

CULTURE, GLOBALIZATION, MEDIATION

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■ **Abstract** This chapter reviews the literature on media and globalization. It develops the argument that this literature foregrounds a problem that, ironically, it also largely disavows: namely, the question of mediation as a general foundation of social life. I explore the origins of this contradiction in the emergence of globalization studies out of earlier traditions in media and cultural studies. I suggest that the failure to move beyond this impasse has perpetuated a surprising and debilitating reliance on substantialist and essentialist models of culture, models that are both at odds with the critical thrust of globalization studies and fully complicit with the agendas of public and commercial bureaucracies. The review tracks the recurrence of such thinking in several key strands of globalization studies and proceeds to outline an alternative ethnographic and theoretical strategy on the basis of a general theory of media and mediation.

INTRODUCTION

This review explores the relation between the following propositions: (a) that the question of globalization should push anthropologists to think more carefully not simply about media but also, and more generally, about mediation as a constitutive process in social life; (b) that the cultural politics of globalization, inside and outside the academy, involve a contradictory relation to mediation, on the one hand foregrounding the mediated quality of our lives and on the other hand strenuously disavowing it; (c) that this tension becomes particularly visible in the puzzling contemporary status of the culture concept, half-abandoned in anthropological theory, celebrated everywhere else; and (d) that a critical ethnography of the cultural politics of globalization might usefully set its sights on those nodes of mediation where value is often produced and contested, more or less self-consciously, in the name of culture.

In the following text, I refer primarily to the literature on media and globalization. But my argument assumes a much broader concept of a medium, one that would allow anthropologists to theorize the intersection between, say, cinema and ritual performance as an intermedium relationship rather than a primarily media-culture relationship. I am particularly interested in an ambiguity that I think

characterizes all media, a tension that the condition of globalization has made particularly evident.

On one level, whether or not it is apprehended that way by its “users,” a medium is a material framework, both enabling and constraining, for a given set of social practices. In this guise a medium is both dynamic and largely taken for granted. However, a medium is also a reflexive and reifying technology. It makes society imaginable and intelligible to itself in the form of external representations. Inseparable from the movement of social life and yet removed from it, a medium is thus at once obvious and strange, indispensable and uncanny, intimate and distant.

“Mediation” is a name that we might give to the processes by which a given social dispensation produces and reproduces itself in and through a particular set of media. Because of the structural ambiguity of media, the work of mediation is always potentially volatile. An obvious way of being in the world depends on certain everyday practices of mediation that can, with a slight shift of perspective, begin to appear arbitrary or externally imposed. To many, the moment of globalization appears as simply another installment of modernist disenchantment, as in Marx and Engels’ famous phrase, “All that is solid melts into air.” But in a subtler register it may also remind us that things were never quite as solid as they may have looked. These are very different analytical optics. On the one hand, an all-or-nothing confrontation between watertight cultural worlds and the poison of reflexivity. On the other, the recognition that meaning and value arise out of ongoing practices of mediation that are always at least half-conscious of the “close distance”—the blend of immersion and self-consciousness—that any cultural identification involves (Mazzarella 2003).

SOMETHING HAPPENED

In the late 1980s, just as the Cold War was running out of fuel and anthropologists were still reeling from the epistemic dislocation brought on by *Writing Culture*, something happened. As if on cue, a whole series of essays began appearing taking “globalization” as their object of inquiry. To some, no doubt, this was yet another nail in the coffin of a once-dignified discipline. To others, however, it spelled relief. Globalization studies made it possible, after all the hand wringing, to “do” relatively guilt-free ethnography again.

Why? This was partly an effect of the anthropology of globalization shifting the ontological burden back onto our informants. The ethnographic critique of the 1980s had called into question our habitual practices of representing culture. By the early 1990s, many anthropologists, responding to the globalist provocation, found a path back to ethnography by studying what Appadurai (1996) has called “the production of locality”—that is, our informants’ habitual (and not-so-habitual) practices of representing culture. Drs. Clifford, Marcus, and Fischer had prescribed greater reflexivity. But in an age of globalizing media and markets, it turned out that

reflexivity, and how best to manage it, was as much a concern for our informants as it was for us (Ginsburg et al. 2002).

Already manifest in the emergence of such new domains of inquiry as “public culture” (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1988, 1995; Pinney 2001), on one level this concern indexed a heightened self-consciousness about the relationship between media and culture. One pressing challenge was to understand the staggeringly complex interaction between different media in the reproduction of social experience. Another challenge emerged from the slightly bemused recognition that while the culture concept was undergoing an apparently terminal crisis in anthropology the rest of the world was lustily discovering it.

