TELEVISION AND THE MYTH OF THE MEDIATED CENTRE:
TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT IN TELEVISION STUDIES?

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> 'The celebrities of media culture are the icons of the present age, the deities of an entertainment society, in which money, looks, fame and success are the ideals and goals of the dreaming billions who inhabit Planet Earth'
> Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (2003: viii)

> 'The many watch the few. The few who are watched are the celebrities . . . Wherever they are from . . . all displayed celebrities put on display the world of celebrities . . . precisely the quality of being watched – by many, and in all corners of the globe. Whatever they speak about when on air, they convey the message of a total way of life. Their life, their way of life . . . In the Synopticon, locals watch the globals [whose] authority . . . is secured by their very remoteness'
> Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998: 53-54)

Introduction

There seems to something like a consensus emerging in television analysis. Increasing attention is being given to what were once marginal themes: celebrity, reality television (including reality game-shows), television spectacles. Two recent books by leading media and cultural commentators have focussed, one explicitly and the other implicitly, on the consequences of the 'supersaturation' of social life with media images and media models (Gitlin, 2001; cf Kellner, 2003), of which celebrity, reality TV and spectacle form a taken-for-granted part. Are we seeing perhaps the mainstreaming in media studies of once radical 'postmodern' claims that media are much more than one production sector among others, and infuse the whole of contemporary life, requiring new forms of social analysis? It is striking certainly, looking further afield, that some of the grandest names of social thought appear to agree on what Zygmunt Bauman calls 'the unique role of the media as the principal vehicle of culture production and distribution' (1992: 31), seeing media as 'that which in general assures and determines the spacing of public space, the very possibility of the *res publica* and the phenomenality of the political' (Derrida, 1994: 51, added emphasis).[1] What is at stake in this apparent consensus?

I personally would not argue with this shift in attention in media studies, if that is what it is. It fits neatly with some of own interests (Couldry, 2003)! But beneath this apparent consensus, I want to argue, there lie concealed some crucial choices – methodological, theoretical and even perhaps political – that need to be made explicit, because a great deal depends on them. The underlying issue, as ever in media and cultural studies, is: how can we maintain a critical distance from our object of study? But here I am not referring to debates about value – I have no interest in taking up a value-position in relation to the quality of contemporary television[2] - but to the possibility of a critical stance towards the wider process of mediation and its enmeshment with power. There is, after all, a paradox: if 'the media'[3] are so total in their fusion with and dominance over everyday private and public life, then how any longer does it make sense to isolate one dimension of the media process, one asymmetry, and call it 'power' (media power), and how does it make sense to call our

possible critical orientation to that power 'politics'? If our starting-point is 'media unlimited' (Gitlin, 2001), from where can we take up a critical stance on that unstoppable flow?

I certainly do want to take up a critical position on the mediation process, by deconstructing a myth that lies at its centre. As a way into this debate, however, I want to analyse the recent important attempt by Douglas Kellner (2003) to develop a critical and politically engaged stance towards contemporary 'media spectacle'. My point will be not to minimise the importance of the timely and detailed analyses Kellner offers of McDonalds, Nike, the OJ Simpson trial and other spectacular media productions, but to argue that, whatever its other virtues, Kellner's explanatory framework is in one respect incomplete, and in a way that undercuts the critical edge of his own analysis. In this way I hope to illustrate what is at stake in the deconstruction later offered of 'the myth of the mediated centre'.

The Myth within the Critique

If we abstract from the details of its analyses, Douglas Kellner's recent *Media Spectacle* takes the theoretical framework of his earlier book *Media Culture* (Kellner, 1995) and enhances it to encapsulate the sheer scale of contemporary media (or rather multi-media) spectacle. So Kellner, following his earlier work, insists that 'media culture' is 'a central organising force in the economy, politics, culture and everyday life' (2003: vii), a force which increasingly flows beyond television and film into computers and the Internet (2003: ix). In this context, media spectacles are not just privileged events in the flow of media culture, but privileged nodes in the flow of social life itself: 'media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution' (2003: 2, added emphasis). In what Kellner wittily calls 'the infotainment society' (2003: 11), media play 'an ever-escalating role in everyday life' (2003: 2, added emphasis), with the medium of television still central: 'the broadcast media appear to be still the most powerful arbiters of social reality . . . TV culture remains the center of contemporary politics and everyday life' (2003: 122 n15, added emphasis).

