# The I and the Me(dia): The Contribution of Recent  Neo-Meadian Philosophy to an Understanding of the Media-Saturated Social Environment

Steve Bailey[1]

In this essay, the author explores the largely overlooked contribution of recent philosophical work by several followers of the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead to the study of contemporary media and particularly the question of the individual and the mediated environment.  This neo-Meadian tradition, which includes the work of Hans Joas, Ernst Tugendhat, and Hans-Herbert Kögler, has refined several of Mead's key concepts—the I/me dialectic, the social origin of the self, the "generalized other"—such that they may have a particular utility for a media ecological understanding of the contemporary social environment.  philosophical literature.  The essay concludes with speculation on the broader contribution of this approach to the field of media studies and, especially, the media ecology paradigm.

One of the hallmarks of recent scholarship on the impact of various forms of mass media—and this is especially true of scholarship from the media ecology tradition—has been the development of a particularly detailed elucidation of the symbolic character of a media-saturated social environment.  The work of Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), Fredric Jameson (1991), Lawrence Grossberg (1992), and Jean Baudrillard (1998), for example, is exemplary in this regard, providing a philosophically and culturally sophisticated diagnosis of a social world—or perhaps an "asocial world"—in which life is transfigured by the near ubiquity of streams of mediated discourse.  While these often provocative and always fascinating descriptions of a mediated environment raise (and sometimes answer) any number of crucial questions regarding the postmodern media culture, they have tended to leave one critical element within this culture—the individual social subject—unexamined.  The tendency to favor the structure or environment in the subject/structure or individual/environment binary is not surprising; indeed, "the death of the

---

[1] Steve Bailey is Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Faculty of Arts, Division of the Humanities, 204 Vanier College, 76 Winters Lane, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M3J 1P3 (416) 736-2100 x77021 (bailey@yorku.ca).

subject" is a common assumption within the postmodern philosophical tradition from which much of this analysis emerges.  However, the tendency to accept the irrelevance of the individual subject as an a priori assumption can have significant consequences for the broader understanding of media culture, and often these are not explicit within the theoretical analysis itself and thus never subjected to proper critical scrutiny.

The most obvious consequence is to reproduce a kind of behaviorist understanding (in the Watsonian or Skinnerian sense) of the subject, in which social determination appears absolute and in which the possibilities for self-reflection, self-consciousness, and self-assertion are neglected; put plainly, the subjective depth required for such processes to be even conceivable is flattened out.  Grossberg, for example, rejects subject-centered cultural analyses as inherently "Kantian" and calls for a model of social articulation that would focus on forces rather than individuals.  Baudrillard, who is more metaphysically inclined, finds individuality doomed in the current hyper-reality of postmodern life.  Whether the rejection is methodological or metaphysical, though, the effects at the level of analysis are similar—the subject becomes illegitimated as an area of study and indeed as a theoretical concept.  However, I will argue that such a rejection is premature, and indeed, that a model of social subjectivity that is both consonant with the postmodern and media ecological traditions (as much as these are separable) can be developed.  Additionally, I hope to demonstrate that such a model can hold a particular utility for concrete cultural analysis by pointing to some examples from my own fieldwork.

The roots of the understanding of the social subject I deploy in this research are located in the philosophical anthropology of the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead, whose division of the self into an "I" and a "me" is referenced in the title of this presentation.  For Mead, the "I" describes the aspect of the self that acts in the present and is thus capable of

innovative action, while the "me" describes the conventional aspects of the self, those that conform to the symbolic norms provided by the social environment. For Mead, the self always involves an interplay between the "I" and the "me," and a continual process of the creation and resolution of tensions between the social demand for conventional behavior and the potential for innovations and transformations created by the instability and irreducibility (the latter guaranteed by the existence of the "I") of the self. Mead additionally argues that the self emerges through a secondary engagement with various forms of otherness. This begins with physically proximate interpersonal others—as in the child's relationship with parents and siblings—but is ultimately expanded to include what Mead calls the "generalized other," which is a set of more abstract social expectations. The self, therefore, is not given in a quasi-Cartesian sense; it emerges gradually and always in a dual engagement—externally and internally—with an environment. Mead thus avoids an essentialist notion of the self as pre-given or intrinsically "authentic," and he also avoids the reduction of the self (as in the models described above) to an epiphenomenon of the social environment.[2] In this sense, Mead provides a theoretical grounding for understanding subjectivity as produced by, but not irreducible to, a symbolic environment.

