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Sensational Processes

To the extent that we are indeed encountering a ‘culture of sensation’ here, it is clear that the term does not have to be restricted to the popular sensationalism of the sensation novel and the newspapers; beyond this, it corresponds to a distinctive orientation to, and experience of, the world of modern experience and the refraction of this through modern culture generally. We can pursue this by tracing the further ramifications of the part played by repetition in the culture of sensation, along with the modes whereby sensation is manifested, through enactment and figuration, and the resulting controversies – over sensationalism itself – that have been central to this culture. All this will serve to strengthen a sense of sensation as involving *process*, whereby cycles of sensation, and the means whereby sensation is transmitted, permit us to locate the notion of a ‘circuit of sensation’ in more detail.

Repetition, transmission, manifestation

If we take repetition, this has been seen as a central feature of the culture of sensation – and, as such, frequently denounced. Thus a commentator from the 1860s referred to ‘the violent stimulant of serial publication’ with ‘its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident’.¹ Readers revealed an ‘appetite’ for such fiction, ‘devoured’ it, succumbed to ‘addiction’. Sensationalism was of a piece with consumerism. Any specific sensation, after all, rapidly ceases to be sensational, and the ‘high’, if there has been one, must be sought for anew. This reminds us of Campbell’s point that it is ‘changes to monitored sensations which yield pleasure rather than anything intrinsic to their natures’;² again showing a continuity between the physiology of sensation and its cultural dynamics. The plots of the novels were declared to be ‘merely vehicles to sustain the reader’s interest so that constant and rapid

consumption would be guaranteed': stimulating the body thus became an important aspect of marketing. Cvetkovich adds that the reader's body thereby 'becomes a machine hooked into the circuit of production and consumption'.³ Through this paradoxical repetition of 'novelty', sensation became ever more deeply 'embodied', apparent both as an enactment of the new kinds of experience and a manifestation of possible underlying stresses and strains, whether coded as social, psychological or physiological.

Nevertheless, we must be careful here. It would be wrong to map the idea of 'linear development', an important component of ideologies of modernity as progress, onto sensationalism, as if the latter involves a remorseless unilinear drive towards ever greater, ever more sensational sensationalism. If the restraints of civility do not appear to restrain sensationalism overmuch, neither do we encounter a steady build-up of increased drama or more intense horror, as measured by some absolute standard. Rather, there are *cycles*, as with fashion, and it is the 'interior' of the cycles that does indeed involve the drive to the ever more sensational. Since this is what we tend to notice, it can indeed seem as if the process has an absolute, linear quality. Then, when a certain point in the cycle is reached, a point of near-saturation, of excess becoming excessive, the attention of both producers and consumers is attracted, or distracted, elsewhere. If any one particular cycle is defined in terms of the sensationalism of a particular content, this can develop in a linear way, but there is no overall linear process of which this is a stage; what is involved is more a matter of intrinsically unpredictable outbursts or manifestations of the sensational, each of which develops in a relatively repetitive way. And if sensationalism necessarily produces a response, the nature of this response cannot be guaranteed, which contributes to the uncertainty over both the origin, and the ending, of any particular cycle of sensation.⁴

In moving from the theme of repetition towards considering the modes of transmission and manifestation of sensation we can begin with a consideration of the place of enactment or dramatization in these processes. It is useful to take a specific case, that of Washington Irving Bishop. By the time his career climaxed, in the 1880s, he had become 'the most extraordinary of the performers working at the interface of entertainment, science, and magic', as Simon During puts it. He was a mind reader, performing in public arenas, always with an eye to his media appeal; he did not claim extraordinary powers, rather 'the ability to receive thoughts or sensations via undiscovered psychological capacities',⁵ the ability that would in due course come to be christened 'telepathy'. One of his most popular routines was a crime reconstruction he

called 'Imaginary Murder'. He would be blindfolded while the audience enacted, in mime, a 'crime' they had planned beforehand, involving a murderer, a victim and a weapon; then, still blindfolded, he would grasp the hands of one or two members of the audience and try to identify the murderer and the victim, ostensibly drawing on the clues offered by involuntary muscular movements and the other involuntary aspects of behaviour whereby people 'give themselves away'. He himself was intensely involved in the process, doing all this at speed: pale, fraught, tense, gesticulating, he would not infrequently collapse, exhausted, at the end. In short, claims During, he was 'acting out an image of exceptional "nervous energy"', precisely in the terms that 'nervous energy' was described by one of the leading contemporary experts on it, the physician Beard, who indeed suggested that this mix of hypersensitivity and exhaustion – neurasthenia – was caused by the shocks, speed and stress of modernity.

Furthermore, by 'enacting nervousness so extravagantly',⁶ Bishop simultaneously enacted it as a media spectacle: his career was organized round the print media, rather than the stage, often putting on special performances in public arenas where they were more likely to be well reported, and always taking care to ensure the maximum presence of reporters and photographers. The 'live' quality of his acts – which of course was central to their 'sensational' appeal – was enhanced by the very real possibility of failure; even if, as seems likely, he used confederates, he could at times fail to 'read' the clues. Thus his mind-reading performances, laden with suspense, unfolded in real time, making them all the more dramatic and attractive to the media. And here again we encounter the sense in which the enactment is repetitive, with the sensational body being doubled as sensational media event, the enactment of sensation as both embodied and mediated, and the repeated performances that were never quite identical, hence repeatedly sensational through their separate enactments on different occasions, keeping audience and media hooked.

Miller's presentation of the sensation novel suggests some continuity with this, in that 'its particular staging of nervousness remains cognate with that of many of our own thrillers, printed or filmed', hence demonstrating the continued significance of the 'nervous state' in modern culture. The excitement of the sensation novel renders our bodies 'theatres of neurasthenia',⁷ whereby our sensational response becomes a physiological enactment. Anson Rabinbach adds that neurasthenia is a 'cacophony of complaints that replicate "real" illness', an 'unstable mimesis', and a kind of 'corporeal text'; thus we see 'a second order of modernity in neurasthenia beyond its modern etiology, a modernism of the symptoms and the narrative of the illness itself'.⁸ Here we encounter the way

the sensation novel elaborates 'a fantasmatics of sensation' in which our reading bodies are immediately implicated in a 'hysterical acting out' through physiological response.⁹ This pattern of 'deep meaning', both 'expressing' personality and projecting it as 'surface enactment', marks the modern body as quite deeply hysterical.

