

# **Media Anthropology: An Overview**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The meeting between cultural anthropology and mass media is, in fact, a meeting between an object of research and a scientific discipline. In such a situation, the discipline brings with it certain delineations, a number of investigating methods, and a group of relatively specific concepts and theories. In the case of media anthropology, the fact that various researchers do not assume that clear disciplinary identity (with roots in sociology, cultural studies, narratology, history, etc) yet use concepts specific to cultural anthropology, as well as research methods intimately related to this science (ethnographic methods), may appear as a random meeting, and a passing experience. Especially since the authorized representatives of cultural anthropology have treated these attempts with skepticism. On the other hand, border-crossing and interpreting mass media phenomena from a cultural anthropology perspective can also be understood as the beginning of delineating a new sub-discipline of cultural anthropology, or of communication studies, a sub-discipline that has as its research object a specific form of cultural creation - the mass media. Or as the first step in the creation of a new anthropological frame for the study of the global and mediated cultural phenomena.

“For many years mass media were seen as almost a taboo topic for anthropology” (Ginsburg et al, 2003:3). Faye Ginsburg’s formula states a truth and hides another. Indeed, anthropologists have not been interested in mass media, or have reduced it to a simple work tool for (what they thought it represented) an “accurate” recording of social facts, or to an accessory in the study of other social and cultural phenomena. But why have they overlooked mass media with such fervor? Why was media “a kind of forbidden object to anthropologists working non-Western settings” (Ginsburg, 2002: 369) and Western-settings too? Where does the reluctance to accept media anthropology as an interdisciplinary field come from? Why have they acted as if mass media were a taboo?

### **Media, Mass and Anthropology**

A common sense definition for media anthropology would say that it represents the application of instruments (theories, concepts, research methods) from a field of science, cultural anthropology, onto an investigated object, in this case media (i.e. communication mediated by technologies and institutions, be it mass or group, “big” or “small” – Spitulnik, 2002:179-184). It exactly what suggested one of the first approaches to the field: “We feel that media anthropology is an awareness of the interaction (both real and potential) between the various academic and applied aspects of anthropology and the multitude of media” (Eiselein, Topper, 1976:114). This phenomenon is not new, because several sciences can claim the interpretation of the same social system (history of tourism, sociology of tourism, geography of tourism, anthropology of tourism). In this case, besides older actors of mass media research such as sociology, economics, history, law, ethics, and psychology, anthropology as well can find a place under the sun of mass media, interpreting, with its own tools, the same realities interpreted, in an already legit manner, by its sisters. This point of view is suggested by Coman and Rothenbuhler (2005:1), who believe that “media anthropology grows out of the anthropology of modern societies, on one hand, and the cultural turn in media studies, on the other. It turns its attention from “exotic” to mundane and from “indigenous” to manufactured culture while preserving the methodological and conceptual assets of earlier anthropological tradition. It prepares media studies for more complete engagement with the symbolic construction of reality and the fundamental importance of symbolic structures, myth, and ritual in everyday life.”

But in the case of media anthropology things are not simple, firstly because of the ambivalent relationship between the sciences (now) in dialogue: for cultural anthropology,

confronted with an identity crisis, it would be reluctant to widen its borders, while mass media, confronted with a growth crisis, has the tendency to lose its identity by extending without limits toward the most heterogeneous areas of social life. In other words, “self-cannibalism” (Argyrou, 2002:75) for anthropology is media studies bulimia. From this stems the eclecticism (theoretical and methodological) specific to many representatives of media studies (who must conceptualize permanently emergent processes) and the jacobinism of many representatives of canonical anthropology, who are preoccupied to defend and re-legitimize a theoretical system confronted with an identity crisis. This fracture generates more series of ambiguities and paradoxes.

### **The Paradox of Definitions**

“The term media anthropology itself was coined in a brief flurry of activity following the 1969 American Anthropological Association meetings” and had as starting point “the concern of a growing number of anthropologists about both the death of public knowledge of anthropological concepts and their own lack of skills and channels to disseminate them” (Allen 1994:2). According to the same author, the debates and research within this field have led to the development of two branches: (1) the research branch, which “studies structure, function, process, impact, etc., of media information, technologies, professionals, audiences” and (2) the applied branch (1994:27). The latter, in its turn, has two functions: “The function of the direct or academic division of the applied branch is to communicate anthropological information and insights through media channels in widely acceptable styles and formats, but through more or less traditional anthropological subject matter (...) In the more indirect division, media anthropologists – with training in both anthropology and communication – may assume a role traditionally associated with the media. Rather than focusing only on anthropological subject matter per se, it seeks to expose people to information that can generate a more universal perspective” (1994:29). The applied field also attempts to promote anthropology in various media by influencing journalism practices to add a sixth “W” – Whole – to the conventional list of “who, what, when, where and how,” in order to “to create an alternative method of gathering and presenting information that can help fill the educational vacuum, not with more detail, but more perspective” (Allen 1994:24). In essence the applied branch appears as a form of public relations or media relations, whose purpose is to promote the anthropologists’ accomplishments and anthropology’s vision about the world, by adapting communication techniques to the specifics of the journalistic work and in some

cases through efforts to model the profession's values according to some values of cultural anthropology.