Kellner draws on Guy Debord's concept of 'the society of the spectacle', although he seeks to distance himself from Debord's implication that the spectacle's dominance is total. Instead he seeks critical and political breathing-space through the claim that there is 'a plurality and heterogeneity of contending spectacles' and 'spectacle itself is a contested terrain' (2003: 11). Media spectacle does not offer one single message, but is rather the privileged forum, he argues, where society's competing positions engage in battle: 'media culture is . . . the stage on which social conflicts unfold and social reality is constructed' (2003: 89, added emphasis). Hence the need for critical interpretation of contemporary spectacles' contradictions for what they reveal about the real conflicts at work in contemporary society (2003: 27-30).

While I admire the energy and scope of Kellner's analyses of specific media spectacles and the links he consistently makes between mainstream narratives (for example of Nike or McDonald's) and protest or resistance narratives, he offers along

the way some dangerous hostages to fortune. These are of three types: methodological, theoretical and political.

Methodologically, Kellner makes in passing some disparaging comments about the audiences of media spectacles which are not necessary for his critical argument and which, in fact, derive from a quite outdated view of what audiences are or do. Although he advocates, rightly, the importance of critical media literacy (2003: 30), his only explanation for the huge audiences for the 1994 OJ Simpson trial is audience weakness:

> . . . the very ability to hook a nation on a single murder trial, despite so many important political and social issues on the agenda, shows the immense significance of media culture and its megaspectacles. The ability to attract vast audiences day after day to follow a murder case is itself a sign of power, as is its ability to create a nation of OJ <u>addicts</u> whose time, energy, <u>and lives</u> were <u>fixated</u> on the spectacle. (2003: 102, added emphases)

There are various problems with this claim: it contradicts Kellner's recognition elsewhere that a great deal else was going on beyond mindless 'addiction' in the ethnically differentiated reactions to the trial (2003: 104); it also undermines his claim (already noted) that media spectacles are the sites where key social <u>values</u> are expressed (if so, why is it 'addiction', rather than say civic engagement, to watch them intensively?); and, finally, its claims about the trial audiences are not based on any detailed evidence about how they watched, only on broad figures of audience levels and market-based opinion polls on attitudes to trial issues. It is puzzling that, in such a critical and politically sensitive analysis, it is the audience that takes on the role of dummy variable.

I said earlier that Kellner did not need to make such loose claims about the OJ Simpson trial audience. The above quotation might suggest the opposite since it appears to claim that the audience's assumed addiction is <u>itself</u> evidence of the very power of media megaspectacles, on which the book's whole argument is built. Why that claim is unnecessary for Kellner's wider argument will only become clear when we have isolated the mythical assumption at that argument's heart.

To get closer to that point, let me turn to Kellner's theoretical hostage. While he draws on a range of theorists (see especially 2003: chapter 1) and while, to be fair, he emphasises that his main aim in this book is not theoretical discussion, but case analysis (2003: 31 n10), the key premises of his theoretical framework are surprisingly old-fashioned: the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (1967) - which he acknowledges (2003: 122 n16) - and the structural functionalism of Edward Shils - not acknowledged, but see Shils (1975). These traditional sources lie at the heart of Kellner's claim that media construct social <u>reality</u> and that media are <u>the centre</u> of social life.

