# MEDIATED MODERNITIES : COMMUNICATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY LIFE AT THE CENTURY'S END

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## Approaching modernity

The social and human sciences, as they developed in the West, were born out of a desire to understand and master the dynamics of modernity- that complex of profound economic, political, social and cultural shifts that wrenched people away from familiar patterns of life and belief *rooted in tradition* and pitched them into a condition of permanent change and flux.

One of the most *frequently* quoted characterisations of this great transformation occurs towards the begining of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* where they describe the creative destruction *set in motion* by the arrival of industrial capitalism. The present, was, they argued, an age of "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation...All fixed, fast-frozen relations...are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels 1968:38).

Written a hundred and fifty years ago this year, this passage remains remarkbly resonant and relevant to our own times. As does their insistence, *in the next* paragraph, that the captains of capitalism harboured ambitions to generalise their influence "over the whole surface of the globe" .

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that Marx was absolutely right to see the the logics of capital as pivotal to the formation of modernity. At the same time, we can also agree with later commentators who have followed the great German sociologist, Max Weber, in drawing attention to two other major shifts ; the rise of

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the nation-state as the key unit of political organisation and action, and in the cultural sphere, the the de-centering of magic and religion and the reorganisation of intellectual and imaginative life around the scientific world view, a process Weber called, in a memorable phrase, the 'disenchantment of the world' .

Although these movements in political and cultural life were clearly bound up with the installation of capitalist relations at the centre of social life, contrary to the arguments advanced by some Marxist scholars, they were never simply reflections or instruments of capitalism. They had they own distinctive histories and dynamics, which intersected with the rise of capitalism in complex ways. This recognition has lead one of the *best known* of today's sociological writers, Anthony Giddens, to define 'modernity" as the ensemble of all the distinctive "modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently become more or less worldwide in their influence" (Giddens 1990:1).

This characterisation has been very influential in social debate over the last few years, but it has two major limitations.

Firstly, it is ethnocentric. Western capitalism has certainly enjoyed considerable success in extending its geographical reach. Indeed, its global influence is arguably both broader and deeper now, in the era of post-colonialism, than in was in the age of empire. But this project has not gone uncontested. There has been a continual history of resistance and of selective incorporation as capitalist ambitions have collided with deeply rooted cultural and social histories, other definitions of value, and alternative visions of the future. 'Modernity' then, has to be seen as a multiple not a singular process.

Secondly, as Giddens himself makes clear, he is offering "an institutional history of modernity with cultural overtones" (op cit p 1) It is a top-down view. His conceptual categories are elegant but deserted. He offers us a sociology without human faces. As a result he has comparatively little to say about the experience of living with modernity, about how it felt to be caught up in this vortex of change, or about people's struggles to find a comon vocabularly and a shared

set of images that might give voice and shape to this experience. Developing a bottom-up account of modernity that does justice to its intimate textures, has been a particular concern of scholars in the humanities, *most notably* in history, literary criticism, art history, and philosohy. They have turned Giddens' social science project on its head and set out to construct a cultural and experiental account of modernity with institutional overtones.

Searching for a starting point, many have been drawn to the elegant figure of the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, walking the streets of Paris in the Winter of 1859, moving with the crowds thronging the pavements, wrapped in a continually changing envelope of sounds and sights -the clang of a distant railway train, the hammering and banging of building projects, music coming from a cafe, and the constant parade of people, of every type, glanced for second and then gone. He describes what "an immense joy" it was "to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive" (Baudelaire 1964: 9) For him, the experience of modernity is always a *matter* of living with "the empemeral and the contigent" (op cit :13) To capture this quality he calls for a new kind of artist, willing to turn themselves into a human kaleidoscope responding to each new pattern of movement and reproducing its multiplicity (op cit p 9) This ambition later underpinned the succession of avant-garde movments in European art that we now call "modernism', or rather 'modernisms', since attempts to capture the fugitive and the multiple took a wide range of forms; from the Impressionists' fascination with the momentary play of light, to the Futurists' romance with speed and the machine, to the Cubists' efforts to *pin down on a flat canvas* the fragmentation and *overlap of viewpoints that an* observer *might occupy as they* moved around *an object in three dimensional space.*

At first sight there would appear to be little or no common ground between the detailed explorations of everyday experience and representation undertaken in the humanties and by humanistically inclined social scientists, and the analyses pursued by social scientists concerned with mapping institutions and structures. However, if we accept that modernity is constituted at three main levels- the

institutional, the symbolic, and the experiential- and I would argue strongly that we should, it is clear that conventional divisions of intellectual labour present a major obstacle to the development of a richer, more comprehensive *and* nuanced account .

