

# **Media, Modernity and Technology**

The geography of the new

**David Morley**

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# Introduction

This book brings together contributions to a set of theoretical, methodological and substantive debates in media and cultural studies. The issues addressed range from the status (and future) of cultural and media studies as disciplines, within the institutional framework of the academy, to the significance of the new technologies of our day, the relation of those technological issues to our very definition of modernity and the problems raised by the insights of post-colonial theory for prevailing Western models of modernity.

The book also engages with debates about the current tendency towards the narrowing of both theoretical and methodological orthodoxies in these fields. In relation to media studies, my concerns are with how the object of study of the field might best be constituted, so as to deal with the dynamics of current technological developments. To my mind, one key theoretical issue here is how to develop a non-mediacentric analytical framework which will pay sufficient attention to the particularities of the media, without reifying their status and thus isolating them from the dynamics of the economic, social and political contexts in which they operate. These issues are of much more than theoretical interest. They also have very material consequences, in terms of funding and educational policy and have been loudly articulated in the popular imagination – not least in the recurring debates (or perhaps, ‘pedagogic panics’) in the UK, as to whether either media or cultural studies can ever possibly constitute ‘proper’ disciplines.

In pursuing these questions, my own work has drawn on an increasingly wider set of different disciplines: from cultural geography, anthropology and ethnology, design studies, literary theory and art history, to post-colonial theory and area studies. These latter disciplines have provided particularly important resources in trying, as I have, to move beyond a Euro-American perspective on these issues. Thus, the book’s further ambition is to contribute to the development of a thoroughly ‘de-Westernised’ form of media and cultural studies.

One of the book's ambitions is to attempt to integrate theoretical modes of enquiry with the fruits of detailed empirical work in a variety of related fields. This commitment defines both the characteristic mode of enquiry and the style of presentation which runs throughout the different chapters. The book thus aims to offer a set of grounded and contextualised accounts of key cultural processes, where micromodes of analysis are set in a broad and interdisciplinary theoretical framework. The issues addressed here span from macro-questions such as how best to map the geography of modernity, to micro-questions such as how we are to understand the role of the mobile phone in transforming both the relations of the public and private spheres and the experiential texture of our everyday relationships.

The work presented here has been in gestation over some years and Chapters 1, 5, 7 and 9 have all appeared in English before, in earlier versions. However, with the exception of Chapter 1, which I felt was best left to stand in its original form, all the others in this category have now been very substantially reworked to reflect the subsequent development of my thinking on these issues. Many of the other chapters in the book can also be read as further developments of these original essays, but now moving into new areas and extending the perspectives with which I began this work in relation to different kinds of material. If the book has (as I hope, and as the reader must judge for themselves) a coherent narrative, it is, nonetheless, one which at various points circles back on itself before proceeding. I can only hope that my attempt to make the overall story cohere does not involve any unwelcome sense of repetition, as I explore my central concerns from different angles.

### **Fundamentals and premises**

My project here is founded on two, interlinked contentions (or premises), one spatial, one temporal. The first concerns the way in which our conventional sense of history is in fact founded on an uninterrogated conception of geography – which, in spatialised form, reads from right to left, on the standard map of the world. Thus, the narrative of historical development is assumed to run from its past in the Orient to its future in the Occident. The consequent equation of the West with all that is dynamic in history is one which we must interrogate closely, if we are ever to break out of the insidious grip of this one-way conceptual street. These matters are the particular concern of Part III of the book.<sup>1</sup>

My second premise is that media studies, in particular, as presently constituted, suffers from a drastically foreshortened historical perspective, the absence of which is all the more critical now, as we enter the word of the digital media. Thus, I argue that media studies needs to place contemporary developments, such as the constitution of cyberspace – with which much

contemporary work is concerned – in a much longer historical perspective. As we now enter an era of digitalisation, technical convergence, individualised and interactive media systems, all these issues become all the more urgent. One of the key problems here is that so much work on the new media (whether in utopian or dystopian modes) falls back into technologically determinist forms of explanation, a tendency which the argument here tries to avoid. As Lynn Spigel has put it, the more we speak of futurology, the more we need to take a longer historical view of these issues. Moreover I argue, following Hermann Bausinger, that we need to explore the extent to which folk culture is alive and well in the world of modern technology.<sup>2</sup> This is to take seriously the ‘marvellous’ dimension of new technology. The symbolic dimension of technology has thus far been woefully neglected – a neglect that demands the theoretical resources of anthropology.

