

Canons, orthodoxies, ghosts and dead statues

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In this essay, I shall address the question of monumentalisation in relation to a variety of related processes – those of canonisation, institutionalisation, reification, naturalisation, and the formation of a variety of faken-for-granted wisdoms and common senses. I will do this across several different contexts. First, I will focus on the institutionalisation of academic disciplines with a particular emphasis on Cultural Studies. Secondly, I will concentrate on how we come to understand contemporary processes such as globalisation. The third problem concerns the question of the concept of newness itself, especially with regard to the so-called new media and the transformations that the computer-driven media of the digital age have brought about. Fourth, I will discuss how the idea of the home as a fixed place has been replaced by the idea of the home as a mobile vehicle. In relation to the technologisation of the domestic, I will conclude by illustrating how the principles of scientific management have now been installed within the design of the smart home and prioritise notions of productivity, efficiency and control as central to the idea of how the Good Life should be lived.

ACADEMIC CANONS AND THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THEORETICAL ORTHODOXIES

Let me begin with the question of canonisation in general and in my own field of cultural studies in particular. To pose this question, in one sense already seems anomalous – because in its origins, cultural studies

was defined as an anti-discipline, committed precisely to breaking down established disciplinary boundaries, hierarchies and canons. This was most evident in cultural studies' critique of the classical aesthetic approach to culture, derived from literary studies, which defined only High Culture as worthy of study, and its replacement, by an anthropological definition of culture as 'ordinary' – which thus validated the study of popular culture.

These days, it is easy to forget just how radical that move was and in any case, as we know, cultural studies has been a major success story, growing from a place on the margins of UK academic culture (as the bastard offspring of English and Sociology) to become an internationally recognised discipline in its own right – a global brand which now has its own canon of Great Works and Great Thinkers, enshrined by the publishing industry in a seemingly endless supply of textbooks. These textbooks constantly re-cycle and re-work the canon of cultural studies in ever new permutations, for presentation to audiences of undergraduate students all over the world, now that it has made its own successful Long March through the institutions of the academic world. There are, of course, both gains and losses here. It is certainly true that, in practical terms, cultural studies' institutionalisation was vital to its survival. At the same time, that process has had a high price in intellectual terms, as the critical, interdisciplinary thrust of the enterprise, which was always committed to *provisional* forms of intellectual exploration, originally among postgraduates who had already mastered one of the conventional disciplines, has been blunted by the necessities of teaching it to undergraduates as a fixed body of new wisdoms.

And "therein lies the rub" – in this process of institutionalisation, what had been always provisional has increasingly become fixed; a canon has had to be formed; judgments made about which pieces of work remain worthy of re-reading, long after their original publication; which authors are to be seen as foundational to the cultural studies approach – and crucially, which books, by which writers, the big classes of First Year undergraduates are to be told they absolutely must read.

These days, when I do the first session with our new PhD students at Goldsmiths, I devote myself to deconstructing what they think they know – crucially to deconstructing what I have called elsewhere the "theoretical orthodoxies" which have come to dominate and define the field of cultural studies as it is currently constituted. Of course, the field of cultural studies is no more immune to the vagaries of intellectual fashion than any other discipline and the contents of these dominant orthodoxies change over time. At present, the particular orthodoxies of which our own students need to be disabused include the fixation on ethnography as the only 'respectable' method of enquiry and the corresponding neglect of all other methodological approaches (especially quantitative ones); the

presumption that poststructuralist critiques of essentialism have now enabled the transcendence of all the problems addressed by classical sociology; and the presumption that Foucault's deconstruction of the imbrications of knowledge and power now renders all forms of realist epistemology redundant. However, in a sense, it hardly matters which particular orthodoxies I nominate among this list – my main ambition is simply to get my students to recognise that all intellectual positions are, by definition, provisional and arguable – and to get them to move away from any assumption that it is in the nature of intellectual work that what came later is always better than that which came earlier, as if we were all involved in some steady and irreversible march towards a revealed ultimate truth.

Of course, some of my students then complain that they are confused by my dislodging their certainties – but I reply, quoting a comment relayed to me by Herman Bausinger about his own pedagogic methods, that while, at the end of the course they may still be confused, hopefully they will, by then, be "confused at a higher level."

