Visual Media in Culture

A Historical Look at the Present

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As students of the media we should all have a pretty good idea of what the media are, and perhaps we would reach some agreement as to which are the most important of them. But we can hardly say the same about culture, probably one of the most slippery, complex concepts we have. On the question of the role and importance of the media in society, paradigms and schools of thought abound, and there are empirical findings to suit every purpose. A particular bone of contention is the question of the roles visual media and visuality play in the public sphere and in our cultural development. But if we here at the outset keep to the more descriptive and neutral definitions of media, and confine our attention to the principal mass media, we should be able to find a common conceptual starting point. Practically speaking, a medium is a carrier, a messenger (cf. Eriksen 1987:7ff), which conveys a communicative act, be it factual or fictional, be it sophisticated or simple. The medium has a technological component, and thus a range of specific modes of expression which, however, can be formed and used in many different ways. These expressions take part in a dynamic interaction with social, cultural and, ultimately, individual contexts.

As a technological means of conveyance the medium is neither independent nor neutral vis-à-vis the culture it occurs in, but neither is it totally steered by that culture. Raymond Williams (1983:203) describes the historical development of the term, 'medium', from its meaning as mediating subject or agent to modern usage, in which three tendencies coincide: the older meaning just cited; a newer, more technical conception which begins to differentiate between sound, text and image; and a more sociologically inflected meaning, whereby the medium is conceived of as the bearer of certain institutional characteristics and functions, e.g., in relation to the market and the public sphere. The media are tremendously, albeit not altogether unequivocally, important to society and cultural life as a whole, and the public and cultural attention devoted to the significance of the media has grown explosively and exponentially with technological advances and the global reach of the media.

Cultural concern over the strong and rapid growth of the media has often led to linear, causal and deterministic ideas concerning the relationship between the media and culture. But such explanations, which generally tend to accord the media great significance, are problematic. Media have been known to help start major revolutions and processes of fundamental change, but it is also quite clear that the media are formed in the image of the society in which they function and therefore are conditioned by fundamental structures and human needs, which the media only reinforce and afford

new opportunities. The medium as such is not a primus motor or causal agent and should not be looked on with deterministic lenses. Or, as we used to say in my youth: ”The centre of media research lies outside the media.”

Text vs. Image: A Brief Media Typology and Historical Review

Our culture has a fairly long tradition of executing the messenger, or showering medals over him – to paraphrase various dystopian or utopian notions attached to the media. The typical media executionist/pessimist claims that the media are to blame for this or that, for violence and the Demise of Culture. If only television or the telegraph had never been invented, we would all be living in an enlightened democracy, instead of this age of entertainment, where public discourse has decayed into a circus of pseudo-debate and commercial staging (cf. Postman 1982, 1985 i.a.). The typical medal-pinner/media-utopian will, on the other hand, say that it is thanks to the media that we now have everything we ever wanted and are on our way toward a wonderful, multicultural, interactive global media culture where everyone will be on-line with everyone (cf., for example, McLuhan 1964). Like some kind of latter-day, naive utopians, some reception researchers and postmodern media populists have claimed that the receiver is king, and that all this critical nonsense is nothing but stale, old elitist paternalism from a bygone day. Even if both tendencies have filled a mission, it is high time sender and text were rehabilitated.

Once upon a time I, myself, took position on the critical wing. With age, I have become more pragmatic – not only in the everyday sense of the word, but in a philosophical sense, as well. I believe that the truth is concrete, and that media should be studied in use, i.e., in a pragmatic, contextual perspective (which includes both sender and receiver), and I believe that the truth about the media lies somewhere in between the two ideological poles I just described. To put it another way: the media incorporate many tendencies and have many different effects and potentialities, depending on the intentions of the sender, the content and quality of the media, and the context in which they are used. Alongside this pragmatic bent, I still respond to the spirit of Frankfurt and Critical Theory (cf. Bondebjerg 1988, 1993) and I endorse wholeheartedly the indictment of modern relativism and populism Jostein Gripsrud puts forward in his recent book on *Dynasty* (Gripsrud 1995). The ’critical pragmatist’ in me would like to put it this way: It is well and good when we remind ourselves that there are many factors as important as, or more important than the media, and that we recognize that the question of cultural quality must be broached on the basis of a relative and heterogeneous conception of culture. But it is equally important to realize that there are cultural and medial differences and distinctions which we need to be aware of in order not to slide into a fashionable, postmodern ”anything goes”-populism.