Nonetheless, there are a number of difficulties with Mead's formulation of the self which need to be resolved if it is to be suitable for the analysis of contemporary culture, and here recent scholarship in the German neo-Meadian tradition can prove very helpful[3]. One of the difficulties with Mead's work is that it lacks a suitably sophisticated understanding of symbolic and especially linguistic systems, and that it tends to view meaning as relatively transparent. Hans-Herbert Kögler (1997) argues that if Mead's sense of the I/me dialogue and the encounter with otherness is understood as explicitly semiotic, which is implied but not stated directly by Mead, then the quasi-organic biopsychological tone that is sometimes evident in Mead can be avoided

(pp. 34-56). This is a crucial step if the model is to be of use by scholars of media, who are inevitably dealing with an unquestionably social and undeniably symbolic phenomenon. Also, by posing self-development in semiotic terms, the insights developed by semioticians and philosophers regarding the complex structures of meaning-making in all forms of discourse can be taken into account in the analysis of self-practices. In the context of the heterogeneous symbolic environment posed so acutely by postmodernists, this is a particularly critical supplement. In a similar vein, neo-Meadian philosopher (and leading explicator of Mead in Germany) Hans Joas poses the need to consider role-play—the critical Meadian engagement with otherness described above—as involving more than interpersonal others but also significant symbolic objects; the vast array of mediated experiences which are common to everyday life in developed societies can thus be considered as a critical element in the self-generating process of role-playing, an aspect which will be pursued in greater depth later in the presentation.

Perhaps the most critical elucidation and expansion of Meadian theory within the German philosophical tradition comes from Jürgen Habermas and Ernst Tugendhat, who point explicitly to the social implications of Mead's developmental theory of the self and its suitability for the contemporary social field. Habermas (1992) notes that Mead's theory is particularly relevant to the "detraditionalized lifeworld" of modernity[4] and argues that in this context, selfhood becomes a form of social accomplishment as the strong models of self supplied by the church, state, family, etc. become increasingly diffused (pp. 195-200). Tugendhat (1986), similarly, describes the process of self-definition as a kind of quest in which the free-ranging demands of the "I" seek a me-structure, that is to say a set of normative symbolic conventions capable of accommodating this more impulsive side of the self (pp. 254-255). The engagement with otherness, in Tugendhat's view, always contains at least some element of volition in which role positions can

be accepted or rejected.  Of course, this always occurs within constraints imposed by the conditioning of previous role-encounters and within the set of choices offered by the range of social "others" provided by the experience of the individual.  The work of Habermas and Tugendhat is critical to my perspective as they help to specify the nature of the social construction of self-hood and open up the possibility for understanding forms of mass media as elements in the multifaceted role play from which a social self emerges.  In a sense, I am arguing that forms of mediated experience need to be "socialized" and regarded as having the kind of significance and materiality that more conventional forms of socialization may have.

Thus, by fusing the model of self-formation and social subjectivity offered by the neo-Meadian perspective with a sense of mass media as constitutive of a symbolic environment developed by the media ecology tradition (from McLuhan onwards), one can potentially account (or begin to account) for the complex interplay of the individual and forms of mediated discourse.  If the mass media are considered, in essence, as a form of otherness (in the Meadian sense) and thus as a resource for the development of forms of social selfhood rather than simply as message delivery systems, many of the more subtle impacts of a media-saturated culture may be brought into relief.  This model may be particularly relevant in a context—primarily fueled by the development of forms of computer mediated communication—in which "demi-persons" (to use Sherry Turkle's term[5]) and virtual forms of selfhood are increasingly available to consumers (Turkle, 1993, pp. 83-85).  In these cases, the lines between interpersonal and mediated forms of social interaction become extremely fuzzy.  Rather than trying to extricate "communication" from "context" and "individual" from "social structure," the analysis could focus on a system of mutual productivity in which communication itself is a kind of social context and in which the individual as a distinct entity develops directly out of a complex array of symbolic flows.[6]  One

finds this, for example, in the development of online gaming in which an individual's connection with a character can become strikingly intimate (a true demi-person) while still inextricably linked to a very specific and in some sense all encompassing "context."