Later, without a direct link to the efforts of this scholars from applied anthropology discipline, other researchers have launched various labels to name an anthropological approach of mass media: media anthropology, anthropology of media, anthropology of mass media, mass communication anthropology, anthropology of culture and media. Each of these implies a difference in the design of the conceptual framework and of the subject matter.

Debra Spitulnik (1993:293) believes, "Given the various modalities and spheres of operation, there are numerous angles of approaching mass media anthropologically: as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, as historical developments". Despite the vast areas of investigation, the studies reviewed by Spitulnik have so far focused only on visual anthropology and ethnographic films, indigenous and alternative media, national media, and interpretative practices at both ends of the mass communication process. K. Askew (2003:3), who uses both the terms *media anthropology* and *anthropology of media*, defines this type of approach as an "ethnographically informed, historically grounded, and context-sensitive analysis of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies". From this perspective, the field is defined by the technological dimension of the modern forms of communication, and the angle of approach is fundamentally (and restrictively) ethnographic. For F. Ginsburg et al (2002:23) an anthropological perspective on media should explore "the dynamics of all these social processes of media consumption, production, circulation". And Osorio (2005: 36) writes: "Mass media anthropology is a field within the discipline dealing with the relationship between the mass media and culture. The specific point of this is how culture is transmitted through the mass media. Therefore, we study a process or system by means of which society is shaped. Anthropology is the social science studying culture. Therefore, mass media anthropology is the field within anthropology studying the way in which culture shapes us through the mass media".

The previous definitions vacillate between to poles: accordingly, media anthropology is or should be only a tool for applied anthropology or a theoretical perspective on media and anthropology.

### **The Paradox of Actors**

Many investigations have been carried out, from within the cultural anthropology, focusing on the consumption and production of mass media messages in non-modern communities, be they in the Third World, or “exotic” enclaves in Western countries (synthesis in Askew 2002, Dickey 1997, Ginsburg et al, 2002, Kottak 1996, Peterson, 2003, Spitulnik 1993). These studies were done in the light of classical anthropological themes such as cultural diffusion, acculturation, the relationship between indigenous societies on one hand, and modernity and globalism on the other, creation and loss of local memory and identity, the relationship with the ritual system, literary and artistic traditions and religion.

„Authentic” anthropologists have been much less interested in how the media are produced and consumed in the modern society. These studies have been developed under the flag of “cultural studies”. The numerous and very popular studies of this kind have dealt either with the ethnography of reception, or with the ethnography of the production, in Western or Westernised societies (synthesis in Barker, 2000, Berkowitz, 1997, Cottle, 2000, Moreley, 1992, Nugent, 1997, Tuchman, 1991). Neither of these approaches have been conducted starting from an anthropological program as such, but rather from a major theme of cultural studies: the role of culture as terrain of battle between the hegemonic force of the dominant classes and the resistance of popular classes. In these studies anthropologic tools were perceived as a solution to evade from the (classical) theoretical and methodological frames of the sociology of mass communication: „Significantly, media scholars invoke anthropology at precisely the point at which scientific approaches to society prove manifestly inadequate” (Hobart, 2005:26). Consequently and paradoxically, in the exact moment when anthropology was at the maximum point of „disciplinary anxieties” (Apadurai, 1995:204), of criticism up to self-destruction of its conceptual and methodological apparatus, media studies scholars have resorted to the anthropological „tool box” as a tank of saving concepts and methods, adequate to the interpretation of modernity and above all epistemologic doubts.

Another perspective, involving both media scholars and anthropologists was devoted to the study of the connection between media contents and elements of the symbolic production of reality such as myth, ritual, religion (synthesis in Coman, 2003, Coman and Rothenbuhler, 2005, Couldry, 2003, Hoover, 1988, Saebo, 2003, Thomas, 2005).