Naturally, I am not against the formation of canons *per se* – I think that, as long as they remain open to review, they are both inevitable and necessary. Critically evaluative, comparative judgements of the relative worth of different perspectives and analysis is a vital part of intellectual work. To pre-empt a part of my later argument about the new media of our day, one of the greatest difficulties they seem to me to offer is that of information overload – an endless plethora of alternative views and opinions, presented to us in unmediated form, without the intervention of any process of selection or quality control. To be sure, the democracy of access enabled by the web, which allows anyone to publish their views on any subject at all is, in itself, admirable. However, there is a profound downside to this proliferation of an endless array of not necessarily well-informed comment, which could, if perhaps a little unkindly, be understood to amount to a form of digital narcissism among those who simply take pleasure in announcing their views to the world. In this context, it seems to me that the process of evaluative judgement by properly qualified peer audiences, which underlies the process of canonisation, still has an important role to play. To take an example from my own field of audience research, I think that Stuart Hall's paper on "Encoding/Decoding TV Discourse" well deserves the canonical status it has now achieved in the field. At its simplest, it has proved itself seminal, by continuing to provide a theoretical starting point and framework from which subsequent generations of audience researchers have been able to develop their own approaches.

In this context, Michael Gurevitch and Paddy Scannell have rightly argued that the value of Hall's model is principally to be judged with reference to the subsequent body of work which it has spawned and enabled,

as a *seminal* text. Here, in effect, their argument echoes the terms of Harold Bloom's approach to the great texts of the literary tradition, which he argues, are to be judged in terms of what he calls the "anxiety of influence." If Bloom seems an odd figure to whom to turn in this context, given his visceral dislike of cultural studies, I would argue that his own declared political prejudices should not debar us from recognising the acuity of his analysis of how intellectual influence works, not only in literature, but also in other fields. For Bloom, a great writer is not necessarily one who creates *ex nihilo* but rather, one who acutely judges which past work continues to be of value – crucially what *cannot* be cast aside – and thus returns to the key questions and issues set by that previous tradition, to rework them into something which is still new for their own times. In doing so, they also help set the agenda for future work, through their "powers of contamination" on later writers – which, for him is the "pragmatic test for canon formation." Much as the particular content and political trajectory of Hall's work would appal Bloom the Encoding/Decoding model clearly passes that test.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOMS OF GLOBALISATION

Let me now turn to the question of globalisation and the canonical forms of theoretical orthodoxy through which it has now largely come to be understood. Currently, our understanding of the process of globalisation is powerfully informed by a series of linked tropes and metaphors, focussing primarily on the (supposed) instability of our situation. The central concerns of this problematic tend to be Mobility, Fluidity, Flux, Flow, etc – and the principal analytic focus tends to be on processes of De-stabilisation, De-territorialisation and De-materialisation.

Such analyses tend to produce an abstract 'Nomadology' of the Postmodern, or of the 'Liquid Society' which presumes that, in contrast to our place-based predecessors, we [whoever that is] are nowadays somehow all equally mobile nomadic subjects of the techno-terrain of an undifferentiated global hyperspace in which we have, among other things, transcended geography. By way of rationale for the need to develop a new perspective on the situation in which we live, we are often told that we live in an age of unprecedented and revolutionary change. My intention is not to deny that an important set of changes are occurring around us, but simply to query some of the unargued assumptions which undergird this increasingly fashionable, and often taken for granted perspective.

In the first place, we must note that the emerging orthodoxy of both of globalisation and new media studies is characterised by a dangerously a-historical perspective. Here we might usefully bear in mind the American

media scholar, Lynn Spigel's injunction that the more we speak of the future, the more vital it is that we place the present itself in proper historical perspective, if we are not to replicate the conventional process through which all societies, in all ages, have tended to think of their own times as the genuine "New Days" which mark the Millennial Break with the Old World of the past ... or even the "End of History" (*Welcome to the Dreamhouse*). To establish this, we need look no further than the work of scholars such as Stephen Kern and Wolfgang Schivelbusch – which readily demonstrates that the mid and late nineteenth century represented, in comparative terms, a much more rapid period of technological transformation of everyday experience and indeed, comparatively higher rates of change in the speed and extent of patterns of mobility and migration than does the present day.

Secondly, we need to differentiate the argument about how these changes are experienced by people in different sectors of particular societies in distinct geographical locations. That is simply to say that both the "we" and the "nowadays" of the argument about postmodern globalised nomadology need to be rather more carefully specified, if it is to be possible to actually get a grip on what is happening around us, rather than falling into an abstract, a-historical mythology of the techno-global. To put it simply, it is clearly true that contemporary transformations in the speed and reach of both communications and transport technologies do entail significant social and cultural changes. In the classic analysis of postmodernity (as advanced by Frederic Jameson or David Harvey) this was precisely the explanation of the "time-space compression" which they argue to be central to the postmodern experience. The problem is that we do not all experience these transformations in anything like the same way.

