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# Transitional Times

## 'New Media' – Novel Histories and Trajectories

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### Abstract

The alluring traits of 'new media' have spurred new research interests. This article discusses the discourse of 'new media' from the vantage point of critically reviewing three emissions from MIT Press during the years 1999-2003 within the series *Media in Transition*, as to the fundamental concepts used and introduced in these works. It cautions against any reductionist perspective on new media forms, and while highlighting the many merits of writing new media histories, the article shows that this discussion, also nascent within an interdisciplinary Swedish research environment, also carries other important features with implications for the relationships between communication and (time)space. It concludes that it is not enough to acknowledge that 'new media' call for a deep awareness of the historicity of the technological imaginary; deeper understandings of transitions in media also call for thoroughly expounding the socio-spatial ramifications of communication.

**Keywords:** MIT Press, new media historiography, communication geography, media in transition

### Introduction

Media are in transition. In accord with media scholars all over the world at present, this is the key contention that has given rise to the present and recurring publishing of MIT Press-books (from 2003, in the series *Media in Transition*), and the simultaneous series of conferences that have taken place at MIT since 1999, MiT 1-5.<sup>1</sup> It is fair to suggest that MIT – and its Comparative Media Studies program – has emerged as a pilgrimage center for media scholars. For many of us, it seems to hold the key to the gates of enlightenment, as we throw ourselves over books dealing with the *new* situation of the *new* media and the *new* research brought on by *new* predicaments. Over the past decade, the term 'new media' has gained a wide currency, resulting in stacks of new publications, including new journals such as *Convergence: the International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, published by John Libbey Media since 1995, and *New Media and Society*, published by SAGE and appearing in 1999. But how may this discourse, stretching more than a decade now, be evaluated in hindsight?

The two words *new media* often conjure a bright future. At the same time, new media are alleged to be both the cause of and the key markers/symptoms of broader social changes, such as the shift from modernity to post-modernity, from industrialism to post-industrialism, a de-centering of established colonial geo-political orders and intensifying processes of globalization dissolving national boundaries, etc. When the world of media

began to look different owing to the new paradigm of digitalization, it seemed that “the nature of change that was experienced warranted an absolute marking off from what went before” (Lister et al. 2003: 10). In general, a few major developments are alleged to demarcate these transitional times. It seems valid to boil them down into four tendencies. First of all, *convergence* implies that previously discrete media forms now converge both at the level of production and consumption. Second, one might speak of *incremental self-referentiality*, which means that representations have become increasingly auto-referential or ‘windowed’; they open up to other representations in other media rather than to referents outside the media. Third, there is within our contemporary media cultures what Henry Jenkins calls an expanding “*participatory culture*”. This refers to the fact that patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by the new technologies and citizens are now able to archive, annotate, appropriate and transform media content in a way unthinkable before.<sup>2</sup> And fourth, there are *new spatial arrangements*: the speed of digital media is alleged to alter the way we sense space, bringing about and/or enhancing what scholars have termed “time-space compression”, “telepresence” and “deterritorialization”, etc. These shifts in the media landscape also seem to call for imperative shifts in outlooks upon it. This article will assess some of the expressions of what I will call *the transition approach* and look back on how the transformations have been conceived of by media scholars during the period 1999-2003, from the vantage point of three books published by MIT Press during the same period: *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999); *Rethinking Media Change: the Aesthetics of Transition* edited by David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (2003) and *New Media 1740-1915*, edited by and Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree (2003).

These books all deal with the profound changes in the media landscape in general, but in *media technologies* in particular, and show that these transitions have implications for society, culture and human selfhood. One important contribution of this literature is that it has shown how these transitions have affected media theorizing and in particular the practices of writing *media history*. Scholars argue that many media critics remain captivated by the modernist myth of the new in presupposing that digital technologies such as the World Wide Web, virtual reality, and computer graphics are essentially different from earlier media and both supply and call for a new set of aesthetic and cultural principles. Such a claim is forcibly refuted within the transition approach. But moving beyond such self-acclaimed merits of writing ‘new media histories’, I suggest that the current ‘transitions’ actually imply a wider scope for media studies, as a wider range of issues have (re)entered our space. Information and communication technologies constitute an expanding geography, parallel to and highly enmeshed with our everyday experiences of space and our physical environment (see Sundén 2006). In pursuing this line of reasoning, I will pin down novel trajectories that have opened up in relation to these discussions, as they revive issues of *place*, *space* and *time*. I will also provide a few examples of sensory-emotive negotiations with these dimensions. These readings will be framed in relation to what they can teach us about the role of ‘new media’ in shaping and altering the fundamental features of the human experience of time and space. Situating the transition approach this way brings out undercurrents pointing to what has been termed a ‘spatial turn’ in media studies (Couldry and McCarthy (eds.) 2004; Falkheimer and Jansson (eds.) 2006). The ‘transition approach’ will also be evaluated in relation to a few *Swedish examples* where similar questions are raised. These examples will serve the purpose of broadening the outlook on transitions in media and media history research.<sup>3</sup> But first, under the following three headings, I will introduce and critically assess some

of the most important features of the three works, starting with the new media historiography, followed by an evaluation of the scope and limitations of the concepts introduced (*remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy*) and employed (*technology*).