The world after globalization is one in which culture is everywhere, and everywhere at issue—except, it seems, in the avant-garde of anthropological theory. Appadurai writes of a new generalized “culturalism,” Poster (2001) begins a book by declaring that “Culture has become a problem for everyone” (p. 1), and Tomlinson (1997) announces that “the globalization process is revealing both political and conceptual problems at the core of our assumptions about what a ‘culture’ actually is” (p. 133; Hall 1997). Sometimes this new culturalism is expressly political: an idiom through which to make claims, locally and transnationally, on scarce resources and shortening attention spans (Ginsburg et al. 2002, Povinelli 2002, Wilk 2002). Elsewhere, it is theorized as symptomatic of a new “linguistic,” “symbolic,” or “postmodern” phase of world capitalism (Featherstone 1991, Harvey 1990, Jameson 1991, Lyotard 1985, Poster 2001), where profit is realized from the sale of signs and experiences as much as out of more conventionally defined products. Meanwhile, other social sciences less encumbered by the burden of culture have, during this same period, optimistically latched onto the concept in response to the sense that globalization must be understood, at least in part, in terms of the management of meaning-that-matters (du Gay et al. 1997, Eyerman 1999, Friese & Wagner 1999, Hall 1997).

The culture concept’s newfound popularity often displays the kind of essentialist or substantialist tendency that drove many anthropologists in the 1980s and 1990s to disown the concept or at least to insist on a radical revision of its analytical status (Gupta & Ferguson 1997; compare discussions in Kuper 1999 and Ortnor 1999). Its contemporary global careers manifest a curious tension: a simultaneous foregrounding and denial of the social processes of mediation that anything that we might recognize as “culture” necessarily involves. On the one hand, the mediated quality of culture has never been so obvious. On the other hand, and in response to a sense that this recognition constitutes a kind of crisis of value, the culture-mongers in commercial, nongovernmental, and state bureaucracies are desperately trying to recuperate the aura of authenticity that the word still popularly evokes. As I show here, even many critical academic projects that are in other ways dexterously attentive to the politics of mediation nevertheless seem unable to shake the substantialist habit.

Electronic audiovisual media enjoy, as many scholars point out, an overdetermined relationship to the discourse of cultural globalization. They are at once

its infrastructural means and its privileged signs (Barker 1997, Jameson 1991, Hardt & Negri 2001). Whereas the benefits of media are loudly foregrounded in mainstream debates—"let's wire the world!"—mediation itself is frequently denied. This denial occurs because the idea of mediation implies distance, intervention, and displacement. It thus undercuts the romance of authentic, intuitive identification, which, in turn, is the ideological guarantee that both capitalism and politics are driven by the interests of the consumer-citizen, not the corporation-party.

Marketing and politics, those rigorous machines of mediation, both proclaim cultural sensitivity as the salve for modernist alienation and use it to link the grandest institutional ambitions with the most intimate habits of the heart. Many of our most widely noted "critical" divinations of the present, for example Hardt & Negri's (2001) recent *Empire*, recognize and deplore this motivated disavowal of mediation as characteristic of the contemporary workings of power. But instead of taking mediation as the object of critical analysis, they compound the problem by demonizing it as the death-dealing, freeze-frame technology of those whose global sway depends on "fixing" the dynamic, productive, and im-mediate (their word is "immanent") energies of the "multitude." By romanticizing the emergent and the im-mediate, this neo-vitalist position tends too briskly to dismiss given social formations as always already foreclosed. This is clearly an impossible point of departure for an ethnographer because the critical value of fieldwork depends on an understanding of social process as an ongoing mediation of the virtual and the actual, of potentiality and determination.

Contrary to a widespread belief that globalization-talk has meant the end of "good" anthropology, I believe that it holds the potential to revitalize the discipline, precisely as a mode of critically informed empirical inquiry, an inquiry that is attentive to the specific social conditions or mediations out of which particular representations (including "culture") emerge in our informants' lives and work. And such an anthropology would track the ways that these representations, once in circulation, recursively help to remediate these social conditions. In so doing, it would capture the dialectical doubleness of mediation—its close distance—in the flow of practice, not just as an analytical problem.

To make my case below, I begin by going back to the inaugural provocations of globalization studies, the moment at which what I have ironically come to think of as The Formula was first proclaimed. I trace the intellectual conjuncture out of which The Formula emerged, the better to understand the persistence in contemporary anthropology of the central contradiction to which I allude above: the simultaneous awareness and disavowal of the problem of mediation. I survey the manifestation of this contradiction in several recurrent narratives in globalization studies, including the ideas of "the resurgence of the local," "cultural proximity," and "hybridity." Finally, I develop some general thoughts on mediation and media as objects of ethnographic inquiry, along with a brief argument about why I think anthropologists are particularly well situated to move us beyond the current intellectual impasse.

THE FORMULA: ORIGINS AND IMPASSES

In a chorus of voices speaking many dialects, the heralds of globalization studies announced a deceptively simple Formula. The Formula registered a sense of disorientation, the dizziness of inhabiting a world in which familiar relationships of scale, as well as taken-for-granted hierarchies of general and particular, were coming unstuck.

Robertson spoke, palindromically, of a “twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular” (Jameson & Miyoshi 1998, p. xi). Appadurai (1996), for his part, remarked that “the central problem in today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (p. 32; for other variations, see Featherstone 1990; Hannerz 1992, 1996; Miller 1995; Straubhaar 1997).

But what tools might be required for an ethnography of such processes and tensions? One thing seemed clear: The successive critical models of the 1970s and the 1980s—cultural imperialism and active audiences, respectively—needed a kind of theoretical *Aufhebung* for the 1990s. Whereas previous models of cultural dynamics had tended to posit uniformity and difference as existing in a kind of zero-sum struggle (occasionally moderated by concepts such as syncretism), globalization studies saw them as poised in a kind of volatile, perhaps dialectical, coconstitution.

