# Some Thoughts on Culture/Media

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When I was asked to develop a program in ethnographic film in 1986, I was determined to develop a curriculum or, more ambitiously, expand the paradigm in a way that would not reproduce the reified dualisms of *gemienschaft/gesellschaft* that have had a striking and depressing resilience in the field of ethnographic film, visual anthropology, and communications research. Despite the early and important work of people such as Jean Rouch that broke down these barriers, notions of "us" as high-tech and post-industrial and "them" as pre-tech and underdeveloped still persist. Myriad versions could be summarized and parodied along the following lines:

> we have cameras/ they have exotic rituals
> we have mass media/ they have "authentic" art
> we have alienation/ they have face to face communities
> we have post-modernism/ they have ecologically-integrated worldviews

For anthropologists, mass media have mostly been viewed as disruptive if not corrupting of the small-scale non-western societies once (and probably still) identified as our bailiwick. Other than Hortense Powdermaker's study of Hollywood (1950), some brief attempts by Gregory Bateson (1943), Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux (1953) and others to use films for the analysis of other cultures at a distance during World War II, and prescient attention to new media technologies from filmmaker and communications scholar Sol Worth (1966, 1969), film and video in anthropology have been seen primarily as a transparent medium for documentation. Until very recently, with the exception of some interest in the development of media use by indigenous peoples since the 1980s (Ginsburg 1991, 1993; Michaels 1986, 1991a, 1991b; Ruby 1991; Turner 1991, 1992a, 1992b), there has been little systematic ethnographic engagement with what is rapidly becoming the most widespread means of cultural production and mediation on the globe. As Debra Spitulnick notes in her recent review of "Anthropology and the Mass Media,"

> ...an inquiry into just why and how anthropologists have managed to neglect the centrality of mass media in twentieth century life would not only be of historical interest, but also of potential use in illuminating certain conceptual gaps in contemporary anthropological theory (1993: 1)

In the field of communications, much contemporary theory still views mass media as inexorably hegemonic and homogenizing in the interest of dominant social groups, wiping out the cultural integrity, authenticity, and diversity of the people at the receiving end. Alternatively, most empirical communication research models depend so heavily on quantitative methods that it is almost impossible to account for cultural difference.

In the last few years, a new generation of scholars – trained in both communications and anthropology – has emerged whose interests in the relationship between media and culture are generating a fertile new area that might be called "culture/media."[1] This dialogue between disciplines became audible at sessions organized at the American Anthropological Association meetings in

1991 and 1992,[2] which in turn engendered this special issue of the *Visual Anthropology Review*, "Culture/Media," guest edited by Victor Caldarola.[3]

The essays collected for the "Culture/Media" issue of the *VAR* make a powerful case for the value of an anthropological approach to the study of culture and media. The research and ideas they offer are an impressive demonstration of the possibility and necessity of grounded ethnographic inquiries into the creation and consumption of film and television in diverse cultural and national contexts. In anthropology's best tradition, they throw into question the taken for granted nature of the way media is created and consumed in our own society.

What distinguishes an anthropological approach to mass media as opposed to studies in communication or semiotics? I would argue (as do most of the authors here) that our work is marked by the centrality of people – as opposed to media texts or technology – to the empirical and theoretical questions being posed in the analysis of media as a social form, whether we focus on its production, modes of representation, or reception. In certain ways, this parallels what critic Bill Nichols has characterized as the central problematic of ethnographic documentary: "What to do with people" (1981). In other words, if there is some original contribution to be made by an ethnographic approach, it is to break up the "massness" of the media, and to intervene in its supposed reality effect by recognizing the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting works in relation to their cultural and historical circumstances.

Focusing on people's activities with media, however, is only the first step. The next intellectual move, implicit in all the essays, is still only begrudgingly acknowledged in anthropology or communications: that social bodies – from nation states to provincial communities to individuals – increasingly mediate and comprehend their identities and placement in the world in relation to televisual and cinematic structures and experiences. From that premise, the authors represented here have moved along research paths that offer increasingly sophisticated approaches to understanding the ways that film and television are contributing to the mediation of national identities and to the construction

of cultural difference within and across societies. By looking at the broad range of social processes that shape media production, distribution, and reception in particular settings, they offer cogent challenges to the ethnocentric assumptions of the inevitability of western media hegemony. By exploring the intersection of local cultures, regional histories of cinema and television, and the political economies and ideological agendas of nation states, these papers suggest a sequel to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* that would broaden his analyses of the role of print media in nation building to include the cinematic and the televisual.[4]

The authors have worked in a remarkable array of locations which include Belize, China, Japan, Tonga, the U.S., and the Alsace region of France. Their methods range from analyses of institutions and events, to studies of the cultural impact of national communication policies, to explorations of interpretive practices, life histories and the space-time effects of new technologies on social hierarchies. The authors' theoretical stances encompass debates on the "technologies of power" through which states establish hegemonic power and the dynamics of the "public sphere" through which independent criticism can develop; they address questions regarding the tensions between ideology and culture and the semiotics of national and neocolonial regimes; and they provide provocative insights into the unstable relations between intention, text, and effect by studying how producers make decisions and audiences interpret works in unpredictable and destabilizing ways.

