

L I M I N A

Interstitial Spaces and Multiple Histories in William Gibson's *Virtual Light*, *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*

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In William Gibson's post-cyberpunk Interstitial trilogy – Virtual Light (1993), Idoru (1996) and All Tomorrow's Parties (1999) – he maps an oppressive, urban and globalised American monoculture. However, the most provocative spaces in these novels are those liminal spaces 'in between' the rigid corporate, military and governmental structures. Utilising a theoretical framework derived from Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and Vivian Sobchack, among others, this paper argues that Gibson's novels both reflect the increasing domination of categories of space over categories of time as well as examining and to a certain extent championing the interstitial spaces—those new spaces of resistance populated by those people that cannot or will not easily fit into the bland urbanised world surrounding them. The two interstices focused on are the bridge—an amorphous collection of society's most unwanted in a near-future San Francisco – and the Walled City, an eclectic digital recreation of Hong Kong's demolished Kowloon City. Modes of resistance as well as new and changing approaches to personal and collective histories in these spaces are also examined.

The only way through a crisis of space is to invent a new space.¹

- Fredric Jameson, *Universal Abandon?*

The Walled City's whereabouts, the conceptual mechanisms by which its citizens have opted to secede from the human datascape at large are the place's central and most closely

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held secret. The Walled City is a universe unto itself, a subversive rumour, the stuff of legend.²

- William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties*.

Although William Gibson's oft-cited cyberpunk works³ are often read as oppressively pessimistic about the immanent future, in his later Interstitial trilogy – *Virtual Light* (1993), *Idoru* (1996) and *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1999) – he maps a more optimistic future geography which includes spaces of resistance within the seemingly closed monoculture of urban America (and, increasingly, the entire globe). Following cultural critic and theorist Fredric Jameson, these new spaces are responses to a 'crisis of space' on at least two levels: firstly, a crisis in purely physical terms, where public spaces have been all but eradicated leaving those people who, for one reason or another, do not 'fit in' with nowhere to go; and secondly, a crisis in more conceptual terms where, as Jameson has argued, 'our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are ... dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time,'⁴ and where the baggage of modernist linear time is lost, replaced by the perpetual present of spatiality and simulacra. Similar trends have been noted by David Harvey, arguing with a strong focus on cityscapes and spatiality, while cinema theorist Vivian Sobchack's examination of the screen and space are particularly useful in mapping new digital realms.

The first of the two new spaces imagined by Gibson, referred to simply as 'the bridge', is an organic community of San Francisco's outcast and marginalised citizens who have turned the Bay Bridge, which had been damaged by an earthquake and left unused, into an autonomous refuge outside the normal mechanisms and laws of the surrounding city. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of people have constructed eclectic dwellings and impromptu shops and markets out of every imaginable building material available. According to the residents, the bridge has 'no agenda, ... no underlying structure', only an alliance of outcasts, a functional but unplanned community of people who have created their own habitat, their own space.⁵ While the bridge is a physical manifestation of new spaces of resistance, Gibson's other imagined space, the Walled City, is completely the opposite. In the Interstitial trilogy the internet has become as highly regulated and policed as the urban physical spaces. In response, the citizens of the Walled City found a way to 'secede from the human datascape', to create a virtual city which, as

Masahiko, one of the self-styled 'denizens' of Walled City, cryptically puts it, is 'of the Net, but not on it'.⁶ Like the bridge, the Walled City has 'no laws ... just agreements', and therefore houses an eclectic population who have founded a new space outside of, and resistant to, the dominant digital culture (*Id*, 209).

