

Editorial

In *Techniques of the Observer* (Crary 1998), Jonathan Crary refers to a contemporary "transformation in the nature of visibility probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from Renaissance perspective" (Crary 1998: 1), a transformation predicated on:

a sweeping reconfiguration of relations between an observing subject and modes of representation that effectively nullifies most of the culturally established meanings of the terms observer and representation ... increasingly the emergent technologies of image production are becoming the dominant models of visualization according to which primary social processes and institutions function. And, of course, they are intertwined with the needs of global information industries and with the expanding requirements of medical, military, and police hierarchies. Most of the historically important functions of the human eye are being supplanted by practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to the position of an observer in a 'real', optically perceived world ... Increasingly, visibility will be situated on a cybernetic and electromagnetic terrain where abstract visual and linguistic elements coincide and are consumed, circulated, and exchanged globally. To comprehend this relentless abstraction of the visual ... many questions would have to be posed and answered ... How is the body, including the observing body, becoming a component of new machines, economies, apparatuses, whether social, libidinal, or technological? In what ways is subjectivity becoming a precarious condition of interface between rationalized systems of exchange and networks of information? (1998: 1-2).

Crary's formulation of the relationship between communication technology and contemporary subjectivity - and more generally with regard to what we can call cultural politics - has been strongly influenced by Guy Debord's notion of the media as spectacle (Debord 1967). For Debord, as for Crary:

Spectacle is not primarily concerned with a looking at images but rather with the construction of conditions that individuate, immobilize, and separate subjects ... In this way attention becomes key to the operation of noncoercive forms of power ... Spectacle is not an optics of power but an architecture. Television and the personal computer ... are methods for the management of attention ... even as they simulate the illusion of choices and 'interactivity' (Crary 1999: 74-5).

From this perspective, the media still calls us up as members of a community held together by normative values and principles, but this act of interpellation is now carried out as an architecture of individuation and isolation. The programs, images and speakers seem to be addressing 'only me': when I am called up by the media, a technological 'entre nous' is brought into being which effectively pulls me out of any social and spatial relationships I have (familial, communal, personal, domestic), and demands that I pay attention to what is being shown (on televisions, computers, film screens) in front of me. In a sense television and other media function like private booths at peep shows; we move into a simulated private space where the show, it promises, is for us and us only, with the presumption that we will reciprocate with our attention.

These technological changes, and the forms of subjectivity, social relations and cultural politics which they have helped constitute, have coincided with the proliferation of (commercial) global media networks, and the concomitant withdrawal of the state from any serious commitment or role with regard to the 'media-as-public-sphere'. This has brought about a significant change both in the ways in which the public sphere is constituted and functions and, as a corollary, to the ability of democracies to keep from becoming 'identified' or co-substantial with different

interest groups (such as the institutions of global capitalism) and their imperatives, logics and discourses. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, refers to commercial television programs (although we can, to some extent, extrapolate and include virtually all the mainstream media in the West) as circuses dominated by the twin constraints of 'time' and 'effect' (Bourdieu 1998). He makes the point that the very limited time available to 'do' a news story, for instance, means that issues are pared back, decontextualised, and explicated in terms of simple binaries (right/wrong, business/unions, men/women, citizens/foreigners); and in a sense the same is true of non-news genres, such as soaps and sit-coms. But news programs provide the best example of this process: stories which are connected to one another only in the sense that they happened at the same time (a famine in Africa, a celebrity divorce, the enactment of government policies) are thrown together in an order which is not so much arbitrary as interest-driven ('Are people tired of hearing about African famines?'), without explanations of contexts or antecedents. Moreover, because each event is dealt with in a minute or so, the explanation of the story has to be punchy and evoke human interest. For instance, a famine might be articulated in terms of the plight of one starving child or family, or a government policy might be reduced to the effects of the policy on a single shopkeeper. And of course once that single child is fed or the shopkeeper's problem solved, the issue effectively 'disappears'.

These twin imperatives of time and effect make it virtually impossible for the mainstream commercial media to say anything that is not sensationalised or simplistic. In fact it really doesn't make sense for them to say anything much at all, which is why television news stories, for instance, are invariably dominated by visuals. A sixty-second description of a massacre, famine, riot or war usually produces an immediate emotional effect. Film of a person being beaten to death, of emaciated babies, of crowds destroying buildings, or of bombs zeroing in on bridges or enemy troops can provoke an immediate, and strong, response (pity, anger, fear, revulsion, elation). But this action of taking the viewer 'into the story' effectively dissolves the story, at least as far as any kind of complex understanding is concerned; viewers can only become involved if they automatically sympathise or empathise with, or fear or hate, the objects of the representation.

In these circumstances the issue of media literacy becomes particularly important. The media has become the most important cultural field for the playing out meanings and explanations of what is happening to and around us; in a sense it constitutes, as far as public sphere activity is concerned, the only game in town. If we are to have a functioning public sphere it will only be because those individuals and groups who wish to contribute to public sphere debates are at least as media literate as the representatives of the field of power.

This is the challenge that confronts media analysts, educators and practitioners in New Zealand and elsewhere. We would like the *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies* to play a role in facilitating the development of media literacy in this country, with regard to theoretical and policy questions; the representation of specifically local and wider global issues; and in terms of the ways the media both inflects and transforms other socio-cultural fields (art, education, fashion, politics and sport, to name a few), and is itself transformed by technological developments and the (often conflicting) imperatives associated with its various functions (to make profits, entertain, educate, inform and act in the public interest).

Bibliography

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