



**Topology for Culture:
metaphors and tools**

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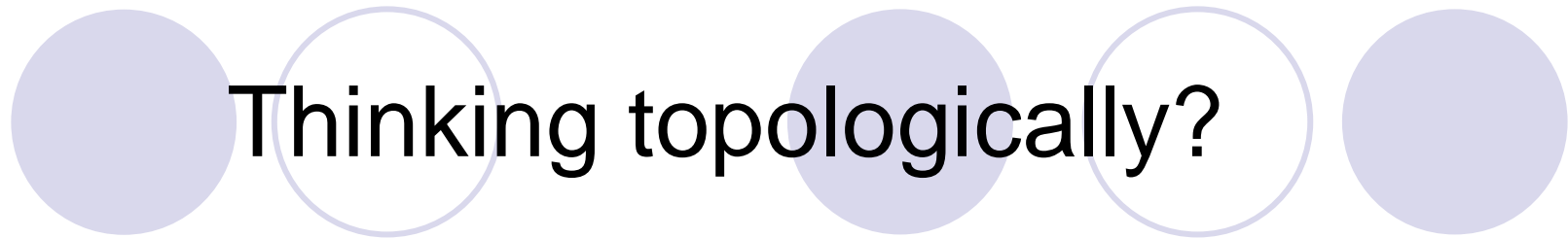
Topological thinking?

The principal objective of the Co-ordinated Action, A Topological Approach to Cultural Dynamics (ATACD) is to provide an infrastructure for the sharing, consolidation, and development of topological approaches to the study of cultural dynamics across disciplines.



Approaches to *cultural* dynamics include:

- *typological* approaches, that is, understandings to do with types or essences, often assuming a unity of some kind to culture; and
- *topographic* approaches, that is, understandings linked to Euclidean space – perhaps not formally developed as such, but implicit in, for example, the use of metric notions of distance, or in the use of volumetric metaphors of surface and depth; and
- *topological approaches*, that is, understandings linked to topological space.



Thinking topologically?



Topological approaches *might*:

- define cultural change as normal and immanent rather than exceptional and externally determined;
- define cultures in relation to capacities for change rather than in terms of their essential properties, size or location;
- understand these capacities for change as constituted in relations (of ordering, of connectedness and so on) rather than being constituted by some essential properties (eg archetypes, values or norms), or perhaps better, to the extent, that it is possible to speak of properties, these are seen to be relative to specific transformations or relations;



Topological approaches *might*:

- understand cultural change to be intensive;
- understand cultural change in relation to populations (of people, of objects, of ideas, whatever), and that change in these populations is to be understood in terms of probabilities - the use of a statistics of probability means that variation is real while norms are abstract;
- provide a set of concepts, methods and tools to address probabilities in the present, rather than certainty in either the present or the future. They thus offer a complex model of predictability and enable a problematization of events in terms of the potential they offer for change.



Globalization: an example of cultural dynamics

- In a *typological* approach, global culture might be said to be a particular type or kind of culture (eg expansionist, competitive).
- In a *topographic* approach, globalization might be understood as a process of the increasing extensity, that is, in terms of increasing spread, reach or distance (eg there are more McDonalds' restaurants in more countries now than 10 years ago).

Sometimes - often - the two may be combined, as in claims that globalization is the spread of American culture across the globe.



Globalization - as a 'changed relation to context' (Marilyn Strathern)

There are of course lots of different ways of understanding this, including:

- i. globalisation means that no context is our context;
- ii. globalisation means that cultures exist in plural relations to multiple contexts, not singular, exclusive relations;
- iii. globalisation means that culture is not to be understood in terms of relations to an external context that acts as an embedding or foundational structure, but is (makes) its own context.



Global culture industry: the mediation of things, Lash and Lury

What is the global context? or What is the context of the global?

A study not of culture industry, but of the global culture industry, in which we 'mapped' the 'biography' of 7 'objects' as they moved:

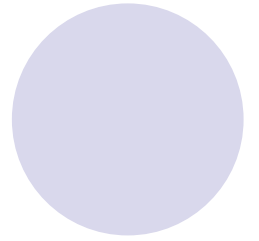
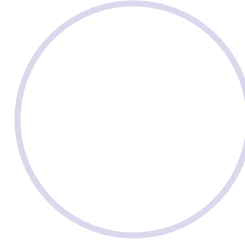
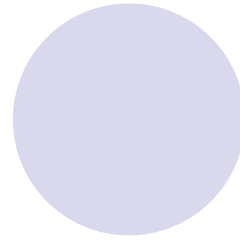
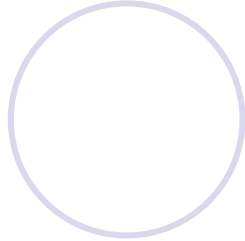
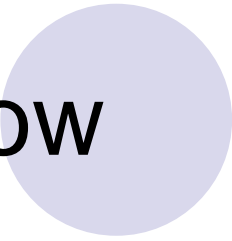
- across production, distribution, reception;
- across media; and
- across borders and boundaries.