We shall return to this point in connection with the cultural aspects of visual media. Let me first, however, before turning to the visual media in particular, say a few more words about the media in general. I imagine we would agree that there are four main types of media, if we use technology, typical format and patterns of use as our definitive variables. There are the *print media*, which can be further differentiated into discrete (one-time) media (books) and periodical or ’serial flow’-media (newspapers, magazines, etc.). There are *auditive media*,

like radio, clearly a flow medium, and music media (records, CDs, tapes, etc.) which carry individual works of the user's choice. There are *visual* and *audio-visual media*, which, again, can be further differentiated into media of single works (e.g., film, photographs, posters) which, while they reach great numbers of people over time, differ from television, which offers a continuous flow of miscellaneous content to a very large, heterogeneous number of people at once. Video affords the individual greater control over his consumption and the flow. Video makes films and television programmes more like books, works. (This can also be acted out symbolically: you can buy cassette-holders camouflaged to look like the backs of books on your shelf.)

To some extent, then, we have defined the conventional mass media, which clearly have different characters; some of us may not count books and films among the mass media inasmuch as they are more closely related to 'works' and the *auteur* concept. Be that as it may, the trend clearly leads away from the mass media: they are on their way to becoming history. The trend is in the direction of *telecommunications and information-technological media*, which have their origin in telephony and computer technology, but have recently taken a turn that has led to a number of entirely new, hybrid forms that transcend all the conventional media categories.

Every self-respecting newspaper now has a high-tech supplement, each more eager than the next to tell us all about the information society of tomorrow. There is no doubt about it, a technological cultural revolution is just around the corner! But, let us keep our heads for the moment and not let technology become an obsession. Clearly, technology opens up new possibilities that will make it increasingly possible to move from a sender-steered media culture toward a more personalized, receiver-steered one. The discussion we have had in recent years concerning the transition in television from a culture of public monopoly to channel-steered competition will be confronted with new challenges of entirely new dimensions. The current debate concerning public broadcasting is in many respects passé; many of its basic premisses will have changed fundamentally when knowledge, entertainment and art can be acquired and consumed more on the basis of individual preference. But, all this represents neither the blazing end, nor the salvation of the planet. What we are talking about is simply a technology which permits the integration of electronic media culture with other sectors of media culture.

It is not uncommon to describe media history in terms of successive transitions from oral culture, via written culture, to a visual culture. Often, this sweeping characterization is coupled with anxieties about the eclipse of enlightenment, the decline of public debate and the progressive decay of democracy. These worries arise out of an ideologized contradiction which has been constructed between writing, rationality and depth on the one hand, and visuality, feeling and superficiality on the other.[1] But this ideological construct hardly corresponds to the real position visuality occupies in our culture, nor to the many different ways visual media and modes of expression function in our society. Visual images can have as much to do with rationality as they do with feeling, and represent structured sequences and narrative genres known in other media as often as they are specifically aesthetic forms of expression. This is becoming even more apparent in the tendencies toward a new electronic culture, where new forms of communication – at once oral, visual and textual – are emerging.

Analyses of the transition from oral to written culture have, of course, provided numerous valuable insights (cf. Ong 1983; Leed 1979 i.a.) and represent, as Leed points out, central cultural metaphors, which recur again and again in cultural discourse: orality related to intimate culture, the written word to the *Öffentlichkeit* of the Enlightenment. But many of the ideas about visual culture as a modern resurrection of medieval oral culture (cf. Lindhardt 1993, i.a.) are more tantalizing than they are accurate. This is not the place to question the wisdom of setting about defining various epochs in our cultural history, where the dominance of oral, written or audiovisual communication is accorded a decisive role. Suffice it to say that there is reason to examine tendencies to generalize about broad, heterogeneous historical epochs and cultures on the basis of a strong preoccupation with the media. After all, all three forms of communication have always existed, albeit, with respect to technology, in widely varying degrees of prominence and reach. Media-fixated characterizations of historical epochs tend to create Garden-of-Eden or serpent-and-apple myths, utopias or dystopias, based on essential, normative conceptions of the nature and cultural character of the media in question.

