



CHAPTER ONE

The Designs of Media

“The entertainment media is [sic] changing,” said Allan Mayer, managing director at Sitrick and Company, a public relations firm. “The currency a movie star had was the ability to put people in the seats. They command enormous salaries. But simply having a star in a movie isn’t enough. Young audiences don’t have the same loyalties and interests that previous generations have. That’s why there is so much panic in the industry.”

New York Times, November 9, 2005

“Panic in the industry.” An interesting place to start a discussion of media. The media are money-making events, and their producers are fond of thinking of themselves and their companies as an industry, perhaps like the Ford Motor Company. An industry is responsible for circulating money; investing in production, creating a product, selling it to consumers, making a profit, turning part of the profit back into production, salaries, and dividends for stockholders. The products of the Ford Company are automobiles: physical things. The product of the media is entertainment, itself a medium in the sense that it is a means for creating pleasure for its audience, who will like it enough to pay, which will in turn make the profit for its producers. The media’s media are not automobiles or air conditioners or hair gel, but products of the imagination: movies, television shows, websites, games; or carriers of information, like newspapers. One of the media, advertising, attempts to manufacture a desire for other products and, in so doing, supports other media and the economy as a whole. Like the leaders of any other industry, the producers in media work in fear: whenever money is at stake, fear is involved. What will the audience want? How do we measure the audience and their desires? What do we do when the audience doesn’t respond by buying tickets, watching TV and buying the advertised goods and services; doesn’t click through to the advertiser’s link; stops reading the newspaper? Panic in the industry.

The quote we started with comes from an article that dealt with two specific media events. Its main subject was the popular movie actor Tom Cruise, who had to hire a new agent in 2005 because his behavior during interviews, and his support of a

controversial religious movement, were putting off his fans. More importantly, it addressed a concern that swept movie-making during the same year: a severe drop in movie attendance. Celebrity, pleasing an audience, attempting to craft products that will get its attention, are all part of the core of the media complex, part of its history and ours as well. It is that core and how it came to be formed, and the ways that we can open it up to our understanding, that constitute the subject of this book.

One thing must be kept in mind at the outset. The metaphor of a “core” suggests something tight and stable. In fact, media are not stable, nor – aside from making money – do they have a nucleus that can be clearly defined. By the time you read this, the article I’m referring to may have no relationship to anything regarding the media. Tom Cruise may be gone and forgotten, another celebrity grown old and discarded. Indeed, Paramount studio’s boss, Sumner Redstone, severed the studio’s contract with Cruise because they felt that his antics hurt tickets sales of his last movie for them, *Mission Impossible III*. He has since gone on to form his own production company. The movie business will most definitely change and will have good years as well as lean. Hidden in the “panic” voiced by the industry in late 2005 was a major shift on all levels of movie-making, movie exhibition, and reception. Celluloid – 35 mm film – is slowly disappearing to be replaced by digital recording, distribution, and projection. The movie-going experience is changing and will continue to change, as more and more people watch films at home on DVD, on cable, or on web-based video on demand.

The core of media that we’re looking for is in a constant state of change. Everything about media is in perpetual change. The design of media, the loosely integrated relationships between the producers of media and its audiences, keeps getting rewoven as the audiences, the technologies, tastes, and culture – you and I and all the things we do, including the media we read, watch, and listen to – change. It is not very likely that, in the course of our investigation, we’ll find a single, stable definition. What we will find are a few constants that will guide us through our attempts at understanding the meaning of media gained by close analysis of their history, their texts, and the ways in which we respond to them.

First, we need to consider the way we will use certain key terms. The media refers to the aggregate of profit-making, technology-driven companies *and* products that make up news delivery, radio, music, recordings, advertising, film, television, and the varieties of digital transmissions and interactions. *The New York Times*; NBC; Paramount Pictures; Rockstar, the company that makes the “Grand Theft Auto” video game; Sony, the manufacturer of PlayStation that plays GTA, as well as televisions and computers, and the company that owns a movie studio and record labels; Apple, the company that makes computers, the iPod, and distributes iTunes; TBWA/Chiat/Day, the advertising agency that created the iPod commercials – these are all part of the media, their companies, products, and we, the consumers. Mass media is a term, sometimes used derogatorily, that refers to these companies and products when they are created and consumed by very large numbers of people. Popular culture is mass media seen from the other end. Rather than being concerned with the owners and major producers of media, popular culture embraces its products and the people

who use them in a variety of ways, even those not intended by their creators. Popular culture is the *use* of media, the way it is understood, enjoyed, hated, consumed, made part of the life of an individual or the larger cultural group she belongs to. Popular culture embraces media, but it is more than the sum of media's various parts.

Popular culture can be thought of as an environment that includes media, which includes its productions – tunes, video games, Internet sites, movies – its listeners, and its artists. While this environment encompasses and informs all that we address here, it is the media themselves that will receive most attention. We can begin by considering media as a series of *texts* and *contexts*. A text is a coherent, related unit of expression, like a rock song: a formal construction of words and music, following certain conventions, communicating, mediating thought and emotion. It is recorded on a digital or analog medium, broadcast or played on CD, MP3, or iPod, and listened to. Everything involved in the making, distributing, and listening to the song constitutes its context. There is a lot of mediation going on here, beginning with the songwriter and performer, ending with the listener, and mediated by a host of technological processes on the way. We need to define, unpack or decode – a concept we'll address further on – all parts of the process in order to understand what the study of media, their texts, contexts, and cultures, entails.

Almost always, definitions raise more questions than they answer. Are blogs, which have rapidly entered the popular culture and which borrow the conventions of the diary or journalistic opinion-making, while employing the technological medium of the World Wide Web, part of mass media? How do we categorize a music mix, made up of mass-mediated works – popular music from various sources – put together to suit personal taste? If some of the tunes that make up the mix are copyrighted and have been downloaded for free from a P2P (peer-to-peer) network, do we leave the realm of mass media and popular culture and enter the world of law? How do we square the concept of the individual, artistic imagination at work in the creation of a song, a movie, or even an advertisement with the concept of commercialized mass media and mass audience in which, convention has it, individuality plays little role?

In order to begin understanding these and other questions that will come up in the course of our discussion, I want to introduce a list of core issues, somewhat broader than definitions, and central to the complexity of Media Studies. What follows is not a definitive or exhaustive list; it is difficult to discuss any one of the items without referring to the others. All of these elements will be more fully explored in the chapters that follow, but the chapters do not follow them slavishly. These elements of the media design, like the media themselves that are covered in the following chapters, move in and out of one another as they converge in ways that continually alter the design.

Threads in the Media Design

- Audience
- Art and artifact
- Culture

- Codes and genres
- Business
- Technology
- Immediacy and change
- Evaluation

Audience

All issues in the study of media are contentious. Disagreement reigns. But there may be no one issue more contentious than the nature of the media audience. The media audience must be a large one – hence the term “mass” media. But that very adjective carries a negative connotation. The thinking is based on some empirical evidence that concludes anything made to please large numbers of people must be produced and consumed indiscriminately, must be mediocre at best, and therefore must be made to appeal to what is often referred to as “the lowest common denominator.” Mass media are compared to “serious” media, the works of high culture – classical music, novels, poetry, drama – which are made *by* individuals *for* individuals, who, it is assumed, are mature, educated, and actively discriminating in their taste. By comparison, mass media must pander, make itself simple and accessible to a large audience who are, presumably, uneducated, vulgar, and passive. Even more damaging, according to accepted wisdom, the mass audiences of mass media are made *worse*, coarsened, even harmed by the media.

We find this argument throughout media history, and it is part of a kind of cultural convention in which any given society is always seeing its eventual doom, while trying to pin that eventuality on some evil influence. In the US during the 1920s, jazz was said to be causing the cultural decay, particularly (and always) among the culture’s young people. In the 1950s, it was comic books and rock ‘n’ roll. Today video games are said to create an environment of violence that causes gamers to become desensitized to violence in their daily lives. The Internet itself is said to be a dangerous field of predation and incipient violence where young people are constantly at risk.

In the past, mass media audiences were often gendered, and that itself became a cause to condemn it. Before the advent of mass media, the popular novels in the eighteenth century were written mostly by men about and for women, and therefore considered somewhat less than major literary works. Indeed, the audience for popular mass media is often thought of, derogatorily, as “feminine”: passive, emotional, undiscriminating, easily swayed. The media audience is tarred with the negative stereotypes usually applied to only one gender. The result has been a persistent discourse in which the comparison of “serious” and “popular” culture, high culture and low, is voiced in the binaries of active/passive; intellectual/emotional; discriminating/indiscriminate; uplifting/vulgarizing; difficult/simple.

It is true that many media products were and still are aimed at female audiences. Magazines like *Cosmopolitan* come to mind, and there is an entire subgenre of movie melodramas that the studios called “women’s pictures.” Film magazines from the twenties through the sixties, as well as contemporary celebrity and gossip magazines,

are aimed at women audiences. The marketing of television in the early fifties was specifically aimed at stay-at-home housewives, taking for granted their limited and limiting experiences and offering them a window on the world. Today, television programs like *Oprah* and the various Martha Stewart programs – indeed, much of the output of cable channels like HGTV and Lifetime – are gendered. But if these are aimed at women, then the cable network Spike TV, action movies, televised NASCAR races and all their paraphernalia, wrestling, and first-person shooter games are aimed at men. Targeting movies, television, or sports events toward one gender or another may smack of stereotyping, but is more involved with marketing, with “segmenting” the audience. It isn’t the same as using gender to derogate the audience.

