

Ward Rennen  
Department of Media Studies  
University of Amsterdam  
w.rennen@uva.nl

Nick Couldry. *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. (2003) London and New York: Routledge. 173 pp. ISBN 0 4152 7015 4.

Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (eds.). *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*. (2004) London and New York: Routledge. 303 pp. ISBN 0 4152 9174 7.

In his book *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, Nick Couldry has set himself the task of moving current debates about the media's role in society into another direction, by arguing for a new concept, which he defines as media rituals. In the current debates, Couldry identifies two general positions: a positive and a negative stance toward the effects of media on society. Influential works, such as Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: Whatever Happened to the American Dream* (1961) and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983) represent the latter approach. Both authors suggest the power of the media has negative effects on society. In their view, media manipulate reality by producing events and images that do not correspond with 'real' events anymore: media reduce our social reality to a dream world that is experienced as more realistic than the 'real' world. There are also more positive approaches to this debate represented in the works of media scholars academics such as Paddy Scannell's *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996) and Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz' *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992). These academics attribute positive values to the ways media, and television in particular, influence our daily life practices and our sense of private and public spaces. This approach rejects pessimist attitudes towards popular culture, like Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the false conscious, and draws on active audience research. In Couldry's view,

both schools ignore questions about the media's overall impact on society by either focusing exclusively on power relations or on daily life practices. Additionally, most contemporary studies are based on existing conceptual tools and methodologies (e.g. textual analysis), which are applied to make even finer descriptions of media practices, without amounting to new conceptual frameworks to theorize media practices. According to Couldry, only new concepts offer the possibility to move beyond these levels of analysis by addressing the question of how 'central media' such as television, radio and the press, are entangled with the contemporary social order.

Couldry introduces the concept of media rituals to capture "our sense of 'being with the media' in their totality" (Couldry 2003, 2). Media rituals are ritual acts that are constructed around media-related categories and boundaries—for instance, the distance that media create between a celebrity and an 'ordinary' person. Couldry argues that these rituals legitimate, or even produce the false impression that media are our only access point to our 'social center'. The term social center refers here to the widely accepted, but in Couldry's view unjust, assumption that societies cohere by way of central and dominant values and norms. From his critical stance towards the social center, Couldry introduces the concept of media rituals as a critical analytical tool to demystify those situations "where media themselves 'stand in', or appear to 'stand in', for something wider, something linked to the fundamental organizational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, connected as members of a society" (4).

Couldry's concept of media rituals suggests it is a truly interdisciplinary term. He draws for instance on Emile Durkheim, but also on authors whose work cannot directly be labeled as disciplinary, such as Foucault. Couldry first discusses the term ritual, he uses the Durkheim's definition of ritual, namely an act that reaffirms social coherence, as a point of departure in formulating his own description. Couldry then adheres to a post-Durkheimian approach

by adopting the term to the works of Maurice Bloch and Pierre Bourdieu, who define rituals as acts that mask social inequality. He avoids, however, the risk of narrowing his definition of ritual down to a solemn functionalist approach, by drawing on Catherine Bell's concept of ritualisation that links ritual actions to the wider social space in which they are embedded (Bell 1992, 1997). This allows Couldry to expand the term ritual to new fields of inquiry, such as the analysis of the connection between contemporary media institutions and modern forms of government. In doing so, Couldry is able to connect Durkheim's concept of ritual to the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Michèl Foucault. This leads Couldry to define the term 'ritual' in such a way that it "encourages us to look at the links between ritual actions and wider social space, and in particular at the practices and beliefs, found right across social life, that make specific ritual action possible" (12). In this way, Couldry moves away from cultural studies in which the media text is the central object of analysis. Without reducing this field of research to the margins of media studies, Couldry avoids questions on representation without ignoring questions of power relations. Hence, Couldry offers us a macro-model to investigate the role and functioning of media society at large, and poses questions of representation which investigate how media reproduce dominant ideologies in relation to social exclusion processes, that take place across divisions of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality,