There is no doubt in my mind that the invention of the printing press and the emergence of the written text formed the basis for a cultural revolution: the book, and print media generally, implied a fundamental democratization of power structures and education. But visual images, too, are part of the culture of books. Therefore, when people speak of the visual media as a revolution of similar magnitude – but often a revolution in a negative sense – and direly predict the demise of books, yea, of literature as a cultural form, I can only think they have lost their sense of proportion. They are victims of their media-fixation. Clearly, the development of images from cave paintings, via paintings on canvas, graphic illustrations in printed works, to the photograph, not to mention motion pictures, really does constitute a medial revolution. Mechanical reproduction and processing of our visual experience in the form of moving images represents a technological quantum jump in our visual perception of the real world, while the images also allow us to see and experience things vicariously, via technology, which we would not have access to otherwise. Meanwhile, cinematography, like all previous visual art forms, affords an opportunity to experiment with visual expression. The simultaneous distribution of cultural expressions in a centralized audiovisual medium (such as the culture of broadcasting) in many respects represents a radicalizing step in the process of democratization which started with the printing press. But this step in the revolutionary process is hardly of the same magnitude as the advent of printing. And it is, for that matter, rather simplistic to equate the sum total of culture with these characterizations, to, for example, label our contemporary culture as a visual culture.

What I see happening at present is a successive *conglomeration* of medial forms of expression, a course of development which, to put it somewhat simply, only enhances and extends our senses and communicative resources. As we all know, the fully functional human body can see, hear, and speak. Sight is closely related both to the written word and language (since the invention of printing) and to all visual processing of the visible world around us. Technology now allows us to capture and store away both sound and image, but this is hardly a revolution to be compared with the invention of an alphabet and then learning to mass produce uses of that alphabet in print.

If we are looking for a really fundamental revolution in our media, and therewith in the relationship between media and culture, we should look elsewhere. The media have served as messengers, but have also meant (as McLuhan pointed out) an extension of our senses. One of the most far-reaching influences the development of mass media has had concerns the relationships between sensory perception, information and time and space and thus the relationship between local, national and global phenomena and between different levels in private and public discourse.

In his book, *The Constitution of Society*, Anthony Giddens (1984) points to this development as modernity's fundamental break with the past when he identifies the differentiation of means of communication from means of transportation as the definitive, revolutionary characteristic of modernity. It is not the development of visual media *per se* which is important, but the electronic revolution whereby radio frequency waves make it possible to break the tie between physical proximity and experience and information, be it in the form of sound, visual images/sight or text. The electronic media and the modern visual media do not primarily present us with entirely new forms of communication, visual or otherwise. On the other hand, they do, of course, open the way for new forms of expression and genres, and new versions of known genres and formats.

The big difference, though, is that the electronic media of sound, sight and text, give our minds access to sights, sounds and sensations without our having to be bodily present. We can move in time and space without leaving our armchairs. Of course, it has always been possible to dream, to imagine, and books and travellers' stories have long expanded our sense of time and space. But, as Giddens and perhaps especially Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) have pointed out, we can now be 'eye-witnesses' to events and see and listen to people, synchronously, in the farthest corners of the world, as though we were there, while the written word is flitting about the globe as hypertext on the vast electronic seas of Internet.

Even in our immediate cultural context it is clear that this transcendence of time and space and the fact that new aspects of the world around us are made audible and visible have had an impact on traditional discourses and norms. For example, the norms that have to do with the distinction between public and private, or to what Erwin Goffman (1974), Giddens and Meyrowitz call "frontstage" or "backstage" behaviour (cf. Bondebjerg 1996a).

Does this transition have anything to do with the proliferation of (audio)visual media? Yes and no. The very fact that reality is made visible and audible gives rise to a concrete and personal sensory experience of distant phenomena in ways which the written word does not, since text has to communicate via arbitrary signs and codes. In the audiovisual media the codes used in interpersonal communication suddenly become central to mass communication: body language, facial expressions, appearance, all the features that characterize the personal, private and perhaps more pre-conscious aspects of the communicative act. But if one now claims that the intimization and privatization of the discourse in television and other previously staid, serious information media is due to the growing influence of audiovisual media, one is ignoring the fact that what these media now are making audible and visible to ever greater numbers of people has existed all along, only in other places, in other contexts and in other forms. As Joshua Meyrowitz (1985: 87) puts it:

> As a shared environment, television tends to include some aspect of every facet of our culture. ... However, there is little that is new about any of the information presented on television; what is new is that formerly segregated information systems are integrated. ... (I)nformation once shared only among people of a certain age, class, religion, sex, profession or other subgroup of the subculture has now been thrown into a public forum.