It is important to be clear here about the criticism I am making. The problem is not introducing <u>some</u> notion of social construction, since there is no doubt that media institutions' attempts to construct social reality are powerful and significant. The problem rather is the assumption that those attempts are successful and that media <u>are</u> the centre of social life. To believe that is to believe, first, that social life has such a

thing as a 'centre' and, second, that media are that centre, or at least the privileged route to it. These two beliefs comprise what I will shortly analyse as the myth of the mediated centre. Again, to be clear, the problem with them is not that they don't exist as claims (indeed, as claims, they are central to media institutions' self-image and everyday practice), but that they are just that: claims. They are claims that we must be particularly careful not to reproduce in analysing the rhetoric of contemporary media, precisely because it is on such claims that this rhetoric fundamentally relies. In addition, such claims echo with disturbing precision the theoretical moves of conservative social theorists such as Edwards Shils (1975) who argued unproblematically, following Talcott Parsons, that society does have a centre which is associated with certain shared values and around which the social fabric is woven. We are a long way here, for example, from Stuart Hall's (1977: 340) insistence (when cultural studies was dissociating itself from mainstream social science) that the very notion of 'the social' as a totality is itself a highly political production.

Kellner's third hostage to fortune stems from the implicit political constraints of the second. For if media (and megaspectacles as their most highly developed stagings) really are the centre of social life, then the only way to work for a transformation of social life is through better, more politically engaged forms of spectacle, a possibility which is, in part, enabled by the critical readings of existing spectacles that Kellner offers. As he says: 'a democratic politics of the future must invent a progressive spectacle politics that will further the goals of democracy, justice, human rights, environmental protection, and a progressive agenda' (2003: 177, added emphasis). The worry here is not this idea in itself (clearly it is being acted upon by many groups around the world,[4] most recently and visibly during the globally framed anti-war campaign of January to March 2003), but the implication that there is no other way (or at least no other way worth mentioning in this, the conclusion of Kellner's book) of contesting the power of media spectacle. In this respect, Kellner's position seems less radical than the Situationists whose analysis he evokes, since the Situationist *détournement* was precisely an attempt to reimagine the city in ways that did not rely on spectacle, but thought beyond it.[5]

To summarise, I have been arguing that, quite against the grain of his otherwise laudable dissection of contemporary media spectacle, Kellner builds in some quite conservative assumptions: methodologically (concerning the audiences for those spectacles), theoretically (concerning the way social structure and media's contribution to it is understood) and politically (concerning the range of strategies open for contesting the dominance of media spectacle). None of these problematic assumptions is strictly necessary to Kellner's overall analysis, but each assumption derives, I suggest, from the wider interpretative framework within which he works.

That framework, instead of contesting the idea that there is a social centre and that media are privileged access-points to that centre, further entrenches those assumptions. This is true even, or indeed particularly, at those points where Kellner emphasises resistance to domination, because the very ground for resistance, as he sees it, is framed by the claim (already noted: 2003: 89) that media are 'the stage' where society's differences are contested; this is nothing other than the myth of the mediated centre in its developed form. As a result, Kellner is led, first, to assume that audience practice simply reproduces the apparent social dominance of media spectacle (what if it does not?);[6] second, to assume that media really are society's

centre (but what if we wanted to contest that claim, or, more radically, to contest the very idea that society <u>has</u> such a thing as a central, organising set of meanings?);[7] and, third, to close down unnecessarily the possibilities for contesting the political dominance exercised through media spectacle.

Since I am sympathetic to Kellner's critical aims, my concerns are not with them but with the consistency of the theoretical framework within which he conducts his analysis. I have spent so long in analysing that framework's problems not for their own sake – since Kellner's book remains an important inspiration regardless of them – but because they are symptomatic of the wider problem within media studies that I want to address. The problem, put simply, is that media studies has invested too heavily, and no doubt in many cases unwittingly, in the myths that encircle its object of analysis. This problem is not to be confused with the uncritical populism for which Kellner and many others rightly criticise some versions of cultural studies; it is both more subtle and more fundamental.

Media studies has, in constructing for itself an object of critical analysis, taken for granted precisely the myth of which it should be most critical: the myth of the mediated centre. The issue is not so much 'mediacentrism' - a stick sociologists and others often use to beat media studies with for its supposed exaggeration of the significance of media in contemporary social life – but a misleading, because <u>oversimplifying</u>, formulation of media's relationship to social space as a whole, that takes media's claims to be society's 'centre' at face value.