By the end of the study we understood this movement as the mediation of things, that is, as of *flows* of various products.

This is an understanding of flows as a particular kind of complex, collective, constitutive ordering (which might usefully be contrasted with networks?), and of the global as a (topological?) space in which our objects surface.



Flow



We then tried to address the ‘properties’ of this space, not in terms of essences, or in terms of depth (or shallowness) of meaning, but in terms of the properties of flow as a particular kind of ordering.

The argument here then is that it is the global as the mediation of flows - a complex, collective, constitutive ordering - that makes, for example, ‘novelty’, ‘tradition’, ‘fashion’, ‘events’.

It is the mediation which coordinates the movement of ‘objects’: how they mutate and how they make value (what ‘kind’ of value they make).

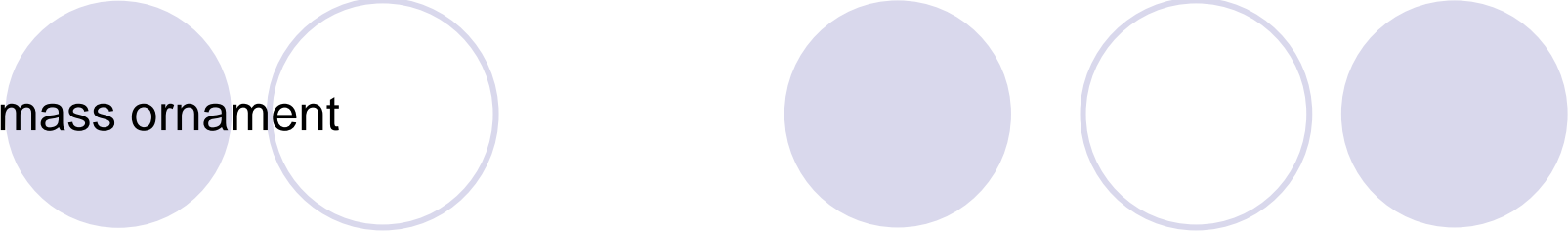


Culture industry: the turn to surface

Siegfried Kracauer - writing at the same time that Adorno and Horkheimer are first describing the culture industry - uses the phrase 'the turn to surface' in relation to the mass culture of the Weimar Republic.

To develop his description of surface in terms of what he calls 'the mass ornament', Kracauer pays special attention to the mass forms of his day - the hotel lobby, arcades, the Tiller girls and bestsellers as well as cinema and photography - the media practices that 'display an elective affinity with the surface'.

In this work, he focuses on the penetration of culture by *ratio*. He says, 'The ornament, detached from its bearers, must be understood *rationality*' (1995: 77). He goes on to describe this rationality in terms of 'Euclidean geometry' and the 'elementary components' of physics, such as waves and spirals'.

A decorative graphic at the top of the slide consists of two groups of circles. The left group has a solid light purple circle on the left and an outlined light purple circle on the right. The right group has a solid light purple circle on the left, an outlined light purple circle in the middle, and a solid light purple circle on the right. The text 'The mass ornament' is positioned to the left of the first group of circles.

The mass ornament

Kracauer describes the reason at work as providing a (mathematical) logic that organizes the mass.

This is the logic of a 'linear system', training 'the broadest mass of people to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions' (1995: 77).

He sums his argument up by saying that 'The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires' (1995: 79).



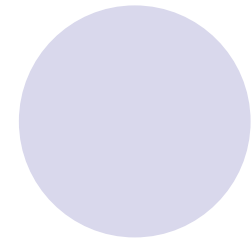
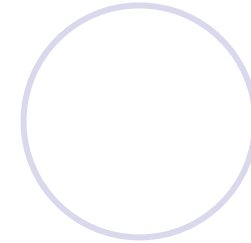
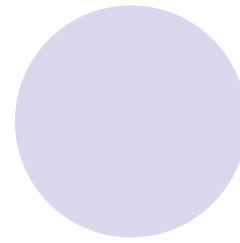
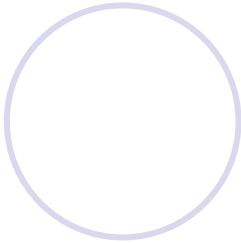
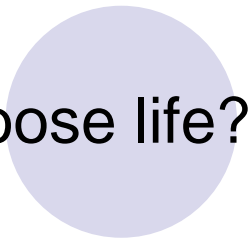
A different ratio?

