



The Medium Has a New Message: Media and Critical Geography

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Throughout my studies of the place of media within geography, I have repeatedly encountered Doreen Massey's (1992) article "Politics and Space/Time." Massey discusses the concept of space and the term spatial, and the great difficulties faced by geographers in their quest to adequately (and perhaps uniformly) define these important geographical terms while working towards better understandings of space and its inherent properties.

Media is an equally ambiguous term: to Friedrich Kittler (1999) "media determine our situation," to Marshall McLuhan (1964) "the medium is the message" and to Don Mitchell (2000, 66, emphasis in original) people should "take the representations amid which they lived and make *something* out of them." New media critic Lev Manovich (2001) proclaims the obsolescence of the representational image in its traditional sense: since new digital imagery culminates the transition from an indexical basis (film) to a sequential scanning (the DVD, the computer monitor or any remote sensing technologies like radar and satellite imagery), it substitutes for the image proper a processural realization of information in time that appears as a traditional image only for contingent reasons (i.e., because scanning is fast enough to simulate the appearance of a static image). Manovich asks why we still consider a hybrid conception of the image as, at once,

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an analog surface and a digital infrastructure. To come full circle, Manovich, like Massey, questions why, given the disjunction between surface appearance and materiality, we continue to associate a given set of numerical coordinates of information with a visually perceivable form.

In terms of the study of media, critical geography subordinates the image as coordinates of information to the bodily manipulation of that information. As interface or instrument, the image does not comprise a representation of a pre-existent and independent reality, but rather a *means* for the geographer to intervene in the production of the 'real,' which we can understand to be a rendering of spatial data. For geographers, the critical analysis of media accomplishes what Manovich (2001, 100) concludes:

[It] changes our concept of what an image is – because it turns a viewer into an active user. As a result, an illusionistic image is no longer something a subject simply looks at, comparing it with memories of represented reality to judge its reality effect. The image is something the user actively *goes into*, zooming in or clicking on individual parts with the assumption that they contain more information.

The above observations about media provide differing insights into the important implications for our understanding of media today, especially within the context of critical geography. Thus, the authors included in this themed issue have sought to address the challenge posed by media to geographers – that of updating geography's study of media. It is, however, still extremely important to place the landscapes of media into a geographical context, both temporally and culturally, and the papers presented in this issue illustrate the necessity of understanding the cultural landscape within which media images are presented. Of particular interest to this issue of *ACME* and its audience is the manner in which social power and social constructs are shaped by specific locales, such as the spaces of both modern America and the America of the late 1800s, the Paris of 2000, post-apartheid South Africa, and Fascist Italy.

This collection of work presents geographic methodologies that critically explore the content and construction of various forms of media, the contexts of their conception, production, dissemination, consumption and preservation, and, most importantly, how geographers may engage media. In my view, media and its technologies and practices have become so ubiquitous that media is, for all intents and purposes, invisible or *indiscernible* – yet, the authors of these articles make the various forms of media technologies and practices both visible and comprehensible through their ways of geographically contextualizing media representations. Media, in all its forms, is produced and consumed in historically specific and carefully constructed ways and many factors combine to frame how meaning is generated. Thus, media cannot be engaged in isolation from, but rather must be linked in

multiple and complex ways to, other forms of material evidence. Our authors are concerned with media not merely as a visual reflection of the material world but as discrete moments in the production and circulation of cultural meaning. Further, media is not only a technology of meaning construction but, more importantly, it is a technology of information transfer. Media functions as an act of communication. It is a chain of practices and processes by and through which geographical information is gathered, geographical facts are ordered and our imaginative geographies are constructed.

All of the authors presented here engage a form of *visual* media: film, advertising, television, and illustrated religious tracts. This is not to prioritize the visual over the aural or any other sort of sensory-based form of media. It is important for this issue of *ACME* to ‘place’ media into geographic discourse both contextually *and* methodologically and, given geography’s traditional reliance on visuality, this emphasis on the visual perhaps makes the engagement of media geography quite reasonable. John Thorne (2004, 793) makes this apparent:

Visual literacy is an important new skill that geography as a whole needs to embrace for both constructing and deconstructing images. The creation and interpretation of visual images has always been important to geography and is what makes geography unique. It is an exciting time to propose that visual literacy is a common goal of both human and physical geography and that it may act as a common denominator across geography. Common techniques and methodologies are required to both critically understand and to create powerful visual images across the whole discipline of geography.