The link between these two propositions concerns the inadequate (and overdrawn) binary divisions frequently made, not only between the worlds of the old analogue media and the new media of the digital age but, more fundamentally, between the worlds of, on the one hand, tradition, culture, ritual, and irrationality and, on the other, the world of modernity, economics, functionality and rationality – which is often seen as being inscribed in these technologies. This is the fundamental issue referred to by the phrase in my subtitle: ‘the geography of the new’. Thus, the chapters in Part III focus on the conventions by which the future is usually understood as Western in orientation (*sic*), while those in Parts IV and V focus on how the future is so often symbolised in and through new technologies. The same conceptual issue is at stake in both cases – whether the question is posed in geographical terms, as that of the analytic constitution of modern centres and backward peripheries, areas or regions (the concern of Chapters 5 and 6) or in temporal or historical terms, as a question of periodisation, in relation to the magical dreams of the era of technomodernity to have instituted a Great Divide which makes a clean break between itself and the traditional past, so as to move into a truly New Age (the concerns of Chapters 7–10). In either case, my argument is that claims that ‘we’ (in the West?) have now arrived (alone?) at the End of History, whether as a result of an inescapable historical destiny, based on the intrinsic superiority of liberal free-market capitalism to all other forms of social life, or as a result of the *deus ex machina* of the new digital technologies, are all badly misguided. My argument, throughout these sections of the book, is directed against these falsely binarised polarities, and the book’s Coda, in Chapter 11, attempts to bring these various theoretical threads together, so as to offer a new way of conceptualising these issues which is more attuned to the many overlaps and continuities between the Occident and the Orient, the traditional (irrational) past and the logics of the modern, and between the realm of magic and that of technology.<sup>3</sup>

## **Part I: Disciplinary dilemmas: canons and orthodoxies**

The chapters in this section are concerned with different aspects of the question of disciplinarity, in relation to cultural and media studies. They deal with a set of contentious questions that have been both the site and stake of much theoretical debate in recent years, as the backlash against these new disciplines from those with more conventional positions to defend has gathered force. In Chapter 1, the claims of older established disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, to be the privileged guardians of insight in the sphere of culture are scrutinised and challenged from an interdisciplinary perspective. In this context, I am concerned not only to defend cultural studies against the backlash of intemperate criticism which it has attracted in some parts of the UK academy in recent years, from the guardians of tried and trusted disciplinary wisdoms, but also to articulate my own particular vision of cultural studies' potential future.

The interview in Chapter 2 was originally conducted as part of a project to introduce both British cultural studies and media studies to a European readership. In this context, the interview addresses the necessity to 'de-familiarise' the specificities of that British tradition, as well as its differences from the more recent forms of American cultural studies. It also explores the ways in which these Anglo-American traditions of cultural studies have both, in effect, often functioned as forms of cultural imperialism, exporting ready-made forms of 'one-size-fits-all' abstract cultural theory (what has come to be just called 'Theory', in some quarters) to the rest of the world, via the conduit of the international market for English-language publishing. These theoretical questions are here addressed in the material context of the role of powerful institutions such as publishing houses, governmental agencies and academic institutions.<sup>4</sup> The question of how we should approach the constitution of a truly transnational field of study, in relation to questions of culture, media and communication, is among the key issues addressed here, in the context of the variety of different approaches to media and cultural studies now developing in Asia, Latin America and elsewhere.

## **Part II: Methodological matters: interdisciplinary approaches**

The chapters in this section address the methodological dilemmas faced by those wishing to develop new work in these areas from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The interview in Chapter 3 offers the opportunity for an informal and vernacular exploration of these theoretical and methodological issues. In the

course of the interview, which focused on the concerns of new graduate students coming into these fields, I attempt to open up the 'black box' of research as a practice and argue for an understanding of research as a material form of intellectual labour, with the emphasis on the second of those two terms.

Here the theoretical questions at stake are exemplified by reference both to the way scholars in the field actually do their research and to the material factors governing their research practices (as opposed to their post-hoc rationalisations of their methodology, and of how and why it was chosen). I argue for a radical pragmatism in matters of methodology, based on the need to recognise the limitations (and 'opportunity costs') of *all* methods. Thus, the interview also focuses on the problems created by the sanctification of certain methodological procedures (for example, self-reflexive forms of ethnography) as if they could somehow function as the guarantors of Truth in contemporary intellectual discourse. The now taken-for-granted wisdoms of cultural studies, in relation to questions of epistemology and methodology, are closely interrogated here, as the interview revisits the debates that have developed as self-reflexive ethnography has been imported from anthropology to become to be the hegemonic method of choice within much of cultural studies. The difficulties attendant on this position are here subjected to serious critique, and consideration is also given to alternative positions in the field – such as the development, in some quarters, of new uses of previously scorned quantitative methods.<sup>5</sup>

