

From the motor-car to television: cultural-historical arguments on the meaning of mobility for communication

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In order both to understand the underlying dynamics of media technology rather than simply its everyday appearance and to make generalizations which rest upon more than a mere snapshot or vague assumptions about technological development, it is necessary to combine cultural-historical analysis with an empirical investigation of media markets and their uses in everyday life. Where the media tend to be in the foreground of the analysis, however, the result is that the general dynamics of development get reduced to *descriptions* of media history in which one innovation follows another: from book via radio and television to video and so on.

Even where the empirical material is less concerned with the media themselves and more with social communication and people's lives, it can only be used for the purposes of forecasting against a background of cultural history. This still leaves considerable theoretical ambiguities, since the development of communication technology has produced its own theoretical accounts which are unaware of cultural-historical questions. If historical questions are posed, then they are posed in media terms, as in the history of television (for example, see Bruch, 1967). The reason for this is that the media constitute a 'section' of communication technology which is directly experienced and which thus seems to be the most important aspect of communication. Everyday interpretations of communication technology since the development of the telegraph, as well as most theoretical accounts, have been based on sender–receiver models. Lasswell's famous formulation of 'Who says what through which channel to what effect' (Lasswell et al., 1952), and similar cybernetic formulations by Shannon and Weaver (1949), use the sender–receiver model of com-

munication to reduce communication theory to information transfer. This reduction is not arbitrary but corresponds exactly to the organization of communication technology and is something which we experience every day, whenever we use technical media. The organization and interpretation of communication, since the telegraph, have formed a self-reinforcing circle which includes the organization of communication technology, positivist media and communications theory, and everyday experience (for critiques of the positive model see Dröge et al., 1973; Mead, 1973; Bisky, 1976; Langenbucher et al., 1978).

There are two sets of questions which this approach cannot deal with adequately. These relate to changes in the structure and themes of communication when it is drawn into media technology. The first, which we will only note here, concerns the ways in which communication becomes a *symbolic intermediary* between internal and external environments. This has been studied, particularly with regard to television, by thinkers as diverse as Anders (1987), Horkheimer and Adorno (1971) and McLuhan and Fiore (1969) (see also Bachmair, 1988, 1990)

The second problem concerns the application of *mobility* to communication. Here we take the relationship between motor-car and television as the exemplary case. The argument follows from the fact that no one was astonished by the rapid acceptance of television, and that the almost symbiotic fusion between television and everyday life was only possible because television fitted into an already existing cultural infrastructure. It both absorbed and advanced existing trends. In the mid-twentieth century it did this very much better than other innovations, such as, for example, the computer. This dynamic interplay between television, culture and everyday life occurred because the technical medium fitted in with the paradigm of *information transfer*. Television succeeded because it broadened and extended lifestyles associated with the motor-car; primarily those concerned with *mobility* as a shaping principle of communication.

The comparison between television and the motor-car is parallel to the definite connection in the nineteenth century between the railway and the telegraph. The logic of the railway requires a control system that runs parallel to the track, transmitting a clearly defined signal along an equally clearly defined channel connecting sender with receiver. The logic of the electrical transmission circuit located the information transfer parallel to the railway tracks (Schivelbusch, 1977; Oberliesen, 1982: 98ff). Today, this connection is obvious since it has proved successful in a cultural sense and it has provided its own interpretation: the sender-receiver model of communication and the paradigm of communication as information transfer.

We cannot follow this development in any detail here, but I want to use the metaphor of 'cultural inheritance' to signify the relationship between such developments and cultural objectifications. One important

consequence of this method is to do away with the compulsion to define the real and decisive moment when a historical development begins and make this the starting-point of analysis. There is no need for an Archimedean starting-point to explain the interdependence of a developmental and a cultural objectification. The idea of cultural inheritance, objectified in the motor car and television, which the latter takes from the former, can be considered under four headings: (1) individualization; (2) equalization and consumption; (3) system development; and (4) compensatory fantasy.

