

# Media(ted) Gestures and Postmodern Subjectivity

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(The paper aims at analyzing language, images and discourse used in media reporting and its effect on subjectivities. The homogenisation of inputs into received and receivable modes tend to take for granted a collective nonconsciousness through a suspension of the unsaid. On the other hand the creation of this consciousness is accelerated and mediated through news channels that create their own reportage).

Wars, commercialism and Globalisation tend to locate generic identities through the language determined by print and digitextual agencies. This relationship between the signs and the human is dyadic in that it involves psychoanalytically, the conscious and the unconscious. In modern times these meld into what Donna Harroway intends by the term 'Cyborgs' and Peter Lunenfield's arbitrated extension of the term in its new dimension to include—'the dynamic nonconsciousness'. The idea of nonconsciousness has been used more broadly than intended by Lunenfield. The discursive impact on listeners and the process of cultivation and nurturing a homogenized response, through what Norman Fairclough calls mass-crafted discourse has been dealt with. Language and non language in the form of proliferating images is manipulated to meet the demands often conveniently grouping receivers in generic divisions. Plurality resolves in collective and synthetic identities.

The web of multiple media discourses, never signs off without a number of invitations. Vigilance or resistance is often undermined by the conscious or non-conscious surrender to the greater captivating force. Hyperlinks and hypertextuality unfold a virtual virgin terrain that riddle away consciousness until it blurs in an act of willing surrender to domains that take over reins of formal control of the conscious self and creates a subjectivity to suit its reception. The performativity quotient in media is primed in passivity. The result is, as Fairclough reveals, an identity created by 'mass crafted discourse', synthetic and media-generated.

The playing fields are language, signs and the meaning of meanings and images as texts and narratives unraveled by the socio-cultural-political psyche and mediated through technology. Language as we know it today is not only rhizomatous but adventitious slipping into realms of the 'text'. With the advent of media, the slippage is reinforced and with the advent of new media the hegemony of the written word becomes fictional, "Even while the written word is beleaguered with the problem of authority, the origin of suspicion may be traced to the basic question of the 'lie' of the meaning". As Bret Dellinger writes, "The comprehension of meaning ...lies not in the text itself, but in the complex interaction between the author's intent and his/her performative

ability to encode that intent, and the receptor's intent and his/her performative ability not only to decode the author's intent but to mesh his/her own intent with the author's.<sup>1</sup>

We may read into this the Eskimo boy's ordeal while living in an igloo and forced to learn a rhyme alien to his linguistic and social consciousness, trying to figure out the sitting position of *Little Jack Horner who sat in a corner eating his Christmas pie*. If 'corner' is alien so is the fact by implication, of sitting in a corner while eating a Christmas pie. The boy would read rituals in order to discover the meanings and unconsciously extend the same to a possible fallacy that, one always ate a Christmas pie sitting in a corner. Here the performativity of the rhyme is countered by the performativity quotient of the boy. Both meanings claim their places in oscillating or equal measures and both are equally valid in every sense of their terms.

But the power of language is questioned particularly when, to quote Chomsky, *Colourful green ideas sleep furiously* or the syntactic challenge offered in Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. The popularity of the latter surpasses all imagination. However in both cases grammatical correctness can be matched by images that may transcend the language and slip into meaning bypassing the ridiculous through postmodern pastiche and parody.

Whereas the interdependence of language and images is critical to the production of meaning, the relationship between words and signs ontologically and functionally, demands explanation. However hard we try to load or translate signs into bare word-codes they overtake with a vengeance proliferating and spilling over as images in a postmodern reality. This spillover is caught to create texts capable of surprising meanings with plural affiliations. The subjectivities are manipulated to interpret images. In this case psyches are constructed by the mediated reality around us. Such technologically mediated psyches live in a perpetual present where the boundaries of the bodied and the abstract and that of time and space are dissolved through simulations which take over reality. Baudrillard's 'more real than real' and 'cyberblitz' assumes a proportion where the distinctions between real and the hyperreal no longer exist. Donna Haraway's Cyborgs take on a more generic connotation expending itself to the use of manipulated audio visual texts that lend themselves to 'n' readings. In the creation of cyborgs the human media has not only surrendered to a greater more rampant and vibrant force but has also voluntarily melded with it. Visual and verbal overloads are thus free to initiate and sustain oscillations of the senses reacting at the same time to the multiple stimuli in varied receptions. The regularity and speed of the coding/decoding process sets in motion a roller coaster effect on the individual psyche which learns to decipher and construct a meaning of its own making. At this junction of sense and reception, resides the subject. To bring in Lacan at this stage is precocious. Yet the 'unconscious is structured as a language' and the ability to receive the message is subject to the 'subject' if we pin the drift in the Lacanian relational sense of the term.

