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The cultural public sphere

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ABSTRACT   Media research that uses the concept of a public sphere in order
to measure distortion against its ideal standard of dialogic democracy tends to
concentrate upon the cognitive aspects of news and either ignores or disdains
affective communications. Jurgen Habermas's original formulation
distinguished between the literary and the political public spheres. While
everyday news was a feature of the political public sphere, the literary public
sphere was not so constrained journalistically by current events and provided
an arena for deeper reflection. This article updates the notion of a literary
public sphere into an expanded concept of the cultural public sphere,
including the whole range of media and popular culture. This concept refers
to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain
through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication. Three
typical political stances in relation to the cultural public sphere are identified
and evaluated: uncritical populism, radical subversion and critical
intervention.

KEYWORDS   *affective communications, critical intervention, cultural public
sphere, radical subversion, uncritical populism*

Introduction

The public sphere is both ideal and actual. The actuality is a good deal less
perfect than the idealization of free and open debate that has policy
consequence in a democratic polity. Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural
Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989[1962]) identified the formation
of a bourgeois public sphere in 18th-century Europe, especially in Britain
and France. Prototypically, the London coffee houses were sites of dis-
putation where everyone present – middle-class males, for once on a par
with aristocrats – had their say, in principle, on the issues of the day. Thus,
the bourgeoisie found its voice in the transition from feudalism to
capitalism and this was represented in the press and other forms of public
communication, including the arts. There was always a contradiction, of
course, between the ideal and the actuality. Universalizing claims were
made for equality and freedom of expression that were not realized in
practice. It was not in the immediate interests of bourgeois men to extend

disputatious citizenship to women and the subordinate classes. However, as it turned out, from the emergence of capitalism and liberal democracy onwards, the demands of the working class, women and colonial subjects for citizenship and self-determination were framed to practical effect by that contradictory amalgam between the ideal and the actual. They claimed for themselves the same rights as bourgeois men. Such claims not only involved bitter struggle but were, in a sense, logical and therefore difficult to argue against with consistency: this is the force of the better argument.

Young Habermas (1989[1962]) told a tragic story about the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere. He argued that press freedom and open debate were diluted and distorted by commercial considerations and public relations by the middle of the 20th century. Moreover, radical demands had been incorporated to an extent by the welfare state. This resulted in a generalized quiescence, according to the disappointed Habermas. Grievances had been partly ameliorated, thereby neutralizing conflict, politics had become detached from popular struggle, and the masses were becoming amused consumers, indifferent to the great issues of the day and preoccupied by their own everyday lives. That is exactly the kind of elitist imaginary that cultural populists are inclined to contest. For them, the meaningful practices of mundane existence are not signs of alienation but instead of empowerment and 'resistance', to what precisely we cannot be quite sure.

It is important, however, to note that Habermas (1996) was later to revise his earlier pessimistic conclusions. His latter-day 'sluice-gate' model of the public sphere awards primacy to social movements and campaigning organizations in forcing issues onto the public agenda that otherwise might not be there at all. Big business and big government would not have addressed of their own accord, for example, environmental issues to anything like the current posture forced by public protest. Taking the argument further, the field of action for a social justice movement networked across the globe is the public sphere in its various forms and configurations – however much distorted by mainstream communications media and politics. Furthermore, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque, Habermas (1992) came to appreciate popular cultural subversion of hierarchical relations and, in so doing, also registered his belated recognition of the feminist 'personal is political'.