The descriptions and terms used to describe spaces in the Interstitial trilogy are already imbued with an analytical edge through Gibson's use of outside witnesses to frame these new spatial arenas. The first glimpse of the bridge is through the eyes of Yamazaki, a visiting Japanese academic who humbly describes himself as 'a student of existential sociology' (*Id*, 6). Yamazaki's initial description of the bridge is extremely telling:

The integrity of its span was rigorous as the modern program itself, yet around this had grown another reality, intent upon its own agenda. This had occurred piecemeal, to no set plan, employing every imaginable technique and material. The result was something amorphous, startlingly organic. At night, illuminated by Christmas bulbs, by recycled neon, by torchlight, it possessed a queer medieval energy. (*VL*, 66)

These few lines manage to evoke a number of elements of recent arguments regarding the postmodern cityscape. One such argument can be found in David Harvey's work. He contends that the great metropolitan cities of the Western world, complete with 'the machines, the new transport ... systems, skyscrapers, bridges, and engineering wonders of all kinds', were amongst the most powerful centres, and signifiers, of the modernist project.⁷ By contrast, however, the postmodern cityscape has jettisoned these icons and ideals of progress in favour of '[f]iction, fragmentation, collage, and eclecticism, all suffused with a sense of ephemerality and chaos', in terms of imagination, design, and day-to-day life.⁸ It would be hard to find a better representation of this shift from a modernist to postmodern cityscape than the transformation of the Bay Bridge, once a central transport artery of a modern metropolis, into an eclectic, 'piecemeal' community housing an alliance of difference and otherness. Thus, while some cityscapes, such as the Los Angeles described in *Virtual Light*, are becoming more highly policed and surveyed with a concurrent eradication of public spaces, the

inevitable outcome is the almost 'organic' creation of new spaces, such as the bridge.⁹ Moreover, the increasing number of eclectic urban refugees which populate the bridge may form only an ephemeral and chaotic alliance of difference, but while working together they have created, and maintain, a space of resistance with its 'own agenda', an agenda at odds with the monoculture of the surrounding metropolis.

One way in which the bridge's difference can be mapped is through its removal from the (modernist) linear history of the surrounding metropolis; no longer having a singular history, the bridge becomes a postmodern space where multiple histories co-exist. One of the bridge's histories is told to Yamazaki by Skinner, one of the few remaining original inhabitants who was part of the crowd that 'took' the bridge. He recalls that there were 'no signals, no leader, no architect', but 'people just *came*' one night, climbing the fences surrounding the then defunct bridge and running onto to it from either end, clinging to the towers. Eventually, the officials of the surrounding city decided, rather than risk the bad publicity of emptying the bridge by force, to allow the collection of society's most unwanted to set up a new home there (VL, 98-102). Skinner's history thus marks the bridge as an almost mythical space of resistance, where an alliance of difference prevailed against the surrounding authorities. Yamazaki also noted that 'Skinner's mind was remarkably like the bridge', and while Skinner's version of the bridge's history may appear representative of the whole, Skinner self-consciously realised that 'history ... was turning into plastic', and that every history 'was an approximation, somebody's idea of how it might have looked', rather than a singular definitive narrative of 'how it really happened' (VL, 68; 273).

The bridge, therefore, also housed the histories that Fontaine perceived. Fontaine, who ran a small shop and maintained many of the bridge's electrical systems, had a very different take on history:

Everything, to Fontaine, had a story. Each object,
each fragment comprising the built world. A
chorus of voices, the past alive in everything,
that sea upon which the present tossed and rode.
(ATP, 158-159).

Fontaine saw the histories implicit in every object; the histories of fragments and commodities rather than people and places. Both Skinner and Fontaine's histories share certain characteristics: both

reflect Elizabeth Mahoney's argument that 'future cities [will] foreground space over ... time',¹⁰ in that their organising principle is their spatial position on the bridge rather than where they had come *from* – their past. Moreover, both depend on randomicity and chaos rather than linear causality (people 'just *came*' to take the bridge, and Fontaine's objects and fragments all travel various paths to end up on the bridge); and both histories are entirely contingent (Skinner recognises that when he dies, his version of bridge history will die with him, and Fontaine realises that the 'chorus of voices' that he perceives in material objects will alter as new fragments and objects come onto, or leave, the bridge). Additionally, many of the bridge's inhabitants choose to completely privilege the perpetual present of their spatiality over any historical baggage they once carried. For example, when an outsider enquires of Boomzilla if he has seen someone they call a 'lost child', he lies and says he has never seen the girl because, '[a] lost child himself, he has every intention of staying that way' (*ATP*, 83). In the space of the bridge, the inhabitants all implicitly recognise each other's choice, if they wish, to escape their former histories and, if need be, the alliance works to allow each of the bridge folk to exist in a community which is concerned only with the spatial dynamics of their eclectic, but functionally communal, present.

