

Working with Key Concepts in Cultural Studies: Media

Cultural Studies as Media Studies

In Cultural Studies, media have become a central concern (cf. e.g. Kelleter and Stein's recent collection of essays on *American Studies as Media Studies*). Yet, how do we approach them theoretically and methodologically? And, first things first, what exactly do we mean when we say 'media'?

On the Different Uses of the Term 'Media' / 'Medium'

The term "media" is quite frequently used both in scholarly as well as in everyday discourse, in many different contexts with many different connotations. So, "for all its present popularity, the concept of medium remains strangely ill-defined" (Grishakova/Ryan 2).

And, to make things even more complicated, the trouble starts with the word itself: It is derived from Latin, but "while the correct Latin form is *medium* (sing.), *media* (plur.), some scholars use the plural *mediums*, and others use *media* in the singular" (ibid.).

Moreover, word combinations and compounds such as "mass media," "media technologies," "media studies," or "mediascapes" may add to the overall confusion about what exactly is implied when we – or others – use the term.

Consequently, when we talk about 'media', we have to make sure that we know which definition and which concept of 'media' or – in the singular form – 'medium' we employ.

Wide and Narrow Concepts of 'Medium' / 'Media'

Rather wide concepts:

1. Media as 'modes of representation' in different forms of art (including their respective genres), such as short story, graphic novel, documentary film, etc.
2. Media as 'channels of communication,' i.e. as modes of recording, reproducing, and disseminating information, such as books, newspapers, films, television, the Internet, etc.

Rather narrow concepts:

3. Media as 'systems of signs,' i.e. the different systems of signs (verbal, visual, musical, ...) such as a language, musical scales, etc., can be regarded as media.
4. Media as 'carrier of signs,' i.e. the material basis of the representation (in the above sense), for example ink on paper, oil on canvas, wood, celluloid, etc. (adopted from Assman 61)

On Representation and Media-Specificity

In any of the four senses of the term, media, through their mediality and materiality, shape the ways in which we experience, understand, and communicate the world. They are, to use Kelleter and Stein's words, "an inescapable part of collectively shared realities, shaping our daily lives in complex and frequently unintelligible ways."

In so doing, media can be regarded as part and parcel of "signifying practices of representation" (Barker 8); they use media-specific aesthetic strategies for a range of different purposes.

Thus, when you approach a particular medium, you should ask:

- What are its physical features? (i.e. consider its materiality!)
- What is its specific aesthetic potential compared to other media? (i.e. consider its form!);
- What are its potential functions (e.g. entertainment, documentation,...)?
- How can you describe the relationship between the formal characteristics of the medium and the potential functions?
- What is the specific context of use (i.e. private/public, professional/amateur, commercial/non-commercial, etc.)?

Sources

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- Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein, eds. *American Studies as Media Studies*. 167. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009. Print.