A further methodological point is that which concerns functional equivalence, in which the car and television may be regarded as having an equal functional value in the processes of everyday life and cultural development. A cultural inheritance can be handed down from car to television because car and television both realize the functions of social development and stability in terms of integration, openness and civilization (in Elias's [1979] sense). Car and television both became points of crystallization and guidelines for social and personal integration and openness, in which the civilizing process came increasingly to the fore.

The 'integrating' function of car and television is a consequence of the zoning of living spaces and hence of lifestyles which are bridged by means of cars and the mass media. They provide a link which integrates both population groups and families and by means of which tradition and progress are integrated. The 'openness' function of car and television involves the extension of the everyday life environment, first as a spatial overcoming of local limitations, then as a biographical development, and finally as a broadening of the limits of taboo. The 'civilizing' function lies in the continuous and internalized discipline which feeds into long-term and wide-ranging planning, control and homogenization with, at the same time, differentiation. There is a transfer of these three functions from mobility to communication, which thus loses its *personal* pre-industrial character and is transformed into an aspect of *systematic* mobility.

As cultural objectifications, car and television mark a cultural-historical moment which is both typical and dominant for the psycho-historical development that emerges at the end of the eighteenth century. The subject-formation which then occurs is a process with two contradictory poles. One pole, that of *individualization* can be described in terms of narcissistic subject formation — as the appropriation of images of feudal rulers. The other is a process of *equalization* in which this narcissistic subject formation occurs in *all* subjects. This latter process is subversive of feudal hierarchy and constitutive of a republican order. Because the processes are contradictory, the subject-formation is full of *fantasies* which are either action-determining or compensatory. These three dynamic elements of subject-formation were present long before communication and mobility were connected, but they are forced into an integrated and interdependent structure by both car and television. At the same time,

there are shifts of emphasis between car and television, for example in the meaning of compensatory fantasy.

There is no straightforward path from railway and telegraph to television, no 'point' at which mobility becomes the interpretive and organizational paradigm for communication, where expressive personal communication turns into information transfer. This is not a technical but a cultural argument. Braun's tube was not sufficient in itself for the development of television; there had to exist a specific communication structure with both a social and a subjective sense. This applies in particular to the obvious case of *individual* behaviour occurring inside or alongside technological innovations.

The railway as a means of *mass* transport is incapable of fulfilling the individualistic imperative. Because the railways were carrying raw materials, goods and people, there had to be a way of calculating the consequences of segregation resulting from the division of labour. It was a question of a centrally controlled freighting system which contradicted the individual subjectivities of aristocratic or upper-class locomotion, a contradiction which was always felt and also popularly portrayed. In nineteenth-century caricatures you can see the narcissistic offence given by the equalizing effect of railway transport. Not even the social division of carriages into classes or the aristocratic luxury of the saloon coach can hide the fact that one is no longer master of one's means of locomotion as one was with one's own carriage or horse: then one could stop when and where one wished, one could determine one's own pace and choose the company one travelled with or without (Schivelbusch, 1977: 111; Giedion, 1987: 488ff).

The obvious next step culturally is to give the carriage an engine. In a cultural-historical perspective, this means that the aristocratic obviousness of subjective mobility, i.e. individually determined mobility, now requires a mechanized, motorized vehicle. This is how we get the early amateur phase of car-building with all its trial and error, using horseless carriages fitted with engines. This mechanized and motorized carriage soon became an exclusive means of locomotion; a new aristocratic phase of design and application replaced the earlier, rather primitive car carriages. The design is luxurious, splendid, imposing (Tubbs, 1978: 67, 71). Apart from being imposing, another form of aristocratic theatricality comes into play: competition between charioteers, a sport which allows each competitor to indulge his narcissistic fantasy and to be lord of space and time. This grandiose imagination forms a key part of the cultural component of individually organized mobility.

