Discussant's Comments
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on
Loose Ends: Lines, Media and Social Change
by
Shaun Moores

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Dear Shaun, and seminar audience

I have been asked to act as discussant in this seminar, and I wish to thank the network organizers for the opportunity, and Shaun for delivering this highly stimulating paper on a very timely topic. By way of introduction I should say that I am an anthropologist, having worked (as far as media goes) with questions of change related to the internet, particularly in contexts of economic practice.

Shaun invites us to consider some ways in which Tim Ingold's work may illuminate media engagements in terms apart from the 'symbolic representation' approach that more conventionally, in different guises, takes centre stage in media related studies. It is from this perspective that Shaun develops some of Ingold's analytical tropes as they may apply to studies involving media. At the same time Shaun takes issue with some aspects of Ingold's work, notably his lack of sustained attention to contemporary media, and his pessimistic outlook regarding the contemporary straight-ness of lines, as it were.

When I read the paper, I became a little worried that I might not be able to find much to raise for discussion, as I share several aspects of Shaun's orientation, in particular the approach to media as only part of wider living, and the phenomenological inspiration (especially readable phenomenology that is, and in that regard I also enjoy Ingold's writing). But for the present purpose I suppose my job is to raise points for discussion, so I will leave agreements aside, at least in this posting.

One thing that strikes me, especially given the paper's stated aim of 'understanding media and their uses within wider circumstances of everyday living and social change', is the lack of a more sustained engagement with a specific empirical context. One way the problem with this is brought out, is the way Ingold's dwelling/movement perspective is exemplified. The examples Shaun gives us are indeed closely focused just on media (watching Australian television, narrative as movement). I miss a wider context of 'everyday living and social change', in terms of which to situate the significance of media. Early in the paper, Shaun mentions a recent study he has done on trans-European migrants and their media uses. I am of course aware of the constraints of space in a paper, but in the course of this seminar then, I would like to hear more about (e.g.) this study, as it may variously relate to and illuminate the paper. As just one example that springs to mind, for such

migrants 'movement' surely is more than a trope? How might their literal movement be related to the trope of movement in the context of their media engagements?

Another thing I noticed, given that 'Social Change' is in the paper's title, is the lack of sustained attention to matters of social change in the paper, except in terms of the critique of Ingold's pessimistic view of ostensible contemporary 'straight' linearity, which is caste in rather generalized terms. I think Shaun's critique here is important, since some version of the view he critiques has become axiomatic in an enormous range of literature variously dealing with 'change'. But I wonder then, how Ingold's writings may help us to approach change any differently. Again, some empirical examples of substantial social change, where media in some way are at issue, might be a helpful line along which discussion could be pursued through the seminar.

The last point I want to raise, at least for now, is whether some of Ingold's reflections 'along lines' not covered by Shaun, might be useful in approaching media and social change, and worth taking up over the seminar. As an example, without having thought carefully about this, the chapter on 'Traces, Threads and Surfaces' (Ingold 2007: 39-71, see full reference in Shaun's paper), strikes me as an interesting resource in this regard. It offers a 'taxonomy of lines', and centers on the ways different kinds of lines make up different kinds of fabrics, and on their transforming relations. I think it might be interesting to probe this dimension to Ingold's work a little further than Shaun managed to do it within the confines of the paper. Incidentally, this might also be a way to open up for a discussion of how Ingold's tropes relate to other works, where tropes bearing affinity to Ingold's have been explored: e.g. landscapes, media-scapes, networks, meshworks, rhizomes, traces, etc. This is not to open the floor for a random listing of sexy tropes, or to say that the tropes Shaun did consider may not work, but rather to open for a collective and focused exploration of 'how so' in contexts of media and social change.

I will leave it at that – I look much forward to a rewarding debate.

Jens