### **The Paradox of the Fields**

The approaches coming from the anthropologists’ camp seem to offer several privileged fields. One refers to the use of media techniques and media systems by anthropologists in

order to (a) better record, “save” and disseminate the social practices of the insiders, (b) promote their field or (c) improve the content of the journalistic practices. Another refers to the investigation of the ways in which different “indigenous” groups use media in order to disseminate their culture and to affirm a specific identity. Another perspective looks to mass media as a specific “field”, employing cultural anthropological methods and concepts in order to interpret the “media culture”. Within this field I would include (a) the study of the influence of channels (oral, scriptural, audiovisual or Internet) on media content or media consumption, (b) the studies of the processes through which these cultural products are institutionally created and distributed by specialists in the mass media industry, (c) the investigation of processes by which these products are consumed and invested with meanings by different types of audience and (d) the analysis of media contents. All these phenomena could be addressed at a local, national, transnational or “global” level and in relationship with various social agencies. The vastity of the mass media system leads to some authors underlining the material dimension (ethnographically noticeable) and putting at the center the mediation phenomena, and the contributions of the actors involved in this process (Figure 1), and others preferring to focus on the study of contents and the construction processes of cultural representations in and by these contents (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Actors vs Media	Western (Sameness)	Non-Western (Others)
Production	Ethnography of producers (from Hollywood to newsrooms)	Indigenous (community) media; third world state controlled media
Consumption	Ethnography of reception in Western families or communities	Ethnography of consumption in places defined as Non-Modern

Figure 2

Content vs Media	Western (Sameness)	Non-Western (Others)
Western (Sameness)	The Image of Sameness in Western media	The Image of West in international, national or „local” media (from „cultural imperialism” to „glocalism”)

Non-Western (Others)	The Image of Others in Western's media (from National Geographic to Indiana Jones)	The (promotion of the) the Aboriginal Image in the local media
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Studies by media studies scholars have had as a privileged object the processes of production and consumption of mass media in modern society. The best known are the investigations in the *ethnography of reception*, which were carried out mainly under the banner of cultural studies. This research was not conducted starting from an anthropological program as such, but from a major theme of cultural studies: the role of culture in exercising power (and, on the other hand, the ways in which the public escapes the tyranny of hegemonic discourse promoted by the dominant classes). The search for forms of resistance to hegemonic messages and actions brought to the foreground the problem of *practice of signification*, meaning the techniques by which groups and individuals select or reject the products of cultural industries, break down the messages into components, and “re-assemble” them in texts which are conveyed a meaning other than the hegemonic one. In order to study these practices of signification, researchers had to lend more attention to concrete determinations of media technologies, micro-group cultural traditions, reception situations, and immediate social and economical configurations. In other words, they promoted a “local” vision of acts of communication with mass media, “placed within a domestic communication that is defined by inter-discourse connections, which link new technologies, television, and other media, to the family dynamics and other conventional networks” (Morley 1992:32). Carrying out such a program required scientific methods capable of allowing the immersion in these volatile contexts, capable of leading to eliminating social distance and psychological barriers and of favoring the observation of microscopic behaviors and the identification of (implicit) values on which cultural consumption practices are based. These requirements re-actualized the methodological set of cultural anthropology, and pushed to the foreground techniques of *ethnographic* research. Their application allowed the mapping of circumstances specific to cultural consumption: a) the medium of reception - what J. Lull (1988) called “practical social arrangements”: the location of objects and people inside the room with the TV set, the relations between family members and mass media supports, rhythms of consumption, forms of control distribution, etc.; b) concrete acts of reception - ways of utilizing supports and content, relations with the messages, interactions between people

during reception, values and attitudes towards mass media or towards precise media content, etc.; c) the discourse referring to the received messages.

Another “field” from within the mass media system where ethnographic methods were applied was the *newsroom*. This studies never claimed to be anthropological research – in fact it was labelled by M. Schudson as “sociology of the newsroom”, and by Ph. Schlessinger as “the empirical study of news production”. Its topics, theoretical references, and even methodological inspiration are strictly sociological. When ethnography was invoked, it was non-reflexive, and entirely broken away from anthropological tradition (for the relation between sociological and anthropological approaches to ethnography, see Burawoy, 2000). According to a recent evaluation, “though relatively few in number, ethnographic studies proved to be highly influential. Collectively they demonstrated how the in-depth study of the news producers, their cultural milieu and professional domains could help to explain the dynamics and determinants of news output and, as such, they served to qualify the generalising and largely speculative theories of that time” (Cottle 2000:19).

The term that synthesized these approaches on both media production and media consumption is *ethnography*, but “here is the spirit of ethnography (i.e. qualitative understanding of cultural activity in context) which is invoked polemically against the tradition of quantitative communication research” (Barker 2000:28).

If the problematic of mediation and of finding an adequate research method to observe these processes has given birth to intense applications and heated debates, the theme of contents and significations has passed almost unnoticed. Several representatives of media studies have applied concepts such myth, rite, religion, sacred, magic or liminality to interpret various texts and contexts of the production of significations in mass media. Their enterprises, exotic in rapport with the main trends in media studies, have been totally ignored by anthropologists, despite the fact that, as S. Dickey (1997:454) remarked, “as anthropologists, we approach the field of mass media studies at a time when it raises issues we are very well prepared to take on using our methods and theoretical perspectives”.

