190, 205, 249; cf. 229, 241); conflicts between generations over how to value the family's assets (1999, pp. 381–391), and so on. If a common theme through the book is individual loss, what is lost, again and again, is very often the possibility of a perspective *shared* with others, whether at work, or in politics, or in inter-ethnic relations.

I return later to some important limitations of Bourdieu's analysis. But in its emphasis on the complexities of the space of points of view, it connects with a neglected strain in recent cultural sociology and cultural studies. In classical sociology, C. Wright Mills insisted that "no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, and of their intersections within society, has completed its intellectual journey" (1970[1959], p. 12); indeed the structural importance of conflicts between society's values and individuals' capacities and resources goes back to Robert Merton's article "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938).[6] Even so, work based on that principle in sociology (such as Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Gilligan, 1982; Skeggs, 1997) and in media and cultural studies (Nightingale, 1993; Steedman, 1986; Press, 1991; Walkerdine, 1997) has been rare. Yet at stake in this neglected tradition is a broader question of the social impacts of the unequal distribution of symbolic, especially narrative, resources to which *The Weight of the World*, whatever its weaknesses, is an important contribution.

The Weight of the World: specific methodological issues

What is striking about *The Weight of the World* is the emphasis Bourdieu puts on the *evidential* value of individual narratives:

> Situated at points where social structures "work", and therefore worked over by the contradictions of these structures, these individuals are constrained, in order to live or to survive, to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp, and to the objective structures expressed in and by these contradictions.
> *(Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511)*

Here the "proper place" of analysis is not only the site where habitus is formed but the site where individual narratives of conflict and dissent are articulated and developed over time. At the same time, Bourdieu sharply distinguishes proper sociological treatment of individual narratives from journalistic or popular accounts, whether individuals' own de-contextualised accounts of themselves (see below) or ungrounded media commentary on social affairs (1999, p. 628). Both are doxic representations of the social from which the sociologist must distance himself. Implicitly, therefore, Bourdieu raises the methodological stakes at play in using individual accounts of the social world as evidence.

Specifically, Bourdieu insists early in the book on not narrativising the interviews in a literary way (1999, pp. 3, 63; cf. Grass & Bourdieu, 2000, p. 26), since "writing well" might obscure the constructed nature of the interview situation. Bourdieu's caution is in line with many sociologists and social psychologists (Potter & Wetherall, 1987; Skeggs, 1997). The practice is, however, not always so straightforward. First of all, perhaps inevitably in such a large multi-authored book, there are lapses, where quasi-literary interpretation takes over from scientific caution. Sometimes this is harmless, as in this comment which legitimates the role of

the sociologist-interviewer: "all she has left is the satisfaction, not without bitterness it is true, of having understood after the event what it was that happened to her, a satisfaction that can help to transform an apparently intolerable destiny into a new, unexpected freedom" (Jean-Pierre Faguer, in 1999, p. 552). At other times, the distortion goes further. So in Michel Pialoux's interpretation of interviews with car workers, we hear of one interviewee (on page 270) that his relationship to the future is constructed through his children's prospects – "they're doing pretty well", he says with a smile, but he doesn't venture far into territory he doesn't know well, afraid that the future has unpleasant surprises in store for him" – but (by page 271) his relative silence is interpreted as part of a wider "disillusionment" "that is tied to the present but also comes out of a whole history: disillusionment that shows in the way he looks at his own past, at his own future or that is his children". Where do we draw the line between literary overinterpretation and sociological caution?

Bourdieu's own view is clear when he explains the point of the book's interviews:

> [which is] attempting to situate oneself in the place the interviewees occupy in the social space in order to understand them as *necessarily* what they are . . . to give oneself a *generic and genetic comprehension* of who these individuals are, based on a theoretical and practical grasp of the social conditions of which *they are the product*.
>
> *(1999, p. 613, emphasis added)*

Yet this is itself quite a particular and contentious view of how individuals "fit" into social space, which prioritises the "conditions associated with the entire category to which any individual belongs" (ibid.). Whether there are such positions, conditions and categories is clearly a sociological question, and ruling such a question out in advance under cover of a methodological strategy is itself close to a literary conceit.

It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that Bourdieu's approach to the interview material is anything less than cautious and self-reflexive.[7] First, he is well aware of the degree of self-censorship interviewees probably exercised in the interview situation, particularly around the display of racism (1999, p. 616, and compare interview on page 33). Second, he is sensitive to the symbolic power differential inherent to the interview situation, and therefore insists on reducing the consequent symbolic violence (in Bourdieu's term) through, for example, various interviewer comments designed to underplay the formal distance between interviewer and interviewee. Bourdieu calls this practise, slightly oddly, "methodical *listening*" (1999, p. 609, emphasis added), even though in his own interview with two young men on a housing estate (Francois and Ali) he does far more than "listen", making various interventions and suggested interpretations which, from another perspective, would be seen as leading questions. He comments (without prompting from the men) "and there are lots of problems like this? It's always the same people who get accused?" (1999, p. 65). While this diverges from standard interviewing technique, the aim is to avoid what Bourdieu sees as the misleading "neutrality" of a structured questionnaire or survey which reinforces, rather than softens, the power differential between interviewer and respondent.

By contrast, Bourdieu was prepared to intervene to prevent the inclusion in the book of interviews where the relationship between interviewer and interviewee became too comfortable (1999, pp. 616–617). In one specific example which he discusses in the final essay, an interview with a woman who interpreted her educational problems as a narrative of displaced identity was rejected because such self-narrativising "excludes de facto any investigation of the objective facts of [the interviewee's] trajectory". While purely self-referential interviews are certainly unhelpful, the obvious question is who determines in advance what the "objective facts" of the interviewee's situation are, and on what criteria? Bourdieu's own cautionary comment (1999, pp. 63–64) on the interview with Francois and Ali and its status as identity performance – that "it would be far more naïve *to reject* this possible truth" (emphasis added) than to accept it at face value, because of its potential insights into a certain sort of self-despair, born of lack of symbolic resources – is relevant here.

More broadly, we have to ask whether, in the preselection of interviewees, the conducting of specific interviews, the selection of completed interviews for the book, and the interpretation of interviews within it, Bourdieu and his team ended up simply confirming the presumption of social suffering from which the whole research project started. This is an obvious line of attack and indeed one which Bourdieu himself acknowledges when he speaks of the project as "invoking" from the subjects "*as the research invites them to do* "what is wrong" with their lives" (1999, p. 615, emphasis added). More worrying than occasional steers in the interviews' published text is preselection during interviewee recruitment, since it cannot retrospectively be monitored. A response to this charge (if not a complete one) is to draw on the political justification for the book's subject-matter (noted at the beginning of this chapter), arguing that it is a counter-weight to sociological and media narratives that give insufficient attention, for example, to the unemployed's "omnipresent fear of hitting rock-bottom" (1999, p. 371), or the profound isolation of many sick and elderly people (1999, p. 600), or the anger of the socially and economically disadvantaged when they feel misrepresented in their rare opportunities to be heard in the media (1999, pp. 103–105).

There remains, however, another problem in how Bourdieu understands social suffering. A striking absence from the book discussed more in the next section is any sense of the everyday *pleasures* of those interviewed, in social interaction or leisure activities and particularly in media and cultural consumption. Were these topics excluded in advance from the interview protocols, and if so why, given that Bourdieu was all too aware that "nothing is simpler, more 'natural', than imposing a problematic" in interview research (1999, p. 619)? Since media consumption is one obvious common topic to "break the ice" in an interview situation, are we to assume that an effort was made to avoid any such discussions or instead to edit those that occurred out of the finished text?

It is important to remember at this point just how much editing lies behind the final selection of voices presented in the book.[8] In the book's final essay "Understanding", Bourdieu acknowledges the value of William Labov's method for investigating speech patterns by using people from the same linguistic group to do the

recording (1999, p. 611); are, he suggests, interviews with people about their living conditions better done by those without formal sociological training (1999, p. 611), as in Paul Radin's 1930s work?[9] Indeed, this was Bourdieu's original plan: his small team of trained sociologists were to reply on a large army of *untrained* interviewers or mediators who would conduct the bulk of the interviews, but as he explains, a significant proportion of those "lay" interviewers' work was excluded from the published research because of over-identifications between interviewer and interviewee, which "produced little more than sociolinguistic data, incapable of providing the means for their own interpretation" (1999, p. 611–612). In the English edition, of 42 interviews (some of them joint interviews), 25 were conducted by Bourdieu and his core sociologist team[10] or by long-term collaborators of Bourdieu (Champagne, Wacquant, Bourgois). What we cannot know, of course, is how that excluded "sociolinguistic data" might have changed the book's depiction of social suffering.

The Weight of the World: some strategic absences

It is time to look at the broader methodological and theoretical judgements that stand behind the text of *The Weight of the World*. Paul Rabinow has depicted Bourdieu's method as tragically contradictory, and therefore flawed:

> Against the grain of his own system, Bourdieu sympathises, does find the pervasive reproduction of social inequalities . . . both fascinating and intolerable, he *does* respect his subjects. . . . However, he "knows" better and therefore must engage in the constant battle to overcome these sentiments, so as to become . . . indifferent. Hence, his (unrecognized) pathos.
>
> *(Rabinow, 1996, p. 13)*

Although "indifference" in a sense derived from Epicurean philosophy is a term Bourdieu himself uses (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 115–117; cf. Bourdieu, in 1999, p. 614), Rabinow's claim both overdramatises and oversimplifies Bourdieu's position. While the issue of avoiding emotional identification is occasionally raised in *The Weight of the World* (for example 1999, p. 152, chapter by Loic Wacquant), in his preface Bourdieu talks of a *balance* between achieving objectivity and avoiding "the objectivising distance that reduces the individual to a specimen in a display case"; analysis of interview material "must adopt a perspective as close as possible to the individual's own without identifying with the *alter ego*" (1999, p. 2). "Participant objectivation" (as Bourdieu calls this method)[11] involves getting close enough to the agent's point of view to reproduce it in all its taken-for-granted depth – as the point of view of a real agent speaking from a distinctive location in social space – but avoiding an emotional identification. While sharing Garfinkel's ethnomethodological concern with the taken-for-granted, Bourdieu rejects completely Garfinkel's (and indeed Goffman's and Schutz's) belief that close analysis of the *interaction* situation is sufficient unto itself; *a fortiori* emotions generated by the interaction must

be excluded. Bourdieu is offering more than a knee-jerk insistence on "objective" scientific rigour (a claim he mocks elsewhere in relation to supposedly neutral survey research); his point is that emotion generated by the interview situation is misplaced. As Bourdieu argued on many occasions, romanticising the local encounter involves "the interactionist error" (1990b, p. 167, cf. 2000, pp. 146–147, 174) of ignoring that the space of social encounters is *already* distorted in advance by wider forces.

The problem, then, is not Bourdieu's striving for emotional distance (as Rabinow claims) but rather *the type of theory* Bourdieu brings to the interpretation of the interviews. As noted briefly in the last section, a fundamental weakness in the book's theoretical universe, not just its methodological practice, is its downplaying, to the point, almost, of silence, of media and popular culture's role in interviewees' lives; the contrast, for example, with Carl Nightingale's work on inner city US black communities (1993), is striking. This drastic selectivity on the part of Bourdieu and his team is never explained or justified and applies even in the book's substantial section on the US inner cities. *The Weight of the World* is simply blind to the possibility that media and cultural consumption (fashion, cars, clothes, leisure) might work as a common resource linking local experiences. Where media *do* figure, this is, as already noted, in the analysis of the *disruptive* effects of media representations on those who lack cultural capital (1999, pp. 46–59, cf. 104–105, 213), but this cannot be the whole story. This argument against Bourdieu is not based on a populist view of cultural consumption. For what is important in Carl Nightingale's argument is precisely his insistence on the *disarticulation* between shared material aspirations sustained by media and cultural consumption and the actual and continuing inequality in resources and life chances from which poor inner-city black populations in the US suffer. It is this, he argues, that is intolerable, and reinforces exclusion on a deeper level. Given Bourdieu's interest in analysing "durable inequality" (Tilly, 1999), he would surely have wanted to take such issues of alienation seriously; indeed, they are mentioned in passing (Champagne, in 1999, pp. 59, 110; Bourdieu & Champagne, in 1999, pp. 425–426). But by bracketing out the everyday landscape of media and cultural consumption that people inhabit, and its possible pleasures, as well as its frustrations, the book's analysis of social suffering is significantly weakened.

What can explain this strange absence? Bourdieu's often-criticised distance from popular culture can hardly be sufficient, given the seriousness of Bourdieu's attempt here to engage with the texture of everyday lives. More relevant is his explicit aim, through the interviews, of allowing interviewees some distance from the oppressive burden, as he sees it, of the media's "common sense" view of the world (1999, p. 620). Yet, while it would certainly be a distortion to assume that media are *the* central focus of everyday experience,[12] it is equally misleading to assume there is no substance to the mechanisms media and popular culture offer for coping with everyday "suffering" (cf. Walkerdine, 1997. Media and popular culture (television, film, music, magazines, sport) are surely more than a simple pain-killer without cognitive consequences. Bourdieu here falls foul of one of his own most powerful criticisms

of mainstream sociology and anthropology: ignoring the consequences of the analyst's preexisting, socially produced, distance from the interviewee (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 1–2). This difference, as Bourdieu himself makes clear, is not one of emotion but of interest; the analyst's distanced interest in the interviewees' life is a *privilege* based in what Bourdieu elsewhere calls "that logical and political scandal, the monopolisation of the universal" (2000, p. 84); yet the consumption of media and popular culture cannot be understood without considering its role in the contestation (by no means necessarily successful, let alone universal) of such monopolisation. No shared emotion, or indeed suppression of emotion, could change the reality of the sociologist interviewer's privileged distance (hence Rabinow's critique is misplaced). What would have been valuable, however, is more theoretical reflection on Bourdieu's part concerning the consequences of his own distance from media and popular culture for his ability to depict convincingly contemporary experiences of social suffering.

What of the wider aims of Bourdieu's sociology in *The Weight of the World*? Bourdieu's methodology – its particular focus and ambition – only makes sense in the light of his belief that sociology, and pre-eminently sociology, can illuminate the "essential principle of what is lived and seen *on the ground*" (1999, p. 123). But what "ground" are we discussing? Given that (as we have seen) Bourdieu is prepared to use his sociological judgement to *override* an individual voice, we need to look closely at the criteria that drive the book's interpretative decisions. In discussing a provincial wine dealer, close to retirement after a working life of declining success, Patrick Champagne comments:

> If there was nothing to surprise me in these aggressive observations, which I had heard many times over without really understanding then, *I was still astonished* at just how sociologically coherent those observations are once they are connected to the social position of the person making them (a move not made in ordinary conversation or done only to counter-attack).
>
> *(in Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 392–393, emphasis added)*

Or, as Bourdieu himself puts it (1999, p. 391), when interpreting a farmer's talk about his son's failure to take on the family farm as a masked statement that the son had *killed* the father, "it was only after having constructed the explanatory model – simultaneously unique and generic" that such an interpretation became possible. These admissions of difficulty, while refreshingly honest, raise a problem. It is not obvious how a "model" (explaining what someone in this farmer's *structural* position *might* mean to say about his son) can reveal what this particular farmer *actually* meant to say on that particular occasion. This gap, Bourdieu insists, cannot be filled with psychoanalysis (1999, pp. 513, 620–621), but, if so, how is it to be filled? Bourdieu appears to rely on a theory of how to understand what is *unsaid*, an implicit theory of *repression* (1999, p. 615), that surely needs more discussion (cf. Billig, 1997). The theory of "habitus" – as the general principle that determines the range of practices available to an individual – hardly seems sufficient to explain the

dynamics of individual narratives, and their specific repressions and absences. There remains, then, at the end of the book, a gap between the "partial and temporary truths" of the interview method (1999, p. 629) and Bourdieu's wider sociological framework.

Perhaps such a gap is in principle insoluble. Perhaps the resulting uncertainty is inherent in all serious fieldwork, as George Marcus (1999) has recently argued, although it is unclear whether Bourdieu would have endorsed Marcus' epistemological scepticism. I suspect that Bourdieu was well aware of the gap between the "evidence" of the book's interviews and his bigger social theory and wanted to confront it. It is a mistake to see this, crudely, as a failing deriving from the tension between habitus and lived situation throughout social theory (Martuccelli, 1999, p. 141), because it is precisely such tensions which the book's final essay appears deliberately to heighten. If so, the book's uncertainties, unresolved tensions and strategic absences must be accepted for what they are, inviting one final question: notwithstanding them, does *The Weight of the World* yield an enriched understanding of the conditions under which contemporary individuals act and speak?

Conclusion

This chapter has answered that question by arguing that *The Weight of the World* is indeed successful in such terms. It is the book's very particular combination of empirical engagement, methodological reflexivity and theoretical commitment (commitment, that is, to maintaining some notion of social structure operating within the details of local experience) that allows us to explore the tensions on which this chapter has focussed. In this way, the books take us, I would suggest, further than either the general theory of Giddens and Luhmann or the empirical investigations of "de-socialisation" within Touraine's school. At the same time, we cannot be satisfied with the flaws in Bourdieu's approach that this chapter has identified. Since my most fundamental criticism of *The Weight of the World* has been its inattention to media and popular culture's role in everyday experience, I want to conclude by arguing, briefly, for the *value* of Bourdieu's theoretical framework (if applied in a more open fashion) in addressing precisely that aspect of contemporary cultures.[13]

We live, arguably, in an age where two things are happening simultaneously: *both* the dispersal of some forms of social and cultural authority *and* the intense concentration of forces of media and cultural production through which certain other social rhetorics can be channelled. If so, there is value in examining the *categorising* power (in Durkheim's sense) of media institutions in everyday life, for example the intensely negotiated categories such as "reality", "liveness", "celebrity" and so on. These categories are interesting not because they are fashionable but because of their combined role as both social and cognitive distinctions, precisely the dual usage which Bourdieu saw as distinctive of symbolic systems (Swartz, 1997, pp. 87–88) and as so important to the interpretation of individual narratives.

It would have been interesting, for example, if Bourdieu's interviewees had been asked to reflect on their view of today's mediated public spaces (the talk show, for example) as places from which to represent themselves; the marking of such spaces by class differentials is so important that they are, arguably, an ideal site for symbolic analysis in the spirit of Bourdieu (Grindstaff, 2002; Couldry, 2003a, Chapter 7). We could move from the analysis of certain key social classifications in media and popular culture to re-examine how "habitus", the foundational term in Bourdieu's work that links structure and agency, should be rethought for an age when virtually every living-space has its own electronic window onto the world?[14] We could broaden our analysis to rethink the sociological implications of the constraints under which in mediated societies individual narratives of the social world get produced, exactly the type of issue that was characteristic of Bourdieu's sociology as a whole; from there, we could gain a sense of how this constructed "world" of media representations is involved in subtly constraining the imagined space of action of specific individuals.

Paradoxically, given Bourdieu's stated hostility to "cultural studies" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999), the result of developing Bourdieu's concerns with habitus would be something akin to the aim set by Elspeth Probyn for cultural studies itself: the aim of "thinking the social *through*" the self (1993, p. 3, emphasis added). There is more at stake here, in other words, than the continuation of one sociologist's legacy. The issue is how best to develop, in an inter-disciplinary spirit, the theoretical basis for critical commentary on both the commonalities and the divisions of contemporary cultures.

Notes

1 I discuss this at greater length in Couldry (2000, chapter 3).
2 Quoted, Bourdieu (1999, p. 93).
3 See Bourdieu (2002).
4 This analysis is picked up also at various points in the *Pascalian Meditations* (2000).
5 See respectively Elliott (1996) and Bauman (1992).
6 See Young (1999, Chapter 3) for valuable discussion.
7 He is surely right, although hardly pathbreaking, to draw back from treating the interviews as 'truths' about those who speak (1999, pp. 63, 240, 536). This has been a consistent theme for example of anthropology and feminist sociology for two decades or so (see for example Scott, 1992; Gray, 1997).
8 Note that not all the interviews published in the original French edition were included in the English translation.
9 Discussed in Gupta and Ferguson (1997, p. 23).
10 Christin et al. (in 1999, p. 611).
11 This translation, previously adopted in other Bourdieu translations, seems, perhaps even because of its initial awkwardness, preferable to "participant objectification" introduced by the recent translators of *The Weight of the World*.
12 I have argued against the prevalence of this assumption in media studies (Couldry, 2003a).
13 Clearly to develop this point fully would require at least one article by itself. For part of such an argument, see Couldry (2003b).
14 For the continued relevance of Bourdieu's notion of embodied "habitus", compared with Foucault's discourse-based analysis, see McNay (1999).

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PART II

Spaces of media, spaces of exclusion

5

REMEMBERING DIANA

The geography of celebrity and the politics of lack

Introduction

"Death", wrote Walter Benjamin, "is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell"[1]; "not only a man's knowledge or wisdom but above all his real life . . . first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death". As a celebrity, Princess Diana (hereafter "Diana") had, of course, already used the media to reveal the tribulations of her life in her own voice, but this story was further sanctioned by her death: as a media story, it acquired a different kind of authority when its reference-point in "reality" died. Even if we agree with Baudrillard that there are effectively no reference-points in contemporary culture which are not already marked by the media's influence, the aftermath of Diana's death represented the "simulacrum" at its most compelling: a "model" whose "reality" it became almost sacrilegious to deny. The events that followed Diana's death, therefore, offer a remarkable opportunity to study the mechanisms of our media-saturated culture as they operated on a large scale. Once we adopt that entirely necessary distance, we must, I will argue, be sceptical about the idea that the events showed something fundamental had "changed" (in British culture or in anything else).[2]

Yet it is undeniable that the mourning for Diana was a "liminal" period in Victor Turner's term,[3] a social "crisis" in which social continuity was in some way felt to be at issue. It was, after all, a collective confrontation with death. "Today", as Benjamin also wrote, "people live in rooms that have never been touched by death". But a death as public as Diana's opened spaces where stories of death could be shared: the rooms touched by death where people signed books of remembrance and saw visions of Diana;[4] spaces touched by death, such as the grass outside Kensington Palace where every tree (anything standing) held personal messages to Diana read by thousands. As Judith Williamson pointed out,[5] this collective show of grief for someone most people had never met has wider implications: to call it "*dis*placed"

private grief is perhaps odd when there are normally *no* places where grief of any kind can be shared collectively and the Diana mourning sites, exceptionally, provided them.

Crises, however, do not necessarily involve change: on the contrary, as Victor Turner's work suggested, crisis events are often the channel through which long-term distributions of power are reproduced, indeed legitimated. I want to develop such an argument for one aspect of the Diana events: their connection with British society's "discursive economy". By this, I mean the regular, and unequal, distribution of symbolic power under which certain forms of discourse (above all, those in the media) have particular authority, which others lack.[6] At this level, certainly, there was a crisis of some sort, but the overall impact of the Diana events was not to undermine but to *reproduce*, the normal inequality of speaking positions: between those who, whether as producers or as preferred sources, are active in the "media world" and those who are not. Yet, as with all crises, there was a moment of "excess": above all, as we shall see, the mass of personal messages placed at mourning sites. It was this excess that – by the very fact of its being so exceptional – revealed the normal landscape of speech *and silence* that characterises the mediated public sphere. The media themselves were "surprised" at this "unprecedented" "insight" into a "new" nation. They should not have been. For what was illuminated was what normally lies in the shadows cast by the media's own power, the profound inequality in the "power of naming"[7] between media producers and media consumers and its consequence: the exceptional importance for people outside the media at least to negotiate that inequality when the opportunity arises.

My concern, then, is not with the psychic economy of the Diana events nor even with their narrative economy (important though both are),[8] but with issues of "discursive economy": the broad, structural constraints in a mediated public sphere which shape who is able to speak and be listened to, and who (normally) is not. In emphasising links to such *normal inequalities*, I am going against the grain of the countless commentaries which saw the Diana events as an exceptional, and positive, expression of equality, or at least togetherness. The political implications of that interpretation could be adjusted according to taste, as was the significance of Diana herself. On the traditionalist right, "the most important thing to grasp about Princess Diana is that she was an ardent monarchist" (Paul Johnson).[9] On the populist right, "Diana walked with kings and queens but she was more at ease with the poor, the sick and the needy" (the *Sun*).[10] On what was once the left: "Diana was the Princess of a young country. Both she and "Call me Tony" Blair signalled a new informality, the end of the age of deference" (Suzanne Moore);[11] or (more brutally) "we must now ask ourselves what socialism is actually about. Is it class conflict or inclusion?" (Linda Grant).[12]

I am interested not so much in the myth of Diana as such (however it may have been politically appropriated) but in the "politics" that surround the production of all such myths of celebrity, and their connection with the wider politics of speech

in the mediated public sphere. Here too there is a myth (that the Diana events represented some unproblematic expression of "the People")[13] that needs to be questioned, and whose strategic gaps[14] need to be analysed. I return to an aspect of this question in my concluding section.

To introduce my more detailed analysis, let me freeze media coverage of Diana and her death at two specific, early moments. In terms of original temporal sequence, I take them in reverse order.

Freeze-frame (1)

Around 10.15 on the morning of Diana's death I was watching the BBC's coverage. They cut from the anchorman, Martyn Lewis, to a reporter outside Kensington Palace, where flowers were already accumulating. By then, there was one main inflection of the story: that Diana had died in a car, under chase by press photographers. The BBC reporter confirmed that people were showing anger against the press. A woman walked past him, having laid some flowers. "This woman", he said, had been one of those who felt angry. He called her back into the frame to speak, but there was no interview. "It's YOU", she said, pointing at the camera, "it's you who've killed her". Another woman, the other side of the frame, joined in, uninvited: "that's right". The reporter wavered uneasily, struggling to narrate the small tide of events engulfing him. Martyn Lewis intervened, commenting smoothly that the BBC were only trying to do what they were sure the viewers would want them to do, that is, cover events as they unfolded.

No smooth words, however, could cancel out the immediate impact of what had just been broadcast. The camera, the presence of the reporter – the *material form* of the media frame itself – had briefly been de-naturalised before a national audience. For a moment, it ceased to be an unseen window on the world and became visible as what, of course, it always is: a mechanism that intervenes in the world, whose actions were themselves now under challenge. The moment was probably forgotten, but it reflected no doubt many confrontations between press and public (by the next day, the press was already practised in neutralising them: "Kensington was not a place to show a Press card and ask questions of people *soaked in grief*",[15] and therefore implicitly incapable of thinking straight). Certainly, it was not a theme the British media wanted to amplify over the next week, as television blamed the "press", the broadsheets blamed the "tabloids", and the tabloids blamed "foreign" paparazzi (or else attacked the "broadsheets" hypocrisy), in their rush to deflect accusations that they were somehow responsible for the death. And, in any case, throughout the course of subsequent events the naturalised authority of the media (in all its forms) to present social "actuality" – the ultimate "actuality" of a national state of mourning – was massively reproduced. However, in that moment of early coverage that was precisely excessive – spinning out of the orbit of the media's control – a normally hidden threat to the media's authority had been temporarily exposed.

Freeze-frame (2)

I want now to look back briefly at the situation before Diana died, when she was simply a global celebrity whose tragic dimension was a matter for debate. The intrusive coverage of the final weeks of Diana's romance with Dodi Al-Fayed, of course, became retrospectively notorious: particularly the surveillance-style dossier called "The Kiss" which the *Sunday Mirror* published on its front pages on 10 August 1997. The tabloids were, however, right to point out the "hypocrisy" of those who attacked them. If, that is, "hypocrisy" is the right word: the point rather is that virtually everyone in a mediated culture (all producers, all consumers) is involved in its daily reproduction, in particular the reproduction of its key principles such as that of celebrity (and the gaze that actualises it). The production of "actuality" (with little ethical or other restraint) is fundamental to the symbolic authority which the media in all their forms have. To reject that is not, normally, an option.

Three days after "The Kiss", the *Daily Mirror* published, also on its front page, a photo of Diana and Dodi in a field with their helicopter during a visit to the woman claimed to be Diana's clairvoyant. The photo had been bought from some schoolchildren who had happened to see the couple land and had run home to get a camera. Particularly interesting is how a broadsheet, the *Guardian*, reported the incident the next day.[16] Underneath a picture of the schoolchildren (caption: "Children in the frame"), the intrusion on celebrity privacy was reported in a light-hearted, hardly critical, manner:

> Youngsters in a Derbyshire village yesterday were coming to terms with a little-known side of the Princess of Wales – a tongue lashing and a right royal brush-off – after *beating the paparazzi* to snap a world exclusive a few yards from their homes . . . Diana told them: "Go away". But *like Fleet Street's finest*, the youngsters stuck with the story and finally cornered the couple.
>
> *(emphasis added)*

Underneath, the *Guardian*'s picture editor made a brief comment under the sub-headlines "Canny child keeps it simple and focuses on the job in question . . . Eamonn McCabe hails a budding pro". This light-hearted story is clearly offered on the basis that anyone else with initiative might have done the same, and that, if they did, they would be showing the professional skills which are highly valued within the media and underlie the media's wider social authority.

I recall this story simply as an example of how the media's differential symbolic power – its special authority to represent the social, the actual, the significant – is regularly reproduced as natural; indeed, it is readily naturalised under the guise of professional values. An exceptional feature of the events after Diana's death was that, at least partially and briefly, that authority was de-naturalised (as in the incident I recalled earlier), even if on a larger scale it was massively reinforced. In this context, the acts of non-media people (such as the *Guardian*'s "children in the frame") are an "excess", which help highlight, but in no way alter, the normal distribution

of symbolic power. Non-media people are the actors in what is purely a "*symbolic* reversal" of the media's power.[17]

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In what follows I will explore these themes of naturalisation and excess. How far did the "unprecedented" events surrounding Diana's death simply confirm the structure (in particular, the geography) that is inherent to media celebrity and the media sphere more generally? And, if there were moments of excess – such as the explosion of messages to Diana, the sociality of the mourning sites – were they a challenge to that structure, or simply a consequence of it?

The geography of media celebrity

There is a geographical dimension to our relationship to the media (whether as viewer, listener or reader) which is normally latent. Although where we watch, listen and read *from* is normally quite separate from where the media are produced, we are not generally conscious of that as a spatial separation. The media give us access to a "de-spatialized publicness",[18] even though there is a real, and important, segregation of sites of media production from sites of media consumption.[19] When people identify with a media celebrity, however, that segregation often becomes more explicit. Although people in myriad different physical locations are interested in them, celebrities exist in one place, they have one body, and that body is normally somewhere else. The pain and difficulty caused by this asymmetry was memorably brought out by the testimony of rock music fans collected by Fred and Julie Vermorel. As one Michael Jackson fan put it:

> I look up to the moon and I think to myself: This very second, he's alive somewhere, and he's breathing. . . . It seems unreal, but it's not. It's reality. Because he's living at that moment . . . And I think: What's he doing? And then it really gets to me.
>
> It makes me cry because it's so impossible.
>
> And I know what it is to never be able to talk to him.[20]

Any actual meeting with celebrities may, therefore, have a special value, as does any place ritually set aside for communing with celebrities after their death, such as their graves. As the anthropologist Ian Reader put it, discussing visits to celebrity graves: "[celebrities] are, like mediaeval saints at their tombs, directly accessible in *an unmediated form* to those who visit them" (emphasis added). As one Billy Fury fan he quotes put it: "coming here [to the grave] is our chance to see Billy, to meet Billy. . . ".[21] There are wider links here with the concept of pilgrimage, to which I return later.

Diana was a global media celebrity with a very broad and complex range of followers and admirers. But her death intensified the inherent asymmetry of the celebrity situation. First, all the old stories about her as celebrity were "rekeyed" by

her death.[22] They were lifted out of the unending flow of most celebrity news and became fixed in a new tragic structure. There was a compelling urge to reinterpret what you already knew about her, because it had acquired new significance when the reality of the person *behind* the stories was now confirmed by her very public death. Perhaps this in part underlay some people's change of attitude to Diana, such as the following mourner, quoted in one press report: "I am not a royalist. I admired her, *but I never realised that I loved her*. I wanted to be part of it all. It's the most moving thing that's happened in my lifetime" (emphasis added).[23] Second, and as this quotation also suggests, all the stories about Diana, following her death, became absorbed in one larger story, which appeared to be a story about everyone: a story about the remarkable actuality that was affecting the whole country. Everyone knew that everyone else was in *some* way affected (even, however unwillingly, the significant, but uncounted proportion of the population who were not mourning).

That intensification of attention was, of course, focussed not only on Diana's death but on the unfolding events in various "centres": the site of the accident, the palaces (Kensington, Buckingham, St James, Balmoral), the places where the death was to be publicly commemorated. As more and more people travelled to these sites, this fact itself was continuously covered in the media: hence the desire which so many felt, quite simply, to "be there" at one of those "centres". As one person who went to camp along the funeral route put it: "I kept looking at the TV reports and saying to myself, "Why are you looking at this?" You should be there. So I came".[24] People drawn to the televised lying-in-state of President Kennedy 34 years before had spoken in similar terms: "The more we watch[ed], the more we felt we just had to be there ourselves".[25] Not only did the whole week of mourning qualify as a "media event" in Dayan and Katz" term,[26] but the centres of mourning were, in a sense, media sites. By "being there", you could cross over (temporarily) into the media narrative itself.

While this concentration of public attention was certainly extraordinarily intense, the structural pattern which it reflected was far from extraordinary: in fact, we regularly see its effects. There is plenty of evidence for the fascination with the places featured in the media. Visits to "disaster sites" (sites of tragic events which are media stories, whether because of their size and importance or because they involve "media people") have been studied by Chris Rojek.[27] More generally, visits to film and television locations are a growing feature of the tourist industry.[28] Christopher Anderson in relation to Disneyland has written perceptively about the particular "desire for authenticity" invoked by television: the sense of a "sublime, unmediated experience that is forever absent, just beyond the grasp of a hand reaching for the television dial".[29] Television (and, to an extent, all major media) offer a relationship with "an unreachable and otherwise inaccessible world"[30] which, therefore, always implies the possibility of travel (or "pilgrimage") to the "centres" it invokes.

The metaphor of "pilgrimage" has become almost a cliché for describing many forms of travel, but it is particularly appropriate to visiting locations featured in the media. They certainly do function, at least to some extent, as distant places associated with shared values (loosely, Victor and Edith Turner's definition of a pilgrimage

site).[31] The Diana mourning sites were also liable to be read as pilgrimage sites, first, as sites associated with celebrity and, second, as sites of mourning. The value of understanding contemporary sites of public mourning (such as those that developed after the Hillsborough disaster) as secular pilgrimage sites has been plausibly argued.[32] At such sites, and perhaps as Dean MacCannell argued at tourist sites generally, "markers" (things which can stand in for, or connect with, the site in some way) are particularly important. The ritual of visiting involves "connecting one's own marker to a sight already marked by others".[33] In precisely this way, people left "markers" at the Diana sites in the form of words and flowers. Contributing a message was a way of connecting materially (through the leaving of some trace) with sites of such central importance. For those abroad who could not visit the London sites, creating or participating in a Web site connected with the Diana events carried, perhaps, something of the same function: "the Web enables people who would otherwise have no way to express themselves publicly to stand up and shout, 'I'm here, and I care'".[34]

More than that, the media images of the mourning sites – the seas of flowers, the queues through the night to sign books of remembrance, the vast numbers, and wide range of nationalities, present – announced these places as new, if temporary, sites for *experiencing "the social"* in Durkheim's sense. As he put it in his famous discussion of the social origins of the sacred/profane distinction, "the very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant".[35] The connection between Durkheim's theories and modern royal ceremonial was made by Shils and Young in their essay on the 1953 Coronation, where they pointed out its role in focussing "the common sentiment of the sacredness of communal life and institutions".[36] It is sometimes forgotten that Durkheim's analysis was originally formulated in relation to a nomadic society which rarely met together. It therefore applies with particular force to contemporary societies which are highly dispersed; the power of collective gatherings is directly related to the extent of normal social *segregation*. Further, in accordance with what Durkheim called the "contagion" of the sacred, the sites for mourning Diana were replicated elsewhere. The mounds of flowers and messages, and the remembrance books, were repeated all over Britain and abroad. On the day of the funeral, people gathered at sites along the coffin's route, including many places which are normally "non-places",[37] devoid of sociality, such as motorway verges and bridges.

There was a media dimension to these gatherings, since the sites were extensively covered in the media. This media dimension became quite explicit when television coverage of the funeral was broadcast to open-air gatherings in London and elsewhere. If there is a connection between the intensity of those moments when we come together as a social group and the extent of our normal dispersal, then our role as media consumers is also implicated in this. It is in part domestic media consumption that keeps us apart, in a state of "serial absence" as Jean-Paul Sartre once put it.[38] Implicitly at the mourning sites through the week, and explicitly at the viewing sites on the funeral day, everyone gathered was part of a media audience, principally a television audience, since that was how most had seen the

story of Diana's death develop. At all these sites, what Claus-Dieter Rath has called television's "invisible electronic network" became actual, face-to-face.[39]

With my partner, I was one of the hundreds of thousands sitting in Hyde Park watching the giant television screens. I was – and remain a Republican – but, regardless of that, it was impossible to be there and ignore the intense pressure of socialisation. But crucially this moment of togetherness was shaped by the presence of the electronic media. The "social" was experienced directly as a shared *viewing situation*. As far as I could see, most people did not participate in the funeral ceremony in the conventional sense (by singing songs, saying prayers) although the service's words had been supplied in the British press. Even the National Anthem was watched, not sung. Nor is this surprising. For part of what was confirmed by coming together was our belonging to the "electronic network" *of viewers*: it was as if the walls of our living-rooms had been removed. In Sartre's terms, the "seriality" of our normal "absence" (as viewers) from the events we watched was banished for an hour, but not that absence itself.

This focuses a limitation of any simple Durkheimian model of events at the Diana sites. The great value of Durkheim's analysis is that it emphasises the foundational importance of our moments of experiencing the social, the importance of simply being together as a social unity. As I have already suggested, this analysis is all the more powerful, at least in one respect, when applied to contemporary massively dispersed societies: that in part is the basis of Michel Maffesoli's theory of contemporary sociality.[40] A difficulty, however, is that so many contemporary experiences of "the social" are not direct but *indirect*. As viewers of a large-scale media event, we merely *assume* an experience of being together, since we watch separately, "serially"; and that assumption of "being together" is mediated through our belief in the media's representational mechanism itself. Even those exceptional cases where the social is still experienced directly, face-to-face, may take their meaning, and their structure, in large part from a mediated context: this was certainly true of the Diana events. This means that contemporary experiences of the social are inseparable from issues of representation in – that is, inequalities of representation in and access to – the mechanisms (the media) which have shaped them.[41] This is to return to the questions of discursive economy, which I emphasised earlier and which we saw being (at least briefly) at issue in the controversies toward the beginning of the mourning week over the media's role in Diana's death. I will clarify how precisely I see these questions affecting my interpretation of the mourning sites in the final section, but one point should be made immediately. In analysing the inclusive aspects of the Diana events, it needs to be emphasised that many were *not* included in them, and even resented the claim upon their time and attention that the events made. The Diana events were not therefore unproblematic experiences of "the social"; they were rather experiences based on an assumption that they were fully inclusive, and this assumption (derived only from the dominant representation of what was happening) was false. Those excluded from the picture were left largely in silence.[42]

Before returning to those issues, however, I must explain more fully what I mean by the "excess" at those sites.

Spaces of excess

However significant the media dimensions of how the mourning sites were formed, what happened there cannot be reduced to media effects. The week or so after Diana's death saw not only a massive explosion of media discourse about her but an equally massive explosion of public discourse *outside the media*, above all, in the personal messages which people wrote to Diana to accompany their flowers.[43] The latter constituted an "excess" in relation to the normal discursive economy of the media. An excess, it is true, that the media quickly recognised as significant and sought to contain – for example, when papers such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Evening Standard* and the *Sun* published large selections of the messages, or when, like the *Daily Mail*, they organised their own "Book of Condolences" – but an excess nonetheless.

No one has read all the messages written to Diana, nor could a "random sample" be effectively taken, so any comments are necessarily impressionistic. An important starting-point, however, is to insist that the repetitive nature of so many of the messages is *not* what mattered about them. The fact that a limited field of common material was used (for example, the phrase originated by Diana herself: "Queen of Hearts") is hardly surprising and is irrelevant to the key issue: *how* was that shared material used? More specifically, we can ask a number of questions.

First, in what mode were the words written? Many messages that I saw were written in the "subjunctive" mode, implicitly calling on what should be, but is not: "more royal than all the royals", "the greatest queen that never was", and so on. Diana was addressed as someone "above" or "to one side of" normal reality: "to a person who saw reality and never judged a soul", "Saint Diana, the Irreplaceable Patron Saint of Love". Recalling Victor Turner once more, it is precisely the "subjunctive mode" that is typical of liminal situations.[44] In the "subjunctive" mode, possibilities are articulated, which normally cannot be realised.

Second, who was the implied subject of the words written? One interesting point is the degree to which *difference* was asserted even within the shared frame of the events and the shared language it stimulated: not only the difference between the ideals – of government, royalty, the social order – and their realisation (a difference natural to the subjunctive mode) but also differences of speaking position. Returning once again to the idea of "pilgrimage", Victor Turner's analysis (which insists on pilgrimage as the space where common values are affirmed) is here less useful than Michael Sallnow"s work on Andean pilgrimage which interprets it in terms of the *projection of difference* "onto a wider translocal landscape, where it begins to acquire a moral categorical meaning".[45] We need to transpose the terms of Sallnow"s analysis, since many of the differences projected in September 1997 were hardly "local", but, with that qualification, it is plausible to see the Diana sites (and the Diana events as a whole) as a national and global space onto which a mass of important differences were projected. To contribute a message from a position of difference was, then, to make a public claim to be *included* in this moment that seemed to define the social whole. This dimension of difference is another way in which a Durkheimian account of the events" inclusivity must be complicated.

Sometimes the difference asserted was simply the claim of a particular nation to be included in what was so obviously a global event. Many messages quite explicitly identified their writers as representatives of their country. In similar vein, the *Washington Post* claimed Diana as "the most American of the royals",[46] and a Soweto resident was quoted as saying: "the British must not think they're the only ones mourning".[47] No wonder the well-known British right-wing commentator, Simon Heffer, was moved to be so emphatic: "Diana *was* one of our people. The Princess of Wales *was* British".[48]

Sometimes, however, the difference of speaking position implied a claim which others might be expected to contest, or, at least, emphasising that difference in this context constituted a significant claim of inclusion, whether on the grounds of ethnic status, class, gender, sexuality, or otherwise. One tribute was written by two men "on behalf of gay men around the world". In others, the assertion of difference was implicit, but no less clear for that: "The Princess of Wales to "Royalty" but The Queen of Hearts to "The Commoners""; or, "if the monarchs and leaders of this world were as caring as our Queen of Hearts, the world would be a better place". Both messages implied the position of "the ruled". Another addressed Diana from the position of a woman: "Diana, you've shown it's OK to love. To show emotion. To care. To do what a woman is best at. You are love. I love you".

In these various ways, the normal distribution of discursive and symbolic power was negotiated, or at least engaged with. At another level, many of the messages worked as "tactical" uses of shared media material, operating within the "strategic" space of the media in precisely the way Michel de Certeau analysed.[49] Some were less texts than collages which used fragments of media imagery as well as words, perhaps including cut-outs of the very press images of Diana and Dodi that had, since her death, become controversial. People used media materials for their own "tactical" ends to express a strong personal emotion and to insist on involvement in event which, though partly defined through the media, had begun to exceed the media's control.

One aspect of that "excess" of meaning is particularly important. The mass of messages to Diana left all over Britain and elsewhere (at embassies, on websites and so on) represented, I would argue, something very different from a false consciousness or a compulsion to repeat. In the days after Diana's death, a frame had opened up (formed through, but operating partly in excess of, the media's workings) in which, quite exceptionally, the words and actions of *non-media people* could be publicly registered, where they could have "weight" in the context of a wider event. An important point not enough commented upon,[50] is that the accumulated messages at Kensington Palace and elsewhere were *read*. People stood reading them, even queuing to read them. When they did so, communication occurred between large numbers of the "invisible electronic network" (Rath), but outside *the media process*. Since people both wrote their own messages and read those of others, part of the context for writing was this anticipated two-way communication with unknown readers. Each message represented a fragment of a public story which its author, in her or his own voice, could tell and, in telling, be heard: a moment, in effect, of "broadcasting" that briefly suspended the normal distribution of symbolic power. And yet, as already emphasised, that moment was itself only made possible by the context of a wider media event.

The (mediated) politics of lack

In order to grasp the full significance of this excess, we need to connect it with the issues about representation and discursive economy raised earlier. We need to see how this excess (in words, gestures, in part perhaps in the emotions of that time) bore a relation to real needs, a real lack. There is a parallel here with Richard Dyer's powerful analysis of how the dimensions of entertainment (energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, community) correspond to the negative features of "everyday life" (exhaustion, scarcity, dreariness, manipulation, fragmentation).[51] Celebrity in all its trappings can clearly be understood in terms of this model. It is important to emphasise at once that the whole point of Dyer's argument is that what we label "entertainment" is never "*only* entertainment", it meets serious, and deep-seated, social needs. There is nothing trivialising, therefore, in applying Dyer's logic (for example, his arguments about the dimensions of "intensity" and "community") to the Diana events.

Rather than pursue this point, I want to adapt Dyer's logic to frame another question: if we take the dimension of "excess" in the Diana events that I have analysed – the explosion of public communication by non-media people outside the bounds of the media's normal framework – to what underlying social need did that excess correspond? The question almost answers itself. One reason people spoke, wrote, and travelled with such urgency was that the opportunities to participate in a public event through the use of one's own words – *without* (or apparently without) the mediation of press, television or radio – are so rare. The "strategic" space of the Diana events (returning to de Certeau's terms) afforded, briefly, "tactical" means of communication to those outside the media and the media's principal sources. For a time, those "tactics" occurred on such a large scale that they took on the appearance of a "strategy" demanding adjustments by those with normal strategic power (royalty, over the form of the funeral, or the media, in compelling the media to recognise the significance of so-called "ordinary people" speaking). But for all its apparently positive potential, this "excess" was from the beginning structured by a *lack* – the normal inequality in our politics of speech – which never shifted.

There are several reasons why this aspect of the Diana events has been little discussed, even among those who care deeply about this lack when explicitly stated. First, positive identifications with "royalty" have understandably been regarded with suspicion on the left because of the political baggage they carry. In the "cult" of Diana, the power vested in royalty was made doubly appealing (and therefore, from a republican point of view, doubly suspicious): not just the glamour of royalty but the glamour of rebellious royalty. Michael Billig's important work, however, on how inequalities of power are negotiated *and reproduced* through talk about the royal family has demonstrated that this is an important subject which even (or especially) republicans ignore at their peril.[52] A similar study might be useful in relation to how power relations were reproduced through the populist rhetoric that characterised so much commentary on the Diana events.[53] Second, many on the right and left were concerned to appropriate the Diana events for particular causes. I referred to some versions of this earlier. Perhaps the most unhelpful were

those which claimed that the Diana events represented a shift or movement in Britain's balance of power. Some even claimed that there was something "revolutionary" going on. Elaine Showalter (able, perhaps, to be sentimental from a distance) referred to "a moment of subdued, but very British, revolutionary sentiment".[54] Such claims are so absurd that, even as they are being made, it is impossible to stop irony breaking through:

> Diana's Britain went to the florists and found not just wreaths but a voice. It can't now be silenced.
>
> *(Michael Elliott)*

> Perhaps a British revolution would be like this.
>
> *(Matthew Engel, describing the queue to sign the Book of Remembrance)*[55]

Given such wilful misreadings of the Diana events, it is tempting perhaps to abandon any attempt at interpretation. To do so would, however, be a serious mistake. The dense symbolic values vested in those events must be understood, *because of*, not in spite of, the discursive inequalities which form their background.

