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## Passing ethnographies: rethinking the sites of agency and reflexivity in a mediated world

### Book section

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**PASSING ETHNOGRAPHIES: RETHINKING THE SITES OF AGENCY  
AND REFLEXIVITY IN A MEDIATED WORLD**

**[BOOK CHAPTER PUBLISHED IN P. MURPHY AND M. KRAIDY (EDS)  
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*Introduction*

The problem of ethnography has cast a long shadow over the practice of media and cultural studies. The disputes concerning the ethics and epistemological coherence of fieldwork that split anthropology in the 1980s seem to have transferred some of their force to recent debates about how we can study media audiences across the world. It would, however, be a mistake to discuss the epistemology of the media audience as if the audience researcher carried a pale version of the colonialist's historical burden, although the rhetoric of some attacks on audience research suggest this (Hartley, 1987 and 1996; Nightingale, 1996). For that would obscure a more interesting question, whose significance stretches well beyond media analysis: what kind of 'location-work' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997b: 5) will enable us to address the locational complexity which characterises all social and cultural phenomena today, not least those marked by the multi-directional flows of media images?

Even when stripped of its colonial connotations, ethnography's fiction of 'being there' – 'there' where the systematic order of a wider culture is 'revealed' to a sensitive observer – remains problematic. But its problem can now be seen as a problem for conducting any research in today's dispersed, mediated societies. Put simply: how do

we conceive of the order, or system, at work in today's world, and where do we need to be to grasp it better? We can formulate this in more specific ways, for example, as the question of how, and from exactly where, can we track the movements which all our lives as self-reflexive agents in such societies entail, and the movements across our lives of media flows from countless sources?<sup>1</sup> Or, recalling Donna Haraway's (1991) provocative term from an earlier, rather different, epistemological crisis: how can we produce 'situated knowledge' of mediation's place in the lives of others and ourselves?

The study of media, then, is entangled with the problem of ethnography, but in interesting ways that transcend old debates on the colonial encounter. The issue of complexity, and how to study it, affects all branches of the social sciences and humanities that are attempting to give accounts of what goes on 'inside' today's 'cultures' (both sets of scare quotes being necessary). It is a matter of grasping, first, as I have said, the complexity of 'order' and 'space', but also the complexity of agency and reflexivity, so we can produce more satisfactory accounts of what 'subject' and 'object' of ethnography share. Both, after all, are self-conscious agents (Cohen, 1994), who are highly mobile, living and reflecting across many different sites. I want to argue that the situated analysis of mediation's place in our lives has resonances for today's reconceptualisation of ethnography in general (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a; Marcus, 1998), and in particular the shift towards an ethnography that is '*places-* rather than *place-focused*' (Marcus, 1998: 50).

This chapter will approach these difficult issues in three stages. The first section will review the critique of 'culture' within anthropology and the ways beyond this critique

that have recently suggested a different mode of cultural analysis. The second section will explore how that general debate about ‘culture’ plays out when we think specifically about mediated culture and media uses: what contribution can media analysis make to an ethnography of ‘places’ within a wider analysis of cultural complexity (here, I suggest, anthropology and media and cultural studies are partners, not rivals)? The third section will review the method of my own empirical research which was at least a partial attempt to address these issues. The chapter will, in these various ways, flesh out its title’s metaphor of ‘passing ethnographies’.

*Disappearance of the Ethnographic Agent?*

The implication of the apparently innocent object of research – ‘cultures’ – in the practices which comprised, and in some respects still continue, colonialism is well-known. As Lila Abu-Lughod has put it:

culture is the essential tool for making other . . . anthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident.

(Abu-Lughod, 1991: 143, added emphasis)

And not just that: applied to ‘ourselves’, a belief in a distinctive, shared culture is the touchstone of nationalism in all its, often disturbing, forms, even if the evidence for what it is we share with our compatriots is often problematic or absent (Schudson, 1994). For some writers, a shared national ‘culture’ is always the projection of a mythical unity (Bhabha, 1994; Zizek, 1990), desired but never possible.

To say this, however, is only to pose a problem, not to resolve anything. What happens when we attempt to study cultural processes without relying on the notion of ‘cultures’ - that is, stable, coherent, localised ‘units’ of cultural analysis? What are the implications for the practice and theory of ethnography, when both its object (a distant ‘culture’) and its subject (the agent who moves with privileged status outside his/her own ‘culture’ to study another) disappear, at least in their familiar forms?

