UNDRESSING THE DEATH SCENE, AND OTHER PUZZLING COMMUNICATION ABOUT CULTURE THAT JAMES CAREY BEQUEATHED ME

James Hay

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009
James Hay

UNDRESSING THE DEATH SCENE, AND OTHER PUZZLING COMMUNICATION ABOUT CULTURE THAT JAMES CAREY BEQUEATHED ME

This essay chronicles four lessons (or puzzles) that James Carey ‘left’ to the author. These lessons pertain to Carey’s account of communication as culture, the salience of that account with respect to the changing meanings and objectives of the ‘liberal arts’ and sciences, Carey’s view of the relation between time and space (history and geography), and the suggestiveness of Carey’s interest in the relation between communication and transportation. Chronicling these lessons or puzzles (and Carey’s story) leads the author to reflect on the history of Communication Studies and Cultural Studies in the US.

Keywords communication; culture; history; liberal arts; media; mobility; ritual, sciences; space; time; transportation

Over the years, at the University of Illinois and other places, through conversation or reading, James Carey became one of my most important teachers. There are several lessons that I learned from him. Their sequence below represents a chronology of my having encountered them as ‘lessons,’ but collectively they comprise a puzzle whose piecing together reminds me (still) of Carey. A lesson is both a program of instruction and something extracted (thoughts, reflections, practices) about instruction or exercise. Sometimes lessons are puzzles. The puzzle that Carey left me is that, as communication, lessons are not simply the transferring of information from teacher to pupil, sender to receiver; they always occur (as ritualized games or scientific experiments) from places and along paths that have been shaped and regulated over time, in part by the economies, institutions, technologies, and uses of communication and culture. As citizens, workers, analysts, theorists, and differentially mobile bodies, our changing relation to this terrain and field of study that does not sit still is what makes ‘communication as culture’ so difficult and important to chart. It is a terrain that requires constant rethinking.
of our position, maps, and techniques that have been adopted to understand, represent, inhabit, and intervene in it. This is a puzzle on which I am still at work, thanks in no small part to Carey.

Lesson one – Communication is culture

This is a lesson for which I certainly have not been the only student, and it arguably is a theme for which he is most known. However, my history of this lesson is instructive and worth recalling, because it was my first encounter with Carey and his writing, and because the encounter occurred through a university course – as a formal lesson. The lesson is buried so deep in my training that now I am not sure about all of the details of its history.

The general arc of my interest in ‘cultural studies,’ before the term had developed a currency in the US, is fairly easy to recount, though then as now it followed a curriculum that seemed disjointed, even messy and unruly, to most onlookers. By the end of my graduate course work at the University of Texas–Austin in 1981, I had taken about a third of my courses in the Department of Comparative Literature; many of these courses were in critical theory and its relation to the art of reading texts. The other two-thirds of my curriculum was spread fairly evenly across the Department of Anthropology (where I studied with a faculty of prominent folklorists) and the Department of Radio-Television-Film (RTF) (where I was taking courses on cinema, television, & international media policy). Across these courses and departments, my considerable interest in theory increasingly had led me to various kinds of ‘cultural theory,’ particularly as that theory was being articulated and used in my course work as ‘critical theory.’1 Around 1979, I became aware of a body of academic work in the UK that had formed around the term ‘cultural studies.’ My encounter with it was particularly idiosyncratic and fortuitous: having been introduced to the writing of Antonio Gramsci in Italy (where I lived for much of the 1970s, dropping out of school occasionally to do so), I discovered that the projects of British Cultural Studies were widely engaged with Gramsci’s writing. (In a testament to my life-long lack of business acumen, I brushed off the suggestion by Archie Green, a professor of Folklore at the University of Texas, that I should translate Gramsci’s writing about popular culture and folklore into English; ‘who would be interested in that narrow topic?’ I laughed, at the beginning of a decade when translating Gramsci would become a cottage industry.)

Like some graduate students of my generation in the US, my encounter with the study of ‘communication’ occurred through a historical convergence between literary and cultural criticism in the Liberal Arts and in departments such as Texas’ relatively young Department of RTF, which was located in a College of Communication and supported only two or three professors with
interests in the relation between culture and contemporary communication/media. But it was a long walk from one side of campus to the other; the Modern university’s geography insists on differentiating its zones of knowledge and has never insisted on instituting ‘collaboratories.’ So the pathway to Communication left me at the edge of Communication, and deeply aware of its boundary. Something called ‘cultural studies’ was being (re-)invented in the US through this network of study, and through the disciplinary interloping and restlessness of graduate students such as me who eventually found jobs in departments of Communication. My passage, however, did not happen without help from those slightly older than me who were imagining alternative histories and maps for communication studies.

It was at that juncture that I encountered my first lesson with Carey. In my last year of graduate course work I enrolled in a seminar that was titled, either modestly or ambitiously, ‘Theories of Culture.’ I was not privy to, or simply do not recall, much about why the course was offered, except that it was designed by a committee of professors from different departments in Liberal Arts and cross-listed through the Departments of Political Science and the Department of Comparative Literature (with the majority of its students coming from Language and Literature departments). In digging through some old files, I found the following course description (produced with a typewriter and mimeograph machine):

There is a large area of shared interest among different departments and academic disciplines in the University, although marred and confused by differences of approach and vocabulary. The term ‘culture’ as a central concept in many different disciplines is a venerable one and at the same time illustrates the difficulty. This course is intended as a step in the direction of exploring common ground in the new definitions of culture that are emerging from the studies of literature, art history, anthropology, sociology, history, political science, and philosophy.

The course was designed as a symposium, with weekly lectures by professors from different Humanities departments on campus (Gayatri Spivak and Michael Holquist) and from other campuses (Hayden White, Vincent Crapanzano, Margaret Rose, Richard Sennett, Thomas McCarthy, and Alexander Piatigorsky). Jurgen Habermas and Meyer Shapiro were invited to participate but never came. In many respects, the course gestured toward a new formation in critical theory, if not cultural studies in the US.

Although a seminar designed as a symposium was relatively rare (budgets often having prevented faculty from organizing courses as menus of speakers), it was consonant with Comparative Literature’s commitment to comparativism and interdisciplinarity, and with its considerable investment at that time in Structuralism’s search for homologies across diverse languages and cultures. The
seminar also represented one way that, after the 1960s, Comparative Literature perpetuated the faith in a pluralism of knowledges and cultures upon which liberal arts curricula had developed in the US, even as it became one of the funnels for European critical theory that called into question the Enlightenment project. The Liberal Arts perpetuated the modern university’s old relation to literary culture, even as contemporary media and its study made the study of literary culture a study of the past. Print and electronic media properly belonged to Colleges of Communication. The seminar’s primary object, ‘culture,’ thus operated as a framework for a comparativist interdisciplinarity in the Liberal Arts and Humanities, and specifically departments of Language and Literature. I distinctly recall, however, that ‘culture’ or its study were never discussed as the object of disciplinary knowledge by the seminar’s leaders or the guest lecturers. ‘Culture’ was an umbrella term that sanctioned Comparative Literature’s version of interdisciplinarity and the agnosticism that it assumed about its own ‘comparativism’ of language and cultures. One lesson of the seminar therefore was that culture was a big enough tent to house the entire speaker series, even though all the series’ speakers were employed in departments of Humanities and Liberal Arts, and even though the course would not easily have been offered in any of the department’s at the University of Texas – even Political Science or Comparative Literature. My running question in that seminar, sometimes posed to lecturers and sometimes posed to myself partly out of frustration with the rules of the seminar’s game, was how the study of language and literature (as a discipline or interdiscipline) constituted a study of culture. That the seminar’s weekly readings and lectures were made by Sennett (a Professor of Humanities at New York University), Rose (a Professor of Humanities in Australia), Spivak (a professor of English), Holquist (a professor of Russian Language and Literature), Crapanzano (an cultural anthropologist teaching in Comparative Literature at City University of New York), McCarthy (in Philosophy at Northwestern), and White (recently appointed Professor and Chair of the History of Consciousness program at University of California, Santa Cruz) collectively bespoke the extent to which theoretical work was indeed blurring some of the old differences between certain disciplines. But within the legacy of the Modern university, in the late-twentieth century US, Comparative Literature, English, and other language departments were still the bastions of the study of culture, as what the course’s description hailed as a ‘venerable’ object and objective.