We should be in no doubt that those inequalities continue unchanged. As de Certeau always made clear tactics do not de-stabilise the power of the strategic spaces they cross. In the case of Diana, the category of celebrity has been reproduced and reinforced in a global public event of vast proportions. This event has now generated a commemorative industry and a new celebrity geography: holidays that visit "the most important points in Diana's life",[56] the anticipated retracing of the funeral route one year later,[57] and the large number of visitors expected at Althorp, where Diana is buried. More than that, aspects of the normal hierarchy of speaking positions in relation to media production remain unchanged; indeed, they were being reproduced constantly even in the course of media coverage of the mourning week.

Take, for example, the position of the "*ordinary* person", the non-media person who is outside the media sphere, and who doesn't normally speak within the media, but who on special occasions is asked to speak (on behalf of other "ordinary people"). There were countless occasions during the Diana coverage when "ordinary people" spoke in the media. That did not alter the media's normal concentration of symbolic power in any way; indeed the media's naturalness (as the frame through which non-media people could speak and be positioned in advance as *merely* "ordinary people") was reproduced at very same time.[58] An apparent challenge to the media's authority came from the fact that (unusually) so many non-media people were making their own public statements of various sorts, the "excess" in the media's discursive economy that I have discussed. That fact, of course, had to be reported; indeed, reports from the queues for the Books of Remembrance, and so on, became commonplace. Just how easily, however, that moment of excess could

be framed within the normal hierarchical terms is shown by the following press description:

> Valerie Adams froze in front of the book. New Malden is where she is from. She rehearsed on the early train and remembered. "I said it to myself for the whole hour I waited in line", she said. She wrote with ease. "Dear Diana. Rest in Peace. You were a lovely lady and you always will be". The man who cried [described earlier in the report] said he didn't want to say what he wrote or give his name: "it was just something about all our love, leave it at that". . . . The flowers led you to the People's Princess in London yesterday. They were in the hands of children and *the ordinary people* [Diana] said she loved.[59]

People's act of communicating in the public world, but outside the media mechanism, is effortlessly placed within its normal context: these, it is implied, are "ordinary people" communicating, briefly and nervously, these are not the people who ordinarily speak to us with authority.

My aim in this chapter has not been to attack the media as such: the issues around the distribution of symbolic power that I have raised are simply too broad to justify criticising any element in the media in particular. The uneven distribution of symbolic power is instead a condition of our society which affects us all, and which all of us, in various ways, help reproduce. The point instead has been to look more closely at the (hardly disputable) fact that the media – taken together – constitute a massive concentration of symbolic power in contemporary societies and then examine the possible social consequences of this fact, which may be wider than we normally realise. We need to open up, as a sociological subject, what happens when, exceptionally and on a large scale, speaking positions in mediated public space open up, or appear to open up, for people outside the media;[60] we need to examine closely what happens in those rare, "liminal" times when our society's normal hierarchy of speaking positions is temporarily, but only symbolically, reversed.

One reason, then, why the sites of mourning for Diana were so moving (as they undoubtedly were) was because their excess registered the profound, but normally latent, inequality in our politics of speech: the normal *lack* of places where those outside the media can give public weight to their actions and their speech. In the cascade of words, we could trace (if only in obverse) the impact of the media's massive concentration of symbolic power, an impact which is never suspended.

Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 94.
2 See for example the articles by Jonathan Freedland and John Gray, *Guardian*, September 3, 1997.
3 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).
4 *The Independent*, September 4, 1997.

5 Judith Williamson, "A Glimpse of the Void", *Guardian*, September 13, 1997, Weekend, 8.
6 See, for example, Stuart Hall, "The *Structured Communication* of Events", in *Stencilled Occasional Paper*, 5 (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973); James Curran, "Communications, Power and Social Order", in Michael Gurevitch et al. (eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).
7 Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182.
8 On the former, see Williamson, "Glimpse"; on the latter, see Christine Geraghty's contribution to "Flowers and Tears: The Death of Diana, Princess of Wales", *Screen*, 39, no. 1 (1998): 77–79; Elizabeth Wilson, "The Unbearable Lightness of Diana", *New Left Review* 226 (1997): 136–145.
9 *Daily Mail*, September 6, 1997, 14.
10 Editorial, September 6, 1997, 8.
11 *The Independent*, September 3 or 4, 1997.
12 *Guardian*, September 9, 1997, G2, 8.
13 For useful scepticism, see John Lloyd, "How the Left Took Over Diana", *The Times*, September 5, 1997, 18.
14 Cf. Wilson, "Unbearable", 137–138.
15 John Edwards, *Daily Mail*, September 1, 1997, 11.
16 *Guardian*, August 14, 1997, 7.
17 Barbara Babcock (ed.), *The Reversible World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press).
18 John Thompson, "The Theory of the Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10, no. 3 (1993): 173–189, at 187. Cf. generally Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
19 See Nick Couldry, "Sites of Power, Journeys of Discovery: Place and Power Within the Hierarchy of the Media Frame", unpublished PhD dissertation (London: University of London, 1998), Chapter 3.
20 Quoted Fred and Julie Vermorel, *Starlust: The Secret Life of Fans* (London: Allen Lane, 1985), 45.
21 Ian Reader, "Introduction", in Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 21.
22 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 79.
23 Quoted, Valerie Grove, "A Triumph for Populism in Trainers", *The Times*, September 6, 1997, 10.
24 Quoted, Grove, "Triumph".
25 *The New York Times*, November 25, 1963, 5, quoted in Barry Schwartz, "Waiting, Exchange and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems", *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 4 (1974): 867.
26 See Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
27 Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape* (London: Routledge, 1993).
28 See Nick Couldry, "The View from Inside the 'Simulacrum': Visitors' Tales from the Set of *Coronation Street*", *Leisure Studies* 17, no. 2 (1998): 94–107.
29 Christopher Anderson, "Disneyland", in H. Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 83.
30 Roger Silverstone, "Television Myth and Culture", in James W. Carey (ed.), *Media, Myths, and Narratives* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1988), 25.
31 Victor Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 241.
32 See Grace Davie, "'You'll Never Walk Alone': The Anfield Pilgrimage", in Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Tony Walter, "The Mourning After Hillsborough", *Sociological Review* 39, no. 3 (1991): 599–625.
33 Dean MacCannel, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 137.

34 Novelist Susan Barlow discussing her Diana Website, quoted in *People*, October 6, 1997, 53.
35 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 217.
36 See Edward Shils and Michael Young, "The Meaning of the Coronation", in Edward Shils (ed.), *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 146. For the link between that analysis and the Diana events, see C. Watson, "Born a Lady, Became a Princess, Died a Saint", *Anthropology Today* 13, no. 6 (1997): 3–7.
37 Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1992).
38 Quoted in Conrad Lodziak, *The Power of Television* (London: Frances Pinter, 1987), 175.
39 Claus-Dieter Rath, "The Invisible Network: Television as an Institution in Everyday Life", in P. Drummund and R. Paterson (eds.), *Television in Transition* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 200.
40 Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1996).
41 Cf. Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media", in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 164–184.
42 On sceptics who went unrepresented: see Ian Jack, "Those Who Felt Differently", *Guardian*, December 27, 1997, Weekend: 4–10.
43 Cf. also the websites (those for Buckingham Palace and the BBC and many independent sites).
44 See Turner, *Pilgrimage*. Cf. in relation to media events, Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 122.
45 Michael Sallnow, *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional Cults in Cusco* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 204.
46 Quoted by Martin Walker, *Guardian*, September 3, 1997, 4.
47 Quoted in *The Sunday Times*, September 7, 1997, 20.
48 "How Diana Has Truly United Our Kingdom", *Daily Mail*, September 3, 1997, 8.
49 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
50 But see Stefan Szczelkun, *The Heart of the Matter* (London: Working Press, 1997), 7–9.
51 Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), Chapter 3.
52 Michael Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family* (London: Routledge, 1992).
53 For sharp comments on this, see John Lloyd, "How the Left", and Elizabeth Wilson, "Unbearable", 143.
54 "Storming the Winter Palace", *Guardian*, September 6, 1997, 15.
55 Respectively in *Newsweek*, September 15, 1997, 37; *Guardian*, September 2, 1997, 3.
56 German tourist brochure quoted in *The Sunday Times*, April 19, 1998, 4.
57 *Evening Standard*, May 1, 1998, 4.
58 For material positioning the "ordinary person/woman/family" (all 1997), see *Mail on Sunday*, September 7, 17; *Evening Standard*, October 27, 8–9; *Guardian*, September 6, 12–15.
59 John Edwards, *Daily Mail*, September 2, 1997, 2, emphasis added.
60 Cf. Nick Couldry, "Speaking Up in a Public Place: The Strange Case of Rachel Whiteread's *House*", *New Formations* 25 (1995): 96–113. [Chapter 1 of this volume].

6

PASSING ETHNOGRAPHIES

Rethinking the sites of agency and reflexivity in a mediated world

Introduction

The problem of ethnography has cast a long shadow over the practice of media and cultural studies. The disputes concerning the ethics and epistemological coherence of fieldwork that split anthropology in the 1980s seem to have transferred some of their force to recent debates about how we can study media audiences across the world. It would, however, be a mistake to discuss the epistemology of the media audience as if the audience researcher carried a pale version of the colonialist's historical burden, although the rhetoric of some attacks on audience research suggest this (Hartley, 1987, 1996; Nightingale, 1996). For that would obscure a more interesting question, whose significance stretches well beyond media analysis: what kind of "location-work" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b, p. 5) will enable us to address the locational *complexity* which characterises all social and cultural phenomena today, not least those marked by the multi-directional flows of media images?

Even when stripped of its colonial connotations, ethnography's fiction of "being there" – "there" where the systematic order of a wider culture is "revealed" to a sensitive observer – remains problematic. But its problem can now be seen as a problem for conducting any research in today's dispersed, mediated societies. Put simply: how *do* we conceive of the order, or system, at work in today's world, and where do we need to be to grasp it better? We can formulate this in more specific ways, for example, as the question of how, and from exactly where, can we track the movements which all our lives as self-reflexive agents in such societies entail, and the movements across our lives of media flows from countless sources?[1] Or, recalling Donna Haraway's (1991) provocative term from an earlier, rather different, epistemological crisis: how can we produce "situated knowledge" of mediation's place in the lives of others and ourselves?

The study of media, then, is entangled with the problem of ethnography, but in interesting ways that transcend old debates on the colonial encounter. The issue of complexity, and how to study it, affects all branches of the social sciences and humanities that are attempting to give accounts of what goes on "inside" today's "cultures" (both sets of scare quotes being necessary). It is a matter of grasping, first, as I have said, the complexity of "order" and "space", but also the complexity of agency and reflexivity, so we can produce more satisfactory accounts of what "subject" and "object" of ethnography share. Both, after all, are self-conscious agents (Cohen, 1994), who are highly mobile, living and reflecting across many different sites. I want to argue that the situated analysis of *mediation*'s place in our lives has resonances for today's reconceptualisation of ethnography in general (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a; Marcus, 1998), and in particular the shift toward an ethnography that is "*places*- rather than *place-focused*" (Marcus, 1998, p. 50).

This chapter will approach these difficult issues in three stages. The first section will review the critique of "culture" within anthropology and the ways beyond this critique that have recently suggested a different mode of cultural analysis. The second section will explore how that general debate about "culture" plays out when we think specifically about mediated culture and media uses: what contribution can media analysis make to an ethnography of "places" within a wider analysis of cultural complexity (here, I suggest, anthropology and media and cultural studies are partners, not rivals)? The third section will review the method of my own empirical research which was at least a partial attempt to address these issues. The chapter will, in these various ways, flesh out its title's metaphor of "passing ethnographies".

Disappearance of the ethnographic agent?

The implication of the apparently innocent object of research – "cultures" – in the practices which comprised, and in some respects still continue, colonialism is well-known. As Lila Abu-Lughod has put it:

> culture is the essential tool for *making other*. . . anthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident.
>
> *(Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 143, emphasis added)*

And not just that: applied to "ourselves", a belief in a distinctive, shared culture is the touchstone of nationalism in all its, often disturbing, forms, even if the evidence for what it is we share with our compatriots is often problematic or absent (Schudson, 1994). For some writers, a shared national "culture" is always the projection of a mythical unity (Bhabha, 1994; Zizek, 1990), desired but never possible.

To say this, however, is only to pose a problem, not to resolve anything. What happens when we attempt to study cultural processes *without* relying on the notion of "cultures" – that is, stable, coherent, localised "units" of cultural analysis? What

are the implications for the practice and theory of ethnography, when both its object (a distant "culture") and its subject (the agent who moves with privileged status outside his or her own "culture" to study another) disappear, at least in their familiar forms?

There are no straightforward answers but to move forward we need to draw, for example, on the new model of cultural processes and flows developed by Ulf Hannerz (see Couldry, 2000b, Chapter 5 for more detail). The reasons for this can be seen best, if we briefly recall the old model of culture that must be superseded. The older model pictures the space of culture primarily in terms of a series of separate "cultures", with the interactions between them being of secondary importance. Each "culture" is understood as a natural unit: coherent (so that hybrid cultures are an exceptional case) and associated with a particular shared place and time.

Paradoxically, that older model on which classical anthropology depended was formulated most clearly by its anthropologist critics. As Ulf Hannerz puts it, it is "the idea of culture as something *shared*, in the sense of homogeneously distributed in society" (1980, p. 11, emphasis added). This holistic model (with its "fiction of the whole": Marcus, 1998, p. 33) is supported by various metaphors which James Clifford did much to excavate. There is the organic metaphor of culture as *growth*, "a coherent body that lives and dies", or alternatively survives, provided it remains uncontaminated by outside influences (1988, pp. 235, 338). Closely linked with growth is the metaphor of *place*, an issue which will be particularly important in the rest of this chapter. Just as every body occupies one, discrete place, so too from the point of view of the old notion of culture the "place" of culture is the site where its reality is lived, the focus where all the possible lines of diversity in a culture intersect in a unity (Auge, 1995, p. 58). They intersect there, so that they can be "read", a third metaphor: "culture as *text*" (ibid., pp. 49–50), a text with finite boundaries.

These metaphors are problematic not least because they exclude others: metaphors emphasising the connections between multiple cultural sites, the uncertainty of cultural boundaries, in a sense, therefore, the opaqueness, not the transparency, of culture. The old metaphors encourage us to look for *less* complexity in cultural phenomena, when we should be prepared to look for more.

The old holistic model of culture has, however, been extremely influential not only in anthropology but also in sociology (it was at the root of functionalist models of social integration, such as Talcott Parsons") and cultural studies, where its influence on Raymond Williams" (1958) early account of culture as a way of life is obvious. Yet it is clearly inadequate to deal with a world of complex flows of people, images, information and goods, in which local culture everywhere incorporates "transculturality" (Welsch, 1999), and we live in "imagined worlds" that are complex amalgams of elements from all over the world (Appadurai, 1990). In this context, the idea of culture as necessarily tied to a place can be seen for what it always was: an *assumption*. We must look for cultural processes in different places, or (better) through imagining a different relation of cultural production to place and space. If we do, then new spaces and new mobilities come into view: Paul Gilroy (1992) has famously argued for the study of the Black Atlantic (a space of passage

between nations), Marc Auge (1995) has argued for the study of "nonplaces", the "cultures" of ordinary places of transit, such as airports, tourist zones, and there are many other examples which could be given.

Here, though, a further difficulty with the old metaphors must be addressed, which results from debates in spatial theory, rather than anthropology. If "culture" has been deconstructed as a simple object, so too has "place". No place, argues Doreen Massey (1997), is reducible to a simple narrative, a coherent set of meanings. Places are points where many influences, operating on many different scales (up to and including the global), intersect. Instead of a traditional notion of "place" as bounded locality, we need "a global sense of the local" (1997, p. 240). In every place, multiple scales of connection are overlaid.

Once we complicate our idea of how culture is embedded in place, then we must question our assumption that cultures have a simple relation to time. We must for example, as Homi Bhabha has argued, raise "the essential question of the representation of the nation as [itself] a temporal process" (1994, p. 142): national "culture" cannot be reduced to a simple object describable as it exists at one point in time. Material processes for constructing past, present and future are wrapped up in our sense of the national "present". We have to challenge what Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley called "the myth of 'the nation, now'" (1978, p. 27). And the problem of time applies to other descriptive terms as well, including those that try to capture the open-ended process of the self, at which point the dimensions of space and time become entangled. Quasi-spatial language for describing the self (such as "subject-*positions*") is problematic, precisely because it closes off the self's reflexive processes in time (Battaglia, 1999, p. 117; Couldry, 1996, p. 327).

The result of all these moves is not to divorce our notion of cultural production and cultural experience entirely from space, place or time. Rather we need a more complex notion of that relation. The question is too complex to resolve in a few pages, but one initial consequence is clear: the dissolution of that apparently innocent methodological presumption, the ethnographic "present", present "there" in "the field" where the ethnographic agent is based.[2]

To take these thoughts a stage further, I want to draw specifically on Ulf Hannerz's work on cultural space in his important book *Cultural Complexity* (1980). "Complex societies" according to Hannerz are distinctive in a number of ways. Most relevant here is the fact that their meanings have to be *distributed* to that society's members, who are dispersed across space. There is no reason to assume that distribution is even. On the contrary, "in a society where the cultural flow is varied and uneven, it is an open question which meanings have reached where and when" (Hannerz, 1992, p. 81). But people are not monads taking inputs from the wider culture in isolation from everyone else; they are also engaged in making sense of *other people's* meanings and interpretations (1992, p. 14). This adds a second layer of complexity to the distribution of meanings, which cannot be simply extrapolated from the first: a dimension of reflexivity which itself is a material process that takes place here, and not there.

The idea of cultural "holism" – that cultures comprise principally the meanings that people share – is thus untenable. As Hannerz puts it:

> we must recognize the real intricacy of the flow of meaning in social life. As each individual engages in his [sic] own continuous interpreting of the forms surrounding him, how can we take for granted that he comes to the same result as the next fellow [sic]? There is nothing automatic about cultural sharing. Its accomplishment must rather be seen as problematic.
>
> *(1992, p. 44)*

Put another way, our idea of cultures as large-scale structures has to take account of the "local" complexity of agents" reflexivity about culture, not just academics" reflexivity of course, but the reflexivity of every agent they study. Everywhere processes of agency and reflexivity intersect. Given the resulting complexity, ethnography's situated knowledge can no longer based on the ethnographer's movement (or lack of it) perfectly tracking culture's movement (or lack of it). The intersection between "ethnography" and "culture" is necessarily more partial than that: it takes the form of *passing ethnographies*, that yield, we hope, knowledge under particular conditions.

Accepting partiality in this sense (at the level of guiding metaphor) does not mean renouncing claims to generalisable knowledge, as I explain below. But it does mean thinking about generality from a starting-point that takes complexity seriously. There is no reason any more to suppress or reduce the complexity all around us. Lives are stretched across many sites and many roles, without necessarily cohering into a unity; communities are not tied to a single nation-state but are informed by the experience of moving between many. We must take seriously "identities that resist classification" (Kearney, 1995, p. 558), which, of course, may mean working at odds with the definitional strategies of states or markets. We don't know, and certainly can't assume, that people accept the market-led identities that are prepared for them, which means that we must take seriously people's journey's across cultural space, whether they are voluntary or involuntary. Culture, in short, emerges "on a differently configured spatial canvas" (Marcus, 1995, p. 98) where the connections between sites matter as much, and sometimes more, than the sites of imagined closure (the village, the city, the nation-state, or even the globe).

The nature of this methodological shift has been brought out well by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in her (1993) book on her time spent with the Meratus Dayak people from the mountainous forest regions of south-east Kalimantan in Indonesia. They are in various ways managed and marginalised by the central Indonesian Government, but at the same time, engage in a complex set of negotiations of their identity with many "centres", not just Jakarta but more locally, and globally. Tsing found there were no "villages" to study but rather a shifting network of cultural dialogues across scattered populations. Her own practice – as reflexive ethnographic agent – involved ceaseless movement as well. In a powerful passage,

Tsing describes how her own movements across cultural space made irrelevant the attempt to reduce that space to a closed cultural order:

> As I involved myself with a network that stretched across the mountains, I moved increasingly further from structural models of local stability and came to recognize the open-ended dialogues that formed and reformed Meratus culture and history. My own shifting positioning made me especially alert to continual negotiations of local "community", to the importance of far-flung as well as local ties . . . a culture that cannot be tied to a place cannot be analytically stopped in time.
>
> *(Tsing, 1993, p. 66)*

I want now to explore what this means specifically for the analysis of mediated cultures.

Analysing our mediated lives

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing expresses very clearly that existing notions of how cultural analysis fits with reality are inadequate. Tsing was, however, in one respect writing still in a classic ethnographic situation, one that was not intensely mediated. Mediation, as communication which crosses contexts and borders in pervasive and regular ways, changes the boundaries of the ethnographic situation, just as it changes the boundaries of the political situation, the family situation, and the educational situation (Meyrowitz, 1985). The consequences of this for ethnographic have only recently been explored.

Lila Abu-Lughod, whose subtle work on television audiences in Egypt has been important here, has recently argued that television is in fact central to ethnographic practice today. Television often provides a ready-made link between ethnographers and their subjects (1999, p. 111), of a sort that earlier ethnographers in "strange" countries could never call upon. More than that, television – as its genres, styles and knowledges and often, of course, specific programmes too) cross the world – has reconfigured the cultural space which ethnographers need to cross. As a result, Clifford Geertz's famous methodological tool of "thick description" (which Abu-Lughod endorses) "needs some creative stretching to fit mass-mediated lives" (1999, p. 111). This raises a question: where exactly is the entry-point for ethnography in studying "the significance of television's existence as a ubiquitous presence in [people's] lives and imaginaries"? (1999, p. 111). Or, more bluntly: thick descriptions of *what*?

On the face of it, there is common ground between anthropology and the significant tradition of situated qualitative research in media sociology since the mid 1980s. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Abu-Lughod undermines this ground through a very partial account of media sociology. She takes no account of the methodological debates in audience research about the difficulties of fully contextualising research into audience s in the home (Morley & Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone, Hirsch &

Morley, 1991); this makes unfair her criticism of certain texts (such as Silverstone, 1994) which never purport to offer fresh ethnographic work themselves. Her analysis seems designed to create the space for anthropology "proper" to do fully contextualised research into media consumption, as if for the first time. There are two problems with this position, in addition to its very partial account of the work already done in audience research: first, it operates within a rather polarised view of the boundaries between anthropological work and media and cultural studies, which is no longer helpful (cf. Thomas, 1999); secondly, it implicitly makes a claim for methodological advances in Abu-Lughod's own work which seem rather exaggerated. Her analysis in the same chapter of audiences and producers of the Egyptian television drama *Mothers in the House of* Love is certainly suggestive in detail and it is a "mobile ethnography" (Abu-Lughod, 1999, p. 122) in the limited sense that the ethnographer moves between locations, asking questions. But it provides no account, for example, of the mobility of the people it studies, of how people's interpretations of the serial might change as they interpret it in different contexts, or of how media themselves might affect the circulation of interpretations in significant ways. While Abu-Lughod's recognition of mediation's centrality to ethnographic method is welcome, we need, I suggest, to turn elsewhere to clarify exactly how that relationship should work.

An important advance is represented by George Marcus's essay "The Use of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork" (1999).

This is a thoroughgoing rethinking of what "thick description" can mean in today's complex cultural spaces. Marcus abandons the idea that what is feasible or desirable in fieldwork is "rapport", that is, a close *fit* between the ethnographer's and her/his interlocutor's understandings of the world, achieved within the confines of the ethnographic situation. Instead of "rapport" as the "foundational commonplace of fieldwork" (1999, p. 87), Marcus develops the notion of "complicity", which emphasises not the knowledge, so much as the questioning and curiosity, that ethnographer and interlocutor share.[3]

Marcus' first characterisation of this "complicity" is as "an awareness of existential doubleness on the part of *both* anthropologist and subject; this derives from having a sense of being *here* where major transformations are under way that are tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere*, but not having a certainty or authoritative representation of what those connections are" (Marcus, 1999, p. 97, original emphasis). The result of this uncertainty may be anxiety (1999, p. 98), as well as a shared sense of questioning that extends far beyond the dilemmas of the (post-) colonial encounter. Indeed, the uncertainty which the interlocutor feels is not the product of being approached by the ethnographer at all; it is a pre-existing condition of *any* self-reflexive life in a world of complex cultural flows and influences. It is this self-reflexiveness and uncertainty within everyday life that the ethnographer has to reflect in her or his accounts.

The result, Marcus argues, is to change the focus of fieldwork itself:

> Only when an outsider begins to relate to a subject also concerned with outsideness in everyday life can these expressions [of anxiety] be given focal

> importance in a localized fieldwork that, in turn, inevitably pushes the entire research programme of the single ethnographic project into the challenges and promises of a multisited space and trajectory – a trajectory that encourages the ethnographer literally to move to other sites that are powerfully registered in the local knowledge of an originating locus of fieldwork.
>
> *(Marcus, 1999, p. 99)*

What the two figures in the ethnographic "situation" share, then, is "an affinity", based on their "mutual curiosity and anxiety about their relationship to a "third" – that is, to the sites *elsewhere* that affect, or even determine, their experiences and knowledges *here* (1999, p. 101). When the anthropologist travels, she is not, therefore, doing something exclusive to the (still generally privileged) position of the anthropologist but instead she is materializing a concern with external determinations that is shared with her interlocutor. This, at least, is the intriguing alternative metaphor for fieldwork that Marcus offers.

It is a powerful analysis because it takes seriously the mobile reflexivity and agency of both ethnographer and interlocutor; and because it emphasises that the ethnographer's discourse must be adequate to the doubts and uncertainties already lived by the interlocutor (cf. Battaglia, 1999, p. 115). Complexity and uncertainty, in other words, are not just an academic projection onto the world but already woven into the fabric of everyday life, part of what situated knowledge must capture. Crucially, however, Marcus' analysis emphasises not only doubt but knowledge. Ethnographer and interlocutor are perplexed precisely because they both want *to know* something that holds true beyond their own partial situation. A romanticisation of the purely local is not Marcus' point, nor could that satisfactorily reflect our attempts to make sense of a complex, largely opaque world (hence the failure of visions of anthropology based on avoiding "representation" entirely, such as Tyler, 1986). We try, even if we often fail, to make sense of our location in "places [that are] simultaneously and complexly connected, by intended and unintended consequences" (Marcus, 1998, p. 551). Ethnography must aim to do no less.

While this new conception of ethnography has roots going back for example to Hannerz's early work on our dispersed lives in the modern city (1980), that long predate recent concerns with mediation in anthropology, it is peculiarly apposite to today's concern with the media's role in our lives. The media operate as a "third" space within our lives, both close and distant, and whether we are ethnographers or not – a paradox which Raymond Williams expressed better than anyone, when he described modern communications as:

> a form of unevenly shared consciousness of persistently external events. It is what appears to happen, in these powerfully transmitted and mediated ways, in a world within which we have no other perceptible connections, but we feel is *at once central and marginal to our lives*.
>
> *(Williams, 1973, pp. 295–296, emphasis added)*

Media provide common contexts, language and reference-points for use in local situations, even though media production takes place outside most localities and its narratives cut across them from the outside. The frameworks within which we reflect on ourselves and others are shared with others, because they have a common source in media flows, and yet those frameworks are never entirely "ours"; we can grasp them alternately as "inside" or "outside". Indeed "complicity" (in Marcus' sense – of a shared awareness of the importance to us as agents of the *external* forces that act upon and across us) may be a useful metaphor precisely for the ways in which city life itself has been changed by mediation. As Nestor Garcia Canclini has put it:

> Since . . . even the accidents that happened the previous day in our own city reach us through the media, these [the media] become the dominant constituents of the 'public' meaning of the city. . . . More than an absolute substitution of urban life by the audio-visual media, I perceive a *game of echoes*. The commercial advertising and political slogans that we see on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others. To this circularity of the communicational and the urban are subordinated the testimonies of history and the public meaning constructed in longtime [sic] experiences.
>
> *(Garcia Canclini, 1995, pp. 210, 212, original emphasis)*

The media, in other words, by providing so many shared resources through which we can (and in a sense must) frame the social world, change the terms on which we can offer individual testimony as well. Our sense of public history has already been displaced before we can articulate our personal place within it. If so, media's implications for ethnography go well beyond the problems of studying the immediate viewing situation in the living-room.

We need an ethnography that adequately reflects the complexity of how media flows together produce *the mediation* of our social life (cf. Martin-Barbero, 1993). At the very least, this requires a methodology that recognises the stretched-out nature of that process of mediation: encompassing not only the stereotypical site of media consumption (the home) but also the countless other sites where media circulate (the street, the shop, the office, the bar, and so on), the sites of media production (the studio, the live event), and those hybrid sites where audience members travel to see the process of production close up.

Before I explore some of these possibilities in more detail, let me make one broader point which explains why studying such complexity in the mediated landscape is more than academic self-indulgence. "Ethnography" – seen in Marcus' terms, as a commitment to grasp the situated reflexivity of actual agents – is part of what elsewhere I have called the "principle of accountability" in cultural research (Couldry, 2000b, chapter 6). Quite simply: the language and theoretical framework with which we analyse others should always be consistent with, or accountable to, the language and theoretical framework with which we would hope to analyse

ourselves. And, equally, in reverse: the language and theoretical framework with which we analyse ourselves should always be accountable to the language and theoretical framework with which we analyse others.

The reversibility of the principle is crucial: it is this that prevents us from falling into a spiral of endless self-interrogation, never to resurface! There must be a dialectic between the way we think about others and the way we think about ourselves; what we say about one must reflect what we know about the complexities of the other. Put another way:

- Every attempt to speak in one's own name is tied to an obligation to listen to the voices of others; and
- Every attempt to describe others must allow them the complexity of voice that one requires to be acknowledged in oneself.

Deliberately here I am combining ethical issues with methodological ones. The methodological challenge to grasp the real complexity of "cultures" only has force because we in turn recognise the ethical obligation to listen to (multiple) others. In our commitment to account for how we think about self and others, methodology and ethics converge. We cannot, as analysts, safely turn our backs on the complexity which mediated cultures display.

Passing Ethnography, or Notes on an Emergent Method

I want now to reflect in some detail on my own attempt to research aspects of mediated culture in *The Place of Media Power* (Couldry, 2000a). The strategies I adopted and their limitations are, I would suggest, relevant to the wider questions – of the role of ethnography in media sociology, and the development of ethnography generally – which this chapter has tried to address.

My starting-points, long before I formulated my exact research strategy, were, first, a commitment to the underlying principle of audience research as practised by David Morley and others – that is, a commitment to the empirical study of how actual people put media texts to use in their lives – but, second, a concern about whether detailed study of how particular texts are interpreted in particular contexts can answer the question that, in Britain at least, audience research was designed to address: the role of media in the legitimation of wider power structures and inequalities.[4] There is a gap between the ambitions of audience research and its actual achievements, given the limitations which it initially imposed upon itself. None of which means that media are *without* social impacts, only that there is a question about the best entry-point for analysing them (I agree with Lila Abu-Lughod to this extent).

I tried to answer that question in my research through two moves (this, perhaps, is to give more order retrospectively to my strategy than it had at the time). First, I had the hunch (later developed as a theory: Couldry, 2000a, Chapter 3) that one way to research the media's social impacts was to look at how media institutions

and media people are thought about: what, in other words, are our beliefs about media power and how do they contribute to the usual legitimation of that power? My research, therefore, aimed to find moments where the vast, society-wide process of legitimating media power was explicitly articulated or at least could be traced in behaviour and language. Second, I had the hunch (see Couldry, 2000a, Chapter 2) that, while mediation has very broad impacts on a territory such as Britain, those impacts are never simple or even, and, therefore, that there must be moments – or rather sites – where the legitimation of media power is open to challenge, or is negotiated in some way: fissures, if you like, where, as in Victor Turner's (1974) model of liminal behaviour, wider structural patterns are revealed.

The result of these two hunches was to encourage me to research not conventional sites of media reception or production, important though these are, but instead more exceptional sites where the status of media institutions and media authority was in some way negotiated, whether playfully or seriously. Hence my choice of two very different situations for field research: first, leisure sites where people get close up to the process of media production, such as Granada Studios Tour in Manchester, which contains the set of Britain's longest-running prime-time soap opera, *Coronation Street* (the American parallels, while not exact, would include Universal Studios in Florida and NBC Studios Tour in New York: Couldry, 2000a, pp. 65–66); and, second, protest sites where people without media experience became involved in a mediated event and, therefore, saw the media process close up. In the latter case, my fieldwork was inevitably limited by what protests were under way at the time of the research, and my main research was on people's reflections about a protest that was completed the year before my fieldwork, the protests against the export of live animals through the small East coast port of Brightlingsea in 1995. Since the detailed political context of these protests was not my main concern but rather their status as an access-point to the media process, I will not detail it further here (but see Couldry, 2000a, pp. 123–124).

My approach to such sites was on the face of it based on conflicting principles: on the one hand, I wanted to do as detailed a contextual analysis as possible of why people visited Granada Studios Tour and how people understood their experience of participating in the mediated protests at Brightlingsea, since it was through their detailed accounts of those localized encounters that I hoped to obtain insights into people's orientations toward media institutions in general. On the other hand, both types of site were temporary, in the sense that my interviewees had merely passed through them, either in the space of a day (as at Granada Studios Tour) or over the space of a few months (as at Brightlingsea). They were not the type of permanent living or working space in which ethnography has normally been conducted. Their interest was precisely as *exceptional* sites, which meant that they could not be fully contextualised in the lives of their participants, or indeed fully contextualised at all. (Which is not to say that they were exceptional in exactly the same way: the Brighlingsea protest site was a space closely linked to a real, inhabited place, whereas Granada Studios Tour was much closer to a "nonplace" in Auge's (1995, sense.)[5] I was drawn, in other words, to do a maximally contextual study of sites which

lacked a full context, a quasi-ethnography that I decided was better not called an ethnography at all (2000a, p. 198).[6] Only much later did I realise that it had parallels with the shift in 1990s anthropology to a pluralistic notion of ethnography that might include the study of "accidental communities of memory" (Malkki, 1997, p. 91) such as those formed at Granada Studios Tour and Brightlingsea.

In any case, the apparent theoretical contradiction was less intractable in practice. First of all, I was quite clear that these sites were worth studying – they were public sites where significant events or practices occurred, the like of which had rarely been researched. Second, I was convinced that ethnography in the sense of total *immersion* in what happened at such sites was in principle impossible. Granada Studios Tour was a commercial site visited by up to 6,000 people a day, well beyond the grasp of even the largest army of ethnographers; and the protests at Brightlingsea were already firmly in the past, even if the recent past. Ethnography on the traditional model could not then be the answer to the methodological problems posed by researching those sites, and yet those problems were surely typical of many other non-trivial sites of "sociality" where people come together on a temporary basis, often without knowledge of each other's full context for being there (cf. Maffesoli, 1996). If such sites were significant, yet not susceptible even in principle to ethnographic work in the traditional sense, then a different possibility, and necessity, was opening up for qualitative research.

This alternative model – which I can now see as a version of Marcus' ethnography as "complicity", not "rapport" – involved renouncing the aim for an impossible immersion in context and instead seeking as much context as could reasonably be obtained. I pursued this in various ways. For the sites themselves, I relied on participant observation (at Granada Studios Tour) or (at Brightlingsea) on a mixture of observations and close study of local and national press materials on the protest. From interviewees, I obtained, where possible, long open-ended interviews, usually in their own homes. At Brightlingsea, this was my main source, but at Granada Studios Tour, the home interviews were a supplement to a large number of interviews conducted on site. Unfortunately, in the latter case, there was only one person interviewed on site who was willing to meet me again at home: not surprisingly, since Granada Studios Tour represents precisely a day-off from commitments! This, however, revealed, in another guise, the limits to "ethnographic" context built into the very structure of this particular public site. My third source of context was provided by the interviewees themselves, as they reflected on their engagement with the site in question. They chose the relevant context within which to talk about their time at the studios or on the protest. They could have related it to any event in their lives whatsoever, but it was the context *they* chose, usually in retrospect, in which I was most interested.

A full ethnographic context for their visit to Granada Studios Tour or the protest experience at Brightlingsea was in principle impossible, but this did not mean that the context obtained was trivial. On the contrary, it was useful evidence of what the site had meant to those I interviewed. In effect, by pursuing this strategy, I made a choice. I could have chosen a radical contextualist approach (cf. Ang, 1996), which

might have led me to abandon research altogether – since the context available was never going to be complete enough! Instead, I took a more pragmatic approach, working in each case with what context I could obtain, and building up from there a larger picture of the way people talked about those sites, and the patterns in such talk.

That choice was grounded in a growing sense that there *was* a striking pattern, even or, especially, at the level of the banal language people used about those sites and their significance (cf. Couldry, 2000a, pp. 104–105, 143–144, 197 for further explanation). It was this patterning, and its pervasiveness, that was the most important aspect of the various interviews and observations I had conducted: a wider pattern that did not contradict or undermine the self-reflexivity of those I interviewed but which instead worked itself out through their reflections. Indeed, such patterns of thinking – their characteristic categories, such as the underlying hierarchy between "media world" and "ordinary world" (Couldry, 2000a, Chapter 3) – emerged most strongly in the passages where they were put under greatest pressure by the interviewees themselves, by being argued with or renegotiated. Rarely, however, were those patterns entirely deconstructed, or absent; and this, I realised, was the wider point toward which my scattered quasi-ethnography was leading.

In effect, I had conducted a contextualised, multisited study of people's talk about visits to two sites (not themselves connected), that revealed patterns of thinking that were more than just multisited: they were the type of pervasive and banal categories (Billig, 1995) through which wider ideological structures get produced, in this case the ideology of media power. To grasp such patterns, and their influence, we need paradoxically, to study them in action, as they are put to work in particular cases. This means doing research in multiple contexts that have to be grasped as *rhetorical* contexts – as contexts of argument and negotiation – which is not the same as knowing the total life-context in which those arguments took place. Listening closely and effectively to people's talk need *not* require (and, in practice, usually cannot involve) a full ethnographic contextualisation for that talk.

Only through work *across* a number of such contexts (without necessarily immersing myself in any of them) could I grasp the patterning of language, thought, and action, through which media power is reproduced and legitimated. The "place of media power", I had discovered, is latent everywhere, even if our naturalised beliefs about the media emerge most clearly at those place (for example, sites of media production) where they are called into question.

Final reflections

These reflections on my own research might seem a long way from the traditional notion of ethnographic method: the ambition for what Marcus calls "rapport" within the ethnographic situation. My approach has tried rather to engage with as much context as is available for some of the passing acts and reflections we make as we pass through a mediated world. The result is a passing "ethnography", but one no less serious for that. It represents a serious commitment to engage with

the texture of our dispersed but mediated lives. And it is a real ethnography, if we accept George Marcus' wider rethinking of what ethnography entails: an engagement with the situations of others based in a shared attention to the complex webs of determination within which we think and act. This involves qualitative work that crosses a number of places, and travels to some which we would not necessarily first think of as sites where we engage with media.

Even so, it might seem that this new dispersed notion of ethnography and in particular media ethnography has sidestepped some important questions of politics. Even if "the circumstantial commitments that arise in the mobility of multi-sited fieldwork provide a kind of psychological substitute for the reassuring sense of "being there" of participation in traditional single-site fieldwork" (Marcus, 1998, p. 99), too mobile an ethnography of mediated space risks running free of the ethical questions which the ethnographic encounter so powerfully brought into focus. It is important to emphasise, therefore, that what I am *not* arguing for is a footloose analysis that follows media images wherever it chooses. Our sense of complexity, and why studying complexity matters, must be more grounded than that.

It should be grounded in an awareness that it matters to study power, and its disguises. Media have the vast power that they do, because we all, systematically even if usually unobtrusively, work to produce their authority as natural (Couldry, 2000a, Chapter 1). Our presence as analysts at *one* place (whether it is the home or the studio) will not be sufficient to unlock the workings of media power. To believe otherwise would ironically be to reproduce the type of mystification upon which media power itself relies:[7] that there is one place, the place in the media, where society's important things happen, the myth that it matters to "be there". If we are fully to understand the *dispersed* symbolic order that underlies the media's myth-making powers, we must avoid the old ethnographic myth that we can only do so by "being there" ourselves.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 I am using the term "societies" here guardedly, as there is a growing debate about its usefulness (Urry, 2000).
2 For an important exploration of the problems with the classic ethnographic notion of "the field", see the essays in Gupta and Ferguson (1997a).
3 Cf. also Paul Rabinow (1996, p. 17) on the "tacit sharing of curiosity" between researcher and researched.
4 For a valuable restatement of the values of the "critical" audience research tradition, which is clear about the methodological challenges it has faced, see Ang (1996).
5 Thanks to Roger Silverstone for drawing my attention to this point.

6 I was aware of the valid criticisms of some inflated claims for ethnographic research in media studies. See for example Gillespie, 1995, p. 23; Nightingale, 1996, pp. 110–112.
7 Like Marcus, I am interested in a "grounded study of the mystifications" of culture. In my case it is "media culture" and in Marcus's case, it is "capitalist culture": see Marcus (1998, p. 159 n2).

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7

THE UMBRELLA MAN

Crossing a landscape of speech and silence

Introduction

It has become a cliché of political debate in Britain and elsewhere in Europe to assert that we live in an "anti-political" age (Mulgan, 1995), or, more positively, that we have put "class conflict" behind us, so as to face better the challenges of the globalized economy.

Such claims no doubt connect with strategies of political control, but they are also based in serious debates, about the terms on which any critical account of society or culture can now be conducted. If political conflict has genuinely been reduced, then those who mount social critiques from the academy at least have to examine their conscience. But, as the political philosopher Axel Honneth (1995, p. 215) has powerfully argued when he wrote that "a social analysis derived from Marxism must see as its task today the identification of moral conflicts connected to the social class structure which are hidden behind late capitalism's facade of integration", the challenge can be reversed. What if, instead of consciousness of class-specific injustice declining, it is the means with which that consciousness can be *expressed as such* that have declined?

There are many possible reasons for that shift. One is what Honneth calls "cultural exclusion", by which he means "those strategies which limit the articulation chances of class-specific experiences of injustice by systematically withholding the appropriate and symbolic means for their expression" (1995, p. 213). Perhaps Honneth's phrase "systematically withholding" implies too much intentionality, but we can still ask: is the perception of reduced political conflict, even reduced political awareness, connected with a change in the circumstances in which social and economic conflicts come to be perceived *as* political? Or, more modestly, is the apparent reduction in political conflict related to the conditions under which some social actors are seen as having political significance, and some are not? The issue, in other

words, is where the boundary of politics" "discursive domain" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 60) gets drawn.

If so, there is a serious question to be researched: how do people in practice contest the boundaries of "the political"? How is that connected to class position, education, gender, ethnicity, and other factors? And since politics is now thoroughly mediated, how do people challenge the media processes which help reproduce particular definitions of "the political"? We should not look only at those institutions already defined as political, or assume these questions lie safely within the province of political sociology or political theory. They are questions of importance for cultural studies and media studies, because they affect the whole field of cultural and social activity *within which* "the political" is demarcated,[1] and, therefore, the underlying conditions of today's mediated "public sphere" (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992).

It is not only collective action that matters here. Given the massive authority to define "the political" that is concentrated in media institutions, we would expect resistance to that authority to be scattered, often disguised. We must look across to the other side of politics, to a region that is not legitimated and lacks the implicit endorsement of collective action. There we cannot dismiss individual actions as insignificant. One reason is that, as Honneth also argues (1995, p. 214), it is partly through the "*individualisation*" of social life that the contexts for wider injustices to be expressed as such are limited, and political activity thereby constrained. We must look at individuals who are precisely *seeking* collective significance for what they do but lack the normal routes to collective action. As James Scott in his classic study of everyday peasant resistance in Malaysia pointed out, "The inclination to dismiss "individual" acts of resistance and to reserve the term "resistance" for collective or organised action is misguided". (Scott, 1985, p. 297). It is therefore a mistake to dismiss individual, localized action as "trivial" or non-political; it may be the main, or only, tool of those who are furthest from the resources of legitimate political expression.

I want to explore these large issues through a very particular story: the social and media activism of "The Umbrella Man", so called because of the "umbrella hats" he wears to protests (see below). (I use this symbolic name, rather than his real name, at his request.) He is a working-class man in his 60s, living on the outskirts of London. He retired early through ill health from his job as a carpentry supervisor for a local authority. In the past decade, he has participated in many campaigns, spanning the range of activism in Britain, *outside*, that is, the official political process. He has been involved in countless social conflicts: from purely local campaigns (on practical measures for the elderly and the disabled, such as mobility issues), to national campaigns on specific social issues that continue earlier traditions of trade union and political activism (on hospital closures, pensioner rights, disability campaigns, and so on), to those "direct action" campaigns connected with the environment and animal rights that have attracted intense media coverage in Britain in recent years (the protests against live animal exports in 1995, the anti-road protests at Newbury and Fairmile in 1996–7, the Pure Genius land occupation in London in 1996, the campaign against the second runway at Manchester Airport in 1997, and so on).[2]

A common thread throughout the Umbrella Man's activism is his attempt to find ways of attracting media coverage for causes which are *not* normally in the media eye, and as someone who has *no* connections with media organisations. His practice is, he contends, "non-political"; in the sense of being unconnected with formal political organisations, this is true. However, the issues on which he campaigns are increasingly central to the public standing of governments in Britain and many other "developed" countries – health provision, disability rights and benefits, pensions – and his media tactics are an intervention in the politics of media power. His practice, therefore, illustrates well the dispersal of "politics" in an "anti-political" age.

Royal watcher or social activist?

As a way into the issues which the Umbrella Man's activism raises, consider two newspaper fragments. The first is an ironic report in a British broadsheet on reactions to the Queen Mother's hip operation (*Guardian*, 27 January 1998, p. 3). Under the sub-headline "Biggest fan answers 5 am alarm call", it wrote:

> [the Royal surgeon] was assisted during the operation by two other members of the Queen's Medical Household. . . . However [the Umbrella Man, "UM"] was assisted only by his wife. She woke the veteran royal-watcher at 5 am to tell him about the Queen Mother's stumble, and [he] packed his thermos at once. He travelled from his official home – a bungalow in Waltham Abbey, Essex – to the Queen Mother's official home – Clarence House, The Mall, finally arriving outside the hospital at 8.30 am. "It is terrible. It's like when you worry about your own parents", he said. "We are all rooting for her to make it to 100".

The patronising tone is obvious. The echoes of stories about the Prime Minister or other dignitary being "awakened to news" of a major disaster at his or her "official home" and reaching the scene "at such and such a time" (in the precisely measured time of public crises) clash with the "banalities" of suburbia (the "thermos", the "bungalow"). It is implied that the "veteran royal watcher's" seriousness is out of place, and that he too is out of place on the national stage: an "ordinary person" seeking vicarious importance from a parasocial relationship with a royal.

Contrast this with how a local newspaper picked up part of the same story a few days later (*Essex Guardian and Gazette*, 19 February 1998, p. 6):

> Veteran Waltham Abbey campaigner [UM] was in the thick of the action when he wedged himself under a bus, protesting for disabled people's rights. . . [UM] was part of the group DAN (Direct Action Network). . . . Messages and chants targeted Prime Minister Tony Blair. . . [UM] said: "It was a very productive day, it was busy and I believe we achieved a lot. I think it's worth doing, it does get noticed".

> Despite his busy day, [UM] found a moment to take a red rose to the Queen Mother who was still recovering from her hip operation last week. . . .

This second, unpatronizing treatment puts the royalist gesture in a serious context unimaginable from the first chapter, a sustained practice of protest against the current British government.

I am interested in the paradoxes of a landscape of media representation that marks some people in advance as politically insignificant: how do people resist being positioned in that way? How are public selves formed, and maintained, in the large, partly obscured space where people *outside* media institutions and public organisations attempt to influence current events? In this chapter, I will concentrate on one person's practice of resistance as its details reveal indirectly some of the constraints on being heard in the contemporary mediated public sphere. The larger argument – about the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions and its impacts on social life – is one I have developed at length elsewhere (Couldry, 2000a), and is beyond the scope of this chapter.

