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Domesticating Dislocation in a World of “New” Technology

It is now a commonplace that the networks of electronic communication in which we live are transforming our senses of locality and community—and in this context it has been argued that we need to develop a “politics of dislocation” that is concerned with the new modalities of belonging that are emerging around us.¹ The issue I focus on, in this connection, is what all this does to the relation between the media and the domestic sphere—conventionally the place of belonging, *par excellence*.

Now the home is less and less a self-enclosed space, and more and more, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued, a “phantasmagoric” place—as electronic means of communication allow the radical intrusion of “the realm of the far” into the “realm of the near.”² The media thus produce a psychic effect that we might describe as that of the “domestication of elsewhere”—a process whereby Hollywood brings images of the streets of the global cities to everyone, without their ever having been there. The media certainly provide us all with a secondhand sense of the “global familiar,” but we should remember that, whatever range of imagery they may be familiar with, for most viewers their “horizons of action,” as well as their actual experience of geographical mobility, may still be very limited

(here we might think of the very low statistics for internal mobility within the United Kingdom or, on a larger scale, of the very low percentage of U.S. citizens who have ever left the United States).

Following the lead provided by Franco Moretti's work on the geographical determination of narrative possibilities in literary fiction,³ I am concerned with the ways in which particular geographies systematically produce different types of events; returning to Foucault's insistence that our analyses must be sensitive to both the "grand strategies of geopolitics" and the "little tactics of the habitat," I want to address how the processes of globalization and domestication are intertwined, in these respects.⁴

In pursuing these questions, I want to return, via Lynn Spigel's work, to Raymond Williams's concept of "mobile privatization," as a way of understanding what she calls the "simultaneous rise of the mass produced suburb" and the place called "televisionland."⁵ Spigel notes that, in the North American context at least, we can usefully understand the genealogy of ideas about domesticity, in a media-saturated world, as developing through various phases, in the postwar period—to the point where we now see the model of the digitalized "smart house" (of which, more later) offering a "sentient space" which, we are told, so thoroughly transcends the divisions of the public and the private as to make it unnecessary to actually go anywhere any more. In its digitalized form, the home itself can thus be seen, in Virilio's terms, as the "last vehicle," where comfort, safety, and stability can happily coexist with the possibility of instantaneous, digitalized flight to elsewhere.⁶

Developments such as these all readily lend themselves to a technoutopian narrative. As domestic and private spaces are increasingly connected and overlapping with public spaces around the world, it is all too easy to believe that geography and history are being transcended. Yet, in what follows, I hope to demonstrate that it is both true that huge changes are happening—reconfiguring the domestic and the public and their relations at galloping speed and in a huge variety of ways—and that the particular dislocations and deterritorializations involved are still deeply enmeshed with the complexities and vicissitudes of geography and history. In these circumstances, only further attention to specific instances can enable us to map the precise nature of these phenomena.

The End of Geography?

In relation to the claims made by many about the transformative effects of the new technologies of our time, we would be wise to exercise what Ulf Hannerz once called some "unexciting caution."⁷ The contrast

between the old world of what has come to be known, in some quarters as the "slouchback media," and the exciting new world in which we all sit upright, busily doing things with our mouses and remote controls, is surely overdrawn. We know full well that media consumers of the past were never simply passive—and that much of the activity of the users of the new media is often of a relatively trivial nature.

Among their other effects, the new digital technologies have been trumpeted as heralding the ultimate "death" of geography. One striking example of this is the growth of the telephone call centers—based in India—which, because of their combination of a low-wage economy and a high level of indigenous English language skills, now handle a lot of the customer services calls for a variety of British businesses. The workers in these call centers are carefully trained to present to their callers a highly developed form of virtual Britishness. This involves them operating on British time, for the convenience of their callers; and keeping up to date with British news programs, soap operas, and weather reports, the better to engage their callers in sympathetic conversation about "local" conditions, and to disguise the cultural differences between the two geographical locations. However, it would be quite wrong to interpret these call centers as instances of the deterritorialization of culture. They may not be on British soil, but they are not just anywhere—they are located where they are because of the history of the British empire, which left behind in India the particular combination of a low-wage economy and high indigenous English language skills. The supposedly "deterritorialized" geography of our postmodern era is, I want to suggest, much more legible if one reads it as a set of secondary (or "shadow") geographies created through the history of imperialism.