## **A Case Study**

As vast and numerous as the anthropological approaches on mass media may be, in the following paragraphs I will focus on the relation (rarely approached by classical anthropologists) between media content and the concepts of myth and ritual. My anthropological approach stems from the hypothesis that mass media, same as non-modern



manifestations studied with the aid of concepts such as myth, rite, sacred, liminality, magic, etc., creates and imposes symbolic systems of thinking surrounding reality, and of articulating it in cultural constructs which are accessible and satisfying to their audience. In other words, the anthropological view starts with the premise that mass media is a cultural system for the social construction of reality, and claims that this construction is made, under certain circumstances, with instruments which are not part of argumentative rationality, but of symbolic rationality. It follows that mass media cannot be conceived of as a go-between, mediating or covering certain cultural constructs - a situation where its role is only to carry and remodel messages designed and made by other social instances. On the contrary, the anthropological approach imposes a perspective that places mass media at the center of the process of social construction of reality, as an institution that generates specific discourses and logics. The products incorporating such values are distributed to the public, and assumed by it as edifying images about the world, understandable in themselves, in agreement with its expectations, norms, hopes and fears. The anthropological perspective further claims that these images are accepted and assumed precisely because they have the status of *symbolic constructs*, and that, having that status, they function and signify in the same way as mythical systems and rituals of non-modern societies. What follows is not a reduction of the media to mere relics of rite and myth, and the avoidance of any specific differences or notes. On the contrary, such a view proposes to read/interpret certain mass media phenomena into the framework of anthropological concepts which can explain the processes of mythologizing or ritualization of reality through media discourse.

Most analyses resorting to basic anthropological concepts come down to two great paradigms: ritualistic interpretation, and mythologizing interpretation.

From the point of view of a ritual universe, the press was viewed in two ways: a) as a *component* of ritual manifestation, a component conveying more symbolic force and more social amplitude; b) as a *ritual agent*, as a constitutive factor, producing special rites.

Dayan and Katz (1992) ventured a successful name for this reality (“media events”) and, more importantly, a number of persuasive analyses, a conceptual vocabulary, a proposal for a typology, and an angle of approach that have become referential. According to this approach, mass media has the same role and effect in relation to socio-cultural phenomena, as in relation to ceremonies: they *amplify* an element of the ceremony – the audience (physical or affective) participation, the prestige of officiating agents or other actors, the structure of the ceremonial script, or the public significance of the event (for critical perspective see

Alexander and Jacobs, 1998, Bell, 1997, Coman, 2003, Couldry, 2003, Katz and Dayan, 2003, Rothenbuhler, 1998, Saebo, 2003)

According to the second perspective, the research suggests that mass media are actually generators of a specific, modern ritual type. The press' power to be a *ritualizing* factor was explored in two types of social configuration: small groups in their daily life, and collectives, in their moments of social mobilization.

The first level of analysis targeted mainly the processes of reception of mass media content. These studies conferred to television programs (and newspaper reading) the capacity to set the rhythms of home life, and to install a sort of "daily rituality". Starting sometimes from careful ethnographic descriptions, other times only from theoretical considerations, many scholars claim that these fixed encounters with the same shows (stars) is to regulate the interactions between receptors and mass media, receptors and the outside world and receptors and the universe of private existence. Moreover, the rites of mass media consumption dramatize the consumption of cultural products, introduce patterns of behavior, generate collective solidarity forms, and even offer existential security (synthesis in Goethals 1981, Lull 1988, Martin-Barbero, 1997, Real 1996, Silverstone 1994). In observing these studies, the anthropologist cannot but notice that the notion of ritual is used to name and add meaning to: (1) identical and regulated behavior; (2) certain acts of simultaneous reception of certain messages (therefore *communitary*); (3) certain dramatically charged content with the power to interpret the world. We notice that, out of the broad palette of features that single out rituals, those selected derive from the regularity of performance, which brings to the foreground, for this type of behavior, the value of "communication without information" (Rothenbuhler 1998). And we can wonder if this is enough for labeling a social behavior as ritual.

Much more fascinating, although less researched, is the other level of analysis, according to which the mass media are seen as *ritual agents* capable of ritualizing certain manifestations. When the accent shifts from the ritual pattern to the ritualization process, it is possible to study the processes by which the media ritualized manifestations that, although having some formal elements, had neither the cyclic character, nor the form or purposes of a ritual. This perspective opens interesting possibilities of renewing theories on the social role of the press, on public space, and on the ceremonial universe (Coman, 2003, Couldry, 2003, Saebo, 2003)

From the perspective of myth and theories of myth, mass media was seen (Coman, 2005):

- (1) as a storage bin for mythical constructs to be preserved and reactivated
- (2) as a *maker* of myths and mythical units of the modern world

In all these studies, the relationship between media contents and myths is justified by the premise (often assumed implicitly) that the mass media system is, on the whole, a form of ‘modern’ actualization of *pre-modern cultural models*. Articulated by the opposition between high and popular culture (folkloric, mass, media, deviant, counterculture, etc.), this argument associates to the former values such as rationality, a reflective character, seriousness, moral responsibility, etc., and places at the other pole the irrational dimension, spontaneity, entertainment (pleasure), the absence of sophisticated ethical standards, etc. Following this association, it is easy to explain how the products of the popular press re-actualize certain features or certain functions specific to mythology.

