Translocal media cultures

Andreas Hepp
Translocal Media Cultures:
Networks of the Media and Globalisation

The main argument of this article is that the concepts of (global) connectivity, networks and flows offer a chance for rethinking international and intercultural research. Recent work on globalisation in sociology as well as media and communication studies tends to culminate in the argument that globalisation is best understood as the process of an increasing, multidimensional worldwide connectivity. If we accept such claims as correct, we are confronted with one problem: how can we theorise media cultures, their differences and diversity as part of the global connectivity? Based on present academic discussion, I argue that there have to be at least two perspectives in which such an undertaking can be accomplished. On the one hand there is the perspective of the structuring aspect of globalisation which can be related to the already mentioned term 'network', on the other hand it is the processing aspect of globalisation which can be related to the term 'flow'. Both perspectives offer appropriate and complementary concepts for theorising the differences and diversity of media cultures: they offer the chance to theorise media cultures as 'translocal thickenings' or 'amalgamations'. This way of thinking allows a more concrete understanding of media cultures and their diversity in a new way.

1 Introduction

The aim of my article is to substantiate the following thesis: 'Connectivity', 'network' and 'flow' are concepts which help us to develop a methodology that is especially appropriate for investigations focusing on questions of globalisation within media and cultural studies. With these concepts it becomes possible to theorise media cultures in times of globalisation, not because they are 'universal' but because they allow a self-reflexive way of thinking about present cultural forms.

To support this thesis, I want to put forward a two step argument. First, I will comment on the concepts of (global) connectivity, networks and flows. Taking these reflections as a starting point, I will then develop a theoretical framework for the critical analysis of translocal media cultures.

2 Global Connectivity, Networks and Flows

Recent work on globalisation in sociology, cultural studies, as well as media and communication studies tends to culminate in the argument that globalisation is best understood as the meta process of an increasing, multidimensional worldwide connectivity (cg. Hepp 2006b). This formulation seeks to conjoin at least three different arguments: In the first place, if we understand globalisation as a "meta process" (Krotz 2006), this indicates that the concept 'globalisation' does not designate something we could 'observe' in the sense that it is an 'empirical object' which can be situated in a specific context. Rather, 'globalisation' is a theoretical concept like 'individualisation' or 'commercialisation' which helps us to understand contradictory sub processes as a whole.

In the second place, this process is "multidimensional" (Giddens 1990: 70; Tomlinson 1999: 13). This indicates that globalisation operates on different 'process levels' or 'scapes'. Whatever concept of globalisation we rest upon here, the different arguments meet in the point that globalisation cannot be reduced to one 'main dimension' (for example the economic one) which determines the others. The different sub processes of globalisation seem to have their own 'logic' or 'forces' that have to be conceptualised before relations between them can be understood. Nevertheless there seem to be many relations between the different 'process levels', their "disjuncture" (Appadurai 1996: 27) is relative.

This refers to the third point which is associated with the term 'connectivity'. In the arguments of John Tomlinson (Tomlinson 1999: 3–10), the term 'connectivity' indicates a wariness of what we can conclude from the meta process we call globalisation: While early work on that topic had the tendency to argue that globalisation might imply an increasing global standardisation, homogenisation, a kind of "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 1998) or – in short – a "global culture" (Featherstone 1990), we now know that cultural proximity *can* be one result of globalisation in specific contexts. But also processes of increasing conflicts, misunderstandings and cultural fractions are part of globalisation: "globalisation divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites" (Bauman 1998: 3). This is especially a central argument in the field of media communication: an increasing communicative connectivity does not bring people inevitably together – as Marshal McLuhan's utopian idea of the global village has outlined (cf. McLuhan and Fiore 1968) – and has not a 'worldwide Americanisation' as an unquestioned result. Rather the increasing worldwide media connectivity indicates, on the quantitative level, a high number of ongoing communicative processes. These processes have a very different character when seen from a qualitative point of view. We must analyse in detail what the consequences of media globalisation are, by focusing on specific processes within specific contexts.