Despite dissimulations of the kind practiced in these call centers, even cyberspace still has a very real geography—as can readily be seen by consulting a map showing the density of net connections per square mile in different parts of the world. Moreover, as research in the "Globalized Society" project, based in Copenhagen, has shown, "Where are you?" is (still) one of the most insistent questions in Internet "chat rooms," and questions like "Where do you live?"—or, more technically, "Where are you Mooing from?"—are posed so frequently as to suggest a continuing desire to "reterritorialize" the uncertainty of location inherent in online worlds.⁸ In parallel with my comments earlier on Indian call centers operating on British time, the Copenhagen researchers found many examples of what they call the "taken-for-grantedness of America, as place and culture, on the Net" so that, in effect, America (and American time) still

provides the perceptual horizon of the "online real." Despite arguments that the advent of broadcast TV means that "we" (whoever that is) now live in a "Generalized Elsewhere" where we have, according to McKenzie Wark, neither roots nor origins, only aeriels and terminals,⁹ I want to argue that the geographical locations that we inhabit still have very real consequences for our possibilities of knowledge and action.

Futurology, Periodization, and History

Let me now turn to questions of futurology. There is a long history of visions of how technical advances in communications—from the telegraph, to the telephone, to the Internet—will somehow lead to "better understanding." The telegraph—or the "Victorian Internet," as it as recently been redescribed¹⁰—was heralded as ushering in an era of world peace, for this very reason. Such utopian visions not only mistake technical improvements in modes of communication for the growth of understanding in human affairs, but can also be seen to represent backward-looking forms of nostalgia, for technological fixes for the loss of the idealized communities of a lamented Golden Age.

If we are to avoid the twin dangers of utopianism and nostalgia here, we need some way of placing these debates in historical perspective—which brings us to the question of periodization. We certainly have some guidelines to work with here. John Ellis rightly pointed to the necessity of distinguishing, in the realm of television broadcasting, between what he calls the "age of scarcity," the "age of availability," and the current "age of plenty and uncertainty" (as we move into a multichannel broadcast environment, replete with remote controls, time shift videos, and audience fragmentation).¹¹

To take the case of the domestication of television, alongside Spigel's work on the United States, Tim O'Sullivan in the United Kingdom, and Shunya Yoshimi in Japan, have investigated the symbolic role played by the acquisition of TV in the development of postwar consumer cultures.¹² Just as Yoshimi points to the significance of the TV—along with the washing machine and the refrigerator as the "Three Sacred Things" in the symbolic repertoire of Japanese consumer culture in this period, one of O'Sullivan's respondents, looking back on the United Kingdom in the 1950s, remembers that "when a house had got a TV aerial and a car—then you could say they would have really 'arrived.'"

However, the dynamics in play, in the entry of TV and other media to the home, are complicated, as we know. Moreover, even the very latest technologies can always be domesticated—to suit traditional purposes.

The most popular Web site in the United Kingdom is now "Friends Re-United," which allows people to find friends from their schooldays, and Turkish migrants in Europe have now set up Web sites for the purpose of facilitating arranged marriages. Clearly any conception of a static realm of "tradition," which is then transformed by new technologies, will be unhelpful here. What we need, rather, is a conception of how "mobile" traditions incorporate new technologies, as they develop.