A brief genealogy might help to clarify the stakes. In the 1960s and 1970s, the critics of cultural imperialism took aim at the happy one-world pieties of the postwar global modernization project, interpreting them as the ideological discourse of Euro-American geopolitical domination (Boyd-Barrett 1977; Burton & Franco 1978; Dorfman & Mattelart 1975; Galtung 1979; Lee 1980; Nordenstreng & Varis 1974; Schiller 1976, 1989; Nordenstreng & Schiller 1993; Sarti 1981). In many cases, they also traced back the conceptual and technical infrastructures of contemporary media systems to the compulsions and requirements of nineteenth-century European imperialism (Hendy 2000, Herman & McChesney 1997, Lau 2003, Mattelart 1994, Shohat & Stam 1994, Sreberny-Mohammadi et al. 1997).

Drawing on the more romantic tendencies of the early Marx and his subsequent interpreters, the cultural imperialism thesis combined a critique of Western-led commodification with a celebration of the organic integrity and cultural density of societies that were peripheral to the world system. Neo-imperialist culture, pale and sickly despite its world-conquering thrust, was vampirically dependent on extracting the lifeblood—first the labor and raw materials, later the symbolic content—of thriving local communities. Thus “authentic” culture was attenuated and depleted, alienated from its organic connection to the timeless authority of tradition, remaining only as a vulnerable, deracinated husk in need of (often rather paternalistic) nurturance and protection. Meanwhile, global culture was too thin, too brittle, and too inauthentic for proper affective commitment and identification, those pillars of civil society (Meyrowitz 1985, Smith 1991). Even after the United

Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-sponsored New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) collapsed in the mid-1980s, European states continued to draw on these assumptions during the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations of the 1990s, arguing that culture constituted a unique (and uniquely vulnerable) kind of resource that needed to be protected from the predations of the market (Garcia Canclini 2001; Hamelink 1983, 1994).

By the 1980s, scholars were roundly and rightly deconstructing the cultural imperialism model on several counts: its overemphasis on macrolevel determinants of social change, its tendency to conflate economic power with social and cultural effects, its assumption of a passive and helpless audience, and its fetishization of endangered “authentic” cultures (Garofalo 1993; Golding & Harris 1997; Harindranath 2003; Tomlinson 1991, 1999). A new wave of media studies busied itself with studying the micropolitics of reception, highlighting the unpredictable ways in which local needs and inclinations refracted the would-be hegemonic discourse of national or transnational media content (Ang 1985, Fiske 1987, Gillespie 1995, Liebes & Katz 1990, Silj et al. 1988, Wasko et al. 2001). And of course the *topos* of the active audience, with its localism and its kitchen-sink heroism, found a ready audience among anthropologists, particularly in combination with the parallel ascendance of “everyday life” as a vantage point for critical theory (de Certeau 1984, Highmore 2001, Lefebvre 1992).

The limitations of the active audience/popular pleasures position soon, in turn, became too evident to ignore (Ang 2003 [1990], Gripsrud 1989, Miller 1998, Modleski 1986, Morley 2003 [1993], Morris 1988, Schudson 1987). If the cultural imperialism thesis had underplayed the complexity of reception, then the active audience model was blind in the other direction. By overemphasizing the cultural and political integrity of the average suburban living room it ran the risk of turning the ethnography of media into a celebration of banal differences and pyrrhic insurrectionary acts. And by locating the site of politics and complexity at the level of the family den, it diverted critical attention away from the complex of institutions, mediations, and interests that used to be known as the culture industries. The ironic upshot was that reception studies actually helped to perpetuate the image of a monolithic, seamlessly functioning capitalist culture-machine, kept from achieving total hegemony only by the mischievous “agency” of what used to be called the masses. Consequently, the local—whether the village or the living room—tended to be reconfirmed in its structural integrity, “appropriating” what it desired from the surrounding world.

It was out of an increasingly desperate sense of the intransigence and inertia of these binaries—power and resistance, structure and agency, macro and micro, political economy and culture—that the programmatic Formula of globalization studies emerged. But The Formula also represented an attempt to integrate the poststructuralism that anthropologists had imported from the humanities with the continuing challenge of empirical ethnographic study. That being the case, it is perhaps not surprising that the most visible internal differences in the literature on

globalization concerned the relative weight to be given to institutional determinations versus the indeterminacies of translation and mediation.

Appadurai (1996), for example, highlights the disorienting “disjunctures” between conceptual entities—economy, politics, culture, etc.—whose stability and mutual determinations previous models had confidently assumed. For many scholars, globalization entailed the supplanting of both the ideological polarities of the Cold War and modernist hierarchies of command and control by decentralized, multipolar networks of complexity, chaos, and emergence. This current of globalization theory resonated with the extraordinary, seemingly anarchic, explosion of the Internet in the 1990s, and consequently also found common intellectual ground with many cybertheorists in the antifoundationalist philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and their heirs (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, Guattari 1995, Hardt & Negri 2000, Massumi 2002).