Derogation of the audience has always been a way to get at the media that delights an audience. But the producers of media are difficult targets to aim at. They are usually large corporate entities, not oblivious to criticism, but inured to insults. And, because the producers of media almost always argue in their own defense that all they do is give the audience what the audience wants, they deflect criticism to that audience, which therefore remains the butt of criticism or warnings about the harm being done to them.

The fact is that audiences for mass media are as varied as are the media they listen to, watch, and read. The condemnation of that audience, as well as the media that serve them, reflects a nervousness, if not snobbishness, on the part of many people who embrace high culture and fear for its demise, or indulge in popular media and are embarrassed to admit it. That fear, and the threat of a diminishing audience for traditional forms of media – classical music, drama, serious fiction, poetry, even mass media products like newspapers – plays into larger concerns of cultural coarsening and debasement.

The notion of debasement leads to another form of audience stereotyping, this time based on age, class, and race. America has always tried to fool itself into believing that it is a classless society, despite the economic realities that show a small percentage of the population owning the largest percentage of the wealth; a large underclass of poverty-stricken people of all races; and a middle class, part of which is struggling, another part reasonably well-to-do, and both of which are the major consumers of mass media. High culture has been the traditional property of the wealthy and educated, attending and supporting what we can now begin to call small-audience (as opposed to mass-audience) art. Popular art and mass media not only become the province of middle- and working-class audiences, but, in the eyes of the protectors of high culture, mark both the audience and their art as inferior.

There are even physiological markers for this, metaphors that somehow link to the way a person looks, and marks her class, depending upon the kind of entertainment she attends to. High culture and those who love it are “highbrow.” “Lowbrow” applies to rock ’n’ roll music and rap, and television reality shows – anything that seems vulgar, undemanding, or pandering. The terms have a slight odor of racial stereotyping about them.

Popular “mass” culture is also the province of youth. Few adults, after all, play video games; and most popular music is originated, made, and enjoyed by young

people. Those who worry about lowbrow entertainment destroying the culture always aim their concerns at young people. In the 1920s, jazz was going to ruin the young, and in the 1950s, as we mentioned, comic books and then rock 'n' roll were supposed to be turning kids into juvenile delinquents. These days, video games are blamed for making their users violent. Studies are made; congressional hearings held. The culture continues more or less intact. Or disintegrating: there has never been a time when people did not think the culture was degenerating. Perhaps it always has been.

The actual result of media bashing and audience stereotyping is to turn complex issues into artificially simplified ones. This is what stereotyping of any kind always does. There may indeed be such a thing as “highbrows,” individuals who entirely eschew the popular and only read serious novels and poetry and listen to classical music – “highbrow” art. There are even some people who don't own a television or a computer. Not many. Much of the culture, however, have their brows in the right place and enjoy a variety of media for an even greater variety of reasons. The culture of media is one of both acceptance and discrimination, something that small-art (as opposed mass-art) audiences would deny, but which is common practice. There are few places, few cultures, anywhere in the world that can avoid media. Whether this means villagers gathered around the community television in the Indian subcontinent, Muslim immigrants in France watching the Arab-language news channel, Al Jazeera, on satellite, a Midwestern businessman reading *USA Today*, or an entire family enjoying *American Idol*, or someone reading a criticism of it in *The New York Times* – we all live in a mediasphere. It is much more interesting to understand what our relation is to this environment than to condemn it or people who don't resist it.

Art and artifact

The word “art” has crept into our discussion, and it is another contentious issue in the study of media, and an integral part of its design, even more so as the design attempts to hide it from view.

Our contemporary notion of what constitutes art is only as old as the nineteenth century, when the Romantics fantasized the myth of the misunderstood artist, toiling alone in his garret (always “his”; though, interestingly enough, the creator of one of the most enduring and influential works of popular art, *Frankenstein*, was a woman, Mary Shelley, wife of an English Romantic poet). The artist is misunderstood and so is his art, which can never quite find an audience as sensitive and intelligent as the artist himself. That work, growing from the experience of the artist, a product of inspiration and suffering, is personal and difficult, available only to an equally sensitive audience of the few who can appreciate beauty and complexity.

I have just indulged in a bit of stereotyping myself by claiming a kind of universal image of the suffering artist producing personal, difficult works. Historical truth is different. Art began both with individuals and with community and almost always had a social, religious, instructive force behind it. No one quite knows the purpose behind prehistoric cave paintings, which are some of the earliest artifacts we have. But these representations of animals and the outline of a human hand probably had to do with

hunting. Drama emerged from communal rituals. Poetry and narrative fiction began as oral presentations passed on from storyteller to storyteller – bards and minstrels – culminating in the early eighteenth century when novels were read aloud to audiences, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when, in some cultures, silent film was accompanied by a narrator in the theater telling the story. Historically, art as something difficult, belonging to the privileged, sequestered in spaces of private contemplation in libraries, museums, or concert halls, is only one notion of the art experience. Art as a shared experience, involving a give-and-take between performer and audience, is another. “Large audience” art, mass media, popular media – no matter the term we choose – is an extension of very old communal practices.

But what about the work of art itself? Is there only one way to define it? Is it unalterably different from the notion of entertainment? Art is imaginative expression: emotion, ideas, events “made up” and formed by a hand painting on canvas, a hand writing music on a sheaf of paper, a voice singing the music, a story told on television or in film. The productions of the creating eye, hand, body, or voice, all require a viewer, reader, or listener. Art is always a circuit of mediation. The creation of a work of art involves the production of a mediating form – words, paint, music, voice, images – and an interpreter. An interpreter is the reader, viewer, listener – in short, an audience. This circuit is always open. The artist and the audience, the medium of art itself, change in large ways as tastes change, as the various intellectual and ideological forces that make and remake a culture change. It changes in small ways: every act of interpretation is an act of change, again responding to large cultural pressures but also to more local pressures of individual inclination (that include many things like upbringing, education, race, gender, class), and that most indefinable of qualities, taste.

We can visualize the process of art-making and art-receiving as a mediated circuit of production: the formal object; its reception – the attending ear and eye of the audience. All of this set within yet another circuit of ideas, emotions, forms, artifacts, policies, genders, and races called “culture.” We can also conceive of art objects existing on a spectrum. There is no denying that there exist difficult, challenging works of art that demand time, intelligence, and inquisitiveness on the part of an individual who seeks to appreciate them. A good poem, a complex canvas, is meant for engagement, for processing, not quick consumption. But what happens when we travel along the spectrum? Is a best-selling novel a work of art? It requires the same kind of creative, mediating, and reading process as, say, a novel by Henry James, but on a different, more immediate level. A best-seller has to be written, published, distributed, purchased, and read. The mediated object – the collection of words making up the novel – and the act of reading are different if we’re looking at a Stephen King novel than they would be were we considering James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, a book whose last sentence is the first part of its first sentence, inviting us to read it over and over again. A popular novel may be written in such a way that the story told takes prominence over the telling of the story. We have no greater praise for a novel than to call it a page-turner. The suppression of form, making it transparent, is a major defining factor of the works of popular culture. Form recedes behind content, even though content is the product of form. Try parsing the various parts of a rap song and see how complex its formal rhythms are.

Let's extend the spectrum even further. Perhaps nothing is further from high, small-audience art than computer games. At base they violate one of high art's most fundamental principles: single authorship. Remember that our romantic view of art idealizes the artist working away in isolation. Computer games, like the movies that spawned them, like the computer programming that makes them work – like television, newspapers, and advertising – are created through collaboration. What's more, the collaboration that results in computer games creates a medium that doesn't stand alone, but needs the active participation of the user. All art requires active engagement, but computer games *respond* to user intervention and are interactive the way no other art or media form can be. Then there is the matter of an online user group of millions (for a massively multiplayer online role-playing game like *The World of Warcraft*), each of whom interact in an imaginary world. Can computer games be considered "art"? By our criteria, yes. They are products of the imagination and it takes imagination to engage with them. They are complex but, unlike traditional imaginative works, they change in response to our own imaginative input.

Computer games fill other criteria as well: they are mass produced to make a profit for their manufacturers. Their creators may think of them as art – certainly imaginative in the detail of their computer-generated graphics and elegant computer programs. Gamers? Maybe not so much. Or not consciously. Computer games don't fulfill one traditional requirement of high art, which is quiet contemplation. They are not quiet, and they are immersive and interactive rather than contemplative. Perhaps they require skill more than the refined sensibility that is sometimes called forth by high art. But the games are engaging, and engagement itself may be the key. All art, high or low, small or mass audience, must engage its audience. The means and results of the engagement may be different, the means and results of their creation may be different, but if emotions and intellect are brought into play through a mediated object, we can consider art at work.