Through Tessa, an Australian new media student and documentary maker who, like Yamazaki, witnesses rather than participates in the new spaces of resistance, Gibson reveals the perfect terminology to describe the bridge:

The documentary Tessa wanted to make was about interstitial communities, and Tessa said Chevette had lived in one, because Chevette had lived on the bridge. Interstitial meant in between things, and Chevette figured that that made a kind of sense, anyway. (*ATP*, 33)

The bridge is an 'interstitial space' on a number of levels: literally, the bridge is between the two landmasses of San Francisco; metaphorically, the bridge and its inhabitants exist between the gaps in the ostensible monoculture; and paradigmatically, the bridge exists between the end of modernism and whatever comes next (such as the Walled City discussed below). The sense of being 'between things' resonates throughout all three books, thus my description of them as Gibson's Interstitial trilogy. Ironically,

however, as soon as the perfect term for the bridge is found, it starts to lose its interstitiality.

When Tessa arrives on the bridge she is accompanied by Chevette who is returning after an absence of over a year. When they walk out onto the bridge, the first thing they see is a 'Lucky Dragon', 'a modular convenience store, chunked down front and centre across the entrance to the bridge's two levels' (ATP, 66). Chevette is horrified to see a commercial chain-store on the bridge and while Tessa brushes it off, explaining the bridge has been there 'long enough to become the city's number-one postcard', Chevette senses that the bridge has lost something important. Tessa comments that she has to hurry in order 'to document the life before it's theme-parked', but Chevette realises that it is already too late (ATP, 67). Later, Chevette explains to Tessa:

Used to be, everyone who did anything here,
who had a business going, they lived here.
'Cause you have to. Have to be in possession.
No rent or anything. Now, though, you get
businesses that are run like businesses, you
know? That Bad Sector [a shop] we were in.
Somebody owns all that stock, they built that
storefront, and I bet they pay that sumo boy to
sleep in back, hold it down for them. (ATP, 138)

Moreover, when she is reunited with Fontaine, Chevette asks him why he thinks the bridge is changing, and he replies: 'It just is, ... [t]hings have a time, then they change' (ATP, 160). While the bridge was initially an exclusively interstitial space, it has slowly become popular and begun to re-integrate into the surrounding city. Just as the bridge became interstitial by no set plan, it could not then become permanently ephemeral (an oxymoron, after all), and instead the bridge community need either become more integrated into the San Francisco cityscape, or search out new spaces. Chevette, a former bridge resident, understands this, while Tessa, never having been 'in between', cannot:

It is a world within the world, and, if there be
such places between the things of the world,
places built in the gaps, then surely there are
things there, and places between them, and
things in those places too. And Tessa doesn't

know this, and it is not Chevette's place to tell
her. (ATP, 80-81)

Chevette recognises that while some may disappear, there will always be new, emerging interstitial spaces in between things. The Walled City is one of them.

Just as the bridge exists as part of the geographical city of San Francisco but is conceptually and spatially at odds with it, the Walled City is part of the broader digital world but exists outside the rules and regulations of the normative internet. As Masahiko explains, the 'Walled City is of the net, but not on it. There are no laws here, only agreements' (*Id*, 209). The Walled City, unlike the internet, is not centrally governed but, like the bridge, exists due to an alliance between the various eclectic citizens who perform 'distributed processing', building and maintaining the Walled City on their own terms, not within the frameworks enforced by governments and global corporations (*Id*, 209). The bifurcation of the Walled City and the outside digital world can be mapped through Mark Nunes' conceptualisation of 'virtual topographies' – geographical and conceptual explanations of information and communication systems. Nunes argues that there is a digital dichotomy between the competing paradigms of *smooth* and *striated* virtual space: the former, represented in the phrase 'Surf the 'Net'', refers to a more fluid, unlimited and malleable concept (recognisably postmodern); the latter, represented by the phrase 'Cruise the Information Superhighway', refers to a concrete, linear, and 'point-oriented' virtual topography (which is more recognisably modernist).¹¹ In the Interstitial trilogy, the global information communication system is more like the concrete, linear model, complete with stringent regulations and restrictions. The 'denizens' of the Walled City, however, like the bridge folk, found the increasing restrictions on their (virtual) space impossible to live within, so they managed to break away from the broader human datascape. They constructed what they call 'another country', but not 'in any obsolete sense of the merely geopolitical', but rather a completely 'autonomous reality', which is functionally and spatially separate from the highly restricted global system (ATP, 126). Their new country retains the fluidity and malleability of Nunes' smooth topography, as the internet before it became highly regulated, and thus provides a new space for projects and existence outside of and resistant to the striated digital system of the dominant culture.

