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The crucial in between:

The centrality of mediation in cultural studies

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In the beginning of cultural studies as we know it, and more generally of the cultural turn in the human sciences, there was text, but since texts seemed to be transparent carriers of lived experiences and social relations, they tended themselves to remain invisible as such. Then, with the structuralist critiques of culturalism, all became text in a much more emphatic sense: there seemed to be nothing else in the world. In recent years, there has appeared a backlash tendency to get rid of textual mediations in order to revive lived reality in its absolute immediate presence. As textuality once exterminated subjective and objective realities, now there are efforts to kill the text and dance on its grave.

I do not want to join either of these purist conceptual cleansings. Instead, my plea is for the contaminating notion of mediation as a necessary basis for cultural studies. This is no radically new idea, but neither are its adversaries, contrary to their own self-images. Purifying attacks on complexly mediational forms of understanding – particularly but not exclusively in structuralist streams of thought – often make use of the recurrent romantic trope of radically breaking free from tradition, including the tradition of modern thought itself.

Some recent texts by Lawrence Grossberg, including one in Angela McRobbie's anthology *Back to reality?* (1997) and another in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (1:1, 1998), have argued for a total break with modern thought, 'getting out of the modern', away from the combined modern logics of mediation and temporality, into a 'productive' and 'spatial' materialism which is 'defined by something other than the logics of modern thought'.¹

Such rhetorical gestures of totally new beginnings have themselves very old historical roots, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur once emphasized: 'Critique is also a tradition. I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection.'² The intensi-

¹ Grossberg (1997: 16 and 19; cf. also 1998).

² Ricoeur (1981: 99). Cf. also Koselleck (1979/1985) on the modern time experience.

fied experience of one's own time as radically different from all earlier history is contemporaneous with the birth of modernity hundreds of years ago, and is inherent in the modern condition itself. Efforts to push this experience to its extreme is likewise a long-standing tradition of the modern era: a tradition of self-reflexive modernity critiques within modern thought itself, from romanticism to postmodernism.

Critical thought dialectically needs to maintain reconstructive dialogues with other traditions. Hegel and Marx carefully emphasized that emancipatory transformations must build upon those elements or germs of the new society that are born within the old one, rather than invent a pure utopia out of thin air. Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch and many others have likewise emphasized (if not always lived up to) a demand for immanent critique, where the bad present is not judged against an abstract and remote ideal but rather against its own unfulfilled hopes and promises. More recently, Pierre Bourdieu has reminded that 'one cannot revolutionize a field without mobilizing or invoking the experiences of the history of the field'.³

The dream of a totally new start is partly an illusion and partly a truth – a necessary illusion and a dangerous truth. For better or worse, we actually do (and cannot but) forget, just as we do (and cannot but) remember. This also applies to thought-forms. Their development is propelled by illusions of total renewal, and accompanied by a certain loss of nuances strenuously achieved by prematurely abandoned models. There are in fact two faces of this loss, that may be conceived in temporal and spatial terms. As theories are dichotomized by depicting 'our' radically new ideas as totally free from 'their' old mistakes, the result is a discursive strategy of us/them-polarization, with its tendency towards stereotypical dualism, splitting and lack of attention to the driving inner contradictions in other positions as well as in one's own. This way of thinking might sometimes be rhetorically effective, but remains theoretically and politically problematic, since it tends to cut off contact both with not yet exhausted traditions and with potentially productive dialogues with others in the cultural studies field of today.

Critique certainly remains necessary, sometimes in sharp forms. But as the power/resistance theories of Foucault and many others have shown, the world cannot so easily be divided into a homogenous power-bloc and a pure progressive camp, neither in politics nor in the cultural studies field. Though dominance often coincides with conservatism and marginalization with radical critique, some oppressed groups actually produce terrifying ideas and sometimes established philosophers or artists make useful expressions that are important to learn from. Power and transgression work along complexly intertwined lines and

³ Bourdieu (1992/1996: 101).

cannot be simply divided into clear camps. This should not tempt anyone to give up attacking unjust patterns of domination or striving for change, only remind that a simplistic now/then- and us/them-thinking is no useful substitute for a careful interpretive work of identifying how powers and resistances are distributed in specific historical and social contexts.

Grossberg actually inherits the trope of skipping all the old stuff and reaching directly to the true, essential real from an established stream of modern thought, including Nietzsche, Deleuze and Rosaldo. Their language of radical reorientation, of 'stepping outside' what has hitherto been and of critically examining modernity itself, is a typical trait of the self-understanding of modernity. For instance, Kant's famous call for 'man's release from his *self-incurred* tutelage' (my emphasis) implies a reflexive self-critique that did not leave modernity itself untouched, as history transformed some of its aspects into limitations for its own emancipatory aspirations.⁴ Modernity *is* crucially self-reflexive, like Benjamin's new angel looking backwards to the past while flying into the future, never standing still. Modern thought is full of fresh beginnings, which usually start by critically reconsidering tradition, tracing its genealogy in order to find its mistakes. This results in a typical inner tension between starting anew and rethinking: rehearsing history in order to forget it, combining reflexive self-thematizations with revolutionary gestures. Grossberg cannot escape this tension, and neither can I, only try to be aware of it. If the total break would be possible, that detour through tradition would be unnecessary, but that is not the case. The effort to jump out of tradition (even the tradition of modernity) immediately leads right back into precisely that same modern tradition.

