

CRISTINA GRASSENÌ AND THORSTEN GIESER

Response to Rupert Cox

We wish to thank Rupert Cox for his insightful commentary, which contextualises our ‘skilled mediation’ concept in ways that complement our introduction and opens up new avenues to investigation. In our response, we would like to give some background information about the conversations that led to this special section, followed by our own thoughts regarding the relationship between technology, skilled mediation and the politics of (de-)skilled mediation.

This special section originates from correspondence with a number of ethnographers interested (primarily, but not exclusively) in skilled visions and skilled listening. Some of these encounters were face-to-face, for example at the University of Siegen with Simone Pfeifer, Judith Willkomm and Anja Dreschke, some ‘virtual’, for example with Pablo Rojas. Participating together in the EASA Milan conference of July 2016 with Rupert Cox as co-convenor of a panel on ‘skilled engagements’, of which Thorsten Gieser was discussant, was a precious opportunity to extend ongoing conversations to more scholars, notably Lorenzo Ferrarini, Franziska Weidle, Cathy Greenhalgh and Fabrizio Loce Mandes. For both of us this was a chance to develop a more specific focus to our common interest in skilled visions. Not all the people who contributed to this correspondence are represented in this special theme section, just as not all the initial conversations could be continued, due to conflicting commitments, real-life serendipities and the vagaries of academic publishing.

Given the broad scope of this conversation, it is no wonder that skilled mediation has multiple ramifications. Rupert Cox rightly points out that skilled mediation offers a new take on the ‘conditioning forces’ of ‘technological mediation’. Two issues seem to us to be at stake here. First, we insist on media being skilfully engaged with, rather than simply being used. This move draws attention away from the medium in order to situate it within wider ecologies of practice, in line with the work of Lucy Suchman (2006), Jean Lave (2011) and Edwin Hutchins (1995). Skills, in this sense, are not so much embodied as *distributed* in processes and environments (Patchett and Mann 2018). Second, technological artefacts are not just skilfully engaged with but – as a result of them being incorporated into sociocultural practice – are often modified in their material design as to be compatible with skill, to enhance skill or even to de-skill in favour of ‘standards’, efficiency or safety. As a consequence, skilled mediation has to confront and work with (or around) what Judith Willkomm (2014) calls the ‘obstinacy’ of media (*Eigensinnigkeit der Medien*). This German pun is difficult to translate as it expresses the idea of obstinacy through evoking the specificity of sensorial engagement. Yet the idiosyncrasies of this incorporation of practice, senses and media in skill should not distract us, Cox rightly argues, from the social and political ways in which enskilment (or indeed deskilling) become manifest in the ‘technical’.

The politics of skilled mediation is at work both within the ecologies of practice on the one hand and the ‘in-built’ politics of the focusing media on the other. As Cox suggests, skilled mediation is as much a matter of focus as it is of horizons. Staying out of focus is the underdetermined ambiguous background where serendipity, accidents and circumstance interfere with the regularities of normalised practices, institutions and values. Skilled mediation is thus inherently political as it is a way of navigating through and negotiating the uncertainties that come from performing in ‘workmanships of risk’ (Pye 1968), expressing both mastery and vulnerability (Ingold 2018) in social settings that enhance or inhibit enskilling (Gieser 2014). This can only add to our anthropological understanding of the dialectic between local practices and the de-localising standardisation of knowledge and its politico-economic dynamics (Grasseni 2007, 2009; Gieser this issue).

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