Meyrowitz and other sociologically oriented media scholars do not analyze forms of visual expression and their particular significance with respect to the viewer's perceptions. Such an analysis must be performed, particularly when one deals with audiovisual fiction, where these aspects definitely merit attention. But the attempts of semiologists to elaborate a visual 'grammar' on a level with linguistic grammar, to identify distinct visual codes, is fraught with some fundamental problems, as modern cognitive theory of images has shown (Messaris 1994). A good share of the importance of visual media and the cultural revolution they have produced is unrelated to the question of a new grammar, since visual media communicate on the basis of correspondence with the reality we preconceive.

Cognitive theory deals with mental processes at a general level and tells us nothing about historical perspectives on visual aesthetics and the different ways images affect us. But there is reason to stress that it is neither the visual mode nor a 'visual language' which gives images their special place in our culture. Sociological analysis offers a partial explanation, pointing out that the revolutionary effects of new visual media lie in their visualization of people and events far removed in time and place from the spectator. Photography started this process, moving pictures extended the repertoire, television made it a pivotal feature of our culture, and now, the new electronic media will, in entirely new ways, make distance in time and place and the distinctions between private and public relations even more fluid.

The Place of Media in Culture: Ritual and Prototype

Meyrowitz' comment brings us straight to the question of media in culture because it raises the question of whether and to what extent the visual media – and perhaps other media as well – in themselves invent new genres of communication. To my way of thinking, tradition and continuity, indeed, even triviality and repetition, are at least as important culturally and aesthetically as breaks with tradition and innovation. The media develop and revamp old forms and genres; they never create entirely new and separate systems of aesthetics and information. Instead, the media gather, interrelate and 'innovate' by creating hybrid forms. What seems to be new is largely based on 'givens' and thus contributes to a feeling of continuous updating, of continuity. It also points in the direction of a very central issue concerning the place of the media in relation to different kinds of culture and the relationship between mainstream and avant garde culture.

In a recent book on television fiction (Bondebjerg 1993) I make a case for a holistic socio-cultural view of the media and media analysis; the media perform functions in relation to what Raymond Williams (1981) calls "a whole way of living". In extension of the cultural studies tradition, I see culture as a process, as everyday culture, as a way of life. That the media have a ritual function in our lives and serve as a symbolic, cultural forum I perceive as central to their function in cultural life. In

short, for the most part they do not create anything new, but rather interrelate and process existing experiences, genres and forms of cultural expression. All our communication is based on genres, prototypes and mental schemas (cf. Höijer 1992, 1992a; Mandler 1994; Bondebjerg 1994) which are not medium-specific. Even if the media impart new information and new sensations, there is also an element of updating and repetition which is needed in order for the communication to be successful.

Anthony Giddens (1984), who writes so much of relevance to a socio-cultural understanding of the media, but, strangely enough, hardly ever mentions them, elaborates his observation regarding time and space to differentiate three dimensions of time:

- the ”durée of day to day experience”
- the life span of the individual (living memory)
- the ”longue durée of institutions” (history).

In my above-mentioned book on television fiction I take this analytical scheme as the basis for an analysis of the ways in which fictional narrative structures on television *cooperate* with the culture, especially when it comes to historical serials. But both in serial fiction (series and serials) and in news analysis one can see how in the production and the reception of television genres there occurs a processing of experience and memories, which relates to such temporal structures and their roots in our culture, conceived of as ”a whole way of living”.

Among the examples I discuss in the book are the American serial, *Holocaust*, Reitz’ counter-serial, *Heimat*, and the Danish television classic, *Matador*. These are classic examples of the ritual and symbolic function. As visual narratives they operate on different dimensions. In *Holocaust*, for example, the melodramatic close-up, a focus on the personal, individual level, dominates. The intimate, fictionalized idyll of the family is contrasted, in shock-cut fashion, with documentary and documentary-like images of the horrors of the era. In *Heimat*, on the other hand, the day-to-day life of the figures is eloquently visualized using overlays of carefully composed, symbolically laden visuals; it is largely through visual detail that Reitz establishes and maintains strong associations between the micro-drama and its historical context. The narrative exploits the interplay between day-to-day experience, life-span and the longue durée of institutions in an extremely sophisticated fashion. In *Matador*, visuals are used to create a limited, highly realistic micro-universe of cozy security in which the events of the era are mirrored, but largely within the framework of the genre conventions and stereotypes of social comedy. The visual component is closely coordinated with other dimensions of communication (music, dialogue), and the visual expression can hardly be isolated from the overall characteristics of the genre, which the visuals are used to create.