I believe an anthropological view on mass media should focus on the forms and processes media employs to build a symbolic representation of reality by means of myth and ritual. In other words, we should turn from the study of the forms of coverage of myth and ritual to exploring the *ritualization* and *mythologization* of reality by the media. This approach would include studies which purported that “this mythical archetype is present in this news story” or “this ceremony influences media coverage and formats”, while bringing a further processual approach to earlier, vague analogies like “media messages and myths have identical functions” or “media consumption and rituals have identical functions.” Research from this new angle should concentrate on the processes through which media introduces a ritualized and/or mythological perspective to the image of the world it offers, as well as to its particular manner of structuring the image of reality.

### **The Paradox of Methods**

Applying ethnographic methods to modern societies has produced a passionate dispute regarding methodological purity. Many authors believe such studies followed the basic principles of ethnographic investigation. Thus, “media researchers practice long-term participating observation, which means that the epicenter of this approach lies in their communication with the informants; they build the intelligibility of their worlds starting from their specific position. At the same time, they stay within the bounds of legitimacy conferred by social sciences, but place themselves in a separate position; they cast their subjects as strangers. By this, they place themselves in an outside position, that of strangers in relation to the world they study” (Althabe, Selim, 1998:31). “My own feeling is that despite these clear differences, reception studies can still properly be called ethnographic. It is true that they are not based on extensive fieldwork in distant lands, but they do share some of the same general

intentions as anthropological research (...) If the means of investigation are not always identical, then the aims of inquiry can be” (Moore 1993:4).

Other scholars, however, consider this investigation as being outside the exigencies of ethnography. “These demands are: to interact in the local language; to participate in daily as well as special events; to pay particular attention to the minutiae of social action and interaction, to the institutional, cosmological and materiality of daily and ceremonial life, to the qualities of significant objects, to daily and ritual speech and the dissecting of local categories of indigenous ideas and values; to evaluate cultural representations; to elicit patterns and paradoxes, underlying structural principles and the force of the normative, as well as interpretative significance of instances of breaches and idiosyncrasies. In principle, this is the approach adhered to whether we study hunter-gatherers in the Malaysian rain forest or rock groups and their followers in Oslo. I see little sign that cultural studies take account of our findings or give the methodology credence. Indeed questions of method receive scant attention. This may perhaps be the reason for the superficiality of ethnographic accounts and the tendency to operate on a theoretical meta-level in many cultural studies” (Howell 1997:115-116). From the same perspective, Spitulink (1993:298) remarks: “Most of this work is based on interviewing audiences in their homes, and critics have argued that the label ‘ethnography’ is misleading, because detailed participant observation is minimal and actual immersion in the daily practices and social worlds of people studies is almost inexistent”. On a much more severe note, some well known representatives of cultural studies will label the ethnography practiced in these studies as “an abused buzzy word in our field” (Lull 1988:242), or “vox-pop techniques, common to journalism and empirical sociology” (Morris 1990:22).

Even while using ethnographic methods, this kind of research did not use anthropological theoretical frame, was not inspired by anthropological issues, and was not sensitive to anthropological debates referring to the “crisis of representation” inherent to classical ethnography. In all these field researches, “the contribution of anthropology was practically nil” (Dickey 1997:463). The three decades of ethnographic investigation of mass media have remained suspended between the anthropologic horizon, hyper self-reflective, and the media and cultural studies universe, hyper instrumental. However, this theoretical and methodological mixture proved to be very attractive: “While adopting so many long-debated anthropological concepts, theories and methods and presenting them as their own, there is no doubt that in the process they are repackaging them very seductively” (Howell 1997:104)