It is often assumed that such inequalities are simply local or temporary hitches, which will steadily be ameliorated over time, by improving access to communication (in both its physical and virtual senses) so as to make it more equally distributed both within and between nations. However, there is plenty of evidence that new technologies are re-inscribing old forms of inequality in new guises. In this connection Manuel Castells speaks of the emergence of a '4th World' of information poverty and of new forms of '2-tier' citizenship largely defined by differential access to communications.

Arun Appadurai rightly insists that ours is now a world where "moving images meet de-territorialised viewers [in a] mutual contextualising of motion and mediation" and that the conjunction of mass-mediated events and migratory audiences produces "a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities" in a situation where "migrant workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats and

Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in the mosques of Iran" (Appadurai, 4). In important respects, Appadurai is right about this – but, while migrancy is an important dimension of the contemporary world, not everyone is a migrant, by any means, and most people in most places still live very local lives. To take the case of the UK as one example, most adults still live within 5 miles of where they were born – and the majority of the world's population still has a very narrow and localised sense of the horizons of action within which they can exert any control on the world around them. Moreover, we must distinguish, within ranks of those who are mobile, between the voluntary and involuntary cosmopolitans – i.e. those who exercise control over their mobility and those who have it forced upon them by external circumstances – and thus between the tourists of the globalised world (whose Visa card ratings make them welcome almost anywhere) and the vagabonds whose lack of visas of any sort often makes their various journeys rather more arduous.

CANONISING THE NEW – LATER DAY SAINTS AND GHOSTS OF THE NEW DAYS

In the following I venture to address the question whether there are periods in history which stimulate or facilitate monumentalisation. I want to develop one or two of my earlier passing comments about the nature of the so-called new media of our day – and about their theorisation in the field of New Media Studies or, as some enthusiasts have named it "Media Studies 2.0." On the face of it, one might suppose that, given the emphasis on the newness, flexibility and speed of these new media, the period which they are held to constitute, according to some analyses – would be one which was particularly resistant to monumentalisation. Certainly new media theory is marked by a very strong form of iconoclasm – in so far as we are told by its advocates that, given the radical nature of the transformations affected by the computer-driven media of the digital age, all the insights of conventional media studies are now entirely passé, and we must begin again from the theoretical equivalent of Year 0. From this perspective it seems that the best we can do with the key figures of conventional media studies is to knock them down and move them out of town, to the theoretical equivalent of the Parks of the Dead Statues of the deposed heroes of the Soviet era which one can now visit on the outskirts of places like Budapest. The problem here is that the simple removal, or erasure of such monuments is no way to deal with the past – which, unless dealt with more thoughtfully, will always return, as Derrida so aptly put it, to haunt us, in a variety of ghostly ways. Ironically, the iconoclasm of today's new media theory is accompanied

by a burgeoning process of new monumentalisations, in which a new orthodoxy is rapidly being constructed and some surprising figures from the past – such as the long discredited Marshall McLuhan, are now re-sanctified as the true prophets of the digital age, whose insights, we are told, were so far ahead of their time that only now can their true significance be appreciated. Simultaneously, a new pantheon of media theorists (Lev Manovich, Friedrich Kittler, W. J. Mitchell) is now canonised as representing the best insights into the digital world, with the theoretical foundations of their work guaranteed by the philosophical insights of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose work, even if largely conducted 30 years ago, is somehow seen to have an intrinsic fit with the fluid and non-linear dynamics of today's digital technologies. However, in this context, it is worth recalling not only James Carey's claim that the digital age is perhaps best understood as beginning with the invention of the Telegraph in the 1840s, but also that the "rhetorics of the technological sublime" that now surround the new computerised media, similarly accompanied the invention of the "Victorian Internet," as Tom Standage has described the international telegraph system. The further problem is that so much of the binary division, on which this contrast of old and new media rests, is badly overdrawn. There is, as yet, little sign of the media convergence (in either the realms of production or consumption) which has been so widely trumpeted. The division between analogue and digital media remains rather blurred – and the great expectations of consumer demand for enhanced interactive media services remain, in many places, as yet largely unfulfilled. Moreover, even the newest technologies can be recruited to the most traditional of purposes. There are websites for the conduct of arranged marriages, mobile phone systems designed to ring the faithful to let them know when it is time for prayer – and the most popular website in the UK is one called "Friends Reunited," offering the thoroughly nostalgic and old-fashioned pleasures of putting old school friends back in touch with each other.