Giddens’ observation that routine and iteration play a decisive role with regards to how we function in day-to-day life and for how we relate our experiences and sense of identity over distances of time and space does not relate specifically to media or visuality, but to deeper structures which connect the three dimensions. Not only our social praxis, but the whole of our consciousness is characterized by myriad routines, schemas, etc., which are crucial to the function of social and cultural processes. The ritual function of the media form a part in this, which casts a new light on a feature of the media which is also criticized, viz., their trivial redundancy, use of cliché,

genre conventions and formula drama – instead of innovative creativity. It is no coincidence that narrativity is a basic form of recognition based on familiar patterns (cf. in the cognitive tradition Bondebjerg 1994; Branigan 1992; Mandler 1984), or that metaphors are not only stylistic devices in fiction (cf. Johnson 1987), but are also present in scientific prose, in informal speech and in our cognitive processes. Media production and reception are based on a set of primary, powerful prototypes which recur throughout media history and in the many varieties of aesthetic expression.

The question is whether one can be so rash as Cawelti, who in his book on formula drama (Cawelti 1976) claims that there are no more than a handful of essential formulas in mainstream culture. Exaggeration or not, the observation fits well with the findings of recent research in social and cultural interaction. Repetition, prototypes and ritual play a very central role; in visual media realism and genre products probably account for at least 90 per cent of the content, with avant garde works and radical breaks with convention accounting for the rest. With regard to visual prototypes, one can identify three main aspects of film: the image – reality – the narrative.[2] Building on this typology, most genres might be classified in terms of three columns (Fig. 1).

The point is not that these three prototypes are specific to visual media, but rather the contrary, that they recur in all media. Nor do I mean to suggest that the three tendencies appear in pure forms; they are tendencies which occur in different mixes in real-world products. Nonetheless, most people can, with quite some precision, categorize any given film or television programme in terms of the three categories. When we switch on *Cosby* or *Columbo*, for example, we are well aware that we are on genre narrative turf, and we readily devote ourselves to the conventions of the sit-com or formula mystery. Such narratives may have realistic qualities; on one or another level it is actually practically necessary. But it will not be the same kind of realistic reporting as in the news or a documentary or in realistic fiction produced for the home market or a new wave film of the 1960s. In

Figure 1. Visual Aesthetic Genre Prototypes

Avant garde prototype	Realistic prototype	Genre narrative prototype
Modernism	Psychological realism	Comedy formula Adventure formula
Postmodernism	Sociological realism	Romance formula Mystery formula
	Documentarism Journalism	Melodrama formula Horror formula
Image	Reality	Narrative
Thematic network	Episodic structure	Linear dramaturgy
Symbol	Reference	Stereotype
Transcendence	Recognition	Sensation

(Bondebjerg, 1996)

these latter cases the prime feature is not highly stylized narrative structures designed to give the viewer a sensation, but rather the works' reference to familiar, recognizable reality (cf. Höijer 1992b). Similarly, when Danish director Lars von Trier presents us with occult and bizarre sequences in his parodic hospital series, *Riget*, we know we are on the fringes of the avant garde, albeit a highly intertextual form which makes countless references to formulas and forms of visual expression from both realistic and genre traditions. The sensations and aesthetic patterns which we respond to are more closely related to feelings of transcendence and an intellectual seeking after symbolic traces and networks.[3] No qualitative hierarchy is implied in this typology, nor can one meaningfully compare the quality of the sensory/sensational dimensions within the columns. But one might venture an hypothesis: a visual culture that does not as a whole contain elements from all three columns, or which is extremely skew toward one or another prototype, will leave something to be desired. Both on a collective and an individual level, plurality of prototypes is a quality per se.

Visual Media: Innovation and Quality

Now, it may sound as though I have a very conservative, indifferent idea of aesthetic and cultural development, and that I deny the specificity of visual media. This is not my intent, although I must admit I am sceptical of attempts to define media in essential terms.[4] What I am trying to say is two things: (1) that the media, each on the basis of its own premises and potentialities, all function on the basis of more general communicative, perceptual and cognitive characteristics, and (2) that the various media, by virtue of their respective technological characteristics, have different potentialities in terms of their 'reach' and function in the culture. Clearly, the media are part of a dynamic cultural process fraught with tensions and contradictions, and new media do break new ground. But I object, in the spirit of the pragmatic tradition, to the notion that communication, aesthetics and cultural praxis *primarily* consist of radical innovation. We tend to experience things in terms of clear-cut breaks, we tend to look for new tendencies and trends when we describe historical processes: this is an intellectual, a basic human need. But the inertia and continuity of everyday life and everyday culture is a fact, and a necessary basis for all understanding of the media and everything relating to them.