These problems and paradoxes of the modern body necessarily and notoriously involve gender. The gender-coding is less obvious in the now little-used 'neurasthenia' but has always been in play in 'hysteria'. Michelle Henning points out that, in the late nineteenth century, ideas about bodily sensation were articulated in terms of 'feminine vulnerability', hence assuming that 'an openness to and absorption in sensation is related to passive acceptance'. Conversely, masculinity involved a kind of closing-down of the senses; men should 'refuse' sensation, maintain strong barriers, since an excess of sensation, in shock, would lead to breakdown.¹⁰ Hence a 'culture of sensation' presented pressures and dilemmas for both sexes: for women, already attuned to sensitivity, sensationalism was a logical extension, though one that threatened either 'nervous exhaustion' or hysteria; for men, the passivity of exposure to sensation threatened a kind of emasculation, especially if the defences of 'male armour' were overcome, producing trauma and, in war, 'shell-shock'.¹¹ In this context, then, 'sensationalism' represents a contagious over-sensitivity to sensation that can potentially incapacitate women and men alike. In the context of reading, if the response is 'hysterical', hence the 'acting out' of a female sensation, then, as Miller points out, the male reader is effectively positioned as the 'female soul in a male body' that was one of the earliest formulations – from the 1860s – of what would in due course come to be identified as 'homosexuality'; and the male reader can become all the more 'nervous' in that 'his experience of sensation must include his panic at having the experience at all'.¹² We can also observe a certain process of circularity here, in that the relative deadening of the senses required for 'normal' masculinity could also result from an excess of sensation. The sensation novel – like other forms and contexts of sensation – can play on these tensions of projection and identification, thus heightening the sensational effect. And we should remember that a *positive* response to these situations could produce pleasure as much as trauma: Emilie Altenloh's celebrated early study of audience response to film (1914) showed women to be particularly ready to be involved in sensory immersion, receptive to the new stimuli of the challenging new medium, eager for experience as 'cinematic subjects'.¹³

Via the theatre, 'enactment' also returns us to questions of aesthetics. The modern theatre has generally been comfortable with the aesthetics of distance,

in which the actor 'represents' the role, at some distance from it. Even if the actor who is convincingly playing a role feels the 'appropriate' emotion this still leaves us with the problematic of dissimulation that is implicit in the aesthetics of distance in this context, familiar since Diderot's formulation of the paradox of acting in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Artaud's modernist theatre reveals a break with this. His aim is presence, not representation; his advocacy of 'nonacting' over acting implies a 'carnalisation' of acting, whereby shared, immediate experience is enacted, and thereby intensified. This production of the body, as ritual, is a theatre of sensation which readily becomes a theatrics of the sensational, a 'theatre of cruelty' in which the 'enactment' of the body displays it in its carnal, and often distressed state.¹⁵ Artaud's theatricality is thus 'anti-theatrical' in being anti-text, opposing gesture, colour and movement to the abstraction and distance of language, requiring language to return to the body, so that language becomes physical too, 'communicating as pure sound and sensation rather than through abstract correspondence'.¹⁶ If, as Michael Fried argues, 'What lies between the arts is theatre',¹⁷ advocating as he does a modernist programme that emphasizes the autonomy of the arts, then a 'modernist theatre' would seem a contradiction in terms. But Artaud takes up and explores this paradox of modernist theatre; his intensification of the theatrical experience, his theatre of sensation, is an articulation not of what lies 'between' the arts so much as what lies 'beneath', what is always implicitly there (as in the sensation novel), now made overt. To 'sensationalize' experience is thus to intensify it, but also testifies to the 'intensity' that is always potentially there in experience anyway – and to shape, form and 'enact' the sensation brings this out. In the theatre, the sensationalism of this also manifests itself in the privilege of the occasion, the actual performance, over the work (as written), thus implicitly (and often explicitly) making the theatre simultaneously more 'public' and more spectacular, more continuous with the sensationalism of mediated mass culture generally.

Along with the dramas of enactment, we encounter figuration as the other mode whereby sensation is shaped and projected. Sensationalism, claims Cvetkovich, 'makes events emotionally vivid by representing in tangible and specific terms social and historical structures that would otherwise remain abstract'. Through figuration, then, 'the sensational force of melodramatic narrative organizes affective life',¹⁸ with the body itself as the central focus. Given the examples of these abstractions that are made subject to sensational figuration – terms like 'nation', 'people', 'mass' – we can see that there is inevitably a politics of sensational representation. These sensational bodies are readily available for

ideological uses, and indeed this follows from the logic of sensational figuration itself. Thus Streeby points out that popular sensationalism developed as the idiom of working-class cultures, in which context it was also a 'racializing, gendering, and sexualizing discourse on the body', one that 'risks obscuring the constructedness of bodies and reifying "differences" of race, gender, and sexuality'.¹⁹ And the tendency to naturalize affect could be said to have the effect of presenting it as a matter of spontaneity, chance, the uncontrollable exigencies of embodiment, beyond rational control or social understanding, hence a potent resource for mystification. Critique thus seems implicit, almost demanded, by this culture of sensation; and doubtless it is Adorno who furnishes us with this in its most extreme and eloquent form, denouncing sensation as a cult of the new when there no longer really is anything new, and arguing that, from its original sense, 'sensation' has become 'the arouser of masses, the destructive intoxicant, shock as a consumer commodity'. In subverting judgement, it becomes 'an agent of cataclysmic degeneration'. All this culminated in Fascism, 'the absolute sensation';²⁰ and we are reminded that Goebbels was said to have boasted that at least the Nazis weren't boring ...

On the first aspect of all this, the critics are certainly right to point to the way sensationalism does indeed remind us of the power of the two great essentializing, naturalizing discourses of modern times, those of race and sex. In its focus on the body, sensationalism confronts us with the way bodies present themselves as sexed and coloured, and this is hardly an unimportant fact about them. The body figured, in text or image, hence no longer an abstraction, cannot avoid this specificity. We are thus reminded of the power of sensation in possessing not just a presentational but a rhetorical aspect, in that when embedded in narrative, the power of persuasion can be superimposed on the immediacy of figuration. And certainly it is right to say that sensation works through *immediacy*; it does not, of itself, encourage a detached, analytical or philosophical stance. Immersion *in* experience is what is encouraged; it entails reaction, response, a registering of the sensation that may also be a recoil *from* it, or a further embeddedness *in* it. The sensational does not encourage *reading*, if that entails textual interpretation, treating the world as text, as a set of signifiers that need decoding, signs or markers of the social. That *can* come, but is not intrinsically *there*, in the sensational as experienced. The 'language of sensation' is the language of the extraordinary, of fate and chance, a language that points to real enough aspects of the modern world even if it may itself have consequences that have troubled its critics, just as its critics may, conversely, find it difficult to escape it, may indeed even succumb to it, or use it. Although he presents

commodity fetishism as 'a process of sensationalising objects' that thereby mystifies and misunderstands the source of their power, Cvetkovich argues persuasively that Marx also deploys this language, draws on its own power.²¹

Really, much of the criticism only amounts to saying that sensational experience is indeed sensational *experience*, not analysis; and surely the latter *can* follow – it is not necessarily blocked off by the former. Emotional intensity is a powerful force, but precisely because it cannot carry its own reading with it, its *effect* can never be predetermined. The sensational body may indeed come sexed, gendered, coloured or whatever, but whether – or to what extent – these features come as culturally standardized or are matters of controversy within (or beyond) the culture is not prejudged merely by pointing to this as a phenomenal 'truth' of sensational experience itself; nor, therefore, can we know how any given individual will react in such situations. We can surely say, anyway, that the impact of sensationalism is not necessarily that of a mechanical, automatic imposition; sensation is *engagement*, involvement, the unpredictable drama of the reception that can also be a transformation. And it can as well stimulate ideas as foreclose them, it can explode meanings as well as reproduce established ones. In the context of the novel, its problematic relation to questions of interpretation has already been shown. Overall, it can be sense-making as well as sense-taking.