We are today firmly embedded in modernity, and those of us who are American and European cultural theorists cannot escape having roots in its Atlantic form, even though sharply opposing some of its voices or aspects while exploring routes to alternative modernities. After all, this is probably not as devastating as it may first sound, since this very tradition is particularly rich in inner contradictions that open critical spaces for opposition and change. We are never free from the past or the present, but neither are we their prisoners, because they are no prisons, it is only a totalizing thought that make them definitely closed. 'We gotta get out of this place' (a typical Grossberg book title from 1992) certainly expresses a good motive for transformative action – what I doubt is that the world can therefore as easily be divided into them inside modernity and us outside of it. Paul Gilroy's (1993) studies of a dialogically critical Black Atlantic tradition is one example of the many contradictory openings that coexist *within* modern thought, and that marginalized and alter-

⁴ Kant (1784/1963: 3). This does not mean that I am in any other way a Kantian, only that such a quote is symptomatic for modernity's potential of repeated reflexive self-critiques.

native tradition still remains as Atlantic and as modern as those more dominant and problematic modern ideologies whose claims for hegemony and self-closure should rather be contested and deconstructed than uncritically accepted by their adversaries.

There are different but interconnected modernities, also within the Atlantic sphere. The endeavour to transgress their limitations and imaginatively shape a different future is a crucial driving force to renewal and emancipation, but this necessary moment of utopic hope and deconstructive critique is always in danger of degenerating into escape and repression, in several senses. The effort to escape history (tradition, modernity or time) remains a problematic branch of modernity, since it tends to freeze into a system of totalizing stereotypes that prevent creative conflicts of interpretation to develop. The teleological wish to get out of one's own place needs to be dialectically connected to an archeological self-reflexivity and to moments of learning from others in history (discovering new emancipatory potentials in older traditions of thought) and in the present (through dialogues with other critical modern positions that need always to be criticized but not always to be condemned). This wish is motivated by an urgent will to finally get rid of old governing structures, but it unfortunately also tends to exterminate useful inherited insights while giving rise to a vengeful return of the repressed, often in monstrous forms – or as a farce.

A whole series of old problems turns up in new clothes in Grossberg's recent texts. Their typically postmodern advocacy for space against time is for example an understandable reaction to neglects of spatiality in earlier theories of modernization. However, a dialectical mediation between spatiality and temporality would be more fruitful than a simple reversal of that problematic hierarchy. Asking for mediations may not be as sensational as making daringly one-sided interventions, but it provides a more useful and justifiable basis for cultural theory.

I will here focus on the attempt to finally escape the interpretive spirals of meaning, which is shared by several others today. *Mediation* as a key concept in cultural studies is basically contested from two sides. In a *reductionism of absence*, structuralist positions have reified textual autonomy in relation to both subjects and contexts, both of which are subordinated or reduced to it, and thus annihilated. Various structuralisms have fought for the autonomy of the text, against the subject, against materiality or against social reality. French philosophers like Lacan, Derrida, Barthes and Foucault developed notions of a post-structuralist death of the author and even of the subject in general. Book titles like Eduardo Cadava's (et al.) 1991 collection *Who comes after the subject?* are symptomatic of this trend. All was seemingly reduced to textual structures, that were only vaguely anchored in intersubjective relations of communities.

This has induced a sort of backlash in the form of a series of attempts to murder the text instead, in order to regain space for either subjective experience or social reality. Just as, in an earlier phase, the birth of British cultural studies implied a reaction to formalism in literary theory, an oppositional tendency has recently resurfaced against textualism, sometimes advocating a return to the roots of culturalism in Hoggart and Williams. A *reductionism of presence* strives to abolish mediation in favour of ideas of direct routes to external or internal reality. In such an antitextualist cult of immediacy, a recourse to real subjective experience or hard social facts seems to escape any need for interpretive practice.

In the first case, the textual labyrinths of language games effectively close all roads to social or subjective reality. In the second case, textual and interpretive mediations are perceived as unnecessary detours from the straight road to immediate presence and experience. Against both these threats, I here want to defend the centrality of mediation in cultural studies.

Reified immediacy

Grossberg thinks that ‘cultural studies, as it moves outside the determinations of modern thought [...] must escape culture [...] to describe, understand and project the possibilities of lived material contexts as organisations of power’ (1997: 31). The advocated road to ‘escape the modernist logic of mediation’ and develop ‘a non-mediational theory of culture’ (Grossberg 1998: 76), goes through a rejection of all that interpretive textualism which ‘erases the real’ by equating ‘culture with communication’ and ‘mediation with communication’ (ibid.: 74). Cultural studies is instead defined as ‘a context-specific theory/analysis of how contexts are made, unmade and remade as structures of power and domination’ (ibid.: 68). Is this meant to *exclude* the study of *texts*? In what way would this be different from, say, *social* studies? Is it not necessary for any definition of cultural studies to keep the *specificity* of culture in focus, not least in order to be able to show its wide-ranging importance for general processes in society and life?