The first three chapters of Couldry's book are devoted to a theoretical delineation of the concept of media rituals. In the next chapters, Couldry applies media rituals to case studies in order to explore the usefulness of the term. In chapter 4, the pervasive naturalness of the media's presence in our daily lives is explored by way of an analysis of several media events. The fifth chapter addresses questions about the close relationships that exist between media practices and spatial configurations. Couldry demonstrates how media turn spaces into sacred sites, by analyzing how fans attribute an almost holy value to sites that have prominently featured in the media. In

chapter 6, Couldry examines how media claim to represent reality by means of an analysis of the reality-television genre. The next chapter shows how media rituals generate new public sites of individual self-disclosure, which in their turn legitimize the media's omnipresence in society. In the final chapter, Couldry explores the question whether there is a world possible beyond media rituals; a world in which access and distribution of symbolic power is more equally divided. Couldry emphasizes, moreover, the need to demystify the media's central, though masked, position in contemporary society.

Despite Couldry's impressive efforts to provide an alternative model to theorize the media's role in society, a few critical remarks need to be made. In the last chapter of the book, *Making the Strange Familiar*, it becomes particularly evident that Couldry is pushing for a neo-Marxist agenda within media studies. There are many similarities between Couldry's concept of media rituals and Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the false conscious. By implicitly referring to the Frankfurter Schüle, his concept of media rituals comes across as another Marxist's attempt to show the ignorant media consumers how media constantly mask their presence through very sophisticated modes of indoctrination, namely through media rituals. Although, there is nothing wrong in pushing this agenda, the implicit ideological stance will certainly evoke criticism of media scholars that identify themselves with the culturalist, or cultural studies, approach. From a cultural studies' point of view, Couldry underscores the idea of human agency too much, by playing down the notion active audience readership. By reducing media consumers to passive audiences that are not aware or able to see through the real deceiving mechanism of mass media. Couldry is perhaps not completely original. This view is closely connected to the Frankfurter Schüle view, which portrays audiences as passive consumers who are 'drugged' by mass media and popular culture that prevent these same masses from resisting capitalist hegemony and exploitation. At the same time, Couldry's

attempt to propose a new agenda for media studies should certainly not be instantly discredited. By moving beyond debates that mainly focus on media content, Couldry addresses critical questions about the position and functioning of media at meta-social levels. This type of analysis is too often ignored within cultural studies, because the primary focus lies on the analysis of media texts and the specific contexts in which these are produced and consumed. But the question remains: are audiences really not able to acknowledge the media's mystified omnipresence in contemporary society, and do people really lack the ability or ambition to break through media rituals.

In his most recent book, titled *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, Couldry and co-author Anna McCarthy approach the media's omnipresence from a different angle by focusing on the relationships between media practices and technologies on the one hand, and space on the other. Couldry and McCarthy introduce the concept of *MediaSpace*, which is open to a much wider variety of approaches to study media than the theory in Couldry's previous book *Media Rituals*. The authors introduce the idea of *MediaSpace* to push for a new agenda in media studies and geography, namely to draw more attention to the specific interrelations that exist between media practices and technologies within spatial constellations (both actual and virtual space). Couldry and McCarthy define *MediaSpace* as "a dialectical concept, encompassing both the kinds of spaces created by the media, and the effects that existing spatial arrangements have on media forms as they materialize in everyday life" (1-2). The concept is a generic term that suggests connections between the works of different authors that contributed to the volume. The wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds for the authors and the different approaches to which each of them adheres resulted in a comprehensive volume that embraces cross- and interdisciplinary research. Some of the academic fields on which the authors

draw are: social geography, media studies, anthropology, urban studies, sociology and cultural studies.