In short, to argue that sensational figuration necessarily dictates any specific ideological use to which it can be put is to misunderstand such figuration. Immediacy of impact inherently refers to specific bodies, specific affects, at particular times; in itself this does not entail any automatic codification of that experience. To suggest that it does is *itself* to fall for the undoubted potency of sensationalism, in an extreme form, rather than analysing it; and to allow possible ideological uses of sensationalism to shape our understanding of the dynamics of experience and representation that makes the 'sensational moment' possible is to risk remaining trapped within the sensational circuit itself. And finally, dare one suggest that lying behind all this is that combination of rationalist distrust of the body and intellectual distrust of popular culture that has made it so difficult to develop an adequate theoretical framework for the analysis of the culture of modernity, modernity *as* culture ...

Anyway, it is clear that by the late nineteenth century, the culture of sensation was indeed producing a 'discourse of sensation', both at the level of newspaper commentary and in emergent social theory; and we can see the beginnings of what Singer, writing in the context of film studies, calls the 'modernity thesis', the discussion of how 'the unprecedented sensationalism of popular amusement'

was related to 'the new sensory environment of urban modernity'.²² Singer suggests that three categories of stimuli are most likely to be found stressful: namely those that are unexpected; those that are uncontrollable, or difficult to control; and those that are relatively ill-defined, experienced as confusing or chaotic. He adds that it is likely that the experience of modern life multiplies all of these.²³ Certainly this was *perceived* to be the case, and the perception could in turn both increase the sense of stress and the readiness to characterize problems and responses in these terms, hence the simultaneous emergence of a 'discourse of stress' that has accompanied modernity throughout.²⁴ These 'stress indicators' are also, of course, features of sensation and sensationalism, suggesting the possibility that 'sensationalism' could both be part of the problem, indeed could carry a particularly virulent form of it, *and* could be part of the response. This overlaps with another tension running through these debates, between the portrayal of everyday life as deadening, impoverished, on the one hand, or as over-stimulated, full of incident, on the other, since *both* could be seen as productive of stress, or as responses to it. 'Stress', after all – like 'sensation' – is a term that is poised uneasily between subjective and objective, feeling and external stimulus.

If we ask about the link between this external sensory environment and the amusements or entertainments that are in some sense a response to this, we can locate three main emphases or hypotheses. One, the most straightforward, presents an essential continuity. On this model, suggests Singer, 'the modern individual somehow internalized the tempos, shocks, and upheavals of the outside environment, and this generated a taste for hyperkinetic amusements';²⁵ hence, the intensification of modern entertainment simply reflects – or further intensifies – the sensory intensification of modern life. Miriam Hansen writes of the appeal of the variety format of entertainment, providing 'a short-term but incessant sensorial stimulation', mobilizing the viewer's attention through a 'discontinuous series of attractions, shocks and surprises', commenting that this was seen as a 'specifically modern form of subjectivity'.²⁶ A *Scientific American* editorial from 1905 claimed: 'The guiding principle of the inventors of these acts is to give our nerves a shock more intense than any hitherto experienced.'²⁷ A new era of entertainment was hence increasingly defined by 'immediate, gripping sensation' with 'concentrations of visual and kinaesthetic sensation' defining the modern era of 'manufactured stimulus'.²⁸

The second hypothesis postulates a more complex relationship here. Singer summarizes this in terms of a response to a kind of sensory burnout: 'excessive sensory stimulus eventually exhausted and incapacitated the sensory apparatus'.²⁹

For Simmel, this deadened sensation led to a blasé or jaded attitude: 'An incapacity thus emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy ... The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination.'³⁰ Hence sensationalism becomes a cure for exhausted sensation, as it were. Freud's theory of the consciousness shield, and the Elias idea of body armour, as the means by which the subject is protected from excessive stimulus, become relevant here; for both authors, failure of the 'shield' results in sensations of flight and trauma.³¹ This would imply that the sensorium *needs* to be blunted, in which case it is difficult to see why entertainments should be sought that have precisely the opposite result, unless we adopt the theory (of Benjamin, among others) that there can be an insulating, prophylactic effect in being exposed to stimuli in a more measured, controlled way, through entertainment.

This can slide into a third approach, the 'compensation' model. Here, it is not so much a matter of jaded attitudes, as of a jaded world. For Siegfried Kracauer, writing in the 1920s and 1930s, sensationalism was a response to our alienated, impoverished experience of the world, a compensation response. Singer adds that this hypothesis presumably loops back into the blasé attitude/sensory exhaustion hypothesis: sensational amusement is just one more ingredient contributing to the 'inflationary curve of strong sensation'.³² And the result is that 'The compensatory thrills of popular amusements reproduced the very register of hyperstimulus that vitiated modern experience to begin with'.³³ The upshot is, as Leo Charney puts it, that we see 'the increased appetite for mobile kinetic sensation' packaged as 'a respite from those sensations'.³⁴ Indeed, a 'craving for sensation' can be seen variously as a reflection of the frenetic pace of modern life, a kind of addiction to it; as a symptom of burnout; or as a means of compensation, of escape – nor is it clear how we could begin to distinguish between these, symptomatically or empirically. In short, we have a series of circulating hypotheses – all overlapping, empirically confusing, and in varying degrees plausible – that rather mirror the circuits of sensation themselves. And it is to this idea of a 'circuit of sensation' that we now turn.

The circuit of sensation

We have seen that the sensational flashes across all three registers – the characters in the text (or event), the reader of the text (spectator of the event), and the mass appeal of the text (the event as spectacle) – as if aspiring to an immediacy that will fuse them all into one experience, affect as effect. Like an electric current

that requires two poles to leap between – an analogy that would have made immediate sense to nineteenth-century readers – ‘sensation’ plays between the great constitutive binary distinctions of modern Western culture, both threatening their separation while keeping them precariously apart. In effect, we have a circuit, a linking process, involving sensation as mediator between body and media, and body, media, and other bodies, in turn implicating the binaries of individual/social, concrete/abstract, public/private, distance/presence and mind/matter. Through figuration and enactment, sensation transmits and displaces the affective power of the body in and through mediated form, as moments in this circuit.

