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For a Materialist, Non–Media-centric Media Studies

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As my title implies, "my" media studies, for the future, would have as their defining characteristic the attempt to avoid being either as idealist or as media-centric as most versions of the discipline currently are. Lest this seem merely oxymoronic, let me explain. My argument is that we need a new paradigm for the discipline, which attends more closely to its material as well as its symbolic dimensions. If improvements in the speed of communications are central to the time-space compressions of our era, emphasis has recently fallen almost exclusively on the virtual dimension (the movement of information) to the neglect of the analysis of the corresponding movements of objects, commodities, and persons. However, we should aim to develop a model for the integrated analysis of communications, which places current technological changes in historical perspective and returns the discipline to the full range of its classical concerns.

In this connection, it is worth remembering that in their own work, Marx and Engels defined *communication* broadly enough to include not only the study of the instruments for transmitting information but also the material transportation infrastructures of their day. Their concern was with the connections between the technologies for transmitting messages, transporting commodities, and people, all of which was seen as part of a broader, geopolitical "science of territory"—a set of concerns that are readily recodable into contemporary debates about de- or reterritorialization.

This classical definition of *communication* thus encompassed not only the symbolic realm—which is what we nowadays tend to think of first, when the question of communication arises—but also the often-neglected field of what has come to be defined as transport studies, which has declined to the point of being a relatively neglected subfield within geography, presumed to be of interest only to technical specialists. What is needed here is the re-excavation of the tradition of work which continues Marx and Engels's concerns with the constitutive powers of systems of communications and transport (see Carey 1989; Mattelart 1996).

In this context, questions of transport and communications must be analyzed in terms of how infrastructural "networks" of different types enable (or inhibit) different modes of activity for different sections of the population. Thus, rather than an

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abstract "dromology" of speed as a generalized aspect of contemporary culture (Virilio 1986), we need an analysis of the stratification of access to different modes of "connexity." As against the much-trumpeted role of new technologies in allowing the transcendence of social, geographical, and cultural divisions, our inquiries should also be concerned with how new divisions are continually reinscribed in technical modalities (on "techno-zones," see Barry 2001).

In pursuing these questions, media and communication studies need to take their interdisciplinary roots more seriously. Thus, within geography, it is now widely recognized that the striking improvements in transport speed, efficiency, and capacity that now enable vast quantities of material and people to be moved around the world at low cost are one of the key driving forces of the global economy (Crang and Thrift 2000). Within sociology, recent years have also seen the emergence of what has come to be called the "new mobilities" paradigm concerned with the diverse mobilities of populations, goods, information, and wastes (Urry 2007). In this connection, Appadurai's (1996) now canonical argument for the importance of addressing the disjunctions between mediascapes and other systems of flow or blockage (e.g., in relation to patterns of physical mobility and migration) has been much quoted but little implemented—with emphasis remaining predominantly, if not exclusively, on the (increasingly transnational) flow of information (and, to a lesser extent, on its regulation). It is for these reasons that my own audience work has, in recent years, increasingly stressed the material location of audiences, in terms of both their domestic settings and their variously sedentarist or migrant lifestyles (Morley 2000, 2006).

My proposal is that we need to do more to investigate the changing relations between the material and the virtual realms of communications. In doing so, we need to avoid the simplistic periodizations and overdrawn binary divides between the worlds of the "old" and the "new" media, which unfortunately characterize much contemporary work in this field. Rather than assuming that "we" have proceeded abruptly from one era of communications to another, we also need to investigate the continuities, overlaps, and modes of symbiosis between old and new technologies of symbolic and material communications and the extent to which material geographies retain significance, even under changing technological conditions.

In this context, critical work on the virtual realm has also begun to recognize that cyberspace itself has a perfectly identifiable geography, the routes and locations of which largely replicate the structure and patterns of earlier modes of communication (Zook 2005). The object of our analysis should thus be defined as the shifting landscapes of differentiated forms of virtual and actual connectivities, in which old ghosts from previous historical eras still haunt the byways of cyberspace (just as new satellite/telephony systems in the Balkans "remap" these territories along the lines of the Austro-Hapsburg empire; Parks 2007) and where the effectivity of even the latest technologies still depends, ultimately, on material infrastructures (e.g., much internet traffic still runs along the old imperial routes of undersea cabling technologies).

Contemporary theorizations of globalization provide a good example of the deficiencies of approaches that focus only on symbolic communications, to the neglect

of transport. In most analyses of globalization, which fetishize speed and focus on "electronic instantaneity," shipping is largely neglected, as if e-mail and air travel constituted the totality of global movement. But the slow and massive movements of the shipping industry still constitute the foundations of global economics (Sekula 1995). If globalization is about the movement of information and people, it is also about the movement of goods. The key development here has been the container box, now at the core of a highly automated "intermodal" global transport system (road, rail, and ship), which has decreased costs so as to transform the structure of the global economy (Levinson 2006). Just as digitalization converts all information into a standardized form, readily transferable across different media platforms, so, with containerization, transport has become intermodal. When we speak of technological convergence, as media scholars have done for some time now, we must also attend to its significance in the realm of transport, for we have much to learn from debates that have already taken place there about technological forms and their regulation.

In better addressing the articulation of virtual or symbolic and actual or physical modes of communication, it may be possible to set a new agenda for the future that rewrites the paradigm for communication studies so as to transcend their narrowly media-centric focus on the technologies for the transmission of information. We need to be more concerned with the articulation of complex networks of both communications and physical transport, if we are to develop a paradigm that places questions of media and communications in the broader frame of their material contexts and settings (see Morley forthcoming).

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