I first met the Umbrella Man in June 1996 at a meeting on a council housing estate in south London, near where an illegal occupation was taking place of a proposed supermarket site owned by the international drinks conglomerate, Guinness Plc. This was the occupation (May to October 1996) ironically called "Pure Genius" after the Guinness advertising slogan.[3] The meeting had been called as part of the public inquiry into Guinness's redevelopment plans; a harassed planning inspector was in charge, listening to local community views.

The Umbrella Man was not a local resident but was there to express his support for the occupation and for local residents opposing the development. He was dressed in shorts, a white T-shirt covered with campaign badges, and a Union Jack hat. I discovered that he had visited the site several times, taking food and other supplies, and introducing it to old age pensioners from his area as part of a "day out" in a local mobility bus. Later I interviewed both the Umbrella Man and some of those passengers. I discovered that supporting Pure Genius was just a small part of his (and their) activism.

I want to emphasise that my argument does *not* depend on claiming that the Umbrella Man's practice is representative of larger social trends in any simple sense, although, as I have already argued, we can learn a lot from individual stories.[4] Some of what the Umbrella Man does is clearly exceptional; it is exceptional, precisely because it challenges constraints on public action that are pervasive but normally hidden. These constraints can be traced in what the Umbrella Man does and how he talks about it. (For more detailed explanation of this type of argument, see Couldry, 2000a, Chapter 1).

The theoretical landscape

Although this is a quite specific story, behind it lie some broader debates, and *absences*, in cultural studies and sociology.

The first is the terrain of symbolic action where early British cultural studies was particularly productive: the study of resistant practices of "bricolage" and parody of elite or mass-distributed culture (Hebdige, 1979; Chambers, 1990). But we need to connect this with more recent insights into symbolic production in European political sociology, especially in the context of the "new social movements" (Beck, 1992; Melucci, 1989, 1996; Offe, 1985). This work has brought out the pervasiveness of *symbolic conflict* as a political phenomenon, particularly (as Melucci argues) in mediated consumer cultures, saturated with messages and images. In such a world, one central form of inequality is not broadly economic or social but rather unequal access to the "power of naming" (Melucci, 1996, p. 225): that is, unequal access to the media resources to define, among other things, "the political". The Umbrella Man's practice sits awkwardly at the boundary between "cultural" and "political" production, which it contests. As a result, I will argue, he has to draw on a shared context of humour and popular patriotism to make interventions, whose real message is much more provocative and political. That is one reason for his activism's apparent eccentricity and conservatism.

A connection can also be made with historical work on the everyday resistance of subordinate groups (Hobsbawm & Rude, 1969; Rude, 1980; Scott, 1985), a tradition that shares with Hebdige and Chambers" work a common origin in E. P. Thompson's pioneering studies (1968, 1971, 1978). Interestingly, Axel Honneth also refers to this tradition (1995, p. 315 n3) to support his argument that there is a great deal of contestation lying disguised behind the "control mechanisms" that limit political expression. If the tools of symbolic action are unequally shared (through the "de-symbolisation" of most people: ibid., p. 213), then we have to look for "politics" within the broader culture, where it may be "forced below" into the realm of "prepolitical privacy" (ibid., p. 218). Honneth's essay was originally published in 1981, but it has even greater resonances now after two decades in which trade unionism and working-class politics have been largely marginalized in Europe. This is the broader political context of the Umbrella Man's apparently unpolitical actions.

The Umbrella Man himself was a committed trade unionist, until ill health forced him to retire from work prematurely at 48 in the mid-1980s. His subsequent activism, however, has coincided with the declining fortunes of trade union activism in Britain after the cataclysm of the Miners" Strike in 1984–85. Since then, there has been a resurgence of other forms of social activism (the anti-Poll Tax campaign of 1990, the anti-road protests, environmental and health-related campaigns), but these tend to be discussed in isolation from the decline of trade union activism. The Umbrella Man's career as an activist is interesting therefore because it connects the two periods of trade union activism and decline; its background is precisely the fragmentation of formal working-class solidarity predicted as early as the 1970s (Roberts et al., 1977).

When I interviewed the Umbrella Man in July 1996 and February 1997, experiences of solidarity were something to which he often returned. He had been

particularly inspired by a national miners' rally in the early 1990s, held in torrential rain in central London:

> The unity was fantastic, people actually shared anything and everything . . . and they were only too pleased to tell each other where they came from, and they did come from all over the country.

The experience of solidarity and sharing was something he saw on later protests characterised by physical hardship, such as the Pure Genius occupation and the anti-roads protests up trees and down tunnels at Newbury and Fairmile. When profiled in the tabloid *Sunday Express*, he made a provocative connection between the solidarity of activism and wartime (or, in his case, conscripted National Service in the early 1950s):

> I don't hold with criticising the young people who get involved in protest. Standing up for your beliefs is a damn sight harder than just going to work every day to look after Number One. Life is like the Army – it's comradeship and caring about each other that really matter.
>
> *(Sunday Express, 23 February 1997, p. 23)*

I will come back to the significance of the Umbrella Man's military analogies later. His comments about solidarity are interesting in other ways. Echoing Hannerz's point that the contemporary experience of work normally generates individualism, not solidarity, he told me that it was only when he *retired* that he felt ready to be active in wider causes: "where I was an ordinary person who went to work . . . I was actually working for myself and my family . . . the difference is now, as I'm retired, I've decided to help others". And it was precisely such a sense of solidarity that, in the final year of Britain's 18-year long Conservative government, he saw threatened by the notorious Criminal Justice Act that restricted public gatherings in a draconian way: "what this government don't want is people [to] get together. They become a threat". The night the Criminal Justice Act became law was in his view the night when "our rights were taken away".

The Umbrella Man's actions, then, are effectively political, even if he has no formal links with institutional politics. His reference-points instead are broadly social. This connects with Ulrich Beck's argument (1992, p. 194) that "political modernisation disempowers and unbinds [official] politics and politicizes society", except that it is, in a sense, still the overwhelming *concentration* of political power that the Umbrella Man is, in part, contesting. The welfare state is probably the main focus of his decade of protest: pensions, National Health Service cuts, other public services (such as support for striking firemen), disability rights and disability benefits. Whether or not such campaigns are presented formally as political, their consequences clearly are political: for example, the march organised by the public service union Unison (which he attended) in North East England in April 1999,

that contested the level set by the British government for the Minimum Wage: the "March for a Living Wage".

There is to all this a spatial dimension. The importance of material and symbolic space to political contests, and also to the media's social impacts, have often been neglected (cf. Couldry, 2000a). An alternative approach would, perhaps, begin by drawing on Michel de Certeau's work (1984) on the "strategies" and "tactics" of cultural production, as well as Stallybrass and White's work (1986) on transgression and marginal spaces. There are parallels also with recent symbolic geography (Cresswell, 1996; Shields, 1991; Sibley, 1995). In thinking about the space of public life, it is worth remembering David Sibley's comment that "the human landscape" (both literally and symbolically) "can be read as a landscape of exclusion" (ibid., p. ix). What, then, is the price of contesting the landscape of media and political exclusion?

Participating in public life through media interventions means taking quite specific paths across national territory. Richard Sennett (1977) has done more than anyone to articulate the subtle links between story-telling and space. What, Sennett has asked, are the impacts – on the types of stories we can tell to each other – of the intensified regulation of public space, the *reduction* of so much public space to "dead space" (1977, p. 12)?[5] And if, less polemically, our strategies for dealing with contemporary urban space often involve the masking of our differences (Lofland, 1973), what individual means are available to use public space in order to project political messages that (like all politics) raise questions of difference?[6] These issues are relevant to the Umbrella Man's actions at political and symbolic centres, such as Westminster, but also his tactics in the television studio: particularly in the new public space of television talk shows on which he regularly appears in the studio audience. Symbolic politics and the politics of media power here intersect.

I will be working, finally, against two kinds of neglect within cultural studies and much sociology. First, there has been a general neglect of cultural production that falls outside the cultural industries or is not implicit in the consumption of cultural industry products. I mean the vast area of amateur enthusiasms and voluntary cooperation which Bishop and Hoggett (1986) have highlighted. While their work focused on pleasure and relaxation, the point could be extended to voluntary work with political implications.

There is also the neglect within media and cultural studies of the elderly, or even those in late middle age, like the Umbrella Man (61 when I first met him). Prejudice against the old is, of course, a wider social phenomenon (Hazan, 1994), but age has been a particular blind spot for cultural studies (cf. Couldry, 2000b, Chapter 3). Yet even a superficial knowledge of social activism in 1990s Britain reveals that it is partly alliances *across* the age range that characterised them: for example, the protests against the live export of animals (Couldry, 2000a, Chapter 7). It is a myth that only the young are at the "forefront" of social change or conflict, and a pernicious one, that prevents us from seeing how in "developed" nations many of the elderly too have been radicalised by harsh government treatment, a process directly related to class position (more specifically, the ability to draw on a private pension).

There are, then, a number of debates that coincide in the figure of the Umbrella Man and the "landscape of resistance" (Scott, 1985, p. 48) he crosses.

Specific themes

I have followed the Umbrella Man's public actions closely for more than three years across many different campaigns. Since most of those campaigns have received little, if any, academic attention, there is a great deal of detail that could be discussed. I want to concentrate, however, on four themes that illustrate the range of what he does, and the constraints under which he operates: transgression, mobility, media tactics, and, finally, what I speculatively call an alternative geography of celebrity.

Transgression

One key to understanding the Umbrella Man's practice is to see the constraints under which he works. He is trying to transmit a message to those who would not ordinarily listen to him. He is intervening, in other words, in the politics of speech: who speaks and who is silent (and from where)? It in no way trivialises this point to connect it to the clothing the Umbrella Man wears for his public actions, for example the "umbrella hats". The umbrella hat idea originated in a joke hat bought at the seaside: a base supporting a sunshade, shaped like a small umbrella in the colours of the Union Jack flag. Each hat and the rest of his clothing worn on public

FIGURE 7.1 The Umbrella Man posing for press photographers outside the House of Commons, Budget Day, November 1998

FIGURE 7.2 The Umbrella Man wearing miner's helmet at a fast in protest at live animal exports, Essex, October 1996

events (T-shirts, placards) are covered in stickers and badges relating to particular campaigns in which he has participated in the past. In this way they are easily recognizable to camera crews and press photographers, and through them, perhaps, to a media audience.

The function of these protest clothes is worth exploring in more detail. It applies even to situations when the Umbrella Man is standing in the audience for royal events. Among the waiting crowd, he often still wears his umbrella hats with their condensed references to protest activity, intending that people should read them. The late King Hussein of Jordan once spoke to him on such an occasion: "he wanted to know why I should wear red white and blue with all the stickers and I explained to him that I highlight the campaigns that I support people with and it shows that I'm red white and blue, I'm English". The point of his clothes becomes clearer: he is using the conventional backcloth of "red, white and blue" to project a message that would otherwise not be heard. He is trying to ensure that he (and

the activist message he carries) are seen and read by people of higher status. This is not vanity; it connects with an acute sense of the social and class differentials that determine who is and who is not normally seen and read:

> It's sad to say you don't always see the truth. Because, as I say, the camera always moves into a different direction . . . they always talk nice about the Queen and Royal Family and everything else . . . I'm not being rude, but what I'm saying is, they always show the goody-goodies, the, em, upper crust but *the ordinary people* . . . the only time you can gather is to wave your flag to the Queen and the King or whoever.
>
> *(emphasis added)*

The Umbrella Man, through his clothing on royal occasions – with its combination of conventional reference-points (nationalism, humour) and messages about specific protests – attempts to influence where the eyes of the powerful (whether individuals or cameras) move. He described to me how he dresses for actual protest actions in similar terms:

> If I was dressed in clothes like this [i.e. normal casual clothes] and I was that keen to get my story over, nobody would ever listen to me. But if I stand out as an individual that represents the campaign, I'm not there just for myself, I'm there for the cause. . . .

Through his clothes, then, the Umbrella Man makes himself into a readable *sign* of the events to which he wants to draw attention.

A similar strategy underlies the many other transgressions he makes. First of all, various actions which block the normal course of events and force attention onto the image he wants to project: for example, handcuffing himself to buses, trains or buildings. These actions are not just random gestures but are linked directly to his concerns with issues of mobility (see next section). So for example, in October 1996 he chained himself to an London underground train at a suburban station to draw attention to his claim that most disabled people are unable normally to board those same trains.

A second type of transgression involves crossing a controlled physical boundary: entering government buildings without permission (the Treasury, the Home Office), putting a foot across the threshold of Ten Downing Street ("just to say I've been in"), and so on. Although these actions can simply be read for their humour (playing with the boundaries of government institutions), they are usually intended to project a wider point. His unofficial entry into the Treasury on Budget day 1996 received some media coverage, as he intended: he was wearing Father Christmas uniform, adapted with flashing lights, campaign stickers and texts referring to the expected ill-treatment of pensioners in the Budget!

These transgressions are striking because they work, in part, through signals of *normality*. This applies not only to the Umbrella Man's clothes (whether the

umbrella hat with its nationalist colours overwritten with campaign stickers and messages, or the Father Christmas uniform) but also to the account he gives of himself to the media. Here again is the passage from the short press profile in the tabloid *Sunday Express* (23 February 1997, p. 42):

> I don't jump on every bandwagon. I study each issue to work out my opinions and I'm non-political. I don't hold with criticising the young people who get involved in protests. Standing up for your beliefs is a damn sight harder than just going to work everyday to look after Number One. Life is like the Army – it's comradeship and caring about each other that really matter.

A deliberately non-controversial framework – "I'm non-political" – is reinforced by a consensual reference-point – army life – to make a far from uncontroversial point about protest actions: the idea that protesting is more admirable and more courageous than going to work. The newspaper condensed these tensions into a sub-headline: "The Old Soldier Who's Still Fighting".

It would be a great mistake to see these consensual reference-points simply as evidence of the Umbrella Man's "conservatism", without considering their tactical role in transmitting a message, constructing a transgressive act out of non-controversial material. His comment when I interviewed him captured the ambiguity: "today, instead of getting medals, which I don't need, I get a [campaign] badge, and that's as good as a medal".

The Umbrella Man uses the reference-points of normality to make his transgressions *readable* as something more than mere "law-breaking". His own descriptions of his practice reflect this tension between normality and transgression directly in their language. Although he lacks any "elaborated" language (Bernstein, 1971) to describe what he does, he expresses it effectively in other ways, particularly through adverbial phrases ("in a different way", "in a nice way") that *reappropriate* words whose normal implications he wants to resist. For example, he talks of "caus[ing] problems" or "becom[ing] a criminal" "in a different way". Or: "I always try to break the law in a nice way". His language is also is, in a sense, a form of transgression.

Mobility

In the 1990s Britain saw increasing social activism by disabled groups, and this has recently begun to receive national media attention with coverage, for example, of the painting of the gates of Downing Street in autumn 1997 to protest against disability benefit cuts by the new Labour government. The Umbrella Man has been very active in these campaigns and provides considerable practical assistance to disabled protesters, particularly the Direct Access Network (DAN). There have been many protests across Britain, not only on issues of benefit cuts and service cuts (such as the closure of the Centre for Independent Living in Lambeth, south London,

in 1999) but also broader issues of disabled access and mobility. In April 1999 he travelled to Washington with members of DAN to join up with American disabled protesters. I mentioned earlier the Umbrella Man's chaining himself to a London underground train.

Issues of mobility have been central to the Umbrella Man's activism from the beginning. Shortly after he was forced to retire, when his own mobility was still limited, he became concerned with the numbers of elderly and disabled people in his town who were unable to leave their homes, because of lack of transport services. He organised a local mobility bus to give them days out. He has also mounted a large number of local campaigns to preserve bus and other transport services.

His links with DAN developed in the mid-1990s and are closely related to his views (already discussed) on the importance of building solidarity, as he explained to me:

> I also get involved with disabled people. Disabled people . . . travel around [to protests] because, why?, they have to support their groups. The whole idea of disabled people moving around in wheelchairs [to protests] [is] to highlight their problems in different areas. . . .

Because disabled people's own mobility is restricted, it is all the more important (practically and symbolically) for them to coordinate protest actions between otherwise isolated groups around the country. These links are a major part of what the Umbrella Man does: he drives activists to sites they would not otherwise reach. This connects with Richard Sennett's idea that the way we move around public space affects what stories we are able to tell about ourselves. The story of a mobile protest is particularly powerful if told from the position of the disabled person. Equally, the story of elderly people's "day out" at a protest action (whether for their own cause, or for others, such as the Pure Genius occupation) is significant if told from the perspective of the elderly, since it contradicts the usual assumption that elderly people are not involved in protests of any sort.

Through practical action, whether or not with media coverage, the Umbrella Man challenges the normal geography of protest; he connects areas of social life and activism that would otherwise remain separate, *not* perceived as part of a wider pattern. Strikingly, he sees his umbrella hat as materialising precisely this sort of connection. The umbrella hats are covered with badges and stickers, bringing together in one place references to the many campaigns across Britain in which he is involved, and informing whoever meets him of those campaigns. Given the lack of media information connecting most of those campaigns, this is far from trivial. As the Umbrella Man put it:

> I've got probably hundreds of badges, different campaigns. . . . And there's loads of stickers, stickers on stickers. And . . . it highlights what is what. . . . And

> I think in terms, that if I'm supporting the pensioners and I'm supporting the disabled people and I'm supporting the homeless, *it all comes together doesn't it? . . . And what makes it come together is this* [pointing to the hat].
>
> *(emphasis added)*

To call this a "geographic" practice is not an academic inflation, since it is implicit in the Umbrella Man's own language: "the whole idea is to bring the groups together", "I have got to move around", "I travel where I am needed". Not only does he have a strong sense of the importance of solidarity, he negotiates the conditions under which (in a highly dispersed and fragmented society) such solidarity can now be achieved.

At the same time, the Umbrella Man spends a lot of time at the key ritual centres of British political life: not only outside Buckingham Palace but more importantly outside the Houses of Parliament and around the government departments of Whitehall. As he put it in one letter copied to me, "I spend lots of time at the House of Commons to ensure we're not forgotten". It is all part of being "in the right place at the right time" (interview with author). Mobility, then, involves not only making new connections across space but travelling to the fixed ritual centres of Britain's political life, which, of course, are also central sites of media activity, my next theme.

Media tactics

I want now to consider the Umbrella Man's media tactics more specifically. The link between mobility and media tactics is direct, because it is by travelling to the ritual political centres and to demonstrations across the country, that the Umbrella Man has the chance to project his message to a media audience: remember that he has no resources of media production himself. As he wrote in another letter: "always look out on TV, you never know where I'm going to turn up".

If we are interested in the contemporary relationship between media and politics, it is vital to consider the many types of media tactics: only in this way can we get beyond the small percentage of "politics" in the media eye, seeing the much wider landscape of activism that is aimed at media coverage, *but does not achieve it*. *Not* receiving (deserved?) media coverage is a major issue for less fashionable campaigns, such as pensioner and disability rights. A comment from one of the many pensioner campaign magazines about a protest in Whitehall on the day the Blair government announced its pension reform package in early 1998 captures this tension:

> . . . with all this magnificent show of pensioner power and despite the TV cameras and journalists present – not a word in the media except for one captioned photograph in the next day's *Times*, and some very brief glimpses of a small section of the lobby queue on the main television news channels.
>
> *(Essex Pensioner Summer 1998, issue 8, p. 5)*

In spite of their appearance of playfulness, humour and (English!) eccentricity, it became clear to me from studying the Umbrella Man's actions, that they are a well-developed form of media "tactics" (in de Certeau's, 1984, sense), designed precisely to combat the difficulties of an "ordinary person" obtaining media coverage.[7] The Umbrella Man's principal media tactic is to insert himself within the frame of larger events or spaces which are already likely to receive media interest, in order to become readable by the media. He achieves this, first, by performing actions that are "outrageous" and, second, as we have already seen, by wearing particular clothes. It helps, however, if he can do all this within the context of some larger story that is already guaranteed media attention.

That is why many of his actions take place near Parliament, especially on major media days such as Budget Day. Those spaces provide a narrative context within which his actions may get "picked up" (his own phrase). Here he describes his entry into the Treasury Department on Budget Day 1996 wearing Father Christmas uniform:

> I made a beeline for the Treasury Department. And what was good about it was, he [the Chancellor of the Exchequer] didn't turn up, so we went in after him. . . . And it must have been, whether it was luck or whatever, but the TV cameras came running down to Treasury Department and by the time I'd got inside the door, as normal security came after me and politely pushed me out the door, yeh? And what was good about it was, when the cameras were there in front of them, they ran back in because they don't like to be seen on the door with Father Christmas . . . I've got my sack, my hat and all those boards . . . and this went all over the world.

The conventional Father Christmas uniform (a source of automatic, uncontroversial humour) made him ready material for the television cameras already present to cover the Budget announcement. Once again, his aim was to ensure he was read not as an individual but as the representative of a cause. As he put it elsewhere in the interview, "we attract the camera for the others". If he stood there as an individual, he implies, he would be ignored – just another "ordinary" bystander to important national events. His actions are therefore a reaction to necessity. This suggests a wider, but little studied, topic: how are people outside institutional politics now using media tactics as an instrument of symbolic conflict in Alberto Melucci's sense, the tactics of the *amateur* photo-opportunity.[8]

These actions are not just "antics". The Umbrella Man is well aware of media stereotyping, and resists it, using the resources at hand (including his status as an ex-soldier, already mentioned):

> I'm one of the old soldiers who's got a clean nose . . . but I support the elderly and the young people. But I do believe . . . me being there helps them. Because they can't call me a thug or a bully or out of work . . . because they tend to paint people with a brush and then they push them aside. Well they can't do that to me.

For the same reason (his awareness of stereotyping), he is equally ready to adapt his normal practice, when the conditions of media coverage alter: for example, when he appears as an individual "*ordinary* person" on a television talk show or discussion programme (such as *Kilroy, Question Time*). He is well aware that in this setting, because of those programme's exclusive interest in *individualising* general issues – yet marginalizing the eccentric – it is crucial to appear "normal" in order to get points across: "being part of the audience, I always dress pretty smart so I look normal". But his aim, as elsewhere, is to contribute to a campaign and get beyond an individual persona:

> if you're fighting a cause, you should be allowed to have a few words to say what you're fighting for. And I mean, to talk about yourself on the telly is not worth being there really, it's what you're standing for . . . you're speaking for the people, the real people really.

An alternative geography of celebrity

Just as the Umbrella Man's transgressions have to work within the geography of our dispersed social world (its ritual centres, its potential connections), so his media tactics suggest an alternative geography of the media. The media (Couldry, 2000a), involve not only the transmission of messages across space but a *geographical concentration* of symbolic production in certain places, rather than others. Celebrity is directly related to this spatial concentration of media activity.[9] An alternative geography of celebrity might develop in two ways: first, by attempting to draw the cameras to different types of place and person; or second, by appearing in spaces where the cameras are already present, in order to project an alternative type of person within existing media narratives.

Some of the Umbrella Man's protest actions take the first approach: for example, chaining himself to a tube train at a suburban station did obtain a small amount of television coverage (on local news reports) for an issue (disability access) that is rarely represented in the media. He has also been involved (although only through providing practical and moral support) in protest actions by others which drew large numbers of cameras away from the normal political "centres", for example the anti-roads protest encampments at Newbury. Another example would be the Umbrella Man's participation in 1996 in digging up the palatial garden of the then Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine for a campaign against open-cast mining. As one woman I interviewed in another context commented on national press coverage of this incident (*Daily Mail* 22 October 1996, p. 13): "it's funny when you pick up national newspapers and see people you know in there digging holes in people's gardens". The potential impact of such media appearances can only be appreciated against their normal background: the fact that when most people watch or read the news, it *never* involves anyone they know, or are likely to know! The news is "another world" (cf. Edelman, 1988, p. 35). The Umbrella Man is well aware of this – his experience through most of

his life has been no different – which gives a meaning to his media appearances that is not mere exhibitionism:

> . . . I'm making the most of what I can do. And I think it actually gets home, they say, "Oh, saw you on the telly". It's not me they saw, they saw what I represent and it gives them hope.

Much of the time, however, the Umbrella Man challenges celebrity in the second way mentioned above: he uses *existing* media narratives as a framework in which he can insert himself, in order to project his causes. I have already discussed his actions at the centres of political action (such as Westminster). The same applies to his following of media celebrities, such as television personalities and sportspeople. It is clear both that he is fascinated by celebrity and that he sees a tactical advantage in associating himself with it. He claims to be increasingly known to celebrities and politicians, and when a significant meeting occurs, sometimes passes on this information to the local press as a way of maintaining *his* profile *as a campaigner*. Hence, local newspaper reports of his trips outside Buckingham Palace to see the Queen Mother, his various meetings with television personalities on protests, or the occasion when a Japanese television crew covered his protest outside Parliament on Budget Day, 1998 and then did a wider report on his activism.

It is easy, of course, to dismiss such small stories; for some, they will seem like the small change of provincial news, where news demand outstrips supply. I am not for a moment using them as evidence of the wider "effects" of the Umbrella Man's tactics, although it is worth remembering that the Umbrella Man has received a profile in the national press (see above). They are evidence rather of a different process: the continual small-scale battles along the borderlines of celebrity and media power. Each local report crucially referred to the Umbrella Man as a campaigner for pensioners rights; the "celebrity" storyline, therefore, kept alive another story about activism, against the grain of normal media storylines. But, as with the whole of the Umbrella Man's practise, his causes are precariously poised between a temporary promise of speaking and a long-term condition of silence:

> Somewhere along the line I do get the papers [in which he has been featured] posted to me. . . . It's the feedback . . . I think it's important to know the feedback on the result that you got. And . . . you can show other people what the outcome is, otherwise it's just word to mouth and you don't know really.

In a world where, for most people, media attention – being publicly listened to – is extremely scarce, tactical challenges to that inequality are inevitably local; they work along the border zones of media geography, playing with its boundaries and rituals of exclusion. de Certeau in his reflections on tactical play put it well: the tactician must "insinuate[] [him]self into the other's place. . . *without being able to keep it at a distance*" (1984, p. xix). These tactics of the media world are all too easily obscured or ignored. As Dick Hebdige famously put it, it is a matter of discovering

those who are "hiding in the light" (1988): hidden from us by the glare of media productions, caught up within the supposedly central narratives of our age.

Conclusion

Before we can understand the politics of an anti-political age, we have to understand the wider forces that shape who and what gets defined as "political". We have to grasp the mechanisms through which many people are excluded from existing political cultures and their mediated forms. Cultural studies is well placed to open up these issues, particularly if it connects with recent European work in political sociology and symbolic geography. This is what I have tried to do in drawing out the implications of the Umbrella Man's highly individual "political" practice.

The Umbrella Man has had many successes. It is perhaps no accident that, following his many local campaigns, on health, transport and other issues, the local authority in his home town has begun to describe itself as "a campaigning council" (*Essex Guardian and Gazette*, 23 July 1998, p. 7). The Umbrella Man has also been involved in effective national campaigns, particularly on issues of disability, where for example the protests outside Downing Street's gates and the entrance to the Houses of Parliament have helped put disability benefit cuts onto the national front pages.

My argument, however, does not depend on such a balance-sheet of success and failure; it is not a question of "effects". The point has been to illustrate – here from one case only, but potentially from many more – how the immense concentration of symbolic power in contemporary societies shapes the actions of those *outside* the "centres", whether of media power or political power or both. The story has not simply been one of reproducing inequality but one of contestation and humour, a continuing struggle on unequal terms.

I raised at the beginning questions about how people's position in such struggles are affected by broad social variables: class, education, gender and so on. Clearly, to develop systematically such large-scale connections would require a much larger programme of empirical work, and this is a project for the future. It would be interesting also to discuss at greater length the extent to which in the mediated public sphere individual actions can sometimes make connections on a larger scale than would be possible without mediation: the balance-sheet of media power is complex (cf. Corner, 1995), and I have tended to focus on its hidden negatives, rather than its potential positives. The Umbrella Man's case remains, however, suggestive of what a close attention to individuals' media tactics can achieve.

During his struggle, the Umbrella Man's relationship to the media has changed. Before, he told me, he read the paper only occasionally and watched little television: he was in a sense alienated from the media. Now, he says, he is too busy to read or watch much, unless he, or his causes, are covered. His media consumption in quantitative terms may not have increased but he has become a different type of media *non*-consumer, someone active within, or at least on the borders of, media production.

He has made, then, a journey across the uneven landscape on which politics and media narratives are constructed. Such journeys are normally obscured behind the constructed facade of "the events of the day". They give us an insight into the processes of inclusion and exclusion that underlie our present politics, and its absences.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 Here I am reviving a line of argument from earlier cultural studies: notably Hall (1977) and Stallybrass and White (1986).
2 For more general background, see Couldry (2000a, Part Three, Introduction) and McKay (1996).
3 For more analysis of that event, see Couldry (2000a, Chapter 8) and Featherstone (1997).
4 See more generally Steedman (1986), Bourdieu (1993) and for discussion Couldry (2000b, Chapter 3).
5 This process is, of course, gendered (Valentine, 1989), although I will not focus on gender issues here.
6 A similar issue arises also in relation to public art (cf. Couldry, 1995, Chapter 1 of this volume; Hebdige, 1993). Public art, however, is almost always recognised as an exclusive discourse with special (even if limited) rights; the public artist has an institutional license which someone trying to make an individual stand in public space on a social issue rarely has.
7 On the construction of "the ordinary person" versus the "media person", see Couldry (2000a, Chapter 3).
8 One example would be actions aimed at the cameras by "ordinary" shareholders outside general meetings of large corporations, a topic I intend to write about elsewhere.
9 Cf. Couldry (1999) [Chapter 5 of this volume] on "the geography of celebrity" in the events following the death of Princess Diana.

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8

ON THE SET OF *THE SOPRANOS*

"Inside" a fan's construction of nearness

Introduction: the paradox of fandom research

When people use up a great deal of time and energy in interpreting a specific text, their subsequent actions oriented to that text pose interesting problems for social scientific interpretation. While the early history of fandom research was dominated by deconstructing fans" subordination in an outdated taste hierarchy, one challenge for current research is to gain a clearer, more inclusive view of the underlying interpretative problem that fan practices pose.

This is a problem in which unwittingly I have found myself entangled. My book *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* was not intended as part of fandom research, and its emphasis was on questions of media, power and space more generally. But it could not avoid the link, because one of its case studies involved making sense of what fans and others did when they visited the set of the UK soap *Coronation Street* in Manchester (Couldry, 2000, Part Two). However, the anger I felt at the frequent pathologising of fans" perfectly legitimate interpretative practice was one reason I avoided all trace of individual psychology in my analysis. I was trying to avoid what I saw as a reduction of such practice to the "defects" of individual psyches, and so set off in the opposite direction to see how far you could go in understanding an (admittedly) highly specific fan practice – journeys to the location where a media text is produced – relying only on a sociology that had excised psychology.[1] This was clearly too limited a solution to the interpretative problem of fandom, and in any case the emergence since of sensitive treatments of fan psychology that simultaneously deconstruct and move beyond the old taste hierarchy (Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005) removes any justification for my rhetorical exclusion of psychological perspectives.

Another criticism has been made of my earlier treatment of fans that I want to mention as a jumping-off point for some reflections on the wider difficulties

inherent in interpreting fan practice, reflections that I hope will be appropriately self-critical. I have been accused in my reading of fan journeys to the set of *Coronation Street* of overemphasizing questions of power – that is, the power relations between those outside media and those within media institutions, and the social power of media generally – or at least of operating with an oversimplified and binary division between media and audiences (Sandvoss, 2005).[2] There is no space here to debate the wider question of media power,[3] but in any case there were other dimensions of my interpretation that were not about power but emphasized memory, pilgrimage, and the paradoxes of getting close to the production site of fiction. So, this criticism, while rightly pointing out my earlier (and deliberate) neglect of individual psychology, is in turn a reduction. I am not complaining (far from it), since my point is that the multilayered complexity of fans" actions in relation to texts, they love makes *any* account liable to charges of reductionism: there is always more to say, and more perspectives from which to say it. Sandvoss" overall analysis of fandom (Sandvoss, 2005) offers a very interesting resolution of the sociology/psychology binary by showing, along the lines of the Frankfurt School, how a sociology of late capitalism that does not pass through the psychological dynamics of individual investments in particular texts and commodities is incomplete. This is clearly right – and a valid criticism of my earlier sociological reduction – but that does not mean an account that corrects for this automatically, in turn, offers a complete interpretative framework of what fans do. There is the separate, and independently difficult, issue of how we take sufficient account of the space of the text, and fans" relatively underdetermined activities as interpreters within that space. There is a great deal to be learned from models drawn primarily from literary theory (Gray, 2005); indeed, studying fans "interpretative communities" (in Stanley Fish's sense) is a route *back* to a sociological interpretation, even if one that considers power in a very different light from my earlier account.

My point then is that reductionism is not a fatal interpretative flaw that distinguishes good from bad accounts of fandom but something endemic to *all* accounts that aspire to offer a total model of what fans do. Maybe it's that aspiration that has to be abandoned. After a period when various rival models of fan practices have emerged in competition with each other, we may now be on the threshold of a different phase where the interpretative challenge is different: how to find the right mix (from the range of sociological, psychological, sociological/psychological and literary models available) for interpreting *this particular* fan practice? In which case, fandom research is best seen as an open, cross-disciplinary space for grappling with the highly various consequences of being a more than casual interpreter of a text.

Against that background, I would still want to defend my own emphasis on power and space, but only as one strand that sometimes is more salient than others but cannot yield an overall model. I agree with Sandvoss that "in fandom . . . place remains a fundamental point of reference" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 66), but this, I would add, is difficult to separate from questions of power that do not necessarily pass through individual psychology. Even if these can never provide the whole picture, they should not be ignored either.

I want to develop these thoughts in a spirit that is explicitly self-critical and reflexive, by recalling a visit I made in May 2005 to "The Original Locations for *The Sopranos*" run in New York by On Location Tours, Inc.[4] When writing about the *Coronation Street* set, what I shared with the programme's fans was not fandom of the programme (beyond a basic level of interest) but an excitement and fascination with places featured in media, and the rich meaning of such places. But here my situation was different: I am a fan of *The Sopranos*, a fandom I share with family and friends. With my wife Louise I have cooked meals from *The Sopranos* cookbook for evenings of *Sopranos* video-watching with friends! I was keen to visit *The Sopranos* locations and knew of the tour well in advance from fellow *Sopranos* fan and film and television scholar Dana Polan. We shared photos of our visits, as would any friends who were also fans. But how would my "internal" account of my visit fit, if at all, with any "external" sociological interpretation (let alone deconstruction) I might imagine myself making of the same experience?

The dialectic of internal/external is inherent, of course, to any attempt at general interpretation of what people do and think; it cannot ever fully be resolved. What I want to argue, however, is that this interpretative tension, far from being artificially imposed on "real life" by the curious and privileged practice of sociology[5] (or psychology or literary theory for that matter) is in fact integral to this particular fan tour in ways that connect interestingly with the text that is its origin.

Getting close to the fiction

Media – as a highly centralised mechanism for distributing narratives that are themselves produced in quite specific places – generate many paradoxes of place. There is the paradox of a phenomenological "nearness" (to a news event, a character, a storyline, or the excitement of a gameshow studio) that is inseparable from a practical and material *distance* from its production. Martin Heidegger was one of the first writers to pick up on this contradictory feature of broadcasting (1962, p. 140): radio, he argued, bring us existentially "near" to places that are distant. In relation to media news, this feature has generated contrasting assessments: some argue that media events remain too distant for moral engagement, while others fear news brings those events trivially close.[6] Media fictions, of course, raise completely different issues: we know they never happened, even if they encourage us to imagine a not-so-different world where we are told they did (notably with *The X-Files* for example). Sometimes a narrative relies upon, and allows its readers to develop, a sense of place that is validated by a general belief that a very specific place exists where such things might have happened. In this respect, fictions like *the Sopranos*, that rely on a highly specific sense of situated historical events, differ markedly from soaps such as *Coronation Street* where the associated sense of place is always, from the beginning, based on a generality (life as it once was in the North of England). In the case of *The Sopranos*, visiting New Jersey would *already*, for a fan of the programme, mean entering the space of the real events that the fiction models and

reworks – and this would be true without us ever discovering locations of where particular shots were filmed.

The *Sopranos* tour I did therefore doubled for those on the day (who disclosed themselves as coming from the US including Alaska, Canada, Norway, as well as Liverpool and London in the UK) as an introduction to a real region (New Jersey) and a journey to real sites of television production. Neither journey by itself was in the least problematic. Everyone is familiar with the experience of tourism, and most people are fairly familiar also with the experience of media tourism, visiting sites specifically and only because they have featured in a media narrative. It is commonplace now for the second type of journey to be used to market the first (Couldry, 2000, p. 65). We are familiar, also, as part of the second type of tourism, with being taken "inside" the fiction, even if many media tourist sites offer this only minimally, with that experience being limited to a basic moment of recognition ("Oh, *that's* where it was filmed"). The explorations of *X Files* sites in Vancouver that Matt Hills describes (Hills, 2002, Chapter 7) would appear, however, to involve more than just noting where something was filmed: the uncertainties of exact location feed into the spatial ambiguities and uncertainties of the *X Files* narrative itself, generating the possibility of imagining, for a moment, you are a character exploring the narrative space of the programme.

The *Sopranos* tour then combined three spaces that by themselves are unproblematic: (1) the space of general tourism, (2) the space of media tourism, and (3) the imaginary action-space "within" the fictional narrative that (2) sometimes generates. I will return to the contradictions between (3) and (1/2) later on, for it is the contradictions that may be problematic. First, however, let's consider the interaction between spaces (1) and (2).

Unlike many tourist guides, the tour guide for the *Sopranos* tour could assume considerable shared knowledge amongst those paying on the day. Everyone might be dressed pretty much the same with no obvious signs of expertise or interest, but anyone who in a city as packed with tourist opportunities as New York considered this bus tour a good use of their time could safely be assumed to have watched with enthusiasm at least one series of *The Sopranos*. The main feature of the witty tour commentary was to acknowledge this knowledge and indeed flatter the participants: quiz questions were opportunities to display special levels of fan knowledge, but a considerable basic level of familiarity with the show, its character and ethos, was generally assumed in any jokes and patter. There was virtually nothing on the tour, after the initial "housekeeping" announcements, that was not reflexive to this extent, right down to the snack of cannoli delivered to us mid-tour (a recipe for "Carmela's" cannoli recipe was included in the tour booklet). The knowing sophistication of those on the tour was consistently primed – not just sophistication about the quirks of television production (the hidden nepotism and sheer chance that lie behind any complex cultural production) but also sophistication about the meaning of the programme, with its story of a mafia culture in steady decline. The guide, acknowledging some people's concerns about the programme, asked the party whether the show defamed Italians or was it "just television". "Just television"

came the reply. On the tour you learned a lot about the real functions of the buildings used as backdrops, and I won't reveal any secrets here so as not to spoil the fun of future visitors! The guide was in a strong position to share minor "secrets" of the business, since he had been an actor and extra in many *Sopranos* episodes. From the point of view of the space of media tourism, those of us on the bus could reflect at some distance on the less knowledgeable space of general tourism, even though for most of us I suspect we were in both spaces, since this was our first trip specifically to New Jersey.

Indeed, what we saw of New Jersey – from the famous Turnpike onwards – was shot through with memories, prompted by the guide, of narrative moments from the series. The Turnpike is where the show's opening sequence was filmed. With the theme tune playing, we watched on the video monitors the sequence where Tony Soprano inserts his ticket into the entry barrier and looked in vain for the view and the light shown on the programme sequence. There were many other such moments, not spoilt by the irony sensed by both guide and tourists of the mismatch between the extreme banality of many locations (a one-room diner by a parking lot under a bridge, for example) and the narrative significance of the fictional locations they embodied. Here we were looking back on the space of media tourism, from the space of the narrative. We could laugh at the same relation in reverse, as when we were told that the owner of the tiny "Pizza Land" outlet on Belleville turnpike (shown in the opening credits) gets real orders to send pizzas by FedEx from addresses all over the world (he smiled and waved at us as our bus drove past).

Negative aura?

"Just think, within two hours we'll be at the Bada Bing", I said to Louise as we entered the lift from a drab hotel landing, to walk down to 39th Street where we were to pick up the bus for *The Sopranos* tour.

It's no secret that a *Sopranos* tour culminates at the Bada Bing, a strip joint which provides the "glamorous" end of Tony Soprano's chain of business interests (their core is "waste management" and building site racketeering). Many scenes are set around the Bada Bing dance floor and bar, or in the office where members of Tony's crew relax, playing pool or cards, and Tony takes important business calls and visitors. Along with Satriale's "meat market" and Tony and Carmela's kitchen and pool, the Bada Bing is one of the consistent spatial reference-points in the *Sopranos* narrative.

Our bus pulled up behind the building and we were shown the guard rail where in Series Three Ralphie committed a particularly gruesome assault on a stripper who had annoyed him, earning Tony's retribution. We were also given very strict instructions about what we could and could not do once inside, instructions that we were told came from its owner. For "the Bada Bing" is not a set made for television but a real strip club called Satin Dolls on Route 17, South Lodi, New Jersey.[7]

As we entered the club at 430pm, after touring the car park to get a good view of its outside, I was still recalling incidents from the plot that had occurred there.

I was still thinking in other words within the narrative space of the programme. By entering the dance space, and like most of the rest of the tour party edging nervously along the wall while looking in toward the raised dance floor beyond the bar counter, I had, of course, entered a space of media tourism as well. There was no doubt this was the actual place where all those scenes had been filmed: the lighting rig, we had been told, was now permanently installed to save time putting it up and taking it down for each shoot. But in the 15 or 20 minutes allotted for our tour stop, there was nowhere else to go apart from the dance floor or the club's perfectly ordinary toilets; everywhere leading off from the club area was backstage for its staff, and not part of the set, let alone part of the narrative space of the series. Around the edge of the room, the three tourism spaces (the space of tourism, the space of media tourism and the space of the narrative) became fused in the club's marketing strategy; the club sold itself as "Satin Dolls aka the Bada Bing Club", with club-type merchandise (tank tops, thongs, g-strings and the like) that marketed both the real and fictional location. A *Sopranos* pinball machine jokily used the mafia hierarchy (from "Associate" to "Boss") to customise the path of the pinball around the table. But this was the only spot where you could lose yourself in the show's narrative (or at least a commodified reworking of one of its terms). For, as my eyes got used to the light, the sound levels and the social scene (three or four men sat hunched around the bar, looking up occasionally at the sole dancer on the stage), it became obvious that the only space we were in was the commercial space where this sex club on a bleak transit route marketed itself.

A fascination with the narrative of *the Sopranos* had led me, and thousands of others, by a simple commercial logic into looking on as a tourist in a New Jersey strip joint on a grey Saturday afternoon. For sure, the club is entitled to conduct its business, although I personally am uncomfortable with the sour patriarchy that I sense saturates such places. The morality of all this is less interesting than the meaning. What did my act of standing there by the dance floor communicate? Clearly not ironic distance: there is no way of standing ironically. Clearly not anger or moral distance, since neither I nor any other visitor had, as it were, *locus standi* to complain: we had paid to see *Sopranos* locations, and this was what we were being allowed to do, and the club was carrying on its lawful business. In any case, it was clear from the weary contempt with which the off-floor dancing staff looked at us that we had no moral standing in their eyes: not customers (although a few on the tour bought a drink at the bar), not enforcement authorities with a power to interfere, just tourists who had come to "see" the fiction with which their real working lives were for commercial benefit incidentally associated.

As tourists, we were in a "nonplace", but in a sense, rather different from Auge's (Auge, 1995). For this was not so much a place without "place-like" features, a mere route of passage, like a freeway, although as it happens the club's location was a bleak spot by a freeway (interestingly this is not something the programme emphasises about the fictional location, as far as I recall). It was a real place with many place-like features, yet a non-place *to us* because it was somewhere, we had not wanted to

visit as such (under *this* description, as a philosopher might say), a place where we had no ability or right to act.

So, we said and did nothing – until we were back on the bus, on the return trip to Manhattan with old *Sopranos* clips for entertainment. This climax to our tour had unexpectedly brought a melancholia at which Adorno might have grimaced. Blithely at play in the space of the series" large and tangled narrative and enjoying the chance to map that narrative space onto the array of New Jersey streets, retail outlets and parking lots, we had stumbled into the material reality of an all-too-ordinary place of capitalist work from which our narrative engagement had distracted us. While many such media tourist sites have an "aura" in Benjamin's sense, as a place of actual filming,[8] aura depends on a particular type of encounter – touching the place where the actual thing was/happened/happens – and it was just this possibility of encounter with the fiction and its filming that had been occluded by our uneasy realisation of where it was we were standing.

Concluding thoughts

The *Sopranos* tour carried many of the auratic expectations that a media location conventionally has, but it culminated, I have suggested, in a site of negative aura, a site whose different reality effaced any aura associated with the fiction and its process of production.

But this contradiction is, perhaps, not so foreign to the narrative offered by *The Sopranos*. For from its outset the series has been distinctive for a double narrative: the "public" story of the outer edges of a New York Italian mafia "family" in terminal decline, and the "private" story of Tony Soprano's health and psychological problems and imperfectly managed family life. This doubleness is more than a narrative conceit since at various levels *The Sopranos* shows it at work in characters" lives, and the painful contradictions which flow from this. In this sense, and this has always been part of its attraction to me as a fan, *The Sopranos* addresses on a large scale some of the contradictions between "work" and "life" that are central issues in late modernity. That the *Sopranos* tour should have generated its own contradictions between "play" and "life" seemed, on reflection, somehow appropriate, whether or not those contradictions were intended by the tour's organisers. What emerged was at the same time a contradiction, between different levels of narrative absorption, in my own experience as a fan.

Where do these recollections take us in terms of the choice from which this chapter started – the puzzle over the disciplinary space in which we should locate our academic accounts of what fans, ourselves included, do. In one way, they might seem to confirm Sandvoss' argument that our psychological investments in narrative commodities are an essential part of how we are entrenched within capitalism's order. A complication is that one attraction of *The Sopranos*' narrative is its implicitly *critical* exploration of the linkages between exploitation, violence, and everyday comfort in contemporary society; but a Frankfurt School reading would have us ensnared within capitalism's order, *whether or not* the narratives that are the objects

of our passion are critical. A further complication is that, as visitors, our entanglement with the reality of a New Jersey strip joint was not shaped in any way by the specificities of our individual *psychological* investment in *The Sopranos*' narrative; one might just as well say that it was shaped by the social pleasures afforded by *The Sopranos* as a complex, evolving narrative that provokes discussion based on the deep generic foundations of mafia narratives. On the other hand, I would happily acknowledge that, on this tour at least, issues of symbolic power (while present at some level throughout) were outweighed in terms of analytic interest by the spatial and narrative ambiguities into which the tour drew its participants.

The only safe conclusion, I suggest, is to acknowledge that fandom research needs a theoretical flexibility to match the phenomenological complexity of much fan experience. Instead of a "unified" model which privileges one framework of interpretation (psychological, sociological, economic, textual, spatial), we need perhaps a toolkit from which, when faced with particular fan experiences, can draw on any or all of these frameworks. Indeed, it is in part just this complexity – this sense at times of moving uncertainly between different levels, and perspectives, of interpretation – that gives the practice of fandom its rich fascination.