At the same time, there should be cause for concern that by broadening the notion of art, including within it the various productions of mass media, we may simply be diluting the idea of art beyond recognition. It is already a stretch to think of a video game as artistic, and it would be a complete break if we applied the word to a reality television show or a commercial for a prescription drug. We would risk losing all credibility. However, if we maintain the traditional direction of applying the name of art only to works of high intellectual and emotional purpose, we risk perpetuating the notion of cultural debasement, that is, of condemning both the productions and the audience for mass-mediated art as somehow less intelligent, more gullible, and simply inferior to the audience and productions of high art. It will, finally, be necessary to apply some discrimination and evaluation. We might dodge the problem, for the moment, by referring to the productions of mass media as "artifacts," or just simply "works," the objects that are made for mass consumption. We can also substitute for the misleading hierarchy of "high" art over mass art by referring to "fine" or small-audience art and popular or mass-mediated art. This, however, may be semantic sleight of hand and it will not finally free us of the ways our culture leads us to think about art and continually degrade what does not seem to fit the term. It will serve for now to use all of these terms and be as clear as possible about what we are referring to.

Culture

The design of media is woven in, by, and for its culture. The meaning of culture is as complex and contentious as meanings of “art,” and it too requires some shift in thinking. We usually think of culture as being the realm of high art, just as we think of someone who is smart and discriminating in taste, someone who loves high art, as “cultured.” “Culture” is often the culture’s way of referring to the creation and appreciation of small-audience art. The fact is that high culture, the world of serious, small-audience art, is only one part of the broader, all-inclusive set of interactions among people, the things they say, do, make, feel, believe in, buy, sell, love, and hate that make up their culture. Culture is a kind of sum total of human activity and its representations. It is made up of all the ways people see, interact, present, and represent themselves to each other. Culture is the opposite of “nature.”

The natural world is made up of anything that goes on without human intervention or interpretation. Atomic and cellular movement, the electromagnetic spectrum that carries much of our media, belong to the natural world, but not the *concepts* of atom and cells, or the division of the electromagnetic spectrum into profit-making parts: these are made up by humans to describe and manipulate nature. The change of the seasons is a response to the rotation of the earth, but not our descriptions of the seasons, which are a product of meteorology and poetry. The process of evolution is a long-term, natural series of random events that cause changes in living things. The theory of evolution is human-made narration of how these changes occur, based on natural evidence.

As soon as we apply imagination and language to nature, explain it, do science on it, turn it into a discourse understood by many people, nature becomes culture. That’s why evolution can become a contentious issue. That evolution occurs is beyond reasonable doubt; but the language – the discourse, the explanation and description of a process that takes place with no apparent cause, and that places organic development in the realm of genetic accident – causes discomfort within other discourses that believe in divine purpose.

It is the nature of human curiosity and our need for narrative – for stories that explain things – that we turn nature into a cultural discourse. We need to account for things we don’t understand, and we create understanding by talking about things. Many of our shared stories are ancient, and some defy scientific knowledge by the very convenience of their explanations. In nature, the earth turns on its axis, exposing one part to light and the other to darkness in a predictable rotation. In culture – our culture, right now – we still say the sun rises and sets.

Imagination and knowledge mediate the unknown into the known, telling stories that enable us to comprehend the human and non-human world; in so doing they turn nature into culture. Science is only one cultural discourse. Religion is another. So is politics. So are literature, movies, and other media. All of these and more create culture: the dominant culture that speaks to our shared values; subcultures, in which various groups express themselves in different ways, often in opposition to the dominant culture; and even the apparently independent culture of the individual. Indeed,

in one-to-one communication, the way we speak and gesticulate in any particular situation, the words we choose, and the references we make are in some way culturally determined – mediated. The “self” you present to a professor is not exactly the same self you present to a friend or to your parents. You choose, perhaps unconsciously, a different representational mode. What that mode is, and the very fact that you choose different modes, is culturally determined. The same goes for the mode of art and entertainment you choose, the way you use it, and the way it was created. If you choose to listen to rock ’n’ roll rather than classical music; if you read blogs rather than a newspaper; if you watch reality television rather than *Law and Order*, you are making cultural choices. You might respond immediately by saying, “no, these are personal choices.” But the personal is the cultural insofar as your taste is created or influenced, formed and informed by age, social interaction, education, indeed politics, as well as taste, among all the things that intermingle to create culture.

It is important always to keep in mind that culture is a mutable thing, in fact not one thing, but a variety of subcultures that move and change within the larger dominant culture that voices and affirms the values of a society. Your taste, habits, inclinations, loves, and hates are formed and informed by many things, including gender, race, and class, and religious and political beliefs (even if your political belief is disinterest in the political). All of these are the products of or responses to culture.

The producers of media artifacts – themselves parts of various subcultures, or communities, to borrow a term used by online groups – are always attempting to understand subcultures in order to produce products they will buy. Various subcultures will often contend with one another in an attempt to impress their culture on another. Lovers of grunge rock may disparage hip-hop; fans of MySpace may not share the political passions of the DailyKos blog. Media creators try to discover and create for these subcultures: they call it “segmenting” the audience – a process that includes considerations of age, gender, race, even geography; we call it taking part in the media we like. In all cases personal taste is only one part of a larger cultural context that guides us to our choices and forms our taste.

There is no better example than the culture of music. This can be roughly divided into three parts: “classical” music, whose origins are European; jazz, whose origins are African-American; and popular/rock/country/rap/, whose origins are extremely varied. There are other forms – folk music, indigenous music, music from different cultures, and so forth – but these three will serve for now. Each of these major groups can be further subdivided on sides of both the producers and consumers of music. There are composers, performers, and the audience; there are record companies, radio stations, concert managers on one side and consumers who buy records, listen to radio stations, and go to concerts, or download tunes to their iPods on the other side. Each kind of music, each mode of production, performance, and consumption is produced by and appeals to specific cultural groups, although there is a great deal of crossover. What’s more, all of this tends to change from generation to generation and from one technology to another.

We will discuss recorded music in chapter 4. It is among the most complex of media forms on both the production and reception sides. But it is also the most ready example

of how cultures and media interact. The history of rap, for example, shows the emergence of a form of expression from urban African-American culture into mainstream popular music. It combines not only a musical style, but a set of cultural attitudes. It involves not only music, but celebrity, notoriety, gender conflict, and a defiance of a variety of values held by the dominant culture.

We have heard much in recent years of the “culture wars,” the contention between a strongly felt, Christian-driven morality and a supposedly looser, more “liberal” view of the world. Much of this battle has to do with strongly held beliefs and practices by many groups, holding different views, some of which are expressed in political choices and media such as music, movies, and television. Media become a target of the culture wars, variously condemned as too liberal, too one-sided, too full of hate or sexual innuendo; too conservative; too liberal – too something that one side considers excessive.

Historically, media have always been involved in culture wars of one variety or another because they are so intimately involved in our cultures and in self-expression. In many respects they are the most obvious expressions of our cultures. The fact is that most people get their information and entertainment, their view of themselves and the world, and often the very fashion of the clothes they wear to make a statement about themselves and their community, from television, movies, rock groups, interactions with the Internet, or computer-based games. This makes media the steered and steering current of our society.

Codes and genres

How does culture cohere when it is such a dynamic, complex entity? More particularly, how do we understand and respond to that particular aspect of culture that we are studying, the media and our relationships to it? In attempting to answer these questions, I am going to draw upon some established ideas in Media and Cultural Studies, in particular the work one of its founders, Stuart Hall.

Hall was one of the founders of Cultural Studies, the larger branch of inquiry that, along with Film Studies, contributed to the kind of Media Studies we are undertaking here: understanding media as a complex relationship between the producers and the audience of media works and the cultures that embrace them, and the close analysis of the forms those works take. We have already touched upon Hall’s basic position in our discussion of “nature” versus culture, and the ways we represent the world in order to understand it. Hall discusses the fact that all of our notions of “reality,” our beliefs, demands, values, and our conviction of our own individuality, along with our fears and anxieties, are mediated through language. We know the world and ourselves by the ways we address and describe each. And “language” can be a broad term, applicable to any coherent means of communication. In that broader sense, we can use the term “discourse” when we refer to ways in which meaning is made through verbal or visual expression. Language, discourse, and our ability to share its meanings all exist through a process of coding and decoding. This occurs when we express our shared beliefs and understandings in specific ways and interpret such expressions. If we use a word, some terminology, an image, or a gesture, that has some intended meaning,

it is encoded. When we interpret it, we decode it either as it was meant to be or as we think it should be.

Here is an example. “I am planning to go to college.” This relatively straightforward declaration is deeply coded, and with more than a desire to better one’s self. To plan to go to college implies a social and economic background out of which the expectation of a college education can grow and be made possible. The statement is therefore coded differently from “I *wish* I could go to college,” and is different still from “College is a waste of time, I’m going to work,” or “College is worthwhile but I have no choice but to go to work.” There may be various attitudes (themselves a kind of coding) behind these statements; but they are themselves fed by cultural assumptions and economic contexts that have formed the individuals who hold them. We can decode and respond to these statements with versions of admiration (“That’s great, everyone should go to college”), a kind of transference (“Yeah, that’s what my parents say to me, that I should go to college”), pity (“I wish it were possible for you to go to college”), or even scorn (“Get off it, you have about as much chance of going to college ...”).

Let’s move our coded example into college and more specific realms of mediated language, non-verbal this time, and apparently less serious: the choice of dress. The closest we get to nature in the way we dress is to protect ourselves against it. Any protective covering would serve us if all we wanted was to be physically comfortable in a given climate. But physical comfort, in our culture certainly, is the least important purpose of clothing. Clothing is coded in terms of who we believe we are and, perhaps more importantly, how we wish to be perceived by others in our subculture, how we want to be decoded. Why else would one of our most basic uniforms, blue jeans, for example, be available in such a variety of styles, some of them specifically coded by gender and even race?