## **The Paradox of the Strategies**

These trends of scientific development and disciplinary overlap have two results: on the one hand - the absence of a significant corpus of texts by anthropologists, analyzing mass media production, consumption and contents (especially in Western societies) by using the theoretical framework, the field experience and the concepts of cultural anthropology; and on the other hand - the existence of numerous studies of mass media employing concepts from cultural anthropology and methods labeled as ethnographic, but carried out by authors from other scientific fields. Asserting the anthropological point of view, anthropologists made, a decade ago, a radical claim: “Judging from the present state of the literature it is fair to say that a substantive media anthropology does not exist” (Chalfen, 1978:211); “There is yet no anthropology of mass media. Even the intersection of anthropology and mass media appears rather small considering the published literature to date” (Spitulnik, 1993:293); “Although several studies have been done, media anthropology remains an emerging field” Kottak, 1996:157). While recently Askew (2002:12) claimed: “Media anthropology, the brainchild of Mead, Bateson and Powdermaker, has finally come into its own”. The difference in evaluation comes not only from a temporal distance (i.e. a change of the domain’s parameters), but especially from an epistemologic rupture. Between lucid denial and romantic affirmation, media anthropology risks, even before claiming academic legitimacy, to be eroded by an early identity crisis. In this context, several clarifications seem necessary.

When an emerging discipline claims a place in the academic Olympus, it can choose a neutral name, which does not make any reference to the gods in the Pantheon: cultural studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, performance studies etc. This way, it combines the precise title of a field with hiding the scientific paradigm.

When the newcomer tries to occupy a portion from an already occupied territory, a subtle rhetoric of unfelt insertion can lead to intermediary formulae. Often one uses a well behaved phrase such as “an anthropologist sits among... (especially in the francophone environment there are numerous studies labeled as “un anthropologue dans” – le metro, le cockpit, l’hospital etc). This formula expresses modesty: besides other specialists of modern societies, the anthropologist as well asks permission to sit at the “science feast” and to share the delicacies of the investigation of modernity with his fellow sociologists, economists, psychologists, historians. A second strategy consists in identifying a limited field and suggesting the “adventure” represented by anthropologic investigation. A quick look into the domain’s bibliography shows the proliferation of the phrase “anthropology of...” – a formula

which suggests a scientific excursion into a single social field, without claiming to found a new discipline. We are now talking of an “anthropology of streams and flows” (Trouillot, 2003:126), of an anthropology which proposes “transversal sub-disciplines, replacing geographical-based research with conceptual research” (Delaporte, 1986:167). Thus, the body of literature includes numerous works dedicated to the anthropology of sports, education, travel, tourism, of the sexual life, body or the blood, of irony, anger, pain, violence, gestures, of memory, fraternity (or incest), of tobacco, electricity, and even cyberspace. Other times, these “transversal” anthropologies refer to social processes of great scope (which can, anytime, involve the autonomization into a specific sub-discipline): communication, health, development, globalization, conflicts, nationalism, political movements, etc. In consequence, it is possible that a label such as “the anthropology of media/mass communication” is easier accepted by the community of “canonic” anthropologists, as it suggests an occasional extra-muros excursion, a non-threatening theoretical and methodological experiment.

The label *media anthropology* involves a vehement affirmation of identity and autonomy: like physical, social, political, economic, linguistic anthropology, media anthropology affirms itself (through its name) as a self-standing branch, whose identity is assured by a well-defined object, by a specific conceptual lexic and by a hard to deny role in configuring cultural anthropology’s scientific capital. The vastity of (technologically and institutionally) mediated communication phenomena would justify such a claim. But the lack of own concepts and the uncertainty over methods, on one hand, and the almost general reluctance of “authentic” anthropologists to debate, accept or promote this discipline leans the balance toward the opposite direction. Moreover, media anthropology is also marked by the too close vicinity with other disciplines that seem to occupy the same territory or to analyze segments of this territory – visual anthropology, urban anthropology, anthropology at home, or, on a more general level, anthropology of modernity.

### **The Anthropological Taboo**

Two approaches are possible in examining the status of media anthropology as a domain marked by restrictions and interdictions, in other words the taboo involved by the relationship between anthropology and mass media.

The first perspective is one of an evolutionist type and involves certain optimism. It is founded on the following assumptions: a) anthropology, built as a science of Otherness, faces some difficulty in adapting to the study of modernity (Sameness); b) forming or changing

concepts and work methods requires certain time and certain strategies to interact with sciences that study modernity in a consecrated fashion; c) as soon as this self-shaping and self-imposing is finalized, media anthropology as well will have gained legitimacy.

“Imagine a fourfold table in which one dimension is ‘present versus past’ and the other ‘exotic versus home’. Traditionally social and cultural anthropology’s domain has been the exotic’s present and history’s domain the home’s past. A third box, the home present has been occupied by sociology, while the fourth, the exotic’s past has usually been the province of anthropologists...” (Kosakof, 1999:535). The privileged position of anthropology at this last supper of sciences has transformed in the past decades into a nightmare: the exotic has disappeared, both as a social reality (under the impulse of modernity) and as a theoretical construct (under the impulse of critical anthropology). The right and ability to describe and interpret (better than other sciences) “the savage slot” (Trouillot, 2003:2), which gave the identity and prestige to the discipline, have vanished with the generalization of this “dialogical cosmopolitanism” (Kurasawa, 2003:169) generalized by post-modernity. As a consequence, the fundamental paradigm of anthropology universalized the differences between Sameness (Western, modern civilization) and Others (non-Western, exotic, folkloric or archaic civilizations); this theoretical move, through which the capacity of this science to understand Otherness and to explain, by this very understanding, the humankind sameness, was instituted can no longer be accepted and promoted in a scientific manner (Argyrou, 2002, Friedman, 1994, Kurasawa, 2003, Lett, 1997, Trouillot, 2003).