Moreover these slippages of meanings are caught at the cusp of global space / time overlaps hence they pan out into a homogenization caught in an eternal present. Thus Kipling's reading of signs into language in his 'Just So' stories is both an insightful and simplistic account of trapping signs in letters unalloyed by theory. His idea of how in pre-linguistic categories hieroglyphics gave way to symbolic representation in terms of an evolution in alphabet is as

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<sup>1</sup> Brett Dellinger, *Views of CNN Television News: A Critical Cross-Cultural Analysis of the American Commercial*

intriguing as it is convincing. It gives a hypothetical picture of what might have happened in the course of symbolic expression and subsequent empowerment through expression. Here the need slips into a code for meanings that enters the corpus of language. This relationship between the signs and the human is dyadic in that it involves psychoanalytically, the conscious and the unconscious. In modern times these melds into what Donna Haraway intends by the term 'Cyborgs' and Peter Lunenfield's arbitrated extension of the term in its new dimension. Lunenfield while explicating the new space and time order in media writes

Those who throw themselves into binding relationships with the digital then, add a third, triangulating element to the psychoanalytic dyad of the conscious and unconscious mind. The dynamic nonconscious, then is the machine part of the human computer interface that most interests me, especially in relation to an alien aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

It is this non-consciousness that extends into numerous possibilities of breaching identity. In every case the meaning of all meanings even in such triangulated terms is disseminated through discourse. Discourse thus in the final analysis, explains where it situates meaning. In media, discourse is problematic, precisely because of the multiplicity of presentations and partial and impartial representations.

Discourses are thus multi-dimensional, dynamic and fulfill the agency of the quibble in its most refined and distilled form. It leaves language far behind to habit zones of thought that catch its drift. The discourse of war has always been as enigmatic as it has been elusive. While media reporting on war has issued discourse in multiple contexts for varied purposes, its dissemination is governed by factors of politics and security concerns.

War time reporting has been to a great extent default reporting; reporting through a clearly fragmented and partial conscience. Language is burdened through a baggage of moral codes and ethics, loyalties, justice, fair play and the purely professional aspect of the coveted first reporting. Besides this, there is a clearly fissured sense of loyalty both to the nation and to the mediating agency.

In one of O. Henry's masterpieces, the filiations of the written word follow the order of a code. War time reportage becomes an art of camouflage of words and blatant subterfuge. In the short story *Calloway's Code*, O' Henry situates the story in the battle field where the war correspondent uses his ingenuity to trick the censors and successfully passes on the information to the New York *Enterprise*. The rest of the story takes place in the office of the *Enterprise* where the struggle to decode the message ensues on a war footing.

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*Discourse Style* (Vaasa: Universitas Wasaensis, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lunenfield, *Space Invaders*, in Anna Everett, A., & John T. Cauldwell, ed. *New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 69.

*Calloway's feat was accomplished before the battle. What he did was to furnish the Enterprise with the biggest beat of war. That paper published the news of the attack on the lines of the Russian General Zassulitch on the same day that it was made.*<sup>3</sup>

O. Henry's remarkable genius anticipates through fiction the working of generic associations in language. The rest of the story dwells on the decoding of a wartime censored cablegram in a news room. The censors found the following unintelligible and dismissed it as nonsense allowing it to be sent. The message ran as, "Foregone preconcerted rash witching goes muffled rumour mine dark silent unfortunate Richmond existing great hotly brute select mooted parlous beggars ye angel incontrovertible". p.835.

The decoding in the News office takes some time before someone cracks the code in simple English by using the word that naturally follows each cue word for example - Foregone – *conclusion*; Preconcerted- *arrangement*; Rash- *act*; Witching- *hour of midnight*; goes- *without saying*; muffled- *report*; rumour-*hath it* and so on and so forth. The decoding was possible owing to the unconscious generation of news paper lingo which registers as journalese. This prefigured use of language postulates word linkages which are often internalized in structures that are too deep and help a reader speed while skimming. Here language works as a facile and effortless purveyor of ideas through easily recognizable clusters of associations. O'Henry's story is not only one of the pointers to the strategies used in war time reporting but also how clusters of words are anticipated through nonconscious associations much in the same way that linked genes may be anticipated while encoding/decoding a DNA strand.