There are no straightforward answers but to move forward we need to draw, for example, on the new model of cultural processes and flows developed by Ulf Hannerz (see Couldry, 2000b, chapter 5 for more detail). The reasons for this can be seen best, if we briefly recall the old model of culture that must be superseded. The older model pictures the space of culture primarily in terms of a series of separate ‘cultures’, with the interactions between them being of secondary importance. Each ‘culture’ is understood as a natural unit: coherent (so that hybrid cultures are an exceptional case), and associated with a particular shared place and time.

Paradoxically, that older model on which classical anthropology depended was formulated most clearly by its anthropologist critics. As Ulf Hannerz puts it, it is ‘the idea of culture as something shared, in the sense of homogeneously distributed in society’ (1992: 11, added emphasis). This holistic model (with its ‘fiction of the whole’: Marcus, 1998: 33) is supported by various metaphors which James Clifford did much to excavate. There is the organic metaphor of culture as growth, ‘a coherent body that lives and dies’, or alternatively survives, provided it remains uncontaminated by outside influences (1988: 235, 338). Closely linked with growth is

the metaphor of place, an issue which will be particularly important in the rest of this chapter. Just as every body occupies one, discrete place, so too from the point of view of the old notion of culture the ‘place’ of culture is the site where its reality is lived, the focus where all the possible lines of diversity in a culture intersect in a unity (Auge, 1995: 58). They intersect there, so that they can be ‘read’, a third metaphor: ‘culture as text’ (ibid.: 49-50), a text with finite boundaries.

These metaphors are problematic not least because they exclude others: metaphors emphasising the connections between multiple cultural sites, the uncertainty of cultural boundaries, in a sense therefore the opaqueness, not the transparency, of culture. The old metaphors encourage us to look for less complexity in cultural phenomena, when we should be prepared to look for more.

The old holistic model of culture has, however, been extremely influential not only in anthropology, but also in sociology (it was at the root of functionalist models of social integration, such as Talcott Parsons’) and cultural studies, where its influence on Raymond Williams’ (1958) early account of culture as a way of life is obvious. Yet it is clearly inadequate to deal with a world of complex flows of people, images, information and goods, in which local culture everywhere incorporates ‘transculturality’ (Welsch, 1999), and we live in ‘imagined worlds’ that are complex amalgams of elements from all over the world (Appadurai, 1990). In this context, the idea of culture as necessarily tied to a place can be seen for what it always was: an assumption. We must look for cultural processes in different places, or (better) through imagining a different relation of cultural production to place and space. If we do, then new spaces and new mobilities come into view: Paul Gilroy (1992) has

famously argued for the study of the Black Atlantic (a space of passage between nations), Marc Auge (1995) has argued for the study of ‘nonplaces’, the ‘cultures’ of ordinary places of transit, such as airports, tourist zones, and there are many other examples which could be given.

Here, though, a further difficulty with the old metaphors must be addressed, which results from debates in spatial theory, rather than anthropology. If ‘culture’ has been deconstructed as a simple object, so too has ‘place’. No place, argues Doreen Massey (1997), is reducible to a simple narrative, a coherent set of meanings. Places are points where many influences, operating on many different scales (up to and including the global), intersect. Instead of a traditional notion of ‘place’ as bounded locality, we need ‘a global sense of the local’ (1997: 240). In every place, multiple scales of connection are overlaid.

Once we complicate our idea of how culture is embedded in place, then we must question our assumption that cultures have a simple relation to time. We must for example, as Homi Bhabha has argued, raise ‘the essential question of the representation of the nation as [itself] a temporal process’ (1994: 142): national ‘culture’ cannot be reduced to a simple object describable as it exists at one point in time. Material processes for constructing past, present and future are wrapped up in our sense of the national ‘present’. We have to challenge what Charlotte Brunson and David Morley called ‘the myth of “the nation, now”’ (1978: 27). And the problem of time applies to other descriptive terms as well, including those that try to capture the open-ended process of the self, at which point the dimensions of space and time become entangled. Quasi-spatial language for describing the self (such as

‘subject-positions’) is problematic, precisely because it closes off the self’s reflexive processes in time (Battaglia, 1999: 117; Couldry, 1996: 327).