I will not attempt here a detailed excavation of how the myth of the mediated centre is at work in media studies. Elsewhere, I have argued at length that Dayan and Katz's highly influential account of 'media events' is entirely dependent on that myth's functionalist assumptions (Couldry, 2003: chapter 4), and the same could be argued of much writing on media in the Durkheimian tradition (for example, Real 1989) . The problem however is much wider; another place to look would be recent accounts of celebrity culture which, often, but not always, unwittingly, reproduce as truth media claims that celebrity is <u>the space</u> where contemporary identities are contested and forged.[8] The underlying problem in this latter case is with postmodern media theory itself, which from the beginning (one key source would be Baudrillard's *Simulations*: Baudrillard, 1983) has been derived from a <u>totalising</u> analysis of media's impacts on social space, which is itself mythical, or at least philosophical, in its generality rather than grounded in empirical inquiry (for discussion, see Couldry: 2000: 23-31; 2003: 16-17).

Rather than postmodern theory, it is the more nuanced theoretical position of, for example, Stuart Hall's early but still classic analyses of ideology (for example Hall, 1977) to which we must return. Given that I am proposing not so much a completely new paradigm for media studies, as a return to an earlier more rigorous paradigm, my title's suggestion of a 'paradigm shift' may be an exaggeration. But I hope at least to show that deconstructing the myth of the mediated centre is a significant step forward, not least in grasping the very spectacles to which Kellner rightly gives priority.

Deconstructing the Myth of the Mediated Centre

In his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, published as 'The Order of Discourse' (Foucault, 1981), Foucault analysed a number of ways in which the protean variability of discourse is socially controlled. One of course is direct prohibition, but more interesting are two others: what Foucault calls internal constraints within the discourse and 'the rarefaction of speaking subjects'.

By internal constraints, Foucault means the ways in which a particular discourse is organised around certain principles such as the 'author-function' whereby the uncertainties of a text are reduced by reference to the organising certainty of the author supposedly at its 'centre'(1981: 59). Another internal constraint, which lies behind the author-function, is what Foucault calls 'commentary', which allows endless new discourses about a text but on the condition that the primary unity of the text commented upon is not questioned. As Foucault puts it:

> commentary exorcises the chance element of discourse by giving it its due; it allows us to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is this text itself which is said, and in a sense completed. (1981: 58)

There is no doubt that media narratives are socially significant, but the failure of media studies so often to deconstruct the myth of the mediated centre rests, I suggest, on exactly this sort of constraint, which prevents commentary (whether on television or film texts or on large-scale multi-media spectacles) holding open at the same time the question of how significant those texts actually are within and across the vast social spaces we inhabit. So, as we saw in discussing his treatment of the audience, Kellner's commentary on media spectacles rests on a strange foreshortening of perspective which reduces the audience for spectacle to an inconsequential blur. The result is curious: just as the distribution of media spectacles reaches a global scale, we are encouraged to believe that their embedding in social life becomes ever more intense, and consistently so across national divides.[9]

One thing that gets closed off by 'commentary' (whether within literary or media analysis) is awareness of how within a body of discourse another set of constraints is at work: what Foucault calls the 'rarefaction of speaking subjects'. By this Foucault means the constraints hidden behind the text, which went into framing its very conditions of possibility as a 'text'. As an example, Foucault gives the asymmetry 'between the writer and any other speaking or writing subject' which makes writing (in the sense of authoring) into an intransitive act (1981: 63). No doubt there is a significant difference between the degree of intransitivity of the literary text (which Foucault had in mind here) and the contemporary media text which is generally collectively produced and whose production may, within certain constraints, be open to audience reaction and even adjustment. But the fact there is a significant degree of intransitivity about media production taken overall is surely not in doubt: most media consumers are not media producers. Whether this rarefaction of speaking subjects is benign or not, depends on your point of view, but it is real, and it involves (as my opening quotation from Kellner suggests) 'billions' of people (billions who, as the second quotation from Bauman reminds us, cannot be assumed to be unified by the process).