We can begin by observing that when used as terms to capture and shape experiences of embodiment and feeling, on the one hand, and the shocks and drama of media-inflected events, on the other, ‘sensation’ and ‘sensationalism’ convey a certain ethos, a certain way of living in, and relating to, the world of modernity. Thus Cvetkovich points to how ‘sensational moments’ get represented as ‘the product of chance occurrences, uncanny repetitions, and fated events’; these ‘sensational events’ – sensational both in their extraordinary nature and their bodily responses – are described in ‘the rhetoric of fate and chance’. This melodrama, these hints of control of the body by ‘other forces’, this passivity in the face of the impact of the contingency of experience, produces a world in which involuntary bodily sensation ‘becomes a symptom of the self’s subjection to the shock of chance or surprise events, and underwrites the process by which a sensational or melodramatic narrative can be constructed’.³⁵

Drawing on both aspects of ‘sensation’, as feeling and as event, Charney draws our attention to a further point, namely that momentary sensations become startling as contrasts to the ‘undifferentiated drift of everyday experience’.³⁶ This explicit contrast between the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘sensational’ is worth further consideration, along with a sense of the plurality of ‘sensation’: since any sensation is ‘of the moment’, it will give way to others, always against the background of this taken for granted ‘ordinariness’, the fact of ‘background’ itself. There is something discrete, disjunctive, about sensation, a sense in which it requires multiplicity, discontinuity; this is in the very nature of its impact. Nadia Serematakis spells this out further: ‘The sensory structure of everyday life is experienced as naturalized, almost cosmic time over against which eruptive, “sensational events” such as elections, performances, accidents, disasters, are profiled’; adding that ‘the narrativity of the sensational event is itself made possible by a relation of foreground and background.’ Expanding this, she argues: ‘The polarity between the sensational and the mundane is also

the dichotomy between the sensational and the sensory in which the latter is left unmarked, unvoiced and unattended to, as a banal element of the everyday.³⁷ What is pointed to here is really a *process*, that whereby the 'undifferentiated', which is precisely that which 'makes no difference', emerges as something distinct, something that *does* make a difference, in that it emerges as both product and condition of the sensational itself. Both come into being *together*. Hence the emergence of sensation out of the sensory, and of the 'sensational' out of either sensation or the sensory, is a process of foregrounding, of figuration as concentration, the very process by which sensation is constituted as such.

The terms fate and chance, and these notions of sensation and the sensational, can now be shown to be in some ways connected. Let us begin with fate and chance. While often conjoined, in these discussions, they are, on the face of it, opposites: 'fate' implies a determinism that is absent from 'chance'. Yet, at both a popular and a scientific level, the connection is there, if we map on a surface/depth distinction. What 'appears' as chance may actually reveal the deeper workings of fate ... (Some conjunction of this kind is also implicit in our notion of the uncanny.) The world of experience, then, is the world of the unpredictable, of chance, central features both of sensation and of the sensational. But in the background is this 'deeper logic', whether coded as fate or scientific causation; and here, these notions can be seen to sit readily enough within the popular dissemination of the nineteenth-century scientific revolutions that gave us the laws of thermodynamics and the accompanying, underlying ontology of energy. Thus, comparing this emergent ontology of the later part of this period with that of the Enlightenment materialism of a century before, Rabinbach claims that 'the result is a material world far more random, arbitrary, and ephemeral. Only energy is constant and protean.'³⁸ 'Energy' constitutes the underlying backdrop; particular transformations, pulses, of energy will be experienced as 'sensation'. An important implication of all this for the notion of 'sensation' is spelt out by Gustav Fechner, one of the most influential psychologists of the time. In claiming the discovery of a 'stimulus threshold' whereby a certain *intensity* of energy, as stimulus, is needed before a sensation can be experienced, he both confirms the discontinuity of 'sensation' against its background and points to a kind of defence against it: 'The fact that each stimulus must first reach a certain limit before it arouses a sensation assures to mankind a state undisturbed to a certain degree by external stimulation.'³⁹ At the same time it ensures the constant potential, in an unstable era of rapid change and media penetration, for precisely such sensational stimulation ...

We can now spell out the 'process ontology' of this 'circuit of sensation' in more detail. It is force, energy, *Kraft*, that constitutes the raw material of the

universe; and a central feature of energy is that it is protean, ever-changing in form, these changes in form both masking and revealing the underlying process of circulation. These changes, in turn, involve jumps, discontinuities, which in the worlds of both culture and human physiology can be mapped as 'sensations'. Entities, and boundaries between them, become problematical, relative: this is an ontology of relations and processes rather than objects, so 'boundaries' necessarily become contingent, unclear. Exemplifying this, Pykett points out that the debate over the sensation novel was a debate over how and where to draw boundaries, given that the novel itself was about 'the unfixing and transgression of boundaries'.⁴⁰ With William Carpenter, an influential psychologist of the time, we find what is, in effect, a formulation of a version of the circuit of sensation: 'so does a Sensation, an Instinctive Tendency, an Emotion, an Idea, or a Volition, which attains an intensity adequate to "close" the circuit, liberate the Nerve-force with which a certain part of the Brain ... is always charged'.⁴¹ These circuits run through, and across, orthodox distinctions between literature, mass media, psychology and science, and the subjects of these discourses: nature, society, the economy, the body, the person. All are reconstituted in this language of currents, flows and blockages. As Rabinbach puts it: 'Interpreted through the dynamic language of *Kraft*, the body appeared as a field of forces, energies, and labour power'.⁴² Something of this is captured by Ernst Mach, the 'sensationalist' philosopher of science and critic of conventional notions of 'self' and 'ego' as separate entities: 'When I speak of my own sensations, these sensations do not exist spatially in my head, but rather my "head" shares with them the same spatial field'.⁴³ For Mach, the ego is chimerical, and the individual is really constituted by 'currents of sensation'.⁴⁴

Notions of body and mind, subject and object, become destabilized, seen in relational terms; Christoph Asendorf suggests that the subject cannot close itself off, instead becoming 'a surface on which the movements of others are written'. The body thereby becomes 'noncorporeal, immaterial, arbitrarily subject to being charged with tensions'.⁴⁵ He thereby reinforces Rabinbach's contention that this ontology is a kind of 'transcendental materialism' (or, perhaps, 'materialist idealism').⁴⁶ This would be a 'materialism' of flows, fields, forces – and, one might add, images, which in their simultaneous vividness and 'immateriality', their instability as between subject and object, and their ability to circulate, cause endless difficulties across a range of discourses and experiences from spiritualism to newspaper sensationalism.⁴⁷ There is a widespread concern with 'influences' here, with the 'permeability and suggestibility' of mind and body, with 'materialized and dematerialized contact', and psychoanalysis itself

could be portrayed as a language of transmission and translation in which the boundaries between psychic and somatic are necessarily insecure.⁴⁸ It is hardly surprising, then, that these processes could encompass sexuality, most widely interpreted in terms that emphasized the physical aspects. For the early sexologist, Krafft-Ebing, interruptions to the 'network of electrical circuits distributing finite amounts of energy', notably masturbation, would produce aberrant sexual behaviour, such as homosexuality.⁴⁹