I recall that during one of the weeks not allocated for these speakers, Carey was scheduled to offer a lecture. I may be wrong about whether he spoke for this seminar or simply during that year, albeit in the same seminar room. (And I confess that I might even be wrong about his lecture having occurred that year rather than the following year.) However, I am certain that Carey’s lecture was arranged by Horace Newcomb, who had been a professor in the English Department (where he taught his first, sparsely enrolled,
graduate seminar on ‘Television Criticism’) but who was in the process of transferring to the Department of RTF (where his seminars became over-enrolled). I was one of three students in Newcomb’s first seminar about TV criticism, and we shared (physically and figuratively) the long walk from one side of campus to the other during those years — walks during which we had ample time to muse about this distance, and ways of overcoming it. Carey’s talk was supposed to be one of the levers for overcoming this distance and difference between the homes of Communication and Culture. Newcomb may have been the only person on campus in those years who was acquainted with Carey, much less who was familiar with his writing about communication and culture. The obviousness of selecting Carey for this aim may have been lost on everyone but Newcomb who attended the lecture.

Looking back on Carey’s lecture, through all that I subsequently have admired about his intellectual energy on the page but particularly in seminars and public lectures, I am puzzled that his presentation fell flat with his audience. And it is that puzzle that is worth laying out again now, particularly as a way of reflecting on how he articulated culture to communication, and communication to the ‘culture’ of the Liberal Arts. In advance of Carey’s lecture, students were assigned a version of his ‘A Cultural Approach to Communication’ (Carey 1989). I also recall that we were assigned ‘Mass Communication and Cultural Studies’ (Carey 1989), though Newcomb can not confirm either. While the lecture would have attracted faculty and students from the Humanities (because it was staged in the room controlled by Comparative Literature and English, where my seminar was held) as well as from RTF, Carey’s connection to Communication put him at the center of their convergence but on the fringes of each. Although I have no notes from Carey’s lecture, it is both difficult and easy to understand why his lecture would not have resonated — with this audience, in that place, at that time.

There certainly were ways that Carey’s riff on ‘communication as culture’ intersected with many of the theories of culture assembled for the seminar. For instance, he was deeply engaged with the literature about culture and literacy, which was the topic of assigned readings from Eric Havelock, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Jack Goody, and Ian Watt. He also was as intent on thinking historically as were these authors, many of the seminar’s speakers, and many of the faculty in the Liberal Arts. His argument about communication as ritual was informed by some of the anthropological writing about culture that was included in the syllabus (particularly Clifford Geertz’s Interpretation of Culture, discussed by Crapanzano). He was certainly aware of the (post-)structuralist theory and criticism of contemporary culture as ideology (e.g. Barthes), even though he was less prone to equate culture and ideology, and rejected the formalist tradition of that critical project. That he recognized or referred to such a broad range of cultural theory in some ways made him central to the aims of the seminar.
As much as Geertz may have been a useful touchstone for Carey’s explanation of what was difficult or ‘thick’ about cultural (anthropological or ethnographic) analysis, Carey’s conception of cultural study was formulated as an intervention about how communication was being studied in the US. Even though his argument about a ‘cultural approach to communication’ was propelled along the same interdisciplinary drift of theories of culture during the 1970s that produced my seminar, his argument was primarily, and more than the theories represented by my seminar, about an alternative to the dominant models of research in a particular discipline – communication. And thus it was about the limits to culture set by institutions and disciplines. While the importance of such a venerable subject as ‘culture’ may have been obvious to the seminar’s organizers, and while the term’s ‘difficulty’ did bring different disciplines in the Liberal Arts into conversations with one another, the seminar never broached how much the term was understood and instrumentalized as part of disciplinary regimes – in and outside the university.

Furthermore, while it was one thing to acknowledge the difficulty of the term ‘culture,’ it was another thing to emphasize to students and faculty from literature, arts, and the humanities that culture was something as ordinary and common as ‘communication.’ Spivak’s lecture on Barthes and myth (with a nod to a reading that Michael Ryan had just completed of Apocalypse Now! as imperialistic text) and Rose’s presentation on ideological criticism (with a nod to Judith Williamson’s ‘decoding’ of photographic advertising’s gendered ideology) both demonstrated the textual analysis of contemporary media, even as their project assumed the primacy of textual readings as social and political critique. Sennett offered an inspired, sophisticated, and provocative rationale about the importance of the city and urbanism as an object of cultural criticism and theory; however, his assigned book, The Fall of Public Man, explained urban space in terms of a history of theater rather than twentieth century media. In the spirit of all too familiar theses about the ‘culture industry’ and ‘mass culture,’ his passing but emphatic statement that ‘electronic media is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end’ (p. 282) generalized and thus trivialized communication in the age of electronic media. The supposed passivity of media audiences, and their irrational obsession with media stars as charismatic authorities, rested on the assumption that ‘mass’ forms of communication (as ‘mass culture’) were neither difficult, complicated, nor worthy of veneration. Unlike Rose, Sennett saw nothing complicated about the culture of contemporary media, but Sennett’s social psychologism offered as devastatingly generalizable statements about contemporary communication and culture as did Rose and Spivak. And none of them were willing or able to address how mass communication or popular media were partly what had made culture such a difficult – and not always venerated – term. Neither the seminar’s nod to anthropological theory about pre-modern communality, nor its perpetuation of literary criticism’s veneration of culture, left room to account for the dominant
popular) forms of communication and culture. Recognizing what made ‘culture’ and its study so difficult in the Liberal Arts during the 1970s and early 1980s, involved recognizing how the study of culture was limited, regulated, and disciplined, and how/why these disciplines (or the interdisciplinarity of a Liberal Arts seminar on Culture) mattered in the age of contemporary communication/media.

To the extent that Carey’s elaboration of a ‘cultural approach to communication’ was oriented toward literary criticism or literary history, it was through historians of printing, journalism, and literacy (such as Richard Hoggart or the historians of printing cited earlier) and particularly through Raymond Williams’ rethinking of culture and literature as communication. Williams figures prominently in ‘A Cultural Approach to Communication’ and ‘Mass Communication & Cultural Studies,’ the two essays published during the 1970s wherein Carey formulates a rationale about communication as culture. The latter is partly a response to Williams’ and Stuart Hall’s efforts during the early 1970s to rethink the linkage between culture and communication. Carey noted that while both were keen to study ‘mass communication’ or ‘mass media’ as culture, they also were concerned that the study of contemporary culture as mass communication risked being reduced to specific forms and analytic practice. While Carey concurred about the importance of unfixing the object and method of communication studies, by recognizing that communication is part of a ‘way of life’ (the anthropological definition of culture), his response hones in on the differences between the US and British disciplinarity of communication studies. For Carey, instituting a ‘cultural approach to communication’ in the US was nothing short of navigating the already formidable institutions of communication research and policy that were not as deeply rooted in the UK. To say that ‘communication is culture’ opened communication research to an alternative set of questions than the ones typically driving that research, and to say that ‘culture is communication’ affirmed that there are institutional limits and dispositions to discourses about culture. While Carey did not state the issue quite this way, it is implied through his two essays from the 1970s.