Denim has been around for a long time. The cloth originated in France and was known as “serge de Nîmes.” In the mid-nineteenth century, an American tailor named Jacob Davis developed the rivets and stitching for Levi Strauss’s clothing company, a style that was patented and continues as the basic way of fashioning blue jeans. Jeans were originally work pants, associated with laborers and therefore marked or coded by their class. In the twentieth century, the jean code began to shift and move up the social scale, aided by the Levi Strauss company, which recoded jeans – by means of advertising – as “Western” garb, an image that migrated into Western films. Jeans became part of the myth of the West. In the 1950s, again through movies, particularly teenage rebel films like *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the coding shifted, and jeans became associated with adolescence and rebellion for both men and women; in fact women had already adopted jeans as work clothes during World War II. By the 1960s, jeans became the uniform of the counter-culture and the general dress of young people. Levi Strauss took full advantage of the fact and began to create variations: “pre-worn,” stonewashed, stretch (for those who no longer have an adolescent waistline), and baggy – in addition to a variety of “designer jeans.” The marketing and purchasing of these various styles were coded *by their wearers* with specific meanings.

Tight or baggy, tapered or straight, low cut or high, jeans have acquired an association with the groups that wear them. They are marketed for a Western look or as part of an “urban lifestyle,” marked as high fashion or as somehow belonging to an outlaw culture. Marketing and “marking” are key here. Jeans and other clothing are part of a cycle of style that keeps getting coded by people who market and people who buy them, based on their decoding and recoding of the styles, creating a circulation of desire, fulfillment, and renewed desire articulated in a complex discourse in which the “natural” element of clothing – protection against the elements – is all but forgotten. Tightness, looseness, sexy, punk, cheap, expensive, gangsta are all codes not of behavior but of what we want people to think of our behavior.

This is the process of coding and decoding that works through all discourse and is particularly potent in the production and reception of media. Clothing becomes part of our cultural expression and self-expression, part of entertainment, a major element of advertising. The fit of jeans, the choice of make-up, the genre of a television show or a video game, and the assumptions of an advertisement are all coded in various ways by their producers and then decoded by each of us as we select what we want, as we interpret what we see and hear. Our mediated lives are an ongoing process of decoding messages, as we ourselves code the “messages” that we in turn send out.

Viewed this way, media are about messages being formed, sent out, received, and interpreted. A pharmaceutical company invents a pain remedy. In order to sell the medicine, it isn’t sufficient simply to announce its existence. The company must create a need to go with the awareness. It creates a series of commercials that essentially communicate the idea that all of us are always in some kind of physical pain. Since that’s so, there is now a pill to take care of it. A reality show asks its viewers to play along with a fantasy of events occurring as they are seen, coded so that we forget or ignore the careful editing that puts all the separate pieces together.

The coding process is clear enough: pain is universal and continual. This pill will take care of your pain. The decoding that the pharmaceutical company asks is simple: agree with the message; buy the pill. As an individual consumer, you may do just that. Alternatively you may decode the message as being irrelevant. “I don’t have a pain all the time.” You may decode it by applying common sense: “If I have constant pain, I ought to see a doctor.” You may decode it as a joke and make fun of someone who is always complaining of pain. Something like this happened a number of years ago when a manufacturer of a medical alert device created a pathetic advertisement in which an elderly woman, having taken a fall, cried out, “I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up.” It became a national joke, full of scorn and fear of getting old and falling down.

Late in 2005, *The New York Times* ran a long article about online pornography, focusing on a young man who virtually and physically sold his body for profit through the Internet. The piece is part of a larger cultural concern about the dangerous ways the Internet is being used, but, like all such reports, it had a bit of the voyeuristic about it. It can be read (decoded) as a cautionary tale, as something to worry about, another reason to condemn the misuses of technology. It can be read to get something of a vicarious buzz. From a different perspective, the essay can also be read or decoded as a response to the ongoing distress of the news business. Given that the

reporter subsequently revealed that he had actually given financial assistance to his subject, it could be read as the news influencing the news – changing it by reporting on it. But the fact is that this kind of reporting, sensational as it is, sells newspapers, and newspapers have, in general, been losing readership at a steady and alarming rate. News reporting has come under attack – by politicians who don't like what they read in the papers, and by the public, some of whom have lost faith in how the news is reported. *The New York Times* in particular suffered a number of setbacks. In 2003, a reporter named Jayson Blair was discovered to have made up the stories he was reporting. In 2005, Judith Miller, a political reporter, was jailed for refusing to name a source. The paper supported her, until it was found out that she was too close with an assistant to the Vice President, who fed her false information about the run-up to the Iraqi War. She had breached the objectivity that all reporters are supposed to practice. She left the paper in disgrace that was shared by *The Times* itself.

In the context of the most important newspaper in the United States, the “paper of record,” as it's known, whose motto is “All the News That's Fit to Print,” *The Times* has coded itself as dependable, solid, trustworthy. It was once called “the great gray *Times*” because of its stalwartness in straightforward reporting. In that context, a long piece on Internet pornography might seem more appropriate to a tabloid newspaper or TV news magazine – and indeed, some months later, when the subject was testifying about Internet predators, it did make the television news. It seemed somewhat inappropriate for *The Times*, even more so given the fact that the reporter wrote about how he personally intervened to help the victim. However, in light of a paper attempting to regain readership, the piece had a certain marketing logic. An attempt at self-recoding might well be appropriate in order to gain readership. Sexuality, as we will discover over and over in media, is a prime mover of audience attention. *The New York Times*, like any other media organization, must make money and a profit to survive. It will do what it feels necessary within the limits of the genre of news reporting it has created. The particular piece was done with enough sensitivity and human interest to make it attractive, all the while fitting nicely into the genre of Internet horror story, which almost always involves a child put at risk by an online predator.

We all have a general knowledge of what genres are when we classify a movie as a horror or science fiction film, a western or a thriller. Gamers understand the genres in a general sense of individual versus online community games; first-person shooter games; world simulation games. The concept of genre began in literature, was carried over to film and television, and now extends to almost any text that is defined (or coded) with a particular storyline and setting, certain kinds of characters with particular relationships to each other and the reader, and a set of narrative expectations that must be fulfilled. A genre is, in a sense, a contract. If you select a science fiction film to watch, you are, in a sense, negotiating a contract with it; you expect certain elements – a future world, space travel, aliens. Watching a news story about a disaster, you expect a concerned reporter, visuals of physical devastation, and interviews with tearful victims asking for “closure.” If the science fiction film turned out to be set in the old west or the television reporter asked “who cares about the victims of this disaster?”

you would feel cheated; the expectations coded into the genre would be unfulfilled, and so would you. If the natural disaster involved no deaths, no failures in government assistance, no children buried under the rubble, you would be both relieved and (admit it) somewhat disappointed. The fact is that every kind of sensational event has developed its own genre (one meaning of “genre” is “kind”), its own discourse, description, victims, and perpetrators. Hurricane, murder, robbery, online sexual predator, and identity theft are presented as variations on a theme, like any other television show. There are even star “reporters” of catastrophe, like CNN’s Anderson Cooper.

These varieties of sensationalism, wringing our hearts with pity for hapless victims, carrying us along on an emotional roller coaster, are part of an inclusive genre called melodrama, in which emotions are large, threats of danger great, and people are in distress. Melodrama subsumes a number of other genres, and we will examine its fictional forms in chapter 6.

If genres were simply repeated without change, fulfilled expectations would quickly turn to boredom and rejection. The disaster story genre on TV news is automatically varied with each new catastrophe: hurricane, mine collapse, fire. The descriptions and the urgency remain the same, but new details keep us interested. In the fictional realm, *Law and Order*, *CSI*, and the host of other police and FBI procedural dramas manage very small variations within their genres by introducing new kinds of crimes, ever more psychotic perpetrators, and, in the case of the *CSI* variants, increasingly gory depiction of wounds. If we like a genre and respond to its codes, it takes just small variations to keep the media producers and us happy. The producers like genres because the container is ready-made to be filled with somewhat varying content. We like it because it guarantees certain dependable elements in form and content each time we watch.

Genre is the container of almost everything we see and hear through media. Its varieties and variations keep us comfortable with its familiarity and excited by its difference. The ways in which genres are encoded and the ways we decode them keep the media design active and refreshed.

Business

“The last time I checked, a media company was generally defined as a business that accumulates audiences and sells access to them to marketers.”

Richard Siklos, *The New York Times*, November 12, 2006

In the media design, the audience – that is, you and me – is part of the cycle of production and reception that maximizes profits by maximizing pleasure. The media are about business. That the media are a business is part of what defines them. Making money is the prime goal and a prime means for us to identify what we are studying. In order to understand the ramifications of this, we need to go back to our discussion of art and imagination and investigate another myth – another code: high art is coded

as non-commercial. Poets don't write to make money. Painters express themselves regardless of how misunderstood they are. They will keep on painting even if no one buys their work. Van Gogh hardly sold a canvas during his life. The starving artist, the lonely, even mad artist, is a mainstay of our romantic image of artistic devotion. Not so for the products of the media imagination. If anyone starves, or, to use more reasonable language, if a rock band, a television show, a screenwriter, an advertisement or its copywriter; if a network or a movie studio does not make money – and not just a little money – from the results of their work, they have failed.