The result of all these moves is not to divorce our notion of cultural production and cultural experience entirely from space, place or time. Rather we need a more complex notion of that relation. The question is too complex to resolve in a few pages, but one initial consequence is clear: the dissolution of that apparently innocent methodological presumption, the ethnographic ‘present’, present ‘there’ in ‘the field’ where the ethnographic agent is based.<sup>2</sup>

To take these thoughts a stage further, I want to draw specifically on Ulf Hannerz’s work on cultural space in his important book *Cultural Complexity* (1992). ‘Complex societies’ according to Hannerz are distinctive in a number of ways. Most relevant here is the fact that their meanings have to be distributed to that society’s members, who are dispersed across space. There is no reason to assume that distribution is even. On the contrary, ‘in a society where the cultural flow is varied and uneven, it is an open question which meanings have reached where and when’ (Hannerz, 1992: 81). But people are not monads taking inputs from the wider culture in isolation from everyone else; they are also engaged in making sense of other people’s meanings and interpretations (1992: 14). This adds a second layer of complexity to the distribution of meanings, which cannot be simply extrapolated from the first: a dimension of reflexivity which itself is a material process that takes place here, and not there.

The idea of cultural ‘holism’ – that cultures comprise principally the meanings that people share – is thus untenable. As Hannerz puts it:



we must recognize the real intricacy of the flow of meaning in social life. As each individual engages in his [sic] own continuous interpreting of the forms surrounding him, how can we take for granted that he comes to the same result as the next fellow [sic]? There is nothing automatic about cultural sharing. Its accomplishment must rather be seen as problematic. (1992: 44)

Put another way, our idea of cultures as large-scale structures has to take account of the 'local' complexity of agents' reflexivity about culture, not just academics' reflexivity of course, but the reflexivity of every agent they study. Everywhere processes of agency and reflexivity intersect. Given the resulting complexity, ethnography's situated knowledge can no longer be based on the ethnographer's movement (or lack of it) perfectly tracking culture's movement (or lack of it). The intersection between 'ethnography' and 'culture' is necessarily more partial than that: it takes the form of passing ethnographies, that yield, we hope, knowledge under particular conditions.

Accepting partiality in this sense (at the level of guiding metaphor) does not mean renouncing claims to generalisable knowledge, as I explain below. But it does mean thinking about generality from a starting-point that takes complexity seriously. There is no reason any more to suppress or reduce the complexity all around us. Lives are stretched across many sites and many roles, without necessarily cohering into a unity; communities are not tied to a single nation-state, but are informed by the experience of moving between many. We must take seriously 'identities that resist classification' (Kearney, 1995: 558), which of course may mean working at odds with the

definitional strategies of states or markets. We don't know, and certainly can't assume, that people accept the market-led identities that are prepared for them, which means that we must take seriously people's journey's across cultural space, whether they are voluntary or involuntary. Culture, in short, emerges 'on a differently configured spatial canvas' (Marcus, 1995: 98) where the connections between sites matter as much, and sometimes more, than the sites of imagined closure (the village, the city, the nation-state, or even the globe).

The nature of this methodological shift has been brought out well by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in her (1993) book on her time spent with the Meratus Dayak people from the mountainous forest regions of south-east Kalimantan in Indonesia. They are in various ways managed and marginalised by the central Indonesian Government, but at the same time engage in a complex set of negotiations of their identity with many 'centres', not just Jakarta, but more locally, and globally. Tsing found there were no 'villages' to study, but rather a shifting network of cultural dialogues across scattered populations. Her own practice – as reflexive ethnographic agent – involved ceaseless movement as well. In a powerful passage, Tsing describes how her own movements across cultural space made irrelevant the attempt to reduce that space to a closed cultural order:

As I involved myself with a network that stretched across the mountains, I moved increasingly further from structural models of local stability and came to recognize the open-ended dialogues that formed and reformed Meratus culture and history. My own shifting positioning made me especially alert to continual negotiations of

local 'community', to the importance of far-flung as well as local ties . . . a culture that cannot be tied to a place cannot be analytically stopped in time.

(Tsing, 1993: 66)

I want now to explore what this means specifically for the analysis of mediated cultures.