Notes

1 I realised a little later that some sociologists (but against the grain) have argued that sociology needs to integrate psychology into its regular discourse (Craib, 1998), but that remains a minority position. I was also aware of sociological approaches that emphasised different dimensions from my account: Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Harrington and Bielby (1995).
2 Cf. Corner (2003).
3 Key here and relied on in part by Sandvoss at this point, is the argument of Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998); for a discussion of what I see as weaknesses in that latter position, see Couldry (2005).
4 For details see www.screentours.com. [This business is now run by On Location Tours: https://onlocationtours.com/index.php/NC].
5 Cf. Bourdieu (1998).
6 Respectively Robins (1995), Silverstone (2003).
7 I discovered on a trip to New Jersey in 2019 that this (real) club has now closed.
8 ~Benjamin (1968), Cf. Couldry (2000, p. 81).

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9

TEACHING US TO FAKE IT

The ritualised norms of television's "reality"-games

Introduction

Whatever its contribution to the overblown claims of semiotics as a general "science" of language, Barthes' analysis of "myth"[1] and its connection to ideology remains useful as a specific tool to understand particular types of media language such as advertising and also, I will argue, that most striking recent phenomenon, "reality television". Myth itself, Ernesto Laclau has argued, is increasingly a requirement of contemporary societies whose divisions and dislocations multiply.[2] If so, reality TV's mythical claim to represent an increasingly complex social space, for example in the largely entertainment mode of the "gamedoc" or reality gameshow, may have significance far beyond the analysis of television genre. I will make this argument more precise by considering reality TV's ritual dimensions and their link to certain media-centric norms of social behaviour.

The idea underlying reality TV is hardly new. Here is the television anchorman who commentated on the 1969 Apollo moon touchdown speaking three decades ago:

> [television's] real value is to make people participants in ongoing experiences. Real life is vastly more exciting than synthetic life, and this is real-life drama with audience participation.[3]

This idea – and the associated claim of television to present "real life" – does not disappear in the era of television "plenty",[4] but rather comes under increasing pressure to take new forms. The sub-genre of "gamedocs" on which I will concentrate is a later adaptation to those pressures, succeeding an early wave of "docusoaps" and TV verité in the mid-1990s[5] and a subsequent crisis of many docusoaps" documentary authority because of scandals about fake productions,[6] for example over

Carlton TV's documentary *The Connection* (1999) which supposedly uncovered an operation for smuggling drugs from Colombia but was alleged by the London *Guardian* to have faked various scenes. But if the gamedoc signifies a shift to a "postdocumentary" television culture,[7] the result is not an abandonment of reality claims but their transformation. As John Corner puts it,[8] discussing the first British series of *Big Brother*: "*Big Brother* operates its claims to the real within a fully managed artificiality, in which almost everything that might be deemed to be true about what people do and say is necessarily and obviously predicated on the larger contrivance of them being there in front of the camera in the first place".

My interest here is less in the gamedoc as generic form (excellently discussed by Corner) but in the wider social process which gamedocs constitute. At stake in these often much-hyped programmes is a whole way of reformulating the media's (not just television's) deep-seated claim to present social reality, to be the "frame" through which we access the reality that matters to us as social beings.[9] In the gamedoc, this claim involves the promotion of specific norms of behaviour to which those who court popularity by living in these shows" constructed spaces must conform.

To get analytic purchase on this complex process, the term "myth" by itself is too blunt. Instead, we need the more precise notions of "ritual" and "ritualisation" that can link television form to wider issues of authority and governmentality.[10] Most contemporary self-performance can, as Palmer notes, be interpreted in the light of Foucault's theory of governmentality whereby power is reproduced through norms not just of control but also of expression and self-definition. I want, however, to push further than Palmer does the implications of the fact that in gamedocs "what develop[s is] not so much a self [as] *a media self*".[11]

What is this media self? What is its social status, and what are its social consequences? To link gamedocs to "governmentality" is not enough since all contemporary social space is in this sense "governed" by norms that regulate what is acceptable, meaningful and pleasurable, and what is not. We need also to ask: are gamedocs such as *Big Brother*[12] spaces for reflecting on governmentality shared by performers and audiences alike, or spaces for audiences to reflect on governmentality by watching others (the performers) being "governed", or finally a process whereby both performers and audiences are in effect governed through the unreflexive naturalisation of particular behavioural norms?

The ritual space of the reality gameshow

What might we mean by the "ritual" properties of television forms such as the gamedoc?[13]

Ritual action and media form

First, it is important to emphasise that by "ritual" I mean more than habitual actions. While much of gamedocs *does* consist of "rituals" in this common-sense use of the

term (as people get up, eat, wash up, chat and sleep for the cameras), this use adds nothing to the idea of habit. Instead, I am interested in the two more substantive anthropological senses of "ritual": (a) as formalised action and (b) as action (often, but not necessarily, formalised) associated with certain transcendent values.

Sense (a) captures how certain action-patterns are not only repeated but organised in a form or shape which has a meaning over and above any meaning of the actions taken by themselves. So, putting a ring on a finger in the context of a wedding signifies the act of marriage, and putting a wafer in a mouth, again in a very specific context and not elsewhere, signifies the act of Holy Communion. The leading theorist of ritual, the late Roy Rappaport, defined ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances *not entirely encoded* by the performers";[14] ritual action, in other words, is always more than it seems. In sense (b) of the term "ritual", less emphasis is placed on the formality of actions and more on the kinds of values with which those actions are associated. In a line of argument that goes back to the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,[15] many have seen in ritual action an affirmation of the values underlying the social bond itself, more important than its exact formal properties.

When I talk of "media rituals", I want to combine aspects of these two senses. From the formal analysis of ritual (sense (a)), I want to take the idea that rituals can reproduce the building blocks of belief without involving any explicit content that is believed. Far from every ritual expressing a hidden essence in which the performers explicitly believe, rituals by their repetitive form reproduce categories and patterns of thought in a way that *bypasses* explicit belief. On the contrary, if made explicit, many of the ideas apparently expressed by ritual might be rejected, or at least called into question; it is their *ritualised* form that enables them to be successfully reproduced without being exposed to questions about their "content". This is useful in understanding how ritual works in relation to media, where, quite clearly, there is no explicit credo of shared beliefs about media to which everyone signs up. From the "transcendent" account of ritual (sense (b)), I want to take the idea that there is an essential link between ritual and certain social values or at least certain very large *claims* about the social. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a striking similarity between the socially oriented values (our sense of what binds us as members of a society) that underlie Durkheim's sociology of religion and the types of claims which media, even now, implicitly make about their power to represent "the social".[16]

Media rituals are actions that reproduce the myth that the media are our privileged access-point to social reality, but they work not through articulated beliefs but through the boundaries and category distinctions around which media rituals are organised. Let us adopt the following working definition: *media rituals are formalised actions organised around key media-related categories and boundaries whose performance suggest a connection with wider media-related values*.[17]

What aspects of the gamedoc process would count as media rituals on this definition? One example would be the "ceremony" developed in the British version

of *Big Brother* on each night when a housemate is evicted. Once the result of the week's popular vote has been announced to the inmates by live link from the *Big Brother* studio, the evictee is given one hour exactly to get his or her baggage ready. With one minute to go, the lead presenter, Davina McColl, walks live from the studio across the barrier to the house. The door to the house is opened and the evictee emerges, clutching belongings, usually to the cheers of their supporters in the crowd outside. From the house door, McColl leads the evictee, as they take in the adulation of the crowd, back to the studio for a live interview, where they are asked to reflect on their time in the house.

This weekly pattern has been repeated in each British *Big Brother* series until the series" final week when the final inmate leaves the house as winner. In its regularity we have a clever simulation of other forms of television ceremonial. But it is not the formalisation that I have most in mind in calling this a media ritual but rather the way the whole sequence is based around a fundamental boundary between "ordinary person" and "media person", in other words, around the media value celebrity.[18] A basic point of *Big Brother* is to enact a transition for each housemate from "ordinary person" to "media person"; the eviction ceremony is designed to make that transition seem natural (natural as television event, that is!).

The "celebrification process"[19] in *Big Brother* is obvious to everyone, both performers and viewers, even though far from transparent in its details and exclusions.[20] But its significance goes wider, since underlying the idea that the housemates become celebrities is another more basic media value: that being in the *Big Brother* house is somehow *more significant* than being outside the house. In other words, mediated reality is somehow "higher" than, or more significant than, non-mediated reality – which, as I have argued elsewhere,[21] is the value that underlies the legitimation of media institutions" general concentration of symbolic power. BB3's winner, Kate Lawler, in her reactions in her final hour in the house, vividly enacted the boundary and hierarchy between media and non-media "worlds". She cried and seemed overawed by the transition from the apparently private but, of course, intensely mediated world of the *Big Brother* house to the explicitly mediated world outside with its cheering crowds and press flash bulbs. When Davina McColl came to interview her *inside* the house (on the series" final night, the winner gets to be interviewed inside the house, where only he or she has earned the right to stay), Kate had difficulty speaking. She acted starstruck in front of Davina (who is in Britain a minor celebrity in her own right, because of *Big Brother*). Davina turned back to her the standard phrase used by fans on meeting their idol: "No, it's me who can't believe I'm sitting here with *you*" (BB3, 26 July 2002).

At this point, I want to shift the focus to the related concept of "ritualisation". For it is in the dynamic relationship between the ritual highpoints of, say, *Big Brother* and the wider process of ritualising the often banal actions in the *Big Brother* house that we find the best entry-point to the social, not merely textual, process that gamedocs constitute.

Acting "Up" for the cameras

Media rituals cannot, any more than rituals in general, be studied in isolation from the larger hinterland of ritual*isation*: that is, the whole gamut of patterns of action, thought and speech that generate the categories and boundaries on which media rituals are based. It is this hinterland of everyday action that makes the special case of media rituals possible.

As the anthropologist Catherine Bell[22] argues in her study of religious ritual, ritualisation organises our movements around space, helps us to experience constructed features of the environment as real, and thereby reproduces the symbolic authority at stake in the categorisations on which ritual draws. The background ritualisation that underlie media rituals work in a similar way, through the organisation of all sorts of actions around key media-related categories ("media person/thing/place/world", "liveness", "reality").[23]

The term "ritualisation" is our way of tracing how rituals connect to power; for media rituals, the link in question is to the increasing organisation of social life around media "centres". Drawing again on Bell, we must study how:

> the orchestrated construction of power and authority in ritual . . . engage[s] the social body in the objectification of oppositions and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions of the social order. In this objectification lie the resonance of ritual and the consequences of compliance.[24]

In principle this could lead us from the celebrification rituals of *Big Brother* to the mass of actions whereby all of us contribute to celebrity culture (buying celebrity magazines, for example). But with gamedocs, there is also a tighter link between ritual and ritualisation: what are the nine weeks in the *Big Brother* house if not a space of ritualisation, where inmates' banal everyday routines are tested for their appropriateness to a mediated space?

If rituals are naturalised, stable forms for reproducing power relations, ritualisation is the much wider process through which the categories underlying those power relations *become* naturalised in action, thought and words. The raw material of ritualisation is much more liable to be destabilised by doubt, reflexivity and correction. The action in the BB3 house reflected similar instabilities, as various inmates thought about leaving the house voluntarily (see below). A particular focus in BB3 was inmates' mutual accusations of *performing to the cameras*, and the anxious denials that resulted. It could be argued, of course, that all this was part of BB3's developing plot and entertainment value, but we see below how, on the contrary, this issue opened up conflicts among inmates, and between inmates and the show's producers, about the norms of behaviour in the house, conflicts that could not be contained within BB3 as a "game".

Gamedocs and real "Experience"

One of the words most frequently used by BB3 contestants was "experience": they wanted to make the most of the "*Big Brother* experience", they were asked how their

"experience" in the house had gone when they left, and so on. Although hardly a simple word to disentangle, "experience" connotes something both significant and real, and usually something *more* significant and real than the everyday run of things. But since the conditions of the *Big Brother* house made it exceptional from the start, there was always a tension: was the *Big Brother* experience significant because it was exceptional, or was it significant because, however exceptional it seemed, it showed something important about the underlying continuities of human nature? Such ambiguities are the very stuff of myth in Barthes' sense.[25]

Yet, however ambiguous the claims of *Big Brother* and other gamedocs to represent "reality", without *some* such claim their status – as shows which make celebrities out of real "ordinary people" – collapses. Every gamedoc has a specific myth about how it represents the social world. A number of British shows rely on the myth that, in the face of extreme physical challenges, especially those requiring team collaboration (however artificially constructed), an important aspect of human "reality" is shown. This is the myth underlying *Survivor* (Carlton, 2000), an international format less successful in Britain than *Big Brother*, perhaps because it is less obviously aimed at a stereotypical "young" audience (having some middle-aged contestants and much less emphasis on celebrity and sex), although arguably the almost comic exoticism of *Survivor*'s British version (with its "Tribal Gatherings" and the like) undermines its wider reality claim in any case.[26]

In *Castaway 2000*, a failed variant on the *Survivor* theme produced for the "Millennial" year (BBC1, 2000), 35 people were put onto Taransay for one year, a deserted island just off the coast of the Hebridean island of Harris, to see how they would survive. Taransay in fact is in full view of one of the most beautiful beaches in Scotland (I know because I holiday on Harris myself!), so its claim to present a controlled experiment in genuine isolation was strained from the outset. The programme's mythical intent was, however, clear from its opening voiceover:

> Castaway 2000 is a unique experiment to discover what happens when a group representative of British society today is stranded away from modern life. On the deserted Scottish island of Taransay, they'll have a year to decide how to run the community, devise new ways of living together, and reflect on what aspects of life are really important in the 21st century.[27]

Other recent experiments have sought to mine the old myth of "human nature" even further. *The Experiment* (BBC2, 2002, with a subsequent US version) offered a reworking by two psychologists of the well-known US 1970s "Prisoner" experiment, which had pitted two selected groups against each other, one in the role of "guards" and the other in the role of "prisoners", in order to test how far the former exploited their artificial authority over the latter. Here the programme relied both on the myth of objectivity built into psychological experimentation and the additional myth that cameras changed nothing significant about the "experiment". The BBC has now produced a further variation on *Castaway* and *Survivor*, sending a group of selected teenagers to the Borneo jungle. *Serious Jungle* has not been broadcast as I write,[28] but from the producers' comments it is the youth (and supposed

innocence?) of the contestants that underwrites its claim to truth, refracted through the fictional model of *Lord of the Flies*:

> *Serious Jungle* has a serious point to it, and because it is focused on children, the viewers will see very clear and honest reactions to their experiences.[29]

At the same time the organiser of the teenagers' trip showed a touching faith in the quality of the experiences they would undergo, mixing the myth of television's superior "reality" with the older myth of the encounter with "nature":

> For the first time these children will be forging relationships that are no longer about what music they like or what trainers they wear. They will change so much during these few weeks that going home to their old friends could be quite difficult for them.[30]

In spite of the implied distinction from the youth culture represented by *Big Brother* here, nowhere is the underlying myth of gamedocs challenged: that there is plausibility in reading human "reality" into what transpires in a space made and monitored "for television".

The particular success in Britain of *Big Brother* may derive, in part, from its clever mix of mythical authorities: the suggestion of scientific experiment is there (with "top psychologists" even being given their own show on each Sunday night of BB3), but also the validating myths of celebrity and popular "interactivity". "Popular participation" is itself, of course, a useful myth; viewers of *Big Brother*, after all, have no control over its format, the initial choice of participants, the instructions or rules given to participants, the principles of editing, or indeed how the "popular vote" is interpreted to contestants and audience.

None of these contradictions should surprise us. For it is precisely in the oscillation between contingent detail and some broader mythical value that for the anthropologist Maurice Bloch,[31] echoing Barthes, the power of ritual lies. In Bloch's analysis of Madagascan rituals, the broader value is that of "ancient history" lost in the mists of time; in contemporary societies, no one believes in history in that sense, but the myths of human nature, science and what Marc Auge[32] has called "the ideology of the present" are powerful substitutes.

The norms of reality performance

There is another myth reproduced through the gamedoc form and its apparently innocent rituals of television celebrity. I say "myth", but it is more like a half-statement that works largely by *not* being articulated, hence its affinity to ritual. This is the "idea" that *surveillance is a natural mode through which to observe the social world*. Few, perhaps, would subscribe explicitly to the will to "omniperception" (as the leading sociologist of surveillance puts it)[33] implied here, but by constant media repetition it risks rigidifying into a myth that is fully integrated into our everyday expectations of the social.

The pleasures of surveillance

What are we to make of the "idea" that, to find out about an aspect of social reality, it is natural to set up an "experimental situation" (with or without the endorsement of qualified psychologists), watch what happens when people are either not yet aware of the presence of cameras or are presumed to have forgotten it, and treat the result as "reality"? You might think it hypocritical for a sociologist, like myself, who regularly interviews and observes others, to protest so much. But there is an obvious difference between the gamedoc and the normal context for sociological or indeed psychological research: confidentiality. Remember that *The Prisoner* was in part designed by two psychologists as a hybrid of entertainment form and experimental situation.[34] Never in the recent history of the social and psychological sciences have studies been conducted for a simultaneous *public* audience, unless we return to Charcot's public demonstrations with hysterics at the Paris Salpètriere in 1870s Paris, recalling the long history of public operations on the living and the dead that preceded Charcot. Yet even in that early modern history of public experiment there is no parallel for experimental subjects being watched in permanently retrievable form by an audience of millions.

The emerging model of surveillance and governance, and the rejuvenated "experimental science" that is parasitic upon them, is disturbing. Its implications go wider than the popular legitimation of everyday surveillance, important effect though that it is.[35] For surveillance-entertainment (a cumbersome, but equally accurate, name for the gamedoc) has implications for everyday social relations that surveillance focused on criminal activity does not. While the saturation of public space with CCTV is, of course, a matter of concern, the issue is more its effects on the quality of everyone's experience of public space, rather than the effects on how people might perform in front of the visible and invisible cameras – which is precisely why the New York art campaigners "The Surveillance Camera Players" *performances* in front of surveillance cameras are striking, as ways of de-naturalising a dimension of public life that we screen out of our consciousness entirely.[36]

But in surveillance-entertainment the impacts on "performance" are surely the *key* issue, since its underlying premise is that we can expect *any* everyday activity legitimately to be put under surveillance and monitored for a huge unknown audience.

What is striking is how easy it is to hide this disturbing idea beneath the cloak of ritual. In a six-part series introduced by Britain's Channel Four in 2002 called *Make My Day*, the *Big Brother* format was turned adeptly into a pure entertainment package. The idea of the programme was a simple, if alarming, extension of the *Candid Camera* format: friends or family nominate someone to the producers to be put under secret surveillance for a day to test their reactions to five challenges; if all are passed, the unwitting contestant wins £5,000 and retrospectively the "benefit" of having "starred" for national television "in her very own game show" (as one episode put it). The "challenges" are simple tests of the subject's ability to act as a person with a "normal" sexual appetite and a "natural" interest in celebrity. Will this young woman let into her house a half-naked man (recruited to match her

tastes in men) needing to make an urgent phone call? Yes! – move to stage two. Will the same young woman allow herself to be distracted from getting to work when a member of her favourite pop band approaches her in the street, pretending to be lost and needing help to find his way? Yes! – move to stage three, and so on. . . .

This series attracted little attention, and the predictability of its challenges was surely a weakness. What is interesting, however, is how the unwitting contestants reacted at the end of "the day", when its strange events were explained to them by the well-known British celebrity and show narrator, Sara Cox.[37] What we saw on the programme – and, of course, we have no way of knowing how far this was rehearsed or edited – is the contestant delighted, even awestruck, at the revelation, clutching her face, crying out, "Oh My God!" and the like. Any later reflections by the contestant on having in effect consented to being submitted to 12 hours secret filming for national television (including an opening scene in their bedroom!) were left to our speculation.

My point is not to moralise about this particular series but to offer it as an example of how easily consent to the process of surveillance before a national audience (even if quite counter-intuitive) can be made to seem natural, given the right ritual context. Here are Sara Cox's explanatory words to one contestant:

> Hello [], it's Sara Cox here. You must be thinking you have had the strangest day of your life. Well it's all because of Channel 4's *Make My Day*. We have been secretly filming you using hidden cameras all day long and we reckon it's about time you got out from under your mother's feet so as a big thank you we would love to give you a deposit on your first flat . . . I really hope we've made your day.

The programme is useful because it is so artless. Here we see quite directly how two positive behavioural norms (one automatically positive – obtaining your own independent place to live and the other increasingly constructed as positive in contemporary British culture – showing an interest in celebrity) are combined to make the programme's whole sequence of events seem natural and legitimate. (It must also have helped the producers that the "contestant" was living with her mother, who presumably gave legal consent to the presence of cameras in her daughter's bedroom!) Underwriting those norms here is the principle that "media experience" (discovering that the contestant's meetings with celebrities were not just accidental but "real", that is, planned specifically by the media for her) automatically trumps "ordinary experience" including any questionable ethical dimensions it may have. This is a social "magic" (in Marcel Mauss' sense): a transformative "principle that eludes examination"[38] which nonetheless we must try to unravel.

The real (mediated) me

BB3 differed from previous British series of *Big Brother* in its emerging divide between those inmates who were clearly unhappy with the expected norms for behaviour in the house and those who broadly accepted those norms. Even among

the latter were a number, who were unhappy at times including the eventual finalists ("[*Big Brother* voice] How are you feeling, Alex? [Alex] Um . . . institutionalised").[39] Of the former, two [check re Lynn] left voluntarily and another (Sandy, who happened to be the only housemate without fashionable "young" looks) remained quiet and isolated for a few weeks before being voted out (as the *Big brother* voiceover noted on one occasion:[40] "Sandy was the first to go to bed", cut to Sandy reading a book in bed!).

An interesting case was Tim, the only obviously upper-class inmate, a later replacement in the house who never settled. He was not so much withdrawn, like Sandy, as openly complaining at the "tasks" set the inmates and the way others played up to the cameras. His complaints (in the programme's famous "Diary Room") were portrayed by the producers, through editing and commentary, as that of a moaner who, conveniently, was also discovered to be physically vain when his black hair dye started to show, and he was caught on camera shaving his chest in the apparent privacy of his bed.

There was no particular drama to his eviction (on 19 July 2002), since he had made it clear on camera that he was "desperate" to leave the house. The eviction was presented in a hostile manner by Davina McColl: "[before the vote result] The whole house thinks Tim's going to be out and to be honest the whole of the nation thinks Tim's going to be out". Tim emerged from the house to boos and hisses from the waiting crowd. His live interview was more dramatic; criticised by Davina for "whinging" and unwillingness to play the *Big Brother* game, he responded that he had thought the set tasks "could have been a bit more mature". He was challenged to defend his charge that other inmates were playing up to the cameras:

D: On a number of occasions you talked about performing, other people performing – what did you mean by that?

T: The whole time I was in there, I was very much myself. I don't think my whole personality came out, because there wasn't much to stimulate a lot of it . . . but there were a lot of people in there who I'm convinced are not like that in their normal life.

D [interrupting] Like who?

T [continues over Davina]: . . . and when I spoke to them one-to-one, and you found out more about what them as a person, that's the side I really liked, but they never showed enough of that. As soon as a camera came in or they felt they were being watched, they were up and [mimes clapping to music] singing and dancing and sure, the public obviously like it because they get really into it, but. . .

D [interrupts again] But it's not that it's that – I think that generally some of them are quite up positive people. [cheering in background from crowd to whom the conversation is being relayed outside on large screens] If you can't perform, physically you can't do it, not for 7 or 8 weeks, you can't do it. . .

T: No, there were times when they didn't and they dipped and that's the times you saw them when they weren't acting.

D: OK, Tim . . . let's move onto something a bit more positive. . .[41]

There is an unresolvable conflict here between two norms of how to behave in the house: first, to give the public what they are assumed to want ("singing and dancing" (Tim), or being "up positive people" (Davina)) and, second, the unobjectionable, but also vague, norm of "being yourself". If as an inmate you find the second norm is incompatible with the first, what are you to do?

Many inmates betrayed anxiety about whether they had been "themselves", for example Jonny (eventual runner-up) who asked Jade why his housemates had put him up for eviction more than once and was told it was because "you've studied it, you know what the people on the outside would like".[42] He vehemently denied this, but in his eviction interview on the series' final night (26 July 2002) he failed to resolve the contradiction. When asked by Davina "who's the real you?", the melancholy loner smoking by the pool or the comic performer, he responded immediately:

J: The real me's the stupid, idiotic clown but it takes a lot to get us down to the serious quiet Jonny, but it worked in there. . .
D: It stripped you down did it?
J: Yes

But he admitted at another point: "I don't care what anybody says, you're always aware of the cameras and on the other end of them cameras is your family and your friends who you love". Or take Sophie, a late arrival who appeared unhappy during much of her time in the house but who (like Jonny) was treated favourably in the shows' comments on her performance. Here is an exchange from her eviction interview (28 June 2002) where Davina asks a standard question, drawing on the idea of "media experience" being better (or "bigger") than ordinary experience,[43] but Sophie's answer is ambiguous:

D: What's it like in that house? . . . I mean it's like a pressure cooker. . .
S: It is.
D: . . . everything's big, feelings are felt stronger, what was it like for you?
S: Um, I felt . . . It's very . . . false in a way . . . I mean everyone in the house . . . they've not got a mask on but. . .

Here contemporary media's wide-ranging myth that cameras tell us more about underlying reality because they magnify feelings *that are presumed already to exist* is directly contradicted.

These contradictions matter, because they cannot, in principle, be resolved. They are contradictions within the myth that *Big Brother* produces to legitimate itself: on the one hand, it claims to show us the human reality that must "come out" when ordinary people live for a long time under the cameras; on the other hand, it polices any differences of interpretation about what that "reality" should be, ruling out any behaviour excluded by the production choices it makes and ruling in the "positive"

selves that it presumes the public wants to see and contestants want to display. Once contestants start to doubt the latter reality, as in BB3, there is nowhere for the producers to turn, but ritual: rituals of vilification turned on Tim who posed the most direct threat to the show's norms, or rituals of incorporation, affirming the show's status by including successful inmates into the club of celebrity. Here are Davina's final words on the last night:

D: Kate entered the house unknown and now she's taking her first innocent steps into a world of unseen wealth and privilege . . . offers of casual sex, fame beyond her dreams and general admiration . . . I hope you've enjoyed this as much as I have. This has been Big Brother 2002. Thank you for watching. Good bye.

The producers could afford some irony here, of course, in the show's final moments, but not, as we have seen, when the show's myth was directly challenged.[44]

Conclusion

Where has this brief sceptical tour of the British gamedoc brought us? Clearly the gamedoc is a generic adaptation of considerable robustness (after all, it no longer carries the docusoap's hostage to fortune, the residual claim to documentary authority), and in the case of the British version of *Big Brother* great resourcefulness and commercial promise: BB3 was widely reported as having "rescued" Channel Four in the 2002 season.[45]

This chapter's underlying argument, however, has been that our analysis cannot rest with observations on the adaptability of television genres. For *Big Brother* and all gamedocs are *social* processes which take real individuals and submit them to surveillance, analysis and selective display, as means to entertainment and enhanced audience "participation". It is this social process, not the programme's textual properties, that should be our main focus and I offered some concepts (myth, ritual and ritualisation) to help us grasp its real and ideological dimensions.

There is, of course, one further stage to which the argument needs to be taken, and that is ethics. What are the ethics of surveillance-entertainment? Or, perhaps as the first question, where should we stand to get an adequate perspective on the possible ethical dimensions of the social process which gamedocs constitute, both by themselves and in their interface with the rest of social life? Finding that perspective is not easy. Part of the fascination of that oxymoron, reality-television, is its ambiguity, which in the case of *Big Brother* rests on another: between the expressive, almost obsessively self-reflexive individualisation which it displays for us ("saturated individualism", as Michel Maffesoli has called it)[46] and the barely accountable "exemplary centre"[47] which underwrites (or seeks to underwrite) the plausibility and legitimacy of that display. By "exemplary centre", I mean the mythical "social center"[48] which media institutions, even as they face unprecedented pressures from the dispersal of media production and consumption, attempt to project:

the apparently naturally existing social "world" to which television likes to claim it gives us access. The point is not that we can do without media or that media are exactly the same as other unaccountable forms of governmental or corporate power but rather that we cannot avoid at some point turning to ethical critique if we are to address how media are transforming, and being transformed by, the social space in which, like it or not, we have to live. This chapter, I hope, has provided some useful starting-points for that wider debate.

Notes

1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1972).
2 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 67.
3 Quoted in Carolyn Marvin, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 159.
4 John Ellis, *Seeing Things* (London: IB Tauris, 2000).
5 Ib Bondjeberg, "Public Discourse/Private Fascination", *Media Culture & Society* 18 (1996): 27–45; Richard Kilborn, "'How Real Can You Get?' Recent Developments in 'Reality' Television", *European Journal of Communication* 13, no. 2 (1994): 201–218.
6 Caroline Dover, "British Documentary Television Production: Tradition, Change and 'Crisis' within a Practitioner Community", Unpublished doctoral thesis (University of London, 2001).
7 See John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions", *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 255–270.
8 Corner, "Performing", 256.
9 Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of Media Power* (London: Routledge, 2000); cf. Roger Silverstone, "Television Myth and Culture", in J. Carey (ed.), *Media Myths and Narratives* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1988), 20–47.
10 See Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2002); Gareth Palmer, "*Big Brother*: An Experiment in Governance", *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 311–322.
11 Palmer, "*Big Brother*", 305–306, emphasis added.
12 Palmer, *Big Brother* 3rd series, which I'll call "BB3" (May–July 2002) is my main example.
13 The term "ritual" is a difficult one and there is no space here to explain in detail its history or my specific use of the term "media rituals" (but see Couldry, *Media Rituals*).
14 Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24, emphasis added.
15 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. Fields (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1995 [1912]).
16 Couldry, *Media Rituals*.
17 For further background, see Couldry, *Media Rituals*, Chapters 1–3.
18 Cf. Nick Couldry, "Playing for Celebrity: *Big Brother* as Ritual Event", *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 289.
19 For this term, see Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 186–187.
20 Again, see Couldry, "Playing for Celebrity".
21 See Couldry, *The Place of Media Power*, Chapter 3.
22 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
23 On these categories, see Couldry, *Media Rituals*.
24 Bell, *Ritual*, 215.
25 Barthes, *Mythologies*.
26 Interestingly, the *Survivor* prize money is £1 million, compared to *Big Brother*'s £70,000, surprising until you realise that the more successful *Big Brother* contestants have in the past picked up promotional deals, hosted television shows or issued pop singles.

27 *Castaway 2000*, January 25, 2000.
28 See however its website: www.bbc.co.uk/talent/jungle.
29 Marshall Corwin, producer, quoted *Observer*, March 31, 2002, 15.
30 Alex Patterson, quoted *Observer*.
31 Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 130.
32 Mark Auge, "Le Stade de l'écran", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2001, 24.
33 David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2001), 124–125.
34 Steve Reicher and Alex Haslam, quoted in *Guardian*, May 3, 2002, 7.
35 See Mark Andrejevic, "Little Brother Is Watching: The Webcam Subculture and the Digital Enclosure", in /N. Couldry and A. McCarthy (eds.), *Media/Space* (London: Routledge, 2003), 193–208; Couldry, *Media Rituals*, Chapter 6; Palmer, "*Big Brother*".
36 This group has since the mid-1990s contested the surveillance of public space through performances in front of CCTV cameras, and increasingly has sought a wider audience, including in mainstream art settings. In Situationist style, they lead walking tours of Manhattan neighbourhoods, exposing the cameras. For more information, see www.notbored.org.
37 Cox is host DJ of Radio 1's high profile early morning show.
38 Quoted Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 7.
39 *Big Brother,* July 17, 2002.
40 *Big Brother,* May 29, 2002.
41 This and later passages: author's transcription.
42 *Big Brother,* June 28, 2002.
43 Cf. Couldry, *The Place of Media Power*, 113, cf. 47–48.
44 Such irony is often misinterpreted as scepticism or distance, when in fact its effect is just the opposite – Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 32–33; cf. Couldry, *The Place of Media Power*, 45.
45 See for example *Guardian*, July 27, 2002, 7.
46 Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes* (London: Sage, 1996), 64.
47 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.
48 Cf. Couldry, *Media Rituals*, Chapter 3.

10

CLASS AND CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF "REALITY" PRODUCTION, OR HIDDEN INJURIES OF CLASS, 2

Introduction

The opacity of how power operates in society is hardly a new problem. In modern societies, where resources are allocated largely by the "hidden hand" of a market system, this opacity is intensified, making the regular inequalities that result from that allocation difficult to perceive as such.[1] According to Max Weber, common class interests (based on shared positions in that allocation) are grasped only if there is a "*transparency* of the connections between the causes and the consequences of the "class situation".[2] The growing scalar complexity of economic and labour relations, combined with the decline of institutions for organising labour (trade unions) and of a whole family of narratives for making sense of social action in terms of class (socialism), has made it still more difficult to produce effective narratives of class in late modernity.[3] This is a general, and not a specifically national, problem; obviously, it is not something for which direct responsibility can be laid at media's door.

If there is a *specific* problem in the relations between contemporary media institutions and class, then the problem must lie elsewhere: not in media's failure to sustain an account of class based in inequalities of resource distribution but in the *specific ways* in which that story fails to be told. Contemporary forms of "reality" production (reality TV) require attention because, at least in the UK, they embed new mechanisms for publicly reproducing class difference in an increasingly unequal society. Media are also built on their own distinctive form of inequality (privileged access to the means of representing reality).[4] In reality TV the broader "hidden injuries" of media power (Couldry, 2001a) cross with the distinctive hidden injuries of class, first diagnosed famously by Richard Sennett (Sennett & Cobb, 1972): hence, my subtitle, "Hidden Injuries of Class 2".

The surface features of this process have already been carefully analysed by media scholars.[5] The faultline of class has been traced from TV shows that "make-over"

anything from homes to dress sense,[6] to generalized reality-games such as *Big Brother*,[7] to the most obviously classed subgenre of media pedagogy, the cookery programme.[8] Two important background factors have been widely recognised, the first more than the second: first, the basis of "reality TV" formats everywhere in the economic benefits in increasingly competitive national and global TV markets of their low costs, high audience interactivity and easily transposable formats;[9] and second, in the UK and USA at least, the societal background of increasing inequality,[10] decreasing *upward* social mobility,[11] and (in terms of general features of popular culture) increasing cultural *de-differentiation*. The last factor deserves immediate comment. In a cultural context where it is both notable and strategically important for a member of the Royal Family (Prince William) to wear jeans and trainers, the symbols of "ordinary" fashion, it is perhaps not surprising to see the same royal, six years later, hailed as "King of the Chavs", when he attended an army training party in mock-working-class ("Chav") clothing:[12] "difference" needs in the end to be marked. The only odd thing is that the latter occurred in a newspaper whose readership is principally working class.

In what follows, I endorse the argument that reality TV reinforces, rather than challenges, class differentiation in Britain: helping to "mould and to legitimate our class membership" (Palmer, 2004, p. 189), enforcing a model of "judgement and classification" (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 151), and providing a new "stage for the dramatising of contemporary class relations" (Wood & Skeggs, 2008, p. 181). The notable expansion of opportunities for non-media professionals to appear in media formats in Britain (and many other countries) over the past 15 years does not represent *in itself* a new form of politics,[13] let alone an actual reversal of class inequality: the question is always the terms on which such expanded access has been made available.

I hope to contribute to the debate by asking two additional questions. First, what is it about reality TV – understood not so much as a media text or format but as a social process (something one set of social actors do to another) – that generates reality TV's contribution to the reproduction of *class in particular*? And, second, what is it about reality TV's insertion in a wider mechanism of representational authority (television, "the media") that enables this work of reproducing, indeed renewing, class difference to get done without protest? For perhaps the most striking thing about the public debate in contemporary Britain on reality TV and class is an apparent tolerance for a marked increase in class abuse (directed "downwards", not "upwards"). The voice of the working-class subject is on this point mostly silent, at least in public discourse We need to focus then not only on the reproduction of class but on the *naturalisation* of this reproduction. To focus here is, I acknowledge, to give less emphasis to the inevitably greater variety and complexity that emerges when we look at the detailed workings of a large range of reality TV texts, let alone at the reactions of individual and collective audiences. But this emphasis is, I believe, justified: we need to understand the machine of reality TV in all its symbolic force, before we turn to those subtleties. Inevitably my argument is focussed on the classed realities of a particular society, the UK, with some cross-references

to the USA. The mechanisms uncovered will, I hope, be of potential relevance to some other societies also.

Hidden injuries of class 1

My argument starts out from Richard Sennett's analysis of the distinctive, hidden injuries, with which class is associated. These hidden injuries are broader than inequalities of taste or "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984),[14] although taste is one key means by which those injuries are reproduced.

There were at least three ways in which 1970s sociologists explained how, from the perspective of the working or dominated class, inequality is reinforced through culture, taking further the insight that perceptions of inequality are based on "relative deprivation", that is, lack relative to the perceived situation of relevant reference groups (Runciman, 1972, Chapters 2–3). Paul Willis" ethnographic account emphasised, at least for working class boys, how a positive culture of solidarity and resistance at school exactly *trained* those boys not to take jobs that would change their position in the work hierarchy.[15] Pierre Bourdieu took a different direction, using statistical data to track the patterning of taste across all class fractions in a system that *objectified* the unequal distribution of cultural capital and hid its basis in underlying economic and social inequality (Bourdieu, 1984). Richard Sennett also started from inequalities in education but traced their consequences into working class US men's accounts *of themselves*.

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's 1972 book *The Hidden Injuries of Class* examined the damage that class inequality, embedded through the education system and division of labour, did to individual members of the American working class. They discuss a manual labourer "Rissarro" who "believes people of a higher class have a power to judge him because they seem internally more developed human beings. . . . He feels compelled to justify his own position [in relation to them]".[16] While it is difficult to believe, nearly four decades since that fieldwork, that the point of comparison and difference would today be expressed in quite these terms ("formal education" versus "manual labour"), Sennett's diagnosis of how objective inequalities come to make painful *subjective* sense is perhaps the most durable account of how class is culturally reproduced, as well as the most apposite for understanding class reproduction in reality TV.

Sennett bypasses two explanatory principles that have in the past four decades become difficult to sustain – the existence of hermetically sealed subcultures (Willis) and the existence of a clearly hierarchized field of cultural production and taste (Bourdieu) – and relies only on the subject's internalisation of others" capacity to *judge* him or her, and on that capacity's assumed basis in an achieved level of *personal development*. Sennett and Cobb insist that this vulnerability to judgement is not based in any positive respect for those imagined judges (Rissarro, they say, feels a revulsion toward "educated people")[17] or in any negative self-devaluation (Rissarro, they say, believes in the dignity of his own manual labour). The problem lies, instead, in the internalisation of a model of self-development ("a higher form of self-control"),[18] on terms which guarantee that the working-class man is always

positioned as having a lack, and the middle-class man is always positioned as having the capacity to judge and fill that lack. Educators, educated, and the whole school system, become a machine of class reproduction, producing injuries that deepen and, by deepening, further naturalise class difference. The result is to disable a working-class voice that could translate its basic sense of self-respect into a public discourse of self-development to rival dominant understandings of the developed human being – an asymmetry of narrative resources that Axel Honneth later called "de-symbolisation",[19] although (to be clear) this de-symbolisation of the working class is not incompatible with the re-symbolisation of other classes.

I want to argue that in Britain reality TV operates something like a system of de-symbolisation in this sense, even though it appears on one level to give voice to so-called "ordinary people". I will base my argument not on any specific judgements of class-related taste made in reality TV (there are plenty of those, but they are variable, and their object is not always the working class) but rather on the *mechanism of judgement* that reality TV comprises. The de-symbolisation of the working class through reality TV has brought with it a re-symbolisation of other class positions, for example new pedagogical roles for middle-class and upper middle-class performers such as Nigella Lawson and Davina McColl: however, I do not have space to pursue this here.

Before going further, it is important first to clarify what is, and what is not, distinctive about the hidden injuries of class. Other forms of inequality involve hidden injuries, whether based on "race", gender, age or sexuality.[20] If anything, Fanon and Du Bois" accounts of racism offer more vivid accounts of hidden injuries.[21] And, since hidden injuries work in the territory of the self, they inevitably have some connection with the languages available for self-assessment: think of Du Bois' famous definition of "double consciousness" as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others",[22] or Jean Améry's less well-known account of the "total social determination" that derives from old people's submission to others" discourses about themselves.[23] Nor is class uniquely characterised by an occlusion of authentic self through a system of self-transformation whose tools all lie in the hands of the dominant: at different periods of history, both gender and "race" have been managed through the "mask" of education.[24] What distinguishes the hidden injuries of class is that class is tied to differences that are *not* "automatically" marked on the body, differences that, to some degree, *must* be elicited *in the course* of the attempt at self-development. Just as a narrative of solidarity based on class is difficult to initiate (because there is nothing simple in common it can point to),[25] so a narrative of individual self-transformation can be imposed from the outside rather easily (because there is no simple difference that it is seen to disrespect). In the "violence"[26] committed in service of the hidden injuries of class, there is *always* an alibi.

Mechanisms of judgement

Sennett and Cobb could not have anticipated that the *imagined* mechanisms of judgement on which the hidden injuries of class rely would become *objectified* in an entertainment format broadcast nationally with the full authority of major media

institutions behind it. I shall come to the broader media setting in the next section. Let's focus first on what reality TV's format does to class's hidden injuries.

What reality TV does not do is expose those injuries and so potentially demystify class difference. As much commentary on reality TV has brought out, this genre reinforces class-related differences, exposing working-class people to the judgement (often harsh, insulting, undermining) of those from different class-positions.[27] But that is only the beginning: for in the process of enabling and legitimating class-based judgement in an entertainment format, reality TV also brings into being a social mechanism – whose workings are on public view, with little, if any, apparent challenge – that *objectifies* the judgements that Sennett and Cobb's subjects had internalized in imaginary form. Whereas Rissarro "believes people of a higher class have a power to judge him because they seem internally more developed human beings" (quoted above), reality TV confirms this as a fact. TV schedules provide endless models of how such judgements get done, and how people, including working class participants, accept such judgements, and the "expertise" that underlies them. Even if the injuries of class remain hidden, one mechanism for inflicting them is now out there, celebrated in public.

A complicating factor is that, in the social process of reality TV, the judging is not done only by the television experts but by audiences who, as research has shown, take up the programmes" invitation to judge, even if with some ambivalence (Hill, 2007; Skeggs, Thumim & Wood, 2008). Potentially there is a more democratic process at work here, but it would only work to challenge the hidden injuries of class if the mechanisms of judgement were themselves exposed to challenge. *Reality TV's mechanism of judgement is doubly mystified*: first, because it is embedded in a form of play whose rules, like the rules of any game, are not explicitly open to challenge while the game is being played;[28] second, because, through the rhetorical invitation of the reality TV text (its implied claim to access "shared" reality), its judgements carry a claim to universal relevance and authority; they are judgements about "the way things are" for all of us. I will return to this deeper underpinning of reality TV's authority later, since it helps explain the success of reality TV in making its strange mechanisms acceptable. Let's concentrate first on just how bizarre those workings are, as seen from a broader social perspective.

Four things are striking about the judgement process that reality TV enacts, the first is that such judgements are accepted by the participants and by the audiences who watch their outcomes. Why should it be acceptable to see people confronted with humiliating comment and self-images? Let's acknowledge the sheer difficulty of "ordinary" citizens challenging the media process,[29] but let's also assume that the genre of reality TV could not have expanded so rapidly unless there was a significant body of opinion who regarded its judgement mechanisms as somehow "right", or at least as justified by a larger end (that of transforming participants into something "better"). If there are ethical issues raised by this process, they are seldom voiced. The resulting normalisation of personal judgement in public culture is significant: the intersection between changing norms of the neoliberal workplace and this wider authorisation to judge the lives of others is also striking,[30] even if we

must avoid a neat functionalist explanation of the coincidence. We now live in societies where, within the authorising frame of media institutions, people are allowed to harshly judge and embarrass others in public without the judged having the opportunity to respond, let alone question the basis of the judgement. To say "it's only entertainment" is to miss the point: that this is an actual process which *serves as* "only" entertainment, a process that under other conditions might be challenged.

The second strange thing about reality TV's mechanisms of judgment is the authority on which it relies. At one end, there are the widely acknowledged experts who judges participants, and demonstrates what they need to do to be expert (for example, celebrity cooks judging cooking programmes): a master-class format, where wide agreement on the value of the knowledge to be imparted licenses a degree of tension and difficulty for the participants. Then there are "experts" in domains where the value of expertise is at least open to question because there may be differing regimes of value at stake: for example, the so-called experts on programmes about property transformations and clothing makeovers, the psychologists on *Big Brother* (as if one could be "expert" about anything so artificial!), and Sir Alan Sugar, the "expert" host on the UK's *The Apprentice*. Finally, there are programmes which apply the expert-participants model to domains where arguably there is no expertise at all, or at least no expertise that can be plausibly displayed under the conditions which a short television programme requires: programmes which, in individualised form, seek to address general social problems, such as unemployment (*Who Knows Best*: Channel 4, *Famous, Rich and Jobless*: BBC). In this last type, the very *idea* that anyone could have the expertise and authority to judge or alter someone's capacity for employment is highly questionable. And yet this is what the entertainment format requires us to believe.

This leads us to the third strange thing about the authorised judgements of reality TV: that anything *like* a competitive entertainment format could be considered an adequate way to address the issues arising in the domains where reality TV's judgements are meted out. While it is unsurprising to see advice about hair, dress sense or body image being imparted through a narrative that focuses on individuals' possibilities of self-transformation (as Simmel was the first to note, fashion is a language for competitive self-differentiation), it is odd to see *general social problems* (family breakdown, unemployment, and the like) treated in a similarly individualised and game-based way. Things were once different: a long tradition of realist documentary sought to present social issues in vivid but still general form (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, Chapter 2). As Biressi & Nunn note (2005, p. 36), reality TV redefines what it is that television "reveals": no longer the "previously hidden condition of the working classes" but now *the individual's* path to realising how by applying an expert's existing knowledge they can transform themselves along anticipated lines. Reality TV focuses on how to "manage the self and one's immediate environment rather than the social", even though this individualised transformation is portrayed as plausible only by reference to assumed "social, psychological, political and historical truths" (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 5, 3) and on the basis of an assumed "social" or collective authority that legitimates reality TV's games.

Fourth (and this is less strange than inherent to the televisual setting) television spectacle, by its usual emphasis on the display of emotion and emotional interaction, foregrounds the aspects of judgement which are, for quite different reasons, most wounding: not the process of reasoning that led up to the judgement, or its retrospective rationalisation, or the discussions of bystanders but the emotion of the acts of judging and receiving judgement themselves. In other words, anger, contempt, dismissal on the one hand, and distress, humiliation and shame on the other. Reality TV, as part of the broader spectacularisation of everyday life (Wood & Skeggs, 2008) effortlessly foregrounds the aspects of judgement which hurt most: the face-to-face exchange of emotions which register the moment of judging. As a result, reality TV does more than naturalize the judgements of class that, in another era, were "hidden" and privately internalized: it naturalizes the force and violent interchange of those judgements and installs them as a "fact" of public life.

In these various ways, reality TV establishes an alternative model of social knowledge in ways particularly suited to reinforce the hidden injuries of class: first, by *acting out* in public the judgement process whose injuries an earlier sociology had treated as hidden; and second by *supplanting* general accounts of social, political and economic conditions (accounts that, because general and impersonal, might be questioned by anyone from whatever class position) and replacing them with a new mode of social "knowledge" (speculative, but vouchsafed by the sequenced witnessing of the reality format). In the new mode of knowledge, we are assumed to learn when an individual submits to various artificial transformation procedures in order to reach a pre-formatted result. Such *pre-formatting* of the social outlaws from the start any possibility of discovering life-conditions beyond the set format. The institution of game-based judgment and evaluation as the privileged tool for social knowledge has a specific implication for the hidden injuries of class, for it silently reproduces, as "nature" beyond investigation, many external factors that predispose some groups to be judged "better" than others: for example, language-skills, obesity, levels of education.[31] Meanwhile the media institutions that once sought to visualize such factors as general problems for popular discussion now concentrate their efforts on selling program formats that turn the consequences of such problems into reality games. The result is to install in society a form of cultural pedagogy (Giroux, 2000) whose authority has rarely been accounted for, let alone justified.