Some time ago now Maud Lavin argued that we needed to develop what she called the "intimate histories" of living with a medium such as broadcast television. This she described as involving "how the TV set (has been) gradually incorporated into the home . . . and . . . how we design our spaces, habits and even (our) emotions, around the TV."¹³ This is also a question of how our personal memories are formulated around media experiences. In this respect we might usefully draw a parallel with Gaston Bachelard's analysis of how the material structure of the house provides the "trellis" on which childhood memory is woven—but perhaps we now need to extend the analogy, to think of how that "trellis" now has a mediated, as much as a material, structure.¹⁴

The long history of television's domestication—and of its journey from its initial position as a singular "stranger," allowed only into the most public/formal space of the living room, and [the story of] its gradual multiplication and penetration of the more intimate spaces of our homes—has now to be complemented by the story of the latest personal media delivery systems, which, in their portable and miniaturized forms, might more properly be conceptualized as "body parts." The domestic history of TV is by no means singular, in this respect. Eliseo Veron and his colleagues in France have detailed the similar pathway traced by the journey of the phone in the household, as it gradually multiplied and moved from the public space of hallway, into the other rooms of the house.¹⁵ To jump forward for a moment, when we come to the era of the mobile (or "cell") phone, not only is the phone entirely personalized—and often understood by its users as just as much a "body part" as their wristwatch—but it often becomes, in effect, its user's virtual address, the new embodiment of their sense of home.

In an earlier moment, Simon Frith rightly pointed to the historical role of broadcasting technologies, in enhancing what he called the "pleasures of the hearth."¹⁶ He describes this process as having led to the "rediscovery of the home" as a site for domestic leisure activities. The contemporary issue is what the emergence of both the new forms of public media and the personalized communications technologies now do, to correspondingly destabilize the centrality of the domestic home. The problem here is to

understand how new and old media now coexist in symbiotic forms, and how to better grasp the ways in which we live with them.

The Mediated Forms of Fetisbism

Clearly, in trying to understand how we live and work with technologies, the last thing we should do is to imagine they are desired, and used simply for their functional purposes. Everything that the anthropology of material consumption tells us points to the fact that, beyond their practical uses, communications technologies also function as powerful totems and fetishes for their users. This is to insist on the importance of the symbolic meanings, as much as the practical functions, of technology. Here we might do well to remember Ondina Leal's work on the symbolic meanings of the TV set as a signifier of modernity in the Brazilian *favelas*.¹⁷ Conversely, we might recall the firm grasp of this point displayed by the Taliban government in Afghanistan, when they hung TVs from the trees, as a potent symbol of the unwanted Westernization of their country. However, this is by no means only a matter of strange cultural practices in "exotic" places. The purchase of one of the High Definition TV sets advertised in the United Kingdom under the slogan "the less you watch, the higher your standards," signifies, whether or not it is switched on, key things about its owner, as a discriminating consumer.

In the same way, the mobile/cell phone's particular style (plain, silver, unadorned and business-like; or with customized fascia and David Beckham pendant)—or its personalized electronic "ringtone"—already communicates the particular cultural identity that its owner has chosen for him or herself, and also functions as a powerful signifier of its owner's degree of social "connexity." Zygmunt Bauman argues that, in the symbolic logic of the current period of "Liquid Modernity," "fluidity is (now) the principal source of strength . . . it is now the smaller, the lighter, the more portable that signifies improvement and 'progress.'"¹⁸ One good example of this would be the British TV advertisement about the "sad" mobile phone, which cannot be taken out any more, because it embarrasses its owner by being too big and clumsy in appearance.

New Mobilities

Mobilities, of various sorts, are clearly central to our analysis here. In this context, the extended family has now sometimes to be seen as stretched out across the long distance phone wires, especially for

migrants, who often spend a high proportion of their wages on phone calls home. These new international phone networks now allow people not just to keep in touch, but to contribute to decision making processes and to actively participate in the familial life of multisite households, from a distance.¹⁹

All of this points to the ways in which people have adapted to the capacities that new technologies offer them to effectively “be” in two places at once. As Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy argue, in their study of Turkish migrants in London, this ability to oscillate between places is now, for many migrants, no more than a banal fact of their everyday lives—as they routinely move back and forward, at different points in the same day, between British and Turkish TV channels, local, face to face conversations and long distance phone calls to distant friends or relatives. Thus, twisting Raymond Williams’s phrase, Aksoy and Robins insist that we must recognize that, for many people, it is now transnational culture that is “ordinary,” at least in its mediated forms.²⁰