### *Analysing our Mediated Lives*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing expresses very clearly that existing notions of how cultural analysis fits with reality are inadequate. Tsing was, however, in one respect writing still in a classic ethnographic situation, one that was not intensely mediated.

Mediation, as communication which crosses contexts and borders in pervasive and regular ways, changes the boundaries of the ethnographic situation, just as it changes the boundaries of the political situation, the family situation, and the educational situation (Meyrowitz, 1985). The consequences of this for ethnographic practice have only recently been explored.

Lila Abu-Lughod, whose subtle work on television audiences in Egypt has been important here, has recently argued that television is in fact central to ethnographic practice today. Television often provides a ready-made link between ethnographers and their subjects (1999: 111), of a sort that earlier ethnographers in 'strange' countries could never call upon. More than that, television - as its genres, styles and knowledges and often, of course, specific programmes too) cross the world - has reconfigured the cultural space which ethnographers need to cross. As a result,

Clifford Geertz's famous methodological tool of 'thick description' (which Abu-Lughod endorses) 'needs some creative stretching to fit mass-mediated lives' (1999: 111). This raises a question: where exactly is the entry-point for ethnography in studying 'the significance of television's existence as a ubiquitous presence in [people's] lives and imaginaries'? (1999: 111). Or, more bluntly: thick descriptions of what?

On the face of it, there is common ground between anthropology and the significant tradition of situated qualitative research in media sociology since the mid 1980s. It is unfortunate therefore that Abu-Lughod undermines this ground through a very partial account of media sociology. She takes no account of the methodological debates in audience research about the difficulties of fully contextualising research into audience practices in the home (Morley and Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1991); this makes unfair her criticism of certain texts (such as Silverstone, 1994) which never purport to offer fresh ethnographic work themselves. Her analysis seems designed to create the space for anthropology 'proper' to do fully contextualised research into media consumption, as if for the first time. There are two problems with this position, in addition to its very partial account of the work already done in audience research: first, it operates within a rather polarised view of the boundaries between anthropological work and media and cultural studies, which is no longer helpful (cf Thomas, 1999); secondly, it implicitly makes a claim for methodological advances in Abu-Lughod's own work which seem rather exaggerated. Her analysis in the same chapter of audiences and producers of the Egyptian television drama *Mothers in the House of Love* is certainly suggestive in detail and it is a 'mobile ethnography' (Abu-Lughod, 1999: 122) in the limited sense that the ethnographer

moves between locations, asking questions. But it provides no account, for example, of the mobility of the people it studies, of how people's interpretations of the serial might change as they interpret it in different contexts, or of how media themselves might affect the circulation of interpretations in significant ways. While Abu-Lughod's recognition of mediation's centrality to ethnographic method is welcome, we need, I suggest, to turn elsewhere to clarify exactly how that relationship should work.

An important advance is represented by George Marcus's essay 'The Use of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork' (1999). This is a thoroughgoing rethinking of what 'thick description' can mean in today's complex cultural spaces. Marcus abandons the idea that what is feasible or desirable in fieldwork is 'rapport', that is, a close fit between the ethnographer's and her/his interlocutor's understandings of the world, achieved within the confines of the ethnographic situation. Instead of 'rapport' as the 'foundational commonplace of fieldwork' (1999: 87), Marcus develops the notion of 'complicity', which emphasises not the knowledge, so much as the questioning and curiosity, that ethnographer and interlocutor share.<sup>3</sup>

Marcus' first characterisation of this 'complicity' is as 'an awareness of existential doubleness on the part of *both* anthropologist and subject; this derives from having a sense of being *here* where major transformations are under way that are tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere*, but not having a certainty or authoritative representation of what those connections are' (Marcus, 1999: 97, original emphasis). The result of this uncertainty may be anxiety (1999: 98), as well as a shared sense of

questioning that extends far beyond the dilemmas of the (post-)colonial encounter. Indeed, the uncertainty which the interlocutor feels is not the product of being approached by the ethnographer at all; it is a pre-existing condition of any self-reflexive life in a world of complex cultural flows and influences. It is this self-reflexiveness and uncertainty within everyday life that the ethnographer has to reflect in her or his accounts.