In his passionate defence of social science as an imaginative, rather than simply a technical activity, the American writer C Wright Mills argued that its distinctive vision was grounded precisely in "the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self...to shift from examination of a single family to comparative assessments of the national budgets of the world; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry- and to see the relations between the two" (Mills 1970: 13-14).

This project requires us to move continually between the macro and micro levels of analaysis, between the distant and the near-to-hand, *between* situated social action and the wider formations that envelop and shape it. As *the Latin American* cultural sociologist, Garcia Canclini, has recent put it, reflecting on his exoerience of trying to map the organisation of everyday life in Mexico City "The meaning of the city is constituted by what the city gives and what it does not give, *by what subjects can do with their lives in the middle of the factrors that determine their habitat and* by what they imagine about themselves and others" (Canclini 1995:751).

Puzzling out the connections between structure and action, location and imagination, is also a militantly interdisciplinary project . It requires us to become intellectual trespassers, ignoring the 'keep out' notices erected by the guards who patrol the borders of academic enclaves. This is difficult, but it is also essential, and no*where* more so than in the analysis of communications.

The study of communications demands interdiscipinary commitment for the simple reason that in the contemporary world, communications systems have come to play a pivotal role in the organisation of the institutional formations, symbolic systems and patterns of everyday life that together characterise modernity.

From the mid nineteenth century, when Marx, Engels, and Baudelaire produced their initial sketches of modernity, the emerging

media of communication - initially the popular press, photography *and* the electric telegraph, and later the telephone, gramaphone, cinema, radio and television - have been central its formations and mutations

Firstly, they were themselves major institutional formations, expanding industrial systems, that intersected in complex ways with the consolidation of the two major institutions of the capitalist economy and the modern polity- the corporation and the nation-state.

Secondly, they played a fundamental role in the reorganisation of everyday life, offering new points of social contact, cementing new routines and rituals and providing new resorces for the reconstruction of identity and memory.

Thirdly, and most importantly, as the central public arena for organising and promoting new systems of meaning and representatiuon and organising the competition between them, the mass popular media became, for most people, the principle source of the discourses, images and interpretative frameworks they could draw on in their attempts to understand the processes of change they were caught up in, and formulate strategies of action. *They offered symbolic spaces in which the present and its possible futures could be collectively imagined.*

*If* we accept that modernity was and is, always and everywere, mediated, it becomes impossible to chart its transformations without addressing the central role played by communications systems in constituting its major institutional, symbolic and experiential forms.

Relevant histories are only just begining to be written (see for example, Thompson 1995: Flichy 1995: Mattelart 1996) but by way of illustration, let me just sketch in some examples of the kinds of articulations we need to explore.

## Economies, polities and communications

The emergence of the modern corporation as the typical form of capitalist enterprise coincided with the extension of the telegraph system, the development of the telephone, and the globalisation of communication networks with the completion of major undersea cable

projects. This new infrastructure of telecommunications (after the Greek word 'tele', meaning at a distance) played a central role in companies' efforts to co-ordinate their increasingly complex systems of production and bureaucratic control. It enabled them to take maximum advantage of the economies of scale delivered by mass production and mass distribution *and to operate effectively across national borders.*

At the same time,by tracking the activities of competitors and customers and monitoring shifts in key operating environments, the expansion of the major international news agencies,the emergence of specialist sources of business news and analaysis, and the beginings of modern consumer research, combined to provide an essential resource for formulating more effective business strategies. In the age of modernity corporate success came to rest as much on command of strategic commercial intelligence as on control over key productive resources .

The importance of communications systems to economic life has been consolidated by the recent move from industrial to what we can call, digital capitalism. In this emerging system, communications systems are both the centre of a new cluster of pivotal industries, and the principle infrastructure around which all economic activity is increasingly organised.