Up to this my arguments bind together present academic thinking on globalisation. Altogether one can say that the globalisation of media communication is one dimension of

CONNECTIVITY

structuring aspects   *processing aspects*

network   **flow**
line/thread   space/scape
node   thickening
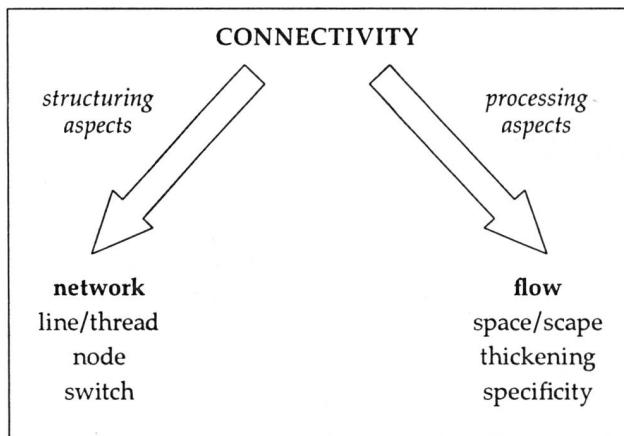switch   specificity

Figure 1: Theorising Global Connectivity

the meta process of globalisation and this dimension is best understood as an increasing communicative connectivity. But how can we theorise this global connectivity? It seems that there are at least two perspectives in which such an undertaking can be done. First of all, there is the perspective of the *structuring* aspect of globalisation that can be related to the already mentioned term 'network', secondly, it is the *processing* aspect of globalisation that can be related to the term 'flow' (see figure 1). It seems to me that it is important to keep both aspects in mind when we discuss questions of globalisation.

2.1 Networks: Structuring Aspects

The term 'network' offers a clear view of the structuring forces of globalisation. To make this comprehensible, I want to quote Manuel Castells definition of 'network' which meets with many others. For Castells networks are

> "open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals)" (Castells 1996: 501).

This quote clarifies some of the important aspects of 'theorising networks'. In a specific sense, it is tautological to argue that networks consist of connections ('links', 'threads', 'curves' and so on) which are woven at nodes. This is just a description of a network as an everyday metaphor. But in recent theory, these terms have been loaded with specific meanings. It is increasingly obvious that the connectivity of a network is constituted along a specific 'code'. 'Structures' of (social) networks are not just there, but reproduced in an ongoing contextualised process. This for example makes it possible that one and the same person may be part of different networks: they can be part of the network of friends (where a specific kind of social relation might be the 'dominant code'), and they can be part of the network of a social movement (where specific cultural val-

ues and political aims are the 'dominant code'). This seems to be the reason why network structures are so open and the borders of networks are so blurred, while nevertheless working as structuring forces: A network of friends places demands on us, just as our political engagement in a social movement closes other opportunities for political action.

These remarks help to theorise what we can understand by the term 'nodes'. At a neutral level one can say a node is the point where the connection ('ties', 'links', 'threads', 'curves' and so on) of a network traverses itself. From an initial perspective, formulations like this seem to be irritating; nevertheless they help us to understand the important point that 'nodes' within network structures can be completely different things. We can understand communication as a process of establishing a specific kind of connectivity, in which the speaking persons are the main 'nodes'. But 'nodes' can also have other social forms. For example, we can describe local groups as 'nodes' in the network of a wider social movement, or we can understand organisations like local companies as 'nodes' in a wider corporation network. 'Network structures' can be seen on completely different levels; and that is the reason why the concept offers the chance to describe and compare structuring powers *across* these different levels.

A third term that seems to be important when discussing the structural aspect of global connectivity is the term 'switch'. Again, it was Manuel Castells who introduced this term in the academic discussion. For Castells, a 'switch' is a specific kind of node which links different networks. The term 'switch' refers to the idea that this node must be able to 'switch' the code of one network into the code of another. To make this clearer, it will help to have a look at the nodes Castells describes as switches. The examples he focuses on in this context are the networks of capital, information and decision making (see Castells 2000: 502). Their different structures are 'linked' via specific 'switches' – in these cases located in so-called global cities. 'Switches' are in this sense the location where central aspects of power are concentrated in network structures, and this idea opens an additional aspect of analysing power relations within (global) networks: While power relations are rooted in the totality of social networks – as Michel Foucault has pointed out (Foucault 1996: 43) –, the concept of the 'switch' helps us to understand where power relations are concentrated in networks, at the position where different networks interact.