If ‘culture is not simply a matter of meaning and communication’, then why would that be in any way ‘simple’, and even if culture is about more than communicative and meaning-making practices, is it not always at least precisely that? I agree that ‘cultural studies should hold on to a more contextual notion of discursive practices and effects, locating both texts and audiences within broader contexts that articulate the identity and effects of any practice’ but find the following formulation more problematic: ‘*Rather than* asking what texts mean or what people do with texts, culture studies should be concerned with what discursive practices do in the world. [...] Discourses are now active agents, not

even merely performances, in the material world of power' (ibid.: 75; my emphasis). Favouring contexts and power instead of texts and meaning is quite common in cultural studies. Andrew Tolson, in his introductory book with the promising title *Mediations: Text and discourse in media studies*, defines the task of media studies as 'no longer a question of learning from the text, but rather how the text actually works' (Tolson 1996: xiv). Textual analysis is thus seen as a pure explanation of constructions and effects, in opposition to textual interpretation aiming at understanding meanings, but the analyses then made clearly combine both, since they lead to deeper understandings of what media texts actually say, not only how they do it. In my opinion, cultural studies keep on learning from texts, even when this interpretation makes detours through an explanatory analysis of how they function. What texts do is certainly as important as what they say, but what makes the discursive work of texts specifically *cultural* is that it is mainly fulfilled precisely by their signifying force of saying something to someone. The power of culture is anchored in a capability to induce meaning, which makes interpretation the clue to critique.

Such interpretation is not to be reduced to an subjectivistic or mentalistic reading of people's minds. It is certainly necessary to abandon the old view of culture and meaning that narrows them down to the level of individual cognition and psychology. In most late modern cultural theories, for instance in the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, it has since long been forcefully argued that textual meanings are much more than cognitive ideas or 'psychological tastes'. Only by abandoning such a reductive and basically romanticist notion of culture can the centrality of meaning, mediation and communication be defended.

Grossberg ends up wanting 'a more materialist and contextualist notion of cultural studies as the study of "all the relations between all the elements"' (1998: 77). Again, this systemic view is highly modern. And once again, virtually all and nothing is included in such an abstract notion. It seems to contradict the simultaneous romantic insistence on the value of affectual immediacy, which is abundant in his texts. This results in a paradoxical combination of super-structuralism and super-sensualism. That fascinating ambiguity results precisely from the collapsing of mediations, whereby immediacy is reified into a dead and empty structure of discourses as meaningless, mechanical agents. Just like in the old dialectics of Enlightenment and Romanticism, such dichotomizing, dualistic thinking tends to collapse its opposites indefinitely into each other, so that pure immediacy becomes indistinguishable from pure structural relationships.

This specific turn is peculiar to Grossberg, but there are other voices who have recently joined the anti-mediational choir. Sociologists have called for hard social facts, ethnographers for embodied and lived experience, and historians for material evidence of past such experience. The recipes they propose diverge, emphasizing either the phenomenology of lived experience or the quasi-

positivist factuality of social or economic structures, and the demand for more ethnographic fieldwork is not obviously compatible with a demand for longer historical perspectives. Such contradictions should not be erased in order to construct a homogenous camp out of highly diverging positions. But there is a common thread in some of these recently voiced critiques: the urgent wish to get rid of textualist labyrinths by rejecting interpretation and mediation in order to return directly to the social reality of 'real', basic facts of life, whether they are thought to reside as lived experience in living people's actions and minds, or as material forces in the institutional power structures that frame them.

In their introduction to *Cultural studies in question*, the editors Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding prefer 'investigation' instead of 'interpretation', and attack cultural studies' 'textualism', that is supposed to have lost sight of social structure, political force and economic dynamics (Ferguson & Golding 1997: xxv). This attack from without has certain parallels in recent internal debates within cultural studies. The important cultural studies key figure Angela McRobbie in that same anthology thinks that feminist cultural studies have lost sight of 'lived experience' (ibid.: 170), and she advocates saving the 'three Es' – the empirical, the ethnographic and the experiential – from the attacks by three influential 'anti-Es': anti-essentialism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis.⁵ Graham Murdock argues that 'we need to move from [!] interpretation to critical realism' (ibid.: 91). In a special issue on cultural studies of the Swedish theoretical journal *Zenit*, the sociologist Mats Trondman (1997: 81) emphasizes 'lived experience' as 'that which is immediately given'.

In a similar vein, the historian Michael Pickering, in his new book *History, experience and cultural studies* (Pickering 1997), goes back to Wilhelm Dilthey's romanticist hermeneutics of immediate lived experience as an antidote to poststructuralist textualism in cultural studies. It is hard to believe that cultural or historical studies would manage without a theoretical understanding of how culture and history are already textualized, not only by literary theorists but in the very minds of those 'ordinary' people who are its actors.⁶ We *can* speak of reality, but only by speaking, i.e. using chains of symbolic mediations that offer us potentials for creating meanings by pointing towards something absent in time and/or space. Intersubjective understandings and lived experiences are constituted through expressive forms, and can only be reconstructed by means of detours through textual interpretations. This insight does not imply any surrender to (post-)structuralism, leaving us 'ineluctably locked inside texts upon texts upon texts' (Pickering 1997: 232). While there is no way

⁵ Cf. also McRobbie's article in *Feminist Review* (55, 1997).