As traditional manufacturing industries have declined in importance in the major western capitalist economies, the communications industries have moved to the centre of economic life . In the latest list of the world's leading 500 corporations, compiled by the ***Financial Times*** of London, four out of the top ten entries are communications companies. They include the American computer companies, Microsoft and Intel, and the Japanese telecommunications operators, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone.(Financial Times 1998:5) The first ranked company is General Electric, which owns, among other things, one of the leading american television networks, NBC.

The economic importance of these companies and others operating in the same fields has been massively stengthened in recent years by the beginings of the move from analogue to digital forms of communications .Digitalization allows all forms of information- text,

sounds, data, still and moving images, and the human voice- to be coded, *stored* and transmitted in the universal language of computing- as an array of 'zeroes' and 'ones' . This *deceptively simple* technological innovation has cleared the way for the convergence of three major comunications sectors - computing, telecommunications, and the cultrual industries - that had previously operated separately. This continuing process is installing a new golden triangle at the heart of the modern capitalist economy and constructing a new economic circuit in which the cultural industries (education, museums, the arts and the mass media) provide symbolic materials that can be stored and manipulated by computers and distributed by the emerging telecommunications networks based around broadband cables and satellite links.

The convergence of computing and telecommunications is also providing a new digital infrastructure that simultaneously acclerates and thickens flows of strategic commercial information and allows instant adjustments and responses. This process is at its most advanced in the financial markets where the 24 hour flow of prices around the world's time zones and the computerisation of dealing has led to permanent instability as speculators take advantage of movements measured in nanoseconds.

Turning now to the political realm, we find that much discussion of political transformations in the age of modernity has focussed on the consolidation and extension of the nation-sates. Most comentators regard the hypen linking the two terms in English, as unproblematic. They present it as the iron bar of a dumbell riveting the formations at both ends together in a single, solid, entity. In fact it is more useful to see the connections between nation and state as a ricky bridge slung across a chasm, in constant danger of collapse. States are ensembles of administrative institutions with claims to legitimate control over the peoples and social organisations within an agreed territory. They levy taxes to sustain public investment in essential services (although in the modern period what exactly counts as 'essential' has been the subject of continuous debate). They administer the criminal justice system. And they maintain a military capacity for *internal security and* external defence. Nations on the

other hand, are 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), invitations to identify oneself as belonging to a unique people. These symbolic spaces are constituted on the basis of shared accounts of origins, agreed criteria of membership (usually,though not exclusively, ethnic), and selective cultural signs and rituals that claim to distil the distinctive qualities of nationhood.

The rise of the nation-state as the central unit of modern political organisation has to be seen not as a smooth process, but as the site of *constant* contests over the lack of fit between the two formations. Stateless nations -such as the jews- *have* struggled *continuously* to secure a home land. Nations in waiting within states (such as Scotland within the United Kingdom) *have pressed* for secession and independence.

Against this unsettled background of *disputed* territorial claims, the national imaginary has be continually re-activated . The mass media are central to this process. By providing simultaneous access to shared experiences and common knowledge, national *newspapers* and later,national braodcasting systems, have played a pivotal role in developing the solidarities between strangers that national identity requires. They activate this sense of self not just in the great set pieces of national celebration- state funerals, the anniversaries of *resonant* cultural figures, key sporting contests - but through a multitude of banal daily signs of national integrity- the weather map printed in the newspapers, the continual oblique references to the colours and composition of the national flag in television studio decor.

Securing the popular promotion of national culture and national identity has been one of the central ambitions of modern states in the sphere of communications, promoting continual battles *with* media professionals *pver their* proper sphere of autonomy. But states also mobilise communications as a central resource in pursuing other core functions.

The history of modern warfare for example, is less a history of innovations in weaponry and more a history of advances in the command, control and communications systems that allow troops and armoury to be deployed to best effect across extended theatres of

conflict. Similarly, internal security has increasingly come to depend on a proliferating system of visual surveillance - from the early photographs and fingerprints of criminals to today's blanket coverage of public space by surveillances cameras. *At the same time, the growing computerisation of paper files has massively incresased the state's* ability to store, *collate* and interrogate the *disparate data on the medical, educational financial and criminal careers of individual citizens.*. Like corporations, States keep continual watch over their operating environments and draw on the same basic communications systems in order to construct archives of strategic knowledge.