Looking back on my first encounter with Carey’s writing (through my own disciplinary wandering, and my participation in academic experiments such as ‘Theories of Culture’ and Newcomb’s project on ‘TV as Cultural Forum’), it has occurred to me that in the late 1970s and early 1980s Carey’s difficulty in finding an audience for explaining why ‘a cultural approach to communication’ mattered in the US had to do with the difficulty in locating the ‘common culture’ and institutional base on which such communication (as writing or lecture about disciplinarity) depended. While his essays were certainly beginning to be disseminated during the 1970s (through US journals such as Communication, or British anthologies such as Mass Communication &
Society), the shift in US communication studies and the emergence of a Cultural Studies in the US were yet to come.

It is no coincidence that Cultural Studies emerges in the US over the 1980s through Communication departments, journals, and professional associations, in no small part because of the compellingness of Carey’s interventions for and about communication – in those years and in that field. That the early home for Cultural Studies in the US was in Communication certainly risked affirming Williams’ and Hall’s concerns (acknowledged by Carey) that Cultural Studies might become synonymous with media studies – or worse, with media criticism and ethnographies of media audiences. (The considerable amount of British Cultural Studies about media that was being read and discussed in the US also contributed to the perception in the US that Cultural Studies was a study of communication media.) However, the emergence of Cultural Studies through Communication Studies in the US (as well as the perception that Cultural Studies was essentially the study of a popular media/culture) has not diminished the significance of Carey’s effort to describe, demonstrate, and institute an alternative to the dominant models (the disciplinarity) of communication research in the US. If anything, those models and their legacy remain as dominant as ever – and Carey’s proposal as useful in the current state of communication research as it was in the 1970s.

Lesson two – The arts and sciences of undressing the death scene

This was a lesson which I processed in countless ways and instances after I left the University of Texas and took a teaching position in a Communication department at the University of Illinois in the mid-1980s, where my self-satisfaction about having become a professor gave way to the feeling that I was going back to school, as a student. Perhaps we should feel lucky when that happens. Indeed the University of Illinois was a laboratory and experiment not only about Cultural Studies in the US but an experiment occurring through Communication.

More than anyone else, Carey and his former student Lawrence Grossberg (as much for their agreements as for their disagreements) led me to imagine alternative models for thinking about communication. Something called ‘cultural studies’ was certainly part of that. Whatever Cultural Studies was at the University of Illinois while Carey was here (aside from being a hall of mirrors which projected, to points beyond Champaign, an image of a university at the center of interesting, alternative, and decidedly interdisciplinary academic research), the local version of Cultural Studies was a collectivity of faculty and graduate students who were dispersed across departments, who read widely, and who (collectively) were rethinking the
idea of (and the linkages between) the political, the cultural, and the possibilities of academic research. For me, Carey was a model because he read (so voraciously) across the disciplines and had a capacity to speak beyond a discipline – both to bridge and complicate things that way. For Carey, as well as Grossberg (though sometimes in very different ways), Communication was involved in this project of ‘rethinking.’ For Carey, the only projects worth doing were ones that involved continually ‘rethinking.’

The production of Cultural Studies at Illinois in those years had its centers: the Unit for Criticism & Interpretive Theory that coordinated seminars and lectures from various departments and that sponsored interdisciplinary events, colloquia, and reading groups; Grossberg’s regular offering of seminars about Cultural Studies. However, the campus also attracted a generation of graduate students who (for various circumstances that were fairly unique to the campus at that time) designed courses of study across departments. In a ‘college town’ the scale of Champaign-Urbana, the networks of sociality were intertwined with the robust circuits of lectures and events across academic departments, and the graduate students became acquainted with professors outside their home-departments that way. While many of these graduate students were aligned with one of the two Communication Departments on campus [Speech Communication and the Institute of Communication Research (ICR)], they comprised a fairly coherent (and dare I say, undisciplined) network of sociality and intellectual energy. Like the wasps (or honey bees) that Deleuze and Guattari mention in ‘Rhizome’ (their famous introduction to Thousand Plateaus), these students transported questions from one knowledge-field to another, and in so doing they required that professors expand their theoretical repertoire and they enriched the dispersed conversation about the disciplinarity and politics of theory and research.

This is not to trivialize some fairly significant differences dividing communication research on the campus. There were several conspicuous differences between the ICR and Speech Communication – the former headed by James Carey and Cliff Christians, and the latter by Jesse Delia and David Swanson. As an Assistant Professor who had not been trained primarily in a Department of Communication, many of these differences escaped me in my first years at Illinois. In the first years of my appointment, the ICR also cultivated connections with Speech Communication (cross-listing courses and granting some Speech Communication faculty honorary appointments), while Speech Communication accommodated the likes of Grossberg and myself, whose interest in Cultural Studies was respected and encouraged by many colleagues who had an impressive familiarity with research and theory beyond their specialities in Communication. However, by the mid-1990s (just after the departures of Carey for Columbia University, and Grossberg for the University of North Carolina), these differences became pronounced and increasingly intractable. The ICR continued Carey’s commitment to a program
of research and study that understood communication as a hybrid object connected to various disciplines and theories of communication from beyond the US; Speech Communication increasingly became oriented toward Communication as a discipline — and a profoundly US-centric version of the discipline that mostly ignored its relation to the complicated and variegated history of communication research.

So, in part, my regular encounters with Carey at Illinois (the stage for this second ‘lesson’) posed a set of questions whose importance I was just beginning to recognize. The most challenging task for me during my first 10 years at Illinois had to do primarily with coming to terms with the inclination in communication research toward the social and behavioral sciences, and secondarily with the veins of research (the sub-disciplines) through which these sciences circulated. My uses of Carey’s essays in the courses on media and cultural studies that I taught during that time increasingly impressed upon me that his interventions had as much to do with the disciplinarity of communication research in the US as with the need for a critique of and an alternative to the positivism of that disciplinarity (i.e. the dominance of the social and behavioral sciences in US communication research). Carey was no Foucaultian, or even an apologist for Foucault. Nor am I familiar with any reference that he made to Science Studies. He did not need Foucault or Latour to explain how ‘communication’ had been rationalized and instrumentalized through this scientific positivism and its value to a wide array of research and policy in the US. However, his intervention increasingly has seemed to me to corroborate some of their themes — in this case, about the truth- and proof-regimes of communication research, or about the need for an analytic that set itself up within and was about the ‘differentiating machinery’ of technical knowledge about communication.

Carey’s explanation of the need for an alternative to the dominant models of communication research in the US riffed in some ways upon Williams’ comments about ‘mass communication’ and ‘community’ in the Conclusion to Culture & Society (1958), although Carey never attributed to Williams the distinction between a ‘transmission’ and ‘cultural’ (or ‘ritual’) model of communication. Over 15 years before Carey’s essays about a cultural model of communication, Williams had argued that mass communication could not be understood simply as a transmission from sender to receiver, that theories and studies of mass communication arbitrarily focused on sending messages rather than on the difficulties of analyzing reception, and that the effects of mass communication should not be reduced to essential characteristics of contemporary media/technology because the uses or effects of communication were shaped ‘mainly by the whole circumstances of the common life’ (Williams 1958, pp. 301–302). In Carey’s essays about communication as culture, these points tend to separate into two streams: a dominant, transmission model, and a minor, cultural/ritual model whose recognition (according to Carey) could serve not only as a way to understand the
dominance, political instrumentality, and truth-claims of positivistic analysis but also as a fruitful, alternative path of research. Whereas Williams, as well as Hall and the preponderance of work associated with British Cultural Studies during the 1970s and 1980s, emphasized the relation between political and cultural formation, their sense of this relation was not about the legacy or current mattering of science. Arguably the terrain for enacting a Cultural Studies in the UK was not as disciplined through Communication Studies and its social and behavioral scientific models as was the case in the US. However, it is just as significant that so much of what counted as Cultural Studies in the US by the mid-1980s found Carey’s rationale for a cultural model of communication compelling – even precious – without addressing how theorizing the political, and how politicizing cultural theory, occurred on a terrain dominated by the funding of social and behavioral scientific models for communication research and policy. Defining an alternative model of communication research (a model that recognized the many uses and effects of communication within the multiple and unevenly practiced rituals, spheres, and structures of daily life) involved thinking tactically on that terrain. For Carey, the utility of a cultural approach to communication had to do with the way models and reasoning about communication have underpinned all sorts of research, business, and policy initiatives; and with the way that the truth of communication was being perpetuated through university training in positivistic forms of research. As he noted, a cultural model of communication opened the possibility for ‘examining the construction, apprehension, and use of models of communication themselves’ (1989, p. 32). It therefore is interesting that, while Carey invoked Geertz to do a lot of heavy lifting for his rationale about what a cultural model of communication entails, he turned to Williams not only to support his suggestion that science is practiced through systems of representation (the lesson of structuralism and semiotics at that time) but more importantly to point out that introducing alternative models of communication research involves rethinking and changing the social institutions that discipline knowledge about communication:

