PRIVATE REVERIES & PUBLIC SPACES:

some thoughts on the relation between art and social science in an age of media and technology

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The title of the *Private Reveries Public Spaces* project offers an invitation to think about boundaries. It juxtaposes, both explicitly and implicitly, the private and the public, inner and outer worlds, the physical and the virtual, the technological and the social, and possibly much else besides. It offers an invitation, more particularly, to think about the way in which life, especially ordinary everyday life, is continually confronted by the challenging fluidities of late modernity. These challenges are structural, emerging from the system and its capacity or incapacity to deal with the tectonic shifts of globalisation and technologisation (forgive the neologism). And they are experiential, emanating from the daily traumas of the life-world — the social, cultural and, in the small scale sense of the quotidian, the political dimensions of mundane reality: the pin-pricks of modernity.

The title of the project also poses a challenge for both social scientists and artists not to just to think about how they think about this efflorescence of change, but also to begin (again) the process of thinking about their relationship to each other. At stake, for certain, is our capacity to address, in an analytic, an aesthetic and an ethical way, questions both of difference and control. Questions of difference, because both in dreams and on the streets, in our mediated domesticities and in the physical, bodily movements across cities, we are continuously confronted by the other, the stranger, the neighbour. And questions of control, because in those movements, through dream-worlds and life-worlds, we are continuously struggling to make sense, to make and secure our identities, to hold the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the comforting and the threatening.

This is the project. Both in the singular, in this particular initiative, and in general, as we all go about our daily business. It is a common project, and an unfinished, if not an unfinishable, one. And it is one for which the media — the technologies of representation, information and communication — are both tools and troubles. The media are tools because they enable this common project. We have become increasingly reliant on them as platforms, both technological and social, for building our frameworks for individual and collective understandings and for our sense of ontological security as we go about our everyday lives. But they are troubles too, because they also become disturbances, constantly undermining, in their capacity both to report on the traumas and disasters of the world but also through their propensity themselves to dysfunction and to break down, the very security which otherwise they enable.

We live in a society, consequently, that is under construction. It is under construction in two senses. The first is as an acknowledgement of the far from completed changes that are taking place in everyday life as a consequence of the rapid emergence of new media and information technologies as increasingly mass market objects and services. Despite the fact that technologically stimulated social change is always on-going, as indeed are the socially induced changes in technology, it would be fair to say that at this point, as well as in the immediate future, that such changes are both particularly significant but also both particularly uncertain and uneven.

The second sense of the phrase, *Under Construction*, is as an acknowledgement of the limitations, theoretically, in social constructivist models of technological, and indeed in technologically determinist models of sociological, change. Here the issue is an epistemological one. It is more difficult to present, but perhaps even more important from the point of view of the agenda shared by both social scientists and artists.

It addresses the need to be cautious in accepting the more radical claims of social constructivism as a theoretical tool to provide not just a necessary but a sufficient account of innovation and its social consequences. Likewise — though this perhaps is more easy and obvious — to be cautious in seeing technology as actively constructing social and societal change.

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Both technologies and everyday life are, therefore to be considered as *under-constructed*. Both technological and social relations are under-determined by the forces, respectively, of society and the machine. Perhaps the most radical implication of this perception is that there is a need to recognise technology and technological change as being independent variables in the analysis of social change but one in constant and unstable tension with society, society considered as a complex of values and actions, interests and constraints. This leaves open, and open to empirical investigation and aesthetic exploration, the precise relationship between the social and the technological, and it does so in the recognition that neither society nor technology are either entirely determined or determining.

What strategies are available for us to manage this degree of under-construction? How do we confront, prepare for, mop up from, the spillages and fluidities, the fractures and the uncertainties, at the interface between private and public worlds, technological and social environments, and personal and political orientations to the world?

We have a number of metaphors — metaphors which in some cases shade into theories — to describe these changes and these uncertainties. Let me review some of them. Each speaks in its own way of the blurring and the permeability of boundaries; each also speaks of indeterminacy (and in some cases of determinacy too). Each attempts to capture a sense of change and does so in relation to a distinct dimension of everyday life. Each has its limitations as well as its benefits.

Liquidity[1]

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) points to the degree of under-determination that increasingly defines the character of modern society, both at the individual level, where we move through life increasingly without the fixed reference and control points of even relatively recent modern times, and at the general societal level, where the solids of modernity, the institutional and political frameworks, both guiding and being guided by human action, have increasingly become unhinged, remote and unreachable. Ulrich Beck's (1992) account of risk society is another version of this estrangement between system and life worlds, and our increasingly general incapacity to exert control or presume responsibility for the world in which we find ourselves living.