State secrecy however is only one face of the modern political system. The other is publicity. Modernity is marked by the rise of popular participation in the political process. People move from being subjects of a monarch or emperor, entitled to protection but *subjected* to autocractic rule, to becoming citizens, with the right to participate in choosing the repesentatives who will make the laws by which they consent to be governed. As the principle site where candidates for office compete for popular support and allegiance, where alternative policy platforms are presented and debated, and where the performance of public agencies is scrutinised, the popular mass media have played a pivotal role in mediating between citizens and power holders .

This mediation has been performed principally by vertical, top-down, networks of communications, such as national broadcasting systems, where material is produced centrally and disseminated to discrete homes or individuals who have little or no cotact with one another. Modern politics however, has also been formed in important ways by horizontal networks, where each participant can potentially produce as well as consume. The development of political mobilisation in the modern period is inextricably tied to popular uses of media that are cheap to produce and which circulate outside the established vertical systems. They include pamphlets, xeroxes, audio and video cassetes, faxes and Internet sites.

The resulting struggles between vertical and horizontal communication flows, between manged and spontaneous political participation, *between hierarchies and networks,* is one of central threads in the history of political life in the modern period.

## Conflictual identities : consumers versus citizens

The major institutional formations of modernity offered people two master identities, The capitalist economy hailed people primarily as consumers, actors in the markplace of commodities with a sovereign right to comfort and satisfaction. In contrast, as we have seen, the mass political system addressed them as citizens, members of a moral community whose personal entitlements were accompanied by a responsibility to contribute to sustaining the common good. Where consumerisim *champions* personal pleasures and self expression through possession, the rhetorics of citizenship emphasised shared needs and communal solutions. As the major medium of product promotion, the popular commercial media priviledged the appeals of consumption *not only* directly, through advertisements for branded goods and services, *but also less obviously,* by celebrating ways of life - in films, televsion fictions, and press coverage of stars and celebrities- in which the good life rested on an an abundance of material goods. This insistent publicity for commodities progressively hollowed out the modern political sphere, draining citizenship of its original impetus, and converting political particpation into an extension of shopping, where voters supported candidates who branded themselves succesfuly and promised to raise living standards without raising taxes.

This contradiction between the promotion of consumerism and the demands of citizenship has been a major features of modern communications systems, particularly in societies such as Britain and the United States, which presented themselves as champions of democracy. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as ownership became increasingly concentrated and the financial viability of popular newspapers more dependent on adverttsing revenues, it became more and more difficult to present the commercial press as the central source of disinterested political information and open deabte that liberal democratic theory required. As one angry American observer complained in 1900:

*"The newspaper, which is pre-eminently a public and not a private institution...ought not to be controlled by irresponsible individuality. ...It is absurd that an intelligent, self-governing community should be the helpless victim of the caprice of newspapers managed solely for profit" (Wilcox 1900 : 86-9).*

This tension between the perogratives of private enterprise on the one hand and the cultural rights of citizenship on the other, has been addressed in two main ways; by attempts to regulate private media by requiring them to act in the 'public interest', and by creating news forms of public communicative enterprise outside the orbit of the market.. The first option is characteristic of the Uniteed State's response, whilst perhaps the best known example of the second, is Britain's public broadcasting service, the BBC, which is funded out of taxation but operates at arm's length from government. However, with the recent moves towards increased privatisation and deregulation in both countries,and the rapid ris eof multi-media conglomerates with interests across the whole range of communications industries, the tensions beteween public and private interests, citizenship and consumerism, are once again intensifying.

## Communications and the reconstruction of experience

Turning now to the level of everyday experience, I want to illustate the decisive role of mediation by looking briefly at two major areas that have *recently* begun to attract *sustained* academic analysis; the reorganisation of time and space (see eg Kern 1983) and centrality of images in popular culture. (see eg McQuire 1998).

### *Altered spaces / changing times*

Time and space are the central co-ordinates of social experience. We use them to position ourselves in relation the other people- calibrating our closeness or distance from them and measuring our intimacies and separations - and to make connections between autobiography and history- seeing our lives unfold against a

backdrop of resonant public events and slower moving changes.

In order to work effectively, the institutional formations of modernity required the standardisation of time. Clock time replaced *bodily,* diurnal and seasonal rythms as the hegemonic measure of time's passage. The working day was constructed around going to work, clocking-in, being at work, and clocking -off. The coming of the railways and and need to co-ordinate time-tables, prompted the construction of uniform national grids of time, displacing the myriad local regimes that had existed before. And at the end of the last century, transnational business interests finally secured an international agreement which divided the globe into uniform time zones measured in terms of hours ahead or behind the time in Greenwich in London, the zero meridian.