It is not only academics, but also visual artists who have turned to ethnographic approaches in recent years.<sup>6</sup> In this context, Chapter 4 interrogates the theoretical significance of a variety of artistic and literary practices through which topics of concern to media and cultural studies have been approached. Thus, I address the work of conceptual artists such as Susan Hiller who have mobilised the techniques of the ethnographic museum in subversive ways, and of Krzysztof Wodiczko whose installations function as interrogative devices for the production of knowledge about power relations. I also consider the work of novelists and literary theorists such as Georges Perec and Italo Calvino, particularly in relation to the possibilities of what Perec calls an 'endotic anthropology of the infra-ordinary' and to Calvino's concerns with exactitude in matters of description and enumeration. The work of Sophie Calle and Christian Boltanski, which subverts conventional practices of ethnographic observation and questions the veracity of photography as a form of documentary evidence is also reviewed. The final section of the chapter compares the work of Ilya Kabakov, as an ethnographer of the 'lost world' of Soviet everyday life with that of the ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, whose work documented the civilisations of West Africa. Rouch's work is given a particularly detailed consideration in the light of his

enormous influence not only in the world of documentary film-making but also as a crucial (if little acknowledged) influence on the subsequent development of European 'New Wave' cinema, especially through his 'ethno-fictions'.

### **Part III: The geography of modernity and the orientation of the future**

The essays in this section explore debates about conventional models of Western modernity and address the urgent need to better theorise non-Western forms of modernity (and indeed, of cultural and media studies). These chapters explicate some of the fundamental conceptual difficulties in defining modernity (or postmodernity) adequately, by addressing some of the implicit (and deeply problematic) forms of historical periodisation which underlie much work in this field. One key issue concerns the need to avoid the kind of naively Eurocentric mode of analysis for which Cornel West has rightly criticised much French (or perhaps, more precisely, Parisian) work on postmodernity. If we are not to end up in Fukuyama's blind alley of imagining that 'We' (whoever that is) stand at the 'End of History', then we must avoid reducing history itself to the particular story of the West and avoid equating rationality with its familiar, Westernised forms. As David Forgacs has noted in his commentary on a previous version of Chapter 5, the argument there 'executes a precarious manouvre, rejecting the ethnocentrism involved in identifications of modernity with the West, while upholding Enlightenment notions of philosophical reason, rational debate, justice and tolerance, against radical forms of scepticism and epistemological relativism.'<sup>7</sup>

In Chapter 6, this argument is extended in the further context of my own frustrations with the limits of the various forms of global abstraction which have come to dominate the field in recent years, as one Big Theory of the inevitable fate of globalisation (be it the West's final victory, or its decline) has superseded another on the bookshop shelves with monotonous regularity, but with little grounding in (or intellectual purchase on) what is actually (and variously) happening in different parts of the globe.<sup>8</sup> In this context, I argue for a return to 'regional' theories and review the prospects for reinventing the long neglected discipline of area studies as a better basis for understanding the new global dynamics of our age.

Clearly such a reinvention would not be without its difficulties – some of which derive from the long inscription of area studies with matters of state power and global surveillance. There are also fundamental conceptual difficulties here, which have their origin in the continuing influence of Hegelian conceptions of the West as the origin of rationality and, thus, the

Archimedean point from which Western man (*sic*) produces knowledge about all those others who are still condemned to ethnicity. In this context I address the theoretical significance of current economic, cultural, political and technological developments in Asia. These developments have given rise to a variety of forms of non-Western (and often religious) modernities, which I analyse in the context of a reconsideration of the question of 'Occidentalism' and of dialogic forms of intercultural communication. My argument here also addresses the significance of the current development of a variety of regional forms of cultural imperialism, in different parts of the world. The questions that arise here involve the newly mediated forms in which Others see (or indeed, bypass or ignore) us, as much as how 'we' stereotype or Orientalise 'them'.

#### **Part IV: Domesticity, mediation and the technologies of 'newness'**

The concerns of this section are both geographical and historical. In relation to the first of these issues, we must note that one of the key claims made on behalf of the new technologies of our age concerns their capacity to transcend geography – as a result of which geography itself has recently been pronounced dead. My argument disputes these contentions by means of a close analysis of the material geographies of new computer-based industries such as call centres and an examination of the continuing geographical concentration of hub web sites and of the dot.com industry itself. In temporal terms, the perspective here, as indicated above, also rests on the premise that media studies needs to place contemporary developments, such as the constitution of cyberspace, with which much contemporary work is concerned, in a much longer historical perspective.<sup>9</sup>