The 'network thinking' that I have outlined offers a way of describing structural aspects of connectivity which explains the paradox of the 'openness' and 'closeness' of connectivity. On the one hand, the structures of networks are open in the sense that networks can (more or less) easily integrate new nodes and grow without losing their 'stability'. With this in mind, networks are 'open'. On the other hand,

networks are also closed, as these processes of extension operate across specific 'codes' which define the specificity of a network and its power. But again there seems to be a certain 'openness' of networks at this point as 'switches' offer the opportunity to 'communicate' across the 'coding borders' of networks. This is the point where the 'network' metaphor seems to be more productive than – for example – the 'system' metaphor in current functional theory: 'systems' are, as in the writing of Niklas Luhmann (1997), thought of as 'closed structures' which reproduce themselves in an 'autopoetic way'. Because of their 'autopoetical structure', there is no possibility for systems to interact in a direct way; they are 'linked', instead, by 'structural coupling'. While these concepts of functional system theory may offer a coherent theoretical framework, their weakness lies in their focus on unambiguous system borders and system integration. 'Network' as a concept seems to offer a much more open way of thinking which is appropriate for the paradoxical structures of globalisation (see Karmasin 2004 for the concept of paradox in media studies).

2.2 Flows: Processing Aspects

As I have argued that focusing on 'networks' is only one way of discussing global connectivity. As important as this structural aspect is the processing point of view. The main term used to describe these processes is 'flow' or 'fluid', while I prefer in the following the concept of flow. These flows operate across specific network structures; for example, the 'flow of news' has to be conceptionalised on the basis of different media networks (see Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992, Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 1998), while the flow of migrants operates across person(al) networks (see Pries 2001).

John Urry, in particular, has argued that the concept of the flow or fluid seems to be highly important for describing social and cultural processes in the time of globalisation, because these concepts offer the possibility for a new kind of sociology that can conceptualise the increasingly mobile cultural forms. Urry argues that the "development of a 'mobile sociology' demands metaphors that view social and material life as being 'like the waves of a river'" (Urry 2003: 59). Based on this idea, Urry favourites a concept of 'global fluids', emphasising that fluids undoubtedly involve networks, but nevertheless the specificity of these global fluids is that they transgress networks and are "in part self-organising, creating and maintaining boundaries" (Urry 2003: 60). These arguments are very interesting from my point of view as they are both helpful and problematic at the same time. They are helpful because of the accentuation of the transgressing character of flows: Flows like the flow of specific information 'transgress' different networks and this is the reason why the concepts of network and flow can't be interwoven. On the other hand, this argument seems to be problematic as Urry concludes from this –

partly despite his critique of the functionalist tradition – a self-organising aspect of global flows. However, if we break down such an abstract theoretical perspective to the level of everyday experience, we notice at least that global communication flows are not auto-nomic phenomena, but are structured through communication networks along which they have to 'travel' – and these structuring processes have something to do with power. What I want to argue is that Urry is certainly right in emphasising the complexity of (global) flows. What remains problematic is his tendency to give up on asking about structuring aspects in global complexity and how these are interwoven with power relations. In spite of their tentative character, theoretical concepts like the fore-mentioned concept of the 'switch' as a power-marked 'transgression point' of different networks are a more appropriate way of thinking about power in 'global complexity' than talking about 'self-organising' aspects of flows. It is exactly these switches that are very manifest in everyday life: if we discuss media flows, we have to have a look at the power position of 'globally' acting media companies, while acknowledging that they are – at the same time – part of an increasing global capitalism that produces uncertainty and ambiguity rather than a collective understanding (cf. Ang 1996: 171–180).

Based on this we can conclude that flows are not an instantaneous occurrence, but constitute long-term conglomerations of processes. There are different terms that have been established to describe these conglomerations, like 'space' in Castells (2000: 407-459) concept of 'space of flows' or 'scape' in Arjun Appadurai's (1996: 33) well known differentiation of ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. Theoretical frameworks like these try to capture the idea that different (global) flows constitute 'complex landscapes' which have to be described in their appropriate logic. The flows of globalisation do not exist as an isolated singularity but constitute one part of a more complex whole.

