

Erkki Huhtamo
University of California Los Angeles

Intercultural Interfaces: Correcting the pro-Western Bias of Media History¹

On September 14, 1792, the British caricaturist James Gillray published an engraving titled *The Reception of the Diplomatique & his Suite, at the Court of Peking*.² It appeared just before the departure of Lord Macartney's mission to China, organized in the hope of opening up relations and trade.³ In his satirical print Gillray shows a ridiculous selection of miscellaneous gifts, including a rat trap, an infant's coral rattle, a toy windmill, a racket, a shuttlecock, a cup with dice – and a magic lantern with a slide. It is with these trinkets that the British will, according to Gillray's satirical vision, try to impress the ancient civilization of China. In other words, the emperor is treated much like the village chief on a remote island who has just been reminded that the outside world exists. The inclusion of the magic lantern cannot be a coincidence. Having been invented in the mid-17th century, it had already become a familiar object, encountered both in the curiosity cabinets of the savants and the cheap shows given by travelling lanternists or 'colporteurs'.⁴ In fact, it was no longer new in China - it had already been introduced in the imperial court more than a century earlier by the Jesuit missionary Claudio Filippo Grimaldi.⁵ Another Jesuit, Jean-Baptiste du Halde, described Grimaldi's lantern demonstration in his *Description ... de l'Empire de la Chine* (1735):

“Finally he showed [the Emperor] a Tube which contained a burning lamp, whose light exits via the small hole of a tube, at the mouth of which is a telescope lens and in which slide several small glasses painted with various pictures. These same pictures are represented on the wall opposite, smaller or of a prodigious size, according to whether the wall is close or far away. This spectacle during the night or in a very dark place, caused as much fear in those who did not know the art, as it did pleasure in those who had been instructed. It was this which caused it to be given the name Magic Lantern.”⁶

¹ This text is a revised version of the paper read at the *Re:place: On the Histories of Media, Art, Science and Technology* conference, House of the World Cultures, Berlin, November 17, 2007.

² Reproduced in David Robinson, *The Lantern Image. Iconography of the Magic Lantern 1420-1880*, Nutney, East Sussex: The Magic Lantern Society, 1993, 38. The engraving was published by H.Humphrey, 18 Old Bond Street, London.

³ See Albert S. Roe, "The Demon behind the Pillow: a Note on Erasmus Darwin and Reynolds," *Burlington Magazine*, Vol.113, No 821 (1971), 468.

⁴ For the early history of the magic lantern, see Deac Rossell's "Magic Lantern: a History, part I," (forthcoming, Stuttgart: Fuesslin Verlag, 2008).

⁵ To my knowledge there is no information available about the magic lantern's other possible uses in China. Did it develop a tradition? Was it adopted by Chinese showmen? Were magic lanterns ever produced in China? This is one of the *lacunae* that needs to be filled.

⁶ Quoted in Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art and Light and Shadow. Archaeology of the Cinema*, trans. Richard Crangle, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000 (orig.1994), 73. The magic lantern was only one of the “wonders of Optics” with which Father Grimaldi astonished “all the Great Ones of the Empire.”

The reactions of the Chinese spectators to Grimaldi's projections sound familiar. In fact, it seems that Halde is simply repeating a formula (or *topos*) he may have found from earlier books about "natural magic." After all, more than sixty years had passed since Grimaldi's presentations.⁷ Two modes of reception are suggested: in the first case, the fascination emerges from the spectator's familiarity with the "trick;" in the second, his unfamiliarity with the causes creates fear and terror.⁸ Both strategies have been used countless times by westerners – missionaries, educators, tradesmen, politicians - to impress, frighten and discipline other peoples and cultures.

