



Editorial Introduction

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# Communicating Change: Representing Self and Community in a Technological World: Introduction

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‘It is change, continuing change, inevitable change that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be.’

Isaac Asimov

## Introduction

The articles that are presented here arose from the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Graduate School of Arts and Humanities, held at the University of Glasgow in June 2009, and entitled ‘*Communicating Change: Weaving the Web into the Future*’. The organising committee wanted to find a title that would offer scope for a broad range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary practices, whilst also ensuring that the conference would provide an opportunity for the next generation of scholars and practitioners to express the notion of change within their own fields.

The following seven articles are excellent representatives of these motivating factors. As the editors organized them into themes and subjects, it was noted how these pieces circled the notions of selfhood, often reflecting the broader concerns of how this was imagined within certain communities, and how modern technologies were a driving force in both problematising and extending the representations of these ideas in our contemporary context. As human subjects we are eternally interested in ourselves. However, and what a collection such as this amply demonstrates, we can only

imagine ourselves in relation to others and that this is a process that always takes place through means of communication that in themselves also provide spaces for conflict or opportunities for productive, ‘knowing’, change.

### **The technological world as a ‘theatre of selves’**

Wentao Jiang’s essay, ‘Institution of Feelings: Theatricality, Moral Sentiments and Empire Building in Adam Smith’, sets up many of the issues that later articles also focus upon. Jiang compares and contrasts the moral philosopher Adam Smith’s seemingly divergent understandings of human relations; one that seems based on sympathetic emotions, posited in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (first published in 1759); the other built on an idea of relations organized around systems of economic and materialist interest and exchange (as demonstrated in *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776). For Jiang, the important point of access across these two texts is Smith’s figuration of the ‘impartial spectator’ whose function is to govern interactions by granting or withholding fellow feeling. This ‘sympathetic sentiment’ (a key concept in eighteenth century moral philosophy) is then extended into the ‘theatricality’ of print-media, effectively operating as a site for an increasingly technological eighteenth century to disseminate a perceptual model of wealth and acquisition. The private individual may present themselves to be ‘seen’ through a new ‘public-ness’ in print; as Jiang has it, ‘each person wanting to be materially rich or visibly individual has to work to become a dramatist.’ Smith correlates sympathetic sentiment with a visual economy which necessarily excludes the marginalized; moral depravity is thus linked with the inability to be ‘seen’ and to interact in systems of commodity and exchange. For Smith, the result of a rising market economy is a more comfortable and prosperous society,

freeing more people to act sympathetically to others. For those of us who situated in 'First-Nation' countries, it is up to us to judge how far we may believe this to be true in an age of hyper-capitalism, mass consumerism, and economic instability. Jiang leaves us with an image of a 'Janus-faced Adam Smith' who links a turning inward of the moral sentimental mode with the social transition 'from the local to the global in the formation of the British Empire'. A major outcome of just this Empire-building can be seen in the following two articles.

Laura Ferguson's article, 'Hong Kong: Communicating 1997 and beyond through Film', explores how Hong Kong's colonial past (after being made a British colony in 1842) resulted in a territory set apart from mainland China in its unusual East-West hybridity, something that would prove its cultural significance in the handover to Chinese rule on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997. In keeping with the theme of communicating selfhood within a 'theatre of selves', Ferguson reads Hong Kong cinema as displaying the so-called 'China Syndrome'; films of this transitional period exhibited strong themes of searching for a stable identity, a nostalgia for an imagined past, and a preoccupation with time. Before the handover itself, Ferguson notes the rise in horror films and 'crisis cinema'—films with survival as their core narrative. Others enact a search for 'Hong Kong-ness', particularly with a keen eye on western culture, as films attempt to fix place and home, often as a reaction to other groups' embracing of Confucianism, Buddhism or other Chinese customs. The film *Chungking Express* (Dir. Wong Kar-wai, 1994) even has a countdown as its central plot device as, in the political world, the deadline for handover approaches. A series of films delve back into the 1930s, 1950s or 1960s, not simply as a means of avoiding the present but also as a way of exploring present concerns below the radar of increasing censorship. Post-handover films begin to display very stark