The theoretical value of the public sphere concept as a measure of democratic communications, then, is somewhat more complex than its use in the critique of news as propaganda (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The news is indeed frequently, routinely and structurally propagandistic. This is undeniably so in many respects and must not be set aside by sophisticates as too familiar a problem to interrogate persistently. To take the most obvious contemporary example, the role of the American and British news media in obscuring the reasons for invading and occupying Iraq remains

a current and urgent issue (see, for example, Curtis, 2003; Miller, 2003; Rampton and Stauber, 2003).[1]

However, it would be grim indeed, were there no space for dissent and disputation. But because disputation is so often deflected onto questions of who said what to whom instead of addressing why something happened, it is vital to appreciate that argument alone is not evidence of an actualized public sphere in operation. Much of the time we are witnesses to what is rightly called a 'pseudo' public sphere, where politicians and docile journalists act out a travesty of democratic debate. No wonder, as Jean Baudrillard (1983) suggests, the masses are generally turned off from 'serious' politics and turned on to something else that is much more entertaining.

Nevertheless, it is necessary for 'subaltern counterpublics', as named by Nancy Fraser (1992), to keep up the pressure. Otherwise the spin doctors will have it all to themselves and there will be a frighteningly fascistic closure of discourse. Every now and then a really big issue does capture popular attention: famine, genetically-modified food, the questionable reasons for pre-emptive war, and so forth. However, it must be said that these are seldom the most compelling attractions for mass-popular fascination. The ups and downs of a celebrity career, minor scandals of one kind or another, sporting success and failure: these are the kinds of topic that usually generate widespread passion and disputation. On the one hand, such topics may be viewed as trivial distractions from the great questions of the day or, perhaps on the other hand, as representing deeper cultural concerns.

The literary public sphere

In *Structural Transformation* Habermas distinguishes between the literary public sphere and the political public sphere. Although not separate from one another, their functions diverge in a significant manner. Speech and writing go hand-in-hand, but certain kinds of writing and literary comment transcend fleeting topics of conversation. The Parisian *salons*, for example, were important sites of the literary public sphere, somewhere that women were at least present, and where writers could try out their ideas before committing pen to paper.

Consider, for example, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in which 50,000 people lost their lives. This was news indeed, a conversation topic and the object of what we might now think of as disaster management. However, Voltaire went further in reflecting upon the reasons for such an event in his picaresque novella, *Candide*, which was effectively an attack on both religion and uncritical rationalism. For the complacent ideologue Dr Pangloss, the earthquake was 'a manifestation of the rightness of things, since if there is a volcano at Lisbon it could not be anywhere else' (Voltaire, 1947[1759]: 35). Candide was left none the wiser by this explanation.

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Ruthless questioning of conventional wisdom, whether in the guise of theology or what would become public relations in a later period (in effect, ideology), was at the heart of the Enlightenment project and was more likely to be found in an 18th-century novel than in a newspaper. Moreover, according to Habermas, disquisition on the social role of literature and philosophical reflection in the broadest sense prepared the ground for legitimate public controversy over current events. The very practice of criticism was literary before it was directly political (Eagleton, 1984).

The literary public sphere was not about transient news – the stuff of journalism – that is, the usual focus of attention for the political public sphere. Typically, complex reflection upon the chronic and persistent problems of life, meaning and representation, which is characteristic of art, works on a different timescale. Critics tend to have a better memory than the producers of distorted news events. Journalists are often agents of social amnesia, only interested in the latest thing. Old news is no news. Social-scientific research must address the treatment of the event while also putting it in the context of patterns of representation over time as a necessary corrective. However, such research is confined largely to cognitive matters and is neglectful of affective matters. It is concerned with the political agenda, selection of information and the framing of issues. The aesthetic and emotional aspects of life may be used to distort the news but otherwise they are of little concern to critical social scientists. This is unfortunate, since public culture is not just cognitive, it is also affective.

Should you wish to understand the culture and society of Victorian Britain, would you be best advised to read its newspapers, such as *The Times*, or its literary fiction, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) and Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875)? Admittedly, this is a rhetorical question. The great realist novels of the 19th century display sociological insight and enduring appeal unmatched by any *Times* editorial. It would be difficult to make the same claim for novels in the early 21st century. Again, however, *Times* editorials are unlikely to provide better insight. And, in any case, the value of affective communications is not confined to great literature. Perhaps television soaps are the most reliable documents of our era. Affective communications are not only valuable as historical evidence; they are themselves sites of disputation, as the history of the arts in general would attest.