Essentially, such an approach would position mediated experiences as forms of the role-play that, for Meadians, conditions the development of the self[7]. Rather than the individual merely interpellated by discourses—as in the Althusserian Marxist tradition that has a substantive impact on European (if not U.S.) media studies—or freely engaging texts—as in the uses and gratifications and other media research traditions—the neo-Meadian approach would view such encounters as dialogic. They would be viewed, ultimately, as reflective of the kind of symbolic quest described by Tugendhat in his linguistic revision of Meadian theory.[8] It would thus hold the additional advantage of avoiding the persistent (and seemingly insurmountable) disputes among scholars of media regarding the passivity or activity of the audience by resisting a binary between the subjects (an audience) and structures (mediated messages) with an argument that "the subject" herself is a mediated, reflexive entity built from (and thus limited) by a set of communicative practices.[9]

This theoretical point inevitably begs the question of research strategies appropriate for the application of this neo-Meadian perspective to actual audience practices. I will provide some concrete examples from my own work shortly, but first I will briefly discuss the particular suitability of ethnographic research techniques in this area. Ethnography, of course, has enjoyed a considerable prominence in qualitative studies of media audiences in the last twenty years or so, precisely because it has offered strategies for research that might provide a better account of the "lived experience" of audiences than other qualitative or quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, and so on). Certainly, the investigation of something as potentially elusive as "the

self" demands a particularly nuanced mode of research, and thus the advances in ethnographic practice (particularly in regard to media audiences) are relevant here.[10] At the same time, however, one of the most potent critiques of ethnographic research is the relative theoretical naïvete and sometimes even outright hostility to "high theory" evident in some ethnographic work,[11] a quality which might be partly explained by the often formidable gap separating theoretical work from the far less analytically pure domain of real people and real practices. In my own ethnographic work with media audiences, I have attempted to apply some of the insights developed in the neo-Meadian approach described above—insights which enjoy little recognition in the world of media audience studies—without simply "stenciling" the theory on to the ethnographic data, but with a clear analytic hermeneutic for the interpretation of this data.

The first case study I will briefly describe examines the culture of the "Kiss Army," the extremely devout fans of the rock band Kiss. Kiss was a phenomenally popular band in the 1970s that fell into mid-level rock journeymen status in the 80s and early 90s, and then returned to fame in the late 90s when all the original members reunited. Kiss was a critically-derided, defiantly vulgar band, as famous for their spectacular stage show and facial makeup—they refused to show their real faces until 1983—as for their music, which was mainstream hard rock. I chose Kiss fans as an object of study because I wanted to examine a cultural formation that was unapologetically mainstream and paradigmatically inauthentic, a superculture, so to speak, rather than a subculture. I was particularly interested in long-term Kiss fans (many, like myself, in their early- to mid-thirties) who had maintained a dedication to the band past their adolescence, which was the band's largest audience demographic in its70s heyday. So, over four years, 1995-1999, I conducted an in-depth ethnographic study of Kiss fans, including interviews, participant observation at Kiss-related events, and extensive engagement with secondary fan discourses

(fanzines, fiction, art, "Kiss shrines," etc.)[12].

What I found within the amazingly complex symbolic world of the Kiss army was a process of self-definition and indeed self-formation that resisted the easy binaries of the passive and active audience.[13]  One of the most intriguing artifacts of the Kiss culture is the "Kisstory," which is an autobiography that interweaves the details of one's life with her discursive (and occasionally) personal experiences with Kiss; there are dozens of such Kisstories available on the WWW and many more in paper fanzines and other forms of fan discourse.  Fans would often describe their fandom in explicitly religious terms as "acolytes" to the band's "eldership," and a quasi-theological atmosphere pervaded much of the wider discourse surrounding the band and its fans.[14]  Additionally, because Kiss had a reputation as "Satanic" and incorporated horror-show theatrics into their presentation[15], many fans saw Kiss fandom as a kind of social achievement, as the overcoming of societal scorn and personal fear.  Most significantly, though, Kiss fans saw themselves as empowered beings, with particular fantasies of autonomy and rebellion, and as occupying a kind of egalitarian community of fellow "Kiss-tians."