Simultaneously, the passage of time accelerated. Value was attached to smaller and smaller units of time, a mind set encapsulated in the popular expression, 'every second counts'. Late arrival at work, by even a few minutes, resulted in loss of pay. Rest breaks during the working day were rigorously policed. The new system of factory management built around Taylor's time and motion studies, speeded up production, requiring workers to peform their designated task more often within the same time-frame.

These new time regimes were woven into the textures of everyday life, not only through capitalism's reorganisation of work and liesure, but through the revised periodicity promoted by the popular media. The new popular newspapers that emerged in the mid nineteenth century were designed to be read on the way to work and in lunch breaks. They assumed a short attention span, and offered banner headlines announcing the theme of the story, a relatively short exposition, supported where possible by dramatic illustations . These images *mobilised* meanings by association. They worked by simulteneity as opposed to the ordered sequences of the written word. By breaking up the densely packed pages of close print that has characterised earlier newspapers they helped to forge new patterns of popular cognition and memory.

Social remembering came to be anchored around images. The collective recall of how things had been was increasingly reduced to

representations of how they had looked. When Kodak launched the world's first cheap, snapshot camera in 1888, this visual memorisation permeated tdomestic as well as the public space. Traditions of story telling gave way to the family photograph album. Oral histories were transformed into parades of fashion.

The ubiquity of photography accelerated that eclipse of substance by style, which many observers have seen as one of the hallmarks of modernity. As Marx noted, this fascination with surfaces was the key to understanding how commodity culture was able to conceal its origins in production. The ability to hide from history that this nostalgic relation to the past encouraged was reinforced by a growing fixation with the present, and here again the press played a central role.

The popular press was a daily press, divided between editions printed on each working day and editions designed for Sundays, the usual day of rest. The dailies sold themselves as being 'up-to-the minute' relaying news as it happens. Being the first to break a major story became a central plank in the organisation of press competition. This continual emphasis on instanteneity, has been progressively extended with the arrival of live television relays and 24 hour news channels.It encourages audiences to focus attention on the present. Because news is organised around the *relentless* succession of discrete events it offers a radically discontinous narrative. It cannot illuminate the slow movement of underling processes whose grasp is central to genuine historical understanding. A media system organised around news may be information rich, offering packages of data on a myriad of happenings, but it is knowledge poor. It does not provide that contexts and interpretive frameworks that allow people to make connections, to see the 'big picture', to understand what forces have formed the present situation or how they might be altered.

This radical forshortening of time occured alongside the effective abolition of distance, setting in motion a complex relation between the two. The fundamental shift in spatial relations came with the invention of the electric telegraph in the 1840s. For the first time in human history communications was uncoupled from transportation. Messages no longer had to assume a physical forms- a letter, a parcel,

and gift. Using Samuel Morse's digital code of dots and dashes, they de-materialised, moving through space as a stream of electical pulses travelling along conducting wires.

Wired communication systems, from the original telegraph to today's cable televsion networks, has one major disadvanatge however. They required a physical infrastructure of connections .This limitation was overcome towards the end of the last century when Herz discovered that it was possible to send signals through the atmosphere using a portion of the electro-magnetic spectrum. This ushered in wire-less communication and laid the basis for the radio, television and satellite industries.

The development of these telecommunications system separated place from space. Take markets for example. Prior to these developments they were events that took place on a designated day at an agreed location where *people* came together physically to do business. They required co-presence. Markets of this type have continued *of course,* but many are now disembodied . Transactions take place over telecommunications links, between participants who may never meet in person. The key locations are no longer places but cyberspaces, the comunication networks that link the computers of buyers and sellers.

The increasing salience of disembodied experience in not confined to business dealings or home shopping however. It is a general feature of modernity's reconstruction of social relations.

The domestic telephone for example *helped to* compensate for the increasing physical separation that followed the acceleration of social and geographical mobility within nations and across continents. Modernity is characterised by massive movements of peoples, travelling from the countryside to the city, from the provinces to the metropolis, and migrating overseas, driven by forced dispossession of hoping to escape discrimination and find new opportunities. Because it mobilised the distinctive individual grain of the human voice and allowed private conversations, the telephone came to play a central role in sustaining the intimacies of kin and friendship networks across space and eradicating the tyrannies of distance.