Let me give another example. In a travel account from 1827, an anonymous writer [a British diplomat] describes the ways in which the British ambassador to Persia used western technology to impress the Persians. After an electric shock machine had lost its fascination by becoming too familiar as an attraction, the ambassador had purchased a phantasmagoria magic lantern, giving performances as part of his mission. Phantasmagoria, a ghost show, was the state of the art at the time.⁹ Soon "old and young, rich and poor were in raptures."¹⁰ According to the ambassador, the device not only convinced the locals of western technological superiority; the magic lantern amusement also helped to 'break the ice,' subverting the rigid diplomatic conventions by creating a relaxed atmosphere. Convinced of the workability of the ambassador's idea, the author recommends "phantasmagorias, or something similar, as of essential importance to the success of all future embassies to Persia!"¹¹

Whether factually accurate or not, these discursive fragments point to a familiar pattern: when it comes to the history of technology (in this case, "media technology"), the west has been positioned, over and over again, as the nexus from which technological innovations emanate to the rest of the world. In a recent, highly polemical book, the famous anthropologist Jack Goody has accused Europe – including European scholars - of "The Theft of History."¹² For Goody, in the European tradition "the east is ignored, oral cultures unconsidered." After discussing the treatment of topics like space and time, capitalism, science and technology, and even romantic love by European scholars,

⁷ According to Mannoni, Grimaldi, who was in correspondence with Leibniz, may have introduced both the magic lantern and the camera obscura at the Chinese court around 1671-72, when he first arrived to the Chinese capital (Mannoni, 72).

⁸ Pierre Petit, who was familiar with the Dane Walgenstein and the Dutch Huygens, who were among the very first to use the magic lantern (Huygens is often considered its inventor sometime before 1659), gave it the name *lanterne du peur* ("lantern of fear") (Mannoni, 48).

⁹ It is also possible that the author used "phantasmagoria" as a generic term for the normal magic lantern. Philip Carpenter in England had introduced his "Improved Phantasmagoria Lantern" c.1821. It had little to do with the special equipment (fantascopes) created for the phantasmagoria proper. For more about phantasmagoria, see Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, Hastings, East Sussex: The Projection Box, 2006. See also my critical commentary on Heard's work, "Ghost Notes: Reading Mervyn Heard's *Phantasmagoria. The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*," *The Magic Lantern Gazette*, Vol.18, N:o 4 (Winter 2006), 10-20.

¹⁰ Anon., *Sketches of Persia, from the Journals of a Traveller in the East*, Vol.II, London: John Murray, 1827, 180.

¹¹ *Sketches of Persia*, 183.

¹² Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Goody concludes that they have "stolen history by imposing their categories and sequences on the rest of the world."¹³ The European supremacy is confirmed again and again. In one of the most extreme formulations, the historian H.R. Trevor-Roper asserts outright that "the history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history."¹⁴

Even in those rare cases in which a western authority has clearly acknowledged the achievements and primacy of a non-western culture, Goody detects problems. Joseph Needham's classic multi-volume *Science and Civilisation in China* (1954-) demonstrates the breath of the achievements of the Chinese civilization during thousands of years, providing a massive argument against treating Europe as the origin of all significant and influential things.¹⁵ However, even Needham ran into a dilemma, which has come to be known as the "Needham problem."¹⁶ According to Needham, in spite of the Chinese achievements, the west took the lead from the 16th century onwards. For Needham, the primary cause was the emergence of the private enterprise of the bourgeoisie during the Renaissance, which created a favourable setting for the sciences to flourish.¹⁷ The Chinese society, however, remained stifled by rigid bureaucracy that did not allow competition and open scientific discussion.¹⁸ This explanation has not been universally accepted; the Needham problem is still debated.

Taking Media History beyond Eurocentrism

What is clear, is that the European attitudes toward other cultures haven't been disinterested. On the contrary, they have served political, economic, educational-propagandistic and cultural-hegemonistic goals, often enmeshed with each other. It might even be suggested that westerners have, at least in some cases, striven to install among other cultures a model that cultural anthropologists call 'carbo cults.' It refers to a complex of indigeneous practices and symbolic manifestations that see the western "overseas" civilization – represented by the trade boats or cargo planes appearing from the horizon and disappearing there again - as the source of everything desirable. The western things that have been seen, but are largely beyond the reach of the native

¹³ Goody, 304. Such Eurocentrism was – unawares - even present in Siegfried Zielinski's invited lecture at the Re:place conference, Berlin 2007. Zielinski called for studies that "should go eastwards and southwards," implying Europe as the centerpoint.

¹⁴ Goody, 1.

¹⁵ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954- (seven volumes projected, latest to date: Vol. VII, Pt.2, 2004).

¹⁶ See Goody, 148-153.

¹⁷ See A.C. Graham, "China, Europe, and the Origins of Modern Science: Needham's The Great Titration," in *Chinese Science. Explorations of an Ancient Tradition*, ed. Shigeru Nakayama and Nathan Sivin, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1973, 47.