The result, Marcus argues, is to change the focus of fieldwork itself:

Only when an outsider begins to relate to a subject also concerned with outsideness in everyday life can these expressions [of anxiety] be given focal importance in a localized fieldwork that, in turn, inevitably pushes the entire research programme of the single ethnographic project into the challenges and promises of a multisited space and trajectory – a trajectory that encourages the ethnographer literally to move to other sites that are powerfully registered in the local knowledge of an originating locus of fieldwork.

(Marcus, 1999: 99)

What the two figures in the ethnographic ‘situation’ share, then, is ‘an affinity’, based on their ‘mutual curiosity and anxiety about their relationship to a “third”’ – that is, to the sites elsewhere that affect, or even determine, their experiences and knowledges here (1999: 101). When the anthropologist travels, she is not therefore doing something exclusive to the (still generally privileged) position of the anthropologist, but instead she is materializing a concern with external determinations that is shared

with her interlocutor. This, at least, is the intriguing alternative metaphor for fieldwork that Marcus offers.

It is a powerful analysis because it takes seriously the mobile reflexivity and agency of both ethnographer and interlocutor; and because it emphasises that the ethnographer's discourse must be adequate to the doubts and uncertainties already lived by the interlocutor (cf Battaglia, 1999: 115). Complexity and uncertainty, in other words, are not just an academic projection onto the world, but already woven into the fabric of everyday life, part of what situated knowledge must capture. Crucially, however, Marcus' analysis emphasises not only doubt, but knowledge. Ethnographer and interlocutor are perplexed precisely because they both want to know something that holds true beyond their own partial situation. A romanticisation of the purely local is not Marcus' point, nor could that satisfactorily reflect our attempts to make sense of a complex, largely opaque world (hence the failure of visions of anthropology based on avoiding 'representation' entirely, such as Tyler (1986)). We try, even if we often fail, to make sense of our location in 'places [that are] simultaneously and complexly connected, by intended and unintended consequences' (Marcus, 1998: 551). Ethnography must aim to do no less.

While this new conception of ethnography has roots going back for example to Hannerz's early work on our dispersed lives in the modern city (1980), that long predate recent concerns with mediation in anthropology, it is peculiarly apposite to today's concern with the media's role in our lives. The media operate as a 'third' space within our lives, both close and distant, and whether we are ethnographers or

not - a paradox which Raymond Williams expressed better than anyone, when he described modern communications as:

a form of unevenly shared consciousness of persistently external events. It is what appears to happen, in these powerfully transmitted and mediated ways, in a world within which we have no other perceptible connections but we feel is at once central and marginal to our lives.

(Williams, 1973: 295-96, added emphasis)

Media provide common contexts, language and reference-points for use in local situations, even though media production takes place outside most localities and its narratives cut across them from the outside. The frameworks within which we reflect on ourselves and others are shared with others, because they have a common source in media flows, and yet those frameworks are never entirely 'ours'; we can grasp them alternately as 'inside' or 'outside'. Indeed 'complicity' (in Marcus' sense – of a shared awareness of the importance to us as agents of the external forces that act upon and across us) may be a useful metaphor precisely for the ways in which city life itself has been changed by mediation. As Nestor Garcia Canclini has put it:

Since . . . even the accidents that happened the previous day in our own city reach us through the media, these [the media] become the dominant constituents of the 'public' meaning of the city . . . More than an absolute substitution of urban life by the audiovisual media, I perceive a *game of echoes*. The commercial advertising and political slogans that we see on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others. To this circularity of the



communicational and the urban are subordinated the testimonies of history and the public meaning constructed in longtime [sic] experiences.

(Garcia Canclini, 1995: 210, 212, original emphasis)

The media, in other words, by providing so many shared resources through which we can (and in a sense must) frame the social world, change the terms on which we can offer individual testimony as well. Our sense of public history has already been displaced before we can articulate our personal place within it. If so, media's implications for ethnography go well beyond the problems of studying the immediate viewing situation in the living-room.

We need an ethnography that adequately reflects the complexity of how media flows together produce the mediation of our social life (cf Martin-Barbero, 1993). At the very least, this requires a methodology that recognises the stretched-out nature of that process of mediation: encompassing not only the stereotypical site of media consumption (the home), but also the countless other sites where media circulate (the street, the shop, the office, the bar, and so on), the sites of media production (the studio, the live event), and those hybrid sites where audience members travel to see the process of production close up.