Art and politics

Plato wanted to banish poets from the republic, whereas Shelley claimed that they were the unacknowledged legislators. So, the over-politicization of art goes back a long way in the European tradition, not only on the Left but also on the Right. Since 20th-century cultural politics is normally

recalled as left-wing, it is important to remember that it figured on the right-wing of modern struggle as well. In the 1930s Nazism promoted the Aryan ideal in Germany, especially in its bodily form, and attacked 'degenerate art'. Adolf Hitler, himself a failed artist, hated modernism and sought to establish an eternal classicism modelled on Hellenic culture as the official art of the Third Reich (Grosshans, 1983). Artists were bullied into compliance, sacked from their teaching jobs and forced into exile. The 1937 Exhibition of Degenerate Art (*Entarte Kunst*) in Munich held modern and leftist art up to ridicule. After the exhibition had toured the country, 'degenerate' pieces of art were sold off at international market prices, including major works by '*Auslanders*' such as Pablo Picasso as well as exiles such as Paul Klee.

It is particularly striking how successful the Nazis were at co-opting intellectuals to enact their cultural policies and to organize and justify a massive theft of visual artworks for the greater glory of Germany (Petropoulis, 2000). In the main, curators, dealers, critics and artists themselves were prepared to do the Nazis' bidding. It was not only Josef Goebbels' media propaganda in news, documentary and fiction film, denouncing Jews and others in the name of German purification, which convinced many ordinary Germans of the ideological superiority of Nazism. The Nazis also believed that Germany had the right to actually appropriate and possess the great European heritage of art, since the Third Reich represented the pinnacle of civilization.

In Walter Benjamin's (1970) estimation, the Nazis had aestheticized politics with their showy displays and affective appeal. In this they left a lasting legacy, as anyone might recognize who saw Bill Clinton's rock star presentation on television at the Democratic convention that adopted the hapless Al Gore as his successor. As they say in politics these days, presentation is everything. For Benjamin, the point of oppositional art was to reverse the process, to politicize aesthetics. There is a bad history of that project on the Left, culminating in Stalin's socialist realism and a suppression of experimental art and artists comparable to that of the Nazis. Yet, there was also an unorthodox – indeed heterodox – tradition of western Marxism, preoccupied by cultural questions and with a quite different trajectory to orthodox Marxism-Leninism. It was much more open to new ideas and remains residually influential to this day (see, for example, Bloch et al., 1977). Debates in the 1930s about the form and media of communication, subject matter and political stance, historical contexts and institutional settings were to inform the resurgence of left-wing cultural politics from the 1960s and 1970s.

There was a very pessimistic side to that western Marxist engagement with art, culture and politics, articulated by Habermas's own mentors, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979[1944]). The great refusal of authentic art was eclipsed by the burgeoning culture industry and mass-standardization of the mid-20th century, according to the Frankfurt   431

School pessimists. In so arguing, they set themselves up as the perpetually élitist 'fall guys' for populist cultural studies. However, their insights did inaugurate lines of inquiry into the relations between culture and business that are vital to understanding the operations of the cultural field now (see, for example, Bjorkegren, 1996; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Miege, 1989; Steinert, 2003[1998]). One of the distinctive features of recent development is not so much the marginalization of artistic refusal but its incorporation. Just think of the appropriation of surrealism and other avant-garde art by contemporary advertising, not to mention the commercial nous and profit-making patronage of 'Young British Art' (see, for example, Hatton and Walker, 2000; Stallabrass, 1999). But the commercialization of art is not a novel phenomenon. Since religious, monarchical and aristo-cratic patronage were superseded by the art and literary markets – one of the salient features of 'modernity' – much of the great work of that comparatively recent past was produced in a commercial context. This is quite a different matter from the observation made by Raymond Williams as long ago as 1960 that advertising had become 'the official art of modern capitalist society' (1980: 184).