On further examination, this ontology of sensational circuits is by no means free of problems, and has in turn posed problems for its interpreters. We can use Jonathan Crary's influential reinterpretation of the changing nature of vision and attention in modernity to delve further into this. He points to 'dynamogeny', a term in vogue in the 1880s, meaning 'excitation', whereby 'sensation' was now seen in terms of force, movement, motor behaviour, often bypassing consciousness; and on the face of it, his claims that the transformation of the nineteenth-century awareness of sensation led to 'the disintegration of an indisputable distinction between interior and exterior' which in turn became 'a condition for the emergence of spectacular modernizing culture and for a dramatic expansion of the possibilities of aesthetic experience'⁵⁰ seems entirely consistent with what has been presented so far. He argues that modernity, and in particular the modernization of vision, collapses the old space of representation: sensations and stimuli now have no clear reference to a spatial location, so the distinction between internal and external becomes blurred.⁵¹ Crucial here is that the revolution in mid-century psychology and physics appeared to have made sensation measurable, thus making human experience quantifiable. Fechner, who set about rationalizing sensation through the measurement of external stimulus thereby furthered an 'obliteration of the qualitative in sensation', a process crucial to modernization. This rendered Goethe's distinction between internal sensation (inner light, inner vision) and the external world obsolete,⁵² along with the 'sensationalist' psychology of the eighteenth century, which characteristically implied a pronounced inner/outer distinction. By the late nineteenth century, 'sensation' was being experimentally produced and measured in laboratories, so 'an older model of sensation as something *belonging* to a subject became irrelevant.'⁵³

There is much to be said for this, but it is important to notice that the argument is located firmly in terms of developments in science, which in turn is seen in its role as central to the rationalizing imperatives of the project of modernity; it does not really consider the wider cultural context. Even in terms of science, it is interesting to compare Crary's account with the significantly

different emphasis offered by Emile Meyerson, one of the most influential philosophers of science of the period under discussion. Writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, Meyerson argues that scientific mechanism necessarily loses, and cannot reconstitute, our sense of the 'quality' of sensations. We cannot know the *manner* whereby movement is transformed into the experience of sensation, although the two ends of the process, cause and effect, can be known, even measured.⁵⁴ You can look inside a nerve for as long as you like, but you will never find a sensation. Hence, what we have here is 'a relation which we do not succeed in rendering logical'; it can be described as 'irrational', indicating a 'limit' we can never pass beyond, never understand.⁵⁵ Significantly, this extended discussion of sensation occurs in a chapter entitled 'The Irrational' (Chapter IX). How intriguing, then, that at the heart of the science of sensation itself we find a correlate to the 'irrationalism' that is often said to accompany sensation in its everyday, media-related use ...

And it is not just Meyerson. Crary himself implicitly acknowledges that luminaries like William James, from within psychology, and Bergson and Whitehead, from philosophy of science, argued that 'sensation' cannot ultimately be separated from a relationship with memory, will, desire and other aspects of experience, including 'inner' experience.⁵⁶ And Rabinbach, also writing of the impact of science, but within the broader cultural context of the experience of modernity, argues that defence against excess sensation 'gives birth to a radically *interiorized* subject, whose personality is shielded from all stimuli by the tomblike heaviness of late nineteenth-century bourgeois décor'.⁵⁷ Not only does the 'interior subject' not disappear, then; it is reinforced.

To some extent, it is clear that these conflicting interpretations can be explained by differences of intellectual context and focus; but there is more to it than that. The problems arise from features of the 'circuit of sensation' itself. Take Crary's claim that sensation had ceased to designate an element of the process whereby representation occurs: 'Rather, it is part of a sequence of events in which the end point is not an inner state, such as knowledge or cognition or perception; instead, sensation is that which culminates in movement', whether voluntary or involuntary.⁵⁸ But we have already seen, from Meyerson, that 'movement', as that which precipitates or results from sensation, does not have any simple relationship with it. Rather, there is a *discontinuity* here, a discontinuity that makes both sensation *and* representation possible. There is an intractable *gap* here, central to the very experience of sensation: precisely the gap, the distinction, between 'inside' and 'outside' that, as we have seen above, both permits the flow of sensation and is challenged by it. 'Sensation' is the

impossible point of transition, the point of *intensity*, where 'inner' and 'outer' are constituted, and where background becomes foreground, the body becomes aware of itself and its continuity with what is outside, beyond. And this, then, is also the point or 'place' of representation, where 'inner' becomes constructed as the 'inner theatre' of representation, where ideas, images and feelings disport themselves, and 'sensations' become felt and figured. The emphasis on change, on movement, indeed reflects a profound shift from eighteenth-century materialism, but we do not, cannot, move totally away from the universe of David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749, still being reprinted in 1810), in which sensations feature as 'internal feelings of the mind' resulting from impressions of external objects on the body, and ideas are 'internal representations' of sensations.⁵⁹

Along with this, we are of course reminded of the 'imaginary' nature of this inner theatre, constructed as it is of images in a spectral space that cannot, indeed – and here, in a sense, we rejoin Crary – have any clear or 'real' spatial location, being rather a result of this very construction of 'inner' and 'outer' whereby self and mind are posited in relation to body through the very discontinuities of the circuit of sensation. And just as sensation faces both ways, so do images, problematically related both to world and to mind. The 'sensational images' discussed by Henning in relation to *fin-de-siècle* newspapers thus represent this very conjunction of sensation and representation, that sense in which they both require and subvert the inner/outer distinction that serves to define them in their relation of mutual exclusion and dependence.

We can now return to the distinctive implications of all this for our sense of body and self. Henning points to an emergent understanding of sensation in terms of nerves and electrical currents,⁶⁰ so that 'the person' is a locus of currents of energy, translated into the language of nerves; indeed, the two are often joined, as 'nervous energy'. Writing of how readily news of approaching bad weather, or even distant earthquakes, produces rapid effects among 'the nervous', Proust points graphically to how this becomes embedded in a community: 'This is a measure of the links that bind the nervous, from the farthest points of the globe, in a solidarity they often would prefer to be less intimate.'⁶¹ There is a hint, here, of a certain exclusiveness about this community; 'nerves' seem to play something of the role of 'sensibility' a century before, as a marker of quality. It is the refined who are most likely to manifest 'nerves'. The leading historian of nerves in science and culture, George Rousseau, indeed argues for a strong continuity from the eighteenth century, over which period 'the nervous system became the battlefield on which civilization and its discontents would be played

out'.⁶² Nor should the link with status obscure – and it may indeed be compatible with – the more general emphasis on how nerves accompany the stresses and strains of modernity, the 'modernity thesis'. Writing in 1891, Bahr refers to these 'new people', who 'live now only through the experience of nerves; they only react on the basis of nerves'.⁶³ As the raw material of the circuit of sensation, these nerves both register sensation and transmit it. The protective 'body armour' referred to previously thus turns out to be porous, often alarmingly so. Asendorf can thus assert: 'The invisible electrical currents are the metaphor of the life of the nerves: the body becomes a force field, a contingent intersection of effects determined elsewhere.'⁶⁴