I am using Foucault's terms here to open up, from another direction, the problem analysed earlier as media studies' failure to think outside 'the myth of the mediated

centre'. That myth is not directly about who speaks and who doesn't. But it is inseparable from a situation, so naturalised that it is more like a landscape, where the range of the media's 'speaking subjects' is limited, or rarified, to a small percentage of those whom media addresses. Legitimating that situation, day in, day out, is the myth that media speak 'for us', that at the root of the social experience of each one of us is a central core for which 'the media' speaks. What if there isn't, and it doesn't?

This is not just an abstract question – if it was, it might not be worth pressing – but a question increasingly at issue in contemporary complex social spaces. Which, after all, is more plausible – that large contemporary social spaces really are increasingly defined by their media, or that the idea that they are so defined is increasingly promoted by media as part of their processes of self-legitimation? Both of course could be true, for example if we assumed that we as social agents have no critical distance from the media's claims of social centrality. But why assume that? Why build the media's starting-assumptions into our own, thereby missing out a crucial stage in the analysis of contemporary media myth: the mythical production of the status of 'the media' themselves, as our 'central' source of truths about the social world. It is this step, I am suggesting, that is crucial in maintaining sufficient critical distance from contemporary media's ritualising force.

To put the emphasis here is not incompatible with ideological readings of the contents of specific media myths, rituals and spectacles (such as Kellner offers), but it is to resituate them within a wider critique of media form. Such a critique owes less to Hall's encoding/decoding model (on which Kellner draws: 2003: 27) and more to Hall's late 1970s analyses of the 'ideology' of 'common sense' (Hall, 1977). One element of common sense ripe for deconstruction is the assumption that the media's claims to colonise social reality are true, rather than themselves ideological. It was precisely ideological analysis of television's underlying forms that Jane Feuer offered in her classic deconstruction of 'liveness' (Feuer, 1983; cf Heath and Skirrow, 1977); or that Brunsdon and Morley offered in their classic analysis of the 1970s British current affairs programme *Nationwide* and its daily reproduction of 'the myth of "the nation, now"' (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978: 87).[10] It is time for television studies reclaim the legacy of such early theoretical work, but with the difference, perhaps, that we must apply it to a social world where the myth of the mediated centre is both more intensely produced and more subtly diffused than before.

Doing without Myth in Media Analysis

Media studies rightly prides itself on being critical of essentialising claims of all sorts, whether in the construction of 'sexuality' or 'feminism' or 'race' or 'politics'. Yet it has fallen prey, I have argued, to an essentialising production right at the heart of the object it studies: they myth of the mediated centre. What would it be like to do media studies without the prop of that myth?

It would mean an analysis that was able to foreground, as one of its principal concerns, the construction of social order in the contemporary world and media institutions' contribution to that construction. It could do so without any functionalist assumptions that there is such a thing as 'social order', or that media's role is to reproduce it. As a starting-point, this is in tune with current trends in social theory and its scepticism about the term 'society', whether at a national or at any level.[11] Far

from ignoring the 'mythical' in contemporary media, it would foreground it, precisely for its constructedness, whether in megaspectacles, or in the everyday myths that media sustain of 'liveness' and 'reality', or (more generally) in the huge range of everyday practices that constitute, or contribute to the creation of, 'media rituals' (Couldry, 2003). In the latter term, I include both such highly dramatised actions such as talk-show confessions and the seeming banality of everyone in a room turning room because a celebrity has just entered. Far from rejecting the legacy of Emile Durkheim and the questions about social order and cohesion that he raised, this approach would insist on the importance of those questions precisely because, as they become ever more complex and differentiated, contemporary societies (if we can still use that term) 'are required by their very dynamics to become increasingly mythical' (Laclau, 1990: 67). The point, in a sense, is to return to Durkheim's questions about how complex societies hold together, but to read his solutions (with their emphasis on the actual <u>achievement</u> of order through shared myths and ceremonies) against the grain; to see the underlying form of contemporary myths, including media myths, as precisely political instruments aimed to '<u>make it possible</u> for there to be a consensus on the meaning of the social world' (Bourdieu, 1991: 166, added emphasis). And so it is precisely 'consensus', for example about such things as celebrity culture, from which we should maintain the greatest critical distance. As Stuart Hall once wrote, 'ideology is, precisely . . . what is most open, apparent, manifest' (1977: 325).

