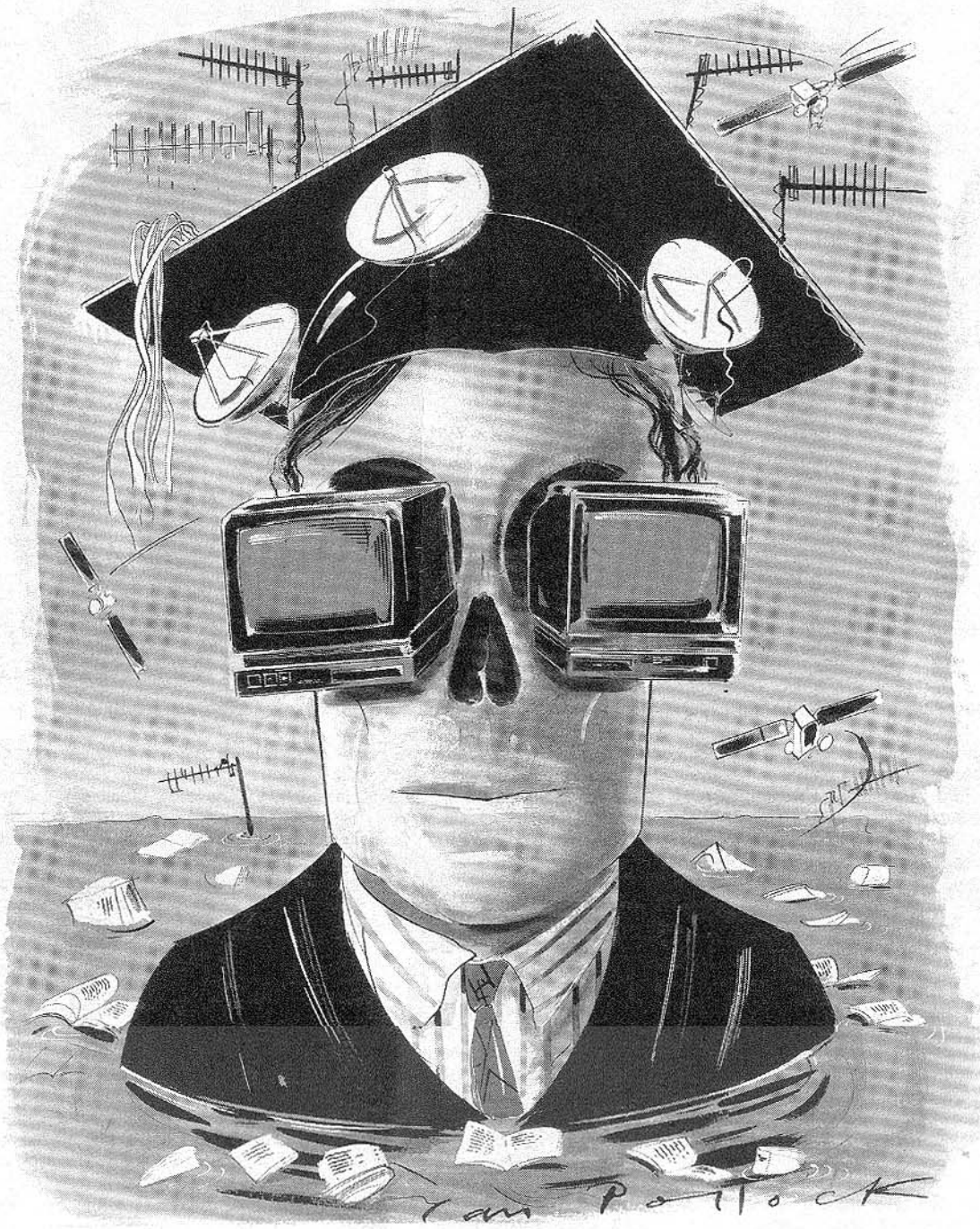
Chasing shadows

As students queue to sign up for media studies, DAVID STARKEY argues that a subject that blurs fact and fiction has no place in academia



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Media mania is sweeping British universities. This year nearly 45,000 sixth-formers have applied for degree courses in media or communications studies. The resulting competition is intense: at Loughborough university, for example, there are 600 applicants for 34 places. Those fortunate enough to be admitted will apparently divide their time between intensive study of Baywatch, Dallas and the wit and wisdom of that Machiavelli of the media, Kelvin MacKenzie, and more theoretical approaches derived from Marx, Weber, Brecht, feminism, psychoanalysis and postmodernism.