The ritual setting

As I write, a respected social commentator (Alison Benjamin, editor of the *Guardian's* society pages) complains that recent reality TV formats dealing with unemployment and employability "fail . . . to highlight the [new UK Coalition] government's flawed approach to tackling unemployment" (*Guardian* 11 August 2010). If ever there was a social problem tied to the hidden injuries of class, it is unemployment, but the problem is that the reality TV formats Benjamin describes (including (*Who Knows Best* (Channel 4), *Famous, Rich and Jobless* (BBC) mentioned earlier) cannot in principle deliver the types of policy reflection she quite rightly wants somewhere

in media. As reality-games that focus on the fates and characters of individuals, they only masquerade as social knowledge, even though they are broadcast by major media institutions (BBC, Channel 4) within a public service remit. How can such a gulf between the apparent purpose of television formats (to capture "reality") and their actual formats be sustained?

We need to turn here to the "ritual" dimensions of reality TV, and indeed other types of media (Couldry, 2003). There are three distinct levels on which reality TV works as a media format and which, taken together, help explain the otherwise implausible work that reality TV does to reinforce the hidden injuries of class.

First, reality TV in all its varieties is produced and consumed within a longer and much larger social construction that I have called "the myth of the mediated centre" (Couldry, 2003, Chapter 3, 2006a, Chapter 2). This is the social construction of centralised media ("the media" in common parlance) as our privileged access-point to the "central realities" of the social world, whatever they are. This "myth" builds on an underlying myth that society has a "centre". Granted that society operates on the basis of many overlapping concentrations of resources, what I mean by "the myth of the centre" is the idea that this organisational centre, which will always in practice be complex (that is, the site of multiple, competing forces: political, economic, social, cultural) is also a centre *of social values and coherence*. The myth of the centre (with all of its functionalist baggage) is inseparable from the myth of the *mediated* centre: the myth that media institutions are our privileged, or central, access-point to the social "centre". The myth of the mediated centre is a pervasive feature of media discourse: media are consistently telling us that they speak "for us", express "our values". This myth is now under considerable pressure from many directions: the proliferation of media interfaces, the declining economic viability of at least older models of media production (such as the newspaper), the growth of alternative social "centres", such as social networking sites. But there are too many institutions with a lot at stake in the myth of the mediated centre for it simply to be abandoned (Couldry, 2009); considerable efforts are likely to be made to sustain it, even if in new forms. Indeed, I would see reality TV as one important means of doing precisely that, reclaiming media's privileged access to some important shared "reality" by incorporating performances from members of the audiences themselves. The circularity of this process does not matter since, like any hermeneutic circle, it is based practically in a way of organising things *as if* its claims were true.

Second, the myth of the mediated centre is reproduced, not in the abstract but through certain key categories that have a general organising force.[32] One category in the media case is that of the "media" person/thing/event, which is treated as automatically of higher value than any person, thing or event not in the media: the specific distinction between "media" and "ordinary person" overlaps with the notion of celebrity.[33] This is important, since the "ordinary person" is after all the defining origin and target of reality TV's narratives. I will come back to the "ordinary person" in a moment. More important at a general level for stabilising the genre of reality TV is the category of "reality" itself (Couldry, 2003, Chapter 6). In itself, of course, it makes no sense to claim that the singular productions of a

particular media institution based in a particular site with finite resources amounts to "reality", especially in a production environment like today's where production is almost entirely outsourced to an unstable chain of suppliers. That the notion of "reality TV" has been sustained in industry and general discourse for so long is evidence, I suggest, that the term is based on a category in Durkheim's sense, and marks the special connection that media presentations are assumed to have with an underlying reality shared in common. In previous work, I have tended to write at this point of media's assumed link to "the social", but "social" is exactly the term that is increasingly at issue in the diffused accounts of contemporary life that reality TV provides, I will return to this point at the end. The claim to "reality", based as it is in an underlying category distinction between "media" and "non-media" or "ordinary" worlds, is linked with an equally important claim associated with television since its early days: the claim of "liveness". Liveness is a term that does ideological work (Feuer, 1985), claiming for TV – and increasingly the whole range of interconnected media linked through television – a special connection to a shared reality, enacting this in versions of reality TV with climactic competitions such as *Big Brother* (Couldry, 2003, p. 106; Turner, 2010, p. 13).

It is from these core categories that the basic discourse and rhetorical claims of reality TV are constructed. However, reality TV could not have been such a successful format unless it had worked these categories into a process with meaning in its own right, a transformation that stood in for something wider: in other words, a ritual. This is the *third* and crucial level on which the status of reality TV is sustained. In reality TV, two types of transformation are overlaid on each other: the basic transformation of the "ordinary person" (not yet in the media) into a "media person" by virtue of their appearance on the show; and second the transformation of the ordinary person's inchoate existence into the underlying reality that media claims to reveal in all its "potential". The transformations enacted through reality TV thus answer two types of constructed need: the collective need for access to a shared "reality", and the individual need for access to media exposure. The latter addresses what elsewhere I have called the "hidden injuries" of the media frame (Couldry, 2001a), that is, the sense of symbolic exclusion that comes from living in societies dominated by the narrative outputs of media institutions that benefit from huge inequalities of *symbolic* (as well, of course, as economic) resources. The attractions of reality TV's call to participation in societies distinguished by such symbolic inequality, as well as other deep inequalities of recognition, must be taken very seriously;[34] They are further reinforced by the general culture of gossip and scandal that a spectacular process of judgement brings inevitably in its wake.

The linkage of *media's* "hidden injuries" (as I call them) to class are not straightforward, since any of us who is not part of "the media" is injured in this new sense. But in practice, there is a tighter, if still only partly understood, linkage to class, derived from the wider economic logic of mass media production in the digital age. TV's increasing reliance on short-term employment contracts, or even in early career no contact or pay at all – and the general collapse of any career structure for all but the most successful entrenches persistent inequalities in the types of people

who *can* participate in the media industries, except through the spectacle of reality TV. Unless you have considerable private resources, reality TV's judgement machine is effectively your only route to "breaking into television" and, as we have seen, it comes at a high price.

Conclusion

Reality TV emerged as a form in global television through a range of disparate factors that are likely to underpin reality media's continued role across multiple platforms in the next decade. Elsewhere I have called reality TV a "figuration" in Norbert Elias" sense, to reflect the many cross-cutting interdependencies that underlie it: economic pressures, threats to broadcasters institutional legitimacy, a deficit of social recognition, a growing crisis of governmental legitimacy (Couldry, 2010, quoting Elias, 1994).

As Graeme Turner (2010) has recently argued, the largest transformation in global media is media's increasing basis in selling *entertainment* as opposed to any more political strategy (binding together or educating the nation, sustaining public values). In this new environment, there is every reason to think that reality TV's cheap model of entertainment based on formatting games for individual's self-transformation will go on being exported and renewed. If so, its pervasive renarrativisation of the everyday world will be even more securely installed. As Turner points out for television in general, the outcome is ideological, "like an ideological system but without an ideological project" (Turner, 2010, p. 25), a machine that redescribes social processes in regular ways, yet is based in no intent to influence the social. That machine, as it operates in Britain, assigns roles of judge and judged broadly according to class, unequal roles that are taken on under the guise and alibi of social "reality".

The politics of reality TV are not then accidental. Indeed, we can go further. In countries dominated by neoliberal discourse, reality TV's politics intersect with a neoliberal view of the social domain as the site for the individual's competitive self-transformation[35] and in Britain at least with an actual social world characterised by less mutual support, more aggression and growing insecurity and inequality.[36] Bu crucially those politics do not depend on any intent of class oppression. No intent is needed to maintain in place a public mechanism for objectifying the hidden injuries of class, once it has been installed; meanwhile reality media's vestigial sense of the "social" affords no space from where a broader critique of that mechanism could be mounted. It will require therefore more than a cultural politics to name and challenge reality TV's new hidden injuries for what they are.

Notes

1 See Parkin (1972, p. 161).
2 Gerth and Mills (1991, p. 184), quoted in Parkin (1972, p. 162).
3 And indeed, many other forms of political narrative: Bauman (2001, p. 9).
4 Carey (1989), Couldry (2000).

5 For important analyses of class in reality TV, see Palmer (2004), Phillips (2007), Biressi and Nunn (2005), Wood and Skeggs (2008), and see the recent surveys by Morley (2009) and Turner (2010, Chapter 3).
6 Palmer (2004), Phillips (2007)
7 Holmes, 2004; Biressi & Nunn, 2005, pp. 149–152.
8 Palmer (2004, p. 178), Strange (1998).
9 Kilborn, 1994; Magder, 2004; Rafael 2004.
10 Institute of Fiscal Studies figures, reported Giles (2009); on the USA, see Greenhouse (2009).
11 Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007). As Morley (2009, p. 499) notes, British television's (including reality TV's) portrayal of what Marx would have called the "lumpen proletariat" coincides with the more permanent marginalisation of large groups from the labour market in Britain since the 1980s
12 Respectively *Sun* 17 June 2000, discussed in Couldry (2001b, pp. 225–226) and *Sun* 10 April 2006, discussed in Harris (2006).
13 Turner, 2010, pp. 2, 173 makes a similar broad point well.
14 On Bourdieu and reality TV, see Palmer (2004, pp. 176–179), McRobbie (2008).
15 Willis (1978).
16 Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 25).
17 Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 25).
18 Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 23).
19 Honneth (1995, pp. 213–217).
20 Compare Couldry (2010, pp. 117–124) for overview of the literature.
21 Fanon (1986), Du Bois (1989) [1903].
22 Du Bois (1989, p. 3).
23 Améry (1994, p. 67).
24 Viswanathan (1990), Gilligan (1982).
25 Parkin (1972, p. 161).
26 Biressi and Nunn (2005, p. 151).
27 See references in note 5 above.
28 Compare Couldry and Littler (2011) on *the Apprentice* (UK version).
29 Compare Couldry (2006a, pp. 137–139).
30 Compare Couldry (2006b, 2008).
31 For valuable commentary outside reality TV on the continuing links between social and economic resources and poor language skills, obesity, and low educational attainment, see Toynbee (2004a, 2004b), Webber and Butler (2007).
32 I am working here via an analogy with Durkheim's analysis of the social bases of religion (Durkheim, 1995). For more detail, see Couldry (2000, pp. 14–16, 2003, pp. 6–9).
33 Compare Holmes (2004).
34 Compare Couldry (2010, pp. 81–82).
35 See Palmer (2003), Couldry (2006b, 2008), McCarthy (2007), Ouellette and Hay (2008).
36 Couldry (2010, Chapters 3–4).

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PART III

Democracy's uncertain futures

11

FORM AND POWER IN AN AGE OF CONTINUOUS SPECTACLE

Introduction

There was a time when it was impossible to say anything substantive in media research without launching into an exhaustive discussion on Althusser or Lacan. That time of compulsory theorizing is over, to the relief of many, but that does not mean media research's relationship to theory is now healthy. On the contrary, contemporary media research tends either to operate in a theory-free zone or in isolated capsules of theory-saturation – Deleuzian, Manovichian, and so on – unconnected either to each other or to any wider space of debate. To change metaphors, we lurched in the late 1990s from an all-night party of theoretical excess to find ourselves at dawn in a "post-theory" desert where even the effort of asking *why* we need theory, and *how* we might compare the relative merits of competing theories, seemed beyond us.

Luckily this book's editors are determined to prod us back into alertness. The stakes – both for media research and for wider social theory – are high, indeed they have rarely been higher. It matters what counts as "good" media theory in an era when media logics are ever more closely embedded in the everyday stuff of politics and when everyday politics seems ever more closely dependent on the strategic use of spectacle by many actors (not only states) in a global sphere of conflict whose instabilities threaten us all.

The point, however, is not to construct large-scale theoretical systems in Parsonian style or to conjure up totalities and treat them as if they were real as in Hardt and Negri's provocative but ultimately unhelpful work on *Empire* (Hardt & Negri, 2001). As Pierre Bourdieu and Stuart Hall have both argued,[1] theory is only useful if through its relative generality it enables us to engage better with the particular, that is, for better tools with which to practise our *suspicion toward* totalizing claims, whether by academics, politicians, or media executives. It is here – in our choice of

theoretical tools – that some difficult choices must be made, when we consider the entanglement of today's media forms with power.

The main choice I want to discuss is between Actor Network Theory (ANT) and ritual analyses of media, using Foucault's account of "the order of discourse", briefly, as a bridge between them. ANT – and the "associology" that has recently emerged from it – for all its potential insight into media processes, lacks, I will argue, an interest in questions of social and media form, and so fails to deliver on Dorothy Smith's ambition (1987, pp. 8–9) for a sociology that "will look back and talk back" to the determinants of everyday life.

My point will be not to defend my own theory of media's ritual dimensions in detail – for this readers can look at my previous work (Couldry, 2003a) – but to defend the type of theoretical choice it represents in answer to our ask of understanding media power. At this "meta-theoretical" level, I want also to make more explicit some philosophical underpinnings of the antipathy toward certain rhetorics of "the social" that runs through my work on media rituals. That will lead me back to broader social theory, and to three forms of scepticism about the notion of "society" – those of Latour and Laclau and the scepticism I find, against the grain, in the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar. I will argue for preferring the third over the first two. In conclusion, I recall the global political context in which our choices about theory come to matter.

Let me say a word about the word "spectacle" in my title. I use it to refer to those things which in contemporary societies we are encouraged to view in large numbers and in viewing participate in an act of representative significance. Every era has had its distinctive spectacles, but modern media make a decisive break in the history of spectacle (Thompson, 1995, p. 134), whereas the spectacle of the old royal courts was "representative" only by virtue of the high status of its performers and immediate audience, the representativeness of contemporary spectacle is inseparable from its dissemination to large and distant media audiences. "*Continuous* spectacle" in my title points to the intertextual and temporal intensity by which contemporary media spectacle creates, or appears to create, a "media world" for our attention. This is not to deny Nicholas Mirzoeff's point that we also live in an age of "*anti*-spectacle" which on painful topics such as war and prisons "dictates that there is nothing to see, and that instead one must keep moving, keep circulating and keep consuming" (Mirzoeff, 2005, p. 16). We can, however, restate Mirzoeff's point by adapting Jonathan Crary's terminology (Crary, 1999): along with new "regimes of attention" come new "regimes of inattention", the relations between the two being important. None of this contradicts the more basic point that media contribute crucially to power in an age of continuous spectacle; indeed, the structured relations between regimes of attention/inattention suggest that, from our involvements with spectacle, emerge social forms of considerable significance. I will return to this point when I discuss ritual, but first I want to look at things from a very different angle, that of networks.

The limits of ANT

My question is simple: how best to theorize – make broader causal, not incidental, sense of – how media act in and on the world. There are, of course, media specialists interested in media texts for their own sake, but that approach is oriented by very different epistemological concerns. We are discussing here *only* media research for which social theory is at least in principle salient. Approaches to media formed within the paradigm of literary criticism are not relevant.

I begin with ANT, partly because it was important to me when I was starting down the path of media theory in the mid-1990s. At the time I just couldn't see how the classic elements of media research – the study of media texts, media institutions and the interpretations we make of those texts (vital though they all are) – could together be enough to explain the place of media in contemporary societies. We had also surely to confront the question of *belief*. Media institutions have as their main asset symbolic power: a concentration of symbolic resources – crudely the power to tell and circulate stories about the world – that is historically unprecedented. But that symbolic power, however much its infrastructure depends on concentrations of economic and/or state power, is not reducible to them. It is sustained in part through belief, through legitimacy. How can that legitimacy be reproduced except through a stretched-out process, that encompasses not just ceremonial moments but the full expanse of daily life? That was the starting-point of *The Place of Media Power* (Couldry, 2000).

And, although I drew on various inspirations – the late Roger Silverstone's (1981) work on myth and television, Stuart Hall's (1973, 1977) early work on media – there was one essay which freed things up for me more than any other: Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's *Unscrewing the Big Leviathan* (1981). There they showed that we can understand a particular node of power – and so the salience of the general accounts of the world made through it – not by imagining that node's power to be literally "big" (which would be simply to repeat its own rhetoric) but by tracing all the local linkages that together, over time and under particular conditions, have generated the site from which such claims can circulate on a large scale. Scale, Callon and Latour say, is not a natural property of social space but something produced by particular actors (using "actors", of course, in the broad sense characteristic of ANT to include non-human actors).

Callon and Latour weren't thinking of media directly back in 1980, but that does not diminish the relevance of their insights for understanding media's symbolic power. How *better* to grasp the emergence in the 20th century of legitimate media institutions which derive such broad authority to represent the world from very particular and local processes of production and decision-making? Callon and Latour's tracking of how certain "obligatory passing points", as they put it (1981, p. 287), become "black-boxed" opened up for me a new de-mystified way of thinking about media power.

This is just the first of ANT's many advantages for media research. New research on the local television newsroom (Hemmingway, 2007), online poker (Austrin &

Farnsworth, 2006) and the treatment of audience participants in game shows such as *Blind Date* (Teurlings, 2004) is opening up important insights by building on ANT's interrogation of how networks are built, and how claims about the world come to be "hard-wired" into everyday practice. Rather than discuss that new work, I want (schematically) to make some more general points about ANT's usefulness for media research.

First, ANT's general suspicion toward "the social" encourages us to be equally suspicious about media institutions' claims to represent, or be proxy for, "the social": more on this later. Second, Latour's analysis of networks' relation to the territories they cover captures beautifully why the complex issues of representation raised by media are always more than "textual". For, as Latour puts it in, *We Have Never Been Modern*, talking about technological networks generally: "[they] are nets thrown over spaces, and retain only a few scattered elements of those spaces. They are connected lines, not surfaces" (1993, p. 118). So, media texts, though they often seem to "cover" a territory in their claims, retain only "a few scattered elements" of the space they represent: this insight is fundamental for challenging functionalist claims about how media texts relate to "society". The idea that media make selections is, of course, familiar (as in theories of agenda-setting or framing) but the misleading relationship between the *apparent completeness or saturation* of media discourse and the objects and worlds which media describes or shows, is perfectly expressed by Latour's aphorism: media discourse crowds out the more particular perspectives from which its totalizing nature can be grasped for what it is, just as a net appears to "cover" completely the territory over which it is stretched. Third, ANT highlights the asymmetries of representation built into networks, and the difficulty of uncovering and renegotiating those asymmetries. As Latour and Woolgar put it in *Laboratory Life*, "the result of the construction of a fact is that it appears unconstructed *by anyone*" (1979, p. 240, emphasis added). This remains a vital insight into the role of constructions in daily life, even if Latour sharply distinguishes it from social constructionism (Latour, 2005, pp. 90–91): luckily, we do not need to pursue that point here.

In all these ways, ANT is a very useful tool for thinking about "the fundamental a-symmetry between shapers of events and consumers of events" (Hall, 1973, p. 11) – an asymmetry of symbolic power that media do not so much create (it has long historical roots), as deepen, entrench, naturalise. ANT helps us think about how particular asymmetries come into existence, and how they come to *remain* legitimate and (relatively) unchallenged. ANT is equally useful for thinking about how *new spaces* of mediated storytelling are being generated, perhaps hardwired into, everyday practice because of the networks of circulation and attention on which they rely: ANT accounts for such spaces in a way that does *not* presuppose media's everyday workings merge seamlessly into "the social". If ever new phenomena needed ANT to demystify claims about "social" impact made on its behalf, it is *MySpace* and *Facebook*.

But like any set of tools, ANT has limitations. First, while it shares with Bourdieu an intense scepticism toward generalised notions of social space, it is less able than

Bourdieu to map out the *stable* if complex relations between the relatively autonomous spaces of material and discursive production that Bourdieu calls "fields": see Couldry (2003b) for detail. Second, while ANT may help us in thinking about how new practises emerge in the newsroom, or new mediated spaces online acquire the features of a "territory", ANT is less equipped, by its very interests and preferences, to help us understand the consequences of the *representations* that media generate – how they work and are put into everyday use. The latter problem might seem trivial, given how much we have already learned from ANT, but it is of fundamental importance. This becomes clear when we consider Latour's recent highly rhetorical defence of ANT in *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Latour is more insistent here than elsewhere that ANT is a complete new way of doing sociology (a "sociology of associations" or "associology") which in some ways replaces the old "sociology of 'the social'" – at least in relation to the more interesting things going on in the world. Latour concedes old-style sociology might still be able to make sense of the boring stuff, comparing it to physics before relativity theory! The problem with these grander claims is that they conflict with ANT's radically reduced ontology. In ANT, there are things, persons conceived rather like things, and associations – that's it! ANT looks, very acutely, at how associations are formed between persons and things (and, at a basic level, sustained) but has little or nothing to say about how actors interpret or think about the persistence of such associations and the institutions which result, or how actors reflect on their mutual relationships with each other and the wider space of networks.

The result is that, when Latour *does* come to deal with interpretations in one sense – the totalising interpretations of the social world he calls "panoramas" (some are theoretical like Bourdieu's field theory, but he also means the claims of media, politicians, and so on) – he has little substantial to say about them (2005, pp. 183–189). He points out, following ANT's usual argument, that such totalizing claims about the world are only *local* constructions – we need, in media research, to hold onto ANT's radicalism here – but offers no way of sorting out good totalizing constructions from bad ones, a vital task we might think in an age of continuous media spectacle. "Panoramas" for Latour are all in one sense wrong (because totalizing), but all in another sense potentially positive since they contribute, he says, to our possibilities of thinking on a general level about the world. It is here, *unwittingly* (since the book's conclusion shows Latour wants to guard against this charge), that ANT's political conservatism is revealed. Let me quote one passage at length:

> [panoramas'] role may become central since they allow spectators, listeners and readers to be equipped with a desire for wholeness and centrality. It is from these powerful stories that we get our metaphors for what "binds us together", the passions we are supposed to share, the general outline of society's architecture, the master narratives with which we are disciplined . . . so no matter how much they trick us, [these panoramas] prepare us for the political task ahead.
>
> *(2005, p. 189)*

What "political task" is this? The end of the book reveals it to be nothing more specific than living better together and keeping our eyes open for associations in and between unexpected places. This is fortunate since, as Latour's discussion of panoramas reveals, ANT has no tools to help us to separate good representations of "society" or "world order" from bad ones, no tools to grasp how certain representations and claims about our world have a particular rhetorical and emotional hold on us. Why not? Because ANT is a theory of associations, not a theory of representation. ANT is therefore agnostic on many of the key issues raised by contemporary media but by default, a disabling political quietism that is not less frustrating for being built "from below" rather than imposed (like Niklas Luhmann's) from above.[2] The consequence is immediate: since media are s of representation, ANT *cannot* even in principle offer a complete account of what media do in the world. ANT cannot ground a full sociology of media, however useful and illuminating its "associology". While Latour may not care about this, we as media researchers must.

Are there alternatives?

Luckily, there are alternative paths for using social theory in media research not constrained by the self-imposed limits of "associology". I will spend most of this section reflecting on what is at stake in the "ritual" approach to media developed in my work and others'.

Foucault

First, however, it is worth recalling briefly the Foucauldian roots of ANT, which have been neglected as a resource for thinking about media. Foucault is important, because he takes us back to the properties of discourse – not ignoring its material base in associations and interactions with objects but in an analysis not *restricted* to the mere fact of those associations. Foucault was not, any more than Callon and Latour, focusing on media, but in *The Order of Discourse* – his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (1980) – he discusses some very general "procedures" which "permit the control of discourse".

It is a matter of building on the principles Foucault establishes. He talks, for example, of the "rarefaction of speaking subjects" (1980, p. 61). Some forms of this principle are less common (the intense ritualisation of certain speech settings, certain restricted "societies of discourse"). But Foucault argues that, even in an apparent era of open discourse, there are hidden restrictions built into discourse's institutionalisation. In one sense Foucault's insights have already been adopted by a whole generation of discourse analysis (for example Fairclough, 1995) but there is still something exhilarating in Foucault's insistence on a *materialist* analysis of discourse, that undercuts the rhetoric of discourses themselves and explores the constraints built into various media discourses. By the rarefaction of speaking subjects, Foucault makes clear he means not just the literal exclusion of particular people from speaking but also "the gestures, behaviour, circumstances, and the whole set of

signs which must accompany discourse" (1980, p. 62). There is more than enough here to provide a provocative starting-point for analysing the gestural universe of celebrity culture.

And crucially (unlike ANT) Foucault develops his materialism into a close attention to the patterns of discourse itself. "Discourse analysis understood like this" he writes "does not reveal the universality of a meaning but brings to light the action of *imposed scarcity*" (1980, p. 73, emphasis added): that is, the scarcities, or limiting rules, that structure the surface of discourse. Such scarcity, working at the level of the categories and exclusions from which a universalising discourse is built, can be uncovered not by a generous reading of the text but only by an investigation of its conditions of possibility. What better advice for deconstructing the mediated rhetorics of nation, society, community, "the free world", and so on?

Ritual analysis

Having briefly recalled how much (contra ANT) we can learn about power's workings within discourse, I want to return to the question of social form raised earlier via work on media's ritual dimensions which draws on Durkheim's account of the social origins of religion. This move might seem paradoxical in this context, since Latour at least makes it very clear that the sociological tradition he wants to get distance from is precisely the Durkheimian (2005, pp. 8–9). Latour, however, ignores the cost of this move, which is to put to one side the belief questions that media raise, and their links to the legitimacy of media power. Ritual analysis enables us to explore the cultural "thickenings" (Löfgren, 2001) around media that are so important to its authority – "thickenings" that ANT, as a theory of association, not representation, is less well placed to grasp.

It is important to emphasise right away that ritual analysis is quite different from old-style ideological analysis, for it is precisely the simple notion of "belief" implicit in classic Marxist ideological analysis (statements explicitly believed by people, yet false) that a notion of ritual *practice* moves beyond. Rituals work not through the articulation, even implicitly, of beliefs, but through the organisation and formalisation of behaviour that, by encoding categories of thought, naturalises them. As Philip Elliott put it: "to treat ritual performance as simply standing for political paradigms is to oversimplify it. [Ritual performance] also expresses and symbolizes social relationships and so, quite literally, mystifies them" (1982, p. 168). While this might sound like classic 1980s ideological deconstruction, Elliott here turns back from complete reliance on Steven Lukes' (1975) deconstruction of political ritual as pure ideology and acknowledges the force of Durkheim's theory of how social order is maintained through the embodiments of ritual practice. As Elliott and many other writers from Dayan and Katz to Michel Maffesoli have argued, there remains something very suggestive about Durkheim's account of totemic ceremonies for understanding contemporary political and media rhetoric. It is not a question here of relying on the historical accuracy of Durkheim's (1995) account of totemic ritual, or of accepting his claims about the origins of religion. The interest today of

Durkheim's work lies in seeing how his proto-structuralist analysis of "sacred" and "profane" captures a generalisable pattern which links (1) those moments when we are, or appear to be, addressed as a *collectivity* and (2) certain categories of thought which have an organising force in everyday action. It is in this limited – but I hope precise – sense that I have borrowed from Durkheim to build a theory of the ritual dimensions of media (Couldry, 2003a).

From this perspective, Durkheim can still teach us a lot about how to interpret the generalized claims that media make about the social world. But from that recognition we can head off in two very different directions. The first route (the "neo-Durkheimian") argues that contemporary media reinstitute, through electronic means, the unity of the totemic ceremony (for example, Dayan & Katz, 1992). The second approach – more compatible perhaps with today's greater scepticism toward totalizing rhetorics of "the social" – uses Durkheim merely as an entry-point to a practice of deconstruction. Accepting that Durkheim draws our attention to the *constructions* encoded in ritual – the *claim* of media to invoke social order, to stand in for, and give us privileged access to, a social totality – this second approach aims to dismantle those constructions, drawing on anthropological insights about the organising role of ritual categories, the normative force of ritual boundaries and the expressive resonance of ritual practice, while rejecting any assumption that ritual really is the basis of social order. Indeed, this second approach rejects the very notion of "social order" as a *normative* or *necessary* category, while examining more closely the naturalisation of certain claims to social order in contemporary societies. The second approach is distinct both from ANT and from neo-Durkheimian functionalism: acknowledging (unlike ANT) those media representations which mobilize large emotion and encode large claims about "the social" through their organisation and *formal* patterning but on the other hand (*like* ANT) refusing to take such media forms at face value and always remembering the material asymmetries which make them possible. Sensitized to the potency of ritual form by Durkheim but inspired by a deconstructive spirit closer to Foucault, Bourdieu or Laclau, this approach to media power looks to media rituals' formal details as important sites where contemporary power is encoded and naturalized. As Maurice Bloch once put it, ritual *is* "the use of form for power" (1989, p. 45).

Because it focuses on details of form, ritual analysis done properly (that is, with a substantive rather than purely nominal concept of ritual action)[3] gives us the tools to trace patterns not just in media discourse but also *in everyday actions oriented toward media*. It is vital to explore the linkages between the "special moments" of media rituals (the final night of *Big Brother* or a person's entry onto the stage of *Jerry Springer*) and the wider hinterland of practice Catherine Bell (1992) calls "ritualization" (for example, practices as banal as flicking through a celebrity magazine while you wait to get your hair cut). There are many terms in play in media ritualisation: not just celebrity but the constructed categories of "media"/"ordinary" people, things, places, times (and so on), and the category of "liveness" (which indirectly affirms the priority of direct connection though media to social "reality"). This approach is *not* motivated by a special interest in ritual or ceremony per se – there

is no claim here that media rituals are emergent forms of secular religion! – but instead by a concern with the ways in which certain *claims of/to social order* (Wrong, 1994) are naturalized in discourse and action. The subtle effectiveness of media power – the extraordinary fact that extreme concentrations of symbolic resources in particular institutions have remained legitimate for so long – requires theoretical tools of some subtlety for its analysis. Ritual, and just as important ritualisation, are just two of those tools.

More broadly, ritual analysis provides an account of what Bourdieu called "the *production* of belief" that links us back into the local and detailed processes from which even the largest and grandest mappings of the social world derive (remember ANT), while drawing us outwards to explain the representations and formalisations on which much political and cultural staging relies. Consider the Live 8 concerts in early July 2005. In those events quasi-political actors (current and ex-music stars) orchestrated a process in which citizens could plausibly *act out* participation in political decision-making – something very different from the political spectacle Murray Edelman deconstructed two decades ago (1988) as ideological rhetoric performed at a distance from audiences. The more participative Live8 events bring out how *ritual* analysis – an attention to "subjunctive" or "as if" language that is drawn upon, however elliptically, in action – can supplement ideological analysis (important thought the latter remains, of course, in uncovering the explicit discursive contradictions around such events). Only the former can explain how some of the Live 8 marchers (as quoted by media) saw themselves as being "part of the message" given to governments and as a means to "force" change in the very same political establishment that (in the UK at least) had already *endorsed* the spectacle in which they acted! We return here to the dialectic between attention and inattention that I noted earlier.

At this point, given our wider aim of explaining social theory's role in media analysis, it is worth reflecting on what the theoretical term "ritual" adds to the descriptive term spectacle. This emerges in my one small disagreement with Doug Kellner's excellent and courageous book *Media Spectacles*. Early on in the book, when introducing his topic, Kellner writes that "media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that *embody contemporary society's basic values*, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life" (2003, p. 2, emphasis added). But is this true? What are these ideals and values Kellner talks about and where is the evidence they are so simply accepted and internalized by those outside media industries? This is clearly a rhetorical concession by Kellner, but why concede *even this much*? This small point limits Kellner's critique of contemporary spectacles: since Kellner's argument starts by taking the normative force of spectacles for granted, the only possibility for political resistance in our era must be forms of counter-spectacle. But I would want to go further and acknowledge forms of resistance that question the basic principles and preconditions of media spectacle, and the inequalities and totalizing rhetorics on which that production is based. But to do this, we need a more detailed theorisation of how exactly spectacle works to encode categories of thought and action: in other words, a theory of media rituals – not for our own

edification but to deconstruct more fully both the contents *and the form* of media's claims to represent the "truth" of populations.

Some right and wrong ways to deconstruct "Society"

I have argued that if we take media representations seriously, we need also to address the social forms constituted by and focused on those representations. Analysing media rituals and ritualisation are one way of doing this, providing insights not available to ANT. But within ritual approaches there is, I argued, a fundamental choice between deconstructive and reconstructive (or neo-Durkheimian) approaches. I will argue in conclusion for the political value today of that deconstructive approach.

First, however, and in the spirit of making transparent the theoretical choices involved, I want to explore some philosophical underpinnings of this deconstruction. While my approach to media rituals seeks to dismantle certain discourses about "the social" and society – most obviously, functionalist discourses in the Parsonian or neo-Durkheimian tradition – surely there are languages of the social that we need to keep intact? Of the various deconstructions of "the social" and "society" on offer in contemporary theory (from Latour to Laclau to Bhaskar), which are more useful, and which are less useful?

My previous critique of the "myth of the (mediated) centre" (Couldry, 2003a, 2006) was inspired initially by Edward Said, but it shares something important with Laclau and Mouffe's broader notion of hegemony whereby "a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. x).[4] What Laclau and Mouffe mean by "contaminated universality" – a consistent confusion of the particular for the universal (2001, p. xiii) – is very similar to what I meant to capture by the notion of "myth". Media are *particular* institutions that benefit from a specific concentration of symbolic resources, even if one that is huge in scale: yet they represent their role as a relationship to/for *a totality* ("society", "the nation", and so on). Media discourse is always contaminated by such claims to the universal (so too is government discourse, which incessantly speaks for the totality of the nation). Whatever the real pressures that exist toward centralisation in contemporary societies, the idea that such totalizing rhetorics are *fully* explained, let alone made "functional", by a particular centre *of value* is a delusion: as Laclau and Mouffe write, "the mere idea of a centre of the social has no meaning at all" (2001, p. 139). I call this delusion "the myth of the centre", onto which media build their own myth of privileged access to that centre ("the myth of the mediated centre"). And yet precisely such a myth was installed in the structural functionalism of Edward Shils (1975) and others in the mid 1970s and can be traced even today in discourse about media's relation to society.

Laclau and Mouffe's deconstruction of hegemony and universality seems even more useful for analysing media rituals and media power when we notice its historical dimension. As Laclau puts it in a passage I quote at the start of *Media Rituals*: "[contemporary societies] are required by their very dynamics to become

increasingly mythical" (1990, p. 67). The same point is made at greater length by Laclau and Mouffe elsewhere:

> advanced industrial societies . . . are constituted around a fundamental asymmetry . . . the asymmetry existing between a growing proliferation of differences – a surplus of meaning of "the social" – and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure.
>
> *(2001, p. 96)*

Laclau and Mouffe surely capture something here that helps explain the stampede by media industries in the past decade toward the apparently tautological aim of re-presenting to audiences their "ordinary" "reality".

The more closely, however, I look at Laclau and Mouffe's broader arguments about politics and "society", the more uneasy I become. Any possibility of class-based identities is dismissed, not on grounds of historical contingency but absolutely because it is only a "naturalist prejudice" that the economic underlies the cultural (2001, p. 67). "Unfixity", we are told "has become the condition of *every* social identity", yet myths of society are deluded because they "suture" an "*original* lack". That lack, it seems, is endemic to the social itself – "there is no sutured space peculiar to 'society', since *the social itself* has no essence" (2001, pp. 85, 88, 96, emphases added). At work here in Laclau and Mouffe's argument is an absolutism of denial (an inverted universalism) which we should question. First, because it undermines their *historical* insight into the increasingly mythical nature of contemporary societies; for if the mythical nature of discourse about "society" derives from the absolute gap between *any* discourse and what they call the "field of discursivity", then it is difficult to see how contemporary societies can be any more mythical than all those that preceded them.[5] And, second, because if "the social has *no* essence", then there is no stable basis for constituting a discipline around it. This is exactly the position of Latour, as we saw, yet the political aims and argumentative premises of Laclau and Mouffe seem very different. While Latour absolutely prioritises networks (in some sense) over things and people (or indeed representations), Laclau and Mouffe absolutely prioritise discourse (in some sense) over things or people. Laclau and Mouffe's prioritisation of discourse entails that everything including "the social" is subject to the conditions of discourse and in particular to one condition, discourse's "openness" and non-totalizability. So Laclau and Mouffe tell us that the "partial" character of articulation "proceeds from the openness of the social, *as a result, in its turn*, of the constant overflowing of *every* discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity" and that objects cannot "constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence"; as a result, "'society' is not a valid object of discourse" (2001, pp. 113, 108, 111, emphasis added).

Yet, if the general terms "society" and "social" – and not just the value-loaded notion of a social "centre" – are to be abandoned *entirely*, the idea of media research drawing on social theory is pure paradox, exactly as Latour would have us believe.

At the very least, we are forced to make clear in what precise sense we draw on notions of "society" and "the social" when claiming that media research – whether on media rituals or anything else – might contribute something to "social theory". Here, I think, it is useful to draw on the "critical realist" philosopher of science, Roy Bhaskar whose work,[6] for all its formidable difficulty of language, would seem to offer a nuanced position between Latour and Laclau, between postmodernism and crude positivism.

Very briefly, Bhaskar's ontological starting-point for the social sciences is that their subject-matter includes "both social objects (including beliefs) and beliefs about those objects" (1989, p. 101). Bhaskar is concerned to defend the importance in the social world of interpretations without lapsing into constructionism, and of concepts without falling into a "conceptual absolutisation or reductionism (that concepts are not only necessary for, but exhaustive of, social life")' (1989, p. 185). Bhaskar rejects the absolutisation of discourse on which Laclau and Mouffe's arguments precisely rely as "the linguistic fallacy", "the definition of being in terms of . . . language or discourse" (1989, p. 180). While Bhaskar's insistence that "societies are real" (1989, p. 69) appears to be a naïve positivism, it is far from that. For Bhaskar rejects the prioritizing of either individuals or social groups in explanation – so ruling out both utilitarian liberalism and Durkheim's collectivist conception of society (1989, p. 73). The objects of social science for Bhaskar are above all "the persistent relations between individuals (and groups) and . . . the relations between those relations" (1989, p. 71). While society exists, society is not for Bhaskar a simple functional totality, but "a complex totality", "an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform" (1989, pp. 76, 78).

What matters here is that Bhaskar insists on the "causal irreducibility of social forms in the genesis of human action" (1989, p. 91). And so, I suggest, should we – painful though it is to declare one's ontological commitments at such a high level of abstraction! The alternatives at the level of ontology – Latour's associationism (which runs the risk of turning into a strange vitalism of connections) and Laclau and Mouffe's discursivism – are hardly satisfactory. Nor is there any contradiction between a deconstructive spirit toward media rituals and a critical realism as advocated by Bhaskar. On the contrary, it is difficult to see what other philosophical framework could provide the friction that a genuinely critical and deconstructive project needs.

Conclusion

We have never needed that deconstructive project more than now. We live in an intensely connected global mediaspace where media's capacity to saturate everyday life is greater than ever. Elements of decentralisation – the decentring of some transnational media flows, the intensified competition faced by national media sources – only make media spectacle a more important resource for all media actors, both political and non-political. Add in a conflict-ridden global politics and we can expect the resources of mediated ritualisation to be continually drawn upon by

political, corporate and other actors, producing dangerous exclusions within the sphere of visibility (Butler, 2004). There is something political at stake in achieving a *theoretical* grasp of how large-scale media forms work and aspire to the status of naturalized social forms.

The Retort Collective (2005) have recently argued that political power is inseparable from media (symbolic) power in a world of spectacle far more dangerous than Guy Debord ever envisaged (see also Giroux, 2006). If so, it follows that any challenge to political power must involve contesting *media power*: that is, (following both ANT and ritualisation theory) questioning not just media's institutional power but our whole way of organising life and thought around and through media. (Here online resources will surely be crucial longer-term, whatever the dangers of believing the myths that currently circulate about the Internet.)

The Retort Collective from outside media research – they are sociologists, geographers, historians – set two very different challenges for media research. First, alongside giving attention to the major media spectacles of our time, we must analyse also the countless practices of "mediation" that fall *outside* media's dominant flows and rhetorics, which silently challenge them by heading in a different direction and on a different scale: hence the importance of the expanding research into alternative media. Rejecting totalities means analysing new and different *particularities* and in sites beyond, or obscured by, the scope of those rhetorics.

A different challenge, implicit in the first, is to maintain, in the face of media's universalising "panoramas" a deconstructive intent and a continual suspicion. It is, of course, tempting to argue – witness Simon Cottle's (2006) recent attempt to save media rituals from what he calls "neo-Marxian" political critique – that, even if media events or rituals are social constructions, they are none the worse for that: what society can live without myths? Surely, we should bracket out our usual questions (what type of myths? whose myths? myths constructed on what terms?), because, in the end, we have no choice but to accept media's role in focussing our world's mythical production? The "end of history", perhaps, for critical media research? There is a pragmatic weight to such arguments, yet it is vital we resist such temptation. For it invites us, adapting Søren Kierkegaard,[7] to make the one error that, as media researchers, we had a chance of avoiding.

Notes

1 Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Hall (1996).
2 Luhmann (1999).
3 Not all uses of the term ritual are helpful. For an unhelpful usage, see Cottle (2006) on "mediatized rituals", and the response in Couldry and Rothenbuhler (2007).
4 Thanks to Mark Hobart for suggesting that I look more closely at the parallels between my position and Laclau & Mouffe's.
5 Butler makes a similar criticism directly of Derrida (Butler 1997, p. 150).
6 Bhaskar has generally been neglected in media research, so far as I can tell. For a rare discussion, see Deacon et al. (1999).
7 Søren Kierkegaard wrote (1958, p. 167): "Not to venture is shrewd. And yet, by not venturing, it is so dreadfully easy to lose that which it would be difficult to lose in even

the most venturesome venture, and in any case never so easily, so completely as if it were nothing . . . one's self". Compare the unreferenced quotation from Kafka in Laing (1971, p. 78): "You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world . . . but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that you might be able to avoid". Kierkegaard and Kafka are writing about the individual self, but their logic is surely transposable to collective enterprises such as research.

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12

LIVING WELL WITH AND THROUGH MEDIA

Introduction

Media raise normative questions of various sorts. Some start out from evaluating the organisational structures through which media get made; others start out from our evaluations of the things media institutions and individual media agents do and the implications for our wider media environment in an environment that in the past 15 years has expanded massively with the growth of the Internet and countless new digital platforms. It is the second action-related question with which I am concerned in this chapter, and for which I use the term "media ethics". I mean media ethics to be distinct from, for example, Habermas's reflections on the adequacy of the mediated public sphere for democratic functioning.

Journalistic codes of ethics exist in almost every country but comprise only a small part of what I mean by "media ethics".[1] Media ethics must address the broader questions – of concern to all citizens – which Durkheim termed "civic morals" that lie beyond the detailed internal debates for which he reserved the term "professional ethics" (Durkheim, 1992). Media ethics asks what the standards are by which we should judge the satisfactoriness of media institutions' own codes of "ethics". It is this broader perspective that has for a long time been missing in discussions about journalistic ethics. But as Israeli legal philosopher Raphael Cohen-Almagor notes, there is a wider problem if "the liberal values that underlie any democratic society, those of not harming and respecting others, are kept outside the realm of journalism" (Cohen-Almagor, 2001, p. 79). Moral philosopher Onora O'Neill analogously argues that "we need to rethink the proper limits of press freedom. The press has no licence to deceive and we have no reasons to think that a free press needs such licence" (O'Neill, 2002, p. 102). Both writers appeal to the wider moral or ethical standards within the framework of which we might judge the particular codes adopted under the banner of "ethics" by actual journalists. It is those wider standards with which "media ethics" as I understand it is concerned.

There is a particular emphasis in my discussion on media *ethics*. I signal here an allegiance to the tradition of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. I believe this is the philosophical tradition best suited to building a conversation about media standards from minimal premises. I aim for an argument based on minimal premises for two reasons. First, media contribute to the shaping of actions and world-views on a variety of scales, up to and including the global (the global distribution of a media message is a possibility that can never be excluded). So, any conversation about media ethics involves a global scale. But how do we start such a conversation without also taking into account the huge differences of worldview (religious, political, cultural, moral) among those potentially affected by media who we would want to take part in such a conversation? Second, debate today about media standards must intervene in the daily workings of media industries that are under intense financial and competitive pressure and in conditions of production that have changed radically in the digital age (Fenton et al., 2010). Two quotations from recent debate in the UK illustrate the difficulties. On the one hand, newspaper owner Richard Desmond told the Leveson Inquiry into the standards of the UK press: "I don't quite know what the word [ethics] means . . . everybody's ethics are different" (quoted, *Guardian* 13 January 2012). On the other hand, one respected journalist argues that the working conditions of today's UK press "positively prevent [journalists from] discovering the truth" (Davies, 2008, p. 28). If we want, therefore, to challenge the insouciance of a Richard Desmond or alter the conditions that Nick Davies diagnoses, it is best to build an argument from minimal premises whose plausibility can command wide assent.

The task of interrupting what media do every day is difficult, but as the 2011–2012 scandal over the *News of the World*'s phone-hacking practices illustrates dramatically, it is essential, not just for the quality of democracy but for the quality of public and social life, whether aspiring to democracy or not. I hope that "media ethics", as understood in this chapter, can be a modest but effective tool for asking appropriate normative questions about everyday media practice, whether conducted by professionals or by anyone who acts with and through media including digital media platforms.

Some preliminaries

Why Aristotle as a starting-point for media ethics? Clearly there are philosophical choices. What of Kant and the whole post-Kantian tradition? What of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida? Rather than review philosophical history in detail, let me note some signposts within philosophical debate that help make sense of the path taken by this chapter.

Where to start?

First, there is Alisdair MacIntyre's historical re-reading of the Enlightenment view of rationality and knowledge – and the Nietzschean and other critiques that

responded to that view – as based upon an unhelpful rejection of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. MacIntyre asked "was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle?" (1981, p. 111). And his own approach to the choices for a late 20th-century moral philosophy reopens the path back to Aristotle.

Our contemporary sense of the renewed relevance of Aristotelian ethics is linked also to Ludwig Wittgenstein. The return to Aristotle, and specifically Aristotelian ethics, in Anglo-American philosophy from the late 1950s, and especially from the 1980s, is incomprehensible without the huge influence of Wittgenstein, particularly his philosophy of language and mind, and his highly original approach to philosophical method. But Wittgenstein is also a pivotal figure in the long split between Anglo-American and Continental philosophical traditions because, as Henry Staten (1986) argues, Wittgenstein's philosophical method can in many ways be seen as an anticipation of Derridean deconstruction. Wittgenstein's dismantling of Enlightenment models of "self-knowledge" removed some important obstacles to looking back beyond the Enlightenment to the Aristotelian model of virtue ethics which had been discarded.

Against the spirit of the Enlightenment's grander rationalist ambitions, both Aristotle and Wittgenstein draw readily on everyday language or judgement and is impatient with scepticism abstracted from everyday practise. Stanley Cavell's gloss on Wittgenstein's discussion of "following a rule" is vivid here:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projects. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response . . . all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life". Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.
>
> *(Cavell, 1972, p. 52, quoted in McDowell, 1998, p. 60)*

Cavell's discussion has particular relevance to my argument, since it is quoted by John McDowell in his essay *Virtue and Reason* when discussing resistance to the characteristically Aristotelian "identification of virtue with knowledge" (McDowell, 1998, p. 53). In McDowell's version of virtue ethics, Wittgenstein's method is treated as having implications not just for philosophy of language but for ethics too. A modest view of the role of philosophy makes possible a modest, but distinctive, view of the cognitive dimension of ethics. Here is McDowell:

> a coherent conception of excellence locates its possessor in what is, for him at least, a world of particular facts, which are often difficult to make out. Faced with a prima facie [ethical] conflict, one has to determine how things really are.
>
> *(1998, pp. 21–22, emphasis added)*

It might seem odd to characterize as modest a claim to determine "how things really are", especially when the "form of life" we are discussing is a set of practices as large and wide-ranging as contemporary media. My sense, nonetheless, is that by building, as McDowell suggests, from our appreciation of "particular facts" about how media operate in the contemporary world, we have a more useful starting-point for the tangled problems of media ethics than by relying on supposedly consensual norms, rights or obligations.