There is always a risk, of course, that in taking myth seriously (for example the myth that media give us access to society's 'reality' that underlies the practice of 'reality TV': Couldry, 2003: chapter 6), one can be accused of reproducing precisely the totalising frame of anlaysis one wanted to undermine. So it is worth emphasising that in conducting mythical or ritual analysis of contemporary media (and doing so outside the legitimating myth of the mediated centre), one is asserting the importance of media myths and rituals as realities, yes, but as real <u>constructions</u>. There is no underlying organising social 'presence' from which they derive their reality, only the continuous material process whereby myths and rituals are produced, circulated and legitimated. The sociologist, Karin Knorr-Cetina (2001: 527-29), offers a useful concept for capturing these totalising constructions without lapsing into the very constructions on which they rely: rather than 'presences', they are best understood as '<u>unfolding structures of absences</u>' which always suggest a totality, but never realise it, because the very idea of totality is itself a mystification. The ideas, or myths, of 'live' or 'real' television, of or celebrity 'revelation', or media spectacle, are not the means through which an underlying social totality is revealed, but rather the unfolding structure through the impossible idea of such a totality is continuously constructed. The most slippery such myth, because it appears to deny its own totalising force, is the idea (noted earlier in discussing Douglas Kellner) that the media are 'the' forum or stage where 'society's differences' are displayed and contested. Through this myth, the underlying 'text' of society is 'in a sense completed' (in Foucault's words: 1981: 58) by the media's imaginary plenitude.

So far I have stayed at the level of generalities, which might suggest that doing media studies without the myth of the mediated centre means a return to high theory. This would be quite misleading, since (and here the metaphor of a paradigm shift is perhaps justified) one major reason for deconstructing that myth is to allow into view whole areas of empirical research which otherwise might either not seem worth doing or remain isolated.

Empirical research which from this new perspective would seem obviously important includes the following:

1. research on the extent to which <u>or not</u> people ('audiences' no longer seems the right word) actually do 'live their lives through immersion' in media spectacles (Kellner, 2003: 102). Two studies leaving the way here are Rob Turnock's (1999) analysis of English viewers of the televised funeral of Princess Diana and Marie Gillespie and others' study of audiences of news coverage of the September 11 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC.

2. research on the extent to which <u>or not</u> people orient themselves towards celebrity narratives, whether for their resonance with questions of personal identity or as sources of commentary on social or political issues. As far as I know, this is an area which has been little developed although as suggested above (note 8) there are a great many assumptions made about people's attitudes towards celebrity culture. But it may be quite misleading to assume that people are unified in their acceptance of celebrity culture and its supposed relevance to their lives. This emerged, unplanned, from research which I and Ana Langer conducted with the British Mass-Observation Archive based on questions put to the Archive's panel which is, admittedly, skewed towards the middle-aged and elderly (Couldry and Langer, forthcoming). We found significant levels of dissent from, and distaste for, celebrity culture among the panel diarists, yet we know very little, if anything, more general about degrees of dissent from such supposedly consensual features of contemporary 'media culture' as celebrity.[12]