⁶ Cf. Ricoeur (1985/1988: 158f) on the *prefiguration* of human action, life, society and history, as a basis for the *configuration* of texts and their *refiguration* in acts if interpretation.

around textuality, this textual way need not be any self-enclosed labyrinth, if better hermeneutic models are used than those offered by various structuralist theories.

The late modern hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur shows that textuality and history are necessarily intertwined, by stressing the complex mediations of explanation and understanding, time and narrative, history and fiction, meaning and identity.⁷ Where Dilthey, in a romanticist spirit, placed the goal of hermeneutics and the core of meaning in the intentions of individual historical actors or authors, Ricoeur instead emphasizes the necessarily distancing textual mediations in all communicative discourse, which implies a certain relative (but not absolute) autonomy of the world of the text. Signification is not locked up in a closed semiotic universe, but all communication implies mediations that distance textual meanings both from their producers' intentions and from their originary context.

This actually might also problematize Raymond Williams' important insistence on understanding texts by contextually locating them in their historical processes of emanation or production. Such contextualization is necessary but insufficient. While opposing the reduction in romanticist hermeneutics and auteur theory of textual interpretation to the tracing of expressive forms back to their roots in individual authors' intentions, it risks making a similar reduction of meanings to their original production, only on a more collective and institutional level. Anchoring textual meanings too definitely in the contexts of their material *production* involuntarily tends to repeat a productionist bias that close these meanings to the productivity of further reinterpretations. The meaning of the Bible in history or today certainly crucially depends on the institutional conditions of its writing, but is not reducible to them but must also be related to the shifting contexts of its use. The same is true when texts cross much shorter temporal and social spans. The interpretation of a CD record needs to contextualize it in relation to the context of the artist and the music industry, but the life of any cultural text never stops there. It lives on within shifting interpretive communities and accumulates new meanings, perhaps also irrevocably losing some of its old ones. This process is full of conflicts of interpretations, never free from patterns of domination, such as the strongly institutionally supported power of modern mass media producers, but it doesn't stop when a text is once produced, i.e. fixed as a material object. Later shifts among social forces may often make the once dominating interpretations of a text outdated, as previously marginal counter-interpretations gain in importance or becomes dominant. Far from any happy harmonic play, this is an intensely

⁷ Cf. Ricoeur's seminal work *Time and Narrative* (3rd vol. 1985/1988).

conflict-laden process, but all reductions of meaning back to the contexts of textual production alone prematurely stops it.

Stuart Hall's very complex and inspiring reasoning around communication practices in terms of an 'encoding/decoding'-model dives directly into this problematics.⁸ Just like Roman Jakobson's (1958/1960) model of six language functions, it aims at deconstructing earlier linear communication models of fixed media contents having specific effects on consuming audiences. As their subsequent uses have made still more obvious, both these models however retain too many of the problematic implications of a transmission-information model of cultural mediation. It is partly a matter of terms: it is too tempting to think of 'encoding' as a first entering of meaning into texts in their material production and composition, and of 'decoding' as some kind of reproduction of this content. The underlying semiotic model is often very useful, but it borrows just a little too much from the traditional model of information transport from sender to receiver. Sometimes (for instance in news journalism) communication seems to function almost in this way, like ciphers that are constructed and then faithfully or oppositionally decoded. But that cannot be the general model, as expressedly aesthetic or poetic works make obvious. Who or what decides the meaning of 'Open your heart': Madonna herself, the 80s' music industry, the totality of its time? All and none of them: its meaning is not yet definitely fixed, as long as it remains a living cultural text. Hall's later refined model of 'articulation' tries to handle such problems but unfortunately remains rather vague in its applications. I believe that the relations between textual production and reception need to be reformulated in ways that better avoids the recurrent tendency to think of meaning as something that is put into texts by their producers, and will here soon mention some elements in such a reformulation, the precise details of which will however have to be filled in at some later occasion.

The Anglo-American tradition of cultural studies has generally been hampered by an unhappy wavering between a romantic longing for immediacy in its culturalist pole and a reification of symbolic systems in its structuralist pole, combined with a partly overlapping wavering between empiricism and theoreticism, which is deeply rooted in certain English and American traditions of thought. This has resulted in repeated slidings and unproductive leaps between contradictory extremes.⁹

A series of important texts by Hall, including a summarizing overview in the reader *Representation* (1997), have tried to balance these two sides. First, the

⁸ Cf. Hall (1980 and 1994) and Pillai (1992).