Many of our communication models become, in themselves, social institutions. Certain attitudes to others, certain forms of address, certain tones and styles become embodied in institutions which are very powerful in social effect. ... These arguable assumptions are often embodied in solid, practical institutions which then teach the models from which they start.


At a time when Williams’ writing was being cited in the UK and the US to explain the interests and objectives of Cultural Studies (and ‘cultural studies of media’), Carey’s attention to this thread about instituting models of
communication was extraordinary — and may even have not been the point that most of his readers heard him making.

Carey’s contraposition of a ‘transmission’ and ‘cultural’ model of communication often, and rightly in some senses, has been criticized as too binary. Some have pointed to Carey’s argument as evidence that Cultural Studies eschewed or was anathema to economistic analysis. However, the distinction that Carey made between the two models of communication — one dominant, the other minor — had less to do with cultural studies of communication as a separate project from political economic analysis than with a kind of political economy which shared the assumption of the social and behavioral sciences that communication was primarily or only a process of transmission, which was overly preoccupied with media industries, or which focused mostly on big and stable structures of production and distribution rather than the plurality, contingencies, and overdeterminedness of economics. That his rejection of positivism was at the heart of his distinction between political economic and cultural studies of communication was evident where he condemned the ‘cognitive and moral positivism’ encouraged by an ‘abstract economistic Marxism that elucidated laws that applied to everyone and no one’ (Carey 1995, p. 85). The impulse to pose Cultural Studies as the opposite of scientific positivism certainly developed out of debates in the US (galvanized most famously by C.P. Snow) about the mission of the university and its relation to the Modern articulation/institution of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Carey certainly would have been familiar with these debates as a student during the late 1950s and 1960s, when Communication Studies in the US was an accommodation between the legacy of the Liberal Arts (e.g. the neo-classicism of Rhetorical Studies) and the emerging communication sciences (interpersonal communication, organizational communication, political communication, and media-effects research). Over the 1960s, the Liberal Arts often and increasingly accepted that the study of science should occur somewhere else on college campuses than in their own curricula, even as (through literary criticism and semiotics) cultural criticism developed proto-scientific techniques and vocabularies of analysis, and as many English Departments housed courses in ‘technical writing.’ Carey’s rationale for a ‘cultural approach to communication’ was complicit with this tendency in the Liberal Arts, even though the scientificity of communication research made Carey’s intervention seem too disciplinary and exotic to those working ‘beyond the sciences,’ in the Humanities and Liberal Arts (as was the case when he delivered his talk at the University of Texas when I was a graduate student). While Carey (similarly to Snow) emphasized the importance of science and technology for any ‘cultural studies of communication,’ he decried communication science’s failure to recognize that communication is culture.

It is worth noting that within Communication Studies, the difference that Carey made between a transmission and a ritual/cultural model of commu-
communication intersected with or was translated as a distinction between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ communication research – the latter term referring to Structuralist-inspired strategies of interpretive analysis (of media texts or how audiences interpret media texts) that sometimes were used in conjunction with methods of measurement. However, it is difficult to explain his formulation of a ‘cultural approach to communication’ merely as an alternative to quantitative analysis or an alternative that was primarily about problems of interpretation (i.e. interpretation as something that complicated empirical research or as the primary object of a ‘cultural approach’). His version of Cultural Studies, as a model of and for communication research, is more complicated and nuanced than this binarism suggests if one is willing to recognize his cross-purposes – of posing a ‘cultural science’ (Carey 1989, p. 56) that is suited for Communication Studies but also of decoupling communication from Communication Studies, by demonstrating the embeddedness and over-determinedness of communication and by gesturing toward a study of communication that either lay beyond Communication Studies or would involve re-inventing Communication Studies around for instance the study of communication as networks/economies of various practices, as a hybrid object, as embedded in everyday life, and as an object fixed by the various institutions of communication research. This is why reducing a ‘cultural approach’ to a ‘qualitative method’ simplifies that approach, even as it attests to Communication Studies’s need to rationalize any alternative to quantification within a binary logic and its regime of truth about communicating subjects.

To underscore what was (and is) complicated and nuanced about Carey’s proposal for a cultural science of communication, and what is salient about that proposal for recent theorists or polemists of cultural studies who have called attention to the need for a neo-empiricism or neo-positivism (and not just in communication research), it is worth revisiting one of Carey’s clever examples – his hypothetical and now poignant ‘conversation on the meaning of death,’ which he offered in ‘Mass Communication & Cultural Studies’ as a way to exemplify what is conveniently ignored by the positivism of communication research and what is opened up by a cultural model. In the essay, he does not initially explain why he chose to illustrate his point with a conversation (or exercise) about death. The example initially is offered to translate for Communication Studies the significance of Geertz’s famously ‘thick description’ of cockfighting (and life) in Bali – and Geertz’s suggestion that the best way of understanding the life of a people is to examine their practices surrounding death. One of the statements that he includes from Geertz also invokes Ruth Benedict’s canonical anthropological text: ‘those who arrange chrysanthemums cast swords’ (Carey 1989, p. 60). In an essay where Carey waxes approvingly of Geertz’s view that cultural analysis always involves interpreting the interpretations of others (that ‘the culture of people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles which the anthropologist strains to
read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong’), translating Geertz for Communication Studies is both a serious (academic and scientific) undertaking and a wry play upon this conceit. After remarking on the ‘archness’ of Geertz’s statement (following Max Weber) that cultural analysis should be a science less interested in proving laws than in ‘construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical,’ Carey offers a more ‘artless and transparent example of the type of scene communication researchers should be able to examine’ (Carey 1989, p. 56) – a puzzle or exercise about the ‘death scene.’

He stages the death scene through four actors. The first is a contemporary physician ‘who argues that death occurs with the cessation of brain waves’ – a scene that is empirically observable (Carey 1989, p. 56). The second is a ‘typical middle American’ who ‘declares that death occurs on the cessation of the heartbeat’ – a scene that also is empirically available (pp. 56–57). The third is an Irish peasant who ‘finding these first two definitions rather abhorrent, argues that death occurs three days after the cessation of the heartbeat’ – the deceased being ritually remembered and thus kept alive before being buried (formally separated from his community) in a wake. As Carey notes, this ritual also is empirically observable: ‘days can be counted as well as anything else’ (1989, p. 57). A fourth party represents the conviction that death occurs prior to the cessation of the heartbeat, when for instance an individual can no longer gather food or sustenance. Collectively they represent the poles of Carey’s compass at that time between empirical evidence and a set of considerations more likely followed by cultural anthropology; in fact, he cites cultural anthropologist Colin Turnbull’s The Mountain People (1972) in conjunction with the fourth voice.