### **Nothing is New? New Media Histories**

Intuitively, there seems to be something indisputably *new* about the transformations we are witnessing. Paralleling this, however, there is in fact, among transition theorists, a strong skepticism toward and empirically grounded repudiation of the newness craze. In the foreword of the Media in Transition series, for example, David Thorburn, Edward Barrett and Henry Jenkins argue that: “New media technologies and new linkages and alliances across older media are generating profound changes in our political, social and aesthetic experience. But media systems of our own era are unique neither in their instability nor in their complex, ongoing transformations”. Media scholars at MIT further define their own assignment in a similar manner. The program

seeks to bring a needed historical perspective to current discussions of media change. Our conferences create a common space for conversation and comparison between historians engaged in the study of those earlier historical moments and innovators shaping the future direction of digital media. Our research seeks a middle ground between technophobia and technophilia, one that promises a more pragmatic and historically-grounded assessment of the directions changes are leading us. (<http://web.mit.edu/cms/Research/transition.html>)

All three books deal with the complex relations between emerging technologies and their ancestor systems. Their aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of those *liminal phases* in which technologies are subjected to negotiations, before they become recognizable as cultural forms that are employed and understood in distinct ways. William Uricchio argues, in an essay called ‘Historicizing Media in Transition’ (in Thorburn and Jenkins 2003), not only that the state of affairs requires a new complexity in analyzing the mediascapes of today and of the past (he suggests a triad model of analysis where perceptual experience, epistemological order and individual and collective memory might shape the interrogations), he also maintains that we need a new postmodern historiography to come to terms with the material in satisfying ways. Tom Gunning also contributes to the practice of media history. When a new medium is introduced, it is always followed by ‘rhetorical tropes and discursive practices’, which disclose how the new technology was perceived – these discourses constitute, according to Gunning, the nucleus for media historians (in Thorburn and Jenkins eds., 2003: 39). Gitelman and Pingree (eds., 2003) show, in a similar manner, that the same sorts of anxieties shaped the reception of older media, just as today in the connected age, when we are both enabled by the Web in a ‘global village,’ but also anxious about, for example, the intrusion of privacy and changes in moral codes. So, according to the transition approach, today’s reactions largely echo modes of receiving ‘new media’ in the past. This key notion has even generated complete models for understanding new media.

### **Opening Up and (En)closing the Subject?**

The most ambitious and large-scale of these conceptualizations of media in transition seems to be the theory of *remediation*, suggested by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin

in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, which appeared in 1999. In the first section of the book, Bolter and Grusin offer the notion of remediation as *a way of thinking* about new media. What they term remediation is, however, according to their own glossary, ‘the *formal logic* by which new media technologies refashion prior media forms’ (1999: 273). The theory of remediation is a theory of dialogues between different media that engage humans in the modern world. New visual media, Bolter and Grusin argue, achieve their cultural significance by paying homage to and by rivaling and refashioning old media forms such as perspective painting, film, photography and television (ibid: 15). This process consists of a double logic. First, there is the desire for *immediacy*, for a transparency in media that obliterates or lessens the perception of the media themselves in the viewer’s mind. The word simultaneously connotes proximity (in time) and an unmediated quality to the experience. Transparent immediacy means that the medium tries to hide itself, to ignore or deny its own presence. This desire has a history, Bolter and Grusin argue, in opposition to those enthusiasts who conceive of digital media as surpassing other media, bringing media history to an end. Earlier media such as painting, photography, film and television sought immediacy through the interplay of the aesthetic value of transparency with techniques of linear perspective, erasure and automaticity, all of which are strategies also at work in digital technology (ibid: 24). The second aspect of remediation is the reality of *hypermediacy*, which is defined as a preoccupation with media itself and a hyper-awareness of the processes of mediation. Designers of such forms ask us to take pleasure in the act of mediation, and modern media cultures tend to multiply their media. New media refashion older media and older media refashion themselves in response to the challenges posed by the new media. Hence, this double logic causes new media cultures to multiply their media, while simultaneously making efforts to erase all traits of mediation. The point made is that remediation is an historical process of constant *oscillations* between hypermediacy and immediacy. The authors specify that in the case of, for example, mobile observational technologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as the diorama, the phenakistoscope and the stereoscope (characterized by multiple images, moving images and moving observers), transparent immediacy was incorporated *within* hypermediacy owing to the fact that these media offered ‘more reality’ without hiding the contrived strategies for doing so (ibid: 37).

The authors demonstrate the way in which the idea of remediation plays itself out in different media forms. They examine how each new medium refashions older media and how they are often refashioned themselves. The new media discussed in the second part of the book are primarily visual: computer games, digital photography, photo realistic graphics, digital art, film, virtual reality, television and the World Wide Web. The Web (1999: 196f) is described as the best example of the logic of hypermediacy. The logic of transparent immediacy is discussed in relation to virtual reality, which is described as “the clearest (most transparent!) example” (ibid: 161) of this logic. Virtual reality, according to Bolter and Grusin, requires that media users forget that they are wearing a computer interface. Immediacy is also achieved by the illusion of three-dimensional immersion and the capacity for interaction (ibid: 162).