⁹ Cf. Gibson (1998), who also discusses the strange mixtures occurring for instance in Dick Hebdige's vacillation between French poststructuralist deconstructions of the concept of 'reality' and empiricist gestures towards a returning to the 'ground' of observation and experience.

structural semiotics developed by Saussure and Althusser is taken over, then some corrections are made to counteract its weaknesses when it comes to the understanding of actual dialogic uses of language, of power practices and of creative changes of symbolic structures. To this end, ideas from Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Bakhtin are introduced into this basic model, but with some difficulties in mediating between them, to see in what way they support or contradict each other. The result is a problematic dualism, where language systems and discourses are sometimes said to ‘speak us’ by creating subject positions for us to enter, and in the next moment, the concrete creative activity of human dialogic practices is underlined. Subjects are sometimes seen as effects of language, sometimes as its creative agents. This type of reasoning avoids the pitfall of one-sided reductionism by holding on to a fascinating ambivalence and boldly mixing elements of a phenomenological metaphysics of immediacy with a radical structural fetishism. Such jumping from one extreme to another seems however unable to develop the mediations needed to prevent this dualism from becoming abstractly flat.

Efforts to rethink, rework and refine the inherited positions in the field are certainly welcome, since dialogical self-criticism is a crucial way to keep the field dynamically alive, as it at least in some places starts to become more firmly institutionalized. More problematic is when this welcome critique of formalist reification of language systems leads to a falling back onto a metaphysics of immediacy. The field of cultural studies is haunted by unresolved tensions that turn up again and again, in varying shapes, where each formulation retains the same dualistic conceptions and thereby refuels its polarized opposite position. Opposing experience to textuality is one such core dualism, which remains stuck between two complementary reductionisms – to immediate presence and lived experience on one side, and to textual distancing and objectivating structures on the other. The critiques of text-fetishism contain a grain of truth, but they do tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater, by denying the continuing central importance of textual mediations and interpretations in cultural studies. The problems with reifying textual theories are not solved by reverting to a romantic cult of immediacy. This backlash against the late modern cultural turn just invites renewed neo-neo-structuralist critiques, in an endless series of turns that consistently avoid developing an understanding of *mediation* between texts, subjects and contexts, which is necessary to break this evil circle of repeated wavering between sensualism and structuralism, by upholding a tension between process and product, practice and structure. I will here briefly mention some elements in such a mediational cultural studies.

Passages of meaning

Culture is symbolic communication of meaning, with a capacity to bridge or mediate between human beings situated in multi-dimensional social contexts. This mediation necessarily goes through sensual-textual embodiments of meaning in flows or webs of works, created by signifying practices and appropriated by acts of interpretation, in everyday lifeworlds or in specialized spheres of science and art. Culture is that aspect and type of human activity that is centred around meaning, and there is no culture without communication, just as there is no meaning without mediation.

Media mediate, as cultural tools of communication.¹⁰ *All* culture and communication is in fact already doubly mediated. First, by material embodiments, texts or artefacts that act on bodily senses. Second, by socially organized and historically developed symbolic systems in which interpretive communities are inscribed as they construct meaning with reference to forms of expressions and genres.

Certain instances of culture and communication are further mediated in a third way, namely, through some technical apparatus that is produced by socially organized cooperating human beings. Such mediated communication in the common and narrow sense of the word makes more visible the dialectics of transgression and distancing, understanding and explanation, appropriation and exteriorization which is actually inherent in all communication and culture, but less obvious in so-called direct face-to-face interactions. Written words, audiovisual broadcasting and the Internet all constitute different forms of mediation that all in various ways highlight how mediation is able to connect people only through mediation by some third textual element, whether this consists of printed letters on a paper, electromagnetically formed images on a screen or vibrating airborne sounds. Internet discourses often paradoxically tend to revive the romantic ideology of presence, as if communicating on the net were an unmediated connection between minds. This only shows the strength of that ideal of communion that remains a goal – neither fulfilled nor abandoned, always a task that is dialectically undertaken by way of the multidimensional mediations that constitute culture as a specific dimension of the human world.

Cultural modernization involves an accelerating mediatization of everyday life, identities, arts, politics and public spheres. Media have immeasurable importance in late modern societies, as integrated resources and channels for interaction and communication. The development of digital multimedia tends to

¹⁰ '[C]ulture, in the anthropological view, is the meanings which people create, and which create people, as members of societies' (Hannerz 1992: 3). '[M]edia are machineries of meaning' (ibid: 26f).

blur relatively sharp borders between fact and fiction, production and reception of texts, mass media and individual media, mediated and direct communication. But no form of communication can escape meaning or mediation.

A new Swedish research project is called 'Popular Passages: Media in the modern space of consumption'. In this five-year project we are five researchers who will ethnographically study those media that circulate through an urban shopping mall in the Stockholm area. The name of the project is inspired by Walter Benjamin's famous unfinished *Arcades* project, with its original German title *Passagen-Werk*.¹¹ In that work, Benjamin analyzed modern urban life, consumption and popular culture through the lens of the arcades of Paris. Almost seventy years later, we will use a shopping mall as a prismatic focus to study late modern passages or intersecting spatio-temporal networks of media and popular culture.