At the end of the dramatization, playing the role of chorus or narrator, he explains that he has chosen (for Communication Studies) a scene as ‘simple and simpleminded’ as death because it is a ‘universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon’ which also is ‘fiercely resistant to reduction to laws, functions, powers and interests’ (Carey 1989, p. 59, emphasis added). In the 1970s and 1980s, scripting a death scene for a discipline whose dominant ways of rationalizing human behavior depended upon techniques of measurement and verification must have involved a mixture of lament and mischievous joy. Geertz provided him with the Structuralist techniques of stage direction – a way to dramatize that death is lived, practiced, and made meaningful through ritualized forms of representation, that understanding the death as scene involves recognizing the representational rules and rituals that dress it and make it understandable for its practitioners, that we all (albeit in different roles as scientists, holy figures, mourners, and the dead) are subject to these rules and rituals, and that this ritualized representation is a form of regulation (power exercised through and over the scene) that can be just as powerful and worth recognizing as the ‘laws of nature’. There is also in the death scene a
reminder that one cannot assume a priori the meaning or rules of death or life, that individual death scenes cannot be explained in terms of their regularity and relation to a homologous structure, that the scene must be discovered (over and over again) because it (and the rules governing it) are continually being re-enacted in different circumstances, times, and places. I take this to be what Carey means when he states that ‘the trick is to read these “texts” in relation to concrete social structure without reducing them to that structure. . . . There are enough methodological dilemmas [in this perspective] to keep us occupied for a few generations’ (1989, p. 61). Because research about communication/media continues to grapple with whether or how to locate communication and media (as ‘death scene’) in everyday life, Carey’s forecast seems as pertinent as ever in these times.

While I understood in the 1980s the value of this dramaturgic technique as an intervention in Communication Studies, there was another implication to Carey’s theater and its death scene that has challenged me more: his concluding remark about the need to ‘undress the death scene’ — to ‘deverbalize it, strip it of words . . . [and to observe it not as] a conversation but a set of actions’ (Carey 1989, p. 61). Undressing the death scene is a paradox because on the one hand it refers to what Carey rejects about the sciences of communication (their emphasis on behaviors rather than the thickness of descriptions), and on the other hand it refers to the inability of get outside the ‘play’ of interpretation. In the latter sense, the death scene undressed is pure ritual and/or performance, although he goes on to say that even these actions must be deciphered — that as gestures they make meaning and understanding death possible as a scene. So, he notes that what has gotten lost in communication research is communication, i.e. various ways that death and life are made meaningful and understandable, even in complete silence or the absence of a heartbeat.

Now, in part because his death scene reminds me of these matters, I am inclined to nudge this thought a bit further. Since the death scene playfully illustrated the limits of a crudely empirical understanding of communication, to what extent does the conversation help us understand how ‘culture’ or ‘communication’ are always the object of particular institutional discourses? How have institutions ‘ritualistically’ reproduced and/or buried certain ways of representing and understanding culture or communication? How has the ritualization of the death scene occurred not only alongside or through other practices of daily life but through the institutionalized protocols and procedures of medical and governmental verification, not to mention the economies of health and disposal? Or, to turn this thought around, how has the ritualization of certain ways of living (predicated partly on certain ways of enacting death scenes) affirmed and perpetuated particular institutional and governmental rationalities about ‘the good life’ and ‘the good death’ through ‘proper communication’ and ‘healthy communities or cultures’?
Addressing questions such as these would require a cultural study of communication science – a study that is about undressing the relation between the laboratories of communication research and the ritualized scenography, paths, spheres, economies, and technologies of daily life. This would involve not just analyzing social structure, social regulation, or cultural logic through text and ritual, as Carey’s example tends to emphasize, but developing an analysis (a ‘cultural study’) that also locates the laboratories and institutions of communication science, in the making and doing of daily life. It would involve, in other words, actually following the complicated way that models of communication operate throughout the lives of particular populations as models for technological innovation, institutional organization, governmental arrangements, the production of social space, and (in those ways) social connectivity. Carey’s thesis gestured toward this kind of project by suggesting that models of communication matter in all aspects of life because of their relation to research and policy, though the simplicity of his example (the death scene) leaves the impression that he was counterposing two models.

Since readings of texts have everything to do with the ‘field’ of their practice, and with the institutions which watch over and govern those readings and their fields, and since Carey’s theater of the death scene was an intervention in communication science, there are two other readings of his illustration worth making. One, which is implied by Carey’s account, is that undressing the death scene does not lead to a hidden secret, meaning, truth, or law exposed by a critic, scientist, or observer outside the scene. This was one lesson that his work posed for me as I reflected on the place of Cultural Studies or Media Criticism in Communication departments. Another is that undressing the death scene is tantamount to thinking about communication or culture not simply as communication, meaning, and textuality. Indeed the usefulness of Cultural Studies for Communication Studies has had to do, then and now, with gesturing toward communication’s embeddedness in various practices and rituals that cannot be reduced to communication or its ‘media.’ And this is a tall order for Communication Studies. To unfix or decenter communication/media (as a privileged object of study and a preferred way of explaining the world) its research must continually ask itself how particular media practices matter amidst the many, often interdependent, life practices and death scenes. Challenging Communication Studies to recognize that communication is culture begins by addressing the role of institutional rationalities and sciences in disciplining and differentiating communication from other practices – in the arbitrariness of beginning with communication to understand communication, and of communication science or cultural science as always, already reliant upon networks of technologies, economies, and institutions of knowing (and sometimes fixing) life and death. The objective is not only to recognize that the legacy of Snow’s distinction
between Science and Art/Culture continues to inform distinctions between Cultural Studies and communication science in the US but to develop (and continually rethink) the most useful theory and analysis for intervening in the networks articulating ‘science,’ ‘culture,’ and ‘communication’ and in the specific regimes of truth about ‘culture’ and/or ‘communication.’ Carey’s exercise about communication of the death scene is a testament to why this history (i.e. the relation between Snow’s 1950s and today) continues to matter, albeit differently.

Lesson three — Historicizing the ‘progress’ of communication, and mapping the ether

From the first month that I arrived in Champaign until Carey left Champaign, he and I had lunch regularly. We sometimes had awful food (Champaign being what it was — then and even now — for restaurant choices) but we always had conversations that satisfied. These conversations were wide-ranging — the university, communication studies, media studies, cultural studies, journalism, our favorite new television series, politics and baseball, religion and baseball, Reagan and Bush, what he was writing, what I was writing, the long history of new media, my connection to Texas and his to New England, the importance of studying airports, airfares to Italy and Ireland, the Great Beyond, and the paltry choices for nourishing ourselves on the menus in front of us. My last meeting and conversation with Carey was in April or May of 2005. He had come to Champaign to produce an audio book of some of his already published essays. I picked up my phone to hear his voice: ‘James Hay? Do you know who this is?’ One of my friendly ghosts, re-entering Champaign through the ether — a medium about which he wrote often. I picked him up in my car and ferried him to Boltini’s Lounge — at the vanguard of Champaign’s quaint and pathetic program of gentrification downtown. I wanted Carey to see this local version of progress that involved dusting off and re-purposing the urban past, but I also wanted to take him someplace where he could find any brand of his beloved Irish beer. Such are the ways that the globalization of the local economy has converged with the local inauguration of a downtown arts and cultural district cum bistro-scape that strives, among other things, to bring the city into the future by re-fashioning remnants from its past. Carey, perched on a stool amidst the artsy, rococo designs of the bar, marveled that there was now a drinking-establishment in Champaign that stocked over 30 kinds of beer (not to mention wine!!). He sipped an Irish draft, followed by a few more. I was damn glad to be back in one of those conversations with him again — even if the menu had improved ever so slightly.