¹⁸ As Shigeru Nakayama has noted, Needham also emphasized the impact of the Christian monotheistic tradition, which assigned common origins to the human natural law and the laws of Nature. Under monotheism and absolute monarchy, "the search for the laws of Nature has developed the same significance as obedience to natural law." (Shigeru Nakayama, "Joseph Needham, Organic Philosopher," in *Chinese Science*, 41.) What about the Greek science under polytheism, Nakayama asks.

population, become re-enacted in tribal rituals and provided with symbolic, and even magic, qualities. It may seem a questionable leap to try to connect the island cultures of the Pacific, where 'cargo cults' first developed, with the court of the Prince of Persia, who develops an ardent desire to possess the British ambassador's phantasmagoria lantern, but whose offers are turned down (no doubt due to cunning calculation by the diplomats – a sustained desire serves their goals better than a satisfied one). Of course, these cultural contexts are hugely different and cannot be compared as such. Still, in both cases the west is positioned as the cultural Other, an abode of miraculous inventions, and wealth.

I agree with Goody that eurocentric historical narratives are suspicious. Do they really tell the whole (hi)story? Could it be told differently, releasing the non-westerners from their peripheral and passive roles? Isn't it missing something essential – like the accounts by the non-western cultural agents themselves? Goody demonstrates that many of the topics listed above have appeared elsewhere, even centuries before they came to the attention of the Europeans. How could this multiplicity be taken into account? How could the different perspectives be brought together, constructing more 'truthful' narratives of cultural contributions, migrations, influences and mergers? This paper will make some suggestions by concentrating on a more specific issue: the history of "media." As any book bearing these words in its title easily discloses, the history of media has been a particularly western "affair." A case in point, Asa Briggs's and Peter Burke's *A Social History of the Media* (2002) bears the telling subtitle "From Gutenberg to the Internet."¹⁹ Although the "A" in the title reminds the reader that this is just one possible version, non-western developments (save for a few references to China and Japan) have practically no role in the nearly 400-page volume. Starting from the Gutenbergian print revolution and its context, the book proceeds to discuss the media and the public sphere in early modern Europe [sic], continuing to topics like steam and electricity, information, education and entertainment, and finally cyberspace.

That it is possible to deal with media history differently is demonstrated by Timon Screech's remarkable book *The Lens Within the Heart. The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan*. Strictly speaking, Screech is not writing "media history." He investigates the vicissitudes of western scientific (particularly optical) knowledge in Japan during the relatively isolated Edo period (1603-1868). Far from being passive, the Japanese actively integrated pieces of western learning into their own cultural habits, practices and imaginaries. Screech expresses his mission succinctly:

*"Our inner theme is international encounter - the existence and compulsion of 'the foreign' within a native space. We shall consider how one cultural cluster - Japan (federal and disparate as it was at this time) - used another in the building up of its proper self. The case is made that this encounter provoked a change in Japan that particularly related to systems of visual awareness - indeed, to a reassessment of the entire faculty of sight."*²⁰

¹⁹ Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*, Oxford: Blackwell / Polity, 2002.

²⁰ Timon Screech, *The Lens Within the Heart. The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002 (orig. 1996), 1.

The Japanese contribution was not limited merely to the level of the discursive; it also manifested itself in material forms, such as the *karakuri* (wooden automata) and the *Utsushi-e*, the Japanese magic lantern show that combined features from Asian shadow theatre, the Western magic lantern show and Japanese popular storytelling, leading to an original cultural form.²¹ The Japanese did not slavishly imitate foreign influences; they adapted and synthesized them with their own ideas, gradually and silently laying the foundations for their later technological and cultural achievements that were eventually exported to other parts of the world. Western accounts are usually lacking an awareness of the extent, length and depth of such processes. The Japanese contributions to today's media culture are considered important, but also as something very recent, a post-World War II development. They are often explained as being successful *imitations* of foreign influences. It is rarely understood, for example, that popular cultural forms like *manga* and *anime* contain elements – techniques, themes, narrative strategies – that have been developing within the Japanese context for a very long time.²² The encounter with Western comics, animated films and other forms of 20th century popular culture gave motivation to re-activate these traditions and develop them further to match contemporary mentalities; but they did not suddenly appear out of nowhere.²³