The most recent example of this unpragmatic penchant for cataclysm is postmodernism, which, in a state of total hubris, has proclaimed the demise of all narrative, the archetypal dramas, and all established perspectives, references and genres. I rather see postmodernism as a chapter in a classic narrative, a chapter which is nearing its end. I do not mean to say that postmodernism and the discussions relating to it have been trivial; I simply say that they rest on the kind of 'radical break with tradition'-thinking which contradicts everything we know about human history and our function as communicative beings. To my way of thinking, postmodernism is primarily a signal, a response to the progressive conglomeration of our cultural forms, the confusion of cultural genres and discourses, which technology makes all the more apparent by bringing them together in a virtual, cultural forum.

In cultural studies there is a tradition of differentiating the concept of culture into various dimensions, which are not absolutely distinct, but constitute forms along a cultural continuum. Terms like institution-

alized culture, everyday culture, subculture, counterculture, hegemonial culture, etc., represent a clearly cultural critical approach. As to form, the media are, of course, mainly part of institutionalized culture, but when we consider their content and reception, we find numerous nuances on other dimensions, which tended to be ignored back in the 1970s. But it is this neglect which Giddens to some extent rectifies with his concept of the routine, and it is what Paddy Scannell is discussing when he analyzes the interplay between the media and structures of everyday life (Scannell 1988) or, more recently, when he argues for abandoning purely ideological and semiotic perspectives on culture for a conception of communication which also includes social interaction (Scannell 1994). He also stresses the intentionality of communicative acts, and thus the natural interaction that exists between sender-text and receiver in practice. The concept of intentionality may be seen as an assault on portions of more recent reception research, which have carried on a polemic against ideological analyses and critical theory. Some reception researchers have adopted the slogan, ”The centre of media research lies outside the media themselves” so to heart that both texts and senders have been totally ignored.

Culture is, as noted earlier, a concept as slippery as wet soap. Be that as it may, most attempts to specify the concept have resulted in either triads or dualisms. Raymond Williams (1981), for example, defines culture in terms of a triad:

- the ideal, i.e., culture in the sense of a stage in a process leading toward human perfection;
- the documentary, i.e., culture as a collection of intellectual and aesthetic artefacts;
- the social, i.e., culture as a way of living, consisting of convictions, values, norms and processes.

This definition involves a certain contradiction. On the one hand, culture is perceived as qualitative and distinctive; art, intellectual production, education and development toward a higher goal, and the institutions associated with this striving, constitute one pole. At the other pole we have culture in the broad sense of a way of living, a mode of existence, and all the mental and practical apparatus of norms, values, schemas, prototypes, routines, etc., that life entails. In the space between these two potentially antagonistic conceptions lie the challenges to the media, to media researchers and intellectuals, as well as public cultural policy and the eternal dilemma of public service media.

Intellectuals and the Media: The Transformation of Culture and the Public Sphere

In his collection of essays, *Towards 2000* – a year no longer distant – Raymond Williams writes:

> In a period of what is certain to be major technical innovation in cultural production and distribution and in information systems of every kind, it will be essential to move beyond old terms. Yet there is now an effective coalition, including not only cultural conservatives but many apparent radicals, who are agreed that the new technologies are a major threat. ... At the same time, however, on quite different bearings, a new class of intellectuals are already occupying and directing the sites of the new cultural and information technologies. (1983:128)

Traditional critical intellectuals, a category which ostensibly includes the subset 'critical media researchers', have been the target of a good share of criticism over the past decade – much of it well-deserved. Charges of elitism and paternalism have hailed over them. A fairly virulent strain of cultural relativism has spread in the wake of Bourdieu's critique of intellectuals as a power-based class who use their cultural capital as a mark of distinction on the market (cf. Skovmand 1988, i.a.), and in the aftermath of the shift in focus to the receiver and the diffuse conception of text and structure associated with reception research and postmodernism. The positive feature in this development is something both a classic critical intellectual like Williams and a postmodernist like François Lyotard have pointed out, viz., a democratization of culture and knowledge as a consequence of mass media in general, and new media technology in particular, and the breaking of prevailing monopolies on education and culture. In this respect we can see the electronic visual media as a direct extension of the Gutenberg revolution. Phenomena like *Oprah Winfrey* and 'reality television'-genres like the British magazine, *999*, together with a new documentary focus on everyday cultural expression, have a characteristic ambivalence. On the one hand, they represent a break with the hegemony of expertise and traditional emphases within the pedagogic tradition of public television, i.e., a democratization. On the other hand, they are expressions of an overall vogue which smacks strongly of commercial populism (Bondebjerg 1996a).