Is everyone in it for the money? The answer isn't simple, though simply put, the media is all about money. Consider the choice: an individual may be in love with words and music and have the imagination to create moving combinations of both. If she chooses to use this talent to write a symphony, hope for profit plays no part. Symphonic music is the epitome of high, small-audience art. If she wants to be a rock singer, she may be content to remain an amateur, play in a garage band, perhaps do some local gigs, even put songs online. But if the desire is to be well known, to reach a wide audience, a mechanism of business and profit joins with the making of art, and the designs of media begin to form.

The media are made of art and commerce with the balance tipped to the latter. Excellence is judged by profit. Media productions, from newspapers to computer games, are pieces in the circulation of capital. As we will see in the case of journalism, even relative profitability is sometimes not sufficient to prove worth. If a movie that everyone on the production end hoped would be a blockbuster doesn't make an extraordinary amount of money on its opening weekend, it is judged a failure. If a new television show does not attract viewers instantly, it is yanked from the air. The result is that talent and imagination are often sacrificed in favor of the reliable, the formulaic, the proven, producing works designed for maximum simplicity and similarity to what is already popular. Too often genres are repeated with a minimum of variation and few surprising turns on the expected. More often than not, if the goal is to reach a large audience and make a large amount of money, the desire on the part of media producers will be to make music, television, a movie, or a computer game appeal by being easily accessible and the most like other works that have already made a lot of money.

Of course, there always needs to be an original to copy. Imitating past successes means that someone, at some time, did take a chance in creating, packaging, and marketing something that was unusual, different, even challenging. If the products of media were only repetitions of each other, they would become boring beyond audience endurance. But even in the act of repetition there is an opportunity for imagination to work. Let's think again about the *Law and Order* or *CSI* shows. The formula is strict. Watch enough installments and you will know exactly when events will occur and how the characters will react: a grisly murder, an investigation of the crime scene, processing the evidence or interrogating a suspect, a few wisecracks, little hints about the characters' personal lives, solving the case or sending it to the jury. But, within the formula, small, important, and attractive variations are worked into the storyline; interesting characters appear; unique methods of murder are invented; a particularly

monstrous perpetrator is created. Variation within formula is the key to genre and genre is the key to repetition in any media form. As long as the genre remains firm and the variations fresh, the program, movie, song, or video game will gain its audience.

The news, in all its forms, is an important example of genre and variations and the pressures of commerce. Reporting on, interpreting, and distributing information about local, national, and international events made up one of the earliest of media forms, a necessity for a functioning democracy. But the work of journalism from its inception has never been free in any real sense. Newspapers have always been owned by someone or, today, some corporation. The owners influence the larger genre of the paper, its political ideology, right or left, conservative or liberal. The editors determine what makes an event “news.” They choose the events a reporter will cover and the kind of photographs that will represent the event. By such determination, policy is made: a national politician stating the principles she will follow if she is elected will go unnoticed unless her words are published, distributed, and analyzed in print or on the air. A politician’s statement of principles may contain ideas important to maintaining a democracy fair to all of its people, or may be general and clichéd enough to be part of the genre of political speech and condensed enough to be quoted on the air.

Important and “new,” banal and generic, the speech and the ideas must be distributed and, in order to be distributed, someone – an editor at a newspaper or the news bureau of a television network – must deem them newsworthy. That decision will differ from one editor or news outlet to another, and will be determined by commercial imperatives. A tabloid newspaper devoted to celebrity scandal (like the adventures of Tom Cruise we cited at the beginning of this chapter) will ignore the politician, unless he gets involved in a sexual escapade. The local news may give the politician little or no notice because this form of media is mostly involved with sensational and scary stories of murders and fires. As we’ll discover, “local news” is itself a generic form, developed not locally at all, but by a few national consulting companies, who determine the format and the “look” of local news broadcasts, down to the hairstyles of and happy conversation among the newsreaders.

Who will report on the politician’s speech? Certainly a serious newspaper, like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or other large-city papers. It will be mentioned, perhaps with a small sound bite on the network news and CNN. More coverage will be offered on MSNBC. These outlets are still (at least as of this writing) committed to reporting such items. But more and more “news” is just another commodity, like any other mass-mediated artifact, to be sold for a profit. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. The news services, like the Associated Press in the US and Reuters in England, were formed in the mid-nineteenth century as purveyors of news to various papers who subscribed, allowing them to save the time and money that would otherwise have to be spent maintaining a network of reporters to gather news as events happened around the world.

With the growth of television news and the decline of newspaper readership, the commodity nature of news has changed. Competition for audiences is fierce; newspapers are old news the second they are printed; sensational news – storms, crashes, murders, celebrity trials – become fodder for television, with each network or cable

channel packaging the information for maximum exposure, maximum sponsorship, and maximum income.

All news outlets now have online components, themselves supported by advertising. Their selling points are based on the ability to update information almost instantly, accompanied with streaming sound and video. But, as outlets proliferate, as paper and ink newspapers fade away, the ownership of those outlets both contracts and expands. Fewer and fewer companies own more and more media outlets; more and more companies own a large variety of media, expanding rapidly into the Internet. We can rarely point to a company that is solely involved in newspapers or television or cable channels; a company whose major business is music or books. Almost all media are owned by various conglomerates who aggregate as many smaller companies as possible. The news is one business among many owned by a media conglomerate.

We can look, for example, at the Walt Disney company. The once living individual, Walt Disney, was an animator, whose films were enormously popular. He invented Mickey Mouse in 1928, formed his company in 1929, and released his first full-length animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937. In the early 1950s, his company built its first theme park, Disneyland, and tied it in with a series of television programs on the ABC network: *The Mickey Mouse Club*, *Disneyland*, *The Wonderful World of Disney*. Walt Disney died in 1966. The company lived on and grew. In the following decades, more and more companies were added to the Disney portfolio. The ABC network became part of the Disney company. So did the ESPN, the cable sports network. Disney owns and operates 10 local television stations and 64 radio stations, including many stations in the same city. It owns 10 cable outlets in addition to ESPN. Its movie holdings have expanded to eight subsidiaries. It owns publishing houses, record companies, its own software and game unit, sports franchises, theme parks (of course), and, for good measure, various Internet sites, including NASCAR.com.

There are other media companies that own a great deal more. The argument is that with fewer companies owning more and more smaller units, there is increasingly less chance for diversity of any kind and a greater chance of homogeneity across the media landscape. If Disney owns six radio stations in the Minneapolis-St Paul area, will it squash programming possibilities? The larger question is, how many genres of radio programming exist today in any market, under any ownership? One of Disney's Minneapolis-St Paul stations broadcasts for children; the others carry the usual varieties of rock 'n' roll. No matter who owns what, varieties of talk radio, sports, news, and religious programming, the various genres of pop, rock, and rap proliferate around the dial. Problems of diversity and diversification are quite separate from the companies that own them.

There are many forces at work and many ways to address the conglomeration of media ownership. We could concentrate on the business side, the economics, and the negative or positive results of conglomeration. The business sections of many newspapers and journals devoted to media do just that. At the same time, we could point out that ownership great and small is a constant in media. During the studio era from the 1920s through the 1950s, film production was controlled by a handful of studios where variety and innovation continued, despite the control and despite self-censorship

of content. Even today, when each movie studio is a small part of a large media company, we still find variety, and occasionally something daring. The point is not simple. Yes, more creative and distribution companies owned by fewer companies does challenge variety and threaten to put the bottom line as the topmost concern. But the bottom line will not grow without creating and distributing innovative products, whether those products are newspapers, recorded music, television programs, movies, websites, or the advertisements that keep them all in business. This must happen or audiences – that is you and me – would get bored, turn elsewhere, and the companies would lose money.

There is no doubt that the business element in the media design has designs on us. They want our attention and our money. At the same time, we remain free agents, able to choose which site to go to or which song to download; which movie to watch or computer game to play. The result is an ongoing, multifaceted tension between conglomerate owners, the stockholders to which they may be beholden, the creative personnel within the various media organizations, many of whom are intent on applying imagination within the genres at their disposal, advertisers, whose money supports media productions, and the audience, always choosing among what's available and, in a way, making new things available by refusing what is already there. This complex interaction creates a complex text, a coherent meaningful structure that emerges from the media design. This text is made of the interaction of audience, the work (song, movie, television show), the producer/creator of the work, and the medium of its distribution or transmission. All play a role, all add to the complexity.

Technology

Ownership and the circulation of capital, together with the creation of media commodities to be delivered for profit, weave the commercial design of media. But radio, television, recorded sound, newspapers, and websites have to be created and distributed widely and made accessible. The creation and distribution of media is technologically driven. Technology, in its broadest sense, refers to any device or process that is the result of the practical application of science, mathematics, or engineering. The media is born of these applications and exists because of them. It can be argued that all audience art uses technology and is created and mediated by it: the composition of music in antiquity and the invention of perspective in painting in the early fifteenth century are the results of mathematical calculation. Photography is by any definition a technology-based art whose development from a chemical to a digital base follows the history of technology from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

Though many art forms make use of technology, mass-mediated art, indeed every aspect of media, depends upon it, is founded upon it, and is defined by it. It can be argued that the creation of the media (to borrow the title of Paul Starr's important book on the subject) began in the West in the mid-fifteenth century with the invention of movable, metal type. Gutenberg, credited as the inventor of metal type (it had actually been developed earlier, in Asia, and engravers throughout Europe were working on it at the same time as Gutenberg), was an engraver and worked from his technical

expertise in metallurgy to develop metal letters that could be arranged, inked, and pressed. The printing press itself grew out of agricultural technologies of wine and olive pressing. All parts of the process, the type, the press, ink, paper, have long histories that came together at this extraordinary time of the Renaissance, and all of them required the extension of the human imagination into tools that would provide for mass distribution.