With the advent of digital discourse, war reporting has changed dynamically. The activation of an integrated sensorial stimulus, the reinforcement through images, the audio-visual impact embedded through repetitions and unconsciously regurgitated and revealed in bits and fragments, have a cumulative effect of capturing a drama in real life. The story board and transcripts are first hand with embedded reporters who follow the war closely seemingly impersonal and neutral. However the optimized sensationalism in required doses is deliberate and made out to be subconscious. The soldiers, the victims and the reporters all occupy the same plank and real life spaces in what we see as 'real' dialogue replete with phatic innuendoes. The Iraq war reportage by way of embedded reporters in the CNN was alive to suspense, guesswork *newspretation* emotionalism in equal measures of '*back to you Bill*', and after a bloody carnage and footage of hospital corridors and tired overworked doctors to '*thank you H..*' with the commercial breaks. The stealth bombers and the war machinery the ripped water ways, the ironic looting by the locals and the focus on blasts at night which could have easily passed off as festive fireworks etch a larger than life picture. Coding and encoding is apparently minimal despite footage cuts and editing which ensures a story read from all sides.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Calloway's Code' : O. Henry, Collected Stories. Delhi: Rupa p.835

In the same vein correspondents like Christiana Amanpour of CNN and Barkha Dutt of NDTV, India, take on in part and in revised terms, the mantle of the ephors of Sparta in their representation of war time dialectics. Like tragedy, the pity and fear evoked by images of war surpasses all known soaps on T.V. Such reporting directly from the battlefield stimulates the news hungry social psyche. Living generically the smug vicarious armchair dare-devilry is satisfying, harmless and *cathartic*. The suspense created is alive every second, precisely because unlike the thriller stories the end is anybody's guess but the curiosity stems from how the end is reached, if there is an end before world bodies like the UN step in. Again like wrestling matches which Baudrillard makes out to be tragedy played out in a post modern arena in postmodern terms, the spectacle of war holds uninterrupted viewer attention. The magnitude of war coverage replete with the sights and sounds makes the channels that air the news susceptible to viewer/consumer needs. However the Aristotelian concept of *catharsis* through viewing aggression has been replaced by the idea of stimulation rather than purgation in modern times.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau, audiences are created through *strategy* and *tactic*. Accordingly digital media and news reportage with its audio-visual strategies, incites the audience the need to know and experience virtually an otherwise inaccessible reality. Similarly, armchair travelogues shrink a world on to an implosive TV screen. According to Certeau the product or concept is created in advance to the need. The need is spawned after the airing of the promotional. Thus commercial breaks at strategic intervals keep the curiosity alive when fragments and preview of forthcoming events are delivered in doses. This is the Certeau's presentation which ensures and homogenizes audience attention. The tactic is subtle and draws a generic audience into empathetic participation. Identity is surrendered to an all encompassing footage of 'mass-crafted discourse'. This results in the consolidation of myths *a-la Barthes mode*— through appropriation and large scale bricolage of received and subscribed stock beliefs.

Technologically invasions have instituted fresh dimensions of 'texts' and their dissemination breaching all major divides including those between humanities and sciences. The texts do not speak but reveal. These 'unsaid' texts are open ended yet tactical pointers to fixed goals. Since the ends justify the means, the unsaid is suspended in a plethora of images that overtake words. Media texts are diverse and exponentially alive to further prolixity.

In the Vodafone India marketing campaigns, the advent of the thoroughly innovative Zoozoos, a new dimension is engaged in the reception. The Zoozoos are humans conceived as humanoids and communication is achieved through gibberish. The Zoozoos have a unique alien, childlike, blank- innocent often listless faces marked by two eyespots and a mouth on an oversized head. Dressed in a white body suit they feature clumsy movements. The only readable expressions are the changes in the mouth through limited modifications in the pout or the smile or a zigzag to symbolize anger or irritation. The Zoozoos have become an instant hit with popular myths woven into everyday incidents. The curiosity factor has been aroused as to the making of the Zoozoos and have captivated proactive viewers and encouraged them

to follow the numerous You tube links. So also the invitation to integrate the more active audience has led many to enter contests for prospective ideas for stories through visual props. The fully integrated campaign subscribes to multiple levels of viewer demands thus ensuring the ever renewed interest in the concept and the product. The overall result of the campaign may be summed up in a dynamic yet collective and nonconscious acceptance of the Zoozoos. Much like the evoked images of *Jabberwocky*, here the images literally take over language which in the process becomes redundant and superfluous. Thus technology driven discourse occupies extra mural spaces converting everything into comprehensible texts.