This potent combination of intimacy and distance was also

central to the new forms of popular entertainment built around the star system. *The* Hollywood *film industry* completed what the *american* popular muisc industry had begun, deploying the full range of publicity and *promotion* to encourage audiences to *become fans* indentifying with the stars as *people* simultaneously like themselves - coming from humble orgins, coping with the trials and tribulations of family life- but also unlike themselves - living lives of exaggerated glamour and excitement which pointed to the possibilities opened up by the new consumer system. *You* might not be *able* to be a star but you could buy moderately priced versions of the clothes they wore or the objects they used in your local store.

The publicity system that promoted stardom therefore encouraged a peculiar, displaced, intimacy. People felt they knew them well although they had never met. They became a significant, though absent, prescence in people's everyday lives, a potent focus for desires and regrets, often unexpressed. Arguably, it was precisely because Diana Princess of Wales had been promoted as a star that her sudden death touched so many people so deeply. The worldwide television relay of her funeral also demonstrated very clearly how global communications networks can constitute virtual communities of strangers over huge distances. The fact that these collectivties are ephemeral does not detract from their potency as links in the chains connecting autobiography to history. Everyone I know of my generation for example, can remember exactly where they were when they heard that John Lennon of the Beatles had been shot.

## New ways of looking

Princess Diana's death also reminds us of a second distinctive feature of modernity's reconstruction of experience, *which we have already touched on* - the centrality of images. She was the most photographed woman in world history and when people came to build personal shrines to mark her death, the centrepiece was often a *magazine or newspaper photograph* of her, surrounded by candles and flowers.

This use of images as a central mode of public and personal expression is rooted in two very different relations between mechanical *reproduction* and popular experience. We can see these relations in the process of formation if we examine the carreer of Louis Daguerre *the celebrated French nineteenth century inventor and entrepreneur* . He started out painting scenery for the theatre but moved on to develop a Diorama show. People entered a dark room where they were confronted by a huge image, 70 feet by 45 feet, that filled their whole field of vision. It might be a mountain scene or the interior of a cathedral.After staring at it for some minutes, the seats would revolve and they would move to a second scene. In his own time, he was best know for this widely acclaimed spectacle.But he is rememberd now as the inventor of one of the early photographic processes.

The French government bought the patent and granted him a life pension, promoting his invention as a new scientific instrument that like the microscope and telescope captured details never seen before with total accuracy. This image of the camera as *a* mechanical guarantee of truth *provided the model for the* ideal of objectivity that emerged in journalism and the nascent social sciences at the same time. Reporters and researchers aspired to become human cameras, taking comprehensive pictures of the social world uncontaminated by prejudice or partisanship. Despite the faking and falsification that has punctuated photography's subsequent career, there is still a powerful popular assumption that images are more truthful than language. However, the vitality of this belief depends on the conditions under which the images were taken.

Power holders soon recognised that entering the competition for popular support set in motion by the rise of mass politics, required them to present a convincing and attractive image. As we noted earlier, like the new advertising for the branded commodities that poured off the new production lines, they promoted themselves in the new political marketplace by manipulating appearances. What they looked like became more important than what they stood for. As this trend developed, so the line separating politics from show-business became more and more blurred. Politicans became performers and

performers aspired to become politicians. In the Phillipine elections earlier this year for example, almost one hundred of the candidates competing for local and national office were film stars, TV hosts, beauty queens, singers or sports personalities.

Cultivating a marketable appearance requires the management of innumerable photo opportunities designed to compile a popular archive of resonant images . But in the contemporary world, orchestrated promotion is continually subverted by the stolen images taken by paparazzi . This dynamic began in the late 1920s when the *launch* of small, lightweight cameras that could take pictures in natural light without using flash, enabled news photographers to capture images of the powerful at embarrasing moments and in unflattering poses. These non official images allowed viewers to see behind the scenes.They exposed the back stage area usually hidden from view. They revealed power holders without their make up.

The visual culture of the camera then, has generated two traditions of image making in which carefully fabricated and arranged productions jostle for attention with fugitive images of the private lives of the powerful. In popular aesthetics, only the second can now mount a convincing claim to 'realism'.