Books were made by hand for centuries before the invention of type; they were created one by one, on order, and for people who could afford them. Printing made possible the production of books in large numbers for less money. The production of many copies made possible a larger readership, which increased as did literacy in the ensuing centuries. The content mediated by books changed as well, from the largely religious content during the early days of printing to works of science, philosophy, history, and literature. A fairly straight line can be drawn from the birth of the novel in the early eighteenth century to the contemporary best-seller, and it is a line that works its way through the growth of literacy and the technologies of mass production. As we will see in the next chapter, it also leads to the birth of the newspaper.

Throughout the Renaissance, from the fourteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, a combination of intellectual and mercantile energies pushed scientific inquiry while an expanding search for markets pushed technological development. Some technologies, like those of Leonardo da Vinci's designs for a flying machine, waited centuries to be translated into mechanically feasible forms. His notes on a calculating machine led the French philosopher Blaise Pascal to build one in 1642. In 1694, the German Wilhelm Leibniz refined Pascal's calculator into a more complex machine, work that set a path leading to the development of the computer in the nineteenth century, the period that saw the development of technologies that laid the ground for modern media.

The engines driving media technologies were business interests, a growing educated class, and imperialist expansions into less developed countries – all of which called for tools and, with those tools, an ability to communicate more broadly, to reach across geographical and temporal obstacles. The key technologies of the nineteenth century involved reconfigurations, *mediations* of time and space. The railroad moved physical objects – the body itself – through space, diminishing the time it took to get from one place to another. Telegraphy and telephony, each involving technologies that enhanced the rapid communication of information, transformed one physical entity into another, erasing space. Writing became electronic code – the dots and dashes of Morse code transmitted over wires – and the human voice itself became disembodied, separated from the anchor of the body. This led to radio, which in the early twentieth century became the first mass media to enter the private space of the home. Photography and motion pictures captured and represented space. The first stopped time in favor of recording space, while the second added time back, creating visual narratives that, by the early twentieth century, began to overtake the book as a medium for the culture to tell stories about itself. Recorded sound was invented in the late nineteenth century: Thomas Edison thought that movies would be a good companion medium for his company's invention of a wax cylinder that held the impression of sound vibrations.

But then he separated the two, and they remained separate until the late 1920s, the technology of the wax cylinder evolving into the music business that continues to generate music and contend with the newer technologies to distribute it.

Television, considered a foundational technology of the twentieth century, was in fact conceptualized in the mid-nineteenth century. William Urrichio, a scholar of television history, pinpoints the first ruminations about the medium in the 1870s, when Alexander Graham Bell – an inventor of telephony – and other scientists started to imagine using the telephone to broadcast live images around the world. Even earlier, in the 1840s, a fax-like technique had been developed for sending graphics by telegraph. In short, the delivery of images, and a fantasy of television, was being developed before motion pictures. Fantasy is a key word in the history of nineteenth-century technology and the birth of modern media, and the play of imagination was a useful alternative to other, more oppressive technologies of factory production in which humans were becoming functions of machines, creating wealth for some alongside a growing class of working poor. This was also the great age of imperialism, of wealthy Western countries ruling poorer Southern countries in Africa and Asia. Many of the nineteenth-century technologies were useful means of control and communication in colonized countries and between the colonies and the countries that ran them. Time and space needed to be overcome in order to keep the colonies governed. At the same time, useful technologies for control and command could also become technologies for flights of imagination.

Speculation, whimsy, and caution about what the future might bring accompanied the work of scientists and inventors. As we noted earlier, in 1818 Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, encoding within it the enduring myth of man creating man, without the bother of the normal processes of inception and birth. *Frankenstein* was the first modern telling of the robot story, of the cyborg that, once created, develops its own consciousness and threatens its creator. The narrative would nourish countless films and feed into the development of artificial intelligence as a discipline within computer science. Later in the century, H. G. Wells in England and Jules Verne in France developed what would become science fiction, which should more appropriately be called technology fiction and future fantasy, Wells imagining Martian invasion and Verne a voyage to the moon – the latter becoming an early motion picture, and the former the basis of a radio program that sent a good part of the United States into a panic.

In 1879, George du Maurier drew a cartoon for London's satirical magazine *Punch*, in which a Victorian couple in England address their daughter in "the Antipodes," the other side of the world, a colony of the mother country, fantasized as easily accessible through a picture phone (figure 1.1). The text reads in part:

EDISON'S TELEPHONOSCOPE (TRANSMITS LIGHT AS WELL AS SOUND).
Every evening, before going to bed, Pater- and Materfamilias set up an electric camera-obscura over their bedroom mantel-piece, and gladden their eyes with the sight of their Children at the Antipodes, and converse gaily with them through the wire.

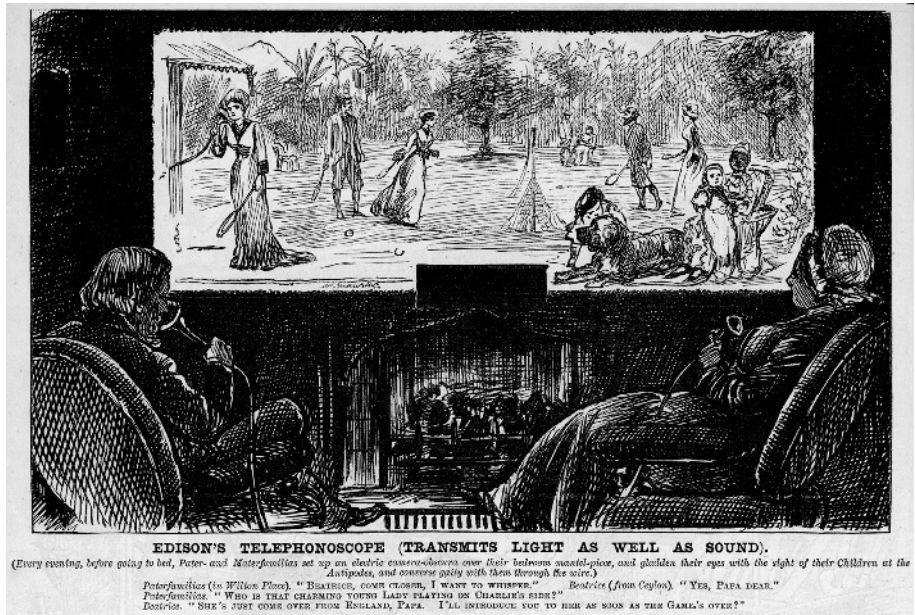


Figure 1.1 George Du Maurier's 1879 cartoon fantasizing television and the picture phone, from *Punch's Almanack*. Mary Evans Picture Library.

Fifteen years before the Lumière Brothers projected their movies in Paris, du Maurier picked up on the inventions of Edison and Bell and combined them with an older device, the camera obscura, in which an image of the outside world passed through a pinhole and onto the opposite side of a black box, fantasizing nothing short of a combination of wide, flat-panel television and the mobile picture phone. The world is brought into the home through visual transmission. The imagination of mass media is all but completed.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, two Britons – Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace, daughter of the poet Lord Byron; and the mathematician Charles Babbage – invented machinery and programming that would eventually become the modern computer. It was a long path that started as far back as the abacus in Asia, through the seventeenth-century calculating machines invented by Blaise Pascal and Wilhelm Leibniz, and the French weaver, Joseph Jacquard, who, in the early nineteenth century invented a means to program weaving patterns on punch cards, which, in turn, ran the looms. In the 1820s, Babbage began work on his Difference Engine to calculate mathematical tables. He started to build it, but couldn't get the necessary gears machined to the right specifications. He then proposed the Analytical Engine, which would be based on Jacquard's punch cards and perform sophisticated computation. It was never built.

Partnering him, mostly through written correspondence, Ada helped theorize programming for the Analytical Engine. She wrote poetically about its mathematics:

The distinctive characteristic of the Analytical Engine, and that which has rendered it possible to endow mechanism with such extensive faculties as bid fair to make this engine

the executive right-hand of abstract algebra, is the introduction into it of the principle which Jacquard devised for regulating, by means of punched cards, the most complicated patterns in the fabrication of brocaded stuffs. It is in this that the distinction between the two engines lies. Nothing of the sort exists in the Difference Engine. We may say most aptly that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraical patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves. (Quoted in Toole, 1992: 240–61)

And she warned against thinking more of the machine than it was:

The Analytical Engine has no pretensions whatever to originate any thing. It can do whatever we know how to order it to perform. It can follow analysis; but it has no power of anticipating any analytical relations or truths. Its province is to assist us in making available what we are already acquainted with. (*ibid.*)

Ada not only developed the art of computer programming, and had a modern programming language named after her, but she also set up an argument about the powers of intelligent machines that is carried on to this day.