We can here rejoin neurasthenia, from a different angle. With energy, after all – with the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics – came entropy, the dissipation of energy, taken to entail the inevitability of decline, of exhaustion. In the language of the body, this meant 'the endemic disorder of fatigue',⁶⁵ the body's resistance to unlimited progress and productivity; and in the transformable language of body and mind, the psychosomatic, it meant neurasthenia⁶⁶ and hysteria. Here, 'the aesthetic sensitivity to nerve stimuli is transformed into a symptom of illness'.⁶⁷ The neurasthenic needs protection against the sensations and shocks of modernity. Above all, it reflected a weakness of *will* ('aboulia'), which in turn testified to an inadequately strong ego, an inability to bind and direct energy towards clear goals. Hence the ego had to coordinate conflicting impulses or sensations, whether from physiology or society, and Rabinbach suggests that 'fatigue was perceived as *both* a physical and moral disorder – a sign of weakness and the absence of will'.⁶⁸ Neurasthenia, then, reveals a blockage in the circuit of sensation, yet is also a manifestation of it, and indeed its cure requires a different kind of blockage, a form of rationing, carried out by a precarious ego that must somehow dominate the flow, impose its own (masculine) order, rescue the self from its passivity in the face of the engulfment of sensation. That this tension can actually be productive is clear from the case of Proust. His novel has, after all, been described as the story of a 'nervous Narrator',⁶⁹ who has to overcome neurasthenia by writing his way through it, without ever really escaping it. Michael Finn presents Proust as desperate to escape the trap of everyday talk – the apparent authenticity that is really just endless copying from others – through recourse to a more basic, quasi-corporeal 'mimetic language of the body' which must then be reproduced in metaphor by the language of art. Yet what results is a 'hysteria of imitation', a constant self-quotation, whereby the repetitive copying of everyday language is replaced by an equally repetitive copying of sensation, fundamental to his style.⁷⁰

Sensational technologies

We can now return to the 'shocks of modernity' to put more emphasis on technological dimensions that open up new channels for the circuit of sensation. Walter Benjamin, in the 1930s, presents film as a medium of shocks, emerging to meet 'a new and urgent need for stimuli'.⁷¹ 'The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock,' states Benjamin, claiming that it is now film that can give us the sensation of 'plunging' into the crowd as into a 'reservoir of electric energy'.⁷² This emphasis is not, of course, unique to Benjamin; a link between film, sensation and the shock experience runs through film theory of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in Soviet montage theory and its major figure – both as filmmaker and theorist – Sergei Eisenstein, in turn a major influence on the film theory of Deleuze.⁷³ Discussing Eisenstein, Deleuze in effect identifies a circuit of sensation, 'A Circuit which includes simultaneously the author, the film and the viewer,' adding: 'A complete circuit thus includes the sensory shock which raises us from the images to conscious thought, then the thinking in figures which takes us back to the images and gives us an affective thought again.' It is, he adds, as if cinema itself is saying 'you can't escape the shock which arouses the thinker in you',⁷⁴ and, as with Benjamin, this engagement with cinema, this reflective capacity stimulated by shock, can be critical, just as it is also influenced by the dynamics of figuration that escape conscious awareness. All this, however, develops out of a context of technological innovations that go far back into the previous century, and which are worth exploring.

'The sensation of the General Strike,' Beatrice Webb noted in her diary in 1926, 'centres around the headphones of the wireless set,' so that people 'gathered in rapt attention' to listen.⁷⁵ What is intriguing is a slight awkwardness about the use of 'sensation' here, as though the word is itself seeking to highlight its ambiguity and plurality, its ability to refer to various dimensions simultaneously: to the sensation, the feeling of experiencing events, events that seem sensational in themselves and that are further sensationalized by their mediated status, and the accompanying, rather unsettling, diffusion of the sense of the presence of others. Certainly the relation between the great nineteenth-century innovations in communications technology and the forms taken by these dimensions of the circuit of sensation may well suggest another perspective on the latter, not indeed unconnected with this incorporation of 'others' in the circuits themselves.

Spreading through the Western world from around mid-century, the telegraph seemed to carry radical implications both for the familiar and

scientific problem of action at a distance and for the relation between mind and body. Bridging vast distances in a way that seemed to separate out and parcel up the components of consciousness, minus their normal embodied status, the telegraph simultaneously seemed to involve a radical materialization of mind. If, on the one hand, 'the electronic circuitry of the telegraph made possible the instantaneous exchange of messages in the complete absence of physical bodies,' as Jeffrey Sconce claims, it is nonetheless true, as he observes elsewhere, that late-nineteenth-century medical science postulated 'a direct and most literal homology between the telegraphic network and the central nervous system.'⁷⁶ A clue to the tension here can be grasped in this description, by a commentator in 1852, of 'nervous energy' as 'an intermediate agent by which mind acts on matter, and which is itself neither mind nor matter.'⁷⁷ This suggests that this mysterious 'stuff' of communication, which can exist as 'mind' at both ends of the communication process, the encoding and the decoding of the message, exists in between in some almost, but not quite, material state: strange, different, but not radically discontinuous. By late century, the innovations of electromagnetism and thermodynamics had suggested that 'matter may be conceived as a configuration of energy alignments,' as Stephen Kern puts it;⁷⁸ and the auditory taps of the telegraph, the dots and dashes of the Morse code, are manifestations, transformations of energy that can bridge distances because they are, ultimately, phenomena that partake of the very circuits of energy that were by then seen as the basic sources and mechanics of the universe and its processes. These taps, dots and dashes could also be seen both to signify, and to embody, those discontinuities in the flow, that ability to leap across gaps, that was central to the understanding of electromagnetism as the basis of the 'nervous energy' of the universe – a universe that could conceivably include the souls of the dead, continuing to exist as electric impulses ...

Here it seems appropriate to introduce the ether, a concept that reached the height of its influence in the nineteenth century, only being finally laid to rest in science itself by Einstein's special theory of relativity in 1905, although it would long linger on in popular consciousness. Its appeal is not hard to see: the ether was a medium that allowed light, electricity and magnetism to work at a distance. For the greatest theoretical physicist of the century, James Clerk Maxwell, the ether was a 'wonderful medium,' sensitive to any 'vibrations' that occur in it.⁷⁹ It appealed to the apparently commonsensical view that 'something' could not pass through 'nothing': there had to be another 'something,' a medium. Hence Henry Adams, a commentator on the physics of the time, writing in 1909, called the ether an 'undifferentiated substance supporting matter and mind alike.'⁸⁰

Popularly, it could seem interchangeable with 'air', hence the idea of a medium as not just the intermediate form, format or channel for transmission, but the whole environment, the 'pervading or enveloping substance'⁸¹ within which an organism – and even perhaps a culture – lived (and died). Another favourite figure for this was the ocean, so that a message set loose on 'the open sea of the electromagnetic spectrum' became 'a small boat tossed about on the waves of this etheric ocean', in Sconce's words.⁸² Human communication itself comes to involve those vibrations in the ether whereby initial sensations can be transmitted – not always with predictable results, as will be readily apparent.