Toward a Comparative Approach to Media History

As the rise of the "New Historicism" has made clear, historical writing cannot escape the valuations and perceptions of the ever-changing present.²⁴ However, neither should it turn them into a mold superimposed on the past. A theoretically-informed dynamics has to be created between these two poles. Applied to the current state of the media-historical scholarship this means that under the increasingly global media-cultural condition, histories that are *a priori* Western-centered have become untenable. At the same time, trying to correct the situation by merely casting a "multi-cultural" mold over the past, thereby replacing singularity with a pretended plurality (in other words, amending Eurocentric media history with a conglomeration of local "media histories"), would be insufficient. What is needed is a *qualitative* re-orientation – a history that takes into account cross-cultural exchanges and influences. Such a history should not focus

²¹ Although he mentions magic lanterns in Japan, Screech does not deal with *Utsushi-e*. For an introduction, see the excellent website on *Utsushi-e* created by Professor Machiko Kusahara from Waseda University, <http://plaza.bunka.go.jp/bunka/museum/kikaku/exhibition02/english/index-e.html>. The website also contains my short article "Utsushi-e, The Japanese Magic Lantern Show". The nearly extinct tradition has been recently revived by the theatre group *Minwa-za* (Tokyo) and others.

²² This is a point the well-known Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami has been contently making, in relation both to his own work and to the Japanese popular culture that has influenced him. See Murakami's book *Superflat*, Tokyo: Madra Publishing Co, 2000.

²³ Adam L. Kern's book *Manga From the Floating World, Comicbook Culture and the Kibyoshi of Edo Japan*, Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2006 shows that Manga (the Japanese comic book) has a long and rich history, deeply rooted in Japanese visual culture. Kern's extremely well documented book provides a model for media-cultural scholarship as well.

²⁴ See *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser, New York and London: Routledge, 1989.

only on hard material facts, such as the evolution of media technology. Other cultures may not have developed gadgets that would qualify as "media technology" in the western sense. They may, however, have created *other* cultural forms that have fulfilled similar functions. Of course, these functions could also be something quite different, emerging from the needs and concerns of the local context. Finally, one also needs to consider the symbolic and the discursive. The tribal "cargo cultists" who produced their own bricolaged versions of western devices, using them in rituals and weaving mythological narratives around them, may in fact have participated in a "media culture" of sorts. To be able to account for phenomena like this, media history may need to look beyond its boundaries toward other disciplines.

Useful models can be found from cultural and visual anthropology and comparative cultural studies. Significantly, Goody, who calls himself "an anthropologist (or comparative sociologist)," proposes "an anthropo-archaeological approach to modern history."²⁵ Cultural anthropology has for a long time been learning to deal with the complexities and pitfalls of cross-cultural encounters. The relationship between the observer and the observed is never without problems, particularly when it entails overcoming complex issues of power, cultural difference and economic inequality. When it comes to visual anthropology, the writings of Eric Michaels about the extremely intricate relationships between the Australian aborigines, the western media technology, the Australian government and the cultural anthropologist as an in/outsider provide a supreme, and theoretically enlightened, example.²⁶ Unfortunately, the historian cannot enjoy the opportunity of doing fieldwork. S/he needs to patch the explanation together from sources that are heterogeneous and fragmentary. Heuristic problems, when it comes to cross-cultural communication that may have happened in the distant past, can be extremely complex. A certain amount of speculation cannot be avoided.

What comparative historical approaches can achieve is demonstrated by Victor H. Mair's book *Painting and Performance. Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis* (1988).²⁷ Beginning as a narrowly focused study about a genre of Chinese popular literature known as *pian-wen* ("transformation texts") from the T'ang period (618-906), the book broadens up into a vast cultural and geographic mapping of the migration routes of 'picture recitation' or 'visual storytelling,' spanning thousands of years. According to Mair's persuasive, but necessarily tentative conclusion, the original 'home' of such traditions may have been ancient India, from where they spread to all directions, transforming themselves as they gradually merged with local influences. Interestingly, none of the cultural vectors that Mair has identified originate in Europe. The European tradition of *Bänkelsang* or *Moritat*, a popular 'nomadic show' of the 18th and 19th centuries that affected other forms of "screen practice," bears similarities with much

²⁵ Goody, 3, 287.