In spite of the incorporation of art into advertising, it did seem as though everything was still up for grabs during the hegemony of social democracy in Britain, and not only on the countercultural margins. For example, public service broadcasting, as represented by the BBC in the 1960s and 1970s, provided some space for experimentation and critical argument. This was particularly so in the 'progressive' drama of *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today*. Williams (1977) himself commented on one such production: Jim Allen, Tony Garnett and Ken Loach's *The Big Flame* (1969), which imagined a Liverpool dock strike turning into a political occupation. With the lurch to the Right in the 1980s and 1990s such exceptional work was considered outdated, the remains of a failed Leftism, and became increasingly rare. Already it had been argued that radical interventions from the Left were less significant than what was going on in the very heartland of television. An exemplary statement of this kind was Richard Dyer, Terry Lovell and Jean McCrindle's (1997[1977]) paper, 'Women and Soap Opera', originally delivered at the Edinburgh Television Festival 1977, where both Williams and Dennis Potter also delivered papers. Williams and Potter, in their different ways, wanted a further radicalization of television drama in the single-play slot. Alternatively, Dyer and his colleagues wanted appreciation of the actually existing television serial from a feminist perspective. The most popular programme on British television, the archetypal British soap opera *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–), produced by the commercial company Granada, foregrounded the problems and capacities of women in everyday life. Was this a site of the cultural public sphere?

The cultural public sphere

Soap opera is a melodramatic genre. It deals with personal crises and the complexity of everyday relationships. In the form of a continuous serial of overlapping and fragmented narratives it artfully corresponds to the haphazard flow of events and messy irresolution in lived reality. The genre offers multiple subject positions for men as well as women with which to identify. In order to amass huge and heterogeneous audiences, there is usually something on offer for everyone. Viewing may be a casual distraction from domestic labour or of passionate intensity, a special and sacred moment. One can keep up without paying much attention, or the current episode may be the highpoint of the day in some households. Above all, for the lonely, physically or mentally isolated viewer, soap opera produces a vicarious sense of urban community, a mundane (albeit degraded) utopia (the rural setting of Yorkshire TV's *Emmerdale* is a comparatively rare exception to the general rule). This is especially notable in the leading and long-running British soaps *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* (1985–), which conjure up the nostalgic myth of the 'traditional' working-class neighbourhood and are set ostensibly in actual places, respectively, Salford in Greater Manchester and London's East End. The makers of *Coronation Street* were originally inspired by Richard Hoggart's (1957) founding text of cultural studies, *The Uses of Literacy*. Idealized representations of working-class community maintain a residual yet powerful appeal for the British television viewer. Latterly, in Britain, the genre has evoked multicultural harmony and downplayed racial tension. Soap opera typically ignores public controversy in the world beyond the immediate context of imagined community.

Jostein Gripsrud (1992) has commented upon the historical role of melodrama in the public sphere. He points out that 19th-century theatrical melodrama dealt with moral dilemmas and problematic social life. These are also characteristic features of 20th-century Hollywood melodrama – 'movies for women' – and the variants of television soap. Melodrama performs not only an entertainment but also an educational function, which is also true of tabloid journalism: 'Today's popular press . . . teaches the audience a lesson, everyday' (1992: 87). The lessons taught are not so much cognitive (to do with knowing) but emotional (to do with feeling). Thus it is a sentimental, rather than a critical, education that is provided. According to Gripsrud, sentiment has its place in the public sphere.

This argument is perhaps offensive to the more solemn Habermasian who is concerned with rational-critical debate and is troubled by distracting sentiment and 'infotainment' just as much as by selective distortion. It is not unknown to figure the difference in attitude as between feminine and masculine sensibility, that there is a communicative gulf between women's heartfelt emotion and men's cold logic; as a popular psychology advice book puts it, 'Men Are from Mars, Women Are

from Venus' (Gray, 1992). That difference is theorized with much greater depth and sophistication in feminist psychology. Carol Gilligan (1993) has questioned Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive and ethical universalism, which influenced Habermas's own discourse ethics. She invokes the notion of an 'ethic of care' that is sensitive to particular life experiences and is more typical of the feminine rather than masculine response to personal and social problems. Gilligan treats the difference as contingent and socially constructed, not essential and naturally given.