Indeed, the Kiss world seemed to serve as a resource for fans, mostly working and middle class white males, to derive an identity which was fantastic in many respects but still rooted in the creative and interpretive tasks normally associated with fandom—making sense of the primary texts supplied by the band and creating derivative aesthetic works.  The culture offered a variety of role-positions (indeed Kiss was carefully crafted around four fantasy personas: the cat, the demon, the alien, and the starchild) and discursive entry points for the kind of I/me dialogue Mead found in more conventional social contexts (from Little League to the League of Nations, literally, as Mead presented both as examples of self-generating social bodies).  It was not a matter of fans being "affected," in a crude sense, by Kiss products, but rather of entering—in the

case of serious fans—a symbolic world in which selves were formed and performed. Essentially, Kiss and its culture served as a symbolic milieu and the key symbolic source for the derivation of a fan identity. The distinction is important because it suggests a place for popular culture within a broader social context that may be less deterministic at some level but is in another, environmental sense, quite profound. The chorus of the Kiss song "I," which is relatively obscure but a fan favorite, repeats "I believe in me" over and over, and I think the Kiss army, more than anything else, serves as the venue for both the "I" and the "me" (in the sense delineated above) to perform some amazingly complex symbolic labor. While I had shed my "Kiss identity" in the late 70s—though I had one—in my journeys through a series of symbolic others, the fans I examined had retained it, hanging on to the coherency it seemed to offer.

The second case study I will discuss, one similarly developed through ethnographic research, investigates a rather different audience formation, fans of recently cancelled Fox program *Futurama* who use the Internet as a means of building and maintaining a fan community. Rather than the attempt to create an almost utopian symbolic self from the primary and secondary discursive objects supplied by the culture as in the case of the Kiss army, the *Futurama* culture tended to involve a more ironic and technologically-enabled process of self-doubling. *Futurama* is an animated comic science-fiction program from *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening that offer a unrelentingly satirical view of, among other things, technology, morality, capitalism, romantic love, and the family. Unlike the vulgarian milieu of Kiss, it has a status as middle-brow "quality television" and a fan base than tends toward the collegiate and the technologically skilled. However, it also shares a strong overlap with the quintessentially geeky and undeniably cultic world of both science-fiction and animation fans; this status itself is the source of much ironic self-reflection among the *Futurama* community.

The central components in the *Futurama* web world are the network of fan websites, a collection of virtual discussion and response forums, and the interactive practices and technologies designed by and for fans (fan art, video games, computer tools—wallpapers, skins, sound effects, etc.). Participation in this culture can thus occur entirely within the domain of the Internet,[16] with no need for the kinds of interpersonal contact associated with more traditional fan cultures. One of the key characteristics of this culture is the intensive engagement with the program and, with this, the hermeneutic power it seems to hold for fans. There is the obsessive exegetical work evident in the numerous websites that offer extensive archiving of a variety of elements associated with *Futurama*[17] and in the prolific discussions of the program from a variety of critical perspectives within the collection of chat rooms, mailing lists, and other net-based discussion forums. There are also a wide variety of forms of fan art, from relatively conventional fan scripts and comic and other visual art, to interactive performance pieces and the aforementioned *Futurama*-based games. In this respect, it is not dissimilar from the Kiss culture described above; however, the virtual location of the culture produces a rather different mode of symbolic self-formation.