The theory is neat – it fits all thinkable media forms and genres. This is, however, where it becomes problematic. The more I read *Remediation*, the less I feel convinced about the utility of the ‘formal logic’ that Bolter and Grusin claim to have unearthed. Remediation, transparent immediacy and hypermediacy are words that describe important meaning-making processes surrounding new media forms, and it seems that at least the term *remediation* is gaining wide acceptance and is increasingly employed, for example

in the Nordic context.<sup>4</sup> These concepts do seem to capture something interesting, but are they necessarily connected in each and every case? Why do these scholars long for *the* Media Theory that will explain it all – a theory to end all theorizing? This seems utterly paradoxical, as a consensus among leading media scholars simultaneously points to *differentiation* due to digitization (see, e.g., Manovich 2001). Klaus Bruhn Jensen, who pleads for recognizing the embeddedness of the Internet in longstanding political and social institutions – in a *history of virtual interaction* – nevertheless pins down what is *new* (although not in any revolutionary way) in current ‘new media’:

What distinguishes recent forms of computer-mediated communication in this regard, perhaps most of all, is the increased differentiation of the constituent communicative acts, not only because of a multiplication of the available applications and genres on the same platform, but also because of the adaptability and programmability, broadly speaking, of each act. (Bruhn Jensen 2001: 103)

What seems mandatory is, thus, a diversification of theories and methodologies to deal with this situation. Moreover, would it not be more apt to suggest remediation as an *empirical problem* rather than declare its status as a formal logic, pledging to deliver *the answer* to everything media studies ever asked for? Early on in their book, however, Bolter and Grusin explicitly retreat from such ambitions and clarify important conditions of their thinking:

The two logics of remediation have a long history, for their interplay defines a genealogy that dates back at least to the Renaissance and the invention of linear perspective. We do not claim that immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation are *universal aesthetic truths*; rather we regard them as *practices of specific groups in specific times*. (1999: 21, cf. 105, my italics)

Nevertheless, an all-inclusive ambition linking all three concepts is actually what Bolter and Grusin end up with in their attempt to keep the whole construct together. Though an undoubtedly tempting move in academic writing, this seems to me to venture rendering the concepts less meaningful than they are, perhaps even emptying them of meaning. *Remediation* runs the risk of attempting to do too much, as the concepts seem endlessly resilient, as the authors themselves recognize:

Although the logic of immediacy has manifested itself from the Renaissance to the present day, each manifestation in each age may be significantly different, and immediacy may mean one thing to theorists, another to practicing artists and a third to viewers. The diversity is even greater for hypermediacy which seems always to offer a number of different reactions to the contemporary logic of immediacy (ibid).

Let me provide three examples of the ways in which the authors stretch, for example, the term *transparent immediacy*. Immediacy or transparency is exemplified as key to photorealistic computer graphics (ibid: 115), through styles of televisual remediation, where transparency is favored in dramas, soap operas, daytime talk shows, and real life-programs (ibid: 187), and at Disney World, where encountering a real, larger-than-life Mickey Mouse is an experience of immediacy for children (ibid: 171). The term immediacy becomes nebulous as it refers both to the *reality trick* we consciously buy into in the reception of computer graphics, as well as to the emotional connections and *identifications* involved in consuming the television genres mentioned and the immensely complex *imaginings* of children. All these involve composite reflexive negotiations

with ‘reality’ on completely different scales. I am critical of how such broad usage of the term risks bringing thinking about the media to a dead end. To the extent that teleological reasoning brought media history to an end – something that the transition approach aims to counter – *Remediation* is dangerously close to ‘closing’ the subject.

The openness and indeterminacy of the complex cultural and technological processes that pervade current and past transitions are more consciously fore-grounded in another anthology from MIT Press, in print four years later. We are on the road to somewhere – that is clear from the introduction of *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* called ‘*Toward an Aesthetics of Transition*’ written by David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins. In rejecting apocalyptic scenarios of media revolution, demonstrating instead that media transition is always a mix of tradition and innovation, the contributors highlight media change as an ‘accretive’ (i.e. accumulative) process in which emerging and established systems interact, shift, and collude with one another (2003: 2). The authors sketch an *aesthetics* of media transition. This consists of patterns of development and social dispersion that they hold to operate across eras, media forms, and cultures. The discourse of our digital revolution, Thorburn and Jenkins argue – apart from being replete with a high degree of self-conscious awareness, that is with *hypermediacy* or *media reflexivity* (ibid: 4-6) – is sated with apocalyptic rhetoric, both utopian and dystopian, which resembles discourses in the past:

similar utopian and dystopian visions were a notable feature of earlier moments of cultural and technological transition – the advent of the printing press, the development of still photography, the mass media of the nineteenth century, the telegraph, the telephone, the motion picture, broadcast television. In these and other instances of media in transition. (2003: 1-2)

The book challenges the idea that new technologies displace older systems with decisive suddenness. Instead the contributions, which cover a wide range of topics and empirical material – ranging from the relationship between the book and information technology, the amusement phonograph, pamphlets in 17<sup>th</sup> century, cybercultures, virtual space, visual culture – show that the emergence of new media sets in motion a complicated process in which ‘established and infant systems may co-exist for an extended period or in which older media may develop new functions and find new audiences’ (ibid: 2). We must acknowledge the hybridity and collaboration among media forms, the authors argue, and exemplify with oral forms outlasting the written word, and the culture of print, the illuminated manuscript surviving into the Gutenberg era, theaters and novels co-existing with TV and the movies, radio reinventing itself after TV. Competing media strengthen one another; newspapers, television and movies extend themselves on the Web.<sup>5</sup>