contradictions between the places and people of Hong Kong and mainland China. Identity becomes linked with what Ferguson identifies as ‘forgetting’ or ‘not-forgetting’ films; ‘forgetting’ films often centred on drifters or loners who have no clear vision or narrative and ‘not-forgetting’ films as foregrounding the realities of life in post-handover Hong Kong. Overshadowing these post-handover films is Hong Kong’s 2046 integration into mainland China; as Ferguson emphasizes, ‘it appears Hong Kong cinema will continue to be a cinema communicating change’ for many decades yet.

At this point, Dr. Julia Sallabank’s extensive and detailed work on language endangerment provides a bridge between two articles centred on Hong Kong/Chinese relations; the fears of identity loss and reduction in cultural diversity portrayed by Hong Kong cinema (and the website translations in the following essay) are mirrored in Sallabank’s analysis of the increasing loss of minority languages. As she highlights, ‘it is estimated that at least 50% of the world’s languages will disappear by 2100.’ Some of the causes of this are negative attitudes towards minority languages, economic factors and widespread lack of awareness about the problem. Political and cultural identities are also seen as extremely significant in language use; for example, the paradox of the ‘mutual incomprehensibility of Chinese ‘dialects’ compared to the mutual comprehensibility of Scandinavian languages’ demonstrates that language use is never a neutral factor in creating and communicating ‘selves’. After laying the groundwork for the crucial study of language endangerment, Sallabank then moves on to discuss her own research on the indigenous language of Guernsey, known as Dgernesiais. Her analysis proves significant, especially her conclusions that, with an understanding that identities display an inherent non-fixity, even in

language use, Dgernesiais is now seen as a distinct cultural and commercial asset, often amongst non-Dgernesiais speakers who have moved into the Channel Island community. Although it is likely that the current older generation will be the last fluent speakers, Sallabank sees signs of hope in the interest shown by the Education Department to accept Dgernesiais into the school system as people become more aware of the distinctiveness of what is to be lost if nothing is done.

With Chung-yan Kong's intriguing essay, 'The Self-Representation of Regional and National Identities—Comparing the Translation Patterns between China and Hong Kong Tourism Websites' we are returned to the theme of Chinese-Hong Kong relations and an examination of how cultural identities are represented through the medium of Hong Kong tourist websites. Language use is a significant political and cultural theme as, again, it is the performed selves, 'the theatre of selves', that is at stake here as images are imposed upon different cultural groups and chosen for Chinese-English translational contexts. Comparing tourism websites produced on the Chinese mainland and websites issued from Hong Kong itself, Kong finds that among the key features of the Chinese versions are translated expressions that emphasize the superiority of China's imperial past. Of course, the Chinese Communist Party deploy a strict monitoring of all internet activities on the mainland, particularly encouraging self-censorship and Kong detects such political will being imposed upon these nationalistic self-representations. In comparison, the websites originating in Hong Kong tend to focus on the province's hybridity and embrace seemingly contradictory yet co-existing cultural constituents, often emphatically linking themselves with a westernized colonial past. These visual and textual representations strongly echo the themes of

Laura Ferguson's work as Hong Kong struggles to come to terms with its ongoing transition to Chinese administration. However, what is of particular importance in Kong's work are the political implications of the use of the medium itself; who controls the communicative technologies when attempting to represent 'selves'? One groups' attempt at representation may, in fact, operate as an oppressive apparatus that orders knowledge and meaning production, effectively sealing it from any, seemingly inevitable, change. Are there perhaps media that may offer some escape from this control?