While we can see how powerful spatial concepts are to describe long-term conglomerations of flows (cf. for this in general Morley 1996: 327-331, and the chapters in Couldry and McCarthy 2004), one specific theoretical concept seems to me very helpful in discussing the processes involved in a conglomeration of flows. That is the concept of 'thickening' (cf., for example, Löfgren 2001). If we understand our present world as being marked by an increasing 'global connectivity' of 'networks' and 'flows' that merge into each other and have uncertain borders, we have to answer the question, how we can think of nevertheless still existing cultural, economic and other conglomerations. If we understand them as 'meaningful thickenings' of flows along and across networks, we emphasise, on the one hand, the specificity of such a conglomeration, but stress at the same time their blurred borders. It is striking that 'thickening'

accentuates the 'open character' of networks and flows, but at the same time the specificity of the 'space' or 'scape' of long-term conglomerations: thickenings are a focused and meaningful specificity with disappearing borders. The specificity of thickenings is based on the character of its constituting flows, their direction and extent.

3 Translocal Media Cultures

Up to this point, I have outline a framework in which media is understood as a tool for establishing communicative connectivity on a global level. Yet, if we don't want to remain too abstract, one has to pose the question, how can we understand these mediated connections culturally? And how are 'identities' negotiated in this context? In the second part of my presentation, I want to discuss these matters.

Concerning the question of how we can analyse such mediated connections in detail, I would give the following answer: By focusing on translocality (see for this concept Hepp 2004, 2006b). First of all, the word 'translocal' or 'translocality' is an analytical concept used to study the connectivity of the media. There are two reasons for this concept that are appropriate and that one can link with the word 'locality' and its prefix, 'trans'. 'Locality' emphasises that in the time of media globalisation the local world does not cease to exist. Irrespective of how far the communicative connectivity of a locality goes, this does not prompt questions of whether a person is living his or her life primarily locally. As a physical human being he or she must reside somewhere. Surely this place changes its meaning with growing communicative connectivity, especially if this connectivity tends to be global. But the centrality of locality is not minimised in the time of globalisation. 'Trans', as a prefix, guides the focus from questions of locality (on which, for example, media anthropology focuses in particular) to questions of networks and flows. If research is centred on 'translocality' this emphasises, on the one hand that those questions pertaining to all that is local still matter, but that on the other hand, that today's locales are connected physically and communicatively to a very high degree. And that is the reason why that which is local does not cease to exist, but rather, changes.

At this point, the ongoing communicative deterritorialisation can be made comprehensible. Communicative deterritorialization means that one has translocal connections between different 'present contexts' and across various territories. This way of thinking allows the theorising of media cultures in a new way.

When speaking about media cultures I include all cultures whose primary resources of meaning are accessible through technology-based media. From this point of view, all media cultures have to be theorised as translocal, inasmuch as media make translocal communicative connec-

tions possible. With respect to the context of a connectivity theory, media cultures in general have to be theorised as 'translocal phenomena'.

By focusing on this framework, it will be possible to describe the change of European media cultures during the last hundred years in a different way. One can take, for instance, the works of Benedict Anderson, Orvar Löfgren or David Morley as examples of this. The rise of national cultures is related to the diffusion of the so-called 'mass media'. When different locales are very intensively connected, different people can be involved in a communicative process, and the construction of a common "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), "cultural thickening" (Löfgren 2001) or "home territory" (Morley 2000). Such reflections refer to the level on which questions of territory pertain to translocality. One can take television history as an example. First, television was marketed in the fifties as 'global', when it was called a 'window to the world'. Secondly, television had to be appropriated locally; that is to say it had to find its place in local life. And thirdly, the horizon of its first representations had the tendency to be nationally territorial, because the first important television events were national celebrations, national football games or national serial productions. Like the print media and the radio before it, television helped to construct the territorialised "imagined community" of a nation.