²⁶ Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art. Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. For a more general introduction to the theory of visual anthropology, see Sol Worth, *Studying Visual Communication*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

²⁷ Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance. Chinese Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

older Asian traditions of visual storytelling and was most likely influenced by them.²⁸ Another western media-cultural phenomenon, the 19th century moving panorama, a show which displayed large and long rolls of paintings, may have been equally influenced by eastern models, such as the Javanese Wayang bèbèr, although to date no direct connecting links have been found.²⁹

Comparative methods could be applied to trace the trajectories of other visual cultural forms as well, such as the shadow theatre and the peep-show. Both are encountered in 'localized' forms in different cultural and ethnic contexts over wide geographic areas. While the former's origins are clearly Asian, the latter may have originated in the occident, spreading along trade routes and reinterpreted by the different cultures along the way. Traces of peep-show practices can be found from a wide area, including Egypt, Syria, India, Singapore, China, Russia, Japan, Europe and Northern America.³⁰ Although the structures of the peep-show 'apparata' are often quite similar (implying that they did not develop in isolation), their external designs vary according to local traditions and aesthetics. What these boxes contained is a historical problem. At least some Chinese and Japanese ones seem to have displayed "foreign views," perhaps pointing to their foreign origins. A Japanese illustration from 1782 shows a peep-showman doing his business. Boards affixed on the box read: *Oranda o-garakuri*; "Great Dutch Karakuri".³¹ Peering into the peephole meant a momentary escape from one's physical surroundings, an optical trip into a foreign land that was simultaneously out of reach. So far the cross-cultural trajectories of the peep-show have received little scholarly attention.³² One of the reasons may be its status as a street entertainment. While the shadow theatre had social, cultural and religious connotations that helped to preserve its memory and its exhibition practices, even to our day, the peep-show was considered as something ephemeral.³³ In spite of its wide cultural presence, it has left few traces.

What constitutes a "Medium"?

As has already been suggested, the quest for cross-cultural comparative media history may force us to redefine the meanings of "media" and "media culture." These concepts

²⁸ The concept "screen practice" was coined by Charles Musser, see his *Emergence of the Cinema: The American screen to 1907, History of the American cinema, vol.1*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, chapter one, "Towards a History of Screen Practice".

²⁹ I will deal with the issue in my upcoming book on the moving panorama (University of California Press). For a shorter early treatment of this connection, see my "Peristrepthic Pleasures, or The Origins of the Moving Panorama," in *Allegories of Communication: Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to the Digital*, edited by Jan Olsson and John Fullerton, Rome: John Libbey Publishing, 2004, 215-248.

³⁰ Based on the information collected by the author from various sources, including visual representations.

³¹ See Screech, *The Lens within the Heart*, 121. "Nozoki karakuri" was the Japanese name for the peep-show box.

³² A few hints about the extent of the peep-show tradition can be found from Richard Balzer's *Peepshows. A Visual History*, New York: Abrams, 1998.

³³ About the social, religious and cultural meanings of the Javanese shadow theatre, see Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987.

developed in the west reflecting occidental ideas; therefore they should not be superimposed on other cultures without scrutiny.³⁴ Of course, some cases may be easier to decide than others. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to use the word "peep-media" as a general term, as I have done in another context.³⁵ "Peep-media" existed in many contexts and forms, yet in spite of local differences these nevertheless resembled each other. The peep-show box is an *apparatus* (a "media machine") designed for viewing visual representations that could even be enhanced by 'visual effects,' such as motion and 'atmospheric' transformations. The peep-show could be seen as a "media cultural" phenomenon, because it offered "mediated" experiences that were visually and experientially separated from the continuum of everyday experience. Enclosed in a box and "entered" optically, the pictures provided "virtual voyaging" experiences, to use an anachronism.³⁶ It could also be pointed out that the practice of peeping is still present in contemporary media culture, most obviously in the "logic of attraction" used by commercial websites (in particular erotic ones) that try to seduce the user by tiny thumbnail pictures or animations, persuading him/her to "enter" them by paying a fee (the credit card has replaced the coins handed to the peep-showman).³⁷ How this phenomenon could be linked with the peep-shows of the past is a historiographical and cultural-theoretical problem.