However, as Gripsrud argues, it is mistaken to simply map the difference between feminine and masculine sensibility onto the difference between the affective and cognitive dimensions of the public sphere. After all, there is nothing particularly feminine or caring about the discourse of tabloid journalism. While consideration of the conventional polarities of femininity and masculinity may illuminate the gender differentiation of dramatic genres, it does not account satisfactorily for what distinguishes the cultural public sphere from the political public sphere. Gripsrud identifies the provenance of the contemporary cultural public sphere as popular alienation from public life. This argument is consistent with Habermas's (1987) binary opposition between lifeworld and system. Habermas was worried that the instrumental and strategic rationalities of capital and the state were colonizing the lifeworld, which is the site of communicative rationality, mutual respect and understanding. On the other side of the divide, it is understandable for people to turn inwards, to cocoon themselves, out of a sense of powerlessness. Preoccupation with the dilemmas of everyday life and personal satisfaction is undoubtedly more pronounced than active citizen engagement with the systemic processes of business and government.

In a similar vein to Gripsrud, Peter Dahlgren (1995) has called into question the division of labour in media research between attention to cognitive communications with regard to the public sphere problematic, and attention to affective communications with regard to the pleasures of popular culture. He says, 'rational communication is necessary, but if our horizons do not penetrate beyond the conceptual framework of communicative rationality and the ideal speech situation, we will be operating with a crippled critical theory' (1995: 109). Furthermore, Dahlgren suggests that no representational form is entirely cognitive and rational, not even television news, in spite of its pretensions. In practice, the whole array of television genres across fact and fiction programming combines affective and cognitive elements in variable mixtures.

Accuracy of information and conditions favourable to dissent and dialogic reason are normative requirements of genuine democracy. Nevertheless, a solely cognitive conception of the public sphere has serious limitations. If democracy is to be more than a legitimizing myth in a highly mediated world, then citizens indeed should be properly informed about serious issues and be able to participate in rational-critical debate

that has policy consequence. However, that is not the whole of life. Why should people be expected to treat official politics, where they have so little power to influence what happens, with the same passion that they devote to their own personal lives and lived or imagined relationships to others? In actual fact, when it does happen, keen popular engagement in something like a public sphere more often than not takes a predominantly affective mode, related to the immediacy of lifeworld concerns, instead of the cognitive mode normally associated with experience of a remote, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable system. The concept of a cultural public sphere may go some way to explaining what is going on in this respect.

In the late-modern world, the cultural public sphere is not confined to a republic of letters – the 18th century's literary public sphere – and 'serious' art, classical, modern or, for that matter, postmodern. It includes the various channels and circuits of mass-popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life. The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication. The cultural public sphere trades in pleasures and pains that are experienced vicariously through willing suspension of disbelief; for example, by watching soap operas, identifying with the characters and their problems, talking and arguing with friends and relatives about what they should and should not do. Images of the good life and expectations of what can be got out of this life are mediated mundanely through entertainment and popular media discourses. Affective communications help people to think reflexively about their own lifeworld situations and how to negotiate their way in and through systems that may seem beyond anyone's control on the terrain of everyday life. The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence.