This project emphasizes material spatiality, lived experience and social structures. But it sees them through rather than outside of cultural processes of meaning and mediation. We investigate how mediations take place in spaces of consumption. Cultural products made and distributed in capitalist commodity form have to pass a series of instances on their way to their final use. Like popular media culture in general, a specific shopping mall is an arena for two interlaced communicative passages. People flow through spaces and media, while media hardware machines and software texts flow through spaces and people. In these spaces, the combination of those two passages gives rise to at least three principal types of encounters. (1) First, people meet people, shaping various types of social relations, private connections and public arenas. (2) Second, texts meet texts and media meet media. Through each media text flow other texts, in intertextual streams that become increasingly complex through digital multimedia conglomerates. And video films, posters, books, magazines or computer games from different producers are also within each shop put alongside of each other to shape unique combinations, that are then broken up by each customer who then recombines different texts into new constellations at home or wherever the media use takes place. (3) Third, texts meet people. In their contextualized media use, people encounter meaningful texts and shape interpretations, lived experiences and identities. Through such passages, textual meanings, personal identities and social relations are conti-

¹¹ Benjamin (1983). The title of its Swedish edition is similar ('Passagearbetet'). The term 'passage' is important in cultural studies, as indicator of a dynamic view on cultural processes. Hall (1980: 129) thus talks of a 'passage of forms' in the flow of media production/reception.

nuously recoded, not least in terms of high/low-distinctions. Recontextualizations make certain reinterpretations possible.¹²

None of these processes take place in a vacuum. The commercial media spaces, as well as the everyday uses of media texts, are inscribed within crossing power structures. The market and the state systems combine to set up institutional frames of economic and administrative power. Also, the relations and institutions of the lifeworld, including groups, communities, associations, movements and media, contain complexly interlaced patterns of social power, related to dimensions of identity and difference (gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc.).¹³ The communicative power of cultural processes to create understandings and experiences connects to all these other power forms, with varying results, which the Passages Project will study empirically.

Instead of choosing ethnography *before* textual analysis, it will make ethnographies of texts and interpretations of spatialized passages, to investigate how meaning is born and transformed in such practices.¹⁴ Ethnography and textual interpretation need to be tightly combined in order to make ethnography aware of its necessary mediation through texts while contextualizing each text in its more or less institutionalized settings of practices. Acknowledging the importance of empirical studies of social practices should not lead anyone to abandon the insight of the equal necessity of textual interpretations, since human practices are always impregnated with meanings, just like all meanings are products of socially contextualized practices.

Ethnographical data are nothing without interpretation, and no 'respect for the voice of the Other' can release the researcher from that responsibility. To retreat from interpretive understanding is, virtually, to make ethnography meaning-less. Cultural studies are no simple copying of people's lived practices and meaning-constructions. Such a view is widespread, also in some social anthropology with a positivist or empiricist inclination. Like all human sciences, ethnographers have to enter the conflicts of interpretation and make their own meaning-constructions, in dialogue with those of their informants.

In studies of Internet communication, the border between ethnography and textual analysis actually becomes quite blurred, since to participate in people's everyday interactions might there be precisely to communicate with them through digitalized texts. Similar blurs occur in the study of mediatized fan cul-

¹² This can be related to Ricoeur's (1985/1988: 158f) concept of interpretation as refiguration.

¹³ Cf. Habermas (1992/1996) and Thompson (1995).

¹⁴ Drotner (1994) argues well for a media ethnography that incorporates textual dimensions of everyday reception in order to overcome increasingly untenable dichotomies. Also Gripsrud (1995) writes in defence of textual interpretation as an indispensable element in studies of the social practices of media audiences.

tures. These are no special exceptions to some simple rule, but rather cases where the ever-present interweaving of social practices and textual interpretations becomes particularly manifest.

Texts – subjects – contexts

Cultural studies thus have to interpret textual meanings. This is not all to be done, but it is the crucial core task. The life of texts that is culture takes place on four interconnected levels: materiality, form-relations, meaning and application (encompassing both appropriation and use – in some function for some purpose and with some effect).¹⁵ Grossberg's effort to escape mediation and focus either immediate affective presence or 'all the relations between all the elements' is trapped between the first and second of these levels. That last phrase might perhaps define structuralism, but cannot easily be reconciled with the wish to capture sensuous immediacy, and remains only a (however necessary) part of the more complex mediational flow that constitutes culture. This calls for a hermeneutic cultural theory that includes also the third level, that of meaning.¹⁶ A wavering between the reductionism of presence (phenomenologic immediacy) and that of absence (structuralist formalism) will never be able to produce a rich enough theoretical basis for cultural studies.

Within the level of meaning, cultural phenomena involve triadic interactions between texts, subjects and contexts. Different strands of cultural theory and cultural studies put their accents differently within this triangle. The internationally dominant cultural studies of Britain and the United States have often been marked by an incapacity to catch the dialectic tension between all three sides. Instead, a series of reductionist models have been launched that attack each other in a continuing war, giving rise to a series of pendulum swings between one-sided extremes. Textualists see meaning as inherent in texts and think of symbolic systems as self-creating automatons capable of producing subjectivities. Subjectivists depict audiences as relatively free to read their own meanings into media texts. Contextualists (like Grossberg) instead emphasize the overdetermining power of societal, superindividual settings to decide what happens in each text-subject encounter. These are ideal types, since most

¹⁵ See further Fornäs (1995). The term 'application' derives from Gadamer (1960/1990: 313). Cf. also Paul Ricoeur (1985/1988: 157ff).