Could the shadow theatre be considered a "medium" as well? Isn't it rather a performative genre, a form of ritual theatre?³⁸ Does the addition of magic lantern projections to the shadow theatre, as happened in the Japanese *Utsushi-e*, turn it into a medium – especially because *Utsushi-e* was more clearly a form of 'pure' entertainment?

³⁴ See Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, London: Fontana, 1984 (orig.1976), 203-204. For Williams, in the mid-20th century the concept "media" "became widely used when broadcasting as well as the press had become important in communications." Although the plural form had been available since the mid 19th century, its development "probably" happened in the context of describing the newspaper as a medium for advertising.

³⁵ See my "The Pleasures of the Peephole: An Archaeological Exploration of Peep Media", in *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*, edited by Eric Kluitenberg, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006, 74-155.

³⁶ Jonathan Crary, analyzing William Hogarth's *Southwark Fair* (1730s), has noted the presence of the peep-show box as one of the attractions of the fair. For him, it is an index pointing toward the development of the modern enclosed and privatized spectatorship, and the fading of the carnival. Crary ignores the peep-show's cross-cultural dimension, dealing with it in an exclusively western context. Would it make sense to claim that a peep-show displayed in a 19th century Indian village or at a 1950s Japanese popular fair announced isolated modern spectatorship as well? The spectators of the peep-show at an 18th century fair may not have been as isolated from the surrounding "carnival" as Crary thinks. The experience was momentary, the sounds from the outside formed a continuum and physical contact between the peepers was commonplace. These factors kept the peeping experience firmly tied to the carnival. As before, Crary's argument suffers from his refusal to consider such contextual factors. See Jonathan Crary, "Géricault, the Panorama, and Sites of Reality in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Grey Room*, 09 (Fall 2002), 7-8.

³⁷ Many peep-show boxes had pictures attached on the outside as "teasers" for things waiting inside the box. This practice is related to other forms of "the culture of attractions," such as the ads hanging outside fairground tents and eventually the posters at the entrance to cinema theatres, as well as billboards. About other manifestations of peeping in contemporary media culture, see Clay Calvert, *Voyeur Nation. Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004.

³⁸ Imported to Europe since the late 17th century, probably via Italy, the shadow theatre became more clearly a form of commercial spectacle and eventually also a domestic pastime.

How about the trajectories of 'visual storytelling' – can a peripatetic singer explaining pictures at a marketplace be characterized as a kind of 'media artist' *avant la lettre*? To have a meaning in the cross-cultural context, the concept "media" should probably be extended to cover cultural forms that deal with communication, but don't necessarily involve the *replacement* of the physical human element with something mediated. The use of advanced "media technology" should not be considered an absolute criterium either, nor should one require the existence of institutionally maintained networks for the dissemination and exchange of messages. From such a perspective the shadow theatre might indeed be regarded as a "medium," because it uses audiovisual modes of representation to communicate complex meanings with social, cultural and aesthetic relevance for the audience.³⁹ It matters less that its messages are produced in real-time by a living person manipulating puppets behind a screen. The shadow theatre may not be a 'technology,' but it could certainly be characterized as a cultural 'technique.'

The idea of "media culture" should never be limited to material forms only. These are always related with things immaterial – the dream worlds of culture, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin. Traditional modes of visual representation may therefore also function as 'media,' because their material existence inspires discursive "media-related" manifestations that begin to live their own lives within the fabric of culture. In his interesting book *The Double Screen. Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* the art historian Wu Hung has demonstrated the range of meanings that surrounded painted screens in the Chinese tradition.⁴⁰ Far from being just material artefacts (pieces of furniture and works of "art"), the screens had meanings that extended deep into the cultural imaginary. They provided virtual extensions to the physical environment, 'enveloping' persons placed in front of them (the emperor was depicted ritually posing in front of a painted screen, the colors and ornaments of his clothes merging with those of the screen). They also served as imaginary gateways to other realms. Although many of the uses and meanings associated with Chinese screens strike the western mind as alien and exotic, it is worth trying to see beyond or through them. Clearly the screens Wu Hung discusses are not "screens" in the western media-cultural sense (surfaces for displaying dynamic visual data), but they nevertheless transmit codified visual messages and cultural meanings that are recognized by the cultural agents.⁴¹

Extension without Implosion?