That afternoon, our drinking soothed the painfulness of his stories to me (and mine to him) about the plight of the Institute of Communications Research,
the unit that Carey had headed and played a prominent role in defining from 1969 through the early-1990s when he left. He had returned to Champaign at the height of the doomed efforts, mostly by current and former administrators of Speech Communication, to forge a 'merger' with (or takeover of) the Institute. This imperium of administrators imagined that the merger/acquisition would produce the largest and most prestigious Communication Department in the US, albeit a department whose splendor was to be built primarily upon a familiar menu of communication science. Our conversation therefore could not avoid musing about the relation between the downtown ‘renaissance’ and the efforts to capitalize on the ICR’s valuable ‘brand’ (as administrators in Speech Communication were prone to describe it). In that bar that afternoon, we could not have foreseen that this would be our last encounter, or that roughly a year later the wheels would come off the hitherto certain merger/acquisition. Still, I could not quite get over the sensation in the summer of 2006 that Carey had succumbed, in part, from the weight of disappointment surrounding the seemingly imminent death scene of the ICR, or conversely that the merger had suddenly and surprisingly come unglued due to the mischievous pranks of invisible Irish pixies that Carey had helped mobilize.

There are various stories – indeed a veritable soap opera of intrigue – to relate about the initiative to claim the ICR and launch a new vessel (‘flagship’ or battleship) for communication research on the US prairie. However, the scene that bears most directly on the third lesson that I want to describe concerns the importance that Carey attached to history and particularly his story or history of communication as space, territory, and empire, and his related story/history about the ‘spatial bias’ of communication research. While Carey’s writing sometimes counterposed history and geography (as happened most famously in his distinction between ‘transmission’ and ‘ritual’ models of communication), how I learned to see them as mutually constitutive owes a lot to Carey – not only through my conversations with him but instances in his writing where the binary breaks down.

My interest in ‘media/space’ developed intensely during the last few years that Carey was at the University of Illinois. These were the years (the early 1990s) when there was a vigorous discussion about space in various disciplines, some of it sparked by the translations into English of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) and Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991), as well as David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1991) Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), and Fredric Jameson’s eponymous essay in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). In the spring of 1990, amidst the run-up to the major conference in Cultural Studies staged on the campus of the University of Illinois, Meagan Morris directed a graduate seminar, ‘Space and Time’ which engaged this body of writing in order to rethink the orientation of Cultural Studies. While I marveled at the abstractness of her seminar’s title when I first saw it, the course’s readings
and lectures (alongside her contemporaneous ‘At Henry Parkes Motel’) were profoundly useful and influential for its students, and for auditors such as myself. The swarm of publications about space only indirectly addressed, and often generalized (as in Harvey’s account of ‘an image society’ and ‘time-space compression’), the role of communication media in the ‘production of space.’ My training outside Communication Studies had not introduced me to the work about communication as movement, transport, and space by Harold Innis, Yves de la Haye, or Wolfgang Schivelbusch, but neither were media criticism or the behavioral sciences of communication research particularly focused on anything but what was on the video screen.10 It took my conversations with Carey, and particularly his historical account of the relation between communication and transportation in ‘Technology & Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph’ (Carey 1989), to remind me that studying communication is about geography, territory, boundaries, frontiers, empire, architecture, cities, households, and (to invoke the title of the John Candy and Steve Martin film) planes, trains, and automobiles.

Whereas Carey’s rationale for a ‘cultural approach to communication’ counterposed ‘transmission’ and ‘ritual’ models of communication, his discussion of telegraphy in the nineteenth century offered a model for thinking about how the space of communication developed through converging historical practices and technologies and was productive of future/historical possibilities. Just as importantly, it returned ‘communication’ to its older meaning as transport and circulation, which Armand Mattelart would elaborate more thoroughly in The Invention of Communication (1996). Carey’s distinction between ‘transmission’ and ‘ritual’ models of communication was indebted (in some unfortunate ways) to Innis’s view that ‘time-binding cultures’ were replaced by ‘space-binding’ ones; like Innis, Carey viewed the spatial bias of the transmission model of communication as having overshadowed older, pre-modern conceptions of communication as ritual. But Innis was also the unacknowledged model for ‘Technology & Ideology,’ an essay which affirmed the view that a transmission model emerged concurrently with telegraphy’s relation to rail systems, without implying that transportation and communication replaced an older, ‘ritual’ understanding of communication. Instead, the essay gestures toward a historico-spatial materialism of communication—one in which communication and culture are circulatory systems predicated upon multiple technologies and networks of circulation, distribution, territorialization, and expansion.11 Providence and Christian religions (the traveling culture of frontier expansion) are just as integral to these circulatory and distributive technologies and networks as are science, the state, and mercantile capitalism.

Considered through ‘Technology & Ideology’ and ‘The History of the Future’ (Carey 1989), his commitment to a ‘ritual model’ and ‘cultural study’ is not merely a lament about the dominance of the transmission model of...
communication favored by the communication sciences but also about the importance of historical analysis – of communication as well as Communication Studies. For Carey, the positivism of communication research works against its having an interest or investment in the historicity of truth-claims or historical ‘regimes of truth.’ Like Williams and Hoggart, whose writing he admired, Carey viewed the project of cultural studies as historicist, but unlike them, he emphasized why historicism was important as a response to the present-mindedness of communication science and to communication science’s dominant position in rationalizing and abstracting the space and empire of communication/cultural technology.

In addition to his view that communication science has been disinvested in the historicity or historical contingency of their claim to the truth about communication and its ‘mass’ of recipients, he also viewed this trend as having obfuscated the link between communication and culture. One of the most vivid examples of how this played out in the 1980s, and profoundly in my own academic backyard, was the relatively contemporaneous histories of Communication Studies by Carey (then Head of the ICR) and Jesse Delia (then Head of Speech Communication). In 1987 Delia, a voice central to the behavioralist research of Interpersonal Communication studies in the US during the 1970s and 1980s, published ‘Communication Research: A History’ (Delia 1987) wherein he traced the development of communication research from the Chicago School of social research during the late-1930s, with passing mention of Cultural Studies in his concluding discussion of the 1980s. Carey’s Communication as Culture, published two years later, assembled essays that collectively charted the history of US Communication Studies from the earliest years of the Chicago School (prior to the period when Delia’s history begins). For Carey, the earliest years of Chicago School social research emphasized the embeddedness of communication in a variety of local practices and historical conditions, and the mutually constitutive production of communication and community. He viewed this early disposition as overtaken by the drift toward scientific positivism that Delia emphasized. He argued that recognizing this early history of communication study is essential to understanding the formation of Cultural Studies in the US during the 1980s – not as a return to the past (though his praise of Dewey sometimes suggested that) but as an attention to US Cultural Studies’ contemporary relation to the historical, geographic, and institutional force of communication science as a locus of truth, ‘progress,’ and modernization. Thinking about Communication Studies historically (and therefore spatially and institutionally) was not only tantamount to understanding how Cultural Studies in the US differed from Cultural Studies in other parts of the world, but it put front and center the role of communication science in a history of the US as a global empire. Carey may not have followed Williams’s rethinking of historical materialism as ‘cultural materialism,’ but his interest in charting an alternative history and
future for communication studies, as well as a ‘US Cultural Studies,’ was similarly about restoring material history (the technical, and embodied rituals of communication embedded in daily life) that communication research tended to ignore, and whose recognition would help re-conceptualize communication (research) as cultural (studies).