Its individualized form of locomotion makes the car the vehicle of display, self-determination and prosperity, which aristocratic self-determination makes possible, usable and generalizable, so linking itself with the *republican* need for an individual subject-formation. The car objectifies a general cultural pattern of individual mobility. Individual

travel means buying your own vehicle, caring for it, getting and paying for petrol; determining your own pace, your own time and choosing your passengers. This is my car. I decide with whom, when and where I travel. Only the roads and supply systems (petrol stations) are 'public'. The roads are state-owned, the petrol stations privately owned.

The automobile transport system, therefore, organized as individual traffic, continues an aristocratic tradition and an aristocratic pattern of individual subject-formation. This aristocratic inheritance needs to be recalled when asking which communications technology has most promoted the motor-car

The motor-car undergoes a confused, complicated and inconsistent development before it assumes its cultural function. A perusal of the engineering and economic history of Daimler-Benz shows that the technical development fits into the logic of a *system*, that of individual transport, and that technology and 'logic' develop interdependently. The same applies to the history of television, which found an inheritance and merged with it; but it was not the inheritance of the cinema. The aristocratic cultural inheritance of individuality moved 'through' the car into further areas of technologically organized communication. A complicated cultural development leads from the car to radio and then to television. Television takes up individualization. This is what makes it socially relevant in the first place, that is to say, television pushes out cinema. Railway and cinema on the one hand, car and television on the other, correspond to one another in their respectively public and individual roles. Car/television is individual consumption within a public network; railway/cinema are parts of a public system of transport and communication.

Like the car, television is used in the private sphere. Here the car corresponds to the living room, to which family, friends and acquaintances have access. The streets correspond to public service broadcasting, where overall programming allows for individual decision-making with regard to purchases, maintenance of equipment, the social context of reception — the 'handling' of television (a comparison can be made with speed and driving style, etc.)

The feudal importance of individual auto-mobility was for a long time available only to the well-off. In Germany, this continued even after the Second World War. The car was the expression and constituent of a noble way of life. Even today, car design, as we know from Rolls-Royce or Mercedes and sometimes from advertising, has emphasized display and prosperity in conjunction with modernity. Sachs gives examples of this 'cultivated pleasure' and spirit of extravagance (Sachs, 1984: 11ff). The car as it appears in art from the turn of the century to the 1930s expresses this quality of nobility and prosperity particularly strongly (Tubbs, 1978: 67, 71)

At this point, there enters a dialectic, that of the mechanisms of

narcissistic subjectivity. The subjective, self-determining uniqueness which joins with republican ideas of (or wishes for) equality requires corresponding social objectifications, sometimes of a mass nature, which are available to every individual — an aristocratic car for everybody! Since this republican wish for equality is already political, the car as object of affluence or as wish object can always be put to political use, whether in the sense of extending or of limiting mechanisms of equality.

Ford's Model T, produced before the First World War, belongs to a different political constellation from Hitler's VW. In the case of Ford, the motor-car is an economic object of large-scale industrial production and marketing. For Hitler and National Socialism the car as a potential object of consumption carries an important social and political meaning, and as the 'Führer's car' it fulfils the same function of display and authority as the carriage. By planning the Volkswagen as a mass product, integrated into the general system of motivation, consumption and satisfaction known as 'Strength through Joy', National Socialism held out the promise of prosperity and autonomous mobility. What promise must it have been to convert the luxury product of feudalism into the mass product of the Volkswagen! This begins in films such as *Mit Vollgas ins Glück* (*Full Speed to Happiness*), with the racing driver Hans Stück in the leading part. There is also the striking photo of an ordinary man (the photo emphasizes his 'ordinariness') who bends over the VW, bangs on the metal and listens carefully to the sound (Kunze and Stommer, 1982: 39). One of the most common questions is: Is it pure steel? — Yes. Clearly, the Nazi prototype of the VW and its mass production version in the Federal Republic is an authentic and first class car, not a surrogate.