Consider briefly a different starting-point: the work of Emmanuel Levinas on communication. Choosing Levinas as our starting-point for a global media ethics would involve a conception of what philosophy can do quite different from the modest conception just mentioned. For the areas of questioning about language and communication that Wittgenstein seeks to close down – because he sees the problems they raise as illusory – are exactly the areas which Levinas' approach to communication, so clearly expounded and developed by Amit Pinchevski (2005), insists on opening up. Paradoxically, both Wittgenstein and Levinas want to move beyond the Enlightenment's misconceived problem of solipsism, but they do so in mutually exclusive ways, relying on very different conceptions of philosophy. Wittgenstein's famous private language argument (Wittgenstein, 1958) seeks to establish the irreducibly social nature of language – a topic no less important to Levinas – by arguing that our imagined sense of a solipsistic self existing in isolation from the socially sustained fabric of language derives from earlier philosophy's doomed attempt to solve the illusory problems that arise when everyday language is used outside the language-games in which alone it makes sense. As Wittgenstein put it, properly conducted, "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language . . . since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden . . . is of no interest to us" (1958, paras 109, 126). For Levinas, by contrast, the self/other dichotomy remains the key philosophical problem. It must be thought beyond but never forgotten, requiring for its transcendence a radical and continually repeated move: the invocation of a "preontological" obligation that lies beyond, and prior to, both self and other, prior to the self's detachment from or attachment to the other (Pinchevski, 2005, p. 8). The drastic nature of Levinas' notion of the preontological (criticized by Paul Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 337–338) derives from Levinas' sense of the urgent need to go on overcoming a philosophical problem – of the disjuncture of self from Other – which Wittgenstein had argued philosophy must simply forget.[2]

Ethics versus deontology?

Why, in particular, choose the neo-Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics? One incidental reason is that it is rich in writers who have sought to bridge the gap between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy.[3] But there is another larger reason. I said earlier that I want to build a framework of media ethics based on minimal premises, because of the complexity of the normative context in which we now act: the world is riven by major differences of belief and value, and media as a specialized technical and professional practice now intervenes in, and represents, the actual

lives we lead. Bernard Williams saw the complexity of modern moral debate as the basis for defending ethics over deontology (Williams, 1985). Williams insists that the openness of the Socratic question (How should I live?) is helpful because it implies a second question (How should any of us live?, or How should we live together?) (Williams, 1985, p. 20). Answering these questions does not require us to construct an abstract system of media obligations that any rational person as such is compelled to accept. Our aim can be more modest: to find starting-points for discussion, perhaps factual starting-points, around which consensus has a chance of emerging. In a world of fierce conflicts of value, it may be more effective to adopt a media ethics closer[4] in spirit to Aristotle's "naturalism" than to Kant's "transcendental idealism" (cf. Lovibond, 2002, p. 25).[5]

Here we face the apparent fault-line in contemporary moral philosophy between approaches based on notions of "the good" (ethics, which specifies virtue)[6] and approaches based on a notion of the "right" (deontology, which specifies duty).[7] I say "apparent", because this fault-line's usefulness has been questioned (O'Neill, 1996, pp. 9–23), and indeed I will later argue for an eclecticism that in part ignores it. However, in clarifying the basic orientation that led me to choose Aristotle, not Kant, as a starting-point for my work on media ethics, a brief discussion of this supposed fault-line is helpful.

The fault-line can be summed up historically in the difference between Aristotle's question (What is the good life for human beings?)[8] – and Kant's question (broadly, What actions are the duty of any rational being?).[9] There are, of course, immediate complications. It is possible to follow in the tradition of "ethics" without believing in Aristotle's teleology. There are forms of deontology that are not Kantian (Levinas); while, as already noted, philosophers such as O'Neill argue that it is the compatibilities between the ethical and deontological traditions that are more important than the oppositions.[10] But I have in mind here only a minimal difference between one approach (which I associate with the Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian traditions of virtue ethics) that searches for some open-ended, quite general principles (not a comprehensive system) for evaluating practice upon which human beings at a particular place and time might come to agree, and another approach (that I associate with at least some versions of the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy) that continually searches for a comprehensive and systematic specification of moral rules that any rational being anywhere and at any time must find compelling.

Seeking to specify fully compelling rules for media practice is, in my view, hopeless once we consider the range of interlocutors required in such an inquiry: How can we possibly hope to find agreement between Christian, Islamic, and secular traditions, for example, on what we are rationally required to do in relation to media? Each such tradition has different approaches to obligation and rationality itself (MacIntyre, 1988, Chapters 18–20). Does that mean that we should despair of developing a broader ethics, as MacIntyre's work (1988, Chapter 20) sometimes suggests? Not if the neo-Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics provides tools for developing consensus in a different direction, that is, by prioritizing questions of

the good, not the good in an abstract sense ("good" for any rational being), but the good "for man" under common conditions that can be specified.

The positive basis for building such a neo-Aristotelian argument lies in our need, as human beings, to address certain shared questions and shared facts or conditions. Prioritizing the question of "the good" – what it is to live well – does not rule out some eclectic borrowing from other traditions, whether some version of the Kantian principle of universalizability or Levinas' insights into the question of the Other. Indeed, both Kant and Levinas raise issues that can be drawn upon in our specification of "virtues" within media practice, and the harms that, if embedded in daily practice, such virtues might minimize. But I will argue that the insights of Levinas and Kant work more effectively when translated out of the language of universal obligation (what Simon Blackburn once called in relation to Kant "the mesmeric command . . . at the bottom of things" (1995, p. 42): cf. Geuss, 2005, pp. 20–21) and into the more flexible practice-based language of virtue ethics.

What might a neo-Aristotelian approach to media ethics involve?

A neo-Aristotelian ethics proceeds, Warren Quinn, argues by asking "what . . . it would be good or bad in itself to do or to aim at" on the basis of "what kind of life it would be best to lead and what kind of person it would be best to be" (Quinn, 1995, p. 186).

Two questions *(How should I live? How should each of us conduct our life so that it is a life any of us should live?)* can be posed to anyone. No assumption is made about the "community" (if any) to which questioner and respondent belong: they could be any two individuals anywhere. A further question would therefore seem to flow automatically: How should we live together? An objection might be made against that further move: What if, from my perspective, a good or even tolerable life depends on your ceasing to live? If so, the question of how we live together would not arise. But to ask any philosophical argument to give us the resources to impose a dialogue between two parties determined to kill each other is hardly reasonable: creating a space for dialogue in such extreme circumstances requires means other than philosophical argument. Relying on the question How should we live together? rests only on the minimal assumption that in some relevant respects the continued lives of each of us depend on our parallel use of common resources; no assumption of the necessity of mutual cooperation is required. Since media, distinctively, link people living parallel lives in multiple places into the same causal nexus, this point is crucial when we frame the first question of media ethics: How should any of us act ethically with and through media? All of us (whether media professionals or not) are potentially actors in relation to media resources in the digital age. But what if we lack even a framework within which agreed standards of media ethics can be assessed? Then debate about media ethics must address a preliminary question: From where (in the absence of an agreed concept of "the good" in relation to media) can we start to build a framework within which such concepts might be formulated?

This is just the most basic sketch of the starting-points of a neo-Aristotelian media ethics. Underlying these questions is not Aristotle's particular view of "human nature" – hardly acceptable today – but instead an account of the common conditions by reference to which any of us would start to answer the above questions. This minimal naturalism allows for a continuous rediscovery of what constitutes human "nature": Why assume human "nature" is fixed for all time? According to McDowell, human nature encompasses precisely the ability to live not only by certain fixed principles distinctive of the species (our "first nature") but also within a reflexively and historically adjustable set of principles that he calls "second nature" (Lovibond, 2002, p. 25, discussing McDowell, 1994, p. 84).[11] This second nature includes the processes of reflecting on our accumulating history and our first ("fixed") nature. In such reflections, how can we avoid noticing the existence of media institutions and media platforms? Two decades ago, Hans Jonas pointed out that modern ethics faced a new type of problem from classical ethics, namely the long-term effects of human technology on physical nature; the scale of human environmental action cannot be understood except as global (Jonas, 1984, p. 1). It is similarly implausible now to exclude from ethics the consequences that media messages have for a world audience even if its members, as I have insisted, may sometimes share very few moral values with the producers of those messages (O'Neill, 1990, p. 176).

A neo-Aristotelian ethics asks what stable dispositions (or "virtues") do each of us, need to have in order to live well together in such "natural" conditions.[12] Admittedly, there is a dispute in interpreting Aristotle about whether he means by "virtues" whatever dispositions might be discovered to help us live well together, or whether he draws his list of virtues from pre-existing conventions about how people should act (Swanton, 2003, pp. 9, 87; cf. McDowell, 1998). But since Aristotle is quite explicit that his ethics is not grounded in isolation from everyday thought but rather seeks to clarify that thought's foundations, this point may be of secondary importance. A neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, applied to media, would ask what virtuous dispositions can be expected to contribute to our living well together with and through media.

The notion of living well together is often expressed in the neo-Aristotelian tradition as "human flourishing". But the usefulness of this term is as disputed as the notion that human life is oriented to specifiable ends. Many would argue that the ends of human life are themselves now undecidable, since no consensual starting-points exist from which such a question can even be asked (Williams, 1985, p. 53, Swanton, 2003, pp. 1–2). But that does not mean that other aspects of "human nature" – what Foot calls "essential features of specifically human life" (2000, p. 14) – are not stable and constraining enough to serve as starting-points for thinking about what is necessary, even if not sufficient, for a good life.

We do not need then to assume either a fixed human nature or a nature aimed at universally agreed ends in order to agree that humans have in key respects a "characteristic way of going on" (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 223) from which an evaluative framework can be built.[13] Bernard Williams, on whom I draw later, develops an account of the virtues of truthfulness via a "genealogy" which "is intended to

serve the aims of naturalism" (2002, p. 22) without claiming that human nature is something either fixed or readily specifiable. And this is precisely the advantage of a neo-Aristotelian approach, that it can start a conversation about how we should live – for example, with and through media – without needing to specify fully the ends of human nature, and so without needing to foreground the disagreements that would no doubt emerge between us if we attempted such a full specification.

Accuracy and sincerity

What are the media-related virtues that might emerge from such a neo-Aristotelian perspective? Here Sabina Lovibond offers a helpful starting-point when she argues that at every stage of their history humans have had "natural interest in gathering correct information about their environment" (Lovibond, 2002, p. 77), which requires them to rely on what others tell them about it. This suggests that there is a domain, broadly termed, of communicative virtue:

> if information about deliberatively relevant circumstances is (so far as it goes) a natural good, the lack of such information is equally a natural evil and the benefit or harm we can incur from these sources brings communicative behaviour within the scope of ethics.
>
> *(2002, p. 78)*

Williams in his book *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002)[14] explores this domain in detail, identifying through a complex argument two basic "virtues of truth": accuracy and sincerity. The subtlety of his argument lies in insisting on the non-negotiable importance of these virtues for all human social life, while rejecting any assumption that particular embodiments and articulations of those virtues (and particular institutionally backed sanctions when we fall short of them) have an obligatory status for all historical periods. By non-negotiable, Williams means that, in any plausible account of a sustainable human life, it has never been enough for people to pretend to care about telling the truth, since if that was all they did, we would never have a stable basis for trusting them to tell the truth:

> the reason why useful consequences have flowed [for humanity] from people's insistence that their beliefs should be true is surely, a lot of the time, that their insistence did not look just to those consequences but rather toward the truth.
>
> *(Williams, 2002, p. 59)*

It is only therefore if truth-telling is stabilized as a virtue – a disposition that humans can rely upon, because it is a reliable characteristic of virtuous people – that it contributes to the good collective life.[15]

Williams is not arguing that we must be truthful because we are obliged as rational beings to do so, as Kant did (Williams, 2002, pp. 106–107). He is arguing only (but this is already enough) that there is a plausible explanation why humans

have come, over time, to hold each other to account for their truthfulness. Accuracy is the disposition not so much to always hit the truth (truth is too complex an achievement for that to be a plausible characteristic of anyone) but to make the "investigative investment" (Williams, 2002, p. 124) required for generally obtaining the truth. Sincerity, by contrast, is the disposition to make appropriate efforts to ensure, so far as possible, that what one says is consistent with what, more broadly, one believes.

To this point, we have said nothing about media institutions as such, and the possibility that such general virtues of truthfulness might work differently where individuals or groups aim at truthfulness with or through the use of media. (By "media" I mean institutionalized means of symbolic production, transmission and circulation.) Here we need to make a link to another philosopher who, while not exclusively writing within a neo-Aristotelian framework, had major influence in arguing for that framework's contemporary relevance: Alisdair MacIntyre. His concept of "practice" is crucial in making the general notion of ethical "dispositions" more specific. For him a "practice" (1981, p. 175) is a coherent and complex form of cooperative human activity whose internal goods involve distinctive standards of excellence, which, if achieved, extend our wider notion of human excellence. Media are plausibly a practice in this sense.

MacIntyre's notion of practice gives bite in the media case to what might otherwise seem highly generalized virtues of accuracy and sincerity. If we agree that media – the set of institutional practices for circulating representations of common life – are integral to the life-conditions that humans now encounter, that is, lifeworlds of complex interconnection across large scales (Beck, 1992; Urry, 2000), then media are plausibly part of the practices that contribute to human excellence. Conducting the practice of media well – in accordance with its distinctive aims, and so that, overall, we can live well with and through media – is itself part of human excellence. This affects not just individual journalists at a newspaper, or lone producers blogging from their rooms or tweeting from their phones but also those proprietors and corporations that sustain the conditions for journalism and media practice more broadly.

How do such ideas work when they hit the ground in a newsroom or reporter pool? Recent studies reveal an alarming gap between the conditions under which journalists work in many countries and those under which ethical action, even ethical reflection, is possible. Let's ignore authoritarian states and concentrate on democracies where supposedly government/press relations work well. Nick Davies's extensive interviews with UK broadsheet journalists, press agency employees and freelancers, (2008, pp. 12, 28, 154) suggest that journalists in the UK "work in structures which positively prevent them discovering the truth". The problem is not that journalists have changed their values: they still aim to tell the truth. It is that the conditions under which they work are not ones where that value can be consistently or reliably acted upon. This may be because of direct interference by owners, or priorities set by editors (Phillips, 2011) or because of the sheer speed of the production processes across multiple platforms in today's news production. In

the digital age the newsroom has become congested to a degree which undermines ethical reflection. And yet was not a journalism oriented toward truth the original purpose of a free press? When media owners are not disposed to support the conditions of ethical production, they can be asked: do you not, by so acting, undermine the conditions for all of us of living well together? This conflict becomes even sharper when we turn to questions of hospitality, or "care" in media practice.

Hospitality or care

Communicating well involves considering the consequences of one's falsehood for distant others as seriously as the consequences for those close to us. As Sabina Lovibond notes, there is no ethical reason to distinguish one audience from another: "only what is epistemically good enough for anyone is good enough for one's present audience" (Lovibond, 2002, p. 84). Lovibond's argument is based on the common interest in the practice of truth-telling on any scale, rather than on an absolute obligation of truthfulness for all times and places (O'Neill, 1996, p. 105). The general scope of truth-telling acquires particular importance in the era of digital media when communication for an intended local audience may suddenly and unpredictably be circulated to the largest possible global audience, for example via YouTube.

Increasingly global media present us with unfamiliar Others on a global scale, giving any discussion of the ethics of media an irreducibly global dimension. Roger Silverstone discussed the consequences in terms of a media obligation of "hospitality". Hospitality is normally understood as a virtue of the home, and as necessarily restricted in scope (O'Neill, 2000). Clearly, we cannot say that "the world" is each media outlet's home, and equally hospitality involves some boundaries when strangers are invited into the home. Silverstone sidesteps these problems by drawing on a different notion of hospitality, Derrida's "hospitality of visitation", not invitation (2007, p. 142, citing Derrida 2002). This acknowledges that media's "home" is automatically affected by distant others who cannot avoid being affected by what media do. From the permanent porousness of the "home" that media provide for their audiences, some broader notion of hospitality must, Silverstone argues, develop.

Silverstone's overall argument about "media morality" is deontological, set within the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition. Paradoxically he uses the term "virtue" when introducing "hospitality", describing it as "the first virtue of the mediapolis" (2007, p. 136).[16] But, he tends to often write about hospitality in termsless suited to a virtue and more to but an obligation, drawing on Rawls and Bauman (Silverstone, 2007, pp. 147–148). But how can media professionals have a rationally compelling obligation to be hospitable to distant others, particularly if this clashes with their basic contractual obligations to their immediate audiences, including those who buy their newspapers or pay their channel subscriptions? And how can audiences have an obligation to pay attention to the distant Other presented through media ("an obligation to listen and to hear" others, 2007 p. 136)? Silverstone underpins his notion of an Other-directed obligation of hospitality by reference to Hannah Arendt's concept of "space of appearance" (2007 pp. 32–37). Important though that

concept is, it is unhelpful here, since media audiences (and media professionals) are precisely not visible to the distant Others represented in media, and media audiences' vision of those distant others is limited to the view that media offers – quite different from the opportunities for open-ended mutual visibility that the Greek agora arguably offered its citizens.

Silverstone's argument places too much weight on the uncertain link between media and their audiences, displacing our attention from the process of producing media. The act of watching or listening, of itself, carries no opportunities to *act upon* the events to which one watches or listens: that depends entirely on other factors, including one's position in the social fabric. That, however, does not mean media ethics should have nothing to say about "audiences". On the contrary, when a non-media professional sends in an image to a broadcaster in the hope of its being used, he or she is already acting in the media process and the virtues of media practice are already relevant to evaluating that act.

A more flexible approach is to understand "hospitality" precisely as a "virtue" or disposition desirable in all those involved in the practice of media. Paul Ricoeur's late work *Reflections on the Just* offers a way forward. He attempts to reorient our conception of "the just" away from the Rawlsian theory of justice or Habermas' focus on deliberative procedure toward a broader concern with "politics in its root sense at the level of what we can call a willingness to live together" (Ricoeur, 2007, pp. 234, 248). As a form of life in the global era, living together necessarily involves media: we live together, irreducibly, in and through media. Ricoeur's broader strategy of bringing together Aristotelian ethics and Kantian deontology – indeed deconstructing that division – has some similarities with Onora O'Neill's (1996). Its starting-point is, however, Aristotelian rather than Kantian, and its target is to reformulate our understanding of Aristotle's (1976, Book 6) overarching virtue of *phronesis* or practical wisdom (prudence). A key issue for prudence in Ricoeur's account is our unavoidable relationship with others. He approaches this through the notions of "translation ethos" and "linguistic hospitality". For him, the issue of "translation" addresses the problem of "plurality in a world of dispersion and confusion" (2007, p. 28), providing a "paradigm by which to expand the problematic" of ethical thought (2007, p. 29). To "translate" in Ricoeur's extended ethical (not narrowly literary) sense is not to collapse the distance – and differences – between self and Other but "to do justice to a foreign intelligence, to install the just distance from one linguistic whole to another. Your language is as important as mine" (2007, p. 31). This disposition can also be expressed in terms of "linguistic hospitality" (2007, p. 116), grounded in an appreciation that "it is always possible to say the same thing in a different way", because "there is a stranger in every other" (2007, p. 116). The similarity with the work of Levinas (discussed earlier) is less here than might first appear, since Ricoeur makes clear that the "solicitude" that underlies such hospitality is based on a care both for others and the self (2007, p. 53), as part of living together.

Ricoeur's "translation ethos" at no point refers to media as a distinctive practice with its own practical ethics. But the link can readily be made. Indeed, his notion

of a "translation ethos" – and his metaphorical notion of linguistic hospitality – is more useful than Silverstone's "obligation" of hospitality. We have a choice. We might treat Ricoeur's reflections as a way of refining our grasp of how we relate to "the Other" in an abstract sense drawing perhaps on writing in the broad post-structuralist tradition: Kristeva's call to become "strangers to ourselves" (Kristeva, 1991) or Maurice Blanchot's insistence on the need to interrupt and "unsettle the construction of . . . any [communicative] order" (quoted in Pinchevski, 2005, p. 98). Alternatively, we can follow Ricoeur's concern with prudence in an era of complex communication flows, and apply his notion of "solicitude" or care to any scale on which we communicate through media. As Jean Seaton put it beautifully, "without news that is careful of us, how can we judge our situation, and know where we are?" (2005, p. xxiii).

It is good to be disposed to take care about the effects of our media communications as they circulate, but this derives not from any notion of territory as "home" (with its implied exclusiveness) but from the fact of our commonly experienced connectedness, the common fabric of a mediated world, which makes all of us vulnerable to each other. Misrepresentations (and the regular patterns or gaps in media representations) can always do harm. However, much we disagree on specific moral issues and priorities, we may agree on one fact: that we inhabit a world connected by a common media fabric. Just as we need to show care in using the shared institution of language, so we need to be disposed to show care in our use of media, because through media we can harm each other, and in the long run harm the fabric of public life. Onora O'Neill (1996, p. 203), who has sought to overcome the artificial divide between ethics and deontology, similarly discusses (as a "social virtue") "the sustaining of the natural and man-made environments on which both individual lives and the social fabric depend". Potentially this virtue of case through media is a principle around which neo-Aristotelian, Kantian and feminist approaches[17] to the normative questions raised by media might converge.

Conclusion

We can expect contradictions, certainly, between the media-related virtue of care with those of accuracy and sincerity. Imagine a UK journalist, who, accused of using a rhetoric against asylum seekers that is inhospitable or at least carelessly aggressive, responds that he addresses the facts (about take-up of social services in particular locations, and so on) as he, and his immediate readers, see them. But this is where a wider virtue of prudence becomes important, in identifying the need to balance competing claims – the claim of addressing readers' immediate concerns versus the claim derived from the longer-term consequences of a dehumanizing rhetoric about asylum seekers that undermines peaceable relations between the groups and territories involved.

There is then no definitive answer to the following question: What should a journalist do? Journalists often face conflicted situations, ahead, where complex facts generate no easy answers. Recognizing the intractability of many ethical

matters is an advantage of the neo-Aristotelian approach to ethics, what McDowell refers to as the "uncodifiability" of ethics (1998, p. 73). At most we can hope to specify the disposition that would enable agents in the media process to find, more often than not, the appropriate balance between seemingly incompatible ethical demands. But this modest claim is already a great deal.

For all the modesty of its starting-points and claims, a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics poses a challenge to every person who has responsibility for managing or using the resources or interfaces available for making media. If journalists increasingly work without the time, authority or resources to exercise any independent ethical discretion or choice, then they have no chance of contributing to a good life, and the media institutions in which they work risk undermining that good life. Certainly (O'Neill, 2013) truth-telling is only one part of what media institutions exist to do: they also seek to entertain us. But why accept media institutions that are systematically reckless about their employees' chances of achieving, or even aiming at, truth? What sort of human collectivity is served by entertainment that regularly misleads people as to their conditions of existence? What counts as "misleading" will, of course, often be the subject of fierce debate. Pretending we don't care ethically about the conditions under which media get made is, however, not an option.

Notes

1 See Couldry (2006, pp. 102–109).
2 For an example of how the force of Levinas' arguments depends on keeping the alternative of Enlightenment scepticism in play, see Levinas (1999, pp. 7, 9). Compare Ricoeur's comment that Levinas confuses the old problem of self/other with the continuing and unavoidable questions of how we should act (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 354).
3 Lovibond (2002), Ricoeur (1992, 2005), Taylor (1985).
4 I say "closer to" because Bernard Williams rejects "naturalism" as the formal basis of virtue ethics. However, Lovibond and MacDowell's historicist and reflexive account of "nature" (on which, see later) is different from the original Aristotelian teleology to which Williams objects. See Hursthouse (1999, Chapter 10) for helpful discussion.
5 Habermas' concept of "postmetaphysical thinking" also aims to respond to modern moral complexity but depends on a dismissal of Aristotle (and any "affirmative theory of the good life": 1992, p. 50), exactly the mistake from which MacIntyre sought to rescue us.
6 For useful discussion of what distinguishes virtue ethics, see Oakley and Cocking (2001, Chapter 1).
7 I leave out the third, and until recently, quite dominant alternative to deontology, utilitarianism. My reason, put crudely, is a belief that ethics must start out from broadly social considerations which any framework based in the optimisation of individual good (conceived in terms entirely separate from social good) cannot provide. For useful discussion of the differences, and gradual convergence between, all three approaches, see Hursthouse (1999, pp. 1–5) and Crisp (1996). For a classic, diagnosis of the ethics/deontology fault-line, see Anscombe (1997) [1958].
8 Other approaches to virtue ethics frame it differently in terms of common understandings about what count as good motivations in human beings (Slote, 2001). In what follows I keep to the neo-Aristotelian approach. For discussion of this and other differences, see Oakley and Cocking (2001, pp. 15–17).
9 Or, as Kant puts it more elaborately, what are the actions "that I could also will [such] that my maxim should become a universal law?" (Kant, 1997, p. 15).

10 The Kantian Barbara Herman goes further and argues that "the canon that sorts all moral theories as deontological or teleological" is misleading in the case of Kant, whose ethics, she argues, is not deontological, but based in the value of the "good will" (1993, Chapter 10). But I am only using the ethics/deontology distinction to indicate a broad positioning of my argument; my main argument does not depend on that distinction.
11 For a similar argument about the necessary historical dimension to virtuous practice, see MacIntyre (1981, pp. 180–181).
12 I will not consider here Swanton's (2003) attempt to develop a more inclusive virtue ethics which allows various ways of grounding the specification of virtues, some based on human flourishing and self-fulfilment, and others based on appropriate responsiveness to certain types of situation.
13 Indeed, Hursthouse argues that human nature is specifically "non-teleological" (1999, p. 256), but this does not allow for the tiered notion of first and second nature proposed by McDowell and Lovibond.
14 The virtue of truthfulness is treated also by Onora O'Neill as one of a number of "virtues of justice" along with fairness, toleration and respect for others (1996, p. 187).
15 A similar point emerges in Williams' argument against moral sceptics who doubt that truth-telling is generally in the individual's interest (2002, Chapter 5).
16 Silverstone echoes here a well-known sentence at the start of Rawls' *A Theory of justice*: "justice is the first virtue of social institutions" (Rawls, 1972, p. 1).
17 Feminist ethics of care focusses on the need for *particular* practices of care (Held, 2006). There is no contradiction, since the shared social fabric sustained by media is a particular object, but one whose scale and scope is very general and wide.

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13

WHAT AND WHERE IS THE TRANSNATIONALISED PUBLIC SPHERE?

Introduction

Public sphere theory encourages us, rightly, to focus on the *tension-ridden* space where discursive practices and normative requirements meet. How we think of that space has been transformed since Habermas's early formulations: no longer face-to-face but inherently mediated,[1] no longer singular but inevitably plural,[2] no longer single-level but multi-level and networked.[3] It is too easy, however, to assume that, merely by becoming more complex, public sphere theory has become more adequate to the actual space of mediated politics (Curran, 2000). For, whatever the complexity required, the point of public sphere theory is to generate principles whereby the *adequacy* of current forms of public consultation and deliberation can be judged in relation to the decision-making processes that concern them. Nancy Fraser's article on *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* asks, afresh, whether *any* version of public sphere theory (Habermas' original model, Habermas's recent networked model, or accounts generated from critiques of Habermas's models) performs the critical job we expect of it. Fraser thus takes the normative/concrete tension inherent in public sphere debate to a new level. But do Fraser's particular formulations of that tension offer the most productive way of addressing the deep problems to which she has helpfully drawn attention?

I approach this question as a sociologist of culture and media. For me the value of public sphere theory has been not that it offers a model which fits in any simple way with actually existing democracies, and media institutions' role within them, but that, against the background of public debate excessively influenced by market naturalism, it insists that something fundamental to our democracies *is* at stake in how public discussion and political structures interrelate, and that we *do* have normative reference-points from which to evaluate the operations of powerful political, corporate and media actors as they affect those interrelations. The task of public

sphere theory has recently become much harder: transnationalising pressures create a disjuncture between theory and actuality that, as Fraser indicates, must be urgently addressed.

Fraser's strategy is to re-scale the public sphere concept, clarifying how the key tests – of normative legitimacy and political efficacy – would apply to such a transnational public sphere: how can we establish those who would need to be included *are* fairly included and that the resulting space of debate has effective influence over the *relevant* decisions? This strategy, while it raises crucial questions of long-term interest, may (in the short term) risk focussing our attention on a problem (how might a new fully transnational public sphere be built?) that is under current conditions insoluble, while diverting us from the points within *existing* national and local public spheres where pressures of transnationalisation need and can, more plausibly, be addressed. Instead, should we aim for something more modest already suggested by Fraser's title, that is, an account of what it would be to transnationalis*e* existing public spheres?

My argument will involve making distinctions between the six presuppositions, all tied to a Westphalian model of nation-states, on which Fraser argues public sphere theory to date has depended. Fraser outlines transnationalising processes which disrupt each of these presuppositions. But are they equally far advanced for each presupposition? If yes, then, because *all* the presuppositions of the public sphere have been disrupted, there is no choice but to rethink its basis completely. But if not, it may be productive to try another approach: rather than attempting to define the conditions for a wholly new public sphere (or spheres) on a transnational scale, we can investigate, first, how transnationalising pressures might be more adequately addressed in public spheres on *every* level (including local and national) and, second, whether an eventual "transnational public sphere" might be better understood not as a single thing but as the networked resultant of transformations at multiple levels. That will be my strategy in this chapter.

Fraser's formulation of the problem with existing public sphere theory

Let me begin by summarising the problem with existing public sphere theory as Fraser sees it, bringing out the particular way Fraser sets out to solve the problem she identifies.

As Fraser clarifies, public sphere theory is not a descriptive model which works well as long as its elements track the detailed mechanisms of existing democratic states; the purpose of public sphere is normative, to assess whether existing structures provide the *right, not the wrong*, group of people (all of those affected by a set of decisions) the opportunity to participate *effectively, not trivially*, in the formulation and implementation of those decisions. Within discourse ethics this relates to an underlying principle that Seyla Benhabib expresses thus: "the basic idea behind [Habermas'] model is that only those norms can be said to be valid . . . which would be agreed to by all those affected by their consequences", reaching a decision in a

satisfactory way (Benhabib, 1996, p. 70). It follows that the conditions of normative legitimacy and political efficacy are not incidental, or subsidiary, features of public sphere theory's application to the world, but preconditions for that application having *any point at all*. For all the force of the detailed critiques of Habermas' theory to date, most, Fraser argues, including her own, have been grounded, like the theory itself, within assumptions about the Westphalian state which no longer simply hold. As a result, the efficacy and value of public sphere theory is fundamentally challenged.

Habermas' later complexification of public sphere theory (in *Between Facts and Norms*) does not escape this problem. Here is Habermas isolating the working assumptions on which his networked model of the public sphere depends:

> The distinction between normal and extraordinary mode of posing and solving problems . . . can be rendered fruitful for a sociological translation and realistic interpretation of the discourse concept of democracy *only if we introduce two further assumptions*. The *illegitimate independence* of social and administrative power vis-a-vis democratically generated communicative power is averted to the extent that the periphery has both (a) a specific set of capabilities and (b) sufficient occasion to exercise them. The first assumption, (a), refers to the capacities to ferret out, identify, and effectively thematize latent problems of social integration (which require political solutions); moreover, an active periphery *must then introduce them* via parliamentary (or judicial) sluices into the political system *in a way that disrupts the latter's routines*. . .. Resonant and autonomous public spheres of this sort [on the periphery of H'snew networked public sphere, NC] must in turn be anchored in the voluntary associations of civil society and embedded in liberal patterns of political culture and socialization; in a word, they depend on a rationalized lifeworld that meets them halfway.
>
> *(1996, p. 358, emphasis added)*

Habermas goes on to explore the conditions for this happening in terms of a relation between politics and everyday life:

> The political public sphere can fulfil its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among those who are potentially affected. It is carried by *a public recruited from the entire citizenry*.
>
> *(1996, p. 365, emphasis added)*

Two things are striking here. First, Habermas emphasises that the normative problem for democratic workings is the "illegitimate independence" of administrative power from political power (with its ultimate popular roots), so a way must be found of meshing the two together so that everyday communication ultimately finds a route by which to "disrupt the political system's routines": I will return to

this vital point in my conclusion. Second, even after posing the problem so vividly, Habermas solves it in terms that take no account of the limits of the Westphalian model: there is no other way of interpreting the phrase "entire citizenry" except as invoking a national citizenship. Indeed, Habermas' recent discussion of a possible European public sphere defines it in terms of a network for "*citizens* of all member states" (2001, p. 17, emphasis added). So those who might be relevant to everyday communication who are not formal citizens of the territory considered are, by definition, excluded from the conversation. This, as Fraser points out, is deeply problematic.

How, then, does Fraser set out to solve this problem? Fraser breaks down the problem into a consideration, one by one, of the six specific presuppositions on which the Westphalian version of the public sphere depends. Those presuppositions can be distinguished, I suggest, into three contrasting sorts: first, there is a presupposition *of intent* (presupposition (1) in Fraser's article) which ties the overall aim of a public sphere to the reform of its associated territory: so the aim of the classic public sphere is (2007, pp. 10–11) "the democratization *of* the modern territorial nation-state", "critiquing the democratic deficits of actually existing Westphalian states". Second, there are what we might call *identifying* presuppositions (listed as (2) and (3) in Fraser's article) which identify the participants or appropriate topics of debate in a national public sphere: that is, the nation-state's citizen-members and the regulation of its economic and social arrangements. Then there are *infrastructural* presuppositions (listed as (4)-(6) by Fraser) which deal with the cultural means by which a public sphere so motivated and constituted is sustained – a national media infrastructure, operating in an assumed single national language, on the basis of a national cultural tradition of argumentation and debate. In spite of these possible distinctions between these presuppositions, Fraser's aim is to show that public spheres today are "increasingly transnational or postnational" in relation to all six presuppositions.

This way of formulating the problem with public sphere theory is open to two objections. The first, an empirical objection (see next section) is that Fraser exaggerates the degree to which those infrastructural presuppositions have in fact been rendered outdated. The second objection (to be discussed immediately) is theoretical: *does Fraser's way of setting up the problem privilege one type of solution at the expense of other possible solutions?* More specifically, does Fraser privilege as a solution the building of an entirely new public sphere or spheres on a transnational scale at the expense of considering an alternative solution, that is, one achieved through the linkage of multiple spaces on a variety of scales, each transformed by transnationalising pressures no doubt, but articulated together in a new way that does not produce a primarily transnational space (or spaces) at all?

Without question, we need "a public sphere" that *in some way* is aimed at the activities of a political space larger than the nation-state (the presupposition of "intent") and we need "a public sphere" whose workings *in some way* incorporate both people beyond the nation citizenry and issues whose scope exceeds that of the nation-state (the "identifying" presuppositions). But it does not follow from this

that the only way of meeting these needs is through set of processes that operate entirely on a scale different from that of the Westphalian nation-state. More specifically, it does not follow that the only way to satisfy the problems with the presuppositions of intent and identification is to create a public sphere (or linked spheres) whose *cultural infrastructure* is "transnational", in other words a fully "transnational public sphere". Why not extend Habermas's idea of a networked public sphere more radically, applying its principle of distribution not just within the space of the nation but to produce a more adequate linkage between many different public spheres operating on different scales, local, national, regional, even global? This, I take it, is part of what James Bohman suggests through his concept of "democracy *across* borders" (2007, p. 12).

But this more radically distributed solution to the "transnational problem" is not allowed for in Fraser's account. So, when she identifies the infrastructure of the communicative contemporary public sphere, she writes only of "current flows of transnational publicity":[4] what about national and local publicity? And when she proposes solutions to the problem, she argues that public sphere theory must now address not one but two (implicitly separate) levels, with the new problems arising only in addressing the second:

> A critical conception [of the public sphere, NC] *can no longer restrict* its attention to the direction of communicative flows in established polities, where publicity should constrain an already known and constituted addressee. *In addition*, it must consider the need to construct new addresses for public opinion, in the sense of new, transnational public powers that possess the administrative capacity to solve transnational problems.
>
> *(2007, p. 23, emphases added)*

Fraser's two-level formulation leaves no room for a different transformation: the addressing of the "already known and constituted addressee" in a new way, through deliberations involving an adjusted version of the original group of participants, operating through an adjusted version of the national cultural infrastructure. Fraser's weighting of her argument toward one, more drastic solution matters if it excludes from consideration adjustments that are easier to imagine than the construction of a completely new addressee.

The limits of transnational publicity

Let me now evaluate Fraser's empirical starting-point: have in fact all of the presuppositions of the public sphere model have been disrupted by transnationalisation to the degree that Fraser supposes?

In discussing the "where" of public sphere communication, Fraser says this is no longer a "national communications infrastructure" (presumably old-style print and broadcasting) but "deterritorialised cyberspace". Yet, in the case of the UK, TV (which is largely TV addressed to a UK audience) remains the main news source

for 65 per cent. of the population, while the Internet is the main news source for only 6 per cent.. (Ofcom, 2007, figure 3.1); while hours watching terrestrial news still (at nearly 2 hours per week) dwarf those spent on Internet news sites (just over an hour a month), a multiple of eight (Ofcom, 2007, Figure 3.4 and Table A2.26).[5] Overall UK TV viewing was *unchanged* between 2002–2007 (Ofcom, 2007–8). While exactly comparative European figures are difficult to obtain, in Germany in 2008 76.5 per cent. still used TV daily for news, compared with 14.9 per cent. for Internet (Oemichen & Schröter, 2008, Table 9), and overall TV viewing *rose* (from 214 to 225 minutes daily) during 2002–07.[6] So these statistics are hardly evidence of a shift to deterritorialised *cyberspace*, even if (which I doubt) we should accept that cyberspace *is* deterritorialised: again we should note that, after social networking sites, YouTube and eBay, the BBC is by some margin the most searched for brand for UK Internet users according to the latest available figures (Hitwise, 2008, p. 5).

Fraser also makes an argument for drastic change in relation to the language-base of the public sphere. Certainly, there are issues about how, in Britain, for example, the parallel worlds of English and, say, Polish or Arabic media can be linked up. This is hardly happening at the moment and needs to be developed. But this does not require us to put all our efforts into imagining, in place of Britain's dominant English language public sphere, a public sphere that is overall multilingual, an extremely difficult undertaking.

More generally, if we think about the public sphere sociologically, as a process underpinned by habits of media use in everyday life, these habits remain, and are likely to remain, largely *national, not transnational*, in their focus. In the Public Connection project on which I worked at LSE with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham between 2003 and 2006, we found, contrary to expectation, little evidence that people were oriented either to media or to public worlds beyond the national or the local (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007). That is not to say that national and local public spheres are not, in new ways, porous to transnational pressures, only that habits of media consumption are not simply determined by those new possibilities.

None of this is accidental or aberrant. On the contrary, the systems that actually regulate *everyday* life (taxes, border controls, rights to start a business, criminal law) still *issue* in large part from the nation-state and not from a transnational power source, even if transnational powers set the parameters within which national states can act in these domains; and they still get implemented often at a *local* level. So why should transnationalising pressures not continued to be best challenged, initially at least, within national and local public spheres?

If Fraser is incorrect in claiming that all the presuppositions of the public sphere model have become invalid at once, then there is no obvious advantage in imagining the public sphere to be rebuilt *de novo* on some other scale, targeted at another addressee and populated by a differently constituted group of citizens. Indeed, as we move beyond an exclusively Westphalian understanding of the political processes that the public sphere aims to regulate, the nation-state may remain crucial to that transformation.

From the transnational public sphere to transnationalised public spheres

Arguably, then, restoring public sphere theory's critical edge involves not only the longer-term imagining a completely new object, a public sphere (or spheres) on a transnational scale but more immediately answering a different question: *what would it be to transnationalise the local and national public spheres within what are still largely national media infrastructures, cultures that are still relatively homogeneous linguistically, and historical traditions of political engagement that till now have been, but arguably no longer should remain, exclusively limited to contributions from national citizens?* This would apply Fraser's most radical proposal – her reworking of the "all affected" principle in terms not of the default position of a national citizen-body but a broader understanding of "co-imbrication" in political, social and economic processes that cross borders – to *existing* public spheres. Let me develop these thoughts a little further.

Fraser talks throughout the article about a "transnation*al* public sphere", but her title *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* is compatible with a different term: the transnationalis*ed* public sphere (*or spheres*). This might seem a minor semantic difference, but it is not. Transnationalising pressures, I am suggesting, create two quite different types of challenge for democratic politics: a challenge of *extension* – so that decisions increasingly need to be made, and public opinion starts to need to be formed, across much larger spaces than before (addressed potentially by something we might call a transnational public sphere, separately identifiable from national or local public spheres); and a challenge *of intensity*, so that what counts *as* a national or local issue needs itself to be rethought as our awareness of the interdependence of local actions and translocal forces increases. This second challenge – of intensity – introduces a transnational dimension into the most local of acts, and so requires that *every* public sphere at *any* scale becomes amenable to influences, voices, cultural norms and media inputs that do not fit within the implied boundaries of the Westphalian model. We might fear this "unstitches" the fabric of the public sphere at the national and local levels entirely. Alternatively, we can imagine it as *enriching* the fabric of national and local public spheres, in the process *re-forming* national and local citizens into a larger group of actors with a sensitivity to transnational processes and demands, thereby perhaps making imaginable more effective long-term political mechanisms on a trans-national scale.

On the level of individual practice, some such transformations are already under way. Think of the choices we make on a supermarket aisle about whether to buy local produce or produce flown in from across the world; think of our choice whether or not to buy a cheap sandwich whose low price, it may turn out, depends on the exploitation of migrant workers in an illegal factory just a few miles from where we live; think of people going to work in the knowledge that their job may depend not only on management decisions made far away but also on national or local government's willingness to treat distant "market-based" decisions as open to "political" intervention or something beyond the bounds of political challenge. Some of these choices are beginning to be recognisable as part of politics, others, as

yet, are not. But they are all examples of how transnational forces shift potentially the boundaries of the political on every scale.

It is here – staying within the national and local scale – that critical public sphere theory, and particularly Fraser's rethinking of the "all affected" principle, immediately cuts into contemporary practice. This connects with other critical reflections on contemporary democracy: the need for what Pierre Rosanvallon calls new "acts and discourses for producing commonality" (2007, p. 250) at all levels, including local politics; and indeed, Fraser's separate work on the injustices in the framing of politics (2005) at all levels.

If we consider the case of migrant workers who move from poorer to richer economies, resolving the issues of regulation, legal rights and justice is impossible within the confines of an individual state. Yet the resulting issues of justice, fair treatment, resources and recognition generally arise first at national, indeed local, levels. However, migrants rarely appear as political or social actors in Britain's public sphere, important though they are to its national and local economies: a rare and impressive exception, outside the normal range of daily media, was Ken Loach's (2007) film *It's a Free World*, about Polish migrant workers in London.

How should we think about the implications of this paradigmatic case? It may imply that migrant workers should have a voice, in some way, in the organisation of resources and the taking of decisions in the localities where they make a sustained contribution to the economy and social provision: this is already a major change from the present circumstances; to respond to it would require a major rethinking of existing local and national public spheres

It may also imply a wider principle, that any one (wherever they are) affected by an international issue (in this case the rules governing migration of labour and their application) should be represented in any decisions on the adoption or implementation of those rules. This second possibility would seem to be implied by Fraser's argument to replace the "citizenship test" as a short-cut to addressing the "all affected" principle by a different principle of "co-imbrication" in "a common set of . . . life conditioning structures whose effects are at issue". But specifying all the groups across the world "affected" by issues such as global labour markets (or indeed the global economy or global warming) would be very difficult; prima facie *everyone* is almost affected in some way or other. And imagining a communications infrastructure that would enable this huge group to talk and be heard where it matters even more difficult, not to say unimaginable in its complexity. This is not to say that transnational debate (international NGOs, and so on) is irrelevant to such issues – one can easily imagine an international campaign online making a significant difference on any level where such issues are discussed. But within the current political infrastructure, it seems too difficult to imagine how to constitute a public sphere that reflects on a transnational scale the interest of all world citizens in the many issues raised by transnational migration and labour.

More practical in the immediate term is to consider how the quality of local and national spheres might be transnationalised, influencing *national* decision-processes, and through them indirectly international decision-making processes. Local press

for example might be encouraged to show greater sensitivity to a range of local populations: Polish migrant workers in the UK have (in towns such as Reading) local Polish newspapers, but that is not the same as their interests and voices being more adequately represented elsewhere in local or national public spheres. Do not the voices of migrant workers in Britain, and indeed their families abroad who depend on their remitted income, need to be heard more in British media than at present? How often are they represented other than in stereotyped, hostile form?

This is not just a matter of better rules or regulations. It is something more fundamental: a matter, as Etienne Balibar writes, of putting the term "community of citizens" "back into action" so that its recognition enables us to take into account "the contribution of all those who are present . . . in [a] social space" (Balibar, 2004, p. 50). Without doubt, Nancy Fraser's article challenges us to move in this direction.

Conclusion

My aim has not been to give up on Fraser's insistence that we need to rescue the critical edge of public sphere theory. Only on the basis of such theory are we impelled to ask: *do* the transnationalised public spheres just envisaged involve all the right people? *are* they effective in the right places? And to what extent do our answers to those first two questions *require also* a separate transnational public sphere that *supplements* the national and local public spheres and addresses political entities formed on scales beyond the national? If they do, then the problems Fraser raises about the constitution of that supplementary, newly located public sphere return. In so far also as the international hegemony of neoliberal discourse *trumps* national and local deliberation in particular places, there *is* a democratic deficit (Habermas, 2001), which even transnationalised national and local public spheres must address.

This leads to an underlying problem whose urgency, Fraser suggests, but which is unresolved in any version of public sphere theory: how should we understand the *articulation* of public sphere theory to the conditions under which existing democracies work? While Slavko Splichal (Splichal, 2009) is right that public sphere theory itself cannot define the conditions under which the "public" formally influence government (a matter for political science and democratic theory), there is a problem if existing public spheres conform, say, to Habermas's networked model, yet work in ways of which national governments take little account, as Davis (2009, pp. 289–294) argues for the UK case.

What is the underlying notion of articulation between public sphere and political decision-making (distinct from formal political influence) that gives sense to public sphere theory? Here we reach the boundary of what that theory specifies; since this articulation is not internal to the public sphere itself, it has remained little discussed. In earlier versions it was based on an implicit condition of *resonance*: discussions in the London coffee house could be *assumed* to matter to the UK state because they circulated, gathered momentum, were reworked and refashioned, in a word "resonated", within a space whose boundaries for most purposes were co-terminous with the space that determined the actions of that state, the UK's

bounded national territory. But such resonance becomes more difficult to assume when both the flow of public discussion and the pressures which shape state actions spill beyond national borders. The deep risk transnationalising pressures pose for the public sphere as a practical concept is that neither citizen discourse nor the networks of political action are *ever* focused in such a way that they are heard in dialogue with each other.

Our best starting-point for addressing this risk, I have argued, is not to fall short in imagining a transnational public sphere we do not yet know, but to consider what it would mean to transnationalise the public spheres we do know. That leads to an issue neglected by Fraser, but also not answered here: how to move away from the idea that each public sphere has an exclusive citizen constituency toward a notion of overlapping constituencies whose mutual interactions require regulation in ways that have not yet been clarified. How, in other words, can we rethink for a world of increased complexity the conditions under which public opinion at any level are adequately articulated with the scales of political action?