One of the consistent themes in academic work regarding virtuality is the ability for participants within this culture to explore alternative identities and to create virtual personalities,[18] and indeed this is a critical element in the *Futurama* fan culture. This aspect of virtual discourse is critical because it allows the *Futurama* fan to engage symbolic practices which had been limited to those willing to make the effort and take the social risk—of such quintessentially "geeky" fan pursuits—demanded by less removed forms of participation. In fact, the *Futurama* fan culture shows evidence of the construction of a virtual geek persona that is allowed to remain relatively discrete from the actual individual and can even be the source of

thematization and reflection.  Thus, rather than the fashioning of a coherent symbolic I/me

symbiosis (in the manner suggested by Tugendhat) and the construction of a consistent identity

evident in the Kiss army, the *Futurama* culture bears evidence of a recognition of the possibility

of maintaining what are in effect several relatively autonomous "me" positions without the need

for a reconciliation.  The "geek" persona and a simultaneous ironic stance toward the same, then,

is enabled by the homologously autonomous symbolic milieu of the Internet.  The differences

here are quite significant and their full explication demands a more nuanced analytical system.

The *Futurama* culture is particularly intriguing, as it reflects the cutting edge of

contemporary media culture and, particularly, the much discussed realm of "media

convergence," one that has been examined primarily in economic and technological terms rather

than as a socio-symbolic phenomenon.  Certainly, a consideration of the mass media in

environmental or ecological terms requires an awareness of the reshaping of the media landscape

that accompanies this accelerating process of convergence.  In this sense, then, the *Futurama* fan

community may offer some clues as to the future of the audience experience and thus I will

conclude with some thoughts regarding the potential for further research on the mass media from

the neo-Meadian perspective utilized in the preceding analyses.

I would first acknowledge that the case studies presented here are examples of a

particularly keen engagement with a form of mass media; they tend to include individuals who

exhibit particularly intense forms of self "saturation," to use the terminology of social

psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991).  However, it may be possible to view such fan formations

as delineating points on a wider continuum of media practices or, phrased another way, as

distillations of practices that are present in less dramatic form in the everyday experiences of

most individuals.  While the practices associated with the two audience formations described

above might not be generalizable in a traditional empirical sense, I do not believe that they are utterly singular in the ways that they illustrate the process in which symbolic selves are enabled through mediated experiences.

In fact, in the case of the *Futurama* culture, one of the notable attributes of this culture is the extension of what were largely subcultural practices—fan fiction and art, especially—into a virtual public space that thus allows much greater access. The boundaries which had been drawn between everyday audiencehood and fanaticism have become increasingly blurry, an effect compounded by a second expansion in the range of mediated personas available to individuals. "Audience" itself, a key term, obviously, in the world of media studies, has become destabilized, and many of the older assumptions about audience practices need to be challenged, and I hope that I have indicated at least one new possibility for the study of media audiences in the context of contemporary cultural and technological developments.

I will end, then, by returning to the challenge that I raised at the beginning of the essay—the challenge of constructing a theoretical model of the social subject that could match the complex, heterogeneous character of the environment in which she operated. Although it is still in its early development, I would argue that the neo-Meadian model may offer the greatest potential in meeting these challenges and I hope that the theoretical work and case studies provided above offer some illustration of this potential. For scholars (including myself) who would align themselves, in one fashion or another, with the media ecology tradition, the issue is especially critical, both because it works to fill out the subject-structure dynamic in light of the former—the latter is elucidated quite extensively by much of the current media ecology literature—and because it allows for the incorporation of insights provided by philosophy (both analytic and metaphysical), social psychology, and a number of other fields. Given the often

astonishing horizons of media culture, to put it colloquially, we need all the help we can get.  I

only hope that I have pointed to one fruitful source of such scholarly assistance.

## References

Baudrillard, J. (1998) *Paroxysm* (Trans. C. Turner). London: Verso.

Gergen, K. (1991).  *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. New York: Basic.

Grossberg, L. (1992). *We gotta get out of this place*. New York: Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1992).  "Individuation through socialization: On Mead's theory of subjectivity."  In
    *Postmetaphysical thinking: Philosophic essays* (W.M. Hohengarten, Trans.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke
    University Press.

Joas, H. (1985). *G.H. Mead: A contemporary re-examination of his thought* (R. Meyer, Trans.).
    Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Jordan, T. (1999).  *Cyberpower: An introduction to the politics of cyberspace*.  London: Routledge.