There is a direct media relationship here to the 'car' as consumption product. The promise to produce the VW was only a media event. The VW was not built by the Nazis. Instead of VWs, military vehicles were manufactured in the newly constructed factories. Only the Federal Republic turned the promise and the prototype, hence the media event, into the usable commodity. A Christmas advertisement of 1950 touchingly projects a desire for consumption and wealth upon the precursor and cousin of the car, the motor-scooter. A girl dressed as a Christmas angel with ringlets and coronet rides through the snow on a motor-scooter festooned with wrapped-up gifts. Caption: Christ Child, 1950. Sachs (1984: 82) writes: 'Avarice, conspicuous consumption and envy — according to this threefold measure the German people is slowly transforming itself — layer by layer, commodity by commodity — into a consumer society. The car has taken the lead in this process.'

Perhaps there is a more sympathetic and understanding way of expressing what the combination of wealth, feudal luxury and individual mobility meant for the lives of our parents and ourselves. The driving licence and motor-car were and are symbols of freedom, the first car still

means that you are taking care of yourself, even if you are also crippling yourself financially. Historically, the car is the promise and offer of a share in wealth; biographically, it is the promise of a life of one's own. The car opens the way to consumption and mobility. Television as a technical instrument was able to progress because it moved in the tracks of the car. Television promises a — consuming — share in a world whose images flash by; a consuming share in a kaleidoscopic life of adventure, shows, politics, sports, sex — all of which pass in front of *me*.

As noted above, in contrast to the Nazis who envisioned the VW only as an icon of wealth and freedom in the future, after the war the Federal Republic fulfilled this promise of wealth and freedom. Television, on the other hand, can only remain a *promise* of sharing, can never enter a historic phase where this promise can be realized. The *Bericht aus Bonn* (Report from Bonn)¹ will never invite its viewers to engage in political action.

The contradiction is deeply felt because the history of the car as a consumer item has legitimized and naturalized *consumption* rather than *participation in the social world*.

Standardization and uniformity are directly connected with consumption. In the history of the motor-car it was not until Ford and the VW that the car came to stand for consumption, standardization and uniformity, whereas standardization and uniformity are part and parcel of television.

The car is for us the most important part — emotionally and financially — of a system, and therefore forms its centre. It is a system which has grown over decades and reached its logical conclusion in the petrol station network and the motorway. It is not the product of planned development, but came into being via detours and 'wrong turnings' as economic expansion interacted with rationalization. The petrol station and the oil industry are particularly striking examples (see Polster, 1982). On the other hand, the 'car' system is also a front for state symbolism and legitimation as in the Nazi road-building programme and the way in which the Autobahn is a monument to fascism, an endless, triumphal road of technology and modernity.

We know how this system works — its instability on the one hand and its inseparability from our lives on the other: the oil crisis of the 1970s and the travel restrictions; the fact that every fifth, sixth or seventh workplace forms part of the system. Without the car, adult education colleges would have to shut down. Without pupil conveyances the centralized school system would collapse. Factory councils seem unable to agree on smog regulations which would restrict the use of cars. In the absence of 'meals on wheels', care of the elderly creates even more ghettos for old people, etc. We experience the instability of this system in terms of a crisis and a warning — loss of employment, export dependency of the economy, etc.² The stability of the system lies in its power of resistance. Despite

dysfunctionality — dying forests, accidents, population dispersal in the countryside, urban destruction — it never changes, or only minimally. The system that comprises the combustion engine, private transport, roads, car industry, mineral oil industry, construction industry, advertising, design, engineering science, radio traffic control, etc. permeates all our lives and continues to remain a central mechanism of integration.

Neither evolution nor reason can destroy this system. Only a catastrophe can do that. But it is possible to replace elements of the system without destroying the rationality of the whole. This replacement — so my thesis goes — began with television: out of the technological system of mobility came the technological system of communication. Television moves from the system of 'private transport and mobility' into the digitalized network of mass communication. One important reservation: television is a system only in a rudimentary sense; there is little that it can take over from the car system. It is a transitional phenomenon. Television has not acquired system status; in the end it is an isolated phenomenon of a kind which either disappears, losing its importance, or joins another system. A system arises when mass communication of an individual type is connected with computer and digital networks. When that happens we are at the threshold of the development of a new medium.