All this opens a window on to what can seem the more bizarre aspects of the late-nineteenth-century cultural imaginary – in particular, the relative ease with which resolutely materialist science could coexist with spiritualist séances and related phenomena, such as telepathy, a term coined by Myers in 1882 to open up the possibility of direct mind-to-mind communication for scientific investigation. While it has been usual to emphasize the 'spirit' in spiritualism, to sharpen the contrast with science, this has always been to some extent misleading, and more recent scholarship has pointed to the continuities, emphasizing the tactile and the auditory as much as the visual, which has the effect of reinserting spiritualism into the world of everyday material practices. 'Talking with the dead through raps and knocks, after all, was only slightly more miraculous than talking with the living yet absent through dots and dashes ...', Sconce suggests,⁸³ and indeed some spirits did seem to embrace Morse code as their means of communication readily enough. Nor were other technological innovations immune to these possibilities. The phonograph, for example, with its ability to separate voice from body and give an apparently independent existence to the former, contributed to this sense that 'messages' could be ubiquitous, always potentially present, whether detected or undetected.⁸⁴ Laurence Rickels points to the intriguing phenomenon of recorded voices of dead children; in an era of high childhood mortality, the custom of recording the voice of the child, a recording that would all too often turn out, before long, to be a voice from beyond the grave, contributed to the cult and the culture of mortuary ritual and the craving to communicate with the dead.⁸⁵

The major presence of women in Victorian spiritualism, whether as mediums or as the primary audience, has often been noted.⁸⁶ It has also been convincingly argued that if it was women who constituted the primary sensational subjects of sensationalist fiction, so too the greater sensitivity and receptivity of the female body, its status as relatively 'other' to masculine rationalism and its orientation to control, made it a more likely receptacle for messages from the

‘other side.’ Building on this more broadly, Steven Connor outlines the ‘mimicry of materialist language and modes of thought’ present in the séance, emphasizing the ‘sensationalism’ that produces the ‘sensory intensification’ so central to the experience.⁸⁷ He quotes the medium Elizabeth d’Esperance on how the passivity of the situation, the loss of physical power by the participants, enabled normally inaudible sounds to become audible, and how ‘a movement of any of the sitters sent a vibration through every nerve; a sudden exclamation caused a sensation of terror’; thoughts ‘made themselves felt almost as though they were material objects.’⁸⁸ Well into the twentieth century the séance continued to draw on media technologies to associate the voice with a range of acoustic and kinetic sensations.

‘There’s something coming through from somewhere; but it isn’t Poole’: Sensations of communication

In order to emphasize the aural dimension, and moving to a later technology, let us take Rudyard Kipling’s little story, ‘Wireless’, as a basis for further exploration.⁸⁹ It was first published in 1902, at the very beginning of the radio age, when the ‘wireless’ was still experimental, mainly used for communication between ships at sea, and between sea and land.

The key moment in the story comes as a conjunction of two events. Mr Cashell, a wireless experimenter, has set up advanced equipment in the back room of a chemist’s shop, in order to send and receive messages to Poole, along the south coast. At the same time, the unfortunate Mr Shaynor, ostensibly on duty in the front part of the shop, and who has taken a drugged drink for relief from the symptoms of the tuberculosis that is clearly fated to kill him, has gone into a disturbed trance, and is beginning to write down lines from a Keats poem. Mr Cashell suddenly asks for quiet, announcing: ‘There’s something coming through from somewhere; but it isn’t Poole.’ The narrator, seated by Mr Shaynor, replies: ‘There is something coming through here, too.’⁹⁰ In the first case, it turns out to be a couple of warships in the Channel, attempting forlornly to communicate with each other, but with defective receivers, so it is actually only Cashell who can understand what is going on. In the second case, it turns out to be John Keats who is communicating with, or through, Shaynor, Keats as he struggles to write a poem; this time, it is only the other third party, the narrator, who happens to be familiar with the Keats poem, who can make (disturbing) sense of it. And on to these two triangles, we can superimpose a third, with the reader

as the third party, trying to make sense of these two events and the relation between them, since clearly links are being implied, whether metaphorical or literal or 'somewhere' that isn't clearly either, helping to transmit a sense of the uncanny. Indeed, Cashell's comment, towards the end, reinforces this, when he refers to the fragmented messages from the ships: 'Have you ever seen a spiritualistic séance? It reminds me of that sometimes – odds and ends of messages coming out of nowhere – a word here and there – no good at all.'⁹¹

Superimposed, these all give us a picture of a universe of messages passing ethereally, from whom and to whom we do not know, yet always *there*. And then, the uncanny sense is intensified, as we ourselves come to fill in some of the gaps, and pick up some of the clues, that lead up to the possession scenario, a process of reading and reflection in which increased knowledge actually *enhances* the uncanny effect. We thus pick up – but only later, and perhaps gradually – the sense in which Shaynor might in some sense *be* Keats, the hint of possession as repetition. Gillian Beer puts it well, suggesting that as readers we 'take for granted moving freely back and forth through time, yet are disconcerted when it occurs as event within the fiction. Evocations and prolepses are melded into the early part of the narrative, but so dispersed that they are at first inaudible ...' Hence, 'We see it all, too late. We may pick up the mental vibrations early but they delay functioning as intertextuality. Keats is absent.'⁹² At some point, perhaps suddenly, we *do* work it out: Shaynor, trained as a chemist, taking drugs, suffering from consumption, is in love with Fanny Brand, and takes a walk around St Agnes Church; Keats, trained as a chemist, taking drugs, suffering from consumption, is in love with Fanny Brawne, and is writing the poem 'The Eve of St Agnes'. And we have learnt that Shaynor has never even heard of the poem ...