A recent issue of *Media Culture and Society* carried the poignant title, "The Intellectuals Revisited". In that issue Nicholas Garnham (1995) discusses this problem complex and the dilemma of intellectuals. Referring to the classic critical intellectuals, typified by Raymond Williams, Garnham observes that they lived in an ambivalent intellectual discourse. On the one hand, a critical analysis of the media and media products based on universal cultural and aesthetic standards coupled with a pedagogic ambition to train and develop the public's critical faculties. On the other hand, a clear critique of undemocratic, elitist and class-conscious tendencies in the culture which produced those very universal standards. Their stance on public broadcasting is illustrative: in the 1970s they attacked the institution; today, they are prepared to fight for it tooth and nail. In some cases this contradiction was resolved through a dual commitment to an avant garde cultural praxis and critical pedagogics. But the cul-de-sac of the Frankfurt School and their rejection of mainstream culture thwarted any greater democratic optimism. Nonetheless, this position represents a significant historical challenge, a challenge having to do with the affirmation of a general, dialogic, critical and democratic public.

Garnham pokes his finger on a sore spot when he asserts that much of contemporary media and cultural studies amounts to no more than "the observation of the pasing scene" and looks upon their perpetrators as no more than "the boulevardiers of contemporary culture". The fear of appearing elitist should they set out critical, qualitative standards in the name of "a general public" has been fired by postmodern theories, while a fundamentally untenable relativism threatens the legitimacy of the critique itself. Meanwhile, a new cadre of professional intellectuals have entered the media and institutions and are making decisions every day on the basis of more or less tactical assessments of the audience and their needs and preferences. In the face of new media challenges and technologies it is no good to fasten in old positions and conceptions , as

Williams cautioned back in 1983. It is not the media, but ourselves and our prejudices, which are the problem. But as members of the polity, as citizens, intellectuals have a special role to play in the generation of public knowledge, debate and critique. For a number of years now we have, not without reason, been preoccupied with the receiver, which resulted in the demise of a couple of prejudices. Perhaps we should now turn to look at the sender and the text through new lenses, as well.

Notes

1. Bent Fausing has examined this contradiction in several works (e.g. Fausing 1988, 1991, 1995). Fausing takes this dichotomy for the social construct it is, but at the same time uses it as a model for scholarly arguments and analyses in which he describes and defends the sense of sight and visual phenomena as ”the repressed other”. But there, in my opinion, he goes wrong; he positions himself on one side of a false dichotomy and exaggerates certain aspects of the function of visual media. He does so mainly by choosing rather special visual examples which support his theses, whereas he plays down other aspects of images, such as their narrative, informative and documentary functions.
2. In an article from the 1950s André Bazin (1958) defined two types of directors: those who believe in reality and those who believe in the image. My definition of three prototypes was inspired by this thought, but whereas Bazin was engaged in polemics, in defence of a special form of deep-focus aesthetic, the present schematic definition of prototypes is totally neutral and descriptive.
3. I make constant reference to the concept of aesthetic prototypes in my book on televised fiction (Bondebjerg 1993), but without explicit reference to the model used here. The model and the thinking represented in it are, however, elaborated in a forthcoming article in the Swedish journal, *Filmhäftet* (Bondebjerg 1996).
4. As I see it, media-essentialism has tormented discussion of the media, both the scholarly and public discourses. Statements to the effect that books are X, television is Y are inherently futile inasmuch as books or television, or any other medium, for that matter, are so many things. There are good books, bad books, good programmes and bad ones. One might be able to make a case for American television being one thing, and Danish quite another, but media-essentialist generalizations are essentially untenable, even when put forward by scholars like the otherwise so perceptive John Ellis, who in *Visible Fictions* (1982) tends to define film and television as two fundamentally different systems of visual communication.

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