¹⁶ The semiotics of Charles S. Peirce (1940/1955: 74ff) is here exemplary, as it clearly connects what he calls Firstness and Secondness (cf. materiality and form-relations) with his Thirdness (related to meaning). Compare also Jacques Lacan's model of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. The problem is when theories do not manage to include the mediationality of the third level, which never erases the first two ones but cannot be reduced to them and remains the defining key to what specifically is culture.

theorists are somewhere in between these extreme positions, that are often occupied by authors only briefly and within particular texts. However, some lacanian theory and film analysis of the Screen type tends toward the textual strand, some reception studies have had ‘populist’ tendencies in the subjectivist direction, and some Gramscian cultural studies spokesmen have a preference for contextualism.

When texts, subjects and contexts meet, something intrinsically new is produced, as all three poles are transformed by being provided with dimensions fed from this ongoing intersubjective, social practice. This gives texts their *meanings*, as people link material forms to some kind of references, reading them as pointing to something outside themselves, thus making the physically absent mentally present. Mediation implies that these meanings are distanced from their authors’ intentions and from the original context where the texts were once made, through processes of de- and recontextualization. The meeting of texts, subjects and contexts also lets subjects develop their individual and collective *identities*, by producing in interaction with surrounding others cultural identity-positions with which they identify. In mediated action, people use texts as cultural tools to create collective and individual identities.¹⁷ The same triadic encounter finally develops contextual settings into ordered social *worlds* that systematically frame social action and cultural mediation. The specific meeting of one text and one subject in one context is a pure abstraction. All three are to be thought in the plural, as configurations in continual passages rather than as singular, atomic, autonomous and fixed units.

Culture is about interacting subjects, texts and contexts. Meanings, identities and social worlds are made by subjects, but never individually alone (S-S), never unmediated by symbolic webs (S-T) and never unconditioned by contexts (S-C). Texts do not themselves produce meanings, identities or social worlds, but these are always developed through texts, though always in intertextual plays with each other (T-T), framed by contexts (T-C) and mediated by human interpretive agency (T-S). Contexts are developed into worlds and determine identities and meanings, but only in relation to other contexts (C-C) and mediated by the use of texts (C-T) in human subjects’ interpretive acts (C-S).

The meaning of a text and the identity of a subject are not objectively given in advance, but neither are they individual or arbitrarily variable illusions.¹⁸ They are constructions, but effective, ‘real’ ones. *Whose* constructions are they? A voluntaristic answer to this question points to meaning and identity as free creations of each self, with contextual worlds as passive frames. Such ideas are

¹⁷ Cf. Ricoeur (1990/1992) and Wertsch (1998).

¹⁸ This argument can also be extended to include the world of a context, but with some modifications that would extend the scope of this presentation.

abundant in 'postmodern' theories of media use and cyberspace. A deterministic answer instead makes each interpretation and subject an object of the external, super-human forces of social institutions and symbolic systems, as in much semiotic structuralism. It is either assumed that individuals produce themselves through more or less goal-oriented identity-work and the meanings of each text they use through self-governed imagination, or else that identities are forced upon people and meanings upon texts by dominating systems and institutions. In cultural studies, there is plenty of problematic wavering between these two extreme poles, that often stand unmediated side by side, which again creates those dualistic problems that have already been mentioned.

Paul Ricoeur instead emphasizes the complex mediations through which identities always twine together the individual self-image ('I') with the one offered by encountering others ('you') and the one constructed by larger societal institutions ('he/she/it').¹⁹ He also consistently conceives of meaning as evolving out of mediations where subjects are neither autonomous rulers or passive receivers in their relations to texts in contexts. People neither simply give meanings to texts nor passively receive meanings from texts. Texts surprise us and form us by opening new virtual or imaginary worlds to explore, in contrast to the other worlds we already inhabit. It is by the confrontation between the fictive world of the text and the real world of its 'reader' that meanings are developed, and this also applies to those meanings that become attached to the subjects themselves. Texts give identities to subjects (selves to egos) but only mediated through their own active interpretive work. There can be no simple formula where either subject, text or context is given all the creative power in this central triplet of culture.

Is there an outside of texts and meanings? Yes and no. Even though not everything is at all times assigned meaning, nothing remains permanently outside meaning, since anything can be thematized by being drawn into the signifying process through acts of interpretation, narration and imagination. Avant-garde artists often want to cross the border and explore the world outside of meaning, outside of culture, in nonsense, brutal or deconstructionist art of various kinds. But in all such efforts the result is always again new meanings produced, perhaps on other and higher levels but still meanings: works that to their users (readers, watchers and listeners) are experienced as pointing to something outside their own materiality, be it basic existential conditions of life or intricate configurations of late modern intertextuality. People cannot help but drawing everything into the endless processes of interpretation out of which meaning result.

¹⁹ This is true of his earlier work on psychoanalysis and hermeneutics as well as of his more recent studies of sameness and selfhood, cf. Ricoeur (1990/1992).

The human urge to produce meaning by interpretive practices is accompanied by a tendency to actively or passively avoid meaning. Borrowing from Freud's terminology, one could perhaps talk of interpretation as an *Eros* of culture, followed by its shadow in the form of a *Thanatos* or death-drive of culture, where people not only have difficulties in reaching understanding but consciously or unconsciously erect defences against that meaning-production that is the crucial aspect of culture. This happens in everyday life, but can also be found in some cultural theorists efforts to escape meaning and evacuate hermeneutics in favour of some ideology of either material immediacy or structural formalism.