### **Animist and Culturalist Positions**

In *Remediation* and *Rethinking Media Change*, technology is a topic of great importance. This also applies to the third volume, which I will discuss below. Looking closely at how technology is conceptualized in the introductions to the two anthologies and in *Remediation*, however, two problems may be identified in this instance. First, it is somewhat unsettling to read Bolter and Grusin, as they, on reflection, are dangerously close to falling prey to a form of technological determinism, or at least to a kind of anthropomorphist or animistic medium theory, in constructing the media as an *agent*, a *subject*. This is implied in their use of language, when stating that the medium ‘refashions itself’

and that ‘all current active media...honor, acknowledge, appropriate, and implicitly or explicitly attack one another’ (1999: 87). Thorburn and Jenkins also use similar formulations: ‘*Self-reflexivity* and imitation are contrasting aspects of the same process by which *the new medium maps its emergent properties* and *defines* a space for itself in relation to its ancestors’ and ‘the movies assumed and more fully achieved some of the prime ambitions of its ancestors’ (2003: 10, 11). Can a medium *map* and *define* and *achieve ambitions* or *attack*? Can it also be *self-reflexive*? The media are here afforded agency and ‘life’ in a way that is utterly misleading. The second related problem is the tendency to reduce the media to their technological properties. The media are arguably *more* than texts, institutions and technologies – but *less* than a subject. Media are, as William Uricchio states in *Rethinking Media Change*, ‘cultural practices which envelop these and other elements within a broader fabric offered by particular social orders, mentalities and the lived experiences of their producers and users’ (Uricchio 2003: 24).

In many ways, it might appear as a ‘natural’ state of affairs, that in books from MIT Press *technology* is given special attention and located as the hub of such practices. Its accentuated role in the analysis at the Massachusetts Institute of *Technology* (as well as in the United States, where technology and preoccupation with technological development are extremely important in the country’s history) might seem obvious. But technology is clearly overplayed when it takes on ‘human’ traits. It would seem important to underscore, in this context, that the media do not have a ‘soul’ or an inherent character with a conscious will and an intention. In addition, this language surprisingly unveils an ostensibly underdeveloped *cultural* as well as *socioeconomic* understanding of transitions in media. It is something of paradox that Thorburn and Jenkins employ such language, when they simultaneously call for ‘a perspective that aims to understand the place of economic, legal, social and cultural institutions in mediating and partly shaping technological change’ (2003: 2). Such a culturalist stress on the complex of social, cultural and economic factors shaping technologies and on the way they are mobilized to meet certain ends and needs is imbricated by a diametrically different view. In Thorburn and Jenkins and Bolter and Grusin, amid a discussion relying on Raymond Williams and his emphasis on the reasons why technologies are developed, a McLuhanite position surfaces in which media technologies are conceived of as proprietors of wide ranging agency, determining the course of events as well as human selfhood.

A different awareness, however, can be traced to *New Media, 1740-1915*. Gitelman and Pingree stress the complex of forces that have shaped the media in use today, and as they emphasize, “these forces are technological, to be sure, but also social, economic, and representational” (2003 xiv). Their collection constitutes a fully-fledged cultural studies approach (at its best) to media in transition. Gitelman and Pingree resist pure and static notions of media and argue for *intermedial* analyses. The volume traces a history of dialogue between media and society from the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to our own times. One of the goals of the book, as in *Remediation* and *Rethinking Media Change*, is to establish a context for our own notion of new media and how its newness is constructed. All media were once new media, and the purpose of the collection is to consider emerging media within their historical context. There is a will to ‘encourage thinking about newness’ (2003: xii). Gitelman and Pingree describe the moment before the material means and conceptual modes of new media have become fixed. At such moments, the meanings of the media are in flux and then “new media briefly acknowledge and question the mythic character of and the ritualized conventions of existing media while they are themselves defined within a perceptual and semiotic economy that they then help to transform”

(ibid). The period between 1740-1915 is described as crucial to understanding how electronic and digital media have acquired the meanings that are bound to them to this day. The media under scrutiny are ‘dead media,’ that is, they were once new and broadly employed, but later they became obsolete and forgotten. New media thus implies both that they have newly received scholarly attention and that they have been studied during their novelty years. Studies of *zograscopes*, *optical telegraphs*, *the physionogotrace* as well as *stereoscopes* are examples of how new media forms are productively examined, framing them in relation to how they *function socially*. In all of the contributions in Gitelman and Pingree, media are conceived of as deeply integrated into different social, cultural, political, economic and *spatiotemporal* structures.

## **Reclaiming Space for Understanding New Media**

The works discussed contribute in important ways to the writing of media history and, notwithstanding the problems I have chosen to highlight, they offer media historians important perspectives and new conceptual tools. What may seem less obvious is that they also do so by offering new and radical installments to the discourses on media studies. After having read these books, it seems legitimate to suggest that understanding ‘new media’ not only involves discovering the genealogy of dialogues between old and new – and an awareness of the complexity and congeniality of the actual relations between emerging technologies and their ancestor systems – it also benefits from thick descriptions of how media forms alter or redefine spatiotemporal parameters. The introduction of ‘new media’ forms, not only in our time, but in different periods throughout modernity, has played major roles in shaping these fundamentals of the human experience. In order to show the many potentials of a spatial media analysis, in the following section I will deliberately attend selectively to certain contributions to this body of literature, sometimes bringing undercurrents to the surface.