The term ‘microtexts’ coined to accommodate the peripherals like packaging, blurb, advertising etc., hold immense potential in the bait of a plethora of untold stories in its suspension of the unsaid. The actuality that belies a number of textual possibilities is finalized in an awakening and reconciliation in facts.

These texts and microtexts coupled with mediated portrayal of reality and its simulations anticipate and strategise audience reception. From plurality that is read as a corollary of postmodern studies to the manipulation and construction of a collective psyche through a series of repetitions is often subtle and primed at catching the conscious in its interim ‘nodding’ phase. The projections of reality are targeted to hit a collective psyche. The stages from ideation to execution follow a set though invisible pattern. Some of these steps are outlined in Wimmer & Dominick’s *Mass Media Research*. However a working model would include

- The attitude of the audience/consumers
- The embedding of the concept/product
- Initiation and invitation
- Cultivation
- Enculturation
- ‘Addiction’
- Sustenance of interest
- Altered sensitivity
- Collective non-consciousness

The theory of cultivation and enculturation has been further probed by Gerbner & Gross, 1976<sup>4</sup>. His findings use terms like *resonance* and *mainstreaming* to account for any anomaly in research. He uses the term resonance to incorporate real life situations which reinforcing the already embedded in a ‘double dose’ while mainstreaming comes from repeated viewing which results in common perceptions. Both result in a leveled collective non conscious.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerbner & Gross, quoted in Wimmer, Roger D., & Joseph R. Dominick. Mass Media Research: An Introduction. Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2003. p.413.



All of which lead to a drastically overwritten palimpsest of psyche where the boundaries between reality and media are successfully permeated and breached and intervened. The fixing of the context is decided by many factors, social, cultural, political environmental. More importantly a capitalistic society overridden by commodity fetish will seek to gratify its needs through a build up of images that contextualize both the need and the commodity. The repetitions and the emphasis on the need gradually works on the aesthetics of the product making it audio-visually attractive. Images are supported with jingles. The jingle associated with such projects, gels with the images and plays up the aural faculty, embedding a mnemonic system with easy retrieval possibilities. Thus repeated retrieval results in habit formation or enculturation so that the Pavlovian bell is simulated through a mere reference to the jingle or the image which results in commodity colonization of the target group. Enculturation over a period of time renders the receptor passive and the message is accepted as a myth or an image or a piece of music as an unquestioned reality. Roland Barthes makes out a case for *Omo* detergent playing up the myth factor. He uses the myth of good triumphing over evil as a givens. Though secondarily devised, it becomes unconsciously primary in its reception of later similar commodity projections. Reality is myth, seamlessly blurred and indistinguishable. *Aquaguard* is a popular brand of water purifiers in India. In the case of the *Aquaguard* the product comes with a piece Beethoven music accompaniment as water flows out. The system has succeeded not only in popularizing a piece of classical music but has also, in the process made it its own. Here again the product becomes the music. The careful integration of myth, images and music substitutes crowds away the reality.

As in every event, so also in technologically mediated interventions there is a period of gestation, germination, growth, peaking and subsequent exhaustion and death or defiance of death by alteration. In postmodern reality, death is often circumvented and parodied. So that 'heaven or hell' is often breached by images that transcend death. The process of phoenixing into another phase to relive and proliferate in another cycle rejuvenates and revitalizes the images. The rejuvenation is manipulated through an amoeboid cleaving that leaves both halves as young enough for fresh life cycles. The amoeba, a unicellular organism divides through binary fission where the parent is subsumed in the offspring. The origin is unrecognizably encrypted in the new reality.

The elemental case of the amoeba explains the endless multiplication of digital images overcoming the fatigue of age through rejuvenation and change. Moreover in Baudrillard's explanation of 'hyperreality' there is a certain nostalgia for origins lost beyond recognition while the 'simulacra' overtake reality. This is a copy of the replication process in the amoeba proliferating into newer cycles to overcome fatigue. To quote Jeffery Lotman CEO of Global Icons we have, "So, if you had the rights to a Michael Jordan...you might not need him to appear personally at every promotional event or in each commercial. You can use his digital clone instead." <sup>5</sup> Such digital clones mask the reality of the origin and guarantee freshness of the human commodity.

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Everett (quoted) in New Media New York Routledge 2003 p.10

In the Nineteen thirties the British poets wrote about the changing world. They were socially conscious and alert to the influences of Marx and Freud. The four major poets Louis Macneice, Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden and C.Day Lewis grouped under a collective pseudonym, *MacSpAunDay*. Of the four poets, Auden anticipated the evolution of the collective consciousness through the rigmarole of conformity to progressive mechanization and the subsequent dissolution of individual consciousness in the poem quoted in part below.