The car — as technical invention, hub of an economic system or as expression and instrument of state ideology and state activity — could only progress as far as it did because there were people who wanted it, who wanted to realize their desires with it, who wanted to give their daily lives a meaning, especially by participating in the aristocratic freedom of mobility, and the prosperity of the bourgeoisie.

In addition, one could take part in the social life of consumption, publicly displaying one's own power and greatness. Linked into erotic desire and fantasies of omnipotence, one could enjoy leisure and nature, professional life and the world of the autonomous adult. Fantasy performs an integrating function in this conglomerate. It indicates which way the private transport system is going, namely to make these fantasies available to consumer and technological needs, to use them as a means of mediation. Some of the principal mediating links are given below according to theme

Omnipotence

As an example, here is a typical advertisement in *Die Zeit* of 31 January, 1986. It advertises Citroën. An athletic black woman in scanty sports attire is apparently pushing a motor engine skywards. Possible association: power-woman as rocket, thrust-force of the motor-bomb. Her mouth is open as if she's shouting. The caption in giant letters reads: I WANT POWER. (And the text reads: I WANT THE NEW CITROEN CX)

Here is a 'classic' constellation of power, sex, omnipotence and technological fantasies and wishes that the car is meant to fulfil. The fantasy conglomerate accompanies the car throughout our century. In his *Rückblick in die Geschichte unserer Wünsche (A Backward Glance at the History of our Wishes)*, Sachs has compiled pictures showing the relationship of cars to women. The elegant and sought-after woman of luxury (1984: 11, 52); the motor/animal/woman relationship of *art nouveau* (1984: 31); the woman admiring the phallic car (1984: 54); the woman immersed in everyday life (1984: 128).

Never-ending greatness

Alongside power, eros, luxury, happiness, the car embodies the eternal and indestructible values of greatness and power. This applies in the first place to the German autobahn, known in the collective memory as Hitler's autobahn. This was a successful, symbolic materialization of absolute greatness, technically tried and tested and worthy of its place in humanity's memory. Neither wars, ruins nor the horror of the concentration camps could dim its glory. Stommer (1982: 49ff) shows how Nazi Germany built the autobahn bridges as cultural monuments with great success, as the continuing connection between Hitler and the autobahn testifies.

Being part of 'magnificent' and 'eternal' nature is a motif that continues. An example is a BMW advertisement in *Die Zeit* in autumn 1985: a BMW car is seen on a mountain road in a majestic setting resembling a Caspar David Friedrich painting.³ The fantasy of grandeur is captured in giant letters: 'Supremacy in a Frontier Area'.

Everyday happiness

The car represents technical greatness and eternal greatness against the background of a beautiful, harmonious and powerful natural world. But to be complete the picture has to include everyday happiness. What is more fitting than to show the family in harmony with car and children? This is the theme of the lead article of *Zeitmagazin* (27 December, 1985) on 'The Hundredth Birthday of the Automobile', which shows two family photos with cars, father, mother, boy and girl. A photo from the turn of the century adds a female figure to the group, an aunt or governess, who looks after the children while their parents, sitting in an open car, take leave of their children to engage in sport. In today's photograph the children sit inside a giant toy, the motor-car, with beaming parents looking on. In an advertisement for a Hispano-Suiza from the 1920s there is another scene of leave-taking: an elegant world with a castle, successful and dynamic

fashion-conscious people and girls and boys with a dog as the car departs (Tubbs, 1978: 59).

Archaic struggle

The colossal powers released by the car call up ancient warrior fantasies and set them cheek by jowl with reality. The frontier between reality and fantasy is blurred. Life becomes once more a brutal battle for survival, of force and cunning, for wife and child, fought with knight's armour and enormous horsepower. The origins of motor sport are marked by murderous races. Blood tribute has moved from the races into everyday life.