The importance of space and time as analytical categories is particularly visible in Gitelman and Pingree, where new media are densely described within societal and cultural frameworks, and theories of space/place, representation, virtuality, visibility are presented in detail and generously discussed in the different articles. The approach is holistic and promises to show how the media frame and how they inform our apprehensions about the real and how the media orient us in relation to other representational forms and frame our sense of space, place and time. Hence, in *New Media 1740-1915*, the spatial turn in media theorizing is clearly spelled out. The perspective is brilliantly elaborated in an article on *zograscopes* by Erin Blake, which through its precision and clarity will serve as a very important example of the merits of communication geography. *Zograscopes* were popular commodities in 18th century England. They were 3D gadgets creating virtual views that only came into being in the viewer’s visual cortex. According to Blake, *zograscopes* enabled its users ‘to think of themselves as individuals participating together in the larger sphere of polite society’ (2003: 1-2), i.e., in what Jürgen Habermas has called the emerging bourgeois public sphere. These devices provided a model for seeing and theorizing public cosmopolitan space as generic, neutral and polite. For subjects in polite society, the spatial understanding engendered by *zograscopes* defined streets, church interiors as spaces for unhindered physical movement and expansive vision, and this idea of space was congenial with the self-conception of polite society. Mapping space through a *zogrscope*, i.e. constructing knowledge about space as neutral and ‘empty’, told a story of space as available, accessible, dynamic



and vibrant, but controllable, clean and polite. Blake elegantly lays bare the sociality of space and how this was informed by a new media form, in turn demonstrating that media in transition have deep-seated entwinements with the political, social and cultural settings from which they originate and to which they contribute.

The story of the physionogrotrace is similarly fascinating and shows how media representations may be inseparable in time and space from the subjects represented. This medium is profusely contextualized within the political culture of Jeffersonian America. Wendy Bellion discusses how one media apparatus – the drawing machine – within the space of Charles Willson Peale’s museum became a machine on which the ‘era’s deepest political worries were etched onto its simple metal frame’ (2003: 31). Bellion discusses the concept of representation, both the political (substitution) and artistic (simulation) definitions, and shows that these conceptual structures might occasionally meet (ibid: 37). In the case of the physionogrotrace, which cut peoples profiles ‘perfectly’, the apparatus was believed to create infallible images – perfect representations of citizens. The machine also collapsed the difference between signified and signifier: ‘Profile portraits were ontologically inseparable from their referents, spatially and temporally bound to real bodies’ (ibid: 48). The history of this medium gives valuable information about the idealistic political model of direct representation. This was a never realized political ideal, in as much as the physionogrotrace was an imperfect representational index, Bellion argues. The machine reduced personhood to the sum of its skeletal proportions. In so doing, it revealed more about Enlightenment rationalism than it did about the subjectivity of the individuals who had their profiles drawn.

Many contributions in Thorburn and Jenkins also support the notion that at least space is a given dimension in an emerging aesthetics of transition. A highly interesting aspect of how mediatization alters and redefines our experiences of space is elaborated when the authors examine how we relate to and make sense of those virtual or digital spaces that we inhabit, in the second part of the book, ‘Emerging forms and practices’, in terms of, for example, spatial experimenting in *cybertextual spaces*. This, however, also exposes an underlying futuristic and partly utopian notion about new media as spaces of innovation, sites of transgression and as shapers of what will become – of radical transformations – of media use, if not of the whole of culture. This is implied in some of the discussions about digital books and interactivity. A marginal *avant-garde* role is ascribed to interactive fiction (*hyperfiction*) in Michael Joyce’s ‘Forms of Future,’ as he states that these activities take place at ‘the sheltered edge of a plain scoured by winds of transformation’ (2003: 227). Joyce also presents a prophecy for a magical electronic form, yet to fully emerge: ‘the new electronic literature will distinguish itself by its clarity. It will seem right. [...] I mean a *new human clarity*’ (ibid: 230). In the articles on online novels and fan cultures, the notion of new media as *avant-garde* also surfaces, but this is curiously underdeveloped in the introduction. This part of the collection would have benefited from a dialogue with Tom Gunning’s discussion on meaning-making processes in relation to the new, the magical, the promising (2003).

The last section of the book deals with visual culture and space. Anne Friedberg’s article summarizes her project *The Virtual Window: A Cultural History of Windows and Screens*, where she endeavors to expand an account of “the emergence of a mobilized and virtual visuality,” backwards and forwards. She analyzes the historical traces of framed visuality of the window and discusses the deep cultural history of the window as a figurative trope for the framing and mediation of the pictorial image (2003: 338). The modern function of the window was to *frame a view*, aside from letting in light and