However, new technologies are not only relevant to the lives of migrant families. The research of Jan English-Lueck and James Freeman, on “doing family in Silicon Valley” offers a picture of a situation where the new modes of electronic communication have become the very infrastructure of family life.²¹ This, they argue, is especially so among busy, middle-class “dual career” families, living tightly scheduled lives, in which parents have to balance the continually conflicting demands of work and family. In this situation, the issue of which parent is to pick up which child from which place at what time, from their after-school activity club, is negotiated daily by the participants, on the move, by mobile phone, pager, and email. When they get home, the children may reel off their activities for the next day, while the parents dutifully enter them in their palm pilots, checking problems with the scheduling of their other appointments as they go, and promising their children to page them confirmation of their “pick up” point and time by midafternoon of the next day. This is a world in which virtual parenting now has to carry some part of the burden of childcare—and where being in electronic contact with a child (welcoming them home with a text message, hoping that they have “had a good day”) is what good parenting is now about.

As we know, for all its continuing ideological centrality, the nuclear family household is declining rapidly in the West, under the impact of demographic change. It may not be possible (or even, ultimately, important) to work out which is the chicken and which is the egg here, but we

have to develop a mode of analysis that can articulate these changes in household demographics with the rapid growth of “personalized” media delivery systems. Certainly, in the United Kingdom, the “multiscreen” household is now the norm, and this does affect household life in profound ways. Many people have pointed toward evidence of the internal fragmentation of the home—such as the trend towards the serial “grazing” of microwave meals by individual family members, which has replaced the shared “family meal” in many households. One might also argue that a technology such as the Walkman is intrinsically solipsistic—or, in Stephen Bayley’s phrase, a “sod-you” machine, for switching off unwanted interaction with others.²²

The question of the contemporary fragmentation—and individualization—of both audiences and the media technologies that service them, is evidently central here.

Domesticating the Future

Let me now turn back to the question of the future, which is now defined so much in technological terms. If the future represents, for many people, a troublesome realm, much of this “trouble” comes to be symbolized by—and in—technological forms. The issue then, is how this realm comes to be “naturalized” and domesticated, so as to make it more manageable for its inhabitants. Many years ago Herman Bausinger spoke of how the everyday was coming to be characterized by what he called the “inconspicuous omnipresence of the technical.”²³ If an increasing array of technologies has now become naturalized, to the point of literal—or psychological—invisibility in the domestic sphere, we need to understand the process of how that has come about.

However, it is not just a question of how people come to feel “at home” with the technologies in their houses. In the case of the Californians I referred to earlier, I argued that the technologies they used to coordinate their activities had, in effect, become the infrastructure of their lives. With the advent of the “Electronic Dreamhouse”—whether in the earlier versions that Spigel has described in the 1950s and 60s, or in Bill Gates’s own “fully-wired” domestic paradise, as described by Fiona Allon, we arrive at a new situation where, rather than electronic technologies being domesticated, the domestic realm itself is now thoroughly mediated. In this vision of the household, the technologies are no longer merely supplementary to, but rather, constitutive of what the home now is.²⁴

From Domestication to Dislocation?

Thus far, in my narrative, I have focused on the story of the gradual domestication of the media, and I have taken the “smart house” as the culmination of this story, where the home itself is then defined by the technologies that constitute it. However, perhaps we now face the beginning of a quite different story, where the narrative drive runs in the opposite direction, toward the dedomestication of the media and the dislocation of domesticity.

As Yoshimi has demonstrated, in relation to Japan, in many countries, TV began as a public medium, which only gradually moved into the home.²⁵ However, increasingly, TV has now reescaped from the confines of domesticity. Nowadays, we find TV everywhere—in bars, in restaurants, in laundromats, in shops and airports, as Anna McCarthy, has documented in her study of “ambient television.”²⁶ Public space is increasingly colonized by advertising discourses and commercial messages. In this context, the old distinction between those who are part of the media audience and those who are not, may be quite outmoded—we are all now, in effect, audiences to some kind of media, almost everywhere, almost all the time.