The Walled City not only provides an alternative political sphere, but allows the residents to develop more postmodern spatial relations to, and within, their constructed virtual environment. When Chia McKensie first visits the Walled City, she immediately becomes imbricated (and almost overwhelmed) by their different conceptualisation of time and space:

They were inside now, smoothly accelerating, and the squirming density of the thing was continual visual impact, an optical drumming. "Tai Chang Street." Walls scrawled and crawling with scrolling messages, spectral doorways passing like cards in a shuffled deck. And they were not alone: others there, ghost-figures whipping past, and everywhere the sense of eyes. Fractal filth, bit-rot, the corridor of their passage tented with crazy swoops of faintly flickering lines of some kind. "Alms House Backstreet." A sharp turn. Another. Then they were ascending a maze of twisting stairwells, still accelerating, and Chia took a deep breath ...
(*Id*, 182)

Here, Chia is guided through the Walled City not in linear time, but in a temporal framework completely defined by Masahiko (her guide) and Chia's movement through the spaces of the Walled City. Masahiko, a Walled City resident, can choose to move through the city as fast as he chooses, navigating the virtual cityscape at accelerated speeds, creating an 'optical drumming' for Chia who is stunned by the depth and intensity of the 'continual visual impact' of the digital simulacra. The shift in temporal and spatial signification in the Walled City echoes Vivian Sobchack's arguments about similar shifts of meaning in science fiction films. She argues:

The inflated value of space and surface has led to a deflation of temporal value, to a collapse of those temporal relationships that formulated time as a continuous and unifying flow – constituting the coherence of personal identity, history and narrative ... [and] transformed temporal coherence into spatial co-Here-nce.¹²

In the Walled City Sobchack's notion of spatial co-Here-nce reaches its logical extreme: in the virtual cityscape, time has become completely contingent on the subjective movement of individuals through the labyrinth of its dense surfaces. Significantly, time and space within the Walled City are no less real to the inhabitants, many of whom exist like Masahiko who spends 'all his waking hours [there,] ... his dreams too' (*Id*, 89). Even in contemporary society, Mark Nunes has argued

popular acceptance of cyberspace as a space has not needed to wait for the arrival of bodysuit-and-goggle "virtual reality"; for literally millions of users, cyberspace already "exists" as a *place*, as real as the work and play conducted "in" it.¹³

Thus, for the denizens of the Walled City, their interstitial space is not only as real as the material and digital culture of the surrounding monoculture (or the bridge), but their space in between is also all that much more important given that their reality privileges spatial co-Here-nce over previous (modernist) concepts of linear time.

The new spatial relations in the Walled City also mean that multiple histories can co-exist, as they did following reconceptualisations of space on the bridge. The Walled City's first history is really more 'the stuff of legend' and 'subversive rumour' than an historical narrative (*ATP*, 194). In the myth, the Walled City began with a 'shared killfile' – a communal set of mechanisms to delete any incoming messages or data the users wanted to avoid – and then:

Someone had the idea to turn the killfile inside out. This is not really how it happened, you understand, but this is how the story is told: that the people who founded [the Walled City] ... were angry, because the net had been very free, you could do what you wanted, but then the governments and the companies, they had different ideas of what you could, what you couldn't do. So these people, they found a way to unravel something. A little place, a piece, like cloth. They made something like a killfile of everything, everything they didn't like, and they turned that inside out ... (*Id*, 221)

Not concerned with the complex technical details of how it actually happened, the killfile myth emphasises the Walled City's deliberate interstitial position outside the norms of the dominant digital culture in both a technological and political sense. A second history also emphasises these themes, but in a different way.