The essays divide roughly into two groups that fall along the illusory but heuristically useful divide between production and reception (Dornfeld 1992): the first focuses on the consumption of popular cinema; the second on the production and impact of television. In the first group, the work of Yang, Hahn, and Caughey are exemplary, in different ways, of possibilities for carrying out what Yang calls ethnographic studies of media reception of both foreign and indigenously produced cinema. The authors do not limit reception to the moment of contact between media event and audience, but situate their questions about the reception of cinema in relation to histories of cinema viewing (Hahn, Yang), prior interpretive practices (Hahn), and

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problematic social relations that catalyze relations with imaginary characters (Caughey), all of which structure the "codes of perception" through which interpretations of media become forms of cultural production (de Certeau 1984). Yang, in her study of film discussion groups (*qunzhong yingping*) that emerged along with economic reforms in the People's Republic of China in the 1980s, offers an illuminating perspective on Western understandings of the public sphere as an arena of social criticism autonomous from state or market domination (Habermas 1989). While these forms of film criticism were initiated and/or structured by the state, her interviews with and readings of the reviews written by members of these groups of non-professional film enthusiasts suggest that they provide one of the few arenas in China in which governmental control is ruptured by popular discourse in an otherwise very tightly regulated cinema industry. Yang queries as to whether a public sphere developing under the aegis of the state, is in fact any less constrained than those traditions of criticism that are overshadowed by market interests, as in the U.S.

Hahn's study of the reception of western cinema in Tonga invites us to consider raucous behavior in their movie theaters as well as their preference for American action films not as ignorance or naiveté but rather as continuous with Tongan interpretive practices that require audience participation and group response as an essential aspect of performance (*faiva*). Hahn argues that for Tongan moviegoers, audiences' lively interaction with cinema screenings helps to "make Tongan" popular Hollywood movies and thus reinforces Tongan identity. For Western analysts, such interpretive behavior demonstrates the ethnocentrism of Bazin's theories of cinematic spectatorship which assume that all meaning lies in the text and is centered in the *individual's* identification with the screen characters (1967), a view that has been challenged by critics working in Western settings as well.

As an example of more distinctly Western tendencies in cinema reception, Caughey's essay shifts us from collective settings to a "person-centered ethnography." He focuses in depth on an upper middle-class Italian American woman's ongoing interest in and identification with a male martial arts movie hero, Steven Seagal. As an interpretation of this powerful and empowering fantasy relationship, Caughey considers the particular social, ethnic, gendered, and

life historical conditions that shape her attachment. More broadly he argues that anthropologists need to take such relationships with popular culture figures as seriously as they do the ties people have with ancestors, spirit beings and other non-corporeal inhabitants of social landscapes more commonly associated with serious anthropological research.

In the second group of essays, Painter, Wilk, and Zinn address the production and reception of mass media - especially television - in a range of locations, focusing in particular on questions of ideology. hegemony, and culture. They focus on the actual processes through which cultural and ideological agendas are encoded which legitimate or destabilize (perhaps unwittingly) national elites by considering the specific ways in which television acts as a "technology of power" (Foucault 1979) through production practices, state policy, and shifts in knowledge/power engendered by new technologies such as communications satellites.

These studies offer important challenges to the overly simple media imperialism arguments of the 1970s (Schiller 1976, Tunstall 1977), showing how, in different contexts, television and cinema are put to the service of identity formation in ways that may not be immediately obvious. Such processes of identity formation can help to constitute what Appadurai and Breckenridge have called "alternative modernities" (1988) even as they may reinforce class, regional, and ethnic hierarchies.

Painter's study of Japanese television production is also a persuasive argument for what he calls:

> ...the anthropology of television [which]...studies problems, not programs. Stressing what people do with television rather than what TV does to people, it encompasses the everyday practices of TV producers and audiences as well as the form and content of specific telerepresentations and the relations of TV to other lived experiences..Television does not merely reflect culture; it produces and channels it in socially and historically variable ways...The move to study television culture is part of a larger movement that actively focuses on the production of culture..(Painter, this issue)

Painter's riveting account of the Japanese broadcast media's representation of the national educational

system – a central problematic reaching into the daily lives of most citizens – considers how Japanese telerepresentations of youthful enthusiasm, innocence, and spirit embodied in the concept of *seishun* are meaningfully related to a rigid and demanding educational system and meritocracy. Painter's analysis scrutinizes the televisual production of the National High School Quiz championship as a "spectacular transformation of meritocracy outside of the classroom." Through that event, he demonstrates the contradiction in the Japanese preoccupation with *seishun* – a central principle in the spectacle – which is of course subverted by the intense competition of the quiz, a kind of apotheosis of the unrelenting ranking that characterizes the broader educational system.