Of course, extending the concept "media" too far may lead to problems, in the worst case, turning it into an empty shell. If every kind of visual form can be interpreted as a "medium," an implosion may occur. There are questions we should keep in mind. What

³⁹ For an analysis of such complexities, see Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Japanese Selves*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

⁴⁰ Wu Hung, *The Double Screen. Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, London: Reaktion Books, 1996. See also Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁴¹ About western notions of the screen, see Anne Friedberg's *The Virtual Window*, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2007.

is “media culture”? What does it cover? Where and when did it begin? It might sound reasonable to assume that to have any meaning at all, this concept should be reserved to a certain, fairly recent, cultural condition, developed in “technologically advanced societies,” and related with ideas such as “society of spectacle” (Debord), “cultural industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer) or “hyperreality” (Baudrillard). In most pre-20th century societies such a condition simply did not exist. Then how is it possible even to suggest that “media” could apply to such “primitive” circumstances?⁴² The answers can only be tentative, and are certainly open to debate. As media-archaeologists, including myself, have attempted to show, the “deep time of the media” (Zielinski) is much longer than had been previously thought.⁴³ But it extends laterally as well, across cultures, continents and traditions. It connects things that until now have seemed disparate, or worse still: nonexistent. There are reasons to argue that what has been defined as “media culture” is really part of (a) larger cultural formation(s), the outlines of which we are only beginning to perceive.⁴⁴

It is here that the real challenges begin. This is the basic question: how do we write “global” media history within and between cultural environments that don’t share the same goals, concepts, interests, scholarly traditions and theories, and even the same language?⁴⁵ Supposing that the issues outlined in this article are worth pursuing immediately raises the question of scholarly collaboration. Comparative media history does not exist as an internationally recognized discipline.⁴⁶ Researchers with something important to contribute would probably have very different scholarly backgrounds. Quite possibly they would be neither media scholars nor historians. How would one locate them from the different corners of the world and create a polylogue between them? An international conference might be a good starting point, but it is a rather conservative and problematic idea. Establishing an on-line forum might be a better opening, but it has its problems as well, including the dominant role of English in on-line communication. Whatever form the collaboration would take, it should start by discussing some basic questions. What is “media,” and how is it understood in different cultural contexts? How can we write media history simultaneously from multiple

⁴² One answer has been provided by artists bridging media and indigeneous traditions. A good example are the works by the Indonesian artist Heri Dono. Dono’s art has lineds traditional Indonesian Wayage shadow theatre with contemporary media.

⁴³ Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media. Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2006 (orig.2002).

⁴⁴ I cannot resist quoting Jack Goody’s critique of current cultural studies, which may well apply to media studies as well: “The field of cultural studies, both in its British and its American variants, is chaotic. The textual base of the latter is virtually exclusively western writings, usually philosophers, often French, who comment upon life without offering much data except their own internal reflections or comments upon other philosophers, all representative of modern, urban societies. The level of generality of such comments is such that one has no real need of information to enter into the conversation.” (Goody, 305).

⁴⁵ Gunalan Nadarajan’s article “Islamic Automation: A Reading of al-Jazari’s The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices (1206)”, in *MediaArtHistories*, edited by Oliver Grau, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006, 163-178 is a useful opening to this direction.

⁴⁶ It can naturally profit from the work done within comparative cultural studies. A spin-off of cultural studies, MIT:s Comparative Media Studies program, also tries to encourage “thinking across media forms, theoretical domains and cultural contexts,” but its primary focus is not media history (see www.cms.mit.edu).

cultural perspectives and adjust these with each other? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is such a “total” approach possible, or even desirable?

© Erkki Huhtamo 2007

Biography: Erkki Huhtamo is a media archaeologist, writer, and exhibition curator. He was born in Helsinki, Finland (1958) and works as Professor of Media History and Theory at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Department of Design | Media Arts. He has published extensively on media archaeology and media arts, lectured worldwide, created television programs and curated media art exhibitions. His research in recent years has dealt with topics like peep media, the pre-history of the screen, and the archaeology of mobile media. He is currently working on two books, one on the 19th century moving panorama, and another on the archaeology of interactivity. He is also editing a collection of writings on media archaeology with Jussi Parikka. With Doug Kahn and Margaret Morse, he is the editor of the book series “Technoculture and the Arts” for the University of California Press.