As the work of the authors in this issue shows, geographic knowledge can be derived from the study of media representations – one of Thorne’s “common techniques and methodologies.” The articles use the fact that media is inherently geovisual to present a critical understanding of these various cultural representations. The authors use critical analysis to contextualize media productions that are presented as universal and thus make visible alternative narratives that allow us to *see* more than we already know. For example, when we ‘see’ the streets of Paris in the movie *La Haine* or the landscapes of South Africa in the SABC television show *Generations*, we gain a deeper understanding of how the affective process works in tandem with geospatial information, thus allowing critical geographers to create a space in which the media representations are transformed from conceptual spaces to actual places. The authors in this issue of *ACME* use, as Thorne advocates, techniques of critical analysis that offer both a creativity and a compositional power of thought through their engagement with the geographies of their respective media representations. The articles show how media geography participates in understanding the formation of new identities and the cultivation of critical responsiveness to new forms of data and information. This

can create a new intensity of affective intra- and inter-subjective relations of engagement with spatial information and data that can, in turn, form more refined layers of conceptual thought and conscious imagination that will lead geographers to a more comprehensive engagement with media datasets.

The authors in this issue use critical analysis to build upon previous geography/media discourses, especially ostensibly objective research on the technologies for observation and classification of media. Their articles allow the reader to better understand the typically modern phenomena of media as technologies of/for value and power. As these articles illustrate, media is an excellent subject for critical studies because geographers can take into consideration their philosophical grounding, their history and their production – considerations that work to great effect in Brent Piepergerdes' discussion of Fascism and Italian neorealist films. Further, the authors here engage media from the perspective of agency and causality, narrative detail, circulation, consumption and impact. They especially focus on the ways geographers might use media to allow their technologies and their critical analyses to intertwine in a useful discourse so that there will be a more fully developed understanding of the spaces, identities and power relations contained within the performances of a particular media form or representation. All of the authors emphasize that using media to think geographically can illuminate issues far beyond the narrative content of the media itself. The constructions and performances with which the authors in this issue are concerned are central elements in the ongoing and increasingly visual encounters between diverse cultures, including engagements with cultural productions and social relations of the past.

The topics chosen by the authors have a particular density of dynamic variation that identifies these topics as sites of interpretative activity. Films such as *La Haine*, *About Schmidt*, and Visconti's *La terra trema*, post-apartheid South African television, Jack Chick's politically-motivated religious tracts, and early 1900s bicycle advertisements all exemplify a full working out of the spatial dynamics within media – dynamics that are themselves part of and dependent upon the broader translation of cultural spaces in our postmodern world. As these articles establish, geographers who engage media believe that it is the spatial elements that give meaning to the experience of the participants and to those concrete spatial elements that form the geographies that give shape to cultural performances within them.

Thus, these articles use the critical study of media to suggest alternative orderings of knowledge. As stated above, critical geography can take media that is presented as natural, universal, or true and analyze it so that alternative narratives, based on geography, become visible. For instance, some authors in this volume explore and explain the bond between media culture and nationalism or gender relations. These explorations and explanations help us understand the motivations

of media producers to prioritize history by enmeshing the media consumer in systems of visibility and normalization. Jason Dittmer's exploration of the religious tracts of Jack Chick and Chris Dando's investigation of how bicycle advertising contributed to the mobility of women are examples of how geographers can gain a better understanding of how dominant classes set themselves and their icons up as examples to recognize and follow – a theme central to critical geographers. We can then understand the political interests underlying the production of these cultural representations by using critical analysis to study their transparency: as several authors in this issue note, artistic quality mattered less than the faithful representation of the achiever or, conversely, the complete subversion of the achiever and their attempts to resist the reinforcement of gender, sexual, and racial stereotypes. The authors also engage the role of the consumer in their articles: understanding production comes first, followed by the perception it guides, a theme especially made clear in Kevin McHugh's study of the film *About Schmidt* and Sarah Ives's investigation of South African television production and consumption. By privileging a critical reading of these various media datasets (and the others found in this issue of *ACME*), the authors provide an understanding of what until now has largely been considered indiscernible. Media changes meaning as the environment changes, so the function of its characteristics in relation to social processes can be the purveyor of a specific relationship to the body. The inherent characteristics located within the media form can instill emotional comfort or distancing, confinement, intimacy, or threat. However, it can also, as a cognitive mode of understanding, provide Thorne's critical 'visual literacy' skills that are needed for grasping the complexities of the (post)modern world. Through these articles we hope that geographers will gain a deeper appreciation of different paths of exploration offered through an engagement of media in a variety of temporal and cultural forms.

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