3. Research on research on the extent to which <u>or not</u> people do orient themselves towards media narratives. One of the important, if paradoxical, possibilities of digital media convergence is the progressive fragmentation, or at least personalisation, of people's patterns of media use. The digital media age contains many forces by which the dispersed media consumer can be kept under orders, of course, including countless cross-media marketing tie-ins plus the apparently more real but in fact no less constructed frame of 'event TV'. Kellner is surely right to insist that the proliferation of media outlets need not undermine, and indeed might fuel further, the drive towards ever-longer media spectacles; what is uncertain however (and what only studies of what media users actually do can decide) is how people in fact orientate themselves to the pervasive spectacles of today's media.
How, in other words, do people select from the supersaturated media environment on which postmodern theory lays such emphasis? How do the all too obvious constraints of a 'time-famine society' (Robinson and Godbey, 1997: 43) actually limit the extent to which people engage with that environment? The environmental metaphor (which is becoming increasingly popular as a way of capturing the sheer vastness of contemporary symbolic production) doesn't help us, unless we find out more about the trajectories of people across that environment.[13] We may find that people are much more selective than we have generally assumed and than the myth of the mediated centre claims (another reason why we need as researchers to distance ourselves from that myth, rather than hard-wire it into interpretations).

Not only are there, then, new questions to ask and research in depth once we step outside the protective umbrella of the myth of the mediated centre. There are some significant areas of existing media research that have, for a long time, seemed marginal to the central narratives of media studies (invested as those were in the myth of the media as social centre) but which now, precisely because of their prior marginality, look much closer to the 'centre' of a reconfigured media studies – if, that is, we still want to use the word 'centre' (and probably we should not).

I mean, first, the growing field of fan studies and in particular the study of fans' media productions, which in the late 1980s was so marginalised that its authors sometimes felt it necessary to lend their own academic authority to the legitimacy of the practice they were studying, by insisting that they too were fans and fan writers (Jenkins 1992: 6).[14] What is so interesting, and was so inspiring, about the position taken by Henry Jenkins and others was that it was a treatment of popular culture that took the word 'popular' seriously, and refused to operate within the assumption (the media industry's assumption) that fan production is somehow secondary to the primary broadcast text:

> Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides. (Jenkins, 1992: 49)

The result, Jenkins argued, was the possibility through shared creative work for fans to 'find something more than the superficial relationships and shoddy values of consumer culture' (1992: 282-83). Not that work on fandom ignored the real centralising claims of media producers to master the production space of popular culture; on the contrary, that work cast light, as never before, on the forces that operated to police and control the space of cultural production (cf also Bacon-Smith, 1992). But this interpretative move was only possible because researchers into fandom no longer took for granted the myth that production outside the media's industrial production centres was somehow less legitimate because less 'central'. That did not, of course, mean deconstructing the narrative significance of, say, Star Trek, as a narrative or indeed as a media spectacle, since its centre of attention was already displaced elsewhere onto the open-ended productions of fans.

The second field, once marginalised, that now seems central to media research is work on alternative and community media (the classic book is Downing, 2001, the second edition of an earlier 1980s book; important recent studies are Atton, 2002; Meikle, 2002; Rodriguez, 2001). This work operated from the beginning outside the assumption that the only media that mattered were those understood as, or which claimed themselves to be, socially 'central': the broadcast media and mainstream national press. This research was much more open than most media studies to the huge range of media in circulation, including work normally classified as art (see for example Downing 2001: 55-66). Given the challenge to barriers between media, and to false divisions between 'margins' and 'centre' that stem from digitalisation and the opening-up of the Internet as a communication space, it would now seem bizarre to ignore media productions (such as websites) solely on the grounds that they were not part of 'the centre'.[15] Indeed Kellner's analysis of media spectacle is, as already noted, particularly important for its analysis of the critical websites encircling such spectacles. It is important, however, to remember that the recent explosion of research

into web-based media operates outside or (if not, then unwittingly undermines) the myth of the mediated centre, at least as a governing assumption in media studies. What is that 'centre' now?

Towards a Morality of Media

In concluding, I want to suggest one final direction towards which media studies might move, once dislodged from the myth of the mediated centre. This is towards the questions implicit, for example, in work on fans or alternative media, about the moral and political validity of the actual, highly centralised, distribution of symbolic resources which the contemporary media still constitute, notwithstanding the efforts of fan and alternative media producers.

