

Chapter 3

The Globalisation of the Media: Towards New Opportunities for Artistic Practice and Cultural Heterogeneity?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the claim that the continuous globalisation of the media industry is leading unrelentingly towards a hegemony of global cultural homogeneity. Through a discussion of the phenomenon that is globalisation, and the theoretical background against which the cultural effects of the global media might be studied, the chapter critically examines the role of global commercial broadcasting in the creation of a so-called global culture and in the engendering of global cultural convergence. The past three decades have witnessed an explosion in the size and number of Transnational Corporations (TNCs), while advances in science and technology have revolutionised the way in which people around the world think, work, collaborate, and share information. The expansive growth in the size and number of TNCs and the rapid proliferation of the Internet and its associated technologies has led in recent times to profound changes in the global mass media industry.

INTRODUCTION

The communication media are monopolised by the few that can reach everyone. Never have so many been held incommunicado by so few. More and more have the right to see and hear, but fewer and fewer have the privilege of informing,

giving their opinion and creating. The dictatorship of a single word and the single image, much more devastating than that of the single party, is imposing a life whose exemplary citizen is a docile consumer and a passive spectator built on the assembly line following the North American model of television. - Eduardo Galeano

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The term ‘globalisation’ has become the catchphrase of our times as it echoes down the streets of metropolises and tiny villages, in centres of learning and houses of business, in political discourse, and in street corner ravings. First coined during the 1980s as an all-encompassing expression to describe the processes leading to the greater integration of the global economy, globalisation has over the years acquired a list of positive and negative connotations without anyone having actually arrived at a comprehensive definition (Reich, 1988). Different theoretical positions and different political stances each have their own notion of what globalisation stands for. On one level, globalisation is an economic phenomenon referring to economic activity on a global scale. On another, globalisation is concerned with issues of cultural meaning and identity. For the purposes of this chapter, we may define globalisation as a “rapidly developing process of complex interconnectedness between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide. It is a social process which involves a compression of time and space, shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in time taken – either physically or representationally – to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing human beings ‘closer’ to one another” (Tomlinson, 1996).

It is widely agreed that communication has an important part to play in the globalisation process and in particular with the process of cultural globalisation. Information and the media have been regarded as sources of power and global change since the time of James I of England when the growth in popularity of the printing press was watched with great suspicion by both the Crown and the Church (Perrit, 1998). It has since been recognized that information and communication might also have central roles to play in both socio-economic development and the production and creation of artistic content. Writing in 1894, John Stuart Mill noted that “it is hardly possible to overrate the value, in this present low state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with

which they are familiar... Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the main sources of progress” (Quoted in Grace et al., 2001:1). In recent times, globalisation has collapsed spatial and temporal barriers to economic and social exchange, and its convergence with two other trends, world-wide electronic connectivity and emergent knowledge networking practices, has reinforced the importance of the role played by knowledge and information in the global political, social, and economic arenas (Virkar, 2014). Today, we live in knowledge-driven societies poised on the threshold of an Information Age.

The world in the past few years has witnessed the spectacular rise of a series of technological innovations, particularly digital and satellite communications technologies, resulting in a decoupling of space and time that has significantly accelerated the process of globalisation (McChesney, 1998). The subsequent rise of the global media industry and its associated creations and technological applications is attributed to the effective commercial exploitation of these technologies and the data they generate, and also to the simultaneous development of a range of institutions and institutional frameworks that continue to shape the way in which media networks operate in the world today. Parallel to the liberalisation and deregulation of global media empires has been the rapid globalisation of the commercial media, advertising, and telecommunications markets – all of which have contributed to the overall process. The development of information and communication technologies is thus inseparable from the development and the proliferation of media industries (Thompson, 1999), and it is these industries that are today responsible for the continued transmission of ‘valorised symbolic forms’, ‘symbolic goods’ or ‘cultural products’, i.e. those objects produced by the media subject to economic valorisation. In today’s world, culture is tied up unequivocally with economic production, and ever-increasing importance is given to the study of cultural products within (particularly so-called capitalist) forms of production and exchange.

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