David Morley's metaphor of the "home territory" is, at this point, important in a dual sense. On the one hand, it shows the specificity of these national media cultures. It is possible to describe national media cultures whose translocal communicative networks and flows have been territorialised in such a way that national frontiers are the main borders of many communicative thickenings. The process of "thickening" of the national "imagined community" was bound territorially. On the other hand, Morley's metaphor of the "home territory" shows us quite clearly that this territoriality of the media-influenced home no longer exists in a pure form. In the time of globalisation, communicative connectivity is becoming more and more deterritorialised. With the distribution of media products across different borders and the emergence of the internet, global communicative connectivity grows – which makes the thickenings of national media cultures relative. One must localise them in the different networks of the media. This means that the 'borders' of the "imagined communities" we belong to do not necessarily correspond with the territorial borders, while at the same time territories still have a high relevance as a reference point of constructing national community.

Having said this, the concept of 'translocal media cultures' offers both: A starting point of describing an increasing deterritorialisation of communicative thickenings on the one

side and, on the other, the still existing relevance of territorialisation as a moment of constructing national cultures and their identities.

If we present the media cultures, we can say that we have both moments at the same time: On the one hand we still have rather territorially focused thickenings of communicative connections, which is why it does make sense to talk about mediated 'regional' or 'national' translocal communities as reference points of identities. One example would be the identity of different German federal states like Bavaria or Bremen, another example the different national identities within Europe. In addition, the construction of Europe itself is a space of communicative connectivity and the originating European identity is historically a territorially bound process (cf. Kleinsteuber and Rossmann 1994; Morley and Robins 1995).

But at the same time, we have on the other side communicative thickenings across such territorial borders, thickenings which offer the space for deterritorial translocal communities with corresponding identities. Analytically we can make here a four level distinction based on ethnic, commercial, political and religious aspects. On the level of ethnicity we have an increasing number of communicative thickenings of minority groups and diasporas within Europe. On a commercial level we have an increasing number of deterritorial popular cultural communities like youth cultures or scenes. On a political level we have an increasing number of deterritorial social movements. And on a religious level, we have one of the oldest forms of deterritorial communities which seem to have become more relevant during the past years.

4   Conclusion and Discussion

To conclude, I hope that the outlined systematisation is a further argument for a translocal understanding of media cultures. From my point of view, this is a highly promising frame for discussing questions of cultural differences and diversity as it offers a "transcultural perspective" on comparative media research that considers the complexity of present cultural diversity as well as cultural conflicts (cf. Couldry and Hepp 2006).

By using the term 'transcultural' I don't wish to imply that we should only focus on forms which are standardised 'beyond' or 'across' cultures. Rather, I borrow the term from Wolfgang Welsch (1999), who used it to indicate that in present times important cultural phenomena can not be broken down into dimensions of traditional cultures based in specific territories. Instead contemporary cultural forms are increasingly generated and communicated across different territories.

The concept of translocal media cultures offers a starting point for analysing these cultural forms. Across different states global media capitalism has become a structuring force in the sense that in different regions of the world networks of media conglomerates conduct media communication as an 'exchange of economic goods'. Nevertheless we have to bear in mind that this global media capitalism does not standardise the articulation of meaning because of its 'over-determination' (Ang 1996). Quite often global media capitalism rather seems to be a source of ongoing cultural fragmentation, contestation and misunderstanding – not only between national cultures, but also across them.

Within global media capitalism political media systems are the most territorially related entities, because the legitimacy of political decision making still is to a high degree state-related. However, as soon as questions of media culture come to the fore, it becomes obvious that cultural thickenings can either be broadly territorialized (as with national cultures, articulated with reference to a state and its territory) or they can transgress states and their territories. An understanding of media cultures as translocal phenomena makes it possible to understand both in one theoretical frame. This is necessary if we want to analyse cultural diversity within global media landscapes.

Dr. Andreas Hepp is professor for communication and head of the Institute of Media, Communication and Information at the University of Bremen, Germany.

E-Mail: *andreas.hepp@uni-bremen.de*
Internet: *http://www.imki.uni-bremen.de*

References

Ang, I. (1996): Living Room Wars. Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World. London / New York: Routledge.

Appadurai, A. (1996): Modernity at Large. Minneapolis: Minneapolis UP.