Such historical work as has been done in media studies has focused largely on institutional structures and modes of production, or on narratives of technical invention and has largely neglected the 'intimate histories' of how we live with technologies. Chapter 7 attempts to redress this imbalance by focusing on the history of the micro-processes through which a range of communications technologies have now been accommodated (*sic*) in the home. I situate the 'domestication' of television in the broader context of the entry of a range of other technologies to the home, such as the telephone, the radio and more recently, the computer. However, the story of the domestication of the media is here complemented by a consideration of a new narrative – that of their 'dis-location'.<sup>10</sup> Just as television now escapes from the home to colonise public space, individualised media, such as the mobile phone, now contribute to the radical dislocation of domesticity.<sup>11</sup> In Bill Gates's vision of the 'smart house', the contemporary home itself (in its



digitalised or 'fully wired' form) is increasingly seen as the 'last vehicle' of mobility, rather than as a static space of retreat. As electronic forms of communication increasingly come to constitute the infrastructure of our newly mobile lives, the 'trellis' of domestic memory, of which Bachelard speaks, may itself now take an electronic, as much as an architectural, form.<sup>12</sup>

The further issue addressed here concerns the role of individualised mobile media delivery systems such as the Walkman, the iPod and the mobile phone in transforming the relations between the private and the public spheres, by giving people the capacity to conduct a virtual form of withdrawal from public space into a solipsistic aural cocoon or privatised sound bubble. This process has given rise not only to a new set of practical debates about the etiquette of public behaviour, but also, at a theoretical level, to debates about the political significance of this process, which has been described as one in which the space of the public sphere is filled now with the 'chatter' of mobile domesticity. In this context, John Tomlinson has argued that these technologies might best be understood not so much as 'tools for the extending of cultural horizons' but 'imperfect instruments by which people try to maintain some sense of security, within a culture of flow and deterritorialisation'.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 8 contextualises the current 'rhetorics of the technological sublime' by placing them in the context of the long history of dreams of liberation-through-technology which have accompanied the rise of a variety of (once-new) technologies – from those of the steam and machine ages to those of electricity and digitalisation. The claims made on behalf of the new technologies of our own age – not least that they will usher in a world of better understanding and more inclusive citizenship – are questioned by reference to evidence about the extent to which, rather than overcoming social and cultural divisions, these technologies in fact, often replicate and reinscribe them in new technical forms. The simplistic binary which is taken to divide the words of old and new media is also questioned here and the argument explores many of the overlaps and continuities between these supposedly different technical 'ages' and offers a critical perspective on contemporary debates about media convergence.

Returning to my earlier comments on the problems of born-again technological determinism in the field of new media studies, this chapter also critically addresses current tendencies towards the resanctification of McLuhan as the true prophet of the age, whose prognostications are now, we are told, finally coming true, in the era of digital techno-convergence. Here McLuhan's own 'futurology' is critically examined and contrasted with what we may gain from a reconsideration of Raymond Williams's more historically nuanced approach to the relationship between technologies and the cultural (and institutional) forms in which they are materialised in any given period.



The chapter also offers a critical assessment of both the work of influential writers on these technologies, and of the now widely taken-for-granted assumption that Deleuze and Guattari have provided us with a theoretical framework that fits naturally with the non-linear forms of technology of the 'control society'.<sup>14</sup>

In search of alternatives to these ways of understanding technology, its determinations, effects and uses, the chapter then turns to the potential contribution to be made by design studies. One important issue here concerns the paradoxes of a technical rationality at a time when many consumers are effectively disabled by the growing range of functions of the increasingly complex technologies on offer to them. In this context I draw on work in design studies on 'unuseless' objects and, in architecture, on deliberately designed forms of inefficiency that defamiliarise taken for granted 'solutions' to technological problems.<sup>15</sup> This work embodies a critique of what Castoriadis has called the technological 'fantasy of total control' enshrined in the Taylorist dream of rational efficiency in all areas of social life.<sup>16</sup> One of the key issues explored here concerns the way in which technical 'solutions' to perceived problems often themselves create new problems for other people. This autocritical design work thus produces a valuable 'inventory of suspicion' of the taken-for-granted technological solutions with which we routinely live.

Drawing on the work of Forty, Hartley and Ross and on a long tradition of feminist scholarship on the uses, functions and symbolic significance of domestic technologies,<sup>17</sup> I take as my foci here the cultural meanings of not only the television set but also of other, neglected domestic technologies such as the washing machine and the fridge (now figured as the 24/7 command centre for the latest generation of 'smart homes') and, most recently, the 'kitchen computer'. One key question here concerns the gendered symbolism of the worlds of these white and black goods; another concerns the process through which particular technologies are made inconspicuous and the invisibility of domestic labour is now enshrined in the design of the contemporary home. Ultimately, my concern is to explicate the ways in which we might better understand the processes through which the 'inconspicuous omnipresence' of a variety of forms of the 'technical' is now constituted in our everyday lives.<sup>18</sup>

## **Part V: Techno-anthropology: icons, totems and fetishes**

This section focuses on the potential benefits to technology studies of taking an anthropological perspective on the symbolic dimension of a range of different technologies.