The Walled City's second history begins with Kowloon, an autonomous zone in Hong Kong (when it was a British colony) that had been without laws or police because of a mistake in the possession agreement with China. Kowloon, a tiny space but extremely densely populated, was an 'outlaw place', which housed 'drugs and whores and gambling. But people living, too. Factories, restaurants. A city. No laws' (*Id*, 221). Kowloon was the model for interstitial spaces, but before the handover of Hong Kong back to China, it was cleared and demolished. As Masahiko recalls, 'thirty-three thousand people inhabited [the] original. Two-point-seven hectares. As many as fourteen stories' (*Id*, 184). The collective digital architects of the Walled City found in Kowloon their political model, and therefore decided to make the virtual world of the Walled City an exact replica of Kowloon: 'they found the data. The history of it. Maps. Pictures. They built it again' (*Id*, 222). Thus, the Walled City's second history emphasises how the new spatial possibilities of the digital domain can be used to keep alive a political and spatial 'world' the material authorities sought to eradicate. These multiple histories of the Walled City also evoke Fredric Jameson's idea of the 'new spatial logic of the simulacrum'. For Jameson, the increasing dominance of space and surfaces was implicitly negative because, he argued, it replaced any sense of linear historical development, and thus political unity and progress.¹⁴ However, the Walled City's digital regeneration of the interstitial space of Kowloon illustrates how the 'spatial logic of the simulacrum' can be a positive force, used for political resistance against the monolithic late capitalist systems that Jameson so powerfully critiques. Thus, the Walled City's multiple histories, precisely because of their position within a new system which emphasises spatial co-existence and surfaces, map a space which is intrinsically interstitial and resistant to the dominant culture in terms of politics, identity, mythology and histories.

The Walled City also ostensibly fulfils Douglas Kellner's idea of a 'cyberspace democracy', which 'espouses information for the people, fighting corporate control and monopoly of information',¹⁵ as well as using 'the new spaces of computer and media communication [to] make possible more participation in public

debates, more outlets for political and cultural expression'.¹⁶ The real test of the strength of interstitial spaces, however, comes at the conclusion of *All Tomorrow's Parties*. In the final novel, Cody Harwood, the president of the Harwood Levine megacorporation and the world's richest man who 'maybe, just maybe, ran it all,' has embarked on a project that will eradicate the bridge community as well as undermine any resistance to his political and economic dominance (ATP, 15). Through various means, the inhabitants of the Walled City become aware of Harwood's plans and in alliance with Colin Laney, a data analyst with a particular 'knack' for seeing emerging structures, set out to stop Harwood. In the last few chapters of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Berry Rydell, Fontaine and a number of other people on the bridge form one prong of an attack on Harwood, while Colin Laney and 'virtually the entire population of the Walled City, working in a mode of simultaneity that very nearly approximates unison' form another (ATP, 250). Through this uncanny and eclectic alliance, Harwood's plan is halted and the bridge, while set on fire by Harwood's team, is saved, while Harwood's more cryptic plan to consolidate his material and economic power is similarly undermined. Ultimately, Gibson privileges the interstitial spaces and their communities who may come from many different backgrounds but, when they work together, can be more powerful than any force the dominant culture can muster. Similarly, the Walled City's population appear completely capable of working for the collective good if need be, in this case to undermine the attempts by the monoculture to erase interstitial spaces, thus showing that the Walled City does, indeed, fulfil Kellner's ideal of a cyberspace democracy.