The current claims for the specificity of the realm of the interactive media can thus be seen to be woefully exaggerated. Not long ago, I was talking to a young interactive media professional, who referred, in passing, to the contrast between her world and that of the old 'slouchback' media. That very phrase clearly connotes a thoroughly negative image of the passive, morally bankrupt, corrupted audiences of 'couch potatoes' who are then presumed to have characterised that era – an assumption that we know to be false, from many years of audience research. The 'netizens' of the world of the new media then automatically accrue a positive value, by contrast – as they are all presumed to be sitting forward (or, at least, upright) interacting significantly with the new media of their choice. Apart from anything else,

the problem here is that, as we know, a lot of their activity is of a relatively trivial nature. But there is also a further irony here: Notwithstanding all the hype about the interactive dimensions of these new media, at a conceptual level, most new media theory also returns us, ironically enough, to a place we started out from, long ago – to a technologically determinist version of hypodermic media effects. In this vision, these technologies are seen as inevitably transforming both the world around us and our very subjectivities. It is as if the technologies themselves had the magical capacity to make us all active – or in some visions, even to make us all democratic – a strange form of media effects indeed.

Unfortunately, it does seem that the successful installation of the canon of new media theory requires the construction of this false binary between the worlds of the old and the new media, which, among other things, blinds us to their many forms of symbiosis. However, not only is it easy to see that 'newness' is by definition, always a historically relative term, as Carolyn Marvin has noted, but the new heroic figures of the internet age – such as the independent-minded hacker or file-sharer – turn out, on closer examination, to have close historical precedents, such as the experimental 'radio hams' of the early days of that previous technology – and those precedents are, all too often, ignored.

Further, in this Manichean conceptual universe, a more fundamental opposition is implicitly constructed between the fast-changing, rational world of modernity itself and the static, irrational world of traditional society. The problem is that, clearly, much of the speed of the contemporary world is counter-productive – and it is, manifestly, itself a world riddled with irrationalities. Not only is "folk culture alive and well inside the world of technology" as Bausinger has argued, but our own attitude towards most of the technologies we use is not easily distinguished from attitudes to magic in so-called primitive societies. Conversely, traditional societies themselves were never static – as any tradition that fails to adapt itself to changing circumstances will rapidly die out. Furthermore, not only do many of the beliefs of traditional societies turn out, on closer examination, to have a profoundly rational basis (as in the case of primitive gift economies), but our own worlds are often equally involved in ritual behaviours, even if they involve new and shinier fetish objects, such as the mobile phone (which might perhaps be best described as the St Christopher's medallion of our day). To this extent, I would suggest that overcoming this kind of false binarisation/polarisation is the key to developing an analytical model which is adequate to the complexities of our contemporary world, even if this means that we must be a little more careful about the rate at which we pull down the old statues in order to make room for new ones.

CONTEMPORARY DOMESTICITY AND THE DESIGN OF THE HOME: MONUMENT TO VEHICLE

In this concluding section, I want to address the contemporary transformation of the canonical idea of what a home is. The penetration of a whole raft of media technologies into the home has turned it into what Zygmunt Bauman has called a "phantasmagoric space". In the mediated home, the realm of the far (conventionally, the source of the strange and the potentially troubling) has now invaded the realm of the near (the traditional site of privacy and of ontological security). In this process, in which home life is now saturated with media representations of elsewhere, the private sphere is socialised and, at the same time, the public sphere is domesticated, so that the domestic space in which they now mingle is neither public nor private in the conventional sense.

Thus, if conventionally, 'home' has been a fixed, private place of dwelling and retreat, it has gradually been transformed, by the gradual domestication within its walls, of a wide range of broadcasting and communications technologies, which have literally re-invented it as a space for both work and leisure. Naturally, given the profound sensitivities and anxieties associated with the transformation of such a sacred space, this process has had to proceed by stealth, with new technologies often being introduced into the home in the camouflaged form of traditional designs – thus the latest digital TV may well be accommodated in a Shaker-style wooden cabinet, the better to tame such disruptions as it might entail to the sanctity of the domestic world. Even Bill Gates' latest version of the fully wired home is shown in his publicity as enshrined in the most conventional of suburban architectures: a bungalow surrounded by carefully tended lawns.

However, these days, the wiring which connects the private space of the home to the public sphere outside its walls is no longer an optional extra which might or might not be added to the basic fabric of the house, but is increasingly understood as a necessary and constitutive part of what a home is. Indeed, in the era of the digitalised smart home, where virtual access to a wide range of elsewhere is wired into the infrastructure of the building, the home itself can perhaps now best be understood, in Paul Virilio's terms, as the "Last Vehicle", which enables a whole new form of what Raymond Williams in relation to television had originally envisaged as a lifestyle of mobile privatisation. Moreover, the conveniences commonly associated with being at home are no longer necessarily confined to one fixed geographical site. The advent of the mobile phone, which ensures continuing virtual contact with ones familiars wherever one happens to be geographically, provides for its users a flexible, protective cocoon, which functions as the psychic equivalent of a mobile home or gated community.