Before I explore some of these possibilities in more detail, let me make one broader point which explains why studying such complexity in the mediated landscape is more than academic self-indulgence. 'Ethnography' - seen in Marcus' terms, as a commitment to grasp the situated reflexivity of actual agents - is part of what elsewhere I have called the 'principle of accountability' in cultural research (Couldry,

2000b: chapter 6). Quite simply: the language and theoretical framework with which we analyse others should always be consistent with, or accountable to, the language and theoretical framework with which we would hope to analyse ourselves. And, equally, in reverse: the language and theoretical framework with which we analyse ourselves should always be accountable to the language and theoretical framework with which we analyse others.

The reversability of the principle is crucial: it is this that prevents us from falling into a spiral of endless self-interrogation, never to resurface! There must be a dialectic between the way we think about others and the way we think about ourselves; what we say about one must reflect what we know about the complexities of the other. Put another way:

- every attempt to speak in one's own name is tied to an obligation to listen to the voices of others; and
- every attempt to describe others must allow them the complexity of voice that one requires to be acknowledged in oneself.

Deliberately here I am combining ethical issues with methodological ones. The methodological challenge to grasp the real complexity of 'cultures' only has force because we in turn recognise the ethical obligation to listen to (multiple) others. In our commitment to account for how we think about self and others, methodology and ethics converge. We cannot, as analysts, safely turn our backs on the complexity which mediated cultures display.

*Passing Ethnography, or Notes on an Emergent Method*

I want now to reflect in some detail on my own attempt to research aspects of mediated culture in *The Place of Media Power* (Couldry, 2000a). The strategies I adopted and their limitations are, I would suggest, relevant to the wider questions – of the role of ethnography in media sociology, and the development of ethnography generally – which this chapter has tried to address.

My starting-points, long before I formulated my exact research strategy, were, first, a commitment to the underlying principle of audience research as practised by David Morley and others – that is, a commitment to the empirical study of how actual people put media texts to use in their lives – but, second, a concern about whether detailed study of how particular texts are interpreted in particular contexts can answer the question that, in Britain at least, audience research was designed to address: the role of media in the legitimisation of wider power structures and inequalities.<sup>4</sup> There is a gap between the ambitions of audience research and its actual achievements, given the limitations which it initially imposed upon itself. None of which means that media are without social impacts, only that there is a question about the best entry-point for analysing them (I agree with Lila Abu-Lughod to this extent).

I tried to answer that question in my research through two moves (this, perhaps, is to give more order retrospectively to my strategy than it had at the time). First, I had the hunch (later developed as a theory: Couldry, 2000a, chapter 3) that one way to research the media's social impacts was to look at how media institutions and media people are thought about: what, in other words, are our beliefs about media power and

how do they contribute to the usual legitimization of that power? My research therefore aimed to find moments where the vast, society-wide process of legitimating media power was explicitly articulated or at least could be traced in behaviour and language. Second, I had the hunch (see Couldry, 2000a, chapter 2) that, while mediation has very broad impacts on a territory such as Britain, those impacts are never simple or even, and therefore that there must be moments – or rather sites – where the legitimization of media power is open to challenge, or is negotiated in some way: fissures, if you like, where, as in Victor Turner's (1974) model of liminal behaviour, wider structural patterns are revealed.

The result of these two hunches was to encourage me to research not conventional sites of media reception or production, important though these are, but instead more exceptional sites where the status of media institutions and media authority was in some way negotiated, whether playfully or seriously. Hence my choice of two very different situations for field research: first, leisure sites where people get close up to the process of media production, such as Granada Studios Tour in Manchester, which contains the set of Britain's longest-running prime-time soap opera, *Coronation Street* (the American parallels, while not exact, would include Universal Studios in Florida and NBC Studios Tour in New York: Couldry, 2000a: 65-66); and, second, protest sites where people without media experience became involved in a mediated event and therefore saw the media process close up. In the latter case, my fieldwork was inevitably limited by what protests were under way at the time of the research, and my main research was on people's reflections about a protest that was completed the year before my fieldwork, the protests against the export of live animals through the small East coast port of Brightlingsea in 1995. Since the detailed political context of these

protests was not my main concern, but rather their status as an access-point to the media process, I will not detail it further here (but see Couldry, 2000a: 123-124).