By the end of the nineteenth century, electricity was added to the computing process and computers were put to use by the US Census Bureau. By the 1940s, another Britisher, Alan Turing, used computation to crack German war codes and the US army began using computing machines to track artillery trajectories. But, in the history of technology that concerns us, the computer lagged far behind much more simple mechanical and analogue methods of capturing and transmitting sound and light waves that became the basis of media. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that digital technology, and with it the ease of both creating and moving around words, sounds, and images, forced a convergence of traditional media forms and the industrial structures at their base. That convergence will underlie everything that follows in this book, for in the design of the media the rapid movement and the control of accessibility to television, movies, music, news – to all the artifacts of the media – is what media industries and technologies are about.

Immediacy and change

It may seem curious to use “immediacy,” a word that suggests a lack of mediation, to describe an important part of the media design. But the concepts of immediacy, of the instantly available and constantly new or novel, the fleeting and changeable, the here-now-and-then-replaced, are essential to our understanding of media culture. All parts of the media design, the creative and imaginative, production, distribution, and audience reception, are in constant flux, with a steady state of demand for profit and entertainment, of satisfaction of demand, of more demand, and more products.

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to go back to our comparison between small-audience “high” art and popular or mass art. A defining feature, a primary code of what we consider to be “high” art is its uniqueness and permanence. Think of a painting in a museum. Assuming it is an original, it has the presence of a unique item, the only one of its kind, bearing the marks of its creator's own hand. We look at the

painting and imagine ourselves in the presence of the painter. A Shakespeare play, though it may be printed and performed many times, affects us with the presence of its importance (we are convinced by having been told so often), the beauty of its poetry, and the profundity of ideas that seem appropriate to any period. We are told that Shakespeare's plays are "universal," transcending time and cultures, unique, and always present.

This effect of uniqueness and permanence was termed "aura" by the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin. Benjamin was a member of a group of scholars, called the Frankfurt School, who devoted much of their work, first in Germany and later (except for Benjamin, who died during World War II) in the US, to the study of media. Benjamin's 1935 essay entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was destined to become one of the foundations of media studies. According to Benjamin, the original work, the sense of authorial presence, the experience that the work of art is a direct channel (or mediation) between artist and audience, radiates an aura. Once art goes through mechanical or technological reproduction that removes a sense of the creator's presence from the work created, making the reproduction one copy out of many, aura is lost. Shakespeare comes alive in each and every performance of *Hamlet*, because the universality of his words maintains their aura each time they are spoken. But every recorded performance of the Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" is a copy of an original that is itself the product of a once popular group singing a song that speaks to contemporary popular culture. It is mediated, not by live, present performers, but on the radio, on a CD, an MP3, or an iTunes. When the Ramones do perform it on stage, it will be as much like the recording as possible, or a tribute band will attempt to sound like the group to which they are paying tribute. A rock concert may have an "aura" of immediate excitement, but might fail as a unique presentation of enduring truths.

Think about a television sitcom. There will be about 20 or 22 new episodes each season. But each of these episodes will have the same characters, in the same setting, delivering versions of the same lines, in the same way each week. Each character will react in the same way – literally, in the sense of responding with a look or a joke that is so slightly different from the last show as to be hardly different at all. In a sense, this meets the generic qualities we talked about earlier. Every "new" episode of the sitcom will be advertised as such – "coming up, an all new episode of *My Name is Earl*." Not partially, but *all* new. At the same time, the episode will be a reinforcement, close to a carbon copy of the previous episode, with a slightly different plot twist. Its immediacy exists not only in its newness, but also in its sameness. Genre and "aura" do not go well together, though Shakespearean comedy and tragedy do follow generic outlines. It would be more accurate to say that in high art, individual imagination acquires genre, which serves as a form to be molded by the artist. In mass-mediated art genre pushes and forms individual imagination, is duplicated, reproduced, and in the process loses its aura, but, Benjamin argues, gains by being available to a greater number of people.

This quality of sameness in the productions of media has, paradoxically, a sense of movement, of progression. Small-audience high art demands interrogation, requests

intellectual activity, and evokes profound emotional response. It asks us to pause, to stop and examine, and to pull away from the flow of the everyday in order to respond. The immediate response to the repetition of a rock song or a TV show secures us in its sameness, allowing us to move on with it, to consume it and move on to the next show, the next song. Immediacy and repetition build a rhythm of expectations continually met and gradually varied.

Media industries profit on meeting expectations and thrive on change. Only by promising and fulfilling a need for the new can profits continue to be made. The new can come in the form of content – a new song by a popular group; a new sitcom that just slightly varies its genre. Each new technology for creating, recording, and distributing media creates a shift in business methods and sometimes leads to the creation of new companies and even newer technologies, and occasionally new content (only rarely new genres). The stimulus for change comes from an interaction between the audience and the media business and can be quite complex. Recall the quotation about “panic in the industry” that began this chapter. The movie business is always in a state of panic, which can be traced back to its beginnings. I pointed out earlier that Edison wanted to create a visual accompaniment to a sound-recording device. For technical reasons, this marriage was not consummated and movies developed as a silent form for some 30 years. (“Silent,” however, is a relative term. During projection, silent film almost always had a live piano or orchestral accompaniment.) During the late twenties, audiences began to dwindle, putting the studios in economic distress. Some studios, Warner Bros. in particular, were close to failure. In response, they rushed to complete technologies of synchronized sound they had been experimenting with for some years. The studios looked at synchronized sound as a novelty. After all, silent film had both thrived and evolved into a sophisticated form of visual storytelling. Audience response to early sound films like Warner’s *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was so positive that the changeover became universal within months.

In the early 1950s, movie audiences were again dwindling, due in part to the growing popularity of television and to the fact that families were moving into suburbs not yet served by movie theaters. Again, the studios tried to meet the challenge through technological change by bringing forth various wide-screen technologies that soon permanently altered the old box-like, 3×4 ratio of the movie screen into the various wide-screen formats we see today. Television, however, maintained the 3×4 ratio and the sides were lopped off movies to format them “to fit your television.” In the 1980s, MTV videos and other commercials began being filmed and shown in “letter-box” format that emulated the wide screen. In the nineties, the introduction of DVDs, large-screen television, and high definition began changing the television screen itself.

The advent of the digital has speeded up media to a pace of breathless change. Media companies are moving in all possible directions to make money through the ease of delivery made possible by digital transfer of media objects. Music, made available for free through MP3 peer-to-peer networks, is now under pressure from copyright owners, put up for sale. Apple, the computing company, never able to penetrate more than a small percentage of the computer market, has found a new niche by selling the iPod music players and charging for downloads of music. Movie and television studios

and networks, coming to terms with falling attendance at theaters and viewers time-shifting television programs with their VTRs, are making films and programs available online and on mobile phones. Some movies are being released on cable and on DVD simultaneously with their release in theaters.

Convergence is the magic media word for the way the various means for delivery are coming together in ever-changing ways. There are new combinations almost daily, many of them desperate attempts to capture an audience that is itself changing rapidly. There is nothing more fluid, fleeting, or slippery as the taste for popular art. There is often nothing more amusing than watching media producers attempt to outguess its audience. Sometimes they synchronize. Pleasure occurs for the audience; money accrues to the producers. Sometimes, desire for pleasure and desire for profit just slide by each other, and the quest continues, rapidly, always on the lookout for a perfect fit that will last for a moment or produce profit for years to come.

The rapidity of change and quest for novelty has an important consequence for writing about media. Put simply, some of what you read here will be out of date by the time you read it. That's why we'll be working with general concepts, which have some permanence, and methodologies we can use to study particular media texts, which can be extrapolated to the media texts that are current when you read this. That's also why an active website accompanies this book. The permanence of printed page can be offset by the immediacy and volatility of the digital.

Evaluation

Our discussion of change in media has focused largely on media technologies and less so on the productions formed and carried by them – the content of media. We need to return to content in order to address the notion of evaluation, of judging media critically. Earlier, I indicated that it was possible to navigate away from the usual condemnations of media and its creations as simple-minded, vulgar, and unimportant. To understand media and its various productions, we need to begin from a point of understanding their complexity rather than dismissing them as commercial and crass. At the same time, there are always evaluative acts that are carried out on all levels of media-making both from within the media – including professional journalists whose job is to review its productions – and from our situation as audience. We need to consider, for example, the imponderables of taste. How do we account for the fact that I may like the kind of music that you cannot sit still for, or that the reality shows that you find amusing, I may find banal? Within the media, how does a record company's A&R (artists and repertoire) person, who listens to many singers, make a choice of whom to record; or a movie producer, who reads dozens of scripts and listens to dozens of story pitches, choose what she thinks will make a commercially successful film, again based on experience and on taste? If questioned, you will probably defend your taste quite directly: "I like their lyrics and the way the band works together." The A&R person or film producer will most likely assert the superiority of his or her taste, and the certainty of understanding "what the public wants."