Other scholars, however, saw in the cultural politics of globalization the consolidation of structures of knowledge and institutional practices that served to organize cultural production in relatively predictable ways. Wilk (1995), for example, speaks of the dissemination of “common structures of difference”; Hannerz (1990) surmises that what we might call a “world culture [. . .] is marked by an *organization of diversity* rather than by a replication of uniformity” (p. 237, emphasis in original). Valuable interventions explored the relation between putatively “global culture” and the practical requirements of identifiable professional elites (Featherstone 1996; Hannerz 1992, 1996, 2004; Sklair 1991; Turner 1990). And the literature on “global cities” was an important corrective to the ideological tendency to speak as if global capitalism has, in this so-called information age, become weightless and dematerialized (Castells 1989, Dear & Flusty 1999, Sassen 2001, Scott 2002, Soja 2000, Thrift 1996). In these writings, globalization was essentially a matter of the attempted global extension of a modernist dynamic of coordination, administration, and equivalence.

Both strands had identified something fundamental. The prophets of indeterminacy noted the heightened sense of disjuncture felt by many at this historical moment, as the rapid spread of novel technologies had upset and displaced long-naturalized relations between center and periphery, form and content. Those who discerned “common structures of difference” were, for their part, responding to the fact that these novel technologies and relations nevertheless often remain closely tied to professional, political, and economic interests that had important stakes in mobilizing and regulating global media. These interests, even as they capitalized on the proliferation of “cultural difference,” also demanded that such cultural difference be rendered manageable as content within globally reproducible (and thus marketable) forms and genres.

The tension between these two lines of inquiry manifested itself as an apparent incommensurability, an analytic lacuna that might be expressed as follows: There is no simple correlation between the spatiality of cultural production and the production of cultural space. That is, a detailed understanding of the political economy and scalar management of the global media business will tell us much about media

ownership patterns, structures of influence, and the movement of capital. But it will tell us less about the relation between these structures and movements, on the one hand, and the densely particular assemblages of practice and meaning that they depend on and reproduce, on the other.

Always troubling, this impasse has been aggravated by the need to come to terms with a world where the so-called logic of commodification more than ever depends on semiosis, and semiotic processes are in turn increasingly inseparable from the political economy of mass communications. As ethnographers, we need strategies that will allow us not so much to worry the impasse as a conceptual problem but rather to capture its dynamics as a practical challenge in the lives and work of our informants. One way of doing this is to focus ethnographically on what one might call nodes of mediation. These are the sites at which the compulsions of institutional determination and the rich, volatile play of sense come into always provisional alignment in the service of (and always, in part, against the grain of) a vast range of social projects, from the grass roots to corporate boardrooms.

The urgency of developing such strategies can perhaps best be shown by considering some of the problems that continue to haunt many contemporary studies of globalization and media.

LOCALITY, PROXIMITY, HYBRIDITY

Since *The Formula* was announced, it has become virtually de rigueur to insist that, contrary to longstanding expectations of McWorld-style homogenization, globalization has in fact led to a revalorization of the local. There is, of course, a kind of *prima facie* obviousness to the idea that we value that which we know from the everyday rounds of our lives. Mauss (1990) argued that valuables are generally “a class of goods more closely linked to the soil” (p. 10). On the other side of the coin, the postcolonial “allure of the foreign” (Orlove 1997) is often taken as a symptom of cultural self-alienation, especially on the part of what dependency theorists used to call comprador classes.

But the narrative of local revival begs a couple of questions. First, what spatial or scalar level is denoted by this “local”? The nation remains, of course, an important unit of representation, legislation, and collective address: the nation-form as commodity form and media public (Abu-Lughod 1993, 1995; Davila 1997; Foster 2002; Guss 1996; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Miller 1997; Moeran 1996b; Morley 1992; Rajagopal 2001; Scannell 1996). The nation remains popular partly because it is a readily available and generally intelligible unit of scalar mediation. Much of the mediating work deliberately performed by public and commercial bureaucracies still involves achieving at least provisional commensurations between the nation-form and, on the one hand, transnational imaginaries and relationships and, on the other, regional commitments and interests. Of course, and this point is discussed at greater length below, the relative emphasis given to different scalar levels is in part a function of the particular medium being used—of its formal

properties as well as the historical contingencies of its development in a particular place.

The second question is more directly focused on the problem of cultural substantialism; it addresses how we imagine the ontological relationship between the entities that we call “the local” and “the media.” Accounts and analyses often imply that media are something that happen to or are imposed on already-constituted local worlds. The local, in this view, is composed of a certain set of cultural values and practices to which media must then adapt, in order to find an audience. The media are then commonly understood to “impact” the local world in a number of beneficial and/or deleterious ways. But rarely is it acknowledged that mediation, and its attendant cultural politics, necessarily precedes the arrival of what we commonly recognize as “media”: that, in fact, local worlds are necessarily already the outcome of more or less stable, more or less local, social technologies of mediation.