The fluidities and instabilities referred to in this notion of liquid modernity are structural — that is they emerge from the fundamental changes generated in the contradictions of boundary ignoring globalisation. As Bauman suggests, in his inimical and paranoid prose, this liquidity is both a condition and a consequence of the emergent dominance of global powers and it becomes a synonym for social disintegration:

> … social disintegration is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new technique of power … for power to be free to flow, the world must be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints. Any dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way. Global powers are bent on dismantling such networks for the sake of their continuous and growing fluidity … and it is the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of human bonds and networks which allow these powers to do their job in the first place (Bauman, 2000, 14).

We do not necessarily have to accept the full force of Bauman's apocalyptic vision to recognise, once again, the centrality of representation, information and communication technologies to this

1 The next sections of this paper draw heavily from Silverstone, Roger (2001) 'Under Construction: New Media and Information Technologies in the Societies of Europe: A Framework paper for the European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network (EMTEL 2)', www.emtel.org

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contradictory process: a contradictory process both of connection and disconnection; both of empowerment and disempowerment. But we do need to acknowledge and accept at least as hypothetical, that the arguments announcing this critical fluidity, grounded as they are in a sense of a fundamentally changing social space, have to be relevant to our emerging society, however it comes to be defined or defended.

Convergence

Convergence is a much more familiar notion to students of representation, information and communication technologies. It refers to a multiple process of coming together, of boundary weakening, and of interaction, between, firstly, digital (television, telecommunication and computer) technologies; secondly, the commercial organisations that produce and distribute these technologies and the content and services they in turn enable; and finally between the multiple uses and sites of use amongst consumers.

We are generally comfortable with accounts of technological change which talk of the convergence between telephony and computing, with hand-held technologies that combine personal organising capacity with digital radio, with on-line video-streaming, and the like. We are equally at home amongst accounts of global alliances between companies in traditionally distinct sectors; between Time-Warner and AOL; Sony and Universal, or the mix that was Vivendi. And those who have been researching uses know of the ease with which the young especially, move between different technologically mediated experiences, both simultaneously and sequentially.

Each of these dimensions of convergence is therefore tangible, empirically identifiable and well covered in the literature. Together they provide a distinct framework for discussing not just the fluidities at the heart of the digital world but also its new certainties. Convergence signals an achievement but also implies a finality. It refers to a process, but a process which is essentially teleological, and which has a fixed — and in much of the literature — a desirable end-point.

One of the hidden injuries of notions of convergence is that it provides a blanket account of a much more complex and uneven set of technological, industrial and consumption processes. Not only does it tend to mask conceptually the non-starters and the failures, both in technological development and in industrial activity, thereby simplifying, from an inevitably post hoc perspective, the uncertainties and instabilities of innovation, but it also simply ignores those areas of technological and social activity that are excluded. As a result we tend to become blind to the continuities within technology and practice, as well as failing to recognise the divergences — perhaps above all in the moments of resistance or failure — always present as threatened in the experienced present, when the supposedly inevitably converging future has yet "quite to mature" (the current situation, it might be said, in relation to the 3G telephony, never mind e-commerce).

Convergence, however, has two further, and perhaps equally problematic referents. The first of these is the often proposed convergence between production and consumption, and the second is the equally often proposed convergence between the technological and the social — symbolised most powerfully in the image of the cyborg. Let me briefly address both dimensions.

The first, the convergence between production and consumption, involves two moves. The first is a predominantly empirically derived claim that the process of production — perhaps especially the production of media and information products and services — is not complete until the consumer, actively engaged with the plenitude of meanings that surround the commodity, whatever it is, has finished his or her own work. Consumers produce meaning and significance in their acts of consumption. Their capacity to do so not only adds value, but also feeds back into the otherwise discrete dimension of production to inflect, change or divert it.

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These are arguments are paralleled in similarly articulated discussions in relation to technology (Feenberg, 1999), where the tension between production and consumption is reframed as a struggle between system and agency, between the forces of control and those of resistance.

The second move is more theoretically derived (Bourdieu, 1984). It involves the claim that the centre of gravity in the political economy of late modernity has shifted away from production towards consumption. Bourdieu's claim is that we are increasingly to be defined, and define each other, from the point of view of our place in a hierarchy of consumption rather than that of production.