In our study, we also understood the culture industry in terms of a surface, and like Kracauer argued that it is to be understood in relation to the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.

However, we did not describe this rationality as either Euclidean or linear; rather we understood it in terms of a complex, co-ordinating, constitutive agency, whose logic is non-linear and non-Euclidean and thus might possibly be illuminated by thinking topologically. This, for us, is what makes it a global culture industry.



Choose life?



This logic does not produce a global to be understood in topographic terms - as an ever more expansive distribution and reception of discrete, equivalent items in time and space.

Nor does it produce a global to be understood in typological terms - that is, in terms of a pre-existing type or essence.

Rather, it produces the global as and in a (particular) mediation of things - the movement of objects - in flows of differentiated products, services, experiences, with the intensive ordinates of this space being the Swoosh, the lifting of Wallace's eyebrow, the catch-phrase - 'Choose life', 'That's not flying, it's falling with style'.



Is this space new?

One answer to this question is to say that it is newly visible but that just raises the question of how it becomes visible.

Some people have argued that the space of the global as it is described here is *performative* (Lee and Lipuma, 2002; Mackenzie, 2005).

To use the example of the brand, this is quite literally an object that coordinates the circulation of products, services and experiences. At the same time, coordinated actions centred on the brand constantly modulate it as an object in self-referential ways. Thus brands are things that recursively refer to descriptions of themselves.

From this point of view the visibility of global cultural forms such as the brand (and perhaps this EU coordinated action as well) is unavoidable; representation is how they are enacted.

The implication here being that if this space is newly visible, then this is because it is itself new.



Is this space new?

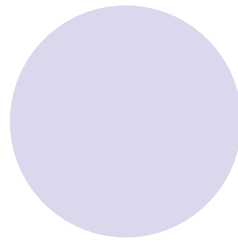
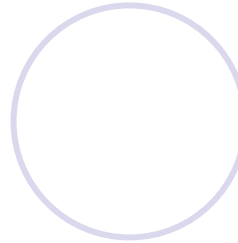
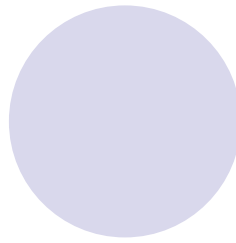
Another answer – not necessarily alternate – is that the newness of the global is to do with the implementation of new processes of rationalization.

Here one might point to the technical and other processes by which a new ratio is being introduced into the (cultural) economy, including:

- i. the use of communications and information technologies to produce-distribute-receive (that is, to circulate) products, services, experiences;
- ii. the use of statistical techniques to model (finance, product and consumer) markets;
- iii. the introduction of cross-national standards and regulations (including importantly IP legislation) and so on - Arvidsson,
- iv. as well as more general cultural processes such as reflexivity.



My research questions



Whether and how a new rationality is contributing to cultures of circulation (Lee and Lipuma, 2002) and new cultural forms such as the brand? (Is performativity useful here or a side-issue?)

Whether and how and with what effects information and communication technologies move into wider circulatory practices of ordering and coding, of representing and regulating difference?

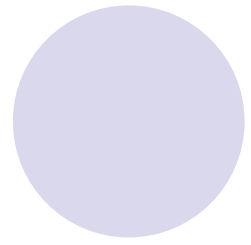
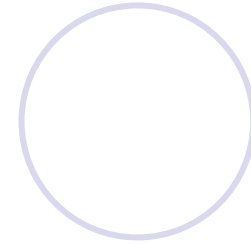
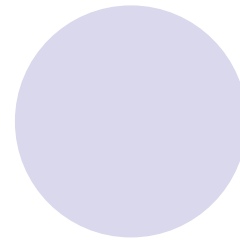
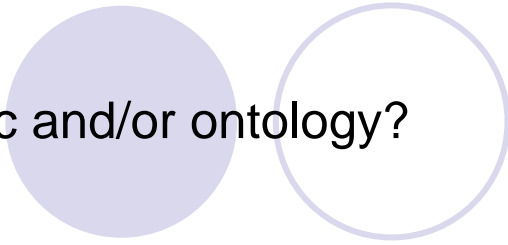
Whether and how cultural change is predictable?

Whether and how (un)control exists?

Whether and how such developments contribute to the emergence of new forms of power – what has been called the power of performativity (Lash, Mackenzie) or the power of transitivity (Massumi)?



Logic and/or ontology?



Last and first questions:

- whether and how topology – and/or mathematics more generally
- can be seen as logic and/or ontology;
- whether and how thinking topologically is to be understood in terms of metaphor, model or application.

For now, I'm tentatively pursuing the possibility that this way of thinking can be understood analogically – that is, in terms of the drawing of a relation of internal similarity.

The analogy is also a relation that Barbara Stafford has described as involving proportion (ratio) and participation (performance).