Bauman, Z. (1998): Globalization. The Human Consequences. Cambridge / Oxford: Polity.

Bauman, Z. (2000): Liquid Modernity. Cambridge, Oxford: Polity.

Boyd-Barrett, O. / Rantanen, T. (Hrsg.) (1998): The Globalization of News. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

Boyd-Barrett, O. / Thussu, D.K. (Hrsg.) (1992): Contra-Flow in Global News. London: John Libbey.

Castells, M. (1996): The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2000): The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. 1. Second Edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Couldry, N. / McCarthy, A. (Hrsg.) (2004): Media Space: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age. London u.a.: Routledge.

Couldry, N. / Hepp, A. (2006). What should comparative media research be comparing? Towards a transcultural approach to 'media cultures'. Paper presented at the conference "Internationalising Media Studies: Imperatives and Impediments", University of Westminster, London (UK), 15–16 September 2006.

Dayan, D. / Katz, E. (1992): Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press.

Featherstone, M. (1990): Global Culture: An Introduction. In: Theory, Culture & Society 7, 1–14.

Foucault, M. (1996): Wie wird Macht ausgeübt? In: Foucault, M. / Seitter, W. (Hrsg.): Das Spektrum der Genealogie, Frankfurt a.M.: Philo, 29–47.

Giddens, A. (1990): The Consequences of Modernity. London u.a.: Polity.

Granovetter, M. (1983): The Strenght of Weak Ties. A Network Theory Revisited. In: Sociological Theory 1, 203–233.

Hepp, A. (2004): Netzwerke der Medien. Medienkulturen und Globalisierung. [Reihe «Medien – Kultur – Kommunikation»]. Wiesbaden: VS.

Hepp, A. (2006a): Konnektiviät, Netzwerk und Fluss: Perspektiven einer an den Cultural Studies orientierten Medien- und Kommunikationsforschung. In: Hepp, A. / Winter, R. (Hrsg.): Kultur – Medien – Macht. Cultural Studies und Medienanalyse. Dritte überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage [Reihe Medien – Kultur – Kommunikation], Wiesbaden: VS, 155–174.

Hepp, A. (2006b). Transkulturelle Kommunikation. Konstanz: UVK (UTB).

Hepp, A. et al. (Hrsg.) (2006): Network, Connectivity and Flow. Conceptualising Contemporary Communications. New York u.a.: Hampton Press.

Karmasin, M. (2004): Paradoxien der Medien. Wien: Wuv.

Kleinsteuber, H.J. / Rossmann, T. (Hrsg.) (1994): Europa als Kommunikationsraum. Akteure, Strukturen und Konfliktpotenziale in der europäischen Medienpolitik. Unter Mitarbeit von Arnold C. Kulbatzki und Barbara Thomaß. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Krotz, F. (2005): Von Modernisierungs- über Dependenz- zu Globalisierungstheorien. In: Hepp, A. / Krotz, F. / Winter, C. (Hrsg.): Globalisierung der Medien. Eine Einführung, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 21–44.

Löfgren, O. (2001): The Nation as Home or Motel? Metaphors of Media and Belonging. In: Sosiologisk Årbok 2001, 1–34.

Luhmann, N. (1997): Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft. 2 Bde. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag.

McLuhan, M. / Fiore, Q. (1968): War and Peace in the Global Village. New York: Gingko Press.

Morley, D. / Robins, K. (1995): Spaces of Identity. Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries. London / New York: Routledge.

Pries, L. (2001): Internationale Migration. Münster: Transcript.

Ritzer, G. (1998): The McDonaldization Thesis. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Tomlinson, J. (1999): Globalization and Culture. Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press.

Urry, J. (2003): Global Complexity. Cambridge u.a.: Polity Press.

Watts, D.J. (2004): Small Worlds: The Dynamics of Networks Between Order and Randomness (Princeton Studies in Complexity). Princeton: Princeton UP.

Welsch, W. (1999). Transculturality — The Changing Forms of Cultures Today. In: Institut für Kulturwissenschaften (Eds.), The Contemporary Study of Culture. Wien: Turia & Kant, 217–244.