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Notes

1 Compare Habermas (1996, p. 362 on media) with Peters (1993), Thompson (1993).
2 Compare Habermas (1996, pp. 354–355) with Fraser (1992).
3 Habermas (1996, p. 360).
4 As when she writes: "Unless we can envision conditions under which current flows of transnational publicity could conceivably become legitimate and efficacious." (2001, p. 20).
5 In the Netherlands, the multiple was almost as high (6.8, based on an average of 46.7 minutes per day spent on consuming television news and 6.9 minutes a day spent on internet-derived news): source: Mediamonitor (2009). www.mediamonitor.nl. Thanks to Irene Costera Meijer for alerting me to this Dutch source.
6 Source: Medien Basisdaten (2009). www.ard.de/intern/basisdaten/onlinenutzung/. Thanks to Andreas Hepp and Jeffrey Wimmer for supplying me with this and other German statistics.

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14

A NECESSARY DISENCHANTMENT

Myth, agency and injustice in a digital world

Introduction

I'm delighted to be back at LSE, and particularly its Department of Media and Communications, after seven years away. In marking my return, I want to give you some idea of how I've been thinking and researching about media and communications over the past 20 years and of the themes that currently preoccupy me. I am interested in how certain institutions with concentrated power over the production and circulation of symbols (we've usually called them "media") have for at least two centuries been bound up with our possibilities of knowing the social. By the term "social", I mean the web of interrelationships and dependencies between human beings which are always, in part, relations of meaning.[1]

Media are institutions with particular power over the means for *representing* shared reality, reality that becomes recognised as "ours", in part, through what media do. To grasp how this power works, we need to follow the larger stories about "society" and the "social world" that get told through and about our everyday uses of media. That means making media's familiarity strange, and taking, as feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) put it, "the everyday world as problematic". In that spirit, I will use the language of anthropology to describe three "myths" by which the relations between media and social knowledge have been framed and disguised. Myths that have emerged at different times but now overlap each other. I will call them "the myth of the mediated centre", "the myth of 'us'" and "the myth of Big Data" (that is, of Big Data as social knowledge). The institutions we usually call "media" (television and radio companies, newspaper corporations) were central to the first myth, but are increasingly displaced in the production of the second and third, as centralized information and image flows ("media") becomes entangled with the building and sustaining of platforms for social interaction (such as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo) and with the continuous gathering of data about us whose

value fuels those platforms and increasingly the whole of the media and cultural industries. Calling these different processes "myths" enables us to see an underlying pattern in how, as societies, we make sense of organising things around *assumptions* that certain types of information, expertise and knowledge are more valuable than others, and offer us a privileged view on the reality of social life. I say "we" because these myths are not merely an elite production: we are all, potentially, involved in producing these myths through our everyday actions (making "myth" a more useful term, incidentally, than "ideology"). Each myth I have mentioned has a distinctive domain, a distinctive effect and a distinctive set of beneficiaries.

To anticipate my story, *the myth of the mediated centre* has as its domain the organisation of everyday life and resources around the productions of large media institutions. Its effect is to make sense of inclusive media-based social collectivities: historically, these have been focussed on national (sometimes regional) broadcasting territories. This myth has various beneficiaries: proximately, media institutions themselves; ultimately government (which needs large media to provide the means for assuming that it can still talk to its population) and advertisers, or least those advertisers still interested in buying access to whole populations or segments of them. The "*myth of us*" has, as its domain, our activities of social interaction as registered by social media platforms; its effect is to underwrite the belief on which those platforms rely that *this* is where we now come together: the "us" here is not necessarily national, it is just as easily transnational. This myth's immediate beneficiaries are the platform owners, while the ultimate benefit passes to the institutions from government to marketers that want to remain in touch with us this way. The *myth of big data* is the strangest of the three myths I'll discuss tonight, because it seems to have nothing to do with media institutions, and its operations are indeterminate in scale. Its domain is simply: everything – the entire extent of the data we generate as we live and interact. Its effect is to reinforce our belief that such data offer a new route to *social* knowledge as well. Its proximate beneficiaries are the new data mining and data analysis industry; its ultimate beneficiaries are businesses which want continuous marketing access to whatever we do, and states which are rethinking government as a version of total data access.

Each such myth, by rationalizing a certain perspective on how we come to know the social, obscures our possibilities for imagining, describing and enacting the social *otherwise*. And each myth, to be unpacked, requires its own distinctive type of interpretation or hermeneutic. Which is where the special power of the myth of Big Data emerges, because it challenges the very idea that the social is something we can *interpret* at all. I'll return to this anti-hermeneutic danger later, but for now I'll recall a great philosopher, the late Bernard Williams, who articulated that danger poignantly in one of his last public lectures: "we run", he said, "the risk that the whole humanities enterprise of trying to understand ourselves is coming to seem peculiar". And yet, he wrote, "we all have an interest in the life of that study – not just a shared interest but an interest in [its being] a shared interest" (2006, pp. 198–199). Indeed, that interest is integral to any notion of *social* understanding.

The myth of the mediated centre

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning of my story. What exactly do I mean by "media"? "Media" are, first of all, technological means for producing, circulating and receiving *communications*. We would have no media unless human life were constituted, in a crucial respect, by communications: by the exchanges of signs that enable acts of communications to *make* sense, to accumulate over time *as* meaning, *as* knowledge. As Paul Ricoeur put it, "substituting signs for things. . . [is] more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation" (1980, p. 219).

It became essential, however, at a certain point in history to mark off the work of "media" infrastructures from the general flow of communications. This occurred when technological forms of communications emerged that could consistently and reliably transmit certain bundles of meaning across large territories. Many would associate this with the start of large-scale printing in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe.

The notion of "*the* media", in which I've been strongly interested in my work, emerged in the early 20th century (according to the OED) with the interconnected growth of the modern state, modern economy and modern media institutions: stable infrastructures and networks for the production and circulation of communication packages to a state's whole population. The social theorist who paid most attention to these shifts was Gabriel Tarde (1969). Through newspapers, radio, film and television's intensified forms of simultaneity, media gathered populations, or seemed to, in rituals of national attention that took initially quite curious forms such as in the UK the media event of the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race: I still remember my mother wearing an Oxford blue ribbon on the race day (she had never been to university). Such rituals evolved into more stable genres such as the coronation (1953 in Britain, 1958 in Japan), the state funeral (1963 in the USA, 1965 in Britain), the sporting spectacle, and so on.

Media institutions' relations to social knowledge have been entangled from the start with the submerged categories, norms and exclusions through which *some* notion of national life or culture gets constituted. Understanding these relations means going beyond the analysis of particular media contents and production processes and considering media institutions' role in the stories we tell about ourselves, as members of a social domain, or indeed of a democratic one. Raymond Williams captured this in his 1974 inaugural Lecture at Cambridge when he wrote of the role of TV drama in providing "images, representations, of what living is now like" (1975, p. 9) in societies that were becoming increasingly "opaque". But it was a Latin American scholar, Jesus Martín-Barbero, who summed up most neatly the shift that a content-based media research must undergo to fulfil Williams' core insight. He wrote a book called "From the Media to the Mediations" (oddly the English edition relegated the Spanish main title to subtitle: Martín-Barbero, 1993). And in Britain Roger Silverstone, founder of LSE's Dept of Media and Communications, against the prevailing fashions in media research, argued for a wider view of

the social and cultural processes that media constitute, which he called "mediation" (Silverstone, 2002).

I have tried to maintain this tradition of thinking about media institutions" consequences for social knowledge through the term "myth" which I introduced a few minutes ago. I use the term the "myth of the mediated centre" (Couldry, 2003, 2012) to point to the long history whereby media institutions became increasingly implicated in the languages, practises and organisational logics of whole societies. This myth is what we might call a "reserve rationalization" that makes sense of our organising our lives around the content flows of media organisations; it tells us that society *has* a "centre" of value, knowledge and meaning, and that particular institutions, those we call "media", have a privileged role in giving us access to that supposed "centre". Media institutions work hard to sustain that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows "what's going on" for us as a society. So too do other institutions, such as governments and political parties, which depend on something like a mediated centre to underwrite their "space of appearances". This is how media institutions' symbolic power gets reproduced. Media have evolved elaborate categories of thought to express the myth of their centrality: for example, the language of "liveness" and celebrity, the greater value given to what's "in" the media over what isn't. But, as I have argued for a decade or so, we need to disenchant that language, not because it is necessarily bad for us but in order to grasp all the work done that keeps it in place and sustains the particular perspective on social knowledge that it involves.[2]

Paradoxically, my analysis has become less controversial as, with digital media, the plausibility of the myth of the mediated centre has in some ways declined! In the past 10 years, it has become ever more obvious *when* media are telling us they are central to our lives and to society's life, *and why* – because for some sectors such as the press, audiences have declined irreversibly, while traditional media must compete for our attention with so many other communication interfaces. But the myth of the mediated centre still provides a useful reference-point to interpret the next media format that claims to offer a privileged standpoint on our shared "reality". We still need that "hermeneutic of suspicion".

However, such a hermeneutic is no longer enough to grasp what media are doing, and what we are now doing with media. It is not that "media" have disappeared, or that media's claims to be central have diminished – arguably those claims have become more insistent.[3] It is rather that the whole terrain of media (and media institutions) has been reshaped by huge external forces. Fundamental has been what Rainie and Wellman (2012, p. ix) call the "triple revolution" of 1) the Internet as a personalized mode of one-to-one and many-to-many communication, 2) the continuous availability of both interpersonal and mass communication while on the move, and 3) the resulting intensification of social networking. A key tool for such networking has been "social media platforms", such as Facebook. Social media are of fundamental importance to the myth of the mediated centre, because they offer a new form of centrality, a new *social* "liveness", mediated apparently *by us* rather than by content-producing media institutions. The implications for media

as social institutions are profound. When we think about media today, we cannot sharply separate, as we once did, media infrastructure (for the centralized distribution of institutional content) from communications infrastructure (for distributed, interpersonal forms of communication). Both now flow into and over each other and across the same platforms.

But there is no question of social media simply substituting *for* mass media institutions. Large-scale media content producers, and cultural industries linked to them such as advertising, are already closely involved *in* social media. Indeed, social media platforms, far from being an authentic social response to large media, represent an entirely new business model for media and communications infrastructures. And, as this new way of organising business and our lives around digital platforms becomes normalized, a new myth is emerging to make sense of this.

The myth of "Us"

A new myth about the collectivities we form when we use platforms such as Facebook. An emerging myth of *natural* collectivity that is particularly seductive, because here traditional media institutions seem to drop out altogether from the picture: the story is focussed entirely on what "we" do naturally, when we have the chance to keep in touch with each other, as, of course, we want to do. Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley (1978) had a brilliant phrase for the myth of the mediated centre at its mass media peak in the late 1970s: the "nation now". Today, when Facebook offers to "tell the story of our lives", we have: "us now". Of course, this myth is not yet fully established: if the myth of the mediated centre took decades to become so, the myth of "us" too will only fully stabilise over time. Nor am I the first to detect a mystification here: Christian Fuchs (2011) and Jose Van Dijck (2013) have brought out the *competing* norms at work in the proprietary business models of social media. We see the myth's effects in accounts of political protests across the world in the past 3 years as Twitter or Facebook revolutions, or in the *Guardian*'s recent listing (1 September 2013, *Media* section) of "us" as media personality of 2013.

But again, why talk of "myth", why disenchant what so often is good fun? Because we must be wary when our most important moments of "coming together" *seem* to be captured in what people happen to do on platforms whose economic value is based on generating *just such* an idea of natural collectivity. It would not be enough for Facebook, for example, to say that lots of small groups, unknown to each other, do roughly similar things behind virtual closed doors. It is vital to the value claims on which Facebook depends for it to open as many of those interconnecting doors as possible and claim that Facebook is what "we" are now doing together. "We", the collectivity of everyday people, everywhere. Vague as it is, this claim grounds any number of specific rhetorics and judgements about what's happening, what's trending, and so (by a self-accumulating logic) what *matters*: for government, society, business, and for us.

The myth of "us", however, because it is loosely focussed across vast platforms (in Facebook's case of 1.1 billion users in over 200 countries), requires a special type

of analysis. Foucault in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* used the term "system of dispersion" for patterns of communication, documentation, and action that are rule-like across many different sites. He talks of "practices that systematically *form* the objects of which they speak" (1972, p. 49). Remember there is no collectivity, no "us", of the sort we have come to talk about around social media, until those platforms attract "us" (whoever we are) to use them, and link to them. The myth of "us" is even less of a belief system than the myth of the mediated centre; it is more a basic form of orientation, what Andre Jansson (2013, p. 289) calls the "centripetal dynamic" of always "checking in", so routine that it requires not a hermeneutic of suspicion (there is often little to deconstruct) but a hermeneutic of tracking, tracking us as we perform the act of "being us", on platforms that propose we do just that.

But the myth of "us" is spawning academic discourses that do need some deconstruction, some suspicion. Take Rainie and Wellman's book *Networked* that I mentioned earlier, where they claim that we are witnessing the rise of "a different social order. . . [a] networked [social] *operating system* [that] gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs" (2012, pp. 8–9, emphasis added). "The new media" they write "*is* the new neighbourhood" (2012, p. 13). There are two problems with such language. First, rhetoric about the social does the work of analysis: what do these writers mean by "social"? does it relate to what we have meant by that word in the past? Second, such writing is silent about the other, possibly also social (or even anti-social), features of the territory *across which* this "us" is gathered. The myth of "us", like all myth, disguises the other knowledges it helps us lose along the way. So, we need to dis-enchant such rhetorical claims about the new social world that platform-based networks make possible.

One route to doing so is to think about the economics of such platforms. Social platforms benefit a very different type of advertiser from mass broadcasting. An advertiser who is concerned with reaching not big audiences gathering simultaneously at a particular place but individuals tracked serially as they cross the media landscape, including on social media. We all know that the tracking of our activity on social media sites *is* the basis of the value Facebook sells to advertisers and, indirectly, to the new data-mining industry that has emerged to create additional value out of that data. As Joseph Turow explains in his book *The Daily You* (Turow – 011), traditional media (to survive) must deal with this new industry, often offering their own data-gathering capacities to tempt potential advertisers. The "social" at which media processes are targeted is being reconstructed all around us. In a video roadshow just before Facebook flotation's last year, Mark Zuckerberg claimed Facebook is "a fabric that can make *any* experience online social" (quoted Van Dijck, 2013, p. 67), sounding more like a social theorist than many social theorists so-called.

The myth of big data

The value in this newly constructed social domain is unimaginable without a third myth, the myth of big data. Of course, Big Data – the huge capacities of

computer-based analysis now increasingly influencing science, corporate and governmental agendas – is not *itself* mythical. Massive computing capacity really is vital to discovering complex patterns in huge datasets, for example in the medical field; the servers that manage the flow of our everyday communications really do involve huge costs (on one estimate nearly $150 billion a year: Gartner quoted in Arthur, 2013); and there really is a practical problem of interpreting all the data now circulating (a recent Japanese film launch generated 150,000 tweets per second (Arthur, 2013), so if you took 6–7 seconds to read and respond to any one, another million would *already* be there by the time you had finished!). But I'm interested here (as with the first two myths I discussed) in the claims now being made about what Big Data can achieve for understanding our world.

Those claims matter, in part, because Big Data capacity is increasingly integrated into advertising and marketing in the form of the means to track vast numbers of individuals (data company Acxiom claims to track more than 700 million consumers globally): so Big Data affects the wider field where market-based media compete for funding. More broadly, "Big Data" advocates' claims about what *counts as* social knowledge affect all of us interested in producing social knowledge: whether in the media or in academic disciplines that research the social, as Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007) warned a few years back in an article called *The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology*. Big data's new "politics of measurement" (in anthropologist James Scott's phrase: 1998, p. 29) is changing the terrain on which all large institutions (including governments) can *claim* to tell us the way things are.

I am not the first to talk of "myth" in relation to Big Data. Tom Deutsch (2013), a commentator on IBMDataMag.com, wrote recently of the "vendor myths" about the qualities or problems with particular types of big datasets. More deeply, Kate Crawford at MIT's Center for Civic Media who with danah boyd has done so much to draw academic attention to the issues around Big Data (boyd & Crawford, 2012), has spoken of the myths about the neutrality of big datasets and our chances of avoiding being identified by Big Data gatherers. As she noted, "Big Data is something we create, but it's also something we imagine" (quoted in Hardy, 2013). Absolutely, and I'm concerned here with an even more wide-ranging act of imagination that connects Big Data practices to our very possibilities for social knowledge.

Listen to Victor Mayer-Schonberger and Kenneth Cukier in their recent book *Big Data: A Revolution that will Transform the Way We Live, Work and Think* (2013). They celebrate the fact that, in response to the almost impossible challenge of making sense of the vast masses of data we can now collect, analysts are giving up on specific hypotheses and instead focussing on generating, through countless parallel calculations, "a really good proxy" for whatever is associated with a phenomenon, and then relying on *that* as the predictor. Sometimes the proxy makes indirect interpretative sense: as in the controversial case where US retailer Target started communicating with a young woman on the basis she was pregnant, just because she had started buying a basket of consumer products that *their* predictive model associated with women who would shortly *start* buying pregnancy products.

Sometimes, however, the proxy makes no interpretative sense at all, and indeed this is the authors' point. This lack of sense doesn't matter, they argue, because a really good proxy, once discovered, will help us *see* regularity across vast numbers of variables that would otherwise be invisible. The result is to undercut the rationale of not just qualitative methods of analysis but also of the interpretative models – the hermeneutics, if you like – that for decades have driven large-scale survey research. And, if we reject the very possibility of such a hermeneutic, then we appear to disarm hermeneutic *critique* also, making the myth of Big Data armour-plated against criticism.

So, let's follow this third myth in more detail. Myth works, as I've often argued following Maurice Bloch (1989) and Roland Barthes (1972), through ambiguity: through sometimes claiming to offer "truth" and at other times to be merely playful, providing what, in the George W. Bush era, was called "plausible deniability", but here at the level of claims *about* knowledge claims! So, Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, on the one hand, say Big Data bring "an essential enrichment in human comprehension" (2013, p. 96). They go further, proposing a large project of "datafication" that involves quantifying every aspect of everyday phenomena to enable Big Data analysts to find its hidden order: the result will be "a great infrastructure project" like Diderot's 18th century encyclopaedia: "this enormous treasure chest of *datafied* information . . . once analysed, will shed light on social dynamics at all levels, from the individual to society at large" (2013, pp. 93–94, emphasis added). The world too will look different: "we will no longer regard our world as a string of happenings that we explain as a natural *or social* phenomenon, but as a universe comprised *essentially* of information" (2013, p. 96, emphasis added). On the other hand, when the moral consequences of acting on the basis of "Big Data" arises – for example, arresting people for offences they are *predicted* to commit but haven't yet – they back off and say that Big Data only provide probabilities, not actualities, and worry about "fetishizing the output of our [data] analysis" (151).

Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier's is just one of many books making similarly mythical claims. A trailblazing article in 2007 by *Wired* magazine editor Chris Anderson called *The End of Theory* (Anderson, 2007) announced that access to "Big Data" meant: "out with every theory of human behaviour, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology and psychology". Why? Because the proxies that Big Data generate are good enough; or as Google's research director put it, "you can succeed without them". But success for who? For what purpose? In the service of whose or what notion of knowledge?

Google's clearly, and that of many other data-processing institutions big and small but the unintended side-effects for the rest of us may be less positive. Writing about how governments' understanding of, and decision-making, about its populations will increasingly rely on Big Data, Evelyn Ruppert suggests that we will all get used to being governed not on the basis of our individual features but as "data doubles" that "will supplant older notions of the general population" (2011, p. 223): predictive strings that tell those who care what, say a man in his 50s with a certain educational background will do on a Thursday evening in November.

And, as with all the myths I've discussed, we too are involved in its reproduction, supplying information (to government and countless other collectors, including social media platforms) about what we do, as we do it, allowing that information to supplant other possible types of information about ourselves, what we say, and how we reflect on our situation. Algorithmic practices are now, for example, at the core of states' modes of managing border security risk, as geographer Louise Amoore (2011) shows. In development is a quite distinctive *working model* of "what human beings are" that validates new types of evidence and expertise – and supplants other knowledges of our present and our futures.

To disenchant this new myth, we need a new type of interpretation or hermeneutic: what paradoxically we might call "a hermeneutic of the *anti*-hermeneutic". Judith Butler provides a clue to this when in her book *Precarious Life*, discussing how a media of excessive spectacle (too much showing) narrows our grasp of the human, she writes that "there is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a *refusal* of discourse" (2004, p. 36, emphasis added). It is the *gaps and breaks* in our languages of social interpretation, authorised by the myth of Big Data, on which we must focus. The CEO of a big-data-based sentiment analysis company, sounds reasonable when he says that "if we're right 75 per cent. to 80 per cent. of the time, we don't care about any single story" (quoted Andrejevic, 2013, p. 56).[4] But if the Big Data model works by equating our only forms of social knowledge with such *probabilities*, then we have already started organising things so that the single story – your story, my story – really doesn't matter. That raises fundamental questions about individual voice, and the way voice is valued in our societies (a link back to another theme in my earlier work: Couldry, 2010).

The myth of Big Data is oriented to the social world differently from the other myths I have discussed. It does not have as its domain a national population, or even the particular collectivities that might gather online. It builds its population, data-bit by data-bit, through a series of operations that bypass earlier ideas of social interrelations. Its new form of "social knowledge" *splits up discourse populations*: the groups that could once be talked about *as* populations for various purposes. It *fractures the space of discourse*, depicting its data subjects in ways that don't connect any more with the space of action and thought in which actual individuals think they live; and it *stretches the time of discourse*, aggregating action-fragments from any moment in the stream of a person's recorded acts into patterns that bear little relationship to how those people *themselves* understand the sequence and meaning of their actions.

Combine all this and mystify it through the myth of Big Data – and you risk replacing older ways of talking about the social world that can still be related to social actors with myriad data-strings that lack *any* elements that connect with how individuals, with recognisable sets of human aims and capabilities, make sense of what they do. And so, since hermeneutics (and the exchange of signs) is the basis of social life, in installing the Myth of Big Data into our working practices for generating and attributing knowledge, we risk unravelling the social itself, or at least the languages of social description on which not just sociology but also justice and

politics, have relied.[5] We risk building a social landscape peopled by what the 19th century Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol (2004) called "dead souls": human entities that have financial value (in his novel, if you remember, as mortgageable assets; in our new world, as unwitting data producers), but that are *not alive*, not at least in the sense we know human beings to be alive.

And yet this transformation may not seem "peculiar" to us (in Bernard Williams' word), because we have become accustomed to giving accounts of ourselves in such data-saturated ways on social networking sites and elsewhere; as such habits become established, we may lose the sense that our collective life could lie anywhere else than in such "datafied" forms. And this matters not just to those, like me, with a vested interest in certain ways of talking about the social. It matters to all citizens – to all those who would be citizens – that corporate interests and increasingly *the state too* aspires to know us through Big Data. As John Lanchester put it in a fine article in the *Guardian* in October (Lanchester, 2013), the surveillance capacities of the American and British states operate increasingly on the principle that "all they need is everything".[6] It would be a mistake to see the problem here as simply "the big, bad state", and I am not concerned Prism and Tempora tonight. My point is that the myth of Big Data has *already* rationalized a state of affairs where a network of data-gathering and data-amalgamating institutions has, or aspires to have, everything (what Acxiom calls "big marketing data": Phil Mui, Acxiom's chief technology officer, quoted Steel, 2013). As governments and corporations increasingly prioritise access to "Big Data" in their visions of how they will govern or profit (or both), we are only a step away from the fact, *not* the myth, of continuous surveillance from all directions as the new basis of how societies and the world are ordered.[7]

Beyond the myth of big data

So, what can we do about this? It is not enough to simply reject the myth of Big Data. Jaron Lanier, the inventor of virtual reality in the 1990s, insists that "people" [not algorithms] are "the only sources or destinations of information" (2013, p. 4). Absolutely, but, when a vast attempt is under way to build a different account of how and why people matter, it is not enough just to say *that* people matter. We need an alternative *account* of why knowledge about people matters for understanding the social, and indeed why "the social" matters, if understood as more than just a probability set for predicting repeat action.

Media institutions, as sites from which important claims about the social still get made, can surely make a positive contribution here. Yes, we can easily imagine media producing "reality games" that convert Big Data proxies into entertaining prediction (a Reality TV format originally from Colombia that was built around a lie detector machine already anticipated that), but media, at their best, present us with the force of this person's account of what happened to them, of how their life has gone: exemplary bodies and voices. Conversely, we should not assume that academic critique is always helpful. There is no room for hermeneutics, for example,

in the anti-humanist analysis of media technologies developed by Friedrich Kittler, concerned only with media's role in the "channelling of signals" (Parikka, 2012, p. 69 on Kittler). Nor in social analysis based on "affect" (such as Patricia Clough's) which claims capitalism and data-based securitisation have produced a world where "*pre*conscious" "*pre*-individual" "affect modulation" is all there is (Clough, 2009, pp. 48, 50). Such analysis, by abandoning any language for interpreting what human subjects *mean* by their action, condemns us, like sleepwalkers, to submit to such changes.[8]

Indeed, I am troubled by the misalignment of "social imaginaries" (Charles Taylor's term: Taylor, 2005) implied by today's competing accounts of how we get to know our shared world. Some critical theory operates with a social imaginary that fits perfectly well with the imaginings of Big Data discourse (by renouncing any claim to interpret social meaning), but in the process loses touch with the imaginary that was for so long social science's starting-point: Weber's account of sociology as the "science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action" (1947, p. 88).[9] As my colleague Robin Mansell (2012) argues in her book *Imagining the Internet*, we cannot move beyond such misalignments, unless we build new imaginaries – or at least, renew our hold on old ones. Challenging the myth of Big Data – a myth in which mass media and social media, the focus of my first two myths, are increasingly implicated and in which states and corporations are investing on a massive scale – this means reaffirming *in some version* the hermeneutic principles of that Weberian model of social science (otherwise social science risks being washed away with the "end of theory").[10] And it means reconnecting this hermeneutic principle with the genuine excitement today about what access to very large datasets, if differently thought about and interpreted, *might mean* for the future of social science and for citizens.

Conclusion: agency and injustice in the digital age

I want to end by discussing the implications of all this for two specific domains: agency and injustice. First, agency, by which I mean not brute acts (of clicking on this button, pressing "like" to this post) but (following Weber) the longer processes of action based on reflection, giving an account of what one has done, even more basically, making sense of the world *so as* to act within it. It is easy to give up on agency in a world where so many of our acts are fed into predictive models that have no interest in meaning. And one response to the rise of Big Data is to argue that, regrettably, all agency has now been subsumed by "algorithmic power" (Lash, 2007). But this confuses Big Data discourse's mythical vision of a ready-to-be-datafied universe for the messier world we live in. New forms of agency *are* emerging that do not ignore the seeming inevitability today of being watched and counted but address and deal with them.

The starting-points for a hermeneutics of the social world are, in key ways, being transformed by Big Data and by the embedding of algorithmic calculation in the everyday, and we need a new type of social research to address this. I call

this research "social analytics": that is, the study of how social actors are themselves using analytics – data measures of all kinds, including those they have developed or customised – to meet their own ends, for example, by interpreting the world and their actions in new ways. As Jannis Kallinikos (2009) points out, data only become information when it is interpreted, when it passes through hermeneutics. In a world that is starting to be shaped by the myth of Big Data, "*social* analytics" tracks alternative projects of self-knowledge, group knowledge, institutional knowledge – whose ends are not the tracking of data for its own sake, or even for profit but for broader social, civic, cultural or political goals. It also tracks people's practices of resisting the introduction of analytics-based tools as default forms of management or evaluation. Conversely, it tracks those who are using analytics, even Big Data, to build new forms of civic and social action, for example to govern cities.

The idea of social analytics emerged from the Storycircle project that I led until this summer at Goldsmiths, particularly a project we did with a community reporter organisation in the north of England.[11] It struck us that in the digital world being an organisation with social ends – where "to be" is already "to be measured" – is challenging, a challenge of sociological interest to those of us still concerned with "meaningfully oriented behaviour". For there – in how organisations gather data about their websites' workings, how they think about metadata and its uses, and reflect on how, as organisations, they might change in response to such information – there, in raw form, are everyday battles to make sense of a data-saturated world in terms of social actors' own goals, not data production alone.

So, a world of algorithmic power may, if we pay attention, reveal new forms of interpretive agency, and not just for the massively powerful, but it also involves distinctive forms of *injustice*. All the myths I have discussed tonight rationalize massive concentrations of symbolic resource; all therefore involve injustice of a sort. Such injustices are difficult to name, precisely because they involve concentrations of power over the resources *for* naming. But the injustices associated with the myths I have discussed play out differently. The power asymmetries involved in "mediated centres" are so embedded in the organisation of modernity and its spaces for claiming justice that it is difficult now to see how we can operate without them; indeed, when genuine injustices occur through the operations of mass media (the UK phone-hacking scandals), they are difficult to resolve. But the injustices associated with the newer myths of us and of Big Data may have even more fundamental consequences for the longer term.

Take the digital infrastructure on which both social media and Big Data collection depend. As US legal scholar Julie Cohen notes, we all increasingly operate in our daily lives in "networked space" but "the configuration of networked space is . . . increasingly opaque to its users" (2012, p. 202). Indeed, she argues, today's web of protocols and passwords, data requirements and data monitoring, has created "a system of governance that is authoritarian", in the sense that there seems little alternative but to comply with it. And here, at the intersection between the desire to do just what we ordinarily do, and a new information sector's need to track us across this 'datafied' space of appearances – here a vast power asymmetry is emerging that

would not, I suspect, be tolerated if it were exclusively state power that was benefiting. But, as I noted earlier, we cannot easily prevent the state seeking to benefit from the big-data-gathering infrastructure.

Meanwhile the Big Data myth itself risks installing, as common sense, a way of thinking about human action that undermines the very languages through which we talk about justice and injustice. Why? Because the myth of Big Data's version of social knowledge lacks *any* interpretative language from which comparisons of how things stand for different individuals might be built. Here we return by another route to the fundamental link between communication, the social and the institutions that acquire dominant power over our accounts of social knowledge. In Amartya Sen's recent reworking of the theory of justice, communication is the site where the lifeworld comparisons that ground claims for injustice get made. As Sen puts it at the end of *The Idea of Justice*, "it is bad enough that the world in which we live has so much deprivation of one kind or another . . . it would be even more terrible if we were not able to communicate, respond, and altercate" (2009, p. 415). And yet through the myth of Big Data we are starting to give credence to a *working* model of social knowledge that operates as if the explanation of human action, and the processes of meaning-making on which such explanation has relied, don't matter anymore. As Chris Anderson put it: "who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it". While this earthy pragmatism has a certain charm, it turns its back on the hermeneutics that remains fundamental to our best understanding of social science. Big data rhetoric is the latest example of what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer once called "the alienation of the interpreter from the interpreted" (2004 [1975], p. 312): I simply don't believe that Chris Anderson doesn't care why *he* does what he does.

It is always tempting, however, to think that the latest large claims for "social" knowledge are absolutely new, and so must this time change humankind's possibilities for a good life, once and for all. The history of new media and communications technologies is littered with such predictions. Indeed, we can find echoes in Big Data discourse of a problem that Friedrich Schiller captured two centuries ago in his comments on earlier languages of state-building: "the State remains for ever a stranger to its citizens since at no point does it ever make contact with their feeling. Forced to resort to classification in order to cope with the variety of its citizens, and never to get an impression of humanity except through representation at second hand, the governing sector ends up by losing sight of them altogether, confusing their concrete reality with a mere construct of the intellect; while the governed cannot but receive with indifference laws which are scarcely, if at all, directed to them as persons" (1967 [o.p. 1795], p. 37).

As Schiller saw, a polity based on an impoverished model of the human subject cannot expect much loyalty from, or legitimacy with, those it governs. The warning holds, whether it is governments or dense networks of corporations that are promoting the "construct of the intellect" in question. The right response is not, of course, to walk away from the challenges and opportunities to which today's new forms of social interconnection and information generation give rise, but instead

to make sure that, in facing those challenges and thinking creatively about those opportunities, we take care to hold on to our richer accounts of human agency and knowledge, and to the sense of possible democratic agency and possible justice whose basic components they supply. That is what, for me at least, is at stake in the work on our changing infrastructures of media, communications and information that I want to do here at LSE in the coming years.

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Notes

1 I draw implicitly throughout on William Sewell's (2005) approach to "the social" which is both materialist and constructivist, that is, it takes seriously the effectiveness of materially based processes of social construction. Within this perspective, "the social" is not defined by reference to the unit of national society, nor to "some 'really real'" underlying all social relations, but rather to "the various mediations that place people into "social" relations with one another" (2005, pp. 326, 329). In the last sense only is the term "social" needed, indeed it is indispensable. On this view, the "complex interdependence of human interrelationships that we call the social" can only be understood through two *contrasting* metaphors, that of "language game" and "built environment" (2005, p. 365). This position is, I believe, quite compatible with the insights, for example, of Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Bruno Latour's materially based focus on "the progressive composition of the common world" (2004, p. 244), in spite of Latour's own scepticism (2005) about the term "social".

2 In talking of "disenchantment", I am looking back to Weber's claim (Weber, 1991, p. 155) that the modern age is one of inevitable disenchantment, a loss of divine reference-points. Maybe, but some new forms of disenchantment discussed here are now needed, and they will involve not loss, but gain.

3 Graeme Turner (2010) makes a similar argument.

4 The underlying source is Jeff Catlin, the CEO of Lexalytics Inc., quoted by Sisk (2009).

5 This unravelling, it is worth emphasising, dissipates not only any notion of the individual, but also any notion of the sense-making relationships *between* individuals (that is, is relational individuals) out of which the "social in Sewell's sense is made up. A "social" ontology built merely by aggregating data detached from both individuals and the mutual relations through which they are, largely, formed is not a *social* ontology at all, but an elaborated and reified *refusal* of the social which, following Butler, requires a hermeneutic of its own anti-hermeneutic.

6 This phrase does not appear in the online edition of this chapter but was a sub headline on page 36 of the London hard copy edition. Thanks to Tarleton Gillespie to alerting me to the need for this clarification.

7 Since I wrote this, I have read Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* (2013) which gives this vision a nightmarish novelistic form.
8 See for a powerful critique of the misguided "radicalism" of much writing on "affect", Leys (2011).
9 It follow that what Paul Ricoeur, in a dialogue with neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux called the "semantic gap" between natural sciences (including neuroscience) and philosophical phenomenology (and any social science based upon it) should be defended, not collapsed, which is not to deny that renewed social science in interest in brain science is welcome (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Changeux, 2000, p. 28).
10 I say "in some version" because the challenge of ANT and Bruno Latour's profound rethinking of human relations to technology clearly requires *some* adjustment to Weber's hermeneutic principles (see also note 1).
11 www.storycircle.co.uk. Researchers: Nick Couldry, Richard MacDonald, Wilma Clark, Luke Dickens, Aristea Fotopoulou, Hilde Stephansen. Funded by the UK Digital Economy programme (EPSRC/AHRC, grant EP/H0003738/1).

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15

MEDIA IN MODERNITY

A nice derangement of institutions

Introduction

Media have played a fundamental role in the emergence of modernity's institutions and the forms of coordination on which they rely. The relationship between media (as ways of organising communications) and the possibility of society is so basic to modernity that it is often hard to see: its operations are almost entirely naturalised, and in a specific sense (to be explained later) mythified. But the key institutions of modernity (corporations and trade unions, communities and churches, civil society organisations and governments) may now be being disrupted, deranged even, by the new and distinct set of institutions that we still broadly call "media", a possibility to which this chapter seeks to orient us. The chapter's main title recalls sociologist John Thompson's book *The Media and Modernity* (1995) which offered a definitive account of media's contribution to modernity on the threshold of the Internet era. The chapter's subtitle recalls an article by philosopher Donald Davidson (*A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*) which offered a challenging reinterpretation of how language works through convention. My purpose here is to suggest that, under conditions of the intensified production and circulation of communication – as well as radically transformed market competition – the changing set of institutions *we call* "media" demand a reinterpretation of how modernity itself "works" through institutional concentration. In this way, I hope to contribute to this special issue's "critical inventory of modernity".

My argument involves an underlying move, which is to uncover the role that communications have *always* played in the emergence of the coordinated spaces of exchange and interaction intrinsic to modernity. Take markets for example: at all times and not just in the modern era, they have been spaces of communication, but national or regional market economies require a more highly organised

flow and recording of communications (across space and time) than is enabled by the resources of the traditional market square. That dependence is partly direct (as in the operations of national stock markets) and partly indirect, because a market economy relies on a transportation system, and that transportation system, if it is not to quickly break down, relies in turn on faster and more coordinated flows of communication. Because, however, human beings are fundamentally animals who construct reality through communication, communication (as just "what goes on between us") tends always to get *effaced* in our accounts of the solid, stable institutions associated with epochal shifts in human organisation. When doing institutional analysis, we are tempted to "see through" face-to-face communication and focus on the "harder" structures supposedly underlying it, forgetting precisely the fundamental role that communication plays in making those very structures possible. But recent changes in the organisation of communication invalidate any attempt to "see through" communications' role in institutional formation, because they bring changes in the possibilities for organising people and resources, which, in turn, have with fundamental consequences for future forms of modernity, for what we might call late "late modernity".

In the past three decades, the digitisation of most communicational content, the construction of an encompassing global space of communicative exchange called "the Internet"; and the embedding in daily life of the resulting possibilities for everyday action have, together, begun to transform social relations and so the very nature of modern institutions. While a first wave of social theory (Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai) drew key insights from an earlier stage in the globalisation of media, those insights predated the establishment of high-speed, high-bandwidth, many-directional digital communications as a *banal fact* in the everyday lives of billions. This recent intensification of communications ("recent" in the sense of "in the last two decades") has come at a price: the embedding of most actions in a new "communication system" (Mansell, 2012) across which the generation of economic value becomes fundamentally reliant on the gathering, processing, evaluating and selling *of data*: that is, the data constituted by those acts of communication themselves. The result is an emerging regime of total surveillance developed primarily for corporate benefit, but also available for use by political power, as revealed in Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA and GCHQ. Markets and states, indeed all social forms from institution building to informal interaction, are becoming increasingly dependent on a communicative *infrastructure* whose operations are incompatible with the value of freedom that once seemed fundamental to the project of modernity.

This is the "nice derangement of institutions" which the chapter will try to unpack. Its argument is anticipated in fable-form by San Francisco author Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*. That novel parodies new "media" institutions' ambitions for control, and their corrosive implications for any possible ethical life. This chapter offers a sociological unpacking of how we could have reached the dystopian threshold that Eggers depicts.

The emergence of media institutions in modernity

The role of the printing press in the Reformation in Europe in challenging traditional forms of religious authority is well known; so too is the role of books and pamphlets in the emergence of profound challenge to the autocratic states of the UK, France and elsewhere, and in the longer-term building of modern civil society (Wuthnow, 1989). Newspapers, although their origin derived from the need for the circulation of market information (Rantanen, 2009), became over time essential fora for the deliberations of emerging social and national imagined communities (Anderson, 1990), and emerging forms of democratic deliberation (Tocqueville, 1961). Mass newspapers were one key element in the emergence of the more intensely connected national publics of the 20th century (Tarde, 1969). The history of mass printed media within modernity is well known and frequently celebrated.[1]

Less often celebrated is a broader infrastructure of distributing written matter in all directions which was essential to market and state: the modern postal service. As a general system for distributing content *from anywhere to anywhere*, the postal service was useful to the emergence of modern markets (both their networks of producers and their interconnected mass of consumers). Indeed, as soon as we focus on many-to-many communications, other forms of movement – equally important in modernity's history – come into view, such as mass transportation, yet this is not always considered as part of the same transformation. We must choose a wider-angled lens.

This involves considering the relations of media and modernity *not* from the perspective of specific media innovations (tracing out from there their ever-expanding effects over time and space), but instead, from the perspective of modernity at the broadest institutional level, that is, the development of the modern state, the modern economy (on national and increasingly transnational scales) and, through both, the emergence of an international or "world system" (Wallerstein, 2011). Within this broader perspective, there are, of course, important things to say about the role of media innovations, for example the role of the *telegraph* in the emergence of modern diplomacy and warfare (Mattelart, 1994). Even more important, however, is to shift our starting-point from an exclusive focus on single technological innovations to what we might call "structural" innovation, that is, innovations in the way that communications technologies and practices of many sorts get embedded into, and eventually integrated within, wider patterns of *organising everything*. Here the emergence of large-scale markets and organisations that market to them ("corporations") is crucial, and relatively neglected in communications research. As Craig Calhoun noted in an important essay:

> State power could grow because the new forms of organisation and the improved transportation and communications infrastructure (based partly on new technologies but, at first, more on heavy investments in the extension of old methods) enabled the spread of increasingly effective administration throughout the various territories of a country. . . . But [recognising this, NC] is not sufficient. A full account needs to recognize . . . that the growth of the

> state, like the capitalist economy, developed infrastructures that could be used by ordinary people to develop *connections with each other.*
>
> *(Calhoun, 1992, p. 214, added emphasis)*

The gradual development of those connections, not just among "ordinary people" but in their interactions with corporations, was to install a "tertiary" (that is, institutionally mediated) level to social relations over and above the two basic levels of primary and secondary relations that Charles Cooley (1962) had theorised at the start of the 20th century (whole-person relations versus relations mediated by roles) The fullest account of *how* this occurred is provided by James Beniger's brilliant book *The Control Revolution* (1987).

Beniger's book set out to track "a complex of rapid changes in the technological *and* economic arrangements by which information is collected, stored, processed and communicated, and through which formal or programmed decisions might effect societal control" (1987, p. vi). That broad focus on both "information processing" and "communication" (1987, p. 8) enabled Beniger to grasp a fundamental higher-order dynamic of 19th century modernity which he called "a crisis of control". To explain: because the Industrial Revolution speeded up "society's entire material processing system", it precipitated "a crisis of control" in which information processing and communications practices lagged behind processes of energy production, manufacturing and transportation (1987, p. vii). The crisis required integrative solutions across many diverse domains, for example, transportation *and* media, product standardisation *and* advertising, in order to enhance the overall predictability of society, both market and state. Beniger's most vivid example is a US rail crash in 1841 in which two Western US railroad trains crashed head on, simply because (unknown to each other) they were travelling down the same track at the same time in the opposite direction (Beniger, 1987, pp. 221–226). The result was a sudden realisation in the mid-19th century that accelerated transportation *required* faster and more coordinated communication, if disasters were to be avoided. The risk profile of everyday interaction in any one locality had been changed profoundly by the banal possibility of transporting distant goods and people *into* that locality within a matter of hours, requiring the development of a *communications* ecology that linked localities everywhere in certain ways. Meanwhile, the solutions to such problems generated improved networks of transportation, which also served to accelerate the delivery of centralised symbolic content (newspapers). Such transformations of communications processes integrated with wider organisational change had impacts far beyond general risk management: they affected the quality and speed of economic production (its better coordination across growing economic networks), consumption (based on the more secure flow of information about potential purchases to consumers), and distribution (to ensure that the desired goods actually reached consumers).

Such an account takes us some way from centralizing narratives concerning media's role in the nation's imagined community (Anderson, 1990); by bringing out the key role of coordinated communication in the development of market *and* state *and* state/market relations, Beniger's analysis reveals the role of "media" (in a

broad sense) in the achievement of higher-order solutions to complex problems of interdependency (Elias, 1994). That broad framing of media's relations to the development of modernity in the 19th century will be essential when we turn later to the potential derangement of modern institutions in the 21st century.

Comparable processes of interlocking market and state development through communications occurred in the 20th century with the emergence of what Raymond Williams (1990) called "mobile privatization": radio and television for the instant communication of symbolic content to populations of hundreds of millions; the telephone as a means for instant one-to-one communication across local, national, and international networks; and, in the background, radical changes in transportation – the car for individuals over shorter distance, the plane for fast long-distance travel – that in turn made further demands on the communications infrastructure under conditions of peace and conflict.

The increasing presence of daily and, by the second half of the 20th century, hourly media flows in everyday life helped transform wider norms of sociability, mutual recognition and engagement with the state-focussed political system (Scannell & Cardiff, 1991; Starr, 2004). While the balance-sheet is distinctly mixed when one turns away from relatively stable countries such as the UK and the US to countries with states of sharply varying strength (Germany: Kershaw, 1987), or weak states in postcolonial contexts (Nigeria: see Larkin, 2008), or states in the process of disintegration (former Yugoslavia: Smith, 1995), there is some plausibility to the general claim that the continuous daily operations of media institutions ("the media") somehow contributed to the stabilisation of the broader institutions and institutional frameworks of modernity. Certainly "the media" are institutions without which our inherited forms of society and politics are barely imaginable in the early 21st century. The great historian Eric Hobsbawm notes this, for the case of politics, while striking an appropriately ambivalent note about the implications: "as the [20th] century ended, it became evidence that the media were a more important component of the political process than parties and electoral systems and likely to remain so . . . however . . . they were in no sense a means of democratic government" (Hobsbawm, 1995, pp. 581–582). Certainly, there is a danger, in such an argument, of conflating what political scientist David Lockwood half a century ago classically distinguished, namely, system (practical) integration and social (value-based) integration (Lockwood, 1964, discussed Couldry, 2000, pp. 10–12). That is a distinction to which I will return.

Notwithstanding the apparent fit between media institutions and modernity's broader features, in the 1970s and 1980s a sense developed that the increasing quantity and intensity of media messages were generating a qualitative phase-shift: a turn to the *post*-modern. There were many strands to 1980s debates about postmodernity – including broader forms of de-differentiation derived from expanded global cultural flows and the increasing salience of "culture" in economic production for ever larger and more differentiated markets (Lash, 1990; Lash & Urry, 1994), but the most clearly delineated aspect of the postmodern emerged in relation to media specifically. This took the form of Jean Baudrillard's well-known claim that, through

television, modernity had become an age of "simulation" in which the epistemological reference-points for modernity's legitimating discourses (freedom, societal and economic progress, democracy) were now buried under a welter of media messages. Media power itself, on this view, became hard to grasp since we could no longer stand outside it: "it is impossible to locate an instance of the model, of the power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, since *you* are always already on the other side" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 51, original emphasis). A more subtle version of this argument was Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) account of electronic media's effects on the reorganisation of key settings of everyday social interaction, for example the family (continuously *invaded by* authoritative images of other ways of behaving through media), or the working lives of politicians (continuously *exposed to* their electorates through media). For other writers, media saturation had the effect of dissolving space (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 63), place (Auge, 1995), and time (Nora, 1989).

When one looks more closely, however, such arguments derived their force from their *distance* from everyday experience. The period of the apparently "post"-modern was characterized by the growth of many new forms of travel through which space and place seemed to matter more, not less. A parallel argument could be made for media's role in stimulating an expanding interest in popular history (Samuel, 1994). None of the arguments from the *intensification* of media flows in the age of television showed ultimately any fundamental challenges to modernity.

To make better sense of media's role in modernity, one needs to allow for media's transformations of *all* sides of social conflicts and interactions and be suspicious of claims that media has disrupted modernity's formations in a linear way.[2] Required instead is a flexible account of the role that media has played in the development of modernity, sketched in the next section.

The myth of the mediated centre

How could media have acquired such importance in modernity? It is worth reviewing this, before we move to the next stage of the history. "Media" are, first of all, technological means for producing, circulating and receiving *communications*. We would have no media unless human life were constituted, in a crucial respect, by communications: by the exchanges of *signs* that enable acts of communications to *make* sense, to accumulate over time *as* meaning, *as* knowledge. As Paul Ricoeur put it, "substituting signs for things. . . [is] more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation" (1980, p. 219). It became essential, however, at a certain point in history to mark off the work of "media" infrastructures from the general flow of communications. This occurred when technological forms of communications emerged that could consistently and reliably transmit certain bundles of meaning across large territories. Many would associate this with the start of large-scale printing in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe. The notion of "*the* media" emerged in the early 20th century (at least in English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary) with the interconnected growth of the modern state, modern economy

and modern media institutions: stable infrastructures and networks for the production and circulation of communication packages to a state's whole population.