One such vehicle was the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 (McGuigan, 2000). The public response was extraordinary in terms of extravagant expressions of grief and loss. Most significantly, the eventful life and sudden death of 'the People's Princess' engendered public debate on the role of the monarchy and also more generally, as Beatrix Campbell (1998) argued, relationships between men and women. Diana's estrangement from the Royal Family and her divorce from Prince Charles provoked much popular disputation. Her glamorous celebrity and charitable reputation contrasted sharply with the Windsors' haughty *noblesse oblige*. The Royals survived that moment of recrimination but, as Campbell put it, sexual politics had shaken the very institution of monarchy in Britain. The Royal Family was revealed, yet again, to be a distinctly inadequate model of personal conduct and intimate relations, which had been its   435

ideological, if not constitutional, *raison d'être*. In this way, the popular debate around Diana manifested what Anthony Giddens (1992) calls 'life politics' whereby people try to work out how to live in a de-traditionalized moral universe where the old conventions are in question. Similarly, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have discussed the negotiated relationships and chronic decision-making of personal life under the disconcerting conditions of reflexive modernity. These are not just theoretical issues for sociology and cultural analysis but ordinary features of everyday life in 'western' culture and society today.

In addition, the popularity of the *Big Brother* television series can be explained as a vehicle for reflecting upon appropriate conduct when traditional assumptions are no longer taken for granted and people are confused about how best to carry on. Contestants are judged in weekly nominations for eviction within the house and by the voting public outside with greater enthusiasm than is usually evident in casting votes for candidates to public office. This has encouraged some to argue light-headedly that official politics should learn from game shows such as *Big Brother* and adopt their popularizing techniques. Still, there is a political point to these shows. The appropriateness of the contestants' behaviour in an artificially constructed situation is under perpetual surveillance, dull moment by dull moment, and in the drama of narrative summary, providing the material for critical interrogation. In effect, *Big Brother* is a modern morality play.

Spaces of action

In conclusion, let us identify three broad stances regarding the politics of the cultural public sphere: uncritical populism, radical subversion and critical intervention. Uncritical populism is associated with populist cultural studies, the credibility of which derives not so much from its intellectual acuity but from its affinity with currently conventional wisdom (Frank, 2001; McGuigan, 1997). The domain assumption here is that consumer capitalism is culturally democratic. Consumer sovereignty goes unquestioned. What we get is what we want. The consumer is consulted and permitted to speak. In any case, consumption is an active phenomenon. Consumers are not the passively manipulated recipients of commodity culture and mediated experience: they choose, and woe betides any business that fails to respond efficiently to its customers' demands.

Not long ago, this author read in the *Guardian* of a conference on 1950s culture at which a young academic remarked of the coffee bar scene so bemoaned by Hoggart at the time: '[It] provided both male and female sites for dress, dance, display, discussion and democratisation' (Ward, 2003: 13). Was the coffee bar of the 1950s, then, a democratic advance on the 18th-century coffee house as a public sphere site? The idea of the coffee house or, in latter-day nominations, the coffee bar or the coffee shop as places of cultural subversion and critical questioning, has been revived in

a bizarre manner recently by the omnipresent Starbucks hosting public debates in association with the Royal Society of Arts. Postmodern or what?

It is an established protocol for populist cultural studies to seek out endlessly instances of really existing cultural and consumer democracy, not only in the past but also in the present. Occasionally, such discoveries are even related to the problematic of the public sphere, although rarely in cultural studies as narrowly defined. The work of social psychologists Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (1994) on the much-derided television genre of audience participation talk shows is exemplary. Incidentally, it is also much better grounded in empirical research than most cultural studies in this vein (see McGuigan, 2002). Political theorist John Keane (1998) has argued a similar case for really existing cultural and consumer democracy in contemporary civil society when he distinguishes between micro (subcultural), meso (national) and macro (global) public spheres (see McGuigan, 2004).