By the early 1990s, Cultural Studies had become a signifier and a currency more or less accepted (at least acknowledged) in Communication Studies. Openings for positions in Communication Departments seldom were for a young scholar with training in ‘cultural studies,’ but the opening of faculty positions in Communication increasingly included the term in a menu of possible branches of knowledge that the department was willing to represent. This development occurred nationally albeit differently in regions of the US where Communication Studies had developed differently. The Communication departments at the University of Illinois certainly were not the center of Cultural Studies in the US, but the events, colloquia, lectures, and seminars at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in that period made a significant contribution to a recognition (if not acceptance) of Cultural Studies in the US. There were many individuals at the UIUC that collectively and interdependently comprised the ‘arrangement’ of Cultural Studies on that campus, and Carey certainly exerted a gravitational pull that put that universe in motion and in orbit around certain questions and problems – in and outside Communication Studies.

Carey left Illinois at a moment when Cultural Studies was an easily visible constellation of study on the campus, and in the wake of his departure the ICR energetically fashioned itself as a center – on campus and in the US – for doing Cultural Studies. This was the same moment that the Department of Speech Communication as energetically began re-inventing itself as a center for social and behavioral scientific communication research – or what Delia (who had just become the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Science) unabashedly referred to as a ‘center for excellence.’ (See Delia’s self-aggrandizing ‘Building Excellence in Communication Studies: Illinois Speech Communication 1975–1995.’) In the mid-1990s, as ‘excellence’ became the mantra of US ‘public’ universities’ investment in the neo-liberal and neo-conservative models of public–private ‘partnership’ and corporate accountability, a trend described so compellingly by the late-Bill Readings (1997), Communication at Illinois appeared to require separate train tracks for transporting Cultural Studies and communication science into the future.

By the time Carey and I met for a drink in 2005, it seemed inevitable that a Cultural Studies, traveling on a parallel track than the one for communication science, had little option but to be acquired (as an attractive brand), customized, and integrated into what the station masters considered to be one passenger car among the many comprising the twenty-first century unlimited of Communication Studies. But the merger/acquisition failed a
year later – if not for pixie dust, then for the tendency of communication science to ignore the multiplicity of practices by which their train is supposed to run on time from here to there.

Carey’s brief return to Champaign led me to reflect on the local paradox of instituting a ‘cultural approach to communication,’ and the local institution’s relation to a Cultural Studies in the US. It is no small coincidence that Cultural Studies developed in the US through Communication Studies, and then became increasingly integral to efforts by literary studies to re-invent itself (albeit still within the old distinction between the Liberal Arts and Sciences). If Cultural Studies understands itself as a project at odds with the institutions of scientific research (suited to the old rubrics of Humanities and Liberal Arts, where art and ‘culture’ are the opposite of ‘science’), then it certainly is bound to be relegated to ghettos of irrelevance. Because this paradox and puzzle is an outcome of the history and legacy of communication science, it therefore is worth pondering how this legacy has and continues to shape the relation between communication and culture. And one lesson of this history and legacy for Cultural Studies is the usefulness of an analysis that makes difficult the tendency to understand communication as either ritual or transmission – of not seeing communication as anything but a hybridized object, a historical and geographic assemblage of practices.

Lesson four – After bodies in motion

I increasingly have abandoned the view that Carey’s writing about Cultural Studies was simply a contrast between a cultural and scientific study of communication, and increasingly I have been absorbed with the ways his examples actually complicate that contrast, or how circumstances in the later years of his life changed the implications of his early distinctions, particularly between cultural studies and communication science. There are of course many ways to discuss how this happened, but I focus on two here.

One is that Carey’s advocacy during the 1970s and 1980s for a ‘cultural science’ has become a fundamental research technique for media and advertising companies that construct audiences as markets around ‘taste cultures’ and ‘lifestyle clusters,’ rather than through models of communication conceived as message-transmission and media effects. Carey wrote his essays about two models of communication at a period when forms of ‘narrowcasting’ and their place in an economy of ‘mass customization’ were beginning to erode the dominance of a ‘broadcasting’ model of ‘mass communication.’ As media industries developed around life-style clusters (e.g. cable television for youth, women, or African-Americans), they have relied upon ‘ethnographic’ studies that examine media uses within the lifestyles of certain classes of consumers. The recent regime of technologies for ‘interactivity’ and of
‘convergence cultures’ (i.e. life-styles measured in terms of their ritualized applications of multiple technologies, and participation in multiple communication networks) have made the relation between ‘ritual’ and ‘transmission’ models of communication increasingly valuable to communication industries. Therefore, while the current communication technologies and ‘smart’ appliances are central to the current regimes of accounting and measurement that Carey once associated with the positivism of communication research, there are significant ways that his distinction no longer works – or is put to work – in the same way.

Second, what I continue to find helpful and useful about Carey’s interventions in Communication Studies are those instances where his rationale – often in simple examples – complicates not simply the easy separation of ritual and transmission but its related separation of temporality and spatiality, history and geography. To demonstrate my point, I turn to something other than his ‘death scene’ – to an example that he uses in ‘A Cultural Approach to Communication’ to elaborate what he means by ‘a ritual model of communication’: ritual as map, and the map as ritual. I have commented on this example elsewhere to discuss how (in its wonderful simplicity) it gestures toward a study of communication that sees history and geography, temporality and spatiality as mutually productive and whose mutual productivity might be the object of an alternative analytic of communication/media (Packer & Robertson 2007). In some respects, the example is similar to the hypothetical conversation about the death scene. For instance, he uses the example to underscore that there are multiple technologies for representing space and routes [‘space can be mapped (i.e. represented or communicated) in different modes — lines on a page, sounds in air, movements in a dance,’ p. 27], and that some of these modes accord with technical rationality (diagraming the path from point A to B) and others with everyday rehearsal, custom, and ritual (learning a path by physically following someone who has traveled it). The map is the outcome of ritualizing prior travels and prior maps (a model of prior communication), and the map is a model for future movement and travel — however ritualized. As I have suggested in my elaborations of these points, this example seems particularly relevant to thinking about an analytic suited for the current regime of mobile communication technology, where sending one’s child to school may rely on global positioning system (GPS) technology that allows parents to know where their child is — whether the child has stayed on the right path — or may involve mobile phones which also are plugged into these networks and practices of surveilling the path between home and school. But coming at the end of an essay about ‘models of communication,’ which always operate as models for future communication, the example is also a wry and clever map for communication researchers who work with and within their own compendia of disciplinary logics and maps for surveying communication as field of practice. The lesson that I have learned from Carey (as an
analyst and theorist of communication/media) is about the puzzle that we always find ourselves confronting, attempting to locate communication as life lived spatially and temporally. We cannot become too reliant on these maps, as much as we need to struggle with where they want us to go as researchers and activists. We are, more than ever, as James Cliffs once pointed out about anthropologists, implicated (as ‘communicators’ and analysts, subjects and objects) in traveling cultures (Cliffs 1991). Planes, trains, and automobiles (as well as their material passages) are technologies through which we move and are transported (albeit in different temporalities) armed with mobile communication technology. And despite the claims about the etheriality of communicating and socially networking in an era of time-space compression, or the sense of freedom afforded by the latest technology of auto-mobility (the car as audio- and video-entertainment center, or a work station for a laptop), the interdependency between the communication and transportation network still needs to be mapped — as historical outcomes and by analysts and theorists who move (and sometimes dance) across them. This is to say, after Carey, that communication is not just what people say and think, or how they cognitively react to stimuli (which is what mostly has preoccupied the research agendas of Communication Studies in the US), but how bodies move, are moved and mobilized — a question of mobility and access (of where one can or cannot go, and of the ethics, conduct and learned behaviors of mobile subjects). To say that maps can be danced is, in this sense, a current proposition and puzzle for Communication (though the historian in me now wants to ask Betty Carey, without getting too personal, whether Jim danced — and, as young man in the late 1950s and early 1960s, whether he ever learned to Twist).