Kögler, H. (1997).  "Rethinking subjectivity through Mead and semiotics." *Studies in symbolic
    interaction* Fall 1997: 34-56.

Mead, G. H. (1934).  *Mind, self, and society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist* ( C. Morris, Ed.).
    Chicago: U of Chicago Press.

Mead, G.H. (1936).  *Movements of thought in the nineteenth century*.  Chicago: University of Chicago
    Press.

Mead, G.H. (1938).  *The philosophy of the act*.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
.
Mead, G.H. (1932).  *The philosophy of the present*.  Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Probyn, E. (1993).  *Sexing the self*. New York: Routledge.

Radway, J. (1996). 'The hegemony of 'specificity' and the impasse in audience research."  In *The
    audience and is landscape* (Hay, Grossberg, and Wartella, Eds.).  Boulder: Westview Press.

Tugendhat, E. (1986).  *Self-consciousness and self-determination.*  Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet*.  New York: Simon and Schuster.

---

[2] This epiphenomenal understanding of the subject is also evident in the highly influential work of Louis Althusser
and Pierre Bourdieu, who view the social subject, respectively, as a "bearer of structures" and as a neo-functionalist

location of "habitus"; neither offers much possibility for innovation or at least the possibility for explaining innovation.

[3] Mead's work has generally been much more influential in Germany than in North America, although its influence is evident in the symbolic interactionist sociological tradition. Robert Dunn's 1999 book *Identity Crisis*, which argues for a renewed relevance of the Meadian paradigm, is a refreshing and intellectually valuable exception to this tendency.

[4] I think this would hold for what is commonly called the "postmodern" as well.

[5] Turkle uses the term to describe the relationship that younger people, especially, have toward computers, viewing them as partly human, partly machinic.

[6] Arjun Appadurai has developed a unique analytical perspective based on the interplay of "scapes" and "flow" which offers some very interesting insights regarding the symbolic constitution of the contemporary social environment.

[7] There is a potential overlap here with certain aspects of contemporary Lacanian psychoanalysis (as in the work of Slavoj Zizek, for example) in the emphasis on a symbolic "other"; indeed, Mead and Lacan have a number of intriguing similarities.

[8] Tugendhat wants to link Mead's role theory to the Wittgensteinian principle of "phi" (Greek letter) statements, as in "I am Canadian" and argues that it would support a symbolic variation of Meadian self-development theory.

[9] There is a similarity here with the later work of Michel Foucault; as Gilles Deleuze argues in his fascinating exegesis of Foucault's late work, the subject appears as a kind of "fold" in the plane of discourse, as discourse turned upon itself.

[10] The work of Elspeth Probyn (1993) and Janice Radway (1996) are excellent examples of ethnographic media analyses which take on questions of self in exciting new ways; while not explicitly engaging the theoretical tradition described above, they certainly share many of the assumptions associated with a social-symbolic understanding of the self.

[11] The vogue for "grounded theory," for example, which is quite popular among ethnographers, while not explicitly hostile to meta-theoretical perspectives.

[12] Interestingly and luckily, I began my ethnographic work about 7 months before the Kiss reunion plans were unveiled and thus was able to obtain a "before and after" perspective on the shifts in the fan culture engendered by the band's return to popular acclaim.

[13] Indeed, the early stages of the research provided a major incentive for further development of the theoretical work detailed in the remainder of the essay.

[14] Mead's philosophical position, of course, has a good deal in common with that of theologian Martin Buber, so the theological dimension here may not be so surprising after all.

[15] This "Satanic" quality is evident in the significant body of folklore surrounding the band.

[16] This includes primary viewing itself as whole episodes are widely available as video files, despite the best efforts of Fox to stop their circulation.

[17] For example, there are sites that offer lists of every cultural reference on *Futurama* and others that reconstruct "blueprints" for the spaceship used by the main characters on the program from its combined appearances across several seasons of the show.

[18] See the work of Sherry Turkle (1995) and Tim Jordan (1999), for example, who offer extensive reflection on the impact of virtual technology on issues of social identity.