The value of uncritical populism – the kind of position that would regard *Big Brother* as a vehicle of the public sphere – is its debunking of the critical idealization of a public sphere that is never present but always absent in favour of a 'realistic' attention to what actually goes on. As with *Big Brother*, public controversy today is very much associated with questions of identity, celebrity and scandal. Chris Rojek (2001) suggests that celebrity culture is a manifestation of the paradox of egalitarian democracy, the promise that everyone can make it but few actually do so. Public figures are the source of incessant fascination, in particular their achievements and failures. Nothing is so fascinating as a soaring star as a falling one. Manuel Castells argues that public interest in official politics is mediated largely by scandal. The conduct of political leaders is constantly under scrutiny, their moral failings amplified and sometimes secretly admired. Interestingly, observes Castells, 'Corruption *per se* seems less significant than scandals (that is, corruption or wrong doing revealed) and their political impact' (1997: 335).

Radical subversion finds all of this deplorable. From such a perspective, the democratizing claims of uncritical populism are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Currently, radical subversion is associated most closely with the cultural practices of the global movement for social justice, especially in its anti-capitalist and anti-globalization manifestations. Parts of the movement draw on the kind of 'do-it-yourself' culture that came to prominence in the 1990s, with road protests and raves in Britain. Radical subversion has complex roots in the 1960s American counterculture, French situationism and older traditions of international anarchism (see, for example, McKay, 1996, 1998). Such radicalism places special emphasis on symbolic contest, acting out various forms of carnivalesque subversion in order to disrupt, for example, the City of London in June 1999 and the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle towards the end of that year (Cockburn et al., 2000).

Kalle Lasn's (1999) manifesto for radical subversion, *Culture Jam – The Uncooling of America*, is representative of this form of cultural politics. According to Lasn, the remedy for the American cultural malaise is 'a rebranding strategy – a social demarketing campaign unfolding over four seasons' (1999: xvi). In the autumn, the question is asked: 'What does it mean when our lives and culture are no longer shaped by nature, but by an electronic mass media environment of our own creation?' (1999: xvii) In the winter, 'the media-consumer trance' of 'our postmodern era' is criticized and a further question posed: 'Can spontaneity and authenticity be restored?' In the spring, the fundamental question is put: 'Is oppositional culture still possible?' In the summer, 'the American revolutionary impulse re-ignites'. All of this – theory and practice – is meant to lead to a Debordian '*detournement* – a perspective-jamming turnabout in your everyday life' (1999: xvii). *Culture Jam* is a book inspired by the critique of 'the society of the spectacle' and the subversive tactics of French situationism (Debord, 1994[1967]). It also derives inspiration from the US's own revolutionary tradition of independence and participatory democracy. It wishes to challenge the value and values of the most powerful culture and society in the world: the American consumerist way of life and its global reach.

Culture jamming is a form of 'semiological guerilla warfare', to use Umberto Eco's phrase. As Eco argued in the 1960s: 'Not long ago, if you wanted to seize political power in a country, you had merely to control the army and the police ... Today a country belongs to the person who controls communications' (1987[1967]: 135). However, culture jammers are unlikely to take control of the communications media in the US. Their tactics in producing 'subvertisements' that attack capitalism, and in anti-media campaigning generally, are those of guerilla skirmishing in the space of signification, which on their own are unlikely to bring the whole edifice of postmodern culture and consumerism tumbling down. The battle is conducted at the level of signification, ridiculing the dominant system of meanings in the aim of rendering 'cool' uncool. In a volatile culture where fashion is constantly overturning itself and sudden reversals of meaning occur, counter-discourse may act like a virus entering the symbolic bloodstream of the body politic. Well, that is the theory anyway.

Radical subversion is the exact obverse of uncritical populism. Instead of apologetics, it offers total transformation whether people want it or not. In this sense, it is élitist and, to many, either downright offensive or simply unintelligible. The third position regarding politics and the public sphere, critical intervention, combines the best of uncritical populism – an appreciation of the actually existing cultural field – with the best of radical subversion, producing a genuinely critical and potentially popular stance.

Television is at the heart of contemporary mass-popular culture. It remains central to everyday life in spite of the internet, although digitalization does indeed bring about a convergence of media. Most

people still turn to the box in the corner for information and entertainment. Public service principles have been seriously eroded in recent years. Even such an august institution as the BBC mimics commercial populism in order to justify its license fee in 'a competitive market'. Yet occasionally, even now, television (at least in Britain) affords a space for critical argument. This is a precious space and one that should be cherished and safeguarded.