These arguments involve both a blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption or use, and a revaluing of the relative weight to be given to each dimension of the process. They tend, Feenberg is arguably an exception, to romanticise the significance of creative consumption and use, and also to under-estimate the very real consequences of the inequalities of power. The relations of production and consumption are always political (Silverstone and Mansell, 1996). They are never equally balanced, and the predominant skewing towards the forces of production are persistent and indisputable. Claims for the convergence between production and consumption, and associated claims that these two aspects of single process are broadly equivalent, need to be treated with caution.

What perhaps I might call *cyborgism* has been a consistently dominant trope in the analysis of the convergence of the human and the technological. It has, of course, bio-genetic dimensions as well as communicational ones. Scholars as different as Marshall McLuhan and Donna Haraway have identified and analysed the increasingly significant ways in which bodies and machines are converging and in what ways the boundaries between social and technological objects are no longer impermeable. Indeed some social theories of technology embody a kind of *cyborgism* in their own epistemologies, for example in the principle of symmetry in the relationship between social and technological actors in actor network theory. There are, I would suggest, significant, and significantly unexamined, moral and ethical issues that emerge in this claimed convergence (Silverstone, in press), and in the implicit and sometimes explicit claims that even the human is under-constructed and under construction

Hybridity

By and large the notion of hybridity has emerged to describe and analyse the particular emergent property of a significant dimension of modern or post-modern culture. It recognises the fluidity of boundaries around and through the formation and sustaining of identities in a world of increasingly intense instability, both material and symbolic. Hybridity speaks above all about the instabilities of ethnicity at the core of modern culture. It is associated discursively, and also politically, with notions of diaspora, multi-culturalism, and the changing nature of the nation state in the face of globalisation. It is a key concept in post-colonial theory, where it also has a status as a way of measuring inclusion and exclusion, and the processes, once again both discursive and political, which shape the positioning of the post-colonial subject in the novel and challenging relations of power that have emerged with the collapse of Empire (Bhabha, 1994, 112).

The problem with the notion of hybridity in this context is that it presumes a moment when the world (or the nation or the state) was anything other than in some sense hybrid – that there was once some primordial (or achievable) purity against which the hybrid is taken to be significant. As Stuart Hall points out this is both misleading and pernicious.

There is another weakness too in the notion of hybridity, which should also suggest caution. In biology the hybrid is both an achievement (the merging together in a single organism of

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otherwise distinct and possibly incompatible elements) but it is also sterile (it cannot reproduce itself). Both of these elements – finality and sterility – are never fully addressed in cultural studies theorising. The suggestion of the finality of the hybrid in particular, the suggestion of hybridity as a fixed end-point, runs the risk of leading to a blindness to the instabilities and inevitable contradictions of cultural processes and social formations in our highly mediated late-modern world.

Mobility

We increasingly live in a world in which people are on the move, voluntarily or as a result of oppression or economic necessity. We increasingly live in a world in which the materiality of population movements has its equivalent in the symbolic mobility to which, in part, Bauman refers. Arjun Appadurai's (1997) set of *scapes* (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes) has provided a framework and a range of metaphors to identify the instabilities and fluidities at the heart of social life, and ones which focus, above all, on the disintegration of modernity's confidence in, and dependence upon, boundaries: boundaries of demarcation, boundaries of defence, boundaries of distinction.

One can identify this broad brushed process at a number of different socio-geographic levels. In the context of the present essay, I will briefly discuss two: migration and the relationship between public and private spaces.

When people move, and when people move on the scale that they have within Europe over the last 50 years, the consequences, both for them and their neighbours – those they have left and those that they encounter along the way – are immense. This kind of mobility is, of course, dislocating; but it also involves relocation. Such population movements shift the balance geo-politically, between the alternatives of inclusion and exclusion, and also phenomenologically, in the experience of everyday life, between permanence and transience. The issue of security is a common thread in these shifts and a common preoccupation. And indeed these changes are not just spatial. Location in space has profound implications for location in time; disturb the first and you disturb the second just as much. Traditions and memories are disrupted as people leave the sites in which those traditions and memories are embedded, and on which they depend for their meaning.

Migration blurs or problematises the boundaries between States, though States, of course, still remain. Migration challenges the claimed certainties of identity and community, though the rhetorics of identity and community still persist, and persist perhaps with increasing intensity – the symbolic, as ever, compensating for material loss.