My approach to such sites was on the face of it based on conflicting principles: on the one hand, I wanted to do as detailed a contextual analysis as possible of why people visited Granada Studios Tour and how people understood their experience of participating in the mediated protests at Brightlingsea, since it was through their detailed accounts of those localized encounters that I hoped to obtain insights into people's orientations towards media institutions in general. On the other hand, both types of site were temporary, in the sense that my interviewees had merely passed through them, either in the space of a day (as at Granada Studios Tour) or over the space of a few months (as at Brightlingsea). They were not the type of permanent living or working space in which ethnography has normally been conducted. Their interest was precisely as exceptional sites, which meant that they could not be fully contextualised in the lives of their participants, or indeed fully contextualised at all. (Which is not to say that they were exceptional in exactly the same way: the Brightlingsea protest site was a space closely linked to a real, inhabited place, whereas Granada Studios Tour was much closer to a 'nonplace' in Auge's (1995) sense.)<sup>5</sup> I was drawn, in other words, to do a maximally contextual study of sites which lacked a full context, a quasi-ethnography that I decided was better not called an ethnography at all (2000a: 198).<sup>6</sup> Only much later did I realise that it had parallels with the shift in 1990s anthropology to a pluralistic notion of ethnography that might include the study of 'accidental communities of memory' (Malkki, 1997: 91) such as those formed at Granada Studios Tour and Brightlingsea.

In any case, the apparent theoretical contradiction was less intractable in practice. First of all, I was quite clear that these sites were worth studying – they were public sites where significant events or practices occurred, the like of which had rarely been researched. Second, I was convinced that ethnography in the sense of total immersion in what happened at such sites was in principle impossible. Granada Studios Tour was a commercial site visited by up to 6,000 people a day, well beyond the grasp of even the largest army of ethnographers; and the protests at Brightlingsea were already firmly in the past, even if the recent past. Ethnography on the traditional model could not then be the answer to the methodological problems posed by researching those sites, and yet those problems were surely typical of many other non-trivial sites of ‘sociality’ where people come together on a temporary basis, often without knowledge of each other’s full context for being there (cf Maffesoli, 1996). If such sites were significant, yet not susceptible even in principle to ethnographic work in the traditional sense, then a different possibility, and necessity, was opening up for qualitative research.

This alternative model – which I can now see as a version of Marcus’ ethnography as ‘complicity’, not ‘rapport’ – involved renouncing the aim for an impossible immersion in context and instead seeking as much context as could reasonably be obtained. I pursued this in various ways. For the sites themselves, I relied on participant observation (at Granada Studios Tour) or (at Brightlingsea) on a mixture of observations and close study of local and national press materials on the protest. From interviewees, I obtained, where possible, long open-ended interviews, usually in their own homes. At Brightlingsea this was my main source, but at Granada Studios Tour the home interviews were a supplement to a large number of interviews

conducted on site. Unfortunately in the latter case, there was only one person interviewed on site who was willing to meet me again at home: not surprisingly, since Granada Studios Tour represents precisely a day-off from commitments! This however revealed, in another guise, the limits to 'ethnographic' context built into the very structure of this particular public site. My third source of context was provided by the interviewees themselves, as they reflected on their engagement with the site in question. They chose the relevant context within which to talk about their time at the studios or on the protest. They could have related it to any event in their lives whatsoever, but it was the context they chose, usually in retrospect, in which I was most interested.

A full ethnographic context for their visit to Granada Studios Tour or the protest experience at Brightlingsea was in principle impossible, but this did not mean that the context obtained was trivial. On the contrary, it was useful evidence of what the site had meant to those I interviewed. In effect, by pursuing this strategy, I made a choice. I could have chosen a radical contextualist approach (cf Ang, 1996), which might have led me to abandon research altogether – since the context available was never going to be complete enough! Instead, I took a more pragmatic approach, working in each case with what context I could obtain, and building up from there a larger picture of the way people talked about those sites, and the patterns in such talk.

That choice was grounded in a growing sense that there was a striking pattern, even or, especially, at the level of the banal language people used about those sites and their significance (cf Couldry, 2000a: 104-5, 143-4, 197 for further explanation). It was this patterning, and its pervasiveness, that was the most important aspect of the

various interviews and observations I had conducted: a wider pattern that did not contradict or undermine the self-reflexivity of those I interviewed, but which instead worked itself out through their reflections. Indeed such patterns of thinking – their characteristic categories, such as the underlying hierarchy between ‘media world’ and ‘ordinary world’ (Couldry, 2000a: chapter 3) – emerged most strongly in the passages where they were put under greatest pressure by the interviewees themselves, by being argued with or renegotiated. Rarely, however, were those patterns entirely deconstructed, or absent; and this, I realised, was the wider point towards which my scattered quasi-ethnography was leading.