Culture presupposes and reproduces not-culture, and contains a crucial dialectics between meaning and non-, no-more- or not-yet-meaning, but it is the meaning-side that makes it culture. Culture includes more than meaning, since it also presupposes materiality and form-relations. But culture is always also meaning, and while the same is true for culture and power, it is precisely meaning that is the most central defining aspect of culture. Cultural studies therefore focus processes of meaning and mediation, involving triadic relations of subjects, texts and contexts.²⁰ Texts are not only used for their meanings, but exploring meaning remains the core of both culture and cultural studies.

Meaning and not-meaning cannot be frozen into a dichotomous dualism, but have to be understood as provisional and in continual process. There are fascinating borderlands between semantic meaning and not-yet-meaning, dynamic sectors of both creative and destructive transition into and out of meaning that have been associated with pre- or extra-symbolic levels of experience and communication: Julia Kristeva's 'semiotic', Jürgen Habermas' 'paleosymbols', Alfred Lorenzer's 'protosymbols', Susan Langer's 'presentational symbols' and Ricoeur's 'non-semantic moment of opacity' in cultural symbols.²¹ Such aspects of cultural processes testify to the limits of interpretation but they are never definitely outside meaning and culture, but rather on its floating borderline. This unstoppable force of culture questions Wittgenstein's dictum 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen', in favour of what, paraphrasing Freud's 'Wo Es war, soll Ich werden' could be formulated as: 'That which can presently not be expressed will always attract new efforts of symbolization', or: 'Out of the meaningless, meaning will emerge'. The continuous play between semantics and affectivity, the signifying process and the not-yet-textual, prevents the symbolic order from becoming fixed and closed and enables it to leave nothing permanently untouched.

²⁰ In Peirce's terms again, culture involves Firstness (materiality) and Secondness (form-relations), but there is no culture without Thirdness (meaning).

²¹ Cf. Ricoeur (1976 and 1985/1988), Kristeva (1974/1984) and Fornäs (1997).

Communicative cultural studies

Texts, subjects and contexts are both differentiated and connected in these communicative acts that are the focus of cultural studies. None of the three should be reduced or subordinated to the others. Subjects and contexts are not texts, neglecting contexts is as mistaken as is thinking of texts as simple vehicles for interacting minds. In interpretation, they develop as separate poles while being simultaneously brought together in a creative process that shapes meanings, identities and social worlds. Cultural studies concern the triadic mediation of texts, subjects and contexts. This might sound abstract enough, but it is at least one step less abstract than formulas like ‘all the relations between all the elements’. And though the fascinating tensions between meanings and non- or not-yet-meanings are of focal interest for cultural studies, as it studies processes where meanings arise, it makes no sense to *exclude* culture or interpretation from its scope.

It is thus my conviction that just like the two rumours of the death of the subject and of reality were considerably exaggerated, so is the recent counter-rumour of the death of the text. Instead of fleeing mediation, cultural studies need to pass through it, on several levels. This may be a detour that often leads astray, but there is no straight and direct way to the world through the field of culture.²² Cultural studies need to choose instead the long and winding interpretive detour through symbolic forms to the self, to others and to social reality.²³ Against cynicism, I claim there is such a road that is not firmly closed – against romanticism, that it necessarily goes through mediations.

²² For the early Ricoeur, modernity has made it inevitable that mediation excludes immediacy, but he retains the belief in a kind of indirect immediacy, mediated through interpretation of symbolic forms. ‘What is experienced [...] requires the mediation of a specific language, the language of symbols. Without the help of that language, the experience would remain mute, obscure, and shut up in its implicit contradictions’ (Ricoeur 1960/1969: 161). ‘If we detach the living experience from the symbol, we take away from the experience that which completes its meaning’ (ibid.: 171). ‘For the second immediacy that we seek and the second naïveté that we await are no longer accessible to us anywhere else than in a hermeneutics; we can believe only by interpreting. It is the “modern” mode of belief in symbols, an expression of the distress of modernity and a remedy for that distress. [...] Thus hermeneutics, an acquisition of “modernity,” is one of the modes by which that “modernity” transcends itself, insofar as it is forgetfulness of the sacred. I believe that beng can still speak to me – no longer, of course under the precritical form of immediate belief, but as the second immediacy aimed at by hermeneutics’ (ibid.: 352).

²³ There are of course also a lot of important cultural studies work that does emphasize the important of textuality and mediation, including the argument for the centrality of textuality in Mowitt (1992), Drotner (1994), and Gripsrud (1995) and the similarly crucial focus on mediation in Negus (1996), just to mention two such works.

Cultural studies should also themselves be as mediational and communicative as is culture. In order to make rich and strong interpretations, they have to mediate dialogically between areas of knowledge that are elsewhere developed in separation, instead of breaking loose from all others in solitary reductionisms. I therefore end this manifesto for a communicative cultural studies in a truly crossroads spirit by rephrasing a much more famous, 150 years old slogan:

– Cultural researchers of all countries and paradigms, communicate!

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