Zinn's essay on Alsatian regional identity and French TV argues that modernity is not simply reflected in mass media but is actually constituted through forms such as television that both shape and transgress boundaries of nation states. Her study offers insight into the tensions between France's regional minorities and the centralized French state, which used television to help constitute an "imagined community" that focused, until recently, on Paris as the dominant standard for a national culture. In the 1980s, cultural policy shifted to an ideology of regionalism that resulted in the decentralizing of television of which the development of Alsatian TV was a part. While this act was an undeniable endorsement of an Alsatian subculture, it is, nonetheless, a form of regional identity that is sponsored and defined by the state. Can this situation, Zinn asks, allow for counter-hegemonic possibilities? Rather, she suggests, such alternatives might emerge elsewhere, for example, from Alsace's location on the borders with Germany and Switzerland where an unanticipated polyphony of televisual sources bespeak the ambiguities, tensions, and complexities of Alsatian identity in a register that is more post-modern than modern.

While Zinn focuses on space, culture, and regional identity, Wilk focuses on issues of *temporality*, television, and hierarchical social relations. In his study of how "TV time" disrupts neocolonial hierarchies in Belize, Wilk solves a puzzle: why do the upper-class oppose television, claiming that it is destroying Belizean culture, while working-class people embrace TV and find it culturally affirming? The immediacy of the medium via satellite, he argues, challenges the temporal basis of the legitimacy of Belizean elites as the less

privileged are no longer dependent on them for information, the latest styles, and news from the metropoles. Simultaneously, he argues, the appearance of Belizean products in advertisements in between live transmissions from the U.S. has freed their material world from the status of "backward," making it (and Belizean identity) coeval with the centers of modernity seen and heard on television. More generally, Wilk demonstrates that the impact of television is not so much in the content of its message (as many have argued). Rather, for Wilk, the power of mass media is in its intervention into concepts of time and distance as they are altered in often unexpected ways that can enhance rather than erode local cultural autonomy.

As a group, these essays offer a rich array of ideas and methods that suggest how we might, as ethnographers and cultural analysts, analyze televisual and cinematic processes and artifacts. They demonstrate, as well, how our methods and insights can contribute new understandings of these powerful and far-reaching forms of cultural mediation. While in the past I have invoked pessimistically the modernist meta-narrative of the bargain with Mephistopheles as summarizing the impact of the global penetration of media (1991), I would like to hold out for the voices of optimism, both for future research and for the actual televisual practices themselves in which we are all enmeshed. The "Culture/ Media" issue makes clear that whatever the power and reach of media institutions and messages, the people who receive it continue to have unpredictable and creative responses. But these responses can only be discovered and understood through close and contextualized attention to media practices in particular settings, from the ways Tongans used the internal space of Western style movie theaters in the 1930s; to the sudden rupture in cultural notions of temporality in Belize that satellite TV helped bring about in the early 1980s; to the impact of critical shifts in French government policy on controlling and later decentralizing broadcasting. The variety and particularity revealed by such research is a healthy corrective to grand theorizing about culture and media that loses touch with the specific, embedded, and diverse ways that people use media to make sense of their worlds and, most importantly, to construct new ones. It is only through such case studies, especially in diverse cultural settings, that we can refine and rethink prevailing

theories regarding the power and impact of film and television, and re-imagine the place of media in all of our lives.

NOTES

1. My comments are necessarily very brief due to space limitations, and therefore cannot really do justice to the "prehistory" of the present moment. Broadly speaking, while there have been individual communications scholars interested in things cultural, such as Eric Michaels (1986) and Sol Worth (1972), there seems to be a new critical mass of scholars (for example, Calderola 1994; Dornfeld 1992; Roth 1992) who not only take social theory and ethnographic methods very seriously, but also are committed to working with their colleagues in anthropology. As another example of the burgeoning of research and theory on culture and media, see "Screening Politics in a World of Nations" a special issue of *Public Culture*, 1993, guest-edited by Lila Abu-Lughod.
2. As two recent examples, at the 1991 AAA Annual Meetings, Victor Calderola organized a well-attended invited panel entitled "Television and the Transformation of Culture," co-sponsored by the Society for Visual Anthropology and the Society for Cultural Anthropology. At the 1992 meetings, Tamar Gordon and Mayfair Yang organized a panel entitled "Culture and Mass Media: Production, Representation, and Reception."
3. Given the sense of excitement and velocity around these developments, it is not a coincidence that in 1993, I changed the name of the program I direct at New York University from the Program in Ethnographic Film and Video to the Program in Culture and Media.
4. British producer and film critic John Ellis' arguments sound like a mandate for such work:

Television is an essentially national activity for the majority of its audience...the private life of a nation state defining the intimate and inconsequential sense of everyday life. To look at the whole phenomenon of broadcast television in a particular country, both how its output works and how it intersects with the social and economic life of the country it would be necessary to live there for an extended period of time.. Sudden exposure to the often bizarre practices of broadcast television in

another country can stimulate fresh thinking about the whole phenomenon of broadcast television. (1985: 5)

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