The effect is to *intensify* the paradox of the 'rational' explanation offered by the narrator as an amateur but 'scientific' essay in emergency sense-making, for this becomes all the more *implausible* as the details that might seem to make it plausible are filled in. The explanation involves 'induction', a concept which maps into the story itself, with its electrical connotations. 'Induction' is the process by which electromagnetic properties are transferred, without physical contact, from one circuit or body to another; but it is also the principle of 'like causes, like effects' in scientific explanation, the idea that the accumulation of identical circumstances would produce identical outcomes. In this case, applied to the Keats/Shaynor scenario, the piling up of 'coincidences', and the impossibility of the resulting 'explanation', has the effect of throwing us back onto the impossibility of possession by a long-dead poet – and our oscillation here constitutes the

heart of the uncanny. In effect, this testifies to our own *involvement* in the story, our role in the third triangle, which in turn means that we are likely to collapse at times into the equivalent in each of the first two, particularly the first. Just as the narrator finds his subjectivity fractured, so do we. The impact on him of what appeared to be happening to Shaynor was dramatic: in a 'rainbow-tinted whirl ... my own soul most dispassionately considered my own soul as that fought with an over-mastering fear', and as his attempt at rational explanation kicked in, he found himself 'whispering encouragement, evidently to my other self', even while 'the other half of my soul refused to be comforted', cowering in some corner.⁹³

In effect, the third party here plays the part of what is called the 'coherer'. This is the electrical component used to detect radio waves, which cause the particles inside the mechanism to 'cohere', thereby changing the current through the circuit. The 'magic', the 'manifestations', are due to the coherer, explains Cashell: this is what reveals 'the Powers – whatever the Powers may be', working through space and distance.⁹⁴ The coherer makes the radio circuit work, makes some sort of communication possible. Whether the coherer necessarily brings 'coherence' is, as we have seen, another matter ...⁹⁵

Moving on to the 1920s, with the cultural impact of modernism, we do indeed encounter 'the emergence of a subjectivity mediated through the mass-produced sounds and disembodied voices of gramophone, telephone, radio and talkies'.⁹⁶ In a short story by Virginia Woolf, 'Kew Gardens' (1919), we encounter voices before we can hear what is being said, or who is uttering the words, and sounds which pass out of earshot before conversations are over. Discussing this story – and other works of hers, notably *The Waves* – Melba Cuddy-Keane finds that time as progression, as in an unfolding conversation, is subordinated to 'relations among disparate points in space', and if there is any sense of a whole it certainly is 'not unified round a center'. We seem again to be in the presence of the disconnected simultaneities of the airwaves. In this decentred, dispersed world of experience, we find 'disparate sounds – human, natural and mechanical – broadly diffused from different points in space and in the nonhierarchical mixing of voices and noises'.⁹⁷ Jane Lewty, in turn, suggests that James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is full of the language of the airwaves, messages from anyone going anywhere or nowhere, 'loftly marconimasts from Clifden' sending signals picked up by 'Nova Scotia's listing sisterwands', and disembodied voices shouting demands that others 'get off my air'.⁹⁸ In such hands, the novel itself is transformed into – or revealed as – not so much the unified product of a coherent self (a 'coherer'), but a space of diffusion, of networks, of multiple voices on different frequencies, broadcasting to someone, anyone, in the void.

Since the 1940s, it has doubtless been the gradual impact of communication and information theory that has tended to provide the language to clothe our experience here. DNA becomes a code of genetic information, neural synapses become switchboards, nerves become telephone lines, the brain becomes an 'information processor'. John Durham Peters suggests that this frequently seems to reverse the characteristic direction of nineteenth-century imagery, when the technological figured the organic;⁹⁹ and he adds that information also 'shares semiotic space with subatomic physics, coming in bits, flashes, bursts, and impulses'.¹⁰⁰ If the figures slip and slide and reverse themselves, this in turn points to the underlying continuity, the presence of a deep structure working through these substitutions and oscillations. For Sconce, all this suggests the extent to which 'the public imagination of a given historical moment considers these flows of electricity, consciousness, and information to be homologous, interchangeable, and transmutable', with 'electricity mediating the transfer and substitution of consciousness and information between the body and a host of electronic media technologies'.¹⁰¹

There have, of course, been significant shifts along the way. If we return to Beatrice Webb, glued to her wireless set to receive the latest news, we can point out that the momentous events came at the time of transition from 'wireless' to 'radio', or more accurately, from the point-to-point form of early wireless transmission, as in the Kipling story, to the centre-periphery form taken by radio (and television) 'broadcasting' as it became dominant from the 1920s.¹⁰² Nevertheless, the continuities are marked: the disembodied voices, the effect of 'liveness' as a feature of the medium, and the fact that the radio signal has always been inherently *public* just as the context of its reception has been in varying degrees *private*. Peters suggests that 'Organizing radio's connection to the bodies of the communicants was a chief prerequisite of its naturalization into everyday life',¹⁰³ and this formulation, which can include a political dimension without being reducible to it, seems apt, as we can indeed see from the Beatrice Webb example. Bodies, voices, 'media objects', linked through oddly disembodied yet material networks: these constitute the raw material of the circuits of sensation, and the very possibility of that other rather odd manifestation or emanation – the social – in the mass media age. Nor are the boundaries at all clear here: the limits, if any, as to who can constitute the community of communicants. It is not only the dead, but assorted aliens and others who can potentially appear on this scene.¹⁰⁴ All this, in turn, gives the flavour, the forms and potential of the controversies, the fashions, the moral panics and enthusiasms that periodically flash across and illuminate the circuits, for good or ill.

Indeed, 'sensation' can come to stand in for the 'enthusiasm' that so troubled eighteenth-century commentators on the 'common people' and what they saw as their strange, irrational, potentially disturbing and uncontrollable ways. Stefan Jonsson reminds us that, in a later generation, the early sociologists and social psychologists of the decades around the beginning of the twentieth century defined the masses in similar ways to scientists defining physical mass: both postulated the existence of an 'undifferentiated matter' which, under appropriate circumstances, could be converted into energy. The outcome could be positive – the further development of 'civilization' – or negative, the irruptions of disorder, riot and revolution.¹⁰⁵ Recently, there has been a revival of interest in these 'mass psychology' approaches. Nevertheless, these more recent theorists, seeking to update and transform this model, have tended to use terms that clearly show these origins. For Serge Moscovici, for example, society is 'made up of the passions that flow through our lives', and these constitute the 'primal links' between us,¹⁰⁶ while for Teresa Brennan, a theory of the social as the 'transmission of affect' promises a way beyond the rigid dichotomy of 'biology' and 'society'.¹⁰⁷

Let us conclude by returning to the idea of radio as a 'live' medium. In an interestingly ambiguous way, Peters claims that 'liveness' in radio was 'the effort to break the connection between death and distance'.¹⁰⁸ In the context, this seems to mean that life can be present across distances, *authentically* present, not a simulation; but it could also be read as the claim that death could come *closer* – as indeed it did, for the Victorians, for Kipling and for many since. The dead, apparently, cannot be excluded from the community of communication so easily. Just as 'live' radio may turn out to be pre-recorded, not 'live' at all, so the dead may simulate life and communicate 'live'. Peters also notices that 'live' can also mean 'containing unexpended energy',¹⁰⁹ transmitting power, as in a live shell or cartridge; and we can add that a 'live wire', as a person, can be a dynamic presence, just as a 'live' wire provides both power – and shocks; life – and death. In these sensational circuits, death represents the ultimate impossibility of its own exclusion, the limit of the circuit that is inseparable from its creative dynamism, the shock that empowers, and the shock that kills ...