Media are institutions with particular power over the means for *representing* shared reality, reality that, over time and through that power, becomes recognised as "ours": media institutions, within modernity, came to acquire what Pierre Bourdieu, in relation to earlier religious institutions, called "the power of constructing reality" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 166). To grasp how this power works, we need to follow the larger stories about "society" and the "social world" that get told through and about our everyday uses of media. The language of anthropology (for example, "myth") is helpful here to capture how the relations between media and social knowledge have been framed and disguised. By "myth" I mean not a credo or organised set of explicit beliefs but rather an underlying pattern in how, as societies, we make sense of *organising things as if* that certain types of information, expertise and knowledge are more valuable than others, and offer us a privileged view on the reality of social life. Myths are not merely an elite production: we are all, potentially, involved in producing these myths through our everyday actions (making "myth" a more useful term, incidentally, than "ideology").

As we look back, we can see what I call *the myth of the mediated centre* as crucial to the organisation of modernity. This myth has as its domain the organisation of everyday life and resources around the productions of large media institutions. This myth has various beneficiaries: proximately, media institutions themselves; ultimately government (which needs large media to provide the means for assuming that it can still talk to its population) and advertisers, or least those advertisers still interested in buying access to whole populations or segments of them. To grasp the social importance of this myth means going beyond the analysis of particular media contents and production processes and considering media institutions' role in the stories we tell about ourselves, as members of a social domain. Raymond Williams captured this in his 1974 inaugural Lecture at Cambridge when he wrote of the role of TV drama in providing "images, representations, of what living is now like" (1975, p. 9) in societies that were becoming increasingly "opaque".

I use the term the "myth of the mediated centre" (Couldry, 2003, 2012) to point to the long history whereby media institutions became increasingly implicated in the languages, practices and organisational logics of whole societies. This myth is what we might call a "reserve rationalisation" that makes sense for us of organising our lives around the content flows of media organisations; it tells us that society *has* a "centre" of value, knowledge and meaning, and that particular institutions, those we call "media", *have* a privileged role in giving us access to that supposed "centre". Media institutions work hard to sustain that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows "what's going on" for us as a society. So too do other institutions, such as governments and political parties, which depend on something like a mediated centre to underwrite their "space of appearances" (in Hannah Arendt's term: Arendt, 1960). This is how media institutions' symbolic power gets reproduced.

Through the workings of the myth of the mediated centre, modernity's pressures toward centralisation and decentralisation achieved a set of stable institutional forms (with accompanying patterns for focussing the infinite flux of daily life), that installed certain media institutions which, in turn, could name in their language elements of local social life *as* all part of the "reality" of the nation. This fundamental role of media within modernity can be underlined by drawing on the recent sociology of critique developed by Luc Boltanski. For Boltanski "reality tends to coincide with what appears to hang together. . . [that is] with order" (2009, p. 93), and certain institutions have a deep role, at the level of everyday language, in constructing reality and making possible a particular reality's appearance of hanging together against a background of much greater flux. It is to those institutions that is "delegated the task of stating the whatness of what is" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 75, 2009, p. 117).

Boltanski does not discuss media institutions at all (his emphasis is on legal institutions) but the relevance of his argument to understanding media's role in the social world is clear. Media's emergence as institutions for "stating the whatness of what is" has been a historical achievement over two centuries.[3] Such a reading of media's role explains media institutions' association with "tradition" but does not itself depend on any assumption of the dominance of tradition, and so is open to the emergence of radical dislocations. And, in the last two decades, forces within the expanded media industries themselves have emerged which are potentially disrupting the arrangement of modern institutions. These are discussed in the second half of the chapter.

Late "Late Modern" media institutions

The account of modernity offered so far – and specifically the account of media's role in the stabilisation of modernity – is under challenge. It is not that "media" have disappeared (that is, most traditional media, although hardcopy newspapers are under pressure in most countries), or that media's claims to be central have diminished – arguably those claims have become *more* insistent. It is rather that the *whole terrain* of media (and media institutions) has been reshaped by the "triple revolution" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. ix) of the Internet, continuous access to communication (whether interpersonal and mass, and often online) while on the move, and the rise of online social networking via platforms, such as Facebook. Social media are important to the myth of the mediated centre, because they offer a new *form* of centrality, a new *social* "liveness", mediated apparently *by us* rather than by content-producing media institutions. The implications for media as social institutions are profound. When we think about media today, we cannot sharply separate, as we once did, "media" infrastructure (for the centralized distribution of institutional content) from "communications" infrastructure (for distributed, interpersonal forms of communication). Both now flow into and over each other and across the same platforms.

From the point of view of modernity, the changes under way recently go beyond the thoroughgoing globalisation of modernity, and the global complexification of cultural and media "scapes" (Appadurai, 1996), that are consequent upon media's role in time-space compression (Giddens, 1990). They also go beyond any rejection, following Latour (1993), of a certain modernity's imaginary separation of nature (science, technology) from culture (society). Of course, in the wake of modern media, culture (and society) cannot coherently be separated from technology, or from the technologically adjusted version of nature that we inhabit. Under way now, more fundamentally, is a change in the conditions under which communications flows can be centralized, with profound implications for the institutional basis of modernity, that is, any possible future modernity (or late "late modernity"). To grasp this, let us return to (and update) our institutional history of the media and social interface.

The emergence of the Internet: behind the scenes

At the turn of the century, when Internet services were in the early years of diffusion, their significance was framed primarily in terms of whether "the Internet" would replace television as the reference medium of contemporary life. This was the wrong question. Television viewing has not disappeared, but *increased* in many countries, as Internet use has established itself (Miller, 2010); television remains a dominant form of news and entertainment, even if the physical device for watching television may, for many, have changed from an non-networked analogue television set to a digital television, laptop or tablet that can interface with a range of Internet-based content streams. The better question concerns the role that the *connective infrastructure* of "the Internet" is playing in the institutional transformations of late "late modernity". And here there is a dramatic new picture, whose outline is only gradually becoming clear.

The history of "the Internet" has been told many times. Everyone knows that it emerged from the research arm of the USA's military establishment, through its connections with university research labs; as such it exemplifies how developments for which "the market" claims credit usually derive from underlying subsidies by the state and other public institutions (Mazzucatto, 2013). But that is only the beginning of the story. Particularly important is the combination of steps (some state-led in the US and Switzerland, some driven by markets) as a result of which in 2015 a small number of corporations loosely called "media" – Google, Facebook, Apple, perhaps also Twitter and Instagram and in China Alibaba – can, through their "platforms", act *directly* on the world of consumption and the world of everyday social interaction.

The stages involved in that development are worth setting out more fully:[4]

1 the building of "distributed" networks of communications between (initially very few) computers through the innovative process of "packet switching", as a means, initially, to ensure more secure forms of communication under military attack (the formation of ARPANET in October 1969, NSFNET in 1985).

2 the development (anticipated by Vannevar Bush in 1945) of a protocol for connecting up groups of already linked computers into a wider network, first implemented in the early 1980s, and leading by 1989 to an "Internet" of around 160000 computers in the public sector.
3 The emergence of the world-wide web from the idea that texts could be linked together if associated with ordered sets of "metadata" called "hypertext", and Tim Berners-Lee's formalisation of the means to ensure the reliable transmission of hypertext. From this followed the proposal in 1990 for a "web" of files on networked computers and the first system for "browsing" the domain of those texts ("the World Wide Web"), and the first "web" site in November 1991 (info.cern.ch).

This publicly subsidised development had produced, by the early 1990s, the skeleton of a connective infrastructure, but this was not yet linked to everyday commercial activity, or even non-specialist everyday use.

A rather different and accelerated sequence generated the deeply commercialized Internet and worldwide web that we know in 2015:

4 In 1991, NSFNET was closed and the Internet's operations handed over by the US government to commercial providers. The first commercial web browsers (MOSAIC and Netscape) quickly followed. Meanwhile there was the diffusion of small desktop computers and then laptops as means for accessing the Internet easily.
5 A shift in the late 1990s in the means to access the exponentially growing domain of Internet-linked files from managed directories (Yahoo) to Google's *algorithmically* based model of indexing pages based on a hierarchy ordered through counting the number of *links in* to each Internet page. Google's model was distinctive because, rather than searching within a bounded and finite directory, its operations were recursive, each new link increasing the data over which its calculations ranged, and so increasing the mechanism's power, without limit.
6 Building on the huge success of its Google search engine, Google bolted on to it a much more robust commercial infrastructure for the Internet: a new model for advertising tied to terms searched through Google ("Google Adwords") and a system of live-auction advertising ("Adsense"), which together opened up a new basis for the *marketisation* of online "space".
7 The independent development of "smart" mobile phones that could access not just phone functions (talking, listening, the sending and receiving of SMS), but also the domain of the worldwide web. Around "smart" phones, there developed quickly "apps", installable on each phone, to provide simplified access to particular domains of web data.
8 A final but crucial step involved the emergence (tentatively in 2002 and on a larger scale from 2006) of a new type of website architecture (or "platform") that enabled hundreds of millions of users to network with each other, but

within the parameters designed by that platform's owners: so-called "social media networks".

The result of these interlocking steps has been a strikingly complete transformation of "the Internet" from a closed, publicly funded and publicly oriented network for specialist communication into a deeply commercialized, linked space for the conduct of many aspects of social life. The question then is how we make sense of this transformation's consequences for modernity and its institutions.

Consequences?

Understanding the consequences of the Internet's emergence as a *connective* infrastructure for modernity and its institutions involves itself a number of steps.

First, we must notice the profound shift in the spatial organisation of modernity's communications that flows not from the Internet in itself but from the *normalisation* of access to the Internet on a continuous basis for social actors, wherever and whenever they are. The idea of a many-to-many communications space was already inherent in the small networks which began to be set up between computers in the 1960s, but so far, it benefited only elite communicators, and the state or military institutions in which they were embedded. *Diffusing* the possibility of networked transmission and networked reception across large percentages of the population changed the *basic resources* of everyday social action. "Mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009) from the mid-2000s in many countries, unimaginable even a decade before, had become by the end of the 2000s banal. This is the 21st century replaying the role of lateral communications which Calhoun (1992, p. 214) noticed for the 19th century, but this time harnessed to a global space of communications. As a result, the *space* of social action has been transformed from a space in which possibilities for action-at-a-distance had to be "loaded" through the specific, and serial, use of particular technologies (the phone, the radio, even email) into a space that is at all times "sprung" with the potential for acting, and being acted upon, at/from multiple distances and directions, and in multiple modalities (phone call, email, Twitter, Instagram, etc). Habit has evolved quickly to reduce the effective range of choice from moment to moment, but the "sprung" potential of social space cannot, any more, be denied or removed.

Second, this new potential of social action – always at least two-way (the capacity to send an SMS while on the move, saying one is late *and* the capacity to receive an SMS, indicating that there is no point going on, because a meeting is cancelled) – necessarily now involves not just actions between individuals but actions *by corporations* on individuals. Corporations have capacities to act more continuously in time and with fuller coverage of space than individuals, and in this way to act effectively on "the social" (the effectively infinite domain of points where interaction can be started with one or more social actors). Social space-time accordingly, through the enhanced possibilities of connection accumulated over the past 15 years, became open to saturation by corporate action – that is, action directed

always at instrumental ends: the making of profit, but (for governments) also the regulation of action. As Joseph Turow writes, "the centrality of corporate power is a direct reality at the very heart of the digital age" (Turow, 2011, p. 17).

Third, and connectedly, commercial corporations (in fact all who attempt to communicate beyond a small set of defined interlocutors) face a deep challenge which drives them, ever more, to *use* their new, hugely expanded potential for acting on "the social". This challenge derives directly from the transformed nature of social space. Actors of all kinds now have hugely increased capacities to send messages in all directions, and they often exercise that capacity. As a result, the volume of messages in circulation has increased exponentially for a long period, creating two problems: the need to filter out most messages (regardless of their value) in order to focus on a more manageable subset of what is in circulation (addressed by apps or other means) and the need for tools to search for particular messages (addressed by search engines and, increasingly apps). Each person comes, increasingly, to engage with the world through an intense filtering, which, in turn, increases the difficulty of generalized communicators such as advertisers and governments. In response, advertisers, as Turow tracks (2011), have evolved their own cumulative set of solutions: now, in the USA and UK at least, they try to reach audiences not through such general means but through *continuous tracking*, wherever individuals are online and whatever they are doing.

Leaving aside the consequences of this third point for particular media institutions (such as the hard copy newspaper which, for two centuries, had relied on that content old cross-subsidy: Couldry & Turow, 2014), a fourth and broader consequence is to fuel the rise of *generalised* communication interfaces (so-called "platforms": Gillespie, 2010) whose goal is to ensure that people spend as much time as possible *just there*, while performing as many actions as possible. Platforms are an institutionalised way of optimising the overlap between the domain of social interaction and the domain of profit. The simple name "platform" belies the dramatic nature of the move under way from a world (until the mid 2000s) of largely *non-networked* social action concentrated nowhere in particular (that is, in localities and small networks that could never add up to a larger network) to a world (from the mid 2000s) of *pervasively networked* social action that passes through a small number of platforms under corporate, not public, ownership (Van Dijck, 2013).

This has a fifth and broader consequence, that, as more and more of what we ordinarily do occurs (is encouraged to occur) on online "social media platforms", via applications, or via other selective cuts through the infinite domain of commercially accessible online activity, so economic value increasingly depends not on the direct selling of goods or services intensive commercial activity) but on the selling of *data about potential future actions* (protensive commercial activity). But the protensive bias of online commercial expansion has profound implications for the fundamental values of modernity, and particularly for freedom, through the new infrastructural conditions that, to enable and sustain this shift, we must accept. As legal theorist Julie Cohen explores, two forms of acceptance are crucial. There is acceptance of the norm of permanent surveillance (Cohen, 2000): the business

model of even the most ordinary start-up is likely to depend on collecting data about its users to cross-subsidise the service that it purports to offer, requiring from those users acceptance of something, permanent surveillance, that is normally regarded as conflicting with a basic principle of liberty of action (Skinner, 2013). And, underlying this, there is acceptance of the broader operating conditions of the platform and system architectures on which one must rely to perform basic actions: a pragmatic acceptance of one's vulnerability to that system's refusal, whenever it thinks fit, *to accept* one's acceptance, so excluding one from the system. This two-level acceptance installs, as Cohen argues (2012, pp. 188–189), a system-based authoritarianism across huge swathes of everyday life.

Government meanwhile does not stand aside from these developments but itself looks to rely on the new accessibility of the social domain to permanent surveillance. The possibility of asymmetrical monitoring of the social is, of course, not in itself new, and was already theorized by Calhoun (1992, p. 219) as a "quaternary" relationship to supplement the "tertiary" level of communications with large-scale institutions that, throughout modernity, had increasingly been taken for granted in social interaction. But, while Calhoun already then noted the growth of data collection for commercial purposes, the possible extent, depth and connective power of such data collection could not have been anticipated in the early 1990s, since it depends precisely on the development of the Internet as an open space for the social, without which recent data-mining industries could not have grown to their current scale (Amoore, 2013; Turow, 2011). In this way, the system integration of everyday life has developed massively, but without necessarily (or even possibly), a concomitant development of social, or value-based, integration.

It is surely naive to believe that such transformations will have no implications for the longer-term *legitimacy* of modern institutions of all sorts (from governments to corporations to civil society organisations) that flow from their stakeholders increasingly coming to understand that their institutional survival depends on the *continuation into the future* of such freedom-ignoring practices. Can the institutional arrangements of modernity – the transformed arrangements of late "late modernity" – endure when their basic precondition is a regime of "total surveillance" that is offered under the guise of freedom? It is clear that answers to such a huge question can at this stage be, at most, speculative, but in my conclusion, I will attempt to sketch some beginnings of an answer.

Conclusion

It might appear that, through the abstractness of my argument, I have engineered a paradox in media's ongoing relation to modernity that is too violent to be plausible. Certainly, we should not underestimate the role of various factors in blunting for everyday life this paradox between late "late modernity's" infrastructural growth and its values. First, these violent contradictions are embedded within our daily relations with infrastructures that appear to enable us simply to achieve our goals of keeping in touch with friends and family, working effectively, buying the sorts

of things we need and desire. The nature of infrastructure is that practical relations on which its functioning depends get "sunk" phenomenologically, buried beneath the threshold of consciousness, far from political anger (Star & Ruhleder, 1996), at least until the infrastructure breaks down. Second, we must not underestimate the capacity of institutional invention to find local solutions to the particular tensions to which these contradictions give rise (negotiating "terms of service" to disguise better particular processes to which users have objected) or to frame acceptance within a wider narrative of threat (the current US and UK governments' narratives about the necessity of their vast surveillance programmes and the connivance of corporations on which they depend). Third, it never was true that modernity was *without* contradiction, and so there is nothing *automatically fatal* to the ongoing project of modernity from the fact that new contradictions have emerged, this time between the operating conditions of modernity's new communications' infrastructure and the demands made of its processes of political legitimation; it is not as if, after all, this emerging communications infrastructure yields no benefits for the political process, for example by redistributing the possibilities for visibility amongst general populations and political actors (Rosanvallon, 2011).

We cannot assume that these contradictory factors are sufficient to "mute" the tensions and contradictions that I have outlined, given especially that they are intrinsic to the business models that drive the Internet's expansion and drive today's wider economy. Better, rather, to foreground, as a level of analysis, the *struggle to neutralize* these contradictions, which takes us back to the question of myth. In the chapter's first half, I argued that sustaining anything like the modern nation required the imagining of something like a "mediated centre" and that this imagining stabilized over time in the arrangement of objects and agents, beliefs and discourses, that I call the "myth of the mediated centre". Today, perhaps, we are entering a new age of mythical inventiveness! On the one hand, the constant push to be present on social media platforms carries with it an incessant attempt to invoke a new horizon of social possibility focussed around those very platforms, an invocation which I have called the "myth of us" (Couldry, 2014a). On the other hand, the main route to *profit from* our presence on social platforms depends on the gathering and selling (whether to advertisers or other interested parties) of *data derived from* that presence and those platform activities. Data sometimes can be collected silently through cookies and other more elaborate devices, but its collection can certainly be enhanced by enlisting the social actor in specific actors of data release. A number of areas such as the health provision, drugs and health insurance sectors are increasingly focussed, particularly in the USA, around the expanding collection of data. What is at stake here depends on how much weight we give to hopes (for a more effective, because more data-intensive, sickness prevention regime) or to costs (the costs to freedom of the sort already noted by Julie Cohen for other much *less* intensively system-reliant forms of everyday practice than health). What is clear is that such major transformations of the institutional basis of health provision are unlikely to emerge without some further cultural supplement or myth. Jose Van Dijck identifies an "ideology of dataism . . . a widespread belief in the objective

quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behaviour and sociality through online media technologies" (Van Dijck, 2014, p. 2); others (boyd & Crawford, 2011; Couldry, 2014b) have talked of the "myth" or "myths" of Big Data. The long-term significance and effectiveness of these myths in neutralizing the new communications-based contradictions of modernity are unknown, but, given the effectiveness of the myth of the mediated centre for over a century, one would not bet against them succeeding!

Finally, it is worth situating this chapter's argument within the social theory context from which it began. I have argued that communications has generally been neglected as a key dimension of what is organised in modernity, but when we turn to late "late modernity", the astounding speed of infrastructural change represented by the Internet has generated new contradictions which threaten at least to challenge some ideas of modernity and possibly the very legitimacy of political and corporate institutions. Emerging might be a new crisis of control (Beniger, 1987) focussed not around conflicts of risk management but around the sustaining of *both* system *and* social legitimacy, when the "ordinary" production of new economic value conflicts, because of deep system architecture, with the sustaining of social or institutional value.

Whether, over the long-run, the result of this major refiguring of modernity's infrastructure of communications will be to derange or resettle its wider institutions cannot yet be known. What is to be avoided, however, is the mythical belief that modernity's unfolding future is simply actualizing, in exciting new form, the consensual libertarian norms of the past: that at least is at odds with what we can already know and see.

Notes

1 For fuller histories, see Thompson (1995), Starr (2004), Mattelart (1994).
2 Compare, for the state's recent transformations in an era of media saturation, Sassen (2006).
3 For a rare discussion of the relevance of Boltanski's recent work to media, see Dahlgren (2013, pp. 161–165).
4 Andrew Keen's recent book (2015), though polemical, sets out these key stages with unusual sharpness.

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AFTERWORD

Refracting power in an age of Big Data

The topic that first fascinated me as a researcher was media power, and specifically the power of television and the press. In a sense my focus still is on media power, though what we now mean by 'media' has expanded hugely. This book brings together articles and essays from the very beginning of my writing career up to the present day, and I hope they give a good sense of the many routes I have travelled in trying to make sense of media power. Those routes, as the book's three sections show, intersect with questions of voice, space and politics.

Whatever the detours I have taken, there is visible, I hope, a line from my earliest work on art, culture and media (especially television) to my latest work on data and datafication, a line oriented by the same underlying question: the nature of *social order*, and media institutions' distinctive role in sustaining, transforming and perhaps even undermining social order. Writing in 2019, at a time of dramatic change in media and communications, I want in this final chapter to reflect on what has and has *not* changed in relation to this fundamental question, since I began writing 25 years ago.

The chapters in this collection approach social order from many angles: the perspective of the individual (whether activist, artist, tourist, television viewer, or individual voice); the perspective of public space and public discourse; and the perspective of the institutions through which anything like social order is sustained. This new chapter has been prompted by reflecting on some changes and continuities in my own thinking,[1] which, in turn, highlight some hidden dimensions of social change that it has taken me until now to see clearly. The result, I hope, is some insight into the social order of today's datafied societies, where every aspect of life must, it seems, be converted into data for economic value.

Approaching media power

From the start of my research career, my goal was to make sense of media power and its role in society. Chapters 1 and 2 show this question emerging in my early

attempts to formulate what interested me about the field of media and cultural studies: Chapter 3 addresses the same issue, but from the point of view of the individual voice expressed in writing and social struggle. My focus on media power was fully explicit by the time of Chapter 5 (written in the final year of my PhD thesis), but we can skip ahead even further to my first book *The Place of Media Power*, which emerged from that thesis. There I wrote: "I will analyse media power – the massive concentration of symbolic power in media institutions – as the complex outcome of practice at *every* level of social interaction. . . . Media power is reproduced through the smallest details of what social actors (including audience members) do and say" (Couldry, 2000, p. 4).

In writing two decades ago about media power as distributed and dispersed, I was broadening the basic insight about media power's complexity of media power that had come to me already when writing Chapter 1. But by the end of the 1990s I wanted to anchor this in a wider understanding of society, drawing on Michel Foucault and Actor Network Theory (ANT). I tried to explain how this dispersed form of media power emerges across society as a whole: "the media . . . have social effects on a large scale not only because centralized mechanisms of broadcasting are in place but also because we believe in the authority of media discourse in countless local contexts, because we believe that most others believe the same, and because we act on the basis of those beliefs on countless specific occasions" (Couldry, 2000, p. 5). The idea expressed here – the importance of our *beliefs* in media as institutions, and the way we act on those beliefs – is still at the core of my work. Yet, as I saw it, belief was missing in then dominant political economy approaches to media, something which attracted me to the very different work of one of my key mentors, the late Roger Silverstone. But my response was not to reject political economy but to supplement it more effectively: for it makes no sense to study media power, except by building on political economy's conclusion that huge power really is, in some way, concentrated around media institutions with their large economic base. But how is such power sustained *in society*? That was the mystery.

My choice to think about media in terms of the web of social beliefs, rather than, say, the details of media economics, or indeed the details of media texts or media production, was inspired by two books. First, Dayan and Katz's book *Media Events* (Dayan & Katz, 1992) which introduced anthropological approaches into media. Second, the great Colombian sociologist Jesús Martín-Barbero's book *De Los Medios a las Mediaciones* (which I read in its English version: Martín-Barbero, 1993) which argued for studying not media but the wider "field of mediations" represented by our relations to media. What I took from each book was not so much people's empowerment through media, as a better understanding of the new forms and resources *of* power, emerging *through* media. Another inspiration was the Italian political theorist Alberto Melucci who had argued that "the real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming' (1996, p. 182), an exclusion in which media are crucially involved, since they are institutions with the power to name. Behind Melucci lay the great work in the 1960s and 1970s on "conscientization" by Brazilian Paolo Freire. Although I did not realise it clearly at the time, my

early work was already entangled in the relations between the media research traditions of North America/Europe and Latin America, a connection whose importance is becoming ever clearer today (Stephansen & Treré, 2019).

I tried to develop back then a five-level model of how media power is actually worked out in the social world in everyday practice. In Chapter 3 of *the Place of Media Power*, I described five underlying dimensions of media power**:** the framing (of things, places and people as special); the ordering **(**of things, places and people against each other); the naming (of things, places and people as real); the spacing of the world (that is, the ordering of social space through and around media), and, finally, the imagining of the world that results from the other operations of media power. In all these fundamental and interlocking ways, I argued, media power works to reinforce itself, naturalizing the role of media institutions in society, and so making media power a phenomenon that is very difficult to analyse. Through this multi-level model, I was trying to move away from what I saw as too simple attempts to formulate how media power works, for example the notion of "media logic" introduced by David Altheide and Robert Snow (Couldry, 2000, pp. 18–19, discussing Altheide & Snow, 1979). Unfortunately, however, no one picked up on this model of media power, and I didn't develop it in detail myself. So the question today remains open: what *is* the best way to uncover clearly the workings of media power, when media are so fundamental to society and their workings so deeply embedded in daily life?

In my work that followed, I tried to answer this question by focussing on what I called "media rituals". Media rituals are concentrated ways in which media institutions are involved in reproducing belief in media through organised social forms separate from the normal flow of everyday life: forms such as reality TV programs, talk shows and media events (see further Chapters 9 and 10 above). Underlying this was my continuing interest in media's role in the wider organisation of society and space. I was impressed by an insight in an early essay by Jean Baudrillard "Requiem for the Media" that media are much more than mechanisms for distributing content: they are forms of life which, as forms, "induce a social relation" (1981, p. 128). Understanding those forms, I argued, means more than understanding media rituals themselves. It means understanding the way of organising *society* that makes something like media rituals possible in the first place. I called this way of organising things 'the myth of the mediated centre', defined as "the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre of the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks 'for' that centre" (2003, p. 2), and the organisation of the social world accordingly.

This was the first time I made explicit my interest in the concept of social order. In defending the importance of this question, I took the side of the classic French sociologist Emile Durkheim against post-structuralists and postmodernists who were willing to drop the idea of social order (2003, pp. 5, 9–11). I wished to draw, however, on Durkheim's insights on social order *in a critical way*: the point was not to celebrate media's role in social order but to deconstruct it. Remember: I was writing in the era when media diversity meant multichannel TV and radio, a still flourishing mainstream press, and only slow Internet which people could access

via desktops or laptop computers (mobile phones still existed in a separate world of interpersonal communication). In *that world* of 2003, it still made sense to draw on a key assumption that Durkheim had made at the start of the 20th century, the assumption that "at certain key times, we experience ourselves explicitly as social beings, as members of a shared social whole" (Couldry, 2003, p. 6). For Durkheim rituals are moments when we come in touch with what he called "the serious life", the moments when we come together *as a society* via core social institutions. But my emphasis was on how this experience of "the serious life" was always *constructed*, constructed by media institutions that benefited precisely from this belief, since it provides the basis for our shared attention to media. I intended this an alternative to standard Marxist understandings of economic and social power, while still "recognis[ing] the pervasive pressures toward order in mediated societies" (2003, p. 12). The theme of social order has become ever more important since.

In developing the concept of rituals, I explicitly emphasised the cognitive aspects of Durkheim's model of how societies appeared to hold together – his interest in ritual's role in how thought and space are organised – rather than his alternative emphasis on the emotional aspects of ritual. Today, in an age of social media, I might put the emphasis differently. An even more important choice I made back then, whose full significance was hidden from me at the time, was to choose ritual as a way into thinking about social order. Rituals are processes which offer special access to the most important values of the social world. So, going back to the dimensions in my original model, this approach meant emphasizing how rituals *frame* aspects of the world, and through that *order* things as special (or not): for example, in religious ritual distinguishing sacred from profane, or in media rituals marking off media persons, things or places from merely "ordinary" persons, things or places. But that emphasis on ritual's role in social order meant paying less attention to other ways in which media potentially contribute to social order, for example the simple *naming* of things as real (as in news) or the process that in 2000 I had called *spacing*: the organising of space in ways that support belief in media institutions. Maybe, as we will see, those aspects of media have become more important today.

I already at that point wanted to move beyond the limited contexts of ritual, by drawing on the concept of *ritualisation* (from the sociologist of religion, Catherine Bell). Rituals, Bell argued, are relatively rare events, but they depend, for their existence, on processes right across the social world which develop the categories on which rituals relied. As I put it "the most central quality of ritualisation is how it organises our movements around space [and] helps us to experience constructed features of the environment as real" (2003, p. 29). I used a quotation from Bell whose full significance I only realise now: "the orchestrated construction of power and authority in ritual . . . engage[s] the social body in *the objectification of oppositions and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions of the social order*" (1992, p. 215, added emphasis). I'll come back to that quotation, because it has surprising new relevance to our era of algorithms and Big Data. That is where my thinking about the relations of media to social order had got to 2003, before anyone beyond a few specialist computer engineers knew anything about social media platforms!

Disrupting the basis of media power?

When I returned to media theory later after spending a few years thinking about political engagement and media ethics, the world had changed. Fast Internet access was available to most people in the rich countries where I was researching and Internet use was becoming increasingly integrated into daily life; social media platforms such as Facebook had emerged and grown very fast, although mobile phones did not yet generally have Internet access. What were the challenges of these changes, I wondered, for understanding how media contributed to social order?

One thing was already clear: that the online world did *not* offer simple translations of the media rituals that were normal in the pre-Internet era. When I taught my course on media rituals at London School of Economics and Goldsmiths, University of London, I told my students that, while online media rituals were as yet unproven, there was no doubt the online world contributed to media's further ritualisation. That was clear to see, for example, in the role of talk on social media around reality TV shows or media events (Campanella, 2012).

But events moved on again. As people's time spent online increased further, new challenges to that original understanding of media's role in social order emerged. In 2007, the US scholar Joseph Turow (2007) argued that the result of both people's increasing amount of time online and developments within the marketing industry was that marketers were becoming less interested in reaching consumers as part of a general audience (for, say, a TV programme or a newspaper) and much more interested in tracking individual consumers *continuously* wherever they were and whatever they were doing online. Could the result, I wondered, be a more fundamental change, a disruption of the myth of the mediated centre itself? I discussed this possibility in an article from 2009 called "Does 'The Media' Have a Future?" (Couldry, 2009). But I concluded that, even if marketers were shifting their interests away from large-scale narratives targeted at general audiences, *other* institutions – governments, civil society – still had an interest in what I called media's "space of appearances". Otherwise, without media, where would politics happen, what would politics be about, or indeed civic and social struggle? The result, I suggested in 2009, was that the myth of the mediated centre "is now both more openly contested and more actively produced than before" (2009, p. 438). And that I believe is still, to some degree, true today.

I could have continued to argue that media rituals continue in slowly changing forms, ritualisation spreads online and the myth of the mediated centre goes on, even if the battle for attention between traditional media, especially television, and social media continues to intensify. But today that seems insufficient, and the reason goes back to the fundamental question about the nature of social order that underlies my interest in media and media power in the first place. So, what exactly has changed about media's role in social order today?

Before I answer that, let me recall a moment that changed the direction of my research. In 2012 and 2013, I was leading fieldwork at Goldsmiths into practices of digital storytelling in Salford, near Manchester, UK, working with a wonderful team of researchers (Richard Macdonald, Wilma Clark, Luke Dickens, Aristea

Fotopoulou and Hilde Stephansen). Originally, we had expected to research projects for video stories. But as we got into the fieldwork, two things became clear which changed the course of my research. First, that the impact of social media platforms in social life was so profound that it required a reworking of social theory completely and second, that, even with projects that were uploading video stories direct to a website without any social media or platform component, a new dimension was becoming important: *data*. I first encountered data in the form of the analytics which measure website performance, a factor that has transformed how most organisations understand who they are and what they do in the world. But from there I developed a wider interest in the role that data are playing in the ordering of the social world more widely. I became interested, in other words, in *datafication*, that is, the transformation of social processes into data. Let's consider social media and datafication from the perspective of social order.

Social theory for an age of continuous social media and datafication

As I began thinking about social media more intensively, and looking at how they describe themselves, I began to see that not only did the myth of the mediated centre continue to be contested but that a new myth around media's role in society was growing up alongside it (Couldry, 2014). In that piece, I tried to reflect on the dramatic transition brought about by social media's growth. Before social media platforms, social life was located only very partly online and just for some people (who wrote blogs, made regular commentary, and took part in online game spaces and discussion lists). By 2012/2013, social life for very large proportions of the population in many countries seemed to be *centrally* online, via digital platforms. Clearly this was not something that social theory could ignore. Equally, however, social media do not themselves construct *as a societal centre* in the same way that traditional media institutions did, because their emphasis at all times is that their networks are made up of *the users themselves*, the people for example that make up what Facebook calls its "global community". Often, in general conversation, users too talk about their online spaces as the spaces where people, those they know, gather. There is a tremendous pressure to think about those spaces *as the space where the social happens*, which must mean that the people who gather there are simply "us", all members of society.

But that idea of "us" – of "the collective subject" of social media platforms – is just as constructed, just as mythical, as the idea that traditional media institutions are a societal centre. Platforms are complex constructions of software that enable certain types of interaction and not others. Platforms have many features, some of them disturbing, for example the ability to spread rumour very fast and widely, features that have recently created major concern in many countries. Even more important for social theory over the long-term, perhaps, than issues such as fake news, is the more general of *where* social life goes on, and *how* we imagine social life to be. In the past ten years, there had emerged a myth of "natural collectivity . . .

the myth of 'us'" (2014, p. 855). That myth of "us" is absolutely vital to the legitimacy and commercial promise of many Big Tech companies, just as the myth of the mediated centre was essential – and still is, in some form – for traditional media institutions. It may be that, under pressure from various recent scandals, companies such as Facebook will reformulate the story that they tell about the spaces they create, emphasising the creating of encrypted *group* spaces, not individuals' spaces. We will see. But social media platforms' stories about their role in social order are very important, whatever form they take.

Just as with the myth of the mediated centre, so too with the myth of "us", we need to analyse the languages that sustain it: the general stories about the need for connection of the sort that platforms provide, the way platforms categorise one type of activity or use versus another, with some "experiences" being marked as more special than others, and through all this the wider picture of how the social world fits – needs to fit – together. *But we are no longer in the territory of ritual here*: indeed when Google or Facebook algorithms try to create a sense of ritual, for example by reminding us of anniversaries or putting together pictures we have of a certain sort, they usually fall flat, probably because Google or Facebook engineers have no understanding of the actual processes of ritualisation that make ritual possible! None of that, however, affects Google's or Facebook's power. The reason *why* such failures of ritual don't matter is where things get really interesting.

Let me turn now to data's role in social order. I began to be interested in data's role in constructing – reconstructing – the social world, when during fieldwork I had to address how vital the process of being measured through data was now to almost every organisation today. Data analytics, for example on a website, involve a process of translation: translating from the organisation's original values in the broader social world into analytic measures, and then, once the measuring has happened, translating the process of measurement *back* into something that makes sense in terms of the organisation's values. This is the process that my team at Goldsmiths called "real social analytics" (Couldry Dickens & Fotopoulou, 2016). It has its basis in something fundamental which has nothing to do with television but everything to do with computers: the fact that, as computers have come to operate in contemporary societies, they store records of very many things that computers do (they track *themselves* in other words). Because computers are connected, those records easily become available to *other* computers. So, from two simple facts about computer operations today (archiving and connection), we have the basis for an extraordinary change in how social order hangs together: the possibility of continuous tracking or monitoring of computer use by distant computers, something we more usually know as surveillance.

I had been interested in surveillance for a long time: video-based surveillance was a prominent aspect of reality television from the late 1990s (touched on in Chapter 9 for example). But the growth of computer-based surveillance is much wider, creating a phenomenon with no equivalent in the era of reality tv: the generalised and continuous collection of data about the world by corporations of all sorts. Not just the collection of data but the making of decisions based on data, relying

only very partly on human decision-making and much more on automated processes of calculation called algorithms. As my interest in automated computer-based surveillance grew, I discovered the remarkable work of Oscar Gandy (1993) who as early as the late 1980s was analysing the large-scale collection of data by credit card and other corporations, and insisting that data gathering always has a purpose, and that purpose is social and economic *discrimination* in the service of social and economic *hierarchies*. This gives us a fresh perspective on that quotation from Catherine Bell that I used earlier: ritualisation as a process which makes possible "*the objectification of oppositions* [that is, discriminations] *and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions* [that is, the hierarchies] *of the social order*". Clearly, in the era of datafication, we are back to something similar, but by a very different route. What are the implications?

Datafication and the social order

In the past five years I have developed my thinking about digital platforms and data – the era of Big Data – from these beginnings and they have taken me very far from my original interests in art, space and television! There is not the place to go into details.[2] Instead, let's stay more generally with the question of what, through data, is changing in the relations between media and social order.

No one can doubt that media rituals still exist in some form: media events, some forms of reality television, sport events, talk shows, and so on. And that means that, in some sense, the mediated centre must still go on being constructed. If it didn't, it is hard to see why large populations would continue to watch television, including live TV. There are, for sure, signs of long-term change. A recent survey by the UK media regulator Ofcom (Ofcom, 2019) found that the main way young children in Britain now watch television is not the traditional television set, and not even online versions of television channels but YouTube watched on tablets or laptops. Without doubt some forms of ritualisation are emerging on YouTube, but YouTube's links to the myth of the mediated centre have still to be investigated: perhaps YouTube is the site where in a country like Britain, as their viewing of mainstream television declines, young people are searching for something like a "centre". But the dynamics are clearly very different from earlier versions of the mediated centre.

Maybe, however, the fate of the mediated centre is no longer now the most important point. Let's look again at that quotation from Catherine Bell that I have mentioned a number of times: "the orchestrated construction of power and authority in ritual . . . engage[s] the social body in *the objectification of oppositions and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions of the social order*" (1992, p. 215, added emphasis). What does this quotation – important to my original theory of media rituals, but originally written a quarter of a century ago – tell us today? We can get at that by asking what the quote assumes as its starting-point. It assumes that society *needs* "the orchestrated construction of power and authority in ritual" to "engage" social actors and social life in "*the objectification of oppositions and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions of the social order*". It

assumes, in other words, that society needs *ritual* for the reproduction of social order and so for the building of wider hierarchies and social divisions. But this view of social order is surely now at best a partial truth. The reason is not that as an analysis of what ritual it is unhelpful, or that rituals have disappeared. The reason is that there are now huge *new* forces at work in society to categorise social life and to categorise each of us, as members of society. Those forces work on the vast amounts of data that are collected from everyday life online, including our actions on social media platforms.

The question of Big Data goes much wider than social media platforms, but to keep things in focus, let's stay with them. If we recall my model from nearly 20 years ago and its five dimensions of media power, we can translate what has happened with Big Data and social media into its terms. We can say that social media platforms and the corporations that own them today have acquired the power to *frame* the social world and, through that, to *name* what goes on there, and also to categorise it – that is, *order it* through the algorithmic sorting of data. In the course of this, as ever more of our lives becomes organised through the time we spend on platforms, the social world has become divided up in different ways – a process of *spacing* – that is changing, in turn, how we *imagine* the social world for the longer-term.

It is not just as ordinary users of social platforms that we are affected by this change. Social media data – and the categorisations that can be based upon them – has very wide uses by employers, universities, political parties, governments and more, as a resource for managing populations. Media institutions themselves – for example broadcasting institutions like the BBC – are increasingly measuring themselves and applying new forms of data analytics as measures of how they perform and how they understand their audiences, and their relations to their audiences in the UK, Holland, USA, and elsewhere (Van Es, 2019).

Through datafication – and the embedding of automated tracking into social life via our mobile devices, and the huge resources now being invested in processing the resulting data – contemporary institutions of social order (including both government and media institutions), are changing from the inside out. Jose Van Dijck captured this in her 2013 book *The Culture of Connectivity* when she wrote that "through social media, . . . casual speech acts have turned into formalized inscriptions, which, once embedded in the larger economy of wider publics, taken on a different value" (2013, p. 7). The result, she argues, is to change the nature of the social itself: "the meaning of 'social' . . . seems to encompass both (human) connectedness and (automated) connectivity" (2013, p. 12). Let's try and understand this point more closely.

Until, say, 15 years ago – that is, before social media platforms became a regular part of social life – all social theories could assume that the world takes its order from the things that we, each of us, do as social actors: connecting, interpreting, commenting, making sense, agreeing, disagreeing with each other. Here is a typical version of that assumption from Berger and Luckmann, leading sociologists of the 1960s: "everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world. . . . A world that originates in their

thoughts and actions and is maintained as real by these" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 33). But now, as Van Dijck notes, the very *idea* of connection to other humans is being transformed by connectivity, by the goals of the commercial corporations that own platforms and seek to ensure that we *are connected* in ways that optimize the extraction of data can be from us for profit. In our 2019 book Ulises Mejías and I go even further and argue that the *order* of social life emerging today is being shaped increasingly by a new corporate ambition: to annex to capital every point in space and time, reproduce social relations so that this annexation to capital seems natural, and build a social order that capitalizes human life without limit.

This transformation remains invisible, if we limit ourselves to the normal tools for analysing social change – the concepts of power at the institutional level and identity or agency at the individual and group level. For this is a change in the very nature of social space and in the sorts of relations that can characterise social space: a true change in the nature of social order. But if so, then social order cannot any more be understood exclusively through the Durkheimian approach which was concerned with how social bonds are formed by human beings. We need, from the start, to look at the role of corporations (and governments who work with corporations) to construct the social fabric itself, to change what *counts as* a social space. To do this we need to turn to a writer whose work from the 1970s and 1980s and even before has in many places been forgotten: the German sociologist Norbert Elias. Particularly useful is Elias's way of thinking about complexity and social order, and his idea that complexity in social life emerges from interconnections between human beings, from the patterns of interaction that he calls "figurations" (for more detail on this, see Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

Figurations for Elias are "processes of *social interweaving*" that have a "special kind of order" that "*starts . . . from the connections*, the relationships, and works . . . out from there to the elements involved in them" (Elias, 1978, p. 116, added emphasis). His most simple example is a game of cards or football or a dance in which everyone plays their part by being in relations with each other person playing. As he says, "the behaviour of many separate people *intermeshes* to form interwoven structures" (1978, p. 132, added emphasis). In Elias's approach to social order, by contrast with Durkheim's, two things are very important. First, he grasps the role that *material* infrastructures play: today, that means software, computer code, severs for storing data, the cloud. But second, Elias insists on thinking about the consequences of that material infrastructure, of the technology, from the point of view of the human beings entangled within them and their *human* goals. This was a point Elias made eloquently toward the end of his life: "People often seem deliberately to forget that social developments have to do with changes in human interdependence [. . .]. If no consideration is given to *what happens to people* in the course of social change – changes in figurations composed of people – then any scientific effort might as well be spared" (Elias, 1978, p. 172).

There are many worries today about the role of social media platforms in politics, in government, in family life, in the lives of children. Those worries are important, but they do not focus on the most important issues that datafication raises for

social space, power and indeed voice: the problem of how social order is being put together today and being reconstructed for corporate interests. This is something to which all of us, by our uses of social media platforms and many other activities, are contributing, and it is arises not just in social media platforms but also in the many other infrastructures for gathering data. Think of the intense debate today in the USA about the consequences of automatic data collection on the lives of the poor, which in America disproportionately means the lives of black people. As the legal theorist Patricia Williams (2019) recently commented, "many of us imprison ourselves with . . . technology by choice – the smart watches we wear on our wrists, the GPS tracking on our cell phones or car-location apps, the . . . reassurances of Siri. There aren't perceived as disciplinary tools; instead they are marketed as ways to connect". Yet that, she suggests, is what they are: disciplinary tools of social order operating through processes of datafication.

The most dramatic example of this new vision of social order through connection, through datafication, comes from China. In China there are the most socially integrated digital platforms: in effect "super-platforms" like Alibaba or Tencent which combine social media (something like Facebook and Twitter and WhatsApp), with sites for e-commerce (like Amazon) and with sites for personal finance. Unlike in the West, none of those platforms are securely encrypted and the government has a close relation with the owners of those platforms (it helped finance their building). There is China's emerging 'social credit system', which the Chinese government plans to be operational by 2020 which will give a score to every citizen depending on the data gathered about them online, their score for social responsibility. In an important policy document outlining this new system, the Chinese government used an interesting phrase to describe its significance: "a market improvement of the social and economic order"? (China Copyright and Media, 2014).

So, we return to the question of social order, but this time not as a theoretical concept but as vision of government, a practical plan for the management of society. A vision that, for the USA, Patricia Collins (2019) calls "the civic practice of nothing less than totalitarianism". By pursuing the question of how *media*, and communications systems more widely, are involved in social order, that is, in the organisation of *power* across *space*, we are brought up sharply against some fundamental developments in democracy itself, some potential changes in the very possibility of democratic *voice* in contemporary societies characterized by intense media dependency and intensive new infrastructures of data processing. Media, voice, space and power: these are not simple interrelations that we are uncovering but multiple aspects of the complex *refractive* process whereby representations help make up what counts as reality.

Conclusion

What have we learned from these brief reflections on my research into media's relation to social order over the past 25 years?

First, that we need to recognise the new, paradoxical, and deeply conflicted role that media institutions and infrastructures of communication now play in a world of continuous computer connections and the corporate reconstruction of the social fabric. Faced with such alarming change, we perhaps need media institutions – and their imaginative resources – more than ever to give us with visions of social worlds that are about more than the automated extraction of data: the cult success of the television series *Black Mirror* is surely no accident. Yet we must also acknowledge that media institutions themselves are being reshaped by processes of datafication, with Netflix a more likely paradigm for 21st century media institutions than the BBC.

Second, when the social fabric itself is being transformed by a new vision of social *order*, we cannot think about media's role *in* society without drawing on social theory. The societies we are inhabiting today are not societies *in the same way* as societies of fifteen, perhaps even ten, years ago. They are different types of order, operating on different scales, from the societies of earlier eras. Indeed, because every point in space and time now in principle embeds a two-way computer connection (for influence and surveillance), the non-linear order of social relations operates in many more dimensions than our old models of social interaction can account for. The result is new forms of technological, institutional and social power that we have barely begun to characterize. We therefore need social theory (empirically oriented, and not purely speculative) to help us map what the differences might be from the social worlds that, just two or three decades ago, we thought we knew.

It should go without saying that the social theory we need for this huge task must be critical and open to challenging power. It must acknowledge the increasing role of corporations – and governments who work closely with corporations – in reconstructing a social world through surveillance, for profit, to build a new type of social order that, across many countries from the UK to the USA, Germany to South Africa, Brazil to China, is in deep tension with the very idea of democracy. In performing this critical role, social theory's role is not simply to reflect power's languages in their own terms but rather to *refract* power: to break its workings apart into their elements in an attempt to capture the hidden levels on which power is able to work.

Far from the parodic depiction of media research as endlessly researching the banal and obvious, the study of media and communications' contribution to social order involves a search for ever more complex answers: or, perhaps more accurately, an unending search for better questions to break apart the myths about media's operations that are such an important part of media's work in the world. To study media *in* society is truly to study society anew.

Notes

1 Parts of this chapter were originally prepared for the opening keynote to the Congreso de Televisões conference at Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 17 May 2019. Thanks to my friend Bruno Campanella for the invitation.

2 If you are interested, see Couldry and Hepp (2016) and Couldry and Mejías (2019).

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