For example, every two years the BBC turns its resources over to Red Nose Day, the telethon organized by the Comic Relief charity. What is significant about Comic Relief is not just the money it raises for projects in Africa and Britain, though that is not insignificant for the people who benefit. What is very significant is the combination of entertainment with critical agitation concerning poverty and deprivation. This mass-popular television event is made up of comic turns and documentary material on the parlous conditions of life in African villages and British inner cities. The audience is, of course, guilt-tripped into donating a few pounds over the telephone with their credit cards (see McGuigan, 1998 for analysis of Comic Relief).

Comic Relief is hardly the cutting edge of critical intervention in the mainstream. Other examples from British television are closer to the edge, such as Channel 4's satire show *Bremner, Bird and Fortune*. In the run up to the latest Gulf War, impressionist Rory Bremner and the two old-stagers of British satirical television – John Bird and John Fortune – poured mockery on the British and American governments and examined the real reasons for bringing about 'regime change' in Iraq. When official hostilities ceased, a special edition of *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* (following on from the earlier, *Between Iraq and a Hard Place*) devoted to the issues of war, *Beyond Iraq and a Hard Place*, was transmitted (11 May 2003). It examined the current and historical background to the US's neo-imperialistic agenda and the human costs of the war. The programme offered a much more radical analysis of the meaning of the assault on Iraq than you would have found anywhere else in British mainstream media. Perhaps it was permitted because comedy is not serious.

Around the same time, the BBC televised *The Day Britain Stopped* (13 May 2003), successor to a great tradition of British documentary drama, stretching back to *Cathy Come Home* in the 1960s and including *Threads* and *Who Bombed Birmingham?* in the 1980s. Set in the near future, *The Day Britain Stopped* imagined what might happen if a disastrous chain reaction occurred in Britain's decrepit transport system. It started with a one-day rail strike in response to a crash at Edinburgh's Waverley station. *The Day Britain Stopped* told a 'what if?' story, tracing gridlock on the roads to a mid-air plane crash at Heathrow. It told the story through individuals and families caught up in the chaos, interleaved with expert opinion and documentary-style footage.[2]

It is troubling that there was no great outcry against Bremner, Bird and

Fortune's seditious comedy or the plausible but alarmist *The Day Britain Stopped*. Nevertheless, these are critical interventions in public debate and from which there is much to learn. It is especially important to value such interventions and to be clear about what actually constitutes a critical intervention. This is not necessarily measurable in terms of social impact. Neither of the two examples given here had much direct impact on contemporary politics, but they did articulate widespread dissent and, in so doing, contributed to an enduring tradition of independent criticism of dominant power and ideology in the cultural public sphere.

Notes

1. See also the recent debate on Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model' (Corner, 2003; Klaehn 2002, 2003).
2. In my opinion, *The Day Britain Stopped* was a more incisive intervention in the cultural public sphere than David Hare's much celebrated National Theatre play which was also broadcast on BBC Radio 3 (14 March 2004), *The Permanent Way*, for a number of reasons. Hare's play looked specifically at trouble on the railways and was a form of theatrical journalism or documentary based on interviews with various interested parties, their words spoken by actors. Rather than a dramatized documentary, *The Day Britain Stopped* was a documentary-style drama, which combined factual material with a fictionalized and tragic dramatization of a chain reaction throughout the whole transport system, trouble on the railways, gridlock on the roads and a mid-air plane collision. It represented what might happen through typical characters and experiences, where chaos suddenly engulfs everyday life, in a hypothetical and interlinked set of circumstances. The presence of *The Day Britain Stopped* in a popular medium – terrestrial and public service television – also attracted a larger and probably much more socially diverse audience than would normally be so of the National Theatre and Radio 3's audiences.

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