*"The Unknown Citizen"*

*(To JS/07/M/378) This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State)*

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*And our Social Psychology workers found  
 That he was Popular with his mates and liked to drink.  
 The Press are convinced that he bought a Paper every day  
 And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.  
 Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured  
 And his Health-card shows he was once in a hospital but left it cured,  
 Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare  
 He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan  
 And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,  
 A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.  
 Our researchers into Public Opinion are content  
 That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;*

.....

(The title manifests the collective psyche and the parody of an *Unknown Soldier* is further reinforced by a cipher, a numerical that erases all individuality into a herd instinct of unquestioned conformism with the majority).

Peter Lunenfield's idea of the the triad relationship- the dynamic nonconscious in a digital era, has a pivotal role to play in all media generated mass subjectivities. This is akin to the trance often experienced in religious discourse and incantations; the mesmeric catching attention device of the magician, the hypnotic appeal of popular music groups and the fan following of celebrities. The modern day electronic revolution has displaced in a big way the human element. The privacy of the home does not entail absolute exclusion. The gadgetry may be read either as intrusive or inclusive to privacy. The French film *Mon Uncle* hinges precisely on this debatable question of the world of the human and the invasion and accommodation of mechanization. The seamlessness of the organic, inorganic / material world confounds us in its perennial accommodation and its collective and unsuspecting acceptance. Harold Pinter's use of the menace of the outside world as a repeated motif in his plays, is obsolete. In its present context it is rendered harmless through the inoculation of prime time Television, films and other related media.

Another endorsement of this continued mechanization is the concept of social networking through popular e-sites. Chat sites, Twitter, Blog spots are exposed subjectivities.



Privacy is plural and available for inspection. This coupled with the ready availability of required emotion from an available and handy kitty of emoticons proves the all pervasive invasion of media in personal and psychological spaces. They reveal a collective subjectivity forced to conform to a fast track consumer-oriented world. The concept of emoticons further reinforces the idea of dependency on media for very subjective resources. The emoticons fulfill the role of consumer durables and rechargeables. This reaching out to human relationships has facilitated displacement. Marshall McLuhan in the *Medium is the Massage* writes

The family circle has widened. The whirlpool of information fathered by electric media- movies, Telstar, flight far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear. Character is no longer shaped by only two fumbling experts. Now all the world's a sage.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, the passivity of the subject position is taken for granted and the assumption of a take over of surrendered consciousness/unconsciousness to an active playing field for the media to message/massage upon. Again in Marshall Mc Luhan's *the medium is the message to the medium is the massage* endorses how unconsciously the psyche renders itself to these forces beyond it and willingly yields to media controls.

If the images in all its recombinant phases prepare to alter the psyche to participate in its freshness then we have an ever absorbing consciousness where imprints do not come in the way of further imprints. An 'allatonceness' after Mc Luhan enables both absorption and reaction to the innumerable moving images that inflict us constantly setting the stage for a necessary credibility of pastiched, pseudo reality. The instance of the passage of a celebrity or an artist of world renown therefore, not only creates a vacuum which is instantly filled with his memorabilia where life and death are simultaneous zones of habitation for the virtual blurs all into a state of the present. Such a state of virtual presence confers a posthumous 'life' to a Michael Jackson or Princess Diana, resurrected not only in Madame Tussaud's wax museum but in a timeless zone of the postmodern eternal presence.

Though McLuhan conveys us to an acoustic age positioning us in retrospective before the written word, the fact remains that as denizens of a media-mediated world, we are collective in our non consciousness. Not barren but, able to react collectively with an integrated social or political conscience constructed through the media in collaboration with a relenting psyche. So that we take conscious decisions and participate in opinion polls from the comfort of our media-invaded homes or at the click of a mouse imprint ourselves on the key pad of our handsets. There is no black print to decipher as images unfold a telling tale with easy props. As Mc Luhan writes

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall, McLuhan. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Berkeley: Gingko Press, 1996.p.14.

Ours is a brand-new world of ‘all atonceness’. ‘Time’ has ceased, space has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening.<sup>7</sup> We live therefore in a global village, that has successfully homogenized its denizens into a habit of nonconsciousness conformity and collective participation controlled by the received media dictate in a digital age.

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Masssage: An Inventory of Effects*. Berkeley: Ginkgo Press, 1996. p.63.