Most discussions of culture and media include an obligatory nod to the fact that media “produce and reproduce dominant ideas.” And yet many of these analyses nevertheless continue to presuppose that such ideas actually ontologically precede the media that supposedly produce and reproduce them. This is particularly the case when these ideas are taken to belong to a domain of social life that is understood to be in some sense “deep,” such as culture. For example, Lee et al. (2002) discuss the production of local relevance in global television reporting along these lines, concluding with a routine invocation of sociological/anthropological authority: “[M]ass media stand at the forefront of institutional venues through which each national community acts out its shared experiences and the underlying cultural premises” (p. 4). Global events are “selectively domesticated [. . .] in tandem with core social values. Global news must be filtered through the domestic system of commonsense knowledge (Berger & Luckman 1967) or ‘local knowledge’ (Geertz 1993)” (p. 4, references in original).

In this kind of argument, culture and media are not in fact seen as coconstitutive. Instead, “underlying cultural premises” and “the domestic system of commonsense knowledge” are reconfirmed as always already preexisting the intervention of the media. But what are the mediations through which these “underlying cultural premises” are constituted? And which new kinds of mediation are required to link these existing social mediatory practices to the transnational circulation of spectacular news reportage? It may very well be interesting and important for us, as anthropologists, to theorize the kinds of shifts that occur in the self-understandings and practices of a particular social group when, for example, a “traditional” ritual is performed especially for television cameras. But we must also remember that the ritual is itself already a medium, with its own distinctive mechanisms and possibilities of objectification and translation. The problem, then, is less the meeting of “culture” and “media,” and more the intersection of two or more systems of mediation.

Making things worse, and against its own best insights, the discourse of globalization often tends toward an exaggerated sense of novelty that easily gives rise to

the implication that commercial satellite television and the Internet have suddenly made ordinary people cognitively and affectively dependent on external processes of mediation, whereas previously stable and locally rooted “schemas” have sufficed to make sense of the world (Graber 1984, Gurevitch 1991). Even the most reflexive analyses remain curiously dependent on this anchor of authenticity. John Durham Peters (1997), in the context of a volume dedicated to questioning the naturalized boundaries of culture, spends a provocative article exploring the mediated, or as he puts it “bifocal,” structure of experience. And still he chooses to conclude with a sentiment that fully reinstates the pathos of the local-under-fire: “We must take a gamble on the ongoing relevance of the lifeworld, however perforated it may be by the system” (p. 92).

The point is not simply academic. Rather, the substantialist understanding of culture and locality, embedded as it is in the bureaucratic imagination, is indispensable to the functioning of power. In the culture industries, it helps to maintain the fiction that media and marketing are merely “responding” to the already-constituted desires of audiences—even as many decisions are actually made on a hunch basis by a surprisingly small group of people worldwide (Havens 2003, Sinclair et al. 1996, Tinic 2003). Multiculturalist strategies of governmentality attempt at once to incite and to contain the conviction that “cultural identity” might be a legitimate basis for political claims (Benhabib 2002, Gutmann 1994, Kymlicka 2001, Young 2002). At the same time and for the same reasons, cultural substantialism is just as likely to appear as a weapon of the weak (Gupta 1998, Miller 1994, Povinelli 2002, Spivak 1988). It is, then, hardly radical to suggest that if we, as anthropologists, want any critical purchase on these phenomena, we need to be doubly attuned to the potential complicity between the substantialist current in our discipline and its appearance in the discourses and practices of our informants.

Take, for example, the study of the local adaptation of globally circulating types of entertainment and information: soap operas, talk shows, and news (Abu-Lughod 1995, Allen 1995, Barker 1997, Boyd-Barrett 1997, Das 1995, Hannerz 2004, Jeffrey 2000, Mattelart 1994, McMillin 2003, Miller 1998, Rajagopal 1993, Ståhlberg 2002, Tinic 2003, Wilk 1995), or consumer brands and their advertising (Davila 1997, Foster 2002, Kemper 2001, Mazzarella 2003, Miller 1997, Moeran 1996a, Watson 1997). As any ethnographer of the global media will have found, the “organic intellectuals” internal to these industries will often deploy substantialist models of culture to explain, and to attempt to predict, what works where. We might call the basic idea cultural proximity. This notion is frequently found imported, without noticeable modification, from the desks of corporate media planners to those of media theorists at major universities. The key proposition, deceptively simple, is that “like attracts like.” This then becomes the explanation for apparently fortuitous cultural “fits.” So, for instance, the Japanese TV series *Oshin* does well in Iran, of all places, “because its values of perseverance and long suffering were compatible with cultural codes prevalent in what might appear a distinctly different society” (Mowlana & Rad, cited in Lechner & Boli 2000, p. 305).

In this line of thought, the object is to identify correspondences at more or less manifest levels, between two reified cultures.

Another, more interesting, variation on the idea of cultural proximity introduces a note of ambivalence. Here, the power and attraction of particular forms of media depend on their close distance, that is, their ability to appeal at once to the intimately quotidian and the compellingly distant. Many regionally powerful centers of media production and dissemination have, it seems, been able to withstand the pressure of Hollywood by offering an aspirational idiom desirable precisely by virtue of its non-American modernity: Mexico and Brazil for Latin America, India for South Asia, Egypt for the Arab Middle East, Hong Kong and Taiwan for ethnically Chinese East Asia, etc. (Barker 1997, Ching 2000, Iwabuchi 2001, Liechty 2002, Shohat & Stam 1996, Shohat & Stam 2003, Yang 1997). Indeed, close distance-based strategies have been responsible, at a national level, for some of the classic examples of the resurgence of the local. McMillin's (2003) description of the formula that guided production at Channel V, India's (Hong Kong-based, Bombay-produced) alternative to Music Television (MTV), is exemplary: "Producers knew that 'an all-English veejay [video jockey] [brought] abysmal ratings while an all-vernacular veejay [was] not hip enough for a country that generally worship[ed] English—Hinglish, Gujlish, Tamlish, Anythinglish'" (p. 344).

