

## **Comments on Francisco Osorio's working paper *Why is interest in mass media anthropology growing?***

**by Mark Peterson (Miami University)**

In this brief essay, Francisco Osorio suggests that anthropologists have only recently turned their attention to mass media. Since there is no epistemological reason why anthropology cannot take media as its subject, he argues that there must be a reason why anthropology has ignored media until the late 1980s, and a reason why anthropological attention has been growing. He suggests that the answer is that as anthropology has increasingly turned its attention to nationalism, so it has become more and more interested in mass media.

I want to begin by saying that Osorio is, in general, probably essentially correct. There are close links between the rise of the nation as an object of inquiry, and increasing attention to mass media. Indeed, his argument resonates with Abu-Lughod argument in "Screening Politics in a World of Nations" or the introduction to Dissanayake's edited volume, *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*.

At the same time, Osorio's essay, as written, overstates its case.

The first problem is the claim that anthropologists have only recently begun to seriously attend to the mass media as a subject of analysis. It is implicit from the beginning, and Osorio explicitly says this when writing that he is trying to explain "why anthropology did not come to mass communication before" nations became a key unit of analysis. This has become a standard trope in anthropological writing about our study of media -- we all invoke the newness of our subject as something that has emerged just in the last 15 years or so, since the late 1980s. I do it in my book, Spitulnik does it in her seminal essay, most of the recent readers in anthropology do this as well.

But it just ain't so. The media have been an occasional subject of anthropological attention at least since Boas referred to the role of native language newspapers in the *Handbook of Native Americans* in 1918 or Malinowski to advertising in *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1935). I have posted to this group's web site a partial list of nearly 180 anthropological works on media predating 1988 (an arbitrary date intended to symbolize "the late 1980s" when interest in media anthropology begins to really take off and not entirely coincidentally the date of the first publication of the journal *Public Culture*). By "anthropological" I mean that they are written by people self-identifying as anthropologists, or they were published or reviewed in anthropological journals.

They make interesting reading. Some are about modernization, some are about the linking of small communities to larger communities, some are about the cultural construction of truth, some are about myth and ritual, some are about how media re-present old symbolic values in new forms while others are about the ways media offer new models for understanding the world. They take a number of different approaches, variously involving the analysis of texts, the ethnography of production and the study of audiences. They take various entities as their units of analysis: texts, cities, production sites, nations, the world. Theoretical approaches are likewise diverse: some are functionalists, some "culture and personality," some are structuralists, some are interpretivists or symbolic anthropologists, and a few are materialists. And Carpenter is as "postmodernist" as anyone writing today, except for being more readable.

Some of these--Mead, Powdermaker, Carpenter, Warner--probably wrote enough about media to justify their being called media anthropologists. Of these three, only Mead took "nation" as her unit of analysis.

What *has* occurred since the mid to late 1980s, as Osorio's title correctly states, is a significant rise in serious attention being given to media by anthropology. The last time someone bemoaned in my presence the paucity of media panels at AAA meetings, I pointed out that on at least half the panels, whatever the topic, at least one paper will touch on the media in some form. Media has gone mainstream as a topic of serious anthropological attention. This has all happened during the course of my own anthropological career. When I began the process of leaving journalism for academia in 1987, my mentors warned me off the media, at least until I was an established scholar. By 1991, media study was conceivable so long as it took place in an exotic land (India). When I returned from India in 1996 to write up my dissertation, I was introduced to Sarah Dickey's book on Tamil film in the social life of the urban poor in Madras published by Cambridge, as prestigious an academic press as one can find. In 1998, when I was asked to be faculty at the University of Hamburg's summer school on media anthropology, I met dozens of scholars doing ethnographic work on media not only in "exotic" lands but in the U.S. and Europe as well.

So why *has* anthropological attention to mass media increased so dramatically? Without in any way contradicting Osorio's links between nation and media as objects of study, I want to suggest that there are disciplinary reasons why the rise of nation as an acceptable unit would make anthropologists more able to write about media. To use an evolutionary metaphor, I see the history of media anthropology to the present era as made up of anthropologists who became interested in media and published on it, only to have their work ignored except when changes in the social context ("environment") made it acceptable. One such context was the second world war, in which the combination of a rise in government funding for work that might contribute to an understanding of morale (including that of allies, enemies and potential allies and enemies) and the closure of field areas made possible the rise of the ICC (led first by Ruth Benedict and then by Margaret Mead) with their studies of "culture at a distance." Another moment was the rise of development anthropology in the early decades of the cold war, and the hope that mass media could prove the "magic bullet" that would help underdeveloped communities "prepare for take-off" (to use Rostow's ridiculous but influential language). Osorio correctly notes both of these factors.