In this new theoretical paradigm the founding categories of “classical” anthropology disappear: on one hand “there is no Other, but multitudes of others who are all others for different reasons” (Trouillot, 2003:27); on the other hand, the Sameness is no longer a terrain refused to anthropology. In other words the idea of an anthropology at home is no more a paradox: the opposition between home and abroad, center and periphery, civilized and primitive are unacceptable. The result is that what seemed to be the loss of its specific territory becomes an opening towards territories thought, until now, inadequate for anthropologic investigation. In a world that transforms as into “post-exotic” or “cosmopolitan” anthropologists (Peirana 115), one can no longer find an absolute Insider and Outsider, nor stranger or “native/indigenous ethnographer”. Which means that anthropology, armed with the experience of navigating between otherness and sameness, is by excellence the science able to study the processes of globalization, more precisely the relationships between local and translocal in the post-modern world (Appadurai, 1995, Friedman, 1994, Kearney, 2004, Peacock, 2000).

An anthropology of modern society, irrespective of its area, must, first and foremost, allow the anthropological thinking to go on – sliding between close and far-away, familiar and exotic, the banal and the significant. In other words, it must use several “de-familiarization” methods, of an epistemological nature (through cultural critique), or of a comparative nature (by the juxtaposition native culture - foreign culture) as elements that are specific to an anthropology which shifts the exotic from the outside of the scholar’s culture towards the heart of that culture (Marcus, Fisher 1986:138). In this way, the anthropology of modern societies does not gain individuality so much through certain fields (inaccessible or lacking interest for other disciplines), as through a specific perspective of approaching certain fields (possibly already known) as expression of an Alterity. “Anthropology is the art of taking distance within the very heart of modern society. It is an art that is doubtlessly more easily practiced in other societies than in our own. The ethnology of worlds close to us runs the risk of losing itself at any moment in the quiet river of our symbolic certainties (...). For an ethnologist familiar with exotic universes, the attempt to apply his methods to French society sketches an anthropology of platitudes. For him it is no longer an issue of how to familiarize himself with an unknown culture, but how to artificially create a distance in relation to the obvious within our day-to-day world, to somehow elude this blinding proximity of the subject” (Abeles 1990:43-44). But such an anthropology is threatened by numerous dangers. Of the many voices that took part in this debate (Affergan, 1991, Akbar, Shore 1995, Althabe, Selim 1998, Auge 1994, Gupta, Ferguson, 1997, Ortner, 1999 etc.), Bromberger (1997:229) seems to me to synthesize the difficulties of this perspective: “This brief review sketches in filigree the crucial issues that anthropology must nowadays tackle, confronted with often fugitive, and desegregated fields: choosing study units and the scale of analysis (individual, network, community, of interest, local group, national identity, even international identity); applying to the modern world concepts developed for analyzing the somewhere-else and the some-other-time; shifting the upstream view to a downstream view of practice and knowledge codified towards singular behavior, local DIY, context (...). On top of this, there are the peculiar conditions of the inquiry and of the ‘restitution’, conditions tied to the proximity between researchers and informers, as well as the distinctive status of scattered and over-abundant data (articles, reviews, television shows, internet servers (...). In short, the configuration, the physical and intellectual proximity of these new objects of research require a re-evaluation of our methods, and, naturally, increased vigilance”.

Once an anthropology of modernity is accepted as a legit discipline, mass media phenomena, so specific to modernity and post-modernity, can autonomize a field and a self-



standing academic territory. Kottak (1990:12) expresses most precisely this (optimistic) feeling of the anthropology's attitude shift and of the inevitable recognition of the utility of an anthropology of mass media: "Anthropology's late entry into television research probably reflects the discipline characteristics suspicion of the modern and its resistance to cultural destruction through homogenization. Television worldwide dissemination is usually seen as spreading cultural similarity and thereby reducing diversity. For years anthropology has been known for expanding cultural relativism, focusing on diversity and revealing the others."