This is a far cry from the early, naive, view that the camera cannot lie. But Dauguerre has also left another legacy. His Diorama was one of the first modern immersive environments. It screened out all external points of references, and through the sheer scale of the images he projected, encouraged people to enter into the scenes depicted. Audiences were no longer set apart, on the outside, looking at an image. The image filled their field of vision.They were inside it. This expereince of immersion in a parallel and heightened reality, more real than the everyday world, a hyperreality, was later generalised to a whole series of environments. These included the new department stores and world fairs, and later, shopping malls and the theme parks pioneered bt Walt Disney. But it was the rise of the cinema that installed immersion at the centre of everyday experience.

The classic style of Hollywood film that developed in the years before World War I and rapidly became one of America's most successful cultural exports, was a particularly potent vehicle for this

new way of looking. In this style of film making the viewer is invited to witness action that appears to be occuring 'naturally,, but to remain concealed, an invisible presence. The actors' only have eyes for each other. They never break the illusion by looking out of the screen at the audience. But the spectator is not simply looking at an image, as they would a painting. They are drwn into the scene. Riding on the camera's back they travel into and through the action, moving from the panoramic, all-seeing, viewpoint of long-shots to the intimacy of the close-up, and the exhilerating mobility of tracking shots. Sitting in a darkened theatre, with no external reference points, the constraints of everyday life are stripped away and new vistas opened up. The German cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, caught this sense of release from the miundanei perfectly, in an essay written in 1936:

*"Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have locked us up hopelessly. Then came film and burst this prison-world asumder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventuroursly go travelling" (Benjamin 1970 :238)*

*Immersion* has been extended still further with the arrival of the current generation of computer games and the first, primitive, forays into virtual reality environments where the spectator has the illusion of moving through a computer generated three dimensional space *not as an adjunct to the camera -as in the cinema- but as an independent actor with the ability to control and reconfigure events.*

*Nevertheless,* the basic experience of continually moving to and fro between the prosaic reality of the everyday world and the hightened reality of virtual space, remains essentially the same as it was for the customers who paid to go into Daguerre's Diorama. Here as elsewhere in the modern world we live simutaneously in both places and spaces.

## Communications and the culture of modernity

Making sense of these shifting co-ordinates of experience and of the changes set in motion by the transformations of institutional

life, depends on access to those vocabularies of description, systems of representation, and frameworks of interpretation that lie at the centre of cultural systems.

Many writers on the culture of modernity have seen the central movement as an eclipse of religious systems and the installation of the scientific world view as the pivot of thought and belief. Science, in turn, is seen as providing the essential underpinning for modernity's master narrative of 'progress', the assumption that the future will always be better than the past and that improvements will be secured by the patient application of scientific principles to *technologies capable of managing* the the natuaral world, social life, and pyschological well being. Unfortunately, this account draws on highly selective evidence drawn almost exlcusively from elite cultural sources. When we look at popular mediated culture however, we see a more complex and contested picture.

Although the rise of modern science broke religion's monopoly over world views, it never managed to displace it entirely. On the contrary, positvism's insistence of the rigorous separation of facts from values meant that it could *only* address the mechanisms of life not its meanings. *Moreover, the scientific method's core committment to refutation meant that even its most spectacular conceptual innovations could only ever be refarded as provisional. It own practices replaced the solid ground of certainty with the continually shifting sands of doubt As the zoologist in Christina Garcia's novel the Aguero Sisters, gloomiliy notes ; "science is a yardstick waving in the dark of the unknown, approximating what it has yet to learn from what it has partly exposed" (Garcia 1997 :2-3).* Science's inability to engage with questions of ethics opened up a substantial space through which religion could re-enter popular structures of feeling (see Murdock 1997) .

We see this in its most powerful form in the contemporary resurgence of militant fundamentalism within Judaisim, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Refusing the radical provisionality of modern intellectual systems these movements insist on the incontestable truth and spiritual authority of holy texts. The tensions between modern and religious world views have also been played on a daily basis in

the popular media of countries, like Britain, with predominantly secular cultures, though rather less confrontationally.