Andrew Rayment's essay, 'A Bloodless Coup, Metaphorically: Representations Of 'Progress' in Terry Pratchett's *Carpe Jugulum*', suggests that such an exploratory space might be found in fantasy literature. What this space allows for is a fictional structure that is able to mirror some aspects of our social and political 'realities' in a similar way to Laura Ferguson's analysis of the filmic space in pre- and post-handover Hong Kong. For Rayment, Pratchett's novel presents three configurations of that most modern of ideas, 'progress', in sharp and satirical ways. *Carpe Jugulum* presents progress as an ideal devoid of any meaning other than the ideological frameworks that are read into it, be they the forward-looking Verence, King of Lancre, who wants to instigate a period of social reform and tolerance of vampyres, or Count Magpyr who wants to escape the cultural conditioning of the old vampirism. Reading the motifs of the 'New-Vampirism' versus 'Liberal-Absolutism' through Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek, Rayment sees fantasy as an ideal theatre in which to analyze these fictional renderings of 'pure' ideologies. In this sense, fantasy writing enacts a technology, a making (*téchne*) of space, where such issues may be addressed in a more potent way than in some forms of realist fiction.

The creativity that is allowed for when using cinematic technologies is the subject of Gillian Kelly's article, 'Gene Kelly: The Performing Auteur – Manifestations of the Kelly Persona'. Gene Kelly is presented as more than an auteur in the traditional understanding of this term; he moves from performing in front of the camera as actor, dancer and singer, to directing and choreographing the film off-screen. Extending auteur theory, Kelly labels Gene Kelly as a 'performing auteur', who works hard to become visibly individual, a dramatist of the 'self', but also to generate a sense of authenticity between his on-screen, off-screen, and 'private' roles. He is an Everyman, the blue-collared guy on the street, but also a creative individual separated by his performative talents. In order to explore this fusing of the 'same but different', Kelly analyzes his on-screen and off-screen personae under the headings 'control', 'authenticity', and 'mise-en-scène'. The result is a fascinating portrayal of an individual able to communicate through both the technology of the cinema studio, utilising many innovative cinematic techniques in his theatrical creations, and through his dancing ability. As Kelly highlights, Gene Kelly's auteur status meant that he was able to create 'a sense of himself woven into the fabric of his films from both sides of the camera.' The medium carried not only the message but also sustained and extended his artistic 'self'.

This notion of technology as providing and extending the means of communication for human subjects animates Elena Marcevska's work, 'Technologies of Change: Body Coded in Motion'. Where Andrew Rayment positions fantasy literature as a possible site for exploring our social and political ideals, Marcevska offers the electronic art of the visual screen. Technology has advanced to such a stage that it is impacting upon our sense of identity which, on Martin Heidegger's terms, may not be a negative



result but may actually instigate a process of bringing forth and revealing truths not yet present. The screen operates as a contested space on which social relations may be played out. Marcevska's research is focused on how the body's motion can be used as a signal that displays this movement on the screen. This artificiality articulates some of the ways in which the body is imagined in western and globalized cultures, particularly since the technologies of lens and camera. This is not to posit a hierarchy between 'live' and 'mediated' performances; for Marcevska, 'although they are commonly placed in opposition to one another, both performance and technology explore the interaction between the body (the person) and the environment by challenging parameters of what the body can do and experience (human potential).'

### **Communicating Change**

A major theme running through all of these papers is the use of technology as a means of representing 'selves', sometimes emphasising the creative and utopian possibilities of this representation, as Marcevska and Kelly explore; at others, demonstrating that social and economic power and control are always at work in deploying representative media, as Jiang, Ferguson, Sallabank, Kong and Rayment attest. What the authors all agree on is that ongoing communication is necessary if we and others are to be made aware of the regimes of signification that operate when we step onto the changing stage in the 'theatre of selves'. As Walter J. Ong put it, in his book *Orality and Literacy*; 'Once the word is technologized, there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it without the aid of the highest technology available. Moreover, the new technology is not merely used to convey the critique: in fact, it brought the critique into existence' (1982, p.80).

It is one of our tasks, as readers, writers and performers, to maintain such a critique of what words are able to do in our own technologies of change.

### **Bibliography**

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