Which brings me, finally to the question of architecture and the current transformation of its canons – because the arguments I have been tracing have by no means been lost on architects. Conventionally, architecture has been about building fixed physical structures, or monuments – hence its appellation (in metaphorical form) as a frozen music – which transform temporal patterns into spatialised structures. However, recent years have witnessed significant challenges to prevailing notions of architectural durability and monumentality – evidenced by the growth of what has been described as a dematerialised form of architecture. In this process, it is sometimes now said “bits have replaced bricks”, as architects have expanded the range of their building materials to incorporate networked telecommunications, sampled images, auditory environments and cinematic imagery in a new architectural poetics that embraces notions of fluidity, indeterminacy and flux. To this extent, architecture ceases to be monumental, because it is designed in time as much as in space, and changes interactively as a function of its duration. This has given rise to ideas that architecture should now be concerned with the construction of liquid and transmissible forms of *electrostructure* or *datastructure*, as living systems, rather than the creation of durable, static buildings and permanent monuments. This is the basis for the recent trend towards smart or intelligent buildings, whose materials are designed as responsive systems that afford greater convenience to their inhabitants or users.

At the same time, in the field of design studies, a number of people have begun to investigate the ways in which the conventional solutions – of both building and product design – themselves always create problems. In this connection Kenji Kawakami has explored the realm of what he calls the “unuseless”: The objects he designs (which include a portable pedestrian crossing, a fresh air mask and a pair of lawn-mowing sandals) are intended to defamiliarise the taken-for-granted presumptions and unquestioned premises which are literally built into established forms of design, architecture and urban planning, and thus make us think laterally, so as to consider other, previously unthinkable scenarios. In a similar spirit, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio (and others) have explored the construction of deliberately inefficient technologies (such as a domestic light which only stays on if the people in the room keep talking). Their interventions are designed to encourage a heightened sense of the everyday conventions which we take for granted – problematising the normative rhetoric of the design solutions of how to live which are literally built into in architectural spaces (Betsky). Rather than follow Reynier Banham’s classic injunction that the architect should always seek to create a well-tempered environment, in their Blur Building (constructed on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland in 2002) they deliberately created an ill-tempered one. Visitors

to the building were constantly addressed by recorded voices, which spoke an unintelligible language; the building itself was all but invisible, because it was deliberately shrouded in water vapour – which also meant that visitors had to wear raincoats and hoods, even on sunny days. This work may seem merely playful, but the project has very serious intent: By using technology against itself they aim to encourage the development of a public inventory of critical suspicion of the predominant logics of technical innovation which surround us.

These issues can usefully be set in the broader context of concerns with the various ways in which the whole of social life, including now the domestic sphere, is increasingly subordinated to Taylorist principles of scientific management concerned with maximising productivity, efficiency and control. The irony of all this becomes most apparent when we consider the effect of these principles on the latest designs for the smart home (Spigel, “Media Homes”). The latest of these fully interactive homes are constructed so as to encourage us to be continually active – and indeed productive – 24 hours a day. In these homes, lest you should waste time while ambling along the corridor from one room to another, a remote sensor will activate the display screens in the walls, to update you with relevant information of the types which you will have programmed into the home’s central computer.

It seems that the logic of this newly canonised set of scientific design principles, far from producing a well-tempered domestic environment for a restful home life, will mean that in the not too distant future, your fridge may reprimand you (at a gradually increasing volume, until you respond) if you leave its door open. Clearly, leaving the door of a fridge open is a wasteful and inefficient thing to do, but we have to ask whether the solution – being bossed around by your own domestic appliances – might perhaps, over time, create more serious problems than it solves.

CONCLUSION

I leave the reader with that slightly troubling image of the bossy fridge as a way of placing the problem of canonisation, and of the institutionalisation and transformation of convention in its most quotidian setting – the domestic kitchen. If a house is, as someone once said, a machine for living, then, as a technology, its architectural design will (literally) have built into it a particular set of taken-for-granted assumptions – and implicit prescriptions – as to what constitutes the Good Life and how we should live it. Hence, it is also here, among the everyday routines of domestic life, just as much as in the higher realms of Theory, that processes of canon-

formation (and transformation) are in play, which demand our close critical attention.

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