Take newspapers for example. At first sight, news reporting was squarely on the side of science, a daily reminder that objectivity delivered truths that could be tested in the court of hard facts. But news reports were also stories, and those printed in the popular press, particularly if they dealt with crime, continually drew on religious frameworks, with their familiar cast of saints, devils and redeemed sinners. Moreover, these narrative were surrounded by astrology columns that reaffirmed religious notions of fate and predestination and by obituary notices whose phraseology continually hinted at a world beyond the testable and at a life to come.

And when we look at popular fictions we see that offical narratives of 'progress' were very frequently contested. The Gothic tradition that begins with Mary Shelley's cautionary tale of Frankestein and continues through the dysutopian strands in science fiction and horror stories, consistently points to the dangers of science, conjouring up a dark landscape of mutations, disturbing amalagams of men and beasts and men and machines, produced by scientific *arrogance*, error and ignorance. Within this rich tradition of popular imaginings, the application of reason breeds monsters not improvements.

## Leaving modernity ? The postmodern mistake

As you will have noticed, my argument in this paper rests on the proposition that we can only understand contemporary life as we approach the century's end if we recognise the power of continuities as well as breaks and if we restore the interdisciplinary study of communication to its rightful place, at the centre of social and cultural analyses *of modernity*. Even though I have only been able to offer a very bald sketch here, I hope I have presented sufficient illustration to convince you to take this argument seriously as a possible trajectory for future research. However, before I close it is only proper to point out that my argument is comprehensively contradicted by supporters of the idea that we are now leaving the age of modernity and entering

a new, post-modern era.

*Proponent of postmodernity* have no difficulty accepting that innovations in communications are central to current changes. On the contrary, many see the new digital communications systems as the primary engines of transformation. The stronger versions of this argument share all the problems of technological determinism more generally. They start from innovations and ask "what they might do" rather than starting from existing social conditions and patterns of power and asking "how these embedded structures might organise the ways these innovations are deployed and used". Any *sociological* account worth the name must contextualise change.

In the major capitalist economies of the West, for example, the emergence of digital media has coincided with an accelerated drive towards privatisation .This has transferred strategic assets (such as telecommunications systems) from public ownership to private ownership and made access to services conditional upon the customer's ability to pay the prices determined by the new corporate entrepeneurs. This produces a sharp division between the communication rich and the communication poor that mirrors almost exactly inequalities in disposable income. We therefore have to ask who is it who lives in the new digital culture, and who is excluded ? Is it a generalised social condition or an experience confined to the priviledged ?

We can think of the on-going corporate capture of the communications system as a new enclosure movement. In the same way that the rising capitalist agriculturalists of eighteenth century England erected fences around land that had historically been claimed as common property, for the use of everyone in the locality, so the new captains of digital culture are enclosing domains of expression. Postmodern writers may be correct to argue that the core productive assets of Late Capitalism are ideas and expertise rather than land and industrial plant, but these assets remain commodities to be traded for a price rather than placed in a communal pool to be shared by everyone.

*As we noted earlier,* in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx begins his exploration of Victorian capitalism by unpacking the commodity. He shows that its seemingly innocent

appearance conceals the exploitation and dispossesion involved in its production. The more seductively the commodity glitters the more effectively this dark history is hidden from view. We live in a global economic system in which commodification remains the central dyanamic. Indeed, it has considerably extended its reach in recent years, penetrating more deeply into major economies, such as India, where its orbit was previously more circumscribed, and annexing new areas of intellectual inquiry, most notably in the fields of bio-technology and genetic engineering. Given this, developing an analysis that insists on looking beneath the surface, to uncover what is concealed by appearances, is more relevant than ever. Postmodernists have no inclination to do this since they do not accept that there is anything but appearances. For them what you see is all there is. They are intellectual victims of modernity's saturation of experience in images.

To accept the post modern position is *also* to deny the need for a properly historical perspective. Postmodernism is a celebration of breaks and ruptures without an account of inertia. *Like the nes system it is relentlessly present-minded. It focuses on events but igmores what the great French historian, Ferdinand Braudel, has called the longue duree - the slow moving currents of deep seated changes that unflod over long loops of time.* Consequently, it continually presents *continuing mutations* as though they were unprecedented novelties. I hope I have done enough here to convince you that tracing the history of communication's central role in the constitution of modernity is not an eccentric antiquarian interest, but an essential resource for developing a better understanding of the dynamics of change as we enter the next century.

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