The current context for the emergence of media anthropology I suspect has as much to do with the collapse of the high art/low art distinction as with the emergence of nation as a unit of analysis. In general in academia, the "popular" has been a problematic subject. It was one thing to write about early 19th century works by Byron or Shelley, quite another to write about *Varney the Vampire* or *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*--even though at the time of production the latter works reached and probably influenced many more millions of people than the former. This distinction about acceptable canon has been declining since the 1960s, but it remains relevant. It is still one thing to write about Hitchcock, quite another to write about Kolchak: *The Night Stalker* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

For the anthropologist this is a particular problem: in general, the more elite the art form, the less interesting it is. As Lee Drummond has pointed out, it is the movies that people will line up for hours in the blazing sun or even overnight to see that clearly must touch on significant cultural themes. Yet movies like *Return of the Jedi* are also the very films analyses of which are least likely to impress our colleagues. Rather than hazard the risk of irrelevance or disdain (and subsequent consequence of unemployment), anthropologists could easily just ignore the

media. I think Ulf Hannerz hit it on the head way back in 1971 when he wrote: "I have a feeling that anthropologists usually regard mass media research within their discipline as gimmickry. This is a rather unfortunate attitude."

Three significant things have happened to change this for anthropology. The first is the increasing ubiquity of media. In my book, I write:

There is a well known Gary Larson cartoon that shows a group of grass-skirted hut dwelling "natives" scrambling to hide their technological appliances--including a television set--before the anthropologists arrive. But in real life, the "natives," whoever they may be, have not needed to hide their televisions. Anthropologists have done it for them by selectively choosing what they will or will not pay attention to in their ethnographies. Even as anthropologists spent decades insisting that their discipline was *not* the study of "primitive" cultures, and criticizing notions of unchanging tradition and stable authenticity, they have collectively as a discipline "selected out" or marginalized many aspects of the social lives of the people they studied, particularly where these involved the media.

Eventually, I think, the ubiquity of media just became too great to keep ignoring.

The second factor has to do with the capacity of distance to reframe subject matter. In comparative literature, the popular art of the past is now canonical (i.e. one can now propose writing a crit lit dissertation about *Varney the Vampire* (1840) without raising too many eyebrows, but not *Interview with the Vampire* (1980)). Its historical distance makes it acceptable. For anthropologists, geographical distance serves the same function. Rambo is academically interesting/acceptable if we discuss how the films are interpreted in New Guinea. Bombay *filmis* are interesting in ways Hollywood *filmis* are not. And it apparently goes the other way. An editor at Berg told me that they picked up Denis Duclos's fascinating poststructuralist analysis of American media violence which had done well in France, only to have it sink more or less without a trace in the American market. Distance also allows anthropologists to define their subject matter in contradistinction to other fields that have been engaged in media studies for many decades. Finally, the trope of distance allows us to frame our analyses as part of the broader study of globalization, central buzzword of the new millennium.

This brings us to the third significant change, the rise of new conceptual languages that allow us to analyze media in what appear to be more sophisticated ways. By this I do not mean actual theoretical sophistication, but rather the capacity to relate our analyses of media to concepts that have significance in many different disciplines. There is nothing particularly unsophisticated about Peter Claus's structural analyses of Star Trek or Ivan Karp's discussion of anti-structure in the Marx Brothers, but (for the reasons emphasized above) structuralism looks more impressive when it is focused on South American myths and anti-structure on Ndembu rituals. Then along came cultural studies. For all its flaws (and I could discuss them at length) cultural studies emphasized the possibility of socially and culturally contextualizing media using the language of political economy. In anthropology, Elizabeth Traub's work is exemplary in this genre. Many of the earlier anthropological studies, in focusing on symbolic structures, had understated the social. Structural analyses that seek to reduce myths to formulaic binarisms look thin by comparison to works that link changes in filmic representation to shifting changes in political economy, racial categorization and gender expression. Many of the media studies of the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s exist in that "ethnographic present" our discipline inherited from functionalism. Such work cries out for an anchoring in

time and space, and discussion of what elements have enduring capacity to entertain what kinds of contemporary audiences, and why. Anthropological study of mass media in its current phase is exciting because having reconnected the symbolic and the social, it also grounds it in ethnography as opposed to rootless analysis of texts common in cultural studies.

This is where I situate Osorio's argument. The nation is one of the (but not the only) new conceptual apparatuses that allow anthropologists to frame their theoretical discussions of media in sophisticated, relevant and interesting ways. In my own history of media anthropology, I probably underplay the importance of nation as a concept. Still, Osorio's phrase "the knowledge that anthropologists have produced in mass communication and especially television takes nations as the unit of analysis" seems to me a gross overgeneralization.

Many of the best work in anthropology of media (Abu-Lughod, Mankekar, Heider) *does* take the nation as a central focus, but there are many other foci. Identity, ritual, fans, community, family, globalization, consumption--these are all also recurrent foci. Dickey, who Osorio cites, is actually a good example of an anthropologist for whom "nation" is not the "unit of analysis." The same is true of Granzburg, to whom he refers. Indeed, I would invert Osorio's argument about the relationship of nation and modernity. For me, the anthropological study of media is primarily (but still not exclusively) about modernity, and "nation" is one of many crucial modernist concepts.

I am embarrassed to have written a response that is two-thirds the length of the paper I am commenting on. Consider it a testament to the interesting challenge posed by Osorio's paper. Let me repeat that I think Osorio is on to something but that I think his argument requires a more nuanced articulation, and more attention to relations between the shifting content and historical contexts of works on media by anthropologists.