However, there is yet another dimension to this problem. If, as I argued earlier, the Walkman is a technology that allows its users to “privatize” public space, then the mobile/cell phone is perhaps the privatizing or “individualizing” technology, par excellence. Evidently, one of the things that this technology does is to “dislocate” the idea of home, enabling the user, in the words of one advertising campaign, to “take your network with you, wherever you go.” However, like the Walkman, it also insulates its users from the geographical place where they actually are. Often the user is paying no attention to those who are physically close to them, while speaking to others who are far away. To that extent, it might also be argued that the mobile/cell phone often functions not only as a psychic cocoon for its user, but even as a kind of mobile “gated community.”

It is usually taken for granted that these phones are principally devices for transcending spatial distance, but just as we know that a large percentage of the world’s e-mail is sent between people working in the same building, the mobile/cell phone is also often used in counterintuitive ways—not so much to transcend space as to establish parallel communications networks in the same space (for instance, as in the use of clandestine text messaging by UK school pupils). As we know, the mobile/cell phone call disrupts the public sphere, in a variety of ways and it has been fascinating to see the ways in which this issue has given rise to a whole new

set of debates about the "etiquette" of communications. However, more is at stake here than just a question of etiquette.

The mobile/cell phone has also been described as enabling the emergence of an even more "mobile" descendent of the *flaneur*—the "*phonneur*."²⁷ But just as I noted earlier, in relation to internet chat rooms, the first question in many mobile conversations is often "Where are you?" (Answer: "I'm on the train/stuck in a traffic jam. . . I'll be a bit late"). It seems that geography is not, in fact dead at all—and that one of the things that this technology delivers is, in fact, endless anxious commentary on our geographical locations and trajectories. Perhaps we might even say that these phones are, among other things, devices for dealing with the problems of distance created by our newly mobile lifestyles—and with the emotional "disconnectedness" that that geographical distance often symbolizes for us.²⁸

In this connection Timo Kopomaa argues that the mobile phone has now acquired a particularly important place in contemporary culture, as, for many people, their portable magic charm—the device that "makes everything alright."²⁹ To take one banal—but nonetheless significant—measure of the mobile phone's symbolic significance in contemporary British culture, it is worth noting that by 1999 the mobile phone had replaced the umbrella, as the single item most frequently left behind on London Underground trains. This is particularly interesting, as there was certainly, at that time, no effective network connection on most of the Underground—so these phones were lost by people who had felt compelled to have them to hand, even when they could not actually use them for any practical purpose, save perhaps, playing rudimentary games.³⁰

To pose matters more theoretically, the geographer Yi Fu-Tuan distinguishes between "conversation" (the substantive discussion of events and issues—a discourse of the "cosmos") and "talk" (the phatic exchange of gossip, principally designed to maintain group solidarity, which Tuan calls a "discourse of the hearth").³¹ Drawing on Tuan's distinction, John Tomlinson argues that the discourse of most "mobile conversation" can be characterized as a form of phatic—or gestural—communication,³² which is principally concerned with the maintenance of networks of interpersonal contact, rather than with the exchange of significant dialogue. In these terms, one of the things that the mobile/cell phone does is to fill the space of the public sphere with the discourse of the hearth, allowing us to take our symbolic homes with us wherever we go, just like a tortoise in its shell. To this extent, Tomlinson argues, we would be mistaken to regard these new technologies as tools for the extending of cultural horizons.

Rather, he claims, we should see them as “imperfect instruments, by which people try . . . to maintain some sense of security (and) . . . location, amidst a culture of flow and deterritorialization.”³³ We now find ourselves in a world where we are all audiences to one or another medium, almost all of the time, and where, after the long process of its “domestication,” TV and other media have now escaped the home—to (re)colonize the public sphere, in new ways. And if the domestic home is now becoming an increasingly technological artifact, it also seems that domesticity itself has now been “dislocated”—or perhaps, as I suggested earlier, “embodied” in a range of newly mobile technologies. In this context, as we wander the public realm, protected by the carapaces of our Walkmen and mobile phones, it may be a good moment to re-pose Heidegger’s question about what it means to live in a culture of “distancelessness” and to ask again, where we are now, and where are we going?³⁴

Notes

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