Bliersbach has described the strategies used by contemporary drivers: 'driving for thrills', 'fear of risk', combined with a 'desire to withstand fear' (Bliersbach, 1979: 26). Aggressive combat situations of an archetypal kind occur:

A driver just about to overtake notices another driver in his rear mirror approaching and flashing his lights. Most drivers would respond with a sense of outrage that their right to overtake had been challenged. They would also be furious to be at the mercy of the driver closing in on them and flashing his lights. Impotent rage makes them want to hit back, most drivers respond with open or concealed revenge techniques, stepping on the brake, turning on the lights etc. (Bliersbach, 1979: 26ff)

Desensualizing and equalizing excessive fantasy

Nevertheless, the opportunities for automobile aggression are slowly but perceptibly shrinking. In recent years the number of fatal accidents has definitely dropped. Why is this? Certainly not good driving sense or successful educational propaganda. It is the result of restrictions and controls: for example, having to wear seatbelts; the threat of fines (more than half of German crimes and offences have to do with the car); speed limits; increased traffic restrictions as a result of overload on the roads, etc. This accords with Elias's (1979) description of the 'civilizing process'.

What will take the place of combat on the autobahn if 100kph is to be the speed limit in the Federal Republic? This is where film and television come in. The film offers a similar kind of experience to looking through the windscreen with its plethora of impressions. But sensory stimulation moves away from the whole body to the eye and the ear. This opens up a route for extensive and excessive fantasy images. The more restrictions are imposed on driving and the motor-car — and such restrictions are caused by the systematic and consumer character of private mobility — the more the

film, whether as television or video, steps into the breach: television is an unlimited medium. The racing driver now becomes a figure in a Camel advertisement, on a rally tour through Africa, or is transformed into Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* (the war hero) or *Rocky* (the sporting hero). Hitler already encouraged the move from car racing to film by promoting car racing and commissioning a film about Carraciola in 1939 with the title *Sieg auf der ganzen Linie* (*Victory all Along the Line*). Battle fantasies appear on the screen using stylish techniques. If the car already constituted a huge step in the direction of desensualization and discipline, while at the same time extending the domain of fantasy, television brings about the loss of the corporeal. At each step of the civilizing process, there is compensation for loss: an extension of fantasy in the areas of freedom, luxury, sex, power and violence. Television as a telescreen system, to which video also now belongs, gives endless stimulation to eye and ear, offers a limitless and exuberant fantasy life in which all behavioural taboos can be thrown overboard. The progressive desensualization of the civilizing process goes hand in hand with an undreamed of extension of impressions, experiences and fantasies, but these are increasingly prefabricated, prestructured, standardized and bound into consumption. It is, as it were, a process of equalizing extensive fantasy.

Nor does television require outside pressures or necessity, in Elias's sense, to do this. If we still find the car an indispensable necessity, we sit in front of the television of our own free will and at our own pleasure.

Notes

1 *Bericht aus Bonn* (Report from Bonn) is a political television magazine that belongs to the chief broadcasting channels of public service television. Every Friday evening a Bonn studio delivers a report on political events in the federal capital, Bonn.

2 The instability of the car system has brought forth a body of critical thought with arguments or formulations (such as Krämer-Badoni et al., 1971, Dahl, 1972; Dollinger, 1972; Franken, 1972). These all are arguments, questions and ways of thinking which examine a system and lay bare its instability and dysfunctionality. Such arguments are important steps towards a critique, but without a cultural-historical approach they cannot deal with the logic and real nature of the development. The lines of development which interact with everyday behaviour, emotions, technical developments, social developments, economic goals and constraints can be found in Sachs (1984), Stommer (1982), Petsch (1982), Polster (1982), de Rougemont (1980: 159), Eichberg (1984: 150). Important references can already be found in Lefebvre (1977: 140). Schivelbusch (1977) made a notable contribution to the subject in his work on the cultural history of the railway.

3 E.g. *Riesengebirge*, (Giant Mountains) in the Bavarian State Gallery, Munich.

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