Mobility has, of course, another location, though one equally significant for any concern with the social, economic and political implications of technological change in this area. Mobility is personal. Individuals move between public and private spaces with new degrees of freedom and new degrees of connectability. The material and symbolic boundaries between public and private spheres and spaces have become fuzzy and in their fuzziness they have become troublesome. From within this framework it is possible to see the connections between issues of privacy and the changing nature of public space.

On the one hand, domestic and individual spaces and times are vulnerable to the intrusion of mediated communications, communications which are seeking to gather information and opportunities for control. Public agendas, those of state and capital, intrude (with or without licence) into the otherwise privileged sanctity of the home. On the other hand public and shared spaces and times, the spaces and times of both crowd and community, are disturbed by the

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increasing freedoms that mobile and portable information and communication technologies have enabled, most significantly in the cities of advanced industrial societies. Such mobilities — the symbolic and the material — have consequences for how we live and how we work; they have implications as much for urban architecture and planning as they do for the psychology and sociology of the individual, the family and the work-place. They inevitably challenge any simple-minded notions of public-ness and private-ness, never mind the public sphere.

Mediation

Mediation is a difficult term. It is used in a number of different senses in the literature on communication, but it is particularly troublesome in translation. In both German and Spanish, for example, the sense proposed in this strictly speaking *media* context is often found to be uncomfortable.

Mediation, as I have defined it elsewhere (Silverstone, 1998; 2002), is a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded. Mediation, as a result, requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies, as well as the meanings that are delivered by them, are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption.

Mediation, then, speaks to the under-constructed nature of the relationship between the social and the symbolic, between texts and technologies, between communication and experience. It requires a focus on the institutional and, broadly speaking, textual work that media, information and communication technologies in their long history have undertaken, but also a focus on the ways in which that work itself is both extended and constrained by otherwise resisting or resistant social formations.

Indeed Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993) uses the notion of mediation to characterise a set of more specific cultural processes crucially involving social movements and their capacity to resist and to negotiate the otherwise singular communications of the mass media:

> … communication began to be seen more as a process of mediations than of media, a question of culture and, therefore, not just a matter of cognition but of re-cognition. The processes of recognition were at the heart of a new methodological approach which enabled us to perceive communication from a quite different perspective, from its 'other' side, namely, reception. This revealed to us the resistances and the varied ways people appropriate media content according to manner of use (p. 2).

The notion of mediation therefore provides a route into a concern with the delicate, but always historically and sociologically specific, ways in which public (and inevitably private) meanings emerge and merge in the socially and culturally contested spaces of everyday life. Such meanings are the product of institutional, collective and personal work in the shared project of constructing significance, legitimacy, identity — those aspects of ourselves which in turn enable or disable action in complex societies. The notion of mediation also allows us to specify the particular characteristics of information and communication technologies, for they (and no other) are the means by which this communicative project is enabled.

As we move, or appear to be moving, into a new communicative age, one marked by the speed, efficiencies and choices released by digitalisation, as well as by the possibilities of new orders of interactivity on the net, these questions of mediation, of their nature, and of their implications will loom increasingly large.

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Reflexivity

There is one further, but crucial dimension of the process of mediation so far left unsatisfactorily implicit. I refer to reflexivity. Anthony Giddens argues that modernity's reflexivity is different from that which constitutes the reflexive monitoring of action intrinsic to all human activity. It refers to "the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge" (Giddens, 1991, 20). As he notes, such information is not incidental to modern institutions but constitutive of them. Ulrich Beck (1992) by and large shares this view in his analysis of risk society.

It is obviously the case that the mass media, and increasingly the latest interactional media, have become not just the sites where such reflexivity takes place, but actually provide the terms under which it becomes possible at all. Information and narration, news and stories, communication on a global as well as a local scale, and eternally intertwined, are in their mass and inter-mediation the key processes at the core of modern societies. Information and communication technologies, institutionalised as the media, are crucial for any understanding of the reflexive capabilities and incapabilities of modernity.

It is this final notion, that of reflexivity, which brings us back to our starting point, comfortably or uncomfortably full circle. For it is in reflexivity, in the process of critical engagement with the world as we find it, that the final blurring of a boundary — that between art and social science — might in turn find its expression. For such reflexivity requires the drawing together of different kinds of imaginative and analytic resources, oriented to the relation between past and present, in the analysis of cause and consequence, and to the relation between present and future, in the expression of potential and possibility.