Looking back at the last six years, my encounters and correspondence with Carey now seem to have strangely contributed to the production of his autobiography, and (in that sense) to a novelistic journey. In 2000, I realized that several of my students (and best friends) had begun writing about communication, space, and mobility. So I suggested (at the last minute, as I notoriously am prone to do) that we propose a panel about Communication and Transportation for the National Communication Association convention in Atlanta the following year. I promised the younger participants that I would recruit Carey to the panel as a respondent. I was pleased (and the younger panelists a bit unnerved) that the room was overflowing with people — an electrical current from the past to the present, from communication to transportation, and back again. Carey got up, at the end of the panelist’s presentations, to speak extemporaneously, leading the audience through references to Aquinas, Kant, Mcluhan, and (Rupert) Murdoch. It was spellbinding. I spoke with him later that day, over drinks, about (among other things) turning the panel into a book. The book, Thinking with James Carey: Essays on Communication, Transportation, & History, was edited by Jeremy Packer and Craig Robertson and published in early 2006, and its first and last chapters
comprise an interview (about his life and his perspectives) that he conducted with Grossberg. In the interview, Carey is neither defensive nor apologetic, but he is thoughtful to the very end — wondering out loud whether it is now time to rethink earlier positions, to avoid becoming too settled in one’s thinking. We all should have such thoughtful interviewers, and be able to connect our lives to our writing, to write and live a compellingly narrated story — one that is punctuated toward the end of one’s life with stories that one gets to tell about one’s life, in a book written by authors who, while not in complete agreement, feel compelled to write about why its useful to have thought along and to keep rethinking this life, together. I felt lucky to write something for a book which takes its compass (about communication and transport, no less) from what some of us have learned from him about communicating or traveling in this world.  

I will save you some of the other gems and nuggets that Carey passed to me because they will be part of a project that has not yet been written, but that his passing makes me more determined than ever to finish before my own ship sails (on something more akin to Fellini’s luminously fake cardboard luxury liner in his film Amarcord). Since Carey’s passing, I occasionally have pictured him on various water-craft, somewhere along the Rhode Island shore — still marveling and talking to other sailors and passengers, other lively, traveling spirits, about how the old lighthouses along the north-east coast used to be forms of communication. We live and die in economies, networks, and routes that we struggle to navigate — as immigrants, refugees, tourists, travelers, and maybe adventurers. I take my bearings from Carey on this count.

Writing about Carey after his passing has been a strange journey, leafing through essays with my comments in the margins of books that I bought when they were published and whose binding has become fragile. It is, as Carey remarks citing Geertz, ‘like trying to read a manuscript — foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior’ (Carey 1989, p. 62). I cannot decipher these texts without reflecting on how they have continually provoked me to rethink and not become too settled how they have shaped my behavior as a purveyor of communication and culture. And I read these texts as on-going conversations with Carey. I can hear the grain and cadence of his voice in his prose. His style of writing makes me smile as much as do his thoughts. But I also have been grateful to have accompanied him on his intellectual journeys and for the generosity with which he would read me in our reunions — through a laughter in and around his eyes, as we both grew older, perhaps from laughing.

So, I add one more actor to his staging of that hypothetical ‘death scene’ — one more way of communicating about death, one that is about the distance that it takes getting from here to there, and about the contingencies of such journeys. It is an Irish drinking salute that goes something like this: ‘May this
drink not be our last, and if it is, may we get to heaven thirty minutes before
the devil realizes that we’re dead.’

Notes

1 My course work in the Department of Radio-Television-Film (RTF) was
with Professors Tom Schatz, Emile McAnany, and Horace Newcomb
(before and after he left the Department of English for RTF). My course
work in Folklore and cultural anthropology was with Professors Americo
Paredes, Roger Abrams, Richard Bauman, Archie Green, and (as an
undergraduate) Barbara Kershenblatt-Gimblet.

2 Newcomb was a faculty member in the English Department from 1978–
1981. He held a joint-appointment in English and RTF during 1982, and he
transferred his appointment entirely to RTF by 1983.

3 Newcomb recalls that he recruited Carey to be a reviewer of his
(Newcomb’s) ‘Television as Cultural Forum’-project, which Newcomb
had designed with Paul Hirsch (then at the University of Chicago). (For a
fuller account of this project, see Newcomb & Hirsch 1983.) However,
Newcomb can not remember exactly when Carey came to speak at the
University of Texas in conjunction with that project.

4 I state this with the caveat that there may have been one other student, the
late-Eric Michaels, who, if he was not familiar with Carey’s writing, quickly
recognized its usefulness. Michaels and I were friends, and took courses
together, following a somewhat similar curriculum between Media Studies
and Cultural Anthropology. In 1982, Michaels was hired by the Australian
Institute for Aboriginal Studies to report on the ‘effects’ of a proposed
broadcast and communication satellite on indigenous populations living in
the Australian ‘outback.’ He published many extraordinarily provocative
essays, collected posthumously by Dick Hebdige in Bad Aboriginal Art:
History, Media, and Technological Horizons (1994). In the mid-1980s, soon
after I became a faculty member at the University of Illinois, I consulted
several times with Carey about hiring Michaels, but by that time Michaels’
illness had made it difficult for him to leave Australia or to want to return to
the US. In the final years of Michaels’ life, he corresponded occasionally with
Carey. Strangely, a week before Michaels died, I was meeting with Carey in
his office when he informed me that Michaels’ brother was working in
Champaign. The conversation that developed between Carey and Michaels
over the 1980s is reason enough to mention the latter in the context of
Carey’s visit to the University of Texas, even if he was not actually in
attendance at Carey’s lecture.

5 In Carey’s ‘Mass Communication & Cultural Theory’ (1989), Geertz’s
Interpretation of Culture is central to how Carey formulates a link between
Communication Studies and Cultural Studies.
The colleagues in Speech Communication to whom I am referring included Dilip Gaonkar, George Kamberalis, Barbara and Daniel O’Keefe, David Seibold, and Cheris Kramarae.


C.P. Snow’s 1959 lecture ‘The Two Cultures’ (a.k.a., ‘The Two Cultures & the Scientific Revolution’) argued that the central problem in Modernity is the distinction in education between the Humanities and the Sciences.

Carey’s use of the expression ‘cultural science’ in this essay is interesting for several reasons. In the essay, he uses the term to describe what a ‘cultural studies’ of communication would involve: ‘an attempt to bypass the rather abstracted empiricism of behavioral studies and the ethereal apparatus of formal theories and to descend deeper into the empirical world. The goals of communications conceived as a cultural science are therefore more modest but also more human . . . ’ (emphasis added). In this sense, a cultural science of communications aspires to an alternative empiricism, rather than an alternative to empiricism. However the term also is interesting because Carey commented years later that he did like ‘cultural science’ as a name, though he preferred not to use the word ‘science’ (Packer & Robertson 2006, pp. 20–21).

Margaret Morse’s ‘An Ontology of Everyday Distraction’ (1988), thematic threads in David Morley’s Family Television (1988), Eric Michael’s ‘For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuendumu’ (1988/1994), and Lynn Spigel’s Make Room for Television (1992) were some of the most notable exceptions to film and television criticism’s pre-occupation with the screen, or to media ethnography’s focus on the meaning that audiences made of what was on the screen.

I have elaborated this point more thoroughly in ‘Between Cultural Materialism & Spatial Materialism: James Carey’s Writing about Communication’ (Packer & Robertson 2006).

See for instance, Jesse G. Delia (1999).

This a theme in many of Grossberg’s accounts of Cultural Studies in the US, most recently Grossberg (2006).

My contribution to Packer and Robertson’s book (Hay 2006) focuses on how Carey discussed communication in terms of a relation between temporality and spatiality, history and geography. His formulation has helped me think about the relation between the “cultural materialism” often attributed to Williams and what I have termed a “spatial materialism.”

References