In effect, I had conducted a contextualised, multisited study of people’s talk about visits to two sites (not themselves connected), that revealed patterns of thinking that were more than just multisited: they were the type of pervasive and banal categories (Billig, 1995) through which wider ideological structures get produced, in this case the ideology of media power. To grasp such patterns, and their influence, we need paradoxically, to study them in action, as they are put to work in particular cases. This means doing research in multiple contexts that have to be grasped as rhetorical contexts – as contexts of argument and negotiation – which is not the same as knowing the total life-context in which those arguments took place. Listening closely and effectively to people’s talk need not require (and, in practice, usually cannot involve) a full ethnographic contextualisation for that talk.

Only through work across a number of such contexts (without necessarily immersing myself in any of them) could I grasp the patterning of language, thought, and action, through which media power is reproduced and legitimated. The ‘place of media



power', I had discovered, is latent everywhere, even if our naturalised beliefs about the media emerge most clearly at those place (for example, sites of media production) where they are called into question.

### *Final Reflections*

These reflections on my own research might seem a long way from the traditional notion of ethnographic method: the ambition for what Marcus calls 'rapport' within the ethnographic situation. My approach has tried rather to engage with as much context as is available for some of the passing acts and reflections we make as we pass through a mediated world. The result is a passing 'ethnography', but one no less serious for that. It represents a serious commitment to engage with the texture of our dispersed but mediated lives. And it is a real ethnography, if we accept George Marcus' wider rethinking of what ethnography entails: an engagement with the situations of others based in a shared attention to the complex webs of determination within which we think and act. This involves qualitative work that crosses a number of places, and travels to some which we would not necessarily first think of as sites where we engage with media.

Even so, it might seem that this new dispersed notion of ethnography and in particular media ethnography has sidestepped some important questions of politics. Even if 'the circumstantial commitments that arise in the mobility of multi-sited fieldwork provide a kind of psychological substitute for the reassuring sense of "being there" of participation in traditional single-site fieldwork' (Marcus, 1998: 99), too mobile an ethnography of mediated space risks running free of the ethical questions which the

ethnographic encounter so powerfully brought into focus. It is important to emphasise therefore that what I am not arguing for is a footloose analysis that follows media images wherever it chooses. Our sense of complexity, and why studying complexity matters, must be more grounded than that.

It should be grounded in an awareness that it matters to study power, and its disguises. Media have the vast power that they do, because we all, systematically even if usually unobtrusively, work to produce their authority as natural (Couldry, 2000a: chapter 1). Our presence as analysts at one place (whether it is the home or the studio) will not be sufficient to unlock the workings of media power. To believe otherwise would ironically be to reproduce the type of mystification upon which media power itself relies:<sup>7</sup> that there is one place, the place in the media, where society's important things happen, the myth that it matters to 'be there'. If we are fully to understand the dispersed symbolic order that underlies the media's myth-making powers, we must avoid the old ethnographic myth that we can only do so by 'being there' ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term ‘societies’ here guardedly, as there is a growing debate about its usefulness (Urry, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For an important exploration of the problems with the classic ethnographic notion of ‘the field’, see the essays in Gupta and Ferguson (1997a).

<sup>3</sup> Cf also Paul Rabinow (1996: 17) on the ‘tacit sharing of curiosity’ between researcher and researched.

<sup>4</sup> For a valuable restatement of the values of the ‘critical’ audience research tradition, which is clear about the methodological challenges it has faced, see Ang (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Roger Silverstone for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>6</sup> I was aware of the valid criticisms of some inflated claims for ethnographic research in media studies. See for example Gillespie, 1995: 23; Nightingale, 1996: 110-112.

<sup>7</sup> Like Marcus, I am interested in a ‘grounded study of the mystifications’ of culture. In my case it is ‘media culture’ and in Marcus’s case, it is ‘capitalist culture’: see Marcus (1998: 159 n2).