There are the professional critical voices, the evaluators we turn to in order to help us make a choice. Film reviewers, for example, are everywhere: in newspapers, on television, radio, online. They form a part of the movie distribution process. While they don't work for the studios, the studios depend upon them as part of the advertising campaign for a particular film. They speak the language of immediacy – they see a film once just before it is released – and they work within a genre all their own. They summarize a film's plot, talk about its characters, and more often than not make bad jokes and a pun on the film's title. They do pan a film on occasion, usually by making fun of it. But the studios are extremely careful of this. If they have a film they know is terrible, they won't send it out for critic previews. A film critic is part of the entertainment process. No qualifications are necessary, which is why he or she will rarely address matters of film form – how the film tells its story – or where it fits in the history of the medium. Other media do better at evaluation. Music, for example, produces some outstanding critical writing in newspapers and through magazines like *Rolling Stone*. Here is Philip Kennicott, writing in *The Washington Post* in 2006 about the Three 6 Mafia rap, “It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” which won the Academy Award for best song in the film *Hustle and Flow*:

Witness the explosion of a new hip-hop meme into “white culture.” ... Perhaps the line [“It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp”] has resonance because so much of American political discourse is about determining who is allowed to feel properly aggrieved. Is it Muslims offended about sacrilegious cartoons, or defenders of free speech seeing their high holy delimited? Daytime talk radio has essentially evolved into a vast trading floor for the commodity of complaint. And slowly we drift to a new understanding of the basic social contract: Your liberty ends where my outrage begins.

A pimp complaining that “It's hard out here” has, in a single outrageous leap, passed by the issue of whether he has any right to grievance, and is demanding – so shamelessly that it's funny – all the perks and merits of someone who legitimately feels wronged.

The musical setting of the line, a deliciously catchy and melodic tag, confirms the scandal. The line that the conservative Kathryn Jean Lopez and a zillion other people can't get out of their heads is essentially a melodic ending, a sequence of notes that seems to conclude a musical thought. Yet it keeps repeating, if the person who insists that it's hard out here for a pimp is continually saying, “Case closed.” I'm right, end of argument ...

I quote this at length because it shows how an understanding of contemporary music demands that we also understand the culture that surrounds it. Kennicott defines how the structure of rap, its musical lines and melodic tags, create a sympathetic response, even – or especially – when its lyric could be deemed offensive by some. In fact, the starting point for Kennicott's essay highlights another kind of evaluation that occurs on the cultural and political level. The essay takes as its starting point a conservative blogger's uneasiness about the song: it is morally repugnant but catchy, nonetheless. Kennicott analyzes the song and its effect within the context of the resistance to it.

As we have seen, media have always been the target of concern from the defenders of high culture. Evaluating media for content that might be offensive is a game that has been played for as long as modern media have existed. In the United States the game usually begins with statements of outrage from religious groups that are then taken up by a government agency and finally absorbed by the media that is the object of the outrage, in the form of self-censorship. The cycle of outrage is most clearly demonstrated in the history of film censorship. Films of the early 1930s were often openly sexual without being pornographic and, with the birth of the gangster genre, increasingly violent. Catholic groups took issue especially with the sexual content of films, but also with the glorification of gangster violence. Their pressures resulted in the formation of an internal censorship unit, called the Hays Office, after one of its directors. From the early thirties through the fifties, almost every movie script went to the Hays Office to be vetted for objectionable material, which, according to the Hays Code guidelines, included anything from sex outside of marriage that went unpunished to merely showing a married couple sleeping in the same bed, as well as any criminal activity that did not end in the capture and prosecution of the criminal.

The result was another game that went on inside of this process. Screenwriters would write in the most outrageous, most raunchy material possible, hoping that it would act as a diversion for the censorship board. The board would fall upon this material while other, more subtle, sexual references passed by unnoticed. The game had a positive effect on the imagination of film-makers and viewers. Sexuality and violence would be played out subtly, indirectly; the viewer would be called upon to imagine the unseen.

The Hays Code remained intact until the late fifties, when a number of films, most famously Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), began to render it useless; in time it was retooled by the Motion Picture Association of America, a powerful industry group. You see the results to this day in the rating system that begins every film and most television programming. The rating system allows the studios to police themselves and control output, essentially limiting what film-makers can do by threatening to give a film a restrictive rating. It allows them to control the audience as well, basically creating smaller, younger audience or a larger, more adult audience by means of the rating given to a film.

Censorship proclaims itself as an act of protection, but too often reveals itself as an exercise in resentment and power. The Hays Office is history, as are the senate hearings of the 1950s that sought the causes of juvenile delinquency in comic books and rock 'n' roll. But there remain various groups who watch for changes in the moral barometers of the culture at large and blame the media for causing the change. Some of these evaluate media as a measure of cultural collapse; others as purveyors of immorality. The first group wring their hands about the coarsening of taste and blame the media. The second narrow their focus, going after sexual and violent content of music, television, film, and games, insisting that exposure to such content will somehow infect the culture and that their vigilance will help inoculate the culture against the infection.

Aimed often at the "liberal media," sometimes tinged with anti-Semitism (as in the occasional, outrageous, and false claims about the Jewish-owned media), this criticism

as censorship claims to speak for a segment of the culture that finds itself offended by sex and violence in media and believes it must protect everyone from the cause of this offense. The aggrieved group sets itself against the producers of the offensive material, creating a set of oppositions and promising to force change, often through boycotts or, because they rarely do have a profound influence on media producers, on distribution outlets. So, for example, WalMart – a huge market for media products – may not carry DVDs of films, CDs of music, or games deemed to be offensive by watchdog groups. Occasionally a network may pull a show, or an advertiser its commercials, if the offended group complains enough.

This “us against them” opposition to media is largely the symbolic flexing of moral and economic muscle. Such organized opposition refuses to recognize the reality that individuals are perfectly free to choose what to buy and watch or listen to. It may in fact recognize that parental control is not easy, yet rather than educate the means to gain that control, it bypasses it by attempting to remove the thing it wants controlled.

Sometimes the government will step in, particularly to support groups that support these groups. The infamous half-time event during the 2004 Super Bowl game, during which singer Justin Timberlake exposed singer Janet Jackson’s breast, resulted in the Federal Communications Commission levying a \$550,000 fine on Viacom, the company that owned CBS at the time (later a court found the fine excessive). The event was vulgar enough in itself, though only a bit more vulgar than much of television often is. Despite claims that it was an “accident,” media observers saw it as a rather transparent attempt on the part of CBS to test the limits of sexual display. Conservative morality groups in their turn tested their powers to punish such displays. The FCC’s decision to side with them, and ratchet up its censorship powers over all network programming, led to greater caution on the part of broadcasters. Caution, as always, plays out in areas of sexual content; rarely in violence, which, on television, has grown incrementally during the ensuing years, especially as the FCC keeps raising its fines in response to continued agitation by groups who are themselves agitated by what they see on television.

The varieties of media criticism, from movie reviewers to political or religious pressure groups to the MPAA, are almost exclusively involved with content. A movie reviewer discusses a film’s plot, the MPAA gives an R rating for sexual content, and a conservative watchdog group will decry the sexual innuendo of *Desperate Housewives*, while describing the content in detail on their website. What is left out is the determining factor of content, the *form* that creates content. If we look again at the article on the rap song quoted earlier, or the following discussion of a computer game, we understand that content alone does not explain our response to media:

The prince’s internal conflict is given tangible form when his blood is infected by the Sands of Time, which causes him on occasion to turn into the powerful Dark Prince, a savage, primal creature. The Dark Prince can easily slay demons, and must do so to replenish the sand that keeps him alive. He must also speed through the game’s elaborate obstacle courses to reach safety before his sand runs out, and the player is likely to die repeatedly in the attempt. This is exciting, but sometimes more frustrating than fun. (Herold, 2005)

Imagination, emotional and physical engagement, mark the relationship between a gamer and the game.

The cultural analyses of “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp” and the above poetic description of *The Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* express an understanding of what happens when we evaluate media as a formal construct in which we, as participants, play a part. Content doesn’t exist by itself but is determined by form, which includes the internal structure of a song or television show as well as the larger external structures of production and distribution. When we consider a computer game, for example, we would need to go beyond concerns that its violent content will desensitize its players to violence in the “real” world and instead try to analyze how it situates a player either as a first-person participant or part of a large, online community. We would need to analyze the quality of the graphics and the intricacies of the interaction between player and game. We would need to understand that form responds to the desire of the player and that the player can influence the form of a game.

The communities become part of the total structure of gaming that we need to study in order to understand and evaluate gaming as a practice, a part of the media complex, its art, business, and its audience. The notion of form as primary object of study, with an emphasis on the fact that the media audience is part of the media text, and that text is intricately connected with the cultures that surround and infiltrate it, make up the design of media studies.

Conclusion

One important aspect of that cultural surround must be mentioned, because the design lives within it and we live within it, and that is the concept of *modernity*. Modernity is not part of the media design; it is what designs the media. It is not a thing, not something out there, but rather a state of culture, of a society, of the way people think about their world and their place in it. Modernity is a state of uncertainty, where we can no longer rely on external or even internal events to provide us with a secure and coherent environment. Modernity is change, which may be its only constant. It is the attempt to comprehend the universe, which physicists tell us is simultaneously infinite and finite; and life, which evolutionary biology theorizes comes from perhaps four basic gene sets. Modernity is a state in which we may turn to religion to provide us with the balance and anchor we do not find elsewhere, or to computer games or rock ’n’ roll to focus our emotions and intellect. It is the cynicism of the media, working imagination in the service of commerce, and the desire of the audience to be entertained, distracted, and to create a community on MySpace. Modernity is the lack of a secure mooring. And it is the media – beginning with telephony, movies, radio, and television, and now with computers – that allow us to be unmoored, to travel without moving, to maintain virtual relationships with friends, to carry our imaginations beyond our place and even our time. These are the beginnings and ends of the media design, and are influenced by the business structure in which they thrive together with the entire cultural surround in which they and we live.

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