Of course, just as evolutionary theorists can divine adaptive advantages in just about any given social phenomenon, so the mysterious correspondences of cultural proximity can be discerned, *post facto*, in almost any conceivable culture/media relationship. The reliance on substantialist models of culture and cultural correspondence ultimately becomes a strategy for avoiding the questions that really need to be asked. These questions require us to confront culture as, at one and the same time, ideology and social process, as something continuously made and remade through constantly shifting relations, practices, and technologies of mediation. The answers we may reach will not be much good for modeling or mapping. But they will give us a much better sense of the complex cultural politics of what is happening when, for instance, Hausa youth in northern Nigeria find in Hindi films a resonant-yet-removed idiom through which to explore and elaborate sexuality and romance (Larkin 1997). Moreover, as opposed to the self-fulfilling teleology of culture-as-destiny, such projects are likely to foreground the often provisional and unstable translational politics of transnational media encounters, what Boellstorff (2003) terms "dubbing culture," meaning made out of tenuous, glancing, fragmentary, and half-understood engagements.

The spectre of "hybridity" inevitably rears its head in this connection. Therefore, let me emphasize that I am by no means advocating a celebration of complexity (or indeed "diversity") for its own sake. In the early years of globalization studies (and even now in mainstream discourse) the invocation of complexity often seemed designed to allow a kind of joyous explanatory abdication. This was the realm of the "charming" juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern, or the kind of studiously casual demotic multiculturalism for which Dick Hebdige's JoJo of Balsall Heath became an early and subsequently rather overextended poster boy (Hannerz 1996,

Hebdige 1981, Ina & Rosaldo 2001). As West & Sanders (2003) complain, “It is far too commonplace, in this literature, to speak in ill-supported generalities—to conjure evocative images of people, things and ideas found in surprising new places” (p. 10).

What makes systematic critical analysis more urgent is that these figures, although apparently radical in their will to unsettle, are in fact fully consonant with disturbingly conservative political and intellectual agendas. As Hutnyk (2000) reminds us, “Hybridity and difference sell; the market remains intact” (p. 36). Indeed, celebratory discourses of hybridity often depend on precisely the cultural substantialism that they disavow (Friedman 1999). The grimly repetitive publicity formula of Tibetan monks with cellphones or computers in remote yet colorful Indian villages leans on the historicist categories of Eurocentric modernity for its effect even as it appears to trouble it (Chakrabarty 2000). And our delight in ethnographic reports of remote islanders finding, in a Coke bottle, a convenient ritual representation of the female torso mixes this questionable, overdetermined enchantment with a comforting reassurance about the pragmatically adaptive integrity of “traditional” lifeways (also see Taussig 1993).

What is lost in both the affirmation of local integrity and the celebration of freewheeling hybridity is any sustained understanding of the grounded actuality of cultural politics. By taking given social processes of mediation as the practical loci of politics, we also see that these processes are the points at which institutional overdetermination and the indeterminacies of translation cohabit, all the time and everywhere. Rather than hanker for im-mediacy—understood either as ethnological nostalgia or as the vitalist romance of emergent potentiality/difference—we need, ethnographically speaking, to attend to the places of mediation, the places at which we come to be who we are through the detour of something alien to ourselves, the places at which we recognize that difference is at once constitutive of social reproduction and its most intimate enemy.

MEDIATION AND MEDIA

As anthropologists of media and globalization, we confront a world in which cynicism about the social functions of the media and romanticism about the authenticity and value of culture are equally widespread. These two phenomena are, moreover, related, and their interrelationship arises, in part, out of the profound ambivalence that a heightened self-consciousness about the mediated quality of our lives has produced.

Our everyday understanding of mediation involves notions such as harmonization and the resolution of differences, often through the intervention of an apparently neutral third term. This neutrality is an ideological or discursive effect, but a powerful one; it has important social consequences for the credibility, legitimacy, and, indeed, the seeming naturalness (or im-mediacy) of a given type of mediation. All mediation involves the appearance of an ontological separation between form

and content. This appearance, in turn, makes possible the apparently impartial authority that modern institutions rely on. And it helps to support the ideological proposition that media are simply formal, neutral tools that may be applied to any situation.

At the same time, however, mediation is a matter of the greatest intimacy. It is the process by which the self recognizes itself by returning to itself, renewed and once removed. I separate the prefix “re-” here to signal a paradox. On the one hand, reflexive social entities (selves, societies, cultures) are fundamentally constituted (and not just reconstituted) through mediation. On the other hand, as Derrida and other scholars suggest, this constitutive mediation also always produces a fiction of premediated existence. Hence the term identity, a concept that expresses this recursive doubling, this simultaneous intimacy and distance. And hence, also, the persistent plausibility—against all the evidence, as it were—of substantialist ideas of culture and origin.