Of course, I have no ready-made answers here, for the whole point is to open up an area where, until now, we have been starved of debate. The morality of media, including the morality of the particular unequal disposition of symbolic resources we call 'the media', has perhaps been the most marginalised topic of media studies. At best, it has surfaced in the stunted form of discussions about the professional ethics of journalists, an area which, important though it is, is only a very small part of the wider debate I have in mind. Postmodern social theory, by building into its framework the most generalised assumptions about the social consequences of our current, highly centralised system of media production and distribution, threatens to silence debate on the morality of the media for ever, by rendering it illegitimate because based on an unreachable standard of objectivity; this is the effect, although reached through very different routes, of the arguments of Baudrillard (1983) and Luhmann (1999). Yet political theorists debate endlessly the justice and appropriateness of the distribution of political resources prevailing in contemporary democracies, often taking up positions (such as those of radical participatory democracy) that are largely at odds with prevailing 'realities' and 'common sense' (for example, Barber, 1984). If then we can have debate into the morality of the distribution of political resources, and if, as most commentators now acknowledge, contemporary politics is profoundly influenced by the media (including the prevailing distribution of media resources), why should we not in media studies debate more openly the moral implications of the latter, not least for politics but also for morality in general?

The underlying question – what structure of communication is most compatible with the governance of complex societies and the well-being of their citizens – is, as Nicholas Garnham recently demonstrated (1999), as old as modernity, but, as it translates into a specific debate about the organisation of contemporary media, and the morality of that organisation, it has been neglected, even silenced. It is time, I suggest, that it is brought centre stage. But it is the myth of the mediated centre that until now has blocked such moral and political questions from teaching the stage, simply by naturalising the current state of things: one more reason to move beyond that myth as we debate new agendas for media studies.

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[1] Cf Beck (1999: 12) who defines 'the peculiarity of the present, and future, globalisation process' in part through the scale of 'regional-global relationship networks and their self-definition through the mass media'; and Bourdieu's comment (1998: 22) that 'we are getting closer and closer to the point where the social world is primarily described – and in a sense prescribed – by television'.

[2] See Ouellette (2002) for a helpful demonstration in the case of US public television of why we should think carefully before making value-judgements.

[3] For the importance of retaining this general phrase, while recognising it precisely as a construction, see Couldry (2000: 6). Cf from a different perspective Gitlin (2001: 7).

[4] Cf Hardt and Negri (2001).

[5] To the extent that Situationism inspired direct spectacular protests (as in May 1968), they were criticised by Baudrillard (1972: 140) for remaining locked within the cycle of media agendas, a criticism which applies also to Kellner's position.

[6] For evidence of 'undisciplined' audience behaviour in relation to one apparently hegemonic media spectacle that Kellner doesn't discuss, the 1997 funeral of Princess Diana, see Turnock (1999).

[7] For just such an argument, see Laclau (1990).

[8] For a version that seems quite self-consciously uncritical, see Lumby (1999); for arguments that unwittingly take an insufficiently critical stance to this myth, see Rojek (2001), Turner et al. (2000). The functionalist roots of much current celebrity debate are exposed for all to see in the much-cited essay by Alberoni (1972): see also Klapp (1960); Shils (1960). For an approach to celebrity which puts more emphasis on questions of power, see Marshall (1997).

[9] See Kellner's footnote 1 on page xiii.

[10] Cf Hall (1981: 242) on how in news photographs 'all history is converted into "today" . . . [and] in the same moment all history is mythified'.

[11] See Beck (1997), Laclau (1990), Urry (2000), and compare Bourdieu's avoidance of the word 'society' in his work.

[12] Another important area for empirical exploration is audience readings of and reflections on 'reality TV': see Annette Hill's pioneering work on British audiences (Hill, 2002).

[13] For two pioneering studies of the distracted ways that people 'use' or rather select from, and think across, media, see Hermes (1995) on magazines and Lembo (2000) on television.

[14] Since fan studies is no longer marginal, such positions, once essential, are themselves becoming open to (sympathetic) deconstruction (see Hills, 2002: introduction).

[15] That is not to say, however, that the question of the audience for 'alternative media' is not important, if neglected (see Downing, forthcoming).