Not included in this predictable cocktail is Plato. This is a pity, since the old boy has some interesting things to say, both to students of media studies and, more particularly, to their teachers. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear — and let them burn!

The most remarkable passage in Plato's Republic, the great dialogue that deals with the relationship between the individual and the state, is known to scholars as the allegory of the cave. Plato describes a deep cave. It can be entered only by a long, narrow, sloping passage that cuts off all daylight. Prisoners are held in the cave, doubly chained, so that they can neither move around nor look in any direction save directly in front of them at the wall of the cave.

Behind the prisoners and higher up a fire burns, and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a tall parapet in front of it. The parapet conceals stage crew and actors who move along the track, holding up images of people and objects above the parapet. The fire casts the shadows of the objects on to the opposite wall of the cave, off which the voices of the actors also echo.

The Greeks, we know, usually had a word for it. But they often lacked the thing. For the clumsy apparatus described by Plato is a sort of primitive cinema (in full, cinematograph: from the Greek words for motion and writing).

The parallel was first drawn by the great Cambridge classicist F M Cornford in his 1941 translation of The Republic. "A modern Plato," he remarked in an inspired footnote, "would compare his cave to an underground cinema, where the audience watch the play of shadows thrown by the film passing before a light at their backs. The film itself is only an image of 'real' things and events in the world outside the cinema."

However, Plato not only anticipates the cinema, he also gives a clear prognostication of media studies as well. For he imagines his prisoners in the cave having "the practice of honouring and commending one another, with prizes for the man who had the keenest eye for the passing shadows and the best memory for the order in which they followed or accompanied one another, so that he could make a good guess as to which was going to come next".

Here a future Cornford will have to add a new footnote, pointing out the resemblance between Plato's prizes for shadow-spotting and BA (Hons) 1st class in media studies.

The question, for Plato as for us, is what are these honours worth? Are they glittering prizes or mere dross? The answer, then as now, is that they are fool's gold. And the reason is unchanged, too: both shadow-spotting and media studies deal with the world of illusion, while the proper concern of academic activity is the world as it really is.

But of course, as T S Eliot famously observed, "human kind cannot bear very much reality". This is why, for the 45,000 eager applicants for media and communications studies, there are a mere 26,416 for mathematics, 21,422 for physics, and 30,290 for chemistry. Why bother with $E=mc^2$ when Ena Sharples's ample form offers a softer option?

There are some sophisticates who deny that the theory of relativity is any more real than Dallas, or that history is more true than fiction. Peter Ackroyd is one of the most eloquent exponents of this position. I remember with pleasure an exchange I had with him at a party. There was no reason, he was arguing, to privilege modernity; instead, science was just another world-view, on a par with theology or alchemy or magic.

"If science and magic were equally real or unreal," I replied, "how is it that we have no record of a scheduled service by magic carpet between say Baghdad and Samarkand, with kilims for tourist and finest Persian silk for caliph class?"

For once the great novelist fell silent.

The reason for dragging in literature (apart from the excuse for a good anecdote) is that the comparison with Eng Lit is used by the more fly defenders of media studies such as David Cardiff, principal lecturer at the school of communication studies at Westminster university. "Look," he is reported as saying, "I simply do not have a problem about the intellectual relevance of media studies. They are just as important as English literature and probably more directly important in the modern world."

Plato, who is nothing if not consistent, would have accepted the parallel but drawn the opposite conclusion. For Plato, notoriously, proposed to ban poets, writers and perhaps even artists from his ideal republic. The reason was that their artful representation of reality confused the real world with that of illusion. Plato's objection to the imaginative arts has struck most commentators as implausible. But, once again, it seems as though he was anticipating the development of the modern media.

For in the modern media illusion and reality *are* inextricably confused. The recent conviction of Mandy Jordache and her daughter in Brookside gripped the nation more than the trials of real women for the murder of their allegedly abusing husbands. And Helen Baehr, lecturer in communication studies (what else?) at Westminster university, gloried in the confusion: "It's much more effective to address a subject like this through the genre of soap rather than through something like Panorama because people know the characters."

Her words put the case against media studies more effectively than any critic. They show that it is a subject which systematically blurs the line between fact and fiction. To feed our future journalists and broadcasters such a diet is to corrupt them. Like the inhabitants of Plato's cave, not only will they not be bothered to distinguish illusion from reality, they will not even know the difference. □

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