All mediation, then, involves a dual relation: a relation of simultaneous self-distancing and self-recognition. In the words of the now-most-unfashionable theorist of the media, McLuhan (1994), “All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way” (p. 57). We “let go” in order to see ourselves differently, to be able to do new things in a reconstituted world. Peters’ (1997) concept of media as practices and technologies of “social envisioning” (p. 79) usefully captures the fact that media (in his account not only television, radio, press, and cinema but also statistics, accounting, mapping, and census taking) make society imaginable to itself. Because they are so intimately tied to the very possibility of imagining and inhabiting our social worlds in particular ways, these mediations are also commonly naturalized. That is, discursive and affective constructs like a “society,” a “nation,” or a “culture” depend, for their apparent self-evidence, on mediations and contingencies that they must ultimately deny.

An important feature of the moment of globalization, as registered in social theory, is a sudden and vertiginous self-consciousness of many of these mediations and, by the same token, a heightened awareness of the contingency and the brittleness of our social worlds. It is as if the disenchantment of tradition that has so often been described as a leitmotif of the experience of modernity were spatialized and generalized to encompass not only our relation to our pasts, but also now the differences that served to distinguish geocultural selves from others. In its cruder alarmist and affirmative versions, the discourse of globalization tends toward both a compulsive fixation on the problem of cultural authenticity (even, as we have seen, in the guise of hybridity) and a fetishization of media per se as utopian or apocalyptic technologies. In a more critical register, however, it encourages us to reopen the problem of mediation, to explore the practices and predicaments that constitute our worlds via particular media.

Ironically, the iconization of a medium is in part a result of its embedding in social process, an embedding which retrospectively acquires the appearance of

necessity. The formal and material properties of a medium arise out of and crystallize a socially and historically determinate field of possibilities. Having emerged, the medium then recursively remediates each new social context to which it becomes relevant, often at great spatial and temporal removes from its origins. Insofar as it requires and enables particular social relations, a medium starts to appear definitive of certain socio-historical forms—colonialism, nationalism, transnationalism. This process should not be confused with technological determinism. For example, to speak of the complicity of a particular medium with nationalism does not mean that the existence of the medium necessarily “leads to” nationalism in any simple sense. Rather, we are registering the historical effect of mediation: that neither of the social relationships and institutional histories that we recognize in turn as nationalism and a particular medium are any longer fully intelligible or recognizable to us in isolation from each other (for discussions of the relation between nationalist imaginaries/publics and various media see Anderson 1983, Fair 2003, Garcia Canclini 2001, Ginsburg et al. 2002, Hendy 2000, Hilmes 2003, Mankekar 1999, Rajagopal 2001, Schwach 2003, Urla 1997).

At an early point in the development of a medium, this overidentification between particular media and particular social forms often appears as utopian or dystopian prophecy. Later, once a medium has grown functionally inseparable from a form of life, it appears as a kind of forgetting. Consequently, and ironically, the first step that any critique has to take is one of abstraction: an attempt to remember the potentialities of a medium away from the social routines that it has come to define. At this level it is useful to insist that media do have formal properties and that these properties condition their social potentials, the alternative social lives that they may yet live.

Any given medium enables and constrains the control and dissemination of information in particular ways. Different media offer different communicational structures: broadcast or closed circuit, far-flung or face-to-face, one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many. The price, availability, and complexity of hardware combined with the extent to which content may be modified or re-created by users at different locations in the social field of circulation will condition the extent to which a given medium becomes the focus for “alternative” or “radical” uses and mobilizations. For example, in contrast to typically national media, certain kinds of mass media technologies—particularly those with relatively low user overhead, such as radio, video, and the Internet—frequently offer opportunities to address very specialized audiences, either in the form of outlaw or dissident programming, indigenous radio, or—in a more dispersed spatial mode—diasporic and/or exilic production (Browne 1990, Hendy 2000, King & Woods 2001, Llorens 1991, Marks 2000, McLagan 2002, Naficy 1993, O’Connor 1990, Schein 2002, Urla 1997).

The importance of, at a very literal level, controlling broadcast facilities is obvious from the priority given, in contemporary political coups, to seizing radio and television stations. But once the seizure has been effected, more complex questions arise about the relative interplay between intimacy, interactivity, and anonymity in a given medium. Radio, for example, is often taken to be a medium

both intimate and amenable to disguise; hence Radio España Independiente, which purported to be the regional voice of the Pyrenees but was in fact Soviet-based and backed (Hendy 2000). The diffused structure of the Internet provides a powerful political alternative to control over centralized state media apparatuses—witness the Zapatistas' ability to mobilize worldwide support for their rebellion in the mid-1990s. But the Internet's combination of real-time interactivity and anonymity also enables both the transgressive-liberatory thrills of ethnic and sexual "passing" in multiple user dimensions (MUDs), MUD object-oriented dimensions (MOOs), and chat groups, and the agonies of identity theft and other forms of cybercrime (Bell & Kennedy 2000, Castells 2001, Herman & Swiss 2000, Kolko 2003, Levy 2000, Lunenfeld 2000, Nakamura 2002, Turkle 1997).