The second perspective is one of a conflictualist type and involves a rather sacrificial attitude. It is founded on the following arguments: a) anthropology has in the past decades been subject to destructive inner criticism, which affected its status as a science and its moral legitimacy; thus, another "re-invention of anthropology" is needed; b) the essence of anthropology is in observing the symbolic mediation mechanisms through which a certain community, with the help of culture, creates a symbolic web and a self consciousness; c) in post-modernity, media are those who substitute culture (in its traditional forms) in this process of mediation and meaning construction; in consequence the only possible framework for an anthropology of most-modernity is media anthropology.

In the past decades anthropology has faced a critical re-evaluation of its status as a science and of its scientific methods. These debates, violent and passionate sometimes, have created not only a current of ideas, but also a parallel anthropology (if not even a non-anthropology by the violence of denial) – critical, reflective, interpretative, post-modernist anthropology. On a first level, anthropology's status as a science has been denied, in other words, its capacity to offer verifiable empiric knowledge and generalizations that can lead to conclusions with universal value: "Interpretative anthropology assumes, first, that the goal of anthropology should be the evocation and interpretation of cultural variability (in contrast with scientific anthropology which assumes that the goal of anthropology should be the description and explanation of cultural variability); second, interpretative anthropology assumes that scientific knowledge of human affairs which entails the description and explanation of objective facts is unattainable" (Lett, 1997:12; Argyrou, 2002, Sidky, 2003, Spiro, 1996). From this perspective, anthropology is a hermeneutical enterprise, based on interpreting and subjectively reconstructing a universe of meanings, an enterprise that cannot lead to generalizations, to laws and theories claiming to be universally valid. On a second level, not only the relevance of anthropological representations has been denied, but also their conscience. This approach has tackled the authority of the ethnographer in the field, and the authority of the ethnographic description. The ethnographers' claims to neutrally study exotic

civilizations have been de-constructed: they were hiding (1) a political project (colonialism, i.e. the superiority of Western civilization towards subjected civilizations), (2) a professional ideology (i.e. the academic superiority of the researcher towards the studied culture) and (3) a self-centric cultural vision (i.e. the white, the Western, the male centrism). Moreover, transcribing field observations is not a neutral, scientific act, but a subjective and fictional one; the production of the anthropological discourse is marked by the social context in which it is generated (the institutional constrictions of production and the types of public targeted) and by the rhetoric of the discourse (the role of the fabrication of the author's authoritative voice, the role of the narrative structures in the construction of the "field", of the persuasive strategies in organizing information). In essence and at the limit of anthropological accounts one can consider an ego-centric and fictional staging of a subjective experience, dominated by ideological illusions (Clifford, Marcus, 1986 Fisher, 2003, Marcus and Fischer, 1986).

The re-invention of anthropology must take into account two essentially congruent processes: a) changing the object of study: anthropology is no longer the science of the exotic, but of multiple otherness built by the researcher through intellectual techniques of de-familiarization; anthropology investigates the various mechanisms through which meaning is created and negotiated in the nexus which links the local with the global, the present with the past; b) the disappearance of the traditional forms of scientific authority: the basic pillars of anthropological vision (Otherness, Sameness, Culture, etc), subject to the process of self-reflection, no longer have a substantial character, are no longer objects per se, but processes. Anthropology has defined itself as the science that studies culture, more precisely the way in which, as creators of culture, people from any place on the planet and from any time manifest their human essence, their fundamental cultural Sameness. If Culture, Otherness, Sameness are no longer embodied in autonomous objects, if they are conceived as processes and if these processes should be thought, at the same time, at local and global scale, how can anthropology be re-invented?

Human knowledge (be it scientific or usual) is realized through cultural mediation, that is, through cultural symbols. They mediate between the subject and the object of knowledge, and, on a superior level of reflectivity, between subject and self-consciousness. The essence of anthropology is in the study of these processes: "Mediation is the key word here. Rather than being a separate domain, like icing on a cake, culture in this sense mediates all human conduct. It has to do with everyday life; material, economic and institutional realms; politics, romance, religion and spirituality" (Rosaldo, 1994:526).

In the post-modern world, culture is produced, transmitted, re-cepted and re-signified through mass communication and within mass communication. No social sub-system can function outside the mediation provided by mass communication. But this is not only a simple channel through which cultural symbols circulate, it is the very system that produces culture; media are substituting traditional forms through which culture is generated and, through their ubiquity and power, they take over the culture's functions from the pre-modern societies. The media are, in post-modernity, the culture, and from the processual perspective described above mass media is the Mediator. Consequently, cultural anthropology cannot ignore mass media: not because they are an important social reality, but simply because they are Culture itself. The cultural anthropology of post-modernity cannot be anything else than media anthropology: this just means that media anthropology becomes the general frame, as was cultural anthropology until now, for the various anthropologies of post-modernity.

From this perspective Faye Ginsburg's formula gains sense: classical anthropology has perceived mass media as a Taboo, because accepting media anthropology implies the fundamental sacrifice: the killing of the founding father and the establishment of a new order.

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