The under-constructed socio-technical universe requires for its understanding and its transcendence the multiple resources of the analytic and creative imagination. It requires both seriousness and playfulness. And it requires interventions which are adequate to meet the challenge of the tension between innovation and resistance, between the flights of fancy and creativity, on the one hand, and the dragging anchors of established cultures, on the other.

I would like to propose two ways of thinking about this relationship, summarised within the two terms: prototype and counterpoint. Each provides a starting point and perhaps no more than that, for thinking about how this might unfold.

Probe and prototype

Marshall McLuhan, neither social scientist nor artist, nevertheless described his own work (and indeed that of the creative artists whom he saw as being in the vanguard of intellectual life when it came to understanding both media and technology) as a series of probes. Citing A.N. Whitehead, and the latter's refusal of the "insistence of clarity at all costs", McLuhan describes himself as an explorer and an investigator: "I make probes. I have no point of view. I do not stay in one position" (McLuhan, 1967, 10; Stearn, 1967,13). In a letter to Claude Bissell (January 28, 1966), he compares his approach to that of the artist, and to art as having an indispensable function in cognition: " … men without art strongly tend to be automata, or somnambulists, imprisoned in a dream" (Molinaro, 1987, p. 333).

Prototypes are (usually) material transitional objects; objects that bridge between an idea, a design, and an operational and viable technology. Social science does not perhaps produce anything like a prototype, though artists and designers certainly do. Yet the emergence of a prototype marks the significant moment of reality testing. It is where art hits the world of users, of consumers.

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There is a link to be made between the probe and the prototype, insofar as the latter represents a materialisation of the former; a tangible expression of innovative thinking. Both probe and prototype have methodological and substantive significance, yet in some ways it is the former, the methodological, which provides the most important starting point, insofar as it offers the initial opportunity to think through how artists and social scientists might work together. For in questioning the how of aesthetic and sociological (broadly speaking) enquiry, insofar as that question itself becomes a focus of concern — shifting the agenda deeper into epistemology — then the basis of a dialogue becomes possible. And of course it is McLuhan's dialogue that one is after, notwithstanding his own perverse version of it, for his position requires us to address the relation between technological and socio-cultural change as the key one for understanding the world in which we live, and the way it has changed, is changing and, perhaps, will go on changing.

Counterpoint

The second metaphor takes this notion of dialogue one step further. I have begun, elsewhere, to explore the notion of the contrapuntal as a metaphor and a methodology for the analysis of the cultural experience of diasporic minority cultures in relation both to their history and geography, and in relation to the dominating cultures in which they find themselves. In doing this I follow Edward Said (1994), who uses the term less to describe his own identity or experience, and more to provide for a way of reading the imperialist or neo-imperialist written text. The counterpoint signals the plurality, multiplicity, and even the structured inequalities of a text, without insisting on the fusion of elements, nor indeed on their resolution. The contrapuntal text resists synthesis (and the notion of hybridity) and exists in its fullness only by virtue of the relation within it of the multiplicity of voices, whose full meaning only emerges in their constant, and constantly changing, relationship to each other.

The complexity of the contrapuntal relationship may not be visible to the naked eye, just as the listener to a Bach fugue may not realise the particular distinctiveness of the different voices and their formal relationship to each other, hearing either consonance or dissonance (and both can be contrapuntal effects) without a sense of the technology of their materialisation in the music. Yet what emerges is a sense of coherence, and a unity (to put it entirely banally) through difference. What also emerges, both analytically and creatively is also a politics of the text, a politics of dominance and subordination, but one in which the two relations are neither fixed to one or other of the specific voices. Power shifts within the voices of the novel or the musical composition, continually, but (in an ideal world) always creatively.

What kind of counterpoint can we imagine, as artists and social scientists begin to address a common agenda? Perhaps we need to think about how our methodologies, both for enquiry and expression, might in some way engage, playfully or analytically, with the equivalent counterpoint in the relations between technology and social life, and the equivalent counterpoint in the relations between private and public, reveries and spaces. The key would be to refuse attempts at synthesis, to preserve the distinctiveness and the difference of the analytic strategies with both forms of endeavour and to provide accounts of the world which are irreducible to the singularity either of social science or art. This is of course easier said than done, and maybe it can only be worked out in practice, but it ought to be worth pursuing.

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