ventilation. The architectural role of the window changed when virtual analogs were developed, Friedberg claims. The virtual functions of today's windows – the film screen, the TV screen and the computer screen – are becoming components of architecture: they are virtual windows that have changed the materiality of built space. Friedberg discusses the moving image as in effect located within the confines of framed visibility: 'as the mobilized gaze became more virtual, it grew to involve less physical mobility.' On the cinema screen, psychic space enfolds onto physical space. Moving images, the television screen and the computer screen 'ventilate' domestic space today, because images have become a utility, Friedberg argues. The metaphor of the window has retained a predominant role in the technological reframings of our visual field. Screens have multiplied and they compete for our attention. The consequences are enormous, Friedberg concludes: "As screens have multiplied and divided, so has subjectivity. As we spend more and more of our time staring into the frames of television, computer and handheld screens – windows full of text, icons, 3-D graphics, streaming-images, streaming audio – a new post-perspectival, post-Cartesian subjectivity has emerged" (2003: 348). The *multi-screen* is the new figurative trope for this subjectivity. But what is next, she asks: defenestration of virtual images and then an uploading of images, bypassing the optics of vision? What would happen to subjectivity at such a transition of visual media technologies? Friedberg's approach seems to be part of the 'medium theory,' in reverence to McLuhan among others, which states that the media we use are extensions of ourselves and vice versa: that our subjectivity is informed by media use. What are the limits of such a suggestive analysis? It is worth stressing that Friedberg is indeed unique in sticking to the jettisoned notion among transition theorists, that the *newness* of the ever more virtualizing window-experience is actually creating something new – new subjects!

The Anglo-American dominance is clear throughout all three books. Historical approaches that deal with instances in which old technologies were new – or with *remediation* – are, however, currently in press or progress elsewhere, for example in Sweden.<sup>6</sup> Three cases will exemplify appropriations of the transition approach in the Swedish context. Turning her attention to dimensions of time, space, and visibility, Anna Orrghen (2007), in her dissertation *Den medierade konsten. Scenen, samtalet, samhället*, is looking at how new media forms and our current media age are thematized in art works from 1998-2005 – a periodization that also overlaps the years in which media researchers were perhaps themselves chiefly interested in the transformations. Orrghen defines the period as 'significant... characterized by a condition of negotiations around new media and their role in society'. As three exhibitions of contemporary art take on media society by attempting to disclose the centers of our time, they respond to de-territorialization or 'time-space compression' by concretely locating physical coordinates – concrete places – at which our media culture can be argued to materialize, such as artistically depicting the venue of one network operator and distributor, or the locale of a major daily newspaper, etc. Adherence to the transition approach is displayed here, although, or perhaps because, the dissertation deals with new media in contemporary society in a synchronic manner. But Orrghen's work attempts to do more than replay the remediation tune with Swedish lyrics: it seeks, by following Carolyn Marvin, to carefully delve into the moments when media forms are subjected to *negotiations* – moments of *drama*.

The work of senior scholars also exemplifies the recent attention given to these issues. In the context of the project *Kommunikationstekniker i stöpsleven*, Madeleine Kleberg is conducting diachronic research into the discourses surrounding the establishment of

new media forms in Sweden. She is analyzing the novelty years of the telegraph in the 1850s (Kleberg 2001), the years preceding the wireless era of radio technology in the 1920s (Kleberg 2003) and the debates on television in the 1930s and 1950s (Kleberg 2006), in a manner closely resembling the transition approach. Within some factions of the transition approach, history seems to have little value in and of itself: historical evidence and insight constitute a foundation on which the current digital era is rendered further comprehensible and conceivable. This is, however, not Kleberg's position: the explicit aim of these case studies is to trace patterns of reactions – discourses foregrounding the launching of a new technology – in order to, for instance, describe how the media depict, in line with Williams, 'the different kind of needs a new communication technology will meet and how new media with its apparatus and content relate to the private and public sphere' (2003: 153). The goal is furthermore to illuminate how well new technologies are imagined to deliver and for whom, i.e. for which social interest. How was, for example, broadcasting, before it became a cultural form in the twenties, discursively related to these spheres, and what did this imply for maintaining or subverting this division? An undercurrent spatial interest in Kleberg's analysis links such issues (the duality of public and private spaces) to debates on women, modernity and mobility when evolving understandings of new media (the wireless phone) are related to evolving ideas about the new woman and her spatial and physical movement within an urban and increasingly international context (2003: 158). In "Från teknikfascination till programkritik," Kleberg probes the establishment of television in its early stages in Sweden in the 1930s and 1954, and identifies an exposure of media philosophical assumptions about the nature of the medium and the *imagined remediation* of older media such as film, radio and the press, within the emerging self-definitions of the new medium. In this respect, an important shift occurs in relation to Bolter and Grusin, who examine the *factual* re-mediations rather than the discursive field within which refashioning of the 'old' was *understood*. Kleberg further assesses one of the logics of remediation within a spatial understanding, as she sides the notion of transparent immediacy (achieved by, e.g., the audiovisual medium of television) with liberation from 'spatial hampers'. In mediating intimacy, authenticity and 'spatial presence' (2006: 18), the medium of television proclaimed a 'here and now' (and achieved what it usually referred to as 'time-space compression') in ways that film and photography could not.