William Gibson's Interstitial trilogy contains a number of material, virtual and conceptual responses to the perceived 'crisis of space' mapped by Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Vivian Sobchack and other cultural theorists. The resulting interstitial spaces, envisioned by Gibson in the form of the bridge and the Walled City, share a number of characteristics, conceptually the most important of which is the shift away from a modernist conception of linear time to a spatially dominated world of surfaces and spatial co-Here-nce. These new spatial conditions allow the formation of communities which house an eclectic mix of people who are all refugees from the dominant culture at some level. These communities are generally ephemeral, fluid, and temporary, but while they exist they encompass alliances of difference and otherness which can, if required, work powerfully toward the greater good of

their chosen community. Similarly, each interstitial space houses multiple histories, but each member of these interstitial communities respects the history, or chosen lack of history, of their companions. Moreover, many of these multiple histories provide myths and stories of hope and resistance for people in some way antagonistic towards the dominant urban or digital monoculture. Technology plays a large role in creating these interstitial spaces, especially for the Walled City, where the inhabitants have discovered a means to digitally secede from the human datascape and establish a more lasting space of resistance. When combined, the strength of all the interstitial spaces are a force to be reckoned with, even for the most powerful in the dominant culture, as seen in the final confrontation with Harwood. Ultimately, the interstitial spaces as imagined by Gibson show that even in seemingly monolithic urban and digital environments there will be gaps somewhere in the system, and within these gaps lie the possibility for entirely new and resistant cityscapes and data-scapes which are not just spaces of defeat, but can, when working in alliance, be spaces of hope, influence and power.

Notes

¹Anders Stephenson, 'Regarding Postmodernism – A Conversation with Fredric Jameson' in Andrew Ross (ed.), *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, p.18.

²William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Putnam, New York, 1999, p. 194. Hereafter referred to in the body of the essay as 'ATP'.

³William Gibson's cyberpunk trilogy comprises *Neuromancer* (1984), Voyager, London, 1995, *Count Zero* (1986), Voyager, London, 1995 and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), Voyager, London, 1995. Often the short stories collected in William Gibson, *Burning Chrome* (1988), Voyager, London, 1995 are also read as part of his cyberpunk work.

⁴Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991, p.16.

⁵William Gibson, *Virtual Light*, Penguin, London, 1994 (Originally Viking, Great Britain, 1993), p.129. Hereafter referred to in the body of the essay as 'VL'.

⁶William Gibson, *Idoru*, Penguin, London, 1997 (Originally Viking, Great Britain, 1996), p.209. Hereafter referred to in the body of the essay as 'Id'.

⁷David Harvey, *The Postmodern Condition: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Cambridge & Oxford, 1990, p.27.

⁸*ibid.*, p.98.

⁹The other possible (and more pessimistic) outcome of the eradication of public spaces is the construction of 'Skid Row' and other centres of poverty and crime which are specifically designed by the Establishment to be contained, self-defeating and self-destructive areas. The bridge, by contrast, houses many criminals but exists outside the broader political and legal structure of the surrounding city (San Francisco) and thus all the different citizens exist in (a sometimes uneasy) alliance. Mike Davis, *City*

of *Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Verso, London & New York, 1990, p.233.

¹⁰Elizabeth Mahoney, “‘The People in Parentheses’ Space Under Pressure in the Postmodern City’ in David Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p.168.

¹¹Mark Nunes, ‘Virtual Topographies: Smooth and Striated Cyberspace’ in Marie-Laure Ryan (ed.), *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, University of Indiana Press, Indiana, 1999, p.62.

¹²Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, Ungar, New York, 1987, p.272.

¹³Nunes, p.61. It should be pointed that William Gibson *never* uses the term ‘cyberspace’ to describe the virtual spaces in the Interstitial trilogy. Gibson’s choice not to do so is most likely because the digital spaces in the Interstitial trilogy are quite different to the ones originally described in *Neuromancer* where the term ‘cyberspace’ was coined. Moreover, Gibson’s use of cyberspace is implicitly linked to cyberpunk, and the Interstitial trilogy is explicitly *not* cyberpunk. (*Virtual Light* uses several strategies to both parody Gibson’s earlier cyberpunk books as well as distancing the Interstitial Trilogy from them. The character of Sublett is one such example: he is the only character wearing the cyberpunk symbol – the mirrorshades – but is not the typical cyberpunk (anti-)hero, but rather a non-violent person, with crippling allergies and is generally misunderstood due to his mirrored glasses!).

¹⁴Jameson, p.18.

¹⁵Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Routledge, London, 1995, p.323.

¹⁶*ibid.*, p.324.