While it is impossible to pay detailed attention to all individual contributions in the volume here, Couldry and McCarthy distinguish five levels at which MediaSpace can be studied. The first level comprises the study of media representations in local, national and global space (5). Whereas the first level does not investigate the spatial dimensions of media processes themselves, the second level focuses on the study of how images, texts and data flow across space (6). This mode of research also investigates how the mobility of media output reconfigures social space. Since this approach is rather site-specific, as Couldry and McCarthy argue, level 3 examines specific spaces of media production and media's consumption (6). This approach has, however the disadvantage of de-coupling media production from consumption. The fourth level moves, thus, beyond this divide, by studying the scale-effects that result from media's operation in space. This level of investigation takes a more nuanced stance towards the entanglements of the differential scale levels (local up to global) at which media operate (7). The final level of analysis goes even further by drawing attention to the various ways how media-caused entanglements of scale are experienced and comprehended in particular locales (8).

Together these five levels of analysis compromise a research agenda for the humanities and social sciences, media studies and geography in particular, that seeks to link the ways space affects media practices and technology and vice versa. To some extent, Couldry and McCarthy's concept of MediaSpace is a more specific interpretation of Edward Soja's (2000) *Thirdspace*, even though the authors do not refer to this concept. Soja has proposed this term to bridge the discrepancy in the study of space that exists between physical and material space (*Firstspace*), and the imaginary of space (*Secondspace*). A lot of research on space concentrates on either

Firstspace or Secondspace. Disciplines such as urban planning and urban studies traditionally focus on the built and natural environment, whereas literary sciences and art history concentrate on the representation and imagination of space. Soja's 'Thirdspace' is an attempt to think these binary spaces together as lived space. 'Lived space' incorporates both the physical spaces we inhabit in our daily lives, as well as our fantasies and images about space. The concept refers to the ways we experience spaces. In Soja's view, experiencing space is always blurring the boundaries between actual spaces and the ways we think, or imagine spaces. In his analysis of the relationships of media and space, Soja, nevertheless, makes the same mistake that he points out in other works. Soja theorizes the spatial dimensions of media from a Secondspace perspective by underlining the different ways in which media represent space. As such, he ignores the physical-material spatial dimensions that underlie media-generated processes of representation.

Couldry and McCarthy's 'MediaSpace', thus, fills this inconsistency in Soja's plea for a Thirdspace. MediaSpace is a concept that makes the connection between the actual (material) spatial constellations in which media operate and the virtual (symbolic) space that media create more explicit. MediaSpace bridges the gap between Firstspace and Secondspace. Couldry and McCarthy clearly advocate a reworking of a materialism-inspired agenda, because, as they state "[it] is more productive to think of media, as with all spatial processes, as complex co-ordinations of presences and absences" (8). Here we can see an implicit reference to Couldry's concept of media rituals, since this level of study is mainly concerned with the taken-for-granted, mystified or 'naturalized' entanglements of scale at which media operate. Nevertheless, due to the openness of the concept of MediaSpace, this (neo)Marxist agenda does not dominate as much as Couldry does in his book on Media Rituals. This is, however, also a weakness of Couldry and McCarthy's volume. The concept is too undefined and therefore open to

multiple interpretations that could lead to a certain vagueness, instead of the specific analytical use of MediaSpace. On the other hand, their book does set a clear agenda for future research in the field of media studies and geography by introducing a generic concept which resists a narrowing down of future research. Indeed, the richness of the contributions in this volume articulate a pluralist and open research agenda that allows for the study of the relationships between space and media from disciplines across all the social sciences and humanities. Considering the promising results of this volume, hopefully other scholars working will contribute to a further study of MediaSpace.

## References

- Baudrillard, Jean. (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bell, Catherine. (1992) *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. (1997) New York: Oxford University Press.
- Boorstin, Daniel. *The Image: Whatever Happened to the American Dream*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Dayan, Daniel and Elihu Katz. (1992) *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Scannell, Paddy. (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. (1996) Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

*Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*. (2000) Malden, MA: Blackwell.