Similarly, a tendency toward 'spatializing' media histories is visible in an anthology entitled *1897. Mediehistorier kring Stockholmsutställningen* (Stockholm: SLBA, 2006), on the cultural history of the media in Sweden, with contributions by film scholars, intellectual historians, musicologists and ethnologists. In contrast with Kleberg, however, the theoretical purpose is broader, while the timeframe is more focused. Contributors look at one particular site and point in time, The Stockholm Expo of 1897 (Allmänna konst- och industriutställningen, which opened on May 15, 1897), in order to trace the ramifications of a broader media culture of the era (Ekström, Jülich and Snickars 2006). The way in which the authors conceive of media and mediation is wide-ranging. The Expo is regarded as a place where old and new media forms – such as the camera obscura, the diorama and the phonograph, the cinematograph and x-ray images – were compiled and juxtaposed. The authors discuss how these media forms were presented at the exhibition, and how they were made use of as well as how they were received. *Use* seems to be a key term in the anthology in relation to how the media are employed, both concerning media consumers and producers. But even more important, the Expo is conceived of as a medium in itself or as 'engines' of meaningful discursive produc-

tion. Spatial dimensions of mediation are further incorporated into the framework as the Expo is regarded as a *public event* and in terms of how the exhibition was *extended in space* due to mediation. Ethnologist Lotten Gustafsson Reinuis discusses two exhibitions – Etnografiska missionsutställningen 1907 and Stockholmsutställningen 1897 – as ‘complementing sides of the same media coin’. She stretches the notion of mediation to include the material rhetoric of the artifacts displayed, but she also attends to the spatial arrangement of people and material objects. The first exhibition united science with the missionary goals of the Protestant church and displayed objects from the Congo. These were bestowed in their original context with ritual meaningfulness and symbolic power, but as they were ‘stolen,’ they became narrativized differently, far from home, as objects of fear and repulsion – of traditions of the past in the lands of darkness. Contextualizing this event in relation to the Expo of 1897, Gustafsson Reinuis pits the communicative meaning of these foreign objects against the mechanically reproduced objects of tomorrow that audiences were fostered to desire at Expo 1897. Perhaps surprisingly, the objects of modern industrial production were re-enchanted and this in fact connected these opposites – the manifestations of modernity and its culturally constructed antitheses: the uncivilized world – to each other. The objects of both exhibitions were rendered a luring and magical quality. Intellectual historian Solveig Jülich also focuses on the magical side of mediation. Her article attends to the intermedial relationship between x-ray images and film, and she argues that ‘new media’ are in constant transformation and that their meanings are negotiated in the process of becoming established. X-ray images and film have a common connection to magic shows of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Magicians prepared the way for later innovations, Jülich demonstrates, and they became attractions laden with ‘modern magic’ (Jülich 2006).

Hence a spatial paradigm, which the volume more or less explicitly propounds, is also, in several articles, interlaced with an analysis of the emotional-perceptual sides of the medium of the exposition or the media forms displayed/existent on its grounds (see also contributions by Ekström and Habel). 1897 exemplifies a fruitful analytical mix, underscoring that a ‘spatial turn’ in media studies does indeed imply sensory, and in effect, emotive turns as well. A clear affiliation with the transition approach (here depicted as ‘research on new media’) is demonstrated: the prefixes much used in the MIT publications – the ‘re-’ and the ‘new’ and the ‘inter’ – recur here too. The authors are also indebted to Foucault, as the compilation of media forms at the exhibition can be described as an historical *media archive*. The concept is introduced as a way of thinking about media landscapes of a particular timeframe and context. Much in reverence to the transition approach, but also to media historiography in a German context, the purpose is to go beyond any linear historical narrativization. There is also a pronounced ambition to complement traditional historical writings within the field of media and communication studies, which according to Ekström et al. have been focused on traditional mass media of the twentieth century, and their institutions and texts. Visual culture studies and the new film history are further discussed as major and instrumental inputs into this new media history. While new Swedish media histories *within* media and communications studies are, strangely enough, left out of Ekström et al., resulting in an anachronistic and twisted picture of this area of study, the collection nevertheless validates the point that a cultural history of the media is a growing field, reliant on a cross-border dialogue between disciplines. In this sense, at least, research on mediation within our national borders is perhaps in itself in ‘transition’.

## Conclusion

The alluring traits of ‘new media’ have spurred new research interests. As Tom Gunning would express it, this might be a vindication of our astonishment with novelty – in itself a product of discourses we construct and are surrounded by (Gunning in Thorburn and Jenkins 2003: 43) – as we, media scholars, turn into voracious readers as well as fervent and excited conference attendees. But beyond this, the transition approach contains vivid and highly important contributions to media studies. In this article, I have cautioned against the extensive employment of the term remediation, and stressed the potential limitations and the risk of enveloping debates on changes in media through the spread of, and in effect zeal for, all-encompassing notions and terms. I have also identified an “American” tendency, in the Media in Transition series from MIT, to afford too much agency to technologies, while professing a culturalist position. I have also sought out, however, a few examples of how the transition approach has been productively put to work in the writing of Swedish media histories and analyses of new media. These writings testify to the merits of analyzing spatial arrangements when addressing new media of the past and of today. After having read Ekström et al., it seems fair to infer that the novel historiography of ‘new media’ not only has implications for the burgeoning debates on *media space*, but also thrives on the spatial turn in cultural theory. The collections of essays discussed in this article, including a couple of individual works, center on a variety of media forms at different moments of disruption and cultural transformation. The works discussed show that focusing on spatial (as well as temporal) aspects of communication is a project readily aligned with the transition approach.