The possible social lives of media are further conditioned by their radically different "lexes," that is, the structure of reading that a particular medium requires and allows: still images versus moving pictures, audio-visual versus silent, textual versus visual, the sensory intensity of a 15-second commercial versus the stately unfolding of a 3-hour epic film. McLuhan (1994) remarks of the relation between the patterns of sociality and the sensory properties of media: "The use of any kind of medium or extension of man alters the patterns of interdependence among people, as it alters the ratio among our senses" (p. 90). From the Frankfurt School onward, the question of our sensory engagement with media has been at the center of debates over their social implications and effects. For example, television and video enable more decentralized diffusion and viewing than does the highly concentrated experience of the cinema; however, the insertion of television into everyday life is also likely to be more low-key, leading, perhaps, to more distracted forms of engagement (Mankekar 1999; McCarthy 2001; Rajagopal 2001; Silverstone 1994; Williams 1974, 1999).

Ethnographic approaches to mediation are potentially powerful because they do not have to rely primarily on speculative abstraction to render visible those potentialities that are constitutive of, and yet disavowed in, any social order. Given a well-chosen field site, an anthropologist has access, as events unfold, to the precarious relationship between determination and indeterminacy that structures mediation in the flow of social practice. Nonethnographic critical theorists of the media may strive to rescue or redeem these potentialities by projecting them into a radical future or mourning them in a receding past. But anthropologists enjoy the empirical benefits of being in the thick of it while not succumbing to the plain empiricism that characterizes instrumental and applied analyses of culture, globalization, and mediation.

There is of course an important anthropological tradition of attending to "failed" mediations, to the points at which cultural difference precludes translation. Scholars who have worked in ethnographic film production, for instance, have been particularly attentive not only to the more-or-less creative appropriation of media technologies and narratives by communities new to electronic media or, indeed, to writing, but also to the possibility of radical incommensurability. Aboriginal songs or stories that last for hours or even days may not be suited to radio broadcast;

modes of knowledge inscription may not allow for the alienation between writer and reader characteristic of mass-produced print; conventions of representation and viewing may not translate into the formal conventions of the cinema (Browne 1990; Ginsburg 1994a,b, 2000, 2002; Langton 1993; McDougall 2002; Michaels 1986, 1994; Smith & Ward 2000a; Turner 1992, 2002; Zimmerman et al. 2000).

An important distinction between postglobalization anthropologists of the media and many of their forebears in the study of ethnographic film and indigenous media is the recognition that difference can no longer simply be understood as a function of culture. Difference is no longer so much a measure of the distance between two or more bounded cultural worlds; rather, we may now understand it as a potentiality, a space of indeterminacy inherent to all processes of mediation, and therefore inherent to the social process *per se*.

Globalization studies, contrary to superficial objections, announce neither the end of culture nor the end of difference. Rather, they remind us that culture is an effect of social processes of mediation, that these processes of mediation always grapple with internal indeterminacies as well as external provocations, and that social actors—consciously or unconsciously—try to manage or fix these indeterminacies and provocations by means of reified schemes of cultural identity and cultural difference. That such a “fixing” is at once both necessary and impossible is one of the ground rules of cultural politics.

CONCLUSION

Half a generation ago, the theorists of globalization noted that we had reached a kind of watershed, a moment in our apprehension of the world as a totality that was characterized both by unprecedented connection and by incomparable complexity. Skeptics, for their part, complained that there was nothing new about globalization. Both camps were right, and both were wrong. The power of the globalist provocation was, in a sense, that it finally required us rigorously to confront and to theorize what we had “known” all along. *Writing Culture* and the critique of representation tackled the cult of immediacy in ethnographic writing, that is to say the disavowal of the mediating work done by means of naturalized literary devices. Globalization studies turned this critical awareness outward, onto the practices of our informants, refashioning it as a methodological tool.

Substantially, this review has been largely a discussion of projects and problems emerging out of the anthropology of the media as currently constituted, particularly *vis-à-vis* the problematic of globalization. But of course my intention has been to suggest that the question of mediation is a far more general one, one that touches on the very fundamentals of social process. Indeed, we should be careful not to choose only overdetermined nodes of mediation as sites from which to explore these issues. These are the sites where mediation is, as it were, out in the open—part of the explicit discourse and self-imagination of a type of institution, a class of people. But this is of course only the tip of the iceberg. If, in fact, mediation is a dynamic principle at the root of all social life, then, having developed ways

of theorizing it, we should move toward exploring its conditions and outcomes in social projects and movements that may not recognize themselves in those terms.

Similarly, although the discourse on globalization has foregrounded the question of the relation between the local and the global, this relation could usefully, I think, be read as a variation on the larger theme of close distance. Mediation produces and reproduces certain configurations of close-distance, mediated self-understandings that depend on the routing of the personal through the impersonal, the near through the far, and the self through the other. Close distance is therefore a figure for the dialectic of engagement and alienation inherent in all cultural politics. Again, this is not simply a theoretical or even just an existential issue, although it is both of these. Rather, documenting the play of close distance can be a useful way into an analysis of social projects of value across the board: the half-managed dialectics of desire and distance, engagement and fear that structure all our attempts to wring meaning, value, and permanence out of the contingencies of our lives.

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