But why is space (and time) important for media studies? What will this bring to our understandings of communication? The works discussed here illustrate a broader tendency within social and cultural theory to engage in these issues, but they also show that tackling (time)space is sometimes, as in the case of Orrghen, an empirical necessity, allowing us to unpack important facets of the contemporary transitions in media – here as the art world sees them. It also entails new ways of understanding the relationship between gendered technologies and power, as in Kleberg’s project. It opens up new ways of thinking about the built environment and its relationship with subjectivity, as in Friedberg. It enables an understanding of how media work upon space and vice versa in consolidating one particular social order, as in Blake’s work. As Erin Blake, Anne Friedberg and Ekström et al. show, it is fruitful to study those *sociospatial arrangements* that are caused by and causative of the implementation of new media forms, such as spatial extensions, new architectonic features and the interplay between one medium and the sociospatial imaginary. These scholars are engaged in an agenda that involves exploring communication in terms of changes in the way we *sense space* – changes in what McLuhan terms our “sense ratios” – for example in relation to the notion of ‘time-space compression’ in our connected age (cf. Jansson and Falkheimer 2006). Another important venture is to attend to physical spaces that are subjected to high degrees of mediation and to discover how they are experienced (Lagerkvist 2008).

All things considered, then, I will make a plea for the many virtues of the transition approach, notwithstanding my critique, as it calls for a needed and timely expansion of our research agenda. This requires ‘walking through’ our mediatised world with new eyes. In Bolter and Grusin’s book from 1999, a suggestive section entitled ‘Mediated Spaces’ (1999: 169-183) introduces one way of thinking about cities, theme parks and malls in terms of media spaces. Conceiving of walking through a mall, as they do, as analogous to walking around inside a giant TV, where choosing between stores is equiva-

lent to zapping between channels, might be a long-shot for custodians of the disciplinary (b)order. This allegorization, however, entails an appealing conceptual move, because space and media are, in our global media age, as Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (2004) have argued, the *obverse* of each other: they are irreducible to each other, but endlessly intertwined and never completely unrelated as analytical units. This is why it is not enough to acknowledge that ‘new media’ call for a deep awareness of the historicity of the technological imaginary; deeper understandings of transitions in media also call for thoroughly expounding the socio-spatial ramifications of communication.

## Notes

1. Conferences include Media-in-Transition Conference October 8-10 1999, Media-in-Transition 2: Globalization and Convergence May 10-12 2002, Media-in-Transition 3: Television May 2-4 2003, Media-in-Transition 4: The Work of Stories May 6-8, 2005, and Media-in-Transition 5: Creativity, Ownership and Collaboration in the Digital Age, April 27-29, 2007. MIT offers an undergraduate and Masters’ program in Comparative media studies and this department played host to the conferences mentioned. The transition approach is but one of many research foci at MIT’s CMS program. CMS defines its core identity as multiperspectival. Six themes, which cross academic disciplines and involve both traditional and emerging communications media, are at the center of the program. These include Creativity and Collaboration in the Digital Age, Childhood and Adolescence in a Mediated Culture, The Informed Citizen and the Culture of Democracy, Global Culture and Media, Media in Transition, Transforming Humanities Education.
2. There is a new style of consumerism evolving in this environment, Jenkins shows; the photocopier became the people’s printing press; the VCR enabled people to control the broadcast signal more fully; camcorders and digital cameras allow people to enter more directly into the filmmaking process; walkmans and cell phones enable a new mobility; computer games make participants feel they are participating more actively; and digital photographs enable users to manipulate content (in Thorburn and Jenkins 2003: 286). Fan films are also mentioned, where fans, e.g., make their own Star Wars versions. These films are described as an expression of a potential and promising third space between commercial and high art expectations for digital cinema. According to Jenkins, such films are ‘shaped by the intersection between contemporary trends toward media convergence and participatory culture, these fan films are hybrid by nature neither fully commercial, nor fully alternative, existing as part of a grass roots dialogue with mass culture’ (ibid: 309). In relation to Jenkins, one could here mention the emerging importance of a global and local ‘blogosphere.’ This, at least in rose-colored fantasies, is contributing to a more participatory and interactive journalism and public sphere. Blogs constitute a field of emerging forms – of media in transition – and a new media space in need of close study.
3. The cases drawn upon exemplify that the terms have been embraced and are now being hooked up with budding discourses in the scientific community of Swedish media scholars. Because concepts migrate in time and space, or on the other hand, as their conception is potentially concurrent in different parts of the world, it would be highly interesting to attempt to map the theoretical geography (the flows, centers/peripheries, contemporaneous evolutions) of the transition approach. One might further ask how new empirical case studies can contribute to the international discussion and potentially contest some of the premises of this research agenda. This massive task has not yet been tackled elsewhere, and it is not my intention to tackle it here.
4. I made this observation at the 17th Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research in Ålborg August 11-14, 2005, where the term recurred in several sessions and in one keynote speech.
5. It is a bit surprising that no homage is paid here to Bolter and Grusin, except for on page 10, in a short passage, even though the ideas expressed are very similar. Ironically, convergence between media is conceived of as a *process*, while convergence in academic production remains rather *under-processed*.
6. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the field in Sweden. Further, in this article, I am deliberately *not* browsing for research that is less in reverence to the transition approach, but that

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nevertheless addresses the issue of old technologies when they were new. Ethnologist Jan Garnert (2005) has studied, for example, the early years of the telephone in Sweden, and literary scholar Stephen Donovan (2001) is looking at how authors of the late 19th and early 20th century represented the press in fiction. Staffan Ericson's dissertation (2004) is also an example of a cultural history of mediation, which intersects aesthetics with media studies, modernism and mediatization, spanning cultural theory and discourses on high and low throughout the twentieth century.

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